

CHALKING AS DISRUPTION AND DIALOGUE:
A PRACTICAL EXPLORATION OF A RHETORICAL ECOLOGY AT A
SOUTHERN, RURAL COLLEGE

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ABSTRACT

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In this thesis, I explore how an informal form of discourse like sidewalk chalking functions as and within a rhetorical ecology, how ideas and texts circulate within such a complex system, and how this sometimes disruptive medium affects the potential for productive dialogue. By applying Margaret Syverson's four principles of rhetorical ecologies (distribution, embodiment, emergence, and enaction), we learn that chalking is an interconnected but informal system of sidewalk-based communication that uses playground chalk for writing or drawing messages, from art to insults, event notices to poetry, protests to love notes. It is a complex, dynamic system that includes other writers, other ideas, other texts, and other overlapping, entangled ecologies of the physical, social, historical, and cultural worlds we live in. Chalking is both social and material, and by mapping the interactions of and relationships between its human and nonhuman actors, we can explore the blurred boundaries of its rhetorical ecology and examine the disruptive potential within that ecology. Furthermore, we can uncover its practical uses: chalking can serve as visual rhetoric that can be studied in the composition classroom, connect students with the "real" world outside the classroom, and encourage them to engage in productive discourse. More broadly, informal discourse, however mundane it may seem, can guide or influence public rhetorics in often surprising, meaningful ways.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

I learned to read and write on the grounds of the backyard of my house, in the shade of the mango trees, with words from my world rather than from the wider world of my parents. The earth was my blackboard, the sticks my chalk.

— Paolo Freire, “The Importance of the Act of Reading”

This project coalesced in a campus elevator where I overheard several students talking about a pro-Trump chalking seen near the dining hall late September 2016. They piqued my interest because college students seemed largely disengaged from the presidential election season that fall semester. And yet, this cluster of students *had done something public and political* and they had to share it, talk about it, and re-enact it. They were talking about a “GO TRUMP 2016” chalk message etched in big, red-and-blue letters on a gray-concrete circle in the sidewalk. Many smaller, less colorful versions of the message had been posted overnight on campus, but this one had grabbed their attention. While they told their story, one of the students kept pirouetting as his friends buzzed with conversation and laughter that did not pause as the elevator doors opened. As the doors closed and I moved to the back, the pirouetting student said, “We poured water on [it] and danced.” He made this announcement as if they had doused Trump’s golden-haired head and not mere letters etched in chalk on a college campus in the mountains of North Carolina. The student pointed one slender arm toward the elevator ceiling, tilted his head back, and added, “I did ballet.”

How could words and images etched onto a campus sidewalk elicit such a response, including the literal and figurative pats-on-the-back his group provided him? What was “chalking” anyway but some easily dismissed, casual conversation (if it was indeed a conversation)? Typical messages that I observed during the Fall 2016 semester included sorority

“love” messages, invites to the latest off-campus hiking adventure, colorful drawings of triangles, excerpts from Bible verses and Beat poetry, protest messages, and the ubiquitous “FREE CUPCAKES HERE” (complete with an arrow pointing the way). What kind of public discourse was all this? In the graduate studies I had started that semester, my classmates and I joked that everything revolving around language and public discourse is rhetoric; everything human applies, in some way, Aristotle’s “available means of persuasion” (p. 24). But I also recalled James E. Porter (2009), who writes, “That drive of people to interact socially is a key feature of the new digital era” (p. 219). He speaks of new forms of communication, from online news feeds to Facebook. Chalking, however, relies on cheap, tangible tools (stubby sticks of playground chalk). It appropriates available horizontal surfaces. Grounded in the outdoor, public spaces in which it occurs, chalking compositions can be washed away by rain or by students armed with water bottles. Its potential audience includes everyone who traverses its physical, public spaces.

Chalking is also temporary, local, vernacular, and informal; yet, it contributes in surprising ways to more formal types of discourse (and rhetoric) like political speeches, protests movements, or institutional policies. I see chalking as important, because even the most casual chalking message functions as an interactive, symbiotic component in a complex network of discourse called a rhetorical ecology. Kent A. Ono and John M. Sloop (1995) write, “If we limit our attention to ... documents that shaped the ‘history’ of our society, then we are missing out on, and writing ‘out of history,’ important texts that gird and influence local cultures first and then affect, through the sheer number of local communities, cultures at large” (p. 19). It is debatable whether Ono and Sloop would count a pastel blue-and-pink shape, etched into red brick, and an added comment (“nice rectangle”) as “important,” though it had to have been

important in the moment, to the student who drew it and the one who replied. Nathaniel A. Rivers and Ryan P. Weber (2011), for example, argue that if we see public discourse as a rhetorical ecology, then we should interrogate even the most “mundane texts like newsletters, internal memos, proposals, strategy documents, images of protests and the spaces ... that shaped and were shaped by the rhetorical activity” (p. 196). I take from these scholars that our critical focus should be broad, for singular texts often fail to tell the whole story—or they tell only the most remembered, visible parts, chosen by those in power.

By “rhetorical ecology,” scholars mean, most simply, a dynamic, complex system of texts and contexts that are interlocking and ever-changing. Marilyn Cooper (1986) sees writing and, by extension, rhetoric, as activities “through which a person is continually engaged with a variety of socially constituted systems” (p. 367). Margaret Syverson (1999) further disrupts the myth of the solitary writer by arguing that space, place, social¹, and material components *matter* (outdoors or indoors, in a classroom or in a ship’s navigation room, tools like pen and paper, “files of ideas and correspondence,” the “arrangement of objects on a desk,” weather, software, buildings, and so on [p. 9]). Together, all these elements form a complex system in which the rhetorical situation (rhetor-text-audience-exigence) is *distributed*, in Syverson’s parlance. Jenny Edbauer (2005) calls this system a rhetorical ecology or “open network” in which “rhetorical situations simply bleed” (p. 9). Syverson outlines three other characteristics, saying that in addition to being *distributed*, rhetorical ecologies are *emergent*, *embodied* and *enacted* (Table 1).

¹ Largely for convenience, in this project I use the term “social” to include cultural, historical, and political contexts and their related, *human* constructs.

Table 1: *Syverson's Characteristics of Rhetorical Ecologies*

Characteristic	Short definition
Distributed	Shared; social/material; interactive, <i>not isolated</i>
Emergent	Self-organizing; acquiring meaning or form over time (e.g., genre formation)
Embodied	Inherently physical; in interaction with and relationship to the material
Enacted	Knowledge creation through activities, experience

In Chapter Two, I explore these characteristics more explicitly. For now, let's understand a rhetorical ecology as a complex system of discourse that adds up to more than its individual components, which actively share, circulate, distribute, and create ideas, texts, and rhetorics in relationship to each other.

To follow the action, I turn to Bruno Latour (2005) and his notion of “tracing [the] associations” that bind us together as social beings (p. 5). He refers to Actor Network Theory (ANT), a social-material model that makes it possible to surface various elements in complex systems like rhetorical ecologies and, by doing so, analyze them. Latour argues that exploring any complex system requires examining the interactions and relationships between its social and material elements—the human and the nonhuman. Chalking, as casual, informal, vernacular discourse, operates not in isolation but within a social, material, and constructed system of discourse, which M.M. Bakhtin (1981) calls “the living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment” (p. 276). This is not Aristotle's classic rhetoric but closer to Kenneth Burke (1969), who defines the art of persuasion as “the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature

respond to symbols” (p. 43). Chalking uses “symbolic means” to persuade, inform, provoke, invite, express, and entertain. Chalking is rhetorical. To study it means tracing or following its human-nonhuman associations.

These ideas began to coalesce in the moment I overheard students celebrating a rhetorical intervention via water bottle and ballet. I began to understand that campus chalking was influenced by and entangled with such complex, interlocking systems of discourse, social assemblages, and *rhetorics* as the national presidential race, a local voter-registration drive, ongoing Black Lives Matter protests, local campus events, free-cupcake days, an upper-level course on Beat Poetry, institutional policies and goals, pedagogy, and lingering rhetorical traces of a chalking controversy that occurred at WCU during the Spring 2016 semester. Together and in relationship with each other, these elements (and many others, seen and unseen) form a rhetorical ecology. By examining chalking’s ground-level ecology of informal, mundane rhetorics (and the related texts and broader rhetorical ecologies just noted), I hoped to discover both what blocks dialogue and what leads to productive discourse on a campus like WCU. In short, I sought signs of bridging what Sharon Crowley (2006) calls “ideological impasse,” the absence or shortage of any “willingness to acknowledge difference while remaining open to the necessity of respectful address to others and to their positions” (p. 22-23). On a personal, practical level, I also hoped to discover useful, accessible ways to get first-year-writing students thinking about and applying rhetoric in their everyday lives, and chalking is present in their lived experiences, at least on this campus, at this time.

More broadly, rhetorical ecologies show how we come to know what we know. Inherent in the model lies the recognition that ideas circulate and, out of that movement, transform the system and public discourse. Michael Warner (2002) calls this evolution “poetic world making,”

that is, an effort to “realize” or bring into being the world as we understand it or want others to understand it (p. 114). I call it rhetoric. We often focus on Aristotle’s notion of rhetoric as the art of persuasion, but Crowley points out that his complete statement emphasizes the *ability* “to see the available means of persuasion” (p. 27). She also posits rhetoric as a conscious practice, which circles me right back to Warner. Therefore, what “world” did the elevator students seek to craft, and how did that world come to be? Viewed from that larger conversation writ on the WCU campus, was chalking disruptive or productive or something else?

These and other questions meandered through my mind as I obeyed standard elevator etiquette, observing the students but not engaging with them. Remembering that day, I cannot separate my double identity as a former journalist and a scholar-in-process. The journalist stays back, watches, pays attention to changes in the world under observation, reports what happens, and avoids becoming part of the story. The scholar of rhetoric, however, steps into the flow as participant-critic. Imagine, for example, how difficult it would be to teach writing if we ourselves were not writers and did not interrogate our writing, or if we taught “literature” without reading any of it. Rhetoric is likewise a practice, as Crowley suggests; as such, we can gain insights into a rhetorical ecology by becoming part of it.

In that spirit, this project represents my active engagement and critical reflection of chalking’s rhetorical ecology at WCU. Herein, I report ethnographic observations of campus chalking, the process and results of a 2016 election-season case study, and chalking’s practical use in a first-year-composition course. These informal modes of research help demonstrate that, as a rhetorical ecology, campus chalking persists despite the changing population of students from semester to semester, the constraints of the environment, or its temporality. I apply primarily the rhetorical-ecology model outlined by Syverson, Cooper, and Edbauer but also

incorporate useful applications of the rhetorics of space, publics, sociology, and protests (Ackerman, 2003; de Certeau, 1984; Latour, 2005; Warner, 2002). Within this ecological framework, I overlay a journalist's sensibilities and methods: I ask questions, seek answers, and explore the site of activity; I modify these inclinations via rhetorical field work (Middleton et al., 2011; McHendry et al., 2014). First, allow me to begin by defining the informal discourse that is the subject of this study.

What Is "Chalking"?

These days, some of us pick up a piece of chalk and write on a blackboard—a 19th century medium that often still hangs on classroom walls behind "Smartboards" we control by computer, remote clickers, and (for the digitally savvy) hand motions. Fewer of us, perhaps, have lately picked up a piece of chalk and etched the conventional squares and codes of hopscotch into the pavement. And who has read Thomas Huxley's 1868 lecture, "On A Piece of Chalk," which turns musings about Great Britain's renowned chalk deposits (and cliffs) into a treatise on the marvel of science? In any case, unlike a 19th century American recipe that included "good whiskey" and "ground plaster" (Karpf, p. 65), modern sidewalk chalk is more commonly made with plaster of Paris, which may scratch blackboards but is well suited to the rough textures of brick, concrete, and asphalt. And packages of multicolored chalk are readily available at the nearest Walmart. For these and other reasons, chalk remains a practical, yet potentially expressive and persuasive, tool. Some of the most sophisticated sidewalk chalkings in America were produced by Robert Guilleman, aka "Sidewalk Sam," a 1980s artist who reproduced classic but momentary art like the Mona Lisa on Boston's sidewalks (Romano, 1980).

Whatever its modern composition or potential applications, chalk is cheap, widely available, and easily removed, which may partially explain why it is commonly used in

spontaneous situations as varied as a street-and-sidewalk vigil for the young woman killed during the August 2016 protests in Charlottesville, Va., (Malone, 2017) or a college fitness club's invitation to an off-campus hiking trip ("Base Camp Awaits"). This sidewalk-based genre of informal communication, by the way, includes posters that stick to brick and concrete; information and/or activity booths; or banners, kiosks, display boards, and the like. All are periodically placed on or beside campus sidewalks, and many of them invite some degree of interactivity. With these considerations in mind, I rely on the following definitions:

- 1) **Chalking(s)**: in the singular, an interconnected medium for sidewalk-based communication that uses chalk for writing or drawing messages, from art to insults, event notices to poetry; in plural, chalk messages, events, and/or campaigns.
- 2) **Chalk Message**: a single communication ("Black lives matter!").
- 3) **Chalk Event**: one or more chalk messages that elicit an "edit," response, or appropriation ("~~Black~~ BLUE lives matter!").
- 4) **Chalk Campaign**: a coordinated delivery of multiple messages placed simultaneously or near-simultaneously in multiple locations, one large area, or a major artery in the sidewalk network (such as excerpts from Beat poetry "posted" or distributed around WCU's bricked "Catafount," a large, outdoor space encircling a water fountain where major sidewalks converge and students often gather).²

As defined here, chalkings (messages, events, and campaigns) regularly appeared from one side of campus to another during the Fall 2016 semester. What connected them? Marshall McLuhan's (1964) "the medium is the message" comes to mind: "For the 'message' of any medium or

² The college mascot is the catamount, a type of large feline once common in the Appalachian Mountains. "Catafount" combines the mascot moniker with "fountain."

technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs” (ch. 1). Railways as medium for trains but also for conquering the West and powering America’s industrialization, for example, “accelerated and enlarged the scale of previous human functions,” he explains (ch. 1). On a smaller, personal scale, chalking turns the paved surfaces on campus into an informal, temporary message board. Chalk messages are applied to sidewalks and the paved Catafount plaza, which both mark and create a physical network across campus; concrete and brick serve as media; and messages (texts) are delivered via chalk. Sandra Smeltzer and Ian Rae (2014) suggest that, “in an increasingly cybernetic world, the tactility of chalking can ... provide citizens with a ... hands-on communicative experience” (p. 619). I add that such a physical experience also transports individual *and* collective networks of culture, ideology, history, and social interaction. All these elements, from the physical to the social, indicate that chalking functions as and within a rhetorical ecology. Next, I frame our understanding by providing an overview of how we can trace the associations (that is, “map” the ecology).

Methodology

A Living Network

I chose the rhetorical ecology approach for this study because, as Cooper, Syverson, Edbauer and many others describe the framework (Spinuzzi & Zachry, 2000; Shepley, 2013; Weisser & Dobrin, 2001), it reads as metaphor for a *living* system of texts, ideas, material elements, physical space, historical-social contexts, and much more. This dynamic model merges the classic understanding of rhetoric with the modern sense of ecology as the study of “interrelationships” and “interdependency” between living organisms and their environments—famed biologist Rachel Carson’s “web of life” (1962, p. 189). Neither rhetorical nor natural

ecologies are static; they remain open to change, evolution, and transformation. Rhetorical ecologies, in particular, remain open to the *movement* or circulation of ideas and texts.

The rhetorical-ecology model also provides a practical way to examine a diffused medium like chalking and the rhetorical activity recorded therein. Cooper (1986), for example, says that the rhetorical ecology model provides “ways of thinking about, or ways of seeing, complex situations [that are] inherently dynamic” (7). In other words, the model surfaces the individual elements *and* their relationships. Cooper also suggests that rhetorical ecologies distribute rhetorical effects; they break up or disrupt the simple, classical rhetorical situation of rhetor-audience-text-exigence. That is, discourse may not move simply from A to B; it may circulate in multiple, interrelated directions (and back again). It may also be disrupted at any point in its ecology. Disruption, in fact, is one of many ways that ecologies function in nature: climate change, the arrival of an invasive species, disease, loss of natural resources, and so forth effect the system. Chalking can be disruptive or simply expressive; it may circulate in multiple, interrelated directions over time or all at once. Syverson’s four characteristics of rhetorical ecologies (distributed, emergent, embodied, enacted) help orient us as we try to analyze such systems. Hence, the rhetorical ecology model provides a perspective, but we need a map as a starting point. In fact, we need many maps.

Mapping the Network

A drone’s-eye view of campus on a sunny September day, sometime in the recent past, provides a useful perspective and starting point. Seen from above, Western Carolina University rests in a green-lined valley between Appalachian mountain ridges. Red-brick buildings cluster in the heart of the valley, with an oval-shaped football stadium to one side and on the other, the pale gray concrete of the main administrative building—dubbed by students “the monolith” or

“the cube” and by some faculty as “the White House.” While more than 700 miles from the New York City that Michel de Certeau (1984) described as a “giant rhetoric,” the WCU campus is likewise a “text that lies before one’s eyes” (pp. 91-92). Blocky, reddish buildings and green trees rise like letters, yet the campus seems flat, two-dimensional from this vantage point. What texts operate closer to the surface? There, chalked messages enter the material field, and the people who travel this space interact with those messages.

To explore and potentially understand the rhetorical ecology in which chalking operates, I start with this big-picture view, situating this study in place and time in much the way the de Certeau posits the urban landscape of New York City as “written” by the people who move in it, live in it, “read” it, “write” it. I zoom in, metaphorically and in real-time, by also placing myself within this ecology. Such a move comes from a methodology outlined by Michael Middleton, Samantha Senda-Cook, and Danielle Endres (2011). They note rhetoric’s “participatory turn” toward *in situ*³ field work, or what they call “rhetorical field methods” (p. 387): “participant observation [that] allows critics to experience rhetorical action as it unfolds and offers opportunities to gather insights on how rhetoric is experienced by rhetors, audiences, and critics” (p. 390). In the act of conducting a case study, I experienced chalking as observer, critic, and embodied performer, learning through participant observation that campus chalking is lived, everyday rhetoric situated in place and time. Studying it requires qualitative, informal, but critical study of just the sort that Middleton et al. describe.

