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Maclain Bernabei Scott

Illinois State University, maclainscott@gmail.com

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SYSTEMIC NOISE: INVESTIGATING THE POSTHUMAN
RHETORICAL MOVEMENT OF “YOU
DIDN’T BUILD THAT”

Maclain Bernabei Scott

80 Pages

While campaigning for reelection in 2012, President Barack Obama gave a speech in which he uttered the sentence “If you’ve got a business, you didn’t build that.” In the aftermath of the speech, the phrase “you didn’t build that” circulated widely in political discourse, generating a variety of responses from campaigns and commentators as to what the phrase means. This thesis uses a posthuman rhetorical framework to investigate how “you didn’t build that” influenced and was transformed by political discourse systems. Specifically, I synthesize scholarship on complex systems, enthymeme, and new materialism to argue that the ambiguity of the phrase enables individuals to draw inferences capable of destabilizing discourse systems, and that from such disruptions emerge responses that work to (re)stabilize those systems. In particular, I analyze a response from the Obama campaign, articles written by political commentators, and the “You didn’t build that” Wikipedia page in order to consider the rhetorical activity generated by the phrase. Ultimately, this thesis argues that treating sites of analysis as momentarily stable can provide a productive means of investigating the complexity of

rhetorical movement. I also maintain that seemingly divisive arguments can indicate subtle yet significant changes in political discourse.

KEYWORDS: Complex Systems, Enthymeme, Political Discourse, Posthumanism, Posthuman Rhetorics, Rhetoric-Systems

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RHETORICAL MOVEMENT OF “YOU
DIDN’T BUILD THAT”

MACLAIN BERNABEI SCOTT

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SYSTEMIC NOISE: INVESTIGATING THE POSTHUMAN
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MACLAIN BERNABEI SCOTT

COMMITTEE MEMBERS:

Julie Jung, Chair

Angela M. Haas

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CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	i
CONTENTS	ii
CHAPTER	
I. BUILDING A RHETORICAL FRAMEWORK TO INVESTIGATE “YOU DIDN’T BUILD THAT”	1
Review of Literature	6
Methodological Framework	13
The Site(s) of Analysis	18
II. SYSTEMIC NOISE	26
Extending a Dynamic Situation	31
The (De)Stabilizing Effects of Digital Boundaries	35
“A Multiplicity of Stabilities”	41
Systemic Movement in Political Interaction	44
Adaptations in (Divisive) Discourse	52
Contextual Matters	61
III. MOVING (FORWARD)	63
Temporal Complexity	67
Digital Implications and Interventions	72
REFERENCES	77

CHAPTER I
BUILDING A RHETORICAL FRAMEWORK
TO INVESTIGATE “YOU DIDN’T
BUILD THAT”

On July 13, 2012, while campaigning in Roanoke, Virginia, for reelection, President Barack Obama gave a speech where he espoused the importance of government investment and criticized economic policies that cut taxes for the wealthiest Americans. While making the case for the interdependent relationship between individuals, private enterprise, and government, Obama said:

If you were successful, somebody along the line gave you some help.

There was a great teacher somewhere in your life. Somebody helped to create this unbelievable American system that we have that allowed you to thrive. Somebody invested in roads and bridges. If you’ve got a business – you didn’t build that. Somebody else made that happen. (“Remarks”)

In the aftermath of the speech, the sentence “If you’ve got a business – you didn’t build that” circulated widely in political discourse. At a campaign stop in Pennsylvania on July 17, for example, Republican nominee Mitt Romney claimed the President was suggesting that Henry Ford hadn’t built Ford Motor Company and that Steve Jobs hadn’t built Apple. Romney noted, “To say something like that, it’s not just foolishness. It’s insulting to every entrepreneur, every innovator in America” (qtd. in Blake). The Romney

campaign also posted a video on its website that featured a loop of the President saying, “If you’ve got a business – you didn’t build that.” In turn, the Obama campaign released a video of the President maintaining that his words were taken out of context (Kiely). Additionally, a host of political commentators sought to clarify, interpret, and otherwise extend the situation surrounding the phrase “you didn’t build that,” what I refer to in this thesis as an example of a “textual fragment.”

Many responses—from the campaigns and the commentators—used the concept of *context* in their attempts to explain, what they claimed to be, the meaning of the President’s statement and to respond to the way the Romney campaign framed the textual fragment. What exactly constituted the “appropriate” context was a matter of debate, but for the most part, *context*—as a concept—was associated with what Obama explicitly said. Put another way, *context* was located within the text of the speech, and how his words were represented influenced the supposed meaning of the textual fragment. For instance, on its own, the sentence “If you have a business – you didn’t build that” implies that the antecedent of “that” is “business,” encouraging an interpretation that the President stated that business owners don’t build their businesses. The Obama campaign claimed, however, that the President was referring to the bridges and roads he had mentioned in the previous sentence (Kiely). Here, expanding the quotation by a single sentence provides a wider textual context that may enable a different reading, as does including the surrounding paragraph and the entire speech.

In these examples, *context* functions as a conceptual cornerstone, yet its meaning is limited to the explicit words of the speech. This approach has its affordances; after all, nobody wants to be misquoted. But it implies that context is stable and that a correct

reading of a text is possible. Such a conceptualization does little in the way of addressing how a text can be simultaneously situated within myriad contexts that extend beyond the confines of specific wording to generate a variety of meanings. Indeed, different explanations of “you didn’t build that” suggest that a definition of context that only considers quotation practices doesn’t account for how interpretations are influenced by more than specific words delivered on a certain occasion. For instance, Michael Smerconish, writing in a column published in *The Huffington Post*, moved beyond the immediate context of the speech and argued that the President was echoing comments made by Elizabeth Warren a year earlier when she was contemplating a run for the United States Senate. Similarly, in *The Washington Post*, Glenn Kessler situated Obama’s comments within a tradition that extends back to Franklin D. Roosevelt. And in *The Atlantic*, Andrew Cline claimed that the President’s words undermined the conception of America laid out by Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence.

The rhetorical complexity of context underlies the project of this thesis, which investigates the movement of “you didn’t build that” within and among political discourse systems. This investigation is well served by posthuman rhetorical theory, as it contests reductive understandings of context and meaning. Informed by complexity theory, posthuman rhetorics reconceptualize rhetorical situation as a complex adaptive system, which seeks stability by (re)organizing itself through feedback loops that continually incorporate new, and often discordant, information into the system. Here, autonomy, intentionality, and predictable effects are challenged and ongoing emergences emanating from intra- and inter-acting heterogeneous elements are privileged (Hawk). In such a framework, then, context and meaning can’t be stable because every rhetorical

situation—as well as the texts circulating within and comprising it—is necessarily engaged in perpetual movement.

This instability is evident in the situation(s) surrounding “you didn’t build that.” While an individual response may posit a certain sense of contextual stability that enables a particular reading of the textual fragment, when considered together, the variety of responses that claim to explain the meaning of the fragment suggests a dynamic rhetorical situation that extended (and continues to extend) well beyond a campaign stop held in Roanoke in 2012. But by framing the situation in a certain way, individual responses evidence how the construction of boundaries can work to somewhat stabilize the rhetorical situation and encourage a particular interpretation of the President’s words. Put another way, specific responses to the textual fragment often posit stability, but collectively they indicate that the situation is complex. As such, in this project, I examine through a posthuman rhetorical framework the ways the textual fragment “you didn’t build that” traveled within, influenced, and was transformed by systems of political discourse. In particular, I look at how responses to the textual fragment can be considered emergent, and I explore how the fragment and its various interpretations potentially stabilize certain discourse systems while also opening them up to noise from other, seemingly disparate systems.

In this project, the texts I analyze are specifically mentioned in the “You didn’t build that” Wikipedia page.¹ I chose this approach, for one, because the scope of the project and the time allotted for completion necessitate a boundary, which the Wikipedia page provides. But the page (and the site as a whole) also exemplifies the notion of

¹ I capitalize “You” when referring to the Wikipedia page; otherwise, it’s written in lowercase.

textual and systemic (in)stability this project seeks to investigate. From its use of hyperlinks to ongoing page revisions to its including information from only “reliable sources,” the page offers a rich site for further analyzing the interplay between movement and stability. By examining texts referenced on the Wikipedia page as well as the page itself, I attempt to emphasize the subtle, complex work involved in maintaining seemingly stable systems.

The goal of this project, then, is to offer a call to those doing work in posthuman rhetorics that analyzing specific texts doesn’t have to undercut posthumanism, but can actually provide a productive means of investigating rhetorical movement. The following research questions guide this project:

- How might texts that posit stability actually indicate movement in complex systems?
- If texts can be considered as emergent effects of systemic interactions, how and why may these texts also work to (re)establish stability?

Along with contributing to ongoing conversations in posthuman rhetorics, my project seeks to understand whether political argumentation—often associated with a kind of polarization and intransigence that hinders deliberative discourse—can actually evidence the flow of information between political discourse systems. To this end, I also ask the following:

- How might arguments and beliefs that comprise a political discourse system emerge from interactions with other seemingly disparate systems?
- And how might political arguments indicate such systemic relationships?

Review of Literature

On their own, definitions for both posthumanism and rhetoric elude consensus, so in situating this thesis in terms of posthuman rhetorical theory, I acknowledge that I'm dealing with a framework that, perhaps fittingly, isn't stable. From my perspective, though, this framework's baseline premise revolves around posthumanism's decentering of the liberal humanist subject and the rise of computer technologies and network cultures, which requires a reconceptualization of the traditional notion of rhetorical situation as comprised of a stable rhetor, audience, and message. This premise has been informed by and taken up in a range of distinct yet often relating scholarship that influenced this project.

In *How We Became Posthuman*, N. Katherine Hayles investigates and draws on a history of cybernetics, informatics, and systems theories to put forth her conceptualization of the posthuman subject. For Hayles, the "posthuman subject is an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction" (3). This convergence of human and machine—an enmeshment that has always existed but is now amplified by contemporary digital technologies—signifies that the concept of the autonomous, liberal humanist subject is limited, as agency, consciousness, and action occur within a network of human and nonhuman actors (3). It's the scope of such a project, in part, that leads Cary Wolfe to assert that "the nature of thought itself must change if it is to be posthumanist" (xvi).

The question of what posthumanism means for rhetorical theory was brought to the forefront by John Muckelbauer and Debra Hawhee when they suggested that

posthumanism's consideration of human beings as "distributed entities rather than as discrete processes" requires that rhetoricians rethink the stability often assigned to rhetorical situation (768). As posthumanism as a field of study emerged from systems sciences, it's no surprise that complexity theory has informed how subsequent posthuman rhetorical work has taken shape. In "Toward a Rhetoric of Network (Media) Culture," Byron Hawk extends the work of complexity theorist Mark Taylor in order to reconceptualize rhetorical situation as a complex adaptive system (835). More recently, rhetoricians have taken up complex systems theory to investigate a range of topics, including enthymematic persuasion (Trader), explanation and description (Jung), and rhetorical flow and blockage (Mays).

While complex systems theory is nuanced, the basic premise is that a system adapts, or self-(re)organizes, based on the movement and intra-action of heterogeneous elements within the system as well as the system's interaction with elements previously considered outside the system. This process of adaptation occurs via recursive feedback loops that monitor the system and encourage stability. However, as Kristen Seas Trader maintains, "[T]he same feedback loops that organize the system also hold it open to the influence of the environment and other systems, allowing information to be exchanged in both directions" (204). This tension between stability and instability regarding a system's boundaries echoes the work of social systems theorist Niklas Luhmann, who argues that systems are simultaneously open and closed (Mays). But because some sense of a boundary is necessary for a system to exist and meaning-making to occur, the "line" between a system's "inside" and "outside" is continually re-drawn in light of

environmental changes, a process that leads Chris Mays to note that such boundaries are rhetorical.

Because “outside” information interacting with the system is interpreted as perturbations, a system reorganizes, i.e., adapts, in an attempt to maintain stability. In doing so, it somewhat incorporates the outside information into the system. It’s this process that encourages Trader to argue that posthuman rhetorics “engage in a parasitic relationship with the tradition they seek to undermine” (206). In other words, posthuman rhetorics privilege the perpetual movement of a system whose continual adaptation in response to outside elements can’t help but reflect, in emergent ways, the influence of those elements, now inside the system. It’s this idea of a complex adaptive system that enables me to better conceptualize various instances of political commentary as effects that emerged from seemingly outside elements (i.e., “you didn’t build that”) entering a discursive system. In this framework, the textual fragment’s circulation in public discourse encourages the proliferation of interpretations that work to stabilize their respective systems, a process that often brings the fragment itself as well as competing interpretations into those reorganizing systems, thereby enabling parasitic relationships to occur.

Complex systems theory has a wide range of applications, but the call to re-think rhetorical situation has also been taken up in scholarship that uses the metaphor of ecologies. Work on rhetorical ecologies brings with it certain affordances, but also important ethical considerations, namely the appropriation of a term used in indigenous

and environmental rhetorics to emphasize relationships with the natural world.²

Appropriating and/or diluting the concept of ecology is a concern of mine, especially since attending to the important ways digital technologies and individuals interact with the natural environment is beyond the scope of my project; however, I find that scholarship on rhetorical ecologies has positively influenced this project. Because of this, I make connections between my project and the relevant research by translating the latter into the register of complex systems in an attempt to avoid reductive metaphorical uses of “ecology.”

