

English 460: The Scope of Rhetoric

Schedule and Weekly Lessons

Schedule

Week	Topic	Preparation	Writing
1	<i>Module 1: Concepts and definitions</i> "These are the lies we tell"	Browning, Bridle, Gorgias, Jackson	DF1: Two truths and a lie
2	<i>Module 1</i> "Lie to me, like they do at the university"	The "Grievance Studies" hoax articles; syllabus and assignment descriptions	DF2: A kind word for BS
3	<i>Module 1</i> "Bullshit and bad arguments"	Frankfurt, <i>On Bullshit</i> ; Almosawwi, <i>Bad Arguments</i>	DF3 (creative)
4	<i>Module 2: Networks and flows</i> "The velocity of rhetoric"	O'Connor and Weatherall, ch. 1--2 (19--92); Ridolfo and DeVoss	Project 1
5	<i>Module 2</i> "Conspiracies of language"	O'Connor and Weatherall, ch. 3--4 (93--186); Foucault	DF4
6	<i>Module 2</i> "Useful fictions"	Borges, Rudoff, Chiang, Wolff	DF5
7	Midterm	Individual conferences	Midterm proposal
8	<i>Module 3: Politics and propaganda</i> "Can the subaltern speak?"	Nietzsche, Huxley, Orwell, Arendt	DF6 (creative)
9	<i>Module 3</i> "I hear new news every day"	McIntyre, ch. 1--4 (1--87)	DF7 (creative)

10	Module 3 "Alternative facts and grand narratives"	McIntyre, ch. 5--7 (89-172)	Project 2
11	Module 4: <i>Language and power</i> "The facts about lies"	Merlan, ch. 1--4 (11-101)	DF8
12	Module 4 "Epistolam non erubescit"	Merlan, ch. 5--6 (103-170); Derrida	DF9
13	Module 4 "Signifier, signified, signifyin"	Merlan, ch. 7--9 (171-239); Gates	DF10 (creative)
--	Break	Nothing due	--
14	Module 5: <i>Conclusions and questions</i> "De te fabula narratur"	Merlan and McIntyre conclusions; <i>The Debunking Handbook</i>	DF11
15	Module 5 Presentations	Record video presentations	DF12
Exams	Module 5		Final project

Weekly Lessons

These are the written lecture notes that accompanied each week of the course. Recorded video lectures were part of the original delivery and are not reproduced here; where the notes refer to something said on video, the reference has been kept as a pointer rather than removed, since it marks where the spoken and written commentary divided the work between them.

The course runs on a five-module arc. Module 1 builds a definitional vocabulary; Module 2 asks how bad ideas travel; midterm conferences fall in Week 7; Module 3 turns to politics and propaganda; Module 4 to language and power; and Module 5 to synthesis.

Module 1: Concepts and Definitions

Week 1: "These are the lies we tell"

Reading. Robert Browning, "My Last Duchess"; Gorgias, "Encomium of Helen"; Shirley Jackson, "Charles"; James Bridle, "Something Is Wrong on the Internet."

This class is bullshit.

I'll try not to use that phrasing too much, because I know we come from different backgrounds and have different levels of tolerance for strong language, but this class focuses on lies, deceit, deception, propaganda, and disinformation, and specifically on their rhetorical aspects. When we and others lie or deceive, there's certainly rhetoric involved, although it can be hard to figure out what kinds of rhetoric or how it's working. When I teach, I try at least to not drop the F-bomb (although those attempts in the past have sometimes been unsuccessful). You'll notice that I'm talking about **style** and **audience** in discussing whether or not to use certain types of language, and those will be big concerns in this class: I expect we all come from different personal and political backgrounds, with different opinions, and we're talking about **lying**, which often feels high-stakes. So we need to figure out ways to be respectful with each other when we are talking about stuff that we feel isn't true, and I'll ask from the outset that we try to be more civil and tolerant of disagreeable ideas than we would in everyday life.

I'm also very aware that people with different political opinions sometimes feel silenced in classes with touchy subject material, and that part of the game in college can sometimes feel like figuring out what the professor wants or thinks. I try to be impartial, but the truth is I'm just as susceptible to lying, BS, and flattery as any other professor: we like to feel that we're brilliant and that everybody shares our opinions, and of course we also know that's not necessarily true. So: one thing I've been thinking about as an option is to ask you, given the power relations in the classroom, *how much do you want to know about my politics and your classmates' politics?*

Here's one first foray into the politics of power, honesty, and disclosure, as applied to our classroom. I believe there's a general or popular assumption outside the university, with some basis in fact, that university professors tend to be left-wing in their politics, especially in English departments. Given that I'm a professor in an English department teaching a course explicitly themed around BS, there's a

possibility that my political beliefs will influence what I characterize as lies, deceit, deception, propaganda, and disinformation. I think it's important for me to be credible as a teacher---in other words, for me to be persuasive, and to persuade you that the work of this class is worth doing---and I think the best way I can be credible is to publicly respect the beliefs of everybody in this class, even if I disagree with them. So I'm usually inclined to try to keep my politics out of my teaching, and to hide my politics as much as possible. Obviously, no matter what your politics may be, expressing them (*respectfully*) will **not** affect your grade in this class. But you know we're a diverse bunch of people, and in a class themed around BS, some of us are gonna disagree, right? And if I want to be seen as credible and fair, what would you want me to do in such cases? All of that is a long way of asking a short question central to this class: **how much do we lie about or hide our own beliefs just to live together as a society?**

One *possibility*---definitely **not** a requirement---that we might consider, if you're interested, is examining our own political perspectives through some of the various political tests and quizzes available online: **The Political Compass**, **IDR Labs 8 Values**, and the **Pew Research Political Typology**. If you'd like to do this, and if you'd like me to share my own results, let us know your opinion in the discussion forums this week. I've found those three to be usefully explicit about their methods, and also interesting for trying to explicitly identify others' ideologies and to be aware of my own, and my blind spots, as well.

I'll also add that this is a rhetoric class in the English Department, and while my specialty is rhetoric, I think lies and deception are also a part of teaching, literature, creative writing, and professional and technical communication---so we'll be looking at and composing texts in all those modes in this class, as you've already seen with the Week 1 readings. This week, I'm asking you to read a poem (Browning's "My Last Duchess"), an oratorical performance (Gorgias's "Encomium of Helen," where he praises Helen of Troy and defends against those who would find fault with her for starting the Trojan war), a short story (Jackson's "Charles"), and an essay (Bridle's "Something Is Wrong on the Internet"). They all deal with deceit in different ways, and ask us to think about deceit in different ways---my goal with the readings this week is to offer a really wide range of possibilities for response. And if we're thinking about lies, deceit, deception, propaganda, and disinformation, some of my former colleagues would suggest that today we're in what could be called a "target-rich environment," a euphemism for being surrounded or outnumbered.

For that reason, I strongly encourage you to make connections to current events in your discussion forum posts and comments. BS is all around us, and you've got smart things to say about it: what egregious lies are you noticing in your everyday life, and how does it connect to what we're talking about in class? Two of the readings I didn't initially comment on in my own forum post this week are both ones that have some relevance to me, because I'm the single dad of a five-year-old, Malcolm, who's learning how to lie---although he's not quite as naughty as Charles, or at least I hope not---and who's also gotten into trouble with teachers for talking about the content in videos on Kids' YouTube, like in the Bridle reading. I anticipate I might talk about young Malcolm in some of my interactions in this class, and when accusations of lying show up in the media, they're hard to ignore as well. As we'll see in the readings for next week, there are plenty of people who think the stuff that gets taught at universities is BS, and we should be aware of that critique.

Here's how the course will go. This week, we're doing introductions, and I'll expect you to familiarize yourself with the syllabus and course materials. Next week, we'll look at the so-called "Sokal Squared" academic hoax, where some of the types of work we're doing in this class get characterized as bullshit, and I'll ask you for your thoughts. In Week 3, we'll go through the two very short core books for the class: Harry Frankfurt's *On Bullshit* and Ali Almosawi's *Bad Arguments*. My idea is that those books will offer key **definitional concepts** and a **critical vocabulary** for how we talk about BS for the rest of the semester. That completes Module 1, and then we're on to Cailin O'Connor and James Weatherall's social science examination of disinformation and how bad ideas spread in Module 2, on networks and flows, which will take us up to the midterm. After the midterm, we'll look at Lee McIntyre's book on *Post-Truth* for Module 3, and then Anna Merlan's history of disinformation and conspiracies in the United States for Module 4, before doing some synthesis and reaching for conclusions in Module 5 at the end of the semester.

I don't have any predetermined arguments or big conclusions or a particular rhetorical agenda to push in this class, other than the idea that deceit and disinformation seem to be a difficult and growing concern in the theory and practice of rhetoric. In this class, we're going to explore the various implications and possibilities of that idea, and so I'll close this short initial lecture by asking: **what lies matter, and why?**

Outcomes. By the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

1. Articulate initial definitions of what lies, deceit, and deception mean to you in a rhetorical sense.
2. Connect those definitions to some aspects---cultural, political, economic, social---of our current context.
3. Begin identifying what you see as some of the current ways we engage with lies, deceit, and deception.
4. Begin applying rhetorical terms and concepts to how we talk about that engagement.

Also worth a look. If it's been a while since English 101, or if you need a refresher on rhetorical terminology, Doug Downs's chapter "Rhetoric: Making Sense of Human Meaning-Making" may be useful.

Week 2: "Lie to me, like they do at the university . . ."

Reading. Yasha Mounk, "What an Audacious Hoax Reveals About Academia" (*The Atlantic*); *BuzzFeed News*, "Here's What Critics Say About That Big New Hoax on Gender Studies"; Helen Pluckrose, James A. Lindsay, and Peter Boghossian, "Academic Grievance Studies and the Corruption of Scholarship"; *Inside Higher Ed*, "The Overlooked Messages of the Sokal-Squared Hoax."

Bottom line up front: this lesson focuses the definitional questions proposed by Week 1 by examining four perspectives on a recent incident in higher education wherein some academics accused other academics of studying, teaching, and promoting BS.

Guiding questions

Last week, we looked at a short story, a poem, an essay, and an oratorical performance: very different genres of reading that engaged the concepts of lies, deceit, deception, propaganda, and disinformation in very different ways. And as part of last week's lecture, I asked you: given the power relations in the classroom, how much do you want to know about my politics and your classmates' politics? Part of the reason I posed that question is because academic politics, and questions over the validity of certain forms of knowledge here in the university, are very much bound up in contemporary debates over BS and lies.

So I'll ask you this week: as you read the selections---I suggest starting with Mounk and *BuzzFeed* in the first part of the week, and then *Inside Higher Ed* and Pluckrose, Lindsay, and Boghossian in the second part of the week---**try to get a sense of what their politics are.** These people are arguing with and past each other, and accusing one another of lying and BSing: what are their politics, and who are you most inclined to agree with? What are their assumptions and beliefs about how power and knowledge work, and what the role of the university should be? Finally: what do you think the role of the university should be, particularly in relation to the types of questions raised this week?

Politics and knowledge in academia

Last week I pointed you toward some political quizzes, and I'll remind you this week that they're entirely optional in terms of whether or how you choose to use them, but it's often helpful to try and pin down someone's ideology when they're trying to convince you of something. When I get news from the popular media, I try to be at least aware of my own biases and the biases of the sources, so for me, triangulating my own politics against what I know about the sources helps me figure out when I'm echo-chambering myself.

Academic knowledge has its politics as well: as you might guess or stereotype, professors in engineering, business, and the hard sciences tend to be less left-leaning in their politics than professors in arts, humanities, and social sciences.

Context for the readings

Mounk, in the left-leaning magazine *The Atlantic*, gives one version of what happened with the "Sokal Squared" hoax, although to me his account does seem to be somewhat conservative in its politics. The *BuzzFeed* story offers what is to my mind a more balanced account, and I've also included the testimony of the authors themselves in "Academic Grievance Studies and the Corruption of Scholarship." I will point out that "Grievance Studies" is itself a super-loaded pejorative term that definitionally inverts the term "Social Justice," just like being "pro-life" and being in support of "forced-birth" are two terms---one much nicer than the other---for the same position. The *Inside Higher Ed* article does some careful digging into the assumptions and implications of the rhetoric around the debate.

