

How have your own research questions led you to your work on the writings of Adolf Hitler; what is your particular interest in this writing?

Political rhetoric has been one of my main interests since I was in graduate school, but it became my primary research focus in 2015 just after I took the job at SJSU. I'd just finished my first book (a history of writing instruction in higher education) when Donald Trump announced his presidential candidacy in June 2015. It was, to say the least, an unorthodox announcement given how much time he spent insulting people from China and Mexico. Within a month, very serious people were comparing Trump to Hitler as he campaigned on things like a "Muslim ban," building a wall on the U.S.-Mexico border, and birtherism conspiracies. He retweeted white nationalists multiple times, news broke that he'd kept a book of Hitler's speeches on his bedside table, and he was endorsed by notorious white supremacist and former Ku Klux Klan leader, David Duke. For all these reasons and more, renowned journalists and scholars of Nazism and fascism routinely weighed the value of comparing Trump to Hitler.

As someone who studies rhetoric for a living, I was fascinated by the whole spectacle. I followed the campaigns and the Nazi comparisons closely, especially because a significant number of articles, essays, and interviews comparing Trump to Hitler did so on the grounds that both were populist speakers. That is, the comparisons hinged on similarities in their rhetoric. It is true that both Trump and Hitler fed audiences' grievances, amplified audiences' latent (and not so latent) prejudices, and played on audiences' base emotions, but these appeals are hardly confined to Trump and Hitler. Despite holding a PhD in rhetorical studies and being an acknowledged expert in the field for more than a decade, however, I had a hard time objectively comparing Trump's rhetoric to Hitler's. Even more unexpectedly, the weak rhetorical link was Hitler, one of the most studied men of all time and the unambiguous "gold standard of demagoguery, an ideal example of the evil power of evil rhetoric."

Hitler gave more than 5,000 public speeches from 1919-1945. He is acknowledged by rhetoricians and historians alike as "one of the great orators of history, perhaps the greatest in the twentieth century." At the same time, studies of Hitler's rhetoric are rather scant. Notwithstanding a few exceptions, Hitler has not received much sustained attention from scholars of rhetoric, and almost none since the 1960s. For nearly half a century, Hitler has existed more as a bogeyman than a subject of scholarly investigation among rhetoricians. Lots of people have (very firm) opinions about why Hitler's rhetoric worked, but we don't have a lot of actual research on it.

So that's how I came to work on a book about Hitler's rhetoric. I was, and honestly still am, trying to figure out if and how Hitler's rhetoric—both overt and covert—continues to shape our thinking about politics, anti-Semitism, and violence. I know a lot more than I did when I started this project eight years ago, but I still have questions—first and foremost, why did Germans (and lots of non-Germans) fall for Hitler's rhetoric?

What questions keep you up at night? What are you thinking about these days?

I have some questions about contemporary politics that keep me awake which fall along two basic lines. One, it's hard to not look around the world and wonder why, given all the things we know and all the advances in human history, we still can't seem to stop destroying one another. The other is more specifically about myself and my family—are we safe (and variations on that). I think the latter is pretty universal, although it takes on different forms for different people. It's an existential question that drives virtually all political thinking and especially political reporting. The latter probably keeps me up more than the former, partly because it's completely speculative, but the two are related. Part of the answer to the first question is a result of people

acting on their speculations about the latter. So I spend a lot of time—usually between the hours of 2-4am—thinking about that connection.

Why a course on the rhetoric of hate; why now? What's in it for a student in 2024?

In my office, I have an 8-foot bookshelf right next to me that is floor-to-ceiling books about Hitler, Nazis, demagoguery, fascism, etc. Whenever someone comes into my office, I feel like it's important to reassure them—I'm not a fan. I study Nazis because I want to better understand how to confront, resist, and reject hate. I think it's also important to reassure prospective students—this is not going to be an “appreciation” class. Our goal will be to better understand how to confront, resist, and reject hateful rhetoric. Anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, neo-fascism, neo-Nazism, white nationalism, homophobia, transphobia, and other forms of hate speech and violence have been on the rise internationally for at least the past decade. The rhetoric of hate is everywhere. This class works from the premise that we are better equipped to confront, resist, and reject hate when we understand where it comes from, why people adopt it, and what works (and doesn't) to confront it. This is going to be a tough class given the subject matter, but I think it's both important and, frankly, fascinating. But we're not going to just marinate in hate, either. Every class isn't going to be an endless stream of darkness. It's ultimately a hopeful class—we can do better, and we're going to learn together how to tap into that hope even when things seem bleak.