

Cluster Introduction: Why Teach Feminist Rhetorical New Materialisms

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Abstract: When new materialist theory met rhetoric, definitions of rhetoric were expanded to consider non-human ways of communicating and making meaning. Whereas ample theory in rhetoric studies supports scholars studying rhetorical new materialisms and teaching feminist composition, few resources serve as guides for how to teach feminist new materialist rhetorics. Further, to our knowledge, no records exist of how students experience this “Big Rhetoric.” This cluster conversation presents what experiencing new materialist rhetoric feels like to undergraduate students, in their own words.

Keywords: feminist science studies, new materialisms, rhetorical feminisms, pedagogy

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Glory be to God for dappled things—
For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches’ wings;

All things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change.

Gerard Manley Hopkins, “Pied Beauty” lines 1-4; 7-10

The world we study, philosopher of science Nancy Cartwright calls a “dappled world.” “Pied Beauty,” the Hopkins poem that inspired Cartwright’s turn of phrase, hints at how the world speaks through its colors, tastes, and sounds. “We live in a dappled world,” Cartwright argues, “a world rich in different things, with different natures, behaving in different ways. The laws that describe this world are a patchwork, not a pyramid For all we know, most of what occurs in nature occurs by hap, subject to no law at all” (1). Some evolutionary scientists stake their careers on this idea: that most of what occurs in nature occurs by hap, that non-human individuals and their radically unique tastes and habits fashion the natural world’s differential

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becoming.¹ So should you propose to scientists that the world we live in is a dappled one, most would agree. For rhetoricians, however, this world may be dappled, but it's not quite the one theorized by Cartwright.

Cartwright implies that scientists are separate from the world around them, their arguments concerning the ornaments and wing songs of birds only ever channeled through discursive symbols. As she remarks:

[Scientists] have no special lenses that allow them to see through to the structure of nature. Nor have they a special connection or a special ear that reveals to them directly the language in which the Book of Nature is written. The concepts and structures that they use to describe the world must be derived from the ideas and concepts that they find around them Always the source must be the books of human authors and not the original Book of Nature. (46)

Certainly, there is no way to translate the “Book of Nature” into forms that human animals can understand discursively. But scientists—any human observer really—may take a look, may bend an ear, and become swallowed by nature in all its magnitude. Because if we are part of that world we seek to understand, as new materialist scholars Karen Barad, Robin Wall Kimmerer, Eduardo Kohn, and others contend, then human animals share a deep semiosis with those non-human relatives under “study.” This semiosis may register more on the level of the senses than the symbol, but affective, shared meaning is just as sure.²

When applied to rhetoric, new materialisms insist that the bounds of what is rhetorical be stretched beyond texts and discourse and, further, that the subjects involved in rhetorical inquiry feature more than the human. In *Where's the Rhetoric*, S. Scott Graham finds a Bergsonian root, via Kenneth Burke, for rhetorical new materialisms, and importantly clarifies that rhetorical new materialisms grounds inquiry in a “relational metaphysics and a flat ontology” (188), not reinforcing a hierarchy in which human discourse is privileged above other ways of knowing. Graham further identifies three main points of consensus among new materialist scholars (including, but not limited to rhetorical new materialist scholars): 1) Western thought has too long been preoccupied with dualistic thought; 2) dualistic thought has enforced a policed divide between “human” and “nonhumans”; 3) dualistic thought leads to the unethical mistreatment of others in the world (188). In response to rhetoric's historical tendency to instantiate those same borders, most pointedly between “the human” and “the animal,” Diane Davis argues that what was treated as an “ostensibly ontological border” is more of “a metaphysical prejudice.” “There [is] no indivisible border,” Davis argues, “only an infinitely divisible limit, a site of exposure that joined what it also separated” (277).³ Relational

- 1 This idea is perhaps most pronounced in ornithologist Richard O. Prum's *The Evolution of Beauty*. There, Prum argues, somewhat controversially, for biologists to take the subjective experiences of animals seriously, rather than reducing their choices in sexual selection only to measures of “fitness.”
- 2 Rhetoric scholar Diane Keeling and anthropologist Barbara Smuts articulate how interspecies interactions are made possible via affect and sensation. Keeling argues that “living together *socially* is possible through a shared arena of sensation,” through an expansive “common sense” (236). Likewise, Smuts reports a “deep intersubjectivity” between herself and non-human animals in which “a new subjective reality—a shared language, culture, or experience—[transcends] . . . the individuality of the participants (308).
- 3 Diana Coole and Samantha Frost similarly define the work of new materialisms as that which asks scholars “to think in

ontologies, Laura Micchiche shows, allow scholars to *witness* this joining, this enmeshed connectivity, as she defines a relational ontology as a “radical withness” (503). For rhetorical new materialisms, Micchiche explains, “writing is contaminated, made possible by a mingling of forces and energies in diverse, often distributed environments” (503).

