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Masked Meanings: COVID-19 and the Subversion of Stasis Hierarchy

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ABSTRACT

Partisan rhetoric surrounding COVID-era face-masking has reshuffled traditional stasis hierarchy, allowing the middle stages of definition and quality, which emphasize epideictic motives of cultural affirmation, to supersede conjectural questions of medical efficacy. Viral images positioning masks as metonymic approximations of "authoritarianicity" and government overreach illustrate how right-wing masking rhetoric circumvents scientific concerns, instead rooting discourse in questions of cultural essence. Science communicators, in response, must embrace the inherently tropological and epideictic dimensions of the mask and work to recode the symbol as a metonym for citizenship and personal responsibility.

No symbol better epitomizes the polarized tenor of modern American politics than the COVID-era face mask, a protective filter properly worn over the nose and mouth to mitigate the spread of disease-bearing airborne respiratory droplets—or sometimes improperly worn under the nose in a gesture of apathetic protest, or not at all to signal overt defiance.[1] Masks rapidly permeated American life beginning in April 2020, when the Centers for Disease Control recommended mask-wearing as a precaution, alongside social distancing and disciplined hygiene, against the airborne transmission of the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2, or the pathogen behind the COVID-19 pandemic. Nationwide, lockdown and masking measures took effect at the state and local levels—though often along partisan lines. Democratic governors and mayors generally mandated more aggressive precautions than their Republican counterparts, who have often fought tooth-and-nail against precautionary measures and spurned scientific orthodoxy. One May 2020 political column put it like this:

> For progressives, masks have become a sign that you take the pandemic seriously and are willing to make a personal sacrifice to save lives. Prominent people who don't wear them are shamed and dragged on Twitter by lefty accounts. On the right, where the mask is often seen as the symbol of a purported overreaction to the coronavirus, mask promotion is a target of ridicule, a sign that in a deeply polarized America almost anything can be politicized and turned into a token of tribal affiliation. (Lizza and Lippman)

As such a "token," the mask had become more than a layer of protective fabric. It became (and remains) a dynamic rhetorical topos whose connotations and circulation demand the attention of rhetorical critics and theorists. Rhetoricians might note, to

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begin, that liberals and conservatives have routinely approached the mask from different vantage points. Liberals have typically begun with scientific consensus, which affirms that masks significantly mitigate the airborne spread of COVID-19 and therefore save lives (e.g. Brooks and Butler). Many conservatives, by contrast, have positioned masks as cultural rather than medical artifacts, beginning with questions of what the mask socially "means." These two positions notably correspond to two different questions within classical stasis theory, specifically the stasis of conjectural fact and that of definition—what exists in the world versus how we essentially define what exists in cultural practice. Stasis theory shows us, then, how liberals and conservatives have spoken at cross-purposes; more tellingly, though, the rhetorical advent of COVID-era face masks also shows us how public translations of scientific issues can upend or subvert the traditional hierarchy of stasis theory, which is our concern in this essay.

We are interested in both the rhetorical explanation of COVID-era masking controversy and ways in which this controversy compels revision of established rhetorical categories. In approaching these parallel problems, we identify a deep-seated connection among Hermagoras's four stases (conjecture, definition, quality, and policy), Aristotle's three oratorical genres (forensic, deliberative, and epideictic), and tropological rhetoric as described by Kenneth Burke—a theoretical nexus that sheds especial light on the rhetorical problem of masking but also informs a wide array of rhetorical practice stemming from the popular, ideologically fraught translation of technical knowledge.

Of these three concepts—stasis theory, genre, and tropes—the former two have received the most scholarly attention in tandem. Accordingly, we begin by surveying scholarship on stasis theory and Aristotelian genre, with an emphasis on stasis theory's application to science communication and the oft-neglected category of epideictic rhetoric. We then progress toward the problem of figurative expression in such rhetoric, epitomized by Burke's "master tropes" and their concomitant gravity toward the stases of definition and quality. Finally, we apply these ideas to the visual metonym of the face mask, revealing how reactionary representations of the mask have successfully short-circuited scientific questions of medical merit in favor of political fearmongering against perceived threats of authoritarianism (or "authoritarianicity"—the visual connotation of odious autocratic power), findings that imperil the viability of public arguments centered on "what the science says."

Stasis Questions and Rhetorical Genres

Stasis theory in its most familiar, fundamental structure derives from Hermagoras of Temnos, a Greek rhetorician of the first century BCE. Hermagoras poses a series of increasingly subjective questions designed to highlight areas of disagreement or impasse (*stases*) in rhetorical exchange about a given topic, person, or event:

1. Fact or *conjecture*: What exists? What happened?
2. *Definition*: What kind of thing/event is this? What is its fundamental *meaning* in social settings?
3. Degree or *quality*: Is this good/bad, just/unjust?
4. Practical application, jurisdiction, or *policy*: What do we do about it?

