POLITICAL CONVERSION AS INTRAPERSONAL ARGUMENT: SELF-DISSOCIATION IN DAVID BROCK’S BLINDED BY THE RIGHT

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Political conversion narratives are pervasive features of U.S. public discourse, yet their workings and functions are still relatively uncharted. This essay explores the rhetoric of journalist and activist David Brock, a convert from the political right to the left. I argue that Brock’s controversial autobiography, Blinded by the Right: The Conscience of an Ex-Conservative, demonstrates how conversion experiences can be enacted through dissociative argumentation. In particular, the author uses a series of what I term self-dissociations to define a new identity and advance movement advocacy. The paper concludes by evaluating political transformation in relation to dissociation, identity, and U.S. politics.

Key Words: conversion, dissociation, identity, movements, intrapersonal argument

“The choice of a social identity rarely occurs in tranquility.... The crisis may culminate finally in political disassociation, and the displacement of previous associations by a different configuration of social attachments, sometimes a new invention, sometimes a rehabilitated memory.”

—Edwin Black

Wherever one looks in current affairs, there are political converts who leverage arguments about personal change toward public causes. Political converts and party-switchers such as Ronald Reagan, David Horowitz, Arianna Huffington, James Jeffords, and Dennis Miller—to name only a few of these types of advocates—have both produced and been influenced by discursive webs of social transformation. More than simply expressive claims about one’s party preferences, political conversion narratives are nexus points between identities and movements. These stories justify and extend one’s political change as support for larger collectives and interests. In 2004, for example, the Republican Party had former Democratic Governor Zell Miller deliver its keynote address at the Republican National Convention to buttress President George W. Bush’s campaign and policies (Files, 2004).

Political converts stand before the public as persuasive models and embodied arguments, wedding their experiences of change with political purpose. They also play indirect roles in politics. In recent years, many former Marxists like David Horowitz, a conservative journalist and activist, turned up on George W. Bush’s doorstep as “team members assembled to help craft and carry out President Bush’s governing philosophy” of turning the Republican party into “the party of caring” (Kosterlitz, 2001, pp. 1296, 1303). Indeed, terms like “compassionate conservatism” would never have even been created without the intellectual resources and experiences drawn from these converted elites (p. 1297).

As argument forms with public consequence, this essay examines the right-to-left political conversion of Washington insider and journalist David Brock. Brock was a conservative...
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journalist (in)famous for his coverage of Anita Hill during the Senate hearings over the nomination of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court, and another series of writings that set in motion conservative campaigns to unseat President Clinton from office in the 1990s (Bruni, 2002, para. 1). Yet just two years after Brock (2002) wrote his tell-all conversion autobiography, Blinded by the Right: The Conscience of an Ex-Conservative, former President Clinton (2004) was publicly praising him for recanting conservatism (p. 565). The text was also celebrated by Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle (D-South Dakota), who threw a book release party with James Carville, Paul Begala, and other Democrats, publically declaring: “To any Republicans out there: If you are willing to disavow your past and change your ways we’ll throw a party for you as well!” (as cited in Grove, 2003, p. C03).

In this analysis, I demonstrate that conversion narratives can be constructed through an interpenetrating framework of self-dissociative argumentation. This finding demonstrates how identity transformation is an argumentative process. Brock’s dissociative discourse gradually presents an unveiling of a moral, authentic gay identity in the author’s shift between political movements. Although Brock certainly makes his conversion rhetoric public, the story is framed as a process occurring within and about the self, particularly through Brock’s “internal” struggle to maintain allegiance to a conservative movement hostile to his gay identity (Brock, 2002, p. 44).

Whether they are presented in a book, on a television appearance, or in a speech to party faithful, conversion narratives are rituals with rhetorical significance in American political life. They thus give us critical insight into how political identity can be formed through self-targeting arguments that reinforce or extend particular political paradigms. In the following sections, I discuss my definition of political conversion and situate the topic with work in identity studies. I then explore the literature on dissociation to construct the concept of self-dissociation in political conversion. To provide some context for the analysis, a short overview of Brock’s life is provided. The remainder of the essay demonstrates and draws implications from four key self-dissociations in his book.

Political Conversion

Deep interdisciplinary literatures analyze religious conversion narratives (Booth, 1995; Caldwell, 1983; Gooren, 2007; Griffin, 1990; McGee, 1998; Rambo, 1999; Spencer, 1995). Secular and political conversion accounts are less charted, though some explorations have been made (Bond, 1973; Branham, 1991; Brown, 1994; Fabj, 1998; Golden, Berquist, & Coleman, 1989; Jensen & Hammerback, 1986; Walsh, 1990). Scherer (2006) argues “that figures traditionally identified with religion, such as ‘conversion’ … persist within secular rationality” (p. iv). In the early-twentieth century, for instance, the Women’s Social and Political Union appropriated and modified traditional conversion narratives in its periodical pamphlets to create new modes of self-representation and converts for the suffragist cause (Hartman, 2003). Bailey (2008) finds that George W. Bush adopted a traditional religious conversion narrative to stake a claim to the presidency and influence public policy. That conversion narratives have become such powerful resources in the political realm thus beckons critical attention.

Stories such as Brock’s might be partially explained by several key terms, including mortification, apologia, and confessional discourse. Yet conversion most captures the sense of transformation constituted in such a narrative. Religious conversion is typically defined as “a radical reorganization of identity, meaning, and life” (Travisano, 1970, p. 600), “the process
of changing a sense of root, reality,” or “a conscious shift in one's sense of grounding” (Heirich, 1977, pp. 673-674). Quite simply, conversion is a fundamental personal and public turn, a deep change from one state of being, knowing, and acting to another.

For this essay's purposes, it is enough to define political conversion as one's private or public assertion of or justification for changing from one political ideology to another. Confessional discourses in politics, for instance, may or may not evidence conversion. An individual may assert she or he is sorry for past mistakes and turn away from former allegiances, without necessarily converting to a new political affiliation. I believe that major policy changes can also constitute a type of political conversion to particular causes that can occur without party changes. President Jimmy Carter's political transformation “from a dove to a hawk” over the course of his administration is one such example (Aronoff, 2006, p. 425). For the moment, I focus on an account where a personal transformation coincided with a party change.

