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## Place Matters

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## Place Matters

*The Locations of Composition*. Edited by Christopher J. Keller and Christian R. Weisser. Albany: SUNY Press, 2007.

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Christopher J. Keller and Christian R. Weisser begin their collection *The Locations of Composition* with the contention that “nearly all of the conversations in composition studies involve place, space, and location, in one way or another” (1). In fact, what we do as rhetoricians and compositionists has always been situated in spatial terms; Aristotle’s *topoi*, for example, are not merely strategies of argument, but literally *places* from which one can argue. In theories of location, we in rhetoric and composition have found a useful heuristic for examining our practices, epistemologies, and pedagogies: in short, our ways of reading and writing the world.

The editors and contributors to *The Locations of Composition* seek to expand our conception of the term *location* and thus our theoretical and pedagogical approaches to composition studies. They claim that “to be located, in other words, is to be positioned—either physically or metaphorically. One may be physically located or positioned east or west of a place, above or below it, or inside or outside it, for instance” (3). Through this definition, Keller and Weisser emphasize the relational nature of locations. They stress that the pieces in this collection work to complicate the term *location*. The book’s title itself reflects multiple meanings: composition is composed of

many locations, and composition as a field has positioned itself (or has been positioned) in particular ways. The vast network of places called into being by these perspectives is reflected in the pieces in this collection. Together, these essays highlight the richness of viewing composition studies through a lens of place.

In his opening chapter, “The Occupation of Composition,” Sid Dobrin asks provocative questions about how composition locates itself. Dobrin contends that as compositionists we have a long history of turning our gaze inward, often fixing ourselves in particular locations. In remaining fixed, we exert hegemonic force; Dobrin’s “occupation” is an act of colonizing, of laying claim to these locations. Instead, Dobrin advocates that we move into what he calls the “counterspaces” that are work in the heterotopia of composition.

By contrast, Elizabeth Ervin’s essay, “Composition and the Gentrification of Public Literacy,” advocates that composition remain fixed in academic discourse. Ervin cites recent scholarly interest in “public writing,” writing that moves outside of traditionally academic realms and engages with local communities or similar public spheres. While many have deemed this trend a natural shift back toward composition’s democratically focused rhetorical roots, Ervin cautions us against positioning ourselves as the “agents of positive change” who swoop in and restructure spaces with our own interests in mind. Although she does not set out to demonize service/community-based learning, Ervin does forcefully argue against it. While it is always important to interrogate our own motives, I found her explanation—that composition’s focus on public writing is motivated by self-interest—to be dubious, particularly considering rhetoric’s civic-minded foundation.

Peter Vandenberg and Jennifer Clary-Lemon’s piece, “Looking for Location Where It Can’t Be Found,” advocates the opposite of Ervin’s approach by calling into question the civic relevance of academic discourse. These authors question whether we in rhetoric and composition perform a disservice by inculcating our graduate students with rarefied discourses that bear little semblance to discourses found outside of the field. This disconnect, Vandenberg and Clary-Lemon argue, impedes the very ability of scholars to form productive connections with communities outside of the profession. They argue for a community-based graduate pedagogy of location that would help build connections between scholars/researchers and those who do not practice academic discourse, including our students. Through such a pedagogy, Vandenberg and Clary-Lemon hope to subvert the judgmental academic “gaze” that is often projected upon nonacademic publics.

Moving into digital locations, Cynthia Haynes's "In Visible Texts" argues that the text made visible in MOOs (MUD, object oriented; text-based online virtual reality) creates meaning through the rhetorical canon of memory. The dynamic nature of MOOs requires readers to rely on memory to be able to synthesize information and respond accordingly. Haynes calls for increased research into the canon of memory so that we can better use locations such as MOOs and other sites of memory in composition instruction. As Haynes encourages us to reconsider memory, Thomas Rickert in "Invention in the Wild" calls for a reconceptualization of *kairos* that remains attentive to its grounding in place. Rickert reminds us that the term translates from *The Iliad* to mean "the deadliest spot," a denotation that emphasizes the prominence of context in considering *kairos* as a space or location. Kairotic moments do not merely "happen" but rather are willed by a particular environment; we are always already enabled by our environment. In this sense, both Rickert and Haynes situate location as invention. The places we inhabit—virtual or otherwise—help call rhetorical situations into being.

The authors included in the next section, "Inside the Classroom and Beyond," all focus on pedagogical activities or heuristics for developing pedagogies of location. John Ackerman's "Teaching the Capital City" draws heavily on the relational nature of location, positing what he calls a "georhetorical method" that pays attention to proximity, adjacency, and reciprocity. He suggests that a georhetorical teaching repertoire might include mapping activities and site analyses, both designed to encourage inquiry into how boundaries and landscapes are formed and maintained through multiple networks of power. Robert Brooke and Jason McIntosh flesh out this relationship of body, space, and text in their article, "Deep Maps," emphasizing the progression from place-conscious writing to social action. Deep maps function as renderings of "psychological locations" for writers, helping them to visualize the kind of actions that might be undertaken to make locations more inhabitable for a plurality of concerns and needs. Both articles emphasize the materiality of location-based pedagogies—how locating students in a very concrete sense can serve as a springboard for the kind of localized social action/participation that otherwise can sometimes be nebulous and difficult to enact within the confines of a classroom.

