

Our Places in a Rhetorical Century

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When John asked me for a title for this talk, I said, “Our Places in a Rhetorical Century.” I had two things in mind with the title, both connected to the rhetorical theorist who intrigues me the most right now—Richard McKeon, that oddball pragmatist philosopher who wrote about the subject from the ‘40s to the ‘70s. First, I wanted to say something broad and historically sweeping about rhetoric’s intellectual revival over the past hundred or so years. Second, I wanted to connect that revival to the idea of rhetorical places, which John and a number of us are working on in one form or another right now. Both the historical revival and the place idea could feed multiple seminars and books in their own right, and I’ve got about 15 minutes, but I decided to go big and breezy, like the hot winds that blow across the Plains and the Front Range of the Rockies this time of year; or maybe I’d go wide and shallow, like the Platte River when it flows out of the mountains east toward Nebraska. Hot winds, shallow waters—it’s a combination that both plays to my own personal strengths and seems fitting for a speech delivered on the border of a region once known as the Great American Desert.

It’s easy to forget that Boulder sits on the edge of the Plains, since most of us are oriented west toward the Rockies—“the barrier that became a destination,” in the words of the WPA guidebook to the state. It’s also easy to overlook McKeon. His intellectual and prose style are their own barriers, plus as a

field we've tended to orient ourselves toward his near-lifelong friend Kenneth Burke as the leading rhetorical revivalist. And it's also easy to let Burke's long shadow occlude two otherwise towering figures who rediscovered rhetoric some six decades before he did—Charles Peirce and Friedrich Nietzsche. So let's remember our forgetting and drift for a few minutes across times and places (blending Richard McKeon with Michael McGee and stitching a few rhetorical fragments together into a text suitable for subsequent criticism).¹

On two continents within five years of one another, Peirce and Nietzsche rediscovered rhetoric and bent it to their respective projects. Peirce was first, publishing a seminal piece in 1868 that revived rhetoric as part of new trivium that would serve his humanistic science of signs.² Four years later, Nietzsche would lecture on classical rhetoric, which in turn served as an inventional base for his tropological theory of truth as constructed through language.³ We could do worse than locating the beginning of our own intellectual moment in these early writings by two idiosyncratic geniuses. We can find in them some of the competing impulses that continue to inform rhetorical studies today: reconstruction and deconstruction, solidarity and critique, knowing and creating, epistemology and

¹ Michael Calvin McGee, "Text, Context, and the Fragmentation of Contemporary Culture," *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 54(3): 274-89.

² Complementing his reformulated grammar and logic, rhetoric would address "the formal conditions of the force of symbols, or their power of appealing to a mind" (Peirce, "On a New List of Categories" (1868), rpt. in Nathan Houser and Christian Kloessel (eds.), *The Essential Peirce*, Vol. 1 (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1992), 1-10. For a later and more complete vision of his rhetoric, see "Ideas, Stray or Stolen, about Scientific Writing" (composed ca. 1904), published in *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 11:3 (1978), 147-155. For excellent reconstructions of Peirce's theory of rhetoric, see James Jakób Liszka, "Peirce's New Rhetoric," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 36:4 (2000), 439-76; Liszka, "Peirce's Revolutionary Concept of Rhetoric," in Mats Bergman et al. (eds.), *Ideas in Action: Proceedings of the Applying Peirce Conference* (Helsinki: Nordic Pragmatism Network, 2010), 118-33 [avail at <http://www.nordprag.org/nsp/1/Liszka.pdf>]; John Lyne, "Rhetoric and Semiotic in C.S. Peirce," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66 (1980), 155-168; and Mats Bergman, *Peirce's Philosophy of Communication: The Rhetorical Underpinnings of the Theory of Signs* (New York: Continuum, 2009).

³ Evident in his classic 1873 essay, "On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense." For that essay as well Nietzsche's lectures on rhetoric and an excellent short introduction to them in relation to his later writings on language, truth, and the will to power, see Sander L. Gilman, Carole Blair, and David Parent, eds., *Friedrich Nietzsche on Rhetoric and Language* (New York; Oxford, 1989).

aesthetics, hermeneutics of hope and hermeneutics of suspicion. Two faces of modernism, Peirce and Nietzsche helped re-launch the intellectual conversation about rhetoric, operating at the vanguard of the European humanist tradition, and doing their work in the refined elite cultures of Cambridge, Massachusetts and Basel, Germany.

