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Terministic Screening and Conspiracy Theory in Political Communication: A Critical
Analysis of Trump's Rhetorical Ties to FAIR and Alex Jones Through "Invasion"

Immigration Discourse

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Abstract

This study focuses on the political and social communicative implications that result from mirrored anti-LatinX immigration discourses from three different political entities: President Donald Trump, special-interest hate group the Federation for Immigration Reform (FAIR), and conspiracy theorist Alex Jones. Through a critical communication lens, the author presents and discusses the influence of presidential communication, and its ability to contribute to and bolster xenophobic political undertones, creating a communicative environment that functions to empower and embolden proponents of racially based discrimination. Further, this study discusses the power presidential communication has to legitimize, normalize, and amplify the racist and xenophobic anti-LatinX discourses perpetuated by hate groups and conspiracy theorists, bringing fringe beliefs into the communicative mainstream.

Key words/concepts: critical communication, political discourse,
presidential rhetoric, immigration, terministic screening, conspiracy theory

Dedication

I dedicate this work to the twenty-three innocent people who lost their lives during the El Paso shooting that took place on August 3, 2019, as well as their beloved families and friends. May they know peace and healing, and may another horrible and senseless tragedy such as this never happen again.

And to my family and friends, who have always empowered me to stand up for what I believe in. I love you all.

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Foreword

From a very young age, the notion of categorizing entire groups of individuals based on stereotypical social misconceptions felt inherently wrong to me. I never understood how it made logical sense to group people together based on one aspect of their personality, behavior, or appearance. Perhaps this stemmed from my constant anxiety about being judged or misunderstood by my peers as a result of years of bullying, I just knew that I always wanted to be the kind of person to give people a chance to show me who they really are instead of focusing on some sort of socially-imparted false reality. Hearing classmates refer to a young girl as a “slut” or listening to a young boy be taunted with the word “fag” has always caused a sharp cringe in my spine, because not only do I understand how damaging negative words can be to those on the receiving end, I believe that those who stoop to this level of cruel behavior are doing so to hide a deeper, insecure, fearful identity. Simply put, I have long acknowledged and accepted the importance of what we say, how we say it, and how our communication will always have consequences, good or bad.

Luckily, as I got older, I noticed two things happen: 1. Most bullies found themselves so consumed by their own mundane lives that they no longer went out of their way to hurt others, and 2. Those of us on the receiving end of hurtful treatment as children grew up to have extremely thick emotional skin, something we used as a shield to protect others who were being victimized. This heightened sensitivity and sympathy for those who are being mistreated, I believe, is something gifted to those of us who know what it is like to have to constantly work to be accepted for who you are. For this reason, I am able to possess the empathy to write this thesis and deeply care about issues

that do not necessarily impact my life on a daily basis, but deeply hinder the happiness and liberty of other people. I am thankful to be someone who cares, and I believe that if everyone exerted the miniscule amount of effort it takes to give people a chance and appreciate them based on who they are as an individual, we would not be having this discussion.

Of course, I've had it easier than most. Not to discount my unfortunate childhood experiences of being the odd-girl out, but as painful and impactful as they were, acknowledging my significant amount of privilege is the very process by which I find myself here today. I am a white woman from a loving, middle class family, who has been given pretty much every opportunity I could have ever asked for. I was also born in the U.S. and have enjoyed the benefits that being a United States citizen has to offer. I have never had to worry about where my next meal was coming from or whether or not my family and I would have a safe place to live. Further, I have never had to be fearful of how I would be treated based on the color of my skin, my religion, my sexual identity, my gender performance, or my culture. Frankly, I have barely even had to even think about how these aspects of who I am would effect my position in the world. I was blessed to have a childhood unclouded by the forces of racism and classism, let alone xenophobia. However, although I have never personally experienced these types of discrimination, when I began to witness and understand the very deep hold that prejudice maintains in my society, it was very difficult to un-see how these unfair and unjust frameworks of thought impacted every social structure I could think of. I learned about and witnessed how racism and classism dictated things like where people live and go to school, how people are able to secure well-paying jobs to support their families, whether

or not people are able to feel safe while interacting with law enforcement and the legal system as a whole: all things that I took for granted. It was not until I became increasingly interested in and critical of these socially constructed institutions that essentially control our everyday realities, that I began to understand that the most influential of all of these systems, the political system, harbored the power to contribute to or improve the inequality I was witnessing. This realization, along with my frequent disappointment in the outcomes of the political system, have shown me how crucial a critical communication lens is to understanding the social implications of American political discourse. Further, it has shown me that not all bullies grow out of their immature habits. Instead, they become President.

Chapter 1: Introduction

August 3rd, 2019 is a day that will live on in infamy in the United States and around the globe forever. On this day, a 21-year-old white man by the name of Patrick Crusius walked into a Walmart shopping center in El Paso, Texas with a WASR-10 rifle and a plan to take the lives of as many people as possible. As reported by Michael S. Rosenwald, Hannah Knowles, and Robert Moore (2019) of the *Washington Post*, he shot and killed twenty-two people and injured twenty-four more. The victims included thirteen Americans, eight Mexicans, and one German. This tragedy shook the El Paso community and is known as the deadliest 2019 mass shooting in the United States. However, it did not take long for law enforcement to discover a clear and focused motive for the incident.

According to Tim Arango, Nicholas Bogel-Burroughs, and Katie Benner (2019) *The New York Times*, posted in an online message board, a manifesto entitled *An Inconvenient Truth* outlined the attack that would soon come to fruition. The name of the perpetrator was mentioned as well as the weapon that would be used, but there was another element to this document that was even more daunting. Patrick Crusius had a purpose, and that was to kill as many LatinX¹ people as possible in order to eliminate the threat of the “Great Replacement” (Arango et al., 2019, para. 8). As described by Rosa Schwartzburg (2019) for *The Guardian*, this right-wing conspiracy theory promotes the idea that if LatinX immigrants continue to migrate to the United States, the American way of life and so called “white culture” will be destroyed and replaced. The deeply flawed theory also relies on the premise that the Democratic party is counting on this invasion to regain political power (Schwartzburg, 2019, para. 1). Furthermore, the author

¹ Rodriguez (2019) states that "LatinX" is a gender-neutral term used in lieu of "Latino" or "Latina" to refer to a person of Latin American descent.

of the manifesto discusses his belief in the impending “Hispanic Invasion” and why it is his duty to try to stop it (Arango et al., 2019, para. 2). After all, what is an invasion if not a threatening force that needs to be halted before it takes control over a certain space? A word most commonly used to describe an insistent pest or a violent and powerful militia on the move, it seems strange to use the word invasion when describing a migrant group of asylum seekers. However, Crusius was deliberate with this word choice and boldly described the invasion as a, “cultural and ethnic replacement” (Schwartzburg, 2019, para. 5) He cited those who have done their part to eliminate the invasion in the past, including the Christchurch mosque shooter, whom Crusius believed to be a brave soldier in the fight against the Great Replacement.

In his hate-filled manifesto, the El Paso shooter boldly and clearly states, “This attack is a response to the Hispanic invasion of Texas” (Schwartzburg, 2019, para. 1). One may choose to disregard these terms as the incoherent babbles of a mad man, who also believes the United States should be segregated into separate territories based on race and that interracial marriage should be illegal, however, this discourse is far too familiar to rationally consider as an isolated occurrence. Those who choose to ignore this type of racist, xenophobic, and deeply damaging rhetoric as “just words” when they read it in a manifesto or hear it on the news are not paying attention to the pattern and connections being communicatively constructed. Anti-immigrant discourse, specifically pertaining to LatinX migrants, has increasingly become the choice modality of political communication within the fringe right in the United States. However, no longer are fear-mongering conspiracy theories trapped within the confines of fringe right-wing hate groups. Labeling LatinX immigrants through terms meant to invoke fear, hate, and

distrust has become an activity legitimized and practiced by several conservative political figures, interest groups, and commentators. This type of discourse is more easily found than ever, in fact, all one has to do to find it is scroll through the feed of posts on President Donald Trump's Twitter account or stream a video of one of his rallies.

According to *The White House* (2019), on May 30th, 2019 while giving a statement to the press, President Trump said, "As everyone knows, the United States of America has been invaded by hundreds of thousands of people coming through Mexico and entering our country illegally." He continues, "This sustained influx of illegal aliens has profound consequences on every aspect of our national life-overwhelming our schools, overcrowding our hospitals, draining our welfare system, and causing untold amounts of crime. It must end now" (para. 1). *Time Magazine* correspondents Gina Martinez and Abigail Abrams report (2019) that in an official White House statement to the press on February 15th, 2019, Trump said, "We're talking about an invasion of our country with drugs, with human traffickers, with all types of criminals and gangs" (para. 4). On March 1st, 2018, *Vox* contributor Dara Lind (2018) reports that Trump stated, "At this very moment, large, well-organized caravans of migrants are marching towards our southern border. Some people call it an 'invasion.' It's like an invasion. They have violently overrun the Mexican border" (para. 30). *PBS News* reporter Yamiche Alcindor (2019) recalls that during a 2019 rally in Panama City Beach, Florida, President Trump discussed using deadly force on immigrants attempting to cross the border into the United States. He quickly explained that this is not something the U.S. can do, stating "And don't forget — we don't let them and we can't let them use weapons. We can't. Other countries do. We can't. I would never do that. But how do you stop these people? You

can't. There's—" to which an individual in the audience responded by shouting, "Shoot them!" Trump's reply? A humored chuckle and the words, "That's only in the Panhandle, you can get away with that statement. Only in the Panhandle" (Alchindor, 2019, para. 3-4). Trump laughed about the possibility of murdering asylum seekers as if it was a silly joke, however, Patrick Crusius did much more than laugh. According to the Anti-Defamation League (2019), in his manifesto, Crusius states, "the Hispanic population is willing to return to their home countries if given the right incentive. An incentive that myself and many other patriotic Americans will provide" (para. 13). The rhetorical similarities between the statements made by the El Paso shooter and the President of the United States presents the discursive political communication environment I will be analyzing: an environment that empowers the Crusius' of the world to feel as though they are patriots protecting their country, when in fact they are cold blooded killers.

This rhetorical pattern of anti-LatinX migrant discourse can be traced throughout Trump's entire presidency, presidential campaign, and life before politics. It is one thing for Trump, as reported by German Lopez (2019) for *Vox*, to have used business practices that denied housing to minority communities and to have campaigned for the execution of innocent young men of color in a newspaper while he was a private citizen, but his racist and xenophobic attitudes and behaviors have followed him into the office of the Presidency, which enables his communication to have profound effects on society (para. 10, 13). While we cannot yet know the full extent that these effects will have on political attitudes and how deep they will reach, we can see the dangers that occur when Presidential communication mirrors the profoundly problematic discourse of right-wing conspiracy theorists and anti-LatinX immigrant hate groups.

President Trump, like most of our leaders who came before him, wasted no time declaring his goals for the duration of his Presidency as well as the specific issues he wished to address during his time in power. Juliet Eilperin and Darla Cameron (2018) of the *Washington Post* describe that his vision for his presidency, which was made clear during his campaign, included an overhaul of Obama-era policies, namely the Affordable Care Act, tax cuts, and, what has now become his drastically forged and infamous agenda, immigration reform (para.1). Immigration has long been a pressing issue at the forefront of American political debate and discussion, and Donald Trump is certainly not the first to take a firm stance against illegal immigration. Dara Lind (2016) for *Vox* reports recalls that in 1996, former President Bill Clinton signed into effect the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act, a bill which essentially created opportunity for law enforcement to use deportation as a punishment for a plethora of crimes committed by illegal immigrants AND legal immigrants. This bill also reinforced the judicial system's ability to detain immigrants while their cases are being decided (paras. 3-4). While former President Barack Obama has often been praised by those who identify as pro-immigrant for enacting the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program (DACA) in 2012, *Politico* correspondents Laura Barrón-López and Alex Thompson (2019) report that nearly 3 million individuals were deported during his presidency (para.1). It is clear that while immigration reform has been an important agenda for several presidential administrations of the past, none have taken quite the same approach as President Donald Trump. Trump's constant insistence on using demeaning and offensive rhetoric to publically describe and attack undocumented immigrants, specifically from the LatinX community, as a means to justify his

administration's inhumane treatment of asylum seekers from Latin backgrounds, is political communication that could be setting a new rhetorical precedent, and it is dangerous.

In the age of Trump's America and the rising relevance of social media networks, such as Twitter and Facebook, when it comes to political discussion and the sharing of political opinions, one can often read strongly worded political debates in the comment sections. These posts contain arguments that look a little something like, "Trump is making America more racist!" or "People are more comfortable being openly racist now that Trump is president!" or even "Trump's racism is causing more and more hate crimes and mass shootings to occur!" According to Eugene Scott (2019) of the *Washington Post*, while a 2019 study conducted by the *Washington Post* found that counties that hosted a Trump campaign rally in 2016 saw a 226% increase in hate crimes compared to similar counties that did not hold a rally, and a 2019 *Pew Research Center* poll found that 56% of Americans believe Trump has caused race relations in America to become more problematic, it is simply impossible to insist that Trump's rhetoric directly incites violence, racism, or bigotry (para. 6). However, that does not mean that the racist rhetoric used by the President is not dangerous, for the danger lies not in a direct correlation, but in the overall political and social environment that Presidential rhetoric has the ability to contribute to and maintain.

Why Political Communication?

Communication has the power to shape the way we view our world and those in it. However, it is important to realize that not all communication is created equal. For instance, the rhetoric used by the President of the United States certainly possesses a

higher potential to influence the masses than does, say, my middle aged neighbor's political Facebook rants. To say that President Trump's rhetoric influences the political and societal environment is not to say that because of what Trump says, suddenly previously non-racist people are becoming racist. Instead, this study will focus on the ability Trump's rhetoric has to enable and bolster a certain type of discourse already practiced by certain political entities and groups. When analyzing Trump's rhetoric, specifically the way he describes LatinX immigrants, there are clear allusions and nods to the ways in which radical right wing political conspiracy theorists, white supremacist organizations, and anti-immigrant hate groups communicate in regard to legal and undocumented immigrants of Latin heritage.

As a master's student of communication studies, who is especially interested in the impact of rhetoric and how it establishes and maintains social and political power, the effect that information communicated directly from the President of the United States has on societal norms and public opinion is not lost on me. As a future law student who hopes to focus on improving policy for underprivileged groups in our country, I am terrified by President Trump's ability to affect public policy through not only his position, but also through his racist and xenophobic rhetoric. The political communication used by Trump to describe LatinX immigrants, or as he would refer to them, the "invasion," has the ability to impact crucial public policy that could worsen the already horrific situation that so many immigrants are being subjected to. Further, it has the potential to legitimize a certain radical *modus operandi* that has previously been disregarded in prominent political spheres. This concerning communicative shift normalizes the discourse that would usually be labeled as fringe and brings it into the mainstream, allowing racist and

xenophobic voices the opportunity to promote their fear mongering agendas and spew their radical unsubstantiated conspiracy theories to the public as if it is fact. To demonstrate the communicative linkage between Trump and these sources of fringe political communication, I will analyze his rhetorical ties to FAIR and Alex Jones.

