

## Interrogating the “Field”

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To emphasize the connection between food and transportation, Emerging Terrain, an organization in Omaha, Nebraska, closed a two-lane bridge and held a dinner party. The bridge they occupied is on 36th Street between Grover and D Streets and spans over Interstate 80, several sets of railroad tracks, and a small service road. With the permission of the city, Emerging Terrain invited chefs, designers, and diners to interrogate—albeit in a festive way—food systems and called the event Elevate. From the overpass, diners could see massive artwork (also commissioned by Emerging Terrain) oriented vertically on unused grain elevators. The art reinforced the event by commenting on the relationships between food and transportation. Local restaurants and organizations set up cooking and dining stations along the bridge. Attendees at the event circulated among these stations, choosing their meals and interacting with other participants and event planners. Hosting the event on a bridge highlighted a range of interesting rhetorical choices that the event organizers made. First, the use of transportation infrastructure as the location for the event functioned to draw attention to the distances food travels before it arrives on our plates. Diners were confronted with various modes of transportation—the highway and rail

lines—that deliver food. Likewise, the temporary food stations reinforced the work done by local restaurants and organizations to transport materials to this location. Second, the event disrupted traffic and communication patterns in the neighborhood by blocking travel across the overpass, with reference to similar disruptions created by the original construction of I-80. The event organizers further emphasized these disruptions by displaying large posters with newspaper headlines about I-80 construction from 1957 that chronicled the thoroughfare’s initial construction.<sup>1</sup> Emerging Terrain mobilized the event to critique contemporary society’s approach to food. In doing so, the organizers hoped to encourage participants to elevate their expectations about food production and delivery. The bridge (and the surrounding environment) was the field where rhetoric was happening. In this respect, Elevate offers an opportunity to grapple with how the “field” brims with complicated and nuanced rhetorical forces, providing a case study through which to contemplate the “field” not only as rhetorical itself, but also as a space that encompasses shifting scenes of constraint and possibility for the rhetorical action it hosts.

Studying an event such as this (and the characteristics of field-based rhetoric more generally) necessitates doing fieldwork wherein the critic (1) inhabits the physical place of such rhetorical events; (2) takes field notes, photographs, and other records of the event; and then (3) analyzes them. Elsewhere we described this undertaking as rhetorical field methods and participatory critical rhetoric.<sup>2</sup> In this essay we problematize and add theoretical texture to the concept of the “field” by thinking of it not simply as a materially delimited area one enters to do research (i.e., field research), but instead as a rhetorical place<sup>3</sup> that contributes to and limits conditions of possibility for rhetorical practice, performance, and intervention. We aim to emphasize the rhetoricity of place that is activated by entering the field and to challenge conceptualizations of the field as simply a location, backdrop, or context in which rhetoric takes place. We argue that the “field” participates in and cocreates the rhetoric of its inhabitants. Recalling Endres and Senda-Cook’s argument that places of rhetoric are often in the process of becoming insofar as “locations, bodies, words, visual symbols, memories, and dominant meanings all interact to make and remake place,” field as place plays a crucial role in rhetorical dynamics.<sup>4</sup> Rhetorical practices create, activate, and challenge meaning differently depending on the specific field where they are enacted. For example, in her examination of the rhetorical practices of outdoor recreators, Senda-Cook explains that trail-running, while accepted and encouraged on some trails, is frustrating to some recreators on steep, slippery trails because of the danger it creates for themselves and others, and the perceived (dis)regard runners have for the environment.<sup>5</sup> Yet, in this example, meanings are not only interpreted differently depending on the field, or specific trail, but the trail/field itself is interpreted differently by walkers and runners who choose from the field’s range of possible

interactions. Similarly, several critics have explored how place itself is filled with potential meanings—that it enables the rhetorical actions of some identities and communities, while problematizing and constraining other bodies and practices.<sup>6</sup> Given this, the field itself needs to be examined as both a potential rhetorical artifact and a compelling factor in the creation, execution, and consequences of rhetoric.

Elevate emphasizes the field's role as both a site of rhetorical practice and a set of rhetorical fragments that create meaning for participants. Elevate, as a rhetorical "field," highlights the challenges faced by field-based rhetorical critics seeking to reconceptualize artifacts, recalibrate evaluations of "live(d)" rhetorical practice, and address the political nature of the field. These challenges generate questions that guide our essay as we interrogate how we might conceptualize the field within contemporary rhetorical inquiry. Elevate provides a heuristic opportunity to think about these questions because the field—in this case, a dinner party on a bridge—is part of the rhetorical performance of the event; its rhetorical force cannot be reduced to just the event's verbal messages. Examining Elevate as a rhetorical field adds depth to how we think about live(d) rhetorical practice by highlighting how such practices are embedded in a field that exceeds bodies and their words alone. It reveals the convergence of place, bodies, sounds, and ideas that are accessed experientially through co-participation. These critical insights challenge rhetorical theory to better account for the experiential, embodied, and emplaced nature of rhetoric.

