

# Ecological Rhetoric

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## Summary

As the problems wrought by anthropogenic global warming have become more urgent, scholars of rhetoric have turned more than ever before toward environmental topics and ecological perspectives. These interests have influenced the contemporary study of rhetoric enough that it is now possible to identify some different yet overlapping strains of research at the nexus of ecology and rhetoric. Doing so, however, is not without ongoing contestations, including over the nature of ecological thought, expanding systems of rhetoric, environmentalisms, ecofeminisms, and critical eco-futures. Despite these challenges, rhetoric and ecology may pair so well together because each is a capacious figure of thought, capable of accommodating others.

As a way of thinking about interconnectedness in particular, “ecology” has been taken up by many scholars in diverse fields and disciplines. As a result, the ways the concept is mobilized in studies of rhetoric reflect an unruly assortment of approaches to, and understandings of, ecology, the influence of which cannot be traced to any pure or universal version of the term, because, as with “rhetoric,” no such common meaning exists. Grappling with the complex convergence of both terms might help scholars to constellate a semi-stable image of what it can mean and involve to study these topics together.

**Keywords:** ecology, environment, relationality, rhetorical systems, scope, materiality, eco-criticism, ecofeminism, anthropocentrism

**Subjects:** Rhetorical Theory

## Ecology + Rhetoric

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One of the trickiest impediments to making sense of research invested in ecology and rhetoric is the question of which takes primacy. Which modifies the other: “ecological rhetorics,” or “rhetorical ecologies”? At first glance, the difference seems to hinge, like so many differences, on a matter of attention. Attend to the ways ecologies operate rhetorically, and “rhetorical ecologies” becomes an apposite frame. Attend to the ways rhetoric operates ecologically, and a more fitting frame is “ecological rhetorics.” It would certainly be convenient, and not completely inaccurate, to make this distinction a disciplinary one. In the context of American higher education, for instance, it might be said that research on “rhetorical ecologies” tends to be the domain of rhetoricians working in English departments or writing programs, whereas interest in “ecological rhetoric” is more prevalent among rhetoricians working in communication departments. But such clean distinctions neither hold up nor are especially helpful. Look closer and many of the same commitments and emphases will run across each framing of the research, regardless of one’s disciplinary home or training. Meanwhile, consult ecologists about the

difference, and you may struggle to find many who give rhetoric much attention at all. Whatever else might be said of the strange mashup of rhetoric and ecology, it is primarily among those studying rhetoric who have tended to care.

Without discounting work in the ecological sciences to address rhetorical concerns, this article will focus on tracing some of the entanglements that have arisen within the study of rhetoric, broadly conceived, as that long-practiced study has turned more recently to grapple with ecology both as a figure of thought and as a topical exigence owing to anthropogenic global warming. Given the chiasmatic relationship between “rhetorical ecologies” and “ecological rhetorics,” a fast and clean separation of the two would tell a more convenient story than the complex one that is likely closer to the truth. It is sometimes necessary, however, to abide provisionally by an unsatisfactory distinction in order later to show its shortcomings. Ecological rhetoric, in this provisional sense, can be understood to be a project of identifying in what ways rhetoric operates through an ecological structure, and with what consequences for its practice and theorization. Such is the operational premise here.

Nevertheless, the practical reality is that “rhetorical ecologies” and “ecological rhetorics” are sometimes as hard to disentangle as salt and sand. As a result, an encyclopedic account of the latter (as would be true of the former) requires critical methods that risk delineating a tidy and comprehensive account of something that will always, to some degree, both fall short of and exceed what the account purports to describe. Rather than endeavor impossibly to draw definitive distinctions or tell an exhaustive story, the method employed presently attempts to accommodate the challenging entanglements of rhetoric and ecology through scalar shifts in attention and emphasis. This means that some texts or concepts receive more sustained or detailed attention than others, which get addressed comparatively quickly (or, as some readers will surely bemoan, get left out altogether). These choices do not necessarily reflect a recognizable consensus about some validated “canon” of research in ecological rhetoric. The method is rather to constellate some of the brightest and most legible texts or concepts in ecological rhetoric alongside others whose importance might not be as recognizable except when seen from a different vantage. In this way, shifting between overviews and ground views, sometimes staying with the general, other times zooming into the particular, this article follows a critical method less intent to reflect a text or concept’s value or importance than to put ecology and rhetoric into generative modes of relation.

Though there are many early precedents for the incursion of ecological thought into the study of rhetoric, the first major text to make sense of them in a concerted way is the edited collection by Bridie McGreavy and her collaborators from 2018, *Tracing Rhetoric and Material Life: Ecological Approaches* (McGreavy et al., 2018). The giveaway comes after the colon: the ecological, in their book, is an approach, a relation, a figure of thought, as much a means of study as a topic of it. The Introduction, written by Justine Wells and the other editors, along with the Afterword, written by Nathan Stormer, bookend the most encyclopedic account of rhetoric’s doings with ecology outside an actual encyclopedia.

At the outset of their collection, Wells et al., offer a helpful genealogy of “rhetoric’s ecological turns,” which they organize into three iterations: (a) Constitutive Rhetorics: Practices of Articulation and Transhumanism; (b) Ecological Models of Composition: Toward Complex Processes and Systems; and (c) Rhetoric in Situ. Rather than attenuating their work by summarizing their summary of these turns, readers would be best served by consulting their robust account directly (see Wells et al., 2018, pp. 8–20). Nevertheless, the aim presently is to characterize some different points of contact between ecological thought and rhetoric, and these include both those that Wells and her coauthors emphasize, as well as many others. It will be helpful, then, both to accentuate some of their emphases and to add others that were beyond their purview. Doing so should reveal that there is no single, universally agreed-upon version of what “ecological rhetoric” is or does. Whatever that practice or thing is that bears “ecological rhetoric” as its name, it takes many forms, none of which appeared suddenly or without precedents for their ongoing emergence.

One of the challenges of thinking about ecological rhetoric is the very concept’s resistance to clean and discrete subfields, lineages, and histories. Madison Jones has written a provocative “Counterhistory of Rhetorical Ecologies” (Jones, 2021), but that is not the same as a history of ecological rhetorics, even though they’re related, and even if it were, the notion of a *counterhistory* implies an accepted history from which it differs. There is no such common story. The study of something reasonably called ecological rhetorics may currently be flourishing across different sectors of rhetorical studies, but their ongoing emergence—the ways these studies continue going in new directions and opening onto unexplored spaces—makes the project of historicizing how-they-got-here challenging. Emergent research reveals emergent precedents. The organization of the genealogy that Wells and her friends offer is instructive in this regard because it speaks to a broad, patchy, and often subtle incorporation of ecological practices and emphases among those studying rhetoric over the course of several decades.