Why Trump, FAIR, and Alex Jones?

Trump: As discussed above, the potential influence that the communication from the President of the United States possesses is unmatched in the political system. In terms of reach, significance, and visibility, Trump's anti-LatinX discourse has the power to embolden fringe racist and xenophobic motivations more than any other political entity. Trump has consistently mirrored and contributed to the already-occurring conversation taking place in racist and xenophobic spheres, and considering the power his position grants him, his role in the maintaining and fostering of anti-LatinX discourse takes priority in this study.

There is a seemingly endless number of individuals and organizations that promote similar racist anti-immigrant rhetoric, but for the purpose of this study I have decided to narrow my lens to the following two entities: special interest group, The Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), and fringe right-wing conspiracy theorist, Alex Jones. I have chosen these two specific subjects and their communicative connections to Trump to analyze in my study for a very clear purpose; I want to demonstrate that this way of thinking survives and flourishes in several different areas of political society.

FAIR: According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, The Federation for Immigration Reform (FAIR) fashions itself a public interest group, and this group has nearly two

million dedicated members. Although from its name, one might assume that FAIR seeks to encourage legal immigration and works to provide immigration to more people. The actual goal of this organization is quite the opposite, as FAIR aims to limit all immigration in order to keep the United States “pure.” The significance of FAIR in terms of this specific study lies in its ability to disguise itself as an organization that is, for lack of better fitting words, on the up and up. However, through my analysis of the anti-LatinX immigration rhetoric on FAIR’s website, I will demonstrate how this xenophobic wolf in sheep’s clothing contributes to the fear mongering shift occurring in political communication, as well as the communicative role FAIR and Trump’s rhetorical ties plays in furthering the deeper anti-LatinX immigration political agenda.

Alex Jones: I chose a notorious right-wing fringe conspiracy theorist to demonstrate through my analysis that although these radical claims may seem too far-fetched to dignify, we cannot ignore the likes of Alex Jones or his messages any longer. This man believes and promotes some of the most outlandish conspiracy theories ever conspired, and yet he also has a direct line of communication to the President of the United States. Alex Jones and his relationship to the President have given legitimization to unsubstantiated conspiracy theories in mainstream political conversation. I strongly believe that this level of influence into American immigration rhetoric being held by a radio show conspiracy theorist is a concerning phenomenon worth looking into. Through my analysis, I will demonstrate the potential communicative effects that the relationship between Jones and Trump may have on the discursive political environment.

Analyzing these three very different entities and the rhetorical link between them will allow me to show that no matter how seemingly distant these political entities are from one another in terms of relevance and sphere of influence, the communicative connection they share functions to promote the same narrative.

Guiding Questions

- How does xenophobic presidential discourse function to alienate and dehumanize LatinX migrants?
- How do communicative relationships between prominent political figures and special interest hate groups contribute to fear mongering and poor treatment of LatinX migrants?
- How do communicative links between prominent political figures and conspiracy theorists work to legitimize and amplify unsubstantiated fringe frameworks of political thought surrounding LatinX immigration?

Prior Research/Theoretical Approach

There has been significant research conducted by academics in the field of critical communication studies regarding the societal and relational affects communication has the ability to create and maintain. The arguments I will present with this thesis project will most closely adhere to the positions taken by critical communication scholars who focus mainly on rhetoric and how it enables dominant ideals to gain power and sustain control.

Critical rhetoric, as articulated in the essay “Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis”, by Raymie E. McKerrow (1989), a professor of critical rhetoric at Ohio University, can be understood as, “a perspective on rhetoric that explores, in theoretical

and practical terms, the implication of a theory that is divorced from Platonic conception” (p. 91). Critical rhetoric aims to uncover and expose, “the dense web connecting seemingly unrelated forces in society” as they relate to power dynamics within almost every space in our world. (p. 92). McKerrow has conducted extensive research into not only the purpose of critical rhetoric, but also how the field allows for a deeper understanding into the imbalance of power in our society, which can often be bolstered through communication. McKerrow (1989) states, “In practice, a critical rhetoric seeks to unmask or demystify the discourse of power. The aim is to understand the integration of power/knowledge in society- what possibilities for change the integration invites or inhibits and what intervention strategies might be considered appropriate to effect social change” (p. 91). This passage offers an important insight into the power rhetoric holds. It is not possible to assert and maintain that speech is just speech and that words are not capable of swaying societal norms one way or another. Presidential discourse is arguably the most prominent and influential source of political communication in the United States. Therefore, it has the highest chance of contributing to the oppressive domination of social structures and further alienation of marginalized groups, such as Latinx immigrants, by the utilization of de-humanizing rhetoric. When political groups connect with and perpetuate these harmful themes in their own rhetoric, the reach the damaging communication has in society can be devastating for underprivileged and underrepresented groups.

Kenneth Burke, one of the most notable voices of rhetorical theory, believed that defining terms and assigning meaning through language is a symbolic act. In his book, *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method*, Burke (1966)

discusses how important the difference between the meanings we assign to language and reality is. When President Trump refers to LatinX immigrants as an invasion, he is committing a symbolic act. This symbolic act, Burke explains, can be recognized and analyzed in two different ways. The first is the “scientific approach” (p. 44). This approach has to do with what is, and what is not. It is easy to recognize this pattern in Trump’s rhetoric about undocumented immigrants; what they are is an invasion, and invasions are not human. Therefore, undocumented LatinX immigrants are not human. The second approach is the “dramatistic approach” (Burke, 1966, p. 44). This approach has to do with what thou shalt, or what thou shalt not. Again, this approach also shows that Trump’s rhetoric is symbolic action because the approach relies heavily on mythologies we accept as true. Therefore, when Trump calls undocumented immigrants from LatinX countries an invasion he symbolically asserts that we shall not treat them as humans, but as an infestation, because that is what they are.

However, critical scholars, such as Burke, understand that just because meaning is applied to any given terminology, that does not make the meaning reality. Burke (1966) states, “Even if any given terminology is a reflection of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a selection of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a deflection of reality” (p. 45). Burke’s further elaboration on “directing the attention” explains how when rhetoric favors dominant views of reality, it inherently disregards the realities of non-dominant groups (p. 45). This can be understood when analyzing how Trump directs attention. When he uses his invasion rhetoric, he directs attention towards the needs of dominant groups to feel as though their way of life is protected, while directing attention away from the basic human rights that the undocumented immigrants

have to pursue safety and happiness for their families and for themselves. If President Trump were to use accurate and unloaded terminology to describe these immigrants, (examples: migrants, asylum seekers, etc), the rhetoric would not stir up the same fear and unease as the language he is currently employing. Therefore, Burke's theory of the power of terministic screens and the effect they have on how we view the world and each other solidifies the idea that how the president labels undocumented LatinX immigrants is of the utmost importance.

Further, J. David Cisneros (2008), a professor of communication studies at the University of Illinois, builds upon Burke's framework in his article, "Contaminated Communities: The Metaphor of 'Immigrant as Pollutant' In Media Representations of Immigration." In this piece, the concept of metaphorical labeling of immigrants is presented as the following, "As repositories of cultural understandings, metaphors are some of the principal tools with which dominant ideologies and prejudices are represented and reinforced" (p. 571). He continues, "This framing is 'NOT neutral' but 'dehumanizes' immigrants and 'pre-empts' a consideration of 'broader social and economic concerns' (such as foreign policy and international human rights)" (p. 571). Cisneros (2008) explains that the use of metaphors to describe immigrants serves, "as conceptual tools with which scholars build research, society establishes group relationships, and government creates public policy" (p. 570). Through the instances of immigration discourse analyzed in Cisneros' work, a clear theme of racist metaphorical language is established, as well as the ideology of immigrants as, "invaders, infections, criminals, and infestations" that is present in American media coverage and broader social conversation (p. 572). Cisneros' presentation of metaphors as, "cultural indices

with which ‘Americans build their commonplace understandings’ and attitudes” provides a framework of thought with which I will analyze the communicative environment present between Trump, FAIR, and Jones.

In the book, *Race and News: Critical Perspectives*, authors Campbell, LeDuff, Jenkins, and Brown (2012) question and discuss the relationship between influential communication and social beliefs, specifically the power unbalanced representation has to create fear and distrust. The authors focus on how reports of crime and criminal statistics presented in mass media consistently portray marginalized groups to be the perpetrators in grossly inaccurate percentages as compared to their white counterparts. The authors also argue the social significance this false labeling has on power and control and how these fictional norms are able to persist. Campbell et al. (2012) discuss the phenomenon of “common sense” and how society’s acceptance of what we hear communicated in the media by prominent and influential sources becomes a belief system. The authors state, “The danger of the common sense claim to truth is in its exclusion of those who live outside the familiar world it represents” (Campbell et al., 2012, p. 8). The insights offered by the authors of this book contribute to the argument I will be making because not only is the racist rhetoric communicated by President Trump presented to the public through media, he specifically utilizes inaccurate information regarding criminal activity perpetrated by undocumented immigrants. Trump’s frequent insistence that LatinX undocumented immigrants are violent, criminal, and dangerous greatly contributes to the creation of a false societal belief due to his position as President of the United States. Many citizens have faith in his powerful and influential role and they rely on the assumption that the presidential communication being presented to the

public is true and accurate. When President Trump refers to undocumented immigrants as an invasion and states that many of those immigrants who are seeking asylum in our country are rapists and murderers, his position as President causes many citizens to accept what he is saying as truth, even when his claims are unfounded and merely an attempt at political gain. When society begins to accept and believe inaccurate or alternative facts about a certain marginalized group, it creates a breeding ground for fear, distrust, and hate to fester, ultimately contributing to unfair and unsafe treatment of that group.

The work presented by notable critical communication theorists Hasian and Delgado (1998) informs us how different sections of critical communication theory are able to intersect and strengthen our understanding of complex social issues. For this reason, I will be utilizing the theoretical framework presented by Hasian and Delgado (1998) and focusing on how critical rhetoric theory and critical race theory work to explain the connection between the influence of political communication on society, as well as how racism and oppression intersect and perpetuate these notions. When examining the rhetoric used to label LatinX immigrants, it is crucial to not only have a firm grasp of critical rhetoric as discussed in the prior research above, but to also include a perspective that acknowledges and explores issues of race and racism. Through critical communication theorizing, we understand that there are dominant power structures in society, but how do aspects of race further inform how these structures function to oppress certain racial groups? This is where critical race theory comes into play. Critical race theory, or as presented by Hasian and Delgado (1998) “racialized critical rhetorical theorizing (RCRT)”, is a “framework (that) attempts to assess the ways in which public

and legal notions of race influence the ways in which we create histories, cultural memories, narratives, myths, and other discursive units” (p. 247). This perspective allows for a deeper understanding into how these anti-LatinX immigrant notions have been constructed, maintained, and bolstered throughout history and have created the current communication climate. The authors state, “In place of moderate and formalistic racial reforms, critical race theorists advocate the need for positive reconstructions in the form of theories that come from the lived experiences of traditionally disempowered and disenfranchised groups” (Hasian and Delgado, 1998, p. 252). This passage provides key insight into the theoretical contribution of critical race theory when analyzing political discourse. If the experiences of marginalized racial groups are subdued or ignored by social and political rhetorical systems, it is impossible to expect a just and equal society. Further, when certain racial groups are alienated by these rhetorical power structures maintained by oppressive influence, opportunities for the spread of false information and discriminatory social behavior become more common. It is crucial to recognize the ever-present element of racism in relation to immigration discourse because without this focus, the presence of damaging political language will continue to foster prejudicial communication scenarios within our political environment.

Robin DiAngelo (2018), author of the book *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*, explains the idea of white fragility through a sociological perspective. DiAngelo states,

Whiteness rests upon a foundational premise: the definition of whites as the norm or standard for human, and people of color as a deviation from that norm.

Whiteness is not acknowledged by white people, and the white reference point is assumed to be universal and is imposed on everyone. (p. 19)

DiAngelo's framework for whiteness, white fragility, and how these concepts are woven into the very fibers of the culture in the U.S. sets up a clear connection to the aspects of political communication analyzed in this thesis. Through institutionally grounded dominant power relations, whiteness maintains a stronghold of control over the social narrative. In this instance, the narrative is used to diminish the reality faced by undocumented immigrants. Aspects of white fragility are clearly demonstrated throughout the communication patterns of Trump, FAIR, and the Jones, which contributes to hostile and racially prejudicial communication towards LatinX migrants in political and social spheres.

Through the implementation of the perspectives discussed above, this study will display not only a clear connection between the immigration rhetoric of Donald Trump, FAIR, and Alex Jones, but it will also offer insight into what this connection means for communication in our society. These three political entities and their usage of xenophobic and dehumanizing language will act as a rhetorical sample for my analysis into the overall contribution to the anti-LatinX immigrant climate. The frameworks of critical rhetorical theory and critical race theory will contribute to how these political communication patterns ultimately create false narratives and further marginalize LatinX immigrants.

Chapter 2: The Influence of Presidential Communication: How Trump's Anti-LatinX Migrant Rhetoric Shapes Political Discourse

As soon as Donald Trump embarked on his campaign to be elected the 45th president of the United States, he appeared to have a clear stance on undocumented immigrants entering the country. This position, typical of conservatives and those who associate themselves with the Republican party, focuses on illegal immigration and how to stop it. However, Trump's anti-migrant policies do not treat all undocumented immigrants the same, a distinction clearly represented in his insistent efforts to build a wall on the U.S./Mexico border. The focal point of Trump's mission to deny migrants entry to the U.S. landed directly on the LatinX immigrant community. Trump's anti-illegal immigration agenda is predominately focused on limiting the amount of undocumented immigrants entering the country, specifically targeting those who are attempting to cross the southern U.S. border. Although the myth of the American dream is often regarded as the reason LatinX migrants decide to relocate to the U.S., there are more contributing factors that are far less glamorous and hopeful. Some of these motivators include unethical government structures, lack of quality food and water sources, generational poverty, political unrest, natural disasters, and even a lack of basic human rights. Regardless of the scenario unfolding in the immigrants' home county, Trump's agenda does not allow for situational consideration when it comes to undocumented immigrants seeking asylum in the U.S. when they are migrating from countries south of the border. His firm stance on the matter relies on the standard that migrants gain citizenship the "right" way, referring to the fact that these migrants are entering the country while undocumented. However, according to the International Rescue Committee (2019), an organization dedicated to ensuring the rights and safety of

undocumented migrants, seeking asylum at a United States port of entry is in fact legal (Is It Legal, 2019, paragraph 6). Understanding this is critical when analyzing Trump's resistance to LatinX migrants because it begs the question: is Trump's problem with undocumented LatinX really migrants' legality, or does it stem from somewhere else?