Hermagoras's original writings on stasis remain lost to history, but notable recapitulations of his thought famously occur in Cicero's *De Inventione*, the anonymous *Rhetorica ad Herrennium*, and Quintilian's *Institutio Oratio*, the latter two of which excise the fourth stasis of policy or courtroom objection from the Hermagorean system to create a compact triad (Nadeau, "Classical" 54n4; Heath 119-23). For the ancients, stasis questions proved appealing as inventional schematics, in the words of Malcolm Heath, because they supply "a basic analysis of a rhetorical problem" (115), one projected within what Jeanne Fahnestock and Marie Secor call "a taxonomical grid for sorting out kinds of argument" ("Toward" 223). These questions supply structure, order, and hierarchy, efficiently instructing rhetors where to focus their efforts. They are also, not coincidentally, primarily associated with the disciplined scene of jurisprudence and forensic rhetoric, which also imposes order and facilitates linear, refereed progression among stasis questions.

Such settings, as modern rhetoricians have observed, represent a small sliver of latter-day rhetorical practice, which tends to be messy, fragmented, and ecologically complex. Modern commentary on stasis theory—taking Fahnestock and Secor's 1985 chapter "Toward a Modern Version of Stasis" as a vital starting point—has therefore sought to expand the system in search of what these authors call "heuristic value as a generalized principle of invention" (219). Fahnestock and Secor stress that modern circumstances upend the rigid sequentialism of stasis questions we inherit from the second-century rhetorician Hermogenes; instead, the stases often function recursively, such that "a question about any issue can disrupt the question of any other, sending the whole procedure back through another round of establishing facts, definitions, evaluations, and jurisdictions" (218; Nadeau, "Classical" 67). These insights presage a modern scholarly trend of modifying, complicating, and recontextualizing the stases, exemplified by Lawrence J. Prelli, who cross-references the Hermagorean stases with the science-specific questions of evidence, interpretation, evaluation, and methodology to investigate disciplinary rhetoric within the sciences (144-84); or, more recently, by Adele H. Hite and Andrew Carter, who juxtapose Hermagoras's stasis questions with those of criteria, effectiveness, universality, and innovation to suit discourse on public health (155-56). In such work, the insight recurs that stasis theory must morph to suit specific cultural and disciplinary settings, lest rhetorical theory succumb to the rigid, logocentric pall that Callum Matheson detects haunting traditional stasis structure in general. According to Matheson, stases must draw meaning from affectively prior emotional commitments, lest we "grammatize rhetoric" by flattening human experience into pseudo-logical precategories (75).

While retaining the Hermagorean four-stasis schema in this commentary, we also wish to recontextualize stasis theory within the ideological entanglements of modern human experience, much as Matheson describes. For this reason, we are interested in locating overlooked epideictic motives among the stasis questions. Further, while many have adapted stasis questions to modern disciplinary argument and other arenas of official communication (Carter; Fahnestock and Secor, "Stases"; Graham and Herndl; Gross; Prelli; Weber), we focus on what Fahnestock has termed "accommodating science"—the "translation" of technical, scientific information into the public sphere—and what Leah Ceccarelli has called "manufactured scientific controversy," or the politically

motivated fabrication of dissensus where little or none exists among experts. Fahnestock and Ceccarelli both illuminate incongruities between the goal-oriented discourse of compact disciplines and the comparatively unwieldy fracas of postmodern public rhetoric (see also Toulmin 145-73, 378-95). How, then, do stasis questions apply in the wild of the public sphere, uprooted from the refereed domains of the courtroom and science lab?

This shift toward the public sphere yields unstable movement among stasis questions. While theorists traditionally associate stasis theory with forensic rhetoric, others note that situations beyond the courtroom convolute the rhetorical motives of the stasis questions. As Lynda Walsh has argued, "The stases exert an irresistible upward pull on the discourse surrounding a particular issue because the answer to a question at one stasis generates a question at the one above it," creating a "bridge between forensic questions on the one hand ('is' questions) and epideictic and deliberative questions on the other ('ought' questions)" (42). Such epistemic drift and implied conflation between stasis points, as Ceccarelli notes, especially accents manufactured controversy surrounding issues like AIDS, climate change, evolution, and—we can now add—matters like COVID-era face-masking and vaccination ("Manufactured" 212-13). Within such public exchange, as Walsh implies, the traditional motives of Aristotle's three oratorical genres often intermix and alloy together due to affinities among certain genres and certain stasis questions.

We expand on such comparison to propose three specific affinities: the conjecture stasis aligns with forensic rhetoric, the definition and quality stases with epideictic rhetoric, and the policy stasis with deliberative rhetoric (see fig. 1). As Fahnestock has argued, scientific reports emphasize factual validity within the conjectural stasis and its concomitant emphasis on "methods" and "results," thereby mirroring Aristotle's conception of forensic rhetoric as a retrospective attempt to reconstruct the facts of the past (Fahnestock 278, 291; Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1.3; 1.10-15). One can pose a parallel affinity between the policy stasis and Aristotelian deliberative rhetoric, which attempts to politically dictate the future of the polis, much as the fourth stasis looks ahead to consequences and applications of the prior stases (Aristotle 1.3, 1.4-8).

