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Critical Approaches to the Climate Crisis

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Abstract

This essay turns to theories developed in critical rhetoric and cultural studies to give us an alternate understanding of what is at stake in the climate crisis and offer tools to respond to the crisis. Scholars from those fields, especially decolonial scholars, help us access alternate scales of both time and geography by shifting our perspective from universal to specific, from dominant to insurgent, and, even from human to more-than-human. This article focuses on examples that can expand our understanding of who can combat climate change, what counts as climate activism, and our epistemological understanding of the climate crisis. Through an attention to power and the centering of those most marginalize and, consequently, those most affected by the climate crisis, Communication studies can give us the tools to address climate anxiety and envision a better, more sustainable, and more sustaining future.

Keywords

climate anxiety, cultural studies, decolonial, race

If there were any issue that we could call a truly global problem, surely the climate crisis would head the list. Given the widespread and apocalyptic impact of the problem, one might expect that the climate crisis is primarily a problem of knowledge diffusion. Certainly, my early environmental communication research began with the assumption that facilitating better quality communication, meaning faster and more information rich communication, was the primary goal. The alarming spread of disinformation undermining and minimizing the climate crisis does highlight the urgency of clear and persuasive scientific arguments about the existence of climate change, yet, as we have seen, facts alone are insufficient (Wibeck, 2014).

As more and more people come to accept the concept of human-induced climate change (Leiserowitz et al., 2023), scholars have also found that even those who acknowledge the existence of climate change will disengage, responding to the overwhelming reality of the climate crisis with paralyzing anxiety or apathy (Ballantyne, 2016). A 2021 study published in *The Lancet* surveyed 10,000 16–25 year olds and found that more than 50% felt fear, helplessness, powerlessness, and despair among other negative emotions in regard to climate change (Hickman et al., 2021). While anxiety can sometimes be productive, in this case, the complexity and lack of clear solutions to the issue means that climate anxiety is more likely to be intense and overwhelming rather than constructive. The climate crisis exemplifies what scholars like Nerlich et al. (2010) term a "wicked problem," referencing the multiple and interrelated factors leading to the climate crisis and the resulting difficulty of locating a starting point to address the issue.

One of the key challenges in responding to the climate crisis, then, stems from a problem with scale and perspective. The scale is too large and the perspective too singular since our current framing of the climate crisis as a global issue is both too complex and too simple. The global scale the problem is too enormous to contemplate, while the solutions proposed are frequently too large scale and too universal in their approaches. In my own research, I have turned to theories developed in critical rhetoric and cultural studies to give us an alternate understanding of what is at stake and offer tools to respond to the crisis. Scholars from those fields, especially decolonial scholars, help us access alternate scales of both time and geography by shifting our perspective from universal to specific, from dominant to insurgent, and, even from human to more-than-human.

Drawing from cultural studies theory, communication scholars can stage a crucial intervention in the universalist logic of responses to climate change. The massive scale of the climate crisis seems to demand an equally massive and coordinated response. For some activists, this might appear to be an opportunity to unite us all against a shared threat to

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our existence and a chance to embrace our commonality. While, ultimately, none of us can escape the effects of climate change, it is also true that the climate crisis does not impact us all equally. Climate change, like so many other environmental threats, disproportionately affects poorer, less empowered, and racially marked populations. Rob Nixon (2011) describes the everyday steady toll of environmental harms such as climate change, toxic waste, and air borne pollutants on colonized and displaced populations as "slow violence." As peoples already understood to be disposable under both capitalism and colonialism, they are affected first and most severely. Of course, this realization can compound a sense of helplessness given the deep historical roots of the problem and the extent of the damage, but it can also help us to find the key entry points for responding. Cultural studies, with its long-standing focus on power and inequality, is well positioned to provide tools to identify and track the hierarchies and ideologies that enable the differential effects of environmental degradation.

Rather than looking for an all-encompassing answer, both cultural studies and critical rhetoric approaches focus on the specific, with cultural studies paying particular attention to the most marginalized. This is not only an ethical stance, but also one that undermines the very notion of a universal subject. As cultural studies was taken up by academia in the last decades of the 20th century, one of its major contributions was to turn deconstruction methods toward understanding the relationship of the margin to the center. For instance, in the 1980s, Stuart Hall's (2020) now-classic analysis pointed out the symbolic role of tea in British society as England began its rightward swing. The move toward conservatism was accompanied by a wave of nationalism rooted in white supremacy. Hall pointed out the irony of the concurrent embrace of British culture and rejection of foreign Others by noting the colonial origins of that most British of beverages, tea. Rather than an autonomous or pure, British culture was a hybrid culture and only existed in relation to the Other, a relationship that was diminished or repressed to assert its own supremacy. Cultural studies scholars center those people and spaces that might seem to be extraneous or eccentric to the proper object of study. Importantly, they refuse an additive model that seeks to fit the marginalized into an already existing frame. Instead, the margins act as a lever that dislodges the false promise of the pure, the autonomous, and the universal.

Within critical rhetoric, the universal subject has already been thoroughly rejected. Decolonial scholar Daryl Wanzer (2012) argues, "First, cultural homogeneity is a rhetorical fiction and technology of power, not an objective state threatened by fragmentation" (p. 651). Displacing and undermining the universal subject also splinters notions of a singular and coherent understanding of both the environment and our response to environmental crisis. In his analysis of the rhetoric of famed conservationist Edward O. Wilson, Stephen Haymes (2018) critiques one of his most influential theories, biophilia. Biophilia, according to Wilson, is the innate human affinity for savannah-like landscapes. Wilson argued genetics predisposes humans to these garden-like spaces unlike less developed primates that flourished in the desert and rainforests. Haymes uses this example and others like it to argue against the notion of a singular ecological system rooted in colonial ideologies of European norms, which masquerades as innate and definitionally human. Instead, he argues that we need to move away from a universalist ecology to situational ecologies. Then, we might also reframe the complexity of the climate crisis from a wicked problem that we need to untangle to one that requires an understanding of deeply contextualized relationality. Our goal is not to reduce the problematic to a primary issue and solution but to seek out the web of relationships that can sustain our response.

