

Toward a Theory and Pedagogy of Rhetorical Vulnerability

David Riche—University of Denver

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The question of what speech has made asks at least two things: what account can we give of language's capacity for effecting change, and at the same time, what account can we give of ourselves as manipulators of language's capacity for effecting change?

—Richard Marback, *Managing Vulnerability* (16)

On more than one occasion during my time as a graduate student, I had the experience of passing through a section of campus known as Free Speech Alley within earshot of a local church group as they publicly vilified the stereotypical sources of modern America's moral disintegration, including unwed mothers, godless liberals, Muslims, and homosexuals. As a self-identified gay man born and raised in southern Louisiana, I was not unaccustomed to hearing such rhetoric in public spaces, though these encounters always left me wondering what the most optimal manner of response would be. Once or twice, I considered joining the throng of students and civilians who inevitably gathered to hear about the perils of sin and the wrath of God, if for no other reason than to acknowledge their rhetorical address. I imagined myself more than once confronting these speakers face to face, refuting their self-righteous polemics with a well-reasoned, well-researched argument, the kind I push my students to prefer in my writing courses. Instead, I made a habit of changing my route whenever this group appeared on campus, drowning out their diatribes by humming to myself. Still, even while I did my best to avoid their direct address, I always felt a creeping anxiety as I passed them, imagining that one of them might see me, see through me, and shout, "Where're you going, faggot?"

I begin with this anecdote in order to foreground one of the key concepts underwriting my current theory of rhetoric and writing pedagogies. Ever since my first encounter with these demonstrators, I have been intrigued not only by their rhetorical strategies, but also by the ways in which their rhetorical practices make me feel *vulnerable*, acutely aware of how I am precariously exposed to the words and actions of those around me. From the moment I entered into the proximity of their protests, I was provoked (*pro-vocare*; literally, "called forth") into making a decision about how to respond to that address. Beyond that moment, even if I chose to ignore them, I could not avoid *responding* to them in one form or another. As rhetorician Diane Davis puts it, "You might whip out your Blackberry or plug into your iPod or feign sleep or complete absorption in your magazine, iPad, or Nintendo DS, but the active refusal to be responsive is a response and so no longer simple indifference" (*Inessential Solidarity* 11). In other words, my decision to ignore these demonstrators was already a response to their rhetoric, and an attempt to manage my vulnerability within that

scene of address. What's more, the provocation of that decision, the calling forth to respond even if that response turned out to be a diversion, was partly a reminder that my existence as a rhetorical being necessitates my existence as a vulnerable being, someone whose life is contingent, perpetually exposed, and always subject to the effects of language (among countless other factors).

By “rhetorical being,” I do not simply mean that I am able to affect others through language, a capacity that we might call *rhetorical agency*; I also mean that I am constantly exposed to the effects/affects of others, a capacity that I will tentatively call *rhetorical vulnerability*. As Richard Marback notes, the “question of what speech [or any other form of rhetoric] has made” demands a two-fold answer: one accounting for the ways in which we effect change through language, and one accounting for the conditions that allow language to affect us so deeply (*Managing Vulnerability* 16). The first account has been the subject of numerous commentaries concerning the nature of rhetorical agency (see, for example, Geisler; Turnbull, “Rhetorical”; Greene; Lundberg and Gunn; Campbell; Wallace and Alexander; and Cooper). The second account—of language’s capacity for creating change—cannot be fully addressed without provoking us, calling us forth, into further reflection on our own capacity to be moved by language, our rhetorical vulnerability.

Here, I attempt to respond to this aforementioned provocation by considering how a rhetorical theory and pedagogy more deeply grounded in a rethinking of vulnerability might help us as rhetoricians and writing scholars to address the proliferation of fake news and trolling in our public discourse. In the first part, I bring together a range of scholarly voices from within and outside of rhetoric and writing studies in order to move towards a fuller theory of rhetorical vulnerability. In the second part, I propose the use of trolling rhetoric as an object of analysis that may help students better understand how deceptive and disruptive genres of discourse (including, but not limited to, fake news) may, in the process of trying to exploit our rhetorical vulnerability, actually call attention to something fundamental about rhetoric.

Toward a Theory of Rhetorical Vulnerability

As both a term and a concept, vulnerability typically is not framed in a positive light. Rather, the term is more commonly used to describe an unfortunate exposure to the threat of subjugation and injury, which should be avoided or mitigated whenever possible. These typically negative connotations can be attributed to a wide range of factors, including culturally learned presumptions and linguistic associations. After all, vulnerability is derived from *vulnus*, the Latin word for “wound” (“Vulnerable”). However, in recent years, scholars from many different fields have begun to question this conventional wisdom by reimagining vulnerability not just as a position of precarious exposure, but also as a basic condition for social connection, political existence, ethical engagement, and even rhetorical responsiveness.