Draw closer with the drone’s-eye view of campus: Below us, with a footprint larger than most of the buildings around it, a circle is paved in red brick, accented by the comma-like curves of a tree-lined, inner ring. In the middle, a dark-gray concrete circle draws attention to a plume of

³ Middleton et al. use the term in the sense of “onsite,” where live/current rhetoric is happening.

water that sprays upward. This central focus is the Catafount, installed in 2011 as a new public space, “an epicenter for social activities” at a public university that was growing both in the number of students and the spread of its manmade structures (“Historic Walking Tour,” n.p.). This view is seen online in an image that appears almost every time a student, instructor, or staff member logs onto the university’s “MyWCU” portal, shown in Figure 1:



Figure 1: Overview of Western Carolina University

From the Catafount, sidewalks of varying widths, colors, and shapes spoke outward. These lead to surrounding buildings, cut across open green areas, pass under a clock tower, flow up a tiered series of steps that connects to Catafount Drive, one section of a ring of roads that enclose the main campus. Near the end of a noticeably wide, red-bricked sidewalk that angles toward a cluster of green-roofed buildings, we can make out a smaller, concrete circle. This whitish circle,

barely visible to the northwest of the Catafount area in Figure 1, is slightly smaller than the fountain point. This circle is where the elevator students saw a large, colorful pro-Trump chalking before walking to Coulter, where I encountered them in the elevator.

This view shows part of the physical ecology in which chalking operates on campus. Most chalkings occur in the large, Catafount area; many are deployed in the sidewalks that veer away from it. The students themselves, moving from point to point in this network and carrying with them their own texts and lived experiences, manifest another element in the system. In my constructed, drone's-eye view, chalking messages appear and disappear like seasonal blooms. But, as rhetorical events, these, too, have or link to networks of ideas, texts, and media. And the best way to explore this ecology, I argue, is to walk it, live it, question it. Rhetorical field work, which resembles journalistic methods I used for many years, suits this approach.

A journalist surveys the scene like a detective, looking for details that are out of place, unexpected, or unusual. The rhetorical field worker likewise pays attention while walking the scene. Middleton et al. explain, "Rhetorical field methods operate at the intersections between [critical rhetoric], ethnography, and performance studies" (p. 389). That is, field study typically includes interviews, focus groups, reflection, and "participant observation" of rhetorical events, often as they are happening. Rhetorical field work also includes "mundane discourses that often evade critical attention" and allows "a shift from analysis of objectified texts to critique of 'live' rhetorics" (Middleton et. al., p. 387). For example, I became both participant and observer of events when I encountered the students in that elevator on that day during a contentious presidential-election season. As a chalking participant, I had recently attempted a chalking-based, rhetorical intervention of my own in the Election 2016 presidential campaign; in Chapter 3, I report findings from this case study.

Even as “live” and “lived” rhetoric, however, chalking poses particular challenges for study. Rarely documented and not designed to outlast even light rainfall, chalking messages, events, and campaigns disappear quickly; but these problems of temporality and bounded space can be assuaged by *in situ* field work and complimented by review of the mundane texts in the ecology. For example, Rivers and Weber’s study, though not performed at the time of the historical events, applies the rhetorical ecology model to the 1950s-1960s bus boycotts that took place in Montgomery, Alabama. They argue that Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous speeches during the protests and Rosa Park’s well-publicized refusal to sit on the back of the bus were primary “texts” situated within a rhetorical ecology that included “mundane” texts: prior speeches, committee memos, letters, institutional policies, ongoing as well as prior protests, and much more. In the WCU chalking ecology, mundane texts can include a parking map as well as a presidential-campaign tweet.

There are layers of meaning and activity in “mapping” an ecology this way, whether we are examining mundane texts or imagining a drone’s-eye view of the physical space. By “mapping,” I also mean documenting key elements of WCU’s chalking by cataloguing samples across subsequent semesters and outlining the physical environment of the university’s main campus, particularly with regard to the network of sidewalks that connect buildings and parking lots. In the broadest sense, mapping also encompasses historical, cultural, and political contexts, both local and national. It also means situating the chalking ecology within related communicative systems on campus, such as posters and bulletin boards. For example, James Porter and Patricia Sullivan (1997) use the metaphor of “mapping” a basketball game. Eight different people will give eight different “maps” of the game, depending on their viewpoint, how much attention they give to various aspects of the game and/or surrounding milieu, and where

they “come from” in terms of interests, backgrounds, “game” knowledge, and objectives. Taking a cue from Porter and Sullivan, I enacted “multiple mappings” (p. 8) for this study to provide a more inclusive view of chalking’s rhetorical ecology. The next section explains how I did so.

Methods

Ethnography

Ethnographic methods are useful for exploring rhetorical ecologies, and I have applied them in this project. In the Fall 2016 case study, I used chalking to encourage students to register to vote, leaving messages and chalk sticks as ways to invite “readers” to “ChalkToMe.” In this thesis, I report the experience of performing that case study, with the objective that Middleton et al. describe: “Rhetorical field methods identify a critical practice aimed at understanding how texts and embodied, lived experiences interanimate one another” (p. 393). Seeking observations beyond my own experience, I complimented the case study with four IRB-approved interviews; these interviews offer what Edbauer calls “the lived, in-process operations” of the rhetorical ecology. Laurie Gries (2013), for example, interviewed subjects involved in the circulation and re-appropriation of the Obama “Hope” posters; as qualitative data, the interviews contextualize her study. I framed my interviews with specific questions about chalking and campus discourse but left room for open conversation. Andrea Fontana and James H. Frey (2005) say, “Exploratory interviews [are] designed to establish familiarity with a topic or setting; ... where the intent is to tap intersubjective meaning with depth and diversity” (p. 704). As a journalist, furthermore, I preferred conversational interviews for their potential to elicit in-depth, thoughtful responses. As journalist-rhetorician-human, I also seek Burkean identification⁴ or commonality.

⁴ Burke says, “You persuade or communicate with a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* your ways with his” (p. 55, emphasis in the original).

Rhetorical Analysis and ANT

From Fall 2016 through Fall 2017, I sampled chalking messages, events, and campaigns by photographing them, documenting their location, and analyzing them rhetorically. For example, I considered where these chalkings occurred, how effective they were in terms of such rhetorical features as color, what message was intended, and whether interaction or intervention occurred. In addition to rhetorical analysis, I also tracked and documented the *actors* involved in these chalkings. Syverson notes, for example, “The knowledge involved in ‘writing’ depends on activities and communications shared in interactions not only among people but also among interactions between people and various structures in the environment” (8). These human and nonhuman elements are sometimes called agents in rhetoricians’ parlance, but in Latour’s Actor Network Theory (ANT) they are known as *actors* who move individually and collectively (as *actants*) within the network or ecology. Most simply, this means that a student about to chalk is a human actor; a piece of chalk is a nonhuman or material actor; together, they form an actant—student-with-chalk. In Chapter Two, I further explain ANT and its application.

Briefly, following the actors/actants also means noting the many texts that enter, influence, or frame the chalking ecology in some way. I have mentioned in this introduction, for example, WCU’s “Historic Walking Tour,” which provides the institution’s perspective on campus history and the arrangement of space. Individual human actors also bring texts into the rhetorical space or create new ones. For example, in creating a chalk campaign about homelessness, a former student of mine drew on slogans and memes she found on the social-media platform Instagram. Combined with other elements surfaced in this study, these texts and many others start to show us how everything in the rhetorical ecology is connected, and what we might do with that knowledge. In short, we might come away with something practical.

Chapters Preview

In this first chapter, I have laid out the methodology for studying chalking as a rhetorical ecology. Chapter Two, “Maps, Actors, and Actants,” applies that methodology. In it, I provide a drone’s-eye view of campus as a constructed space, ground that overview in Actor Network Theory as applied to rhetorical ecologies, outline the broader contexts in which chalking occurs at WCU, and include a chalking sampler that helps situate the ecology in space and time. In the process, we begin to see *how* chalking fulfills the four qualities that rhetorical ecologies exhibit: Syverson’s (1999) theory of *distribution, embodiment, emergence, and enaction*.

Chapter Three, “From Lived Experiences to Praxis,” delves into the perspectives and practice of five actors in chalking’s ecology: four interviewed subjects and me. These reflections represent institutional, pedagogical, and participatory perspectives in the chalking ecology. They also bring to light the variety of texts that human actors bring to the network, and they demonstrate that rhetoric does not occur in isolation: it is social, dynamic, and situated. The interviews also surface the material contexts of chalking, situated in place (chalk in hand, crouching over a campus sidewalk on a sunny day while people walk by).

The final, concluding chapter reiterates connections between the human and nonhuman actors in the chalking ecology, interrogates my experience as a first-year-composition instructor who used chalking in class lessons and projects, and looks beyond classroom and campus. Since the lively chalkings of Spring 2016 and Fall 2016, the medium has been quiet; in ways that surprised me, my findings account for this reduction. My study also suggests how we can situate chalking within broader rhetorical ecologies and how these may lead to pathways for productive discourse and free expression on a college campus and, perhaps, in the “real” world.

CHAPTER TWO: MAPS, ACTORS, AND ACTANTS

Imagine retracing the elevator-students' steps on a sunny, late-September day. In the hallway where I first see them, clusters of Music students mingle and merge, leaning against instrument cases or each other, opening and closing lockers large and small in a wide space too informal to be called a lobby for the building. But the students make it into one. A bevy of glass doors open and close as students exit or enter from a tree-covered courtyard paved from this building to the next. From that adjacent building, the A. K. Hinds University Center or "U.C.," the aroma of fried chicken wafts from the food court. Under the trees, the paved area splits into several sidewalks, one that hugs the U.C., others that curve away toward such structures as the Campus Recreation Center and a metered parking lot. One sidewalk cuts across the grass to a square, red-bricked space framed by lilacs and other small trees; it is anchored by the three-story Alumni Tower. Students walk around this brick monolith or through its ground-level arches, moving along other sidewalks. They enter the Catafount circle, cross it, take the two-car-wide, red-brick sidewalk that leads to another intersection. Here, a gray, concrete circle interrupts the path as it expands into a large area of pavement that stretches from one building to another like wall-to-wall carpet. Inside the circle, shallow grooves create a four-pointed star filled with a darker shade of concrete. The entire space has been appropriated by red, white, and blue letters, American colors, outlined and filled in, each almost two-feet long, though the middle word smears across the concrete, evidence that the elevator-students have just emptied their water bottles over it: "GO TRUMP 2016."

Where and how do we begin to make sense of the physical, social, and rhetorical connections manifested by these texts of place, space, and language? Chalking, I argued in Chapter 1, manifests as a rhetorical ecology; it exhibits Syverson's four characteristics

(distributed, emergent, embodied, enacted). Exhibiting all of these features, the “GO TRUMP 2016” chalking scene was written on the physical, social, and rhetorical maps of the university campus that year. In this chapter, I explore those maps as the foundation for the chalking ecology, but literal maps are rhetorical texts, too. They change over time in interaction with each other; they are ecological. In this exploration, I look for witnesses like a journalist would. As a rhetorician, I understand that “witnesses” include the human as well as the nonhuman—the individual actors who, together, create clusters of actors (*actants*) that are situated in time and space. In the classic rhetorical situation—particularly as codified by Lloyd Bitzer (1992)—the witnesses are distinct; rhetor, audience, and texts connect and unfold in a logical, linear way, sparked by a singular exigence. But in a rhetorical ecology, rhetors influence audiences, audiences influence rhetors, the texts influence both; the exigence fluctuates or changes; and all interact with one another, co-existing and co-evolving within larger, organic ecologies. This blurring is part of what Syverson means by *distributed*. That blurring fosters change, transformation, evolution—the *emergence* of new forms and the *enaction* of new ideas.

For example, in Edbauer’s (2005) analysis of a “Keep Austin Weird” campaign and counter-campaign, a pedestrian or bicyclist pauses beside a road in a neighborhood in danger of being gentrified. She reports that the interlocutor posted a:

piece of white paper ... on the side of a newspaper stand. In all block letters, the words read: ‘Keep Austin fucking normal. Conform. It’s just easier.’ [Such] counter-rhetorics directly respond to and resist the original exigence [and] expand the lived experience of the original rhetorics by *adding* to them (p. 19, emphasis in the original).

Her example illustrates that a rhetorical situation evolves over time (and place); it moves, and its audience moves or changes, too. The “fucking normal” rhetor played off the original “Keep

Austin Weird” slogan and assumed a new audience would get the connection. This co-existing, co-evolving notion challenges Bitzer’s linear, static rhetorical situation. Critical for this study, the Bitzer model of exigence-rhetor-audience-text fails to account for how a message like “Keep Austin Weird” can gather meaning, or rhetorical weight, to which audiences and rhetors may continue responding, even when the original “message” changes, moves, or gets overwritten like a palimpsest.⁵ As Edbauer explains, the original “Keep Austin Weird” message “circulates in a wide ecology of rhetorics [and] accretes over time” (pp. 19-20). Syverson calls this accretion of meaning *enaction*, which occurs at the intersection of the physical and social: “knowledge [as] the result of an ongoing interpretation that emerges through *activities* and *experiences* situated in specific environments” (p. 13, emphasis in the original). Knowledge is dynamic.

More importantly for this study, Latour’s Actor Network Theory suggests a method for “tracing” relationships between the witnesses we uncover in a rhetorical ecology. We want a glimpse of how processes like emergence and enaction take place. As a step in this direction, ANT involves following the actors and actants (the human and nonhuman elements in complex systems). Liza Potts (2009) applies ANT, describing actors as “active participants ... who [have] equal agency to affect any given situation” (p. 285-286). A group or “collective” of actors forms an “actant” or “network comprising any actors” (Potts, p. 286). Gries (2012) also applies ANT, musing on Latour’s theory and the assembling of actors into actants: “[W]oman and pen are transformed through their material engagement and/or relationship. ... we acknowledge, in fact, that ‘woman-pen’ writes” (p. 59). This notion disrupts the myth of the solitary writer-genius. But

⁵ “A parchment or other writing surface on which the original text has been effaced or partially erased, and then overwritten by another; a manuscript in which later writing has been superimposed on earlier (effaced) writing” — *Oxford English Dictionary*

via ANT, Latour calls for surfacing these actors/actants, human and nonhuman, as Gries does with “woman-pen,” and trying to account for “how society is held together” (p. 13). He urges, “‘Follow the actors themselves’ [and] try to catch up with their often wild innovations in order to learn from them what the collective existence has become in their hands” (p. 12). Despite coining the theory, Latour prefers to call ANT the “sociology of associations” (p. 9), explaining, “The social [is] not a special domain, a specific realm, or a particular sort of thing, but only ... a very peculiar movement of re-association and reassembling” (p. 8). Here, Latour gives a *sense* of “the social” as active, not as a static entity or some analyst’s attempt to “impose some order ... [or] to teach actors what they are” (p. 12). ANT, then, provides the sense of constant movement lacking in a data snapshot; reveals the whole, living system; and shows Syverson’s four characteristics in action.

For example, each individual student in the “GO TRUMP 2016” scene is an actor in the network or ecology; assembled and *assembling* in clusters, collectives, or nodes in the network, they form an actant, not just with each other as physical, embodied humans who dance over the symbols but also in relation to the nonhuman actors they *use* (water bottles) and *interact with* (sidewalks as both chalking medium and pathways for movement, for example). Potts also describes actants as “*temporary networks*” (p. 286, emphasis added). Chalking is temporal, periodic, often passing as events occur. Therefore, ANT as a method for studying temporary networks suits this ecological project; ANT can, as Potts suggests, “allow designers and researchers to see an entire landscape of active participants” (p. 286). It also expands on Syverson’s inclusion of material elements in a writing ecology as well as the human. These active participants, witnesses, actors—whatever we might call them as they come together as actants, human and/or nonhuman, *hybrids*—share the elements bound together as a rhetorical

situation. In a twist on Bitzer, the rhetorical situation is *distributed* among them. It is also *embodied*: students-with-water-bottles, students-walking-talking-pirouetting, and all of us together, in an elevator, re-enacting, watching, and listening; later, I retold their/my story to classmates and wrote it down in my notebook. And in all these various processes, meaning accrues, gathers rhetorical weight, and starts to create new knowledge. We have *enaction*.

To map such an overlapping, ongoing ecology, I started with the landscape via a drone's-eye view, seeing the elevator-students' moment as part of a multilayered, 3-D Venn diagram that embodies not just a physical space but a particular, *present* moment with a past and a future. Both physical contours and mundane texts create a rhetorical space that appears static and stable, until *something* disrupts it—an acrimonious election season, a traumatic event, or water that washes away the message (the classic, Bitzerian exigence—except that these disruptions may be just the beginning, the end, or the middle of the story). This disruptive feature is a key reason we need what Sullivan and Porter call “multiple mappings” or viewpoints (p. 8). Different kinds of maps and viewpoints configure the space, and its human actors interpret and write it. Their embodied writing puts social contexts in play and sets the field for chalkings to occur in the resulting rhetorical/ecological space. In surfacing these elements, we learn that one event (a story overheard in an elevator) is actually many events, not necessarily in linear sequence, and that is exactly what Sullivan and Porter predict.

Maps in Place

Laid flat as a two-dimensional space on a map produced, published, and distributed by the university, the contours of WCU's campus form a lopsided horseshoe laid on its side, as seen in Figure 2, a screenshot of the online version of the text available at wcu.edu:

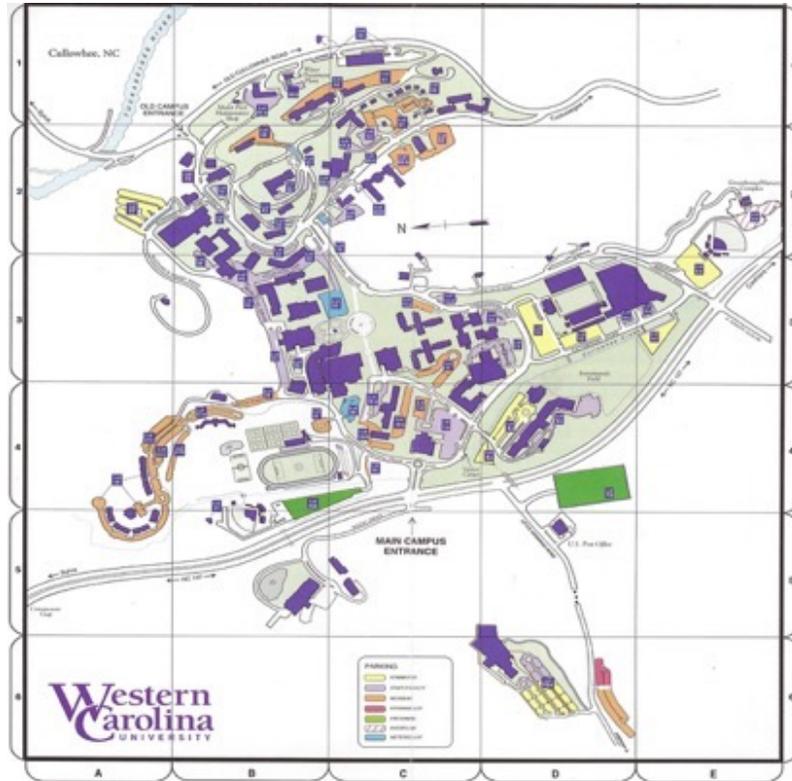


Figure 2: WCU Commuter Parking Map

This configuration orients readers to the Main Campus Entrance, placed in the lower center of the map. The entrance also marks the western side of campus, bounded by the four-lane North Carolina Highway 107. Letters and words identify the Tuckasee River and the nearest U.S. Post Office. By far, the largest words on this map shout out “Western Carolina” in big purple letters, the “W” and the “C” interlocked like a handwritten medieval text; the purple words overshadow a smaller, all-caps “UNIVERSITY.” Those first two words in WCU’s name also situate the campus in the *western*, mountainous region of North Carolina.