In the seminal article “Unframing Models of Public Distribution,” Jenny Rice advocates for an understanding of rhetoric based on movement, writing:

The rhetorical situation is part of what we might call . . . an ongoing social flux. Situation bleeds into the concatenation of public interaction. Public interactions bleed into wider social processes. *The elements of rhetorical situation simply bleed.* (Edbauer 9)

Speaking against assumptions of stability, Rice argues that the concept of rhetorical ecologies can productively emphasize rhetoric as a process emerging from and circulating throughout interconnected affective networks. Such a framework is helpful as it seeks to foreground how rhetoric isn’t contained to a specific place made up of

² For instance, Gabriela Raquel Rios uses *land-based literacies and rhetorics* to “shift the ontological presuppositions inherent in the term ‘ecology,’” which to Rios doesn’t quite denote the literal kinship between people and the land she wishes to convey (64). And Matthew Ortoleva argues that an ecological approach to rhetoric and composition can be used to effectively emphasize the reciprocal relationship between discourse and the material, natural world, a relationship that he claims is often foregrounded in environmental rhetorics (68). At the same time, he warns that work using the metaphor of ecology often ignores or only indirectly alludes to the natural world (68).

exigencies and constraints identified by the rhetor. She writes that “a rhetoric emerges already infected by the viral intensities that are circulating in the social field. Moreover, this same rhetoric will go on to evolve in *aparallel* ways” (14). In this sense, rhetorical effects always travel beyond a specific site through myriad networked connections, therefore extending and transforming rhetoric in the process.

Nathaniel A. Rivers and Ryan P. Weber take up rhetorical ecologies as a way to approach composition genres networked in public discourse, which they then apply to public rhetorics scholarship and composition pedagogy. In doing so, they offer a way to synthesize or perhaps re-converge work on rhetorical ecologies and complex systems. The authors draw on Margaret Syverson, who argues that “an ecology is a kind of meta-complex system composed of interrelated and interdependent complex systems and their environmental structures and processes” (qtd. in Rivers and Weber 192-93). Here, an ecology can be used to situate a larger network of complex systems and help conceptualize their interactions. This is also evident in Trader’s argument that rhetorics “can be viewed as systems of theories with/in systems of discourse, which in turn are enmeshed with/in cultural ecologies made up of not only discourse but material, ideological, and affective elements as well” (205). Similarly, Mays presents rhetorical ecologies as comprising a multitude of systems that “interact with each other in an interconnected dynamic network. . . .” In this, rhetorical ecologies and complex systems are used together to help account for the complexity inherent in the interplay of heterogeneous elements at any given site of inquiry. However, situating systems within ecologies doesn’t mean that ecologies must be used in this context. In fact, as Mays points out, rhetorical ecological approaches are rooted in complex systems theories. And

Rivers and Weber make clear that Syverson's use of ecologies doesn't "move us up and out of complex systems, but further down and through both their complexity and their mundanity," with the mundane signifying technologies and processes like pens and publishing systems (192). For the authors, the affordance of a rhetorical ecology seems to be that it lends itself to the role of the material in complex systems, as they view rhetoric as "a bloody mess, a living thing, or . . . a confluence of many living things: an ecology" (193). In this sense, a rhetorical ecology signifies the same thing as a complex system, just at a different register.

It's important to note that although complexity theory is often associated with contemporary network culture, complex systems aren't relegated to digital, discursive spaces. Rather, as Hawk stresses, "[e]nvironment, rhetoric, texts, and audiences are complex adaptive systems in themselves and together form other complex adaptive systems. What we have are networks linked to other networks" (837). In other words, complex systems can and do account for all intra- and inter-acting elements, including the material. With this in mind, scholarship on rhetorical ecologies can be translated into a complex systems register without reducing that research. In fact, Rice's notion that rhetorical situations "bleed" can be productively extended by considering how systemic boundaries attempt to regulate rhetorical flow.

The movement of texts is also taken up by rhetoricians who don't work through a complex systems and/or ecological framework. Rebecca Dingo analyzes the transnational flow and subsequent transformation of feminist discourse across local and global spaces. Mary Queen tracks how representations of women circulate and transform when digital texts are linked through different "fields of rhetorical action" (474). Stephanie Vie

analyzes how social networking technologies enable the transmission of visual memes. And Jim Ridolfo and Dánielle Nicole DeVoss' concept of rhetorical velocity extends the canon of delivery to account for the ways that a writer's text might be recomposed, or remixed, by third-party sources in a viral economy.

In *Still Life with Rhetoric*, Laurie Gries draws on Rice's work and takes up dynamic rhetorical situations through a new materialist, visual rhetoric framework to help account for and investigate the ways in which the Obama Hope image circulated through various networks and means of distribution. For Gries, attention to the movement and effects of nonhumans and humans that "assemble and intra-act in various collectives" is paramount for rhetoric studies (12), arguing that "things must be studied as divergent, unfolding becomings in order to account for their unique, distributed rhetorical ontology" (19). In this sense, a thing becomes rhetorical through its movement and the subsequent, perpetual effects it generates beyond its initial and obvious exigencies; therefore, attending to the complexity of these effects is necessary. I find the aforementioned scholarship on circulation helpful, and Gries' emphasis that rhetoric needs to account for an image's perpetual transformations highlights that "you didn't build that" did in fact change and had myriad effects as it proliferated throughout political discourse.

Even though I acknowledge that texts are constantly in the process of becoming something else and in many ways resist stability, in order to study anything, and by extension investigate the rhetorical becomings that Gries discusses, a sense of stability is required. Chris Mays sets out to "productively complicate the relationship of *movement* and *stability*," arguing through a "rhetoric-systems" framework that the concept of "excess" is essential for conceptualizing flow and blockage in complex systems. Mays

notes the ways in which self-organizing systems “re-draw” their boundaries in order to maintain stability in the face of perturbations. In particular, he conceptualizes stubbornness as evidence of rhetorical movement. Additionally, by considering the ways systemic boundaries are constructions, he asserts that for participants within a system, that system is necessarily interpreted as a stable situation. In doing so, he challenges a posthuman framework that negates stability and extends the conversation by advocating for the paradoxical necessity of rhetoricians to treat situations as simultaneously stable and in flux in order to analyze them. What I find helpful here is that Mays acknowledges that a sense of stability is a necessary component of meaning-making. Treating the texts I’ve selected as stable and dynamic enables me to rhetorically analyze them as emergent and as circulating elements that contribute to other emergent effects. Considering the “you didn’t build that” textual fragment and its various interpretations as momentarily stable encourages a more complex analysis, an analysis that points toward and presupposes a state of perpetual movement.

Methodological Framework

As discussed prior, this thesis is informed by a posthuman rhetorical theory that reconceptualizes the traditional rhetorical situation as a complex adaptive system, a system that constructs boundaries between itself and the outside environment through perpetual feedback loops that also hold the system open to influence from “outside” elements (Hawk; Trader). This view of rhetoric privileges systems as necessarily engaged in perpetual motion via adaptation and therefore resisting stability. However, I will supplement this with Chris Mays’ overarching rhetoric-systems framework, which

“reveals that stability and movement are not opposed, but rather *inseparable* concepts operating simultaneously in any situation.”

Although rhetoric-systems is the overarching framework, Kristen Seas Trader’s belief that posthuman rhetorics are parasitic offers a way to consider how systemic boundaries are contested. For Trader, this aspect of posthuman rhetorics is exemplified by enthymeme, which she reconfigures as a kind of fluid feedback loop that allows a system to adapt while also holding it “open to countless contingent, inferential connections” (210). By bringing outside information inside the system, the system reflects this parasitic relationship in emergent ways. She goes on to present enthymeme as a “collaborative, inferential dynamic in discourse that weaves relationships among what is explicitly stated and the implicit ideas, emotions, and experiences that help make sense of a message” (210). Although he approaches it from a postmodern framework, Matthew Jackson similarly takes up the instability of rhetorical situation and argues that enthymeme can even be understood as “a piece of drifting discourse” (605). In this sense, an argument could be made that all discourse is inherently enthymematic as inferences are as unpredictable as they are inevitable.

Despite the slipperiness of such definitions of enthymeme, I value Trader’s conceptualizing enthymematic assumptions (intentionally rendered or not) as systemic feedback loops. In particular, she notes that “effective” enthymemes most often operate in highly contextual discursive spaces largely informed by strict ideological coherence; however, in the “low context communication that makes up the majority of networked discourse today . . . such closure is . . . almost impossible” (211). In this sense, arguments and beliefs conveyed through implicit assumptions can strengthen a more stringently

cohesive discourse system, but the perpetual onslaught of information in contemporary society makes a 1-to-1 correspondence between implication and inference less likely, and therefore the system is always vulnerable to inadvertently disruptive inferences. But as systems strive for stability, it follows that they would attempt to minimize the risks inherent in networked discourse.

To help ground Trader's conception of enthymeme, I draw on Laurie Gries' new materialist, visual rhetorical framework. Gries argues:

Rhetoric is a distributed event that unfolds *with* time in and across networks of complex, dynamic relations. At the heart of this process is rhetorical transformation—a virtual-actual process of becoming in which rhetoric unfolds in unpredictable, divergent, and inconsistent ways. (32)

She goes on to write, “While *actual* . . . pertains to an image's concrete, physical manifestation, *virtual* refers to an image's undeterminable unique potential that is immaterial yet not inconsequential” (37). This framework is essential because it allows Gries to attend to a circulating image by drawing on Annemarie Mol's concept of the *single multiple*, thereby framing an image and its ensuing, and even divergent, manifestations as “both one and many” (39).

Treating the textual fragment “you didn't build that” as the single, I consider as the multiple the varied responses that emerged as the fragment entered into seemingly disparate political discourse systems. It's important to note, though, that the “original” textual fragment doesn't exist as a static single and that its manifestations aren't static multiples; rather, the various actualizations, including the original utterance, simultaneously act as one and many. In the context of partisan politics, and especially

presidential campaign season, when a fragment like “you didn’t build that” circulates in discourse, it becomes quickly contested, i.e., interpreted in multiple ways. Gries writes, “Despite such divergent actualizations . . . images such as Obama Hope maintain some sense of wholeness, allowing us to recognize their presence in various actualizations and account for their complex rhetorical life” (42). While she is discussing a visual image, a similar move occurs with the textual fragment, if only because political commentators are quick to assign explicit ownership to President Obama. Even those responses that claim some interpretations have taken the textual fragment “out of context” still attribute the phrase to him.

Similarly, although a visual image is involved in this “virtual-actual process of becoming,” when placed in conversation with Trader’s enthymeme, it’s possible to see the textual fragment as possessing the quality of the virtual in that it maintains a sense of connection to Obama’s statement as well as the potential to generate multiple versions. Because any piece of discourse, but certainly a contested one like “you didn’t build that,” can evoke destabilizing inferences, the interpretations offered by the campaigns and commentators can be seen as attempts at minimizing the fragment’s disruptive potential by effectively filling in its enthymematic blanks. That is, by explicitly supplying the alleged meaning of the textual fragment, political responses put forth versions of the phrase more likely to be accepted by and stabilizing for their respective systems. In this sense, the fragment’s “actual” can be conceptualized as the various responses that emerged from and further expanded the fragment’s circulation.

Putting Gries and Trader into conversation provides a way to shape this project within Mays’ overarching rhetoric-systems framework; however, a rhetoric-systems

methodology also helps me engage with Gries' and Trader' concepts. Gries and Trader (amongst others) emphasize movement and circulation as a defining characteristic of contemporary rhetorical theory and responsible rhetorical analysis, but Mays' rhetoric-systems approach stresses the need for rhetoricians to "define things univocally, as frozen, even as they are not. In order to describe flow one must suspend that very flow." He draws on Hayles ("Making") to argue that this sense of stability occurs when an observer inevitably makes a "cut" from the available information in order to generate meaning of a rhetorical situation. Mays makes clear, however, that "[t]o take a rhetoric-systems approach is to recognize the 'cuts' we make, *and* to recognize the ways such cuts create a paradox: stable systems are also inherently unstable." Here, I acknowledge that the texts I analyze are in a constant state of flux, containing, constructing, and distributing divergent meanings; however, by simultaneously considering certain texts as momentarily stable, I can productively consider the ways the texts contribute to and are themselves evidence of systemic emergence.

I apply this framework to campaign and political commentator responses that take up the textual fragment and were published prior to November 6, 2012 (Election Day). I do so in order to analyze the effects the fragment had on political discourse systems in the early stages of its circulation. Any attempt to categorize individuals or organizations according to political ideology is going to be fraught, so I consider whether certain interpretations take a generous or more critical stance regarding the President and the textual fragment. Similarly, any given discourse system is comprised of a variety of voices, but certain viewpoints carry more weight. I know that making generalizations about discourse systems based on political ideology privileges certain individuals and

institutions over others and offers an incomplete and even reductive picture of those politically engaged members of the American populace, but I feel that analyzing the responses from more prominent voices and institutions within political systems will help highlight how even those most polarized beliefs are influenced by systemic noise. When analyzing these texts, I look for the ways that the authors invoke context and meaning in order to legitimize their interpretations and maintain system stability.

The Site(s) of Analysis

For this project, I use sources mentioned in the August 28, 2015, version of the “You didn’t build that” Wikipedia page. My initial exposure to the textual fragment wasn’t through Wikipedia, but from my casually following campaign coverage leading up to the 2012 election; however, when I started this project in August 2015, my re-exposure to the issue was certainly influenced by Wikipedia (even before I knew which direction I’d take the project). As such, any project on this topic would have reflected this to varying degrees of transparency. My reliance on this site isn’t unique; the free, online, open-source encyclopedia has steadily ranked in the top ten of most visited websites both globally and within the United States. As such, I wanted to also analyze how Wikipedia encourages a certain perspective on an issue.

