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BUILDING COMPLEXITY, ONE STABILITY AT A TIME:
RETHINKING STUBBORNNESS IN PUBLIC
RHETORICS AND WRITING STUDIES

Chris Mays

183 Pages

May 2014

In deliberative argument, in political discourse, in teaching, and in casual conversation, as rhetors we often hope that our attempts at interaction will have some effect on the participants in these discursive environments. The phenomena of stubbornness, however, would seem to suggest that, despite our efforts, there are times when rhetoric just doesn't work. This dissertation complicates this premise, and in so doing complicates common understandings of both stubbornness and rhetorical effect. As I argue, rhetorical effects exist within a complex rhetoric *system*, within which they circulate and are interconnected with a diversity of other rhetorical and non-rhetorical elements. Using N. Katherine Hayles's concept of "making the cut," I argue that within such complex systems, stability and change are tangled up in an interdependent relationship; in short, in order for complexity to exist it must be constrained by contingent stabilities. These necessary stabilities mask the way that systems are always moving, and so we often do not see changes in the rhetoric systems we inhabit. In this sense, these changes are *compensatory*, and they work to maintain a stability that can manifest precisely as stubbornness. In delineating what I call a "rhetoric-systems"

approach, this dissertation maps the stabilities and movements of several different rhetoric systems, and provides new insight into the complex and relational movement of rhetorical effect. Our use of this approach asks us to recognize the existence and value of certainty and stability, and *then* to pull back and recognize the existence of complexity and change. The approach integrates insights from systems theory (and so from the sciences) into existing rhetorical theory, and in so doing models an interdisciplinary approach to public rhetorics and writing studies that is firmly grounded in rhetorical theory.

BUILDING COMPLEXITY, ONE STABILITY AT A TIME:
RETHINKING STUBBORNNESS IN PUBLIC
RHETORICS AND WRITING STUDIES

CHRIS MAYS

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of English

ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

2014

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BUILDING COMPLEXITY, ONE STABILITY AT A TIME:
RETHINKING STUBBORNNESS IN PUBLIC
RHETORICS AND WRITING STUDIES

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CHAPTER I

REFRAMING STUBBORNNESS, AND RHETORICAL EFFECT:
INTRODUCING COMPLEX SIMULTANEITY AND
THE RHETORIC-SYSTEMS APPROACH

In the fall of 2008 *New York Times* journalist David Rohde, along with Afghan journalist Tahir Luddin and their driver Asad Mangal, were kidnapped by pro-Taliban forces in Southern Afghanistan. In a harrowing account of his seven-month captivity and subsequent dramatic escape, Rohde describes on several occasions his efforts to bargain with his captors for his and his two fellow captives' release, only to be met with either false promises or outright refusals. One of the striking things about the whole situation—and there are many memorable aspects to the story—is that so many of Rohde's efforts to negotiate with his antagonists resulted in complete failure:

During our time as hostages, I tried to reason with our captors. I told them we were journalists who had come to hear the Taliban's side of the story. I told them that I had recently married and that Tahir and Asad had nine young children between them. I wept, hoping it would create sympathy, and begged them to release us. All of my efforts proved pointless.

Although Rohde does report that he had a few brief arguments with his captors, during which he tried to express the point that what they were doing was wrong, that it went

against the values they claimed to be upholding, the vast majority of his article contributes to an overall sense of the futility of such attempts. While his guards did interact with him, the information he attempted to convey to them seemed to have no effect whatsoever.

In a broad sense, Rohde's account is an acutely terrifying vision of a situation in which deliberative rhetoric seems utterly and completely pointless. At one particularly telling moment in the narrative, Rohde describes his captors listening to Western media reports, which routinely presented information describing the ordeal of other kidnapped Westerners, many of whom were in hopeless situations and had not even been directly involved in the conflict in the region: "[The guards] browsed the Internet and listened to hourly news updates on Azadi Radio, a station run by the American government. But then they dismissed whatever information did not meet their preconceptions." In this succinct sentence is the implication that lurks beneath the surface of Rohde's entire story: no matter what they heard, from Rohde or from any other source, his kidnappers would have refused to consider any information or argument that did not conform to what they already believed.

* * *

In a study conducted in the fall of 2005 and the spring of 2006 by political scientists Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler, participants were presented with mock newspaper articles that repeated one of several common beliefs about current events—for instance, that the regime of Saddam Hussein was harboring Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) somewhere in Iraq. This information was immediately followed (for some

participants) by a correction that unequivocally renounced the previous claim—in the case of Iraq’s WMDs, the article discussed authoritative “document[ation]” of “the lack of Iraqi WMD stockpiles” (312–13). As Nyhan and Reifler discovered, in cases where the original information confirmed the participants’ previous beliefs, the subsequent counterevidence *had no effect* on those beliefs; as the authors write, these participants “failed to update their beliefs when presented with corrective information that runs counter to their predispositions. Indeed, in several cases, we find that corrections actually *strengthened* misperceptions among the most strongly committed subjects” (304; emphasis in original).¹

As the authors point out, these results are in line with many other previous political science studies, and follow “extensive literature in psychology that shows humans . . . tend to evaluate information with a directional bias toward reinforcing their pre-existing views” (305–07). In short, Nyhan and Reifler’s study, in addition to much prior research, demonstrates what is a pervasive scenario wherein information, arguments, and persuasion itself, when they run contrary to one’s beliefs, are quite *ineffective*. As it would appear, dismissal of inconvenient evidence is a phenomenon endemic in both Taliban extremists and American citizens alike.

¹ To balance out for the possible explanation that conservative supporters of the Iraq War were somehow particularly resistant to counterevidence, the experimenters included a parallel set of conditions in which participants were presented with mock articles that repeated, and then offered a similarly authoritative counterargument to, the belief that then-President George W. Bush had “banned stem cell research in the United States” (while Bush limited some federal funding he did not do so for privately funded research) (320–21). Again, the study found that “political predispositions” affected one’s likelihood of accepting the correction—liberals, too, that is, ignored significant and authoritative information if it ran counter to their beliefs. To be sure, Nyhan and Reifler’s study is open to the criticism that they failed to account for differences in the beliefs tested in their study: certain beliefs might be more amenable to correction if, say, they didn’t involve life-and-death issues. The more general point illustrated by their results, however—that many beliefs *are* resistant to counter-evidence—is the one that I am interested in here, as it would seem to counter the assumption made in deliberative rhetoric that an argument *does* have some effect on a person’s belief.

Reasserting Rhetoric through Complex Simultaneity:

The Rhetoric-Systems Approach

To study and embrace a deliberative model of rhetoric is, among other things, to embrace the assumption that we can interact with others in a way that is productive of rhetorical effects. This premise assumes that when I discursively engage with someone each of us can have an effect on the other's point of view, that we can introduce to each other a perspective not previously considered, and that we can evaluate our own perspective from a new vantage point. In Patricia Roberts-Miller's explication of Hannah Arendt's version of "agonism," she articulates this version of deliberative rhetoric in which we are "able to shift perspectives, and not simply as a way to consider arrangement, but as inherent to thinking." Such perspective shifting does not mean that we have to be instantly converted to a new belief; as Roberts-Miller puts it, this "good thinking" requires not that we "free ourselves from our own [perspectives]," but rather that we "*hear* the arguments of other people" (124; 182–83; emphasis in original). In this sense, simply hearing others' arguments and so even provisionally shifting our perspective is itself proof of the existence of rhetorical effects, and so participants in diverse rhetorical situations—from public discussions, to family dinner tables, to rhetoric or writing classrooms, to even (and perhaps especially) hostage negotiations—*all* have the potential to bring about rhetorical effects. In such hypothetical deliberative discussions, interlocutors may not change their minds, but they are at least receptive to others' ideas.

There is a rich scholarly tradition that upholds a faith in the power and efficacy of this kind of deliberative rhetoric. Wayne Booth, for example, steadfastly maintains that one can adopt what he calls a "rhetoric of assent," which entails "cultivating a benign

acceptance” of divergent beliefs as long as they meet certain criteria of “reasonable”-ness (40, 63n16). James Crosswhite echoes this faith in his articulation of a “rhetoric of reason,” which presumes that rhetors, “even if they are from conflicting rhetorical communities,” will be able to “reason together” (17). Kenneth Burke, as well, gives a definition of rhetoric as “rooted in an essential function of language”—a language defined by its utility “as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols” (*Rhetoric* 43).

And yet, as the opening illustrations show, there is no shortage of situations in which such effects are absent; where even the beginnings of such “hearing,” much less any shifting of perspective, fail to manifest. Roberts-Miller herself notes that “one of the recurrent criticisms of argument (made by colleagues as well as students) is that it is ultimately ineffectual [when there is] a committed opposition” (110). Such situations, in which rhetorical effects seem absent, are often blamed on *stubbornness*. We refer to stubborn people, stubborn beliefs, stubborn values, and even stubborn environments (all of which I will address later), and with all these attributions it can seem as if stubbornness is the enemy of rhetorical effect.² This is a conclusion that would undercut the value of deliberative rhetoric in general—and perhaps even rhetoric’s disciplinary legitimacy—since, if rhetoric is only useful when conditions are favorable, it is more a luxury than a necessity.

² It is important to note that while the term “stubborn” can carry with it a negative connotation (as it may seem to here), stubbornness is known in many forms that are anything but negative. To be “resilient,” for example, is to be persistent in the face of hardship—a distinctly positive sense of the concept. Throughout this dissertation I contest the exclusively negative sense of the idea of stubbornness; in fact, as I argue, while stubbornness is often an impediment to productive deliberative discourse, it is also a requirement for its very existence. In this sense, opening up new possibilities for what it means to be “stubborn” is one of the larger goals of my work.

In this dissertation, however, I argue that rhetoric is not a luxury but rather a constant force acting in the world, a force that we can at times control but also that exceeds our intentions and our grasp. Rather than existing in the form of visible effects, rhetoric in its excess has a multifaceted and often unnoticed complexity that demands our attention and theorization, or at the very least, our recognition. In performing just such a theorization, I argue that the apparent opposition between stubbornness and rhetorical effect (and by extension, deliberative rhetoric) is insufficient. Specifically, I use what I call a *rhetoric-systems approach*, a blend of rhetoric theory and complex systems theory, to argue that stubbornness, as well as the rhetorical effects supposedly absent in stubborn situations, are more complicated than they first appear. That is, while it is certainly our tendency—and a necessity, as I will show—to focus on one side of the equation at the expense of the other, this can be overcome. We can reconceptualize these concepts as not simply mutually exclusive, but as mutually exclusive *and* simultaneously coexistent in an interdependent and reciprocal relationship. Paradoxically, not only can we theorize stubbornness without rhetorical effects (and vice-versa), but we can simultaneously theorize them as coexistent; that is, stubbornness can be perceived as existing in isolation, but this “isolation” can be shown from another perspective to *depend* on the work of rhetorical effects.

A rhetoric-systems approach thus illustrates that stubbornness itself is a much more complex concept than it would first seem, and that exploring the complexity of its function also changes our conception of rhetorical effects. Moreover, if we apply the same approach to other oppositions pertinent in rhetoric and composition scholarship we

can accommodate positions that at first glance might seem to be in direct conflict.³ For example, as I explore at the end of this chapter, a rhetoric-systems approach can mitigate the detrimental back-and-forth between, on the one hand, the promise of “flow” in a rhetorical situation—a concept embraced by several rhetoric scholars—and on the other, the existence of “blockages,” or in other words, the all-too-often social or physical reality of being unable to alter or participate in such flows.⁴

As I will illustrate, a rhetoric-systems approach allows us to get past simple simultaneity—to retain the useful sanguine aspects of flow while foregrounding the blockages that pervade our rhetorical landscape and that may be overlooked by an uncritical embrace of flow. This approach, much like in the debate over stubbornness and effect, gives us a way to theorize both concepts as intertwined and coexistent, but also, each on their own. In short, the approach gives us a way to recognize a both/and *and* an either/or take on the situation—a recognition of what I call *complex simultaneity*.

To Begin (Again): What Is Rhetoric, and What Is Stubbornness

Using a rhetoric-systems approach to reconceptualize stubbornness is a useful starting point for this dissertation, as an expanded understanding of this concept helps explicate

³ While I position my approach within the interconnected fields of “Rhetoric” and “Composition,” I also assert, with Jessica Yood, that a “key component” of a recognition of complexity and systems theory is the shift from “Composition” to “Writing Studies.” In this sense, my approach ultimately positions itself within the field of Writing Studies, although in this dissertation I recognize the overlap of “Composition” scholarship, and so still make use of the term. I further discuss the implications of this shift in chapter five.

⁴ Given my use of the term “rhetorical situation” in this context I would be remiss not to mention the rich history of the term, and the debates over the concept initiated in foundational articles by Lloyd Bitzer and Richard Vatz. My approach does not so much contest the nature of a rhetorical situation as either pre-given (Bitzer) or constituted in/by discourse (Vatz), a question which itself has become something of a *topos* in our discipline, as it attempts to redefine our conception of such a situation as “stubborn,” for example. In other words, my approach is not an attempt to (re)define the rhetorical situation so much as it is an argument for redefining the *stubbornness* often perceived to inhere in such a situation. Moreover, as I discuss in subsequent chapters, in many instances we would be better off conceiving of a “rhetorical ecology” rather than a “rhetorical situation.”

key aspects of my larger argument. Before expanding on this point, however, I will more clearly define the very concept of rhetoric as I will be discussing it here. While I retain all of the characterizations of deliberative rhetoric described in the preceding sections, I integrate an important new addition: *Within a rhetoric-systems view, rhetoric itself can be thought of as a system comprising an interconnected and interdependent network of beliefs, arguments, commonplaces, meanings, and texts (in short, the elements of language that comprise the traditional purview of rhetoric), that all have the potential to affect, and be affected by, each other.* This view complements existing definitions of rhetoric (such as those I sketch above), while also complicating how we think of rhetoric in significant ways.

Such a system of rhetoric resembles a variety of systems that have been more extensively theorized, such as the organization of an entire society (a social system), of a single cell (a biological system), or of the entire universe (a physical system). *And while these systems can be thought of as always linked to each other, we can also think of each as discrete.* Thinking of rhetoric as a system involves conceiving of all the elements of language as an interconnected set of mutually sustaining relations wherein no individual element in the system exists independently, and the stability of each is determined by, and helps determine, the stability of every other element. As such, the totality of these relations contributes to the stability of the whole. At the same time, while we may think of rhetoric as an overarching system, we may also conceive of the “rhetoric system” of individuals—that is, I can say that in *my* rhetoric system, all of my beliefs, commonplaces, and so on, are connected. Importantly, while each person’s rhetoric system can be considered in isolation, I do not assert that each person’s rhetoric system

can *only* be considered in isolation. Just as the aforementioned varieties of systems are discrete and yet linked, a person's rhetoric system is both discrete and linked to the rhetoric systems of members of his or her community and to the systems of others in more distant communities, and so on, in a mutually sustaining interrelation.

The key idea here, and one I will repeatedly come back to throughout this dissertation, is that *a rhetoric-systems approach, fundamentally, posits both connection and discreteness*. Thus, in my rhetoric system every one of my beliefs, and every commonplace I adhere to, are all connected to and all reinforce each other, and each helps sponsor the cohesion of the whole of my belief system. And yet, these elements are not completely isolated from the beliefs and commonplaces of my neighbors and friends, the totality of which manifests as a larger system constituent of the rhetoric system of the community. In a rhetoric-systems approach, one may consider an individual system on its own, or consider a larger system encompassing what could be considered multiple systems. As I will explain below, this approach enables—and, in fact, forces—a continual refocusing of perspective: a zooming in and zooming out in one's point of view to consider and re-consider both less and more inclusive systems.

For both an individual's rhetoric system as well as the community's, conceiving of rhetoric as and in a system means that beliefs that seem relatively unrelated can be shown to significantly influence one another, and that the stability of each belief contributes to the stability of the system as a whole. Furthermore, systems theory emphasizes that any cohesive system must remain stable: a rhetoric system *wants*, in a sense, to remain stable, since for the system to function effectively it *must* be stable (this is a point I will elaborate upon in chapter two); it is this necessary stability that is often

interpreted as stubbornness. Here, then, the possibility arises for reconceptualizing stubbornness as *resilience*—not as something that resists our efforts to change it, but rather as a property that enables the preservation of the integrity of the system. This shift in perspective recasts stubbornness as a positive characteristic—the very survival of our beliefs depend, to a varying degree, on the stability of all of our beliefs, even ones that seem completely unrelated. So what may be seen as stubbornness in one context may actually be a form of self-preservation of a distant set of beliefs, and by extension, of a person’s (or community’s) belief system as a whole.⁵

Consideration of rhetoric as/in a system can also provide a glimpse into the paradoxical interdependence of stubbornness and rhetorical effect: if we see rhetorical effects as *compensatory changes* that work to keep cohesion of the overall system, then stubbornness is specifically *enabled by rhetorical effects*. Present a pro-George W. Bush conservative with evidence that there were no weapons of mass destruction found in Iraq, to come back to Nyhan and Reifler’s example, and (in some cases) that person’s other beliefs about the liberal bias of the media compensate in such a way that the original information does not make even a ripple in his overall belief network.⁶ From this perspective, for stubbornness to be present, *compensatory* rhetorical effects need to be at work, and yet the very presence of stubbornness functions to hide this work—the end

⁵ The tendency for a person to affirm one set of beliefs as a way of compensating for the destabilization of a seemingly distant set of beliefs is well documented in social psychology. Often this occurs as a phenomenon called “fluid compensation,” in which “alternative beliefs about oneself are more strongly affirmed” in response to “one’s self-concept” being “threatened” (Proulx 61; see also Sherman and Cohen; Tesser). I will explore the workings of compensatory stability—from a variety of perspectives—in more detail in chapter two.

⁶ Incidentally, Nyhan and Reifler did try to offset this very tendency, by including a diverse set of news sources used in the study. My point here is not to argue that the study was flawed; rather, I wish only to point out the existence of this compensatory mechanism.

result of these kinds of compensatory rhetorical effects is to disguise their very existence behind the veneer of stubbornness.

This is a conception of stubbornness that, for one thing, allows us to rename this concept as something other than a site where argument seems ineffective. By breaking down the opposition of stubbornness and rhetorical effect, a rhetoric-systems approach corrects our tendency to under-appreciate the effects of our rhetorical actions when we perceive stubbornness, and so also corrects our undervaluing in these situations the efficacy of argumentation in general. The realm of what counts as a rhetorical effect, that is, is often radically local—what counts in a given location is often only what I intend, and what I can observe. However, as I argue, the totality of the movement of rhetorical effects, and of their impact, perpetually eludes our grasp; when we argue with someone who seems unaffected, that very appearance of the lack of effect is enabled by rhetorical effects. So in taking this approach we can conceive argument as always present and always effective, as well as involved in every situation.

This explanation points to the way that rhetorical effects can often *seem* absent, yet are in fact in complex ways always at work. Throughout this entire dissertation, in fact, I will be exploring a variety of such oppositions, which often involve seemingly static, tangible concepts (stubbornness, blockage, the body, the physical, the measurable) on the one side, and what would appear to be more complex, intangible concepts (rhetorical effects, flow, immeasurability) on the other—although these oppositions can involve a diversity of terms locked in opposing, but not dichotomous, positions.

This revelation of simultaneity only gets at the beginning of a rhetoric-systems approach to ostensibly opposing concepts. As I assert, such sets of terms exist in a

complex simultaneity; in this sense just recognizing these concepts as coexistent is not enough. To say that stubbornness simply hides the work of simultaneous rhetorical effects tends to favor one side of the equation—stubbornness in this characterization becomes subordinated to ubiquitous rhetorical effect. Stubbornness, however, is an important concept that cannot and should not be lost, as for many participants in certain rhetorical situations it is a very real phenomenon that must be reckoned with in isolation (think here of David Rohde’s interactions with his captors—any hidden rhetorical effects in his situation were for all intents and purposes irrelevant). A rhetoric-systems approach, then, gives us a way to talk about stubbornness and rhetorical effects as simultaneous, but also, to talk about occasions when stubbornness needs to be considered as independent.

Alternate Versions of Stubbornness

The concept of stubbornness is both implicitly and explicitly pervasive in rhetoric scholarship, as well as in scholarship from numerous other disciplines and in popular discourse in general. To more fully explicate my version of the concept, it will be helpful to explore these various conceptions, and to illustrate their overlaps and differences.

For many people, stubbornness at first glance is simply a stubborn person: a colleague who dismisses your work, a relative who ignores your point of view, a terrorist who won’t listen to reason, even yourself when you (think you) know you’re right. All of these conceptualizations, in short, locate stubbornness narrowly, within the person.

Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca posit one version of this in what they call “recalcitrance.” As they write, if a particular attempt at persuasion fails one can always “resort to disqualifying the recalcitrant by classifying him as stupid or abnormal” (33).

Even if one avoids such derogatory classifications, to simply “disqualif[y]” a person is certainly an appealing way out of the dilemma, and indeed it is a common reaction to ascribe stubbornness to individualized factors. It should be noted, however, that these factors typically associated with the individual are also typically considered as separate from language and thus beyond the reach of deliberative rhetoric. A person who is thought to have a stubborn disposition, that is, is often perceived to be this way no matter what is said to him or her.

Such an individualized attribution of stubbornness can be found in a variety of disciplinary locations, both in popular culture as well as in scholarly explorations within and beyond rhetoric. Jim W. Corder, for example, while taking a more language-centric approach to the issue, nevertheless reproduces this personalized view when he describes the “near-hopeless prospect” of a situation in which “each narrator is entirely *steadfast*, wholly intent upon preserving the nature and movement of his or her narrative, earnest and zealous to keep its identity” (23; emphasis in original). Such individualization is emphasized with the use of the terms “earnest” and “zealous,” which narrowly locates this resistance by drawing the focus to the temperament or disposition of the individual person.

In other words, to locate resistance in one’s temperament or disposition is, commonly, to locate this resistance in one’s emotional makeup—and even if language is involved in such a conception, language (and so, deliberative argument) is often seen as subordinate to such emotion.⁷ Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, whose work has been

⁷ Genetics is another factor that is often invoked—and is similarly considered a property of an individual, and thus outside the purview of language. Psychologist and political theorist Drew Westen, for example, in a discussion of resistance to political arguments, claims that “politics can literally be in our genes,” since “partisan leanings are related to personality traits . . . which are themselves in part genetic” (82n).

taken up by rhetoric scholars as well as scientists, expresses this perspective in arguing that in our formation of thoughts (and, thus, in our formation of arguments) emotional catalysts effect a kind of “preselection” of ideas, “sometimes covertly, sometimes not,” and this process allows only a few thought “candidates” to “present themselves” for the “final exam” that is our cognition (189).⁸ In other words, by the time we are “ready” to use our language to make decisions about the world there has already been a significant emotionally-triggered perceptual dismissal and/or selection of relevant concepts.

This view that, as neurosociologist David Franks concisely puts it, “emotion drives the brain” (59), entails that our language use—and so our efforts at rhetorical deliberation—is at the mercy of prior non-linguistic and often non-conscious factors associated with our emotions. This prioritization, first of all, reinscribes a reductive opposition of (non-conscious) emotion and (conscious) reason, which I argue is precisely the type of equation rendered moot by a rhetoric-systems approach. As well, and more central to my point here, this view locates stubbornness firmly both within the individual and beyond the purview of rhetoric, and so reproduces the limiting version of the concept that I wish to resist.

While stubbornness undoubtedly does *involve* factors that reside within individuals, and does involve factors that reside to an extent beyond the reach of rhetoric, any attempt to conceive of the individual as the primary site of this resistance can disguise a picture of stubbornness that is significantly more complex and more comprehensive. In other words, while in certain contexts some beliefs, some meanings,

⁸ As rhetorician Brian Jackson has argued, Damasio’s *Decartes’ Error* is one of a few foundational texts whose “core argument” about the centrality of emotion in reason “seems to be holding” (480). Much of Jackson’s article (from which this quote is taken) is devoted to the argument that rhetoricians should embrace these kinds of neuroscientific claims about emotion.

and some claims are inarguable due to emotions, disposition, or (perhaps) genetics (see note 6), as well as due to other individual and ostensibly non-linguistic factors, a rhetoric-systems approach demands that we not reduce stubbornness to any single isolated factor or location and leave it at that. The aforementioned views do precisely that by construing emotion and reason, and (correspondingly) the individual body and language, as exclusively opposed, and so leave little room for a recognition of these concepts' possible interrelation.

Various forms of such reductionism remain widespread in a variety of discourses and disciplines, and so stubbornness is often considered as isolated from, and thus impervious to, deliberative rhetoric. For example, in Drew Westen's *The Political Brain*, a book devoted to the study of effective political persuasion (and thus, ostensibly, to rhetoric itself), whose stated "intended audience includes readers interested in politics, psychology, leadership, neuroscience, marketing, and law" (ix), the author, a psychologist, argues that in certain "high-stakes political situations" unconscious emotional processes drive our behavior, as in these situations "reason plays virtually no role in the decision making of the average citizen" (112–13).⁹

Even in more nuanced arguments there can be a tendency to localize stubbornness within the individual, which can lead to an underestimation (even if implicit) of the efficacy of language. In a persuasive account, legal scholar and philosopher Martha Nussbaum writes that we are compelled to reject people and ideas that make us feel

⁹ Several of Westen's claims reinforce a general downplaying of the efficacy of argument. For example, Westen in a separate chapter expounds on the effectiveness of subliminal messaging, a practice about as far from deliberative argumentation as one can get (on this particular point, at least, Westen's view seems clearly in the minority; as Jack Haberstroh writes, in a work preceding Westen's by more than a decade: "The scientific research indicating subliminal advertising doesn't work is simply overwhelming" [56]. See also Pratkanis and Aronson 285-94).

“inadequate, lacking some desired type of completeness or perfection” (184). We shirk, she explains, from things that disrupt the cohesion of our self-descriptions, from that which make us feel or seem vulnerable and incomplete. Echoing Kenneth Burke’s critique of humans as “rotten with perfection” (Burke, *Language* 16), Nussbaum argues that this constant drive for wholeness, “completeness,” and “perfection”—embodied in our strive to be considered “normal” (an ideal that functions as “a kind of surrogate perfection or invulnerability”)—manifests as an emotional “reflex” of “narcissistic aggression that underlies much social stigmatizing” (220–21). While Nussbaum touches on a variety of complex factors involved in our stubborn rejection of what she calls our “humanity,” and her analysis is both comprehensive and resistant to reduction, she nevertheless at several points specifically locates the *origin* of such stubbornness (as implied by the term “reflex,” for example) within the body.

As a similar example of a more complex take on the subject, psychologists Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson extensively document the way people habitually “self-justify” in order to reduce the “pangs” or “anguish” caused by an encounter with an idea or piece of evidence that contrasts with one of their beliefs; in so doing the authors describe this process as one that “purrs along automatically, just beneath consciousness” (222–23). Here the authors ascribe a complex act *involving* language to a process that nevertheless happens largely within ourselves, “beneath” the social terrain of our conscious language use.

The idea that decision making—and thus stubbornness—happens “beneath” language is also often found in work coming out of linguistics: many linguists, in fact, do not share rhetoricians’ ideas about the communal dynamic of our language use, and

instead adhere to the view that language is posterior to our “deeper” brain functions. This is a view Sharon Crowley articulates as the default in the “modern” era: wherein the “ultimate source of knowledge” arises not from communal knowledge but rather from within individual minds (*Methodical* 5). For example, in popular linguist Steven Pinker’s *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language*, the title alone is a vivid embodiment of this view. Moreover, as linguist George Lakoff writes, in a book that is, ironically, about the need for liberal-leaning citizens to change their language patterns in order to be more effective in the face of stubborn conservative opposition, that language is merely “a tool” that is “the surface, not the soul, of the brain.” For Lakoff, not only is language use an individual rather than social act, but our use of it is driven by processes deep within our individual brains. Lakoff wants us “to look *beneath* language,” since “[n]ew curtains won’t save your house if the foundation is cracking” (15; emphasis in original).

More examples abound, from a wide variety of disciplines, of this localization of the cause of stubbornness; even in popular works about deliberative rhetoric this reduction shows up. In his rhetoric primer *Thank You For Arguing*, for example, Jay Heinrichs decrees “Argument’s Rule Number One: *Never debate the undebatable*.” That there are premises that are “undebatable” in the first place is a result of a person’s “morals,” which Heinrichs stresses are “inarguable in deliberative rhetoric” (36; emphasis in original). More importantly, however, Heinrichs represents such morals as largely “personal,” taking a to-each-her-own approach to morals (and thus stubbornness) while at the same time discussing language as a communal phenomenon. From this

perspective, whatever the outcome of our language-based debates, when it comes to morals we arrive at “the undebatable” and so may as well avoid the issue.

Heinrichs’ assertion may be the most cynically strategic way of dealing with stubbornness—if I were feeling charitable I might consider his approach simply a pragmatic answer to a thorny problem. Such pragmatism, however, is not only reductive, but also destructive to rhetoric itself. This is a point I have been making consistently throughout this introduction: failing to see stubbornness (as with all of the oppositions I will be discussing later on) in all its complexity risks relegating deliberative rhetoric to a subordinate position in academic and popular discourse. As Nussbaum writes, it is a commonplace in the American legal system that emotional states can be impervious to reason: “a putatively criminal offense may be judged less heinous, or not even a crime at all, if it is committed under certain ‘emotional circumstances’” (8). In other words, one’s emotional state may be deemed *legally* an overriding factor in determining one’s actions—a proposition, I argue, parallel to the idea that some people are beyond the reach of rhetoric, since in this view the occurrence of rhetorical action happens at the tail end of a causal chain that begins with emotion, and so begins within the individual.

Such a commonplace bubbles up in several cultural locations. In scholarly/popular works on pedagogy—including one in particular entitled *How Learning Works*, which purports to explain to teachers what the developments in “the science of learning” can tell us about classroom practices (Ambrose et al. xiii)—it is a truism that “emotions can overwhelm students’ intellect” if those students lack “emotional maturity” (Ambrose et al. 157–59). Once again, emotions “overwhelm” language in a one-way

movement that starts within the individual person for whom a language-based “intellect” is made to seem difficult to resist.¹⁰

While I do not disagree completely that our bodies and emotions play a role in the complex process of our decision making and in our avoidance of certain ideas, a rhetoric-systems approach broadens the scope of where we should be looking for such stubbornness, and in so doing broadens the way we can think of concepts (including stubbornness) involved in seemingly intractable debates.

