

As I sit here right now and write this, my body is the largest it has ever been. I have gained 50 pounds in the last year. I have oscillated (sometimes violently) between enjoying the experience and feeling sharply critical about myself: not necessarily my body as much as my habits. My habits are manifested on my body. You look at me and you know I indulge. You don't know by looking at me, though, that my drug of choice is Buitoni Spinach Tortellini and that I eat the whole package myself, when I'm alone, using my fingers, while sitting on my couch.

My understanding of rhetoric has changed from being “something connected to persuasion” as a MA student in a composition focused program to “a way to see power structures that are often invisible and harmful” by the end of my first year here. This was HUGE for me. I never really understood what people were talking about when they¹ talked about race/class/gender issues and “patriarchy” and “evil corporate America”. I saw beauty and consumerism as power, and it is a source of power, but didn't know *how* to look at these things critically. **805** and **885** pushed me to understand rhetoric as a tool [**I started to talk about this in my research précis from 885 and in my term paper from 805**], but it wasn't until the end of my second year that it really clicked that rhetoric is a methodology.

So what do I mean when I say that rhetoric is a methodology? That's an excellent question, and one that I am still trying to articulate well (although I know that this has been a central takeaway from each of the core courses). Everyone comes to knowledge and the understanding of knowledge in their own way. For me, it's both through and along side my body. [**You can see my try to take a stab at this in my research stance from 870**].

I never thought I was “letting myself go” and I still don't. For me, this phrase means that a person doesn't feel the pressure to change—it's an abandonment of the social norms, which is both freeing for the individual, and dangerous/transgressive for society². I have never let myself go, though, because I've been conscientious of ideology and my participation in it. And to be completely honest, even though I “know better” than to feel guilty that my body isn't perfect and that I'm not trying 110% to make it that way, there are really intense moments when I absolutely hate myself for the choices that I have made, continue to make, and know that I will make in the future. There are moments when I feel trapped both in this physical form that has a bulging belly and jiggly

¹ Becca Hayes, who was a huge influence while I was at North Dakota State

² That is, if “abandonment” can ever really be obtained—I wonder if it's just a myth. Here's a place where I'm torn between Althusser and something more sunny. If you abandon ideology, you are alone—and no one wants to be alone. There is power in the group, which is why ideology works so well.

thighs, and the emotional/psychological makeup of my head—I don't eat this way because my BODY wants to; I eat this way because my MIND wants to.

It is through rhetoric that I have come to name and begin to understand this tension³.

This last year was a game I played with myself where I would do little things (like over-eat and not run) and see “what I could get away with”. I kept waiting for my body to balloon overnight. What happened, though, was a gradual, very very gradual increase of body mass and a very, very gradual decrease of muscle. Even now, I still have some definition in my legs—and it's been over a year since my last long run. It was this gradualness that kept me going in this direction—I was constantly surprised at how little my body actually changed. I could ENJOY myself and still looked good enough to pass as normal looking. Similar to how I fell into a comfortable pattern of activity when I lost 30 pounds two years ago, I fell into a comfortable pattern of inactivity that I am currently still in.

These patterns, these habits, exist in a cultural system that decides what “good” and “bad” means in terms of my whitefemalemiddleclassheterosexual body. [\[You can see more about this in my midterm paper from 882\]](#). The funny thing is that while this meaning making is done collectively, the negative effects are felt in ways that make me feel sharply alone.

I can name this and begin to understand this through rhetoric.

I want to clarify that when I talk about my body, I am discussing beauty, and not health. I personally have some knowledge about my body and health—but that judgment is something that will come out of conversations with specialists; this is between me and my doctor⁴.

I have come to understand this through rhetoric.

³ This was a big take away from **882**: we are split and see ourselves in other people and other spaces and can never really be outside of ourselves enough to objectively see ourselves, (also, there is no such thing as objectivity)

⁴ Unfortunately. Wouldn't it be great to live in a world where everyone had an advanced knowledge of their own body's health: blood pressure, cholesterol, eating habits, exercise, etc.? The way it is now, at least for me and the world I see, most people know just enough to be intimidated and leave the “knowing” to the “professionals”—and this extends beyond doctors. We turn to nutritionists to tell us how to eat. We go to personal trainers to tell us how to work out. We join fashionable programs that give us fancy corporate diet plans and a fake sense of community. My question is: why are things so complicated that we have to go to others (and spend money) to learn about the body that we are?)

I understand that everyone sees things from a different viewpoint and we can't ever assume to understand how anyone else actually sees things. It's a miracle that we understand each other at all. The systems and patterns that we construct as a society still have meanings that are different to each individual. The individual meaning making practice seems like a place (space?) of agency but it always already exists within a larger social context: we can't escape ideology.

Rhetoric helps me understand this.

So why am I telling you about my body in this reflection? Because this is how I understand rhetoric right now. I understand it through my lived experiences. I know that I can talk to other people and read things written by other people but I will *never* know what it is like to be in their body. I will never know all the things that happened to them to get them to a place where the world looks a certain way. I will never know what their secret indulgences are—and need to read them knowing that there is always more than I know that's going on.

Turning this around means that you, my dear committee members, will never know *exactly* what rhetoric looks like to me. I know it's my job, in this reflection, to paint the most clear picture for you so that you can read my exam responses in a way that makes sense. The answers to my questions are honest representations of the knowledge I have gained from the core courses. For me, this exam will be a conversation between myself in the present moment and the moments of learning that have happened during the core. Here are some things that I want to make sure I explicitly address before I turn in my exam responses:

Definitions

Methodology, Discourse, and Rhetoric

Methodology, discourse, and rhetoric are three things that are very closely linked for me. I am going to try to start to explicitly parse them out, though, so that my viewpoint is clear before I start to write my exam responses. I am sure my definitions will evolve as I work through my exam and the theorists that I have listed after each working definition are only the surface—I am sure that others will emerge as I continue to write. Here's what things look like right now:

I see **methodology** as the theory of research: it's the guiding ideas behind how something is done (Clarke, Sullivan and Porter, everyone from decolonial theory, more that I'm sure I will acknowledge in my exam).

Discourse is the thing that I am looking at. Discourse is meaning making and is socially constructed. Discourse can be found in language, dress, bodies, actions, structures, and more (Lacan, Derrida, Kristeva, Althusser, and more).

As I mentioned earlier in this reflection, I see **rhetoric** as a methodology. For me, rhetoric is the “how”. Rhetoric is how meaning is made and how discourse is (re)produced. Rhetoric is how I see the things that are going on around me, and the way that I understand the meanings objects have in contemporary society (Baudrillard, Lacan, Derrida, Foucault, others).

Bodies and Dress

People have **bodies**. While at certain times society might privilege the mind over the body, No one is able to exist independent from their corporeal form. **Dress** is something that bodies do (or have done to them). My definition of dress includes any modification to the body (Eicher), which includes clothing and the addition or subtraction of body fat.

Other things I want you to know before you read my exam answers

It's REALLY HARD to separate the core and the concentration. Just thought you all should know. This is probably a good thing (in the long view) because it shows that I have internalized the information I've been exposed to, but it also means that I have to set up boundaries for this exam and I find myself continuously pushing those limits. I'll admit it: dress studies permeates my understanding of rhetoric and writing. This is reflected in many of my questions and I'm not going to worry about crossing the boundary with this material. [\[You can see me work with the intersection of rhetoric and dress in my final project for 882\].](#)