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“What is writing education for?": Challenging the Transfer Turn with Rhetorical Ethos and Place-Based Writing

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Carlo, Rosanne. *Transforming Ethos: Place and the Material in Rhetoric and Writing*. Utah State UP, 2020. 215pp.

“What is writing education for? Why does it matter?” (5). Such questions form the heart of Dr. Rosanne Carlo’s new book, *Transforming Ethos: Place and the Material in Rhetoric and Writing*. Carlo urges writing teacher-scholars to reconsider the aims of the composition classroom, echoing over a century of debates around the purpose of teaching English (Gere et al.). That is to say, Carlo offers a clear case for making personal growth, critical citizenship, and social equity the central aims of writing programs and courses—as opposed to workplace training. *Transforming Ethos* reimagines composition theory and pedagogy through rhetorically-informed, place-based writing. For Carlo, such writing can be “transformative” when writers engage with everyday rhetorical objects and practices.

Carlo’s argument for rhetorical ethos begins with a thoughtful critique of the “transfer turn” in composition studies and writing program administration. In her Introduction, “Rhetoric and Writing for Ethos Development, Not Transfer,” Carlo questions the widely-influential concept of “transfer” as a linear understanding of the purpose of First-Year Writing (FYW) courses for developing certain literacy capacities within students that may *transfer* to other situations—namely their future courses and workplaces. Carlo problematizes transfer discourse exemplified in three recent, landmark writing studies texts: CWPAs revised statement on outcomes for FYW classes; Adler-Kassner and Wardle’s edited collection on “threshold concepts,” *Naming What We Know*; and Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak’s book on “teaching for transfer,” *Writing Across Contexts*. *Transforming Ethos* contributes to ongoing debates in composition and rhetoric by offering a unique voice that resists the common-sense ubiquity of transfer in FYW today.

Carlo’s stance against transfer is clear, compelling, and provocative. Composition’s transfer turn, according to Carlo, constitutes an embrace of the standardized, corporatized neoliberal university, part of our wider abdication of the field’s historical commitment to liberal arts education and critical citizenship. To be fair, recent moves toward professionalization in writing studies are appealing to those who value accountability, career training, and “momentum” (5) toward graduation—a point that Carlo and I, both “accidental” WPAs, readily acknowledge. The problem with transfer discourse though, for Carlo, is that it embraces “efficiency and deficiency” with “measurements and certainty” as opposed to “invention and inquiry...uncertainty, conflict, and becoming” (6). Many embrace transfer because of its positivistic understanding of “naming what we know,” with promises of teaching universal concepts to students and quantitatively assessing the outcomes. While these data may create a certain legibility for outsiders, they mask the messier, everyday work of teaching and researching writing.

Carlo’s work reasserts a qualitative understanding of writing, education, and lived experience, grounded in the rhetorical concept of *ethos*. *Transforming Ethos* builds on numerous ancient and contemporary works to inform a rhetorically-minded writing pedagogy and praxis. Carlo’s Introduction makes the case for ethos as “transformative,” “connected to a physical place” while “highlight[ing] the community and the cultural practices we perform” there (11). To counter the “rhetoric of professionalization” that has come to dominate writing studies, Carlo suggests a place-based curriculum that embraces “exploratory writing, personal writing, and writing for and about community and public issues” (6). She claims that “when writers tell of their experiences with objects and places, they create and reveal the ethos appeal,” an approach to writing that can lead to

“identification across difference” (10). Compositionists and WPAs will find this chapter of particular interest, and even supporters of transfer will find value in Carlo’s counterarguments.

Next, in Chapter 1, “Finding a Transformative Definition of Ethos,” Carlo explores the ancient Greek concept of *ethos* in the history of rhetorical studies, presenting her stance that a more complex understanding of ethos be used to transform FYW curriculum. This chapter’s study of ethos seeks to answer a question previously posed by rhetorician James Corder: “Why do we listen to some voices and not to others?” (qtd. in Carlo 31). Carlo responds by exploring the history of ethos in rhetorical studies while presenting an expanded view of the concept. Ethos, according to Carlo, primarily involves three domains: “character as lived experience,” “character as expressed in texts,” and “character as expressed in the material (place and objects)” (37). This approach views rhetorical ethos as generative and invitational, holding the transformative potentiality of a “threshold” between self and Other (34). Moreover, ethos-informed writing can lead to “transformation for both the speaker and listener” (34) through “learning to dwell with others in language” (35). Therefore, according to Carlo, expanded notions of ethos should be central to FYW because it contributes to an understanding of whose voices we listen to and why. Overall, Carlo’s desire is “to practice and teach rhetoric with an ethical center” (54); such idealistic aims contrast greatly with “the reductive formula of ethos = character” or considerations of rhetoric as “merely a tool for success in school” (53).

