

# Currents of Innuendo Converge on an American Path to Political Hate

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*Uses of innuendo such as enthymemes, sarcasm, and dog whistles by politicians and the resulting interlineal readings available to some listeners gave us an early warning about the type of relationship that has now obtained between Christianity and politics, and specifically the rise of Christian Nationalism as facilitated by President Donald Trump. I argue that two currents of indirectness in American politics, one religious and the other racial, have converged like tributaries leading to a larger body of water.*

The ellipsis is the punctuation of innuendo par excellence [...] The ellipsis points toward the moment “just after,” inviting the reader to dwell in this blank, white, critical space so he or she may reflect on the possibility of irony within the text.

– Srikanth Reddy<sup>1</sup>

When George W. Bush delivered the 2003 State of the Union address, Vice President Dick Cheney and Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert presided over the proceedings on the podium behind him. On that cold January evening, barely fifteen months after the World Trade Center attacks of 2001 and eight weeks before the bombing of Iraq, this speech was only Bush’s second State of the Union address and his third to both houses of Congress. Seated in the presidential box, two seats from the first lady, were some special guests: a former prostitute and drug user who now ran a heavily evangelizing church-based program to get addicts off the streets in Louisiana, representing compassionate conservatism; a former marine who repeatedly entered the Pentagon wreckage on 9/11, representing heroism and American grit; and two disgruntled physicians who had been hit by rising malpractice insurance costs, representing their own less profitable selves. Each one of these guests’ physical presence indexed an initiative that was addressed in the speech.<sup>2</sup> But there were other things, a lot less overt and neither personified nor directly stated, which were in the water, *a escondidas* – covertly – in the president’s speech:

For so many in our country – the homeless . . . the fatherless, the addicted – the need is great. Yet there is power, *wonder-working power*, in the goodness and idealism and faith of the American people. . . I urge you to pass both my faith-based initiative and the Citizen Service Act to encourage acts of compassion that can transform America, one heart and one soul at a time.<sup>3</sup>

Political scientist Bethany Albertson probed the interpretation of the phrase “wonder-working power” with an experimental setup.<sup>4</sup> She found what was effectively an interpretive bifurcation (a dog whistle) varying in audibility according to the listener’s religious background: 89 percent of Pentecostals recognized the reference as coming from a well-known church hymn, while this effect held for only 9 percent of a more general subject population.<sup>5</sup> Albertson additionally found that, for those who did recover the reference, a preference was exhibited for inexplicit rather than overt religious appeals, leading her to the conclusion that coded religious communication is particularly persuasive in politics.

We can corroborate these experimental results by tracing commentators’ reactions following Bush’s speech. The president’s supporters warmly welcomed the reference, praising the speech’s compassionate leanings, as well as an overt transfer of some of the roles of government (like dealing with unmet need among citizens) to the conditional charity of faith-based organizations. Gregory Rummo, a Christian Exchange contributor, wrote on the Writer’s Exchange Blog:

Those words will become hollow echoes as long as the obstructionists – the people who become apoplectic at the thought of God and government working in tandem – manage to block what is the only hope for the down-and-outs of society: Changed lives through the power of the Cross.<sup>6</sup>

Still others interpreted (admittedly verbally awkward) Bush 43’s role not so much as author but as animator; the words as spoken by the president were written by Michael Gerson, a fundamentalist Christian hired as a speechwriter prior to the announcement of Bush’s candidacy.<sup>7</sup> Gerson, an opinion columnist at *The Washington Post* until his death in 2022, thought this was no big deal, since many presidents up until that point had hinted that they were religious, deployed mentions of God, and spoke of their faith before it became de rigeur to state one’s religious affiliation early on in the campaign.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, when specifically asked in 2007 by journalist Kim Lawton about the idea that Bush was speaking in code to religious believers (recall some of his other [impromptu!] speeches on good versus evil, and crusades), Gerson had the following to say: “These aren’t code words. They are our culture. You know, millions of people understand them, and just because some people don’t get them doesn’t mean that there’s some kind of plot.”<sup>9</sup>

Having established that the Bush/Gerson message was on the surface about love and compassion, what motivates me to identify it as part of a downstream

branch meandering toward political hate?<sup>10</sup> And what can linguistic and discourse analysis elucidate about it? It is already well known that politicians worldwide use dog whistles in communicating with and often manipulating their constituencies.<sup>11</sup> Rhetorical indirectness has been described – in the West at least – since the enthymeme (in brief, a syllogism missing one of its premises), as explored by Aristotle and Theophrastus, applied to war history by Thucydides, among the Islamic philosophers by Ibn Sina/Avicenna and Ibn Rushd/Averroes, and in the East as part of Abhinavagupta’s contribution to Classical Sanskrit *Rasa* poetics, making meaning through *Dhvani*, the process of suggestion or revelation.<sup>12</sup>

American politicians’ interpellation of religious audiences, by indirectly indexing specific Christian beliefs on one hand and Donald Trump’s later increasingly overt invocation of eugenicist logics on the other hand, has contributed to a kind of alluvial discourse sedimentation, intensified by processes of circulation and repetition.<sup>13</sup> The sedimentation of the detritus swirled about by these religious and racist currents provides precedent and license for even more extreme views, and has made it increasingly acceptable to “say the quiet part aloud,” leading to our current political moment of red flags and alarm bells, constantly ping-ponging us with instances of political hate toward non-Christians and non-whites. At the same time, an inchoate Christian Nationalist movement gains shape and momentum, churning back and forth through indexical uncertainty (our disbelieving minds have to process: *Did they really just say that?*), and follow-up denials of hatred and racism. Every disavowal primes the core concept. This can be seen in the exponential growth of innuendo like the ludic “Let’s Go Brandon!” phenomenon described by linguist Janet McIntosh.<sup>14</sup> It’s hard not to constantly think about an issue when everyone denies it is there, and all the denials paradoxically establish the issue as discursive common ground.<sup>15</sup>