At the same time, Brock could have kept his political conversion to himself (i.e., through exclusively intrapersonal communication such as private journaling), though it would be hard to imagine such a scenario, given how subsequent actions would likely generate some form of public announcement. But as much as Brock writes about the intrapersonal processes by which his conversion was constituted, his writing also acts as a public justification for that change—both reflecting and performing the dissociations employed to construct his new political identity.

Scholars know that selves are formed through continually reconstructed biographical narratives (Giddens, 1991), emerging in processes of communication. But the communication discipline still has much work to do in creating an adequate vocabulary for dealing with identity (Pearce, 2007, pp. 171-198; see also Jasinski, 2001, pp. 192-193; Zarefsky, 2009, pp. 445-446). Examining several religious and secular conversion narratives (including Brock’s), Anderson (2007) argues that identity is a rhetorical achievement, moving beyond a naïve modernist essentialism “that mortifies the self at play,” or poststructural readings that simply analyze the concept in terms of its presupposed fraudulence (p. 168). Conversion rhetoric thus has much to tell us about how communicative identity is formed and leveraged as a persuasive technique. Similarly, Lake (1997) writes that as much as identity claims are conjunctural constructions, arguments about authenticity can be legitimate, providing a coherent, grounded self from which to engage in new acts.

Following these works, I argue that identity is a continual process of argumentative construction both informing and being informed by a rhetor’s temporal conceptions of a self. In this “dialectical site” (Lake, 1997, p. 68), it is critical to track the degree to which an author uses essentialist or constructionist argumentation, which may thwart or advance the potential for further arguments about identity. This is not to deny the role that factors such as biology may play in human development; rather, this perspective gives scholars insight into the symbolic contours of identity transformation. As such, my position acknowledges that

1 Anderson (2007) examines Brock’s autobiography in relation to ethos and identity as part of a larger project on the Burkean constitution of identity. He argues that ethos and identity mutually imply one another, and that “identity is more limited than character in its ability to shape itself to . . . situations, constrained by our cultural expectations about the reality of identity” (p. 97). Anderson finds that Brock’s pre-conversion ethos invites reader sympathy, and that Brock’s post-conversion ethos, which should have exemplified a change in character given his new identity, was betrayed by the author’s post-conversion acts. In other words, Brock’s “contradictory, competing ethos of the tell-all insider complicates the clean break of conversion Brock asserts” through his continued use of tactics such as name-calling and tabloid-esque gossip after his conversion (p. 113). While Anderson underestimates the sheer degree of praise Brock has also found in his post-conversion life—that is, why so many did not find Brock’s ethos and identity questionable—I seek to advance his touchstone work on identity by providing an alternative reading of Blinded by the Right as a form of dissociative argument.
stabilized core identities—which are constructed through argument processes—can provide people with perfectly legitimate, coherent grounds for living, so long as they remain open to further communicative possibilities.

In Brock’s case, however, dissociative conversion rhetoric largely serves to naturalize an ontological self that is beyond criticism. In his transformation, Brock (2002) writes that conservatism had blinded him from seeing his real, true self, “suggest[ing] a theme of initial innocence that was betrayed” by his blindness to the nature of conservatism (p. 285). Across the text, Brock mostly employs essentialist terms to argue his conversion involved finding an authentic core identity, while the conversion narrative itself tends to reify these dissociative constructions. Overall, this essay advances interdisciplinary scholarship by demonstrating the role and consequences of public presentations of intrapersonal argumentation processes in the construction of public identity claims, repositioning these subjects in terms of argument studies.

Self-Dissociation

Conversion experiences about the discovery of or return to a real self can be enacted through what I term self-dissociation. That is, conversions are argued into existence through contingent, dissociative rhetorics targeting the self. Lake (1997) claims identity is an argument that one has with oneself and others—that “one’s self is the argument in which one engages about identity” (p. 68). I contend that by closely tracing arguments about identity in a conversion context, scholars are offered new insights about dissociation, how these narratives are constructed, and why they are such powerful appeals within and between public movements.

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) introduced theories of dissociation to U.S. argumentation scholars, and many subsequent studies have explored the concept (Bass, 1981; Frank, 2004; Lynch, 2006; Murphy, 2004; Olson, 1995, 1996; Rubinelli, 2006; Stahl, 2002; Warnick, 2004). Perelman (1982) states that dissociation arises when a person faces incompatible thoughts, but “does not limit himself [sic] to conjuring away the difficulty by pretending not to see it, but instead tries to resolve it in a theoretically satisfying manner by reestablishing a coherent vision of reality” (p. 126). The prototypical root term I/term II “pair appearance/reality, [is] a practice which we find directly or indirectly in all dissociations” (Perelman, 1982, p. 126). Term II is always a coherent, normative, and explanatory vehicle in relation to term I, “with the purpose of getting rid of incompatibilities that may appear between different aspects of term I” (Perelman, 1982, p. 127). Using social/personal as an example, Perelman (1982) writes “term II indicates what is innate and natural, sincere and authentic, while every social participation is only superficial and artificial, a ‘mask’ and an ‘armor’ behind which we have to rediscover the true person” (p. 135).

Importantly, dissociative arguments reduce tensions created by inconsistencies in our experience of the world, by redefining and reconstructing, rather than simply dividing phenomena (Jasinski, 2001, p. 176). Perelman (1982) argues the terms can be reversed, but that reversals usually modify one term or the other. This means that dissociation is not simply division from a presumed unity, but a means of discursive transformation and resolution, with reference to “the argumentative situation in its totality.... by remodeling our conception of reality, it prevents the reappearance of the same incompatibility” (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969, p. 412). Thus, dissociative argumentation is highly compatible with conversion rhetoric. Indeed, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s (1969) use of terms
such as "purification," "substitution," and "liberation" to describe dissociation underscores this potential (pp. 439–440)—as does Olson’s (1996) description of dissociation, which "profoundly converts [emphasis added] and prioritizes the elements in decoupling them" (p. 196). Dissociation is "a technique for preserving philosophical integrity" (Stahl, 2002, p. 453), making it a fitting concept for Brock’s claim that he recovered a real self in his conversion.

