Writing With Risk: Dangerous Discourses And Event-Based Pedagogies

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WRITING WITH RISK: DANGEROUS DISCOURSES AND EVENT-BASED PEDAGOGIES

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DEDICATION

To all the actors who rearticulate me—extra love to Mom, Dad, and Sandra.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As one who argues that agency is distributed among human and nonhuman actors enmeshed within a complex network, I know that the list of actors to whom I owe a debt of gratitude for writing this dissertation is far too long to list here. However, I would like to mention a few actors whose influence on this project has been particularly influential. First, I would like to thank my family. My parents have helped to encourage and support me without hesitation, even when they probably shouldn’t have. My brothers, sisters, nieces, and nephews have continually shown a keen interest in my work, reminding me that what I do has value beyond my field. Sandra’s grace, strength, and wisdom have been invaluable. Second, I would like to thank my mentors. Mindy Fenske challenged me to perform my arguments, which I continually strive to do. Pat Gehrke has been an enthusiastic and supportive adviser throughout this program. Laurie Gries has intellectually guided this project while also showing me great kindness. And Byron Hawk’s mentorship has been singularly valuable in a way I do not have space to express here. Third, I would like to thank the community at University of South Carolina, including the faculty, graduate students, and staff. I would like to extend a special thank you to members of RSA@USC, First-Year English, those who let me sleep on their couches when I was commuting, the students I was lucky enough to teach, and Laura Thorp. Finally, I would like to thank those actors who offered succor when I felt most harried including my bicycle, the Belgariad, coffee, Charleston Krav Maga, Dungeons and Dragons, my friends, phoenix, and a list of albums too long to list here. Thank you.
ABSTRACT

“Writing with Risk: Dangerous Discourses and Event-Based Pedagogies,” responds to the pedagogical work of scholars such as Susan Wells, Nancy Welch, and Linda Flower by arguing that the risks associated with public writing pedagogies stem from the transformative nature of the rhetorical event that implicates and rearticulates actors through co-production, subverting their assumed autonomy. I argue that each of the three primary vantages of publics scholarship is particularly vulnerable to a certain type of risk aligned to a specific element of the rhetorical situation: idealist scholarship to unintended consequences in which the meaning of the text transforms, activist scholarship to harassment in which the comportment of the audience transforms, and materialist scholarship to demagoguery in which the rhetors themselves transform.

I explore each of the three risks through the case studies that compose Chapters Two, Three, and Four of this dissertation. First, I explain how the meaning of Black Power changed as it was interpreted and co-created by the Los Angeles street gang the Crips, which was then itself multiply interpreted and co-created by a variety of actors. Second, I present Gamergate as an example of how audiences can turn from innocuous to violent before explaining how the alt-right utilizes harassment to build their sphere public. Finally, I analyze the techno-utopian accelerationists to show how publics infatuated with their own terministic screens can move from narcissistic to demagogic.

I end by advocating for event-based pedagogies that address these risks by attuning students to the co-productive and transformative nature of rhetoric. Event-based
pedagogies follow five tenets, asking students to: 1) enable other actors to participate in Life as such, 2) conduct nuanced research that illuminates the complexity of public discourse, 3) be open to the diverse array of opinions and perspectives expressed within and among various publics, 4) adapt positions and arguments in response to new information, and 5) attend to the ways in which new arguments are constructed from elements of prior arguments.
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CHAPTER 1

THE RISKS OF REAL PUBLICS: THE POTENTIAL HARMS OF IDEALISM, ACTIVISM, AND MATERIALISM

In his 2016 review essay “Publics and Intellectuals, both Real and Unreal,” Nathan Crick reviews four books that have been published in the field of Composition and Rhetoric in the last five years: Jay P. Childers *The Evolving Citizen*, Frank Farmer’s *After the Public Turn*, Anna M. Young’s *Prophets, Gurus, and Pundits*, and Samuel McCormick’s *Letters to Power*. Crick notes that each of these books argues that in some vital way the twenty-first-century public is failing to act as the authors believe it should. According to Crick, the authors are only able to make this argument because they have established a dichotomy between a *real* and an *unreal* world. Crick argues that Childers depicts a world in which young citizens no longer participate in the *real* public sphere of day-to-day local politics and instead focus on the *unreal* world of their own interests, Farmer depicts a world in which inauthentic and *unreal* normative politics hide the *real* authentic publics of marginalized groups, Young depicts the media and political class of this country as involved in creating an *unreal* politics for a citizenry whose only hope for being guided back to addressing their *real* concerns lies with public intellectuals, and McCormick depicts a *real* world in which academics exist in too complex a web of power to act as public intellectuals, asserting that anyone looking for academics to become opinion leaders is living in an *unreal* world. In making this critique, Crick identifies not simply a problem for these specific books but for Composition and Rhetoric
more generally: its tendency to create ideals from the complex, contingent, and material networks in which authors compose, texts circulate, and audiences interpret.

Scholars of Composition and Rhetoric seem to believe that publics share a Platonic Form—a common ideal of which material publics are only imperfect representations. If only publics could be more rational, more community-centered, more authentic, and more intellectual, then they would be closer to this ideal. The problem with such an approach is that ideals are misinformed. Idealized spaces of discourse with transparent actors debating each other until the better argument wins out simply on its own merit—spaces in which participants do not tie their own interests, identities, and social positions to their arguments so closely that they are hurt when their positions are attacked—have never existed and could never exist. Such safe conceptions of the public sphere neglect to consider the material lives of public actors, which is why idealize publics have only ever existed in the abstractions of philosophers and glib readings of Jürgen Habermas’s *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Real publics are material, complex, and filled with a myriad of physical, social, and psychological risks both for those actors explicitly operating within the public sphere and the multitude of humans and nonhumans who will be effected by the conversations those actors have. It is because of these risks, not despite of them, that rhetoric is powerful. Rhetoric can change the world in material ways, and if this were not the case, then rhetoric would incur no risk, but it would also be of very little consequence.

Despite the material effects of rhetoric, some scholars in Composition and Rhetoric continue to advocate for discussing publicness in its most abstracted, hyper-rational, and sanitized terms—even when dealing with specific publics composed of
embodied actors. Moving forward, the field of Composition and Rhetoric should acknowledge the material risks of real publics in order to understand their causes and teach students to navigate them prudently and ethically. Such an acknowledgement is a risk to instructors because they may be accused of being too political, too activist, too agitating, and too allied with those whose political and social struggles they support. They may be accused of holding biases for and against students, they may even be put on watch lists. But failing to do so—continuing the penchant for abstraction—risks further alienating students from one another, from instructors, and from the real material publics we all share. Not acknowledging real publics, warts and all, risks stagnating the public sphere by stifling students from understanding the public’s embodied realities, its risks, and its immense capacity for change.

A clear example of Composition and Rhetoric’s penchant for abstracting material publics can be found in the article “The Public Sphere and Rhetorical Criticism” in which Alan Gross takes up the Habermasian line of public sphere theory to argue that the public sphere must “be properly construed as a center of rational debate” that upholds liberal democracy through enabling political discourse (144). Gross explicitly rallies against scholars such as Cara Finnegan and Jiyeon Kang, who “illegitimately extend the scope of the public sphere” beyond rational discourse by discussing art; Kevin Deluca and Jennifer Peeples, who “praise this violence [protesting the 1999 World Trade Organization Ministerial Conference in Seattle] because it garnered media attention;” and Sonja Foss and Martha Solomon, who erroneously argue that the political beliefs of proponents and opponents of the Equal Rights Act led to a political impasse instead of realizing “that the progressive atrophy of the public sphere led to the creation of these separate worlds”
In his response to Gross, “Practicing Rhetoric Beyond the Dangerous Dreams of Deliberative Democracy,” Kevin Michael Deluca argues that Gross is valorizing an ideal public that has never existed, will never exist, and if ever existed would be incapable of creating change. For DeLuca, rhetoric is not only about rational argumentation; instead, “Rhetoric is force. The rhetorician’s task is to understand and deploy forces that transform worlds amidst the cataclysms of our times. It is not to promote a moral vision of an idealized past from which to decry a lacking present” (231). In this response, Deluca flips the binary established by Crick and Gross, arguing that it is not the deficient publics in which we live that are unreal—in fact these publics effect the real world and create new conditions of possibility through material action. Instead, it is the ideal publics imagined by Childers, Farmer, Young, McCormick, Habermas, and Gross that are unreal because they are not lived, embodied, or material. While real embodied publics can be affective, inauthentic, messy, misleading, self-centered, violent, vulgar and most of all risky, these aspects are a part of living in the material world with other actors; this
material messiness is how actions take place in the world. If scholars in Composition and Rhetoric want to understand publics, then they should understand them as they are lived; however, the stakes of this argument are intensified for scholars in Composition and Rhetoric who are interested not only in understanding real public discourse but also in teaching students how to effectively persuade and transform the publics in which they participate. Because of our duty to students, compositionists cannot simply ask how publics work but also should ask themselves how they want to influence students to re-create and rebuild those publics through discourse. Similarly, they should consider what kinds of risks such a pedagogy invites both for instructors and students. To the extent that these questions are framed around publicness and pedagogical risk, they are relatively new; however, as these questions relate to audiences, discourses, and risk, they have been central to considering how compositionists teach writing, even before the word public came into fashion within the disciplinary scholarship.

Composition and Rhetoric Turns Public

Prior to the popularization of the word public, Composition and Rhetoric was interested in understanding the groups in and for which writers composed. Scholars in the field wanted to understand how these groups read texts, how they responded to texts, and how they circulated ideas. Scholars also wanted to know how best to teach students to reach these communities and influence them through discourse. In her 1982 essay “Cognition, Convention, and Certainty,” Patricia Bizzell uses the concept of discourse community to refer to groups with shared “discourse conventions,” “habits of language use,” “expectations,” “ways of understanding the world,” and patterns of “interaction
with the material world” (217-18, 226). The term soon eclipsed Bizzell to become prominent throughout 1980s composition scholarship. Perhaps the most famous of these uses is David Bartholomae’s “Inventing the University” in which he argues that though students realize there are academic discourses with specific conventions, they are unfamiliar with these community norms and find them difficult to learn. The primary convention Bartholomae identifies as a site of struggle for students is how best to establish their authority and create spaces from which to justify their arguments. According to him, students first attempt to build authority by locating themselves as participants within their fields or subjects. Then, as they become more advanced, students mimic the sound of academic prose. Finally, when they actually become members of their discourse communities, students are able to locate their arguments within competing strands of argument, which they navigate to create unique arguments with specific repercussions for specific audiences (623). Pedagogies based on this method of teaching students how to write for abstract scholarly communities became extremely popular with first-year writing instructors, and many composition textbooks still discuss how students can best adapt to college writing, position themselves as academic writers, and establish authority in their research essays. In other words, these textbooks help students to act appropriately in supposedly real discourse communities that act deliberatively and rationally based on their shared values and conventions.

Despite its popularity and longevity, the concept of discourse communities also has its detractors. Compositionists on the political right fear that theories of community and the pedagogies they influence glorify consensus and silence the opinion of free-thinking individual students. For example, Thomas S. Johnson scathingly critiques
Kenneth A. Bruffee’s argument in “Collaborative Learning and the ‘Conversation of Mankind’” that classrooms should operate as communities of consensus by saying, “Do we not here read yet another case of establishmentarian liberalism paving the wide road for authoritarianism? If not, what are the specific, substantive distinctions between collaborative learning and authoritarian leveling toward the norm through peer pressure?” (76). On the other side of the political spectrum, some on the political left worry that community ignores the fact that different students are part of different communities. For example, John Trimbur argues that Bruffee’s notion of consensus is how dominate communities “legitimize their own conversation by marginalizing others” whose discourses, identities, and cultures differ from their own. Trimbur argues that composition classrooms should find consensus not in collective agreement but in “collective explanations of how people differ, where their differences come from, and whether they can live and work together with these differences” (741). The debate in composition then is not only about how real discourse communities function but also about the best ways instructors can organize their classrooms so as to teach students how to enact equitable communities that are as of now still unreal.

The overarching problem with the idea of community from both the political right and the political left is rooted in the same concern: community erases difference both among individuals and cultures. For many, the solution seemed to come in Mary Louise Pratt’s 1991 address to the Modern Language Association, in which she famously critiqued “ideas of community that underlie much of the thinking about language, communication, and culture that gets done in the academy” and characterized them as naïve because they only explain how language functions in homogenous communities
where people all have the same language, dialect, values, interests, norms, and rules (507). Since few communities are so homogenous, Pratt argues that scholars should instead think of language use as the “art of the contact zone . . . spaces where cultures, meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (501). Pratt argues that these contact zones are complimented by *safe houses*: “social and intellectual spaces where groups constitute themselves as horizontal, homogenous, sovereign communities with high degrees of trust, shared understandings, [and] temporary protection from legacies of oppression” (511). This pairing of *contact zones* and *safe houses* quickly gained traction in Composition and Rhetoric, and many scholars still use this analogy to represent not only the real way in which language functions but also how their classrooms should be modeled, with students learning to share their opinions and perspectives with those whose experiences differ from their own. It’s worth noting that due to its popularity, Pratt’s essay is still included in a variety of introductory composition readers. Still, the concept has been critiqued for paying little attention to the ways in which contact zones can become brutal spaces as people choose not to engage with other cultures but rather to reaffirm their beliefs in their safe houses and use the contact zone as a space solely for combatting those with whom they disagree. Critics are concerned both as to whether or not this is how groups really act and if this is the culture of discourse Composition and Rhetoric instructors should be propagating.

In his 1997 book *A Teaching Subject*, Joseph Harris dedicates his last chapter to critiquing Pratt’s notion of the contact zone, which he refers to as a “romanticized . . .
neo-Marxist utopia” (123). Harris begins his critique with what was at the time a standard argument against Pratt that was established by scholars such as Richard Miller: how should teachers running their classrooms as contact zones respond to ideas that are blatantly offensive or violent? Pratt’s essay only deals with dissent that is either cheeky and cute or exotic and sympathetic; she gives little mention to the types of bigoted sentiments students often share in class—sentiments that are becoming more prominent in the age of Trumpism. Rather than being alleviated through contact zone pedagogies, Harris argues that the problems of bigoted sentiments, confrontation, and violence are compounded in contact zone classes because students are encouraged to think of themselves not as members of the class but as members of different safe houses that meet together in the classroom space to debate the validity of their opinions. To utilize Crick’s distinction, students feel as if they each belong to their own real publics outside of the classroom and only enter into the unreal diversity of the classroom to argue with others. There is little about the shared space of the contact zone classroom itself that promotes productive conversation, shared culture, common interests, or even the need to just get along with one another; instead, the contact zone is a balkanized place of conflict that discourages empathy and compromise in favor of surface level discussions of difference.

Discussions of difference that lack empathy and understanding are disturbing not only because they offer platitudes rather than a significant space for discourse to students attempting to share their embodied experiences of the world but also because those students who express abhorrent ideas are regularly ostracized from the classroom instead of being encouraged to think outside their hateful mindsets. As Harris argues, the lack of community within the contact zone teaches students to repress, rather than rethink, their
positions. Students are able to merely stifle their actual opinions and save them for when they re-enter their safehouses, which they feel are their real publics. Harris evidences this characterization of the contact zone not only with examples from the classroom but also from academic departments, journals, and business offices. These examples reinforce the idea that contact zones may indeed be the real way groups communicate with each other, but the question remains whether or not they represent the kinds of communicative groups composition instructors want their students to recreate, especially when contemporary researchers such as Steven Pinker believe that these types of spaces, in which participants are not willing to engage others by explaining their own positions, enable the rise of blatantly false counter positions. If such siloed spaces are the not what instructors want to reproduce either inside their classrooms or in the public sphere, then they need to ask themselves if there is a way to conceptually merge the understandings of real communication practices with the unreal groups they would like to see manifested not only in their classrooms but also in the broader culture.

In response to this question, Harris offers an alternative to the contact zone by identifying another real way that embodied humans in the material world relate to one another through discourse: the public. Harris argues that publics are groups of strangers connected by shared interests and concerns that transcend the individual cultures and identities that compose them. If communities are generally seen “in far too romantic, organic, and pastoral terms [as] . . . small closely knit villages—where everyone pretty much shares the same set of values and concerns,” then Harris’s public is a large, chaotic industrial city where people remain mostly anonymous in their dealings with each other. The public is a place where people get along despite their differences, not because of
their commonalities (108). Building on American philosopher John Dewey’s conception of the public, Harris acknowledges that power imbalances are present in such spaces, and he takes them seriously, defining the public as “a place where differences are made visible and thus where the threat of conflict or even violence is always present. This means that we need to resist moves to romanticize conflict in order to argue for something more like civility, a willingness to live with differences” (109). Civility is not being used here as an excuse for keeping the status quo, but rather as a way of using diverse discourse practices outside of violence to create more equitable publics. This description harkens to Susan Wells’s influential article “Rogue Cops and Health Care,” in which she argues that real public communication makes salient all differences, including power dynamics, which invites risk. Despite these risks, Wells argues that publicness should tap into shared concerns that transcend visions of community to make sustainable, negotiated agreements between different people with interrelated concerns. This publicness is not an abstracted ideal; rather, like Deluca, Wells is describing a real lived and embodied publicness. Unlike Deluca, however, Wells’s public avoids violence by continually renegotiating and reproducing itself, and she sees compositionists as having an important role to play in teaching citizens how to continually build and rebuild the publics of which they are members.

Early in her article, Wells argues that if composition instructors imagine their students as potential public actors, then they have to “build, or take part in building, such a public sphere; [instructors and students must realize] that the public sphere is always constructed; and that it cannot, in our society, be unitary” (326). The public sphere is enacted through the interactions among various actors—speakers and audiences
producing, remixing, and circulating a variety of texts among themselves in the material world. These discursive practices create complex networks of people connected by discourses with which they may agree or disagree and with which they will participate differently using a diversity of media, modes, languages, experience, understandings, etc. Through participation, however, actors also change how the networks of which they are distinct parts function, which has material effects for the human and nonhuman actors within the public. As Wells explains:

[T]he public is neither noble nor inherently oppressive. The cynicism that we encounter daily in our students and ourselves responds to a fragmented and contradictory public, a public that must be constructed and reconstructed, that requires multiple negotiations and positions for every possible speaker. (333)

With each new actor who participates in it, the public is remade in ways that may range from hardly perceptible to quite obvious. As the public influences individual actors in ways that might protect its collective identity, these actors are simultaneously relating to the public in ways that project their individual identities onto it. The continual give and take between individuals and the complex network of actors that constitutes the public means that real publics are always materially and socially shifting, an abstract principle that itself seems unreal.

Since composition instructors train students to participate in the public sphere, they play a double role in creating publics not only through their own public actions but also the influence they have on students. To ensure that the real publics our students effect are constructed thoughtfully, Wells suggests four practices for teaching public participation: running the classroom as a public, studying public texts, having students
write for the public, and studying how various disciplines write for public audiences. These practices teach students how to reproduce the public sphere through their participation within it not only by studying a variety of texts that imagine and engage the public differently but also through the creation of public or potentially public texts. For example, students in a science oriented public writing classroom may examine the writing in Richard Dawkins’s *The Oxford Book of Modern Science Writing* in order to understand how scientists write for people beyond their field, and then they might practice turning their own research into popular press articles. When such practical methods of education are accompanied by the abstract and theoretical concepts that have traditionally composed a rhetorical education, then these courses teach students how to operate within *real* publics and use their discourse practices to make them more closely resemble *unreal* publics. Instructors in such classrooms not only teach students how to thrive in existing publics but also provide them with the tools and insights necessary for making those publics more closely resemble the discursive networks of readers and writers that have been idealized by compositionists at least since Patricia Bizzell coined the term *discourse communities*.

**Idealist, Activist, and Material Publics**

Since the late 1990s when Susan Wells and Joseph Harris were initially focusing on the concept of publicness—as opposed to discourse communities or contact zones—as a way to understand the contexts in which people compose, distribute, and circulate their messages, both the metaphor of the public and the practice of having students write for specific publics began to proliferate. While it is difficult to say with absolute certainty
why this concept became so popular, the term has three characteristics that make it particularly attractive to compositionists: 1) publicness has ancient roots that are entwined with the democratic practices of ancient rhetoricians that Composition and Rhetoric touts as its intellectual forbearers such as Aristotle, Isocrates, Cicero, and Quintilian; 2) publicness acknowledges Composition and Rhetoric’s image as a discipline dedicated to teaching students civic values in the line of John Quincy Adams, James Berlin, Edward P.J. Corbett, Sharon Crowley, and Susan Miller, and 3) publicness brings with it a long line of Marxist materialist and new materialist philosophers whose texts can inform Composition and Rhetoric’s understanding of what it means to operate in a public space such Hannah Arendt, Jane Bennett, John Dewey, Michel Foucault, Jürgen Habermas, Emmanuel Levinas, and Bruno Latour. While these attributes have clear moments of overlap—such as contemporary theorists building on the work of the ancient Greeks, or the practices of civic participation being grounded in either ancient democratic or eighteenth-century liberal ideals—the different emphases of each has led compositionists to approach the study of publicness from three different vantage points: idealist, activist, and materialist. Understanding these vantage points, their orientations toward the subject, and the types of scholarship and pedagogies they produce can help contemporary compositionists not only understand how the field has understood publicness but also what models of publicness are currently being discussed in Composition and Rhetoric scholarship.

The first of the three vantage points for studying publicness—idealist—has historically been ethically oriented; it asks, “How can public rhetoric be used to propagate just democracies?” and it uses specific case-studies to diagnose and treat
problems within the real public sphere. Sharon Crowley’s *Toward a Civil Discourse*, which argues that a rhetorical approach to argumentation can be used to negotiate the deliberative stalemate in the United States between rational liberal subjects and fundamentalist Christians, serves as a strong example of this kind of scholarship. The second vantage point—activist—has historically been political; it asks “What are the actual practices, discursive or otherwise, that public actors use to negotiate the power structures in which they live; how can these practices be taught to students?” and it uses case-studies to understand the development and outcomes of specific rhetorical practices so as to teach students how to politically participate in the contemporary public sphere. Nancy Welch’s *Living Room*, which studies the rhetorical practices of working class political movements in order to teach these types of practices to students, serves as a strong example of this kind of scholarship. Finally, the third vantage point—materialist—has historically been ontological; it asks “What is a public; who are its members?” and it uses case-studies to push the accepted boundaries of how we understand publicness. Laurie Gries’s *Still Life With Rhetoric*, which uses new materialist philosophies to consider the *Obama Hope* image as a rhetorical actor who transforms and is transformed by the other actors among whom it circulates, serves as a strong example of a contemporary version of this kind of scholarship. Each of these vantages then creates a very different model of the public sphere.

The ethical orientation of idealist scholarship—used by scholars such as Robert Asen and Daniel C. Brower, Jay P. Childers, Gerard Hauser, and Michael Warner—presents an idealist model of an equitable and peaceful public sphere that is generally rooted in the ideals of discursive democracy. This type of work is primarily conducted by
scholars in Communication but is often cited and built upon by those in Composition such as Frank Farmer, Jenny Rice, and Christian Weisser. The idealist model of publics scholarship approaches publics as groups of peers engaged in rational-critical discussions about shared problems. Idealist scholars are heavily invested in defining the characteristics of publics in order to be able to categorize various groups of people as public or not. An exemplary text of this genre is the title chapter of Michael Warner’s *Publics and Counterpublics*, which defines three different types of publics: the entire population of a polity, the physical audience of an event, and the nebulous network of people who read the same texts. Warner gives seven attributes that define his third type of public, which he characterizes as dispersed, poetic, loosely connected, and relatively cohesive. These publics are built on shared languages and logics, but little attention is given to the material situations that influence members of a public and the dangers they face through their participation. The pedagogical result of this idealized model of publicness focuses on teaching students to create rational and effective arguments.

William Keith and Roxanne Mountford’s “Mt. Oread Manifesto,” typifies the pedagogical goals of idealist scholars. They begin their manifesto with an appeal for merging Composition and Communication programs before arguing that the purpose of rhetorical education should be to instruct students in practical ways to participate in a rational-critical public sphere as active, motivated, and competent democratic citizens.

The political orientation of activist scholarship—espoused by scholars such as David Coogan, Ellen Cushman and Erik Green, Kevin Michael Deluca, Jessica Enoch, Linda Flower, Christina Foust, Paula Mathieu, Nancy Welch, and Susan Wells—presents a practical model of the public as a network that can be manipulated by specific groups to
reach their political goals. This scholarship takes as its exigency that the public is in some aspect broken: people are being excluded, the state is infringing on the rights of people to protest, or privatization is encroaching into public space. In response to these problems, activist scholars find groups and individuals who are using innovative methods to enter into public conversation such as ‘zines, radical cheerleading, blocking intersections with trash, or posting revolutionary poetry. In other words, activist scholars study the practices of oppressed individuals and groups who are utilizing their voices to enter publics and oppose their oppressors. By studying these actors, activist scholars in both Communication and Composition are able to re-define publics and public action.

Pedagogies from this model of publicness vary but generally fall into two categories: 1) teachers who ask their classes to act as publics and by doing so encourage their students to engage in nonconventional and often multimodal forms of communication such as Frank Farmer and Nancy Welch and 2) teachers who encourage their students to leave the classroom and enter the public as members of community organizations or protests such as Jessica Enoch, Paula Mathieu, Phyllis Ryder, and Susan Wells. In the most ambitious form of this pedagogy, scholars may even attempt to collaborate with communities that lack spaces for public discourse to establish community organizations that facilitate such discussions, as in the work of Linda Flower.

Finally, the ontological orientation of materialist scholarship—espoused by scholars such as Marilyn Cooper, Laurie Gries, Byron Hawk, Jenny Rice, Thomas Rickert, Nathaniel Rivers, and Margaret Syverson—presents an abstract model of the public sphere composed of a surprisingly diverse amount of human and nonhuman actors persuading each other in unexpected ways. Currently, this type of scholarship has moved
way from deterministic Marxist materialism, which argues that the material world structures the social world, and toward new materialist approaches of publicness, which argue that the material world influences, but does not determine, the rest of the world. Material objects are seen as rhetorical actors who participate alongside humans in the public sphere. Unlike classic materialism, new materialism can readily be paired with other theories of public discourse, such as the rhetorical situation or circulation, to create new insights, which has led this vantage to become quite popular in Composition and Rhetoric. This popularity is most clearly evidenced by the proliferation of anthologies such as Scot Barnett and Casey Boyle’s *Rhetoric, Through Everyday Things*, Laurie Gries and Collin Gifford Brooke’s *Circulation, Writing, and Rhetoric*, and Paul Lynch and Nathaniel Rivers’s *Thinking with Bruno Latour in Rhetoric and Composition*. Each of these anthologies primarily sees the public as composed not only of humans engaged in various types of communication but also a variety of nonhuman actors who act rhetorically both with humans and among themselves. New materialists take as their exigency the limitations inherent in traditional conceptions of publicness. They argue that idealistic and activist scholars limit their understanding of what counts as both a public and a public actor by focusing too narrowly on humans acting intentionally in specific rhetorical situations. New materialists argue that public sphere scholars should acknowledge the ways in which animals, plants, minerals, images, slogans, and all manner of material objects and forces impact the public sphere.

Rhetoric in materialist scholarship is not about intentional persuasion but rather about the ability of one actor to compel another to act differently. Materialist scholars do not take as their base the same political theorists adopted by their idealistic and activist
counterparts. Instead, they ground their work in conceptions of the social as an enmeshed network composed of actors acting upon and influencing each other from social scientists and new materialist theorists such as Stacy Alaimo, Karen Barad, Jane Bennett, Elizabeth Grosz, Martin Heidegger, Bruno Latour, Brian Massumi, Annemarie Mol, and others. Though this vantage has few pedagogies, those that exist focus on the conditions in which students invent, compose, distribute, and circulate messages. Instructors are encouraged to be more aware of both the environment of the classroom and how they and their students—complete with complex lives and histories—effect complex network in which learning occurs. The goal of education is less about teaching students specific lessons and more about setting the conditions of possibility in which students and instructors can co-create knowledge about certain topics. Similarly, students are encouraged to consider how the environments in which they live affect them and are effected by them; students are often asked to study the rhetoric of objects or to create objects that interact and effect not just human, but also nonhuman, actors.1

It is important to acknowledge that though these three vantages are distinct from one another, complete with unique orientations and models of publicness, they all inform pedagogies that take as a premise that one of the most important aspects of education—particularly of rhetorical education—is to teach students to act as citizens who are able to engage others in discussing and solving complex problems. Idealist pedagogies teach students to create coherent arguments in a variety of media in order to address others within a polity. Activist pedagogies teach students how to directly engage others, either

1 Despite the amount of new materialist scholarship interested in public writing, few pedagogies have been developed from it. I predominantly base my description of these pedagogies on Byron Hawk’s *A Counter-History of Composition*, Nathaniel Rivers’s article “Tracing the Missing Masses,” and Jim Brown Jr and Nathaniel Rivers’s article “Composing the Carpenter’s Workshop.”
through practicing community participation or through mimicking such publics in the classroom. Finally, new materialist pedagogies ask students to take into consideration how material conditions influence rhetorics and how rhetoric can be used to care for often ignored material actors. In all three cases, students are being encouraged to experiment with the available means of persuasion so that they can make change in the world. The core belief that public discourse is valuable and that it is the responsibility of composition instructors to prepare their students for participation within the public sphere is the same, regardless of the vantage point from which any given instructor is operating. If all of these public sphere scholars are correct in asserting that it is the role of composition instructors to teach students how to prepare for the public sphere, then it is vital for us to teach them not only how to make arguments, locate audiences, and navigate the material world but also to be aware of and prepare for the risks associate with publicness. We should instruct students to consider the harms that can emerge from public participation—harms that include but are not limited to violence.

**Dwelling with the Risk of Violence**

Since this dissertation is being written at a large research university for an audience composed primarily of researchers, perhaps the best definition of *risk* I can provide comes from The Belmont Report, which was written by the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research in the wake of the “Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male.” The Tuskegee study was a forty-year research study on the effects of untreated syphilis in Black men. The 600 volunteers for the study, all of whom where poor sharecroppers in
Macon County, Alabama, were told they would be receiving free treatment for “bad blood” as the scientists studied the best cures for the disease. Instead of being cured, participants were actually being refused penicillin, which had already been proven effective in treating syphilis, so that researchers could better understand how the disease developed in the human body. When news about the unethical experiment was published in 1972, there was a mass public outcry, Congressional hearings, an investigation, and a class action lawsuit. One of the outcomes of all these events was the establishment of the Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects, which was intended to prevent such atrocities by establishing guidelines for research on human subjects. The commission established three fundamental ethical principles to guide all research on human subjects: 1) respect for persons, meaning that every subject must provide informed consent based on accurate descriptions of the testing; 2) beneficence, meaning that every precaution must be taken to minimize the risk to volunteers while maximizing the potential benefits to the field of research; and finally 3) justice, meaning that all procedures must be administered fairly and without bias. All of these principles are vital to conducting ethical research, but it is this second one, beneficence, that is most pressing for studies of risk.

While explicating the principle of beneficence in the report, the committee defines risk as the possibility that harm—be it psychological, physical, legal, social, or economic—may occur to the research subjects, their families, or society writ large due to an experiment. The committee acknowledges that all studies are risky, but it argues that there are also risks associated with not conducting studies. In the former case, a subject may die; in the latter case, a disease may not be cured and many may die. For this reason, the committee argues that there needs to be a method for determining when studies are
appropriate. Of course, the specifics of this decision are always contextual and complex, but the basic logic is to measure risk against benefits: a calculation that proves particularly tricky because:

Unlike, “risk,” “benefit” is not a term that expresses probabilities. Risk is properly contrasted to probability of benefits, and benefits are properly contrasted with harms rather than risks of harm. Accordingly, so-called risk/benefit assessments are concerned with the probabilities and magnitudes of possible harm and anticipated benefits.

The potential harms and benefits of research need to be weighed in regards to likelihood, severity, and equitable distribution of both possibilities; however, there are some harms that are never allowed, regardless of the potential benefits. Any risks a test subject encounters must be ready for human testing, necessary for the experiment, and cannot be considered “brutal or inhumane.” In this section, the committee makes a split between violence and risk, though they do not state this explicitly. The final determination is that it is okay for subjects to incur harm so long as that harm is not excessive, intentional, or nonconsensual—i.e. subjects can be harmed, but that harm cannot be violent. By this logic, the Tuskegee experiments were unethical because by intentionally causing unnecessary harm to the research subjects without their knowledge, the researchers were enacting violence onto them; the fact that this violence was of little scientific consequence is beside the point.

Though the difference between harm and violence seems rather clear for researchers in this country, the distinction appears less stark when considering the close connection between violence and rhetoric, a relationship in which each informs the other.
In *Deep Rhetoric* James Crosswhite argues that violence is unique from harm because it has meaning, which is given to it via rhetoric: “Without rhetoric, there can be force but not violence; with rhetoric, the world opens to violence, both the meaningful violence of war and other overtly physical kinds of violence, and the violence whose force does not depend so much on direct physical compulsion as on more purely symbolic power” (162). Violence is not merely a harm; it is a harm that makes meaning as a nonconsensual pain is forced onto a body, and these kinds of harms, according to Crosswhite, set the condition for relatively peaceful rhetorics by demarcating a sphere of discourse surrounded by an otherwise violent world. For Crosswhite, rhetoric and violence are “intimate partners” that “dwell in proximity” to each other across the chasm of three bloody borders. He elucidates this point by retelling Protagoras’s fable about the creation of rhetoric from Plato’s *Protagoras*. Crosswhite argues that when the sophist tells the philosopher his fable in the hopes of convincing the latter that rhetoric is the art that enables people to form cities and live together, he also demonstrates how violence enables rhetoric.

According to Protagoras, when Prometheus and Epimetheus were tasked with equipping animals with the attributes needed for survival (hides, horns, talons, etc.), they ran out of characteristics before providing humans with any power that would enable their survival. In response, Prometheus stole scientific knowledge and fire from Hephaestus and Athena so that humans would not immediately perish, and while these tools did allow humans to survive, our ancestors failed to thrive because they were unable to work with one another as a collective to accomplish shared goals. Instead, whenever humans attempted to erect cities, the population would commit injustices on each other,
conducting wars of all against all. Worried that humanity would completely perish, Zeus sent Hermes to distribute justice and shame equally among all of the people so that they could get along with each other. As part of the process, Zeus also demanded that any person unable to participate in the shared sense of justice and shame should be killed as a pestilence to civilization. In this way, Crosswhite notes that from its ancient and fabled beginnings rhetoric was understood as operating in a public sphere marked by three bloody borders: 1) the border between violent prehistory and civilized history, 2) the border between animals and humans, and 3) the border between those barred from the public sphere and those allowed to participate within it (137-8). The ability for humans to get along with each other peacefully is, in this way, premised on our inability to get along with those we deem to be less than human.

These bloody borders mark the violences that have been the primary critiques of the public sphere since the latter half of the twentieth century. When Derrida in *The Animal That Therefore I Am* discusses the violences humanity has committed against animals, failing to empathize with them when they clearly have a consciousness with which to observe humanity and the ability to suffer, he is arguing against a border covered in the blood of slaughterhouses, research labs, puppy mills, etc. When Nancy Fraser argues in “Rethinking the Public Sphere” that the eighteenth-century liberal civic sphere that Habermas celebrates only existed through its exclusion of women, slaves, indigenous people, the disabled, and workers, she is pointing to a border covered in the blood of patriarchy, slavery, genocide, exploitation, etc. But these demarcations are only one way that violence pervades rhetoric. Building on Walter Benjamin’s famous essay “Critique of Violence,” Crosswhite argues that violence also undergirds all public
rhetoric because civic conversation is rooted in the threat of violence insofar as the state’s 
authority is rooted in its ability to use intolerable violence at its will. This truth of 
governance means that any conditions for speaking in a given society, any attempts to 
realize justice, and any pleas for change all play out in a space made possible both by past 
violences and implied threats of future violences. The threat of excessive and intentional 
physical harm is always very real in civic spaces—whether or not it is felt by citizens. 
For Crosswhite, there is no way to abolish violence altogether, and he argues that instead 
of attempting to create abstracted philosophical, political, or theological solutions to 
vioence, we should develop grounded and concrete practices that mitigate and manage 
vioence as best as possible in specific contexts (172). Crosswhite understands rhetoric as 
a becoming in which humans open themselves up the world, and he argues that instead of 
rationaing a pure state of non-violence, humans can open themselves up to new 
possibilities of peace through attuning to the specific concrete actors in their lives and the 
harms that befall them. By being open and empathetic with others, individuals can 
increase their capacities for building peace in the world, not just their capacities for 
repelling violence.

