Review: Space, Place, and the Public Face of Composition
Reviewed Work(s): Making Writing Matter: Composition in the Engaged University by Ann Feldman; City of Rhetoric: Revitalizing the Public Sphere in Metropolitan America by David Fleming; Living Room: Teaching Public Writing in a Privatized World by Nancy Welch
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REVIEW: Space, Place, and the Public Face of Composition

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Fleming, David. *City of Rhetoric: Revitalizing the Public Sphere in Metropolitan America*. Albany: SUNY P, 2008. 368 pp. Print.

Welch, Nancy. *Living Room: Teaching Public Writing in a Privatized World*. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 2008. 184 pp. Print.

Over the last decade, issues of space, place, and location have become pressing concerns for scholars in the humanities. A search for *space* in the MLA database turns up 48,407 hits for works published since 2000; *place* turns up 83,149. This geographical interest is also reflected in a collective fascination with terms such as terrain, territory, boundaries, borders, and mapping. In rhetoric and composition, this interest does not just rest on the level of representations or metaphors of space. Instead, it hinges upon the mutually constitutive relationships between physical spaces and rhetorical practices.

Feminist scholars including Roxanne Mountford, Nan Johnson, Nedra Reynolds, and Jessica Enoch have examined how physical spaces (the pulpit, the parlor, the daycare center) shape and are shaped by gendered rhetorical practices. Ecocompositionists have demonstrated how natural spaces are constructed through discourse (Dobrin and Weisser), while scholars of public memory point to the rhetorical shaping of memorials and monuments as sites of collective identity construction (Halloran; Blair; Wright). Scholars have also turned their attention to the construction of electronic spaces (Gillespie, Julier, and Yancey; Burbules) and to these spaces' con-

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nections to physical locales (Doheny-Farina; McPherson). And historians of rhetoric and composition instruction point to the connectedness of pedagogical traditions to particular spaces (Hawhee; Kates).

This rhetorical investment in space is also connected to our longstanding public and pedagogical commitments. The turn to service-learning or community-based inquiry in composition reflects a desire to connect writing instruction to the physical spaces in which it is situated, or to forge new connections to the spaces that surround the writing classroom: the campus, town, or city neighborhood. In the books reviewed here, David Fleming, Ann Feldman, and Nancy Welch each connect rhetorical practices in specific places to public writing. Each of these works can be considered as extensions of Johnathon Mauk's claim that "the physical geography of an institution, and the human geography which surrounds and constitutes it, have an impact on the topography of composition courses—and ultimately influence the success (or failure) of pedagogical strategies" (374). In other words, these authors connect their investigations of public writing to the particular spaces in which it occurs. In Fleming's case, the institution in question is not a university, but the public housing projects of Cabrini Green in Chicago. Feldman's study explicitly argues for links between the university and the local community with which it often *fails* to make connections, describing a community-based sequence of writing courses that forge connections between the University of Illinois–Chicago (UIC) and its local neighborhoods. In Welch's case, the place of the university is the focal point, but Welch takes the "human geography" to include both the local community (the city of Burlington, Vermont) and the national political issues that concern its citizens. Each of these books points to connections between material spaces and the kinds of rhetorical education (formal or informal) they can or should enable.

Fleming's *City of Rhetoric* focuses on public discourse and urban environments in America, arguing for a reciprocal relationship between the two. The increasingly stratified *spatial* arrangements of our cities, suburbs, and towns, he argues, both result from and exacerbate stratified *political* relations (xi). Through a close examination of the history of one of Chicago's well-known housing projects, Cabrini Green, Fleming demonstrates that how we organize space *matters*, particularly for the kinds of rhetorical spaces they encourage (or discourage). In the first three chapters, Fleming situates his study with relation to scholarship in political theory, urban space, and civic discourse. Here, he argues for a renewed focus on public discourse at the level of the city district—an area containing approximately 50,000 to 100,000 people. This "middle sphere," he suggests, has been neglected by rhetoric and composition scholars, who tend to focus on the nation-state as a site for civic discourse (56). Yet, the urban district is an important rhetorical space because it is "small enough that individual residents belong to it and have a reasonable chance to be seen and heard in it, but large enough to allow for a measure of both diversity and power" (56).

