



Wayne State University

Honors Scholarly Publications

Irvin D. Reid Honors College

2020

Challenging Public Rhetoric Justifying Immigrants as 'Indecent'

Aaron Martin

Wayne State University, aaron.martin@wayne.edu

Lisette LeMerise

Wayne State University

Riya Chhabra

Wayne State University

Sudharshana P. Kanduri

Wayne State University

Julia Beleshi

Wayne State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/honorssp>



Part of the [Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication Commons](#), [Race and Ethnicity Commons](#), [Social Policy Commons](#), and the [Speech and Rhetorical Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Challenging public rhetoric justifying immigrants as 'indecent', Aaron Martin, Lisette LeMerise, Riya Chhabra, Sudharshana P. Kanduri & Julia Beleshi, *Cogent Arts & Humanities* (2020), 7: 1740538. doi: [10.1080/23311983.2020.1740538](https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2020.1740538)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Irvin D. Reid Honors College at DigitalCommons@WayneState. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Scholarly Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@WayneState.



Received: 06 August 2019
Accepted: 26 February 2020

*Corresponding author: Aaron Martin,
Irvin D. Reid Honors College, Wayne
State University, 2516
Undergraduate Library, Detroit MI
48202, USA
E-mail: aaron.martin@wayne.edu

Reviewing editor:
Lincoln Geraghty, University of
Portsmouth, UK

Additional information is available at
the end of the article

CULTURE, MEDIA & FILM | RESEARCH ARTICLE

“Challenging public rhetoric justifying immigrants as ‘indecent’”

Aaron Martin^{1*}, Lisette LeMerise¹, Riya Chhabra¹, Sudharshana P. Kanduri¹ and Julia Beleshi¹

Abstract: Elites employ various rhetorical strategies in public discourse, including on the topic of immigration. As such, those with influence rely on storytelling to shape views about the narratives related to immigrants as a minority out-group. This has significant consequences, particularly in areas of policy development. Policy shapers have isolated immigrant groups by creating certain ideologically derived criteria well beyond citizenship for them to eventually receive “full American” status. Further, such status first has required immigrants to unduly prove their “worthiness” as exceptional—like being extra hardworking and very law abiding. Our essay seeks to show how foundational rhetoric is often intentionally chosen in order to categorize immigrants as inherently different and intrinsically inferior. As an alternative, we propose a pragmatically conceived model of discourse for the practice of public rhetoric that redescribes immigrant narratives as one of belonging and inclusion. To this end, we draw on examples of how rhetoric, informed by Richard Rorty, has sought to emphasize this-worldly commonalities rather than metaphysical abstractions about similarity or difference. Pragmatism prevents the philosophical justification of cruel acts endured by immigrants, both in indecent

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aaron Martin has a PhD in Political Science from and is a Senior Lecturer in the Irvin D. Reid Honors College at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan, USA. He leads an interdisciplinary research program where this essay’s co-authors— Lisette LeMerise, Riya Chhabra, Sudharshana P. Kanduri, Julia Beleshi, and Dr. Martin—analyze important and timely problems by applying the pragmatic method to interpret the social world and argue for social progress through political reform. Dr. Martin—along with other collaborators from his research program—has been published as well as has multiple interdisciplinary scholarly articles formally “Under Full Consideration for Publication,” in the “Revise and Resubmit” phase, and “Under Review” at various scholarly journals.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Language has the power to shape lives and influence outcomes. This essay explores how rhetoric used by public figures has specifically affected the experiences of immigrant populations. Historical and contemporary examples abound with elected officials employing carefully chosen terminology to marginalize vulnerable constituencies. We trace certain instances of such rhetorical strategies back to a philosophical orientation to the world. We then attempt to show how such philosophical presuppositions, turned political ideology in the form of public displays of divisive speech, can—and do—rationalize racial and religious prejudices and thereby justify indecency toward, as well as legitimate the mistreatment of, immigrants. In response, we propose an alternative analytical framework known as the pragmatic method. The vocabulary of pragmatism, applied here to discourses on loyalty and fraternity, reflects an emphasis on the shared human susceptibility to feel pain and the desire to avoid suffering, hopefully leading to increased empathy and greater inclusivity.

rhetoric and wrong-headed public policy, while simultaneously enlarging the definition of “one of us,” in part by reconceiving the notion of democratic loyalty.

Subjects: American Studies; Sociology & Social Policy; Rhetoric; Media Communication; Intellectual History; Cultural Studies; Race & Ethnicity; Subcultures; Language & Linguistics

Keywords: Decency; democracy; foundationalism; immigrant; Richard Rorty; rhetoric; pragmatism

1. Introduction

Rhetoric is used to justify indecency toward immigrants, as it characterizes them to be intrinsically inferior to their citizen counterparts. This essay seeks a shift in public rhetoric—from one of exclusion to one of inclusion, the result of which, we contend, would amount to a change in the prevailing definition of the democratic American community to a more expansive one that would include immigrants. Greater decency toward immigrants has origins in the use of rhetoric rooted in the kind of acceptance that establishes loyalty among humans based on their shared susceptibility to feel pain. With that, the first section establishes how public rhetoric can have meaningful consequences, specifically as it pertains to telling stories and constructing narratives that shape decisions meant to affect whether or not to treat immigrants with decency. We understand one problematic strain of indecency to be the manifestation of certain deliberative rhetoric, and that if elites with influence over large swaths of the general population were to shift from foundational rhetoric to one of pragmatism, society could more easily replace the narrative of objectivity with the preferred one of solidarity, and thereby promote greater inclusivity by emphasizing that shared propensity to suffer and that mutual tendency to evade it. Relatedly, current as well as past public uses of dehumanizing and apocalyptic rhetoric in the United States exemplify nostalgic narratives to reinforce foundational ideology as a means for rationalizing the justification of indecent behavior, particularly toward immigrant populations. In short, we seek to replace such metaphysically based rationalizations with the pragmatic method—for pragmatism, in its outright denial of all essentialist features, disallows for ideological rigidity to deem acceptable inhumane behavior toward and indecent treatment of those individuals who are in greatest need of structural empathy (Rorty, 1993a, pp. 133–34).

In the next section, we attempt to demonstrate how past and present political leaders such as Benjamin Franklin and Donald Trump have employed rhetoric grounded in foundationalism to establish an in-group and an out-group dynamic among citizens and immigrants, respectively. The characterization of immigrants as less than fully human typifies the indecency directed at them. We unpack this process by scrutinizing and treating certain keywords carefully picked—ones like “alien” and “rapists,” as a means to dehumanize immigrants on the one hand and to resonate with and rile up would-be sympathizers on the other hand. We trace and give context to policies—historical and contemporary—whose passage was aided by such rhetoric that shaped both the political narrative of the issue as well as the life experiences of the immigrants themselves. For example, the English-only movement has fanned inflammatory speech directed at those non-English speaking individuals, without regard for the newness of their time in the U.S. It is critical, we maintain, that those with a public voice are mindful of their rhetoric when describing immigrants because their words have—and still do—set in motion policies that include provisions with discriminatory criteria that determine the narratives of what it means to belong in America.

Pragmatism presents an alternative to foundationalism—and, as a method, is more conducive to enhance public rhetoric in a way that fosters a more harmonious atmosphere among the many pluralistic communities in the U.S. Although pragmatism has received less attention than foundationalism—at least comparatively so in philosophical and sociopolitical circles—its emphasis on cultivating what is shared among existing communities, rather than theorizing about some general nature of humanity, merits investigation. To that end, we analyze certain rhetoric—that is, selected articulations specifically informed by a pragmatic orientation toward outcomes

promoting decency in very particular instances—used by two vastly different U.S. presidents, Thomas Jefferson and Barack Obama. Additionally, we offer historical examples that exemplify the extension of greater protections and privileges to more constituencies and consider the benefits of such outcomes. Overall, our focus here is on how pragmatic language nurtures an enlarged (sense of) community. Finally, we argue why a pragmatic orientation toward the immigrant experience could increase the prospects of more decency and thus more human flourishing for those living in America, the process of which, we maintain, is connected to the concept of loyalty. For such new and greater alliances to form, we detail selected criteria used to define certain groups and notice how differences are exacerbated with the use of foundational terminology. More precisely, we see how an extreme and forceful rhetorical strategy relying on the language of threat—often couched in dire prediction and steeped in the counterfactual—is voiced in an ideological narrative consistent with foundational thought. One such example is the promise of a utopian future, a doomed enterprise because of the foundational determinants that comprise the terms themselves. Ultimately, however, we conclude that to move forward it would behoove societies like the U.S to increasingly adopt pragmatism to help reduce the indecent treatment experienced by immigrants—immigrants who, too, are loyal to democratic values.