This solution to the problem, using rhetoric to focus on a peace that transcends an 
absence of violence in order to mitigate a violence that can never be completely 
overcome, is not possible for Cynthia Haynes, who in The Homesick Phonebook argues 
that rhetoricians should think of violence and rhetoric not as two concepts that dwell near 
one another, as Crosswhite does, but rather as two concepts that dwell with one another:

We will never know the why when it comes to conflict and unspeakable 
vioence. But I do know where they live: right through the front door
and inside the rhetorical address of humanity, in our basements, yes, but also our living rooms, even in our gardens—especially in our gardens. For they are where we plant the seeds of every new species of alibi, where we cultivate the roots of complacency and complicity, and harvest the next crop of tacit torture. The silos in which we store every history, crime, and good intention should be emptied of their rotting grains of truth. (10)

For Haynes, rhetoric dwells with violence and violence dwells with rhetoric because they both dwell with humanity. Violence creates space for rhetoric, while rhetoric justifies the violence that created it in order to propagate and justify even more new violences. In Haynes’s contemptuous circle, it is not that violence has meaning because it is a type of rhetoric but that violence is given meaning through rhetoric. Rhetoric is understood as the narratives that justify horrific actions and navigate oppressive systems; it is born in violence, and if there was no violence, there would be neither need nor ability for rhetoric. Similarly, violence is understood as the use of material force to cause explicit pain; it is born in rhetoric, and if there was no rhetoric, then harms would have no justification, and there would be no place for violence. Though different, the two forces overlap so much that it is difficult to determine their distinctions. Can the rational arguments of the eighteenth century that Gross romanticizes be considered rhetoric when they are created from systems of genocide, marginalization, oppression, and slavery that constitute rhetoric’s bloody borders? Can the destructive protests Deluca studies be considered violence when they emerge as calculated responses from rational actors to disrupt conversations that will determine their fates without their input? These are
difficult questions that threaten to equivocate our understanding of violence and rhetoric because of their reliance on humanistic understandings of the world.

A shift to a new materialist paradigm, however, makes the world appear much different because the border between individuals and their environment becomes more fluid, breaking down the simplified notions of causality on which humanist models of violence rely. Both Crosswhite and Haynes’s understandings of violence and rhetoric, though illuminating in how the two function together, depend too much on an Aristotelian dichotomy between violence and persuasion to be useful in understanding real material publics. Megan Foley argues that Aristotle understood persuasion as a force that acts in accordance with nature because the audience chooses to be persuaded, and the decision to act originates from within their beings. Violence, on the other hand, acts against nature because the victim is controlled by an external force to act in a certain fashion (193). Persuasion, and even coercion, are not violent because rhetoric relates to desire in a nondeterminative fashion; though language influences thought, it does not force thought or action to do its bidding (197). Violence, on the other hand, is force; the audience has no choice but to succumb to the will of the violent actor. The problem with this model is that it requires humans to have complete selves with their own independent internalities and complete externalities that are themselves composed of a multitude of separate individuals. Though Aristotle claims that the internal and external meet during the act of persuasion, he generally understands them as separate spheres.

A new materialist understanding of the world denies the separation between individuals and their environments. Instead, new materialists acknowledge that individuals are composed of a variety of other actors—such as the internalized voices of
those who raised them through childhood, digestive bacteria, and gravity. Likewise, new materialists acknowledge that humans are permeable to the outside world in relation to social forces (such as class, gender, and race) and to material forces (such as moisture, carcinogens, and soundwaves). If soundwaves permeate the brain, change the ways human synapsis fire, and influence human actions, is this more controlling, external, or manipulative than a punch that merely bruises the skin and influences a person through pain? This is not to say that the experiences of listening and being physically assaulted are not different from one another in very important ways to which the rhetor needs to pay attention—new materialism acknowledges that experience matters—nonetheless, these are not categorically different phenomena. Both violence and persuasion are forces intra-acting with bodies. In neither case is there a clear determinative cause leading to a simple effect; instead, in both cases, a variety of multiply-composed bodies are intra-acting with one another and effects are emerging from those intra-actions. In such a paradigm, we cannot define violence by either the intensity of the persuasive force or the type of force utilized. Traditionally peaceful media can be extremely forceful whereas traditionally violent rhetorics can lack force.

Unable to explain the difference between violence and rhetoric through the types of force being utilized and the concept of choice, perhaps it is possible to understand their relationship by examining the intended effects of an interaction; however, this line of questioning is also complicated by a new materialist paradigm. Though the Belmont Report’s emphasis on risk/benefit analysis suggests that the intentions of a study, supported by research that demonstrates the probability of these outcomes, determines whether or not the study would be ethical, and though their explicit statement against
brutal and inhumane practices implies that intentionally violent actions are never ethical in the sphere of research, new materialist rhetoricians do not hold this same standard for persuasion. Since the structuralist movement, linguists, philologists, philosophers, and rhetoricians have all argued that speakers’ intentions matter less for meaning than their words. Only by examining a text can a reader know what it says. Looking beyond text and toward its relationships with other actors in the world, Laurie Gries takes this interpretation further from the intentions of the rhetor by demonstrating that meaning is not found within a text but is rather “temporally and spatially distended” (49). As texts, which are just as composed and permeable as humans, circulate and intra-act with other actors, they take on new meanings and have new consequences in the world: “it is only in tracing a single multiple image’s transformations that unfold with time and space that we can discover what divergent consequences emerge and thus know for certain what rhetorical meanings have materialized” (52). If it is not possible to know meaning through intention but only through the consequences that texts create within their enmeshed relationships with other actors, then it is also impossible to understand violence, which itself dwells with rhetoric and is imbued with meaning through rhetoric, by a standard of intentionality. Instead, violence must be understood as a consequence of actions, regardless of intention. This does not mean that intentionally violent actions are not often more nefarious than unintentionally violent ones, but it does mean that material harms cannot be understood as non-violent merely because they were not intended to hurt someone or were carried out by a nonhuman actor. Gravity enacts violence; it even enacts persuasion in the sense that it moves bodies. If intentionality is nixed from the equation, then anything that persuades is rhetoric, and when it causes harm, it is a violent rhetoric.
At their root both rhetoric and violence are forces of change enacted by a myriad of actors constantly influencing each other and struggling within complex relationships of power. When publics are seen as both *real* and *unreal*—material and abstract—it is revealed that each rhetorical act has a relationship to violence (courting it, rejecting it, enabling it, diffusing it, etc.) and each violent act has a relationship to rhetoric (inviting it, stopping it, generating new discourses, etc.). The two types of action are not the same, and collapsing them together risks equivocating everything to violence, but it is clear that the two aspects of humanity dwell together and change the world in relationship to one another. It is not by coincidence that the language of argumentation and the language of combat are so closely related. Both rhetoric and violence are forces of change that have material consequences in the world and can be used to positive or negative ends. Some violences—physical, psychological, social, or economic—stop genocide, protect children, help students feel validated, or justly compensate the victims of cruel government experiments. Some rhetorics—embodied, material, political, social, etc.—devalue human life, cause distress, make people feel threatened, or enable exploitation. The forces themselves are not constrained to moral categories—violence is not inherently bad while rhetoric is inherently good—rather every action needs to be evaluated as ethical or not in its specific contexts. Compositionists can no longer make categorical distinctions but must ask what futures an act of either violence or rhetoric makes possible and probable.

Each rhetorical and violent action will have consequences and create change in the world, and this relationship is co-constitutive. Rhetors change the material publics of which they are a part, and the public in-turn changes the rhetor. The same is true for texts
and audiences as well. Because of the complexity of the public, with a multitude of actors constantly intra-acting together, changes are emergent and difficult to predict. This uncertainty amplifies the risks of publicness. There is no simple subject exerting its will on an object so that the object will change in a certain way; instead, there are multiple subjects influencing each other so that unpredictable change emerges. As Dennis Lynch et al. argue in their essay “Moments of Argument,” the risks of rhetoric are often different than the ones we foresee. Discussing the ways in which they urge students to engage one another in discussion before establishing entrenched positions on a subject, the authors claim, “the risk in argument is not that you may lose but rather that you may change” (407). Similarly, James Crosswhite argues “One threat of exposing ourselves to one another in language is that we may be called on to change” (141). All types of rhetorical action from the violent to the pleasantly discursive enable the possibility that the speaker, the text, the audience, and the world will change—often unexpectedly and in unwelcomed ways. For this reason, entering into a real public is always risky. Change, perhaps violent change, is always imminent. Moreover, whenever actors act within a public, they risk helping to create unreal publics different from their original intentions.

**Publics as Risk-Laden Events**

The unpredictability of change is the great risk of rhetoric and the primary topic of this dissertation. I argue that the multiple agencies that compose real material publics are what make the outcomes of our actions uncertain, causing risks both violent and rhetorical. I evidence my position with three separate case studies because by understanding how harm occurs in these instances, I am able to ground my understanding
of risk in the practices of real publics. From this understanding, I am able to create a pedagogy that responds to risk as I understand it to operate the world. In other words, I analyze three instances of risk in the public sphere in order to better understand risk and to better teach students how to consider such risks when they compose for publics. This method is grounded in the actual rhetorical practices of real publics, which affords it validity but limits its scope. These three case studies cannot explain every type of risk associated with composing for the public, but they can begin to form a corpus through which compositionists can understand risk more holistically. Further study will be necessary to create a fully formed understanding of risk and the public sphere, but this dissertation signals a beginning for this work.

The three case studies that compose this dissertation are each indicative of both a vantage for understanding and engaging the public—idealism, activism, and materialism—and an element within the rhetorical situation—text, audience, and rhetor—that is being transformed through engagement with the public. In the first case study, an idealistically crafted text is unexpectedly changed by more cynical actors participating with it. In the second case study, several activists see audience responses to their texts shift from an innocuous mainstream style to one of extremely violent political reactionaries. In the third case study, materialist rhetors unexpectedly become demagogic as they participate in argumentation and discourse. Though these risks are distinctly different from one another, each of the case studies demonstrates violence in that harm is being enacted on at least one of the implicated actors. Sometimes this harm is physical, but often it is economic, emotional, legal, psychological, social, or some mix thereof. Despite the presence of violence, none of the case studies can be understood as merely
violent. Each case study is always also rhetorical and generative. Focusing only on either the violence or the rhetoric of the situation provides a skewed understanding of how risk operates within the events. Ignoring the violence of publicness ignores the embodied reality of discourse and the dangers such embodiment presents; conversely, ignoring the rhetoric of publicness neglects the ways discourse produces beneficial and peaceful changes. My approach to publicness, which balances violence and rhetoric and sees each as creating the conditions for the other, informs the claim at the end of my dissertation that rhetorical ecologies are ongoing events in which things change in both harmful and beneficial ways. Composition is not a process headed toward a product but an continual event in which actors intra-act and change their shared worlds in unanticipatable ways. To teach students to write within such rhetorical events, I advocate for the creation of event-based pedagogies that teach students to ethically operate within publics by developing their agency, curiosity, empathy, adaptability, and ingenuity. These are not abstract values but rather practices that pay careful attention to the material consequences of public action and the ramifications those actions have on a host of human and nonhuman actors.

Throughout the dissertation, I discuss public action as having a variety of effects on a multitude of different actors. This argument is not based on a simple causality but rather an understanding of the public sphere as a dense network of human and nonhuman actors who use their agencies to shape each other and their shared worlds. The public is not merely a group of individuals relating to one another but rather a group of actors so intimately interconnected that their actions cannot help but reverberate throughout the network. In such an enmeshed environment, agency is not individual but rather is
distributed in what Karen Barad refers to as *intra-action*; individuals and their actions emerge through their relationships with the world rather than relationships being formed through the actions of individuals (74). Actors emerge from the world just like plants emerge from the interactions between seeds, soil, water, and sun. There is no outside of relationality from where an actor can act; individuals can only operate within complex material and social relationships, and even then, the word *individual* is just a convenient shorthand for the multitude of actors intra-acting to create what is commonly referred to as a subject.

Despite their enmeshed position, individuals still have the experience of acting and making decisions. Simply because actions are not solely determined by an autonomous subject does not mean that people no longer have to take responsibility for their actions, and it does not mean that people are free from thought and judgment; instead, distributed agency means that individuals’ thoughts, which emerge through intra-action, will effect a host of others who are enmeshed and intra-acting with them. Thus, acting to shape the world is simultaneously every individuals’ responsibility to others and to themselves because there is no difference between the two positions. This model of publicness courts understanding, and like Romantic Irony, event-based pedagogies acknowledge that instructors cannot fully realize these co-productive publics either in their classrooms or in the broader culture. Nonetheless, through attempts to enact these *unreal* publics in *real* public spaces, compositionists can make reality more closely resemble the as-of-yet *unreal* publics they wish to see manifest; however, in order to build these ideal publics through rhetorical education, compositionists must first understand the risks associated with contemporary publics. For this reason, this
dissertation includes three case studies of real publics laden with risk. In each case the risk is associated with both a vantage of the public sphere and an element of the rhetorical situation.

In Chapter Two, “The Risks of Idealism: Mis-using Black Power and Mis-representing the Crips,” I argue that idealist movements, organizations, and texts always risk becoming co-opted by other actors because the public is an ecology in which meaning emerges through the interactions among a myriad of actors. I root this understanding of publicness in Lloyd Bitzer’s materialist definition of the rhetorical situation, which has been much derided by social constructionists whose outlooks much more closely resembled Michael Warner’s account that people create publics to look and act a certain way. However, I use new materialist theories from Bruno Latour, Stacy Alaimo, and Margaret Syverson to demonstrate how a co-participative ecological model does not need to choose between materialism or sociality to understand meaning as emerging from the intra-actions of a variety of actors who change the meaning of texts so that no one actor can independently call forth a public that acts or thinks in a pre-determined manner. This history of the Los Angeles Street gang the Crips—especially when understood as emerging from the rhetoric of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense—demonstrates how different actors can make idealist movements, organizations, and texts mean differently than they may have originally been intended. I conclude this chapter by arguing that texts will always be misinterpreted because meaning emerges as arguments are enacted, not as they are composed. This risk clearly befell the Crips as they evolved from an anti-gang coalition inspired by the Black Panther Party to become the largest street gang in the world.
In Chapter Three, “The Risks of Activism: Gamergate Harassments and the Alt-Right Sphere Public,” I argue that political action always courts violent responses because it attempts to rearrange social hierarchies. Since social hierarchies are already regularly upheld through harassment, which is a demonstration of who has power in a space and who lacks power, violence is a preferred method for those who wish to maintain the social order of specific publics. Understanding how social hierarchies function within publics requires that I differentiate the overlapping concepts of the public and the social, which I do, starting with the famous distinction created by Hannah Arendt and ending with Byron Hawk’s conception of sphere publics. I discuss the recent harassment campaigns by the ultra-conservative populist movement, the alt-right, as an example of how groups utilize harassment not only to maintain the composition of their publics but also to make those publics more closely resemble their ideal spaces for discourse. I specifically focus on the harassment of feminist media critics Anita Sarkeesian and Zoe Quinn during the Gamergate controversy to demonstrate how the alt-right utilizes violence and threats of violence as a way of trying to evidence their control of the public sphere and the weakness of their victims. I conclude this chapter by claiming that the audiences of activists texts contain the possibility for socially significant violence because political action upsets the social composition of the overlapping sphere publics through which political change is enacted.

In Chapter Four, “The Risks of Materialism: Narcissus and the Nascent Demagoguery of Accelerationism,” I argue that tightly knit materially focused publics risk becoming demagogic once their participants become entranced by their own arguments and create righteous communities that ignore arguments, ideas, information, or
perspectives outside the accepted premises of the community. I develop this understanding of collective narcissism through theories of how language provides meaning and structure to the world by Friedrich Nietzsche and Kenneth Burke before turning to Patricia Roberts-Miller’s conceptualization of demagoguery. I argue that the myopic and Promethean arguments of the leftist accelerationist movement demonstrate a public whose fixation with the intersection between technological utopianism and politics has led them to believe not only that they are the only group among the contemporary left that understands how to bring about a more equitable future but also that such a future requires their being in near total control of both human and nonhuman actors. The hubris necessary for this kind of argument may not yet be demagogic, but it is indicative of the processes by which a public becomes so. I conclude this chapter by claiming that rhetors themselves can be changed by the circulation of and responses to their own arguments within the public sphere. This risk clearly befell the accelerationists as they evolved their position from trying to invigorate and expand leftist political projects to isolating themselves through technological utopian fantasies and academic jargon.

Taken together, I argue that these three case studies not only outline three risks of public rhetoric but also explain how these risks are rooted in the way rhetorical ecologies change the elements within the rhetorical situation. Change, whether through persuasion or violence, is the risk of rhetoric, and this risk is inevitable because texts, audiences, rhetors, and other material actors co-constitute and change each other as they intra-act in the rhetorical ecology. From this perspective, rhetoric is an event in which the borders between enmeshed actors are blurred and each begins to change the others. In the event of rhetoric, actors do not merely influence each other but co-re-create one another. Each
of the case studies that constitute this dissertation demonstrates how the distinctions between text, audience, and rhetor are already arbitrary: the text of the Crips is changed not only by those who embody it but also by those who witness it from the outside, the alt-right switches from audience to rhetor as they intentionally misconstrue the texts of other rhetors to fit their narratives, and finally, the rhetors of the accelerationist movement become their own audience as their texts and intertexts persuade them to further entrench themselves in their positions.

In response to these case-studies, Chapter Five, “The Risks of Events: Toward Event-Based Pedagogies” addresses the question of how public writing instructors can best teach students to better understand and mitigate risk. After explaining how inaccurately people perceive risks, I argue that the root of rhetoric’s actual hazards is its transformative characteristic as an event as described by compositionists such as Marilyn Cooper, Michelle Ballif, and Dianne Davis. I argue that Joe Panzner’s understanding of the event provides a useful approach to writing that asks rhetors to pay attention to how their texts relate to others and their capacities to act in the world. This principle informs my argument for event-based pedagogies that follow five tenets created to helps students better perceive and manage the risks of public writing. I ask students to increase the capacity for others to act, conduct thorough and empathetic research, be open to other opinions and perspectives, adapt to new information, and build new arguments from the remains of old ones. These practices are rooted in the real publics in which students live while also helping them to build the unreal publics they deserve.
CHAPTER 2

THE RISKS OF IDEALISM: MIS- USING BLACK POWER AND MIS- REPRESENTING THE CRIPS

Perhaps the risk most associated with composing for the public is the inability to know with certainty how a text will be understood, what influences it will have, and what realities it will enable. Rhetors, through the very act of rhetoric, risk having their messages mis-appropriated, mis-communicated, mis-interpreted, mis-read, and mis-understood. In other words, much can go amiss within the rhetorical situation, and these unintended consequences are not always based on the rhetor, audience, or text being erroneous, nefarious, or wrong. Instead, unintended consequences emerge because meaning is co-produced by a variety of actors. Not every mis-take is a failure of communication, goodwill, or understanding; instead, mis is an inherent aspect of the complex nature of the public sphere in which actors co-create meaning together with no single entity determining what a text means forever and for always. The meanings of texts change as they encounter new actors and new situations, and this is the mis of rhetoric. Mis, which has its roots in the Indo-European i-mene meaning “to change or exchange,” is the characteristic of the public sphere that gives fluidity to both meaning and interpretation. The unexpected and unanticipated consequences that emerge from within the public are mis in that they emerge from the rhetor letting go of a message, enabling it to be circulated and changed by the other actors who engage with it in the public. The nature of publicness should be understood more as a collaborative mis than as
a collection of singular intentions being distributed across a network. While actors may imagine themselves distributing messages with singular meanings, multiple meanings are being co-created through the texts interactions with a variety of actors. This characteristic of the public often generates positive outcomes, but it is also a risk for those hoping to guide the public in specific ways because it does not allow for any guarantees that a message will fulfill a rhetor’s goals, since the rhetor cannot know how others within the public will mis-understand the text.

Idealist vantage points are perhaps more vulnerable to the risky aspects of mis than activist or materialist perspectives because people operating from this position have clear beliefs about how the public ought to function and the steps needed to arrive at those goals. The ethical orientation of idealism leads idealist scholars to find actual publics lacking in comparison to theoretical versions of publicness. This orientation also leads to these scholars spending a great deal of time describing both the conditions of the actual public sphere and their ideal versions of publicness not only so that they can take concrete steps toward realizing their ideal publics but also so that they can measure their progress toward that ideal. Composition and Rhetoric scholars operating from this vantage—including Robert Asen and Daniel C. Brower, Jay P. Childers, Sharon Crowley, Gerard Hauser, Michael Warner, and Christian Weisser—tend to diagnose problems with the public sphere and offer some potential steps forward. For instance, in his article “Representing the State in South Central Los Angeles” Robert Asen takes as his object of critique not only theories of publicness that ignore the ability of the state to participate deliberatively within the public but also the actual practices of state actors who participate in discourse with the public. Asen’s specific example is a townhall style
meeting between CIA Director John Deutch and members of the South Central Los Angeles community following the 1996 publication of Gary Webb’s investigative journalism series “Dark Alliance,” which claimed a CIA-backed drug ring introduced crack cocaine into Los Angeles to finance the Contra war against the communist government in Nicaragua. Asen claims that the exchange between Deutch and the citizens of South Central Los Angeles demonstrates the ways in which representatives of the state can operate as participants within deliberative publics, which changes the theory of publicness to include the state as an active participant within the public rather than just the context in which deliberation takes place (139). Asen goes on to show how Deutch’s changing demeanor throughout the meeting demonstrates how state actors can either legitimize the concerns of undervalued counterpublics or invalidate them. The article ends with the claim that, at its best, the state can, “extend the circulation . . . [and] facilitate the expansion outwards of counterpublic discourse beyond the reach of its regular advocates” (154). This outcome is not certain, however, and Asen claims that it will only occur if citizens actively press their state representatives and if state representatives find value in engaging citizens. In this argument, Asen uses a specific case study to demonstrate both the problems with the public sphere and its potential virtues. He ends by presenting an ideal model of public discourse in which the state listens to its minority constituents, and he provides his audience with some steps for reaching these goals such as community organizing and creating conditions for the state to facilitate discussion. Because he has a clear ideal in mind, Asen makes a point to be explicit and specific as to how the public operates, how it should operate, and how
citizens can bridge the gap between the two. Asen is explicit in this argument because, with a definite goal in mind, he does not want to be mis-understood.

Idealists participating within the public sphere often use more direct political action than Composition and Rhetoric scholars when they attempt to move the public closer to their ideals. Nonetheless, these actors also spend a lot of time defining both who they are and what their goals are in order to create a cohesive movement that will move the public closer to their ideal. These idealists do not wish to be mis-understood any more than idealist scholars, so they work to make their messages as exact as possible. The rich textual histories of movements from enlightenment rationalism to material feminism demonstrate the type of arguments groups create as they attempt to move the public in a particular direction. However, despite the specificity of their texts, mis still happens because movements, and the texts they produce, exist in co-productive publics in which other actors will change the meaning of texts through their engagement with them. Though movements meticulously craft texts for specific reasons, their rhetors cannot determine what meanings others will make from them—including meanings that fly directly in the face of the movement’s primary concerns and values, as demonstrated by the relationship between the Black Power movement and the Los Angeles street gang the Crips.

**Mis-using the Black Power Movement**

The relationship between the Black Power movement and the Los Angeles street gang the Crips illustrates how the texts of an idealist public can be mis-used by other public actors to create situations completely antithetical to the original public’s
intentions. The term *Black Power* was first popularized within the civil rights community by Stokely Carmichael during the 1966 March Against Fear. The march had originated as a solitary protest with the Black activist James Meredith walking the Mississippi Delta from Memphis, Tennessee to Jackson, Mississippi. After Meredith was shot by a white sniper on the second day of the march, however, civil rights leaders from all over the country—including both Stokely Carmichael, representing the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, and Martin Luther King Jr., representing the Southern Christian Leadership Conference—came to Mississippi to complete the march that the hospitalized Meredith could no longer complete himself. By the time they arrived in Jackson on June 26, the march was estimated to have 15,000 participants. According to King, it was during this march, at a rally in Greenwood, Mississippi, that Carmichael first used the term Black Power:

Stokely mounted the platform and after arousing the audience with a powerful attack on Mississippi justice he proclaimed, “What we need is Black Power.” Willie Ricks, the fiery orator of SNCC leaped to the platform and shouted, “What do you want?” The crowd roared, “Black Power.” Again and again Ricks cried, “What do you want?” and the response “Black Power” grew louder and louder, until it had reached a fever pitch.

So Greenwood turned out to be the arena for the birth of the Black Power slogan in the civil rights movement. The phrase had been used long before by Richard Wright and others, but never until that night had it been used as a slogan in the civil rights movement. For people who had been crushed so long by white
power and who had been taught that black was degrading, it had a ready appeal.

(31)

King had his reservations about the slogan, worrying that white audiences and the media would mis-understand it as a violent argument for Black superiority, but the term gained popularity among younger activists in the civil rights movement. According to the rhetoricians Robert L. Scott and Wayne Brockriede, the slogan had an important impact on the summer of 1966, becoming “a revolutionary force in American life” that could not be ignored (vii).

Due in part to the concerns of advocates like King, Carmichael made his understanding of Black Power extremely clear not only at his well-attended speaking engagements but also in the book he co-wrote with Charles V. Hamilton: *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*. In this book, Carmichael argues that previous civil rights groups were attempting to negotiate with their white political allies before having accumulated their own power, which forced black leaders into the “beggar’s role, hoping to strike a responsive chord,” leaving these groups to the whims of stronger political and economic forces (78). For Carmichael, the only way for the Black community to get out of its beggar’s role was to unite in cultivating the political, economic, and cultural power of their communities in order to wield it against that of other political groups. Carmichael argued that Black communities needed to free themselves from the structures that were oppressing them and unite under their own systems of power so that they could more effectively negotiate with the white power structure. An important part of this accumulation of power was the realization that being Black was not something of which anyone should be ashamed. Carmichael argued that Black people should realize their own
natural beauty and stop trying to emulate white culture through hairstyles, dress, and social organizations like fraternities (“Morgan State”). For Carmichael, Black Power was both a cultural and a political awakening for the Black community; however, other groups saw these as separate endeavors, and this created a rift in the Black Power movement that those hostile to it were able to exploit.

Though there was always some ambiguity surrounding the term *Black Power*, its adherents were generally unified until nefarious outside forces, representing white supremacist society, joined the conversation and sowed mis-trust. The most prominent and politically active Black Power organization of the 1960s and 1970s was the Black Panther Party for Self Defense [BPP], of which Carmichael was Prime Minister from 1967 to 1969. Founded by Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton on October 15, 1966 in Oakland, California, the BPP adhered to a ten point program that expressed their desire for freedom, employment, economic justice, housing, education, and changes to the United States judiciary and military laws as they related to Black people (Newton). Often remembered for exercising their rights to bear arms while policing the police around Oakland in order to ensure that officers were not violating the rights of Black citizens, the BPP also focused on community initiatives including free breakfast programs, free furniture programs, and a program to research Sickle Cell Anemia (“Black Panther Community Programs”). The group’s popularity grew quickly not only because of their revolutionary message but also because of their style, with members sporting afros, turtlenecks, black leather jackets, sunglasses, and berets. Unsurprisingly, the United States Government was suspicious of the BPP, with the Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, J. Edgar Hoover, famously saying, “the Black Panther Party, without
question, represents the greatest threat to the internal security of the country” (PBS). As such, the FBI launched a counterintelligence program meant to disrupt the party by exacerbating disagreements between members, incarcerating high ranking officials, and even assassinating those who they could not otherwise control.²

The FBI’s Counterintelligence program was successful in sowing discontent within and among Black Power organizations by mis-identifying and mis-representing the positions of both individuals and institutions. The most famous mis-communication propagated by the FBI is the escalation of the dispute between the BPP, who believed in amassing Black Power through political change and community involvement, and the US Organization that believed in creating Black Power by promoting African cultural unity through programs such as Swahili language classes and the establishment of African-American holidays such as Kwanzaa. Though the BPP and US were complimentary organizations, they found themselves competing with each other for recruits, which caused tension. The FBI stoked these tensions by mailing death threats and humiliating cartoons to each group under the guise that these texts were created by the competing organization. The dispute came to a head on January 17, 1969 when the founder of the Southern California Chapter of the BPP and former Slauson gang member, Alprentice “Bunchy” Carter, along with the leader of the Los Angeles chapter of the organization, John Huggins, was killed at a meeting of UCLA’s Black Student Union by alleged members of the US Organization after the two BPP leaders were overheard making

² I realize that to claim the Federal Government assassinated civil rights leaders is one with which many people will take exception. While the FBI may not be able to be held completely responsible for many of the deaths of the movements most prominent leaders such as Malcolm X, George Jackson, and Alprentice “Bunchy” Carter, the death of Fred Hampton is unambiguous in its indictment of the organization. See Jeffrey Haas’s book The Assassination of Fred Hampton for more details.
derogatory comments about the US Organization’s founder, Ron Karenga. Due in part to this incident, as well as problems with the government and other types of internal strife—all of which were being amplified, if not completely manufactured, by the FBI’s counterintelligence program—the BPP lost much of its power and popularity around this time; however, their style and rhetoric continued to influence their communities in ways they would not have anticipated.

One community that the Black Power message of the BPP influenced, though by no means the only community it influenced, was the Los Angeles street gang the Crips. While the exact relationship between the two organizations is uncertain, the influence is obvious. Established by Raymond Washington in 1969, early Crips wore earrings in their left ears, plain white muscle shirts, khaki pants, tan leather Biscuit shoes, and leather jackets. Not only was the uniform reminiscent of the BPP, but the idea of having a unified style came directly from the movement. According to the former Crip member Gregory “Batman” Davis, Washington modeled the Crips after the BPP, which he knew about from his relationship with Bunchy Carter (“Raymond Washington”). However, alleged Crip cofounder Stanley “Tookie” Williams claims that neither he nor Washington knew anything about the BPP when the gang was formed (87). Most accounts, however, lay the influence somewhere between these two extremes. It seems likely that Washington and other early Crip members were familiar with the BPP and may have attended free breakfast or education programs offered by the party; still, there is no reason to suspect a more official connection between the two groups. Based on this loose connection, it appears that Washington understood the style and the anger of the BPP but not their message of political revolution. As former gang member Raymond “Dhanifu”
Cook says in the documentary *Crips and Bloods: Made in America*, “At thirteen and fourteen years old, we really didn’t know what the hell [the BPP] were saying, only thing we really understood was the pigs.” The Crips, which went on to be one of the world’s most infamous gangs, are not direct descendants, or necessarily a logical extension of the Black Power movement or the BPP. They are not necessarily “the bastards of the [Black Panther] party” as Los Angeles historian Mike Davis refers to them in his book *City of Quartz*.

Nonetheless, the mis of the public sphere, the co-productive exchange that provides multiple meanings to texts, movements, and ideas morphed the ideas of Black Power and the revolutionary style of the BPP into something they otherwise would not have become when they influenced the Crips. Some of the actors involved in this mis were explicit proponents of Black Power, some were wary of the term, others maliciously opposed it, and some were mostly unaffiliated with it, but all of these actors engaging with a text changed its meanings through their engagement, despite Stokely Carmichael’s careful explication of what the term meant. The Black Power slogan was, and still is, not stagnant, it changes as actors involve themselves with it. The slogan is still influencing activism, arts, politics, and scholarship as contemporary audiences engage with it and make meaning from it. Many of these new engagements, like the Black Lives Matter movement, are quite reminiscent of Carmichael’s original articulations.

This shifting meaning for Black Power is indicative of the mis of rhetoric. Once a text—be it a book, movie, slogan, or the tenets of a political movement—enters the public sphere, no one can be certain how other actors will understand it, engage with it, or change it. The text is not the singular creation of the author but rather a multiple object
that is interpretable, malleable, and shifting. As actors exchange texts, meaning emerges. Once publicness is understood this way, it becomes impossible to see public composition as anything other than mis, making mis-understanding a constant, if not unavoidable, aspect of the communicative act. Publicness is so complex that it is impossible to know in advance the consequences of entering into it. This understanding is based in the articulation of a materialist rhetorical situation, which was first articulated by Lloyd Bitzer in the 1960s.

**Co-Producing the Rhetorical Situation**

Lloyd Bitzer articulates a materialist understanding of the rhetorical situation when he claims that rhetoric only exists in response to a situation that grants communication rhetorical significance. He claims that such situations invite fitting discourses that are rhetorical in that they possess the ability to “change reality through the mediation of thought and action” (4). Communication is rhetorical, then, only when it is able to act as a force in the world: to act as an agent of change in co-producing the world. Such forceful agency only emerges within the confluence of actors who constitute the situation; it does not exist independently of context. In this way, communication is not independently effective; rather, it is effective within an enmeshed situation constituted by other actors. Bitzer categorizes these other actors, what he refers to as the “complex of persons, events, objects, and relations,” into three categories based on their relationship to the speaker: exigence, audience, and constraints. Exigence is “an imperfection marked by urgency” that can be positively modified by discourse. Audience is those persons who are both “capable of being influenced by discourse and of being mediators of change.” And
constraints are those things which limit the means of persuasion available to the rhetor (6-8). Bitzer sees the rhetorical situation as an invitation to rhetoric that emerges from this confluence. Such an situation is not abstract; it is explicitly material in that it is created by the interactions of embodied humans and nonhumans. This understanding is not a vulgar realism that believes the world creates meaning intrinsic to itself, which is then discovered and understood by humans; rather, Bitzer describes a dynamic material world that co-participates with humanity in creating meaning.

In his famous critique of Bitzer, Richard Vatz ignores the complexity of the former’s materialism, claiming that Bitzer is simply a vulgar realist who believes that objects, events, and situations have meaning intrinsic to them, which the rhetor merely discovers before advocating for positive modification. Vatz asserts that rhetoric is far more complicated than such realism, however, and he argues for something approaching social constructionism when he asserts that more complex situations do not have simple material solutions: “One wonders what the obvious ‘positive modification’ of the military-industrial complex is” (156). In this example, Vatz chooses a conceptual multiple object to demonstrate not only the complexity of the world but also the social dimension of language. The military-industrial complex does not exist in the same way that a stone exists, easy to see and identify; instead, the military-industrial complex is composed of a variety of material actors whose actions create global conflict and military action resulting in profits for weapons manufacturers and other combat industries. It is impossible to easily point to the military-industrial complex, but as Vatz gestures toward it, he demonstrates that it still exists, and there is a term for it. Vatz uses this example to argue that rhetoric is not descriptive, it is generative in that creates concepts that allow us
to understand the world. Language for Vatz does not merely mirror a thing’s intrinsic identity; rather, language creates an identity for the thing. For example, by naming the military-industrial complex, rhetors created a concept where there would otherwise be seemingly disparate war profiteers. For Vatz, this creation occurs in two vectors: rhetors sifting through contexts to choose the events they will communicate to their audiences and rhetors creating meaning through their “linguistic depiction[s]” of the events (157).

The problem with this argument is that the military-industrial complex is still composed of material actors, and if it wasn’t then there would be no need to name it. The material and the linguistic co-produce the military-industrial complex, but Vatz ignores this, as he does with his other, seemingly more rhetorical, example of declaring an end to the war in Vietnam.

To elucidate the difference between how he and Bitzer understand the rhetorical situation, Vatz discusses George Aiken’s suggestion that the United States first declare victory and then remove troops from Vietnam. Vatz claims that seeing the war in Vietnam as a situation that required American intervention had been a rhetorical act in itself, meaning that, regardless of the material situation, it could also be remedied rhetorically (159). The United States could control how the situation was understood by using language to define both the situation and the nation’s role within it. However, as the Paris Peace Accords and the fall of Saigon demonstrated, controlling how a rhetorical situation is understood is more difficult than it may appear because Bitzer’s material complex of “persons, events, objects, and relations” refuse to be easily kowtowed by language. The Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the Republic of Vietnam, the Provisional Revolutionary Government, the norms of war, the tradition of colonialist
intervention, the complexities of American politics, the amassing of military forces in North Vietnam, and a myriad of other material and social forces resisted any one rhetor’s attempts to make sense of them. It could be argued that the Vietnam War is simply a bad example because it was rhetorically mis-handled, but the Iraq War teaches the exact same lesson, which is that no amount of narrative will be able to completely constrain material conditions so that new meanings and understandings will cease to emerge from the interactions of material actors. The United States invaded Iraq on March 20, 2003, and President George W. Bush declared victory on the deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln on 1 May of that same year. Despite this rhetorical move, the United States did not remove its troops until 2011, and though the war is technically over not only does the conflict and its material ramifications continue but also there are still United States troops in the region. In short, claiming an end to the war twice failed to end the war not only materially but also socially in the minds of many Americans and Iraqis.