Using a Wikipedia page as a boundary certainly brings with it affordances and limitations. The “You didn’t build that” page provides me with a set amount of “reliable” sources that I can analyze; however, I acknowledge that this ignores the vast majority of individuals who took up and transformed “you didn’t build that” in their own ways. In this sense, the page exists through a series of “cuts” that could have been made otherwise, just as my using the page makes a certain cut that could have been made otherwise.

Because of this, I don't pretend to offer a full account of the textual fragment, but even limitations have helped inform this project. As such, I'd like to provide an overview of scholarship and conversations surrounding Wikipedia. To do so, I'll discuss a couple key features of wikis in general that will help ground how I approach the "You didn't build that" Wikipedia page.

A defining element of wikis is hypertextuality. In the 1960s, Theodor Nelson defined hypertext as "non-sequential writing—text that branches and allows choices to the reader, best read at an interactive screen" (qtd. in Landow 2-3). Much scholarship has been written on the potential of computer-mediated hypertext to challenge both traditional understandings of authorship and the linearity of texts (Bolter; Landow; DeWitt; Johnson-Eilola and Hea; among others), and Angela M. Haas has further argued that the revolutionary tone that can accompany scholarship on hypertext often privileges Western notions of technological discovery and ignores indigenous multimedia technologies, such as wampum belts. Haas writes that "[t]he organization of nodes and links forms a nonlinear, or webbed, network of information in both wampum and Western rhetorics" (87). And this webbed network is apparent in wikis, as users can construct the way they encounter information by moving within and across hyperlinked texts instead of following a path laid out by a single author. This emphasis on a nonlinear reading experience informs my analysis of the "You didn't build that" Wikipedia page because it reminds me that despite the page's seemingly straightforward structure, I shouldn't make assumptions as to how users encounter the information.

Susan Loudermilk Garza and Tommy Hern argue that an important aspect of wikis is that by "[u]sing only a web browser, any number of users can quickly and easily

create, access, and edit wiki pages, including those created by others.” The authors maintain that this ongoing collaboration is key, and when coupled with the nonlinearity of hypertext, it may be beneficial to consider a wiki as a process and not a product. By their very nature, then, wikis subvert the traditional notion of texts as stable products.

The knowledge that anyone can edit the majority of pages (also known as articles)³ found on Wikipedia has contributed to a sense of skepticism toward the website in terms of credibility. Criticism often focuses on authorial knowledge (or alleged lack thereof) but also the purposeful inclusion of incorrect information on a page, known as vandalism. Marcus Messner and Marcia DiStaso argue that concerns over the veracity of content on Wikipedia encouraged site administrators to tighten regulations for editor contributions, including restricting access to certain pages as well as requiring editors to either register with the site or have their IP addresses recorded (468). Wikipedia also seeks to shore up issues of credibility through its three inter-related core content policies: neutral point of view, verifiability, and no original research (“Wikipedia: Core”). These principles revolve around Wikipedia’s intent to publish only information supported by “reliable sources,” which are defined as “third-party, published sources with a reputation for fact-checking and accuracy” (“Wikipedia: Identifying”). A component of this is the attempt to give reliable sources their due weight: “Giving due weight and avoiding giving undue weight mean that articles [read: pages] should not give minority views or aspects as much of or as detailed a description as more widely held views or widely supported aspects” (“Wikipedia: Neutral”). On this, Timothy Messer-Kruse, a professor at Bowling

³ Wikipedia refers to its pages as articles, and it considers an outside article from, say, *The Wall Street Journal* as a source. Because my project deals with articles from a variety of online websites, I refer to the “You didn’t build that” Wikipedia article as a webpage.

Green State University, writes how he was prohibited from removing a widely held, but from his perspective false, claim presented on the page for the Haymarket riots and trial of 1886, even though this is the subject of his published scholarship. He was informed by one of Wikipedia's administrators that his corrections were reversed because they gave a minority view undue weight over popular beliefs. Messer-Kruse claims he was told by an editor that "Wikipedia is not 'truth,' Wikipedia is 'verifiability' of reliable sources. Hence, if most secondary sources which are taken as reliable happen to repeat a flawed account or description of something, Wikipedia will echo that" (qtd. in Messer-Kruse). What I find relevant for my project is the self-sustaining relationship between reliable sources and Wikipedia pages. Even though most anyone can edit a page, editors are required to base information on sources generally considered to be reputable. This policy, then, allows for democratization inasmuch as it enables anyone with site access to decide which viewpoints from already-privileged persons or media outlets they wish to draw from.

Ridolfo and DeVoss' concept of rhetorical velocity draws attention to the ways existing information is transformed when it's recomposed, or remixed. If we apply this to Wikipedia, a specific edit on a page doesn't simply convey how a subject was taken up in a reliable source; rather, that entry reflects a necessary transformation of information as it's recomposed and often collaboratively revised in order to fit a different setting. This element of collaboration leads the authors to argue that Wikipedia exemplifies contemporary, networked culture where traditional notions of authorship and the boundaries of texts can be questioned. In such a culture, "[i]nstead of a single author producing solitary work in isolation and that work being attributed to that single, solitary

author and delivered in a one-way fashion, we have distributed, shared views of authorship” (Ridolfo and DeVoss).

Echoing the notion of distribution, Collin Brooke suggests that credibility concerns facing Wikipedia due to its use of open-source collaboration emanate, in part, from a narrow framework that ignores the “distributed credibility” at play in Wikipedia (190). He argues that because the website provides access to each article’s revision history and to discussion pages where debates over contributions take place, the site presents credibility through the continual negotiation of content by editors. It’s this sense of distribution that encourages Brooke to describe the site as a discourse system that simultaneously “collects both the process and product of reference work” (191). Here, I read reference work as the ongoing negotiation of editors to review what constitutes content that meets the principles of neutrality, no original research, and verifiability. In this, a page is a product because it presents a current version by default, but it’s also perpetually engaged in a process of becoming something else through revision. Every page, then, can be thought of in terms of a rhetoric-systems framework, in which “a situation exists as a multiplicity of stabilities in the midst of constant change” (Mays).

In terms of the “You didn’t build that” page, Wikipedia’s emphasis on neutrality, no original research, and verifiability requires that the page only provides information supported by “reliable sources.” In doing so, the views of certain individuals are given a platform for circulation not available to most, and some of these opinions are situated within discourse systems explicitly labeled according to political ideology, i.e., “Conservative commentators” and “Liberal commentators.” The page’s structure, then, encourages the notion that perspectives on a given issue can be partitioned according to

political ideology, thereby facilitating a conception of the larger American political system as stable or at the very least balanced. In this, the page somewhat minimizes the textual fragment's potential for enthymematic disruption by enabling individuals to process responses to the phrase according to their beliefs regarding political discourse systems and/or the sources information is based on.

It's important to note that the page puts forth a plethora of different responses to the textual fragment. This is evident in that there are sections devoted to both conservative and liberal commentators, but also because nuance exists among responses associated with the same political ideology. The page reflects, then, that the rhetorical situation surrounding "you didn't build that"—to borrow from Rice—bleeds well beyond a campaign speech in Roanoke, subtly revealing that interpretations and the systems they emerge from aren't inherently stable, but result from rhetorical selections, or "cuts," that could have been made otherwise. Furthermore, all the information published on the page has undergone some sort of transformation as it was recomposed from reliable sources. In this sense, the page is comprised of a series of interpretations of reliable sources, which are interpretations of the textual fragment in their own right. Specific entries, then, might not encourage the same rhetorical effects in terms of enthymematic destabilization or (re)stabilization as the sources they're based on. This has to do with how they're situated in the page, but also the inevitable transformation that accompanies recomposition and revision. As such, I use the concept of the single multiple to analyze the complex relations between the textual fragment, reliable sources, specific entries, and the page in general.

I take the August 28, 2015, version of the “You didn’t build that” page as my primary site of analysis, but I also examine the version from November 5, 2012, the latter of which was the version available at the time of the election. By attending to two versions, I’m able to foreground how Wikipedia’s available revision history presents the page as both a product and a process, a text and a continually revised collection of texts that are simultaneously stable and perpetually becoming something else. Furthermore, I examine how the changes between the two versions indicate systemic adaptation. Ultimately, then, while the Wikipedia page enables me to analyze a certain set of articles, it also provides another site of analysis, in that the page continues to circulate and transform the textual fragment.

With this in mind, I have somewhat divided Chapter 2 into two parts. The first part features the aforementioned analysis of the “You didn’t build that” Wikipedia page. Specifically, I examine how the page evidences the textual fragment’s complex rhetorical becoming, and I investigate the ways the page can have (de)stabilizing effects on Wikipedia users. In the latter half of the chapter, I use Mays’ rhetoric-systems methodology to inform my analysis of “reliable sources” found through the more recent “You didn’t build that” Wikipedia page. Framing the rhetorical situation as a complex adaptive system, I investigate how political responses from individuals and organizations can be considered emergent effects of the textual fragment’s systemic perturbations as well as attempts to maintain system stability. I do so by drawing on Trader’s notion of enthymeme to conceptualize the textual fragment as potentially evoking destabilizing inferences, which the political responses both reflect and compensate for by making specific interpretations available. In particular, I analyze a statement from the Obama

campaign as well as political commentary from James Taranto in *The Wall Street Journal*, Jennifer Rubin in *The Washington Post*, Andrew Cline in *The Atlantic*, and Michael Cohen in *The Guardian*—all of which were published online. As these responses transform the textual fragment but still maintain a distinguishable connection to Barack Obama’s original utterance, I approach “you didn’t build that” as a single multiple. This enables me to consider the textual fragment (which includes its various manifestations) as both momentarily stable and indicative of rhetorical movement.

In the third and final chapter, I examine possible implications of this thesis for rhetoric studies. In particular, I encourage those doing work in posthuman rhetorics to attend to the ways *context* is used in popular and political discourses. I then discuss how this project’s engagement with temporal complexities could impact how we conceptualize rhetorical historiographic work. Finally, I consider how this thesis might be productively extended through work in digital rhetorics.

Ultimately, it’s my hope that this project adds to and/or offers access to a discussion concerning the subtle prevalence of connection, about how individuals, belief systems, and technologies—from the most obvious and persuasive to those assumed to be inconsequential—all play a role in shaping and continually changing what we understand as life.

CHAPTER II

SYSTEMIC NOISE

If my own experience is any indication, Wikipedia is a website where you can start researching a particular subject only to find yourself hours later on a seemingly unrelated topic, not quite sure how or why you arrived at this new page other than that you followed a series of hyperlinks. Yet this nonlinear and in some ways unexpected sense of movement associated with Wikipedia is facilitated by more than internal links. With the site's policy against "original research," information presented on every page ideally needs to come with an endnote citing the reliable source(s) on which the information is based. Many of these endnotes include links to external websites, while others signify offline source materials. Wikipedia even suggests that it is good practice for users accessing the site for research to directly consult the reliable sources indicated in the endnotes ("Wikipedia: Researching"), thereby encouraging individuals to leave the page. In other words, whether it's through hyperlinks or the acknowledgement that the information offered "originated" elsewhere, every Wikipedia page is a complex network that foregrounds myriad internal and external connections, challenging the notion that a page is a stable text with definitive boundaries.

The "You didn't build that" page may boast a level of complexity that I'll only scratch the surface of, but amidst the constant changes and almost endless potential for networked connections, the page can paradoxically be read, albeit from a limited

perspective, as momentarily stable considering that a particular version is published at a given time.⁴ As such, the “You didn’t build that” page can refer to both a page in flux and a specific version. It’s this duality that enables Wikipedia to be productively considered as a product and a process (Brooke), a description analogous with Mays’ argument that a rhetorical situation can “neither fully be characterized as frozen nor as flowing.” In this sense, Wikipedia digitally embodies the dynamic interplay between movement and stability associated with the observation of and participation in a situation.

More than just mirroring this dynamic, though, the “You didn’t build that” page is material evidence of the fragment’s expanding rhetorical situation. With Wikipedia’s “no original research” policy, for a page to come into existence in the first place, it’s necessary for an issue to have traveled enough to have been taken up by reliable sources and for Wikipedia editors to have then based entries on those sources. In other words, the “You didn’t build that” page could only ever exist because “*elements of rhetorical situation simply bleed*” (Edbauer 9). As such, the textual fragment and the page don’t exist as discrete entities; rather, the page is an actualization of certain associations the phrase has entered (and continues to enter) into. In this sense, each revision is an instance of the fragment’s ongoing rhetorical becoming.

⁴ As of January 13, 2016, there were 100 links throughout the Wikipedia site that directed users to the “You didn’t build that” page, which itself contained 492 links that would take users away from the page. Furthermore, as of the aforementioned date, 128 editors had been involved in the page’s 454 revisions. While I take as my primary site of analysis the version of the page that existed on August 28, 2015, I mention the January 13, 2016, statistics for two reasons. The first is that they were “currently” available in the page’s “Revision history statistics” tab as I began drafting this section. But more importantly, these statistics highlight how the page became something else multiple times throughout my project.

