

# Rhetoric in a Dappled World

Kathleen Criner

**Abstract:** In a feminist new materialist rhetoric course, a student plays with key ideas from different canonical definitions of rhetoric, ultimately arguing that the act of definition itself is paradoxical. To extend the limits of discourse, the student plays with poetry to capture rhetoric as a feeling rather than a disciplinary way of knowing.

**Keywords:** [rhetorical new materialisms](#), [chaotic composing](#), [feminist praxis](#), [definition of man](#)

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*Context from Megan: At this point in the cluster conversation, I fear that my students may have misled you a little. They say I introduced them to rhetoric without providing a definition of it. True, I didn't provide a definition of rhetoric. I provided 21. From Plato's "art of enchanting the soul" to Kennedy's "the energy inherent in communication," this list of rhetoric definitions allowed them to conceive of rhetoric as an art or a science, as speaker-centric or audience-centric, as discursive symbols or non-discursive energy. Maybe that's what happened: they drowned in definitions until there wasn't one.*

*And, as historians of rhetoric have long argued, our earliest definitions of rhetoric continue to ring most true. As a discipline, we continue to debate the importance, or not, of new materialisms to rhetoric, and in our struggles to articulate what rhetoric isn't, we often overlook emphasizing what it is. When we bring the entangled messiness of the differential becoming of natural worlds and the meaningful relations therein to students, perhaps what emerges for them is less definitional work than learning to engage in a languaging beyond the bounds of discourse. In other words, learning to articulate the dappled nature of rhetoric allowed students to find the crux of rhetorical studies not in words, but in feeling. After all, as one student argues, defining rhetoric will always be a paradox in that scholars define through discourse. To fathom rhetoric's broad expanse, she plays with discourse through poetry.*

## Kate on How Rhetoric is the Worn Trail that Led Us Here

It feels so good to wonder;  
to breathe in ideas  
and reach further.

A head nod to nature,  
a reminder that I am small.  
A reminder that we are all equals  
on the surface of the Earth.

**Kathleen "Kate" Criner** (she/her) is an undergraduate student at the University of Louisville. She is a neuroscience and psychology double major, with a minor in both creative writing and biology. Kate currently works as a research assistant in the university's Auditory Perception and Processing Lab and is an avid volunteer at the Parklands at Floyd's Fork. She plans to graduate in the Spring of 2024 and attend graduate school with a focus in either clinical psychology, or research related to the field of ecopsychology.

My thoughts are the Trees,  
my actions Earthworms.  
We all consist of  
the same dreamy atoms.

By the time Kenneth Burke, one of the most prominent voices on rhetoric of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, published “The Definition of Man,” rhetorical theorists had greatly narrowed the meaning of rhetoric, trying to fit it in a box with arbitrary borders based on human narcissism. However, the definition of rhetoric has not always been this marked by boundaries. In fact, Plato’s definition of rhetoric is not only one of the discipline’s oldest attempts at definition, but also its most flexible. Whereas I cannot speak for a man who has been deceased for many centuries, I hope that “the art of enchanting the soul” was intentionally open-ended. In poetry it is often not the goal to make your readers agree with you, but to consider their own lives from a new perspective. In this way, poetry is rhetorical, the first autumn leaf to fall from a tree is rhetorical, and a dog begging for table scraps is rhetorical.

To successfully teach the concept of rhetoric to students, it is essential that even the most accomplished rhetoricians set aside their own knowledge base. Sure, those who have been studying rhetoric for years may fully align themselves with one rhetorical theorist or another, but to only teach that perspective would do a disservice to rhetoric. What I am asking of theorists, rhetoricians, and teachers is vital to the work of understanding abstract concepts. What if the most canonical things that have ever been said of rhetoric, even the tenets the discipline holds as “facts,” were placed aside in the name of exploration? On a deeper level, I think most students already question their “position” when they hear another stance; however, we have been conditioned to fear being wrong. We believe that altering our opinions makes us appear weak. We contradict ourselves and stumble over our words to protect our honor; we are too stubborn to release ourselves to the creativity needed for greater learning. Teachers do it too.