When they write about constitutive rhetorics, for instance, as a key part of that ecological insurgence, Wells et al. are also shoring up a history of material rhetorics, influenced by Kenneth Burke but expressed best by Michael McGee’s work in “A Materialist Conception of Rhetoric” (McGee, 1982) and Richard Rogers’s equally important (Rogers, 1998) article, “Overcoming the Objectification of Nature in Constitutive Theories: Toward a Transhuman, Materialist Theory of Communication.” When they go on to show how James Boyd White’s (1985) and Maurice Charland’s (1987) independently developed constitutive models of rhetoric relate to the concept of “articulation” from American cultural studies, they then show how the uptake of articulation theory, most notably through work by Kevin DeLuca (1999a) and Nathan Stormer (2004), in turn opens onto transhumanist or transcorporeal research by the likes of Tema Milstein (2008, 2009; Milstein & Kroløkke, 2012), Emily Plec (2013), Tasha Seegert (2014), and others who were beginning to think of rhetoric beyond humans to consider nonhuman animals as well. This is not sloppy historiography. They get the story exactly right. But it discloses the phenomenon whereby the unfolding present of ecological rhetoric informs a different past, and that is part of the challenge in making sense of the relationship between ecology and rhetoric. There is nothing tidy or neat about the different ways ecological thought makes its way into the

study of rhetoric. As Wells et al. (2018) explain, “Instead of distinct lines of argument, we can conceive of these developments in the concepts of articulation, transhumanism and transcorporeality as entangled invitations to more ecological modes of thought” (p. 12).

The next part of their genealogy illustrates a similar complexity. While attention to constitutive rhetorics and their influence involved research mostly among those studying rhetoric in its tradition as the study of speech communication, their genealogical attention to the ways composition comes to be approached through an ecological lens, as early as the 1960s, highlights research mostly among those studying rhetoric in the literary tradition of writing and rhetoric. The upshot is that ecological thought seeps across traditions of studying rhetoric. It enriches, by complexifying, more conventional ways of understanding rhetoric’s force in the world. Here, the ecological influence materializes as an understanding of rhetoric as a process, not as a fixed set of properties or functions operating independently or in a vacuum, but rather as something always emergent and interconnected. No understanding, no composition, can be removed from its broader context of understanding, or from the broader context of its composition. The turn to such contexts and processes is thoroughly ecological.

Extending that line of thinking to research interested in more than just speech communication or written compositions, in the final iteration of their genealogy, Wells et al. rightly acknowledge that ecological thought has influenced those who see the work of studying rhetoric to involve embodied interactions with other living and nonliving bodies in the actual places and communities where these interactions constitute part of everyday life. Rhetorical fieldwork, and the host of methods to undertake it ethically in light of its unspooling parts and participants, is accordingly another area they identify in which ecological thought has shaped what it means and looks like to undertake the study of rhetoric with an eye for the emplaced unfolding of rhetoric’s “natural” occurrence. This turn to fieldwork has coincided with the widespread interest in space and place among rhetoricians, which itself often follows a material, ecological orientation (see Endres & Senda-Cook, 2011, for one exemplary instance among many others). The surge of interest in rhetorical field methods can also be seen as one precedent for more recent interest in temporality among rhetoricians attentive to social justice (see, for instance, Houdek & Phillips, 2020). Whether in Mike Middleton and his collaborators’ *Participatory Critical Rhetoric* (Middleton et al., 2015), Sara McKinnen et al.’s *Text + Field* (McKinnon et al., 2016), or Candice Rai and Caroline Gottschalk Druschke’s more overt attention to ecological figures of thought in their *Field Rhetoric* (Rai & Druschke, 2018), it is evident that ecological thinking, whether tacitly or explicitly, has also begun informing the methods whereby rhetoricians operate (for changes in field methods vis-à-vis environmentalism, see Pezzullo & de Onís, 2017).

While the three-part genealogy that Wells et al. propose is both generative of additional insights and helpful as a way of accounting for ecological thought’s old and ongoing tangles with rhetoric, it cannot escape the paradox of its very existence. The authors themselves are the first to point this out: “It is quite unecological to trace out these separate lines of inquiry,” they write, “and doing so underrepresents the crossover among them” (Wells et al., 2018, p. 5). In other words, an encyclopedic account of ecology’s entanglement with rhetoric in many ways risks undermining the nature of that entanglement to begin with. Precisely *because* of their mutual expansiveness, few subjects lend less to encyclopedic capture than ecology or rhetoric.

## The Ecological Thought

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Where, then, to begin? We could do worse than to start with a simple observation about the rhetorical inflections of the term “ecology.” In common English usage, the word “ecology” is sometimes taken as related to, if not quite synonymous with, the word “environment.” These inflections may differ across contexts of American and British English, as well as others; but, as Timothy Morton describes the relation, the term “ecology” is generally taken to have “something to do with global warming, recycling, and solar power; something to do with quotidian relationships between humans and nonhumans,” among a motley array of other disparate associations (Morton, 2010, p. 1). To the extent that this spread of associative meanings rings true, the very ranginess of “ecology” in its vernacular meanings attests to the difficulty of pinning it down. Though work in ecological rhetoric could well attend to ecology as a science, the preponderance of such scholarship treats ecology, as Nathan Stormer and Bridie McGreavy have put it, “as an orientation to patterns and relationships in the world” (Stormer & McGreavy, 2017, p. 3). It is in this sense of “the ecological” that research in ecological rhetoric can perhaps best be understood as an attempt to envision what follows from supposing that rhetoric has an ecological nature.

In its most rudimentary sense, as Barry Commoner once put it, ecology’s basic precept is that “everything in the environment is connected to everything else” (Commoner, 1971, p. 23). As these connections can be seen to expand beyond “the environment”—when understood as something somehow separate from humankind and its culture—it becomes easier to identify ecological structures in social fields of interaction, in flows of monetary transactions across economies, even in the internal biological system of any specific living body. Morton puts it this way:

The word *environment* still haunts us, because in a society that took care of its surroundings in a more comprehensive sense, our idea of environment would have withered away. The very word *environmentalism* is evidence of wishful thinking. Society would be so involved in taking care of “it” that it would no longer be a case of some “thing” that surrounds us, that environs us and differs from us.

(Morton, 2007, p. 141)

Yet, it is important not to mistake such terms as “ecology” or “ecological” with such terms as “environment” or “environmental,” despite various associations between them. The ecological is not the same as the environmental, though research under the auspices of either may well justifiably overlap.

