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INTRODUCTION

After Donald J. Trump was elected the forty-fifth president of the United States in November 2016, I felt what many others felt: shock, anger, disappointment, even fear. Then, another emotion kicked in: guilt. As an English instructor and specifically a writing instructor for more than fifteen years and a writing program coordinator for ten years, I felt partially responsible for the outcome of the election. Had I not been teaching my students to reject the kind of rhetoric that Trump employed? Had I failed at teaching them the importance of evidence to making an argument, the significance of both citing sources and the credibility of those sources? Had I neglected to teach them the value of precision in expression and the importance of context to constructing meaning? Had we not addressed what it means to be ethical readers, writers, and communicators who undertake this work in responsible ways? Almost half the country voted for Trump. How many of these voters had I taught?

Those who voted for Trump, some of whom may be reading this book, could not even celebrate or enjoy their victory. Whether they felt silenced by their Democratic colleagues or resentful of how the media portrayed the election results as thoroughly shocking, these voters were also angry, distracted, and disheartened. Despite feeling some of the same emotions, people across the country had seemingly become even more divided.[1] It is the combination of this political divisiveness and the increase in the use of post-truth rhetoric that brought about this book. No matter where readers fall on the left-right political divide, though, I think *Teaching Readers in Post-Truth America* explores something on which we can all agree: we have found ourselves at a pivotal moment in which the stakes of literacy

education are pretty high. Certainly, we have been privy to any number of previous "literacy crises," as well as political crises wherein high-ranking political figures, including presidents, have been exposed as dishonest. We have also witnessed the circulation of "fake news" in the form of rumors, hoaxes, and salacious news stories.[2] What we have not witnessed before, though, are the cultural and ideological shifts that characterize our present moment. In an article by the BBC's Sean Coughlin, philosopher A. C. Grayling describes our contemporary moment through the concept of post-truth:[3] "The whole post-truth phenomenon is about, 'My opinion is worth more than the facts.' It's about how I feel about things. It's terribly narcissistic. It's been empowered by the fact that you can publish your opinion. You used to need a pot of paint and a balaclava to publish your opinion, if you couldn't get a publisher. But all you need now is an iPhone. Everyone can publish their opinion—and if you disagree with me, it's an attack on me and not my ideas."

As Grayling points out, post-truth culture thrives particularly in a society that values opinions more than facts and, moreover, has as many outlets for people to share those opinions as there are outlets to disseminate facts. Still, the iPhone is certainly not the root of our post-truth culture. These roots have been traced—for different ends—to any number of sources. Some see the roots of our post-truth culture in Evangelical and other religious sects that preach against accepting a secular worldview over a religious (i.e., a Christian) worldview wherein the latter is characterized by a "deep distrust of the media" and "scientific consensus" (Worthen 2017). Others see our post-truth culture as an outgrowth of the postmodern rejection of an objective reality (D'Ancona 2017; Cadwalladr 2017), while many maintain that post-truth rhetoric is not only as old as political rhetoric but that they are one and the same.

Despite the current climate, in his dual biography of George Orwell and Winston Churchill, Thomas E. Ricks (2017:269–70) comments on the central role objective truth has historically played: "The struggle to see things as they are is perhaps the fundamental driver of Western civilization. There is a long but

direct line from Aristotle and Archimedes to Locke, Hume, Mill and Darwin, and from there through Orwell and Churchill to Martin Luther King writing his 'Letter from Birmingham City Jail.' It is the agreement that objective reality exists, that people of goodwill can perceive it, and that other people will change their views when presented with the facts of the matter." A post-truth culture in which there is no agreement that objective reality exists puts educators in a seemingly untenable position. If no one agrees on what constitutes accuracy or facts, then where does this leave us?

As its title and introduction thus far suggest, this book takes the position that we are, in fact, living in a post-truth culture. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "post-truth" as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief." While the media and other sources have outlined the ways the Trump administration has perpetuated this culture,[4] it is important to remember—alongside Grayling, as well as those who posit other origins—that our post-truth culture has evolved over time and is the result of far more than the election of a single president.

While origin stories can be very interesting, this book is more concerned with the implications of this post-truth culture, particularly for education. Philosopher Michael P. Lynch (2016:63) begins to parse these implications: "When you can't agree on your principles of evidence and rationality, you can't agree on the facts. And, if you can't agree on the facts, you can hardly agree on what to do in the face of the facts, and that just increases tribalization, and so on and on in a recurring loop." In a culture that does not agree on the principles of evidence and rationality or on facts, how does one teach reading, writing, and thinking?

John Duffy (2017:18) lays out some options for instructors: "We can accept the language and culture of post-truth as the new normal in which facts are not facts, assertions need not be burdened by evidence, and truth is what the powerful say it is. Or," he continues, "we can choose to speak, write, and teach in

a language that resists the culture of post-truth . . . a language of argument grounded in such virtues as honesty, accountability, generosity, courage, and radical humility."

Bruce McComiskey (2017:38) argues that our field is uniquely positioned to respond: "The fact is, rhetoric and composition has had the tools to combat post-truth rhetoric for years, and we, as a community of scholars and teachers, need to double-down on those tools." Moreover, writes McComiskey (2017:43), "A plan for action already exists in disciplinary white papers like the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* and the *WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition*," which promote values including curiosity, openness, engagement, creativity, persistence, responsibility, flexibility, meta-cognition, critical thinking, analysis, and rhetorical knowledge.

Although not directly addressing post-truth culture, this concept nonetheless seems to inflect Linda Adler-Kassner's March 2017 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) presidential address, wherein she details our field's commitment to preparing students to "question assumptions they've made, to shake up what might have been inert, to adapt or change prior knowledge." She continues, "Learning involves being comfortable with the discomfort that this invokes, because this discomfort is critical for changing one's mind— and real learning happens when that change occurs, when learners develop new or deeper ways of thinking and doing. Writing plays a critical role here. When we work with students to study writing, we are helping them look at how expectations for writing or products of writing reflect deeper commitments and epistemologies, at how what is written tells us about how people work with and from expectations" (Adler-Kassner 2017).

