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BOOK REVIEW

# The rhetoric of climate change

## Debra Hawhee: A sense of urgency: how the climate crisis is changing rhetoric. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023, 272 pp, $27.50 PB

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I write this review from my home in Asheville, North Carolina, a city of 95,000 people that was left devastated from the 30 inches of rain dumped by Hurricane Helene on 26–28 September. As a result of the storm, 30 Asheville residents are dead and 26 are still missing. In some Asheville neighborhoods, over 80% of homes and businesses were destroyed. Smaller nearby communities—Chimney Rock, Black Mountain, Swannanoa—were just obliterated. Now, over a month later, most homes again have electricity and running water, though the water is still unsafe to drink or bathe in. Ryan Cole, the Assistant Director of Emergency Services for Buncombe County, where Asheville is, described the devastation from Helene as "biblical" (Gomez 2024).

But this, of course, was not an act of God. It was a man-made disaster. According to World Weather Attribution, Helene was the result of anthropocentric climate change which not only brought more violent rains and wind, but also made it 70% more likely that the storm would make it to Asheville, in the Appalachian Mountains—*450 miles* (725 km) from where it made landfall in Florida (World Weather 2024).

Enter Debra Hawhee's *A Sense of Urgency*, a book that examines how climate change and the ways we talk about it—as, for instance, *unparalleled* in nature, *unfathomable* in scope, a source of *biblical* destruction—is changing rhetoric itself. The project is important, for climate change presents distinctive challenges for rhetoric. Climate change is, after all, *unprecedented* and this means that we struggle to explain, much less understand or respond appropriately to, something that is, literally, without precedent. We need better rhetorical tools that can help us appreciate the magnitude and urgency of the challenges we face, tools that can help us understand

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the harm—the injustice—that climate change brings to the most vulnerable members of our communities, to future generations, not to mention non-humans, ecosystems, and landscapes.

The book's aim, then, is not only to help us understand the rhetorical challenges that climate change brings, but also to improve our understanding of how rhetorical innovations might help us better appreciate—and so work to "bend back"—the devastation that climate change is bringing (4). While this is valuable work, the book is, to my mind, undergirded by a misplaced optimism about the power of climate change rhetoric. This is not to say the book is not important: Hawhee helps us see occasions where our talk of climate change is changing rhetoric for the better. But she also neglects the darker side, where the same changes in our talk of climate change are being weaponized, misunderstood, or just plain ignored.

Bookended by introductory and concluding chapters, the core of Hawhee's discussion consists of four, chapter-long case studies that she sees as "departures" from the rhetorician's ordinary way of talking about climate change (16). While the lessons of the case studies overlap and inform each other, she uses each to highlight a particular rhetorical innovation.

Chapter 2 focuses on a 2019 ceremony memorializing the death of the Icelandic glacier Okjökull. Here we see how the various pieces of this event come together rhetorically. For instance, through talk of Okjökull as a glacier with a grand history that is now dead, we come to see it as a witness to climatic change spanning centuries. This not only amplifies the importance of what has happened, but also extends our understanding of agency: if Okjökull is a witness, then *non*-human entities can be sources of moral knowledge. But talking about Okjökull's death also engages our imaginations, making present what may come to be: Iceland without ice, Mount Fuji without its snowcap (38).

But as poignant as this is, there is a dark irony to the rhetoric as well. Hawhee tells us, for instance, how the ceremony's organizers traveled to Iceland the year before for an "Unglacier Tour"—an event designed to counter the glacier tourism that has recently exploded in Iceland (33). But not only has the growth of Iceland's glacial tourism continued, but boutique glacier tour companies now boast of their proximity to the memorial for Okjökull as a selling point in their marketing materials (Arctic Adventure 2024).

In Chapter 3, we move to the committee rooms of the United States House of Representatives. Here we see how four BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) and LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) youth climate activists used their lived experiences to deliver a rhetorically and morally powerful combination of fact and feeling, testimony that the Democratic organizers of the hearings hoped would convince their "intransigent, partisan colleagues to agree to take bold action" (53). So, for instance, Chris Suggs, an 18-year-old, African American, spoke of his life in Kinston, a poor, largely Black city in eastern North Carolina. "In just my 18½ years on this earth, my community has experienced two 500-year floods" (62). He then adds that communities like Kinston, are "the communities that have *already* been hit the hardest by all of society's other problems" (63, original emphasis). The rhetorical innovation in this testimony lies in its engagement of time and mood. Suggs' words, and those of his peers, are future-oriented in a way that not only gets

one to *feel* the underlying fear, anxiety, and anger, but does so in a way that connects the present injustice with the racism, segregation, and discrimination of the past.