In the next four chapters, Fleming turns to his case study of Cabrini Green, and to how the physical design of this space and its imagined alternatives might contribute to rhetorical community. Chapter 4 maps a history of the ghetto in Chicago, tracing the social, economic, and governmental forces that turned what was originally a thriving multi-ethnic, lower-class community into acres of racially stratified, isolated blocks of high-rise public housing projects. The spatial arrangement of Cabrini Green creates "a low-status group segregated from others, isolated from the wider world, cut off from power, its members placed on a life trajectory that promises only increased inequality and thus increased segregation" (89). Fleming argues that this leads to rhetorical isolation as well, where the only places available for public meetings are unsafe ones—lobbies, elevators, stairs, laundry rooms, or the large expanses of empty playgrounds (89). Without what Jane Jacobs termed "eyes on the street" (qtd. in Fleming 45)—the concentration of daily activities in public spaces that lend safety and provide social interactions—ghettos provide little opportunity for rhetorical communities.

When Fleming was writing *City of Rhetoric*, discussions were underway about the future of Cabrini Green, which had been slated for renewal and redevelopment. Each of the next three chapters focuses on a different spatial solution to the "problem" of Cabrini Green—suburbia, new urbanism, and resident management corporations (or RMCs). In Chapter 5, Fleming shows how suburban spaces limit opportunities for rhetorical community by privatizing public areas; by decreasing personal interaction and diversity through high-priced, low-density housing arrangements; and by consolidating civic concerns into a small set of middle-class desires (such as protecting property values or maintaining good schools) (96). Fleming examines Schaumburg, Illinois, as an example. Here, the opportunities for rhetorical community seem no broader than the ghetto's; as a planned community, Schaumburg lacks public spaces in which rhetorical actions could flourish. In their very design, Fleming concludes, suburbs are "*a*political and may even be *anti*political" (119). Schaumburg, in particular, "is no polis; it is a private corporation designed to protect property values and keep taxes in check" (119). Proposals to move former Cabrini Green residents into suburbs through housing vouchers, Fleming fears, would do little to reduce isolation or improve rhetorical community, even if moving into the suburbs might have some benefits (such as better schools or increased safety).

Chapter 6 considers the new urbanist alternative: redeveloping Cabrini Green as a mixed-income, mixed-use community. Given its desirable location, city planners hoped to raze Cabrini Green and build an urban village, providing both subsidized housing for low-income families and market-rate housing for young professionals. On the surface, such an arrangement might seem to offer great hope for a rhetorical community—the residents would come from diverse socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds, and the village would include a range of public spaces (schools, parks,

stores, a library, and so on). Yet, in the new urbanist proposals he examined, Fleming found a strong emphasis on unity rather than difference that masked the overall goal of catering to the higher-income residents of the community (141). In this way, he suggests, "poor, black, inner city families are denied a place to stand *as a people* and participate in a free and open public" (141). Further, the proposed village would not accommodate all of the former residents of Cabrini Green, many of whom would be displaced to other low-income communities in the city. Ultimately, these residents had little say in the design of the village, and all residents suffered from the disruption, losing connections to their homes, friends, family, and neighbors. These spaces seem to further constrain the rhetorical opportunities of low-income individuals, whose needs and interests are likely to be subordinated to those of the higher-income residents.

Next, Fleming considers whether resident management corporations might provide low-income residents with opportunities to imagine and build their own communities. Here, Fleming takes up the example of one Cabrini Green building, 1320 North Burling Street, where a group of residents, mostly women, began an RMC to oversee building security and management. After managing the building for more than ten years, the residents of 1320 North Burling Street hoped to be spared from redevelopment, but their proposal was denied by the Chicago Department of Housing. Nonetheless, Fleming locates rhetorical benefits in the RMC arrangement, such as opportunities for self-determination, leadership, personal and communal advancement, civic education, and, most important from a rhetorical perspective, the opportunity to express needs, desires, and demands in speech and writing to outsiders.

The final two chapters conclude by considering, more broadly, whether "different human environments of the contemporary North American metropolis affect the *rhetorical* 'inventiveness' of their inhabitants" (186). Fleming concludes in the affirmative, suggesting that spaces can influence whether and how one acquires certain rhetorical habits (188). Channeling Jane Jacobs, he suggests that dense, lively neighborhoods can spur "civic skills and sensibilities" (Fleming 189), while physical isolation can lead to decreased participation in civic issues. Fleming identifies five key factors that contribute to rhetorically rich communities: accessibility, density, diversity, publicity, and sovereignty (190). Although these spatial factors do not guarantee a workable rhetorical community, they should be considered in plans for community spaces. Though not primarily a pedagogical text, the book concludes by suggesting that public schools should participate in fostering rhetorical communities by encouraging students to use "language to effectively, responsibly, and publicly render their experiences, values, and opinions" (205).