Locating Stubbornness in a (/as the) System

As I have argued, a rhetoric-systems approach does not preclude the location of stubbornness within the individual. Rather, this approach precludes the location of stubbornness as *exclusively* located in the individual. One alternative to this narrow conceptualization exists in Kenneth Burke’s conceptualization of “recalcitrance.” Burke’s version of the concept hits on the useful counterpoint that the world also exerts a stubborn force upon us. As Burke writes, recalcitrance “refers to the factors that *substantiate* a statement, the factors that *incite* a statement, and the factors that *correct* a statement” (*Attitudes* 47n; emphasis in original). For Burke, recalcitrance resides in those “factors” that don’t line up with one’s particular perspective—as Prelli, Anderson, and Althouse put it, for Burke, “recalcitrant materials” are those that “cannot initially be encompassed” by a given set of terms we adopt when operating within a certain perspective. Those recalcitrant factors, though, can reshape those terms, making them

¹⁰ I have argued previously that such an emotional “overwhelming” of language by emotion is needlessly one-sided, and that we as rhetoricians would do well to remember the converse of this equation: that language can be a causal force on our emotional responses as well—a point that is distinctly amenable to the rhetoric-systems approach I outline here (see Mays).

“revisable to enable better ‘readings’ of the situation’s supportive as well as resistant materials” (101). Recalcitrance here is a productive force that for Burke is “disclos[ed]” when we consider “the universe” from one limited “point of view” (*Permanence* 257); in refusing to be integrated into our point of view recalcitrant factors provoke in us a revision of our perspective.

Burke was famous, I should point out, for his proclivity to “fall on the bias”—to “situate his arguments,” as M. Elizabeth Weiser puts it, “*across* seeming dichotomies” (134; emphasis in original). In this sense Burke does not simply reduce stubbornness to the either/or logic of environment versus individual, but rather highlights the way that stubbornness can exist not only in a person but also in the universe. Similarly, complex simultaneity in a rhetoric-systems approach emphasizes discreteness *and* connection, and so allows for an either/or *and* a both/and approach. Stubbornness thus can be localized as coming from the body’s emotional responses, or from the environment, or from shared communal meanings maintained in language. A rhetoric-systems approach also allows, however, that all of these factors can be involved in a mutually affective and simultaneously reciprocal relationship, with stubbornness itself emerging from the totality of that relation.

That is, each component can function individually in separate systems, or they can be thought of together, as an interrelated whole. In fact, a rhetoric-systems approach would posit that we must continually choose one of these ways of conceptualizing the situation, but that while we can change our choice of what we focus on, at least for a moment, we *must* make this choice, and when we do, we will unavoidably deselect the other ways of conceiving the situation. By looking at the entire situation as composed of

connected yet discrete systems of individuals, beliefs, bodily and social systems, and non-bodily “physical” materials, I argue that we can better account for the ways that all of these elements are both causal of and caused by each other, interacting both within and across each other in an interconnected and dynamic network. In such a conceptualization, stubbornness can be seen in certain contexts as coming from a person’s individual emotional state, or in another context, from that person’s shared system of values with others in their community, or, from any number of insuperable “recalcitrant factors” in the world. Each of these *is* an important component of stubbornness, and when the context warrants, each should be theorized alone. But neither should we forget that a rhetoric-systems approach allows us to recontextualize stubbornness as a property that is the result of the mutually sustaining interrelation of these specific locations.

A Rhetoric-Systems Approach to “Flow” and “Blockage”

To close this introduction, I will sketch a brief practical example of the way a rhetoric-systems approach can be useful, and in so doing, illustrate how such a seemingly impossible—or at least, paradoxical—approach can mitigate a particularly stubborn theoretical opposition. Specifically, I would like to explore the seemingly opposed ideas of “blockage” and “flow,” which, while they have their own unique valences, in many ways mirror the opposition of stubbornness and effect.

Taking a rhetoric-systems approach to this debate allows us to show that these concepts do not need to be in conflict, as they can be shown to be mutually interdependent. But also, this approach allows us to get past the idea of simple simultaneity in a way that can retain the useful sanguine aspects of focusing on flow

alone, and can also foreground the blockages that exist in specific rhetorical situations untouched by flow. Once again, this approach posits complex simultaneity; it is a both/and *and* an either/or approach.

In this specific debate, *flow* represents the idea that the elements in a rhetorical situation are always on the move, and thus are always reconfiguring that situation, and always being reconfigured—even if this process is happening in ways we cannot perceive. This is not a new concept in rhetoric, as scholars have been exploring the constant movement of the universe for as long as they have been theorizing rhetoric itself. Recently (although still over a decade ago), John Trimbur called for a renewed attention to the concept of circulation in composition studies. In particular, Trimbur called for the field to attend to how “rhetorical transformations” occur in an environment in which texts are continuously circulating (195; 213). One scholar who answered this call was Jenny Rice, who, zeroing in on the circulation trope’s entailment of liquidity, explored how that “the dimension of movement” could be considered a central component of the traditional rhetorical situation (Edbauer 20). In a continuation of this project in a recent special issue of *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, Rice diversifies the consideration of flow as only rhetorical, calling attention to the way rhetorical inquiry can serve as an “interface” via which we can “engage” *other* kinds of flows such as those involving “food, labor, migration patterns, consumption, or land” (Rice, “From” 204). Building on this idea of rhetorical elements as a flow caught up in relation with other, nonrhetoric flows, Rebecca Dingo highlights the diverse ways texts, and even specific claims about the world, can “travel” and (re-)interact in a variety of new contexts with what she calls “extra-rhetorical forces.” Such “malleable” elements as they cross borders

encounter new material conditions and interact with other elements, and so become “layered and connected to other information” in ways that alter their uptake by participants in diverse rhetorical situations (14, 20, 146). On an even broader scale, Eileen E. Schell points out in her introduction to *Rhetorica in Motion* that both “feminist rhetorical studies” and “[r]hetorical studies” in general are themselves “constant[ly] . . . in motion” (6–7).

These varied examples of the focus on flow and on the way texts, arguments, and beliefs change their meaning as they move broaden the view of a rhetorical situation, casting it as a constantly dynamic and effect-full environment. As such, this theoretical approach supports my own contention that rhetoric is indeed always at work in any and every situation. The examples also remind us that such effects are not always immediately apparent, and that rhetoric does not always work in a simple straight line from intention to effect(s); rather, rhetorical effects themselves are often nonlinear and dispersed, showing up in multiple and often unexpected places as “malleable” rhetorical elements travel and flow.

However, foregrounding flow in our account of a rhetorical situation elides the fact that in many situations, nothing is able to “move” at all. As Sara Ahmed argues, for example, to focus on flow is to risk undervaluing situations where rhetors don’t have the means or institutional power to change the contexts in which their rhetorical realities are pressing in on them, or situations when rhetors don’t have the luxury to wait for things to start flowing their way. As Ahmed puts it, things “might appear fluid if you are going the way things are flowing,” but when “you are not going that way, you experience a flow *as* solidity,” as a “blockage” (186–87). This point, I argue, is crucial. While foregrounding

the concept of flow can productively highlight the dispersed nature of rhetorical effects, and can help us formulate new strategies for affecting rhetorical situations, this approach can also distract us from the fact that sometimes, there just is nowhere for the situation to flow.

Just as we cannot simply say that rhetorical effects are always present, and be done with it, we cannot say that flow is everywhere, for that elides the reality that some people have no power to effect any meaningful flow in a situation (for all of their intents and purposes, at least). For David Rohde, telling him that the Taliban soldiers were not actually “dismissing” the information they were hearing on the American radio station, and rather that they were in subtle ways being affected by that information, would have been of little use. In part because of examples like this one, I argue that we *need* to retain a definition of stubbornness that is synonymous with blockage, and that helps us understand that from some people’s perspective stubbornness can completely exclude any meaningful flow.

In fact, a rhetoric-systems approach posits such lack of movement as a *necessary condition* for a system, even while in other ways there is always movement. As I will explain throughout this dissertation, this movement is hidden from our view; in any of the sets of seemingly opposed concepts I will be discussing in the following chapters, to view one concept is to necessarily fail to see the other(s). This is the tricky part about a rhetoric-systems approach: although it posits interconnection and discreteness, we cannot literally theorize multiple perspectives at the same time (even theorizing interconnection is to deselect theorizations of the concepts individually, as independent); rather, we must

continually jump back and forth, and inhabit each viewpoint one at a time—and we must recognize that there is no final, ultimate theorization, or relation, that trumps all others.

In terms of blockage and flow, this means that we can view a situation not as always moving *or* as always blocked, but rather as a series—a multiplicity—of stable states, in which there is movement, blockage, or both. To be clear, this is not the same as saying that a situation is always both static and moving. Rather, it is to say that advocating any of these perspectives over the other, while a useful and necessary practice, can never be our stopping point; we must remember that each term is not the only one that can be privileged.

Our Stubborn Oppositions

Significantly, a rhetoric-systems approach explicitly articulates that *either* blockage, flow, or both, and either stubbornness, rhetorical effect, or both, can be articulated as predominant—and that none of these prioritizations is wrong. As a rhetorician, then, it is important—and legitimate—for me to use the approach to validate and endorse the way that rhetoric *is* always present, and always a factor, in any situation, and that rhetorical effects (and flow) are always at work. This is my choice, one that I am consciously making. Although I must realize it is not the only one available, I can recognize it as an available choice. This particular feature of a rhetoric-systems approach thus gets us to a version of deliberative rhetoric where no argument, and no claim, can be considered off the table.

To illustrate: In Roberts-Miller's version of a deliberative democracy characterized by agonism there are, she writes, "high demands [made] of its citizens":

We must treat one another with empathy, attentiveness, and trust; we must take the time to invent and continually reinvent our ideas in the light of informed disagreement; we must care enough about our own views to try to persuade others of them, but not so much that we are unwilling to change them; we must listen with care to people who tell us we are wrong; we must behave with grace when other views prevail; we must argue with passion but without rancor, with commitment *but without intransigence*.
(*Deliberate* 187; emphasis mine)

Such demands are sponsored by the presumption of existence of rhetorical effects, and I would argue that these conditions are always possible in any situation. I do not deny, however, that from some perspectives these possibilities may seem out of reach. Those perspectives aren't *wrong* so much as they are not *final*. In this sense, each of these perspectives is one stability that exists in its author's particular situated context.

If I were to respond to the previous quotation, I might choose to emphasize the means by which we might meet such "high demands," and to theorize such a situation precisely *as* attainable in any context. And this is exactly what a rhetoric-systems approach allows me to do—to articulate the ways that, perhaps, such a set of conditions is not so far-fetched; to use my deliberative rhetoric skills to perhaps convince participants in a stubborn situation that, in fact, things aren't as stuck as they may have seemed. In taking this approach, however, I would also recognize the potential legitimacy and perhaps even benefit of a point of view that held stubbornness as a benefit—as a form of resilience, for example. A rhetoric-systems approach, in short, recognizes the

simultaneous legitimacy of opposing views, and as well recognizes their (at times) necessity.

While I may argue that my own perspective is better, my approach stipulates that I can never claim mine as *ultimately* better; deeming *any* perspective as simply wrong or ultimately right risks marginalizing an alternate perspective, and as I argue in this dissertation, the detriments of marginalization outweigh the benefits of certainty—we *need* to be able to constantly incorporate, and jump back and forth between, different points of view. Moreover, I argue that such permanent certainty is theoretically, and epistemologically, flawed. So while I can certainly advocate one perspective over the other, I also take responsibility for my perspectival commitments, and acknowledge that things *could* be otherwise. A rhetoric-systems approach gives us a way to switch between such views, to do productive work within each, yet to never yield to the hopelessness that characterizes any situation that is considered *finished*.

Summary of Chapters

The following chapters of this dissertation will articulate just such a back-and-forth movement, engaging in debates between seemingly opposed concepts in ways that will allow a mitigation of what are often entrenched oppositions. In chapter two I will expand on the specifics of the rhetoric-systems approach, delving into the systems theory roots of the approach, and specifically into the crucial concept of *excess*. The existence of excess means that in our dealings with complexity we need to “make a cut”; that is, in order to deal with complexity we must first reduce it. This idea is a key difference between my approach and other scholarship that incorporates complexity and systems theory. I argue

that we can recognize complexity, but we must do so one stable piece at a time—this is the key to complex simultaneity, which asks us to consider an issue first as an either/or, and then as a both/and. In the final section of chapter two I will enact the both/and component of the rhetoric-systems approach in the context of rhetorical theory, and will show how extant rhetorical concepts can travel to new contexts, be applied in new ways, and become joined with other rhetorical and extra-rhetorical concepts in a way that invents rhetoric theory in new configurations.

In chapter three I will continue the exploration of stubbornness and rhetorical effect in an examination of a tenacious political debate in which there seems to be only stubbornness. Specifically, the popular belief that the “founders” of the United States were devout Christians is one that has provoked a great deal of exasperation from those who cannot understand why the belief persists in the face of apparently clear evidence of its inaccuracy. In exploring this debate I challenge how we often think of stability and change in our beliefs, and in so doing I will elaborate on the complex functioning of stubbornness—as both a limiting and a productive force—in public debate. I will also illustrate how a consideration of rhetoric as a system in itself can be useful in the study of political rhetoric, public argumentation, and rhetorical inquiry in general.

Chapter four illustrates how a rhetoric-systems approach—and complex simultaneity—can reshape our thinking about causality. I argue that simplified narrations of cause and effect are necessary, but that these reductions can also have deleterious effects, in particular for the way we view language, and by extension, the way we view rhetoric studies. By explaining how our decision-making process exhibits what I call “excessive causality,” I provide a blueprint for future discussions of cause and effect that

are both (necessarily) simplified *and* theoretically robust. Again, this is an approach that deals with complexity via one stability at a time. As well, the major epistemic move in this chapter—from a consideration of rhetoric as a system in itself to a consideration of rhetoric in a more encompassing system that includes the physical world—provides a way to imagine a productive interchange between rhetoric and the sciences. I do not posit either field as more important than the other, but rather, I argue for an either/or and a both/and approach, which illuminates how these fields are both independent and interrelated.

In chapter five I turn my attention to writing studies and pedagogy, taking up the seemingly problematic opposition of fluid approaches to writing on the one hand, and on the other, those pedagogical approaches that at first glance can seem overly static (that some pedagogical approaches are static is a critique often heard in “postprocess” perspectives on writing). A rhetoric-systems approach, I argue, overcomes the supposed inhospitability of “practical” classroom approaches—which are often valued highly by students themselves—to the innovative theoretical possibilities offered by several recent expansionary approaches to rhetoric and writing studies.

My final chapter will turn outward to broader political questions involving writing standards, and to questions involving the reliability of quantitative measures, in both writing assessment and also in general. A rhetoric-systems approach provides a way for us in rhetoric to avoid a completely oppositional position vis-à-vis so-called “common” standards, but to do so without yielding our fundamental recognition of epistemological situatedness, which would seem to militate against the very possibility of universal standards. This is a sort of paradox the rhetoric-systems approach is well-suited for, and

as an answer to the often-heard enthusiasm for empirical results we can see a benefit of the approach, which asks us to recognize the way that instability and stability can be conceived as complementary, and not opposing, concepts. Exploring the difference between the terms “algorithm” and “heuristic,” an opposition I argue reproduces the tension inherent in cultural demands for certainty in the face of unavoidable uncertainty, I make the case for the possibility of valid measurement—valid, that is, as long as we remember that every measurement must always leave something out.

A rhetoric-systems approach can prove useful as a way to intervene in debates where any number of concepts are locked in seeming opposition, and where participants on various sides of the debate often consider their position to be, not just correct, but also inarguable. While the approach does not provide a final resolution to any of these debates—and in fact the approach itself precludes the existence of a final resolution—it can provoke a rethinking of the way the debates may have been initially articulated. In so doing, the rhetoric-systems approach is a rhetorical strategy that can, at least provisionally, both bridge, and validate, our stubborn oppositions.

CHAPTER II

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE RHETORIC-SYSTEMS APPROACH, AND FURTHER IMPLICATIONS FOR RHETORIC STUDIES

As rhetoricians well know, look close enough at any label and you will find a definitional argument. While the rhetoric-systems approach I outline and employ in this dissertation deals with ideas found in the broad trans-disciplinary body of theory generally referred to as “systems theory,” the theoretical perspectives I gather here are drawn from a wide range of sub-disciplines within the field, including “Social Systems Theory,” “Complexity Theory,” “Nonlinear Dynamic Systems Theory,” “Second Wave Cybernetics,” “Second-Order Systems Theory,” “Wild Systems Theory,” and “Autopoetics” (to name a few). These terms denote different bodies of work with similar yet distinct theoretical tenets.¹¹ Keeping this point in mind, my use of “systems theory” is not intended to unify the diverse and divergent multi-disciplinary body of theory that comprises the insights I am weaving together. Rather, I am bringing, as Byron Hawk (quoting Latour and Weibel) puts it, an “ecology of . . . interests” together by considering “more and more elements . . . simultaneously, side by side” under the

¹¹ For a more in-depth exploration of systems theory concepts from each of these named perspectives, see (respectively): Luhmann; Kauffman; Guastello and Liebovitch; Hayles *How*; Clarke and Hansen; Jordan “Wild”; Livingston.

umbrella of what could be called a “new rhetoric” (Latour and Weibel 40; Hawk, “Reassembling” 90–91).¹²

In so doing, my rhetoric-systems approach does not simply borrow from these diverse articulations of systems theory in order to apply them in rhetorical contexts, but rather shows how rhetoric *is* a system itself. Highlighting the properties of rhetoric systems enables us to better delineate stubbornness and rhetorical effects as complex rhetorical phenomena—neither entirely detrimental nor entirely beneficial—that have the potential to function both productively and prohibitively in deliberative rhetorical contexts. As I will show, conceiving of rhetorical elements in a system gives us a way to account for the novel and unexpected function of our rhetorical actions and effects, and can expand and complicate our theorizations of these rhetorical elements themselves. At the same time, the insights gained from this approach give us a way to sharpen our theoretical focus and to reign in the complexity and scope of a potentially unending field of interacting elements, and can serve as a useful method for application in public argumentation, and in rhetoric studies in general.

In this chapter, after exploring the connections of my own rhetoric-systems approach to similar applications and articulations of systems theory, I will lay out the implications of the key theoretical principles involved in the approach. In the final section of the chapter I will show how the rhetoric-systems approach allows extant rhetorical concepts themselves to travel to new contexts, be applied in new ways, and join with

¹² In addressing such theoretical divergences, I adopt a method similar to what Julie Jung and I have described as a “neurorhetorical methodology.” Although my subject matter here does not directly pertain to brain science, the methodological underpinnings are the same: here, I “emphasize the rhetoricity of . . . scientific arguments as [I] import them,” and in so doing “acknowledge” the “conflicts within the [scientific] research itself and the conflicted relationships of . . . scientific theory with preexisting debates in our own discipline” (Mays and Jung 47).

other rhetorical and extra-rhetorical concepts in a way that reinvents rhetoric theory. As I argue, adopting a rhetoric-systems approach not only changes how specific concepts can be conceived, but it also changes what form rhetorical inquiry can take by drawing together critical terms in new coherent formulations.

The Need for Stability in a Context of Complexity and Change

An important premise in what is an ongoing, but recently accelerating, embrace of complexity and systems theory in rhetoric and writing studies is the recognition of dynamic contexts. Byron Hawk argues that we should be emphasizing fluidity in our theorizations of rhetoric, and so should take it up as “a system that moves and evolves” (*Counter-History* 192–94).¹³ Jenny Rice, also, has called for a move from “rhetorical situation to rhetorical ecology,” an approach that highlights the relations of diverse rhetorical texts, rhetorical actions, and, as she puts it, other “effects, enactments, and events” (Edbauer 9).¹⁴ Along similar lines, Nathan Shepley articulates systems theory as requiring us to account for how “texts” in a rhetorical ecology can be conceived “not as a single moment of action from a writer-rhetor but as sites of a series of diachronic

¹³ Cary Wolfe, who is not located specifically in rhetoric and composition but whose work is influential to scholars in these disciplines, describes a posthumanism informed by systems theory that also stresses evolution and movement; as Wolfe argues a system always “operates upon . . . deviations from a norm or baseline” (*Critical* 56). For more on posthumanism in the context of systems theory, see Hawk “Reassembling”; Hayles *How*; and Wolfe *What*. For a development of the link between posthuman rhetorics and technical communication, see Mara and Hawk.

¹⁴ The expansion of what we consider as a part of the rhetorical situation has greatly enriched the research trajectories in our field. In a foundational article, Marilyn Cooper makes use of the “web” metaphor to argue that a writing “system” involves connections between even the most seemingly disparate environmental and social elements (“Ecology”). More recently, Rice’s “publics approach” builds from her own description of rhetorical ecologies in “demand[ing] that we pay attention to the nonofficial spaces where such communally sustained consciousness is developed: letters to newspapers, blogs, informal conversations that happen in public spaces, talk radio calls, online message boards, [and so on]” (*Distant* 14–15; 19). For a further development of the “ecology of composition,” see Syverson; for more on ecological rhetoric, see Herndl and Brown; Killingsworth and Palmer; and Zebroski; for a comprehensive account of “ecompositionist” approaches, see Dobrin and Weisser.

interactions between people and ideologies.” The emphasis on fluidity of concepts is also taken up by Sidney I. Dobrin in his *Postcomposition*, where he describes his own “ecological theor[y] of writing” as explicitly embracing “complex ecology and systems ecology,” and as overcoming what he calls the “will to simplicity and stability” inherent in many approaches to writing (142; 173).¹⁵ And in an earlier expression of a similar sentiment—which many of the above theorists draw upon—Richard M. Coe argues for an “eco-logic” approach that advocates turning away from a static approach to the teaching of writing and correspondingly embracing the idea that “meaning is relative to context” (233).

The importance of ever-shifting contexts as well as the expansiveness of what can be included in the system are both premises embraced in my own rhetoric-systems approach. What is different about my approach, however, is that it emphatically does *not* deny the value of stability, nor of limiting (temporarily, at least) the purview of a system (such as rhetoric or writing). As I explored toward the end of chapter one, dynamism, fluidity, and expansiveness are important notions to include in any theorization of a system or complex activity. However, it is important to also recognize that stability is itself essential. Carving out a discrete stability from a potential infinity of choices is what N. Katherine Hayles calls “making a cut,” and this key move within systems theory is often overlooked in uptakes within rhetoric and composition. My rhetoric-systems approach emphasizes the necessity of making a cut, thereby creating a static and circumscribed perspective, as I hold that such a cut is indispensable to managing the vertiginous complexity inherent in a system.

¹⁵ Similarly, Paul Prior and Jody Shipka’s articulation of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) stipulates that our theories of writing should look to “the dispersed and fluid chains of places, times, people, and artifacts that come to be tied together in trajectories of literate action.”

Dobrin's assertion, then, that the "will to simplicity and stability" is a "conscious retreat . . . away from complexity" (171), disregards an important component *of* complexity—namely, the need for stable approaches to it. Complexity may be a vast and ever-expanding field of possibilities, but it also entails that these possibilities *be constrained as stabilities*, even if these stabilities are temporary. To only think of the systems we study as infinitely expansive and always on the move is to lose the value of reigning in and stabilizing what it is we choose to study in a particular moment.

For example, to think of rhetorical ecologies as including the material and the digital, as many in the field are beginning to do;¹⁶ to pay attention to writing and rhetoric not only "from above," but also "from below," as Nancy Welsh puts it (480); to include the networked "structures of feeling" circulating in a rhetorical ecology (Edbauer 10); and to go even further, to think of rhetoric as that which cannot be "zone[d] . . . within symbolicity" and thus to include the ontological dimension in our rhetorical theorizations (as Thomas Rickert has suggested [xv; see also Davis])—all of these are useful expansions of what rhetoric (and writing) *can be*. Likewise, while my approach in this dissertation focuses on public argumentation and deliberative rhetoric, I also position these activities as part of a larger ecology that encompasses a variety of material and technological dimensions.

Many of these approaches, however, also have the potential to move the focus away from what rhetoric can be when it *is* confined to the narrow zone of symbolicity, or

¹⁶ A variety of rhetoric scholars have embraced systems and complexity theory as a means of theorizing the integration of new and emerging technologies into our rhetoric and writing ecologies. Jennifer L. Bay, as one example, develops the premise that writing itself is constituted by "the body and computer together [in] a complex, co-adaptive system" (930). Building on this turn to the digital, Jim Ridolfo and Dànielle Nicole DeVoss's description of "rhetorical velocity" addresses the impact of a digitally-integrated rhetoric and writing ecology on the canon of delivery. For more on the diverse digital aspects of rhetorical and writing ecologies, see Brooke; DeVoss, McKee, and Selfe, eds; Rickert and Blakesley.

what writing can be when it *is* confined to a single context. This is not to say, to reiterate once more, that our theorizations of these endeavors should always be so restricted; we can and should push past theorizations that settle on limited ecologies or overly narrow contexts. But by lingering on these narrower contexts, at least for a moment—by allowing the insights we gain from theorizations of confined and static ecologies to be developed undisturbed by an impulse to include more, and *then* to see what an expansion of the context and scope of our study can bring to the table—we allow the local and the global, the confined and the expansive, to better and more robustly resonate: first as an either/or, then as a both/and.

Stable Boundaries, Moving Systems: “Compensatory Effects” and the Theoretical Origins of Complex Simultaneity

The roots of the “both/and”-and-“either/or” aspect of complex simultaneity lie in systems theory’s unique articulation of *boundaries*. First of all, for a coherent system to exist at all there must be a boundary around it—that is, there must be an “inside” and an “outside” of the system. Fundamentally, then, the boundaries of any stable system must be closed to the “outside,” since, if a system allows that which is outside it to overrun its boundaries, there is no way for that system to maintain its integrity, and it ceases to exist. While the principles I describe in this section have somewhat nuanced ramifications, they are built from this key point: that stability (and closure) is necessary for systems to operate.

What Hayles calls the “second wave” systems theorists argued that this principle of stable boundaries makes systems “informationally closed.” As Hayles writes, this

means that since nothing can “cross the boundary separating the system from its environment,” anything that happens on the outside does not *directly* affect the inside of the system; instead, such external events can only “trigger changes” on the inside (*How* 10–11). With regard to a system of rhetoric, we can think of a person’s network of beliefs (for example) as self-enclosed: any new events that happen out in the world are thus interpreted solely within a pre-existing network of beliefs; upon hearing some new piece of information I make sense of it completely within the context of what I already know (within the boundaries of my rhetoric system). Nothing on the outside, then, can directly alter the functioning of my rhetoric system inside of its boundaries.

Rearranging a rhetoric system without destabilizing its basic underlying structure and boundaries involves an indirect form of rhetorical effect described as *compensatory self-organization*. As second wave biological systems theorists Humberto R. Maturana and Francisco J. Varela put it, a system “continuously generates and specifies its own organization . . . under conditions of continuous perturbations and compensation of perturbations” (79). The function of this type of compensatory effect allows systems to be remarkably stubborn (or, resilient) since, as I describe above, in the compensatory process a system’s boundaries resist destabilization by avoiding direct interaction with the outside. In short, the system reacts to external perturbations by reorganizing itself entirely *within* itself in ways that maintain its continued integrity and stability. As an example, we can think of the way we often react to destabilizing information not by immediately changing our worldview, but by *reorganizing* it, compensating for this information internally in such a way that keeps our overall view of the world relatively intact: think here of my example from chapter one, in which a person might compensate

for information about WMDs in Iraq with the assertion that the media has a liberal bias—a mechanism that allows one to avoid any direct engagement with the information and keeps intact the contours of that person’s network of beliefs.

This brings us to the idea that stability is sponsored by compensatory change, and correspondingly that the appearance of stubbornness is sponsored by the existence of rhetorical effect(s): presenting a person with clear evidence that he or she is wrong often results in that person seemingly ignoring that evidence, interpreting it differently than the interlocutor expects, or falling back on other beliefs to justify plain disbelief. This mechanism of ignoring, reinterpreting, or justifying disbelief of potentially destabilizing evidence is in this sense a reorganization of the entire system in such a way as to assimilate the new piece of evidence without destabilizing the entire network. The belief network self-organizes in this way in order to maintain its overall integrity, and *each self-organizing movement constitutes a rhetorical effect*. This self-organization maintained by rhetorical effects abides by what biological systems theorist Stuart Kauffman calls “order for free.” This tendency to self-organize—in short, to keep order as an organized system—is, Kauffman argues, a primary imperative for all systems that allows them to sustain their existence *as* systems (71–92).¹⁷ Such maintenance happens precisely by preventing potentially destabilizing direct interactions with external elements.

In deliberative debate, then, rhetorical effect can be seen as ever-present, functioning compensatorily to keep a system stable. One consequence of this is that it becomes unlikely that a few words, or a single well-constructed argument, will simply

¹⁷ Kauffman argues that the imperative for order in complex systems gives them a “decided survival advantage” (90). As I explain below, while there are distinct benefits to maintaining order (and stable boundaries), I assert that such stability and its benefits are ultimately rhetorical, and although it is useful to theorize stability we must subsequently consider the ways in which stability is also contingent.

overturn (to put it colloquially) a person's tenaciously-held beliefs, since this would set off changes that could destabilize one's entire rhetoric system. Rather, the system will compensate in such a way as to make that system seem unaffected—even while rhetorical effects are exactly what facilitate this stability.

Another ramification of compensatory self-organization for deliberative debate is that this compensatory movement is also ultimately *preparatory*. In compensating for new external perturbations the system reorganizes in a way that allows it to handle other, similar potentially destabilizing perturbations. In other words, deliberative interaction itself can help reconfigure a system to accommodate similar perturbations: it would stand to reason, that is, that in defending one's point of view against a particular counterargument, a person will have created a system configuration that can withstand other, similar perturbations, as the system will be less vulnerable to those counterarguments. As I will explore in later sections, this stability may still be vulnerable to destabilization in unexpected ways, but in terms of creating resistance to similar counterarguments such compensatory reorganization *can* create more robustly stable systems.¹⁸

More on Stability, and on the Mechanisms of Stable Systems: Explaining Attractors

In many ways, it's good to have stable boundaries. Life (a biological system), for instance, depends on the maintenance of our boundaries as living organisms—destabilization would mean death. A society (a social system) has stable boundaries that

¹⁸ This point is corroborated by a variety of studies on the phenomenon of inoculation in argumentation. In general, these studies demonstrate that a person's prior exposure to arguments contradictory to her beliefs has a strengthening effect on resistance to future attacks on these beliefs. See for example Anderson and McGuire; Compton and Pfau; Lumsdaine and Janis; McGuire; McGuire and Papageorgis; Papageorgis and McGuire; Pfau and Burgoon.

allow it to function cohesively and to provide order and stability for (at least some of) those who live in it. A rhetoric system with stable boundaries allows a person to have a worldview that makes sense to him or her, and thus allows knowledge to be built upon solid premises—a destabilization would mean those heretofore solid premises would be called into question, and everything one knows could be thrown into disarray.