2. Methods of rhetorical strategies

To begin, it is important to first specify the method we have selected to guide our analysis throughout the essay as well as to clarify our use of a particular strain within the tradition of pragmatism. Parsing out some of the more well-known intentions for deploying such a “vague, ambiguous, and overworked word” (Rorty, 1982, p. 179) like pragmatism is vital to what we hope to accomplish in what follows. In service of making the societal conditions more conducive for enlarging the cultural capacity for treating others, particularly immigrants, with greater decency, we theorize what we believe could be a plausible way forward, both in thought as well as in action, for such a worthy scenario—more rhetorical civility and political inclusivity. With that, the argumentative trajectory of this essay is developed using pragmatism, more as a methodological tool for narrative than as a metaphysical or philosophical system for categorization. Theoretical inquiries, such as this one, can aid in intellectual attempts at “mov[ing] toward contemporary consensus” (Rorty, 1992, p. 2).

That is, pragmatism, more generally thought of, has been leveraged as an “action-guiding,” or “practical activity,” for “problem-solving” (Rorty, 1993a, p. 119, 1993b, p. 443, 1993a, p. 119). Our problematizing of rhetorical strategies, followed by subsequent policy proposals, takes these overarching components of pragmatism, broadly conceived, from the likes of Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey, respectively, into previously uncharted intellectual terrain—that of Richard Rorty’s postmodernist pragmatism, often referred to as “neopragmatism,” or more precisely, “Rortyan [neo]pragmatism.” Where Rorty’s pragmatic predecessors—and contemporaries alike—long abandoned what is known as the “correspondence theory of truth,” which holds that some claim about what is true “corresponds to [the nature of] reality” (Rorty, 1980, p. 721), as reality is the very project of doing metaphysics, Rorty provocatively goes much further, maintaining that “there is no such things as truth at which we aim” (Auxier & Hahn, 2010, p. 30). His outright denial of capital-t “truth” has made Rorty, as Richard J. Bernstein has noted for those interested in and followers of pragmatism, the “villain” and “kidnapper of pragmatism” (Saatkamp, 1995, p. 62), in no small part due to the connection between Rorty’s influential status and his audacious, postmodernism exemplified by his anti-philosophical announcement of capital-p philosophy’s death.

Important here, for our purposes, is to acknowledge two things. First, that with Rorty, our goal is to emphasize what is shared among those whose orientation to reading and interpretation are informed by pragmatic themes, ones, for instance, like giving up on what Hilary Putnam calls “a God’s-eye view” (Rorty, 1993b, p. 449) for objective truth-claims and abandoning “foundationalism,” or the assumption that some sort of “foundation” exists on which to build toward objective truth (Rorty, 1979, p. 3). And second, that with supporters of Rorty as well as critics alike, both

within pragmatism and outside of the tradition, we readily acknowledge that Rorty, or his writings—some of the very ones used here to bolster our argumentative positions of “advocat[ing for] pluralism” and giving credence to “a multitude of stories” (Hollinger and Depew, 1995, p. 38–9)—does not possess authorial control over how Cornel West succinctly puts American pragmatism: “a diverse and heterogeneous tradition” (West, 1989, p. 5). No one does, for pragmatism, like any other intellectual lineage, is a “contested concept” (Saatkamp, 1995, p. 66). Similarly, rhetoric, as we see it, at least in Rortyan terms, can never assume proprietorship over what is truly true or “really real” (Benhabib & Fraser, 2004, p. 9); this is what we intend to show—that is, from a particularly Rortyan perspective, as method within the tradition, which we will refer to as “pragmatism” rather than, say, “Rortyan [neo]pragmatism,” or some variation of that sort because of the preceding bracketing, the intention of which has been to appropriately delineate our use of the term pragmatism from others’ use as well as to prevent, to the degree possible, the charge of conflating differences, be it in emphasis at the margins or on the most substantive matters debated among pragmatists (Auxier & Hahn, 2010, p. 75).

Rhetoric has power. In this sense, words with their various meanings are combined in a multitude of patterns to communicate a desired message. Depending on the speaker or writer’s intent and effectiveness of her choices, these language patterns can elicit responses within readers or listeners, whether they be a meager laugh, a proposal to think, or a massive call to action. According to the linguistic Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, the language one uses and hears can influence one’s thoughts and perceptions, leading to various effects on that person (Hussein, 2012). Thus, we suggest that the language people choose has consequences. This applies to the public sphere where these consequences can have major political outcomes that are potentially as widespread as influencing societal thoughts and paradigms. Voting patterns and enacted policies best illustrate this. It has been suggested that anyone involved in public discourse is a political actor involved in intentionality (Reyes, 2011, p. 783), where “no word is gratuitous, no phrase is formulated just for the sake of it, everything is actually the result of deliberate behaviour” (Cuza & Mocanu, 2016). Consequently, the act of deliberately choosing specific rhetoric is often employed by those in the public sphere to gain legitimacy and public support to justify social acts (Utych, 2017, p. 441), as these supposed actors strategically choose words advantageously (Reyes, 2011, pp. 782–784). Such strategies create legitimization, particularly allowing “political leaders [to] justify their political agenda to maintain or alter the direction of a whole nation and, in the case of US leaders, the entire world” (Reyes, 2011, p. 783).

Therefore, it is possible for these strategies to induce social acts like the justification of indecent behavior toward fellow human beings. According to Critical Discourse Analysis, such strategies include evoking emotions, generating a hypothetical future, rationalizing, citing experts, and portraying oneself or one’s goals as altruistic or beneficial (Reyes, 2011, pp. 784–787). The use of incivility itself in political discourse is considered a tactic, suggesting that “politics [have] become organized around indignation, to the point that it is sometimes hard to imagine politics without the indignation that frames it” (Benson, 2011, p. 28). Thus, individuals have become accustomed to uncivil discourse, so much so that it is hardly questioned when used. For instance, politicians utilize dehumanizing rhetoric in an effort to separate people into in-groups and out-groups. They claim something is fundamentally nonhuman about the out-group, pinning the groups against each other and allowing politicians to more easily rally the in-group in support of policies against the out-group (Devine, 2015, p. 510): “Insofar as incivility is a mode of speech, it nowadays represents itself, implicitly, as an index of identity—of race, class, gender, power, identity, authenticity, region, history, and ideology. For some, ‘she’s one of us’; for the rest, ‘she’s one of them’” (Benson, 2011, p. 26). Generally, rhetoric chosen by one with influence in the public sphere can have indecent consequences, as it promotes separation among immigrants and groups. However, this would indicate that the converse is also true; by using an alternative rhetoric that promotes community, more decent outcomes could arise. Hence, Rorty has proposed two forms of rhetoric with alternative outcomes: foundationalism and pragmatism (Rorty, 1989a, pp. 168–69).

Foundationalism serves as an approach toward rhetoric that utilizes an objective vocabulary to justify decent or indecent behavior. According to Rorty, “[w]e are the heirs of this objectivist tradition, which centers round the assumption that we must step outside our community long enough to examine it in the light of something which transcends it” (Rorty, 1989a, p. 168). Respectively, foundationalism is an ideology with the premise that the world and each part of it have one true nature to be discovered. It assumes that this nature inherently exists, and the ultimate truth is inevitable. Thus, they serve as the objective standards by which to make comparisons and draw conclusions, particularly about the choices and actions of others. However, how one decides on an ultimate truth depends on their foundation, as the ideology’s name implies, and his or her means of finding the truth: “[He] must construct an epistemology which has room for a kind of justification which is not merely social but natural, springing from human nature itself” (Rorty, 1989a, p. 169). A foundation may be any concept on which to base judgement, such as religion, but the fact that foundationalists are in search of something inherent provides them with the capability to potentially justify any act in service of discovering truth, even if said act would be considered indecent. Due to its emphasis on objectivity and focus on the comparison against one objective truth that seems to transcend humanity, the foundational vocabulary is considered “non-human” (Rorty, 1989a, p. 171). Missing the human aspect, foundationalism can more easily stress differences between diverse groups of people, indicating a vocabulary that could more easily justify indecency.

In contrast, pragmatism maintains its human aspects within its vocabulary, as it rejects the notion of using an ideology to find that which transcends humanity and the finding of what is nonhuman. In fact, it abandons the possibility of “finding” altogether, since pragmatism “giv[es] up the attempt at a God’s-eye [view] of things, the attempt at contact with the non-human which [Rorty] has been calling ‘the desire for objectivity’” (Rorty, 1989a, p. 171). Although this may be disconcerting to some since they draw comfort from hoping that one true answer is achievable, pragmatism offers another form of hope: rhetorical redescription for the possibility of the betterment of humanity and the prevention of cruelty. The pragmatist employs a rhetoric that recognizes the necessity of comparison between people and between cultures, real or imaginary, so as to use the past and what one imagines could be “to make the best selves for ourselves that we can” (Rorty, 1989b, p. 80). In turn, this promotes a common social hope which unites diverse groups and promotes solidarity on the basis of feeling rather than objectivity, suggesting pragmatic rhetoric to more easily promote decency. Pragmatists want “our chances of being kind, of avoiding humiliation of others, to be expanded ... [They think] that recognition of a common susceptibility to humiliation is the only social bond that is needed” (Rorty, 1989b, p. 91). Therefore, pragmatic rhetoric does not allow for justifications of actions to go beyond the pain of others in the service of something larger than humanity itself. Rather, because pragmatists realize their own susceptibility to suffer, their rhetoric cannot be used to justify the suffering of another. Thus, the justification of indecency is much more difficult, and the ability to prevent cruelty becomes an easier task.

