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- 1 On August 9, 2016, in the thick of the United States presidential election campaign, Republican candidate Donald Trump warned supporters at a North Carolina rally that his Democratic rival Hillary Clinton's election and her following Supreme Court appointments would result in strict gun control. He cautioned, "nothing you can do, folks." After a slight pause, he continued: "Although the Second Amendment people—maybe there is, I don't know."<sup>i</sup> The statement made many media and election watchers gasp: What did he say? Did Trump suggest that "Second Amendment people"—meaning gun activists and enthusiasts—could or should stop Hillary Clinton and Democratic judges from limiting gun rights, presumably with their guns and force? Or did Trump simply mean that these people would peacefully, democratically organize to oppose such measures? Although there is ambiguity and disagreement about Trump's meaning, as Julian Zelizer observed at the time: "what's most notable is that at this point in the campaign so many people don't have confidence that he didn't mean to refer to the threat of assassinating her."<sup>ii</sup>
- 2 Why did masses of people around the world interpret Trump's words as a threat of violence? The rise of Donald Trump and the popular movement that surrounds him has relied on emotional evocations of violence—fear, threats, aggression, hatred, and division. In order to better understand this phenomenon and the development of pop politics more broadly, this article analyzes the emergence of "Trumpism" in the United States through the lens of violence. I frame Trumpism as a social movement characterized by populism, strongman politics, and identitarianism. At times during the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election campaign, political tensions resulted in outbursts of physical violence and aggression. More often, however, election violence took on more discrete forms. Trump utilized subtle and not-so-subtle rhetorical violence, which served to mutually strengthen populism and cultural violence.<sup>iii</sup> In addition to these raw and dramatic moments, I argue that the impact of Trumpism can be understood through the lens of a prevailing *meta-violence*, evidenced by extreme emotions, social antagonisms, and international tensions. The article pairs an analysis of meta-violence with "slow violence,"<sup>iv</sup> or the long-term consequences of a divided nation and far-right politics espousing nativism and environmentally hostile policies. While centering on

Donald Trump's character and his support movement, Trumpism can only be understood in the context of broader U.S. and global socio-politics. In order to begin to untangle the magnitude of the rise of Trumpism, it is essential to examine violence that is explicitly said and done, as well as violence that remains just out of grasp but affective.

## 1. Feeling Violence

- 3 The notion of “meta-violence” evokes a multifaceted violence that looms over a moment, a space, or a phenomenon. However, meta-violence has not been integrated sufficiently into the vocabulary and theory of violence studies, as pursued by social scientists and humanists, among them cultural studies scholars, political scientists, geographers, and historians. I argue that the concept well serves the study of political, social, and cultural movements, such as Trumpism. Meta-violence, as conceived of here, is closely bound to emotion. It harkens to a Freudian uncanny feeling of fear, threat, and danger, and the unsettling convergence of dark pasts and presents.<sup>v</sup> Meta-violence in its omnipresence is also closely related to the concept of “slow violence” proposed by Rob Nixon and built upon effectively by Sarah de Leeuw.<sup>vi</sup> In 2011, analyzing the long-term impact of environmental calamity, Nixon emphasized the urgent need to “complicate conventional assumptions about violence as a highly visible act that is newsworthy because it is event focused, time bound, and body bound.”<sup>vii</sup> Meta-violence, like slow violence, can be hard to put your finger on. Nixon argued, “we need to account for how the temporal dispersion of slow violence affects the way we perceive and respond to a variety of social afflictions.”<sup>viii</sup> We need to look carefully at the workings of Trumpism and trace its trajectory through society and the environment to identify its subtle, compounding violences. de Leeuw has taken Nixon's framework further, analyzing slow, discrete violence on the lived experiences of people in the context of neo-colonialism. Such an approach reminds us of the intimate and overarching impacts of sociocultural division, structural violence, and inequities, befitting a study of Trumpism.
- 4 Meta-violence also incorporates “cultural violence,” defined by Johan Galtung as “those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence – exemplified by religion and ideology, language and art, empirical science and formal science (logic, mathematics) – that can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence.”<sup>ix</sup> The danger of such subtle violence and consistent messaging is that “it makes direct and structural violence look, even feel, right – or at least not wrong.”<sup>x</sup> The meta-violent culture of the Trumpist social movement appears in its ideas, rhetoric, and science, dividing the United States into “Americans” and others, upholding Christianity above other religions, dictating control over women's bodies, and thwarting efforts to protect and nurture the environment. In this way, meta-violence fuels the populism and popular culture of Trumpism. While bloodshed in a violent clash can be sensationalized and manipulated for political gain, probing into the deeper levels of violence that permeate daily life in thoughts and behaviors, we begin to see the shaping of culture and society. The emergence of Trumpism has revealed a window into the development and production of meta-violence.