The examples of the Vietnam and Iraq wars demonstrate the problems with unnuanced social constructionist understandings of the world. Vatz articulates a belief that humans create their worlds through language, attributing an immense amount of world-shaping power to the rhetor, but the rhetor does not singularly wield such power. This is not to say that Vatz’s position is entirely erroneous; language is also a material force that allows humans to understand the world and bring new identities into being, but this position fails to understand the ways in which the social world interacts with the material world. As such, Vatz fails to pay attention to the ways in which the consequences of speech cannot be solely attributed to the intentions of an author because there is more than social production happening within the rhetorical situation.
Bruno Latour offers a productive way to understand the relationship between the linguistic power of the rhetor and the material power of the world in his critique of the nature/culture binary in his book We Have Never Been Modern. The relationship articulated in the text not only explains the philosophies that inform Vatz’s social constructionist understanding of world but also better illuminates the type of materialism articulated by Bitzer. Latour argues that the difference between nature and culture was developed through the work of enlightenment philosophers and scientists to propagate their worldview, though it failed to accurately describe either the material or the social world particularly well. Using the work of Stephen Shapin and Simon Schaffer, Latour demonstrates that Thomas Hobbes and Robert Boyle’s debate over the merits of mathematical philosophical knowledge compared to empiricist experimental knowledge helped to create the two ontologically distinct categories whose separation defined modernity: pure nature and pure culture. Contrarily, Latour demonstrates that these two realms can only exist when they are in communication with one another other because human culture and ingenuity is needed to understand the natural world via scientific processes, and nature is the necessary base upon which human cultural practices are built. The moderns intentionally ignored these connections, and focused instead on purifying everything to the realm of pure nature and pure culture because doing so allowed them to pivot between different operative logics that would justify their seemingly contradictory social beliefs such as natural human rights and the practices of slavery and colonization. Latour claims that the modernist worldview, what he refers to as the modern Constitution, is powerful only because of the way by which it separates enmeshed reality
into these two different categories, allowing Western culture to justify any of its practices by appealing to one of the two concepts.

Latour argues that the separation of nature from society allows the modern Constitution four paradoxical guarantees: 1) Even though humans construct nature, the natural world exists as if it were not constructed; 2) even though humans do not construct society, the social world exists as if it were constructed; 3) nature and society must remain absolutely distinct from the work of mediation, and 4) God’s transcendence distances him from interfering with both the natural and social worlds, but he can be appealed to in the event that the two forces are in conflict. These four tenants, all simultaneously imminent and transcendent, allowed the moderns to legitimize or delegitimize any practices they wished by alternating between the categories of nature, society, and divinity as it fits their needs. Modernists could “mobilize Nature, objectify the social, and feel the spiritual presence of God, even while firmly maintaining that Nature escapes us, that Society is our own work, and that God no longer intervenes” (34). The system for justification only began to unravel as hybrid issues, those that could not be explained away and critiqued as either completely natural or completely cultural, became more ubiquitous. Problems such as computing, pollution, and contraceptives combined the natural and social worlds in ways that began to erode the modern Constitution.

Latour illuminated how Vatz mis-reads Bitzer because Vatz is operating from within the logic of the modern Constitution while Bitzer is not. Vatz sees rhetoric as purely social, and he understands Bitzer as seeing the world as purely natural. Instead, Bitzer’s understanding of the rhetorical situation is an early articulation of something that
operates outside of the binary. Bitzer’s understanding of rhetoric is akin to what Latour refers to as a hybrid or a quasi-object: something that is simultaneously completely natural and completely social. Whereas modern sociologists attempted to explain material objects dualistically, claiming that some objects were mere social chimeras whereas others were biologically determined, quasi-objects are simultaneously both (53). This claim is neither to say that all objects have aspects of nature and society, which is an extension of the dualism, nor to say that all objects exist on a spectrum between the poles of nature and society, which also reaffirms the binary; rather, the definition of quasi-objects claims that nature and society are both forces that operate in creating how we experience everything within the world, including ourselves. There are neither distinctly natural objects nor distinctly social subjects; instead, there are only quasi-objects and quasi-subjects constituted both by human agency and material reality. Nature does not create humanity, nor does humanity create nature; instead, a variety of human and nonhuman actors are always co-creating each other. The robot is both as natural and as social and the dandelion; they are just differently so. To move beyond the modern Constitution, Composition and Rhetoric should build on Bitzer’s perspective and see rhetorical persuasion as neither a product of nature nor a product of language. Rhetoric should be understood as both cultural and material. If the discipline hopes to deal with the complex communicative issues of the twenty-first century, it must realize how multiple actors co-create meaning and consequence within the public sphere.

To imagine what it would be like to see public composition as a quasi-object, Composition and Rhetoric scholars can turn to new materialist scholars in environmental humanities who are already doing this kind of work. In her article “Trans-Corporeal
Feminism and the Ethical Space of Nature” Stacy Alaimo asserts that understanding the human body as both a cultural and natural entity elucidates the interconnectedness of contemporary problems such as healthcare, environmentalism, and social justice. In making this argument, Alaimo demonstrates how multiple actors are enmeshed in contemporary problems in complex and influential ways. Starting from a critique of feminism, Alaimo argues that much feminist theory has worked to detangle the figure of the woman from nature, because this connection had been used to cast her “outside the domain of human transcendence, rationality, subjectivity, and agency” into the realm that Latour would refer to as pure nature (239). However, Alaimo argues that attempts to combat this understanding of womanhood by demonstrating that the woman’s body is socially constructed worked to merely re-enforced the binary by placing femininity in the realm of pure social rather than demonstrating the “nonsense” of biological determinism. Alaimo argues that contrary to popular opinion, women and other marginalized groups may benefit from more focus on the body, not less. She claims that a new wave of material feminists, scholars who take seriously social construction while also trying to understand how the social butts up to the nature of bodies, are rethinking materiality by considering how the body is not limited to the autonomous borders socially imposed by modernist thinkers in order to consider new solutions to pressing problems. Alaimo is arguing that women operate as quasi-objects that are not only both socially and materially constructed but also co-construct the worlds they live in with other social and material actors. For Alaimo, the border that separates humans from the world are not as definitive as the modern Constitution claims. Following the work of feminist scholars such as Julia Kristeva, she claims that bodies are much more porous.
New materialist theorists like Alaimo are exploring the interconnectedness, the co-constitutiveness, and the mis of the world. They are exploring how nonhumans—plants, dirt, animals, technology, cells, toxins, viruses, etc.—exert force within the world and interact with humans. What emerges from these various new materialist instantiations of the world is an understanding of humans as so materially and socially entangled with the rest of the world that those terms, and the binary between them, no longer seem relevant. These thinkers demonstrate the ways in which the objects we produce both affect and are affected by other material bodies in the world. Nothing is an autonomous individual; rather, everything is always co-created through mis. Alaimo demonstrates this point by showing how poisons from factories change the chemical composition of human bodies. In the quest for better industrial cleaners, humans have mutated themselves (15). Moreover, these same chemicals affect animals and ecosystems, creating more toxic bodies that are consumed by other animals, dirt, and plants, creating more toxic bodies. In this situation, no individual actor is simply the active subject nor are any actors merely passive objects. Instead, everything is quasi-object and quasi-subject. Everything co-creates consequences, and no one individual can escape this intra-active complexity. The same is true for texts, which are not independently authored by autonomous subjects but rather are co-created through the intra-active exchanges of human and nonhuman actors. Moreover, the text is its own actor that helps to co-create the world through it intra-action. In this way, texts exist in a rhetorical ecology in which they are constantly being co-created by and co-creating the world.
Ecological Situations and Circulating Texts

For the last thirty years scholars within Composition and Rhetoric have been developing ecological models of composition to understand how texts both co-produce meaning and are co-produced by the world. Scholarship in the area has historically been sparse, but it has grown more rapidly in the last decade. Ecological theories of composition generally trace their roots back to Marilyn Cooper’s 1986 essay “The Ecology of Writing,” which argues that writing is not produced by a single solitary genius author, as the cognitive model of writing had assumed; instead, Cooper claims that writing occurs across a variety of complicated social systems such as ideas, purposes, interpersonal interactions, cultural norms, and textual forms (369). Cooper argues that authors are influenced by these social systems as they navigate them to best fit their purposes. In her 1999 book *The Wealth of Reality*, Margaret Syverson argues that though Cooper’s model is a gesture away from flawed cognitive models and toward more ecological ones, it is still based on five cognitivist assumptions: 1) Cognition is the function of individuals, 2) language merely represents thought, 3) thought precedes language, 4) a group is a gathering of individuals, and 5) composing can be conceptually separated from the material conditions of its production and consumption. For Syverson, Cooper’s model still relies too much on individual authors and does not pay attention to the agency of the material world that helps to compose them, their texts, their contexts, and their audiences.

Working against Cooper’s cognitive assumptions, Syverson offers an ecological model of rhetoric that traces the ways in which every aspect of the rhetorical situation—audience, rhetor, and text—is composed of a multitude of human and non-human actors
co-creating activity within a complex system. Unlike Cooper’s model, which focuses solely on social forces and human actors, Syverson’s complex systems pay attention to the ways in which a myriad of different human and nonhuman actors interact with each other physically, socially, psychologically, temporally, and spatially in order to create the discreet elements within the rhetorical situation; in this model the text, rhetor, and audience are not single individuals but rather complex amalgams of human and nonhuman actors. In this understanding, the rhetorical situation writ large is a confluence of rhetorical elements. The rhetorical situation is as an ecological “metasystem” in which the complex systems of the text, rhetor, and audience interact with each other to produce a variety of meanings. Meaning is not the fixed intention of the complex system of the rhetor, inherent to the system of the text, or dependent on a multiplicity of audience interpretations; rather, meaning emerges through the interactions of these complex systems within an ecology.

This ecological model of the rhetorical situation has been extended into the study of circulation as well. Jenny Edbauer Rice, argues in her 2005 article “Unframing Models of Public Distribution” that the elemental and atomistic way in which previous scholars imagined the rhetorical situation does not account for the ways in which rhetoric engages other situations, histories, spaces, feelings, and lived-experiences. For Rice, rhetoric cannot be limited to any specific situation, as if every act of persuasion was to begin the entire rhetorical process anew. Instead, Rice argues that elements of the situation “bleed” into other situations, publics, and social processes. As an example, Rice tells the history of the “Keep Austin Weird” slogan that was developed by local businesses to protest the incentives the city of Austin, Texas was giving to national chain stores. The slogan
impacted people affectively, and they modified it for other conversations such as pledge
drives, city council meetings, and the marketing of other local businesses. The slogan has
even gone so far as to be appropriated by national chain stores, adopted by other cities,
and parodied by cynical youth. Because of the emotional resonance, social significance,
material brevity, and cultural ubiquity of the slogan as a text, it has bled beyond the
ecology of its rhetorical situation to become a part of the culture writ large, which
increases the ways in which it will be interpreted, used, remixed, and shared. This
example shows that, as circulation increases, the mis increase, as does the meanings.

Laurie Gries’s Still Life With Rhetoric builds on Rice’s work to demonstrate the
ways in which circulation changes the meaning of a text and amplifies its potential
consequences within the public. Building explicitly on new materialist theories from
Bruno Latour, Karen Barad, and Jane Bennett, Gries argues that a circulating image can
change the actors and ecologies with which it interacts while simultaneously being
changed by them as well. Since identities and meanings are not intrinsic to individuals
but rather emerge through the interactions among human and nonhuman actors, the
circulating text both changes the actors it encounters and is changed by them. To
demonstrate how this occurs, Gries abides by a strict method she refers to as
iconographic tracking in which the researcher collects as many instantiations of a given
image as possible, organizes those iterations into categories, conducts more focused
research on each category, and then conducts a close analysis of all the different
communities with which the image has interacted. Gries’s proof of concept is a four-part
case study of Shepard Fairey’s famous Obama Hope image; she investigates how the
image came to change the 2008 election, United States copywrite law, political parody,
and global activism. Notably, Gries demonstrates how within these larger ecologies *Obama Hope*’s circulation also transformed a myriad of smaller ecologies such as Fairey’s professional reputation in the United States art scene, Occupy Wall Street protests, and bottled water sales in Ghana.

The transformations that Gries elucidates in her study help to further demonstrate a Bitzerian model of the rhetorical situation that ignores the nature/culture binary of the modern Constitution to become an ecological site in which meaning emerges from the social interactions of material actors. In other words, Gries demonstrates that rhetoric takes place in the types of new materialist ecologies discussed by Alaimo. A new materialist public is neither elemental nor static; rather, it is a constant re-assemblage of beings, forces, and meanings that bleed and circulate into new situations and social realities. Such publics are continually being reinvented as new actors enter into the interaction, meaning that the public and its actors are constantly being rearticulated. Actors are constantly creating new texts and engaging old texts in new ways. Each of these articulations and rearticulations creates different consequences because each of the elements exerts slightly different forces and recreates the world in slightly different ways. Such a complex and perpetual ecology makes the emergence of unintended consequences inevitable because texts will always both be co-created by other actors and co-create those actors, generating new meanings and implications through the mis of rhetoric. Of course, care, diligence, and research can be used to try and mitigate the worst of these effects because the actions of the rhetor are still forces that act within the public; however, as we saw in the example of Stokely Carmichael, unintended consequences, be
they malignant or benign, can emerge from the mis of even the most meticulously crafted texts.

The unintended consequences that emerge from the co-productive mis of the public are intensified by the amount of actors involved and the intensity of their actions, which are in part driven by their beliefs in the message’s ability to create change. The Black Power movement struck the national consciousness, and actors—including the BPP, FBI, SCLC and US Organization—acted intensely to force their meanings onto the slogan because they believed that the text could move the public. Actors cared about Black Power because of the material realities they believed could emerge from it. This example demonstrates that the co-productive nature of meaning is less about texts than about movements and their material repercussions. Rice’s example of “Keep Austin Weird” was not only about a slogan but also about an economic and cultural movement to promote local businesses and preserve the culture of the city. Similarly, Gries’s example of Obama Hope was not only about an image but also about a political movement to elect the first black president, a liberal who promised change from the failed policies of the Bush administration. In each of these situations, the texts acted in the world, and people acted with them in hopes that they could make them act differently in order to bring about new material realities, publics, and ways of being-in-the-world. In each of these cases people co-opted and changed texts because they wanted to change the public in which they circulated. Ultimately, no one rhetor gets to determine the identity of a public because this identity emerges from the mis of the public itself. A clear example of how a multitude of forces operating on a group can change its direction in unexpected ways is the formation and proliferation of the Crips.
Defining a Multiplicity of Crips

The National Alliance of Gang Investigators labels the Crips a national-level street gang that allies with prison gangs, neighborhood-based gangs, drug-trafficking organizations, and Mexican transnational criminal organizations; however, defining Crips is much more difficult than this because the gang is amorphous with a multitude of members defining what it means to be Crip in different ways through their daily practices. According to the United States Department of Justice, Crips have an estimated 30,000 to 35,000 members operating in 221 American cities in 41 states. The National Gang Intelligence Center claims that Crips have expanded internationally to places including Bermuda, Canada, Great Britain, and the Netherlands; however, it is uncertain if these international instantiations of the gang have direct connections to their counterparts in the United States or if they have merely appropriated the name because of its extremely violent reputation. Regardless of whether or not these international gangs are directly connected to those in the United States, it is certain that the Crips have an international presence due to their participation in drug trading, human trafficking, and military service. Traditionally, Crips have made the majority of their money through drug and arms sales, but they have also been involved in crimes such as automobile theft, falsifying tax documents, identity theft, money laundering, prostitution, and sex trafficking. While it is difficult to track the exact size of gangs, Crips are commonly referred to as the second largest street gang in the world, second only to the Bloods. Due in part to the massive size of the organization, there is no singular Crip identity.

The Crips, though often depicted as a unified crime syndicate, are better understood as “a collection of structured and unstructured gangs that have adopted a
common gang culture” (Department of Justice). There is no single unified Crip gang but rather a loose confederation of small neighborhood-based gangs, known as sets, that identify with the gangster culture of Crip such as wearing blue, C hand signals, tattoos, Crip Walking, and the use of Crip slogans such as “Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop,” “Crips don’t die, we multiply,” and “Chitty Chitty Bang Bang, Nothing but a Crip thing.” Some of these sets are quite large, with international and national connections, including close ties with Mexican drug trafficking organizations. Other sets are quite small and may be confined to a single neighborhood. Interestingly, law enforcement agencies report these smaller neighborhood-based gangs to be more significant threats than their national-level counterparts in regards to violent crime (FBI). Some of these neighborhood sets have “legitimate” claims to the Crip gang and were founded by Crips from other sets; some sets are “copy-cat” gangs that are affiliated with the national organization only in name and color, but even the use of blue, one of the most distinct Crip attributes, changes from neighborhood to neighborhood with some sets, such as the Grape Street Crips and the Hoover Crips, associating with different colors, purple and orange respectively, that represent their specific neighborhoods.

With all of these different sets enacting the gang differently, the similarities between Crips become tenuous, especially as the gang continues to grow. According to the 2015 National Gang Report, Crip membership is currently on the rise, though gang power is once again concentrating into major metropolitan areas after a brief expansion into more rural spaces. Metropolitan gangs are often composed predominantly by adults who have lived in their city for years, whereas rural gangs are often composed of younger members who are looking for new opportunities outside the city, not all of which are
necessarily gang related. Many of the Crips sets that are still forming in larger cities began as non-aligned neighborhood-based gangs that eventually joined with the Crips to gain protection, connections, and recognition from their alliance with the national gang. Cooperation among these different Crip sets varies depending on local politics and the histories of the neighborhoods. In fact, despite sharing an overarching gang culture, Crip sets often war with each other over resources, territory, and personal feuds. The former Crip member Sanyika Shakur has claimed that, despite the popular narrative of the Crips being at war with the Bloods, the most common killer of Crips is other Crips, an assertion that is verified by reporters such as Michael Krikorian and the gang sociologist Malcolm Klein (Shakur 19, Krikorian, “Raymond Washington”). Overall, gang loyalty is much more complicated than a singular devotion to an organization, which can also be seen in the 2011 National Gang Threat Assessment claims that there is currently a rise in hybrid gangs whose members claim multiple affiliations and adopt symbols from national level street gangs such as the Crips without obtaining the kind of membership and support from the gang that law enforcement would usually expect. As such, what it means to be a Crip is amorphous—it changes depending on the specific actors and contexts involved. For this reason, I argue that the Crips are what Michael Warner refers to as a “productive fiction” in that they are a concept used to understand the relationship between a group of human actors, most of whom would otherwise lack strong connections to one other.

Being a productive fiction means the Crips are a public; they are a group of strangers loosely connected by shared culture, interests, movements, practices, texts, and intertexts but who lack strong bonds and associations. While individual sets may be close knit, the overarching public is only connected by a Crip culture that is so fluid and
nebulous that seemingly the only constant is the name. However, even this marker of identification varies significantly not only from set to set but also from person to person. Specifically, the origin of the name *Crips* is a hotly disputed topic. One of the earliest gang members, Jamel Barnes, claims that the name is a portmanteau of *crib* and *R.I.P* meant to emphasize the lifelong commitment of being in the gang (Sloan). Another prominent gang member, Colton Simpson, claims that the name stands for “Community Revolutionary Inter-Party Service (125). Yet another former gang member, Sanyika Shakur, claims that the name stands for Clandestine Revolutionary Internationalist Party Soldiers (304). An unnamed gang member in the Blaxploitation style documentary *War Stories* claims that the name stands for Community Revolution In Progress, while self-proclaimed cofounder of the Crips, Stanley “Tookie” Williams, rejects the acronym theory altogether, claiming that inebriated gang members merely mis-pronounced the gang’s original name: the *Cribs* (xix). One time gang member Calvin “Snoop Dogg” Broadus also claims that the name is a mis-pronunciation of *Cribs*, claiming that during a robbery a Korean grocer screamed after two Crib gang members, and a newspaper reporter who mis-heard the grocer published the gang’s name as *Crips* (74). Among those who believe that the name was originally cribs are those who believe that it was a shortened form of the name *baby avenues* or *avenue cribs*, named as on homage to the gang the Avenues who refused Washington membership into their gang because he was too young (Fortier 55). There are also those who claim that *Cribs* was a reference to the

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3 I use the spelling Jamel Barnes because that is the spelling used in the documentary, though elsewhere the name is spelled Jimel Barnes.
4 Interestingly, when Stanley Williams claims that the name is not an acronym he cites completely different names than the ones other gang members mentioned: “It is also fiction that the Crips functioned under the acronym C.R.I.P., for Community Resource Inner-City Project or Community Revolutionary Inner City Project. (Words such as “revolutionary agenda” were alien to our thuggish, uninformed teenage consciousness)” (xix).
gang being the younger generation of the BPP (“Raymond Washington”). The documentary *Inside Bloods and Crips*, claims that the name was always the Crips, a reference to the canes that members carried early in their formation. Zach Fortier, who wrote an authorized biography about the Crip’s founder Raymond Washington, claims that the name was a reference to Washington’s brother Reggie, who walked with a limp (54).

Which account of the name’s meaning and history a person believes often depends on the way they understand the gang’s relationship to the rest of the world. From the cradle to grave emphasizes loyalty. Clandestine Revolutionary Internationalist Party Soldiers emphasizes the revolutionary possibilities of the group, and Community Revolution in Progress focuses more on local change. If the gang’s name was originally an homage to another street gang, then the Crips are direct descendants of Los Angeles’ history of street and car gangs, but if it is a reference to the BPP, they are the descendants of revolutionaries. If the name is a reference to the cane, then style is their defining attribute, but if it’s a reference to Reggie, then the gang in rooted in familial connections. Because there is no official record of the gang’s formation, all of these explanations are simultaneously both valid and invalid. There is no Crip identity, just identities; there is no history, just histories. But this is not to say that every history is equal. For instance, it is fairly doubtful that Raymond Washington walked around his neighborhood carrying a bassinet; however, when there is witness testimony for each of these identities and histories, how can anyone determine which is true? In the case of the Crips, all of the histories are true because each different account bears witness to a manifestation of a multiple public that was created not by a single actor but rather by the mis of a public.
The identity of the public emerges from this exchange. Still, there are some aspects of the Crip’s history that are generally agreed upon, and it is vital to understand them in order to understand how the Crips emerged from the exchange of texts within the public sphere and how they participated in creating new texts that changed not only their specific public but also the public sphere writ large.

**The Histories and Influences of the Crips**

This history of the Crips is a case study in how a variety of actors, likely misunderstanding the BPP, composed their own movement that was, and continues to be, mis-read by the larger culture in ways that have re-articulated both the gang and the larger public sphere of which it is a part. By most reports, the Crips were founded by Raymond Washington on the East Side of South Central Los Angeles in 1969. These accounts claim that the Crips expanded their territory the same way street and park gangs in Los Angeles traditionally had, through forcefully acquiring other gangs in ritual fist fighting in which the losing party’s gang would be subsumed by the victor’s. Raymond Washington was allegedly so skilled in hand-to-hand combat that he never lost one of these contests. If a rival gang leader refused to bet his power on a fight, then Washington and his gang would deride, harass, injure and mock him until the reluctant leader would either acquiesce to the fight or his demoralized followers would abandon him. As the Crips acquired more gangs and gang members, they became more powerful, which allowed them to acquire even more territory and influence. In 1971 the Crips merged with gangs associated with Stanley Williams on the West Side of South Central, making them the largest unified gang in the area. Williams, who is regularly criticized for
referring to himself as the cofounder of the Crips despite him joining two years after it was already established, claims that the first meeting after the merger was “the largest body of black pariahs ever assembled,” but the gang was still small enough to be able to gather at the bleachers of Washington High School where he was enrolled (89).

According to Williams, the goal of the merger was to “commence an urban cleansing of the gang element” (87). Other reports claim that the formation was even more benevolent and modeled on the BPP in their devotion to protecting the Black community (“Raymond Washington”). The memoirs of Sanyika Shakur and Colton Simpson even go so far as to discuss an upper tier of the Crip gang called the Blue Note Crips who, even after the gang became an explicit criminal organization, were still dedicated to the cause of protecting and liberating the Black community in the style of the Black Power movement. However, there are many reports from people who lived in the area that the gang was never about community protection; critics claim that outside gangs were only kept out of Crip neighborhoods so that the gang would be free to terrorize residents without repercussions. Lorriee Griffin Moss, who lived next door to Washington, claims, “Raymond was a bully. A muscular bully. He wouldn’t let anybody from outside our neighborhood bother us. He would bother us” (Krikorian). In this way, from the origins of the gang, their intentions have been nebulous and open to interpretation. What is certain, however, is that the Crips became larger than any previous Los Angeles gang, and their rapid growth changed gang practices in the area.

The rise of the Crips changed the nature of gangs, which is clearly seen in the founding of the Bloods. According to most histories, the Crips’ traditional rivals, the Bloods, were founded as an alliance of smaller street gangs who refused to submit to the
power of the Crips. While there are several stories explaining who started this alliance and how they did it, accounts agree that the gang was initially founded in an agreement between three neighborhood gangs: The Bishops, Athens Park, and Piru Street. Perhaps the most interesting origin story claims that the leader of the 92 Bishops, Bobby Lavender, escaped from a mob of 300 Crips by hiding on his mother’s roof. While on the roof, Lavender turned to a friend and said, “When we get down off this roof, we’ll never hide from them again” (Sloan). Another account, from an interview Lavender gave to a local news station in 1988, claims that he started the Bloods after his friend Skip was shot in the neck while walking down Bandera Street in Los Angeles. A third account claims that the leaders of the Piru Street Boys, Sylvester Scott and Vincent Owens, began offering other gangs protection from the Crips after Robert Ballou was beaten to death in 1972 outside of the Hollywood Palladium for refusing to relinquish his leather jacket to a group of Crips. While each of these three origin stories is different, they all demonstrate that only a year after the merger of Washington’s Crips and Williams’s gang, the Crips were a large and violent enough force within South Central Los Angeles that members of other gangs believed they needed to unite in order to protect themselves against them.

Robert Ballou’s heinous murder, and the fact that he was killed over something as trivial as a leather jacket, propelled the Crips into the national spotlight. As they gained infamy, they also amassed territory, and different sets began to develop their own unique practices that differentiated them from the gang as a whole. Some of the clearest examples of these differences can be seen in sets’ different initiation rituals. Some early gang members, such as Sanyika Shakur, tell stories about having to prove themselves tough enough to be in the gang by being beaten and having to murder members of rival
gangs; Shakur claims he was only eleven when this happened to him (8-11). Colton Simpson tells a very similar story, but claims he was only ten when it happened to him (20). Other gang members, such as Calvin Broadus, claim that entering the Crips was easy: “There was nothing secret or special about it. . . . Shit, they want you in. There’s strength in numbers” (76). Broadus admits that he was asked to fight his friend Blue as a sort of initiation, but he claims that the boxing match was much more playful than it was dangerous. Other initiations seem non-existent, with membership being based simply on birthplace. For instance, the Crip Caddy claims, “I didn’t get jumped into this. I grew up in this. My mom grew up in my neighborhood. My dad from my neighborhood. All my uncles from my neighborhood. So I don’t look at it as no gang thing, it’s just family” (Bloods and Crips Made in America). But not all gang members join because they have been raised by the gang. Shakur claims to have joined the militant Eight Tray Gangster Crips in 1973 because he thought the older gangsters were cool, and he wanted to be like them. Broadus joined the financially minded Rolling Twenty Crips in 1987 because he wanted to make money selling drugs, which had become a prominent Crip practice by the 1980s. The Crip Bandana, on the other hand, intimates that he joined the Crips in the early 2000s out of feelings of obligation: “When he hooks up with his crew, they feed him, they’re looking out for him, putting clothes on his back, okay. But now it’s time to get in his car and go get these niggers who just shot up my house. What you going to do? You obligated to do; that man just fed you” (Bloods and Crips Made in America). In this way, both the reasons for joining the gang and the initiation into it are various because they are co-created by the individuals, the set, the neighborhood, the time period, and other contextual factors. Nonetheless, it appears that some of the more infamous initiation
stories like cutting a stranger so that they require 150 stitches or driving with headlights off and killing the first person to flick theirs as a reminder are more urban myth than reality.

There are many urban myths about the Crips, but they make up only a small portion of the ways in which the gang has influenced culture in the United States and beyond. By the 1990s gangster rap albums, movies about inner-city gang violence, and gangster memoirs that explicitly mentioned the Crips were extremely popular and profitable. Rappers such as Dead Prez and Bobby Shmurda still rap about being Crip and their Crip heroes. More exploitatively, companies such as L.A. Gang Tours continue to profit by taking tourists to the places sensationalized by albums, movies, and memoirs. Mainstream United States society wants to see the material spaces of the Crips, which have been marked and changed by the gang. They want to see the churches where bodies were pushed out of caskets to be shot again. They want to see the crack houses where overzealous police officers handcuffed scores of people and identified them permanently as gangsters. They want to see where the drive-by shootings occurred. Conversely, these tourists also want to see the spaces that helped to create the gang because they know that the spaces influenced the gang as much as the gang influenced the spaces. Specifically, Stanley Williams discusses how the cruelty of the ghetto, in particular the abuse of animals—including dog fighting and racing enkindled pigeons—influenced his cruel and selfish worldview (15).

But it is not just the material conditions of these spaces that influenced the formation of the Crips, the gang was also shaped by the larger media culture. The movie Superfly, the novels of Iceberg Slim, and the music of James Brown are regularly cited as
helping Crip’s understand who they were within the United States culture and who they wanted to be. *Superfly* in particular is credited with popularizing the idea of individualism over BPP style community involvement (Sloan). Similarly, Iceberg Slim’s glorification of crime and misogyny were influential to rappers such as Ice-T and Ice Cube who named themselves after the famous pimp (Sloan). Even a song as popular as James Brown’s “The Payback” played a part in Crip culture as the unofficial gang anthem because Stanley Williams would listen to it before leaving his house on any gang related activities (Shakur 249, Williams 186). It is hard to overstate the significance these media are given in gangster memoirs and documentaries; these depictions of Black life influenced how young Black men saw the world in the same way that the Kerner Report claimed that the riots of 1968 were in part influenced by white affluence being “flaunted before the eyes of . . . the jobless ghetto youth” by way of the television screen (National Advisory). Media influenced how the Crip founders understood themselves and how they helped to co-create the world.

The relationship between popular culture and the Crips is a complex feedback loop that demonstrates how people interact with the publics of which they are a part and create new meanings by combining different facets of life and culture in ways that are much less linear than indicated by the term *loop*. For example, the themes of individualism, gangsterism, and the Romantic criminal that mark both *Superfly* and the work of Iceberg Slim are recreated in gangster films such as *Boyz n the Hood, Juice, and Menace II Society*. Meanwhile gangster rap artists such as Snoop Dogg were utilizing popular aspects of funk music—heavy bass lines, sexually explicit lyrics, the radio DJ interlude—in the creation of their rap albums. In these examples, the Crips act as a filter
through which popular media enters and influences the gang’s culture before being recreated by the gang and recirculated back into popular culture. As the objects of the mass culture enter into the public, these artifacts are remixed, remade, and represented by other forces such as movie directors and album producers, meaning that Crip culture is also being influenced by people outside of it. Cultures, both Crip and mainstream, are being created through the exchanging mis of the public with various actors making texts, making meaning, and moving the public in various ways. As individuals associated with the Crips such as Raymond Washington, Stanley Williams, and Calvin Broadus were co-creating what it meant to be Crip through their exchanges both with each other and those outside the publics such as the LAPD, James Brown, Ice-burg Slim, and Alprentice “Bunchy” Carter, so too were the Crips as a collective participating in the mis of the mainstream public through music, movies, and news reports. In both these ways, the Crips were co-creating the public, and perhaps one of the least obvious but most poignant ways they were doing so was through the gangster memoir.

**Crip Memoirs as Idealist Public Texts**

While the outlaw narrative has long been a staple of American culture, the gangster memoir gained new prominence in the first decade of the twenty-first century as Crip members began to write prison memoirs about their growth from cynical delinquents to idealist leaders prepared to re-create the world. Three of the most popular such memoirs are: *Blue Rage, Black Redemption* by Stanley “Tookie” Williams, *Monster* by Sanyika “Monster Kody Scott” Shakur, and *Inside the Crips* by Colton “Lil’ Cee Loc” Simpson. While each of these narratives responds to a unique exigence—Williams is
trying to demonstrate his redemption in hopes of being spared execution, Shakur is in solitary confinement for his crimes and wants to demonstrate the ways in which impoverished environments create violence, and Simpson was convinced to tell his story by his coauthor despite his book later being used as evidence against him in criminal court—they follow a similar idealist narrative arch that moves from a poor upbringing to criminality, incarceration, and finally a type of idealized enlightenment that the authors commonly refer to as redemption. Josephine Metcalf, in her book *The Culture and Politics of Contemporary Street Gang Memoirs*, argues that the conversion trajectory of the narrative has long had a place in American literature, and she claims that it is particularly common in the stories of subjugated people, especially Black Americans. Metcalf claims that redemption stories, from the slave narrative to the prison narrative, allow the author to assert the individual identity that made them strong enough to overcome their circumstances while simultaneously addressing the sociopolitical issues that face their community. For this reason, the memoir has often been an effective way of persuading the American public toward social change. Within this tradition, Crip gang memoirs most closely follow the examples of revolutionary black prison narratives such as those written by James Carr, Eldridge Cleaver, George Jackson, Huey P. Newton, and most influentially, Malcolm X. All of these narratives begin with the illicit escapades of a young man and then follow him into prison and solitary confinement, where he converts to a more socially conscious and just way of being that focuses on racial awareness (47).

It is not surprising that racial awareness is described as blossoming in the California prison system where prisoners face de facto segregation in an environment that constitutes a perpetual race war punctuated by small stretches of uneasy peace. While
separating prisoners by race is not an official policy of the prison system, it is widely documented in gangster memoirs as well as documentaries and news reports that prisoners are organized into four overarching race-based gangs: Blacks, Norteños, Sureños, and whites. Much like the Crips themselves, these gangs can be seen both from a broader perspective and a more specific one. For example, The Norteños, who are predominantly Mexicans from the northern part of California, ally themselves with the Blacks; the Sureños, who are predominantly Mexicans from southern California, ally themselves with the whites. Looked at from this perspective, the entire California prison system is organized as two large gangs. Conversely, each race-based gang is composed of a variety of smaller gangs. The Blacks are predominantly composed of Crips, Bloods, and Black Guerilla Family; Norteños are mostly composed of Nuestra Familia but include other Hispanic gangs from north of Bakersfield; the Sureños are mostly composed of the Mexican Mafia, otherwise known as La eMe, but also include other Hispanic gangs from south of Bakersfield; and finally, the whites are composed of mostly white supremacist gangs such as the Aryan Brotherhood, Nazi Lowriders, and the Dirty White Boys. Seen from this perspective, the California prison system is composed of many gangs, and this can be further complicated by noting that these gangs, like the Crips, are broken into a variety of sets. Because of the complexity of allegiances, prison makes salient the racial divides in the United States while also demonstrating how a lack of racial consciousness can be detrimental. As an anonymous Nazi Low Rider told reporters, “When there’s a war, there’s a war. . . . You’re a target just because of the color of your skin, so you might as well. You’re going to have to defend yourself. The lines get divided. You’ve gotta take sides. . . . It’s definitely racist. . . . Prison made me this way” (Sullivan). Forming such a
race-based defense, however, requires that sets and gangs overcome their internal divisions, which is difficult. As Sanyika Shakur argues, “tribalism,” attacking other members of one’s own racial gang because of inter-gang or set conflicts, often prevented Black prisoners from organizing against more powerful and organized forces (207). In this way, the material reality of the California prison system seems to engender a new kind of racial awareness in prisoners that makes the other movements and organizations of which they are a part less important, and this change is definitely true for the writers of gangster memoirs. Previously, the authors claim not to have thought much about race because they were much more interested in being Crips, but in prison, the topic becomes unavoidable: they not only become racially aware, but they want to actively work to bring about a more equitable future for Black people.

Besides functioning as a necessity of surviving the prison system, in the memoirs, burgeoning racial consciousness is encouraged by mentors such as prison imams and older gang members. For Shakur, Simpson, and Williams, this education teaches them the extent of Black subjugation throughout the history of the United States, and it influences them to work toward justice against oppressive white power structures. However, education does not have this effect on everyone mentioned in the books. Shakur tells a particularly disturbing story in which a prisoner named Fat Rat reads a book on slavery, and then uses this information to break prison bitches by beating, degrading, and raping them (293). Despite such violent possibilities, the protagonists of the memoirs are able use their education to change who they are for the better. For Simpson and Shakur specifically, education gives them a new found sense of what it means not only to be Black but also what it means to be a Crip. It is at this point in their respective books that
both these men learn about the revolutionary history of the Crips—their relationship to the BPP and the elusive Blue Note Crips still working for revolutionary change in America. Not surprisingly, both men are initially suspicious that the gang could mean anything more than violence and crime, but through learning Kiswahili and participating in ritual chants that recite an idealized Crip history, they come to think about the gang as not only having a revolutionary past but also as having a possible revolutionary future that they can help to make manifest. The writers believe that they can, like idealists, play their part in moving the public in a specific way.