According to *Time Magazine* contributor Katie Reilly (2016), at his first campaign rally in New York City that took place on June 16, 2015, Trump spoke these now infamous words, "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best, They're not sending you. They're not sending you. They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people" (para. 5). He gave his supporters promises of building a wall that would separate the United States and Mexico, which Trump claimed would result in an end to illegal immigration. On top of that, he claimed that he would require Mexico to pay for the wall, a claim that former Mexican President Vicente Fox has outright denied (Reilly, 2016, paragraph 6). These statements, both completely unsubstantiated, have become part of a larger pattern of presidential rhetoric that Trump has employed in his discourse surrounding immigration.

These statements and claims regarding Mexico and LatinX immigrants unfortunately have continued to become more and more inflammatory as Trump's presidency has commenced, and with these statements has come a shift in the political and societal climate. Specifically, Trump's referral to LatinX immigrants as an "invasion" has shifted public focus on the issue, changing the immigration narrative from people's effort to find a better life to a sinister and violent infestation. While many political entities and anti-immigrant groups have utilized the same "invasion" rhetoric to

describe LatinX asylum seekers, the political communication delivered by the President of the United States has the power to effect change, for better or for worse, more than any other individual or organization. Presidential communication constructs and maintains political and societal norms due to possessing more power and influence than other elected or unelected government officials in the United States government. With this power comes great responsibility, because as communication scholars understand, the construction and maintaining of norms in society has the potential to help certain groups and drastically damage others. Dominant groups often benefit from the narratives perpetuated by those who have power and influence over political communication, while marginalized and oppressed groups are forgotten, abandoned, or in the case of Trump's immigration discourse, outright attacked.

Just a few clicks on Google would lead any critical thinker to a vast wealth of knowledge surrounding the topic of immigration and immigrant behavior that disproves the President's claims about LatinX migrants seeking a new life in the U.S. However, not everyone would take the steps to research what the President Trump says during his rally and press statements, because they are not aware that this is something they have to do. In his essay "Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis," Raymie E. McKerrow (1989) quotes Giddens (1979), "The emphasis has shifted from the question 'is this discourse true or false?' to 'how the discourse mobilized to legitimate the sectional interests of hegemonic groups'" (McKerrow, 1989, p. 93). Think about this concept in terms of a controversial Hollywood rumor. Gossip magazines report the salacious event, talk shows run with the juicy topic, and before the target can properly defend themselves, their alleged behavior is splattered all across social media. By the time the dust has settled and the rumors are

cleared, there are many people who will still choose to believe the false information. Public opinion, once its mind is made up, has a difficult time letting go of the narratives fed to them by influential sources, and this is even more true when it comes to political communication. Trump's political discourse has the power to greatly influence political attitudes and social behavior through the power that exists inside of his already privileged communication. This is how the power of political communication, specifically presidential rhetoric, is able to create and sustain political and social narratives, whether or not those narratives possess any amount of truth at all. The narrative presented by Trump is taken as fact by individuals who have not considered the strategic use of oppressive power at the president's finger tips. In the book *Presidents Creating the Presidency: Deeds Done in Words* (2006) by Karlyn Campbell and Kathleen Hall, the authors discuss the importance and impact that presidential rhetoric has on political realities when they quote Murray Edelman, "political language *is* political reality" (Campbell and Hall, 2006, p. 8). This statement clearly signifies the importance of what political leaders say and how they say it, especially the President of the United States, because the discourse creates the very political reality it exists in. Donald Trump's position as president gives him the ability to access and embolden his desired political realities.

The privilege of possessing this great amount of political power comes with great responsibility. Campbell and Hall (2006) state, "The president must be able to speak for the nation – beyond its partisan divisions. The Constitution assigns the president the distinctive role of assessing the state of the nation and the special authority to set priorities-to recommend necessary and expedient legislation" (Campbell and Hall, 2006,

p. 13). Having the power to assign priority to certain national and international issues is one of the most important roles the president has, but assigning priority to certain issues means that other issues will be placed on the backburner. In the case of Donald Trump's immigration rhetoric, he places priority on southern border security and ensuring that LatinX migrants are unable to seek refuge in this country. He frames this situation as a dire issue threatening the American people. When the issue of the current immigration situation is framed in such a way by presidential discourse, the topic and discussion around how to help these migrants is minimized. Priority is given to protecting one group while taken away from another, a process which works to greatly diminish awareness and humanitarian effort that would do remarkable things to alleviate certain issues surrounding immigration. This shifting of focus in favor of dominant perspectives, as discussed by notable critical rhetorical theorists Ono and Sloop (2002), relies on comparing two sides of the story: "dominant discourses" and "outlaw discourses" (p. 14). Dominant discourses are those backed by oppressive power and institutional influence. In contrast, outlaw discourses speak to the experiences of those who are marginalized in society without discursive power to control and shape narratives. Therefore, the presidency is a source of dominant discursive power, which has the ability to, "work within the most commonly accepted understandings of what is just or unjust, good or bad", a level of influence unpossessed by those whose experiences are devalued in society (Ono and Sloop, 2002, p. 14). This discursive power imbalance results in an unfair political communication environment that does not allow every perspective to be properly acknowledged and understood.

Further, critical rhetorical theorists Hasian and Delgado (1998) discuss the importance of considering how race plays into rhetorical power by presenting three claims offered by critical race theory, “1. Racism is a complex construct that involves individuals and institutions that are not usually considered complicitous; 2. Discourse theorists need to pay attention to competing histories and narratives that have created complex racial characterizations; and 3. The “rights talk” of classical liberal theorizing has become depoliticized and stalled (p. 250). It is crucial to take these three guidelines into consideration when analyzing the power of presidential communication. Guideline one provides key insight into why and how presidential communication is able to harbor such political discursive power even when the information is unsubstantiated and relies on racist political undertones. The institution of the presidency has discursively positioned itself in order to be aligned with positive notions such as honor and responsibility, which creates a social contract of perceptual trust between the president and the public. An institution as powerful and influential as the presidency is able to rely on this positive discursive reputation to control the discussions around any given political issue, because it is perceived to be the most qualified political source in the United States. Guideline 2 implores critical thinkers to take historically-constructed racially prejudicial discourses into consideration. In order to hold institutions, such as the presidency, accountable when the political messaging it perpetuates contributes to racism in our society, consumers of political communication must question how oppressive power is contributing to and helping those in power to further racial stereotypes and alienation. Lastly, guideline 3 insists that true critical and liberal theorizing needs to regain political momentum in order to truly engage with and create solutions for the existence and

determination of dominant power institutions. A critical rhetorical lens is imperative to the process of ensuring that the presidency is held accountable for contributing to racially unjust discursive patterns.

An understanding of critical rhetorical theory allows for individuals to consider multiple solutions that take into account the experiences of more than just the dominant group in power. According to Eugene Robinson of the Washington Post (2019), there are practical and useful steps that would help the situation at the border, “We need more border agents, more immigration judges, more housing” (para. 2). If the topic was presented to the public within the confines of thoughtful and ethical communication, American citizens would have more opportunity to not only become aware of the real issue, but also have more motivation to help create solutions. However, as stated by Robinson (2019), President Trump, “treats the migrant surge like an existential threat. ‘We can’t take you anymore. We can’t take you. Our country is full,’ he said this month at the border in California. But, of course, our vast nation is anything but full. Instead of ‘can’t,’ what Trump really means is ‘won’t’” (paragraph 4). This fear mongering tactic of stating that our country is full results in fear and resentment toward migrants who are coming here to seek refuge instead of inspiring compassionate concern for human welfare. This is why it is crucial for the President to use factual and ethical communication practices when delivering political messages.

In the book *Uncivil Wars: Political Campaigns in a Media Age*, author Thomas Hollihan (2009) quotes Nimmo and Combs (1990 pp. 3-4), “1. our everyday, taken for granted reality is a delusion; 2. reality is created, or constructed, through communication, not expressed by it; 3. for any situation there is no single reality, no one objective truth,

but multiple subjectively derived realities” (Hollihan, 2009, p. 18). As critical communication scholars understand, in order to be a well informed and self-aware individual, it is imperative to recognize the existence of “little t” truths instead of just one “capital T truth.” This acceptance of multiple realities, when it comes to political communication, allows for a more well-rounded understanding of the social implications caused by political rhetoric, especially presidential discourse. Believing only the narratives and realities presented by those who hold dominant power is dangerous, because it contributes to the common sense myth. This myth disallows any perspective to be recognized and focused on other than the view held by the majority or those in power. Communication is how we create our reality and life-narrative and it also deeply affects how we interact with and judge the realities of others. Hollihan (2009) states,

Thus, the political arguments that create public discourse shape and are shaped by the central values held by citizens. These values are embodied in the symbols by which we communicate. Through symbolic choices we construct the stories that give meaning to our lives, these stories are populated with heroes and villains acting out roles in accordance with our expectations. (p. 18)

To understand this statement in terms of Trump’s immigration rhetoric, one must consider who the heroes and villains are in his narrative. Donald Trump is the president of the United States, and therefore he speaks for our country and his message has the strongest influence over American politics than does any other source of communication. When Trump idealizes a false notion of what the American way of life is while demonizing LatinX immigrants, he is constructing a political reality which will affect the political climate present in the society he governs. His political arguments surrounding

immigration will shape public opinion due to how powerful presidential rhetoric is in political and social spaces.

Paying attention to and analyzing presidential communication is extremely important for many reasons. As discussed above, the discourse that comes directly from the president and the president's administration has the power to create and shape social beliefs and narratives. When the President of the United States delivers a public message, the American people listen, absorb, and consider the communication because it is coming directly from the leader of their nation. This is why it is crucial to critically analyze and take seriously everything the President says, because the potential impact the communication could have on societal attitudes cannot be taken for granted. In 2020, it is easier than ever for the White House to convey these messages to the American public through both traditional communication channels such as television news and newspapers, and new media such as social media websites and apps, including Facebook and Twitter. The ease and convenience through which the President has the ability to communicate with the public results in frequent and unexpected posts, which can be overwhelming for the public to keep up with. Attempting to stay on top of every contribution to political communication made by President Trump would require an individual to have several social media accounts that they must routinely check, as well as access to varied traditional news sources. Although it may seem daunting to take the time out of the day that is necessary in order to contemplate and consider the communication made by the president, it is extremely important to do so in order to stay aware of how this discourse could be effecting society.

Staying aware of presidential discourse in American politics has taken on a new challenging sense of rigor and significance with the Trump presidency and the topic of LatinX immigration. The responsibility presidents have to maintain fairness and promote equality through their presidential communication to the American public has not been a priority for Trump and his administration, however, that does not mean that the communication being utilized is not strategic. The Trump administration has succeeded to some degree within its supportive base when it comes to nurturing a narrative President Trump and his constituents deem to be favorable in order to further a certain agenda. However, it is imperative to understand that these narratives are not something that Donald Trump created, and those who buy into these claims did not reach these conclusions over night. Attitudes of prejudice and distrust against LatinX individuals and their culture are part of a long standing tradition in American political discourse. Trump's base, a group that was aligned with anti-LatinX migration myths long before Trump's political career, did not suddenly decide to be racist because of Trump's rhetoric. Instead, the connection between Trump's anti-LatinX discourse and the racist political shift must not be understood as direct correlation, but as a circular pattern of communication. When Donald Trump refers to LatinX immigrants and asylum seekers as an invasion, an infestation, and as rapists and murderers, he is agitating the already angry and fragile beast through his powerful presidential communication. This communication, which is then conveyed to the public, contributes to building the narrative and furthering the political cause. When a narrative that labels LatinX immigrants and asylum seekers as evil and dangerous is not only recognized but emboldened by the president, opportunities to grow compassion and understanding for that group are limited. The perceived reality

that society holds of these migrant people changes from human beings in search of a better life to a dangerous army here to ruin the lifestyle and threaten the safety of American people. A topic that should elicit humanitarian concern and empathy is shifted to a source that contributes to unnecessary panic and fear, which inherently leads to situations of hate, misunderstanding, and intolerance.

When critics of communication studies argue that words are just words and that they do not hold the power communication scholars such as Burke (1966) insist they do, the important connection between discourse and societal norms and behaviors is being ignored and diminished. Societal norms act to benefit certain groups while excluding others. When it comes to social norms constructed and maintained by political communication, there is more at stake than just public opinion. Political communication has the power to effect social change through public policy and law making that is supposed to serve and benefit all people, however, history shows us that more often than not, this is not the case. The dominant group we focus on when discussing LatinX immigration, white people, is the beneficiary of most public policy and law, which ensures that this powerful group avoids punishment for crime including fines and jail time more than any other group. This group also has the luxury of possessing the power to shape moral understanding, which in turn adds to the social influence already given to this dominant group. When this group reaps the benefits of the system, this inherently means that marginalized groups do not. This takes the form of unequal treatment in the eyes of the law which then manifests as unbalanced arrest patterns and longer sentences for crimes, punishments that the dominant group would never be held accountable for. It also presents itself as the unfair and unrealistic judgment and labeling of marginalized

groups which further alienates the group from benefiting from the social system. Social power imbalances in regards to immigration can be traced back to the idea of the United States being a melting pot. In the book *White Fragility*, author Robin DiAngelo (2018) states,

The metaphor of the United States as the great melting pot, in which immigrants from around the world come together and melt into one unified society through the process of assimilation, is a cherished idea. Once new immigrants learn English and adapt to American culture and customs, they become Americans. In reality, only European immigrants were allowed to melt, or assimilate, into dominant culture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, because, regardless of their ethnic identities, these immigrants were perceived to be white and this could belong. (pp. 17-18).

These unfortunate yet undeniable historical truths can be clearly demonstrated through the political communication Donald Trump delivers to the public when discussing LatinX immigration.

Throughout history, immigrants have been demonized by several different nationalist-leaning politicians and groups in various parts of the world. One especially heinous example of this occurred during the rise and reign of Adolf Hitler in Germany. Hitler, responsible for one of the most reprehensible and disgusting ethnic cleansings in history, used anti-Semitic themes that had been around for many years to grow and embolden hatred of Jewish people in Germany. However, this was not the only ideology he employed in order to justify to the German people the plan he had in motion. He needed to contribute to the narrative of hate that he hoped would convince his desired

community to feel empowered in their perceived sense of racial purity. Hitler drew his inspiration from a surprising source, the words of an American author. Madison Grant, writer of the 1916 book *The Passing of the Great Race*, sparked the notion of racial purity throughout the world. As told by Adam Serwer of *The Atlantic* (2019), Hitler wrote to Grant to thank him for writing this book, which he called his “bible” (para. 6). Serwer (2019) recalls Grant’s work as a writer to present and describe an ideal “Nordic” race that, “had founded America was in peril, and all of modern society’s accomplishments along with it, helped catalyze nativist legislators in Congress to pass comprehensive restrictionist immigration policies in the early 1920s” (para. 6). Grant’s perspective, which has now been “rebranded as white genocide”, describes a desirable ethnic group that risks being destroyed and replaced by immigrants that will inevitably ruin the America that came before (para. 6). Grant also engaged in “scientific racism” that used the concept of eugenics, the process of “improving” the human race through controlled breeding in order to increase desirable characteristics, to explore his belief that whiteness was the purest human form (Serwer, 2019, para. 9). When describing Jewish immigrants, Grant (1916) wrote:

These immigrants adopt the language of the native American, they wear his clothes, they steal his name, and they are beginning to take his women, but they seldom adopt his religion or understand his ideals and while he is being elbowed out of his own home the American looks calmly abroad and urges on others the suicidal ethics which are exterminating his own race. (paragraph 10)

Hitler took these beliefs and applied them to his own mission in Germany, mirroring Grant's white America in his objective to restore Germany to "aryan purity" (Serwer, 2019, paras. 25-29).

