

On Rachel Carson's Continuing Legacy: How Students at the University of Maryland Aim to  
Commemorate Carson in 21st Century Environmental Activism

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### Abstract

This paper explores gender discrepancies in public commemoration rhetoric in the context of current environmental activism. Simply who deserves to be remembered reveals a long history of gender inequality in the United States. In 2017, a group of students at the University of Maryland recognized the same pattern of the unequal representation of men to women in building dedications and attempted to reform that by starting a petition to dedicate the Plant Sciences building to ecologist and writer, Rachel Carson. Though the final result was unsuccessful, the recognition of this problem of unequal representation and taking action to reform is a step forward towards a more equitable future. Through this case study, this paper also looks at the wider uprising of youth-lead environmental activism.

*Keywords: Gender, Rachel Carson, Environmental Activism, Public Memory, Representation*

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### **Introduction**

The lush Brazilian Amazon rainforest grabbed the world's attention this August when its number of fires exceeded what was considered normal. Due to deforestation by human activity, the Amazon became more vulnerable to fires in the dry season. Not only is the cut vegetation left to dry before being burned, but the remaining surrounding plants also become stressed and released less water vapor into the air, causing them to struggle to stay cool and conserve water ("Drought-Stressed Forest Fueled Amazon Forests", 2019). Even though natural forest fires occur regularly and can even benefit the ecosystem, human-generated fires remain dangerous. What was alarming about the number of fires in August for the Amazon was that it was three times higher than that of 2018 and highest since 2010 ("Amazon Deforestation and Number of Fires Show Summer of 2019 Not a 'Normal' Year", 2019).

More recently, in November 2019, Venice experienced its highest tide in 50 years. The high-water point reached 6-feet, 2-inches, only two inches short of the highest flooding ever recorded in 1996. As more than 85 percent of the city became flooded, Luigi Brugnaro, the mayor of Venice, declared the city to be in a state of emergency. Brugnaro recognized that great flooding events such as this are just some effects of climate change (Chappell, 2019).

Our Earth is desperately calling for our attention to be better stewards of our land as catastrophic events continue to happen more frequently and more severely. As the Amazon burns, habitats are destroyed and various species are dwindling with it. The Venice flooding

event reminds us that these terrible occurrences are not only putting plants and animals in danger but humans too. The current environmental concerns that we face are marked by exigency. It is a Kairotic moment, or opportune moment for action, for activism and change.

### **Background on Climate-Centered Activism**

As a result of increasing global environmental issues, there is also a rise in environmental awareness and activism, especially among today's youth and college-age students. The Global Climate Strikes, which started on Friday, September 20, 2019, are an example of climate-centered activism picking up steam among the younger generations. These strikes took place in over 150 countries and were scheduled before the opening of the United Nations General Assembly and Climate Action Summit on September 23rd. These protests were organized by youth around the world who are part of the "Fridays for Future" campaign, in which students walk out of schools on Fridays to demand their political leaders to take urgent actions to address climate change (Ott, 2019). Movements like this speak onto why we must take drastic approaches to sustain our planet. The voice of the youth is especially powerful as they remind those in positions of power that their future, and the coming generations' future, matter. Additionally, this is an interesting form of rhetoric to study through a communication/rhetoric lense due to the nature and the goals of these movements, which is to enlist change through persuasion.

Young climate activists can look to contemporary leaders like Greta Thunberg for inspiration. At only 16-years-old, Thunberg obtained the world's attention as she addressed

political leaders at the U.N. Climate Action Summit through a powerful speech. Thunberg uses logical arguments such as statistics and emotional appeal to point out the severity of the environmental issue that we are currently facing. Thunberg was rather passionate and serious in her delivery. Perhaps what sets her apart from others is her dedication and her bravery in speaking out and taking action on an issue that desperately needs more attention.

Yet today's climate activists can also look back and learn valuable lessons from memorable historical leaders such as Rachel Carson. Carson appreciated the natural world around her, especially the oceans, and used her platform as a voice to elicit change. Carson was born in Springdale, Pennsylvania, in 1907 and attended the Pennsylvania College for Women where she first majored in English and later switched to biology. In 1937, Carson and her family moved to Silver Spring, Maryland ("Timeline", 2019).

