**Colleen**: Hello, and welcome to re:verb! I’m Colleen Storm.

**Calvin**: [rushing into the room, breathless] And I’m Calvin Pollak! Before we dive into today’s episode, Colleen, I think I should tell you that…we’ve got a situation.

**Colleen**: Calvin, is everything okay? Should we stop recording?

**Calvin**: Everything’s fine, but what I’m saying is, we’ve got a *situation*.

**Colleen**: Calvin, I know it’s April Fool’s day, but we’ve got a show to record.

**Calvin**: What I mean is that on today’s episode of re:verb, we’re going to break down the concept of the rhetorical situation.

**Colleen**: I knew that, I just wanted to clarify for our listeners.

**Calvin**: Thanks, Colleen. We’re also going to clarify for them the three parts of the rhetorical situation model: exigence, audience, and constraints, before touching on some of the different theories surrounding how situations develop *meaning*—a topic that inspired a famous debate which we’ll revisit together. Then we’ll apply the theory of the rhetorical situation as we analyze the recent discourse between the New Zealand Prime Minister and President Trump surrounding the Christchurch shooting.

**Alex:** In 1968 Lloyd Bitzer published a canonical article in the inaugural issue of the journal *Philosophy & Rhetoric* entitled “The Rhetorical Situation.” In it, he theorizes what he perceives to be the intrinsic meaning of situations that call for a rhetorical response. He posits the term rhetorical situation to describe “a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigence.” In other words, this concept helps us think about *why* speakers and writers craft particular responses to urgent situations that require change.

The foundation of Bitzer’s claim is essentially that “Rhetorical discourse comes into existence as a response to a situation, in the same sense that an answer comes into existence in response to a question, or a solution in a response to a problem”. In his theory there are three major elements that comprise a rhetorical situation. The first is the **exigence**: a problem or “obstacle” that calls for a response, and has the potential to be “modified” through discourse. For example, a natural disaster cannot be fully resolved through discourse. Rhetorical exigencies must also specify and characterize the audience in which “change can be effected”.

The second part of the model is the **audience**, which he defines as a group of people who “are capable of being influenced by discourse and of being mediators of change”. The last component of Bitzer’s rhetorical situation are the **constraints**, which are contextual factors that have inevitable effects on the rhetorical situation. These can range anywhere from beliefs, attitudes, motives, cultural traditions, and so on. Bitzer outlines two categories of constraints: those that call for “artistic” or “inartistic” proofs of persuasion. **Artistic proofs** describe the constraints that the rhetor brings or “manages” within the rhetorical situation, whereas **inartistic proofs** are those constraints “which may be operative”. Overall, Bitzer believes that a rhetor, through the introduction of a rhetorically situated discourse, can alter reality.

Shortly after the publication of Bitzer's framework, Richard Vatz leveled a critique of Bitzer’s theory of rhetorical situation by calling attention to his misguided notions about *meaning.* In his response piece, “The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation,” Vatz argues that rhetorical situations do not have an objective, intrinsic meaning. Rather, he believes that rhetors give situations meaning and salience through a process of subjective, communicative selection. He challenges Bitzer’s tenet that context informs rhetorical discourse by emphasizing that context is “inexhaustible” - there are virtually limitless factors that can influence how we *define* a situation, and thus we cannot say (as Bitzer does) that an exigency for rhetorical discourse is based on “observable fact,” something objective that any analyst or rhetor could see. Vatz’s model of rhetorical situation begins here, where he says that rhetors take the first step in choosing an event to communicate and describe. In making this first step of selection, the rhetor inherently makes the event salient to their audience, thus making it meaningful. He says, “meaning is not discovered in situations, but *created* by rhetors.” This  is in stark contrast to Bitzer who believes that rhetorical situations dictate “fitting” responses to objectively observable exigencies. Whereas Bitzer says the rhetorical situation (and rhetors) create or alter reality, Vatz is concerned with *what* reality is being created by *whom*, and how prior discourse inevitably alters a speaker’s perception of the situation itself.

Barbara Biesecker's 1989 article in *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, “Rethinking the Rhetorical Situation from Within the Thematic of Différance,” draws on the philosophy of Jacques Derrida in an effort to resolve the disagreement between Bitzer and Vatz. Biesecker's essay is, as she puts it, an "attempt to turn what appears to be an impasse (does situation or speaker occupy the position of origin?) into a productive contradiction, one that makes it possible for us to rethink rhetoric in a new way."