One point of emphasis in McGreavy et al.’s *Tracing Rhetoric* is the acknowledgment of “interdisciplinary work that embraces *ecology* as distinct from *environment*” (McGreavy et al., 2018, p. 5). In other words, while studies of “ecological rhetoric,” for understandable reasons, often involve engagement with environmental concerns, that topical focus is not a necessary prerequisite. The *ecological* in ecological rhetoric is as much invested in an ontology of

interconnection and dynamism as it is in environmental issues as such. To take an example from McGreavy's longstanding fieldwork in Frenchman Bay, Maine: just because the connections and moving components of an ecosystem such as tidal mudflats are important to the maintenance of mutual flourishing among the nonhuman, "natural" components of this system—the clams, the mud, the water, and so on—that does not mean the system can be understood as separate from the human and "cultural" components thereof. The onerous embodied ways that local clambers work the flats, for instance, contribute to their own health, which can lead to drug abuse or medical needs, and of course to regional economies and communities of practice in the area that, in turn, influence the health of the flats themselves (McGreavy, 2016).

The denial of firm distinctions between nature and culture, in favor of a more entangled understanding of their mutual co-constitution, is something that the very notion of an ecological rhetoric tends to take for granted. These views, sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly, are inspired by the work of Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway, each of whom have sought to show, in their own contexts, that there have never been separate categories—nature here, culture there—but only ever a seeping connectivity between them. Haraway names such a notion *naturecultures*, one word, in her *Companion Species Manifesto* (Haraway, 2003). Latour, similarly, writes about "hybrids of nature and culture" in *We Have Never Been Modern* (Latour, 1993, p. 10), arguing that, "Cultures—different or universal—do not exist, any more than Nature does. There are only natures-cultures, and these offer the only possible basis for comparison" (Latour, 1993, p. 104). Numerous other examples of work in their stead can be found (see Descola, 2013, for a starting place). The important point here is that trying to understand ecological rhetoric as a project inextricable from its concern with environmental issues (i.e., with "nature") will fail to acknowledge that all concerns for "natural" environments are already implicated in corresponding concerns for "cultural" ones.

Whatever else might be said of the imbrication of nature and culture, such a perspective stretches the limits of ecology's expansiveness. The concept can carry a scalar immensity that risks exceeding its usefulness. If the fundamental precept of "ecological thought" is that everything is interconnected, then there is literally no outside to the ecological. Yet, scientists and humanists alike talk regularly about *ecologies*, plural. For instance, a polar arctic ecology differs from an equatorial desert ecology. Though *intraconnectedness* characterizes each of these different environments, the salient connections within each will not be entirely alike (there are no rattlesnakes in the Arctic, no reindeer in the desert). At the same time, although these two very different ecologies are decidedly *interconnected*, the connections between them are weaker and more distant than the connections between, say, wetland ecologies and boreal forest ecologies, because some boreal forests have wetlands within them. In other words, "ecological thought" tends to elide through its grand premise of interconnection the paradox that "ecologies" are at once totalizing—everywhere all at once—and intensely patchy, that is, nowhere in all the same ways (see Tsing et al., 2019).

Meanwhile, ecologies have been grouped into larger typologies. The Earth system, for example, can be divided into several different spheres, which can include, depending on whom you ask, the atmosphere (air), the hydrosphere (liquid water), the cryosphere (frozen water), the geosphere (land), and the biosphere (all living organisms). These have all been characterized as separate

ecosystems, though even within each, numerous smaller ecologies are at work. Wetlands and boreal forests, for instance, are both land types, and hence involve the geosphere; but they also both harbor life, and hence involve the biosphere; and, since wetlands have surface water, they could well be grouped within the hydrosphere. Indeed, overlapping connections both within *and* between given ecospheres of the larger Earth system are the rule, not the exception, though not all of them overlap or connect as significantly as others.

The felt need for an “ecological rhetoric” may well go without saying in the contemporary context of anthropogenic global warming, rampant resource extraction, and all the repercussions that follow for habitat loss, species collapse, and the dwindling biodiversity that affect all life and environments on the planet. But it is within such a context that ecological rhetorics are flourishing today, if only as a tacit paradigm enacted even by those who may not realize they are working within it.

## Expanding Systems and Paradigms of Rhetoric

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Just as “ecology” is an expansive concept difficult to pin down, of course, rhetoric is, too. Rhetoric may once have been understood as an exclusively human art of persuasion through speech, or even through writing, but now it is widely acceded that “the rhetorical” includes much more than that: *animals* (Davis, 2011; Gordon et al., 2017; Hawhee, 2017), *algorithms* (Hallsby, 2018; Ingraham, 2014; Johnson, 2017), *bodies* (Chávez, 2018; DeLuca, 1999b; Selzer & Crowley, 1999), *beer* (Pflugfelder, 2015; Rice, 2016); *monuments*, *memorials* (Dickinson et al., 2010)—even “materiality” itself. The impossibility of enumerating the ways in which rhetoric manifests its force in the world attests to its capaciousness, the ways it seeps across salient scenes and sites until it’s everywhere—indeed, much like ecologies. What this means for the relations between ecology and rhetoric is that the inflection of either term, at least in the semantic structure of English, tends to privilege one or the other as more consequential or capacious. Neologisms such as “rhetoricologies” or “ecorhetorics”—however clunky—might be more adequate terms than either “ecological rhetorics” or “rhetorical ecologies,” much the way that “nature” and “culture” have been more accurately compressed to “naturescultures.”

Owing to the sheer breadth of the long-standing (indeed, ancient) study of rhetoric, a comprehensive history of its iterations and shifts over time would be impractical, if not outright impossible. The undeniable trend in its more recent past, beginning at least with Kenneth Burke’s shifting of rhetoric’s main business from persuasion to identification in his *Rhetoric of Motives* from 1945, however, has been toward expansiveness of rhetoric’s range and scope (Burke, 1945). This trend toward expansiveness and inclusivity—which continues acknowledging ever more and more people, places, things, and processes “as rhetorical”—can itself then be seen as an expression of the ways ecological thinking has made its way into the study of rhetoric, without always announcing its influence.