## 2. Trumpism: Populism, Strongman Politics, and Identitarianism

- 5 Though Donald Trump ran in the 2016 election as the Republican candidate, his strategy, support, and style were far from mainstream politics. Beyond Trump's personality, "Trumpism" came to represent the movement and ideas driving his election. As a new phenomenon, however, varied definitions and uses of the concept have been employed by voters and pundits. Though the definition of Trumpism is in flux and contested, it offers a useful lens for viewing a new phase of U.S. politics and for analyzing Donald Trump's political ascendance. In order to begin to untangle meta-violence, we can identify three key characteristics of Trumpism: populism, strongman politics, and identitarianism. First, a look at the origins of Trumpism situates this analysis.
- 6 Before Donald Trump stepped onto the mainstage of national politics, "Trumpism" had already entered English lexicon and the realm of Twitter hashtags, referring to his unique expressions and analogies, as featured on *The Apprentice* and in *The Art of the Deal*. A month after Trump's escalator entry into the presidential race, however, the term began to shift in meaning. This is made evident, for example, through a survey of uses of #Trumpism on Twitter from January 1, 2015, to January 1, 2016. "Trumpism" began to be used to describe his brand of political vision. In late July 2015, Rick Perry, then still a vocal opponent of Trump, denounced "Trumpism: a toxic mix of demagoguery, mean-spiritedness and nonsense that will lead the Republican Party to perdition."<sup>xi</sup> As Trump's Republican nomination campaign progressed, the notion of Trumpism began to be discussed more widely. A watershed moment for the ideology came in December 2015, following Donald Trump's call for a "total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States."<sup>xii</sup> The extreme objective and its reception among supporters signaled that something "huge" was at hand. Recounting Trump's announcement at a rally on the U.S.S. Yorktown in South Carolina, Anand Giridharadas captured the spirit of the moment and the movement:
- The roar came when Trump read his press statement aloud. It was a long, full-bodied roar — hands clapping, fists stabbing the air. The roar you give when things that you and your family and your friends have long believed are suddenly utterable on what is arguably the greatest stage on earth: the American presidential election. It was a roar of relief: These were no longer notions that had to be muttered under your breath. Trump wasn't just "saying what he means" ... He, the freest of men, was saying what they meant.<sup>xiii</sup>
- 7 Though Donald Trump's presidential candidacy was still taken lightly by many pundits and reporters, from this point on, Trumpism became an undeniable force to contend with, not only in the election, but in socio-cultural political analysis.
- 8 In attempts to define burgeoning Trumpism, comparisons to violent early twentieth-century fascism have proven popular. Jane Caplan, a leading historian of fascism, has identified many parallels between the rise of Donald Trump and German and Italian fascists of the past, including the manipulation of "systemic crises of national identity and security."<sup>xiv</sup> Caplan's understanding of fascism, past and present, highlights the significant role of meta-violence in its production and maintenance. Caplan argues: "Fascism is not just the big bang of mass rallies and extreme violence; it is also the creeping fog that incrementally occupies power while obscuring its motives, its moves

and its goals. It is about inserting demagoguery, violence and contempt for the rule of law into the heart of popular politics.”<sup>xv</sup> The movement surrounding Donald Trump, however, requires careful analysis on its own unique terms. In David Tabachnick’s words, Trumpism “intertwin[es] contemporary and traditional political trends in such a way that makes it both uniquely American and of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, distinct from the European Fascism of the last century.”<sup>xvi</sup> An examination of Trumpist populism, strongman politics, and identitarianism reveals its contemporary U.S. context.