Historical background

Beyond those readings, here's some additional background about the debate. Thomas Kuhn, in 1962, wrote a book called *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, which coined the term "**paradigm shift**" as applied to scientific knowledge. This book was a big deal. Kuhn challenged the then-prevailing view of scientific progress as development-by-accumulation, arguing instead for an episodic model: periods of cumulative progress, which he called "normal science," interrupted by periods of revolutionary science. The discovery of anomalies during those revolutions leads to new paradigms, which then ask new questions of old data, move beyond the puzzle-solving of the previous paradigm, and change both the rules of the game and the map directing new research.

This resulted in situations where new scientific knowledge contradicted old scientific knowledge: what once was capital-T **Truth** was no longer truth, but superstition. Think about how biology and medicine evolved. At one point in human history, people knew with certainty that human health was governed by the interactions of the four humors of choler, phlegm, blood, and bile. Human society knew with certainty that the Earth was at the center of the universe, and all celestial bodies rotated around it. It's really hard for us to understand now that for people who lived five or six or seven hundred years ago---really smart people---magic was real.

Implications for the readings

What we have this week, then, could be seen as arguments over whether a paradigm shift is happening in how people understand the world, and there are different epistemologies involved. The authors of the hoax itself take issue with "that postmodern brand of 'theory' which arose in the late sixties." That's their target, at least in part, but I think it's worth paying attention to **how that target moves**.

When I was a new graduate student, I was really worried I didn't understand all this stuff about postmodernism, so I asked one of my professors to have coffee with me and explain it, and she was gracious enough to do so. That got me to design my own directed study with another professor, and I actually wound up taking the final project I did for that directed study and turning it into one of my first publications. Here's what I would suggest as the components of a basic definition of late-sixties postmodernism, based on what three of the most frequently cited scholars say:

- **Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*.** The images and signs and symbols (simulacra) that we use to refer to reality increasingly refer to themselves, so that there is increasing confusion between reality and representation.
- **Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.** The lines between cultural production and economic production are increasingly blurred, so that distinctions between "high" culture and "popular" culture---or even between cultural activity and economic activity---have become fragmented and irrelevant.
- **Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*.** Society increasingly rejects overarching "grand narratives" or "metanarratives" in favor of diversely fragmented or local forms of knowledge.

Those are the assumptions and the historical context for this debate, and the debate obviously has implications for differing conceptions of what the university is or ought to be.

Guiding questions revisited

Perhaps it's ridiculously obvious in today's political context to acknowledge that truth is political, and to acknowledge the longstanding and ongoing arguments about the influence of politics on knowledge in higher education. But it seems dangerous not to acknowledge that those issues are the elephants in the room in a university course on rhetoric themed around questions of truth and its opposite.

Do those questions matter? Perhaps they depend upon expectations and context: do you expect that you're pursuing an education here for the purposes of job preparation, for the purposes of civic life in a democratic society, for the purposes of pursuing knowledge and truth about the universe and the human condition? What should the role of higher education be? Those are the big questions, but they're deeply connected to the smaller, more local questions for this week: who are the lying liars in these articles, what are the various types of BS, and which to you seem most concerning? What is true, and how do we know?

Outcomes. By the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

1. Apply more general definitions of lies, deceit, deception, propaganda, and disinformation to specific debates in and across cultural and ideological

contexts.

2. Identify initial connections between rhetorical constructions of truth and ideological perspectives.
3. Begin to apply rhetorical terms and concepts to academic controversies and debates.
4. Explore initial connections among rhetoric, ideology, and truth in academic contexts, and how those academic contexts are rhetorically represented and constructed in different publications and contexts beyond academia.

Also worth a look. The Ad Fontes Media Bias Chart, which in my opinion is a solid guide to the political leanings and factual reliability of many popular media news sources; two articles on the original Sokal hoax from nationally prominent English professors, Stanley Fish's "Professor Sokal's Bad Joke" and John Guillory's "The Sokal Affair and the History of Criticism"; and Phillip Eubanks and John D. Schaeffer's "A Kind Word for Bullshit: The Problem of Academic Writing," from the flagship journal for college composition instructors, which digs deep into whether or not writing teachers are teaching students how to BS effectively.

*Anybody who guesses the song lyric this week's title is misquoting, and surreptitiously incorporates another lyric from the same band into their discussion post, wins the coveted **I-guessed-what-my-professor-was-thinking** award. One entry per applicant. Offer has no cash or grade value and is limited in certain states and to proficient users of the word "surreptitiously." Contest may unfairly favor members of a certain age group. Void where boring, prohibited, or generally a bad idea.*

Week 3: "Bullshit and bad arguments"

Reading. Harry Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*; Ali Almosawwi, *An Illustrated Book of Bad Arguments*.

We're reading two **very** short books this week. The concepts in the two books are at the core of the course, and we're going to try to apply their principles to the remainder of the readings as we progress. Frankfurt gives us a definitional theory of BS---of what it is and what it is not---and that's a useful strategy. Almosawwi gives

us a taxonomy and an exploration of its applications, with examples, and that's another useful strategy. Together, we've got theory and practice, or definition and application.

The readings

When you're reading Frankfurt, note that he's focusing on BS as a question of **intent**, and the components of his argument build on each other. Lying is a **continuum**, according to Frankfurt, and he sees distinctions between promoting *false beliefs about the topic* and promoting *false beliefs about the speaker's state of mind*. This leads Frankfurt to raise questions about the degree of effort that BS requires, and further questions about the distinctions between bluffing and lying, and between telling lies and being a liar. These definitional distinctions ultimately lead him to some questions about the consequences of BS. Recall that last week's supplemental reading, Eubanks and Schaeffer, explicitly linked Frankfurt to undergraduate courses in writing and rhetoric.

When you're reading Almosswawi, I'll ask you to pay attention to the diagram on pages 6 and 7. It's important, in that it shows how the different types of BS he explores relate to each other, and as you go through, it's useful to return to that initial diagram. Notice that the big clusters are "informal" and "red herrings," with one other top-level fallacy that is "formal," although Almosswawi doesn't go into much detail about it. Formal logic, and its attention to *modus ponens* and *modus tollens*, is a big part of how the discipline of philosophy deals with questions of truth in an abstract sense. If you're interested and would like more detail, *Information Is Beautiful* has a much longer list of rhetorical fallacies and an example of applying them, and of course there's the *Wikipedia* page on fallacies, which can be interesting to dig into if you're the sort of person who's ever enjoyed getting lost in Wikipedia.

Rhetoric

We'll return to that idea of getting lost in a sea of information later in the semester, with the Week 6 Borges story "The Library of Babel." For right now, though, I'll just ask you to keep in mind that we looked at a really wide range of BS during Week 1, and then we zoomed in and looked at a very specific and complicated instance of BS during Week 2. This week, as we wrap up the module on definitions and

concepts, I'll ask you to think about how Frankfurt's **theory** and Almosswawi's **taxonomy** help us think about those readings as instances of BS as a rhetorical problem today.

Recall that we've talked about the five houses or **canons of rhetoric** that we get from classical rhetoricians like Aristotle and Cicero: invention, organization, style, memory, and delivery. These canons focus our attention on different aspects of rhetoric.

- **Invention** includes attention to how you come up with the ideas, the substance, the content, and the topics of your argument.
- **Organization** involves attention to how you set up and signpost your argument and progress from one idea to the next, and can include such topics as the template for the five-paragraph theme or Schaffer method that you learned in high school, which obviously only works for essays of a very specific length; the research paper format of introduction, methods, literature review, analysis, discussion; the fact that the thesis statement for professional writers is often the second-to-last sentence in the second paragraph; and the classical arrangement of *exordium*, *narratio*, *partitio*, *confirmatio*, and *peroratio*.
- **Style** involves attention to word choice, diction, and the hundreds of stylistic devices detailed alphabetically from *abcisio* to *zeugma* at *Silva Rhetoricae*, and can include such topics as the idea of an elevated, middle, and low style, and the association of types of style with the aims of rhetoric---to educate, to delight, to move.
- **Memory** concerns how we recall and access the components of an argument. Obviously for early rhetoricians who performed their orations, memory was a big deal, and today a lot of rhetorical research is looking at what happens to rhetoric when memory is externalized into hard drives, paper, networks, and other forms of storage.
- **Delivery** is concerned with how rhetoric travels from author to audience, or how rhetoric spreads, and we're going to look at questions of delivery starting next week with O'Connor and Weatherall.

For this week, then, as we wrap up our unit on definitions and concepts, much of the focus will likely be on invention. Again, rhetorical invention is concerned with the substance, the ideas, the content, the argument. You've probably seen the most

discussion of invention in English 101 with the attention to the rhetorical appeals: *ethos*, the appeal to authority or authoritativeness; *pathos*, the appeal to emotions or feelings; *logos*, the appeal to logic and facts; and *kairos*, the appeal to timeliness.

I have some issues with the way these appeals are sometimes taught in English 101 as a grab-bag, where teachers ask students to identify the appeals, so that the analysis becomes something like, "The President used *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos* in his speech." Such assertions are sometimes unkindly but accurately referred to as being "not even wrong." I would suggest that it's entirely the fault of those teachers who teach the appeals as a grab-bag, rather than as strategies, when they find themselves exclaiming, "Of course he did! So *what?*" The idea is not to find them, but to examine how and why he used them---and how effectively---in specific combinations to respond to specific elements of what he saw as his rhetorical situation.

Guiding questions

So this week, I'm asking you to read Frankfurt and Almosawsi---they're super-short---and use them as *inspiration* for this week's creative post. One way we can start thinking about the connections between Frankfurt and Almosawsi and all these components and methods of organizing rhetoric would be to ask: of the *branches*, *purposes*, and *aspects* of the *situations* and *appeals*, which are **more suited to certain combinations** than others?

branches	appeals	purposes	situations
forensic	logos	inform	message
epideictic	ethos	delight	rhetor
deliberative	pathos	move	audience

For example, given the *rhetorical situation* of Gorgias, what do you see as the distinction between informing, delighting, and moving? When is rhetoric so strong and so powerful that it makes one *want* to do something that one didn't want to before? What is the difference between that rhetoric that moves and power that forces?

Those are some of the questions that we could ask of Gorgias and the "Encomium of Helen" if we keep Frankfurt and Almossawi in mind. You've now got a lot of different rhetorical terms, concepts, and principles. Which of them are most interesting to you, and why? What conflicts or problems do they foreground in today's information environment of seemingly pervasive lies, BS, and deception?

Application

The above material gives you a lot of background, context, and theory, in order to give you a conceptual framework in which to position Frankfurt and Almossawi. I intend for that conceptual framework to offer some possible ways of thinking about your responses to the examples we've seen in Week 1---"Charles," "Duchess," "Encomium," "Internet"---and Week 2---the deception strategies you discussed for "two truths and a lie," the "Sokal Squared" readings---and how they work.

What surprised you or got you thinking in the discussion? How could you creatively represent that: in a short story, animation, social media meltdown, infographic, clickbait listicle, comic strip, or some other genre? In a world of deepfakes, catfishing, autotune, fake news, art forgeries, and other deceptive media, it's important that our understanding of deceptive rhetorics engage the production, distribution, consumption, and re-production of those media.

Finally: please show us as a kind community of fellow humans that you've kept in mind the guidance for creative posts, and *be respectful of your classmates*. I'm aware that I've themed this class around a word that's offensive to people, so I try to say "BS" when I talk about it, but I also sometimes link to some highly offensive content: it's a balance, as you've seen if you've been in a class where I shared the Al Qaeda jihadist public relations magazine *Inspire* or the "Collateral Murder" video. I figure lies and deception are a part of the grown-up rhetoric that we deal with in our lives and in the news, and so it merits study in a grown-up way, and some of the lies we see are dangerous and ugly enough---I think---to demand investigation, while also acknowledging, **especially** today, that there are competing versions and definitions of truth. Good-faith controversy is totally acceptable; just keep in mind that the values and assumptions you hold will differ from those of others in the class.

Outcomes. By the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

1. Understand key conceptual distinctions in rhetoric, including the rhetorical **canons, branches, appeals, purposes**, and components of the rhetorical **situation**.
2. Articulate initial definitions of key rhetorical fallacies.
3. Articulate initial distinctions between various forms of lies, BS, and deception and the emphases those distinctions make.
4. Creatively represent some aspect of lies, BS, and deception.
5. Discuss distinctions between what analytical and creative representations reveal about lies, BS, and deception.