While the racial dynamics of the prison, along with mentors and education, help to bring about enlightenment in these memoirs, the most important space of the conversion process in each memoir is solitary confinement. In this space, the author is forced into deep introspection and finds something he can equate with a more authentic self; further, through surviving the psychological torment of solitary confinement, the author demonstrates that he is too strong to be broken by his material conditions. Perhaps the clearest articulation of the change associated with solitary confinement in the revolutionary literature is the story of when Huey P. Newton was forced into “the soul breaker.” In this isolated space, Newton chose to meditate and focus on his memories for psychological strength, while limiting his water and food intake so that he did not have to soil the small room in which he is trapped (39-42). In his memoirs, Williams teaches himself languages, philosophy, and history while maintaining a strict fitness regimen to stay sane; through maintaining this routine, he claims to come to a deeper understanding of his value as an individual and the value of Black Americans as a people. Similarly, Shakur comes to admire Black revolutionaries, deciding that the only way for there to be
real justice for “Afrikaans” is for them to separate from the Americans and the “Toms.” Simpson comes to a less radical sense of Black pride, but when he tries to describe it to his friends, he is accused of “sounding white” and being prideful, which makes it difficult for him to understand where a newly educated Black man belongs in the world (284). This is a particularly relevant question because the Secure Housing Unit [SHU] cells where each of these authors were isolated are, by design, apart from the world, not a part of it.

The official purpose of SHU is “to monitor, to control, [and] to isolate” the most violent prisoners in order to tamp down the gang problem in the rest of the prison; however, being moved to solitary has become a badge of honor for many gang members, so it no longer works as a deterrent (Sullivan). Despite the reputational draw of the SHU, the small confined living space where prisoners spend 22 ½ hours of their day is not a pleasant experience. Many prisoners experience severe anger, anxiety, depression, and psychosis from prolonged confinement in these isolating spaces, and some experts consider their use a form of torture (Office of the Inspector General 16). In each of the memoirs, the writers were meant to be broken and made more submissive through their time in solitary confinement, but instead, they became more radical, intelligent, and determined. This is by no means the effect solitary has on most prisoners, and the narratives are not meant to justify the practice of isolation but rather to demonstrate the individual’s strength and by extension, the strength of those among the readership who identify with them. The SHU cell is the place where the writer is cut off from the circulation of texts and forced to determine meaning for himself in a psychologically traumatic space that is different from all other experiences in that it is uniquely his.
Though he still co-participates in this space with actors such as the walls, the guards who slide him his food, morality, power, and the police state, there are far less actors to directly engage with in this space than in most other situations and publics. Similarly, those actors that he remembers such as family, friends, movies, music, and the gang itself have less immediate force in this place. In short, there is less mis to this public, which provides the prisoner the opportunity to take more responsibility in their creation of meaning as they consider the outside world of which they were a part and of which they may be a part again.

Indicative of this ability to create meaning with other texts is the education each author receives while in prison. Though all the memoir writers received similar educations in prison, they do not come to the same political conclusions. Just like Fat Rat turned the book on slavery into an instruction guide on how to break a prison bitch rather than to understand the historic oppression of his ancestors, so too are all texts malleable to the users, settings, and situations within which they find themselves. Similarly, the Crips, as a movement, were intended to be a force for radical community change in the style of the BPP, but they quickly became a destructive force that destroyed black lives and gave the LAPD a way to vindicate their increasingly aggressive policies toward inner-city neighborhoods. Regardless of intentions, the drugs, violence, money, etc. of the gang world changed the Crips into what they are today. Similarly, the BPP’s intentions did not create the public for which they hoped. Through being dismantled and destroyed by the FBI, the BPP helped to influence a culture of gang violence that terrorized black neighborhoods. The BPP of course is not to blame for gang violence, but their idealist intentions, despite being meticulously crafted, were mis-understood and
mis-handled by the mis of the public sphere, though some gangster have come to mis-read this relationship in more productive ways, as seen in the memoirs.

The Malleable Text and the Malleable Public

The lineage between the Black Power movement and the Crips demonstrates how the mis of rhetoric, the co-productive way in which meaning emerges from the interactions between a variety of human and nonhuman actors, changes not only how texts mean but also in so doing changes how publics understand themselves. This change is particularly relevant for idealists such as those associated with the Black Power movement. The movement hoped to make the public more equitable and just, and it created a variety of texts in order to do this. They created traditional texts such as books, newspapers, plans, and speeches and more embodied texts such as organizations and protests. Of course, not every Black Power organization imagined their goals the same way or had the same tactics; they debated fervently over these issues as well as what the term meant and what worlds they wanted to create with it. In this way Black Power was being co-created through mis. Seeing the power of these various messages, the FBI and other groups attempted to make them mean something completely different not only by arguing against Black Power in the media but also my dismantling organizations and turning them against one another.

Perhaps one of the greatest changes to the understanding of Black Power was the rise of the Crips, who did not engage with the slogan or idea directly but justified themselves, at least in part, through their association with the revolutionary BPP. This conflation, though a departure from the BPPs ideals, was not unprecedented. As George
Barganier argues in his dissertation Fanon’s Children, “Black nationalists of the Black Power era often viewed Black criminality as an essential component of Black political consciousness” and though most Black youth have neither been in a gang nor in a radical political group, “the historical relationship between the two social collectives illuminates a fundamental aspect of Black consciousness (1). The co-productive relationship between the revolutionary movement and the gang element existed from the beginning and co-created what revolution meant in that moment. This connection can most clearly be seen in the claims that Raymond Washington started the Crips as an anti-gang gang that would make his neighborhood safer. However, an anti-gang gang is still a gang, and by the mid-1980s, through the co-creative that defines a public through intra-action, the criminal aspect of the group seems to have taken over, defining not only a radial criminal public within Los Angeles but also, in its way, a new interpretation of Black Power. The memoirs of gang members reflecting on their own histories as well as their engagements with the ideas of the 1960s and 1970s revolutionaries demonstrate the ways in which the Crips helped to co-produce Black consciousness, though of course they weren’t the only ones. A myriad of actors—from African-American studies professors, to community organizers, to school teachers, etc.—were co-participating in this conversation about Black Power as a text, a movement, and a potential world.

As Black Power influenced the Crips, so too did the rise of Crip culture, in its various manifestations, influence American culture writ large as people engaged with the cultural products both being created by Crips and about them. Crips influenced music, movies, and literature in significant ways, while also co-creating what it meant to be a Crip as well as the gang’s significance and its history. In this way, the gang demonstrates
that the mis of rhetoric means not only that texts are malleable but also the networks in which they exist are malleable. The texts of the gang are only as mis-understood and mis-spoken as the gang itself. A gang is maintained through its history, embodied practices, and collected symbols, but all of these things are understood and enacted differently by different sets for different reasons. What it means to be Crip is different for each Crip.

The Crip experiences of Stanley Williams, Sanyika Shakur, and Colton Simpson are all markedly the same and markedly different, and their memoirs demonstrate the different ways they believe Crip both has changed society for the worse and can be used to change society for the better. However, these articulations run into the same problems as other idealist texts. No matter how meticulously and convincingly the rhetors argue for their understanding of the gang, they will always be mis-read and mis-understood because meaning is not up to the individual—it emerges through the intra-actions of a multitude of actors. No matter how much rhetors prepare their texts, they always risk being mis-understood and creating unexpected realities. Perhaps there is no clearer example of this in the memoirs than in Colton Simpson’s own redemption narrative being used to convict him in a criminal trial. Still, the problem of mis is not exclusive to texts because meanings effect entire rhetorical ecologies in ways that change publics, societies, and material worlds as well. As a text is rearticulated by the world so too does it, with all of its multiple meanings, rearticulate the world. Mis is a constant risk for both the rhetor and the world.
CHAPTER 3
THE RISKS OF ACTIVISM: GAMERGATE HARASSMENTS AND THE ALT-RIGHT SPHERE PUBLIC

One of the most concerning risks associated with the public sphere is the possibility of harassment. By entering into interactions with strangers, an actor becomes vulnerable to transgressions both miniscule and great. In her 1995 book *Passing By: Gender and Public Harassment* Carol Brooks Gardner famously defined harassment as the “group of abuses, harryings, and annoyances characteristic of public places and uniquely facilitated by communication in public . . . harassments include pinching, slapping, hitting, shouted remarks, vulgarity, insults, sly innuendo, ogling and stalking” (4). Primarily, these violences are perpetrated by men onto women because, as Gardner explains, women are undervalued and seen as less deserving of respect. For this same reason, people of color, members of the LGBTQAI community, and the poor are also more likely to be harassed in the United States than cisgender white men, though, ultimately, it is possible for anyone to be targeted for harassment. According to Gardner, harassment often serves to silence people and perhaps even punish them for entering the public. Though the purpose of any individual act of harassment is idiosyncratic, multiple, and complex, all harassments work to demonstrate that the harassed is not as strong, valuable, or intrinsically worthy as the harasser. Harassment enacts a social order in which the harasser, and to a lesser extent all of those who are able to go about their world un-harassed, are seen as more deserving of respect than the harassed. These aggressive
signs of disrespect that lower the status of an individual often discourage the harassed from entering the public sphere altogether or encourage them to modify the ways they behave when they do decide to act publicly. Gardner argues that these ways of responding to harassment create “both a gulf between private and public realms and a gulf between the individual’s private and public selves” (11). In this way, harassment threatens the entire public by limiting both the diversity of actors and the diversity of opinions that circulate within it.

Activists vantages are perhaps more vulnerable to the risk of harassment than idealist or materialist perspectives because people operating from this position are actively advocating for specific changes to the public sphere, and as agents of change, they are apt to encounter those adverse results that are often referred to as blowback. Unlike idealist scholars who are trying to define the perfect public so that they can develop strategies to achieve it, activist scholars study the tactics political actors use to negotiate the worlds in which they live in an attempt to understand not only the effectiveness of such actions but also their implications. In other words, activist scholars are distinctly less teleological than their idealist counterparts in that they focus on how publics are changed rather than the ideal they believe the public should change into. This orientation does not mean that activist scholars do not have their own political commitments and desires that influence their work—in fact many scholars working from this vantage are proud of their political activism and the ways that it informs their interests, subjects, methods, and conclusions—however, the political orientation of activist scholarship leads these scholars to study how politics are enacted rather than what politics should be ideally. Despite the lack of teleology, these scholars are attuned to the
effects of rhetorical practices, including the responses to them. One of the primary concerns of these studies is whether or not the type of political discourses being observed either are harassment or are being met with harassment. The goal of the activist scholar is often to find means for discussion that are both effective and equitable when the disenfranchised are fighting the powerful for their rights, so they are keenly aware of harassment.

Erin Rand’s 2013 article “‘What One Voice Can Do’” clearly demonstrates the kind of tactics-based studies that emerge from the political orientation associated with activist scholarship. This article examines the ways in which the LGBT activist training event Camp Courage utilizes storytelling, chanting, and applause to build community. Rand argues that such choric communicative practices—that is rhetorics that are communally synchronous, rhythmic, and embodied—not only build community among disparate actors without assuming a common identity but also demonstrate the indivisibility between rhetoric and performance (29). By participating in community story-telling, chanting, call and response exercises, and applauding, Camp Courage attendees establish a community while maintaining members’ sense of individuality and idiosyncrasy. These exercises are not intended to persuade participants to think the same way but rather to create solidarity through affective performance; the practices create embodied collectives rather than abstract unities. Rand explains that in the context of Camp Courage, choric activities are meant to teach participants how to build their own collectives in their own neighborhoods while also reminding them that they are part of a larger support system intended to help members navigate the risks associated with advocating for the LGBT community (45). In this way, Camp Courage’s exercises not
only create social bonds without harassment but also help to mitigate future harassments, or at the very least, provide succor for the pain such harassments may cause. Rand is ultimately very positive about these exercises and their capacity to create community while respecting individuality because she, like most activist scholars, is invested in finding effective rhetorical tactics for creating social and political change without the need to conform to a singular position. Activist scholars generally hope to enable diversity by advocating for tactics of public communication that enable a multiplicity of actors to co-produce the world collectively.

Of course, such choric practices are not completely unproblematic, and Rand critiques the ways in which Camp Courage ignores the conflictual histories between labor movements, civil rights movements, and the LGBT community. Understanding these types of problems is particularly important given how rhetorical practices—especially using contemporary, digitally connected media—can either be used to build alliances or destroy diversity. In general, the internet allows for a myriad of cruelties that we not possible only a few decades ago. Activists in the twenty-first-century United States public sphere risk not only the traditional physical and political blowback associated with upsetting the dominant public but also a diverse array of online harassments that can best be understood through the complex public debacle know as Gamergate, in which members of the alt-right viciously harassed feminist media critics and video game designers who they felt were threatening the masculine ethos of the video game community. I use Gamergate as a way to understand the ways in which the alt-right tries to use harassment—violent manipulation of publicness’s sociality—in order not only to create their ideal public but also to make their public the dominant one. Ideally, the alt-
The alt-right wants to replace the contemporary public sphere—which is better understood as multiple sphere publics intra-acting with each other—with a monolithic public composed of predominantly cisgender white men who argue with each other based on a common set of assumptions. Such a public would accept a diversity of identities and thoughts, but only within a very narrow scope; everyone else would be annexed to the private sphere. Not surprisingly, those the alt-right wants to relegate from the public are the same people who have traditionally been barred from participating in it: foreigners, minorities, the poor, radicals, queers, and women. To help manifest their ideal public sphere, the alt-right often acts as a vicious audience whenever a representative of these groups critiques their assumptions, values, and worldviews. Because of the digitally connected nature of the contemporary public sphere, the alt-right has a diverse array of harassment tactics at their disposal.

Gamergate and the Harassments of Anita Sarkeesian and Zoe Quinn

The well-publicized harassment of Anita Sarkeesian during the height of the misogynistic video game controversy commonly referred to as Gamergate is a clear example of the ways in which seemingly innocuous arguments within the public sphere can garner harassment from unexpected forces. Sarkeesian’s story is particularly illustrative of the ways in which activists risk harassment because, though her arguments were well researched, expertly crafted, and generally inoffensive, Sarkeesian was met with particularly hateful, sexist, and violent types of harassment. Leigh Gruwell argues that this case is particularly relevant for compositionists because:
In many ways, Sarkeesian has done exactly what digital compositionists have argued students should be doing in composition classes: through critical, rhetorical engagement with the affordances of new media, she created and circulated compelling arguments for public audiences. Despite the quality of her video series “Tropes vs Women in Video Games”—the first of which explains the project by claiming, “This series will include critical analysis of many beloved games and characters, but remember that it is both possible (and even necessary) to simultaneously enjoy media while also being critical of its more problematic or pernicious aspects”—Sarkeesian was subject to extreme forms of harassment, coming from a group of gamers and internet personalities who would later be identified as part of the alt-right movement.

To understand the harassment Sarkeesian faced, it is important to understand the history of her videos before examining some of the responses they garnered. According to the “About” page of Sarkeesian’s educational not-for-profit website, Feminist Frequency, the media studies organization began in 2009 when “Sarkeesian borrowed a camera and some lights, tacked a piece of fabric up on her living room wall, and started making videos examining pop culture from a feminist perspective.” Sarkeesian did not become a prominent public figure, however, until her 2012 Kickstarter campaign to raise funds to continue her research and produce more videos raised $158,922 from almost seven thousand individual backers. As Sarkeesian’s success grew, she also began to receive a flood of online harassment by video gamers who claimed she was both misrepresenting and attacking the games they loved in her attempt to get rich through internet fundraising. In July of 2012, a member of the entertainment and social media
website *NewGrounds.com* went so far as to upload a simple flash game in which players were invited to punch an image of Sarkeesian’s face that would become increasingly battered and swollen with each strike (Sterling). Two years later, in August of 2014, Sarkeesian received death threats that were so specific that she contacted police and had to evacuate her house (Robertson). In October of that same year, Sarkeesian had to cancel a speaking engagement at Utah State University because the school refused to take steps to guarantee her safety after an alleged student sent an email to several school staffers threatening, “the deadliest school shooting in American history,” in response to her visit (Ahmed and Marco).

And while the events of the previous paragraph highlight the severity of Sarkeesian’s harassment, they do not represent the continual onslaught of degrading, derisive, and violent comments she was receiving on social media; this constant barrage is illustrated in a *Tumblr* post where Sarkeesian displays a week’s worth of “hateful” Tweets that were sent to her @femfrequency account between January 20, 2015 and January 26, 2015. In total there are 157 tweets. I have pulled a few exemplary ones from the list, but they are by no means the worst:

- @femfreq Everyone knows, you’re a liar, a con, an attention whore, a femenazi (not a feminist), a sexist pig. an all-round joke. get real.
- @GamingMattersUS @femfreq “harassing” will continue and accelerate. We’re not going to stop until no one will openly admit to being feminist
- @fremfreq I WANT TO FUCKING STAB YOUR STUPID FUCKING UGLY SHAPED FACE YOU FEMINIST CUNT, KILL YOURSELF, NO ONE WILL CARE BITCH

90
• im going to come to your house and violently rape you in front of your family @femfreq

The hateful and violent responses Sarkeesian received to her videos are indicative of how severe public harassment can be. While it is expected that her arguments would invite responses from other critics, video gamers, and perhaps those in the video game industry—and it should be noted that representatives of each of these groups have created counterargument videos on YouTube that explain their positions while generally also accusing Sarkeesian of being an ideologue who evidences her biased arguments with “cherry-picked” and unrepresentative data—these types of reasoned responses, even when they are laden with the typical snark and condescension that have become typical of internet culture, are not the problem. Disagreement is not harassment.

Some prominent alt-right critics—such as Sargon of Akkad, Milo Yiannapoulos, and the Internet Aristocrat—attempt to dismiss claims of harassment by asserting that the harassed are over reacting due to their inability to cope with disagreement, but this position only serves to further disrespect the victims and position them as weak and unworthy of respect by downplaying the severity of the harassment they are suffering. These critics want to position misogynistic, threatening, and violent discourse as normal—as the kind of thing with which they could easily cope. Many of these critics claimed that if Sarkeesian cannot put up with being harassed, then she has no right to participate within the public sphere. However, harassment is explicitly meant to silence opinions by frightening and devaluing those who espouse them. By claiming that such conduct is normal, these critics exacerbate the problem, creating a cycle in which the
victim is harassed, leading to more criticism, leading to more harassment, etc. This cycle is not a productive discourse, but it is a common part of the contemporary public sphere.

Even public actors who do not enter into the political fray may face harassment. A 2014 Pew Internet study found that 40% of internet users have faced harassment online, and research conducted by the advocacy group Stop Street Harassment suggests that 65% of women and 25% of men have experienced harassment in a non-digital public space (Duggan, Kearl). Most of the men who reported being harassed identified themselves as queer, and among women who reported harassment, most were women of color. Clearly, embodied realities affect the likelihood of an actor being harassed, and this is even true online. According to the Pew study, men were more likely to be called offensive names and purposefully embarrassed in online environments, whereas women were more likely to be stalked or sexually harassed. Young people between ages 18-24 by far experienced the most online harassment with men and women reporting at about the same rates in all the different categories, except stalking and sexual harassment, which were overwhelmingly experienced more frequently by young women. Unsurprisingly, those who were stalked, sexually harassed, and underwent sustained harassment felt more traumatized than those who were called offensive names or purposefully embarrassed. Thus, the report seems to indicate that though men are more likely than women to experience harassment online, the harassment experienced by women is likely to be more severe—especially if the harassed is a young adult.

An example of unexpected harassment befalling an unsuspecting young woman can be seen in the story of the Gamergate victim Zoe Quinn. Though she was not a critic like Sarkeesian, at least not prior to Gamergate, Quinn could be seen as an activist in her
own right in that her game *Depression Quest* was designed “to illustrate as clearly as possible what depression is like . . . [in order to] spread awareness and fight against the social stigma and misunderstandings that depression sufferers face . . . [while also hoping that through playing] sufferers will come to know that they aren’t alone, and hopefully derive some measure of comfort from that.” Nonetheless, Quinn was not actively involved in discussions about gamer culture; instead, Quinn was dragged into the Gamergate controversy when her ex-boyfriend Eron Gjoni created a *WordPress* blog about her in which, among other allegations, he claimed she had engaged in sexual affairs with journalists in exchange for them writing favorable reviews of her game, which had won several important awards. Based on what Gjoni wrote, alt-right thought-leaders created elaborate conspiracy theories. Vox Day claims, “Given the very poor quality of *Depression Quest*, it seemed readily apparent to casual observers that the unusual amount of media attention garnered by the game must have been the result of the developer’s liberal distribution of her sexual favors” and the Internet Aristocrat argues that Quinn was upset about what Gjoni had written not because it exposed her private life but because it unveiled the identities “of the people she slept with—that she cheated on him with during the relationship and who they are, and specifically what they can do for her as an entrepreneur. Gaming journalism reached a low point” (qtd. in Sandifer 176-81). In short, alt-right gamers and journalists used a libelous screed written by an angry ex-boyfriend to place Quinn at the center of a conspiracy in which video game journalists were not only exchanging positive reviews for sex but also were slowly attempting to change “gamer culture” by discussing social issues, such as depression, in their publications. It did not help matters that *Depression Quest* is not a video game in the
usual sense but rather a hypertext fiction, or a written narrative connected by hyperlinks the player can choose from in order to get different results. The format of hypertext games is reminiscent of the choose your own adventure “branching-path” gamebooks that were popular from the 1970s-1990s. The unusual format of the game and its bleak subject matter combined with Quinn’s gender, politics, and style made it easy for alt-right leaders to depict Zoe as an outsider who was not really invested in gaming, despite women making up almost half of the gaming community (Yee).

By November 2015 more famous members of the alt-right, often referred to as the alt-light, including Milo Yiannopoulos and Christina Hoff Summers, were appearing on more approachable far-right shows such as The Rubin Report to claim that Gamergate was not about attacking women but rather about problems with video game journalism and the preservation of gaming culture. As Elizabeth Sandifer demonstrates in her book NeoReaction A Basilisk, all of the claims they were making, however, were unsubstantiated. The allegations that Zoe exchanged sex for positive reviews has been debunked both because the men she slept with did not review her games and because she slept with them months after they mentioned her game in their articles. Similarly, socially critiquing games has been a part of the industry for at least the past twenty years, as best evidenced by Keiron Gillens’s 2004 manifesto “The New Games Journalism.” Finally the demographics of gamers is much more diverse than the stereotypical image of the young heterosexual cisgender white man that the alt-right likes to propagate, and despite what they may claim, young white cisgender straight men do not own the medium or culture of video games (182). In short, Sandifer demonstrates that all of the critiques against the game industry that surround Quinn are not true; they are simply hurtful,
misogynistic, and false. However, as with Sarkeesian, the worst harassment Quinn faced was not from thought-leaders but rather from less well known members of the alt-right who threatened her, released her personal information online, and released nude photos of her.

The sustained harassment of Quinn was complex and involved. Sandifer mentions that screenshots Quinn herself released from Gamergate related message boards show users contacting Gjoni to get her personal information and coordinating harassment campaigns against her. Sandifer also outlines more nuanced attacks that members of the alt-right used against both Quinn and Sarkeesian, such as the creation of fake Twitter accounts purporting to be women and minorities that sided with the alt-right in order to make Quinn and Sarkeesian seem like fringe thinkers, the use of fake Twitter accounts purporting to be feminists pushing extreme positions such as #EndFathersDay and #WhitesCantBeRaped to make feminism look like a radical position, and the creation of long-term counter intelligence operations on feminist organizations that are reminiscent to those used by the FBI when dealing with civil rights organizations. As Sandifer evidences, when the alt-right planned these campaigns they assumed that Quinn and Sarkeesian were also using false flag operations and sock-puppet accounts to build support; the alt-right assumed these women were playing the same games they were, and they used this assumption as an excuse to ignore any criticisms of Gamergate (191). In the minds of the harassers, the complex harassment levelled against Quinn and Sarkeesian was not only justifiable, it was necessary for fighting an ideological war.

The harassment of Quinn and Sarkeesian was necessary in the minds of many in the alt-right because these women were understood as attacking the video game
community rather than participating with it. Quinn and Sarkeesian were vilified for not being tough enough to deal with the harassment that was meant to excise them from the public. They were attacked because members of the alt-right believed these women were clearly engaging in covert operations to destroy alt-right gaming communities. Quinn, who now runs the Crash Override Network that provides free support and counsel to victims of online harassment, sums up her experience differently, however:

There’s been campaigns like this across a bunch of different industries. It’s a symptom of this larger brewing negative sentiment toward anybody that could be perceived as other [sic]. The further away you get to the 1950s sitcom dad, the more people there are out there that hate you. All of the bigotry and hatred and stuff that happens offline definitely translates online, so really this was just the game-flavored version of that rather than something that is unique to games.

This larger movement that Quinn is referring to is the alt-right, a term I have been using throughout this section to discuss those who harassed Sarkeesian and Quinn. In general, the term refers to a loosely connected group of far-right fringe thinkers including men’s rights activists, paleoconservatives, and white nationalists. The group rose to prominence during the election of Donald Trump and have become well known for their harassment campaigns, including those against Quinn and Sarkeesian. These campaigns are effective because the public sphere is not the sterile space for discourse that many idealist scholars argue it should be; rather, as activists know, the public is a messy space where culture, embodiment, identity, and social standing are just as important to persuasion as rational-critical discourse. If a group can rally their allies and shout-down their enemies, they
have no need to engage in rational-critical debate because the public is social, not just discursive. In fact discourse and sociality are co-constitutive and inseparable.

**Socializing the Public**

Much of the scholarship on the public sphere has neglected to consider the public’s relationship to sociality and has instead focused on publicness as a unique form of interaction that is free from social hierarchies and prejudices; this is a dangerous position, and one that needs to be remedied. The most prominent example of this position is Jürgen Habermas, who actually begins *Transformation of the Public Sphere* by arguing that the ancient Athenian *polis* was composed of citizens whose claims to family, land, and slaves freed them from having to concern themselves with the necessities of life, allowing them to instead tend to the affairs of state (3). In this way, the Athenian *polis* literally separated the social world of embodied relationships from the abstracted discursive world of public deliberation. The model Habermas later provides for the eighteenth-century public sphere—a group of private citizens collected together to make their will known to the state and to hold it accountable to their will—is based on this same premise. Because their immediate needs for survival were guaranteed, bourgeois men could focus their energies on utilizing their economic power to subvert the European monarchies (27). However, in order to hold the monarchies to their will, the bourgeois public had to first determine what their will was. To understand their interests and determine the best course of action for securing them, the bourgeois used rational-critical debate. In order to ensure that debate highlighted the best ideas over everything else, both rhetors and audiences were asked to bracket their personal identities and
interests before debating so that they could all deliberate objectively, without the burden of their individual identities clouding their collective judgement (27). This method claimed, in no uncertain terms, to strip away the social prejudices from each argument so that the audience could evaluate them from a strictly logical perspective.

This bracketing of sociality, according to Habermas, is how the bourgeoisie ascended to power and implemented democratic forms of government, but Nancy Fraser famously refuted this argument in her article “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” by showing how the bourgeoisie were never able to successfully bracket their identities and engage in completely disembodied rational-critical debate. Instead, Fraser argues that those people whose identities would trouble the perspectives of the bourgeoisie public sphere—foreigners, minorities, poor people, queers, radicals, and women—were excised from public discussion. These groups were shunned from the public sphere in the same way that they are still the most likely groups to be silenced in the contemporary public sphere via harassment. Fraser argues that because they were excluded from the dominant public, these groups created their own subaltern counterpublics where they could consolidate power, plan agitational activities, and attempt to hold the dominant public accountable to their will. In this way, the subaltern counterpublics closely resembled the dominant public against which they struggled, except they were keenly aware of the important influence sociality has on publicness.

Like the subaltern counterpublics she studies, Fraser acknowledges the social nature of public engagement and the ways in which social inequalities lead to public inequalities. By showing how identities, discriminations, and the need for subalterns to consolidate power have co-produced multiple public spheres based on social relations,
Fraser demonstrates that the public sphere is not a space of pure reason populated by abstract concepts but rather an embodied space populated by material actors. Acknowledging this social aspect of publicness, she argues:

We should question whether it is possible even in principle for interlocutors to deliberate as if they were social peers in specifically designated discursive arenas, when these discursive arenas are situated in a larger societal context that is pervaded by structural relations of dominance and subordination. (12)

Without a completely egalitarian society, Fraser doubts there can be an egalitarian sphere of discourse because the social will necessarily influence the composition of the public. Similarly, Hannah Arendt argues that though the social and political were once separated, they are now so intertwined that it is near impossible to tell them apart. Arendt, however, is less concerned about hierarchical divisions and much more concerned about conformity of thought and behavior.

Arendt’s argument in *The Human Condition* is unique in that she not only contrasts publicness to privateness but also contrasts both of these spheres to sociality. Arendt begins much in the same way as Habermas, by demonstrating that participation within the Athenian *polis* required the citizen to first free himself from the necessities of life by subjugating others. She goes as far as to claim that this divide was also the divide between violence and speech because the former was seen as the tool for organizing a household built on patriarchal rule whereas the latter was seen as the tool for promoting action among peers within a democracy (31). The two spheres were completely different: whereas the household was ruled monarchically by the citizen, the polis was egalitarian; whereas the household focused on communal survival, the polis focused on individual
greatness. The distinctness between these spheres was blurred by the rise of the social, which Ardent defines as “the collective of families economically organized into the facsimile of one super-family” (29). Arendt explains that as the bourgeoisie took power in Europe during the eighteenth century, public life became increasingly concerned with economics rather than politics and “the fact of mutual dependence for the sake of life and nothing else assume[d] public significance.” As such, people became less concerned with individual action and increasingly concerned with proper behavior that would enable economics to flourish unhampered (46).

In other words, the subjugation of the household began to permeate the public, and Western Civilization became more equitable not by allowing everyone the individual differentiation of publicness but by making publicness as homogenized and controlling as the private sphere had been. Note that in the Gamergate controversy both sides are arguing over social norms, behavior, and consumer goods; the controversy is about determining shared values and how people should behave themselves in a public that has become a super-family. Seen in this way, the use of harassment is almost unsurprising in that violence has historically been the tool used to create order among those seen as unequal within the private sphere—those who were restricted from having a public life. It was the prominence of this violence in the domestic space that spurred many feminists, along with others on the new left, to proclaim “The personal is political” during the 1960s (Echols 16). Similarly, because many in the alt-right believe in “traditional gender roles” and strict father morality, it is unsurprising that they felt the need to take it upon themselves not only to act as patriarchs in this debacle but also to enact particularly disgusting and violent versions of fatherhood and husbandry as they tried to force
Sarkeesian and Quinn into the social roles they had designated for women. Sarkeesian and Quinn, however, refused to retreat into the private sphere, and both are still working for social change. This ability to continue acting in the public sphere demonstrates both personal resilience and the multiplicity of overlapping publics within society. Both Quinn and Sarkeesian were not only involved in the discursive and social public of the Gamergate controversy, they were also members of other, more supportive publics. The twenty-first century is not a world in which one is either part of the dominant public or relegated to privacy or membership in a subaltern counterpublic; instead, in the twenty-first century there are multiple publics centered around different poetic worlds that are constantly diverging, converging, and overlapping.

Seeing the public sphere as comprised of multiple publics in this way was popularized in no small part by Michael Warner’s book *Publics and Counterpublics* in which he argues that the word *public* refers to three different types of entities: polities, physically present audiences, and loosely affiliated readerships. Warner’s study focuses predominately on the third type of public, which he defines through seven characteristics. Publics are: 1) self-organized, 2) relations among strangers, 3) both personal and impersonal, 4) constituted through mere attention, 5) created by reflexive circulation, 6) dictated by the temporality of their circulation, and 7) involved in poetic world-making. The first four of these definitions are rather easy to understand, and they serve mostly to demonstrate the ways in which the loose connections among publics are different from clubs and organizations where there may be governing structures, people may know each other, messages may be localized, and people may have to be initiated in order to join. Unlike these kinds of clubs and organizations, Warner argues that publics are rather
amorphous, with texts being delivered to a potentially infinite number of audience members who may or may not pay attention to them.

The last three characteristics of Warner’s definition are much more nuanced than the first four. Warner claims that publics are not created by one text but rather by a multitude of texts written about similar issues, referencing each other, and circulating among the same basic readership. From the circulation of these texts, a poetic world emerges in that readers co-produce a collective relationship with the world that they would not have had otherwise. As long as a public’s texts continue to circulate, the public and its poetic world can be said to exist, but once circulation ceases, so does the public. Seen from this angle, it is easy to see how multiple overlapping publics can exist at the same time because different readers participate within different networks. For instance, while it would be misguided to think of the readership of Feminist Frequency as a public because it is only one organization, Composition and Rhetoric scholars should consider the network of readers who are not only watching Feminist Frequency videos but also reading other feminist authors, volunteering with feminist organizations, and participating in Tumblr-based feminist subcultures as a public. Similarly, critics can think of the alt-right as a public that is defined by the circulation of far-right texts and memes on news sites such as Brietbart, message forums such as 4Chan, and printing presses such as Counter-Currents. As Gamergate demonstrates, these publics are not exclusive; they have overlapping in interests, concerns, texts, and maybe even readers. However, it would also be erroneous to think of either of these publics as representative of dominant American society, especially when they both define themselves against what they see as dominant cultural standards, even while appealing to common cultural virtues such as
fairness. Of course, these publics are also not equally subaltern; while members of both publics will claim to face prejudices because of their embodied identities and their political beliefs, the struggles they face are very different from one another. Finally, members from both of these publics participate in the dominant discourse as well; both Anita Sarkeesian and Milo Yiannopoulos have been interviewed on broadcast television networks and allowed to speak on college campuses. In other words, both of these publics exist and create poetic worlds, but they are not separate from the other publics that comprise not only American society but also global politics.

A Multiplicity of Digital Sphere Publics

Both contemporary feminist media criticism and the alt-right enjoy the popularity that they do in no small part because they predominantly exist in digital spaces that enable public actors to circulate their poetic worlds across time and space to interested readers who will help to co-produce and propagate the public. Warner’s definition of publicness does not account for the reach of digital publishing because his book was released at the very start of the social media revolution (a year after Facebook was founded and a year before Twitter). As such, Warner does not account for the ways in which internet technologies have changed the public sphere, and he is skeptical about their ability to do so; however, Byron Hawk’s 2011 article “Curating Ecologies, Circulating Musics” updates Warner’s model of publicness from a multitude of publics distributing different poetic worlds through analog media to a multitude of public actors circulating and sharing poetic worlds in both digital and analog environments. In this article, Hawk makes three major updates to Warner’s model. First, he argues that
understanding contemporary publics requires scholars to abandon traditional notions of both circulation and distribution, both of which have traditionally been used to describe a process in which a single entity provides others with texts. In contemporary publics, such as those involved in Gamergate, texts do not simply move from one sender to multiple receivers but rather from multiple senders to multiple receivers, with those roles being in constant flux. In short, distribution is not centralized, it is radicalized. Second, Hawk argues that the timeliness of contemporary publics is based not solely on the rhythms of producing texts but also on the emergent interests of readers. Unlike print journals, which keep their political relevance through punctuated circulation focused on the moment of writing and distribution, digital information can be accessed whenever the reader is interested. In such a public, the *kairos* of the writer and the *kairos* of the reader may be completely different, but they are equally as important to the moment of engagement. Finally, Hawk argues that contemporary “sphere publics” connect individuals though different media, timescales, and intensities. Since these publics are non-structural and non-hierarchical, they are always being created and re-created by those who participate with them.

In many ways, Hawk’s description of sphere publics describes traditional publics that share, archive, and co-create texts; in this way, he is describing a change in intensity rather than a change in form. People are able to share more content with more people at a faster pace than ever before in human history; similarly, finding old articles requires an internet search rather than a trip to the library, and people are able to respond, remix, and rearticulate messages with more speed and ease than they were with analog media. Gamergate is a testament to the speed and intensity in which contemporary public
discourse can spread. The controversy began suddenly in August of 2014, and an
astounding amount of content—ranging from essays to message board posts—was
created to respond to the problem within days. Likewise, the majority of the harassment
and discussion was over within a year. In the contemporary media landscape, messages,
arguments, and controversies can emerge, proliferate, and defuse quite quickly. This
intensity is further complicated by the sheer number of arguments circulating at any
given moment.

In the twenty-first century, there are so many sphere publics producing so much
content so rapidly that rhetors who want their messages to be read need to find ways to be
noticed by potential audiences within the attention economy. These authors must choose
tactics that will convince people both to read and to share their work. How to accomplish
this goal is a question that concerns not only logical argumentation but also style, which
aligns well with the dynamic possibilities of contemporary media. Warner argues that
publics are not created by texts that persuade people to take interest in them but rather by
texts that gather people who already recognize themselves as the ones being addressed:

Public discourse says not only “Let a public exist” but “Let it have this character,
speak this way, see the world this way.” It then goes in search of confirmation
that such a public exists, with greater or lesser success—success being further
attempts to cite, circulate, and realize the world understanding it articulates. Run
it up the flagpole and see who salutes. Put on a show and see who shows up. (114)
Warner—like Fraser, Arendt, and Hawk—knows that publics are social entities, and they
create connections between individuals affectively as well as rationally. Publics
proliferate because audiences identify with styles, tones, ideas, and opinions of texts and
authors. A text does not persuade a public into being; rather, it calls forth a public who already cares, sympathizes, and identifies with its message, even if the members are not yet aware that they do.