- 9 The election primary season saw an unprecedented surfacing of populist activism, which most strongly drove the campaigns of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders. Both figures spoke to the emotions, but instead of Obama’s campaign of “Hope,” the 2016 election touched on people’s sense of displacement and outrage. Both Trump and Sanders supporters were mad. They were angry at the power of the political establishment. They were angry at the changes they saw as corrupting their lives, values, and idealized version of U.S. society, though framed differently by the two camps. They were ready for a radical change and turned to what they saw as “anti-establishment” figures like Trump and Sanders to lead the movement. The populist support for Donald Trump, specifically, owed to his status as a non-politician, as a (falsely assumed) “self-made man” and shrewd businessman, and as someone not afraid to speak for his supporters. Trump has consistently been characterized as a demagogue. His supporters viewed him as an advocate for the everyman (note the gendered specification), perhaps in the ancient tradition, while Trump’s critics viewed his demagoguery as a dangerous path of lies and incitement.<sup>xvii</sup> Though running as the candidate of the GOP, Donald Trump fashioned a campaign that appeared on the surface to reject Republican fiscal conservatism, shifting the Republicans’ resonance as a “Party of the People”—something the mainstream GOP had failed to do, despite its intentions.<sup>xviii</sup> The voter swing in the Rust Belt demonstrated Trump supporters’ demand for economic stability and their discontent with an elite growing richer while their own standard of living degraded. Donald Trump, “by breaking with Republican orthodoxy on the economy, ... more effectively exploit[ed] the anxiety and frustration felt by the vast majority of Americans who still live in the long shadow of the Great Recession.”<sup>xix</sup> Despite being a self-proclaimed billionaire, he was accepted as “of the people” and for the people by his largely white, male, non-college-educated, and rural supporters.<sup>xx</sup>
- 10 As the nomenclature makes clear, Trumpism is a personality-driven movement, fueled by Trump’s celebrity power. Trump utilized his widely recognizable persona brand to engage reality TV spectators with federal politics—and significantly, the vote.<sup>xxi</sup> With this attention, Donald Trump positioned himself as the savior of “America” and millions responded enthusiastically. Exploiting fear as a collectivizing tool, Trump assured his supporters that he—and only he—could single-handedly fix all that stood in the way of the “American Dream.” With unfaltering confidence, he made it clear that nothing would stop him and that he would not be bound by rules to achieve what the movement desired. In January 2016, Trump exclaimed: “I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn’t lose any voters.”<sup>xxii</sup> Robert Kagan, opining for the *Washington Post* in May 2016, captured without restraint the emotional strength of Trump’s cult of personality:
- What he offers is an attitude, an aura of crude strength and machismo, a boasting disrespect for the niceties of the democratic culture that he claims, and his followers believe, has produced national weakness and incompetence. His

incoherent and contradictory utterances have one thing in common: They provoke and play on feelings of resentment and disdain, intermingled with bits of fear, hatred and anger.<sup>xxiii</sup>

- 11 Trump's strongman politics were part of a broader global course, characterized by the leadership of Vladimir Putin, Viktor Orbán, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Xi Jinping, Kim Jong-un, and Rodrigo Duterte, among a growing list. Trump has personally expressed sympathetic support for leaders (read: dictators) such as Mussolini, Kim Jong-un, and Putin.<sup>xxiv</sup> Adding Trump to the strongman ranks, Gideon Rachman summarizes: "All these men have promised to lead a national revival through the force of their personalities and their willingness to ignore liberal niceties. In many cases, the promise of decisive leadership is backed up by a willingness — sometimes explicit, sometimes implied — to use illegal violence against enemies of the state."<sup>xxv</sup>
- 12 Trumpism has many enemies. Trumpism defines the "we" it seeks to protect through racial and nativist lines.<sup>xxvi</sup> Preceding its labeling, the movement can be seen as having been born out of the earlier "birther" movement. In 2011, Donald Trump started publicly calling into question the birthplace and religion of Barack Obama<sup>xxvii</sup> and, thereby, the legitimacy of Obama's presidency. Trump solidified support among many "birthers," who he referred to in March 2011 as "great American people... unbelievable salt of the earth people."<sup>xxviii</sup> The birther conspiracy movement has made a significant impact on public opinion. In September 2015, 33% of Whites and almost half of Republicans, conservatives, and Tea Party supporters surveyed believed that Obama was Muslim, and approximately 16–22% believed he had been born in Africa.<sup>xxix</sup> After years of pressure from journalists and critics, Donald Trump admitted that "President Barack Obama was born in the United States, period" on September 16, 2016. Shortly after, however, he maintained that he had "done a good job" and was "satisfied" with his role in the birther movement.<sup>xxx</sup> By suggesting there was something "very bad" about being Muslim<sup>xxxi</sup> and highlighting Obama's Africanness by alleging he had been born in Kenya, Donald Trump established parameters for what he and his early supporters accepted as "American"—and an African American president with the middle name Hussein did not fit.
- 13 Donald Trump's rhetoric awakened underground identitarian movements that found mainstream platforms for espousing hatred and division. While "identitarianism" is still most often connected with European extreme-right organizations, in the United States, the self-coined "alt-right" movement and organizations such as the white supremacist National Policy Institute (NPI) think tank also frequently frame their identity politics as identitarianism. The term, referring to the prioritization of "identity" over all else, refers most often to white supremacy and misogyny, but can also be used to uphold Christianity and heterosexuality. In 2015, Richard Spencer, a frequent public face of the "alt-right" and NPI president (also known for his "Hail Trump" declaration in the wake of Trump's election win), has argued for the adoption of the term "identitarianism," citing it "to be powerful, evocative, and useful on a number of fronts."<sup>xxxii</sup> Identitarianism, as understood by Spencer, "posits Identity as the center—and the central question—of a spiritual, intellectual, and (meta) political movement. ... And Identity is not just the call of blood, though it is that."<sup>xxxiii</sup>
- 14 The "call of blood" was very loud during the rise of Trumpism. Trump has been described as an "icebreaker" for public discussion of racial identity politics and has drawn immense support from identitarian ranks.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The chair of the American Nazi

