City of Rhetoric: Revitalizing the Public Sphere in Metropolitan America, by David Fleming

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BOOK REVIEWS

Debra Hawhee, Editor

David Fleming, *City of Rhetoric: Revitalizing the Public Sphere in Metropolitan America* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2008), xiv+332 pp. $85.00 (cloth).

"OK, quick, close your eyes," wrote Peggy Noonan in an August 18, 2008, *Wall Street Journal* editorial. "Where is Barack Obama from?" The question is admittedly a stumper. Obama seems to come from an amalgamation of places—Hawaii, Chicago, Indonesia—although from no place in particular. The same goes for John McCain, raised as a navy brat, who landed in Arizona only after a long-distance journey around the globe. Noonan laments that the 2008 election between two cosmopolitan candidates reflects an "end of placeness" that we are all experiencing right now. We have become *cosmo polites*, citizens of the world. Of course, Noonan's lament about an end to placeness is nothing new. Critical theorists and popular writers alike have long considered the contemporary condition of placelessness (see Marc Auge's *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* [London: Verso, 1995], for example). Yet, the effect of placelessness on deliberative public rhetoric has received relatively scant attention. Here is where *City of Rhetoric* makes a strong contribution to the growing study of rhetorics and place. Fleming's book examines two sides of the same place problem. While our political and rhetorical pedagogies have become increasingly anti-urban, our city spaces have likewise become anti-rhetorical and anti-political. His answer (far from a Noonan-like lament) is that we must simultaneously revitalize the rhetorical and material spheres.

Fleming argues that the key features of postmodern space—networks, globalization, and hybridity—minimize the visibility of local context. Because we seem capable of being anywhere at any time in the telecommunications age, the physical geography of our lives might appear to be less critical. However, in shifting attention away from our immediate material circumstances, the citizen has been recast as "a disembodied rights-bearer, a roving cosmopolite, an itinerate consumer, a migrant worker" (24). Such disconnection between physical place and public discourse breaks with the classic ideal of a polis that tightly mingled language, politics, and space. Athenian citizens were able wrangle together *in* public places, *about* public places. Yet, according to Fleming, the rhetorical polis now looks more like a cosmo-polis, which has engendered a somewhat rootless rhetoric in our cities and suburbs.

The contemporary disconnection among discourse, politics, and place is reflected in our increasingly context-free rhetorical pedagogies. Persuasive discourse has been repackaged as a portable skill that can be deployed regardless of our specific physical or social environments. Fleming argues that rhetorical pedagogy is too rarely contextualized within the material spaces that we (and our students) inhabit. At the same time, there is the related problem of an increasingly anti-rhetorical character to our material spaces. The mass move away from cities has meant that people tend to congregate in suburban neighborhoods filled with residents who have roughly the same demographic qualities. Encounters of difference are fewer than in urban

cities, which minimizes opportunities for healthy deliberative conflict among citizens. Even if opportunities for deliberation do occur, there are fewer and fewer public spaces for its engagement.

However, *City of Rhetoric* is not a critique of postmodern space. It does not simply bemoan a lost "placeness," as Noonen does in her piece on the presidential candidates. Fleming begins with this familiar critique, but he quickly moves forward by thinking about how to build public spheres that are grounded in local conditions of place. His underlying premise is that places can affect individual capacity for participation, whether it is due to local violence that scares people away from common areas or simply a physical separation that discourages people from gathering outside private spaces. Fleming seeks new ways of designing material spaces in order to increase rhetorical and political engagement among citizens. The recurring questions throughout *City of Rhetoric* ask how we can create physical spaces that link people together. How can we create accessible places that do not demand assimilation and allow us to deliberate about differences, all while preserving a sense of fixed spatial existence? What kinds of real urban spaces can potentially reinforce and recreate politically and rhetorically active publics? Fleming attempts to answer these questions by examining different spatial configurations in one of Chicago's most infamous neighborhoods: the Cabrini-Green housing projects. Through his case studies of Cabrini-Green, Fleming hopes to discover whether different kinds of territorial publics can encourage different kinds of social life. He hypothesizes up front that a re-organization of our actual physical spaces can turn city space back into a rhetorically and politically engaged polis.