In the 1920s, the deeply rooted false narrative of immigration-fueled white replacement had maintained a stronghold in the fringes of American far-right political attitudes for generations, however, the United States deflected this relationship and gripped onto a more desirable belief system: The United States was responsible for contributing to ending ethnic cleansing during World War II, and therefore believed it was separate from those beliefs. Serwer (2019) states:

Most Americans, however, quickly forgot who Grant was—but not because the country had grappled with his vision's dangerous appeal and implications.

Reflexive recoil was more like it: When Nazism reflected back that vision in grotesque form, wartime denial set in. Ever since, a strange kind of historical amnesia has obscured the American lineage of this white-nationalist ideology.

(para. 7)

Serwer (2019) quotes historian Jonathon Peter Spiro, author of *Defending the Master Race: Conservation, Eugenics, and the Legacy of Madison Grant* (2009) who presents the idea that, "Even though the Germans had been directly influenced by Madison Grant and the American eugenics movement, when we fought Germany, because Germany was racist, racism became unacceptable in America. Our enemy was racist; therefore we adopted antiracism as our creed" (para. 7). This ideology that white nationalism and anti-immigrant hate, "has no roots in U.S. soil, that it is racist zealotry with a foreign pedigree and marginal allure" is a false notion that has kept these attitudes at bay in the fringes of

far-right political spaces, however, these sentiments are becoming more and more prevalent in American and European politics in the modern era (Serwer, 2019, para. 2).

Donald Trump's employment of invasion rhetoric to describe undocumented immigrants, as well as his immigration discourse as a whole, while prolific, is nothing new when it comes to political communication. According to Isaac Stanley-Becker (2019) of the *Washington Post*, Trump's immigration rhetoric, "carries far-right echoes that go back to the Nazi era" (para. 1). Stanley-Becker reports that Trump's immigration discourse, specifically his statements that liken LatinX immigrants to criminals, has generated a distorted fan base of sorts among modern far-right anti-immigrant German nationalists. One specific segment of this group called the Alternative for Germany (AfD) praised Trump on their official Facebook page, calling him, "a realistic man who has the courage to speak the truth" (Stanley-Becker, 2019, para. 4). Trump has also communicated on numerous occasions the idea that the United States is "full" and there is no space for Mexican and Central American migrants. This claim is completely unsubstantiated. In fact, Stanley-Becker (2019) reports that not only is the United States not full, fertility rates are at a "record low", but that does not stop Trump from reiterating this false claim. During a visit to the border on April 8, 2019, Trump addressed these immigrants saying, "Can't take you anymore" and again in a tweet days later that stated, "Our country is FULL" (Stanley-Becker, 2019, para. 3). Stanley-Becker (2019) describes the relationship between this false narrative and the similarly false ideas about Germany being too full for immigrants that Hitler presented to his followers, stating, "The notion that Germany required more space in the early 20th century was similarly not born out by reality. Parts of eastern Germany were actually underpopulated" (para. 20). These anti-

immigrant themes have played out throughout history to the demise of millions of individuals, which is causing historians grave concern considering the current political climate. Germany has a long and horrific history with anti-immigrant attitudes being in control of social and political behavior, however, Stanley-Becker (2019) states that nationalist views have been gaining popularity throughout all of Europe, writing that Trump's language, "fits a pattern of far-right rhetoric reemerging globally. Fear of an immigrant takeover motivates fascist activity in Europe, where, historically, the specter of overcrowding has been used to justify ethnic cleansing" (para. 5). In an interview with the Stanley-Becker (2019) John Connelly, a historian of modern Europe at the University of California at Berkeley stated, "the echoes do indeed remind one of the Nazi period, unfortunately. The exact phrasing may be different, but the spirit is very similar. The concern about an ethnic, national people not having proper space — this is something you could definitely describe as parallel to the 1930s" (para. 7). These "echoes" have become a source of inspiration for far-right, anti-immigrant, European activists, who in an effort to distance themselves from Nazi connective themes so they can normalize their message in society, have begun to look to Trump's immigration statements for guidance and justification.

Trump has used his invasion-centered rhetoric to describe LatinX immigrants with a reckless sense of disregard for the truth. His insistence on using this myth while communicating with his supporters and the media has caused severe backlash from the press, however, the support he receives from his base is enough to keep him on this rhetorical path. Trump, since announcing his campaign, seems to be on a warpath to be *right* about Latinx immigrants, and he is not going to let something as irrelevant as the

truth get in his way. Some political-business analysts including David J. Lynch and Kevin Sieff (2019) of the *Washington Post* theorize that Trump's immigration rhetoric and behavior toward the situation at the border has been a powerful and successful mechanism to secure business and trade agreements that Trump finds favorable to U.S. economic growth. In fact, the two contributing writers discuss that Trump has already begun to threaten the implementation of trade punishments on Mexico in order to, "force the Mexican government to take more aggressive actions to prevent Central American migrants from crossing its territory en route to the United States" (Lynch & Sieff, 2019, para. 3). The question raised by Lynch and Sieff (2019) is whether the chicken or the egg came first; is Trump's end goal actually a closed southern border, or is this all a ploy at revising or possibly even doing away with the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA)? The focus on Trump's rhetoric as it pertains to this critical communication study, although it can be dissected in countless ways through lenses of various critical avenues, has less to do with the many reasons why he is presenting this rhetoric and more to do with the political and social implications this discourse has had and could have in the future.

One of the most crucial aspects of Trump's immigration rhetoric that needs to be understood is that there are simply no substantiated resources to back up what he is saying about the situation at the border. *Washington Post* columnist Eugene Robinson (2019) argues,

Tens of thousands of Central American asylum seekers, even hundreds of thousands, do not constitute a serious crisis — not for a continent-spanning nation of 330 million, a nation built through successive waves of immigration.

The migrants have severely taxed and at times overwhelmed the systems at the border that must process and adjudicate their claims for refuge, but this is a simple matter of resources. (para. 3)

Interestingly enough, the Editorial Board at *USA Today* (2019) reports that during Trump’s first two years in office, illegal immigration was at “multi-year lows” (para. 7). Not only did the traditionally largest source of immigrants, Mexican males, attempting to cross the border decrease, a new source that was on the rise, families and minors from Central America, decreased as well. In fact, according to U.S. Customs and Border Protection, the 2017 fiscal year showed the lowest number of border apprehensions in nearly 50 years. This trend can be observed in below Figure 1, a timeline of immigration arrests created by U.S. Customs and Border Protection and reported by *USA Today* (2019). CNBC correspondent Carmin Chappell (2019) reports that simultaneously to this record low in illegal immigration arrests, President Trump was trying to justify declaring the situation at the border as a national emergency in order to gain funding to build the wall (para.1).

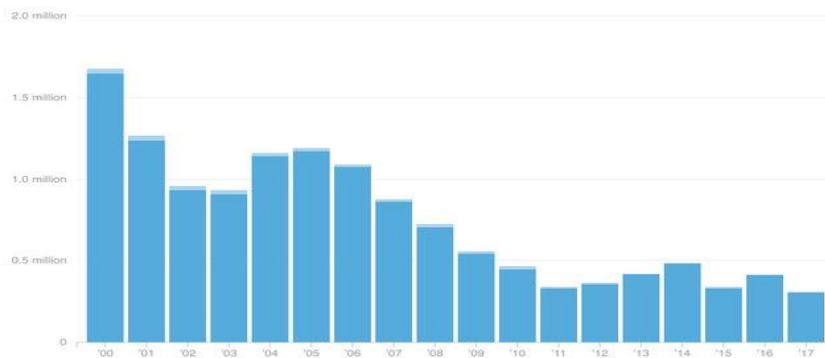


Figure 1 (U.S. CBP, 2019)

Another non-alternative fact that Trump left out of his statements on immigration is that according to the Anti-Defamation League, most immigrants currently living in the United

States are not here illegally and, percentage wise, there are less undocumented immigrants in the U.S. now than there were between 1900-1930 (para. 1). The ADL reports that undocumented immigrants make up about only 3.5% of the population today, which gives reason to question Trump's insistence that our borders are being invaded.

The apparent discrepancy between the given facts regarding the situation at the border and the response from the President is anything but shocking. The false everity of the threat posed at the border is just one aspect of the invasion myth that Trump chooses to perpetuate to his supporters. According to *Time Magazine* contributor Katie Reilly (2016), one specific example of Trump spreading other falsehoods about LatinX immigrants to his followers is when he attacked Mexicans during a campaign rally stating, "They are not our friend, believe me. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people" (para. 1). Before delving more deeply into the the societal and political impact presidential communication has on social norms and views, it is crucial to understand that these claims made about Mexican and Central American immigrants by Trump are false. In order to break down the various myths in just that one statement from Trump, one can refer again to the ADL. According to the ADL, the notion that immigrants consistently bring crime such as rape and murder to the United States is outright false. The ADL (2015) reports,

public figures have claimed that immigrants are "killers" and "rapists," bringing crime to the U.S. Study after study has shown, however, that immigrants—regardless of where they are from, what immigration status they hold, and how much education they have completed—are less likely than native-born citizens to commit crimes or become incarcerated. (para. 4)

One such study presented by the ADL, conducted by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce (2016), states that there is a negative correlation between levels of immigration and crime rates. Another interesting fact reported by the ADL is that, “crime rates are lowest in states with the highest immigration growth rates, and that states with larger shares of undocumented immigrants tend to have lower crime rates than states with smaller shares” (para. 4) These reports and studies show the contradictory relationship between the truth about undocumented immigrants and what the President says about them, which is an issue that cannot be ignored. When those who hold the power to shape political conversation do not use truthful and ethical communication practices, it is our duty as members of society to pay attention and speak up for those whose voices are taken away by dominant groups. As holocaust survivor turned anti-war pacifist Pastor Martin Niemöller once stated,

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—

and there was no one left to speak for me. (Marcuse, 2000, para. 1)

Donald Trump’s presidential immigration discourse acts to bolster and further assign racially prejudicial symbolic labels to an entire group of people in order to ostracize them from American society. His political communication is so influential that

even if his intent is different, it would not matter. The false racist and xenophobic language used by Trump to discuss LatinX migrants creates a favorable environment for hate, prejudice, and conspiracy to thrive.

Chapter 3: Normalizing Xenophobic Anti-LatinX Discourse: Trump's Communicative Link to White Nationalist Group FAIR

In this chapter, I will be continuing my discussion into the anti-immigration rhetoric utilized by Donald Trump as well as another political entity that has a profound effect on the narrative surrounding immigration. This group, The Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), will act as my focal point. This organization, while different in function and social stance than the office of the President, works to construct and maintain the same political communication narrative. I will be analyzing the anti-immigrant and anti-LatinX language put forth by this group, specifically the rhetoric displayed on its website. This analysis will not only work to continue my entire critical exploration of anti-immigrant discourse, it will allow me to demonstrate that the political communication of vastly different entities at various levels of influence can contribute to an all-around theme of prejudice, discrimination, and hate.

The source I will be analyzing is the Federation for American Immigration Reform. The name of this group, which is often abbreviated to FAIR, is highly misleading. This organization, which was founded in 1979, calls for immigration reform that would limit legal and illegal immigration to the United States. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, the organization considers itself to be mainstream and it is self-described as a, "public interest organization with a support base comprising nearly 50 private foundations and over 1.9 million diverse members and supporters." However, the world views and beliefs the organization was founded on, and still perpetuates to this day, align more with fringe conspiracy theory than mainstream public interest. This group has utilized rhetoric to describe LatinX immigrants as a "Latin onslaught" or "explosion"

which is occurring while “whites see their power and control over their lives declining” (SPLC, para. 3). FAIR also relies on using logical fallacies, including direct causation, arguing that having LatinX immigrants in the United States has contributed to higher crime rates, environmental decay, and pay stagnation, all of which are claims that have not been proven or substantiated. When analyzing FAIR’s website, the term “alien” is the only term used to describe LatinX immigrants, which is another dehumanizing tactic used as a terministic screen by anti-immigrant entities. On FAIR’s website, there is heavy praise for the efforts being done to limit immigration by the Trump Administration and even a timeline of Trump’s “Immigration Accomplishments.”

This artifact, though different in form and sector of influence than President Trump, functions to uncover the same rhetorical pattern prevalent within certain segments of today’s America. Further, this organization specifically employs anti-LatinX immigration stances. I see an important opportunity to demonstrate through my research that no matter how legitimate or obscure a group may seem, ignoring the potential impact of their language as it pertains to LatinX migrants does not serve or promote democracy. This is why I have chosen to study a political sector different than the Presidency, a special interest group/hate group, to display this integral relation. It is through discussing and relating this organization to the Trump Presidency that I will display one of the key pillars of my overall argument; although racist and xenophobic political communication comes in all shapes and sizes, when it is constructed and maintained by those in power, serious social consequences may result.

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the word “fair” is defined as, “marked by impartiality and honesty: free from self-interest, prejudice, or favoritism.” As

children, we learn the importance of fairness on the playground, in sports, in academics, and how creating a fair environment means treating everyone with equality. This is why I find myself so confused while analyzing the literature available on the Federation for American Immigration Reform's (FAIR) website. At first, the organization does an almost decent job of disguising itself as an average conservative political group. Not my cup of tea, personally, but nothing too alarming upon a brief overview of the site. Below, I have included the information provided in the "About FAIR" tab on the website,

"As concerned Americans, we all share a responsibility to look to the future and envision where current policies may lead. Immigration is no different.

Immigration policies can determine what kind of America future generations will inherit – livable or overcrowded, successful or overburdened. While we see our obligations to help the less fortunate around the world, we also know that irresponsible border policies can undermine our own nation's ability to be a successful change agent for the human race. FAIR engages in community outreach to inform affected communities of how national immigration policies affect their own situation, and invites them to engage in a meaningful dialogue on how to shape immigration policies for the 21st Century and beyond.

