

# Re-Composing Space: Composition's Rhetorical Geography



Roberta Binkley and Marissa Smith

Places, whether textual, material, or imaginary, are constructed and reproduced not simply by boundaries but also by practices, structures of feelings and sedimented features of habitus.

—Nedra Reynolds

Rhetorical theory, as the origin narrative of our discipline goes, was created in a particular space and time—the late 5th and early 4th century, BCE in ancient Athens. Origins, those narratives that constitute the foundations of a discipline, determine what counts as knowledge and how and by whom it is produced as well as what and who are excluded or elided. As a result, narratives of origin conceal assumptions that operate in unconscious ways. For example, within the discipline of rhetoric, there exists the prevailing assumption that rhetoric was both defined and refined by the Greeks and that its definition by Plato and Aristotle in the ancient geographic space of Athens constitutes the locus of its origins.

Composition Studies, still a relatively young discipline, remains focused on process, thesis sentence, argument, and propositional, linear logic as primary goals in the spaces where the teaching of first-year writing occurs in the North American university and community college. The rhetorical practices that underlie the discipline of composition studies as well as the “Western” tradition of the humanities are those primarily defined by Aristotle. While Aristotelian theory provides powerful conceptual tools and vocabulary, scholars such as Enos (Richard), Glenn, Jarratt, Neel, Swearingen, and others have well documented its limitations, frequently offering the sophistic tradition as an alternative.

In this paper we will further explore the limitations and implications for composition imposed by this historicist concept of the origins of rhetorical theory, one that locates the “birth” in ancient Athens. Using a Postmodern/Poststructural critique rooted in human geography, we wish to expose the simultaneous influence of time *and* space, the foundation of human geography (Dear 270), on the structures of rhetoric. Looking at the putative “birth” of rhetoric in the specific geographic spatio-temporal context of ancient Greece allows us to compare and display similarities between ancient Greece and the rhetorical spaces of today, specifically writing classrooms and campuses. Rhetoric creates and influences spaces but is also influenced and created by space. Composition theory as it has embraced this particular story of Athenian rhetorical origins has also incorporated some of the discursive practices, pedagogy, and the making of knowledge that include the exclusionary spaces (physical, intellectual and social) of rhetoric’s birthplace.

Edward Soja, a Postmodern geographer influenced by Lefebvre’s Marxism and Foucauldian Poststructuralism (Peet 222), describes postmodern geography as “an exercise in both deconstruction and reconstitution” (Soja 1989:12). That is, it simultaneously uncovers spatial patterns and processes in order to critically deconstruct “the intellectual history of critical social thought, and is spatially reconstructive, in the sense of an emphasis on the struggles of peripheralized, oppressed peoples” (Peet 223). Space, explains Lefebvre, in its socially constructed form, is shaped by history, politics and ideology, “it is literally filled with ideologies” (qtd in Soja 1980: 210). Space also plays an operational or instrumental role. As Lefebvre explains, it exists “as knowledge and action, in the existing mode of production” (11). Spatial practice, according to Lefebvre, simultaneously defines “places—the relationship of local to global; the representation of that relationship; actions and signs. . . spaces made special by symbolic means as desirable or undesirable, benevolent or malevolent, sanctioned or forbidden to particular groups” (288).

How, then, might spatial theory both construct and deconstruct rhetoric and composition? Toward the end of his life in an interview with the editors of the journal *Hérodote*, Michel Foucault explained that deciphering “discourse through the use of spatial, strategic metaphors enables one to grasp precisely the points at which discourses are transformed in, through, and on the basis of relations of power” (Power/Knowledge 70). While Soja argues that social theory is “enveloped in a temporal master-narrative, in a historical but not yet comparably geographical [i.e. spatial] imagination” (1989:137). This temporal master-narrative operates to veil or disguise the importance of space, the place in which power is promulgated. Geography’s critical postmodern theorists such as Soja and Dear, etc. help to reveal the constructed, socially produced spaces of modernism and the historicist examinations of social theory that

obfuscate spatial dynamics, and thereby operate as “natural” or “given” unconscious formative influences on the underlying theoretical structure of rhetoric and composition.