We begin by defining the "field" and posing questions that this generates. Then we examine Elevate as a case study for addressing these critical questions, emphasizing how the field reveals political commitments and rhetorical possibilities that might otherwise be concealed by analyzing only the textual traces of an event. Finally, we discuss some implications of thinking about the "field" for ongoing discussions about material rhetoric.

### Defining the Field

We contend that the field *acts*. It is a co-participant in the rhetorical activities that we go "there" to study. The field is not merely a site outside the critic's office for gathering rhetorical texts or only a context for rhetorical action. It does not simply constrain or enable the action of rhetors who engage in (extra)ordinary rhetorical practices, though the field does exert those influences. Rather, field-based rhetorical inquiry ought to be attentive not only to how the field names the combination of material and discursive constraints that imbue delimited places with meanings and power, but also to how the field is a rhetorical place that acts with, against, and alongside the rhetorical practices it hosts.

Our conception of the field participates in ongoing efforts to theorize the role of context in the practice of rhetoric.<sup>7</sup> Bitzer viewed context as a necessary

condition for rhetorical action (text).<sup>8</sup> Critical rhetoric scholars have troubled neat distinctions between text and context, leading critics to analyze the rhetoric found in what has traditionally been seen as context. Similarly, critics have focused on place itself, seeing places as not merely contexts for rhetoric but as inherently possessing rhetorical force in excess of and prior to the rhetorical acts they host.<sup>9</sup> Further, critics have argued that the meaning, influence, and consequence of rhetoric are always differently felt and experienced when encountered in the places from which they emerge.<sup>10</sup> Building from these conversations, we conceptualize the field as a physical place that is both context and text, or from a Burkeian perspective both scene and agent. Defining the field as a place that acts, as opposed to context or setting, emphasizes that the field (as scene) is an agent that participates in a coequal manner with the other dimensions of the rhetorical phenomena encountered in the field.<sup>11</sup> Although Burke's theorization conceptualizes scene as a container for rhetorical action and an agent as someone who can "act in a scene," our conceptualization of the field reveals how scene can be a rhetorical agent in its own right.<sup>12</sup> Considering the field as rhetorical place recognizes its dynamic, polysemous relationship with rhetorical action. For instance, a public park is a polysemous rhetorical field. The rhetoricity of the park can vary by time of day and audience. The presence or absence of park benches, and the type of bench, can enable and constrain a variety of meanings, audiences, and interactions with the park. A park with circular metallic benches, which may be comfortable for a short break but not for sleeping, is not just a scene but also a rhetorical force. Urban parks are (re)made over the course of even a twenty-four-hour period as they shift between recreation spaces for professionals seeking respite from their offices to residential places for homeless populations who remap the city under the cover of night.

In this sense, the field is a socially constructed place imbued with meaning(s) that simultaneously enables, constrains, and constitutes rhetorical practices. However, the field can play a more or less dominant role in the practices of the rhetoricians who inhabit it. The subjective practices enabled, encouraged, and expected in that place reveal the normative role of places in policing the boundaries of rhetorical possibility. In doing so, places communicate meanings (e.g., decorum, propriety, belonging). Conversely, the improvisations made by rhetorical subjects in such places often refute these boundaries, challenge the rhetorical force of places, and begin to blur the "boundaries" of the rhetorical field.

This is especially apparent in civic places that often are the scene of rhetoric. As David Fleming writes, "Place remains a powerful basis for civic lives. . . . [It] reminds us of our embeddedness in, and dependence on, the natural and built worlds."<sup>13</sup> For example, the public square is defined by liberal democratic discourses as a place of public democracy, which enables and constrains what

subjects do there: it both creates a place for political debate and creates limits like libel and defamation. It is further (re)defined by neoliberal discourse as a place of consumption, and it is put to such use by “good subjects.” Finally, the public square is challenged by unruly subjects (e.g., LGBTQ activists, homeless, Occupy) and converted to a stage for insurgent discourse.<sup>14</sup> Such civic places enable “publicity” at the same time that they limit (but never fully) the rhetorical practices performed there.<sup>15</sup> Conceiving of the field as rhetorical place reveals that rhetoric does not operate in a vacuum; rather, it is created in places that “have a say” about what type of meanings can be created. In some instances, rhetoricians challenge the disciplinarity of (public) places by using their constraints as foils against which to talk back in efforts to create emergent, vernacular, and resistant uses and meanings. In short, the field itself is a dynamic player in the rhetorical action that field-based rhetorical critics analyze.