On this map, individual buildings appear as nameless, purple blocks of varying sizes and shapes, like the giant letter Fs with their backs to each other in the center of the map. Parking lots are denoted as numbered shapes filled in with yellow, orange, or green, according to who can use

the space (faculty, students, commuters). Several roads snake in and around the campus. Sidewalks are not shown—except in the center of the map. There, a round, white shape sits in the middle of a long white line that connects two roads (Centennial Drive and University Way). The white circle represents the Catafount; to its left, a cluster of lines from a faint, connecting oval, with a small dark square in its center. No bigger than a large period in this image, this square represents Alumni Tower.

I infer layers of meaning from this official map. Elena Glasberg (2003) says, “A central point of contemporary cultural geography contends that maps, far from being passive records of objective geographic knowledge or even of authorial intention, generate meaning in their own right” (p. 251). That is, a text like WCU’s parking map shows at initial glance what was *already there* at the moment the map was created; it documents a mostly two-dimensional view of the world at that instance in time and place. The map also shows the perspective and intention of its creators (a guide to parking at WCU, a practical text for finding your way around campus via vehicle, a kind of advertisement for WCU values, and so forth). As Paul C. Adams, Steven Hoeslcher, and Karen E. Till (2001) observe, “Communication always *takes place* somewhere, in particular social and spatial contexts” (xiii-xiv, emphasis in the original). Communication does not occur in vacuums (even if we are talking to ourselves). Places are also rhetorical, constructed in interaction with and between human/nonhuman actors and actants (networks of actors).

By seeing the map another way, *rhetorically*, we can analyze it. In visual rhetorics, the placement of images and letters, the use of certain fonts and particular colors—all of these elements draw the eye but also impart meaning. For example, Western’s primary school color is purple; hence its prominence on the map (and T-shirts, athletic uniforms, stickers, mascot outfits, and so on). It is significant, therefore, that this color fills both the denoted buildings and the

“Western Carolina” letters in the bottom left corner. Furthermore, the eye is drawn to the university name as a brand and logo. Looking closer, it is also significant that the map emphasizes roadways, not sidewalks: This is a *parking* map; its target audience is people driving to campus, not pedestrians. The map’s perspective derives not just from American culture’s car fixation but because WCU lies a few miles from the nearest town, Sylva, N.C., and is reached primarily by motor vehicle (while the “town” of Cullowhee exists, it has no urban center; the 11,000-student university is, effectively, the “town” of Cullowhee, with its own meanings).

It is also significant that the map places the Catafount in the center, though it is not identified in the legend or in letters/words. Another campus map names WCU’s more than 100 buildings and main structures, listing them in columns to the right and left of the map; this map is identical to the parking map in almost every other regard, including the lack of sidewalk markings (the WCU “campus map”). But it *reads* very differently. The building-oriented map names the Catafount area the “Central Plaza”—a moniker that I have never heard used by students, faculty, or staff, but it does assert what the institution intended the space to be or become. Whatever we call it, the Catafount is a constructed, repurposed gathering space: Until a few years ago, a road traversed this space as the vehicular route from the H.F. Robinson Administration Building to the center of campus and beyond to Catafount Drive, which circles from the south entrance and the football stadium. Institutional leaders *designed* the Catafount as a gathering space, where none had been before. Reflecting on this change, I recall Sandra Schmidt (2011), who distills de Certeau’s theory of “geographic meaning-making” by saying that “institutions and their conceivers organize locations in certain ways” for particular purposes, while “people ... undermine [this strategy and] interpret the scene in their everyday practice of geography” (p. 22). A dirt path at WCU, for example, defies the sidewalk plan by showing how

students often favor a shorter route between such destinations as the dining hall and Alumni Tower. Maps are rhetorical, interpreted, changed, sometimes undermined, and re-interpreted by human actors as time goes by.

For example, a mundane document, published upon the WCU's centennial celebration and created by students in a history class at the time, provides evidence of this spatial, temporal, and *rhetorical* evolution: The university's "Historic Walking Tour" brochure (2014) describes the Catafount as "an epicenter for social activities" (n.p.). The Catafount was built in 2011; it *became* a public gathering space as students used it and practiced their geography, but it was also designed that way, with its intended purpose reinforced even in a mundane text. That the Catafount functions fairly well as such a public, social space stems as much from stated intentions as it does from the physical attributes of the campus, the mountain valley it lies within, and the ways that its human actors actually use the space. In more ways than one, the Catafount draws people to a space where they can host events like the Fall 2017 eclipse viewing or access the largest, most central location for chalking. Even campus visitors feel the pull: When grade-school children were on campus for a science fair one recent semester, they filled the Catafount with happy, colorful, we-are-here and we-are-cute messages and drawings. The latter example indicates that chalking is more than a "thing" at WCU; it is, in Syverson's terms, *emergent*. It is, and has been, taking shape as a genre/medium over time, and not just at WCU (otherwise, there would be no need for Crayola to make and sell boxes of multicolored sidewalk at Walmart).

And yet, while the WCU maps are far from being passive texts, they are incomplete. They do not fully show the sidewalks, paved open spaces, and dirt footpaths that link buildings to parking lots (typically located on the edges of the space), buildings to each other, and all of the above to open spaces and gathering spots. Nor do they show trees, archways, and other structures

that shade those sidewalks (and frame their contours in what some might say wall-like fashion). Most campus chalking occurs in the open, sunny areas where bold colors stand out; much of the Catafount lies in such an open space. Chalking messages applied in the shade of Alumni Tower, for instance, are often more difficult to read, dappled in obscuring shadows.

Campus topography also comes into play as a potential actor in the chalking ecology, because it affects and to a large extent *pre-determines* such elements as the placement of buildings and parking lots, the arrangement of landscape trees and shrubs that shade sidewalks and grassy areas, the overall shape of the university property, and (more importantly) how *human* actors interact with the physical space. The Catafount would not function well as a public gathering space if it were not located, topographically, in one of the flattest areas in the center of campus. The Figure A “topo” map shows how the university is situated in an area of low mountains and valleys, oriented with the north:

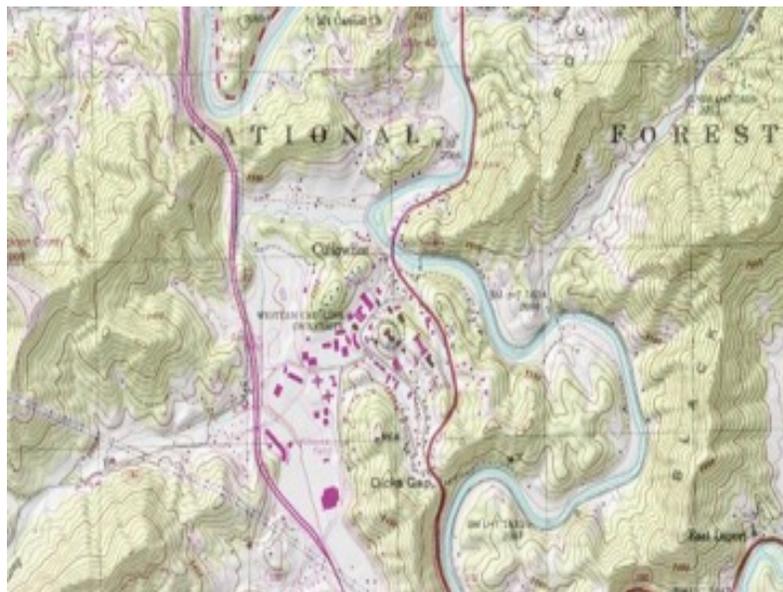


Figure 3: Topographical Map of Cullowhee. Image courtesy of Topozone.com

This map, based on a U.S. Geographic Survey, *reads* very differently from the campus parking map. It emphasizes changes in terrain, natural features like the prominent Tuckaseegee River and Dicks Gap, and (just out of view in this zoomed image) the names of national forests (Pisgah, in this southern section of the Appalachian Mountains). Manmade features have been overlaid onto the map; but they do not present accurately (of course, that representation is not the *purpose* of this map). For example, in the middle of this view, not far beneath the small all-caps “Western Carolina University,” two purple plus-signs can be seen in the lower, left-center of the map. These are the two dormitories represented on the parking map as giant “F” shapes. The double-lined, purple route cutting through the left side of the map is N.C. Highway 107.

This map adds to our understanding how WCU’s human actors actually use a space. The campus horseshoe shape, we can surmise from the topo map, comes from the university’s placement in a wide valley traversed by the highway, as well as its curving extension into an open cove. What is less apparent in this map is that the topography slopes upward from the highway to the center of campus—the blank space underneath the words “Western Carolina University.” The Catafount lies in that blank space, but without actors (individual elements, human and nonhuman) and actants (clusters, nodes, and/or networks of actors, dynamically linked), the schematic is just a map. It cannot account for a student doing ballet over a pro-Trump chalking message after he and his classmates have poured water over it.

Writing the Space

Seeking to account for such rhetorical acts, we fly closer and lower from the drone’s-eye view, hovering over the football-field parking lot—a flat expanse of dark asphalt marked by white lines and yellow speed bumps. From the nearby four-lane state highway, every morning, commuter students drive over Cullowhee Creek and into the lot, where they park, shoulder book

bags, traverse the crosswalk, and move toward the center of campus. To appropriate de Certeau, pedestrians *write* the text of the urbanized space with their bodies as they move uphill, under a Belk hallway that spans the open air from original building to annex. Many, if not most, pedestrians will cross through, around, or near the Catafount during the course of their day. We need tools for analyzing their writing of the physical space, so that we can understand how it codetermines the chalking ecology, but Porter and Sullivan (1997) caution researchers about “the confusion between space and time: the spatial rendering of a fluid event always skews the time element (*kairos*) and that time skew needs to be acknowledged and pondered” (p. 6). That is, research tends to capture moments in time, “snapshots” and not the full “chronology (or flow)” (Porter & Sullivan, p. 5). By starting with a drone’s-eye view and various maps, I have set the scene but need to map the “flow” of human actors within it and show how they come together with the space and the tools to chalk across its physical network. This mapping is Latour’s “tracing the associations.”

Laurie Gries (2013) suggests a tracing method, not just by identifying individual and grouped components (actors and actants) but by following the dynamic pathways and relationships of rhetorical action(s). Focused on visual rhetoric, Gries tracks the circulation and evolution of the Obama “Hope” poster as it moves through a worldwide rhetorical ecology: Mannie Garcia’s 2006 photograph of Barack Obama morphed into Shepard Fairey’s now-iconic “Hope” poster, which subsequently took on new life in a multitude of “manifestations and remixes” that travel “across genres, mediums, and context” (p. 332). If we consider the “GO TRUMP 2016” scene as, likewise, a part of a complex, living system of discourse that can we can track/trace over time and space, we get a “flow” something like this: In 2015 Donald J. Trump descends on a golden elevator, announces his run for president, and starts disseminating a

primary campaign slogan (“Make America Great Again,” itself an echo of Pres. Ronald Reagan’s “Let’s Make America Great Again”). Someone comes up with a cheer or a sign: “GO TRUMP 2016,” which probably does *not* appropriate the name of a Los Angeles-based all-girl punk band (Go Betty Go), but the phrasing is nonetheless well embedded in the American vernacular. This slogan, often shortened to “GO TRUMP” and “TRUMP 2016,” appears on signs at rallies, tweets and hashtags online, and chalkings on American college campuses. Almost simultaneously, counter-slogans emerge and circulate: “DUMP TRUMP” and “FUCK TRUMP.” In some appropriations, rhetors add “F” to the end of Trump’s name as a reminder of his family’s historical, Austrian spelling. In an echo of these memes and countermemes, chalkings at WCU (and other campuses, we can be fairly certain) bring the slogans onto the sidewalks and into the university’s public space, along with “HILLARY 2016,” “Gary Johnson 2K16.” One day, a group of students ponder a recent pro-Trump chalking, but instead of crossing out words or adding any, they empty their water bottles over it and dance.

Their intervention represents but one moment in a complex sequence of events at a particular place on a particular college campus. Fall semester 2016, various sidewalk-based communications included not just political etchings but chalked excerpts of Beat poetry, large university-sponsored get-out-the-vote stickers pasted onto the pathways, activity booths pitching everything from T-shirts to fundraisers, information kiosks plastered with event flyers, sandwich boards advertising messages from cafeteria specials to theater plays, Homecoming “billboards” lining a main route to the Catafount, and live performances, like the recurring Friday street preacher who sets up an informal booth next to a busy sidewalk periodically and quizzes students on their Bible knowledge or taunts them for their alleged sins. All of these elements, as actants in a vibrant rhetorical ecology, cluster in and around the Catafount, at times spinning off to

connected sites and sidewalks. All of them, I argue, connect in various ways that codetermine what gets chalked, and when, and where. In addition to these rhetorics of place/space, the rhetorics of time also codetermine the chalking ecology.

Echoes of the Past

Ever short-lived, chalking occurs not just in place but also in time. Chalkings (messages, events, and campaigns) may disappear with the next rain (and with an average annual rainfall of nearly 90 inches in some parts of the Southern Appalachians, this can be often). Nonetheless, traces of past events linger within the sidewalk-communication genre despite such temporality. That is, chalking memes and themes become *emergent*; they take on meaning and form in new ways over time, as I discussed in Chapter 1. A recurring message like “Base Camp Awaits” gathers meaning, semester after semester, even when it is not accompanied by details about a specific event, like the drawing of a blue alligator for a trip to the Congaree Swamp in South Carolina; in fact, the shorter message becomes a stand-in for whatever specific adventure or training session is being organized at that time.

The most powerful example, however, comes from the chalking-related events of Spring 2016. A group of WCU graduate students, who presented a 2017 “Chalk It Up to Racism” panel at the Conference on College Communication and Composition conference, frame it this way in their session description: “Western Carolina University erupted in a firestorm of racial unrest that made headlines throughout the state” (Foote, A.; Huber, J.; Roberts, C.; Searcy, S.; n.p.). Or as local *Smoky Mountain News* reporter Holly Kays (2016) says, it “started with a poster” (n.p.). She lays out this chronology: In February that year, as part of the nationally celebrated Black History Month, some students set up an Intercultural Affairs display that referenced the 2012 shooting of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman. Soon afterward, a WCU student posted on

Facebook about the display, saying that it repeated the “lies” circulated by the #BlackLivesMatter movement.⁶ His post elicited racist comments on the social-media platform as well as written complaints delivered to school administrators. Students responded with a #BLM chalk campaign on campus, while anonymous trolls on the social-media site, Yik Yak, countered with intensely racist comments that were also seen and reported by some students. Notified of these escalating, interlocking events, university administrators responded with a campus-wide, conciliatory email, followed by a “dinner” meeting of students and Facebook posters, who were not anonymous. On April 4, 2016, a group of students, children, and adults of various ethnicities performed their own response; they staged a live protest by encircling the fountain, holding up #BLM posters, and supplementing their demonstration with chalkings (Ball; Calhoun; Kays; Krueger; Simkiss).

Almost simultaneously, though not in direct response to the WCU events, a Twitter-based campaign called #TheChalkening was underway on campuses across the United States, from the University of Tennessee to the University of Oregon, and reports of the activity were spreading (Kutner, 2016; Tesfaye, 2016). The campaign was started, or promoted, by former Trump social-media director Dan Scavino Jr. and two social-political groups (Old Row and Students for Trump) that distributed a message urging college students to take part in #TheChalkening (Kutner, 2016; Rogers, 2016; Svrluga, 2016). Via Twitter, students were encouraged to chalk pro-Trump messages, including provocative, controversial memes like “BUILD THE WALL” and “HILLARY FOR PRISON.” Scavino tweets on April 1, “LET’S ROLL #StudentsForTrump

⁶ From J. Huber’s individual presentation in the Foote et al. panel session: “The initial Facebook response from [a] WCU student [who was also] campus EMS chief reads ‘As a public service professional which has the biggest love for my brothers and sisters in law enforcement, it pains me to see such lies ... My struggle with this organization is that instead of uniting cultures, they often times divide them by catering events/exhibits to only one specific culture.’”

!! #TheChalkening #Trump2016 #TrumpTrain,” interjected with a train emoji, half a dozen U.S. flag emojis, and the campaign slogan, #MakeAmericaGreatAgain. Old Row—an anonymous, conservative, self-described “satirical” group unofficially aligned with Southern, white college fraternities—delivered a podcast about the twitterized call to arms; Old Row offered prizes and required photographed chalkings to feature, very prominently, any identifiable or unique features of the campuses purported to be the scene of the #TrumpTrain, chalk edition (Kutner 2016). Old Row also re-posted Scavino’s challenge via Twitter to nearly 400,000 followers.

One #TheChalkening sample, retrieved via a Twitter search, shows a collage of images collected and posted May 25, 2016, by “gop_wcu” (the “official” Twitter handle of “Western Carolina College Republicans”). An image that appears in the top left corner is the key component of the tweet collage: That individual tweet is no longer available from the group’s Twitter timeline, nor is it available via a Twitter search of #TheChalkening (see Figure 4).