Aristotle's third genre, epideictic rhetoric, pervades the middle stases with more complexity. As Ray Nadeau reports, the original Hermagorean schema allows for epideictic subject matter—or "ceremonial" discourse that Aristotle aligns with praise, blame, and public affirmation of norms and morality—chiefly at the stasis level of quality ("Classical" 69-70; Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1.3, 1.9; Hauser). Within the quality stasis, questions of what is good and bad align naturally with epideictic questions about what is

Stasis Question		Temporal Alignment		Genre Emphasis
1. Conjecture	↔	Past	↔	Forensic
2. Definition 3. Quality	↔	Present	↔	Epideictic
4. Policy	↔	Future	↔	Deliberative

Figure 1. Alignment of stasis questions with oratorical genres.

praiseworthy and blameworthy, virtuous and odious, as Aristotle describes in detail through his *idia* (special topics) of epideictic discourse. This trend mirrors Fahnestock's claim that popular "translations" of scientific findings often adopt a more epideictic than forensic caste, epitomized by appeals to "the wonder" of science: "An epideictic argument praising the space shuttle, for example, would use the 'wonder' appeal if it talked about the 'never before' achievements of the machinery, astronauts, and engineers" (278-79). The "wonder," here, amounts significantly to a pathos-laden qualitative assessment of science (it is good, noble, awe-inspiring) that slots neatly into the third stasis position.

But such emotionally rich epideictic appeals also approach the second stasis, orbiting questions of how communicators fundamentally define or essentialize science. We suggest that epideictic—understood through a broad, epistemic scope—also aligns with the definition stasis, insofar as each firms up social categories and gravitates toward the bedrock of cultural symbology. As Jeffrey Walker explains in his panoramic counter-history of classical rhetoric and poetics,

> [T]he function of the epideictic in its nonpragmatic setting is a suasive "demonstration," display, or showing-forth (*epideixis*) of things, leading its audience … to contemplation (*theôria*) and insight and ultimately to the formation of opinions and desires on matters of philosophical, social, ethical, and cultural concern. (9)

For Walker, epideictic so defined constitutes nothing less than "the rhetoric of belief and desire," which supplies the emotional foundation underscoring the pragmatic genres of deliberative and forensic (10). We'll add that the definition stasis, configured accordingly, circumscribes *fundamental social meaning*; it points rhetors to core assessments of social value: not only what is good and bad, praiseworthy or blameworthy, but also what cultural essences we engage through such categories in the first place. To return to Fahnestock's example, science communicators not only evaluate science as good (quality) but also essentialize science as numinous wonder (definition). Gabriel Cutrufello, for example, similarly examines how nineteenth-century scientist Henry Rowland's public addresses embody epideictic motives in their definitional arguments about scientific pursuit, substantiating "larger narratives about scientific work" (287).

This alignment of epideictic with the mediatory states of definition and quality prompts a radical reevaluation of stasis hierarchy, at least in public settings. Fahnestock and Secor echo the conventional wisdom on stasis hierarchy: "Questions of fact are logically prior to questions of definition and are subsumed in definition arguments; questions of definition are similarly included in questions of policy"; and so on ("Toward a Modern" 218). Walker's foundational vision of epideictic, however, entails an alternate image of the definition and quality stases as likewise foundational, exerting an inexorable gravity on adjacent questions of fact and policy, which—once loosed into the public sphere—ideologically adhere to the construction (definition) and assessment (quality) of cultural value. In a similar vein, Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca configure epideictic as the genre of rhetorical groundwork: "[E]pideictic oratory has importance for argumentation because it strengthens the disposition toward action by increasing adherence to the values it lauds" (50). Again, one notes Walker's ideological hierarchy coupled with Mathesons's affective considerations of emotional commitment: epideictic affirms certain values (we define and praise "courage" and

"patriotism") that resurface pragmatically in forensic and deliberative rhetoric (vote for our candidate, the courageous patriot). Or again: observe the numinous wonders of space travel; therefore, you should fund NASA. Fahnestock and Secor remain correct, of course, that conjecture "logically" precedes definition and quality, but definition and quality often emotionally and *ideologically* precede other stasis questions—even those of fact. Such primacy of the middle stases matters especially for science communicators, illustrating how matters of scientific consensus, as Burke puts it, escape the laboratory into "the orbit of Rhetoric" (*Rhetoric* 26).

The Epideictic Gravity of Tropes

In her essay on "Manufactured Scientific Controversy," Ceccarelli reasonably suggests that more explicit, self-referential shifts among stasis points might clarify public debate on scientific issues and vitiate the trickery of science-deniers (212-13). This noble and logical strategy, while likely expedient in certain settings, also highlights challenges of COVID-era masking controversy and similar issues. In particular, we doubt that political advocates and science communicators dealing with issues like masking will be able to fully localize their arguments within the forensic stasis of conjecture or the deliberative stasis of policy due to the deep infusion of figurative, tropological symbology into the COVID-19 crisis, which creates a gravitational pull back to epideictic questions of definition and quality.