### Field(ing) Questions

Engaging with rhetoric in the field offers enhanced access to the undocumented aspects of the (extra)ordinary practices of everyday life, as well as to the rhetorical force they exert. This access, however, challenges researchers to navigate a critical pathway that accounts for the complex interaction between rhetorical places and the rhetorical practices they host. These tensions should compel rhetorical theorists to ask questions about how rhetorical theory can be adapted to these challenges. First, the field gives an entry to recognize and analyze embodied and emplaced practices as they happen. When one enters a field of rhetoric, potential rhetorical artifacts proliferate and demand that critics grapple with, *How should critics define, delimit, and gather artifacts when in the field?* Second, having access to embodied and emplaced practices reveals the limits of textualization (including field notes). Although our means of evaluation may not change much, we must recalibrate the way we make sense of and report on lived experience. In the evaluation/analysis process, the rhetorical critic needs to ask, *How can the experiential nature of the field be represented?* Finally, as a complex live(d) rhetorical space, power circulates throughout the field. Critics’ engagement in the field raises questions about the ethics and role of the critic seeking to capture, analyze, and publicize field-based rhetorics. Critics must sort out, *Whose needs are prioritized by publicizing the (often vernacular or hidden) rhetorical practices enacted in the field?*

### Elevate

On June 3, 2012, people assembled on an overpass in Omaha to engage in a few hours of dinner, art, and conversation around the themes of food and transportation. Emerging Terrain, a nonprofit research and design collaborative,

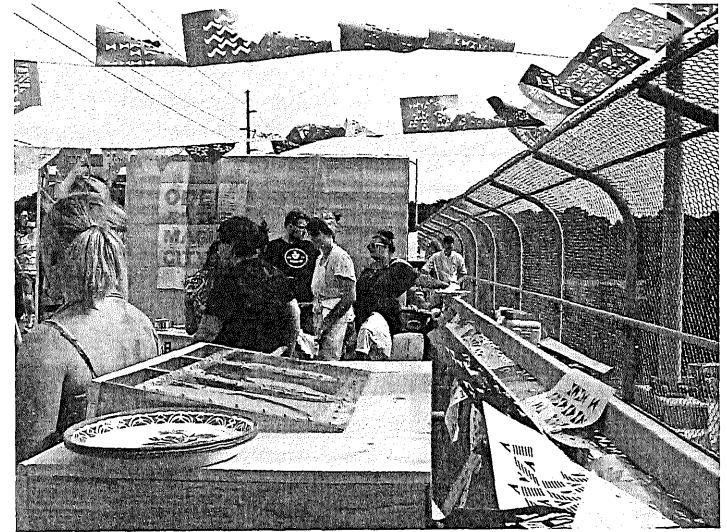


FIG. 1.1 A food station “in honor of South Omaha,” which demonstrates how some organizations transformed the bridge with decorations and themed menus. Photo by Samantha Senda-Cook.

hosted events like this aimed at challenging normative transportation options and rethinking the built environment.<sup>16</sup> This group had commissioned art to display on the unused grain elevators in Omaha (see fig. 1.4), and Elevate was the second dinner party to celebrate their unveiling. At both “art openings,” guests had a clear view of the grain elevators and were encouraged to “focus on new possibilities for collaboration, reinterpret a place, and ultimately expand perceptions of our city.”<sup>17</sup> Workers from restaurants and volunteers from nonprofits constructed unique, visually arresting food stations, planned themed menus, and provided distinctive food to five hundred paying guests. In all, about twenty “Elevation Stations” served small-course dinners, drinks, and desserts that merged artistic presentation, locavore impulses, the politics of everyday life, and the practicalities of eating dinner on a bridge in the middle of the summer. For example, one food station towered above the others, but its height was not the only thing attracting participants. Organizers had created shade by swathing a scaffolding frame in bright blue plastic, mesh-like fabric. They enhanced the shade and created a cool environment by periodically spritzing the air with water. Although the visual effect of this station was whimsical from a distance because of the gentle folds of the fabric, up close the station offered a comfortable space for outdoor eating on a hot summer evening. For

some participants, Elevate included other activities that started before the event. To foster a sense of collaboration and local production, Emerging Terrain gave burlap bags containing soil and edible plants to people in Omaha who agreed to act as caregivers prior to the event. The caregivers were responsible for returning the plants at the event to become part of a local food display that mapped food production onto sites all over the city and symbolically connected them to the overpass. This display occupied a central position at the event. Supported by thick, metal columns, a 15' × 15' map of Omaha made the ceiling of an awning-like structure. The map had holes drilled through it that represented the locations of the homes of the plants' caregivers. From the holes hung the burlap, soil-filled bags, suspended by steel cables.

On the whole, most workers, volunteers, and guests appeared to be white,<sup>18</sup> but judging from jewelry, clothes, and past interactions with individuals and organizations present at the event, people appeared to be from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Cognizant of the economic privilege implicit in treating food as leisure, organizers attempted to include people in the event who might otherwise be deterred by economic or social barriers. For instance, different ticket prices were charged depending on the time of purchase. If attendees bought a ticket early, then they paid less than did those who bought late. Nonetheless, the event surely was influenced by the reality that its attendees were mostly those with adequate economic security to participate in "foodie culture" and/or to dedicate an afternoon to such an endeavor. An analysis of Elevate helps us answer the questions we posed about the field because it provides a limited instance to examine the interactions between place and rhetors in the field.