Dissociative pairs do not have to be made explicit; the use of single terms such as "apparent peace" or "true democracy" are examples of condensed dissociations (Perelman, 1982, p. 134; Jasinski, 2001, p. 179). They often infer the other half of the dissociative pair to complete the transformative act. While for "purely classificatory" purposes, dissociations seem thus to take on an independent existence," we should continually look toward their "interdependences established in argument" (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969, p. 423). That is, dissociations often work interactively with other pairs and are modified as they are adopted in different spheres.

The topic of definition is closely related to dissociation “whenever it claims to furnish the real, true meaning of the concept as opposed to its customary or apparent usage” (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969, p. 444). Scholars have found numerous functions of dissociation between interlocutors (van Rees, 2005, 2006, 2009), and have analyzed the concept in relation to one’s definition of a situation, social values, and public policy choices (Schialpa, 1985, 2003; Zarefsky, 2004; Zarefsky, Miller-Tutzauer, & Tutzauer, 1984). I extend these perspectives by looking to dissociation as a way of defining the self.

Brock’s autobiographical medium works in tandem with dissociative processes of defining identity. Autobiographical writing is well suited to identity dissociations, given the sense of distance it creates between current and former senses of self. Loschnigg (2008) argues that “the temporal distance between experiencing-I and narrating-I is the pivotal point in autobiographical narration” (p. 35).2 Similarly, Brock (2002) proposes that his break from conservatism “came not in one decisive moment, but in a series of revelations great and small” (p. xvii). In toggling between current and former senses of self, the author gradually breaks ranks with conservatism through a series of dissociations, connecting with Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s (1969) idea “that a single incompatibility can yield several adjustments of concepts designed to resolve it” (p. 415).

It is critical to note that Brock’s efforts to dissociate his former, false-conservative self (appearance) from a new, true-liberal self (reality) had the further effect of evoking dissociative responses from his critics. One reviewer stated that Brock “won me over, not through fine prose or clever wit or deep psychological analysis, but by a steady, graceless, honest rain of anecdotes and details” as “the real [emphasis added] David Brock is not only stranger than fiction, he is richer and more profound” (Bram, 2002, p. 19). Goldstein (2002) believes that he was influenced “not by Brock’s earnestness but by the substance of his saga,” as differentiated from the ruthlessness of others, whose “ambition is merely the surface [emphasizes

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2 Loschnigg (2008) clarifies that autobiography only became a literary genre in the late eighteenth century, despite its public presence since Augustine’s Confessions. There is widespread scholarly agreement that during the eighteenth century, confessional religious discourses gave way to new emphases on secular individual development and subjectivity in autobiography, because “individuals felt the need to ascertain their identities in the face of a rapidly changing environment” (p. 35). In the 1970s, deconstructionist theories eliminated notions of a “self” and “subject” in autobiography (p. 35). Starting in the late 1980s, however, “the concept of autobiographical reference has reappeared. But now the referent is no longer a pre-existing self, but rather a time-bound human experience corresponding with the temporality of narrative” (pp. 35–36). In this “narrative turn . . . the self is the product of his or her stories” (p. 36; see also Dorsey, 1993). I would add that the self is also constituted by argumentative processes.
To understand how Brock employed self-dissociation and invoked such responses, some background is necessary.

**Brock's Life and Context**

Brock was born in 1962 and grew up in New Jersey and Texas. He worked at the Robert Kennedy Memorial Foundation in Washington, D.C., before attending the University of California at Berkeley. Brock (2002) went to Berkeley to be with other social justice advocates, but found the censorial atmosphere stifling (p. 2). He decided to become a conservative after taking classes with conservative professors, and was particularly influenced in his decision by Irving Kristol, Ronald Reagan, and by reading "Commentary, the leading monthly magazine of the ex-liberals known as neoconservatives" (p. 5).

Brock came to Washington in 1986 as a conservative journalist and attacked Anita Hill in a book funded by The Free Press, *The Real Anita Hill*. Brock also wrote a series of articles on "Troopergate," in which some Arkansas state troopers accused President Clinton of engaging in sexual indiscretions with several women while he was Governor of their state. The investigative pieces were widely hailed as influencing several national events. Some believe that without Brock, "the Clinton impeachment trial may not have happened" ("David Brock," 1999, para. 1). In January 1994, Brock accidentally left the name "Paula" within the text of one of his articles, "which spurred Paula Jones to sue President Bill Clinton for sexual harassment. The ensuing depositions introduced Monica [Lewinsky], and the impeachment trial soon followed" (para. 1).

In time, Brock became uneasy about his Anita Hill claims. Upon the publication of Jane Mayer and Jill Abramson’s (1994) book countering Brock's text—among other revelations about Judge Clarence Thomas from close friends—Brock (2002) realized that "I put a lie in print" in his writing about the case (p. 268). In the midst of his ideological struggle, The Free Press asked Brock to write a book similar to his earlier one, this time attacking Hillary Clinton. In the course of writing, Brock finds evidence countering what he believes his conservative audiences wanted to hear. Upon its release, many conservatives considered the book a defense of the first lady, and according to Brock, subsequently attacked his writing and sexuality.

Brock wrote a piece in *Esquire* (1997) magazine renouncing his conservatism, and published *Blinded by the Right* (2002). After his conversion, Brock started *Media Matters for America*, a non-profit organization dedicated to monitoring conservative media and building the progressive movement. Democrat funders such as George Soros and others contributed over two million dollars toward the project ("David Brock," 2007, para. 5–7; McKelvey, 2004). Brock released subsequent books, such as *The Republican Noise Machine: Right-Wing Media and How it Corrupts Democracy* (2004), leveraging his insider knowledge of the conservative movement toward progressive claims.