Party, for example, wrote: “We have a wonderful opportunity here folks... Donald Trump’s campaign statements, if nothing else, have shown that ‘our views’ are not so ‘unpopular’ as the political correctness crowd have told everyone they are!”<sup>xxxv</sup> Trump drew much controversy when he failed to denounce the endorsement of former Ku Klux Klan Grand Wizard David Duke in February 2016. While Trump’s personal views and affiliations with white supremacy in the United States are not clearly known, he has drawn support and surrounded himself with known racists, anti-Semites, and nativists. The appointment of Steve Bannon, executive chair of extreme-right Breitbart News, to Chief Strategist and Senior Counselor of Trump’s administration was a troubling sign of Donald Trump’s investment in the “alt-right.”

- 15 Pankaj Mishra has identified a recurring “hypermasculine dream of grandeur, heroism, self-sacrifice, power, and conquest... shared today by aggressive men across racial, ethnic, national, and religious lines who believe that the quickest path to self-empowerment is through the domination and degradation of anyone they see as vulnerable.”<sup>xxxvi</sup> Like other global extremist movements, the world of Trumpism is also a masculinist one. The extent to which misogyny and violence against women would be tolerated became clear during Trump’s campaign.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Donald Trump has an extensive record of making sexist and cruel remarks about women. Furthermore, he was accused of several counts of sexual assault and predatory behavior just weeks before the election.<sup>xxxviii</sup> However, many Trump supporters, including women, were able to turn a blind eye to Trump’s comments about women, not seeing the cultural violence in his attitudes.<sup>xxxix</sup> Patriarchal values also allowed others to maintain their commitment to Trump. For example, one supporter, interviewed by journalist Nicole Puglise, expressed her view that women should not be one of the “three Ps”: police officer, preacher, or president.<sup>xl</sup> While sexist comments about women’s appearances and emotions are daily fare, they represent significant meta-violence. Trump dismissed his vulgar descriptions of sexual assault as “locker room talk,”<sup>xli</sup> but such casual rhetorical violence can trigger serious trauma and insecurity in women’s daily lives.<sup>xlii</sup> The impact of political and cultural hypermasculinization is felt even more acutely by those who are also targeted for their skin color, ethnicity, religion, and/or sexuality. Through misogynistic rhetoric and the normalization of nonconsensual contact, the meta-violence of Trumpism was strengthened.
- 16 Peter Beinart provocatively argued that “[w]hat distinguishes Trump supporters is not their economic vulnerability. It’s their cultural, religious, and racial resentment.”<sup>xliii</sup> In the Trumpist world, Mexican rapists, criminals, and murderers are rampant.<sup>xliv</sup> In the Trumpist world, Mexican planes are “ready to attack.”<sup>xlv</sup> And, as the narrative of fear continued, ISIS extremists are hiding behind every hijab and in every Muslim home.<sup>xlvi</sup> Through Trump’s rhetoric and political platform, a clear division was drawn between the *we* who represent Trump’s “Great [white] America” and those who don’t belong: Latinxs, Blacks, Muslims, and those who promote “political correctness.” Trumpism for identitarians calls attention to the plight of the white man in the United States and to what white nationalists refer to as “white genocide.”<sup>xlvii</sup> Richard Spencer has reflected on “a deep visceral, you could say emotional connection between the alt-right and [Trump’s] campaign.”<sup>xlviii</sup> David Duke has explained how white nationalist politics operate in Trumpism: “He’s talking about it in a visceral way... Donald Trump is talking implicitly. I’m talking explicitly.”<sup>xlix</sup> The visceral messaging of Trumpism is its meta-violence. As Jeet Heer argued in May 2016, Trumpism is “a transformation that transcends politics and bleeds deeply into our culture.”<sup>l</sup> Trumpism enacts cultural