Also advocating for approaches that move beyond the classroom walls, Tim Lindgren and Derek Owens in "From Site to Screen, from Screen to Site" attend to both the classroom and the Web as locations that contain/illuminate multiple spatial narratives. They advocate place-based writing as a means for personal and cultural exploration, focusing on two Web-based

student projects they have found useful for engaging in this exploration. They attest to the effectiveness of the Internet in “locating” oneself, arguing that place blogs are a means of disseminating knowledge of places to a wide and diffuse audience. Having students write about place regularly, they persuasively conclude, constructs both the place and students’ own identities. Lindgren and Owens’s classroom activities serve as a call for the use of technology to “pay attention to the places we inhabit” (210): a generalizable foundation for a variety of place-based classroom practices.

Rather than looking outward, the “Inside the Classroom and Beyond” section could be described as a move to look inward. In her essay, “Between Perception and Articulation,” Kristie Fleckenstein seeks to outline a “compassionate classroom” through an epistemology she terms “imageword”: a fusion of image and word that highlights the “sensuousness, coproduction, and dynamism of all places” (154). A classroom conceived through imageword possesses two main characteristics: perception as identification (a privileging of relationships) and articulation as love (the negotiation of difference). Through imageword, Fleckenstein constructs a classroom that both visually and linguistically enacts a kind of intellectual environment where students feel comfortable taking risks and sharing differences.

In “The Locations of Usability,” Johndan Johnson-Eilola and Stuart Selber advocate for an expanded understanding of usability. They take the central mission of usability and argue for its realization through several location-based approaches to design. The three locations/methods that Johnson-Eilola and Selber advocate (heuristic evaluations, usability tests, contextual inquiries) will be familiar to most with experience in usability studies. Unique to this discussion, however, is their examination of these three locations as a continuum from localized to broad contexts. Viewing these three methods as locations that exist in situated contexts enhances the ability of designers to create tools and spaces that meet the specialized needs of their users. Through Johnson-Eilola and Selber’s location-based framework, usability can be employed toward the end of attentive, beneficial designs.

The final section of the collection, “Among the Institutions,” uses the lens of location to examine various sites, or “institutions.” Both Nancy Myers and Nedra Reynolds choose specific, identifiable sites of analysis, interrogating how these sites have been located. In “Relocating Knowledge,” Myers examines *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student (CRMS)*, tracing how it came to inhabit a location of authority. Just as *CRMS* used classical rhetoric as the basis for constructing “new knowledge” about rhetoric in the modern classroom, Myers argues that other sources/concepts can find use in

a variety of sites, both theoretical and pedagogical. Myers also champions the blurring of novice and expert that *CRMS* enacts. In doing so, *CRMS* becomes a mobile location of authority that moves across disciplinary and experiential boundaries. Reynolds, by contrast, selects a location—Harvard—and uses “Cultural Geography and Images of Place” to critically analyze how the school constructs writing within its boundaries. With the Harvard-produced video *Shaped by Writing: The Undergraduate Experience* as her text, Reynolds questions what the video suggests through the “locations for writing” that it shows.<sup>1</sup> The images in the video lead her to conclude that a universalized writing experience is being put forth, one that erases the inseparability of writers and their contexts. This exclusion prompts Reynolds to advocate for a view of writing that reaches beyond its role as an academic act or artifact. Rather, she calls for writing (in both its noun and verb form) that inhabits multiple locations, not just those of academic privilege.

The final three articles all use the familiar concept of genre to advance their respective claims about location. Amy Devitt’s “Transferability and Genre” builds on the definition of genre that she has rehearsed in some of her other scholarship by constructing an explicit connection to location. Genre, in fact, is location: a place where a certain *kind* of writing is appropriate. By addressing writing in spatial terms, Devitt believes that students might be able to more easily envision how a change in genre (or a change in location) would call for different styles, audiences, emphases. Devitt argues that when students encounter a new genre, they can employ what she terms “transferability”: finding commonalities between the new location and already familiar locations in order to adjust accordingly to the new genre.

While Christopher Schroeder’s look at Illinois’s Summer Transition Program in “Notes toward a Dynamic Theory of Literacy” does not address the concept of genre per se, he argues for an honoring of multiple locations, or genres, of literacy. The students who are part of the Summer Transition Program are primarily Hispanic, and they practice genres of literacy not typically recognized by traditional constructions of what it means to be a well-functioning reader and writer. As a result, Schroeder argues for a “dynamic” model of literacy that recognizes linguistic and cultural difference as genres/locations of valid intellectual ability. Tom Deans incorporates genre into his article, “Shifting Locations, Genres, and Motives,” as one tool for enacting his vision of locations as activity systems, or “the dynamic relations between social contexts and the actions of individuals” (292). By viewing genre as a tool, we can see how genre can be used by writers to adapt to an activity system, be it a school-based system or a community-based system (as in service-

learning situations). These authors all argue for theories of location/genre that allow students to effectively navigate the range of rhetorical situations that will confront them in school and beyond.

The wide range of locations at work in this collection serve Keller and Weisser's purpose well. While the book succeeds in expanding the purview of location, a "missing" location that springs to mind is that of disability studies. Considering the advancements made in this field in recent years, including an article devoted to disability studies would provide a fruitful context for examining the body as a location. Despite any omissions, *The Locations of Composition* will prove a valuable resource for teachers, scholars, and graduate students. The three sections of the book work in consort to provide a theoretical and pedagogical framework of location-based writing. This axiology works off the assumption that location helps bring the relational nature of writing into focus. Since so much of our work in composition is bound up in these relations, being given an opportunity to (re)examine them—as *The Locations of Composition* does—is, in itself, productive.

### Note

1. The video that Reynolds references is drawn from a longitudinal study of undergraduate writing at Harvard conducted by Nancy Sommers and colleagues (see [www.fas.harvard.edu/~expos](http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~expos)).

### Work Cited

Corbett, Edward P. J. 1971. *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press.