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Cover Page Footnote

T. Jake Dionne (M.A. Syracuse University) is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Communication at the University of Colorado Boulder. He wishes to thank Joe Hatfield, Kyle Colglazier, and the two anonymous reviewers for their generative feedback. He also extends his warmest gratitudes to his undergraduate students at Syracuse University for participating and taking seriously the issue of environmental racism.

Mapping Human Sacrifice Zones through Informative Speeches

T. Jake Dionne

Abstract: The toxification of place is not a process that happens “elsewhere,” a location uninhabited by human and nonhuman populations. Rather, the toxification of place occurs in close proximity to bodies susceptible to the harmful effects of toxins. Robert Bullard names these places “human sacrifice zones” and characterizes them as locales targeted by corporations because they are home to low income, persons of color. Taking seriously environmental racism, this forum piece outlines and relays the productive characteristics of “Mapping Human Sacrifice Zones through Informative Speeches,” a unit-length activity that transforms the typical informative speech assignment into an ecopedagogical tool. For this activity, students locate a number of human sacrifice zones at home and abroad before designing, composing, and delivering an informative speech that helps renders visible the unjust distribution of toxins. In turn, the instructor develops a map that spotlights these locations to further solidify the need for environmental justice.

Earth boasts both local and global dimensions of communication insofar as communicative exchanges happen from within local ecosystems that are interconnected with global environments. Unfortunately, as Robert Bullard (1993) made perfectly clear, not all local ecosystems are created equally as systems of global capitalism unjustifiably mistreat sites populated by working-class persons of color. They do so by channeling the effects of environmental degradation into places where those marked “Other” reside. Bullard (1993) called these targeted areas inhabited by low income, persons of color “human sacrifice zones” (p. 12).

“Mapping Human Sacrifice Zones through Informative Speeches” (MHSZ) is a unit-length activity designed for courses on presentational speaking that aims to not only teach the essential components of an informative speech, but also develop a cartographical understanding of local and global sites of environmental degradation. As Richard Kahn (2010) argues, “[E]cological issues, requiring critical knowledge of the dialectical relationship between mainstream lifestyle and the dominant social structure, require a much more radical and more complex form of ecoliteracy than is presently possessed by the population at large” (p. 6). As this activity attests, the magnitude of environmental racism—the systemic practice that forcefully situates low income, minority communities at heart

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of environmental degradation—is as shocking and heartbreaking as it is insidiously unpublicized (Pezzullo, 2003). MHSZ objects to the entangled manifestations of ecological, racial, and class-based violence by prompting undergraduate students to investigate the formation and effects of human sacrifice zones in the United States of America and beyond.

In this activity, students design and compose an original informative speech that documents a specific human sacrifice zone. Students then deliver their speeches to their classmates, a performance that generates a collective critical ecoliteracy about local and global instances of environmental racism by way of a series of case studies. Finally, the instructor creates and distributes a world map that demarcates each human sacrifice zone as discussed by students. Through this collaborative oratorical and cartographical process, instructors and students raise consciousness about the impacts of systems of global capitalism on low income communities of color. When most successful, instructors and students transform courses on presentational speaking into “vibrant critical sites of learning and unconditional sites of pedagogical and political resistance” (Giroux, 2004, p. 77).

To that end, MHSZ is a tool for critical pedagogues, especially the collective of graduate students with activist tendencies. Although departments often assign graduate students to facilitate lectures and create assignments for courses dubbed “basic,” departments do not always restrict the ways in which budding educators teach threshold concepts in the basic communication course. Being an ecologically conscious graduate student who remains hopeful for his future in academia, I continually strive to reclaim a sense of agency when teaching courses on presentational speaking by *greening* building block assignments in the basic communication course. MHSZ is one example of the type of activity whereby instructors of all levels of experience can simultaneously provide students with the theoretical foundation and skills necessary to deliver an original and well composed informative speech all whilst cultivating a more critical constituency of undergraduate students studying in the Anthropocene.

Preparation and Procedures

Designed for courses in presentational speaking, the main objective of MHSZ is to offer students a comprehensive understanding of the components of an informative speech. With that said, at no point in time should the ecopedagogical nature of MHSZ take priority over the particular characteristics of an informative speech. For the purpose of brevity, I will not offer an instructional overview for how to deliver and teach an informative speech, and instead note that I always approach this type of oratory by asking students to develop and answer a *who* or *what* question about a particular theme.