In the context of Gamergate, this calling forth can best be seen in the style of Sarkeesian’s more recent installments of *Tropes Vs. Women in Video Games* and Troy Leavitt’s response video “Anita’s Pinhole.” The early editions of *Tropes* are extremely professional in their style. Sarkeesian’s voice is clear, and each video game discussed is accompanied by graphics that evidence the arguments being made. Sarkeesian herself is professional but nondescript; her makeup is neutral and her hair is singed-colored and tied back. Similarly, her scripts are informative, if not a bit bland; she demonstrates an affection for the games she is discussing and then provides her critiques of them. Later episodes keep the same clear voice and professional production quality, but Sarkeesian herself has a notably bolder style including more vibrant make-up, two-toned hair, and a little bit of snark in her critiques. This style is not meant to reach out to those who will disagree with her, as the original videos seem to be; instead, these videos speak to existing members of her public and those who will see the video and identify as members. Sarkeesian’s style says, “Let contemporary feminist media criticism look this way, speak this way, and see the world this way.”

Similarly, Leavitt’s response, which was first published in 2016, has its own style. The production is not as professional as Sarkeesian’s, but it is not amateur either. His voice is clear and friendly, though distinctly condescending. His arguments against Sarkeesian are clearly organized and directly stated. He utilizes appropriate visual graphics throughout, but his use of jocular, and sometime explicitly derisive, music
seems out of place. Unlike Sarkeesian, there is no video of Leavitt speaking in the presentation, though he does show a few pictures of himself at the beginning of the video and includes an image of himself in the bottom left hand corner of the screen throughout. Though it is unclear exactly who his target audiences is—the alt-right, conservatives who want to criticize Sarkeesian without associating with the alt-right, moderate gamers, or someone else—he is clearly talking to the digital gaming public, and his style says, “Let online video game criticism look this way, speak this way, and act this way.” Sarkeesian and Leavitt’s political orientations and styles seem to be speaking to two separate publics, but there is clear overlap between groups, and both speakers are attempting to capture the attention of online audiences who are interested in gender and video game criticism.

Kevin Deluca has, perhaps more than any other scholar in Composition and Rhetoric, dealt with the issue of garnering attention in the context of digital sphere publics. He argues that one of the primary ways to gain attention is to create image events that are so startling they change the way people understand and engage the world. Such image events will affect audiences so deeply that they will not only engage with the public but will also distribute and propagate its messages. In an article co-authored with Jennifer Peeples, Deluca goes as far as to argue that in the attention economy, arguments must be publicized through spectacle in order to then be engaged. This leads him and Peeples to claim that the rioters at the 1999 World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle, WA needed violence in order to gain the attention of those who might distribute their story, read their arguments against global capitalism, and contribute to their cause. Violence was necessary for the protestors to gain attention because the public had become desensitized to nonviolent protests. Deluca and Peeples do not see the spectacle
as mere bait to garner attention for traditional arguments however; instead, they see the
image event itself as a transformative text that can open up the conditions of possibility
for re-thinking the social sphere and acting differently within it.

Gamergate embodies the type of rhetorical spectacle discussed by Deluca and
Peeples. The violent online harassment of photogenic women made for a myriad of
stories not only in culturally aware digital gaming magazines like Kotaku and Polygon
but also traditional presses like the ABC News, CNN, and the New York Times. While
there were no striking images besides screenshots of cruel tweets and memes, the
harassment itself was a shocking enough spectacle to garner attention. Even for those on
the alt-right, the publicity was good. People became interested in the group and their
messages. Websites like Breitbart gained considerable boosts in traffic when reporting on
Gamergate, and Milo Yiannapoulos transformed from a regular journalist to a minor
celebrity. And it is not surprising that the alt-right gained prominence through the
spectacle of harassing women game developers and critics because the group both traffics
in cruelty and is particularly media savvy. By taking a look at the alt-right as a sphere
public, it is possible to understand how this group uses digital and analog harassment
both to silence the opinions of those with whom them disagree and to amplify their own
voices.

Defining an Alt-Right Sphere Public

To understand how the alt-right uses harassment, it is important to first define the
group. A clear definition, however, has eluded journalists, pundits, and scholars because
the alt-right appears to be a patchwork of different interests and actors. As such, the
group has been referred to as an amorphous political movement, a counterculture, a coalition of reactionaries, and a loose affiliation of groups. This ambiguity stems from the collective’s three characteristics as a sphere public in which 1) members distribute information among themselves through a multitude of channels without a singular hub, 2) texts are created at *kairotic* moments but are often engaged atemporally, and 3) collective identity is co-created by members. All of these characteristics are intensified by the group’s online presence, which allows members access to a massive audience without having to negotiate with the gatekeepers of traditional media. Being online provides the alt-right with the ability to create a larger community than prior fringe groups could have imagined because the weak ties that connect members are radically distributed. This also means that no one person or entity created the alt-right. Though Richard Spencer has taken credit for popularizing the term, the sphere public is not his. Though news organizations like *Brietbart*, discussion boards like *4chan’s /pol/*, and thought-leaders such as Paul Ramsey are important actors within the sphere public, they did not birth the alt-right either, and they do not control it. The sphere public emerged from a confluence of actors utilizing specific spaces, ideas, and media to create and distribute messages among themselves. As some ideas gained traction, some styles became popular, and some members continued to participate in the discussion, a very specific public culture—what is now understood as the identity of the alt-right—became increasingly salient. But because the culture emerged through actors co-participating with each other within the public, understanding the exact make-up of the alt-right is difficult, and any attempt to map it requires decisions as to what to include and what to exclude.
The multiple identities and understandings of the alt-right can be understood by analyzing three histories produced by members of the sphere public at different times for different purposes for different audiences: 1) Allum Bokhari and Milo Yiannopoulos’s “An Establishment Conservative’s Guide to the Alt-Right,” which was written in March of 2016 to defend the movement from the criticisms of traditional conservatives; 2) Andrew Anglin’s “A Normie’s Guide to the Alt-Right,” which was written in August of 2016 to justify the seriousness of the alt-right to people who became interested in the group after Hillary Clinton’s famous alt-right speech in Reno, Nevada; and 3) Roaming Millennial’s three-part interview with Richard Spencer, which was published in May of 2017 as a way of presenting her “classical liberal” audience with a different perspective on contemporary social justice issues. When analyzed side-by side, these three histories demonstrate the ways in which the co-created nature of the alt-right enables different participants to understand the sphere public and its demographics in idiosyncratic ways based on their own experiences.

First, Bokhari and Yiannopoulos—neither of whom personally identify as alt-right, despite their chronic associations with it—argue that the sphere public is composed of four categories of participants: 1) the intellectuals, 2) the natural conservatives, 3) the meme team, and 4) the 1488ers. In this hierarchy, the intellectuals—such as Steve Sailer, Jack Donovan, and Nick Land—write philosophical texts on issues such as nationalism, race, gender, technology, and accelerationism that natural conservatives—those who believe that western culture is a cohesive entity that needs to be protected from outside corruptions—use to support their cultural and political beliefs. The meme team spreads the beliefs of natural conservatives by creating and distributing memes that promote their
ideology and derisively mock contrary ones. The images produced by the meme team range from innocuous pro-Trump cartoons to virulently racist images, such as the alt-right mascot Pepe the Frog dressed in a Nazi uniform or standing in front of an open oven threatening to incinerate his enemies. Bokhari and Yiannopoulos make a point to argue that the images created by the meme team are not actually racist but rather ironic criticisms of the leftist media’s hyperbolic reactions to conservative movements. In this way, the authors attempt to distinguish the meme team from the 1488ers—the title of which is a portmanteau of 14, a reference to the fourteen-word skinhead slogan “we must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children,” and 88, a reference to Heil Hitler based on H being the eighth letter of the English alphabet. Bokhari and Yiannopoulos claim these explicit white supremacists are actively ostracized from the alt-right because of their racism and violence, though some 1488ers still participate in the discourse through the community’s selective openness as a digital sphere public grounded in the circulation of multiple texts and media. According to the article, then, the alt-right believes in preserving white western culture by limiting immigration and cultural exchange, and though the group will make jokes about genocide to demonstrate their ideologies, they distance themselves from the active white supremacist organizations who are clearly a part of the public because they want to claim that the alt-right believes in the peaceful preservation of white culture rather than violent white supremacy.

Andrew Anglin’s “A Normie’s Guide to the Alt-Right,” which was published on the explicitly white supremacist website *The Daily Stormer*, creates a very different map of the sphere public than that presented by Bokhari and Yiannopoulos. Anglin claims that the group is “a confluence of White men who reached the same objective truths through
different avenues.” The avenues he references are a hodgepodge of right-wing subcultures such as conspiracy theorists, libertarians, paleoconservatives, men’s rights activists, pick-up artists, and traditional white nationalist organizations. The objective truth Anglin claims all these different sub-publics promote is, unsurprisingly, the superiority of white culture. Anglin goes as far as to claim that the alt-right can most easily be understood as a “re-boot of white nationalism.” Unlike Bokhari and Yiannopoulos, then, Anglin sees white supremacy as the core value of the alt-right, claiming that all other interests are secondary to this one; however, like Bokhari and Yiannopoulos, Anglin emphasizes that the alt-right is a peaceful group dedicated to preserving whiteness through political change rather than through force, though his sincerity is highly suspect due to the amount of violent imagery and language he uses.

Of the three sources, Richard Spencer is the least interested in providing a taxonomy of the sphere public; instead, he defines the alt-right as “identity politics for white people” and claims that its participants hold a diversity of views around this basic premise. In his interview with The Roaming Millennial, Spencer provides a history of the group in which the alt-right emerges in 2009 in opposition not only to current leftwing politics but also to George W. Bush style Republicanism. The core values uniting the movement are racism and nationalism. Spencer claims that those interested in the alt-right in the early days argued that race is a determining factor of identity and that politics should be “derived from a racial understanding.” These thinkers believed in the self-determination of nations, which not only fueled their racist ideology but also led them to oppose all types of foreign intervention ranging from the Iraq War to the United Nations. From these basic premises, the alt-right began to attract members who identified with
their concerns and found their arguments compelling, even if they initially thought about
the movement as a joke. For Spencer, a distinct alt-right identity began to coalesce
around the presidential candidacy of Donald Trump in 2015 because he was a prominent
politician espousing a worldview that spoke to the interests of the nascent public.
However, after Donald Trump’s election, the movement once again began to diffuse, and
members once again argued over policies, values, and worldviews. In this way, Spencer
sees the alt-right sphere public as much less defined than Bokhari and Yiannopoulos
describe it, but he agrees with them that the main purpose is cultural nationalism through
peaceful means. Similar to Anglin, this nationalism is based on the importance of
whiteness; however, unlike Anglin, Spencer distances himself from the term white
supremacist and prefers to refer to the alt-right as “an identitarian movement.” On the
whole, Spencer likes to present himself as more cosmopolitan than traditional white
supremacists like Anglin, with a contemporary fashion style and more accepting views on
Jews, homosexuals, and women.

Looking at these three understandings of the group, it is clear that, due be being
co-produced by its participants, the alt-right has hazy borders with some actors regularly
participating in the public, while others join the conversation only when it piques their
interests. As Anglin says, there is no over-arching alt-right structure: “the mob is the
movement.” Nonetheless, among this mob there are thought-leaders, platforms, and
arguments that are more influential than others; still, none of these figures singularly
dictates the movement’s identity—even as they try to dictate the identity of a nation.
Richard Spencer even goes so far as to claim that this attribute of the alt-right
demonstrates the network’s relevance and diversity (Roaming). Of course, many would
not see the coalition of white supremacists, conspiracy theorists, paleo-conservatives, men’s rights advocates, nationalists, gamers, and anti-Semites as a diverse crowd, but these actors do hold different opinions on issues such as civic nationalism, femininity, homosexuality, religion, spirituality, and violence that they find very important. In fact, these are issues that the community debates in excruciating detail, often arriving at stasis without being able to move forward. These differing opinions are acceptable, if not actively encouraged, within the public, and Spencer even claims that he does not want to see the alt-right become “a closed system” whose message does not resonate beyond the interests of a few inter-related actors; however, this freedom of opinion clearly has strict limits within the white supremacist sphere public.

Though someone like Greg Johnson, author of *Confessions of a Reluctant Hater*, can make arguments about stereotypically liberal causes, such as environmentalism and healthcare, he is accepted within the public only because he discusses these issues within the context of cultural and racial purity. Belief in racial purity, white culture, and ethno-nationalism is the key to belonging to the alt-right. If someone attempts to engage the sphere public without having these core values and a white body, they will be harassed until they leave. Like the ancient Athenians, the alt-right uses harassment to create a social system in which those with certain bodies and identities are given freedom to express their opinions and debate within the public, while those who are barred from the public because of their bodies and identities are characterized as inferior.

Occasionally, this harassment leaks into the alt-right sphere public itself, most often in regards to the movement’s spokeswomen like Tomi Lahren, Lana Lokteff, Lauren Southern, and Ayla Stewart, who are intermittently harassed and defended for subverting
traditionally feminine roles by participating in the public. The problem became so prominent in December of 2017 that the outspoken ethno-nationalist Tara McCarthy argued in a series of tweets that some men in the alt-right were trying to bully her and other female alt-right thought-leaders off the internet. McCarthy argued that other men in the movement would have to decide if they were going to passively endorse such behavior or speak out against it in order to better promote ethno-nationalism. She asked her audience to choose between racism and sexism.

The fact that McCarthy’s harassment is so similar to what happened to Sarkeesian and Quinn is no coincidence, both events spring from the perception by men in the alt-right of who belongs in the private sphere and who belongs in the public. Like the ancient Athenians, these men are willing to use violence to maintain that boundary because only by subjugating others do they believe they can be free. In both cases, harassment is justified by the harassers because they feel as if their values—the norms they grew up with—are under attack and need to be defended. This is the standard alt-right justification for all their harassment campaigns. The group always argues that they have to defend themselves. Such a justification is not surprising because a victimized mentality is necessary to maintain social cohesion within the type of populist coalitions that the alt-right sphere public so closely resembles.

**Digital Populism Through Harassment**

As a sphere public, the alt-right lacks a cohesive agenda but different actors attempt to ascribe various agendas to it in order to meet their own political desires, as demonstrated by the different depictions of the group presented by Allum Bokhari and
Milo Yiannopoulos, Andrew Anglin, and Richard Spencer. According to Ernesto Laclau, this struggle to define an agenda is the primary characteristic of populist movements. Laclau claims that such movements begin with a group of people making a demand of their government. If this demand is not met within a reasonable time, the group begins to suspect that their neighbors have equally unsatisfied demands and critiques. Finding that this is true, the neighbors band together to hold the government accountable to their various demands. Eventually, the government is unable to deal with the demands as individual problems and an “equivalential relation is established” among the disaffected citizens (73). This chain of demands then turns into a gulf between the people and their leaders. Common citizens begin to believe that those in charge of the country are detached from their collective concerns. As they begin to rebel against the government, the populist movement creates symbols, images, and slogans to represent their newfound collective identity. These discursive signs of unity are empty signifiers, allowing those within the group to negotiate their meaning as they see fit. Each different dispossessed faction understands the symbols to represent slightly different desires, identities, and interests (69, 76). The populist symbol may never resonate with every citizen, but it can stop infighting between important but separate factions within the movement, at least for a while, by providing them with a common symbol they can all unite behind. Finally, Laclau claims that populist movements will eventually fracture because there is little of substance to unite the various factions and prevent infighting.

This narrative is currently playing out with the alt-right. The reason the sphere public is such an ideological hodgepodge is because it is composed of a variety of actors attempting to find common ground among disparate concerns with varying degrees of
validity. Men worried about their jobs, status, and civil rights; citizens concerned about mass migration, economic security, and safety; gamers concerned about losing a subculture they understood as predominantly masculine; scientists feeling ostracized because of their methods; journalists feeling as if their work is being stifled; and a variety of other people with various concerns came together when their specific demands were not being satisfied. Notably, these concerns are mostly not governmental but personal, economic, or social, which is why so many of the groups to which the alt-right is opposed seem so abstract: e.g. cultural Marxists, elites, feminists, globalists, and the media. Since the alt-right’s problems are so varied, it is necessary that they understand the forces oppressing them as not only completely controlling but also as too diffuse to actually engage.

Seeing their various gripes as equivalent and having identified their abstract enemies, members of the alt-right began to develop and appropriate symbols and slogans to identify themselves as a collective through digital poetic world making practices such as sharing memes and commenting on anonymous forums. Pepe the Frog, a previously innocuous meme based on a character from Matt Furie’s stoner comic Boys Club, is the symbol most representative of the sphere public; however, the group also has other identifying markers. Using slang such as *cuck*, *shitlord*, and *social justice warrior [SJW]* clearly marks someone as a member of the alt-right, as does a “fashy” haircut that is short on the sides, longer on top and combed with a bit of pomade. Other symbols—such as the flag of Kekistan, a fictional country based on Korean internet slang for laughing; (((echo parenthesis))), which are meant to symbolize the extent of Jewish influence on society; and fashwave, which is a fascist appropriation of the popular internet music vaporwave—
are also meant to symbolize the entire sphere public while having a stronger appeal with some factions than others. Since all of these symbols are vague and have either little meaning or multiple meanings, different factions within the alt-right alliance can define them as they see fit. Pepe for instance is simultaneously a symbol of internet subculture, Donald Trump, populism, resistance to political correctness, and white supremacy; the frog maintains his fluidity even as he is mutated to resemble Trump, a Nazi officer, or Slimer from Ghostbusters. Notably, the histories of the alt-right from Bokhari and Yiannopoulos, Anglin, and Spencer all read the character of Pepe differently. Bokhari and Yiannopolous see him as a playful resistance to dominant culture, Anglin sees him as an articulation of white nationalism, and Spencer sees the character as a concrete symbol for the alt-right movement writ large. Most likely, interpretations of Pepe will continue to proliferate until the alt-right fractures, and he becomes the symbol for a single faction.

According to Laclau’s account of populism, these groups believe that their ingroup is being actively oppressed by opposing forces, so they intentionally create discursive spheres in which the dominant public will not feel comfortable. That the dominant public finds the alt-right’s use of language repugnant is part of the appeal of that language for the sphere public because it demonstrates the ideological opposition between the movement to the dominant public. Language is a way of creating the barriers between “normies” who don’t understand the movement, “lefties” who oppose the movement, and the movement itself. The shared language is not a political argument but rather a social argument that homogenizes the group to certain behavioral and linguistic norms more suited to a family than a public. In this way, language functions as a barrier that separates the alt-right from those with whom they would disagree, and the
particularly blunt and hateful language they often utilize serves this purpose quite effectively. Harassment functions as an attempt to extend this barrier because it demonstrates who is allowed to speak in a certain space or on a certain topic. In the example of Gamergate, alt-right factions within the gaming community were attempting to say that women, particularly feminists, were not allowed to express their opinions about video games because that culture belonged to the alt-right. In this way, the harassment of Sarkeesian and Quinn was also a threat to anyone who might try to defend them or oppose the culture of the alt-right. Part of the goal was that “normies” would find the discourse and the practices so repulsive that they would just look away.

Much has been written on the ways in which the alt-right harasses people, with some authors claiming that the alt-right’s existence is itself harassment. Nonetheless, I would like to provide a brief list of some of the more extraordinary ways in which the alt-right harasses people as a function of digital poetic world making. This list goes beyond trolling, which is itself a diverse set of practices, and enters into malicious and harmful territory (Phillips, Beyer, and Coleman). Not all of these tactics were created by the alt-right and they are not exclusively used by people who would identify with the sphere public; however, each of these tactics are commonly used by this public.

- **Doxing**—Derived from the word *documents, or docs, “dropping dox”* is an old hacking technique in which a harasser collects personal information about their target—generally using social media, reverse phone look up services, and government websites—and posts it on the internet so that people can call, write, visit, or message an otherwise anonymous user. Famosly, actress and avid video
gamer Felicia Day was doxed in 2014, shortly after speaking out about Gamergate (Hern).

- **Revenge Porn**: Revenge porn is when someone distributes sexually explicit material of someone without consent. It is referred to as revenge porn because it is often used to spite ex-lovers; however, the category is larger than this single motivation. During the height of the Gamergate controversy, nude pictures of Zoe Quinn were leaked on the internet.

- **Shaming**: Public shaming is when an internet community castigates someone for a socially deviant behavior. During the Gamergate controversy, the alt-right site *The Daily Stormer* encouraged readers to shame Nintendo employee Alison Rapp for an old college essay she wrote defending Japanese child pornography as a cultural practice. Readers were encouraged both to post about Rapp’s essay on social media and to directly contact Nintendo executives and request she be fired.

- **Swatting**: Swatting is when someone makes a false emergency call in order to send a SWAT team to a target’s door. Besides being intensely frightening, swatting often leads to destruction of property, detainment, psychological distress, physical injury, and a waste of public funds. In 2014 several users of the online video game streaming platform *Twitch*, were swatted solely because they were women (Fagone).

- **Threats of physical violence**: While such threats are not exclusive to the internet age, the alt-right has successfully used treats of violence, rape, and death to harass their enemies until they had to abandon their social media accounts and in some cases even leave their homes for extended periods of time.
- **Violence:** In the last few months the alt-right has become increasingly violent at their rallies. The fame, reverence, and resources being received by Klye Chapman—better known as Base Stickman or the Alt-Knight—after he beat Antifa protestors with a stick during the Berkley protests, demonstrates not only a willingness for the sphere public to get involved in violence but also to celebrate it (Donut Operator). Also, it should be noted that members of the alt-right have killed over one-hundred people in the United States, including James Fields who drove his car into counter protestors during the “Unite The Right” rallies in Charlottesville, Virginia injuring nineteen people and killing Heather Heyer (Hankes and Amend).

In each of these harassment techniques, the alt-right uses the internet to silence those whom it wishes to expel from the public sphere. Even in the case of John Chapman, who physically beat Antifa protestors, the internet is used to raise money for his legal fees and insure so that he can attend other marches. The internet in these instances is not just a medium through which to distribute ideas to a public; it is also a tool to distribute information, collect resources, develop plans, and form community. Likewise, since the alt-right exists among other publics, it can use the internet to understand, research, and reach these other publics. For example, Alison Rapp was not targeted by the alt-right because of her college essay, she was targeted because of her feminist beliefs and because she was a woman in the video game industry. In fact, many in the alt-right who had been attacking Rapp prior to the essay being published had accused her of toning down the sexualized depiction of minors in Nintendo games, despite her not having that authority. The alt-right shamed her as a pedophile not because they oppose pedophilia—
in fact, two of the most popular alt-right forums, 4chan and 8chan, are known to be hotbeds of child pornography—but because they know that members of other sphere publics and organizations find pedophilia to be abhorrent (Klepek). In this way, the alt-right is not only trying to create their own sphere public with unique beliefs and linguistic styles, they are trying to silence people outside their group and spread their social standards to other publics via harassment. If they can get those who disagree with them to cede digital communities, then those communities essentially become alt-right.

The threats against Anita Sarkeesian and Zoe Quinn were meant to silence the ability of these women to speak in communal spaces shared by multiple publics. Like the subaltern counterpublics discussed by Nancy Fraser, the alt-right is trying to use their power to influence what they see as the dominant public, but the alt-right’s power is not found merely in their ability to discourse. Their power is found in their capacity to utilize the embodied and affective aspect of publicness to simultaneously build a collective and exclude people from it, and if they are not opposed, this network can easily continue to grow. Growth, however, may be the downfall of this particular populist sphere public because as a populist movements grow, differences between thought-leaders and interest groups become more apparent and more divisive, which fractures the larger community. Similarly, as the sphere public expands, more people know about it, which allows for more opposition to it. Awareness of the alt-right among supporters, detractors, and normies might be the sphere public’s downfall. But, it is hard to measure the growth, intensity, or interconnectedness of the group. Some people believe the alt-right to be a mass movement, while others claim that it is “not as large as it’s able to appear online” (Zuylen-Wood et al.). Some people have glibly argued that alt-right internet campaigns
created Trump, while others point out that they were at most one factor among many (Phillips et al.). Recently, it was reported that the alt-right is in decline (Wilson). Nonetheless, though it is uncertain how big or influential this populist sphere public is or how long it will last, it is clear that the alt-right’s willingness to utilize harassment makes it a dangerous force within contemporary American culture and politics.

Harassment and the Risk of Audience

Harassment is particularly frightening in this historical moment because the public sphere is touted as a place for everyone. Whereas for the Athenians and the Enlightenment bourgeoisie there were strict economic, gendered, and racial requirements for participation within the public, the contemporary American public is supposed to belong to everyone, regardless of identity. When Americans enter the public sphere they expect to be treated by their audience with the respect due a peer. No speaker expects to be met with the type of violences that had previously maintained the bloody barrier between the public and the private because the social code states that such conduct is no longer acceptable. Contemporary United States society has norms that are supposed to govern behavior; however, social norms are malleable. If, as Hannah Arendt claims, the social describes the affective relationships between material bodies, then these relationships can be changed based on how those bodies relate to one another. The example of Camp Courage demonstrates how bodies can relate to one another to create new heterogenous collectives that respect individual identities. Conversely, the example of Gamergate demonstrate how bodies can be used to keep people from participating in the public. I know neither what kinds of responses Anita Sarkeesian expected when she
created *Tropes Vs. Women in Video Games* nor those Zoe Quinn anticipated when she created *Depression Quest*; however, both women have stated that they did not expect to face the kinds of violent harassment they did. Neither of them expected to become symbols of alt-right hatred. Both of these women expected to be treated with some kind of respect by their audience, but they weren’t; instead, they were barraged with harassment. And one of the things that made that harassment so frightening is that the audience with which they were hoping to connect subverted their expectations and transformed into violent antagonists.

The violent transformation of this audience was unexpected, but by studying the composition and history of the alt-right, scholars in Composition and Rhetoric can begin to understand how and why the group—and groups similar to it—use harassment to establish their own sphere publics with a shared, if malleable, identity based on a set of core principles. Likewise, researchers can begin to understand in what types of spaces a rhetor is likely to experience this type of harassment by asking what conversations and communities the group is attempting to take over. Knowing this kind of information is important for composition instructors specifically because, as Gruwell argues, many digital compositionists are asking their students to enter into the same kinds of publics that became so toxic for Quinn and Sarkeesian. The internet is not an inherently safe space for discourse, and compositionists can no longer pretend that it is the Habermasian rational public that idealists want it to be. Composition and Rhetoric needs to continue to acknowledge that the public is a social sphere in which the reactions and responses to embodied realities create hierarchies, often violently. This is not to say that instructors should not have their students compose in digital spaces; as Quinn says, internet users
should not “cede the internet to whoever screams the loudest at the most people, and just hand over this amazing technological achievement to the nastiest people” (Valenti). Nonetheless, the field also should not teach students to enter these spaces uninformed, as if publics did not contain real risks both for students and those they will meet there, including the risk of reaching audiences that they didn’t intend, the risk of having their messages appropriated and misused by audiences, and the real risks of harassment and potentially even violence. By training students to think about the social and embodied realities of the internet, perhaps activist pedagogues will not only prepare them to deal with the risk of harassment but also teach students to think about the effects their messages will have on the embodied experiences of others.

Asking students to consider the potential risks that could befall themselves and others when they enter the public sphere is particularly important for activist pedagogues who ask their students to enter into the public sphere and try to create new poetic worlds using the tactics derived from activist scholarship. Creating poetic worlds can be an invigorating experience for those who find themselves able to call forth sphere publics of likeminded individuals; however it is also risky because sphere publics overlap, and existent sphere publics may see new arguments as a challenge to the status quo that benefits them. These threatened publics will respond, and they may do so violently. And while this potential risk is no reason not to act in the public sphere, it should make instructors reflect on the practice of having students enter the public sphere for a grade. Instructors should ask themselves how much they are willing to have students risk because no matter how skillfully rhetors compose, there is always the chance of harassment in the public sphere. Though students can be taught how to interact with
others productively, instructors cannot control how others will respond to them. If students are harassed for what they create and publish for a course grade, then their instructors must be seen as in part responsible because they coerced those students into a public whose sociality breeds the potential for harassment. And though it is a cruel aspect of the public sphere, instructors, especially activist instructors, cannot pretend that harassment does not exist. Harassment, in one form or another, will always exist in the public sphere because the public is social and embodied. In light of this reality, instructors should ask how they want to train their students to perceive and navigate this risk, not how they ask them to embrace it.
CHAPTER 4

THE RISKS OF MATERIALISM: NARCISSUS AND THE NASCENT DEMAGOGUERY OF ACCELERATIONISM

One of the least conspicuous risks of the public sphere is that the rhetor will create or otherwise become a part of an insular public that is so zealous in affirming their collective worldview that they come to consider themselves the only people with a clear understanding of reality. This distinct form of narcissism—the belief that the group a rhetor belongs to is superior to all other groups because only they see the world correctly—can serve as a precursor to demagoguery, which Patricia Roberts-Miller defines as “a discourse that promises stability, certainty, and escape from the responsibilities of rhetoric through framing public policy in terms of the degree to which and means by which (not whether) the outgroup should be punished for the current problems of the ingroup” (Characteristics). When publics begin to fashion strong beliefs, identities, and worldviews that distinguish them from other publics, they can easily begin to lapse into simple binary thinking wherein they understand themselves as an intelligent and righteous ingroup and all those who disagree with them as members of an ignorant outgroup. As members come to increasingly identify with the ingroup, they also become susceptible to accepting increasingly radical opinions and beliefs when espoused by the thought-leaders of that group because they wish to demonstrate their loyalty and by so doing prove their intelligence and righteousness in the esteem of their public. In other words, members of the ingroup can become increasingly radical in order to avoid being
associated with the outgroup. Such a strong identification with an ingroup is dangerous, often leading those within it to strongly dislike, distrust, and deride the outgroups. This animosity creates the conditions for demagogic types of rhetoric that advocate for the punishment of outgroups for their perceived sins against the ingroup. Narcissism functions as a precursor to demagoguery by promoting the belief that one specific public is not only more correct in their understanding of the world than the rest but also that their members are inherently better people because they understand the world correctly.

Materialist vantages are perhaps both more vulnerable to and more aware of the risks associated with narcissism than idealist or activist ones because their ontological orientation encourages them to question both the ways in which publics exist in the world and what constitutes a public actor. Such ontological questions—rather than the ethical questions of idealists or the political questions of activists—encourage materialist scholars to spend much of their time exploring the border between those considered active subjects within a public and those considered passive objects. This exploration has led new materialists—who make up the vast majority of materialist scholars in Composition and Rhetoric and who are much less deterministic than their Marxist forbearers—to the conclusion that all material objects in the world are potential public actors because autonomous agency is neither a key characteristic of rhetoric nor an essential aspect of public actors. New materialists argue that public rhetoric is about the influence one material actor has on another, and neither consciousness nor agency in the traditional sense are required for an actor to exert this kind of influence onto another in a public, private, or social sphere. Similarly, since actors are constantly influencing one another, then no one actor can be said to have an intrinsic agency; instead, agency is co-
produced by the intra-actions of various actors as they relate to each other. Such an emergent understanding of agency does not relieve any individual humans of responsibility for their actions; rather, it asks each of them to consider how they can best intra-act with the actors with whom they are enmeshed in order to create the conditions of possibility for productive change. And though this conclusion is ostensibly benevolent, it runs the risk of narcissistic demagoguery because it, like the ontological positions and assumptions it is critiquing, claims to understand the nature of existence, which makes other interpretations of agency, existence, identity, and rhetoric suspect. Part of the suspicion new materialists have for other ontological claims stems from the meticulous standards by which this scholarly community argues for and studies their ontological understandings of the world. However, no matter how meticulous a group is in their methods, any claims to ontology remain dangerous because they are inherently claims to know how the world actually operates, even if those operations run contrary to the experiences and lived realities of others.

In the 2014 article “Tracing the Missing Masses” Nathaniel Rivers navigates the tension between the indetermination that accompanies an emergent understanding of public agency and the determination that accompanies advocating for any particular ontological understanding of the world. His article begins with the argument that Latour’s sociology and Jane Bennett’s political ecology—both of which argue that objects are influential actors within public life—can help Composition and Rhetoric to better study publics as emergent phenomena that “are themselves ever products of nonhumans and humans in (oftentimes agonistic) relations.” He then explains a pedagogy he developed that is inspired by these sources, which asks students to trace instances of nonhumans
participating in public life. He justifies his pedagogy by claiming, “attending to the nonhuman makes for compelling student work” and because “teaching is enculturation: where better to make the case for symmetrical understandings of rhetoric and public life?” It is this second justification that is of interest here because Rivers’s enculturation takes place on two vectors as he asks his students both 1) to take part in a type of publicness composed of humans and nonhumans acting rhetorically and 2) to accept an ontology that will enable them to understand the world this way. Because of this duality, students are both being enculturated into the public of things and into the conversations of new materialists.

The enculturation taking place in River’s pedagogy is unique in that it is co-constitutive. Students are not only acquiring the characteristic and norms of these two cultures but also are helping to create those characteristics and norms through their engagements. This exchange can be clearly seen in the object analysis assignment, where students conduct creative and multimodal analyses that ask what a specific object in the world does and is rather than what it means. The assignment has distinct parameters, but the instructions are broad enough to allow for play, experimentation, and co-determination in regards to how the students understand the objects they are studying, the publics of which they are a part, and the ontological commitments of the class. By designing the class this way, Rivers relates to it as a complex object that not only influences students to understand publics as emergent and co-produced entities but also invites them to co-create that understanding of publicness through their engagements with specific public objects. By using such inventive methods to teach this ontology, Rivers avoids determining the understandings that will emerge from his students’
engagements with the objects and publics they are studying. Of course, as the instructor, Rivers has an inordinate influence on what emerges from the relations of actors that compose the class, but he takes strides to actively avoid forcing his ontological beliefs onto this network. Instead, Rivers uses creative pedagogies to avoid the risk of becoming demagogic about ontologies that are themselves opposed to demagoguery, and in so doing he avoids one of the most prominent, though perhaps sophomoric, critiques of co-constitutive rhetorics: that rhetors acts deterministically merely through the act of making their argument and that the teacher acts deterministically merely through the act of teaching.

Avoiding the tendency to act narcissistically when discussing ontology is more difficult than Rivers lets on in his article. Often when someone comes to an understanding of how things exist in the world—whether this understanding is reached through affect, argument, belief, community, desire, hallucination, socialization, etc.—it is difficult to express the newly discovered truth in a way that allows for doubt and invites collaboration. Instead, new devotees often expresses themselves with unyielding certainty and perhaps even righteousness as they attempt to share their newly discovered information with the world. If this righteousness finds a public, then the collective narcissism has the potential to become demagogic, with the righteous public not only opposing its beliefs to those outside its discursive borders but also feeling actively slighted by the people in the outgroup who they believe deserve to be punished simply for not being a part of the ingroup. In this way, it can be a quick movement from belief to narcissism to demagoguery.
The radical leftist techno-utopians commonly referred to as accelerationists are currently on such a path to demagoguery. They are not currently demagogic, but they are clearly a narcissistic public whose laborious prose adamantly argue that the only way to realize an egalitarian post-capitalist society is by embracing their belief that the advancement of technological production will enable society to evolve beyond capitalism. Accelerationists argue that the contemporary left should stop resisting capitalism by regressively turning toward traditional community practices, and instead they should martial their resources toward improving societal ills by embracing contemporary technologies and becoming involved in their design and production. This argument is intentionally similar to Karl Marx’s proposition that nineteenth-century workers should take over the means of production in order to manifest a more egalitarian society. Simply put, accelerationists argue that a new and better society cannot be reached by repeating the mistakes of the past; instead, they claim that workers need to struggle to make a new, more equitable society by using new and emergent technologies. The only way to destroy capitalism, they argue, is by accelerating it and thereby speeding up its collapse.

Steven Shaviro defines accelerationism as “the argument that the only way out is through” (2). In a less pithy moment, he claims, “The hope driving accelerationism is that, in fully expressing the potentialities of capitalism, we will be able to exhaust it and thereby open up access to something behind it” (3). Accelerationism is a political project focused on the unfettered expansion of capitalism through a complete embrace of its logics, mechanisms, and systems. Accelerationists are aware that such an embrace demands the sacrifice of all other systems—aesthetic, individual, moral, philosophical,
political, religious, social, etc.—to the system of capitalist production. Accelerationists are willing to lose all of this not because they believe in capitalism itself but because they believe that technology will bring about a better post-capitalist future. How exactly different accelerationists imagines this future depends on where they identify themselves on the political spectrum. Those on the left believe that acceleration will completely exhaust the logics of capitalism, resulting in the need for another system of production. Those in the center believe acceleration will demonstrate capitalism’s inability to meet the needs of the populace, and a new variant of it will arise from the resulting turmoil. Finally, those on the right believe that the perpetual intensification of capitalism will bring about the technological singularity in which everyone will be constantly producing, an ending that both destroys and perpetuates the capitalist model.