Also worth a look. A longer list of rhetorical fallacies from *Information Is Beautiful*, and an example of applying them in a rhetorical analysis.

Module 2: Networks and Flows

Week 4: "The velocity of rhetoric"

Reading. Cailin O'Connor and James Weatherall, *The Misinformation Age*, ch. 1--2 (19--92); Jim Ridolfo and Danielle Nicole DeVoss, "Composing for Recomposition: Rhetorical Velocity and Delivery" (*Kairos*).

This week we're moving on from the definitions and concepts of Module 1 and into more specific book-length examinations of how rhetorics of deception operate. O'Connor and Weatherall, two philosophers of logic and science, ask: how do we form beliefs, especially false ones? How do they persist? Why do they spread? Why are false beliefs so intransigent, even in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary? It's worth keeping in mind as you read that they're philosophers, working in a discipline that until the Middle Ages and Peter Ramus's rejection of Quintilian was deeply linked to rhetoric: before rhetoric became popularly associated with deception, it was considered to be one of the ways we developed and understood and communicated truth. However, O'Connor and Weatherall are concerned with the rhetorical canon of delivery rather than invention---in contrast to Ridolfo and DeVoss, the other reading this week, who make a case that composing for "rhetorical velocity" matters to both delivery and invention. In other words, *deception need not be only in the **content** of the message.*

O'Connor and Weatherall begin by noting that analyzing particular examples is only part of their strategy; the other part draws on methods from science itself, computer simulations and mathematical modeling (16). In Chapter 1 they offer several case studies of the spread of evolving beliefs. The important thing to focus on is that they're interested in **networks** of people and influence. As you follow their examples, pay attention to what they're saying about how beliefs spread and move. After the setup and the examples in Chapter 1, they go into more detail regarding the model they use in Chapter 2.

When you're reading, **pay extra-careful attention** to what they call the **Bala-Goyal model on pages 53--63** and its **hexagonal diagrams of nodes and connections on pages 56, 58, and 62**. You really need to understand the model and how it works to understand the rest of the book, so please make sure you **slow down and read carefully for those ten pages**. That model, in the latter part of the book, provides the basis for their social-science theory of how misinformation spreads---what humanities scholars would call a theory of rhetorical delivery.

The Ridolfo and DeVoss reading also offers a theory of rhetorical delivery, from the perspective of humanities scholars. In their words, rhetorical velocity is a strategic approach to composing for rhetorical delivery: a way of considering delivery as a rhetorical mode, aligned with an understanding of how texts work as a component of a strategy. In the inventive thinking of composing, rhetorical velocity is the strategic theorizing of how a text might be recomposed by third parties, why it might be recomposed, and how that recomposing may or may not be useful to the rhetorician's short- or long-term objectives.

Ridolfo and DeVoss are interested in how the author or composer can compose a message to most successfully allow for remixing and recomposition by others, in order to facilitate its spread. The original *Kairos* article you'll read this week was published before the recent rise to prominence of digital "fake news," but you can see that it anticipates the phenomenon. Their analysis has a technological component, in that they acknowledge that digital technologies offer the increased capability to remix and spread messages quickly---in other words, with rhetorical velocity. One implicit thread in their analysis, then, is that people who have and know how to use these digital technologies will be able to more effectively employ the strategies they describe: access to digital technologies can reinforce a rhetorical digital divide, because technologies replace labor with capital.

As their analysis suggests, context can contribute to or inhibit rhetorical velocity, including **legal** context. Legislation governing intellectual property---copyright law, the Stop Online Piracy Act, the Digital Millennium Copyright Act, and other US and international laws---governs remix culture, leading to cases like that of Aaron Swartz. Additionally, governments and corporations are becoming increasingly invested in surveillance and big data and data mining, leading to more opportunities for remixing or data manipulation. Cultural context is also obviously highly relevant to the notion of rhetorical velocity, given the increasing prominence of fan fiction, fan art, and memes.

Given such contexts, Ridolfo and DeVoss suggest there is a pedagogical challenge: to teach students not only the content of argumentation, but to provide them with the ability to trace how conversations emerge, traverse across media, and are amplified by state and non-state actors. Consider a hypothetical case in which people are logged into several social platforms and email during the proliferation of a meme. During one short block of time, a message is shared, re-shared, texted, or emailed. By analyzing streams of data and timestamps, what can individuals discern about the trajectory, velocity, origin, and distribution of messages? What are they able to surmise about the rhetorical situation? And, equally relevant, how much time and what sort of research activities are required?

Perhaps obviously, this course is designed to lend itself to such analysis, so if concerns of remixing and delivery interest you, it might be worth looking into further scholarship building on Ridolfo and DeVoss. Elsewhere they argue for more mixed-methods research that includes qualitative work to understand the origins and rhetorical intentions of authors, as well as the individuals and systems of distribution and recomposition that make up networks of amplification; and they argue for the need to understand the plurality of paths and contexts a text might take, with an eye to the confusion that may result when readers encounter, via social media, only a very small segment of an ecosystem of texts and their circulation. That confusion is part of what's produced by lies, deceit, deception, propaganda, and disinformation, and the complex analysis they offer---as well as the model offered by O'Connor and Weatherall---are two possibly useful ways to respond.

Outcomes. By the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

1. Articulate an initial understanding of the relevance of rhetorical delivery.
2. Articulate an initial definition of what "rhetorical velocity" means.
3. Understand how social science models of networks inform understandings of rhetorical delivery.
4. Describe rhetorical relationships between delivery and deception.
5. Begin applying understandings of rhetorical delivery and velocity to our contemporary rhetorical situations and context.

Also worth a look. The *Keywords for Digital Rhetoric* entry for "Rhetorical Velocity."

Week 5: "Conspiracies of language"

Reading. O'Connor and Weatherall, *The Misinformation Age*, ch. 3--4 (93--186); Michel Foucault, "The Discourse on Language."

Toward the end of their book, O'Connor and Weatherall assert that emotion plays no role in their models, and neither does intelligence nor political ideology: they have only very simple, highly idealized agents trying to learn about their worlds using mostly rational methods, and those agents often fail. Moreover, they can be readily manipulated to fail, simply by an agent taking advantage of the same social mechanisms that, in other contexts, help them to succeed (152). That quotation offers a disclaimer: the model they present of how misinformation gets propagated is a highly simplified one that does not adequately account for all of the real-world variables.

Foucault, in "The Discourse on Language," presents a similar disclaimer, although his is more elliptical. In that first paragraph he's raising the question of the author or rhetor's role while *also* acting in the role of rhetorician and talking about what he's doing *while he's doing it*. The fact that he leads with a reference to Samuel Beckett's novel *Molloy*---you may recall that Beckett wrote *Waiting for Godot*---offers an indication that he's concerned with what language can and cannot do. Beckett's novel concerns itself with the search for where meaning comes from in language, and asks how we understand what truth is when it's constructed and communicated through language, or more properly, discourse.

For the purposes of this class, we should understand that Foucault's definition of "discourse" largely overlaps with what we understand as "rhetoric," particularly when he asserts that in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its powers and its dangers (316).

Foucault describes the ways in which, around the 1500s in Europe, a will to knowledge emerged that sketched out a schema of possible, observable, measurable and classifiable objects; that imposed upon the knowing subject a certain position, viewpoint, and function---look rather than read, verify rather than comment---and that prescribed the technological level at which knowledge could be employed in order to be verifiable and useful, as in navigation, mining, and pharmacopoeia. From the time of the great Platonic division onward, he argues, the will to truth had its own history: the history of a range of subjects to be learned, of the functions of the knowing subject, and of material, technical and instrumental investment in knowledge (319). This "will to knowledge" and its accompanying systematization helped move knowledge out of the domain of the individual and into the domain of the social, where it would necessarily be affected by power relations, even as it helped to construct those same power relations.

Foucault also describes and challenges the idea of the author as the unifying principle in a particular group of writings, lying at the origin of their significance and serving as the seat of their coherence. That principle is not constant at all times. All around us there are sayings and texts whose meaning or effectiveness has nothing to do with any author to whom they might be attributed: mundane remarks, quickly forgotten; orders and contracts that are signed but have no recognizable author; technical prescriptions anonymously transmitted. But even in those fields where it is normal to attribute a work to an author---literature, philosophy, science---the principle does not always play the same role. In the order of scientific discourse it was, during the Middle Ages, indispensable that a scientific text be attributed to an author, because the author was the index of the work's truthfulness; a proposition derived its scientific value from its author. Since the seventeenth century that function has steadily declined, barely surviving now except to give a name to a theorem, an effect, or a syndrome. In literature, from about the same period, the author's function has become steadily more important: we now demand of narratives, poems, and dramas that circulated relatively anonymously throughout the Middle Ages that they tell us who wrote them, and we ask authors to answer for

the unity of the works published in their names, to display the hidden sense pervading their work, and to account for the experiences that gave birth to their writings.

In other words, part of what Foucault's history traces is **how the author in part becomes spoken by the discourses he or she authors.**

This circumstance should lead us to ask what the rhetorical consequences are for authors, audiences, and frameworks of disciplinary knowledge. How knowledge is constructed and transmitted relies upon assumptions, genres, and systems outside the knowledge itself, and Foucault is arguing that those assumptions, genres, and systems are not fixed or permanent but contingent, and based in part upon local standards of knowledge. Within its own limits, he writes, every discipline recognizes true and false propositions, but it repulses a whole teratology of learning: a proposition must fulfill onerous and complex conditions before it can be admitted within a discipline, and before it can be pronounced true or false it must be, as Georges Canguilhem might say, "within the true."

How does Foucault's assertion fit with the representation O'Connor and Weatherall offer of Bayes' theorem? Bayes' theorem describes the probability of an event based on prior knowledge of conditions that might be related to it: if the risk of developing health problems is known to increase with age, the theorem allows the risk to an individual of a known age to be assessed more accurately than by simply assuming that individual is typical of the population as a whole. *If a piece of textual evidence that we encounter is very likely to occur if our belief is true, we should be more confident in that belief.* How much should we believe in something, O'Connor and Weatherall ask, after we learn of some evidence, taking into account what we knew and how likely we understood the evidence to be?

Foucault suggests that we are not dealing with a succession of instants in time, nor with a plurality of thinking subjects, but with caesurae breaking the instant and dispersing the subject into a multiplicity of possible positions and functions---and that we must therefore accept the introduction of chance as a category in the production of events (330). In other words, given the gaps in human knowledge and the gaps in our capability to express human knowledge, causality beyond the limits of individual experience is contingent.

As a result, Foucault argues, in societies like ours the "political economy" of truth is characterized by five important traits:

- Truth is centered on the form of scientific discourse and the institutions which produce it.
- It is subject to constant economic and political incitement---the demand for truth, as much for economic production as for political power.
- It is the object, under diverse forms, of immense diffusion and consumption, circulating through apparatuses of education and information.
- It is produced and transmitted under the control, dominant if not exclusive, of a few great political and economic apparatuses: university, army, writing, media.
- It is the issue of a whole political debate and social confrontation, that is, of ideological struggle. (333--334)

Furthermore, these traits imply some further characteristics of truth: that truth is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements; that it is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, forming a regime of truth; and that this regime is not merely ideological or superstructural, but was a condition of the formation and development of capitalism (334).

It might be productive to consider these arguments from Foucault in conjunction with some examples: to my mind, the World War II propaganda films made by Frank Capra (*It's a Wonderful Life*, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*) and Theodor Geisel (*The Cat in the Hat*, *The Lorax*) offer interesting ways to consider the applicability of Foucault's ideas.

The second half of O'Connor and Weatherall's book traces the effects of such propaganda, shifting its focus from flows of information between communities of scientists and policymakers to flows among scientists, policymakers, and the public. They mention in passing the sorts of pressure the tobacco industry placed on the researchers it funded, and the ways their Bala-Goyal model helps us understand that pressure. In college, I worked for a while as an administrative assistant at AARP in Washington, DC, when they were heavily lobbying Congress over the Medicare and Social Security overhaul, and I certainly saw some of the influence AARP lobbyists had: they would write laws for Representatives and

Senators, and then the Representatives and Senators would submit them and vote for them. (The book *Showdown at Gucci Gulch* offers an excellent account of how this happens.)