Attending to such complexity necessitates a certain paradoxical degree of stability. Mays notes that “a rhetorician must freeze a rhetorical situation in order to successfully analyze it.” Adopting a rhetoric-systems approach, we can freeze a particular page in order to investigate the complex relations that contribute to that version’s emergence. Through such an analysis, I consider how the “You didn’t build that” page extends a dynamic rhetorical situation through necessarily divergent rhetorical activity that transforms the fragment in myriad ways. I then analyze the page as a complex system comprised of smaller complex systems in order to consider the potentially (de)stabilizing effects that digital “cuts” can have on Wikipedia users who might identify as participants within conservative or liberal political discourse systems. By then attending to two instantiations of the page as product, I provide a glimpse of the page as process, highlighting how the construction of certain boundaries facilitates alternate and equally legitimate readings of the page and the textual fragment. With this investigation, I ultimately hope to offer a closer look at how the subtle yet consequential interplay between stability and movement contributes to an issue’s rhetorical life, especially in terms of how seemingly stable systems—whether it’s a Wikipedia page or a particular rhetorical situation—could have been and are becoming otherwise.

Although all situations are dynamic and all Wikipedia pages involve complex rhetorical activity, the textual fragment’s potential to generate a variety of inferences capable of destabilizing various discourse systems makes it particularly noteworthy. This capacity to evoke inferences warrants consideration as to how the fragment functions as enthymeme. Trader argues that traditional definitions of enthymeme describe it as “the efficient use of unstated commonplaces to reach an intended conclusion” (211).

However, this efficiency is unlikely in the “majority of networked discourse” because “the diversity of discourses, ideologies, and experiences create myriad inferential ‘gaps’ in any discursive system” (211). From a posthuman perspective, an *inefficient* enthymeme can actually “destabilize the coherence of an ideological discourse that seeks to exclude difference” by encouraging diverse assumptions (211). Drawing on Trader’s work, I argue that “you didn’t build that” acts as an inefficient enthymeme. This is the case not only because the fragment exists in networked discourse(s), but also because of its ambiguity. Indeed, in Roanoke, Virginia, President Obama said:

If you were successful, somebody along the line gave you some help.
There was a great teacher somewhere in your life. Somebody helped to create this unbelievable American system that we have that allowed you to thrive. Somebody invested in roads and bridges. If you’ve got a business – you didn’t build that. Somebody else made that happen. (“Remarks”)

This passage may elicit questions regarding who is included in the President’s use of “you,” as well as who is—and who is not—implicated by his use of “somebody else.” For our purposes, if we reduce some of the uncertainty and assume “you didn’t build that” means “[business owners] didn’t build that,” the syntactic ambiguity concerning the antecedent of “that” still increases the possibility that divergent inferences could disrupt a sense of ideological cohesion circulating within each political discourse system. This isn’t to say that assumptions will necessarily or even likely break from ideological alignment; however, the enthymematic inefficiency of “you didn’t build that” makes it harder for even ideologically cohesive inferences to be drawn with unequivocal certainty. For instance, it wouldn’t be surprising if a supporter of the President found his words

uncontroversial, i.e., that the President meant “business owners” didn’t build “roads and bridges,” whereas a critic of the President found it controversial, i.e., that “you” didn’t build “your business.” Both of these individuals would be making assumptions that align with and therefore stabilize their discourse systems’ conceptions of the President. However, the disruptive potential of the textual fragment isn’t that it lends itself to polarized readings by participants in disparate discourse systems, as that would indicate a certain enthymematic efficiency; instead, the phrase’s ambiguity makes it so that individuals from both systems can identify with and be susceptible to myriad inferences.

The acknowledgement that another interpretation is plausible—even if it’s disregarded—is significant. The textual fragment as inefficient enthymeme brings discordant noises inside both systems, thereby infiltrating boundaries to “engage in a parasitic relationship” with the dominant ideology (Trader 206). If a supporter of the President maintains that Obama was referring to infrastructure or critiquing the notion of autonomous innovation by commenting on the interdependent relationship between people, government investment, and private enterprise, the phrase still possesses the potential—in part through its ambiguous wording—to evoke a pang of sorts that the President was being disrespectful to business owners. Similarly, a critic of the President may maintain that the textual fragment reveals the President’s hostility toward private enterprise, but the idea that individuals don’t build roads, bridges, or even businesses in and of themselves can also fester. This provides an exigency—consciously recognized or not—for campaigns and commentators to suppress the disruptive assumptions generated by the textual fragment. By supplying specific interpretations that will (re)stabilize their “own” discourse systems, they essentially work to complete the textual fragment as

enthymeme by making explicit what would otherwise be unstated inferences. The plethora of interpretations provided and the fact that these political responses often contest one another contribute to the phrase's circulation, including how it materializes in Wikipedia.

Extending a Dynamic Situation

In this section, I investigate how the “You didn’t build that” Wikipedia page evidences the circulation of the textual fragment such that it extends an already dynamic rhetorical situation. If we adopt a rhetoric-systems approach and momentarily freeze the “You didn’t build that” page from August 28, 2015, it’s possible to interpret it in such a way that contests a simplistic understanding of rhetorical situation. For instance, the page describes certain effects the textual fragment has had in the world. The page begins:

“You didn’t build that” is a phrase from an election campaign speech delivered by President of the United States Barack Obama on July 13, 2012, in Roanoke, Virginia. The phrase was publicized by his political opponents, and it has been described as a meme.

From a posthuman rhetorical framework, even these simple introductory sentences indicate that while the textual fragment was first uttered at a campaign stop, it became rhetorically consequential, in part, through its circulation in political discourse.

The page’s layout further emphasizes how the fragment was taken up in divergent ways and experienced a sense of rhetorical becoming that extended well beyond Obama’s campaign stop. The layout includes a quick overview of the topic, an interactive “Contents” menu, and three main sections titled: “Background,” “Speech,” and “Response,” with “Response” containing the subsections: “Conservative commentators,”

“Liberal commentators,” “Fact checking organizations,” “Comedic commentators,” “Romney campaign,” and “Obama campaign.” Although the page-as-product is comprised of all the entries, the majority of the content is found within the overarching “Response” section. And by including responses to the phrase that were diverse enough to be split into six different subsections, the page suggests that the textual fragment’s rhetorical life isn’t contained within the traditionally conceived rhetorical situation that was the President’s speech in Roanoke.

At a glance, the page’s depiction of the phrase’s circulation seems to evidence Gries’ conception of rhetoric as a “distributed event that unfolds *with* time in and across networks of complex, dynamic relations” (32). It’s the very complexity of such relations that challenges approaching the page simply as a distinct representation of a situation. As the page emerges from the fragment having entered into diverse associations, it exists as both an effect of and component in the fragment’s rhetorical life—a life that continually extends its dynamic situation. Investigating certain relations in the “You didn’t build that” page, then, offers a better understanding of this complexity.

The concept of the single multiple can help us attend to the rhetorical unfolding of the textual fragment by framing reliable sources and the Wikipedia page as actualized versions of “you didn’t build that.” As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Gries takes up the concept of the single multiple to account for an image’s rhetorical complexity. She argues that images like the Mona Lisa and Obama Hope manifest in a variety of versions that “maintain some sense of wholeness,” enabling them to be identified as part of those images’ distributed events (42). In this sense, political responses—whether from

campaigns or commentators—that take up the textual fragment transform it, generating different yet connected versions of it. Gries also notes:

[A]s images actualize in different versions via their relations, they become more rhetorically consequential, or meaningful, in divergent ways. These consequences are multitudinous in and of themselves, begin to take on lives of their own, and stimulate more rhetorical activity. (45)

Here, I read “divergent” as signifying the complex and unexpected things texts do as they’re taken up in the world. In this sense, the single multiple helps maintain a common thread in a text’s rhetorical unfolding and directs our attention to instances where divergences essentially touch down in actualized versions and generate effects.

If we consider a political response as an actualized version of the textual fragment, we can recognize Wikipedia editors creating entries for the “You didn’t build that” page as part of those versions’ rhetorical consequences. Furthermore, creating an entry based on a reliable source is itself an instance where the textual fragment transforms yet again since each entry on the webpage is ultimately an interpretation of a reliable source (which is an interpretation of the textual fragment). Because entries are then subject to further revision by the Wikipedia community, the page evidences how rhetorical activity leads to more activity, with the editors’ practices producing subsequent versions of the textual fragment. As such, analyzing these relations shows how the page’s participation in the textual fragment’s rhetorical life necessarily entails it being the consequence of divergent rhetorical activity as well as a catalyst for further consequences.

A subtle yet important instance of a particular entry transforming the textual fragment can be identified in the “Background” section of the “You didn’t build that” page published on August 28, 2015. The “Background” section focuses on a speech Elizabeth Warren gave a year earlier while she was contemplating a run for the United States Senate. After providing a quotation of Warren’s “fiery defense of progressive economic theory,” the page states that “Obama later echoed Warren’s thoughts when he spoke in Roanoke, Virginia, about how private businesses rely on government investment in infrastructure.” This statement is verified by two endnote citations, but on closer inspection, it’s not the reliable sources so much as the way they’re taken up in this specific entry that shapes the textual fragment.

On the Wikipedia page, the word “echo” is the linchpin situating Obama and the textual fragment within the same tradition as Warren’s “progressive economic theory.” One of the reliable sources, an article written by Mark Trumbull in *The Christian Science Monitor*, states that Warren is “someone linked to President Obama’s controversial ‘you didn’t build that’ line about private sector business people” and that “[t]he theme that America is about ‘we’ as well as ‘I’ is a longstanding one for Obama, but his comment also echoed notes that Warren has been hitting.” In this case, the use of “echo” enables Trumbull to comment on and circulate a belief in the alleged association between the two speeches even if definitive evidence isn’t provided. But by acknowledging that Obama himself had previously taken up these ideas, the connection to Warren can just as easily be interpreted as their messages being in alignment rather than Warren’s somewhat producing Obama’s. The other article, written by Kevin Robillard and published in *Politico*, reports that Warren’s opponent in her subsequent Senate race, Scott Brown,

claimed Obama's speech was directly informed by Warren (the article's headline is "Brown: Obama echoed Warren"). This article certainly connects the two speeches, but through a political rival's allegation.

Analyzing the cited sources verifies the use of "echo" in this specific entry, but it also shows that the page's depicting the textual fragment as essentially the progeny of Warren's speech hinges on the use of a word that "originally" signified a more tenuous connection. While "echo" still denotes a certain ambiguous link, the assertion that "Obama later echoed Warren's thoughts when he spoke in Roanoke, Virginia" is reifying, especially because it is the essential pillar for the entire "Background" section. As such, the version of the textual fragment actualized via the page is enmeshed with "progressive economic theory," thereby transforming the phrase and influencing how it's interpreted by participants in various political discourse systems. This brings us to how, from a complex systems perspective, even the "same" actualized version of the textual fragment can generate different effects.

The (De)Stabilizing Effects of Digital Boundaries

While in the previous section I discussed how the "You didn't build that" Wikipedia page emerges from and extends the textual fragment's rhetorical life, in this section, I adopt a complex systems perspective in order to take a closer look at how an actualized version of the page—and the textual fragment—can variously stabilize or destabilize readers' conceptions of themselves and their discourse systems. For instance, the August 28, 2015, version of the "You didn't build that" page sections off the political commentators according to two ideological labels: conservative and liberal. As complex systems are both comprised of smaller systems and constitute larger ones (Hawk; Trader;

Rivers and Weber), we can interpret the page's "Conservative commentators" and "Liberal commentators" sections as discourse systems that make up the overarching political discourse system. In this sense, the section headings serve as digital boundaries between smaller systems and their surrounding environment. I mentioned earlier that the page's layout indicates that the fragment's effects extend beyond a particular campaign stop; here, a complex systems perspective reveals that the page's layout can influence how the textual fragment is processed depending on how closely we zoom in.

Because the page features an array of political reactions to the fragment, it makes sense that a reader invested in liberal or conservative discourse may look to interpretations more likely to reaffirm his particular worldview. Without section headings, he would likely have a harder time with this because he would have to sift through an influx of information offered by the Wikipedia page, processing each entry on a case-by-case basis (I discuss the absence of such headings further in the next section of this thesis). The page's framing information according to political ideology, on the other hand, can be stabilizing for a reader because it somewhat insulates those sections from information that's "outside" each of the smaller discourse systems but still "inside" the overarching one. The presence of conservative and liberal sections suggests a sense of ideological cohesion at the more local level, theoretically reducing the "myriad inferential 'gaps'" in the discourse system (Trader 211). In this sense, the textual fragment's capacity for enthymematic disruption is lessened if, for example, an individual browsing the page were to gravitate to the responses under a specific section heading in order to process the fragment in alignment with a particular ideology. More specifically, someone sympathetic to the President may focus on the liberal commentators in order to receive an

ideologically coherent interpretation of the fragment and/or reinforce a narrative that Mitt Romney and conservative commentators take things out of context. Conversely, someone more critical of the President may look to conservative commentary to verify his belief that Obama is disrespectful toward private enterprise.

Any sense of ideological coherence (or lack thereof) found in the Wikipedia page necessarily reflects the work of the editors as much as (if not more than) the reliable sources themselves,⁵ but the illusion of legitimacy that accompanies the appearance of these digital boundaries has effects. The section headings may frame content as belonging to disparate discourse systems, but zooming in closer reveals nuanced interpretations. For instance, while the majority of the reliable sources referenced in the “Conservative commentators” section are described as taking a critical stance toward the President and the textual fragment, the presence of divergent viewpoints is significant. Part of this section reads:

In *The Atlantic*, Andrew Cline wrote that what Obama said was an “enormous controversy—a philosophical rewriting of the American story” . . . Earlier in the same publication, Clive Crook wrote that Obama’s statements did not mean what his critics wrote they meant, but that the caricature resonates due to it being recognizable as part of his theme of the “rich aren’t paying their fair share.”