Rhetoric’s inheritance and perpetuation of the exclusionary spaces of ancient Greece has important implications for all Western-based theoretical narratives in the humanities, but especially for composition. If classical Athenian rhetorical principles continue to be reified as *the* rhetorical principles, then those whose spatial history and context are different from “mainstream” Western Eurocentric heritage will be subject to repeating the experiences of Athenian disenfranchised populations. They will continue to exist outside of, and to be excluded from, the physical, social and intellectual space ideologically created by the unproblematic origin narrative of Anglo-American rhetoric as it manifests in the teaching and practice of composition.

## The Athenian Geography of Epistemology and the Other

The Greeks have been from very ancient times distinguished from the barbarians by superior sagacity and freedom from foolish simpleness.

—Herodotus

Ancient Athens, as a particular socially constructed space, has acquired two thousand years of historical reinterpretation and venerated inheritance. “Places evoke powerful human emotions because they become layered, like sediment or a palimpsest, with histories and stories and memories,” as Nedra Reynolds reminds us (2). Like marble from the limestone quarries of Attica, its modernist patina scoured by post-modernism, to reveal the pits, gaps, faults and veins, Ancient Athens nevertheless remains the bedrock of rhetorical theory.

But what influenced the spatio-temporal theory that Plato and Aristotle developed in ancient Athens? Plato, using the voice of Socrates, began the creation of a new system of rhetoric, with its emphasis on analysis, abstraction, and conceptualization, and thereby advocated the separation of intellect from its former mythic matrix, demolishing the *muthos* in favor of *logos*. In this new order, the *Polis* and the *Agora* became a particular monopolization of space, the nexus of power in a geography of exclusion that relegated “weaker groups in society to less desirable environments” (Sibley ix). Women, slaves and non-citizens were excluded from these places of making knowledge. As Sibley notes, “. . . the production of knowledge involves both the exclusion of knowledge which is deemed dangerous and the exclusion of some categories of intellectual” (xvi). Thus, the rhetorical theory that underlies composition studies, often invisible, but which yet remains the “bedrock” of composition theory and pedagogy needs to be examined and understood as spatially specific and time constrained: an exclusionary knowledge developed from a political and ideological space that recreates subtle and similar physical, intellectual and social spaces. Although the “classical tradition” is often treated as unproblematic, the fissures and cracks can be deep and dangerous.

Evolutionary models of the Western tradition beginning with the Greeks often act as methodological subtext to historical discussions of rhetoric. While the scholarly community is well aware that the Greeks did not suddenly create a high culture, but that they were influenced by early Near Eastern civilizations in a myriad of ways, the work in rhetorical historiography appears to be little informed by this realization. Thus, figures (Gorgias, Protogoras and the other Sophists), civilizations (Mesopotamia, China, Egypt), and texts previous to the classical age of Athens become “pre-rhetorical” or “proto-rhetorical.”

The Greeks, illustrated by the quote from Herodotus above, labeled the “Other” as barbarian. As such, the Other, particularly the geographic Other, becomes intellectually suspect. For example, Mesopotamia (modern Iraq), in the general geographic area defined by the term Middle East, forms part of the synecdoche of the Orient, the hostile Other as the current conflict in Iraq illustrates. It is this same area that Marc Van Der Mieroop explains was: “The otherness of the East in antiquity, which provided the Greeks with a means of self-identification” (166). So too, as Edward Said in *Orientalism* and Martin Bernal in *Black Athena* have pointed out, the rhetoric of the geographical construction of the East continues to provide the contrasting oriental and racial otherness.

Yet different rhetorical approaches functioned and were situated in very different socio-spatial cultural locations. Egypt, Mesopotamia, Judea, China, and India existed long before and simultaneously with the Athenian Greeks. Asian cultural traditions, often more ancient and equally complex, remain marginal to contemporary rhetorical theory. For example, five scholars in Asian rhetoric (Vernon Jensen, Mary Garret XiaMing Li, King Lu and LuMing Mao) interviewed by Bo Wang, when asked how they felt about the present impact of Asian rhetoric research, were all unanimous that there had been little impact. XiaMing Li commented: “. . . yet the fact of the matter is that Eurocentrism still dominates . . . while non-Western rhetoric is accepted with polite tolerance” (177). The same suspicion

of Otherness continues today, no less than in Herodotus's histories. But, these alternative rhetorics, born in other spatio-temporal cultures, not only uncover and make visible alternate ways of understanding human behavior, they raise historiographic issues and problems.

