



Dispatch

Climate (In)justice and Advocacy: A View from the Humanities

SHRUTI JAIN

Binghamton University, USA

LE LI

Binghamton University, USA

In the struggle to address ecological catastrophe and its deeply entwined social injustices, what can the humanities offer? The second and third events in the Landscapes of Injustice, Landscapes of Repair seminar series took up this question from rhetorical and imaginative perspectives respectively.¹ We focus here on rhetorical forms of environmental advocacy presented by Belinda Walzer and Savannah Paige Murray, both of the Rhetoric and Writing Studies Program at Appalachian State University (US), in their seminar, “Climate (In)Justice: A View from the Humanities.”² With a firm belief in the power of stories to effect change in the world, they argued that it is vital to pay careful attention to the rhetorical strategies we employ to tell these stories. Echoing Marco Armiero’s discussion (in the first seminar) of the *wasteocene* as a valuable term for understanding our current era, Walzer and Murray critiqued mainstream environmental rhetorical frameworks and advocated instead for rhetorics of everyday violence, resistance, and slow violence (Nixon, 2013) to work toward sustainable futures.

Rhetoric, the speakers began, does more than simply persuade. Rhetorical frameworks are rooted in temporal, spatial, and ideological contexts. They convey values and build conceptual knowledge based on those values. Attending to rhetorics of climate (in)justice allows us to understand what Walzer and Murray describe as “the deep contextual ecologies of power, discourse, materiality, ethics, and ethos” in a situation. With reference to

¹ <https://sites.google.com/binghamton.edu/landscapes/home>

² <https://binghamton.hosted.panopto.com/Panopto/Pages/Viewer.aspx?id=eecaa00b-8371-44bf-86d8-aff60130cca7>

Correspondence Address: Shrutri Jain, Institute for Advanced Studies in Humanities, Binghamton University, State University of New York, 4400 Vestal Parkway East, Binghamton, NY 13902, USA; email: sjain15@binghamton.edu



scholarly work and case studies, they examined the landscapes of climate and environmental injustice on both global and local levels, theorizing what counts as resistance and highlighting more collective and everyday rhetorics of resistance that make landscapes of repair possible.

Walzer and Murray provided a brief overview and critique of three dominant, mainstream discourses: conservation and wildlife management; preservation; and reform environmentalism and environmental health. Although not interchangeable, these frameworks typically begin from the assumption of nature and human society as separate and distinct categories (whereas discourses of environmental health address their intersection). In conservationist and preservationist rhetorics, respectively, nature or wilderness is often posited as a utilitarian resource to be maintained for human benefit or as a source of ineffable, intrinsic value. Drawing on Nicole Seymour's work in *Bad Environmentalism* (2018), Walzer and Murray emphasized the ways guilt, shame, anxiety, didacticism, prescriptiveness, reverence, seriousness, earnestness, sentimentality, and sanctimoniousness propel mainstream environmental rhetoric and how, historically, it has been complicit with heteronormative, patriarchal, and white privilege.

Walzer and Murray also developed the critique of the term *anthropocene* – to refer to our current epoch as one in which world ecology is dominated by humans – discussed briefly by Armiero (see Munoz Martinez & Nenger, this issue) in the first event of the series. According to the speakers, when the term anthropocene frames environmental degradation, it conveys crisis (as opposed to slow violence) alongside a universalized, neocolonial, and Eurocentric perspective in which the overdevelopment and extractivism of the Global North is used to describe the globe without simultaneously inscribing responsibility for the effects of those practices on specific actors.

To elucidate additional blindspots of the anthropocene as a rhetorical framework, in addition to its universalized flattening of human impact and evasion of accountability, Walzer and Murray used the example of the anthropomorphisation of Lake Mary Jane in Florida. In a 2022 article in *The New Yorker*, American environmental journalist Elizabeth Kolbert (2022) anthropomorphized the lake with she/her pronouns in describing the lawsuit through which the lake is suing the state under Orange County, Florida's "rights of nature law," for damages caused by a proposed development. On one hand, Kolbert's terminology is fitting given the lake's name and because rights of nature law ascribes individual rights to nonhuman entities. Although the law has previously been used by animal plaintiffs, Kolbert (2022) notes, "never before has an inanimate slice of nature tried to defend its rights in an American courtroom." However, Walzer and Murray pointed out the limitations of anthropomorphic rhetoric and ultimately argued against its use:

This kind of individualized discourse that is meant to prevent a more distributed and ecological violation activates a public attuned to crisis events that reinforces geopolitical structures of power and neoliberal political sovereignty and thus forecloses the recognition of the structural and ongoing causes of violations. In

other words, by suing the development company, the lake may prevent its destruction if it preserves its feeding wetlands from being developed, but that doesn't prevent its potential demise from the warming atmosphere causing algae blooms, changes in soil structure, or more frequent drying or flooding due to climate change.