Of course destabilization isn't all—or always—bad. Life can evolve into new and advantageous forms, societies can be redrawn for the benefit of more members, and beliefs and knowledge can be called into question resulting in further theoretical and practical development. But while the destabilization of boundaries *can* be a good thing, a rhetoric-systems approach reminds us that it is important to draw out and linger over our theorizing of stability, both to recognize its benefit and to better understand how it works. With this in mind I take for granted that systems strive to stay stable, and do not ask who benefits (a question that could give rise to doubts about the benefits of such stability), nor do I ask (yet) what can be gained by embracing change. Rather, in the following section I expand the concept of *attractors* in order to illustrate the ways systems *do* maintain stability, and so more fully elaborate the benefits gained from this state.

In general, the stability of a system can be particularly tenacious. In part this is because systems often become locked into what is called a “state cycle,” or an “attractor” (Kauffman 77–78). An attractor functions as a specific stable configuration of elements, all in relation with each other. In other words, there are particular configurations of elements-in-relation to which a system is literally *attracted* (to be clear, it is the *configuration* that is the attractor, not the individual elements that constitute the configuration—a common misperception). The elements in such a configuration can and

do move, as they may “cycle” through several different “states” of arrangement, but in each state the elements are nevertheless very resistant to unexpected disturbances.

Systems theorists/psychologists Stephen J. Guastello and Larry S. Liebovitch describe an attractor in spatial terms, as “a box of space” that functions “like a magnet,” with “an effective range in which it can draw in objects, known as its basin.” As they write, an “attractor is regarded as a stable structure because all the points within [its configuration] follow the same rules of motion” (6).¹⁹ Guastello and Liebovitch’s point that an attractor functions “like a magnet” is particularly important because it illustrates that configurations that are even *close* to an attractor state can be (as the word implies) attracted to the stable configuration, and so drawn to conform to its shape.

In terms of a rhetoric system, a set of beliefs that has held up for a particularly long period of time would be an example of a strong attractor. Such a specific set of beliefs would entail specific definitions of key terms, allegiance to specific commonplaces, and so on, all existing ostensibly in harmony. This belief system could be said to be locked into a stable state cycle that is governed by an attractor (a stable definition of a term or a commonplace within the system would not in itself be an attractor; rather, the attractor would describe the entire stable configuration). In this sense a stable rhetoric system, including all of its beliefs, commonplaces, texts, and so on, can be said to be governed by an attractor, and if it is a particularly strong attractor, the system will be highly resistant to perturbations. Importantly, too, such strong attractors are able to subsume small differences and tolerate (to a point) deviations, as even when a

¹⁹ Guastello and Liebovitch in fact describe several types of attractors, all dictating different kinds of stable system behavior. For the purposes of my project, however, I need only describe attractors in the sense that they organize system behavior, and thus are associated with stable system states. For a specific explication and application of the different types of attractors in the context of rhetoric and writing studies, see Hawk, “Stitching.”

system is pulled away from the exact configuration of the attractor it can still be within the range of the “magnet” (the range encompassed by the magnet’s pull is referred to as a state cycle’s *basin of attraction*). In short, an attractor functions to organize the elements of a system, whether those elements are biological properties (as Kauffman discusses), individual and social behavioral properties (as with Guastello and Liebovitch), or rhetorical properties (here).

The Next Perspective: And Yet, Boundaries—and Systems—*Aren’t* Stable

My rhetoric-systems approach demands that my theorization not settle on the idea that systems must always remain stable. From another point of view, system destabilization is a continuous process, manifesting as a multitude of ongoing subtle changes interspersed by sporadically extensive—often dramatic—changes. As I detail in previous sections, compensatory stabilization via system reorganization means that change often occurs without observers being aware: from this perspective such change enables perceived stability. But as many systems theorists also explain, even this outward stability cannot continue indefinitely, and those internal changes do not just enable greater stability but create the conditions under which more extensive destabilization can occur.

Not only can we think of stability *as* change, but also we can think of stable boundaries as the precondition for the redrawing of boundaries. These periodic extensive destabilizations constitute the system abandoning its attractor. As Kauffman puts it, while a system can be bound by an attractor, it also always exists in a larger “state space” with several different attractor points. Although the system can be stuck in the pull of one of these, it is nevertheless “draw[n] . . . ineluctably forward” by the pull of each successive

attractor. That is, perturbations to the system eventually pull the system configuration far enough away from one attractor so that it falls into the “gravity” of another attractor, causing the system to reorganize in a new configuration (100). Using a different metaphoric frame of reference, environmental systems theorists C.S. Holling, Lance H. Gunderson, and Garry D. Peterson describe this kind of major change in terms of the “creative destruction” and “renewal” of a system, using the example of a fire decimating a forest and subsequently allowing a grassland to spring up.

It is important to remember that there are always a multitude of systems operating in relation to each other, and as Holling, Gunderson, and Peterson explain, there can be “renewals” of some systems without the destabilization of those that encompass them (67–77). In terms of a rhetoric system this would mean, for example, that an individual’s rhetoric system can be destabilized and transformed without leading to the destabilization of the rhetoric system of the community to which she belongs—in some cases that individual’s transformation could even function as a compensatory change of the community rhetoric system. In such a case the severity of the change would only depend on the vantage point of observation: for the individual, the change would be a destabilization; for the community, it would be nothing more than a blip.²⁰

Smaller (and potentially invisible) changes and destabilizations, however, can also make a difference in the fundamental underlying structure of systems networked to the first. This means that those compensatory changes that make a system more resilient to certain perturbations *can also* create the conditions under which a more significant

²⁰ Holling, Gunderson, and Peterson sketch a complex interrelation of systems that can all be altered by cascading changes that reverberate across a linked series of environments they call a “panarchy.” Many of the details of the functioning of these interrelations, while useful in understanding the concept of panarchies, and of system renewal in general, are beyond the scope of my project. For more see Gunderson and Holling.

change can occur in a wide range of connected systems. As pioneering systems theorists Ilya Prigogine and Isabel Stengers explain, at times a single “dangerous . . . individual, idea, or behavior” can “exploit” the “nonlinear relations guaranteeing the stability of [a] preceding regime” (190), and in so doing can resonate throughout several systems at once, driving major destabilizing change in all of them. While an observed massive destabilization is the result of the accumulation of many previous changes, it often will seem to have been caused by one specific change (such a single event is sometimes referred to as “the last straw,” “the tipping point,” or as Mark C. Taylor calls it, the “decisive crossroads” [150]).²¹

This revelation has several significant ramifications for deliberative rhetoric. First of all, from this point of view we can see a rhetoric system operating in relation to an unending multitude of other rhetoric systems, all of which exhibit stabilities in the midst of constant change, and all of which can potentially stabilize or perturb each other.²² These processes often operate in ways that elude observation, especially if they create an outward appearance of stubbornness. These rhetorical effects do not remain invisible at all times, however, as there is always the potential for a massively resonant “dangerous” element to transform them into something more clearly noticeable. Putting these descriptions together, we can say that all deliberative rhetoric is in fact effective,

²¹ It is also important to note that such major change does not always occur as a result of one of these “dangerous” changes; as Holling, Gunderson, and Peterson remind us, whole systems and series of systems can be “transformed” either by “productive novelty cascade[ing] up” (such as with a seemingly small, dangerous change), *or* by “destructive catastrophes cascade[ing] down” (such as when a major change in a larger system forces the reorganization of all of the systems contained within it) (88).

²² In this context, the concept of stabilities in the midst of constant change is a slightly alternate take on (although it has clear parallels to) Mark C. Taylor’s point that complex systems theory posits stabilities that “are but momentary eddies in an endlessly complex and turbulent flux” (3). In my articulation of the concept, and in attempting to keep in mind the either/or component of my approach, I would reduce the emphasis on flux and on the “momentary”-ness of these stabilities. As I elaborate in chapter one (and, as I noted, as Sara Ahmed argues), it is important to recognize that for those who are caught up in such stabilities, they often are not at all momentary.

although it is effective in a way that is not always observable. Moreover, rhetorical effects drive all of the systems' evolutions, and whether or not these effects are visible they create the conditions under which all observable change can occur. From this perspective, stubbornness is subordinated to the importance and efficacy of rhetoric, which may not always be at work in ways that we can observe, but is in fact always circulating, and always waiting for its own inevitable (observable) return.²³

Order and Disorder in a System

To clarify where we are so far: Systems survive, and thrive, by maintaining a stable internal order. This order entails that the elements of a system are arranged in a particular configuration, defined as an attractor. For a rhetoric system governed by such an attractor this means that the definition of terms and of commonplaces, the texts thought of as “important,” and the cultural premises held in common are for the most part universally agreed upon. Anything that does not fit into this established order is relegated to the outside of the system (deviant definitions, or heretical texts, would be examples of this). Such order is predicated on system boundaries being closed, as this prevents these potentially destabilizing external elements from being let in.

Building on these points from a perspective that foregrounds change rather than stability: within the boundaries of a system, internal compensatory changes occur that preserve the overall order in the system. These internal changes, however, simultaneously

²³ In chapter four I will explore the notion that those rhetorical actions we *do* perceive as having a significant rhetorical effect, and which can seem like the tipping point of system change, are never the sole cause of system change. As I will explain, this point means that traditional notions of causality—where rhetorical action X is the sole cause of system change Y—must be reconfigured within a rhetoric-systems approach to account for the way that change is always a relational phenomenon, involving past and future actions, and observed and unobserved rhetorical effects.

create the conditions under which the system will be destabilized, as even the most durable order will eventually collapse. Upon this destabilization, system boundaries dissolve, external elements are let back in (they *return*), and new system boundaries are formed, ordering the system in a way that entails different configurations and exclusions. Stability can be thought of as change, but also, the stability created by change is a precondition for the possibility of new system formation, since those changes constantly reorganize the system in innumerable and often unnoticeable ways. As well, any of these reorganizations and destabilizations can be catalysts for the destabilization of other systems interconnected with the first, resulting in a massive, multi-system reorganization. Finally, both internal changes and whole system destabilizations, even though they are constantly occurring, may be completely invisible—depending on one’s observational perspective—and so what is often counted as an “effect” in a system can be the cumulative result of innumerable other effects, both seen and unseen.

In terms of rhetoric, and a rhetoric system, these insights provide us with new ways to think about boundaries as necessary yet contingent, and about stability and change as independent yet dependent on the other’s existence. These insights also prompt us to reconsider the way that beliefs, commonplaces, texts, and other elements of the system are often subtly interconnected, and to reconsider how this interconnection might affect their evolution. Additionally, they tell us that stubbornness and rhetorical effect function as co-existent and complex phenomena intertwined via myriad visible and invisible connections.

A rhetoric-systems approach, grounded in the theory I lay out here, can thus provide us with a way to map how certain groups of rhetorical elements may, to those

caught up specific rhetoric systems, possess a meaning that is complementary and reinforcing (and so promote stability), and correspondingly, to map how destabilizations in one system can affect the integrity and stability of other systems. In short, the theoretical principles that underlie this approach allow us as rhetoricians to be attentive to new, unique, and unexpected collaborative rhetorical effects across multiple systems. As I will further illustrate in chapter three via an exploration of a particular rhetorical ecology, all of these potential applications and theoretical perspectives can provide new paths via which we can approach rhetorical inquiry in general, yielding new conclusions about the functioning of any number of diverse rhetorical ecologies.

System-As-Perspective: Again, the Need for Stability in the Presence of Complexity

So far, by jumping from one perspective to another—the preferred method of inquiry in a rhetoric-systems approach—we have gained insights into the function of rhetoric systems, and into the phenomena of stability, change, stubbornness, and rhetorical effect. Slightly shifting our focus once more provides a fuller explanation of the way that stable systems can also function themselves as perspectives by which we can manage overwhelming complexity.²⁴ From this point of view we would not think of systems as collections of rhetorical (or other) elements so much as we would conceive of systems as ways of viewing the world. This way of thinking complements the theoretical principles explicated previously, but it also adds another important layer to our understanding of systems. Instead of reifying systems (or the elements they comprise) as things in

²⁴ The idea of a system of rhetoric as a perspective by which we manage complexity has clear parallels to the work of Kenneth Burke. Burke discusses often what he calls an “orientation”—a concept which (in a striking parallel to systems theory) he describes as “largely a self-perpetuating system, in which each part tends to corroborate the other parts.” A “shif[t] in perspective,” he writes, can create new ways of viewing or critiquing that system (*Permanence* 169).

themselves, from this viewpoint we can understand our very perceiving of what is encompassed in a given system as a stability that creates the conditions for knowledge. From this perspective *we can consider systems as epistemic, as ways of managing infinite complexity* in our world. This premise, among other things, helps explain how we can understand stable systems (as perspectives) as *necessary*, but also as *necessarily temporary* (and as *temporal*—as perspectives that exist for a finite period of time). Such an idea has particular parallels with the notion that systems themselves are rhetorical, in the sense that their boundaries are always shifting.

While individuals perceive a system as ordered, disorder continually pervades every system. And because every system exists in complex interrelation with a vast network of other systems, even the way these systems draw boundaries amongst themselves will never ultimately be settled. Because of this, any stable perception we have of systems is necessarily a contingent freezing of what is an ever-changing constellation of systems. Social systems theorist Niklas Luhmann describes such frozen (and reduced) complexity in terms of what he calls a system's "ordering perspective" (136). In short, an ordering perspective sorts information in a way that maintains the semblance of closed boundaries in a rhetoric system-as-perspective. Luhmann discusses this creation of closure in terms of "meaning": as he explains it, meaning is a way of reducing infinite complexity—or what he calls the "endless horizon of possibilities"—to specific "points of consensus" (64–66).

Hayles describes Luhmann's point here in terms of the need to *make a cut*; as she puts it, in creating meaning "the observer reduces the unfathomable complexity of undifferentiated reality into something she can understand" ("Making" 160). Luhmann

writes that in every momentary structure of this shared meaning “something else is always excluded,” and it is this *excess* that creates what he calls the “unrest” of a system. So while stable meaning is always present, and importantly, even when we perceive systems as stable (as we do when we “understand” meanings), because of the unrest caused by the excess left out, this stable meaning periodically “forces itself to change” (90, 64–66).

What is important in all of this is the way that we can think of *consensus* as *the creation of shared meaning that takes the form of definitions* which structure a system’s specific ordering perspective. These definitions themselves tend toward stability even while they are constantly being reorganized. Thus, any stability or stable meaning seems permanent to those perceiving or caught up in it, but no matter how secure it might seem, it is always haunted by the excess it proscribes and so is destined to be reformed.

As Luhmann explains, these stabilities are by their nature temporal and ultimately fleeting, as our experience of stable knowledge, which is produced by closing off divergent definitions from our ordering perspectives, is precisely what gives rise to the possibility of new knowledge structures. As he puts it, once consensus is reached, “the social situation is thereby synchronized. . . . In this moment everyone deals with the same object, and this leads to a multiplication of connective possibilities for the next moment. Closure opens the situation; determinacy produces indeterminacy” (167–68). In other words, for participants in a rhetorical ecology the moment an ordering perspective is

fixed via consensus is the moment the situation/perspective is closed. This is what enables the *next* perspective to be introduced.²⁵

That systems exist in a context of unending complexity means that our stable views of them become temporal: our perception of the world can be considered as a series of (contingently) stable systems/ordering perspectives carved out of unending complexity. In this way definitions are parts of a rhetoric system, including all of the other elements previously mentioned, but importantly: *stable definitions constitute the system as an ordering perspective*. While the perspectives explored earlier in this chapter give us a way to conceptualize definitions as individual elements of a rhetoric system, the perspective from which I operate now looks at definitions as generative, and at systems as epistemic phenomena consisting of those definitions, which contingently fix meaning by a process of inclusion and exclusion—by “making a cut” as to what can be defined in a certain way and banishing the excess (which would be that which falls outside a given definition). While stability is a necessary condition for knowledge, our knowledge of the world is caught up and determined by all of the elements of the rhetoric systems to which we belong, which are always shifting. Thus, a perspective constituted by a particular system configuration is a way of creating stable knowledge out of that which is in fact always on the move.

All of this speaks to the idea that the making of a cut is *necessary*. The “simplicity and stability” that Dobrin vilified as a “retreat” from complexity, and which he identified

²⁵ Compare to this the argument made by Steven Yarbrough, who, following Donald Davidson, explains that in order for rhetors to successfully communicate—as he puts it, to “get” each other—they must “come to share” a “similar method of adjusting [their] use of signs” that is “invent[ed] as they interact” (3). Yarbrough’s point that there must be this sort of common ground for communication to occur (5) parallels my own point here that there must be a way to forestall the potential for slippage of meaning—in choosing one out of a myriad possibilities of interpretation we both create a context for understanding and “make a cut.”

as “*rhetoric*” (173; emphasis mine), is, I argue, *a crucial part of complexity*. It is also crucial to a rhetoric-systems approach. Unending complexity is, ultimately, unmanageable, and in order to create knowledge we must embrace the imperative to stabilize and circumscribe our definitions of what a system consists. That is, there is no way to account for all of the possible rhetoric systems, nested within each other, overlapping, and otherwise interconnected in diverse and unending combinations. This *excess* is what drives an observer to make a cut, which creates the stable knowledge that allows her to make sense of the world. Similarly, the presence of excess is also what drives a rhetorical analyst to make a cut in her choice of what to explicate in mapping a rhetorical ecology. In both cases, the unrest caused by excess impels an eventual change in perspective, and underlies the constant presence of rhetoric itself, thought of in this case as the sequential initiation of these alternate configurations.²⁶

Inventing (and Reinventing) Rhetorical Theory

The imperative to make a cut does not just mean that we must reduce complexity. In articulating complex simultaneity, I argue that making several cuts, one after the other, can create more robust theorizations, which can produce unlikely combinations of

²⁶ The concept of *excess* is one that has a long history in rhetoric and philosophy. As Theodor W. Adorno argues, we manifest a sense of contradiction that is a result of our desire for unity—a desire parallel, I would argue, to our tendency to hold systems stable. This “thought of unity,” however, can never be permanent; as Adorno writes, to conceive of unity is to run counter to a heterogeneity that is destined to “collid[e] with its limit” as it “exceeds itself” (5). As Jane Bennett expands on the ramifications of this: “we knowers are haunted, [Adorno] says, by a painful, nagging feeling that something’s being forgotten or left out. This discomfiting sense of the inadequacy of representation remains no matter how refined or analytically precise one’s concepts become.” Adorno’s method of “negative dialectics,” Bennett argues, is meant to bring this “sense” to the forefront, and remind us “that life will always exceed our knowledge and control. The ethical project par excellence, as Adorno sees it, is to keep remembering this and to learn how to accept it” (14). This ethical dimension, I argue, is also a part of the articulation of my rhetoric-systems approach, which recognizes a particular system configuration as being constantly destabilized by the excess of possibilities from which it is chosen.

perspectives that provide unique new insights about a given rhetorical ecology. This idea works in the realm of rhetoric theory as well as in the realm of rhetorical inquiry. In this section I specifically investigate the way a rhetoric-systems approach can invent rhetorical theory in new ways, by forging new connections across heretofore disparate theoretical realms. As Jasbir K. Puar puts it, to be interested in such new connections is to be interested in “the unexpected, the unplanned irruptions, the lines of flight, the denaturalizing of expectation through the juxtaposition of the seemingly unrelated,” so as to “undo” that which is “naturalized” as “taken-for-granted knowledge formations” (xv).²⁷ Putting into conversation rhetorical theory with empirical research from a variety of disciplines can provoke new “lines of flight,” both for further empirical rhetorical research and rhetorical inquiry in general.

Michael A. Hogg and Danielle L. Blaylock’s edited collection, *Extremism and the Psychology of Uncertainty*, is one example of empirical research that can be productively combined in unique ways with rhetorical theory. As the editors write, one “clear leitmotif” that runs through the research explored in the collection is the notion that

[w]hen people feel uncertain about some aspect of themselves, or their perceptions and beliefs, they turn to aspects of themselves or to worldviews that they do feel certain about; and they engage in behaviors that are oriented toward affirming, consolidating, and reinforcing self-conception and relevant ideological systems and worldviews. (xxiii)

²⁷ Puar was referring to the attempt to “undo the naturalized sexual scripts of terror” that become “taken-for-granted knowledge formations” (xv); in this case, I am applying this formula specifically to disciplinary knowledge formations. In this sense, while the nature of the target discourse differs significantly, the goal of the approach is parallel.

As one author included in the collection sums up, “Within psychology, an emerging literature is directly addressing . . . how unrelated anomalies may evoke the heightened affirmation of political and moral beliefs” (Proulx 67).

Here we have empirical support for an “affirmation of political and moral beliefs” that I would call *compensatory*. Not only does this corroborate the idea that beliefs are interconnected and shift in relation to the perturbations exerted on other beliefs, by taking a rhetoric-systems approach we can draw such research together with, for example, the point made by Jenny Rice (along with others discussed above who advocate this position) that we should be including *more* in our “rhetorical ecologies.” Thinking along these lines raises questions about what kinds of diverse elements—including textual, affective, technological, social, and so on—might contribute to the compensatory affirmations of disparate views.²⁸ In short (and as I will take up in chapter four), the combination of these ideas suggests that even traditionally non-rhetorical elements can influence the way our rhetoric systems are structured, and also suggests that rhetorical effects themselves can circulate through both rhetorical and non-rhetorical realms, creating new relationships between ostensibly disparate elements.

The rhetorical concept of commonplaces serve as another example where seemingly disparate ideas can be combined. Thought of as specific terms or phrases the meanings of which are held in common within a community, commonplaces can exist as key components of a rhetoric system. Combining various theoretical perspectives on commonplaces, however, can build an even more cohesive and coherent working

²⁸ Such new questions could also help answer Raúl Sánchez’s call for a “reimagin[ing of] empiricism” in writing studies (“Outside” 239), perhaps by suggesting a way to integrate empirical observation of writing practices with theoretical extrapolation of the way these practices create and are constrained by specific rhetoric systems.

definition of the idea as a whole. In Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee's definition of the concept, for example, commonplaces are described as what "[i]deologies are made up of." Within a rhetoric-systems approach, the commonplaces agreed upon in a community structure the stable state of that community's rhetoric system. Using other principles of systems theory (and of a rhetoric-systems approach), we can highlight different ways of thinking about the commonplace. As Crowley and Hawhee write, commonplaces such as "Anyone can become president of the United States," or "All men are created equal," can all seem "obvious" to members of a particular community (20–21). Such obviousness from my approach would reveal the existence of an *attractor* in the rhetoric system. While everyone in the community may not have identical definitions of each commonplace, there would be a locatable "basin of attraction" (as Kauffman would refer to it) within which these deviant definitions would be pulled toward and stabilized around the "common" definition. To describe this in terms more familiar to rhetoricians, the set of commonplaces falling within the basin of attraction would tend to *normalize* toward a single stable set of definitions.

To build on this point we can turn to Mark Garrett Longaker, who writes that common definitions of commonplaces generally are based on a "conversation" in a community that "has its own available vocabulary and discursive forms that new participants must learn to employ" (5). While these conversations can be sites for disagreement and debate, argues Elizabeth Kimball, picking up on Longaker's definition, they entail a shared set of understandings (375–76). Using a rhetoric-systems approach to integrate these various articulations of the concept, we can say that the very conversations and resolution of disagreements that create and sustain commonplaces would comprise

the *basin of attraction* of the rhetoric system. These conversations would pull community members toward a stable, shared definition of commonplaces, even if the “common” definitions would not be exactly coextensive among the members. These discussions would help structure the stable rhetorical states of the community, and in the process would help bind the community together and interconnect the commonplaces with all of the other beliefs, actions, and texts (all elements of a rhetoric system) of that community.

One possible research trajectory suggested by this approach would involve studying the way the system as a whole is reinforced in these conversations by the invocation of compensatory beliefs, definitions, or commonplaces. In a particularly close-knit community, bound particularly tightly by a series of interrelated and networked commonplaces structured by a particularly strong attractor, deviance from definitional norms in ostensibly unrelated areas may be policed particularly vehemently, and such policing could be mapped using a rhetoric-systems approach by focusing on the connections between seemingly disparate rhetorical elements.²⁹

Combining several theoretical “cuts” allows us to put into conversation various rhetorical concepts and definitions that are often considered apart from one another. As Michael Leff writes, “rhetorical arguments generally deal with confused notions, with ideas and concepts that do not admit of a single, unequivocal meaning.” Here, though, I would argue that a rhetoric-systems approach allows us to *embrace* what Leff calls the “bewildering diversity of meanings.” Rather than being forced to reduce, or as Leff writes, being forced to pick out for analysis “a single strand” of a concept (“Topics” 23–

²⁹ In chapter three I will examine an example of a particularly tenacious set of commonplaces, held in a group resembling the religious fundamentalist communities documented by Sharon Crowley in *Toward a Civil Discourse*. In both the communities Crowley and I investigate, there are, as she writes, “few spaces for invention” (147).

24), by making novel theoretical cuts my approach allows us to put together a variety of sources in new ways, and to combine several strands in order to yield a new conceptual whole on top of which a more complex argument can be built.

Coming from a different angle within rhetorical theory, Michael Calvin McGee's notion of an "ideograph" adds another layer of complexity to the idea of a set of commonplaces defining an attractor. As McGee puts it, ideographs are "the basic structural elements, the building blocks, of ideology." McGee describes ideographs, slightly in contrast to the commonplaces described by Crowley and Hawhee (although similar to those described by Longaker and Kimball), as "one-term sums of an orientation"—for example "liberty," "equality," or "rule of law" (6–7). As with the commonplaces discussed previously, the meaning of ideographs are not exactly coexistent among members of a community, but rather exist within a narrow range of meaning in what is essentially a "basin of attraction." As Celeste Condit and John Lucaites point out, "ideographs for a particular rhetorical culture identify the range of acceptable public beliefs and behaviors within any publicly constituted community" (xiii).

McGee's formulation of ideographs also directly recalls Luhmann's idea of an ordering perspective, as for McGee these terms compel a form of rhetorical "social control"—a normative force that persuades a community to one way of thinking, and that "guides behavior and belief into channels easily recognized by a community as acceptable and laudable" (6, 15). As McGee describes the ideographic phrase "the rule of law," for example:

[O]ne [is not] permitted to question the fundamental logic of ideographs:
Everyone is conditioned to think of “the rule of law” as a *logical*
commitment just as one is taught to think that “186,000 miles per second”
is an accurate empirical description of the speed of light even though few
can work the experiments or do the mathematics to prove it. (7)

In this sense, McGee is arguing that the rhetoric system “condition[s]” those caught up within it, since its very stability *as* an ordering perspective exerts self-sustaining rhetorical force on those caught up in its web.

McGee’s ideas about ideographs can shape our understandings of commonplaces: as “building blocks,” commonplaces alter the meaning of *other* building blocks in a way that maintains the overall structure of a rhetoric system. When McGee writes that an ideograph “is always understood in its relation to another,” and “is defined tautologically by using other terms in its cluster” of other ideographs (14), we can likewise understand commonplaces as defined based on the definition of other terms in the system. And when McGee characterizes a society’s collection of ideographs as “a situationally-defined synchronic structure of ideograph clusters constantly reorganizing itself to accommodate specific circumstances while maintaining its fundamental consonance and unity,” we can ascribe that quality to commonplaces as well. When he discusses ideographs as “related one to another in such a way as to produce unity of commitment in a particular historical context,” with each one “thus connected to all others as brain cells are linked by synapses, synchronically in one context at one specific moment” (14; 16), we can think of commonplaces as creating in a culture a similar unity of commitment in each synchronic historical moment. Finally, and most importantly, we can see both ideographs and

commonplaces as exhibiting properties that are the result of their existence in a networked system, the formulation of which is highly resistant to destabilization from the outside. Such a system is not only durable and cohesive, but because of its specific ability to compensate and to exert a stabilizing and a shaping force on those individuals and rhetorical elements caught up in the network, also is constantly productive of a diversity of ongoing rhetorical effects.

This integrated perspective reveals unique properties of both the concepts and the systems of which they are a part, and draws on several different rhetorical theories that we can now link together, using the rhetoric-systems approach as the bridge. Overall, taking a rhetoric-systems approach requires us to acknowledge the fundamental unpredictability and unmanageability of rhetorical action, inquiry, *and* theorization. At the same time, the approach provides us a way out of such a dilemma by stipulating that we commit to a specific cut even while recognizing that our cut is not the only one that can be made. A rhetoric-systems approach thus entails that we sequentially recognize and construct alternate ways of viewing a situation without becoming inextricably committed to any one perspective—every stability, that is, while useful in itself, must eventually be broken down and reformed.

In chapter three I will make use of some of the theoretical alliances I have invented here and commit to a cut in both my analysis of a particular rhetorical ecology and in my choice of the boundaries of that ecology. The scope of the chapter necessitates that I largely stay within one perspective, although I recognize that there are other ways to theorize such situations (and in chapter four I will specifically redraw the bounds of what I include in my theorizing). In general, in the next chapter I will make use of the

insights and theoretical combinations of this chapter to illustrate the benefits of the rhetoric-systems approach for rhetorical inquiry, highlighting unique nuances of how rhetorical actions function, and how the appearance of stability/stubbornness can in fact reflect a variety of interconnected stabilities and effects within that system.

CHAPTER III

WHO WERE THE FOUNDERS?: A PARTICULARLY “STUBBORN” BELIEF THEORIZED VIA A RHETORIC-SYSTEMS APPROACH

On the *Amazon.com* page for the e-book *A Tea People's History* (the cover of which is displayed in figure 1), there appears the following “product description,” intended to give prospective buyers a brief preview of the item:

A Tea People's History is the real story of America, as told by a person who wasn't there but who has watched a lot of Glenn Beck. From the betrayal of our Christian Founders by ACORN agent Aaron Burr to our nation's salvation at the hands of Saint Reagan, this rigorously opinion-checked history is an ideal guide for any home-schooled student turned off by the liberal bias of traditional textbooks.

The book, the tone of which is summed-up well by this description and by the picture on the cover, expresses a common reaction against what is for many people an impossible-to-believe premise: that the authors of the Constitution were fundamentalist Christians who, in creating the

Figure 1: Cover of *A Tea People's History*

document, intended for the United States to be a distinctly Christian nation. In this chapter, I discuss the way certain premises, beliefs, and definitions can be considered undeniably “factual” by some individuals—as is, for many people, the premise mentioned above—while others deem these same facts to be inconceivable. As I explain, such seemingly impossible beliefs not only exist, but thrive as part of a *rhetoric system* where they persist in the face of what might appear to be irrefutable contrary evidence. In the following pages, I will use the rhetoric-systems approach to zoom in on a particular belief—that the “founders” of the United States were devout Christians—in order to illustrate important aspects of rhetoric systems in general, and in turn to show the value of the approach as a means of rhetorical inquiry and as a way of reconceptualizing our potential for intervention in rhetorical ecologies. That the belief I have chosen here is widely considered to be a particularly “stubborn” one is crucial, since I intend to illustrate that it is precisely in situations where rhetorical intervention seems useless that a rhetoric-systems approach can show us such intervention is actually productive of rhetorical effects—effects that are neither immediately apparent nor completely predictable.