Figure 4: Students for Trump

And here, the social-media phenomenon, in its plurality, links physical spaces with digital ones, political campaigns with social movements, local events with national trends, free speech to hate speech. In a scan of Twitter posts hashtagged #TheChalkening, readers can see that the social-media movement continues, more than a year post-election. Readers can also see a dynamic mix of in-your-face posts deriding how “Pro-Trump” chalkings make “liberal snowflakes” afraid, and other posts manifesting participants’ sense of pride and self-wonder (but not surprise) that (mostly white, male and female) millennials were inspired by #TheChalkening.

It exceeds the scope of this project to fully explore the digital ecology highlighted here; however, its rhetorical energy directly affected chalkings at WCU, bringing Trump slogans and #TheChalkening campaign to the campus and reverberating across the campus discourse well into the fall semester. In Figure 4, a large chalking message (“Students for Trump”) is clear, with WCU’s Catafount in the background and the Alumni Tower brightly lit on the left. Though the posted photo was taken at night, this image shows the open nature of the campus gathering area, the effect of large filled-in letters on red brick, a chalking message that fills the space, and the rhetorical suitability for any message on this wide, prominent path. Filling the space, by the way, significantly reduces opportunities for message appropriation. This image also shows how texts from larger ecologies enter the rhetorical space of smaller but connected ecologies. If we had been inclined at the time of those chalkings, we could have tracked, à la Gries’s application of ANT, the many variations of the message that appeared across the WCU campus during the Spring 2016 semester.

Most importantly for this study, the image shows that WCU’s rhetorical ecology does not exist in isolation and is inherently social and dynamic. Entangled and working off each other, therefore, digital ecologies, election discourse, live protests, national celebrations, protest

movements, and a college administration came together in an active rhetorical ecology—or as Foote et al. summarize it in their CCCC panel description, “a firestorm” (n.p.) In the aftermath of the Spring 2016 events, chalking at WCU changed but, true to its ephemeral nature, not permanently, as if the system sought a modicum of balance. With this notion in mind, in the next section, I explore what chalking has been and *is*.

Chalking Snapshots

Within frames of space, time, and dynamic interactions between actants distributed across America, consider a sampling of the local WCU chalkings that I catalogued during the Fall 2016 and Spring 2017 semesters. I documented four primary categories: Events/Mundane, Political, Public-Awareness, and Expressive. While noting date and location, I frame these examples primarily by their material/physical actants, reserving further discussion of (and by) human actors for the next chapter. It is also important to frame chalkings by one of the mundane texts that governs them. Student use of the chalking medium, whether intentionally or not, adheres to a one-paragraph section of WCU policy, “114.XI.G,” last updated March 2016:

To aid in the preservation and maintenance of University facilities, chalking on the vertical surfaces (for example, walls are vertical surfaces and sidewalks are horizontal surfaces) or covered horizontal surfaces (for example, porches or the walkway beneath the Alumni Tower) of any University facility or structure is prohibited. Chalking on prohibited surfaces may be removed by University personnel consistent with routine practices or procedures. In the event that chalking on any University facilities, whether permitted or prohibited, communicates a threat to the safety of any individual or the

campus community or potentially creates a hostile environment, Legal Counsel's Office must be consulted before removal.

This policy nugget, available to students and the general public via the university website, surfaces in one of the interviews included in Chapter 3 but has likely been read by few students. Nonetheless, it backdrops WCU's chalking discourse. Policy 114.XI.G never addresses the *content* of chalking, other than what *might* be construed as hate speech ("communicates a threat ... or ... creates a hostile environment"). It also speaks to the location and potential removal of chalking rather indirectly. That is, the policy treats the material aspects of chalking as rhetorical—an act of communication meant to persuade, influence, or express; but the policy seems more concerned with how chalking is *done* and whether it adversely affects "University facilities." Furthermore, it neither approves or disallows chalking, leaving the human actors in chalking's rhetorical ecology free to infer *what it can be*, based on what chalking explicitly *cannot be*. In the following samples, I show what chalking *is*, for students experience it not in a university policy but in their everyday space.

Event/Mundane

In this admittedly broad category, I include chalking messages, events, and campaigns that relate to campus activities and the mundane or everyday (love messages, fraternity/sorority rush week missives, and miscellaneous etchings). Chalkings in this category occur the most often and regularly of any other. They vary in style, colorfulness, readability, and placement (though most are found at or near the Catafount).

For example, Base Camp Cullowhee is WCU's outdoor program, which offers recreation trips like hiking or kayaking, experiential education, and equipment rentals. In the Figure 4

collage, a “Base Camp” chalking message, top left, shows a common campaign orchestrated by the program; variations on this message appear in various forms semester after semester.



Figure 5A: Base Camp
Sept. 21, 2016
Catafount



Figure 5B: My Donna'
April 11, 2016
Catafount



Figure 5C: Rush Week
Jan. 25, 2017
Catafount

Figure 5: Chalking Sampler 1

Variations of the “Base Camp” chalking message appear in various forms every semester on sidewalks almost exclusively on routes linking the U.C. and the Catafount to the nearby Campus Recreation Center, where Base Camp is headquartered. Because they recur over time from semester to semester, I consider them to be part of an ongoing chalk campaign. In this sample, the white lettering on red brick is easy to see, for the most part, and the totality of the image can be viewed in one frame. That is, it can be *read* as you walk by, without pausing.

The “Donna” excerpt shown in the top-right image (Figure 5B), on the other hand, was one of several chalked ads for a Spring 2017 student production of the musical, *Hair*. Some chalk messages in this simultaneously celebratory and invitational campaign provided information about showings; others cited lyrics and lines, as shown in this sample. “Lookin’ for my Donna” is written in simple block letters contained within each brick at the Catafount—a recurring, *emergent* technique used by many chalking rhetors (a Beat poetry’s “Protest and Survive” chalking message and a Domestic Violence Awareness chalking, “Love Shouldn’t Hurt,” used this same method during the study period). The “Donna” lyrics are easily read while walking by but too small to be seen from a distance.

Sorority rush week occurs every spring semester, as seen in a January 2017 message (the lower image in Figure 4) that was posted at the Catafount and accompanied by many others on other campus sidewalks. Such chalk messages are usually clustered near dorm and building entrances; only the names change from semester to semester. This image shows the effect of certain colors on the brick, and the rhetorical “Greek”-ification of the lettering in “BΣAUTIFUL.” Chalkings often include features or illustrations that match or reinforce the message, like colored-in alligators accompanying an invite to a Congaree Swamp outing. The love-notes are some of the most common chalk messages broadcast across campus sidewalks.

Political

The 2016 election season marked a particularly active period of campus chalkings, likely heightened by a previous WCU-student-led initiative that established a voting site on campus. This effort included a voter-registration drive, election events such as debate-viewing parties, and a variety of sidewalk-based communications, particularly as election day (Nov. 8, 2016) approached. For example, the left-most image in Figure 6 shows a hashtagged message

(#RepealDumbRules) that was chalked on several routes leading to the U.C., where the campus voting site was located, and the right-most image advertises a “Presidential Debate Party.”



Figure 6A: Repeal Dumb Rules
Nov. 4, 2016;
Alumni Tower-U.C.



Figure 6B: Debate Party
Sept. 20, 2016
Dining Hall-Catafount

Figure 6: Chalking Sampler 2

Related chalkings in the “Repeal” campaign referenced a particular text in the campus rhetorical ecology: “University Policy 82, Facilities Use and Public Art.” Though unclear which particular part of the policy was being addressed, nearby messages pointed to a chalked line showing that no campaign literature could be posted any closer to the University Center. Policy 82 defines and codifies various types of facilities, groups, and uses, such as:

Use of University Facilities must comply with United States and North Carolina constitutional provisions regarding free speech and public assembly. For public forums (areas consistently open to public speech and assembly by past practice or by administrative approval), administrators may place reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions on public speech and assembly if they are not based on the content of speech (except that unlawful speech is prohibited) or the viewpoint of participants. For areas not

traditionally open for public speech or assembly, administrators may also limit use to further the University's educational mission and operations. For more information on public assemblies and address, see University Policy #114.

While the passage above may not be specifically referenced by the “Repeal” chalking messages, it does address limits on free speech and assembly on campus.⁷ In the “Repeal” photograph, also note the accompanying placement of a yard sign and an activity booth. These non-chalk means of sidewalk communication are actors in the rhetorical ecology; they help define, for example, the “voting” space and constraints that the “repeal” message argues against. We can also see in “Repeal” chalking how tree shadows make the message more difficult to read.

“Debate Party” shows a chalking posted near Alumni Tower and the U.C. It advertises a “Presidential Debate Viewing Party,” including date, time, and location (the latter lies outside the frame of the photo). The thin chalk lines can be hard to read; the chalking is large enough that readers must stop to take it all in; and its placement in an area shaded by trees and the towers made it easier to read on a sunny day. In classic rhetoric, we would focus on the rhetor alone making a savvy decision (aka the solitary, genius writer). In ANT, however, space/place, tree, medium, chalk, culture and history, political conventions, and human actor come together as an actant to codetermine placement (not to mention, weather; no one chalks when it is raining, very cold, or very hot). It is not that the human actor lacks agency but that everything in the rhetorical ecology works together almost simultaneously. In any case, activity invitations almost always include a what-where-when format, sometimes with arrows pointing the way. During the election

⁷ This policy, in turn, is governed by a policy adopted by the N.C. Board of Governors in December 2017: Policy 1300.8, “Free Speech and Free Expression Within the University of North Carolina” (Stancil, n.p.). This controversial policy establishes possible punishments of students, faculty, and staff for “material and substantial disruption” (section IV).

season, chalking messages like these were often complimented by other sidewalk communications, such as a sandwich board explaining various rules (no campaigning within 25 feet of the U.C.), campaign signs stuck in the ground beside the sidewalk, and sidewalk stickers, one of which lists election events on campus and urges students to register. The stickers remained in place for months. Sandwich boards sometimes partially block the sidewalk. All come together as actants in the rhetorical ecology.

Public-Awareness

This category blurs the line between political messaging and public-service campaigns, but it is notable that in the semesters following the charged events of Spring 2016, very few chalkings for #BlackLivesMatter appeared on campus, though there was at least one live demonstration Fall 2016 during which students placed duct tape over their mouths and sat silently on the concrete ledges at the Catafount.

However, there was that fall a series of events held nationwide in support of law enforcement, and one of these occurred in Cullowhee. Students handed out flyers about the local event, and a “BACK THE BLUE” chalking event (Figure 7) appeared at the Catafount:



Figure 7: Back the Blue
September 25, 2016
Catafount

It announced "BACK THE BLUE" in, of course, blue chalk. In this chalking event, someone crossed out "BLUE" and replaced it with "BLACK." A subsequent edit, as a Fall 2016 ENGL 101 student of mine called it, added "HUMAN." That same day, a scattering of #BLM-related chalkings were also etched into a sidewalk past Coulter and about halfway from the Catafount to Hunter Library. One of these, dated Sept. 26, 2016, said in purple letters that were hard to read on the gray sidewalk, "Pro Black does NOT mean Anti White."

In Figure 8, shown below, a Feb. 14, 2017, chalking message coincided with colorful, expressive Valentine's Day chalkings etched across the Catafount (lots of hearts, for example), but this message references an ongoing, national Domestic Violence Awareness (DVA) initiative as well as an ongoing chalking campaign at WCU. Concentrated at the Catafount but sometimes distributed near dorm entrances, classroom buildings, and sidewalks that lead to Hunter Library, DVA chalkings are most often posted in October, Domestic Violence Awareness Month. Figure 8B shows a version of the message as applied during the Fall 2016 semester.



Figure 8A: Feb. 14, 2017
Catafount



Figure 8B: Oct. 12, 2016
Catafount

Figure 8: Domestic Violence Awareness

Expressive

This category includes Beat poetry, Bible verses, and art that are sometimes, but not always, linked to events and class assignments; they are not usually repetitive from one semester to the next. The Beat poetry excerpts, for example, dominated the Catafount space the day after the presidential election, Nov. 9, 2016, and can be traced to a literature course being given that semester (“ENGL 351: Beats, Radicals, and the Avant-Garde”). A line in the course description reads, “How do [the Beat poets’] works speak to underlying tensions of race, class, and ethnicity that will erupt into the national consciousness with the Civil Rights Movement that linger to this day?” The Beat poets wrote at a time of unrest in America; their work expresses a mix of anti-hegemonic protest and hippy love. Nov. 9, 2016, was a day on which many Americans were stunned that Donald J. Trump had won the presidential election and, throughout the semester, pro-Trump chalk messages had dominated the Catafount space in much the same way the candidate dominated news and social media. This chalking campaign will be covered in more detail in Chapter 3. The Diane DiPrima excerpt in Figure 9 is from the poem “Three Laments.”



Figure 9: The Upper Hand
Nov. 9, 2016
Catafount

Beat poetry is not the only type of expressive or excerpt-style chalking. A message photographed on March 31, 2017, shows a less common chalking campaign: excerpts from Bible verses (Figure 10).



Figure 10: Proverbs
March 31, 2017
Catafount

This Bible excerpt, accompanied by others that day, appeared at the Catafount. Larger, periodic chalkings sometimes advertise gatherings and events hosted by a student “Christian Fellowship” group; these event chalkings tend to be done on sidewalks leading from the Catafount to the U.C., where the events are often hosted. It is unknown if there is a connection between this active campus group or if the March 2017 campaign related to other campus events, such as the frequent street-preacher visits.

In any case, expressive chalking campaigns and messages like these present a world view, a “poetic world making.” Notably, they are rarely edited or appropriated negatively.

Within the rhetorical ecology, they seem to function as a bridge between light-hearted expressive chalkings (colorful Valentine's Day hearts) and political/partisan chalkings ("Build the Wall").

Conclusion: Etched in Place and Time

All of these sample chalkings (messages, events, and campaigns) are placed in areas of significant pedestrian traffic, which follows the human-designed and nature-designed environment of the campus. The rhetorical ecology's material actants codetermine this placement, along with temporal actants (Valentine's Day hearts on Valentine's Day). That is, early in this chapter, I remarked that chalking is done in place and in time; it is a very physical, temporal medium on many levels but not as helter-skelter as it seems. We can tie almost every chalking to where it occurs and when. Indeed, with a bigger snapshot or view of the overall ecology, we can start to recognize patterns and see how chalking manifests Syverson's four characteristics for rhetorical ecologies. For example, many chalking campaigns repeat from semester to semester and are usually tied to recurring events and/or initiatives ("Base Camp" invites, sorority rush-week notes, DVA messages); this feature makes them *emergent*, in Syverson's framework, and means that *the techniques used in these ongoing campaigns very likely influences how, when, and where new chalkings occur*. Most chalkings are posted at or near the high-traffic Catafount, with notable variations ("Base Camp" chalking messages closer to the Rec Center; rush-week messages clustered near classroom buildings and dorms). These spatial/temporal aspects are dynamically related; they do not work in isolation, because in a rhetorical ecology, the "situation" is *distributed*. That is, there is interaction and shared agency between human and nonhuman actors and actants that codetermines message and placement.

The water-bottle intervention, therefore, represents one moment in place and time in this rhetorical ecology, with echoes of past chalkings (the Spring 2016, pro-Trump #TheChalkening)

and suggestions of chalkings to come as the election season wore on. Space and time link and intertwine, with variations of “GO TRUMP” chalkings written from the star-circle to the U.C. that September 2016 day and in the following weeks as election day approached. Counter-chalkings were written over time, too: “#GaryJohnson 2K16,” “Black Lives Matter” and Beat poetry excerpts (“Protest and Survive”). Other actants interact in this ecology to varying degrees, and produce *emergent* themes and forms, such as the Beat poetry text and its excerpts, university policies, and Twitter hashtags (#RepealDumbRules).

The relationships and interactions of such elements demonstrate “a network of independent agents [who] act and interact in parallel with each other, simultaneously reacting to and co-constructing their own environment” (Syverson, p. 3). That is, all chalking shows the inter-connectedness of campus communication, social media, students, administrators, and national events, which often (but not always) end up *written* on the physical space of Western Carolina University by human actors dynamically linked with other human actors as well as nonhuman actors (e.g., campus topology, sidewalks, weather, and chalk). *Embodiment*, *distribution*, and *emergence* are all at play here; these dynamic features lead to *enaction* (knowledge formation). Enaction, most especially, helps explain how students who have never read WCU policy 114.IX.G nonetheless know where to chalk (the Catafount and other paved sidewalks but not vertical surfaces) and how to chalk (colors, fonts, in-the-brick, across-the-bricks, big letters).

Furthermore, the material mapping done earlier in this chapter produces clues as to what extent human actors, armed with chalk, *notice* and *learn* the advantages of mundane matters like placement, color, and font, or take cues from the material environment. The periodic “Base Camp” invites are placed closer to the Campus Recreation Center, where the program is

headquartered; it seems likely that invites are placed there because students who use the fitness center are more likely to also be interested in Base Camp activities. Beat poetry chalking filled the Catafount the day after the election, as had chalkings during the Spring 2016 events. The Catafount had been the site of political chalkings for several semesters; it is the most visible, most traveled site in the network. By filling that particular space, the Beat poet campaign set a tone for the day but also materially blocked the possibility of partisan chalking, or at least reduced the possibility. As recorded in my sampling, the “Back the Blue” chalking dominated the brick at the Catafount the same week that students were handing out flyers to a nationally inspired and possibly coordinated event meant to honor law enforcement Fall 2016; other human actors *edited* or recomposed the message. These are just a few examples of the chalking ecology.

Chalking’s human actors, consciously or not, read the rhetorical possibilities and the rhetorical space, then write it again and again, though not in rote repetition. As Paolo Freire (1983) says, “Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world” (p. 8). With chalking, the world (or medium) and the word (messages) present as one and the same, difficult to separate because they work as one unit but also function in relation to the landscape (the physical ecology). When human actors enter the space, interact with it, and join with other actors to become actants (humans-with-water-bottles, for example), the ecology becomes a complex network not unlike the composition ecologies that Syverson describes. What happens when the actors are aware of this ecology, at least in the parts they can see and experience? In the next chapter, I interrogate human actors to seek the perspective of those who were involved with chalking in significant ways, including myself.