As a non-partisan, public interest organization with a support base comprising nearly 50 private foundations and over 1.9 million diverse members and supporters, FAIR is free of party loyalties and special interest connections.

FAIR evaluates policies, seeking out solutions that help reduce the negative impact of uncontrolled immigration on the nation's security, economy, workforce, education, healthcare and environment.

Our Mission

FAIR seeks to reduce overall immigration to a more normal level. Reducing legal immigration levels from well over one million presently to 300,000 a year over a sustained period will allow America to manage growth, address environmental concerns, and maintain a high quality of life.

FAIR puts the interests of American citizens and future generations ahead of big business and partisan demands.

What We Believe

Immigration, within proper limits, can be positive. Adhering to the rule of law is central to successful assimilation and citizenship.

Tough decisions require strong leadership. Strong leadership, in turn, is underscored by defined principles that anchor public policy.

Immigration can be an emotional topic: We believe in respecting the basic human rights and the dignity of all involved. As such, FAIR opposes policies based on favoritism toward, or discrimination against, any person based on race, color, religion, or gender.

We understand that under any rational system of ordered entry, the demand will always vastly exceed available slots. Tough decisions will therefore always be necessary.

“FAIR does not endorse political candidates or parties.”

There are several key communication elements present in FAIR’s self-description that need to be unpacked before one can move forward to the other statements on their webpage. First, one must examine how FAIR lays out its political alignments: “non-partisan”, “public interest”, “free of party loyalties and special interest connections”, and this disclaimer, *“FAIR does not endorse political candidates or parties.”* All of these descriptors are questionable at best, but most importantly, from an objective standpoint, these words simply do not accurately describe what FAIR stands for and perpetuates as an organization, and any further analysis into their political communication will make that quite clear. For a “non-partisan” group that “does not endorse political candidates or parties”, FAIR is pretty vocal about their overall distaste for democratic and progressive legislators and policies. On September 20th, 2019, FAIR (2019) published a press release entitled, *“The Democratic Leadership Are Now Stalinists, Charges FAIR.”* The press release outlines FAIR founder Dan Stein’s frustrations about how his group and similar groups are being labeled as hate groups by the Southern Poverty Law Center, an organization that FAIR describes as, “unaccountable, discredited, and scandal-ridden” as well as “shadowy” and by democratic legislators who have sought to strip these organizations of their tax-exempt statuses. FAIR’s political alignments are further materialized with the posting of the March 14th, 2019 press release, *“FAIR Stands with*

President Trump and Urges a Swift Veto of the Misguided Congressional Resolution.”

This article refers to the Senate resolution to terminate Trump’s southern border emergency declaration and praises Trump for his continued anti-immigration efforts.

Once again, not exactly what I would call a “non-partisan” piece of political communication from an organization that “*does not endorse political candidates or parties,*” but to each their own.

The inconsistencies continue. When analyzing FAIR’s self-identifying organizational description, one must examine the language used to describe the current immigration situation: “overcrowded”, “overburdened”, “irresponsible”, and “uncontrolled” (FAIR). FAIR elaborates in the online post entitled, “*The United States is Already Overpopulated*” stating that,

Mass unchecked immigration exacerbates the problems of traffic congestion, increased energy and fuel consumption, as well as rising rents and housing prices. Foreign-born Americans and their descendants have been the main driver of U.S. population growth, as well as of national racial and ethnic change, since passage of the 1965 law that rewrote national immigration policy. Unrestrained immigration is an undue and unnecessary pressure on our cities and suburbs that must be stopped and replaced with immigration levels that reflect a changed nation.

The relevance of this specific claim from FAIR is that it provides an opportunity to discuss the commonplace practice of posting and spreading unsubstantiated information as fact, and what impact this rhetorical behavior has on the communicative political climate. Lyman Stone (2018), an agricultural economist for The United States

Department of Agriculture as well as a regional population economics researcher, discusses the irrelevance of the overpopulation concern in *Vox Magazine* article entitled, “Why You Shouldn’t Obsess About ‘Overpopulation.’” Stone states,

The truth is that overpopulation in the United States is not even *close* to a serious problem. Even globally, overpopulation is an overstated problem. Concerns about population growth are especially irrelevant in low-growth countries like the US. Even if US population rises over 500 million people, the impact on the world is barely noticeable. There is only one way to effectively prevent, alleviate, or reverse dangerous climate change: technological, geographic, and social advancement. Population has little to do with it — especially not in the US.

(paras. 1-2)

If Stone’s expertise in the area of United States population trends is to be trusted, why then is FAIR standing firm in their claim that overpopulation is such a threat? FAIR’s insistence that the United States is already overpopulated and overcrowded is not only untrue, it is racially motivated and an example of their false claims being communicatively solidified. Communication scholars in the fields of critical theory and critical race theory, such as Hasian and Delgado (1998), inform our understanding of why certain language is used and what these communication patterns are meant to connote to the reader. In FAIR’s use of the words, “overcrowded”, “overburdened”, “irresponsible”, and “uncontrolled” to describe LatinX migrants, the organization is strategically feeding into a communicative pattern that relies on oppressive power and discrimination. Using these terms conveys a fearful and worrisome tone to readers, which FAIR builds upon in order to take fear and turn it into prejudice. Further, FAIR’s (2019) statement that

immigration, “must be stopped and replaced with immigration levels that reflect a changed nation” and use of “national racial and ethnic change” as one of the key motivations for this change, displays the basis of the ideology behind the false claim; racism. The racism disguises itself as an attempt to appeal to nationalism and American pride, however, the communicative power very clearly mirrors a familiar rhetoric of the not so distant past. In the book *The Rhetoric of Hitler’s Battle* by Kenneth Burke (1941), Burke discusses the common trope used by Hitler to further his cause: the “common enemy” trope (p. 167). Burke presents that in order for Hitler to gain the political momentum he needed to carry out his aspirations, he would first have to create a scapegoat that would unify Germany against one specific enemy. By publicly and firmly blaming the Jewish people for certain unfavorable aspects of German society, despite the claims being unsubstantiated, Hitler was able to create a complex of superiority among his desired Aryan demographic (Burke, 1941, p. 173). Burke (1941) explains that by using terministic screens such as “destructive”, Hitler associated negativity and German demise with the Jewish population, a rhetorical pattern of targeted blame that is very clearly being strategically utilized by FAIR (p. 175). By maintaining a narrative of targeted blame against LatinX migrants, political entities such as Trump and FAIR further a historically rooted prejudice against a specific group, a tactic that had led to mass destruction and suffering in the past.

Robin DiAngelo (2018), states, “We do not recognize or admit to white privilege and the norms that produce and maintain it. It follows that to claim whiteness, much less suggest that it has meaning and grants unearthed advantage, will be deeply disconcerting and destabilizing, thus triggering the protective responses of white fragility” (p. 22). This

notion is contextualized through FAIR's (2019) statement regarding "national racial and ethnic change." Notice that FAIR does not claim whiteness or white privilege through this statement, but instead refers to a threatening "change." This demonstrates white fragility as explained by DiAngelo because without claiming the advantage of whiteness, FAIR still manages to display fear and distrust of un-whiteness. This fear and distrust results in, as DiAngelo stated, "protective responses to white fragility" which have materialized as the organization of FAIR itself along with its as racist, anti-immigrant, xenophobic rhetoric.

This leads us to the statements regarding FAIR's stance on diversity and racial discrimination: "1.9 million diverse members and supporters" and "FAIR opposes policies based on favoritism toward, or discrimination against, any person based on race, color, religion, or gender." In contrast, on August 2, 2019, FAIR released yet another PR, this one entitled, "SPLC Wants to Teach Everyone "Tolerance." How About Teaching Kids English in Their Hometown? Says FAIR." This article, once again attacking the SPLC, does not exactly align with the self-proclaimed opposition to, "policies based on favoritism toward, or discrimination against, any person based on race, color, etc." laid out in the "About FAIR" section of their website. In the book, *Race and News: Critical Perspectives*, authors Campbell, LeDuff, Jenkins, and Brown (2012) raise this key question: are we living in a post-racial world? This is an important query to be mindful of when examining political communication in general, and especially in the case of FAIR's contribution to the wider political narrative. Of course, Campbell, et. al., (2012) would argue that we are most certainly still living in a world that has racism and race relations embedded in its very core. The authors state, "Most Americans would like to believe that

their country is a tolerant and fair one, that discrimination does not exist, that equal opportunity is there for all. But what we would like to believe and what actually exists are clearly at odds” (p. 6). This denial can very clearly be seen in FAIR’s statements regarding their stance on diversity and racial discrimination. FAIR, like many other political organizations and individuals in the United States, would like us to believe that racism is long gone and does not cloud our social and political spheres. Through FAIR’s denial of being guided by racist ideology, they are able to keep pushing their blatantly racist rhetorical narrative under the commonly used disguise of an “Americans first” agenda. Kenneth Burke (1966) perfectly analogizes this phenomenon in his book *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method*. Breaking down Pascal’s seventh *Provincial Letter*, Burke (1966) states,

Pascal theorizes a device which the Jesuits of his day called “directing the intention.” For instance, to illustrate satirically how one should “direct the intention,” he used a burlesque example of this sort: Dueling was forbidden by the Church. Yet it was still a prevalent practice. Pascal satirically demonstrated how, by “directing the intention” one could both take part in the duel and not violate the Church injunctions against it. Thus, instead of intentionally going to take part in a duel, the duelists would merely go for a walk to the place where the duel was to be held. And they would carry guns merely as a precautionary means of self-protection in case they happened to meet an armed enemy. By so “directing the intention,” they could have their duel without having transgressed the Church’s thou-shalt-not’s against dueling. For it was perfectly proper to go for a walk; and

in case one encountered an enemy bent on murder, it was perfectly proper to protect oneself by shooting in self-defense. (p. 45)

The strategy of “directing the intention” perfectly applies to FAIR’s denial of racist motivations. Think of FAIR as the duelers and society as the Church in the analogy described by Burke. Our society wants to believe that it is not racist and strikes down racist rhetoric and behavior. In order to get around this, FAIR claims that their anti-immigrant agenda is not meant to be racist, directing the intention of their messaging to some other cause (i.e. overpopulation, environmental impact, etc.). This way, FAIR is able to continue functioning as a “mainstream” interest group while still posting and lobbying their racist and xenophobic values. The phenomenon of “directing the intention” therefore allows FAIR to deny ties to racism while still reaping the benefits of the stronghold racism has on the political immigration narrative. Now that we have broken down and debunked the rhetoric FAIR uses to describes itself, we can begin to analyze the political immigration discourse taking place on their website.

FAIR has several tabs on their homepage to lead their readers to various topics regarding immigration and FAIR’s stance on the current migrant situation. The first link guides readers to a section of the site entitled “issues” and the first listed issue reads, “How Many Illegal Aliens Live in the United States?” This article presents, explains, and defends FAIR’s estimate as to how many “illegal aliens” are currently living in the U.S. In this instance, the use of the term “illegal alien” is both bold and persistent. The term “illegal aliens” is used in this single article 52 times. Anytime migrants are being referred to or described, they are called “illegal aliens,” not migrants, not immigrants, not even undocumented immigrants, just “illegal aliens.” Further, once readers choose to navigate

to other sections of the website, (i.e. “Societal Impact of Immigration”, “Stolen Lives: Victims of Illegal Alien Crime”, “How Much Are You Paying for Illegal Immigration” etc.) not only does the use of the term “illegal aliens” continue, but several other descriptive terms become part of the overall immigration rhetoric. FAIR uses language to deliberately portray immigrants in a manner that will fit and align with their overall political narrative. This portrayal seamlessly relates to President Trump’s immigration rhetoric through J. David Cisneros’ (2008) conceptualization of metaphor. Cisneros states, “When the nation is conceived of as a physical body, immigrants are presented either as an infectious disease or as a physical burden. When the nation is conceived as a house, immigrants are represented as criminals” (p. 572). Both President Trump and FAIR have conceived of immigrants as an infectious disease, a physical burden, and as criminals. Trump specifically tends to employ the “invasion” catchphrase while FAIR utilizes “illegal aliens” most often. Cisneros (2008) continues, “Metaphors of immigrants often portray them as objects or threats to society, whether biological, physical, or social. On the other hand, metaphors of immigration concretize the problem through cognitive comparisons to other physical or social ills. Contemporary discourse capitalizes on metaphors like invasion or disease” (p. 572). These cognitive comparisons act to constitute false perceptions and assumptions about undocumented immigrants, especially when these metaphors are established by those with political power. FAIR takes advantage of its political influence and deliberately contributes to these false ideological narratives through various forms. Some examples of specific instances of this rhetoric are listed below:

- “Illegal immigration is a fiscal burden on taxpayers. Emergency medical expenditures and incarceration costs of illegal aliens add up too”
- “Criminal aliens – non-citizens who commit crimes – are a growing threat to public safety and national security, as well as a drain on our scarce criminal justice resources”
- “Each day without an effective border barrier or stronger immigration law enforcement means an increased threat to both the American public and National Security, not only from illegal aliens, gangs, drug smugglers and human traffickers, but also terrorists who might infiltrate the wave of illegal aliens”
- “But a fair share of the crime has also been perpetrated by illegal aliens who just seem to prefer crime to a quiet life in suburban America”
- “Evidence shows that the tax payments made by illegal aliens fail to cover the costs of the many services they consume”
- “A large percentage of illegal aliens who work in the underground economy frequently avoid paying any income tax at all”

These claims, though unfounded and unsubstantiated, have power through the social and political narrative they create about undocumented immigrants. The use of the term “illegal alien” instead of a less provocative label to describe migrants is a choice, not a factual or natural description of the population. This choice, or as Burke (1966) would say, this “symbolic action” results in the employment of “terministic screens” (p. 50). Burke states, “We *must* use terministic screens, since we can’t say anything without the use of terms; whatever terms we use, they necessarily constitute a corresponding kind of screen; and any such screen necessarily directs the attention to one field rather than

another” (p. 50). The terms we use to refer to any given thing constitute a screen, and the screen we constitute comes with consequences. For example, when we refer to LatinX individuals and families coming to our country for a better life as migrants, asylum seekers, or undocumented immigrants, we are constituting the communication narrative of these people and their lives. The before-mentioned words create a vision of brave, hard working, family oriented, people who are deserving of our compassion, help, and understanding. However, when we refer to these people as an “invasion” as Trump does, or as “illegal aliens” as FAIR does, we are constituting a much different rhetorical reality. This reality creates unease, distrust, fear, and anger. Again, this distinction is a choice, not a coincidence. Neither is the fact that both FAIR and President Trump both continue to make the same choice in order to constitute the same ideological environment, despite the damage this rhetorical behavior has caused.