## The Problematics of the Classical Rhetoric Tradition

The term **rhetoric** has taken on such warm and cuddly connotations in the postmodern era, and we feel so good about having recognized the rhetoricity of nearly everything that we tend to forget the political and world view in which rhetoric is and always has been embedded.

—Jasper Neel

In George Kennedy's and Kathleen Welch's views the problem is not with the tradition itself, but with the way it has been received and interpreted. Classical rhetoric scholars such as Kennedy trace the evolution of classical rhetoric from the fifth century BCE in Sicily to the twentieth century. While Welch focuses on the contemporary appropriation of ancient discourse, she believes that most composition is taught by teachers who operate in a world unconscious of theory. She also critiques those rhetoricians she calls members of the Heritage School, Douglas Ehninger, Robert Gorrell, Patricia Bizzell, and Bruce Herzberg. Welch believes that to understand and "interiorize" the complexity of classical rhetoric is basic to a grounded comprehension of contemporary rhetoric and to effectively teach composition. The actual tradition itself in all its complexity is reified.

The "appropriation school", as we call such historiographers, view classical rhetoric as unproblematic. Welch, in her book the *The Contemporary Reception of Classical Rhetoric: Appropriations of Ancient Discourse* stresses that the classical tradition is one of the most powerful discourse systems ever devised to study texts and their contexts as well as the production of discourse. While George Kennedy, in "A Hoot in the Dark" sees everything as rhetoric.

The classical tradition is not unproblematic. Stephen Katz in his article, "Aristotle's Rhetoric, Hitler's Program," points to the conundrum that Aristotelian rhetoric is indifferent to what is right. He quotes Sullivan: "Aristotle's view of the good is sociological: the community defines what the good is, and the individual is good when he or she performs well the functions required by society" (Katz 38). The deliberative rhetoric of that society can become an amoral rhetoric. Thus, based on "the ethic of expediency in Aristotle's treatment of deliberative rhetoric," Katz argues that Hitler conceived and implemented a particular ideological form of social-epistemic rhetorical theory. "In creating this ideological form, he [Hitler] constructed a praxis and thereby created the political and ethical conditions for the Holocaust" (39-40). Hitler's constructed ideological rhetoric was not unique: "All political rhetorics, even a social-epistemic theory of rhetoric. . . are based on and embody the ethic of expediency that allows any ideology to subvert them" (40). What emerges from Katz's discussion is the fact that deliberative rhetoric, based as it is on the inheritance of the Aristotelian tradition, reflects and is confined by an origin narrative that represents a flawed and partial world view.

Jasper Neel reminds us, "we tend to forget the political and world view in which rhetoric is and always has been embedded" (15). The politics are those of an elite male world. Athens was a slave society, as was most of the ancient world. The much-vaunted democracy only applied to a very few male citizens, perhaps 10,000 to 30,000 in a population variously estimated as 260,000 to 310,000.<sup>[1]</sup> The political, physical and social spaces of government, intellectual discourse and debate were not "public" spaces but rather exclusionary ones with right of entry and participation given only to citizen males. The Sophists, who were usually not citizens, were always at a serious disadvantage, but women and slaves, who constituted the major underclasses, had virtually no rights. In fact, the position of women in Athens deteriorated further under the democracy. Sparta was a tyranny; however, its female population experienced greater freedom, as they could own property, and when widowed were not forced to marry the brother of their deceased husband. While in Athens, witness the way ancient Other rhetorical figures such as Gorgias, Aspasia, and Diotima become marginalized in the grand narrative of classical rhetoric. Gorgias, in Plato's dialogue of the same name, is a simpleton, no match for the wily Socrates. Aspasia, is either a harlot or an intellectual joke. Diotima, an even more shadowy figure as a priestess and a philosopher, is treated as a myth. These shadowy, obscure figures in the spaces of classical rhetoric testify to the dominance of those that inhabited the social and intellectual space as male "citizens" of ancient Greece, and to the exclusionary nature of literacy.

## Composition and Uses of the Rhetorical Tradition

The rhetorical tradition is a fiction that has just about outlasted its usefulness.

