



Transforming Ethos: Place and the Material in Rhetoric and Writing

Rosanne Carlo. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2020. 216 pages.
\$24.95 paperback.

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To cite this article: Jennifer Jacovitch (2022) Transforming Ethos: Place and the Material in Rhetoric and Writing, Rhetoric Review, 41:1, 75-77, DOI: [10.1080/07350198.2021.2008198](https://doi.org/10.1080/07350198.2021.2008198)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07350198.2021.2008198>



Published online: 18 Jan 2022.



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So, what *has* Me Too made possible? As demonstrated by this collection, the movement offers survivors new avenues and language for discussing their sexual trauma. While the long-term effects and resilience of the movement will be debated in the coming years, the discourse around the impact of misogyny on women's lives is finding increased scrutiny. As this edited collection illustrates, sharing stories of past trauma is an act of political courage. If women's experiences are to be given epistemological weight, women's stories must be present in the public sphere.

In solidarity with the authors of these chapters, and inspired by Powell's chapter, I conclude by offering this incomplete list of my own "layers" of harassment:

- Age 7, kissed on the mouth by the dinner host three successive nights while on a Disney cruise (before I asked my dad to tell him to stop).
- Age 13, told by a middle-aged man in the foursome I was caddying for that the standard caddy shorts I was wearing showed off my legs.
- Age 17, accosted by a man who passed me in Chicago's Loop and started yelling about my breasts.
- Age 20, whistled at by a car full of men while walking on campus with my roommate. When we shared the incident with her mom, who was in town visiting, she responded that we were lucky because some women "never get that."
- Age 33, told by a senior male colleague as he passed me in the hall that I was one of the prettiest women in my department.
- Age 41, leered at by a male doctor who made comments about the appearance of my body.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/07350198.2021.2008199>



Rosanne Carlo. ***Transforming Ethos: Place and the Material in Rhetoric and Writing***. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2020. 216 pages. \$24.95 paperback.

Rhetorician Jim W. Corder spent a considerable portion of his lifetime developing a way of writing that was both scholarly and personal at the same time. Corder's style evolved over the decades from very conventional prose to a carefully crafted theory of generative ethos that was both embodied and enacted throughout his later works—he quite literally practiced what he preached. Corder believed the short answer to rhetoric's most basic question—Why do we listen to some people and not to others?—is *ethos*, and he spent the majority of his professional career grappling with ethos and writing about and practicing varieties of ethical argument. Ultimately, Corder believed it was impossible to fully separate or exclude the personal from any writing. Instead, he argued that ethos is revealed in the blessed particulars of our lives and that our capacity to persuade or, more importantly, to transform both ourselves and others rests in the ability to explore and talk about those particulars.

In *Transforming Ethos*, Rosanne Carlo uses Corder's perspective as the jumping-off point as she seeks a (re)examination of ethos and discusses how its revival "can begin to shape our thinking about writing and its teaching" (4). However, she expands Corder's perspective significantly, drawing on a range of contemporary voices within and beyond the discipline. Carlo argues that engagement in the material realities surrounding our lives and our students' lives affords the opportunity to (re)consider the educational experience and (re)explore "the

ways writing can foster a sense of self and prepare people to be in community” (5). Furthermore, Carlo offers an answer for two deceptively simple, yet essential, questions: “What is writing education for?” and “Why does it matter?” (5).

Carlo opens the book with a description of an object, one of the blessed particulars in her environment working at College of Staten Island. The object, which is shown on the front cover of the book, is a gnarly vine that over time has made its way through the exterior walls of her office building on campus and now hangs from a ceiling vent in a stairwell she often uses. She explains that the vine exists as a frequent source of frustration, adding “Most days, the vine embarrasses me—I walk by it quickly, pretending it’s not there. Other days, I’m angry at it, wanting to rip it out from the ceiling in one violent tug. Some days, I believe it holds all the secrets to the universe but refuses to tell me” (3–4). These moments of contemplation about the vine highlight the material realities that define her institution and shape the experience of those who teach and learn there, and the vine offers a metaphor to situate her discussion in the book within the broader context of higher education, the discipline of rhetoric and composition, and the teaching of first-year writing.

Carlo’s approach is Corderian, in the sense that she offers a blend of personal and more conventional scholarly discourse, foregrounds a discussion of ethos, and seeks to expand the dimensions and possibilities of ethical argument. Likewise, throughout the text, Carlo often enacts the arguments she is inviting her readers to consider. As a fundamental concept in rhetoric studies, ethos can sometimes seem fairly basic (it is one leg of Aristotle’s familiar triad of appeals—ethos, pathos, and logos—the bread and butter of introductory rhetorical analysis), but of course the term is far more nuanced and continually ripe for ongoing (re)consideration. Carlo’s book demonstrates the latter. The result is a rich (and rare) combination of rhetorical theory and pragmatic application.