In “Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis,” author Raymie McKerrow (1989) discusses the key principles to critical rhetoric. Principle #2 is especially applicable to this chapter because it explains the depth to which ideology permeates society and political reality. McKerrow states,

The discourse of power is material. An ideology exists in a material sense, in and through the language which constitutes it (McGee, 1982). As Therborn (1980) notes, “ideology operates as discourse...[It] is the medium through which men make their history as conscious actors” (pp. 15, 3). Participants are not passive bystanders, simply absorbing ideology and having no power to alter its force or its character. Ideology is property of the social world, but agents have the capacity to interact in that world to modify the discourse. (p. 102)

These agents McKerrow describes are not created equally and therefore do not share the same amount of power and freedom to influence the discourse that shapes our society. However, we all have to live in and deal with the realities that are constituted for us by those in power. President Trump has been given the opportunity to possess immense influence over political discourse by his constituents and through the efforts of special interest groups such as FAIR. With political power comes social responsibility to take the power and the ability to decide, create, maintain, and control ideological narratives seriously and use these power structures to promote equality and fairness. This is why as a society we cannot ignore the immigration discourse used by FAIR and President Trump. According to the frameworks provided to the field of communication by critical rhetorical theory and critical race theory, this type of language matters and has significant relevance to the overall political communication climate in our society. It matters that FAIR uses generalizing and dehumanizing language such as “illegal aliens” to describe an entire group of people who are in and of themselves a vastly diverse and complex population. It matters that FAIR, a group labeled an “extremist group” by the Southern Poverty Law Center, produces and distributes the same theme of racist, discriminatory, xenophobic political immigration rhetoric as the President of the United States. Furthermore, the social repercussions that this type of communication behavior can have on human lives cannot be ignored.

As active agents in society, we may not possess the same power over political discourse that politicians and powerful special interest groups hold, but that does not mean we have to be passive bystanders. Critical rhetoric gives us the ability to recognize the power structures in our world, analyze how these structures are able to control and

maintain political and social realities, and use our own critical judgment to either enable those in power when we agree with what they are doing, or to stand up to the unjust systems around us in our own way. When we witness instances of racist, oppressive, and xenophobic rhetoric being constituted by political groups and by politicians, an understanding of critical rhetorical theory and critical race theory allows us to challenge and change these situations to strive for safety and equality for our most vulnerable populations.

Chapter 4: Legitimizing Fringe Political Conspiracy Theory: Trump's Rhetorical Relationship with Alex Jones

"We are all sufferers from history, but the paranoid is a double sufferer, since he is afflicted not only by the real world, but by his fantasies as well" - Richard J. Hofstadter (1964).

The LatinX immigration conversation was boiling over leading up to the 2018 U.S. midterm elections. Peters (2018) reports that President Donald Trump, along with other prominent conservative leaders, told tales (sent tweets) of a migrant caravan invasion that was coming to destroy America, enriching their narrative with statements such as, "Many gang members and some very bad people are mixed into the caravan heading to our southern border" as well as referring to LatinX migrants as "an illegal alien mob" (paras. 7-13). Further, democratic philanthropist George Soros became the center of a right-wing immigration conspiracy. Peters (2018) states, "The baseless claims that George Soros is financing the migrants as they trek north, which carry a strong whiff of anti-Semitism, have been one of the most consistent themes of commentary on the caravan from the right" (para. 8). These unsubstantiated claims were repeated and bolstered by President Trump in an October 18, 2018 tweet, in which he shared a video that insinuated that Soros was involved with someone who was providing financial aid to the migrants. The rhetoric surrounding the caravan shifted and fluctuated almost daily as conservative commentators followed the President's lead in sharing conspiratorial claims to further alienate LatinX migrants. Warnings of terrorist infiltration and deadly diseases coming into the United States along with the LatinX immigrants clouded our TV channels and our news feeds while making threatening promises like Michael Savage's insistence that this would lead to "an end of America as we know it" (Peters, 2018, para. 20). This conspiratorial immigration rhetoric continued to be a main focal point for

Trump, who even referred to the situation as the “election of the caravan” (Peters, 2018, para. 11). That was 2018. America as we know it is still here, and so is right-wing conspiracy.

When we think of conspiracy theories, we tend to envision scenarios of mystery, manipulation, lies, and secrecy. These hidden “truths”, kept safely tucked away by those in power (i.e. government, the wealthy, the “man”, etc.) are brought forth from the shadows by theorists who aim to uncover the true meaning of the world and its occurrences. Those of us who choose to subscribe to the narratives laid out for us by conspiracy theories may do so for several different reasons. We may find the seemingly black and white coincidences and causations to be straight forward, or we may just simply enjoy the entertaining and imaginative explanations conspiracy has to offer, but at its core, conspiracy gains and maintains its traction through an overall undertone of fear and distrust.

There is no denying the spectacle of conspiracy that keeps us hooked and eager to uncover more, however, the danger lies in the willingness to subsume truth and wisdom to these unsubstantiated theories. It is crucial to remember that although they are almost always less mystifying and possess less shock-value, the facts remain the most powerful explanation and the most critical element to understanding any given narrative. This power has the ability to uphold fairness and deliver justice while teaching society key lessons to apply in the future. The facts, although regularly attacked and denied by conspiracy theorists, are still the key to understanding phenomena. The truth is a complex web of experiences that encapsulates various factors in order to create our reality. However, when the power of facts is ignored, disregarded, or manipulated through

rhetoric, key sides to the story can be left out. History has taught human beings time and time again the importance of fair representation when it comes to creating solutions that benefit us all, but what happens when marginalized groups are denied the opportunity to share their truth? What will be the outcome for a society that places value on one dominant reality while displacing and shunning the concerned voices of everyone else? In this chapter, I will demonstrate how the rhetorical power of conspiracy theory has the ability to construct and maintain communication consequences in society that exist far beyond the surface.

Conspiracy theories can be found lurking in every segment of society. Conspiracy theorists have raised questions varied in topic and area of interest, proving that as humans, some of us suspect dishonesty and manipulation in almost every sector of our lives. These conspiracy theories range from the concept of reality-shifting time travelers from the future suggested by the Mandela Effect, the all-powerful and never wavering influence of secret societies such as the Illuminati, and even the causes behind the mysterious deaths of celebrities such as Natalie Wood and Princess Diana. Some of the most notable of these conspiracies have to do with our very world itself and the creatures within it: the size and shape of the Earth, our planet's position in the solar system, whether or not we have ever truly had the ability to travel beyond our world, and my personal favorite, whether or not birds, yes *birds*, are real living animals or robotic government spies (Google it). Almost every aspect of our physical and intellectual world has at one time or another been questioned, however, an innocent sense of curiosity can morph into something much more devious when conspiracy theory is added to the mix.

For most of us, these ideas are nothing more than interesting talking points at parties or deep dark YouTube wormholes to fall into when procrastinating (well, perhaps that is just me...). They are interesting and sometimes innocent, until someone at said party relies on them just a little too much and believes in the claims with an extreme amount of enthusiasm, and then the mood turns weird. However, when it comes to rhetorically constructed conspiracy theories in the realm of political communication, the line between seeking entertainment from and having delusional faith in conspiracy theories becomes a bit blurry and more nuanced. Political conspiracy theories are structured in ways that allow them to come across as logical and rational to the untrained eye, and sometimes even experienced rhetorical analysts. Even the most critical of thinkers can at times fall victim to the appeals to fear, distrust, and insecurity that political conspiracy theorists often perpetuate. In the age of social media, it can be difficult to decipher which sources of information are factual and which are being manipulated to advance political ambitions. This is why understanding political conspiracy theories is a key element to analyzing the impacts that political communication, such as anti-LatinX immigrant rhetoric, can have on society.

What is Conspiracy Theory?

Before delving into the specific manifestations and consequences conspiracy theory has in relation to political immigration rhetoric in the United States, one must first understand what exactly this phenomenon is and how it can be recognized. Michael Barkun, a professor of political science at Syracuse University, has explored and explained conspiracy theory extensively in his book, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*. Barkun (2013) states,

The essence of conspiracy beliefs lies in attempts to delineate and explain evil. At their broadest, conspiracy theories “view history as controlled by massive, demonic forces.” The locus of this evil lies outside the true community, in some “Other, defined as foreign or barbarian though often...disguised as innocent and upright.” The result is a worldview characterized by a sharp division between the realms of good and evil. For our purposes, a *conspiracy belief* is the belief that an organization made up of individuals or groups was or is acting covertly to achieve some malevolent end. (p. 3)

Barkun’s explanation demonstrates how conspiracy exists and behaves as a connective link between fear, distrust, and how we make sense of these unsettling feelings in our world. Barkun (2013) elaborates on this connection by emphasizing that there are three principles that shape a conspiracist’s world view,

1. *Nothing happens by accident*: Conspiracy implies a world based on intentionality, from which accident and coincidence have been removed. Anything that happens occurs because it has been willed. At its most extreme, the result is a “fantasy [world]”... far more coherent than the real world.
2. *Nothing is as it seems*: Appearances are deceptive, because conspirators wish to deceive in order to disguise their identities or their activities. Thus, the appearance of innocence is deemed to be no guarantee that an individual or group is benign.
3. *Everything is connected*: Because the conspiracists’ world has no room for accident, pattern is believed to be everywhere, albeit hidden from plain view. Hence the conspiracy theorist must engage in a constant process of linkage and correlation in order to map the hidden connections. (pp. 3-4)

These guidelines portray the inner thought patterns of individuals plagued by constant fear and unease. The source of this fear, especially in regards to immigration, is often irrational, as I will demonstrate throughout this chapter. However, how others perceive the rationality of this fear and distrust matters greatly to the conspiracy theorist, because as Barkun explains, this way of thinking acts a security blanket, which helps conspiracists to feel less vulnerable. Barkun (2013) states,

In an odd way, the conspiracy theorist's view is both frightening and reassuring. It is frightening because it magnifies the power of evil, leading in some cases to an outright dualism in which light and darkness struggle for cosmic supremacy. At the same time, however, it is reassuring, for it promises a world that is meaningful rather than arbitrary. Not only are events nonrandom, but the clear identification of evil gives the conspiracist a definable enemy against which to struggle, endowing life with purpose. (p. 4)

This explanation gives insight into the mental pattern that allows conspiracy theorists to engage in these far-fetched concepts. As Barkun noted, conspiracy allows an outlet for individuals consumed by fear and insecurity to express their emotions and frustrations at a specific blame-carrying target: a scapegoat. Directing this anger, distrust, and unease at a clearly defined individual or group enables the conspiracist to cultivate a hatred. This hatred, which is tended to and nurtured over time, creates an opportunity of release for the theorist to express their ideas in a way that feels concrete, rational, and fully righteous to them. This allows the conspiracy theorist to perceive their feelings to be those of bravery and security instead of fear.

Through the conspiracy theorist's disillusioned self-perception of rationality, their quest to be understood and believed becomes exceedingly important to them. Barkun (2013) states, "Those who subscribe to such constructs do not ask that the constructs be taken on faith. Instead, they often engage in elaborate presentations of evidence in order to substantiate their claims" (p. 6). To a conspiracy theorist, being able to back up their claims and shut down any sort of criticism their theories may receive is of the utmost importance to maintaining their self-perception of safety and security. However, Barkun explains that through these obsessive efforts to be correct, the more delusional the conspiracy theorist's claims become. Barkun (2013) elaborates,

The more sweeping a conspiracy theory's claims, the less relevant evidence becomes, notwithstanding the insistence that the theory is empirically sound. This paradox occurs because conspiracy theories are at their heart nonfalsifiable. No matter how much evidence their adherents accumulate, belief in a conspiracy theory ultimately becomes a matter of faith rather than proof. (p. 7)

Further, when conspiracy theorists are met with critiquing evidence that goes against their tightly held belief systems, it is highly unlikely that the theorist will take these criticisms as anything more than yet another example of a conspiracy that aims to keep the "truth" hidden. Barkun (2013) explains this reaction,

Because the conspiracy is so powerful, it controls virtually all of the channels through which information is disseminated—universities, media, and so forth. Further, the conspiracy desires at all costs to conceal its activities, so it will use its control over knowledge production and dissemination to mislead those who seek

to expose it. Hence information that appears to put a conspiracy theory in doubt must have been planted by the conspirators themselves in order to mislead. (p. 7)

This means that no matter the amount of evidence that contradicts a conspiracy theorist's claims, they will not stray from attempting to prove that their desired reality is true. This dedication and loyalty to their own delusion can be dangerous to themselves and society; it is harmful because it causes the conspiracist themselves, as well as their believers, to be suspicious of mainstream news that could potentially be valuable to their safety and world awareness. When logic and rationality are abandoned, Barkun (2013) states that, "The result is a closed system of ideas about a plot that is believed not only to be responsible for creating a wide range of evils but also so clever at covering its tracks that it can manufacture the evidence adduced by skeptics" (p. 7). According to Barkun (2013), conspiracists will combat the evidence against their theory by distancing "themselves ostentatiously from mainstream institutions. By claiming to disbelieve mass media and other sources, believers can argue that they have avoided the mind control and brain washing used to deceive the majority" (p. 8). This continues the cyclical power of fear and distrust that inspired the initial creation of the conspiracy theory itself. By asserting to themselves, and those who choose to buy into their claims, that the majority of people and mainstream institutions are controlled or contaminated by some sort of evil power, conspiracy theorists are able to position themselves as the brave and watchful underdog. This self-appointed position allows the conspiracist the ability to maintain their unsubstantiated beliefs and claims under the safety of being unfalsifiable. When an opponent of the conspiracy theory attacks it, the theorist simply disregards the enemy as

brainwashed, un-enlightened, or part of the greater secret system the conspiracy promises to uncover.

According to Barkun (2013), at the heart of almost all conspiracy theory is the element of fear, and this is certainly the case for political conspiracy theories. Fear is the driving catalyst that inspires conspiracy to begin, and the main force behind why any given conspiracy theory is maintained. However, just because a conspiracy is created, not every person who encounters the theory will be as easily convinced of its merit as others. Joseph E. Uscinski & Joseph M. Parent (2014), authors of the book *American Conspiracy Theories* present the existence of the *conspiracy dimension*, which works to explain why some people are more susceptible to conspiratorial thinking than others. The authors elaborate,

We turn to evidence of a recently identified ideology that predicts (1.) the amount of prejudice people harbor against powerful groups they find less likable and (2.) the degree to which people view events and circumstance as the product of conspiracies. We call this widespread and stable belief the *conspiracy dimension* and conceive of it along a continuum, ranging from extremely naïve (those believing conspiracies cause nearly nothing) to extremely cynical (those believing that conspiracies cause nearly everything). Most of us are somewhere in between. When a person high on the conspiracy dimension receives information that an event may have been the product of a conspiracy perpetrated by a disliked party, he or she will likely concur with that conspiracy theory. (p. 14)

The existence of this spectrum of likeliness to believe conspiracy theories acts to explain why some people choose to totally ignore them while others focus on them as their sole

source of information. What causes this distinction? According to Uscinski & Parent (2014), “socialization is probably the most important influence” (p. 15). The authors continue,

Nevertheless, an absolutely large but relatively small number of citizens are socialized to have a worldview in which conspiratorial thinking is more pronounced. This is perhaps because they were exposed to socializing forces that drove them toward conspiratorial thinking (i.e., a conspiratorial parent, a conspiratorial media environment, or experiencing an actual conspiracy) or because they grew up in communities with alternative norms. (p. 15)

Socialization may be the key factor that creates conspiracy theorists, however, once a conspiracy theory is created there are several other elements that contribute to the trajectory of its lifetime. Barkun explains that there are different levels of breadth and scope which can be used to categorize the notoriety and social relevance of conspiracies. Barkun (2013) breaks down the three main types,

1. *Event Conspiracies*: Here the conspiracy is held to be responsible for a limited, discrete event or set of events. The conspiratorial forces are alleged to have focused their energies on a limited, well-defined objective.
2. *Systemic conspiracies*: At this level, the conspiracy is believed to have broad goals, usually conceived as securing control over a country, a region, or even the entire world. While the goals are sweeping, the conspiratorial machinery is generally simple: a single, evil organization implements a plan to infiltrate and subvert existing institutions.