Outside of rhetorical studies, vulnerability has become a complex and ever-growing discourse of its own. Political theorists like Judith Butler, legal scholars like Martha Albertson Fineman, and ethical philosophers like Alasdair MacIntyre, William Connolly, and Erinn Gilson (among others) have composed a wide range of texts exploring vulnerability as an ethical relation, a political position,

a concept for critical theory, and so on. One recurring theme that has emerged from this scholarship is the notion that vulnerability is simultaneously (1) a *predisposition* to being affected by others that is mutually experienced by all, including humans and nonhumans, and (2) a precarious *position* that is uniquely experienced by each of us based on an ever-changing configuration of external forces, contingencies, and interdependencies. Judith Butler makes this distinction in her 2010 book *Frames of War* when she introduces the interrelated terms “precariousness” and “precarity”:

Lives are by definition *precarious*: they can be expunged at will or by accident; their persistence is in no sense guaranteed. In some sense, this is a feature of all life, and there is no thinking of life that is not precarious.... *Precairity* designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death. (25; emphasis added)

In other words, while all lives are precarious by virtue of simply being alive and broadly dependent upon forces beyond one’s control, each life’s exposure to harm can be exacerbated by “failing networks of support,” leading to differentiated experiences of vulnerability. Ultimately, Butler’s terms help to highlight the fact that while all of us experience vulnerability, none of us experience it in *exactly* the same ways. Her distinction here is helpful; however, her terms also run the risk of implying an inevitable link between vulnerability and harm.

This negative yet persistent perception is one that scholars like Erinn Gilson have been working to challenge, most often by emphasizing vulnerability’s priority as a fundamental openness that foregrounds our ethical engagements with the world (42). To be sure, Gilson readily acknowledges the commonly perceived negatives that underscore vulnerability. She writes that the “experience of vulnerability presents us with the reality of fallibility, mutability, unpredictability and uncontrollability,” elaborating,

We are affected by forces outside our control, the effects of which we can neither fully know nor fully control. Thus, experiences of vulnerability can also prompt fear, defensiveness, avoidance, and disavowal. Where the ability to predict and control is valued, the inability to do so is perceived as a failing and thus to be avoided at all costs. Hence, we are often ill at ease with vulnerability because it is a form of exposure to that with which we are unfamiliar or uncomfortable. (3-4)

Importantly, Gilson does not reject the aforementioned link between vulnerability and harm, but she works to expand the concept by strongly emphasizing the idea that vulnerability entails far more than an inevitable exposure to injury. “Vulnerability is regarded as definitive of life,” she writes, “a condition that links humans to nonhuman animals, and an experience that roots us in the corporeality of our existence. [...] Thus, vulnerability is a topic of concern...because it is a fundamental part of the human condition...” (4).

Within rhetoric and writing studies more specifically, an increasingly explicit concern for vulnerability has been developing along similar lines. To be fair, this attentiveness to vulnerability is not a particularly recent development. After all, Socrates’s condemnation of rhetoric in Plato’s *Gorgias* stems at least in part from his suspicions about how easily people can be fooled into believing

false character and acting on untruths (455a-460e). Similarly, as Brooke Rollins has argued, one of the oldest texts in the rhetorical tradition, Gorgias's *Encomium of Helen*, simultaneously elaborates on and exploits vulnerability insofar as it treats persuasion as a kind of force, both in the body of the text, when Helen is characterized as being unable to resist the power of speech, and in the performance of the text, when Gorgias concludes the speech by calling attention to his own attempt at persuasion (8-21). Rhetoric is troublesome, then, not merely because it can be deceitful, but also because it can be compelling, exerting a kind of force on audiences that cannot be easily detected, avoided, or diverted.

In more contemporary commentaries, this link between rhetoric and force has often been coupled with arguments about the distinction (or lack thereof) between rhetoric and violence. On the one hand, some rhetoricians have argued that rhetoric provides a counterpoint to violence, a method for engaging people and enacting change that does not run the risk of injury for audiences. For example, George Kennedy links rhetoric to vulnerability by suggesting that rhetorical practices emerged from an instinct to survive and control, which could be done “by direct action—force, threats, bribes, for example” or “by the use of ‘signs’” (*A New History* 3). Similarly, Wayne Booth suggests that “the effort at genuine, deep listening [or listening-rhetoric] has fewest successes when violence and war are at stake,” thus implying that “good” rhetoric is most successful when separated from violence (150).

On the other hand, a number of rhetoricians, including feminist rhetoricians, have argued that rhetoric (in its traditional, masculine, agonistic form) enacts a kind of coercive violence upon others. Sally Miller Gearhart, for example, makes this case in her 1979 article “The Womanization of Rhetoric” when she asserts that “any intent to persuade is an act of violence” insofar as it attempts to coerce rather than communicate (195). She further describes students of modern rhetoric as “weapon specialists who are skilled in emotional maneuvers” and “expert in intellectual logistics” (197). Sonja K. Foss and Cindy L. Griffin echo Gearhart's characterization, writing that any “act of changing others not only establishes the power of the rhetor over others but also devalues the lives and perspectives of those others” (3). They further suggest that the distinction between rhetorical and physical force is unsustainable: “Although these discursive strategies allow more choice to the audience than do the supposedly more heavy-handed strategies of physical coercion, they still infringe on others' rights to believe as they choose and to act in ways they believe are best for them” (3). Challenging this coercive power of persuasion, Foss and Griffin propose what they call “invitational rhetoric,” defined as “an invitation to understanding as a means to create a relationship rooted in equality, immanent value, and self-determination” (5). Implicit in both of these critiques of rhetoric is a concern for how vulnerability is managed by rhetors. As Rollins observes, Gearhart's “weapon specialists” are able to exert their persuasive force from a “safe distance,” thereby “encroaching on the space of the other without ever endangering the self” (542). Similarly, Foss and Griffin argue that persuasion “can constitute a kind of trespassing on the personal integrity of others” (3). Their critiques thus characterize rhetors as strategists who attack others from guarded positions, exploiting vulnerabilities and imposing themselves upon available audiences.