Rights of nature laws, like other forms of individual rights, lack the capacity to address structural conditions foundational to rights violations as well as causes that may not be reducible to a single jurisdiction, bounded entity, or lifespan.

This argument initiated a robust discussion amongst the seminar's participants. While acknowledging the dangers of individual (inherently anthropomorphic) rights frameworks, an environmental studies professor in the audience pointed out how this kind of anthropomorphizing of rivers or forests can, nonetheless, invoke empathy. She described how she uses the example of the Ganges River, which is personified as a goddess in Indigenous Indian culture, to garner empathy for the river from her students, arguing that the approach enables faster and more effective mobilization in environmental justice movements. A graduate student posed the possibility that personifying lakes, mountains, or even algae might act as a starting point for imagining newer and expanded definitions of personhood that would help overcome the limitations of legal personhood the way we know it today. Another seminar participant took up this observation about the need to expand the concept of personhood, asking if it were possible to use Walzer's concept of everyday violence to think about the figure of the climate refugee whose personhood and land claims has been compromised due to slow violence (those forms of socio-environmental violence whose pernicious incrementalism and multi-scalar effects might be transgenerational; Nixon, 2013).

As an alternative to mainstream environmental rhetoric tied to histories of exploitation, colonialism, and rarefied views of nature, the speakers proposed alternative environmental rhetorical frameworks to address the inequity of environment protection and injustice in marginalized and minority communities' access to clean environment and land uses alongside these communities' exposure to environmental harms and degradation. Walzer and Murray pointed out that whereas the rhetoric of environmental justice often focuses on minority communities, it can do so in ways that underestimate or ignore the resilience and ingenuity of these communities. As a case study, Murray discussed her extensive research on community-driven resistance to the Tennessee Valley Authority's (TVA) dam project in Appalachia (e.g., Murray, 2015). Through a decade of resistance using environmental justice rhetorics that were highly localized and based on lived experience, the grassroots environmental activists – the local “Dam Fighters” – united and succeeded in thwarting the TVA's proposed plan of building 14 dams on the French Broad River and its tributaries in Western North Carolina. Those dams would have resulted in flooding of fertile agricultural lands, displacement of 600 local families, and destruction of freshwater streams that local residents use for trout fishing and recreation. As Murray explained:

One of the most effective examples of the group's highly specific arguments stems from the 1971 public hearing the group organized with TVA. Although originally scheduled for three hours on one afternoon, the large number of attendees wearing the yellow scarves ... *insisted* on speaking before TVA and sharing their lived experiences along the river, [such] that the hearing lasted for three full days.

She added,

The yellow scarves were created by the dam fighters and were spray painted with black UFBDA letters. The full name of the dam fighters was the Upper French Broad Defense Association. One news source covering the hearing suggested that 'the hall blossomed yellow' because there were so many people wearing yellow scarves in the audience of the hearing with TVA officials. The scarves created an impressive visual argument stating the overwhelming local opposition to the TVA project.

The success of the Dam Fighters' efforts from 1961 to 1972 and ultimate obstruction of the TVA dam project due in part to lack of public support demonstrates the effectiveness of localized environmental justice rhetoric in making changes at a local level.

Murray's careful study of the effectiveness of the rhetoric of environmental justice deployed by the movement resisting the TVA dam project sparked an interesting discussion with the audience. One graduate student connected the description of the TVA dam project to the Three Gorges Dam in China, a hydroelectric gravity dam on the Yangtze River. She asked about the potential for collaborations and solidarities across such geographically diverse locations, an inquiry that raised the larger question of how rhetorical approaches might bring both local knowledges and values and translocal or global frameworks to bear (we think of the slogan, "We are all Bhopal," used by local and transnational activists working on the ground in response to the 1984 Union Carbide toxic pesticide plant gas leak in Bhopal, India, as one possible example).

Murray's case study of the Dam Fighters emphasized how local activists drew on their lived experience and material realities to resist the TVA project. Walzer took up that thread to introduce new materialist approaches within rhetorical theory. Briefly, new materialist approaches do away with binary oppositions between humans and nature and, correspondingly, subjects (or actors) and objects. Analyzing a context in terms of its assemblage or network of human and nonhuman actors, new materialist rhetoric, Walzer explained, "constitutes a distinct approach to considering the ways in which power, agency, violence, and the social operates outside of traditional rhetorical teleologies of persuasion." This materialist approach to rhetoric is at the core of what she terms the "rhetoric of everyday violence," arguing, "if slow violence relates to the structural condition of precarity, then a rhetoric of everyday violence is a more effective rhetorical way to claim rights within the global climate justice movement." Crucially for Walzer, the framework of

everyday violence addresses the situated effects of structural violence and environmental degradation which may be translocal or multi-generational and may take place on a cellular level or on a vast geographic scale. Everyday violence is “always interested in the contextual rhetorical relationship: of who is speaking, on behalf of whom, and for what ends within a rhetorical situation always embedded in structures of power.”