CHAPTER THREE: PRAXIS AND LIVED EXPERIENCES

“Don’t think of writing as only the production of the text.” These are the words I wrote by hand, in pencil, in the notebook I used exclusively as a student in the Fall 2016 graduate-level course ENGL 695, subtitled “Rhetorical Circulation Studies.” I recall writing these words as the professor spoke, asked questions, and introduced the syllabus. I recall having no idea what rhetoric was or is, much less what rhetorical *circulation* might be or what “rhetorical intervention” I might undertake for the major project required for the class. I also read from the syllabus the professor’s course overview, distributed via Blackboard, WCU’s online hub for coursework:

How does writing circulate and have an impact? How do the media we use to create and deliver writing shape our decisions about composition from the outset? As scholars, teachers, and practitioners, rhetorical circulation studies shifts our attention from specific outcomes (i.e., lines of argument and persuasion) to how our work is taken up, transformed, and used in communities. (Bradshaw, 2016, p. 1)

In my notebook, I summarize this overview as “how things move, transport, persist, transform” and add a big question mark. Immediately afterward, I jot down the professor’s example: “Trump’s ‘Make America Great Again’ ... becomes slogan, hat, ‘Make Donald Drumpf Again.’” By the time I make these first-week notes, I have seen chalking messages, events, and campaigns around campus. Chalking struck me as an old-fashioned delivery method, like hopscotch squares scratched onto a city street when I was a kid. Indeed, after photographing the image in Figure 11, I watched a few students hop through it, though the joke escaped me until I was editing the photograph.



Figure 11: ICUP Hopscotch

In the coming weeks, my notes show that I am writing-thinking about rhetoric, quoting the professor, and listing key concepts that have yet to accrue meaning for me: “text, movement, assessing/tracking, appropriation, delivery, pedagogy, ... methodology, ... civic impact, transformation, material contexts” (p. 4). I also write, “The delivery of texts matters as much as the content” (p. 6). I do not record anything about the place where this writing took place (a fluorescent-lit classroom in Forsythe Hall, at a large round table, seated next to other students, facing the instructor in a semi-circle shaped by the unwieldiness of the large tables for this purpose, holding a Pentel mechanical pencil, 0.9 mm lead, the thickest available, because I write so firmly that I break thinner ones). Only later in the semester would I start to call these elements “actors” after reading Liza Potts (2009) and Laurie Gries (2012, 2013) and talking about ANT in class. I still saw writing as disembodied and solitary, separated from its material (nonhuman) and social (human) elements.

As we saw in the previous chapter, however, material contexts (the nonhuman actors) matter as much as the learning, writing, work, and *stuff* that happens on a university campus (from rainy weather to election campaigns). Human decision-making and interaction with nonhuman actors matter, too; they all come together in a variety of collectives or actants that are

agential, networked, and networking. That is, actants influence the rhetorical ecology by linking the texts and connecting other actants along the path. These actants thus form rhetorical ecologies in which nothing operates in isolation (even if it seems to). In the previous chapter, I situated this ecological/rhetorical study in its material/physical space, from a drone's-eye view of campus to an elevator within the interior spaces of the university environment. In this chapter, I move into a different type of interior space: the lived experiences of five participants (including myself). I attempt to situate those experiences in "real" time as best as each participant can recall. During the Fall 2016 semester, for example, where were the five human actors represented here, in this *textual* documentation of the chalking ecology? What "texts" link to them and extend from them? I put "texts" in quotes because I mean more than written documents; I mean all the things we *read*—and by that, I mean Freire's sense that we read the world and we write it, too.

When Porter and Sullivan (1997) explain research practices for rhetoricians, for example, they use a basketball game as metaphor and case study, acknowledging, "the game would turn out to be many events" (p. 2): the cheerleaders' performance, the team mascot's interaction with kids at halftime, the gameplay of a star athlete, the response of fans, the coaches' strategies and how those play out during the game, and so forth. Seeking a view of the "many events" occurring in the chalking landscape, in this section I excerpt, paraphrase, summarize, and highlight my own lived experience as well as those of four other human actors who were involved with, or aware of, chalking on the WCU campus. Each of us views chalking from different perspectives, which I summarize in three categories: institutional, pedagogical, and participatory. Each of us introduces into the ecology our own texts, sometimes consciously, sometimes not. However, my intention in these interviews was not to provide a comprehensive

view of the chalking ecology but to sample it; these actors provide a ground-level view of the chalking ecology and snapshots of data, to use Sullivan and Porter's description. If, as we saw in the last chapter, chalking manifests a rhetorical ecology grounded in place, time, and texts, and leading to knowledge (thus fulfilling Syverson's four characteristics), then we can situate the human actors living and acting within it. From them, we can get a sense of the whole picture. We should also get something much bigger: practical rhetoric that we can *use* as we keep writing our world.

#ChalkToMe

Invention but Not Isolation

After those initial weeks in Fall 2016, my handwritten notes move to typed Word docs in which I draft formal proposals for a chalking-based project, respond to heuristics aimed at focusing my ideas and methods, and sort through readings, conversations, other classes, and work as a tutor in the WaLC. In one of the semi-formal documents, for example, I preface my ideas with an excerpt from Marilyn Cooper (1986), who I had just read: "What I would like to propose is an ecological model of writing, whose fundamental tenet is that writing is an activity through which a person is continually engaged with a variety of socially constituted systems" (p. 386). Or as "Dr. B." told the freshmen in the ENGL 101 Writing and Rhetoric course I observed as a paid graduate teaching assistant: The myth of the solitary writer is just that—a myth.

In writing this thesis, in this moment more than a year later, I recognize how much my invention process for the chalking project was dynamically interlocked with this mix of human and nonhuman actors, this assembling of actants in my own rhetorical ecology. For instance, while taking ENGL 695 as a student and plotting a rhetorical intervention via chalk, I recorded observations from ENGL 101, focusing on information I could use to teach my own class the

following year. Looking back, I see that the 101 topics, lessons, and textbook passages bled into my chalking project. For example, I followed along in the text the freshmen read for the class, *Rhetorical Analysis: A Brief Guide for Writers* (Longaker & Walker, 2011), and highlighted definitions and passages, such as these words by Kenneth Burke (1965): “language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols” (p. 3). I began to link such ideas to the visuals needed for my chalking project, asking myself such questions as “What colors work best on gray concrete and red brick?” and “What message would *induce cooperation*?”

These examples show the evolution of my thinking on rhetoric in general, my invention process for the first ENGL 695 project, and the dynamic mix of texts I drew from. Even Dr. Seuss circulated in my ecology: My notes show drafts of a Twitter-oriented slogan (#iVote + #uVote + #WheeVote #ChalkToMe) that was inspired by a Dr. Seuss book I “googled” then wrote down (title in italics): “*One Vote, Two Votes, I Vote, You Vote*. ... Voting is something we do every day, / It’s a way we can choose, that gives us our say” (Worth, 2016, p. 6). If rhetorical situations “bleed,” as Edbauer suggests (p. 9), then rhetorical ecologies do as well; the borders are fluid; the line blurs between my ideas and the ideas I read about or heard. In an ENGL 695 group workshop, for example, a fellow graduate student, Jarred Worley, listened to my project idea and said, “Chalk to me.” The slogan stuck. A few days later, equipped with stubby sticks of sidewalk chalk purchased in the school-supply aisle at Walmart, I launched #ChalkToMe on sidewalks from Belk to Coulter Hall, inviting response by taping pieces of chalk to the sidewalk.

Performed in Place

When I gripped the chalk, bent down, and etched a message on a concrete sidewalk, however, I was not thinking about rhetorical ecologies or human-nonhuman actors. I looked over

my shoulder because I was worried about being seen, though I chalked on a Sunday morning when campus was deserted. I tried to pick colors that would be visible on the available mediums (concrete and red brick), wrote in big letters so my message could be easily read, and situated some chalk messages near get-out-the-vote stickers as tag alongs. I wrote in the shade and in sunny spots just to see how the different sites affected the visibility of the message. If anyone responded, would they choose to be crude or thoughtful? Would they notice the twitterized hashtag approach and share my message? Like Gries and “woman-pen” musing on Latour, I became woman-chalk that Sunday, like a kid picking up a No. 2 pencil and writing about my latest summer vacation in a Red Chief notebook.

While I hoped my intervention would encourage students to vote, my purpose was also experimental, yet practical. Limited by time and energy in how much chalking I could reasonably do, I sampled locations between the football-stadium parking lot (where I usually parked), Belk (where I tutored in the WaLC), and Coulter (where I attended two classes). My chalkings were variations on the “#iVote #uVote” slogan. I considered the university’s physical environment and temporal elements, such as making sure my chalkings would be the first thing students saw on Monday morning. I did not consult a WCU campus map or check university policy. I had watched people crossing campus and knew the most well-traveled routes, gathering places, and preferred chalking sites. I had lived the map. I did, however, check the weather forecast (a digital text in my invention ecology) and chalked a few days before a big rain. I photographed my work and tweeted the images and hashtags. On Monday, I walked the route, checking to see if anyone had responded or appropriated my message as in the edit of the “Back the Blue” chalking. I already knew from observation that passersby will more likely read or stop to read if the chalking uses large, colorful characters and images. By Tuesday, heavy rains had

washed my work all away, except for an #iVote sequence placed under a covered passage between two dorms. I supplemented the chalking with Twitter posts, and in both mediums, I sought to minimize negative appropriation, such as retweets by the many “haters” and trolls in the #Election2016 stream on Twitter. That is, I made a conscious choice to stay nonpartisan—no #DumpTrump or #HillaryForPrison tweets or chalkings.



Figure 12: #ChalkToMe

My immediate take-aways from the #ChalkToMe intervention ranged from the practical to the theoretical/pedagogical. No. 1: use the right tool for the medium; skinny chalk breaks; sidewalk chalk, like big magic markers with broad lines, works best. No. 2: staying nonpartisan minimized not just negative appropriations or responses but all interactions. No. 3 is more nuanced, because at the time of my intervention, I simply had more questions: Responses to both the chalking and the Twitter campaign were modest at best, which challenged the possibility that chalking could be a productive way to foster dialogue. Perhaps my intervention did not rise to the level of a major disruption to the environment, like the “firestorm” Foote et al. describe for the Spring 2016 events. Do chalkings have to be provocative in order to get a response? For an answer, I looked to the experiences of other human actors in the chalking ecology.

Chalk Talk: Lived Experiences

Each of the four interviewees featured in this section have some connection to WCU's chalking ecology; they bring institutional, pedagogical, and participatory perspectives to this study. Thinking like a journalist with limited resources and time, I looked for interviewees from these categories as a way to sample types of human actors in the chalking ecology.

"Institutional" interviewee 1—WCU's Chief Diversity Officer, Ricardo Nazario-Colon—was navigating his first full semester working on campus and representing the university during the Fall 2016 semester. "Pedagogical" interviewee 2—English professor Dr. Paul Worley—was teaching an undergraduate course about Beat poetry that same semester. "Participatory" interviewee "Mac"—a former student of mine—was a high-school senior, a year away from becoming a WCU freshman but witness to a Black Lives Matter protest in her hometown; she used chalking as part of a project for the ENGL 101 course I taught a year later, Fall 2017.

Another "participatory" interviewee—a student named "Michael"—was enrolled in Dr. Worley's Beat poetry class Fall 2016.⁸ These interviewees represent a modest sampling, therefore, of those involved with or knowledgeable of campus chalking.

I selected them in an informal way, following hunches like a news reporter would, but also determining representative categories I thought would give a good sample (institutional, pedagogical, participatory). The Beat poetry chalkings, for example, gained my attention early in this study and pointed me toward Dr. Worley. Also, I was his student in a Fall 2016 graduate class on transnational literature, and we had several casual, wide-ranging conversations about

⁸ Interviewees are referenced according to the degree of anonymity or recognition they self-selected. Both students, for example, are referenced by first-name only. Both the faculty member and the administrator agreed to be recognized by their full names and titles. The student participants requested first-name references only.

chalking and the intersection of pedagogy with politics. Nazario-Colón, on the other hand, had been featured on the cover of a Spring 2017 issue of the WCU magazine, and I had heard him speak on several occasions, including a Fall 2017 English department meeting. We talked briefly about my project after that meeting, and he agreed to an interview. I met Michael through mutual classmates and friends, and when we spoke informally about his Beat poetry experience, he also consented to an interview. Mac, meanwhile, was a student of mine in the first composition course I taught at WCU; when she used chalking for a class project and submitted a writer's reflection on it, I knew she would bring an interesting and valuable "participatory" perspective to my project. After receiving IRB approval for these interviews, I spoke to them separately for about one hour each; all interviews took place in late January 2018. What follows are highlights from those interviews and critical reflections. Their reflections further confirm that in a rhetorical ecology, ideas evolve, move, and transform as actants coalesce and influence the system.

Institutional: Chief Diversity Officer Ricardo Nazario-Colón

Institutions are inherently slow to change or adapt to changes, but they nonetheless influence chalking's ephemeral ecology. For this study, I selected a representative whose job involves not just speaking on behalf of the institution but also trying to foster positive change from within it: WCU Chief Diversity Officer Ricardo Nazario-Colón. About a week before speaking with me, for example, he took part in the "Unity March," an annual event for the school's annual celebration of Martin Luther King Jr. Day. The march takes students from the campus periphery to the Catafount and beyond—an act not just celebrating King's work but making a political and rhetorical statement, though one that is more intentionally public than the actions of the students who poured water over the pro-Trump chalking message (or the students who chalked the message the night before). That is, students, faculty, and staff who believe in

diversity and dialogue reclaim the space as they walk it, and they do not hide or obscure their identities. This year, however, as the group walked past a dorm, someone yelled the N-word at them, says Nazario-Colón. It is part of his job to craft the institution's response to such incidents but also, more importantly, to foster dialogue that counteracts it. A March 30, 2016, WCU announcement about his hiring says, "The appointment [of Nazario-Colón] fulfills initiatives in the university's '2020 Vision' strategic plan calling for increasing the diversity of the student body to serve the needs of the changing demographics of the region and state, and improving the diversity among faculty and staff" (Studenc, 2016). The announcement also acknowledges that Nazario-Colón was hired at a time of local and national unrest. His "institutional" perspective, therefore, provides a reasonably objective, somewhat formalized view of campus chalking.

Emphasizing the systemic tension between First Amendment free-speech rights and hate speech, Nazario-Colón says of the Spring 2016 events and the January 2018 racial slur, "I'm OK with [political] chalking and students being able to express their political views. My challenge is when you come for someone else, personally." His words put a human voice behind WCU policy 114.IX.G, which seems focused more on the "preservation and maintenance of University facilities" than discourse via chalking. Nazario-Colón says that someone yelling the N-word on campus might be free speech, but it veers toward hate speech. He asks, "Who decides where that line is?" The question lingers, unanswered. I am reminded of Patricia Roberts-Miller's (2017) words: "Demagoguery ... thrives in an expressive public sphere" (p. 85). In other words, giving broad latitude to free speech makes "hate" speech more difficult to define, much less limit. In this vein, Nazario-Colón questions how we can allow free speech yet apply reasonable guidelines. As we talk of such American quandaries, Nazario-Colón points to the pages and pages of poster-size notes and lists that line the walls of his office like contained graffiti. These

pages represent the results of many meetings, workshops, and brainstorming sessions about diversity and inclusion on campus. Nazario-Colón jokes, “This is my work.” I write in my notes as we talk, “These are his texts.”

I also note that, in the literal and metaphorical map of the chalking ecology, Nazario-Colón’s office lies at a slight remove from the chalking scene: His office is located on an upper floor of the H.F. Robinson Administration Building (the “White House”), which lies far downhill of the Catafount. To counteract this rhetorical and physical distance, he travels the campus frequently to meet with students, faculty, and staff. For his part, Nazario-Colón says he officially started his WCU job June 1, 2016, but accepted early in the tumultuous Spring 2016 semester. He was not on campus “when the [controversial] chalking happened, [but] did get some emails asking me my opinion.” Nazario-Colón recalls being asked by WCU faculty and staff, “‘What’s your assessment?’ and ‘Are we handling it properly?’”

Nazario-Colón says he answered “yes,” but allows that official responses can be slow, and real change slower still. To frame his response to my questions about dialogue and chalking on a college campus, he asks me what the purpose of higher education is. Nazario-Colón answers his own question, saying, “You come here to expand your mind, to learn about the world, to [become] a better human being, ... understand the past, and weave it [with] current affairs, and maybe critically think about ... the future.” He suggests that the Spring 2016 chalking-related events, and the racially charged contexts in which they occurred, made the university re-focus on this overarching mission. However, says Nazario-Colón, the question of where to draw the line between free speech and hate speech remains unanswered, in chalk or otherwise. Expressing some amazement that “chalking is a thing” at WCU, Nazario-Colón recalls that when he was growing up, such actions were considered vandalism. Now chalking is accepted: “It’s a way for

students to express themselves and continue to *connect*. ... Political chalking is debate. We need more of that.” Nazario-Colón adds, “Chalking has a space. The exchange of ideas has a space.”

I found it interesting that Nazario-Colón ties the “exchange of ideas” to “space,” a tangible location, like the classic public forum or *polis*. His words remind me that Roberts-Miller suggests we “channel Thucydides” and think about “*how* we argue, not just *what* we argue” (pp. 123-124, emphasis in the original). Her words about fairness and inclusion connect with Nazario-Colón’s notion of providing guidelines for dialogue, but first comes listening and engagement—hence, his many meetings and workshops. He also says, reflecting on the social contexts of the Spring 2016 chalkings, particularly the Black Lives Matter protests:

[Students] are becoming more organized and ... want a conversation. When students are demonstrating, they're sharing what is important to them at that moment. Black Lives Matter [at WCU] was a demonstration of solidarity with what was happening nationwide to black people. You can't be on the sidelines in these kinds of conversations, whether it's chalking or an altercation on campus or national news.

At this point in the interview, I ask him whether WCU remains “on the sidelines” in public debates and what guidelines it provides as institution. Nazario-Colón replies, “The chalking is one of those things that we're giving [students, and saying], ‘Here are these tools for you to express yourselves [and] say whatever you want,’ ... but we had nothing in place [Spring 2016] to address what the outcome may be.” He adds that WCU still lacks a plan for similar events that may happen in the future.

In any case, one of several points that struck me in the Nazario-Colón interview was his acknowledgment that the Spring 2016 “firestorm” highlighted conflicting institutional concerns but, ultimately, left them unresolved, like the ambiguous one-paragraph policy relating to the

medium and its application. That is, WCU is a “free speech campus,” but does that mean we allow hate speech? Nazario-Colón asks, rhetorically but also as a practical dilemma, *who* determines what “hate speech” is? He also points out that the Spring 2016 chalking-related events, and to some extent those occurring the following semester as the presidential election came to its conclusion, resulted in *some* dialogue and *some* increased awareness about the underlying tensions at WCU, a predominantly white, public college in a rural part of the state. He says WCU as an institution is at a “101 level” in its ability to talk about racial issues.