*How Should Critics Define, Delimit, and Gather  
Artifacts When We Are in the Field?*

Defining, delimiting, and gathering artifacts in the field relies both on conventional rhetorical criticism and on methods that are not part of typical textual analysis. As Middleton, Senda-Cook, and Endres state, "Rhetorical field methods avoid bracketing out insights that fail to gain the status of objectified texts and include more careful attention to the extradiscursive elements of rhetorical action."<sup>19</sup> This commitment means that the difference between context and artifact often is not as clear when using rhetorical field methods. Artifacts may include many aspects of rhetorical action that would formerly be considered part of the setting. As a location, the bridge on which Elevate took place easily qualifies as a context in which people might make speeches or hand out pamphlets. And yet, as Endres and Senda-Cook contend, the place itself can be rhetorical; the bridge enacts event organizers' goal to challenge common understandings of urban places and transportation systems.<sup>20</sup> As the event's name

implies, the bridge literally elevates participants and their conversations about urban space. Further, by making the bridge a destination and closing off traffic for the duration of the event, Elevate enacts a variety of disruptions. Closing off traffic on the bridge interrupts modes of transportation that intersect with food distribution and positions the transport of food against locally produced food as part of the critical focus of the event. Moreover, Elevate temporarily changes the bridge from a place of transfer to one of destination; it disrupts typical flows of bodies, meanings, and capital. On its website, Emerging Terrain explains the significance of this location: "The . . . bridge over the Interstate 80 corridor . . . made two neighborhoods from one, and produced a massive flow of people and goods through the city—changing our movement, economy, and physical landscape."<sup>21</sup> These disruptions shift the bridge from a backdrop to part of the critical focus. In other words, seeing the bridge as a place recognizes the ways in which it not only acts rhetorically but also participates with, constrains, and enables the other forms of rhetoric performing at the event.

Responding to and critiquing how places perform in the moment, as well as in the long term, requires a different mode of thinking about artifacts and a different way of collecting and describing "textual evidence" for our critical claims. When in the field, evidence can take different forms to account for the feelings and experiences produced by the concurrent presence of (extra)verbal rhetorics, participants, and critics. Place, or field, as a rhetorical actor is one of these copresent factors, and it cannot be easily documented as a text as we traditionally imagine them. Commenting on the challenge of documenting an emplaced experience, Pezzullo explains, "Viewing this landscape provides me with no empirical evidence that this hill is full of waste or that it is a problem for the local community."<sup>22</sup> In other words, sometimes simply photographing what we, as researchers, see cannot capture meaningful fragments while in the field. For example, the conversations that happen at Elevate and the reactions of onlookers can be as important as the event itself. One conversation that captured the potential of such fragments took place between two people trying to make sense of this unusual experience by comparing it to a gallery opening. From where they stood, they could easily see the artwork on the grain elevators. The arrangement of the food stations on the bridge effectively created a front stage and a back stage because on one side of the bridge there was a sidewalk with a concrete barrier on one side and a chain-link fence on the other side. Stations were set up against the concrete barriers and workers used the sidewalk as a quick way to get around. Meanwhile, the fronts of all the food stations faced the road, the participants, and the artwork on the grain elevators, contributing to a feeling of all-encompassing art, like a gallery. This way of viewing the event spoke not only to the purpose of the event but also to the location of (and the discourses of class status present at) the event, emphasizing that it could not have happened just anywhere. It needed to be in view of the grain



FIG. 1.2 This organization combined serving methods with seating (foreground). Structures were made and transported specifically for the event (background), creating multiple individualized atmospheres that appealed to all the human senses. Photo by Samantha Senda-Cook.

elevator art. While an important implication of rhetorical field methods is that conversations such as these can be considered rhetorical artifacts, our focus in this essay on the “field” emphasizes that the field in which these conversations occur is significant. The conversation, though a nontraditional form of text, does not unfold in a vacuum. The conversation happens as people experience an event in a particular place. The conversation is informed by, responds to, and potentially challenges the rhetorical features of the place.

Temporary events, like Elevate, also point to the ephemerality of rhetoric, the power dynamics at play in what gets documented, and how places, though seemingly stable, are always in process.<sup>23</sup> Elevate happened for just one day and then disappeared except for its online presence. This highlights the distinction between what the rhetorical critic is able to access and make claims about at an event itself versus only using the documentation of it on websites and elsewhere. The latter acts more like a traditional text in that it selects some aspects of the event to report. Attending the event and using field methods accesses rhetorics that remained undocumented, as well as the interactions between the various rhetorics present in this material and experiential field and their differences from the documented versions of the event/site.

A critic in the field must view all these aspects of the field as potential artifacts. In addition to collecting typical rhetorical texts while in the field, rhetorical critics take field notes, photograph places and people, and record interviews to capture the intricate and interconnected rhetorical force constituted by the intertwined sensuous, temporal, embodied, and emplaced experiences present in the field. Elevate reveals how distinct artifacts expose conflicting messages manifested through *in situ* rhetorics. Although the event itself seemed complete and coherent, interviews revealed challenges faced by planners regarding what to make, how to transport it, and how to present it. For example, one participating food provider rode a bike with a basket full of miniature ice cream cups for guests to consume. She explained that the organizers initially proposed that she bring bikes to churn ice cream outside on the day of the event. Taking the June heat into consideration, the organizers scrapped that idea and said they would drive bikes to the event so that she could ride around and distribute ice cream. She protested that bikes are a form of transportation, meaning that having them delivered to the event as props ignores their utility. She suggested instead that she and some friends ride the bikes to the event. In the end, the event organizers agreed with her suggestion. Although the artifact seemed to be simply a person riding a bike, distributing ice cream, the interview uncovered tensions in the production of the artifact and, more significantly, the competing interpretive frameworks informing the event encountered by attendees. When we view the field as a place, we acknowledge the presence of multiple rhetorics in conversation and conflict with one another and attempt to make sense of their negotiations.