violence by “changing the moral color of an act from red/wrong to green/right or at least yellow/acceptable.”<sup>li</sup> Trumpism has broken down social taboos of hatred, racism, and violent confrontation.<sup>lii</sup>

### 3. Violent Eruptions

- 17 Galtung’s explication of cultural violence proves informative for analyzing the meta-violence of Trumpism: “The culture preaches, teaches, admonishes, eggs on, and dulls us into seeing exploitation and/or repression as normal and natural... Then come the eruptions.”<sup>liii</sup> Physical violence became a hallmark of the battle over Trumpism during the election. Trump rallies—inside and out—became arenas for pitting supporters against protestors, especially during the primaries. Perhaps because of the emotion and fervor driving both campaigns, violent clashes during the presidential election were most often framed as Trump supporters facing off against Sanders supporters. In March 2016, tensions boiled over when a Chicago Trump rally was canceled and Trump protestors clashed with supporters. In June, fighting erupted in San Jose. A protest outside of a Trump rally resulted in anti-Trump protestors throwing eggs, spitting on people, and burning Trump merchandise. At least one Trump supporter went home with a broken nose.<sup>liv</sup> On September 12, 2016, in Asheville, South Carolina, hostilities again flared and a 69-year-old woman with an oxygen tank was punched in the face by a Trump supporter.<sup>lv</sup> Trump protestors were a constant, though unwelcome, presence inside Trump rallies. Both peaceful and taunting protestors—as well as those who simply did not look the part of a Trump supporter<sup>lvi</sup>—found themselves caught in aggressive ejections, roughly handled by security and supporters. Numerous videos of confrontations circulating on the internet, from rallies across the United States, depict the charged atmosphere and the crowd’s cheering and chanting: “U.S.A., U.S.A.”<sup>lvii</sup> The patriotic chant chillingly suggests the equation of violence with “Americanness” and a clear drawing of the line between those who belong and those who do not.
- 18 Political talk of removing illegal immigrants, blocking out Mexicans with a wall, and banning Muslims encouraged many supporters of a “Great America” to take policy ideas to the streets. Or, in Jeet Heer’s words, “Donald Trump is a big bully who is enabling many little bullies.”<sup>lviii</sup> America’s Voice, an immigration advocacy organization, has been mapping specifically Trump-inspired hate crimes since June 2015.<sup>lix</sup> Their findings are being corroborated by other sources. For example, recently released FBI 2015 hate crime statistics show an increase in incidents from 2014 and reveal that Muslims have been the primary target.<sup>lx</sup> In the days following Trump’s election win, a surge of hate crimes was reported across the United States.<sup>lxi</sup> 867 such incidents were reported to the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) between Election Day on November 8 and November 29, 2016.<sup>lxii</sup> While many incidents certainly remain unreported to the authorities, SPLC, or to the “Trump Hate Map” and only a few gained significant media attention during the election campaign, the reported incidents suggest a serious violent trend. In one example, in March 2016, two students of color in Wichita were randomly beaten by a man yelling “Trump will take our country from you guys!”<sup>lxiii</sup> In another example, from May 2016, two men in Boston were charged—and since found guilty—with brutally beating a Latino homeless man while allegedly proclaiming “Donald Trump is right.”<sup>lxiv</sup>



