

Aktualne kierunki w badaniach retorycznych

Current developments in rhetorical studies

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Inventing local rhetorics: Towards a topographic critical praxis

Retoryki lokalne: Propozycja topograficznej praktyki krytycznej

Abstract

This essay offers a pluralized conception of *local rhetorics*. The local has traditionally been conceived as the backdrop or flat surface where rhetoric/discourse is situated, or at best as a contextual dimension of rhetorical situations. The history of usage of this term – evoking a fix and inert connotation that often indicates a bounded locality or site – has contributed to its neglect as a tool for rhetorical theory, while its actual use in rhetorical praxis has proliferated in conjunction to the turn to field and site-based methodologies and practices. By drawing on fieldwork about the rhetoricity of a post-disaster locality to ground my theoretical reflections, here I offer a conceptualization of local rhetorics via multiple ontologies and ecological theories. Finally, throughout the essay, I suggest a rhetorical-topographic approach as a methodological orientation to integrate existing theoretical and methodological pathways for exploring the multiple rhetoricity of the local.

Niniejszy esej proponuje przyjęcie pluralistycznej koncepcji „lokalnych retoryk”. Tradycyjne ujęcia lokalności zwykle poprzestają na traktowaniu jej jako płaskiej przestrzeni lub tła sytuacyjnego dla retoryki lub dyskursu, a w najlepszym przypadku jako wymiaru kontekstu wpisanego w model sytuacji retorycznej. Historia użycia terminu „lokalny” – z jego konotacją stałości, nieruchomości, dookreślenia przestrzennego – przyczyniła się do zaniedbania rozważań teoretycznych z jego użyciem w badaniach retorycznych. A tymczasem użycie „lokalności” w praktyce retorycznej rozwinęło się zgodnie ze zwrotem ku metodologiom terenowym. Opierając się na pracach terenowych na temat retoryczności miejsc katastrof w celu zapoczątkowania refleksji teoretycznej, niniejsze studium proponuje konceptualizację retoryk lokalnych, która jest konstytuowana przez wiele ontologii i teorii retorycznych. W eseju omawia się podejście retoryczno-topograficzne jako orientację metodologiczną, która może integrować istniejące teoretyczne i metodologiczne ścieżki dociekań na temat wielowymiarowej retoryczności tego, co lokalne.

Key words

local rhetorics, space, materiality, fieldwork, *in-situ* methodologies
retoryka lokalna, przestrzeń, materialność, praca w terenie, metodologie terenowe

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Inventing local rhetorics: Towards a topographic critical praxis

1. Inventing local rhetorics

The notion of the local has not been a central preoccupation in contemporary rhetorical theory. The local is often mentioned in relation to specific contexts or settings of particular rhetoric, but rarely in its own right as a concept to critically engage those situated rhetorics. For Michael Leff, for example, the task of the rhetorical critic was to explore “the local circumstances that frame and motivate the work and the unique blend of formal and material elements that constitute its substance” (Leff 1986, 382). Yet, in Leff’s classic textual criticism approach the local had strictly to do with the context/setting of a speech, where the orator was the center of attention and the context the background, and where the symbolic was emphasized in comparison to the material effects of speech. In critical rhetoric scholarship, a notion of the local is present in Ono and Sloop’s conceptualization of vernacular discourse, where vernacular rhetoric is theorized as “speech that resonates within local communities” and grounded in the discourse practices of communities discoverable mostly “through texts” (Ono and Sloop 1995, 20). Thus, localism in general has relevance in critical rhetoric scholarship as an orientation, grounded in notions of discourse typical of cultural studies. One example of this locally-oriented work is Flores and Villareal’s “Mobilizing for national inclusion” that analyzes the discursivity of whiteness among Texas Mexican’s arguments for desegregation in a local paper (DeChaine 2012, 86).

In all the instances mentioned, the notion of the local has continued to appear in rhetorical criticism or critical rhetoric to indicate the static and bound space of the context of rhetorical situations or the locality where discourse emerges and resonates within local communities. In its traditional association with the setting and context of public address or in its character as an orientation to the study of discourse of local communities in critical rhetoric, the local has thus been associated with a rather inert spatial dimension, that of “a background, a backdrop against which the real stuff of history and politics is enacted” (Shome 2003, 39)

and lacking a sense of materiality and relationality, which contributed over time to shift the focus of critics towards history or temporality, among other foci, at the expense of the spatial and its thickness and ecological liveliness. However, as Joan Faber McAlister highlighted in the opening essay of a *WSC* special issue dedicated to space and place in communication studies, “if space is treated as a static stage on which changing cultural practices take place – rather than a dynamic dimension of all communicative encounters – we will lose crucial opportunities to consider how subjects (and perhaps objects) interact in complex ways” (McAlister 2016, 119). Refocusing on theorizing the local character of rhetoric as spatially situated, but simultaneously ecological, expansive, and ontologically plural, can enable critics to operationalize a type of rhetorical praxis that highlights precisely those complex and relational interactions between subjects/objects that are manifested in particular local-topographic configurations and that we risk missing when we consider the spatiality of localities as just a flat and finite dimension.

By drawing on a meta-reflection of my own extended fieldwork experiences in investigating the textured rhetoricity of a post-disaster ecology, here I offer a conceptualization of *local rhetorics* via multiple ontologies, ecological theories, and rhetoric’s fieldwork turn. Reviewing the many ways in which current rhetorical theories grapple with sites and localities, I suggest that attention to the local topographies of rhetoric, those assemblages of materiality, discourse, bodies, and affects that emerge in specific locations – yet have the power to “bleed” (Edbauer 2005, 168) and exceed their local contexts of articulation – can productively refocus our critical attention towards accounting simultaneously for the emplaced spatiality and thick materiality of local rhetorics, as well as their discursive circulation, affective capacity, or broad consequentiality beyond their local manifestations.

Such reconceptualization of local rhetorics builds on the work of rhetoricians that engaged with regional theory (Rice 2012; Edbauer [Rice] 2018; McGreavy et al. 2018), spatial articulation and post-human capacity (Stormer 2004; Ewalt 2016; Stormer and McGreavy 2017; Druschke 2019), material rhetoric and place-making (Dickinson, Blair and Ott 2010; Ott and Dickinson 2019; Dickinson 2020; Conley and Dickinson 2010), and it also draws from rhetoric’s fieldwork turn (Pezzullo 2009; Dickinson, Blair and Ott 2010; Middleton et al. 2015; McKinnon et al. 2016; Senda-Cook et al. 2018; McGreavy et al. 2018; Bengtsson, Berg and Iversen 2020; Druschke 2019; Druschke and McGreavy 2016; Rai and Druschke 2018). In the rest of this essay, I will engage with these entangled bodies of literature in turn, to recover the local and its rhetoricity, rethinking it as ontologically plural and suggesting a topographic orientation to its investigation. In what follows, I review significant theoretical issues arising from each body of literature mentioned above

to open up a space to reinvent the local as ontologically multiple and to integrate and expand the ways we engage with it in rhetorical praxis.