⁵ For instance, Michael Smerconish is listed as a liberal commentator despite the fact that he had been a registered Republican for 30 years before officially dropping his party affiliation in 2010, upon which he claimed that he didn’t feel comfortable in either party (“For”). The Wikipedia entry expresses Smerconish’s belief that the Romney campaign took the President’s statement out of context. This criticism, as well as his column being published in *The Huffington Post*, may be enough to flag him as a “Liberal commentator.”

Here, I'd like to focus on Crook's comments and what I see as their disruptive potential. Somewhat hidden in the heart of the "Conservative commentators" section, the presence of an alleged conservative commentator's belief that "Obama's statements did not mean what his critics wrote they meant" undercuts the messages of other commentators within this section. The page's structure may encourage the perception that the conservative discourse system is essentially partitioned from environmental perturbations, but as Crook's entry indicates, discordant noise exists on the inside of this digitally constructed boundary. As such, a reader looking to the "Conservative commentators" section for a unified explanation of the President's statement may not have found it since the chance for ideological cohesion is disrupted by someone situated within the conservative discourse system. Without that coherence, the enthymematic potential of the fragment could, in theory, be left un-cauterized, enabling a disruptive line of questioning for a reader: *If "you didn't build that" doesn't mean what those in my discourse system claim it means, what does it mean? Why is there discrepancy?* Such fleeting and not even consciously realized questions can affect a reader through the possible emergence of destabilizing inferences—inferences that may begin with the fragment's grammatical ambiguity but are amplified by a lack of coherent ideological interpretations.

The effects of such ideological discrepancies aren't relegated to those whose beliefs might otherwise align with conservative discourse. The availability of conflicting interpretations within the "Conservative commentators" section could also destabilize the conservative discourse system's boundary as it's rhetorically constructed by an outside observer, such as someone who considers herself aligned with liberal discourse and who assumes that conservatives would take a predictably critical or reductive stance on the

President's statement. Here, the inclusion of Crook's comments challenges the view that those on the other side of the political spectrum are in lockstep on every issue. Processing Crook's alleged views on the textual fragment destabilizes the rhetorical boundary between these discourse systems and encourages it to be re-drawn.

It should be noted, though, that the content attributed to Crook can be processed in a way that renders it less disruptive. Mays argues that "we often react to destabilizing information not by immediately changing our worldview, but by *reorganizing* it, compensating for this information in such a way that keeps our overall view of the world relatively intact." He refers to this reorganization—this maintaining of systemic boundaries in the face of new information—as a rhetorical rationalization. In this case, the page acknowledges that Crook's statements were published in *The Atlantic*, so his comments that challenge other conservative commentators can be rationalized as coming from a media organization that may have a liberal bias or doesn't publish "real" conservative views; therefore, his criticisms are more easily dismissed as not *really* being a part of the conservative discourse system.

The response attributed to Glenn Kessler, situated within the "Conservative commentators" section, is arguably more disruptive because his connection with a media organization is less pronounced:

In *The Washington Post*, Jennifer Rubin wrote that the statement showed that Obama "revealed a level of resentment toward the private sector that was startling, even to his critics" . . . Glenn Kessler later said that the Obama statement was taken out of context and that he was speaking about

higher taxes for the wealthy, comparing individual initiative to the system of many people working to create supporting infrastructure.

Here, Kessler is depicted as indirectly supporting Obama's claim that his words were taken out of context, which paints the Romney campaign and certain conservative commentators as unfairly representing the President's words. If Crook's lack of ideological alignment could be rationalized as coming from *The Atlantic*, the same could certainly be true for Kessler, whose piece was published in *The Washington Post*, a news outlet not exactly known for its conservative bent. However, the only indication of this association, aside from the endnote citation and what could be found by linking to Kessler's "own" Wikipedia page, is the "later" in "Glenn Kessler later said." This subtle link between commentator and news organization encourages his comments to be read as part of conservative discourse rather than identified as a node in *The Washington Post*'s network, making it just a little harder to rationalize his criticism. This is ironic, as the entry is taken from the "Fact Checker: The Truth Behind The Rhetoric" blog that Kessler writes for *The Washington Post*.⁶ It's entirely possible that his being placed within the "Conservative commentators" section is a misrepresentation of Kessler's political leaning, but when such seemingly incongruent information is situated—accurately or not—within a particular system, that system's stability is threatened. To further consider

⁶ There is a lot I'd like to get into here—including the title of the column—but I especially find it interesting that this information wasn't included in the "Fact checking organizations" section. Perhaps it's because the section heading specifies *organizations* as opposed to columnists. This uncertainty is an example of how extending this project to include a more robust look at the revision history and talk pages—which showcase discussions between Wikipedia editors—would be productive.

the effects of these headings-as-systemic boundaries, it's helpful to look at a version of the page that hadn't yet made such digital cuts.

“A Multiplicity of Stabilities”

The drawing of boundaries has effects on readers, who process such information according to their understanding (consciously or not) of what these systemic boundaries mean, but the “You didn’t build that” page’s digital cuts are made by Wikipedia editors and are subject to further revision. Since the page is always in the process of changing, it’s unproductive to claim that the most recent version is somehow the most legitimate or “real.” Rather, it’s more useful to consider the page(s) and the ensuing actualizations of the textual fragment as exemplifying the notion of a “multiplicity of stabilities in the midst of constant change” (Mays). A given version may be uniquely accessed and treated as stable in order to infer meaning from it, but the information conveyed isn’t definitive since the page also exists in flux.

Changes in the page’s layout can significantly affect how information is interpreted, even if specific entries don’t undergo extensive revisions. Unlike the August 28, 2015, version, the “You didn’t build that” page published on November 5, 2012, didn’t make a distinction between conservative and liberal commentators.⁷ In the earlier version, the political commentators were grouped under one section heading aptly titled, “Political commentators.” From a complex systems perspective, instead of relying on section headings as interpretive navigational tools, readers would have had to assess the commentator, the organization, or the sentiment of the statement itself. This is certainly

⁷ To help differentiate between the two versions of the “You didn’t build that” page, I refer to the version from November 5, 2012, in the past tense and the version from August 28, 2015, in the present.

feasible, but grouping all the political commentators into one overarching political discourse system can make it difficult to process information. It's this type of confusion that encourages the construction of boundaries. Put another way: this scenario—following Hayles and Mays—calls for a cut to be made. As Hayles notes, a cut “helps to tame the noise of the world by introducing a distinction, which can be understood in its elemental sense as a form, a boundary between inside and outside” (“Making” 71). If the political commentators aren't placed within particular systems, the “diversity of discourses” that inhibits ideological coherence within the overarching system is amplified (Trader 211). In this case, the section headings that exist in the August 28, 2015, page can be interpreted as digital cuts that “tame the noise” of the earlier version.

Although the “Conservative commentators” and “Liberal commentators” section headings construct boundaries and therefore make it easier to process information according to political ideology, Kessler's and Crook's entries ironically become more disruptive once these cuts have been made. The wording of Crook's entry doesn't change across the two versions, and while Kessler's entry is revised, both versions attribute to him the same belief that President Obama was taken out of context. The entries' potential for destabilization increases, however, once they're situated within the conservative discourse system. Without the section headings, arguments that Obama was being treated unfairly or that his words were taken out of context could be read by a participant in conservative discourse as “noise of the world” because that participant might not personally make a cut to include such information inside her own construction of the conservative discourse system. In other words, the November 5, 2012, entries concerning Crook and Kessler may not have been as disruptive to conservative discourse because

they weren't situated within that system, and a participant could have compensated for their potentially destabilizing information by rationalizing them as biased, unfounded, or simply ideologically *other*. Once the comments are explicitly placed inside a particular system—as they were via the August 28, 2012, section headings—such a rhetorical rationalization becomes more difficult.

Both versions of the “You didn’t build that” page rely on the textual fragment being taken up in diverse ways and enable a recognition that with every revision the rhetorical situation further extends beyond a campaign stop; however, the page does actualize the situation’s dynamism in a seemingly stable manner, even with revisions looming. When pages are understood by users as both products and processes, it’s possible to acknowledge that these versions of the textual fragment are themselves in flux. Differing versions—whether through the inclusion of certain section headings or revised wording—indicate digital transformations of the page, but also facilitate an array of readings of the textual fragment. Even a seemingly stable page, when analyzed at different scales, can encourage a multitude of meanings. With the help of the single multiple, the page can be traced backward through specific entries and reliable sources to the President’s utterance. Doing so doesn’t hold the “original” version to a higher standard; rather, it affirms that every node in this concatenation emerges from and contributes to rhetorical activity, which influences how the textual fragment exists—and what it does—in the world.

Even though the page generates a range of meanings concerning the textual fragment, it does circulate particular reliable sources. The information based on these sources is certainly taken up in divergent ways via Wikipedia entries, but the page

provides access to the majority of these “original” articles. Analyzing these sources doesn’t discount the rhetorical activity playing out in Wikipedia; instead, it offers a closer look at systemic interactions that occurred as the single multiple textual fragment circulated within political discourse, especially in terms of how discourse systems compensated by simultaneously positing stability and evidencing movement.

Systemic Movement in Political Interaction

I’ve thus far discussed how the “You didn’t build that” Wikipedia page evidences and influences aspects of the textual fragment’s rhetorical life—from the creation of reliable sources to the composition and revision of entries based on those sources to the (de)stabilizing effects the work of editors can have on readers. One catalyst for this complex rhetorical activity is the generative potential of the textual fragment to destabilize political discourse systems. By now zooming in on specific political responses to the fragment, I analyze how they both emerge from and compensate for systemic disruptions. In doing so, I consider the subtle effects political interactions have on the systems and elements involved.

In a way, the argument that the contemporary American political system is comprised of interacting elements is rather easy to make: a person or group does or says something, and others respond. Even a perspective that identifies political discourse as unproductive must acknowledge that the parties privy to a debate (very generously defined) at least present their arguments, in part, via disagreement. In this sense, the issue isn’t so much that the entities active in American governmental politics are disconnected from one another; rather, the concern is that beliefs don’t seem to evolve through political strife. The political discourse surrounding “you didn’t build that” certainly lends itself to

such an interpretation. A posthuman rhetorical framework, however, helps us to identify instances of systemic movement occurring in what might otherwise be considered an unproductive situation. In particular, although seemingly rigid political responses may work to quell nuance, through a rhetoric-systems approach, certain instances of partisan conviction can help us paradoxically recognize a situation in flux. And while systemic adaptations are not inherently positive or negative, they do provide us with an opportunity to reconsider how we perceive political interaction.

Although campaigns and commentators attempt to delegitimize political opponents and competing interpretations of the textual fragment, framing political responses in terms of the single multiple helps foreground the connections between versions as well as how these versions evidence the compensatory effects of systemic interactions. Remembering that the textual fragment as inefficient enthymeme can destabilize discourse systems by encouraging myriad inferences, political responses work to suppress the enthymematic potential of “you didn’t build that” by actualizing ideologically aligned interpretations of what the fragment *really* means. These actualized versions of the single multiple textual fragment essentially complete the enthymeme by stating the unsaid. By doing so, political actors minimize the likelihood that participants in their discourse systems who encounter their responses will go on to draw assumptions of their own. At the same time, by actualizing particular inferences, political responses can increase the disruptive potential of the fragment for participants in other ideologically aligned discourse systems. It’s when interpretations are presented as univocal, however, that systemic movement can often be identified.

Returning to the single multiple, we can frame the President's utterance in Roanoke, Virginia, as the "original" version of the textual fragment, complete with its syntactic ambiguity. Then, on July 17, 2012, while at a campaign stop of his own, Mitt Romney provided an interpretation of the President's statement, saying, "[Obama] said this, 'If you've got a business, you didn't build that. Somebody else made that happen.' That somebody else is government, in his view" (qtd. in Kiely). Romney went on to note that public employees and infrastructure are necessary for businesses to exist but that people who work in government "did not build this business" (qtd. in Kiely). Here, Romney acknowledges some sort of interdependent relationship between private enterprise, government workers, and public services, but he ultimately asserts that the meaning of the textual fragment is that the President believes businesses are built by the government and not business owners. By actualizing an inference, Romney amplifies a particular interpretation, one that's stabilizing for a system supportive of him and that fuels the textual fragment's parasitic relationship with the discourse system supportive of the President (Trader 206). Through this, Romney puts forth another version of the single multiple textual fragment into political discourse, enabling us to think of "you didn't build that" as both the President's utterance and the version put forth by Romney. And because his version hadn't yet been contested, Romney completes the textual fragment as enthymeme without having to defend his version. In other words, he doesn't address the phrase's ambiguity but presents his interpretation as a matter of fact.

Although Obama supporters may rationalize Romney's comments as coming from a political rival in the months preceding an election, the phrase's syntactic ambiguity has already laid the tracks for the destabilizing information to seep into the

system. And the Obama campaign's response indicates the disruptive potential of Romney's interpretation. On July 17, 2012, a component of the Obama campaign known as the "Truth Team" posted a response on the campaign's website contesting Romney's version of the textual fragment. Titled "Fact check: What President Obama actually said about small businesses," the post begins, "Mitt Romney is deliberately taking President Obama's words out of context in order to distort the President's record of support for small businesses." The Truth Team offers a portion of Romney's remarks, arguing that the Republican nominee "decided to selectively edit" the President and completely distort his message. After providing a longer quotation of Obama's speech, the Truth Team asserts that "[t]he President's full remarks show that the 'that' in 'you didn't build that' clearly refers to roads and bridges—public infrastructure we count on the government to build and maintain."