One can see the contrast exemplified when foundationalism is taken to its most extreme in the public sphere through apocalyptic rhetoric. Apocalyptic rhetoric proclaims an inevitable catastrophe on the basis of some foundation. Oftentimes, the foundation is religious, and promotes a strong fear toward immigrants through the creation of crisis: “Its voice mixes horror and hope, nightmare and dream, destruction and creation, dystopia and utopia. Tuned into that which is inevitable if not predetermined, it is also the voice of prophecy, the voice that knows how our story, our history, ends, and how it begins anew” (Stewart & Harding, 1999, p. 286). This portrays an ultimate truth through hyperbole (Ivie, 2017, p. 707), and because there must be some cause, public speakers employ objectivity by “ ... scapegoating that rejects as alien those who either do not know or refuse to learn the secret plan or message ... Traditional apocalyptic is fundamentally an operation that excludes something or someone” (Gunn, 2008, p. 95). In turn, scared or angry policy makers often support more indecent acts against the scapegoat whether the chosen foundation is true or not. They consider these scapegoats to be unlike them, as these scapegoats could not possibly comprehend the prophecy. Pragmatism, by contrast, cannot assume an

apocalyptic problem in the first place, for it rejects the notion of inevitability and the creation of a scapegoat or out-group entirely. Pragmatists “[make] a change rather than [discover] a fact” (Rorty, 1989b, p. 77), so the discovery of an apocalypse, and one that promotes objectivity rather than solidarity, would not be fitting.

Consequently, one can see how the rhetoric chosen by a person in the public sphere can dramatically alter the story being told. This concept is further substantiated by prominent rhetoricians, including the narrative theorist Kenneth Burke who suggested that a function of rhetoric is the “use of words by human agents to form attitudes or to induce actions in other human agents” (Brock et al., 1990, p. 184). That is, stories about an immigrant or out-group, if told enough times, can eventually become an overarching narrative that influences the public’s opinion of said immigrant or out-group. The key, then, becomes the type of rhetoric used because the chosen rhetoric could manipulate the public’s views and eventual actions. This is especially true of immigrants, and one can easily see instances occurring to those in the U.S. For example, politicians often promote objectivity with foundational rhetoric by creating immigrants as out-groups and the stereotypical white American as the in-group. To do so, animalistic or dangerous rhetoric is often used: “using analogies to disasters, vermin, or disease, political elites are able to deny dehumanized immigrants or out-groups some level of humanity, which makes it easier for the American public to support harsh and punitive action against them” (Utych, 2017, p. 440). In the eyes of the American in-group, immigrants described as such are inherently different, as if they were animals, incapable of the “ability to reason, think critically, or feel emotions” (Utych, 2017, p. 440). As a result, immigrants should be treated without empathy, justifying indecent policies toward them, including the prevention of their immigration entirely. Another such example toward immigrants is the nostalgia narrative, commonly associated with displacement and resistance to social and cultural change. Residents battling gentrification often tell nostalgic tales about better times before newcomers arrived “to stake their claim for the future,” while highlighting how their community was ruined as jobs and land were taken and how their quality of life supposedly decreased (Maly et al., 2012, p. 760). This paints immigrants as destroyers of what was once safe and dear, suggesting they should not be treated with empathy; they are not one of “us”—not a genuine part of society.

Consequently, narratives help people quickly navigate how to treat groups of various people, like immigrants or out-groups, whether that be with decency or indecency. They tap into the currently held cultural views of that group, making decency seemingly contextual (Benson, 2011, p. 26). Hence, one could potentially promote greater decency toward immigrants using pragmatic rhetoric instead of foundational rhetoric by reforming the way in which the common narrative is told. Narrative simply creates a framework that can be easily used and understood in public discourse: “The value of narrative ... is that it is flexible, and responsive to different ways of understanding and interpreting experience” (McArdle, 2012, p. 181). Instead of comparing immigrants against some ultimately true way they should be and treating them indecently if they do not fit that mold, public discourse could focus on the commonality between immigrants and current citizens: the common susceptibility to suffer (Rorty, 1989b, p. 91). In turn, this pragmatic narrative could promote empathy between the two groups to prevent cruelty, but “[f]or empathy—when its relevance is recognized—to be effective, it must tap into the cultural narratives and expectations that are meaningful for others” (McArdle, 2012, p. 180). What is currently meaningful may not necessarily be the empathetic narrative, particularly since the current understanding of policy narrative follows a pattern requiring a hero, a villain, a victim, and sadly, a judge (Shanahan et al., 2013, p. 457).

Many politicians use policy narratives as a tool to form characters, which is advantageous since it is considered a highly reliable strategy, especially when discussing the “distribution of costs and benefits among the characters of the policy narrative” (Shanahan et al., 2013, p. 460). Narrative building allows for the characterization of real people, and depending on the connotations of the given characterization, each individual is likely to be treated differently. Hence, heroes tend to be

treated with respect and civility due to the presentation of their low costs and high benefits, while villains are treated with disgust and indecency due to the presentation of their high costs and low benefits (Shanahan et al., 2013, p. 460). Not only does this allow for the easier creation of in-groups as heroes and out-groups as villains, but also using rhetoric that implies characterization suggests that real people must fit those characterizations, or, as Rorty suggests, those foundations and the criteria for them (Rorty, 1989b, p. 75). Characterizations can promote objectivity, separation, and, in turn, the justification of indecency. Tactics like these are often applied to immigration policies, with immigrants being portrayed as villains or “[t]he entity responsible for the damage done to the victim” (Shanahan et al., 2013, p. 459). Because villains are commonly associated with evil and the cause of problems, people often treat immigrants as the source of a nation’s problems in politics, particularly when said by an influential figure like the U.S. President. Yet, it is important to note that the language utilized by a political figure often reflects the tone and context of a nation, leading to the possibility for greater pragmatic rhetoric and potentially greater decency toward immigrants as well, depending on the nation’s contextual situation. “[P]residents tailor their policy statements on salient issues to match the majority public opinion polls” (Arthur & Woods, 2013, p. 470), indicating that other political figures do so as well, as evident through the analysis of prominent political figures and their rhetoric across various historical contexts.

3. Indecent treatment of immigrants

Politicians shape their candidacies and political narratives on the basis of appealing to certain constituencies (Waldinger, 2018, pp. 1411–1426). Then-candidate Donald Trump made his anti-immigration stance clear at the forefront of his presidential bid by announcing that Mexico was not an ally of the U.S. because “when Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. They’re not sending you. They’re not sending you. They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists” (“Here’s Donald Trump’s”, 2015). Trump’s rhetoric is rooted in foundationalism, as his words imply that being Mexican inherently makes those immigrants more prone to being rapists, drug users, and criminals. His repetition of “they are not sending you” creates an us-versus-them dynamic that dehumanizes Mexicans. In Trump’s eyes, the term “human being” is synonymous with “member of our tribe,” but the immigrants are not seen as “paradigm members of the species.” Instead, these people are first seen as a—if not *the*—“problem” (Rorty, 1993a, p. 114). Overall, the portrayal of immigrants as unequal justifies indecent behavior toward them. If they are not considered equal, then by extension, they do not deserve the same “inalienable human rights” as Americans. In order to be worthy of decency, these immigrants have to prove themselves by first freeing themselves of stereotypical caricatures and even accomplishing more than earning a living wage from some entry level job. Under such premises, immigrants are expected to achieve a higher standard of success that improves and advances society in some fashion—and only then are worthy candidates for decent treatment.

Trump’s foundational rhetoric also shapes the lives of Muslim immigrants, indicating that this is a continuing rhetorical trend in his narrative toward immigrants. On his campaign site, Trump initially stated,

Without looking at the various polling data, it is obvious to anybody the hatred is beyond comprehension. Where this hatred comes from and why we will have to determine. Until we are able to determine and understand this problem and the dangerous threat it poses, our country cannot be the victims of horrendous attacks by people that believe only in Jihad and have no sense of reason or respect for human life. (Johnson, 2015)

Even though Trump is not directly targeting Muslim immigrants, the generalizations made in his statements attach a stigma to all Muslims. By claiming that Muslims lack reason or respect, Trump is asking his audience to think in terms of rational versus irrational. As a result, people are divided into two groups: the good versus the bad. The identity of his audience is “bound up with their sense of who they are not.” Compared to the Muslims, Trump’s audience “[thinks] of themselves as being

a certain good sort of human being—a sort defined by explicit opposition to a particularly bad sort,” or, in other words, the ones who have reason and thus respect for human life (Rorty, 1993a, p. 126). In this case, “bad” becomes synonymous with Muslim immigrants. Then, similar to Mexican immigrants, they do not receive access to decency as the “good” or American people do.

