Communication 2215: Rhetoric and Human Rights
Professor Lester C. Olson, Ph.D.
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Fall semester 15-2 (1/15-4/15)
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Class meeting times: Mon 5:30-8:30
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Texts: Speeches, readings, photographs, poems, DVDs, videos, and TV broadcasts will be available to you through Courseweb primarily and online resources. Some materials may be available via Hillman library’s e-reserves, e-journals, and media services (located in G-20).

Objectives: What are human rights? How do claims concerning human rights operate rhetorically in public advocacy? In what ways are social differences such as sex, sexuality, gender, race, and economic class featured in such advocacy? Such questions are central to the intellectual labor of this graduate seminar.

1. This graduate seminar focuses on key concepts which are generally useful for describing, analyzing, and interpreting significant public texts and symbols produced during human rights controversies domestically and internationally. The central objective is to strengthen the seminar participants’ awareness of qualitative techniques for interpretive and critical studies of public advocacy featuring human rights claims. In the process, participants will become familiar with rhetorical criticism — practices for message analysis, interpretation, and assessment — through classroom exercises, readings, and writings. Seminar participants will demonstrate their ability to perform rhetorical criticism by writing short papers analyzing and interpreting the rhetorical dynamics of selected texts.

2. In the process, seminar participants will become acquainted with public advocacy concerning human rights in the United States and abroad during the twentieth century — both the affirmation and the denial of human rights. Because the subject is broad, the seminar will touch on a series of significant instances of such rhetoric. The seminar will concentrate on specific twentieth-century controversies within the United States concerning “hate” or bias crimes, especially as they pertain to violence, aggression, and poverty across social differences, while, at certain junctures, featuring key international declarations and speeches. The seminar draws on the United Nations 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, various subsequent statements by the UN, plus certain key speeches, such as Elie Wiesel on the “Perils of Indifference.” Considerations of sex, sexuality, gender, race, and economic class will be interwoven throughout the seminar materials and discussions.

3. In addition, seminar participants will develop skills for speaking and listening across significant differences in backgrounds and perspectives while dealing with controversial topics. During the seminar, I plan to provide some teaching tips for dealing with controversial issues in the classroom setting.

Projects, Requirements, and Evaluation:

1. On an every other week basis, you will write one criticism concerning one or two texts, usually speeches, which I have provided for class discussion. Ordinarily, the featured texts will be listed as the first two items (sometimes more) scheduled for the seminar meeting date. On occasion, these texts will consist of photographs, poems, DVDs, videos, or TV broadcasts. In
these brief papers, you will either comment upon the rhetorical dynamics of a single text or you will compare and contrast the rhetorical dynamics in a pair of texts. About 4-6 pages per paper. 70% of the evaluation.

2. You will **actively participate in research and class exercises.** You will complete a series of varied participation projects during the seminar for about 30% of the final evaluation:
   a. On an every other week basis, you formulate discussion questions and written responses to others’ discussion questions for the class. These questions focus only on the supplemental readings, photographs, poems, videos, DVDs, or TV broadcasts which I have selected to feature a concept pertaining to the featured texts for critical comment. These discussion questions and replies will be posted on Courseweb to the entire class at least 48 hours before each class period.

   Your discussion questions and replies are **not** to be about the upcoming featured texts themselves, for reasons which I will amplify in seminar. They may, however, be retrospective in nature provided that the questions and replies also actively engage the supplemental readings for the upcoming seminar meeting.

   In addition, your regular contributions to discussion during the seminar will be part of this component.

   b. During one class meeting during the semester, you will provide copies of one essay that, in your judgment, enriches the existing materials that have already been listed as readings for the class discussion. The aim is to include research featuring scholars and concepts that may not be represented in the existing materials as well as may be desirable.

**Academic Integrity:** Cheating/Plagiarism will not be tolerated. Students suspected of violating the University policy on academic integrity will be required to participate in the outlined procedural process initiated by the instructor. Plagiarism (presenting another person’s work as your own) will result in failing the assignment. The offense will be documented and submitted to the appropriate office of the University.

**Electronic devices:** In order to maximize free and open discussion of ideas during class, all recording devices must be turned off during class time. Cell phones and pagers must be turned off during class (unless you are formally on duty as emergency personnel in some capacity), as should web cams, recording and/or musical devices. Sending and receiving text messages during class time is inappropriate behavior, as is surfing the web (except if you are helping me to locate information germane to an ongoing discussion). You may use a laptop to take notes for your own use, but not for re-distribution. Unauthorized reproduction or distribution of lectures, discussions, exercises, speeches, or any other materials from class is forbidden.