Tropes, in other words, facilitate the gravity of the middle stases, inasmuch as devices like metaphor, synecdoche, and most especially metonymy invite *essentializing definitions* and assessments of their subjects, tethering pragmatic arguments, however overtly or subtly, to the definitional and qualitative premises. Hayden White, in his introduction to *Tropics of Discourse*, frames the problem well:

> The conventional technique for assessing the validity of prose discourses—such as, let us say, Machiavelli's or Locke's political tracts, Rousseau's essay on inequality, Ranke's histories, or Freud's ethnological speculations—is to check them, first, for their fidelity to the facts of the subject being discussed and, then, for their adherence to the criteria of logical consistency as represented by the classical syllogism. This critical technique manifestly flies in the face of the practice of discourse, if not some theory of it, because the discourse is intended to *constitute* the ground whereon to decide *what shall count as a fact* in the matters under consideration and to determine *what mode of comprehension* is best suited to the understanding of the facts thus constituted. (3)

Note White's revision of foundational order, which mirrors the present reshuffling of stasis hierarchy: To judge Machiavelli or Freud—or, we might add, any number of science communicators—by "the facts" is to commit to traditional stasis hierarchy beginning with conjecture. Meanwhile, as White argues, the tropological dimensions of language at the levels of definition and quality actually dictate what count as viable first premises in many rhetorical situations. Such troping, White asserts, is "inexpungeable from discourse in the human sciences, however realistic they may aspire to be" (2).

Here, the terms *trope* and *stasis*, both of which evoke metaphorical motion, merit parallel consideration. *Trope* derives from the Greek *tropos*, for "turn" or "direction" (White 2); Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, for example, employs the Greek *tropos* to describe the common topic of "[*turning*] what has been said against oneself upon the one who said

it" (2.23.7; emphasis added; brackets in original). Here, *tropos* describes not the strict content of an argument but its rerouting or deflection of rhetorical energy—the sort of directional movement White identifies as "not only a deviation *from* one possible, proper meaning, but also a deviation *toward* another meaning, conception, or ideal of what is right and proper *and true* 'in reality'" (2). In particular, Aristotle's sixth common topic implies the deflective energy of irony, a trope of counteraction and reversal. *Stasis*, meanwhile, evokes a complementary idea: from the Greek for "to stand," it evokes stillness, impasse, and "[disrupting] continuity, [dividing] motion into two movements" or the "head-on collision … between opposite *kinēsis*" (Dieter 347-48, 350, 362). In Otto Dieter's words, the classical sense of *stasis* employed by Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, and other ancient commentators on rhetoric and geometric philosophy yields a sense of "standing still, which must occur momentarily among opposite 'changes' and in-between contrary motions, movements, processes, functions, or forces in action" (369). *Stasis* evokes settings or nodal points among which tropological vectors of movement change course toward different implications of meaning. Tropes, that is, can reroute energy among the stases, which supply stopping points for tropological energy.

Burke's four "master tropes"—metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony—all describe specific "directions" of such rhetorical energy that intersect with stasis questions. Metaphor, for Burke, is bilateral, stressing "the thisness of that, the thatness of this" and a "'carrying-over' of a term from one realm into another, a process that necessarily involves varying degrees of incongruity in that the two realms are never identical" (*Grammar* 503-04). Such tropological incongruity, one might note, often bespeaks incongruity among stases. Take, for example, the "science as frontier" metaphor Ceccarelli scrutinizes in a book-length study. As she explains, "the metaphorical frontier of science was introduced as a compelling rhetorical substitute for the vanished American terrestrial frontier," thereby retelling the story of science through the lens of westward expansion mythos (*On the Frontier* 11). For our purposes, note that this retelling involves a deliberative, policy-level prescription that science must persist and receive funding, which is tethered to epideictic, definition- and quality-level characterizations of science as a quintessentially noble and American "conquest" of new knowledge. True to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, the epideictic dimension of the metaphor precedes and supports the deliberative.

While metaphor attracts the most commentary of any one trope, we're especially interested in the tropological motives of "reduction" and "representation" that Burke aligns with metonymy (the tangible for the abstract) and synecdoche (the part from the whole) (*Grammar* 505-11). These tropes supply "efficient" shorthand for the "essence" of a given issue, system, or cluster of ideas, where "essence," as Burke describes it, denotes a selective judgment about the *primary* quality of a complex construct (*Attitudes* 252-54). Ceccarelli's "frontier," for example, often applies just as metonymically as metaphorically, essentializing scientific expansion (a breathlessly complex network of lab tests, grant proposals, disciplinary peer review, institutional politics, and so forth) through the tangible image of the frontier, which both *reduces* science to an image of pioneering gumption and *essentializes* science in the mold of this image:

paperwork and data entry aside, the enthymeme goes, science is *fundamentally* about exploration and conquest.