Meanwhile...at that same historical moment, our own Boulder, Colorado was solidifying itself as an outpost of the Anglo-European imperium that Peirce and Nietzsche were busying themselves with extending philosophically. The Spanish had been the first Europeans to set foot in Colorado, initially tracking down runaway Indian slaves from New Mexico, later searching for gold and sweeping through on military expeditions. In the 19th century, the region fell into the expanding American empire. White trappers ranged the mountains for the beaver that anchored commodity chains routed through fur companies to fuel the consumption habits of well-heeled men and women in the East and in Europe. Miners followed en masse after the discovery of gold in 1858, looking to get rich quick. With them came white settlements, roads, printing presses, newspapers, telegraph lines, railroads, and schools—including the new University of Colorado, which opened its doors here in 1877. The First Nations people had alternately made room for and resisted the invaders —Arapaho, Cheyenne, Kiowa, and Comanche on the Plains; Utes in the mountains that bordered them. The years that Peirce and Nietzsche turned toward rhetoric were particularly devastating for the natives here. As Nietzsche wrote gaily of truth being a mobile army of metaphors, the people of the First Nations were living a very different kind of material truth—having over the past decade been killed, starved by the systematic extermination of the buffalo herds, or forcibly removed from the region.⁴ Among much else, the native rhetorical ways that had grown up through living in this region were brutally extinguished, clearing space for institutions like the University of Colorado to grow, and making room for people like us today.

⁴ Donald J. Hughes, *American Indians in Colorado*, 2nd ed. (Boulder, CO: Pruett, 1987)

Basel, Cambridge, and Boulder are three geographical places whose rhetorical histories we might map, documenting significant events, traditions, and sometimes tragic discontinuities in the realms of cultural practice and theoretical reflection. Such a mapping would be fitting, I think, for what I sometimes call the long rhetorical century that we're living in.⁵ It's a Eurocentric historical framing, inspired partly by McKeon, but it opens out toward comparative work with other civilizations and regions as well.⁶ In calling it a long rhetorical century—'rhetorical age' is probably more accurate because the century gets pretty damned long—I mean that it's been one where rhetoric has flourished and metastasized as a theoretical subject, an object of empirical inquiry, and heterogeneous family of social practices. In the theoretical realm, starting with Peirce and Nietzsche, we have witnessed the creative revival of rhetoric as an explicit topic for a host of philosophers, literary theorists, critics, historians, and social scientists; and institutionalized through the fields of English, speech, and communication. We've also witnessed the growth of what I sometimes call "latent rhetorical theory," made manifest through fields like propaganda studies, public opinion, and mass communications research, as well as the interdisciplinary turn toward language-in-use across the humanities and social sciences—all of which take as their subject matter phenomena that have traditionally fallen within the rhetorical domain. These projects have of course been driven by a number of factors—but one that's stood central is the structural transformation that the historian Robert Albion in 1932 retroactively termed "the communication revolution" brought about by "canal, turnpike, steamboat, railroad,

⁵ Peter Simonson, "Merton's Sociology of Rhetoric," in Craig Calhoun (ed.), *Robert K. Merton: Sociological Theory and the Sociology of Science* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 214-252; and Leonarda Garcia-Jimenez, Peter Simonson, Johan Siebers, and Robert T. Craig, "Some Foundational Conceptions of Communication: A Cross-National Map of Core Ideas and Traditions of Thought," *Medien&Zeit*, in press.

⁶ On which, see George A. Kennedy, *Comparative Rhetoric An Historical and Cross-Cultural Introduction* (New York: Oxford, 1998); Sue Hum and Arabella Lyon, "Recent Advances in Comparative Rhetoric," in Andrea A. Lunsford, Kirt H. Wilson, and Rosa A. Eberly (eds.), *Sage Handbook of Rhetorical Studies* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2009), 153-66.

telegraph, submarine cable, telephone, automobile, wireless telegraph, airplane, and radio.”⁷

Understood not simply as technologies but rather institutionally organized systems of social practice, the communication revolution has profoundly re-shaped the material dimensions of our rhetorical worlds.