**Disabilities:** If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting an accommodation, you are encouraged to contact both me (as your professor) and Disability Resources and Services, 140 William Pitt Union, (412)-648-7890 drsrecep@pitt.edu, (412)-288-5347 for P3 ASL users, as early as possible in the semester. Disability Resources and Services will verify your disability and determine reasonable accommodations for this course.
Office hours are listed at the top, lefthand corner on the first page; appointments are welcome. In addition, I always post my office hours with the department secretary, who will provide them to you on request. Because I realize that coming to office hours takes a lot of your time and effort, I usually arrive at class early and I tend to stay awhile afterward to talk about academic matters. So please feel welcome to initiate conversation with me before and after class. I enjoy teaching and conversations about ideas.

**Ground rules for class discussion:** Because we will rely extensively on interaction through frank conversations and discussions, and because we will be treating controversial topics, it is important that we work together to create a constructive environment by observing these rules:

- You should participate in the discussion of ideas. If you feel uncomfortable in the environment provided by the course, it is your responsibility to talk about it with me.
- You may choose to advance or defend an opinion “for the sake of the argument,” if you wish.
- You may choose to pass on specific questions or topics without giving any explanation.
- You may affirm your own point of view on an issue and how you arrived at that point of view.
- You should respect diverse points of view: we do not need to come to an agreement on any particular issue; we can agree to disagree.
- You may not belittle or personally criticize another individual for holding a point of view different than your own.
- You may ask how another person arrived at a point of view in an effort to understand it (though the other person may pass).
- Your use of language should be respectful of other individuals or groups.
- You need not represent any group, only yourself, though you may choose to represent a group if you wish.

Please note that you may propose additional ground rules for the seminar participants to consider, if you feel a need to add them as our work together progresses.

**General advisory notice:** Some materials in this graduate seminar are graphic and they might be emotionally difficult for you to view or hear. I will provide a description of these materials so that you may decide whether to watch one or another of the videos, DVDs, or TV broadcasts. No explanation is necessary for your decision.

**SCHEDULE:**

**January 5**   *introduction to course and instructor:*
orientation to seminar concerning rhetoric and human rights
conversation concerning ground rules for discussions
a listening exercise featuring an excerpt concerning poverty from The Edge of Each Other’s Battles
key variables in rhetorical criticism (message analysis and interpretation)
an orientation to ways of approaching the relationship between rhetorical criticism and theory
commentary concerning the roles of touchstones, analogs, and models in the seminar

optional further reading:
Lester C. Olson, “Concerning Judgment in Criticism of Rhetoric,” Review of Communication
12.3 (July 2012): 251-256.

January 12 practice with touchstones and analogs in rhetorical criticism/theory
speech texts
Available on Courseweb and online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MudnsExyV78
also at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/12/06/hillary-clinton-gay-rights-speech-geneva_n_1132392.html. The latter online source has a transcript as well as an online video.

Images and essays:
Black and white photograph of Eleanor D Roosevelt holding the Declaration of Human Rights
“The Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” passed by the General Assembly of the United
Diane S. Hope, “Communication and Human Rights: The Symbolic Structures of Racism and
Sexism,” in Thomas W. Benson, editor, Speech Communication in the Twentieth Century
Kenneth Cmiel, “The Emergence of Human Rights Politics in the United States,” Journal of
American History 86.3 (December 1999): 1231-1279.
Arabella Lyon and Lester C. Olson, “Special Issue on Human Rights Rhetoric: Traditions of
Testifying and Witnessing,” Rhetoric Society Quarterly 41. 3 (2011): 203–212

January 19 MLK day observed

January 26 conflicts among human rights: security of person, equality, and free expression
speech texts:
Daniel Troy, “Testimony on Hate Crimes,” Aug. 4, 1999, “Hearing Before the Committee on the
Frederick Lawrence, “Testimony on Hate Crimes,” Aug. 4, 1999, “Hearing Before the
Committee on the Judiciary House of Representatives,” Serial No. 74 (Washington, D.C.:
GPO, 2000). Both testimonies are available on Courseweb and on Congressional Universe and other on line resources for Congressional proceedings.

*Essays and speeches:*


*February 2 agency and rights of the child*

*Images:*


“Migrant Mother,” U.S. photographer Dorothea Lange’s photograph for the Farm Security Administration, 1936. Available on Courseweb and online via a Goggle search.


