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Regimes of Post-Truth: Rhetorical Mediations of Knowledge and Fact

by

Christopher Luis Shosted

A Dissertation

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of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

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Christopher Luis Shosted

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Christopher Luis Shosted
"Regimes of Post-Truth: Rhetorical Mediations of Knowledge and Fact"

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Approved Date

Dr. Brooke Rollins
Dissertation Director

Dr. Lorenzo Servitje
Committee Member

Dr. Edward Lotto
Committee Member

Dr. Crystal Fodrey
Outside Committee Member

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	1
Introduction	2
Chapter 1	14
Chapter 2	80
Chapter 3	139
Chapter 4	186
Chapter 5	216
Conclusion	276
Bibliography	282
Vita	313

ABSTRACT

The concept of "post-truth" has gained popularity as a way to characterize Western political culture since the emergence of the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement in the United States. Alongside the public recognition of this term is a wider assumption that political audiences, especially those who support the policies of Donald Trump are rejecting the role of fact in the deliberative process. I suggest that this is a mischaracterization of how audiences interact with rhetoric. Audiences are always involved in mediating their understanding of the world through subjective experiences. Therefore, the positions termed reasonable or rational do not possess privileged access to objective reality but are assigned these labels as part of broader systems of power. I argue that conventional understandings of post-truth that suggest epistemic superiority serve to engender demagogic divisions by characterizing groups as irrational. I support this claim by demonstrating how the acceptance of typical post-truth rhetoric does not necessarily rely on a rejection of truth, but the overreliance on epistemic objectivity that transgresses into naïve realism. This problem is also understood as being more than just a symptom exhibited among the American right-wing. Critics of the MAGA movement are equally susceptible to the same kinds of epistemic naivety that engender post-truth conditions among the right. The first section of this dissertation argues for the redefinition of post-truth as a product of naïve realism and the application of a rhetorical epistemology as a means of responding to post-truth conditions. The second section moves through three sites where truth is expected to inform action: politics, science, and education. I explain how within these sites an epistemically naïve position yields ineffective results and instead requires methods of negotiating complicated rhetorical situations. Rhetoric is understood here as more than just a method of making truth more palatable, but a component of constructing reality as a site where multiple actors can come together and respond to the material exigencies the community acknowledges as being true.

Introduction

What comes after truth? Once we have come to know something, what is left to say about it? Those things which are not truth, primarily ignorance and lies, could surely still come after. But is communicating in a world that exists after truth just a matter of choosing to speak the truth or speaking that which is not the truth? This dissertation is concerned with this state of affairs. Specifically, what is the purpose of rhetoric – the techniques, products, and situations of communication – once the truth is found? Or, more likely, when we believe the truth to have been found.

Communication features as a cornerstone of public life – as we engage with others, we enter encounters mediated by our use of rhetoric. These encounters result in the reconstruction of worlds as we present reality to our interlocutors and they, in turn, present theirs to us. Sometimes these realities may symbiotically contribute to a deeper synthesis of perspective, creating new understandings of the circumstances of reality. Or they could produce deep schisms between parties who refuse to share in a mutual reality. Of course, the conditions of objective reality – what well and truly *is* – exist outside of these encounters. The rhetorical bears little influence on the metaphysical. But nevertheless, rhetoric influences the reconstruction of reality, and these reconstructions are often all that we can work with.

This dissertation is concerned with what has been dubbed "post-truth." As a term, the post in post-truth seems to suggest a kind of progression, or in this case a regression: a movement forward in time but backwards in progress. Simultaneously, it suggests that there once existed a truthful moment in history. Narratives about post-truth tacitly claim that humanity had successfully stumbled out of the darkness into the light of objective truths about the world. The practices and theories of rhetoric offer a counterpoint to these sorts of narratives. Rhetoric's

relationship to truth has been a focal point from Western rhetoric's founding as ancient sophistic and philosophic theories in Athens debated the differences between speaking well and speaking true. Ancient rhetoric, such as the theories of the sophists Gorgias, Protagoras, as well as others, offer ways of considering the epistemic components of speech beyond a purely representational relationship. What this sort of thinking holds for the rhetors of today is that a framework of only true and false is not the only way of considering how people speak and make claims in the contemporary equivalents of the agoras and polies of yesterday.

The purpose of this dissertation is to disturb the central conceit behind labeling a period or rhetor as part of a post-truth orientation to facts, logic, as part of a construction of truth. A conceit that operates as a manifestation of naïve realism – the belief in the purity of one's own access to and relationship with knowledge. Furthermore, the assertion that we live in a post-truth era – one exacerbated by unscrupulous demagogues and malicious online rhetors – tends to engender a naïve certainty in particular types of knowledge. These types of knowledge are often deployed as a method of asserting one's own objectivity. However, the claim to objectivity is never as neutral as it might first appear and can have drastic effects in permitting who is allowed to speak, when, and to what extent. As feminist scholar Donna Harraway describes, "all knowledge is a condensed node in an agonistic power field" (577). This intersection of knowledge and power is evident in that among the clearest examples of post-truth rhetors – the political agents of the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement – a consistent refrain of finding and following the truth is used to justify attacks on the democratic foundations of the United States. In fact, it can be argued that the claim to objectivity is corrosive to democracy. Plato, whose grudges against democracy were matched by his belief in the inherent goodness of the truth, famously argued in favor of an oligarchy of the wisest philosopher kings. For Plato, the

reconciliation of the problems with rhetoric and its relationship to democracy is in changing the political system as he outlines in *The Republic,* which can be read as arguing for the authoritarianism/ guardianship of a philosopher-king, or as political philosopher Thom Brooks interprets – a moderate authoritarianism where unelected experts and democratically elected officials govern together (29-32). But even a generous reading of Plato's politics fails to assert a model of rhetoric that goes beyond it as a process of merely replicating the idealized form of its referent. It is worth considering rhetoric's epistemic contributions outside of this process of replication, otherwise known as mimesis[1].

The critical perspective of this dissertation is indebted to the intellectual developments of feminist scholars who have successfully challenged the notions of objectivity that draw their roots from Platonic philosophy. In particular, Donna Haraway's "Situated Knowledges" gives voice to the difficulties in challenging an objective epistemic order while maintaining a stable enough epistemic foundation from which to issue challenges in the first place. Harraway states that, "Science has been about a search for translation, convertibility, mobility of meanings, and universality – which I call reductionism only when one language (guess whose?) must be enforced as the standard for all the translations and conversions." (580). If there is a keystone concept to this dissertation, it would be Harraway's distinction between science and its reductionism. This difference is paradigmatic of the epistemological grounds on which this dissertation finds purpose. It is folly to reject the ways that knowledge speaks to matters greater than a single person's perception or to imply that it is merely a social construction. But it is

[1] Meaning "imitation," mimesis refers to the replication of ideal objects through observation to eventual replication in abstractions. In the context of rhetoric, this is in Plato's assertion that rhetoric is an imitation of purer arts related to justice see *Gorgias 460a*.

equally foolish to presume that when one voice speaks it speaks from nowhere, regardless of how many times its words are repeated.

This dissertation is neither anti-truth nor anti-science. Instead, I aim to describe the ways that the reductionist narratives of being that are endemic to contemporary discourse are toxic to the deliberative practices of democracy. And most importantly, these narratives are not in themselves partisan. The kinds of "perverse capacities" of modern vision that Harraway describes (581) have only managed to grow through the methods of science and surveillance that permeate life in the information age. As such, Harraway's call for the introduction of "politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating" is necessary today to form our response to the effects of post-truth. Feminist conceptions of rhetoric are one such site of developing this response. In particular is the need to move beyond a masculinist tradition of reproducing ideas in the minds of others or otherwise demanding that they yield to superior arguments through agonistic models of communication. Sally Miller Gearhart's critique of conversion is especially prescient of these times. She writes, "To change other people or other entities is not in itself a violation. It is a fact of existence that we do so. The act of violence is in the *intention* to change another (196 emphasis original). Methods of managing post-truth discourse often set out to change those who listen to Trump or are otherwise prone to disinformation, presuming that they must be brought out of their echo chambers into the light of the truth. But this in turn engenders demagogic narratives of the ignorance of the other: the rhetorical environment is conditioned a need to convert the other to become rational. But Gearhart reminds us that this is not the only option available to us. She writes:

> Communication can be a deliberate creation or co-creation of an atmosphere in which people or things, if and only if they have the internal basis for change, may change

> themselves; it can be a milieu in which those who are ready to be persuaded may persuade themselves, may choose to hear or choose to learn. With this understanding we can begin to operate differently in all communicative circumstances, particularly those wherein learning and conflict encounter take place.

Responding to post-truth and the dangerous disinformation that it presents will require the cultivation of the environment Gearhart suggests here. We must understand how others might choose to change for themselves rather than having it forced upon them by the violence of conversion – these contests which require cladding fact in the armor of logic and arming it with rhetoric.

If we presume that objective truth does exist, it is necessarily influenced by our perceptions. While philosophy has wrestled with the exact nature of truth through the presentation of multiple theories, such as the theories of correspondence or coherence, I instead turn to rhetoric to better understand truth's application in the world. Wayne Booth describes that rhetoric may respond to the absolute truths of the universe as well as the temporally contingent facts we know to be true at a given moment; it is also responsible for constructing the meanings and significances of these facts (14-17). The significance of a fact is as much a product of its rhetorical construction as of its intrinsic characteristics. A fact is not necessarily plated in rhetoric as much as it is transformed by its rhetorical construction.

In describing this relationship, I do not aim to resurrect the notion that rhetoric is epistemic in the sense of the debates following Robert Scott's initial presentation of the idea in 1967. Scott, drawing from concepts introduced by Stephen Toulmin, describes rhetoric as a "frame of knowing" and truth, not as something fixed and final but as something to be created moment by moment in the circumstances in which [a person] finds himself and with which he

must cope" (17). In the years following Scott, rhetorical scholarship debated the exact parameters of rhetorical epistemology up until the theory was dismissed towards the end of the century (Harpine 336). William Cherwitz and James Hikins, for example, alter some of Scott's arguments about rhetoric being epistemic by defining rhetorical discourse as "*the description of reality through language*" (136-137, emphasis original) and the composition of knowledge as a synthesis of truth, belief, and justification (142). Though as Harpine points out the difference between Scott's work and that of Cherwitz and Hikins – as well as other writers taking up this question – is that Scott is primarily asserting an ethical rather than an epistemic orientation to the acts of speaking and communicating. In this sense (346). In this sense, ethics is less of a matter of following the rules of moral rights and wrongs, and more an orientation to the other – the ways the rhetor and audience interact within their system. For Scott, this orientation requires a reconceptualization of truth itself as something invented in rhetorical encounter encapsulated in the question that Scott poses and answers in his revisitation of the rhetoric-as-epistemic theory in 1976:

> "What sort of knowledge does rhetoric seek to achieve? The understanding of what it means to be persuaded and to persuade. Such an understanding is both general and specific: general, in that one's own grasp of oneself as a social being with others in society is essential to being human, and specific in that one must continually face concrete situations in which one will act to affirm some commitments" (263 CN).

In the interplay between these general and specific sites of knowledge about rhetoric we encounter a dilemma in our own arguments as scholars of rhetoric which Harpine describes as follows: "Rhetoricians obviously do not want to maintain that rhetoric is a source of knowledge, and then clam that the matters about which people engage in rhetoric are unknowable" (346).

The drive to assert an absolute and fundamental theory of communication through rhetoric is powerful, but nonetheless, it has been a problem lacking a sufficient answer since antiquity. How can we as scholars of rhetoric purport to know how people are persuaded without providing a method of persuading or producing knowledge that is true in *all* cases? Isocrates criticized the sophists for making that exact claim ("Against the Sophists" 7-12), and the characterization of rhetoric as a knack rather than an art which forms the central argument of Plato's *Gorgias* relies on the absence of certain knowledge within rhetoric's domain. However, in recent years, questions about the social dimensions of truth seem more prescient than ever in the face of the ever-growing MAGA movement. Cloud describes how rhetorical theorists taking up both realist and relativist positions "should hold rhetoric accountable to realities that are not universally shared but rather mutually debated" (22). Cloud's position helps shift the site of argument away from debating the material of language to considering language's operation in an environment distant from metaphysical and linguistic objectivism.

In these cases, the observation Scott makes that the contention that "men can possess truth" (10) leads to a diminished significance of rhetoric's epistemic contributions, holds more weight today than it may have in 1967. This reductionism is articulated in Scott's assertion that: "accepting the notion that truth exists, may be known, and communicated leads logically to the position that there should be only two modes of discourse: a neutral presenting of data among equals and a persuasive leading of inferiors by the capable" (10). In this case, naïve realism can lead to this sort of rhetorical reductionism. It is this relationship between modern certainty and post-truth communication that forms the primary investigation of this dissertation. Rather than bemoaning the denigration of our rhetorical methods, I ask how a modern demand for universal truth and certainty in our politics engenders the conditions for rhetors such as Donald Trump to

flourish. As such, this dissertation will not be involved in defining truth's role in rhetoric through the language of formal epistemology in the vein of scholars like Cherwitz and Hirkins. Rather, Scott's proposal of an ethical turn toward truth in communication and a rejection of truth being known will be a more fruitful endeavor in attempting to trump MAGA's claims to the truth.

This dissertation will work in two sections across five chapters. Chapter 1 will reconsider the ways the term post-truth has been deployed as a way of characterizing political shifts, mainly starting around 2016. Specifically, I will examine the rhetorical artifacts produced during 2015 and 2016, which led to the proliferation of the term post-truth in common discourse. These events are the 2016 US presidential election and the UK referendum vote to leave the European Union that same year. I will demonstrate that the rhetoric produced in support of Donald Trump as president of the United States and in support of Brexit goes beyond traditional conceptions of duplicity, lying, and foolishness and actually works to form arguments that remain cogent to certain audiences despite their obvious fallaciousness and inability to cohere with the material of objective reality.

Chapter 2 will follow through on this reconceptualization by examining theories of rhetoric that assert differing relationships to the truth. Specifically, I will consider the epistemic dimensions of sophistic rhetoric and Roman oratory to describe alternatives to what I am calling the ornamentation model of rhetoric. The ornamentation model describes rhetorical theories that position rhetorical construction and design as methods in service of truths already found. I argue that this model is not the only way to conceive of rhetoric, as supported by both sophistic rhetorical models and a postmodern understanding of knowledge construction through metaphors and other sites of knowledge production.

I recognize that the theories I am drawing from come from a Eurocentric conception of rhetoric and a rhetorical tradition stemming from a Greco-Roman historical narrative. It is not my intention to assert that these solutions can only stem from these sites, but rather I wish to demonstrate that even within these narratives, there are ways of conceiving ways of interacting with rhetoric that resist dominant historical narratives about the ways we came to understand speech. To do this, I draw from Edward Schiappa's method of "rhetorical salience," where readers find and develop the ideas that are meaningful and correspond to the values that are significant to contemporary situations (207). Rather than attempt to cling to objectivist assertions of what these sorts of texts must mean, my use of classical rhetoric is to suggest alternative approaches to texts. As Schiappa describes this method, the purpose is not to argue for the success of one interpretation over another, nor is it to retreat into relativism by suggesting that all meaning is merely constructed (55-58). We must instead catalyze the synthesis of fact and interpretation – the material and the intellectual – to develop understandings useful to our current circumstances. And classical rhetoric is one of these sites where that synthesis can occur.

Furthermore, a Greco-Roman rhetorical tradition is not the only site where we may find concepts beneficial to our handling of the post-truth phenomenon. Buddhist understandings of "right speech" (*sammā vācā*) may conceive of ways of speaking that go beyond a dogmatic pursuit of truth for truth's sake in favor of the Middle Path – a concept in Buddhism involving the balancing of extremes in ethical practices. Thich Nhat Hanh's *The Art of Communicating,* for example, describes other possible ways of conceiving of the matter of speaking the truth that can balance competing obligations within independent situations. Hahn writes of an encounter he had with a child viewing a mummified person inside a museum:

> After we both had stood there looking together for a while, with fear in her eyes she asked me something like, "Am I going to be lying dead on a table one day?" I breathed in and out and gave her the only answer that was appropriate for that situation: "No." I hope that someday a wise parent or friend will be able to talk with her about the impermanence of all things, including our bodies and the deep teaching of the Buddha that nothing ever ceases to exist altogether, nothing goes from being existent to being nonexistent. But this was not the time or place for her to be told all that, so I gave her the best answer available under the circumstances, which was "no." (32-33).

In this case, the skillful – or what we might call rhetorically savvy – method of communicating truth in this situation requires a balancing of competing interests that serve in what can be conceived as the best interests of the interlocutor. Truth is not located within the statement itself but requires a wider support relying on Buddhist metaphysics of non-being to be understood as true, even if the child's interpretation would likely be mistaken for now. While there are ways that concepts such as right speech could fall within the ornamentation model of rhetoric, the difference in metaphysical orientations to truth may be enough to distance the models far enough that right speech could serve as a useful practice to deconstruct the modern orientation to knowledge, I argue is the locus of the post-truth phenomenon. But it would be beyond the scope of this project to argue for a definitive answer to post-truth's proliferation in modern discourse. Rather, this would require a scholarly praxis that moves from the need to assert the truths of our own discipline. And I will describe this praxis further in Chapter 2.

The second section of this dissertation will focus on applying these new understandings of truth and rhetoric within three fields where the public presumes truth ought to exist: politics, science, and education. Each of these areas will be discussed in a chapter where its relationship

to truth and rhetorical practice will be considered according to the frameworks of the first section. Chapter 3 will focus on the ways political rhetoric engages responding to social truths while simultaneously reconstructing their meaning to engender new performatives through J.L. Austin's theory of speech acts. Where political rhetoric acts as a site where the public asserts truth ought to be, Chapter 4 instead examines where truth is presumed to be: within the communicative practices of science. I assert that the actual communicative practices of science have little to do with the development of objective truth but instead require practices that resist the production of universal understandings of the world. The use of the label "anti-science" therefore, does not necessarily need to connote a denial of science itself, but it can also be found in the work of those who dogmatically deny science's mediated relationship to the natural world. The assertion that audiences must "trust the science" has more to do with political constructions that often act in disservice to the production of knowledge through science and medicine.

The last chapter of the dissertation continues this section on application by looking at the role of writing education within this post-truth environment. While it may make some sense to conclude this dissertation with a chapter focused on developing a specific pedagogical praxis useful to teachers of rhetoric, the pedagogical turn may be premature at this stage. At this point, I argue that a shift in orientation is necessary before developing explicit methods. Instead, I recommend that change by considering the wider social pressures present within our classrooms. I challenge the assertion that by teaching students to be better critical thinkers we are preparing them to be better participants in democratic society. Critical thinking is an insufficient intervention in this matter due to the ways that it is deployed within a neoliberal construction of education that claims students come to possess or purchase knowledge from the university. As such, I support this claim by considering the ways both sides of the political partisan argue for

the purposes of education – especially writing education – and how these expectations seek to constrain what we are allowed to teach as part of a system of preparing students for employment.

Ultimately, this dissertation uses rhetoric as a way of reconstructing an ethical orientation to the truth. What we have begun to witness since 2016 is a failure in our society's ability to negotiate difference. Waging crusades in service of our truths will inevitably lead to the replacement of metaphoric combat with physical violence. If we do not begin to repair the division wrought by this demand for facts and certainty, it is doubtful that democracy can withstand the authoritarian impulses born from such an appetite for truth.

Chapter 1 – Post-Truth Post-Trump: Defining the Phenomenon

Rhetoric is no stranger to lying. From the early sophists of Athens to contemporary politicians dabbling in demagoguery, language's impact on behavior forms a central question of rhetorical study. Today, the term "post-truth" has entered common parlance to describe a particular relationship people have with fact—a relationship marked by the diminished rhetorical significance of the fact itself. The state of American politics, with Donald Trump at its helm, stands as a prime example of this shift. While Trump himself acts without regard for truth, the more troubling development is in how the American democracy has failed to hold Trump accountable for his rhetoric, his lying, his reasoning, his actions, or really anything. The impeachment of Trump failed on multiple occasions during his first term. Four separate criminal prosecutions of Trump likewise stalled and were dismissed at various stages – even after convictions were obtained in New York. And when, in 2020, it seemed that the American electorate had finally had enough of The Donald and voted him out of office, he returned in 2024 and was given another four years. It seems that Trump was rather prescient when he quipped to reporters in 2016 that: "I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody, and I wouldn't lose any voters." (Dwyer).

The Trump presidency, for some, marks a tipping point in our culture: an instant where accountability in politics is impossible. The public's refusal to acknowledge that the actions we take as a country require truth appears to spell the doom of American democracy. Plainly put, our society had moved past truth. And within this post-truth society, our straying from our own knowledge manifests in the way fields that were once lauded for their relationship to the facts, such as science, journalism, and education, are now subject to what philosopher Lee McIntyre calls the "war on Truth" (29 *Disinformation)*. McIntyre alleges that post-truth today, "amounts to

a form of ideological supremacy, whereby its practitioners are trying to compel someone to believe in something whether there is good evidence for it or not" (*Post-Truth* 11). For McIntyre, post-truth represents the culmination of the work of "truth killers" *(Disinformation* 7). actors in the public sphere who have undermined the public's faith in truth. Among lobbyists and politicians who have refuted the harms of tobacco and the impending doom of anthropogenic climate change, McIntyre blames postmodernism for the development of post-truth politics. Specifically, McIntyre claims that the two primary theses of postmodernism are that "there is no such thing as objective truth," and that "any profession of truth is nothing more than a reflection of the political ideology of the person who is making it" (*Post-Truth 126)*. Both claims are, at best, sever reductions of the work of post-modern theory. Post-truth, therefore, is the result of a bastardization of postmodernism produced by the political right.

Nevertheless, McIntyre blames postmodernism for having overstepped its bounds. The assertion that science is itself subject to cultural influences that affect its construction represents, for McIntyre, a kind of infection released from the labs of postmodern theory and left to propagate among the fertile minds of an unsuspecting public. All with a little help from pollsters and pundits, happy to profit from their doubt in fact. McIntyre writes: "It's all fun and games to attack truth in the academy, but what happens when one's tactics leak out into the hands of science deniers and conspiracy theories, or thin-skinned politicians who insist that their instincts are better than any evidence?" (*Post-Truth* 145).

While McIntyre opposes conventional post-truth peddlers, his position shares more in common with those he critiques than it might first appear. The post-truth crisis is a symptom of a wider demand for truth in deliberation — a demand that comes at the expense of an awareness of the conditions that make the circulation of knowledge possible in our lives. Both objectivists like

McIntyre and deceivers such as Trump respond to a rhetorical environment that demands objectivity, or at the very least, a positioning that presents itself as objective. Post-modernism often features as an object of disdain in recent attacks on the university, so McIntyre's account shares some common ground with the positions of those he is arguing against.

For the right, postmodernism's Marxist influences lead to the kind of destabilization McIntyre takes exception to. The right-wing commentator and clinical psychologist Jordan Peterson, for example, reduces Derrida and Foucault to "barely repentant Marxists" who repackage class consciousness as discussions of power. Peterson also presents what he calls the fundamental claims of post modernism: "(1) since there are an innumerable number of ways in which the world can be interpreted and perceived (and those that are tightly associated) then (2) no canonical manner of interpretation can be reliably derived… [thus] all interpretation variants are best interpreted as the struggle for different forms of power." Peterson's definitions were written on his website about three months after the publication of McIntyre's book. The similarity is obvious. However, there is no evidence that either was influenced by the other. Both blame postmodernism for undermining confidence in instructions and in a stable circulation of objective truth. While the two would certainly be on opposite sides of the political spectrum, we can begin to see how objectivism is not a partisan position.

What emerges from these parallel critiques is a shared epistemological posture that cuts across partisan lines: both the left's demand for objective accountability and the right's insistence on common-sense reality presuppose that truth is singular, stable, and accessible to the properly oriented observer. The disagreement is over who possesses the correct orientation, not over whether such an orientation exists. This chapter intervenes at precisely that point of agreement. Rather than adjudicating which side holds the better claim to objectivity, I argue that

the framework of objectivism itself – shared by McIntyre and Peterson alike, however different their politics– obscures the rhetorical and social processes through which truth comes to circulate as truth. To make this case, I draw on the classical concept of *doxa*[2] as socially figured knowledge to reframe post-truth as a disruption from the shared conditions of meaning rather than a departure from fact. *Doxa*'s history as a counterpoint to *epistêmê*[3], which figures as true or otherwise objective knowledge, allows us to conceive of the post-truth phenomenon as more epistemologically complex than the viral spread of ignorance, as McIntyre suggests. With this complexity in mind, I examine the 2016 events that crystallized the post-truth label – Brexit and the election of Donald Trump – as sites where the breakdown of common doxastic ground became visible. These events do not represent the public's abandonment of truth so much as the collision of incompatible frameworks for making the truth intelligible.

McIntyre's account contributes to a conventional understanding of the broader post-truth phenomenon. Specifically, that Trump's rise to power, as well as the advent of other far-right nationalists across the globe, are the result of a collapsed epistemic order. Within that rearranged order is a replacement of objectivity in favor of subjective matters, thus giving sufficient cover and legitimacy for the circulation of heretofore absurd policies and beliefs. Post-truth, according to some, such as McIntyre, is a matter of people being too stupid to even know what truth is. This is admittedly a harsh summation of his argument. But the argument is equally harsh in its treatment of the participants in democracy, McIntyre castigates. When we talk about the set of epistemic problems that came to a head in 2016, it is necessary to explain that two simultaneous problems in communication arose. Yet a cohort of left-wing objectivists also sought to reinscribe

[2] *Doxa* is often translated as "common belief," or a variation such as "common sense" but it can vary in its specific meaning depending on the theorist while typically being understood as distinct from *epistêmê* (Ellwanger 185).
[3] *Epistêmê* is typically understood as referring to true knowledge; the distinction between this and *doxa* also articulates the material of rhetoric as primarily based on *doxa* and therefore not exact knowledge (Bengtson 20-23).

a model of truth within the political system. While the latter may not seem like much of an issue, in practice, it only serves to undermine democratic processes by naïvely asserting one's perceived objectivity.

This chapter seeks to reorient our understanding of the post-truth phenomenon. Rather than the erasure of fact from discourse, post-truth reveals a shift in how we develop common understandings and the fragmentation of communal sites of knowledge. The problem lies in reducing argument and deliberation to a contest to see which side has the better facts. Rather than relying solely on this agonistic model, I propose we consider alternative concepts that account for the social production and circulation of knowledge. Aspects of knowledge, such as *doxa*, will be examined to articulate the social and rhetorical dimensions of these things we call facts. Clarifying these distinctions shows that post-truth is not the death of facts but a transformation in how facts, beliefs, and shared knowledge relate to and are expressed within rhetorical environments. Specifically, I will argue that post-truth is better understood as an epistemic environment that develops when the deeply held constructions that communities regard as settled reality are disrupted. These disruptions produce radical conflicts over the conditions of meaning itself rather than individual propositions of fact.

To support this reconsideration, we will assess the conditions often termed post-truth and evaluate the epistemic dimensions of the events that have shaped our current perception of the post-truth phenomenon. The events in question are the 2016 UK referendum, commonly known as Brexit, and the US presidential election of that year. While the term "post-truth" had circulated prior to 2016, these two events synthesized the current understanding of the phenomenon as involving the political right's propensity to challenge traditional sites of knowledge production. In both cases, the public, as well as the politicians who led these

movements, eschewed clear evidence and logical inferences in favor of policies that addressed deeper resonances with the world and modern orders.

The naming of post-truth also helped construct figures deemed unreasonable: citizens who words cannot reach. Post-truth denotes a set of political agents who pose a preeminent threat to democracy by refusing to accept evidence that contradicts their beliefs. However, I assert that this construction is myopic at best and represents the inability of modern discursive norms to manage conflicting perspectives. The post-truth divide is not the result of a wanton disregard for fact as such committed by any one political party, but instead a result of a deeper demand for certainty in a rhetorical field where such degrees of confidence are impossible to truly meet. Within discussions of what rhetoric ought to be, we have forgotten to account for the ways people use language to construct the world and interact with this nominal reality.

These two events are considered here as emblematic of the post-truth phenomenon, but they are not its genesis. The conditions of post-truth have broader antecedents in recent history and in the wider saga of the academic pursuit of truth and knowledge. Post-truth is also not an Anglo-American, or even a Western problem. This dissertation will primarily consider the effects of post-truth from an American perspective in conversation with its dovetailing in Britain around 2016. This is a global problem that aligns with the broader rise of right-wing governments in major democracies. Aside from the obvious situation in the United States, other democracies have seen leaders emulate the extreme nationalism we see in Trump, along with the disinformation that so often coincides with that sort of politics. Many politicians have operated within a wider nexus of disinformation, nationalism, and demagoguery since 2016. Among them are Narendra Modi in India, Shinzo Abe and now Sanae Takaichi in Japan, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, and others vying for top executive positions, such as Marine Le Pen in France. Trump's

political strategies align with a broader shift toward the policies and practices of right-wing politicians worldwide. While this discussion centers on an American perspective and focuses on 2016, it addresses an enduring issue that the global community has yet to address. Brexit and Trump's first election are not necessarily the only sites for analysis, but they are the moments when the phenomenon is named in full. They are therefore emblematic of the conventional understanding of post-truth, thereby highlighting its epistemic character. It is named as a phenomenon that is not only marked by the ignorance of the franchised, but also in the labeling of the population's incapacity for proper reasoning.

While Chapter 2 will focus more heavily on understanding rhetoric's epistemic relationship to an exterior truth, this chapter will instead describe how the expectations of truth endemic to modern society created fertile ground for rhetors wishing to capitalize on the public's dissatisfaction with conventional understandings of the world, specifically, in those dominant narratives that are labeled truth. I do not aim to rehabilitate our understanding of Brexit or Trump's election as sound political movements that possessed appropriate, if alternative, forms of reasoning. Both votes represent failures in political systems to serve the people. Voters in the United Kingdom ultimately enacted a policy that actively harmed their economic interests despite being made sufficiently aware of the potential risks of leaving the European Union. Likewise, tens of millions of votes cast for Donald Trump across three separate elections demonstrate that the American electorate is willing to accept the actions of a man who, to put it bluntly, reflects the most atrocious aspects of the American character. He is as perverse as he is mendacious, as vindictive as he is manipulative, as jingoistic as he is cruel. Yet Trump's political successes have less to do with spellbinding audiences to accept lies as truth. Instead, Trump and rhetors like Trump who have adopted post-truth strategies respond to an antipathy within the

public toward what is conventionally asserted as truth. Rather than focusing on Trump as a master manipulator, I suggest that the rhetoric Trump periodically employs resonates with the public because it disrupts hegemonic narratives that fail to align with voters' experiences. To be clear, this does not mean that Trump's rhetoric is more truthful *per se* because of this resonance. Still, cultural norms of objectivity and dominant narratives grounded in privileged interpretations of the facts as such fail to provide salient accounts that address what swathes of the public find important.

The implied suggestion within post-truth as a term is one of loss. That somehow, often due to malevolent forces in society, we – or perhaps an unspecified "they" – no longer have the ability to see the truth. But this suggests that the truth was somehow self-evident in the first place. It is not as though we have forgotten the advancements of modernity, but there is a popular movement away from the very concept of objective fact. It is this movement that McIntyre addresses in his definition of post-truth, and he cites several origins for it – including postmodern philosophy (122-130). But McIntyre ignores that epistemic certainty and objectivism possess their own genealogical legacies and sprang from debates within the Western philosophical and rhetorical traditions.

We must examine our current relationship to truth to better understand the nature of our post-truth world and the politics that surround it. Trump and the MAGA movement are not necessarily the driving force behind this development, but they are emblematic of a shifting set of priorities in the ways citizens deliberate and make sense of the world around them. These epistemological developments are both endemic and systemic, arising from the deliberate construction of truth as such within our society. This aligns with broader communicative systems that enable the development of communities capable of maintaining distinct sets of facts about

both empirical phenomena and social constructs. While it may sound as though these communities that adopt their own facts are simply falling prey to their own solipsism, I aim to demonstrate how all facts – and, by extension, the wider construction of truth – are mediated by language and, by extension, by community and social norms. I am not suggesting that objective truth itself does not exist, nor that reality is relative to individual perception. But rather, our ability to access the world is contingent on two forms of mediation. These are our individual perceptions of the world, mediated by our sensory organs and cognitive processes, as well as by the social influences that shape meaning.

I realize that in doing so, I am repeating the very mistake that McIntyre claims engendered the conditions for our current predicament. In a way, this dissertation may be one more product of the post-modern "weapons factory" (142) he claims is still running within universities today. But it is my hope that this argument, rather than undermining the notion of objectivity, better forges the concept by casting off the slag we have failed to remove from our understanding of objective reality. We require an objective account of what truth is, or rather, what *our* truth is. The truth that belongs to the human race. Facts are mediated by the processes that discover and communicate them. As long as the named object and the thing in itself are conflated as one, we will fail to respond to the epistemic challenges posed by rhetors like Trump.

Post-truth is better defined as a set of distinct epistemic conditions that influence the construction of meaning, rather than as a disregard for fact or a tendency toward emotional irrationality and relativism. I suggest that we reconsider our understanding of the term "post-truth," as it is used too often pejoratively. Post-truth suggests that some members of our society do not live up to their epistemic commitments or otherwise engage in improper argumentation. However, within a democracy, one does not choose who is allowed to participate if that

democracy is to be considered free. If we are to maintain the promise of a free and liberal democracy, we must understand how to manage disagreement and opposing perspectives beyond dismissal. Democracy can survive only if we learn to understand opposing rhetorical constructions of truth and to listen beyond our agonistic desires. Concepts *qua* truth have circulated as true and have been discarded throughout history. Myths of biological race have operated as truth for much of this country's history, and their legacies have been difficult to disentangle precisely because of the apparent objectivity conferred by their circulation and conversation with fledgling theories of objective biology. The notion of truth may be a comfort in these tumultuous times. Still, an overly narrow approach can doom us to making the mistake of allowing a limited construction of truth to dictate what is possible for us to achieve as a society.

The locus of post-truth is often cited as residing in emotional irrationality. However, this dichotomy of emotion and reason is not partisan, as both critics of Trump and some of his most ardent supporters point to objectivism as both absent and necessary to political deliberation. McComiskey claims that post-truth rhetoric results from a pathos and ethos that have overpowered logos in an audience's evaluation (20-33). McIntyre also argues that feelings over facts in politics portend an Orwellian dystopia (4). However, right-wing influencer Ben Shapiro is credited with coining the phrase "facts don't care about your feelings" as a method to insist that Caitlyn Jenner should only be regarded as male and be addressed only as Bruce. ("Moment" 0:43-0:52) In his book, also titled *Facts Don't Care About Your Feelings*, Shapiro refers to the American Psychological Association as "The scientific experts who hate science" for caving to political pressure by no longer classifying gender dysphoria as a mental illness (144). They are also at fault for suggesting that gender characteristics are social rather than biological constructs,

thus ignoring clear scientific evidence (144). Charlie Kirk, who made a career of what he called debate on college campuses, often resorted to this fact/emotion dichotomy to justify arguments similar to Shapiro's. Kirk asserts: "If you are being led by feelings as a man, you're not a man… We have reason for a reason. We are able to hopefully be able to say, 'man, outside of how I feel about this what is true, what is good, what is beautiful, and then what is the calculated decision I want to make there'" ("Lead with Reason 0:08-0:43). While Shapiro and Kirk largely align themselves with not only Republicanism but also the broader shift within the Republican Party toward post-truth politics, they employ truth within a rhetoric of dismissal. Truth, or at least its presence, is malleable enough that it can be used within their arguments as an effective rhetorical tool. Rather than relativism, their arguments adopt an objectivist stance to maintain their posture and launch volleys in service of irrational concepts like xenophobia.

While there is nothing in McIntyre's argument to suggest he would agree with the kinds of assertions made by Kirk and Shapiro, there is a parallel to the wider argument that emotion overrides critical thinking. Drawing from research in psychology and neurology, McIntyre describes cognitive biases such as the Dunning-Kreuger effect (the propensity for people ignorant on a subject to inflate their perceived knowledge of that subject) and the backfire effect (the ways that the presentation of contradictory evidence can cause a doubling-down of the erroneous conclusion) as a part of our "human inheritance" (*Post-Truth* 56). Particularly troubling is the way that this inheritance is attributed to the physiology of the brain, as he cites research that "Has shown that the fear-based amygdala tends to be larger in conservatives than in liberals" (*Post-Truth* 58). While McIntyre admits that the research does not show a drastic correlation, he nevertheless suggests that this could explain why more disinformation targets the right and could be enough to skew elections. There is something deeply unsatisfying in

attributing political difference to anatomy. Considering that McIntyre is so concerned with how academic writing (specifically postmodern theory) can be misused by bad actors seeking to further their agendas, it is surprising that his argument smacks of biological determinism. I doubt that he is attempting to dogwhistle to racists. But when research on the size of brain lobes is extrapolated to claim that some people are more "gullible" than others, one cannot help but draw parallels to discarded concepts like phrenology. That parallel is doubly troubling when the potential for political disagreement to be seen through such a lens is so obvious. It is worth noting the possibility of discussions of post-truth being deployed as a means of curtailing political expression in the name of reasoned debate.

While the phrase post-truth has been in use for some time, particularly in reference to the at-the-time cavalier communication style of the Bush administration during the War on Terror[4] (Keyes 150), it truly entered the public consciousness in response to Brexit and Donald Trump's first election. Post-Truth was named Oxford's 2016 word of the year, where it was defined as: "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief." This initial definition highlights the major components of the current understanding of post-truth. *Oxford*, through its definition, attempts to name and thereby give presence to a shift in the methods of public deliberation. Instead of objective fact –those things that are observable and exist independent of perception – emotion and belief become powerful elements capable of shaping public opinion. While it is naïve at best to believe that the general population grounds all decisions in rationality, the expectation nevertheless exists. The concept of fact is construed as the most relevant and therefore important of matters. The emergence of the concept of post-truth has widened

[4] Keyes footnotes a 1992 article in *The Nation* by playwright Steve Tesich for first coining the phrase (17).

divisions, as opposing groups fail to recognize the precarity of their mediations of truth. If we wish to address the havoc that results from what we describe as post-truth, we must consider how systems of language complicate our relationship to truth.

1.1 Doxa and Rhetoric – Common ground in Argument

If post-truth is not the abandonment of fact but a fracture in the shared conditions that render facts intelligible, then the conventional framing of the phenomenon requires closer scrutiny. The Oxford definition of post-truth – which, as the most widely circulated distillation of the concept, warrants sustained attention – presents 2016 as a fulcrum. That year, at once, became the moment where reason supposedly departed from the public's consciousness. Or it at least experienced a diminished significance. It also reifies the past of pre-post-truth social order. The nature of that order itself may be difficult to pinpoint. Still, it signals a reasonable and modern past while setting the stage for a moral panic—one centered on the post-truth agents who are understood to exist within society. The post-truth construction does this by signaling a difference between knowledge, belief, and opinion as discrete concepts. To specify what is lost when deliberation is reduced to the mere exchange of facts, we need a vocabulary for the background conditions that make an argument intelligible in the first place – and it is here that the classical distinction between *doxa* and *epistêmê* becomes essential.

Doxa and *epistêmê* constitute an important division within the concepts of knowledge. In English usage, "belief" and "opinion" signal a distinction between deeper commitments and flexible judgments, but in practice they operate as near-synonyms in most circumstances. The Greek "*doxa"* is translated as either "opinion" or "belief," depending on context, and is used as a primary counterpart to *epistêmê* – knowledge understood as stable, demonstrable, and

objectively accurate. In this classical register, *doxa* names what *seems* to be the case. This is the apparent understanding of an object or situation, as distinct from knowledge of what it essentially is (Moss 155-156). Yet *doxa* also operates through societal knowledge and experience, naming the shared belief systems of a community. *Doxa* can, in turn, refer to the subtle assumptions, values, and interpretive habits through which a public recognizes something as plausible or meaningful. (Cloud 3). For this dissertation, I treat belief and opinion as largely interchangeable insofar as both are modes of *doxa*, while also recognizing that rhetorical subjects often experience their commitments as layered and dynamic rather than neatly divided into separate concepts.

This broader understanding matters because it complicates the common assumption that only *epistêmê* counts as truth. Rhetoricians such as Dana Cloud argue that beliefs function as truths not because they are immune to critique, but because no *epistêmê* circulates outside the linguistic and symbolic systems that render it intelligible and actionable (8). On this view, the question is not whether publics possess truth or mere opinion, but how claims come to be recognized as knowledge within a society's shared structure of symbols, and how those recognitions harden into shared certainties. This reveals how post-truth operates – not through relativism, but in a crisis within the symbolic processes by which a public stabilizes what counts as true.

Rhetoric has responded to this conflict for millennia. Plato's dialogues provide the foundation for distinctions between *epistêmê* and *doxa*. However, that framework is not solely epistemological: that is, there is no reason for it to fall within the disciplinary boundaries of modern philosophical practices. As Moss emphasizes, Plato's treatment of knowledge is also ontological, metaphysical, and ethical: *epistêmê* is aligned with being, stability, and the good.

Doxa is instead aligned with seeming, contingency, and moral risk (Moss 155-156). In Plato's ethical project, then, the pursuit of *epistêmê* is not only cognitive achievement but a moral orientation. Conversely, the cultivation of *doxa* can appear as susceptibility to persuasion, appearance, and manipulation. Moss further argues that Plato positions sophistic practice as operating at this level: the sophist alters the audience's cognition of what seems to be the case rather than leading them toward what is (Moss 196). The familiar Platonic worry is that rhetoric, oriented toward persuasion rather than knowledge, produces gratification and pleasure rather than knowledge (*Gorgias* 462a), and thus risks replacing learning with an imitation justified solely by the construction of the social system.

Read through a contemporary lens, this Platonic critique anticipates what later theorists describe as bullshit – communication untethered from the speaker's responsibility to objectivity and the relevant facts (Frankfurt 47-51). But that does not fully articulate the relationship between language and the act of knowing – a question that this dissertation will discuss further in Chapter 2. However, for now, it is necessary to continue beyond Plato's indictment to consider *doxa's* importance in the construction of meaning. The more productive move is to ask what this anxiety over sophistry reveals about persuasion in public life: namely, that the locus of political argument is not pure demonstration and revelation, but from shared premises, reputational cues, and socially validated senses of plausibility. Put simply, argument is located within *doxa* rather than *epistêmê*. If rhetoric is dangerous, its danger lies in its relationship to *doxa*, not truth.

Recent scholarship has complicated the standard picture in which *doxa* is subordinated to *epistêmê*, as well as the broader schism between rhetoric and philosophy. Bengston, for instance, argues that modernist reading habits amplify the sharp division between rhetoric and philosophy and that Plato's dialogues do not consistently stage *doxa* and *epistêmê* as stable opposites. In

Bengston's account, the *Gorgias* draws more salient contrasts through related terms such as *manthano* (learning) and *pistis* (a mode of belief that can resemble modern concepts of faith). The Phaedrus shifts *doxa* toward meanings such as impression, public opinion, and reputation, in contrast to *Aletheia* (truth) (Bengston 43). Importantly, Bengston stresses that Plato does not fully foreclose on the possibility of an *alethes doxa* –true opinion – though he treats its formation as dependent on dialectical practices rather than the public speech culture associated with the sophists. Plato does not embrace rhetoric per se, but the dialogues can be read as acknowledging a continuum of socially mediated knowing rather than a simple binary between truth and mere opinion. Platonic epistemology is not necessarily incompatible with practices that regard *doxa*'s importance in public life.

The continuum becomes clearer when we turn from Plato to Isocrates. If Plato frames *epistêmê* as the telos of learning, Isocrates offers a pedagogy aimed at preparing citizens for public judgment, grounded in a categorical understanding of uncertainty. Takis Poulakos argues that Isocratean *doxa* is oriented toward public ends and governed by *phronesis* – practical wisdom understood not as possession of timeless knowledge, but as a cultivated capacity for deliberation and decision (79). In this register, *doxa* is not an epistemic failure to be honed by philosophy; it is the necessary medium of civic action. The contrast is instructive for responding to post-truth. If civic life requires judgment amid contingency, then the problem cannot be solved by demanding that political discourse behave as formal demonstrations of facts. The problem must instead be approached by understanding how publics form, stabilize, and contest *doxa* – and what happens when shared premises cease to function as common ground.

This is where contemporary post-truth dynamics can be reframed more precisely. If publics operate within an epistemological imaginary in which facts are treated as the only

legitimate currency of deliberation, then disagreement is readily attributed to ignorance or bad faith. Jeffrey Friedman describes this as a "failure to think epistemologically" (2), and he draws on work by Lee Ross and Andrew Ward to argue that a wider naïve realism– the belief that one's own knowledge is unmediated and true (18) – operates as part of the post-truth phenomenon[5]. Friedman asserts two interlocking forms of naïve realism engender a post-truth environment: individuals experience their own beliefs as direct corollaries to reality, and they treat experts they agree with as similarly unmediated conduits to objective reality rather than as fellow social agents subject to the conditions of interpretation and persuasion. Under these conditions, utterances circulating in public discourse are not experienced as claims within a deliberative context. Instead, they are experienced as obvious reality on one side and error/corruption/manipulation on the other. Deliberation then collapses into a contest of fact-assertion and fact-counterassertion despite the deeper conflict being a matter of *doxa*.

This helps to clarify how alternative facts can function rhetorically despite the oxymoronic nature of the term. The point is not that political actors are engaging in good-faith deliberation when they proliferate fraud narratives or weaponize disinformation against their rivals. The point is that everyday argument – both among those persuaded by rhetors like Trump and among those opposing it – often proceeds inside an impoverished epistemology that recognizes only one acceptable mode of disagreement: the other side being wrong. When that epistemology dominates, interlocutors tend to be sorted into a narrow set of moralized roles: liars, bullshitters, dupes, idiots. Such a framework forecloses the possibility of democratic

[5] Patricia Roberts-Miller defines naïve realism as "the term social psychologist use for the belief that it is easy to perceive reality with perfect accuracy (in other words, what many people in rhetoric call foundationalism). Naïve realists reject the need for complexity or nuance in descriptions of situations…'; they tend to see calls for deliberation, further research, more complicated descriptions, or skepticism as intentional attempts to obfuscate a situation that is clear to all right-thinking people ("Naïve realism and Ingroup Identity " 180-181).

contestation because it treats disagreement as a pathology rather than a necessary political condition. It also helps explain the recurrent drift toward paternalism and coercive solutions. If only one side is understood as inhabiting reality, then the temptation is to manage or discipline the other rather than to deliberate with them.

A rhetorical approach to *doxa,* therefore, offers a way to diagnose post-truth without collapsing into relativism. McKerrow argues that Plato's critique assigns rhetoric an unsuitable expectation of truth– an expectation rhetoric is structurally unable to meet because it operates through symbols and values. Critical rhetoric inquiry, on McKerrow's view, attends to *doxa* as more than simple opinion, but belief and regard as well. (103-104). McKerrow focuses on how symbols accumulate cultural capital and circulate within dominant groups, writing, "Rather than focusing on questions of 'truthy' or 'falsity,' a view of rhetoric as doxastic allows the focus to shift to how the symbols come to possess power – what they 'do' in society as contrasted to what they 'are." (104). From this perspective, post-truth claims become legible not only as (mis)representations of reality but as symbolic investments that organize matters such as identity, authority, and belonging. Bengston likewise stresses that as knowledge circulates, its status as socially mediated *doxa* is often concealed (190). Post-truth conditions intensify this concealment: the more a community experiences its premises as self-evident fact, the more rhetorical mediation disappears from view. And the harder it becomes to treat disagreement as anything other than irrationality or malice.

The classical tradition thus establishes that civic argument operates within *doxa* rather than *epistêmê* – that persuasion proceeds from shared premises and situated plausibility rather than from the demonstration of stable truths. But the expectation that political discourse should deliver unmediated certainty is not only a classical inheritance; it is reinforced by a parallel

structure in modern understandings of knowledge that compound the conditions of naïve realism. Identifying this structure helps clarify why the demand for truth in post-truth discourse takes the particular form it does – and why that demand is structurally impossible for language to satisfy. Kant's distinction between phenomena (objects as they appear under the conditions of sensibility) and noumena (the "thing in itself") frames noumena as a boundary concept: we can think it, but we cannot know it directly in experience. On Kant's account, understanding requires the synthesis of intuition and concept; when one is severed from the other, we are left with representations that cannot be related to a determinate object (Kant B314). This boundary matters rhetorically because metaphysical absolutism—the belief that the world consists of independent essences knowable as they "really are"—encourages the hope that language can simply transmit reality without remainder (Schiappa 39–40). Nietzsche considers this linguistic expression the only accessible form of truth, since truth is nominal rather than noumenal (Babich 103). Nietzsche's nominal, and therefore perspectival, understanding of truth will be discussed further in Chapter 2; however, this understanding helps address rhetoric's relationship to truth as it pertains to post-truth. Schiappa argues that popular discourse often reaches for essential definitions in response to the question "what is X?" (42–46), and post-truth discourse commonly inherits that essentialist demand: it seeks a definition of truth that would end contestation rather than a practice of argument that can manage contestation. The further claim of linguistic absolutism—that language could contain reality in a complete "God's-eye" register (Putnam qtd. in Schiappa 41)—makes that hope even stronger. But if language cannot deliver noumenal certainty, then political discourse is structurally unable to satisfy the absolutist expectation placed upon it. Under such pressure, discourse does not become "post-truth" because truth

disappears; it becomes post-truth because the demand for unmediated certainty collides with the irreducibly mediated character of public meaning.

If the demand for noumenal certainty is structurally impossible for language to satisfy, then what remains is the field where political life operates. This is where *doxa* must be treated not merely as an aspect of human imperfection but as the infrastructure of public reason and public life. Post-truth conditions, on this account, do not simply produce disagreement about particular propositions; they intensify a breakdown in the shared doxastic background that coordinates interpretation prior to deliberation. Rival communities do not simply have alternative facts but instead inhabit incompatible frameworks for judging salience and authority. The same evidence is rendered persuasive, irrelevant, or illegitimate depending on processes of trading symbols and metaphors that form the material of *doxa*. In that context, fact-checking can misfire as a rhetorical practice. Myopic attempts to reinscribe truth for truth's sake isolate the deliberative act within matters of fact while neglecting contested premises that make meaning possible at all. What follows, then, is not a war between truth and falsehood so much as a struggle over the production of common ground: over the institutions, symbols, and interpretive habits that direct deliberation for all who argue.

1.2 The Affect of Brexit

If post-truth names a breakdown in the production of common ground, then the next task is to examine how that breakdown is narrated and managed in public discourse. Post-truth is repeatedly framed within the narrative of the public's abandonment of objective facts. The remedy thus is framed as the reestablishment of objectivity through the correction of falsehoods, exposure to the facts, and the disciplining of epistemic methods (listening to the appropriate

sources, engaging in critical thinking, etc.). But this posture is not neutral. It configures a crisis and establishes agents who are afforded the right to engage while dismissing others. The post-truth label can itself become an instrument of drawing boundaries: it demarcates who counts as rational, who counts as corrupted, and which forms of speech count as legitimate democratic participation.

This is why the Oxford definition of post-truth – and its distillation into the popular construction of the phenomenon – matters. It condenses the dominant story of post-truth into a compact moral and epistemological diagnosis. It provides a method for the public to evaluate events in our politics and cast groups and figures within particular archetypes. Concepts such as emotion interplay with these figures, as in the case of Brexit and the 2016 US election. The Brexit case demonstrates how the logic/emotion dichotomy obscures deeper aspects of doxastic knowledge construction by focusing too closely on a moral falling grounded in subjectivity. Appeals to fact, expertise, and common sense become reorganized through rhetorical maneuvering that restructures the topography of an argument. Competing publics contest the authority of institutions and use interpretive frames to (re)figure reality in manners suitable for deliberation.

I point to Oxford not because it is particularly culpable in the construction of post-truth, but in that it is the most succinct distillation of the common understanding of post-truth as what Cloud calls a "Moral Panic," using Stuart Hall's concept to highlight the ideological functions that the post-truth label enables. For Cloud, the moral panic of post-truth is the fear that society, or at least an unreasonable contingent within it, has rejected objective fact in favor of the comfortable lies of Trump, which are themselves a means of dodging the radical problems within society (ix-xii). Now, in the early portion of Trump's second term, we have failed to fully

respond to Cloud's warnings of a need to resist the impulse to "spend countless hours opening up the little windows of [Trump's] advent calendar of mendacity" (xii). Instead, American society cannot move past the need to maintain a metaphysical objectivism[6]. To respond to Trump's rhetoric, we must reconsider how we understand the circulation of truth and how communities come to act.

If we wish to address the ways in which debate, conversation, and consensus have eroded as concepts in our society, we must move beyond navigating only with capital-T Truth as our lodestar. Post-truth began not because Trump demolished the public's appetite for fact, but because metaphysical objectivism engendered positions of naïve realism. 2016 marked an inflection point for epistemological anxieties, not just because of the nature of Brexit and Trump's victories, but also because of what they represented. Both events demonstrated a kind of regression in the wider narratives of progress. Brexit represented a return to nationalistic European politics, and Trump rolled back the apparent progress made by electing the first Black president of the United States of America.

The coincidence of Brexit and Trump represented a rupture in the narratives of progress that had unfolded through the latter half of the 20th century, and they shared striking similarities in how they came about and the exigencies they responded to. It is worth considering these situations to understand how they both came to be associated with post-truth as a concept and became emblematic of a wider unreason present among voters. While the particular cultural configurations of the UK and the US are distinct and British and American politics are by no

[6] I use "metaphysical objectivism" to refer to a philosophical position holding objective reality as stable and wholly independent of human perception. Ayn Rand defines objectivism as holding that: "1. Reality exists as an objective absolute – facts are facts, independent of man's feelings, wishes, hopes or fears. 2. Reason (the faculty which identifies and integrates the material provided by man's senses) is man's only means of perceiving reality, his only source of knowledge, his only guide to action, and his basic means of survival." (35).

means identical, the similarities between the two events demonstrate important features of regression that seem central to the issue of post-truth. In both cases, these events come to represent a rupture within a narrative of progress grounded in the mid-twentieth century. In the United States, this is the notion of a post-racial America; in the UK, the broader question of a pan-European identity was rejected. The election of Donald Trump came following the election of Barack Obama as the first Black president of the United States, signaling to some (but most certainly not all) Americans that the wounds of racial enslavement and segregation might have healed. Trump, however, made his antiquated views on race clear for all to see from his first speech as a candidate in the Republican primaries in June of 2015. As for Brexit, this marked a major step backward in the progress toward a borderless Europe that had been developing since 1945. The European Union, while primarily an economic arrangement, has gone far in developing a diminished appetite for nationalism in Europe through the development of the Four Freedoms of the EU (the free movement of goods, services, capital, and workers/people throughout member nations). Brexit, as a geopolitical shift seemingly enacted by popular will, signaled a backslide in the social order in much the same way that Trump's presidency backslid understandings of race in the United States. In both of these cases, post-truth does not necessarily signify a progression but rather a regression. Both Brexit and Trump promised a return to prior social orders. This is most evident in Trump's slogan, "Make America Great Again*."* Yet Britain, and particularly England, also experienced a deep yearning for return through the Brexit referendum.