Recent Western work in philosophy of language and the discourse/pragmatics of political hate speech has focused on “dog whistles,” “fig leaves,” and “stupefying,” terms that all point to the real-world effects of indirectness in the carrying out of political aims.<sup>16</sup> Various accounts for these effects by processes of implicature, deniability, in-group identitarian appeals, indexical field effects, and the at-issue/not-at-issue distinction, these types of strategic conversational manipulation fall into a broader category that I will here call innuendo.<sup>17</sup> Not only do multiple linguistic strategies involving speaker, target, audience, and interpretant support innuendo; it also happens through other semiotic channels: for instance, consider that the Trump administration’s frequent photo-ops eating KFC, while ostensibly innocuous, were a veiled sexist dig at Hillary Clinton.<sup>18</sup> Another example is the “tableau vivant” that was Ronald Reagan announcing his presidential candidacy in the city of Philadelphia, Mississippi, the heart of the movement for “states’ rights” that opposed the federal enforcement of antisegregation legislation.<sup>19</sup>

Effects such as the religious, sexist, and racist ones described above are crucially dependent on background social context: coded religious innuendo prevails in the United States because it is a normatively (though variably) secular society with an established-but-contested practice of the separation of church and state, coexisting with pervasive religiosity now bubbling forth that has until recently remained relatively excluded from official government actions.<sup>20</sup> Along with other frowned-upon but pervasive behaviors (such as sexism, racism, and classism), this creates the conditions for religious, sexist, racist, classist, and other types of innuendo.

Consider the following now-familiar example of enthymematic innuendo as uttered by Trump, cloaked in plausible deniability, and capped off with what I have previously discussed as reactive reversal.<sup>21</sup>

#### Statement 8.7.2015

Then-candidate Trump, speaking to CNN's Don Lemon, complains about Fox News correspondent Megyn Kelly's performance at a recent presidential debate: "She gets out and she starts asking me all sorts of ridiculous questions. You could see there was blood coming out of her eyes, blood coming out of her wherever."<sup>22</sup>

#### Enthymematic Innuendo

*Premise 1:* She had blood coming out of her eyes and blood coming out of her [place called X].

*Unstated Premise 2:* Women menstruate out of a place called vagina. This place is unmentionable in polite society. I am being polite by not mentioning it.

*Unstated Premise 2a:* Because of menstruation, women are irrational.

*Conclusion, to be drawn by the listener:* Megyn Kelly was probably menstruating, and this made her irrational.

*Possible secondarily primed conclusion:* She was aggressive, like a bull seeing red (the use of "gets out" and "blood coming out of her eyes").

The next day, Trump and his campaign issued two more statements, the first a tweet, the other a campaign statement attempting to rewrite his words.

#### Plausible Deniability 8.8a.2015

Re Megyn Kelly quote: "you could see there was blood coming out of her eyes, blood coming out of her wherever" (NOSE). Just got on w/thought<sup>23</sup>

#### Reactive Reversal 8.8b.2015

Mr. Trump made Megyn Kelly look really bad – she was a mess with her anger and totally caught off guard. Mr. Trump said "blood was coming out of her eyes and whatever" meaning nose, but wanted to move on to more important topics. Only a deviant would think anything else.<sup>24</sup>

Though (8.7.2015) is arguably one of the top ten most famous of Trump's sexist statements, I want to draw attention to two aspects from (8.8b.2015). The statement was issued through a campaign press release/Twitter blast, but note the meaning-changing recasting of the prepositional phrase "out of her wherever," to the discourse-marking general extender "and whatever."<sup>25</sup> Also, the last phrase, "Only a deviant would think anything else," is the critical piece of evidence we need to see the inner workings of how enthymemes function. The interpretation can be claimed to be dependent on the listener, and the speaker's responsibility is thus disowned. In this case, it is not "the corrupt media" or "fake news" that promoted this interpretation. If you got that reading of "wherever," *you* are the deviant.

But how do we determine whether the inference was in fact invited by the statement? In conversation analysis, we apply what is called the next-turn proof procedure, looking for the interactional meaning to emerge based on how the contribution was responded to in the next speaker's turn.<sup>26</sup> In this case, the next turn was taken by Erick Erickson, who had invited Trump to the RedState Gathering, and who promptly rescinded the invitation, saying "I wanted to have him here as a legitimate candidate, but no legitimate candidate suggests a female asking questions does so because she's hormonal."<sup>27</sup> Erickson's response is the next-proof we as analysts need to support an assertion that the original statement, in fact, carried the inference.

In 1955, sociologist Erving Goffman wrote what almost appears like a user's manual for the kind of enthymematic innuendo President Trump was employing. It is worth quoting at length:

Tact in regard to face-work often relies for its operation on a tacit agreement to do business through the language of hint – the language of innuendo, ambiguities, well-placed pauses, carefully worded jokes, and so on. The rule regarding this unofficial kind of communication is that the sender ought not to act as if he had officially conveyed the message he has hinted at, while the recipients have the right and the obligation to act as if they have not officially received the message contained in the hint. Hinted communication, then, is deniable communication; it need not be faced up to.<sup>28</sup>

I have analyzed this type of underspecification of meaning at length elsewhere, as obtaining in pronominal forms such as *something*, *anything*, and *thing*, general extenders that are used in discourse precisely because they can instantiate a value that depends on the listener.<sup>29</sup> While articulating the exact relationship between microdiscursive moves such as general extenders and broader discursive patterns of sustained political innuendo is beyond the scope of this essay, I would nevertheless like to flag this for future investigation.

Now we can turn to the remaining data for this essay, examining racist dog-whistle innuendo alluding to genetic purity (the so-called racehorse theory) from the Trump administration and its attendant troglobionts.

What do we want Haitians here for? Why do we want all these people from Africa here? Why do we want all these people from shithole countries? We should have people from countries like Norway.

– Donald J. Trump at a White House meeting on immigration, January 11, 2018

If you vote for me, I'm the difference, and I'm the wall. You know the wall that we're building on the southern border? I'm your wall between the American Dream and chaos.

– Donald J. Trump at a campaign rally in Bemidji, Minnesota, September 18, 2020

One of the tributaries in my argument, racial innuendo, is illustrated by the first Trump epigraph above.<sup>30</sup> While Trump started his presidential run by railing against Mexicans and implementing a near-total ban on travel from Muslim-majority countries, by the middle of his administration, it became clear that his “big, beautiful wall” was largely metaphorical. The tiny, half-finished wall to the south was invoked as the means to keep out immigrants and refugees of all kinds and from all directions, but especially those who came from non-European, non-Christian backgrounds. In his own mind, as seen in the second epigraph, Trump himself was the wall.