Additionally, some participants found the event too complicated, attempting to bring together too many disparate pieces of art and political sensibility. Despite an effort to promote the viability of growing food locally, some guests did not make that connection. One participant stated, “What this [event] means to me? I don’t know how to answer that. I guess I’m not quite sure what else this organization does other than I know that they did this artwork. It’s cool; I’ve enjoyed that since the first ones went up, three or four years ago, I suppose now. It’s really nice, but I don’t really think I’ve learned what this organization is. So, they probably need to do a better job of, maybe, informing people who are coming to these things, what it’s about.” These points of confusion that happened when participants experienced the event would likely be lost in our interpretation if we studied only the documented evidence provided by Emerging Terrain. Accessing these sentiments at the event troubled the “official” record and highlights the potential of the field as a focus for rhetorical inquiry. Although the bridge, the grain elevators, and I-80 performed a unifying function for Elevate, it also created space for and put in conversation the distinct rhetorics of the food stations, which ranged from celebrating the comfort foods of the immigrant populations in South Omaha (see fig. 1.1)

to combining nostalgic agrarian aesthetics with contemporary foodie culture (see fig. 1.3). Mixing these food experiences (i.e., rustic, home-crafted foodstuffs intermingled with elite culinary practices, which further blended into the sights and smells of food trucks) represented them as coequal culinary practices. A station constructed to reproduce the feeling of a trendy bar scene with giant red cubes stood alongside one that used skateboards as a delivery method and another that appeared to be a greenhouse made of Bubble Wrap. For guests, the equal space given to each of these stations disrupted the class boundaries implied by each (even as it reproduced problematic racial and class distinctions between different sections of Omaha, as we discuss below). Engaging these rhetorical fragments materially makes accessible the view from the overpass, the competing discourses of the food stations, the negotiations between organizers and participants, and the enjoyment and confusion of guests. They expose the polysemy confronted by critics concerned with *in situ* rhetorical inquiry. By seeing the field as a place that performs, we can define, delimit, and gather artifacts in ways that record formerly unavailable rhetorics. While our argument builds on previous claims from rhetorical critics about accessing formerly suppressed artifacts, we extend this theorizing by emphasizing the rhetorical value to be found in the role that the field itself plays in the complex circulations of artifacts in the field.

#### *How Can the Experiential Nature of the Field Be Represented?*

Embodied, emplaced practices in the field that are recorded textually and digitally challenge rhetorical critics attempting to analyze the ephemeral and spontaneous meanings they represent. The rhetoricity of an embodied, emplaced, live event is always a gestalt that seems just out of the reach of the critic. For example, to analyze one piece of art or one food station falls short of the extradiscursive dimensions of the complete rhetorical experience (see figs. 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3). Two examples illuminate the troubling task of representing artifacts when we understand that the field does rhetorical work.

First, the physical place created at each food station performed much of the heavy lifting in terms of cultivating unique experiences for participants (see figs. 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3), but that was not easy to capture or represent. At the food station shown in figure 1.3, designers presented wooden pallets that contained jars of food for the event. Each lid said “elevATE 2012” on it (emphasizing the event’s themes), and guests ate the pickled vegetables directly out of these jars. The group’s canning efforts communicate the themes of small batches, slow preparation, and local-mindedness privileged by the event. Likewise, this food station linked its food with the nostalgia of homegrown, family-style cooking implied by the food canning process and the informal presentation of the food. In addition to photographing the station and taking notes about

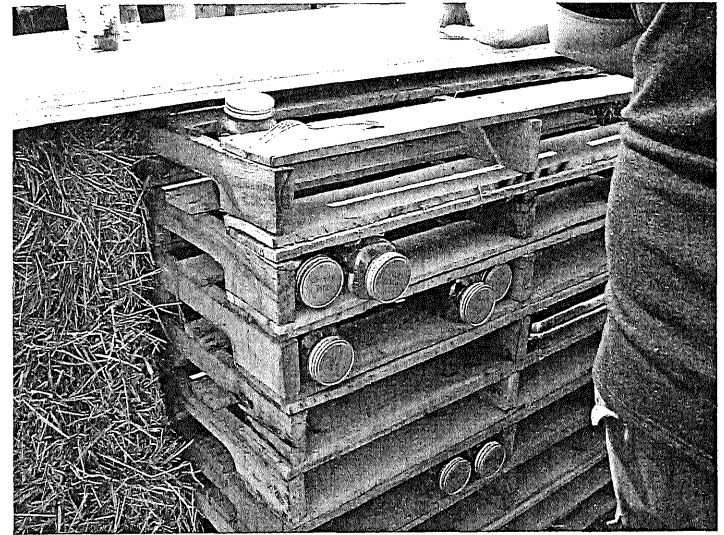


FIG. 1.3 This organization served food in mason jars; the use of glass, metal, wood, and hay develops a nostalgic aesthetic. Photo by Samantha Senda-Cook.

