

Sara L. McKinnon, Robert Asen, Karma R. Chávez, and Robert Glenn Howard (Eds.), **Text + Field: Innovations in Rhetorical Method**, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016, 240 pp., \$34.95 (paperback), \$15.99 (Kindle).

Reviewed by
Thomas A. Discenna
Oakland University, USA



The theme of this excellent collection of essays becomes immediately apparent with the cover art, where the two words “text” and “field” stand around the plus in an uneasy relationship: While “text” has a certain pride of place in coming first, it is “field” in all caps that demands attention and dominates the frame, nearly threatening to overwhelm its purported addend. *Text + Field: Innovations in Rhetorical Method* explores a variety of methods for rhetorical critics interested in exploring the relationship between rhetoric and the sites in which it is produced, consumed, and, ultimately evaluated. Indeed, a central tension that seems to animate the collection comes into focus with Alina Haliliuc’s contribution, in which she cites Carol Blair’s provocation to make rhetorical criticism *matter*. As Haliliuc makes clear, this admonition to make our critical interventions matter moves simultaneously in two directions: Criticism should make the rhetorical artifact, or text, matter in the sense of becoming present to readers as a material presence, and in this material becoming, this mattering, the criticism should move the reader of such work to engage, to care—in short, to produce an effect in the minds, and perhaps the hearts, of criticism’s audience. This set of essays addresses these concerns, largely by arguing for and demonstrating a more nuanced and complete understanding of the relationship between the rhetorical artifact and its context, defined here as its field, and its audience as a part of that field. In other words, by immersing themselves in the field as the site of the construction of meaning, rhetorical critics can make the text more fully present by inscribing it, and themselves, within the contextual conditions in which text operates and thereby identify an audience for whom the criticism might make a difference.

As clearly summarized in the introduction by McKinnon, Asen, Chávez, and Howard, the turn to the field as the site of critical intervention complicates several of the rhetorical criticism’s foundational concepts: text–context, critic–audience, audience–ethics, to name just a few. And the essays that follow demonstrate these complications in all their fraught ambiguity. Indeed, each essay in the collection wrestles with a radical indeterminacy produced by the critic’s close embedding in the rhetorical field: Landau’s “affective-emotional” engagement with the “Bodies: An Exhibition” display of a preserved fetus; Haliliuc’s careful positioning of herself as both audience and critic for Romanian nationalist rhetoric; Ewalt, Ohl, and Pfister’s reconstruction, by means of *imitatio*, of their experience within the Occupy! movement; as well as Hess’s *phronetic* intervention at various sites of rhetorical display. All of these, and the rest of the essays collected here, highlight the fundamental uncertainties that attend the contemporary practice of rhetorical criticism, especially as it occurs in the field. As Chevrette concludes in her essay calling for a “holographic” approach to criticism:

By drawing attention to the different meanings, and levels of meaning, that reside within public memory places and exceed their borders, reframing rhetoric as holographic allows us to attend to rhetorical “wholes” in a way that better emphasizes multiplicity, difference, and fragmentation. (p. 162)

The practice of attending to “multiplicity, difference and fragmentation” is on ample display in this collection, and the authors make an impassioned and important collective argument for the value of field methods in rhetorical criticism. However, if, as Pezzullo argues in her afterword to this collection, the field becomes central rather than peripheral to the practice of rhetorical criticism, then it is perhaps worth asking, in an evocation of Baskerville (2013), must we all (rhetorical critics) be ethnographers? Pezzullo seems to suggest as much: “Given that ancient rhetorical scholars commonly moved between their roles as teachers, advocates, consultants, poets, and more, it should be uncontroversial to affirm to rhetorical analysis that draws on critical ethnographic practices and sensibilities” (p. 178). And while this is certainly true, the move to the field for rhetorical criticism is not without its own ambiguities and uncertainties, as this collection documents so well. In fact, while it is certainly the case that the rhetorical tradition has tended to privilege “audience’s showy sisters—rhetor and text” (McKinnon, cited by Haliliuc, p. 137), the turn to the field in no way resolves the fundamental tension that gives rise to it—the desire to imbue the rhetorical artifact with presence, and with it, the wish to have an impact on the communities and cultures out of which the works grow.

As I read the essays assembled, with their evocative portraits of communities struggling with material exigencies—especially Na’puti’s sensitive exploration of Guåhan, de Onís’s intervention in Puerto Rico, and Silvestri’s study of social media use in war zones—I felt myself compelled to reread Marie Hochmuth Nichols’s (1990) analysis of Lincoln’s first inaugural address. The method here is as traditional and far removed from ethnographic work as it is possible to be, but there is a richness of detail that makes the audience, the text, and the rhetor as fully present in the mind of the reader as Blair (2001) might wish. And while Nichols’s work seems to belong to a vanished past, it is important to note what it offers: a demonstration that presence can be achieved not merely by method, but through careful, patient, and painstaking reconstruction that takes time and skill to achieve. In other words, making the text matter is less a matter of method, whether it be field-based or textually focused, and more a matter of craft and the time to nurture and develop it. If Blair finds that current practice is wanting in this regard, and I would mostly agree, then it seems to me that the problem lies less in the application of method and more in the conditions of speed-up in the neoliberal, corporatized university that compels us to rush our work into print as we listen fretfully to tenure and promotion “clocks” loudly ticking out the moments of our careers.

The turn to the audience is informed, at least partially, by rhetoric’s close association with media studies, where a similar turn to the audience occurred some time ago. However, in response to the notion that rhetorical criticism should be made to matter in the sense of having an impact on individuals, communities, and cultures, I would suggest looking in perhaps a different direction and asking with John Durham Peters (1999), how it is that we know it doesn’t? That is, the anxiety that criticism doesn’t matter in the sense of having an influence seems predicated on what Peters refers to as a dialogic understanding of communication wherein the message is shared and its delivery ensured. Indeed, de Onís’s notion of

copresence highlights the requirement that the critical work be shared with the community out of which it arises. Instead, if we accept Peters' notion of a dissemination model, then the reception of our critical work must be understood to fall outside of our control: It may have the impact that we intend, offering support for communities like those described by Thatcher's work in this collection on citizens' resistance to the environmental damage caused by coal plants in their communities; it may also have no effect at all, or, perhaps even more perversely, an effect that the critic never imagined and might never have hoped for.

Finally, the turn to the field continues the expansion—indeed, proliferation—of methods and objects available for analysis by rhetorical criticism. As an introduction to this profusion of methods, this text serves as a touchstone offering both theoretical insights and practical applications that are accessible (in the best sense of the term), engaging, and thought provoking. At the same time, as our methodological "toolbox" expands, it is important not to lose sight of Nothstine, Blair, and Copeland's (1994) maxim that "criticism is both served and confined by theory and method" (p. 11). It is clear that the authors gathered have carefully thought through how criticism might be informed by reconceptualizing the audience and the context, but it is less clear that the constraints have been equally considered. If the field assumes a more central place in the practice of rhetorical criticism, then rhetoric becomes fundamentally constrained in what it can accomplish. In short, the field is as much a constraint as the archive; it facilitates much, but restricts much as well.

References

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