**Self-Dissociations in Brock's Political Conversion**

Brock enacts his political conversion through four major self-dissociations: false/authentic, base/quality, expedient/moral, and blind/sighted. In the following analysis, these self-dissociations are examined as argumentative actions mediating identity and movement change.
False/Authentic Self

Brock’s first self-dissociation separates his false identity as a closeted conservative (term I) from an authentic, openly gay identity (term II). In his pre-conversion life, Brock had a unitary sense of his socio-political self. Over the course of the narrative, however, he argues that the reality of his gay identity could no longer stand the appearance of his closeted life, reorienting and hierarchizing the relationship between the two concepts, and setting in motion his subsequent political transformation. At the age of 11, Brock became attracted to men, and recounts suppressing recognition of any associations between conservatism and anti-gay prejudice for years. Brock’s knowledge that there were many gay Republicans in Washington, D.C., partly reduced this dissonance. Despite this initial harmony, Brock gradually found connecting with conservatives difficult. When he worked for the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think-tank in Washington, D.C., he adopted “a false pose,” pretending to be interested in young women to cover up his gay identity (Brock, 2002, p. 79).

Brock (2002) enacts his conversion through a psychological language compatible with intrapersonal dissociations. He uses terms such as “suppress[ion]” (p. 84), “denial” (p. 128), and “avoidance” (p. 360) to communicate his inability to face growing tensions between being closeted and openly gay as a conservative, forcing him to live a “stressed, bifurcated existence” (p. 45). This language sets the conditions for discursive division and transformation. Moreover, his lengthy, autobiographical rhetoric performs the very struggle through which this psychological recovery of self occurs. Brock does not present the false/authentic dissociation as about some instant conversion, but rather as a tense endeavor where he only gradually arrives at his authentic, openly gay self.

Over the course of the narrative, for instance, Brock employs measured, increasingly starker contrasts between the two terms of the false/authentic pair. He engages the dissociation through comments such as, “I may have worn the clothes of a social conservative, but they didn’t fit” (p. 140), and later argues more forcefully that “I was now . . . a Jew in Hitler’s army” (p. 177). In this way, the false/authentic gay identity pair also links with a private/public dissociation. Brock connects dissociative argumentation with a temporal rhetoric to communicate that his was not a rash attempt to quickly resolve the incompatibilities in his life. Rather, he weathered the false/authentic tension with great suffering to diachronically remodel his identity, gradually becoming more public about what he perceives as his true self.

Brock’s intrapersonal dissociations link his ideas about a private, real self with public arguments for authentic political movements. As Brock (2002) says, “I had no close personal bond with anyone in the conservative movement. . . . The sad reality [emphasis added] is that I was trying to fill my unmet, private emotional needs through my professional life” (p. 112). Communication with conservatives takes on the appearance/reality split. Despite the apparent support from some on the right who knew about his gay identity, Brock discovers that many conservatives were bigoted about homosexuality behind his back. After critiquing Gary Aldrich’s sensational book about the Clintons, Unlimited Access (1998), Brock says a conservative “antigay offensive” was launched against him that “instantly shattered the false reality [emphasis added] I was living in” (p. 295).

These self-dissociations are deepened by looking to others’ false and real selves, creating a sense that political positions can be viewed as either in or out of accordance with one’s very nature. Brock (2002) describes the hypocrisy he discovers between the real sexual lives of others, in comparison with their false appearances as chaste conservatives. While conserva-
tives were launching impeachment hearings on Clinton’s sexual indiscretions, Brock notes that Republican Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich was in an extra-marital affair, as was Brock’s magazine editor (pp. 68–69). Conservative pundit George Will went after Clinton, but had marriage problems himself (p. 331). Richard Mellon Scaife, who bankrolled many conservative publications and institutions, was an adulterer; moreover, police found a stack of pornography at conservative publisher Al Regnery’s house (pp. 87, 291). These conservatives argued for unitary, consistent selves as a moral standard even as they could not meet that standard, or as Brock implies, as out of accord with their very natures.

As such, Brock uses dissociation as both an intrapersonal means of arguing for the authenticity of his and others’ conversions, but also a tool to make one’s move between old and new alliances seem natural and inevitable. Brock became friends with Arianna and Michael Huffington, two prominent figures in Republican media and politics. Brock (2002) explains that after the two divorced, Michael Huffington later came out to the public as gay (and Arianna converted from the political right to the left). Brock argues, “the conservative fun couple of the Gingrich era were not what they seemed,” and Michael “was lost, numbed emotionally, and alienated from his true self [emphases added]” (pp. 240–241). Following from the appearance/reality foundation, Brock describes the shifts within his self as connected, each step of the way, with public divisions between people. At the same time, these shifts paradoxically both create and essentialize changes in political identity.3

Brock’s (2002) dissociation between his and others’ false and authentic sexual selves ultimately modifies his party identity. He recovers a new definition of self that informs his political priorities: “I began to learn a lesson of life: As long as I am true [emphasis added] to myself, I can handle being alone” (p. 316). Further transforming the terms of his political identification, Brock relates, “through [my partner] Andrew I learned all about the gay world—and how to be honest about who I was” (p. 19). Brock’s political conversion was accomplished through other, interpenetrating self-dissociations. In addition to the false/authentic argument, the author creates a normative, transforming distinction between two views of his profession.