In 2020, Trump held a rally for his reelection campaign in Bemidji, Minnesota, speaking to a largely white audience, where he began by stoking nativist fears of racialized groups, especially Muslims, and by attacking Minnesota's Democratic Congresswoman Ilhan Omar. Remarkably, if one were reading the transcript of the speech, the first parts do not read like he is attacking Omar. However, on listening to the broadcast, we can hear the innuendo, this time in the form of verbal irony and sarcasm. This exemplifies how political innuendo includes not only veiled references to perceived flaws in an opponent's character, or alleged groups who pose a threat to the speaker's constituency, but also the inversion of meaning of one's utterance through pragmatic means such as intonation. Here I provide excerpts from the rally speech for analysis. Readers can follow the link in the endnotes for the full content:<sup>31</sup>

*Excerpt 1*

Trump on Refugees at a Campaign Rally in Bemidji, Minnesota,  
September 18, 2020

Trump: (13:48) One of the most vital issues in this election is the subject of refugees. You know it. You know it perhaps better than almost anybody. Lots of luck. *You're having a good time . . . with your refugees? That's good.* We want to have . . . [turns to someone screaming in the audience]

Audience: Ilhan Omar!

Trump: Omar! He said Omar.

Aud: Boooo! Boooo!

Trump: *That's a beauty.*

Aud: Boooo . . .

Trump: How the hell did SHE win the election? How did she WIN?

Aud: Boooo . . .

Trump: It's unbelievable. Every family in Minnesota needs to know about sleepy Joe Biden's extreme plan to flood your state with an influx of refugees from Somalia, from places all over the planet.

Aud: Boooo!

Trump: Well, that's what's happened, and *you like Omar a lot, don't you, huh?*

Aud: Noooo . . .

Trump: Biden has promised a 700-percent increase [ . . . ] in the importation of refugees from the most dangerous places in the world, including Yemen, Syria, and Somalia. *Congratulations, Minnesota.* A 700-percent increase. *Good luck, Minnesota.* Enjoy yourselves, because if I'm not here, if I don't win [ . . . ] Your state will be overrun and destroyed [ . . . ]

In Excerpt 1, I have inserted italics to highlight Trump's uses of verbal irony, another type of innuendo. As devices for meaning inversion, many have described both irony and the more specific sarcasm as features of Trump's rally delivery.<sup>32</sup> Their commonality in part stems from a high degree of deniability. But how can we tell the utterances in question are ironic? Trump uses many rhetorical devices to signal that he means the opposite of what he is saying. He uses sarcasm ("Good luck, Minnesota") and rhetorical questions ("You're having a good time with your refugees?"). Another way of generating implicatures is through the use of unexpected intonational focus.<sup>33</sup> In Figure 1, I use the Tones and Breaks Indices (ToBI) system of intonational phonology transcription to describe the intonational patterns used by Trump to render a "sarcastic tone" in his Minnesota speech.<sup>34</sup> I've extracted two examples below.<sup>35</sup>

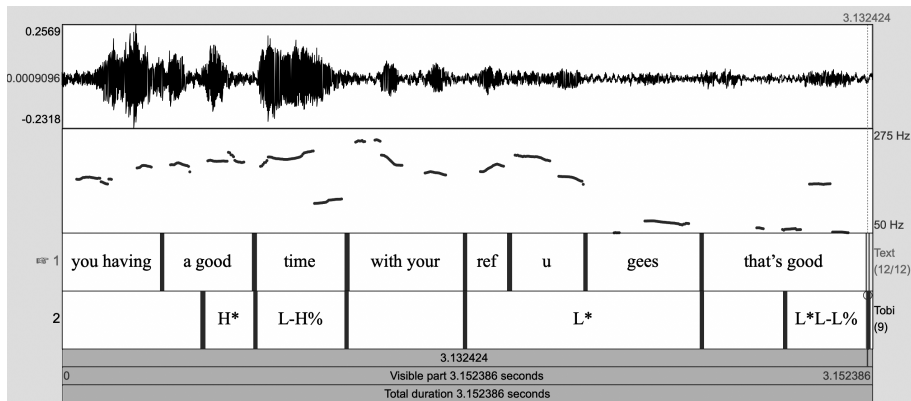
1a. *You're having a good time*

1b. *with your refugees? . . . That's good.*

Example 1a has a high pitch accent H\* on "good" and a low intonational phrase and high boundary tone L-H% on "time" at the end of the phrase. This type of intonational contour is used to signal a continuation rise, and can be heard as a type of ellipsis. Although a transcription hardly captures it (which is why I have included the formant frequency track), this type of level high tone (see the flat visible

Figure 1

Trump's Waveform and Visible Pitch Contour with Text Transcription and Annotation for Tones and Breaks Indices for Examples 1a and 1b



Source: Track generated from examples 1a and 1b using Praat pitch software (developed by linguists Paul Boersma and David J. M. Weenink, 1992).

pitch above the word “time”) invites the listener to respond, and indeed some in the audience say, “No!”

In contrast, Example 1b, which features a yes/no question, would normally be expected to have a high intermediate tone and high boundary tone, H-H%, signaling a question. Instead, Trump has delivered this line with audible pauses between “ref-u-gees,” and an unexpected low pitch accent (L\*) at the end of “that’s good.” Linguists Joseph Tepperman, David Traum, and Shrikanth Narayanan have identified the narrow range and low pitch (approximately 75hz) seen in “that’s good” as reliably signaling sarcasm in speech recognition.<sup>36</sup> The multiple violations of listeners’ intonational expectations here are a strong clue that the message mustn’t be taken at face value, and that the listener must look to other, hidden dimensions of meaning.