To demonstrate the need for this level of learning, whether for new students or long-time rhetoricians, a thought experiment is required. No matter what you believe to be the definition of rhetoric, pretend for a moment that Burke’s “definition of man” is the correct one. After all, blindly believing that animals are capable of rhetoric is a very slippery slope. Consider Kennedy’s idea that rhetoric is *energy*. If the reason animals “use” rhetoric is because rhetoric is energy, then an educated man’s speech is no more convincing than a dog hoarding its owner’s socks for attention. Sure, one could argue that the components in the universe with the most meaning are not human, as the sun’s energy powers every action on Earth. This energy influences *every* man, animal, plant, and rock. But if the sun’s energy persuades the plant to grow, if water uses gravitational energy to map out the Earth—rivers to oceans—if the universe’s very beginning was an explosion of energy, is rhetoric *God*? And if rhetoric is God, can anyone or anything exist without purpose? *This* is what Burke was trying to warn us about. Surely, this line of thinking is not productive in defining rhetoric, or defining anything for that matter. Yes, rules are important, and we must stick to them, end of discussion.

But then again, how good did it feel to stretch the brain? Maybe Burke is right. Maybe it is impossible for non-humans to be involved in rhetoric. However, it is easy to be a man like Burke. More rules equal a tidier argument, an easier workload. But rhetoric is not easy, or at least it shouldn't be. Defining rhetoric is a paradox. It needs to be. As humans write the meaning of rhetoric, the limits of language discredit the attempt. Rhetoric is meant to be beautiful; it is meant to be discussed and debated. Any definition *may be* correct, but there cannot be *one* definition. This is the very nature of the word.

Withholding an uncontested definition of rhetoric may make the teaching and learning of rhetoric harder, but there is so much to be gained from this line of thinking. What you gain by being vulnerable to new students is the key to keeping your subjects valuable in the 21st century. Be honest with yourself and your students. Be critical of the borders you use and what you seal off behind them. Finally, remember that humans were not the first animals on this earth, and we won't be the last. The natural world should never be disregarded, and I hope you experience that world alongside your students. Only then may your lessons be applied in the broader context of their lives and may your work enchant souls.

“The art of enchanting the soul”  
Lies in endless thinking,  
Taste-testing ideas,  
A deep breath in.  
On the exhale? A sunrise,  
A glaring look into infinite possibility.

You almost missed this,  
That the true definition is not written.  
Sunlight warms the skin,  
softening the rustling of the wind.  
Rhetoric is the worn trail that led us here,  
To dip our toes in existence.



**Figure 1.** A student smiles as she stands on the arms of a wooded art piece called a “forest giant” that overlooks a still lake bordered by green trees at Bernheim Arboretum and Research Forest in Clermont, Kentucky. The giant is constructed of reclaimed wood from the forest and is shaped to look like a human contemplating their image in the lake.

## Notes for a Feminist, New Material, Rhetorical Pedagogy (Megan Poole)

*More than anything, I believe, these students who encountered feminist rhetorical new materialisms experienced what Ann Berthoff calls the “chaos” of composition. Composing, for Berthoff, is the making of meaning, and meaning is something that is constructed from the fragmented manner through which our bodies encounter the world. As she explains: “Meanings don’t just happen: we make them. Meanings don’t come out of the air; we make them out of a chaos of images, half-truths, remembrances, syntactic fragments, from the mysterious and unformed” (69-70). In other words, composing is always a rhetorical new materialist act because writing is something that falls together from disparate materials, perspectives, feelings, truths. Now, I consider that when I teach feminist rhetorical new materialisms, I am teaching “chaotic composing.” I encourage students to embark on a journey of questioning, teach them to find fragmented answers, and allow them to compose stories and analyses that chart their unique, situated paths.*

*The feminist rhetorical tool perhaps most present in the work of chaotic composing is what Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa E. Kirsch call “strategic contemplation,” or a strategy for slowing down and paying attention to sensory, intuitive responses that emerge during research and learning experiences. For Royster and Kirsch, strategic contemplation calls attention to how “life is material, not abstract” (94). And in order to consider how our identities are part of ongoing material, evolutionary, and cultural processes, “the senses (sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, intuition) [must be recognized] as sources of [rhetorical] information” (Royster and Kirsch 94). Strategic contemplation thus extends the bounds of knowledge- and meaning-making, considering modes such as intuition as integral to, rather than separate from, logic.*

*Teaching feminist rhetorical new materialisms through chaotic composing and strategic contemplation is to understand the work of the classroom as bell hooks does, as “not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students” (13). Such growth empowers students to find their voices and use them to engage more fully in the worlds of which they are a part. Most importantly, hooks warns that this empowerment “cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks” (21). We must learn to take risks in the teaching of writing. We must learn to “fail” alongside our students as we navigate the chaotic, entangled web of rhetoric. We must take students in the field and acknowledge that we are but one, and perhaps not the best, teacher of rhetoric. We must invite students to meet other teachers in fungi, in fields, in feathers. Our pedagogy, like our worlds, must be dappled.*

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