The lobbying activities that go on in the House and Senate go far beyond the account O'Connor and Weatherall offer of propagandist activities on pages 106-107. In the book, all the propagandists do is selectively share the results of research that support their position---and in fact **we all do this**. When we write papers, we share the evidence that supports our position, and if we're bad researchers, we don't share the research that doesn't. And of course some research merits sharing more than others. Think about the types of research questions you might investigate: *what's interesting and worth sharing, and what's not?*

When I was just starting out as a new faculty member at West Point, I wondered: **does all this writing practice work?** So I did a research project (n=184) that involved semester-long cumulative individual word counts, blind anonymous grading of portfolios, and blind anonymous grading of end-of-semester timed writing exams. I discovered, using statistical regression, that there *is* a correlation between writing more---in other words, just word count---in draft essays and homework assignments and performance on the graded timed writing assignment. Practice works. Now: **is that an interesting finding?** Who would publish an article demonstrating that students who get more practice writing tend to perform better as writers? On the one hand, there seems to be a challenge with the degree to which academic journals will publish *interesting* results.

On the other hand, as O'Connor and Weatherall demonstrate with the diagram on page 109, slicing and dicing a research study can offer misleading results, and I've seen this happen in a national journal with a former colleague who subdivided the results in their study to show something like the result O'Connor and Weatherall describe: in three out of six trials, Action A produced the best result, rather than the overarching conclusion that 70 percent of trials indicated Action B was better. This is the same thing that gerrymandering does with voting.

What O'Connor and Weatherall call **biased production** and **selective sharing** both function in part through rhetorical delivery, and could be seen as aspects of rhetorical velocity. Note, though, that unlike Ridolfo and DeVoss last week, with their focus on the possibilities offered by rhetorical velocity, O'Connor and

Weatherall focus on the risks. So: are they talking about the same things? What happens if we attempt to apply the implications of Ridolfo and DeVoss to the findings of O'Connor and Weatherall, and vice versa? O'Connor and Weatherall seem more interested in systemic effects, while Ridolfo and DeVoss seem more interested in individual ones. What would Ridolfo and DeVoss say about what O'Connor and Weatherall call "the Matthew Effect," wherein once scientists have produced a set of impressive results they are more likely to get funding from government sources, which in turn helps them produce more impressive results? *(For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.)*

What do you think of the recommendations O'Connor and Weatherall offer in the book's final chapter, given that they footnoted the Sokal hoax in Chapter 1?

Outcomes. By the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

1. Articulate how relations of power and truth-claims intersect at the individual and social level.
2. Describe models of how truth-claims propagate.
3. Understand some of the components of how various communities---academics, policymakers---promote and regulate truth-claims.
4. Apply the above understandings to contemporary examples.

Also worth a look. Gregory Asmolov, "The Effects of Participatory Propaganda"; Eli Pariser, "Beware of Online Filter Bubbles"; and "The Mindset List," a useful annual guide to generational assumptions and beliefs---comparing a recent class year to the class of 2003 is instructive.

Week 6: "Useful fictions"

Reading. Jorge Luis Borges, "The Library of Babel"; Ted Chiang, "The Truth of Fact, the Truth of Feeling"; Douglas Rudoff, "An Honest Man"; Tobias Wolff, "The Liar."

This week we're engaging another set of creative readings, as we did during Week

1. You may notice a pattern: I give you a range of creative representations of some aspect of the rhetoric of deception, then I offer you some analytical and critical

ways to think about it, and I ask you to apply one to the other. The back-and-forth here is between theory and practice, and because deception is so complex and there are so many forms, and because I want to give you opportunities to take the readings in directions that matter to you, I'm trying to offer a really wide spread of options and approaches during the first half of the semester.

Borges's "The Library of Babel" is of course a reference to the Biblical story of the tower of Babel in Genesis 11:1--9, which accounts for the different languages of humanity and how we make sense of them---and a lot of people pick up on the parallels between the internet, the search for artificial intelligence, and this story. The story asks, in a sense: *where does the **meaning** of written language reside?*

The other more speculative story this week is Chiang's "The Truth of Fact, the Truth of Feeling," and many people have observed elements it has in common with the *Black Mirror* episode "The Entire History of You," although the episode has none of the deep dive into written and spoken language that the short story offers. As you read, consider not only the content but also the back-and-forth between the two narrative threads, and what that back-and-forth suggests about written and spoken language. Chiang's story is based in part upon the work of Walter Ong, who inspired Marshall McLuhan and other early media theorists. You may also know Chiang as the author of "Story of Your Life," which became the 2016 science-fiction film *Arrival*, with its ruminations on the hypothesis that language structures consciousness---itself a frequent concern of Ong, who wrote a famous essay titled "Writing Is a Technology That Restructures Thought."

You could contrast Borges and Chiang with the two more realistic stories this week: Rudoff's "An Honest Man," which plays with definitions of fact, fiction, and lying and starts to connect those to motivations for deception; and Wolff's "The Liar," which goes much deeper into complex character-based motivations and asks us to understand and sympathize with being a liar---why one acts like a liar, and what emotional or interpersonal needs lying fulfills. The rhetorical triangle might be one useful way to sort out the emphases in these readings. Recall that the **rhetorical triangle**, representing the rhetorical situation, has at its vertices the **rhetor**, the **message**, and the **audience**, and that many representations of it show the triangle surrounded by the circle of rhetorical **context**. Borges and Chiang seem concerned with how **invention**, **memory**, and **delivery** intersect in the **message** and the **rhetor**, whereas Rudoff and Wolff seem more concerned with how **invention**, **style**,

and **delivery** intersect in the **rhetor** and the **audience**. Do those intersections have anything to do with the purposes---to delight, to instruct, to move---or the functions---epideictic, deliberative, forensic---of their rhetoric?

That's what we're getting into this week before we move on to midterm conferences and project proposals next week. As you read, I'll ask you to continue thinking about how these selections might help you flesh out or pursue some of the themes you've picked up on in previous weeks.

Week 1.

- Jackson, "Charles": What motivates us to lie? Why did Laurie feel the need to invent "Charles" and report his deeds to his parents rather than say nothing at all? What responsibility do Laurie's parents bear?
- Browning, "My Last Duchess": How do liars give themselves away? What do liars see and not see about their audience? How do observations about character intersect with observations about actions?
- Bridle, "Something Is Wrong on the Internet": Where do lies and deception come from? What's the role of human intent in propagating deception? How do machines and algorithms reflect human values? Can artificial intelligence lie?
- Gorgias, "Encomium of Helen": How can rhetoric deceive? How powerful is rhetoric? What are the differences and similarities between rhetoric and force? Who holds responsibility for one's actions if one is persuaded by powerful rhetoric?

Week 2.

- The "Sokal Squared" hoax readings all came at questions of truth and knowledge in academia from different directions. What is the role of the university in promoting knowledge? Who gets to determine what knowledge counts as true? How do competing epistemologies complicate our notions of truth? What's the purpose of academic knowledge?

Week 3.

- Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*: What is BS, and how does it work? What defines BS in opposition to other types of deception?

- Almossawi, *An Illustrated Book of Bad Arguments*: What are the various types of rhetorical fallacies and bad arguments that get characterized as BS? How do they operate? What ties them together, and what distinguishes them from each other?

Week 4.

- O'Connor and Weatherall, *The Misinformation Age*: How do the characteristics of networks affect the spread of misinformation? How do we understand the flows of information, and who affects those flows?
- Ridolfo and DeVoss, "Composing for Recomposition": What strategies might authors use in composing their messages to promote remixing and redistribution in delivery along rhetorical networks?

Week 5.

- Foucault, "The Discourse on Language": How does the operation of language itself depend upon social and structural factors? How do Foucault's "critical" and "genealogical" characterizations of language differ, where critical engagements mark out the principles of ordering, exclusion, and rarity, while genealogical engagements grasp the power of constituting the domains of objects in relation to which one can affirm or deny true or false propositions (333)?

That's what we've done and talked about in the past five weeks, and by this point I'm hoping you've found some groupings of the readings that you've enjoyed and that have raised interesting questions. To my mind, there are possible intersections between Bridle and Borges around the proliferation of information: the Borges story is a version of the thought experiment with a thousand monkeys typing on a thousand keyboards somehow producing Shakespeare, but it's also perhaps a parable for how conspiracy theories work today, and a question about how much perceptions of lying---or, more generally, of *meaning*---can rest in the eye of the beholder. (This topic of the rhetoric surrounding conspiracy theories and paranoia is one we'll come back to with Anna Merlan's book in the second half of the semester, so if the deceptive connections made by conspiracy theories interest you, that could be worth pursuing. The themes of paranoia and conspiracy are a rich vein in twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature as well, in the work of such authors

as William S. Burroughs (*Naked Lunch*), Philip K. Dick (*A Scanner Darkly*, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, "Minority Report"), Graham Greene (*The Ministry of Fear*), Franz Kafka, H. P. Lovecraft, George Orwell (*1984*, obviously), Thomas Pynchon, and Kurt Vonnegut. Some critics have argued that paranoid literature is a "literature of narcissism," in that it posits---falsely?---a vast, anonymous conspiracy with the conspiracy theorist, its imagined focus and object, at the center of its hostile universe.) In a similar way, I see some possible points of connection among Gorgias, Foucault, and Chiang around ideas about speech and writing, so if you're interested in the rhetoric of authenticity, that might be a direction to go. On the other hand, the emotional and characterological investigations of Jackson's "Charles," Wolff's "The Liar," and Rudoff's "An Honest Man" raise complex questions about what lying and deception mean to us emotionally, and what needs they fulfill.

So this week I'd like you to engage the four short fictional readings, in whatever order you choose, and try to draw out thematic connections to earlier readings, with the intent of setting yourself up for our midterm conference meeting next week, when we'll talk about what you most want to pursue and study for your final project. The title of this week's lesson---"Useful Fictions"---is of course a weak dad-joke reference to the genre of this week's readings, but it's also intended as a question: what are the various uses to which we put rhetorics of deception? We're familiar with the advice to always tell the truth and with the social taboos around lying, but what are the productive uses to which lying---or even different understandings of what counts as truth---might be put?

In other words: what truths can lying, deception, and misinformation tell us?

Outcomes. By the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

1. Make connections among theoretical accounts of deception and narrative representations of deception in practice and in everyday life.
2. Apply those connections to specific aspects of our current cultural context.
3. Identify some of the differing motivations and methods for reconciling different understandings of truth.
4. Apply rhetorical terms and concepts to those motivations and methods in analyzing how they operate in theory and practice.

Also worth a look. Walter Ong, "Writing Is a Technology That Restructures Thought"; Willard Van Orman Quine, "Universal Library."

Week 7: Midterm

No lecture this week. Week 7 is given over to individual one-on-one conferences, with the midterm proposal and annotated bibliography due before your scheduled meeting. The conference is where we talk through what you most want to pursue for the final project: which threads from the first six weeks have held your attention, what you'd need to read to develop them, and what the argument might turn out to be.

Module 3: Politics and Propaganda

Week 8: "Can the subaltern speak?"

Reading. Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense"; Aldous Huxley, "Propaganda in a Democratic Society"; George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language"; Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics."

This week's readings take us into the realm of power and politics, and ask us to look at the violent and potentially apocalyptic power of deceptive political rhetoric. Orwell and Huxley are often taught in high school---1984, *Animal Farm*, *Brave New World*---as dystopic examples of the dangers of political propaganda and the power of totalitarian and authoritarian societies to corrupt truth. The word "propaganda," from the Latin, means "that which must be spread," and the combination of the verb's passive form and imperative voice gives an idea of the **seemingly irresistible agentless agency** we ascribe to the concept. Consider: with propaganda, who is telling us what must be done? On what authority? With what consequences? By whom must it be done---and against whom must those actions be performed?

Propaganda necessarily oversimplifies for the sake of gaining belief, and part of its reductive power comes from sorting the world into "us" and "them." In doing so it often couples **deliberative rhetoric** about potential actions to **epideictic rhetoric** about differing sets of values between the "us" and the "them," but it also relies on historical cultural imagery presented as settled instances of **forensic rhetoric**: they inflicted X and Y on us, therefore we must inflict P and Q upon them. As you read, it might be useful to keep in mind what you see as potential **examples** of propaganda from our current historical moment, and what specific loaded terms and imagery such propaganda uses. Keep in mind as well that while discussions of propaganda are often made in explicitly political or nationalist terms, propaganda itself can be cultural or economic as well as political---and in fact the term "political," along with its more loaded form "politicize," itself often comes under contestation, as with the feminist argument that "the personal is political," which has a deeply complex history in its adoption and rejection by various groups. Propaganda is dangerous, we all seem to agree, but depending upon our beliefs and values we perceive propaganda in different instances and places: commentators on opposite sides of the political spectrum hold very different ideas about what constitutes propaganda, *for clearly political reasons*.