3. *Superconspiracies*: This term refers to conspiratorial constructs in which multiple conspiracies are believed to be linked together hierarchically. Event and systemic conspiracies are joined in complex ways, so that conspiracies come to be nested within one another. At the summit of the conspiratorial hierarchy is a distant but all-powerful evil force manipulating lesser conspiratorial actors. (p. 6)

Each of these types of conspiracy can be observed in society, especially within the genre of political conspiracy theories.

Political Conspiracy Theory

Uscinski & Parent (2014) define *conspiracy* in the political realm as, “a secret arrangement between two or more actors to usurp political or economic power, violate established rights, hoard vital secrets, or unlawfully alter government institutions” (p.

31). Distinctly, the authors define *conspiracy theory* as,

an explanation of historical, ongoing, or future events that cites as a main causal factor a small group of powerful persons, the conspirators, acting in secret for their own benefit against the common good. A critical feature of our definition is that the conspiracy must come at the expense of the common good, at least in the eyes of the conspiracy theorist. (p. 32-34)

The authors provide both of these definitions to concretely separate the two, stating that, “While ‘conspiracy’ refers to events that have occurred or are occurring, ‘conspiracy theory’ refers to accusatory perceptions that may or may not be true” (p. 33). This clarification between the two definitions will be a critical understanding when analyzing political conspiracy theories. This critical insight allows the ability to recognize

conspiracy theories that function to support favorable political narratives that benefit dominant groups and individuals.

Although conspiracy theories of all genres and social sphere can create traceable amounts of fear, distrust, and unease, political conspiracy theories are arguably the most influential, and the most dangerous. According to Barkun (2013), the “political paranoid believes that the plot is directed not at himself or herself personally, but ‘against a nation, a culture, a way of life whose fate affects not himself alone but millions of others’” (p. 8). This belief allows conspiracists to feel emboldened because they are able to convince themselves and believers that they are behaving this way for the betterment in society, at least for the benefit of groups and individuals that they find to be favorable. According to Uscinski & Parent (2014), “Even when there is little evidence to suggest it, group identities can push people to view their own group as upright and virtuous while opposing groups are viewed as biased and nefarious” (p. 15). In today’s political world, the contentious and divisive reality of partisanship in the American political system functions on its own to contribute to animosity and distrust between parties. When conspiracy theories are thrown into the mix, the situation becomes even more complicated for politicians and the public to navigate.

Due to the already tumultuous relationship between political ideologies, political conspiracy theories, however unsubstantiated, become convenient ammunition with which political actors use to target and attack their adversaries. The political system in the United States is arranged in a way that allows for checks and balances on power, resulting in a difficult feat for one party to have complete control over another. Due to this challenge, political interest organizations or even politicians themselves will seek to

uncover skeletons or dirt on the other opposing party or candidate, or even controversies surrounding a social movement that one political ideology supports. While some of these unfavorable claims and unearthed secrets may occasionally be true, the facts behind these character assassinations are not really what matters to political entities; gaining control of the narrative allows them to create, maintain, and control the social and political realities that impact us all, and neither party is innocent of this behavior. However, the projection of far reaching immigration conspiracy theories by mainstream political figures and groups has been a common theme within the conservative right-wing. The anti-immigration rhetoric used by seemingly legitimate political pundits on the right, including the President has become more and more similar to the language used by right-wing fringe conspiracy theorists. The current rhetorical moment we are living in is creating a communicative environment that allows radical conspiracy theory to be legitimized by media and political attention in ways it has not been before. This rhetorical relationship between mainstream media, legitimate political figures, and conspiracy theorists works to concretize false anti-immigration conspiracy theories in conservative circles: a rhetorical partnership that solidifies unsubstantiated claims regarding the migrant situation in the U.S.

Political conspiracy theories are pervasive in their adoptability how they are perpetuated by those in power in order to further their desired political aspirations. As critical communication scholars know, these ideological political ambitions often work to exclude the realities of those who do not possess the same social and political influence: a theme that is unfortunately very present in the American immigration conversation. As discussed in the two previous chapters, the current rhetorical mood surrounding LatinX

immigration, as presented by the Trump administration as well as special interest/hate group FAIR, is one of prejudice, false claims, and fear mongering. The use of terministic screening and “other” language such as “invasion” and “illegal alien” to dehumanize LatinX migrants by these political entities can be clearly understood as unethical and purposeful attempts at political gain. These rhetorical strategies allow those with political power the ability to create and shape false narratives that will ultimately keep them in power and their political motives at the forefront of social focus. This is where political conspiracy theory slightly differs from the other sources of immigrant rhetoric discussed previously. Although the conspiratorial language that will be presented in this chapter is similar to the rhetoric presented by Trump and FAIR, one must remember that the main motive of the creator and maintainer of conspiracy theory is not to gain power, but to alleviate and control one’s own fear. Fear is the driving force behind why conspiracy theorists attempt to not only prove their unsubstantiated claims, but strive to demonstrate that their claim is more trustworthy than the mainstream. When this behavior is mirrored by those in political power who possess the influence to spread these delusional notions, fear is ultimately encouraged and emboldened. It is through the demonstration of this communicative relationship between the President of the United States, FAIR, and America’s most infamous conspiracy theorist, that one may understand the inherent issues that stem from this rhetorical partnership.

Alex Jones

If you are going to analyze political conspiracy theory, there is simply no better, and more daunting, place to start than by focusing on Alex Jones. The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) describes Jones’ early life as that of a native Texan who grew up

with a “typical suburban upbringing” (para. 14) SPLC also reports that Alex Jones first made a name for himself as a radio show host after dropping out of community college. In the SPLC’s biography of Jones and how he got his start with conspiracy theory, it is stated that,

Near the end of Jones' senior year in high school, events were unfolding that only confirmed his belief in the inexorable progress of unseen, malevolent forces. A hundred miles from Austin, the federal siege of the Branch Davidian cultists' compound here in Waco, Texas., ended in a tragic April 1993 firestorm. The events in Waco had a galvanizing effect on Jones. Dropping out of Austin Community College, he began hosting a viewer call-in show on Austin's public access television (PACT/ACTV), where he honed the bombastic style that has since become his trademark. (para.14)

Over the years, Jones has moved from one station to the next, mainly due to being removed from air by the networks for being too controversial, which alienated sponsors. However, Jones really found his footing when he decided to begin his own independent website and broadcast called InfoWars.com. This is where Jones would gain the highest popularity of his career, which then led Jones to create other conspiracy theory-based content. SPLC states, “His principal venues are ‘The Alex Jones Show,’ which has approximately 2 million weekly listeners and is nationally syndicated on about 60 radio stations, and two conspiracy-themed websites, InfoWars.com (Alexa rank 330) and PrisonPlanet.com (Alexa rank 3,237).”

Alex Jones has acquired infamy as a prominent fringe right-wing conspiracy theorist and has even been regarded by Joe Coscarelli (2013) of *New York Magazine* as,

“America’s leading conspiracy theorist” (para. 1). Similarly, the Southern Poverty Law Center described him as, “the most prolific conspiracy theorist in contemporary America.” Some of his other accolades include being crowned the, “King of conspiracy” by Ben Brumfield (2013) of CNN and “the most paranoid man in America” by *Rolling Stone* contributor Alexander Zaitchik (2011). According to Tucker Higgins (2018) of CNBC, on his show, Jones discusses his many conspiracy-driven beliefs which include his stance that the United States Government planned and orchestrated the Oklahoma City bombing, his opinion the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting was fake, as well as his belief that the moon landing was completely fraudulent. However, the list of conspiracy theories that Jones discusses is as long as the topics are varied. According to SPLC, some of these other topics include his belief that former President Barack Obama is a member of the terrorist regime al-Qaeda, his insistence that vaccinations cause autism and the U.S. government is trying to normalize autism for this reason, the U.S. government carried out both the 9/11 and Boston Marathon tragedies, and even that the President has the power to create tornadoes and hurricanes through the use of secret weather attack technology. The list goes on and on, but for the purpose of this immigration rhetoric analysis, this chapter will focus on Jones’ anti-immigrant language as well as his firm belief in the conspiracy theory known as the white-replacement.

Although Jones’ ideas and beliefs may seem far-fetched or purely entertaining to some, it is important to consider the reach his show and his website have in the American immigration conversation. Jones has strong opinions regarding LatinX immigration as well as the concept of white-replacement, and he is sure to share these conspiratorial beliefs with his listeners and supporters. During a taping of his show on August 4th,

2019, just one day after the El Paso shooting, Jones took the opportunity to discuss his thoughts on the matter. According to Media Matters contributor Timothy Johnson (2019), Jones states that progressive politicians and corporations,

Come turn Hispanics into anti-American racists and then break the country up. That's the globalist plan. To steal the American dream from America that's 50 percent Hispanic already below the age of 25, and within another decade it'll be 50 percent total and if you look by year 2050 some projections are like 70 percent. You are having the birthright of free market and Second Amendment and all this stolen from you. (para. 7)

Ignoring his use of the term "Hispanics" to refer to every LatinX person in America, when Jones refers to this "birthright," he is perpetuating a common theme among white replacement conspiracy theorists. American historian Richard J. Hofstadter (1964) describes how conspiracy theories about foreign and leftist betrayal have become normalized in his essay, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics." He states,

But the modern right wing, as Daniel Bell has put it, feels dispossessed: America has been largely taken away from them and their kind, though they are determined to try to repossess it and to prevent the final destructive act of subversion. The old American virtues have already been eaten away by cosmopolitans and intellectuals; the old competitive capitalism has been gradually undermined by socialist and communist schemers; the old national security and independence have been destroyed by treasonous plots, having as their most powerful agents not merely outsiders and foreigners but major statesmen seated at the very centers of

American power. Their predecessors discovered foreign conspiracies; the modern radical right finds that conspiracy also embraces betrayal at home.” (p. 23-24)

These themes are represented in the conspiracy of the white replacement; the fringe right feels as though their way of life is being threatened and replaced. Unable and unwilling to adapt to ever changing progress and social evolution, they turn to the reliable comfort of conspiracy theory. As discussed in previous chapters, the myth of the white replacement is one of the most prominent conspiracy theories pushing the white nationalist movement in the United States and abroad. The theory relies on the following assumptions:

- 1) White Americans possess some sort of naturally birth-given right to the opportunities and resources the U.S. has to offer more than non-white citizens and immigrants.
- 2) Immigrants, especially those migrating from LatinX countries, are coming to the U.S. to steal these rights from white Americans and ruin their way of life.
- 3) The United States Democratic Party is intentionally attracting LatinX migrants to the United States in order to gain more democratic voters.
4. When white nationalists spew racist and xenophobic language as well as engage in physical violence towards LatinX migrants, they are not being prejudicial. They are instead bravely and patriotically defending their culture from those who aim to steal and ruin it.

The white replacement myth/conspiracy, a common thread between the rhetorical pattern of President Trump, FAIR, and Alex Jones, relies on both the premises of an “event conspiracy” as well as a “systemic conspiracy” (Barkun, 2013, p. 6). This combination brings together every necessary quality to create, as Barkun (2013) described, a

“*superconspiracy*” (p. 6). *Superconspiracies* are made up of both an event or set of events, and in the case of the white replacement, the migration of LatinX immigrants to the United States functions as the most prominent of these events. *Superconspiracies* also include some sort of systematic conspiracy being carried out by a powerful source of evil, which happens to be “leftists” or the Democratic Party in this case. These individual theories come together to construct a powerful and all-encompassing *superconspiracy* that can be understood as the following; in order to gain political power, the leftists have enabled and encouraged the (systematic conspiracy theory) LatinX “invasion” of “illegal aliens” to come and ruin the American way of life (event/s conspiracy theory). Further, the conspiracy theory fights to remain stable by refuting any counterarguments and criticisms.

As discussed in previous chapters, when the El Paso shooting occurred, white replacement conspiracy theorists were quick to blame the political left not only for the “invasion”, but also for the massacre. Even though the shooter blatantly aligned his purpose and ideological mission with that of rhetorical pattern of Alex Jones and other white replacement conspirators, Jones STILL found a way to blame democrats. In the passage below, Jones directly implies that he believes the shooting was actually carried out by “leftists” in order to help encourage anti-fascism protests, stating,

And I said what are they planning to stage -- I said this on Friday’s show -- what are they planning to stage -- and on Thursday’s show -- what are they planning to stage ahead of antifa showing up right on time at El Paso so it looks legitimate when they attack physically the ICE agents and call them Nazis and say kids are drinking out of toilets and that people are being killed. (Johnson, 2019, para. 6)

Here, Jones is referring to the ICE containment and separation of LatinX migrant families at the U.S./Mexican border and the subsequent protests that followed. Jones is insinuating that the shooting was actually carried out by some sort of anti-ICE organization, and then blamed on a fellow patriot in order to rationalize protests against ICE and its unethical practices. Instead of shaming and condemning the perpetrator of this brutal attack that took many lives, Jones behaved as a true conspiracy theorist; he blamed someone from the group he perceives as the enemy instead of holding the actual shooter responsible. As discussed near the beginning of this chapter, Barkun (2013) argues that conspiracy theories are “unfalsifiable” by nature because theorists will insist that any logical or rational argument against the theory is proof that the conspiracy theory exists (p. 7). This is clearly demonstrated through Jones’ discussion of the white replacement myth and the El Paso shooting. According to Jones, although the shooter wrote a clearly defined white nationalist manifesto which detailed his racist and xenophobic purpose and intent for carrying out the horrible crime, white nationalists, nor xenophobes, nor anti-LatinX racists are to blame. Instead, the shooting is part of a greater secret plot by “leftists” to ruin the white nationalist way of life. The *superconspiracy* continues to grow bigger, messier, and more complex as Jones attributes more and more events in connection to white replacement and liberal meddling. This rhetoric not only mirrors the “Great Replacement” conspiracy theory outlined in the El Paso shooter’s manifesto, but also the “invasion” and “illegal alien” discourse used by the President of the United States and FAIR discussed in previous chapters.

