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A Rhetorical Study of Twitter Discourse about  
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## Episode 3: Opposites

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Lauren:

Hey there. Thanks for joining me for episode three of You Can Agree Without Being Disagreeable, a rhetorical study of Twitter discourse about Justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Amy Coney Barrett.

Lauren:

In the last episode, we looked into RBG's career and iconic status. Through tweets that focused more on participation rather than original discourse. People reinforced her iconic status by sharing similar quotes, obituaries, images, and sentiments all related to her death.

Lauren:

In this episode, Amy Coney Barrett officially enters the conversation. We'll look into who Barrett is and most importantly, how she and Ginsburg are presented as opposites through Twitter discourse. Of course, Barrett's background and ideological stances differ considerably from Ginsburg. But the Twitter discourse about these Supreme Court justices serves to further separate them in an already polarized time. Let's get to it.

Lauren:

Hi there! I'm Lauren, and lately, I've been reading tweets. Profound, I know, for a 22-year-old to pay attention to social media, I'm aware. And it's true, most everyone reads tweets from time to time, but lately, I've been reading tweets a little differently. I've combined some of my passions, writing, following current events, and using social media to study the discourse around two of the most talked-about and perhaps influential women of the past year and a half. Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Amy Coney Barrett.

Lauren:

The two women, different in fundamental ways, share a common thread, the Supreme Court. After the passing of Ginsburg on September 18th, 2020. Amy Coney Barrett became her replacement in a record six weeks. The time period was filled with anxiety, fear, and uncertainty as the United States battled a raging pandemic and a violently polarized election scene. Some mourned the loss of Ginsburg while others awaited her younger, more conservative replacement.

Lauren:

The tensions were high, and what did people do about it? They tweeted. In this podcast, I'll break down my study of tweets from the six-week time period between Ginsburg's death and Barrett's nomination. Together, we will examine the intertextual ways in which the two women are connected through the examination of thousands of tweets. Let's go.

Lauren:

Born January 28th, 1972. Amy Vivian Coney is the oldest of seven children. Raised Catholic, she received her undergraduate degree from Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee, and studied English. Barrett attended the University of Notre Dame's law school on a full scholarship. During her time in law school, she served as the executive editor of the school's law review and graduated top of her class.

Lauren:

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After law school, Barrett clerked for Judge Laurence Silberman of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit from 1997 to 1998 and under Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia from 1998 to 1999. Scalia became her mentor, and she adopted his originalist and textualist approaches to interpreting the constitution and law as described in the New York Times article published in September of 2020.

Lauren:

Barrett worked at a D.C. law firm for two years after the clerkships before she accepted the position of The John M. Olin Fellow at law at the George Washington University law school. This is especially notable given the donations that The Olin Foundation pours into conservative think tanks and federalist candidates for government offices, to uphold policies and laws that support originalist interpretations of the constitution, as well as candidates who promote libertarian views and craft legislation that affirms far-right ideologies.

Lauren:

In 1999, Amy Coney Barrett married her husband, Jesse, who is currently a lawyer at South Bank Legal, an Indiana-based law firm, and an adjunct professor at Notre Dame's law school. The couple has seven children, two of them adopted from Haiti and a son that has down syndrome.

Lauren:

Following her time in D.C., Barrett had a 15-year teaching career at Notre Dame. In October of 2017, Barrett was appointed to the Seventh U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. During her three years in the role, she wrote around a hundred opinions and considered cases regarding gun rights, immigration, discrimination, sexual assault on college campuses, and abortion.

Lauren:

As we know, President Trump announced that Judge Amy Coney Barrett would be the nominee to replace Ginsburg on September 26th, 2020. Eight days after Ginsburg's death.

Lauren:

So now our question becomes, what were people saying on Twitter about Barrett, and how is that related to Ginsburg? As we talked about in the last episode, intertextuality is the idea that all texts depend on and respond to other texts. Intertextuality is also how people display their knowledge and make connections between two or more observed texts.

Lauren:

Barrett's speedy nomination invites close comparisons between her career and that of Ruth Bader Ginsburg's. More than this, intertextuality again provides a way to understand how Barrett's and Ginsburg's judicial records and nomination stories became interconnected, both in the timing and the content of Twitter discourse.