As Brexit occurred first, it makes sense to begin by analyzing its circumstances and the arguments for Great Britain to leave the European Union. A policy that was enacted despite the widespread critiques and logistical nightmares such a move would bring. The forecasted

economic effects and the political havoc Brexit could wreak on the United Kingdom as a whole were covered extensively leading up to the referendum. The possibility of monitored border crossings between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, as the only land border in the UK, threatened to violate the Good Friday Agreement of 1998[7]. This presented a plausible concern of a return to the violence in Ireland that still would exist in the memories of many voters.

Additionally, as most of the support for Brexit came from England (Calhoun 57), the United Kingdom itself was threatened with possible dissolution. Populations in Scotland and Northern Ireland considered the significance of independence/reunification movements that drew support from the prospect of a forced exit from the EU (Jarausch 132). The general economic forecasts were also grim for Brexit (Milligan). Many reports drawing on reputable economic sources such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), the Bank of London, and others were viewed by the public as deceitful or as trading in fear for ulterior motives (Hewitt).

The Leave Campaign instead hammered home the claim that the UK lost £350,000,000 per week due to its EU obligations, which Brexit would presumably terminate. This claim was used repeatedly in public communications, to the point that it was even plastered on a tour bus to garner attention. All the while, Leavers argued that the money could be used to fund the NHS instead. The £350 million figure was derived by taking the total amount of money the UK contributed to the EU (£18.8 billion) and dividing it by 52, the number of weeks in a year, while disregarding any money EU membership brings into the UK (Watt). Despite some, such as Boris

[7] The Good Friday Accords were a series of agreements between governments of the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom bringing an end to decades of violence referred to as The Troubles. One of the conditions being the demilitarization and maintenance of an open border between The Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland.

Johnson, admitting that the figure on the bus was less than precise, as the net amount sent was closer to £161 million per week (ITV News) – a figure that still did not consider the indirect benefits of membership – voters were undeterred. The final vote fell largely along polarized lines, with most of the vote to leave coming from voters over 45 and those in more rural parts of England (Jarausch 128).

In the wake of Brexit, it has become clear that the warnings were substantiated, and the benefits were exaggerated. Modeling estimates that the UK's GDP is 2-3% lower than expected due to Brexit, and that this gap is expected to widen to a 5-6% overall reduction by 2035 (Kaya et al. 12). In addition, the effects of Brexit within London through currency depreciation, uncertainty around investments, and other economic factors led to an average loss of £9,500 per household in 2019 and £11,500 in 2021 when compared to models where the UK did not leave (Hope 2)[8]. It is clear at this point that, as an economic policy, Brexit has been a mistake. Of course, the reasons behind Brexit were not only economic. While elements like the Brexit Bus certainly did couch the argument in those terms, a deep nationalistic and racialized motivation was entangled in the vote as well.

A key part of Brexit was motivated by concerns over immigration and unenforceable borders in response to the crisis of refugees arriving in Europe from the Middle East. Sociological analyses of Brexit uncover the unique manifestations of nationalism that occurred in 2016. Some, such as Gerard Delanty, suggest that "it would appear that identity overruled interest," especially as regions that most benefited from EU subsidies voted overwhelmingly to leave (113). While the economic interests, which formed a cornerstone of the Remainer's arguments, were certainly sound from a logical standpoint, it appears that among some voters,

[8] While the 2021 model, would be affected by the COVID-19 Pandemic Hope's report fits within a growing consensus among economists that the UK economy is worse off as a result of Brexit. See Hagopian and Devlin.

certain aspects of national identity were more important. Outhwaite points out that British constructions of citizenship began to use race as a marker to establish tiers of citizenship as the UK transitioned away from its identity as a global Empire. Gurminder Bhambra likewise argues that "In the British context, the defining of British citizenship has been predicated on making citizens into immigrants on the basis of an explicit racial hierarchy… This points to the current British polity as deeply structured by race such that the state itself – and all associated concepts, such as citizenship, are racialized" (97). In response to the migrant crisis, where over a million Syrian refugees arrived in Germany in 2015 (Auer 46), the question of borders became central to both the crisis and the upcoming Brexit referendum. According to Auer, due to Germany's admittance of Syrian refugees into its own nation, the EU became synonymous with weakened borders among Leavers in Britain – although Britain was not at risk of being directly affected by this particular refugee crisis (47). In this case, despite Britain having no actual land borders to enforce aside from the Republic of Ireland, the EU's progress towards a borderless state became an existential threat to the idea of sovereignty – the concept of a nation building its own laws for its own purposes. As such, the possibility of leaving the EU became a means to reinforce distinction and, likewise, ascribe blame for every social ill in the UK toward the EU.

The Brexit campaign demonstrates an adherence to affect in relation to concepts such as sovereignty, even when clear evidence to the contrary is presented. Rather than centering on emotions, which suggest specific, socially labeled projections of feelings, I suggest affect as a term to describe some of the circumstances surrounding the Brexit referendum, as the latter term denotes "a non-conscious experience of intensity" (Shouse). Shouse defines affect as a sort of intensity involving stimuli and contrasts this with feelings and emotions. This, therefore, suggests a process that exists to transform that affect into emotion. Emotions are common and

social, but they are by no means universal to the human experience. The characteristics within definitions of emotions, such as Aristotle's definitions of concepts like pity and indignation, are contingent on social understandings of the concepts.

Additionally, emotions are not experienced per se. They are broadcasts that communicate feelings across groups of people. And feelings themselves are sensations consciously labeled by an agent (Shouse). With this in mind, rhetoric does not appeal to emotion as much as it works to move people through affect. It manages intensity towards the conscious labeling of a feeling and its display. A display that the rhetor hopes will result in the desired actions. The appeal to emotion is not just the demonstration of the emotion itself, but rather a tripartite sequence of affect, feeling, and, finally, emotion. But because feelings and emotions are part of a social reality, they are themselves the subject of rhetorical constructions and are thereby contingent rather than empirical.

While emotions such as indignation did play a role in voters' decision to remain or leave, affect remains significant in how audiences regard a concept unconsciously and is perhaps better described through the comedian Stephen Colbert's neologism "truthiness," which has been pointed to as an antecedent to "post-truth" and was Merriam-Webster's word of the year in 2006. According to Colbert, who at that time was best known through his parody of right-wing American media personalities, truthiness is "the quality of preferring concepts or facts one wishes to be true, rather than concepts or facts known to be true." (Merriam-Webster). It is because Colbert's term points towards preference and desire rather than outright belief that it highlights distinct patterns compared to post-truth. Truthiness instead suggests the effects of affect on how people interact with information. What truthiness describes, in a popular sense, is the role of affect in decision-making, through preconscious intensity that shapes the conscious

labeling of feelings and emotions. Consider the following exchange between Boris Johnson and BBC reporter Tom Bradbury, in which the two debate the inaccuracy of the argument advanced by the side of the Brexit Bus. Johnson states, "That figure represents accurately the gross sum that is sent [to the European Union]." To which Bradby interjects: "The gross sum is meaningless. You've got the rebate, you've got the public subsidies, so the true sum is £161 million as best as anyone can get to.… So you're going around with a dirty great lie on the side of your bus." Bradby's candor in this moment is striking. Here, a prominent politician faces a direct accusation of lying. However, in this case, Johnson suggests that the figure is still important to use not because it accurately reflects the fiscal relationship between the UK and the EU, but because it conveys a sense of how the EU's use of British capital is perceived.

> "The gross figure is the right figure, and I'll tell you why. Two reasons: First of all, yes we do get some of it back at the discretion of EU officials who decide how they're going to expend UK taxpayers' money in the UK when I think – and I think many people would think – it would be better if we [had control of this money] … We think it relevant to keep people focused on the gross figure because that is the figure over which was the key point: that we have no control" (ITV News 1:00-2:59 Edited for clarity).

While Johnson's sincerity in this moment is suspect, his emphasis on how the gross figure better speaks to the affective state of powerlessness perceived by voters is a perfect encapsulation of truthiness. The factually correct figure fails to adhere to the affective component that Leavers perceived, and as such, objectivity began to lack the affective salience that other components possessed. Because the £350 million had both a grounding in reality and emotional salience, it could be perceived as truer than more objectively accurate presentations of the facts. In this case, the indignation that comes from presenting such a high number when combined with other

realities, in this case fears about the NHS not being funded, speaks to this idea of not being in control or the wider loss of sovereignty discussed by Auer.

The closest classical analog to the affective dynamics of the Brexit Bus is Aristotle's concept of indignation, but the fit is imperfect in revealing ways. While indignation is one of the emotions Aristotle names directly in his *Rhetoric* as the opposite of pity, the way indignation is displayed on the Brexit bus is not a full replication of this rhetorical strategy. Aristotle defines indignation as "grieving over undeserved good fortune," yet this definition does not encapsulate the argument made by the Brexit Bus nor its effectiveness. Aristotle describes that rhetors may foment a sense of indignation in their audience by demonstrating undeserved good fortune, and this is tied heavily to the ethos of a subject, as both pity and indignation require a type of imbalance to be present (Aristotle 2.9). Both are comprised of an effect contrasted against a state of character – we expect that the unjust ought to be punished for their bad deeds and conversely that the just should be rewarded in the same way. It is when the unjust are rewarded (or escape consequence) that a sense of indignation comes to bear. However, there is no indication from the Bus that the EU is somehow undeserving of the money, nor that Britain is any more deserving of it than the EU, other than its association with potentially funding the NHS. There is only an appeal to a wider sense of control: that one ought to be in control of one's own money. In this way, the emotional appeal relies on a rhetorical management of affect rather than the emotion itself.

The concept of indignancy may share similarities between ancient Athenian and contemporary British contexts, but both still require doxic undercurrents to catalyze stimuli into the desired result. Literary texts can act as one site where this process can be observed. Ruth Amossy, drawing on Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, stresses the ways writers

employ doxic elements in literature to elicit emotional responses in readers. She writes regarding modernist depictions of war with the short story "Crevasse" by William Faulkner that: "doxa is mobilized to model the reader's reaction in a text that does not formulate any moral condemnation." (469). Amossy continues, "The gap [between the stated narrative and the unstated concepts] is not due to an omission at the level of the narrative, … but to the abrupt passage from one doxic horizon to another… The reader is called upon to activate the empty space and to relate the two segments, thus fully participating in the production of the text's meaning and effect." (470-471). What this signifies is that rhetorical systems of emotion are not the subject of the *epistêmê* of a text, in this case, the exact arrangement of words in a text. Instead, they rely on *doxa* so that the reader can reconstruct meaning. Speaking of the rhetorical feature of allusion, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca write about this doxic system we can see within the emotional appeal. For allusion to function as a linguistic act, it requires a shared understanding between speaker and listener of various events, knowledges, or norms that are shared among the group (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 177). It is communication without speaking, yet it has significant affective components through an intensification of that omission.

We see this intensification in Johnson's comments about the validity of the gross figure: it is still accurate because that money left British control and was thus sent away. The subject of the argument is not the net economic benefit but the mortification that results from the loss of control. To call what it does with indignation just an appeal to emotion fails to capture the wider systems that it needs for that emotion's intelligibility. Bradby demonstrates what this emotional unintelligibility looks like as he interjects into Johnson's argument over the figure. "You can't expect to win if your arguments are ludicrous, and you know this one is ludicrous. First of all, the figure is wrong, and secondly, even Norway, which is out, has to make a contribution which

in net terms is very similar to ours. So, this is a misleading argument and that's all I'm asking you to admit." The interview is an interesting exercise in how this kind of argument works with neither side conceding a point. Because Johnson does not fully articulate the emotional argument and instead only hints at it through this idea of control and the humiliation of such a loss, Bradby has no material to construct his argument other than the detail of the gross versus net figures. The comparison to Norway is applicable, as it shares comparable economic circumstances, but it does not share the same affective circumstances for an Englishman living in the UK. This is where the breakdown in *doxa* occurs and how the interview moves away from mutual intelligibility.

Brexit is distinct in that it is tied to deeper nationalism, along with differing viewpoints about the order of the world. Though Aristotle describes classes of people prone to indignation, specifically those who have attained higher positions justly and believe themselves to be deserving of that which has been doled out unfairly, Brexit is still more than pure emotion. Although Aristotle does not discuss it, the extent to which one is or is not deserving of the carrot or the stick depends on societal norms, and, as such, what may engender indignation in one context may not be applicable in another. The numerical figure on the bus no longer functions as *epistêmê* (a representation of the exact sum of money sent out of the UK) but instead appears as an alternative symbol as a result of doxic conceptions of sovereignty. In discussing the emotional (or rather affective) components of symbols, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca describe a series of transferences between the symbol as object and the symbol as abstraction. They write: "when the cross, the flag, the monarch are viewed as symbols of Christianity, the fatherland, the state, these realities excite love or hate, veneration or contempt, which would be incomprehensible and ridiculous if these symbols, in addition to having a representative character, did not constitute a bond of participation" (322). If all language is symbolic and nominal rather than noumenal, then

the symbolism of the Brexit Bus text is subject to reconstruction and to the influence of *doxa*. For those listening to Bradby, the text is an incomplete argument that misleads because of a lack of context. For those listening to Johnson, the text alludes to a broader understanding of the stagnation of British superiority that coincides with the rise of the EU. Neither is correct because the doxic content is contingent on the listener; a rhetoric of true and false is incapable of resolving disagreement.

Holmwood describes Brexit's relationship to the EU and the subsequent breakup as ordered according to "the demise of the empire" (32). As part of the post-industrial/post-imperial British economy of the 1970s, the narrative surrounding the white working class began to center on this loss of control. Stoked by the anxieties of settler/colonial governments establishing independence in Africa through the 1960s and the narrative of racially diverse immigrants entering the UK, consciousness of a white working class that was "left behind" began to take root (Holmwood 36). Throughout the 1980s, Britain experienced economic shifts that increasingly rewarded postindustrial careers involving intellectual rather than physical labor (Delanty 115), contributing to the perceived abandonment of the working class.

The deeper concerns about control may appear to signal anxiety among the public, but they are more complicated than just irrational worry. Whether it was the economic argument of the Brexit Bus, or xenophobic rows over migrants, the departure from logical evidence was cited as the hallmark of post-truth irrationality. Yet, it failed to address the affective state that influenced the salience of other kinds of evidence. This is partly due to the nature of affect as an unconscious cognition that precedes feeling and emotion. However, that affective state is always a doxastic undercurrent. It is never truly named, but it is permanently experienced through events like Brexit, which reveal fissures in the common ground. In this case, these fissures uncovered

perceived threats to national sovereignty stemming from European integration and economic/cultural threats arising from migration (Delanty 116).

It is ultimately short-sighted to say that Brexit was the result of an emotional response. The sociological underpinnings of the event demonstrate doxic understandings of the constructs of Britain, the EU, race, sovereignty, and control that occurred among voters. To say that it was emotional, and therefore irrational, takes a myopic view of what constitutes reasoning and deeper considerations that voters engage in to make sense of modern conditions. While the actual economic arguments fell flat with some voters, they resonated with others who voted to remain, But to say that the economic arguments alone were the only ones that mattered is to refuse to engage a certain portion of the voting body. As such, the *truthiness* of the Brexit Bus was sound, as it affirmed the affective belief of a working class that felt left behind. Now, is that to say that the Bus's assertion was sound because of that resonance? Of course not. But while the Truth may be true, we can do nothing but derive a sense of the world through affect. And if only one side chooses to respond to that sense, it is unsurprising that they would succeed.

The Brexit case thus brings into focus the relationship between two of the concepts this chapter has been developing. *Doxa* provides the doxastic background –the shared but unarticulated premises through which a community organizes meaning. Affect is the mechanism by which those doxastic commitments become salient: the unconscious intensity that precedes the labeling of feeling and the display of emotion. What the £350 million figure demonstrates is how affect activates particular doxastic commitments – in this case convictions about sovereignty, national identity, and the loss of control – that operate beneath and alongside factual argument. Objectivist responses that address only the epistemic content of the claim (the net figure is £161 million, not £350 million) fail precisely because they do not engage the doxastic

and affective registers where the claim's persuasive force resides. What remains, then, is to consider the specific constructions that organize these commitments – the ideas that communities regard not merely as belief but as settled reality – and what happens to public deliberation when those constructions are disrupted. It is in this disruption that the American post-truth crisis, centered on the figure of Donald Trump, becomes legible.

1.3 Post-Truth, Demagoguery, and Regimes of Truth

While Britain experienced its own existential shock in the form of Brexit, the US underwent its own post-truth crisis that same year during Donald Trump's presidential campaign. After a primary that saw the systematic toppling of the Republican establishment, it seemed that no scandal, gaffe, or mendacity could impede Trump's route to the White House. The campaign was subject to a series of scandals that intensified with each news cycle. Chief among these is the release of a tape where Trump expressed his more violent tendencies toward women, where he stated: "You know I'm automatically attracted to beautiful [women]—I just start kissing them. It's like a magnet. Just kiss. I don't even wait. And when you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything. Grab 'em by the pussy. You can do anything" (qtd. in "Transcript"). Despite an October Surprise that revealed his true opinions, the Access Hollywood tape failed to dissuade enough voters to prevent Trump from eking out a win through the electoral college. All the tape seemed to demonstrate was his ability to endure. Donald Trump, despite all that he has displayed – whether it is gross incompetence, a general callousness for human life and dignity, a wanton disregard for common American principles of liberty and equality, or even the repeated fomentation of violence culminating in the instigation of a political riot in the US Capitol – cannot be excised from American politics.

It is because of this unassailability that Donald Trump is so emblematic of the post-truth era. It feels as though no matter the degree of mendacity at play, no lie is too great, no exaggeration is too bloated, and no truth is powerful enough to counteract the sheer force of Donald Trump's rhetoric. For this, Trump displays a clear lack of accountability, which Mercia calls the mark of a dangerous demagogue (266). Demagoguery, while often described as a form of irrational behavior, operates as an alternative epistemic system according to the formation of internal and external groups within the public consciousness. However, it is important to distinguish between the demagogue and demagoguery itself. While much scholarship centers on a rogues' gallery of demagogues whose use of rhetoric enriches them, Patricia Roberts-Miller suggests that, instead, demagoguery manifests across media landscapes as much as it does in the speeches of those trying to cement their own power (235-237).

Furthermore, in these cases, many rhetors who position themselves within a movement or party argue for power to be administered to an in-group at the expense of a wicked, malicious, or ignorant out-group. It does so by generally arguing for the removal of a group or groups from the deliberative process (Roberts-Miller "Demagoguery, Charismatic Leadership" 236). Consider the ways demagoguery manifests in the current political landscape. In addition to Trump, whose demagogic tactics obviously center around himself, we see an increasing number of Republican politicians argue for awarding Trump power rather than the party. Additionally, Republicans who have spoken out against Trump have either changed their attitudes, as Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio have since their harsher stances during the 2016 primaries, or have resigned or otherwise been spun out of national politics. The shift over time has led to support for Trump and for Republican politics deriving mutual meaning from one another, thereby becoming synonymous. And as Trump becomes a focal point for demagoguery, we must cautiously observe its effects on

ways of making meaning. Because support for Trump has come to define the Republican identity, it may consume the American identity as well.

Demagoguery, according to Roberts-Miller, serves as a method of deliberation, and past examples demonstrate how the significance of identity influences decision-making processes and overshadows material evidence (*Rhetoric & Demagoguery* 52). The epistemic dimensions of demagoguery help to explain the split in messaging over Brexit discussed in the previous section. The British identity, understood in demagogic terms at that time, held that Britain possessed its own sovereignty. As that sovereignty was intruded upon, or rather having been perceived as intruded upon, the choice to leave the EU would be clear. It was not that people were particularly persuaded by the arguments of the Leavers themselves, as it was never about a particular economic policy, but instead in citizens reasserting their British identity as the groups "British citizen" and "Leaver" began to collapse into one another. Demagoguery, through the logic of identity, institutes a propelling force behind actions and thereby shifts the elimination of questions of "what shall we do?" to "how do we convince others to do this?" Roberts–Miller highlights this shift in rhetorical positions through demagoguery with the example of the Bush Administration's arguments to invade Iraq in the early 2000s. Specifically, the Bush Administration argued to solely persuade rather than deliberate in good faith as they "treated the war as a product to be sold, and American citizens as consumers to be wooed into buying the product (*Rhetoric & Demagoguery* 46). Because deliberation within the government had stalled, the question of whether we should go to war was not raised internally; instead, the focus turned to how best to spin the invasion so the public would buy it. The action, in this case, the invasion of Iraq, became a settled matter by virtue of its relationship to the American identity.

However, the actual content of Trump's rhetoric is surprisingly shallow. I doubt many would call Trump, especially as he ages, an expert orator. He regularly speaks extemporaneously and is prone to errors and imprecise vocabulary when he goes off the cuff. Furthermore, he rarely attempts to unify a caucus around any matter other than himself. Instead, he attempts to drive division further through incendiary speeches and social media posts. Trump often attempts to use himself or his office as a synecdoche for America, making support for his policies part of a wider movement to "Make America Great Again." To dissent against his policies, therefore, is to be labeled by Trump as an enemy of both him and, therefore, the United States. Following the homicides of filmmaker and political activist Rob Reiner and his wife Michele Singer, Trump took to social media to broadcast his theory behind their murder. He writes:

> Rob Reiner, a tortured and struggling, but once very talented movie director and comedy star, has passed away, together with his wife, Michele, *reportedly due to the anger he caused others through his massive, unyielding, and incurable affliction with a mind crippling disease known as* TRUMP DERANGEMENT SYNDROME, sometimes referred to as TDS. He was known to have driven people CRAZY by his raging obsession of President Donald J. Trump, *with his obvious paranoia reaching new heights as the Trump Administration surpassed all goals and expectations of greatness, and with the Golden Age of America upon us, perhaps like never before*. (Emphasis added, capitalization original).

Nowhere in the media coverage up to that point lay the suggestion that Reiner and Singer's deaths were politically motivated or had anything to do with Reiner's opinions about Trump, who later dodged calls to be held to account for politicizing what appeared to be a private family tragedy. Instead, he made an unfounded claim that his rhetoric was justified because Reiner was

responsible for long-standing theories alleging that he was colluding with Russia. Demagoguery often attempts to strangle deliberative practices by suggesting or decreeing that dissent is inappropriate or treasonous (Roberts-Miller *Rhetoric & Demagoguery* 5). In this way, Trump's response to Reiner's murder demonstrates a demagogic expulsion. Reiner is presented as anti-American and therefore worthy of public castigation rather than sympathy from the president, and his death is framed as a natural consequence of his opinions. But once again, the rhetorical strategy comes from framing these assertions as settled facts. Reiner *was* obsessed, he *caused* anger, he was *known* to infuriate, and his paranoia was *obvious*. These are not observations to Trump – they are reality itself. To argue those points is to be unreasonable: to suffer "Trump Derangement Syndrome."

Demagoguery features heavily in Trump's rhetoric and contributes to the wider situation of post-truth we find ourselves in. It has drastic epistemic effects that contribute to the deliberative process within a democracy. It is no secret that democracies are vulnerable to the effects of demagogues. The long-standing paradox of free speech – that to have free speech in a society, that society must permit the very speech that threatens free speech's existence – without the liberties of the Weimar Republic, the rise of Naziism in Germany would look quite different (Ziegler). Derived from the Greek term *demos,* demagoguery follows the archetype set by the Athenian general Cleon, who seized power in Athens after the death of Pericles during a plague. It is from Cleon that the model of the demagogue stems, according to Skinnell and Murphy (226). Assertions about Cleon's character claim that he: "was not only violent and relentless but also venal and dishonest, and made money out of politics by taking bribes and [misappropriating] public funds" (Dorey 132). In addition to corruption, Cleon displays a clear contrast in a political persona. Thomas Mitchel, in his history of the beginnings of democracy,

asserts that Cleon was a clear break from past models of leadership. The son of a tanner with limited education or knowledge of the military, Cleon derived his support almost exclusively from the citizens (Mitchel 276).

Additionally, Thomas Hobbes cites Cleon as the premier example of "a most violent sycophant" (qtd in Abbot 394) when discussing the failings of Athenian democracy. Ultimately, the demagogue is the one who speaks to the people and derives authority from them. Within perceptions of democracy as mob rule, the demagogue sits atop the heap. From Adolf Hitler to Huey Long to now Donald Trump, the demagogue engages in a rhetorical strategy that seeks to gain as much authority from the people as possible while siphoning power and capital for themselves. It is typically the strategy of public charlatans, but it is a different matter for the citizens who participate in demagogic societies.

While it is tempting to argue that this method of deliberation signals a post-truth social order, it does not represent a movement away from truth as such. Instead, it is the replacement of one epistemic system with another; demagoguery becomes an epistemic system itself. Roberts-Miller views the post-truth environment as a particular configuration of demagogic practices (*Rhetoric & Demagoguery* 51), and the common demagogic strategy of anti-intellectualism can have significant epistemic implications. Still, demagoguery remains as an identity-driven form of public communication. Demagoguery may use flawed logic to support its policies, such as the pseudo-scientific practices of eugenics of Nazi Germany or the Postbellum South. Still, it nonetheless uses a system of logic. The distinction Roberts-Miller makes is that intellectual practices require metacognition to reflect on the practices of knowing, which carries with it the acknowledgment that one's reasoning might be flawed (*Rhetoric & Demagoguery*). This metacognition is incommensurate with a demagogic practice that holds the in-group as

definitively correct. Evidence serves the function of reaffirming the demagogue's asserted hierarchy of the in-group over others. The demagogue, in this sense, can gain an air of authority as an expert of sorts by presenting what appears to be common sense when contrasted with actual evidence that challenges these ideas. Roberts-Miller demonstrates this to be the case through Mississippi governor Theodore Bilbo's attack on the state's university system and Black intellectuals who challenged the pseudo-scientific concepts of biological race (*Rhetoric & Demagoguery* 149-151). Post-truth, in this sense, can resemble demagoguery through the shifting of epistemic values among audiences, but it is not the only factor contributing to it. While demagogic discourse is obviously problematic and has connections to common concerns about post-truth through the manipulation of evidence, the fact that evidence (erroneous as it may be) still serves a purpose within this system is important to note. This demonstrates that something like common sense serves a foundational role in the process of making meaning in matters of politics. The relationship between these two concepts – common sense contrasted against actual knowledge – holds important implications for understanding what post-truth is.

Demagoguery, therefore, experiences a relationship between *doxa* and *epistêmê* in its development of meaning. The framework of *epistêmê* and *doxa* helps specify how political claims become persuasive. Experiential knowledge becomes rooted through shared premises that render certain interpretations plausible and others as unintelligible. Cloud organizes these concepts into a broader system that clarifies how *epistêmê* becomes legible only when filtered through the wider lens of *doxa* (7). In this account, *epistêmê* and *doxa* are not separable domains so much as mutually constructive processes. The observation and communication of external events provide material for public understanding, but the doxic system that institutes the commonality of common sense also has the capacity to distort the significance of those events

(Cloud 7-8). In the previous section, we considered the warping effects around the intensity of affect as part of an emotional sense of meaning. Still, *doxa* also extends to the apparent empirical meaning of information and data through processes of knowing and feeling. Demagogic discourse is one place where this process can be observed, as the common doxic base warps under the influence of a leader. But this is not simply a departure toward irrationality; it is a strategic intensification of the doxic pressures that govern what counts as knowledge in the first place. Our act of knowing is as social as the act of feeling, as both require systems of symbols which, in turn, require a social system to govern their significances. Demagoguery, then, illustrates one way the doxastic base of deliberation can be reorganized through identity-driven discourse. But the epistemic dimensions of post-truth extend beyond the demagogue's immediate sphere of influence. If *doxa* participates in producing the conditions under which something can count as evidence at all, then the reorganization of evidentiary practices pervades the broader systems that publics use to construct or contest knowledge.

This is also why the concept of *epistêmê* cannot be limited to good evidence, and *doxa* cannot be reduced to mere belief. The point is not that evidence disappears in post-truth conditions. Instead, evidentiary practices themselves are reorganized by the premises that audiences interpret and authorize what they encounter. Jenny Rice notes that even the most outlandish conspiracy theorists employ evidence to support their arguments and asks, "Why do traditional modes of argument often fail in the face of claims that rely on bad evidence?" (17). The rhetorical significance of empty archives, for example, demonstrates the tenacity of arguments built from bad evidence. Within an empty archive – a repository of evidence known or supposed to exist but otherwise unobtainable (Rice 99) – the absence of that evidence becomes a salient fact to support one's argument. On the one hand, this seems to be an obvious

example of confirmation bias, where the conspiracy theorist, in finding nothing, fabricates the support they need to prove their point. However, Rice describes all evidence as distal. Meaning evidence (not the facts but evidence itself) comes into existence through contact and its perception (116-117). This, in turn, means that the presence of an empty archive operates through what Rice calls a "ventriloquist act," in which its presence is not located in the empty archive itself but in an external site that registers this perception of significance (118). What matters here is that *doxa* does more than color evidence after the fact; it participates in producing the conditions under which something can be evidentiary at all.

What Cloud and Rice demonstrate through their research is a broader understanding of how meaning is constructed beyond what we might understand as the more normalized forms of argument that the Oxford definition of post-truth presents. However, an important dimension of post-truth extends beyond immediate politicized contexts. Discussions within rhetoric of health and medicine, for example, have wrestled with questions about the purpose and functions of evidence, as in Colleen Derkatch's book *Bounding Biomedicine,* which describes how a patient's subjective experiences of a patient are transformed into an objective diagnosis with a distinct rhetorical function (116) Heidi Yoston Lawerence's *Vaccine Rhetorics* likewise discusses how online vaccine-effect testimonials act as truth in online discourse, but a truth that operates outside of the modern scientific systems that advance generalized knowledges about the body (94-96). Neither author uses the term post-truth to refer to their situation. Yet, they correspond to the familiar conditions of post-truth: the movement of deliberation away from a shared knowledge of objective fact. However, while the vaccine skeptics Lawerence analyzes bear a striking resemblance to the conspiracy theorists Rice analyzes, the forms of deliberation they adopt are perhaps more palatable and, therefore, understandable than something like the rampant

antisemitism present within many conspiracy theories like Pizzagate. This is not to say there is no considerable overlap among communities, as is shown by much of the public response to COVID-19. What is demonstrated, however, is a wider shift in the kinds of knowledge-producing processes that influence public communication and deliberation.

Discussions of political epistemology have begun accounting for this shift in surprising ways. According to Friedman, much of contemporary political thought involves the assumption of self-evident truths through which opinions are formed. Opinions are understood as having been constructed from observations of truths rather than through perceptions (4). The result is a communicative stalemate: if both parties understand their position to be true, what is left to argue aside from the stasis of fact? As such, both parties refuse to cede ground to the other due to the assumption of a singular truth to which all facts must correspond. Friedman notes the shift of the American academic class towards a "bias" for liberal policies and ideas (bias, in this case, used in a neutral sense) as well as the blurring between scholarship and activism, coinciding with the FCC's termination of the fairness doctrine in 1987[9] (7-17). Friedman's argument is that a post-truth society is not characterized by the absence of truth, but by the ways in which argument and deliberation become impossible under the hegemony of self-evident truths and the spread of naïve realism. While Friedman is not a rhetorical theorist, calling himself "a political epistemologist" (18), his understanding of the epistemological dynamics of this post-truth period helps highlight the contributions that rhetorical theory can make to present post-truth situations.

Additionally, others writing in Critical Review, which describes itself as a political science journal, alongside Friedman, describe the post-truth phenomenon as the navigation of complex systems of disagreement (Russel and Patterson 123), competition (Moore 116), and

[9] The fairness doctrine was a government regulation compelling broadcast license holders to use their airtime to address controversial issues of public interest while demonstrating contrasting viewpoints on the subject.

belief (Levy 103) rather than a simple disregard for truth itself. These interpretations are similar to the analyses produced within rhetoric that move beyond the conventional understanding of post-truth as the public's disregard for fact. Instead, we see a disruption in the broader relationship between truth and discourse. These accounts – drawn from rhetorical theory, political epistemology, and the rhetorics of health and science – converge on a shared insight; post-truth is not a deficit of facts but a transformation in the conditions under which facts become persuasive, relevant, or legible within public deliberation. What remains is to specify the mechanisms by which these conditions are constructed and maintained – and, crucially, what happens when those mechanisms come under pressure from competing claims to authority.

The supposition that a post-truth environment is indicative of a democracy's health asserts something about how democracy, as a political system, is viewed. Michael Hannon critiques the use of the term post-truth for the ways it becomes associated with bullshit and, by extension, with the speaker's sincerity and ethics (48). Hannon further describes post-truth as being normative in that it "portray[s] one's political adversaries as ignoring the facts, appealing to emotion, and having 'lost their minds'" (50). In this regard, the use of post-truth in these ways bears a great deal in common with the kinds of demagoguery Roberts-Miller describes, where the rhetoric centers on a sense of character. If we understand demagoguery as anti-democratic in nature because of the ways it develops methods to exclude outgroups, then these strategies resemble other ways claims to truth are used to discredit and exclude, such as Donald Trump's liberal use of "fake news" as a pejorative. Friedman and Hannon find authoritarian impulses in calls for a return to truth. New York Times reporter Kevin Roose proposes the establishment of the office of a Reality Czar to end "our national reality crisis (qtd. in Friedman 18) while public scientist Neil deGrasse Tyson urges the establishment of a "Truth Force" (qtd. in Hannon 55).

Critics of post-truth, such as McIntyre, likewise recommend government intervention, calling for Congress to regulate social media and for individuals to exert control over news and social media through boycotts and demands (*On Disinformation* 57). These authoritarian impulses constitute what rhetoric scholar Bradford Vivian, drawing on Michel Foucault, calls a regime of truth. These regimes construct themselves as appearing rational and self-evident, using what Vivian calls "metaphysical truths" as their foundation to resist threats to their authority. Metaphysical truths are fundamental concepts about a society and its participants that exist outside of their argumentative construction and therefore function as authoritarian constructs that cannot be challenged without resistance. Vivian describes these sorts of truths as: "concern[ing] the alleged truths of the great leader, of national destiny and might, of blood and soil, of spirit and will" (419), all of which serve authoritarian ends. Importantly, authoritarianism in this sense is not deployed as a simple binary. The sorts of examples Vivian mentions have had both current and past instances in US culture, but the caveat is whether these truths can be deliberated freely. In an authoritarian society, these truths are "extra-deliberative" and regulate others, therefore establishing a regime of truth. Vivian asserts, "Contrary to conventional wisdom, so-called post-truth political culture does not lack for evidence-based arguments; it lacks arguments that acknowledge the inevitable 'general politics' of any claim to truth, and thus a vital ground of deliberative contestation over standards of truth itself" (427). Therefore, the current epistemic crisis Friedman mentions is not a lack of facts, but perhaps an overabundance of them. Due to shifts in news media and information technologies, we do not lack access to facts beyond our own experiences. Still, the wider narratives those facts fit into are far-reaching and complicated beyond what we might initially intuit.

Metaphysical truths, as a concept, are important for this project because they conceptualize certain kinds of knowledge as true (insofar as society regards them as true, even though they are impossible to verify). In this regard, a metaphysical truth acts as a kind of *doxa* – endemic common sense– but operates as an *epistêmê* –justified belief. The justifications of these social epistêmai lie within *doxa*. This process of connecting *epistêmê* through *doxa* is articulated in Aristotle's enthymeme[10] structure (Cloud 21). However, it is important to note, as a point of clarification, that Foucault uses the term *epistêmê* to refer to the full conditions of knowledge within a social system. For him, there is no *doxa* as all knowledge is discursively constructed belief (Cloud 22). Yet the division between our experiential knowledge (*epistêmê*) and a wider system of ideological forces that drive our ability to make sense of those experiences is useful for a rhetorical understanding of these epistemic conditions. Both *doxa*, as Cloud uses it, and metaphysical truths, as Vivian uses it, refer to similar phenomena of common beliefs within society. They do, however, hold different significances. *Doxa* is presented as something different from actual knowledge, which deflates the material circumstances of these modern epistemological conditions. Metaphysical truths, on the other hand, better encapsulate these material conditions by suggesting that ideas like racial purity, homelands, and a leader's authority do not operate as mere beliefs, but as truths of a particular sort. Due to these differences, I will use both terms to refer to distinct concepts. *Doxa* is a system of beliefs that shapes how citizens sort and organize their own experiences and the facts they receive from other rhetorical agents (newscasters, writers, politicians, etc.). Metaphysical truths, however,

[10] Cloud defines the enthymeme as "a form of reasoning that does not rely on hard fact and syllogistic reasoning but rather depends upon resting appeals on established common ground between persuader and audience" (50). Aristotle frames this as a rhetorical equivalent to the syllogism of dialectical discourse most often presented as a statement with a reason or an if-then argument (Kennedy 83-84).

refer to specific ideas about social conditions which rhetors regard as true both in their own communication and as part of a wider system of *doxa*.

With the relationship between *doxa,* affect, and metaphysical truth now specified. With the epistemic architecture of post-truth clarified through the cases of Brexit and Trump's demagoguery, I can offer a revised definition of post-truth. A definition that accounts for the conditions this chapter has examined, rather than reducing the phenomenon to irrationality or the absence of fact. Post-truth, as both a concept and a moment, relates to the purpose of knowledge and is deceptive, in that it communicates a false assertion about how communication functions in the world. We have not moved beyond truth as a discursive or deliberative tool. In fact, truths are more abundant than ever as citizens find significance in the smallest details and enter into the deliberative arena equipped with their prepared sets of facts with which to argue. The issue is not that multiple truths could exist and compete, but that we lack the methods to deliberate and therefore recede into claims of relativism. As such, I define post-truth as an epistemic environment that develops in the wake of a reconfiguration of a powerful metaphysical truth. These truths do not disappear nor are they refigured as *doxa.* Instead, they continue as truth, but the resulting communicative disagreement about that aspect of reality leads to radical conflicts within the communities subject to that metaphysical truth. Donald Trump disturbed metaphysical truths of American exceptionalism through claims grounded in the presentation of facts he claims to know alone. Those being facts about the nature of American excellence and their denigration due to the political pollution he claims to aim to excise. Trump has contributed to a rhetorical environment that can introduce competing claims about the nature of American exceptionalism through a logic of metaphysical objectivism. These include claims such as the existential dangers posed by immigrants and migrants and the nature of the American economic

system. These culminate in his ability to articulate the dangers of oppositional politics through a (flawed) logic that presents dissent as treasonous through its dissonance with these new metaphysical truths. In this regard, post-truth does not signify a grand historical epoch nor the degeneration of the body politic. Instead, I propose an acknowledgment of the epistemological nature of public life. Radical disagreements over matters such as the nature of American character further spill over into a divergence in the interpretive act, as systems of knowing become increasingly aligned with the poles of a political system. this to ideology, the effects of terministic screens[11], or differences in perspective, and all would have valid epistemological significance. But what matters here is the change itself, as well as its radical effect. Ultimately, it results in a system of competing, and alternative, facts.

1.4 Post-truth Discourse and Communication

Having established a revised understanding of post-truth – as epistemic environments formed in the wake of disrupted metaphysical truths, governed by doxastic commitments, and activated through affect – this section turns to the communicative dimensions of post-truth in practice. Post-truth does not only describe a set of conditions; it also names a mode of communication in which competing claims to truth are deployed to demagogic ends. Through an examination of Trump's rhetoric – from his deployment of parrhesia[12] and truthful hyperbole to the neoliberal framing that organizes his candidacy announcement – I demonstrate how metaphorical frames produce intelligibility within post-truth conditions, and why the

[11] Burke's concept of terministic screens refers to the ways that language must be filtered through experiential knowledge that directs a message toward a particular interpretation (Burke 45).
[12] Roughly meaning "saying everything" (Foucault *The Courage of Truth* 10), parrhesia is figured as the opposed practice to rhetoric in a classical sense according to Foucault (13). Foucault claims "Parrhesia is not a skill; it is something which is harder to define. It is a stance, a way of being which is akin to a virtue, a mode of action… Parrhesia should be regarded as a modality of truth-telling, rather than [as a technique [like] rhetoric. (14 additions Gros).

conventional strategies of fact-checking fail to disrupt the doxastic foundations on which those frames rest. Scholars such as McIntyre present the post-truth phenomenon through metaphors of war. The truth requires defenders against so-called "truth killers" like Trump, who present an existential danger to knowledge itself. McIntyre concludes his follow-up to his book *Post-Truth,* titled *On Disinformation: How to Fight for Truth and Protect Democracy*, with a chapter titled "How to Win the War on Truth." There, McIntyre presents strategies and methods his truth-defending reader might employ as they wade into the muck of ideological combat.

Some of his methods are admirable, such as when he recommends resisting polarization by encouraging readers to "Reach out to those who disagree with you [and]… if at all possible, try to do so with kindness. They do not need another person to hate and distrust." (*On Disinformation* 55) Yet such an approach is viciously undermined when, in the very next breath, McIntyre states the following: "As hard as it is, recognize that in some sense deniers are victims. They have been duped. They are the zombie foot soldiers of the creators of disinformation, who are profiting by their ignorance, while the believer gets nothing" (*On Disinformation* 55). McIntyre's language is emblematic of the effects of naïve realism. The "kindness" he recommends is, in the most generous of readings, engendered through a paternalism of knowing and degree of certainty that requires the dismissal of opposing viewpoints. Once again, I am not suggesting any sort of relativism as a method of obtaining agreement or maintaining civility. The facts are indeed the facts. But one tends not to treat "zombie foot soldiers" as equal participants in the pursuit of knowledge. Perhaps equally troubling is McIntyre's propensity to frame his side of the partisan as consisting solely of "truth tellers" (*On Disinformation* 7), martyrs (*On Disinformation* 59), and defenders (*On Disinformation* 55) who engage in a noble risk in a cause greater than themselves. A language that presents one's interlocutors as ravenous hordes of the

ignorant is nothing but poison to democracy. A poison that grows more virulent through encomiastic renditions of one's own virtue. McIntyre fails to realize the ways he dismantles his own argument through naïve certainty.

What we witness in events like the election of Donald Trump and Brexit is not a willing dismissal of truth as a concept, but changes within the common experience that no longer exist on the fringe but have moved to the center. While we may be tempted to consider this an example of how the center cannot hold, it also represents a disruption of these regimes of truth. We can see how the current post-truth moment features heavy use of demagoguery, but demagogic post-truth is not the only way such a matter is achieved. We can view post-truth moments as instances in which the adoption of a new *epistêmê* alters metaphysical truths. These can be for ill, as has largely been the case with Trump through his wanton proliferation of demagogic practices and ideas. Or it could be for a wider social benefit as we react to these metaphysical truths that harm our neighbors and us. We have, so far, redefined post-truth as a set of rhetorical circumstances in which metaphysical truths are disrupted and thereby no longer homogenize meaning. But we must also consider how communication under these conditions operates.

Post-truth communication involves both claims regarding the state of truth in public discourse and a wider attempt to establish a regime of truth, often through demagogic tactics. Here, I borrow from Michael Hannon's understanding of what he calls first-order "post-truth discourse" and second-order "post-truth rhetoric." According to Hannon, "'post-truth discourse' refers to first-order epistemic problems with contemporary political discourse. When people say that we live in an era of post-truth politics, they are alleging that we have reached a newly dysfunctional era of political discourse… those who lament the arrival of post-truth politics are

concerned with changes in the epistemic quality of public discourse" (49). He contrasts this with post-truth rhetoric, which he defines as: "Second-order discourse about political discourse. To say, 'We have now reached a uniquely dysfunctional era of political discourse' is itself a piece of post-truth rhetoric. Those who speak this way assume that political discourse is epistemically defective or even toxic… These are claims *about* the epistemic state of first-order political discourse" (49). Rather than using Hannon's terms wholesale, I suggest a merging of the two beneath a wider understanding of "post-truth communication." The reason for this is two-fold: the first is that there is considerable overlap between Hannon's post-truth discourse and rhetoric – they are distinguished primarily by their ends. Post-truth rhetoric is understood as being anti-democratic in nature by providing grounds to exclude an irrational other from participation. We might call this practice demagogic based on Roberts-Miller's definition. Where discourse is viewed as capacious enough to involve discussion toward a number of ends, rhetoric here is explicitly motivated by persuasion. To be clear, Hannon's use of the term rhetoric is consistent with the popular use of rhetoric as deceitful or political, but it muddies the waters in rhetorical studies, since all language is inherently artful. Second, Hannon focuses his analysis on the term "post-truth" and finds it is predominantly used by those associated with the political left. And while that is certainly true, Hannon's analysis neglects to address the ways the right is also interested in using claims to the truth toward demagogic ends.

Hannon points out that the modus operandi of post-truth rhetoric is to simplify social complexities and treat matters of public policy as self-evident and settled on their face (51-52). However, while Hannon does rightly observe this in left-leaning spaces, Trump's consistent accusations of media bias make a similar move. Both are demagogic attempts to subvert rhetorical intervention in public policy, and both undermine democratic practice. The emphasis

on policing the news media has become one of his most identifying characteristics when it comes to the policies of his administrations. Trump attempts to divert authority to himself through the use of language that suggests that he, and often he alone, is speaking true especially in distinction to the so-called "fake news." After being banned from Twitter and Facebook, Trump formed his own social media platform, calling it "Truth Social," and constructed a rhetoric grounded in a need for truth through both *epistêmê* and *doxa.*

One of the most confusing aspects of Trump's rhetoric is how often he purports to be telling the truth. On the one hand, this may appear to be a case of the guilty proclaiming their innocence, but what is distressing is how effective this position seems to be among his supporters. "Fake news" has such a memetic quality to it that it is both a Trumpism and has pursued a life of its own beyond Trump himself. Likewise, Trump strategically discredits others (whether journalists or politicians) by critiquing their biases and past missteps. There is no doubt that those who support Trump place their trust in him, as misguided as such a position might be. One aspect of his truth-telling is in how he uses the rhetorical position of parrhesia to curry favor. Parrhesia is a classical concept of a sort of truth-telling that Foucault describes in his 1983 lectures at Berkeley. Foucault defines the person who uses parrhesia – the parrhesiastes – as: "someone who says everything he has in mind: he does not hide anything, but opens his heart and mind completely to other people through his discourse (*Fearless Speech* 12). And possessing no filter, there is an arhetorical quality to the speech of the parrhesiastes where the presentation is decidedly unvarnished. Of course, this also means that parrhesia possesses two connotations: the pejorative and the positive – the chattering fool and the wise speaker who has transcended doubt (Foucault *Fearless Speech* 14). However, Foucault points out that the latter connotation is more frequent in classical thought. Trump, of course, embodies both aspects: he could certainly

abstain from *some* of his tweets. But as Ryan Skinnell points out, Trump's use of what Trump calls "truthful hyperbole" resembles parrhesia in important ways. By eschewing the literal meaning of language in favor of the figurative dimensions of understanding, Trump can tap into his audience's deeper beliefs. Skinnell describes how hyperbole itself possesses a kind of truthful quality through its use of language's figurative capacity to construct meaning by expressing emotion (91). While truthful hyperbole and alternative facts are great examples of Trump and his advisors weaseling their way past the consequences of lying, there is a deeper sign as well: its effectiveness, and this is how parrhesia fits in. The parrhesiastes speaks at their own peril; they are unbound by both their own doubts and fear of the consequences of their speech (Foucault *Fearless Speech* 15-17). In this regard, their position as speakers recedes, and they themselves become a vessel of a truth that is external to the communicative moment. The parhesiastes engages in a maneuver to abandon their identity as a speaker to become a parrhesiastes. This identity diminishes and obscures the speaker in favor of that relation to the external truth. However, this position is only possible through the notion of objectivity – an external truth that precedes linguistic expression. As Skinnell continues, Trump uses the appearance of a parrhesiastes to engage in an experience with his audience where both sides know that his language is less-than-literal but expresses an emotional truth to engender the appropriate response (98). Trump does not express the truth insofar as he reinforces certain beliefs about the nature of the country and its citizens, and this forms his honest persona.

While these truths may not have an external correspondent, they simply do not need one to be regarded as true. Trump's campaign has demonstrated that, from the start, as during the announcement of his candidacy, he demonstrated the effectiveness of reinforcing these truths and the inability of his opposition to counter them. Trump's speech announcing his candidacy on

June 16, 2015, demonstrates many of the rhetorical strategies he would reinforce both on the campaign trail and through his presidency. Central to this is his presentation of a loss of global status, which forms the parrhesiastic dimension of his rhetoric: “Our country is in serious trouble. We don't have victories anymore. We used to have victories, but we don't have them. When was the last time anybody saw us beating, let's say, China in a trade deal? They kill us. I beat China all the time” (*Remarks*). All at once, Trump channels the concept of American exceptionalism – that the United States and its citizens occupy a preternaturally unique position in the world – and dismisses it by suggesting the order has been unbalanced. By suggesting that China is killing us in business, Trump successfully reaffirms doubts citizens may have about the nature of American dominance in an evolving world and successfully channels any antipathy or dissatisfaction they may have about their own lives. While this may be a blatant attempt to provide an emotional rather than a logical appeal, as McComiskey observes about Trump’s general approach to rhetoric (27), that does not fully capture how his rhetoric operates as true among those who buy into his premise. The sentence, “We don’t have victories anymore,” barely qualifies as an observation about the United States. That follows with Trump’s rhetorical question about trade deals with China. However, what could be said about Sino-American economics to resolve the observation about victories? The two statements lack coherence, yet they become intelligible by their collocation and thus reinforce one another. To present evidence of American victories, an opposing rhetor would have to address the claim of Chinese trade superiority, but to resolve that claim, the rhetor must challenge the assertion that there are no more American victories.

This matter is further complicated by the presence of truthful hyperbole, which argues that challenging Trump’s exact wording misses the forest for the trees. Because priority is given

by audiences to the affective component of Trump's statement, any factual evidence to the contrary, such as favorable US trade agreements in this case, is understood as an attempt to mislead. It is not that the attempts of news organizations to fact-check Trump are brushed aside; the use of that strategy is seen as actively deceitful because it presents evidence that fails to cohere with the audience's perspective of the United States. As such, the pejorative of Fake News contains a deeper resonance than just simply denial. Facts to the contrary are not simply denied: they fail to be intelligible because they are so foreign to the appropriate metaphors for understanding those facts.

This relationship of meaning between what is suggested and what is said is evident in how the speech gained its widest notoriety through Trump's remarks on Mexican (and presumably Central/South American) immigrants entering the United States through the southern border. Trump continued his tirade over the US losing internationally by suggesting that immigration fits within the scheme of winners and losers. Trump states:

> "When do we beat Mexico at the border? They're laughing at us, at our stupidity. And now they are beating us economically. They are not our friend, believe me. But they're killing us economically. The U.S. has become a dumping ground for everybody else's problems. Thank you. It's true, and these are the best and the finest. When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're not sending you. They're not sending you. They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people" (*Remarks*).

From these comments alone, it seemed as though Trump had torpedoed any possibility of becoming a frontrunner for the nomination, let alone winning the election against opponents with

political pedigrees like Jeb Bush and Hilary Clinton. Vox's Dara Lind begins her coverage of Trump's campaign with the lede: "Donald Trump is not going to be the next Republican nominee for president of the United States," and suggests the campaign's only design was that of a publicity stunt for Trump's brand. From the outside, the backlash from mainstream media seemed swift as NBC, which had carried Trump's reality TV program, *The Apprentice,* signaled they would no longer work with him going forward, and Spanish language broadcaster Univision terminated their agreement to broadcast Trump's *Miss USA* beauty pageant. Likewise, companies that had licensed Trump's name and brand to create and sell products, such as Macy's department stores, were enacting plans to drop all involvement with Trump due to this statement. However, in what would begin to characterize Trump's relationship with the wider media environment, he successfully found an audience and would go on to endure scandal after scandal, apparently unscathed.

The reaction to these comments demonstrates an important element of how truth is understood in relation to Trump's speech. First, Trump is indirect through his repeated use of "they," presumably as a pronoun for a metonymic Mexico. But the phrase "they are laughing at us" is unclear in whether the "they" in question is the Mexican government, its citizens, immigrants crossing the border, or even the globe as a whole. "They" might even stand in for any combination of these elements or none at all – especially as Trump continues to use "they" three more times to express Trump's belief that immigration is an act of economic sabotage, implying a deeper conspiracy at play. He continues establishing a difference between the subject of his speech and the audience: "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're not sending you. They're not sending you." Here, the "they" is almost certainly Mexico, but in what metonymic sense? Mexico, in reference to its government, holds a different meaning

than if Trump is being more figurative here, using "send" as a metaphor for the act of immigration. That metaphor itself can take on a host of other meanings, all of which are unclear but equally supported by Trump's language. The confusion only compounds as Trump uses "they" in two separate senses within the same sentence: "They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with[13] [sic] us." And continues: "They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists." Trump does not indicate that he intends to change the referent of "they" in this sentence, and so the verb "bringing" can be read in two ways, thus changing the meaning of the sentence. The first being "to carry" as in, "[immigrants are carrying] their problems [to] us. The second interpretation comes into effect if "bringing" here means to cause: "[Mexico is causing] these problems with us, however, this makes less sense as the next sentences use "bring" to mean carry instead. Trump, weeks later, however, would insist that this second meaning was closer to what he meant (qtd. in Costa).

It is not my intention to ferret out what Trump actually meant here by scrutinizing his language. There is a non-insubstantial chance that Trump himself would not know what he meant here. Instead, I wish to demonstrate that Trump's literal use of language is almost more difficult to understand than his metaphoric meaning. The statement itself is almost trivial to understand metaphorically, as many intuited that Trump was using a tired trope of casting racial minorities as rapists. That self-evidence was obvious in how quickly Trump earned backlash from those who had previously partnered with him. But because there is no stable referent for his language, it becomes difficult to render that judgment through an appropriate argument using evidence, because there is no evidence to speak of, or at least not enough of it to dispatch with alternative interpretations.