Nazario-Colón predicts that a future disruption, similar to Spring 2016, whether it involves chalking or not, is possible. Perhaps channeling education advocates like Paolo Freire, Nazario-Colón also emphasizes how each of us “read” words and situations differently; he seeks to help others acknowledge that fact. I look at his wall of texts, which represent a lot of engaged listening and a sign that something good and useful may be yet arising from the Spring 2016 events. As he himself acknowledges, institutions move slowly. Meanwhile, Nazario-Colón walks WCU’s physical and rhetorical spaces, fostering clusters of discourse in much the way a chalking campaign delivers a message from side of campus to another. Such material considerations call on us to account for the intentional actions it takes to come together as powerful actants not just in the chalking ecology but in the broader debates WCU faces.

Pedagogical: Assistant Professor Paul Worley

Dr. Paul Worley, for his part in campus discourse, shows how a professor can influence the rhetorical ecology on a university campus, both in the classroom and beyond it. He was out of the country at the height of the Spring 2016 events at WCU, but they were on his mind the next semester when he integrated a chalking experience into an upper-level undergraduate course, “ENGL 351: Beats, Radicals, and the Avant-Garde.” Worley says, “A lot of discourse ...

doesn't do anything, it doesn't *mean* anything, if ultimately it doesn't lead to some sort of ... praxis.” By praxis, Worley means learning and action that take place not just in the classroom but in the “real” world. He says, “The classroom is a safe place to practice off stage, where everybody else can't see you. It's an intimate space.” Worley wants students to move beyond that space and stop looking to him, “the authority figure in the [classroom].”

During the Spring 2016 semester, Worley taught a senior-level, undergraduate course, ENGL 496: Seminar in World Literature. Seeing all learning “as a *practice*, as a lived experience,” he sought to get students beyond the typical “big research paper.” That is, he gave them an option: write the usual end-of-semester essay or set up an exhibit about Mayan culture and literature at a local library. Worley explains the exhibit project as “a sort of public intervention in a public space where a lot of people will see it, [and] an attempt to educate people.” He adds that, for those who do not realize how many indigenous people from Central America live in North Carolina, “Walking into a library and seeing an exhibit on Maya literature that not only includes contemporary stuff but says how there are Maya folks living [here]—it's de-stabilizing.” When I ask him to explain, Worley says, “If you [the student] need me to provide your own thoughts, I haven't taught you much. ... You need to start making *your* arguments and standing behind them for you, not for me.” He emphasizes his focus on getting students outside their comfort zone and working through what they think, what they are learning.

In terms of the Spring 2016 events, racially charged chalking messages, Facebook posts, and Yik Yak comments that filled the rhetorical and digital spaces, Worley ties his pedagogical concerns with WCU's code of conduct and official policies. But where the policy is open-ended and arguably ambiguous, Worley pushes back. He says, “You [can] call black students the N-word on campus. Free speech, right? [But] you end up with ... ambivalences, because [that]

discourse is not leading to praxis.” He explains that praxis here means letting students *move, on their own*, through the ideas they are exposed to, both in and out of the classroom. While Worley was not present during the Spring 2016 #TheChalkening, it influenced him, both pedagogically and politically as “a large-scale public interaction” that was destabilizing instead of positive for many students. That is, the Spring 2016 events informed his rhetorical ecology in the sense that he considered both the physical and rhetorical spaces when he led his Beat poetry students out to the Catafount on Nov. 9, 2016. Like Nazario-Colón, Worley may have been thinking of Freire, who urges educators to empower their students, but the Beat poetry act suggests to me Warner’s poetic world making: raise the flag and see who joins you (p. 114). In any case, Worley’s consciously situates himself as both teacher and community member. As such, he asks, what possibilities does he have for helping create a “much more dialectic process [that] empowers students to take charge of their own learning?” Or as I took his words, policy is no substitute for praxis or *work*. Productive dialogue takes work.

Worley observes that often provocative, sometimes mundane election-season chalking continued into the Fall 2016 semester. Most of it was concentrated at the “constructed space” we call the Catafount, just as the Spring 2016 chalkings had been. He says, “The campus as a whole, [functions] as an iron cage, [and] this vast, open space [at the Catafount] can easily double up as a canvas. ... It draws all of [the chalking] there.” Worley suggests that one of his underlying challenges as a teacher is to get students to consider such campus spaces critically, in terms of constraints and possibilities, and to consider themselves as more than producers of cultures and/or products that “they don’t question” as “they move through that space.”

When I ask what he means, Worley describes students walking from the cafeteria to their dorms, or through the Catafount to their classrooms. The plaza is symbolic; it is a constructed

public space. Students are “being funneled there, which is of course a very important sort of symbol.” In these musings, Worley references a term coined by Max Weber in sociology: the “iron cage” that traps individuals in cultural systems. Such thinking frames Worley’s own lived experiences. One day during the Fall 2016 semester, when he was walking across campus, through or near the Catafount, he saw “some chalking, business calculations or something,⁹ and ... thought, ‘I would like to do something like that with the Beat class.’” He adds, “Because we don’t live in a culture where we memorize things or where we type things ourselves, I wanted to make sure [students] had their own experience of writing poetry *out*” (his emphasis). In Syverson’s terms for rhetorical ecologies, he hoped students would connect with and experience poetry’s material, embodied aspects. Like Gries’s “woman-pen,” *students-with-chalk* would hopefully experience poetry in a more direct way than by reading it, silently, from a book.

The opportunity came on the day after the presidential election, Nov. 9, 2016, when Donald J. Trump won the electoral college. Worley says he “felt compelled to [do something, but] ... I didn’t want to reinforce the notion that the authority figure is the one you look to in these times of need.” He continues, “I brought a bunch of chalk and I was like, ‘Here you go. Pick something out of the [text]book. ... that appeals to you, in this particular moment, and put it out there.’” What happened next was just what he hoped: Students charked and talked among themselves. He says, “The chalk actually was being used to put the stuff down. It was about the process. It was about the praxis.”

But what did it mean for him? Worley admits that when he crossed campus that morning, he saw that no one had charked anything political about the election results. He says that students

⁹ WCU’s Business Department holds classes in Forsyth, located next to the Catafount and Coulter.

may sometimes need “a ringleader to give them permission,” so together, he and his students claimed the public space. Worley says of his thinking that day, Nov. 9, 2016, “What people really need to see today is a bunch of poetry and not a bunch of B.S. ... Some member of the campus community needs to step up and stage, however subtle, some sort of direct action.” In short, Worley was conscious of intervening in the discourse, in a public space. He embraced the potentially disruptive power of campus chalking and filled the rhetorical space dominated by the pro-Trump #TheChalkening one semester earlier. Worley says: “A lot of times, people just look at the world as a permanent sort of object, not something that you [can] impact, not something that you can intervene in, not something that you can change. ... It's important to dialogue, and to create spaces for dialogue.” For me, he echoes Nazario-Colón’s words about chalking and political debate having a space on campus, as if they were reading the same page.

From my perspective in this study, Worley’s experience surfaces a set of actants—the Spring 2016 events, his teaching philosophy, awareness of public spaces as rhetorical texts, the presidential election, and a Beat poetry anthology. These actants came together to spark a cathartic, empowering chalking campaign on Nov. 9 that year. Worley likely has not explored theories of rhetorical circulation, which shift “our attention from specific outcomes ... to how our work is taken up, transformed, and used in communities,” to borrow from the ENGL 695 course description. Via other texts in his rhetorical ecology, however, Worley was well aware that filling the rhetorical and physical space of the Catafount that day would block or minimize the potential for the chalking seen Spring 2016 and, in its place, offer an alternative message.

What I mean by this conclusion is that Dr. Worley and his students co-opted the space, not necessarily to shut down dialogue (particularly any pro-Trump chalking) or simply to express the shock they felt after the election results, but to put forth an *alternative* discourse. Nancy

Fraser (1992) might call this move the work of a “counterpublic,” characterized by its “oppositional interpretations of ... identities, interests and needs” in relation to the dominant public (p. 67).¹⁰ Warner says, “Public discourse says not only ‘Let a public exist’ but ‘Let it have this character, speak this way, see the world in this way’” (p. 114). Substitute his use of “public” with counterpublic, read the words one Beat poetry student wrote in neat block letters contained in the space of individual bricks (“PROTEST AND SURVIVE”), and we may read the total message as one of empowerment. And either side of the partisan divide could take it that way.

Participatory: “Michael”

The lived experiences of those who actually *chalked* at WCU provide a particularly useful map of the rhetorical ecology. One of them, I met through mutual acquaintances and, because I talked about chalking to almost everyone I met, learned that he had participated in the Fall 2016 Beat poetry campaign: WCU student “Michael.” He remembers that chalking campaign as a rewarding experience, though he was only somewhat aware of the Spring 2016 chalkings that informed the activity. Michael says, “I commute, so I didn't live with it at the time [Spring 2016]. I'd come on campus and see some of the chalk [as I walked to class]. I remember seeing a ‘Build the Wall’ chalking, [and] not much [chalking that] was especially positive.”

Michael emphasizes that he interpreted the pro-Trump and “Build the Wall” chalkings as

angry, ... mostly because of the rhetoric that was flying around, you know, in the culture at the time, and the media. I mean, when you're watching [a rally] on television and people are chanting, ‘Build the wall, build the wall!’ you sense and see that anger and you see that same phrase [in chalk] and it's hard to separate that.

¹⁰ Warner defines “a” public as “a space of discourse,” one that “comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation” (pp. 66-67).

In the rhetorical ecology as Michael experienced it, news reports on television were the texts he saw repeated and reinforced in the chalking messages at WCU, particularly the pro-Trump campaigns. In Freirean terms, he read the pro-Trump chalkings a certain way because he experienced the “anger” of pro-Trump rallies broadcast on television. By making this connection, Michael echoes Nazario-Colón’s point that we each read words and situations differently, which often leads to disconnected discourse and Crowley’s “ideological impasse” or unwillingness to enter the rhetorical field at all and start a dialogue.

Consider, for example, ongoing threads in #TheChalkening Twitter thread in which “liberals” are mocked as “snowflakes” for being overly sensitive to messages like “Build the wall!” Michael does remember such undertones and “some controversy” percolating during the Spring 2016 semester but frames them through the Beat poetry chalking campaign: “It was the day after the [presidential] election, and I remember being very, very distraught over the outcome.” Michael went to class, he says, “in a daze,” and remembers Worley handing him and his classmates some chalk, leading them outside, and suggesting they post excerpts from the poems in their textbook, *The Portable Beat Reader* (2003). Michael says, “It was purely an exercise to let us get out, process, and work through things. I took advantage of it and chucked lines from an Allen Ginsburg poem, ‘The weight, / the weight we carry / is love.’” Classmates likewise chucked excerpts from poems they liked or thought spoke to the moment, though written years ago by Bob Dylan, Gary Snyder, Diane DiPalma, Hunter S. Thompson, and others. Michael describes the Beat poetry and Miranda chalking as permission to feel something and to express those feelings. For example, one of Michael’s classmates went “outside” the class textbook and chucked an excerpt from a 2016 sonnet penned by *Hamilton* playwright Lin-Manuel

Miranda in response to the shooting of 50 victims that year in an Orlando nightclub (see Figure 13).



Figure 13: Love is Love

In this expressive sense, the Beat poetry chalkings are like those done on a Charlottesville, Virginia, street after an alt-right supporter killed a female pedestrian during August 2017 protests in the city. Such chalkings represent epideictic rhetoric at work (“Mourners,” 2017).

In terms of his textual-rhetorical ecology, Michael also posted photos of the chalking on Facebook. He says, “I don’t use it for political activity, generally, or contentious sorts of things for discussions because I think [Facebook is] pretty useless for having those types of conversations—as are tweets, by the way.” His Beat photos were liked, shared, and commented on. Michael also describes a different kind of social, embodied text: He and classmates chaked, “pretty quiet while they worked,” but by the end, they were “talking and kind of working through things.” Michael cannot recall if passersby responded in that moment, though some passersby did join them during a chalking campaign the class performed later in the semester. Michael says, “I really liked the Allen Ginsburg piece I had written out. It was positive; and I wanted [my

partner] and two other friends to see that.” His friends’ responses on Facebook mattered the most to him, along with the Beat poetry chalking as a peaceful response to political partisanship.

In terms of the constructed, rhetorical space at the Catafount, Michael remembers driving the route years ago and points out that pedestrian traffic still “flows” in that direction as if carried on a river. In making this observation, Michael acknowledges feeling differently about public spaces now, especially after taking part in the Beat poetry chalking campaign and the Mayan-literature display during the Spring 2016 semester. Michael says:

It is something when it's between the pages of a book, [versus] hearing it spoken [at a performance]. It's another thing to have something that you write out in a public space, where you're used to the space being one particular way. When you're walking, coming from [the dorms], or parking, you're coming through the Catafount every day, and it's kind of a permanent space. . . . It's not just chalk on the pavement. It's an act, and it's art, [meant] to persuade, because all communication is persuasion. It's meant to change what that space is like [and] what it does.

After making these remarks, Michael admits he is new to rhetorical theory. Yet I find rhetoric at work in his ecology—the intersection of a literary text (*The Portable Beat Reader*), news broadcasts of political rallies on TV, and the performed, embodied experience of chalking at the Catafount. He has gathered an ecology of texts and transformed them, with significant awareness that he is doing so. Thinking like an educator as I listen, I recall that composition instructors’ ongoing challenge is how to foster the transference of writing and rhetorical skills students need in future classes and in the real world. Michael’s case demonstrates that ideas do gather rhetorical weight from course to course, and that the embodied experience of chalking can support learning.

Participatory: “Mac”

As a chalking participant, WCU student “Mac” adds the perspective of a student who, in fulfilling an assignment, drew from a variety of sources to create something unique. In Syverson’s notion of emergence, rhetors draw on “a vast ocean of words, phrases, and ideas ... to bring forth texts that organize themselves into more or less coherent and recognizable forms” (p. 10). Mac, for her part in this “vast ocean,” was in high school during the Spring and Fall 2016 chalkings. A year later, as a college freshman and student in my ENGL 101 class, she created a chalking campaign urging awareness about homelessness. Her project combined a mid-semester ENGL 101 assignment with a social-work assignment. The result was a chalk campaign that fellow student Michael, who she did not know and who did not know her, remembers to this day because it was “bold” and “colorful,” with catchy slogans and a clear set of messages, particularly one placed on a trash can which said, “This is someone’s supermarket.” In my interview with Mac, I wanted to know what sort of invention process she used for this project, how it related to experiences she had in the year before coming to WCU, and how she performed the chalking campaign.

September 2016, Mac witnessed a Black Lives Matter march in her hometown. She recalls coming home from work and seeing that her route was closed off. On a major road through town, “There was a big mass of [people], black and white, and young and old, teachers, students, they were just walking down the street, just talking, holding signs.” As Mac watched, a white guy, maybe a little older than me, 19 or 20, and he went up to one of the [marchers], just walked up to this guy [and started saying], ‘This [protest] isn’t necessary, why are you doing this,’ and the [marcher] started talking about why they were doing it, and [the white guy] started punching him, for no reason, and it was just chaos after that.

She adds that the march itself, “was cool. . . . I was in awe.” Signs, marching, a fight—these are a few of the sociohistorical texts Mac drew from a nationwide movement and introduced into WCU’s chalking ecology. Like Michael, she also drew on media-reported events.

Mac mentions that chalking was considered vandalism at her high school, so when she arrived at WCU, the use of the medium surprised her. She saw it as “just advertising” and part of the mix of sidewalk happenings. Early in the semester, for example, Mac witnessed her first sidewalk preacher in action near the Catafount. Students gathered around him to listen but also to protest; one student loudly recited the U.S. Constitution, and another played the guitar to drown out the preacher—all while “authority-figure types” watched. She recalls bypassing “the melodrama” and heading to class. More pressing for Mac was that she herself had become homeless during Summer 2016 but was staying with her boyfriend’s family. Mac says, “I’ve seen a lot of [homeless] people on the street [and people] just keep walking; they won’t even look down at them; but it’s not a piece of trash, it’s a person.” She says her personal predicament “changed her perspective.”

Mac says the initial prompt was “a big advocacy project” for a social-work course: “We had to pick a topic, like abortion, human trafficking, homelessness, . . . and we had to figure out a way to visually advocate.” Classmates did flyers around campus, presentations, and some chalking. Mac remembers learning about rhetoric in my ENGL 101 class. She read the textbook, too, but she says what sparked the visual project were a sequence of in-class, rhetorical analyses of Fall 2016 and Spring 2017 chalking messages, events, and campaigns. Mac says, “It was project 2 [in our class], because I had a huge struggle with it, and we had to find a discourse community . . . or some group we associated with, . . . and we had to make a presentation about it.” The Project 2 assignment asked students to “identify a contemporary, preferably **local** or

regional issue/problem that you and your discourse community care about, are involved in, or *should be*, in your opinion ... [and] present your argument in multiple genres” (emphasis in the original). The assignment suggests emails, video, and social media as options but not chalking. As pointed out earlier, Mac continued to pull from tacit connections between the hometown protest, her personal circumstances, a social-work course, and ENGL 101. Her invention process did not occur in isolation; it evolved as a dynamic interaction between these actants. The classic model of invention and persuasion does not account for this; but Latour’s Actor Network Theory does, because it traces all the actors or elements that affect the rhetorical situation and/or are inherent to it.

Inspired by the chalking analysis and her proposal approved by me, Mac went on the visually oriented social-media site Pinterest to find catchy slogans that were “better than what was in my head.” She says, “I looked up homelessness, slogans, and pictures, and I found a lot of graffiti and art, like [someone who] threw out a mattress and put a slogan on it. ... I couldn’t drag a mattress on campus but I could draw it on the ground,” and she did. Figure 14 shows another image Mac created.



Figure 14: I Want Change

Here, in sharing what it was like to come up with an idea and “chalk” it out, Mac also reveals how the physical/material and the textual all line up, intersect, and produce something new. Memes and genre emerge together within the rhetorical ecology, á la Syverson. Mac recalls that the weather was hot, filling in an image used almost all her “kid’s chalk,” and she had to keep blowing chalk dust away so she could check how the images were turning out. Mac did not know the university policy about chalking. She says:

I was doing my chalking ... with a Pinterest [slogan in which] a certain phrase was on the ground and another was vertical, and I wanted to do that. ... I was testing out the colors to see what would look best on the uprights, and some [Resident Assistance] came over and said, “You can’t do it on the upright structures, it’s vandalism.”