The ways the expansiveness of ecological thought in some ways mirrors shifts in thinking about rhetoric over time can be seen in historicizing attempts among rhetoricians to identify different dominant systems or paradigms of rhetoric through the years. Writing in 1968, for instance,



Douglas Ehninger noted the tendency among those studying rhetoric to take for granted regnant “systems” of rhetoric that have repeatedly changed over time (“On Systems of Rhetoric”). Moving between the systems of the classical period, the 18th century, and the 20th century, Ehninger identified each by its different character, respectively: grammatical, psychological, and sociological. Almost regardless of what these systems have supposedly been or maintained, however, their shifting or “turning” nature suggests that, although the understanding most prominent in any given time can attain the level of fundamental truth in its prime, a different system or paradigm is likely yet ahead, unforeseeable though it may be in the present. Accordingly, one of Ehninger’s more low-key *ecological* observations was that these systems “arise out of a felt need and are shaped in part by the intellectual and social environment in which the need exists” (Ehninger, 1968, p. 140). Which is to say, what rhetoric is in any given moment cannot viably be separated from the almost atmospheric or climatic sociocultural contexts in which semi-contingent understandings of rhetoric crystallize relative to emergent rhetorical practices within a *zeitgeist*.

By 1973, just 5 years after Ehninger made his important argument, Robert Scott intimated another relationship between rhetoric and ecological thought by offering his own expression of rhetoric’s shifty expansiveness, this time in an argument that rhetoric should not be defined at all. “People generally have a sense of rhetoric,” he observes, and “this sense or feeling, which precedes any definition of rhetoric, is immediately rooted in experience” (Scott, 1973, p. 82). Insofar as people experience reality through different and changing relationships toward it, “an ever-shifting *environment* of rhetoric exists” (Scott, 1973, p. 91, *emphasis added*). In other words, he writes, “our environment is rhetorical” (p. 95). Rhetoric is all around us, like water to a fish, and what one takes rhetoric to be or do depends on one’s ways of “experiencing the environment as rhetorical” through their own modes of experience (p. 91). Though neither Ehninger nor Scott acknowledged the ecologically inflected thinking that underwrote their positions—constantly shifting dynamics of rhetoric; material environments as rhetorically inflected; and, by implication, humans no longer categorically the only rhetorical actors—these are decidedly “ecological” incursions.

The same year that Scott advanced his position that defining rhetoric does nobody any favors (indeed, in the very same issue of *Philosophy and Rhetoric*), Richard Washell applied his own ecological approach to thinking about different material forms of living and nonliving communication, including speech acts, kinesthetic bodies, and the environments in which each communicates. “It seems to me,” Washell writes there,

that the notion of an ecosystem may be profitably stretched to indicate the complex level of organization emerging out of the interrelations existing among communicative forms. Within such a system the communicative characteristics of man’s speech acts influence and are influenced by the communicative characteristics of his body movements and *the larger setting* in which such acts are performed.

(Washell, 1973, pp. 115–116, *emphasis added*)



Though different from what either Ehninger or Scott was trying to show, Washell's position is equally as compatible with ecological thinking insofar as it seeks to account for rhetoric and, in his case, communication at large, as part of an entire system—indeed, as inseparable from its systematicity.

Such propositions belong among the important but underacknowledged “early” precedents for the more recent blossoming of ecological rhetoric. But once one starts looking, such precedents are easy to find. In 1982, Michael McGee's important article, “A Materialist Conception of Rhetoric” (not coincidentally published as part of a collection celebrating Ehninger's work), leaned further into an ecological set of precepts (McGee, 1982). In McGee's case, a materialist approach suggests, he writes, that we “think of rhetoric as an *object*, as material and as omnipresent as air and water” (p. 26). Rhetoric, in other words, is not to be understood as an output of situationally bounded speech or persuasive discourse; it isn't even something necessarily directed toward a *telos*. It is a material *process*, all around us and always-already ongoing. Hence, it is a decidedly ecological phenomenon, inseparable from the environments in which it occurs.

Looking across these examples—Ehninger, Scott, Washell, McGee—it should be evident that each resonates with the other. McGee's description of rhetoric as “omnipresent as air and water” gives a tingle of “the larger setting” that Washell finds to be constitutive of any communicative system, which itself jibes with Scott's “ever-shifting environment of rhetoric,” and that bears a distinct trace of Ehninger's emphasis on rhetoric as “a social environment.” Each point both to shifting understandings of rhetoric over time, and to a tendency toward expansiveness in these understandings, which bear the mark of ecology's own expansiveness as a figure of thought.

This expansiveness would reach a tipping point of sorts in 1993, with Dilip Gaonkar's field-rattling article, “The Idea of Rhetoric in the Rhetoric of Science” (Gaonkar, 1993). Gaonkar effectively began a conversation about what happens if more or less everything can be described as “rhetorical.” The ensuing “Big Rhetoric” debates covered a lot of ground over the rest of the decade: hermeneutics, science, criticism, pedagogy, epistemology, and more (for a summary, see Schiappa, 2001). What the debates didn't cover was ecology. In retrospect, and in light of the covert ways ecology has been part of rhetorical studies for decades, this omission is odd. After all, one of the major points of contact between ecology and rhetoric is that both share an interest in understanding how individuals interact with their environments and how environments influence individuals.

In 2016, John Muckelbauer made another Ehninger-esque foray into historicizing what he called the “implicit paradigms” of rhetoric throughout its long history (Muckelbauer, 2016). He categorized these as “Aristotelian,” “Cultural,” and “Heliotropic.” Like Ehninger's systems, each implicit paradigm fits roughly in the space of a hyphen between approximate dates. Muckelbauer's account also engages the general trend toward rhetoric's expanding scope over time, nowhere better illustrated than in his current “Heliotropic” paradigm. Modeled after plants, which turn toward the sun, Muckelbauer writes, “everything is necessarily immersed in (and constituted by) multiple persuasive (turning) forces. And as such, everything is . . . rhetorically” (Muckelbauer, 2016, p. 40, ellipsis in original). He goes on to conclude,

Claiming that “everything is rhetorical”—rather than indicating some fundamental similarity—means precisely that things are immersed in (and constituted by) differential forces of turning. The task of rhetorical scholarship (and frankly any research whatsoever) would be to attend to these differential tropological fields.

(Muckelbauer, 2016, p. 40)

Though it goes by a different name, “ecological rhetoric” could be understood as practice of making visible the tropologies he describes.

For readers looking to understand the sorts of rhetorical ecological conditions under which the diverse yet connected concerns with ecological rhetoric have emerged, the takeaway here is *not* that “ecological rhetoric” is a product of rhetoric’s tendency toward expansiveness, and hence just another example of something else—“ecologies”—that scholars are beginning to acknowledge as rhetorical. Rather, the important observation is that the tendency toward expansiveness in rhetoric parallels the tendency toward expansiveness in ecological thought. The tendency toward changes or turns in rhetorical systems mirrors the tendency toward changes or turns in ecological systems. And the tendency to consider the individual’s relationship with the environment, and vice versa, are concerns of both fields as well. In short, rhetoric and ecology have long been compatible as figures of thought.