Lauren:

Knowledge and discourse surrounding Barrett did not exist in a void. Rather, what my analysis of tweets shows is that discourse about her only happened as a direct result of Ginsburg's death and the

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Republicans knee jerk reaction to the Supreme Court vacancy. On one hand, Amy Coney Barrett and RBG are connected through the discourse because of the rapid nomination after Ruth Bader Ginsburg's death. But at the same time, the discourse, whether in favor of or against Ruth Bader Ginsburg, seeks to establish Amy Coney Barrett's differences. The purpose of linking the two women is to highlight their contrasts.

Lauren:

It makes sense chronologically that discourse about Ginsburg dominated Twitter immediately following her death. Participants in the discourse did just that, participate. Memorializing, quoting, reporting, and empowering women were plentiful in the days after her death. However, as time passed and reports of movement from Senate Republicans and Trump to fill the seat escalated, Barrett began to enter the conversation. Even in speculation, as Trump confirmed his intent to nominate a candidate before the November 2020 election.

Lauren:

One prominent way that Barrett gets introduced into the Twitter discourse is in the category of tweets that I've called passing down legacy. These tweets recall Ginsburg's legacy while speculating on whether Barrett will be nominated and what Barrett might do to jeopardize Ginsburg's judicial legacy.

Speaker 2:

Some in the media will pretend Amy Coney Barrett is reasonable because she's calm in demeanor. They will ignore her viciously anti-LGBTQ, anti-choice history because she doesn't sound like Trump. But don't be fooled. She's an enemy of civil rights, and she's proud of it.

Speaker 3:

R.I.P. Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Horrible. Life-altering news for millions and millions in worst ways imaginable. She was an absolute legend of a human. And on top of that pain, the Supreme Court? Just... Yeah, you know. Oh, God. No.

Lauren:

These tweets seem to function in similar ways. Ginsburg died, so dot dot dot needs to be done. There's a cause and effect type of structure here, and a result of that structure is that Barrett and Ginsburg are pitted as rivals.

Lauren:

Barrett comes next and based on the swiftness of the nomination process and her political stances, most tweets that include both women in the passing down legacy category seemed to raise concern about what Ruth Bader Ginsburg's replacement will do to the decades of progress made. Specific references to progress in terms of voting rights, worker's rights, LGBTQ rights, and abortion rights seem to be in jeopardy with Trump's nomination.

Speaker 4:

I'm scared for all my friends whose rights are going to be threatened by the passing of Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

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Speaker 5:

I can't even articulate how terrified I am about losing Ruth Bader Ginsburg on the Supreme Court, but even worse, it's absolutely absurd that the fate of our country rested on her shoulders in the way that it did.

Lauren:

The other aspect that the passing down legacy category tells us about the two women is that the judicial system as a whole was under critique during this time. Specifically, because Ginsburg felt the need to work into her late 80s in order to preserve her work. Some Twitter users pointed out that our country would not have been in this fragile state if Ginsburg wouldn't have held her position for so long.

Lauren:

Overall though, the message was that Ginsburg's legacy was at risk due to Trump's nomination and the eventual confirmation of Barrett. A similar category of tweets calling to action was common in discussions about the two women and the chain of events that did in fact replace Ginsburg at record speed. Tweets labeled as calls to action are as simple as that. Twitter users ask their audiences to do something in response to the situation.

Speaker 6:

Democrats, you all better fight as hard and as dirty as Republicans have before. No butter knives at gun fights. Fight for us, and we will have your backs.

Speaker 7:

Honor her. Honor her legacy. Vote.

Speaker 8:

Amy Coney Barrett using justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg in her political ads is disgusting. Vote her massless ass out. Keep our democracy.

Speaker 9:

Save to politics for another day. The rank hypocrisy outrage in boat county. Justice Ginsburg was a towering figure, a fighter. Time and time again, she beat the odds. She wouldn't want anyone to give up or be deterred from fighting for the dreams she embodied.

Lauren:

Most actions correlated to the upcoming 2020 presidential election. Tweets urge others to vote in the election and specifically to vote Trump out of office. Verbs such as 'fight' indicate the urgency of the time and the urgency of the action at hand. This category puts context to the tension and the timeline, which as we know, shape the discourse in tremendous ways. Not only is Ruth Bader Ginsburg's legacy being invoked here, but it's taken a step further by users demanding it to be protected.