—Tom Miller

Miller, after making this startling statement, explains: “Composition specialists have used the prestige of a classical heritage to make the teaching of writing respectable in English departments” (26). However, this classical heritage has also facilitated exclusion in ways we have already noted. Composition has too often become the tool in American higher education used to deny entry to the university. The space of higher education has many similarities to the Greek *Agora*. In the space of the *Agora*, “The public . . . was carefully selected and homogenous in composition. It consisted of those with power, standing, and respectability” (Mitchell 116). Access to the physical space of the university often hinges on a K-12 education geared toward college preparation. Certainly upper division standing in higher education is usually determined by composition skills. Thus, continued participation in the intellectual space is contingent on following the rules and methods dictated by Western forms of knowledge.

Indeed, the space of the Western university, “linked to slices in time,” seems to fit Michel Foucault’s description of heterotopia (26). Soja, expounding on the subject describes heterotopia as “actually lived and socially created spatiality, concrete and abstract at the same time, the *habitus* of social practices” (18). As Soja goes on to explain, a heterotopic space is “rarely seen for it has been obscured by a bifocal vision that traditionally views space as either a mental construct or a physical form—a dual illusion” (18). This heterotopia, created by the narrative of Greek origins, inserts rhetorical theory into the interstices of composition theory “Westernizing” and simultaneously obscuring the locally discursive spaces of knowledge and the construction of that knowledge. The rhetoric of composition studies with its emphasis on process, argument, and propositional logic, then, is in actuality the extension of a geographic heterotopia grounded in the *Agora* of Athens and the rhetoric that developed there as defined by Plato and Aristotle. This grand narrative of origins also leaves unconscious and masks the Eurocentric, alphabetic dependent, gendered, and ethnocentric basis of its formation. This becomes more apparent when composition is taught in spaces outside of Anglo-American venues.

## ***Translocations and Dislocations***

How can we connect the process of learning to write well with the student’s own reality, and not simply teach her/him to write acceptable lies in standard English?

—Jan Swearingen

Composition Studies, with its underlying rhetorical theories, is in many aspects a regional-spatial interpretation of knowledge. The practices and pedagogy have primarily been developed in the United States, Canada and England and adapted to those local conditions. It is not a universalized study of writing, one readily applicable to worldwide conditions. Applied to other venues, the aspects that make it local become highlighted while simultaneously revealing the cracks and fissures of the underlying rhetoric.

Recently, Lotte Rienecker and Peter Stray Jorgensen, working in the academic writing center in Copenhagen describe two traditions of writing which coexist side-by-side in European higher education: The Anglo-American (problem-oriented) and the continental (topic-oriented). The continental tradition emphasizes science as thinking. In contrast, Anglo-American writing, they explain, “emphasizes science as investigation and problem solving focusing on the empirically based study, and the systematically and up-to-date literature-based research paper” (104). Both are taught differently with the result that two different systems of thinking and knowledge making result. [2] They explain that American university writing, and the teaching of it is “heavily influenced by rhetoric and rhetorical text-concerns such as purpose, aim, reader, focus, structure and argumentation” (104). In an interesting aside they note the irony of the fact that the “classical tradition of rhetoric while very much a European ‘invention’ seems to have been almost forgotten in continental European writing, while American and British teachers of writing have reintroduced the classic rhetoricians” (105). What emerges from their discussion is the fact that Composition Studies and the uses that it makes of classical rhetoric is very much a spatio-cultural phenomenon. If this were not so, like Coca-Cola, it would be formulaic and readily exportable.

However, Composition Studies and pedagogy does not seem to export well. Mary Muchiri, et al. point out that while English teachers world-wide may read composition research, “they often stop reading because what is said seems to apply only to the US and Canada ” (191). The huge composition industry with its conferences, journals, and departments seems unconscious of the fact that there might be other systems and other geographical spaces and places in which writing is taught and takes place. Often the spaces are peripatetic and always marginal to the composition enterprise. For example, in Africa and in Eastern Europe universities may not have books. They may be closed for up to several years. Muchiri, et al. point out that African universities—using the examples of Kenya Tanzania, and Zaire —are frequently closed because of political problems or strikes, and they remark on the

“fragility” of the university system (191).