1c. *That’s a beauty.*

1d. *How the hell did SHE win the election?*

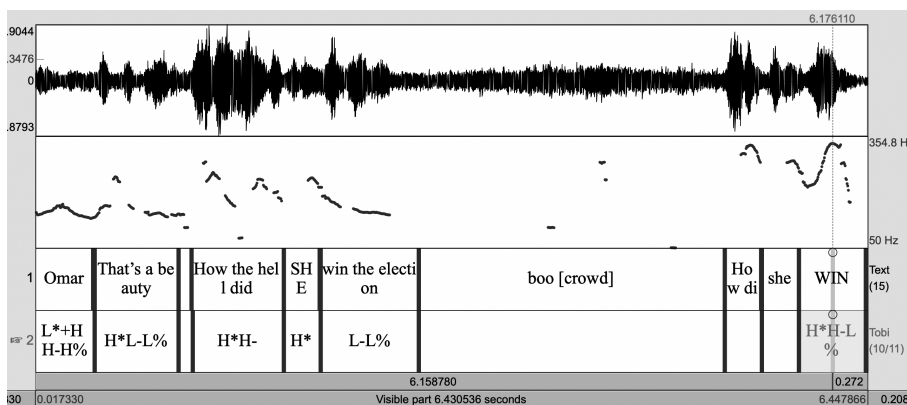
1e. *How did she WIN?*

As seen in Figure 2, example 1c (*That’s a beauty.* H\* L-L%) differs from what one would expect from a nonironic example. By putting the intonational focus on the word “that,” and lowering the pitch for the rest of the utterance, Trump lets his listeners know that he is communicating the opposite of what he is saying. His audience responds in alignment with him by loudly booing the mention of Omar.



Figure 2

Trump’s Waveform and Visible Pitch Contour with Text Transcription and Annotation for Tones and Breaks Indices for Examples 1c, 1d, and 1e



Source: Track generated from examples 1c, 1d, and 1e using Praat pitch software (developed by linguists Paul Boersma and David J. M. Weenink, 1992).

Contrast these unexpected occurrences (1a, 1b, 1c) with the focus given to high pitch peak accents in Examples 1d and 1e, where Trump expresses doubt about Omar having won her election.

Examples 1d and 1e occur immediately after 1c, and before each utterance, Trump resets his pitch, as is normal in English.<sup>37</sup> He starts each intonational phrase and then produces a contrastive high pitch accent, first on “she” and then on “win.” Both of these utterances are instances of the rise-fall-rise (RFR) intonation contour: H\* is the rise at sentence stress, and the low part of the utterance is the phrase tone (L-), followed by another rise at the boundary tone (H%).

The RFR contour’s meaning has been much discussed in the literature.<sup>38</sup> Linguists Daniel Goodhue, Lyana Harrison, Yuen Tung Clémentine Siu, and Michael Wagner posit its meaning as “tak[ing] a proposition *p* as input, and return[ing] *p* as output while insinuating alternatives to *p*.”<sup>39</sup> Thus, examples 1d and 1e, within the standard interpretations of American English intonation, yield alternative possibilities: in 1d, for other candidates to win the election; and in 1e, for Omar to lose the election. In the case of 1e, we get an incredulity reading which could be paraphrased as: *She couldn’t have possibly won the election.*

Trump’s alternations between observing and violating the expectations of our shared intonational grammar is part of what makes his innuendo interesting to hear for the audience, and part of what makes him a dynamic speaker. His speech is full of twists and turns, of sarcasm, innuendo, ellipsis, incredulity, and insinua-

tions, of what sounds like in-jokes and invitations to continue his line of thought, and surely would motivate some in the audience to regard the messages as part of what sociolinguist Janet McIntosh calls alt-signaling.<sup>40</sup>

The last excerpt I will analyze reveals another device used by Trump: the dog whistle, which I define by expanding Ian Haney-López's foundational work from "coded racial appeals that carefully manipulate hostility toward nonwhites" to also include antagonism and violence against other marginalized groups (such as discourse that encourages sexism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, and Islamophobia).

*Excerpt 2*

Trump on "Pioneers" and "Genes" at a Campaign Rally in Bemidji, Minnesota, September 18, 2020

Trump: (01:55:16) From St. Paul to St. Cloud, from Rochester to Duluth, and from Minneapolis, thank God we still have Minneapolis, to right here, right here with all of you great people, this state was *pioneered* by men and women who *braved* the wilderness and the winters to build a better life for themselves and for their families. They were *tough* and they were *strong*. You *have good genes*. You know that, right? *You have good genes. A lot of it's about the genes, isn't it? Don't you believe? The racehorse theory, you think we are so different? You have good genes in Minnesota.* They didn't have a lot of money. They didn't have a lot of luxury, but they had grit, they had faith, and they had each other. [. . .] They were miners and lumberjacks, fishermen and farmers, shipbuilders and shopkeepers. But *they all had one thing in common*. They loved their families, they loved their countries, and they loved their God.<sup>41</sup>

Contrasting my analysis of "refugees" in Example 1b with "pioneers" in this excerpt, Trump details what he thinks must have been the qualities of the ancestors of Minnesotans assembled there, qualities stemming from the genes of their presumed European pioneer forebears. I have italicized the parts of the speech I will focus on with my discussion. In the beginning of the excerpt, Trump erases the precolonization history of the state of Minnesota and of the Native peoples who live there and focuses only on the "pioneers who braved the wilderness." While praising pioneers' toughness and strength, he juxtaposes the claim that the current audience has good genes, creating a causal link between the two through parataxis (they braved the wilderness; you have good genes). Next, he introduces the "racehorse theory" in what sounds like a parenthetical aside. Finally, he returns to his ongoing thought and asserts that despite all their diversity of occupation, the pioneers had one thing in common (and this part he leaves unsaid): their genes.

After this rally footage aired, outlets all across the country wrote articles and religious organizations sent protests and gave interviews alerting the public to the

dangers of the overt eugenics espoused by Trump.<sup>42</sup> *The Huffington Post* even compiled footage of Trump bragging about his great genes on camera. Trump biographer Michael D'Antonio shared the following observation with PBS *Frontline*: "The [Trump] family subscribes to a racehorse theory of human development [. . .] they believe that if you put together the genes of a superior woman and a superior man, you get superior offspring."<sup>43</sup> And while the mention of racehorse theory is an easily decipherable dog whistle, more sinister is the pervasiveness of Trump's lifelong obsession with both family bloodlines and supposedly high IQ. This obsession results in his constant name-checking of his uncle who was an MIT professor, and results in absurdly challenging others to IQ tests, in boasting about his vocabulary, in bragging about his progeny's schools, and so on. Trump's racialized and ableist view of intelligence is in line with the reasoning for his ongoing attacks on everyone from Maxine Waters to Black athletes, and his insistence that Black people live in hell/war zones.<sup>44</sup> Many of Trump's callous actions against immigrants (like family separation), Muslims, African Americans, Mexican Americans, and Asians (like calling COVID-19 the "China virus") all follow a pattern of fomenting hate toward non-whites and other targets of eugenicist movements.<sup>45</sup>

It is important to understand Trump as participating in the history of these deep-rooted racial logics. Many of the terms Trump uses descend from the legacy of John Tanton's "Latin Onslaught" papers in the 1980s (Tanton was the founder of the Federation of American Immigration Reform), and at least "anchor baby" was at one point considered hate speech.<sup>46</sup> Now it is commonplace in Trump's speech and has even been normalized in the media.