The concept of *essence* also connects directly to the definition stasis. Nadeau, in his examination of Aristotelian and Stoic influences on stasis theory, notes the synonymy of "essence" and "definition" in classical thought, where "essence" designates "qualities which make a thing what it is and nothing else" ("Some Aristotelian" 253). In turn, contested essences invoke the definition stasis: Is science *essentially* exploration or conquest or knowledge-creation or blasphemy or something else? The quality stasis then follows in tow, summoning the epideictic work of praise and blame in evaluating such essences. When we refer to the epideictic gravity of tropes, then, we denote the short-hand use of figurative language to reroute public rhetorical exchanges back toward the middle stases, supplying quick and often covert ("efficient," Burke would say) judgements about the essential characteristics of contested topics at the definition stasis and assessments of those essences at the quality stasis. (Science is essentially exploration, which is noble and quintessentially American; or, science is essentially blasphemy, which is an ignoble encroachment on religion. In each case, note that essences and qualities often come prepackaged together, where the connotations of the essential term imply its quality.) In rerouting argument back to the middle stases, tropes fulfill in microcosm Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's understanding of epideictic, anchoring pragmatic and forensic arguments in the footholds of cultural value.

COVID-Era Face Masks as Definitional Metonyms

Prompting an urgent and inescapable explosion of scientific policy in the public sphere, the COVID-19 pandemic has epitomized the epideictic gravity of the definition stasis, particularly through the controversy surrounding masks and vaccines, the former of which we examine in the remainder of this essay. During middle-to-late 2020—the early, especially uncertain months of the pandemic—protests both physical and virtual thrust the mask into the spotlight of controversy. Picketers outside state capitols held up signs calling masks "symbols of tyranny" and "government mind control devices" (see Stopera for a litany of such examples). One September 2020 video showed proudly unmasked crowds marching through the aisles of a Target in Sarasota, Florida, repeat-edly shouting, "Take it off!" (Krietz). Such protest images, alongside the everyday spec-tacle of masks themselves, have come to embody what Megan Poole calls the "minute, repetitive details … that jump across visual snapshots and contexts" and fundamentally "orient" audiences to the rhetoricity of civic life (617).

Despite efforts by authorities like immunologist and executive medical advisor Anthony Fauci to reiterate the mask's efficacy and importance, virulent protest and con-spiracy thinking persisted, complicating the policy-stasis legislation and enforcement of life-saving mandates. The face mask became more than a medical artifact; it became the iconic epicenter of ideological divisions, a contested symbol of political alignment. Mask advocates and science communicators mourned the "politicization" of the mask and stressed the scientific objectivity behind masking policies, though, as Fahnestock and Ceccarelli remind us, the "translation" of scientific knowledge into the popular sphere

inevitably invites politicization, controversy, and drift across established rhetorical genres.

Stasis theory helps articulate the controversy surrounding masks. Applied to masking, the Hermagorean four-step stasis structure would follow:

1. *Conjecture*: Does COVID-19 spread through respiration? Do masks fundamentally deter transmission of COVID-19?
2. *Definition*: What are masks? What are their essential qualities as social artifacts?
3. *Quality*: Are masks good or bad? Just or unjust? How effective or ineffective are they at deterring transmission?
4. *Procedure*: How should we legislate masking? Who should enforce it?

Hermagoras's logical order, however, splinters and reshuffles amid ideological currents, allowing epideictic questions of definition and quality to subvert traditional hierarchy. As a contested symbol that visually punctuates the public sphere, the mask's unpleasant connotations resist the reiteration of its medical merits at the level of conjecture. The American public has struggled to productively engage quality- and policy-level questions about face masks because of fundamental disagreements and obsessions about what the mask *is,* symbolically, definitionally, and socially. Thus, third-stasis arguments about whether masks help or harm us recede easily into second-stasis arguments about the essential characteristics of the mask. A parallel shift in discursive mode follows, drawing proofs not from scientific inquiry but through redefinitions of the mask—through visual rhetoric and tropological symbology—as something political and ideological rather than medical. The efficacy of masking becomes moot when right-wing, anti-science groups essentialize the artifact as a means of censorship, control, or "deep state" propaganda rather than medical protection.

Tropological images of face masks—visual iterations of Burkean metonymy—have facilitated this gravity toward the middle stases. As the examples below demonstrate, anti-mask rhetors lean heavily on visual metonymy to drive home these comparisons in bold, quickly digestible graphics that convey the urgency and fervor of a righteous, counterhegemonic protest movement. Protest signs and viral internet memes benefit from the connotative expediency of visual tropes, positioning the mask as a muzzle, burqa, mind-control device, or other epitomic representation of oppressive government overreach. Consequently, forensic and deliberative discourse about medical merit and implementation yields to epideictic discourse about masks' place in American culture.

The imagistic nature of such metonymy bears emphasis. In "Rhetoric of the Image," Roland Barthes locates the innate polysemy of the image among "different kinds of knowledge—practical, national, cultural, aesthetic—invested in the image" (46). Audiences rarely isolate just one of these knowledges, or "lexicons," when parsing an advertising image or a work of art; rather, lexicons converge to offer a simultaneous multiplicity of meanings within one viewer's idiolect (46-47). Rudolph Arnheim, in his essay "Pictures, Symbols, and Signs," similarly describes cohabitating semiotic spheres: "A triangle may be a sign of danger or a picture of a mountain or a symbol of hierarchy" (136). Like Barthes' lexicons, Arnheim's titular roles necessarily coexist, even when one function dominates a visual expression. Signs refer to other things, while

pictures (even abstract ones) offer mimetic depictions. Symbols portray ideas at a higher level of abstractness and give "shape to types of things or constellations of forces" (138).