From a posthuman rhetorical framework, we can see that the campaign's response to the destabilizing potential of the textual fragment entails engaging with both the President's and Romney's actualized versions. As such, the Truth Team's response features a double-move of sorts: it actualizes a new version of the textual fragment, and it works to delegitimize Romney's interpretation of the phrase. Framing "context" in terms of text and claiming that the President "clearly" meant infrastructure helps persuade readers that the meaning of the President's statement is self-evident. In this sense, the campaign's positing a stable, "correct" version of "you didn't build that" suppresses the fragment's enthymematic potential. That is, it reduces the likelihood that a reader in the campaign's discourse system will draw disruptive inferences on his own now that the *real* meaning has been supplied.

The campaign may allege the meaning of the textual fragment is clear when taken “in context,” but it doesn’t exactly let the statement speak for itself; rather, it’s couched with accusations of Romney’s dishonesty. The assertion that Romney reached his interpretation through deliberately distorting and manipulating the President’s words reinforces a narrative that the President’s political rival is unethical, which more or less reinforces a ready-made rationalization that political rivals and the information they provide should be dismissed. Perhaps more subtly, though, this move encourages the suppression of any and all inferences that don’t align with the version put forth by the Truth Team. For example, if Obama’s words are clear “in context” and they’re only controversial through misrepresentation, then any uneasiness I may have must be the result of my not knowing the whole context *or* my having been primed by Romney. It essentially tries to persuade readers to make a campaign-sanctioned cut by framing all other interpretations as the products of either ignorance or deceit. In this sense, the Truth Team actualizes another version of the single multiple, one that supplies a way for individuals to rhetorically rationalize Romney’s—and by extension their own—divergent interpretations.

When James Taranto sought to vindicate Romney and put forth an interpretation of the textual fragment unfavorable to the President, he directly refuted the Truth Team’s version. On July 18, 2012, in an online opinion column for *The Wall Street Journal*, Taranto argues that “[t]he president’s remark was a direct attack on the principle of individual responsibility, the foundation of American freedom.” He also includes an excerpt of the President’s speech, prefacing it by noting, “Here is the full context, as

presented by the Truth Team.” Then, challenging the campaign’s assertion that the President meant infrastructure, he writes:

That’s bunk, and not only because “business” is more proximate to the pronoun “that” and therefore its more likely antecedent. The Truth Team’s interpretation is ungrammatical. “Roads and bridges” is plural; “that” is singular. . . . Barack Obama is supposed to be the World’s Greatest Orator, the smartest man in the world. Yet his campaign asks us to believe he is not even competent to construct a sentence.

In this, Taranto effectively takes the Obama campaign’s definition of context as being textual and doubles down. Approaching the text on grammatical grounds enables Taranto to claim that, in context, the meaning of “you didn’t build that” *is* clear, but that Obama *clearly* meant “business” and not infrastructure. This works to reduce the likelihood that participants in Taranto’s discourse system will draw disruptive inferences from the fragment. Defining context in terms of text, then, encourages a grammatical reading that supports the legitimacy of his version and paints the Truth Team as offering a dishonest interpretation. It’s through this alleged textual stability that Taranto can stabilize his worldview and discourse system.

Additionally, Taranto rationalizes his allegiance to grammar by facetiously claiming that Obama “is supposed to be the World’s Greatest Orator, the smartest man in the world.” Ironical though his rationale may be, it does provide a certain way for people to compensate for claims that the President simply misspoke. Framing Obama as being beyond grammatical mistakes stabilizes Taranto’s political discourse system even further.

Here, I'm not focused on whether Taranto's insistence on grammar is more or less legitimate than the Obama campaign's assertion that the President was "clearly refer[ring] to roads and bridges." Putting forth an interpretation and purporting that it's the absolute version can be problematic when it demonizes other perspectives and hinders individuals from exploring other alternatives, thereby reducing the opportunity for beliefs to evolve in certain ways unimpeded. The activity of the Obama campaign and Taranto may evidence a dynamic situation, but by suppressing the enthymematic potential of the textual fragment, they work to funnel rhetorical flow through ideologically regulated pathways.

Albeit problematic, this doesn't mean that these systems and the worldviews circulating within them are static. A rhetoric-systems approach recognizes that even something as potentially divisive as foregrounding the disingenuousness of political opponents can be a way to compensate for perturbations made possible by flowing information. Supplementing interpretations with rationalizations indicates an awareness that those positions are contestable. This can be seen as a system working to "[resist] slipping into its infinite other possible states by avoiding direct interaction with the outside as much as possible" (Mays). In this case, avoiding direct interaction means suppressing our inevitable tendency to draw inferences because they may disrupt ideologically cohesive systemic boundaries. But although the aforementioned responses work to insulate seemingly disparate discourse systems, they emerge from the ever-present potential for beliefs to become otherwise.

The presence of divisive rhetoric doesn't signify complete systemic closures, either. Both the Truth Team's and Taranto's responses entered political discourse not

only as emergent effects of systemic interaction but also as feedback loops, helping to construct and ideally stabilize their respective discourse systems. Remembering that an important aspect of complex systems, though, is that “the same feedback loops that organize the system also hold it open to the influence of the environment and other systems,” these systems exist simultaneously as both closed and open (Trader 204). This helps us take note of the information Taranto and the Truth Team inadvertently bring within their respective systems via their actualizations of the single multiple textual fragment.

For instance, by providing Romney’s “out of context” interpretation of the textual fragment, the Truth Team includes a quotation of Romney making his allegation against the President. Although it compensates for this information by framing Romney as dishonest (and editing his comments), the campaign does reiterate an unfavorable interpretation—one actualized by but not necessarily originating with Romney. Put another way: the campaign brings noise from the environment within the system in order to silence it, and in doing so, runs the risk of it reverberating.

Similarly, although Taranto ultimately refutes the Truth Team’s accusations regarding context, the first portion of his column includes a quotation of Romney’s remarks against the President as well as apparent evidence that the President is both “God’s gift to comedy” and a threat to the “foundation of American freedom.” In emphasizing Romney’s interpretation of the fragment as well as other instances where Obama “revealed” his “objectionable” beliefs, Taranto’s column first reinforces ideological opposition to Obama. It’s not until the latter portion of the column—once the reader has been effectively ideologically primed—that Taranto takes up the Obama

campaign's allegations. By not leading off with the controversy, Taranto's response minimizes the risk in bringing outside information inside the system. Still, including the statement "in context" in order to contest it does offer his readers a glimpse of the President's statement, potentially reigniting the very enthymematic inefficiency that Taranto is working to quiet. If we follow Trader's lead and take posthuman rhetorics as parasitic, the question becomes how discourse systems and the individuals that comprise them reflect the inclusion of such information—textual ambiguity, counterarguments, rationalizations, and all.

Adaptations in (Divisive) Discourse

In the previous section, I argued that select responses put forth into political discourse actualized versions of the single multiple textual fragment that refuted the phrase's syntactic ambiguity and claimed alternate interpretations were disingenuous. I'll now analyze how subsequent political responses indicate systems subtly adapting to the inclusion of various instantiations of the textual fragment. Indeed, certain responses moved away from arguments based on the President's grammar. From a rhetoric-systems perspective, this can indicate adaptations in those discourse systems. By examining these actualized versions, we can identify compensatory changes and consider how, without interpreting the fragment's syntactic ambiguity with a sense of certainty, commentators still worked to suppress its enthymematic potential and stabilize their own systems.

On July 24, 2012, in *The Washington Post*'s the "Right Turn" blog, Jennifer Rubin—who offers "reported opinion from a conservative perspective"—took up the issue of the textual fragment, writing:

[When Obama] delivered up his “you didn’t build that” (whether it was the infrastructure or the small business itself to which he was referring) he revealed a level of resentment toward the private sector that was startling, even to his critics.

Here, Rubin puts forth a version of the textual fragment that shares a basic premise with the versions actualized by Romney and Taranto: that “you didn’t build that” signifies President Obama’s disrespect for businesses. But whereas Taranto and the Obama campaign’s Truth Team both engage the debate specifically at the sentence level, Rubin somewhat sidesteps the syntactic ambiguity of the President’s phrasing by essentially deeming that aspect of the conversation irrelevant. Instead, she suppresses the textual fragment’s capacity to encourage destabilizing assumptions by supplying an overarching interpretation void of ambiguity, in effect funneling disparate inferences into a unified conclusion. In this sense, acknowledging differing opinions on what the President *meant to say* paradoxically strengthens her argument by implying either that such minute discrepancies don’t influence her larger point or that they both support it.

Rubin presents the ambiguity over the President’s intended referent as a secondary issue, and placing it in parentheses only adds to the notion that the information isn’t essential. But from a rhetoric-systems perspective, her including this assurance is significant because it indicates an acknowledgment of and subsequent change from an argument based on alleged sentence-level clarity. This isn’t to say that Rubin’s response evolved directly from Taranto’s or the Truth Team’s, but such seemingly intransigent debates over the antecedent of “that” generated subtle rhetorical effects. Rubin’s not entering the conversation on that level, then, highlights an instance of systemic

adaptation—namely that an argument based on grammatical fealty is contestable and perhaps not an effective strategy in neutralizing the textual fragment-as-perturbation.

Just as Rubin doesn't specify what the President referred to, she also doesn't specify whether, in her post, the textual fragment refers to the phrase or the speech. Vaguely describing Obama's "you didn't build that" as a revelatory agent encourages critics of the President to process this single multiple by drawing on their assumptions as to who they think the President *really* is (and who he has been all along). She takes up the issue of context by quoting Romney's assertions that the "context is worse than the quote" and that the President's ideology is "very strange and in some respects, foreign to the American experience type of philosophy" (qtd. in Rubin). By doing so, she associates the speech with an evocation of Obama's Otherness, and the textual fragment more or less bleeds into the speech and the speech into a larger situation, which contains the President's alleged attacks on private enterprise and his "foreign" philosophy.

She only takes up "context" again at the end of her post, noting that the "Obama people argue simultaneously that he was taken out of context *and* that his denigration of individual effort is still valid." In parentheses, she provides a quotation from Obama's speech, but it's from a portion that preceded the textual fragment. Alluding to allegations of context without providing the text immediately surrounding "you didn't build that" asks what information Rubin is circulating or *not* circulating via her post-as-feedback loop. Not supplying the context-as-text as desired by the "Obama people," Rubin withholds potentially destabilizing information from a discourse system whose participants she has just informed shouldn't care whether the President meant infrastructure or business. Aspects of her response may evidence systemic movement, but

her post works to stabilize the system by using “you didn’t build that” to attract and reinforce ideologically aligned assumptions concerning Obama in general. These macro-level beliefs, then, suppress divergent noises emanating from the textual fragment, the very perturbations parenthetically framed as inconsequential.

* * *

Andrew Cline similarly acknowledged the syntactic ambiguity of the textual fragment in order to move beyond it, only his response drew heavily on the concept of context-as-text. On August 10, 2012, Cline wrote an article for *The Atlantic* titled, “What ‘You Didn’t Build That’ Really Means—and Why Romney Can’t Explain it.” In it, he claims that the reason the textual fragment remains prevalent in political discourse is because “Obama made a shift so profound, but so easily misunderstood, that neither side has been able to end the debate. . . .” With this, Cline posits that the conversation between both discourse systems has been unproductive, and responsibility for this alleged ineffectiveness rests not with either “side” but with the subtle magnitude of the President’s words. His article, then, appears to address both liberals and conservatives, providing them with the otherwise elusive explanation of what “you didn’t build that” *really* means.

Cline supplies a large quotation from the President’s speech, one that includes the textual fragment, “so there is no question about the context.” Immediately afterwards, however, he isolates two sentences: “If you’ve got a business—you didn’t build that. Somebody else made that happen,” stating, “Like any classic, it is just as good the hundredth time as it was the first time. . . .” He then acknowledges the debate over the phrasing, writing, “Let’s be charitable and take the White House at its word that the

president meant to say ‘those’ and not ‘that,’” before asserting that “[e]ven by the most favorable interpretation, the president uttered something worthy of enormous controversy—a philosophical rewriting of the American story.”

Through a rhetoric-systems approach, we can identify instances of systemic movement in the way Cline presents the textual fragment. Like Rubin, he foregrounds the apparent ambiguity of the phrase, thereby acknowledging that a debate has been had and that he’s moving beyond that discussion. But after legitimizing disparate sentence-level readings, he goes a step further than Rubin by explicitly taking up the Obama campaign’s preferred interpretation in his move to suppress the textual fragment’s enthymematic potential. Presenting this as a charitable act—prefaced by his describing the controversial sentences as “a classic”—signifies that this move is strategic and that he’s aligned with a discourse system that’s more oppositional to the President. His assertion that even this referent can’t alter the irrefutable meaning of Obama’s words works to stabilize his argument and his discourse system.