Mac says she never read the university policies referenced by the R.A., though they are available online or printed in a brochure. She says, “At [freshman] orientation, they just told us some stuff, and I probably threw it away.” Nonetheless, evidence of the ambiguity in the policy, no one told her to remove the chalking messages she had already applied to the trash cans, with the words “Someone’s Supermarket” wrapped around the top edge (Figure 14).



Figure 15: Someone’s Supermarket

Mac also observes how *physical* it was to chalk, confirming Syverson argument that composition is *embodied*; as physical beings, we can experience it no other way. I explain this briefly to Mac, who nods, thinks about it, and adds: She broke her nails (and her chalk) on the pavement, especially the bricks, which make it hard to draw continuous shapes or letters. Mac enlisted friends to help with the work and afterwards shared her images on Snapchat, which deletes posts after a matter of seconds—a digital version of the ephemeral chalking. Mac also explains that she picked *specific locations for specific messages*, concentrating on the dining hall to educate people about hunger, and the dorms to remind students that some people lack a place to sleep. She picked the biggest dorms near the most traveled areas, in part because of what she learned about “audience” in ENGL 101. However, Mac avoided the dorms and renovated dining hall located uphill from the Catafount, telling me that people come downhill from there, toward their classrooms, and besides, that would have too much work. Mac says:

I wanted [students] to see [the chalkings] as they left the dorms, because they have somewhere to stay [but] take it for granted, ... I chose the food court and the trash cans because, so, I'd seen a lot of advertisements with chalkings, “go here, do this,” so I played off their expectations, like “food here,” with arrows toward the trash cans.

Afterward, she posted pictures on Snapchat, emailed them to me for proof of her work, and watched people respond to the chalking campaign. She took charge of how her rhetoric circulated. Mac says, “It was really uplifting, because I was expecting people to just walk past it.” Some stopped to read, even what she calls “the authority figures, quote-unquote, in their purple shirts.”

I should mention that Mac and I spoke in my office, a windowless space on the top floor of Coulter and closer to the Music Department's practice rooms and offices than the English

Department. We could hear someone practicing their scales nearby. We had met here before, as student and teacher, talking about her project ideas as music played nearby. I did not know at that earlier time that Mac had looked for slogans and memes on Pinterest. If my thinking were old-school, current-traditional rhetoric on this point, I might have said she plagiarized her ideas. Now, I see her work as *playing* with the texts available to her. For example, it is significant that while I looked for textual support in my chalking, from Cooper to Dr. Seuss, Mac considered the visual elements, and the impact of images in relationship to texts; Pinterest provided the memes—original images onto which are mapped various textual interpretations. From memes to catchy Seuss poems, Mac and I both drew from that “vast ocean of words, phrases, and ideas” described by Syverson. New texts emerge but test our notions of plagiarism: I was beginning to wonder if any of us ever write anything completely original.

Conclusion: Rhetorical Ecologies, Rhetorical Intentions

As I stated earlier in this chapter, *actants influence the rhetorical ecology, link a variety of seemingly disparate texts (social, historical, geographical, spoken, visual, written, etc.), and connect other actants in the ecology*. In fact, by using the frame of a rhetorical ecology, and drawing out the actors/actants at play in it, we reassemble the parts into a functioning whole and see more clearly how change happens. The nature of rhetorical ecologies is that they *do* change. Ideas evolve, move, and transform as actants introduce new ideas and texts (or transform them as Mac did). *Those* actants interact as well in a concatenation of textual, rhetorical ecologies, which means that Syverson’s *enaction* principle keeps going. Michael, though chalking for an epideictic purpose, i.e. expressive, also drew from texts available to him (e.g., *The Portable Beat Reader*, and news of Trump’s election rallies broadcast on television), and he spread his work via the chalking medium *and* social media (Facebook). Mac likewise delved into a mix of written

and social texts, from her personal experiences to what she was reading in coursework. Like Michael, she distributed her chalked messages via social media, where the messages circulated. At a practical level, both students' multi-textual, multimodal approach suggests that neither first-year writing or upper-level courses should be limited to essays and research papers, nor should we make assumptions about contributing factors that we (educators) think disparate or irrelevant.

Finally, we may not be able to say to what extent educators, with their own pedagogical/institutional purposes, texts, and rhetorical ecologies, inspire student work, but they contribute to the mix in a dynamic way. Worley and Nazario-Colón are both aware of the implicit ideological impasse manifested in university policies about free speech, hate speech, and chalking; they push against the ambiguity by engaging it via the classroom and meeting spaces. Nazario-Colón may not have influenced the students directly, but he crossed paths with me and likely with Worley as well; we heard him speak about diversity and inclusion. When I consider WCU policies and how Nazario-Colón represents them, I wonder if my chalking-based intervention, which surfaced the constraints and possibilities for the medium, would have elicited more responses if I had been provocative and partisan, or if I had violated WCU policy and painted my message on a vertical surface like graffiti. Would provocation produce dialogue or real praxis, as Worley defines it? The Beat poetry intervention suggests it might do the latter.

In brief, the lived experiences of these interviewees highlight the coming together of many actants to form a multilayered rhetorical ecology, one that does not operate in isolation or linearly. The chalking ecology connects to larger ecologies in often overlapping, interlocked ways, just as Syverson and many others predict. Educators and administrators foster this process and draw it forward from semester to semester; so do students like Michael and Mac. Though informal, chalking is important as well as practical; it delivers far more than "Free Cupcakes."

CHAPTER FOUR: BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

Aimed at untangling how rhetoric in WCU's chalking ecology works, this thesis launched from an elevator scene in which a group of students replayed their interaction with a chalked message. Taking a cue from Latour and Actor Network Theory, I imagined following these students and other actors enmeshed in a dynamic system of texts interacting with place, people, and material elements over time. I also entered the rhetorical ecology as a participant-researcher, interrogating my experiences as well as those of individual human actors who demonstrated institutional, pedagogical, and participatory perspectives. In the process, my research goals were multilayered. As stated early in this thesis, I hoped to discover both what blocks dialogue and what fosters productive discourse on a campus like WCU, particularly in relationship to, and in interaction with, chalking. On a personal, practical level, I also hoped to discover useful, accessible ways to get first-year-writing (FYW) students thinking about and applying rhetoric in their everyday lives. More broadly, I hoped my research would suggest how chalking and other forms of informal discourse might fit within 21st century rhetoric scholarship or suggest new directions for study. In this concluding chapter, I summarize what I learned, how I applied that new knowledge as an instructor in a FYW classroom, and what broader potentialities or challenges I now see.

Like the rhetorical ecology explored in this project, my conclusions are not definitive but open-ended: Chalking at WCU demonstrates a complex, dynamic system of discourse, i.e. a rhetorical ecology, with fluid borders and significant circulation of ideas and texts; and per Syverson's framework for rhetorical ecologies, chalking is distributed, emergent, embodied, and enacted (see Table 2).

Table 2: *Chalking as a Rhetorical Ecology*

CHARACTERISTIC	SHORT DEFINITION	EXAMPLE(S)
Distributed	Shared; social not isolated; decentralized agency	Intertextuality; interaction between actors/actants; the circulation and transformation of memes, ideas, etc. over time; woman-chalk; students-water-bottle; students-chalk-Beat-poems; Instagram memes + chalk campaign; chalkings shared on social media
Emergent	Self-organizing; acquiring meaning or form (such as genre)	The what-where-when format for event invites; “Base Camp” as shorthand for an ongoing, repeating, activity; excerpts (Beat poetry, Bible verses); block letters in single bricks (“Love Shouldn’t Hurt,” “Protest and Survive” chalkings)
Embodied	Inherently physical; in interaction with the material	Woman-with-chalk, water bottles washing the chalk away, weather encouraging or discouraging chalking activity; ballet-on-chalking; walking the space & “reading” it
Enacted	Knowledge creation through activities, experience	Michael and Mac learning about public spaces and rhetorical intervention; memories of chalking carried forward in time & influencing future actions/chalkings

One practical, pedagogical use for chalking is that first-year-writing students can analyze it as visual rhetoric or use it for multimedia projects that demonstrate (and teach) the interplay of texts, audience, exigence, rhetors, and nonhuman actor/actants like medium, place, and time (i.e. *kairos*). They can also *use* it by intervening in the dialogue, creating new discourse, or simply expressing themselves. Furthermore, though temporary and informal by nature, chalking offers real-world possibilities for productive discourse, albeit with constraints that must be overcome or disrupted. Before more fully explaining this last point, I offer a summary of my findings,

followed by a brief report on how I used chalking for a unit on visual rhetoric in a first-year-writing course I taught Fall 2017.

Dynamic, Evolving, Ecological

By imagining the elevator students' brief journey, I saw their rhetoric as an interaction of actants within WCU's chalking ecology. They had walked from the Trump'ed star-circle to the Coulter elevator that day, carrying multiple texts: the pro-Trump chalking and all the rhetorical ecologies that created it; their own individual stories and their coming together that day, whether they met at the dining hall, left their dorms together, or drove to campus; their interaction with the chalking message (students-with-water-bottles, student-ballet); and the story they created from that interaction as they walked the physical space, talked along the way, and shared it with those who had not taken part in their action. In this perspective, I recall Warner's idea that the creation of a public (i.e., rhetoric) is "poetic world making," that is, an attempt to "realize" or bring into being the world as we understand it or want others to understand it (p. 114). In sharing or retelling what they did, the elevator students created a momentary world in which water-pouring and ballet-dancing were valued, political acts. With their bodies, they carried both the pro-Trump chalking and their political act metaphorically across campus, transferring a new text to me. I saw in these evolving texts a *rhetoric* with echoes of past events like the Spring 2016 chalkings, traces of many texts, in fact, and multiple interactions with material actors like place/space and chalk/sidewalk.

Such textual echoes and material effects are not surprising when we view the rhetorical situation as an ecology. Edbauer says that rhetorical situations bleed; they overlap, interact, and become entangled. They are rhetorical ecologies, not linear relationships between exigence, rhetor, text, and audience. For example, imagine the elevator interaction as a triangle that

represents a “data snapshot,” à la Porter and Sullivan, of chalking’s rhetorical ecology. Figure 16 shows the moment as a classic rhetorical situation, reading clockwise from the top and situating the original pro-Trump chalking message in the center:

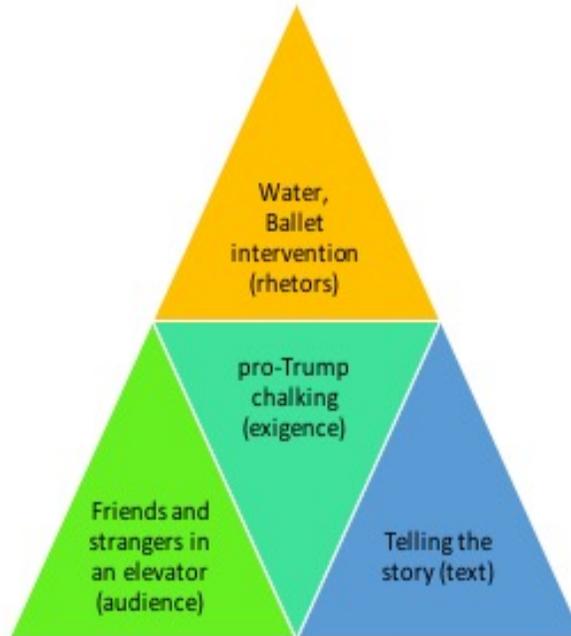


Figure 16: The Elevator Incident

Unfortunately, this classic triangle fails to show the “wealth of reality,” as Syverson refers to rhetorical ecologies (p. xiv). Syverson explains, “We are embedded in and co-evolving with our environments, which include other people as well as social and physical structures and processes” (pp. xiv-iv). We live in material, social, and rhetorical environments, co-creating worlds that are rich with depth and complexity, she argues. Or as I think of it, we live in multi-textual worlds. Very little complexity surfaces in the rhetorical situation as a simple triangle, however; the social and the physical have been flattened, if not written out of the situation.

Some of what is missing are past events, the source(s) of the pro-Trump chalking; the elevator students' coming together; the #ChalkToMe project underway at that moment; WCU policies about chalking; not to mention, future yet related events like the Beat poetry chalking campaign. As demonstrated in this thesis, much more rhetoric was happening in that elevator that day than can be captured, much less understood, via the classic rhetorical situation. Figure 17 shows how an ecologically minded rhetorician might view the moment:

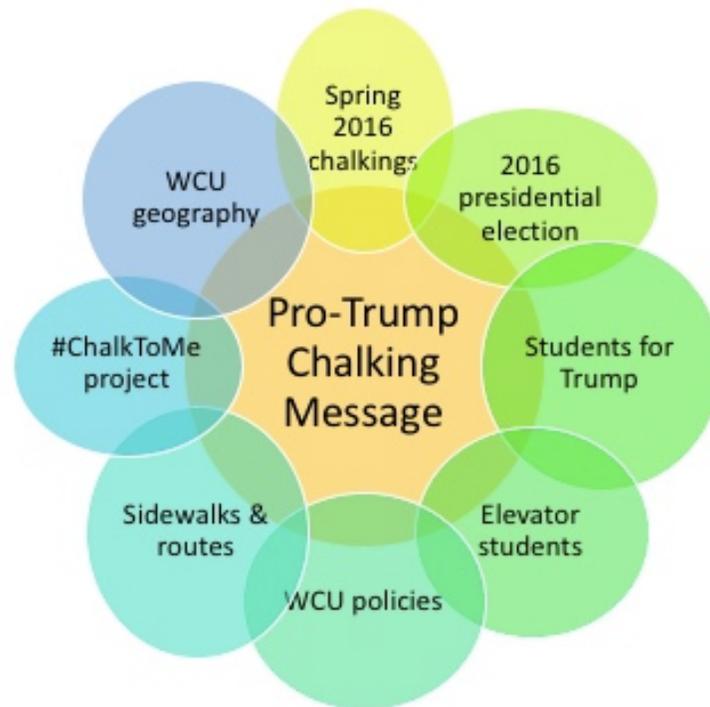


Figure 17: An Elevator Ecology

Notably, I have artificially constrained the rhetorical ecology in a relatively simple box, placed the pro-Trump chalking message in the center, and surfaced *some* of its actants as overlapping circles and ovals. In this view, it is nonetheless difficult to identify or separate rhetors, audience, text(s), and exigence; nor is it easy to distill them from their cultural and material contexts. It is

as if all these elements inhabit these identities at once; but such blurring is closer to the reality of the rhetorical situation. All the actants, even in this simplified view of one moment in chalking's rhetorical ecology, join together in an active network—a notion shown in how all the circles overlap and blur together. The elements shown here are, as actants, co-determining the rhetorical situation, to blend Syverson's terminology with ANT. For example, Students for Trump, a national group with WCU members and associates, contributed to the Spring 2016 chalkings and were likely the rhetors of the pro-Trump chalkings that the elevator students interacted with. For their part, the elevator students met and came together via campus "Sidewalks and Routes," which co-determined the placement of the pro-Trump chalking message in a prominent and fitting location. If we expand this illustration, additional, connecting pathways would extend from each actant shown here—and often intersect. For example, the rhetorical ecology of the presidential campaigns connects with the #ChalkToMe intervention I outlined in Chapter 3, and a complex rhetoric of place, summarized in this diagram as "Sidewalks and Routes," co-evolved with "WCU Policies" to funnel chalking to particular locations like the Catafount.

Once we see such dynamics, we might wonder if anyone ever wrote anything that was truly original or *not* connected in some way to our social and material worlds. For example, as noted earlier in this thesis, the slogan for my #iVote #WheeVote campaign was "Chalk Talk" before a workshop partner, hearing about my ideas, suggested #ChalkToMe. We might also not be surprised that it can be difficult for beginning writers to navigate such a complex ecology of chalk, much less write a 10-page rhetorical analysis for first year writing. With that in mind, I move next to using the chalking ecology as a pedagogical tool in a Fall 2017 section of ENGL 101 Writing and Rhetoric.

Chalking 101

While planning the #ChalkToMe campaign during the Fall 2016 semester, I also worried about teaching ENGL 101 for the first time. I latched onto educator Mike Rose's (1989) suggestion that we start by recognizing students where they are in terms of their skills and interests. In early drafts of a chalking-related paper I produced Fall 2016 for ENGL 695, I wrote about trying to identify with the freshmen writers I would encounter in the classroom. What discourse communities were they participating in? What "texts" did they read? As I pondered these questions, chalking seemed like found art that can be gathered and made into something new. As I have stated in various ways in this thesis, chalking is accessible to most WCU students and on many campuses across the United States. It is present in their lives. As such, it may be more relatable to their campus life than the usual, go-to exercises for rhetorical analyses (e.g., advertisements, political speeches, and often anthologized essays like Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail").

MLK's famous letter, incidentally, is featured prominently in Mark Longaker and Jeffrey Walker's *Rhetorical Analysis* (2011), the primary text ordered for all ENGL 101 courses at Western Carolina University; arguably, it is used often by WCU instructors, and graduate teaching assistants in the English Department are expected to use it. However, though I relate to King in part because I am an Alabama native and I experienced the civil rights era from a child's perspective, I doubt how well his letter connects with 17- and 18-year-old students born long afterward and struggling to understand the principles of basic rhetoric. Chalking as visual rhetoric suits both the learning objectives required for ENGL 101 at WCU and my commitment to using accessible texts whenever possible or suitable.

Early in the section of ENGL 101 that I taught Fall 2017, I showed students a slideshow of chalking messages, campaigns, and events. Before viewing the slides, we had read the first chapter of the textbook and reviewed basic terms (ethos, pathos, and logos). We had worked on defining and understanding rhetorical situations as rhetor, text, audience, exigence, and fitting, timely response (*kairos*). A week earlier, several students observed during a class discussion that this whole “ethos-pathos-logos business” and rhetoric itself were ideas they were already familiar with; they simply had not known what to call these concepts. For the chalking exercise, I also primed them with a brief discussion about what to look for in visual arguments (color, placement, fonts, and so forth). For each image, I asked them questions related to the rhetoric we were studying, as well as practical concerns, like a chalking that was hard to read because the chosen color did not work well on red brick, or another that caught the eye with big and colorful fonts yet was spread out so far across the concrete that it could not be read while walking by. For some images, I provided context, like a very brief explanation of what “Beat poetry” was. The exercise went fairly well, with the majority of the class engaged, talking about the chalkings, and answering questions.