By design, the medical face mask is an inanimate, practical instrument, not an authorial, intentional, rhetorical text like an advertisement, painting, comic, or photograph. However, this distinction furthers the mask's connotative elasticity, authorizing rhetors and audiences to infer the mask's associations and mobilize the mask in their own rhetorical compositions. In his discussion of the image as symbol, Arnheim clarifies that symbolic meaning need not be intentional; often, the image "leaves the effort of abstracting entirely to the user" (138). This is particularly true of the face mask, which lacks readymade symbolic attributes due to its novelty in American culture. (Consider, by contrast, Japan, Taiwan, and other Asian nations, where public masking is a longstanding, commonplace precaution against air pollution and disease.) As symbol, then, the mask reverts to second-stasis questions of definitional essence. For anti-maskers, the essence of the face mask is control and oppression. For mask adherents, it is social responsibility and care. These different essences symbolically conjoin with the image of the mask, enabling Barthes's different lexica to frame efforts of selection. Just as a rhetor or designer can isolate characteristics of an image that elicit responses from a certain lexicon, a viewer prioritizes some types of knowledge over others when inferring meaning from a symbolic argument, enabling explicit or implicit epideictic arguments about the essential nature of the mask.

The "modes of comprehension" White associates with tropological utterance also inflect the visual rhetoric of masking. Anti-mask images both metaphorically compare the mask to something else (a muzzle, burqa, etc.) and construe the mask as metonymic stand-in for an array of authoritarian and anti-patriotic abstractions. For many anti-maskers, the mask has become synonymous with authoritarian control. In his sample analysis of a Panzani advertisement for Italian cuisine, Barthes famously construes a group of signifiers—the bright colors and the copious produce—as the collective sign of "Italianicity" (47-49). The suffix "-icity" suggests a fundamental diversion from what is *really* Italian to "the condensed essence of everything that could be Italian," summoning the cultural shorthand of stereotypes and tourism (48). Following Barthes and Arnheim, we might call the symbolic sign conjured by anti-maskers "authoritarianicity," or the visual evocation of an oppressive government based on culturally prevalent, definitional ideas that already exist as part of the broader cultural lexicon. Such appeals to "authoritarianicity" short-circuit stasis hierarchy by bypassing masking science itself in favor of cultural definitions of the mask as essentially authoritarian. These appeals thereby annul forensic questions of scientific fact altogether and couch deliberative questions of policy within the definitional, epideictic frame of antiauthoritarianism, demonstrating again Walsh's notion of the "upward pull" of stasis questions.

One of the most prolific tropological appeals to "authoritarianicity" likens the mask to a muzzle, suggesting masks represent attempts to silence true patriots and free thinkers. For example, one notable May 2020 photo depicted an anti-lockdown event in Harrisburg, PA; one protester held a poster reading, "THE NEW SYMBOL OF TYRANNY … MUZZLE," the red, bolded text surrounding a stock image of a blue surgical mask (Makela). The mask-muzzle association exemplifies what Barry Brummett terms a "rhetorical homology," which applies when the formal resemblances of

otherwise disparate rhetorical artifacts overshadow their differences to form a comparative argument (3). The differences between masks and muzzles are obvious enough, but anti-mask rhetors deliberately draw on the formal similarity between the two mouth-coverings to argue that their cultural essences likewise overlap. Mask detractors simultaneously claim verbal suppression (perhaps because, like a wild dog, their dissent is "dangerous" to the authoritarian regime) and liken mask mandates to violence in the vein of animal cruelty. Conveniently, mask-muzzle comparisons also evoke the kind of animalistic imagery popular among anti-government libertarians (for example, the Gadsden flag, or "Don't tread on me" rattlesnake), helping solidify symbolic connections between anti-mask sentiment and established right-wing movements. These associations, further, metonymically reduce the government-mandated COVID response in states like Pennsylvania to a tangible symbol of authoritarian overreach. The definitional essence is control, not precaution.

A similar, though more inflammatory and bigoted, strain of rhetorical homologizing has likened COVID face masks to traditional Muslim clothing. In one meme posted by a since-suspended Twitter account, four consecutive images show women with face coverings that gradually transition from a standard disposable face mask on the left to an all-black niqab on the right, leaving only the eyes visible; the images' captions progress from the years 2020 to 2023 ("Goal of the Left"; see fig. 2). This meme proliferated after a retweet by the official account of DeAnna Lorraine, a far-right Republican congressional candidate running against Nancy Pelosi in California. Lorraine's accompanying tweet read, "The goal of the Left," construing the pandemic as not only manufactured, but a slippery slope toward Sharia law (see fig. 3). The Muslim face covering, like the muzzle, shares a convenient formal homology with the face mask and also connotes an implicit "authoritarianicity" among audiences who view the niqab, hijab, and burqa as harbingers of encroaching anti-American (and anti-Christian) despotism that leftists dress up as "woke" cultural pluralism. The Islamophobic "Goal of the Left" meme is noteworthy for both its ideological dot-connecting and its significance as a digital protest image funneling attention to the definition stasis. By visually defining the face mask through association with the existing targets of far-right ideology, the meme fulfills the

Figure 2. An anti-mask meme likening face masks to niqabs.