2. Regional and local rhetorical orientations

The first relevant scholarly conversation to consider when discussing issues of rhetoric and locality is the one concerning rhetoric's regional turn. In the opening essay of a *RSQ* special issue about *rhetorical regionalism*, Jenny Rice defined regions as a "rhetorical interface" between the local and the global, as a critical way to link the spatial (*tectonics*) and the discursive (*architectonics*) dimensions of rhetoric: "regional rhetorics and their performance thus serve as an active interface in which to engage public discourse about those global and local flows" (Rice 2012, 204). In their active characterization as interfaces for relationships, regions are described as escaping territoriality: "regional appeals" says Rice, "perform critical work by cultivating space-based relations that are not grounded in territory" and overall she describes regions as "not so much places but ways of strategically describing relationships among places, as well as the world those doing the descriptions wish to cultivate" (Rice 2012, 206). In this conceptualization, Rice strategically delinks the idea of region from the idea of territory as the backdrop or context for human action. Instead, borrowing the concept from Gilles Deleuze, she defines regions as "folds" or networks in constant flux, with no specific boundaries or distinctions between an inside and an outside: "Indeed every inside is an outside folded upon itself. Moreover, folds draw together regions that were once distant or even opposed to one another" (Rice 2012, 209). Regionalism, in brief, is described by Rice as a rhetorical performance or strategy, delinked by its material connotation of territory and other by definition if compared to both the local and the global. Regions, for Rice and the related literature of critical regionalism, are not "areas defined by physical features – a mountain range, type of climate, or a river, for instance – but by communicative practice, including maps, speeches, novels, letters to the editor, and other discursive phenomena" (Ewalt 2017, 9).

In a similar vein, Joshua Ewalt describes "regional arrangements" defining them as "inventive articulations wherein a wide variety of mobile, material phenomena, coming from places of various distances, encounter, affect and are affected by, each other. These complex mixtures, moreover, result in the generation of new material phenomena to circulate into ecologies of varying spatial reach" (McGreavy et al. 2018, 157). These characterizations of the regional and ecological character of rhetoric are compelling and essential to understand the interrelations of rhetoric and materiality since Edbauer Rice's 2005 landmark piece on rhetorical ecologies. In the introduction of *Tracing Rhetorics and Material Life* (McGreavy et al. 2018),

Wells and the other editors reconstruct a careful genealogy of rhetoric's ecological turn, explaining how, by bringing together Biesecker's critiques of the rhetorical situation model with the focus on ecologies in composition studies, Edbauer Rice "argued that the *situ* of situation evokes 'the originary position of objects' and 'a bordered, fixed space-location,' and yet there is no fixed, original location that we can trace rhetoric back to. The rhetorical milieu, she noted, is not a 'relatively closed system,' as 'situation' suggests, but rather more like a weather system, encompassing 'an agglomeration of processes'" (McGreavy et al. 2018, 15). An ecological and regional model, thus, invites us to see the fluidity and complexity of circulating affects and processes that create the milieu of rhetoric as it transcends spatiality.

This conceptualization of rhetoric as ecological has been groundbreaking for rhetorical studies. And yet, contemporary theories on rhetoric and materiality also acknowledge that territoriality and emplaced material elements have an agentic part in the emergence of specific local assemblages of matter and meaning that circulate and articulate with/in larger rhetorical ecologies. In short, if critical regionalism and the ecological turn have demonstrated how rhetoric articulates fluidly across time and space, the material and spatial turns have also highlighted the inherent rhetoricity of emplaced materiality and space and their importance for rhetorical articulation, circulation, and investigation.

This creates a tension between the immaterial relationality of rhetorical ecologies of the regional approach and the focus on emplaced materiality, spatiality, and the multiple ontologies of rhetoric emphasized in the material and spatial turns. If we characterize all rhetoric as always already regional in the sense described above, without an "original location that we can trace back to," we risk forgetting that sites and locations are always already ecological, but simultaneously also inherently materially situated and rhetorically articulated at the local level. Accounting carefully for the thick materiality of sites, then, can enrich our understanding of the ecological character of local rhetorics, characterized as assemblages emerging from unique topographic configurations of matter and meaning and their circulation and relational articulations with/in regional arrangements and global flows.

By shifting our attention back to this topographical orientation in understanding local rhetorics, I aim here to re-emphasize their territoriality and emplaced materiality: if the local is ontologically plural and not just a flat space, but rather an assemblage of emplaced materiality and related circulating discourses – in Stormer's words we could call it ontologically "polythetic" – then, we also need an ontic/methodological orientation to map those local assemblages as a thick texture of entangled material, semiotic, and emplaced cultural relations. Taking the material interrelation and ecologic circulation of all rhetoric seriously also

means that it is important to attend to materiality and its textural, topographic, localized, emplaced dimensions.

Building on the work of Caroline Gottschalk Druschke (2019) on a *trophic* conception of rhetoric, and aligning with her goal of wanting to

trouble the notion – expressed across a wide swath of rhetorical new materialisms – that the productive intersection of rhetoric and ecology is the adoption of ecological thinking, an ecological orientation to deciphering the voices of material ecosystems: an orientation that suggests attuning and interpreting the epiphenomenal symbols that emerge from an *a priori* world – what Scott Graham refers to as the “long-standing binary between language and reality” re-enacted in rhetorical materialisms (Graham 2016, 118)

here I work through various bodies of literature to invent a notion of local rhetorics that makes justice to rhetoric's materiality. For Druschke, that notion paradoxically sees materiality as producing rhetoric to be interpreted symbolically, “deciphering the voices of material ecosystem,” which is also exactly where “rhetorical ecological inquiry fell short” (Druschke 2019) in accounting for the rhetorical capacity of materiality. Druschke suggests the remedy of reimagining the “rhetorical ecologist” as a “trophic rhetorician,” who engages in “co-laboring and equivocating across species, worlds and registers to take seriously the physicality of relationality, *but not only*” (Druschke 2019). Like Druschke with her call for a trophic future for rhetoric, here I aim to go beyond notions of rhetorical ecologies and to take seriously the “physicality of relationality” that one encounters through a topographic approach to local rhetorics.