This week, however, the definitions and assumptions go far deeper, to the levels of language, ethics, philosophy, and---yes---rhetoric. Is it permissible to lie, often figured as a one-on-one rhetorical interaction and the inverse of Plato's **dialectic**, or to produce propaganda, often figured as a many-to-many rhetorical interaction, on behalf of a cause that might save the world?

Orwell's essay, often taught in English 101 alongside "Shooting an Elephant," poses a clear and explicit link between language and politics, and then goes further to argue that sloppiness of language leads to sloppiness of thinking. Orwell seems to privilege logic as the embodiment of clarity in language, and offers critiques of five different passages early in the essay. There's much to admire, and good reason that it's so often assigned---but it's also got its problems, both serious and not so serious. As with Strunk and White's much-maligned advice in *The Elements of Style*, Orwell uses the passive voice in critiquing the passive voice (4); more problematically, the phrase "pretentious diction" (5) has been demonstrated to be something of a fig leaf for Orwell's English nativism and xenophobia.

In a similar way, we should understand that Orwell's critique of "meaningless words" is actually a critique of words that are *so deeply entangled* in evolving histories of meaning that they become complex and overdetermined---in other words, words having not no meaning but too much meaning. Raymond Williams, with his landmark book *Keywords* and the later projects that build upon it, is a useful antidote to Orwell's linguistic conservatism here, offering multi-page historical definitions and usage histories of complex words like **community**, **nature**, **democracy**, and **culture**. However, Orwell's crucial and partly ironic passage on page 9 ought to give an idea of the stakes: you are not obliged to go to all this trouble, he writes, and can shirk it by simply throwing your mind open and letting the ready-made phrases come crowding in. They will construct your sentences for you, even think your thoughts for you to a certain extent, and at need they will perform the important service of partially concealing your meaning even from yourself. It is at this point, he concludes, that the special connection between politics and the debasement of language becomes clear.

There's a hint here of postmodernism before it was recognized as such: we use language to speak, but we are in some sense also spoken by the very language and concepts we think we are using.

Huxley's "Propaganda in a Democratic Society" is an excerpt from his 1958 book *Brave New World Revisited*, which extends and further analyzes the concerns with democracy and totalitarianism he examined in the original 1932 novel. In that concern with democracy, Huxley also uses the term **liberalism** in a sense somewhat different from the complicated definitions it has today. In the US today, "liberalism" is the idea that government can and should intervene to produce a better society, whereas in many other nations, especially in Europe, "liberalism" means the hands-off or *laissez-faire* approach in which government does not interfere with the workings of capitalism---a sense we see in the term "neoliberal economics." Huxley's sense of the word is closer to its original Latin sense, meaning "characteristic of freedmen," the *libertini* who had purchased their freedom and sought to demonstrate their culture, education, character, and worthiness.

Huxley, another Englishman frequently critical of the United States, notes that Thomas Jefferson knew by bitter experience that freedom of the press can be shamefully abused---nothing, Jefferson declared, can now be believed which is seen in a newspaper---and yet insisted that within the pale of truth the press is a

noble institution, equally the friend of science and civil liberty. Mass communication, Huxley concludes, is neither good nor bad; it is simply a force, and like any other force it can be used either well or ill.

In the quoted sentiment from Jefferson, we might see some analogues to the debates over **fake news** today. What about the latter half of that quotation, though? That is, again, the ideology of technological neutrality that we've seen before: the common saying that guns don't kill people, people kill people, as opposed to my own past example---there's only one thing you can do with a Hellfire missile. Would we ascribe a view of technological neutrality to the ways we use social media today? Can technologies be neutral, or will technologies always have cultural values baked into them? Recall, again, that the Romans were very wary about rhetoric, because it could make the lesser cause appear to be the greater. Given those considerations, I'll simply suggest that the final page of Huxley's essay in particular is rich with concepts that will reward deeper analysis.

Hannah Arendt was a Jew who fled Nazi Germany, and yet who was briefly romantically involved with the Nazi philosopher Martin Heidegger. The essay's first footnote about "Eichmann in Jerusalem" refers to Arendt's reports on the 1962 Jerusalem war crimes trial of Adolf Eichmann, one of the chief organizers of the Nazi "final solution," their euphemism for the Holocaust. The famous subtitle of her book was "A Report on the Banality of Evil." Her thesis is that Eichmann was not a fanatic or a sociopath but an extremely average and mundane person who relied on cliched defenses rather than thinking for himself, was motivated by professional promotion rather than ideology, and believed in success as the chief standard of good society. Banality, in this sense, does not mean that Eichmann's actions were in any way ordinary, or even that there is a potential Eichmann in all of us, but that his actions were motivated by a sort of complacency which was wholly unexceptional. Perhaps obviously, her argument that Eichmann, while evil, was not a monster but an unexceptional person caused enormous controversy.

The first half of the essay, up to about page 10, is pretty slow going: it establishes principles, terms, and background, as in the important difference between rational truth and factual truth (3). She returns to Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" in examining the difference between truth and opinion. These early principles and distinctions allow her to make more controversial claims: what does it mean, for example, to argue that **"truth carries within itself an element of coercion"** (8)?

Once she gets those initial moves out of the way to set her analytical foundation, the final third of the essay---from about page 13 on---is chock-full of brilliant aphorisms, insights, and provocations, contributing to her reputation as one of the greatest political philosophers of the twentieth century. She discusses the relatively recent phenomenon of mass manipulation of fact and opinion as it has become evident in the rewriting of history, in image-making, and in actual government policy (13). In such cases, Arendt argues, the main effort of both the deceived group and the deceivers themselves is likely to be directed toward keeping the propaganda image intact---and that image is threatened less by the enemy and by real hostile interests than by those inside the group itself who have managed to escape its spell and insist on talking about facts or events that do not fit the image. Contemporary history, she writes, is full of instances in which tellers of factual truth were felt to be more dangerous, and even more hostile, than the real opponents (15).

The truth, it seems, can be dangerous.

Outcomes. By the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

1. Articulate how language and power intersect in the rhetoric of propaganda.
2. Describe how propaganda operates in rhetorical terms.
3. Apply the above understandings to contemporary examples.

Also worth a look. Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (excerpt).

Week 9: "I hear new news every day"

Reading. Lee McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, ch. 1--4 (1--87).

McIntyre asks: so is post-truth just about lying, then? Is it mere political spin? (6). He offers a qualified response, then characterizes the term "post-truth" as irreducibly **normative**, adding that the idea of a single objective truth has never been free from controversy (6). That word "never" is interesting in contrast with the qualified character of his response: basically he's saying "it depends," because *any* claim *ever* about a *single* objective truth has been contestable. Pause and think about that. All the way back to the dawn of philosophy and its initial distinction

between **being** and **non-being**---the fundamental idea that there are things that exist and things that do not---there have been criticisms of and debates about that distinction, traceable in the West to the pre-Platonic argument of Parmenides that the world in its unitary state of existence is the subject of true knowledge, but that in the multiplicity of its embodied forms it is the subject of opinion, and therefore illusory. This may seem like philosophical hair-splitting, but given that our ideas about truth and not-truth continue to rest on such distinctions, we may want to think about how those abstracted distinctions get made.

Those abstracted distinctions are so much a part of our daily lives that we don't even notice them. Consider the **POWER** symbol on any of the digital devices we all use every day: what is it? The symbol and mechanism through which all computation works, through which all language can be represented, is **binary**. An empty circle, zero, or hole---nothingness, not-being---intersected by a single unitary line, one, or digit: presence, being. Two states, on and off, one and zero, affirmation and negation, presence and absence, being and nothingness. The "digital" is etymologically derived from those things upon which we count: our **fingers**, or from the Greek, our **digits**.

Metaphorically speaking, **POWER**---and power, in its language and representation through philosophy---is polarized and polarizing. On/off, either/or. Alan Turing invented modern computation by coupling the electrical state of a charge, and its absence, to the philosophically derived symbolic algebra of George Boole. In my opinion and research, I've come to believe that part of the bad reputation rhetoric gets comes from troubling and complicating the philosophical division between is and is-not, between presence and absence, as in the distinctions from Aristotle we see in McIntyre's summation (7).

For those reasons, I want to make sure we understand some of the terms McIntyre drops early on, especially "normative," which means relating to rules---in other words, the way things *should* be. That *should* alerts us to the fact that "normative" refers to human judgment: to **opinion**. One antonym of "normative" is "descriptive," which refers to how things *are* rather than how they *should be*. "Normative" is therefore not **objective**. The concept of truth itself is polarized and polarizing, a notion to which some seem unwilling to grant credence. Furthermore, McIntyre complicates the issue by mixing in the notion of *intent* on the part of the one who expresses truth or untruth, which necessitates the inclusion of *audience* as well (8): once questions of truth move beyond any **individual's** singular understanding---

can truth exist without someone to understand it?---into the social, those questions inevitably become rhetorical rather than philosophical, even as the people arguing over them frequently seek to suggest that their versions of truth, in contrast to those of their opponents, are philosophical and descriptive rather than rhetorical and normative.

As McIntyre goes on to demonstrate, such tendencies are inescapably human: we all do it. At some level we are all inclined to factual cherry-picking (10--11), especially when we are seeking to assert something that is more important to us than the truth itself, leading to a form of ideological supremacy, which is a recipe for political domination (13). Sometimes, I'd suggest, that's OK. To those who ask what's more important than the truth, I'd reply: give me a choice between my son and the truth, and I'll take my son every time. And that's what happens in politics and rhetoric: we make choices between sets of values. Of course, some of those sets of values include what we define as truth, depending upon the ideologies with which we were raised. I would personally qualify McIntyre's claim that our built-in cognitive biases, academic hair-splitting on questions about truth, and exploitation of the media have already had a prior life, to suggest that this prior life exists not only in the right wing's attacks on science (14) but in the simple fact of the history of our human and social existence---a qualification that McIntyre admits to in later chapters. The more alarming part of his critique comes in his observation that the battlefield now encompasses all of factual reality, and that understandings of the shape and boundaries of that factual reality (14) are themselves open to contestation, as we will see in subsequent portions of the book.

In the following chapter, McIntyre critiques people who find their ideological beliefs in conflict with the conclusions of science (18) while neglecting to acknowledge that science is itself a human-constructed rhetorical form of knowledge. I want to emphasize that this is **not** an argument in support of the sort of falsehoods and relativism McIntyre problematizes in Chapter 2, but a claim on my part that scientists are humans who do their best to develop and refine our knowledge of the truth while *also* existing as historical and social beings bound by the constraints of the contexts in which they work. McIntyre hints at this circumstance in critiquing those who say science should not be in the business of excluding alternative theories, and that until a theory is absolutely proven a competing theory could always be true (20). I was disappointed that he didn't footnote Karl Popper in his explanation, although I suspect that, given the perspectives McIntyre expresses later in the book, Popper may be one of the philosophers with whom he disagrees.

Popper developed the criterion of **falsifiability** as the basis for evaluating whether a particular claim to scientific truth could be considered scientific. Logically, no number of positive outcomes at the level of experimental testing can confirm a scientific theory, but a single counterexample is logically decisive: it shows the theory from which the implication is derived to be false. Popper's account of the logical asymmetry between verification and falsifiability lies at the heart of his philosophy of science, and it inspired him to take falsifiability as his criterion of demarcation between what is and is not genuinely scientific.

In other words, a scientific claim should be considered properly scientific if and only if it offers the genuine possibility of being proven false through empirical experiment. If there's no empirical way of proving it false, then it's not science, but opinion or belief. Surviving the vulnerability to negation is what makes something scientifically valid. This is the problem that the students in Wason's experiment in Chapter 3 (40--42) ran into, as anybody who's good at word-guessing games should be able to recognize: they never tested their hypotheses with any disconfirming instances (42). When I teach English 101, I see this circumstance increasingly often, where some students---so apparently worried about being marked down for making any possibly incorrect statement---will attempt to craft an argument so vague that it's **not even wrong**. That's part of my motivation for assigning the creative discussion forum posts: to explicitly allow and encourage you to take those risks.