As insightful and promising as these accounts are, they neglect to think about what a post-truth culture means for readers. How does it affect reading? How does it affect readers? How might it affect the way we teach reading? For example, are there reading practices that are "grounded in such virtues as honesty, accountability, generosity, courage, and radical humility" that would complement the argumentative writing practices Duffy

describes? I also wonder how reading practices, like the writing practices Adler-Kassner details, might "reflect deeper commitments and epistemologies."

Although these scholars don't address reading, I think they would agree—and I think we all would agree, no matter our political leanings—that readers generally, and our students specifically, are under unprecedented pressure within this post-truth culture to navigate the range of texts (broadly defined) that vie for attention and acceptance. Conceiving of reading as a practice of constructing meaning, this book argues that foregrounding and teaching the interpretive practice of reading alongside writing in the academy is one way of responding to this contemporary moment and is absolutely crucial to preparing our students to participate in an information-rich democratic society.

This book explores the importance of teaching in postsecondary institutions and in first-year writing courses, specifically, what is most often called "critical reading."[5] In particular, this book addresses the stakes associated with doing so in a post-truth culture. This work is especially important because we know from large-scale studies (the Citation Project, National Assessment of Educational Progress 2016, Project SAILS 2017) and students' scores on the SAT Verbal/Critical Reading Portion and the ACT Reading Portion that their critical reading abilities, including their most basic comprehension skills, are rather weak. Moreover, studies also indicate that these digital natives are largely incapable of reading to discern the credibility of online sources and are "easily duped" (Stanford History Education Group 2016). If we (optimistically) believe that the value of credibility and the existence of objective reality (among other foundational beliefs crucial to a fully functioning democracy) are not entirely (or forever) lost, this book considers the specific reading-centered interventions the field of rhetoric and composition can make, as well as what we might draw on from other fields to further enrich our contributions.

Teaching Readers in Post-Truth America builds on my earlier work wherein I argue for teaching within the expansive,

reflective, and meta-cognitive framework of mindful reading. More than ever it seems that students not only need direct instruction in reading but that to position students to transfer what they learn about reading across courses and contexts, instructors need to teach reading within expansive contexts like the mindful reading framework I detail in *Securing a Place for Reading In Composition: The Importance of Teaching for Transfer* (Carillo 2015) and elsewhere. Although we have seen a revival of attention to reading within the field of rhetoric and composition, reading still remains under-theorized, making it that much more important to take the time to explore how it fits into the field's larger response[6] and resistance to this post-truth culture.

CHAPTERS

Chapter 2 considers the similarities between the Common Core State Standards' (CCSS) English Language Arts Standards and the reading pedagogy of the New Critics. Specifically, this chapter explores the stakes associated with severing the relationship between readers and texts within a post-truth culture, as well as cultivating in students a reverence for texts. Examining largely unknown revisions of the New Criticism's reading pedagogy, the chapter contends that these revisions should serve as a model of how the Common Core State Standards might be revised to reconnect readers to the process of reading and to better and more accurately represent how meaning is composed through reading.

Building on chapter 2's discussion of the CCSS, chapter 3 contends that no matter how consistently the standards try to push affect and emotion aside to privilege objectivity, research continues to indicate that learning is both a rational and an emotional process. The standards' devaluing of emotion is a worrisome prospect in a climate where it would seemingly be especially productive to help students cultivate an awareness and understanding of how emotions inform beliefs. As such, chapter 3 explores how situating emotion—specifically empathy—as a way of composing meaning and constructing

knowledge complements more rationally driven modes of reading in the classroom. In addition to making emotions and empathy in particular more central to our teaching practices, this chapter also argues for considering how emotion functions in our research, particularly participant-based research. By pointing to an unexamined tradition of "empathic research" within the field of rhetoric and composition, this chapter argues for continuing that tradition by considering more holistic methods of "reading" data.

Taking its cue from Frank Farmer and Phillip Arrington's pronouncement that "imitation might be seriously rethought," chapter 4 explores the opportunities that open up for literacy instruction when we think beyond imitative writing practices and consider what it might mean to model sound reading practices for our students. This chapter focuses on the practice of annotation as a way to directly teach reading in the classroom. Because annotation concretizes the invisible act of reading, it can be used to model the work "expert" readers do. Although the demise of formalist methods of teaching writing also meant the rejection of imitative and modeling exercises, this chapter maintains that imitative exercises are prevalent in classrooms—despite the lack of scholarship that might suggest otherwise—and that bringing them to light is an important step to theorizing and supporting this pedagogy. Ultimately, chapter 4 considers how instructors might explore with students the largely unappreciated dialogic, dynamic, and transformative potential of imitation and modeling activities. Such activities provide opportunities for students to study and imitate expert reading practices that are characterized by flexibility and openness, reading practices that in a Freireian sense are crucial to reading the word and the world.

Chapter 5 provides an overview of the previous chapters to highlight the key concepts and ideas therein. Although the chapter does not deny the importance of the resources and pedagogical approaches explored in these earlier chapters, it details how some of rhetoric and composition's foundational values and principles may complicate the field's response to

the current climate. Specifically, this chapter addresses how the field's prioritizing of logos over pathos, its over-reliance on the teaching of the simplistic argumentative essay, and its lack of attention to psychological research pose unique challenges as rhetoric and composition articulates and mobilizes its response to the current post-truth culture. Chapter 5 contends that anticipating and understanding the obstacles that may lie ahead is crucial to strengthening that response.