Moving beyond sentence-level ambiguity and emphasizing the President’s “full remarks” enable Cline to then pivot to that larger textual context. Alleging that “[w]ith his Roanoke speech, Obama turned Jefferson on his head,” Cline blurs the line between the textual fragment and the speech itself. He describes the textual fragment as the “clincher” on Obama’s “radical” beliefs that the “[g]overnment is not dependent upon the people; the people are dependent upon the government” and that the state has a “claim to the wealth individual Americans created through their own initiative.” For support, Cline doesn’t look to “you didn’t build that” but to different quotations from the President’s speech. Defining context-as-text helps Cline situate the textual fragment within the larger

context, not to explain the phrase, but to implicate it in his overarching interpretation. “You didn’t build that” becomes a synecdoche, then, for the President’s “full remarks.” In this sense, Cline actualizes another version of the textual fragment, one that simultaneously signifies a line from the speech, the speech as a whole, and Obama’s supposed worldview. Because of this, a refutation of the speech and Obama in general suppresses the divergent potential of the fragment.

At one point in his argument, however, Cline writes:

Obama’s one nugget of a point—that infrastructure facilitates commerce—is disputed by no one. Nor does any serious person dispute that everyone should pay for that infrastructure or for the essential services the people have tasked the government with providing. It is a fundamentally American principle.

Although he frames it as a non-issue, from a rhetoric-systems perspective, this passage can be read as a compensatory effect of arguments that frame the conservative position on the textual fragment as absolutely opposed to infrastructure and taxation.⁸ Simply needing to address this issue and set the record straight highlights an adaptation in the system.

As this article moves within the political system, it serves as a feedback loop; like any response that includes the “full remarks” of the President’s speech, it contains the potential to reintroduce readers to divergent inferences generated by the textual fragment. The article, though, most obviously circulates a version of the textual fragment where the

⁸ Cline’s insistence that “everyone” should pay for infrastructure subtly implies that every person, regardless of his or her situation, should pay taxes. Whether it was his intent or not, “everyone” doesn’t acknowledge financial circumstances.

President's beliefs are framed as "radical," which works to stabilize a discourse system critical of the President. But the article also includes simple and otherwise seemingly uncontroversial acknowledgements that the antecedent of "that" could have been infrastructure and that some public services are valuable. So while Cline stabilizes and legitimizes a partisan reading of the President, he also evidences systemic movement. Although his message may be more stabilizing for conservative discourse, the article's circulation in *The Atlantic*, coupled with his "charitable" reading of the textual fragment, can generate widespread rhetorical effects and interact with liberal discourse—and the overarching political system—in myriad ways.⁹

* * *

Not all responses attempt to explain the textual fragment by actualizing a version based on what they believe the President *really* said or who he *really* is. For instance, the theme of the second day of the Republican National Convention was "We Built It" (Beard), and a rhetorical consequence of this somehow unironic actualization was an opinion column published the following day, August 29, 2012, in *The Guardian*. Under the headline "They build that: how a Republican lie turned into an alternate universe," Michael Cohen gives a brief overview of Obama's campaign event in Virginia before providing a passage from the President's speech, one containing the textual fragment. He thereafter describes this larger quotation as "all fairly boilerplate rhetoric—a basic recitation of how Democrats view the role of government and its interplay with the

⁹ This is an instance where an approach grounded more in digital rhetorics could strengthen this project. In addition to analyzing the article's comment section, tracking its digital reach via social networking sites could illuminate how and to whom it's being circulated.

private sector.” But he notes that “like a famished dog with a new bone,” Republicans grabbed onto the phrase “you didn’t build that.”

He continues, “That single phrase, taken out of context by Republicans, has become the GOP’s symbol of Obama’s supposed contempt for the free market and entrepreneurship, and for his socialist assault on America.” In this, Cohen provides an interpretation of the textual fragment, one that works to stabilize a discourse system supportive of the President; however, he doesn’t provide an explanation in terms of what Obama meant, nor does he engage the textual specifics of the phrase. Rather, Cohen encourages a reading of the passage as a single entity, something to be processed as a whole, and by describing it as “boilerplate rhetoric” and a “basic recitation,” he frames the information as not particularly noteworthy.

His subtle use of context—with the word “context” only mentioned the once, and only after providing the quotation from the President’s speech—enables the textual fragment to blend into its surroundings. “You didn’t build that” comes into existence, in and of itself, once Republicans, like ravenous animals, take it out of context and transform it into a “stand-in for all that is wrong with Obama.” Cohen’s actualized version doesn’t so much complete the enthymeme as it rejects the legitimacy of the premise. It’s telling that he claims Republicans latched onto “You didn’t build that” and not “If you’ve got a business—you didn’t build that,” thereby distancing the textual fragment from “business” and reducing the potential for divergent inferences. In this sense, Cohen creates a single multiple textual fragment, but in his version, “you didn’t build that” means Republican deceit.

This may seem like divisiveness, and in a way it certainly is. But through a rhetoric-systems approach, we can consider Cohen's presentation of the textual fragment as itself a rhetorical effect. For instance, like Rubin and Cline, Cohen avoids arguments based on textual clarity, but his participation in a disparate political discourse system indicates that such systemic adaptation isn't relegated to discourse critical of the President.

A rhetoric-systems approach can also identify a subtler instance of systemic adaptation. While the majority of his column is devoted to evidencing the extent to which Republicans lie, toward the end, Cohen writes:

One can believe that government should play a less direct role in the workings of the private economy—clearly, this is a defensible notion. But to listen to Republicans harping on Obama's "you didn't build that" line is to hear a party that views "government" in the most simplistic terms. This isn't a governing philosophy; it's a caricature of how the economy actually works.

To be sure, Cohen isn't exactly softening his criticism of Republicans, but simply stating that he's not diametrically opposed to the notion that government may play a too-direct role in the private economy is significant. Whether it's frustration with the Republican's "alternate reality" or a compensation for his own partisan viewpoint, recognizing the legitimacy of a basic conservative belief, i.e., that government is *too* involved in the private sector, indicates a change in the system. And as this column serves as a feedback loop for political—and particularly liberal—discourse, this compensation circulates, indicating an opening for a debate about the size and role of government. Perhaps in

Cohen's mind, this isn't possible while Republicans take an overly simplistic approach to the conversation, but his response, like any single multiple, both emerges from and generates a range of rhetorical effects.

Contextual Matters

In the previous examples, the concept of context is often presented in terms of quotations from the President's speech. That is, context is primarily textual. Including the sentences that surround the textual fragment lends responses and their accompanying discourse systems a sense of stability, an air of certainty. But we've seen how similar approaches can facilitate disparate interpretations. The Obama campaign and Taranto both focus on the specific phrasing, only to disagree on the President's referent. Cohen and Cline, on the other hand, both use context to draw attention away from "you didn't build that," but what the former identifies as "boilerplate," the latter believes to be a "rewriting of the American story." In these responses, context-as-text serves a legitimizing function; it enables the commentators and the Obama campaign to strategically present their arguments as if they don't have anything to hide, confident their interpretations won't be derailed.

But if context-as-text appears to lend a response a certain degree of stability, such an understanding risks ignoring how even the "same" phrase is interpreted through ideological frameworks, whether it's an assessment of the President as a person, a judgement of his administration's previous policies, or the belief that the Jeffersonian concept of America is better left unevolved. This isn't to discount interpretations on grounds of ideology, but to recognize that the desire to have our worldview reinforced—or at least to have it complicated on our own terms—is as powerful as it is subtle.

Because of this, we chance seeing a comfortable framework not as a cut that could have been and likely is being made otherwise, but as stable and unequivocal.

The comfort of stability works to erase how our interpretations are generated and shaped by an unfolding rhetoric that circulates within, changes, and is changed by a variety of frameworks. The strength of the aforementioned responses seems to be in the refutation of alternate, competing versions, but what this approach doesn't recognize is that every reading is indebted not only to our own interpretive lenses, but also to the rhetorical activity of those we interact with, including those we contest. But even if a specific response or conversation frames context as textual in order to legitimize an interpretation, we can remember that the words put forth aren't necessarily stable.

CHAPTER III

MOVING (FORWARD)

A rhetoric-systems approach calls attention to how an argument both generates effects and is necessarily incomplete, and so it is with this thesis. Rather than outright concluding, then, I'd like to open up this project by examining its possible implications for rhetoric studies and suggesting ways it may be extended moving forward. To do so, I first continue the conversation on context that ended the previous chapter, arguing that the way context is used in popular and political discourses warrants attention by those doing work in posthuman rhetorics. I then discuss how the temporal complexities involved with conceptualizing rhetoric in terms of an ongoing event could impact rhetorical historiographic work. Finally, I consider how the boundaries I've constructed throughout this project might be productively re-drawn through work in digital rhetorics.

At the end of the previous chapter, I discussed how defining context as being purely textual encourages accepting a preferred interpretation of a given text as commonsensical rather than as a perspective shaped by a host of factors. While I maintain that such an understanding of context is limited, contemporary rhetorical scholarship should recognize that context is often understood in public discourses in terms of a text's explicit wording. Indeed, as a popular component in meaning-making, the concept of context-as-text necessitates close rhetorical attention.

Although context as a concept is taken up within contemporary rhetorical scholarship, it's often framed within conversations regarding the limitations of rhetorical situation. For instance, drawing on work by posthumanist scholars such as Bruno Latour, Richard Doyle, and Donna Haraway, J. Blake Scott presents a rhetorical-cultural methodology that looks beyond a text's immediate situation. He reconfigures contextual influences as the interaction of human and nonhuman actors that create larger conditions of possibility that contribute to a text's emergence (354-55). Similarly, Trader argues that engaging the complexity of events

require[s] that we draw on a more complex articulation of the current and likely future conditions of our discursive interactions, as well as the contexts where our communicative practices take place and our rhetorical concepts must take into account. (202)

This necessary articulation entails examining these contexts as complex systems, an approach I've adopted in this thesis. Trader also distinguishes between high and low context communication, but they're taken up in terms of ideologically coherent systems and those with more permeable boundaries, respectively (211). And Rice makes a similar claim when she positions "rhetorical publicness as a context of interaction," which she then frames as a "circulating ecology of effects, enactments, and events" (Edbauer 9).

Rice and Scott point out that traditional views of rhetorical situation can render productive insights, but that such analyses are limited. Ultimately, when conceptualized as influences on rhetorical situation, context is dismissed in favor of an understanding of

rhetoric as an emergent effect and ongoing process of interaction.¹⁰ As this thesis hopefully evidences, I agree with frameworks that privilege the interaction of elements, but I now draw attention to what may be missed by posthuman and other contemporary rhetorics that contest, dismiss, or even supplement understandings of context without also attending to how it's often used in popular and political discourses.

In the previous chapter, I argued that defining context as explicitly textual can work to legitimize those political responses to the textual fragment that include an appropriate excerpt from President Obama's speech as well as delegitimize the validity of interpretations that don't. In this sense, providing the "full context" increases the likelihood that such responses will be more stabilizing for their discourse systems, because if context is limited to the speech's text, arguments can be processed not as the results of ideological cuts, but as explications of the textual fragment's inherent meaning. At the same time, however, this approach is used by individuals who disagree on the phrase's meaning, so while a rhetor's allegiance to context-as-text may legitimize her argument, by the same logic, it also enables competing interpretations to be put forth. As such, context-as-text simultaneously facilitates the problem and the solution, because when this definition of context is used to support multiple interpretations, the proliferation of perspectives highlights how meaning is made by more than what can be located within a given text. On some level, anyone who uses this definition of context in his argument understands this; otherwise, there would be no need for an accompanying explanation of what a selected text means. But if context-as-text paradoxically

¹⁰ The notion of a *wider* context is, however, sometimes used to encourage rhetoricians to recognize the expanding scope of various networks at play in any site of analysis (e.g., Edbauer 13).

foregrounds the very ambiguity that varied interpretations simultaneously seek to refute, why is its use so pervasive, and what can be learned from it?

If we maintain that discourse is itself emergent, it's possible to consider this narrow understanding of context as itself an effect of the inherent instability in any system and the inevitable ambiguity found in the assessment of any rhetorical event. Perhaps the potential to interpret events otherwise calls for a common referent. Precisely because meaning isn't inherent in a text, both sides of an issue benefit from a shared point of reference, something that each can use to anchor its argument. In other words, even if context-as-text creates competition such that an argument's purpose is to challenge the validity of other interpretations, relying on this conceptualization of context is still an important part of establishing that which is contested and therefore entering the conversation. That the referent is a simple quotation is, admittedly, a low bar, but by grounding themselves in a common concept, those who hold seemingly disparate positions find a certain degree of stability through one another. In doing so, the overarching political discourse system becomes more stabilized because those involved are, for the most part, playing by a shared rule or at least an implicitly agreed upon guideline.

Context-as-text fosters a multiplicity of competing perspectives. Although many of these interpretations may be presented as unequivocal explanations of a text/event, it's possible to identify a certain mutual vulnerability within such collective, if paradoxical, conviction, if only because the ever-present potential for events to become otherwise induces cooperation on a shared point of reference. By attending to how context is defined and what such definitions do, posthuman rhetorics can examine subtle instances

of connection within and across seemingly discrete systems. This isn't to say that every argument that mentions context will conceptualize it the same way, but however it's defined deserves recognition, as it may provide an access point of sorts for better understanding already complex interactions.