Richard McKeon had his eye on this communicatively transformed world when in 1970 he delivered his most famous paper in our field, “The Uses of Rhetoric in a Technological Age: Architectonic Productive Arts.”⁸ Taking a long historical view, McKeon charted rhetoric’s fortunes as a comprehensive, overarching art in the ancient Roman and Renaissance eras—all that as a run-up to calling for a new rhetoric fit for our own age of “commercial advertising and...calculating machines.”⁹ This new rhetoric would be what he called an “architectonic productive art,” or one that produced ways of thinking, acting, and addressing problems in the world.¹⁰ Though it’s not always remembered that way, it was a recognizably pragmatist project, sitting philosophically between McKeon’s teacher John Dewey and his student Richard Rorty. “Rhetoric provides the devices by which to determine the characteristics and problems of our times and to form the art by which to guide actions for the solutions of our problems and the improvement of our circumstances,” McKeon wrote. This interpretive and

⁷ Robert G. Albion, “The Communication Revolution,” 718; Albion, Robert G. (1932). *The Communication Revolution*. “*The American Historical Review* 37: 718-720 (quote at 718); see also Wolfgang Behringer, “Communications Revolutions: A Historiographical Concept,” *German History* 24:3 (2006), 333-74.

⁸ Delivered to the Wingspread Conference and published in Lloyd Bitzer and Edwin Black’s edited *The Prospect of Rhetoric* (1971); rpt. in *Rhetoric: Essays in Invention and Discovery* (Woodbridge, CT: Ox Bow Press, 1987), 1-27. On the importance of the classic Wingspread volume today, see Mark Porrovecchio (ed.), *Reengaging the Prospects of Rhetoric: Current Conversations and Contemporary Challenges* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

⁹ Quoted from a complementary discussion in Richard McKeon, “Creativity and the Commonplace,” in *Rhetoric: Essays in Invention and Discovery*, 34.

¹⁰ For excellent discussions of McKeon’s rhetorical theory see Mark Backman’s Introduction to *Rhetoric: Essays in Invention and Discovery*; George Kimball Plochmann, *Richard McKeon: A Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), esp. 150-62; and David Depew, “Revisiting Richard McKeon’s Architectonic Rhetoric,” in *Reengaging the Prospects of Rhetoric*, 37-56. See also Depew’s and other discerning essays in Eugene Garver and Richard Buchanan (eds.), *Pluralism in Theory and Practice: Richard McKeon and American Philosophy* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2000).

problem-solving work hinged in large part on what he called “the fundamental vocabulary of rhetoric,” which offered conceptual routes toward “the discovery of ourselves and our times” and ways we might navigate through them.¹¹

Prominent within this fundamental vocabulary were rhetoric’s family of place-related terms-- *topoi*, *loci*, commonplaces, and the like. McKeon set us on a pathway to creatively extend their meaning and scope. As many of you know, the Greek *topos* literally meant a physical place, but in rhetorical use came to stand for the mental and discursive places one might metaphorically visit to find lines of argument and analysis—a migration from material to linguistic that is exactly in line with rhetoric’s long and persistent logophilia. Rhetorical use of the term dates back at least to Isocrates, but Aristotle codified the idea, and Cicero translated and extended it further. Linked primarily to the canons of invention and memory, the place-idea came to be one of the essentially contested concepts that, as Alan Gross has argued, help constitute rhetorical theory as an extended conversation.¹² McKeon picked it up in the 1960s, exploring its connections to discovery, creativity, repetition, and what we would today call cultural reproduction. Importantly, he also managed to nudge it slightly from its traditional logophilic perch, memorably writing that “[t]he places of invention and memory are places of things, thoughts, actions, and words.”¹³ Words dominated that foursome, for McKeon noted that things, thoughts, and actions were only known through language. But his reconstructive rhetorical project advanced the conversation about rhetoric’s places, and provided a mostly overlooked intellectual bridge between the inherited tradition on the one hand and the sociological and materialist developments in the field since the early 1970s.

¹¹ McKeon, “Uses of Rhetoric,” 11.

¹² Alan Gross, “The Rhetorical Tradition,” in Richard Graff, Arthur E. Walzer, and Janet M. Atwill, (eds.), *The Viability of the Rhetorical Tradition* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 31-46

¹³ McKeon, “Creativity and the Commonplace,” 33.