However, while debates about the deceptive, exploitative, and violent powers of rhetoric

continue (for very good reasons), recent scholarship has begun to expand what it means (or what it *could* mean) to be vulnerable to rhetoric. Richard Marback, for example, has noted that our “aversion to deception, to being led astray, to giving in, can and does motivate us to commit some of our energies to defending ourselves against empty words and deceitful representations” (“A Meditation” 2). Importantly, although our vulnerability to rhetorical effects is not something we are always conscious of, rhetorical training may help us to enhance our awareness of others’ appeals (2). This awareness, however, is not contiguous with becoming *invulnerable* to rhetorical effects. If it were possible to completely guard ourselves against the influence of others, we would become *a-rhetorical* beings, immune to the address of others.

This idea—that “none of us are so self-sufficient that rhetoric is without persuasive power”—describes what Marback calls “strong versions” of rhetoric, which presume that all rhetoric is underscored by vulnerability (3). “Recognizing our interdependence through our appeals to each other,” he writes, “compels us to accept that rhetoric leads us beyond ourselves to experiences, feelings, ideas, sensations, and thoughts we can embrace as our own and that we could never have had alone” (3). Rhetoric, in this view, always involves a prior exposure to appeals and constraints, a giving of ourselves to others, or a kind of dispossession. Marback explains:

Rhetoric is a given; people cannot have relationships or communicate with each other except through their aspirations to appeal to, influence, inspire, or persuade each other. The rhetor who appeals to and has influence over an audience by virtue of awareness and preparation and strategy is at the same time influenced by an audience’s awarenesses, expectations, preferences, and responses. The nature and extent of the rhetor’s influence does not blind an audience. Instead, both audience and rhetor are made aware of the contingencies of being and knowing through their participation together in rhetorical activity. (3)

However, while strong versions of rhetoric accept the reality of vulnerability, they do not necessarily see anything “good” in it. Marback explains that while “mere rhetoric is grounded in a blatant fear of the devious rhetor preying on an audience’s vulnerability, strong rhetoric responds to fear of audience susceptibility with the guarantee of a rhetor’s good intentions and an audience’s shared responsibility for meaningfulness and valuation” (“A Meditation” 4). Thus, vulnerability is rendered as an openness that is ironically unwelcome, a condition of exposure that prompts us to want some reassurance. This aversion subsequently inflects our concepts in the field, including our notions of agency and efficacy. Marback writes that both mere rhetoric and strong rhetoric “share a commitment to rhetorical efficacy as a kind of strength defined in terms of a capacity to avert the self-pity and self-loathing that come from being duped” (5). So, when we realize our rhetorical efficacy, we also minimize our rhetorical vulnerability, which is framed as primarily *negative* potential.

To counter this perception, Marback proposes a rethinking of vulnerability’s positive potential. This is not to say that he advocates gullibility; rather, he suggests that if vulnerability is central to rhetoric, then we as rhetoricians and writing scholars should consider how we might manage it otherwise. And we have good reason for doing so:

What we gain in acknowledging and accepting our vulnerability to the appeals of others is an awareness of ourselves in our responsiveness to others. If we are aware of our responsiveness

to others, we are aware of ourselves as being affected by them; we are aware at some level and in some sense of the irresistible power of their persuasiveness. Such awareness cannot but sensitize us to the subtleties and gradations of our vulnerabilities. (10-11)

Marback furthers this argument in his most recent book on post-apartheid rhetoric, in which he describes how the management of vulnerability is a basic condition for rhetorical processes of democratic deliberation. “If we are to take part in deliberations,” he writes, “we must at least accept the prospects of acquiescence, compromise, and defeat” (*Managing Vulnerability* 131). He goes on to argue that acknowledging our rhetorical vulnerability “involves more than resigning ourselves to the limits of our rhetorical capacities. While everyone at one time or another will experience disappointment with deliberation, we constrain our participation if we cynically conclude that disappointment is inevitable as the price to be paid for hope in a common good” (131). In other words, rhetorical deliberations demand something from us; they require us to risk ourselves and our ambitions in pursuit of a common good. Although these risks may result in disappointments, they are essential if we hope for deliberations to achieve anything other than perpetuating conflicts and complaints.

Marback’s vision of vulnerability as a fundamental condition for rhetoric intersects productively with the recent work of Diane Davis. In *Inessential Solidarity: Rhetoric and Foreigner Relations*, Davis takes up the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas in order to propose a vision of rhetoric that begins with vulnerability rather than argumentation or communication. Davis challenges rhetoricians to consider how all of us are made available to rhetoric before means and meanings are made available to us. She explains:

If rhetorical practices work by managing to have an effect on others, then an always prior openness to the other’s affection is its first requirement: the “art” of rhetoric can be effective only among affectable existents, who are by definition something other than distinct individuals or self-determining agents, and whose relations necessarily precede and exceed symbolic intervention. (3)

Importantly, this concept of vulnerability is not just an abstraction for rhetorical theorists. In a more recent essay on “Creaturely Rhetorics” (2011), Davis applies this theory to rhetorical studies’ burgeoning interest in animals by responding to George Kennedy’s assertion that “rhetoric is a form of energy,” which is “prior in biological evolution and prior psychologically in any specific instance” (“A Hoot” 4). Davis contends that what Kennedy’s argument misses is “an always prior rhetoricity, and affectability or persuadability that is due not to any creature’s specific genetic makeup but to corporality more generally, to the *exposedness* of corporeal existence” (89, emphasis in original). She explains further:

Your material incarnation is the site of a passivity more ancient than the active/passive dichotomy. It’s the condition for your exposure, susceptibility, vulnerability, and therefore for your *responsivity*. Responsibility (response-ability) begins not with a subject who recognizes itself but with “proximity,” in Levinas’s terminology, immediate (as in nonmediated) contact and responsivity.... (90)

Rhetorical vulnerability, then, is not simply a matter of cognitive uptake. Rather, it is rooted in our

embodiment, our affective lives, and our material connections to the world around us, which closes in on us and at the same time keeps us open. “There is no representational power,” Davis writes, “that could catch up to this immediate ‘touch,’ this primordial persuasive appeal,” and so rhetoric arises not simply as a strategy for making and sharing meaning, but as “an underivable provocation [‘calling forth’], an imperative to respond,” even at a very physical level (90). Whatever capacity we have for effecting change in our environments through language is thus grounded in this fundamental rhetorical vulnerability that goes beyond active-passive, thinking-unthinking, and human-animal binaries.

It seems to me that this more expansive understanding of vulnerability as a basic condition of mutual, material, and managed exposure offers a great deal to the study of rhetoric, writing, and literacy. After all, what purpose would communication or persuasion serve in a world where we could fully inoculate ourselves against the effects of language? Similarly, what purpose would rhetorical awareness serve in a world where we are all vulnerable to the same appeals in exactly the same ways at all times? How can we study the uses and effects of rhetoric in our world without first presuming that others are (or can become more) affect-able? If, as Aristotle famously put it, rhetoric describes “the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion,” then we should acknowledge from the beginning that rhetoric is premised upon an always prior *availability*, not only of means, but also of rhetors, audiences, and others (1.2.1). Furthermore, if our ability to function within rhetorical situations is dependent upon the availability of means, minds, and bodies, then how can we imagine the possibility of rhetorical agency without the prior necessity of rhetorical vulnerability?

Importantly, this concern for rhetorical vulnerability is not something that is implied or expressed only in the pages of rhetorical scholarship. Insofar as rhetoric is dependent upon an exposure to persuasive and communicative action, this concern is already deeply embedded within all rhetorical practices. To assess the opportunities and constraints of any given rhetorical situation is in part to gauge the ways in which all participants within that situation (including interlocutors, audiences, and even bystanders) are vulnerable to both verbal and nonverbal forces and influences. For example, a rhetor who is interested in persuading an audience or prompting social action must be attuned to that audience’s shared and diverse vulnerabilities, the ways in which they can be moved through language. At the same time, the rhetor must also be aware of her own vulnerabilities, including the basic risk of failing to achieve a desired goal given the uncertainties of the situation. A well-trained rhetor must therefore ask, “What actions or appeals will generate the responses that I am hoping for? How receptive would my audience be to such actions or appeals? How can I make them more receptive to persuasion? What risks would my actions entail, and are they worth it?” In this way, the concern for vulnerability is not just something that rhetoricians think about; it is also something that rhetors

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think through, something that readers and writers face whenever they compose or encounter texts, something that precedes all communicative action. There is, in other words, a necessary concern for vulnerability at the heart of rhetorical studies; without this concern, the entire enterprise of rhetoric would become little more than a series of rote exercises in disengaged discourse.

Toward a Pedagogy of Rhetorical Vulnerability

If we acknowledge the fundamental role that vulnerability plays in all of our rhetorical interactions, then it is not a far stretch to perceive how it already influences our writing and literacy pedagogies. Like all communicative actions, writing means attempting to affect others in some way, even if that effect is the expression of one's thoughts or emotions. What's more, writing, like any rhetorical move, involves taking risks; this mentality is one that our students are probably already familiar with, even if they do not realize it. As Alexander Reid notes, any student who stresses about an essay grade practices a form of risk-management, "a set of pre-established procedures that all students can follow to compose passable essays" and "minimize risk" (191-2). Reid goes on to suggest that these strategies of risk-management reflect rhetoric more broadly: "We employ rhetoric to maximize our chances of achieving some purpose and to minimize the likelihood of negative consequences. At the same time, we recognize an inescapable relationship between risk and reward" (192). What Reid describes as risk-management might also be framed in terms of what Richard Marback calls "rhetoric's functioning as a management of vulnerability," though the vulnerabilities that Marback describes go far beyond writing assessment (*Managing Vulnerability* 22). Still, when students present their writing to an audience, whether the instructor, a peer group, or a public, they are taking a kind of calculated risk, hoping to achieve a desired outcome. At the same time, they are exposing themselves to an encounter in which they have little (if any) control, whether or not their writing is deeply personal or strictly academic.

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compelling discussions with our students about what it means to be affected by the communicative actions of others. These discussions are particularly opportune today given the ongoing proliferation of fake news stories in our public discourse, stories that frequently prey on audiences' vulnerabilities both through their outrageous rhetoric and through their subversion of trust in sources. To help our students engage more mindfully with fake news media today, I argue that we must teach them not only how to evaluate the integrity of sources, but also how to recognize "rhetoric's functioning as a management of vulnerability," including their own rhetorical vulnerability (*Managing Vulnerability*

What I mean to suggest here is that much of what we do as writing and literacy instructors *already* involves the management of rhetorical vulnerabilities. That being said, I would also contend that by bringing a fuller and more reflective awareness of rhetorical vulnerability into our classrooms, we might prompt

22). Both of these outcomes are vital, in my opinion, because fake news stories do not simply work to deceive audiences; they also work to disturb audiences, subvert trust, and disrupt critical literacies before we are even aware of such rhetorical effects.

