**Chronologies of Character: Rhetoric, Time, and *Ethos***

A Dissertation Abstract

“Chronologies of Character” develops a theoretical framework for better understanding how rhetoric unfolds over time. While *kairos* helps rhetors analyze and deploy persuasive strategies that appropriately respond to the shifting exigencies of a particular moment, such a narrow temporal focus on “right timing” overlooks the important ways that suasive forces also accrete from one rhetorical encounter to the next. To attend to this cumulative rhetorical energy, I examine how the ancient Greek idea of *chronos* can augment rhetorical notions of time and function as a companion concept to *kairos*. *Chronos*, I contend, also foregrounds the role of nonhuman actants in rhetorical ecologies, acknowledging the deep relationality from which rhetorical temporalities emerge. Such a *chronos*-based sense of time, moreover, provides an improved structure for comprehending the rhetorical concept of *ethos*, which—unlike other persuasive strategies that may be selectively deployed—is always present in rhetorical encounters. Figured through the lens of *chronos*, this “cumulative *ethos*” becomes a decentralized and emergent force: it evolves across digital media platforms and imprints itself on human and nonhuman interactions, accruing strength and speed over time.

Chapter 1, “Theorizing *Chronos* for Rhetoric,” asserts that Aristotle’s kinetic sense of time, *chronos*, has important implications for persuasion. Through an analysis of Aristotle’s *Physics*, I reveal how *chronos* functions not simply as a quantitative measure of time but, instead, as a dynamic and subjective temporality that arises from—and rhetorically impacts—worldly interactions. Rather than perpetuating a social constructionist view of rhetoric that sees *chronos* as a rhetorical tool manipulated by rational human subjects, I highlight Aristotle’s surprising ambivalence toward an anthropocentric view of time and extend his theorization of *chronos* with the help of new materialism. Here, I show how a posthuman view of *chronos* has three key qualities that govern its rhetorical impact: emergence, interactivity, and sequence. Taken together, these elements construct a picture of *chronos* as a rhetorically significant *material* force that emerges from the deep entanglement of nonhuman and human ecologies.

Chapter 2, “Cumulative *Ethos*,” demonstrates how a robust theory of *chronos* alters scholarly understandings of rhetorical character, or *ethos*. Researchers typically describe *ethos* as either a product of discourse or a contextualized authority granted by social position. But such notions problematically bifurcate *ethos* into a momentary kairotic element or a static background component; as a result, they both align *ethos* exclusively with human subjects and thus fail to describe the ways that character accumulates over time. A posthuman rhetorical theory of *chronos*, however, attends to the ways that an emergent *ethos* in one moment lingers and bleeds into rhetorical futures. Unlike prior theories of rhetorical character, this model—which I call “cumulative *ethos*”—does not refer to a single rhetorical strategy or a feature that an agent *possesses*. Instead, it identifies an ongoing and distributed *process* of accumulation that molds character over time. In short, “cumulative *ethos*” traces the evolution of character as it arises from the repeated interactions of both humans and nonhumans and contributes to the ongoing mobilization and fossilization of *ethos*.

Chapter 3, “Rhetorical Velocities and Kanye’s Mediated Character,” demonstrates how rhetorical character develops different speeds and trajectories depending on the nature of its mediation. Using the model of “cumulative *ethos*,” I examine how the provocative character of rapper, celebrity, and clothing-designer Kanye West evolves across a variety of media. This chapter extends Laurie Gries’ new materialist method for visual analysis to also include textual, sonic, and digital elements. As such, I track West’s *ethos* as it emerges from his studio albums, videos, photos, television appearances, live performances, clothing line, blog posts, critical reviews, online fan responses, and social media correspondence. Rather than attempting to develop a single interpretation or a stable linear narrative of West’s *ethos*, this investigation reveals how a variety of human and nonhuman actants contribute to the nonlinear, conflicting, and ongoing (re-)mediation of West’s character. But this heterogeneous process of accretion, I argue, develops at different velocities depending on the types of media involved.

Chapter 4, “Blockchain and Cryptocurrency Credibility” demonstrates how cryptocurrencies such as Bitcoin generate public appeal by leveraging a networked model of “cumulative *ethos*” that resides on unstable political and ethical ground. While material currencies derive their authority from centralized sources (e.g. the government institutions that produce them), cryptocurrencies generate credibility through the vast network of computers and publics that undergird their revolutionary “blockchain” technology. Although these cryptocurrencies appear to embrace the emergent, cumulative, and distributed nature of *ethos* that I outline in this dissertation, I caution that such a model is not immune from malevolence. Indeed, the rapid rise and fall in value of many cryptocurrencies foregrounds their vulnerability to speculative traders who seek to exploit the emergent nature of a cryptocurrency’s *ethos*. Such investor behavior, I suggest, emphasizes that even a chronological, networked, and posthuman view of *ethos* still does not resolve one of the oldest problems in the field: the possibility that rhetoric may be manipulated for good or for ill.

In the final chapter, “Staking the Possibilities of Rhetorical Time,” I outline the stakes of extending scholarly considerations of rhetorical time to include *chronos* as well as *kairos*. Doing so, I contend, helps rhetors better account for the ways that persuasion functions across a series of rhetorical encounters. Understanding time as a cumulative can, for instance, help scholars track the ways that a subject’s *ethos* or democratic discourses accrue rhetorical energy as they circulate at different velocities in digital media. At the same time, foregrounding the material aspects of rhetorical time can reveal the ways in which humans and nonhumans alike are enmeshed in an ongoing web of relations that distributes rhetorical forces like *ethos* not only across networks of actants but also across temporal periods. This focus on chronological temporalities, I conclude, may make possible new strategies for both rhetorical analysis and production that attend to the intertwined and often sequential nature of rhetorical interactions.