Trump’s views on immigration that “[T]he U.S. has become a dumping ground for everybody else’s problems” (“Here’s Donald Trump’s”, 2015) can seem shocking. However, his views follow an ongoing trend of anti-immigrant sentiment that has existed since the U.S. was an English Colony. While Trump has proudly embraced his German heritage by publicly announcing that “[w]e passed Trump Tower, 69 stories. I looked up and I said, ‘This is a long way from Kallstadt,’” in reference to his grandfather’s German hometown (Hansler, 2017). German immigrants were not always welcome in the U.S. Yet part of Trump’s self-proclaimed legacy is that he is a descendant of immigrants himself. Trump’s behavior toward Mexican and Muslim immigrants parallels how Benjamin Franklin, a founding fathers and former governor of Pennsylvania, would have treated Trump, the immigrant. In 1751, Benjamin Franklin expressed resentment toward German immigrants by questioning, “Why should Pennsylvania, founded by the English, become a Colony of Aliens, who will shortly be so numerous as to Germanize us instead of our Anglifying them, and will never adopt our Language or Customs any more than they can acquire our Complexion?” (Mott, 1936). Franklin uses foundationalism to argue that Germans are inferior. Even though a goal of foundationalism is to provide everyone with “inalienable human rights,” by changing the definition of human, or in this case, an American colonist, Franklin does not extend those same rights to German immigrants (Rorty, 1993a, p. 112). The Germans’ maintenance of their culture and language deviates from what Franklin considers American. He implies that, just like the German immigrants cannot change their skin color to become whiter, they cannot change their behavior to become more American. In his eyes, Germans were inherently less American and, as a result, ought not to receive the freedoms and privileges that the English settlers in Pennsylvania were inclined to enjoy.

Precise word choices have morphed over time, but the intended effect remains: the creation of an in-group versus an out-group. Immigrants are usually sequestered to the out-group, while those considered American reside in the in-group. The group dynamic that is created “contrast[s] ... the real humans, with rudimentary, or perverted, or deformed examples of humanity” by “manipulating [the in-group’s] sentiments in such a way that they imagine themselves in the shoes of the despised and oppressed. The only people they have trouble being nice to are the ones they consider ‘irrational’” (Rorty, 1993a, p. 126). However, the message remains the same: the immigrants, although countries of origin fluctuate, are the ones placed into the out-group—and the greater perceived differences, in face and custom alike, the more solitary the confinement to the out-group designation is. The further an immigrant purportedly deviates from the traditional American standard so do the (timely) chances of transitioning into the in-group. For instance, at first Germans were not so-called white enough to be American. However, in comparison to other immigrant populations, such as contemporary Mexicans and Muslims, German features resembled American “whiteness” more so with their light complexion and European ancestry. These similarities shifted the out-group, as it expanded to include those who were once excluded. Once joining the in-group, it is these same immigrants who perpetuate out-group status. The indecency that they once faced is now passed on to the current out-group. To maintain their in-group status, the perpetrators justify their actions by the notion that because it was done to them, it should be done to other immigrants.

With the benefit of hindsight, one could assume Franklin’s audience with whom his discrimination resonated was responding irrationally. The same goes for Trump’s most ardent supporters. Labeling them as irrational, however—at least for Rorty—is not to take a thorough accounting of the process for which they find themselves in agreement with Trump’s accusations. Moreover, such conclusions that these supporters’—and Trump’s, too—failure to recognize their contingent location in American history, something the rest of us do, amounts to the unhelpful, self-

congratulatory assessment that, we, the “good people know something these bad people do not know, and that it is probably their own silly fault that they do not know it” (Rorty, 1993a, p. 127). Instead, it is important to view these differences through a lens of security and sympathy. According to Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs, security is a Deficient need while sympathy is a Being need. In order for a person’s attention to shift from self-interest to selflessness, she needs to move up the hierarchy from Deficient needs to Being needs (D’Souza & Gurin, 2016). Politicians’ negative portrayal of immigrants leave their audience feeling insecure in the presence of immigrants. Without a sense of security, audience members are not able to picture themselves in “conditions of life [that are] sufficiently risk-free ... to make one’s difference from others inessential to one’s self-respect, one’s sense of worth” (Rorty, 1993a, p. 128). By using labels like “aliens” or “rapists,” immigrants automatically become part of any ongoing problem in the nation. As minority groups, immigrants lack the powerful voice and influence achieved by the majority, which allows politicians to scapegoat immigrants and shift responsibility from citizens onto those whom they consider outsiders now. Once immigrants are seen as outsiders, audience members find it very difficult to be sympathetic toward them. In our sense, “sympathy is the sort of reaction that ... white Americans had more of after reading *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*” (Rorty, 1993a, p. 128). As a result, “security and sympathy go together, for the same reasons that peace and economic productivity go together.” For the audience, “the tougher things are, the more you have to be afraid of ... the less you can afford the time or effort to think about what things might be like for people with whom you do not immediately identify” (Rorty, 1993a, p. 128). If audience members cannot achieve security in this situation, they are less likely to feel sympathy toward immigrants.

The overall immigrant experience is largely shaped by the rhetoric that is used to describe them. By allowing politicians to set the narrative for immigrants, even before they have a chance to tell their own story, places the power in the hands of a select few. The “idea that people on top hold the future in their hands,” if foundationally informed, paves the way for them to use rhetoric to justify indecent treatment (Rorty, 1993a, p. 130). Foundationalism has been used to set the criteria for who qualifies as “American” or, here, who is worthy of decency. With Franklin, the criteria were based on complexion and language similarities, but with Trump, however, it is rooted in the presence of what he considers basic human traits like reason or respect. This set of criteria has evolved from attacking immigrants’ physical differences to attacking their morals, straining even further any capacity to access in-group benefits.

As such, it falls upon politicians to pay mind to the known harm their speech befalls onto vulnerable immigrant communities, especially when their discriminatory promises are expected to become institutionalized through the enactment of campaign platforms. In short, seemingly fleeting words turn into binding laws. Take for instance, the English-only movement. Its aim is to erase other languages spoken in a single country. Such an initiative has been modified over the decades, but its premise holds: Franklin’s efforts to Anglify German immigrants manifested itself in his trusteeship of the “Charity Schools,” whose curriculum reflected the goals of the movement. Franklin justified his actions by claiming that this would qualify German children “for all the advantages of English subjects” (Frantz, 1998). Franklin’s statements implied that, if Germans did not speak English, they were not considered equal to the other English settlers and therefore were not entitled to their rights. In Trump’s case, he supports the Raise Act, which replaces the current selection scheme for immigrants with a point system that prioritizes “high English test scores” (Gelatt, 2017). This not only restricts the flow of immigrants, but it also restricts the quality of life for immigrants already here. Instead of creating greater unity, the focus on only one language creates division, as it directly targets immigrants and makes them feel inferior if they lack the ability to speak English. The immigrants’ conservation of their own language is used as just another reason to exclude them.

One way to improve the typical immigrant experience is shifting from a rhetoric dominated by foundational ideology to one associated with pedagogical sentimentalism, or in Rorty’s terms, adopting a “sentimental education” because doing so would allow “us [to] concentrate our

energies on manipulating sentiments” (Rorty, 1993a, p. 122), rather than getting continuously bogged down in talk about who is rational or not for believing *this* political narrative or *that* campaign message, or whatever the case might be. Sentimental education begins when people of different backgrounds are sufficiently acquainted with one another to the effect that hearers become increasingly “less tempted to think of those different from [themselves] as only quasi-human” (Rorty, 1993a, p. 123). Subsequently, citizens can come together to extend immigrants the same decency that has since been afforded them. An increase in decency will help foster a sense of community and solidarity that has “no foundation except shared hope and the trust created by such sharing” (Rorty, 1989b, p. 179). Sentimental education focuses on the similarities between and among groups of people rather than on their differences. It is the “desire to extend the reference of ‘us’ as far as we can” (Rorty, 1989b, p. 169). Adopting sentimentality would help to shed labels such as “irrational,” “bad,” and “less American.” The creation of a spectrum where overlapping physical and behavioral traits blur one into another would replace distinct criteria for hierarchal categories of humanness that separate and then justify exclusion and ultimately legitimate persecution. Expanding definitions of concepts like “our kind of people” and “people like us” would create the conditions for an enlarged community not based on complexion, language, or culture but rather on the shared ability to feel pain, physical or otherwise (Rorty, 1993a, p. 123).

4. Extended decency

The concept of sentimental education is a tool pragmatism employs for emphasizing similarities over differences. Although the pragmatic method’s history in the U.S. is a rich one, foundationalism, as an ideology, has dominated the rhetorical narrative of political discourse. With that, though, pragmatic themes appear in correspondences and speeches alike. For example, Thomas Jefferson, founding father and 3rd president of the U.S., used intermittent foundational words to convey what were at times important pragmatic messages. In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson writes that “it does [him] no injury for [his] neighbor to say that there are twenty Gods or no God” (Rorty, 1988, p. 257). For our purposes, Rorty’s use of Jefferson here shows how foundational appeals to the purported objective by invoking the name of God as synonymous with the first of all premises from which to assign morality and then to assess progress. In this specific context, however, Jefferson’s utilization of God is not necessarily impeding progress, as it were, but demonstrates the pervasive nature of forming would-be effective arguments characterized by foundational assumptions. Interestingly, though, Jefferson’s statements contain pragmatic thinking when attempting to make religion irrelevant for developing and maintaining a more stable democratic society whose inhabitants must build community and cooperate to ensure mutual protection. In fact, Jefferson warns that focusing too much on religious affiliation breeds fanaticism—a particularly dangerous threat to democracies. Here, the term “religion” emphasizes the many differences, from skin color to language to cultural practice, that arise in society used to discriminate, particularly against minority and marginalized groups like immigrants. A pragmatized Jefferson discourages such discriminatory practices on the basis of cultivating the conditions for rampant indecency toward those relegated to out-group status: immigrants themselves.