After laying out the theoretical stakes of his argument, Fleming begins to tell the complex story of Chicago's Cabrini-Green housing projects and the residents who once called the projects home. The very name "Cabrini-Green" conjures up images of depressing high rises, gang violence, drugs, and a classic example of poor urban design. For Fleming, the projects also evoke images of a stunted rhetorical sphere: "[W]hat were these places like as scenes of public discourse? of political decision-making and civic activity?" (88) The answer is not surprising. Cabrini-Green's design actively discouraged civic engagement through the lack of open and safe public space, as well as the neighborhood's lack of diversity. Residents had no physical place in which to inhabit their civic roles, yet they also experienced very little ethnic, racial, or class differences that might spark deliberation. Eventually, the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) launched numerous initiatives that aimed to solve the problems of life in public housing projects. Fleming devotes three chapters to the more visible CHA initiatives: dispersal, mixed-income development, and self-management. In each case, he asks what rhetorical possibilities the new designs enabled or disabled.

Chapter 5, "Suburbia: Shaumburg, Illinois," examines the CHA's policy decision to disperse public housing residents to suburban areas through Section 8 vouchers. At first glance, relocating inner-city residents to the suburbs may seem like an ideal solution to the many problems of housing projects. Yet, Fleming shows that not only did suburban towns discourage public housing residents from relocating to their area, but the residents themselves did not necessarily benefit from such relocation. Suburban space is not ideal to rhetorical engagement, according to Fleming. In fact, "the suburbs may be, by their very form, unfavorable to public life" (119). They are centerless, their scale is awkward, and their density is quite low. Fleming argues that typical suburbs are created specifically for a private life, which might help explain their apolitical quality. When some Cabrini-Green residents relocated to Chicago suburbs as part of the Section 8 dispersal program, therefore, they did not necessarily encounter new opportunities for social engagement. Although former public housing residents

did experience more privacy, increased personal safety, and better schools, these spaces did not enable them to enjoy more political decision making and civic activity.

The next case study in chapter 6, "The New Urbanism: North Town Village," closely analyzes North Town Village, a mixed-income community of attractive townhomes built on New Urbanist principles. In the shadow of former Cabrini-Green high-rises, designers created spaces that would attract both middle-class homeowners as well as public housing residents. In many ways, this mixed-income spatial configuration seems to be an ideal setting for a reinvigorated rhetorical public. Not only were public housing residents living next to middle- and upper-class residents, but North Town Village would also be home to different ethnicities and family structures. Likewise, the New Urbanist principles maintain a high-density urban design, which avoids the numbing spatial gulf found in suburban neighborhoods. But North Town Village ultimately does not serve as an ideal public space for rhetorical engagement, in spite of its innovative urban design principles and its creative community-building efforts. Fleming's case study shows how North Town Village's planners actively managed and tamed potential encounters with difference through staged interactions between residents. Public activities such as the Community Building Storytelling Project, in which all residents were encouraged to build a common narrative of a unified community, downplayed actual differences in residents' backgrounds by emphasizing the commonality and sameness of all residents. Topics about race and class were eliminated from North Town Village's public discourse in order to minimize potential conflict.

In the course of his analyses, Fleming shows how healthy public spheres can be degraded by racial and ethnic neighborhood homogeneity, low-density living spaces, and avoidance of encounters with difference. But what are some urban designs that could possibly reinvigorate an active public sphere? In chapter 7, "Home," Fleming examines one configuration that seems to model the ideal scene of public discourse. The high-rise at 1230 North Burling Street may not be as attractive as the New Urbanist townhomes of North Town Village, but they are self-governed by a residential council. The residents themselves formed a housing co-op, which elects members to work with HUD and the CHA. Rather than being deliberated about, the residents are themselves deliberating about decisions that affect them on a daily basis. Fleming concludes that this model is a working example of public rhetoric because residents are in close proximity to one another, and they are given the right to deliberate about their own living conditions. In other words, residents can represent themselves and their world through direct contact with each other.