To help students develop a fuller understanding of rhetorical vulnerability as both a concept and a reality, I have begun using the rhetoric of trolling as a topic of discussion in my classes. Anyone who has ever read the comments section on a blog or YouTube video has probably encountered trolling rhetoric in some form. In modern parlance, the term “troll” typically refers to two very different but comparable activities: (1) the practice of fishing by dragging a baited lure behind a boat and waiting for a bite, and (2) the practice of posting distracting or inflammatory comments to an online community, such as a forum or blog, in order to provoke a response (Herring et al. 372). The origins of online trolling can be traced back to Usenet forums, where trolling played out as what Judith Donath calls “a game about identity deception” (43). Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler, and Barab describe this game as such:

The troller tries to write something deceptive, but not blatantly so, in order to attract the maximum number of responses. [...] In the context of Usenet...a highly successful troll is one that is cross-posted to, and responded to on, many different newsgroups, thereby disrupting multiple groups with a minimum expenditure of effort. (372-3)

Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler, and Barab offer three valuable criteria for identifying trolling messages in online forums: (1) “Messages from a sender who appears outwardly sincere”; (2) “[m]essages designed to attract predictable responses or flames”; and (3) “[m]essages that waste a group’s time by provoking futile argument” (375). These messages are thus crafted as a kind of discursive bait, dropped strategically into the sea of information. For trolls, the rhetorical aim is to lure vulnerable media-users into exposing their naiveté or sensitivity, thereby disrupting the flow of communication, subverting trust among networked interlocutors, and sometimes going so far as to induce outrage or actual harm.

However, digital culture has evolved significantly since the early days of Usenet, and with that evolution, the term “trolling” has become more, not less, ambiguous. Take, for example, a small sampling of news articles published since Donald Trump’s election in November 2016: Andrew Marantz’s *New Yorker* article “Is Trump Trolling the White House Press Corps?”; Robinson Meyer’s *Atlantic* article “Trump’s Solar-Powered Border Wall is More Than a Troll”; John Cassidy’s *New Yorker* article “Donald Trump Will Go Down in History as the Troll-in-Chief.” I could go on, but there’s only so much time. As Libby C. Watson, writing for the tech news website *Select All* in 2015, humorously puts it, “you could be forgiven for thinking that *trolling* is a synonym for ‘doing something on the internet’” (para. 1). While trolling’s semantic ambiguity has not gotten any better over the last few years, Matt Sautman, writing for *The Artifice* in April 2017, has provided a more scholarly interpretation of trolling by arguing that “the history of trolling is a history of rhetoric” (para. 1). Sautman notes that trolling rhetoric is not limited to digital spaces; in fact, it may be as old as the rhetorical tradition itself. He suggests, for example:

Based on how Plato depicts Socrates within [the *Gorgias*], having him outwit and shut down both Gorgias and his pupils, what the reader encounters is not a discussion amongst

conversation partners contributing their thoughts equally and productively, but a fairly one-sided discussion where Socrates sets a series of verbal and logical traps to make his opposition incapable of responding in a reasonable fashion. (para. 10)

Whether or not Plato's Socrates practices a kind of trolling rhetoric is debatable, of course, but the link between trolling rhetoric and traditional rhetoric that Sautman teases out is an important one because, in my opinion, it raises the possibility that trolling exposes something fundamental about how we experience rhetoric, something that might make trolling not only a genre of rhetoric but also a method of exposing (while, sadly, exploiting) our rhetorical vulnerability.

To better explain what I mean, consider a recent case of public trolling with political consequences. On February 3, 2013, the same day that Super Bowl XLVII drew national media attention (along with millions of viewers), Todd Kincannon, former executive director of the Republican Party of South Carolina, posted the following comment to his personal Twitter account (@ToddKincannon): "This Super Bowl sucks more dick than adult Trayvon Martin would have for drug money." This inflammatory comment, with its explicitly racist and homophobic overtones, was not a hoax, as Kincannon himself admitted after the tweet went viral. More disturbingly, it was not an isolated incident but one of a series of tweets that Kincannon posted during and after the Super Bowl. Many of these tweets expressed similar sentiments. For example, in response to another Twitter user (@coreyking), Kincannon replied: "Hey what's the difference between Trayvon Martin and a dead baby? They're both dead, but Pepsi doesn't taste like Trayvon." Not all of Kincannon's tweets included references to Trayvon Martin, but several were racially charged. For example, in response to the power failure that blacked out half of the New Orleans Superdome shortly after the beginning of the game's second half, Kincannon tweeted: "It hasn't been this dark in the Superdome since all those poors occupied it after Hurricane Katrina."

As one might expect, public outrage and condemnation quickly followed on the heels of Kincannon's tweets, with numerous responses posted and circulated on social media networks. Given the controversial nature of the incident, responses ranged from whole-hearted support (Todd: "that's why I like you Todd, balls of pure steel") to shock (Caplan: "Did you really go after a murdered teenager? Why go there? Do you have kids, if so, then why would you hurt parents this way?") to criticism (XXX: "Right to free speech isn't a right to speak without criticism or being called out for racism") to retaliatory insult (Dawn: "Really? You're going to go after a 17yr old murder victim – have fun on that fast train to hell you destined for!"). Some even questioned the authenticity of Kincannon's account, with one respondent (XXX) replying, "I'm really hoping this is a troll account."