While theories of ecologies and regionalism allow us to see and trace rhetorical circulation across the global and the local, here I claim that while we do so we also need to zoom in into the topography of local assemblages of rhetoric in the specific emplaced and crystallized space-time-culture in which they emerge. A deeper attunement to the ontological plurality of the local also helps critics in engaging productively with ontic, methodological orientations that connects that plurality to emplaced social practices. Druschke gets at that by suggesting a “trophic” future for rhetoric, borrowing the word from ecological science, a word that “captures nested sets of direct and indirect predator-prey species interactions” (Druschke 2019) and that directs our attention towards matter in rhetorical ecologies (quite specifically towards their physical relationality). Druschke also borrows perspectives and methods by Amerindian anthropology and encourages rhetoricians to engage in co-labor as a field method to call attention and question the relationship between rhetoric and matter. Building on Druschke in the questioning and rethinking of those relationships, here I want to investigate how local assemblages of matter and meaning affect social practices and social change. This is a question that several other rhetoricians have also been compelled to explore in the last two decades,

especially those in the fieldwork turn. In what follows, I offer another perspective to put to work alongside Druschke's trophic rhetoric in the task of accounting for and understanding rhetoric's physicality and emplaced relationality that is needed beyond the ecologic approach: a topographic orientation to local matter that highlights emplaced materiality and its relations to larger discourses and flows. This topographic orientation, similarly to Druschke's trophic one, contributes to connect the ontological dimensions of polythetic, ecological theories of rhetoric, to the ontic problems we face in actual rhetorical praxis conducted *in-situ* through embodied fieldwork methodologies.

Advocating for a topographic praxis, thus, aims at integrating the many already existing pathways used by rhetoric scholars to explore *in-situ* rhetoric with theoretical insights coming from the material, spatial, ecological, and new materialist turns to account for the ontological plurality of the local. Local rhetorics, as I conceptualize them here, are momentary configurations of matter and meaning that shape and are shaped by the materiality of their local emplacement/situatedness. Simply put, a rhetorical topographic critical praxis explores the site-based articulations of local assemblages and traces their circulation and relational consequentiality in larger ecologies of meaning and matter. Druschke evoked a trophic future for rhetoric in order to account for the relationality between "human, and fish, and river, and nutrient, and climate, and so on. A material relationality with power and force. A relationality that is not only about voice or translation" (Druschke 2019). Similarly, here I invoke a topographic one in order to account for the relationality between human, and rubble, and earthquakes, and tents, and mountains, and so on. The relationality of those local assemblages of materiality is hardly translatable through tracing their discursive rendering that can be traced ecologically, thus I share Druschke's dissatisfaction and the need to point at the "*not only*" of rhetorical ecologies, but also on "its dependence on and support of a view of rhetoric as emergent and epiphenomenal" (Druschke 2019), or in the terminology that I use here as local and topographic. Building on Druschke's work on trophic rhetoric as an orientation, I envision a local-topographic approach to also work towards "renewing our definition of rhetoric *from an emergent collective noun that gives voice to material ecosystems to a connective verb composed of physical, palpable, symbolic, affective, and chemical relations* (cursive in original). To, as Rai and I put it, a notion of 'rhetorical force...as all that might move the collective us' (Rai 2018, 202)" (Druschke 2019).

Before continuing the discussion about rhetorical theories that supports this reconceptualization of local rhetorics, I want to start by sharing an autoethnographic note about my personal affective experience of a disastrous earthquake that

struck my Italian hometown back in 2009¹. This note is a meta-reflection on my past fieldwork on the rhetoricity of that disaster and I start with it precisely to speak to the ecological and regional potential of rhetoric as theorized by Edbauer Rice, demonstrating that local rhetorics are ecological and yes, they “bleed” indeed, connecting tectonics (spaces) to architectonics (discourse) and creating regional arrangements that meet global flows. When I wrote the autoethnographic note about my long-distance experience of the disaster coming up in the next paragraph, I realized how powerfully it demonstrated the ecological affectivity of a rhetorical event happened on the other side of the world and that was affecting me in a completely different location and time zone. Yet, what I did discover over time in my longer-term engagement with post-earthquake rhetorics is that the emplaced and embodied local experience of those rhetorics would affect me in entirely different ways—and those differences emerged from the arrangements and relationality of my body with the materiality of the earthquake, as well as the different receptive/interpretive and affective capabilities cultivated through my inhabitation of the disaster site.

Throughout this essay, I occasionally reflect on the reverberations of the situated experience of my hometown disaster, both locally and within the extended ecology of its plural spaces of impact, as a meta-example to showcase the rationale for embracing a topographic orientation to local rhetorics. My fieldwork experiences explain how the rhetorical consequentiality of the local disaster transcended the location of the earthquake, the situated materiality of the mutations engendered by the seismic shocks, and the multiple spheres of argument and platforms in which the discourse about the disaster took place. However, they also show that the local, situated mutations that happened around the epicenter of the earthquake – for example the ways bodies, rubbles, seismic shocks, and the various objects of the disaster (the fences, the tent camps, the cranes of the reconstruction, the wheelbarrows of the protest, etc.) – articulated on site in unique ways and those assemblages showcase the plurality of local rhetorics that can only be captured topographically and on-site.

This emphasis on the rhetorical capacity of materiality and spatiality in the articulation of local rhetorics and the utility of the critic’s inhabitation of the places and spaces of rhetorical invention and articulation is nothing new: it has been explored extensively by rhetoricians invested in integrating qualitative methodologies with rhetorical studies in the last two decades. Rhetorical-topographical mapping, as a type of praxis to add to the toolbox of fieldwork-based rhetorical orientations, aims to capture a spatialized/material-topographic

1. The earthquake disaster I am referring throughout this essay is the L’Aquila earthquake from April 6, 2009. This earthquake killed 309 people and generated massive destruction in the Italian town. After twelve years the town has not fully recovered from the natural catastrophe yet.

rendering of the ontological plurality of local rhetorics that allows critics to trace those assemblages of matter and meaning as they emerge as specific textured constellations of site-history-culture, and also in their articulations with larger ecologies of varying spatial reach and the global geometries of power.

3. Auto-ethnographic intermezzo: Local disaster and ecological affectivity

The exigence for this project came into my life for the first time about twelve years ago, in a violent, sudden, and destructive way. It presented itself in the form a tectonic shift, an actual destructive earthquake that happened in my hometown in central Italy while I was at the beginning of my PhD program in Seattle WA, in the opposite side of the world and far away from home. I was lucky to be so far away and to not have to experience the 6.3 magnitude earthquake that changed everything for a lot people back in Italy. Not so lucky in having to process an event of that magnitude in long-distance mode, being far removed from everything that felt pressingly significant to me in those days. When I heard of the quake, after a first few hours of shock spent staring at my computer screen that was endlessly streaming the media coverage of the disaster, I felt a sense of estrangement and denial as I saw the places of my everyday life appearing on video as crumbled, broken, annihilated. It initially felt as surreal and unreal as watching a disaster movie, until I saw terrifying aerial images of my neighborhood and I started hearing reports about the death toll. Quickly my sense of reality snapped back as I abruptly confronted the unexpected in what felt at the time like a massive, impossible to grasp wave of mediated information, images, messages, and unanswerable questions. I also snapped out of it as I confronted my embodied response to the unexpected: a wave of affect, a stream of strong emotions, overwhelming feelings, and very physical reactions. I can never forget how violently my hands were shaking that morning, to the point that I kept dialing the wrong number again and again on my flip phone when I attempted to reach my family to know if everybody was ok. I still remember the sense of dizziness I felt as I stood in the classroom a couple of hours after learning about the disaster, teaching my students that day. I cannot remember what I taught, but I remember my head spinning and my effort to keep it together during what felt like the longest two-hour lecture of my entire life. To increase my panic, floating questions in my head, wondering what everyone back home might have been experiencing in that very moment, after the big earthquake and in the middle of a crumbling reality and a swarm of aftershocks. I had no idea. Even before going back to witness what had happened in person, within the spaces and places of the disaster, I felt the resonance of the earthquake on my own body loud and clear, at some 9000 kilometers of distance from the epicenter. Yet, I knew that my loved ones and everybody back home must have been experiencing something entirely different and undoubtedly more dramatic. As I processed my own inner earthquake, I quickly realized that the shift that had happened was not just a tectonic one: the seismic rupture that materially devastated my city had also suddenly interrupted the residents' experience of everyday life, causing a collective and sudden mutation of everything and of the ways of interpreting that everything—not only at the personal level, but also at the material level, and at the public life one: in the embodied experience of the places of quotidian existence, in the local history and traditions, in the topography of the city, in the scope of local citizenship, and above all in the ways of navigating daily life in this forever changed material and symbolic post-disaster reality.

