

Debra Hawhee, **A Sense of Urgency: How the Climate Crisis Is Changing Rhetoric**, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2023, 272 pp., \$27.50 (paperback).

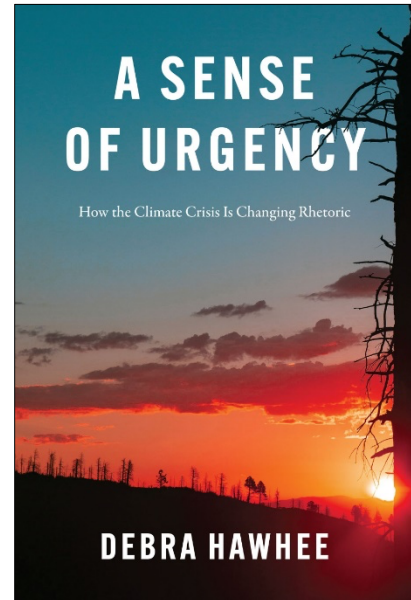
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Climate change is an existential threat that demands a fundamental shift in the way we interact with nature. As the impacts of climate change become increasingly dramatic—from more frequent and intense natural disasters to rising sea levels—the need for effective communication to demand a response to these threats becomes more critical. In her book, **A Sense of Urgency: How the Climate Crisis Is Changing Rhetoric**, Dr. Debra Hawhee explores how different rhetorical forms meet the demands of an unprecedented climate crisis. Hawhee, the McCourtney Professor of Civic Deliberation at the College of Liberal Arts at the Pennsylvania State University and a celebrated scholar of rhetoric, argues that new expressions of rhetoric are emerging to convey the extraordinary and urgent nature of the climate crisis. This book thrives in its ability to bring together wide-ranging examples to demonstrate how rhetoric is used to communicate the climate crisis.

However, the book would benefit from comparing these examples with other forms of rhetoric to justify the claim that rhetoric is changing. Furthermore, a foremost engagement with Indigenous theories, such as the concept of nature as living (Kimmerer, 2002), could reveal how current climate rhetoric has roots in existing modes of thinking and communicating about the environment.

Starting with the title, *A Sense of Urgency* stresses the pressing nature of climate change. The concept of *felt time*, which Hawhee defines as “a palpable sense of how the future . . . feels” (p. 54), winds throughout the book to describe how climate rhetors experience and communicate the urgency of climate change. Likewise, Hawhee draws on rhetoric as “the art of intensification” to explore how rhetorical forms are used to communicate the *magnitude* of the problem of climate change (p. 4). Through a series of four distinct and multimodal cases—spanning analyses of a memorial ceremony for a deceased glacier, congressional testimony of youth activists, repurposed “flatten the curve” graphics, and public artwork of a ghost forest—Hawhee examines ways of rhetorically conveying the *magnitude* and *felt time* of the climate crisis. Using traditional library methods, Hawhee uses a breadth of materials, including interviews, photographs, congressional transcripts, social media posts, news reports, and on-site observations, to examine the cases in depth. Through the aforementioned four cases, Hawhee argues that people are changing the way that we use rhetoric in response to climate change.

The analysis begins with chapter 2, “Glacial Death,” which examines a memorial ceremony held for an Icelandic formation that had lost its status as a glacier due to rising temperatures and, thus, had died. Hawhee explores how the symbolic gestures of the ceremony aid people in *feeling* the climate crisis



personally. The ceremony, which involved dozens of people, included the issuance of a death certificate, a hike, spoken words, and a memorial plaque. These commemorative acts ascribe agency to the glacier, treating it as an entity with its own life and memory. Hawhee writes, glaciers “bear witness . . . to deep time/place, providing what scientists call proxy data about centuries—millennia, even—of climate change, cataclysmic events on both a local and, in the case of Chernobyl, a regional or even global scale” (p. 17). Here, she acknowledges how glaciers are records of past climatic events and current planetary warming. More than scientific evidence, however, the rhetoric of the ceremony helps those gathered to understand and *feel* the intensity of this loss.