Biesecker's reconceptualization of rhetorical situation depends upon Jacques Derrida's theory of différance. Put very simply, différance marks the distance between any concept and the symbols we use to refer to it -- such as words, sounds, and pictures. For example, when I say "the ball," even if we happen to be in the same room together, and you think you know exactly which ball I am referring to, the phrase "the ball" is of course not identical to the ball itself. But it is also not identical to our respective mental *concepts* of the ball. There is thus an irreducible distance between what Ferdinand De Saussure called "signifiers" -- words or phrases -- and "signifieds", the concepts in our minds that words index.

The overarching project of Derrida’s theory of différance is to deconstruct and denaturalize the links we assume exist between signifiers and signifieds. Hence, Biesecker proposes to denaturalize the main components of the rhetorical situation as they have been theorized by rhetoric scholars. She argues that Bitzer and Vatz each take different components of rhetorical situation for granted. Meanwhile, they ignore the ways in which these components exist in Derrida’s middle-space between discourse and meaning. In the case of Bitzer, he insists that situations exist prior to rhetoric, and indeed are rhetoric's condition of possibility. In the case of Vatz, he argues that speakers and writers exist prior to situations, and that they bring situations into being -- for example through their descriptions, identifications, and responses to situations. [It’s a bit of a chicken-and-egg paradox: which comes first, a rhetorical situation, or people using rhetoric?] Both, however, take for granted that *audiences* exist prior to rhetorical situations, that they receive and respond to speech and writing in such situations.

Drawing on Derrida, Biesecker deconstructs each of these components -- situations, speakers, and audiences. She credits Vatz's critique of Bitzer, noting that no, situations are not natural or essential; yes, they are constructed by discourse. But, she notes, Vatz still views *speakers* as primary and essential. Speakers, Biesecker suggests, are not just originators of language but functions of it as well. In other words, to say as Vatz does that speakers construct situations implies that speakers are not also, themselves, constructs of their own speech, that of others, and a world of discourse they inhabit. Lastly, audiences are not simply pre-existing constituents of situations; audiences are temporarily, provisionally constructed and constituted in acts of speaking, and at any moment they can be reconstructed or even dispersed.

Biesecker's provocative critique suggests that we should closely analyze situations, speakers, and audiences as richly historical and contextual rhetorical achievements. How is each component of the rhetorical situation constructed through artful use of linguistic forms, tropes, and strategies? More broadly, Biesecker calls on us to continuously deconstruct and denaturalize the world we believe we inhabit, the perspectives we believe we are speaking from, and the Others we believe ourselves to be addressing.

Writing in 2005, Jenny Rice developed a theoretical & analytic model of how to talk about rhetorical action that not only sought to reconcile Bitzer & Vatz’s debate and integrate the critiques of the rhetorical situation model from Biesecker and others, but to supplement it with the notion that all rhetorical action is shaped by a complex web of temporal, locational, and embodied experiential factors. This new framework sought to not just analyze an instance of rhetoric and the immediate situational factors that influence it, but to get us thinking about what happens to that rhetorical discourse *after* it is uttered. Where does it go from there, and why? Rice used the term “rhetorical ecology” to describe a different model for thinking about why a particular rhetorical action gains “uptake” and “circulation” in public discourse (borrowing terms from Michael Warner), based upon its connections to the material and social facts at play. Most crucially, Rice’s theory of rhetorical ecology rejects a “closed” heuristic model of rhetorical situation in favor of one which “adopts a view toward the processes and events that extend beyond the limited boundaries of elements” which encompass the previous model of rhetorical situation. Rice’s new model calls attention to the ways in which rhetoric “moves” across different public contexts in an almost viral manner – Rice even uses a contagion metaphor to describe the ways in which certain rhetorics “catch on” and become widely circulated due to their alignment with shared affective attunements within and across different publics.

Rice illustrates the utility of this model by tracing the evolution of the phrase “Keep Austin Weird” from a specific, location-based response to a rhetorical situation (gentrification and corporate development in Austin, Texas), to a broader sentiment about celebrating the “weirdness” and uniqueness of individuals, and then, ironically, commodified into a marketing slogan appropriated by the very corporations it was meant to inveigh against in the first place. Within each “movement” of the slogan from one scene to the next, Rice charts the ways in which the affective power of the slogan – an invocation to hold on to the “weird” inside of us all, to not give into the status quo or the powers that be – was taken up and re-appropriated by a variety of different entities with little regard to the initial “exigency” and “audience” to which the slogan was originally responding. Thus, the rhetorical ecology model extends the traditional view of rhetorical situation by illustrating some of the ways in which rhetorical actions are unbounded, continuous, and evolving as they “move” beyond the original context in which they are used.

