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Transforming Ethos: Place and the Material in Rhetoric and Writing

Rosanne Carlo

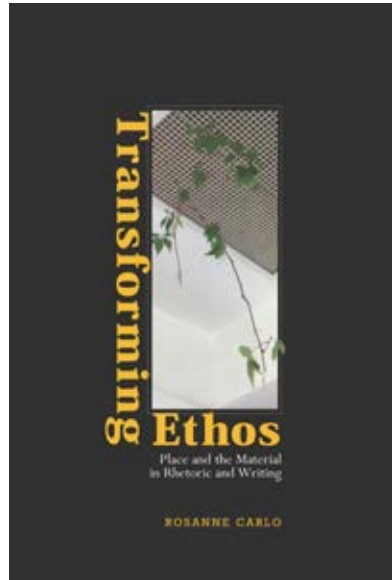
Utah State University Press, 2020, pp. 208

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Recent social justice awakenings such as the “Me, too” movement and Black Lives Matter indicate a rising social consciousness that understands that perpetuating privilege is itself a form of complicity. In *Transforming Ethos: Place and the Material in Rhetoric and Writing*, Rosanne Carlo fortifies movement against complicity as she decries current undertakings in rhetoric and composition that would discount expressivist writing as integral to the desired outcomes for writing in higher education. In particular, Carlo implores rhetoric and composition scholars to consider the ways in which the field’s preoccupation with outcomes and professionalization ignore the material realities of class and race consciousness. Through a careful synthesis of theory, personal explication, and pedagogical example, Carlo offers insight into how a transformative ethos—rooted in place and the material—is central to writing that produces identification across difference.

Transforming Ethos’ introduction, “Rhetoric and Writing for Ethos Development, Not Transfer” establishes the relevance of ‘transformative ethos’ in light of three current discursive sites in field of rhetoric and composition: 1) the WPA Outcomes Statement (Council of Writing Program Administrators 2019); 2) *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts in Writing Studies* (Adler-Kassner and Wardle 2015) and its attendant theory of threshold concepts; and 3) *Writing Across Contexts: Transfer, Composition, and Sites of Writing* (Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak 2015) and its attendant curricular application of teaching for transfer. Through critical analysis, Carlo elucidates how all three promote an agenda that privileges skills and modes of professionalization that are demonstrable, quantifiably speaking, as transferrable to other writing done in the university. Carlo explains that she finds transfer pedagogies problematic in their single-minded focus on creating “expert” voices. Focusing on making students experts in their disciplines, Carlo warns, privileges a rhetoric that “becomes entrenched in the institutions where we teach, which many in the field have reminded us reflects a privileging of standard English, whiteness, middle classness, maleness” (20). Carlo concludes that consequently, “when we agree that the work of composi-



tion is teaching the disciplinary knowledge of writing for students to transfer to other disciplines, we may be opening a Pandora's Box that spews out white supremacist, violent rhetorics I think many people in the field do want to stand against" (20). The central argument of *Transforming Ethos* is an alternative to continuing to "kowtow to the needs of business rather than to the needs of community" (Carlo 16). Carlo aims to demonstrate that the "connections among ethos, materiality, and place are powerful instruments for writing and its teaching," to insist "on the relational and multimodal aspects of writing" and make "prominent its inherent ethical considerations and possibilities" (19).

Chapter one, "Finding a Transformative Definition of Ethos," shifts away from the introduction's spotlight on "extreme pragmatists that focus on datasets and outcomes" to elucidate the theoretical foundation upon which Carlo builds her definition. Carlo constructs a definition of ethos by drawing from the concept of Burkean identification, "contemporary and ancient discourse on ethos in relation to time (Kairos), space (gathering place), and Martin Heidegger's concept of dwelling, relying on his theories on the call of language" (27). Carlo expresses her desire to have her book "expand the term *ethos* beyond the Aristotelian definition—beyond a constructed appeal through words—and out into a theory of transforming identities" (33). Carlo explains that, given that Aristotle's *ethos* is based in textual appeal (constructed) and Plato and Isocrates' *ethos* is based in the character of the speaker (revealed), she suggests *ethos* be viewed as "three pronged: (1) character as lived experience, (2) character as expressed in text, and (3) character as expressed in the material (place and objects)" (36–37). It is this third facet of *ethos*, the material of place and objects, that Carlo explains is the focus of her book, with chapter two focusing on the ethos appeals as developed through interactions with objects, chapter three on places, and chapter four applying transformative theory of ethos to the first-year college writing classroom.