In my research at the University of Maryland (UMD)'s university archives and special collections, I found no physical documents and little information online about Carson's ties to the university. Even while I did locate some websites, they were incongruent with each other, some saying that she taught in the Dental and Pharmacy Schools on UMD's Baltimore Campus (UMDArchives, 2014) and some saying that she was the assistant Zoologist for the Faculty of Biological Sciences of UMD in 1933 ("Rachel Carson, University of Maryland, Baltimore, 1933", 2019). Additionally, I did not find much information regarding the student vernacular voice on environmental activism in the archives, except for newspapers, so I decided to look on social media platforms such as Facebook to get a more accurate representation. This lack of information is important to note as it tells a story of gaps and silences in history, which in this case, can be of women in STEM fields and in higher education.

Aside from Carson's connections to Maryland and UMD, Carson is known for her contributions to science and writing. She published many books and essays throughout her career, often around topics of nature and the environment. Some publications include "Under the Sea-Wind", "The Sea Around Us", and "The Sense of Wonder". However, Carson is most famously known for her book "Silent Spring", published in 1962, where Carson connected the use of modern insecticide dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethane (DDT) to damage wildlife and even humans ("Silent Spring", 2019). DDT was developed to combat many insect-borne human diseases such as malaria and typhus. However, its many negative environmental and toxicological consequences, brought forth through "Silent Spring", outweighed the potential benefits. The literature quickly stimulated widespread public concern regarding improper pesticide use and a need for more regulations ("DDT - A Brief History and Status", 2016). Carson was also said to have inspired the modern environmental movement. "Silent Spring" was influential because it not only questioned the direction of science and technology but also demanded answers and accountability. Her voice as a "witness for nature" is even more relevant today as we continue to face alarming environment-centered events ("Silent Spring", 2019).

In this paper, I examine the need for more equal representation in public memory rhetoric and explore how women figures like Rachel Carson can be better remembered in a time of rising environmental activism. First, I describe the historically unequal representation of men and women in the rhetoric of public commemoration. I then examine the legacy of Carson through a case study of the University of Maryland's building renaming initiative in 2017, exploring how a greater focus on the legacy of Carson allows her to be remembered in a different light today.

Finally, I conclude with commentary on how future students can aim to be more inclusive in public commemoration on campus and foster a more embracing community.

### **Literature Review**

Public memory rhetoric, in this paper, will be defined as how people or events are remembered publicly. Because I will be focusing on Carson and the building renaming initiative at UMD, public memory rhetoric will mainly refer to building dedications as a form of memory rhetoric.

Public commemorative sites, such as statues, gardens, and plaques, often embody the American identity to be one of a white, heterosexual, cis-gendered male. This narrative is often told and retold throughout historical public commemorative rhetoric and often supported by the mainstream, dominant group (Dubriwny & Poirot, 2017). As memory is partial, stories of the dominant groups are often remembered while stories of the subordinate groups are often forgotten. If we think about who the historically powerful groups of people are, we can begin to trace how their stories permeate. For example, in the United States, a staggering 92.4% of statues depict historical male figures while a sliver of 7.6% of statues depict historical female figures (Buchholz, 2019). While this discrepancy is astonishing, it remains unsurprising. Perhaps we, as a society, are accustomed to how gender norms manifest itself in public memory.

This lack of representation of women in places of public memory is problematic in several ways. While it is an inaccurate presentation of women's accomplishments throughout

history, it also diminishes the importance and capabilities of women. Additionally, young girls are prevented from learning important potential role models.

A study published in the *Journal of Politics* researches the effects of increasing female politicians on adolescence' interest in their involvement in politics. Campell and Wolbrecht found that as more women politicians are made visible through news coverage, adolescent girls have a greater intention of being politically active. This role model effect, as explained by the researchers, can be explained by an increased propensity for political discussion (Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2006). We can use the results of this study to suggest that as adolescents continue to mature and seek their identity, positive role models play a substantial part.