The academic map, as Muchiri, et al. point out, is clearly an odd one: “hundreds of small institutions in North America and Europe are on it, and others elsewhere are left of it” (184). And the paradox grows: “Students from Kenyatta, Dar, and Lumbumbashi find they have come to the center of things, in their country, but they have come to the margins of the world of research” (185). Many of these universities, in addition to the fragility of the system, cannot subsidize research and the teachers carry heavy teaching burdens along with other responsibilities. Murchiri, et al. highlight an additional dilemma when they ask why it is necessary to leave large cosmopolitan cities and their families, friends to go to places such as Lancaster, England, “a small university in a small town in a country where it always rains, in order to study the writing done back at their own universities?” (184) Composition Studies, then, is the product of a set of specific discursive conventions anchored in a grand narrative of origins that when relocated appears to become dislocated and maladapted to other cultural conditions and spaces. As its rhetorical heritage becomes more visible in those conditions, aspects begin to emerge from that tradition which manifest as exclusionary spaces when viewed from a critical geographic viewpoint.

## ***The Exclusionary Spaces of the North American University***

Once knowledge can be analyzed in terms of region, domain, implantation, displacement, transposition, one is able to capture the process by which knowledge functions as a form of power and disseminates the effects of power.

—Michel Foucault

Rhetoric’s inheritance and perpetuation of the exclusionary spaces of ancient Greece has important implications for all Western based theoretical narratives, but in particular for the discursive spatio-temporal settings within which composition works in the North American University. While the identity of composition is complex and heterogeneous, it can fall far too easily into its role as a gate keeping function and in so doing it echoes the exclusionary nature of the classical rhetorical tradition. Erika Lindemann pinpoints one of the problems with the rhetorical tradition: “Rhetoric, as a perspective, entails a process of reasoning *down* from wholes to functional parts. . . . But the perspective of composition entails a process of reasoning *up* from constituent parts to wholes. Composition sees wholes in term of parts” (30). Yet reasoning *up* from parts is usually directed toward a particular whole and that whole if not actually defined as classical rhetorical theory inculcates the principles inscribed by that tradition in the western tradition and the academy in particular that have become naturalized. Some of the effects of the subtle influence of the reified classical rhetorical tradition that are less obvious are the role that composition studies creates in spaces that are alphabetic dependent, monolingualistic, and that marginalize other cultures, ethnicities and voices.

The alphabet is the *sin quo non* of Western literacy. Perhaps because it came into widespread use with the Greeks, it has become a form of Platonic idea towards which all forms of “proper” writing must, by necessity, progress. These alphabetic bonds between literacy and complex thought were emphasized in well-known studies from the 1960s by Ian Watt, Jack Goody, Eric Havelock, and Marshall McLuhan. Alphabetic literacy, according to these studies had especially consequential effects on society, making possible rationality, democracy, philosophy, historiography, and complex critical thinking. This traditional narrative of the technology of alphabetic literacy focuses on one local knowledge, one spatio-temporal place, that of the Athenian Greeks and is tied to a particular epistemology and way of constructing knowledge.

There is a bipolarity inherent in the alphabetic system of writing and representation of language adopted by the Greeks that serves a particular system of ontology, one that ties rationality and science to Greek Alphabetic writing. It implies an ethical superiority for alphabetic culture based on the thesis that science is good for humans but other ontologies that include such things as divination and what we call, “magic” are not. Greek alphabetic literacy is only one kind of literacy, perhaps even an odd one, that imposes language structures and a particular history on thought and culture, not to mention writing in general.

The monolingualism of the American composition tradition is much contested. Gloria Anzaldua, in *Borderlands/ La Frontera*, points to what she calls “linguistic terrorism” (58-64), the imposition of only Standard English in the schools and culture. “Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language,” she argues as she code switches between Chicano Spanish and English. (59) Vershawn Ashanti Young in his article, “Your Average Nigga,” explains that when he was hired at Columbia College in Chicago as the only black man teaching in a literacy program for underachieving freshman, blacks had the highest dropout rate, “with black men faring worst of all: 2% of them graduated after four years and only 4% after five” (693). He found that making connections between literacy and

black culture doesn't offer the best solution to student retention. "Instead those connections implicate the literacy classroom as a site that reproduces the retention problem it's designed to eliminate" (696). Hence the conundrum that Foucault speaks of at the beginning of this section, that rhetoric and composition have too often functioned as exclusionary in their spatio-temporal functions by both functioning as a form of power and disseminating the effects of that power.