Outcomes. By the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

1. Articulate how language and power intersect in "post-truth" rhetorics.
2. Describe how "post-truth" rhetorics operate in relation to propaganda, deception, polarization, and philosophies of truth.
3. Apply the above understandings to contemporary examples.

A note on the module epigraph. The quotation that gives this module its title comes from Robert Burton's 1621 *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, in which Burton seems to attempt to include---via metonymy and synecdoche---the entirety of the world's written knowledge in his time. It's a strange and wonderful book, and this passage in particular helps me ask: if one person in 1621 could publish the entirety of what he knew as truth, what are we to do today in the internet's post-truth age?

I hear new news every day, and those ordinary rumours of war, plagues, fires, inundations, thefts, murders, massacres, meteors, comets, spectrums, prodigies, apparitions, of towns taken, cities besieged in France, Germany, Turkey, Persia, Poland, &c., daily musters and preparations, and such like, which these tempestuous times afford, battles fought, so many men slain, monomachies, shipwrecks, piracies and sea-fights; peace, leagues, stratagems, and fresh alarms. A vast confusion of vows, wishes, actions, edicts, petitions, lawsuits, pleas, laws, proclamations, complaints, grievances are daily brought to our ears. New books every day, pamphlets, corantoës, stories, whole catalogues of volumes of all sorts, new paradoxes, opinions, schisms, heresies, controversies in philosophy, religion, &c. Now come tidings of weddings, maskings, mummeries, entertainments, jubilees, embassies, tilts and tournaments, trophies, triumphs, revels, sports, plays: then again, as in a new shifted scene, treasons, cheating tricks, robberies, enormous villainies in all kinds, funerals, burials, deaths of princes, new discoveries, expeditions, now comical, then tragical matters. Today we hear of new lords and officers created, tomorrow of some great men deposed, and then again of fresh honours conferred; one is let loose, another imprisoned; one purchaseth, another breaketh: he thrives, his neighbour turns bankrupt; now plenty, then again dearth and famine; one runs, another rides, wrangles, laughs, weeps, &c. This I daily hear, and such like, both private and public news, amidst the gallantry and misery of the world; jollity, pride, perplexities and cares, simplicity and villainy; subtlety, knavery, candour and integrity, mutually mixed and offering themselves. . .

Week 10: "Alternative facts" and "grand narratives"

Reading. Lee McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, ch. 5 through the glossary (89--174).

This is a slow and easy week for readings, because I want to give you time to devote your attention to Project 2. The rest of McIntyre's *Post-Truth* is pretty easy and uncomplicated, and there's no discussion forum due this week. The one thing to note about Project 2 is that I raised the required word count---it was 800 to 1200 for Project 1, and now it's 1000 to 1600---because I saw some essays for Project 1 that really didn't give themselves enough space to adequately support their argument. That increased word count is a requirement designed to help you

get a better grade. As I've said before, I will never mark you down for doing more than is required, so if you need to go longer than 1600 words, that's absolutely fine too.

I'll also add that the little side notes and links I offer as optional supplemental materials, and the links and references I drop to other sources in the discussion forum comments, are intended *not only for the person I'm responding to* but for *anybody* interested in those topics. Some of you have seen me link to sources for religious rhetorics from various faiths, and others have seen me link to the rhetorical uses of fables, parables, comic books, and fairy tales. I've mentioned my own interests in the politics of digital rhetorics: Chelsea Manning's memoir went straight to the top of my reading list when it came out, and I read Edward Snowden's when it appeared. I'm fascinated by people who use information in certain ways that gets them called traitors, and I encourage you to make connections in your research to material that interests you or that you want to know more about. For me, the events of January 6 have strong historical parallels, and I'm also fascinated by the historical rhetoric of figures like John Brown, an American religious terrorist who was executed by hanging for treason, and yet of whom one of America's greatest essayists---Ralph Waldo Emerson---said, **"He will make the gallows as holy as the cross."** Digging into the history behind some of these readings can be interesting and productive. I also expect that we all have our different politics and different values, and so it's totally OK to say in your writing, "I saw this text X online, making rhetorical argument Y, and it had effect Z on me." In the writing I've shared with you, I've also tried to demonstrate that it's not only acceptable but *encouraged* to have fun with these written projects: figure out the types of additional sources you'd like to pursue, and enjoy reading.

As I said above, the second half of McIntyre's *Post-Truth* is fairly straightforward, although there are still some things to latch onto. In the example he offers on page 95 about seeing paper versions of the *New York Times* and the *National Enquirer* next to each other in the supermarket checkout line, he's observing that our shift from the genre markers of print-based media to the digital reproducibility of online media has made rhetorical problems and possibilities in the canon of delivery visible. That's worth looking into, as Ridolfo and DeVoss do with the concept of rhetorical velocity. However, that doesn't mean rhetorical velocity didn't exist before digital technologies, as the example McIntyre offers on page 99 makes clear with the rise of the Associated Press and our modern form of news: news itself is a

historically evolving concept, as last week's epigraph from Robert Burton---"I hear new news every day," on information overload in the year 1621---was intended to suggest.

In a more modern context, McIntyre offers the example on pages 120--121 of the steps a fifth-grade teacher gives his students to avoid fake news, and implies that older methods of evaluating sources are not quite as useful. I figure that's something you have expertise on, given the schoolwork you've had to do in various high school and college classes on evaluating sources: some of you have probably encountered the acronym CRAAP---Currency, Relevance, Authority, Accuracy, and Purpose---as a checklist for assessing reliability, one that some published research has characterized as unhelpful. At WSU Vancouver we have a national expert on disinformation, Mike Caulfield, who regularly publishes better methods for avoiding digital disinformation on his website and blog and---perhaps obviously---documents his research with sources. One of the implicit arguments I'm making in this class is one you'd expect me to make as an academic: citing sources, to allow and promote access for other people to the evidence you've seen, can be one possibly useful way to overcome both deception and the polarization often associated with apocalyptic beliefs or circumstances.

I think some of the conclusions McIntyre comes to in Chapter 6, which revisits the Sokal hoax and the "Sokal squared" hoax we went into in Week 2, are mistaken. I assign the book anyway, because I don't think that I have all the answers, and I anticipate that you all can think for yourselves. That's part of the theme of this class: it's a course designed in response to what I see as a moment of crisis, and for that reason it's exploratory in nature. I'm offering what I think are the best sources, even if they sometimes disagree, to ask us all to think collaboratively---with our different opinions and value systems---about how we might start working together to solve some of these problems.

You've now read two very short books, Frankfurt's extended definitional essay *On Bullshit* and Almossawi's *An Illustrated Book of Bad Arguments*, which takes apart the components of the rhetorical fallacies we sometimes see in disinformation and fake news. You've read Ridolfo and DeVoss on rhetorical velocity, or how rhetoric propagates through delivery, and a social-science book by philosophers O'Connor and Weatherall about how networks influence the propagation of true and false claims. Those precedents should offer easy connections to the news today, as you've been making in the past two weeks' excellent discussion forum posts.

I've already tried to highlight some of the problems with labeling older forms of media the "prestige press"---the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*---given their associated ideologies. We know that the *Washington Post* skews more to the political left than the *New York Times*, and that the *Wall Street Journal* skews less to the right than *Fox News*, despite sharing an owner. Keeping those biases in mind, it's still worth considering the arguments these organizations make about loaded rhetoric and ideological bias in political reporting.

These news stories suggest, and I agree, that we are not living in normal times: things didn't used to be this way, even twenty years ago. Public rhetorics have changed considerably within my lifetime and yours. I would argue that the most important thing you can do to make a difference is **vote**---I don't care for whom, but **make your voice heard**. You **can** change the world.

Outcomes. By the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

1. Synthesize relationships among claims, warrants, assumptions, and evidence, and how they relate to propaganda and disinformation.
2. Connect those relationships to some aspects---cultural, political, economic, social---of our current context.
3. Use rhetorical terms and concepts to analyze examples of propaganda, fake news, disinformation, and political argument.

Module 4: Language and Power

Week 11: "The facts about lies"

Reading. Anna Merlan, *Republic of Lies*, ch. 1--4 (11--101).

Definitions

We've already seen in this class some of the ways that conspiracy-theoretic thinking intersects with lies, deceit, deception, propaganda, and disinformation. Furthermore, recent events have demonstrated the dangers of ignoring real conspiracies and the dangers of imagining nonexistent ones, and the messy areas

in which those tendencies intersect. Merlan's book offers some useful definitions, suggesting that a conspiracy theory is a belief that a small group of people are working in secret against the common good---to create harm, to effect some negative change in society, to seize power for themselves, or to hide some deadly or consequential secret---while an actual conspiracy is when a small group of people *are* working in secret against the common good (14). She later explains that conspiracy theories tend to flourish especially at times of rapid social change, when we're reevaluating ourselves and, perhaps, facing uncomfortable questions in the process (15), and that such flourishing happens in part because conspiracy theories look like a way to give corporeal form to hard-to-define anxieties: a foe on which to pin the varied worries and misfortunes of a group that senses marginalization (16). Of course, many of us at one time or another have found ourselves in a social subgroup that feels in some way marginalized, which may account for part of the appeal of conspiracy-theoretic thinking.

Conspiracies and conspiracy theories have a distinguished history in literature: Orwell's *1984*, Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow*, Kafka's *The Trial*, just about any of Philip K. Dick's science fiction, Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*, Don DeLillo's *Libra* and *White Noise*---even Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, if you don't mind your conspiracies obvious and silly. As Merlan puts it, both real government conspiracies and their shadows loom large in our collective imaginations, destabilizing public perception of what's true, what's possible, and what we're ready to pin on those running the country. But there's also a curious feedback loop of feverish conspiracy thinking driving *state* action, where imaginary enemies and nonexistent plots have led to some extremely dark deviations (22). In other words, real and imagined conspiracies have led us to a cultural situation in which fantasies about conspiracies have real-world effects---an example of what Frank Mintz calls "conspiracism," a belief in the primacy of conspiracies in the unfolding of history, which identifies elites, blames them for economic and social catastrophes, and assumes that things will be better once popular action can remove them from positions of power (14). Note that the act of identifying the "elites" in question is part of the theorizing: conspiracy theories are adaptable, depending upon who you are and who you see as standing in positions of power.

Examples

The adaptability and diversity of imagined conspiracies is, of course, due in part to the adaptability and diversity of actually existing ones: part of the problem Merlan's book explores lies in distinguishing real from imaginary conspiracies.

- Merlan mentions COINTELPRO (21), a series of illegal secret FBI investigations aimed at surveilling, infiltrating, discrediting, and disrupting domestic American political organizations, which kept files on American citizens---including, for example, my own mother, a community librarian who once purchased a copy of *The Anarchist Cookbook*.
- In Chapter 3, Merlan describes the "Pizzagate" incident at length, including a discussion of Comet Ping Pong, a terrific restaurant in Washington, DC, near where I grew up, where you can go to a punk show and find yourself playing ping pong with band members if you get there early---and which very conspicuously has no basement.
- Alex Jones shows up repeatedly in Merlan's book, and we've seen plenty of him in the news, although some folks might not recall his bizarre 2017 fantasies about immigrant workers for Chobani yogurt not too far from us in Twin Falls, Idaho.
- Merlan also cites Jones's erroneous characterization of the Boston Marathon bombings as a "false flag" attack, despite the ways that the attack's real origins would play much more neatly into his anti-Islamic and anti-immigrant rhetoric.
- On the other hand, many of the people who seem so interested in rhetorically constructing Black Lives Matter and Critical Race Theory as dangerous conspiracies threatening America pay little attention to the actual conspiracies of the Tuskegee experiments, or to the medical procedures Rebecca Skloot documents in *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*---conspiracies I first became aware of when I was in a graduate English class with Skloot.
- Merlan mentions the Florida anti-Muslim pastor Terry Jones, best known for publicly burning a Quran (81--82) in spring 2011, an incident that caused riots that killed Afghans and UN workers when I was in Afghanistan in 2011, and cites him as another person claiming the Boston Marathon bombing was a "false flag" attack---suggesting a curious dissonance over the criteria for what counts as a false flag and what counts as a real attack.
- At the beginning of Chapter 3, Merlan describes her March 2017 visit to Lafayette Park in Washington, DC, and briefly mentions a "minor-league neo-Nazi podcaster" (66) who I'm fairly confident, based on timing and other clues, was a Charlottesville demonstrator and former president of the WSU College Republicans.

