

Review:

Field Rhetoric: Ethnography, Ecology, and Engagement in the Places of Persuasion

By Candice Rai & Caroline Gottschalk Druschke

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Candice Rai and Caroline Druschke have compiled an edited collection of ten articles about field rhetoric written by scholars from disciplines as diverse as English and communication, ecology, and political science. They view rhetoric as ecological, “a complex constellation of persuasive forces in the world” that is best studied in context—through fieldwork, actively engaging with the community. The articles are organized into three subsections, moving from field methodologies and Samantha Senda-Cook et al.’s “Rhetorical Cartographies” that investigates remapping a community of “polarized topographies” (104); to field ontologies and Bridie McGreavy et al.’s “Belonging to the World” that takes a “mundane aesthetic orientation to rhetorical ethnography” (151); and finally field inventions, exemplified by Jeffrey T. Grabill et al.’s “Fieldwork and the Identification and Assembling of Agencies” that builds a new “methodology that attempts to

assign language to fieldwork materials and practices" (194). While ethnography has long been an important part of rhetorical study, this volume lays out the methodologies, ontologies, and inventions to serve as a roadmap for new scholarship. The editors have assigned a primary importance to study of the material, physical manifestations of rhetorical practice through ethnographic field work, which finds middle ground between deterministic, autonomous theories of the importance of literacy to human development in a Darwinistic survival of the fittest and purely ideological views of literacy that do not usually acknowledge the role of the environment and nonhuman actors in rhetorical action.

The last great leap in the oral/literacy debate occurred during the 1980s when researchers found that the benefits of literacy do not necessarily follow from the ability to read, but rather stem from the use of appropriate literate practices in context. When Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole conducted their study of the Vai people in western Africa, literature studies passed into the realm of ethnography taking place *in situ*, in a different culture and country than the scholar's home. Their resulting book, *The Psychology of Literacy* (1981), was a major influence on the oral/literate debate, leading to a shift to the ideological model of literacy. Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways with Words* followed in 1983, focusing on the literate practices of families in the southeastern United States. Brian Street's *Literacy in Theory and Practice* followed in 1984, outlining a similar ethnographic study conducted in Iran. What all of these studies from the 1980s point to is the importance of studying the uses of language and rhetoric in context, but while these studies focused on the sociohistorical factors that affected language development, they did not attend to the physical exigencies and material realities that drove people to communicate in certain ways. This attention to the role of nonhuman actors in human literacy is what the editors of *Field Rhetoric* forward in their collection.

Rai and Druschke take this practice to heart in *Field Rhetoric*, and add reflexive, methodological inquiry to its core. It is one thing to choose ethnographic research as a methodology and to determine a site of research and group of participants. It is quite another to understand how those choices and their physical reality affect the

attendant meaning and outcomes of a qualitative social science study, and how this research might effect real change in the world. Including and even prioritizing nonhuman actors in ethnographic research does call for a new methodology of inquiry: the application of methods previously reserved for human actors, such as observation of and listening to nonhumans. For example, Ackerman shifts the “backgrounds of habitation ... to the ontological foreground” in Chapter 7 “Rhetorical Life Among the Ruins” to describe the rhetorical effects of environmental (both human-built and natural) degradation (177). This type of research also lends itself well to pragmatic action based on its findings, such as the work done by Grabill in a Michigan harbor community faced with a dredging project in Chapter 8 and the recommendations made by McGreavy et al. in the clam-digging industry of a community in Maine in Chapter 6. It appears that taking an ideological stance that attends to physical realities in ethnographic research makes researchers more in tune with their participants’ concerns and needs and more likely to take up social activism in their sites of research.