Such examples involving treatment of immigrants demonstrate a historical reliance on pragmatism as outcome-driven in public rhetoric. For as Rorty has intimated, pragmatism promotes the idea of sensitivity toward others from diverse backgrounds. It seeks to build human relationships by implanting the idea that human suffering is painful, and one way to remove that suffering is by recreating “human selves [through the enlargement] of a variety of relationships which constitute those selves” (Rorty, 1999, p. 79). For instance, immigrants entering the U.S. hope for a positive turn in their lives, as it offers supposed opportunities unavailable in their countries of origin. Typical for immigrants to bring beliefs different from some more widely held in the U.S., Jefferson discounts its relevancy or importance, yet suggests government play a role in ensuring protections exist from predatory majoritarianism. The establishment of such societal conditions, undergirded by the force of law, pushes culture toward greater acceptance and tolerance. As Rorty suggests,

this relational shift engenders an increasingly unified community to shove aside private matters, like religious belief or lack thereof, while simultaneously nurturing inclusivity and decency to groups, like immigrants, previously denied the courtesy of the benefit of the doubt.

Despite the existence of pragmatic strands in important democratic theory as well as in policy formulation, the narrative arc of the immigrant storyline in the U.S. is decidedly foundational. For instance, after the California Gold Rush in the mid-1800s, thousands of Chinese immigrants entered San Francisco. The Chinese worked low-wage, labor-intensive jobs enduring the longest workdays to support their families—much to the chagrin of resentful citizens. Americans bemoaned the Chinese for stealing jobs from Americans. Popular newspapers like *The Chronicle* detailed storylines of whites who

called the Chinese workers ‘heathens’ and ‘cruel murderers’ ... while [China Towns] were cast as places where Chinese men went to gamble, smoke opium, and engage in prostitution ... [which put] more pressure from the West ... [and] on Congress to do something about the increasing rates of immigration. (Dunigan, 2017)

Words like “heathens” and “cruel murders” portrayed Chinese immigrants as destructive agents of a society vulnerable to succumb to their habits and tastes. Furthermore, it gave citizens even more reason to echo that “they are not one of us.” This dehumanizing rhetoric eventually informed the shaping of “The Chinese Exclusion Act” that banned Chinese immigration from 1882 to 1943. One way the indecent treatment of Chinese immigrants could have been avoided is if American citizens had approached the context and issue alternatively. A more pragmatic orientation toward ameliorating tension, borne from resentment, if such were the case, is the “philosophical search [focused] instead on [the human] ability to make the particular things that divide [them] seem unimportant” (Rorty, 1999, p. 86). For instance, in the event that greater attention was paid to the real benefits of these immigrants’ work, whose labor produced economic development enjoyed by the established citizens, the narrative shift reflecting immigrant contribution to advancement would also produce great capacity for progress, as also defined by fraternity and solidarity.

It is possible to see the trajectory of the immigrant experience, in certain ways, having improved over time. In context, Rorty’s advocacy for replacing “traditional metaphors of depth and height with metaphors of breadth and extent” can apply specifically to real-world examples involving immigrant-centered discourse (Rorty, 1999, p. 87). It places greater emphasis on what immigrants add to society as well as on what similarities immigrants share with American citizens. Former President Barack Obama showcased something similar during his prime time speech on immigration in 2014. Obama’s rhetoric is examined here using a pragmatic, or anti-essentialist, reading, where he attempts to break down the intrinsic and extrinsic features of people (Rorty, 1999, p. 72). During the speech, Obama mentioned that he would work to “make it easier and faster for high-skilled immigrants, graduates and entrepreneurs to stay and contribute to our economy, as so many business leaders proposed” (Lawler & Schaffer, 2016, p. 102). Later, he reminded Americans that “[they were] here only because this country welcomed [immigrants] in and taught them that to be an American is about something more than what we look like, or what our last names are ... and what makes us Americans is our shared commitment to an ideal—that all of us are created equal” (Lawler & Schaffer, 2016, p. 105). By drawing on the past, Obama nudged Americans to remember how they—or their family members—got to the place, literally and figuratively, they currently occupied. He implied that they, too, were once defined as extrinsically the out-group. Therefore, by excluding current immigrants, citizens were exhibiting the intolerance decried by their family’s immigrant story and perpetuating the divisions impeding progress.

Furthermore, Obama’s suggestion of looking past the physical traits of immigrants and rather at their skillset supports a pragmatic reading, as it is an attempt to blur the external divisions that characterize different groups of people. As a result, it encourages the decent treatment of immigrants, as they, too, are considered worthy of equal consideration and, in turn, given

opportunity previously denied to them. Moreover, the term “shared” represents the relational aspect of pragmatism. It focuses on the human connection common to all. However, although Obama’s outcome-driven rhetoric exhibits strands of pragmatism, his appeal to the U.S. Constitution rings of foundationalism: to recite that “all men are created equal” purports the existence of some equalizing intrinsic quality that is somehow essential to being human.

Pragmatism, on the other hand, maintains that these documents are “influenced by Christian doctrines of the brotherhood of man” rather than the recognition of a philosophically derived human essence (Rorty, 1999, p. 85). Obama further injected foundational criteria by referencing doctrines that incorporate ideas of exclusion based on some notion of worthiness for equality. This side of Obama’s rhetoric shows that, despite the occasional pragmatic phrasing, foundationalism is pervasive in formulating narratives about how to cope with one another.

Another option for moving beyond foundational rhetoric is individual redescription, “compar[ing] the results with alternative redescriptions which use the vocabularies of alternative figures” (Rorty, 1989b, p. 80). Redescription allows people to reinterpret scenarios in which steps can be taken to create increasingly better versions of themselves. The act of continuously describing and re-describing immigrants reveals errors within the stories people tell about them. Take for instance, that on 14 August 1776, Jefferson writes,

[I]t [has] been the wise policy of these states to extend the protection of their laws to all those who should settle among them ... to a participation of the benefits of civil and religious freedom, and ... the benevolence of this practice as well as its salutary effects [has] rendered it worthy of being continued in future times. (*Army and Navy Pension*, 1852)

Here, Jefferson hopes to earn the trust of immigrants by stating that America provides liberties previously deprived under British rule. By doing so, Jefferson persuades immigrants to enter America, which eventually aided in strengthening the country’s military. His intention is evident in words like “salutary effects” and “worthy.” These words also help extend decency toward immigrants since, in this particular way, the citizens were to interpret immigrants as arriving to help fight against monarchical tyranny. Moreover, Jefferson’s words mean to establish trust between citizens and immigrants by portraying each party as reliable partners.

It is possible to suggest that Jefferson’s take can be “adopted to recreate ourselves, in whole or in part” (Rorty, 1989b, pp. 79–80). Similarly, Obama adopts imagery of Americans treating immigrants with decency in his Executive Actions speech by highlighting that “our tradition of welcoming immigrants from around the world ... has kept us youthful, dynamic, and entrepreneurial. It has shaped our character as people with limitless possibilities. We [are] not trapped by our past, but [are] able to remake ourselves as we choose” (Lawler & Schaffer, 2016, p. 101). Like Jefferson, Obama assures that immigrants will receive support. However, Obama emphasizes the arrival of immigrants who possess expertise. Though the limitation that Obama asserts is objective, its thrust is sympathetic to a pragmatized interpretation, as it contains a mechanism for hope of improving the economic and infrastructural conditions of the country, the result of which furthers progress. By listing the benefits that come with newly-arriving immigrants, Obama reassures citizens in constructing a positive image that immigrants have of America and Americans. In other words, he urges Americans and immigrants alike to work on being the best possible versions of themselves—as members of a single community.