Upon first glance, it may seem easy to brush off Alex Jones as a delusional conspiracy theorist with no tangible merit in the political realm. Ten years ago, your

assumption would probably be very justifiable. However, today is different. Alex Jones and his message matter not only because of his popularity within conservative political spheres and his potential social reach, but also due to the personal relationship he shares with President Donald Trump. This relationship, which can be understood as ego-indulgent for Trump and as super-fan for Jones, has been tracked and noted by Media Matters for America contributor Eric Hananoki (2017) in his article, “A Guide to Donald Trump’s Relationship with Alex Jones.” Listed below are some of the most notable excerpts from the relational timeline:

- **Jones Said He “Personally Talked To” Trump To Give Him Advice During The Campaign.** Jones said in August that “when I came out over a month ago and had a special message to Donald Trump dealing with election fraud -- I personally talked to him as well.” [Genesis Communications Network, *The Alex Jones Show*, [8/31/16](#)]
- **Trump Reportedly Praised Jones For Having “One Of The Greatest Influences” He’s Ever Seen.** Jones reportedly told author Jon Ronson that Trump complimented him as having “one of the greatest influences I’ve ever seen. ... It’s greater than you know. Just know that your influence is second to none.” [*Media Matters*, [10/7/16](#)]
- **Jones Claimed Trump Called Him To “Thank” His Audience After The Election.** Jones said on November 11 that Trump personally called him to “thank” Jones' audience members for their support during the campaign. Jones boasted that the newly elected president “gave me a call, and I told him, ‘Mr. President-elect, you’re too busy, we don’t need to talk.’ Jones added that Trump

said it wasn't a "private call" and told him, "I want to thank your viewers, thank your listeners for standing up for this republic. We know what you did early on and throughout this campaign to stand up for what's right." [*Media Matters*, [11/14/16](#)]

- **Jones: "I Talk To The President And I Talk To People Who Talk To The President Every Day."** [Genesis Communications Network, *The Alex Jones Show*, [4/12/17](#)]. (Hananoki, 2017)

Further, according to Nick Fox (2018) of the *New York Times*, when Trump was still just a presidential candidate in 2015, he once appeared on Jones' talk show where he said, "Your reputation is amazing. I will not let you down" (para. 4). The two have maintained a communicative relationship, which several of Trump's cabinet members have tried to limit. This connection between a conspiracy theorist and the highest public servant in the United States, which has been formed through shared communicative patterns, causes reason for concern.

As discussed in previous chapters, the language and rhetoric presented by the President of the United States is the most influential political communication in the country, and arguably even the world. With this power comes the responsibility of maintaining communicative behavior that is factual, rational, fair, and informative. While President Trump has essentially thrown out any precedent as far as presidential communication goes by means of his Twitter account alone, his most confusing and concerning communicative move might be his rhetorical alliance and fondness for conspiracy king, Alex Jones. Until very recently, Jones had been bold and consistent in terms of announcing his admiration and devotion to Donald Trump, and Trump had made a habit

of relying on conspiratorial claims that can be traced back to Alex Jones and Infowars.

Hanonoki (2017) lists some instances below,

- **Jones Said He Advised Trump To Say The Presidential Election Would Be “Rigged.”** Jones said in August 2016 that he “personally talked to” Trump and encouraged him to push the conspiracy theory that the 2016 election was rigged against him. Trump later made the “rigged” election claim a major campaign talking point. Jones’ Infowars website later wrote that “Trump’s comments mirror Alex Jones’ warning.” [Genesis Communications Network, *The Alex Jones Show*, [8/31/16](#); *Media Matters*, [10/12/16](#)]
- **Trump Picked Up The False Claim That “Millions Of People” Voted Illegally.** Trump has falsely claimed that he “won the popular vote if you deduct the millions of people who voted illegally.” The false claim was popularized by Jones’ Infowars website, which posted a story on November 14, 2016, headlined: “Report: Three Million Votes In Presidential Election Cast By Illegal Aliens.” [*Media Matters*, [11/28/16](#)]
- **Trump Cited Infowars Video About Alleged Mexican Drug Smuggling.** During a July 2015 campaign event, Trump said he saw a “story in Drudge -- and big story, it’s all over the place now -- guys swimming across, and big bags of stuff, it’s drugs, swimming across the river.” Infowars wrote that Trump was referencing its work -- which was then picked up by Drudge -- writing: “Trump saw Infowars’ report last week which showed illegal aliens caught in the act of drug smuggling. ... The footage, shot within minutes of [reporters Joe] Biggs and [Josh] Owens arriving at the border, served to further validate Trump’s earlier

remarks regarding criminal illegal aliens coming in from Mexico.”

[Infowars, [7/25/15](#); Twitter, [7/26/15](#)] (Hananoki, 2017).

It is evident that, at least partially, the relationship between Trump and Jones functions for two clearly defined purposes. Through his relationship with Trump, Jones is able to attain and satisfy his ravenous conspiracy theorist craving for attention, acceptance, and most importantly, validation. Through his relationship with Jones, Trump is able to pander to his supporters on the fringe far-right while collecting scandalous and salacious conspiratorial ammunition to aim at his political enemies on the left. However, there are other communicative social effects that come from all political relationships, especially one that involves such well known figures. When influential actors engage with and push conspiracy theories into the political conversation while shunning the mainstream media, unsubstantiated claims are treated with far too much merit.

Hofstadter (1964) states, “the idea of the paranoid style would have little contemporary relevance or historical value if it applied only to people with profoundly disturbed minds. It is the use of paranoid modes of expression by more or less normal people that makes the phenomenon significant” (p. 4). Alex Jones is certainly well outside the realm of “normal”, and whether one perceives Donald Trump as an individual to be “normal” is a matter of opinion, however, Trump’s position as President of the United States causes his communication to be at the forefront of the mainstream. This is where the true danger lies. If we as Americans decide that dehumanizing LatinX migrants through the acceptance and implementation of conspiracy theory is normal, we are contributing to the normalization of white nationalism in our country. The Marshall Plan, one of the most prominent targets of conspiracy theorists in American history, was

attacked because conspiracists believed the plan to be, “an evil hoax on the generosity, good will, and carelessness of the American people” (Hofstadter, 1964, p. 27). If giving compassionate aid to those who humbly seek refuge in our country is indicative of carelessness, we as Americans need to be boldly purposeful in our stance against conspiratorial influence.

Chapter 5: Conclusion/Guiding Questions Revisited

Guiding Question 1: How does xenophobic presidential discourse function to alienate and dehumanize LatinX migrants? As presented and discussed throughout this rhetorical analysis, the power possessed by presidential communication has the ability to significantly shift social conversations around LatinX immigration. Through the political prominence of his position as President, Donald Trump's use of terministic screening to label LatinX migrants works to further marginalize and alienate them in society. Further, Trump's discursive employment of unsubstantiated conspiratorial claims against LatinX migrants spreads misinformation and unnecessary fear within political and social spheres. My findings suggest that this happens through two main processes that can be understood by Trump's communicative relationships with both FAIR and Jones.

Guiding Question 2: How do communicative relationships between prominent political figures and special interest hate groups contribute to fear mongering and poor treatment of LatinX migrants? The Federation for Immigration Reform (FAIR) maintains its own identity to be one of fairness and equality, while possessing a focus on limiting immigration to the United States. However, as I have argued previously, the communicative reality behind FAIR's statements demonstrate a much more prejudicial and hateful agenda. This mission becomes vividly clear when one looks beyond the surface messaging located in the "About FAIR" section of their website and analyzes the racist, xenophobic, and prejudicial theme present in FAIR's frequently updated website tabs and blog posts. FAIR's distinctive goal to specifically limit LatinX migration to the United States while defaming LatinX people is not only indicative of the entire organizational mission, it is demonstrative of the aggressive hate that exists in anti-

LatinX immigration circles. FAIR is not the first special-interest hate organization to target minorities, and it certainly will not be the last. But, it is often quite easy to weed the messaging from these organizations out before they ever enter substantive political and social conversation, due to the clear connection between “illegals” type rhetoric and racism. However, this task becomes more difficult when the same rhetoric is becoming normalized by legitimate political entities. The mirrored anti-LatinX immigration discourse present between President Trump and FAIR portrays a deeper social and political shift. In the United States, there have always been those who are outright against specifically LatinX migration to America, and they have often used any sort of platform they possess to share these opinions with the public. These beliefs, however, simply did not have the merit to be included in any sort of substantial political discussion. We, as an informed society, would disregard openly racist and xenophobic language, not only because the information was offensive and based on racial prejudice, but because the messages were obviously unsubstantiated and based on illogical hate. For this reason, those who held these beliefs were more or less secluded to their own small fringe community of prejudice, where their hate could simmer, but usually not gain enough momentum to boil over. The social and political communicative shift that has been brought on by the Trump presidency is not that people are suddenly more racist and xenophobic because of what he says. Rather, the shift comes from Trump’s mirrored hateful rhetoric, a communicative behavior that essentially provides previously outcast fringe political interest groups with a sense of normalcy and legitimacy. If the President of the United States is able to openly and confidently demean and marginalize LatinX migrants, and be applauded for it by his supporters, then racist and xenophobic groups

like FAIR begin to gain traction in mainstream political and social conversation, allowing their discourses of hate to become emboldened.

Guiding Question 3: How do communicative links between prominent political figures and conspiracy theorists work to legitimize and amplify unsubstantiated fringe frameworks of political thought surrounding LatinX immigration? The communicative relationship between President Trump and conspiracy theorist Alex Jones is very similar in function to the relationship between the discourse of Trump and FAIR, however, the element of political conspiracy theory works to create a major difference. As discussed previously, political conspiracy theories are inherently based on fear and distrust. According to that standard, Alex Jones is apparently terrified of many, many people, places, and things. My analysis of Jones' anti-LatinX discourse very clearly portrays the connection between his messaging and notions of white fragility and fear of white replacement in America. In order for a conspiracy theorist such as Jones to be able to function in society while maintaining an illusion of control and strength, he must reframe his fear and re-establish it as something else, something more manageable and less debilitating. He also must distinguish someone or multiple targets to blame, which materializes his fear and allows his inner notions of insecurity to become concretized in the physical world. Further, instead of admitting to being fearful in the first place, conspiracy theorists like Jones maintain that they are not afraid, but rather they are diligent observers who have taken on the brave and noble duty of uncovering the hidden truths in our world. In Alex Jones' case, he has transformed his deeply rooted fears into hatred, a shift that has aligned his vocalized perceptions with those of the current president. While the discursive link present in the mirrored communication between

Trump and FAIR demonstrates an emboldening of an already existing undertone of anti-LatinX discrimination, Trump and Jones's connection is more straight forward. President Trump and Alex Jones have had virtual face to face communication about Trump's campaign, his presidential goals, and topics such as immigration. These personal discussions showcase more than a communicative connection; they demonstrate that not only will Trump mirror the communication of a right-wing fringe conspiracy theorist, he actively engages with and encourages the conspiratorial behavior. Trump's direct communication with Alex Jones works to increase the potential spread of unsubstantiated claims that lead to unnecessary and irrational fear. In the case of Jones' racist and xenophobic anti-LatinX migration discourse, the President's reiteration and reaction of agreement to these false and hateful notions legitimizes conspiratorial concepts in mainstream political and social spheres of discussion, cheapening the value of facts in the greater immigration conversation.

Limitations

Although this study is unique in its approach to establish discursive links between fringe hate political entities and messaging from Donald Trump, only two different types were analyzed. The discussion surrounding FAIR and Alex Jones and their relationships to Trump is not an all-encompassing demonstration of the pervasiveness of anti-LatinX immigration notions within American political conversation. This analysis is limited in scope in that countless other groups and individuals that act as sources of racist and xenophobic rhetoric have communicative relationships to other prominent political figures. Further, this study focused on only anti-LatinX immigration discourse, however,

racist and xenophobic political communication targeting other cultures, namely Trump's anti-Muslim discourses, are ever present in the U.S.

Suggestions for Future Research

As stated above, this study, while unique in its contribution to the field of critical rhetoric/communication, specifically within the realm of political discussion, is limited in scope as a master's thesis. To expand upon this discussion, further research needs to be done in areas of the political system that were not discussed here. Specifically, delving into the prevalence of these types of discriminatory discourses on a state or regional level might provide further insight into the presence and insurgence of the legitimization of these racist rhetorical patterns. The American political system grows more nuanced and complex by the day, and there is no shortage of racist and xenophobic rhetoric present in political communication that needs to be both analyzed and debunked. The intersection of this analysis and social media is a route that further researchers may choose to build upon this work. Analyzing how social media further allows the lines between legitimate and illegitimate political discourses to become blurred due to a lack of media literacy is one way that researches can expand upon this work. Another interesting expansion would include looking into other cultural groups targeted by far-right fringe xenophobia and racism within legitimate and illegitimate political spheres. Further, in order to gain insight into how these targeted groups combat unsubstantiated and defamatory attacks, a rhetorical analysis of the counter communication could provide helpful communicative strategies for the future.

Implications

My hope is that readers of this work will give serious reflective thought into how modalities of thought similar to those discussed infiltrate our everyday lives, what this type of communication harbors and allows, and the importance of how we respond to hateful discourses, even within our personal circles. Although I focused on the broader political conversation being perpetuated by Trump, FAIR, and Jones, it is crucial to remember that we all play a part in contributing to a fair and equal rhetorical environment. Critical communication does not simply exist to critique power structures in society, it functions to acknowledge systemic inequalities so that positive changes may be made in the future. We as a nation will never truly be righteous in our claims of living in the land of the free until we collectively take a firm stance against racism and xenophobia and refuse to allow our public servants to contribute to bigotry and inequality. The major implication of this work is to realize that as citizens, Americans have the power and influence to communicatively demand fairness and dignity for all through our vote.

Final Thoughts

On April 27, 2020, while wrapping up my work on this thesis, the news regarding the death of Guillermo Garcia broke. Garcia, a 36-year-old youth soccer coach, is the latest victim of the El Paso shooting that occurred on August 3rd, 2019. Fernandez and Mervosh (2020) of the *New York Times* report that Garcia was at the El Paso Walmart that day, standing outside to raise money for his young daughter's soccer team. After nine months in the hospital, Garcia passed away due to the injuries he received at the hands of the El Paso shooter, bringing the total number of victims to 23 innocent lives lost (paras. 1-2). No amount of research or academic study will erase or ease the pain and suffering of those who lost their beloved family members and friends on that horrible day. However, it is my belief and hope that through a shared understanding of the importance that communication holds in our society, we can work towards a communicative environment in America that stands firm in its support for fairness, equality, and justice.

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