## Conclusion

A whole history remains to be written of spaces—which would at the same time be the history of powers (both of these terms in the plural)—from the great strategies of geopolitics to the little tactics of the habitat.

—Michel Foucault

Deconstructing the spaces of rhetoric and calling attention to its historicist bias should not be seen as discounting that fact that the rhetorically based Anglo-American tradition of composition makes possible the education of large numbers of students. But we would assert that to focus on the unproblematic historicism of the rhetorical tradition in most academic discourses, is to ignore their spatial legacy. Until a thing is actually seen in its actual sociospatial construction of difference it cannot be re-conceptualized. We will, then, continue to be seduced by the shine of a modernist patina of Attica marble mined by slaves. Echoing Nedra Reynolds, we want to argue that a spatial politics of writing instruction, one that takes into account the social production of spaces, calls for a more paradoxical sense to inform our research, theory and practices.

Postmodern/Poststructural critical geographic theory permits a complexified spatial deconstruction of the familiar, making it unfamiliar, and therefore in its unfamiliarity, to provide a new view, and the chance to reconceptualize our own epistemological geographic spaces, to reexamine the meanings inherent in those spaces. It helps us look more closely at contextual information that addresses the understanding of expedience and the particular rhetorical goals involved in specific discourses and texts both within and outside the monolingualistic, alphabetic domain of English and English studies. It complicates composition practices premised on the particular reasoning inherent in the humanities stemming from the received Greek tradition of "Western" civilization. This deeper conceptualization of the relevance of space also helps to illuminate the marginalizing effects of contemporary scholarship thereby contributing to other, more nuanced, ways of seeing, being, and making knowledge, ways that take into account the dynamics of center and periphery, of power, heterotopias and their spaces.

## Notes

1. The question of the number of slaves is difficult and sources disagree. Rachael Sargent Robinson in her book, *The Size of the Slave Population at Athens during the Fifth and Fourth Centuries Before Christ*, (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press 1973) carefully reviewed the evidence: "There seems to be but one direct record regarding the total number of slaves in Athens. Athenaeus, on the authority of a certain Ctesicles, states that from a census taken by order of Demetrius dPhalareus (probably around 309 BCE) there were found to be in Attica 21,000 citizens 10,000 metics, and 400,000 slaves" (13). Hugh F. Thompson in his book, *The Archaeology of Greek and Roman Slavery* (London:Gerald Duckworth, 2003) explained: "Agriculture remained the basic economic activity in Greece throughout the fifth and fourth centuries BCE ... The inability of Attica to produce an adequate supply of grain from its own territory was met by huge imports calculated at four-fifths of its requirements for a population slave and free of c. 300,000-400,000. Ralph Jackson in the Epilogue notes "in the archaeological record slaves are almost invariably invisible. At best the information is shadowy, tenuous and often equivocal. For this reason, because the historical accounts are fuller and more accessible, the archaeology of slavery, excepting the epigraphic material, has been largely neglected" (268). ([Return to text.](#))
2. The Continental and the Anglo-American Traditions as outlined in Bjork, Lennart, et. al. *Teaching Academic Writing in European Higher Education* (103).

Continental Tradition

- o Think'-texts
- o Sources in the foreground

- o Philosophy, the history of ideas, epistemology, culture, spirit and mind, arts and aesthetics
- o Emphasis on concepts and theories (methods)
- o Interpretation (preservation) of traditional culture
- o Contingent epistemology
- o Numerous points, claims, conclusions around the subject
- o Often a non-linear, discursive structure
- o ('Exhurse'), digressions allowed
- o Academic writing as art and inborn abilities

Anglo-American (British-American) tradition Problem solving texts

- o Problems in the foreground
- o Facts, realities, observable matters, empiricism
- o Emphasis on methods (concepts, theories)
- o New understandings, evaluations and action
- o Controlled, purposeful epistemology
- o One point, one claim, one conclusion
- o Linear structure, discourages digressions
- o Academic writing as learned craftsmanship

[\(Return to text.\)](#)

1.

2.

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