Regardless of gender, young people can feel a greater sense of confidence in their abilities when they can identify with successful individuals who have ventured in similar career paths. Given the significance of diverse representation in sites of public memory, it is imperative to find opportunities for the commemoration of women scientists and activists in a time of rising environmental concern.

### **Case Study: The University of Maryland and Rachel Carson**

#### **UMD's Growing Environmental Consciousness**

UMD is home to over 40,000 undergraduate and graduate students. It offers both undergraduate and graduate programs in Environmental Science and Policy (ENSP) and Environmental Science and Technology (ENST). These two majors are both parts of the college

of agriculture and natural resources. In the early 2000s, the university became more environmentally aware. UMD's completion of the Facilities Master Plan and attendance in the first national sustainability conference: Beyond Compliance-Campus Greening Through Stewardship in 2002, spearheaded sustainability initiatives on campus. However, it wasn't until the summer of 2007 when the Office of Sustainability was formed, following the signing of the American College and University President's Climate Commitment ("University of Maryland Office of Sustainability", 2019). The mission of the UMD Office of Sustainability is to "[support] and [advance] environmental performance, economic prosperity, and social equality" ("University of Maryland Office of Sustainability", 2019). Sustainability studies at UMD are currently the largest minor with more than 300 students enrolled ("Minors", 2019). Moreover, the campus is building new structures to meet Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) standards, propelling the campus in a continuous sustainable direction.

The college-age demographic is an ideal group to target to build a wider knowledge-based and spark actions. Students are in a unique position to quickly apply what they have learned towards a positive impact. Recently, UMD students have been part of nation-wide environmental movements and activism such as Global Climate Strikes. On-campus, students are forming more environmentally focused organizations and continuing to hold the university administration accountable and making real changes.

### **Voices of Change at UMD - Building Renaming Initiative**

In the Spring of 2017, UMD's Environmental Science and Policy Student Association, ENSpire, started a petition to rename the Plant Sciences building on campus after Rachel

Carson. The group was formed in the fall of 2015. The following case study looks at UMD as a microcosm of society, where building naming practices parallel larger issues of unequal gender representation in public commemoration rhetoric . Additionally, this case study is taken through the perspective of two students who were involved in the 2017 renaming initiative: Logan Kline and Kathrine Hess.

Kline graduated from UMD in December 2018 with a B.S. in ENSP with a concentration in Marine and Coastal Management and a minor in Meteorology. Kline held the secretary position at ENSPire in 2015 and then the president position for the following two years. Hess will graduate as the class of 2019 with an ENSP and Geospatial Information Science (GIS)/Cartography dual degree. Hess was part of the ENSPire advisor board while Kline was the president.

The building renaming initiative had two main purposes. First, “to normalize the celebration of women’s achievement” and second, “to recognize a pioneer of the environmental movement” (Kline, 2017). The initiative had a somewhat impromptu start. During her time at UMD, Kline witnessed several building renaming projects. First, in October 2015, UMD officially dedicated the Art-Sociology building after Parren J. Mitchell, the first African-American to obtain a graduate degree from UMD and later became a congressman and a civil rights leader (“UMD to Dedicate Art-Sociology Building Named for Late Congressman Parren Mitchell”, 2015). Then two months later, the University System of Maryland Board of Regents voted to rename the “Byrd Stadium” to “Maryland Stadium” to let go of ties to former school president, Harry C. Byrd, who supported segregation practices (Wenger, 2019). These recent building renamings sparked Kline to wonder about the number of buildings on campus

that were dedicated to women. Since Kline saw herself as a “budding STEM”, a female scientist looking for female role models, she started looking more into a female leader in STEM that deserves the same kind of public commemoration (Kline, 2019).

In November 2019 Kline wrote an article in UMD's newspaper, *The Diamondback*, titled “Dedicate More University Building to Women”, expressing the discrepancy of public representation of male to female figures at UMD. Kline notes that although UMD owns more than 1,000 buildings throughout the state of Maryland, 36 had ready information about the people to whom the buildings were dedicated. Specifically,

“Thirty-two of these buildings are named after men. Just four are named after women: Marie Mount Hall, Adele H. Stamp Student Union, Preinkert Field House, and the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center. There are no buildings on the campus named after women in STEM careers” (Kline, 2016).