**Base/Quality Journalism**

Brock’s second self-dissociation separates an old habit of writing base journalism (term I) from his new desire to write quality journalism (term II). In Brock’s pre-conversion life, he did not distinguish between the two—journalism was a unitary concept. Over the course of the narrative, he draws a line between the reality of his new journalistic perspective and the mere appearances in his former conservative writings. In Brock’s (2002) words, his career as a conservative writer was defined by “journalistic thuggery” (p. 277). His writing was driven by assertion rather than argument; “instead of doing real [emphasis added] reporting and

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3 Some comparison can be made between literature on gay identity models and Brock’s largely linear conversion narrative. Cass’s (1979, 1984) model of homosexual identity formation is one of the most referenced studies in this area (Evans, Forney, & Guido-Dibrito, 1998, p. 92). Cass (1979, 1984) defines several stages between identity confusion and acceptance/synthesis that parallel Brock’s own transformation. While theorizing how one may advance, stall, or track back through her model, Cass (1984) even describes developmental pathways in terms of the degree to which selves are “dichotomized” (p. 152). In response, subsequent scholars like D’Augelli (1994a, 1994b) have advanced less essentialized, static models, instead accounting for the many processual, complex environmental and individual influences at play in homosexual identity development. As a whole, Brock’s narrative is in the Cass rather than the D’Augelli camp, but the conversion rhetoric brings an even more teleological approach to these matters by characterizing one’s experiences in terms of a dichotomized, linear return to a real self. Overall, the concept of self-dissociation adds to these literatures the idea that developmental changes can be fostered and impacted by dissociative argument structures targeting identity.
undertaking a legitimate investigation” (p. 124), Brock would often gloss over important details or ignore evidence contrary to his claims. In forming the dissociation between base and quality journalism, Brock expresses a series of doubts about the veracity of his writings on Anita Hill, reorienting the title of his former book, *The Real Anita Hill*. Brock admits to having used a debased journalistic method, so that, “learning about [the real] Anita Hill, the human being behind the political target, was just too painful” (p. 322). While the Hill book was incredibly successful among conservatives and many moderates, Brock highlights that it was rightly attacked as “Sleaze with Footnotes” by other sources (as cited in Brock, 2002, p. 128).

Paradoxically, self-dissociations permit a convert to argue that they underwent a grand change, but also that they never changed. Using the base/quality dissociation, Brock (2002) loses confidence in the pro-Clarence Thomas camp, emphasizing the recovery of his journalistic values: “it had all been just another power game in the service of a hard-right ideology that I never shared [emphasis added]” (p. 269). Brock maintains that in his battles, “I fell in line with people whose social values were anathema to mine” (p. 97). Brock’s dissociative constructions thus build a totalizing defense against potential critiques that may attack the author for changing parties and others that might object he never really changed. At a minimum, the base/quality dissociation makes an argument heralding values of both consistency and change.

As with the other dissociations, Brock (2002) situates the political conversion between chains of intrapersonal identity and public movement claims. He deepens the base/quality pair in a discussion of his work on the Clintons by writing that “investigation” was a euphemism for “cruel smear” (p. 163). Brock suggests that he knowingly used the Arkansas state troopers’ shoddy stories of the Clintons, despite a gnawing sense that they were questionable characters, and that conservatives were constructing base, paranoid political fantasies in these matters. Base/quality chains out into an opinion/knowledge pair, as Brock’s “Troopergate” article is said to be “a mix of circumstantial observation and rumor” (p. 173), rather than real information. Those involved in the Arkansas project “knew nothing about journalism” (p. 214).

Term II (quality) acts as an engine for the political conversion. Brock’s (2002) very writing about conservatism’s lack of journalistic standards, particularly the lack of editing and fact checking in his former job (p. 322), makes the conversion an outgrowth of this terminological reconfiguration. The right-wing investigators he worked with “had no capacity to judge the credibility of sources” (p. 222) and another writer at the magazine “had contempt for the fact-gathering techniques of journalists” (p. 229). Later in the narrative, Brock discovers the source for an article attacking Clinton was paid $15,000 as compensation for the information, hence “journalistic ethics meant little to the right wing” (pp. 233). Incompatibilities developed in Brock’s former job at the conservative *Washington Times*, so much that “thriving at the Times entailed walling ourselves off from uncomfortable truths about our [editorial] bosses” (p. 26). These personal encounters with base standards act as condensed dissociations, implying distinctions between appearance and reality, lies and truth, and creating the conditions for Brock to name conservative politics and media the “Big Lie machine that nourished in book publishing, on talk radio, and on the Internet” (p. 110).

Anticipating the charge that his political conversion was based in some unthinking or irrational experience (perhaps as a religious conversion may be perceived), the base/quality dissociation constructs the transformation as rational and measured. By drawing a normative distinction between real journalism and the hyperbole of right-wing news, for example, the
dissociation functions to both decouple and assert integrity about Brock’s former and new selves. Brock (2002) remembers Ted Olson, the former Assistant Attorney General in the Reagan administration, comparing President Clinton to Don Corleone (p. 229). Conservative radio talk-show host (and former Nixon appointee) G. Gordon Liddy remarks of Hillary Clinton, “I think the woman’s been getting away with everything short of murder” (as cited in Brock, 2002, p. 272). With other conservatives, “[Bill] Clinton was compared to the devil, the impeachment leaders to Jesus Christ” (p. 334).

The temporal, gradual oscillations between the terms of the dissociation create a sense that the political conversion involved an incremental, well-thought change. While writing the Hillary Clinton book, Brock finds that many of the accusations that had been leveled against the Clintons involved mere hearsay and conspiracy rhetoric. Brock (2002) leads readers through gradual dissociations, dissociations he experienced while drafting what he came to perceive as a careless section of his Clinton book, with remarks like: “Something was changing inside me. I was gaining a semblance of judgment and balance as I learned to question the veracity and motives of those who were peddling what I wanted to hear” (p. 279). Note that this change emerged from the “inside” of Brock, as from some real intrapersonal place within the rhetor, creating a sense that the author’s agency increased over the course of his conversion.

Brock finally confronts his journalistic abuses, figuratively unearthing a desire to write quality journalism. Brock (2002) writes, “my zeal, my partisan loyalties, my allegiance to the conservative movement ... was all slipping away. As I tried to soldier on, more and more reality [emphasis added] began to sink in” (pp. 272–273). Closely related to the base/quality pair, Brock dissociates expediency from morality. Highlighting the link between these pairs, Brock proposes that conservatives “hadn’t cheered” his books “because they thought the works were journalistically solid, but because they were politically useful” (p. 296).