3.1. Tærre-mutations: Regional and local insights

When I write about that massive shift that changed “everything” and the “ways of interpreting everything,” I am drawing from my fieldwork in the post-disaster locality, in my hometown of L’Aquila. During an on-site video interview that I discussed in previous research, one of the local residents affected by the earthquake elaborated on the local impact of the disaster, saying: “In the immediate aftermath of the earthquake we were facing a situation... a moment in which we finally had to face some serious choices – to decide what to do for the future, because everything needed to be rebuilt from scratch, and so we had the possibility to re-write the meanings of many things” (Pietrucci 2014, 71). For those living on the site of disaster, the earthquake destruction had generated a material as well as semantic void: the problem that was immediately perceptible to those living in the “seismic crater,” (an expression that started being used by the local authorities to indicate the spatialized-topographic area of seismic destruction engendered by the quakes of April 6, 2009) was not only in the material destruction of the city, in the crumbled homes and places of everyday life, but also in the “meanings of many things”: the symbolic reality of everyday normal life had suddenly collapsed, disintegrated together with the city buildings, roads, schools, hospitals. Talking to local residents, one would get the clear impression that life no longer made sense in the same ways as it did before the earthquake: the tectonic shift that destroyed the city and its surroundings had also destroyed their sense of community and belonging together with many of the symbolic “meanings” we attach to social practices or material places and things. Tectonics and architectonics, to use Rice’s words (Rice 2012), emerge as inevitably linked in the experience of the earthquake, and my goal, in my engagement with that ecology, was to better understand how those links affected local social practices and also to investigate the “tectonics” of the earthquake locality more closely.

In a few seconds, in April 2009, everything mutated in L’Aquila: the city infrastructure collapsed, and that destruction also left the local residents with a sense of “semantic void” infused in the material debris of the town and spilling over all other layers of existence: symbolic, community, collective, and civic ones. Reflecting back with a decade of distance about all those “tærre-mutations” – to use a local expression that plays with the Latin word for earthquake, *tærre motus* – here I want to highlight how local rhetorics are not accessible through a regional lens, because they emerge from the situated relations of human and more-than human-actants that can only be experienced on site and that emerge as entangled with circulating discourses about locality, disaster, politics, and life that go on to link to broader rhetorical ecologies of different spatial dimensions. In short, local rhetorics showcase rhetoric’s multiple and variable ontologies (Stormer 2016)

that we experience through inhabitation. The local rhetorics of the earthquake in L’Aquila, for example, emerge as assemblages of materiality and meaning (and in the breakdown of both) as experienced by bodies in place (or bodies displaced by the earthquake, to mention a local significant example), but also as mediated and circulated across larger spatial and ecological arrangements. Inspired by the practical and theoretical complications of researching local rhetorics in a rapidly changing post-disaster context, I now turn to investigate the complexities of engaging with rhetoric’s ontological multiplicity and mutability through a topographic lens.

4. Local rhetorics through a new materialist lens

Local rhetorics, as I am reconceptualizing them here, emerge in the relationality of human, non-human, material, cultural, social, political dimensions that are entangled and in-flux and that happen to coalesce around precise localities – yet simultaneously have the capacity to exceed those spaces. Gamble and Hanan, in their opening of a special issue about new materialisms in rhetorical theory and criticism, aptly explain the value of new materialisms in broadening our perspective on what constitutes rhetoric beyond its narrow discursive connotation, thus encouraging scholars to investigate matter and meaning, following Barad’s post-humanist perspective, as *intra-actively entangled*, as a “multitude of entangled performances of the world worlding itself” (2016, 266):

new materialisms call for an appreciation not only of the contingent dynamism and agency of the discourses, institutions and technologies that constitute an ostensibly discrete human domain, but also of matter itself. In doing so, new materialisms insist that humans and human discourses are always ontologically enmeshed with more-than-human configurations and also often seek to better understand how other-than-human creatures, critters, things, actants, objects and powers behave as meaningful agencies in their own right. As such, new materialisms invite us to revisit longstanding and foundational questions about the nature and scope of language, meaning, subjectivity, and how these relate to questions of ontology, ethics, and political intervention. (Gamble and Hanan 2016, 265)

Nathaniel Rivers, relying on Jane Bennett’s “vital materialism,” also encouraged rhetoricians to blur the lines that separate human and non-human and to embrace a “strange environmental rhetoric,” one whose “strangeness lies in the call for more relations and not less – not a removal of humans from the environment, which is the value underlying much contemporary environmentalism, but another way of comporting ourselves with environments” (Rivers 2015, 421). Drawing from object-oriented ontology (OOO) and from Bennett’s vital materialism, Rivers also proposes an attitude of “deep ambivalence” in relating as humans with our non-human others: “In the oscillation of ambivalence, there is an attitude of

equivalence. To feel ambivalent is to be equivalent. Deep ambivalence is thus an ontologically flavored rhetoric predicated on a kind of being in the world: being across a flat ontology in which all beings are equally emplaced. Deep ambivalence discloses the rhetoricity of all being in acknowledging the being otherwise of things in relations” (Rivers 2015, 431). Embracing an attitude of deep ambivalence that highlights relationality and equivalent agency of humans and non-humans, and a “strange environmental rhetoric” that blurs the separation between those humans and non-humans while simultaneously tracing their emplaced relations is compatible with a topographic orientation to the local, in its ontological plurality and emplaced materiality.