Figure 3. DeAnna Laorraine's retweet of the niqab meme.

epideictic function of outlining shared praise and blame with its audience and empha-sizing group commitments against masking measures.

The mask-to-niqab image demonstrates how the digital meme culture associated with modern reactionary movements furthers tropological representations of issues like masking and undermines factual science communication. Its arrangement of four differ-ent images excerpted from advertisements exemplifies prevalent conceptions of internet memes as intertextual pastiche and juxtaposition (Shifman 90). As Heidi Huntington argues further, "it is the juxtaposition of text and image, or of multiple different images, and the associations among them that forms the meme's argument" (80). In her analysis of the "Pepper Spray Cop"—a viral image of a police officer pepper-spraying the faces of peaceful Occupy Wall Street protesters in Davis, California, in 2010—Huntington identifies an element of inferential visual synecdoche; by placing the infamous police officer's image into different contexts, variations on the "Pepper Spray Cop" meme invite audiences to perceive larger ideas in the image of the officer, which, once more, essentializes the whole (law enforcement in general, or whatever whole the cop comes to represent in memetic variations) through the image of the part (the cop himself). We'll add that memes like "Pepper Spray Cop," as a tangible essence of an abstract sys-tem, also exemplify Burkean metonymy.

Audience participation in constructing the meme's argument, as Huntington argues, implies enthymematic reasoning, where tacit premises often come from commonplace beliefs that form ideological bedrock; these beliefs trigger visceral, emotional responses by activating the "ideologic" necessary to connect argumentative dots (Huntington 80-

81; Crowley 88). Visual memes like "The Goal of the Left" achieve this effect through the implied relationship between homologous images deliberately assembled. The structure of the niqab meme positions homology itself as an implied premise of the enthymeme; the resemblance between masks and niqabs substantiates the argument that an essential relationship exists between the two. In both the muzzle and niqab examples, homology substitutes for concrete evidence that face masks have anything to do with freedom of speech or Islam. Because the anti-mask ideology conflates the face coverings' shared form with shared connotations of left-wing authoritarianism, the homology evokes, as Sharon Crowley puts it, "as many premises as are needed to secure the audience's belief in the conclusion" (88). The enthymematic effect of such viral images allows a mere visual pun to yield a tropological inversion of stasis hierarchy; the metonymic representation of the mask condenses attention at the stases of definition (the mask is essentially a muzzle or niqab) and quality (as such, the mask is quintessentially odious and un-American), again skipping over matters of scientific conjecture altogether. What starts as a pun thereby fuels conspiracy thinking, misinformation, and hatred.

Looking Forward

Stasis theory needs updating in the post-COVID world. A modern perspective that accounts for the epideictic gravity of the middle stases enables a more cohesive and complex understanding of how public rhetorical issues traverse boundaries between oratorical genres and subvert the logical hierarchy of stasis categories. In other words, the perspective we advocate highlights how a seemingly straightforward scientific topic like masks becomes, as liberal pundits and officials continually bemoan, "politicized" or ideological. When issues—especially those reliant on technical or specialized knowledge—enter the public sphere, they undergo a shift in genre, as Fahnestock's work on scientific accommodation illustrates. What deserves more attention, however, is the parallel, paradigmatic shift that takes place in the order and functioning of the stasis questions when these issues inevitably become social and cultural as well as scientific.

It is hard to guess how the mask and its accompanying discourse will evolve over time as COVID-19 eventually becomes history rather than urgent reality, but for many the mask—the sight of it or the feeling of wearing it—will inevitably represent *something* beyond scientific, medical precaution. It will remind us of a specific period, one fraught with loss, grief, loneliness, and rapid adjustment to new ways of life. It is a visual reminder of the strangeness and discomfort of the realities of life in a pandemic. The pandemic, in other words, has thrown American culture into a state of normlessness. Public rhetoric necessarily enters the vacuum to remedy this state of flux and make ideological sense of the chaos. For anti-maskers, this has meant situating a new symbol within pre-existing narratives of "authoritarianicity." This is where the tropological, epideictic gravity of the middle stases has tragically outstripped the forensic primacy of conjectural fact.