MHSZ unfolds across four movements. For the remainder of this section, I will discuss the procedures for facilitating this assignment. These

procedures include critically (re)orienting students toward local and global sites of toxicity, selecting a topic, outlining and delivering a speech, and cartographically rendering the locations of discussed human sacrifice zones.

Critical (Re)orientation Toward Local and Global Sites of Toxicity

Many students are often ill prepared to discuss issues of social justice in courses on presentational speaking. When one combines this tendency with the fact that many undergraduate students exhibit the symptoms of what Robin DiAngelo (2011) refers to as “white fragility,” or the incapacity to talk about race given that such discussions tend to evoke stress, it becomes all too easy to avoid discussing human sacrifice zones in the basic communication course (p. 54). Given these constraints, the first task of an instructor is offer students a critical (re)orientation toward local and global sites of environmental racism.

To accomplish this task, instructors are responsible for lecturing about the link between environmental racism and human sacrifice zones. The content of these lectures should vary with the instructor’s style. For me, I offer definitions and examples of environmental racism and human sacrifice zones alongside firsthand observations of toxicity *in situ*. As the son of a refinery worker, I quite literally emerged from the smog and have stories about how petrochemical culture ravished the low income, minority communities of Southeast Texas. Moreover, as a participant-observer of toxic tours, I witnessed how hydrocarbon exploration companies disrupted and devastated communities in Pennsylvania. I share these happenings of environmental racism to *bring home* to the classroom eyewitness examples of human sacrifice zones.

Because I emphasize praxis in my courses on presentational speaking, I do not require that students read a select set of articles or chapters about environmental racism and human sacrifice zones. Instead, I distribute via email the following list of supplemental readings from which I developed my lecture:

- Bullard, R. D. (1993). *Confronting environmental racism: Voices from the grassroots*. Boston, MA: South End.
- Pezzullo, P. C. (2003). Touring “Cancer Alley,” Louisiana: Performances of community and memory for environmental justice. *Text & Performance Quarterly*, 23(3), 226-252. doi: 10.1080/10462930310001635295

Whereas Bullard coined the term human sacrifice zones, Pezzullo demonstrated a rhetorical and performative understanding for how communities may resist environmental racism. Taken together, these readings inform the theoretical foundation from which *praxis makes perfect* speakers.

In short, the learning outcomes of this lecture are threefold: (1) Students should be able to define environmental racism and human sacrifice zones; (2) Students should gain an understanding that systems of global

capitalism require material locations to produce and/or dump toxic waste; (3) Students should recognize that human sacrifice zones are manifestations of environmental racism that occur both locally and abroad.

Topic Selection

It has been my experience in teaching courses on presentational speaking that instructors often direct students toward a particular theme (e.g., social issues), but allow them to select their own topic (i.e., deliver an informative speech about a social issue of their choice). MHSZ further directs students by providing them with one of the following preapproved topic regions: (1) Nearby Your University; (2) Eastern U.S.; (3) Southern U.S.; (4) Northern U.S.; (5) Western U.S.; (6) Europe; (7) Africa; (8) Asia; (9) South America; (10) Oceania. To ensure that a wide demographic of people and places are covered, assign equal parts students to select *local* or *global* case studies. Although these preapproved regions restrict the choices students can make, these topic regions allow enough leeway for students to select a variety of case studies with a plethora of different impacts.

The following *who* or *what* questions represent a sampling of some of the more successful speeches delivered by students:

- What are the citizens of Syracuse, New York, doing to protest and eliminate the Midland Avenue Sewage Facility?
- Who suffers from cancer due to petroleum tanks in Linden, New Jersey?
- What factors contribute to the abundance of cancer causing toxins in the arena known as Cancer Alley, Louisiana?
- What populations are affected by contaminated water in Flint, Michigan?
- Who was affected by the 2010 Chevron explosion in Richmond, California?
- What are the health effects of toxic mines on Roma in Ostrava, Czech Republic?
- What are the environmental impacts of operations by Engen Petroleum in Durban, South Africa?
- What are the environmental and health effects of pollution by disposed electronics in Guiyu, China?
- Who are the pollutions affected by air pollution in Santiago, Chile, and what are governmental officials doing to help local populations?