I offer all these examples, and place them within the context of my own personal experience and our local Washington State experience, to indicate **how easy it is for any of us to see ourselves as somehow linked to or affected by real and**

imagined conspiracies. I don't think I'm linked any more or less than any of you to any of these supposed conspiracies. Rather, I want to suggest that **making these connections can fulfill the emotional needs we all have to impose some sort of structure or order on the world.** Whether they're right or wrong, conspiracy theories help us make order out of disorder.

Some critics have suggested that in an increasingly secular and decreasingly religious world, conspiracy theories take away God and then rhetorically ask: who or what has taken God's place? In the eyes of those critics, the conspiracy theorist is one who---without the comforting idea of God's grace allowing for individual salvation---presumes that the individual must still be at the center of powerful forces, but that those forces are no longer beneficent. In other words, if feeling God's grace can be pathologized into narcissism, then the replacement of God's grace with hostile and powerful forces must be realistically transformed into paranoia, with the individual self still at the center of the universe. **Paranoia**, at least, is more comforting than chaos and meaninglessness: it **tells us we're still important.**

And feeling important---feeling recognized---is a human need. Note the amount of coverage Merlan gives to *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, and consider how readily a public figure can become the hero of his own conspiracy-theoretic story, seeing analogues between his own supposed suffering and the suffering of others. Conspiracy theories help us feel important, as if we're involved in or at least close to these events: like Forrest Gump accidentally encountering the Watergate break-in, investing in Apple, and teaching Elvis to dance; like Marty McFly inventing rock and roll, the skateboard, and the frisbee; or like pretty much the entire *Assassin's Creed* secret-history thriller series. In other words: **we love this stuff**, and the fact that we love it is part of the problem.

Outcomes. By the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

1. Articulate some of the defining qualities of conspiracy-theoretic rhetorics.
2. Begin to analyze how conspiracy-theoretic rhetorics work in rhetorical terms.
3. Begin applying understandings of conspiracy-theoretic rhetorics to our contemporary rhetorical situations and contexts.

Also worth a look. Doug Hubley, "A Field Guide to Conspiracy-Theory Rhetoric," a profile of the rhetorician Stephanie Kelley-Romano; Katya Valaskivi, "Circulation of Conspiracy Theories in the Attention Factory," *Popular Communication* 20.3 (2022); Kathryn Olmsted, "A Conspiracy So Dense," *The Baffler* 49 (2018).

Week 12: "Epistolam non erubescit"

Reading. Anna Merlan, *Republic of Lies*, ch. 5--6 (103--170); Jacques Derrida, "The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing."

This week we're going a little further with Merlan's book and trying to apply other theories of discourse to the histories and events she portrays. Clearly there are connections to current controversies and the rhetorical needs they fill for the conspiracy theorists involved---and as Merlan implies, rhetorics about real-world phenomena and rhetorics about conspiracy theories are becoming increasingly blurred together. **How do we tell the difference?** Merlan observes that self-investigation only confirms what the investigator thinks she already knows: it's a closed loop, confined to the internet and to ideas the investigator finds believable or plausible from the outset (115). Conspiracy theories set up a **divide** between the **perceived world** and **the world imagined to exist beyond surface perceptions**, and then seek to prove the truth of that imagined world.

However, as Merlan points out by way of the reporter Jonathan Mahler, with only themselves and their appetites as a guide, conspiracy theorists bypass information that doesn't suit their predisposition and worldview: the self-investigator's media diet is like an endless breakfast buffet, only without the guilt---take what you want, leave what you don't (115). This phenomenon is familiar to anyone who's ever cherry-picked quotations in order to complete a research paper, and yet for conspiracy theorists the stakes would seem to be considerably higher than for students completing academic research papers. After all, one doesn't want to be *wrong* about the end of the world. (Does one want to be *vague* about the end of the world?) As Merlan points out regarding the idea of "paper terrorism" (167), there's a distinction to be made between the real embodied world and the digital and paper world of evidence, but conspiracy theorists still seem to recognize the legitimacy of

some institutions. In other words, there's a collapse between the world and its representation, or what Derrida borrows from Ferdinand de Saussure to call the "signified" and the "signifier."

Derrida is hard, and I **don't** expect you to **master** this week's reading from him completely. At the same time, the concepts he grapples with are useful for illuminating the tendencies Merlan's book illustrates. Do your best to struggle through the Derrida---it's OK if you don't quite get everything he's talking about---and recognize that a lot of the time he's **playing with language** and **doing the thing he's talking about**. Notice, for example, his repeated use of the phrase "to be clarified later" and similar forward references, while he talks about the concept of difference, *differance*, and deferral. In a similar way, he sometimes makes finely grained distinctions between senses of a word, as with "ontic" versus "ontological": "ontic" means relating to questions of existence and being or not-being, while "ontological" means the study of questions relating to existence and being or not-being. Daniel Chandler offers an excellent and comprehensive introduction to semiotics, the study of signs and signification, for those who'd like the underlying vocabulary first.

The division and proliferation of signs contributes to a distinction between a good and a bad writing: the good and natural is the divine inscription in the heart and the soul, while the perverse and artful is technique, exiled in the exteriority of the body (216). In other words, the **alterity**---the state of being different---produced by the division of signs results in a split between interior wisdom, inscribed on the soul as in Plato's *Phaedrus*, and external rhetorics, received from the world outside. For Derrida, good writing has therefore always been comprehended: comprehended within a nature or a natural law, created or not, but first thought within an eternal presence; comprehended within a totality, and enveloped in a volume or a book. The idea of the book is the idea of a totality of the signifier, and that totality cannot be a totality unless a totality constituted by the signified preexists it, supervises its inscriptions and its signs, and is independent of it in its ideality. The idea of the book, which always refers to a natural totality, is therefore profoundly alien to the sense of writing (217).

This is why, for Derrida, reading and writing---the production or interpretation of signs, the text in general as fabric of signs---allow themselves to be confined within secondariness (214). Exterior knowledge always points elsewhere, away from the primary knowledge inscribed on the soul, and so sets up a hierarchy of knowledge.

The devaluation of the word "language" itself, he argues, betrays a loose vocabulary, the temptation of a cheap seduction, the passive yielding to fashion. This inflation of the sign "language" is the inflation of the sign itself, absolute inflation, inflation itself---and yet it is itself still a sign, not only because all that desire had wished to wrest from the play of language finds itself recaptured within that play, but also because language itself is thereby menaced in its very life, adrift in the threat of limitlessness, brought back to its own finitude at the very moment when its limits seem to disappear (207).

In the proliferation of signs, language refers increasingly to itself, resulting in free play between signifier and signified, argument and evidence. Here's the crucial passage in which Derrida describes how that happens: by a hardly perceptible necessity, it seems as though the concept of writing---no longer indicating a particular, derivative, auxiliary form of language in general, no longer designating the exterior surface, the insubstantial double of a major signifier, the signifier of the signifier---is beginning to go beyond the extension of language. In all senses of the word, writing thus comprehends language. Not that the word "writing" has ceased to designate the signifier of the signifier, but rather that "signifier of the signifier" no longer defines accidental doubling and fallen secondarity; it describes on the contrary the movement of language itself. There the signified always already functions as a signifier. The secondarity that it seemed possible to ascribe to writing alone affects all signifieds in general, and affects them always already, the moment they enter the game. There is not a single signified that escapes, even if recaptured, the play of signifying references that constitute language (221).

In this framework, the contradiction at the heart of Plato's *Phaedrus* is crucial for Derrida: writing is that forgetting of the self, that exteriorization, the contrary of the interiorizing memory---this is what the *Phaedrus* said, that writing is at once mnemotechnique and the power of forgetting (222).

Derrida's deeply theoretical account of the deferrals, differings, and play of signifier and signified permits us a richer and more complex understanding of Merlan's point that an eccentric use of language is one of the biggest flags for both sovereign citizens in general and redemption theory in particular (154). As Merlan explains, to redemption theorists a name typed in all upper case indicates the straw-man persona, whereas the name in lower case refers to the real, flesh-and-blood person, the "natural man"; sometimes hyphenation or creative colons and semicolons are used to distinguish the true self from their government-made golem

(154). This unusual doubling or proliferation of forms of language, and their relative distances from the knowing self, is precisely what Derrida is talking about in "The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing." Derrida is hard, in part, because he's trying to give names to all these nuanced operations of language that we often take for granted. At the same time, it's worth remembering that Derrida is one of the so-called postmodernists whose writing we saw attacked in the Week 2 readings on the "Sokal Squared" hoax.

Outcomes. By the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

1. Theorize some of the defining qualities of conspiracy-theoretic rhetorics.
2. Continue to analyze how conspiracy-theoretic rhetorics work in rhetorical terms.
3. Draw connections between conspiracy-theoretic rhetorics and other forms of deception.
4. Apply understandings of conspiracy-theoretic rhetorics to our contemporary rhetorical situations and contexts.

A note on the title. "*Epistolam non erubescit*" is from Cicero, and means "the letter does not blush." It's the epigraph for Walter Ong's article "The Writer's Audience Is Always a Fiction," which offers useful ways of thinking about how authors fictionalize their audiences.

Also worth a look. Mariolina Salvatori's essay "Conversations with Texts" engages Derrida's concepts in an accessible way, discussing how to help students apply them to acts of reading and **interpretation**---certainly a concern central to Merlan's book.

Week 13: "Signifier, signified, signifyin"

Reading. Anna Merlan, *Republic of Lies*, ch. 7--9 (171--239); Henry Louis Gates Jr., "The Signifying Monkey and the Language of Signifyin(g)."

Some years ago, in the WSU computer labs in Avery Hall in Pullman, the laser printers started printing out multiple copies of a single page with all-caps letters centered in a large sans-serif font, stating "it's ok to be white." **(Note that I'm intentionally lowercasing it here, both as a way of not giving it the author's all-**

caps shoutiness and as a way of deliberately and disrespectfully undercutting its obnoxious rhetorical fallacy.) Those flyers are one instance of the strategies of the group Merlan mentions recruiting through literature distributed on college campuses, as well as an instance of how conspiracy thinking can sometimes be harder to identify, more amorphous, thoroughly mixed in with the trappings of our daily lives (219). So, yes: here at WSU in Pullman we've seen direct evidence of some of the disturbing white nationalist conspiracy thinking that Merlan describes in her history.

A couple of related questions, then:

1. These conspiracy-theoretic rhetorics are, in some part, incorrect or untrue: what kinds of lies or BS or deception are they? How do they do untruth similarly to or differently from propaganda, or academic BS, or the other various forms we've seen?
2. Why and how do these conspiracy-theoretic rhetorics work, with their apparent double-voicedness of truth and falsehood, and with the way the people featured in Merlan's book seem aware at some level of the dissonance between perception and meaning?

I think part of the answer lies in looking at the odd double-voicedness of that white nationalist slogan. In seeking to prompt the projected response---*why would this need to be argued?*---the propaganda draws a false imagined equivalence to another racially freighted phrase, "Black Lives Matter," which also seeks to prompt the same response, but in a different rhetorical context and for different rhetorical purposes. To put it more simply: "Black Lives Matter" seeks that same projected response in order to draw attention to the very real conditions---police violence against African Americans---that do, in fact, disproportionately endanger Black lives. As the term's originator, Alicia Garza, has explained, the phrase doesn't mean your life isn't important; it means that Black lives, which are seen as without value within white supremacy, are important to your liberation, and that given the disproportionate impact state violence has on Black lives, when Black people in this country get free the benefits will be wide-reaching and transformative for society as a whole.

In other words, the phrase "Black Lives Matter" does something rhetorically interesting by drawing a contrast between what it **seems** to say---an apparently obvious statement---and what it **means**: the attention it draws to the historical and ongoing racism of aspects of American life. The phrase has what I called above a **double-voiced** quality, in the same way that some other rhetorical devices do, including various forms of irony and some of the devices from Almosawi. The white nationalist slogan borrows that double-voicedness, but in the service of a politics of resentment and false equivalence.