**Caitlan:** Lloyd Bitzer's classic theory of the rhetorical situation drew on a particularly memorable historical event -- the assassination of US President John F. Kennedy -- to argue that, "The clearest instances of rhetorical speaking and writing are strongly invited — often required." He wrote that JFK's assassination was a situation "so highly structured and compelling that one could predict with near certainty the types and themes of forthcoming discourse."

Yet in contemporary politics and culture, such "highly structured and compelling" situations can be hard to find. Certainly, among all the news events that reach us in our 24-hr media cycles, mass shootings are some of the most significant. But the varied responses to such events illustrate why Bitzer's model of rhetorical situation is inadequate, and why it is necessary to examine the partiality and constructedness of all events, speakers, and audiences.

On Friday, March 15, 2019, a gunman entered two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand -- the Al Noor Mosque and the Linwood Islamic Center. The gunman killed 50 people and injured 50 others, all of whom were Muslims. Before carrying out the attacks, he had publicly posted and sent to specific journalists links to his manifesto -- which contained white supremacist, anti-immigrant, Islamophobic justifications for the attacks.

If you were Lloyd Bitzer, you might think a situation like this one generates straightforward exigences and constraints, that nearly dictate the rhetorical responses of public figures... but you would be sadly mistaken. To show why, let's compare the public responses to this event from New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and US President Donald Trump.

In describing the situation, Prime Minister Ardern uses negative emotional language consistently and clearly. She calls it "one of New Zealand’s darkest days", "an extraordinary and unprecedented act of violence", and "extreme and unprecedented violence".

Ardern also constructs a particular identity for the nation of New Zealand as an element of the situation. She describes this identity as inclusive toward immigrants, and thus she judges the attacks as having targeted New Zealand as a whole. In her words: "Many of those who will have been directly affected by this shooting may be migrants to New Zealand, they may even be refugees here. They have chosen to make New Zealand their home, and it is their home. They are us. The person who has perpetuated this violence against us is not. They have no place in New Zealand."

In this way, Ardern directly challenges the rhetorical situation that had been constructed by the shooter himself. The shooter's manifesto is titled "The Great Replacement", and it describes predominantly white countries as suffering from an invasion of non-white immigrants, including Muslims, who are "replacing" white populations. Prime Minister Ardern turns this construction on its head by arguing that, at least in the case of New Zealand, migrants are not invaders. Rather, they are part of the nation, so much so that they are "us", whereas the shooter "is not".

In the early morning after the shooting, President Donald Trump tweeted out his response: "My warmest sympathy and best wishes goes out to the people of New Zealand after the horrible massacre in the Mosques. 49 innocent people have so senselessly died, with so many more seriously injured. The U.S. stands by New Zealand for anything we can do. God bless all!"

Compared to Ardern, Trump is inconsistent in his use of emotional language to describe the situation. He begins with the largely positive language "warmest sympathy and best wishes", before eventually arriving at the negative phrase "horrible massacre."

In addition, Trump is less clear in his construction of national identity or of the victims of the attack. By capitalizing the word "Mosques" and making it the complement of the prepositional phrase "in the", the president subtly renders New Zealand's Muslim community opaque, exotic, and removed from the rest of the nation. At the same time, unlike Ardern, Trump does not directly name the victims as immigrants; he simply quantifies them, "49 innocent people". Further, by assuming that the victims died "senselessly", Trump denies the possibility that the attacks did make sense to the shooter -- that they were consistent with his white nationalist beliefs.

Later that day, the president was asked by reporters whether he viewed the shooting as part of a broader context of white nationalism spreading around the world. He responded: “I don’t really. I think it’s a small group of people that have very, very serious problems.” Like his tweet, this response constructs the situation of the shooting as a singular, senseless act committed by a singular madman. If the shooter is connected to anyone else, Trump argues, it is simply "a small group of people that have very, very serious problems."

Yet tellingly, in the same press conference, Trump announced that he was vetoing a Congressional bill calling on him to end his declaration of a national emergency to appropriate funds for his border wall with Mexico. As The Guardian writes, "Announcing his veto, the president said, 'People hate the word invasion, but that’s what it is.'" Trump uses the same word, "invasion", to justify his border wall that the Christchurch mosque attacker used in his manifesto.

Sickly, in his construction of and response to the shooting, the President of the United States came closer to the anti-immigrant attacker himself than to the Prime Minister of New Zealand.