- What are the environmental effects of creating a toxic waste dump in Muckaty Station in Australia's Northern Territory?

Regarding the most local of the topics, I have found the inclusion of an informative speech about my university's nearby city to be especially interesting and helpful for students. Typically, students grow to identify with not only their campus, but also its surrounding municipality. Unfortunately, the fast-paced worlds of undergraduate students living on campus tends to veil environmental, racial, and/or class-based disparities just around the corner. Take, for example, my previous home of Syracuse, New York. Gentrified by an interstate that quite literally divides the city across racial lines, one student at Syracuse University discovered that a local corporation was looking to build a waste management site within the more impoverished section of town. Because we as a class were familiar with our surroundings, this further critically (re)oriented us to local sites of toxicity—our own backyard was a human sacrifice zone.

Outline Construction and Speech Delivery

In addition to selecting and refining a topic, students should construct a well-organized outline for their informative speech. Beyond offering students a replicable tool for how to prepare for future informative speeches, the third movement of MHSZ allows instructors a chance to determine if/how students' speeches are going awry. In an ideal world, students would be sure that their chosen case study actually reflects an iteration of human sacrifice zones. However, at least one student each semester manages to discover that their selected region does not stringently meet the definitional criteria to be considered a human sacrifice zone. Still, I never request that these students return to the drawing board; because my course on presentational speaking stresses the process of orchestrating and delivering a speech, any instance of degradation increases a collective understanding of environmental racism. Moreover, this small snafu creates a point of conversation to be discussed after students deliver their speeches.

When sharing their findings with their classmates, students should deliver a five to seven minute speech. In my experience, any time *more or less* is ineffective given that students either do not offer enough support for their topic or they struggle to keep their classmates' attention. Because of the unfamiliarity with environmental racism, speeches of greater length also tend to invite inflated content. Critical to the success of this topic is an acceptance that no student will truly unpack the dimensions of environmental racism in any given human sacrifice zone.

Cartographical Rendering of Human Sacrifice Zones

For the fourth movement, instructors create a world map that charts the precise locations of human sacrifice zones. Relying on programs such as

Paint, instructors mark a red X upon each human sacrifice zone—an artistic rendering that helps students visualize the magnitude of environmental racism. Instructors then share this map with students via email and in class in hopes of instilling an understanding of the severity of environmental racism on a global scale. With a class of twenty students or more, the worldwide breadth of environmental racism tends to shock students. As one of my students shared, “I enjoyed learning more about environmental racism issues outside of the United States. I didn’t know what was happening *here*, but I certainly did know what was happening *there*.”

Assessment and Reflection

Reception to MHSZ has been positive. When debriefing, most students admit that they lacked an awareness of the entangled relationship among race, class, and environments. As one student noted, “Definitely something of concern, and possibly an overlooked topic; many don’t connect poverty, minorities, and pollution.” Others cite the variety in topic regions and endless possibilities of case studies as fulfilling. For example, one student commented, “What I liked was the fact many of the major issues that occur have a different impact depending on the group and location.” Indeed, as an instructor, I find myself learning about different people and groups each time I facilitate MHSZ. One of the greatest pleasures of teaching a basic communication course is when I walk away with unforeseen information.

Still, some backlash about the topic surfaces each time I facilitate this assignment. On several occasions, students have described the topic of environmental racism as “too dry,” citing a disinterest in issues of ecology. Others have cautioned me against exploring the topic of human sacrifice zones, because it “could be seen as a touchy subject to some people.” Perhaps the most helpful feedback came from one student who said, “The issues were somewhat difficult to find due to localization.” Although I dislike providing students with a list of example topics, to curb this complaint, I now offer a list of specific populations and cities affected by environmental racism while simultaneously encouraging them to be original.

In sum, MHSZ transforms the typical informative speech into an ecopedagogical tool. For graduate students constrained by their status as supervised employees in training, this activity charts a path of leniency whereby instructors and students can expose the local and global iteration of environmental racism. At worst, students learn the basic components of an informative speech—a learning outcome necessary in any course on presentational speaking. At best, students learn how to design and deliver an informative speech in addition to generating a collective disdain for systems of global capitalism that prey on marginalized populations and places.

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