Although Fleming suggests, in brief, a few pedagogical projects to fit these goals, for a more detailed study of pedagogical approaches to the problem Fleming outlines, we might turn to Ann Feldman's *Making Writing Matter*. The turn is

especially apt because Feldman's book outlines a community-based civic leadership project at the University of Illinois–Chicago, the same city Fleming addresses. Just as Cabrini Green was spatially and rhetorically isolated from the city around it, so too is the UIC campus isolated from its environs. Feldman describes how the campus itself had originally compartmentalized students and faculty by placing teaching in classroom buildings that were separate from the main campus tower, where faculty had their offices (101); and how the university itself was physically isolated from the low-income communities that surround it (such as Pilsen, Little Village, and North Lawndale). To bridge this spatial divide, Feldman and her colleagues developed the Chicago Civic Leadership Certificate Program (CCLCP), an undergraduate initiative that links writing instruction to community-based learning across a series of courses. The goal of CCLCP is to link scholarship and teaching with the needs of citizens in the neighborhoods surrounding the university.

In the first half of her book, Feldman uses the notion of *embeddedness* to argue for engaged scholarship as a model for undergraduate writing and research. She reappropriates the term from Stanley Fish, who used it to describe the ideal position of the student/scholar within a discipline. Feldman, by contrast, uses embeddedness to describe the ideal relationship between the student/scholar and his or her geographic context (15). By situating engaged scholarship within the rubric of embeddedness, Feldman refers to "a participant's deep involvement in specialized communities of practice populated by community and faculty participants working together to find solutions and responding to pressing concerns" (17). In Chapter 2, Feldman elaborates on this idea, arguing that writing assignments should ask students to engage with issues relevant to the places in which they live. Here, she suggests that focusing on genres, in particular, can help teachers and students to make these connections. Chapter 3 takes the form of a diary, which Feldman encourages us to understand as a rhetorically motivated "back story" (71); it narrates the events leading up to the founding of CCLCP.

Teachers of composition, administrators of writing programs, and others who are interested in developing similar programs will find plenty of useful material, especially in the second half of the book, where Feldman traces the contours of the CCLCP curriculum. In Chapter 4, Feldman describes how the first-year curriculum was developed, provides a rationale for the kinds of assignments that were chosen, and outlines how community-based partnerships were forged. Those familiar with service-learning and engaged scholarship might be especially interested in the section in this chapter titled "Rethinking Reflection in Community-Based Writing." Service-learning pedagogy often emphasizes *reflection* as a key to bridging the *service* component of, say, volunteering in a community literacy center, with the *learning* component of a class in English composition or education. Yet Feldman argues that we often misconstrue the genre and purpose of the "reflection essay." Rather than

narrate students' experiences in a straightforward, literal way, these essays frequently reflect students' own awareness of the real rhetorical situation: they are writing for a grade, and their essay is an argument. Further, the underlying purpose for reflection essays is often, implicitly, to measure changed attitudes—greater awareness and concern about poverty, the environment, or whatever the issue might be. Rather than assign reflection essays, then, Feldman and her colleagues chose to focus on writing with and for the community partners they recruited. Accordingly, students wrote fact sheets, brochures, and other genres for the agencies they worked with, and then constructed explicit argumentative essays in which they described how they had met pedagogical goals (such as solving problems through writing, or applying rhetorical principles of genre, situation, and language).

In Chapter 5, written with Candice Rai and Megan Marie, Feldman outlines in detail the assessment practices developed to adjudicate community-based learning. In addition to writing assignments designed in collaboration with community partners, students wrote argumentative essays that demonstrated how they had met learning objectives for the course, which included "negotiating complexity," "engaging social issues," and "collaboration/teamwork" (159). Chapter 6 outlines how Feldman trained new writing teachers to teach within a program based on engaged scholarship and writing. Ultimately, Feldman suggests that CCLCP provides an example of how writing instructors can move beyond the standard "first-year writing," "basic skills" type of paradigm, focusing instead on approaches that situate students within the "liminal space" between the classroom and a real or imagined rhetorical situation. In such a paradigm, students should ultimately "see themselves as constructing a rhetorically driven representation of that real or imagined situation" (179–180). For instance, while working with local organizations, students wrote feature stories, Web content, biographies of community members, and information sheets (140–142). In this framework, the pedagogical goal is not to teach students a set of de-contextualized skills (such as "comparing and contrasting" or "paragraphing"), but to encourage them instead to develop skills in identifying the rhetorical choices called forth by the localities in which they are writing.