the reactions of the guests, the mingling sounds of conversations and highway traffic, and the heat of the sun on the exposed bridge, Samantha—one of the co-authors who attended the event—interviewed people present. The designer of this station explained his collaboration with the chef to link the food with its presentation. They sought to evoke a

memory association with having, like, this rustic foodstuffs that you have from your youth paired with, like, precision of craft. And so we took that idea and went with these bucolic, agrarian motifs of hay and wood pallets, and, um, juxtaposed them against finely crafted, finished wood that was painted white, um, to really contrast against the hay and steel and cables to facilitate the way that, um, you’d almost do this hunter gatherer, like, um, action of acquiring the food. So, we didn’t want to plate anything traditionally, but go more towards the primitive, shared psyche.

Calling to mind imagery associated with a mythical (raced and classed) past, this group intermingled the tastes of food with the textures of wood and the smells of the hay. This earthy, somewhat sweet smell was misplaced both seasonally and proximally since it was summer in the city, not autumn on a

farm. Coming close to this station piqued the interest of passersby because this distinct smell was incongruent with the rest of the event. Conceptualizing the field as a place necessitates recording the physical elements that contribute to the meaning of the experience. Likewise, it burdens the critic with attempting to relay to the reader the experiential dimensions of the event that informed the rhetorical experience encountered by the critic.

While the first example focuses on the sense of place created at the food stations, the second example addresses a more encompassing rhetorical place: the bridge itself. In choosing this location for Elevate, the organizers literally chose the high road, the overpass that goes over the highway, the means of delivering people and products across the country. The bridge functions literally and metaphorically as a way to connect and elevate. In this case, it joins both neighborhoods and abstract concepts such as food and transportation. It elevates diners, placing them literally above the highway, while it creates the opportunity to demonstrate a “higher” level of thinking. Organizers wanted diners to enjoy a better way of life, full of slow, delicious food, grown locally, prepared in small batches and served in a politically minded, artistic way. Coordinating these efforts to happen on an overpass emphasizes the opportunity to elevate our way of eating. In this basic, physical way, Elevate relied on the performance of the place itself to (temporarily) transform the normal practices of eating to an elevated, unique experience. The wind on the bridge was tempered by the food stations’ structures, but the sounds of the highway constantly mixed with the sounds of dinnerware clinking and conversations happening. The concrete on which participants stood contributed a feeling of a street festival or block party while the view reminded participants they were above the traffic. Walking on the road of a bridge rather than driving on it or walking on the sidewalk of it shifted participants’ experience of the bridge, skewing what the physical design of the bridge usually communicates (e.g., the fenced-off sidewalk that keeps pedestrians in their place and the road that keeps cars in their place). This field-based shift in experience does not easily translate to written words.

Attempting to capture and analyze the disparate parts of emplaced, temporarily bound events makes defending claims and providing evidence difficult because the critic cannot reproduce the experience of touching a wooden pallet or of smelling hay while eating food. We depend on the reproducible—pictures of spatial relationships, quotes from speeches, tidbits from conversations—to support our arguments. When our descriptions of sensations and feelings become our evidence, we must reinvent representational practices. Gathering the threads of many kinds of material evidence around one abstract theme, pattern, or argument requires creative, generative thinking and careful documentation. In addition to these typical responsibilities, critics must consider the effect of the field and try to faithfully render the feelings, glances, and

other un-documentable features of live rhetoric that make spaces overflow with potential layers of meaning.

*Whose Needs Are Prioritized by Publicizing the (Often Vernacular or Hidden) Rhetorical Practices Enacted in the Field?*

When we conceive of the field as a place, we acknowledge that it actualizes, oppresses, encourages, and undermines different groups of people. As Shome states, “Space is not merely a backdrop . . . against which the communication of cultural politics occurs. Rather, it needs to be recognized as a central component in that communication. It functions as a technology . . . of power that is socially constituted through material relations that enable . . . specific politics.”<sup>24</sup> Rhetorical fields that confront dominant meanings of place, such as a bridge as a place for cars, challenge and remake place on a daily or hourly basis, as opposed to the comparative durability of institutionalized, normalized place meanings.<sup>25</sup> For example, Elevate temporarily disrupted normalized notions of transportation and urban space through ephemeral displays that can be experienced for only a limited amount of time. For most, Elevate was a one-day event to enjoy a unique dining experience and engage in some artistically minded advocacy. Yet the organizers of this event sought to make their message durable via their website and in the form of the more permanent grain elevator art that the event was designed to celebrate. The art covered twenty-five grain elevators and featured images of different forms of transportation, notably a space shuttle, a train, trucks, a horse and buggy, cars, boats, and planes. Some emphasized themes of nature with dandelions blowing in the wind or hexagonal patterns. A different local artist designed each sheet. As seen in figure 1.4, together the sheets of grain elevator art employ many artistic styles and represent many variations on the theme of food and transportation. By placing images of food next to images of transportation, these art pieces emphasize the connection that our society often overlooks. The grain elevator art remained visible from I-80 when traveling east and from the bridge on which Elevate took place for several months, but it was eventually removed because Emerging Terrain disbanded and no other group stepped forward to care for the public art. Those who attended the event or who read the news coverage interpreted the art as a reminder both of the event and of what it represented. For others, this trace of the event continued to provoke questions. The grain elevator art made a more permanent alteration to place than did the event.<sup>26</sup> This and other more durable alterations create new symbolic landscapes and potentially challenge the politics of the material structures they co-opt. What are essentially the decaying structures of industrial farming took on a new meaning when coated with large sheets of artwork that subtly