In her book on addressing climate anxiety, Sarah Jaquette Ray (2020) urges us to find a sense of purpose in climate work by identifying "our spheres of influence, redefine actions, find strength in numbers, and cultivate emotional resilience" (p. 52). She further notes feelings of powerlessness and a belief that one is not qualified to do anything meaningful "has been shown to be more intense for females and people of color" (p. 55). While it might seem as if only the most powerful politicians, activists, or celebrities can have any effect on such a large wicked problem, Ray advises people to "scale their action" and seek out long-term solutions in community with other like-minded people. Cultural studies' emphasis on cultural phenomenon and organizations that may slip past the bright glare of mainstream media or that may not fit our conventional definitions of what counts as resistance or activism provides a pathway toward new modes of environmental activism. Again, while large-scale government interventions are, of course, an important part of our response to the climate crisis, the primary focus on governmental organizations as the driver of change limits our ability to envision alternatives. Cultural studies' turn to grassroots, culturally specific, examples of resistance to the climate crisis can help to redefine such terms as "environmentalism" and "activism" and revise what we mean when we say "crisis."

Although there are many, many, examples of localized resistance to dominant power in response to environmental harms, I will highlight three here to give a brief glimpse into how centering their stories can help to reframe what climate crisis resistance looks like and who is able to contribute to change. Of particular note is the origin of these studies across multiple disciplines. The anti-disciplinary ethos of cultural studies allows us recognize the broad range of responses to environmental harm and the multiple ways we might narrate resistance in the academy. Sociologist Nadia Kim's (2021) recently published book *Refusing Death* directly addresses the belief that only those in power can make a difference in environmental organizing. Her research follows a coalition

primarily composed of Asian and Latinx women, many of whom are undocumented. These activists are fighting for clean air in spaces surrounded by freeways, a diesel-powered train yard, and two oil refineries. Living at the industrial end of the fossil fuel industry currently powering the climate crisis, they upturn conventional ideas of who has the power to speak. Kim (2021) writes,

> What society might see as the improbable mountain movers—the of color, low income, first-generation, undocumented immigrant, many of whom are women and mothers—have in fact been on the front lines of influential grassroots community movements of all kinds. (p. 16)

While Kim broadens our conception of who can participate in environmental actions, Ethnic Studies scholar Jesse Quizar's (2018) study of the Feedom Freedom urban farming movement questions what counts as environmental organizing. Quizar, practicing what she terms "deep hanging out," draws connections between the African American-led urban farming movement in Detroit and its roots in radical, anti-capitalist politics. The chapter contextualizes the growth in urban farming within the government's abandonment of the central core of Detroit following the downturn in US auto-manufacturing. Instead of confining climate crisis activism to political protest, the Feedom Freedom project offers up an alternative view of the future. Quizar describes Feedom Freedom's vision as one that "Represents a possibility of delinking from oppressive economic structures and of increasing collective self-determination" (p. 86). Rather than the continual demand for growth and an economy dependent on disposability and waste, Feedom Freedom draws from Black thought and movement building to find a solution oriented away from large-scale governmental intervention and toward local community and self-sufficiency.

Kim disrupts who can respond to the climate crisis, Quizar broadens what counts as resistance to the climate crisis, and English literature scholar Candace Fujikane (2021) invites us to question our epistemology as we confront the climate crisis. Through her documentation of Kanaka Maoli knowledge systems and her research as a participant observer in the revitalization of their agriculture and food ways, Fujikane confronts the harms caused by the plantation system in Hawai'i, military toxic dumping, and climate change events. Yet, she asks us to rethink our scarcity mindset. This is not Berlant's (2010) cruel optimism, a delusional hope based in neoliberalism's false promises. Instead, Fujikane writes, "A Kanaka Maoli economy of abundance is one of mā'ona, a fullness that comes from sharing, trading, gift-giving, conserving, and adapting" (p. 5). She argues manufactured scarcity is the engine of capitalism and proposes an abundant-mindedness as a way to shift the scale from global corporate and state solutions to focus on the ripple effect of local restorations projects. As people who have already experienced the catastrophic, man-made, devastation of their agriculture and fishing, their restoration work exemplifies the movement away from scarcity and competition and moves us toward the cultivation of abundance.

Communication is fundamental to our response to the climate crisis. While crucially important work in Communication focuses on how best to deliver clear, meaningful, science-based information, information alone cannot move us to action. Other Communication scholars have contributed to our ability to persuade audiences and to pay attention to the affective dimensions of the climate crisis message. This article has focused on what decolonial critical rhetoric and cultural studies can bring to the fight for climate justice. Through an attention to power and the centering of those most marginalize and, consequently, those most affected by the climate crisis, Communication studies can give us the tools to address climate anxiety and envision a better, more sustainable, and more sustaining future.

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Leilani Nishime is a Professor of Communication at the University of Washington. She is the co-editor, with Dr. Kim Hester Willliams, of *Racial Ecologies.* She is also the author of *Undercover Asian: Multiracial Asians in Visual Cultures*. Her articles have appeared in journals such as *Critical Studies in Media Communication, Communication Theory, Quarterly Journal of Speech, Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*, and *Journal of Asian American Studies*, as well as numerous book collections. She is also one of the core organizers of the Seattle Asian American Film Festival. She can be reached at nishime@uw.edu.