Next, in chapter 3, Hawhee examines a strikingly different mode of climate rhetoric: the personal testimonies of youth climate activists before the U.S. House of Representatives. Through their testimonies, the activists depict their experiences of living through worsening weather events before Congress, thus making the urgency of their own *felt time* accessible to this group. For example, Hawhee quotes activist Chris Suggs of North Carolina who states,

In just my 18½ years on this earth, my community has experienced two 500-year floods on top of the floods after Hurricane Floyd in 1999. For these catastrophic events to happen at such a fast rate, a rate that my community can’t recover from, is deeply alarming. (p. 62)

The testimonies in this chapter bring the immediate and personal impacts of climate change to the congressional audience, demanding they feel and react to the urgency of the crisis.

Chapter 4, “Learning Curves,” addresses how the COVID-19 “flatten the curve” graphic has been adapted to illustrate the *magnitude* of climate risks with and without substantial action. Graphs take concepts that are difficult to individually observe such as COVID-19 rates or prehistoric global temperature averages and makes them concise. Through the repurposed “flatten the curve” graphic and other climate change graphs such as Michael Mann’s hockey stick graph and the Keeling curve, this chapter demonstrates the role of numerical rhetoric in conveying the magnitude of the crisis.

Finally, chapter 5 details Maya Lin’s public art installation, Ghost Forest, shrewdly named in reference to the scientific name for a forest with dead and dying trees. Lin brought dying trees that were scheduled to be removed from the New Jersey Pine Barrens to Madison Square Park in New York City. She paired them with a soundtrack of the sounds of animals native to Manhattan Island. Where available, Lin included the animals’ names in the languages of the Lenape people native to the region. This chapter demonstrates the concept of *felt witnessing* through Lin’s curated ghost forest, which prompts feelings of loss and absence by asking, “What is missing?” (p. 131).

In *A Sense of Urgency*, Hawhee examines how each of these cases “reduce[s] the spatial and temporal distance of the climate crisis, thereby heightening its magnitude and creating new forms of witnessing” (p. 110). In short, this book discusses how rhetoric attempts to move people into *feeling* the climate crisis personally. One of the notable strengths of this book is Hawhee’s ability to bring together seemingly disparate rhetorical genres and demonstrate their similar capacity to emotionally impact those present.

While *A Sense of Urgency* effectively demonstrates different ways of rhetorically conveying the magnitude and urgency of the climate crisis, the book could benefit from a more detailed exploration of what constitutes new or changed rhetoric in this context. Although climate change undeniably presents “an unprecedented set of circumstances” (p. 3), as evinced through the increased rate of 500-year floods and the record-breaking amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere today, I am not yet convinced that rhetoric itself is changing. How are the expressions of rhetoric discussed in this book different from other expressions of rhetoric? Clarifying how the rhetorical practices examined in the book compare to former rhetorical methods would strengthen Hawhee’s argument that rhetoric is in fact changing or would reveal that these practices may not be all that new.

Relatedly, the book would benefit from a deeper and more consistent engagement with the Indigenous theories that it draws on. For example, nature as “subject, not object” is a concept within traditional ecological knowledge that could have been usefully woven throughout the book into discussions about glaciers, trees, and people as witnesses to change (Kimmerer, 2002). Hawhee addresses the concept of nature-as-living in the epilogue, where she quotes indigenous scholar Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) on the use of pronouns in English and the Native American Potawatomi language: “If a maple is an *it*, we can take up the chain saw. If a maple is a *her*, we think twice” (p. 145). This perspective suggests that the rhetorical strategy of ascribing agency to glaciers, trees, and other elements of nature reflects a *return* to Indigenous ways of thinking rather than something that is outright new. Engaging more with hegemonic and nonhegemonic ways of thinking, communicating, and living with nature could clarify and strengthen the argument of the book.

Debra Hawhee’s *A Sense of Urgency* demonstrates through four wide-reaching examples how climate rhetors use diverse forms to convey the feeling of this moment. Scholars of environmental communication, rhetoric, and discourse alike will find this book engaging for its examination of several intriguing genres of climate change communication—commemorative ritual, congressional testimony, popular mathematics, and art installation. Those interested in witnessing, imagination, and feeling will also find this book particularly relevant. For further exploration of related themes, readers may also consider *The New Climate War* by Michael Mann (2021), *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013), and *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* by Amitav Ghosh (2018). These pieces complement Hawhee’s book by offering additional perspectives on environmental communication and future imaginaries.

References

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