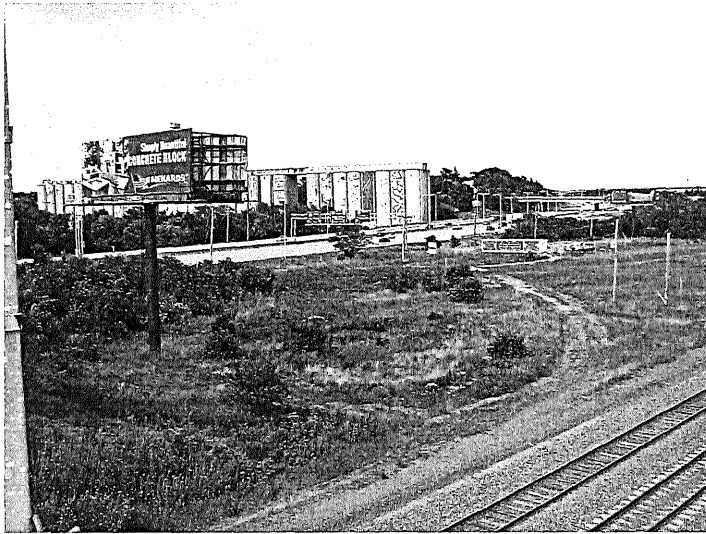


FIG. 1.4 The view of the grain elevators, highway, and rail lines from the overpass. Photo by Samantha Senda-Cook.

challenged relationships between food and transportation by depicting images of gasoline flooding a city, an ear of corn attached to a space shuttle, and fractal wing patterns next to an aerial view of farms across a landscape. The challenge is especially relevant in Nebraska, where swaths of land, devoted to farming, exist among countless rural food deserts.<sup>27</sup> The transformation of the grain elevators endeavored to provoke both diners at Elevate and drivers on I-80 to reconsider the relationships between food and transportation. Yet, as Shome contends, the field can simultaneously challenge and reinforce certain norms and assumptions. While temporarily challenging norms of transportation and food systems in place, Elevate also served to reinforce the economic privilege of its majority white participants.

The field encourages rhetoricians to conduct rhetorical criticism in ways that reflect the uncertainty of the field itself. Regardless of whether we focus on it, the field reflects the norms and processes of culture, creating both dominant and marginalized positions. The field is politically charged in ways that enable and constrain rhetorical possibility, and in ways that may not be perceivable in textual artifacts alone. For example, the sighs and sweat of those working this event contrasted sharply with the guests' laughter and freedom of movement, reinforcing conventional class distinctions between leisure and

work. Organizations with more funding could create structures to protect them from the sun, but some workers, particularly volunteers from nonprofits that could not afford a large-scale structure (see fig. 1.1, for example), struggled with sunburn and thirst all day. One seasoned volunteer, talking to Samantha two years later, described this event as "the worst day of my life." Even those who were paid for their labor looked hassled and frazzled much of the time, serving and rushing "backstage" along the sidewalk to grab something from a vehicle or use a bathroom a few blocks away. Those who paid for the privilege to eat dinner on a bridge appeared to enjoy the day, but for those who did not or could not, the day effectively marginalized their existence. For some the event relied on both economic resources and leisure time they did not have; for others the closing of the bridge was simply another impediment to their efforts to conduct their daily lives. Conceiving of the field as place offers rhetoricians a chance to investigate the construction of the field as a rhetorical act, bringing the same critical advantages to what often goes ignored. For instance, Emerging Terrain created a place to critique dominant social practices and simultaneously enforced problematic hierarchies. The event revealed the double-edged sword of elevating—that is, someone else must always be "lower than." Being in the field expands critics' opportunities to articulate and critique the material enactment of these politics.