Rhetorical inquiry in general, as Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee assert, is a means by which we can “examine” and potentially disrupt a community’s “assumptions about how the world works” (21). While a rhetoric-systems approach does this as well, I argue it can also provide insights into a community’s deliberative rhetoric that traditional forms of rhetorical inquiry often miss.

Rethinking rhetoric in terms of a system, and rethinking rhetorical effect(s) within such a system, emphasize the degree to which we do not always have direct control over or knowledge of our rhetorical successes, and suggests that we won’t know which of our

rhetorical efforts may be successful, nor in what context or time-scale they may be most effective. In this sense the rhetoric-systems approach validates stubbornness as a phenomenon that affects our daily lives, and as something that we cannot always directly alter. However, the approach also posits that our rhetorical effects will always exceed what we intend, even if they do so in ways we do not anticipate or are not aware of. This means that we should not abandon the search for evidence of the effects of rhetorical actions in situations where there is stubbornness; rather, to conceptualize rhetorical effects as excessive is to broaden the contexts, the places, and the time-scales within which we may think to look for these effects. In this sense, while my argument asserts the fundamental partiality, contingency, and unpredictability of the power of language, it also opens up new spaces for rhetorical intervention by delineating new ways to conceive of rhetorical efficacy and giving us new places to look for rhetorical effects.

In outlining this approach I do not endorse a view of rhetorical critique that can, as Dana Cloud puts it in her criticism of the (over)use of Michael Calvin McGee's ideograph, "overestim[ate] the degree to which people can achieve emancipation through discursive work on the fragments of the popular" (152). However, my approach would refute Cloud's claim that the *only* measure of effective critique is "some kind of concrete oppositional action" that is an "effective refusal of the prevailing social order" (151). Rhetorical intervention via an interaction in ecologies pervaded by stubbornness *does* produce rhetorical effects, even if what is produced is not what we think it will be. By examining those ecologies via a rhetoric-systems approach, I argue that we can better understand how they function, and better understand how we might productively engage within them.

Finally, in addition to this chapter's importance for rhetorical inquiry, it has important ramifications for studies of politics. As political science professor Bryan Garsten argues in his recent work *Saving Persuasion*, "If people want to wield political power in a democracy, they must look for opportunities" to "persuade [their] fellow citizens." In theorizing a way to recast stubbornness and to recognize new and unique ways in which persuasion is functioning, I provide a route by which the "persuasive talk" Garsten calls "the currency of the democratic realm" (2) can be reformulated as something that doesn't always happen in observable or recordable speech or writing. Rather, it is in those places where "persuasive talk" *seems absent* that a rhetoric-systems approach can best illuminate the invisible component of that talk. In this sense a rhetoric-systems approach provides a way to both observe and facilitate the "currency" of our "democratic realm."

Introducing the Debate: The "Facts" about the "Founding Fathers"³⁰

Wikipedia is supposed to be a "free encyclopedia," a way to democratize factual information about the world. Many, if not most entries are straightforward accounts of a particular topic with not much acknowledgement of controversy. But because *Wikipedia* can (in theory) be edited by anyone, some entries become proxy sites for intense cultural debates over just what the "facts" of our world are. While the *Wikipedia* entry for the

³⁰ It is worth noting that the term "founders" is itself beset by a host of problematic assumptions, chief among them the fact that there were in fact people already living here with an established society when these "founders" came to the continent. Thus any use of the term summarily elides the history of those nations and people here long before the United States was founded. As well, the common characterization of these historical figures as "Founding Fathers" peremptorily excludes the contributions of women to the founding of the nation. As I will show, while historical inaccuracies plague the invocation of the very term "founders," these omissions' very status as "inaccuracies" is part of what is so difficult to convince many people.

“Founding Fathers of the United States” is ostensibly straightforward, digging a bit deeper shows signs of this sort of entrenched disagreement about the information presented.

Specifically, in the portion of the Founders entry titled “Religion,” the anonymous authors write that of “the 55 delegates to the 1787 Constitutional Convention, 49 were Protestants, and two were Roman Catholics.” Possibly contradicting this point, the entry also notes that “[a] few prominent Founding Fathers were anti-clerical Christians, such as Thomas Jefferson (who created the so-called ‘Jefferson Bible’) and Benjamin Franklin. Others (most notably Thomas Paine) were deists, or at least held beliefs very similar to those of deists.” Finally, the entry adds that according to at least one historian, the “leading Founders . . . were *neither* Christians *nor* Deists,” but adhered to a hybrid view called “theistic rationalism” (emphasis added). The entire section, then, is written a bit disjointedly, with apparently contradictory claims made in consecutive sentences.³¹

Looking at the “talk” portion of the *Wikipedia* page—where disagreements about the edits to the entry (which are all public) can be aired—reveals a major source of this contradiction: while some people want explicit acknowledgement that the Founders were “devout Protestants,” the primary editor (whose user name is “Sir kris”) feels that this “fact” is unsupported and potentially specious. As Sir kris describes her/his thought process while arbitrating others’ edits to the page:

I removed an unsourced paragraph making the very dubious and harmful claim that nearly all of the founding fathers were devout Protestants. I was unable to find any credible sources to substantiate this claim via a Google

³¹ Note that because *Wikipedia* is always open to editing, the exact quotations here may evolve subsequent to this writing. As noted in the works cited, all *Wikipedia* quotes are current as of September 25th, 2013.

search. It also contradicts what we were taught in school regarding the prevalence of Deism among the nation's founders. I judged this claim to be potentially very harmful because it directly pertains to a number of highly contentious and far-reaching political debates happening throughout the country. In fact, my attention was drawn to this after reading a posting that cited the unsourced paragraph in this article as its sole source and drew a number of conclusions, many of which verifiably false, from it. Regardless of how any of us feels about these issues, we should all at least be able to agree that it's not Wikipedia's mission to influence public policy by including unsourced, original research in its articles.

Several interesting points are raised by Sir kris's explanation here. One, her/his account clearly shows the interconnected nature of sources of information for "facts" about the world. As Sir kris reveals, the content of this *Wikipedia* entry largely relies upon what this editor was "taught in school"—information that itself may have relied in part on information gathered from *Wikipedia*. As well, the information in the entry relies upon a (somewhat discerning, one would hope) Google search to decide what gets included in the entry. But as Sir kris also points out, the very sources that may be encountered in such a Google search at times *rely on this Wikipedia posting as their sole source*, and, these texts encountered in the Google search may even go on to draw *further* conclusions *from* the information on the *Wikipedia* page—conclusions that Sir kris deems "verifiably false."

The interconnectivity evident here highlights the way that certain ingrained, or “stubborn,” understandings of a belief or commonplace can self-reinforce as its meaning recurs on itself within a network of interdependent texts. A vast network of sources—all reliant in small or large part on each other—can suggest a particular interpretation of history, which leads other sources to draw further conclusions about those historical facts, which in turn provide the basis for the circulation of related “facts” and commonplaces that support the original, and so on. Even the debates *about* the facts (such as those on the “talk” portion of the *Wikipedia* page) can themselves influence the debate: As Julie Jung has argued, “repeated accounts” of specific debates serve as “storehouses” of commonplaces “from which we can draw as we make arguments.” In this sense every component of the debate, from the “facts” and commonplaces repeated to the sources that draw on that information to the discussions of those very debates over the information, all draw on each other, and more importantly, reinforce specific understandings of facts and commonplaces within the debate.

In addition to the mutually reinforcing nature of these networked ideas, this *Wikipedia* example also illustrates that there can be multiple distinct meanings circulating within the same informational networks. The apparently “dubious” and “harmful” claims Sir kris discusses above, for example, are within that same discussion tenaciously defended. As user JOJHutton retorts to Sir kris: “You need to get ‘support’ for [the claim in question’s] removal. So far you are the only one who appears to want this paragraph removed. Just because you don’t want it in there or that you don’t think its [sic] sourced is irrelevant. Do not continue to remove it without talk page support.” On the same page, both of these diametrically opposite claims are staunchly defended, and both sides are

able to refer to specific evidence to support their claims (although the reliability of this evidence, as might be expected, is not mutually agreed upon).

As this example shows, because rhetoric systems of different individuals are structured in different configurations, with different connections between different elements, and different definitions of commonplaces and phrases all affecting the meaning of other commonplaces and phrases differently, for people caught up in different systems what constitutes a “fact” of history will vary—at times greatly. To a person in one system, what is considered a “fact” by someone caught up in another system may sound somewhat ridiculous, and the refusal of the latter person to change his mind about such a fact could be called stubbornness. But as I have been arguing, to call this stubbornness and leave it at that is to avoid an important complexity of just how “facts” come to be considered as such.

What “The Founders” *Means*: Elaborating the Creation of Divergent “Facts” in Rhetoric Systems

Examining how the same texts can be the source of multiple incompatible-seeming “facts” circulating in different rhetoric systems illuminates how specific rhetorical elements contribute to the composition and cohesiveness of different rhetoric systems. Close examination of such incompatible contributions provides important insights into the function of these systems and so illustrates important new ways of performing rhetorical inquiry.³²

³² Crowley and Hawhee argue that it is unavoidable that many meanings of the same ideas will simultaneously exist, and that via a study of rhetoric this is something we can come to better understand (25–27). A rhetoric-systems approach operates according to this premise as well, but goes further in

If we consider the divergent understandings of the “founders” from a rhetoric-systems point of view, we can find two basic positions in direct contradiction, each of which reveals a different rhetoric-system structure. On the one hand, there is the position advocated by Sir kris. This point of view belongs to what, in American culture, could be considered the “mainstream” rhetoric system. That the founders were *not* devout Protestants nor even particularly devout Christians, and were either mostly a-religious, deists, or in general lacked the fervor of devout religious adherents, could be considered the dominant commonplace in American culture. As Sir kris mentions, it is the one “taught in school,” and as I would argue, it is one that many people would accept as obvious and uncontroversial. University of Chicago law professor Geoffrey R. Stone bluntly outlines this view: The “[f]ounding generation viewed religion, and particularly religion’s relation to government, through an Enlightenment lens that was deeply skeptical of orthodox Christianity” (8). And as *New York Times* reporter Russell Shorto sums up, while “the founders were rooted in Christianity,” they “at the same time . . . were steeped in an Enlightenment rationalism that was, if not opposed to religion, determined to establish separate spheres for faith and reason.”

This is a position that comes from what historian William Hogeland calls “‘public history’—the history we encounter in museums and tourist attractions, in newspaper columns and election campaigns, in public broadcasting and popular biographies.” As Hogeland writes, such history “simplif[ies]” historical situations in such a way that a single clear-cut narrative becomes widely accepted (xii-xiii). In this case, the dominant accepted narrative stipulates that the founders lacked fervor in their religious beliefs, and

explaining the way that these many meanings are shaped, maintained, and how they travel among and between what are in fact complex systems composed of a variety of rhetorical and non-rhetorical elements.

on the whole, did *not* intend for religion to be a primary component of government. Perhaps the most compelling evidence that supports this view's status as the dominant one is the oft-repeated commonplace (based on the First Amendment to the US Constitution) that the founders insisted on a "separation of church and state."

On the other hand, we have the position ostensibly advocated by JOJHutton. A quick Google search (not unlike the one Sir kris may have performed) reveals the commonality of this position. Websites abound with titles like "The Myth of the Separation of Church and State: *American's Founding Fathers: Deists or Christians*" (whose author(s) answer that subtitle by noting that independent experts have verified that "27 of the 56 founding fathers had Christian seminary degrees!"). This is a view that has significant popular support, although a great diversity of authoritative-seeming claims about the founders' strict Christianity can be found coming from a variety of apparently credible academics as well.

When compared to claims made by authors who support the dominant view (such as Geoffrey R. Stone), those well-researched and well-argued academic claims about the founders' strict Christianity read as if their authors are dealing with completely different evidence. Yet, often they are not, and at certain telling moments there is a noticeable split in the interpretations of the same sources. This is the case with the debate in the *Wikipedia* talk section, for example, as much of the argument there revolves around the validity of a particular source that, depending on your position on the issue, either substantiates claims of the founders' religion or does not.

In short, because of the way rhetoric systems work, specific sources contribute differently in different systems. In order to explore one of these sources in more detail,

we can turn to political science scholar Mark David Hall's article on the subject of the founders' religion, which appears on the website for the conservative-leaning Heritage Foundation. In his article, Hall makes a detailed and, it would seem, historically supported argument that while the founders were not unequivocally fundamentalist Christians, they "were influenced by Christian ideas." Hall does not specifically make the type of extreme claims about the religiosity of the founders that one can find on websites that cater to more radical views—such as that the religious affiliation of the founders was unambiguously Christian, or that the founders actively intended for the government to be a religious body. Hall's arguments do, however, tend to *align* somewhat with those who would make those extreme claims, and in many places he *reproduces in part the structure* of the system of rhetoric evidenced on those websites. For instance, as Hall writes of the Declaration of Independence:

It may be objected that Jefferson, the man who drafted the Declaration, was hardly an orthodox Christian, and that is certainly the case. But this is beside the point. . . . Even though Jefferson believed in a vague, distant deity, when his fellow delegates revised and approved the Declaration, virtually all of them understood "Nature's God," "Creator," and "Providence" to refer to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob: a God who is active in the affairs of men and nations.

As this passage shows, Hall is attempting to make a nuanced argument while still affirming that the founders were, for the most part, of a religious mindset. Because of the nuance of Hall's treatment of the subject, as well as his specific acknowledgement of the legitimacy of divergent views ("and that is certainly the case"), Hall's argument might

not be as off-putting to those who believe that the founders were not, in the main, religious. Despite this, his overarching argument reaffirms that, as he puts it, the founders “generally thought it appropriate for civic authorities to encourage Christianity,” and that the country’s “Founding was deeply shaped by Christian moral truths.”

Significantly, there are several elements in Hall’s argument that are crucial *building blocks* of a more extreme fundamentalist Christian rhetoric system. These building blocks exist in the form of phrases such as “Christian moral truths” and “the glory of God” (the latter phrase is used in a different section than what I have already quoted). The point here is that while Hall’s argument is not over-saturated with these phrases to the extent that it might be off-putting to participants in the Christian rhetoric system, enough of the fundamentalist system-structure is reproduced that his argument is *compatible* with this structure.

In this way, Hall’s argument is a partial reproduction of the basic framework for a more dogmatic religious argument. In one kind of rhetorical analysis, significant key words and phrases that function as commonplaces borrowed from a more extreme rhetoric system could be described as shibboleths, by which a speaker or writer indicates membership in a specific community. Such allusive elements could also lend support to a claim about the rhetor’s use of the figure of paralipsis—the rhetorical tactic of drawing attention to something while ostensibly attempting to pass over it. Richard Benjamin Crosby, for example, describes this move as making possible the introduction of subversive ideas in a way that can go unnoticed by many in the audience. As Crosby notes, reactions to speeches making use of paralipsis often “reveal wildly contradictory interpretations of the speech’s ultimate meaning” (121). This kind of having-it-both-ways

rhetorical maneuver also recalls the phenomenon of “dog whistle politics,” which Robert E. Goodin and Michael Saward describe as “a way of sending a message to certain potential supporters in such a way as to make it inaudible to others whom it might alienate or deniable for still others who would find any explicit appeal along those lines offensive” (471).³³

Such rhetorical slight-of-hand (as some would characterize the employment of shibboleths, paralipsis, and dog-whistles) is not, however, necessarily happening in these instances—or at least, this is not what I would note as important. True, Hall’s intent here may well have been to indicate covert support for a more extreme position than is indicated by his frequent deferences to opposing positions (since, even if he ultimately disagrees with these positions, the very fact that he acknowledges their existence makes his argument appear less dogmatically extreme). But despite his probable intent, the important point here is that the *structure* of Hall’s argument functions *complementarily* with the structure of a more radical rhetoric system in such a way as to reinforce the strength of this radical system. Specifically, the commonplace phrases I point out within Hall’s text function as borrowed components of the framework of a radical system. And these components can work to integrate Hall’s *whole* text into the larger overarching structure of that more radical rhetoric system—in a way that not only does not threaten the stability of the radical system, but also, for some participants in that system, actually *reinforces* its stability. In systems theory terms, we can say that key building blocks in

³³ Dog whistle politicking is a common characterization of the way American right-wing politicians have appealed to racist white voters in the last forty years. Republican party strategist Lee Atwater is famously quoted in a 1981 interview arguing that a central component of the party’s “Southern strategy” involved speaking in “coded” and “abstract” language in ways that masked candidates’ embrace of discriminatory policies (Herbert). As Paul Krugman argues, current “leading figures on American right are masters of . . . ‘dog-whistle politics’” on a wide variety of controversial issues (101–02).

Hall's text allow his entire argument to be pulled into the "basin of attraction" of an attractor for which more extreme definitions of the founders' religion are the norm. If we go back to the definition of *attractor* from the previous chapter (that it functions as a stable configuration of elements, all in-relation with each other, to which a system is attracted), we can see that a collection of key commonplace phrases function as an attractor, and so directly reveal and define the structure of the system. Thus, for someone caught up in a particular rhetoric system that defines the founders as devout Christians, and perhaps even as fundamentalists, hearing phrases like "the glory of God" both transmits meaning to and clarifies/specifies the meaning of *other* phrases in the argument.

Julie Jung, making use of Kristine Hansen's definition of an "economy" in which there is an "orderly distribution and interplay of parts in a structure or system" (Hansen 263 qtd. in Jung), similarly argues that in a discursive economy what she calls "identifications" can "circulat[e] within the system" in such a way "that mak[e] another part . . . possible." While the "parts" to which Jung refers are specific "identifications," I argue that in the same way commonplace phrases *create* identifications that bind arguments together; in my example, Hall's argument becomes linked to other more extreme arguments that make use of these same phrases via his deployment of specific identificatory commonplaces. For readers caught up in a rhetoric system that features more radical commonplaces about the founders' religion, these parts of Hall's text serve as *linking elements* that can recontextualize his entire argument within their own specific rhetoric system, thus shifting the meaning of *all* of the elements of Hall's text. Because of these commonplace phrases that function as key building blocks, Hall's argument

becomes yet another text in support of a more extreme version of the founders' religious views.³⁴

My analysis here shows that there exist specific crucial building blocks in a system that are linked via more pathways to all of the other elements of the system. These elements could be thought of as more overly saturated *nodes* in a given system. As Mark C. Taylor explains, a node "is a knot in a web of relations" that is "formed when different strands, fibers, or threads are woven together" (154, 231). In other words, the meaning of a particular phrase that functions as a node will be highly interconnected with and will circulate widely in several rhetoric systems (as well as other, non-rhetoric systems), and the "threads" of meaning of a variety of other concepts will also all pass through in some way the meaning of that node. Thus the node will have *more* power to change the meaning of the other elements and nodes connected to it.³⁵ In this way, my analysis illustrates how, by writing even a few key elements of a particular system into one's argument, the argument can be pulled into the orbit of that system (regardless of the intent of the rhetor). So, because of Hall's deployment of significant phrases such as "the glory of God," his argument is transformed: for someone participating in a particular fundamentalist Christian rhetoric system, Hall's more cautious statements, and his acknowledgments of the legitimacy of other points of view, *mean differently*.³⁶ Instead of

³⁴ Making a related point, Matthew Jackson argues that members of a culture frequently "encounter discursive 'fragments' that can serve as the premises and conclusions" of more elaborate cultural beliefs. In other words, such fragments that circulate in a culture can have a structuring effect on our "logic," thus shaping the way we understand cultural texts and events (620).

³⁵ To go back to Stephen J. Guastello and Larry S. Liebovitch's metaphoric description of attractors: nodes in one system can pull the meaning of a large number of connected terms into alignment according to the attractor to which that system is "magnetically" drawn.

³⁶ The idea of a text meaning differently for people caught up in different rhetoric systems bears important resemblances to the mechanisms of Stanley Fish's "interpretive communities," which as he writes determine their members' "interpretive strategies" ("Interpreting" 483, 476). The concept of interpretive communities influences Fish's later work on belief, much of which aligns with the principles of a rhetoric-

offering balance or serving as acknowledgement of the nuance of the issue (as they may do for participants in the dominant rhetoric system), Hall's cautious statements for a person caught up in a more radical system would likely exist as background noise—diversions from his “real” point that “true” meaning of the Declaration is that it reinforces and codifies fundamental Christian religious truths.³⁷

A Rhetoric-Systems Analysis: Making the Cut, Analyzing, and Making the Cut Again

In the analysis above I have focused on a few of Hall's key phrases to show how the meaning of his text can be transformed by those phrases, but I could also have focused on the way those phrases, combined with the *location* of his work (his work appears on the Heritage Foundation website), had particular resonances that, for some people, would change the meaning of the text. Alternately, I could have focused on how the *kairos* of Hall's article transformed its meaning: since the religion of the founders has different

systems approach. Beliefs, Fish writes, are “mutually constitutive” parts of “a lattice or a web” (*Trouble* 280) that as Gary A. Olson writes can “shap[e] . . . information to support [its] structure” (79). As Olson and Lynn Worsham explain, however, for Fish such a belief structure is characterized by its “insularity” (151), which means that belief change only comes from contradictions or doubt “already lodged within” that network (146). As I discussed in the previous chapter, my rhetoric-systems approach recognizes the insularity of a belief network (and the closed nature of the boundaries of such a network), but also recognizes the way that such a structure is partially open to the outside, and recognizes that there is more involved in belief than a person's, or a community's, web of beliefs alone. In this sense my project builds on Olson and Worsham's argument that emotion should also be considered relevant to Fish's account of belief, as I expand this point to argue that we should consider *in addition* to emotion a variety of external bodily, physical, environmental, cultural, social, textual, and contextual factors. In short, while I agree with Fish that factors within a community (or as I would put it, within a rhetoric system) often are one cause of belief change, I argue that the mechanisms that create these internal “doubts” include factors *outside* a particular rhetoric system as well.

³⁷ My points here also recall I.A. Richards' “context theorem of meaning,” which borrows Sigmund Freud's concept of “over-determination” in its claim that “all discourse” has a “multiplicity of meaning” (38–39). In this sense a rhetoric-systems approach is a distant descendent of New Critical theory; however, the New Critics' general belief that meaning lies predominantly in the text diverges from a rhetoric-systems approach, which explicitly considers a wide variety of elements outside the text as contributing to the way that text functions in a rhetoric system.

relevance in election years than in non-election years, these kairotic dynamics could be shown to significantly affect the meanings of the text.

While these rhetorical features and combinations might be part of a standard rhetorical inquiry, such an inquiry is unavoidably selective because of the *infinite diversity of combinations* of these elements. A rhetoric-systems approach, however, recognizes this ungraspable complexity, and gives us a way to account for it. By treating each selection of elements *first* as if they existed alone, in a closed system—to recall Hayles’ phrase, by *making the cut*—I can zoom in on the specific insights offered by each combination. Subsequently, though, this approach demands that I consider the system’s boundaries as partially open and *re-make the cut* of what I examine. Piece by piece, circumscribed, and closed stability by stability, I can trace relations and connections between a wide variety of different elements affecting the system, and in so doing create a more robust aggregate picture of the movement of rhetorical elements and the routes by which they travel in these systems, which can among other things highlight the existence of previously unobserved rhetorical effects happening in previously unnoticed locations.

By zooming in and zooming out in analysis, a rhetoric-systems approach thus allows us to better trace the circulation of rhetorical effect within and between diverse rhetorical locations. In the above examples it is the presence of specific building blocks (manifested as specific commonplace phrases) in Hall’s text itself *combined* with the reader’s entanglement in a particular system that collectively affect all of the other elements of the text. If I were to continue with the analysis (as I will below), I could examine other elements’ effect(s) on the meaning of the text, and their effect(s) on the other elements in the system, and combine these insights in order to create a fuller picture

of how meanings are formed and are maintained in a rhetoric system. The linkages and effects present in any such rhetorical ecology are innumerable and can be efficiently traced only by taking one perspective, drawing out the connections and effects of those connections, and then reselecting a new combination of elements in order to trace the effects from that new perspective. In my analysis in this chapter, this kind of aggregate approach sheds light on how understandings of the same texts and of the same commonplaces can vary so widely among different audiences who have access to the same sources of information.

In short, what something “means” for one person has the potential to change every other meaning in the system—or, to just change a few—in ways that are often not visible when we analyze from just one perspective (a common approach to rhetorical inquiry). With a rhetoric-systems approach, elements that do not seem conceptually close are often shown to be surprisingly linked, and so each is affected by changes to the other. For instance, while a person’s belief that the United States was founded as a Christian nation is linked to beliefs that person holds about the separation of church and state, about the role of church in family life, and about the virtue of Christian values in modern society, this original belief can also be shown to connect with a host of other beliefs, commonplaces, and texts ostensibly much more distant from the original: that person’s belief about global warming is networked to the belief about the founders, as is her/his belief about where to vacation, about train travel in this country, and even about, say, paper versus plastic at the grocery store.³⁸ As one extant example of this kind of analysis,

³⁸ It should be noted that such a connection between views is often oversimplified. According to conservative historian David Barton: “If I can find out [a person’s] position on life ... I can tell you where they stand on almost any issue.” In Barton’s view, the “wrong view on the abortion front generally leads people to take an incorrect stance on the Second Amendment, traditional marriage and other related

Sharon Crowley's exploration of precisely the belief network I examine in this chapter—that of a specific subset of Christian fundamentalists—traces connections between beliefs about stem-cell research and a belief in an impending apocalypse, and between these ideas and the belief that Americans have an inherent responsibility to advocate for unregulated free-market capitalism (*Toward* 141–45). In Crowley's work, which highlights the same widespread interconnectivity assumed in a rhetoric-systems approach, beliefs that may at first appear contradictory are shown in fact to have traceable linkages.

Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory (ANT) also resembles a rhetoric-systems approach in this way, in that it asks observers to expand the range of places they might think to look for factors affective of the situation being studied. As Latour puts it, "ANT claims that it is possible to trace more sturdy relations and discover more revealing patterns by finding a way to register the links between unstable and shifting frames of reference *rather than* by trying to keep one frame stable" (*Reassembling* 24; emphasis added). While I agree with much of this statement, as I have been arguing, keeping things stable is a *necessity*, and is not something that should be conceived as a part of a problem to be overcome. So, while Latour's command to "follow the actors" (*Reassembling* 12) is a valuable and useful way of thinking that can highlight unexpected connections of events or (rhetorical) elements, and while a rhetoric-systems approach's description of a rhetorical ecology as a multiplicity of stabilities is compatible with Latour's description

issues—even in the economic realm" (Hallowell). While I argue that a rhetoric system consists of a vast diversity of interconnected elements, I also maintain that there is no foolproof way to detect a person's views on one issue based on his or her views on another. Barton's assertions here do tap into the way that a person's, or a community's, views *are* tangled up in a way such that they reinforce each other, and while it may not be as obviously predictable as he makes it seem, there *are* often definable and (to an extent) discoverable connections.

of ANT, I would argue that what Latour calls those “shifting frames” need to be *considered as frozen* in order for productive intervention to occur. A rhetoric-systems approach stipulates that in order to deal with complexity we first need to rein it in.

Telling Us Where To Look for Rhetorical Effects: Nodes and Stubborn Systems

More than just providing a way to map the complexity of a rhetorical ecology, a rhetoric-systems approach illustrates that in those places that seem most inhospitable to rhetorical intervention, our interventions *are* creating rhetorical effects. That is, by understanding the interconnectivity of rhetoric (and other) systems, and by understanding how specific elements circulate in unexpected ways in these systems, we can get a better idea of how and where to find those elusive rhetorical effects in places where there seems to be only stubbornness.

As I mentioned earlier, the building block phrases Hall uses in his argument are highly networked as *nodes* in the system, their meaning particularly influential of a variety of other concepts whose meanings are in turn all connected to other elements throughout the network. A rhetoric-systems approach, in helping us identify those elements that circulate widely as building blocks/nodes, is already telling us where to find unnoticed rhetorical effects at work—that is, once we have identified a widely-circulating rhetorical element, we have identified a node, and thus a potentially productive site for our inquiry. In terms of the rhetoric system I discuss in this chapter, one example of such a productive site of inquiry is the work of historian and evangelist David Barton. Barton’s particular views on American history are often perceived as markedly resistant to what I called earlier the “dominant” historical facts. In other words, the rhetoric system with

which Barton's texts are most obviously entangled is one the majority of Americans view as tenaciously "stubborn." As I argue, the texts of David Barton—as well as the "facts" contained within them—function as nodes, and so circulate widely within Barton's rhetoric system, and also exert a significant amount of power in affecting the views of individuals highly entangled with that system.³⁹ At first glance, Barton's views appear *only* to affect his followers, by further strengthening their worldviews. However, upon closer examination we can see that Barton's work has a significant influence *outside* the network of his followers as well, and in particular on the "mainstream" rhetoric system—which itself seems significantly resistant to ideas like Barton's. The study of Barton's work, I argue, illuminates the way that stubborn-seeming rhetoric systems can be sites of a surprising number of rhetorical effects that are disguised behind the appearance of intransigence.

Of course, when reading Barton's bio page, one gets the impression that everyone knows his work is extremely influential in a diversity of rhetoric systems. As the bio proclaims: "A national news organization has described [Barton] as 'America's historian,' and *Time Magazine* called him 'a hero to millions[']—including some powerful politicians. In fact, *Time Magazine* named him as one of America's 25 most influential evangelicals." Indeed, Barton is very influential in specific pockets of national politics; an *NPR* profile about Barton written before the 2012 presidential election reported that "[s]eeking his endorsement are politicians including Tea Party favorite Ted Cruz of Texas and Florida Sen. Marco Rubio, who's mentioned as a possible running mate for

³⁹ Whether we consider the texts themselves as nodes or some of the individual premises as nodes will depend on the level of scale at which we are freezing our analysis, but for the purposes of my analysis here it is not necessary to specify, as it suffices to say that Barton's ideas about the founders circulate widely, which in itself means that they function as nodes.

Mitt Romney. Newt Gingrich is a fan. So is Mike Huckabee” (Hagerty). Barton himself reportedly gives over 400 speeches a year (Hagerty), and according to his bio, “was involved in the development of the History/Social Studies standards for states such as Texas and California, and has helped produce history textbooks now used in schools across the nation.”

Despite these claims of popularity, on closer examination it might look like Barton’s ideas only have an effect on the already-converted. The *NPR* profile depicts his most famous arguments as revolving around premises that would be quite radical to a person adhering to the mainstream view of American history. For instance, the profile states that Barton believes “the Founding Fathers were deeply religious men who built America on Christian ideas—[which is] something you never learn in school” (Hagerty). Many of Barton’s other assertions are similarly controversial and dogmatic, such as his claim that “Jesus did not like the minimum wage” (Coaster). In general, Barton’s texts—which are clearly very influential in some circles—reveal a rhetoric system that to outsiders is often difficult to comprehend, let alone analyze, since it is based on ideas deemed by many as simply not true; Barton has been repeatedly criticized for “factual errors” in his work, and his recent *New York Times* bestseller on Thomas Jefferson was pulled from the shelves by the publisher precisely because of such errors (Hagerty).

