

# When the First Rhetoric You Hear is New Materialist

Jessica Julian and MarLee Yow

**Abstract:** When asked to craft a position argument defining the limits of rhetoric, students in a feminist new materialist rhetoric course grapple with the benefits and dangers of proffering “Big Rhetoric.” One student narrates the worries that come with extending the bounds of rhetoric to include animals, considering that people in power will use that extension to endanger plants and landscapes. Another student expands the limits of rhetoric beyond animals and plants to all “living thought.”

**Keywords:** [rhetorical new materialisms](#), [Big Rhetoric](#), [living thought](#), [matter and meaning](#)

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*Context From Megan: Write a position argument defining the limits of rhetoric—that was the task given to these students. The day their rough drafts were due, a student burst into my office with a “new” finding, one that helped him better understand what we had been discussing with Burke, Kennedy, Davis, and the limits of rhetoric. “Have you ever heard of someone named Schiappa?” he asked. “He writes about ‘Big Rhetoric,’ and I think that may be what we’re talking about.” In 2001, Edward Schiappa famously defined “Big Rhetoric” as “the theoretical position that everything, or virtually everything, can be described as ‘rhetorical.’” This essay came in response to critics who argued that if rhetoric was virtually everything, then it meant nothing (260). Arguably since then, Big Rhetoric has eclipsed such critiques. More recently, Ehren Helmut Pflugfelder shifted the conversation, suggesting that rhetoric’s size is less important than understanding how, exactly, matter and meaning are entangled.*

*Following Pflugfelder, I asked students to push past the realization that rhetoric extended beyond the human and asked them to grapple with how non-human life has its own rhetorical methods of communicating and making meaning. Reading excerpts from anthropologist Eduardo Kohn’s *How Forests Think*, a posthumanist challenge stemming from fieldwork among the Runa people in Ecuador to that supposed ontological line between the human and everything, we questioned whether rhetoric stops where “we” can see intention. That is, we considered whether the color of flowers was rhetorical in that their beauty attracts bees, or whether how rivers shape landscapes was rhetorical. Perhaps the broadest Big Rhetoric question we posed all semester was Kohn’s: does evolution think? I may have been ready for “rhetoric” to lose all meaning, but, as their words detail, many students never bargained for thinking with evolution.*

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## J.J. Takes on Big Rhetoric

When I registered for this course, I thought it was going to be fun, potentially silly. We would discuss how different species communicate, listen to recordings of their sounds, watch videos, and so forth. What I did not expect was to be presented immediately with “Big Rhetoric,” a new concept of rhetoric explored by rhetoricians that is very different from the typical, Western definition of rhetoric. “Big Rhetoric” challenged my previous notions of rhetoric—that is, a method of speech prepared in advance and used for persuasion—and was difficult for me to understand. To me, rhetoric was the subject studied in academic classes, used in speech and debate competitions, and employed by politicians. Rhetoric was enveloped in persuasion with a tendency for dubious application. I brought these notions into class with me as we began the course.

After some initial, dense theoretical readings from scholars such as George Kennedy and Diane Davis, the first assignment for the course was a position argument about rhetoric. Still not understanding the direction “Big Rhetoric” was taking, I argued *against* enlarging rhetoric. I thought the final product of this enlarged definition would be used as justification for politicians to create policies that threatened the environment and worsened climate change. That is, I saw “Big Rhetoric” as a misguided attempt to use language-ability as the marker of value assigned to certain species and not others.

As someone interested in preserving the planet and its species, I was concerned that even if rhetoric scholars were redefining the limits of rhetoric to be more inclusive, politicians could still exploit this Big Rhetoric, because, I thought, inevitably something will be excluded. That is, if defining rhetoric beyond the human draws the limit at meaning, then might that allow policymakers to privilege animals over trees? Or, if “meaning” could be extended to trees and fungal networks, might we exclude the soil beneath our feet, bringing humans to build more parks as they continue fracking? My fear of this potential scenario brought me to end my position argument this way:

In summary, the discussion surrounding the definition of rhetoric has become bogged down with the unnecessary and incorrect requirement that the definition includes everything which has value. Kennedy began this deviation by supposing that rhetoric was inherent to all living things. Davis furthered the deviation by connecting rhetoric to her Darwinian revelation, proposing that redefining rhetoric could reverse the “inferiority” of animals. The crux of this deviation lies in the false correlation between linguistic ability and value and misses the importance of the rhetorical situation that Lloyd Bitzer has defined.

In this argument, I wanted to emphasize the danger I saw in redefining rhetoric for the purposes of including non-human animals or plants or any other earthly thing—this redefinition would be exploited for what it unintentionally excluded.

It was not until we read an excerpt from Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* that I realized how my initial understanding of Big Rhetoric had missed the mark. In a chapter titled "Asters and Goldenrod," Kimmerer describes her entrance into the world of academia after being raised in the ways of the Potawatomi Nation. Most notably, she describes a conflict with a professor who refused to honor her desire to understand the beauty of nature around her. She wished to know why asters and goldenrods look so beautiful together, but her question was dismissed as a "non-scientific" one (40-41). Eventually, Kimmerer narrates the pivotal moment in which she realized that being an academic alongside honoring Indigenous traditions was not yet represented in her field of study; instead, she would have to pave her own path to wed the two perspectives. It is through her description of this conflict—seeing around science to value other beings in the world differently—that I began to understand the idea behind "Big Rhetoric."