## Environmentalisms

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One of the most approachable ways to think about ecological rhetoric is through work among rhetoricians who study environmental communication. As an area of study, environmental communication can take many forms. Its practitioners can follow vastly different methods (from poetry to statistics) and might well have conflicting opinions about what counts as legitimate knowledge production. Environmental communication is an area of research big enough to have its own international association and conference (the International Environmental Communication Association), but niche enough to be an interest group within regional or national communication conferences in America. In other words, environmental communication is a rich, varied, and complex area of study, worthy of an encyclopedia entry all its own (on that front, see Pezzullo’s essay on “Environment,” Pezzullo, 2017). In what is literally its textbook definition, Phaedra Pezzullo and Robert Cox define environmental communication as “the pragmatic and constitutive modes of expression—the naming, shaping, orienting, and negotiating—of our ecological relationships in the world, including those with nonhuman systems, elements, and species” (Pezzullo & Cox, 2018, p. 13). A reductive but more succinct definition might describe environmental communication as the study of how people communicate about the environment. “Ecological rhetoric” is often undertaken by those whose professional or personal associations overlap with the larger project of environmental communication research.

Here again, though, “ecological rhetoric” reprises a familiar tension: this time, not just between ecological rhetorics and rhetorical ecologies (whether one sees those as subfields of environmental communication or not), but between “ecological rhetoric” and “*environmental rhetoric*.” The tension lies in the same quandary of how to tell two related areas apart when there is often a productive overlap. Some rhetoricians, for instance, study how environmental issues are made to matter in some ways rather than others in certain rhetorical ecologies. In this work, being “made to matter” often involves emphasizing that rhetoric is not just a symbolic-discursive phenomenon but a material one as well, and hence is itself ecologically inextricable from the environments, spaces, and places where all beings dwell and make meaning (A Reading Group, 2023; Gries et al., 2022; Herndl & Brown, 1996; Paliewicz, 2018). How should that work be described?

Compare Jimmie Killingsworth and Jacqueline Palmer’s book, *Ecospeak: Rhetoric and Environmental Politics in America* (Killingsworth & Palmer, 1992) with Sid Dobrin and Sean Morey’s *Ecosee: Image, Rhetoric, Nature* (Dobrin & Morey, 2009). Each shows that specific environmental issues are made salient in public affairs by virtue of the circulating rhetorics that draw attention to different issues within the context of different rhetorical ecologies: *writing* in the former, *images* in the latter. In this work, as in others like it, neither “ecology” nor “environment” are discrete discursive objects in need of rhetorical analysis. To the contrary, as Dobrin and Morey put it, “rhetoric . . . and the politics of environment and ecology are inextricably bound” (Dobrin & Morey, 2009, p. 2). It is important to recognize this, and other scholarship like it, as a different valence of work than the kind better inflected as “environmental rhetoric,” which tends rather to mobilize old insights from the study of rhetoric toward understanding novel topics: typically, exigent environmental issues. “Ecological” rhetoric, by contrast, tends to emphasize rhetoric’s ecological nature as a “new” way of understanding rhetoric itself, often grounded by an environmental issue, but not necessarily.

One of the most helpful and essential accounts of the ways that “environmental” themes have influenced rhetoric, and particularly rhetorical criticism, comes from Phaedra Pezzullo. In a key review essay from 2016, she argued that across the broad field of rhetorical studies, environmental matters have remained largely marginalized, despite critical approaches to environmental issues having become more popular topics of study (Pezzullo, 2016). Pezzullo sees the tension having spawned generative discussions about (and extensions of) many canonical tropes in the study of rhetoric. In other words, more than just introducing a new area of topical attention for rhetorical studies, the trending uptake of environmental matters by scholars of rhetoric have also inspired changes in the very practice of rhetorical criticism, even beyond the context of those studying environmental matters. Readers curious about parsing the entanglements of “rhetoric,” “environment,” and “ecology,” without rendering them synonymous when paired as compound adjective-noun categories, would do well to consult Pezzullo’s review essay to sort out some of these overlaps themselves.

In her review essay, Pezzullo discusses Kenneth Burke briefly in this context, but a closer look at Burke’s outsized influence on so much of contemporary studies of rhetoric can offer another way to make sense of the entanglements between rhetoric, ecology, and environment. Among Burke scholars, a fair deal has been made of Burke’s interest in ecology, beginning in his *Attitudes*

*Toward History*, from 1937, where he first mentions the term. But the concept lingers in his work thereafter, perhaps most prominently (at least for those out looking for Burke's ecological thought) in the "dramatistic pentad" that Burke developed *Grammar of Motives* (Burke, 1945). Laurence Coupe goes so far as to identify Burke as the first to bring "an ecological perspective" to cultural and literary criticism (Coupe, 2001, p. 413), finding his most important contribution to lay in Burke's "foregrounding of earth itself as the ultimate setting of critical activity" (p. 418). The "scene" in Burke's pentad—once and to some degree still taught regularly in rhetorical criticism classes on college campuses in America—can be read as an expression of his ecological thinking as applied to rhetoric, not to mention as at least a tacit influence on Scott and Washell's attention to rhetorical environments decades later.

In an impressively researched study of the context for Burke's interest in what he calls "one little fellow named ecology," Marika Seigel (2004) has shown that Burke was not just interested in ecology as a figure of thought, but also influenced by a more widespread public attention to ecology as an approach to environmental catastrophes of the time, particularly concerning the dust bowl droughts of America's Great Depression. In this sense, Burke exemplifies not only the ways that ecological thinking has been extended to the understanding of rhetoric, but also the ways environmental concerns are implicated in ecological approaches to rhetoric, even if they don't manifest at a topical level. To be a bit glib, ecological rhetoric is always to some degree environmental rhetoric, even when it isn't.

One of ecological rhetoric's more typical endeavors is to consider in what ways, if any, more conventional concepts in the study of rhetoric need to be revised if the ecological nature of rhetoric is taken as a starting premise. As Pezzullo has shown rhetorical criticism to have followed a similar revision and expansion of canonical concepts in light of *environmental* matters (e.g., metaphor, genre, social movements, narrative, publics, etc.), many of those committed to more *ecological* approaches have also reevaluated numerous keywords of rhetorical theory, including such mainstay concepts as *ethos* (Ryan et al., 2016), *tropes* (Druschke, 2019; Keeling & Prairie, 2018), *kairos* (Hawhee, 2004; Rickert, 2013, pp. 74–98), *public rhetoric pedagogy* (Rivers & Weber, 2011), *networked public spheres* (Ehrenfeld, 2020), *racial violence* (Eatman, 2020), *metis* (Dolmage, 2020), *chora* (Ott & Keeling, 2011; Rickert, 2013, pp. 41–73), *genre* (Bawarshi, 2001), *composition* (Coe, 1975; Dobrin & Weisser, 2001; Hawk, 2007), *writing* (Cooper, 1986), and *fieldwork* (Rai & Druschke, 2018), among others. All have been given a new look through an ecological lens. How the "environmental" and "ecological" lens differs precisely, or at least differs in a way that matters beyond mere semantics, is harder to say.