What all this means is that it is easy to dismiss Barton’s views as a product of fringe discourse, influential only within insular groups determined not to listen to contradictory mainstream evidence. But I am arguing that, although Barton’s texts may seem ignored by a large segment of the public, as *nodes*, these texts are in fact widely

influential in *all* rhetoric systems, even the mainstream system, and thus his ideas often end up influencing public discussions and public policy in significant ways.

To illustrate: During a 2012 event for the US Republican primary election in the state of Iowa called the “Thanksgiving Family Forum,” two Presidential candidates (Michele Bachmann and Rick Perry) explicitly endorsed the premise that, as Bachmann put it, “American exceptionalism is grounded on the Judeo-Christian ethic, which is really based upon the 10 Commandments” (Saletan). As Bachmann stated bluntly in an interview: “The Judeo-Christian heritage isn’t a belief. It’s a fact of our nation’s history. It’s a fact.” These are premises pulled directly from Barton’s work—and Bachmann freely admits that this is the case. The Congresswoman is an outspoken admirer of Barton’s, even going so far as to invite him to be a guest speaker at her proposed weekly “class[es] on the Constitution,” which she planned to make available to all Congresspersons in 2010 (Brody). As I argue, in these very public statements and actions, we can see the beginning of an evolution *of the broader public discussion*—and the mainstream rhetoric system—in that the broader public, rather than simply ignoring or dismissing these claims, is increasingly being asked to recognize, and to contend with, the existence and popularity of Barton’s ideas.

Writing on the Encyclopedia Britannica blog (the slogan of which reads, not incidentally, “facts matter”), Joseph Ellis explains that “in recent decades Christian advocacy groups, prompted by motives that have been questioned by some, have felt a powerful urge to enlist the Founding Fathers.” He concedes that while “recovering the spiritual convictions of the Founders, in all their messy integrity, is not an easy task,” what he calls the “dominant pattern” is their “diversity” of belief. This seems to be a

simple acknowledgement of the debate on the issue. But considering the connection of Barton's ideas and Bachmann's endorsement of them on a national stage, we can consider that the ideas portrayed in the Britannica text *have changed to accommodate the views of people who support Barton*. Ellis's acknowledgment that the founders' views might have been more complex than is commonly acknowledged in the dominant view of history can be traced *as an effect* of the now mainstream salience of views like Barton's. In a further tacit endorsement of this diversity, Britannica sanctions a separate blog that serves as a counterpoint to Ellis: on this blog the authors argue that "in their brief asides on the subject," "virtually all" of the founders agreed with "most Christians even today," who "regard immortal life as a communion with God, with their friends, and all those historical greats whom they admire—an everlasting conversation" (Novak and Novak). Phrases such as "immortal life," "communion with God," and "Christians today" are specific building blocks of Barton's arguments, and while the writing on this second Britannica blog does not explicitly nor completely parallel Barton's larger arguments, it certainly reproduces a significant part of Barton's rhetoric system structure. In other words, in the spread of these building blocks to various discursive sites such as the Presidential debates, classes offered to Congresspersons, and blogs and counter-blogs officially sanctioned by Encyclopedia Britannica, we can see Barton's views, which may at first glance seem confined to only the most stubborn of rhetoric systems, generating *considerable* widespread (albeit subtle) rhetorical effects, and influencing a variety of rhetoric systems in significant ways.

Compensatory Change: Finding Effects in Unlikely Places

As the previous example illustrates, a rhetoric-systems approach can show us where effects are at work and where change to a rhetoric system is happening. While many individuals may feel that Barton's ideas make no difference to the shape of their rhetoric system—in a sense their own system may seem to remain stubborn in the face of these ideas—I argue that there can always be found a change in these stubborn systems (even if this change involves a reinforcing of their views).⁴⁰ I would go even further: a rhetoric-systems approach shows us that even when the only noticeable changes appear to be strengthening or reinforcing the system, in just these situations we can find much more than simple maintenance. As I explored in the previous chapter, compensatory change keeps a system stable. But, as I also explored, and as I will explain further here, these often-hidden compensatory changes can also have unexpected and potentially major transformative rhetorical effects.

If there is one certainty that systems theory embraces, it is that systems must evolve, even if this evolution happens over a vast period of time. Although information can be processed in such a way as to mean differently and thus perturbations in the form of information contrary to one's worldview may have little or no observable effect on a person, compensatory changes to any system are always ongoing; despite what may look like continuity of interpretation, a person will not interpret a piece of information in an

⁴⁰ Sharon Crowley, in an argument that draws in part on Linda Kintz' concept of an "ideology of clarity," argues that for members of certain groups dissenting arguments don't "resonate" at all. These arguments don't resonate "because difference is hard to notice; it is hard to notice because in a densely articulated ideology of the same, awareness of difference provides little or no emotional stimulation." Crowley explains that only those things that reinforce the belief network receive attention (*Toward* 146–47). A rhetoric-systems approach would largely corroborate Crowley's argument about the lack of attention paid to "difference," but it would modify the way we can theorize divergent information as resonating. Specifically, from a rhetoric-systems perspective we would posit that divergent information *does* resonate; it just resonates differently, in sometimes less noticeable and sometimes invisible—yet just as important—ways.

exactly consistent way over time. As the system orbits a particular attractor that determines what certain texts, commonplaces, and so on, mean, these meanings move in relation to each other as the system evolves in response to various perturbations.⁴¹ And as this evolution via compensatory movement continues, systems theory tells us that the system is progressing toward an eventual major destabilization—one that may not be observed in the present or even in the near future, but one that is nevertheless always approaching.

What we *can* often observe, though, are the myriad small ways the system is evolving compensatorily. As an example of this, in a *New York Times* account of a 2010 debate over the founders' Christianity that played out in the Texas Board of Education's attempt to shape the state's social studies curriculum, such compensatory changes can be found already at (subtle) work in the reactions of the board members. As the *Times* article shows, the views of those members who advocate fundamentalism appear stable. However, the members' responses to criticism from the so-called "secularists" demonstrate that these board members—ostensibly stubborn and set in their views—have actually slightly changed positions, if only to further rally around their cause. As one of them put it, "You can't appreciate the founding of our country without realizing that the founders understood [these religious truths]. For our kids to not know our history, that

⁴¹ With this in mind, it must be emphasized that the debate over the founders does not simply consist of two (or more) groups who cannot productively interact in deliberative debate. This would simply be to assert a kind of relativism that holds that everyone just sees things differently, and there is no reconciling that. This kind of argument could be seen as endorsing the existence of what Patricia Roberts-Miller describes (without herself endorsing it) as "enclave-based" discourse (99). Summarizing Jane Mansbridge's definition of the term, Roberts-Miller describes an "enclave" as "a place where people speak only to people who share their values . . . a place of perfect agreement" (41). While such agreement is certainly present, for all intents and purposes, in many situations where there is little to no room for dissent (the original example of David Rohde and the Taliban comes to mind), I would argue that it is important to note the ways that an enclave differs from a rhetoric system: while characterized by harmonious agreement on the surface, a rhetoric system *must* also be changing, and so in no context can "perfect" agreement remain that way.

could kill a society. That’s why to me this [debate] is a huge thing” (Shorto). This quotation may sound like increased intransigence—and in a sense, it is. But it is *also*, notably, a *change*, subtle as it may seem, in the dynamic of the debate: this quotation shows that those who hold a radical view of the religiosity of the founders have adopted a position that remains contentious, but that also recognizes that criticism of their views has become widespread; just as the founders-were-Christian commonplace has become more widely circulated in popular discourse, so has criticism of that view. Although the individuals in this *Times* article argue that failure to teach kids their version of history could “kill a society” (which sounds like increased intransigence), that these same individuals have increased the urgency of their tone in response to a perceived threat (in the form of criticism of their worldview) *is itself an evolution of their views*.

There are also signs that such controversial views about the religiosity of the founders are becoming less accepted by more people, as more and more rhetorical effects previously excluded by the system accumulate, and as more and more texts written about the issue circulate, interact, and affect the system in myriad uncountable ways—one of these ways being the growing simple awareness that these beliefs may be controversial. In the *Times* piece, the author relates one instance of resistance (in the form of embarrassment) that could be seen as one person’s recognition of the increased visibility of the contested nature of the debate. As the author of the article writes: “The injection of partisan politics into education went so far that at one point another Republican board member burst out in seemingly embarrassed exasperation, ‘Guys, you’re rewriting history now!’” (Shorto). This recognition in itself illustrates that rhetorical effects can evolve,

and can become more visible as the system also evolves and reorganizes itself in response to current and previous perturbations.

While these rhetorical effects may not be felt by those in close physical or temporal proximity to the situation, our recognition of them *as* effects is an important benefit of a rhetoric-systems approach. By looking at different beliefs—some quite distant from the beliefs that may have been the original target of rhetorical inquiry—we can see other changes in the rhetoric system, and show how the changes in those beliefs can be traced back to the original beliefs. As I stated at the beginning of this chapter, a rhetoric-systems approach posits that rhetorical effects *exceed*: they may not be locally or immediately present, but they are constantly circulating, awaiting their chance to inevitably return. Because of this, there will always (eventually) be a rhetorical interaction that can destabilize the entire system—which is always evolving toward such a point of destabilization. In Taylor’s terms this would be a “decisive crossroads” (150); for Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers it would be a system’s “bifurcation point” (190). Finding clues to that eventual larger change may not always be possible, but a rhetoric-systems approach can make such discoveries more likely. In short, examining a system one piece at a time, and one stability at a time—while understanding that change is constantly at work—gives the rhetoric-systems approach the advantage of being better able to find important (rhetorical) features of a system that other analyses might not consider, and thus can give us a place to start to look for the unlikely and difficult-to-observe effects of our rhetorical interventions.

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For sixteen days in October of 2013, the United States federal government entered what was commonly referred to at the time as “the government shutdown.” The shutdown was widely explained as the result of intractable resistance to the looming implementation of the Affordable Healthcare Act (the ACA, or as many refer to it, Obamacare) by a group of Republican lawmakers who refused to vote for any government funding measures until the ACA was repealed.

Such an event kairotically illustrates the marked acrimony that often pervades the contemporary scene, and which has resulted in a widespread perception of stubbornness as a major problem in American politics. As Marc J. Hetherington and Jonathan D. Weiler argue, the contemporary political environment has created a situation in which it has become particularly “difficult for one side of the political debate to understand (perhaps, in the extreme, even respect) how the other side thinks and feels” (5). This entire situation creates, in short, a perception of stubbornness itself as a roadblock to functioning democratic society. While the presence of antagonistic political factions in the United States is nothing new (2013 marks the 150-year anniversary of the mid-point of the American Civil War, after all), these recent events illustrate, at the very least, that this conception of stubbornness-as-obstacle is one that—not without good reason—consistently lurks in the background of Americans’ perception of politics.

A rhetoric-systems approach adds useful depth to our discussions of stubbornness, both in rhetorical inquiry and in our common conceptions of the notion. By delineating stubbornness as a complex phenomenon that is real but that does not exist to the mutual exclusion of rhetorical effect, a rhetoric-systems approach gives us a way to better study

this phenomenon, to better understand it, and to better strategize how to work both with and around it.

CHAPTER IV

NECESSARY CERTAINTY: THEORIZING “EXCESSIVE CAUSALITY” IN DECISION MAKING AND SCIENTIFIC DISCOURSE

What is often called “billiard ball causality” refers to the tendency to hold a single cause responsible for a single effect. In pool, this is represented by the cue ball striking another ball and “causing” it to roll into (for instance) the corner pocket. If I use a hammer to hit a nail and the nail enters a piece of wood, the basic cause-effect relationship of hammer-to-nail could be considered billiard ball causality. Of course, this simple model leaves much out: the role of the person holding the cue stick who hits the pool ball, and the role of the cue stick itself, are both omitted from this causal picture. Also omitted are more abstract causal factors, such as the car the player may have used to travel to the pool hall, the lamp used to illuminate the pool table, or the rule that says the cue ball must be the one to hit another ball.

There are in fact innumerable factors left out of any determination of cause; billiard ball causality is simply one stark illustration of this logic. When we discuss an event, we tend to reduce it to a relatively simplistic narrative: one ball caused the other ball to roll into the pocket. This reduction is a convenient way of communicating effectively, since it saves us the trouble of having to endlessly elaborate the causes involved in a basic event. This reduction, though, means that we leave out some causal

elements, and in so doing end up highlighting certain factors (the pool balls) at the expense of the others.

In this chapter, following a long tradition of rhetoricians, scientists, and philosophers, I complicate this version of causality. More than just expose the important factors often left out of the causal equation (which many past approaches have done effectively), I theorize a version of “excessive” causality, which I argue can simultaneously validate both simple (billiard ball) *and* more complex causality schemas.⁴² Similar to my theorization of rhetorical effect in previous chapters, I show here how it is beneficial to first theorize an either/or version of cause, and subsequently theorize a complex and excessive version (a both/and version).

This approach conceives of any reduced causal relationship as the result of a particular “cut” a person makes in apprehending an event. Such a cut, as I have also discussed previously, has many benefits; holding a causal cut stable can provide useful explanations about the way our world works. I can’t learn to play pool, for instance, if I don’t understand how the pool balls interrelate. I argue, though, that as with many other “stubborn” (or “resilient”) cuts, the usefulness of these selective causal perspectives must not be the end of the story. We cannot forget that in any such cut there are causal forces left out and so causality in its fullness always exceeds our conceptual grasp. Like rhetorical effects, these unaccounted-for causes are constantly circulating, awaiting their inevitable return. Consequently, the more cuts we can make within a situation, the more robust our understanding of it will be.

⁴² There have been a diversity of theorists who have exposed what is left out of common causal equations—David Hume is often cited as a forerunner to much of this work. As just one example of a more recent text that discusses the myriad elements we leave out of our causal scenarios, see Bennett.

In what follows, I illustrate the ramifications of a rhetoric-systems approach to causality for both rhetoric and science discourses. First, I argue that considering cause from an either/or standpoint has been enormously beneficial to scientific advancement. Specifically, by considering the *physical* causal realm in isolation, discourses of science have provided important insights into the working of arcane phenomena, including those involved in human thought, action, and reason, and this reduction has provided necessary certainty about cognition, behavior, and decision making, among many other processes. Thus, with good reason the prioritizing of the physical has become an entrenched paradigm in the sciences and in popular discourse. Unfortunately, however, when we prioritize physical causes we also reinscribe existing social power inequalities, and our failure to re-make the cut with regard to our causal conception of the world prevents us from fully recognizing these potentially detrimental assumptions. I conclude with an elaboration of excessive causality, providing a route to re-making this cut that interrupts the privileging of the physical as *the* paramount causal force, and interrupts the harmful assumptions this dominant cut hides.

Excessive causality gives rhetoricians a way to contest the dominance of the sciences, yet it also creates an opening for productive alliances between disciplines. At the end of the chapter I demonstrate that conceiving of a specific rhetorical element—the commonplace—as both a discursive “rhetorical” element *and* as a physical “material” element allows us to interrupt any claims of ultimate priority by the physical (or, for that matter, the discursive). I argue that a rhetorical commonplace is neither purely discursive nor purely physical—instead, it is an element entangled in both realms. My theorization illustrates not that we cannot specify causes in any situation, but that we need to consider

the ways *both* rhetorical and physical elements can be mutually influential; thus, while we may maintain distinctions between the two realms, neither realm can be truly considered *more* or *ultimately* causal.

The Affordances of Stable Causes

Systems theorists Grégoire Nicolis and Ilya Prigogine argue that a central property of organized physical systems is that the “huge number of particles” within them can “behave in a coherent fashion” despite the “random thermal motion of each of them” (13). Putting this in terms of cultural systems, systems theorist Steen Bergendorff writes that in organized cultures “everything happens as if each . . . element was watching the behaviour of its neighbour and taking it into account so as to play its own role adequately and to participate in the overall pattern.” Thus, each member of a culture, Bergendorff continues, “need only ‘watch’ the behaviour of its immediate surroundings to produce an order” (48). These systems theorists make clear that the order and stability of a system (two key characteristics of self-sustaining systems) is predicated on each element within the system being able to predict the behavior of the other elements, even if those elements’ individual behavior is to some extent “random.” In terms of a culture, we can say that any stable, ordered culture depends on the existence of *stable explanations and predictions* of the behavior of one’s “neighbors”—or more generally, of the other agents and objects in one’s culture.

Reducing cause to the physical is one way of finding these stable explanations that help us create a coherent and ordered culture. As science historian Hans Siggard Jensen writes, our ability to constitute stable “deterministic . . . laws” has allowed us to

posit a “causal mechanical system” that “we can in a certain sense control” (122–23). The stability afforded by this control also has many tangible benefits, as it has given us the means by which to achieve significant technological advances and to make important scientific discoveries. To take two basic examples: every time we drive a car, and every time we take an aspirin for a headache, we enjoy the benefits of an exclusive focus on physical causes. The benefits of holding stable the “cut” of our causality scheme—a cut in which the physical is dominant—are thus diverse and manifest.

Of course, Jensen also points out that it does not take much examination to see that this way of accounting for cause leaves several noticeable gaps. Every “actual practice[e] we have of description and explanation” that has been employed “throughout the history of science,” he writes, is “essentially incomplete,” and even when a combination of approaches are used to measure the world, “we get a kaleidoscopic and never quite unified picture.” Nevertheless, “we maintain the idea of complete, unified descriptions, and of worlds . . . where there are sharply drawn borders and distinctions” (130). Even though our reduced causality schemes are insufficient to fully explain or account for the workings of the systems of which we are a part, we hold to them anyway because of the tangible benefits they produce, and because they create stability in our world, in our culture, and in our individual identities.

To zoom in on this last kind of individual stability: a lack of psychic completeness is also closely related to instability and uncertainty—to admit incompleteness in one’s self is to admit a gap that cannot be explained easily, and such a gap can easily destabilize one’s identity. As Philosopher Martha Nussbaum writes, we are uncomfortable with, and tend to want to compensate for, anything that makes us feel

personally as if we are “lacking some desired type of completeness or perfection” (184).

Psychologists Michael A. Hogg and Danielle L. Blaylock observe that when people are faced with any hint of uncertainty they “engage in behaviors that are oriented toward affirming, consolidating, and reinforcing self-conception and relevant ideological systems and worldviews” (xxiii).

It is precisely this sense of incompleteness and uncertainty that we avoid by making a reductive cut in our conception of cause. According to Samantha Frost, imagining our world according to a specific kind of linear causality—which very much resembles billiard ball causality—is what we do to counter any threat of disharmony (and thus incompleteness and uncertainty). As Frost writes, “Our knowledge about causation—stipulative and uncertain as it is—makes us feel like effective agents: if I do this, then that will happen.” Drawing on Thomas Hobbes, Frost argues that such a “narrowing of the causal horizon” reconstitutes an effective agential sense of one’s own subjectivity, which produces what Hobbes argues is a necessary belief in our culture’s collective ability to function *as* an ordered culture (Hobbes 186). To believe that oneself is the origin of one’s own actions is to counter the existential fear produced by the realization that cause may not be as linear as we think it is. To recapture a sense of linear cause is, in other words, to recapture the sense of certainty that, as Frost puts it, can “shore up [our] self-image as autonomous self-sovereign agents” (168–74).⁴³

⁴³ Systems theorist and historian Manuel De Landa similarly discusses our tendency to simplify cause and effect so as to create order out of unpredictability. “[O]ur world,” De Landa argues, “is governed . . . by nonlinear dynamics, which makes detailed prediction and control impossible,” and because of this, he warns against any conception of the world that assumes “a ladder of progress, or a drive toward increased perfection.” De Landa calls, instead, “for a more *experimental* attitude toward reality” (*Thousand* 273).

Stable Causes and Decision Making

As Frost points out, we tend to think of ourselves as in control of our actions. One potential threat to this sense of control lies in the realm of decision making. Much recent scholarship in the sciences has shown that we often do not have full control over the conscious decisions we make in our lives. Rather, a variety of non-conscious “biases” influence and diminish our control in various ways. I argue that the uncertainty created by the existence of these biases can also be remedied by a reduction of causal factors to the physical. In such situations, even as we are faced with evidence of our own inability to fully control our actions, a simplification of the causal picture allows us the possibility of regaining this authority; here the causal reduction does not provide an illusion of total control, but rather gives us a way to *manage* those factors that are out of our immediate control. The end result—recapturing a sense of sovereign agency—is the same as what Frost describes, though the process is a bit more circuitous. This reduction in our conception of decision making has important ramifications for discourses of science and of rhetoric, since both are extensively concerned with our ability to influence, control, and predict our choices as well as the choices of others. While this particular reduction of cause can be beneficial, without critical interrogation it can have a variety of negative consequences.

Scholarship on decision making and so-called “cognitive bias” (which details a variety of biases that influence our “cognitive” decisions) is extremely popular, as are examples of this phenomenon, which showcase a variety of seemingly hidden influences on our actions. In one popular *YouTube* video on the subject, a viewer is asked to answer the question: “How many passes does the team in white make?” The question refers to a

group of eight basketball players, whom the viewer is supposed to focus on for the next fourteen seconds of the video. In these fourteen seconds, the players—four of whom are dressed in white, and four in black—frenetically interact, the players in white passing a ball to other players in white, and the players in black passing another ball to other players in black. At the conclusion of the action, the narrator informs us that “the answer is thirteen.” After giving the audience a moment to digest the answer, the narrator adds: “But, did you see the moonwalking bear?” In the next scene the action is rewound, and upon re-watching in slow-motion the viewer is able to clearly see a person in a black furry bear suit, right in the middle of that fourteen seconds, slowly moonwalk through the

Figure 2: The Moonwalking Bear (screenshot)

scene (see figure 2). As the comments on the video attest, this event typically goes completely unnoticed: because viewers have been asked to focus on the players dressed in white, they completely ignore the seemingly ridiculous

anomaly. At the end of the video, the ad promotes the idea that bicyclists are difficult to see, since, the tagline emphasizes: “It’s easy [if you’re a driver] to miss something you’re not looking for [bicyclists]” (“Test”).

Underlying research on the phenomenon at work in this video—“inattentional blindness”—does indeed highlight a surprising lack of awareness in our perception. Studies have shown that in the scenario demonstrated, typically half of viewers will report having no knowledge of having seen the moonwalking bear (Carpenter).

According to the explanation of the phenomenon on the American Psychological Association (APA) website, what is demonstrated in our perception of the basketball players is our inability to process every element in our field of vision; in short, we do not have the “working memory capacity” to “encode” the entirety of our “visual input,” and so we essentially do not see certain things that, in retrospect, were right in front of us (Carpenter). This phenomenon is closely related to what Susan T. Fiske and Shelley E. Taylor refer to as our tendency to be “cognitive misers”; in other words, we tend to take a variety of mental shortcuts that enable us to more efficiently process our world, but which also allow us to “miss” things that are right in front of us.

Such a focus on mental shortcuts in our decision making has been useful, in that it has provided a way for scientists to better account for and thus better manage systematic biases in our reasoning. Recommendations based on this research have found their way to the political realm, and have had significant influence on public policy. Cass R. Sunstein, for example, who with Richard H. Thaler is the co-author of a popular-audience-directed work on bias in decision making (*Nudge*), served as administrator of the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs under President Barack Obama, and some of his suggestions, which were made based on his research on the topic, have been taken up by the administration (Kahneman 372).

Such managing, notably, often depends on the *causes* of these biases being reduced to a few factors—and usually, these factors are *physical*. The discussion of “working memory capacity” featured on the APA website, for example, casts the issue in terms of physical *space*, suggesting the notion of a human brain as a physical container that can only hold so much. Many other scientific accounts of our decision-making

processes discuss the way that *emotional processes* can bias us—again, these are typically discussed in terms of embodied and thus physical barriers that prevent us from making effective decisions. For example, neuroscientist Antonio Damasio writes that emotional catalysts can effect a kind of “preselection” of ideas, “sometimes covertly, sometimes not,” in a process that allows only a few thought “candidates” to “present themselves” for the “final exam” that is our conscious cognition (189). In other words, by the time we are “ready” to make decisions about the world, there has already been a significant perceptual dismissal and/or “preselection” of relevant concepts, driven by these non-conscious emotional catalysts. Such prior dismissal constitutes the force of our embodied emotions as physical.

One of the most influential scholars working on cognitive bias, Daniel Kahneman—whose work blogger David McRaney cites as the “real source for most books, blogs, articles, and so on that talk about irrational thinking and delusion (including my own)” —on several occasions also reproduces this deference (and reduction) to physical causes. At one point Kahneman quotes approvingly the psychologist Jonathan Haidt’s expression that “the emotional tail wags the rational dog,” and argues that strong unvoiced emotions constitute *bodily* responses that bias our decision making in ways that elude our immediate conscious awareness (140). In another section Kahneman discusses the way that facial features can influence our voting preferences: the study he cites found that “faces that exude competence combine a strong chin with a slight confident-appearing smile,” and that these physical competence indicators were demonstrably predictive of voting outcomes in both experimental and actual situations (including national and local elections in Finland, England, Australia, Germany, and Mexico) (90–

91). Ultimately, Kahneman's main thesis posits two "systems" as involved in our decisions, with the impulsive and (embodied) emotional "System 1" taking priority in most situations and overriding the slower, analytical "System 2"—which, unlike System 1, operates exclusively within our conscious, languaged deliberation.⁴⁴

In all of these examples, reducing cause to the physical allows us to establish two things: one, our knowledge of those factors that cause our lack of control, since physical causes easily translate to readily understandable metaphors (e.g., our brains as physical containers; emotions as physical blockages, filters, or kinds of force-generating hydraulic fluid); and two, our ability to control those factors, since all of those physical images can be harnessed, grasped, or controlled in such a way as to reduce their influence.⁴⁵

We Can't Possibly Be That Smart: The Drawbacks of Stable Cause, and the Dismissal of Language

There are many benefits that can accrue from a reduction of cause. In the political realm, for instance, stable causes are at times invaluable. Jane Bennett writes that even in our "world of distributed agency," a reductive assignment of singular blame resulting in occasional "moral outrage" can be "indispensable to a democratic and just politics" (38). I agree that finding stable cause can be good for society, in terms of both social stability and as a way to better understand highly complex issues. But as the rhetoric-systems

⁴⁴ Kahneman's use of the term "system" should not be confused with my—and other systems theorists'—use of the term.

⁴⁵ As the blogger McRaney relates, after he wrote his very successful first book, *You Are Not So Smart*, which detailed the ways a wide variety of ultimately physical factors can delude our languaged deliberations, he received an overwhelming number of responses asking him for ways to remedy these biases. As McRaney writes, "when I was doing interviews for my first book, I kept getting asked variations of the same question: 'How can we stop being so deluded?'" Thus spawned his second book, *You Are Now Less Dumb*, which bears the tagline: "Self delusion makes you human, but you can do something about it. Delusion, that is. You're stuck with the human thing."

approach stipulates, this cannot be the end of the story. Moving out in our perspective allows us to notice the drawbacks to the either/or positions, and to then theorize the both/and. Particularly with the phenomenon of decision making, there are several problematic ramifications of the either/or reduction of cause to the physical.

To start, while cause can technically be located in the physical *or* in the *discursive* realm, the dominance of the former in scientific discourse has the tendency to marginalize the relevance of the latter. In a cultural epistemology dominated by the sciences, in other words, physical causes tend to be considered the most *important* causes. Such a bias toward the physical represents what biological systems theorist Stuart Kauffman calls “the ideal of reductionism in science.” Kauffman explains that this ideal encompasses the desire in the sciences to take complex phenomena such as “economic and social phenomena” and explain them “in terms of human behavior. In turn, that behavior is to be explained in terms of biological processes, which are in turn to be explained by chemical processes, and they in turn by physical ones” (16).

Many theorists have argued that such reductionism is tenaciously ascendent in science discourse. As psychologists and systems theorists J. Scott Jordan and David Vinson assert, this kind of reduction is a longstanding tradition in the epistemology of “physicalism,” which they describe as “the philosophy that all things are physical, and physical effects can only have physical causes.” Physicalism, they write, is itself an aspect of “realism,” or “the philosophy that reality exists independently of observers, and the purpose of science is to discover reality’s intrinsic, mind-independent properties”

(231).⁴⁶ As I have argued previously (and as Jordan and Vinson also aver), such realism—and reductionism—has its benefits. Importantly, it offers a sense of control and stability in one’s knowledge of the world which, from a rhetoric-systems point of view, is a natural inclination of *all* stable epistemologies (since they all function as self-sustaining and self-organized systems). In addition, the reduction to the physical creates a way to leverage this control into scientific advances that have tangible benefits to our culture. Thinking in terms of the physical has given rise to a whole host of mechanical, technological innovations, and to a scientific understanding of the world that has made what we call modern culture possible.

On the down side, the tendency to reduce to the physical—to consider the physical as that which ultimately “causes” all things—often entails the subordination of anything that is *not* the physical, and in particular, of *language*. Celeste Condit points out that this prioritization of the physical is in fact “threatening the financial foundations of traditional human studies” (“How Should” 6). Moreover, this promotion of the physical threatens to undercut the very mission of discursive critique. For example, Elizabeth A. Wilson argues that the current “enthusiasm for thinking of depression in biochemical terms” threatens the efficacy of academic feminism as a site of discursive critique, since seeing depression as a manifestation of physical causes “seems to have arrested feminist analysis of contemporary psychopharmaceutical events” by suppressing the extent to which these “psychopharmaceuticals” may at times “reinforce cultural norms and

⁴⁶ Physicalism’s separation of reality and mind is also a persistent tenet of many materialist traditions, although this assumption has been critiqued by both Material Feminist and New Materialist scholars. See, for example, Braidotti, who argues that the “mind-body dualism has historically functioned as a shortcut through the complexities of this in-between contested zone” of the human body (207). The degree to which the banner of Materialism complicates one’s disputation of a mind-body dualism (given the implications of the rhetorical focus on “materials” implicit in this title), is, however, a matter of debate.

suppress the capacity for change” (374–75). Chandra Talpade Mohanty also reminds us that the power of feminism as a “discursive practice,” one which can work to “interven[e]” in “particular hegemonic discourses” (specifically those discourses that “counte[r] and resis[t] the totalizing imperative of age-old ‘legitimate’ and ‘scientific’ bodies of knowledge” [19]) *depends* on the continued assertion of the power of language. This power is precisely the invisible aspect of discourse that is marginalized when the physical is all that matters; in this sense, ironically, our very capacity to critique the scientific discourses that perpetuate this power dynamic is diminished by the reification of the physical as dominant.