Innuendo, whether through dog whistles, sarcasm, irony, or enthymemes, not only avoids accountability but manages to bring epistemic information into the common ground in discourse (this is why a term like "anchor baby" can become normalized). By couching divisive statements in innuendo, politicians like Trump can dodge scrutiny while still delivering sexist, racist, and xenophobic messages.

The different long-running discourse tributaries I have discussed gather speed and force to meet up at a metaphorical watershed. In just the past few months, far-right religious political figures such as Republican Congresswomen Lauren Boebert (Colorado) and Marjorie Taylor Greene (Georgia) have proudly declared themselves to be Christian Nationalists, again to the dismay of many leaders at civil rights organizations.<sup>47</sup> These bald declarations of religious affiliation and pro-white evangelical bias would not be possible without the discourse precedent, much of it in innuendo, set forth in comments from President Trump. Christian Nationalism not only threatens the separation of church and state but has resonance with the actual Nazi-sympathizer history of the American Christian Nationalist Party, which nominated Gerald L. K. Smith in 1948, an anti-Semitic, anti-Black, pro-deportation presidential candidate with an "America First" platform.<sup>48</sup>

Ironically, even as they protest Christianity's ascendancy in politics, it seems difficult for American observers and media to disentangle their own Islamophobic leanings from their effort to repel racist, sexist, and anti-Semitic statements. Lauren Boebert and Marjorie Taylor Greene have both been accused of being American Taliban by then-fellow GOP Representative Adam Kinzinger (Illinois), and the members of the Supreme Court who recently overturned *Roe v. Wade* were roundly mocked as "American Taliban" by media commentators, while high-profile social media accounts circulated memes of a picture altered to have most of the male judges appear to be wearing turbans and long beards, two signifiers commonly associated with devout Islamic faith, and Judge Amy Coney Barrett wearing a burka, a garment that some Muslim women wear because it covers their face and body.<sup>49</sup> It seems even after the Trump presidency, Americans process home-grown extremism through a projection of the Other, and dog whistling once more against Muslims in the process.<sup>50</sup>

While most of the semantic and pragmatic literature I have cited aims to examine dog whistles and other types of innuendo at the level of single utterances, I argue that studying them as a historically unfolding system uncovers greater regularities and coordinated acts in messaging, as well as elucidating their support among followers and connecting individual speech acts to normalization trends and what becomes acceptable to say. I see the study of innuendo, including dog whistles, enthymemes, and sarcastic intonation, as an investigation into the pragmatics of what remains unsaid, and the recoverability of innuendo as of utmost importance for the understanding of political hate. We are all implicated, and implicated in complicity, in the making of innuendo.

Working hand in hand with other semiotic indices, understanding innuendo gives us a chance to describe the broader aesthetics of our current political moment. I hope this essay provides some tools to recognize and subvert the authority emerging from these powerful strategies while attenuating their stranglehold on discursive practices.<sup>51</sup>

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#### AUTHOR'S NOTE

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#### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Srikanth Reddy, "'As He Starts the Human Tale': Strategies of Closure in Wallace Stevens," *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 24 (1) (2000): 13.
- <sup>2</sup> David Firestone, "State of the Union: The Audience; Guests Put A Human Face On The President's Ideas," *The New York Times*, January 29, 2003, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/01/29/us/state-of-the-union-the-audience-guests-put-a-human-face-on-the-president-s-ideas.html>.
- <sup>3</sup> George W. Bush, "President Delivers 'State of the Union,'" January 28, 2003, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/01/20030128-19.html>.
- <sup>4</sup> Bethany L. Albertson, "Dog-Whistle Politics: Multivocal Communication and Religious Appeals," *Political Behavior* 37 (1) (2015): 3–26, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-013-9265-x>.
- <sup>5</sup> Ian Haney López's classic work defines dog whistles as "coded racial appeals that carefully manipulate hostility toward nonwhites." I have chosen to focus on the broader concept of innuendo partly because I want to broaden the scope beyond racism to encompass sexism, homophobia, anti-Semitic, and anti-Islamic discourse. See Ian Haney López, *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 21. See also Lewis E. Jones's hymn "Power in the Blood," 1899: "Would you be free from the burden of sin? // There is pow'r, pow'r, wonder-working pow'r // In the precious blood of the Lamb."
- <sup>6</sup> Gregory J. Rummo, "Power, Wonder Working Power," *Writer's Exchange Blog*, [http://writers-voice.com/FGHIJ/G/Gregory\\_J\\_Rummo\\_power\\_wonder\\_working\\_power.htm](http://writers-voice.com/FGHIJ/G/Gregory_J_Rummo_power_wonder_working_power.htm) (accessed August 5, 2022).
- <sup>7</sup> Erving Goffman, "Footing," *Semiotica* 25 (1–2) (1979): 1–30, <https://doi.org/10.1515/semi.1979.25.1-2.1>.
- <sup>8</sup> Pew Research Center, "Religion, Rhetoric, and the Presidency: A Conversation with Michael Gerson," December 6, 2004, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2004/12/06/religion-rhetoric-and-the-presidency-a-conversation-with-michael-gerson>.
- <sup>9</sup> Reaction to the mention of crusades is documented in Peter Waldman and Hugh Pope, "'Crusade' Reference Reinforces Fears War on Terrorism Is Against Muslims," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 21, 2001, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB1001020294332922160>. Here is part of the text of the speech in question: "[W]e need to be alert to the fact that these *evil-doers* still exist. We haven't seen this kind of barbarism in a long period of time. No one could have conceivably imagined suicide bombers burrowing into our society and then emerging all in the same day to fly their aircraft—fly U.S. aircraft into buildings full of innocent people—and show no remorse. This is a new kind of—a *new kind of evil*. And we understand. And the American peo-

ple are beginning to understand. This *crusade*, this war on terrorism is going to take a while. And the American people must be patient.” Emphasis added. George W. Bush, “Remarks by the President upon Arrival on the South Lawn,” September 16, 2001, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010916-2.html>. Gerson’s quote is from an episode of *Religion & Ethics*: “Michael Gerson,” *Religion & Ethics*, November 2, 2007, Public Broadcasting Service, <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2007/11/02/november-2-2007-michael-gerson/3101>.