Joshua Trey Barnett, a student of Pezzullo's, has compellingly illustrated the convergence of these lenses—and, perhaps, the folly of trying to make them wholly discrete in the first place—in his essential 2021 work, "Rhetoric for Earthly Coexistence: Imagining an Ecocentric Rhetoric." Barnett urges scholars of rhetoric to embrace "a genuinely ecological notion of rhetoric" (Barnett, 2021, p. 367) as a means of addressing *environmental* issues that the study or rhetoric could be so well equipped to address. This argument is decidedly worth consulting: only through an ecological notion of rhetoric can we adequately foster sustainable and just relations with our planetary environments. But what is it about an *ecological* approach that makes such a

difference for *environmental* concerns? Barnett has some answers, but presently it may be most instructive to consider a couple other impactful arguments related to these themes in order to come at the problem from a different angle.

## From Rhetorical Situation to Rhetorical Ecologies

The concept of a “rhetorical situation” has been a mainstay of rhetorical scholarship for decades, going back to Lloyd Bitzer’s article on the topic in the inaugural issue of *Philosophy and Rhetoric* in 1968 (Bitzer, 1968). Since then, it has been through many iterations. Where Bitzer maintained that exigent social issues created a situation that gave rise to public discourse, his first prominent critic, Richard Vatz, took a diametrically opposed view in 1973, maintaining that public discourse itself created the exigent social issues (Vatz, 1973). Barbara Biesecker, in 1989, offered a deconstruction of each model of the rhetorical situation, on the grounds that a preconceived notion of a situationally rooted rhetoric around an issue (a text) neglects “discourse’s radically historical character,” while a pre-constituted notion of the rhetorical audience (a subject) posits subjects that “cannot be affected by the discourse” (Biesecker, 1989, pp. 110–111). Though subtly, this argument intimated a more ecological approach by enjoining scholars “to read the rhetorical situation as an event structured not by a logic of influence but by a logic of articulation” (p. 126). In other words, rhetoric didn’t address preconstituted issues or audiences, because the issues and their audiences are always already constituted in and through *their relations*. This shift to “articulation” can be read retrospectively as an important nudge, in discussions of rhetorical situations, toward what would later become a more explicitly ecological framework.

That moment came in 2005 with Jenny Edbauer’s influential article, “Unframing Models of Public Distribution: From Rhetorical Situation to Rhetorical Ecologies.” Her argument is that rhetorical situations occur *within* a wider experiential network, an affective ecology, which makes concepts such as an *exigence* (an issue prompting rhetorical action), a *rhetor* (an agent producing such action), an *audience* (the subjects receiving or coproducing it), and *constraints* (the factors limiting the available means of persuasion) too neat and discrete for the reality of how “public interactions bleed into wider social processes” (Edbauer, 2005, p. 9). Thinking about public rhetoric within a more widely distributed social field, Edbauer tries to move away from a “relatively closed system” to imagine rhetorical situations instead “within an open network” (p. 13). This approach clarified, for the first time, that the stakes are how we understand the ways rhetoric circulates through the social field to form public associations that might constellate a shared purpose or movement. No single agent, no isolatable exigence, no discrete audience, no specific constraints can, alone, in any given case, account for the whole processual complexity of rhetoric’s emergence and ecological distribution through public life. Other, more dynamic factors are in play, and these distributed intensities are part of the wider “rhetorical ecologies” that operate in more ambient (Rickert, 2013) and affective ways (Chaput, 2019; Ingraham, 2020).

By invoking *rhetorical ecologies*, Edbauer could be read to signal that ecologies—or, at least some types of ecologies—are themselves rhetorical forms: they involve interobjective or intersubjective exchange, often through language, symbolism, signs, bumper stickers, advertisements, news reports or articles, social media posts, or memes, but also in the bodily proxemics and social intensities that, together, amount to an uncontainable, material-symbolic-

affective process of rhetorical worldmaking. Edbauer was writing specifically about the incursion of Big Box corporate chains into the local texture of Austin, Texas, and the ways that community responded to such incursions with calls to “Keep Austin Weird.” In other words, a conventional “environmental” issue was not her focus. An ecological structure was. And that begs the question: if part of Edbauer’s contribution has been to show that these ecologies have a *rhetorical* character, what can be said of rhetoric’s *ecological* character?

## Thinking Ecologically About Rhetoric’s Ontology

Perhaps the most exemplary illustration of efforts to reevaluate rhetoric’s doings in light of ecological precepts but also abetted by environmental concerns, is in Nathan Stormer and Bridie McGreavy’s important 2017 essay, “Thinking Ecologically About Rhetoric’s Ontology: Capacity, Vulnerability, and Resilience.” They wrote the essay well before it was eventually published, with the delay owing in part to its ideas meeting some resistance given its somewhat radical disruption to the status quo in rhetorical studies. Following an example taken from an environmental issue—specifically, aquaculture in the tidal mudflats of Frenchman Bay, Maine—Stormer and McGreavy show that, if we think about what rhetoric *is* from an ecological perspective, many of the ways that scholars have long identified or understood the force of rhetoric in the world reveal themselves quite simply to no longer be adequate to rhetoric’s dynamic complexity. Here, ecological thought is the driver, but an environmental issue is the illustrative example. More than a contribution to a reevaluation of a specific keyword or rhetorical concept, Stormer and McGreavy focus their argument on “three conceptual shifts that follow from understanding rhetoric as an emergent, materially diverse phenomenon,” and set out accordingly to “revise commonplaces of theory to support ecological considerations of ontology” (Stormer & McGreavy, 2017, p. 2).