Kline suggests that the horrible imbalance of public honoring “reflects an unfortunate trend in our society to celebrate men while ignoring women of equal or higher stature” (Kline, 2016). This recognition parallels some of Dubriwny and Poirot's research on gender and public memory, as mentioned previously. To reiterate, these authors note the stories of public memory rhetoric as an only partial representation of history where the narratives of the dominant group are highly prioritized over the narrative of the subordinate groups. As UMD is a microcosm of society, this pattern prevails. The statistics that Buckholz collected of the gender discrepancy in statues also manifest on UMD's campus.

As Kline saw this current inequality as a chance for reform, she argued that “students at this university should focus on dedicating unnamed campus building toward prolific women in the primary field studied within their walls” (Kline, 2016). This led to Kline's desire to dedicate

the Plant Sciences building on campus (which is currently undedicated) to Carson as she was one of the few scientists (and writer) who Kline felt a connection to in her field of studies and also had ties to the state of Maryland and the University Systems as well (Kline, 2019). Following Kline's article and her bringing up the issue to ENSpire's Executive Board, which consists of two representatives from each grade level all in ENSP, the organization became more interested and decided to pursue the project from then on (Hess, 2019).

The petition was digitally born through a Google form and also shared through online platforms such as Facebook and email listservs. It was also spread by word-of-mouth. The petition enlisted a lot of similar information as mentioned previously, such as the need for the public commemoration of women on campus due to the current imbalance, which stresses the currently small number of buildings dedicated to women on campus. The petition also brought to light Carson's important contributions to the scientific domain, such as how she "catalyzed the environmental movement through her book 'Silent Spring'" ("Petition for the Dedication of the UMD Plant Sciences Building to Rachel Carson", 2017). Informative links about Carson's work in Maryland and university guidelines on building naming and renaming were also provided for the knowledge of the signees. Since Carson's work on DDT, biology, and environmental science did not directly relate to the university, the ENSpire students followed the requirements from Policy VI Section IV, which is in honorific naming:

"In those cases where facility and program namings are honorific, they should be named for scholars and other distinguished individuals who are preeminent in their field of endeavor and/or have contributed meaningfully to the University System of Maryland or to any of its constituent institutions" (University System of Maryland, 2014).

Due to Carson's role as the assistant in Zoology for the Faculty of Biological Sciences of the University of Maryland in 1933 and contributions to the University System of Maryland at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, the students used this a point of argument.

The petition itself was simple. It only required the first and last names of the signee and their connection to UMD, such as an undergraduate/graduate student, professor, alumni, faculty member, or unaffiliated member ("Petition for the Dedication of the UMD Plant Sciences Building to Rachel Carson", 2017). ENSPire's goal was to reach 500 signatures, and they exceeded that, reaching 539 (Hess, 2019). Following the collection of signatures, the ENSPire students brought this initiative to the attention of the university's Plant Sciences (PLS) Department.

To many's surprise, the PLS Department, unfortunately, resisted the ENSPire's renaming petition. The PLS staff and graduate students felt that Carson was not the most appropriate choice given her closer ties with the ecology of animals as opposed to plant sciences and therefore found it unfitting to dedicate the Plant Sciences building after her. Although the ENSPire students disagreed, they respected the decision. Following this disappointing news, the initiative fizzled out in the Spring of 2017 (Kline, 2019).

Although displeased, Kline and Hess both expressed their understanding of the PLS Department's decision in rejecting the renaming initiative. The opposition seemed to lie more deeply in the lack of involvement between the PLS and the ENSPire students. If there was more open communication between the two groups that discussed both the need for more recognition of women in STEM and an appropriate figure for dedication, perhaps the initiative would be more successful.