Despite this variety of thought, most accelerationist theory is written and taken up by the left. And while their arguments sound convincing, the hubristic claims and predictions they make demonstrate the ways in which this public is moving toward demagoguery. For instance, accelerationists simply accept that increasing technological production to undue capitalism will cause a lot of people to suffer, they argue that utopian society should be ruled by a small intellectual class, they ignore the political needs of women and minorities, and they claim that humans should take control of nature and regulate its processes. These arguments demonstrate not only a callousness for those outside the public but also a desire for a few people to wield a currently unimaginable amount of power. Accelerationists will argue, however, that they are not imagining this power for its own sake but rather are responding to the likely possibilities that will emerge from humans and technologies co-evolving together. Accelerationists similarly
claim that they are not utopians because they are basing their ideas on actual material relations, and in this way they understand an ontological truth that others do not. As the famous transhumanist Martha Rothblatt’s responded when her work was called utopian: “this is not speculation, what we talk about will happen” (117). Such assurance in their understanding of ontology is what leads accelerationists to their collective narcissism, which seems to be progressing toward demagoguery.

**From Narcissism to Demagoguery**

The connection between narcissism and demagoguery can be understood through a close analysis of Ovid’s version of the Narcissus myth in which an attractive youth is punished for his hubris by a goddess who makes him mistake reality. Narcissus was the son of a river god and a naiad; he was a beautiful youth for whom many nymphs and young men pined. Callously, Narcissus denied all of his suitors, most famously Echo, a nymph who had been cursed by Jupiter’s wife Juno to only repeat the words of others after she had distracted the goddess with stories so that she would not catch her husband rendezvousing with the nymphs. When the cursed Echo attempted to seduce Narcissus, he scorned her, as he had so many potential lovers before. Having been rejected, Echo fled from her home and hid her face in shame among the leaves and caves where her body withered until all that was left was her voice. Narcissus was then punished for his cruelties, both to Echo and others, by Nemesis, the goddess of divine retribution, who led him to a fountain whose surface had never before been touched by another being. In this divine pool, Narcissus saw his reflection and fell immediately and intensely in love with the shadowy stranger in the water. Not being able to access his love, who he did not
realize was his own reflection, Narcissus remained in that place, staring into the pool. Finally noticing how his lover’s responses mirrored his own actions, Narcissus realized that he had fallen in love with his own reflection and began to cry. As his tears dissipated the reflection, Narcissus feared that his beloved image would disappear, and in a fit of passion, Narcissus beat himself raw, bloodied, and bruised. Eventually, his beautiful body was destroyed—consumed not only by his own blows but also “worn away little by little by the hidden fire [of passion].” As Narcissus died, he called out in self-pity, and Echo, who had been witness to the entire scene, repeated his words in mourning. The devout Echo stayed at the spot of Narcissus’s death until his naiad sisters found the beautiful flowers where his body should have been and named them after the vain young man.

Ultimately, the story of Narcissus’s vanity is one of hubris, which the ancient Greeks understood as a challenge to both the social order and the supremacy of the gods—challenges that were often manifested in vulgar displays of power in which perpetrators harmed victims for their own sadistic pleasure in much the same way that Roberts-Miller claims demagogues punish the outgroup solely for being inferior to the ingroup (Ludwig 172). Such ruthlessness is clearly related to Narcissism in the myth by the presence of the goddess Nemesis, whose primary mythological role was to punish hubristic humans. By having Nemesis punish Narcissus, Ovid demonstrates a connection between vanity and violence. Though he did not maliciously attack anyone or upset the social order, Narcissus still faces the wrath of Nemesis because vanity led him to harm those he deemed inferior to himself. If vanity leads an individual person to hubris; then collective vanity leads to collective hubris, and collective hubris is a pithy definition of demagoguery. The word Demagogue itself is derived from the words demos and agogos
translating roughly into “leader of the people” or “leader of the mob.” The demagogue is one who incites the people to realize their own power and rise above their station—the demagogue literally enacts a collective hubris. For this reason, it is important to understand the three, increasingly dangerous, traits of narcissistic publics that can lead to demagoguery.

Narcissus’s dying scene illuminates three primary ways in which publics move from Narcissism to demagoguery. First, just as Narcissus fails to see his reflection for what it really is, so too do the worldviews of publics change the ways in which their participants understand and engage reality. Second, just as Echo continues to validate Narcissus after his death, so too can members of a public continually affirm each other’s erroneous and dangerous beliefs in ways that lead to obsession. Third, just as Narcissus scorns potential lovers because he believes himself to be the only one deserving of his own love, so too can publics ignore, and even detest, those who disagree with their basic premises.

The first step toward demagoguery is the way a public’s discourse influences how their participants understand every aspect of the world. To an extent, this influence is an inherent aspect of language; however, members of narcissistic publics have a tendency to have very specific terministic screens, leading to very specific understandings of the world. In *Language as Symbolic Action* Kenneth Burke defines terministic screens as the matrices of terminology through which humans understand the world. Similar to how a photo filter changes an image by manipulating its color, form, emphasis, and texture, so too do terministic screens, the languages humans use to understand their worlds, change how individuals perceive it. However, unlike photo filters, with terministic screens there
is no original way of understanding the world; there is no outside the filter that humans can access. There is no Ur filter through which humanity can clearly and accurately understand the world in which they dwell. Likewise, no terministic screen—no set of terms devoted to a particular study in a particular language for a particular public—necessarily creates a truer depiction of reality than any other. While some screens are more logically constructed and can account for more phenomena, they are still screens in that they create a worldview that draws attention toward different elements of the world, influencing the observations and understandings of its users. Though some screens work better or worse than others, they are all semantic constructions. Burke argues that, in something akin to confirmation bias, everyone’s worldview is influenced by the terministic screens they use to discuss and argue about it, and for this reason, a narrow terministic screen creates a narrow worldview, whereas a broad screen creates a broad worldview. And though terministic screens are unavoidable, people can expand their screens by adopting, co-creating, and participating in different discourses with different terminologies and practices. What moves narcissistic publics toward demagoguery, then, is not that they have terministic screens but that they believe their terministic screens to be undeniably true.

Many publics understand their terministic screens as true because, while individual terministic screens may influence how an individual understands the world, the entirety of human understanding—the sum of all terministic screens—is itself created through language, meaning that to have any faith in the world at all is also to have faith in language. In “On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense” Friedrich Nietzsche argues that language is a fundamental aspect of how humans understand and interact with the world.
He begins by claiming that humans have no access to the world as it actually exists but instead have to filter everything through their senses, which are, if not idiosyncratic, at least species specific: “if we could only perceive things now as a bird, now as a worm, now as a plant . . . then no one would speak of such a regularity of nature, rather, nature would be grasped only as a creation which is subjective in the highest degree” (186).

Nietzsche argues that after humans abstract the world through their senses, they abstract it again through their language: “we believe we know something about the things themselves when we speak of trees, colors, snow, and flowers; and yet we possess nothing but metaphors for things—metaphors which correspond in no way to the original entities” (183). Words are not just metaphors for individual sensory experiences; rather, they are metaphors that equate unequal individual sensory experiences. For instance, people agree that a myriad of unique things can be considered flowers, though the similarities among them are fewer than their differences. Nonetheless, humans emphasize the similarities that exist among flowers in order to perpetuate the category of flowers that enables people such as botanists, farmers, florists, and gardeners to operate in the world. In this way, concepts are metaphors that are used to connect some sensory experiences and separate others by determinative attributes. Through this system of categorization, Nietzsche argues that humans created a shared world. To deny this shared world would be both to deny the world and the community that created it. Narcissistic publics like the accelerationists do not want to deny their community, so they stand firm to their ontological understandings of the world, which are in part constructed by the language used to categorize the actors within it.
It is important to note that the criteria used to categorize concepts, whether it be flowers or the co-constitutive nature of humans and technology, is neither completely arbitrary nor completely reflective of reality, meaning that all metaphoric systems should be seen as both simultaneously valid and suspect. Nietzsche explains that since humans create the categories by which they classify and identify things, the resulting hierarchies say little about the world itself: “If I make up the definition of a mammal, and then, after inspecting a camel, declare, ‘look, a mammal’ I have indeed brought a truth to light in this way, but . . . it is a thoroughly anthropomorphic truth which contains not a single point which would be ‘true to itself’ or really and universally valid apart from man” (185). While this type of knowledge creation and categorization lacks a universal truth or understanding of the world as it may objectively exist, Nietzsche argues that it is how humans compose their shared worlds. To attempt to abolish such linguistic structures would be to ignore the stable “facts” that have been constructed and to destroy humanity’s ability to act in the world with any degree of certainty. In other words, while concepts are anthropomorphic truths that do not accurately reflect reality, they do enable humans to build their shared worlds by developing long term plans, moral codes, scientific discoveries, logistics, etc. In this way, language, categories, and terministic screens are not duplicitous negatives; instead, these actors enable activities that are understood to be fundamentally human, and they allow for our large population to survive. Nietzsche goes so far as to claim that humans are inherently category builders—inherently users of terministic and conceptual screens. He argues that abstraction and categorization are how humans relate to the world, and in making this claim he reaffirms Aristotle’s famous definition of man as a rational, speaking animal.
Still, categories and terministic screens can be dangerous. Though there are worldviews that are inherently more or less hazardous, there is none that is completely without risk. Thus, though linguistic constructs should not be universally derided, they also should not be universally accepted. A little bit of skepticism in regards to ontological commitments is healthy. Nietzsche even warns that one of the primary risks of any worldview is idealism. When beliefs become so rigid that they deny alternative possibilities, suppresses artistry, forestall discovery, and limit human capacity, they become dangerous. In this way, the problem with narcissistic publics is that as they come to believe in the correctness of their worldview, they also become righteous, thinking that their worldview is the only correct one. Andrew Pilsch’s rhetorical analysis of accelerationism is particularly interesting in this regard because, though he admits that the public has some problems, he asserts that “it is the only discourse today actively imagining a radical future as radically alien as communism’s idea of a classless society was in the nineteenth century” (3). He claims that this utopian rhetoric is important because it, more than any other discourse, enables contemporary society to imagine possibilities beyond neoliberalism subjectivity. In this way Pilsch, as a critic, speaks to the singular importance of accelerationist publics in a way that demonstrates its own righteous tendencies.

**Righteous Rhetorics and Niche Publics**

Righteousness—adamant belief that the abstracted terministic and conceptual screens through which a person understands the world are completely and universally correct, making its adherents better than those with different ontological commitments—
serves as the second step toward demagoguery. Just as Narcissus was so engrossed with himself that he ignored the suffering of those around him, so too can members of a community become so infatuated with a particular terministic screen that they not only refuse to question the reality it provides them but also claim that it is the realest of all realities. The communal aspect of this exchange is important in creating this infatuation because being a part of a community makes it easier for people to accept premises they may not have accepted otherwise. Leon Festinger’s 1956 study of a small cult in suburban Chicago called The Seekers elucidates this point well. The leader of the cult, Dorothy Martin, claimed that beings from the planet Clarion were using her as a vessel to write letters predicting the destruction of the world by a flood that would occur in the early morning of December 21, 1955. Martin’s writings stated that the Seekers would be rescued by a spaceman in a flying saucer who would arrive at the stroke of midnight, hours before the disaster would occur. When the spaceman did not arrive, there was great cognitive dissonance as the believers—many of whom had lost family, friends, money, and reputations by joining the cult—tried to merge their obstinate beliefs with the disconfirmation of the prophecy. Martin herself cried when her savior did not arrive; however, at 4:45 a.m. she had another bout of “automatic writing” in which the inhabitants of Clarion used her body as a vessel to transcribe a message to the group stating that the earth had been spared because The Seekers had spread so much light throughout the world.

Instead of disbanding after the spaceman failed to arrive, individual cult members became even more committed to both the community and its beliefs. The group became more connected than before, and members began to actively proselytize. In his study,
Festinger explains that when an individual person has a deep seeded belief for which they have sacrificed, they can overcome blatant disconfirmation of that belief through the social support of other believers: “It is unlikely that one isolated believer could withstand the kind of disconfirming evidence we have specified. If, however, the believer is a member of a group of convinced persons who can support one another, we would expect the belief to be maintained” (4). Journalism professor Charles Seife builds on Festinger’s study in his own work on polarization. He argues that new information technologies have increased the capacity for likeminded people to find one another, regardless of how obscure or ludicrous their opinions may be. This capacity makes it easier to build communities like The Seekers that are inherently solipsistic. Seife argues that three prominent phenomenon enable people not only to find and participate in obscure communities but also to shelter themselves from information that would otherwise disrupt their worldview: 1) the catering of news to specific political ideologies, 2) the filter bubbles that determine what internet content people are exposed to, and 3) the ability to find internet communities to fortify eccentric beliefs. Seife argues that when people no longer have to encounter dissonant information, they will hold their beliefs more adamantly, and they may even come to believe increasingly outlandish things as long as they are propagated by publics with which they identity. In other words, the ability to limit one’s participation to discursive spaces where only certain interpretations of the world are allowed and dissonant perspectives are not presented is enabling more extreme beliefs and more radical political positions. A clear example of this for accelerationists is the 2017 publication “#AltWoke Companion” which promotes a more radical version of accelerationism than that originally proposed by Alex Williams and
Nick Srnicek in 2014. The authors of this article refer to this more extreme position as hyper-left-accelerationism:

The idea that technosocial processes within capitalism can be hastened, expanded, or repurposed even more than was originally thought by first generation Left Accelerationists. Accelerationism is a neutral ideology/phenomenon with Left and Right political deviations. Left adherents believe that technology can be pushed to emancipatory ends in order to transition into a post-capitalist world. Right adherents wish to intensify the conditions of capitalism indefinitely to possibly bring about the singularity. Hyper-Left-Accelerationism is the application of the Right Accelerationist methods to the objectives of Left Accelerationism.

Just four years after the initial call for accelerationist politics, its adherents want to push it to more extreme places, even flirting with intensifying capital itself rather than just the means of technological production, and if this path leads to the merging of human and machine consciousness into a singularity, then so be it. In this way, the echo chamber of accelerationism has amplified its position in ways that are astoundingly radical. Of course, this position is not as extreme as an apocalyptic spaceman, but the two are not completely unrelated either; they are both the products of echo chambers.

The reason entering echo chambers not only validate but also intensify peoples beliefs is not only because of the sheer number of times the messages are circulated but also because people want to demonstrate their dedication to the groups to which they belong. As Kenneth Burke argues in A Rhetoric of Motives, identification is the aspect of rhetoric that makes an audience feel consubstantial with the rhetor while still remaining a unique entity (1325). Publics are social, and comradery through shared arguments,
activities, backgrounds, ideologies, interests, opinions, etc. builds community. Through identification with a group, reasonable persons can come to believe unreasonable things because they are reasoning affectively rather than logically. People become so attached to their group identifications that they would rather believe something outlandish than be separated from the group. Likewise, people may be so attached to the group that they completely ignore any ideas that come from outside of it.

A common example that demonstrates the power of identification is the increased polarization and extremism of political discourse and internet news. When users explore the internet, both their browsers and the individual websites they visit track their movements and make recommendations based on their browsing and search histories. These sites then recommend news stories and products based on what content the users have previously engaged. Similarly, news sites track what stories people are reading, and then produce increasing amounts of similar content aimed directly at that audience (Weekend Edition). In this way, people are being funneled toward echo chambers by algorithms, recommendations, and also self-sorting (Sunstein). As people continue to gravitate toward sites that reaffirm their opinions, while avoiding ideas that upset or offend them, they are actively choosing to identify with a single group and engross themselves in one terministic screen: people are choosing to live in one conceptual world. And through each individuals participation with that world, their terministic screens come to have more intensity, more influence on how they understand the world, and more validity in their individual estimations. Individuals read stories, which reaffirms their worldviews, which encourages them to read more stories, which further reaffirm their worldview, and so on. Echo chambers are seemingly infinite loops in which each cycle
intensifies and individual’s beliefs. Such intensification is evidenced by Yphtach Lelkes recent article, “The Hostile Audience,” which describes a study in which the authors showed how access to broadband internet increased political polarization by providing increased access to more polarized new sources. Of course broadband internet is not the cause of partisanship, but it is an actor within the problem that exacerbates it by providing people access to obscure news sources that reinforce their worldviews, even if these people are not particularly political (Lelkes et al. 17). When provided an invitation to enter into an echo chamber occupied by other people with whom they identify, many people will accept it, and once in the echo chamber, these people will most likely begin to identify more strongly with more extreme positions.

And while it may not be surprising either how many people will believe extreme positions if they identify with the community or how adamant and radical those beliefs will be, it is at least alarming how little exposure is necessary to see transformations. For instance, a 2014 study found that watching only four minutes of Fox News a week increases the odds of voting Republican by almost an entire percent. The influence news media has increases as people share stories on various social media sites. For example, a recent study lead by Yochai Benkler examined the number of stories shared on social media during the 2016 presidential campaign, and the researchers found that because of its vast circulation, Breitbart was able to set the agenda for the rest of the news media. The stories that Breitbart covered became the stories that other conservative sites wanted to cover in an attempt to get as many social media shares as the far-right publication. Breitbart’s power was then increased as it explicitly attacked other networks as biased, uninformed, or unreliable—as it did to Fox News during the Republican Primary. When
Breitbart attacked another news organization, that organization would respond by following Breitbart’s agenda more closely in order to avoid the allegations. Eventually, Breitbart became so influential due to its social media presence that it influenced the coverage of mainstream and leftist publications as well. Like a blackhole, Breitbart was able to move the media conversation further to the right because partisan news consumption is not equal in America. There is no force on the radical left that is large enough to serve as a counterbalance to Breitbart’s media machine, so the entire mediascape was pulled to the right.

Benkler’s study found that conservatives are more likely to exclusively read partisan news than liberals, who are more likely to balance their partisan news with mainstream and bipartisan sources. In short, the intake of partisan news is not equal on the right and the left, and this is important because its shows that there is more than technological advances dictating the polarized intake of news based on identification. If technology were the determining factor in these cases, there would be symmetry of media consumption on the right and the left. Since there is much more bias on the right, there is clearly something else happening. Benkler claims that this other factor is a mix of human choices and political campaigning. Being algorithmically exposed to a niche public is not enough to keep someone siloed in an echo chamber, there must be other reasons supporting the exclusive identification with one public, and I argue that the primary reason is a clear articulation of a readerly identity. In the tightly knit network of partisan conservative media, Breitbart is a community that clearly identifies with its audience: who it is, who it isn’t, and who it wants to be. Readers of Breitbart explicitly know who they are and what values they stand for; likewise, they know exactly who disagrees with
them and believe they know their values and motivations as well. Kenneth Buke argues that along with identification, rhetoric creates division. As a community becomes united by values, they also divide themselves from those who they see as not sharing those values. At its most extreme, those within the niche public cease to see any positive value in those outside the community, who they see as their enemies. At this point, the public becomes completely demagogic.

Notably, the accelerationist movement was in no small part created by the division Burke associates with identification in that the movement identifies itself in opposition to conservative forces such as Breitbart and the alt-right. The accelerationist movement is in large part a reaction to the current dominion conservative forces have over the contemporary mediascape. It is an attempt to balance conservative power by establishing a similarly solipsistic force on the left. For example, the prose of the “#AltWoke Companion” begins by claiming that the exigence for the movement was a string a conservative victories such as Brexit and the Trump campaign, which they claim are “symptomatic of and catalysts for Right Accelerationism.” They then claim that the famous conservative accelerationist Nick Land’s understandings of nihilism and how to manipulate the dark side of capitalism is “the suicidal epitome of white privilege” because those who really understand how to manipulate these systems are the, predominantly black and brown, criminals—“our relatives, neighbors, and coworkers”—who have learned how to manipulate the system out of necessity. Beyond this argument, which also calls for understanding identity as a conglomeration of fluid constructs one can move between freely, the rhetorical style of the argument resembles that of the alt-right with graphically sexual images meant to shock the reader, intensely quick
explanations of arguments, and use of re-appropriated cultural slang such as #BlackPopMatters, Kanyeing, and Pleb. Finally, the movement literally defines itself through its mirrored identity to the alt-right: they support cucks, they denounce alpha males, they want to build a second cathedral, and they promise to kill basilisks. Most blatantly, they define their own mascot by saying, “Wohjak is to #AltWoke as Pepe is to Alt-Right.” In this way, the accelerationists are not only righteous in their beliefs but also they are becoming demagogic in their arguments that those outside their niche public—especially those in the alt-right and members of the regressive left who are merely #Woke—are inferior and need to be either punished or converted.

**Demagogic Rhetorics**

Demagoguery—violent notions about who has value and who does not based on community identity—is the final evolution of a narcissistic public. Just as Narcissus refused to see value in any body besides his own, it is possible for people to become so engrossed with the collective body of which they are a part that they become uncaring, if not outright combative, toward those they do not identify as part of their community. Regularly, these communities utilize binary “us vs. them” rhetorics to reify divisions between the community and those outside of it whom they believe pose a threat. Patricia Roberts-Miller’s 2009 article, “Dissent as ‘Aid and Comfort to the Enemy’” explains how this binary works by analyzing a 2007 Gene Simmons interview that went viral after the Kiss bassist and co-lead singer claimed that supporting the troops while also protesting the Iraq War gave “aid and comfort to the enemy.” Roberts-Miller explains that Simmons’s claim was not an argument in the way rhetoricians generally understand
the term; rather, Simmons’s utterance was a performance of a specific group identity. For Roberts-Miller, group identity is important for people not because it provides community but because it says something essential about group members (180). In the Simmons example, he is speaking to those who identify with war supporters because they believe such support is essentially virtuous. This belief does not rely on the specific context of the war or its supporters; instead, “supporting American wars is virtuous” functions as a commonplace enthymeme, and alluding to it demonstrates one’s inherent goodness and superiority over those who do not share the belief. The accelerationists have similar beliefs that enable them to feel superior to those with whom they disagree. For accelerationists, anyone who does not believe in creating a utopian society through the acceleration of capitalist technologies is somehow deficient—intellectually, morally, socially, etc.—when compared to those in the ingroup. These belief helps to create a simple binary between the good people in the ingroup and the bad people in the outgroup.

But just because such demagogic groups allow for simple binary conceptions of the world does not mean that the identifications that bind them are mindless. In fact, people often have to do extra cognitive work to explain why members of the ingroup did something bad or why members of the outgroup did something good. This extra cognitive work is rewarded by reifying the individual’s identity as a good person within a group of other good people; nonetheless, some cognitive dissonance is bound to appear because groups are not stable. Opinions change, contexts shift, alliances become unproductive, and people no longer agree. When the composition of the group changes for any of these reasons, people have a difficult time understanding themselves in relation to it, which is a problem for members who predominantly understand themselves as good because of their
affiliation with the group. If one’s goodness is tied to the goodness of others, then what does it mean when those others do something bad? Roberts-Miller claims that this exact problem is what gave Gene Simmons’s argument so much power within a certain community. Simmons was able to identify people who had once been part of the ingroup, those who supported the troops, with the perceived values of the outgroup, giving comfort to the enemy. Simmons’s identity performance clearly created two groups where there had previously only been one; he gave his audience a way to see themselves as remaining in the ingroup while positioning those with whom they had previously agreed as aligning with the outgroup.

Roberts-Miller’s analysis of Simmons focuses predominately on ingroup/outgroup rhetorics, but her most recent work expands into demagoguery more explicitly. As discussed in the beginning, she defines demagoguery as:

[A] discourse that promises stability, certainty, and escape from the responsibilities of rhetoric through framing public policy in terms of the degree to which and means by which (not whether) the outgroup should be punished for the current problems of the ingroup. Public debate largely concerns three stases: group identity (who is in the ingroup, what signifies outgroup membership, and how loyal rhetors are to the ingroup); need (usually framed in terms of how evil the outgroup is); [and] what level of punishment to enact against the outgroup (restriction of rights to extermination). (“Characteristics”)

She further explains that demagoguery does not rely on emotionalism or populism; instead, demagoguery relies on a group seeing themselves both as essentially righteous and under attack from others in the society. She claims that these types of groups are
often the forbearers of war, genocide, and the denial of rights; and she explains that they all have eleven similar characteristics. Of these, four are particularly important to the study of accelerationism. 1) Demagogic publics operate on binaries: the primary one being who they are and who the outgroup is. 2) These binaries are indicative of the simple way demagogic groups understand the world; they are naïve realists who believe that their observations of the world are not only accurate but also universal. Those in the outgroups can accept or deny these truths, but ingroup members know them to be certain. 3) Despite knowing the absolute truth, demagogic publics always feel as if they are under threat. Though they are often the dominant force in society, they feel as if they have been persecuted and oppressed by the outgroup. They claim that they have been magnanimous victims in the past, but they now need to defend themselves through means that might not reflect their better natures. 4) Any unseemly tactics (name calling, underhandedness, violence, etc.) are justified because the ingroup claims that the outgroups are also using such unscrupulous methods against them ("Characteristics"). In short, the ingroup understands itself as a superior force who must prove their superiority to the outgroups, lest they be destroyed by them.

Roberts-Miller argues that demagoguery can, in its most extreme instantiations, lead to genocide, classicide, or politicide, but it exists well before such atrocities ever occur. She claims that demagoguery is never confined to one oppressive group acting insularly but rather transcends to multiple groups within a society. For example, Hitler’s demagogic rhetoric would not have gained traction if other groups in the Weimar

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5 The eleven principles are: binary thinking, naïve realism, authoritarianism, ontological taxonomies, deductive reasoning, identity as logic, projection, moral equivalence, cunning projection, victimization, and use of hierarchical metaphors.
Republic had not also been pointing fingers and claiming to be the victims of outgroups (Roberts-Miller “Demagoguery”). The culture of Germany between the wars was itself demagogic. What allowed Hitler to gain power was not his unique use of demagoguery but his ability to unite and mobilize a large enough ingroup that they could take power. Because demagoguery transcends specific groups and violences in this way, it is not always easy to identify. Demagoguery does not start out audaciously; its roots are subtle, immersive, and variant. People who would not usually be associated with anger, violence, or hatred can come to identify with demagogic beliefs if exposed to their rhetorics long enough. Demagoguery is alluring because it frees the ingroup from the complex and emotionally exhausting work of democracy (Roberts-Miller “Demagoguery”). It asks a people to ignore the multiplicities of the world and instead embrace a simple realism in which they are inherently good and righteous. This shuts demagogues off from the rest of the world until all they can see is their ingroup and all they can hear is its echoing messages. The world demagogues understand are the ones created by their terministic screens—the linguistic constructions—of the demagogic publics to which they belong. Ideologues becomes Narcissus, ignoring a world full of beauty and passion in order to stare at a young lovers in a shadowy world while a nymphs echo praises back to them.

This image of Narcissus ignoring the world, staring at his reflection, and mourning his inability to embrace his young lover is an apt metaphor for the ways public rhetors can become so enrapt in their arguments and the immediate audiences for which they are writing that they lose track of larger publics, perspectives, and possibilities. Of course, writing for specific audiences or participating in specific discourse communities is not inherently demagogic. These types of speech acts and communities are necessary,
but there is also value in seeing the world beyond one’s usual terministic and conceptual screens, beyond one’s normal interlocutors, and beyond one’s own abilities to incite change. If one refuses to leave their discourse community and experience those of others, then they are much more likely to fall into righteous logics and believe that they alone have access to absolute truth. This is precisely what has happened to leftist accelerationists: they have come to display nascent demagoguery, and while they are not yet a violent ingroup/outgroup thinking public, but their arguments are quite narcissistic, righteous, and moving in that direction.

**Accelerating Toward Demagoguery**

Leftist accelerationists are focused predominantly on accelerating the technological capacities of capitalism, as opposed to its logics or principles, though some more extreme versions claim that everything within capitalism must be accelerated in order to manifest better futures. Still, the primary focus of leftist accelerationism is technological production, with class, consumption, identity, finance, labor, and ownership being secondary concerns. This fetishizing of technology can be seen in the introduction to *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader* in which Robin MacKay and Armen Avanessian argue that the “political heresy” of accelerationism is necessary in contemporary politics because it is the only leftist position that focuses on progress (4). MacKay and Avanessian characterize the contemporary left as a conglomeration of luddites who, realizing that technology was the tool of instrumentalist, capitalist, and conservative oppressors, chose to become “technologically illiterate,” leaving those powerful tools to the devices of their enemies (6). McKay and Avanessian argue that this
illiteracy is not only practiced by the left but is also propagated by them as an impotent and ineffectual form of protest, disruption, and advocacy. This argument is followed by the claim that the contemporary left has been attempting to hold back progress, if not completely revert society to an imagined idyllic state. McKay and Avanessian assert that accelerationism is the only progressive option for leftists, and they call for: “a renewed Prometheanism and rationalism, an affirmation that the increasing immanence of the social and the technical is irreversible and indeed desirable, and a commitment to developing new understandings of the complexity this brings to contemporary politics” (7). In other words, the accelerationists believe that there is only one indisputable reality that humans are able to manipulate, and currently it is being manipulated in pro-capitalist ways. McKay and Avanessian believe that increasing technological capacities will enable humans to reshape nature, politics, and society to their desires. And while this statement demonstrates the basic narcissism of accelerationism, a history of the movement is even more illuminating.

Credit for coining the term accelerationist is given to Roger Zelazny, who used it in his sci-fi novel Lord of Light to describe a sect of future humans who believe that technology should be available to everyone, not just the ruling classes. The term was transformed from sci-fi to theory by Benjamin Noys, who used the term in his 2010 book The Persistence of the Negative to describe technology fetishists who believe that the best future can only be created through a complete embrace of all technological advancements regardless of their individual repercussions. Noys was specifically critiquing both a radical leftist movement focused on accelerating capitalism as a mode of resistance and the New Right who were fixated on limiting the power of governments by selling public
interests to private companies. After Noys’s book, the term *accelerationism* gained some traction in the public sphere, but it did not become popular until Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek published their “#Accelerate: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics” [MAP] in 2013, a document that advocated for the leftist position Noys had explicitly critiqued. The short document made a large impact on a small niche public of radical leftists and has since been translated into several languages. The response to the manifesto has created most of the artifacts now associated with accelerationism: there has been an anemic Twitter campaign, three books, a journal, a workshop, and a movie. There have also been several books written that are loosely associated with the movement, but few of them take the movement particularly seriously.6 There have also been some talks, presentations, and other ephemera, but this list constitutes most of the accelerationist texts that have been produced.

Due to such limited resources, McKay and Avanessian’s anthology is mostly comprised of Marxist theories that have influenced accelerationists. The theories both situate the movement historically and establish “accelerationism ‘itself’ as a fictional or hyperstitional anticipation of intelligence to come” (8). In other words, the editors hope that the history they provide not only explains how accelerationism came to be but also how it makes certain futures possible. The authors believe they are not merely opening up different possibilities and pathways of thought; instead, they imagine themselves as creating these futures merely through the act of publishing the collection in the same way

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6 The books are #Accelerate by Robin McKay and Armen Avanessian, Malign Velocities by Benjamin Noys, and No Speed Limit by Steven Shaviro. The journal is &&& edited by Jason Adams, Mohammad Salemy, and Tony Yanick. The conference was called “At the Limits of Perception and Cognition,” and it was held in Berlin. The movie is called Hyperstition and was created by Christopher Roth in collaboration with Armen Avanessian. Some of the books associated with the movement but not a part of it are Inventing the Future by Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, Four Futures by Peter Frass, and the anthology Fanged Noumena by Nick Land.
the oracle at Delphi brought about events by the act of prophesy. The editors believe that the accelerationist essays they are compiling are neither describing current events nor prescribing actions for a certain group; they believe they are creating a hype machine that will bring about a post-capitalist future through the repetition of the accelerationist apocalypse narrative, and that is why they refer to the work as hyperstitional. Artist Maggie Roberts explains that hyperstition is the phenomenon by which a fictional narrative transcends the work of one person and takes on a shared cultural significance through the mis of rhetoric. Hyperstitions are similar to memes, except they act to create the fiction they are propagating. To do this efficiently, hyperstitions need a history, and for accelerationism, this history begins with the writings of Karl Marx, moves through the poststructuralist theories of Gilles Deleuze and Jean-Francois Lyotard, moves into the cybernetic theories of Nick Land and the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit, and finally arrives at contemporary accelerationist texts. It is from this Marxist base that accelerationists believe they will build a post-capitalist future, but this base is also what is leading them to demagoguery.

Rooted in Marxism, accelerationism has been nurtured by a narcissistic soil. This is not to say that the entire Marxist tradition—one of the most widely distributed and influential intellectual publics of the last two hundred years—has been completely narcissistic; rather, it is to say that one of the central tenets of Marxism to which accelerationists cling is inherently narcissistic: false consciousness. While Marx never used the term false consciousness himself, the term is used in Marxist discourse to refer to ways in which ideology influences how the oppressed classes understand and operate in the world. The term builds on Marx’s concept from The German Ideology that a
society’s economic systems determine its values, despite most workers believing that the values determine the economic systems. Marx argues that workers believe there are truths and principles that influence how businesses operate, but in reality businesses operate to produce capital while ad hoc creating the social values to justify their practices (180). False consciousness as its own term originated with György Lukács who used it in his book History and Class Consciousness to explain why working class people were not always attempting to overthrow their oppressors. Lukács argued—though working class people are rational, intelligent, and working toward their own interests—their understandings of the world, their interests, and how they could achieve those interests have been historically formed against them; in others words, though workers act rationally, they are doing so in a false paradigm in which they cannot be certain to meet their needs: they have a false consciousness of the world. Workers will not revolt because they understand the world incorrectly—their ontological commitments are wrong.

The concept of false consciousness was widely taken up in the 1960s. Revolutionaries assumed they could move people’s thinking out of false consciousness and into real consciousness. However, by at least the 1990s, this objective was seen as naive. As philosophers began to question the epistemological ability to understand the world directly—as opposed to through a terministic screen, conceptual network, or ideological lens—the question of false consciousness began to fade (Eagleton 11). Further, philosophers began to question whether or not ideologies were themselves actually false. If people are smart and able to understand ideologies as social constructs that influence how they act in the world, then there must be something in the ideologies that they either enjoy or find to be convincingly true (12). Such critiques are more
generous, and perhaps logocentric, versions of Lyotard’s pronouncement that workers not only enjoy the consumption of capitalism but also the servitude of it. Lyotard sees exploitative labor as having a *jouissance*, a destructive and libidinal pleasure, that academics, in their want to decry it as exploitative, ignore: “I realize that a proletariat would hate you [academics] . . . because you dare not say the only important thing there is to say, that one can enjoy swallowing the shit of capital” (219). Lyotard claims that academics have invented the suffering of the proletariat because they cannot understand the libidinal drive that motivates them to stay servile. In contrast, Raymond Geuss argues that what makes false consciousness false is that the proletariat does not understand that the created social system was created to maintain oppressive power (62).

It is telling that Lyotard makes three appearances in *#Accelerate*, whereas neither Eagleton nor Geuss makes one. Not only does the former’s abrasive style align with the edgy aesthetic of the movement but also his conceptions of reality, history, and technology foreshadow accelerationism. In MAP, Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek argue that the primary problem of the left is that it is “a folk politics of localism, direct action, and relentless horizontalism” (354). Like Lyotard, they are not interested in the multiplicities of thoughts, experiences, and realities but are rather focused on understanding the world from the perspective of a universalist ontology that claims to know that all humans want increased comfort and consumption. While MAP claims that capitalism is unjust and perverted, their primary issue is that capitalist systems hold back the types of progress and plenty for which all humans yearn. Williams and Srnicek believe that by moving away from capitalism they can unleash the full potential of technology to be something more revolutionary than minor product upgrades. And while
this future may be beneficial, the problem with the utopia is that decisions as to what things will be made and why will not be made equally because in the name of expediency, the authors claim to need “a collectively controlled vertical authority in addition to distributed horizontal forms of sociality” (359). Williams and Srnicek neglect both the values of democracy and diversity as a process of governing collectively and argue instead for a social hierarchy in which a few lead vertically and the many conform horizontally.

In short, the goals of accelerationism are to increase technological innovation and consumption so that everyone can enjoy the future chosen by the select few who believe that their universal understanding of the world allows them to know what is best for the rest of the population. Though Williams and Srnicek seem to be advocating for participatory politics when they claim, “an ecology of organisations, a pluralism of forces” is necessary to create the kind of egalitarian accelerationist society for which they are advocating, they undercut this sentiment when they claim:

The overwhelming privileging of democracy-as-process needs to be left behind. The fetishisation [sic] of openness, horizontality, and inclusion of much of today’s ‘radical’ left set the stage for ineffectiveness. Secrecy, verticality, and exclusion all have their place as well in effective political action (though not, of course, an exclusive one).