[13] Trump likely meant to use the preposition "to" here and simply misspoke.

Trump's use of language is almost protean: as attempts are made to understand its literal meaning, the connection between the intelligible and sensible components of his statements deteriorates. But the discussion around Trump's comments nevertheless insists on trying to prove meaning. This runs into its own set of problems, as Trump, the author, certainly holds authority on this matter. The earliest parts of his campaign involved a great deal of Trump defending himself on this issue without ceding either the validity of his claim or the potential of miscommunication on his or the audience's part. When later interviewed by the *Washington Post,* Trump insists that the coverage of his stance on immigration was a coordinated attack by Democrats working within the news media. When questioned why immigration seemed to be the central focus of his campaign, Trump replies: "They gave it to me. It wasn't a big part of my announcement speech — a small paragraph. The Democrats and the enemies lined up and they criticized me for one line where I said Mexico is sending — I said Mexico is sending. I didn't say people are coming over and they're bad people. They would leave off the 'Mexico is sending' part, chop it and say I said 'rapists' when talking about people (Costa). To Trump's credit, he is factually correct in saying that his speech did not focus exclusively on immigration; he spends far more time bragging about what a rich man he is ("Remarks"). But the preceding analysis in this chapter demonstrates that, at the very least, his statement is ambiguous about who is doing what.

Nevertheless, Trump insists that his intent is correct and successfully shifts the subject from his own actions to the Democrats' failure to respond to his statements appropriately. The factuality of what was said becomes the primary site of argument here. Trump shifts the issue toward the stasis of fact by gesturing towards the specific words he did or did not say: "I didn't say…" Additionally, he introduces another agent in the scenario to obfuscate his actions by

arguing what did in fact occur: that his political enemies twisted his words as part of a larger conspiracy to paint him as racist.

This dispute over what was said is more than a determination of the content of Trump's language; it demonstrates a post-truth rhetor insisting on the importance of fact. Now, there is no doubt that Trump wishes to retreat to facts because it is politically advantageous at that moment. Still, at that point, his metadiscursive argument is that facts matter in determining the content of his speech. By insisting on a narrow, literal stasis, Trump invites audiences to treat semantic bookkeeping as the determining criterion for accountability while simultaneously engendering narratives of media hostility and partisan coordination. The object of this argument is fact (*epistêmê*), but the actual currency is *doxa* – the common sense interpretation of the media's biases. It results in a feedback loop in which the factual record never fully settles the deliberation. Significance is re-routed through shared premises over trustworthiness, who gets to define context, and plausibility. We cannot say for certain that Trump's arguments rely on relativism, because a formation of facts still undergirds them. Trump does not argue that the media's interpretation is one of many, but that it does not align with the content of his speech. The news media's recourse is either to disengage and wait for the next story or to double down while failing to present an argument that addresses Trump's claims. In either case, Trump survives another news cycle to repeat the process once again. The only difference is that the rhetorical circumstances of knowledge production change once again, influencing the next scandal.

The debacle over Trump's comments demonstrates that assertions of what language means can never rely solely on empiricism to persuade those who possess differing senses of *doxa*. This can extend to other sites where empirical facts circulate as part of an argument. Cloud

asserts that, within processes of meaning-making, frames contribute to the interpretation of facts and that audiences need to be addressed on separate registers such as narrative, myth, affect, embodiment, and spectacle. She suggests that, rather than attempting to dispense with these aspects of communication – the strategy of urging critical literacy among voters and stakeholders to remove these elements from deliberation altogether – rhetors ought to learn to avail themselves of their effects to relate to their audiences (38-39). One method of this is what Cloud calls "frame checking," addressing an argument according to its stasis [14]and the relevant metaphors and metonyms that make some sensible information more salient than others (61-63). Cloud's process of frame checking operates on two levels: the recognition of the frame and the invention that such a recognition enables (63). In this case, Cloud advocates the left using this awareness to craft cogent arguments that counter the right's oppressive use of frames to spread disinformation. Cloud presents a rhetorical model aimed at cloaking truths within appropriate rhetorical frames so they can be accepted and disseminated. However, this positioning rhetoric, through the use of Cloud's Big Five principle, serves, in some ways, as a tool for the educated to persuade those whom we might charitably call rhetorically underdeveloped. It is not my intention to suggest that Cloud's work is fundamentally elitist, but rather that there could be ways to use frame checking beyond a means of reifying the truth as such. The understanding of the manipulative tactics involved in the use of frames need not necessarily culminate in an ascent toward valuing that which is considered objectively true, but rather, awareness can be liberatory.

[14] Stasis theory proposes arguments operate on one of several levels of disagreement: fact/conjecture, definition, quality, jurisdiction. Cloud uses the scheme as first developed by Hermagoras for forensic rhetorical contexts. (59). For this dissertation, the content of each stasis (such as the presentation of jurisdiction rather than policy) is less important than the organizing principle of arguments themselves and the propensity of interlocutors to stumble past one another when that stasis is not recognized.

By being aware of the frames of knowing endemic to the human condition, audiences can be empowered to consider the systems they are part of as both agents and observers.

If we use frame checking in the context of Trump's early remarks on immigrants, we can see several metaphors and relationships between ideas come into play. The first of these is the logic of competition and the perceived status of winners and losers. A great deal of the overall speech centers on the economic issues of the United States, located within the neoliberal logics of gains and losses. Neoliberalism, the application of market logic to other social dimensions, dictates that all matters be reduced to the kinds of relationships found in modern business. As such, US/Mexico relations fit within a zero-sum game: if Mexico benefits, then the US must be losing. The answer is therefore to exploit the opponent more than the opponent exploits you. Failure to play this game properly reduces the anti-participant to the status of a loser, as in: "They're laughing at us, at our stupidity." All other actions are reduced to this frame as well. The notion that the process of emigration amounts to a deliberate choice of a country or countries to send citizens somewhere else is, at the very least, a gross oversimplification of the nature of the phenomenon. But within this rhetoric of winners and losers, which assigns a level of agency to states akin to that of players in a game, it lends some intelligibility to this state of affairs. Because there are clear agents who can be presumed to have intentions, the quality of those intentions can be argued. The agency of actual migrants is removed from consideration compared to that of an opportunistic Mexican state, and so Trump's claim that "they're not sending their best" does not need support because it is already warranted through the logic of the frame. This makes it easy for Trump to channel past discourses of migrant/minority violence to provide Mexico's justification for their imagined policies: ship off the undesirables as a Trojan

horse. It is not just Mexico that is filtered through this frame, but it seems as though the entire world is reduced to this concept of competition.

Later, Trump, as he pivots his speech to discuss the situation in Syria and the Middle East states: "Islamic terrorism is eating up large portions of the Middle East. They've become rich. I'm in competition with them. They [the Islamic State] just built a hotel in Syria… When I have to build a hotel, I pay interest. They don't have to pay interest, because they took the oil that, when we left Iraq, I said we should've taken" ("Remarks"). Here, the neoliberal frame is taken to an almost absurd conclusion: Islamic extremism is removed from any ideology it might have and is rendered fully as a site of economic strategy. What we see here is the collapse of any competing metaphors of meaning in such a way that the only site of intelligibility is through the logic of business. ISIS is no longer understood through the perspective of a guerrilla military campaign or religious zealots and instead is somehow rendered here as savvy business leaders who managed to find a novel real estate strategy: terrorism. The Poynter Institute's Politifact project checked the claim of ISIS somehow building hotels and found that Trump's statement was a mischaracterization of the occupation of a hotel in Iraq to house its commanders and enforce Islamic law on the city of Mosul (Carroll). Politifact rated the statement as false, which it obviously is. Still, once again, we see how a hyperbolic exaggeration enables Trump to communicate a different idea about how the world functions. If ISIS operates through the methods of capitalism, then who better to negotiate with them than the author of *The Art of the Deal*?

Trump's first speech meanders through topics but maintains consistency in its framing. It seems that the two sections analyzed here, discussing Mexico and ISIS, are unconnected, but both rely heavily on the neoliberal frame to maintain their intelligibility. A competing frame,

such as one that relies on the cohering narratives of traditional knowledge institutions – news media, academia, and the US government, to name a few – may be incompatible with Trump's rhetoric, but to an audience that is conditioned to accept the perspectives of competition and neoliberalism, then there's a degree of sense to be made here. Trump's rhetoric here does not work despite its fallaciousness, but because of it. Because the speech relies so heavily on the tropes of competition, Trump can establish a logical connection among a series of distinct topics organized around the domain in which he has the most authority by virtue of his wealth. Without the frame, Trump would have no standing to conclude: "Sadly the American dream is dead. But if I get elected president I will bring it back bigger and better and stronger than ever before, and we will make America Great again." The rhetoric of winners and losers becomes the single metaphor that governs the collection of facts presented throughout the speech. Whether it is Mexico, China, ISIS, or the US government, Trump reduces all to a system of interconnected exploitation and successfully makes the case to the American people that if you're not exploiting others, you're being exploited. This maxim becomes the necessary metaphor for discourse to function. It attempts to challenge the factual basis of Trump's rhetoric, such as whether rapists are crossing the border or if ISIS has built a hotel in Syria. Still, it fails to undermine the metaphors that continually govern the flood of facts people are constantly inundated with.

These metaphors are not consubstantial with truth in the sense that they contribute to the materiality of their facts. Just because Trump says that immigration is part of a war with Mexico does not make it so. But prior discussions of affective intensity and a doxic regard for Trump as a parrhesiastes can contribute to reshaping the meaning of facts. The mediation of symbols, and of empirical facts as symbols, in turn results in shifts in *doxa* and, thereby, in functioning conceptions of truth. We cannot simply double down on empirical truth as the sole site of

deliberation, as McIntyre suggests. Rather, we must acknowledge that differing perspectives belong to heretofore privileged sites such as science and empiricism. If we do not acknowledge sites where our understanding of the truth is prone to failure, we lack the means to address flaws in others' arguments.

Trump's frames and metaphors reveal structures present in American ways of knowing, similar to those at issue in Brexit. Both of these post-truth events rely on a series of metaphors and intuited positions about how the world is presumed to operate. These constructions of the world – neoliberalism, sovereignty, or even science as a social system – demonstrate how rhetorical constructions of reality are rendered through the act of perception. In these cases, appeals to objectivity through methods like science and empiricism have less to do with the reestablishment of truth as such. Instead, these appeals succeed only with people who share the cultural norms that make such evidence salient. As such, the fact-checking approach falls flat as a response, as demonstrated by the anemic responses to holding Trump or the Leavers accountable for their flawed presentations of the facts.

This raises the question of what we can do to respond to rhetors like Trump. Skinnell describes that Americans' perception of their political environment is not naïve – few believe that any politician is entirely truthful – but these citizens also position truth-telling as the locus of political communication. The result of this environment is that accountability for telling the truth is almost impossible to enforce (94). While Skinnell attributes this difficulty in part to the ways Trump's truthful hyperbole allows audiences to maintain adherence to the values of truth-telling (106), I argue that our understanding of truth needs to move beyond holding metaphysical objectivism as the primary, or even sole, criterion for determining what is true. How does one argue against claims about the states of borders and the nature of immigration? How do

discussions of budgets, taxes, and government spending construct concepts of relevance to contain the information seen as pertinent? How do we deliberate? Cultural norms can dictate the rules of engagement, and concepts such as the definition and construction of post-truth attempt to establish these norms. However, these rules are always social. There is no god who hands our norms down, and there is no biological imperative that dictates our behavior. We must construct them ourselves. They are subject to the sites of negotiation and relation that come when we engage in our rhetorical endeavors; empiricism and objectivity are only some of the methods we can use to argue.

Post-truth errs as a concept insofar as it presumes that there has been a single unified experience to which all members of our society have equal access. It neglects to account for the differences in experience that result in distinct but no less valid ways of perceiving phenomena and abstract social concepts through *doxa*. What we see in the current post-truth environment is not the abandonment of truth, but the inability of the myth of that single experience to endure an environment where divergent experiences can be shared so readily. Rhetoric has long been held as the instrument of deceit simply because it can undermine the myth of truth. However, today we cannot rely on that myth's value as an epistemological construct.

This chapter has traced that inability across several registers. Beginning from the conventional account of post-truth –exemplified by McIntyre's objectivism and the Oxford definition's reduction of the phenomenon to emotional irrationality – I have argued that the demand for unmediated certainty is itself the condition that produces the crisis it claims to diagnose. The classical distinction between *doxa* and *epistêmê,* complicated by Bengston and McKerrow and reinforced by the Kantian boundary between phenomena and noumena, reveals that civic argument has always operated within the domain of *doxa*. A domain of shared

premises, socially mediated plausibility, and contingent judgment. Post-truth names not the departure from this domain but the moment when its concealment becomes untenable.

The Brexit case demonstrated how affect activates doxastic commitments that operate beneath factual argument, rendering the £350 million figure persuasive as something other than an empirical claim. Rather, its suasiveness lay in the symbolic expression of sovereignty and loss. The examination of Trump's demagoguery and his deployment of parrhesia extended this analysis to show how identity-driven discourse reorganizes evidentiary practices and how metaphysical truths serve as the infrastructure of meaning-making. When those constructions are disrupted, the result is not relativism but radical conflict over the conditions of intelligibility itself, including what counts as evidence, who possesses the authority to interpret it, and which frames render deliberation possible. Trump's candidacy announcement illustrated this process in miniature. The neoliberal frame of winners and losers organized an assemblage of facts into a coherent argument that conventional fact-checking practices could not dislodge.

Where this chapter has examined the circumstances and communicative dynamics that led to the naming of post-truth, the next will turn to rhetoric's role in forming the perspectival understanding of truth that these conditions demand. By shifting away from the expectation that truth must be singular, fixed, and external, we can begin to see how rhetorical practices generate and sustain multiple, situated truths. This opens a path not only for better understanding of post-truth discourse but also for exploring how rhetorical theory – drawing on the classical tradition as well as the postmodern interventions that thinkers like McIntyre too hastily dismiss – might provide resources for navigating disagreement in ways that preserve democratic deliberation within a fractured epistemic environment.

Chapter 2: Rhetorical Constructions of Truth and Reality

Post-truth requires a novel definition to account for the complexities of communication. The previous chapter demonstrated these complexities by accounting for differences in interpretation and in the construction of truth itself. Rather than blithely asserting that the world has undergone an epistemic collapse, I have aimed to show how we are in the midst of a rhetorical crisis. Not a crisis of rhetoric run amok, but rather one involving a communal inability to rhetorically mediate our social circumstances. What I mean is that advances in systems of knowledge production and increasingly complex methods of understanding the world have led to a neglect of the processes of transmission and interpretation inherent in the act of knowing. We have neglected rhetoric.

Rhetorical traditions have tended to emphasize a specific model centered on the ornamentation of ideas. A recurrent theme in the development of rhetoric is a distinction between objective truths and malleable opinions. The dichotomous concepts of *epistêmê* and *doxa* feature prominently, and the broader subordination of rhetoric is understood in relation to truth. Historically, this is evident in Plato's dramatic assertion that rhetoric is no art at all (*Gorgias* 460a). Yet even in attempts to recover rhetoric as a *techne*[15], such as Aristotle's framing of the art of persuasion. Aristotle defines rhetoric as "the power to observe the persuasiveness of which any particular matter admits." (*On Rhetoric 1.2).* While Aristotle admits that rhetoric is useful, its use is limited to presenting the products of dialectical reasoning. The actual intellectual substance of an oratorical act is located outside of rhetoric. And rhetoric is thereby limited to the arrangement of the necessary proofs or appeals for persuasion. This framing engenders a particular view of rhetoric and the persuasive act. Rhetoric, at its best, becomes a means of presenting the truth through the necessary mechanisms for another to accept it as true. Rhetoric is

[15] *Techne* has several definitions among which include generally an epistemological category regarding technical knowledge of a method or skill; it can also refer to a handbook of a skill's practice. (Pender 14-16).

thereby modeled as the handmaiden to truth. It prepares truth for the purpose of being witnessed by others but is nevertheless a lesser subordinate to a greater nobility. I call this persistent configuration – in which rhetoric serves truth but does not participate in its construction – the ornamentation model of rhetoric. The figures examined in this section operate, whether intentionally or not, within this model's assumptions. Identifying those assumptions as a coherent framework, rather than as isolated scholarly positions, is necessary for understanding why the dominant response to post-truth has failed and what an alternative might look like.

While discussions of post-truth have begun to demonstrate rhetoric's epistemic contributions beyond ornamentation, there is still more to do. Within rhetorical scholarship, there is a persistent denial of the role rhetoric plays in constructing our reality as we interpret it. James Crosswhite, for example, takes an objectivist stance towards truth and rhetoric when he calls on scholars to abandon theoretical conceptions of truth in favor of practicality. Models that frame truth as a social aspect of power represent, for Crosswhite, a progression towards post-truth conditions. In this way, Crosswhite's perspective resembles McIntyre's discussed in the previous chapter. Both locate a philosophical tradition that leads into postmodernism by demoting truth, framing it as a social product. They then critique that process for engendering the current post-truth crisis (Crosswhite 377, McIntyre 123). In response to these conditions, Crosswhite argues for a rhetoric centered on the practices of truth involving different ways speakers conceive of their audiences. Borrowed from *The New Rhetoric,* these audiences consist of: (1) oneself, (2) a single listener, (3) a particular audience, and (4) an ideal/universal audience (382). While addressing the speaker/audience relationship is certainly necessary for a response to post-truth, doing as Crosswhite suggests and abandoning a social, and ultimately rhetorical, theory of truth denies deeper ways of understanding that relationship as epistemological. We risk making the

same sorts of mistakes as McIntyre when he proposes reaching out towards post-truth audiences, but only on terms that reify their alterity as an unreasonable other.

2.1 Rhetoric's Epistemic Commitments

The conditions of the encounter between speaker and audience must move beyond a simple ethics of truth and lies. There is a deeper epistemological relationship within the rhetorical act that has largely been denied or otherwise dismissed as mere relativism. Vittorio Bufacchi, for example, asserts that post-truth "borrows the same theoretical foundations of Truth to undermine the foundations of Truth. Post-Truth appropriates the notion of consensus central to the literature on Truth, to undermine the consensus around Truth and legitimize the idea of Post-Truth" (354). Bufacchi is correct in noting that post-truth itself uses theories of truth, such as common consensus, to withstand public credulity – Trump often appeals to the concept of the people's common sense to justify policies on immigration and economics. However, there is less to suggest that there is a meaningful distinction between theories of truth and truth itself as it relates to rhetoric. This is the same issue that Crosswhite abuts. As far as a theory of rhetoric is concerned, how truth itself is conceptualized will influence the kinds of rhetorical interventions that are possible. The question is whether the truth is an external circumstance to which rhetoric responds, *or* is truth a product produced by the rhetorical act? It is not my intention to be overly philosophical about the nature of truth itself; this dissertation is concerned with how truth is deployed in rhetoric. Crosswhite, Bufacchi, and philosophers like McIntyre are invested in a model of rhetoric and epistemology that conceptualizes truth as an external set of circumstances. Rhetors, therefore, operate within a binary. Either they speak the truth and attempt to speak it well, or they set out to deceive or otherwise bullshit their way through the rhetorical act.

This type of rhetorical theory is what I call the ornamentation model of rhetoric. Here, rhetoric's ostensible role is to serve the truth – to clad it in the appropriate forms and perhaps gild it to make the truth all the more appealing. This type of rhetoric does not necessarily correlate to a dismissal of rhetoric, but it does hold a connection to rhetoric's castigation in the *Gorgias*. Like Socrates's metaphor likening rhetoric to methods of flattery (cosmetics opposed to fitness/cookery opposed to medicine) (*Gorgias* 465c*)*, rhetoric's relationship to the truth is seen as incidental rather than constructive. Rhetoric may influence the perception of truth through *doxa*, but it has no effect on the truth's material nature. However, in the previous chapter, I argued that within our conceptions of knowledge, there exists a broader form of naïve realism that occurs when we contrast *doxa* and *epistêmê*. Specifically, the concept of Kant's noumenon, the purest form of knowledge beyond human perception, reveals the extent of modern naïve realism. Modern society believes that the noumenon is truly known; therefore, the possibility of rhetoric's impact on truth is limited to a flawed method of perception. If the noumenon is known, it is self-evident and therefore does not require artful communication; instead, transmission is a matter of accuracy rather than technique, thereby undermining the need for rhetoric altogether.

This aspect of naïve realism has limited the ways that rhetoric can respond to post-truth. The wider discussion of how a theory of rhetoric can respond to post-truth has largely been limited to questions of how we can best support the truth. Bruce McComiskey suggests that post-truth conditions are a case of language run amok, absent any reference to reality (6). To manage this, he suggests that rhetoric scholars double down on values that enable us to teach critical thought, so students can know the truth and hold "bullshit… to a standard of evidence that it cannot survive" (44). The role of education in this case is not necessarily to empower students, but to protect them, or at least allow them to protect themselves. However, the operating

conditions of this defense are reactionary. Students do not search for the truth per se; rather, pedagogies like McComiskey's tend to operate under the conditions of following a map. The student's journey is one of treading the path while not being led astray. There is an underlying positivism and trust in McComiskey's method that borders on naïve realism. And that naivety can be exploited by others who wish to normalize their ideologies through a rhetoric of truth and common sense.

We will return to the question of writing education's commitment to truth and our students in Chapter 5 of this dissertation. However, McComiskey's perception of post-truth reveals how he limits rhetoric to knowledge of methods of persuasion and deception. For McComiskey, post-truth reveals a set of deliberative circumstances where *ethos* and *pathos* have run amok in the presence of "audiences that are not persistent or responsible" (McComiskey 39). Here, rhetoric is almost ancillary in comparison to reasoning itself. One gets the sense from McComiskey's argument that ethos and pathos, while necessary components of rhetoric, are necessary only because of human fallibility. While McComiskey does not make this argument explicitly, there seems to be an implicit divide between an ideal communication of pure *logos* and a pragmatic rhetoric that uses *ethos, pathos,* and pretty much any other form of speech. This division is key in the ornamentation model of rhetoric. Logic and reasoning are figured as almost absent from rhetorical influence, while the use of rhetoric is regarded as a somewhat paternalistic necessity. We see this paternalism in arguments like McIntyre's but also in McComiskey's choice to refer to an irresponsible public that gets swept up by mere rhetoric.

Within rhetoric, there appear to be two strands of thought regarding post-truth. On the one hand, scholars such as McComiskey and Crosswhite suggest that rhetoric serves as a means of reinstating normalcy. Through rhetorical theory, we might once again right our course and

return to the track of progress after a derailment (or perhaps derangement) in 2016. Others, such as Cloud, Skinnell, and Vivian, envision post-truth as a moment where the façades of modern rationality can no longer obscure the precarity of how publics come to know and deliberate. Rhetorical interventions, therefore, focus on responding to audiences in ways that go beyond reinscribing rationality. This dissertation fits within the latter approach because a conception of post-truth as a moral hazard inevitably leads to a paternalistic view towards audiences. Rhetors are more than truth-tellers and deceivers. And while honesty is, without doubt, the best policy, rhetoric goes deeper than mere correspondence. Robin Reames asserts that the development of Platonic metaphysics prompted a shift in the ways rhetoric could be evaluated. Rather than a dichotomy of true and false, oppositions of truth/hiddenness and correctness/falseness once featured as the method of evaluating language for the sophists, resulting in a state where a statement's falsifiability is a social rather than a metaphysical condition (Reames 327-328). Because Plato's model of language as signification[16] is predicated on a memetic correspondence to external reality, the result is a belief that language is purely referential. Because reference is viewed as the only salient element of language, the ways language operates beyond representation are dismissed, thereby empowering post-truth rhetors to act unchecked. Reames writes:

> Signification creates the mistaken impression that we can disarm lies and falseness by looking to the referent, to what the language represents in the world; that we can disarm a politician's deception by fact-checking. It is this mistaken notion that is signification's greatest danger. Far from disarming the dangerous power of the Sophists' *logos* Plato

[16] The theory that language functions by primarily standing in for the objects and states of objective reality Reames argues that the concept of language-of-signification originates with Plato through a theory of language that asserts that speech *(logos)* is nothing more than the arrangement of words/sounds (*onoma*) into phrases/names *(rhema)* (331).

> "weaponized" it by convincing us that it is "mere language," imitative and removed from the world – when in fact there is nothing "mere" about language at all. In so doing, Plato concealed from us its greatest strength – its world-forming power and the very dictation of Being as such. ("Disproof" 334).

Reames's uncovering of these assumptions of referential language helps explain why scholars like McComiskey and Crosswhite limit rhetorical intervention into post-truth. They operate within a Platonic ordering of rhetoric that centers referentiality.

Because language is viewed as referential, the answer to post-truth must lie in methods to essentially aid in fact-checking. For McComiskey, this takes the form of inoculating students through awareness of rhetorics that rely on factors other than logic. The student must learn to resist these influences simply because they cannot exist within a model of language-as-representation. One can examine the appeal to logic through independent observation and adhere to principles of falsifiability. Emotion and character do not align with such a method. So these appeals are viewed as superficial even if influential. Crosswhite, meanwhile, argues that attempts to theorize truth overcomplicate what is viewed as a simple matter. Objective truth exists, and all language production must be oriented toward truth. Rhetors must be just in their attempts to produce language that references reality to the best of language's ability, and rhetorical guile must chart that same course. McComiskey's methods of receiving rhetoric and Crosswhite's conceptions of transmitting rhetoric both develop within the language-as-referent paradigm. I argue that the rhetoric of the language-as-referent paradigm derives from an ornamentation model of rhetoric.

What Reames demonstrates, however, is that the ornamentation model is an insufficient response. Her formulation of pre-platonic rhetoric as operating within a paradigm of social

correctness encapsulates rhetoric's epistemic contribution. Rather than construct reality itself and thereby conflicting with an external metaphysics, language's dictation of being organizes rhetoric toward ends beyond ornamentation. Language's capacity to describe the conditions of existence and make sense of reality as it is observed is something that modern rhetors have begun to channel. The previous chapter studied moments where that capacity of language overtook the need for referential coherence. And ultimately, the public response to this post-truth phenomenon has been gormless. The signaling of a post-truth era, the redoubling of fact-checking, and the adherence to rhetorics of ornamentation are resulting in a collapse of the modern democratic order. Not because audiences have degenerated into slavering hordes, but because there has been no sufficient check to rhetors who are willing to engage in the epistemic dimensions of rhetoric. If we wish to maintain the conditions for democratic governance, we must reconsider rhetoric's capability to construct rather than obscure.

This chapter argues that the ornamentation model of rhetoric– the inherited framework in which rhetoric's role is to dress, deliver, or defend truths that have been secured elsewhere – is not merely one theory of rhetoric among many. It is the structural precondition for post-truth. By training audiences and institutions to imagine truth as before discourse and readily available to anyone who reasons properly, the ornamentation model produces the very naïve realism that Chapter 1 identified as the engine of post-truth conditions. If truth is simply here, there, or somewhere, then disagreement can only mean that someone is lying, ignorant, or deranged – and rhetoric is either the instrument of that deception or the paternalistic corrective applied to those who would otherwise be deceived. This chapter traces the formation of that model through a genealogy of rhetoric's subordination to truth, beginning with Cicero's probabilistic epistemology and its rejection in Augustine's appropriation of classical rhetoric for Christian

ends. Augustine's metaphor of casting pagan gold – repurposing Greco-Roman rhetoric and oratory in service of an authoritative truth crystallizes a relationship between rhetoric and knowledge that persists, in secularized form, through the Enlightenment and into the present. Against this inheritance, the chapter articulates an alternative conception of rhetoric's epistemic commitments. Drawing on Nietzsche's perspectivism and Foucault's account of regimes of truth, and recovering the positions of the early sophists Gorgias and Protagoras, I argue that rhetoric is not the packaging of pre-existing truths but the medium through which truth becomes socially operative. This understanding reframes post-truth as the consequence of a long refusal to acknowledge rhetoric's constitutive role in the production of knowledge.

2.2 Casting Pagan Gold – The Ornamentation Model of Rhetoric

The central problem of post-truth is not simply the circulation of falsehoods, but the persistence of a communicative imaginary where the truth is presumed self-evident. Rhetoric's intervention in such a system is therefore limited to the ornamentation of the truth or those things that are not the truth, such as lies. The next step in understanding the nature of this model is to account for the wider genealogy of the idea. The ornamentation model is stabilized by a rhetorical model rooted in Augustine's methods for orienting classical rhetoric to suit the epistemological ordering of early Christian thought. Ornamentation rhetoric is oriented through recurring efforts to separate the labor of knowing from the labor of speaking, and to know the persuasion as a supplemental technique affixed to truths that have already been secured.

Today, the prevalence of rancorous rhetoric has prompted a renewed call for truthful communication rather than rhetoric of any kind. In addressing post-truth communication, the division is drawn between communication that employs rhetorical devices and communication

that speaks the truth, plain and simple. This is evident in the claims by commentators, such as McIntyre's, discussed in the previous chapter, but also in the demands from Trump to squelch fake news from the airwaves. However, the ideal of communication without rhetoric is only possible if rhetoric is viewed as ancillary to communication altogether. Augustine's contributions to developing the ornamentation model of rhetoric lay the foundation for naïve realism to flourish. Therefore, this intellectual genealogy can help produce rhetorical interventions against the proliferation of post-truth.

This section turns from conceptual diagnosis to a formative scene in rhetoric's inheritance: the Christian appropriation of classical oratory. Augustine's metaphor of casting pagan gold names more than a pragmatic strategy for repurposing Greco-Roman thought; it crystallizes a model where rhetoric is legitimate insofar as it serves an authoritative Truth. By reading Augustine's rhetorical project in relation to Cicero's prior attempts to relate eloquence and judgment, we can see how a tradition that once treated uncertainty and deliberation as constitutive features of civic life is reorganized into a pastoral rhetoric of transmission. And it is this ordering that still shadows post-truth discourse to this day.

The history of rhetoric is tied to the broader divide between processes of knowledge development and communication. This is most obvious in Plato, who divides rhetoric from philosophy by constructing a domain of knowledge. While others, such as Aristotle, devise ways to assert a purpose of rhetoric, such as Aristotle's methods of finding the best possible means of persuasion in a given circumstance. However, rhetoric is nonetheless subject to subordination to truth and, in a modern sense, is either superfluous or necessary only because of the fallibility of the masses. In this section, I aim to trace some of these threads within Roman rhetoric, as a site where the ornamentation model first emerges, through the models advanced by Augustine in

response to prior models of Roman oratory. Augustine's rhetorical theories are noteworthy for our post-truth moment, as they are, first and foremost, models meant to aid ecclesiastical endeavors and are therefore tied to a particular form of truth: one inexorably linked to divinity. It is this singular source of truth that makes Augustine so intriguing in our modern context. To be clear, I am not arguing that Augustine himself is solely responsible for subordinating rhetoric to knowledge. *On Christian Doctrine* is responsible for grounding a pagan practice in a manner compatible with the growing Christian faith. Yet, Augustine's work is caught between both the wider conversion of the Western world to Christianity and the then centuries-long schism between philosophy and rhetoric. Augustine's work marks an interesting inflection point for rhetorical thought in the European tradition. On the one hand, he is responsible for finding a space in which rhetorical theory might fit within an increasingly Christianized Europe as Rome and Greece moved away from paganism and became the two seats of Christendom. However, he also was of a conflicted opinion regarding rhetoric, viewing it as both a tool of the devil and a shield that the righteous must avail themselves of in defense of the Truth of the church (*The Rhetoric of Rhetoric* Booth 26). As such, a particular configuration of rhetoric became the norm: rhetoric, in its proper usage, was fully the handmaiden to truth as such – always at the side of truth but equally capable of perhaps lunging with a dagger poisoned with misdirection.

Augustine himself has been studied as having converted twice over – once from rhetoric to philosophy (Harrison 7) and again to Christianity. These conversions demonstrate a synthesis of ideas between these fields, nonetheless altering the nature of concepts such as rhetoric. Augustine's forms of rhetoric are therefore located within a wider epistemological shift that attempts to reconcile the domination of Christianity's truth of divinity and to find a space for

seeking a truth that has (within Christian logic) already been found. And it is within that shift that we see emblematic parallels to the level of certainty in modern discourse.

While sites of knowledge today are far more secular, the phenomenon of scientism demonstrates how epistemic methods can cross into belief. Scientism[17], defined as "the view that science and only science reveals the truth, such that all true claims are part of a true scientific theory (Loughlin et al, 132), can operate as a quasi-religious form of positivism. I do not mean to allege that people today somehow worship within a cult of science, but rather to describe how certainty transforms the rhetorical act from one of mutual understanding towards a conversion of outsiders and echoes among insiders. However, as Booth describes in his lectures on modern dogma, a characteristic of modernism is in the operation of dividing matters of knowledge from matters of value and categorically denying their shared rhetorical overlap. Booth calls this the distinction between "The factual 'is' and the wishful ought'" (*Modern Dogma* 14). In this way, modernists, divided between camps of scientismic and irrationalist groups, have no use for rhetoric as it is either a means of deception in the case of scientism (*Modern Dogma* 139) or as superfluous as there are no reasons for values as they merely are in the case of the irrationalists (*Modern Dogma* 132). While Augustine argues for rhetoric's necessity in relation to Christianity, the rhetorical model he advances is one in which rhetoric is divorced from the process of knowing and therefore separated from the purposes of rhetoric that Booth describes. We will return to Booth and the wider implications of scientism for post-truth rhetoric in Chapter 4. Still, for now, it is necessary to consider how rhetoric advances towards this ornamentation model through Rome.

[17] To be clear, scientism does not refer to a method of practicing science itself. Rather, it is a philosophical position holding that science is the primary, if note sole, means of generating true knowledge. It is therefore understood in this dissertation as a form of naïve realism. Booth identifies it as one pole of modern dogmatism, the other being the relativistic irrationalist position.

Chief among Augustine's influences on rhetoric and philosophy is Cicero. Augustine cites the now-lost dialogue *Hortensius* in the *Confessions* as a catalyst for his first conversion to deeper philosophical development. Much of the *Hortensius* was lost by the 6th century, but it perhaps represents a different Cicero than the man who wrote *De Oratore.* The dialogue features four interlocutors defending various studies, such as poetry and history, as well as the eponymous Hortensius, who defends rhetoric. At the same time, a younger Cicero asserts the need for philosophic study (Taylor 488-489). The date for the writing of the *Hortensius* is near the end of Cicero's life, sometime in 45 B.C.E., well after Julius Caesar had stripped the Roman Senate of its authority. Taylor asserts that by the time Cicero approached writing the *Hortensius, "*There was no hope, therefore, that [Caesar] could be induced to put aside any of his dictatorial powers or that Cicero could ever have any influence in public life again" (487). It is possible that in the ten years between the writing of *De Oratore* and the *Hortensius,* Cicero's opinions on oration may have soured, and the ostensible mission of *De Oratore*, to develop a rhetorical model that repairs the rupture between the tongue and the brain (3.61), may have been modified in some way. With the text lost, it is difficult to say the extent to which Cicero the orator and Cicero the philosopher may have diverged. Still, for Augustine, the influence of the latter was evidently more salient, with Augustine writing, "At the age of eighteen, in the school of rhetoric… after reading [the *Hortensius*] I was inflamed thenceforth with such a love of philosophy that I thought of giving myself without delay to philosophical studies" (qtd. in Taylor 491). In determining the influence that Cicero may have had on Augustine's rhetoric, it is important to consider the ways that this influence may have fit within a larger narrative of philosophy and rhetoric's division.

While the rupture of rhetoric and philosophy is largely a result of Plato and Isocrates's diverging schools and traditions, Cicero's attempt to bridge this gap is explicit in *De Oratore.* However, these two concepts are understood as mutually necessary. Knowledge is only as useful as the orator makes it, as it becomes a "store of material for the content" (*De Oratore* 3.103), and eloquence is grounded in the ideal orator's ability to speak on all subjects by drawing from those vast stores. This manifests in the assertion that:

> The real power of eloquence is so enormous that its scope includes the origin, essence, and transformations of everything: virtues, moral duties, and all the laws of nature that govern human conduct, character, and life. It establishes traditions, laws, and legal arrangements, governs the State, and addresses with distinction and copiousness all questions belonging to any area whatsoever (*De Oratore* 3.76).

Rhetoric, or its construction as oratory in this case, develops its capacity through Cicero as he continues to formulate it as, "eloquence is so vast and important that it can only be covered by all the books of the philosophers" (*De Oratore* 3.81). Borrowing from Isocrates here, Cicero determines that knowledge becomes the basis of rhetorical production. Rhetoric directs the use of knowledge towards the benefit of the state and constructs the significance of knowledge; knowledge exists only insofar as it is used or expressed. Oratory/rhetoric thereby becomes more than just the complement of dialectic as Aristotle constructed it; it becomes an end in itself while dictating its purpose.

Furthermore, Cicero's epistemic model, described in his Academica, emphasizes a probabilistic form of knowledge rather than clinging to a dogmatic assertion that true knowledge can and should be present in the actions of the ethically sound. Cicero rejects absolute stoicism, not on the basis that truth is what matters, but that it is not an ethical imperative to ascertain and

act in accordance with absolute truth (Academica 2.32). Additionally, through the use of probabilistic ethics/epistemology, Cicero permits the use of potentially fallible tools to ascertain the best possible form of truth for ethical action, as what we now term the sciences act as a "second set of senses" (Academica 2.31). The scientific methods here function with the same level of fallibility that sense do rather than operating as a replacement with which one would supposedly transcend the fallibility of perception. When read in the context of De Oratore, this understanding of epistemology holds great significance for rhetoric in relation to truth. Like Isocrates before him, who emphasized the capability of the rhetor's forming of *doxa* (*Antidosis* 272), Cicero's rhetoric contains a probabilistic form of truth rather than asserting the need for correspondence with absolute reality. Rhetoric can be true at the time of its utterance, even if it is later determined to be false, if it was developed through the ideal orator's vast stores of knowledge. That knowledge is not that of the sage who is presumed to have a full understanding of the past and present nature of all things, one with perfect knowledge. Rather, the ideal orator uses their primary and secondary systems of senses (perception and science) to determine what has the highest probability of being true at a given time. But that probability is subject to change over time. In a way, this ideal orator is an evolution of Isocrates' supposition of the wise within his rhetorical model, as it deploys a concept similar to *doxa* to develop a distinct form of knowledge that can be put to use rather than merely collected. Cicero's model thus demonstrates that uncertainty was once constitutive of rhetorical practice rather than an obstacle to it. The ideal orator does not possess absolute truth; rather, they work with probabilities and judge the best available account. This tolerance for the provisional –the disciplined inhabitation of *doxa* – is precisely what Augustine's Christian epistemology will foreclose. Where Cicero installs suspicion as a productive posture, Augustine will insist on a domain of guaranteed truth, and in

doing so, he will reorganize rhetoric's purpose from the negotiation of competing appearances to the transmission of certainties already secured. It is this reorganization that produces the ornamentation model in its mature form.

Taken together, Cicero's reconstruction of *doxa* and his probabilistic epistemology already gesture toward a different way of inhabiting uncertainty. Because the ideal orator can never escape the fallibility of both primary and secondary senses, his task is not to discover an unmediated view of reality but to weigh competing appearances. Cicero installs a disciplined suspicion of practical wisdom that arises from negotiating the gap between appearances and deliberation rather than denying that a gap exists. Yet, this still leaves us with the matter of modern-day post-truth. If what we are seeing is a breakdown of an epistemological continuum, then establishing an alternative epistemology could provide methods for responding to this apparent shift in discourse. By understanding *doxa* as something other than the warped reflection of an *epistêmê,* we can begin to look beyond the assumptions of political disagreement. Freidman suggests that this crisis is itself a result of a "widespread failure to think epistemologically" (3). Specifically, Friedman draws from the psychologists Lee Ross and Andrew Ward to assert that what we are seeing is a hegemonic epistemology grounded in two separate kinds of naïve realism: That one's own beliefs are grounded in unmediated responses to stimuli (i.e., common sense) and that others, specifically experts whom the individual aligns themselves with, are also operating in response to unmediated stimuli. The resulting division between the far right and the moderate left, Friedman suggests, is not between irrational and rational camps so much as between an overestimation of commonsense and expert opinion in making sense of the world. In both cases, the uncritical examination of one's own knowledge leads to the atrophy of communication.

Read through Cicero, naïve realism marks a breakdown of probabilistic judgment. Rather than *doxa* acting as a working and reversible orientation toward the world, the right and left that Freidman describes, who echo Booth's irrationalist and scientismist camps of modernism, inflate the sagacity of their knowledge. The utterances that circulate in public discourse are not typically framed as arguable but as factual that demand assent under the banner of reason. Deliberation, under this epistemology, collapses into the circulation and policing of facts which are singular, exclusive, and unmediated; nay, perspectival difference is therefore cast as illegitimate under the oxymoronic "alternative fact. "This tension between a probabilistic orientation and the longing for unassailable certainty contextualizes Augustine's contribution. If Cicero responds to Stoic dogmatism by insisting that ethical and political actors must learn to live with probability, Augustine confronts the opposite danger in the New Academy's absolute skepticism: a refusal to grant assent even when the evidence warrants it. *Against the Academics* constitutes Augustine's response to Cicero's epistemology by carving out a domain of truth guaranteed by the divine while still conceding that most human judgments remain probable.

Augustine's treatment of rhetoric is most abundantly recognized in his *On Christian Doctrine,* where, in Book 4, he outlines the use of rhetoric as a liturgical tool. In addition to *On Christian Doctrine*, his *Against the Academics* includes an important caveat about the epistemological aspects of his then-newfound Christianity. This dialogue serves as a counter to the philosophical skepticism presented in Cicero's *Academica* and demonstrates how philosophy and Christian belief can be compatible. However, it still holds significant importance for the nature of rhetoric because that skepticism is so closely tied to the mission of rhetoric: to convince. The two texts together hold deeper implications for the development of rhetoric throughout the Middle Ages and its fall from favor during the Enlightenment.

Against the Academics is one of the four Cassiciacum dialogues, along with *On the Happy Life, On Order,* and the *Soliloquies,* and depicts Augustine as a catechumen – a convert to Christianity but still a candidate for baptism. However, this is still an Augustine who has seemingly left a career in rhetoric before reappropriating that knowledge in service of his church. He describes having left rhetoric, which he calls his "windy profession," to "flee to the bosom of Philosophy" (*Against the Academics* 1.1.3). Still, it is a philosophy distinct from the skepticism of the New Academy, which had inherited and evolved from Plato's philosophy. Skepticism, which Cicero had previously held as important for the discovery of the truth, is Augustine's primary target. Translator Michael Foley describes the shifting perspectives of Cicero and Augustine as such:

> "For Cicero, the false and arid dogmatism of Stoicism and Epicureanism was best met with a hermeneutics of suspicion that could undermine their truth claims and restore philosophy to an open-ended quest for the truth. For Augustine, the dogmatic skepticism that the New Academy had become was best met with a hermeneutics of suspicion that could undermine the skeptic's paralyzing rejection of truth claims and restore to philosophy a lively hope in attaining its quarry… Ironically, Augustine discredits skepticism for the same reason that Cicero defends it: to foster the love of wisdom" (9-10).

Augustine is not attacking Cicero per se, but rather the ways Cicero's skepticism has had a deleterious effect on people in the ensuing centuries after his death. Both are compatible insofar as they both require a deeper consideration of what exists to break from the dogmatism of their times. The issue for both is a lack of engagement in philosophical inquiry due to the extremes of doubting nothing and doubting everything. Since Augustine, we have witnessed another

revolution in this cycle of skepticism: we once again refuse to doubt. The difference is that, instead of relying on the knowledge domains of philosophical schools, we now rely on scientific evidence as the foundation of all knowledge, grounded in a dogmatic understanding of what counts as knowledge and the construction of the reasonable. However, the act of knowing today does not necessarily resemble what Augustine describes. Still, it retains the construction of an absolute truth that is the necessary exigency for its pursuit and the foundation of the moral (and, by extension, legal) domains of the world.

Augustine makes the case against the conventional position of skepticism by holding that its locus– the proposition that nothing can be truly known – is itself a claim about the nature of knowledge that must be known to a degree higher than the probabilistic knowledge advanced by the skeptics. This is not to say that the Academics themselves are not wise. Still, the conventional understanding of the Academics is that they form no opinion on anything, as everything might be false (*Against the Academics* 2.5.11). The probable, according to Augustine, became a necessary device to continue to function: acting on what would likely be true or appears to be true rather than acting in accordance with what is known to be true. However, to assert that nothing can be known, only that something can appear to be true, is a condition that will fail to inspire the pursuit of knowledge (*Against the Academics* 2.9.23). This extends towards his hypothetical court case of an adulterous scenario. Augustine states that the relativism engendered by a concept of the probable fails to instill a concept of sinning: of the commission of actions that exist upon grounds which can be judged. What is probable of right and wrong is not necessarily probable to another – the complexities compound as others enter into the scenario, such as defenders and judges who have no substance to make their arguments or render judgment (*Against the Academics* 3.16.35). The assertion is not that the skeptics are wrong due

to their understanding of all perception being fallible; it is that they do not include the concept of potentially knowing something as true as a possibility. Foley describes this difference in his commentary on the dialogue, asserting that Augustine presents a tripartite method of coming to truth (200). The first is sensible knowledge, which we experience through the physical body, the second is perceptive knowledge through the rational mind, and the last is assent or judgment: answering the question as to whether those knowledges are true and by what means. However, Augustine's position is not one of *universal* absolutism, and Foley notes a striking overlap with Academic skepticism.

> "[Augustine] is essentially conceding that the vast majority of what people think of in the course of their daily lives in not genuine knowledge or *scientia* [*epistêmê*] for it cannot be truly perceived or comprehended. Similarly, when Augustine says that the one thing to which a wise man should give his assent is wisdom, he is essentially conceding that he should *not* give his assent to the other 99 percent… They should be approved of as probable, as the Academics hold" (200).

What is necessary here is for absolute truth to be *possible* within this epistemic system. The issue is not with skepticism itself, but with the absolute skepticism that was developing through the New Academy; as such, both Augustine and Cicero are united in their ultimate positions, though occupying opposing sides of the spectrum. It is philosophical extremism that leads to atrophy, and the solution for Augustine is in providing a philosophical space for knowing Truth as the theological concept of the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps shockingly to modern sensibilities, this theological construction of truth is not merely based on blind faith but on the development of the Latin *Scientia and* the conversion of the Greek *epistêmê,* which is necessary for Augustine's visions of the church. Augustine, of

course, lived in a different moment in Christian history. He presents knowing God as a part of the wider philosophical mission, as much as other pursuits of modern-day science, such as physics, which then fell within the domain of philosophy. Intelligible knowledge, that is to say, knowledge of things outside of immediate perception, is achievable through the intercession of the divine as divinity is truth itself, even if man lacks the intelligence to decipher it (Foley 212). The discussion of Proteus, the shapeshifting sea god of Greeco-Roman myth, stands in for the unknowable divinity with Augustine stating:

> In poems, I say, Proteus performs and plays the role of truth, whom no one can obtain if he is deceived by false images and either loosens or lets go of the knots of comprehension. For these are those images that – in the typical manner of corporeal realities – truth to dupe and deceive us through the very senses we use for the necessities of this life, even when the truth is being grabbed and held, as it were, in our hands (*Against the Academics* 3.6.13).

Augustine's mission, like his rehabilitation of rhetoric in *On Christian Doctrine,* is to establish a philosophical model compatible with the church's teachings. He views universal skepticism as not only an obstacle to attaining knowledge but also to conversion. This positioning holds that the construct of truth is attainable and unknowable but is limited to specific domains – of things that are non-human. However, this knowing also requires a communicable element, and that is where rhetoric plays its role.

On Christian Doctrine (*De Doctrina Christiana)* is Augustine's treatise on how to use rhetoric, but the treatment of rhetoric occupies only its fourth book. Books 1-3 focus almost exclusively on ways to read scripture rather than their communication or any attempt to teach them. As such, these books most explicitly address reading comprehension and, by extension, the

nature of producing knowledge about scripture. For modern educators, the distinction is obvious. What a text *says,* as opposed to what it *means,* is a common difficulty for anyone who has attempted to have students read a text, especially a literary text, beyond merely deciphering the glyphs on the page into their linguistic counterparts. As such, the first three books are necessary to bridge the gap between the epistemological theorizing of *Against the Academics* and the rhetorical positions asserted in Book Four of *On Christian Doctrine*.

The preface to *On Christian Doctrine* also reveals the exigency of Augustine's project. He mentions three categories possible critics would fit into: those who cannot understand his text, those who will fail to apply the methods properly, and those who believe that such methods are unnecessary due to scripture's meaning being self-evident (*De Doctrina Christiana* 3-4). The first two are summarily dismissed as lacking the requisite knowledge to participate in these systems and are treated as outside Augustine's intended audience (*De Doctrina Christiana* 5-6). Rather, the last class of critic, likely others performing the ecclesiastical duties of converting and sermonizing, are attended to through an explanation of how spiritual knowledge is acquired and how it is disseminated. We can assume that the knowledge of these signs belongs to the class of *Scientia* discussed in *Against the Academics*. There, *Scientia* relates not to concrete details of what has or has not happened, but to a deeper understanding of matters beyond perception: what is purely intelligible rather than sensible (Foley 135). Augustine's forthcoming discussion of signs and their meaning maps onto this dichotomy: one may know scripture and cite it chapter and verse, yet that same person may not *know* scripture in terms of its absolute meaning and spiritual significance. There is no reason to expect that when Augustine uses the first portion of *On Christian Doctrine* to discuss the reading that the true knowledge of these signs are of a sensible nature as Augustine describes scripture as a device by stating: "By these devices (so to

speak) such an edifice of faith, hope, and love has been built in them that they do not seek what is imperfect, for they hold what is perfect – perfect, that is, as far as anything can be in this life" (*De Doctrina Christiana* 1.93). Knowledge of scripture is a means to the end of salvation, and it is the most important and expedient of these means, he asserts (*De Doctrina Christiana* 10-11). Still, it is not the only means by which knowledge of the divine can be found, which is why he does not exclude Pagan philosophy and rhetoric from discussion and encourages their use (*De Doctrina Christiana* 2.144).

Augustine's system of signs is surprisingly prescient of a postmodern sensibility of social structures. At times, Augustine is all too eager to remind us of the human element at play in our understanding of the world and its phenomena. One example of this is his discussion of astronomy (or at least what we would today call astronomy) compared with the superstition of astrology, which he describes as a kind of slavery to a preconceived notion of fate (*De Doctrina Christiana* 2.78). He describes how celestial bodies, though examples of divine construction, are misread as signs due to both erroneous names (such as the morning star Lucifer being named Venus and possibly reconsecrated in the name of Caesar) and false prognostication arising from invalid inferences (*De Doctrina Christiana* 2.80-81). This misreading of signs is considered demonic in nature and fits within the continual association of pagan beliefs with demonic entities that Augustine concludes the second book with. Things, in this regard, are material and thereby neutral. Still, their interpretation fits within a moral dichotomy of the divine and the demonic – that which is true, of course, being closer to God (*De Doctrina Christiana* 2.144). The use of language is a component of physical reality, as distinguished from an idealized spiritual reality that man strives toward. In this case, the symbols of language become signifiers of that spiritual reality but possess no further authority beyond their physical form: language, and by extension

ideas experienced through language, are intelligible tools which can lead to *Scientia*, but linguistic expressions of these judgments are not necessarily truth itself. Rather, Truth is withheld and developed as part of the Christian spiritual mission. One might learn the nature of Truth through the Gospels of the New Testament, as one might begin to learn the workings of the universe through careful observation of celestial bodies, but that knowledge of what the gospels said and how the Morning Star moves across the sky is not Truth itself, as all Truth is derived from God (*De Doctrina Christiana* 15). Augustine expresses this concept by applying the rules for interpreting scripture developed by his contemporary, Tyconius. He writes as he discusses the concept of species and genus as it applies to Israel:

> "This spiritual Israel is distinguished from the fleshy Israel, consisting of a single people, by the novelty of grace, not by nobility of race, and by mentality, not nationality. But such is the prophet's [Ezekiel's] profundity that while speaking about the former and indeed to the former he moves imperceptibly to the latter; and while speaking about the latter or addressing himself to the latter he still seems to be speaking about the former and addressing himself to the former, not with the hostile purpose of begrudging us an understanding of the scriptures but with the healthy one of stretching our understanding. So when he says ' I will bring you into your own land' and a little later repeats it, ' And you will live in the land which I gave to your fathers we should understand this not carnally, of the fleshy Israel, but spiritually, of the spiritual Israel. It is the church 'without blemish or wrinkle', assembled from all peoples and destined to reign with Christ." (*De Doctrina Christiana* 3.114-115).

The literal word of the prophet Ezekiel operates on one register, in contrast, an additional register speaks to future Christians, whom Augustine would argue are as much a part of the

intended audience as the carnal Israel. Suffice to say, modern readers ought to be concerned about the ways this division, as it pertains to the Christian canon, is being deployed within the site of modern geopolitics. The belief that the current state of Israel formed in 1947, and the Biblical Israel described throughout the Old and New Testaments are one and the same has, according to Senator Ted Cruz, influenced policy discussions at the highest level of the US government (Carlson 50:30-51:50). While this may seem absurd, it is also emblematic of a wider division present in the ways truth functions as a rhetorical construct and thereby necessitates a hyper-literal understanding of all things – even the spiritual. In our need to reduce the world to the sensible, we are abandoning the intelligible.

What emerges from Augustine's treatment of signs and scripture is the architecture of the ornamentation model in its fully developed form. Truth, for Augustine, resides in the intelligible realm – accessible through divine intercession and the disciplined reading of signs. But it is categorically prior to any rhetorical act. Language is a tool for approaching that truth, and rhetoric is the means by which what has been discovered is transmitted to those who have not yet perceived it. The process of knowing and the process of communicating are thereby separated, and rhetoric is assigned to the latter. It is this separation that will prove decisive in addressing the post-truth conditions this chapter aims to address.

