

Defining the Rhetoric in Feminist Rhetorical New Materialisms

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Abstract: When defining the limits of rhetoric in a feminist new materialist rhetoric course resulted in words seeming to lose their meaning, students began learning rhetorical instruction from the plants and landscapes encountered in the field. One student considers how agriculture was a major influence of change in the evolution of human cultures. Another student considers the humility needed to learn how to value other ways of knowing without comparing those knowledges to human cognition.

Keywords: rhetorical new materialisms, plant rhetoric, evolution, reciprocity, humility

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Context from Megan: And so it was that as feminist rhetorical new materialisms made words lose, and, at the same time, paradoxically gain, their meaning, we left the classroom and went into nature. We hiked through a nature preserve in the middle of the city and spotted “wolf trees” with massive, sprawling branches, evidence that what is now new growth forest was not too long ago a freshly cleared pasture. We poured water over a handful of sassafras and rubbed its leaves together to create a thick, milky texture, the kind of dense substance used to thicken Louisiana gumbo in the absence of roux or okra. I hoped that, at their worst, these experiences might bring students to reconsider their relationships with the natural worlds around them. At their best, these experiences might encourage students to recognize a relational ontology with the world. Many who did flipped the script, asking not how we’re rhetorically affecting nature but how nature rhetorically compels “us.”

Cate Learns the Wisdom of Plants

The relationship I shared with nature prior to my exposure to this “new materialist rhetoric” was ill-defined. Even now, this relationship is complicated, as it was only a short five months ago that my thoughts were challenged by readings in rhetoric and excursions into the field. I can only honestly say that I no longer feel my place in the “hierarchy of life” as absolute. Rather than there being a center around which to revolve, everything feels dispersed, yet also somehow connected. This idea became most pronounced

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when a knowledgeable guide at the city's nature center pointed out a "wolf tree." Having just learned from Robin Wall Kimmerer how plants think, how they *love*, I felt a genuine, emotional response from a plant for the first time. A "wolf tree" is a testament to the land's former agricultural topography, a tree that was long ago not selected for tilling so that it could outstretch its branches in gratitude and provide shade to livestock and farmers. (Unfortunately, its nickname bears the sting of settler colonialism, as foresters viewed these massive trees as wolves, both of whom they believed should be hunted for consuming precious resources.) Today, the wolf tree continues to nurture forest flora and fauna.

So, plants *can* love us back. "Reciprocity" rings in my ears. I think of how much there is that I do not know, how my Western upbringing has indoctrinated me to think unidirectionally about plant-human relationships. Now influenced by thinkers like Kimmerer and Yuval Noah Harari, I wonder what continuing this way of thinking might mean for our collective existence, and I entertain the idea that plants set the limits for human development, not the other way around.

Agricultural plants exercised their rhetorical influence by *persuading* other species to assist in their reproduction. They develop colorful petals, sweet nectar, and edible flesh (roots, shoots, fruits). Evolutionary timelines reveal flowering plants appeared before insects capable of pollination, although as time progressed, plants and insects co-evolved together. Of course, such symbiosis benefits the plant. The evolutionary timing, however, suggests that plants were looking to provide, to cultivate. Like the insects, our human predecessors were also influenced by these plants' desires.

Wheat, maize, and potatoes have become some of the most geographically expansive plants in history and are often touted as products of human genius. But there is more to the story: these plants were sacrificial in nature. They experienced loss of genetic diversity at the expense of the human species' growth. The relationship between humans and plants, Harari elucidates in *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, is intimate. As he puts it: "Wheat didn't like rocks and pebbles, so Sapiens broke their backs clearing fields. Wheat didn't like sharing its space, water, and nutrients with other plants, so men and women labored long days weeding under the scorching sun. Wheat got sick, so Sapiens had to keep a watch out for worms and blight" (Harari 80). If not for the development of agriculture, human population growth would have stunted—restricted to nomadic living. Without agriculture, I may not be. So, I am stuck on this idea of reciprocity. We ensure the longevity of these plants because *they* do the same for us.