*essays*


February 9  speeches concerning experience of irreparable harms  
speech texts:


Images, essays and DVD:


Optional DVD: Searching for Angela Shelton, written and edited by Angela Shelton (Hillhopper Productions, 2004). This DVD is available in the Media Resource Center, G 20 Hillman Library, DVD-2513 (the library’s call number or shelf mark). This DVD deals with sexual abuse of children, incest, and rape, as well as violence against women more generally. Among the most difficult moments is the narrator’s conversation with her father concerning her allegations of incest.

February 16  emotional dynamics of speeches concerning irreparable harms  
speech texts:
on this website makes it possible to listen to the entire speech. A transcript is so available at http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/ewieselperilsfoundedifference.html. To watch a video of the speech, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ldylvNscW54.


Images, essays, optional documentary video disc plus two optional TV broadcasts:

Norman Rockwell, “Freedom of Religion,” available on Courseweb and online.


Optional TV Broadcast: “Screams in the Night” concerning rape cases in Santa Monica, CA, from an NBC Dateline broadcast with Maria Shriver. The broadcast includes extensive first person testimonies from rape survivors Karen Palmer and Patty. I expect to make this one video with both broadcasts on it available through media services in G-20, Hillman Library.

February 23  speaking for and about others: if not with others, how?

featured speech texts:


Images and essays:


March 2 silence and non-reporting of bias offense: systemic analysis of subjugated knowledge speech texts:
“Testimony on “Anti-gay Violence” before the “Subcommittee on Criminal Justice,” October 6, 1986, 1-31. I have provided four speeches by recognized experts, though the complete hearings are voluminous.

Arthur Dong, “Licenced to Kill,” ([Los Angeles, CA]: DeepFocus Productions, [1999]). This documentary consists primarily of interviews with convicted killers of gay men. The video includes graphic footage from homicide scenes as recorded by police investigators. The scenes from Luigi’s restaurant are particularly difficult to view. Consider, as an option, only listening when the background tones signal a shift to crime scene footage. This is available in the Media Resource Center, G 20 Hillman Library, V-299. A brief interview with film maker Arthur Dong about the documentary can be found at http://www.pbs.org/pov/licensedtokill/video_interview.php#.VKiFpCvF9ps

Images and essays:


March 8-15 Spring recess.

March 16 language as site of struggle: the simultaneity of oppressions

speech texts:
Audre Lorde, I Am Your Sister: Black Women Organizing Across Sexualities (Women of Color/Kitchen Table Press, 1985). The pdf on Courseweb is from an ebook of the 1985 pamphlet held at Hillman Library.

essays:
Available on Courseweb and Hillman ejournals.

March 23 apologia, reconciliation, and vengeance:

Photographs, essays and documentary film
Photograph of Barack Obama at the Door of No Return.
Photograph of George W. Bush and Laura Bush at the Door of No Return.
Forum on race in Rhetoric and Public Affairs
John Hatch, “Reconciliation: Building a Bridge from Complicity to Coherence in the Rhetoric of
March 30 performative contradictions and double binds: language and policy discourse

speech texts:

essays:

April 6 embodying, performing and enacting:

speech texts:

Essays and films:


Optional documentary film. The Brandon Teena Story, Susan Muska and Greta Olafsdottir, producers (New York: New Video/ Bless Bless Productions, [1999]). This video concerning gender identity is available in the Media Resource Center, G 20 Hillman Library, V-5216 or DVD-993. It focuses on the rape and murder of Brandon Teena, who describes himself as experiencing gender identity disorder.

Optional film. Boys Don’t Cry (Beverly Hills, CA: Twentieth Century Fox, [2000]). This video concerning gender identity is available in the Media Resource Center, G 20, Hillman Library, DVD- 203. It focuses on the rape and murder of Brandon Teena, who describes himself as experiencing gender identity disorder.

Much about racism, disability, and, more generally, the politics of difference, can be learned from comparing these two accounts of the same events.

April 13 narratives and myths


Images, essays and video:
Norman Rockwell, “Freedom From Want”
Optional documentary film: Hope Along the Wind: The Life of Harry Hay, Eric Slade, director; Jack Walsh and Eric Slade producers ([San Francisco, CA: Frameline Distribution, [2001?]). This video celebrates the life of Harry Hay and his political activism. It concerns GLBTQ sexuality and gender socialization. Though it does deal with serious forms of bias, I hope it will be a gentle and affirming way for us to conclude our work together with difficult materials. Fairies seem to have a knack for rising above oppressive circumstances and deeds. Available in the Media Resource Center, G 20, Hillman Library, V-7637.

April 20 reflection on class project/experiment in practical criticism