## Deconstructing Hierarchy Between Humans and Nature

For other students—specifically those who were not already well acquainted with a "traditional" notion of rhetoric—our disorienting entry into feminist new materialist rhetorics at the start of the semester initiated a more immediate seismic shift in thinking. Shortly before reading Kimmerer, the class discussed Kohn's concept of "living thought" to understand all the *who's* that think. Kohn's premise is that all living beings think, therefore, all thoughts are alive. As he explains, "If thoughts are alive and if that which lives thinks, then perhaps the living world is enchanted. What I mean is that the world beyond the human is not a meaningless one made meaningful by humans" (72). Similarly, Kimmerer expresses that the land and species around us have much to teach human animals about better ways of being in the world. "Our relationship with land cannot heal," she argues, "until we hear its stories" (9). She goes on to express that the land's stories are already fully articulate, if only human animals would learn to pay attention:

In the Western tradition there is a recognized hierarchy of beings, with, of course, the human being on top—the pinnacle of evolution, the darling of Creation—and the plants at the bottom. But in Native ways of knowing, human people are often referred to as "the younger brothers of Creation." We say that humans have the least experience with how to live and thus the most to learn—we must look to our teachers among the other species for guidance. Their wisdom is apparent in the way that they live. They teach us by example. (9)

Take the asters and goldenrods, who teach us the importance of difference growing alongside one another. The purple and gold serve as complementary colors to one another, signaling to bees to drink nectar and gather pollen from both, which results in a "dance of cross-pollination" (47). Reading Kohn and Kimmerer alongside Burke, Kennedy, and Davis allowed us to think about the relationship between humans and our non-human neighbors without a strictly Western new materialist focus. This juxtaposition brought us to consider what Jennifer Clary-Lemon asks of scholars in "Notes Toward an Indigenous New Materialism," namely to acknowledge and name how new materialist rhetorics echo Indigenous thinkers and writers (2). Recognizing that we were "settler[s] on Indigenous lands" brought us to consider the harm of marking

boundaries between self and other (Clary-Lemon 3). With Kohn and Kimmerer as guides, rhetoric became less about “discovery” and more about witnessing attempts at connection.



**Figure 1.** A student sketch features one human hand reaching from rays of light to nearly touch another human hand reaching from among plant branches. A purple, cyclical ball of energy surrounds their emanate touch, reminding of Michelangelo's painting, *Creation of Adam*, in the Sistine Chapel.

### MarLee Observes How Thoughts Come Alive

My professor looked out at our class, a group I knew all of two days at this point, and asked *us* to define the key term we'd be focusing on for the next few weeks. I thought it was a nice way to engage the class, to keep us interested since 9:00 am is way too early for any college student, even on the first Wednesday of the semester. Only, she didn't give us a definition of rhetoric—for the entirety of the course really. Coming from a STEM background, I felt an internal panic as I stared at my note page littered with question marks and segments of ideas.

Yet, somewhere in that mess was something novel: room for real exploration. Throughout the first few weeks, we were given materials to read that guided our thinking, but that also seemed to contradict one other, and we came to class each day to discuss our findings. Somewhere along the way, my notebook became a collection of ideas and memories rather than a study guide. Chasing the limits of rhetoric, we each absorbed its deeper meaning. In such close proximity to an idea, we learned through process rather than fact. This was the nature of learning Big Rhetoric: as if being tossed into the sea, we each swam to a shore of our own choosing.

Most of us found ourselves on the shores of meaning. That is, meaning became our limit of what was and was not rhetorical. Meaning became the proverbial line in the sand, allowing us to parse out mundane, unintentional acts from those with rhetoric. If an action is performed with meaning, it is therefore rhetor-

ical. We were comfortable using meaning as a boundary for what is and is not rhetorical, but then Big Rhetoric expanded meaning to such an extent that it was lost in our search. Not everyone will reach this finding, but our journey into Big Rhetoric allowed for intimacy. In such close proximity with non-human others, rhetoric encompassed an empathetic process, even. While some may still find meaning through clear definitions of rhetoric, learning through experience reached deeper depths of the mind. Getting so personal with the process of learning allows for one to engage empathetic understanding as a rhetorical process. Hearing beyond what is said and seeing beyond what is shown is to experience rhetoric.

This empathetic process may not translate the rhetoric of non-human animals, but it most certainly alters how we interact with the world. Developing empathetic rhetoric implores the learner to understand beyond the physical, allowing rhetoric to extend towards the world at large. Assigning meaning is a heavy psychological concept but understanding the way the world operates encourages empathetic interactions. The individual who understands rhetoric through empathy may view every interaction as meaningful; they may see beauty in a plant turned towards the sun. Ultimately, the world becomes painted in colors to which they were previously blind without this rhetoric so full of “meaning.”

It is this combination of a newly colored world and empathy that drives Kohn’s concept of “living thought” (72). Kohn proposed that “all living beings think” and “all thoughts are alive,” suggesting we live in an “enchanted” world (72). The human desire to assign meaning guides us away from the concept of “living thought,” effectively shutting down our empathy towards beings other than humans. Kohn describes how the subtleties of a dog’s bark is a “[manifestation] of their interpretations of the world” (73), and it takes an empathetic mind to understand such interpretation. Rhetoric most often turns to meaning when assigning definitions because it allows a limitation. Subsequently, meaning can also offer an extension for rhetoric to expand beyond the human. Meaning, then, is the current, guiding rhetorical discussions. It can guide a scholar toward humanistic rhetoric or a broader rhetoric based on the breeze.



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