Transforming Ethos shifts regularly between narrative and academic argumentation, the personal and professional. In juxtaposing these writing stances, this work exemplifies the importance of a writer’s voice and lived experience in building credibility and identification with an audience. Such ideas are central to Chapter 2, “Finding and Collecting: Stories on Material Objects and the Ethos Appeal.” With it, Carlo establishes one of the central arguments of her project: that rhetorical ethos is constructed and communicated through objects. After tracing a “material story” (60) about her great-aunt, Carlo shifts toward her wider argument: that writers and scholars must attend to the rhetorical nature of everyday objects and places. Materiality, therefore, is essential for fully grasping rhetorical ethos. Following Thomas Rickert, Carlo claims that attuning ourselves to our objects and material environments has the capacity to foster deeper links between the self and Other, as well as the human and the non-human world. Building on affect theory and New Materialism, Carlo presents a valuable heuristic for exploring rhetorical ethos through material through the following six key terms: thing-power, affect, character, narrative, time, and becoming (67). Seeking to apply this heuristic to the rhetorics of material narratives, Carlo presents her reading of four works that involve dynamic meditations on finding and collecting objects, including famous works by Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, and bell hooks, as well as an unpublished essay by James Corder. Together, these texts serve to reinforce Carlo’s claims about material rhetorics: first, that rhetorical theory offers much to the reading and analysis of everyday objects and narratives about them; and second, that narrative reveals ethos—character, values, and identity—while building identification by illustrating how “we each interact with objects” (93). Pedagogically speaking, such insights point to the importance of teaching rhetorical ethos through reading and writing material narratives in FYW. Here, Carlo’s push for *chôra* in environmental writing and rhetoric complements earlier works by Rickert as well as Derek Grant.

The overall argument of *Transforming Ethos* about the value of place and materiality in rhetorical ethos continues in Chapter 3, “Movement: The Possibilities of Place and the Ethos Appeal.” This chapter consists of brief discussions on narrative approaches and rhetorical theorizing, all seeking to establish place as intimately tied to rhetorical ethos. For Carlo, place is experienced and defined through movement, defined as “a rhetorical practice important to creating a sense of dwelling” (104). Citing the work of Derrida, among others, Carlo suggests the possibilities of *chôra* as a spatial, (non)discursive, embodied concept offering a more expansive, metaphysical understanding of place than the more commonly used rhetorical concept for understanding place, *topos* (100). Accordingly, *chôra* may offer more generative possibilities for rhetorical invention, but it also offers unique challenges for representation “because it withdraws from our logical and sensible ways of knowing” (116). Carlo argues against *topos* as a concept in space or in persuasion because it “create[s] boundaries,” embracing *chôraphilia*, or love of place, instead because it offers “a more complex term to use in describing our constant, embodied, emotional, and mindful experience of place” (122). Rhetorical theorists and writing teacher-scholars may not be convinced to abandon *topos*, but Carlo’s foray into *chôra* suggests new pathways for using space/place to reinvigorate composition theory and pedagogy.

The final chapter of *Transforming Ethos* presents an applied look at what a FYW class that is “place-based, embodied, affective” (137) might entail, as Carlo discusses sample assignments and student writing from her recent classes at the College of Staten Island (CUNY). Practitioners interested in how to enrich their FYW curriculum and pedagogy via renewed engagements with rhetoric will find this chapter—and the Appendices that follow it—most appealing and valuable. Once again, Carlo begins by situating her curricular and pedagogical approaches contra the turns toward transfer and cognition in writing studies. This is because she views these approaches as offering a shallow understanding and application of the rhetorical tradition while moving too far toward “professionalization” (137). Her stance is that rhetoric, particularly through a focus on the concept ethos as described above, enriches writing instruction by merging the personal and the public through writing about place and material. This pedagogical move attempts to bridge the discursive gap between home and college, marginalized and elite, in an effort to encourage working-class and first-generation students to succeed in academe by embracing their embodied experiences, identities, and places. Carlo analyzes examples of student discourse around three primary assignments from her FYW course focused on gentrification: photo essays on place; a critical analysis essay that synthesizes the issue of gentrification through public reports, news articles, oral histories; and an argumentative, position paper referred to as the “weigh-in essay” (157). Offering rich details for each, Carlo connects these assignments to rhetorical and pedagogical theory while offering quotations from student work.

One valid critique of this final chapter, and the book as a whole, would be that Carlo’s depth of theorizing in previous chapters leaves little space for classroom practice here at the end. Indeed, one can imagine another entire monograph dedicated to profiling and exploring Carlo’s students, their lives, and their writings—about which Carlo only briefly summarizes here. Practitioners may be wanted to hear more from Carlo the teacher reflecting on her evolving teaching praxis: assignments that morphed and connected with emerging local issues, discussions that led to heated debates or awkward admissions, and the like. And while such critiques are certainly valid, they do not detract from the text overall. If anything, they point toward a new direction in scholarship in writing and rhetoric that balances the theoretical depth of New Rhetoric, Object-Oriented Ontology, and Critical Pedagogy with the everyday, lived experiences of teaching writing and rhetoric.

Overall, *Transforming Ethos* takes the reader on a personal journey through theory, narrative, and materiality, all the while presenting teacher-scholars with an alternative vision of how to engage in writing and rhetoric as a way of living, dwelling, and being. Carlo’s commendable text is both far-reaching yet localized, theoretical yet intimately practical. The range of engaging ideas and examples explored in *Transforming Ethos* is enough to make it appealing to teacher-scholars across English studies writ large: rhetoricians will be intrigued by Carlo’s work on expanding the definition of ethos via Heidegger, Enos, Corder, and Rickert. Narratologists and cultural studies scholars will find interest in Carlo’s work with memory, materiality, place, and performance. Composition pedagogues and WPAs will be intrigued by the challenges to transfer and Carlo’s extension of civically-engaged, place-based writing. Indeed, there is something in *Transforming Ethos* for almost everyone in the modern English Department, and Carlo’s attempts to synthesize these important works and concepts across English studies deserves high praise. *Transforming Ethos* deserves to be read and discussed alongside *Naming What We Know* in graduate-level courses on composition theory and professional development reading groups of FYW instructors. This book is an engaging starting point for re-centering the rhetorical tradition, particularly an expanded conceptualization of ethos, within composition theory and the FYW classroom.

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