

## Review:

**Richard D. Besel and Bernard K. Duffy**  
(Eds.). *Green Voices: Defending Nature  
and the Environment in American Civic  
Discourse*

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**I**n *Green Voices: Defending Nature and the Environment in American Civic Discourse*, editors Richard D. Besel and Bernard K. Duffy attempt to address the oversight that most modern rhetorical scholarship focuses on the written works of environmentalists rather than their spoken words. To redress this paucity, the editors collect a series of analyses focused only on U.S. environmental speeches curated specifically to examine “the broad sweep of U.S. environmental history from the perspective of nature’s leading advocates” (2). Besel and Duffy work to represent a wide array of orators, arranging analyses in a “roughly chronological manner” to better help the reader perceive “the historical arc of U.S. environmentalism as it unfolded in the pages of great and influential speeches” (4). The breadth of speakers, both in terms of topic and decade, as well as the variety of analytical methodologies applied to their spoken words, makes this collection a unique and useful addition to the growing corpus on environmental communication research.

Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century with Senate Foreign Relations Committee Charles Sumner's public work on behalf of the Alaska Purchase and ending (chronologically) in 2010 with Ashley Judd's National Press Club keynote address on mountaintop removal coal mining, the book pauses every decade or so to check the temperature of environmental oration in the U.S. Some notable names from U.S. oratorical history are present (e.g. Theodore Roosevelt, Jimmy Carter, and Robert F. Kennedy Jr.) but also featured are speeches from environmentalists better known for their written work (e.g. John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, and Edward Abbey) and some more obscure, yet no less important, environmental advocates (e.g. Lois Gibbs, Frank Church, and Benjamin Chavis Jr.). In sum, the collection demonstrates the evolution of the environmental oration across 150 years of U.S. history.

The editorial logic behind the ordering and content—the oration(s) and analytical methods—of chapters is perceptible. Each introduces the reader to a (relatively) understudied oration, which represents a broader issue in the evolving debates of environmentalism, provides a novel and often useful lens of rhetorical analysis, and makes further connections based upon our privileged present-day seat, looking back on U.S. environmental communications history. Chapters tend to fall into one of two categories in terms of focus and take-away, and though both are useful to scholars and/or instructors of environmental communications and history, the value surfaces in different ways. The first category consists of analyses which privilege the importance of speakers' contributions to discourse theory, while the second category privileges speakers' contributions to the environmental movement at large in the U.S.

Of the first type, Michael J. Hostetler's "Coming to Grips with the Size of America's Environment: Charles Sumner Says Farewell to Montesquieu," is an excellent example of contributions to discourse theory. In his essay, Hostetler closely examines rhetorical efforts by Sumner, including a lecture and a speech, which focused on the orator's efforts to convince the public of the wisdom of the Russian American purchase. Hostetler introduces the concept of the "American Dimension," or the overwhelming size of the U.S. environment, and the subsequent fear that the American republic would be unable

to cope with the addition of the huge Alaskan wilderness (12). As Hostetler argues, Sumner introduced continentalism in his orations as a means to “tame the threat of the continent’s outsized environment” by proffering a “vision of a unified nation both occupying a huge continent and grounded in republican virtue” (13). To analyze the speeches, Hostetler uses Michael Leff and Andrew Sachs’ concept of “rhetorical iconicity,” or the enactment of rhetorical factors (such as syntax or grammar) to reinforce the subject of discourse (15), and concludes that Sumner’s discourse “represents the united, expansive democratic empire he believed would eventually cover North America” (24).

Hostetler’s essay provides the template that half of the essays in *Green Voices* follow and makes excellent use of analytical methods to shine new light on some of the most important speeches in American environmentalism. Of this type, other particularly interesting essays include Anne Marie Todd’s discussion of the “See America First” campaign and the rhetoric of environmental patriotism (75-92), Terrence Check’s essay on three of President Carter’s energy crises speeches and the use of jeremiad (175-198), and Katie L. Gibson’s analysis of the Love Canal toxicity incident and Lois Gibbs’ “rhetoric of care” (199-216). These essays demonstrate analytical rigor and are useful for scholars who are interested in both the environmental movement and the techniques used to analyze public rhetoric.

The second type of essay featured in the collection is that which focuses on the legacy of the speaker and their contributions to the environmental movement as a whole. Leroy G. Dorsey’s essay, “Theodore Roosevelt and the Progressive Impulses of Conservation,” perfectly exemplifies this type of work. Dorsey focuses largely on Roosevelt’s ability to position conservation in public addresses as both a moral imperative and scientifically prudent. As Dorsey claims, Roosevelt exploited religious and scientific branches of progressivism to “find common ground about the environment” (54). Though certainly not lacking in analytical rigor, Dorsey chooses to use his analysis to support his conclusions about Roosevelt’s legacy as an environmental advocate rather than about the usefulness of his methodology. He demonstrates this in his conclusion in acknowledging that “Roosevelt’s rhetorical legacy may not have

survived completely intact into the twenty-first century” but goes on to suggest that at the least, his message about “the interrelation between the environment and the public” lives on to this day (68).

This type of chapter is no less important than those which prioritize analytical method rather than subject, as the contributions of leading voices in the environmental movement have vastly shaped our current political, social, and physical landscapes. Notable contributions of this variety are Besel and Duffey’s discussion of John Muir and his addition to the American tradition of the rhetorical sublime (29-48), Ellen W. Gorsevski’s discussion of Frank Church’s “light green environmentalism” in speeches arguing for preservation of the River of No Return Wilderness (217-242), and Derek G. Ross’s essay on Edward Abbey and the rhetorical advocacy of Abbey’s public self, Cactus Ed (275-300). It would be foolish to say that each essay fits into one category or the other entirely, but the chapters which privilege the legacy of the speaker (even a rhetorical legacy) seem to have a different kind of usefulness, particularly to environmental rhetoricians as well as environmental historians or researchers of public oratory.

One chapter in particular merits special attention, Richard W. Leeman’s essay, “Environmental Racism and Environmental Justice: Benjamin Chavis Jr. and Issues of Definition and Community.” The only chapter violating the chronological order of the text, Leeman’s powerful closing essay focuses on a topic that is certainly underrepresented in the field of environmental rhetoric: race. The essay focuses on the 1991 First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, particularly Reverend Benjamin Chavis Jr.’s address to the conference and the surrounding media coverage. Leeman connects Chavis’ “rhetoric of racism” to the work of black militants in the 1960s, arguing that “Unlike ‘Black Power’ and ‘Black Pride,’ language through which activist rhetors helped shape the political conversation of the sixties, ‘environmental racism’ has remained a term that is able to animate particular groups, without yet gaining a foothold on the national stage” (344). The connection is an interesting one, and given the progress that groups like the National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit have been able to enact, and the work as yet to be done for equality in

environmentalism, Leeman's essay stands out as uniquely positioned to focus on the future of the field of environmental rhetoric.

The dual foci of *Green Voices: Defending Nature and the Environment in American Civic Discourse*, the importance of both speakers and the speeches themselves, make the book useful for a number of different audiences. Researchers will find it beneficial for its oratorical analyses, its inclusion of relatively unknown voices and/or speeches, and its comprehensive chronological scope. Instructors will find it useful as both a historical guide to U.S. environmentalism as well as providing models of rigorous rhetorical discourse analysis. Regardless of purpose, Besel and Duffy's book sheds much needed light on the oratorical moments that helped define American environmentalism, and their collection represents an important addition to the environmental rhetoric corpus.

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