In place of the stalwart rhetorical view of agency as the ability of humans to use symbolic communication, they show that, from an ecological standpoint, agency is rather best understood as a *capacity* that numerous beings, including nonhumans, can exhibit to different degrees under different circumstances. Moreover, in place of thinking about rhetoric as the persuasive imposition of change on another—and hence as something that involves a certain kind of violence—Stormer and McGreavy suggest that, from an ecological standpoint, rhetoric involves a mutual vulnerability, not just a unidirectional dynamic of imposed power. Finally, if *capacities* to change or be changed are considered alongside the reciprocal but not always equal *vulnerabilities* of those entities involved in rhetoric’s emergence, then it makes more sense to talk about “systemic adaptability and sustainability (resilience), rather than individuated abilities to resist (recalcitrance)” (Stormer & McGreavy, 2017, p. 4). These shifts in emphasis may seem benign when laid out coolly as basic propositions, but such small shifts have served to unsettle some fundamental conceptions of rhetoric itself, opening a space for others to do the same.

The sheer extent of work to think more ecologically about rhetoric has only grown as the 21st century advances, undoubtedly in step with growing awareness about anthropogenic global warming. Books such as Tim Jensen’s *Ecologies of Guilt in Environmental Rhetorics* (Jensen, 2019), Jennifer Clary-Lemon’s *Planting the Anthropocene: Rhetorics of Natureculture* (Clary-Lemon, 2019), Joshua Trey Barnett’s *Mourning in the Anthropocene: Ecological Grief and Earthly Coexistence*

(Barnett, 2022), and Kenneth Walker's *Climate Politics on the Border* (Walker, 2022), all take ecological approaches to understanding both rhetoric and environmental crisis. Their work, among that of many others, shows that although "ecological rhetoric" and "environmental communication" are not coterminous, there are several ways in which each implicates the other.

## Ecofeminisms

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One of the less acknowledged ways that ecological thinking could be said to have begun influencing studies of rhetoric is with the publication, in 1979, of Sally Miller Gearhart's article, "The Womanization of Rhetoric." Gearhart's concern was that the widely accepted understanding of rhetoric as effectively synonymous with *persuasion* made rhetoric equivalent to an act of violence. "Can it be an act of integrity," she asked, "to seek to change another person or entity?" (Gearhart, 1979, p. 198). Gearhart's answer, lurking already in the very question, is that models of rhetoric based on persuasion are, indeed, inherently violent. The reason is similar to the reasons colonialism is inherently violent, or various methods of science, or many forms of teaching: the unsolicited imposition of change on others too often involves imposing one's own needs and perspectives upon them, rather than meeting others *where they are* to serve *their* needs and perspectives instead.

Twenty-five hundred years ago, when the old sophist Gorgias gave his famed *Encomium of Helen*—the speech that effectively absolves Helen of Troy from any blame for the Trojan war—he went partway to acknowledging what Gearhart did only much more recently: namely, that imposing change on another undermines that person's self-determination. As Gorgias put it, Helen deserves no blame, "For either by fate's will and gods' wishes and necessity's decrees she did what she did or by force reduced or by words seduced or by love induced" (Gorgias, 2007, p. 253). The key point for theorizing rhetoric is that, if words seduce someone to change, not so unlike a physically violent force that reduces one to cowering compliance, that person's agency is compromised by an imperative imposed upon them from someone else. Gorgias, of course, missed the ethical opportunity that his own realization presented. If through persuasive speech he could convince the Athenian public that one of their most widespread and taken-for-granted beliefs was wrong—that, gasp, Helen was not to blame!—then had he not veritably proved that rhetoric was the most powerful force of all, and *he* the most capable rhetor? How else to explain the possibility that words alone could undermine such an emotionally entrenched commonplace of the Athenian imaginary? What Gorgias might have said instead is what Gearhart and other feminist rhetoricians in her wake pointed to over two millennia later: there is a characteristic violence to rhetoric when understood as the willful act of a speaking subject concerned to induce another to change or assent in ways they would not otherwise have done on their own accord. Stormer and McGreavy's aforementioned argument that rhetoric's violence is better understood as a matter of vulnerability, could be read as an ecological extension of Gearhart's article (see Biesecker, 1992, for more on the status of women in Gorgias's *Encomium*).

Certainly, by suggesting that a different, less patriarchal model of rhetoric might be possible, Gearhart cleared a path toward a more ecological understanding of the way rhetoric operates. Though she didn't attach "ecology" to her argument explicitly, that was partly the context. As



she wrote at the time, “The patriarchs of rhetoric have never called into question their unspoken assumption that mankind (read ‘mankind’) is here on earth to alter his (read ‘his’) environment and to influence the social affairs of other men (read ‘men’)” (Gearhart, 1979, p. 195). Insofar as Gearhart even recognized the entitled altering of earth’s environment as bound up with dominant approaches to how rhetoric was understood in 1979, her aim to provide another, more mutualistic approach is itself to promote a more ecological rhetoric than what was then quite available in the literature, even if it didn’t go by that name.

Though it garnered some attention, the most prominent extension of Gearhart’s article didn’t arrive until 1995, when it became the basis for Sonja K. Foss and Cindy L. Griffin’s influential “Proposal for an Invitational Rhetoric.” Foss and Griffin’s fundamental idea was to look beyond persuasion as a primarily unidirectional and, often, paternalistic act of influence (however benevolent in intention), and instead to operate according to feminist principles aligned with those Gearhart had espoused. They accordingly defined their invitational rhetoric as “an invitation to understanding as a means to create a relationship rooted in equality, immanent value, and self-determination” (Foss & Griffin, 1995, p. 5). As an extension of Gearhart’s call for “womanizing” rhetoric, Foss and Griffin understandably positioned their proposal as a feminist endeavor. Indeed, it is. Yet, the “nonhierarchical, nonjudgmental, nonadversarial framework” they set forth (Foss & Griffin, 1995, p. 5) is equally as understandable as ecological in its orientation.

If ecological rhetoric is not just about environmentalism, but rather about understanding what follows from approaching rhetoric as a mutualistic, interconnected, and dynamic process concerning the relationship between environments and those organisms living within them, then their proposal for an invitational rhetoric isn’t too far removed from such an endeavor. Foss and Griffin’s invitational approach, nevertheless, reads at times as an effort to prescribe a normative ideal: something closer to an axiological best practice for rhetoric than it is to an ontological claim about rhetoric’s being as such. Looking back on their 1995 article in 2019, the two authors explained that they were conscientiously trying to provide “one answer to Gearhart’s question of whether changing another can be done with integrity” (Foss & Griffin, 2019). Their answer was to envision a rhetorical system whose goal was *not* to change another, but rather to invite an opening for mutual understanding, and hence to enact a reciprocal and non-paternalistic structure for rhetorical relationality.