Plants are some of the oldest lifeforms on the planet, and they continue to influence and speak to us as we enter new eras of development. Plants respond to their environment and communicate symptoms of poor health and distress, whether we are attuned to it or not. Fracking, deforestation, soil erosion, chemical leaching, and drastic climate fluctuations are harming our plant neighbors, and we hold responsibility. Plants will not survive or bear fruit in the hostile conditions—the poisoned Earth—we have created for them. They tell us, "Through our shared histories, we have grown together. If we struggle, you will struggle."

Plants' generosity has been grossly exploited in many modern, human societies, and we all too often ignore their warnings. If we expect to continue thriving in a sustainable world, we must learn to listen to what the plants are telling us. We must learn to consider them as our teachers, even, as Kimmerer suggests, as our mothers. "This is really why I made my daughters learn to garden," Kimmerer explains, "so they would always have a mother to love them, long after I am gone" (122).



Figure 1. On the left, two students crouch down next to a white blanket on the forest floor of Bernheim Arboretum and Research Forest in Clermont, Kentucky, to arrange a piece of art from evergreen branches and colorful leaves. On the right, a group of students walk down a grassy trail with tall prairie grasses and yellow wildflowers on either side of the path.

Embodying Good Relations (Megan Poole)

By learning feminist new materialist rhetorics as much through hiking as through reading, students were learning a way of comportment perhaps more than a way of speaking. Quintilian considered the rhetor as “a good man speaking well.” We considered the rhetor “a good being, relating well,” relating openly, fully. And because we spent the first two units of the semester finding ways to open ourselves to the world, to relate to our non-human neighbors, the final unit on environmental sustainability hit with an urgency none of us expected. One student remarked, “We spent all semester learning to love the world, only to find out that the world we fell in love with was dying.” And many students lamented that political realities and climate activism conveyed a sense of hopelessness. For one student, though, the one for whom Big Rhetoric initially posed endless problems, the affordances of a relational ontology broke through and offered hope.

J.J. Finds that a Good Rhetor is a Humble Rhetor

The revelation that Big Rhetoric was not what I thought it was initially came in two parts. First, I came to understand that this Big Rhetoric was more about “influence” than “persuasion.” The difference

between those two terms is just a subtle nuance. The contemporary use of “influence” that alludes to persuasion—think, “influencers” who advertise products from companies that sponsor the advertisement in the hopes that the influencer will “influence” (persuade) you to purchase the product—is different from another connotation that relates more to cause and effect. The cause-and-effect valence of “influence” is what I needed to understand the big picture of Rhetoric. Even at the smallest levels of matter, quarks are influencing each other, which means that at every increasing level there is more opportunity for influence, for something to cause an effect on something else. The asters and the goldenrods have an effect on humans. Their contrasting colors are perceived as beautiful, which may lead to further propagation of those flowers. Influence then takes on a less underhanded meaning in rhetoric to simply name what already happens.

Second, like Kimmerer, I realized how the strict rules and rigor of academia may be separating us as a society of learners from truly understanding the world around us. If rhetoric is a humans-only tool, then we cannot possibly begin to understand the dynamics that exist in and between other species. When these two realizations collided, the misunderstanding and hesitancy that persisted from the beginning of the course disappeared. Because I originally argued against Davis in my first assignment for the course, I returned to her “Some Reflections on the Limit.” There, Davis sets out to re-evaluate where rhetoric has created walls, and she contends that a transition away from the Western view of rhetoric would allow us to encounter other species as “who” rather than “what.” Like Kimmerer, Davis expresses that this transition would allow us the opportunity to learn from the other beings around us.

If we, as humans, stop asking questions that use “human characteristics” as a standard against which to measure behavior, we may begin to understand how other species have persisted for so long without the various “advancements” of which we are so proud. This new perspective of rhetoric demands humility and curiosity. It exists beyond the politicians and classrooms. It is a new way to view the interactions between living things and truly see them as they are, not as they “compare” to humans. Not only did I finally begin to understand the course, but I began to apply these revelations to my life outside of the classroom. Thinking about the issues of environmental justice with the lens of influence and interaction opened my eyes to a new, less hopeless, way to find solutions. And for that, I am grateful.

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