The conflict here between open plurality and closed centrality is further explained in their 2016 book Inventing the Future in which Williams and Srnicek explain that the secretive vertical authority of the accelerationist future government would be informed by a populist alliance of interests united by “one particular demand or struggle [that will
come] to stand in for the rest” (160). What is being offered here is an undemocratic form of democracy in which a population’s demands are advocated for by a variety of organizations but are then entered into a secretive closed system to which citizens do not have access. Further, the demands of these organizations would be influenced by the accelerationist hegemony that Williams and Srnicek hope to propagate through education, media reform, and new understandings of identity. The authors argue that such cultural reform is how political success is defined: “one can only fully understand the success of movements by the extent to which they are able to achieve broad-scaled transformations in the public ‘common sense,’ and to change what people desire” (197). The changing of culture through introducing the population to new terministic screens is a part of any political revolution; however, the specific use of ideological state apparatuses to create, propagate, and celebrate new worldviews has had a nefarious and totalitarian connotation since Lois Althusser coined the term in 1970. Such apparatuses, which also exist in capitalist and neoliberal societies, argue that there is only one correct way to understand the world, and those who refuse this outlook are not only wrong but also dangerous because those in the outgroup are enemies of not only the ingroup but also the state. Advocating for such institutions is arguing for demagoguery.

**Prometheanism Vs. Co-Production**

Ultimately, accelerationism is demagogic because it wants the future to be created only by those who believe in accelerationist values; however, even if the call for humanity to take control of the future were extended to humans beyond the niche public of accelerationism, it would still demonstrate a narcissistic tendency within the
movement because it refuses to acknowledge the agencies of nonhuman actors. The Prometheanism articulated by Williams and Srnicek is so pronounced and nuanced that it is worth quoting at some length:

We declare that only a Promethean politics of maximal mastery over society and its environment is capable of either dealing with global problems or achieving victory over capital. This mastery must be distinguished from that beloved of thinkers of the original Enlightenment. The clockwork universe of Laplace, so easily mastered given sufficient information, is long gone from the agenda of serious scientific understanding. But this is not to align ourselves with the tired residue of postmodernity, decrying mastery as proto-fascistic or authority as innately illegitimate. Instead we propose that the problems besetting our planet and our species oblige us to refurbish mastery in a newly complex guise; whilst we cannot predict the precise result of our actions, we can determine probabilistically likely ranges of outcomes. What must be coupled to such complex systems analysis is a new form of action: improvisatory and capable of executing a design through a practice which works with the contingencies it discovers only in the course of its acting, in a politics of geosocial artistry and cunning rationality. A form of abductive experimentation that seeks the best means to act in a complex world. (360)

This relationship to both the environment and society is problematic because of the amount of control that it seeks to exert. While Williams and Srnicek are correct that much postmodern thought has been ineffectual (Bruno Latour compares postmodern critique to a sledgehammer that can only break things down without building anything new) they
ignore the primary lessons of those critiques: humans do not act alone, and history is not necessarily a story of progress. In nods to these postmodern concerns, Williams and Srnicek mention that they will need to be fluid, improvisatory, and cunningly rational, but they ignore the overarching point that objects in the world have agencies, and it is neither possible nor just for humans to wield absolute control or refurbished mastery over them.

Rather than Promethean control, accelerationists would need something closer to an ethical co-production. In Reassembling the Social Bruno Latour argues that mere passive objects do not exist; instead, everything in the world exerts agency. For instance, the remote control cannot make anyone a couch potato, but along with the television, programming, snacks, and a comfortable seat, it can influence a person to stay in their living room all day (77). Likewise, in response to the right wing cliché “guns don’t kill people, people kill people” Latour responds that the correct answer would be that an assemblage of actors composed of gun, bullet, shooter, victim, legal codes, temperature, time, blood sugar, etc. work together to kill people (Pandora’s 180). That is not to say that hypothetical shooters do not also make decisions for which they should be held accountable, but it is to say that any potential decision a shooter makes would be just one action taken by one actor within a large, complex network of actors exerting influence on each other. By considering any shooter as enmeshed in this complex network from which they cannot completely be removed (though actors are constantly shifting in and out, while exerting more or less force), it becomes clear that shooters are also co-created by other actors who are therefore co-responsible for their actions. For example, would a hypothetical shooter shoot if the gun had backfired, if bullets were more expensive, if
they were feeling sad, if the victim looked different, if gun laws were different, if enforcement of gun laws were different, if it were cold, or if they had recently eaten?

If any of these variables were changed, no matter how seemingly minute, there is no certainty as to whether or not the potential shooter would shoot, and there is evidence that seemingly minor variables can have great effect on human decision making skills. A recent study by Shai Danzinger et al. found that potential parolees have a 65% chance of being granted parole at the beginning of the day or directly after a break. Conversely, potential parolees standing before a judge directly before a break have a nearly zero percent chance of being granted parole. In other words, the more rested, fed, and comfortable the judges were, the more empathetic and lenient they were toward those they were judging. Commenting on this study, Robert Sapolsky went as far as to claim, “freewill is the biology we haven’t learned yet,” meaning that every deviant behavior has a biological cause rather than a moral one (Revising). While Sapolsky’s comment brings in problems of predetermination and normalization, as if humans should/could fix all deviations from the norm, it also demonstrates the ways in which actors function within complex assemblages.

Not surprisingly, the scientifically minded accelerationist community is aware of the ways in which material actors affect humans, which makes it surprising that Williams and Srnicek would advocate for the kind of dominating Prometheanism they do. It is even more surprising when considering how Marxism has historically highlighted the agency of nonhuman actors by describing how machines change the humans with which they interact. Marx understood this when he wrote in the *Gundrisse* about human workers becoming the conscious organs of machine bodies alien to them (401). More recently
Sadie Plant and Nick Land understood it when they wrote about the influence techno music, club drugs, and videogames have on both individuals and society. Despite the importance of nonhuman agency for these thinkers, Williams and Srnicek are not alone in advocating for Prometheanism. In his article “Prometheanism and Its Critics,” Richard Brassier defines Prometheanism as, “the claim that there is no reason to assume a predetermined limit to what we can achieve or to the ways in which we can transform ourselves and our world” (470). It is worth noting that in this definition Brassier does not consider the effects achievement will have on nonhuman actors; rather, his focus is solely on humanity and our world. This myopic focus is indicative of the entire article.

Brassier argues that many current thinkers on both the left and the right are dismissive of Prometheanism because it upsets what they see as a transcendental equilibrium between civilization and nature, and he claims that Jean-Pierre Dupuy’s essay “Some Pitfalls in the Philosophical Foundations of NanoEthics” is indicative of this critique. Arguing against Dupuy’s critique of nanotechnologies leads Brassier to make a host of tenuously related arguments about religion, suffering, and the nature of man in part because Dupuy’s argument is similarly sprawling. Nonetheless, within this critique of a critique, the most problematic arguments are those that involve Martin Heidegger.

According to Brassier, Heidegger argues that humans are ontologically different from other beings because their relationship to time and their awareness of their own finitude provides them with a transcendence that differentiates them from the natural world. Because of this essential ontological exceptionalism, there are things that are “proper and improper for human beings to become” (473). Shifting from reading Heidegger to Hannah Arendt, as if the latter were a proxy for the former, Brassier claims that
Heideggerians see the world as composed of “things given and things made” (474). The problem with Prometheanism for Heideggarians then, according to Brassier, is twofold: 1) humans should not be modified like other elements of nature because they are ontologically distinct from those things and 2) it ignores the things given and overruns the world with things made. According to Brassier, these arguments erroneously assume an essentialism for both humanity and the world. Brassier claims that since such essential qualities are chimeras, there is no reason not to push humanity to its technological limits, whatever the cost to the world. What Brassier does not discuss is the ways in which his argument reinforces a modernist ontology that construes humanity and the natural world as distinct entities in a way that Heidegger does not.

Though Heidegger does argue that the aspect of humans that distinguishes them from animals is their ability to experience language and to be aware of their own finitude, this is not a transcendent essence; instead, Heidegger argues that this unique attribute of humanity, their collective *Dasein*, emerges from their interactions with the world. Humanity’s being is a being-in-the-world, and because humans have language and can understand their own being, they are also called to care for the world and “be the shepherd of being” (252). This care is not dominion. Heidegger claims, “The essential worth of human being does not consist in his being the substance of being, as the ‘Subject’ among them, so that as the tyrant of being he may deign to release the beings into an all too loudly glorified ‘objectivity’” (252). Instead, humans should realize that being, humanity, and the world are all interconnected. As Thomas Rickert says, “This understanding of the inseparability of world from human being operates in all Heidegger’s major concepts,” and can be seen in the way his texts use the middle voice to
blur the border between the human subject and the material object (12). In this way, Heidegger does not reify the human/nature binary that Brassier wants to attribute to him. Instead, Heidegger presents a very material understanding of humanity as a group that dwells within the world as a way of caring for and being in it. Heidegger is not opposed to human improvement, but he is opposed to subjugating nature to the will of humanity.

Brassier’s misreading of Heidegger is indicative of the problems of accelerationist Prometheanism in that it cannot get outside of its human-centric perspective. Brassier simultaneously exalts the human as the essential agent of knowledge and production while simultaneously wanting to objectify the human as brute matter. He repeats the binary between humans and the world by trying to have a metaphysics that can both align and separate the natural world from that of the human. As such, the metaphysics fails as a justification for Promethean technologies because it collapses under its own internal logics. If humanity needs a justification for such advanced technologies, and I expect that such changes will happen whether or not they can be justified, then scholars should be thinking not about human superiority but about the ways in which humans can improve themselves by interacting with the world instead of against it.

Donna Haraway’s *Staying With the Trouble* offers one way this could be enacted. In the book Haraway argues that instead of waiting for technology to “somehow come to the rescue of its naughty but very clever children,” those who want to continue living on this planet need to focus on its current material problems and consider the ways in which they can collaborate with chthonic actors—those close related to the earth—to bring about positive change (3). Haraway does not want to dismiss technology, but she argues that it has to work with other actors, not try to control them, in order to bring about
positive futures for both the planet and those who dwell on it. The problem with Prometheanism and techno utopianism is not simply the amount of agency they each attribute to the human, it is the way they ignore the agency of nonhuman actors in a way that reinforces the modern Constitution.

Promethean ideas that separate humanity from the rest of the world are the pinnacle of accelerationist narcissism. While not quite demagogic, accelerationists are a public that regularly ignores the agency of others because they are not a part of the ingroup. Accelerationism ignores nonhuman actors, while also claiming that non-accelerationists are hindrances to creating a utopian society. They believe that everyone beyond the ingroup of accelerationists fails to realize that the only way for humanity to survive is through accelerationist ideologies. The texts themselves are so dense, obtuse, and filled with obscure Marxist jargon that they act as a barrier between the ingroup and everyone else. This semantic barrier protects the accelerationists from opinions that will differ from their own, which allows accelerationism to act as an echo chamber in which the same ideas are constantly reaffirmed. The ideological worldview is thus able to propagate itself, always seeing the world through the same network of concepts and terministic screens. In this way accelerationists have transformed themselves into Narcissus staring into a pool at their own reflection, as Echo repeats the compliments they shower upon themselves.

**Narcissism, Demagoguery, and the Risk of the Rhetor**

The risk of narcissism and demagoguery is particularly difficult to foresee because unlike the risks of unintended consequences and harassment, which are external
to the rhetor, the internal risk of narcissism does not feel like a hazard. Narcissism can be relatively innocuous, but it becomes dangerous when rhetors are members of communities that reaffirm, reify, and validate not only their ideas but also their identities, in ways that enable them to righteous, as if the way they understand the world is the only correct way. Such righteousness can lead to demagoguery, in which ingroups feel as if their worldview is being threatened, leading them to actively attack and punish outgroups. Besides the inherent violence, demagoguery is also pernicious because it is not confined to a single public; rather, demagoguery spreads to many publics throughout a population. For example, the demagoguery of the leftist accelerationists was developed in part as a response to the demagoguery of the far right who were beginning to take control of the political discourse in the United States, if not most of the Western World. Similarly, accelerationism is also a response to leftist political actors whose ideas about the nature of identity, technology, and localism are popular on digital platforms such as Tumblr. As a movement, accelerationism is surrounded by many outgroups who are in their own ways narcissistic, if not demagogic. These publics not only have different arguments, opinions, styles, and worlds—they fundamentally understand the world to exist in different ways and have different ontological commitments. Perhaps the core ontological commitment of accelerationists is their belief that the world exists to be manipulated by humans. They argue that humans will co-evolve with technology, but they adamantly assert that they can control how this happens. Ultimately, the predominant narcissism of accelerationists is that they think they can control the world.

This totalizing worldview is representative of the problems of narcissism and demagoguery writ large; accelerationists, like all demagogues, believe they are the only
group of people who can make a positive change in the world because they are the only ones who understand how the world actually works. Demagogic publics believe that many outgroups are immoral, misguided, or unintelligent, but the fault of most outgroups is that they do not comprehend the world correctly: outgroup terministic screens are incorrect, while the ingroup’s terministic screen provides them with direct access to the world. The role of the demagogic public then is to convert the outgroups that can be converted and to punish the outgroups that are beyond saving. Conversion and punishment are necessary because they are the only ways to keep the ingroup safe from the actions, futures, and policies of the outgroups. Demagogues believe that only by taking control of the world they can impose the correct world order and bring about the best possible future—at least for the ingroup, and that is all that matters. Demagogues are not interested in the hard work of making connections and co-producing the future with other actors. They believe in working unilaterally because only the ingroup is capable enough to save the ingroup, and only the ingroup’s interests matter.

Materialists are perhaps the most vulnerable to this risk of publicness because of their focus on ontology, but demagoguery is a common hazard for all sorts of rhetors. The violence between the BPP, the US organization, and the FBI; the single mindedness of Crip sets; and the alt-right’s violent sphere public are all forms of demagoguery. Similarly, it is commonly remarked that United States political discourse is becoming increasingly demagogic as politicians and voters refuse to see value in those with whom they disagree. The rise of demagoguery in this country should concern everyone, but especially composition instructors who are tasked not only with helping students learn to create arguments but also to use those arguments ethically in their private, professional,
and civic lives. This calling was one of the reasons public writing pedagogies were originally created, to get students out of their terministic screens and into discourse with other actors. However, in order to teach students to interact with the public in non-demagogic ways, instructors can neither focus their instruction on writing for an ideal public sphere that does not exist nor on the tactics of effectively creating and circulating an argument; instead, what is needed is an empathetic instruction that asks students to consider their rhetorical forces within an ecology of rhetorical forces emanating from both human and nonhuman actors. As Byron Hawk argues in *A Counter-History of Composition*, instructors should “design occasions” that build productive relationships and increase the possibilities for actors to act rather than destructive ones that harm bodies and limit their possibilities (255-58). One answer to this call is to create pedagogies that focus on writing as co-constructed events, rather than as the singular creation of texts. Such a pedagogy would not only help students to consider rhetoric in relation to other actors with whom they intra-act but also demonstrate to them the inherit risks of rhetoric.
CHAPTER 5

THE RISKS OF EVENTS: TOWARD EVENT-BASED PEDAGOGIES

Each of the three primary case studies demonstrates a risk associated with the three categories of public rhetorics. The Crips demonstrate the risk of mis for idealists, the alt-right demonstrates the risk of harassment for activists, and the accelerationists demonstrate the risk of demagoguery for materialists. Public rhetorics as they exist in the world, however, are not as regimented and siloed as they are presented here, and neither are their risks. For instance, the founding of the Crips was not only idealistic but also activist and materialist—it was an act that was simultaneously concerned with ethical models, political tactics, and ontological inquiries. The same is true for the alt-right and the accelerationists. Categories of public rhetorics bleed into one another, as do their risks. The Crips did not just misunderstand Black Power when they created their organization, they also engaged in demagogic ingroup/outgroup thinking and both harassed and were harassed by other members of the South Central Los Angeles public. Likewise, the alt-right’s harassment stems from their demagogic ideology that positions its members as part of a righteous ingroup, despite being mis-interpreted both by those defining the group from the outside and by different factions within the populist sphere public itself. Finally, the accelerationists are not only becoming demagogic but also are actively mis-reading contemporary leftist politics in ways that suggest harassment for those human and nonhuman actors whose bodies prevent them from realizing their ideal
society. Each case-study contains each risk because all the risks of rhetoric grow from the same root: the transformative nature of the event.

The rhetorical event is a concept central to ecological understandings of rhetoric. Traditionally rhetoric has been conceived of as a situation in which a rhetor attempts to persuade an audience to a particular way of perceiving the world and acting within it—a model based on simple cause-and-effect logic—but in the last three decades the field has come to see rhetoric as ecological, as composed of multiple actors impacting and influencing each other in ways that are more substantial than mere persuasion and more complex than mere cause-and-effect. Such ecological thinking sees rhetoric as an event in which actors co-influence how they perceive the world, themselves, and others in ways ranging from the mundane to the extraordinary. Events are encounters where actors co-produce and re-articulate one another. Because of this co-productive nature, transformations within events are emergent rather than predetermined, which means they can potentially pose risks to the actors involved, including rhetors. Not all transformations are positive, and even seemingly mundane events can contain hazards.

The primary case studies serve as extraordinary examples of risk in the public sphere but risk is pervasive and not limited to grandiose displays of violence and antagonism. For instance, on October 30, 2014 Jennifer Tyburczy was detained by University of South Carolina law enforcement after students in her upper-level “Performance of the Americas” class sang spirituals and wrote chalk messages on the campus square to make salient the history of slavery that built the campus. Though no criminal charges were filed, the chalk was immediately washed away by campus facilities because they perceived it as a risk to the wellbeing of the campus community (Harmon).
This innocuous example demonstrates how the perception of risk is a topic that needs to be addressed in public writing pedagogy regardless of the scope of a public writing project because human perceptions of risk are rarely accurate representations of the actual hazards people face in the world. Tyburczy did not expect the risk of university sanction, though it was a hazard; conversely, the university saw risk in social and historical consciousness, though the performance presented minor, if any, harm to the institution.

In its broadest terms, risk refers to any possibility that harm may occur. Sometimes the possibility of harm is predictable, but often it is not. Since human and nonhuman actors are continually changing in unpredictable ways through their engagements with other actors in ongoing chains of events, they are always at risk. Despite its ubiquity, humans lack direct access to risk because they access it through multiple perceptive layers. In *The Feeling of Risk*, Paul Slovic argues that risk is perceived along four separate vectors: emotion, culture, psychology, and communication. Along the first vector, Slovic argues that humans evaluate the risks and benefits of a situation based on their emotional connection to it rather than by evidence or logic. For example, people are more easily persuaded by negative examples than positive examples, are more likely to find an activity less risky if they enjoy doing it, and are more willing to donate to a cause if they think their actions can eradicate rather than alleviate the problem. Along the second vector, Slovic notes that people’s cultural positions determine how they will understand risk. For example, in the United States, white males feel the least vulnerable to hazards because of their experiences, the experiences of those they know, and a psychological predisposition against empathizing with women and racial minorities. Along the third vector, Slovic shows that people’s material, social, cultural,
institutional, and psychological worlds change the ways in which they perceive risks. For instance, individual Americans’ feelings about the positive and negative effects of nanotechnology depend greatly on whether they identify as egalitarian or individualistic; the former makes one aware of the potential risks, while the latter obfuscates them. Finally, along the fourth vector, Slovic demonstrates that the communication of risk can either amplify or attenuate hazards. Risks that are difficult to understand, or effect marginalized groups, are often seen as less hazardous than risks that are easy to understand, occur in a single event, and can be blamed on a single group of actors because the latter are easier to articulate and discuss. When hazards are discussed frequently, they are usually seen as riskier than those that are discussed less often.

Taken together, these vectors demonstrate that the human perception of risk is a complex process involving a network of actors and forces. Perceptions of risk are not based solely on ontological hazards but are constructed from feelings, cultural positions, psychological predispositions, and participation in discursive publics. Of course, the world is filled with actual hazards—material actors who can harm both humans and nonhumans—but these hazards relate little to how humans perceive risk; instead, innocuous actors like Tyburczy’s students are often perceived as dangerous, while actually dangerous actors like the alt-right are regularly ignored. For instance, the probability of being harmed in a terrorist attack, nuclear catastrophe, or epidemic is far less than the likelihood of being harmed because of naturally-occurring radon gas, car accidents, or smoking. Despite the probabilities, people perceive the former examples as riskier than the latter because the latter are complex, ideologically burdened, unconventional, effect marginalized communities, change as technologies advance, and
receive less media attention. In short, people are not good at accurately perceiving risk, and their misperceptions can lead to imprudent decisions such as petitioning government officials to make laws mitigating minor risks rather than major risks, refusing medical treatments, being suspicious of organizations for minor infractions of trust, and engaging in high reward gambles. The inability to accurately assess risk poses a distinct problem for public writing classrooms focused on teaching students how to engage the public sphere because neither the instructor nor the students are likely to accurately assess the hazards public writers are likely to face. Instructors should be concerned about asking students to engage in public discourse when it is difficult to predict the risks of public rhetoric?

The question of how best to teach students to navigate risk has been an important aspect of public writing pedagogies since their beginning. Susan Well’s influential essay, “Rogue Cops and Health Care,” begins with the story of a Temple University student being brutalized by Philadelphia police officers, an anecdote that leads Wells to argue that the violent risks of the public sphere stem from the variety of perceptions, identities, and power dynamics clashing therein. Later, in his book *A Teaching Subject*, Joseph Harris argues that these dangerous elements of publicness are also what make the public sphere valuable because they allow for productive interchange. In the following decade, Harris’s logic would be used to justify many public writing and service learning pedagogies where students left the classroom and wrote for the broader community, generally helping local volunteer organizations with their writing tasks. However, this justification was problematized by Paula Mathieu in *Tactics of Hope*, in which she articulates the ways composition instructors take advantage of these organizations by not
ensuring that student writing is actually useful to community partners. Composition classes and volunteer organizations are supposed to have symbiotic relationships, but often only the instructors and students benefit because their relationships to community organizations, reproducing the same problematic clashes among perceptions, identities, and power dynamics of which Wells had previously warned. In response to this problem, Linda Flower argues in *Community Literacy and The Rhetoric of Public Engagement* that if partnerships are approached with compassion, cultural inquiry, and a pragmatic approach to problem solving, then they will not repeat the oppressive power structures of the past but instead create something new in both the classroom and the public. Flower’s approach quickly became the dominant model for public writing pedagogies because it attempts to mitigate risk through the enactment of community, conversation, and partnership—as if these ways of being together with strangers were not themselves risky.

The primary problem with these community-based approaches to public writing pedagogy is that they assume publics to be stable communities with which instructors can partner. Nancy Welch argues in *Living Room* that publics are not stable communities; rather, they are spaces of discourse created through acts of composition. Welch argues that neoliberal forces of privatization make creating such spaces difficult, but she insists that instructors can use the history of subaltern political movements, such as labor and civil rights, to teach ways of creating discursive spaces and building communities based on shared concerns. Teaching such subaltern rhetorical methods also provides instructors a way to avoid reproducing in their classrooms the same clashes among perceptions, identities, and power dynamics that permeate the dominant public. For these reasons, the last decade has seen a surge in subaltern rhetorical studies; however, despite this surge,
there is still little scholarship on how these methods can actually be enacted in the classroom. Frank Farmer begins to create such methods in *After the Public Turn* by studying how subaltern cultural publics use ‘zines and blogs to compose and distribute messages for politically likeminded individuals, creating a common culture among readers. Farmer argues that instructors should run their classrooms as subaltern counterpublics that use discourse to build subversive communities, but this pedagogical work is still in its nascent stages. Nonetheless, Welch and Farmer both successfully demonstrate the need for public writers to create discursive spaces—a position that is mired in risk.

Nathan Crick argues that the spaces created by marginalized publics can also pose risks not only for the dominant public but also for other marginalized groups. Crick reminds readers that subaltern publics are not all agents of positive change: some are neo-Nazis, Holocaust deniers, anti-vaccine activists, etc. Marginalized publics, and their discursive practices, are as diverse and risky as the dominant publics they are attempting to usurp because they also contain a variety of perceptions, identities, and power dynamics. In short, there is no public devoid of risk and there is no mode of participation that guarantees safety. Writing instructors should stop searching for such idealized spaces and tactics and instead focus on attuning students to better conceptualize and perceive risk so that they can better plan their rhetorical activities for their given contexts. Since instructors cannot be certain what kinds of publics and risks students will encounter, they should focus not on the risks associated with specific publics but rather on teaching students to understand the fundamental risk that influences all public rhetoric: its capacity to transform the actors implicated in the rhetorical event.
In this chapter I argue that the risk of rhetoric stems not from public actors themselves but from the transformative characteristic of the rhetorical event: the co-constituted exchange among actors who influence and re-articulate each other. Public writing should not be taught as a space, either found or created, in which differing perceptions, identities, and power relations clash but as intra-active encounters in which actors and publics are collectively changed through their relationships with one another. Rhetoric is an event from which new perceptions, identities, and power dynamics emerge, and I propose that writing be taught using event-based pedagogies centered around communication’s capacity to implicate and rearticulate a variety of actors. To elaborate on this conception of rhetoric, I combine Composition and Rhetoric scholarship with Joe Panzner’s articulation of the event in order to demonstrate how rhetoric does not merely persuade audiences but rather transforms rhetorical actors and their relationships to the world. I argue that rhetoricians can navigate this transformative risk by inviting other actors to participate in the event and by remaining open to the multiple futures it makes possible. To reach this goal, I provide five tenets for creating event-based pedagogies, each designed to help students perceive risk and their relationship to it.

The Rhetorical Event

Rhetoric is better understood as a transformative event than as a persuasive situation. Starting in the twentieth century, scholars building on the Aristotle’s artistic appeals began to understand rhetoric as occurring within a single situation composed of three discreet entities: rhetor, text, and audience. This dominant model was challenged by the idea of the rhetorical event as early as 1989 when Barbara Biesecker published
“Rethinking the Rhetorical Situation from Within the Thematic of Différance.” In this article, Biesecker argues that the rhetorical situation is outmoded because, despite its many articulations, it derogates the power of rhetoric by claiming it is only capable of influencing stable subjects rather than recreating those subjects anew. This diminution of rhetoric is problematic for Biesecker because it forces rhetorical theorists to think beyond rhetoric and understand the subjectivities of individual audience members as being created prior to their engagements with the rhetorical situation. Biesecker argues that to understand rhetoric as an event rather than a situation means to understand rhetoric as the way in which subjectivities are created. The first step to such an understanding is to challenge the assumption that individual audience members are essential subjects. Using Derrida’s conception of différance as articulated in Glas, Biesecker argues that audience members are not essential and stable subjects; rather, their subjectivities are created through their relations with others. As such, subjects are constantly being formed and reformed as they encounter new people, objects, and experiences. Biesecker argues, “If the subject is shifting and unstable (constituted in and by the play of différance), then the rhetorical event may be seen as an incident that produces and reproduces the identities of subjects while constructing and reconstructing the linkages between them” (126). Since subjects are always being reconstituted through the differences and similarities between themselves and others, the rhetorical event transforms individual audience members from one type of subject to another through the play of differences between them, the speaker, the text, and the rest of the audience.

Biesecker’s model of the rhetorical event was radical for its time because it depicts rhetoric as possessing a transformative power, not merely an influential one.
Whereas previous scholars had gone so far as to argue that rhetoric could influence audience members to understand their subjectivities differently, Biesecker pushes beyond this by arguing that rhetoric rearticulates an audience member’s actual subjectivity through the play of différance. Still, this model is limited in two ways: 1) it focuses on how the rhetor transforms the subjectivities of individual audience members, ignoring how other human and nonhuman actors within the rhetorical situation transform and are transformed by each other, and 2) it isolates the rhetorical situation, ignoring the ways in which rhetorical events transcend specific instantiations of speaker, audience, and text to influence larger social processes. In order to push past the first limitation, I utilize the scholarship of Laurie Gries to argue that rhetorical events are complex situations in which human and nonhuman actors transform each other. To push past the second limitation, I utilize the scholarship of Jenny Rice to argue that rhetorical events are not limited to discreet situations but rather spread throughout larger social processes. When combined, these two new materialist arguments demonstrate how rhetorical events rearticulate all the actors involved in a discourse before entering into other discourses and transforming them as well.

In her book Still Life with Rhetoric, Laurie Gries studies how the Obama Hope icon has contributed to collective life around the globe through its interactions with human and nonhuman actors. Through her four specific histories of the icon—its use in the 2008 United States presidential election, its famous influence on United States copyright law, its contribution to popular culture, and its continued use in social activism—Gries demonstrates that the icon is a rhetorical actor that influences rhetorical transformations in ways that transcend the intentions of its creators. Since the image
transcends the purposes for which it was created, it is not merely a tool but rather an actor that co-creates the rhetorical situations of which it is a part. Gries argues that the icon is not only transformed by humans but also transforms humans. She demonstrates that when the icon reached politically motivated art communities in 2008, it transformed the art they were making by providing them a common icon to rally behind; in turn, these communities transformed the image by placing it into new forms, media, and styles.

What these groups co-created with the icon was a phenomenon larger than Shepard Fairey expected when he created his original image and much larger than Mannie Garcia expected when he took the photo on which Fairey’s image was based. Communities remixed and changed the icon, while the icon simultaneously rearticulated and changed the communities. Gries goes on to argue that this case study demonstrates how all actors—regardless of whether or not they are the traditional subjects Biesecker discussed in 1989—reproduce and recreate one another. In this way, Gries is similar to Biesecker in that she argues that rhetoric is an event, but unlike Biesecker, Gries sees rhetoric as “an unfolding event—a distributed, material process of becomings in which divergent consequences are actualized with[in] time and space” (7). Gries understands the rhetorical event as a moment in which agency is distributed among an enmeshed group of multiple human and nonhuman actors who co-produce each other, influencing how they each interact with the world in tangible material ways. What is produced in the event is not predetermined by one actor but rather emerges from the interactions of multiple actors. In this way, Gries provides a way of seeing past the first limit of Biesecker’s argument by demonstrating how all actors within a rhetorical event influence and transform each other.
To argue against Biesecker’s second limitation, I invoke the work of Jenny Rice. In “Unframing Models of Public Distribution” Rice argues that the rhetorical situation should not be understood as a conglomeration of stagnant elements but rather as an event occurring within a broader network of rhetorical ecologies. Rhetoric is not limited to specific situations that respond to specific exigencies; instead, rhetoric occurs within “events that are shifting and moving, grafted onto and connected with other events” (10). Actors transform each other within their rhetorical events and then move on to influence other actors: “Situation bleeds into the concatenation of public interaction. Public interactions bleed into wider social processes. *The elements of rhetorical situation simply bleed*” (9). She argues that rhetoric is powerful not because it is transformative within singular events but because transformed actors leave their rhetorical events and influence other actors in different events in response to different exigencies. The transformative power of rhetoric transcends any single event. Rice provides an example of this phenomenon in her study of the “Keep Austin Weird” slogan, which was originally developed to promote local businesses in the Texas capital but grew to be the city’s unofficial slogan and is currently used to promote everything from municipal services to nationwide cellphone plans. In this example, the slogan bled among events, and in each event in which it participated, it both rearticulated the other actors and was rearticulated by them. As with Gries’s study of *Obama Hope*, in Rice’s “Keep Austin Weird” example there was no determinate force within these events; instead, perceptions, identities, and power dynamics emerged from the engagements among different actors whose influence spread beyond their immediate rhetorical situations. Taken together, Gries and Rice demonstrate how rhetorical events function as material and temporal spaces in which
human and nonhuman actors transform each other until they transcend their events, influencing the transformations of even more actors.

Gries and Rice articulate the rhetorical event as complex and dynamic, which opens up a host of questions about how to conceptualize events, transformations, risks, and personal comportments to change. While both authors suggest answers to these questions, both are rhetoricians focused on methods. Gries focuses on a method of tracking icons’ rhetorical influences on the world and Rice focuses on a method of teaching embodied knowledge creation. As such, to provide a model of the event and its relationship to risk, I am going to step outside of methodological concerns and outside the field of rhetoric entirely. In *The Process that is the World* the musicologist Joe Panzner elucidates a model of the event by putting the musical compositions of John Cage in conversation with the philosophical writings of Gilles Deleuze. In discussing the overlap between the two thinkers, Panzner provides a unique interpretation of the event, which he describes as an occurrence that “gathers together the potentials inherent in a specific material situation, implicates and complicates them in one another, and individuates subjects and objects through its unfolding” (13). Panzner’s event is not itself a holistic entity but rather a multiplicity defined by the interactions of the elements—material, conceptual, human, non-human, etc.—that compose it. As with Gries and Rice, the event is less of a noun and more of a verb. Panzner’s event is not focused on the given assemblage of elements but on the ways in which the assemblage acts on and reassembles itself. Within this interplay of forces exists the intentional actions of various humans, but human forces are only one type among many. As such, the event implicates, complicates,
and individuates humans as much as any of the other actors that participate within it. All actors within the event are transformed through participation, including humans.

And while events are always transformative, they are not always exciting. Often events are mundane. Objects generally interact in consistent and predictable ways, which means they are implicated, complicated, and individuated with consistent results. For example, the event of me biking to work is routine, and it usually results in me arriving to my office a bit sweaty but ready for my day. Still, some events are extraordinary because the interactions among objects subvert expectations and create unexpected futures. On my commute I could get hit by a car, my front tire could be punctured, or the bridge I cross could collapse. In any of these situations, my expectations would be subverted by other actors within the event, and I would emerge different than I had anticipated. A more nuanced example is the one Panzner shares about John Cage entering Harvard’s anechoic chamber in 1952. When entering the chamber in which sound could not resonate, Cage expected to hear complete silence, but instead he heard the high frequency sound of his own nervous system and the low frequency sound of his own circulatory system. This event subverted Cage’s expectations, helped him to rethink the relationship between sound and silence, and influenced him to compose his famous silent piece “4′33″.” The events of the anechoic chamber could not have happened to just anyone at any time; Cage’s previous work with silence, the methodical way he approached the anechoic chamber, and his career as a composer—in short his past, present, and future—all acted within the event to co-create it. Still, Cage was not the only actor within the event. The chamber, the atmosphere, and Cage’s physiology are just three of the actors that helped to co-create the event in which Cage’s expectations were subverted in a way that influenced
his art. In this way, these actors collaborated with Cage to compose “4′33″,” meaning that he did not independently compose the piece as an autonomous subject. The co-constitutive nature of the event does not mean that Cage did not compose the piece because the concept of the event does not replace human agency with material determinism; instead, the event acknowledges human agency as one force within a confluence of actors that Panzer refers to as “Life as such.”

Panzner’s event is a coming together of discreet objects that share in the grand force of impersonal Life as such and in so doing transform each other. Panzner argues that neither Cage nor Deleuze thought of life as being held captive in the bodies of organisms; rather, both thinkers argued that “Life is an impersonal and an organic power exceeding any capacity for lived experience or any logical restrictions placed upon it” (11). Life is not something organisms have but something in which organisms participate. Through existence with other seemingly distinct entities, individuals participate in Life, and by acknowledging its externality, people can become more open to growth, variation, transformation, and composition. Panzner argues that both Deleuze and Cage saw creativity and novelty as stemming from this external and impersonal Life rather than from within individual autonomous human genius. For these thinkers, creativity is an aspect of Life, and because Life transcends the subject, then creativity does as well. For this reason, creation—whether it be Cage’s music, Deleuze’s philosophy, or Biesecker’s scholarship—depends upon thinking outside of the self and acknowledging “the greater, impersonal, and abstract Life that is the world” (13). Creating anything—texts, art, subjectivities, etc.—is contingent upon interacting with other human and nonhuman actors within the event. Being open to such collaboration enables an actor to work with
uncertainty rather than against it. By acknowledging their own lack of
determinacy, individuals can consider how they will interact with and be open to the
forces that co-create their existences and their worlds. This comportment enables both
growth and creation.

Growth and creation emerge from events in which humans participate but do not control. In such a paradigm, the role of composers—be they musicians, philosophers, rhetors, etc.—is threefold: 1) to be open to the events of the world that recreate them, 2) to assemble material objects so that others can participate in events, and 3) to experiment with form until their creations “render palpable the potentials in sensation” (Panzner 15).

Composers act as conduits between Life as such and the audience. Acting as such a conduit does not necessarily mean that composers have any more access to Life than anyone else; rather, the defining characteristic of conduits is their open comportment to the dynamic multiplicities, potentialities, and forces that make-up Life as such.

Composers use their specific media to draw attention to the various forces and possibilities the world presents, which are beyond the mundane and commonplace. Then, composers ask their audiences not to acknowledge the universal truth they are articulating, as would composers operating within the paradigm of the autonomous human subject; instead, composers of events ask their audiences to use their own agencies to think, create, compose, and perform within the works they have made.