**Expedient/Moral Politics**

Brock dissociates expediency (term I) from morality (term II), splitting and reprioritizing his previously unitary sense of a socially ambitious self. He compares the *appearances* of his former utilitarianism to the recovery of a *real* conscience. Brock (2002) discovers that he was guided by little sense of ethics in his endeavors, having “an ability to sequester my conscience and sublimate my own values” (p. 111), in order to get ahead in his personal and professional life. Brock separates an old life as a dependent opportunist from his new life as an independent, ethically-directed thinker. Early on, Brock’s mother taught him a lesson: “to defer to what others did and to tailor my behavior accordingly” (p. 12). As distinguished from his real inward identity, he creates an externally-driven notion of self, suggesting that “I acquired an unusual ability to block out and avoid the truth and to live my life with no inner [emphasis added] questioning” (p. 13).

More than the other dissociations, the expedient/moral pair assumes an ontological notion of inner/outer identity that grounds human motivation in deep, found psychological drives, rather than in symbolic conceptions of human rationality (see Campbell, 1970). Despite doubts about the worth of his Hillary Clinton project, Brock (2002) dissociates this true, inner drive from a previous, surface focus on the external rewards conservative publishers offered him for proceeding with the book (p. 273). But Brock’s commercial interests did not end with conservative books, as he was paid $500,000 for writing *Blinded by the Right* itself (Overington, 2002, p. 24). The expedient/moral dissociation chains out to an inner/outer philosoph-
tical pair, where Brock discovers an authentic, interior moral self. Yet this division between an external, surface expediency and a discovered inner morality tends to characterize Brock’s redefinition of self in deterministic tones that efface these argumentative processes.

All in all, this way of arguing makes the conversion appear far more natural than constructed. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) mention that a related dissociative pair, pretext/end, “explains why any study of the causes of criminality showing that the latter is only the consequence of a pre-existing state of affairs is bound to lessen even the most legitimate moral indignation” (p. 434). Brock’s former immoralities are resolved in this vein, positioning his previous identity as merely concealing a real, moral self, that had been bursting to emerge, unfettered from the contrivances of his social world. In other words, Brock expediently suppressed (the pretext) his moral self (the end), lessening his former indiscretions by presenting a true identity that has seemingly always been at odds with conservatism’s illusions.

The new political identity emerging from the expedient/moral dissociation further relies upon a chain of other minor pairs to do its work. Brock (2002) relates that, “as a young zealot, I disciplined myself to ignore the soft tug of my own conscience, and see only what I was supposed to see” and “I turned a blind eye to facts that did not suit my political aims” (p. 32). In starker terms, “I was a closeted opportunist. I had no interior life to speak of–my sole focus was outside myself, on my career... I had so little sense of self” (p. 137), and “I was a whore for the cash” (p. 143). Proceeding from the expedient/moral pair there are inner/outer concepts of a self, a condensed dissociation between young/old (and immature/mature), and one of the other major dissociations, blind/sighted. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) write that “there is a noticeable tendency, in everyday thought as well as in philosophical thought, toward new subdivisions” in dissociations, where for example, pairs like phenomenon/principle might generate other pairs such as theory/fact (pp. 431, 428). Similarly, Brock constructs chains of dissociative argumentation to map and enact the conversion.

The expedient/moral dissociation parallels the degrees of self-awareness Brock (2002) claims about his ontological condition, and the gradual coming to terms with the true “self-loathing” that went into his false “self-promotion” (p. 178). Brock describes his behavior as characteristic of “an insecure wannabe,” rather than a stable, secure being with a moral conscience (p. 226). Stuckey (2006) argues that dissociations between political expediency and principle can naturalize arguments, placing them beyond questioning. I find similarly that Brock’s dissociation between expediency and morality naturalizes an ontological real self that is beyond public criticism. In particular, Brock’s focus on recovering a substantial self indicates his political conversion was wrought from a new, hierarchized relation of morality to expediency, and that his identity has now arrived at its final destination, with little room for amendment.

Before discovering the difference between expediency and morality, Brock feels complete in both contributing to his community and doing what one needs to do to get ahead. His retrospective emphasis on “burying” his beliefs in the name of expediency amplifies the recovery that is to take place through the dissociation. He relates that his need to get ahead and “to belong to my tribe, obscured any other feelings or values that would have complicated the picture, and I buried many of my beliefs to fit into the movement” (Brock, 2002, p. 51). The incompatibilities being resolved by the self-dissociation are completely relegated to a past life. That is, the conversion experience and dissociative argumentation work in
tandem to present a vision of the rhetor as having struggled through a *linear* journey, which is now a finished process.

Overall, the intrapersonal expedient/moral pair is put in the service of a political conversion justifying a party platform. Brock (2002) states: “I wrote this book as an act of conscience, to correct the public record on events in which I played a central role and to illuminate for others the dangers that I see in an empowered conservative movement” (p. xviii). Personal, moral transformations are converted into policy claims, linking identity arguments with movement conclusions. Last, Brock constructs his political conversion through a closely related pair.

**Blind/Sighted Activism**

Brock dissociates between blind (term I) and sighted (term II). He draws this dissociation from a previously whole, knowledgeable self. In a condensed dissociation, the very title of the book draws upon biblical, Pauline overtones, as Brock is “Blinded” by the right. This theme is also a way for Brock to communicate his previous lack of knowledge, simplism, unwarranted emotionality, and the subsequent visibility gained in recovering these values’ opposites. Brock (2002) establishes this sense of blindness from the very first line of the autobiography, where he says “this is a terrible book” which is “about how one can be blinded [emphasis added] to the ethics of one’s own actions,” as he and others “plotted in the shadows” (p. xvii). Here the blind/sighted pair is situated within a dissociative network, including the expedient/moral and root appearance/reality pairs (i.e. through the reference to “shadows”). The author’s confessionary tone also advances the blind/sighted distinction. As Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) find, “any painful declaration, particularly a confession, will be presumed to be sincere” (p. 457).