- 19 Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton distanced themselves from election-provoked violence, reproaching such tactics.<sup>lxv</sup> Donald Trump, however, chose a different course. Rather than denouncing violence, Trump frequently praised the “passion” and “energy” of his supporters, and he even promised to pay the legal fees of supporters caught in violent altercations.<sup>lxvi</sup> At a March 4, 2016 rally, he commented on a protestor’s removal: “Try not to hurt him. If you do, I’ll defend you in court. Don’t worry about it.”<sup>lxvii</sup> At times, Trump explicitly condoned the use of violence against protestors. On February 1, 2016, he stated: “If you see someone getting ready to throw tomatoes knock the crap out of them, would you? Seriously. OK. Just knock the hell... I promise you, I will pay for the legal fees.”<sup>lxviii</sup> Though Trump himself wished he could “punch [a protestor] in the face,” he recognized that such tactics were unpopular: “Part of the problem and part of the reason it takes so long [to remove protestors] is that nobody wants to hurt each other anymore.”<sup>lxix</sup> Trump praised violent action against protestors: “I love the old days, you know? You know what I hate? There’s a guy totally disruptive, throwing punches. We’re not allowed to punch back anymore. I love the old days. You know what they used to do to guys like that when they were in a place like this? They’d be carried out on a stretcher, folks.”<sup>lxx</sup>
- 20 Such behavior was justified in the Trumpist logic, as protestors were enemies. After clashes in San Jose, Trump told supporters in Kansas City, “We’re going to take our country back from these people... These are bad, bad people.”<sup>lxxi</sup> After the Chicago riot, blaming Sanders supporters, Trump tweeted, “Be careful Bernie, or my supporters will go to yours!”<sup>lxxii</sup> This tweet had an ominous air of threat and violent encouragement, similar to the later threat regarding the Second Amendment people. With Trump’s strong words and the spread of Trumpist violence, many have asked whether Donald Trump can or should be personally held accountable for inciting violence through his speech. Freedom of expression and political speech, in particular, are vehemently protected in the United States and legally proving incitement is difficult.<sup>lxxiii</sup> The 1969 case which remains as the precedent for incitement reveals similarities with the Trump campaign. Clarence Brandenburg, the leader of the Ku Klux Klan’s Ohio branch, held a rally in the summer of 1964, declaring: “if our president, our Congress, our Supreme Court, continues to suppress the white, Caucasian race, it’s possible that there might have to be some revengeance [sic] taken.”<sup>lxxiv</sup> While he was charged under Ohio law for inciting violence, the Supreme Court overturned his conviction, resulting in the “Brandenburg test,” which is upheld today. The court found that freedom of speech can only be suppressed when there is proof of inciting “imminent lawless action.” Therefore, while Trump has bordered on incitement—especially in the tomato case—his speech has not yet been legally challenged and has been accorded the right of First Amendment protection.

## 4. The Rhetorical War

- 21 To understand the meta-violence of Trumpism, we must acknowledge, as Johan Galtung has reminded us, that “threats of violence are also violence.”<sup>lxxv</sup> In response to Trump’s threat of Second Amendment protectors in August 2016, Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton responded: “words matter.” She further stated: “if you are running to be President or you are President of the United States, words can have tremendous consequences.”<sup>lxxvi</sup> Politicians—more than most people, perhaps—know that words

matter. Through their crafted words, politicians motivate people. Most often, this has meant getting people out to vote for them or to inspire nationalism and civic duty in times of war or hardship. But political words can also motivate hostility and violence. The meta-violence of Trumpism is bolstered through rhetorical violence. Though mocked by critics for his rough mannerisms, plain talk, and avoidance of big words, Trump has demonstrated a keen employment of the power of rhetoric. Trump uses the power of words to strengthen fear, hate, and anger, fueling his political career and driving a wedge in U.S. society.