Temporal Complexity

Throughout this thesis, I've analyzed how and to what effects systems and elements interact with one another. Within this has been a gesturing toward a certain temporal complexity that can productively enter into conversation with scholarship on rhetorical historiographic work. Indeed, I've taken a view of rhetoric as a distributed event, where the textual fragment entered (and continues to enter) into diverse associations; however, the complex rhetorical life of the textual fragment is beyond our grasp. As Gries argues (in a way that aligns with Mays' rhetoric-systems approach), an event "can never be fully captured in our analyses and interpretations because an event is a process of *inexplicable* becoming" (27). Inherent to this notion of becoming is a complication of time as simple and linear. Gries notes that new materialist conceptualizations of time are often informed by timescapes in contemporary online, networked societies, where information appears to flow simultaneously and instantaneously such that past and future collapse into an "eternal present" (30). With such a collapse, "our messages seem . . . everywhere at once and nowhere in particular," thereby facilitating a view of rhetoric as a distributed event (31). At the same time, rhetorics materialize and generate divergent effects. In this is the tension between a present—a sense of being, even a multiplicity of beings—and a sense of becoming, of a moving toward something else.

This tension is evident in the single multiple textual fragment, where divergent actualizations unfold and generate rhetorical activity at different rates of time such that the overall distributed event of “you didn’t build that” has multiple temporal configurations. But as an actualization, each version of the single multiple also comes into being as an emergent effect of rhetorical activity. A value in a rhetoric-systems approach is that it draws attention to the necessity and inevitability of freezing actualized versions in order to analyze them and create meaning. In this sense, each single multiple actualization is both frozen in our interpretations and involved in a temporal flux. Analyzing the textual fragment’s transformations, as evidenced in its manifestations, can point to its various, if partial, states of being as well as its process of becoming.

This sense of temporal complexity has implications for historiographic work. In her work in Chicana feminist rhetorics, Jessica Enoch argues that recovering women’s voices from spaces overlooked by dominant historical and rhetorical traditions can sponsor marginalized rhetorics such that they challenge traditional understandings of rhetorical criticism as well as mainstream feminist histories (13). By placing women’s words and actions in their “immediate and most visible rhetorical situation” (13), historians “not only acknowledge the fact that women spoke and identify the constraints they overcame, but they also examine the specific methods that silenced women’s voices at particular times and places” (17). This historical work generates effects, in part, because it highlights rhetorical strategies used to “discount women’s claims—especially marginalized women’s claims” (17).

An essential component of this historiographic work is situating women’s rhetorics in their past contexts (here, context is understood in terms of rhetorical

situation), which we can consider in light of the aforementioned temporal complexities that accompany conceptualizing rhetoric as an act of becoming and being. Indeed, we can examine the notion of recovery and contextualization to offer a perspective on what these methods may entail. For instance, recovering a marginalized rhetoric could lend itself to a project that starts with a rhetorician looking into the past to reconstruct an historical case. From a posthuman perspective, on the other hand, we could consider women's voices that were silenced in one venue as still involved in a process of becoming. In this sense, an historical rhetoric has always been an unfolding event and therefore transforming with time. Recovery could be thought of as the intra- and inter-action of a marginalized rhetoric, a rhetorical historiographer, and any other cultural systems she may be working within and/or against. Importantly, a simplistic notion of recovery can be complicated when the historiographer is a participant in a rhetorical event that may appear either "historical" or "new" to those operating through a privileged frame. Here, the activity isn't an encounter between discrete entities but perhaps a rhetorician already working within an underrepresented rhetoric and informed by an "historical" case to create spaces for that intellectual tradition and therefore further resist and disrupt oppressive systems. A rhetorician who isn't a participant in such a tradition can ask not only how dominant systems silence certain voices and how those systems can be challenged, but also how his understanding of "recovery" work and the underrepresented rhetoric are influenced by the very systems meant to be disrupted.

Rather than a rhetorician uncovering the past or a rhetoric moving toward the future, from a posthuman perspective, various elements enter into association together. To examine both the need for and conditions of historiographic work, we might ask how

and why the intra- or inter-action of an “historical” case and a “contemporary” rhetorician unfolds at a different rate and to different effects than other associations a particular rhetoric has entered into. With this, we can complicate the notion that history is brought to the present linearly and in a way that inherently signifies progress, as the activity generated by a marginalized rhetoric’s complex relations with historiographic work becomes another fold in its ongoing distributed event.

At the same time, what posthuman rhetorics that privilege emergence from the interaction of elements can learn from historiographic work is the importance of strategic and tactical interventions. Even if effects can’t be predicted, a rhetorician can purposefully enter into an unfolding event such that there’s a likelihood for important social justice work to emerge. Part of this process is identifying and contextualizing a marginalized rhetoric. Situating women’s voices in a particular context is both necessary for learning about their lives and their rhetorical activity as well as the systems involved and strategies employed to silence them. Making such a cut enables a description of the situation, but every historical situation existed in flux. A situation may be described as previously *being* something, but a posthuman rhetorical perspective may ask what else that situation was and was becoming. In other words, what was left outside the cut by doing the important work of situating marginalized women’s rhetorics within their particular historical and immediate contexts? In what ways do the reconstructions involved with historiographic work breathe life into rhetoric but also imply a partial understanding of the event?

The question of what effects an underrepresented women’s rhetoric had—and continues to have—beyond a particular historical context is taken up by Enoch, who puts

forth a feminist rhetorical historiographic tracking methodology, the key tenet of which is to “resist historiographic closure at the initial or most visible rhetorical situation . . .”

(21). As such, Enoch encourages us to ask, “What else happened to this rhetoric? Who else was listening? Who might have retold these [Chicana’s] stories and to what end?”

(21). In this, Enoch’s methodology productively enters into conversation with posthuman rhetorics that privilege nonlinear rhetorical effects. In particular, questions concerning the notion of “retelling” emerge from this interaction. For example, what are the implications of any retelling? What transformations does the rhetoric go through as it “unfolds *with* time in and across networks of complex, dynamic relations” (Gries 32)? How may rhetorics diverge after a retelling?

I don’t know the answers to these questions, but I do know that an aspect of Enoch’s work I value is her emphasis on survival. To me, survival suggests a sense of resistance and overcoming such that the surviving rhetoric will have changed—and continue to change—from its original manifestation to how it comes into a multiplicity of beings in time. A rhetorical event can never be extinguished, but it can perhaps burn brighter and in myriad ways when there are people committed to hearing voices and who take them up strategically, tactically, and ethically. Thinking back to the concept of the single multiple, we can recognize that nonlinear effects are both a part of the “original” rhetoric’s life and engaged in a process of inevitable transformation, of being and becoming otherwise. Rather than a dilution, that “historical” rhetoric exists in flux in the present, entering into diverse associations that produce consequences and contribute to its expanding life, perpetually generating multiple avenues for continued resistance and survival.

Digital Implications and Interventions

This thesis required certain selections. While enabling me to form and articulate arguments, the boundaries I've constructed necessarily limited the scope of this project; however, constraints can also suggest opportunities for future work. For example, one of the most significant boundary lines I drew for this project was to focus on how the textual fragment circulated in texts published on the Internet, thereby ignoring how “you didn't build that” was taken up outside these online spaces. Such an approach risks not only discounting the vast majority of political activity that occurs in offline environments, but also how online and offline activity interanimate one another. It also elides concerns about who has access to Internet and other communicative technologies. Furthermore, by analyzing a popular website in Wikipedia and the arguments of privileged voices backed by established media outlets and political organizations, I've hardly looked to the margins. The textual fragment no doubt entered into associations I haven't even considered, and examining how else it was taken up—in different spaces, in different media, by different people—would certainly be productive. In this last chapter, however, I'd like to specifically address and ask questions that emerged from the sites I did analyze, especially in regards to how rhetorical activity may be strategically deployed to facilitate systemic disruptions.

While I considered the movement of “you didn't build that” as it manifested in various versions, I didn't address how these texts actually traveled. Scholarship in digital rhetorics has attended to the circulation and ensuing transformation of texts as they enter into various relations (e.g., Queen; Ridolfo and DeVoss; Vie). All the texts I analyzed concerning the textual fragment were and are currently accessible online; therefore, the

ability for people to share them on social networking sites, through personal communications such as email, or in various online forums is worthy of consideration. In light of this project's emphasis on systemic interactions, I'm curious about the potential for actualized texts to be brought within and disrupt various online communities.

While some online forums, comment sections, and social media threads may be considered unproductive and even hostile discursive spaces, it's possible to frame them as complex systems in their own right. I wonder, then, how users may be able to bring discordant information into these various spaces. For example, what would be the nonlinear effects of posting in the comment section of Michael Cohen's article from *The Guardian*, and in that response, including a link to Andrew Cline's article from *The Atlantic*, or vice versa? This may seem like a tepid act, and in a way, it is. System participants rhetorically rationalize potentially destabilizing information (Mays), and in an article's comment section, systemic boundaries may be guarded especially well. After all, I don't necessarily imagine that in the previous example a link would likely be opened and the article read; however, even information that is quickly dismissed—whether it's the article's content, the posted comment, or the presence of the link itself—interacts with the system. In this sense, even something as seemingly ineffectual as linking an article into a disparate online space does *something*. And if linking isn't considered to be enough, how might information from other sources be incorporated in a post such that it has a greater likelihood of being accepted by participants in different discourse systems/online communities?

This isn't to suggest that information needs to or should "originate" from a published article, but how arguments from outside texts are incorporated into another

composition asks for a closer look. As mentioned in the first chapter, the notion of “recomposition” is taken up by Ridolfo and DeVoss. In “Composing for Recomposition: Rhetorical Velocity and Delivery,” the authors put forth the concept of rhetorical velocity to extend the traditional notion of rhetorical delivery. In particular, they urge attention be paid to the ways a writer’s text might be recomposed by third-party sources as it circulates, and that this consideration can inform how authors, in turn, compose. The authors also note that the concept of rhetorical velocity can facilitate an analysis that “attempts to understand what has happened in instances of rhetorical delivery by initial authors and by third parties.” In other words, rhetorical velocity focuses attention on what happens, especially what transformations occur, when authors take up texts.

As discussed in Chapter 2, a certain transformation occurs in Wikipedia whenever reliable sources are recomposed and revised as entries. Here, I’m interested in how this may indicate opportunities for systemic disruption as well as complicate Wikipedia’s relationship to dominant beliefs. From a certain angle, I see the website’s policies on reliable sources and on “not [giving] minority views or aspects as much of or as detailed a description as more widely held views or widely supported aspects” as further amplifying already privileged voices (“Wikipedia: Neutral”). In this sense, the distributed work of the editors is beholden to the viewpoints of more “reliable” individuals and organizations. Because the site reflects mainstream views on issues, it may not be the best venue for disrupting dominant perspectives and challenging established beliefs. At the same time, however, Wikipedia does subvert certain cultural assumptions about credibility. As Timothy Messer-Kruse notes about his frustrations revising an entry on the Haymarket riot and trial, “I’ve written two books and a couple of articles about the

episode. In some circles that affords me a presumption of expertise on the subject. Not, however, on Wikipedia.” While I don’t advocate for a repudiation of a professor’s life’s work—especially when it challenges dominant assumptions of a cultural event—this episode makes me wonder how Wikipedia editors perceive and negotiate their actions, especially when they relate to incorporating, revising, or refuting information that challenges the status quo.

Entries may need to be based on reliable sources and not give “undue weight” to an issue, but I’m curious whether Wikipedia editors can work within these policies and still subtly disrupt assumptions. I’m not calling for editors to knowingly misrepresent another person’s ideas, but there seems to be the opportunity to generate divergent effects through the recomposition of reliable source information. As I argued in the previous chapter, something as seemingly simple as Glenn Kessler’s entry being located within the “Conservative commentators” section of the “You didn’t build that” Wikipedia page can be destabilizing. Is it possible to make such a move strategically, regardless of the page in question? Can an editor remain faithful to a reliable source but present that information in a way that manages to disrupt dominant narratives?

Pursuing answers to these questions could certainly be taken up by investigations into Wikipedia’s revision histories and talk pages (as I noted in the previous chapter), but it may also be productive to bring editors into future research. In “Through the Eyes of Researchers,” Kevin DePew argues that textual analysis, while valuable, privileges the scholar’s interpretation of a text (51). In order to partially offset the influence of what Haraway refers to as the “god-trick,” DePew urges digital researchers to incorporate the individuals engaged in online discourse in order to triangulate research (54-5). He argues

that by “talking to rhetors and audiences about their rhetorical experiences with digital texts” we can better understand how these individuals conceptualize their actions and the choices they make (67). By then pairing this with our own analyses, we can come to a more complex understanding of the rhetorical activity of a particular space. In terms of expanding this project, interviewing and getting first-hand accounts from Wikipedia editors about how they conceptualize their work and the nuances in how they (re)compose information would likely be productive. After all, even if editors don’t see their work in terms of activism or intervention, it’s possible that such research could still reveal opportunities for subtle disruptions.

While I’ve situated this example in terms of Wikipedia, the implications of this future research could extend beyond that particular site to other places and spaces where individuals draw from the work of others to effect change. The point of strategic interactions isn’t to change a person’s mind wholesale or collapse a system, because every opinion, every argument, every action—even the seemingly inconsequential—generates an ongoing rippling of effects. All the same, it’s important to note that nonlinear, compensatory effects may be, at times, inadequate, especially when a person’s lived reality is adversely affected by certain beliefs and actions. Similarly, the various systems we construct and the individuals who comprise them may seem inaccessible. However, as I’ve hoped to express in this thesis, we are connected in complex, myriad ways and are together involved in various unfoldings. And in this is an appreciation for the ever-present potential for things to be and to become otherwise, even if it occurs beyond our understanding.

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