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tahlequah, rhetoric, human, journey, understand, stormal, argue, act, worldview, ecological, orca, vulnerability, mourning, analysis, orcas, capacity, observation, seattle, resilience, activists

SPEAKERS

Thomas Ritz



Thomas Ritz 00:13

When Tahlequah finally delivered her baby, observers were ecstatic after a long and difficult pregnancy. 30 minutes later, her baby died. Observers claim Tahlequah then entered a strange period of mourning. She paraded her baby's dead body around for weeks, journeyed over 1000 miles, and refused to even stop and eat endangering her own health. An intense display.



Thomas Ritz 00:42

From this: Tahlequah is a Southern Resident Orca whale. She's part of an endangered species, and last July engaged in a 17 day long journey, where she continually carried the carcass of her dead baby above water. The distinction between mother and child can be seen here, as well as in this striking photograph, both provided by the National Geographic of August 17, 2018. Washington public radio on August 8 2018 explains. These observations ignited a tense local policy debate and a groundbreaking moral debate. Indisputably, ecologists, activists, politicians and even international news media referred to Tahlequah's journey as if it were a public, decipherable piece of communication. The Seattle Times called it, "a journey the world watched." The Washington Post, "stunning and devastating." The Independent UK, "tragic." NPR, "a heartbreaking vigil." And CBS, "a tour of grief." Clearly, this was not human rhetoric, but for so many it became a communicative event, leaving us asking, how did spectators transform Tahlequah's grief into an act of rhetoric?

- T** Thomas Ritz 02:01
To answer, we turn to Nathan Stormer and Bridie McGreavy's article: Thinking Ecologically about Rhetoric's Ontology, published in the 2017 volume of Philosophy and Rhetoric. Our authors understand how the dynamic human-environment relationship can be thought through as what they call ecological rhetoric. So today we'll break down their work, apply it, and then discuss implications. Maybe then we'll understand why one reader wrote the Seattle Times of August 5 2018, "I haven't slept in days. I can't stop crying."
- T** Thomas Ritz 02:36
Our authors propose an ontology, or a way of understanding, rhetoric's fundamental component that encompasses human-environment relation. This ontology has three tenets, capacity, vulnerability, and resilience.
- T** Thomas Ritz 02:52
First, capacity. Our authors argue, we think rhetoric requires that one act on or to another, yet, they further that this action on another only becomes rhetoric because that other is changeable or persuadable, they have the volatility to do something different. What's crucial is not the desire to change, but the ability to be changed; the capacity to react.
- T** Thomas Ritz 03:20
Next vulnerability. Stormer and McGreavy argue, we think rhetoric is forceful, since traditional persuasion imposes a problem and a worldview on an audience.
- T** Thomas Ritz 03:30
Yet they also locate rhetoric in situations where one's experiences, weaknesses and constraints are on open, visual display. Think of performances, where one's experiences are enough to create an entire shared sense of space and response. They argue this is the foundation, a sort of mutual vulnerability, or relational openness.
- T** Thomas Ritz 03:54
Last resilience, our theory requires that rhetoric is not a zone of conflict and friction, but one of production and refinement. Human and non-human actors rarely explicitly resist each other, but so often engage in acts that permanently change us both. Stormer and McGreavy concluded ecological rhetoric looks like this: a series of events that by being

interactive shape new bonds, memories, feelings, senses of community and even worldviews. This theory applies to the entirety of a rhetorical situation. So let's examine how it applies to Tahlequah's journey.

- T** Thomas Ritz 04:35
First, capacity. Tahlequah did have the ability to react differently to her baby's death. The previously cited National Geographic reminds us that most orcas grieve, that is the scientifically accepted term, for only about a day. Scientists have never seen a mourning as long as Tahlequah's at over 17. That's what pushed us to a new emotional place. We found the capacity to think, in the words of the previously cited Seattle Times, "we, did this".
- T** Thomas Ritz 05:06
Next, vulnerability. Tahlequah's journey put orcas' very viability as an endangered species on open, visceral display. Her pod is monitored and known to be starving. They haven't had successful births in years. Perhaps that's what produced relational openness from humans. Take the following audio, "but watching this mother Orca to me express a very human emotion this sort of outpouring of grief. You, you understand where she's coming from, even though she's not a human." Where a CBS anchor seems to stumble over her words, attempting to portray confusion, even concern. Unintentionally open emotional display on national television.
- T** Thomas Ritz 05:53
Last, resilience. Tahlequah's journey produced a strange activist response. The Tri City Herald of August 17th, 2018 reports that one activist claimed this was a message. A Spokane city council member stated this has to be her communicating, and a Pierce city council member even stated this was a clear protest. That interpretation had force.
- T** Thomas Ritz 06:15
On November 10, Pierce city hosted its first Orca Recovery Day. And in December, Washington Governor, Jay Inslee, promised \$1.1 billion of new conservation funding. These policies sought to create a lasting, resilient orca population all grounded on an ecological worldview. Earlier we asked, how did spectators transform Tahlequah's grief into an act of rhetoric? Spectators seized on fundamental components of rhetoric that were present in Tahlequah's act itself. What makes this different from ASPCA videos or PETA campaigns is exactly that. **There is no clear human agency or service music slo mo framing.**





Thomas Ritz 06:59

Just a raw sentiment so many seem to understand. This directs us to focus not just on rhetorical statements, but rhetorical relations, prompting two implications. First, climate science is rhetorical and needs rhetoric. We love viewing science as the observation of fact, with us rhetorers ever since the ancient Greeks being viewed as deceptive truth twisters. But as Dana Cloud argues in her book, *Reality Bites*, this insistence makes scientists unwilling to rhetoricize their research and non scientists unprepared to engage in effective analysis, creating a chasm of inaction and even dishonesty. There is pathos, even persuasion to be found in the simple observation that Tahlequah is mourning and her pod is starving. To be clear, we should not exaggerate scientific observations, but facts, images, spark capacity,



Thomas Ritz 07:56

They should be used not to impose truth but to recognize new possibilities of action and seek resilient change. For us to understand and perhaps replicate Tahlequah's granular, community based response we must acknowledge that our dying, changing Earth is not just something of fact, but of narrative, too.



Thomas Ritz 08:21

Next, we must interrogate the race and gender components of our analysis. Often hallmarks of traditional rhetoric, logic, elegance, civilization, are used to distance ourselves from a dehumanized other. Be it an indigenous person, a slave or an undocumented immigrant who only speak Spanish, our analysis reminds us that we don't need to logically decode a message or speak a language to be vulnerable to a valid sense of pain. A worthwhile, powerful insight. But when we interpret this as a mother's pain, we use a very specific frame. One turning this whale known as Tahlequah, a name with Indigenous origins into a pseudo racialized other. So it becomes unclear whether the power lies in her act, or in our expectations of gendered, racialized performance.



Thomas Ritz 09:13

The solution is not to dismiss our analysis, or to separately analyze her act from our response, but to focus on this relation and push it further. Asking, how can we train ourselves to spot narrative in countless other ignored ecological disasters? Or as Juno Parreñas argues in her book *Decolonizing Extinction*, how can we teach ourselves to care for our earthly environment before we interpret it? Today, we developed a model of ecological rhetoric, applied it to Tahlequah's journey, and discussed implications. When

the Seattle Times called this "a journey the world watched," they were right. But so many tuned in not because they supported ecological policies, although we should, but because in Tahlequah's journey we felt something familiar, personal. Personal, even if not human.