Pragmatism, as a method for orienting individuals, readily endorses the creation of a larger, more inclusive community, where respect, dignity, and prosperity are championed and celebrated. Throughout history, immigrants have had to sacrifice their own identities to meet some fabricated standard of what counts as full citizen. Americanizing was one such plausible option for allowing immigrants to access some semblance of parity in opportunity. To illustrate this, a German-born piano maker who came to the U.S. during the 19th century changed his name from Charles Steinweg

to Charles Steinway because English musicians were paid more and assumed to be more skilled (Roberts, 2010). Similarly, the white superiority ideology was also expressed in the anti-blackness movement where personal, physical, social, and structural attacks on African Americans were taken to extreme measures (Blum, 2018). These events not only represent brutal acts of racism and discrimination, but they also promoted the degradation of minority groups more generally. These ideas are in stark contrast to the pragmatists' non-psychopathic identity. Non-psychopaths are people "who find concern for others" and believe that everyone is related to one another because of the overlap between their needs and struggles (Rorty, 1999, p. 78). American culture has largely been devoid of the non-psychopathic citizen character during the numerous anti-immigrant waves. One method to prevent continued out-group formation and designation is to champion non-psychopathic behavioral norms through pushing the extension of intuitively formal and culturally engrained rights and courtesies to immigrant groups. Instilling this mindset is of particular timeliness because, according to the Migration Policy Institute, "the United States has been the top destination for international migrants since at least 1960, with one-fifth of the world's migrants living there as of 2017" (Zong et al., 2018). The U.S.'s ranking carries cache, as it should, and its making good on such an honorable designation of being welcoming toward and tolerant of immigrants bolsters important features of democratic theory—namely having authorial proprietorship over the narrative of one's life, a promise that extends past any physical border.

5. Enlarged loyalty

Acceptance within a larger community begins by understanding why there is a loyalty to different groups in the first place. Throughout history, policy makers have strategically used foundational rhetoric as a tool to determine who will receive decent treatment. Usage of exclusive language results in the formation of groups that consist of people who share common characteristics. Such behavior justifies the indecent treatment of non-group members because it does not extend loyalty to them. However, the formation of these groups fails to recognize that group members share more similarities than differences with members of differing groups, as all members throughout groups are capable of feeling the same emotions. A formation of such groups, comprised of people who have the ability to feel the same range of emotion, is reflected by Rorty's assertion that the extension of decency toward others ought to be informed by the view that the ability to feel—namely pain here—ranges across species and beyond that of humankind (Rorty, 1997, p. 12). Human flourishing, as one possible manifestation of decent treatment, is connected to loyalty and susceptibility to experience pain. Group members' shared conflict between loyalty and justice also contributes to strengthening that particular bond. Acting justly, as foundationally conceived, allows them to uphold their internalized morals, while acting with loyalty allows them to gain social acceptance. Although an in-group member can convince herself that she is morally correct, she cannot receive social acceptance without the loyalty of other in-group members. Furthermore, the rhetoric that in-group members utilize determines who is considered to be a member of the group. It also suggests that those who do not meet a specific foundational description must be intrinsically inferior.

A person's perception of herself plays a role in determining what group with whom she will identify and, in turn, determine the group in which she will be accepted. The language, dress, culture, and traditions of immigrants are common factors that distinguish them from the natives of their adopted countries. However, grouping immigrants on the basis of their differences says more about a society that distinguishes between in-groups and out-groups than about the immigrants themselves. As Rorty suggests, it becomes not a matter of "how to define words like 'truth' or 'rationality' or 'knowledge' or 'philosophy,' but about what self-image our society should have of itself" (Rorty, 1989a, p. 175). Defining these terms related to group formation reinforces the notion of objectivity. The rise of multiple groups could propel divisions among different people further and allow for discrimination. Indecent treatment stems from in-group and out-group behavior, and the implication that those who are not a part of the in-group do not possess the criteria that classifies a group as being fully human. Group members partake in preferential behavior because they are striving to create a positive social identity for themselves (Tajfel &

Turner, 2004). For example, researchers conducted an experiment that revealed how a person's identity of self is tied to the group to which she believes she belongs. The first part of the experiment required participants to gauge their identification with a northern Italian group. However, in the second part of the experiment, the participants had to determine whether a stranger could be classified as northern Italian, based solely on looking at a photograph. The findings concluded that those who strongly identified with northern Italy excluded individuals who looked differently from them, while the individuals who did not strongly identify with northern Italy were more likely to be more inclusive (Castano et al., 2002). These results indicate that the more loyal a group member is to her identity of the group, the more likely she will participate in promoting an in-group and out-group dynamic. It is worth noting that, in this experiment, those who identified less with a group were more willing to extend group membership to a larger and more diverse group of people. The finding indicates that the behavior of in-group members toward the out-group is one of the ways they keep the divisions well and alive.

Another option for accessing the in-group is to change the definition of the out-group. For example, Theodore Roosevelt, 26th president of the U.S., understood citizenship as having

no divided allegiance here. Any man who says he is an American, but something else also, isn't an American at all. We have room for but one flag, the American flag ... We have room for but one language here, and that is the English language ... and we have room for but one sole loyalty and that is a loyalty to the American people. (Roosevelt, n.d.)

Although it may seem as though Roosevelt is taking an accepting approach toward foreigners in the U.S., we interpret him as suggesting that, in order for those immigrants who are newly arrived, to earn the loyalty of the American people, they need to assimilate themselves and thus identify as American by learning the English language. Roosevelt's requirement for immigrants to learn the English language is based in foundationalism, as it suggests that being included in the American group is intrinsically tied to knowing the English language. Knowing the English language is a foundational implication because it advances the notion that the American identity can only be attained by immigrants if they wholly abandon their native tongue and remain loyal to the English language, as doing so would fulfill what is supposedly essential for being a true American. It is important to reject such assertions because they separate groups on the basis of culture, as well as biology, and replace scientific inquiry with rigid placements.

Shifting the out-group is also propelled by immigrants themselves. Immigrants were often separated from those who were considered to be white. The inclusion of immigrants in the larger white American group occurred gradually over time. For instance, Polish immigrants in Chicago were not considered to be white until the Irish invited them to join their classified white group. Those who were included in the larger American group would go on to separate and distinguish the whites from black people. The Polish, who were at first discriminated against as a result of their "appearance, religion and culture," were now being included in the in-group as opposed to the out-group. Whites were intermarrying with other whites to create an even larger, but still exclusive white group (Kendzior, 2016). A larger white group became increasingly visible when "white flight" occurred, which was the mass exodus of whites, who identified as members of the same in-group, from urban centers. White flight was used as a mechanism to further exclude the out-group of black people by geographically separating them from the larger white group. Similar ideas have been expressed by political leaders, like Donald Trump. He has garnered large support from those who hold an exclusive view of which Americans are in the in-group. These in-group members are discriminating against those perceived as less American which includes, for Trump, Mexicans and Muslims. The basis of such discrimination largely derives from conflating physical traits with perceived morals of these immigrant groups. A more pragmatic approach toward extending decency to a larger group would include dropping the need to discriminate based on an individual's nationality or religion. Rorty exemplifies the effects of pragmatism:

[i]t would be better to say: Here is what we ... [would] look like as a result of ceasing to hold slaves, beginning to educate women, separating church and state, and so on. Here is what happened after we started treating certain distinctions between people as arbitrary rather than fraught with moral significance. If you would try treating them that way, you might like the results. Saying that sort of thing seems preferable to saying: Look at how much better we are at knowing what differences between persons are arbitrary and which not- how much more *rational* we are. (Rorty, 1997, pp. 19–20)

Rorty is claiming that America is not defined on the basis of differences. Therefore, it is not appropriate to exclude immigrants from the larger American group on the basis of language or other distinguishing characteristics. These characteristics include religion, race, skin color, and gender, among other distinctive characteristics. Hence, a determining factor for including immigrants and out-groups in the larger “American” group should primarily consist of an allegiance to basic democratic values.

Understanding the threats that go against extending decency is important so that these threats can be avoided. One such example is the discriminatory rhetoric that influential public figures employ. Public figures, including Tomi Lahren, utilize social media platforms such as Twitter to spread their political views today. Social media has proven to be an effective method for not only reaching a broader audience but also for encouraging participation in politics and political movements (McAfee, 2018). Studies have shown that millennials are encouraged to voice their beliefs through social media platforms and participate in active movements as a result of the content they see on social media (Hwang & Kim, 2015). In a recent survey, 69% of Americans find social media platforms important for the purpose of grasping the attention of politicians, while 67% of Americans use social media platforms to participate in social change movements (Anderson et al., 2018). With her 1.2 million Twitter followers, Tomi Lahren has both power and influence over millennial users (Enli & Simonsen, 2016). Her influence reaches an even larger audience as she is a big supporter of #MAGA, which stands for Donald Trump’s slogan, “Make America Great Again.” Her support for Trump has led her to gain recognition from the President. Trump tweeted about Lahren saying, “Everybody is with Tomi Lahren, a truly outstanding and respected young woman!” (Saad, 2018). Her popularity is largely a result of the controversial statements that she makes. Lahren’s controversial statements can be exemplified in a tweet by Fox News that quotes Lahren in an interview and reads, “You don’t just come in to this country with low skills, low education, not understanding the language and come into our country because someone says it makes them feel nice. That’s not what this country is based on” (McAfee, 2018). Lahren’s use of rhetoric that explicitly emphasizes excluding immigrants from the American group is especially concerning when considering the wide range of support that Lahren has from young millennials who view her tweets and see the support that she receives from President Trump.