The day after the incident, news outlets picked up the story, and Kincannon was invited to respond to the backlash via phone on *HuffPost Live*. When asked to explain why he would post something so insensitive knowing that it would spark public outrage and political controversy, Kincannon replied:

One of the things I like to do on Twitter is, I'll tweet something that's inflammatory or borderline crazy sounding, just for fun. And I enjoy watching people go nuts. And one of the best things about it is that if you say something that's borderline offensive, or that is offensive, the people that attack you and say just the awfulest [sic] things about you, they

do the very thing that they accuse you of. [...] I guess you could call it kind of *high-profile trolling*, but it definitely worked. (“Todd Kincannon,” italics mine)

By describing his actions as a “kind of high-profile trolling,” Kincannon showed that the uses of trolling today extend beyond games of online deception and provocation. In contrast to what we normally perceive as the goals of civic rhetoric, Kincannon used his words to “get a rise” out of his audience and garner as much attention as he could. If this was indeed his rhetorical aim, then it seems rather obvious that he succeeded, at least within the increasingly small window of time afforded him by the nonstop news cycles.

It is tempting at this point to focus on the motives that inspire trolling rhetors to use these tactics. That desire is understandable; however, the reality is that there are as many motives behind trolling rhetoric as there are active trolling rhetors today, and the expanding usage of the term only complicates the search for a central motive. Therefore, in order to describe trolling rhetoric without focusing on characteristic motives, it may be helpful for us to focus instead on the characteristic effects of trolling. For my purposes here, I want to recognize two main effects of trolling rhetoric: (1) disrupting the flow of information and communication, and (2) garnering as much attention as possible for as long as possible. Securing the uptake of a trolling message can be done either by generating a temporary façade of integrity and credibility or by provoking audiences into reacting intensely and emotionally. Either tactic, when successful, leads to a disruption of discourse that distracts or incites audiences while also interfering with the application of reflective and critical literacies. Case in point: through his tweets, Kincannon worked to intensify his audience’s emotional reactions while also setting himself up as an easy target for destructive criticism. Furthermore, if the trolling rhetor is savvy, the trolling message can then perpetuate itself by exploiting economies of attention, such as Kincannon’s appearance on *HuffPost Live* (Lanham). Ultimately, what distinguishes trolling from other rhetorical genres is that it is not (or not primarily, at least) a *meaning making* activity. Instead of drawing audiences into a shared system of signification, identification, and deliberation, trolling rhetoric works primarily to provoke responses and claims attention for as long as it can. The quality of the response is generally less important (if at all) to the success of a trolling message than the gesture of response itself.

So what can we learn from trolling rhetoric if its goals do not necessarily align with the rhetorical goals that we generally *want* our students to prioritize, such as informed argument or democratic deliberation? I argue that what makes trolling rhetoric worth discussing with students is the way in which it provokes us, “calls us forth,” into an awareness of (1) our fundamental rhetorical vulnerability and (2) how that vulnerability can be managed or exploited. While trolling rhetoric may be more disruptive than productive, the fact that it is disruptive *by design* while still achieving a rhetorical effect suggests that rhetoric in general may have less to do with meaning making *per se* and more to do with understanding and managing our vulnerabilities to rhetorical forces. This is *not* to say that rhetoric plays no part in meaning making, but it does acknowledge the possibility that rhetoric is not limited to what John Muckelbauer calls the “apparatus of signification” (“Rhetoric, Asignification” 239). Muckelbauer explains this point by separating the “communicative” (or “signifying”) operation of language from what he calls its “persuasive” (or “asignifying”) operation:

An act of communication...endeavors to reproduce, as accurately as possible, the proposition in the mind of its audience. Hence, communication responds to the preexisting proposition as if that proposition were primarily a meaning, as if it were, above all, an identifiable content that can be reproduced. [...] An act of persuasion, on the other hand, is not primarily a signifying operation...Rather than attempting to identically reproduce the proposition as a meaning in the mind of its audience, persuasive rhetoric attempts to make the proposition compelling, to give it a certain force. (*The Future* 17)

Persuasion as an asignifying operation is thus “interested in provoking the proposition’s effects rather than facilitating its understanding” (18). Or, to put it another way, persuasion focuses on “what the proposition *does*” rather than “what the proposition *is*” (18, emphasis in original). Muckelbauer is careful to point out that communication and persuasion are not completely separate from one another; in fact, they often coincide. “But the fact that these two dimensions exist in close proximity,” he writes, “does not indicate that they are the same” (“Rhetoric, Asignification” 239). Thus, if we are to understand trolling as a rhetorical genre, it may require us to acknowledge that despite rhetoric’s “proximity” to meaning making activities, its foremost concern is with the application of forces and the production of effects (239). It may also require us to acknowledge that, insofar as rhetoric deals

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with such forces and effects, it must also deal with our vulnerability to those forces and effects. As Nathan Stormer observes in his study of language and violence, “The capacity to impose derives from the capacity to be affected” (188). So, even if trolling rhetors do not set out to facilitate

understanding, they nonetheless reveal, through their disruptions, how rhetoric is premised upon both an awareness of and a managing of rhetorical vulnerability.