- <sup>10</sup> I will resist jumping into the topic of *hate speech*, for which legal status and definition vary by jurisdiction. Hate speech is neither illegal nor exhaustively defined in laws across the United States, although harassment and hate crimes are both illegal. Alexander Brown and Adriana Sinclair, *The Politics of Hate Speech Laws* (Abington-on-Thames, England: Routledge, 2019), 67.
- <sup>11</sup> Marco Duranti, *The Conservative Human Rights Revolution: European Identity, Transnational Politics, and the Origins of the European Convention* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Samuel Gyasi Obeng, “Language and Politics: Indirectness in Political Discourse,” *Discourse & Society* 8 (1) (1997): 49–83, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926597008001004>; Joyojeet Pal, Priyank Chandra, Padma Chirumamilla, et al., “Mediatized Populisms Innuendo as Outreach: @narendramodi and the Use of Political Irony on Twitter,” *International Journal of Communication* 11 (22) (2017): 4197–4218, <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/6705>; Alex Massie, “Another Day, Another UKIP Dog Whistle. Fancy That!” *The Spectator*, February 3, 2015, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/another-day-another-ukip-dog-whistle-fancy-that->; and Mathilda Åkerlund, “Dog Whistling Far-Right Code Words: The Case of ‘Culture Enricher’ on the Swedish Web,” *Information, Communication & Society* 25 (12) (2021): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2021.1889639>.
- <sup>12</sup> Aristotle’s somewhat vague definition of enthymeme: “but when, certain things being the case, something different results beside them by virtue of their being the case, *either universally or for the most part*, it is called deduction here (in dialectic) and enthymeme there (in rhetoric).” Aristotle, *Complete Works of Aristotle, Volume 1: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), lines 1356ba15–1356ba17. Although Aristotle referred to the enthymeme as “the substance of rhetorical persuasion,” his underspecification as to the definition of it has left much room for scholarly argument; see Lloyd F. Bitzer, “Aristotle’s Enthymeme Revisited,” *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 45 (4) (1959): 399–408, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335635909382374>. Other scholars such as James H. McBurney have defined the enthymeme “as a syllogism, drawn from probable causes, signs (certain and fallible) and examples. As a syllogism drawn from these materials . . . the enthymeme starts from probable premises (probable in a *material sense*) and lacks *formal validity* in certain of the types explained”; “It is not essential to speak at length and with precision on everything, but some things should be left also for the listener—to be understood and sorted out by himself—so that, in coming to understand that which has been left by you for him, he will become not just your listener but also your witness, and a witness quite well disposed as well. For he will think himself a man of understanding because you have afforded him an occasion for showing his capacity for understanding. By the same token, whoever tells his listener everything accuses him of being mindless.” See James H. McBurney, “The Place of the Enthymeme in Rhetorical Theory,” *Speech Monographs* 3 (1) (1936): 67–68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03637753609374841>. See also *Theophrastus of Eresus: Sources for His Life, Writings, Thought and Influence*, ed. and trans. William W. Fortenbaugh, Pamela M. Huby, Robert W. Sharples, and Dimitri Gutas (Leiden: Brill, 1992);

- Paul A. Rahe, "Thucydides' Critique of Realpolitik," *Security Studies* 5 (2) (1995): 105–141, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636419508429264>; Allan Bäck, "Avicenna's Hermeneutics," *Vivarium* 49 (1–3) (2011): 9–25, <https://doi.org/10.1163%2F156853411X590417>; V. K. Chari, "The Indian Theory of Suggestion (Dhvani)," *Philosophy East and West* 27 (4) (1977): 391–399, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1397981>; and Lalita Pandit "Dhvani and the 'Full Word': Suggestion and Signification from Abhinavagupta to Jacques Lacan," *College Literature* 23 (1) (1996): 142–163.
- <sup>13</sup> Elinor Ochs, "Narrative," in *Discourse as Structure and Process: Discourse Studies: A Multidisciplinary Introduction Volume 1*, ed. Teun A. van Dijk (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, Inc, 1997), 185–207.
- <sup>14</sup> Janet McIntosh, "'Let's Go Brandon': On the Mutable Power of Semiotic Peekaboo," *Anthropology News* 63 (4) (2022), <https://www.anthropology-news.org/articles/lets-go-brandon>.
- <sup>15</sup> Craig Roberts, "Speech Acts in Discourse Context," in *New Work on Speech Acts*, ed. Daniel Fogal, Daniel W. Harris, and Matt Moss (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 317–359.
- <sup>16</sup> Quentin Dénigot and Heather Burnett, "Dogwhistles as Identity-Based Interpretative Variation," in *Proceedings of the Probability and Meaning Conference (PaM 2020)* (Gothenburg, Sweden: Association for Computational Linguistics, 2020), 17–25; Robert Henderson and Elin McCready, "Dogwhistles, Trust and Ideology," in *Proceedings of the 22nd Amsterdam Colloquium*, ed. Julian J. Schlöder, Dean McHugh, and Floris Roelofsen (Amsterdam: Institute for Logic, Language and Computation, 2019), 152–160; Jennifer Saul, "Racist and Sexist Figleaves," in *The Routledge Handbook of Social and Political Philosophy of Language*, ed. Justin Khoo and Rachel Katharine Sterken (Abington-on-Thames, England: Routledge, 2021), 161–178; and Mike Deigan, "Stupefying," *Philosophers' Imprint* 22 (5) (2022), <https://doi.org/10.3998/phimp.2117>.
- <sup>17</sup> My own definition of innuendo is closest to Elisabeth Camp's: "the communication of beliefs, requests, and other attitudes 'off-record', so that the speaker's main communicative point remains unstated." Elisabeth Camp, "Insinuation, Common Ground, and the Conversational Record," in *New Work on Speech Acts*, ed. Fogal, Harris, and Moss, 42. For the purposes of this essay, I consider innuendo to be the superordinate category that includes dog whistles, sarcasm, and other kinds of strategic indirectness.
- <sup>18</sup> Sarah Muller, "Sexist 'KFC' Hillary Clinton Buttons at GOP Event," October 7, 2013, MSNBC, <https://www.msnbc.com/the-last-word/sexist-anti-clinton-buttons-gop-event-msna178021>.
- <sup>19</sup> Michael Silverstein, "Message, Myopia, Dystopia," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7 (1) (2017): 407–413, <https://doi.org/10.14318/hau7.1.027>.
- <sup>20</sup> Thomas Jefferson, *Jefferson's Letter to the Danbury Baptists: The Final Letter, as Sent*, January 1, 1802, The Library of Congress Archives, <https://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/9806/danpre.html> (accessed August 5, 2022); Justice Samuel Alito, "U.S. Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito Delivers Keynote Address at 2022 Notre Dame Religious Liberty Summit in Rome," Notre Dame Law School, July 28, 2022, <https://law.nd.edu/news-events/news/2022-religious-liberty-summit-rome-justice-samuel-alito-keynote>.
- <sup>21</sup> Goffman, "Footing"; Adam Hodges, "Plausible Deniability," in *Language in the Trump Era: Scandals and Emergencies*, ed. Janet McIntosh and Norma Mendoza-Denton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); and Norma Mendoza-Denton, "The Show Must