Composers invite their audiences to use their work to articulate their own expressions of truth. Composers do not control the events of their work; instead, they create the conditions in which audiences can exercise agency in order to build their own creations and interpretations within the boundaries created by the composer. Audiences and
composers work together to create. Likewise, composers, audiences, works, and worlds
are all co-created in the transformational events of performance, meaning that composers’
concepts, ideas, and intentions face the possibility of being enacted, interpreted, and
perhaps subverted through performance. These attributes of the event enable it to
transform others and to be improved by them. It is this unpredictability that makes
compositions worth creating, performing, and otherwise engaging.

Rhetoric occurs in exactly these types of events. Rhetors move among actors,
developing intentions and expectations. They prepare their messages as best they can
through research, practice, editing, and attention to rhetorical elements. Because of this
preparation, rhetors are often able to take account of enough variables so that they can
succeed in reaching their rhetorical goals, but sometimes their expectations are subverted.
Their texts may be misunderstood and misused, their seemingly innocuous audiences
may harass them, or the rhetors themselves may become demagogic. All of these
outcomes are possible because rhetors are not the only actors creating the outcomes of
their rhetorical events. There are other actors who co-create the rhetorical event along
with rhetors, making the outcome uncertain. This uncertainty is the source of risk, and in
response to this risk, rhetors have three options. They can: 1) refuse to create, 2) attempt
to shut-out the other actors within the situation, or 3) accept that they are functions of
emergence and open themselves to the co-participation of multiple futures. For Panzner,
this last option is the one that enables composition by opening up rhetors to the
productive qualities of others, the creativity of the world, and Life as such. By being open
to the perceptions, identities, and power dynamics of others, rhetors are able to participate
in the world rather than trying to force the world to fit into their ideas of what it should
be. This does not mean that rhetors should completely cede their agential capacity; it means they should be aware of how their texts, identities, and bodies both co-produce and are co-produced by others. Rhetors should see themselves as involved in intra-action: responsible, but not solely responsible, for the world. Such a comportment is the acknowledgement of risk—the risk of the rhetorical event’s unanticipatable transformative capacity to make unanticipated futures. This is the risk of not being a completely autonomous and stable subject. This is the risk of Life as such.

**Agential Co-Production and Possible Futures**

Seeing the rhetorical situation as an event that engages the creative force of Life as such and rearticulates the subjectivities of actors can easily be seen as a rejection of individual agency; however, the event does not deny agency outright but rather argues for a co-creative agency that stresses a collaborative comportment on the part of the rhetor. Such a model stresses a collaborative openness to the world, which is an inherently risky position because it invites the world to co-create the individual as the individual simultaneously co-creates the world. Marilyn Cooper’s 2011 article “Agency as Emergent and Enacted” argues that many postmodern critiques of the autonomous human subject, such as Biesecker’s, have served to shift models of the subject from a completely self-determining actor to a figure so fragmented as to be “incapable of coherent intentions or actions” (423). Cooper argues that this overcorrection fails to understand how actors operate in the world, and in response, she articulates a model of agential actors who are “unique, embodied, and autonomous individuals in that they are self-organizing, but by virtue of that fact, they, as well as the surround with which interact, are always changing”
These actors interact with their worlds and through these experiences adapt to fit into and understand them, while simultaneously adapting their worlds to their ways of being; in this way, actors and their worlds co-create each other through their interactions: “mutual adaptation . . . occurs when organisms or systems perturb one another in a prolonged interaction, gradually becoming more attuned to one another” (437). This understanding of an agential actor emphasizes the importance of temporality in constructing identity. All actors are created through experiences from the past, make agential decisions in the present, and will affect the world through their decisions in the future. As time progresses, these agential actors are co-created by their interactions with the others within the world, as those interaction simultaneously co-create the world.

Cooper’s adaptive understanding of agency asks actors to be responsible for their own actions while also considering the rights of others to act in the world. Cooper argues, “Responsible agency . . . requires one to be aware that everyone acts out of their own space of meaning and that to affirm one’s own meaning as absolute truth is to negate the other person” (442). For Cooper, the role of rhetors is to respect, rather than negate, the experiences, identities, and perspectives of other actors as they assert their arguments. This requires rhetors to listen to others and open themselves up to their understandings of the world so that they can co-create with each other if possible. Such openness does not mean that rhetors should refrain from disagreement and argument—openness is not necessarily harmonious—but it does mean that rhetors should not simply dismiss those with whom they disagree. Rhetors are encouraged to acknowledge that they co-produce the world with others, not despite of them, and rhetors should be open to alternative ways of knowing and being—respectful, but not necessarily benevolent. The subtle
transformations that emerge from such acknowledgement and co-production are not often perceived as risky because they occur gradually and imperceptibly, but they are risks because they influence actors and their engagements with the world in ways that are potentially hazardous. Nonetheless, Cooper’s emphasis on openness, temporality, and ethics sets the conditions for thinking about more emergent types of agency.

Michelle Ballif provides an even more radical understanding of rhetorical agency than Cooper’s, one that is focused on being open to the possibilities of the event. In her article “Writing the Event: The Impossible Possibility for Historiography,” Ballif is concerned with how historiographers can “write the event”—how they can create histories that demonstrate the possibilities and uncertain futurities that events make possible rather than merely categorizing events and placing them into grand historical narratives. For Ballif, writing the event is fundamentally an ethical question because the relationship between actors and the event is the relationship between the world and the future. Utilizing Derridean philosophy, Ballif argues that the event is an occurrence that is both constant and exceptional: both commonplace and impossible (247). What allows for this duality is that actors co-producing relatively minor events bring about uncertain, and even impossible, futures. Though some actors have specific goals, they cannot know for certain what their actions will co-produce with others. Nonetheless, through this confluence of actions, futures that were once impossible come to be enacted. Because every action invites such an uncertain multiplicity of responses, every event poses a dilemma because actors will make decisions without being able to know with certainty what futures they are co-creating. In other words, actors are unable to completely perceive the risks involved in an event and cannot know what futures will emerge from it.
because the event has its own agency that is co-enacted by actors participating in it. In such a situation, Ballif argues that if historiographers remain open to impossible futures and realizations that are beyond their “current capacity to receive,” then they may be able to start engaging the full potential of events (254). If historiographers remain open to the transformative power of the event, then they may be able to tap into its agential capacity and create possibilities rather than limit them. This advice also applies to rhetors engaged in public writing. If rhetors remain open, attentive, and adaptive to the events in which they are engaged, then they encourage more actors to participate in the transformations of the world and to co-produce new possibilities. Rhetors’ openness to co-participation enables change. Despite being unable to fully predict the consequences of their actions within agential events, rhetors can help to build positive outcomes through participation that acknowledges the multiple potential futures the event invites.

Operating in such uncertain and co-productive spaces is challenging, but Joe Panzner’s reading of Cage and Deleuze offers some examples of how rhetors can remain open to multiple futures by inviting audiences to co-create compositions. Panzner demonstrates how both the music of Cage and the philosophies of Deleuze invite other actors to help co-create new and unexpected pieces and in so doing bring about unexpected futures. Panzner begins his discussion with Cage, who wrote his indeterminate works in an attempt to move away from the fealty demanded by traditional Western classical music. Western classical music is paradoxical because the notational style demands performers be faithful to the composer’s vision, but such fidelity is impossible due to the agency of the event. An excellent example of this phenomenon is a chronological survey of various symphonies playing the opening chords to
Beethoven’s *Eroica Symphony*. Though all the well-trained and practiced performers are attempting to be faithful to Beethoven’s work, each performance sounds slightly different in timber, pitch, timing, attack, etc. because of the conductors’ interpretations, the performers, the instruments, the spaces, and the recording equipment (“Beethoven”). Listening to this brief survey demonstrates the ways in which complete fidelity to one understanding of a work is impossible. Cage embraced the impossibility of fidelity when he wrote his indeterminate works, which are defined by their ambiguous instructions that encourage idiosyncratic performances. Musicians do not merely recite a Cage piece; instead, through their performances, musicians co-construct it. Panzner argues that this indeterminacy can also be seen in the abstract writing style of Deleuze, whose philosophies are written so as to invite interpretation—unlike his treatments of other philosophers, which are written quite didactically. The style of Deleuze’s philosophy invites audiences to interpret, think, and invent meaning within the borders he has drawn—to be co-creators of philosophy. In this way, both the artist and philosopher are enacting dispositions toward their works that create the conditions for a multiplicity of seemingly impossible future performances to be enacted.

The indeterminate works of both Cage and Deleuze represent comportments toward composition that are open to multiple futures because they are not encumbered by strict fidelity to a single understanding of a given composition. The question is what a performance or interpretation *does* not necessarily what it *is*. For these thinkers, such an understanding of composition is a disavowal of the limiting structures they believe to represent morals and an embrace of the potentiality that they consider ethics. Panzner notes that in various published interviews Cage articulates a distinction between ethics
and morals that echoes those Deleuze explicitly states in his writings. Both composers understand morality as the rigid sorting of actions into absolute categories of *good or bad* used to pass praise or blame on individual actors. Conversely, ethics are fluid systems that take seriously the specificity of a situation in order to understand how actions enable or disable certain possibilities in ways that are comparatively “better or worse” for a variety of actors. It makes no sense to judge Cage’s works morally, as either good or bad, but it makes complete sense to judge individual performances ethically, as better or worse. The judgment of these performances, and any action for that matter, hinges on whether they enable participation, and open themselves up to multiple futures, or disable participation, and shut down a multiplicity of futures. Performers should ask: “does my performance enable more creation and thought or does it limit the capacities of others?”

In this paradigm, most all actions will open up some futures and negate others, which is why rhetorical judgments need to pay close attention to the specific effects an action is likely to have on other actors implicated within the event. Despite best intentions, however, there will always be risks, and there is always the possibility of harm.

Creating compositions that invite other actors to participate in the creation of new futures does not necessarily create results that affirm the life of rhetors or the worlds they inhabit; instead, allowing other actors to participate is risky because it demands rhetors be open to different perceptions, identities, and power dynamics, which will change, even if imperceptibly, the rhetors and their relationships to the world. This openness leaves rhetors vulnerable to harm, but it is also how they come to understand themselves as actors participating in Life as such. In *Inessential Solidarity* Diane Davis utilizes Levinasian ethics to argue that rhetoric is first philosophy because the obligation to
respond to the Other is the precondition for individual humans to understand themselves as having the capacity to act in the world. When people see the face of others, those faces demand responses, and through those demands, the seers come to understand their identities as actors in the world (106). Davis asserts that if the situation were only ever comprised of two people, then there would be few problems because these people would continually meet their obligations to one another, and by doing so, they would completely know themselves; however, because the world is co-created by many people, a tension arises between the infinite obligation to every person and the impossibility of meeting those obligations.

Despite every individual’s inability to meet their obligations to every other individual, they will inevitably respond to everyone because choosing not to respond is still a response. For this reason, the question shifts from if the individual will respond to other people to how the individual will choose to respond differently to different people. Utilizing Derridean philosophy, Davis argues that this contention between infinite obligations, finite resources, and competing desires is the contention between justice—an ethical comportment that demands everyone’s needs be met—and law—a moral comportment that selects whose needs will be met and how (122). Justice, for Davis, can only be manifested in the contention between the impractical idealized realm of ethics that allows for the possibility of multiple futures and the strictly ordered realm of morality that focuses on the needs of the present. This contention is why people need public spheres that serve as spaces in which they can make prudent judgments between the impossibility of ethics and the stricture of law; the public sphere is a place where rhetors can negotiate between the world as it is and the world as they believe it ought to
be. In engaging in such discussions, rhetors open themselves up to different negotiations between morality and ethics, the creation of new laws, and new concepts of justice.

As they are subjected to such new ideas, rhetors are also subjecting other actors to their negotiations and inviting them to adapt to the worlds they are creating. Rhetors who understand themselves to be obligated not only to humans but also to nonhumans invite many more actors to co-create the world with them, and some rhetors extend this invitation to animals, plants, the environment, institutions, or gods. Regardless of whether or not rhetors extend the invitation, all negotiations in the public sphere will affect a variety of implicated nonhuman actors as well as human ones. These broad ramifications are what give public writing its importance but they are also what make it risky.

Public writing is a risk-laden event because it provides a rearticulation of the world that has indeterminate effects for the human and nonhuman actors that are both directly and indirectly involved. Responsible rhetors will consider as best they can how their compositions will enable and disable actors’ abilities to participate within the event and what futures they are making possible through their rhetorical actions. All the while, such knowledgeable rhetors are aware of the potential risks associated with transformation and they acknowledge that they cannot completely foresee the outcomes of their actions or meet their obligations to every actor. While it is every rhetor’s responsibility to create compositions that increase the ability for others to act in the world, they will always fail because every argument will both increase and decrease this ability in different actors. This is the risk of uncertain and co-created futures. A Ballif argues, uncertainty is the dilemma of the event, and as Davis argues, there is no way out of this dilemma because it is a pre-condition for being-in-the-world. If compositionists
wish to teach their students how to engage in public writing, they should teach their students to attend to risk, which means asking these three questions: 1) What multiplicity of futures will be made possible by the rhetorical events being created? 2) What effects will these futures have on all of the implicated actors? 3) What kinds of responses does the event invite? Prior to creating spaces of discourse, learning tactics of communication, or building community partnerships, students should be considering the ramifications of their actions. Though they won’t be able to perceive all of the risks involved, students should attempt to consider how their actions will co-create others and how those others may respond to them. Event-based pedagogies respond to this educational need by teaching students to consider the possibility of risk as they act within complex, risk-laden worlds rife with indeterminate futures.

**Event-Based Pedagogies**

Acknowledging that the fundamental risk of rhetoric is its inherent capacity to transform the actors it implicates through co-production—making it impossible to completely predict all of the potential consequences a composition could have—I propose that public writing instructors adopt event-based pedagogies that invite students to consider rhetoric as an event in which actors rearticulate perceptions, identities, and power dynamics through their intra-actions. Event-based pedagogies ask instructors to teach public writing neither as a product to be assessed nor as a process to be followed but rather as an event to be experienced. Students should be encouraged to create compositions designed to have actual impacts on actual audiences. These texts will likely go beyond not only the traditional essay but also the bounds of traditional argumentation.
Students should be encouraged to create demonstrations, games, happenings, message boards, performances podcasts, puzzles, songs, walkouts and other texts that actively ask audiences to participate in the meaning making process and in so doing ask them to help create new and unexpected futures. Just as the scores of John Cage and the philosophies of Gilles Deleuze invite audience participation and performance so too should the work of students invite reaction and co-creation.

This is a risky approach to writing instruction not only because students could potentially create offensive or merely ineffectual texts, as they may in a traditional composition class, but also because students engaging with each other’s open-ended texts may respond negatively. However, event-based instructors are prepared to discuss the kinds of problems that could potentially arise because such responses are demonstrative of the co-production that defines the rhetorical event. Event-based instructors welcome discussion about the responses texts have garnered because they provide opportunities for students to reexamine their texts and consider why such responses occurred and what students could have done differently, if anything, to get different results. Despite their unpleasantness, ineffectual, negative, or offensive responses provide a concrete impetus for rhetorical analysis not only regarding why the response occurred but also exploring why the response is problematic. These problems—and they are problems—present opportunities for engaging, researching, empathizing, adapting, and re-building not only for the student who created the text but also for the students who reacted poorly.

Not every response to student writing will be a teaching moment because the unanticipated nature of the event means that some responses could be so problematic as to require instructors to shut-down discussion or take disciplinary action; however, this
possibility is also a risk of traditional pedagogies—a risk that is largely ignored. The difference between this risk for traditional pedagogies and event-based pedagogies is that neither event-based instructors nor their students will be blindsided by the antagonistic, offensive, or violent responses. Since event-based pedagogies ask students to consider their texts as objects that invite a variety of responses from different audiences, students will prepared for the possibility of hateful and vitriolic audiences. To this end, it would behoove event-based instructors to explicitly teach their students about the risks of public writing by analyzing case studies of extraordinarily harmful responses to public writing, such as the primary case-studies. Such analysis will help students to perceive risk as they craft their compositions, though it will not necessarily enable them to mitigate such risks, which are an inherent aspect of the rhetorical situation.

Since instructors will never be able to completely mitigate risk, they should instead focus their energy on creating parameters in which students can participate in the co-productive events of composition, trusting that both they and their students will be able to use rhetorical tools to confront and adapt to risks as they arise. Instructors should not become so concerned with risk that they forget that the transformative aspect of rhetoric from which risk stems also enables positive change. By focusing on the positive futures being enabled through event-based pedagogies, instructors can encourage their students to engage in transformative rhetorics on topics for which they are willing to incur risk. This is not to say that instructors should altogether abandon risk assessment when planning their classes; rather, it is to say that they should not let the perception of risk overly determine course design, especially since humans are not particularly good at accurately gauging risk. Instead, instructors should be focused on creating courses in
which students can co-participate in the event of writing in ways that align with the other
goals of individual students, the class, the program, the department, the institution, and
society. For this reason, every course should be designed idiosyncratically, which is why
this method of instruction is referred to as event-based pedagogies rather than event-
based pedagogy.

Adhering to the indeterminate composing practices of John Cage and Gilles
Deleuze, event-based pedagogies do not provide a stable set of practices for teaching
public writing but rather create parameters within which instructors can create their own
methods and practices. Similarly, instructors should not approach their courses as sets of
instructions that students must faithfully follow in order to be successful but should
instead approach them as parameters along which students can exercise their capacities
for composition by tapping into the creative potential beyond themselves and
participating in Life as such. Likewise, students should be encouraged to compose works
that do not demand understanding and fealty from their audiences but rather invite
participation and response in ways that invite their audience to co-produce seemingly
impossible futures.

Event-based pedagogies are not a strict methods for teaching but rather a
collection of considerations for designing courses in which students are encouraged to
participate in transformational rhetorical activities. This collection of considerations can
be summed up in five basic tenets aimed both toward instructors and students: 1) enable
other actors to participate in Life as such, 2) conduct nuanced research that illuminates
the complexity of public discourse, 3) be open to the diverse array of opinions and
perspectives expressed within and among various publics, 4) adapt positions and
arguments in response to new information, and 5) attend to the ways in which new arguments are constructed from elements of prior arguments. Taken together, these tenents help to create classrooms where students and instructors open themselves up to change and engage in creating rhetorical events. These pedagogies are risky, but they have the potential to transform students into actors capable of engaging unpredictable events. Each tenet invites instructors to develop classroom practices that aid students in understanding the dynamic quality of publicness by embracing the uncertainty of the event and considering the rhetor’s relationship with and obligation to the other actors within it. Many of these practices will probably look familiar to contemporary composition instructors because event-based pedagogies stress the rhetorical skills and practices that are most preparing out students for eventful writing and asking instructors and students to keep these in the forefront of their minds as they engage in the event of rhetoric.

The following definitions of the five tenents are not meant to be exhaustive; rather, they are written as provocations for thought—invitations for other instructors to co-create not only the meaning of each tenet but also how they will be enacted.

Enable Other Actors to Participate in Life as Such

Instructors should encourage students to create texts that invite readers to participate in Life as such through engagement with their texts rather than creating texts that simply ask readers to acknowledge the creativity or conviction of the rhetor. Such a mode of composition anticipates the kinds of engagements that individual audience members will have with the text regardless of authorial intention. As Jacques Rancière explains in *The Emancipated Spectator*: “The spectator also acts . . . She observes,
selects, compares, interprets” (13). Even when rhetors desire to simply transmit their worldviews to their readers, those readers will act agentially, derive their own understandings of the text, and act to transform their worlds accordingly. Student rhetors can either choose to lean into the co-productive nature of the rhetorical event and invite new interpretations and iterations of their work, like John Cage, or resist the agency of the audience and demand an unflinching fidelity of interpretation and response that will be impossible to accomplish.

Scholars such as Jody Shipka are already encouraging students to create such co-determinative work by modelling the behavior for them. In her article “This was (NOT!!) an Easy Assignment” Shipka explains the types of tasks she assigns her students:

I provide students with open-ended, inquiry based tasks that ask them to consider how even seemingly simple, straightforward, and relatively familiar communicative objectives (i.e., creating a text based on outside readings/research, summarizing and analyzing a text) might be accomplished in any number of ways, and with any number of semiotic resources, depending on how they choose to contextualize, frame or coordinate their responses to the tasks. Shipka does not demand that her students faithfully reconstruct correct writing formulas; instead, she invites them to respond to rhetorical situations by considering all the means of persuasion available to them. Notably, Shipka’s students often respond to her provocations by creating texts that also invite audience engagement. Most notably in this article, the student Amanda created an interactive definition of the word *representation* that included three hands-on activities, including a puzzle. Building on Shipka’s work, Jim Brown Jr. and Nathaniel Rivers imagine composition classrooms in which students
specifically focus on creating objects that enable their audiences to rethink a particular issue. The authors provide the specific example of students creating a blue sphere with different chambers into which audience members have to equally distribute water; this interaction between the audience and the object is supposed to help participants rethink how fresh water is distributed throughout the earth. The sphere is an example of how students can invite audience members to co-create meaning because, though the topic is predetermined by the rhetors and the object, the understanding that emerges is co-produced.

Another important aspect of co-productive agency that instructors should be modelling for their students is that it is not actors should not be coerce into participating within the public sphere. Specifically, this relates to the ways in which some public writing instructors assign their students to engage in the public sphere in very structured ways. As Hannah Arendt argues in “The Crisis of Education” this practice violates the social border between the classroom and the public. Arendt argues that the classroom is a place where students are compelled to complete certain tasks, whereas the public sphere is a discursive space into which people freely enter. To coerce public engagement through grading is not only to expose students to risks for which they might not be prepared but also to ignore the social convention that everyone participating in the public is acting out of their own volition. If students are going to enter a space as risky as the public, then it should be because they, for whatever reasons, have chosen both how and why they are doing so—not because they were compelled to by instructors. The risks of publicness are too severe for anyone to be forced into participation, though this does not mean that instructors cannot invite or encourage such engagements. If instructors want
students to have practice with public writing, then they should model their classrooms as publics where students are encouraged to argue about common topics and interact with each other as equals without the same severity of risk. Instructors should not coerce students to incur the risks of the public sphere, and this is important because in showing this restraint instructors are teaching students that it is up to them to choose when, why, and how they enter into public discourse. Perhaps it will even help students to consider the ways in which they are already public actors.

Conduct Nuanced Research that Illuminates the Complexity of Public Discourse

Though the co-productive nature of the rhetorical event means that rhetors cannot know for certain how other actors will engage with their texts and what futures will be made possible through those engagements, thorough research can increase the likelihood of positive results by providing them with more information about their arguments, their semiotic resources, and their audiences. Arguing that students should learn how to research topics is in no way radical. It is merely a reflection on the important day-to-day work that is occurring in Composition and Rhetoric courses throughout the country; however, arguing that students should also be spending time researching the genres, media, and modes in which they will be writing, as well as the audiences to whom they will be writing, is surprisingly less common.

For the last twenty years, a contingent of Composition and Rhetoric scholars has been arguing that there should be more focus on the semiotic tools students use to create arguments; however, the question of how best to do this has been divided between two
poles: breadth and depth. Cynthia Selfe clearly argues for breadth in her article “The Movement of Air, the Breath of Meaning” when she argues:

Young people need to know that their role as rhetorical agents is open, not artificially foreclosed by the limits of their teachers’ imaginations. They need a full quiver of semiotic modes from which to select, role models who can teach them to think critically about a range of communication tools, and multiple ways of reaching their audiences. (645)

Conversely, Katherine Ahern argues for depth in her article “Tuning the Sonic Playing Field” when she argues that the breadth position fails to provide students with enough experience in any genre, medium, or mode to imagine with any complexity the kinds of texts any one of these things makes possible (77). Ahern argues that students need extensive practice with individual semiotic tools to understand how they can make something meaningful with them. And though each event-based pedagogy will navigate its own path between these two poles, I argue that instructors should tend toward depth because focus on a few particular genres, media, and modalities allows students to understand those semiotic resources as agential actors who make different realities possible, not as simple tools to be wielded by rhetors toward their own ends.

Along with researching content and semiotic tools, event-based pedagogies also argue that students should research their audiences in order to tailor their invitations to co-create the world. Audience research largely went out of favor in Composition and Rhetoric in the late 1980s when scholars such as Laurie Anderson, Barry Kroll, and Russell Long argued that the practice positioned the audience as enemies, did not reflect the practices of professional writers, encouraged stereotyping, and failed to consider how
texts would be read outside of their immediate situations. Event-based pedagogies are concerned with all these critiques, but I assert that nuanced research and engagement does not necessarily position the audience as antagonistic, result in stereotyping, or ignore future audiences. This last point is particularly important in composing for the event, and I assert that creating a text with a specific audience in mind does not negate its appeal for future audiences. As Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford argue in “Audience Addressed/Audience Invoked,” it is impossible to predict every future audience for a work, but that uncertainty is no reason for the rhetor not to consider the actual external actors who will engage with it. Though uncertainty may be the unavoidable risk of rhetoric, researching the topic, genre, media, mode, and potential audiences of a text can help rhetors not only to mitigate their initial risks but also to better invite their interlocutors to co-create the world with them.

**Be Open to the Diverse Array of Opinions and Perspectives Expressed Within and Among Various Publics**

Event-based pedagogies ask rhetors to remain open to persuasion as they research their topics, genres, media, modes, and audiences. If rhetors are dismissive of ideas, identities, perspectives, and power dynamics beyond the ones with which they are familiar, then they are not enabling themselves to experience the world beyond their current understandings—they are limiting their own participation in Life as such. Surely rhetors do not need to be changed by every text they read, but they should attempt to remain open to the possibility of persuasion whenever it seems reasonably safe to do so because they cannot know what arguments, insights, or realities can be made manifest by
collaborating with unanticipated actors. In this way, being open to others is primarily about listening. In her book *Rhetorical Listening*, Krista Ratcliffe defines the practice as:

[A] trope for interpretive invention, that is, a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to any person, text, or culture; its purpose is to cultivate conscious identifications in ways that promote productive communication, especially but not solely cross-culturally. (25)

Listening is about being open to experiences, opinions, and arguments regardless of the sources from which they come. Ratcliffe argues that listening should promote understanding of the self and others, proceed with a logic of accountability, create identification through both commonalities and differences, and analyze claims as cultural logics. In other words, listening requires close attention to the world as understood through both the experiences of others and the historical/cultural contexts in which those experiences occurred. This comportment is a slow, painful, and not necessarily fruitful way of engaging with other actors, but it is a method that respects their intrinsic, rather than their instrumental, value; as such, listening encourages questions such as “what is being communicated,” “what can I learn,” and “how can I best respond,” as opposed to the usual, “what can I do with this?” In short, listening is a method that sees others as actors to whom the author is obligated in the Levinasian sense rather than as tools that can be used to reach a desired end. This does not mean that all actors will be treated with peace and benevolence; sometimes listening lets the listeners know that the person to whom they are listening needs to be avoided or rebuked.

The openness associated with listening asks the rhetor to be vulnerable, but this request does not negate the importance of prudence and self-care. Event-based
pedagogies acknowledge that rhetoric has material risks, but they do not ask students to simply embrace those risks. Students in event-based classes are being asked to navigate their enmeshed positions and to determine how they relate to the variety of actors with whom they are intra-acting, and sometimes avoiding, ignoring, or standing-up to actors is the best method. Though listening to a variety of actors should be encouraged because it enables unexpected possibilities, making assessments from that listening is equally important. The potential, likelihood, and severity of harm that some actors possess would make it imprudent for the rhetor to engage with them directly, especially if the potential benefits are minimal or unlikely. Certainly, the choice to ignore or confront a certain actor should not be taken lightly—rhetors should consider what they can learn from any give actor, the kinds of threats posed by listening, and the possible futures that could be co-created by engagement before they make a decision—but ultimately the choice of how to act lies with the student rhetors in their specific enmeshed positions. Like all the tenets, listening is a guidepost, not a strict moral law, and how it will be enacted in any given case is contingent upon a host of factors.

Adapt Positions and Arguments in Response to New Information

To be open to the world is to invite change regarding one’s actions, feelings, identities thoughts, and understandings; such openness is frightening because it allows for the possibility that writers may exit rhetorical situations having been changed and understanding their previous selves as deeply flawed. When Krista Ratcliffe discusses this aspect of rhetorical listening, she quotes from the feminist author and poet Adrienne Rich: “Yet we can’t wait for the undamaged to make our connections for us; we can’t
wait to speak until we are perfectly clear and righteous. There is no purity and, in our lifetimes, no end to this process” (123). The *in media res* aspect of rhetoric that Rich is describing is the experience of Life as such; one’s identity is constantly being recreated through events; however, identities are additive and previous ones are never completely erased. These identities, either inherited or created, haunt individuals, influencing how they experience and understand the world. As with terministic screens, there is no outside of identity. Instead, people are thrown into the world with some sense of who they are imposed onto them. These identities build, grow, and mutate, but they do not disappear, and individuals can only ever engage the event from their particular embodied positions, which can make it difficult for them to engage actors with radically different identities.

Stephen Mailloux provides a way to navigate the difficulty of communication among actors whose experiences radically differ from one another in his essay “Making Comparisons.” In this essay, Mailloux focuses on cultural differences as he argues that the culture of individual critics will always influence the ways in which they relate to people from other cultures because their latent hermeneutic and political ethnocentrism—i.e. the terministic screens through which they understand the world—will always compel them to understand the Other from the critics “geographically and historically situated network of beliefs and desires” (267). Unable to genuinely experience the world from the position of the Other, critics find themselves somewhere between the poles of cultural relativism, from where they can acknowledge the futility of understanding the Other, and cultural determinism, from where they can use their cultures as the standard by which to judge all Others. Articulating the unproductive binary, Mailloux provides a third, rhetorical, method for communicating across differences. He argues that communication
across cultures is possible if critics expand theirs terministic screen through patient and imaginative interactions with Others. Through this practice, critics understand the worlds of Others through the critics’ terministic screens until those screens are themselves transformed through exchange. Communication changes how critics understand their world, if they are willing to adapt. Event-based pedagogies respect the cultural, embodied, and experiential identities of actors—especially student actors—while also asking them to be open to the possibility of adapting through the changing situations of the rhetorical event because it is this possibility for unanticipated growth that makes the event potentially significant for all of the human and nonhuman actors involved.

On a more pragmatic level, adaptation also asks students to be open to inventiveness and experimentation. Event-based pedagogies ask students to try different arguments, genres, media, modes, and styles in order to provoke different responses from their audiences. Public communication is difficult, and it is easy for students to become discouraged when their arguments are ignored or refuted. Event-based pedagogies ask students to acknowledge the problems with their arguments, to take honest stock of their rhetorical practices, and then try something else. Students should be encouraged to experiment and rework their arguments in response to other actors, even if this risks failure—if they don’t, they risk stagnation.

*Attend to the Ways in which New Arguments are Constructed from Elements of Prior Arguments*

Event-based pedagogies argue that new identities, possibilities, relationships, texts, understandings, etc. emerge from the intra-actions of actors who rearticulate one
another within rhetorical events, and as such, they understand rhetors as bricoleurs who interact with the materials available to them in order to create new possibilities while those same material actors act upon and rearticulate rhetors. For this reason, students in event-based classrooms should not feel the need to create wholly original arguments but rather to engage and experiment with new combinations of arguments, genres, ideas, media, methods, modes, theories, etc. to see what emerges from those interactions. While having specific goals can be useful, it is also useful to try different methods for attaining them. Event-based pedagogies should be less interested in students creating perfect texts or following specific steps in a process and more interested in them experimenting with the potentialities of languages and the ways in which compositions can be used to engage audiences and participate with the creative and transformative force that is Life as such. Students should be encouraged to deeply, empathetically, and meaningfully interact with other actors in order to co-create transformative events.

Part of teaching students to intra-act with other human and nonhuman actors productively is acknowledging that Composition and Rhetoric courses are themselves rhetorical events that have been co-created by a variety or elements including the mandates of departments, the identities of instructors, the research of compositionists, and the decisions of textbook publishers. In relating to all of these different actors, instructors should see themselves not as autonomous creators but as conduits to Life as such. Among other commitments, this comportment to the course-as-event asks instructors to encourage students to combine different readings in the class with their own experiences, identities, and research to create something new within indeterminant parameters. This indeterminate style does not mean that all student work will be valued
equally—events still allows for judgments of better or worse—but it does mean that instructors should evaluate work by paying attention to the specificity of each student’s composition and its potential outcomes rather than sorting texts into absolute categories based on a few select attributes. In this way, questions of correctness and fidelity should be replaced with questions about the possible futures being invited by student writing.

**Teaching Co-Productive Uncertainty**

In a small midwestern university, students in an introductory composition course are working frantically on their final projects. All semester long they have not only been reading, researching, and writing about the United States’ prison system but also creating arguments about it, considering audiences that need to be made aware of their arguments, and considering the best ways to reach those audiences. Using an online team messaging app, they have shared and critiqued their arguments as well as rough diagrams of different ideas and goals statements for what they are hoping to accomplish. “But really why will they care?” has become a common question as students try to make their work as potentially impactful and honest as possible. On this final work day before their projects are due, students can be seen reworking audio files, filling out zoning permits, and laying out poster designs. After discussing a variety of media and getting hands on practice with a few, students have chosen a variety of ways to present their arguments to various publics including students at the school, the State Board of Regents, and a local philanthropic organization. The team messaging app is projected on the screen in the front of the classroom and last minute questions, comments, and encouragements are regularly being posted. The platform has becomes a kind of cursory public—a place to
test ideas and gauge reactions. For many students, this semester has been frustrating. They were asked to perform readings from prisoners to build empathy, to create article summaries targeted toward different audiences, and to conduct audience analysis to inform how they would create their arguments. However, the final projects look good; though they are not required to, many students are choosing to distribute what they have created once the class is over. They think their texts can actually make a difference, and the impact statements that accompany their projects explain what they think that difference could potentially be.

This hypothetical classroom is the goal of event-based pedagogies. Students have considered how to engage audiences, researched their topics, listened empathetically to Others, adapted to feedback, and created arguments from the tools at their disposal. Moreover, students have interacted with each other in ways that mimic actual publicness. Though they have not entered into the public sphere, they have paid close attention to how it rhetoric functions as a transformative event within it. They have considered the risks of their arguments and are ready to submit projects that they believe could have a positive impact on the world. The example shows how the five tenets that compose event-based pedagogies can help instructors to co-create classes that increase the capacity for students to participate in the rhetorical event, while also asking students to create compositions that enable other actors to participate in Life as such. While the practices may seem mundane, that is largely because humans perceive preparation as less valuable than it actually is.

As the example shows, event-based pedagogies are less interested in the processes of writing and the products of writing and more interested in their effects. Event-based
pedagogies are post-process pedagogies focused on the ways in which research, writing, distribution, and circulation operate within interrelated rhetorical events that impact the human and nonhuman actors who participate within them. Building on the work of philosophers, social theorists, and compositionists, event-based pedagogies stress the importance of engagement, research, empathy, adaptation, and bricolage in creating better compositions and more productive engagements in the public sphere. These tenets of event-based pedagogies are not strict rules but rather guideposts meant to help writers consider both the ways in which they engage in publics and the ways they participate in the rearticulation of perceptions, identities, and power dynamics.

Despite the harmonious goals of this pedagogy, its practitioners should be aware that with co-production comes uncertainty, and with uncertainty comes risk. Though conducting empathetic research and crafting bricolaged compositions meant to invite participation and response can help rhetors mitigate the likelihood of risk and their ability to directly cause harm, these practices cannot eliminate risk altogether because the event is larger than individual intentions and actions. Rhetors cannot simply create good or bad compositions that lead to good or bad results; instead, every composition participates in an indeterminate event and relates to a myriad of implicated actors. Michelle Ballif argues that such events often manifest what was previously impossible, meaning that there is no way for rhetors to fully predict the consequences of their actions; the best they can do is be open to a multiplicity of possible futures. Rhetors can perceive risks in regards to each of these futures, but as Paul Slovic demonstrates, their perceptions will most likely not reflect the actual hazards of the world. The outcome of the event cannot be known beforehand.
Despite its risks, instructors should teach their students to understand rhetoric in all of its transformative uncertainty because this is the place from where rhetoric draws its power: its ability to change audiences, rhetors, texts, and worlds. And though instructors cannot teach students how to mitigate risks in all circumstances, by focusing pedagogy on the ultimate cause of risk, they can provide them with the skills and comportments necessary to enter into such uncertain events. By building students’ capacities to engage audiences, conduct research, empathize with others, adapt to changing situations, and create arguments from all the available means of persuasion, instructors can perhaps teach their students to better perceive the risks of rhetoric and become more effective public rhetors. Of course, the pedagogy risks failure because it is impossible to be certain what will emerge from the events of the classroom, but that uncertainty is the fundamental risk of our field.
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