Taking inspiration from these new materialist approaches to pluralize the flat notion of the local internalized in rhetorical theory and criticism, so much that it is often infused with a static connotation even in theories and methodologies that embrace ecological and polythetic ontologies of sites, also resonates with Candice Rai’s notion of “place of invention.” A place-of-invention, as theorized by Rai, “foregrounds this idea that rhetorical invention requires an examination of the productive and profoundly situational enmeshments of rhetoric and materiality, words and things, bodies and symbols, commonplaces and literal places” (Rai 2016, 41). A place of invention, as demonstrated in Rai’s careful rhetorical ethnographic work on the complex local ecology that shaped the housing development associated with the Wilson Yard in Uptown Chicago – unpacked as a collection of topoi, understood as affective, material, symbolic, ecological as well as discursive – is another example of how local ecologies reflect in practice the polythetic conception of rhetoric I mentioned above: “to study the *places of invention* then” – says Rai – “is an attempt to keep in tow the rich, three-dimensional complexity of all that is involved in the act of invention, which is too often flattened out in the clean definition of rhetoric as the art of discovering what it is that moves people” (Rai 2016, 41). Rai’s approach looks at how materiality and symbolicity influence each other in the process of invention of democratic discourses and practices. My interest in conceptualizing plural local rhetorics closely aligns with Rai’s work and with her call for the utility of fieldwork practices such as rhetorical ethnography, auto-ethnography, or participatory critical rhetoric, in order to access the type of emplaced/embodied rhetorical knowledge that can be only gained through presence and inhabitation of rhetorical sites. My goal is not to prescribe a specific method, nor it is to provide an extended and systematic rhetorical topography of post-disaster L’Aquila.² Rather, as stated throughout, here I aim to connect the already existing theoretical, conceptual, and methodological foundations in contemporary

2. I have studied post-earthquake L’Aquila in-depth elsewhere, so I only use this example and the qualitative data I collected to showcase the need of a reconceptualization of local rhetorics, see Pietrucci 2014, 2016.

rhetorical theory to more clearly orient us towards a topographic rhetorical praxis in approaching the local.

4.1. Plural rhetorics and topographic rhetorical capacity

Inventing local rhetorics as entangled configurations of matter and meaning, of human and more-than-human, makes it necessary to also pluralize their agency, as experiencing the material force of a natural disaster is a sure and quick way of grasping with your body how agency is to be seen “not as the property of autonomous subjects but as an enactment born out of our arrangements with other human and nonhuman, discursive and nondiscursive, modalities of moving matter” (Ewalt 2016, 137).

Paraphrasing Elisabeth Grozs and Karen Barad, Joshua Ewalt clearly articulates the relation between agency and the spatial, decentering agency as the property of human subjects and distributing it across networks/articulations of human and nonhumans, and highlighting the agency of the spatial in particular: “social theory has come a long way from seeing the spatial as the backdrop to human action or a static territory, to embracing the spatial as a site of interentangled mobilities, a lively habitat built out of the meeting-up of many different trajectories of moving matter” (Ewalt 2016, 137). Ewalt describes the spatial as a “knot,” using Tim Ingold’s words, and spatial configurations or “arrangements,” using Doreen Massey’s words – as the articulations of material and semiotic elements in “the knotted world of space” by claiming that “invention is made possible by encounters with alterity, our arrangements with material others, human and nonhuman, through the spatial” (Ewalt 2016, 138). In other words, his perspective on agency is *topographic*: it has to do with the arrangements of material trajectories that put in relation humans and nonhumans through space. Nathan Stormer, in his landmark essay about articulation and *taxis* also describes space as “a dense, dynamic, heterogeneous network of material-semiotic elements that is the result of ordered, collective action. Space is not empty; no single person creates space, nor it is ready made and self-contained. Space forms and reforms, it moves and it has a history” (Stormer 2004, 270). Stormer explains that this conception of space borrowed by Henri Lefebvre is complimented by De Certeau’s definition of space as a practiced place or locus of action, and that ultimately “what makes a space unique is the historical configuration of bodies and languages and their mutual interaction” (Stormer 2004, 270). My interest in the local resonates with these conceptions of space and its agency articulated by Stormer and Ewalt.

Tracing the arrangements of human and nonhuman actants as they articulate in dynamic networks of material-semiotic elements is a way to reconsider and expand both the notion of rhetoric and the one of agency – as well as their combined

notion of rhetorical agency intended traditionally as an essentially human attribute. Most importantly, this re-thinking demands that we also reconsider and adjust our methodologies for tracing what Stormer and McGreavy call “rhetorical capacity” – a type of expanded rhetorical agency that arises in spatial articulations of heterogeneous actants, where “capacity” is replacing the idea of agency to emphasize “the ecology of entanglements between entities over the abilities that are inherent to humans” (Stormer and McGreavy 2017, 5). Thus far, I emphasized the plural ontology of local rhetorics, described as topographic assemblages of matter and meaning, and I discussed a new materialist perspective to read their agency as distributed capacity among human and non-human actants. In the next section, I proceed to unpack more in detail how we can interpret these assemblages rhetorically before incorporating discussions on fieldwork rhetorical praxis and my proposed topographic orientation.

4.2. Local rhetorics as textured assemblages of materiality and meaning

Scholars in the material and spatial turn have talked about different intertwined dimensions of contextual factors in terms of “texturality,” encouraging rhetoricians to attend to the “texture” of public discourse in order to better understand rhetoric and democratic practices in contemporary society (Conley and Dickinson 2010). Conley and Dickinson’s idea of “texturality,” for instance, can help rhetoricians grapple with the tensions among the dimensions of space, matter, mediation, and democratic practices that constitute the contexts of public discourse: thinking about the situated-ness and the “texture” of rhetoric forces us to identify symbols and discourse as always embedded in a particular configuration of time/history, space/matter, culture, and medium (Conley and Dickinson 2010). The idea of “texture” reappears in another essay by Dickinson to displace the notion of “text” and replace it with “texture” as the focal object of the process of criticism (Dickinson, 2019). Texture, for him, defines an alternative and more complex focal object for critics interested in place and space in particular.

In another recent essay about rhetoric and materiality, similarly, Brian Ott and Greg Dickinson (2019) explain in detail “why matter matters” and how matter matters to rhetoric. Once again, they encourage scholars to take materiality seriously in critical practice, specifying that doing so means to “recognize that symbolicity, while significant, does not adequately account for embodied experience and the ways that rhetoric’s nonrepresentational (asignifying) elements elicit affect, activate sensation, and induce presence effects” (Ott and Dickinson 2019, 53). Citing Karen Barad in their epigraph, they frame their call to focus our attention on matter as a way of finding a better balance in critical practice between language/symbolicity and materiality/embodiment (Ott, and Dickinson 2019, 45).