One of the most interesting responses, however, came when I asked students to find and analyze a visually oriented text they had seen on or off-campus, from chalkings to advertisements to public service announcements. One response sticks with me, because it showed a student connecting weighty ideas, chalking’s rhetorical ecology, and multiple texts (including cultural, historical, and social ones). One of the slides in my ENGL 101 sequence showed the “~~Black-Blue~~ Human Lives Matter” chalking (see Figure 7 in Chapter Two). Several students in the class latched onto the idea of the interventions as “edits,” a description that resonated with this particular student, who chose to analyze the image rhetorically for an essay

due a few weeks after the in-class exercise. For the research component of the exercise, the student read an article that quoted Faulkner's famous words (among many): "The past is never dead. It's not even past." Writing about these words, the student connected at least four texts: the chalking, the Faulkner, a *revision of Faulkner's words* spoken in a movie, and riots the student had witnessed as a high school student after a fatal police shooting of an African American. The big conceptual leap, however, came as the student pondered which edit came first ("Back the Black"? "Back the Humans"?), then posed a sequence of questions that I rephrase here: What did each individual "edit" mean? Whose perspective was *right*—law enforcement, blacks, or humans? In a moment of epiphany, the student concluded that there was some "truth" in all the "edits." In short, the student enacted the learning objectives of the class by reflecting critically on a larger rhetorical ecology and demonstrating in writing Warner's "poetic world making."

The student's exploration, not written in Standard English, also reminded me of Mike Rose discussing what it means to be literate. He points out that many students might be dismissed or categorized as illiterate, at-risk, disadvantaged, and under-prepared when we read their essays. Rose says, "They know more than their tests reveal but haven't been taught how to weave that knowledge into coherent patterns" (p. 8). But they are literate. To paraphrase my Fall 2017 students, they know this stuff. For the "edit" student and Mac, who designed a chalk campaign for the multimedia component of a class project, chalking worked as a useful pedagogical tool, though neither student was what we might call a "good" writer. Mac applied the rhetoric she was learning; she considered a creative way to combine assignments from different classes, while taking into account where she would deliver her message, how she would deliver it, and how to make it resonate with her audience. Meanwhile, the edit student grappled with new ideas and tied it all together in ways that some supposedly good writers never do. For

others in the class of 23 students, the exercise seemed to help them analyze various examples of visual rhetoric, such as a climate-change video that featured children speaking or an alt-right poster in World War II poster fonts that advertised the 2017 Charlottesville, Va., gathering.

One take away from this teaching experience is that students were able to envision chalking as a substantive part of their rhetorical ecology because *I brought it into the classroom*. I facilitated chalking's wider circulation by featuring it as a worthy subject of study. In a way, I continued to be a hybrid participant-critic, as Middleton et al. say of rhetorical field study. And I re-created the exigence of the chalking situations I showed on slides. Philosophical and pedagogical musings aside, I count the exercise a modest success but acknowledge that its usefulness may be limited to campuses where chalking is present in the rhetorical ecology. I would use it again if chalking is present in my students' rhetorical environments. However, if chalking is not present, then other formal and informal, visual and textual, material and metaphorical rhetorics might resonate with students in first year writing courses and upper-level courses. For example, on a recent visit to The Citadel, a military university devoid of chalking, I visited a one-room museum hosted at the library and displaying collections of historic uniforms, photographs, the miscellaneous belongings of former students—all behind glass cases. I wonder what visual and cultural rhetorics first-year-writing students might make of such a display. Or on that campus as well as WCU's, many informal rhetorics are at play on flyers and posters stapled to bulletin boards and kiosks. The possibilities abound.

Chalking as Activism

If chalking is indeed present on a college campus, or public spaces like a “free speech” blackboard in Charlottesville, Virginia, then chalking can also be part of the public discourse. Whether that public discourse is productive, disruptive, or static, however, depends on a variety

of factors within the rhetorical ecology. Stated another way, the nature of the discourse depends on how the actants assemble and how the resulting *network* codetermines the potential for productive discourse. I come to such a conclusion by way of this project but also through reading composition theorists as I prepared to teach first year writing. For example, Richard Marback and Patrick Bruch (2013) say, “Writing itself is always activism” (p. 61). They explain, in part, that the inherently social act we call writing means exploring and articulating our values, past and present; and it means shaping the future, or at least trying to. Recreating the past, creating the present, and realizing the future are inherently activist moves, in that we shape our thinking on these realities *as we think about them* (or write them or tell them or show them or perform them). And this, to me, is rhetoric.

Warner phrases this activist potential a little differently, saying, “All discourse or performance addressed to a public must characterize the world in which it attempts to circulate and it must attempt to realize that world through address” (p. 114). We frame reality, in other words; we realize it and so bring it into being in an ongoing process. When that public activity and process pushes against the hegemony and/or the dominant discourse, it is inherently activist. Or as I quoted Warner earlier, “Public discourse says not only ‘Let a public exist’ but ‘Let it have this character, speak this way, see the world in this way’” (p. 114). This poetic world making—the act of expressing our world and our worldview—brings it into being. We conjure it. In the wider sense, such a move is rhetoric. Chalking is rhetorical, despite its informal, fleeting vernacularity. These characteristics, in fact, make it a convenient and sometimes influential act of activism, but also a problematic one on occasion.

Consider again WCU’s one-paragraph policy about chalking. The policy prohibits chalking on “vertical surfaces” and “covered horizontal surfaces,” but cites no penalties or

intervention with chalking messages, events, or campaigns unless there is a direct, communicated “threat to the safety of any individual or the campus community or potentially ... hostile environment” (University Policy 114.XI.G). The policy focuses on the location and removal of chalking on verticals or covered areas, which rain cannot wash away, and it mentions *possibly* offensive chalking; otherwise the policy provides little if any limit on the *content* or message. The language in the policy mirrors what remains a point of practical and rhetorical tension in American discourse—free speech vs. hate speech.

WCU Chief Diversity Officer Ricardo Nazario-Colón, interviewed for this study, makes this connection and acknowledges the inherent tension in these kinds of policies. He explains that in their official positions, administrators try to balance their part in public discourse somewhere between speech that is allowed and speech that crosses the line. As Nazario-Colón points out, “Who determines that line?” He says that, all too often, what is hate speech to one person is free speech to another. Nonetheless, the policy allows free *expression* via chalking, whether the message is about free cupcakes or political campaigns. I continue to wonder, however, whether the WCU policy fosters dialogue via chalking or, by not prohibiting chalking messages, events, and campaigns that many students might *feel* is threatening but others think is pro-America (“BUILD THE WALL!”), effectively hampers productive dialogue. Recall that Michael interpreted the pro-Trump chalkings as negative because he had seen and heard the us-versus-them rhetoric of pro-Trump rallies broadcast on television; he was predisposed to see those chalking messages as bordering on hate speech. Nonetheless, the WCU policy on its own seems neutral; its hands-off approach *might* nonetheless allow for the *possibility* of productive dialogue, but it poses challenges for students, instructors, and administrators.

For example, the policy's problematic neutrality plays out in the observations made by WCU student Jason Huber (2017) as part of a CCCC panel session that year (Foote et al.). In his individual presentation, "Chalk it Up to Racism: Addressing New Genres in the Composition Classroom," Huber reports on the sequence of events, from hate-speech postings on Yik Yak to "silent protests" to more than 150 pro-Trump, provocative messages "like "White Privilege is a Lie." He situates the Spring 2016 incidents within "large-scale sociopolitical discourse" like presidential campaigns and race relations. As a new teacher of first year writing, Huber turns the critical lens to how such discourse, delivered via chalk, influences what we do or should do as teachers:

Our students are writing on social media and other online platforms. They are existing in a rhetorical space without teachers or tutors. ... How do we, as composition instructors, address these rhetorical spaces, and the discourse that's occurring there? ... Composition instructors are faced with a reality in which their students are engaging in potentially harmful dialogue in anonymous rhetorical spaces (section 3).

Huber suggests being open to the new and different genres used by students, staying "apprised of what rhetorical spaces they are engaging in," and "teach[ing] those spaces, and the rhetorical considerations that go along with them." Quite likely he intends here something like teaching the visual rhetorics of chalking, such as exploring the contexts or rhetorical ecologies in which chalkings occur, while not shying away from the problematic politics of what happens outside the classroom. Huber also implies that in our teaching of rhetoric, we should address the realities and politics of rhetorical spaces, wherever these arise. Of course, Huber deals more directly here with digital spaces and the anonymity of Yik Yak, where the worst of the hate-speech messages occurred Spring 2016. Even in that digital-rhetorical environment, the material, nonhuman

actants are in play in the dynamic interaction of smartphones, keyboards, screens, cell towers, broadband capacity, telecommunication companies, and so on, interacting with human actors.

Like Yik Yak, of course, chalking allows anonymous, “potentially harmful dialogue,” but university policy, as expressed in 114.XI.G, does not resolve or prevent problems in either rhetorical space. This potentially frustrating neutrality leaves a lot of room (and potentially a lot of the real work) to instructors like Huber as well as the students who may chalk hate speech or have to put up with it. Regardless, that neutrality leaves room for transformative possibilities, too. I take hope, for example, in how the Spring 2016 chalkings were situated within larger sociopolitical discourse, as Huber points out, and most especially I see productive possibilities in how students entered the discourse and reclaimed it. Many students came together at various points in the evolving ecology of chalking that semester to express their views: staging a silent protest, counteracting the (I believe) intentionally provocative #TheChalkening phenomenon with their own chalking campaigns. Students demonstrated agency as they expressed themselves within a hegemonic system whose conservative advocates sought to drown them out by filling the rhetorical space.

A self-transforming agency was also demonstrated by the water-pouring, ballet-dancing students I encountered on the elevator. As Michael says, “It’s not just chalk on the pavement. It’s an act, and it’s art, [meant] to persuade.” The elevator students performed their textual response to the chalkings; perhaps they also shared photos on Snapchat or Instagram, in addition to inadvertently sharing it with me. Of course, I do not discount students who showed a brand of agency in their pro-Trump chalking campaign. I may disagree heartily with their world view and side with the ballet-dancing student and those who performed a silent #BLM protest at the Catafount during the Fall 2016 semester; but I can acknowledge that the pro-Trump chalk

message on display in the star-circle was one of the most colorful, well-executed chalkings I saw that semester or since.

I also continue to wonder if that boldness and colorfulness inspired other chalking rhetors to be bold and colorful. Some Base Camp chalking campaigns went beyond simple text messages that semester and started to include colorful drawings related to the adventure being advertised—a big blue alligator in an invite to a trip to South Carolina’s Congaree Swamp, for instance. That is the nature of rhetorical ecologies, as notions of rhetor, audience, and texts blur (Syverson’s *distribution* aspect). An instance of informal rhetoric, especially if it repeats or is appropriated, may spur a new convention or a new style, like the neat, precise situating of bright-white letters within individual bricks at the Catafount, as the “Protest and Survive” chalk message read during the first Beat poetry campaign (emergence). Bold, colorful, or otherwise effective chalkings may then persist as a way to make a splash in the space, even if rhetors and audience(s) no longer remember who did it first or when, which means the idea of effective chalkings has been successfully enacted within the system.

Conclusion: Chalking the Future

In any case, chalking seems almost dormant now, two years after the Spring 2016 events. Viewing it as a rhetorical ecology helps account for this change. When I mentioned during our interview that there have been fewer chalkings in recent months, Mac replied, “Usually people need something massive to bring them together. Right now, there’s just nothing going on.” She has a point. If we represent the Spring 2016 chalking-related events in a Venn variation showing the major actants, it looks busy and complex even when simplified, as seen in Figure 18.

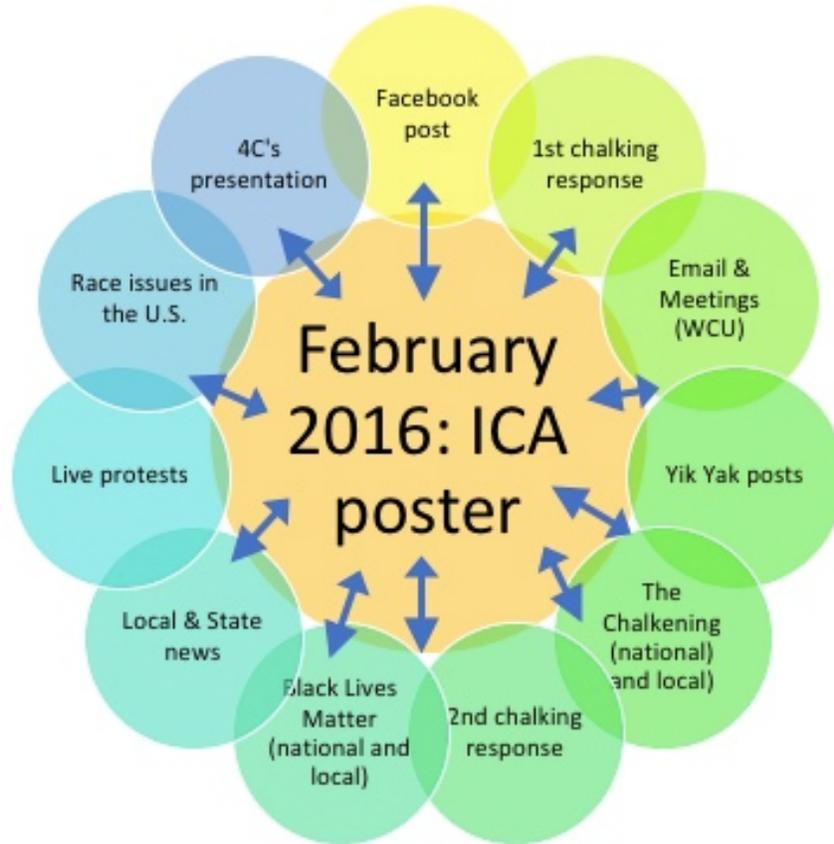


Figure 18: Spring 2016 Chalking Ecology

I say “simplified,” because the actual rhetorical ecologies overlap, interconnect, and link to such a degree that each actant (collectives of actors) melds into the whole, obscuring the nexus and catalyst—the poster displayed outside the Intercultural Affairs department on the second floor of the U.C. in February 2016. By placing the latter in the center, I am arguing that it was a central point, a catalyst in the rhetorical ecology. This view unravels Bitzer’s classic rhetorical situation. Which actant is the rhetor? The audience? Where did the exigence go? And this simplified diagram hints at the interactions between clusters, such as the relationship between national and local Black Lives Matter protests or the connection between the anonymous Yik Yak comments

and the catalytic Facebook post by a WCU staffer; but it does not show these interlocking ecologies to scale. A case could be made, for example, that “race issues in the U.S.” represents a large, dense ecology of discourse, itself part of global, colonial, and post-colonial rhetoric that has been going on for centuries.

In any case, an approximate chronology highlights the traditional, linear relationships in the rhetorical situation, moving clockwise with the local elements in this diagram: from the Spring 2016 Facebook post by a WCU student to the Foote et al. CCCC panel presented March 2017. Though simplified, this diagram gives a sense of the complexity of this rhetorical ecology as a dynamic, complex network whose lingering traces circulated on campus during the Fall 2016 semester, when pro-Trump chalkings and Black Lives Matter chalkings continued; seasonal, recurring chalkings were done; I applied the #ChalkToMe campaign; and the Beat poetry chalking filled the rhetorical space at the Catafount. Spring 2016 presented the perfect rhetorical storm.

Imagine, however, if the ICA poster had not happened, or lacked the reference to the shooting of Trayvon Martin; or the Facebook student had not seen the poster and written about it; or if former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush had been running for president and not the ever-controversial Donald J. Trump. What if the Black Lives Matter movement had not arisen within the national rhetorical ecologies? If not for such catalyzing, dynamic, and interlocking actants in the network, WCU chalking during the Spring 2016 semester would look much like it does today, during the Spring 2018 semester. I simulate this view in the light-hearted example, Figure 19:



Figure 19: The Chalking Ecology Now

Add other sidewalk communications seen this time of year, such as graduation notices on yard signs and sidewalk stickers about summer activities, and Figure 19 represents the state of sidewalk communication at the time of this writing, Spring 2018.

To paraphrase Mac, however, chalking and other forms of informal, spontaneous discourse can get people talking in a productive way when something big *does* happen. In Charlottesville, Virginia, people attended a vigil after a young woman was killed by an alt-right protester; attendees filled the scene of her death—a city street— with colorful, expressive chalkings of grief and eulogy. This kind of chalking was partly what Michael experienced when he was “very distraught over the outcome” of the presidential election, joined his Beat poetry classmates at the Catafount, and etched Allen Ginsburg lines about “the weight we carry.” Though aware of chalking publicly, when most campus chalking seems to be done at night, anonymously, and recognizing that he and his classmate’s chalking filled the space at the Catafount both physically and rhetorically, the cathartic and embodied experience mattered most

to Michael. The chalking was productive on multiple levels. But if it had rained that day or been cold, or if Michael's professor, Dr. Paul Worley, had not intervened, it is possible the Beat poetry chalking campaign would not have occurred or the conversation may have remained in the classroom. Or it may have never happened at all.

Chalking as medium and message persists, however. It remains present in the rhetorical space at WCU, largely because of what I have heard called "institutional memory." Dr. Worley phrases this a different way, remarking in his interview that students (and most humans) sometimes need a kind of ringleader—someone who will nudge them into action or give them permission to act, particularly when they are already thinking about *doing something*. If we flip this human-centric notion, the Catafount is a literal, material ringleader; all major sidewalks on campus lead to it or from it, though the vagaries of weather can disrupt the whole network. In such a human-nonhuman system, on a warm, sunny day, Nov. 9, 2016, Worley brought a box of chalk to class and handed the pieces to his students: Go. Chalk. My ENGL 101 assignment took a somewhat similar tack, as I guided students through an exercise in the visual rhetoric of chalk, then encouraged them to use it for the multimedia component for subsequent major projects. What students did, from Beat poetry excerpts to "Humans Matter" analysis to a "Someone's Supermarket" chalking, may not have happened without the pedagogical, ultimately *activist* interventions that push against the dominant discourse, the commonplace, the hegemonic. Of course, this conclusion does not completely account for Mac's creative campaign about homelessness or a student musing on Faulkner, chalking "edits," and race relations. Such phenomena show the potential for rhetorical ecologies. If we see the medium and the practice as part of an ever-evolving, rhetorical ecology and help students understand they can take part in it, then we may send forth into the future a few traces of what we have done today.

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