Making Tracks: Lynda Walsh

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In the “Making Tracks” series, RCC fellows and alumni present their experiences in environmental humanities, retracing the paths that led them to the Rachel Carson Center. For more information, please click **here**.

By **Lynda Walsh**

I’m not 100 percent positive, but I believe I may be the first rhetorician who has been a fellow at the Rachel Carson Center. This impression was corroborated by the confused squints that frequently greeted me when I introduced myself in the corridors or at a Works-in-Progress meeting: “Rhetoric?” my new colleagues would echo, and their undulating eyebrows added: “What’s that? And what’s it got to do with the environment?”

Good questions. I myself didn’t have the answers to them for a long time, but now I do—in part thanks to my experience at the RCC.

Rhetoric—as taught and studied in the US and most of the British Commonwealth—is the art of forming communities with words, images, and other meaningful gestures. I didn’t know it existed as an academic discipline until I was most of the way through my MA in Linguistics at the University of Texas at Austin. I had some questions related to my thesis—questions about the logical patterns of *National Geographic* texts—and my advisor said to me, “You should go talk to the rhetoricians next door.” When I did, I discovered that many of my questions about how scientific texts cohered and persuaded their readers had been answered nearly 2,500 years ago by Aristotle, Hermogenes, and other rhetoricians. And so I embarked on the study of the *topoi* or strategic “places” from which scientific writers discover what they want to say and signal to their audiences to follow them.

It didn’t occur to me that *topoi* could include real “places” until I moved back to New Mexico, where I grew up, and taught rhetoric and writing at a small technical university there. I should mention here that the twin (and nemesis) of *topos* in the

rhetorical tradition is *kairos*—meaning season, opening, or opportunity. *Kairos* is chance; *topos* is craft. *Kairos* is what we can't predict and control; *topos* is what we can. These terms are in constant tension as we seek stances from which we can survive and thrive in the chaotic onrush of life, *topoi* serving us like rocks in the flooding river of *kairos*. And the *kairos* that quickly flooded around me in New Mexico was a controversy over the reintroduction of the Mexican gray wolf to its ancestral habitat in the area around the Gila wilderness. The reintroduction was failing: more wolves were dying than were being born. But their high mortality had little or nothing to do with the physical landscape; wolves were finding plenty of elk to eat and were denning and raising litters as expected. They were just being shot and trapped (legally and illegally) faster than they could reproduce—mostly due to conflicts (real and imagined) with livestock.

It dawned on me that there was a second landscape the wolves were living in that was invisible to the stakeholders in the reintroduction—and that was the rhetorical landscape. In other words, conflicts among *people* were what was really killing the wolves. And having grown up in the area, I knew people on all sides of the controversy—wildlife biologists, ranchers, environmental activists, and American Indians. I could see the validity in all of their viewpoints. And I had the tools to intervene in this *kairos*, to map the territory each group was staking out with their statements, and to show how they were fencing each other in or out of the conversation.

That was how I started doing environmental rhetoric. I ended up writing three papers on the Mexican gray wolf reintroduction—using *topoi* to draw an outline of the *topology* of administrators', ranchers', and activists' attitudes toward the reintroduction in order to try to trace some common ground among these attitudes. I was able to present my work to a few of these groups and was lucky to be able to stick around long enough to see a little progress made both in intergroup communication and in the wolf population. And Bruno Latour invited me to post a short presentation on rhetorical common ground as it related to the conflicts surrounding the gray wolf reintroduction, to his Massive Online Open Course (MOOC) on digital humanities.

This work connected me to the circles of European scholars who were starting to rediscover rhetoric as a community-building art—not just as a propaganda machine, which was the version of rhetoric that Plato and subsequent Western philosophers (up to Nietzsche) had successfully peddled on the Continent. **Birgit Schneider** invited me to Potsdam in 2011 to talk about new work I was doing on the visual rhetoric of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's graphics, work that revealed the connection

between graphs of temperature and arguments about climate scientists' ethical character. In Potsdam, I met scholars from other humanities disciplines—history and media studies in particular—who were working on questions very close to the traditional purview of rhetoric: How do visual genres constitute communities and vice versa? How can we make our methods more sensitive to the specific places (*topoi*) and moments (*kairoi*) in which communities are deliberating and deciding about climate change? They were interested to hear how rhetorical methods might support their inquiries. Birgit and **Mike Hulme** pointed me toward the RCC fellowships, which is how I ended up in the hallway on the fourth floor fielding the scrunched eyebrows.

But it was there in the hallway that I saw clearly for the first time how and why I had fallen into working on environmental rhetoric. If as a rhetorician I had sworn myself to negotiating the eternal tension between *topos* and *kairos* to try to promote democracy—and if, as Thomas Rickert argues in **Ambient Rhetoric**, the stances we choose choose us at the same time—then of course the wolves, drought, and heat swirling around me in the southwestern US spoke to me and through me. Likewise, I don't think it was an accident that the RCC brought their first rhetorician to the center last fall. Just as Bruno Latour calls for a new Panathenaicus in **An Inquiry into Modes of Existence (AIME)**—one that sees humans and wolves and charts all assembled together in the agora—all of us are urgently searching for new "diplomacies," new tools to build community as a bulwark against the coming storms. I know my colleagues at the RCC taught me many useful techniques from media ecology, critical geography, economics, and anthropology. I hope I was able to pass on a few tools from rhetoric's 2,500-year-old kit as well; after all, this is exactly what they were made for.