This multi-layered speech mirrors Augustine's understanding of esoteric writings in *Against the Academics*. While Augustine does not name his method of reading esotericism there, Foley argues that the principle was known as early as Pythagoras and that it forms Augustine's understanding of the Academics: that the true philosophic methods they advanced required careful reading, as their superficial meanings obscure their true significance. There, in Augustine's closing arguments in the dialogue, he advances his reading in light of the dualism of

Plato's theory of forms (*De Doctrina Christiana* 3.11.24-25). Foley claims that within this summary, Augustine asserts that: "The Truth dwells in the intelligible world… and from the intelligible world the truth can be 'polished and brightened' in the soul possessing self-knowledge (self-ignorant or foolish souls, on the other hand, rely on the verisimilar and produce not truth but opinion" (203). Esotericism in this way is not just applicable to the complex texts of philosophy or the Christian canon; rather, all texts are, on some level, esoteric, as any text or utterance corresponds in some way to the truth that exists in a spiritual/intelligible world of forms. Foley continues stating that: "The truth is in the intelligible world, but the intelligible world which is real, is beyond space and time. The truth is, therefore, not 'out there,' which is a spatial category. On the contrary, the truth must be polished or brought forth in the soul, even though it cannot exist 'in' the soul spatially. Moreover, the soul does not invent or concoct the truth out of itself (203). The truth of texts is therefore not based solely on their memetic connection to truth. A text cannot be wholly truthful as it is sensible: we interact with a text through sight and hearing, and even our other senses, as Augustine even mentions the importance of smell as a sign (*De Doctrina Christiana* 2.5). Language itself is a human tool and susceptible to error caused by the fall of Babel (*De Doctrina Christiana* 2.8). As such, scripture, even though it may perhaps be the most truthful text that exists according to Augustine, is not in itself truth as much as it is truthful. Only through the intelligible act of deciphering signs can that truth be brought forth within the soul.

But this once again brings about a problem: once that truth exists, once it is sufficiently polished, how can it be shared? And this is why Augustine turns to rhetoric to conclude *On Christian Doctrine.* The three purposes of rhetoric first proposed by Cicero – to teach, to delight, and to move (*docere, delectare, et movere)* are deployed here in service of the Christian truth

(*De Doctrina Christiana* 4.96). And while this is part of a wider progression that starts with Plato, we see a new configuration of this relationship that fully shackles rhetoric toward the purposes of adorning the truth. This seems like the natural progression of the logic that had developed through antiquity; it is that rhetoric is subordinated to a means rather than an end. Ironically, in preserving rhetoric towards the ends of Christianity, Augustine establishes the frame that future thinkers like Bacon and Locke will use to disregard rhetoric in favor of rational thought. As the logic of the world moves from the narratives of Christianity toward the narratives of science and into the modern era, rhetoric too will lose its intelligibility and be viewed as expendable in a world in which Truth has moved from the category of the intelligible into the domain of the sensible.

The Augustinian epistemology cannot be untethered from its Christian purpose, and neither can the purpose of rhetoric be divorced from this epistemology/eschatology. Rhetoric shares the neutral position of philosophy, where it might be used for good or ill, but it also possesses an idealized form in scripture. It is not that the style of canonical texts is universally appropriate, but that these texts could not possibly be improved to meet their purpose of spiritual development (*De Doctrina Christiana* 4.50-53). Like his earlier discussion of esotericism in *Against the Academics,* the texts of the Bible are written on two registers – their initial audience and the future audience of Christians seeking salvation (*De Doctrina Christiana* 4.61-63). As such, they remain as perfected examples of eloquence. But that perfected construct has significant implications for rhetoric's ultimate purpose. Rhetoric, or eloquence, in this case, is not only concerned with the presentation of wisdom to make it more understandable, but to create a spiritual program of training so that the audience can have the truth revealed to them, not by the orator, but by the Holy Spirit acting through the speaker (*De Doctrina Christiana* 4.89).

The result is a perfected construct that by necessity paternalizes the relationship between speaker and audience. While rhetoric is removed from the context of a struggle, or *agon,* that features heavily in the first five centuries of rhetorical theory (from the sophists to Cicero), the encounter here is not based on discussion per se but on moralizing toward the audience. If one is speaking with the authority of truth on their side, what room is there for rhetoric but to ensure that the foolish will supply their consent? But it is a manufactured consent. When Augustine states "the function of eloquence in teaching is not to make people like what was once offensive, or to make them do what they were loth to do, but to make clear what was hidden from them" (*De Doctrina Christiana* 4.72) it warps the rhetorical act from one of interlocutors engaged in mutual struggle to that of the pastor leading his flock to the pastures of salvation. The truth becomes eschatologically significant as the means of salvation, and audiences, by necessity, are the unsaved. They are those in need of the truth, even if they do not recognize it themselves. The tripartite purpose of rhetoric inherited from Cicero is placed in the service of the church, not because they are necessary for the state, but because eternal salvation is at hand. But where Cicero's use of instructing/delighting/moving operated within systems with a higher degree of relativism, as evidenced by his *Academica*, the epistemology of Augustine swings further towards absolutism, as the importance of the Christian Truth is of the utmost importance. Without that relativism to act as a check, rhetoric is reduced to an arrow in the church's quiver. Rhetoric, and by extension communication, is absent from the process of developing knowledge, which can only come from an internal process of examining sensible data. Only after the data have been analyzed can the truth be communicated with others, at which time rhetoric can be introduced as a tool to move the audience, but never the speaker.

Augustine's methods in *On Christian Doctrine* reveal a striking order here important for our understanding of rhetoric today. While the significance of Christianity has certainly waned throughout modernity and into the present, there is no doubt that Christianity holds significant genealogical implications for many ways of knowing in the history of Western thought. Likewise, the influence of St. Augustine of Hippo within the European Christian tradition is significant. Augustinian rhetoric demonstrates how rhetoric and truth coexist within an absolutist frame of reference – as a method of adornment towards an end. Rhetoric remains necessary within Augustine's system, but a deeper narrative of progress emerges throughout European history, and the concept of truth is reduced as scientism becomes the dominant method for defining reality. The merging of spiritual and scientific ways of knowing and being, in turn, reduces language's role to that of communication.

The warnings Augustine issues about understanding truth as self-evident and resisting the need for adornment will extend into the scientific revolution, as the need for intelligible truth diminishes as Truth moves from its spiritual construction to observability as first and foremost. This epistemic ordering then engenders in audiences a demand for unmediated accounts of reality and lays the foundation for post-truth. Because audiences demand truth, the success of rhetoric depends on how truthful it appears. Note that this is the appearance of truth rather than the substance. Because noumena are categorically incapable of representation through language, attempts to represent the truth are always metaphysically distinct from the thing in itself. Rhetoric is, therefore, subordinated to a form of communication that does not fully exist. The truth is expected, yet it can never truly arrive. The result is a rhetorical environment in which the audience's assent is epistemically naïve, but that environment also establishes various regimes of truth. With the authority of truth no longer resting within the church, we can now see how the

political and the epistemological collide without a rhetorical component to properly manage it. Rhetors like Trump succeed because they both purport to tell the truth and are not constrained by typical methods of knowledge production. The irony is that Trump's lies work precisely because we demand the truth. The more that we expect truth to be contained within rhetoric, the more difficult it is to manage the differences in perspectives that allow Trump to continue to sway those who support him. The following section will consider what that rhetorical intervention might look like by examining the role language plays in the modern world and how rhetoric can help communicate differing perspectives on the truth.

2.3 Rhetorical Perspectivism as Mediation

The previous section traced the ornamentation model from Cicero's probabilistic epistemology, which held uncertainty as constitutive of rhetorical practice, through Augustine's foreclosure of that uncertainty in service of Christian truth. The result is an inheritance in which rhetoric is legitimate only insofar as it transmits truths secured elsewhere, and any claim that rhetoric participates in the construction of knowledge is dismissed as relativism or sophistry. Per this understanding, then addressing post-truth requires more than identifying the model's deficiencies; it requires articulating what an alternative relationship between rhetoric and truth might look like. This section begins that work by turning to the resources that additional theoretical concepts provide. Nietzsche's perspectivism and Foucault's account of regimes of truth provide these resources for recasting rhetoric's epistemic role.

The specifics of rhetorical epistemology have had their own legacy following Robert Scott's 1967 claim that rhetoric is epistemic. William Harpine's literature review of the concept traces how rhetoric scholars had attempted through the late 20th century to clarify the meaning of

this thesis but have often approached it from different angles – some ontological, others ethical, and others still bordering on other philosophic disciplines. However, Harpine determines that much of the difficulty that rhetoric has had in sustaining and resolving an epistemology of rhetoric has been due to the field's non-unified approach to settling definitions (336-337). For the sake of this dissertation, some encounter with this notion will be required to clarify the limits of the understanding of rhetoric I wish to forward in my own argument. Specifically, I am not interested in considering rhetoric as fundamentally ontological or metaphysical in nature. Are there ways that rhetoric impacts the nature of being? Certainly, to live is to communicate, and one might argue that a being communicates with itself through some manifestation of its will or autonomic systems. Does my body say something when it experiences pain? For example, is it the autonomic system communicating with my consciousness as a divided agent? There is a real argument to be considered there, linked to how systematized forms of communication (i.e., rhetoric) operate beyond the immediate construction of persuasive acts between two rational interlocutors. However, it is not my intention to say that *all* meaning is socially constructed or involves communicative action. Being *qua* human existence is always rhetorical, but rhetoric is not a fundamental condition of being as far as I am willing to argue in this dissertation. Instead, I find it far more salient to consider the ways in which rhetoric is involved in processes of knowledge-making in order to respond to the epistemic circumstances we find ourselves in today.

What follows is, first, a brief engagement with the disciplinary debate over rhetoric's epistemic status – necessary to position this dissertation's claims within the field – and then a turn to the resources that make the alternative possible. Nietzsche's account of language as inherently artful and perspectival provides the ground for understanding truth as a social and

linguistic construction rather than a metaphysical given. Foucault extends this insight by demonstrating that the perspectives elevated to the status of truth are always produced and sustained by systems of power within regimes of truth. Together, these concepts provide a theoretical framework for a rhetoric that does not merely ornament truth but participates in the conditions under which the truth is formed. Let us first clarify the concept of rhetoric being epistemic. Harpine finds a difference between scholars who claim that rhetoric is epistemic (it creates knowledge) and those who claim it is doxastic (it creates belief) (347). The difference has to do with knowledge being a subset of belief, because knowledge is defined as justified true belief (Gettier qtd. in Harpine 342). In other words, for something to be regarded as knowledge, it must correspond to a set of circumstances independent of its communication, and its possessor must have sufficient logical reasoning to have arrived at that conclusion. Only then can a belief morph into knowledge. Rhetoric easily applies to the matter of justification as much as it has the capacity to respond to belief. However, as discussed in the previous chapter, *doxa* is not mere belief nor is it necessarily subordinated to a superior concept of *epistêmê*. Instead, *doxa* has been involved in broader discussions to help delineate the overlapping domains of public and individual thought (Bengtson 100). Because of this, rhetoric's role goes beyond just altering belief, and therefore it is not solely a matter of a true/false dichotomy.

Furthermore, within the previous chapter, the distinction between phenomena and noumena became far clearer, along with the wider propensity for modern thought to assert a connection to noumena – Kant's conception of thing in itself. Contemporary discussions of truth often present one's own position as knowing the object in its totality. I will not rehash that argument here, but it will be significant for a wider understanding of rhetoric's relationship to our conditions of knowing. In short, the response to the wider establishment of post-truth rhetoric

and its continued presentation of alternative facts has been the polarization of knowledge. This polarization along opposing sides of an issue (often aligning with the liberal/conservative or Democrat/Republican poles in the United States) results in both sides retreating into the comfort of their own naïve realism. In many cases, these opposing sets of facts may be resolved through observation or other knowledge-gathering processes, yet they remain unresolved.

This process demonstrates the inefficacy of a truth-based method of communication. Rather than setting us free, the truth leads to a rhetorical stalemate, with both sides refusing to cede ground. However, if simply relying on the truth is insufficient, then what is the purpose of argument? The post-truth phenomenon has not, in fact, revealed the human propensity for convenient lies over hard truths, but rather marks the moment when the limits of our knowledge have become visible. And the moral panic over post-truth in turn demonstrates our inability to cope with the fundamental nature of truth. We could never have moved to post-truth because we had never arrived at truth to begin with.

Understanding the mediation of language requires understanding how language is viewed through the lens of artificiality. As part of the rhetoric/dialectic divide first developed by Plato, rhetoric's emphasis on style has cast it in the mold of ornamentation first and foremost. As a result, rhetoric's placement has been as a complement to or adversary of the practices of dialectic, which focus more heavily on the interplay of ideas through formal reasoning. The counterpart theorem, of course, comes through the Aristotelian model, where rhetoric is defined as a counterpart (*antistrophos*) to dialectic (1.1). However, within this process, dialectic takes an anterior or primary role in the formation of knowledge, which is then communicated through rhetorical action, which is ultimately secondary. Under these expectations, the best-case scenario for rhetoric in communicating the truth is its use to make that truth more appealing in public

communication. This formation, what we could call the cladding model of rhetoric, is best exemplified by rhetoricians such as Augustine, who made the case for applying Greco-Roman/pagan rhetorical traditions to ecclesiastical ends (De Doctrina Christiana 2.144). However, rhetoric's posteriority to dialectic also leads to its superfluity, according to some, such as Locke, who associate it only with duplicity (III.X.34). Changing norms coinciding with the scientific advancements of early modernity led to a growing conceit regarding humanity's ability to possess knowledge. As described in Chapter 1, at some point, knowledge came to be regarded as noumenal rather than either phenomenal or nominal. In other words, the modern condition became marked by a particular epistemic relationship to the notion of a fact – a relationship outlined by the fact's capability to not only represent but to *be* the thing in itself. As such, these naturalized facts. This brief historical outline of rhetoric demonstrates a throughline in how rhetoric's relationship to truth has been fundamentally separated from the processes of finding truth. Even when truth and rhetoric are not seen as opposed processes (as is the case with Aristotle, especially when compared to Plato's definition in the *Gorgias*), rhetoric is seen as ultimately irrelevant to truth's construction. As such, the natural/artificial distinction drawn between rhetoric and other forms of communication becomes a byproduct of positivism. Yet the artificiality of rhetoric is also the artificiality of language itself. By not acknowledging that aspect of language, a naivete about truth manifests, making it impossible to communicate with others continually.

Language's artificiality is best described by Nietzsche, whose *Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense* pragmatically defines language. Rhetoric's artificiality, the feature that has most distinguished it from true knowledge, is also its saving grace. Nietzsche assigns artificiality as something inherent to all linguistic production. Nietzsche, like Plato, assigns a memetic quality

to language where it "conveys not sensations but 'copies of sensations,' not things but images of our perception of things" (Bizzell et al 1188). However, Nietzsche rejects the positivism that begins with Plato: that the ultimate purpose of linguistic expression is to be honed into the truth (or at least as close to the truth as is possible for the medium). Instead, because language can never do more than emulate truth, the only truths that could exist are social expressions through language. The Übermensch transcends the actual social limitations of what is called knowledge and embraces the chaos that such a position might beget (Bizzell et al 1189). Language for Nietzsche is rhetoric, as language is always artful – there is no natural or ideal language to which it can be compared. And, as such, Nietzsche's position assists in disentangling the expectation of truth from rhetoric.

The concept of knowing itself is a social construction according to Nietzsche, as the process of knowing is a philosophical and, therefore, linguistic measure. As he describes "[Humans] are deeply immersed in delusions and phantasmagoria; their eye merely glides around the surface of things and sees "forms"; their perception leads nowhere to the truth, but is satisfied with receiving stimuli and, as it were, playing a groping game on the back of things." (*Truth and Lies* 247). Nietzsche alludes to, but does not necessarily cite, Plato's theory of forms and the Allegory of the Cave, arguing that what is perceived through sensation and stimuli is merely the individual's response rather than a universal constant. Yet, as Nietzsche goes on to describe, the drive for truth is an act of "dissimulation," or a kind of trickery to hide one's own thoughts. If something is proven to be objective, then the author of such a fact disappears within the "*bellum omni contra omnes*": the war of all against all (*Truth and Lies 247*). Truth, as a construction, serves to permit the existence of the self in a manner that permits the existence of others insofar as differences in linguistic expression are categorized along lines of lies (morality)

or ignorance (knowledge). Truthfulness, according to Nietzsche, involves the use of expected metaphors – that one describes what others can see in a way that is agreeable to them. However, the "' rational' being" moves a step beyond the metaphor and reduces them into concepts: narrow yet universal statements on the wider nature of an externalized world – "delicate enough to be carried along by the wave, yet strong enough not to be blown apart by the wind" (*Truth and Lies 251*).

Nietzsche's position on truth is tied to the broader concept of perspectivism that he advances throughout his writings as part of his critique of philosophy's pursuit of objectivity and rationality. In his *Genealogy of Morals* he writes:

> From now on, my dear philosophers, let us beware of the dangerous old conceptual fable which posited a 'pure, will-less, painless, timeless knowing subject', let us beware of the tentacles of such contradictory concepts as 'pure reason', 'absolute spirituality', 'knowledge in itself;—for these always ask us to imagine an eye which is impossible to imagine, an eye which supposedly looks out in no particular direction, an eye which supposedly either restrains or altogether lacks the active powers of interpretation which first make seeing into seeing something—for here, then, a nonsense and non-concept is demanded of the eye. Perspectival seeing is the only kind of seeing there is, perspectival 'knowing' the only kind of 'knowing'; and the more feelings about a matter which we allow to come to expression, the more eyes, different eyes through which we can view this same matter, the more complete our 'conception' of it, our 'objectivity', will be. (97).

Objectivity is the means by which metaphors cease to function as metaphors– where seeing is no longer seeing. There is no sight which can fully meet the demands of objectivity, and the result is an erasure of that initial act of interpretation so that it is neither an act of sensibility nor

intelligibility but something that supposedly transcends humanity: *epistêmê*. Instead of holding to the criteria of truth as external, Nietzsche asserts that truth lies within human experience. That objectivity is not external to that experience but composed by the multiplicity of experiences recorded by all (Fowler 122). In this case, transcendence comes from understanding that the multiplicity of perspectives and varying interpretations are neither solely the result of a lack of understanding nor an outright attempt to deceive, but rather how knowing shifts and warps across perspectives. This understanding has deep implications for the relationship between rhetoric and post-truth, as knowledge arises from the synthesis of perspectives expressed through rhetoric rather than from the conquest of one argument over another.

Nietzsche establishes that truth is perspectival and that objectivity is not the erasure of perspective but the multiplication of it – the capacity to view a matter through as many eyes as possible. Yet Nietzsche's account, by itself, does not fully explain why certain perspectives come to circulate as truth while others are dismissed in error, superstition, or irrationality. It does not, in other words, account for the political dimension of truth's production. This is where Foucault's concept of regimes of truth becomes essential. Where Nietzsche shows that all acts of knowing are perspectival, Foucault shows that the perspectives authorized as knowledge are produced and sustained by historically specific systems of power. Together, the two thinkers provide a framework for understanding post-truth as the crisis that results when competing regimes of truth collide, rather than as the failure of correspondence between language and reality. All the while, the mechanisms for adjudicating linguistic representations of truth are no longer shared across publics. Foucault presents the concept of a regime of truth as a historically mediated process that governs subject and phenomenological object in a process of mutual intelligibility. This is in distinction to the notion of truth's self-evident quality (Deere 517-518).

If truth is a historical product and not a metaphysical condition of reality, then it can be the case that certain power relations govern the regime of truth of a particular era. In our case today, this is marked by a particular reverence for the scientific method, along with a set of metaphysical truths about the world in general that all phenomena must adhere to. The important distinction is that this means that truth is not subject to a process of discovery, but a process of creation – "Truth is of the world" (Foucault "The Political Function" 13). However, this again is not to assert that truth itself does not exist or to presuppose equal validity to all constructions of truth; it presents a necessary dimension of truth to recognize the ways it is bound to other concepts according to the necessary political functions of the society it presents in (Deere 520-521). Foucault asserts that we must understand truth as a process, but not a linear one – rather it has been constructed and reconstructed time and time again to suit the needs of systems of power as expressed by the proposition that: "Truth' is linked by a circular relation to systems of power which produce it and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which redirect it. A 'regime' of truth.'" (Foucault "The Political Function" 14).

The processes by which privileged narratives become established as true and how that influences relationships through networks of power are key aspects of feminist rhetorical theory and hold much significance for this theory of perspectivism. Foss et al describe how feminism articulates a value system that stands in contrast with the persistent formations of hierarchy and domination that influence myriad sites of human interaction – rhetoric being one of these sites. Rather than define rhetoric as a collection of methods designed to persuade others, they define it as "understand[ing] how people construct the worlds in which they live and how those worlds make sense to them" (7) and regard its significance as a practice "because it can and does create reality." (7). Donna Haraway's feminist epistemologies also demonstrate a critical component of

asserting objectivity: what she calls "a conquering gaze from nowhere (581). Haraway explains how objectivist demands to know, in turn, inscribe meaning onto objects and people while removing the knowing subject from any possible position to be recognized. She writes, "The eyes have been used to signify a perverse capacity – honed to perfection in the history of science tied to militarism, capitalism, colonialism, and male supremacy – to distance the knowing subject from everybody and everything in the interests of unfettered power." Haraway's essay is written in response to developments during the Reagan conservative movement, and society has only managed to develop its objectivist myths while decrying any challenge as relativistic slop.

Possible threats to the notion of a stable, unchanging notion of truth are often slapped with the charge of being relativistic by the political left and right. Regimes of truth rely on the concept of relativism to defend themselves not only as representatives of truth but as truth itself. Truths function in our society as foundations for our political concepts, such as the need for unalienable rights and for basing documents like constitutions. The Declaration of Independence makes claims of objectivity when it asserts: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." The primary rhetorical move is to deny the presence of argument in favor of a seeing without sight. There are no concepts that are immune to argument in themselves, and this radical application of rhetoric is necessary to understand what post-truth rhetoric does in the world today. Rhetoric presents the only method to address regimes of truth and their establishment by those with the authority to graft them onto our public consciousness today. And unfortunately, Donald Trump likely holds the most authority in the world today.

Because truth is both perspectival and a site of power, it is significant in the context of rhetoric as well. Truth is rhetorically mediated by how it operates among people: in how we communicate claims about the truth and seek it. Not in the sense of discovering something that

transcends the human experience and is metaphysically outside of the realm of humanity, but in how we can form understandings among differing perspectives. The rhetoric that makes the weaker argument the stronger does not deceive; rather, it is a process of elevation. The weaker argument may be an inferior perspective – insofar as there may be more advantageous metaphors for the workings of the world – but it possesses the same genealogy of human experience as its competing arguments. In making the weaker argument become the stronger, rhetoric elevates the weaker argument as it encounters its agonistic other and, in so doing, collapses the differences between the claims as both must be judged and evaluated as equals –if only for a moment. However, objectivity does not come from the victor's ascension to the status of truth having been unchanged. Instead, it comes from a more radical place within the encounter itself. The truth of the rhetorical encounter comes in the exchange of ideas; in the synthesis that should result from the argument, and the opportunity for multiple perspectives to be shared among one another. However, this synthesis is impossible for the regime of truth, for truth as a site of power requires absolutism.

In this sense, post-truth rhetoric is decidedly not the rhetoric employed by Trump and his cronies. Trump himself has shown a dogmatic obsession with the concept of truth itself, as it forms the primary justification he uses for his actions: whether that is calling out journalists for fake news or building his own social media platform and calling it Truth Social. Trump adopts the strategy of being truthful, as evidenced by his use of Parrhesia (Skinnell 100), and by his continual assertion of a return to common sense. This is most evident in his discussions about gender identity, where he presents the simplistic collapsing of biological sex and socially constructed gender (see executive order). The presentation of truth in this case is grounded in the observable presentation of genitalia: it is sensible insofar as it can be seen.

Meanwhile, the lived experiences of those who do not identify with their sex assigned at birth exist outside of the sensible. They are therefore discarded as being the result of either some sort of confusion in the case of children or some sort of predation/deviancy in the case of adults, and the ensuing moral panic. In this case, the established regime of truth that presents some information as valid for discourse (i.e., the binary of genitalia) and dismisses others (the psychological experiences of gender dysphoria) can have drastic effects, such as the government issuing an official stance affirming the "truth of gender" in the United States (Trump). The falsity of truth is that it masks itself to be something more than its human origins and, in so doing, obstructs the possibility of understanding the very people who created it.

2.4 Perspectivism in Classical Athens

The preceding sections moved forward in time, from Cicero and Augustine through Nietzsche and Foucault. This was necessary to trace the ornamentation model and to develop the perspectivist alternative that challenges it. This section reverses direction as the solution to post-truth is not necessarily found by searching for what comes after "post." Because the narrative of truth's progress and now descent has been a myth this dissertation has attempted to dispel, responses can be found outside of the genealogical progression of modern truth. This section, therefore, reverses direction. We return to the sophists of fifth-century Athens who preceded Plato's subordination of rhetoric to philosophy. Having established through Nietzsche that truth is politically mediated, we are now in a position to read the sophists as more than the naïve relativists of Plato's polemics but as practitioners of a rhetoric that anticipates the relationship of reality and language that Nietzsche would later articulate. Recovering their positions demonstrates that the ornamentation model was never the only available inheritance for a

Western intellectual genealogy. A rhetoric adequate to post-truth has antecedents older than the tradition that suppressed it.

To understand how rhetoric functions as a medium for the continual production, negotiation, and reconstitution of truth, we must also consider rhetoric's original contexts. Rhetoric's supposed malignancy comes from its ways of obscuring the truth. Still, as neosophistic scholarship has shown, that positioning often grants the sophists too little credit for the complexities of their theories. What the theories of the sophists in the generation preceding Plato demonstrate is a working system of language that places human interaction at the forefront rather than humanity's relationship to an exterior existence as the locus of meaning. Matters such as making the weaker argument the stronger or arguing for non-existence in the speeches of Protagoras and Gorgias, respectively, demonstrate meaning's subjectivity and tethering to rhetorical processes. The sophists demonstrate the earliest forms of rhetoric's capacity to dictate and construct meaning and form a theory of knowledge that acknowledges truth's perspectival dimensions. Specifically, that truth is not merely discovered but instead made through the contingencies of discourse. This understanding, obscured by later philosophical traditions that subordinated rhetoric to dialectic, provides a site where we might disinter the radical positivism that enables post-truth and consider alternative ways of understanding our means of understanding.

Within Classical rhetoric, it is well established that alternative forms of understanding knowledge, language, and their mutual relationship abound. Plato's dialogues deliver a particular orientation of these early epistemic disputes, but they contain a polemic element aimed at the excision of the sophistic rhetorical practices. Plato's view on rhetoric through the statements of the dramatic Socrates presents rhetoric as a routine or a knack that produces gratification and

pleasure (*Gorgias* 462a) – something that appears to align with what Harry Frankfurt termed bullshit in a modern context. For Frankfurt, bullshit marks a kind of communicative act in which the speaker disengages from the need to communicate the truth and instead is presented with an obligation or opportunity to speak on matters the bullshitter is unqualified to address (60-63). Unlike the liar, the bullshitter is primarily defined from the origination point of their speech, which Frankfurt calls "phony" (47). The obfuscation of the truth is incidental to the bullshitter's ends – their goal is to communicate continually. However, the bullshitter may stumble on the truth, but they ultimately lack the knowledge that their communication corresponds to.

Additionally, the bullshitter, according to Frankfurt, can rely on endemic skepticism and uncertainty to justify their own bullshit. The kinds of patterns Frankfurt describes ultimately resemble the ways Plato critiques sophistic rhetoric through Socrates's debate with Gorgias. The figure of sophist, here emblematic within the figure of Gorgias, is shown to possess a facsimile of knowledge. Likewise, Plato's perceived sophist does not attempt to engender knowledge among his audience. He merely speaks of forms and manipulates them to his own ends. Hence, the sophist, who at the time of Athens was an expert in what the dramatic Gorgias asserts to be an art which "includes practically all other faculties under her control" (*Gorgias* 456b), is effectively regarded as the bullshitter of antiquity. Yet this is only one interpretation of the sophists' position that we might consider. We may instead regard a sophistic perspective that centers human interpretation as epistemic development rather than pure positivism.

An important aspect of Gorgias's rhetoric is the concept of the power (*dunamis*) of the word (*logos)*. One of the points where Gorgias makes this concept clearest is in his *Encomium of Helen,* where he describes a *logos* that possesses a power of its own. John Poulakos places Gorgias's *Helen* in a wider context of the concepts of weaker and stronger arguments, or, to use

the Greek terms, *to Hetton* and *to kreitton,* respectively. In this sense, to make the weaker argument is not to construct a flimsy argument misaligned with the truth, but rather to form an argument that faces more difficult circumstances due to the audience's preconceived attitudes and opinions on a matter. Poulakos writes:

> An argument or position is not *Hetton* or *kreitton* in itself but in relation to another argument and as a result of one or more rhetorical contests… According to this agonistic view of rhetoric, and argument acquires or loses power in use, and no argument is victorious or vanquished once and for all. Because the circumstances calling for arguments change, any one argument can lose its strength or overcome its weakness in some future contest. This is another way of saying that the status or position of an argument is always situationally determined. Therefore, today's loser may be tomorrow's winner and vice versa. (85)

Rhetoric's *dunamis* in this case concerns the concept of making the weaker argument the stronger, which reappears in sophistic contexts that Schiappa examines in relation to Protagoras. It is not my intention to imply that Protagoras and Gorgias had a unified philosophy of rhetoric as fellow sophists, though, as Mourelatos points out, the epistemologies of both Protagoras and Gorgias have been characterized in scholarship as identical in their shared relativism (135). As such, the weaker/stronger understanding of argument demonstrates a common orientation to language familiar in ancient contexts. As Schiappa points out, the *Hetton/kreitton* dichotomy was a common trope of sophistic teaching that was understood as common to all sophists, even if they did not necessarily advance those ideas themselves, as is the case of Socrates being accused of engaging in that behavior in Aristophanes' *Clouds* (Schiappa *Protagoras and Logos* 106).

What the *Helen* helps to demonstrate is a rhetoric that possesses a force to make the weaker argument the stronger primarily through avenues of *doxa*. Through the mythic Helen of Troy, Gorgias situates rhetoric as a possible (and likely) cause of Helen's actions, along with both divine intervention and physical force, stating: "But if it was speech which persuaded her and deceived her heart, not even to this is it difficult to make an answer and to banish blame as follows. Speech is a powerful lord which by means of the finest and most invisible body effects the divinest works: it can stop fear and banish grief and create joy and nurture pity" ("Encomium" 8). The power of speech lies within these domains, which, from our current perspective, we might see as purely matters of opinion rather than of truth. Fear, grief, joy, and pity today represent psychological phenomena that are ultimately internal and therefore operate independently of an individual's psychic goings-on. As such, modern readers of the *Helen* may be tempted to read its encomium of speech as relying on a nascent model of psychology to use emotion as a *techne* of deception. Valiavitcharska cites this reading as originating with Charles Segal's 1962 article "Gorgias and the Psychology of the Logos," which claims that Gorgias adapts the kind of universal relativism (that no things can be truly known) (148). In other words, Segal develops a view of Gorgias that aligns his practice with what Frankfurt determines as a hallmark of bullshitting. However, Valiavitcharska describes Gorgias's art as a means of connecting the separated concepts of *alethes logos,* or truthful speech, and correct speech (*Orthos logos*), which is the more significant concept for Gorgias (149). The observation of Gorgias's rhetoric is that reasoning (logismos) is not a method of finding the truth as would be implied by something like Plato's dialectics, but as a method of constructing arguments (logos).

The argument itself is what is formed for Gorgias through reasoning (Valiavitcharska 153). Instead, truth is tied to logos through its appropriateness – its form– which by necessity

creates methods to arrive at the truth rather than act as merely reportage. Gorgias address the latter in the Helen by stating: "To understand that persuasion, when added to speech, is wont also to impress the soul as it wishes, one must study: first, the words of astronomers who, substituting opinion for opinion, taking away one but creating another, make what is incredible and unclear seem true to the eyes of opinion; then, second, logically necessary debates in which a single speech, written with art but not spoken with truth, bends a great crowd and persuades; (and) third, the verbal disputes of philosophers in which the swiftness of thought is also shown making the belief in an opinion subject to easy change. ("Encomium" 13). Gorgias gives three examples of deception, which are themselves modes of persuasion through their use of *doxa*. The persuasion of the astronomers Gorgias mentions is notable for the ways it resembles modern arguments from fact, which attempt to shed any smattering of rhetoricity. Having derived their persuasiveness not from form, but their assertion of an epistemic order of the facts understood as such, the soul, or seat of consciousness in this case, adapts and assents to the order that is presented independent of the circumstances of reality. Arguments derived from what we now call science are not persuasive because they themselves possess a privileged position concerning the fundamental nature of reality, but because we accept that perspective as a method of casting reality into language. However, as Valiavitcharska points out, this *logos* is decidedly not an aspect of *epistêmê* but is instead a matter of *doxa,* making it a fluctuating system of symbols inherently subject to change. Porter describes this aspect of the *Helen* as a "self-defeating" presentation of the powers of logos (270). For as much as we hear of the effects of *logos*, such as its analogous framing as a drug of the soul ("Encomium 14), we hear little of how that drug takes effect – especially in comparison to later attempts to form a cogent body of knowledge around rhetoric, such as the lectures of Aristotle. *Logos,* as its negative construction possesses no

inherent meaning of its own, and as such, logos possesses no persuasive effects on its own. It is in the interplay of speaker and audience where the modes of persuasion lie and thereby require the use of forms that rely on a correctness that *only* exists *within* the system of language. Porter writes, "Herein lies, I would suggest [The *Helen's*] seductive power: the speech absorbs all meaning through a kind of attraction; meaning is drawn to its limit conditions as if by a vacuum, and then returned as a shared complicitous illusion" (295). The illusions of the speech, like all components of speeches, exist only in terms of their reconstruction by audiences. Meaning relies on these relations, and even a wider process of reasoning is neither prior nor external to this network of signification.

Logos, even a *logos* subjected to a form of reasoning (*logismós)* cannot be truthful through a process of reasoning alone; after all, it is through reasoning that Gorgias develops his most outlandish claim in his speech *On the Nonexistent / On Nature*. Fragments of *On the Nonexistent,* preserved and recorded by Sextus Empiricus, describe Gorgias's attempt to demonstrate the collapse of the relationship between language and reality. *On the Nonexistent* contains three propositions: "first and foremost, that nothing exists; second, that even if it exists it is inapprehensible to man; third, that even if it is apprehensible, still it is without a doubt incapable of being expressed or explained to the next man" (65). These three arguments can be divided into discussions of ontology, epistemology, and semantics, respectively. While the ontological argument that nothing must exist and that what exists is nothing is the most outlandish, the latter two are the most salient for contemporary discussions of rhetoric. Whether Gorgias was truly sincere in producing a philosophic account of the nature of (non)being is a matter of debate; the speech nevertheless diminishes the conception of language and truth as being consubstantial with one another. Bett, in analyzing whether sophists such as Gorgias were

relativists in a modern sense of the word determines that Gorgias argues that all speech is mere speech writing: "all statements are on a par, as far as truth is concerned, *not* because all statements are true relative to some framework or other, and frameworks cannot be neutrally ranked for correctness, but because *all statements are false*. They are all 'equally true in the sense that *none* of them is the *slightest* bit true. All of them purport to be about *onta*, 'things which are', but there are no *onta*, and even if there were, and they could be known about, discourse about them would be impossible." (151-152 emphasis original). Thus, within Gorgias, we find an antecedent to the metaphysical arguments of Kant and the linguistic arguments of Nietzsche. Those things that are, or those things in themselves, once entered into language, are merely signs upon signs upon yet even more signs.

However, in highlighting only the aspects of Gorgias that align with what Bett calls skepticism rather than relativism, we must consider where, and whether, truth can exist within language, and what the nature of that truth is. This is where appropriate speech (*orthos logos)* collides with truthful speech (*alethes logos),* where, according to Valiavitcharska, correctness is tied to a wider ethics regarding the relationship between speaker and audience (155). The speaker is not assigned merely a role of speaking the truth, nor is the expectation for the speaker to use language as a method of reasoning through the evidence; the speaker's ability to adapt forms into appropriate methods of managing a situation dictates the correctness, and thereby the truth, of the statement. *Logos* is not true because it *contains* the truth, but because it expresses the truth using the signs appropriate for the audience. This helps recontextualize Gorgias's best-known characteristic: his emphasis on style. Valiavitcharska determines that Gorgias's style and focus on eliciting pleasure in his audience are not methods of deception or of spellbinding audiences, but rather a core part of his method of speaking truth. Rather than regarding rhetoric

as a method of dressing up the truth, the stimulation of pleasure in an audience is a method of aligning *logos* with the circumstances that allow it to become true (160-161). This departure from a correspondence model of truth helps consider alternative dimensions of how truth is not only contained within language but, in fact, springs from language itself. As such, the Gorgianic style, as often as it is maligned and parodied within the corpus of Classical texts, demonstrates this model at work. Valiavitcharska assigns Gorgias's rhetoric a kind of ethical commitment to the audience. A responsibility to communicate with their audience rather than simply persuading them, to adopt the necessary signs and symbols to both express reason and elicit pleasure. Rather than assuming that the Gorgianic style is a means to abet deception, it could instead serve as a reminder of the locus of truth within an audience. Acceptance of the truth is as important as the truth itself, as there is no external measure to which truthful language can be compared. All we have is what an audience deems as correct.

So far, what has been described is a shedding of what we assume language to contain. Gorgias's model of logos has largely evacuated language of any stable correspondence with being and instead emphasized its power, form, and effects. The *Helen* and *On the Nonexistent* together establish that logos cannot carry truth by correspondence – that the relationship between language and reality is one of construction rather than reflection. Therefore, the correctness of speech is a social and ethical matter rather than a metaphysical one. But Gorgias's account, powerful as it is in clearing away the assumptions of the ornamentation model, leaves a crucial question unanswered: If language does not contain truth by correspondence, then on what basis can competing claims be adjudicated within a political community? How do perspectival truths become the shared premises that democratic deliberation requires? To address what language might nevertheless produce – what kinds of truth it can still sustain within civic life – we turn to

Protagoras as a complement to Gorgias's linguistic theories. Where Gorgias demonstrates the limits of correspondence, Protagoras demonstrates how perspectival truths become political and how rhetoric becomes a means of negotiating them. His doctrine that man is the measure of all things does not collapse into relativism; it articulates the conditions under which a community can deliberate without the guarantee of metaphysical certainty.

Protagoras, like Gorgias, reaches us primarily through Plato's polemical framing and thus has often been read through subjectivism or relativism (Payne 187). One of Plato's concerns is that sophistic management of *doxa* undermines the pursuit of *epistêmê* by making belief and social expediency the currency of intellectual exchange. Susan Jarrat describes this ethical tension between Plato and the older sophists as a fundamentally epistemological concern: Plato argues that sophists, through rhetorical mediations of *doxa,* fail to uphold a universal ethical commitment to a truth synonymous with human flourishing (95). On the other hand, the communal aspects inherent in the workings of *doxa* dictate a communal encounter in which shared experiences gain substance rather than merely being a shade of true knowledge. As Jarratt describes, "through ethical norms within communities, the sophists go beyond total relativism – a hedonistic self-interest – to a discourse about enlightened self-interest based in the notion of 'self' as constituted by the community" (96). The sophistic project is ultimately one of mediation between interested parties, not necessarily as a means of attaining truth as one might expect from a dialectical process, but one that ethically manages differing perspectives by providing a forum for synthesis. Where Platonic philosophy aims at a view of the forms beyond opinion, Protagorean sophistry begins from the irreducible plurality of opinions and asks how the polis can nonetheless deliberate while maintaining a deeper democratic ethics. While Jarratt specifically analyzes sophistry in the context of developing pedagogies and curricula for writing,

her work also signifies a means of using the sophists to reorient our assumptions about truth in relation to democratic practice.

With this orientation to the sophists in mind, Protagoras's theories are not as much relativistic as they are perspectival. Objectivity may ontologically exist insofar as the material conditions of the unknown can and do affect the conditions of being. Yet, those objective positions are not necessarily inherently more beneficial to democratic processes than those from subjective standpoints. The maxim that man is the measure of all things demonstrates the nature of intelligibility. Schiappa translates Protagoras's human-measure fragment as "Of everything and anything the measure [truly-is] human(ity): of that which is, that it is the case; of that which is not, that it is not the case" (*Protagoras and Logos* 121 additions Schiappa). This translation highlights the fragment's ambiguity regarding whether the measurements are those of an individual or the collective humanity, and the ability to manage encounters with reality. Key to this is the nature of perspective, which limits relativism to particular frames of reference. Schiappa describes this as: "To the form 'A is B' must be added the notion 'for C'" (*Protagoras and Logos* 126). However, Schiappa also describes this as a construction largely in the theory of forms, holding that A and B are categorically distinct from C – that an object's essence is separate from its perception. Schiappa instead notes that the objective/subjective dichotomy was not fully formed for Protagoras, and as such, the human-measure fragment does not fit within either category (*Protagoras and Logos* 130). Perception and an object's being are thereby bound to one another, and the measure of the object in some regard becomes the object as it is transfixed in language. It is through contrasting logoi that the object's form becomes rendered once again. The human-measure doctrine, like the distinction between *orthos logos* and *alethes logos* within Gorgias, holds that the measure of truth is not purely correspondence. The question

of *what is* requires a deeper understanding of social dimensions, including perspective and form, to articulate observations within the appropriate metaphors and symbols required for intelligibility. Truth is therefore inseparable from its context – from the values, politics, and methods of reasoning of a given audience/community/society. For post-truth, this complicates the revulsion towards alternative facts. The nature of the fact itself is relative to that perspective, and since there is no extra-spatial view, there is no stable set of facts that are fundamentally agreed upon, but myriad perspectives that may view the object from the same point in space yet remain individual and therefore alternative.

Sophistic rhetoric helps articulate an epistemic component of language that highlights how systems of language shape the fabrication of truth as far as the human mind can comprehend it. Logos, for the sophists, is as much ontological as it is epistemic or representational: that is to say, logos *is.* Logos possesses its own characteristics independent of what it represents. Whether that is the *dunamis* of *logos* to reshape weaker and stronger arguments, or the nature of the measurement's effects on the object, thereby reconstructing the object, the power of the word is not a derivative element of the object that the word contains. Instead, the word – the metaphor granted agency by those who use and circulate it – possesses its own innate qualities derived from no singular being but the collective human agency. In this way, language is not only representational but possesses its own characteristics independent of the circumstances of a given matter. Again, this is not to argue that being is rhetorical or that rhetoric is epistemic in the sense that it constructs reality itself. Rather, we must change our expectations of what rhetoric is meant to do. Rhetoric is a system of managing perspectives through language. However, the wider history of rhetoric has largely been one of antagonism and subordination regarding truth. If we wish to address the current epistemic crisis, we must reconsider these assumptions. And to begin,

we must consider how truth and rhetoric were divided so drastically and the terms by which they were related.

Taken together, the sophists, Nietzsche, and Foucault articulate a counter-tradition to the ornamentation model – one in which rhetoric is not the decorative packaging of pre-existing truth. Rather, it is the medium through which truth becomes socially operative. Gorgias demonstrates that logos cannot deliver truth by correspondence, that the correctness of speech is an ethical relation between speaker and audience rather than a metaphysical alignment between word and world. Protagoras demonstrates that perspectival truths are not deficient approximations of an absolute reality but the very material of political life, and that the measure of truth is irreducibly human. Nietzsche extends these insights by showing that objectivity is not the suppression of perspective but its multiplication, and that the drive for a single, unmediated truth is itself a fabrication. Foucault adds the political architecture: the perspectives that come to count as truth are produced and sustained as systems of power, and the authority of any given truth is contingent on the regime that underwrites it. What these thinkers share is the recognition that rhetoric does not merely transmit knowledge already secured; it participates in the conditions under which anything can count as knowledge at all. This is the understanding of rhetoric that a response to post-truth demands. And it is this understanding that the ornamentation model has, for centuries, barred.

2.5 Effects of Rhetorical Subordination

While the effects of Augustine's writings are best felt within the church, his treatment of rhetoric demonstrates an attempt to carry it forward into medieval Europe. There, rhetoric largely shifted towards the needs of the time, focusing on epistle, poetic, and ecclesiastical genres

(Kennedy 225). It was not until the classicism of the Renaissance established renewed interest in preserving the works of antiquity to further the projects of the humanists (Kennedy 228) that rhetorical theory resumed where the Romans had left off, before Augustine. As with the other factors that led to the medieval period being labeled as the Dark Ages, Augustinian rhetoric serves as an example of moving beyond the systems and contexts of antiquity and instead attempting to locate rhetoric within the order of a new world. One where absolute truth is understood to exist and is closer than even Plato might have imagined with his Allegory of the Cave. I do not assert that *On Christian Doctrine* was particularly influential on the scholars of modernity, rather, that it contributed to a broader cultural view of what truth is and demonstrated an attempt to make the work of rhetoric compatible with a larger social system that resisted the notion of truth being anything but absolute. Rhetoric has long been subordinated to truth, a precedent dating back to Aristotle's definition of rhetoric as the counterpart to dialectic. In Augustine's case, rhetoric is a tool needed for the purposes of communication; this is due to the fallibility of the human condition. Sensible information only goes so far, so reasonability becomes the mechanism by which truth is discovered. But that truth, once again, is placed in the realm of the reasonable through rhetoric. This framing of rhetoric as subordinated to truth is resurrected through the later Renaissance in Bacon's *Advancement of Learning.* While Bacon is not drawing from Augustine directly, the subordination of truth as a necessary inferior to knowledge is present. Here it is in the concept of his fourth kind of rational knowledge, defined as tradition or delivery (823). There Bacon describes the nature of language, ranging from pictographs and the devices of grammar, along with the methods of dialectic and reason, such as the syllogism. Rhetoric belongs to this fourth class as well, where it is named the inferior to wisdom, though still "a science excellent and excellently well laboured" (824). Bacon goes on to

criticize Plato's definition of rhetoric as being unjustly harsh: "For we see that speech is much more conversant in adorning that which is good than in colouring that which is evil" (824). Bacon attempts the same move of rehabilitating rhetoric's reputation that Augustine does: by associating it with the ornamentation of truth as a necessary component of human communication to move others to action. But what is clear here is that rhetoric is distinct from the production of knowledge, whether through reasoning or learning. In both cases, rhetoric still adheres to Plato's initial proposition in the *Gorgias*, that it is in nature no art of reason at all, merely a way to adorn ideas. One that we may turn to out of necessity, but a necessity that stems from our human fallibility.

Perhaps then it is unsurprising that, along with the advancement of reason following Bacon, rhetoric receives what George Kennedy calls "a stinging invective reminiscent of Plato's Gorgias" (271). Locke describes rhetoric as wholly unnecessary and that its only purpose is to deceive, writing: "if we would speak of things as they are, we must allow that all the art of rhetoric, besides order and clearness; all the artificial and figurative application of words eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions and thereby mislead the judgement; and so indeed are perfect cheats… they are certainly, in all discourses that pretend to inform or instruct, wholly to be avoided; and where truth and knowledge are concerned, cannot but be thought a great fault, either of the language or person that makes use of them (3.10.34). Locke's indictment of rhetoric centers on its artificiality and its effects on emotion. Because it can affect emotion, any attempt to do so is an attempt to mask flaws in logic that otherwise could be filled by means of better reasoning. In distinction to Augustine and Bacon, who present rhetoric as necessary for knowledge, rhetoric is useless because it is not knowledge, and true knowledge cannot be supplemented by any counterpart.

Hence Locke's presentation of rhetoric as "that powerful instrument of error and deceit" (3.10.34): the bounds of human knowledge at this point in the seventeenth century are understood as cracking into the realm of ideas. As such, the need for rhetoric to communicate those ideas is superfluous at best. And this understanding of rhetoric is not alone, as Descartes and Kant similarly begin to discard rhetoric around this time, as the understanding of rhetoric's inferiority moves from necessity to hindrance.

The persistence of this subordination – from Augustine through Bacon's rehabilitation to Locke's final dismissal – demonstrates the durability of the ornamentation model across radically different epistemological contexts. Whether rhetoric is seen as a necessary handmaiden (Augustine), an inferior but useful tool (Bacon), or a contemptible activity (Locke), its separation from the process of knowing remains constant. With this genealogy now complete – spanning from Cicero's probabilistic epistemology through the Enlightenment's rejection of rhetoric as superfluous – the full architecture of the ornamentation model is visible, and its consequences for post-truth can be stated directly. The relationship between rhetoric and truth has evolved over time, and current work in rhetorical theory has uncovered deeper understandings of how our use of language affects our world. The relationship between rhetoric and truth has evolved over time, and recent work in rhetorical theory has uncovered deeper insights into how our use of language shapes our world. The notion of absolute truth is not as hegemonic today as it has been throughout the history of rhetorical thought. But the effects of that idea have influenced rhetorical models and contributed to a wider understanding of rhetoric as somehow inferior – thereby justifying the concept of words and language as *mere* rhetoric. Taken together, the arc of this chapter clarifies the nuances of the current moment of post-truth. Neither the proliferation of public lies nor a cultural deficit of rationality accounts for the present situation's systems of

rhetoric. Rather, post-truth discourse becomes intelligible as the culmination of a long rhetorical inheritance that trains audiences to imagine truth as prior to discourse and readily available to interlocutors. When rhetoric is treated as an external instrument – an optional technique that either decorates truth or corrupts it – language is reduced to a channel, persuasion is refigured as distortion, and the work or interpretation is framed as a regrettable necessity. In that frame, the appearance of widespread disagreement about reality can only be read as the twin moral failures of deceit or ignorance.

The subordination of rhetoric is not incidental to the formation of post-truth; it forms an organizing premise for most responses. The urge to diagnose post-truth as a pathology of communication presumes a model of language as referent and thus requires a strategy of repair. If correspondence is restored, then rhetors like Trump are subject to a level of scrutiny that their claims cannot survive. However, this requires disciplining audiences to align rhetoric with a particular view of the world. This account repeatedly stumbles over the same problem: it cannot explain how appeals to evidence so often intensify conflict or why the policing of factuality so easily becomes a proxy for adjudicating credibility, identity, or belonging. Truth is not an afterthought of a situation, but a constructive element of what counts as the truth in a given moment. Post-truth, on this view, is a crisis of mediation: a failure or refusal to reckon with the conditions that make claims meaningful outside of their immediate correspondence to objective reality.

By framing rhetoric as solely a means of delivery, rhetors are absolved of a certain responsibility to construct the truth for their given audience. Even in moments where interpretive complexity is acknowledged, such as Augustine's treatment of scripture, rhetoric's labor is treated as ancillary to a transcendent guarantor of meaning. Rhetoric's duty is to act on the

audience in a way that serves the truth – a way that allows the propagation of truth among those who cannot perceive it themselves. This framework is durable, not because it is inevitable, but because it offers an attractive distribution of responsibility. Truth belongs to an authorized source, rhetoric is the means of delivery, and error lies in the failure of transmission or the failure of reception. And today, secular modern truths are guaranteed by institutional and methodological authorities that firmly situate truth outside the rhetorical encounter.

However, a counter-tradition is still possible. Rhetorical perspectivism through mediation clarifies how knowledge is inseparable from the social and linguistic connections that make it intelligible. This is not to indulge in relativism but rather to acknowledge that the linguistic construction of truth amounts to a material figuration of that truth as a particular arrangement of the world. A rhetoric adequate to post-truth does not abandon truth, but instead relocates truth from metaphysical correspondence to the historically situated practices by which communities authorize, contest, and revise what is true. Read through this lens, sophistic rhetoric's relativistic elements instead account for the nature of an argument's operation under conditions where certainty is impossible, when public life demands responses within partial knowledge. Rhetoric's dunamis is more than the capacity to sway the wills of others. It is the capacity to disclose, reframe, and share the world through the process of symbolic figuration that is language.

The consequences of rhetorical responses to post-truth are decisive. If rhetoric in this way is epistemic, then post-truth cannot be addressed by treating rhetoric as the contaminant to be expelled so that pure truth can exist. In other words, the response to Trump and rhetors like him is not to see through the bullshit and the guile that is peddled, but to recognize how these absurdities can act as coherent understandings of the world. We must recognize the perspectives in which this rhetoric becomes intelligible. The more aggressively a public insists that truth is

simply there for any rational observer, the more readily dissent is pathologized as irrationality and the more easily institutions justify coercive forms of epistemic governance. What this chapter ultimately supplies, then, is not a defense of "rhetoric" against "truth," but a re-description of their relation. Rhetoric is neither a decorative supplement nor a regrettable deviation from fact; it is the medium in which truth-claims become socially operative. Recognizing this does not mean abandoning standards of evidence or the discipline of verification. It means understanding that evidence does not speak on its own, that verification is always situated in institutions and genres, and that persuasion is not a moral contaminant but a condition of public knowing.

Chapter 3: Truths and Definitions in US Politics

On February 9, 2026, the small city of Springfield, Ohio, received reports of bomb threats made against local schools and government buildings, along with unknown packages having been left unattended downtown that morning. Schools were closed and police investigated; thankfully, the threats were only words, and no actual bombs were placed, let alone detonated. However, according to Ohio Governor Mike DeWine, the threats included the expression of anti-Haitian sentiments (Jordan and Williams). The week before the threats were made, the Trump administration's attempts at stripping Haitian immigrants from temporary protected status (TPS) were challenged by the federal courts, and the termination was paused pending further judicial review. Of course, these bomb threats were part of a pattern established during the 2024 presidential election. Springfield became a focal point for the public's political ire when, during a debate, Trump alleged that the city was besieged by violent Haitians abducting, butchering, and eating the pets of the city's residents. Along partisan lines, this claim led to separate, yet obvious responses. Among Trump's detractors, this appeared to be a lie beyond the pale of even Trump, whose penchant for mendacity had long exceeded any expectation of boundary. Inversely, the pet-eating hoax appeared as a sign of liberal irrationality. Specifically, that Trump was the only one courageous enough to say what everyone else was afraid to due to the ways political correctness smothers hard truths. This, and the assertion that pets in Springfield were ever in danger, are patently absurd. But these sorts of claims were plausible enough for more than 30 bomb threats to be made in the days immediately following the debate.

This brief summation of the pet-hoax is insufficient to explain the rhetorical complexities that accompany its uptake and recirculation. While the pet-hoax appears to be one of many post-truth events that circulate in the wake of Trump's political career, its blatant absurdity helps to

expose the patterns that allow all post-truth claims to be taken up by rhetors and inspire further actions – ways that go beyond simple dichotomies of truth/lies and intelligence/ignorance. Specifically, Trump gave presence to the claim through its utterance. Importantly, this is not to say that these claims become "real" as a result of Trump's rhetoric. Still, they do become real enough for other rhetors to commit drastic rhetorical acts, such as bomb threats, but rhetors also commit less violent acts in support of these claims. While some social media users took to message boards and forums to discuss the situation in Springfield, others created parodies and remixes of the debate itself to communicate a variety of political messages. These rhetorical activities will be analyzed in this chapter to determine the nature of political rhetoric in the face of blatant lies that nevertheless operate as true enough for rhetors to engage further.