In the articles primarily concerned with agriculture and fishing, there is the sense that the researchers are looking for practical applications of their findings to these resource-extractive industries. Druschke’s research on farmers in rural Iowa reflects how the rhetorical construction of ideas about food and water trouble the relationship between farmers and their land. She also describes how this felt difficulty or tension between “feeding the world” and conserving the environment similarly affected her position as researcher (22). According to Druschke, “These competing demands are at the heart of the tensions identified here in the polysemous nature of stewardship” (38). Herndl et al. also investigate agriculture through the difference between language used by scientists and farmers in a study on the potential industry structure for manufacturing cellulosic biofuel. In a departure from the qualitative analyses that characterizes Druschke’s article, they use Semantic Network Analysis and the program Texttexture to identify the collocation of terms used by the two groups. They argue that quantitative analysis can be a useful tool, mostly because it “carries considerable cultural capital” that can lead to “membership in large, externally funded interdisciplinary projects” (89). Greavy et al. study sustainability efforts of the clam industry in Frenchman Bay, Maine through twenty-two interviews and observations, paying particular

attention to the materials used in their fieldwork, the “vibrant matter” that affects their participants’ decision-making processes, and the objects used to take action (157). Their work allowed creation of the 610 Project, “which sought to make progress on opening 610 acres of closed clam flats in the bay” (157).

Articles that focus on the importance of place include chapters by Sendra-Cook et al., Cintron, Ackerman, and McClellan. Sendra-Cook, et al. investigate the rhetorical cartographies of Midtown, Omaha, Nebraska. They reify the importance of space and place in determining the socio-rhetorical possibilities available for inhabitants of the city. But they also show how one group of men set out to remap the community to much success by changing the uses of properties in an urban development project. In a similar observational vein, Cintron describes fieldwork conducted in the Balkans in what is laid out as more of a personal essay format than the outline of a formal study. Cintron alternates between descriptions of young men and women on a bus, speculating as to their economic and social situations while discussing the overall economics and politics of the Balkans. The tension between meritocracy versus corruption is palpable. He takes local examples from his situated fieldwork and then extrapolates to the national and global scale. Ackerman likewise investigates the history of place and includes “ruination” as a comparative tool to study the living—the ghosts of history still affecting the ideological lives of the present (171). He cites Kent State since the May 4 shootings as an example where a massive downtown redevelopment project served to reinforce the university/city divide despite efforts to bring the two together. Such an investigation could productively be applied to research regarding sites of environmental degradation and inequalities/injustice, where “the biological foundation to ruination as a process of recovery resurfaces as a place of persuasion” (188). McClellan’s chapter studies the Portland, Oregon, Pioneer Courthouse Square as “Portland’s living room,” highlighting the different views of habitual visitors to the public square and the way her personal identity affected her interpretations of the site (216).

The remaining chapters aim to give advice and new terminology to ethnographic fieldwork researchers. Adams’ chapter studies the memories of unwed mothers who were sent away to give birth

because of the stigma of their social status. She focuses on the value of memories to field research, and she realizes that interacting with her participants one-on-one when conducting interviews reinforces her subjects' original isolation, so she switches to holding focus groups. She also finds considerable value in accepting and fully experiencing the emotional aspects of subjects' retellings, which she calls "signals of intensity" (55). In a similar turn toward the modes of research, Hess warns that the use of technologies such as smart phones by field researchers should be tempered by "technological reflexivity" because such devices and their programs are not neutral (236). The occurrence of a "filter bubble" and the ubiquitous nature of algorithms makes the researcher subject to unintended biases (237). There is also the sensationalism of "media logic" and framing, where a researcher might choose the most fantastic, but not necessarily analytically important, video footage to report results of a study (245). Grabill, Leon, and Pigg also provide a mode or model for research: new terms for fieldwork materials and practices. They introduce the concepts of *mediators* (ideological/identity assemblages), *resonances* (rhetorical genres that reflect assemblages), and *termini* (finished rhetorical product) and apply them to three fieldwork studies. They quote Latour from *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence* (2013) as asking "what sort of collection and what sort of composition is needed" to conduct rhetorical research (208)? These chapters put forward new frameworks or boundaries to conducting and reporting fieldwork that can guide the researcher toward more ethical, accurate research techniques.

Overall, *Field Rhetoric* is an impressive collection of research articles that are at the forefront of social science research that takes an ethnographic path toward greater understanding of rhetoric's uses and implications. It is clear that the consequences of being literate or not are no longer the focus of this type of research, rather it is the ever-expanding investigation of how rhetoric, whether oral or written, is mediated by nonhuman actors, and how rhetoric also plays an important role in how we live in the material world.