In many ways, the blind/sighted dissociation not only enacts Brock’s political conversion, but also creates an essentialized rhetorical distance from his previous behaviors. Brock reduces his former actions to what Burke (1978) calls mere “motion,” subsequently exculpating his deeds in the process. In college, Brock (2002) says he applied the label of conservative on himself “without even understanding what it meant” (p. 9). When working for the conservative *Washington Times*, he further suggests, “I knew nothing of the movement’s history” of McCarthyism, racial fears in the Nixon years, and the fusing of a secular-liberal with a fundamentalist-religious wing (p. 24). Brock’s behaviors as a conservative thus take on a mechanical quality, distancing the author from culpable acts. In this way, Brock’s rhetoric links with an act/agent dissociation urging that as an agent he is real, but that his acts have been false. In Burke’s (1969) parlance, an act/agent ratio is effectively reversed in the conversion, as Brock dissociates the self and the self’s acts so that false acts are no longer seen as determining the real agent. This move allows Brock to claim that his core moral identity was there all along, but that it was merely obstructed by blind acts occluding the visibility of his real self.

Brock (2002) intensifies the blind/sighted dissociation by describing unseen, “secretive” conservative organizations and networks such as “The Federalist Society” (p. 49), the “Council for National Policy,” and the pro-life, anti-feminist group “Concerned Women for America,” which “still meets clandestinely [emphasis added] four or five times a year” (p. 176). Brock concludes this blindness was compounded by his own ignorant behavior, “when I accepted their invitation[s] . . . in typical fashion, I did nothing to educate myself about [them]” (p. 177). In the foreground, Brock is blinded by the appearances of conservatism. In
the background, the right’s malicious motives and interests are gradually made visible. Brock spotlights these motives with anecdotes of seemingly upstanding conservatives saying homophobic, sexist, racist, and other derogatory comments when off-the-record.

Brock (2002) says that one of the conservative lawyers involved with President Clinton’s impeachment was obsessed with talking about Clinton’s sexual habits in graphic detail (p. 199). Supreme Court Judge Rehnquist “had written a memorandum in 1952 favoring state-supported segregation” (p. 208). The “granddaddy of Arkansas Clinton-haters,” Justice Johnson, “in the mid-1960s, declar[ed] racial integration to be a worse crime than rape or murder” (p. 215). Brock’s dissociative ability to see into the right’s machinations is a vehicle for the political conversion. Subsequently, Brock disassembles the movement by telling his story to a Clinton White House communication strategist, and in confessionary fashion, “this unpremeditated purging was its own reward” (p. 346). Pushing the visibility distinction further, Brock suggests that this information “helped the White House pull back the curtain and reveal the machinery [emphases added] behind the Lewinsky scandal” (p. 347).

The blind/sighted pair is further accomplished through a series of ad hominem statements. Brock came under much criticism from writers like Bruni (2002) and Bozell (2002) for these attributions, after his professed political conversion from assertion-driven journalism. Nonetheless, it is a strategy connected to Brock’s blindness/visibility dissociation—while many conservatives appear respectable, second glances make visible their real natures, which the political convert can perceive with an all-consuming vision. Looking back, Brock (2002) says his mentor at the Heritage Foundation, Michael Pillsbury, “looked like the Hannibal Lecter character in the film The Silence of the Lambs” (p. 81). C. Boyden Gray, a lawyer for Clarence Thomas, “looked like Ichabod Crane”; Lee Liberman, another lawyer in the case, was “known as ‘Rasputin’ for her immense, behind-the-scenes influence over Bush’s judicial picks” (p. 97). David Horowitz had “a Lenin-like beard” (p. 188), Richard Mellon Scaife’s aide looked “like a gargoyle” (p. 210), and some conservative Congressmen were like “cavemen” (p. 244). Given these attributions, Brock’s political conversion has not necessarily prevented him from using the same immoral acts in the service of his new political commitment. These negative descriptions of conservatives evidence constructed cracks (or what Schiappa [2003] calls “definitional rupture[s]” [p. 90]) in the essentialized self Brock purports to have found and, at the very least, undermine the linearity the conversion narrative forces upon matters of human identity. If there was a stable self that Brock discovered over time, I would argue it is best seen as a dialectical, continuous process subject to further inquiry and amendment, rather than a teleological journey between opposite extremes.

These applications of the blind/sighted dissociation tend to divide phenomena into mutually exclusive categories. As Brock (2002) recounts, “I had no deep understanding of conservative ideology.... I had an activist, rather than a reflective, temperament” (p. 36). Just as the conversion experience emphasizes the starkest possible difference between one’s old and new lives, the dissociation draws a complete divide between blindness and visibility, putting a blind, passionate activism against visible, knowledgeable political engagement. More importantly, Brock projects this dissociative move on to others in a way that perhaps overstates its case. He describes Bill Kristol, a conservative pundit who converted to the right, whose “initial attraction to conservatism was more a matter of temperament than intellect” (p. 56). Newt Gingrich’s “appeal was based less on political philosophy or ideology than on raw emotion” (p. 67).
Even Brock’s (2002) former political conversion, from left to right, was seen as unjustifiably reactionary: “I do know that my move in an opposite direction wasn’t a decision; it was an emotional impulse” (p. 82), as “my career path rewarded party-line polemics, not independent thinking” (p. 111). Brock uses such language to create the impression that his right-to-left conversion to a core self was an agonizing, reasonable journey, to be distinguished from his former acts. The blind/sighted dissociation underscores that these essentialisms were only gradually unveiled to Brock, and that his conversion from being a conservative to a liberal involved similar dissociations between immoral/moral and emotional/reflective orientations. Given the totalizing, stark contrasts created through the political conversion rhetoric and dissociative argumentation, however, Brock may be drawing distinctions that overemphasize these divisions. Some conservatives argued Brock made exaggerated claims about conservatives being unreflective and unwilling to critique one another in his book (Hirsen, 2005, p. 104).

All in all, each of these self-dissociations allowed Brock to reposition himself politically through an ontological self-recovery. The conversion was enacted through intrapersonal argumentation made public. As the terms of Brock’s former orientation were modified and transformed, the boundaries of his political identity shifted, with various consequences.

**CONCLUSION**

As prominent features of American public discourse, political conversion stories invite the critical attention of argumentation scholars. David Brock employed the self-dissociations false/authentic, base/quality, expedient/moral, and blind/sighted to construct his political conversion, connecting his old and new political identities to party movement claims. There are a number of implications about dissociation, identity, and U.S. politics following from this analysis.