- Go On: Hyperbole and Falsehood in Trump's Performance," in *Language in the Trump Era*, ed. McIntosh and Mendoza-Denton.
- <sup>22</sup> "Trump on Kelly: Blood Was Coming Out of Her Eyes," *Don Lemon Tonight*, CNN, August 8, 2015, <https://www.cnn.com/videos/us/2015/08/08/donald-trump-megyn-kelly-blood-lemon-intv-ctn.cnn>.
- <sup>23</sup> Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump), Tweet, August 8, 2015, 08:46 a.m., <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/629997060830425088>.
- <sup>24</sup> Zeke A. Miller, "Donald Trump Fires Back after Outrage over Megyn Kelly Remarks," *Time*, August 8, 2015, <https://time.com/3989656/donald-trump-redstate-gathering>.
- <sup>25</sup> Maryann Overstreet, *Whales, Candlelight, and Stuff Like That: General Extenders in English Discourse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).
- <sup>26</sup> Emanuel A. Schegloff, "Repair after Next Turn: The Last Structurally Provided Defense of Intersubjectivity in Conversation," *American Journal of Sociology* 97 (5) (1992): 1295–1345, <https://doi.org/10.1086/229903>.
- <sup>27</sup> Miller, "Donald Trump Fires Back after Outrage over Megyn Kelly Remarks."
- <sup>28</sup> Erving Goffman, "On Face-Work: An Analysis of Ritual Elements in Social Interaction," *Psychiatry* 18 (3) (1955): 224, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00332747.1955.11023008>.
- <sup>29</sup> Norma Mendoza-Denton, *Homegirls: Language and Cultural Practice among Latina Youth Gangs* (Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons, 2008).
- <sup>30</sup> Quentin Williams, "Rejoinders from the Shithole," in *Language in the Trump Era*, ed. McIntosh and Mendoza-Denton.
- <sup>31</sup> For a video and transcription of the speech, see "President Donald Trump in Bemidji, MN," Rev.com, September 18, 2020, [https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/OuUlXo6wA\\_07MUtpY8up9pqqvx-PPTW4O6MTUCh1FsyY9t9Ka2cii5UIv1eQPGqzbPHyP8eoTOBT2rExr1H2rvTKTZWm?loadFrom=PastedDeeplink&ts=828.38](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/OuUlXo6wA_07MUtpY8up9pqqvx-PPTW4O6MTUCh1FsyY9t9Ka2cii5UIv1eQPGqzbPHyP8eoTOBT2rExr1H2rvTKTZWm?loadFrom=PastedDeeplink&ts=828.38).
- <sup>32</sup> Stéphanie Bonnefille, "Confrontational Rhetoric: President Trump Goes Off-Script on the Green New Deal," *Études de Stylistique Anglaise* 15 (1) (2019), <https://doi.org/10.4000/esa.3890>; Abbas Degan Darweesh and Nesaem Mehdi Abdullah, "A Critical Discourse Analysis of Donald Trump's Sexist Ideology," *Journal of Education and Practice* 7 (30) (2016): 87–95, <https://www.iiste.org/Journals/index.php/JEP/article/view/33622/34566>; and Noor Falah Hassan Akbar and Nawal Fadhil Abbas, "Negative Other-Representation in American Political Speeches," *International Journal of English Linguistics* 9 (2) (2019): 113–127, <https://doi.org/10.5539/ijel.v9n2p113>.
- <sup>33</sup> For focus, see David I. Beaver and Brady Z. Clark, *Sense and Sensitivity: How Focus Determines Meaning* (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley, 2009). For implicature, see H. P. Grice, "Logic and Conversation," *Speech Acts*, ed. Peter Cole and Jerry L. Morgan (Leiden, Amsterdam: Brill, 1975), 41–58.
- <sup>34</sup> The ToBI (Tones and Breaks Indices) system is an interpolation-based phonological system of annotation for intonation. ToBI was developed in recognition of the role that intonation plays in both phonological meaning and speech recognition, and taking into account that, on their own, absolute pitch values yield neither consistent percepts nor cross-speaker meaning units. The ToBI system allows for the transcription of an intonational sequence given a recording of speech and an associated spectrogram or formant record. The interpolation occurs between perceptually prominent events that can be categorized as high (and annotated H\* "high-star") or low (L\*) and are known as



pitch accents. Additionally, ToBI allows for compositionally derived intonational contours, such as L+H\* (“low plus high-star,” a low-leading tone followed by a high pitch accent) or H\*+L (a high pitch accent followed by a low trailing tone). The most widely used conventions cover four tiers, arranged and stacked like a musical score, and labeled from top to bottom: 1. Orthographic: for orthographic words, with segmented boundaries lining up temporally with word intervals; 2. Tone: for the edges of high and low phrase tones (H-, L-) and boundary tones (H%, L%), and time values of points indicating the pitch accents, the points over which we interpolate; 3. Break-index: for perceived juncture/pauses; and 4. Miscellaneous: used to note disfluencies. By generating a ToBI transcription, we can abstract away from the specific details of absolute pitch value (as might result from speaker size) and temporal characteristics of talk (spoken quickly or slowly) to arrive at something more like an intonational “signature” for a specific pitch contour, yielding a stable of pragmatic meanings within a specific variety. The ToBI system has been used to transcribe the intonation of numerous languages, including varieties of English, Spanish, French, Chinese, and Japanese, among others. Here I describe it only briefly: please consult annotation guides for fuller accounts; see Mary E. Beckman and Gayle Ayers Elam, “Guidelines for ToBI Labelling, Version 3” (Columbus: The Ohio State University Research Foundation, 1997); and Mary E. Beckman, Julia Hirschberg, and Stefanie Shattuck-Hufnagel, “The Original ToBI System and the Evolution of the ToBI Framework,” in *Prosodic Typology: The Phonology of Intonation and Phrasing*, ed. Sun-Ah Jun (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 9–54.