While both Fleming and Feldman focus their attention on local issues, Nancy Welch's *Living Room* extends this focus to bridge rhetorical practices in individual communities with broader national political issues. Welch's focus is on how to teach students the specific rhetorical strategies and practices that might be useful in the twenty-first century context that she fears offers little room for engagement in public discourse. In Chapter 1, Welch makes the case that an increasingly privatized world diminishes public spaces for rhetorical action, outlining what she calls "the neoliberal logic that reprivatizes a host of vital public issues, placing them outside the realm of what is arguable or tucking them away in the gated domains of credentialed specialists" (9). To counteract this tendency, Welch calls for education in the history of

argumentation about social justice, a pedagogical program that would expose students to the historic struggles for civil rights, access to health care, labor organizing, and so on (10). By turning toward past rhetorical struggles as examples, and by reinvigorating the canons of memory and delivery, Welch hopes to uncover strategies that can lead to more democratic and more influential arguments on key issues (5). For instance, Welch suggests that we expand our focus in rhetorical education to include not just individual speakers or writers, but group action—social protests by women, workers, and civil-rights activists that involve posters, slogans, chants, and embodied actions as well as more traditional forms of speech and writing.

In Chapter 2, "Ain't Nobody's Business," Welch outlines in further detail how rhetorics of privacy have expanded, sometimes unintentionally, to constrain spaces for public argument. Interestingly, it is not just corporate or neoliberal interests that privilege privacy, but even (perhaps unintentionally) the rhetorical framing of liberal issues, such as abortion rights, in terms of personal privacy rather than social rights. In her classroom, Welch encourages students to reconsider their personal, private interests as public concerns: to connect, say, recent experiences of maple syrup farmers in Vermont with global climate change.

Though some of what Welch describes seems to fall into the realm of critical pedagogy, other assignments move beyond critique to more direct rhetorical action. In Chapters 3, 4, and 5, Welch describes how she encourages students to find audiences for their own rhetorical projects, using historical examples as inspiration. Interspersed between these chapters are Interludes, which include instructive examples from both personal and organizational perspectives. For instance, the Interlude between Chapters 3 and 4 draws inspiration from the rhetorical actions that African American workers in the automotive industry took in the 1960s and 1970s to fight against the increasing automation and acceleration of production. Welsh shows how these workers saw the production line as "their prime site for exercising persuasion," organizing production shutdowns as well as slogans, pamphlets, and newspapers to promote their cause (76–81). Lessons drawn from the past demonstrate, Welch claims, that "[o]rdinary people *make* rhetorical space through a concerted, often protracted struggle for visibility, voice, and impact against powerful interests that seek to render them invisible" (93). For Welch, then, space functions both literally and figuratively in the kind of rhetoric she is envisioning: rhetors must make figural space (in the sense of kairos) in order to intervene in the rhetorical issues. And they can do this, often, by occupying physical space. For example, Welch describes how students at the University of Vermont created a "Tent City" on the campus lawn in order to draw attention to the university's failure to meet livable wage guidelines for service, clerical, and part-time teaching staff (146).

Drawing from these historical examples, students in Welch's courses have organized public panels on welfare reform in Vermont, or created found poems about

foreign policy issues and posted them in downtown Burlington. In the process, Welch and her students negotiate physical and figurative spaces and, indeed, blur the distinctions between the two. The goal of this struggle, Welch argues, is to see rhetoric not as a specialized *techne*, but as "a *mass, popular art*" (89).

These works, and the many others in the field of rhetoric and composition that they extend, establish (1) that space matters to rhetoric and composition in material ways; and (2) that rhetorical education should ask students to situate themselves within different kinds of spaces—cities, neighborhoods, and organizations as well as the university. Together, these studies contribute to the ongoing project of rethinking the role of publics and public writing in composition studies. All three might prompt scholars to think about how the spaces of universities, colleges, and schools might themselves encourage or discourage public discourse. Feldman, Fleming, and Welch also encourage us to think about pedagogical strategies that situate students in urban (or rural or suburban) spaces in which they live, engaging them in writing projects that extend into those communities.

What is missing from these studies? As scholars, we might do more to consider our own ethical and ideological entailments as we venture into the spaces surrounding our colleges and universities. First, what are our responsibilities toward our students? In at least two cases mentioned in the books reviewed here, students enter situations through the course of public writing assignments in which their safety is threatened. For instance, Feldman includes an account from one of her students who felt proud of her bravery when she ventured nervously out to meet with her community partner at a coffee shop in the Pilsen neighborhood at 8:45 p.m. What does it mean for Feldman's student to enter a Chicago neighborhood alone at night? Given the social messages women receive about going places alone, at night, do we feel comfortable requiring our students to do so? Similarly, one of Welch's students was detained by the police when she posted flyers in downtown Burlington in spaces (in this case, a metal utility box) deemed private. The student was let go with a warning that she would be fined $50 for each poster hung in a "non-designated area," but was undeterred. Although Welch's assignment did not ask the student to choose this kind of rhetorical act, this student's detainment did result from her assignment. Are we comfortable with the consequences of asking students to move into spaces where their safety might be threatened? Welsh concludes the section with a list of questions ("Did I know Katie's rights in such a situation?" "Was she required to give this cop her permanent address?") and suggests that her class did not prepare students to address the kinds of legal issues involved (88). If we are to pursue this kind of work with our students, it seems that, as a discipline, we should produce guidelines and resources that would enable us to do so knowing the legal and ethical entailments of moving writing into public spaces.