The feminist ethos of such a project is not far removed from its ecological underpinnings. Indeed, as Kathleen Ryan, Nancy Myers, and Rebecca Jones have shown in their 2016 book, *Rethinking Ethos: A Feminist Ecological Approach to Rhetoric*, combining feminist and ecological perspectives as a way to understand rhetoric can “open up new ways of envisioning ethos to acknowledge the multiple, nonlinear relations operating among rhetors, audiences, things, and contexts” (Ryan et al., 2016, p. 3). Certainly, the growing tradition of “ecofeminist” scholarship across academic disciplines attests to the ways ecological models of thought and being tend to affirm and align with feminist ones as well. While there are likely as many ways of approaching the ecological as there are versions of feminism, one of the generally shared insights of ecofeminism across its

many iterations is the supposition that the dominant form of reasoning that normalizes the exploitation and oppression of earth systems is effectively the same as those that normalize the exploitation and oppression of women.

This sort of thinking is nowhere better articulated than in the seminal work of Val Plumwood, the Australian scholar who first introduced the notion of “critical ecological feminism” in her 1993 masterpiece, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (p. 1). In 1985, while exploring the bush, Plumwood was attacked by a crocodile and dragged underwater into multiple death rolls before escaping blood-ridden to crawl for hours across the outback until she could find help. In her own accounting, that experience underscored for her the ways humans and nonhuman beings are entangled on earth as both predators and prey, though only humans have “the illusion of invulnerability” (Plumwood, 1995, p. 34). From where did that illusion spring? Her answer, laid out most completely in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, maintains that, at least since the uptake of Cartesian dualism in the 17th century, humans have cultivated a “hyperseparation” between nature and culture that continues to justify different forms of human exceptionalism because it’s built-in to our very models of reason. But not only that: Plumwood shows in extraordinary detail in what ways the backgrounding of “nature” in service of human ends is almost exactly the same as the backgrounding of certain humans, women, slaves, and Indigenous peoples in particular. Freya Matthews summarizes this aspect of Plumwood’s contribution best:

She showed brilliantly how this dualistic system of thought created value hierarchies that systematically rendered inferior all the terms that came to be associated with nature rather than reason: women, the working class, the colonized, the Indigenous, as well as the other-than-human world. She thereby demonstrated that the ideology underpinning the domination of nature in the contemporary West is simultaneously an ideology legitimating and naturalizing the domination of many subjugated social groups. The implication was that environmentalism and struggles for social justice cannot be separated out from one another.

(Mathews, 2008, p. 319)

Though Plumwood did not research rhetoric as such, her interest in communication as something all beings and things do (human and otherwise) is of a kin with the sort of transhumanist, transcorporeal, nonhierarchical, and relational thinking about rhetoric undertaken by many of those who more overtly take ecological approaches thereto.

Indeed, as Carol Adams and Lori Gruen have shown, ecofeminism needs to be understood as an intersectional and multidisciplinary enterprise (Adams & Gruen, 2022). If so, then understanding ecological rhetoric as a pursuit limited to those working explicitly in the study of rhetoric does a disservice both to ecological rhetoric and to the ecofeminist strains of thinking that are an important part of its history and futurity. In their book *Ecofeminism* (Mies & Shiva, 2014), Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva argue that it’s not enough to acknowledge that modern humans have been responsible for planetary destruction at an unprecedented scale of harm. Such destruction has happened, they suggest, in large part due to the dominant values of modern science, which has for centuries given “Man” license to denigrate and dominate the earth and all living beings in

it, in the belief that humans (i.e., men) are justified because of an exceptionalism based on murky principles. Mies and Shiva argue that undoing such planetary harm and stopping the destruction wrought by such exceptionalism has largely (and unduly) been positioned as the responsibility of women, in part because they represent a counterpoint to the patriarchal systems that undergird the scientific practices that created the problem to begin with. Though in a different register and historical context, this isn't so far removed from Gearhart or Foss and Griffin's projects to womanize rhetoric—in part by theorizing it as more ecological.

## Conclusion: Critical Eco-Futures

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It is not a big leap to extend ecofeminist thinking toward adjacent areas that can be understood to inform ecological rhetoric. Of course, recent turns within studies of rhetoric to ask different sets of questions and emphasize different critical standpoints, of course, are not all “ecological,” either in approach or concern. Yet the critical tenor of many emergent conversations—including the creation of space for voices and perspectives not historically given attention in the field—often do show signs of operating according to more ecological ways of understanding rhetoric and various forms of injustice. More than any contributions to *theory* that the introduction of ecological thought into rhetorical studies may have made, ecological rhetoric's most promising future may lie in its still-expanding critical *practice*.

Insofar as it will never be adequate—indeed, it will always be decidedly *unecological*—to privilege a single dominant perspective or ideology in the study of rhetoric, it is more than a happy accident that understanding rhetoric through an ecological lens can lead to destabilizing rhetoric's commonplaces and inherited forms of power. To the contrary: if taken to its furthest extent—a sustainable environmental equity among all biotic and abiotic beings—then ecological rhetoric is *necessarily* a project of decentering privilege and reversing unbalanced exceptionalism in all its myriad forms. It is because this exceptionalism often foregrounds the human as the most entitled actor on earth that work in ecological rhetoric has often turned to other-than-human beings, animals and plants among them—in what amounts to an anthro-decentric project. As ecofeminists and others have shown, though, “human” privilege tends to mean specifically able-cis-het-white-male humans, far from including everyone. Ecological rhetoric can therefore also be seen as a means of redressing other hideous legacies of privilege that have gained prominence through displacement and erasure. Amid calls bemoaning that “#RhetoricSoWhite,” the field's *racist* (Wanzer-Serrano, 2019), *American* (Asante, 2019), *colonial* (Lechuga, 2020), and *Indigeneity-erasing* (Na'puti, 2019) leanings and legacies are finally being addressed with some much-needed momentum. This work, too, can be seen as within the purview of a truly ecological rhetoric.

In the spirit that would resist limiting ecological rhetoric to a specific set of practices (things that such work does), or to a specific set of necessary and sufficient conditions that such work must meet (things that it is), this article has approached the topic as an intersectional and multidisciplinary meeting of ecological thought with rhetorical thought, placing emphasis on the ways the former has influenced the latter. But just because ecological thought, as imported from the ecological sciences, tends to concern the relationships between all biotic and non-biotic

existents within their environments, that does not mean that rhetoricians engaging with that tradition will do so without trying. There is ample critical promise for ecological rhetorical futures not just to work toward reversing climate crisis—the presumed *telos* that likely comes first to mind for those new to “ecological rhetoric.” Rather, ecological approaches to rhetoric may be the best ones available to continue the essential work of anthro-decentrizing, decolonizing, and fostering survivance in the relations that rhetoric both addresses and maintains.

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