To demonstrate how the rhetoric of everyday violence can become a rhetoric of resistance, Walzer offered an examination of *Sacchi, et al. v Argentina, et al.*³ In this case, 16 children from around the world filed a petition against five G20 countries (Argentina, Brazil, France, Germany, and Turkey) at the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), alleging that those countries violated their rights by perpetuating climate change. Though the UNCRC ultimately announced the petition inadmissible, this is the first climate change case to be filed by individuals from around the world attempting to hold several states parties responsible for human rights violations relating to climate change. Walzer noted that in the case of *Sacchi, et al. v Argentina, et al.*, the children made an argument that crosses temporal boundaries: “you are violating our right to futurity now, and you (will be) violating our future rights if you don’t act now.” Their plea is for a shift to be made away from a crisis-oriented model of environmental justice advocacy, towards a model that draws attention to how this injustice affects not just the present but robs the plaintiffs of their future. Walzer distinguished this from the case of Lake Mary Jane, which attempted to individually personify a body of water, by noting that the advocacy here was on behalf of the children as a collective, rather than individuals.

This rhetorical frame and Walzer and Murray’s emphasis on the power of storytelling and its employment towards justice-oriented ends was of particular interest to us. As co-hosts and co-producers of an ongoing podcast called *Immigrants Wake America*,⁴ we strive to facilitate a space for a diverse set of stories about immigration and migration to be voiced, including those of first-generation immigrants and those whose family migrated to this country several decades ago. Our podcast, in collaboration with the Tenement Museum in New York, was conceptualized as a response to the rampant increase in hate crimes and anti-immigrant rhetoric in the US in recent years. Similar to Walzer and Murray’s work, our podcast is built on our fundamental belief in the power of storytelling. Utilizing the capacity of storytelling to build affective bonds across civic spaces, our podcast aims to blur the lines between the static notions of an “immigrant” and an “American” and offer a humanizing counterpart to harmful narratives. The pervasive demonization of immigrants, especially immigrant women, in all forms of popular culture is the kind of *symbolic annihilation*, “which both precedes and succeeds actual annihilation in that communities are rendered nonexistent, invisible, or expendable before they are

³ <http://climatecasechart.com/non-us-case/sacchi-et-al-v-argentina-et-al/>

⁴ <https://www.immigrantswakeamerica.com/home>

subject to violence” (Caswell, 2018). The rhetoric of everyday violence that Walzer and Murray present lays bare the everydayness of the microaggressions that are part of the lives and stories of immigrant women. Further, their focus on rhetorical strategy inspires us to innovate more with our own editorial practices, to maximize the persuasiveness of the stories being told.

The fusing of everyday violence and justice rhetorics that move beyond personhood is particularly resonant for us and resembles our own efforts to fight for the rights of immigrant women, not only as individuals, but as a collective. Each episode of our podcast focuses on particular stories of immigration narrated by individuals. However, the podcast in its entirety imagines each story as a part of a collective. Further, we saw that the urgency that is part of the ethos of *Immigrants Wake America* corresponds to Walzer and Murray’s efforts to show how everyday violence impacts the collective futurity of the community.

In the discussion that followed the presentation, Walzer responded to a question about the not-yet-rhetorical by clarifying that in their understanding, the rhetorical already encompasses sounds, silences, and other such paralinguistic elements. This makes a lot of sense to us, because in our podcasts, by employing effective editorial strategies in how we use sound effects, background music, and other aural elements, we offer our listeners more insights into the stories, facilitating community building between and among our listeners and storytellers alike. How Walzer and Murray theorize helps us refuse to resort to a flattened universal “we” and instead favor a collective we capable of exposing the deep power differentials resulting from colonial histories. Given that both our storytellers and our listeners are from different race, gender, and class backgrounds, any approach that essentializes their identities would defeat the purpose of their stories, and indeed, of the podcast itself.

Walter and Murray’s seminar and the generative discussion it led to elucidate the crucial place that a rhetorical approach holds in addressing ecological catastrophe and social injustices. Through advocating for the rhetorics of resistance and the framework of everyday violence and slow violence, they provided a potential solution that bridges the efficacy of localized arguments with globalized injustices and highlighted the agency of more collective and everyday rhetorics of resistance. The concepts and strategies Walzer and Murray offered are applicable to our own work in the battle of justice for immigrants, especially immigrant women. We find ourselves better equipped to pay close attention to counter-narratives presented through storytelling on our podcast and are inspired to employ some of their rhetorical strategies to maximize the impact of our own intervention in the ways in which immigrant (hi)stories are produced and consumed locally and globally. The seminar, underlining the rhetorics of everyday violence alongside the collective “we,” provided a framework that recognizes distributed agency in the landscape of (in)justice and partakes in collective and everyday resistance that makes the landscape of repair possible.

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