But what does this have to do with the proliferation of fake news today? Quite a bit, I would argue. Although fake news is problematic partly because it is fake and dis-informative, I would contend that it is also problematic because it exploits our rhetorical vulnerability in much the same way as trolling rhetoric. Given the ever-expanding marketing powers of the Internet as well as the increasingly enclosed media bubbles we now find ourselves occupying, fake news outlets are capable of managing our rhetorical vulnerabilities in ways that turn the game of trolling rhetoric into the business of trolling rhetoric. Consider, for example, the case of the *Denver Guardian*. On November 5, 2016, a fake news website called the *Denver Guardian* published an article with the headline “FBI Agent Suspected in Hillary Email Leaks Found Dead in Apparent Murder-Suicide” (Lubbers). Although the website has since been deleted, screenshots and news reports have preserved elements of the original article, which delivers a fictional account of an FBI agent who shot his own wife, set his house on fire, and then shot himself after being implicated in the leak of emails from Hillary Clinton’s private email server (Mikkelson). Despite its claims, the *Denver Guardian* was neither “Denver’s oldest news source” nor a credible source of information; in fact, as revealed by the *Denver Post*, the address given for the website’s newsroom was actually a parking lot in Denver, and the image

attached to the story originated from a Flickr account (Lubbers).

Nonetheless, the article spread on Facebook like wildfire to the extent that, according to *NPR* and the *Denver Post*, it generated around half a million shares, or “100 shares per minute” at times (Sydell; Lubbers). Reporter Hannah Ritchie, writing for *CNBC.com*, even listed the story as one of the “biggest fake news stories of 2016,” along with the likes of the Pizzagate conspiracy. It is perhaps unsurprising why a story like this would have generated such a reaction. The article, which played into a longstanding narrative about Hillary Clinton’s supposed criminal activities and exploited the contentiousness of the 2016 presidential campaign, was a powerful combination of trolling rhetoric and disinformation, one specifically designed to provoke those already suspicious of Hillary Clinton into reacting with unblinking outrage. In fact, one screenshot of the story as it appeared on Facebook, which is still hosted by the *Denver Post*, includes a response post that describes Hillary Clinton as “that murdering witch!!” (Lubbers). To be sure, both the article and the *Denver Guardian* have been thoroughly discredited at this point; however, I would argue that efforts to discredit the story have addressed only its dis-informative (signifying) elements, not its trolling (asignifying) elements. In other words, what mattered was not the credibility of the story, since it needed only to exploit an existing right-wing narrative about the Clinton campaign. What mattered was the outraged reaction that the story generated and the attention it garnered, including the attention of mainstream news outlets who felt compelled to publicly refute the story.

Interestingly enough, the *Denver Guardian* was one of several fake news outlets that *NPR* linked to Justin Coler, a registered Democrat who claims that he started producing fake news in order to “infiltrate the echo chambers of the alt-right, publish blatantly or fictional stories and then be able to publicly denounce those stories and point out the fact that they were fiction...” (Sydell). In other words, Coler hoped to use fake news stories, including the story about the fictional FBI agent, as a means of educating his readers about their susceptibility to rhetoric. However, given the prominence of fake news today, it would seem that his plan backfired, though Coler has nonetheless made thousands of dollars each month in ad revenue through his combination of fake news and trolling rhetoric (Sydell).

To counter this dangerous combination, I contend that we cannot simply focus on teaching our students to distrust sources until proven trustworthy (though those lessons *are* still important); we must also help our students come into a fuller awareness of what trolling rhetors have long recognized: that we are rhetorically vulnerable beings, that we can never not be rhetorically vulnerable and responsive, and that our rhetorical vulnerability can be managed and exploited for better and, unfortunately, for worse.

Toward a Conclusion

For now, my approach to trolling rhetoric and fake news in the classroom has focused primarily on using the genres as topics of discussion and in-class analysis with students. While I am still experimenting with specific lessons, I have found it helpful to have students compare readings on traditional rhetorical theory with more recent readings on how to compose trolling messages.

Consider, for example, how one dated but useful web guide to trolling explains the “design issues” that a trolling rhetor must take into account:

The experienced troller spends time carefully choosing the right subject and delivering it to the right newsgroup. With trolls, delivery is just as important as the subject. Start the troll in a reasonable and erudite manner. You have to engage your readers’ interest and draw them in. Never give too much away at the start - although a brief abstract with hints of what’s to come can work wonders. Construct your troll in a manner to make it readable. Use short paragraphs and lots of white space. Keep line length below eighty characters. Use a liberal amount of emphasis and even the occasional illustration. A good rule of thumb is that as your troll becomes more and more ludicrous put extra effort into the presentation.... Let confusion and chaos be your goal. (Spumante)

Several parallels with the rhetorical tradition are already evident in these guidelines. The anonymous author’s emphasis on “choosing the right subject” and “delivering it to the right newsgroup” bridges two of the five classical canons of rhetoric: invention and delivery. Although the author is focusing here on online trolling, these bridges (and the trolls living beneath them) are noticeable in political trolling as well; if “delivery is just as important as the subject,” it is little wonder why the combination of Trayvon Martin, social media, and the Super Bowl would have proven so opportune for Todd Kincannon. Similarly, the anonymous author’s insistence that the trolling rhetor must choose the right subject (“right” being a relative term) echoes Aristotle’s system for selecting effective *topoi* to suit the rhetorical situation. Finally, mentions of “manner” (from “reasonable,” “erudite,” and “readable” to increasingly “ludicrous”) link trolling to the canons of arrangement and style, with the principle of decorum largely subverted. These parallels suggest that, as difficult as it may be to admit, modern-day trolling is built upon the same principles as the rhetorical tradition more broadly.