The range of rhetorical responses that the pet-hoax inspired — from bomb threats to viral parodies — becomes more legible when situated within the broader communicative strategies that have come to define Trump's public discourse. Trump's communicative productions are marked by a multifaceted strategy to distance himself from the appearance of rhetorical action. There is a simultaneous need to construct the truth through speech while presenting it as lying out in the open for all to see. The result is a rhetorical two-step: while Trump manufactures the facts that he uses to support his claims, he frames them as obvious to those within the in-group. Rhetorical analyses of Trump's communication demonstrate this strategy across different sites. As described in Chapter 1, Ryan Skinnell unpacks Trump's combined strategies of parrhesia and truthful hyperbole to maintain a veneer of veracity to his statements (96). While the rhetorical strategy of parrhesia is most often associated with truthful speech performed at the speaker's peril (Foucault *Fearless Speech* 13-15), Skinnell instead describes the appearance of parrhesia as a rhetorical move that grants the speaker a persuasive authority through the substitution of

frankness with actual truthfulness (103). In this case, to avoid confusion with a Foucauldian understanding of Parrhesia, I will refer to this strategy as inverted parrhesia, which possesses the appearance of parrhesia, absent the component of asserting a known truth. In addition to parrhesia, Jennifer Mercieca claims that Trump employs weaponized rhetoric aimed at undermining deliberation and democratic practice (31). As Mercieca describes, Trump's rhetoric is marked by attempts to discard its appearance as rhetoric at all (32). Parrhesia, truthful hyperbole, and Trump's peculiar extemporaneous style serve to construct an appearance of arhetorical discourse – of only speaking the truth. Of course, such a construction can only work within a paradigm of rhetorical ornamentation through naïve realism. Due to Trump's demagogic commitments, he relies on a wider environment of naïve realism. Patricia Roberts-Miller claims that naïve realism often lends itself to demagoguery due to a shared denial of pluralism. She writes, "For naïve realists, diversity of opinion is not a good, let alone necessary, quality in public discourse, because the truth is available to any person of good judgment. Diversity is a sign that people (usually 'those people') are letting their judgment be clouded by the prejudices, or are secretly agreeing with us but pretending to disagree out of nefarious motives." (19). For the naïve realist, differences in perspective result from subjectivity clouding perception, and, within a demagogic frame, opposing perspectives are the markers of the outgroup. The rhetorical construction, therefore, lacks resonance with audiences who accept Trump's argument. Because claims are successfully framed as truthful, they are likewise perceived as lacking rhetorical design due to a tacit understanding of rhetoric as ornamental.

3.1 "They're Eating The Dogs," Performative Hoaxes and the Construction of Truths

If relativism and lying are not the hallmarks of the MAGA movement's strategy, then a different epistemological approach may better explain how Trump's rhetoric endures despite obvious problems in its alignment with objective reality. In Chapter 1, we considered how Trump aligns his claims with alternative modes of understanding by linking his rhetoric with certain frames and their systems of logic. In moments such as his candidacy speech, the internal logic of his statements is governed by a series of metaphors, such as business and commerce, rather than geopolitical systems. Trump, the candidate, used the fracturing of perspective to alter the message for certain audiences. To those operating within the frame, a certain truthfulness is present in statements asserting that Mexico is laughing at the US for taking the worst of the worst or that the Islamic State amounts to a real-estate takeover. For those outside the frames, these amount to mischaracterizations of reality or outright lies. However, this strategy presents only one dimension of the epistemic makeup of MAGA rhetoric. In addition to the alignment of rhetoric with alternative frames, we can observe how Trump, the president, can alter and construct these frames. This action implies that, as Trump spews statements, he can also construct reality.

Since the 2016 election, Trump has maintained many of the same strategies he used at the announcement of his candidacy. Trump is rather keen on asserting that his language has a particular meaning. As his candidacy speech circulated, he quickly reprimanded the news media that, according to him, had misconstrued the meaning of his words. While this was a simple method of dodging accountability for his statements, certain audiences accepted the premise that his statement had an alternative, or perhaps esoteric, meaning that spoke to a more radical truth: the United States losing its dominant geopolitical status. This literal/metaphoric redefinition process has continued in campaigns and public statements, such as when J.D. Vance, as Trump's

running mate in 2024, responded to Trump's assertion during a presidential debate that Haitian migrants were terrorizing domestic populations by hunting and consuming house pets.

While many were, and still are, quick to point out the absurdity of such a claim, it nevertheless often circulated as true. In the days following the debate, Vance, who then represented Ohio in the US Senate, claimed that the actual veracity of the accounts of pet eating was irrelevant when compared to the effects of the statement. Vance's strategy is to adopt an inverted form of parrhesia, in which he proclaims he is telling a truth that need not adhere to objective reality. In an interview with CNN's Dana Bash days after the debate, Vance states, "Dana, the evidence is the firsthand account of my constituents who are telling me this is happening. And by the way, I've been trying to talk about the problems in Springfield for months, and the American media ignored it… The American media totally ignored this stuff until Donald Trump and I started talking about cat memes. If I have to create stories so that the American media actually pays attention to the suffering of the American people, then that's what I'm going to do, Dana" (Maher and Boyette 2:25-3:11). Vance never fully concedes that the claim is part of a hoax, instead asserting that because constituents are repeating it, he and Donald Trump have an obligation to amplify those statements. Vance adopts the strategy of inverted parrhesia here to speak these uncomfortable truths, not because people are actually facing the specific risks being claimed, but because constituents are sensing those risks.

Vance and Trump adopt the parrhesiastes' moral obligation, but with a different approach to its content. Whereas a true parrhesiastes is obligated to report the conditions of objective reality regardless of the audience's acceptance, this ersatz truth-teller is obligated to speak in correspondence to a manufactured reality presented by perception. The creation, then, is not reportage but fabrication of the kinds of "stories" that Vance asserts he and Trump are constructing

at this moment. Vance claims here that these stories are produced out of a resulting obligation to speak to the sensations of his constituents. However, these stories are more than ephemera. Due to the platform these speakers possess, which is perhaps amplified further by contemporary media, these fabrications have a metaphysical presence that repositions the perspectival act behind knowledge production. Vance's actions highlight how he and Trump can influence the news media to respond to the sentiments that exist among their supporters. The result is less smoke and mirrors, and instead fabrication. Human action is directed towards this facsimile of reality, regardless of its correspondence to reality. Following her interview with Vance, Bash continues her segment by interviewing the mayor of Springfield, Ohio, Rob Rue, who confirmed the original reports of pets being eaten were an online hoax. Rue, a Republican, stated:

> It would be helpful if they [federal politicians] understood the weight of their words and how they could harm a community like ours. Again, I say the light has been shined so brightly that has caused people to not even see clearly. It's too bright… We're listening to our constituents. We're not ignoring the problems. And, you know, we'd just appreciate more positive light for our community. (CNN 6:25-6:56)

Rue suggests that there is a kind of presence to the recirculation of the hoax by politicians like Vance and Trump. He refers to the weight of the words and the shining of a metaphorical light on his community, and these metaphors help describe the nature of these claims, suggesting a greater presence than the typical metaphors of lying – hot air, empty words, etc. – would suggest.

Trump's initial recirculation of the hoax during the debate could have fizzled – ABC debate moderator David Muir fact-checked the statement immediately after its utterance. Nevertheless, it maintained the very effects Rue describes precisely because it operates within the frame Vance establishes. The correspondence was never to an objective state of affairs but to a sentiment present

among sections of the public. What Trump did on that stage is not just utter a lie, but establish a new reality. I am not saying that just because of Trump's claims, pets in Springfield were at risk of consumption by migrants with protective status. Still, rather than the Springfield, Ohio, that Americans came to know during the 2024 election, was transfigured again according to a new perspective Trump developed during that debate. This displays the epistemic component of his rhetoric.

If we are to understand how Trump's rhetoric operates, we must consider not only how it corresponds to certain antipathies and affective states within certain publics, but also how it actively constructs those states. These are covalent forces that interact and make it difficult to discern where Trump's rhetoric begins and his audience's beliefs end. To consider this further, we ought to consider what language does in ways beyond representation. J.L. Austin's theory of speech acts helps to explicate language's effects on the wider world. Within MAGA rhetoric, rhetors such as Trump and Vance employ an inverted parrhesiastic strategy to frame their speech acts as lacking intent. To shed responsibility for the kinds of effects that Rue claims result from their wanton reportage, Vance and Trump both imply a kind of passivity – that their speech is merely the echoes of reality passing through them. This strategy relies on distinguishing classes of speech. Austin distinguishes these forms of speech as statements and performatives, distinguished by their capacity to represent matters as true or false. Austin describes the distinction as the performative *doing* rather than *saying* and the performative operating under a dichotomy of happy/unhappy rather than a state of true and false (132). Statements, however, are perceived as operating within a true/false paradigm. Austin points out that statements assert the truth of their content and also entail, imply, and presuppose related statements that contribute to the overall situation behind the act of stating (52). In this way, the statement is not unmotivated. Human statements do not operate like wax

cylinders, camera obscuras, and their technological successors. The processes of statements (entailing, implying, and presupposing) are as performative as other actions performed through language, like naming and betting. These components of statements are part of rhetoric's epistemic method of constructing reality, and the Springfield pet-hunting hoax demonstrates this process of epistemic construction.

Trump's claims survive fact-checking because the signs of his utterances circulate beyond the context in which they can be refuted. Rhetoric's epistemic possibilities through speech act theory complicate the notion of communication beyond naïve constructions such as transmission. All communication, whether spoken or written, develops through the use of signs that have indeterminate contexts; as such, statements, descriptions, and definitions are never absent from these systems. Jacques Derrida describes this through the ways the iterability of signs results in what he calls the breaking force of the sign's context. He describes this force as such: "This force of rupture is tied to the spacing that constitutes the written sign: spacing which separates it from other elements of the internal contextual chain (the always open possibility of its disengagement and graft), but also from all forms of present reference (whether past or future in the modified form of the present that is past or to come), objective or subjective. (*Limited Inc* 9-10). Here, the sign, regardless of written or spoken modality, is never fully attached to its context or referent and always possesses the possibility of rupture where the sign becomes dislodged from either the speaker's intended referent or what we might consider its objective meaning. Spacing, which permits the (re)placement of discrete signs in and around other signs, also means that the referent is never metaphysically tied to the subject of its utterance. In that way, one cannot speak the truth as the truth itself, but rather speakers must reference those things that can be seen as true. In this way, the construction of the statement, speech acts which entail, presuppose, and communicate their own

iterations of the interpreted world are never truthful *qua* metaphysical relationships to objective reality. Rather, they are subject to rearrangement, rupture, and relocation across contexts – some operating as true, others as false. However, those states are not the result of the characteristics of the signs themselves, but of their being ruptured from their contexts. This distinction is what leads to the stickiness of Trump's rhetoric – despite refutation, Trump successfully ruptures contexts as his rhetoric continues to circulate beyond its utterance while other interlocutors insist on returning to the utterance's initial context as a means of attaching labels of truth and falsity to said utterance. The Springfield pet-hunting hoax offers a concentrated example of this rupture at work. When Trump asserted during the September 2024 presidential debate that Haitian migrants in Springfield, Ohio, were consuming residents' pets, the locutionary content was immediately challenged – Muir cited the city manager's denial within seconds. However, the force of the utterance was never exhausted by that initial exchange. The sign, grafted onto new contexts of media coverage, social media circulation, and subsequent political action, continued to operate independent of the conditions under which it was first produced. To understand how this iterability functions at the level of a single rhetorical performance, it is worth examining the specific speech acts that constitute Trump's statement.

Disregarding the veracity or sincerity of Trump's claim at the debate, there remains a distinct network of additional statements communicated at that time. Trump uttered the pet-hunting remark as part of a broader explanation for the popularity of his rallies – the argument being that people are drawn to his messaging by the chaos of modern American life. However, the statement consists mostly of assertions of fact. The arguable nature of these statements may better characterize them as claims; however, within Trump's argument, they function as statements bearing on a broader state of affairs. The following comes from the ABC News transcript of the debate, and any utterances

that act as statements– language that attempts to communicate the conditions of objective reality – are italicized here:

> First let me respond as to the rallies. *She said people start leaving*. *People don't go to her rallies*. There's no reason to go. *And the people that do go, she's busing them in and paying them to be there*. *And then showing them in a different light.* So, she can't talk about that. *People don't leave my rallies*. *We have the biggest, most incredible rallies in the history of politics*. *People want to take their country back*. *Our country is being lost. We're a failing nation*. *And it happened three and a half years ago*. And what, what's going on here, you're going to end up in World War 3, just to go into another subject. *What they have done to our country by allowing these millions and millions of people to come into our country*. And look at what's happening to the towns all over the United States. *And a lot of towns don't want to talk*—not going to be Aurora or Springfield. *A lot of towns don't want to talk about it* because *they're so embarrassed by it*. *In Springfield, they're eating the dogs*. The people that came in. *They're eating the cats*. *They're eating -- they're eating the pets of the people that live there*. *And this is what's happening in our country*. And it's a shame. As far as rallies are concerned, as far -- the reason they go is *they like what I say*. *They want to bring our country back*. *They want to make America great again*. It's a very simple phrase. Make America great again. *She's destroying this country*. And if she becomes president, this country doesn't have a chance of success. Not only success. We'll end up being Venezuela on steroids. (Hoffman).

The full quote is exhaustive in its scope. Trump bloviates in a series of statements, but the explicit argument is rather brief and mostly confined to the last three sentences. He warns of the doom that comes from electing Kamala Harris president. Still, the rest of the quote is devoted to

a series of statements that are presented as observations of objective reality. Taken as discrete speech acts, there are about 20 or so statements. Several of these statements intensify one another, and it is difficult to parse the points where they can be divided. However, they do display some key themes. These include the dissatisfaction of citizens, the pet hoax itself, the destruction of the country at the hands of migrants, and Trump's own popularity among these dissatisfied citizens. While all of these observations are debatable, within Trump's construction, they are settled facts. We may understand them as flawed *doxa,* but within the logics of the community, these are as much *epistêmê* as any observed fact of nature. This is due to naïve realism, but denying these claims is tantamount to other forms of irrational denialism within the logic of argument.

Any of these statements is certainly arguable within the confines of typical reasoning. For members outside of Trump's orbit, it would be rational to argue against any of the four main themes Trump presents. However, when David Muir, one of the debate's moderators, begins to argue against Trump's statement regarding Springfield, Trump successfully deflects accountability for his statement. However, the way the deflection occurs demonstrates the epistemic construction at play here. Muir interjects and cites a statement provided to ABC News from Springfield's city manager, who disputed any claim that pets were being abused or attacked, let alone being eaten, in the community. That leads to the following exchange between Trump and Muir:

> **Trump**: Well, I've seen people on television –
> **Muir**: Let me just say here this….
> **Trump**: The people on television say my dog was taken and used for food. So maybe he said that and maybe that that's a good thing to say for a city manager.
> **Muir**: I'm not taking this from television. I'm taking it from the city manager.
> **Trump**: But the people on television say their dog was eaten by the people that went there.
> **Muir**: Again, the Springfield city manager says there's no evidence of that.

Trump: We'll find out.

While it is clear that Muir is attempting to fact-check Trump at this moment, the result of this interjection is another argumentative stalemate due to a refusal to present a claim. Muir's statement, "I'm not taking this from television, I'm taking this from the city manager," relies on an implied hierarchy of informative sources. Trump disputes this hierarchy by presenting alternative evidence in the form of purported statements from people claiming to be victims of immigrants. The absence of official reports corroborating these allegations serves as an empty archive[18] that generates its own evidence of a cover-up. Trump's ominous "we'll find out" suggests the presence of information not accessible at this moment but nevertheless wreaking rhetorical effects in constructing a particular state of affairs in Springfield. The interjection can be boiled down to Muir's statement that the city manager claims *x* about Springfield, and to Trump's statement that people on television claim *y*. In the absence of their wider entanglements, there is nothing about these two mutually exclusive statements– separate people can make differing statements. As a result, Trump is never caught in a lie, as the scope of his statement is limited to what other people are saying. Ironically, by attempting to fact-check Trump, Muir gives him the exact method to eschew accountability for his words.

What this utterance reveals is that these sorts of outlandish claims are not necessarily baseless in the sense that they are fabricated from nothing entirely. Rather, the material that post-truth rhetoric uses is based on a public's perception of reality. In this way, the presentation of the Springfield pet hoax resembles the kinds of arguments made during Brexit, as discussed in Chapter 1. In that case, the actual reality of the UK's spending on the EU could be altered to

[18] The Empty Archive is a concept developed by Jenny Rice introduced in Chapter 1 of this dissertation. It refers to the propensity of conspiratorial discourse to find significance in the absence of evidence and use that absence to produce further arguments.

speak to a deeper affective truth about the state of affairs regarding the UK's place in Europe. In the evaluation of different numerical figures regarding their ability to capture the truthfulness of the relationship between the UK and Europe, the more affectively salient figure was argued as more truthful to that situation than the more numerically accurate number left out of Brexit's messaging. Here, regarding Springfield, the wider narrative coherence that rhetors like Vance point to provides sufficient support for alternative epistemic sites. These can include the empty archive that Trump highlights in his exchange with Muir.

Former Speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich, explains this strategy further. As part of CNN's coverage of the 2016 Republican National Convention, Gingrich explains Trump's success despite evidence that contradicts his arguments. As Gingrich and CNN's Alysin Camerota analyze Trump's nomination speech at the RNC, they debate the state of overall crime in the US. Gingrich states, "The average American – I will bet you this morning – does not think crime is down, does not think they are safer" ("Gingrich" 0:37-0:39) to which Camerota responds: "but we are safer and it is down. These are facts, These are the National FBI Facts" ("Gingrich"0:44-0:49 edited for clarity). Gingrich continues, "That's your view. What I said is also a fact. …. The current view is that liberals have a whole set of statistics that theoretically may be right, but it's not where human beings are. People are frightened, people feel that their government has abandoned them… people feel more threatened" (Gingrich 0:49-1:39). Gingrich highlights the differences between different perspectives on the world – how people feel may not necessarily correspond to the actual state of reality. In short, objective truth may be irrelevant to some if the affective conditions of that truth's acceptance are misaligned. Moreover, the possibilities of that misalignment are obvious when Camerota challenges Gingrich by stating, "Yes, people feel that, but the facts don't support it," to which Gingrich responds, "As a political

candidate, I'll go with how people feel, and you can go with the theoreticians." According to Gingrich, the truth is only true if people feel it is true.

However, Gingrich only reveals part of the strategy. If truth is contingent on how much it feels true, then where does that feeling come from? Gingrich highlights a series of events in 2016 that would likely contribute to this feeling of safety, such as the Pulse Nightclub attack in Orlando, Florida, or the fatal ambush of police officers in Dallas, Texas, that had both occurred the previous summer. However, the part Gingrich does not elaborate on is how public figures thereby contribute to these feelings. Vance, however, reveals the strategy in 2024 in his defense of Trump's debate performance. If Trump's statements are not attempts to report reality but rather attempts to engage in plausible storytelling, he is engaged in restructuring how salience is found in everyday events. In this way, rhetors *make* truth, not by altering objective reality, but through the intensification of details and the heightened salience of a datum's meaning. Returning to the 2024 election, Trump's hoax carries an epistemic potential that goes beyond mere duplicity. According to Austin, statements communicate more than their explicit content, and their agreement requires an alignment between the statement and its requisite presupposition. These presuppositions are parallel facts that must also be true for the statement to be seen as true. Austin's example is that the statement "John's children are all bald" presupposes that John does have children; if John is childless, then the statement is what Austin calls void (50-51). It is not necessarily nonsensical as it bears the correct grammatical and lexical structure of a statement, but it is misaligned with the entailments for it to be true. Additionally, the statement creates entailments which are true by necessity – the statement "the cat is on the mat" simultaneously entails the unstated fact "the mat is under the cat" (Austin 49). While Trump's statement is an

absurdity it entails a set of circumstances that make it more believable to those predisposed to the sorts of assumptions present in the pet-hoax.

For Vance, the action he claims that he and Trump take is a form of exposure. We can describe this as a lexical act analogous to that of photo-editing software. While the camera may attempt to represent reality visually, the use of digital software or even analog tools like airbrushing alters that representation of reality while obfuscating the artistic act itself. While a photographer may amplify the contrast of certain colors or the distribution of light in an image, the rhetor presents reality through a network of salient entailments and presuppositions. Trump's statement contains the phatic act consisting of the words: "In Springfield, they're eating the dogs. The people who came in. They're eating the cats. They're eating -- they're eating the pets of the people that live there."

Alongside this is a rhetic act channeling obvious racist connotations of savagery. According to Austin, the phatic and rhetic acts (as well as the phonetic act – the expression of sounds) comprise the illocutionary act, which separates language (phatic) and meaning (rhetic) (95). The statement, "Trump said 'they're eating the dogs,'" is a report of the phatic act, and "Trump claimed dogs were being eaten' does the same for the rhetic act. The statement is void of singular reference per Vance's admission; in other words, the statement does not reference any particular event where a cat and/or dog had been eaten. Instead, the most generous interpretation of the statement might be that it refers to an affective state in Springfield in which such an act is plausible. As such, the statement entails that dogs and cats *could* be eaten in Springfield, Ohio. While there are obvious antecedents for these sorts of allegations of consuming pets – the pernicious East-Asian stereotype of eating dog has its own anthropological

legacies[19] – I argue that there is a wider connection to discourses of cannibalism as it pertains to Haiti in particular. If Trump's statement is to engage in an imaginary or affective feeling, then that feeling is grounded in a wider entailment of Haitians and myths of cannibalism.

While Trump's assertion did not evoke cannibalism directly, its emphasis on pets specifically blurred the lines through the anthropomorphism of pets in US culture. Valèrie Loichot makes the explicit connection between these pet-eating claims and the Haitian cannibalism myth[20]. Pets today are commonly regarded as members of families rather than as livestock or property (Loichot 66). Due to this anthropomorphism, Trump's statement carries with it an entailment of cannibalism along with the overt assertions of savagery. Claims among right-wing influencers, such as Ian Miles Chong and Elon Musk, further amplified these notions of cannibalism the previous March (Putterman and Uribe). Moreover, while actual atrocities within Haiti had occurred, such as the systematic use of rape, arson, and murder by those under the command of gang leaders such as Jimmy Cherizier, also known by the moniker "Barbeque" (United Nations Security Council). Cherizier's nickname has little to do with any credible accounts of his or any associates' practice of cannibalism. Instead, it reportedly stems from his mother's sale of fried chicken when he was a child (Putterman and Uribe). However, Cherizier certainly may be channeling those connotations to intimidate local and foreign audiences. However, this does not discount the fact that the practice of cannibalism in Haiti has only existed within argumentative imaginaries but has nevertheless influenced policy and public opinion.

[19] While the consumption of dogs as meat is a practice that is not unusual globally or historically, it has been tied to articulating various cultures as barbaric or otherwise uncivilized and dangerous (Sorenson 253). It also features as a prejudicial stereotype with terms like "dog-eater" functioning as a slur "Ku 124-125).

[20] The notion of Haitians being cannibals is recorded as far back as Thomas Jefferson's thoughts on the Haitian revolution (Hickey 368). The cannibal myth continued through the 20th century as travel writers described Haitians participating in "orgies," "black magic," and "cannibalism" in the lead up to the 1915 occupation of Haiti by the US military (Pressley-Sanon 124).

Trump's evocation of cannibalism in the pet-eating hoax is not a total fabrication. There is a rhetorical underpinning that commands and directs its construction. If Trump were purely a fabulist, one must wonder why he would display any moderation in fabricating this hoax. Why not accuse Springfield of harboring cannibals as others on the right had done? Likewise, why not use the same sorts of attacks against other immigrant and refugee demographics? Why not accuse Syrians of cannibalism, or Central Americans? While it may seem like no lie is too outlandish for Trump, this demonstrates that there is a limit to what he can sell to his audiences. The pet hoax required the generations-long conditioning of audiences according to the racist myths that came in the wake of the Haitian Revolution. In this way, the myth is another node in the network of racist discourses that began to manifest as a justification for European expansion. However, it also required a repetition of those discourses in the form of communication occurring among the average population. Vance's urging that he and Trump are repeating what others have said serves as the raw material that they use to manufacture the crisis. None of it would be possible without the presence of the racist discourse that had first occurred in Springfield. Due to these factors, it is not accurate to say that Trump can fabricate his lies out of thin air; rather, there is a recursive element of recirculation between audiences and himself that generates a rhetorical environment in which these claims can function as true. While these acts cannot change the objective conditions of the pasts they refer to (i.e., the question of whether pets were eaten), they successfully change the course of the futures they imply. The terrorism and public policy changes that come as a result of these rhetorical acts are as real as if they were founded in fact.

At this point, it may be more effective to consider Trump's rhetoric as a series of performatives rather than bullshit. Trump's success is often attributed to his ability to lie

effectively (McIntyre 8) or to the exploitation of a relativistic epistemology among audiences (McComiskey 20-33). However, neither of these explanations accounts for the broader effects of Trump's rhetoric. Like Gingrich, these approaches merely chart Trump's ability to exploit rhetorical circumstances. These explanations do not, however, describe how Trump's rhetoric manages to contribute to rhetorical circumstances by reframing what counts as true. In the case of the pet hoax, this takes the form of the kinds of effects Vance and Rue describe: the ability to direct the media and create the grounds for others to act. By the last of his lectures, Austin makes the case for statements, or constatives, as being of the same class as performatives. Specifically, Austin presents that:

> Stating, describing, &c, are just *two* names among a very great many others for illocutionary acts; they have no unique position. In particular, they have no unique position over the matter of being related to facts in a unique way called being true or false, because truth and falsity are (except by an artificial abstraction which is always possible and legitimate for certain purposes) not names for relations, qualities, or what not, but for a dimension of assessment – how the words stand in respect of satisfactoriness to the facts, events, situations, &c, to which they refer. (147-148 emphasis original)

In this case, the position that statements operate independently of speech act theory is not the case. Instead, statements of truth and falsity communicate a state that may relate to the objective world, but are not absent from their rhetorical environment – external factors influence their acceptance. However, the general parrhesiatic stance intensifies that unique understanding of true and false by framing the act as unmotivated. The illocutionary act is tied to the speaker's intent as it gives shape to the locution itself; however, the parrhesiastes is defined by both an

absence of rhetorical design and the harm that comes from offering harsh truth. Trump's presentation of inverted parrhesia heightens understanding of truth-telling as a unique form of communication by dismissing the rhetorical designs that such a truth-teller might have.

Perhaps as a result of this unique configuration, the other effects of Trump's speech acts go unnoticed. In the case of the pet hoax, the perlocutionary effects of the act, the ensuing media coverage and bomb threats in Springfield, are stripped of their association with the act itself. They instead become a function of the truth itself rather than the speaker's utterance. This pattern of deniability on the part of the Trump administration helps to explain the overall rhetorical and political strategies that guide, or at least permit, these ludicrous actions, which have become the signature of Trump's second term. While the pet hoax was indeed a pernicious and racist speech act, it was a product of a wider context that allowed its masquerade as the truth. Moreover, because of that construction, Trump and Vance successfully dodged calls for accountability while engendering further conditions for more drastic actions. Once in office, Trump's draconian immigration policies sought to remove temporary protected status (TPS) from migrants from numerous countries, including Haiti. While many of these acts are being challenged in court, the ultimate decision will be made in a deliberative environment shaped by these acts of so-called truth. If there is anything that the Trump administration proves, it is that no rhetorical act is insignificant when enough people can regard it as true.

In Springfield, the Trump Campaign's supposed truth functions as a motivated act: an illocution that solicits uptake followed by a perlocution that reorganizes subsequent action for an audience of institutions, media, and the public. In this case, the act failed within Springfield's institutions but succeeded in inspiring indulgent media coverage and a streak of vigilantism bordering on domestic terrorism. The preceding analysis has traced how performative speech

acts construct epistemic realities at the moment of their utterance — how entailments, presuppositions, and the breaking force of iterability allow a statement void of referential content to operate as though it were true within certain frames of understanding. However, the rhetorical force of the pet hoax was never exhausted by its initial performance during the September debate. Its signs continued to circulate, and in doing so, they were grafted onto new contexts that further multiplied the epistemic possibilities of the original act. So far, this argument has demonstrated how truth is constructed within the speech act itself. The following section considers how that construction persists and transforms as the act moves beyond the rhetor's control — how the pet hoax's recirculation through digital media, memetic reproduction, and musical remixing reveals the ongoing, nonlinear processes by which rhetorical products acquire new presences and thereby new claims to truth.

3.2 Signs in Motion: Recirculation and the Construction of Competing Truths

The internet never misses an opportunity to respond to a moment involving a cat, and so Trump’s claim became one of the most participatory moments of the election. Responses, reinventions, and remixes of the clip dominated social media feeds immediately after the debate. Drawing on Laurie Gries's new materialist framework for rhetorical circulation, Jacques Derrida's account of iterability, and Jim Ridolfo and Dánielle Nicole DeVoss's concept of rhetorical velocity, I argue that the recirculation of the pet hoax reveals how rhetorical products acquire presences and truth-claims that exceed the conditions of their original production. The same signs that served as the locutionary material of Trump's performative act were grafted into new contexts — memes, musical remixes, political messaging — where they generated divergent and, at times, contradictory rhetorical effects. In some of these iterations, the hoax functioned as

a site of mockery and parody; in others, it was reconstituted as a sincere warning. These competing circulations did not resolve into a single, stable meaning governed by the objective conditions of the original utterance. Rather, they demonstrate that the rhetorical construction of truth is an ongoing and nonlinear process, one that persists well beyond the rhetor's intent or control.

Following the debate, the phrase itself became, on one register, a succinct distillation of the rhetoric of the Trump campaign and Trump's reputation in general. While many accurately reported the racist aspects of the claim, that portion of the debate quickly became fodder for social media. Because Trump named Springfield specifically, many users latched onto the clip, connecting it to various jokes and images from *The Simpsons*. One user went so far as to pitch-correct and splice a clip of Trump to serve as a verse in one of the animated sitcom's many musical numbers, all without altering a single word (Akron Beacon Journal). Others posted photos of their pets acting alarmed with Trump's voice superimposed (Katz). Within a day, full-blown remixed covers of the clip began circulating on streaming platforms. The comedy group The Gregory Brothers (also known by the name of their YouTube Channel "Schmoyoho") posted a remix of the debate titled "They're Eating the Dogs" featuring actor Joseph Gordon Levitt serving as a singing moderator. There, an autotuned Trump belts "They're eating the dogs, they're eating the cats" as a hook during the chorus while Levitt gyrates in rhythm. Two days later, South African YouTuber and musician David Scott, known by the username TheKiffness, where he posts songs that sample videos of animals, crafted his own take on the growing meme. There Trump provides accompanying vocals for verses such as: "They're eating the dogs (woa woa woa woof) / They're eating the cats (meow meow meow meow) / They're eating the pets of the people that live there" (The Kiffness 0:44-0:52). Scott announced his intentions to donate the

streaming revenue to the Clark County Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in Ohio and today the video has amassed more than 17 million views on YouTube and has been performed live for international tours. This does not include views and streams the song collected on other platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, X, Spotify, and Apple Music, as well as countless videos that remixed the clip for their own accounts.

The widespread circulation of the pet hoax made it a defining moment in the 2024 election, but evidently did not deter Trump's chances of winning. Unlike other campaign gaffes — Michael Dukakis's disastrous tank photo-op, Howard Dean's energetic scream to supporters, Jeb Bush's polite request for his audience to "please clap" — Trump's pet hoax did not cost him the election. While assigning blame for a campaign's loss to a specific moment is not necessarily accurate, such moments can be salient in revealing deeper issues voters might have with a candidate: Dukakis being weak, Dean's campaign unraveling, Bush just being so darn boring. It stands to reason, then, that the pet hoax might have been the perfect moment to demonstrate Trump's near-pathological need to lie even when it makes him the object of ridicule. Nevertheless, Trump once again failed to succumb to the pressures created by his actions, and the campaign continued undaunted toward his victory. That resilience is itself significant for what it reveals about rhetorical circulation. The hoax did not operate under linear conditions where a single context — absurdity, mendacity — could govern its reception. Instead, the same rhetorical product inspired divergent responses as polysemic features guided its circulation through competing frames of understanding, a process worth examining in detail.

Let us consider the pet hoax through two lenses. Among some, Trump’s performance served as a site to mock, parody, and lampoon Trump for his absurdity. Among other things, it functioned as Trump intended: an alarm about the supposed conditions of that area, extrapolated

to the country as a whole. In both cases, the discursive act teed up different acts as it was transmitted between political contexts. It is worthwhile to analyze the pet hoax through its circulation to determine how its ability to rupture what appears to be its most obvious context – another instance of Trump's habitual lying. I say this is the most obvious context because under the conditions of rational thought, this is the clear conclusion. As Muir points out at the debate, the grounds Trump uses to make this assertion are clearly specious and do not align with the sum of the evidence. It is rational to conclude that Haitians pose no danger to people's pets. But as the previous section demonstrates, the lens of rationality lacks enough of a suasive component to deter Trump or Vance from plodding forward with this accusation because the objective state of whose pets have or have not been consumed matters little compared to the threat (some) people of Springfield, Ohio, perceive which constitutes a reality unto itself. Furthermore, this reality provides its own materiality to engender Trump's communicative act. Nevertheless, the differences in response demonstrate that, despite the act's clear record, the presentation of the act lacks a single unified context to direct responses.

While it is easy to view the hoax as a single rhetorical act, it is also worthwhile to consider the act itself as possessing its own sort of agency as well. We have already considered how parrhesia often contributes to a sort of agentless speech by diminishing the speaker's position. In some ways, through parrhesia, the rhetor adopts a different identity as the parrhesiastes – an avatar of an external truth, possessing its own agency distinct from that of the individual whose interest is a core component of their very identity as an individual. If we take Trump at his word and consider him as just telling it like it is, a strategy Skinnell notes is common across his rhetorical acts (103), then what force exists behind these acts to propel their circulation? While Trump is obviously a charlatan who attempts to absolve himself of

responsibility for his own words, his words do often possess lives of their own. The pet hoax, for example, did not originate with Trump, nor did it end with him. In this way, the hoax possesses its own form of existence, separate from those who engage with it, perhaps explaining its ability to transcend contexts and, thereby, the conditions of objective reality called truth.

The pet hoax takes on a different meaning when viewed through new materialist understandings of agency and rhetoric. Laurie Gries applies new materialist understandings of rhetoric to develop analytic methods for understanding the effects of visuals across contexts. She writes that, "Instrumental frameworks of rhetoric often focus on human agents producing and delivering persuasive discourse in a situated context to an immediate audience (at the very least in the imagined sense). Rhetoric, in this framework, is conceived as not only the faculty one has to create and deliver a persuasive object of some sort but also as the object itself, whether it is delivered in the form of a speech, a text, or a picture" (7). We can understand these manifestations of rhetoric as rhetoric chained to the context of its utterance. That understanding adds a presence to that context and legitimizes it as the original and, therefore, true signification of that utterance. For our purposes, the pet hoax might be understood as Trump's rhetorical issue and thereby weighed as true/false based on that particular contextual view. However, as Derrida points out, the nature of communication (written, spoken, or otherwise) requires the absence of the signified object and therefore the separation of the communicative act from its context. He writes drawing from Husserl,

> "An utterance, whose object is not impossible but only possible can very well be made and understood without its real object (its referent) being present either to the person who produced the statement or to the one who receives it. If while looking out the window, I say: 'the sky is blue,' this utterance will be intelligible (let us say, provisionally if you

> like, communicable) even if the interlocutor does not see the sky; even if I do not see it myself, if I see it badly, if I am mistaken or if I wish to mislead my interlocutor. Not that this is always the case; but the structure of possibility of this utterance includes the capability to be formed and to function as a reference that is empty or cut off from its referent. Without this possibility, which is also that iterability in general, "generable," and generative of all marks, there would be no utterance" (*Limited Inc* 10-11).

The context of the rhetorically analyzed artifact is just one of myriad contexts that hold meaning, but none of these facets can claim to be the platonically ideal perspective that reveals the truth of the utterance. Rather, because the communicative act is iterable and subject to reconstruction, it contains multitudes even outside of the immediate human contexts. This understanding of communication dovetails with new materialist understandings of rhetoric through the emphasis of what Jenny Rice calls "networked flows," which Gries describes as being, "constituted by flows of historical and cultural forces, energies, rhetorics, moods, [and] experiences that emerge in spaces of contact between humans and their organic and inorganic surroundings (27). These components of alternative contexts help to reveal the polysemic features that influence rhetorical production and circulation.

We have already begun to consider these in the context of the pet hoax, through the ways in which histories of anti-Haitian myths present clear precursors to Trump's rhetorical actions, but the wider technological features also present aspects of the myth that carry it into new presences. Several circulations contribute to both Trump's utterance and its online iterations. The concept of rhetorical velocity, or composing for the purposes of recomposition, complicates the pet hoax further. Digital media is often characterized by the ways audiences engage in discourse, iterating on previous discursive acts and altering them across contexts. Jim Ridolfo and Dánielle

Nicole DeVoss describe how Lawrence Lessig's concept of remixing – the alteration of existing media to create new messages – complicates traditional models of understanding rhetoric as both an analytic and a compositional practice. Specifically, that understanding of discrete events of construction and delivery no longer captures the ways that people produce and interact with rhetoric. An understanding of rhetorical velocity can assist rhetors in composing texts by anticipating how audiences will not only react to their words but also remake those messages in new ways. In their follow-up to their initial definition of rhetorical velocity in 2009, Ridolfo and DeVoss describe how the matter of context has only become more complicated as the ephemera of the internet lend themselves to constructions of unknowable contexts. They write, "In the 2009 piece, we argued that rhetoricians may need to consider the future negative appropriation of their work, but the rhetorician must also consider the potential of what it may mean for their texts to be wholly severed from their original digital contexts and what sorts of rhetorical recovery work may be necessary to counter false or misleading interpretations of past context" (Ridolfo and DeVoss 67). Ridolfo and DeVoss claim this issue can lead to what Ridolfo and Bill Hart-Davidson describe elsewhere as "the fog of digital rhetoric" – the difficulty audiences have in observing contextual information as they interact with digital media (qtd. in Ridolfo and DeVoss 67). However, this again supposes a stable contextual field through which to understand rhetoric. While context is an important part of methods such as rhetorical analysis – many of the analyses in this dissertation have gone to lengths to explain the context behind many of Trump's rhetorical acts – the interpretive acts that are part of general communication regularly invent context with no objective measure to stand behind them.

If context is always already a construction rather than a fixed component of the communicative act, then the signs that circulate through digital media cannot be anchored to any

single ground of context. What remains then is the rhetorical product itself: a thing set loose from the intentions that produced it and subject to the material forces that carry it forward. That is the center point of Derrida's argument in "Signature Event Context." Speaking of the significance of the act of signatures, Derrida states, "In order to function, that is to be readable, a signature must have a repeatable, iterable, imitable form; it must be able to be detached from the present and singular intention of its production. It is its sameness which, by corrupting its identity and its singularity divides its seal" (20). The signature as action involves the necessary absence of the signatory. It communicates the undersigned as having approved or otherwise authorized the signs collocated with its presence. However, the context communicated by the sign of the signature is marked by the continued reproduction of that same sign across repeated yet distinct contexts. Context, in this way, must be a construction rather than an objective condition attached to the presence of communicative acts. Ridolfo and DeVoss already account for the ways rhetors imagine audiences and, therefore, contexts; the same is true of audiences. They imagine that rhetors and their signs gain different meanings. The reproduction of the pet hoax demonstrates how these signs, even when the context appears stable and agreed-upon, fracture wildly across new media.

To understand the remixed clips of Trump asserting the pet hoax, we must consider the clip's presence outside human intent. While Trump himself certainly had intentions and motivations when he spoke, his regular insistence on obfuscating his internal thought processes[21] means that assertions of that sort are unlikely to change minds. These rhetorical acts, once released into the internet, are subject to an absence of context as described above, but also become constitutive of their own rhetorical realities through a constant state of reconstruction

[21] See Chapter 1.3 for an explanation of this strategy in action as through Trump's deflection for his comments about Mexicans.

that renders the original context moot. Though these acts by necessity possess a truth of their construction, the original context is unknowable, perhaps even by the rhetor in the moment. This disruption of time and context reveals dimensions of rhetoric that expand how we might think about the remixing process. Gries describes new materialism's relation to time through the comprehension of non-linear processes of creation and re-creation. She writes:

> From such perspective, becoming cannot help but take place. Things do not just move [inconsequentially] and unchanged through space and time; they are both impacted by and impact that which they encounter. Despite their stable appearance at a given moment, then, things – especially those that experience viral circulation – constantly exist in a dynamic state of flux and are always generative of change, time, and space (37).

The pet hoax appears to be grounded by a particular context, but that appearance belies the construction going on in front of people's screens. The deluge of memes circulated among varied audiences, and in some cases, the remixes of remixes cause the result in messages that refigure contexts through seemingly random ways.

Almost immediately, the internet jumped at the chance to create their own spin on Trump's statement. Visual memes circulated throughout social media sites, but so too did other modalities. The more sonorous components of Trump's speech patterns made the clip a prime target for musical remixes. The actual political content of these remixes often skews more central by lampooning the absurdity of the election in general than forming any cogent argument about the fitness of either candidate or even the validity of the pet hoax itself. Scott's (The Kiffness's) remix, titled *Eating the Cats,* says very little outside the Trump sample, with Scott urging the "people of Springfield" to eat neither cats nor dogs. The sincerity of this statement, *vis-à-vis* whether Scott himself believes it to be an actual issue, is unclear from the text itself. The

recommendation can easily be read as sincere or as tongue-in-cheek mockery, but in an interview, he claimed that the intent was more apolitical and served to bring people together, especially within American politics, through a mutual love of animals. (France24 English) Elsewhere, he asserts that the main exigence of the remix was the fact that it contained a clear beat that could be set to music (Winkler 49:14). However, Scott later chose to express his support of Donald Trump's decision to embrace the claims of what has been called "white genocide" (Velapi)[22]. In an interview for a podcast hosted by fellow South African musician Heinz Winckler, Scott explains his criticisms of the African National Congress (ANC) for what he calls its "demonic" policies (Winkler). The podcast describes itself as "your go-to South African video and audio talk show podcast with knowledgeabble (sic) people who speak boldly and fearlessly about current events and important matters from a more Christian or conservative worldview," which perhaps explains how the discussion moves between political and religious/spiritual frames. I point out this context to demonstrate how complicated and ambiguous reconstructing the context of a simple internet meme can be. Did Scott intend any of these components when composing his remix? Maybe or maybe not. There is significant overlap between the animating histories of something like the Springfield pet hoax and the concept of the great replacement – a right-wing conspiracy theory that governments are attempting to eliminate whites with other races, primarily aimed at Black and Latino communities. Nevertheless, who can say whether that played a role, as tempting as being able to claim that a viral YouTube video is secretly racist might be. The reality is that the original context is largely irrelevant regarding the reproduction and uptake of these actions.

[22] Scott has since deleted these posts from his X account. But various news articles and social media comments have archived them in the form of screenshots and reposts.

There is no clear causal relationship between the original utterances and their uptake by new rhetors, as new contexts influence contradictory messages. If the possibility of remix is unstable, then so too is the interpretive act that necessarily precedes remix. This indicates that concepts like the objective meaning of an utterance or speech act are more difficult to establish than a naïve realist understanding of political discourse would suggest. These rhetorical acts become both collections of signs and signs in themselves. According to YouTube, there are approximately 3500 other videos that further remix Scott's composition. These vary in their relevance to the 2024 election, but some rhetors choose to use them as components of pro-Trump messaging. In one short, the visual components consist of an AI-generated baby Trump who cogently explains perceived faults of American culture (@coachschuman). In another, the audio is played over an electoral map describing changes in German parliament (@VindexShorts). Another channel specializing in Argentinian-style barbecue uses the song as the soundtrack for a video roasting a *cabrito* (young goat) (@alfrugoniofc). Each of these videos earned views in the tens of thousands. "Baby Trump for President" earned 279 thousand on its own. Other remixed compositions from the debate undergo their own circulation as well. A version that only features vocals from the debate by the channel Casa Di, racked up its own series of remixes. Casa Di's video, perhaps due to its heavier emphasis on percussion and rhythm, circulated throughout TikTok and YouTube dance videos.

Many of these remixes are cacophonous and lack a coherent political message, but that is not always the case, as some rhetors use the occasion to form direct, if comedic, messages in support of Trump and his arguments. One video posted by a channel titled TMR, short for The Marine Rapper, samples the song to add an original vocal track featuring the lyrics, "seeing red so don't push me / ain't Donald Trump trying to grab 'em by the (meow) / said it was some

Haitians somewhere out in Springfield / women doin' cartwheels [falsetto] 'have you seen Garfield?'" (0:16-0:29). The video blends several signs and references to anthropomorphic pets (Garfield, Heathcliff, Hello Kitty, etc.) with an increasingly busy shot featuring a dancing Donald Trump inside a cartoon kitchen from *The Simpsons* alongside other cats and waterfowl performing alongside the president. TMR's video is part of a broader social media presence cultivated by the author, which is explicitly pro-Trump and pro-Republican. Moreover, the video clearly fits within that frame of pro-Trump messaging. Through a dense network of collocating symbols, this video comes closest to articulating a point about the election by reproducing what Trump's original context might be. However, that articulation only comes through remix of a remix – a reversal of the co-opting of signs for mockery to become something demonstrating a sort of strength through awareness. The line "ain't Donald Trump trying to grab 'em by the (meow)" requires knowledge of Trump's Access Hollywood tape, where he brags about his assaulting of women, but it also frames it as less important than the dangers of Haitian migrants. A later verse states, "It's a shame, it's a pity / thought oversea's where they said Hello Kitty / But it ain't fair, it's right here in your city / When I turn my back another cat goes missin'" (1:02-1:15). Here, under the umbrella of political communication, there is a type of presence generated through the use of these signs. The hoax becomes real once again, and rhetors can use these signs to issue warnings – even if they are stylized, i.e., "It's right here in your city, and "When I turn my back, another cat goes missin'."

The responses to the pet hoax demonstrate the difficulty in establishing a single, true interpretation of a rhetorical act. The presentation of objective meaning requires, in some part, the assertion of that act's context. But due to the iterability of the signs of that utterance, the context can never fully be located, only presumed and imagined. This is not to say that efforts

such as rhetorical analysis are fruitless because they cannot be objective — quite the opposite. Considerations of what those contexts might have been allow us to consider how audiences may or may not respond to rhetorical action. Those responses are as varied as one could conceive, but they are nevertheless present in those moments. Yet that consideration can never rise to the level of prescription, as the label of truth might suggest. It is naïve to assume that audiences' reactions can be governed by a truthful account of the act's meaning when those same signs can be taken as evidence of alternative facts. Online chatter in spaces such as Reddit demonstrates these competing interpretations. R/Conservative featured posts resurrecting every public policy report of animal cruelty while stating, "We all know what's coming next. 'I was only one incident with the cat.' 'The report doesn't specify Haitian.' 'Okay, the report specifies a Haitian neighbor. But the Haitian was just doing a voodoo ritual. He didn't eat the cat.' 'Okay he ate the cat. But that's a good thing; it helps the environment." (EntranceCrazy918). The sentiment expressed here is one of derision toward the left for engaging in specious arguments to justify positions against the supposed truth of the matter. Once again, the absurdity of the pet hoax becomes salient only if the audience presumes a context in which Trump is incompetent; otherwise, the act is reconfigured as a warning of truths yet to come.

What the pet hoax demonstrates across both its initial utterance and its subsequent circulations is that the epistemic work of post-truth rhetoric cannot be reduced to questions of correspondence between statement and fact. The speech act constructs reality at the moment of its production through entailments and presuppositions; the iterable sign then extends that construction across contexts that the rhetor neither controls nor foresees. In both cases, the general parrhesiastic posture — the insistence that one is merely telling the truth — shields these performative operations from scrutiny by casting them as passive reportage rather than motivated

acts. The following section turns to a site where this dynamic operates with particular institutional force: the definitional speech act. Where the pet hoax traded in the spectacular and the absurd, the Trump administration's acts of naming and defining work through the quieter machinery of governance — executive orders, press briefings, policy language — to reconstitute social categories while presenting those reconstitutions as disclosures of what was always already true.

3.3 Truth by Decree: Executive Orders as Performative Definition

If the Springfield hoax makes anything clear, it is that the position of post-truth rhetors as speaking the truth cannot be treated as merely a failure to represent objective reality. Even when the locutionary content is demonstrably void of referential content, the utterance still contains illocutionary components that determine its perlocutionary effects. These utterances still direct attention, recruit uptake, and reorganize the conditions under which later actions become justifiable. Put differently, the political problems that these rhetors present are not exhausted by questioning whether Trump, Vance, or the rest of the administration have lied, but by what their statements do once they circulate through institutions predisposed under naïve realism to treat asserted facts as free of rhetorical design. The parrhesiastic pose, even when inverted, intensifies this problem by casting speech as the transmission of reality rather than a motivated act, allowing perlocutionary fallout to be disowned as a causal function of the truth itself rather than the utterance that produced it.

This section turns from the spectacle of hoaxes to the more procedural speech act of definition. Naming and defining are not ancillary to Trump's rhetorical strategy; they are among its most consequential performatives. Trump's need to name is most obvious in his penchant for

epithets — "Crooked Hillary," "Sleepy Joe Biden," and "Liddle Adam Schiff" are just a few of the more well-known pejoratives he has been known to deploy. However, during his second term, Trump has moved beyond name-calling to a series of definitional acts aimed at reconstituting significant objects in the wider public consciousness. To define is to commit an act with words: an action that reshapes how language can be used and what can count within a frame of truth. It stabilizes categories, assigns social statuses, and authorizes actions and policies — all while presenting these alterations as disclosures of what was already there. By treating definitional work as performative, we can track how Trump's authority, institutional procedures, and public uptake combine to make truth through classification. In what follows, I treat definitional discourse as a recurring illocutionary operation rather than an unmotivated act of reportage. This operation springs from locutions that form variations of the construction X is Y as a component of illocutions of classifying, excluding, and legitimating, among others. These acts, in turn, establish new perlocutionary possibilities as a result of new relationships between the linguistic referent (X) and its object (Y).

Because definitions function as performatives, their success depends less on objective correspondence to an external state of affairs than on the sorts of felicity conditions that Austin develops throughout his lectures. These include the speaker's authority to name, the procedures through which the naming is issued, and the uptake required for the reclassification to hold across various circuits of communication. This is where naïve realism becomes a political vulnerability. When audiences presuppose social categories — such as citizenship and gender — have fixed, objective meanings, definitional shifts can be smuggled in as description, especially when coupled with a parrhesiastic posture. Accordingly, this analysis emphasizes not only what

definitions mean, but what they do: how they operate as performatives that reconstitute social reality while simultaneously minimizing the visibility of their own construction.

Definitions form an important rhetorical component to the process of constructing meaning – especially in terms of domains typically treated as social in nature. Schiappa claims that definitions engender conceptions about the nature of social objects through tacit arguments of "ought" rather than "is" (3). Linguistically, definitions serve a learned function of normalizing sensory information into categories through processes that western society has inherited from Greek philosophical practices. The practice of producing formal definitions is a product of the development of writing that could "fix or freeze language in order to function as a road map demarcating what words mean" (Schiappa 20). In this regard, the process of defining aligns with Nietzsche's perspectival understanding of truth and language discussed in Chapter 2. Definitions, while attempting to assert the linguistic construction that word X *is* defined as Y, are ultimately a technology with a genealogy brought about by a particular aspect of language as a stable artifact useful for discussion and observation. Schiappa's thesis in *Defining Reality* is that definitions are "rhetorically induced" to establish what he calls intersubjective agreement (29). Definitions are rhetorically induced, not only through an explicit argument of definition – one of the stases within Hermagoras's system of argument – but through mediations of authority and social acceptance. Nietzsche, in his description of the nature of language in *On Truth and Lies,* describes a similar process in the ways languages form connections with some over others. The German *schlange* (snake) is etymologically tied to the verb *schlingen* meaning to twist and as Nietzsche describes: "We speak of a 'snake': this designation touches only upon its ability to twist itself and therefore could also fit a worm. What arbitrary differentiations! What one-sided preferences, first for this, then for that property of a thing!" (82). Language demonstrates

connections between objects in a way that, while not fully arbitrary and therefore meaningless, is nevertheless capricious. The process by which language crafts these connections – what we call the act of defining – is not as much a tool of finding the Platonized truth of a thing's form as much as it is a process of establishing meaningful connections and divisions. Schiappa points out that the production of formal definitions is neither a universal constant in human language acquisition (nor a feature of all languages (21). Rather, we have inherited our process of defining through Plato's notion of the mimetic quality of language in relation to the ideal form of its referent (36).

While western philosophy has certainly changed beyond the particulars of Plato's Theory of Forms, Schiappa claims that there has been a continual commitment to metaphysical absolutism, which he calls, "the belief that the world consists of independent, objective, 'real' objects that can be known directly as they 'really are,' that governs Western philosophy (39-40). This process amounts to attempting to know "the thing in itself," otherwise known as Kant's "noumena" (Schiappa 40). When Nietzsche claims, "The 'thing in itself' (which is precisely what the pure truth, apart from any of its consequences would be) is likewise quite incomprehensible to the creator of language and something not in the least worth striving for" (82) he observes the same issue that Schiappa is describing here: the process of definition does not capture *Truth* – the noumenon or that object of metaphysical absolutism – but instead produces *truth*: the linguistic reality that we use to instruct, prove, and move to action.

Definitions are therefore as perspectival as the truths they communicate. While tools such as science have developed understandings of phenomena that unlock untold possibilities, treating it as a method in service of metaphysical absolutism is incredibly hazardous. We will elaborate on these hazards of science in Chapter 4. However, for now, we will consider how metaphysical

absolutism enables Trump's ability to meddle with social concepts through his authority as president. Trump has a truth problem, not because he lies, but because he relies on metaphysical objectivity to persuade supporters and change the understanding of social concepts such as citizenship and civil rights. What makes this strategy so effective is how well Trump covers his tracks. Because audiences are predisposed to accept metaphysical objectivity as a condition of reality rather than a philosophical theory, they are unaware of the changes in the topography beneath their feet. Trump, by appealing to a sense of objectivity, undermines the ability to argue about what these concepts actually mean, as they are understood as fixed and stable truths that have stood since time immemorial, even though they have a clear genealogical progression.