I'd like to move toward closing by throwing out a verbal windstorm of sorts and suggesting that the idea of rhetorical places is a potentially architectonic concept whose abundant possibilities we as a field are right now on the verge of realizing. To bring it to full fruition, I think we need to do work along four cross-connecting pathways: historical, theoretical, methodological, and praxical. Along the historical pathway, we need to follow McKeon and Gross and take seriously the terms we have inherited, which remain some of our most valuable hermeneutic treasures. We need a blend of careful scholarship and creative reinvention of the sort Carolyn Miller did in her excellent study of Aristotle's *topos*, which helped open new ways for us to think about places of invention and discovery as classically understood.¹⁴ On the second and intersecting theoretical pathway, using some variation on Burke's casuistic stretching, we need to extend these traditional understandings of rhetorical places beyond their habitations in conceptual and linguistic realms. We need to continue our quest to find ways of talking about social places, institutional places, geographic places, and the mobile places of our bodies—and to make sense of the roles they play in invention, repetition, and memory as well. We can find some of this work in place-based memory studies like those collected in Dickinson, Blair, and Ott's terrific volume, and we need to keep pushing it forward.¹⁵ Greg Clark's work has also been pathbreaking for us here.¹⁶ I might also suggest that we supplement this work by conceiving of the full and expanded range of rhetorical places in terms suitable for an epoch saturated with communication

¹⁴ Carolyn R. Miller, "The Aristotelian *Topos*: Hunting for Novelty," in Alan Gross and Arthur Walzer, (eds.), *Rereading Aristotle's Rhetoric* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), 130-146.

¹⁵ Greg Dickinson, Carole Blair, & Brian Ott, "Introduction: Rhetoric/Memory/Place." *Places of Public Memory: The Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010).

¹⁶ Gregory Clark, *Rhetorical Landscapes in America: Variations on a Theme from Kenneth Burke* (South Carolina, 2004); and "Rhetorical Experience and the National Jazz Museum in Harlem," in Dickinson, Blair, and Ott, eds., 113-135.

technologies—let’s think of them as *media* in the double sense of habitats and artistic materials, places we dwell that furnish us with rhetorical materials of many varieties.¹⁷

Such theoretical developments call us to push further down the third, methodological pathway. There we need to continue to refine our ways of capturing the full range of symbolic, social, material, and political economic realities that animate places where rhetoric emerges, circulates, and is experienced by real people. Here I’d like to make a particular pitch for more research conducted with an ethnographic sensibility, aiming to capture the full richness of rhetorical artifacts, events, experiences, and patterns in particular contexts. Ralph Cintron and Phaedra Pezzullo have done fabulous work for us in this domain, and we can find other clues in Schell and Rawson’s excellent recent collection on feminist rhetorical methods, *Rhetorica in Motion*.¹⁸ Finally, while history, theory, and method of course involve their own interrelated practices, we need to travel too down a fourth pathway, guided by other sorts of social praxis. This route toward a new architectonic takes us toward meaningful engagement with rhetorical places outside the boundaries of the academy, where we might invest our emotions and labors to help produce humane and sustainable forms of life. There are many exemplars in this room of such praxis, and their work is truly inspiring, but I’ll call out one since his workshop focuses on the topic—Stephen J. Hartnett, whose prison outreach and tireless work for social justice provides an amazing model. If our inherited vocabulary of terms is one of our great theoretical treasures, the longstanding practical focus of the rhetorical discipline lies at its moral core.

¹⁷ An idea I’m working out in a manuscript in process, “Media of Invention: Places of Finding and Figuring.”

¹⁸ Ralph Cintron, *Angel’s Town: Chero Ways, Gang Life and Rhetorics of the Everyday* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997); Phaedra C. Pezzullo, *Toxic Tourism: Rhetorics of Pollution, Travel, and Environmental Justice* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007); Eileen E. Schell and Kelly Jacob Rawson (eds.), *Rhetorica in Motion: Feminist Rhetorical Methods and Methodologies* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010).

In our seminars and workshops this week, it strikes me that we're bringing a wide range of rhetorical places within our collective ken. *Loci* like classrooms, schools, cities, special journal issues, canonical books, legal codes, archives, Jewish and Latin American rhetorical traditions; research methods of critical discourse analysis, ethnography, and practical criticism; local and broad circulation public spheres; technologies; the discourse of human rights; rituals of remembrance; and affectively saturated bodies. Stretching our traditional terms, we might think of them all as places of invention, repetition, and memory. As places of things, thoughts, actions, and words. As media that provide habitats and materials for rhetorical production. All manifest themselves in particular locales, even as they are also more widely scattered. All are sites for rhetorical projects of reconstruction and critique, knowledge and art, hope and healthy suspicion.

Standing here, it's exciting to think out toward these and other conversations, materializing themselves through bodies that have traveled long distances to gather here in Boulder—one historically embedded place among multitudes, physically stunning, founded through systematic violence, organizing and re-organizing itself over time; and this week, our place together in the latest rhetorical age. Thank you.¹⁹

¹⁹ And thanks to John Ackerman, Dave Tell, and Isaac Reed for their generous and insightful comments on earlier drafts of this speech.