“Relationality,” then, could be considered one of the most important keywords in rhetorical new materialisms, and while remnants of these ideas certainly flow through dominant histories of rhetoric, as Graham shows, rhetorical new materialisms also emerge from interdisciplinary roots that are decidedly feminist. The well-known turn to new materialisms, after all, is most famously found through feminist science studies scholars like Karen Barad, Donna Haraway, and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing.⁴ Here, the mark of feminist new materialisms is a radical expansion of agency that de-centers the human and extends meaning and decision-making capabilities beyond logical thought. In *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Barad turns her attention to the Stern-Gerlach experiment (which set out to study the momentum of quantum particles) to ask how material objects under observation, and those not directly under observation, alter what can be known. Unable to be replicated with accuracy for years, the Stern-Gerlach experiment pushed scientists to uncover that sulfur from the cigars routinely smoked by one of the study’s original scientists influenced study results. In this way, matter comes to be known as lively and agential, and witnessing as much comes to require feminist standpoints that challenge established norms, knowledges, and hierarchies.

For Amanda Booher and Julie Jung, such rethinking of agency and resketching of boundaries are tasks suited to the feminist rhetorician. “Understanding how some changes happen to the exclusion of others,” Booher and Jung insist, “is rhetorical work: by engaging as rhetoricians in the world’s continual becoming, we can participate in remaking boundaries and meanings of difference by helping to enact alternative material-discursive entanglements” (32). Alternative material-discursive entanglements help to fashion more just, alternative worlds, and so Booher and Jung’s “feminist rhetorical science studies” is not only interested in identifying non-hegemonic methods of inquiry, but also in revealing “those practices that sustain asymmetrical relations of power between differentially embodied beings” (5). These asymmetrical relations of power need not be limited to discourse, and these differentially embodied beings need not be limited to the human. For example, in “Toward a Posthuman Perspective,” Sarah Hallenbeck proposes her own posthuman approach to feminist rhetorical studies through her analysis of how engaging with the everyday practice of bicycling in the late nineteenth century transformed cultural conceptions of gender and femininity. Similarly, Mavis Boatema Beckson considers African beads as objects that shift the balance of power and subvert the marginalization of African women’s experiences. So, whereas not all rhetorical new materialisms engage feminist science studies specifically, shared interests in destabilizing dominant power and expanding agency lend itself to feminist approaches.

new ways about the nature of matter and the matter of nature; about the elements of life, the resilience of the planet, and the distinctiveness of the human” (6).

4 In “Humans Involved,” Tiffany Lethabo King argues that Black and Native scholars need not justify their theories through the work of White, Western theorists like Deleuze and Guattari. Or, as I once heard Kim Tallbear say about her work to a group of posthumanist scholars: “I did not need Latour to get here.”

To put it another way, rhetorical new materialisms can work as feminist antenarratives—if we are to have more equitable futures, we must reimagine existing power relations and inequities that persist through dominant sociocultural narratives.⁵ In this way, as feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz puts it, new materialisms shifts the focus of feminism from exclusively “how to give women a more equal place within existing social networks and relations” to “how to enable women to partake in the creation of a future unlike the present” (154). Yet, creating alternate futures must involve equitable access to this world-making. For this reason, abolitionist and decolonial scholar Tiffany Lethabo King importantly marks as feminist the “practices of refusal and skepticism” used by Black and Native writers like Sylvia Wynter, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, and Amber Jamilla Musser who expose the violence and harm done by white, non-representational, post-humanist critical theories—new materialisms included—when they ignore that “conversations about the [limits of] the human are very much tethered to conversations about identity” (165). A decidedly feminist rhetorical new materialisms, then, must center Donnie Johnson Sackey’s question: “What is a more just rhetorical new materialism?” (199).