Specifically, what is more worrisome is Lahren’s use of apocalyptic rhetoric that is employed to segregate immigrants from the American in-group on the basis of the intrinsic qualities that she believes immigrants lack. These qualities include education and the ability to speak English. In fact, immigrant groups in the American labor force hold a higher percentage of bachelor’s and master’s degrees than do native-born citizens (“Discover More”, 2007). Talent, along with the labor that is brought by immigrant group members who do not hold degrees, plays a role in revitalizing major American cities and thus indicates the powerful impact that these immigrants can have if given the opportunity. It is through Lahren’s use of apocalyptic rhetoric that she is threatening immigrants and other out-groups from being included in the larger scope of an American group that believes in the tenets of democracy. Apocalyptic rhetoric is used as a means of instilling fear in citizens in order to create prompt action on that fear. The consequences of both Lahren and Roosevelt’s word choice perpetuate biased narratives against immigrants and the justification of treating them without decency since they are not accepted into the larger American in-group. Lahren uses her social influence to villainize immigrants, which then justifies their indecent treatment. Lahren’s use of social media to belittle immigrants is alarming because, like

Roosevelt, Lahren is defining the American out-group as having certain characteristics that Americans do not possess. Instead of defining immigrants on what they are not, she should define them on what they are, which should be having a shared love for democracy.

It is important here that the in-group of Americans increase, and that decency expand to a larger group of people because the demographic trends of the American population reveal a “browning of America.” By 2044, “no one racial group will be the majority of the country” (Montanaro, 2016). These trends reveal that the majority of Americans will be of immigrant descent. The demographic shift in politics, as “Republicans have become increasingly reliant on white, working class voters,” represents a “shrinking share of the voting public” (Montanaro, 2016). Paradoxically, Lahren herself is a descendant from an immigrant family that possessed the personal qualities that Lahren criticized as being “un-American” (McAfee, 2018). Characterizing immigrants as “un-American” on the basis of characteristics including the languages that they speak, as an example, is a display of foundationalism, which supports the mistreatment of immigrants. It is self-contradictory for Lahren, or past and present leaders including Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, to use apocalyptic rhetoric and foundationalism to attack immigrants in such an extreme manner when Lahren considers herself to be greatly patriotic. Patriotism stems from a loyalty to democracy that natural born citizens and immigrants alike share. Therefore, it behooves Americans to extend decency and loyalty to a group that has adopted the same love and respect for democracy. Lahren is using her freedom of speech to inhibit the freedom of others. In order to extend decency to a larger group of individuals, figures such as Lahren should recognize and appreciate the positive contributions that immigrants bring to the U.S. A healthier alternative to Lahren’s toxic rhetoric would be the use of pragmatic rhetoric, as it would abandon objectivity and allow for the chance to include a larger group of individuals in the American group by promoting solidarity. Not only would such an alternative increase the American group but also promote the extension of decency to more individuals.

The trajectory toward a more utopian rhetoric, where a larger human group is defined by loyalty and decency rather than foundational criteria, starts with confronting, repudiating, and overcoming these threats to decency. A concept of utopia is not an unfamiliar one to humankind. Humans have been pursuing the creation of an ideal scenario for millennia. The determining factors of utopian depictions are dependent on what one imagines as perfect. Plato’s *Republic* emphasizes the importance of perfect bodies; later, in More’s *Utopia*, physical prowess is less of an interest than the proper inspection of a woman’s body by a potential spouse (Abbott, 2010). However, falling short of achieving such imagery calls into question the utility of these endeavors, at least when pursued in such ways (Abbott, 2010). Now, from a pragmatic perspective, exercises in utopian thought are misguided, in part, due to their prescribed formulation based in foundational objectivity. For instance, failures brought to bear by utopianism allow for the exclusion of a group that does not meet the definition of so-called perfection which matches the image of such utopian formations. An alternative conceptual scheme, however, that could provide greater unity from an increasingly enlarging membership of in-group candidates is the promotion of democratic loyalty and the avoidance of feeling pain and enduring suffering.

The move toward such a place can be seen in millennials and GenX-ers, specifically in the rhetoric of greater inclusion. To that end, the harmful rhetoric utilized by public figures is garnering strong opposition by these generations. This opposition is a positive trend for future generations, as it recognizes that the power of Tomi Lahren and similar figures as a threat to democracy. Threats to democracy consist of inhibiting larger groups from treating its members with decency and loyalty. To prevent threats from occurring more frequently, currently and in the future altogether, these generations should become increasingly active in their communities—one method of which is social media. Furthermore, these generations are taking their views beyond their electronic devices. The increasing number of protests by millennial and GenX-er organizers indicates that more individuals in these generations are potentially unwilling to stand for these threats to democracy (Hwang & Kim, 2015). Protests and political movements, whose goals are to

achieve greater inclusivity for different groups of people, particularly those historically in need of structural empathy—and not, say, neo-Nazis—are examples of the kinds of practices needed to engender decency and loyalty. In this way, the perpetual cycle of exclusion informed by philosophical objectivity can be broken. Moving forward, a break in continuous exclusion can start by changing the stories told about immigrants in order to create a narrative of acceptance.

6. Conclusion

To understand why a shift from foundational rhetoric to one of pragmatism offers the kind of potential for promoting greater decency toward immigrants, it is important to study rhetorical strategies employed in public discourse that introduce and perpetuate larger narratives. The value for doing so lies in the consequential power of language. The language that influential figures choose to characterize identities is shown to affect people's perceptions, which, in turn, influence subsequent behaviors and actions toward targeted groups of individuals. As such, we contend that social progress is possible through a rhetorical restructuring of sorts—that is, toward a pragmatic one. A pragmatic rhetorical restructuring calls on influential figures to realize that their discourse carries consequences, and that characterizing immigrants through exclusionary language is in itself contradictory to the values of loyalty, solidarity, and decency upon which America was founded. To that end, we have not only attempted to show the strong legacy and lingering pervasiveness of foundational discourse in the U.S. but also how pragmatic strands of thought have influenced—and continue to influence—key historical and contemporary speeches, positions, and policies. We look to current and future leaders to draw from pragmatic ideas when characterizing those in greatest need of empathy and place. One specific way in which to make more plausible a pragmatically conceived utopian society would be to rethink the notion of loyalty in such a way that offers neighborly dignity through acts of solidarity and decency.

Funding

The authors received no direct funding for this research.

Author details

Aaron Martin¹

E-mail: aaron.martin@wayne.edu

Lisette LeMerise¹

E-mail: gh8943@wayne.edu

Riya Chhabra¹

E-mail: gh1537@wayne.edu

Sudharshana P. Kanduri¹

Julia Beleshi¹

E-mail: gh1453@wayne.edu

¹ Irvin D. Reid Honors College, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, USA.

Citation information

Cite this article as: "Challenging public rhetoric justifying immigrants as 'indecent'", Aaron Martin, Lisette LeMerise, Riya Chhabra, Sudharshana P. Kanduri & Julia Beleshi, *Cogent Arts & Humanities* (2020), 7: 1740538.

References

- Abbott, P. (2010). Should utopians have perfect bodies? *Political Science*, 42(8), 874–881. doi: [10.1016/j.futures.2010.05.001](https://www.sciencedirect.com.proxy.lib.wayne.edu/science/article/pii/S0016328710001060?via%3Dihub). Retrieved from <https://www.sciencedirect.com.proxy.lib.wayne.edu/science/article/pii/S0016328710001060?via%3Dihub>
- Anderson, M., Toor, S., Rainie, L., & Smith, A. (2018, July 11). *Activism in the social media age*. Pew Research Center website. Retrieved December 19, 2018, from <http://www.pewinternet.org/2018/07/11/activism-in-the-social-media-age/>
- Army and navy pension laws and bounty land laws of the United States* (R. Mayo & F. Moulton, Comps.). (1852). Washington, DC.
- Arthur, D., & Woods, W. (2013). The contextual presidency: The negative shift in presidential immigration rhetoric. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 43(3), 470.
- Auxier, R. E., & Hahn, L. E. (Eds.). (2010). *The philosophy of Richard Rorty*. Open Court.
- Benhabib, S., & Fraser, N. (Eds.). (2004). *Pragmatism, critique, judgment: Essays for Richard J. Bernstein*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- Benson, T. W. (2011). The rhetoric of civility: Power, authenticity, and democracy. *Contemporary Rhetoric*, 1(1), 22–30. Retrieved from <http://eds.a.ebscohost.com/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=605efe92-cbd3-41d3-bbd6-0caa8f1af531%40sessionmgr4006>
- Blum, E. (2018, August 7). *Starting a conversation about anti-blackness*. The Christian Century website. Retrieved December 19, 2018, from <https://www.christiancentury.org/review/books/starting-conversation-about-anti-blackness>
- Brock, B., Scott, R., & Chesebro, J. (Eds.). (1990). *Methods of rhetorical criticism: A twentieth-century perspective*, (3), 184.
- Castano, E., Yzerbyt, V., Bourguignon, D., & Seron, E. (2002). Who may enter? The impact of in-group identification on in-group/out-group categorization. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 38(3), 315–322. <https://doi.org/10.1006/jesp.2001.1512>
- Cuza, A. I., & Mocanu, M. (2016). Elements of political discourse pragmatics. *Serie Litere si Stiinte Sociale*, (4), 8–19. Retrieved from http://www.utgjiu.ro/revista/lit/pdf/2015-04/02_Mocanu.pdf
- D'Souza, J., & Gurin, M. (2016). The universal significance of Maslow's concept of self-actualization. *The Humanistic Psychologist*, 44(2), 210–214. <https://doi.org/10.1037/hum0000027>
- Devine, C. J. (2015). Ideological social identity: Psychological attachment to ideological in-groups as