Second, how can we ensure that our public writing assignments avoid what

Feldman decries as "changed attitudes" (114) rather than participation in a writing context, or worse, what critics might deem indoctrination into certain ideological positions? How do we deal with the ideological issues that will certainly spring up from these projects? For example, Welch cites examples of students writing poems against the Iraq War, organizing conferences against sweatshop labor, and creating a comic book for AIDS/HIV activists. But are we equally comfortable with students writing in favor of the Iraq War, in favor of globalized low-wage labor, or in favor of abstinence-only responses to the AIDS crisis?

I've struggled with these questions in my own teaching. In one science writing class I taught at the University of North Carolina (UNC), I lined up three community organizations for students to work with: (1) a nonprofit group that promotes computational science education; (2) the university arboretum; and (3) a student-led organization focused on environmental issues, such as promoting alternative transportation. I was surprised when none of my students chose to work with the student-led group: one student commented that she didn't think politics belonged in the classroom, while another suggested that the representative who came to talk to our class (a UNC student) seemed less polished and authoritative than the representatives from the other (non-student) organizations. In retrospect, these students' reactions stem from ideological issues. As Christian Weisser suggests, ideology normalizes power relations in public discourse, granting authority to some speakers and issues over others (97). Apparently, the long-haired student speaker, who showed up to speak to my class wearing shorts and a T-shirt, having just biked to campus from his office, seemed less authoritative than the button-down-shirt-clad representatives from the other organizations. Further, an issue that I had considered relatively apolitical—who isn't for lower carbon dioxide emissions?—seemed like an imposition of a political viewpoint to one of my more conservative students. Students were more comfortable working in the spaces of the other two organizations. As a class, we visited the shiny new high-rise in downtown Durham where the computational science group was housed; and students felt familiar with the on-campus space of the arboretum. It seemed that no one wanted to go to the shabby, run-down office space in working-class Carrboro, where the student group was housed.

In some cases, these kinds of conflicts can be productive. At Penn State I taught a service-learning course in technical writing, in which students worked with a state nutrition program to refine its website. The nutrition program aimed to provide training in meal planning to low-income citizens across Pennsylvania. One group of students in my class strongly opposed the program, pointing out that the website provided no detailed information about nutrition; residents would need to enroll in the nutrition program and attend classes to get that information. These students suggested that this system assumed that low-income people (a) lived close enough to one of the nutrition program locations to attend classes, and (b) had reliable

transportation to get to those classes—assumptions that were not necessarily true, especially for rural residents of Pennsylvania. In this case, my students were attentive to the special location of the audience for their writing, an attentiveness they found lacking in the program itself.

As an alternative to the website assignment, these students decided to write a report on the feasibility of creating Web-based nutrition training. Yet they ran up against the institutional constraints faced by the nutrition program itself, which received government funding for each individual that enrolled in its classes. In this case, the writing assignment proved to be an interesting case study of the constraints, motivations, and ethical entailments of organizations. At any rate, composition instructors who include service-learning and public writing assignments need to be able to anticipate these kinds of conflicts, and to have strategies at hand to address them.

I do not wish to suggest that the goals of localized writing are not important or valid. But as a field, I think we need more discussion of these kinds of ethical and ideological entanglements. If students do not identify with the goals and purposes of the communities with which they are working, their public writing can still fall into the traps Feldman identifies for reflection essays and other service-learning genres: writing to meet the teacher's (and perhaps the organization's) ideological commitments as well as academic requirements. In this way, such assignments fail to address a key component of public writing, that is, enabling students to, in Weisser's words, "connect with counterpublics comprised of like-minded individuals" (107).

Of course, these three works alone do not exhaust the many spatial dimensions of composition. None of them takes up virtual space in great detail, nor does any deal explicitly with wildernesses, or even the classroom as its own kind of space. Yet, if we place these works alongside the scholars cited in the introduction, we have a rich body of work that examines a wide range of rhetorical spaces, places, and their attendant pedagogies and possibilities for civic discourse.

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