This case study is therefore interesting to look at through a communications and rhetoric lens. The failure of the Carson renaming initiative at UMD gives insight into how important the role of communication is in similar contexts. Environmental activists today and communication scholars can study rhetoric as a means of persuasion to push for policies that are more environmentally conscious.

### **Shifting Memories**

When Carson's book *Silent Spring* was published in 1962, it became an immediate bestseller and phenomenon. It opened up the eyes of the public to the dangers of pesticides and other chemicals on the environment and animals, including humans. It also unleashed national debate and scrutiny towards the chemical industry. President J.F. Kennedy was even inspired to launch investigations into the negative effects of pesticides on public health, which eventually resulted in new laws that regulate these chemicals ("Rachel Carson", 2019). However, we cannot undermine the controversies "Silent Spring" struck with the scientific community and with corporate interests. Since Carson could not rely on scientific consensus as defense, she had to frame an open debate surrounding the issue of pesticide use and to promote audience participation as a rhetorical strategy (Murphy, 2018).

Carson is also said to be the woman who "launched the modern environmental movement and revolutionized how we understand our relationship with the natural world" ("Rachel Carson", 2019). Not only that, her works provoked the passage of the Clean Air Act of 1963, the Wilderness Act of 1964, the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, the Clean Water Act of

1972, the Endangered Species Act of 1972, and the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency in 1970 (Lepore, 2018). Because she shaped a growing environmental consciousness that is even more salient today, she is an important figure to remember.

However, even Carson would be surprised to be remembered by her research on DDT. Before her famous "Silent Spring", "[Carson] had always thought of herself as a poet of the sea" (Lepore, 2019). As noted earlier, some of her publications include "Under the Sea-Wind", "The Sea Around Us", and essay "Undersea". In fact, all of Carson's other books and most of her essays concerned the sea (Lepore, 2018).

A recent local opinion article published in the Washington Post titled "Why D.C. needs a statue of Rachel Carson" argues for the importance of public commemoration of Carson in the District. The authors point out that although there are more than 100 statues in D.C., an overwhelming majority depict white men and only about a dozen depict women (Leibowitz & Morris, 2019). Once again, unequal representation in public commemoration rhetoric remains an issue. Moreover, Leibowitz argues that Carson was an inspiring local and national hero and that she should be recognized as a global figure, especially in this time of rising environmental concern and activism (Leibowitz & Morris, 2019).

### **Conclusion**

Memory is powerful. "The ways in which we construct it and circulate it within our communities through narratives is how we make meaning of the world around us" (Potts et al., 2018). As we continue to live through increasing catastrophic climate events, we must not turn a

blind eye to the consequences of our actions. So, we must remember that we live in an interconnected world. Our actions have inevitable consequences, positive or negative. Carson points out this delicate relationship in "Silent Spring":

"We poison the gnats in a lake and the poison travels from link to link of the food chain and soon the birds of the lake margins become its victims. We spray our elms and the following springs are silent of robin song, not because we sprayed the robins directly but because the poison traveled, step by step, through the now familiar elm-leaf-earthworm cycle. These are matters of record, observable, part of the visible world around us. They reflect the web of life—or death—that scientists know as ecology" (Carson, 1962).

As I like to imagine that we will be successful in combating the effects of climate change, future generations will not forget the once fast-melting ice caps, the dwindling numbers of species, the Amazon fires, or the Venice floods. Similarly, I hope future generations will not forget the brave courageous leaders like Thunberg or Carson who spoke out on issues that need desperate attention and who played a large role in giving birth to and continuing on significant social movements.

Moving forward, I encourage current and future UMD students to challenge cultural norms and push for more equality and fair representation in places of public commemoration, just as the ENSpire students did in 2017. After all, it is not simply enough to remember influential leaders for their contributions, rather, we should embrace their spirits and their aspirations and become agents of change ourselves.

Furthermore, I think there should be more research on how to effectively communicate about the environment. Not everybody is receptive to emotional appeals or statistical data. This is a delicate balance to strike as there are still many people who are not convinced enough of

climate change to adapt to a more sustainable lifestyle. Communication scholars and scientists can find value in working together to best communicate the urgency of climate-related issues.

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