Trump started his second term with a bevy of executive orders (EOs), more than any of his predecessors – including himself. On his first day in office, he signed a staggering 41 executive orders, beating the previous record set by Biden at 14. Within his first 100 days, that number ballooned to more than 190, though some were to clarify other executive orders due to Trump's vagaries (Wooley and Peters). While such a flexing of executive power is certainly troubling, considering the Legislative and Judicial branches do not seem to be in a hurry to curtail these exercises, they also demonstrate an exercise of his ability to fabricate definitions according to his whims. Several of Trump's first executive actions aimed at renaming or otherwise defining social concepts or places, and often do so in the name of restoring some past conception of truth. These include, but are not limited to: defining drug cartels as terrorist organizations (EO 14157), renaming the Gulf of Mexico to the Gulf of America and the Denali to Mt. McKinley (EO 14172), reconstructing the concept of birthright citizenship as it pertains to the Fourteenth Amendment (EO 14160), and attempting to be the final word on the concepts of sex and gender (EO 14168).

While some of these executive orders seem trivial, they hold significance in demonstrating the malleability of ideas and language's capacity to influence perception. EO 14157, in particular, demonstrates an absurd exercise of power with deeper implications that help explain aspects of some of these other orders. Section 4a of the EO describes the official reasoning for renaming the Gulf of Mexico to the Gulf of America, and it is about as shallow as one might expect. The EO lists a series of facts about the Gulf – the kinds of information more suited to a middle-school report about the Gulf of Mexico. These include: its size, its abundance of fossil fuels, its involvement in maritime industries such as fishing and shipping, and its status as a site of recreation for American citizens. The closest Trump comes to arguing for the change comes at the end as he asserts: "The Gulf will continue to play a pivotal role in shaping America's future and the global economy, and in recognition of this flourishing economic resource and its critical importance to our Nation's economy and its people, I am directing that it officially be renamed the Gulf of America" (EO 14157). This statement hardly qualifies as a reason to rename the Gulf; the economic effects of the name change are not even alluded to, and unlike the change to Denali in Alaska, Trump cannot claim to be reversing a bad decision made by a predecessor. Even the notion that this was just an attempt to curry favor with the kind of voters who would appreciate calling it the Gulf of America seems unlikely. Trump did not announce his intent for either geographic name change until after the election, and he has defended this decision to a surprising degree for its anemic rationale in the EO itself.

The name of the Gulf became the subject of a widespread dispute between the Trump administration and the Associated Press when the AP refused to update its style guidelines to reflect the government's official position. The AP stylebook, of course, has long been recognized as an authority in setting the norms of written American English, particularly for mass media.

News outlets often defer to the AP stylebook to establish their own norms and maintain consistency with competing outlets, helping ensure a wide readership. Additionally, unlike many language institutions which may resist change, citing the importance of maintaining a so-called proper way of speaking, the AP updates its guidelines regularly to reflect common usage, publishing new editions of its stylebook annually. In its official statement on the issue, the AP claimed that because the Gulf spanned multiple jurisdictions, it would continue to use the Gulf of Mexico as the designation to avoid confusing international audiences. Notably, the AP stated it would refer to Denali as Mount McKinley going forward, noting that "the area lies solely in the United States and as president, Trump has the authority to change federal geographic names within the country" (Barrett). Despite its best efforts to remain neutral, the AP makes some key arguments regarding naming conventions and Trump's authority as president. First, the issue is not that Trump's decision to rename the Gulf is absurd, but that he lacks the authority to do so. They acknowledge that presidents can rename geographic features owned by the federal government as they wish, but that is limited only to the territory within their jurisdictional borders. By that argument, one could imagine that if Trump wished to rename The Grand Canyon to something like America's Chasm, he need only issue the order, and stylebooks would support that usage. But that authority stretches only as far as the reach of that government. Common usage's influence only applies if authority is absent. Alaskan state legislators have opposed the name change of Denali through formal resolutions passed since this statement, but AP still recognizes the Mount McKinley designation. In hindsight, it is clear that this was a decision to compromise with Trump, but ultimately one that failed to pay off.

As a set of performatives, we can see that states of happiness and unhappiness shape the relationship between the AP and the Trump Administration. The immediate locutionary act of

the executive order demonstrates its superfluity in the simplicity of its argument. Of its locution is less important than the bureaucratic action it takes in making these names both legal and part of the wider state of reality that determines definitions. While Austin does provide classes of illocutions that could map onto Trump's act of naming here, his taxonomy, the relevant components here being the differences between verdictives and exercitives, fails to capture the unique circumstances of Trump's act of renaming. In Austin's case, verdictives are the acts of those who make judgments – umpires, juries, judges, and the like – which attempt to determine a state of affairs. These contrast with other illocutions, including exercitives, which are the uses of various powers an agent is granted in a wider social context – matters such as voting, appointing, or ordering (Austin 150-151). For these executive orders, there appear to be elements of both types of illocutions. On the one hand, the executive order purports to be a judgment based on facts and evidence, as shallow and irrelevant as that evidence might be. On the other, there is a clear component to these acts as official exercises of his authority as president. Again, whether he possesses that authority in the case of the Gulf of Mexico is, to be generous, debatable. Austin notes that often these two acts operate in tandem, and many who typically enact verdictives also commit exercitives as part of the same set of actions, conflating the two. He states:

> As official acts, a judge's ruling makes law; a jury's finding makes a convicted felon; an umpire's giving the batsman out, or calling a fault or a no-ball, make the batsman out, the service a fault, or the ball a no-ball. It is done in virtue of an official position: but it still purports to be correct or incorrect, right or wrong, justifiable or unjustifiable on the evidence. It is not made as a decision in favour or against. The judicial act is, if you like, executive, but we must distinguish the executive utterance, "you shall have it," from the

> verdict, “It is yours,” and must similarly distinguish the assessing from the awarding of damages. (153).

In this way, Austin suggests we read Trump’s executive order as two discrete yet complementary speech acts in the verdictive and exercitive senses. In this case, Trump acts as both an evaluator of the evidence who determines the facts and a constructor of new facts. However, in the examples Austin provides, the limitations of the speaker are clear. The umpire has the authority to call strikes and balls, but they cannot instruct a batter to take their base after two balls or wait to call them out after four strikes. However, in this case, Trump plays the mad umpire who not only makes calls without reason but changes the rules of the game as it is played.

Following the Associated Press’s decision to continue using the Gulf of Mexico as its designation, the Trump administration revoked the organization’s access to the White House. White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt responded to allegations that the administration was unfairly retaliating against the AP over the matter, stating:

> I was very upfront in my briefing on day one that if we feel that there are lies being pushed by outlets in this room, we are going to hold those lies accountable[23]. And it is a fact that the body of water off the coast of Louisiana is called the Gulf of America. And I’m not sure why news outlets don’t want to call it that, but that’s what it is. (Press Briefing 12 Feb. 2025)

Leavitt's statement is revealing not for what it says about the Gulf, but for what it exposes about the administration’s understanding of the relationship between presidential authority and truth. Notice that Leavitt does not defend the name change as a legitimate exercise of executive power — she does not argue jurisdiction or precedent. Instead, she asserts that "it is a fact" and "that's

[23] Leavitt is referring to her first press briefing on 28 Jan. 2025 answering a question from AP White House Correspondent Zeke Miller.

what it is," collapsing the distinction between an act of official designation and a description of metaphysical reality. In doing so, she treats the executive order not as a performative that made the name change but as a constative that reports one, as though the body of water had always been the Gulf of America and Trump merely disclosed what others refused to acknowledge. The accusation leveled at the AP is therefore not one of defiance but of dishonesty — of lying — because within this framework, there is no space between the president's declaration and the state of reality itself.

This conflation of executive decree and metaphysical fact is precisely the operation that Jacques Derrida identifies in his account of the force of law. For Derrida, law requires enforceability to function, "whether this force be direct or indirect, physical or symbolic, exterior or interior, brutal or subtly discursive and hermeneutic, coercive or regulative, and so forth" (6). Leavitt's response to the AP enacts that enforceability: the refusal to use the administration's preferred name is recast as a refusal to acknowledge fact, which in turn justifies the revocation of press access as a corrective rather than a punishment. The force behind the law need not appear as coercion when the law itself is framed as truth. More significantly, the executive order functions as what Derrida calls a *coup de force* — a performative violence that founds new legal conditions while presenting itself as neither just nor unjust but simply necessary. Derrida states that the founding of law "would consist of a *coup de force*, of a performative and therefore interpretative violence that in itself is neither just nor unjust and that no justice and no previous law with its founding anterior moment could guarantee or contradict or invalidate" (13). Trump's executive order does not argue for the name change within an existing framework of justice; it establishes a new framework in which the name change is already settled, and opposition to it constitutes a violation. The danger is not merely that a body of water has been renamed but that

the act of renaming has been rendered invisible as an act at all, absorbed into the fabric of what the administration insists was always already true.

Leavitt's comments here are stark because they suggest that Trump's actions are not only a change in a social understanding of the geography itself but are, in fact, an alteration of the metaphysical conditions bearing weight on what that geographic location is. She signals that this is not an argument of authority or jurisdiction, but rather one that operates on the stasis of fact. What is troubling about this is that the implicit argument here is that Trump is not only an authority on what these things are called, but a deeper significance of what that language signifies: a truth of the United States's rights and sovereignty. However, such an assertion can only exist if we suppose that such a truth either exists or that metaphysical absolutism is relevant to human endeavor. His decision to reverse the government's stance on Mount McKinley followed several well-trodden paths to acceptability. The first is shown in the way the AP accepted his authority to rename federal sites within US borders, but the second is in the way he uses it as a site to venerate William McKinley. It may be an odd position to assert – there are likely few who find McKinley an exciting historical figure compared to other presidents who have been mythologized like Washington or Lincoln – but there is at least precedent from which one can argue. But the Gulf is a different story. If we take Leavitt's assertion that the name of the Gulf is a matter of truth rather than authority at face value, it has troubling implications that are not necessarily present in the issues surrounding the renaming of Denali. It signifies that presidential authority is absolute, and considering some Americans' belief that Trump's authority may, in fact, be divinely ordained, it may signify a collapse of these ideas into a more authoritarian regime of truth with Trump at its head.

Of course, exercising power through the naming of geography and other concepts has been a hallmark of establishing authority throughout history. The Soviets renamed their cities to venerate leaders like Stalin and Lenin; the Romans changed the months quintilis and sextilis in the Julian calendar to reflect the names of Julius and Augustus Caesar in 44 and 8 BCE, respectively, and the United States has a long history of erasing indigenous names and replacing them with names that suit the American imagination – the Denali / Mt. McKinley flip-flop being a case-in-point. These kinds of exercises are a key part of establishing the necessary propaganda for the state to exercise its power: to establish frames of knowledge in which it is centered, but it is surprising to see it wielded so brazenly, as has been the case with Trump and the Gulf. More than just an act of redefinition, Trump demonstrates the legal force required to make these moves. The retaliation against the AP for refusing the new nomenclature enacts the enforceability already discussed: the accusation of dishonesty transforms what might otherwise appear as political punishment into a correction of the record, naturalizing the force behind the decree. What makes these sorts of executive orders so dangerous to the stability of our democracy is that they function as products of the re-inscription of justice that transcends law itself. Trump appeals, quite shallowly, to a projection of truthfulness that guides these orders and thereby re-establishes the terms by which the law is viewed as just.

To continue explaining the effects of these redefinition orders, we must determine the location of the authority of law itself. Derrida makes it clear that law and justice are distinct, as the latter functions as an aporia – literally a non-passage or "non-road" (Derrida 16). Justice no doubt exists, but its manifestation is a kind of memetic reproduction. As Derrida writes,

> Law (*droit)* is not justice. Law is the element of calculation, and it is just that there be law, but justice is incalculable, it requires us to calculate with the incalculable; and

> aporetic experiences are the experiences, as improbable as they are necessary of justice, that is to say of moments in which the decision between just and unjust *is never insured by a rule* (Derrida 16 emphasis added).

The common refrain of these executive orders is that they represent a return to reason, rationality, common sense – in a word: truth. Within the text of the first executive orders of his second term, Trump claims that these acts serve to: correct misinterpretations of the US Constitution (EO 14160), expel deceptive ideologies from schools (EO 14190), assign accurate labels to threats to the country (EO 14157), and prevent the denial of the "biological reality of sex" (EO 14168). For Trump, truth and justice are synonymous, but neither is aporetic. Thus, the naïve realism that governs the attitude toward truth uncovered in this dissertation also applies to a naïve understanding of justice within the law.

Perhaps most troublingly, we have begun to see the results of these shifts. Trump's second term is not complete, so the full impact of these redefinitions has yet to be inscribed in the historical record, and our awareness of the civil liberties lost in Trump's crusade for his truth and justice is even further still. The matter of the Gulf has yet to be resolved, and Trump has given every indication he will not back down from the naming controversy. Despite legal challenges on the basis of First Amendment violations, the AP still suffers from restricted access within the White House l and the US House of Representatives in May 2025 passed H.R. 276, the Gulf of America Act – a mostly symbolic support of Trump's authority, which would make the move irreversible by a future president's executive order if also passed in the Senate. But there has not been an adequate argument for why this name change is a problem. House minority leader Hakeem Jeffries called the bill "small-minded, silly, and sycophantic" (qtd in Peller) and Senator Adam Schiff who has been one of the faces of Democrat opposition to Trump, said,

"The renaming of the Gulf of Mexico and other absurdities like that we just let go" (qtd. in Mahtesian and McHugh). And to be fair to Schiff and Jeffries, there are good reasons to view this as chaff to distract from the real problems. The president's second term has led to a slew of crises that demanded the attention of congressional leaders in its earliest days. But ultimately, they stem from the president's rhetoric and his inability to manage his manipulation of the existing structures of power and authority for his own benefit. One has to wonder if the use of military strikes against alleged drug traffickers in the Caribbean could be possible without an executive order designating cartels as terrorists (see EO 14157). It is one thing to kidnap a foreign leader of a sovereign nation; it is quite another to bring a drug kingpin to justice, as we are seeing now, as Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro stands trial in the US. Trump's actions here demonstrate the ways that a declarative speech act can go beyond its initial context. It may be one thing for him to rename a body of within the language of the government, but as the administration's overreach demonstrates, rhetors like Leavitt actively encourage the collapse of the declarative speech act into an absolute statement on the state of the world. For Trump, the declaration of the new name is as much a fact as its area of 160 million acres. There is no difference in his authority to speak on one or the other due to a metaphysical absolutism run amok.

The deeper effects of the political absurdities of today's politics are more serious than the buffoonery of the Trump Administration might suggest. Within the drastic reshaping of government comes with it the use of force across several political dimensions. Whether that is the perlocutionary force of the racist stereotypes that echo among the lies uttered by Trump and his cronies or the legal force produced through renaming geography, the matter remains that Trump's assertions carry within them drastic epistemological effects that dictate further

rhetorical action. Trump himself would not be culpable for the bomb threats sent to Springfield any more than he is responsible for the memes and remixes created by various YouTubers. Yet Trump contributes to the construction of a rhetorical environment in which these acts are engendered by a synthesis of context and content. Furthermore, Trump's ability to hijack the definitional, and therefore epistemic, actions of the government is not derived from any natural access to the truth as such, but the mythic authority absent of any foundational moment in the government's ability to dictate truths such as they are. These events, the materialization of the pet-hoax and his later redefining executive orders, are as real as one another – which is to say they are fictitious. They nevertheless establish the context such as it is that inspires future action. They become real as a result of the progressive utterances that count them as real. And there lies the danger in Trump's absurdist rhetoric. He not only circulates myths and lies but also rearranges the actions that can follow by combining the authority of his office with the preconceptions of his audience. If these acts are to be resisted, it will require an understanding of the tenuous hold we have on reality at all. And a desire to reshape our truths to suit our moral understanding of how we relate and interact with one another, rather than cede that obligation to a rhetoric smothered by metaphysical absolutism.

Chapter 4: MAHA and Anti-Science Paradigms

In response to the upheaval of the second Trump administration, affirmations of the importance of truth have intensified, and alongside them have been exhortations to trust science to guide policy and dictate opinion. Discussions of the importance of science *qua* truth form a pillar of Lee McIntyre's arguments against post-truth and the so-called truth killers who engender the conditions of disinformation. Among these conditions, according to McIntyre, is post-modernism, which managed to undermine the authority of science by suggesting that ideological forces influence it. McIntyre goes as far as to say that for these reasons, "post-modernism is the godfather of post-truth" (150). This premise forms the crux of the conventional understanding of post-truth: that society is divided between the rational and the irrational, the enlightened and the ignorant, those who trust in science and those who do not. This rationale is not just incorrect; it is also subject to the same logic that undergirds demagoguery's ability to divide societies. Thus far, this dissertation has attempted to complicate this understanding of post-truth, but complications are insufficient; we must now answer whether the typical post-truth rhetors, such as Trump and his political allies, are, in fact, anti-science.

4.1 Defending Science by Denying Debate

Obviously, much of the Trump Administration's domestic policies have relied on a rampant string of attacks on sites of research and knowledge production. Targeting university funding, research grants, and government agencies, the second Trump administration has shown a keen interest in policing the production of knowledge in service of a pro-American agenda[24].

[24] Since 2025, the Trump Administration withdrew unprecedented amounts of research funding provided through federal grants (Kozlov, Tollefson, and Garisto). Additionally, Trump has fired researchers and board members working within various agencies (Kozlov, Witze, and Garisto).

And a pro-American agenda in these cases tends to be whatever Trump and his allies tend to believe is advantageous for their policies. The reversal of the EPA's endangerment finding, a 2009 report published by the agency that declared carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases a public health risk, asserts that the action is part of "creating policy rooted in reality" and is a method of undoing the work of "climate change zealots" (Environmental Protection Agency). While the reversal is absolutely a demonstration of going against settled science, these acts are never framed as such. They are instead framed as righting the wrongs of previous administrations that adhered to their ideological commitments at the expense of following the truth. Peter Hotez, a leading voice in combating anti-science rhetoric, defines the term "anti-science" as "the rejection of mainstream scientific views and methods or their replacement with unproven or deliberately misleading theories, often for nefarious and political gains." (9). This position has commonly applied to the matters of vaccination and climate science (as the reversal of the endangerment finding evinces). But other fields can experience similar backlashes; COVID denial involved as much animosity toward epidemiology and virology as it did vaccinology. On the more extreme side, flat earthers can deny even basic geographic and astronomical knowledge[25].

Hotez's definition is a fine place to start, and it shares similarities with arguments over post-truth, such as McIntyre's, who argues that post-truth springs from anti-science strategies first developed by tobacco companies attempting to obfuscate the links between smoking and cancer (34). To be clear, Hotez does not necessarily share the argument that postmodernism plays a role in anti-science. Yet Hotez's definition does not refer to science *per se* but rather to the mainstream theories accepted by the majority of the scientific community. Therefore, the

[25] Flat-Earthers are a group of conspiracy theorists that assert the Earth is not a sphere but instead a flat disk. Their arguments often dovetail with those of other groups such as moon-landing deniers.

"science" in "anti-science" does not refer to the practice of science itself. Rather, the term refers to the intellectual product formed through the consensus of the community that engages in these practices within a perpetual process of validation, replication, and qualification – and periodically a paradigm shift. This product, what we might call scientific knowledge, differs from theory within Hotez's definition, which may be proven or unproven. However, what constitutes a proven theory here? Colloquially speaking, Hotez's meaning is clear – proven theories are those that are consistent with scientific consensus.

Nevertheless, there is still an unresolved tension in how proof functions semantically within. In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*[26], Thomas Kuhn asserts that paradigms – intellectual models that are shared due to their value in resolving questions that are commonly observed – cannot ever rise to the state of a complete system explaining all phenomena. He writes that some paradigms may be more successful than others in resolving a community's questions, but they do not necessarily provide the means to answer all questions. (Kuhn 18)[27]. Often, the bounds of the paradigm are only expressed to newcomers, and the actual work of science falls within these boundaries – what Kuhn calls "normal science." These are the "mopping up operations" conducted within the field (24). Rarely does science attempt to reinvent knowledge of how the world works; instead, "normal science" is a process of refining the paradigm to grant clearer descriptions of observable phenomena. These practices always serve to construct an approximation of Truth (Sismondo 139). We could call this the difference between finding the Truth of the world and refining the truths we have access to.

[26] Khun's work is foundational in articulating a sociology of science through his argument that scientific knowledge is generated through paradigms which themselves are shaped by the means of observation available at a given time.
[27] "To be accepted as a paradigm, a theory must seem better than its competitors, but it need not, and in fact never does, explain all the facts with which it can be confronted"

There are deeper communicative systems at play that influence the exchange of ideas and make competing scientific paradigms, as well as paradigms of science itself, incommensurate with one another. Hotez's scientific work clearly influences how he approaches communicating science. The distinction between his practice, experience, communication, and colloquial shorthand of "science" has led to conflicts when interacting with others who may differ in their understanding of science and its purposes.[28] Since the pandemic, Hotez has also received harassment and death threats stemming from a refusal to debate Robert Kennedy Jr. on Joe Rogan's Podcast publicly. Hotez explains that he had tried previously to persuade Kennedy to abandon his anti-vaccination rhetoric in private, at the behest of the National Institutes of Health, which had felt a need to produce research that was otherwise unwarranted aside from Kennedy's demands (Unger). Those attempts were fruitless for two reasons, according to Hotez. First, Hotez claims that science is not suited to an open debate format; instead, the refinement of scientific knowledge comes through scientific journals and reports. Hotez states, "So there is a way of doing it. It's not typically done through debate. As I like to say, you debate 18th-century Enlightenment philosophy and talk about Rousseau versus Bishop, Berkeley versus Hume, or you debate politics. But science, we don't typically debate" (qtd in Unger)[29]. Second, Hotez asserts that debating Kennedy would only serve to add fuel to the fire due to the ways he changes the terms of the debate, stating: "So it became this kind of exhausting repertoire of whack-a-mole, where you would knock it down and come up with something else…. If I, quote, were to "debate" him or have a public discussion with him. It would just be this endless string of false

[28] Hotez has had a long career working as physician/scientist contributing to the awareness and treatment of neglected tropical diseases by the World Health Organization (Molyneux et al. 172). And the development of Corbervax, a patent-free vaccine for COVID-19 meant to be deployed in underserved countries (Taylor). Cobervax is currently approved for use as a booster in India (Palca). Hotez has also published several books aimed at general audiences addressing science and vaccine disinformation speaking from his perspective as a scientist, physician, and father of a daughter diagnosed with autism.

assertions about vaccines that I'd always be one behind debunking. (Unger)[30]. In essence, Hotez asserts that he and Kennedy would only talk past one another, as Kennedy is clearly anti-science because he has a hidden agenda. However, while Hotez is not wrong to refuse to debate Kennedy, and that certainly does not warrant his harassment, the inability to communicate may not necessarily be the result of Kennedy's malevolence in refusing to accept the truth.

Kuhn's paradigms and "normal science help us understand anti-science; they clarify what exactly Hotez means by "mainstream scientific views" in his definition. These views are paradigmatic, meaning that the mainstream is referring to the presence of a paradigm rather than to the truth itself. And it is certainly plausible that to Hotez and others working within scientific disciplines, this distinction is assumed and understood well enough that they border on axiomatic – in the same way that paradigms themselves cease explicit expression. However, publics operate with inconsistent understandings of science and its boundaries. If we regard Kuhnian paradigms themselves as a paradigm of the sociology of science, then it is plausible competing paradigms exist on this subject.

I argue that while the colloquial "anti-science is consistent with Hotez's definition, it is better characterized as a competing naïve realist paradigm that treats science as delivering absolute truth. This colloquial understanding of science stands in contrast with more nuanced, and often unstated, paradigms of science which treat its products as part of contingent rhetorical practices grounded in specific methods of observing and interpreting reality. This naïve realist version of science, therefore, is not solely a political manifestation, though both historically and contemporarily it can become a key feature of authoritarian regimes. But importantly, this means that those who place extreme levels of trust in the authority of science are not categorically

[30] Hotez continues: "And I'm sure he'd come up with something new. Because he's not committed to the truth about vaccines. He has another agenda."

distinct from the anti-science paradigm. Instead, the overemphasis on the role of science in deliberative rhetoric can serve as a means to argue for demagogic and authoritarian policies at the expense of democratic practices and values. The term "anti-science" should not refer to a rejection of the role of science in guiding public policy, as it is often deployed in discussions of post-truth rhetoric. Rather, anti-science may be understood as a manifestation of naïve realism that rejects actual paradigmatic scientific boundaries in pursuit of asserting narratives about the world framed as objective and true. This means that Hotez is correct when he asserts that anti-science presents an extreme danger to democracy (113). Still, the mechanism of that danger can exist within the arguments of science's most ardent supporters. And some of those supporters exist within the Trump administration.

This chapter will investigate the rhetoric of the current face of health within the Trump Administration. Robert Kennedy Jr. has a long reputation for contradicting the conventional wisdom on the science of vaccination. And he adds to that reputation today as the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services. Since ending his brief 2024 presidential campaign and endorsing Trump, Kennedy has been the face of what has been called MAHA (Make America Healthy Again). A platform of policies directed at changing the state of health in the United States through dubious interventions based on what has often been called junk science. So far this has included banning certain artificial dyes in foodstuffs (U.S. Food and Drug Administration), promoting nutritional wellness by challenge the use of seed oils in frying in favor of animal fats such as beef tallow (Severson), inverting the USDA's food pyramid to emphasize eating protein (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), and altering the recommended vaccination for infants and children reducing the number of diseases immunized against. This chapter will examine two complementary sides of Kennedy's rhetoric on health: 1)

his antivaccination messaging and 2) his projection of an identity as a scientifically informed citizen/activist. This chapter will show, specifically, that Kennedy's rhetoric is emblematic of a post-truth strategy that overextends the rhetorical significance of science as objective truth. Through an alternative paradigm in the sociology of science, Kennedy can lend credence to arguments that would otherwise seem absurd from other perspectives.

The concept of paradigms here adds to the previous chapters' understanding of the ways post-truth requires a response grounded in perspectivism. Kuhn claims that competing paradigms are ultimately incommensurate because different perspectives generate different facts solely through the methods used. He writes:

> The proponents of competing paradigms practice their trades in different worlds…. [They] see different things when they look from the same point in the same direction. Again, that is not to say that they can see anything they please. Both are looking at the world, and what they look at has not changed. But in some areas, they see different things, and they see them in different relations one to the other (149).

Furthermore, transitions to new paradigms are not necessarily progressive as the advent of a new paradigm never results in a universal shift of all practitioners. It is not quite accurate to say that paradigm shifts are solely process of conversion or persuasion –though many can be persuaded to change their practices based on the evidence. Rather, Kuhn argues that paradigms undergo a process of withering as adherents to certain paradigms die out, leaving too few new practitioners to sustain the community over time. Persuading others to undergo a paradigm shift, which is to say persuading others to change their ways of understanding the ways the world works, is not a matter of agonistic proof. It ultimately requires the individual to change their orientation to the world – and in many cases, they may never do so. In a scientific context, practitioners of

alternative paradigms will often agree to disagree and form alternative professional communities that live and die independently[31]. However, in a wider democratic society, we do not have the luxury of fracturing or expelling others from the public forum. The problem with relying on a rhetoric of scientific objectivity through exhorting others to trust the science is that it attempts to force others to abandon their paradigms. While many may do so, it is never a decision that can be made from without. And attempting to do so can engender the destruction of democratic and rhetorical methods of mediating differences. And we have begun to see what this destruction looks like as individuals like Kennedy manufacture the imprimatur of science to justify the radical demolition of our institutions of knowledge and our practices, which have protected children from suffering from diseases capable of deadly and debilitating conditions.

4.2 Anti-Vaccination and Pro-Science: The Argumentative Positions of RFK JR.

The history of the modern antivaccination movement is well-documented. The controversy finds its start with a study conducted by a British physician named Andrew Wakefield, published in the highly respected medical journal *The Lancet*. Wakefield examined the condition of 12 children with developmental disorders and determined that they had a shared pathology of gastrointestinal issues that were precipitated by receiving the measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) combination vaccine. To simplify the article's argument, Wakefield asserted that these children were reported to have regressed developmentally shortly after the onset of GI symptoms following vaccination for MMR. The result was the popularization of the claim that the MMR vaccine causes autism. Later investigative journalism in "The Sunday Times" found

[31] Khun notes that paradigms shifts do not necessarily result in a full conversion of the discipline citing examples described in the writings of Max Plank and Charles Darwin. Plank is quoted as writing: "a new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light, but rather because its opponents eventually die, and a new generation grows up that is familiar with it." (Kuhn 150).

that Wakefield failed to disclose that he had been recruited as a potential expert witness in a class-action lawsuit aimed at collecting damages for harm resulting from vaccination ("MMR Doctor" Deer). Wakefield also held a patent to a measles vaccine that could compete with the MMR vaccine – another conflict of interest that was not disclosed (Offit 48-50). Many of Wakefield's co-authors later retracted their interpretation of the findings, and the full paper was retracted by *The Lancet* in 2011 following additional journalistic investigations finding that the participants' medical records had been falsified ("How the Case" Deer). Wakefield is a textbook quack, and the study has been fully debunked. But the claims of vaccination harm have evolved beyond the context of Wakefield and his work. Other vaccines, especially the COVID vaccine, have been presented as secretly harmful through massive networks of disinformation. And the current face of the movement is now in charge of the federal agencies tasked with the health and safety of more than 300 million Americans.

The current state of the modern anti-vaccination movement is perhaps more virulent than at any point since 1998. Today, a prominent source of this rhetoric is the US Department of Health and Human Services. HHS encompasses many well-known agencies involved in translating scientific knowledge into public policy, such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Since 2025, HHS has focused on implementing policies in line with the wider platform of MAHA. Shortly after his confirmation, Secretary Kennedy chaired a presidential commission designed to outline what MAHA would entail. *The MAHA Report* asserts that it is the first step in righting the wrongs of the ineffectual policies of the past century, and that it will do so by "lead[ing] a coordinated transformation of our food, health, and scientific systems. (5). As part of that, the report's fourth section, titled "The Overmedicalization of Our Kids" echoes

common vaccine conspiracy theories such as the assertion that vaccination can manifest chronic illness or that currently available vaccines require more rigorous clinical trials (*The MAHA Report* 63-64). The report asserts, *as a matter of fact,* that "vaccines can have a wider range of adverse effects" (64) without making any direct claims as to what those effects are. Instead, the report adopts a stance of arguing for potentially unknown elements that may be at the" root cause" of chronic illnesses in children[32]. These unknown unknowns are framed as the product of a lack of scientific freedom and biases within the systems that produce scientific knowledge in the United States.

In attacking the production of science, the MAHA report frames itself as a step toward resurrecting a sanctified form of science, much as methods of managing post-truth often reify imagined periods of truthfulness in public communication[33]. The report asserts that current systems associated with the CDC and the American Medical Association (AMA) reduce the freedom of medical practitioners to provide adequate care by "conducting or discussing nuanced risk-benefit analyses that deviate from official guidelines – even when those analyses may be clinically appropriate" (65). The report continues by attacking the state of scientific literature, claiming that public perception of the peer-review process is largely mythical while in actuality, "peer review, the gatekeeping attribute that defines medical journals, is ineffective and biased; reviewers at the top journals are untrained, ineffective when tested, and many have financial ties to drug companies" (67). Referring to peer review as gatekeeping that defines medical journals is

[32] The *MAHA Report* states that it "seeks to unpack the potential dietary, behavioral, medical, and environmental drivers behind this crisis. By examining the root causes of deteriorating child health, this assessment establishes a clear, evidence-based foundation for the policy interventions, institutional reforms, and societal shifts needed to reverse course." (5).

[33] Ryan Skinnell describes how in response to Trump's common allegations of fake news, Trump's detractors began looking toward objective journalism as a model. These detractors often ignored the fact that an objective position within journalism is a relatively recent phenomenon and often did not live up to its own standards (553-554).

certainly prejudicial on its own, but the allegations here are supported with citations[34]. And unlike several that made it into the first release of the report, these were not hallucinations generated by AI[35]. These sources are, however, sloppily mischaracterized.

The claims – that peer reviewers are 1) untrained, 2) ineffective, and 3) corrupt – are exaggerations of the findings and recommendations of the original articles referenced. Nguyen et al. (cited as evidence for the third point) found that peer reviewers at leading general medical journals received more in payments from the medical industry than the average. However, the authors specifically state they did not have data on whether reviewers received any compensation that could be construed as a conflict of interest due to the specific articles they reviewed and the companies that paid them (1480). The authors also assert that they did not control for differences between payments given to institutions and that their findings are not necessarily generalizable to other journals (*1482)*. And, of course, these were not secret payments to physicians – they are all publicly accessible as part of the Open Payments Database, which records all payments made by the healthcare industry to physicians and hospitals. The OPD is run by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services – one of the many agencies under the umbrella of HHS. The claims that peer reviewers are ineffective and untrained fare no better. The inefficacy claim uses a citation of an editorial in *The Journal of Investigative Dermatology* explaining and justifying the decision of the journal to move from single-blind peer-review to double-blind review (Hall). However, the editorial does cite several articles suggesting challenges and shortcomings endemic to the peer-review process. Lastly, Kusumoto et al, the authors of the article cited as evidence of a lack of training among peer reviewers, never suggest what many readers of the MAHA report might

[34] These citations are: Ngyuen et al, Hall, and Kusumoto et al.
[35] The Initial publication of *The MAHA Report* included several citations apparently provided by OpenAI's LLM Chat GPT based on the inclusion of the text "oaicite" within URLs within the citations. Additionally several citations either had erroneous authors, dead links, or had never existed (Weber and Gilbert).

infer: that peer reviewers are not qualified to judge the articles they review. While erroneous articles and even obvious hoax papers may slip through the cracks, Kusumoto et al assert that this is due to an overextension of the available pool of peer reviewers, which has failed to keep pace with the increase in the number of academic articles authored (2058). The lack of training the article refers to is specifically a lack of training in peer-review methods, not in subject matter (2060). This problem is real and systematic, as corroborated elsewhere[36]; however, it has been warped and weaponized through *The MAHA Report.* I present this account of a portion of research in *The MAHA Report* to demonstrate one of Kennedy's methods of argument. He attempts to assault readers and interlocutors into submission through the presentation of a nauseating amount of research.

I suggest that Kennedy borrows an argumentative strategy from conspiracy-theory discourse that extends throughout his communications about vaccination, and that this strategy is further supported by a naïve realism of science and scientific knowledge. A papier-mache mode of argument: the chewing up and expectoration of existing texts for the purposes of reshaping them into new and unconstrained forms. The MAHA Report is about 70 pages long; it contains more than 500 footnote citations. Logistically speaking, researching and reporting on the quality of every citation in the report is beyond the scope of this project. And considering that prior editions of the report included now-redacted citations that were fabricated by AI services (Kennard and Manto), there is certainly a chance that the sheer number of citations is a result of using an LLM program to shore up the argument.

Additionally, fact-checking practices in response to this kind of rhetoric have historically shown diminishing returns (Cloud 74). David Aaronovitch describes conspiracy theories as being

[36] See Kaltenbruner et al, Flaherty, and Emanuele and Minoretti

commonly composed of several common features, but for the moment, we will concentrate on Aaronovitch's fifth feature of conspiratorial discourse: academic credibility. Aaronovitch describes conspiracy theorists as engaging in a practice of "death by footnote": accompanying material meant to ape the characteristics of academic discourse by citing selective quotations and evidence (18). Jenny Rice theorizes that part of the reason for this feature of conspiratorial discourse is to cast the theory as somehow sublime through its scale and mass.

It is not the quality of the research which adds credence to conspiratorial discourse, but the fact that rhetors can continually graft material onto the theory and it still holds some shape, regardless of what that shape might be. Rice writes, "What we are responding to when we debate a conspiracy theorist may not be the same object that our interlocutor imagines. In those cases, the evidence has been transfigured, it has shifted, onto something awe-ful. It has become gigantic, something that emerges from an aesthetic sense (95). Therefore, conspiratorial arguments operate under a different method of assembling arguments. These methods prioritize the assemblage and networks of their evidence rather than the content or substance of its constituent parts. These metaphors, therefore, lend themselves to the sorts of epidemiological metaphors that have become common parlance when discussing contemporary communication – especially that which occurs online.

Kennedy's penchant for fabricating policy and presenting ideological claims as research is evident in this report produced by the commission he chairs, but it is also recognizable in his public rhetoric. During his public hearing as the nominee for HHS secretary, Kennedy's anti-vaccination reputation was a key focus of questions from senators of both parties. However, Kennedy manages to redirect the conversation to present himself as pro-science. In his prepared remarks, Kennedy makes the following assertion: "News reports have claimed that I am anti-

vaccine or anti-industry. Well, I am neither; I am pro safety… All of my kids are vaccinated, and I believe vaccines have a critical role in healthcare" ("Senate Hearing 119-21" 8). Kennedy, here, negotiates accountability for his past statements on vaccination; crafting himself, and by extension, antivaccination, pro-science. The chair of The Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions – Senator Bill Cassidy, a physician from Louisiana – begins the questioning by directing the conversation to vaccination. Cassidy asks, in no uncertain terms, whether Kennedy will affirm that the vaccines for hepatitis B and MMR do not cause autism. After some dodging by Kennedy, Cassidy asks again:

> If the data is brought to you and these studies that have been out there for quite some time, and peer-reviewed, and it shows that these two vaccines are not associated with autism, will you ask "No I need even more," or will you say, "No I see this. It has stood the test of time, and I unequivocally and without qualification say that this does not cause autism ("Senate Hearing 119-21" 9).

In response, Kennedy commits that he would follow the science and apologize once he is shown data that contradicts the claims he has made in the past, while making the following claim: "I am science-driven and evidence-driven." ("Senate Hearing 119-21" 9). This claim makes a frequent refrain throughout the hearing as open-mindedness becomes Kennedy's modus operandi for deflecting calls for accountability from both Republicans and Democrats. However, Cassidy's questioning falls short as the obvious next step would be to present the very evidence that would prompt Kennedy's promised apology. Though Cassidy does pick up the threads of this conversation near the conclusion of the hearing by presenting a 2014 meta-analysis that finds no discernible link between vaccination and autism exists in the literature[37]. Kennedy's response to

[37] This article is cited in this dissertation as Taylor et al.

this evidence is to double down and insist on the presence of conflicting opinions, stating: "Senator, I am going to be an advocate for strong science. You show me those scientific studies and you and I can meet about it. And there are other studies as well, and I would love to show those to you… I just want to follow the science. And I will do, if the science says, and I am wrong about what I have said in the past… I will publicly apologize" ("Senate Hearing 119-21" 53). Kennedy's reply to meet one source with another demonstrates the workings of his paradigm of the sociology of science. For Kennedy, the presence of a study is enough to warrant a challenge in the form of an agonistic contest of papers. Because science and facts are construed as objective, the presence of conflicting opinions or contradictory evidence is framed as the result of wider conspiracies of ignorance or malice. And central to this conspiratorial thinking is the edict that we must know.

Kennedy's continued exchange with Cassidy begins to spiral as he asserts the significance of a paper by Anthony Mawson (co-authored with Binu Jacob). Following the hearing several journalistic outlets tracked down the paper which was published in a fringe journal managed by vaccine skeptics and the authors have had previously published articles retracted (McDonald). In his closing statement, Cassidy notes, following a cursory glance at the article's content, that it "seems to have some issues" ("Senate Hearing 119-21" 58). Nevertheless, Kennedy uses the article's presence to argue for the duties that HHS agencies must fulfill. Kennedy states that:

> One of the things we need to do, I think, is a subject that we have not talked about here. Why do not we know what is causing this epidemic? Why has the CDC not been looking at other hypotheses to determine the etiology of why we have had this dramatic 1000 percent increase in this disease that is destroying our kids, is probably the biggest issue?

> Why do not we know the answer after 30 years of steady rises in autism rates? Why do not we know the answer to that? We should know the answer ("Senate Hearing 119-21"54).

We can glean some insight into Kennedy's expectations here. Prior, he used the metaphor of a science that speaks: the notion that science somehow communicates independently of its practitioners[38]. Like Legion, this is a voice composed of multitudes, but it is also presumed to speak a singular message: the truth. Kennedy expects to hear an answer from letting science speak, and when it does not, he blames others for silencing it. This rhetoric of listening to the science permeates Kennedy's defense during this hearing. But as an argumentative strategy, it can also be deployed offensively to argue for the malicious actions of those who would stifle the truth, a strategy he has deployed for two decades prior to the hearing.

The specific content of anti-vaccination claims can vary. Like any good conspiracy theory, the message itself is less important than the gargantuan narratives it can form to orbit itself. But a particular hobby horse of Kennedy's has been the presence of the preservative thimerosal within certain vaccines. Thimerosal contains a form of organic mercury known as ethylmercury. The type of mercury that people are typically warned of – especially regarding seafood consumption – is called methylmercury. While these terms are nearly identical, this sort of terminology is common as the ethyl/methyl prefixes denote differences in the number of carbon atoms in a compound, and despite the similar naming conventions, differences in effect can be significant. For example, methyl alcohol (methanol) is extremely dangerous if consumed,

[38] Here Kennedy is following a simplified epistemological caricature Dalison and Galison charterize as "mechanical objectivity" defined as "the willful intervention of the artist-author, and to put in its stead a set of procedures that would, as it were, move nature to the page through a strict protocol, if not automatically." (121).). Mechanical objectivity can be understood as a denial of a text or artifact's rhetorical situation and features.

causing damage to the optic nerve resulting in blindness; ethyl alcohol (otherwise known as ethanol) is the organic compound in alcoholic beverages. While mercury poisoning has resulted in catastrophic incidents such as the Minamata Bay Disaster in southern Japan,[39] these have typically been the result of methylmercury. Kennedy's antivaccination rhetoric has typically centered on four claims: 1. The distinction of ethylmercury and methylmercury is largely irrelevant. 2. (ethyl/methyl) mercury presents a leading environmental risk to children and fetuses. 3. Autism is a chronic disease brought about through environmental factors, through a possible etiology. And 4. The presence of mercury is a chief, if not the sole, cause of autism. Two texts of Kennedy's demonstrate these arguments: the 2015 book *Thimerosal: Let the Science Speak* and a 2005 article published in *Salon* and *Rolling Stone* magazines titled "Deadly Immunity." While Kennedy's literary oeuvre is littered with anti-vaccination conspiracy theories, including his pivot to challenge the consensus on COVID following the 2020 Pandemic, these texts demonstrate the primary features of the odd intersection of conspiratorial thinking with epistemic demands of evidence-based research.

Kennedy's book mirrors his fallacious and problematic operationalization and crafting of scientific evidence in his Senate testimony. This rhetorical maneuver is most apparent in the introduction where Kennedy's first statement to the reader is "People who advocate for safer vaccines should not be marginalized or denounced as anti-vaccine. I am pro-vaccine. I had all six of my children vaccinated" (*Thimerosal* 26). He continues by presenting his position as being pro-safety rather than anti-vaccine and attempting to prove that he is "rabidly pro-science." (*Thimerosal* 28) Kennedy may be more correct in this phrasing than he realizes. He characterizes

[39] Minamata Disease was a series of environmental mercury poisonings occurring in Japan's Minamata Bay during the 1950s and 60s. The poisonings were the result inorganic mercury contaminating the water through industrial pollution which was converted to methylmercury by bacteria. More than 2000 cases of Minamata disease were confirmed with many having been exposed to methylmercury in utero (Baker 246-247).

the situation around thimerosal as settled by virtue of science's ability to demonstrate absolute truths of the world writing: "Indeed, the evidence of thimerosal's neurotoxicity is so overwhelming and the lack of any safety data so complete that anyone who is willing to read science and who believes in the capacity for scientific methods to determine empirical truths must conclude that thimerosal causes serious brain damage." (*Thimerosal* 27) Kennedy shifts the matter away from appraising the evidence for thimerosal toxicity to the difference between being a member of an enlightened class of skeptics as opposed to ignorant followers of an authoritarian orthodoxy[40]. The same distinction that would gain traction in the years following Trump's election among those critiquing post-truth discourse.

Just as Kennedy will begin conflating ethyl and methylmercury, he conflates science and fact through a sort of dogmatic persistence of objectivism. Rhetorician Wayne Booth describes these sorts of exhortations as being a part of a call for audiences to mature through a narrative of progress – that audiences *qua* society must undergo the painful shedding of all thoughts that are not empirically justified lest we lose the gains of modernity in favor of an imagined pre-modern savagery.[41] The fact that Kennedy's arguments have been repudiated by the wider scientific community, beyond just visible and notably authoritative figures like Hotez and Anthony Fauci, but researchers across disparate discursive fields: industry, academia, government, NGO, and distinct health systems and geographies[42]. That he can continually claim that he is pro-science, however, is not just a case of Kennedy being an adept liar; rather, the process that Booth explains here demonstrates that as the reputation of an irrational society grows, so too does an impulse to

[40] Aaronovitch notes that conspiratorial discourse often contains the division of believers of the conspiracy framed as skeptics and the general public termed with the portmanteau "sheeple." A name based on the public's uncritical acceptance of the conventional or mainstream narrative about the subject of the conspiracy (16).
[41] Booth writes, "If allowing values to affect once again our conclusions about the factual meant giving up all the knowledge earned in man's invention of objective inquiry, we might indeed feel driven to a dogmatic struggle to preserve some last vestige of a rationality in a world gone mad (13).
[42] See Hviid, et al; Offit; and Demicheli et al. all have published work debunking the autism/thimerosal link.

separate facts from values through an objectivist structuring of the world. In Kennedy's case, this comes from the denial of human agency in favor of an active and nearly personified form of science – a distortion of mechanical objectivity. The book's subtitle evokes the metaphor of a science that speaks for itself, just as Kennedy would later assert in his confirmation hearing.[43]

Letting the facts "speak for themselves" as if untouched by human hands (Daston and Galison 121) is a rhetorically effective framing device because it obfuscates the speaker's agency in a similar manner to the previous chapter's understanding of an inverted parrhesiatic mode of communicating through a reputation of frank or guileless speech. Kennedy, like Trump, adopts the stance of telling it like it is. However, this is ultimately a mythic construction that leads to communicative failure due to epistemic naivety. Booth explains that these myths are ultimately characterized through a conception of isolated agents collecting information towards the ends of generating more information to collect (128-129). This becomes a Sisyphean ontology as the knowledge compounds questions. Kennedy's paradoxical pro-science anti-vaccination position therefore is a result of knowledge stretched to the bounds of what communication is allowed. Booth writes:

> Individuals are not [thought of as] free in any real sense but they can find self-satisfaction in contributing to the inevitable march of science: freedom consists in bursting the bonds of ignorance and learning to control nature through master of its own laws. If you are troubled about your "self" and its role in all this, that is because you've been hanging around muddle-headed humanists too long; forget about unanswerable questions and get back to your rewarding work as a functionary in the legions of progress – *or, in recent*

[43] This positioning is as much a moral assertion as it is methodological. The need for mechanical objectivity, and therefore the absence of the author/artist/researcher, is an exhortation to others to produce a pure record of nature. See Daston and Galison 120.

> *pessimistic accounts, in the tiny bands of rational men struggling to postpone ultimate catastrophe.* (129 emphasis added)

Science becomes nearly eschatological in that the aversion of the sorts of catastrophes forewarned are presumed as coming as a result of developing more knowledge. Kennedy's demand to know a true and presumably singular etiology of autism is tied to the presumption of deliverance tied to that knowledge. No longer will children be poisoned by mercurial vaccines once all come to accept the validity of his purported new paradigm of "gold-standard science." But the same can be said of blithely asserting the validity of vaccination or other medical interventions – a lesson we are currently learning as medical skepticism gains a foothold in the mainstream.

Once science begins speaking, all others are silenced. The deliverance that science is believed to bring is framed as external through a conceptualization of science as autonomous, such as through the speaking metaphor. This reduces the public's agency in coming to know; the mind of the constituent individual within is not made up as much as it is foisted upon the individual by the weight the truth and the force such weight entails. The mind is perceived as being subjected to these influences – the force of reason or the force of deception – and responding to stimuli accordingly. As such the force of science is understood only as one that can be avoided and dodged by apostates – so called science deniers and truth killers – but never made through human cognition. In short, these arguments of Kennedy's, and of other naïve realists across the political spectrum, are that we cannot possess our own knowledge. What we know is only granted to us. This subtle dismissal of human intelligence is certainly troubling, but it helps explain the gulfs that can emerge as a result of all parties demanding to let the science speak.

Kennedy does present how he came to know the (supposed) truth of vaccination by modeling the behavior he expects readers to commit to. In "Deadly Immunity," Kennedy suggests that he was converted to this truth after experiencing the same skepticism that readers will likely have. He writes:

> I was drawn into the controversy only reluctantly… Privately, I was skeptical [that children were being neurologically harmed by vaccines) … It was only after reading the Simpsonwood transcripts, studying the leading scientific research and talking with many of the nation's preeminent authorities on mercury that I became convinced that the link between thimerosal and the epidemic of childhood neurological disorders is real. ("Deadly Immunity 13936)

Kennedy's language here suggests a reaction: one that implies a natural consequence of a normalized rational mind being exposed to the sorts of stimuli about this subject. The result is a changed mind, perhaps a kind of intellectual humility[44]. Three stimuli are mentioned here: the Simpsonwood transcripts[45], scientific research, and researchers on mercury. None of these are presumed to have any rhetorical significance on their own, they are merely factual in their own right. Ignoring the ways that Kennedy twists research and reports to suit a narrative, he demonstrates little skepticism for these mercury experts. This absence becomes all the more salient when he delights in attacking CDC experts for having any possible impropriety based on patents they hold (Deadly Immunity 13937). The primary expert on mercury Kennedy interviews

[44] Krumrei-Mancuso and Rouse describe intellectual humility as an awareness of one's own intellectual limits and a willingness to have their own ideas challenged while respecting the perspectives of others (210). Essentially, intellectual humility is an antonym for naïve realism.

[45] Kennedy refers to a series of transcripts recording meetings of CDC researchers and other researchers in 2000. These transcripts feature at the center of Kennedy's claims in "Deadly Immunity" as he presents them as evidence of a conspiracy to quash the results of research. Kennedy's claims about this conference have been debunked as misrepresentations of the transcript's texts and results (Mnookin) and subsequently "Deadly Immunity" has been retracted and deleted by the outlets that published it (Walsh)

is Boyd Haley, a professor of chemistry at the University of Kentucky, who, prior to the publication of "Deadly Immunity," had referred to autism as "Mad Child Disease" (Offit 132).

Haley is a problematic source to hinge an argument's exigency on as much as Kennedy does across his writings on Thimerosal. Haley's research pushed the thimerosal angle before Kennedy hopped on the bandwagon. Haley had also previously asserted that he had developed a cure for autism through chelation[46]. When presenting his findings of this treatment to the Institute of Medicine (IOM), a panel of experts found Haley's claims unpersuasive (Offit 133). Later, when Haley attempted to sell it as a supplement called OSR#1, the FDA demanded that it be taken off the market due to possible side effects and the fact that Haley was attempting to dodge the drug approval process (Salzberg). Kennedy's uptake of Haley's theories of autism and the series of arguments about thimerosal demonstrates how naïve conceptions of cognition can engender the very conditions that lead to disinformation's promulgation.

By ignoring the social constructions of scientific knowledge and a robust understanding of the practice, methods, and appraisal of study design, Kennedy makes himself prone to promoting the sorts of outlandish claims made by fringe researchers like Haley. These claims include both the material world and the character of others, as Haley has demonstrated a habit of using incendiary language to characterize others. When the IOM rejects his theories, Haley states publicly that members of the committee "ought to burn in Hell" (qtd. in Offit 133). When critics respond that the increase in autism diagnoses is likely the result of changes in diagnostic criteria and surveillance methods, Haley is reported as scoffing at the notion while stating "If the epidemic is truly an artifact of poor diagnosis… then where are all the 20-year-old autistics?" (qtd. in Kennedy "Deadly Immunity" 13936). Kennedy would go on to parrot this argument

[46] Chelation is the oral consumption or venous injection of chemical agents meant to bind to heavy metals typically used in cases of severe lead poisoning.

during his first press conference as HHS secretary stating: "One of the things that I think that we need to move away from today is this ideology that the autism prevalence increases – the relentless increases – are simply artifacts of better diagnoses, better recognition or changing diagnostic criteria." While Haley is not the sole "expert" Kennedy cites in these sorts of arguments, he has continuously presented Haley's arguments as facts as part of letting the science speak in his 2015 book on thimerosal.

Nevertheless, assuming that Kennedy is sincere in his concerns about vaccination (and admittedly that is a large assumption to make), it is difficult to imagine why he would be persuaded by the arguments of people like Haley. Part of the reason may be common to discourses of vaccination in particular, which, as Heidi Yoston Lawerence suggests, materializes risks involved in the choice to be vaccinated as opposed to an imagined natural state maintained by not vaccinating (97-98). However, Kennedy's line of thinking follows a direct route through certain paradigmatic elements related to how he relates to knowledge through a naïve realist understanding of science. These understandings are not necessarily incompatible; there is certainly a language of risk that permeates Kennedy's rhetoric about vaccines. This is especially true through the ways that Kennedy frames research as a means of mitigating risk, such as his demands for an etiology of autism. Yet Kennedy's risk assessment is certainly questionable. He does not acknowledge the risk of diverting funding and other resources, nor upending policy in the auspices of his vision of intellectual and medical freedom. But there are also ideological undercurrents of science that direct his rhetoric in ways that are not necessarily unique to the material exigencies of vaccination.