Fleming concludes his case studies by praising the urban space of city neighborhoods as an ideal place for the public sphere's revival. Cities are heterogeneous, which opens opportunities for argument and debate, while the typical size of city neighborhoods also preserves a sense of cohesion among residents. Fleming's version of ideal public space is "small groups of the like minded connected to and by larger, but still accessible, publics that are quite diverse" (183). As reflected by his scathing critique of suburban spaces, Fleming is persuaded that scale and size of community can have a significant impact on our ability to engage rhetorically. It matters whether we write ourselves as rhetorical agents into the scene of the nation-state or the scene of the neighborhood. Although we are often encouraged to "think globally, act locally" (as if the global scene of imaginary agency was the preferred form), Fleming identifies a smaller scale as the ideal civic space. He imagines something like Thomas Jefferson's "little republics," which are large enough to create density and thus increase opportunities for encountering others, but not so large that voices get drowned out by the larger mass. Rescaling and redesigning can help to turn urban spaces (back) into healthy public spheres.

Many places throughout *City of Rhetoric* reminded me of Eric Zencey's essay "The Rootless Professors" (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 12, 1985), which argues that academics in general are a rootless bunch. Zencey writes, "As citizens of the *cosmo polis* ... professors are expected to owe no allegiance to geographical territory; we're supposed to belong to the boundless world of books and ideas ... not the infinitely particular world of watersheds, growing seasons, and ecological niches" (72). Zencey's words are often repeated in the growing scholarship on place-based pedagogy and critical place studies, a category into which I would readily place *City of Rhetoric*. Fleming, Zencey, and other critical place theorists urge us to closely examine unchecked cosmopolitanism within the academy. At the end of the day, most rhetorical theorists have little say in the urban designs of material spaces. But we do have a choice in whether our pedagogy is mindful of the material spaces in which we are situated. Resituating rhetorical theory within our local geographies is yet another way to reinvigorate the polis as a real space where we can wrangle with one another.

In short, *City of Rhetoric* is a hopeful book. But if it has any shortcoming, it is the way Fleming places singular hope in urban spaces. There is good reason why the book is subtitled *Revitalizing the Public Sphere in Metropolitan America*; the claims here are very much about metropolitan areas. Meanwhile, I read this book while sitting in a typical suburban house, in between teaching classrooms full of students who mostly come from shady suburban towns. Revitalizing urban space is not an option for me, and I must work within the scale of my particular suburban-rural contexts. At times, *City of Rhetoric* falls into a romanticized discourse about the city, yet Fleming's emphasis on the urban hardly negates his underlying call to re-place rhetoric. Our challenge is to discover how pedagogies can respond to the specific needs and contours of our local geographies. Can we create place-based discourses that allow us to deliberate about differences, all while preserving a sense of fixed spatial existence? If Fleming is right—if rhetorical place can indeed be repaired—then Noonan's elegy is unwarranted. The end of placeness can be rewritten. Whether it can be rewritten in places outside of the city, however, remains to be seen.

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Ted Striphas, *The Late Age of Print: Everyday Book Culture from Consumerism to Control* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), xii + 242 pp. $27.50 (cloth).

The Late Age of Print is a welcome contribution to a growing body of work on book (or print) culture. Ted Striphas skillfully navigates potentially choppy waters, defending what is of value in a sometimes contentious area of inquiry and sailing clear of what is not while sure-handedly pursuing his own course. This monograph is notable in particular for its quiet insistence that we examine book culture *as culture*. In fulfilling the analytical and argumentative promise of that insistence, its author provides critical-cultural and communication scholarship with a singular and revealing perspective on an important dimension of contemporary public life.

As Striphas politely explains, this book is not another plangent ode to reading: its fostering of interiority, its talent for bridging difference, or its traumatic overthrow—an unsuspecting textual Rome set ablaze at the hands of digital Goths—in late modernity. Why not? Because (1) reading and the culture it sustains are not dead (ix), and (2) our ideas about what that culture signifies are in any case off the mark (2, 5). These claims ground and orient a third assertion: we will not do conceptual justice to book culture until we train our sights on a