But while surely moving for the Democratic organizers, the youths' testimony did little to shift Congressional opinion. In fact, the growing focus on youth emotions is bringing Congressional trouble. For instance, the Republican Senator Ted Cruz uses much of the same research that, as Hawhee notes (60), was highlighted at the 2019 hearings. But he uses it to convey a *very* different message. For instance, a recent Cruz press release warns that "young people are absorbing the rhetoric [of the so-called 'climate crisis']; they report high levels of anxiety about climate change and are adapting their behavior in radical ways, including by foregoing children." Continuing, Cruz maintains that efforts to promote 'climate justice' or push for 'systemic change' are only feeding the crisis of eco-anxiety in American youth (Cruz 2024; scare quotes in the original).

Chapter 4 examines how visual tools from the COVID-19 pandemic have provided climate researchers with better ways of articulating both the magnitude of the climate crisis and the need to take quick action to combat it. Exhibit A is the "epi curve" of the pandemic and the rhetoric of "flattening" that it spawned. Seeing how public health officials used epi curves to great effect has spurred climate change researchers to adopt a similarly visual communication strategy. As Hawhee details, superimposing a flattened curve on top of the more familiar graphs of exponential increases in temperatures is another rhetorical innovation. With this new way of presenting otherwise complicated mathematical data, at just a glance we can not only see, but *understand* what is at stake. Moreover, by also adopting the pandemic's "flattening the curve" rhetoric, climate researchers can more easily convey the need to "crush" the behavior driving climate change (97). The result is an example of how a graphic and its slogan "offer a window on how numbers can feel," how they can engage our emotions (81).

There is no doubt that climate change discourse has become more effective by adopting the data visualization strategies of the pandemic. What remains unclear, however, is whether these tools have really brought feeling to numbers. Was it the graph and the slogan that did the affective work in the case of the pandemic? Or was it the fact that we all *had* COVID or *saw* our family members suffering from it? I suspect the latter, and, if that is right, then it blunts Hawhee's optimism about the impact that the adoption of a graph and slogan will have for climate change. It suggests that what we need if we are to "feel the numbers" is not new data visualization strategies but *actual experiences* with the impact of climate change.

In a sense, this issue gets taken up in Chapter 5 where we turn to Mia Lin's 2021 *Ghost Forrest* exhibition. The installation consists of 49 near-dead Atlantic white cedar trees that were installed in New York City's Madison Square Park. The exhibition aimed to use the trees, dying from saltwater intrusion, to provide palpable, visual evidence of climate change's devastating effects. In designing her exhibition, Lin uses the trees, the signage, and a haunting audio soundscape of native animals no longer there to give visitors the ability to not just see, but feel, the enormity of what is happening. For Hawhee, *Ghost Forrest* illustrates how art, especially *public* art, "can redirect rhetoric about climate change, can intensify without polarizing" (110). Visitors can engage with Lin's display on their own terms, not through protest signs or

preachy speeches: the manner in which the ghostly dead trees appear in an otherwise lush city park invites engagement, provoking not just thought but an eerie, emerging awareness of what is happening and why.

But again, the discussion seems too one-sided. We know, after all, that much of the signage of monuments and educational displays either goes unread or is just consumed by those who already accept the narrative being told (Smith 2020). On this front, we get a confirming anecdote from Hawhee. She describes an encounter where a confused security guard tells and inquiring visitor that the trees are fake (122). Not even the people paid by the curating team are interested in understanding what they are looking at!

All told, the case studies of *A Sense of Urgency* provide an engaging window onto how climate change is shaping rhetoric. But in emphasizing the good that our shifting rhetoric can do, the book misses the opportunity—the need—to tell the more complicated tale. And here I fear that in order to really feel the urgency of climate change, we need not just rhetoric, but the lived experience of Asheville-like destruction.

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