First, by transforming one’s terms, dissociation can create new public definitions of the self. Brock’s intrapersonal arguments resolved incompatibilities in his conservative identity, critically coming to terms with new ways of being, knowing, and acting. *Blinded by the Right* demonstrates that conversion experiences, which have been explained from a variety of non-communicative perspectives (see Gooren, 2007; Rambo, 1999), are also argued into existence through a series of self-dissociations. As term I is relegated to a past life, term II reprioritizes one’s self and relations in the present. This is not to deny the part that other influences such as one’s psychology, history, or sociological conditions may play in conversion experiences. Rather, this perspective gives us additional insight into how communicators use arguments to reconfigure their personal and social paradigms. At the same time, conversion rhetoric can bring particularly teleological, essentializing emphases to these transformations. The dissociative enactments both generate and are impacted by the linearity inherent in this type of story.

Second, political conversions can be enacted through dissociative chains. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) argued that dissociations can inform other dissociations, and sought for greater insights into the interactivities of argument. The four self-dissociations Brock used to enact his political conversion are quite porous. Based in the appearance/reality pair, these self-dissociations chain outward and link up with other major and minor pairs to form a new identity. In other words, interactional dissociations make up political identity, and chain out so that the priorities of one pair impact and are impacted by other pairs in a process of argumentative conversion. As such, this study contributes to discussions about whether
dissociations are techniques or modes of truth (Gross, 2000). Brock applied dissociations as both argumentative techniques and as modes to recover (or construct) truths about identity, in a way not easily separated.

Identity is inextricably bound to arguments made about the self. The extent to which these dissociations are unique to a rhetor remains an open question, however. Indeed, I find that when looked at from a dissociative perspective, Brock’s claims to finding an internal real self are complicated by how much he borrows from pervasive external appearance/reality claims, which have a long history in public discourse. As Stahl (2002) writes, “we use the very powerful tool of dissociation, and existing structures of dissociation use us” (p. 446). Warnick and Kline (1992) further highlight how dissociations “represent the presumed hierarchies of an arguer’s expected audience” (“Dissociations,” para. 3). Similarly, Brock’s tale demonstrates that an arguer’s dissociative chains cannot be separated from his or her public culture. In toggling between each pairs’ terms, one simultaneously navigates a course between chains of agential identity and movement structures.

Third, this study confirms that dissociation has the potential to be both innovative and conservative (Olson, 1995, p. 64; see also Barnes, 1982). In the realm of intrapersonal argument, dissociation was a means for Brock to enact a transformation. At the same time, Brock tells readers that he never really changed. He engages in a recovery of the self that characterizes his former identity (as an expedient, debased, blind, and closeted conservative) as merely an appearance masking his real identity (as a moral, quality, perceptive, and openly gay man). At times, Brock (2002) accomplishes this rhetoric of maintenance and change through a recovery of former memories (p. 361). At another time, he argues that the conservative party left him (p. 140).

By constructing the political conversion through a psychological recovery of an essentialized self, rather than through a rhetoric of rebirth, as we tend to find in religious conversions (see Griffin, 1990; Hoban, 1980; McGee, 1998), Brock can employ paradoxical identity claims heralding both stability and change. Dissociative arguments are particularly suited to this task, addressing and resolving incompatibilities through a transformation in one’s terms. Yet making paradoxical identity claims can also be a way of effacing these argumentative processes of identity construction, and avoiding responsibilities for one’s former actions. By arguing that one’s previous actions were not connected to an essentialized self, one’s identity is put beyond questioning.

Schiappa (2003) argues the variability, partiality, and functionality of human experience and language are bypassed by absolutist “real definitions,” which are “ethically suspect and philosophically problematic” in “demarcating our available ‘reality’” (pp. 41–43, 48). While recognizing the legitimate need human beings have for stable identities, I find that applying absolutist dissociative definitions to oneself obscures argumentative possibilities in matters of identity. As van Rees (2009) has noted, sometimes “dissociation seemingly obviates the need to argue for one’s position,” is “presented as self-evident,” and thus sets up “the audience for a conceptual fait accompli against which it is difficult to come into arms” (p. 121). To the extent that a communicator asserts a solidified identity in the public sphere, I would add that she or he effaces the very argumentative processes that brought both former and new identities into existence. When conversion experiences are seen as processes of self-dissociation rather than as the result of mystical mandate (as may be the case in religious narratives) or pure essentialism (as in more secular accounts like Brock’s), identity can be positioned as an argumentative phenomenon subject to further discursive inquiry.
Fourth, Brock’s political conversion illustrates the powerful role that embodied arguments can play in public movements. Clearly, Brock was influenced by others in his conversions to and from conservatism, and has a story that plays an important role in contemporary Democratic politics. Responses to Brock’s book also suggest that political conversion narratives play a vital role in maintaining political paradigms—that is, as helping movements sustain their own identities. Political movements rely on these rhetors to preach to their own, ritualistically reinforcing current party platforms. The work of speaking to and governing millions of citizens is difficult, so converts provide vivid models for why voters should continue to support a political party.

At the same time, in representing so many dissociative arguments, political converts personify a potent counter-argument against the political opposition. They are resources to draw from in gauging, disassembling, or co-opting adversaries. In an age of information excess, and given the importance of image in contemporary media ecologies, political converts act as quick heuristic cues to why the other side(s) should be discounted and as embodied chains of argument representing the failure of other political paradigms.

All in all, while attending to identity as an argument construction, “conversion clearly registers a possibility of human experience familiar from the depths of antiquity, namely, the possibility of joining a community of belief” (Scherer, 2006, p. 143). Keeping scholarly eyes on these argument forms will continue to teach social critics about conversion as a persuasive strategy within and between publics, or as Anderson (2007) puts it, “stories of transformation that would transform us as well” (p. 57). Future work in argumentation studies should explore other strategies converts employ in the political realm. In doing so, we can spotlight the dialectical dance between argued identity and movement advocacy.

References