That being said, some of my students have pointed out that trolling rhetoric differs from civic rhetoric in terms of its exploitation of *ethos* and *pathos* (i.e., deception and provocation) as well as its subversion of *logos* (i.e., disinformation). In contrast to Aristotle, who stresses the importance of treating *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* in balanced measure, trolling rhetors express little interest in advancing deliberation through balanced appeals. If anything, trolling rhetors design their appeals to create imbalances, interfering with the critical literacies that make civic rhetoric possible. In doing so, they achieve their goals of gaining attention and disrupting communicative exchanges. Thus, although trolling rhetors exercise many of the same principles that form the core of the rhetorical tradition rehearsed by academics, they apply those principles to ends that would likely have Aristotle and Cicero turning in their graves. These comparisons have proven useful in my own writing courses as a way to complicate the concept of rhetoric for my students. On the one hand, rhetoric certainly carries the potential for harm and exploitation, as trolling rhetoric makes clear. But on the other hand, the vulnerability that trolling rhetoric relies upon is not unique to its purposes; instead, trolling rhetoric exposes vulnerability as a definitive and fundamental component of *all* rhetorical encounters.

Of course, a fuller pedagogy of rhetorical vulnerability cannot depend on discussions alone. To help students further expand their awareness of rhetorical vulnerability, I have also turned to

contemporary work on listening and attunement for inspiration, such as the work of Krista Ratcliffe and Lisbeth Lipari, which I believe offers teachers of rhetoric and writing a powerful and potentially transformative vision of what it means to think about and with vulnerability. Christian Smith, for example, has drawn upon the work of Arthur Zajonc and Christy I. Wenger to propose “contemplative listening,” an approach to rhetorical and literacy education that integrates mindfulness “by inviting students to sit in silence before reading aloud a mutual text together—going from student to student until the text is finished and, again, sitting in silence” (82). “Such practices,” Smith writes, “can work to expose cultural logics without an immediate identification with them. In that moment between, that aporetic pause, is an invitation to practice listening” (82).

Part of what strikes me about these listening-based approaches is that they also invite students to develop an awareness of rhetorical vulnerability. In fact, listening-based pedagogies are particularly well aligned to this task because through listening, we experience rhetoric not only cognitively but also materially. As Lipari has persuasively pointed out, the act of listening means that “our bodies vibrate with the sound waves pulsing toward and then through us. [...] Listening may or may not compel you to wiggle your hips or bounce your head, but the waves of sound are nevertheless moving you” (31). When we listen, we consequently open ourselves up to the world around us so that it may affect us intellectually, emotionally, and bodily. At the same time, we are reminded of our embeddedness in a larger web of social relations, contingencies, and interdependencies. As a pedagogical method, then, listening can be another way for us to help our students become more fully aware of how rhetorical vulnerabilities are exposed and managed, both in our classrooms and in our public discourse saturated with fake news.

Inspired by these listening-based approaches, I have shifted from providing purely written feedback on students’ projects to conferencing with each of my students individually on a regular basis. During each conference, I read, watch, and/or listen to the student’s work in real time while the student observes me. In doing so, I encourage the student to pay attention to my bodily cues, such as when I raise my eyebrows or nod affirmatively. Initially, I began doing this as a way to help students learn how to read body language; but over time, I have realized that this process also helps students better perceive how an audience might *experience*, or be *affected by*, their texts. More than once, I have had a student in my office ask me, “Why were you squinting your eyes when you read that paragraph?” or “What was that head-shaking about earlier?” When students ask me these questions, I take time to reflect on my encounter with their text and explain how I physically and mentally processed their work in the moment. This generally leads to a productive discussion about how I was affected by the student’s text more broadly and whether or not that effect aligned with the student’s stated intentions. In retrospect, I find that this method ironically but positively contrasts with my encounters with the church group during my grad school years. Whereas that group made me feel the need to guard myself and maintain a “safe distance” from their rhetorical address, my conference-based approach compels me to make myself more available to my students while actively reflecting on what my reactions mean. Currently, I am working to develop a method for integrating this approach into peer response, though that is still a work in progress.

I must note before finishing that as we move towards a fuller theory and pedagogy of rhetorical

vulnerability, we cannot deny the potential for exploitation and harm that comes with it. Fake news and trolling rhetoric are just two examples of how our openness to rhetorical effects can be tragically mismanaged, as the Pizzagate incident and the shooting at a Congressional baseball game have sadly demonstrated. However, as scholars have pointed out, this potential does not have to be what defines our discussions of vulnerability, especially not when so much of what we already do requires us to be affected by others. This brings me back once more to the protesters in Free Speech Alley I mentioned earlier. On the one hand, those protesters made me feel unwelcome on my own campus and exposed to their rhetoric in ways that still disturb me. However, those protesters also (inadvertently or otherwise) provoked me, called me forth, into an awareness of how my experience of rhetoric is also an experience of being vulnerable. Furthermore, they continue to remind me as both a rhetorician and a writing teacher that this abiding concern for vulnerability exposes something at the heart of what I do, something at the heart of the rhetorical tradition itself, whether I make a habit of acknowledging it or simply continue humming to myself .

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