Lauren:

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The very existence of Barrett threatens to undermine what Ginsburg seemed to build in action, such as voting for Biden and other Democrats in the election brings some agency and active participation beyond just the Twitter-sphere. One additional kind of tweet kept appearing in my study, and I couldn't quite figure it out. And I didn't know what these tweets were doing at first, but I did know that the content was raw, emotional, and a kind of stream of consciousness expression.

Lauren:

Initially, I thought that these were just miscellaneous tweets, written utterances that didn't say much but said in a really dramatic or heartfelt or contentious or corny way. After rereading these tweets, I then realized that they were a category all of their own. I decided to call them the Processing the Moment Tweets. In these tweets, we can see most clearly how individuals are expressing the effective, emotional, even spiritual responses to the current state of affairs. Ginsburg's death support or suspicion of Barrett as a nominee, the divisive effects of the 2020 elections, and so on. Honestly, it proved to be the most formative in my analysis of the data.

Speaker 10:

Ruth Bader Ginsburg died. So I'll be clocking out for the rest of the month.

Speaker 11:

Fuck 2020. Fuck Trump. Fuck.

Speaker 12:

2020 took my gecko and Ruth Bader Ginsburg. I'm not okay.

Speaker 13:

I'm literally sick to my stomach. Notorious RBG was a champion of the people and women's rights. We need her now more than ever. #RIPRBG.

Speaker 14:

Mr. President, this is low, even for you. No, I didn't write Ruth Bader Ginsburg's dying wish to a nation she served so well and spent her whole life making a more perfect union.

Speaker 15:

A party in power duly elected has no constitutional or moral duty to lame duck status and voluntarily relinquish its power to appoint and confirm justices just because an election is nearing. This is such horse manure. The left would never defer. We better govern.

Speaker 16:

I'm as terrified as everyone else, but I'll start worrying about politics and strategy tomorrow.

Speaker 17:

Replacing Ruth Bader Ginsburg with Amy Coney Barrett is like replacing the constitution with a scrap of used toilet paper.

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Lauren:

Every worry of the time is captured in this category. It's the most raw, chaotic kind of category and contains a very different tone and force of expressions than that of the other categories, which tended towards reverence such as the memorializing category or reporting. There is significant range in the topic choices, which also seems to reflect the momentary slash of the moment nature of this category. The tweets here are more immediate, too. They're more reactionary and more charged as a result of the moments and the situations to which people are responding.

Lauren:

Unlike other categories, which seem to be more kin to echo chambers. This category contains the most diversity and personal kinds of expressions while some are politically oriented. They're not necessarily aimed at the circulation of information. Hence, the category name of Processing. Almost like diary or journal entries. It's a sort of reckoning, a coming to terms with, or even being able to make the moment makes sense that elicits these kinds of utterances on Twitter.

Lauren:

To recap, certain categories seem to connect Barrett to Ginsburg more than others. Tweets that indicate a passing down of legacy seem to directly tie Ginsburg to Barrett where Barrett's existence is in the conversation and linked to a type of effect to Ginsburg's death and the consequential Supreme court vacancy. Tweets with a call to action seem to recognize the cause and effect relationship and go a step further. They ask for direct action in the 2020 election to help preserve the legacy of Ginsburg.

Lauren:

And lastly, tweets that are categorized as processing the moment. Provide a glimpse into the messy, emotional period of time. Regardless of political ideology, people were worked up for various reasons and felt compelled to express their thoughts and feelings. These three categories demonstrate the ways in which discourse around Ginsburg and Barrett were jumbled together and hard to separate. Invoking one figure immediately included the other. Oftentimes Ginsburg was painted as the hero and figure who needed protection, and Barrett was the villain or figure in process.

Lauren:

In our next episode, we'll look at the rhetorical ways in which Barrett was presented as a figure in process during this time. Not only was she constantly compared to Ginsburg, but utterances of Barrett were often connected to Republican politicians. After that, we'll take a look at what has happened since Barrett's confirmation and how the fourth female Supreme Court Justice and first black female Supreme Court Justice, Ketanji Brown Jackson, might fit into the mix. Talk soon.