- 22 On August 10, 2016, just one day after making the ambiguous remarks about “Second Amendment people,” at a rally in Florida Trump proclaimed that Obama was “the founder of ISIS,” repeating, “He’s the founder of ISIS. He’s the founder. He founded ISIS.” He added, “I would say the co-founder would be crooked Hillary Clinton.” One can see that calling the President and Democratic nominee *founders* of the most feared and despised terrorist organization serves as a rhetorical device that calls into question both policy and management. However, by not complicating the claim, and leaving a direct link between horrific acts of terrorism and the U.S. administration, Trump succeeded in implicating his enemies in a violence and otherness that was meant to stand in contrast to the society his campaign promoted. This tactic was also employed against Hillary Clinton with the “Trump card” of Benghazi. Trump and followers—as well as other Clinton opponents—characterized her as a criminal, needing punishment and even—as the Trump crowds heckled—to be put to death.<sup>lxxvii</sup> However, Trump’s rhetoric went even further, calling Clinton a murderer. Instead of elaborating on how Clinton’s mismanagement led to the attack on the U.S. embassy in Libya in 2012, Trump utilized the rhetorical power in claiming that *she* murdered the victims. I argue that by rhetorically placing smoking guns in his enemies’ hands, Trump set up a twisted game of logic. That is, the founders of ISIS, the killer of American diplomats, just like violent illegal immigrants, were to be fought—as Trump’s “favorite” Bible verse says—with “an eye for an eye.”<sup>lxxviii</sup>
- 23 Trump supporters do not trust the mainstream media and Trump uses this distrust to build these violent narratives. In December 2015, he joked at a rally in Michigan about whether or not he might murder members of the media.<sup>lxxix</sup> Calling the media liars and proclaiming his hatred, Trump garnered support and found allies in extreme-right outlets, like Alex Jones’s *Infowars*. Jones complemented the meta-violent framework with conspiratorial accusations, such as that the Clintons had murdered hundreds of Democratic staffers and others.<sup>lxxx</sup> Alternative media narratives often frame U.S. politics and society in terms of war. For example, the *Infowars* tagline exclaims, “There’s a war on for your mind!” while Jones declares that donating to the program is “literally buying war bonds.”<sup>lxxxi</sup> These alternative Trumpist narratives collectively built and supported a framework of meta-violence that asked supporters which side of the ideological war they would choose. The slow violence, emotional toll of such anxiety, distrust, and hostility will reveal itself in time.

## 5. Trumpism in the World

- 24 In the United States, so-called “nasty” and often violent politics have been a regular occurrence throughout the nation’s history.<sup>lxxxii</sup> Indeed, as researchers of peace and conflict studies show us, globally, violence and elections go hand in hand all too

often.<sup>lxxxiii</sup> The United States has rarely been considered at major risk, but in 2016, the election was closely watched and analyzed.<sup>lxxxiv</sup> In *World Report 2017*, Human Rights Watch outlined the national and international dangers of the new Trumpist era: “The election of Donald Trump as president in November 2016 capped a campaign marked by misogynistic, xenophobic, and racist rhetoric and Trump’s embrace of policies that would cause tremendous harm to vulnerable communities, contravene the United States’ core human rights obligations, or both.”<sup>lxxxv</sup>

- 25 Trumpism in the United States should be viewed as part of the international far-right populist movement, which has been highly visible in the U.K., France, Denmark, Austria, and the Netherlands, for example. Like Trumpism, these national movements feed on people’s sense of insecurity, fostering fear of terrorism and fear of “the other.” Constant online editorializing and a 24/7 media stream complement the work of the populist leaders, creating an atmosphere of urgency and allowing meta-violence to settle. Rachman has reflected: “The alarming truth is that the impact of strongman leaders is rarely confined within national borders. All too often, the undercurrent of violence that they introduce into domestic politics spills over on to the international stage.”<sup>lxxxvi</sup> In September 2016, the United Nations’ Human Rights Chief, Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, issued a statement that sharply criticized leaders who are activating division and hatred. Trump was specifically singled out. Al Hussein warned “how effectively xenophobia and bigotry can be weaponized,” at which point we “can descend rapidly into colossal violence.”<sup>lxxxvii</sup> He went further to outline tactical commonalities between ISIS and the Western populists. With Trump’s history of pronouncing support for the use of torture and bombing campaigns,<sup>lxxxviii</sup> Al Hussein’s critique seems eerily accurate. During the election period, global security experts warned that Donald Trump was the “preferred candidate of ISIS,” as his election would signal severe U.S. instability.<sup>lxxxix</sup> These factors, and now Trump’s presidency, all raise questions about global stability.

## 6. The Normalization of Meta-violence

- 26 The 2016 presidential election revealed deep dissatisfaction with the U.S. social and political status quo across the political spectrum. Discontent, anger, and a harshly fractured society encouraged increases in rhetorical and, at times, physical violence. Diverse grassroots actions were outlets for airing frustrations. Trumpism was able to take root in this climate and it became a part of the U.S. social and political fabric. During contentious elections, people get pulled into political debate and discourse, which can benefit the democratic process. However, as Shea and Sproveri argue, another result of such times is that “many people are left with a bad taste in their mouth and ill feelings about their fellow citizens.”<sup>xc</sup> More bluntly, Pankaj Mishra warns: “Lynch mobs and mass shooters thrive in a climate where many people think only in terms of friends and foes and where sectarian loyalty or nativist hatred override civic bonds.”<sup>xci</sup>
- 27 Meta-violence gains a hold in this void of empathy and atmosphere of division. In *Violence: Six Sideways Glances*, cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek<sup>xcii</sup> reflects on the “fundamental violence” embodied in our language which allows the “imposition of a certain universe of meaning.”<sup>xciii</sup> Žižek’s postulation resonates with the cultural violence of Trumpism, which makes way for a vertical society, delineated by race, sex, and religion, and characterized by emotions of fear, hatred, and anxiety. These