Augmenting this argument, Justine S. Murison asserts that scientific emphasis on the physical aspect of the brain “encourages scholars to consider the very *materiality* of the brain and nervous system as the location of complexity and creativity” (29), an idea that risks simplifying the complex language-based and invisible aspects of these processes. Indeed neuroscientific research—and in particular the visual, physical, and seemingly tangible evidence it provides about complex social acts—is often seen as the antidote to the uncertainty of cultural, contextual, and language-based explanations for social events. Anne Beaulieu argues as well that much neuroscientific evidence encodes a hierarchy of physical thing-ness over language itself: this binary distinction, she writes, “further reinforces an understanding of historical research as being about representations (words on paper) of cultural contexts, while neuroscience addresses the underlying and unchanging realities of individuals by providing knowledge about the universal brain,” which is seen as “universal and timeless” (155). Decision-making research is no different in its preference for the physical over the discursive; as I mentioned in chapter one, Drew

Westen's popular work on political judgment contains the claim that "politics can literally be in our genes" (82n).

To be sure, such a preference for the physical is not universal, and the reduction of cause does not always happen in the same way. I argue, though, with many others, that it is a tendency of scientific discourse to default to such reductionism. Karen Barad, following Evelyn Fox Keller, argues that this default can be attributed to scientists' "unwillingness to let go of the basic tenets of classical physics: the objectivity and knowability of nature" (287). Such a desire to stave off epistemic uncertainty about an independent and knowable nature, argues Edward Schiappa, has been a characteristic of human culture since at least the time of Plato. For Schiappa, this desire manifests in what he calls "metaphysical absolutism," the "belief that the world consists of independent, objective 'real' objects or essences that can be known directly—as they 'really are'" ("Constructing"). As do Jordan and Vinson, Schiappa identifies a misguided result of this reduction: when we look for things as they "really are," we end up reducing complexity and clinging instead to our particular "cut" while perceiving the world.

There is, however, more going on in the default reduction to the physical than the fear of unknowability and the concomitant desire for absolute certainty. This is surely part of the issue, but I would argue also that the cultural dominance of the physical helps perpetuate a self-serving cycle of cultural and economic empowerment for the sciences—especially those so-called "hard" sciences that explicitly deal with the physical. Condit explains this cycle as "a complex relationship between science and society in which a set of scientists demarcates an autonomous sphere of action through which they seek simultaneously to insulate themselves from social control and to exercise social

influence” (“How Bad” 83–84). In other words, the dominance of the physical creates a feedback loop within which scientists who *study* the physical are rewarded with the power and the funding *to decide what is important to study*: as one might guess, they decide that the physical is important to study. Condit describes how many projects focused on the physical realm—and that posit the physical as *the* important realm to study—have been “enormously successful” in generating economic rewards for their authors (“How Should” 6). What could be called a research-prestige-funding-research cycle, wherein scientists are granted access to impressive funding opportunities that can further the same research agendas that secured those opportunities in the first place, creates a situation where this kind of prioritization is naturalized; as Bruno Latour argues, the “threat of an incontestable nature” enables science to extract itself from political questions of what *should* be studied (*Politics* 10). This is the classical sense of begging-the-question executed *par excellence*: that the physical realm lies outside petty political squabbles over what is important in the world (because we *know already* that the physical *is* important), is considered a given, so that no one gets to ask whether or not the physical *should* be given political priority in the first place.

Because of this cycle, in our culture scientific discourses have become, as Michael J. Zerbe puts it, those “most often associated with knowledge production, descriptions of reality, Truth, impartiality, progress, and universality,” and of “making sense of our physical surroundings, our behavior, and our society at large” (20). In short, the dominance of the physical sciences means that this dominance is not questioned.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ This power of the sciences to dictate social reality also can also lead to an uncritical acceptance of established systems of power that are themselves based on a dominance of the physical. As Donna Haraway argues, scientific discourse operates according to a capitalist imperative that seeks to establish control of the natural world, and specifically, control based on the model of “management hierarchies”

More Drawbacks: The Illusion of the Visual

The elevation of the physical is key to the promise of control over the “natural” and the political. In both cases, this elevation is self-perpetuating, as the ascendance of the physical allows those who study the physical to draft the dominant version of a social reality, which invests these authors with a significant degree of political power. While this situation has many benefits, it is also detrimental, particularly to the capacity of discursive critique to interrupt these very hegemonic discourses.

Another problematic power dynamic manifested by a focus on physical cause is the prioritization of the *visual*. This preference is in part another symptom of our desire for certainty: if we can see something, we believe its existence to be more certain. The equation of seeing and believing is a result of what S. Scott Graham calls our culture’s dominant epistemology of “ocular centrism,” wherein sight emerges as “the ultimate arbiter of reality” (388, 389). As with reductions of cause that create the illusion of ourselves as self-sovereign agents, ocular centrism reinforces the stability of our knowledge about the world.

In *The Birth of the Clinic* Michel Foucault explains that especially in a scientific context, the visual does indeed have a unique ability to provide a sense of power and control, but this power comes with a catch. For Foucault, scientific images offer a simulacra of the authoritarian clinical gaze, and so offer the public a way to appropriate science’s control over their bodies. These images do this by giving the public this knowledge in a “configuration” that is readily acceptable and easily recognizable; as Foucault puts it, the “role” of a picture “is to divide up the visual within an already given

(“Biological” 210). The idea that these kind of hierarchies are, in fact, natural is exactly the kind of logic that goes unquestioned if we do not reconsider the dominance of the physical from another, disparate point of view.

conceptual configuration” (113). Thus, scientific images reinscribe ways of seeing that reproduce pre-existing, socially entrenched discourses of power. The knowledge produced by this discourse always falls, then, within the boundaries predetermined by the vocabulary of the discourse itself. Foucault writes that this knowledge can only be “question[ed] . . . in the vocabulary and within the language proposed to it by the things observed” (108). In other words, our reliance on the visual severely limits the possibility of discursive critique that might disrupt structures of power. Because any such critique is limited by its dependence of the visual, it is unable to transcend the limits of the knowledge structures implicitly present in those images.

In the nineteenth century the science of Phrenology trumpeted the possibility of knowing the “traits” of a person through study of visual maps of the skull. These maps were wildly popular and allowed many non-scientists to take up this research, but these uptakes often simply reflected pre-existing cultural stereotypes that helped justify established racial hierarchies (Gibbons *passim*; Jahoda 39; Hamilton 176). More recently, brain scans, for example those provided by functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI), have become popular images in cultural discourse (and in some discussions of cognitive bias). These scans often feature colorful images of our brains at work and so offer yet another possibility for the appropriation of scientific knowledge, and of the dominance of science over the body. As neurologist Susan M. Fitzpatrick writes, however, “despite the language used to discuss them, the brain images displayed in scientific publications and in the popular media are not representations of changes in brain neuronal activity, or areas of ‘activation,’ or the brain ‘lighting up’ or ‘switching on’” (186). Instead, as with Phrenology, the public’s perception of the images is one that

has already been determined by cultural discourses of power. The specific power dynamics of fMRI research and of Phrenology may not be exactly alike, but the manifestations are strikingly similar: “compassion, fairness and wisdom,” and even “psychopathy” are traits that can supposedly be traced to specific parts of the brain, and in this tracing lie the answers to the uncertainty that is our personality (Miller, Greg; Vergano). In both cases, what seems obviously *there* is in fact that which we expected to find, and these expectations are determined by cultural forces that, ironically, are determined and shaped outside of the visible in the conceptual realm of the discursive.

Images invoked in the science of decision making also offer the public a way to appropriate science’s control over their bodies, and in so doing reinscribe discursively constituted power dynamics. Videos such as the one featuring the “moonwalking bear” provide us a way to analyze how our perception works: playing the video back in slow motion allows us to see what we have been missing, and illustrates that if we look close enough we *can* see the bear. Much like other images of this kind, this video seems to reveal the illusion as just that, and in showing us what we missed—and so ostensibly showing us how the illusion works—the visual reinscribes its own authority. This, again, is an affirmation of the priority of the physical (and of the physical sciences); the video tells us that if we look *correctly*, we will be able to locate that which we would otherwise miss and thus reestablish control over our perception.

Moving Out to Both/And: A Complex and Excessive Causality

We do need certainty, and such certainty is provided by much scientific research. The cut that we make in viewing this research—and especially the visual proof it offers—as

authoritative, however, has specific drawbacks. In what follows, I lay out the contours of a new cut: a version of an *excessive* and *complex* causality that specifically disrupts the certainty offered by the elevation of the physical. In making this new cut, we take our account of cause and add another layer that may have been hidden by the original perspective. This cut can combat reductive reproductions of the unequivocal priority of the physical realm over the discursive, and so remedy in part the entrenched perspective that currently dominates the cultural conversation.

I mentioned earlier that to consider cause as *excessive* means that the causes excluded in any one picture of causality are always circulating, waiting for their inevitable return. In this circulation, cause and effect both are continually forming and reforming together with a variety of other shifting elements, creating new contexts, new perspectives, and new alliances that can challenge and change our very definitions of physical materials and of discursive elements. Bennett calls these alliances (following Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari) “assemblages,” which she defines as “ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts.” These shifting confederations generate effects that are “emergent properties . . . in that their ability to make something happen . . . is distinct from the sum of the vital force of each materiality [in each part of an assemblage] considered alone” (23–24). Assemblages, according to Bennett, create (or cause) effects in a way that is ultimately irreducible to any one part. The shifting swirl of elements can come together differently in each contextual moment.

In her articulation of “agential realism” and “causal intra-activity,” Barad makes a similar point about the contingency and protean nature of causal events and elements. Barad’s argument blurs the boundaries between physical “material” things and

“discursive practices.” Rather, in her formulation the properties of elements—and of discrete causes—are articulated after the fact:

In an agential realist account, discursive practices are specific material (re)configurings of the world through which the determination of boundaries, properties, and meanings is differentially enacted. . . . In its causal intra-activity, part of the world becomes determinately bounded and propertied in its emergent intelligibility to another part of the world, while lively matterings, possibilities, and impossibilities are reconfigured.

Discursive practices are boundary-making practices that have no finality in the ongoing dynamics of agential intra-activity. (148–49)

Barad (like Bennett) writes from the perspective of a dynamic materialist (for Bennett, a “vital materialist”), meaning that she views the world as an “entanglement of matter and meaning” (the subtitle of her book on the subject). For Barad, matter is neither predetermined nor permanent, and therefore neither is any causal element; the constituents of matter, just like the constituents of a cause, are entangled in an ongoing, contextually contingent relationship. Matter and cause are determined only within a given “discursive practice” in a way that creates stable knowledge, making them both “dynamic,” determined for particular contexts within contingent circumstances of “intra-action” (149–50).⁴⁸ This view recalls both Latour’s assertion that we create knowledge about what is “firm ground” in “shifting sands” (*Reassembling* 24), and Haraway’s

⁴⁸ I should note that Barad’s version of “discursive practices,” as “material (re)configurings,” are not exclusively languaged entities. While my own use of the term “discursive realm” has so far been limited to the realm of language, I agree with Barad’s argument that we cannot keep language and matter separate. In keeping with my rhetoric-systems approach, I recognize the value of separating the two (as an either/or), but also recognize the both/and theorization, in which matter and meaning are, as Barad puts it, “entangled.”

concept of “situated objectivity” (“Situated”). In all of these cases, our classifications of materials, elements, causes, and so on, while stable in a specified context, are not final, and thus conclusions based on them can never be definitive.

In Evelyn Fox Keller’s articulation of cause, she argues that it is “a mistake to think of [specific outcomes] as a product of causal elements interacting with one another.”⁴⁹ Keller argues instead that specific effects depend on “the complex orchestration of multiple courses of action that involve interactions among many different kinds of elements—including not only preexisting elements . . . but also new elements . . . that are formed out of such interactions, temporal sequences of events, dynamical interactions, etc” (6–7). Here, Keller takes Barad’s point and adds temporal indeterminacy: the “cause” of any given effect involves elements only contingently separable in the present moment, and so involves elements that exist in different temporal dimensions. As William E. Connolly expresses this idea, “We participate in at least two registers of temporal experience, action-oriented perception and the slower experience of the past folding into the present and both flowing toward the future” (4). In this version of causality, any stable cause is actually specified from a collection of undifferentiated elements from the present, past, and future.

This overflowing attribution of causal elements may seem far-fetched and overly convoluted, but in fact it is not particularly novel in scientific or in rhetorical scholarship. For any scholar working with systems theory, for example, any “complex system,” rather than a series of linear causes and effects, exists as an organized jumble of perturbations and corrections occurring on multiple levels within and outside of the system. The effects

⁴⁹ Keller is discussing genetics here, but as I assert her causal scheme can also be adopted for other uses.

then feed back into the system, further influencing its development and future possibilities. Rhetoric scholar Marilyn M. Cooper discusses this point in terms of the body-as-system; for Cooper, such a version of causality means that “perception, behavior, and knowing” are not detached linear phenomena, but rather are “emergent” properties of the complex process that is “living in the world” (“Rhetorical” 421). Cooper’s point means that decision making, for example (as a process that our bodies in part “cause”), can be seen as a result of a series of perturbations and corrections happening in several different time frames. For example, if I resist the appeal of a particularly well-done political advertisement (for a third-party candidate, for instance), my decision is shaped by my past experiences (if, in the past, I have voted for a third party and been both elated and disappointed), and by my *future* expectations and desires: just as I experience an anticipatory urge to vote for a candidate most closely aligned with my own values, I know that if the major opposition candidate wins I will feel visceral anger and disgust.

A basic scientific model of an approach to causality that entails past and future considerations is laid out by systems theorist Wayne A. Hershberger in his discussion of human volition (essentially, decision making), with regard to a household thermostat and furnace system. The system in this case is essentially circular, and Hershberger writes that when we conceive cause and effect we often “confus[e] sensory input with cause and motor output with effect.” As he describes it, the motor “output” is just as much a cause of the sensory output as anything else: when the temperature changes the sensor tells the motor to spin, but it is the motor that is affecting the temperature and thus telling the sensor what to read, and on and on. Such circularity, Hershberger asserts, renders any

simplistic (and, I would add, non-complex) cause-and-effect terminology insufficient (or as Hershberger dismissively assesses this terminology, as “gibberish”) (824).

More recently, neuroscientists have begun to question the simple linear model of cause and effect as a framework for understanding the very basics of how our brain works—and thus how we “decide” things in the first place. Neuroscientist Walter Freeman, for example, argues that our actions and decisions do not come about in an ordered see-think-do sequence; rather, the states within which we decide manifest as a form of pre-linguistic energy that can be described as a dynamic flow of pre-conscious “intentionality.” Drawing on Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Freeman argues that this “intentionality precedes consciousness, and the dichotomy between subject and object disappears. Action precedes perception” (119). Similarly, the aforementioned neuro-psychologist J. Scott Jordan, with cultural scientist Marcello Ghin, argues that our conception of a division between “physical” and “mental” phenomena is itself deleterious to a more “holistic” understanding of “meaning.” In Jordan and Ghin’s account, meaning is not a locatable effect of discrete brain processes, but rather a non-linear “embedded, embodied self-sustaining process” (51). Jordan’s own “autocatalytic approach” to volition involves an “inherent ability of organisms to offset perturbation” (“Consciousness”), and thus he considers any intentional action as inherently “about” perturbations that can arise from past and future events and considerations. Even among those who take a less radical view of our volitional action and decision making, it is a common sentiment that the basis of our actions and decisions is not a static one. As science philosopher Shaun Gallagher summarizes: We “interpret” the actions of others “in terms of their goals and intentions set in contextualized situations” (229).

The specifics of the causality theories I have articulated here may diverge with regard to details, but in general there is strong support across several disciplines for a causality model that rejects simple linearity. Cause in this model is radically contingent; while we can articulate it as linear in a given moment, we must also acknowledge that both cause and effect are constituted out of a swirl of indeterminate elements. Such elements become defined and discrete only when we specify them as such. Linearity, just as with all of the reductions I have been describing, becomes a necessary stability that allows us certainty in our knowledge of events; however, the knowledge provided will always be incomplete.

In the case of decision making, acknowledging such incompleteness enables us to move from an either/or to a both/and view. In so doing, we can create the grounds upon which to contest the physical as exclusively prior or dominant. Notably, this move allows rhetoricians to write themselves back into the conversation: to be clear, a rhetoric-systems approach does not override the benefits of considering physical causes in themselves—the approach is not a re-assertion of the discursive over the physical. Rather, it allows us to understand how certain discursive elements can interrelate with physical elements. Such a view, as I will conclude, is key to a fuller understanding of the way language can have important entangled and non-linear causal ramifications on our knowing of the world.

Commonplaces as Entanglements

Conceiving the rhetorical commonplace as a site of complex entanglement of time, matter, and language specifically gives shape to a discussion—and to a *new*

commonplace—about the contingency of our definitions of cause and matter, that in *its* circulation facilitates engagement with scientific research that does not reproduce the dominance of the physical and of the visual. In this new discussion, commonplaces, among other discursive elements, *can be* specified in their function as *either* operating in language or as operating in the manner of a physical element; that is, they can function causally as either a discursive or physical phenomenon. This is not an argument for or against the materiality of discourse, as many such arguments have already been made convincingly from several different perspectives. Rather, I show here that the choice to consider discursive and physical causes, as well as discourse and physical materials, as binary distinctions, while useful for certain purposes, constitutes only one perspective on materiality, and that cannot be the only one we consider.⁵⁰

To begin, we can think of a rhetorical commonplace as a linguistic premise—a sentence, a phrase, or even a single term—that conveys an idea that members of a certain culture believe to be true. This is a broad starting point, but a useful one. Thinking of a commonplace as a premise recalls the common Renaissance-era definition of the concept as “a striking or notable passage, noted for reference or use in a book of commonplaces or *Commonplace-book*” (Moss 1). The commonplaces in these books were stock-like phrases or sayings that could be acquired in public and then memorized, resulting in their

⁵⁰ To be sure, there are several nuanced approaches to rhetoric and materiality that do not explicitly argue for one side of the binary over the other. Jack Selzer and Sharon Crowley’s edited collection *Rhetorical Bodies*, as well as Barbara Biesecker and John Lucaites’ *Rhetoric, Materiality, and Politics* are two recent examples illustrative of the diverse potential angles from which this nexus of rhetoric and the material can be explored. Many other theorists are specifically working to overcome this division; Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman’s theorizing of a feminist materialism, wherein they attempt to accomplish a “deconstruction of the material/discursive dichotomy that retains both elements without privileging either” (“Introduction” 6), is one such example of this work. As well, in an approach amenable to the conception of temporality I advocate here, William C. Trapani argues that “materiality’s force” is a “resistance to appropriation” that cannot be reduced to “a flattened sense of time.” For Trapani, the force of the material must include considerations of the past and as well “be open to the coming of the future” (337–38).

availability both in the discourse of a culture and (then) in the memory of individual rhetors.

Premises of arguments in these books were often somewhat ambiguous and subjective, but they were also already finished, in a sense; they were static ideas that one could draw upon in order to make a wide variety of arguments.⁵¹ Ann Moss writes that because of this, the ancient conception of the commonplace as a literal “place” is an appropriate way of conceiving these ideas.⁵² During the inventional process of “rhetorical argumentation,” Moss explains, one must “ru[n] through” certain ““finding places”” in order to create a coherent argument (5); by running one’s ideas through enough commonplaces, in other words, she will find a premise to suit her topic. Flipping through the commonplace books, a rhetor could find a variety of these ready-to-go premises, each of which could be used for a variety of purposes. Even when there was no book at hand, these premises were available to rhetors by virtue of their commonality in the discourse of their culture, as rhetors inventing an argument could draw from a diversity of cultural truisms, common beliefs, or even those basic premises of arguments that they had either memorized, or that were in wide cultural use and circulation.

While modern-day commonplace books are more difficult to find, I argue that the same types of ready-to-go (yet also somewhat ambiguous and subjective) premises circulate in our culture, via the material, digital, and discursive networks that sustain our rhetoric systems. Rebecca Dingo argues that such circulating elements interact with both

⁵¹ Some of these phrases would more accurately be called proverbs than commonplaces; I bracket this distinction here so as to focus on the way that certain (more ambiguous and subjective) proverb-type phrases serve the same rhetorical function as traditional commonplaces.

⁵² The Latin term for a commonplace is *loci communes*. *Loci* derives from the Greek *topoi*, which can mean either “topics” or “places,” and both modern and ancient rhetoricians stress the link between topic and place to various degrees. As a typical (and classic) example, Quintilian discusses topics as the “secret places where arguments reside, and from which they must be drawn forth” (5.10.20).

rhetorical and “extra-rhetorical forces” and so become “layered and connected to other information” in ways that alter their uptake by participants in diverse rhetorical situations (14, 20, 146). As I discussed in chapter three, we can think of these circulating and interacting commonplaces as rhetorical “building blocks” that shape arguments and beliefs in multiple rhetoric systems.

We are often not aware of the way circulating commonplaces profoundly shape our beliefs, conversations, and decisions. Citing Lawrence D. Green, Matthew Jackson asserts that “enthymematic reasoning runs throughout all discourse so completely that we are apt to see right through it and follow the way it patterns our thought without being conscious of the patterning itself” (Green 623 qtd. in Jackson 610). Susan Miller also captures this imperceptible force of the commonplace in her description of them as “rhetorical forms that are comprehended only in examples of ‘successful’ sayings, practices that voice theoretically acceptable desires.” Crucially, these “sayings” as premises not only generate, but also *confine and direct* thought, “limiting” Miller writes, “what it is possible to think” (20–21). In this way a commonplace can be so “successful” as to seem obvious, and this obviousness can have a dampening effect on deliberative debate. For example, take the phrase *freedom isn’t free*, which is a salient commonplace in contemporary American culture. Uttering this commonplace immediately yields an enthymeme along the lines of: *Freedom isn’t free, so to preserve our country we need to make sacrifices and undergo some hardships; thus, being extensively and intrusively searched at airports is something we just have to undergo*. Oftentimes such a statement, as I’ve noted, completely shuts down debate; since everyone knows freedom isn’t free, there is no use arguing it. Of course everyone *doesn’t* have the same opinion about issues

invoked by “freedom isn’t free,” but the phrase itself can carry a logic that seemingly needs no elaboration—a logic that can be both generative and overwhelming on its own.⁵³

In Miller’s definition, these statements, which are at times simplistic, trite, and moralistic, nevertheless exert a palpable *force* on our thinking (and, I would add, on our decisions); as Miller puts it they “simultaneously organize, arrange, and root culturally transmitted common opinion as the active discursive substance of a culture” (20–21). In other words, we don’t *think* “freedom isn’t free,” necessarily. Instead, the concept of “freedom” is networked into our worldview and carried with us, affecting all of our actions and every decision we make. The commonplace as such a networked element circulates in our deliberative rhetoric systems, but also beyond them, interacting with our beliefs and reasoning outside of our conscious awareness.

In support of this claim we can look to Quintilian’s point about the way ideas in one’s memory become linked in a chain of associations that come together “like dancers holding hands,” so that the “sight” of the first quickly “recalls the respective details” (11.2.20). In Quintilian’s account, a commonplace as a premise operates as a quick conduit to the other parts of an enthymeme. Switching metaphors, commonplaces can be (and have been) thought of as *machines* that dwell within our deliberative reasoning on a topic, generating a completed enthymeme automatically.⁵⁴ Combining the two

⁵³ It is important to remember that not everyone responds to the same commonplaces—not everyone understands what “freedom isn’t free” means. This is because not everyone is hailed by the same cultural beliefs. What is important for my point here is that everyone does have a set of commonplaces to which they subscribe and respond.

⁵⁴ The metaphor of commonplace as machine is a common theorization. See for example Carruthers *passim*; Leff, “Commonplaces” 450 (drawing on Carruthers); and Moss (who calls rhetoric in general “a sophisticated machinery of verbal production,” and commonplaces in particular “among the most conspicuous pieces of that machinery”) (vi).

metaphors: commonplaces can be thought of as enthymeme-generators that create immediate associations with already finished arguments.

Thus, we often draw on commonplaces circulating in our cultural discourse *without consciously deliberating*, and in turn immediately produce a full enthymematic structure that shapes our beliefs, and decisions, about the world. In this sense the commonplace as a rhetorical concept exists not only as a generative “place,” as it is often theorized, but also as a static premise that circulates and *invisibly generates and structures* thought in a culture.

In decision-making research (like much other research into our thought processes), physical elements are typically thought of as affecting our cognition non-consciously in the form of physical “biases,” such as our lack of “storage memory” or our emotional “preselection” (to borrow Damasio’s term), thus determining pre-consciously what we can think. These physical and non-conscious factors are thought to be able to overwhelm our *language*d deliberation without our knowing it. My theorization of the commonplace, however, illustrates that this rhetorical element can operate in much the same way and on the same plane as these physical elements can—that is, non-consciously.⁵⁵

I complicate the exclusive priority of the physical as that which can exert force outside our conscious deliberation by asserting that commonplaces generate *non-conscious enthymemes*. As such, commonplaces cannot be placed easily in a

⁵⁵ The notion of the non-conscious character of argumentative premises such as commonplaces is pervasive, if under-recognized, in rhetorical scholarship. As one good example, Jacqueline de Romilly, in tracing the linkage between “magic” and “rhetoric” from antiquity to the present, writes that at the core of our understanding of rhetoric itself is “a struggle between the spell of the irrational and the desire to master it by means of reason” (85). This tension between our ability to create discourse and our inability to fully account for its effects on us strikes precisely at the heart of the conscious/non-conscious duality that inheres in commonplaces.

discursive/physical binary wherein discursive elements exist only in conscious, languaged deliberation, and in which physical elements are the only kind of elements that can operate non-consciously. Commonplaces operate in *both* the conscious and the non-conscious realm: on the one hand, they exist as discursive premises interacting in our conscious deliberations; on the other, they interact with us non-consciously, affecting us as a “physical” force in much the same way as our emotions or our lack of “working memory capacity”—both of which can prevent us from “seeing” that which is right in front of us. Commonplaces, in short, can function as materials comingling in discursive and physical ecologies.

The point I wish to emphasize here is not that commonplaces are either, or both, physical or discursive, but rather that they are not *specified* as either until we constitute them as elements in a physical-discursive assemblage. Such an assemblage has a causal force that exceeds empirical expressions of time and matter, but that we perceive in the moment as linear and as belonging to either the physical or discursive realm. This is to say, we can talk about commonplaces any way we want—as either discursive or material, and as either temporal or beyond linear time—but the important point is that our specification of them will change depending on the context. This is what I mean when I argue that commonplaces are entanglements of matter and meaning: depending on the context and on our reductive specifications within these contexts, commonplaces can exert force non-consciously, much as does traditional physical “matter,” but they also can be created and deployed consciously in deliberative debate.

This conception of a commonplace illustrates the complex interrelation of forces that conspire in every causal scenario, each of which is the end result of the force of a

confederation of elements drawn from shifting assemblages within a networked rhetoric system. Such a rhetoric system is not purely discursive, nor is it purely physical. In fact, while a rhetoric-systems approach would recognize the necessity and usefulness of distinctions such as physical or discursive, it would also call for a bracketing of the very division of matter and discourse, and would require us to re-make the cut so as to obviate this distinction, and to draw attention to the way that elements can work across such distinctions.

In terms of our conception of cause in decision making, the both/and cut can illustrate the way that elements traditionally considered as physical or discursive can work in mutual and reciprocal interrelation, with neither kind of element taking priority. Such thinking can interrupt the seemingly endless debate in which the priority of the tangible is asserted, is answered by assertions of the importance of discourse, and is then met by a re-assertion of the importance of the tangible.⁵⁶

In short, if we reify the hierarchy of the physical over the discursive and assume that the two sides are *not* entangled in constant interrelation, we can easily fall into believing that our words cannot do anything to combat the physical causes in our world, and that once our physically-rooted biases kick in, our linguistic faculties are powerless to resist. Using the perspective of the both/and—without dismissing the either/or—is one

⁵⁶ Some of the recent scholarship on “new materialisms” exemplifies the latter move of this kind of back-and-forth debate. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, for example, in the introduction to their collection, *New Materialisms*, call for a return to a materialism that specifically avoids the “allergy to ‘the real’” that they claim pervades “the dominant constructivist orientation to social analysis” (which would include much work in the humanities, including rhetoric) (6). As I argue, the reification of the physical realm as “the real” reproduces the harmful power dynamic wherein the physical trumps the discursive, and which I have argued here not only is detrimental to a robust understanding of the complex causal nature of our world, but also risks marginalizing the goals of humanistic cultural critique.

way to delineate language as an equally effective causal force in decision making, and is a way to reassert the importance of rhetoric in these conversations.⁵⁷

Our failure to recognize the complexity of the decision-making process means that we cede our agency and our responsibility as linguistic beings; after all, *we* do create these commonplaces that circulate and take hold in our collective cultural discourse, which we unknowingly rely upon and which structure our own arguments. Because of this, we need to understand that our language use is a cause of and a potential remedy for the discursive *and* material obstacles that impinge on our deliberations. By attending to the way we create language and commonplaces, and to the way these become a part of an interconnected and entangled world (the elements of which are specified only in a particular momentary context), we can begin to conceive of how our own language use is both a cause and an effect of our decisions and a cause and an effect of what we call (at various moments) the physical and discursive structures in our world.

⁵⁷ There is already scientific and rhetorical scholarship that can serve as a useful starting point for this kind of dissolution of the physical-discursive hierarchy. For example, Kahneman's research on decision making, which I critiqued earlier in this chapter, nevertheless contains several points extremely amenable to integration with rhetoric scholarship (minus the emphasis on the ultimate precedence of the physical): at one point Kahneman discusses psychological research that illustrates that "vivid details"—in other words, language—can play an important role in affecting the outcome of a decision (328), and at another point he expresses his faith in the idea that both verbal and visual "framing" (or as rhetoricians would call it, rhetoric and visual rhetoric) are crucial in affecting behavior (414–15). Even more promising is cognitive psychologists Anthony Pratkanis and Elliot Aronson's text *Age of Propaganda: The Everyday Use and Abuse of Persuasion*. While the authors explore persuasion and cognitive bias from a distinctly psychological perspective, their work is informed by the view that language is a key factor in these biases—at one point the authors even echo the foundational rhetorical tenet that "words and labels . . . can be used to persuade and create social reality" (79). Finally, as Michael Billig points out, there is a sizeable contingent of "discursive psychologists" who argue "against the very idea of treating language-behaviour as if it is a sign for . . . *real*, underlying psychological entities" that can be expressed in terms of "material objects" (10–11; emphasis mine).