Of course, Carlo is not the first person to propose a pedagogy that involves personal writing, but her way of foregrounding ethos (and the spacious definition of it she formulates) provides a basis for the material and place-based writing curriculum she lays out in the book. In her telling of the vine in the ceiling vent, Carlo explores the physical (material) structures surrounding her work as a college professor, as well as the nonphysical (cultural/ideological) structures shaping those experiences. Her engagement with a seemingly mundane object provides a starting point for Carlo to reveal her own ethos. Throughout the book, she includes other descriptions of lived experiences (family history, childhood memories, educational background) in a familiar, narrative style that effectively illustrates the theoretical framework she constructs. Moreover, she embodies an approach to the place-based writing curriculum she later describes in more detail.

Beyond the introduction, Carlo divides the book into four chapters and includes two appendices. Chapter one, “Finding a Transformative Definition of Ethos,” is based on her early assertion that “the ethos appeal is often misunderstood or oversimplified in contemporary usage when scholars and teachers define it solely as character expressed in a text.” Therefore, she presents a much-expanded definition of ethos by exploring the term within a range of ancient and modern theoretical contexts, including time (*kairos*), space (gathering place), and Martin Heidegger’s concept of dwelling, highlighting the “material consequences and cultural connections” of ethos and “how subjects relate to each other” (27).

In chapter two, “Finding and Collecting: Stories on Material Objects and Ethos Appeal,” Carlo further expands the definition of ethos with a focus on how we locate, collect, and relate to material objects, a process she argues is rhetorical and provides a means of identification with others. In other words, she argues, “If we view material stories as texts to be analyzed [. . .] we are invited to see how others invent themselves. It is through this process of invention, of interaction with objects, that some clues about identity construction are revealed” (93).

Chapter three, “Movement: The Possibilities of Place and the Ethos Appeal” offers a further avenue to expand the definition of ethos, as Carlo shifts from a discussion of things in the previous chapter to consideration of place. She explains, “Reflecting on place allows people to understand and communicate their experiences and their knowledge(s)” (28). Drawing on ancient Greek, she focuses on the concept of *chôra* (instead of *topoi*, a less nuanced term more often associated with place), “because it emphasizes subjectivity and emotions; it connects the idea of place to spatiality, discourse, and the body” (28). Examining one’s connection to and identification with a particular place embodies what Carlo refers to as a form of “mental wandering” (127). To inform her consideration of ethos, Carlo blends personal reflection on significant places in her life with the work of a number of other contemporary scholars who engage rhetoric(s) of space.

Chapter four, “For an Affective, Embodied, Place-Based Writing Curriculum: Student Reflections on Gentrifying Neighborhoods in New York City,” is where the theoretical rubber that Carlo has been meticulously constructing up to this point hits the road, and she offers an answer to that ever-pervasive question, “So what?” in a way that so many academic texts fail to do. Her argument for enlarging the definition of ethos and widening the possibilities that a study of ethos affords is accompanied by the rich, nuanced consideration of the concept she lays out in the first three chapters. The first-year writing curriculum she presents in the final chapter demonstrates how students can engage in a rhetorical consideration of their lives and communities beyond the classroom. An exploration of ethos (how it’s constructed and revealed) offers a critical perspective on the material realities of their lives, the places where they dwell, and the objects found there, and writing becomes a way to make sense of the world and their communities, to create the possibility of connection and identification with others, to bridge difference, and to enable transformation.

The pedagogy Carlo presents is useful in nearly any writing classroom context, regardless of geographic location, student demographics, or institutional culture. The campus where Carlo teaches is part of the City University of New York (CUNY) system in an urban setting surrounded by racially diverse, working-class neighborhoods. Carlo asks students to grapple with gentrification, a process that is drastically changing the material realities of their neighborhood communities, but the framework she offers students to investigate place and the material world around them is replicable anywhere. The appendices contain assignments and writing prompts that guide students through the place-based curriculum and also provide a springboard for others to readily develop similar assignment materials for another situation.

The strength of this book is that it offers an important combination of theory and practice, which is a rare accomplishment in the larger scheme of scholarship in the discipline of rhetoric and composition. Here, Carlo presents a first-year writing curriculum but, as she points out, the approach offers great potential in other writing contexts as well, including professional discourse in the field. Like Jim Corder, Carlo demonstrates the potential for rhetoric (and the study of rhetoric) to transform us.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/07350198.2021.2008198>