Kennedy's perspective, demonstrated by his anti-vaccination statements and writing over the past 20 years, reveals a set of values that guide what he frames as a proper epistemic

relationship to truth/science. That perspective, in turn, complements the kinds of features present within conspiratorial anti-vaccination rhetoric promulgated by fringe academics like Haley. In describing how people come to change their minds, Booth explains that within what he calls the "scientismist" perspective (what this dissertation has referred to as naïve realism) the purposes of changing one's own mind is limited to the implantation of ideas as discrete objects of knowledge that are complete and unmediated. This understanding is obviously flawed, and Booth suggests replacing it with a rhetorical understanding of what it means to change one's mind. He writes, "The purpose of mental change is thus to fulfill one's nature as a creature capable of responding to symbolic offerings. The *process* of inquiry through discourse thus becomes more important than any possible conclusions, and what stultifies such fulfillment becomes demonstrably wrong" (137 emphasis original). Science is permanently transfixed within the symbolic systems that allow its recording and dissemination. Part of that system is the paradigm itself which further mediates the knowledge into coherent systems for as long as it can maintain itself through the sustained activity of its practitioners. Failure to recognize these networks of paradigms that coalesce into the scientific knowledge used in deliberative action leads to a monolithic notion of science, which then engenders an idolatry of facts. Science itself cannot be truth; it is always a symbolic rendering of the truths it can correspond to. Whether those symbols are located within paradigms or the systems of language in which they reside, mistaking them for the truth in itself – what previous chapters have described through Kant's language of the distinction between noumena and phenomena – can lead to the very ignorance people proclaim science to remedy. Therefore, science can be both the medium of truth and the mode of deception. And failure to recognize the rhetorical necessity of knowing – the process of not just remaking the thoughts of

one in the mind of another, but the social production of new facts through dialectical means – results in the very disinformation that scientismic dogmatists attempt to quash.

This chapter has demonstrated Kennedy's continued adherence to a sociological paradigm of science as Truth and therefore engages in political actions that are ostensibly antithetical to actual scientific practice. But so far, this chapter has not yet demonstrated that Kennedy is not just practicing science the wrong way. While the conspiratorial elements of anti-vaccination rhetoric are well established so far in this chapter, there are cases where these conspiracies have been true. And perhaps Kennedy's time uncovering these sorts of malevolent actions taken at the expense of vulnerable publics has led to a blind spot. To be clear, I am not suggesting that Kennedy's image ought to be rehabilitated. His anti-vaccination rhetoric and policies have resulted in a resurgence of measles in the United States and its territories (Newcomer). However, framing the matter as simply the need to replace bad science with good will inevitably lead to a deadlock, as it has so far.

So far, this chapter has worked backward through Kennedy's anti-vaccination rhetoric to demonstrate his commitment to a vision of science. Specifically, a vision of science that positions him as a sort of savior in a world otherwise gone mad: a world where poison is injected into unwitting children because people refuse to follow the science. Beginning with his confirmation hearing in 2025, his writings on thimerosal in 2015, and his initial pivot to this topic in 2005. But this is not where Kennedy's persona developed outside of the immediate context of the Kennedy family and his father's assassination. Rather, Kennedy had a rather auspicious reputation as an environmentalist. Following an arrest for heroin possession in the early 1980s, Kennedy began working with the non-profit Riverkeeper to fulfill the terms of his community service by providing legal services. Kennedy's involvement with Riverkeeper would

continue, with him taking an active role as their Chief Prosecuting Attorney, a member of their board of directors (Brown), and later as president of the related, globally focused organization, Waterkeeper Alliance. His work in Riverkeeper ostensibly demonstrates that he is performing science the right way through deeper investigations of the environment but simultaneously engenders a perspective that possibly makes anti-vaccination all the more salient.

Kennedy's perspective when it comes to science becomes clear through how he describes the work he completed in the '80s. Kennedy describes his time with Riverkeeper in a memoir co-authored with John Cronin, then-president of the organization. The book, titled *The Riverkeepers*, contains an autobiographical chapter from Kennedy explaining his work delivered through literary flourishes. The book models itself as a method of communicating environmental policy through an alternative to the stodgy reputation the topic typically holds, especially as a result of anti-environmental propaganda (Cronin and Kennedy 10). And Kennedy delivers these messages about the state of the Hudson River Valley through a particular rhetorical framing of following the science. Kennedy describes his work through a narrative structure of intrepid heroes and the antagonistic forces that seek to stop them. And science is their primary tool. Kennedy's actions consist of investigating, measuring, and reporting the actions and effects of corporate interest along the river. He writes of his investigation of the Quassaick Creek (a tributary of the Hudson River):

> Walking upstream I found the source of the sewage – a concrete flume hidden between the railroad bridge abutments, belching milky liquid and solid fecal matter… I returned with John Cronin and safety equipment and a rope. Jon lowered me into the pipe where I sampled the phenolic dregs. Analysis showed high quantities of naphthalene, a chemical

> used in the dye and textile industries that is known to cause mutations, blood disorders and other ailments in animals. (Cronin and Kennedy 101)."

He continues to describe further investigations where he and Cronin collect samples and compare them with the official reports submitted by the polluting factories. The vivid descriptions of these twisted environments are only matched by the dynamic actions of the narrative's subjects, Kennedy and Cronin. The two collect samples by diving into waste ponds in their wetsuits (Cronin and Kennedy 102), seine the river only to find strands of toilet paper and human waste (Cronin and Kennedy 101), measure output of wastewater by standing at the source with five-gallon buckets (Cronin and Kennedy 102), and wade through run-off pipes writing:

> We made our way through the dank culvert with flashlights and breathing apparatuses. Bubbly brown algae clung to slimy rocks. We followed the stench up a stone catacomb into the factory's underbelly where teaming dye vats drained through spitting valve and a pipe hole into the creek. I took a sample from the stream and tested the oily loam sediments in the culvert. These samples yielded high levels of naphthalene, chlorobenzene, and other hazardous chemicals (Cronin and Kennedy 105).

Kennedy relies on this structure to communicate this situation. The chapter is littered with these examples of journeying to find the truth through scientific methods. And to be clear, these are not necessarily identical to the crackpot claims Kennedy later makes of organizations like the CDC and Eli Lilly in the context of vaccines. Kennedy reports that Riverkeeper's investigations led to convictions and settlements that helped rectify the damages wrought by corporate carelessness (110-111). But these successes –these civil adjudications of science – stand in contrast to the framing of opposition as malicious through attempts to cover the truth.

Similar to the conspiratorial rhetoric of his later anti-vaccination rhetoric, Kennedy offers quite a bit of blame towards several parties. Several of these are framed as truth killers in their own right. Kennedy records that in addition to the presence of fraudulent reports, that even local labs could not be trusted and required coding samples to hide their provenance from labs in the area, lest they alter their reports (Cronin and Kennedy 103). Kennedy recalls that the conflict of interest came to a head when samples from a sewage plant collected by Riverkeeper were submitted for testing by the owner of a lab who moonlighted as the operator of the sewage plant, unbeknownst to all parties involved. (Cronin and Kennedy 104). Once the gig was up due to a dramatic revelation as Kennedy and local volunteer Joe Augustine scale a barbed-wire fence to collect more samples, the analyst/polluter falsifies a report and dodges accountability. These depictions of malfeasance are fairly common in Kennedy's chapter, and they become a constant element in his anti-vaccination screeds. Is Kennedy unwarranted in asserting that bad science exists and people can alter results to suit their interests? No, but in claiming that all results that contradict his evidence are the result of this process is where skepticism crosses its boundaries.

4.2 MAHA's Empty Symbols

The reception to *The Riverkeepers* was generally positive with then-Vice-President Al Gore providing the foreword. Solidifying Kennedy's reputation as an impassioned proponent of environmental justice. Specifically, Kennedy's profile is that of an errant prince of a forgotten Camelot born anew in the baptismal waters of the Hudson River. A feature on Kennedy published in *Outside Magazine* takes on an almost hagiographic quality in its reporting on him. The profile highlights *The Riverkeeper's* literary qualities and locates the narrative arc of the story told in the book. The writer, Barry Werth, charts the difficulties that Kennedy experienced

while addicted to heroin – difficulties implied to stem from the tragic death of his father and pressures to live up to his reputation. Werth contrasts these with what is framed with an innate desire to do good, along with a need to repent, writing:

> "Kennedy attacked the project with his usual guts and brio – plus a newfound sense of penance and self-abnegation… Donning waders, Kennedy walked every foot of the Quassaic's 'Dantean' seven-mile length. He seined for fish among 'brown trout' and 'river pickles' – human fecal matter – until the cuts on his hands began to fester"

Werth concludes by musing what could be next for Kennedy whom he describes as: "part Jacques Cousteau, part Ralph Nader, part Felix Rohatyn, part [Ted Turner]… – a globe-hopping pied piper, gadfly, consultant, lobbyist, and power broker who brings more to the table on sustainability and social justice as an outsider than he can can from the well of the Senate or some other governmental post." The next year Kennedy publishes "Deadly Immunity."

Today, Kennedy's reputation is polarized. It functions as a combination of spectacle and eccentricity; social media accounts for the Department of Health and Human Services regularly post messages from Kennedy that orbit the general state of MAHA – a cavalcade of pseudoscience and celebrity that delights in projecting wellness through tropes of masculinity and objectivism. A recent video features Kennedy enjoying a workout at the home gym of Kid Rock. These two grandfathers alternate between riding a stationary bike in a sauna while the other does push-ups. They then retire to cold plunges and hot tubs alongside tall glasses of milk. Text reading "WHOLE MILK" rises from the bottom of the frame, white with its letters excreting viscous droplets, all while Rock's "Bawitdaba" scores the 90-second panoply of symbols apparently absent of their meaning beyond sheer spectacle. But symbols vacated of their meaning are what Kennedy has traded in all along.

Kennedy's anti-vaccination rhetoric represents more than just an anti-science expression of bad facts masquerading as truth. Kennedy demonstrates the dangers of science as truth. Once science is no longer contained to its systems of symbols, it threatens to subsume all other methods of understanding reality. And once it outgrows the bounds of its paradigm, its adherents begin to reject others as co-contributors to the truth. In attempting to encompass all, the totalizing science contains nothing. It becomes an empty symbol: at once zero and infinity. It shouts all things at once while being incapable of soliciting a response. In practice the result is an isolation that comes from the desire to remake one's own ideas in the minds of others. In other words, it is rejection of rhetoric for the unmediated transmission of truth. The mythic narratives of Kennedy, whether as staunch environmentalist using science in the service of justice or as crackpot anti-vaxer abandoning science for a journey down the rabbit hole, require a defined form of science. But it is a science that is itself more than its symbol.

Chapter 5 Post-Truth Education

The previous chapters have attempted to describe the extent to which post-truth resists conventional understandings of ignorance and lies. Ultimately, post-truth is the result of a metaphysical absolutism that denies the plurality of human experience and attempts to homogenize all experiences within culturally accepted regimes of truth. As such, our ability to communicate across perspectives has been hamstrung by the demands of aligning all communication within a single perspective labeled "true". This is true of both the political left and the right in the United States, where an understanding of metaphysical absolutism, along with the naïve realism of both parties, has created communicative conditions that threaten democratic practice in our society. The question that we are now faced with is, what are we to do about this? I say "we" here because this is a problem we must face as citizens and as rhetoric scholars. We must acknowledge our own positions within the systems that constitute our practice. We are not immune to the influences on our own discourses, and our pedagogy is not immune to the naivete present within society. Writing scholarship has had a rich history of progressive visions provided by educators who have approached writing pedagogy through the lenses of feminist, queer, and anti-racist practices. Visions that have never been fully realized by our community of educators, as the movements of the past half-century have never been fully adopted. For as radical as the work of composition education can be, we remain tethered to institutions that demarcate the bounds of our practices.

While the writing conventions of dissertations such as this suggest that the next step would be to suggest a specific pedagogical practice to address post-truth, this chapter will diverge a bit from that norm. This chapter will continue the work of the previous chapters in addressing the post-truth relationship to writing education. Still, I argue that writing studies as a

whole is not quite prepared to answer the question of what we are doing. And this in turn has led to praxes that seem to be in line with the liberatory missions of our field, but in actuality serve to engender the very conditions that are propelling the post-truth crisis to begin with. I do not mean that composition studies as a field is responsible for rhetors like Trump, but that certain orientations to our work are failing to equip students with the critical awarenesses necessary to participate as active citizens in their own communities. As such, this chapter will not provide an immediate prescriptive method for teachers of writing to approach in their classrooms. Instead, this chapter will begin the necessary work of interrogating our relationship to students and our desires to participate in our democracy by preparing the next generation of citizens to inherit the democratic practices that have been central to visions of rhetoric stretching back to antiquity.

Rhetoric possesses deep-seated commitments to democracy, and our practices as teachers often feature these commitments as guiding principles to justify our teaching. Since the first democracy in Athens, rhetorical training has featured some iteration of what Quintilian later considered the good person speaking well (*Institutio Oratoria* II.34), tying moral character to effective speech. Isocrates wagers his reputation on his students using rhetoric to the benefit of their community (*Antidosis* 243-246*)*; however, Cicero asserts that the ideal orator possesses the power to sway audiences, the knowledge to speak on all matters, and the good sense to apply it towards communal benefit (*De Oratore* 2.55). While the exact process by which rhetoric relates to a moral cultivation among those who study it varies among theories, there is a continual refrain that what we do as teachers of rhetoric, writing, and communication is not a mere set of skills, but a deeper cultivation of our students' character in some way. That notion of transformation so central to pedagogy has issued a set of new challenges with the rise of post-truth. The foundations of our field seem to position us in direct opposition to the dangerous,

demagogic rhetoric of Trump, as well as the propensity of the electorate to follow along according to his whims. Some, such as Bruce McComiskey, go as far to argue that the corrosive effects of post-truth rhetoric on our societal discourse is a matter that is "anathema to every core value that writing teachers hold dear" and that teaching our students to adhere to the values of our field is our best chance to counter the rhetoric of Trump and those who follow in his strategies (38). It is worth considering exactly how education, especially rhetorical education – the knowledge of rhetorical theories and the processes of writing – can be positioned as a solution to Trump's rhetoric. We must also consider how complications of post-truth as a concept affect this kind of intervention. If the acceptance of post-truth rhetoric is the result of alternative epistemic processes rather than outright error, then rhetorical theory has much to contribute toward developing methods of mediating competing perspectives. But rhetorics that solely attempt to engender a singular truth, rhetorics that are framed as solely a science of persuasion or as the subordinate of truth through metaphysical objectivism, will be limited in their capacity to address post-truth audiences as anything more than unenlightened masses.

This chapter argues that the dominant pedagogical response to post-truth – what I call the preventive model of rhetorical education – is itself structured by the metaphysical objectivism and neoliberal logic that this dissertation has identified as the conditions which produce post-truth environments in the first place. By framing rhetorical education as the transmission of critical thinking skills that immunize students against deceptive rhetoric, the preventive model reproduces the negation of rhetoric's epistemic commitments previously described in this dissertation. Rhetoric becomes a tool for detecting and resisting falsehood rather than a medium through which truth is constituted. This chapter proceeds in four movements. First, I examine the preventive model as articulated by scholars in writing studies such as McComiskey and

interrogate the concept of critical thinking that underwrites it. Second, I demonstrate how this model operates within neoliberal frames that reduce education to measurable outcomes and students to human capital, drawing of Foucault's biopolitics and Chris Gallagher's critique of competency-based education. Third, I will show how the neoliberal transformation of education creates the conditions under which conservative educational models redefine education's purposes and how writing studies becomes vulnerable to reconfiguration within models of outcome attainment. This is due to the ways outcomes-based logic has evacuated the language needed to defend education's democratic and liberatory commitments. Finally, I conclude by explicating an alternative to critical thinking in Freire's concept of critical consciousness read alongside an Isocratean understanding of the impossibility of fully guaranteeing what our students will do with the education we provide. This serves as an alternative that is consonant with the perspectivist understanding of rhetoric developed through the preceding chapters – an approach that empowers students to construct truth through dialogue rather than receive it through transmission.

Before examining the preventive model in detail, it is worth establishing the its foundational assumption – that education inoculates against post-truth – does not hold up to empirical scrutiny. There is not enough evidence to suggest that the issues of post-truth can be remedied by education alone, even rhetorical education. Research of the 2024 presidential election seems to demonstrate that college-educated voters were more likely to vote for Harris than Trump, but it also demonstrates that a non-insignificant number of college-educated voters bucked the trend and nevertheless voted for Trump. Specifically, Trump performed better among voters who do not hold a four-year degree by about 14 percent (Hartig et al). But among college-educated men specifically, exit polls show a nearly even split between voting for Trump and

Harris within that demographic (Alonso). While educational attainment seems to correlate on some level with a voter's willingness to support Trump, it does not prove that education is the solution to handling politicians steeped in misinformation like Trump. Asserting that Trump's success is attributed to the ignorance of his supporters or a lack of critical awareness among voters in general fails to understand the ways people make sense of the world in ways that are not strictly empirical.

Education seems like it should be the antidote to the deleterious effects of the disinformation that has inundated our streams of information and language. The internet, for as much as it has revolutionized global communication and the level of information we have access to at any given moment, is also the chief source of disinformation today. So much of what we do as educators seems to be organized around this notion of protecting students from these effects: granting them the ability to sort fact from fiction or to develop some kind of bullshit detector. However, we must be cautious of our own naïve realism lest we assume that our own knowledge is unmediated. This is especially true for those of us who work in rhetoric and composition; while we may be aware of the protean nature of communication, we may also view our own practices as somehow being universally appropriate, especially as they pertain to the ways public discourse ought to be. Part of this is due to long-standing assumptions in the ways writing ought to be, assumptions which have been continuously challenged through scholarship for decades. The challenge to Standard American English as the default criterion for measuring student success demonstrates how certain orientations to language go further than dictating how students express themselves, it limits their ability to interact with the world in their own terms.

Smitherman's work in *Talkin and Testifyin* did much to begin dispelling notions that Black English / African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) lacked in the linguistic

complexity and capabilities of metaphoric/symbolic representation of Standard American English (SAE). Smitherman achieves this by demonstrating that AAVE possesses complex etymological and syntactical legacies derived from West African languages (5-10), consistent internal rules governing its grammar (16-34), and substantial rhetorical efficacies stemming from the hyper-complex conditions of communicating while enslaved (47). Later scholars such as Vershawn Young have made the case for direct pedagogical endeavors to assist students in navigating their own visions of language rather than solely relying on the norms and features of SAE (Young et al *Other People's English)*. Queer scholarship in composition likewise has taken steps to diverge from restrictive composition models that foreclose on a student's relationship to language and themselves. Jonathan Alexander's work in understanding sexual literacies, defined as "the knowledge complex that recognizes the significance of sexuality to self- and communal definition and that critically engages the stories we tell about sex and sexuality to probe them for controlling values and fore ways to resist, when necessary, constraining norms" (5), demonstrates alternative methods for attending to more complex constructions of literacy to empower students. While this chapter will not be investigating these movements in composition specifically, they do demonstrate the same orientation that this chapter takes toward writing. That teaching students to write is a greater matter than just endowing them with a discrete set of capabilities. We teach them to how interact with and place themselves in the world.

Based on the ways post-truth has revealed a deeper complexity than the modern epistemic order of objective absolutism would suggest, I recommend reconsidering the ways we as teachers of rhetoric position ourselves in relation to politics and the state. We must consider how concepts like critical thinking are deployed as part of wider programs directed at most – if not all – students entering college. And we must also consider if our lofty commitments to civic

participation and awareness of our students still have a place within the increasingly neoliberal American university.

5.1 Preventive Rhetorical Education

Because common understandings of post-truth construct a failure among audiences, it would make sense to consider ways to improve the ways those audiences engage with rhetoric itself. Rhetoric is often framed as an extrinsic component to truth. Either being a matter attached to the truth to make it more palatable, or as a superfluous method when compared to logic and reasoning. The discussions in chapters 1 and 2 of this dissertation helped to explicate the relationship between truth and rhetoric as neither subordinated nor oppositional to truth, but instead demonstrated how rhetoric aligns with perspectivism. In this case, rhetorical theory challenges and undermines metaphysical objectivism by recognizing the inherent artistry and construction present within competing claims to the truth. We arrive at truth not through solitary observation of the world around us but through complex systems of interactions and argument, while we are engaged in a constant process of negotiation of truths about the nature of the world, our state of being, and the morals which govern our interactions. The realities of post-truth rhetoric demonstrate, on some level, the efficacy of appealing to differing perceptions of fact. If the problem is that the voting body is susceptible to the kinds of deceit that post-truth rhetors peddle, then, like a public health hazard, we may intervene at a population level to immunize voters.

I call this approach the preventive model of rhetorical education: the assumption that post-truth can be addressed by equipping students with critical-thinking skills to detect and resist manipulative rhetoric. The preventive model treats post-truth as a pathology of reception – a

failure among audiences to evaluate the claims they encounter properly – and positions the writing classroom as the site where that failure can be corrected. Its logic is immunological: expose students to the mechanisms of deception, and they will develop the systems to resist it. This model is appealing in its clarity and its alignment with writing studies' democratic commitments, but rests on assumptions about truth, rhetoric, and education that the preceding chapters have worked to complicate. Specifically, it presupposes that truth is external to rhetoric, that education's role is to detect and discover rather than construct, and that the educated subject possesses an unmediated access to reality that the uneducated lack – the very naïve realism that Chapter 1 identified as a condition of post-truth.

One such site of this immunization is that of modern education; however, the problem itself requires an understanding of the driving force behind the voting population's susceptibility to the flagrant falsehoods of Trump and other post-truth rhetors. One common hypothesis is that voters lack the critical-thinking skills to recognize when they are being lied to. Knowledge of rhetorical moves, such as the Aristotelian appeals to logic, character, and emotion (*logos, ethos,* and *pathos),* could help voters recognize when politicians attempt to bilk them through the latter, less relevant forms of rhetoric. It is this approach to rhetoric that McComiskey advocates for in his book *Post-Truth Rhetoric and Composition,* published shortly after Trump's first presidential election. There, he argues that ultimately the success of post-truth rhetoric is inherently tied to a lack of curiosity among the public. He writes: "The success of bullshit, for example, requires audiences that are not curious: these audiences fear the outside world and do not want to know more about it; they seek and value only information that already supports their restricted belief systems. Teach curiosity, and you teach a potential counter to the susceptibility to bullshit" (39). Students, or at least some of them, are here understood as lacking in the virtue of curiosity,

which inspires a level of multiculturalism and thereby access to an objective truth. The role of the teacher here is to wake the dreaming student by fostering an innate curiosity that allows them to access the ideal forms of truth. To do this, the teacher activates the student's curiosity by equipping them with methods of critical thinking.

The concept of critical thinking appears on many syllabi each year, and it can be used as a buzzword to signal that students are gaining a certain kind of practice. But like rhetoric, the exact nature of critical thinking can be difficult to pin down. The practices of critical thinking can mean different things to different people. The Value Rubrics of the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AACU) describes it as "a habit of mind characterized by the comprehensive exploration of issues, ideas, artifacts, and events before accepting or formulating an opinion or conclusion." The AACU assesses critical thinking by evaluating whether the student applies comprehensive knowledge of the subject and expert opinions on the topic, using that information to adopt a sufficiently specific conclusion grounded in those opinions. The Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA), in their outcomes statement for first-year writing, has a similar definition: "Critical thinking is the ability to analyze, synthesize, interpret, and evaluate ideas, information, situations, and texts." The Conference for College Composition and Communication (CCCC) identifies critical thought as a throughline connecting rhetoric with preparation for civic participation in a democracy, enabling students to recognize hyper-partisan ways of thinking in contrast to more logical forms of deliberation (Principles for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing 2023).

The proliferation of these institutional definitions is itself significant. Critical thinking can be defined as a comprehensive exploration of issues (AACU), as the analysis and evaluation of ideas (CWPA), and as a bridge between rhetoric and civic participation (CCCC) –all without

specifying the substance or outcome of that thinking. This suggests that the concept functions less as a coherent intellectual practice than as a placeholder. It signals that proper reasoning has occurred without specifying what proper reasoning consists of. This ambiguity is not incidental; it is what allows critical thinking to serve as the common currency of educational outcomes across disciplines, institutions, and political orientations. But that very flexibility also makes the concept vulnerable to appropriation, as the substance of critical thought can be filled by whatever regime of truth holds authority at a given moment.

Critical thinking has also been used to justify an education in English and/or writing (either as a primary major or as a complement to other fields) as students and their parents become more conscious of the return on investment of their degrees. As reading and writing unite under an umbrella of literacy, critical thought seems to be the bridge that holds them together as a single practice and grounds their regard as civil/social rather than just an academic endeavor. Robert Scholes describes this division as resulting from the ways in which literary studies (focusing on methods of reading) and rhetorical studies (organized around methods of writing) have been continually reinvented and subsumed as distinct yet compatible fields throughout modern history (157-159). In advocating for the development of students' reading capabilities beyond the textual, Scholes argues: "all good citizens must be rhetoricians to the extent that they can imagine themselves in the place of another and understand views different from their own" (160). However, the problem comes when this knowledge of the other is reified as the fact – the thing in itself – that engenders certainty. Once rendered as fact, that knowledge of the other becomes another tool by which to deny the truthfulness of the other's perspective rather than understand it.

Because critical thinking serves as the bridge to rhetorical education's role in the civic order, it constructs a proper political subject to judge the propriety of political activity. Education in this sense takes on a preventive role in disciplining the subject towards approved political action – in this case, one that employs the tools of reason as described by educational outcomes statements such as those in the AACU Value Rubric. Critical thinking in the above definitions features no definite conclusion, and no evidence beyond the assertion that it has, in fact, taken place. Paradoxically, critical thought only asserts that it has taken place when multiple perspectives have been considered; the substance of those perspectives, as well as the quality of the resulting synthesis, lacks a definitive outcome to determine their efficacy. Hence, the influence of alternative systems of knowledge production, which justify certain metaphysical truths of the world, is significant. In today's glut of information, which flows through search engines and social media platforms, it is not difficult to cherry-pick evidence to support one's beliefs or to find credentialed experts who agree with a fringe perspective on nearly any topic. In attempting to engage in a comprehensive exploration of an issue, should the student/citizen attempt to integrate and respond to even the most outlandish arguments? Especially now, as the federal government spreads arguments like acetaminophen causing autism in utero, do these absurdities warrant discussion? If we define critical thinking solely in terms of process, we will eventually lack the discursive means to establish which perspectives count and which ought to be rejected. If we define critical thinking in terms of outcome – as the process by which we discover the truth – then we risk only further sliding into naïve realism. While the evidence for Tylenol causing autism is spurious, acetaminophen is responsible for half of all cases of liver failure in the United States. Overdoses occur in approximately 30,000 children annually (Schafer et al) as arguments move between audiences, both claims about the dangers and safety of acetaminophen

risk overgeneralization, as the processes of critical thinking make no promises of product, only process.

The obvious solution to this dilemma is to teach students to discern truth from lies and to spot bullshit, yet without critical thinking as a concept to navigate by, certainty becomes difficult to achieve. Definitions of critical thinking aimed at students take a decidedly uncritical approach to understanding the practice, instead substituting terms like "reasonable" to describe it. James Herrick's 1991 handbook titled *Critical Thinking: The Analysis of Arguments* describes critical thinking as: "thinking informed by an awareness of the criteria of judging the ethicality and reasonableness of arguments, and a willingness to apply these criteria consistently" (37). Peter Facione's work in the early '90s cites a similar definition from the American Philosophical Association's Committee on Pre-College Philosophy aimed at audiences on the other side of the classroom which states: "we understand critical thinking to be purposeful, self-regulatory judgment which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inferences, as well as explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, or contextual considerations upon which that judgment is based" (3). In short, the processes of critical thinking are the processes of consideration itself. Critical thought is defined by its recursivity, in that it asks whether the thinker possesses the meta-awareness to recognize and apply consistent criteria to their judgments. In rhetorical terms, this ultimately asks whether the thinker, qua audience, has been persuaded on logical grounds through *logos* or is ultimately falling prey to the effects of *pathos* and *ethos* at the expense of *logos*. Critical thought then becomes a method to evaluate arguments solely in terms of their reasonability – in other words, in terms of their use of *logos*. Herrick claims as much when he describes the methods of evaluating an argument's use of evidence within the five frames of consistency, accessibility, adequacy, recency, and relevance

(46). However, Herrick and Facione both respond to situations predating the advent of Web 2.0 – an internet where users are as much creators as well as consumers of content.

The regulation of information through academic publishing channels and traditional media outlets no longer projects a unified expert consensus on what constitutes the facts. Alternative viewpoints find audiences and hijack the processes of critical thought through mechanisms like Rice's description of alternative archives. For Rice, audiences circulating outlandish rhetorics (satanic panics, UFO conspiracies, and post-truth conspiracies) engage in logical processes through archives – "ordinary and extraordinary experiences in public life that leave lasting, palpable residues, which then become our sources – our resources – for public discourses" (16). In Rice's understanding, archives are defined by their rhetorical function rather than their contents, which typically favor documents that adhere to the norms of academic rigor. Instead, these capacious archives can construct meaning as a product of their own existence, rather than as the inherent meaning of their contents. As such, audiences can use archives to construct meaning through processes of figuration and disfiguration – epistemic makings and unmakings of objects (Rice 129-133). Or audiences may find connections present within empty archives of absent evidence, which construct their meaning through the significance of their vacuity (Rice 113). Rice's work helps illustrate that post-truth audiences do not suffer from a lack of critical thought, but perhaps from an overabundance of it. They themselves are lost within the labyrinth of critical thought with no yarn to trace their return. The only recourse is to wander further into the archive, to figure new truths to make sense of the surfeit of evidence it presents. Knowledge, to be regarded as knowledge, must be true. And as such, conspiracy theorists and post-truth rhetors are subjected to what Rice calls "tidal waves of evidence" (92). They do not operate outside of truth in favor of fantasy and delusion. Still, they are so inundated

and saturated by evidence that they are weighed down by the pressure of metaphysical objectivism's constraints on all expressions of belief.

Disinformation and post-truth communication from rhetors like Trump operate on the assumption of metaphysical absolutism as the epistemic foundation for how knowledge is acquired and spread. All things exist in relation to an absolute external truth. Education then becomes a preventive measure that enables citizens to resist unscrupulous political agents and their wily methods. We can see the preventive model at work in suggestions such as those made by McComiskey, which assert that writing teachers confront post-truth rhetoric by doubling down on the values the field holds dear. These include teaching students to be open, creative, and flexible as described in the 2011 *Framework for Postsecondary Writing,* and by attaining the learning goals described in the 2014 *WPA Outcomes Statement*: possessing rhetorical knowledge, deploying critical literacy, understanding composition processes across different contexts and media, and knowing writing conventions and their mutability depending on genres (40). The purpose of goals such as these is to prevent post-truth rhetoric from spreading by preventing it from taking root in students' minds by giving them grounds to dismiss it. McComiskey writes, "the success of bullshit is predicated on the absence of critical thinking, reading, and writing, in its audiences, so simply teaching these rhetorical skills is one step in the direction of challenging the success of bullshit in public discourse" (41). This asserts two ideas: that Trump's rhetoric resembles Harry Frankfurt's concept of bullshit, and that audiences accept it through a process that lacks critical thought. In other words, Trump's rhetoric is successful, according to McComiskey, because audiences do not critically assess it, and those who do will categorically disagree. While we have already considered the ways critical thought is not necessarily absent

among post-truth communities, the second component of McComiskey's theory – that rhetorical education serves as a complement to critical thinking practices warrants further discussion.

McComiskey's reasoning reduces students' decision-making as citizens to a mechanistic process of logic. It neglects the important ways ethos and pathos may influence not only persuasion but the production of knowledge as well. McComiskey cites Frankfurt's use of the term bullshit to articulate a specific kind of rhetorical act that is independent of any concern for the truth. But he argues that after Brexit and Trump, what we see is the total erasure of truth as a criterion for judging a statement by the rhetor – in this case, Trump– and the audience as well (11-12). What McComiskey describes is an audience that engages in wanton disregard for the truth itself in favor of ideological alignment. However, such an understanding of these audiences only makes sense if we regard truth through metaphysical objectivism and, on some level, assert that statements that describe true conditions somehow involve fewer rhetorical qualities than statements that are false. Hypothetically, this would mean that noumena could be expressed linguistically through a theoretical arhetorical construction. Yet, if we regard all language as artful and, therefore, rhetorical, then the disregard for truth less resembles an epistemological schism and more of a disagreement of rhetorical foundations. It is not that audiences have disregarded a conceptual commitment to truth, but that what they regard as truth stems from an alternative locus to that of their interlocutors.

Others who have addressed the use of writing pedagogy in handling post-truth have further developed some aspects of McComiskey's thinking. Ryan Skinnell suggests working with students to develop a deeper understanding of the appeals of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*. *Logos*, for example, is shown to go beyond the kinds of academic reasonings of proof we're familiar with, but instead to show associational logic and the ways that fake news –such as

Pizzagate – can use appeal to logic through the use of unstated premises (560-562). Likewise, Skinnell argues that *pathos* can be complicated to account for how appeals to beliefs engender emotions and thereby become rational through commonly shared experiences (559). These approaches attempt to disentangle *logos* from the construction of rational discourse by emphasizing, in turn, the rhetorical and epistemic dimensions of these appeals. *Logos* contains a rhetorical dimension, as much as *ethos* and *pathos* articulate epistemic positions. The divide between rhetoric and knowledge is narrower than modern logics might dictate.

The preventive model's reliance on critical thinking as its primary outcome is not merely an intellectual weakness – a matter of under-defined concepts that could be resolved with better definitions. It is a structural weakness instead. The logic of outcomes – the assumption that education's value can be measured by what students demonstrate possession of by the end of a course or program – is a product of the neoliberal transformation of higher education. If critical thinking functions as the bridge between rhetorical education and civic participation, then the shape of that bridge is determined by the institutional and economic forces that govern how education is conceived, funded, and assessed. To understand why the preventive model reproduces the conditions of post-truth rather than neutralizing them, we must examine the neoliberal framework within which it operates.

5.2 Neoliberal Critical Thought

Critical thinking is at the center of the preventive model of rhetorical education advocated by rhetoric scholars such as McComiskey. Rhetoric's figuration as a science of argument through a meta-awareness of persuasive methods emphasizes this possessive metaphor. The preventive model, in turn, contains the metaphor of possessing rhetorical knowledge in a

manner similar to the possession of physical objects. These metaphors, in turn, reveal the deeper neoliberal commitments inherent to modern constructions of rhetorical education and critical thought. Though McComiskey's recommendation to redouble our commitments to critical thought seems reasonable, we must consider how such processes merely reproduce the logics normalized for the professor and ask students to accept them uncritically. This reproduction is especially troubling in light of the refrain of indoctrination that has become so central to critiques of higher education coming from the right. At a time when those charges are seemingly at their peak, we must consider how to both allow students to grow in their own ways and adopt and shed arguments and beliefs that stand in contrast to our own positions in the world. However, in responding to these issues, the conflicts between rhetorical education and the ways education in general has been neoliberalized intensify, demonstrating conflicting goals and methods.

Neoliberalization, at its core, is the reification of the metaphors of the market. These include metaphors of possession, competition, supply and demand, and investment, which become figured as rational through a common-sense construction. In *Composition in the Age of Austerity,* Welch and Scott define neoliberalism in terms of its transformation of liberal democracies as public services become increasingly privatized. Citing sociologist William Davies, Welch and Scott describe how neoliberalism translates the methods for understanding economic relations into human relations in their totality (7-8). They refer to this translation as the construction of these relationships as common-sense and pragmatic, thus justifying the transformation of liberal democratic institutions into privatized services. They write, "This claim to authority [through a feigned non-ideological pragmatism] is therefore operational rather than moral or philosophical… Even when areas of public life such as public education are not placed entirely under the control of private entities, they are managed according to market logics that

assume that 'rational' methods can be fruitfully applied to any area of society and desirable outcomes can be quantified and compared" (8). In this way, the "common sense" of the market and its logic becomes regarded as truth through the proliferation of metaphors as ways of knowing phenomena. For education, these market logics dictate relationships, practices, and goals as students, educators, administrators, and other stakeholders perceive them. The language of investment is a common refrain used to justify ballooning tuition costs as well as loan programs that border on usury. The risk of neoliberal education is in its totalizing reductionism of adjacent concepts. Neoliberalism's market metaphors denigrate and recast concepts such as education and citizenship as solely economic actions.

Rhetorical education within neoliberal frames thus intensifies an understanding of possession; students gain rhetorical understanding in the same way they gain their physical diplomas. The metaphorical meaning of the diploma and the education it represents collapses into one as scholars like McComiskey render education a service in the progression from ignorance toward enlightenment, thereby reducing the chances of being victimized by rhetors like Trump. Rhetorical education stands as a bulwark against these unscrupulous rhetors, thereby emphasizing the neoliberal understanding of education as possession. In this way, McComiskey's connections between rhetoric and citizenship, as empowering students to detect bullshit, resemble the kinds of competency-based education (CBE) that Chris Gallagher accuses of being a toxic influence on writing pedagogy. CBE is an outcomes-focused approach to students that measures, first and foremost, the results of an educational program; it asks what a student has gained as a result of being educated. Rubrics, due to their consistent application of demonstrable criteria in assessment, are a hallmark of this kind of educational model. Gallagher critiques CBE for the ways it reduces educational practices to measurable, consistent outcomes,

which in turn permit arguments that anyone can learn to write anywhere – that the education gained at the university is not unique because its outcomes can be attained elsewhere (24). It is this logic that informs neoliberal alternatives to higher education, such as the Thiel Fellowship, a program started by PayPal co-founder Peter Thiel, which offers a $200,000 cash infusion to young adults to form a start-up or other entrepreneurial venture rather than pursue a college degree. In a 2016 interview with Bloomberg, Thiel compares the contemporary university to the pre-Reformation Catholic Church as a similar site of hegemonic influence in people's lives. Thiel states:

> You have this priestly or professorial class that doesn't do very much work, and then you basically tell people that if you get a diploma, you're saved, otherwise you go to hell. You know – you go to Yale or you go to jail… My goal with the Thiel Fellowship was not to start a new church or something like that; it's not to have this alternate one-size-fits-all thing. But I think the future system will be one that's much more heterogeneous and where there will be many more ways for people to be successful." (Bloomberg Originals 1:32-2:14 edited for clarity).

Propositions such as Thiel's work through the transformation of concepts: expansive access to higher education becomes seen as a monoculture, one that replicates the transactional soteriology of medieval Catholicism. This collapse of higher education's significance stems from the Trojan horse that Gallagher accuses CBE of being when it is used to justify education. He writes, "As we turned to outcomes assessment, we failed to insist that we were offering particular kinds of *experiences* that could not be attained elsewhere. We might have thought outcomes were just a neutral tool. We might have thought we could have it all. If so, we were wrong" (24). The logic of outcomes is a logic of means and ends, and within that frame, there is

little room for aspects that exist outside of that frame. Hence, Thiel frames his fellowship program as a necessary competitive counterweight to the proliferation of higher education. Because neoliberalism treats competition as a necessary and natural force, introducing a site that can compete with the university as a means of development reduces both to their outcomes, disregarding the wider ramifications of either. If we regard rhetorical education in terms of its preventative outcomes, as McComiskey urges, then we further recede into the neoliberal logic of possessing reason through outcomes translated into the measurability of critical thinking.

The dynamics at work here – the proliferation of CBE, the reduction of students to human capital, the management of education in the form of replicable results – are intelligible as forms of what Foucault calls biopolitical power: the regulation of populations rather than the disciplining of individual bodies. I will turn to Foucault's account of biopolitics in detail below, but previewing the concept here is useful because it identifies the mechanisms by which neoliberal education operates. The preventive model does not merely offer students a set of skills; it administers a form of population management that channels students' epistemic development toward outcomes compatible with the state's needs. It does so while barring the aleatory possibilities of political dissent and epistemic independence that are necessary for democracy.

The critical-thinking outcome has effects beyond merely allowing the intelligibility of neoliberal perspectives on education, such as Thiel's. Others, taking cues from McComiskey's position, have argued for a more radical dismissal of student political beliefs, as erroneous as they may be. Matthew Johnson supports McComiskey's preventive model and argues for teachers to engage in a more drastic intervention when students enter the classroom having engaged with post-truth rhetoric. He refers to post-truth rhetoric as "venomous political

expression" (39) and describes the phenomenon as a divide between "reason and unreason" (42). According to Johnson, any attempt to engage with the claims made by Trump, his political allies, or his supporters only serves to legitimize otherwise unreasonable positions. Of course, many of Trump's positions are abominable. One need only look at the migrant crises that have occurred in his first or second terms to see how his rhetoric trades in xenophobic myths of the other to justify inhumane treatment of people, particularly those hailing from Latin America and the Middle East. There is no doubt that the rhetorical actions Trump takes have material consequences for people that extend beyond distant academic concerns, and those consequences are experienced in varied ways by students who attend our classes – students whose economic and material safety is jeopardized by the government's rhetoric at any given moment. But as we respond to this rhetoric, we need to consider whether we wish to use our position in the university to remake ourselves in our students or to grant our students the ability to make themselves as they see fit.

Johnson's pedagogy and perspective on teaching describe a situation we as educators are all familiar with, and the frustration he expresses is not without cause. He notes a shift in his own perspective through the Trump years, describing how the importance of rhetoric has shifted into more immediate and substantive aspects of public life. Matters such as masking during the 2020 pandemic reveal to Johnson how rhetorical phenomena can become truly matters of life or death (45-46). He also writes:

> While we have long embraced classroom spaces as political, even as we avoid assessing students on their own politics, we're going to have to be comfortable being "political" and "ideological" and even "indoctrinating" in our classrooms *if facts are understood to be beliefs*, by some in our audiences… By insisting on agreed-upon realities (which we

should) while others refuse (which they do), we will be unable to avoid bringing politics, or that which is perceived as political, directly into the classroom. For the time being at least. Stating a fact may also be stating a political position from certain audience members' perspectives (Johnson 46, emphasis original).

While Johnson's frustration with the ways politics has undermined the shared systems of knowledge required for teaching is understandable, there are problems with admitting that students ought to be indoctrinated – even if that language is being used ironically. Johnson's issue is that we are being forced into political engagements due to the broader politicization of epistemic positions. However, in arguing this point, he mythologizes a pre-post-truth moment in modernity. He paradoxically harkens back to epistemic conditions composed of agreed-upon realities while neglecting the fact that those realities required agreement (and thus rhetoric) in the first place. It is nonetheless naïve to presume that facts – insofar as our ability to understand them – could ever be meaningfully distinct from belief. If seeing is believing, then sight's significance is moot without a system of belief to interpret what is seen. What Johnson refers to as the mending and maintenance of the agreement of facts (47) is a repetition of the denial of rhetoric's epistemic nature. In presuming that facts and rhetoric are separate, even if rhetoric is understood as necessary, it is reduced to a tool for enforcing and supplementing a regime of truth.

The wider determination of what can count as true is itself embroiled in systems of power that can dictate the intelligibility of these concepts. Chapters 1 and 2 explicated these concepts by considering the importance of intelligible metaphors in language and of rhetoric in mediating these metaphors amid exigence. A Foucauldian understanding of power explains neoliberalism's effect as a dominant metaphor within education. The use of education as a process is closely

associated with the construction, dissemination, and maintenance of knowledge, and neoliberalism can affect these processes. The biopolitical forces of the state dovetail with the metaphors of neoliberalism to construct pedagogies that fail to address the deeper issues of neoliberalism and ultimately constrain rhetoric to a body of knowledge rather than to its practice. Pedagogical exhortations like those written by McComiskey and Johnson fail to fully respond to neoliberal metaphors because they themselves are naïve about how they frame rhetorical knowledge as an object granted only to those who receive a college education.

Foucault's concept of biopolitics is conceived as a distinct form of state power that emerges with the advent of modernity in the 18th century. Along with disciplinary power (the ability of the state to enforce conformity on an individual and corporal level), biopolitical power works in tandem on the level of what Foucault calls "man as species" (*Society* 242). The logic of power shifted from the sovereign right to take life through means such as sanctioned execution to the state's right to manage living beings at a general level through the development of methods for understanding populations, such as birth and death rates, longevity, and other complementary concepts. In addition to the general management of the states of life and death in a binary sense, the state also historically interfered with the quality of the population's life by attempting to control the outcomes of general phenomena and the population's environment. Foucault calls this form of power "the power of regularization," which he claims "consists in making live and letting die" (*Society* 247). In other words, biopolitical power is distinct from the prior form of sovereign power to take life and the alternative form of power directed at shaping and commanding the individual body (termed disciplinary power). This wider dispersal of power directed at humanity qua population is described by Foucault as being:

> Centered not upon the body but upon life: a technology which brings together the mass effects characteristic of a population, which tries to control the series of random events that can occur in a living mass, a technology which tries to predict the probability of those events (by modifying it, if necessary), or at least to compensate for their effects. This is a technology which aims to establish a sort of homeostasis, not by training individuals, but by achieving an overall equilibrium that protects the security of the whole from internal dangers (*Society* 249).

According to Stephen Ball's reading of Foucault's work, the role of education has morphed over the course of the modern state's needs to manage and direct the population (5) while at the same time using the tools of expertise and truth through the science of pedagogy (Ball 10). By the late modern period (the early 1900s), we see that education treats the student as a biological subject by applying early psychology as a tool of biopower. Within the educational context, tests and examinations become signifiers of intelligence itself and are subsumed within the rhetorics of eugenics and the placement of the social order (Ball 16).

The kinds of control over the random events in a population are evident in preventive writing education, especially when this kind of writing education is understood as drawing its logic from CBE's emphasis on measurable outcomes. Foucault also describes that around the same period that biopolitics becomes a form of power the market transformed into a site of veridiction to assign a natural significance to the workings of the political market stating: "the importance of economic theory… is due precisely to the fact that it enables economic theory to pick out something that will become fundamental.: that the market must be that which reveals something like a truth." (*The Birth of Biopolitics* 31-32). In short, the market and economics within neoliberalism do not merely make its ideas seem natural; a concept's truthfulness is

judged by its contextual significance to the market. Neoliberalism's metaphors thereby become truth itself, and the market's truths become the standard for government's action (*The Birth of Biopolitics 32)*. Foucault also charts the 20th century's shift into neoliberal governmentality as the state's method of regulating the population shifts to what Connor Heaney summarizes as a process of three shifts: state practice using market logic to determine its function, permanent intervention of the state to foster competition, and the direction of this intervention towards society through people as human capital (295).

These pedagogical methods, which seek to control and limit democratic engagement to particular epistemologies, act as means of maintaining this type of homeostasis. Of course, the simple fact that something is an exercise of power does not necessarily discredit it entirely. However, as Vivian points out, these usages of power in the classroom are not necessarily conducive to the kinds of democratic commitments both McComiskey and Johnson assign to their pedagogies. In Vivian's case, the uncritical adherence to metaphysical truths (verities endemic to political bodies) actually engenders the conditions necessary for populations to accept the truth claims made by fascist and authoritarian regimes (424). When truths act as sites of biopolitical power, they resist deliberation and thus rhetorical construction. That is to say, when the rhetorical features of truth are made obvious, the general mythology that enables the idea to operate as true is exposed. Rhetors who operate outside of these regimes seem to rewind the clock of progress, as Vivian mentions: "the basic concern [of regimes of truth] is how, discursively, a particular version of reality acquires the status of rational and authoritative truth at all" (421). History, if understood as an arc tending towards discovering the truth – a process of enlightenment – obscures the means by which the truth is constructed within the frames of political power. Questioning these truths (whether justified or not) carries with it the appearance

of regressing – of moving against history's current. This is how the wider post-truth movement carries a connotation of going backward and losing progressive gains.

As we consider the intersecting node of democracy and education, the figuration of education as a biopolitical mechanism in service of a neoliberal regime will, in turn, transfigure attempts to reconcile these domains. That transfiguration is evident in attempts to use rhetorical education to manage the health of the body politic. The social purpose of education, as examined through Foucault's understanding of biopolitics, highlights the ways the practices and logics of the classroom are inexorably linked to the hoarding of capital (Ball 23). On the one hand, preparing students to meet the needs of the state seems reasonable, but the question becomes to whom do our responsibilities lie – the state or to the students themselves? Stephen Ball, drawing on the work of Ansgar Allen, posits that the teacher's work is that of a technician following the schematics of the educational and disciplinary fields. Teachers, according to Ball, engage in practices that develop their intelligibility in response to the exigencies of neoliberalism, thereby adopting familiar forms of data in relation to outcomes. Data is both representative and generalizable – it becomes the metaphor that cloaks itself in the identity of the noumenon, hence the maxim that the data do not lie. It is absent of rhetoric, or rather it appears that way. Still, that arhetoricity is what permits its generalizability – the ways that the data can be used as a tool for comparison and therefore competition. The wider system of education is now made up of a marketplace of schools, and association with those schools becomes an investment.

Under the neoliberal model, writing's relationship to contemporary vocations is centralized, thereby defining the utility of the endeavor. Matters like clarity are translated into outcomes to be granted to students. These discussions of purpose are not necessarily unique to only writing, but the project of writing is also bound to the democratic and liberatory

constructions of education as well. The problem is that these outcomes can often be placed at odds when the question centers on how we align our utilitarian, civic, and moral commitments with our students, the state, and ourselves. Brown describes how the soft powers of neoliberalism shape human subject into the form of human capital writing, "within neoliberal rationality, human capital is both our 'is' and our 'ought' what we are said to be, what we should be, and what the rationality makes us into through its norms and construction of environments" (36). Brown continues to describe the significance of the human capital's nexus of relationships stating: "we are human capital not just for ourselves, but also for the firm, state, or postnational constellation of which we are members. Thus, even as we are tasked with being responsible for ourselves in a competitive world of other human capital, insofar as we are human capital *for* firms or states concerned with their own competitive positioning" (37). Brown's description of human capital's treatment from within and without illustrates how writing education has attempted to survive as the purposes of education shift under neoliberalism. We assert to our students that effective communication and critical thinking are necessary skills in the workforce. However, in making that argument, we open our arguments to the need for demonstrable evidence to support it, so CBE practices are developed in relation to which, at the same time, undermine the perceived value of that education. Gallagher describes that, as outcomes rather than experiences, centered compositionists such as Irvin Peckham may begin to argue against their own continued place in the university. Peckham's work has argued for the need for data collection and analysis in university writing programs, in part to persuade stakeholders (in this case, students and the government) that writing programs do, in fact, deliver on the outcomes they promise (White et al. 21). Gallagher points out that in developing the kinds of data necessary to argue that certain students should not be required to take a first-year writing class

because they have demonstrated the outcomes of said class, Peckham also forecloses on the possibilities that a college writing class provides any benefits other than those officially enumerated (24-25).

The kinds of lost experiences that Gallagher describes also reveal the ways in which the democratic body is being eroded through the neoliberalization of the university. Brown claims that the expansion of access to higher education in post-war America was not just the proliferation of technical, and therefore more valuable, knowledge, but also the knowledge of how to exercise freedom, enabled by the liberal arts (184-185). Brown describes that post-war educational policy saw that "the ideal of democracy was being realized in a new way insofar as the demos was being prepared through education for a life of freedom understood as both individual sovereignty (choosing and pursuing one's own ends) and participation in collective self-rule" (185). Within neoliberalism, however, the liberal arts are described only insofar as their application to the construction of human capital. As such, CBE transfigures the liberal arts into more immediately observable outcomes such as the critical thinking of the AACU Value Rubric and the WPA Outcomes Statement. The actual management of citizens is only important as it pertains to their positioning as capital; democratic self-governance is therefore illusory within this system, according to Brown, as the kinds of education provided are not in service to individuals' sovereignty, as that freedom is inconsequential in relation to the subject's importance as a site of the accumulation of capital. In attempting to reify the outcomes of rhetorical education in service to democracy – by demanding teachers achieve a specific outcome in service to democracy – McComiskey and Johnson ironically contribute to the erosion of democracy's most necessary function: the citizens' sovereign agency to decide. The power dynamics of the classroom are complex and defy description due to the ways in which multiple

political systems have left their mark on pedagogy. But as it pertains to writing education, I argue that pedagogical methods that reinscribe an uncritical acceptance of truth risk hamstringing students in their ability to be active citizens and thereby making them unable to respond to demagoguery such as Trump's. Of course, allowing students to simply remain ignorant is no solution either. But we must understand how we as teachers are embedded in systems that undermine and challenge the empowering commitments that have been endemic to our field since its inception. Gallagher's Trojan horse metaphor is especially salient in this sense, as the empiricism that we have used to rescue rhetoric from the wider label of the liberal arts can also herald a neoliberalization of rhetoric to make it compatible with a mission of constructing human capital.

It would be tempting to conclude that the biopolitical dynamics described above are confined to neoliberal and conservative frameworks. That progressive pedagogy, with its emphasis on the whole student and its resistance to standardization, escapes these power relations. But the critical examination this chapter undertakes must extend to our own traditions as well. Even pedagogical models animated by emancipatory commitments operate within structures of power. And acknowledging this is not a concession to the right's critiques of education, but rather a necessary step toward a pedagogy that is genuinely oriented to post-truth conditions.

One of the bargains of progressivism was the social status of the teacher as an expert in the esoteric sciences of teaching. Certainly, the history of teaching has included instructions and methods recorded for replication, but the emphasis on producing human capital has resulted in its own form of power. The dynamics of the classroom are, of course, complicated, but Ball describes how the significance of teaching and learning is shaped according to the processes of

progressive pedagogy. This pedagogical model reverses the emphasis from the student as an agent whose actions need to conform to the norm to a continued need to represent the student in their entirety through representational means (Ball 20). Once again, power relations are shown to have transformed in the 20th century as the student's relationship to education shifts from the modern school, with its emphasis on ensuring that actions conform to the norm, to the progressive school, which carries biopolitical modes of power. Progressive pedagogy is figured as a collection of pathologies and power which is intensified within the child, "as the whole child is opened up to the expert pedagogic gaze of the teacher, a teacher who now does not differentiate the child based on outward indicators of performance but understands the child in terms of their interior differences. (Ball 21). It is important to note here that, while this emphasis attempts to move away from the overt exercise of power in the modern classroom, progressive pedagogy never fully empowers the student. The student's internal workings are now fit for diagnosis and response, and we begin to see a pedagogy that resembles a medicalized relationship. Students act as patients and the teacher as a doctor who corrects the malady to transform the patient. Ball refers to the work of the educational theorist Basil Bernstein, who traces the ways signs are used in education to construct meaning within the science of pedagogy. For Bernstein, the profession of the teacher becomes something other than the transmitter of knowledge, but one who "operates with a theory of reading" (qtd. in Ball 22) and one who can read the signs of the student, even when the student themselves could not. As the educational field moved away from the examination as the primary site of understanding, educators looked to the student's interiority as that site.

This shift demonstrates how the wider project of progressive pedagogy – to address the whole student to serve them better – never shakes from its core relations as a mode of

biopolitical power serving the state's need. And because power today is exercised in the needs of the market, it is the construction of human capital that the reading of the body reveals. The student's interiority becomes the site of truth, and that student's truth is imposed on their body. Ball writes:

> In the enactment of judgment and the practices of evaluation and comparison, particular kinds of truth – the truths told about us – articulate our "discursive currency." That is, ways of thinking and talking about ourselves, to ourselves and to others– "a regime of truth offers the terms that make self-recognition possible". This, as Foucault puts it, is the face of truth which has been 'turned away from us for so long and which is that of its violence." (22).