Other public figures toed a similar rhetorical line, but in a much more explicit and affectively intense way, such as Australian far-right senator Fraser Anning. Anning has a history of making public comments that reflect his racist, anti-semitic, and anti-immigrant beliefs, which very likely shaped his response to the Christchurch massacre. In a press release statement that subsequently went viral, Anning “totally codemn[ed] the actions of the gunman” and stated his opposition to “any form of violence within our community.” However, he went on to state that “whilst this kind of violent vigilantism can never be justified, what it highlights is the growing fear within our community, both in Australia and New Zealand, of the increasing Muslim presence.” Thus, from the first few sentences of his statement, Anning construes the rhetorical situation he is responding to as having an **exigency** rooted in the very existence of Muslims in Australia and New Zealand, not in the white supremacist and islamaphobic hateful beliefs to which the gunman himself subscribed.

Anning acknowledges how others might see the situation differently, claiming that “as always, left-wing politicians and the media will rush to claim that the causes of today’s shootings lie with gun laws or those who hold nationalist views but this is all clichéd nonsense.” Here, he positions members of his **audience** whom he views as other (through the explicit marking of “left-wing”) as being overly hasty in making their judgment of the true causes of the massacre. In doing so, he is also framing the discourse typical of this part of his public audience as a **constraint** upon his own rhetorical response – in his conception, these are the voices that will try to lead his constituents astray in their understanding of what really caused the violence in Christchurch.

The *real* situational exigency which requires a response, Anning claims, lies in “the immigration program which allowed Muslim fanatics to migrate to New Zealand in the first place.” He goes on to assert that Muslims are “usually the perpetrators” of violence, even though they are the “victims today.” He then parrots the common islamaphobic trope that “the entire religion of Islam is simply the violent ideology . . . which justifies endless war against anyone who opposes it and calls for the murder of unbelievers and apostates.” With this in mind, he delivers his most odious assertion that we “cannot be too surprised when someone takes them at their word and responds in kind.” Thus, Anning is seemingly attempting to explain the actions of the Christchurch shooter as being a response to what he sees as violent tendencies within the religion of Islam itself.

Anning’s comments on the Christchurch massacre are horrifying, not only in their tone-deafness to the mourning of Muslim communities across the world, but also in the fact that he is re-appropriating a rhetorical response to situations of violence that is becoming increasingly typical in political discourse across the world. This is, of course, the white nationalist trope of blaming all of a nation’s problems on immigrants, whom they often construe as “invaders” from without, disrupting the cultural “purity” of the society. For example, this trope was invoked by far-right pundit Ben Shapiro in the wake of the Tree of Life synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh, when Shapiro attempted to claim that the true root of anti-semitic violence is not to be found in “the white supremacist threat,” but rather in what he called “institutionalized left-wing anti-semitism which works in combination with radical Islamic anti-semitism at a high level.” Shapiro’s remarks can be viewed as equally tone-deaf, given that the Pittsburgh synagogue shooter’s motives – which he wrote about explicitly on social media – were grounded in this Pittsburgh Jewish community’s outreach programs working to provide aid for immigrants and refugees from other countries.

It is important to understand these kinds of remarks as being drawn from a long history of white supremacist, anti-immigrant affective sentiments combined with countless instances of islamaphobic rhetoric and violence, particularly since the beginning of the twenty-first century and the beginning of the global War on Terror, which continues to be waged in Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East. To borrow Jenny Rice’s terms, an affective ecology of anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim sentiment has been shaped by not only the rhetorical responses of world leaders to 9/11 and subsequent events in the War on Terror, but also the continuing violence inflicted upon Muslim communities worldwide that has been sanctioned continuously by politicians and heads of state. The kind of rhetorical ecology this creates arguably makes it easier for politicians like Fraser Anning to feel justified in casting blame and hate upon Muslim communities, even – incredibly – in response to violence perpetrated *against* Muslim communities.

As this analysis has hopefully shown, public figures, social groups, and texts exhibit considerable agency -- and responsibility -- in constructing rhetorical situations. As citizens and publics, we have a responsibility to assess and critique the constructions of our leaders, and to respond in kind.

**Colleen**: Well, that wraps up another re:blurb. We hope you got a better understanding of the rhetorical situation and its many subtleties.

**Calvin**: A special thanks to our audience, the \*second piece of the rhetorical situation model.\* We couldn’t create meaning without you.

**Colleen**: Oh, that’s right, Calvin. I forgot you were a strict Vatzer. You know I’m a loyal Bitzerian...

**Calvin**: Colleen, context is *inexhaustible*, and--

**Alex**: Okay, you two, why don’t we discuss nicely this off the air. Thanks for tuning in everyone!