The imperative toward epideictic and tropological shorthand in situations of normlessness creates significant hurdles for science communicators. In this essay, we have adopted what Celeste Condit calls an "Isocratean" approach toward the rhetoric of

science, one presupposing the basic validity of scientific consensus and stressing rhetoricians' ethical imperative to aid the communication of scientific truth (2). Nothing better epitomizes the urgency of clear and persuasive public health messaging than COVID-19's many controversies, though such messaging likely requires accepting the inexorable gravity of the middle stases and its disruption of the linear stasis model. Though the politicization of the medical face mask may frustrate public health experts, counterstrategies to isolate the issue as strict, forensic science have proven both ineffective and politically indecorous. It is unrealistic that science communicators and public health experts can rid the face mask of its status as a rhetorical, ideological symbol when such reactions risk further caricaturing science as cold and authoritarian. Urging a conjectural, forensic focus on "what the science says" ignores the appeal of metonymy in times of uncertainty and the ability of tropes to root new phenomena in established cultural precepts. Rather, when a scientific policy like masking requires public patronage to function, epideictic must anchor the conversation. Accepting this reality may well equip science communicators to prevent and counteract negative and dangerous ideological characterizations of science that threaten the rhetorical integrity of the conjectural facts themselves.

In this vein, some masking advocates have capitalized on the inherent epideictic dimensions of mask discourse by forwarding their own tropological definitions of the object. Consider one example from the CDC: As figure 4 illustrates, pleasantly stylized and colorful graphic designs that show mask-wearers of multiple ages, colors, and genders can help recode the mask as a metonym for diversity and community wellbeing rather than oppression and censorship (see United States). Indeed, the CDC's communicators here seem to intuit the foundational relationship between the middle stases (visually essentializing and praising masks as tokens of public responsibility, diversity, and wellbeing) and the fourth stasis of policy, represented by the descriptions of how to
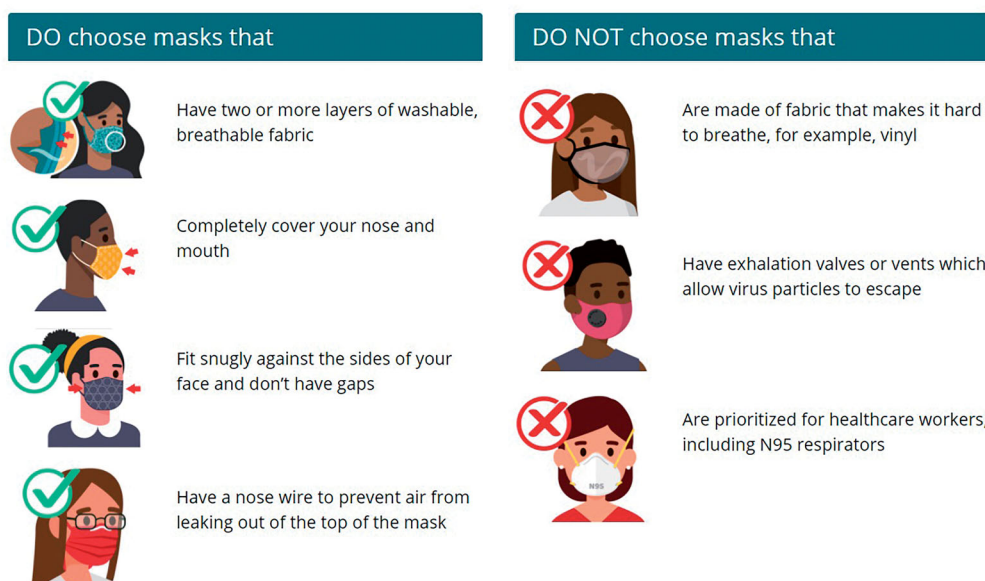

Figure 4. An image from the CDC website encouraging proper mask use.

wear masks properly. Proper masking at the level of policy, the enthymeme goes, now bespeaks a specific vision of good, twenty-first century citizenship at the definition and quality levels. It also reflects good science, but not *just* good science.

Definitional essences of diversity and communalism, however, still identify the mask within commonplaces of liberal ideology, vitiating the appeal of such arguments among mask skeptics. An alternate, largely unheralded approach would involve defining the mask to align with commonplaces of conservative politics—for example, patriotism, individualism, and rural working-class identity. This is a steep rhetorical challenge for reasons expatiated here: the face mask, throughout its short life in American society, has already absorbed powerfully negative connotations that will die hard, if at all, among conservatives. Even so, possibilities arise. The mask, for example, could very reasonably evoke the pathos-laden virtues of personal responsibility and family safety, tapping into conservatives' bedrock emotional commitments at the levels of definition and assessment. "I wear a mask to protect my family"—the slogan has a ring.

While we lack the space (and perhaps the imagination) to solve the riddle of retailoring the mask for conservative audiences here, our summative argument remains: Attempts to re*define* the mask and other medical impositions into public space must do just that; they must engage such symbols at the definition and quality stases and within the domain of epideictic rhetoric. As long as masks tropologically project themselves onto our faces and our public iconography, they will never behave as the tame instruments of conjectural, forensic science so many medical professionals and science advocates justly desire. Instead, they remain inevitable expressions of cultural value. Masking advocates and science communicators, therefore, cannot remain content to stress "what the science says" on issues like masking. Rather, we need to know *who we are* when we choose to wear a mask.

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