Feminist rhetorical new materialisms thus expand rhetoric in ways that can allow us to consider multi-disciplinary, broadly agential approaches to social, environmental, and climate justice. But as a teacher of writing and self-proclaimed feminist rhetorical new materialist, I have often wondered how to bring this approach to rhetoric—in all its complexity—to undergraduate students. That is, I am hyper aware that I, and most scholars I know, encountered new materialisms late in our training in rhetoric. We had the “limits” of rhetoric and its too-often-touted dualisms in mind when Diana Coole and Samantha Frost invited us to conceive of matter in its entanglement. If students’ first encounter with rhetoric came only through feminist new materialisms, how would they conceive of identities, suasion, and power relations?

This Cluster Conversation considers just that by outlining a course, titled “Talking to Animals, Listening to Nature,” meant to expose students to rhetoric through feminist rhetorical new materialisms and invite them to grapple with their relations to one another as well as to animals, nature, and climate writ large. Through this conversation, you will mostly hear from the students themselves, with only necessary framing from me included to stitch their voices together. Rather than outline a coherent pedagogy for feminist rhetorical new materialisms, this conversation presents what might happen when undergraduate students contend with rhetoric’s capaciousness. What results, at least for these students, has less to do with argumentative persuasion and more to do with what rhetorical wisdom comes from lived experiences, including lived experiences beyond the human.

5 For the rich theory of “antenarrative” that originates in the work of Indigenous scholar David Boje, see Natasha N. Jones, Kristen R. Moore, and Rebecca Walton’s “Disrupting the Past to Disrupt the Future.”

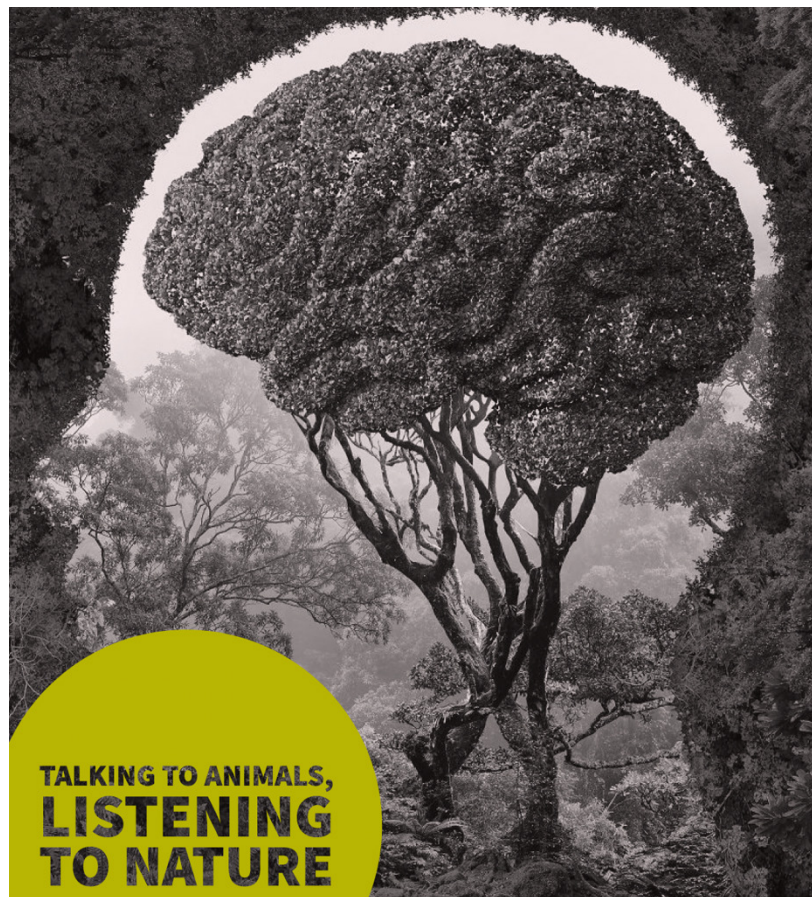


Figure 1. Cover page of syllabus. Image description: a grayscale photograph showing a tree in a forest. The top of the tree is manipulated so that the leaves look like the folds in a human brain. In the lower left corner is a green semicircle with the words “Talking to Animals, Listening to Nature.”

