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Responsibilities of Rhetoric panel
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I used to begin my Environmental Rhetoric class with this quote:

For most rhetoricians who write essays . . . the environment is not a thing you could go out and find in the world. Rather, it is a concept and an associated set of cultural values that we have constructed through the way we use language. In a very real sense, there is no objective environment in the phenomenal world, not environment separate from the words we use to represent it. We can define the environment and how it is affected by our actions only through the language we have developed to talk about these issues. As rhetorical theorists have long argued, what we know, how we know it, and who can speak about it authoritatively are largely determined by our language” (Herndl and Brown, Green Culture).

I no longer find this to be a satisfactory introduction to rhetoric and the environment.

While the “environment” may still be amorphous, cancer, global warming, deforestation and toxins are things you can find in the world. They are objective phenomena that dictate life and death. While the rhetorical framing of these issues matters, and matters enormously, we cannot symbolically construct a world that is cooling nor can we discursively reframe cancer out of the body. It is the interrogation of this relationship between the discursive and the material where rhetoricians can have the most impact.

To analyze this relationship requires investigating the way science functions in constructing reality. While an imperfect tool, science currently is the primary means of establishing evidence for environmental controversies. In contaminated communities this is often challenged with community truths, body epistemology, toxic tours, etc., but Science still reigns as the uber-epistemology. Other ways of knowing are often used as means of gaining enough attention to get someone to do the scientific studies needed for a legal case or for state or federal support. Science moves back and forth between

playing the role of villain and then hero in environmental dramas. The equating of statistical insignificance with social insignificance and scientific studies that are inconclusive by design continue to plague environmental decision-making. But, just when we're ready to count science out, it comes to the rescue in highly public ways, such as the debates on climate change. Nelta Edwards maintains it is not a matter of good science or bad science; it is limits of science that are the problem. I am not sure.

The second area of investigation in this search for the real is through examining the use of images in environmental advocacy, policy and decision-making. Knowing is linked with seeing in Western societies. Nebulous entities such as global warming (until the damage is done) and invisible ones, like many of the most toxic of substances, problematizes analyses of the visual in environmental rhetoric. Still, not having something to see can mean not having something to say in our visually fixated society. How images work to establish and obfuscate what is real is an important area of study for environmental rhetoricians.

Instead of primarily focusing on how rhetoric constructs reality, we now have the responsibility to use our understanding of how rhetoric functions to peel back the layers of discourse to expose something that those of us who work outside of philosophy tend to be wary of asserting: the truth.