CHAPTER V

WRITING COMPLEXITY, ONE STABILITY AT A TIME

Systems theory and complexity theory have an interesting relationship with writing pedagogy. For some rhetoric and composition scholars, to treat writing in its full complexity means that its integration into the classroom is a difficult, if not impossible, task. Sidney I. Dobrin is one representative of this view. Dobrin asserts that we should imagine writing as complex “phenomena,” both interrelated with and independent of other social and political “phenomena” (much like systems theory posits systems are independent yet interrelated with other systems). In so doing, Dobrin argues that we must correspondingly reject an imagining of writing that manifests what he calls a “will to simplicity and stability” (24–25, 173). Writing, in this view, is ungraspable, and resists any kind of reduction to the linear. As Dobrin writes:

[T]he complexities of writing [are] so diverse and divergent that we may never be able to fully account for all of the facets and fluctuations of writing, particularly as writing endlessly fluctuates as a system, making it difficult, if not impossible, to ever identify an unchanging moment about which concrete theories might evolve. (143)

In terms of pedagogy, to posit writing as ungraspable means that teaching writing as a formula, or as reducible to set strategies for students to employ in various situations, is

basically out. For both Dobrin and those with similar views, complexity and pedagogy pull in opposite directions.

Dobrin's ideas mirror a school of thought about writing that has come to be known as the "postprocess" movement. The movement is often attributed to Thomas Kent, who argued that the very idea of a "writing process" is itself problematic, since, as he writes, there is "no codifiable or generalizable writing process [that] exists or could exist" ("Preface" 1). Although postprocess is not a completely unified theory—Dobrin himself is the co-editor of a collection entitled *Beyond Postprocess*, for example—one of its primary tenets is an "unapologetic resistance to simple pedagogical application" (Dobrin, Rice, and Vastola 3). For those who hold a postprocess view, every writing situation demands new approaches, or as Dobrin, J. A. Rice, and Michael Vastola put it, if "each particular instance of writing conceptually breaks with previous instances of writing, forming some sort of relationship between different writing acts becomes more of an open gamble than a guaranteed practice" (11–12). Because writing is a "gamble," any formulaic approach to writing pedagogy is insufficient: as Barbara Couture succinctly asks, "[i]f little about writing is predictable, what lessons can teachers give?" (21).

This question has not gone unanswered, however, and there are many other rhetoric and composition scholars (Couture among them) who argue that postprocess thinking can translate into specific teaching strategies. My argument in this chapter, much like in previous chapters, does not dismiss either point of view. A rhetoric-systems approach recognizes the complexity of writing, and the breadth of factors that are at work in any composition. My theory of rhetoric as a *system* entails that writing is an artifact

that can itself be recognized as a system. Systems can be considered in isolation by making a particular “cut,” remember, and in thinking of writing as a system we make the cut and include the elements that affect and can be affected by a single text. My original definition of a rhetoric system—as an interconnected and interdependent network of beliefs, arguments, commonplaces, meanings, and texts that all have the potential to affect and be affected by each other—in this sense lends itself well to considering writing as a similar (although distinct) system.

A rhetoric-systems approach shares many theoretical premises with postprocess and beyond-postprocess theories of writing: for instance, that writing is a complex phenomenon (or in Dobrin’s terms, that writing is multiple, complex “phenomena”); that it is involved in shifting contexts and situated cultural discourses; and that it is in an unstable, non-linear interaction with a diversity of factors both inside and outside the writing classroom. Indeed, these are the both/and aspects of complexity: its vastness, and its involvement with other systems including but not limited to rhetoric systems. However, as I have argued throughout this dissertation, before we recognize this complexity we first need to *rein it in*. A key move of a rhetoric-systems approach is to first recognize the either/or, and in this case the either/or can be the stability of a single text, or it can be the stability of specific rhetorical elements within a text. By starting from a stability, and then adopting a both/and perspective (and so recognizing more elements at work in a given text), and subsequently freezing those elements as a different stability, I argue we can instill in our theorizations a sense of the complexity of writing without losing the stability and circumscription I argue are necessary to a full appreciation of any complex system.

Precisely *because* of this theorization of writing as complex, writing becomes teachable *as* a complex phenomenon. That is, to theorize writing as a complex entity in itself—outside of a pedagogical context—gives us a way to incorporate stability and still maintain a sense of writing’s complexity. This in turn illuminates a way to teach writing *as complex* within the confines of the classroom, as a containable phenomenon about which we can give lessons and write syllabi—in short, that is *teachable*—but yet that still can be theorized as a complex activity that transcends the classroom. In this way my argument heads off many postprocess critiques of pedagogy that often specifically point to the way the “process” approach to writing reduces it to a static or linear entity. Taking a rhetoric-systems approach to writing allows us to theorize an object of writing as both a static entity confined to a particular classroom context, and also an event intrinsically beyond pedagogy, beyond boundaries, and beyond the individual student subject. To develop this idea, in this chapter I first theorize and explain complexity in writing—in particular, I argue that its complexity makes writing a “fractal” phenomenon. Following this articulation of writing as complex I turn to the issue of writing pedagogy, and illustrate how writing’s fractal characteristics give us a way to teach it as both static *and* complex.

“Fractal” Complexity in Writing

A single text can be theorized as a complex entity: both self-contained as an isolated stability in itself, but also in relation to what is outside of it. These two ways of looking at writing, importantly, must be done one at a time. Once we consider a textual object in isolation (and thus exclude the *excess* outside of the text), the relations *within that object*

are revealed. To use Kent's terms, a rhetoric-systems approach *does* theorize static "codifiable" elements present in writing, but also (crucially) it allows for a consideration of these elements as in relation. This either/or-then-both/and approach to complexity in writing entails a series of movements between the levels of scale in the writing itself: we must zoom in on small-scale relations, and zoom out on larger-scale relations—in so doing we focus on the circumscribed interior elements and *then* pull back and view the relations with outside elements. Together, this varied approach builds a more robust (and complex) picture of writing.

Writing in this formulation, I argue, is *fractal*. This is a term often associated with static objects displaying a particular mathematical pattern, but the term can also illuminate the behavior of complex systems such as writing. In short, as fractal, both systems and individual elements within systems exhibit *self-similarity* across smaller and larger scales, and so reveal complexity on various levels of scale. This complexity can be productively elaborated by zooming in and zooming out on these levels of scale, one stability at a time.

The term "fractal" was coined in 1975 by Benoit Mandelbrot, who used it to describe repeating patterns found in a surprising number of locations throughout nature and culture. Stephan Wolfram describes a fractal as a particular form of repetition: "smaller and smaller copies of a pattern are successively nested inside each other, so that the same intricate shapes appear no matter how much you 'zoom in' to the whole." The term can refer to any objects, constellations, or systems that display such a repetitious quality; Wolfram cites Fern leaves and Romanesco broccoli as examples of fractals found in nature (see figure 3), although they can be found in a dizzyingly diverse array of

locations: digital effects in the movies, cell phone antennas, tree branch patterns, classical music, and the human heart are just a few examples of fractal objects. Elaborating this commonality, Steven Johnson asserts that there are

a series of shared properties and patterns [that] recur again and again in unusually fertile environments In the language of complexity theory, these patterns of innovation and creativity are fractal: they reappear in recognizable form as you zoom in and out When life gets creative, it has a tendency to gravitate toward certain recurring patterns. (17–18)

I do not adhere as closely as some do to the idea (and as Johnson’s quotation here may

Figure 3: Romanesco Broccoli

imply) that every creative process can be reduced to a series of patterns. This would be to fall into a version of the “ideal of reductionism in science” that I discussed in chapter four. But I do argue that there is value in conceiving of writing (as an object constituted by a creative process) as a fractal

entity, or at least, as having fractal-like qualities.

The first step toward understanding writing as fractal is—as I do here—to conceptualize it as a system in itself. As a system, writing exhibits the property of self-organization, which means that out of the constellation of elements that compose the system will emerge a relatively stable order. According to systems theorist Manuel De Landa, even among what would seem to be very different types of systems there are key similarities in their processes of self-organization. De Landa finds similar basic ordering

principles in a surprising diversity of systems that involve seemingly disparate kinds of elements, including systems of genetic materials, geologic formations, and social classes (“Geology”; *Philosophy* 12).

In a writing system this emergent order manifests as a “meaning” of a text; in other words, as soon as a text is comprehended it attains the status of a self-organized system, since its meaning has become stabilized.⁵⁸ A text’s self-organization entails that everything in the text contributes to a meaning which, while it can be destabilized, tends toward stability; put another way, we could say that the meaning of a self-organized text tends to “stubbornly” persist.

When writing is stabilized it coheres not just at the general level of the whole text, but at all levels of scale within the text. Because of this multi-level coherence there are several similar discernible patterns that can be found throughout the structure of a written object—such self-similarity, or homology, is a central property of a fractal. I will explore a specific example of this at the end of this chapter, but in general, we can say that both within and among sentences, paragraphs, and sections (if these structural elements exist in a given text), a variety of relational similarities can be found.

Putting these insights together: when a reader finds meaning in a text, we can say that a multi-scale homology exists. Even texts that initially seem incoherent, as soon as a reader makes meaning he or she creates a coherence that is an effect of homologous relations between textual elements at different levels. Importantly, in keeping with the idea of a fractal we can say that some homologies are more developed than others: that is, not all texts have well-developed self-similarity, just as not all objects are clearly fractal.

⁵⁸ This conception brackets the question of whether writing can stand on its own outside of an agent’s interpretation, but I argue that this question is irrelevant to our purposes here; a text that “means” something is a text that is *self-organized*.

A reader's experience of incoherence is an effect of relations between elements that are not homologous. Those texts that are more coherent, then, are also more thoroughly fractal.

Because a fractal contains repeating similarities at different levels of scale, zooming in on each level provides a glimpse of complexity that does not diminish—and often increases—as we get closer.⁵⁹ At each successive level of zoom we can see new complexity in the relations between elements on that level. Zooming out, too, reveals complexity both on broader levels and between different levels of scale. This revelation of complexity both opens up possibilities and forecloses others: we can find myriad opportunities to explore and discover new structures and connections at and between levels of scale, but this complexity also forces us to circumscribe our view, since we can only comprehend a limited number of relations at one time.

These fractal tendencies of self-organization and self-similarity could be taken as evidence of objective principles of organization that transcend different types of systems, and so might imply that all writing exhibits similar tendencies (this echoes a common criticism leveled by postprocess theorists at “static” approaches to writing: that the static approaches reduce the complex activity of writing to reductive general principles). To draw this conclusion, however, would be a mistake, since it would undermine the emphasis on context that is central to a *rhetorical* understanding of these systems (and so to a rhetoric-systems approach). We cannot exactly equate two kinds of systems, or even two systems of the same kind. As De Landa writes, “Dynamical systems . . . must be seen as *different*,” even while they both have similar “flows of matter-energy that provoke

⁵⁹ Latour compares this effect to the way that the more exact the measuring tool (and thus the more closely one looks), the more a coastline will increase in complexity and length (*Reassembling* 23–24), a cartographic phenomenon commonly referred to as the Coastline Paradox.

their unique metamorphoses” into organized systems. In De Landa’s description of these similar-but-divergent systems, he points to similar “sorting devices” that differ in specifics but are similar in their function; for example, he points to “microorganisms” that use “selection pressures” to organize both “our organic bodies” (in terms of the organization of our immune systems) and also “our institutions” (in terms of the way we organize hospitals to deter the spread of infection)—while the sorting devices in these two cases are the same, the contexts, and the specific results of that sorting, are radically different. De Landa also points to linguistic “norms” that in a similar way can flow through “generations (and across communities)” and exert selection pressure in a variety of historical contexts (*Thousand* 28; 172; 186; emphasis in original). These examples illustrate that there are similar basic sorting mechanisms at work that create a similar kind of order, even if the specifics of that order are different. In terms of writing systems we could say, for example, that the sorting mechanisms at work are the rhetorical inventional heuristics, and the grammar rules, that exert “selection pressures” on the composition of a written text. In all of these examples of dynamic systems there is order in the complexity, and so we find similar repeating patterns integrated into the system itself, even while the specifics of various systems (and various texts) can drastically differ.

Systems theorist Gregory Bateson attributes this kind of parallel-but-not-exactly-coextensive similarity—which, I argue, is central to the characterization of these systems as fractal—to the principle of *stochasticity*. Bateson defines a “stochastic” event as “a sequence [that] combines a random component with a selective process so that only certain outcomes of the random are allowed to endure” (214). For systems governed by self-organization, as I have mentioned, there are patterns of relation that show up on

different levels of scale—as De Landa points out, “[t]he flows of molten rock that lie underneath the surface of the earth, for example, exhibit the same coherent circular motion as the air and water above it” (*Philosophy* 12)—but in keeping with the principle of stochasticity these patterns contain a crucial element of randomness, since each specific system exists in a unique cultural, physical, and discursive context, and is the product of a unique historically situated evolution.

Here we can see in my theory of writing an integration of postprocess and process theories. In one sense, my approach retains the benefit of the process approach, in that it allows an exploration of writing that is shielded from the intrusive excess of complexity—it does so, however, without proscribing complexity from our theorizations of writing. My approach encourages us to explore complexity; it just stipulates that this exploration be undertaken one stability at a time. Moreover, by incorporating the principle of stochasticity, my approach more directly answers the postprocess assertion that writing is an “open gamble,” or as Kent puts it, “hermeneutic guesswork” (*Paralogic* 47–48). In an important sense, stochasticity explains why predictions can be made with a reasonable degree of accuracy, yet why there can never be *absolute* certainty about any prediction. Indeed, as Mark C. Taylor puts it, “no criticism is as devastating for claims of certainty” than the existence of systems theory (115). But, to theorize stochasticity is to argue that there *is* some order to be found in the guesswork. Stochasticity provides a route via which we can conceive of the fractal complexity of writing. Not as completely predictable; we will never be able to find some kind of fractal “golden ratio” that explains

the key to aesthetically pleasing texts.⁶⁰ Instead, we can theorize fractal complexity as illustrative of the way the “selection pressures” that shape a text produce self-similarity across and within different levels of scale in that text, and create similar relations between elements in a writing system.

Reconciling Pedagogy and Complexity

My theory of writing as complex, and in particular as fractal, allows me to treat it as teachable yet complex—as static yet in flux. My account of complexity in writing thus creates a way to theorize a complex writing pedagogy (as both a complex writing-pedagogy, and a complex-writing pedagogy). This creates a significant point of intervention into the postprocess debate over teaching. Many postprocess theorists have pointed out that there are a potentially infinite number of factors involved in the activity of writing, a situation that poses a distinct problem for a writing pedagogy predicated on complexity. In other words, if writing is connected to a potentially infinite number of elements, materials, and other systems in the world—or as Dobrin writes, if writing “endlessly fluctuates” as a system that we cannot “fully account for”—how do we teach it in discrete lessons, or in the narrow confines of the classroom?

One answer is to separate a postprocess theory of writing from pedagogy itself, or at least to expand pedagogy beyond a focus on student writing (and beyond a focus on the students doing the writing) in the classroom. Jessica Yood explains that one “key component” of the postprocess move toward complexity (which she identifies in the

⁶⁰ The so-called “golden ratio” has been proposed as the key to a universally pleasing aesthetic. Like some interpretations of fractals, it is based on a fixed pattern, and is commonly found in natural objects. Also like fractals, it has been used to analyze proportions in a wide variety of both natural and human-made phenomena.

disciplinary change from “Composition” to “Writing Studies”) is its tendency to “thin[k] beyond human actors, and especially, beyond pedagogy.” Dobrin himself is one of the leading figures in this movement; he identifies a “narrow-minded attention to teaching, to subjects, and to the management of those subjects” as one major problem that a theory of writing complexity must overcome (28). In a move slightly less dismissive of teaching, Raúl Sánchez asserts that many classroom-based approaches do not recognize adequately the writing that occurs *outside* the classroom, and argues for a pedagogy that does recognize this. Sánchez wants us to acknowledge, as he puts it, that “the pedagogy that takes place in composition classrooms . . . comprises only a minute fraction of the pedagogy that takes place everywhere else” (“First” 189–90).

Similar to Sánchez’s approach, many postprocess theorists argue that the complexity of writing demands a recognition of the breadth of writing’s influence and interconnection, and thus these theorists assert that rhetoric and composition scholars rethink their narrow, static approaches. Dobrin, Rice, and Vastola assert that complexity requires a “reconfiguration of writing theory away from subjectivity, away from the idea that autonomous agents produce and circulate writing,” and away from the idea that writing (and writing pedagogy) is “bound by the canons, grammars, and rhetorics of pedagogy that have been naturalized as the methods through which writing is learned and performed.” In short, as they write, complexity demands that we “move postpedagogy” and so “rethink writing as a teachable object” (17).

There are, to be sure, several approaches to complexity theorized through postprocess theory that attempt to reconcile postprocess and pedagogy. Lee-Ann M. Kastman Breuch, for example, asserts that postprocess theory does not proscribe teaching

writing per se, but rather specifically challenges process conceptions of writing as a “thing” that can be “skillfully practiced and conquered” (127). Breuch advocates writing not be considered a “thing,” as she puts it, but rather an indeterminate *activity* that can never be fully mastered. Breuch makes a favorable comparison between postprocess opposition to thing-ness and Paulo Freire’s opposition to the “banking” model of teaching; like Freire’s own pedagogy, Breuch argues, effective postprocess pedagogies treat writing as a complex, indeterminate, and interactive endeavor. Teaching in this way avoids reducing writing to a stable and foundational “body of knowledge” that can be transferred in “monologic” form from teacher to student (141–43). Matthew Heard’s approach to writing pedagogy also is an effort to mediate postprocess theory and writing pedagogy. Heard’s approach builds from Donald Davidson’s philosophy of language—which Heard identifies as “the inspirational core of postprocess theory” (286)—in order to deal with the complexity of writing head on; as Heard writes, Davidson provides postprocess theorists with “a way of accounting for the infinite complexity of each communication situation that many of us—and many of our previous composition theories—take for granted” (287). Heard argues that this approach entails that we make postprocess concepts explicit in the classroom, and in so doing draw attention to the way discourse (including student discourse) is created, shaped, and reshaped in each new and indeterminate situation. Doing this, Heard asserts, can lead to “a new way of seeing writing with the potential to produce students who are attuned to the moment-by-moment exchange of discourses in the world around them” (285).

Many other theorists have helped account for the postprocess demand that we attend to the fluid aspect of writing in our teaching. Sánchez, for example, wants to

theorize pedagogy beyond traditional writing instruction, and rather “as culture itself—culture as an aggregate of quasiautonomous teaching and learning relationships.” For Sánchez, this means that we broaden the scope of what we consider in our pedagogical applications, embrace the idea that “writing is culture, [and] that writing is pedagogy,” and so study what it means to be a writer in a culture saturated by the “many scenes” of writing (“First” 192–93). Byron Hawk also argues that postprocess has implications that can translate to a broader conception of writing pedagogy. Hawk argues that we should consider the dynamic processes on both the inside and the outside of a text; as he explains, to write according to this model involves “embodied enactions with a complex, evolving world that includes innumerable objects at various levels of scale.” Such a “posthuman image of the world . . . includes humans but decenters them in relational models of assemblage and expression” (“Reassembling” 77). In this image, human subjects are de-emphasized as writing agents, and student subjectivities become just one factor to consider among many others.

However, as Yood points out, postprocess approaches have a tendency to gloss over “the practical contributions of ‘subjects’—identity groups like feminist rhetors or complex organizations like the WPA—as part of the features of a complex, networked understanding of writing.” This is a common problem that plagues theorizations of systems and complexity in general. N. Katherine Hayles writes that in theorizing systems we often have a hard time accounting for the subjects who make meaning from the system (and in so doing who help make the system itself) (*How* 82). Accounting for complexity can mean eliding the subject whose insights, as Yood reminds us, “inven[t] complexity theory.” The back and forth in trying to account for, as Hawk puts it, “the

subject of writing” that/who is “the network that inscribes the subject as the subject scribes the network” (“Reassembling” 75) can tend to privilege a recognition of *either* the subject or the network. Hayles likens this to the process of “a seesaw that teeters up and down” while those on either side “fail to notice that both ends are connected by a fulcrum joining the two in correlated actions” (*My* 35). These elisions can have consequences for either side: by focusing too closely on subjects—in the case of writing pedagogy, by focusing on the students—we may not appreciate the breadth and distribution of agency and effect that systems and complexity theory can illuminate. This appreciation, many postprocess theorists, network theorists, digital humanities scholars, and others point out, helps illustrate the way our lives and our world, and the writing we do, is inextricably connected with those things that transcend and lie outside of our local subjectivities. On the flip side, by reducing focus on the subject we may not fully appreciate the subjects themselves, and the “human groups” that as Yood points out “make” our ideas about systems. One of the primary goals of rhetoric itself, both as a practice and as a discipline, is to investigate and highlight the way both ideas and human (and nonhuman) subjects become marginalized, privileged, and recovered within and because of our diverse disciplinary and cultural discourses. Losing track of the writing subject, and of the circumscribed and stable act of writing, can make invisible the students who are doing the writing, and thus can cause us to lose track of the very targets of this kind of rhetorical inquiry.

Establishing Stability(ies) as a Way to Manage Complexity in Writing Pedagogy

Many of these theorists who advocate a postprocess or systems pedagogy do so on the presumption that we need to integrate fluidity and contingency into our conceptions of writing in the classroom. In so doing these approaches ask us to consider what we have left out in our static approaches to writing pedagogy. I do not disagree with this imperative, and I also agree that recognizing and transcending the limitations of our “cuts” when teaching writing is not only valuable, but also necessary to better account for the rapidly changing material, technological, and social contexts within which writing happens. As Bonnie Lenore Kyburz puts it, theorizing student writing and the writing classroom as “chaotic” (in the terms of complexity theory), and “thinking in ways that are increasingly free from constraint,” can “underscor[e] the value of post-process pedagogy for progressive composition studies” (517, 510).

My approach does not begin, however, with complexity. Heard explains that “[p]ostprocess theory sets itself apart from predecessors by claiming that the very nature of written communication has been misunderstood until now as a ‘closed’ system that might eventually be captured with enough training, practice, and rules” (284). As I mention, I do not reject postprocess claims about the complexity of writing, nor do I take (much) issue with some postprocess scholars’ desire to separate our theories of writing from pedagogical application. I do, however, disagree that the consideration of writing as a “‘closed’ system” is a misunderstanding. Instead, I argue that a focus on linear aspects of writing, just as is the postprocess dismissal of pedagogy, each is a “cut” one makes in order to theorize specific elements of writing more robustly, and that each of these cuts *is* a closed system. Within a rhetoric-systems approach, we must first draw a line around

our theories, and carve out our own theoretical choices to the exclusion of all others, before we can progress to the next cut. Depending on the cut we make, we may consider writing to be either inclusive or exclusive of individual student texts, of linear pedagogical methods, or of pedagogy in general.

The approach I outline in this chapter makes the cut at a series of levels within an individual text, and shows how seemingly minor elements and relations on one level can work together with elements and relations on another level to produce effects at every level of scale. A text in this sense functions fractally, as a complex entity that can be considered both on its own and in relation with other texts. This, I argue, is a theory of writing that begins with stability (and with a “closed system”), and from there progressively builds complexity.

Theorizing complexity in this way—as a demand that we begin from a place of stability, and from a closed system—enables us to theorize writing as a complex but also a *teachable* entity. A rhetoric-systems approach outlines that a robust conception of a complex ecosystem entails students taking a perspective (making a cut) on a text, exploring *from that perspective*, and then moving on to another perspective. After exploring the local (thought of as a series of either/ors), students can explore the connections between these local features (thought of as various both/ands). In this way students get a better sense of the complexity of each circumscribed perspective, and get a better sense of the dynamics of the relations *between* these perspectives. These kinds of student explorations of complexity are grounded in a series of managed stabilities, each of which provides a unique contribution to students’ understanding of writing. No student can conceive of the complexity of writing at once, nor can a student understand at once

the myriad varying systems that intertwine within and are affected by a single text.

However, by taking a rhetoric-systems approach we can help students construct a *better* understanding of such a complex writing ecology.⁶¹

This idea of conceiving writing as a stability specifically goes against Breuch's characterization of what postprocess theorists see as wrong with the process movement—its adherents' conception of writing as a “thing.” For my students, though, thinking of writing as a fractal object (and as a “thing”) helps create stabilities in what is ultimately a vertiginous systemic entity. In students' own writing and in their interpretations of the texts of others, positing a series of stabilities, each of which can be examined in detail, gives students more ways “in” to a text. It allows students to settle into a perspective and examine a text in detail, and then, when they are ready, to connect those details to textual elements on a different level of scale.

Putting this Approach into Practice: An Example of Fractal Complexity

A useful way to think of this movement between stabilities is captured by the idea of zooming in and zooming out on various aspects of the writing situation. The concept of the “zoom” is a common metaphor in various discourses of critique, but is particularly well suited to highlight the fractal complexity that exists at different levels of scale in a text. In terms of the visual, the zoom metaphor is often used to discuss the way that looking at circumscribed sections of a particular filmed scene allows for new perspectives

⁶¹ As I discussed in chapter two, the term *ecology* reflects a widespread disciplinary movement toward an ecological/systems approach to writing and to writing studies, which holds that Lloyd Bitzer's original notion of a “rhetorical situation” is insufficient to account for the complexity and expansiveness of both rhetoric and writing. See Cooper “Ecology”; Edbauer; Shepley; Syverson. My use in this chapter of the term “writing situation” is not meant as a challenge to this movement, but rather as a reflection of the temporary reduction I argue is necessary for the teaching and for the act of writing.

to emerge. Walter Benjamin, for example, wrote in “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” that in film, this kind of zooming in lets us “expan[d]” a “space” and so focus on the “hidden details of familiar objects” (236). The visual has become a common modality associated with zooming in/out, since not only does the word “zoom” specifically refer to the kind of filmic panning to which Benjamin refers, but also because the zooming motion is so prevalent in our screen-centered cultural technologies, which feature the ability to zoom in and out on specific sections of the images in front of us.⁶²

Visual terms are not the only ones that have been used to theorize the notion of “zoom.” In *Feminist Rhetorical Practices*, Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa E. Kirsch use Clifford Geertz’s notion of “tacking in and tacking out” to highlight a more abstract methodological movement that, while similar to zooming, is more conceptual than purely visual. Royster and Kirsch argue that to “tack” in and out allows feminist rhetorical inquiry to “look at people . . . places . . . practices and conditions at which we have not looked closely enough.” Tacking in allows them to “focus closely on existing resources,” while tacking out allows them to “broaden [their] own viewpoints in anticipation of what might become more visible from a longer or broader view, where the scene may not be in fine detail but in broader strokes and deep impressions” (72).

My own version of zooming in and out resembles Royster and Kirsch’s in that it pertains to the conceptual more than the visual. Since I posit complexity at multiple levels of scale, zooming in and zooming out allows students to examine each aspect of this complexity in isolation. For example, I ask students to focus on a circumscribed set

⁶² The concept of zooming in and out has also been used specifically in the context of rhetoric and writing pedagogy. Daniel Anderson’s *Write Now* asks student readers to periodically use “zooming” as a technique to “narro[w] or expan[d] [their] focus as [they] read and write,” and to “make decisions about texts and culture.” Students reading this textbook are asked to zoom in to help them “explore items and details” in a “rhetorical situation,” and to zoom out to help them “understand contexts and relationships” (5–7).

of conceptual, discursive, and material elements, and then to shift their perspective and to look at another level. Following that, I ask them to focus on the relations between the two levels (we could think of this as a focus on two either/ors followed by a both/and). Above all, my approach emphasizes the importance of taking multiple perspectives, one at a time, on a writing situation.

Each element in a writing situation, including rhetorical, physical, technological, social, cultural, and historical elements, functions in a unique and complex way, and all are interrelated. In looking at these elements and relations there is no end to the number of times one can zoom in or out; the point is to explore and inhabit in a substantive way more than one level of scale, and to see the complexity inherent in the structures and relations in the text from different vantage points. The different fractal homologies uncovered by such a movement can be explored, and can be better *managed*, in rhetorical critique and in students' own writing.

The following example of this fractal approach illustrates its value in the classroom, and shows how I actually discuss the concept of fractal complexity in my own writing classroom (see the appendix to this chapter).⁶³ To explicate these principles in such a class I use the first chapter of Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee's *Ancient Rhetoric for Contemporary Students*, a rhetoric textbook often used in introductory rhetoric and composition classrooms. Looking at this text in terms of its fractal qualities reveals interesting relationships among the rhetorical elements, as well as illustrates some of the specific writing strategies that are evident on different levels of scale. In taking a rhetoric-systems approach in combination with thinking of this particular individual text

⁶³ I have included as an appendix to this chapter a worksheet I use in the classroom, in which I lay out the basic components of the fractal approach to writing pedagogy. The sheet also illustrates the specific example I explain in this section.

as fractal, I emphasize two key points: 1) Every text “works” (produces rhetorical effects) on both larger and smaller scales, although we cannot look at all of these scales at once; and 2) There are different levels of scale on which one should write and revise, and (again), we cannot look at all of these scales at once. Having these two main points as a backdrop helps students focus on the central strategies of the approach: in both reading and writing they start with a narrowly circumscribed stability, zoom in and zoom out to different perspectives, and then work both to *notice* and to *reproduce* (in the texts of others, and in their own texts, respectively) the thematic and rhetorical interweaving that inheres in a complex text.

In Crowley and Hawhee’s first chapter, we can begin with a more overarching perspective on the broader points the authors are making. For example, early-on in the chapter the authors include this sentence: “We do believe that rhetoric is among the best ways available to us for rectifying power inequities among citizens” (6). A bit later, they write: “Ancient rhetoricians were aware that language is a powerful force for moving people to action” (23). Taken together, these statements depict two of the authors’ guiding principles, on two slightly different levels of scale: on an extremely broad level, the authors argue here that language (and rhetoric) can move people to action. A bit more specifically, they assert that rhetoric can rectify power inequities.

These two statements constitute overarching points made in the text—something that a wide-angle perspective can highlight. Thinking in terms of fractal complexity, however, we can look to ways these larger points are reflected on other levels of scale as well; in other words, we can see these points reproduced and in relation with elements on more zoomed-in levels. This is the principle of self-similarity and interrelation that

characterizes a fractal object. To make a somewhat crude (although useful) comparison: just as the spiral pattern of Romanesco broccoli found at a larger physical level of scale can also be found repeated on the smaller levels, so will Crowley and Hawhee's larger points be reflected and to some extent reproduced on "smaller" levels of their writing.

Zooming in even further on this text we find a statement about a specific rhetorical concept, the commonplace: "The distinguishing characteristic of a commonplace," Crowley and Hawhee write, "is that it is commonly believed by members of a community. . . . Some commonplaces are so thoroughly embedded in a community's assumptions about how the world works that they are seldom examined rhetorically" (20–21). In and of itself this statement tells a reader that commonplaces are invisible, a point that is useful to understand on its own. As we will see in a moment, however, this point also complements the previous overarching statement about power inequalities, and the relation between the two affects rhetorical elements that exist in the text on much smaller levels of scale.