### Conclusion

Entering the "field" challenges both conventional theories of rhetoric and rhetoricians themselves. In this essay we further theorized these challenges by thinking through the field as a rhetorical place in addition to a location to which a critic goes to collect rhetorical artifacts or observe the context for embodied (verbal and nonverbal) messages. In this sense, we argue that the field is a co-participant in rhetorical dynamics because of its own rhetoricity and its function in constraining and enabling the other rhetorical messages circulating in the field. We used one extended example to illustrate how entering the field prompts us to acknowledge and account for the messiness of the field, the circulating (extra)verbal rhetorical artifacts that constitute the experience of being there, the fluidity of rhetorical practices, and the politicization of live(d) rhetorics that are sometimes lost in their textualization.

Elevate joins a number of artifacts that continue to push rhetorical theory and criticism to expand our understanding of the role of materiality in rhetoric. As rhetorical criticism rounds the bend on the material turn,<sup>28</sup> we suggest that it is imperative for us to examine our assumptions, criticism, and fieldwork in light of an emphasis not just on the material consequentiality of rhetoric or the material conditions that intersect with rhetoric but also on the *material experience* of being a part of live(d) rhetoric. Rhetoric as it happens in the field



is multi-modal, multi-sensual, emplaced, and temporally bound. While perspectives that examine the circulation and dissemination of rhetorical artifacts beyond their initial instantiation offer immense value, part of our goal in interrogating the field has been to better understand rhetoric in a physical, embodied, and emplaced sense. Fieldwork gives critics more access to the immediate material experience of situated rhetorical invention, audiences, and evaluation than do traditional rhetorical criticism approaches that draw primarily on textual representations, reconstructed context, and imagined audiences. Amid the current groundswell of critical investigation into the rhetoricity of bodies, places, affects, and sensations—topics that often intersect with materiality—we suggest that the field in which rhetoric happens is a significant factor in the material experience of rhetoric.

Attending to the rhetoricity of the field offers several implications for thinking through theories of the materiality of rhetoric. First, conceptualizing the field as a place offers an important reminder that the location of rhetoric matters for how we experience it and how it cocreates that experience.<sup>29</sup> Place functions as a social actor in a milieu of raced and classed bodies, physical structures, senses, and meanings that is always producing rhetorics to be reinforced or resisted. Thinking about the materiality of rhetoric, then, is not just a question of considering the preconditions for rhetoric or the consequences of rhetoric, but the spaces in between, the in-the-moment experiences. These experiences are inevitably messy, fluid, and polysemous not only because they are a swirl of intersecting artifacts in a particular field, but also because of the subjectivity of experience had by each participant in the field, as well as the multiple meanings and interpretations brought to the field by the participants in it.

Second, thinking about the material experience of rhetoric in relation to field as place brings in the concomitant consideration of temporality. Space and time are frequently seen as mutually constitutive phenomena. In this case, we see that the material experience of rhetoric influences and is influenced by a field that is time-bound. The material elements of Elevate existed together for just one day. Although it provided a material experience, the event was not durable in the sense of creating a permanent change in the meaning of the place; the bridge returned to its normal function once the event was cleaned up and cleared away. The durability of the highway, rail lines, and bridges emphasizes the cultural importance of speedy transportation for people and products. By contrast, the grain elevator art, one of the remnants of this challenge to dominant systems, has been removed in the face of a lack of funds to clean and maintain it.<sup>30</sup> In other words, those structures perceived as or made to be durable carry weight and indicate cultural importance. While traditional approaches to rhetorical criticism attend to durable texts, exemplars that stand the test of time, such a focus can shift attention away from the ephemeral

and temporary material experience of embodied, emplaced rhetoric in the field. Interestingly, by documenting this event on its website, Emerging Terrain attempts to make its ephemeral event more powerful through durability. However, as we demonstrated in the analysis, this digital representation of the event neglects some rich details within the material event itself. Because they are an important part of how rhetoric works in the everyday world, those things that are left behind, that are difficult to express, that do not stand the test of time, should be included in our theories of material rhetoric. Fieldwork, and more specifically seeing the field as a rhetorical place, gives access to different forms of material rhetoric—those material experiences that come between preconditions and consequences.

In addition to its implications for material rhetoric, the field raises important considerations for rhetorical critics. Being in the field unceasingly confronts the critic with the reality that live(d) rhetorical practices produce unique types of data and that criticism's conceit is its effort to capture rhetoric in a stable, analyzable form. The description above illustrates some of the rhetorical forces revealed during data collection that are not accounted for when relying on textual traces after the fact, namely, the role of the field itself as a rhetorical actor. Artifacts in this case could be all or just some of the following: interviews, material structures made just for the day, durable material structures (e.g., the bridge), pieces of art that hang on grain elevators, and food presentation strategies. The experiential encounters with these textual fragments constitute the body of artifacts that then come to represent Elevate after the fact. Scholars choosing to venture into the field are confronted with the ongoing struggle between a desire to include the experiential insights and the constraints of representing communities in scholarly publications. Reflecting on his article about homelessness and citizenship, Middleton explains that returning from the field required choosing from those texts that often richly informed a critical understanding of the community a more limited set of artifacts that would effectively focus on the political interventions of the homeless activists.<sup>31</sup> We contend that by complicating our understanding of the rich rhetoricity of the "field," rhetorical critics can better position themselves to resolve these challenges in ways that illuminate the topics that attract their engagement.