Chapter two, "Finding and Collecting: Stories on Material Objects and the Ethos Appeal" is a beautiful interweaving of personal narrative with textual analysis to unfold materialist writings such as Benjamin's "Unpacking My Library" (1969), Barthes's *Camera Lucida* (1980), and Corder's *Lost in West Texas* (1988) into a transformative theory of ethos. This chapter serves as a model of sorts for the type of writing Carlo is admonishing rhetoricians and compositionists to not overlook for the sake of neatly fitting into administrative-mandated outcomes. Chapter two carefully considers "writing that houses contradictions," (56) with the consideration itself acknowledging the limitations of Carlo's own knowledge. Through Carlo's synthesis of the materialist scholarship of philosophers (Barthes 1980; Benjamin 2002; Bennet 2001, 2010; Derrida 1996), rhetorical scholars (Corder; Kinneavy 1979; Shipka 2011, 2015), and literary theorists (hooks 1994, 2009; Sontag 1973; Stewart 1993), she contemplates how such works illuminate the material as both subject and object, interacted upon and themselves interacting (62). Recognizing the agency of material objects, in turn, allows us to "understand that inhabiting the world is a process" others undertake through their relationships to objects (Carlo 63). To discern this process, Carlo adopts the "provisional stance" (47) she recommends in chapter one, inviting rheto-

ricians and compositionists to discuss the material by considering how they already apply and have yet to apply the terms “thing-power, affect, character, narrative, time, and becoming” (67). After providing a brief commentary for each of these material key terms in relation to her larger discussion on ethos and identification from chapter one, Carlo notes the importance of this endeavor as “things ground us in the world, and though they cannot speak, they contribute to our inventive capacities as we speak of them and for them” (70). Next, Carlo proceeds to use the key terms she has defined to study the materialist musings of Corder, Benjamin, Barthes, and hooks in succession, in order to better understand how humans relate to things and, in turn, how this understanding can foster more meaningful connections between people. More specifically, this commonality brings people together because, “when we understand that inhabiting the world is a process others undertake through their objects, we begin to see others’ values” and their character emerges (Carlo 93). In this way Carlo expands our rhetorical understanding of ethos as it is revealed through objects.

Chapter three, “Movement: The Possibilities of Place and Ethos Appeal,” continues to explore how character is developed and communion with others is undertaken through engagements with the material, with a shift of focus from objects to places. What I find most compelling about Carlo’s discussion of ethos in relationship to place is her illumination of “a continual attunement to place” through movement as rhetorical practice (28). Once again, Carlo pushes us to move beyond traditional, limiting conceptions, declaring that “getting into place is rhetorical, and not just in the sense of understanding the context of a rhetorical situation as a backdrop for speech acts” (97). Rather, Carlo states that she follows Thomas Rickert’s (2013) lead in *Ambient Rhetoric*, where he argues that “rhetoric cannot and should not be contained, particularly to an agent’s actions and even further to a system of linguistic or symbolic meaning that can only be perceived by human agents” (97). The process of getting into place, or dwelling, Carlo clarifies, is reciprocal, with human and place both having agency: “we are continually creating place and yet place’s originary impulse of dwelling means place shapes us” (99). Carlo consults scholarship from Jim W. Corder and José Esteban Muñoz, elegantly interspersing her own narrative reflection in this chapter as well, this time including interactions with her dissertation advisor and mentor, Theresa Enos, to demonstrate the ways in which “we’re compelled to write to not forget, to not forget places and loved ones and cultures” (104). Carlo confesses: “I keep thinking if I get Corder down, if I heed Theresa’s imperative to write the book, he won’t be lost, and neither will she,” and it is admissions like these that add power to Carlo’s injunctions, demonstrating that she is not only talking the talk of espousing expressivist writing, but walking the walk.

