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Review
Reviewed Work(s): City of Rhetoric: Revitalizing the Public Sphere in Metropolitan America by David Fleming
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Source: *JAC*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (2009), pp. 843-848
Published by: JAC
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/20866927
Accessed: 10-05-2018 19:43 UTC

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Reviews

City of Rhetoric: Revitalizing the Public Sphere in Metropolitan America, David Fleming (State U of New York P, 2008. 332 pages).

Reviewed by David Coogan, Virginia Commonwealth University

City of Rhetoric is a well-researched, highly readable, and ambitious book—"the first study," as the author notes in the preface, "of modern civic life" that links "political philosophy, urban design, and rhetorical theory" (xii). The subject is the land-grab in Chicago's public housing—how it grew out of institutional and discursive practices that made dispersal of the poor not only possible but, strangely, politically popular. But that's not the ambitious part, telling this story, linking those fields. The ambitious part is in its address—what Fleming asks us to consider not only as teachers and scholars of rhetoric and composition, but also us as citizens, presumably living somewhere in metropolitan America. Against the "insistent 'privatism'" of American life, "that search for personal happiness" amongst "communities of the like-minded" (14), Fleming asks us to imagine the greater public good. What he wants is a "metropolitan public" that straddles the binaries of urban and suburban, a public designed to foster social interchange across cultural and economic difference, an "urban district" of 50,000–100,000 people that sits between "the humane but politically powerless street 'neighborhood' and the powerful but overlarge 'city as a whole'" (57).

The inspiration for this idea of a metropolitan public in political philosophy (including an earlier iteration on that ideal number), Fleming

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argues, is the Greek tradition of the polis, which he defines as a place where people came together and "disagreed with one another while maintaining their association" (13). We in rhetoric, of course, are tireless champions of the polis, especially this idea of "agreeing to disagree." But what associations with other people do we really have that span the sort of differences that have perpetuated inequality? Based on the geography of our own lives—professional and personal—is it even possible to champion the idea of the polis without taking huge swigs of hypocrisy?

Honestly, I don't know. I live in a gentrified little enclave of a much larger inner city neighborhood with some serious crime problems. So you can see my dilemma. When a dozen men were carrying on at 10:30 pm in the playground just across the street from my house, the same spot that once served as a jump-off to a gang rape in the park two blocks away, I didn't think it'd be great if I lived "in a community," as Fleming writes about the polis, "that literally set[s] aside time and space for the public rendering and negotiation of conflicts" (13). I thought it'd be great if the police patrolled the spot more regularly. But I live in a spatially and racially divided neighborhood with a low tax base. There is no metropolitan public, the way Fleming imagines it. At least, I don't have access to one. And if Fleming's research connecting political philosophy, urban design, and rhetorical theory is to be trusted, neither do you.

"What kind of political life is this?" he challenges, rehearsing the oft-heard criticism of that Habermasian vision of open and inclusive publics, the idea of a national public sphere that alienates us from local public spheres. "Can we really bracket the specific contingencies and circumstances that make us different from one another" (21) in order to join rhetors in public deliberation? Of course not. Unfortunately, however, the new cultural geographies of postmodernism that celebrate "our fragmented lives in a space of events, a flow of bits" (30) only exacerbate this disembodied sense of the public. These postmodern, globalist, digital-friendly publics cannot help us figure out how to "actually live in *this* world" (30). The deep roots of the polis that we ought to be tending are parched dry by theories of the public that center on the liberatory touch-n-go of time—publics as "processural" (Rosa Eberly), as a "framework for an event" (Carolyn Miller), or as "a performance in *time*" (Susan Wells) (30, 31). "Places matter!" Fleming exclaims. "And the way we

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know this is that we routinely make discriminations among them: we know which are better and which are worse" (32). We know when a playground is no longer a playground.

Now, Fleming's idea of place is not tied to any one group controlling the land. He's not sentimental about neighborhoods. And he's critical of the fastest growing kind of near-polis—those groups of property owners who meet to deliberate about what's best for their property, not to cross the borders of their property in search of a greater good. But Fleming contends that "the feeling is widespread: despite the hyperactivity, interconnectivity, and fluidity of our era, most people want more than anything to inhabit communities where they can flourish" (34). The central paradox that *City of Rhetoric* tries to unravel is that "flourishing" tends to mean seeking private happiness amidst "communities of the like-minded" (14). My idea of flourishing may not be the same as the ideas of those guys across the street from my house having a party in the park in the dark. What incentives do I have, then—what incentives do any of us have—to seek a greater public good based on the struggle to know difference?

Fleming wrestles with this paradox through the remarkable story of the remaking of Cabrini Green, a public housing development in the heart of Chicago. This infamous complex of row houses and high-rises may be best known as the fictionalized setting for the TV show *Good Times* and the all-too-real setting for incredible gang violence and drug excess in the 1980s and 1990s. However, in *City of Rhetoric*, it is the setting for a different kind of drama. Through a careful reading of the historical record, Fleming shows that before there was a Cabrini Green, there was a ghetto that did not involve African-Americans; this precursor to the federal era of subsidized public housing had more jobs and intact families. The story of that first slum clearance starts with the lure of clean and modern high rises, giving way to the chaos and crisis that Cabrini (among other public housing communities) came to be known for, albeit unfairly, sensationally. What commentators tend to miss, Fleming argues consistently throughout, are the majority of mainstream strivers in public housing who want nothing more than to maintain a home.