With Barad, they argue that:

Language has been granted too much power. The linguistic turn, the semiotic turn, the interpretive turn, the cultural turn: it seems that every turn lately, every “thing” – even materiality – is turned into a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation. [...] Language matters. Discourse matters. Culture matters. There is an important sense in which the only thing that does not seem to matter is matter. (Barad 2003, 801)

Thus, in order to redefine rhetoric from this posthuman/performative/materialist perspective, Ott and Dickinson propose an updated working definition of rhetoric that highlights the importance of the material, putting it at the same level of symbolicity in its capacity to move us, sway us, and be consequential: “Rhetoric” they write, “is the capacity of the thing-symbol – via its aesthetic qualities and signifying practices – to generate affect and discourse, whose intertwined sensory and cognitive processing elicit presence and meaning effects in a particular space-time” (Ott and Dickinson 2019, 54). In this perspective, rhetoric encompasses the material and the symbolic, things and discourse, it produces meaning and presence, it characterizes experience of the world as inherently and immanently rhetorical, and simultaneously decenters the human while privileging the body as a site of knowledge. This conception of rhetoric as having polythetic, multiple and mutable ontologies – along with the conception of textuality as the network of entangled things and symbols, materiality and discourse that encapsulates articulations of rhetorical experiences – is particularly appropriate to understand local rhetorics as the entangled experiences of local discourses, materialities, affects and the way their arrangements shape each other and the experience of both the material site and the discourses circulating with/in it in interrelated ways.

In addition to rhetoric scholars, also media scholars have been adopting feminist and new materialist theories to account for materiality and symbolicity in a non-hierarchical way. Hroc and Carpentier, for instance, in a recent analysis of the entanglements of materiality and discourse of Prague-based zines, use the metaphor of the “material-discursive knot” to theorize the entanglement and relationality of these dimensions (Hroch and Carpentier 2021). Carpentier – similarly to the rhetoric scholars mentioned thus far that theorized textuality, rhetorical capacity, or post-human conceptions of rhetoric by drawing on new materialisms – explains how the metaphor of the knot is useful at the ontological level because it enables us to trace the material and the discursive as “knotted,” which means in a non-hierarchical way, but in a way that reflects their embeddedness and intra-relatedness (Carpentier 2017). The metaphor of the knot prevents us from falling into the trap of the dualism of matter vs signification, thus acknowledging that

disentangling the two dimensions is impossible. Carpentier describes “the knotted interactions of the discursive and the material as restless and contingent, sometimes incessantly changing shapes and sometimes deeply sedimented” (Carpentier 2017, 4). In this model, Carpentier says, “discourse is still acknowledged for producing meaning, but the material is also acknowledged for its agentic capacity to either dislocate discourses or to invite for particular discourses to be articulated with it” (Carpentier 2017, 4).

Mapping all these entangled relationships is also a goal of the topographic practice I propose here: understanding the relations between materiality and symbolicity in a particular locality allows rhetoricians to trace rhetorical topographies that rather than flattening the local’s texture, highlight the linkages, connections, relations and nodes in their emplaced articulation and ecological circulation. Rhetorical topographies, thus, trace the relations among the actants in local assemblages of meaning and matter, highlighting a distributed and ecological sense of rhetorical capacity, and identifying the linkages between local textures and wider rhetorical ecologies across time and space. In order to be able to enact this type of praxis, however, inhabitation and fieldwork are necessary as a methodological, ontic counterpart to operationalize the ontological plurality of the local described thus far. In the next paragraph, then, I turn to discuss fieldwork and site-based methods to enact a rhetorical-topographic praxis.

5. Local rhetorics, inhabitation, and topographic praxis

Several rhetoricians have already contributed to think about the sites of rhetoric as conceptual tools for rhetorical analysis (Stewart and Dickinson 2008; Endres and Senda-Cook 2011; Prasch 2016). A number of other scholars have also contributed by turning to places/sites and advocating for fieldwork practices as a way to implicitly or explicitly investigating rhetoric in context with an ecological perspective that decenters the classic focus on texts and discourse and focuses attention to textures and the relations between discourse and materiality in their field of articulation. In the next section, I turn to these last set of scholarly conversations, before concluding by returning to the example of the post-earthquake locality I mentioned at the outset of this essay. My example will showcase how a topographic praxis can make the local present while also contributing to integrate, advance, and advocate for already existing rhetorical approaches that foreground *in-situ* fieldwork, attention to materiality and spatiality, and a recalibration of text and context.

5.1. Being there: body, movement, field

Before the turn to the field in rhetorical studies during the last two decades, one of the first rhetoric scholars to advocate embodied presence to study rhetoric's materiality has been Carole Blair with her groundbreaking exploration of the material rhetoric of memorial sites and her emphasis on the centrality of the critic's body to explore the material sites of rhetoric. The importance of "being *there*" to do criticism of memorials and memory sites, the need of inhabiting with the critic's body the sites of rhetorical investigation, two decades after her intervention, has now become a commonplace in the discipline (Blair 2001). Dickinson and Aiello, drawing on Blair, proposed a methodology for the rhetorical study of the urban built environment that also claims the centrality of the critic's body *moving through* the field, thus emphasizing bodies, materiality, and emplaced movement: "being *through there* matters," they argued (Dickinson and Aiello 2016). Both Blair and Dickinson and Aiello, gesturing towards the "there" to visit, inhabit, and move through, highlighted the necessity to go/through the specific locales and material spaces where rhetoric articulates materiality and discourse with one's own body. Candice Rai and Caroline Gottschalk Druschke also talk about the turn to the field with a reflection on presence that illustrates how "being there" in the places where rhetoric "does its work" simultaneously enriches and complicates our approaches to rhetorical studies:

Rhetorically inflected fieldwork offers important insights for understanding (and indeed, tools for participating in): the situated power and force of language; the symbolic means through which people produce meaning, generate social energy, and coordinate action in everyday life; and the connections between language and ontology, rhetoric and materiality, and words and things as they manifest in specific places and times. [...] We argue that immersing oneself in the dynamic, living, breathing, ecologies that give rise to rhetoric and its work enhances the capacity to understand and observe rhetoric as a three dimensional, situated force. (Rai and Druschke 2018, 1)

Not only fieldwork allows scholars to study rhetoric's emplacement, it also makes a wider range of texts and experiences available to the critic that they would not have access to without going *there*, being *there*, moving through *there*. Beyond greatly expanding the types of texts, artifacts, and experiences available to the critic, that can for instance collect field notes, interviews, oral histories, and observations, a crucial aspect of being there is also the exposure to the "extra textual aspects of persuasion and rhetorical performance that require our sensory facilities" or "the situated rhetorical forces that can only be observed through inhabitation, such as how place, power, materiality, embodiments, texts, and rhetoric intermesh in particular situations" (Rai and Druschke 2018, 3). This dimension of ecological relationality and materiality emphasized by Rai and Druschke also points our

attention to the necessity of going and moving through the field to experience articulations of matter and meaning in their particular local configurations.