inconspicuous social “contours of the background,” then,<sup>xciv</sup> are meta-violence normalized. There is a danger in normalization. Bruce Lawrence and Aisha Karim warn: “At its first eruption, violence is always experienced as unique. If given time and repetition, however, it becomes routine, part of the air, and one learns to breathe it without being asphyxiated. One no longer seeks to eliminate it, nor even to understand it.”<sup>xcv</sup> To counter meta-violence, already so difficult to pin down, keen attention must continually be paid to how it impacts social relations and people’s sense of in/security.

- 28 The lens of meta-violence allows us to take seriously the long-term, slow-violence consequences of fear and division. With Trump’s election and presidency, there is an opportunity to reflect on how violence was employed during the campaign and in the establishment of the Trumpist social movement. Serious questions, furthermore, arise about what the continuing role of structural, physical, and rhetorical violence may be during the course of the Trump administration, both domestically and internationally. By naming and prodding the meta-violence of Trumpism, we can stay alert to its ongoing development and better understand the new popular politics arising from the 2016 election.

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**lxxxvi.** Gideon Rachman, “Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin and the lure of the strongman,” *Financial Times*, May 16, 2016, accessed January 2, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/1c6ff2ce-1939-11e6-b197-a4af20d5575e>.

**lxxxvii.** Full statement transcribed in Shehab Khan’s “UN’s human rights chief compares ‘demagogues’ Donald Trump, Nigel Farage and Geert Wilders to Isis,” *Independent*, September 6, 2016, accessed January 2, 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/politics/un-s-human-rights-chief-compares-donald-trump-nigel-farage-and-geert-wilders-to-isis-a7227486.html>.

**lxxxviii.** For example, see Ben Jacobs, “Donald Trump renews support for waterboarding at Ohio rally: ‘I like it a lot,’” *The Guardian*, June 29, 2016, accessed January 2, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/jun/28/donald-trump-ohio-rally-isis-torture-tpn-rape> and Pamela Engel, “DONALD TRUMP: ‘I would bomb the s--- out of ISIS,’” *Business Insider*, November 13, 2015, accessed January 2, 2017, <http://www.businessinsider.com/donald-trump-bomb-isis-2015-11?r=US&IR=T&IR=T>

**lxxxix.** Pamela Engel, “Donald Trump is the ‘preferred candidate’ of ISIS, experts warn,” *Business Insider – Nordic*, September 3, 2016, accessed January 2, 2017, <http://nordic.businessinsider.com/donald-trump-isis-candidate-analysts-2016-9?r=US&IR=T>.

xc. Shea and Sproveri, 421.

xc. Mishra, "The Globalization of Rage" <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2016-10-17/globalization-rage>.

xcii. Slavoj Žižek was also very vocal during the election. In November 2016, Žižek spoke publicly at several points about the U.S. election, his dislike of Hillary Clinton, and how Donald Trump, despite his crude and violent demeanor, represented center-liberal policies and offered an opportunity for a "great awakening."

xciii. Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Glances* (London: Profile Books, 2008), 1.

xciv. *Ibid.*, 2.

xcv. Bruce B. Lawrence and Aisha Karim, eds, *On Violence: A Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 5.

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## ABSTRACTS

The rise of Donald Trump in United States politics relied on violence. This article examines uses of physical and rhetorical violence in the context of the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election campaign to analyze the emergence of a new social movement: "Trumpism." Though its meaning and utility are fluid and contested, Trumpism offers a useful lens for viewing a new phase of U.S. pop politics. Defined in terms of populism, strongman politics, and identitarianism, Trumpism employed emotional evocations of violence—fear, threats, hatred, and division—which at times erupted into physical displays of aggression. The article argues that the impact of Trumpism can be understood through the lens of meta-violence, evidenced by extreme emotions, social antagonisms, and international tensions.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** violence; meta-violence; rhetoric; populism; strongman; identitarianism; nativism; social movements; Trumpism; Donald Trump