Feminist Rhetorical New Materialisms in the Writing Classroom

“Talking to Animals, Listening to Nature” served as an undergraduate honors seminar that fulfilled a writing requirement for students at a metropolitan university where the Midwest meets the South and almost every student seems to be working through what it means to have been raised on the fringes of the Bible Belt. What promised to be an interdisciplinary course attracted mostly STEM majors, and I spent the summer realizing that whereas feminist new materialist theory and feminist composition theory is available in ample supply, there is little guidance on how to *teach* feminist rhetorical new materialisms. Two notable exceptions include Davis’s “Some Reflections on the Limit,” which details an undergraduate assignment in which students culled a “rhetorical bestiary” and used the intricacies of animal communication to push against the limits of rhetorical theory, as well as Yavanna M. Brownlee’s “Relational Practices and Pedagogies in an Age of Climate Change,” which outlines the implementation of “relational practice” into a writing classroom grounded in Indigenous rhetorics and environmental sustainability.

More broadly, Laurie Gries has considered a genre she calls “new materialist ontobiography” that “draws attention to our sensorial, embodied encounters with entities in our local environment” and accounts “for how affect and persuasion emerge through deep relationality” (302). Casey Boyle, too, considers writing as a posthuman practice, one that is always codependent on and mediated through material things (533-

534).⁶ Perhaps most pointedly, Marilyn Cooper has defined the human as “the animal who writes” and argues that “writing ethically entails developing habits of paying attention to the relationalities of becoming and always entertaining the possibility that ‘what everyone knows’—and what you believe—might be wrong” (6). From these touchstones, three tenets for teaching a feminist rhetorical new materialisms course emerged: theoretically, we must consider the limits and lines humans are so apt to sketch; physically, we must enter the field to learn how to attend otherwise, specifically through our senses; and socially, we must observe, revise, and maintain good relations with our neighbors, human and non-human alike.

Following these three tenets, I divided the course into three units. In Unit One, “Language and Its Limits,” students read Davis, George Kennedy’s “A Hoot in the Dark,” and Kenneth Burke’s “Definition of Man.” I imagined that we would discuss why “man” has tended to hold exclusive rights to symbolizing and who benefits from delineating what and who makes a “human.” In Unit Two, “Sensing the Languageing of Nature,” we moved outside the classroom, into forests and fields, smelling spice bush, sighting the alligator bark of the persimmon tree, and testing everything we thought we knew about rhetoric. Students would learn, experientially, what it meant to “be there” with our subjects of study.⁷ Finally, in Unit Three, “Writing for Environmental Justice,” we would learn the harrowing realities of climate change, focusing specifically on the inequitable impacts of climate “disasters” as well as the everyday, incessant harms endured by communities of color who predominantly live on the fence-lines of polluting industrial facilities.

As our class progressed, I watched not only students’ ideas change but also their dispositions. And maybe I should admit here at the onset that for me, teaching writing is not only about teaching how to pen words to page, but also about becoming the embodiment of our words. As Ann Berthoff reminds: “Composing—in contradistinction to filling in the slots of a drill sheet or a performed outline—is a means of discovering what we want to say, as well as *being the saying of it*” (20, emphasis added). The writing classroom, indoors or in the field, is where we discover the who, what, and why of our words, and in composing, we end up finding better ways to inhabit our worlds.

Rather than pretend to objectively detail students’ experiences, I want you to hear it from them in this Cluster Conversation. Their experiences bring into relief how if we present feminist rhetorical new materialisms only as a thought experiment—read in texts and discussed in classrooms—then we do not teach radical, relational ontologies. How we are joined and entangled with all that is before us must be experienced and must be experienced *together*. For this group, as rhetoric lost its limits, it started changing their approach to the world, shifting their focus, broadening their awareness, and teaching them that the messy confusion they try to suppress is, simply, part of making meaning in a dappled world.

6 Of course, feminist approaches to the materiality and multimodality of composition, as found in the work of Jody Shipka, Kristin Arola, Anne Frances Wysocki, and others have long considered writing as distributed and mediated.

7 This approach relies on Candice Rai and Caroline Gottschalk Druschke’s *Field Rhetoric*.

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