Looking at a slightly more zoomed-in level we find this statement, which illustrates Crowley and Hawhee's belief about a *particular* commonplace:

We believe that in contemporary American culture people who enjoy high socioeconomic status have more power than those who have fewer resources and less access to others in power. We also hold that men have more power than women and that white people have more power than people of color (and yes, we are aware that there are exceptions to all of these generalizations). (6)

This commonplace about power inequalities stands on its own, but it also combines with the definition of a commonplace I highlighted above to imply that power relations in particular—as commonplaces—are often invisible, or in Crowley and Hawhee’s words, are “seldom examined rhetorically.” Next, combining *this* point with the authors’ broad statement that rhetoric is able to “rectify power inequalities,” the point takes on a new significance: that is, in the relation between the overarching point and the smaller point, the premise emerges that rhetoric is a force that can interrupt the invisibility of *this particular power dynamic*.

Once we have established these points we can zoom in much further on the text and examine how seemingly tiny language choices reflect and are in relation with the larger points. For instance, on the one hand, Crowley and Hawhee’s choice of gender pronouns *could* be considered a minor stylistic choice. Using the fractal approach, however, we can illustrate how details like this in an ostensibly random passage reveal important homologous relations between the levels of the text. To illuminate this for my class, I ask the students to look *only* at the pronoun usage in this (seemingly random) passage:

Our chances of misunderstanding spoken language are also decreased by the fact that we can see and hear the person who is speaking and we can interact with her, as well. Thus we can support our interpretation of the meanings of her words with our interpretations of her facial and bodily gestures and the loudness and pitch of her voice. (26)

This passage is like many others in the chapter and in the book, and at first glance we might not be able to read its association with the passages I previously quoted. However,

if we consider the relation between those broader points about language, rhetoric, ideologies, commonplaces, power, and gender, we can better see the connections between levels, and consider that *the authors' use of gender pronouns* draws attention to a dominant, uncontested cultural commonplace that reflects particular power dynamics. In considering the relation between these multiple elements, we can also see this use of pronouns as a specific rhetorical strategy to call into question the dominance of this commonplace.

In other words, by zooming in and out to different levels and first examining them one at a time, and then looking at the way these levels relate, we can reveal how the writing in the text works independently at each level and works in relation to form a discrete and complex text (or, to form a discrete “thing,” to use the term resisted by the postprocess theorists). In terms of systems theory principles, what De Landa refers to as a “sorting device” that exerts “selection pressure” could be the rule that requires a gendered choice of pronoun; while this might seem like a small detail, it nevertheless shapes the formation and uptake of the text in potentially significant ways. An even more pronounced selection pressure would be the need to make a persuasive *point* in the kind of writing in which Crowley and Hawhee engage. That is, the genre of a rhetoric textbook is one in which authors must introduce students to rhetorical concepts, and must persuade students/readers of these concepts’ importance and efficacy. The pressure exerted by this exigency *sediments* (to use De Landa’s terminology once again) this persuasion across several levels. In other words, the overwhelming need to be persuasive saturates every aspect of the text, and so a variety of individual textual elements are infused by persuasive strategies ostensibly originating on multiple levels of the text—the

broader points trickle down, in a sense, and inform the smaller rhetorical elements on different levels. Thus, the authors' points about language moving people to action, about commonplaces being invisible, and about the capacity of language to rectify power inequalities, are made explicitly at one level, but are distributed and so also reproduced at other levels, a process that creates homologous persuasive structures that echo on multiple levels of scale throughout the text.

An examination of the rhetorical relationships across several levels of a text enables students to increase their apprehension of complexity in writing. When students make multiple "cuts" in their conceptualization of writing they are able to draw together a variety of points made in the text, and to produce new and insightful understandings of the inter-level relations and the effects generated by these relations. As with the previous example, this approach can help students see how smaller-scale language choices connect to seemingly unrelated aspects of a text. In this way students see that in *all* texts there are discoverable relationships between levels, an understanding that helps them perform more complex rhetorical readings.

In students' own writing, this approach highlights that students must write at all levels of scale according to selection pressures that can be introduced, for example, by a specific writing assignment. Of course, asking students to "write at all levels of scale" can be overwhelming, since no one can write at all levels at once. With this approach, though, students can begin with basic ideas and work their way out to a more elaborate development of those ideas. In short, by expanding from basic points, students can build complexity in their own writing. They start simply, with points that they wish to make in broad terms, and the more they write the more levels they can examine and connect.

In addition, each level of a student text can be examined in a separate revision—in this sense, thinking in fractal terms provides students a method for *re*-reading their own texts, and allows them to think more specifically about the connections between each level. In so doing every choice of language can be examined, the alternatives explored, and seemingly tiny rhetorical choices—pronoun selection, verb tense, and so on—can be highlighted in terms of how each choice connects with larger points. Specific examples can be teased out in their complexity, and then subsequently examined in terms of their relevance to more general points.

An important component of this approach is that the diversity of possible choices, and the vertiginous factors involved in writing (both within and outside of the classroom), do not all impinge *all at once* on the students' writing process. By allowing students to treat each text, and each rhetorical choice, as (temporarily) circumscribed and static, I theorize—and teach—complexity, but do so within the localized and sometimes-static environment of the writing classroom.

My use of the rhetoric-systems approach in the writing classroom allows students to grasp complexity, one stability at a time. Importantly, it allows what is a complex non-linear process to be dealt with in (somewhat) linear ways, and thus helps students gain knowledge about the activity of writing that, if theorized as fundamentally ungraspable and always on the move, might seem pointless. My approach does not imply that specific writing strategies can work in any context—in this sense it does not represent a refusal of the idea that at some level writing involves “guesswork.” However, my approach does reveal patterns of relation that, while never entirely similar, can be studied and mapped in each particular case in a way that demands students become more attentive to the small

and large choices that can drastically shape the meaning of a text. Such mapping can not only help the students craft and refine their own writing, but also can help them more effectively participate in analyses of public debates. I argue that when students take a rhetoric-systems approach to reading and writing, they develop an ability to turn pure guesswork into educated guesswork.

The Complexity in/of Writing (In-Class Worksheet; Appendix to Chapter V)

Every text “works” (produces rhetorical effects) on both larger and smaller scales

But you can’t look at all of these scales at once. This is why we must focus *one-at-a-time* at each perspective. Look at a text from a distance, then look up-close; zoom out, then zoom in.

Take this example from chapter one of Crowley and Hawhee’s *Ancient Rhetoric for Contemporary Students*:

- Places where the authors reveal (some of) their overarching points:
 - “We do believe that rhetoric is among the best ways available to us for rectifying power inequities among citizens” (6).
 - “Ancient rhetoricians were aware that language is a powerful force for moving people to action” (23).
 - “The distinguishing characteristic of a commonplace is that it is commonly believed by members of a community. . . . Some commonplaces are so thoroughly embedded in a community’s assumptions about how the world works that they are seldom examined rhetorically” (20–21).
 - “We believe that in contemporary American culture people who enjoy high socioeconomic status have more power than those who have fewer resources and less access to others in power. We also hold that men have more power than women and that white people have more power than people of color (and yes, we are aware that there are exceptions to all of these generalizations)” (6).

Using these overarching points, we can zoom in on the text, and at the way seemingly tiny language choices reflect these major overarching points. Crowley and Hawhee’s alternation of the gender of pronouns they use, for example, *could* be considered a minor stylistic choice. For example, look (only) at the pronoun usage in this passage:

- “Our chances of misunderstanding spoken language are also decreased by the fact that we can see and hear the person who is speaking and we can interact with her, as well. Thus we can support our interpretation of the meanings of her words with our interpretations of her facial and bodily gestures and the loudness and pitch of her voice” (26).

While the main point of the passage may seem to be irrelevant to the overarching points mentioned above, by considering those broader points about language, rhetoric, ideologies, commonplaces, power, and gender, we can better see the connections between levels, and consider *the authors’ use of gender pronouns* as an intentional use of language to draw attention to a dominant, uncontested commonplace, and perhaps to call its dominance into question.

Writing (and your writing) happens at all levels of scale

But what does it mean to “write at all levels of scale”? Tracking how the ideas in a text are interconnected can be overwhelming, and one can’t write at all levels at once. You *can*, though, *work your way out* from basic ideas to more elaborate developments of those ideas, and to the connections between the ideas.

What is important is the zooming in and out—the moving from the overarching point(s) to the specific detail, to the elaboration of that detail, and then back again to those larger points.

So: *Read and revise your work from a broad perspective:* What do the overarching ideas convey to the audience on a holistic level? Does the structure and organization of ideas make sense?

And: *read/revise the work from a narrower perspective:* How might some of the individual words you choose be interpreted by your audience? What is the cumulative effect of your smaller rhetorical choices, such as pronoun selection, verb tense, etc?

Even simple sentences can give rise to vastly complex ideas—look at tiny word choices when you critique the work of others, just as you should be looking at these choices in your own writing. As an example of such a critique, take this ad for one particular ebook accessory:

- “Now that you **own** the Kindle book, you can add the professional narration for \$12.99 to switch between reading and listening without losing your place . . .”
[emphasis added here]

That sentence led to this person’s critique of the ad:

- “There’s a whole bunch of things you’re allowed to do with books that you own: sell them, give them away, lend them out—stuff you can’t do with your ebooks, by and large. Why not? Because ebook sellers characterize the transaction that you undertake when you plunk down your money as a ‘license’ and **not as a sale**. . . But everyone knows that’s a [scam]. Buying books is what we do. Owning books is what we do.”

In other words, thinking of the word choice here of “own” leads to a vast array of critical points: Do we “own” ebooks? What does it mean to own a book? What does ownership consist of? *But also*, we can use this same approach to the *critic’s* prose: what does it mean, for instance, to say “Owning books is what we do”?

You can always expand from basic points, practically to infinity. And this is how to build complexity in writing: *start simply, and build out from there*—every choice you make should be examined, and the alternatives explored. Then, zoom out to the larger issues: every substantive point should be considered as potentially connected to every other point—and *if the connections can be made, make them!*

This is complexity in/of writing.

CHAPTER VI
RHETORIC, SYSTEMS THEORY, AND THE IM/POSSIBILITY OF “COMMON”
WRITING STANDARDS

Wendy Brown argues that “walls often function theatrically, projecting power and efficaciousness that they do not and cannot actually exercise and that they also performatively contradict” (25). Brown follows “a wide range of thinkers,” as she puts it, in arguing that such a desire for control over the unknown is “born of the human experience of smallness and vulnerability in a huge and overwhelming universe and that it harbors a desire for protection, containment, and orientation in the face of this experience” (71). More than just a response to a generalized sense of powerlessness, our acts of wall-building enable us to create an illusion of certainty in both physical and psychological spaces. Whereas constructing material walls can project an image of security (illusory though it may be) amidst a state of national or ethnic instability, stabilizing rhetorical borders can function to sustain a sense of stable knowledge about the world. As Edward Schiappa writes, stable definitions help us “‘make sense’ of our experiences” (*Defining* 13).

In a rhetoric-systems approach, rhetoric itself serves as a means of carving out this kind of secure epistemic territory. This definition follows Kenneth Burke in asserting that rhetoric is concerned with notions of “socialization and faction,” and with identification and division. Both these oppositions involve the creation of stabilities

around which groups can base their identities: when you and I believe something in common, we draw the same epistemic boundaries, and this consubstantiation, as Burke calls it, identifies us together as a faction (*Rhetoric* 45, 22). The unifying mechanism here, I argue, is a persuasion that takes the form of a negotiation called forth by the uncertainty of a world suffused by an irrepressible instability. My approach thus mirrors the way I argue we can intervene in a variety of what might be considered intractable (or, stubborn) oppositions, all of which hold the desire for *certainty* and *stability* against the destabilizing potential of dissent, contradiction, and uncertainty.

In this final chapter, I use the rhetoric-systems approach to intervene in a debate that exists in the discipline of rhetoric and writing studies, but that has ramifications for other debates happening over similar issues where a demand for certainty is pitted against the existence of constant instability (and rhetoricity). In this way I illustrate the rhetoric-systems approach as a viable method of rhetorical inquiry in a wide variety of contexts, and demonstrate its value outside of the discipline as well as within it. Specifically, I focus on the sense of security and stability generated by what can seem to be the most stable knowledge there is: so-called “hard” data. Also known among rhetoricians as extrinsic evidence or situated proof, data, as Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee point out, is often considered by rhetors as that which is “absolutely reliable” (267). Aristotle considered this kind of evidence to be outside the “art” of rhetoric itself, since, as he explains, we do not “construct it by means of rhetoric”; rather, extrinsic evidence is already there. Seemingly untouched by artifice, in his words this kind of proof “has merely to be used” (I.2.1355b).

The belief that extrinsic evidence is absolutely reliable has gained even more cultural traction in recent years. As Lisa Gitelman and Virginia Jackson write, echoing a widely-cited sentiment, we have now entered “the era of Big Data” (2). According to those who make this argument, contemporary culture is pervaded by, dependent on, and perhaps obsessed with the way our lives, work, and cultural practices can be *quantified*. Such quantification has been enabled in part by new technology productive of an array of controversial data aggregations, from the surveillance data collected by the US National Security Agency and exposed by Edward Snowden, to the analytical tools transforming the sport of baseball (and narrativized in the hit movie *Moneyball*). In these and myriad other situations, *numbers* seem to offer us a way to better know our world. As I argue, such number-generating technology does not only offer us more or more useful knowledge; it offers us more *certainty* as well. The predictive power of these numbers is touted as one of their main benefits; as Felix Salmon puts it, one of the reasons the number-enthusiasts—whom he calls “the quants”—have taken over so many areas of our culture is that “they’re almost always right.”

But this reliance on numbers and their predictive power is not without its downsides. As Gitelman and Jackson remind us, “when phenomena are variously reduced to data, they are divided and classified, processes that work to obscure—or *as if* to obscure—ambiguity, conflict, and contradiction” (9). Numbers may be almost always right, but right about *what*? As many rhetoricians (including myself) will point out, the conclusions suggested or made to seem obvious by those numbers are themselves always and already products of the same invisible ideological and rhetorical forces at work in all facets of our production of cultural knowledge. Itzhak Roeh and Saul Feldman, for

example, write that numbers specifically have the capacity to be used “as a rhetorical means [to] contribute to a melodramatic world picture” (347). And even the most “scientific” of data points, as Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar write, exist as a “disordered array of observations” that scientists and observers struggle to make sense of amidst “a seething mass of alternative interpretations” (36). In short, as Geoffrey C. Bowker puts it, “‘raw data’ is an oxymoron” (184).⁶⁴

It turns out, then, that the type of evidence Aristotle thought we need merely make use of is just as dependent on the artistry of rhetoricians as even the most artistic proof. Considering this, it presents a particular difficulty when as rhetoricians we are compelled to cooperate with the demands of our data-driven culture, such as when, for example, we are asked to interact in social, professional, and pedagogical situations in which data is uncritically accepted and relied upon. Of course in many situations the power of empirical data to inspire certainty is useful: the collected averages from my teaching evaluations, for example, when they rise above the department mean are a powerful way of justifying my teaching methods.⁶⁵

What seems less benign, however, is the growing dependence on standardized assessments in the context of writing pedagogy. Indeed, a reliance on more universal teaching and assessment standards and on the easily-aggregated “hard data” these can provide is rapidly encroaching on the writing classroom. For rhetoricians this presents a

⁶⁴ This phrase also serves as the title to Getelman’s edited collection on the subject of “Big Data.”

⁶⁵ Getelman and Jackson point out that the term “data” lies in an “odd suspension between the singular and the plural.” Such a conflict, they write, reminds us that “the imagination of data is in some measure always an act of classification, of lumping and splitting.” This classification is a reduction, they argue, that works to “obscure . . . ambiguity, conflict, and contradiction” (8–9). The authors’ point here underscores the broader tension I address in this chapter: namely, the certainty of data versus our desire as rhetoricians to disrupt that certainty. In keeping with my point that in our culture data has come to represent such certainty, I use the term in the singular—and even more certainty-implying—form.

particular problem in that, while we can recognize the usefulness of empirical evidence in making the case for our teaching, as well as its exchange value in securing funding for various pedagogical and research goals, we must also recognize the inherent rhetoricity of data itself, and thus the danger of treating such evidence as simply “there.” Such uncritical acceptance and reliance on this kind of evidence, for one thing, risks undermining the flexibility of our teaching methods. In addition, I argue that this acceptance undercuts the epistemological foundation of rhetoric itself, which at its core recognizes divergences in various contexts as crucial to our creation of, as Kenneth Burke puts it, specific “strategies for the encompassing of situations” (*Philosophy* 1). By adopting the rhetoric-systems approach, however, I argue we can productively engage with discourses of standardization and with “Big Data” itself. Such an approach can highlight the need for stability that sponsors the drive toward replicable standards of assessment, but can do so without yielding the emphasis on contingency and flexibility that sustains rhetorical inquiry as a critical discursive practice.

“Big Data” and the Common Core State Standards

As Joe Moxley argues, educators in the United States “are under increasing pressure to develop valid measures to assess the development of writing and reasoning abilities.”⁶⁶ Moxley’s use of the word “valid” here is key to understanding the push for numerically-based assessment measures: data that is “valid” is data that is *well defined* in its measurements and thus is *replicable* across different contexts. The most sought-after aspect of Big Data, in other words, is that which holds up more effectively across both

⁶⁶ For more on the appeal of what they call a RAD (replicable, aggregable, and data-supported) approach in composition research, see Lang and Baehr.

epistemic and geographic contexts. In this sense, we could say that this kind of knowledge is characterized by strong and well-defined borders. In contrast, the knowledge provided by non-standardized individual instructor assessment has much more fluid borders, as it is highly contextual, and is often driven by the uniqueness of the writing assignment or classroom for which it was adapted. For this reason this knowledge is often less valued, and thus the kinds of practices that produce it are those most threatened in the push for “valid measures.”

The ascendance of the Common Core State Standards for writing assessment is one example of the rise of contextually portable and widely collectable measures that are an outgrowth of the demand for “valid” data. These standards would establish state- and nationwide criteria that would require educators to measure and collect data on what students have learned—and what they should have learned—in order to determine their “college ready[ness]” (Nelson). The standards themselves have met with considerable criticism—especially so because they have recently been linked, both fairly and unfairly, to the possibility of taking the human element out of the equation altogether. A recent *New York Times* article, for example, reported on software, developed by a nonprofit organization and offered for free over the Web, that would use artificial intelligence to grade student essays, thereby “freeing professors for other tasks” (Markoff). This got the attention of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), which responded in a position statement, the title of which—“Machine Scoring Fails the Test”—essentially sums up the response. The statement points out that there is a clear link between standardized assessment and automated assessment, with the latter often existing as the epitome of the former. The NCTE contested this linkage, however, arguing that

“[c]onclusions that computers can score as well as humans are the result of humans being trained to score like the computers,” and instead advocated for “more localized . . . assessments designed and administered by classroom teachers” (Strauss “Can”).

Despite the NCTE’s assertion that computer assessment can and should be decoupled from standardization, computer grading is nevertheless often considered the ultimate in a-contextual (and so infinitely replicable) testing methodology, producing perfectly collectable and comparable results. We can see this fundamental difference between the seeming orderliness of the digital and the messiness of the human in the divergent definitions of the terms “algorithm” and “heuristic.” The first refers to an automatic process that, in the words of the *OED*, is a “precisely defined set of mathematical or logical operations.” Algorithms are the primary method of calculation for computers, and as “precisely defined” they are precisely repeatable, and so are ideal for generating the kind of data that can be easily extrapolated across contexts and classrooms.

The term “heuristic,” on the other hand, refers to a rule of thumb by which a solution is creatively generated. This is a distinctly human kind of problem solving, where the answers may be derived from general principles, but importantly, are also derived contextually. It is no coincidence, then, that heuristics are commonly associated with rhetoric and rhetorical invention. As Richard Enos and Janice Lauer write, Aristotle used the concept “to capture the way meaning is cocreated between rhetor and audience and how, through this process of interaction, participatory meaning is shared” (79). In this sense, there is no way to completely export heuristic assessment standards to a different situation, since there will be different exigencies and different participants in

each new context. While heuristics are in part defined by general rules, their power lies in their flexibility. Because of this, they do not lend as well to broad implementation, collection, and analysis as does algorithmically-generated data. Byron Hawk, in fact, identifies heuristics as working best when their capacity as widely applicable rules is *most* suppressed; as he writes it is the “primary role of the teacher” to pay “attention to classroom contexts and inject[t] an alternate theory, a key text, or a *new* heuristic at the right time” (*Counter-History* 254; emphasis mine).

To be sure, many of those in favor of writing assessment standards agree that rote algorithmic methods such as those employed by automated grading are inimical to effective writing instruction. Moxley, for instance, admits that many past research studies have “oversimplified the assessment of student reasoning and writing,” and reminds his readers that in order to accommodate the diverse and complex exigencies of writing assessment instructors should be using multiple measures, including “crowdbased community rubric and rubric resources.” As well, Education Secretary Arne Duncan, in an extensive argument for the Common Core Standards, asserts that what he calls “Assessment 2.0” can better serve the needs of both administrators and teachers by “further expand[ing] the range of assessments” used (Strauss “Duncan”).

However, expanding the number of assessments, or the means by which they are determined (by using “crowdbased community” input, for instance), does not yield the same flexibility as heuristics can, nor does it alleviate completely the problem of rigid measures being applied to the inherently *rhetorical* act of writing. Any sort of large-scale standard-implementation, that is, would hinder a teacher’s ability to adapt to the

individual contexts of each classroom, each assignment, and each student, since the standard would have been developed, at least in part, outside of that particular context.

Making the Cut: Rhetoric-Systems and Reconciling Stubborn Oppositions

At first glance, what I am arguing for in this chapter—an integration of a “rhetoric-systems” approach into standardization discourse—would seem to simply add another layer to the argument against standards. Complex systems theory, as I have shown throughout this dissertation, is often deployed in rhetoric and writing studies scholarship in terms of its advocacy of fluidity, openness, and the expansive nature of the endeavor of writing—precisely those things common standards would seem to inhibit. Jenny Rice’s argument that texts should be considered within a “rhetorical ecology” that exists “within an open network” complements Byron Hawk’s urge that we take up rhetoric as “a system that moves and evolves” (Edbauer 13, 9; Hawk, *Counter-History* 192), a combined point which amplifies Nathan Shepley’s argument that a recognition of systems theory necessitates that “texts” in a rhetorical ecology be conceived “as sites of a series of diachronic interactions between people and ideologies”; all of these points, finally, are extended by Sidney I. Dobrin in his description of an “ecological theor[y] of writing” that embraces “complex ecology and systems ecology” as an overcoming of what he calls the “will to simplicity and stability” (142, 173).

Where my approach differs from these and many other similar approaches embracing complexity is in my explicit emphasis on an aspect of systems theory less often theorized: its recognition of the *necessity of contingent stability*. As systems theorist Stuart Kauffman explains, and as I have argued previously, a central characteristic of

systems is their tendency to keep order *as* organized systems (71–92). In much the same way that Wendy Brown describes nations building walls to create a necessary sense of stability in their territorial claims, systems create stable and bordered space in a mass of unbounded complexity. In this sense, while systems theory does posit infinite flow, openness, and complexity, it also emphasizes that such complexity is unmanageable without closure and stability. Luhmann explains this paradox by pointing out that creating stable *meaning* is way of reducing infinite epistemic complexity: what he calls the “endless horizon of possibilities” is in this way reduced to specific “points of consensus” (64–66). Hayles, we can recall, describes this consensus as a result of our need to “*make a cut*” and reduce “the unfathomable complexity of undifferentiated reality into something [we] can understand” (“Making” 160). It is the *excess* of these cuts, then, that create the “unrest” that Luhmann argues eventually forces our cut to change (64–66). If we think of consensus and the creation of shared meaning as similar to the creation of *standards*, we can see that *any* stable criteria or assessment of meaning, no matter how seemingly adaptable it is across contexts, is always haunted by the excess it proscribes, and because it always fails to account for *something* must continually be reconstituted.

This consensus—in the form of verifiable data that can be compared across contexts—is, just as advocates of Big Data argue, necessary for knowledge. There are tangible benefits to this kind of data accumulation. For instance, Chris Anson explains that “changing the public discourse about writing from belief to evidence” can help get us past what Deborah Tannen calls a culture of “unrelenting contention,” and as Anson writes, “toward some common understandings based on what we can know, with some level of certainty, about what we do” (12). For those who advocate for a reliance on

standards to produce measurable data, this certainty is the ultimate goal, since it allows us to make arguments about what teaching can achieve, and to *measure* these achievements in ways that carry significant persuasive force. In order to achieve the certainty offered by stable standards, however, I argue that we must recognize the fundamental paradox highlighted by a rhetoric-systems approach: that our experience of this stable knowledge is enabled precisely by the closing off of divergent formations.

It is this elision of knowledge, this “making the cut,” that can give rise to a more robust form of knowledge. Luhmann explains that the moment consensus is reached and “the social situation is . . . synchronized” is precisely the moment that produces “a multiplication of connective possibilities for the next moment.” “Closure,” he writes, “opens the situation” (167–68). This “openness from closure,” as Cary Wolfe calls it (*What*), reminds us of the pressure of the excess generated by stability. A recognition of this pressure impels us to reexamine and revise our stable knowledge formations, as well as the standards through which we know our complex world.

A rhetoric-systems approach thus demands a recognition that knowledge is created within a multiplicity of temporary stabilities (here, in the form of stable standards), each of which must constantly be reviewed, revised, and compiled against and across one another. Because of this, a rhetoric-systems approach can intervene in the back-and-forth between the need for assessment standards and the irreducible rhetoricity of situations in which those standards exist, since the approach demands that every “cut” we make in our creation of standards calls for a recognition of the corresponding demand for a *new* cut that can account for the excess proscribed by the previous iteration.

In one sense this is a call for the diversification of standards—similar to what Secretary Duncan, Moxley and others have called for. But here I go further: mine is not simply a call for *more*; it is a call to recognize that which is left out, and to recognize that what is left out can circulate and can affect the existing system in unexpected ways. In this way we can view standards themselves as existing in a networked relation, as a kind of stability-seeking system that is constituted by what we count as measurable—and what we *don't* count. What I did in chapter three can be instructive here: for example, using the rhetoric-systems approach to consider standards themselves as commonplaces, the very existence of which can have extensive repercussions on our interpretation of *other* standards, can illustrate the ways that our interpretations and deployments of some standards can shift our interpretations and deployments of other standards. A rhetoric-systems approach not only helps us rethink the debate over the common core, but also it specifically helps us rethink the kinds of questions we can ask in this debate. My approach calls not only for the diversification of standards, then, but also for a recognition of and an inquiry into the contingency and interconnectedness of these standards.

This approach will of course highlight the way that static standards are inadequate to fully capture what is a constantly shifting and incredibly expansive system, but at the same time, the approach asks that we recognize standards themselves as unavoidable and necessary stabilities. Even teachers operating in a single classroom, after all, need to make cuts in their teaching in order to manage the complexities of these local situations. In this sense, responding to the call of systems theory to recognize complexity does not mean a banishment of stability nor of circumscribed boundaries—on the contrary, it

means that we can theorize complexity and indeterminacy while at the same time recognize and embrace those stabilities as that which allow us to deal with overwhelming complexity.

Finally, making several cuts one after the other—in this sense constantly interrogating and revising standards—can also create a more robust understanding of the rhetorical ecologies within which those standards operate, by producing unlikely combinations of perspectives that may account for a diversity of elements (textual, affective, technological, social, and material) at work in these ecologies. More importantly, perhaps, adopting such a revisionary stance helps us be alert to the dangers of the reification of extrinsic evidence as simply there “to be used.” This stance retains the power of humanistic critique, including rhetorical critique, which as I mentioned earlier, in the words of Chandra Talpade Mohanty, lies in its ability to “interven[e]” in “particular hegemonic discourses” and so “counte[r] and resis[t] the totalizing imperative of age-old ‘legitimate’ and ‘scientific’ bodies of knowledge” (19).

Making a New Cut: Wider Implications of the Rhetoric-Systems Approach

The specific exploration I undertake in this chapter illustrates how rhetoric and writing scholars can productively engage local debates over standards. More broadly, my exploration models a way to engage a variety of similar debates that involve, on the one hand, the seeming stubbornness of local or parochial understandings, and on the other, the entrenched opposition of those who wish to complicate or destabilize these understandings—these debates pit established certainty against the destabilizing possibility of change. The debate over standards, in particular, can seem so completely

entrenched that there seems little chance either side might be open to the arguments of the other. However, my approach illustrates that both sides are in fact reliant upon each other, that their views reinforce the stability of their opposition, and that *both* positions are constantly revising their own views in a way that eludes their awareness.

By drawing attention to a basic current running through many of the oppositions that pervade our culture, my application of the rhetoric-systems approach shows its versatility. The oppositions described here and in the previous chapters, in short, are about stability and change, about certainty and uncertainty, about stubbornness—yet also resilience—and dissent; ultimately, these oppositions are about the safety and durability of the reliable, and the promise—yet the insecurity—of the new. These are the oppositions with which this dissertation is concerned, and my treatment of these oppositions I hope can not only illuminate a path to intervening productively in them, but also reveal the way that these oppositions are in fact inseparable, and that they in fact *depend* on one another for their existence. The inquiry I model here is intended to show how a rhetoric-systems approach can intervene in similar debates in diverse locations, and to show in these debates just what kinds of questions we as rhetoricians can ask. I also have intended that my rhetoric-systems approach illustrate that disciplinary understandings do not have to be opposed, and that the use of a diversity of disciplinary ideas in concert with rhetorical concepts can both provide an example of how such interdisciplinary work can be undertaken, and can provide an example of why rhetoric itself is so crucial a discipline on its own. Rhetoric, in short, enables us to find linkages between not only disparate ideas, but seemingly disparate disciplines as well.

To go back to the concerns of the issues in this final chapter, and to make a representative argument for the basic goals of the rhetoric-systems approach: In the word *algorithm* lies a paradox that is interwoven into the very idea of replicable standards of assessment. The term is derived from the French Catalan *algorisme*, which comes from the Middle Latin *algorismus*. This much is unremarkable. What is interesting, however, is that the existence of the latter term (*algorismus*) is the result of a mangled transliteration of the Arabic *al-Khwarizmi*, the surname of the mathematician whose work introduced sophisticated mathematics to the West (“algorithm, n.” *Online*). To make this point clear: it was a mistaken replication that gave us the word we now associate with the flawless reproduction of empirical data. In terms of the issues of this chapter, but analogically, to make a point about language in general: that a mangled repetition resulting from our participation in what may seem to be an automatic (and thus, seemingly, undeniably certain) process gave us the very term for this automated repetition underscores the point that even in an era dominated by digital automation, Big Data, and the apparent possibility of undeniable certainty, rhetoric is still, as it has always been, a necessity.

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