Their perspective on fieldwork dovetails with the notion of ontologically plural local rhetorics I conceptualized thus far and it is essential for the critic interested in tracing rhetorical topographies of local textures. Rhetorically inflected fieldwork, by gesturing towards the inhabitation of a generalized *there*, “where rhetoric does its work,” directs our attention back to the local as the ecological dimension “within which rhetoric emerges, circulates, enacts, and dissipates” (Rai and Druschke 2018, 5). This dimension, therefore, is not just the background for rhetoric: rather it is its material locus of rhetorical capacity that needs to be inhabited and experienced to feel its texture and make the local present in its articulations of matter and meaning. Rai and Druschke, in their introduction to *Field Rhetoric*, describe field sites similarly to how I describe the local:

Field sites are simultaneously locations for inquiry; socially inflected ecologies from which rhetoric emerges, circulates, and perform its work, places (as well as metaphors/synechdoche/heuristics for place) in which rhetoric comes to life, entangled with meaning and forces; amalgamations of people, things, materiality, exigencies, public memories, collective dreams, myths, events, macrolevel influences and microlevel energetics that manifest as singularities in place and time; and representations of the places of persuasion that engage in the earnest (if also impossible) labors of bearing witness to the complexities of a place. (Rai and Druschke 2018, 5)

This description of the field sites describes the various elements, human and not human, that participate in the articulation of local rhetorics. The field also demands to be experienced in an embodied manner, like Blair and others have noted. In *Text + Field*, Sarah McKinnon et al. note how being in the field and looking at performances and practices along the textual, enable critics to incorporate also “bodily, affective, and sensorial elements as important types of information” (McKinnon et al. 2016, 8).

A final but important consideration about emergent field methods in rhetorical studies, in relation to the study of local rhetorics, is that they can be enacted in a variety of ways. In a recent overview about fieldwork approaches, Phaedra Pezzullo and Catalina de Onís explain that fieldwork can be conducted by scholars who identify or belong to the community, movement, or culture they study, and they argue that rigor in fieldwork praxis “lies less in a rigid set of guidelines about rhetorical field methods and more in the scholar’s capacity to make a compelling cultural critique from the evidence at hand or deduce conclusions from empirical evidence rather than preconceived assumptions” (Pezzullo and de Onís 2018, 5). Turning to the field, then, has profound implications not only in the type of rhetoric critics analyze and how they analyze it: positioning rhetoricians

within the sites where rhetoric does its work, with their own bodies, also means recognizing their own entanglements and enmeshments with those sites and their discourses and materialities within fieldwork praxis. Danielle Endres, Aaron Hess, Samantha Senda-Cook and Michael Middleton discussed this aspect of rhetorical fieldwork in their conceptualization of *participatory critical rhetoric*, as “not a prescriptive set of methods for rhetoricians in the field, but instead a set of theoretical and methodological thematics that undergird rhetorical fieldwork, including accounting for the critic’s political commitments, the scholar’s critical embodiment. Emplacement in the (con)text of rhetoric, and multiperspectival judgments as they are gained through interactions in the field” (Endres et al. 2016, 4).

Aligning with these general themes and approaches of the participatory turn in rhetorical studies, I see the topographic-rhetorical praxis I advocate for here as a tool to explore the texture of local rhetorics, mapping the relations between all those material and discursive elements articulating topographically and also circulating ecologically. In order to explore the local topographically, embodied presence, movement, and physical inhabitation in its texture are necessary modes for experiencing the capacity of both the material and the discursive, of their local entanglements in particular spaces, as well as to identify their relations with broader articulations of materiality and discursive formations. Furthermore, rhetorical-topographic praxis – as an embodied/emplaced and materiality/relationality centering type of method of inquiry into local rhetorics – sees the critic’s presence in the field as an intervention in that local texture. Being there and through there, in one’s own body, is a means of both participating in the local articulations of matter and meaning and reflecting critically on those experiences through a praxis of topographic rhetorical mapping.

5.2. Textural-topographic praxis

Kundai Chirindo has encouraged rhetoricians to get inspiration from the work of feminist geographers as examples of how rhetoricians can use bodies to spatialize rhetoric by turning to the “totality of relations that constitute bodies, place, and space” (Chirindo 2016, 131). Specifically, he argued that “it is in the turn to specificity and locality, accessible only by attending to the corporeality of the body and how it is taken up, that the richest potential for broadening rhetorical scholarship lies.” He posits that, “if, as Greg Dickinson has argued, ‘the subject is both embodied and emplaced’ (9), and rhetoric is the modality by which both subjectivity and space are articulated (Stormer; Struever), fields of possibility as vast as all the different modes of emplacement and embodiment possible await scholarly catalog” (Chirindo 2016, 130).

Thus far, following Chirindo's suggestion, I have pluralized and mobilized the local to spatialize rhetoric and I have centered embodiment and emplacement as the primary modes to enable a rhetorical-topographic praxis. Rhetoric scholars interested in spatializing rhetoric have also already engaged in a number of mapping methodologies and practices such as rhetorical cartographies (Greene and Kuswa 2012; Hayes 2016; Rai and Druschke 2018), feeling cartographies (Cram 2016), countermapping/remapping to resist colonial cartographies (Na'puti 2019), mapping and countermapping as a method of social movement framing (Ewalt 2011) and more (Walsh and Boyle 2017; Lewis 2019).

The approach to praxis I offer here, in conclusion, contributes to the spatializing efforts in rhetorical studies by offering another type of mapping methodology, *the rhetorical topography*. A topography, by definition, has a slightly different scope than a cartography. If the term cartography evokes the idea of broad or large-scale mapping, topography evokes something textured, smaller scale, and ultra-detailed. Topographic maps, for instance, include the natural and artificial features of a land, like mountains, hills, creeks. Overall, topographic mapping are maps that include the geographical contours of a land and have the goal of representing the arrangement of the natural and artificial features of an area, in a way that evokes texture and depth. Out of metaphor, the praxis of rhetorical topography that I suggest here is meant to be a tool that focuses on relationality in tracing accounts of local rhetorics in their material depth, physical thickness, textured-ness, and local ontological plurality. Rhetorical topographies focus on relationality within local textures and between local textures and wider rhetorical ecologies. A rhetorical topography maps the relations between materiality and discourse in local sites and it looks at how local discourse and materiality can link with larger geographies of power and discourse.

Topographies are useful in critical rhetorical praxis because they enable a deeper, situated understanding of local textures and the way the local is represented, felt, and understood in larger discourses about it. They can reveal, for instance, realities, experiences, and discourses that sometimes are not accessible to those who have not the experience of a locality, or they can make sense or make present the materiality and affective encounters from specific places that are obscure to those who lack an embodied and emplaced experience of them. Rhetorical topographies, in short, function by integrating fieldwork practices like autoethnography, rhetorical ethnography, oral histories, participant observation, participant critical rhetoric and other qualitative methodologies that work towards mapping materiality and symbolicity in local textures, as well as tracing the connections of that locality to larger discursive formations.

6. Topographic insights from post-disaster life

Verba Volant, Sisma Manet.
Epicentro Solidale, 2009.