- <sup>35</sup> Although examples 1a and 1b split a grammatical sentence into two parts, they are divided into two examples because each one takes place across a “break,” that is, a perceptual juncture. We consider them as separate utterances and analyze them as such in this essay.
- <sup>36</sup> Joseph Tepperman, David Traum, and Shrikanth Narayanan, “‘Yeah Right’: Sarcasm Recognition for Spoken Dialogue Systems,” *Proceedings of Interspeech ICSLP* (Pittsburgh: International Conference on Spoken Language, 2006), 1838–1841.
- <sup>37</sup> Hubert Truckenbrodt, “The Interface of Semantics with Phonology and Morphology: Semantics of Intonation,” in *Semantics: An International Handbook of Natural Language Meaning: Volume 3*, ed. Claudia Maienborn, Klaus von Heusinger, and Paul Portner (Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2011), 2039–2069.
- <sup>38</sup> Gregory Ward and Julia Hirschberg, “Implicating Uncertainty: The Pragmatics of Fall-rise Intonation,” *Language* 61 (4) (1995): 747–776, <https://doi.org/10.2307/414489>; and Noah Constant, “English Rise-Fall-Rise: A Study in the Semantics and Pragmatics of Intonation,” *Linguistics and Philosophy* 35 (2012): 407–442, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10988-012-9121-1>.
- <sup>39</sup> Daniel Goodhue, Lyana Harrison, Yuen Tung Clémentine Siu, and Michael Wagner, “Toward a Bestiary of English Intonational Contours,” *The Proceedings of the 46th Conference of the North Eastern Linguistics Society (NELS)*, ed. Christopher Hammerly and Brandon Prickett (Montreal: The North East Linguistic Society, 2016), 314.
- <sup>40</sup> Janet McIntosh, “Alt-Signaling: White Violence, Military Fantasies, and Racial Stock in Trump’s America” (lecture jointly delivered with Norma Mendoza-Denton as part of “Talking Politics,” a colloquium delivered to and organized by University of Chicago’s Center for the Study of Communication and Society, and University of Colorado Boulder’s Culture, Language, and Social Practice, October–November, 2021).
- <sup>41</sup> “President Donald Trump in Bemidji, MN.”

- <sup>42</sup> Tim Dickinson, “Trump Preached White Supremacy in Minnesota, America Barely Noticed,” *Rolling Stone*, September 22, 2020, <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/trump-white-supremacy-racehorse-theory-1064928>; Seema Mehta, “Trump’s Touting of ‘Racehorse Theory’ Tied to Eugenics and Nazis Alarms Jewish Leaders,” October 5, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2020-10-05/trump-debate-white-supremacy-racehorse-theory>.
- <sup>43</sup> Michael Kirk, dir., *Frontline*, Season 2016, Episode 1, “The Choice,” aired September 27, 2016, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/documentary/the-choice-2016>.
- <sup>44</sup> Susan Currell, “‘This May Be the Most Dangerous Thing Donald Trump Believes’: Eugenic Populism and the American Body Politic,” *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 64 (2) (2019): 291–302, <https://doi.org/10.33675/AMST/2019/2/9>.
- <sup>45</sup> Samuel R. Bagenstos, “The New Eugenics,” *Syracuse Law Review* 71 (3) (2021): 751–763.
- <sup>46</sup> “John Tanton,” Southern Poverty Law Center, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/john-tanton> (accessed July 11, 2022).
- <sup>47</sup> Elizabeth Dias, “The Far-Right Christian Quest for Power: ‘We Are Seeing Them Emboldened,’” *The New York Times*, July 8, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/08/us/christian-nationalism-politicians.html>.
- <sup>48</sup> Special to *The New York Times*, “GLK Nominated: Christian Nationalist Party Asks Wide Deportations,” August 22, 1948, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1948/08/22/86906662.pdf>.
- <sup>49</sup> Josephine Harvey, “GOP Rep. Adam Kinzinger Suggests Lauren Boebert’s Views Akin To ‘Christian Taliban,’” *Huffington Post*, June 29, 2022, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/adam-kinzinger-lauren-boebert-christian-taliban\\_n\\_62bd03dce4b00a9334e3a102](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/adam-kinzinger-lauren-boebert-christian-taliban_n_62bd03dce4b00a9334e3a102); Jason Lemon, “Adam Kinzinger Blasts Marjorie Taylor Greene as the ‘American Taliban,’” *Newsweek*, July 29, 2022, <https://www.newsweek.com/adam-kinzinger-blasts-marjorie-taylor-greene-american-taliban-1729116>; Ruth Cutler, “The American Taliban Rules on Roe,” *Connecticut Mirror*, June 27, 2022, <https://ctmirror.org/2022/06/27/roe-v-wade-and-the-american-taliban>; and Bette Midler, Tweet, July 5, 2022, <https://twitter.com/BetteMidler/status/1544409932883181569>.
- <sup>50</sup> Ariana Afshar, “Stop Comparing Leaked ‘Roe’ Reversal to Sharia Law and Taliban’s Rules,” *Truthout*, May 14, 2022, <https://truthout.org/articles/stop-comparing-leaked-roe-reversal-to-sharia-law-and-talibans-rules>.
- <sup>51</sup> Miriam Meyerhoff and Norma Mendoza-Denton, “Aesthetics and Styles in Variation: A Fresh Flavor,” *Annual Reviews of Anthropology* 51 (2022): 103–120, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-101819-110056>.