Central to her discussion of place is Carlo’s use of the Greek term *chôra* in lieu of rhetoric and composition’s more commonly used *topoi*. Carlo expounds on her preference for using *chôra* over *topoi*, stating that *chôra* is beyond the concept place in that it is a “generative place for the creation of places,” taking on “the qualities of the places and things it holds, and thus it is a hard term to be ‘reached’ or ‘touched,’ as Jacques Derrida (1995) notes” (111). The elusive nature imbued in *chôra* is what Carlo is drawn to, as she “desire[s] to shift the thinking of place” as *topoi* “to place as *chôra*

in order to see place as a thing that withdraws from speakers and wanderers” (111). Carlo goes on to outline *chôra* as spatial, (non)discursive, and embodied and then posits a way into *chôra* by probing memory’s ethereality (122). She uses the imagery of a fold to complicate our comprehension of our relationship to place, inviting us to envision our bodies folded into places: “subjective memory cannot exist without the sensuous perceptions of the body,” as well as our memories (Carlo 125). Like chapter two’s description of objects this conception of place has agency, though this agency appears to make place more elusive, necessitating movement—whether in mind or in body—or what Carlo terms “wandering” (130). For Carlo, wandering is a “practice for how to recover and understand ethos beyond its written manifestations” (132). Ultimately, Carlo promises, “learning these methods of tracing the self and others through place—practicing a hermeneutics through movement that interrogates the *chôra*, or that withdraws—can lead to a discourse that is rich in possibility and holds an inventive stance toward the self, others, and the future” (134). Furthermore, Carlo adds, this inventive stance toward the self, others, and the future offers “reasons for writing outside the concept of transfer” (135).

Having demonstrated reasons for writing outside the concept of transfer, through an explication of a transformative ethos as expressed in the material of place and objects, Carlo concludes the book with a fourth chapter: “For an Affective, Embodied, Place-Based Writing Curriculum: Student Reflections on Gentrifying Neighborhoods in New York City.” Carlo makes sure to clarify that this closing chapter is *not* a definitive guide for practicing a pedagogy with ethos and identification at its center, but rather is meant to “begin a dialogue for a different goal for composition—one for which we put aside issues of transfer [. . .] and take up subjects that remind us of rhetoric’s ethical potentialities for being with and working to understand others” (136). Carlo summarizes the place-based curriculum she developed and taught at the College of Staten Island CUNY, which includes an overview of the theory, readings, and assignment activities for the following: a photo essay, a critical-response essay, and an argumentative essay. She also includes an analysis of student papers for both the photo essay and the argumentative essay. When describing her assignment of “place photo essays,” Carlo discusses the ways in which expressive writing may well serve students in the “real world” more than academic writing ever could; how “remedial” students are served by valuing their ways of knowing and expertise (place-based pedagogy), rather than being rigidly made to conform to academic standards; and “writing to be understood” as alternative to—or further, more complex extension of—argumentative writing. Carlo’s “critical analysis essay” assignment is a great model for how students can be introduced to a controversy in a scaffolded way. Herein Carlo’s curriculum offers students a variety of views on a topic (rather than requiring students to find those views themselves), as well as examples of questions that help students think critically about the various viewpoints provided. For her argumentative essay assignment, which she calls “the weigh-in essay,” Carlo describes the transitioning students from analyzing a controversy to taking a stance in a public argument. She states that a goal for the weigh-in essay is “for students to view issues through

a perspective that allows them to see and critique racial and class inequality” (Carlo 162–163).

Carlo’s book, as a whole, drives home a timely message: by myopically focusing on how students can thrive inside the academy, we devalue the ways the literacy of their everyday lives can sustain them in the day-to-day, perpetuating a system that privileges academic ways of knowing and being over other equally valid ways. Critics of the book may take issue with Carlo’s staunch insistence on the negative implications of threshold concepts and teaching for transfer, arguing that such approaches allow students to gain access to a system that, for better or worse, is necessary to abide within in order to succeed. Yet attempts to improve students’ economic mobility at the expense of erasing their material reality can be self-defeating. Community literacy scholars will do well to read this book and discover insights that can help them implement a transformational curriculum that celebrates, rather than attempts to assimilate the community members with whom we engage.