The act of reading the student – of judging their characteristics and reducing their identity and actions to data within a wider system of meaning – constitutes a form of violence. And ultimately, this underscores the broader juxtapositions in education. It is capable of both liberating and oppressing students: a fact we ought to keep in mind as we translate research into teaching practices.

The preceding analysis has demonstrated how the preventive model operates within a neoliberal framework that reduces education to outcomes and students to human capital. And it has shown how even progressive pedagogical traditions are caught within biopolitical constructions of power. What this analysis has not yet addressed is the political environment where these dynamics play out, specifically, where the neoliberal transformation of education creates the conditions under which conservative actors can redefine what education is for. Once education is reduced to outcomes and the market, the question of *which* outcomes is no longer a matter for educators to develop within their own disciplinary bounds. It becomes a political

contest among the state, private organizations, and ideological movements to define the substance of what students should know. The following section examines how this contest is already reshaping writing education. From the adoption of PragerU's materials in state-approved curricula to the narrowing of composition's purpose under political pressure, the vulnerabilities that writing studies possess to these interventions are not incidental, but structural. It is a consequence of the very outcomes-based logic on which the preventive model depends.

5.3 Post-truth Writing Education

Perhaps due to the civic-mindedness of our field, we place a great deal of emphasis on ourselves as educators to manage the demands of post-truth discourse on society. The preventive model of writing education speaks to this exigency and demonstrates how we, as teachers, attempt to heal the body politic by managing and morphing its citizens into a form suitable for our democracy. The previous sections considered how writing pedagogy operates in line with neoliberalism's goals. Specifically, in how conventional neoliberalism's education limits responses to post-truth as discrete, packageable outcomes. Here, we can begin to consider how writing education contributes to, and is shaped by, the political climate to fit the logics of the state. We must consider these ramifications on our teaching as we attempt to reconcile our better impulses to help our students with the systems we are forced to participate in. The rhetorical citizen is a construct as old as democracy itself, and the ways we prepare citizens, as well as whether we even should endeavor to do so, are worth considering at a time when the place of higher education is questioned more than ever.

Discussions of the purpose of teaching are currently abundant. Right-wing associations and pundits have been vocal about their disdain for modern education systems. But though

current attacks on education by the right have been renewed, they are but a part of a wider backlash to the educational initiatives that have characterized post-war America. The expansion of education in terms of financial access, as well as the matriculation and degree attainment of students from diverse racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, has historically been driven by social programs like the GI Bill and the desegregation brought about by the Civil Rights Movement. However, there is also a broader history of backlash against these developments that has never been fully resolved. This history is intertwined with our own legacy of wrestling with matters of race and class as it pertains to our subject of writing. As we consider where to move next, we must also keep in mind the broader political ramifications of our work and how we may fit in as education reshapes itself in response to the attacks of the Trump administration and the wider anti-woke movement surrounding Trump and his supporters.

The work we do within writing programs is itself embroiled within the wider politics of higher education in the United States. Specifically, both major political parties hold ideas about the purpose of a college degree, and while they may disagree on several specifics, we can note a repeated emphasis on vocational and, by extension, neoliberal ends over more socially oriented goals. For example, Florida governor Ron DeSantis has, amidst his wider attempts to address so-called "woke" curricula in his state, signed into law SB-266, a bill which "establishes content standards in the general education core subject areas, and specifies that general education core courses may not distort significant historical events or teach identity politics and specified concepts related to discrimination" ("SB-266"). Notably, communication classes, one of the five core areas in addition to Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, Mathematics, and the Humanities, are described as being required to "afford students the ability to communicate effectively, including the ability to write clearly and engage in public speaking" ("Senate Bill 226" 20).

Following the bill's passage alongside SB-240, more commonly referred to as the REACH 2.0 Act (a bill funding career and technical education programs), the governor's office issued a press release with the tagline: "Legislation Puts Workforce Education Above Indoctrination." There, DeSantis remarked how the bills demonstrated how "Florida is taking a stand for empowering students, parents, and educators to focus on creating opportunities for our younger generations." Others, such as Ray Rodrigues, the Chancellor of the State University System of Florida, assert that educators within the system "be accountable as good stewards of the significant investment by Governor DeSantis and the Florida Legislature… while creating the talent pipeline necessary to fuel Florida's future." The president of New College of Florida, Richard Corcoran, goes on to assert the importance of having an educational system that supports jobs stating: "When our kids graduate, whether they go on to be a biologist, a physicist, a marine biologist, and they go apply for a job, employers are going to look at them in two seconds and say, 'These kids have a beautiful foundation.'" ("Governor Ron DeSantis").

The bills passed in Florida demonstrate a view of higher education as a means of supporting a student's vocation. The skills that students gain serve to enhance their ability to perform in the workforce. A political orientation in education is very much present in the policies advanced by the Florida legislature. In addition to a change in the curriculum to emphasize a particular view of US history, the bills reaffirm the state's view of communication education as grounded in skills that complement those of a modern workforce member. Skills such as clear writing are part of the same ideologically motivated legislation that prohibits critical awareness. When Corcoran, who previously served as Speaker of the House in Florida, describes the "beautiful foundation" employers will take notice of, there is an understanding that a particular set of outcomes related to writing and communication will be a key part of that.

Similar logic is presented in policies proposed by left-leaning administrations. Joe Biden, as part of his attempts to address federal student debt, used the language of investment to sway public opinion in favor of student debt relief (SDR). The Biden Administration, in public-facing communications on whitehouse.gov, made mention of the rising "sticker price" of a four-year degree. Additionally, they contrast rising tuition costs with a shrinking "wage premium": the difference in earning potential between bachelor's degree holders and those with only a high school diploma. Part of Biden's argument in favor of SDR relied on demonstrating that the return on investment of a college degree did shrink over time. In other statements on plans for SDR, the Biden administration adopted a rhetoric of holding universities accountable and "keeping college costs under control" (Fact Sheet). To that end, the Department of Education solicited public comments on how it might make good on its promise to inform prospective students about what they would receive alongside their four-year degree. The department describes "student loan borrowers who may struggle to repay their debts after discovering too late that their postsecondary programs did not adequately prepare them for the workforce" (Kvaal). The logic of holding schools accountable began during the Obama administration, as the exigency of protecting students as borrowers (and therefore customers) gained salience amid exposure of for-profit universities' exploitative practices. The Obama administration proposed the Post-Secondary Institutional Rating System (PIRS) as a way of empowering student consumers by making an easily accessible report of comparable scores regarding a school's job placement records and the typical amount of debt to borrow to complete the degree (Edwards). While these efforts to empower the student/consumer/borrower are certainly understandable in today's world, where student debt has become a life-defining event for many Americans, they speak to the extent to which the modern neoliberal university has few allies at a time when the cost of

attendance has become infeasible due to myriad factors. While those regulations from the Department of Education, such as the rules on Financial Value Transparency and Gainful Employment, were targeted at for-profit universities and non-degree/certificate programs within the greater body of higher education (Department of Education 70004), calls for accountability are coming from both sides of the aisle. And within the logic of accountability, there is an emphasis on demonstrating that a student's education will develop the skills necessary for the workforce. These policies begin to demonstrate that the wider mission of education is directly related to preparation for employment, as far as the government is concerned. This, in turn, establishes a site of conflict when these institutions are viewed as engaging in activities ancillary to or otherwise contradictory to their missions.

The notion that our students arrive as a *tabula rasa* for us to work with has never held up under scrutiny. Still, many of our students will nevertheless arrive having experienced classrooms warped by the gravitational pull of modern conservative ideologies. These ideologies suggest that the classroom is limited to the immediate intellectual concerns of the discipline or subject, and civic participation is itself taboo. A large influence on these suggestions is the educational nonprofit PragerU. The Prager University Foundation, colloquially known as PragerU, is a 501 (c) (3) nonprofit which aims to "promote American values through the creative use of digital media," through their "primary program [of] marketing and producing educational content for all ages, 4-104, with a focus on a Pro-American, Judeo-Christian Message" (Prager University Foundation Form 990 4a). Despite the naming convention, PragerU produces media targeted at several age demographics, not just young adults. Their PragerU Kids programming provides material that aims to inform children about civics, history, literature, and personal finance across K-12 grade levels. Following the Trump administration's defunding of the

Corporation for Public Broadcasting in the summer of 2025, PragerU has attempted to fill the void of public children's entertainment left by the dismantling of PBS, promoting what they assert is a fact-based form of "edutainment" (Streit qtd. in Beck).

These are paired with various lesson plans to incorporate the videos into state curricula to meet their learning outcomes. Currently, nine states, including Texas, Florida, and New Hampshire, have listed PragerU as an approved educational resource and produced documents detailing their integration with expected learning outcomes. These include videos with partisan overtones such as "Why the 3/5ths Compromise Was Anti-Slavery" (Swain), "If We Lose John Locke, We Lose America" (Shapiro), "Was it Wrong to Drop the Atomic Bomb on Japan?" (Miscramble), and "Is America Racist?" (Elder). These videos are part of PragerU's Five-minute Video series and are all listed as approved materials for use in Louisiana classrooms as part of the US History curriculum. The Five-Minute Video series features notable conservative politicians, pundits, and intellectuals offering brief lectures with the purported purpose of educating general audiences; however, these videos are not shy about attempting to draw connections to modern politics through the lens of history. Ben Shapiro, in his video about John Locke, demonstrates this connection by asserting that Locke's philosophy, summarized within the maxim "Don't Tread on Me," is integral to any continued vision of the United States and that: "today, Locke's ideas are under full-fledged assault. There are many Americans who believe that human beings are not created equal – that we should treat people differently based on their group identity… And there are many Americans who believe that government should have almost unlimited power." While Shapiro does not necessarily point the finger at Democrats or liberals in this video, considering PragerU's use of terms such as DEI as a pejorative

(PragerForce Introduction) elsewhere on the site, it is clear who counts among the "many Americans" Shapiro refers to.

To be clear, the issue with Shapiro's video and most of PragerU's catalog is not their existence. The problem lies in how PragerU's videos are framed as educational and, therefore, factual, while further legitimized by their association with state education systems. PragerU was also granted authority to develop tests for the State of Oklahoma to administer to teachers whose licenses originate in New York or California. This was to ensure that these teachers did not incorporate any non-approved ideological positions originating from out of state in their classrooms. Ryan Walters, the state superintendent of Oklahoma from 2023 through September of 2025, describes the need for the test as follows:

> As long as I am superintendent, Oklahoma classrooms will be safeguarded from the radical leftist ideology fostered in places like California and New York. Any teacher coming from these states will be required to pass our new PragerU assessment before receiving certification, because we refuse to let Gavin Newsom's woke, Marxist agenda turn Oklahoma into the same dumpster fire California has become. (qtd. in Stengle and Hollingsworth)[47]

Once again, the split is between ideology and fact, with facts viewed as lacking ideological significance. PragerU may not be considered a *de jure* educational institution in the same way as a university, but it has successfully gained *de facto* status through its association with state governments. Not only are they able to produce curricula, but they also enter the discourse as a site for constructing facts about the world – a site usually reserved for the modern university.

[47] Walters abruptly resigned from office to pursue a position as CEO of the Teacher Freedom Alliance, an organization aimed to oppose teacher's unions and promote civic values in the classroom. Walters' successor as superintendent, Lindel Fields, later stated that no state funding had been granted to PragerU and the test was scrubbed from any state websites (Evans).

And most troubling of all is that they seem to be attempting to conflate the conservative ideology with fact itself – imbuing both with a complementary rhetorical significance: Conservatism is true because it is factual; a fact is information which aligns with conservatism. In addition to questions centered on basic civics such as "What are the two parts of the U.S. Congress," and "What are the first three words of the Constitution" (Denison) the test also asks multiple choice questions on matters such as gender asking: "What is the primary biological distinction between males and females? A. Height and Weight, B. Hairstyle, C. Personal preference, or D. Chromosomes and Reproductive Anatomy" and "At birth, how is a person's biological sex identified? A. Personal Feeling, B. Parental Choice, C. Online Registration, or D. Visual Anatomical Observation and Chromosomes" (Beck 8:28). The actual efficacy of this test as a tool to evaluate competency would be abysmal. Any adult with the ability for pattern recognition would be able to guess the correct answer in the context of the test – D for both questions. The test also does not allow a taker to proceed to the next question until the "correct" answer is selected, making it impossible to fail. But like Trump's executive order on gender discussed in Chapter 3, the purpose of the test is disconnected from the typical purposes of this genre. It is more about presenting the conservative perspective as fact. As commentator Glenn Beck asserts in his conversation with PragerU CEO Marissa Streit: "This [test] only gets hard if you are completely disconnected from science and reality." (9:02). This begs the question of who this test is designed for? The questions themselves are, by Prager U's own admission, the kinds of facts a child would know (Beck 9:35). Streit claims that: "Part of what this test is doing is that it is recalibrating what is happening in the classrooms. It's reminding teachers to focus on what matters. It's reminding teachers to actually look at the world through common sense. And sadly, the teacher indoctrination centers – which are basically the teachers' seminaries, the colleges for

teachers- have been turning the world upside down and training these young teachers to go into these classrooms. And you're lucky if they know nothing. The problem is the Marxism they're being taught." (qtd. in Beck 10:30-11:10) The test is intended as a warning to those who take it. It serves no evaluative purpose because it only constructs a strawman for conservatives to argue against. But as a ritual – a task that educators must complete to work in the state's system – it becomes a means of communicating the government's values and issuing an implicit warning against doing more than the government views education to be: the banking concept.

PragerU's movement into educational systems, at a time when these systems are under renewed attack by the political right, demonstrates a broader vision of the purposes of education. These visions involve teaching only the right kinds of materials, which are often framed by their supposed correspondence with objective reality. Political pundit Rush Limbaugh in 1993 writes several criticisms of education, including that elementary-aged children are taught the existence of same-sex relationships (195-196) and that young adults have not gained the kinds of knowledge they should have, especially in relation to foundational literacy and numeracy. Limbaugh refers to (without a complete citation) a University of Pennsylvania survey that he says finds that a majority of a sample of 3000 Ivy League students could not recite answers to simple questions like who the current Speaker of the House is or identify Thomas Jefferson as the primary author of the Declaration of Independence (190). When Limbaugh jabs that "' equality' has surpassed 'quality' as the number-one goal of our education system, we can find the antecedent to the current row over DEI programs in schools.

The political right's polemics against educational practices, especially those in higher education, are not new. Lauren Lassabe Shepherd traces the history of these grievances through developments within the mid-twentieth century. Most notably, Shepherd describes how, during

the 1960s, students supported by wealthy Republicans who had opposed the New Deal engaged in an "astroturf" backlash movement in response to the anti-war and Black Power student movements that had found a place on college campuses. (3). These students, after graduating, found spaces within American politics as officials and strategists influenced by their time as members of organizations like Young Americans for Freedom (YAF).

In many ways, this emphasis on teaching only the course material smacks of an oppressive educational model. Likewise, these discussions of a degradation of student ability echo the response to *Newsweek's* article "Why Johnny Can't Write," which alleges that, along with too much time in front of the TV, children are being let down by the permissive attitudes of the CCCC. Merril Sheils, who wrote "Why Johnny Can't Write," asserts that the original resolution of "Students' Right to their Own Language" demonstrates the slipping of standards in university curricula to the detriment of students. Sheils describes the need for students in "Chicago's Black Ghetto" to learn the ways of what we would call American academic English, which the students in Chicago are chided for considering as "honky talk." Shiels asserts that: "there have to be some fixed rules, however tedious, if the codes of human communication are to be decipherable. If the written language is placed at the mercy of every new colloquialism and if every fresh dialect demands and gets equal sway, then we will soon find ourselves back in Babel." Sheil's initial charge that the "Students' Rights…" resolution represents an absence of rigor in academic assessment and, therefore, a slipping standard seems to foreshadow current attacks from the right on the matter of education.

The right-wing organization Turning Point USA names Asao Inoue on their "Professor Watchlist" to admonish and criticize his work advocating for racial equity in the writing classroom. They also pillory Inoue for his critiques of quality-based writing assessment as a tool

of white supremacy. TPUSA's reasons for placing Inoue on the watchlist are borrowed from a *Daily Wire* article, which starts with the lede "An Arizona State University Associate Dean penned a 358-page book detailing how grading students' writing is a form of racism and white supremacy" (Clark). The article, while maintaining a thin veneer of journalistic impartiality, holds Inoue's book *Labor-Based Grading Contracts: Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Writing Classroom"* as an object of ridicule by hacking away at phrases absent from their context and presenting those quotes to support the kinds of perspectives exemplified by pundits like Limbaugh. It is not difficult to imagine that educators like former Oklahoma State Superintendent Walters would view Inoue's work as part of a wider "woke leftist ideology" that exemplifies teachers overstepping their bounds. While Clark makes no explicit judgment on the book's credibility, the article's context does all the heavy lifting to steer the audience's opinion in a particular direction. The result is an argument absent of words: the same kind of dogwhistling as regularly employed by Trump. The argument relies on presenting only the facts in the form of the book's text and details about Inoue's upbringing and career taken from his blog. Still, through this absence of an assertion, the assemblage of facts leaves the audience to draw their conclusions based on incomplete evidence masquerading as independent reportage. This artful manipulation of the facts, something that could be called neither lying nor bullshitting per se, displays the gap between these modes of communication. Clark removes all context from Inoue's work to make passages describing the need for labor-based grading seem absurd. It is telling that Inoue's response to this article, as described by Clark, is to consult the book for answers: Clark clearly had no intention of understanding the material and instead engaged in cherry-picking evidence to support a narrative of teachers running amok. She obviously did not read the book.

What the PragerU, TPUSA, and *Daily Wire* examples collectively demonstrate is not simply that the political right has a pattern of attacking educators– that is well-established and hardly surprising. The deeper point is that these attacks succeed precisely because the neoliberal framing of education-as-outcomes has already evacuated the language needed to defend education's broader purposes. When education is defined by what students can demonstrably do upon completion, the argument that writing classes should cultivate democratic agency, critical consciousness, or the capacity for ethical judgment becomes difficult to sustain within the metrics that institutions have adopted to justify their existence. How does a teacher reduce any of these concepts to fit within a rubric or a syllabus? The right's interventions exploit a vulnerability that higher education has created through its own accommodation of competency-based logic.

I bring up TPUSA and *Daily Wire's* responses to labor-based grading because it demonstrates that the field of writing studies can be a target for right-wing attacks on higher education in much the same way that fields like Critical Race Theory function as targets and are used to manufacture the exigencies for the dismantling of higher education. Writing studies occupy a unique position in relation to Limbaugh's diatribe. While Limbaugh frames education as needing to focus more on the Three R's of "readin,' ritin', and 'rithmatic (194), writing studies as a field has included several important attempts to address inequality within classrooms due to disadvantages caused by class, race, gender, sexuality, and other markers of identity. Additionally, the rhetorical tradition, which stretches back to the great "western" civilizations that those on the right point to as a lodestar, involves pedagogical practices that seek to shape the moral character of students as much as the educational character. Limbaugh's other chapters aim for college faculty and theorists who advance what he sees as seditious and antithetical to

American life. While nowhere in Limbaugh's book will you find the word "woke," we can observe the structures that will later morph into the rhetorical strategies of the modern right in discrediting academic ideas within the public forum.

The narrow construction of writing education is not necessarily novel, nor is it isolated to American conservatism. The idea of limiting the writing class to only writing is most clearly articulated in Stanley Fish's 2008 book *Save the World on Your Own Time*. Fish, directing his message toward a broader conception of education but giving special attention to those in the liberal arts, distinguishes the curricular and the extracurricular. One is the teacher's job – the other is everything else. To say that Fish takes a narrow view of education's purpose is overly broad. The professor, according to Fish, is responsible for two tasks: "Introduce students to bodies of knowledge and traditions of inquiry that had previously not been part of their experience (12) and "equip those same students with the analytical skills—of argument, statistical modeling, laboratory procedure—that will enable them to move confidently within those traditions and to engage in independent research after a course is over" (13). He implores teachers to stop attempting to work in other fields and instructs that their job is to: "show up for their classes, prepare lesson plans, teach what has been advertised, be current in the literature of the field, promptly correct assignments and papers, hold regular office hours, and give academic (not political or moral) advice (19). Put simply, teachers should stay in their lane. But that lane is in the position of telling the truth with Fish writing: "If you're not in the pursuit-of-truth business, you should not be in the university" (20). It is telling that he presents the university as the site where truth is produced and, therefore, as a site where lower political squabbles are inappropriate. Instead, the kinds of truths produced in the university are narrow, limited to specific disciplines and domains, while others are to be determined by legislatures or courts (32-

35). This argument that educators should stay in their own lane bears a striking resemblance to the current strategy employed by organizations like PragerU and TPUSA; in both cases, the academic is constructed as shirking their responsibility to uncover truth through research using approved discipline-specific methods and to communicate that truth through teaching.

When it comes to writing, Fish takes a similarly narrow stance, recommending that the context of the classroom necessitates an objective understanding of language and its rules; as such, it should teach "grammar and rhetoric and nothing else" (45). What Fish proposes is a mechanistic understanding of grammar and rhetoric as the object of study itself: that students must know the rules of language to communicate, and the roots of this are in the similar narrative of the Johnny can't write argument. Because students are told to express their opinions on matters without metalinguistic knowledge of the parts of the sentence, the resulting ideas, according to Fish, are irrelevant. He offers the example of a 31-year-old law student whom he instructs in identifying the parts of a basic sentence by assigning grammatical labels of subject, object, verb, and adverb while comparing sentences. Fish describes the practice as a "Sesame Street exercise," but one that is necessary because the student, who, it bears repeating, is an adult man who had already graduated from college, did not possess the analytical methods Fish asserts are necessary to write. Fish argues that a writing education[48] must teach a student to write, meaning formalized metalinguistic knowledge of grammatical structure and, presumably, rhetorical structure as well. In attempting to define the boundaries of composition and rhetoric as separate disciplines, as Bizzell asserts in her response to *Save the World…* (96), Fish establishes a framework for political intervention in writing studies that we see carried out by TPUSA and in

[48] Fish asserts in his response to the criticism of *Save the World…* that learning to write would involve the structural knowledge described here which forms a foundation for the student to learn rhetoric and argument (Fish "Response" 99-100).

the implicit threat posed by PragerU. The wider myth of Johnny can't write is attributed to a professoriate that refuses to do their job. Instead, these teachers spend their time holding to a phony (according to conservatives) perspective of institutional racism and not addressing the real problems. It is not necessarily the case that the teaching of writing will, overnight, transform into Fish's classes on grammar and formal rhetoric. But there is ample evidence to consider that, as part of the wider conservative reshaping of higher education that has become a hallmark of Trump's second term, we may see renewed pressures to move in that direction.

Fish's pedagogical model, since the writing of *Save the World…,* has seen renewed interest among right-wing intellectual circles and within sites of this conservative transformation of academia. While *Save the World*… explicitly makes clear that he is not in favor of the rhetoric of "intellectual diversity" that the right has used to assert the need for a radical shake-up through government intervention, the book nevertheless resonates. Fish rejects this idea of academic plurality on the basis that the only perspective of the academic is that of truth (119). It is for these reasons that his process of academicizing argument and issues – "to detach it from those contexts where it poses a choice of what to do or how to live" (170)– serves contemporary conservatives well. It quarantines truth into what Peter Wood calls "a caged rabbit." Wood observes that Fish's sincerity in valuing truth contradicts itself through the absurdity of what academicization actually does. In trying to pose an academicized question, we rob the question of its significance and are left to wonder why – why should we even care about that question? Fish might argue that it is the journey rather than the destination that matters; by asking students to participate in an academic method, they become more intelligent individuals as a result and can apply these methods on their own time – better critical thinkers, we might say. However, Wood writes that: "we might pile up hundreds of such questions and look to higher education as

the place where they are rightly posed *as questions*, and as a place where we might reasonably hope to move towards the right answers. But not in Stanley Fish's university. There we can only hope to examine such 'questions' as specimens of rhetoric that can perhaps be analyzed into their parts and connected to other cultural preoccupations." The academic here is the most naïve of the naïve realists – confident in the truth of their own preoccupation, and willing to reject any smattering of ambiguity in favor of what they think can be objectively determined.

Fish's narrow construction of the university's purpose would be merely an academic disagreement – a disciplinary argument on the boundaries of composition theory and praxis – were it not for the political environment it now circulates in. The separation of rhetoric from civic life that Fish advocates has found eager allies among those who wish to redefine what education does, and the convergence is instructive. Notably, Fish has found space within the right-wing educational movement, alongside other educated professionals who bemoan the overrepresentation of leftist ideology in academia. Fish has spoken at the convention of the Heterodox Academy, another multimillion-dollar 501 (c) nonprofit which, like PragerU, has made considerable hay from castigating the university. And the Heterodox Academy has done so through the very argument that Fish has written is incompatible with his vision of the university's mission: intellectual diversity (Fish 119). In a 2024 panel discussion titled *Where is the University Going?* Fish states: "I don't believe that the university should think of itself as being involved in democracy at all. We are not in the democracy business. We are not in the free speech business. We are in the education business" (Heterodox Academy 47:28-47:23). The choice of metaphor is telling. We, the university, are in business: we provide a service in exchange for money. And that purpose is education, as defined by Fish, PragerU, Turning Point USA, and other conservative organizations.

In recent years, Fish has taken a position at New College of Florida, a small public university in Sarasota, which has been at the center of DeSantis's re-envisioning of the state's university system. Fish, when interviewed by the *Chronicle of Higher Education* about his choice to work at a university that had been so mired in political polarization, merely answered, "I'm 85 years old, and someone who asks me to teach courses is a godsend" (qtd. in Gutkin). This is at a time when about a third of the faculty had left NCF, and the school was in the practice of denying tenure for seemingly political grounds (Quinn). For an aged and self-professed apolitical academic, Fish does appear to be involved in several politicized academic projects, whether he would admit to it or not. And this reveals the widest contradiction within Fish's view of the university – we have never transcended politics – and neither has Fish. The university, if constructed as a truth-finding and truth-telling institution, will fall into the trap such a construction necessitates. It reduces the teaching of writing to an anemic grammar tutorial, absent the rhetorical tradition that so heavily values the good person speaking well. Paul Lynch's review of *Save the World…* notes: "Fish doesn't intend this argument for professional writing teachers who know the scholarship. He intends it for a public audience who is already convinced that good grammar is the last hope of the West… This is the audience who is being massaged by his message." And massaged they are indeed, as the political climate now threatens our ability to practice in ways that address the inequities we find important to remedy in our teaching. Fish demands that we stay in our lane and stick to the facts, but the broader history of rhetoric has undermined facts in favor of a deeper focus on fostering virtue in our students. He claims that: "Virtue is not the business of the academy" (Fish qtd. in Gutkin), but it always has been.

Fish's position represents the logical endpoint of the ornamentation model's application to pedagogy. If rhetoric is merely a set of skills for communicating pre-existing truths – if its

purpose is grammar, formal structure, and the arrangement of ideas developed elsewhere – then the teacher's only job is to transmit the rules. And any broader mission is overreach. That this position now finds institutional support alongside conservative movements reshaping universities demonstrates the convergence this chapter has traced: the neoliberal reduction of education to outcomes and the conservative narrowing of education to transmission are not opposing forces. Rather, they complement each other and serve alongside the wider subordination of rhetoric to truth identified in Chapter 2 as the ornamentation model of rhetoric. If we wish to resist this convergence, we will need a conception of rhetorical education grounded in rhetoric's constitutive relationship to truth rather than in its subordination. It must be a conception adequate to the perspectivist framework that this dissertation has developed.

5.4 Critical Consciousness and Betting on Our Students.

The preventive model of writing education frames writing teachers as the bulwark of democracy; however, as the preceding sections show, that image has cracked. Additionally, the argument that we must stay in our lane and abandon any attempt to teach writing at best serves only the neoliberal dimensions of education and, at worst, will prevent our students from recognizing rhetoric's real-world applications. At this point, it seems that there is little recourse left for teachers to truly support democracy and play a significant role in empowering our students. If we do wish to uphold rhetoric's democratic commitments, we will need to reconsider our pedagogy as something other than engendering our own values in our students. We must empower our students without seeking to reproduce our own values in them, and trust that their education will serve them in ways we cannot predict. We must resist the impulses that lead to a

retreat into the comfort of biopolitical control. And finally, we must embrace the aleatory possibilities of rhetorical education.

The alternative I propose here is not merely a different pedagogical technique, but the consequence of the theoretical work performed in the preceding chapters. Chapter 1 redefined post-truth as an epistemic environment produced by the disruption of metaphysical truths rather than the abandonment of fact, demonstrating that the crisis is one of mediation rather than correspondence. Chapter 2 traced the ornamentation model of rhetoric and developed a perspectivist framework through Nietzsche, Foucault, and the sophists that argues rhetoric is not the packaging of truths but the medium of truth's location and existence, where truth becomes socially viable and observable. If this account is correct, then a pedagogy adequate to post-truth cannot transmit truth to students as an object of possession. It must empower students to participate in the rhetorical construction, contestation, and revision of truth in the social world. It is this demand –for a pedagogy consonant with this conception of truth – that leads to Freire and the liberatory possibilities of critical consciousness.

This chapter has described the issues inherent in determining education's purpose as fostering critical thought. But without critical thought, what is left for us to teach and what purpose remains to a liberal education of which rhetoric is a part? Rather than look to critical thinking, which ultimately seeks to homogenize the outcomes of education, I propose substituting Paulo Freire's concept of critical consciousness to manage better the democratic possibilities we ultimately seek to foster through our relationships with our students. The uptake of Freire's work within composition studies has been substantial since the publication of Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in the 1970s. However, as Thomas Giroux suggests, the development of critical pedagogy methods is still important in responding to the state of education today.

Giroux states in a 2013 interview, "According to conservatives, the great sin teachers' colleges have committed in the past few decades is that they have focused too much on theory and not on clinical practice…. Conservatives want public schools and colleges to focus on 'practical' methods to prepare teachers for an "outcome-based' education system, which is code for pedagogical methods that are as anti-intellectual as they are politically conservative" ("A Critical Interview"). The development of organizations like PragerU since Giroux's interview demonstrates that this conservative impulse has not waned. Furthermore, Giroux asserts elsewhere that critical pedagogy stands at odds with neoliberal education models due to the ways teachers are "reduced to the status of technicians" ("Rethinking Education" 715) and in how higher education has redefined itself "as a credentializing factory for students and a Petri dish for downsizing academic labor" (716). Within rhetoric, Patricia Bizzell has suggested that critical consciousness serves as Freire's most important concept for the field of rhetoric (319). James Berlin, likewise, suggests that Freire's work is crucial to the compositionist's pedagogical mission writing:

> Freire provides a rich rationale to support those who argue that literacy ought not be treated as a merely instrumental 'skill,' a useful tool in the mastery of more significant and substantive academic subjects. For Freire, *to learn to read and write is to learn to name the world*, and in this naming is found a program for understanding the condition of our experience and, most important, for acting in and on them. (414 emphasis added).

Naming the world – designating objects and concepts and situating them within the wider systems we call knowledge – is different from having that system imposed on the student as subject. And this makes critical pedagogy within rhetoric a crucial element of the praxis needed

to respond to post-truth. We must encourage students to name – to construct the truth – for themselves; this task can only be accomplished through rhetoric.

Beneath the apparent reasonability and pragmatism of McComiskey's recommendation, the pedagogy he advocates nevertheless demonstrates an unwillingness to engage with the arguments students have brought into the classroom. Freire's concept of critical consciousness (*conscientização*) challenges the metaphors of prevention of possession that structure neoliberal education. Rather than a skill we bestow on our students, critical consciousness emerges through dialogue as an act that allows teacher and student to encounter one another in the register of a shared humanity rather than the social roles both are cloaked in at a given moment. Freire writes: "Propaganda, management, manipulation – all arms of domination – cannot be the instruments of their rehumanization. The only effective instrument is a humanizing pedagogy in which the revolutionary leadership establishes a permanent relationship of dialogue with the oppressed" (68). The language of prevention, as McComiskey employs it, presumes that educators can and should administer reason to those who have, as the teacher sees it, fallen victim to post-truth's deleterious effects. However, by presuming that the solution lies in the argument for the sanctity of past truths, we limit our students' ability to judge for themselves how truth functions as a construct rather than as an object that exists outside human perception. It is one thing to demonstrate that Trump's rhetoric is manipulative; it is another for a student to recognize how such rhetoric acts upon them and to do so through their own processes of mediating knowledge for themselves. This distinction marks the difference between the objective of critical thinking and the enablement of critical consciousness. The former situates knowledge as an object possessed by the teacher and transferred to the student; the latter situates learning as a deeper relationship between the student as subject and the phenomena around them. The student can

come to see themselves as a knower among knowers situated in a milieu of rhetoric and systems of power rather than as a solitary possessor of knowledge who claims dominion over the facts granted to them by virtue of their diploma.

The uptake of Freire within writing studies has highlighted the ways in which critical pedagogy's conception of an emancipatory literacy relates to our praxis of developing students' capabilities in ways that go beyond narrow conceptions of critical thought. Berlin, for example, writes, "Freire has come to stand for a position many of us in English studies have been forwarding for quite some time: in teaching people to write and read, we are teaching them a way of experiencing the world" (417). And this point remains consistent with the argument this dissertation has presented – that language is more than representational; it constructs the very world around us. However, as Gallagher describes, our understanding of writing risks being conscripted and transformed into methods that serve ends antithetical to our own values as educators (22). And so, within neoliberalism, we risk the forms of literacy that we teach metamorphosing from *a* way of experiencing the world to *the* way of experiencing the world. This pattern of reforming writing concepts meant to aid students and using them to disadvantage others is not new. As Victor Villanueva describes the problems that were presented during the application of process pedagogy:

> "Hegemony can operate by promoting the dominant ideologies as universal. Process approaches have given rise to cognitive explanations of writing, and the cognitive sciences are also given to claims of universality. Cognitive explanations rendered basic writers, most often members of minority groups, cognitively dysfunctional. The cognitive was extended to the social and what emerged was Thomas Farrell's claim that African American youth reside in an oral culture, followed by the assertion that as long as those

from an oral culture remain oral they would be incapable of reaching Piaget's level of formal operations, the ability to form abstract hypotheses." (59)

Farrell[49]'s rationalization of racist notions of linguistic superiority, according to Villanueva, stems from the universalization of a writing process. Similarly, the preventive model of writing education universalizes a conception of rational thought. McComiskey and Johnson's arguments in favor of a preventive rhetorical education develop a universalized element to critical thought — that the types of engagement with texts that we teach are themselves proper, due to more than the ends they achieve. They are necessary for democracy itself. The issue with that argument is that it forces the student to adopt the methods codified as critical thought out of a need to belong to the group rather than through their own desire to participate in society on their own terms to understand the world around them. By clinging to critical thought as a method, we dismantle the very processes of liberation that critical pedagogy aims to develop for our students.

Freire's account of critical consciousness begins with the premise that a leader does not grant the revolutionary impulse toward liberation but comes about through the oppressed's journey toward humanization (66-68). A pedagogy rooted in humanization, rather than in prevention and biopolitical control, must create the conditions for dialogue in which students discover how rhetoric functions upon and through them. Freire describes the distinction between biophily and necrophily – terms borrowed from the sociologist/psychoanalyst Erich Fromm– and their relationship to his banking concept of education. The reduction of students to mere objects in the system leads to a necrophilous desire to possess and control students in some form (Freire 88). Necrophilous education seeks to dominate and ultimately restrain life's outcomes by

[49] Farrell's claim comes from his 1983 article in CCC "IQ and Standard English." For more on the issues on Farrell's argument see Villanueva "The Basic Writer as Reluctant Oralist," and Greenberg et al "Responses to Thomas J. Farrell, 'IQ and Standard English"

rendering the student as an object: as a repository of the data of the regime, a series of data points and educational pathologies for assessment, or as a grouping of outcomes to be attained. Neoliberal education is at its core necrophilious. It seeks to dominate and manage outcomes through biopolitical power, and to enable that power, it figures facts as a site that the educational body controls and metes them out to the ends designated by the system. The banking concept of education – Freire's term for the relationship between teacher and student of depositing and reproducing knowledge upon request – supplements this by viewing education as merely the transmission of facts and by limiting the significance of those facts within a greater scheme. Freire describes this as a reverence for "the sonority of words, not their transforming power" (71). To return to Nietzsche's understanding of language described in Chapter 2 of this dissertation, Freire here observes that within the banking concept and within necrophilious education is the domination of the metaphor itself. The metaphor contained by language is no longer metaphoric but truthful. The truth may seem to display the thing in itself, but what Freire describes here is the educator's propensity to become lost in the maze of language, revealing a failure to recognize the greater possibilities of a biophilious education. Freire continues to write: "'Four times four is sixteen; the capital of Pará is Belém.' The student records, memorizes, and repeats these phrases without perceiving what four times four really means, or realizing the true significance of "capital" in the affirmation "the capital of Pará is Belém," that is, what Belém means for Pará and what Pará means for Brazil" (71). If what we wish is to truly enable our students to "trump Trump" (Tallis qtd. in McComiskey 8). – that is, to be strong enough not to be sucked into his demagogic orbit – we must trust our students to be equal contributors to this thing we call truth. We must bet on them.

Throughout this chapter, I have argued that the post-ruth phenomenon exposes deep contradictions in modern education's relationship to democracy. Preventive models of rhetorical pedagogy, though animated by a deep-seated commitment to democracy's flourishing, often reproduce the same neoliberal assumptions and metaphysical naivety that have given rise to rhetors like Trump. Critical thinking, as institutionalized through outcomes statements and assessment rubrics, becomes a biopolitical technology of regulation. One that directs students toward the possibilities that benefit the market rather than their own self-governance or liberation as they deem fit. The convergence of neoliberal outcomes logic and conservative attacks on education's broader purposes has narrowed the space within writing studies in which teachers can fulfill their democratic commitments. And the preventive model, far from resisting this convergence, is structured by the same subordination of rhetoric to truth that enables it.

This argument brings the dissertation's theoretical work to bear on the conditions of our practice. The crisis of mediating perspectives today and the development of the ornamentation model in the Western rhetorical tradition in the past demonstrate the necessity of an orientation in our own teaching practices. If rhetoric constructs rather than transmits the truth, then an education in rhetoric cannot rely on a division of false and true rhetorics. It must instead be the cultivation of a student's capacity to contribute to the communal formation of truth. The preventive model fails because it understands truth as singular, external, and accessible to the educated observer. It replicates the objectivism that produces post-truth conditions and does so with a neoliberal bent. The order of neoliberalism is to control the market, and it can do so through biopolitical methods. Foucault writes, "Ultimately, the idea that the essential function of society or the State, or whatever it is that must replace the State, is to take control of life, to manage it, to compensate for its aleatory nature, to explore and reduce biological accidents and

possibilities" (*Society* 261). We offer critical thinking as a method to rein in these aleatory events — to deny the flourishing of life in education out of fear of such chance events. Competency-based education principles ultimately demonstrate the fear inherent in biopolitics — the fear of the revolutionary effects of our teaching. By reducing education to outcomes, we deny our students true possession of the products of their education; instead, they are only permitted to lease these outcomes from us.

If we are to serve our students to the fullest of their potential, we must embrace the risk that comes with their empowerment. Specifically, the risk that the student will not apply the knowledge and skills we help them develop in the ways we have fully anticipated. However, these concerns are as old as the teaching of rhetoric itself. Isocrates speaks to this moment of being torn between a conservative desire to maintain the status quo and the need to enable students to respond to an ever-shifting set of circumstances that the teacher could never prognosticate. Brooke Rollins, in reading Isocrates, describes what she calls the promises of his rhetorical curriculum. Rather than outcomes – the kinds of rote forms of student development that would be analogous to the methods Isocrates critiques in *Against the Sophists* – Rollins claims that the transformative nature of Isocratean pedagogy included the conditions for students to transform in ways that the teacher could not possibly anticipate fully. Rollins writes:

> Who emerges on the other side of Isocrates's rhetorical training? On the one hand, Isocrates knows exactly who they are, or at least he says so. He claims that they are rhetorically, ethically, and politically astute citizens: they are a credit to Athenian democracy and their actions a benefit to its people. But on the other hand, Isocrates does not know them at all, and he cannot even imagine who they might be. He can never know for sure the precise choices and actions that ultimately amount to this rhetorical acumen.

> This is because, long after his students have left Isocrates's concerned and attentive tutelage, they alone must make their rhetorical, ethical, and political decisions. The best Isocrates can hope for is that he has helped develop in them the *capacity* to respond to the infinite rhetorical and political demands that come their way. (120-121 emphasis original).

Isocrates, though deeply devoted to a telos of moral excellence in his students, represents a premodern method of managing the student/teacher relationship that eschews the biopolitical demands of outcomes restrained by their specificity. Biopolitics aims to know the future. Through rational methods, future outcomes are distilled from the wider ocean of possibilities into those the state deems suitable for its continued exercise of power. This model of writing education is biophilious precisely because it replaces an education that ends with the attainment of exact knowledge with one of indeterminate development. What that development looks like can never be fully defined. What our students do with their education – and I do mean *their* education, as we only provided the conditions for students to develop – is theirs to decide. The surreptitious regulation of these outcomes through a biopolitical model of CBE only serves to engender the conditions in which the pedagogies of organizations like PragerU will flourish.

It was never the aim of this chapter to provide writing instructors with a fully formed pedagogy. Instead, we must consider questions before implementing teaching methods. Questions that specifically challenge our mission to educate students in rhetoric, writing, reasoning, and communication. What has become apparent in recent years is that our relationship to truth is far more precarious than our naïve realities had suggested. And at this point, all that is left is to bet on our students. If biopolitics is, as Foucault suggests, an attempt to control the aleatory events of the future, then those methods, when applied to the context of education,

demonstrate a kind of education that Freire would call necrophilious. The key to cutting through this entanglement of biopolitical and educational interests is to reject the notion that we can control outcomes. Rollins concludes her reading of Isocratean pedagogy by suggesting that what Isocrates commits to is a bet. That despite his deep conservative commitments towards the moral cultivation of his students and extension of the wider political body, Isocrates "wagered the thing that he seemed to hold most dear – virtue –for the chance of ethics, for an openness to otherness that puts that both subjectivity and moral ground at risk" (133). The neoliberal edict is to know and to control; risk is a mechanism in which the savvy actor has the knowledge necessary to leverage their bets appropriately. Data, with their representational fervor, transform the bet from mere chance into a broader statistical art. But Isocrates demonstrates a bet in which exact knowledge is useless because a wider justice transcends that which can be anticipated, measured, and controlled. If our students are to be agents in bringing about that which democracy serves as an end to, the development of a more just world, then we too must make this bet and diminish our belief in truth's totality.

I would not suggest that McComiskey is wrong in arguing that we, as teachers of writing and rhetoric, are a necessary component in the maintenance and enablement of democracy in our society. But that does not mean that we must also champion truth in the ways he suggests. The truths we have access to as educators will always be colored by the state, so long as higher education maintains its position within the broader network of debt, grants, vocations, and employment. So long as the university remains a site to which the government directs its citizens, our truth will be the truth of the state. Whether the government finds it convenient to align with academic conventions or chooses to enforce its own truths through academia as a mouthpiece – as we're beginning to see today – matters little. Holding ourselves to both the

demands of democracy and the truths of the state will be an attempt to serve both God and Mammon.

Conclusion

The post-truth crisis is, at its foundation, a crisis of mediation. It is not the case that truth has disappeared from public life or that citizens have become too credulous or too cynical to care about it. Rather, the expectation that truth should be immediately available—legible without interpretation, stable without negotiation, and compelling without rhetoric—has collided with a political reality in which none of these conditions hold. This dissertation has argued that the collision is not new but newly visible. What the events following 2016 exposed is a set of epistemological assumptions so deeply embedded in modern political discourse that they had ceased to appear as assumptions at all. The most consequential of these is naïve realism. Holding objective reality as accessible and language as merely supplemental to reality's transmission has failed to produce a solution to our political crisis. Naïve realism is the thread that connects Trump's performative fabrications to McIntyre's objectivist complaints; Kennedy's demand to let the science speak to his critics' insistence that he simply listen to it; and the writing classroom's institutionalization of critical thinking as a measurable inoculation against deception. Each of these positions, despite their apparent opposition, shares a common refusal to acknowledge that truth is always mediated—always constructed through the rhetorical, institutional, and perspectival processes by which communities come to authorize what counts as knowledge.

The persistence of naïve realism across the political spectrum is what makes post-truth so resistant to the interventions most commonly proposed against it. When truth is presumed to be external to rhetoric, the only explanations available for widespread disagreement are moral ones: someone is either lying or someone is too ignorant to perceive what is plainly there. The objectivist and the demagogue thus become mirror images. Trump exploits naïve realism by

framing his declarations—whether about Springfield's migrants or the name of the Gulf of Mexico—as disclosures of pre-existing reality rather than motivated performatives. His inverted parrhesia depends on the audience's prior acceptance that truthful speech is arhetorical: that the honest speaker merely channels what is already the case. But his critics exploit the same assumption when they treat fact checking as a sufficient political response, as though the disagreement were a matter of faulty transmission rather than competing constructions of significance. Both positions foreclose the possibility that rhetoric is constitutive of truth rather than parasitic upon it, and both are therefore helpless to explain why appeals to evidence so often intensify rather than resolve political conflict.

The theoretical contribution of this dissertation has been to relocate truth from correspondence to mediation. Drawing on the perspectivism that runs from the older sophists through Nietzsche and into contemporary rhetorical theory, I have argued that the ornamentation model of rhetoric—the assumption that rhetoric merely adorns ideas generated elsewhere—systematically obscures the epistemic work that language performs. This is not relativism. It is the recognition that what we call objectivity is itself a perspectival achievement: a particular arrangement of the world that has been rendered intelligible through the rhetorical and institutional practices of specific communities at specific moments in history. Even when those observations are the product of a powerful and measured methods, such as science, they are the still the product of socio-linguistic practice.

The political stakes of this recognition are severe. If truth is always mediated, then the authority to determine what counts as true is never merely epistemological; it is always also an exercise of power. This is the insight that connects Trump's executive orders to Kennedy's anti-vaccination rhetoric and to the neoliberal instrumentalization of education. In each case, the

claim to speak the truth functions simultaneously as a claim to govern: to designate the boundaries of legitimate knowledge, to authorize certain actions while delegitimizing others, and to position those who disagree as not merely mistaken but irrational, dishonest, or dangerous. Trump's renaming of the Gulf of Mexico demonstrates this operation with particular clarity. The executive order does not argue for the name change within an existing framework of evidence; it establishes a new framework in which the change is already settled and opposition to it constitutes dishonesty. Leavitt's insistence that the Gulf's name is a fact rather than a decree collapses the distinction between exercitive and verdictive speech acts, rendering the performative violence of the founding invisible. But the same collapse is present whenever science is invoked as an authority that speaks for itself, independent of the paradigmatic communities that produce and interpret its findings. Kennedy's demand to know the etiology of autism and his critics' demand that he simply accept the existing consensus share a common premise: that science delivers truths so absolute that they require no rhetorical mediation, and that those who disagree must therefore be either corrupt or deluded. The result, in both cases, is the foreclosure of deliberation in the name of a truth that cannot be questioned without marking oneself as an enemy of reason.

This foreclosure is the mechanism through which naïve realism threatens democracy. Democracy is, in its most fundamental sense, a rhetorical practice: a commitment to the negotiation of competing claims under conditions of irreducible plurality. It presupposes that reasonable people can disagree—not merely about preferences or policies but about the very frameworks through which reality is interpreted—and that the work of governance consists in the ongoing, never-completed labor of constructing shared meanings from these incommensurate perspectives. Metaphysical absolutism denies this premise. When truth is understood as singular,

external, and self-evident, disagreement can only be interpreted as pathology—as the failure of transmission or the failure of reception—and the response to pathology is not deliberation but correction. The authoritarian implications of this logic are not hypothetical. They are visible in the Trump administration's conflation of presidential decree with metaphysical fact, in the retaliatory exclusion of the Associated Press for refusing to ratify a name change, in the weaponization of executive authority to redefine citizenship and gender, and in the use of definitional speech acts to transform policy disagreements into questions of loyalty to reality itself. When the state claims a monopoly on truth, dissent becomes synonymous with delusion, and the coercive apparatus of governance is reframed as the corrective enforcement of what was always already the case.

Yet the authoritarian potential of naïve realism is not confined to the political right. The biopolitical dimensions of neoliberal education demonstrate how the same epistemological assumptions can operate through ostensibly democratic institutions. When critical thinking is institutionalized as a measurable outcome—when competency-based models reduce rhetorical education to a packageable set of skills that students either possess or lack—the writing classroom becomes another site where truth is administered rather than negotiated. The preventive model of rhetorical pedagogy, however well-intentioned, reproduces the fundamental structure of naïve realism by positioning the teacher as the authorized possessor of epistemic virtue and the student as a subject to be inoculated against the disease of unreason. This is the banking concept of education that Freire identifies as necrophilious: an orientation toward controlling outcomes that denies students the capacity to construct truth for themselves. And it is precisely this denial that organizations like PragerU exploit when they collapse conservative ideology with factual objectivity and position any deviation from that ideology as evidence of

indoctrination. The neoliberal university and the conservative educational apparatus are not opposed forces; they are complementary expressions of a shared metaphysical commitment to truth as something that can be possessed, transmitted, and enforced.

What, then, must be done to preserve democracy? This dissertation does not offer an answer in the form of clear and direct practice that must be adopted, and it would be disingenuous to pretend otherwise. The very orientation of this project resists the kind of prescriptive certainty that post-truth discourse thrives on. However, I can articulate the theoretical orientations necessary to foster democratic practice and its unknowable futures. The first is that we must abandon the myth that truth is self-executing—that if the correct facts are assembled and presented with sufficient clarity, reasonable people will inevitably converge upon a shared understanding. This myth has never described how knowledge actually circulates in democratic societies, and its persistence has left us without the rhetorical resources to address disagreements that are not reducible to factual error. The second commitment is that rhetoric must be recognized as constitutive of democratic life rather than as an impediment to it. Rhetoric is not the noise that must be filtered out so that the signal of truth can be heard; it is the medium through which citizens negotiate competing claims, construct shared meanings, and authorize the collective actions that democratic governance requires. A democracy that treats rhetoric as merely the ornament of truth is a democracy that has surrendered the very practice by which its citizens might come to understand one another across genuine differences of experience and perspective.

The third commitment concerns education, and it is perhaps the most difficult to realize. If our pedagogies are to serve democracy, they cannot function as instruments of biopolitical regulation that mold students into approved epistemic subjects. They must instead cultivate the

capacity for rhetorical judgment—the ability to recognize that all truth-claims are mediated, that mediation is not a defect but a condition of knowing, and that the work of democratic citizenship consists in the ongoing, never-completed labor of constructing shared worlds from irreducibly plural perspectives. This is not a call for relativism. It is a call for an epistemic humility that acknowledges the rhetorical dimensions of all knowledge without thereby abandoning the discipline of inquiry, the value of evidence, or the necessity of argument. It is, in the terms this dissertation has developed, a call to bet on our students and our fellow citizens – to trust that the capacity for rhetorical judgment, once cultivated, will produce outcomes that we cannot fully anticipate but that are no less valuable for being beyond our control.

Democracy has always been a rhetorical endeavor. Its preservation depends not on the discovery of truths so compelling they eliminate the possibility of disagreement, but on the maintenance of conditions in which dissent remains possible, productive, and oriented toward a shared horizon of justice. The post-truth moment has laid bare the fragility of those conditions. But it has also, paradoxically, disclosed the resources for their renewal. By recognizing that rhetoric is not the enemy of truth but its most significant constructive force, we may yet find our way toward sustaining the plurality that democracy demands. The alternative – the atrophy of political life under the authoritarianism of denying disagreement – is a future that grows all the more plausible. Not only under the increasing pressures generated by the Trump administration, but also those pressures that mount from the backlash. In defeating Trump's lies we may witness the pyrrhic destruction of American democracy as we know it.

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Vita

Biography

Christopher Luis Shosted is a scholar of rhetoric focusing on the intersection of classical and post-modern theory. Christopher's research interest centers on the development of knowledge through rhetoric and how power manifests around those constructions. Christopher also researches the purposes of writing education in a civil society and how teachers can navigate competing interests in the classroom.

Education

Ph.D. English with Rhetoric Concentration, Lehigh University, 2026

Dissertation "Regimes of Post-Truth: Rhetorical Mediations of Knowledge and Fact"

M.A. English, Lehigh University, 2022

Thesis: "Quantitative Data in Writing Assessment – Panacea or Poison? The Biopolitics of Writing Program Development

B.A. English, Moravian College 2020

Honors Thesis "The Rhetorics of Healthcare on Reddit: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Conservative Discourse Communities," Graduated with Honors, Summa Cum Laude

A.A. Liberal Arts: English, Northampton Community College

Graduated with Honors, Summa Cum Laude

Articles and Presentations:

"Moving Past Post-Truth: Developing Strategies to Combat Disinformation" Rhetoric Society of America, 2024

"Quantitative Data in Writing Assessment – Panacea or Poison? The Biopolitics of Writing Program Development," Conference on College Composition & Communication, 2023

"PragerU as Genre: The Alt-Right's Attempt at Education," Xchanges, Issue 14.2, Winter 2019-2020.

Grants, Fellowships, and Assistantships

Dissertation Fellowship, Lehigh University College of Arts and Sciences, 2026

Graduate Assistantship, Lehigh University Writing and Math Center, 2024-2025

Research Completion Mini Grant, Lehigh University Department of English, 2024

Graduate Assistantship, Lehigh University First-Year Writing Program, 2021-2023

Teaching Fellowship, Lehigh University Department of English, 2020-2026

SOAR Research Grant, Moravian College, 2019

Faculty Scholarship, Moravian College, 2019

Phi Theta Kappa Scholarship, 2018

Awards

MarAnn Haller Award, Lehigh University, 2026

> Given to a graduate student in Lehigh's College of Arts and Sciences who has overcome adversity and turned a challenge into motivation to succeed in their academic program.

English Prize, Moravian College, 2020

> Granted by the faculty of Moravian College's English department to a graduating senior who has demonstrated outstanding achievement in the field of English studies.

Zinzendorf Award, Moravian College, 2020

> Given to the student(s) within Moravian College's English department graduating with the highest grade-point average.

Liberal Arts Award, Northampton Community College, 2018

> Awarded to the graduating student with the highest grade-point average in the Liberal Arts program