In Fleming's hands, the story of Cabrini's downfall is one part headline-grabbing tales of decadence and several parts government

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neglect, ignorance, or discrimination. His emphasis, in other words, is less upon the morality of some residents who chose drugs and crime over work and family, and more upon the morality of public policies that favored suburban growth, triggering the flight of middle-class blacks and whites from the inner city. He traces this to the tumultuous 1980s, when the community saw a dramatic rise in female-headed, young households, an increase in gang violence, more vacant apartments, a dramatic loss of basic services and facilities maintenance, and questionable policing. The Reagan revolution rolled on when Clinton promised to "end welfare as we know it" in the 1990s and delivered. Fleming is good at tracking the exigency for change here in the tittering excitement of public discourse, that trigger-happy enthusiasm for blowing up the buildings—and what they stood for. But what attracted Fleming to this particular housing community, as a rhetorician, was not just the story of the powerful overtaking the powerless, but the sudden "plasticity" in public discourse about the projects—the idea the city could do anything, be anything. In three chapters, Fleming discusses three competing proposals for the fate of Cabrini Green—three claims, essentially, about the kind of public we want.

The first proposal is to tear down the projects—to deconcentrate poverty—by giving the people vouchers to live in the suburbs. Fleming follows the trajectory of this argument into one such well-off place, Schaumburg, Illinois, where he finds little evidence of vouchers being used for private-market housing. The second plan is for a mixed-income community made up of subsidized rentals and town homes, a deliberate and possibly unique attempt nationwide, Fleming argues, to integrate the classes. "But the real winners here," he writes in the afterward, are not the same winners the planners had originally imagined in their portraits of people sharing a common space in harmony, but "the white childless couples who have scored cheaper housing" (213). In planning documents, Fleming shows, these residents are characterized as empowered investors with money and mobility who make the *noble* choice to live near the poor. Public housing residents, meanwhile, are openly characterized as people in need of "training in order to live in middle-class neighborhoods." Fleming, quoting one resident who is clearly disgusted by this kind of characterization, responds, "We do not 'need help being people'"

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(159). In fact, the real losers in *City of Rhetoric* are these kinds of residents who happen to love their homes in Cabrini and are betrayed not only by a city that denies their request to become the owners/managers of their own building—this is the third proposal—but also by their neighbors in the more dangerous corners of Cabrini, who manage to make the negative characterizations rhetorically salient for developers and politicians.

Still, the smug morality that Fleming criticizes, the rhetoric of middle-class noblesse oblige that pulled the tablecloth out from under the spread of the welfare state, misses that noble struggle to know difference. It fails to imagine a more challenging kind of nobility, where all classes and races can learn from each other. The poor don't need help being better people. We *all* do, and we suffer, Fleming argues, and I tend to agree, when we concede ground, literally, to the binaries of urban/suburban, rich/poor, black/white, and so on.

But seeking structural solutions, as Fleming does so well—the ideal size of a polis, the ideal design of our built environment, the ideal policies for social justice, even ideal classroom practices that give students a "deeper and more concrete historical sense regarding their own communities" (208)—misses something smaller, something more basic and intimate in the search for sustainable publics. In order to stay open to the *possibility* of a generative interchange across difference, I need to realize the real chance it might fail. We may admire the women in that resident-management corporation of Cabrini Green, as Fleming clearly does: their stewardship, their audacity in confronting gang members, caring for each other, advocating for their rights. But just on the other side of their deliberative chambers are the people unable or unwilling to join in.

When I was working on the south-side of Chicago, interviewing successful leaders in public housing, I learned this lesson in stark morality from the leaders frustrated by the ones unwilling to join in. "What's the psychology behind that," Larry asked from across the folding table in the Robert Taylor Homes, his face wrinkled up in disgust, "leaving your child in the crib all day while you're out getting high?" As a community organizer in the Boys and Girls Club, he sees more of this than he cares to. "You come home, the child's all dirty and crying, hungry. What's the

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psychology behind that?" I wish I had a better answer for Larry back then. And I wish Fleming had been as tough on this kind of resident as he was on the politicians and policy makers. But that may be asking too much of a book that already implicates its readers in both the problems with public life in America and their potential solutions.

"As we have seen in this book, we have not yet succeeded in imagining, let alone building, a world where our conflicts are actually and literally *faced*, seen as part of who we are: a diverse people who live together, despite and even through our differences" (202–03). One could argue that recent work in community literacy, public writing, and service learning—which Fleming does not really discuss—has at least recognized this problem and begun to address it. Recent titles, such as Eli Goldblatt's *Because We Live Here*, Linda Flower's *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement*, and Paula Mathieu's *Tactics of Hope*: *The Public Turn in English Composition*, have arguably imagined *and* enacted practices for facing shared conflicts, using writing and teaching to open up spaces for inquiry across difference, although they do not take on systemic problems in our built environment in the way that Fleming is arguing. A book that I am co-editing with John Ackerman, *The Public Work of Rhetoric: Citizen Scholars and Community Engagement*, likewise takes seriously the charge to rethink publics from the particulars of place.

If we continue to ignore place, as Fleming fears we may do when we ask students to join publics, we're right back where we started, with an essentially representative form of government on the one side, and us on the other forming opinions of the other. "Government is still remote and other; the issues are still ideologically stark; and politics is still something you do primarily by choice" (42). You don't do it because you have to. And that, Fleming argues convincingly, is by design. The book leaves you wondering just how best to upturn it.

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