In closing this essay, I return to my experience of the post-disaster context in L'Aquila as a significant example to highlight the polythetic and *not only* (in the words of Druschke) ecological dimensions of local rhetorics, as well as the possibilities of inquiry enabled by a topographic relational praxis. My intermittent residency and extended period of research in post-disaster L'Aquila taught me that the traumatic experience of the earthquake that devastated the Italian city, abruptly made the local dimensions – L'Aquila's textuality – immediately present for everyone inhabiting the town, while also destabilizing established local meanings, traditions, and the routines of everyday life. This natural disaster, with its abrupt material and affective consequences, forcefully demonstrated the rhetorical capacity of materiality (in this case this became obvious because of the sudden destruction and its powerful affectiveness) in a myriad of different ways. Here, I share a few examples from another meta-reflection from my own fieldwork in L'Aquila:

Living in a territory that is in constant motion, with incessant daily earthquake shocks. Being displaced from one's home. Enduring a context of emergency as the new normal for what feels like an eternity (13 years in, that shared feeling among residents had not vanished yet). Walking among piles of rubble and debris, in a decaying, devastated, crumbling reality. Seeing all routines and places of the everyday disappear. Looking around and seeing devastation, piled debris supported by intricate cages to support ephemeral facades of otherwise completely collapsed buildings. Thinking that all this was your city, that it was something so strikingly different just a while back: things are literally missing or displaced. Looking up to notice a roof created by the hundreds of cranes separating you from the airiness of the sky. Feeling disoriented because none of your material points of reference are there anymore: that house, that road, that restaurant. What happened to everything? The earth, shaking under your feet. Again, and again. Waking you up at night from the shocks, again and again. Becoming a human seismograph: you can measure the magnitude of that shock with disturbing precision now. Not having a home to go back to and sleeping in a militarized tent camp, with soldiers, and gates, and fences. Fences everywhere, access denied, red-zoned places. Sleeping in a car, in the cold Abruzzo nights. Feeling unsafe in every building, under any roof or enclosed space. Losing loved ones. Losing faith in those who seem to be there to help. Losing memories with each crumbled building and facade. Eating from a plastic tray. Using a blue port-a-potty as your daily restroom. Standing in a long line for your turn in the aforementioned port-a-potty. Being relocated, physically moved to some random hotel in a distant location or to a dormitory style apartment in the middle of nowhere. Seeing your life on TV. Realizing that your regular existence does not exist anymore, it is gone. It is not coming back, normality is gone. Looking around and feeling restrained by fences and blocked paths indicating red zones. Places that are now completely inaccessible. Your things, completely inaccessible. Your house, completely inaccessible. Re-building your life in a rapidly changing, under-construction, work in progress, constantly mutating context. Feeling exhausted, disoriented, unable to fully grasp or process the changes. Being thrown in a vortex of long-lasting and difficult to follow material and immaterial mutations.

Those are just a fraction, small snippets of local experiences of life within the post-earthquake locality. This short description includes some of my own experiences, from my intermittent living in L’Aquila after the earthquake. Others are experiences I have observed or heard people narrating to me in their oral histories of post-earthquake life and are documented in much detail elsewhere (Pietrucci 2016). All of them, regardless of source, are material and affective experiences that have been hard to ignore for people inhabiting that locality and that have had lasting and often complicated consequences over time. The embodied and emplaced interaction with that local texture is a prolonged lesson in dealing with the unexpected and realizing how materiality affects everything – and also the “meaning of many things” as the local resident I cited above nicely put it back in 2010.

In the epigraph at the beginning of this paragraph, I cited a phrase in Latin, meaning “words fly away, the earthquake stays.” This phrase is a play on the classic Latin proverb “*verba volant, scripta manent*” meaning “spoken words fly away, written words stay.” The proverb’s parody is from a local association of citizens from L’Aquila that organized a series of mobilizations for the post-disaster reconstruction that aptly captures the sudden collective realization that the materiality of the disaster, the local physical destruction, exceeded all the possible words one could say to describe it – that it was materially, painfully real, and there to stay, impossible to fix just with words and positive narratives. How do we make sense and make present these experiences in a way that accounts for the entanglement of things and human with other-than-human actants (rubbles, fences, cranes, tents, port-a-potty, plastic trays, wheelbarrows, safety helmets, containers), our emplaced and embodied experiences/sensorium (the fear of seismic shocks, the collective panic and reactivity to the seismicity of the area, the smell of dust and devastation, the disorientation, the discomfort of tent-camp life), and discourses about that local plight of the disaster, policies of emergency management, urban reconstruction, and community re-building? A relational, topographic praxis becomes necessary to account for this plural rhetorical character of the local rhetorics highlighted here in the example of post-disaster L’Aquila.

The last reflection from my experience in researching post-earthquake L’Aquila will be a reminder of the idea that careful topographies of local rhetorics can only be done through engagement with the local texture, experiencing its materiality through the critic’s body to capture the textural and affective features of a place through embodiment and movement – as suggested by Blair, Dickinson, Aiello and many others. A clear example of the importance of embodiment and emplacement for understanding local rhetorics is the fact that the Italian mainstream media public narratives of the L’Aquila disaster and the local counter-narratives disseminated

by the citizens' activist on social and alternative media outlets turned out to be so different because they centered different aspects: the lived, embodied, and affective experience of the disaster in the case of the local narrative, versus a general focus on representing the destruction of historical and cultural heritage and the plans for the recovery of the urban texture in the national and international coverage of the event. This textural dimension can only be experienced through the body and its movement in that location. The failure to represent this dimension in the mainstream media is what initially created a lot of resentment among the people affected by the earthquake and mobilized them to get their voices and their perspective recognized and heard by wider publics.

Besides the affective experience of "being through there," a topographic approach also strives to center local voices, experiences, and narratives that can only be accessed through direct experience or qualitative methods of fieldwork data collection. The local rhetorics of the disaster I wrote about in my work on post-earthquake L'Aquila, besides being grounded in my own embodied and emplaced experience as resident and dweller of that locality, sometimes were also traced through the collection of oral histories voluntarily shared with me, sometimes through semi-structured interviews, other times through a rhetorical-ethnographic approach. I have also occasionally engaged in autoethnography, as evidenced in this essay as well, and participant observation or participant critical rhetoric during times of public mobilizations.

To sum up, throughout this essay I argued that local rhetorics have a polythetic ontology and *not only* an ecologic character. They emerge as rhetorical textures from complex assemblages of entangled matter and meaning and they circulate and articulate with larger discursive formations and geometries of power. In order to access local rhetorics it is necessary to adopt a topographical orientation that incorporates in the critical process methods such as fieldwork or site-based praxis characterized by local inhabitation. An integration of fieldwork practices with the critic's movement within a locality, together with a critical orientation that centers the topographic relationships between materiality, symbolicity, and their entangled articulations is the outcome of the critical praxis I envisioned in this essay.

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