And I'll point out that at this point it's probably clear that I'm being more up-front about my politics than usual. As you've seen, Merlan is certainly not shy about expressing her political opinions, to the point where I found it sometimes detracted from her persuasiveness: rhetorically, she could have done a better job of convincing me if she'd shown herself to be at least somewhat more impartial in her prose. In her defense, the book is clearly the work of a journalist doing history, not an academic doing scholarship, so that's going to affect how she argues. But the differences between journalism and academia have rhetorical implications, related to the various purposes of rhetoric. Recall, from way back at the start of the semester, Cicero's account of the three things rhetoric does: *docere, delectare, movere*---to **explain**, to **delight**, to **persuade**. Academic writing and journalistic writing do those in different proportions, as do conspiracy theories.

In fact, I was amused to see Merlan's anecdote about how, in the Obama administration, Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule proposed performing "cognitive infiltration" by planting correct information among antigovernment and conspiratorial groups (210)---which of course, from one perspective, is just a much more selectively targeted and proactive version of **higher education**. (Although some of the Sokal Squared hoax folks might disagree.) Still, I share Merlan's sense that the stakes seem particularly high these days, and her concern that the fear and suspicion closely reflect the real fragility of American democracy (222). Part of that fear and suspicion, I think, comes from our unease about the differences between seeming and meaning in her examples. Those differences were part of what Derrida was getting at theoretically in last week's reading, with the problem of the idea of a thing standing in for the thing itself.

The idea of a thing standing in for the thing itself: that's part of what's going on both with conspiracy theories and with rhetorics of deception. Merlan's reference to the acknowledged "**straw man** persona" of redemption theorists and sovereign

citizens---in other words, the use of a term explicitly referring to a **rhetorical fallacy**---foregrounds an awareness of the dissonance between **seeming** and **meaning**. The sovereign citizens who believe they are not subject to federal law also believe that there are secret laws, secret books, and secret lists that hold the possibility of *guaranteeing* that they are not subject to those secret laws: the straw man is at once real and not-real.

There are plenty of would-be sovereign citizens here in Eastern Washington, and sometimes they show up at political demonstrations. At one such demonstration a couple of years ago, I recall seeing a few of them holding signs protesting federal taxes. For me, the message of their signs was undercut by the sovereign citizen gear they were wearing and carrying: black semiautomatic rifles, of course, and camouflage clothing, with velcro and nylon webbing and plate carrier vests, and---to top it off---military-style emblems of rank, including one young gentleman who couldn't have been older than twenty-five wearing the eagle of a US Army colonel. These men were protesting federal taxation using the visual trappings and symbols of the federally funded United States military to somehow, in their view, strengthen their rhetorical ethos: again, that weird back-and-forth between seeming and meaning.

That back-and-forth also shows up in how, as Merlan observes, an eccentric use of language is one of the biggest flags for both sovereign citizens and redemption theorists (154). There's the apparent belief in two levels of language, one of which somehow has more power than the other, resulting in documents that are full of abstruse, close-typed legalistic nonsense (154). When I teach English 101, I sometimes see similar practices, with first-year students writing papers that try to take on what they see as the complex language of academia.

And such complex language, of course, is at the heart of the discussion Henry Louis Gates Jr. offers of "the signifying monkey."

Outcomes. By the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

1. Articulate some of the qualities of how language works in conspiracy-theoretic rhetorics.
2. Apply complex theories of language and meaning to conspiracy-theoretic rhetorics.

3. Continue applying understandings of conspiracy-theoretic rhetorics to our contemporary rhetorical situations and contexts.

Also worth a look. Geneva Smitherman, "Black Language and the Education of Black Children: One Mo Once"; Jacques Derrida, "Differance."

Module 5: Conclusions and Questions

Week 14: "*De te fabula narratur*"

Reading. Anna Merlan, *Republic of Lies*, epilogue (241--249); Lee McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, ch. 7, "Fighting Post-Truth" (150--172); Stephan Lewandowsky et al., *The Debunking Handbook 2020*.

Welcome back from the break, and into the final sprint of the semester. For many folks in the United States, having families and friends with diverse values and opinions together around the dinner table can sometimes make for uncomfortable conversations even in ordinary times; these days, when so much of the world seems like it's in crisis, the mood and the differences of opinion can seem even darker. In the run-up to the holiday I saw two newspaper articles and three blog posts on the "how to argue, or not argue, with your relatives about politics" theme, and at the table I shared there was one person sadly absent because of differences of opinion. For all the importance our readings have been placing upon empirical truth, this can be a time of year that reminds many of us that sometimes, both in our differences of opinion and in the emotional bonds that tie us together despite those differences, feelings *are* more important than facts.

Note the emphasis in Merlan's phrasing at the end of *Republic of Lies*, discussing what seems to be a general sensibility these days: people *feel* particularly dispossessed, she observes, and they *feel* that our lives are controlled by corporations and federal agencies that they cannot see or appeal to (243, emphasis mine). When we theorize conspiracies, based upon our fears of what we cannot understand, we invent something that we *can* understand, and then give ourselves

reason to fear it. Naturally, we fear what is different from ourselves, and so we ascribe to it qualities that are different from ourselves---including political opinions.

Yet it should be obvious to us, as McIntyre points out, that there is no such thing as liberal science or conservative science. At the same time, the following sentence from McIntyre might give us pause: when we are asking an empirical question, what should count most is the evidence (163). We should recall from the Toulmin method of argument that the **warrant** connecting the **evidence** to the **claim** is just as important as the evidence. And sometimes, in **one particular subset of arguments**, the argument itself is *about* whether or not the claim warrants the evidence---in other words, whether the evidence actually is relevant to the claim. (See above, regarding holiday dinner table political arguments.) Obviously politics isn't science, but politicians and their supporters often attempt to invoke what they claim is factual or empirical evidence in support of their claims, in addition to the other obvious *ethos*- and *pathos*-based components. An example of a highly convincing *kairos*-based argument: the Friday morning after Thanksgiving is an appropriate and ideal time to eat pie for breakfast.

This leads us to **a second subset of arguments**, detailed by McIntyre, over what is and is not a fact. His book digs into recent debates over the constitution of truth itself, and yet he acknowledges at the outset that he is far from impartial. I'm glad he acknowledges his bias, because I admit I profoundly disagreed with the section of his book on the "Sokal Squared" hoax. I tried not to show what side I was on when I assigned the "Sokal Squared" readings during Week 2, partly because it's a complicated issue, but also because I wanted to make space for you to share your perspectives *without* my saying "here's what I think is right" or "here's what I think is the answer." It would be entirely logical for you to infer from such reluctance a concern on my part that power relations can indeed shape what we consider to be true, and thereby to put me---politically, at least---on the side of the dangerous and silly postmodernist academics the Sokal Squared hoaxers sought to expose.

You'd be right. I tend to believe, personally---and I don't expect you to share my beliefs---that postmodern thought *describes* Western culture from the 1960s onward pretty well. However, be aware of the way McIntyre's word choice and style turn *describing* into *celebrating* and then *advocating*. The big three early theorists of postmodernism don't say that.

- **The proliferation of simulacra.** Baudrillard pointed out that we are living in an era of duplication and copying and images, causing confusion and concern about the increasing blur between representation and reality.
- **The merging of art and commerce.** Jameson suggested that the once-distinct lines between cultural production and economic production have increasingly blurred under capitalism.
- **The fragmentation of grand narratives.** Lyotard observed an increasing skepticism toward large-scale deterministic schemes, and a corresponding awareness of difference and of a multiplicity of communities of meaning.

To my mind, those three defining characteristics of the postmodern condition pretty accurately describe the world and culture we're living in, but your mileage may vary. So when McIntyre levels that critique toward the end of *Post-Truth*, I'm one of the academics he's shooting at.

As I hope I've made clear in this class, **I think truth is important**. I'm bringing up this difference between what McIntyre *says* folks like me believe and what I *actually* believe in order to suggest **a third subset of arguments**, closely related to the second: debates over what is and is not an empirical question. We should keep in mind that when we see such debates, there's another implicit argument resting behind them---**empirical questions are the *right* questions**, the debates often imply. Other types of questions include questions of *value*, which are moral and ethical, and questions of *meaning*, which are interpretive or hermeneutic. Naturally, the arguments under discussion here may themselves be ones of *definition*: are *value* claims being proposed as *empirical* claims? One should also beware, as my example with McIntyre illustrates, of the rhetorical slip between "how things are" and "how things should be." The first is possibly an observation; the second is clearly an argument.

McIntyre makes that rhetorical slip elsewhere, and his doing so gives the book an odd dissonance for me---but one that I think is appropriate to our discussion of rhetorics of deception. Post-truth is a problem, he makes clear; he's against it, generally speaking. But is it a **circumstance** he's describing, a **thing**, a **concept**? That would seem to be the sense he offers of post-truth as media fragmentation, information bias, the decline of objectivity, and the threat not just to knowing the truth but to the idea of truth itself (153): post-truth describes *how things are*. As a well-trained reader, though, I go to the glossary at the back of the book and find post-truth defined as the contention that feelings are more accurate than facts, for

the purpose of the political subordination of reality (174). In addition to wondering about the word *accurate*---really? even though he cites Frankfurt? not, maybe, *important*?---I notice that it's a contention, that it has *intent*. A claim, made by a person or a group. An argument. In other words, a statement about how things should be.

If this all seems familiar, it should: questions about circumstance and intent are central to the rhetorics of deception. Those rhetorics slip between what is and what seems, between what is and what should be, and into questions of whether the deceiver intends to deceive or is merely mistaken. More generous than McIntyre in her assessment of intent, Merlan suggests that the motivations of ordinary conspiracy theorists are harmless: a desire to improve the world, to explain suffering---one's own and that of others---and to remedy injustice (243). Like McIntyre, Merlan frankly acknowledges her bias, and like McIntyre, her moments of overt bias sometimes detract from the substance and ethos of her argument. To her credit, though, she offers a more nuanced stance, suggesting that the truth is often complicated, shaded, and demanding, and that there's no denying it often lacks the powerful, emotional, gut-level appeal of a conspiracy (244)---particularly when, as we've seen before, conspiracy theories reliably change form to encompass the anxieties of the day (243).

Consider, as yet another reinforcing example of shape-shifting conspiracy theories, Merlan's citing of QAnon's references to "the Great Awakening" (242). Certainly some of QAnon's rhetorics are religiously inflected, and that phrase invokes previous significant moments in the history of American religious practice: the first colonial Great Awakening, with rhetors like Jonathan Edwards---no relation, as far as I know, though I did live in his hometown of Northampton, Massachusetts, for a few years---of "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" fame; and the second Great Awakening in the very early days of the United States, starting around 1790, which turned away from the relative secularism of the Founding Fathers and saw the founding of the Latter Day Saints and the millennial and apocalyptic beliefs of Adventism, as well as the rise of various holiness movements that prohibited smoking, drinking, dancing, jewelry, makeup, or fancy clothes. It's a vague connection, of course, just as other conspiracy theories around Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, and the religious right are vague, mixing feelings and facts in order to appeal to our fears. And we know as well that both religious faith and its absence

are things that simply cannot be argued---notably, Pascal's famous attempt to do so in the seventeenth century takes the same form as arguments about climate change today---by the very definition of faith.

What are we left with, then? The questions of intent and belief remain, and we have the salutary argument from McIntyre that one of the most important ways to fight back against post-truth is to fight it within ourselves: whether we are liberals or conservatives, we are all prone to the sorts of cognitive biases that can lead to post-truth (162). Perhaps the best faith we can have---religious or otherwise---is that, like Socrates, we know that we know nothing (Plato, *Apology* 22d).

Outcomes. By the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

1. Analyze and synthesize the qualities of post-truth and conspiracy-theoretic rhetorics.
2. Apply complex theories of language and meaning to post-truth and conspiracy-theoretic rhetorics.
3. Continue applying understandings of post-truth and conspiracy-theoretic rhetorics to our contemporary rhetorical situations and contexts.

Week 15: Presentations and wrap-up

No new reading this week. The week is given over to the final presentations: each student posts a four- to six-minute video presenting the work of their final project, and then comments on classmates' presentations---at minimum, on the two posted immediately before and after their own---so that our last conversation of the semester is one in which everyone reads and responds to what everyone else has spent the term building toward.