- a political phenomenon and a behavioral influence. *Political Science*, 37(3), 509–535. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/43653503.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A8c6374e820d6aa09a9db6a72af500b28>
- Discover more: *Immigration myths and realities*. (2007, September 4). POV website Retrieved December 20, 2018, from <http://archive.pov.org/madeinla/immigration-myths-and-realities/>
- Dunigan, G. (2017). The Chinese exclusion act: Why it matters today. *Susquehanna University Political Review*, 8(1), 82–89. Retrieved from <https://scholarlycommons.susqu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1031&context=supr>
- Enli, G., & Simonsen, C.-A. (2016). ‘Social media logic’ meets professional norms: Twitter hashtags usage by journalists and politicians. *Information, Community & Society*, 21(8), 1081–1096. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2017.1301515>
- Frantz, J. B. (1998). Franklin and the Pennsylvania Germans. *Mid-Atlantic Studies*, 65(1), 21–34. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/27774077.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Ae3aa06096915e7037c4292c9c40df401>
- Gelatt, J. (2017, August). *The RAISE act: Dramatic change to family immigration, less so for the employment-based system*. Migration Policy Institute website. Retrieved December 19, 2018, from <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/news/raise-act-dramatic-change-family-immigration-less-so-employment-based-system>
- Gunn, J. (2008). Size matters: Polytoning rhetoric’s perverse apocalypse. *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 38(1), 82–108. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02773940701779744>
- Hansler, J. (2017, November 28). *Trump’s family denied German heritage for years*. CNN Politics website. Retrieved December 19, 2018, from <https://www.cnn.com/2017/11/28/politics/trump-family-heritage/index.html>
- Here’s Donald Trump’s presidential announcement speech*. (2015, June 16). TIME website. Retrieved December 19, 2018, from <http://time.com/3923128/donald-trump-announcement-speech/>
- Hollinger, R., & Depew, D. (Eds.). (1995). *Pragmatism: From progressivism to postmodernism*. Praeger.
- Hussein, B. A.-S. (2012). The sapir-whorf hypothesis today. *Theory and Practice of Language Studies*, 2(3), 642–646. Retrieved from ProQuest database. <https://doi.org/10.4304/tpls.2.3.642-646>
- Hwang, H., & Kim, K.-O. (2015). Social media as a tool for social movements: The effect of social media use and social capital on intention to participate in social movements. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 39(5), 478–488. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcs.2015.39.issue-5>
- Ivie, R. L. (2017). Trump’s unwitting prophecy. *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, 20(4), 707–717. <https://doi.org/10.14321/rhetpublaffa.20.4.0707>
- Johnson, J. (2015, December 7). *Trump calls for ‘total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States’*. The Washington Post website. Retrieved December 19, 2018, from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/12/07/donald-trump-calls-for-total-and-complete-shutdown-of-muslims-entering-the-united-states/?utm_term=.b7d9ae0790af
- Kendzior, S. (2016, September 1). *How do you become “white” in America?* De Correspondent website. Retrieved December 19, 2018, from <https://thecorrespondent.com/5185/how-do-you-become-white-in-america/1466577856645-8260d4a7>
- Lawler, P. A., & Schaffer, R. M. (Eds.). (2016). *American political rhetoric: Essential speeches and writings* (7th ed.). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Maly, M., Dalmage, H., & Michaels, N. (2012). The end of an idyllic world: Nostalgia narratives, race, and the construction of white powerlessness. *Critical Sociology*, 39(5), 757–779. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0896920512448941>
- McAfee, T. (2018, May 14). *Tomi Lahren attacks U.S. immigrants, gets burned by eye-opening lesson on her own family tree*. People website. Retrieved December 19, 2018, from <https://people.com/politics/tomi-lahren-immigrants-genealogist-family-tree/>
- McArdle, A. (2012). Using a Narrative Lens to Understand Empathy and How it matters in Judging. CUNY Academic Works, 9, 180–181. Retrieved from https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1127&context=c_l_pubs
- Montanaro, D. (2016, October 12). *How the browning of America is upending both political parties*. NPR website. Retrieved December 19, 2018, from <https://www.npr.org/2016/10/12/497529936/how-the-browning-of-america-is-upending-both-political-parties>
- Mott, F. L. (1936). *Benjamin franklin*. American Book Company.
- No taxation without representation*. (n.d.). Retrieved December 8, 2018, from Library of Congress website. <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/magna-carta-muse-and-mentor/no-taxation-without-representation.html>
- Reyes, A. (2011). Strategies of legitimization in political discourse: From words to actions. *Discourse & Society*, 22(6), 781–807. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926511419927>
- Roberts, S. (2010, August 25). *New life in U.S. no longer means new name*. The New York Times website. Retrieved December 19, 2018, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/26/nyregion/26names.html>
- Roosevelt, T. (n.d.). *Quotable quote*. Good Reads website. Retrieved December 19, 2018, from <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/26007-in-the-first-place-we-should-insist-that-if-the>
- Rorty, R. (1979). *Philosophy and the mirror of nature*. Princeton University Press.
- Rorty, R. (1982). *Consequences of pragmatism*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota.
- Rorty, R. (1988). *The priority of democracy to philosophy* (M. D. Peterson & R. C. Vaughn, Eds.). Cambridge University Press.
- Rorty, R. (1989a). *Relativism: Interpretation and confrontation* (M. Krausz, Ed.). University of Notre Dame Press.
- Rorty, R. (1989b). *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*. Cambridge University Press.
- Rorty, R. (1992). *The linguistic turn: Essays in philosophical method*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago.
- Rorty, R. (1993a). *Human rights, rationality, and sentimentality* (S. Shute & S. Hurley, Eds.). Cambridge University Press.
- Rorty, R. (1993b). *Putnam and the relativist menace* (Vol. 90). *Journal of Philosophy*.
- Rorty, R. (1997). *Justice as a larger loyalty* (E. Kaempfer & M. Stepaniants, Eds.). University of Hawaii Press.
- Rorty, R. (1999). *Philosophy and social hope*. Penguin Books.
- Saad, N. (2018). *Trump defends Fox News’ Tomi Lahren, a ‘truly outstanding and respected young woman’*. LA Times website. Retrieved December 20, 2018, from <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/la-et-entertainment-news-updates-2018-trump-defends-tomi-lahren-a-truly-1527090139-htmlstory.html>

- Saatkamp, H. J., Jr. (Ed.). (1995). *Rorty & pragmatism: The philosopher responds to his critics*. Vanderbilt University Press.
- Shanahan, E. A., Jones, M. D., McBeth, M. K., & Lane, R. R. (2013). An angel on the wind: How heroic policy narratives shape policy realities. *Policy Studies Journal*, 41(3), 453–483. <https://doi.org/10.1111/psj.2013.41.issue-3>
- Stewart, K., & Harding, S. (1999). Bad endings: American apocalypse. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 28(1), 285–310. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.28.1.285>
- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (2004). The social identity theory of intergroup behavior. In J. T. Jost & J. Sidanius (Eds.), *Key readings in social psychology. Political psychology: Key readings* (pp. 276–293). Psychology Press. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203505984-16>
- Utych, S. M. (2017). How dehumanization influences attitudes toward immigrants. *Sage Journals*, 71(2), 440–452. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1065912917744897>
- Waldinger, R. (2018). Immigration and the election of Donald Trump: Why the sociology of migration left us unprepared ... and why we should not have been surprised. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 41(8), 1411–1426. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2018.1442014>
- West, C. (1989). *The American evasion of philosophy: A genealogy of pragmatism*. The University of Wisconsin Press.
- Zong, J., Batalova, J., & Hallock, J. (2018, February 8). *Frequently requested statistics on immigrants and immigration in the United States*. Migration Policy Institute website. Retrieved December 19, 2018, from <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/frequently-requested-statistics-immigrants-and-immigration-united-states>



© 2020 The Author(s). This open access article is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) 4.0 license.

You are free to:

Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format.

Adapt — remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially.

The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms.

Under the following terms:

Attribution — You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made.

You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use.

No additional restrictions

You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits.



Cogent Arts & Humanities (ISSN: 2331-1983) is published by Cogent OA, part of Taylor & Francis Group.

Publishing with Cogent OA ensures:

- Immediate, universal access to your article on publication
- High visibility and discoverability via the Cogent OA website as well as Taylor & Francis Online
- Download and citation statistics for your article
- Rapid online publication
- Input from, and dialog with, expert editors and editorial boards
- Retention of full copyright of your article
- Guaranteed legacy preservation of your article
- Discounts and waivers for authors in developing regions

Submit your manuscript to a Cogent OA journal at www.CogentOA.com

