

Unframing Models of Public Distribution: From Rhetorical Situation to Rhetorical Ecologies

ABSTRACT: Whereas earlier work on rhetorical situation focuses upon the elements of audience, exigence, and constraints, this article argues that rhetorical situations operate within a network of lived practical consciousness or structures of feeling. Placing the rhetorical “elements” within this wider context destabilizes the discrete borders of a rhetorical situation. As an example of this wider context, this article explores the public rhetoric surrounding issues of urban sprawl in Austin, Texas. While public rhetorical movements can be seen as a response to the “exigence” of overdevelopment, it is also possible to situate the exigence’s evocation within a wider context of affective ecologies comprised of material experiences and public feelings.

[P]laces. . . are best thought of not so much as enduring sites but as *moments of encounter*, not so much as ‘presents’, fixed in space and time, but as variable events; twists and fluxes of interrelation. Even when the intent is to hold places still and motionless, caught in a cat’s cradle of networks that are out to quell unpredictability, success is rare, and then only for a while. Grand porticos and columns framing imperial triumphs become theme parks. Areas of wealth and influence become slums.

—Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift

Elemental Frameworks

In his multifaceted description of what constitutes a public, Michael Warner explains why certain notions of “public communication” have done us such a disservice. He writes:

No single text can create a public. Nor can a single voice, a single genre, or even a single medium. All are insufficient. . . , since a public is understood to be an ongoing space of encounter for discourse. It is not texts themselves that create publics, but the

concatenation of texts through time. . . . Between the discourse that comes before and the discourse that comes after, one must postulate some kind of link. And the link has a social character; it is not mere consecutiveness in time, but a context of interaction.

(62)

Warner tells us that this is why the overly simplified models of communication—often represented through the triangulated terms *sender*, *receiver*, *text*—are nothing short of a conceptual paradox. He continues, “A public seems to be self-organized by discourse, but in fact requires preexisting forms and channels of circulation” (75). Herein lies the paradox: sender-receiver models of public communication tend to identify a kind of homeostatic relationship, which simultaneously abstracts the operation of social links and circulation. The triangle of sender, receiver, text misses the concatenations that come to constitute Warner’s version of a public.

Of course, oversimplified sender-receiver models of public communication have been productively complicated by theories like Lloyd Bitzer’s notion of the rhetorical situation, which theorized the contextual dimensions of rhetoric. As Bitzer explains, “When I ask, What is a rhetorical situation?, I want to know the nature of those contexts in which speakers or writers create rhetorical discourse. . . .” (“Rhetorical” 382). This starting point places the question of rhetoric—and the defining characteristic of *rhetoricalness*—squarely within the scene of a situational context. In his explicit definition, Bitzer writes that a rhetorical situation is “a natural context of persons, events, objects, relations, and an exigence which strongly invites utterances. . . .” (385). As many commentators of Bitzer have pointed out, his definition locates exigencies in the external conditions of material and social circumstances. Bitzer himself tells us that exigencies are “located in reality, are objective and publicly observable historic facts in the world we experience, are therefore available for scrutiny by an observer or critic who *attends to them*” (“Rhetorical” 390; emphasis mine). In Bitzer’s schema, rhetoricians answer an invitation to solve a problem through discourse, which is then rendered as rhetorical discourse. Richard Vatz’s infamous critique against Bitzer’s “realism” challenges the notion that exigencies exist in any autonomous sense. Whereas Bitzer suggests that the rhetor *discovers* exigencies that already exist, Vatz argues that exigencies are *created* for audiences through the rhetor’s work.

In yet another critique of Bitzer, Craig Smith and Scott Lybarger argue that rhetorical situation involves a plurality of exigencies and complex relations between the audience and a rhetorician’s interest. In this way, Smith and Lybarger revise Bitzer’s relatively autonomous notion of exigence by making it more interactive with other elements of the situation. They offer an example of this reconceptualized situation in their analysis of two 1989 speeches from President George Bush concerning the “war on drugs.” Using

a modified version of Bitzer's model, Smith and Lybarger identify three main elements of Bush's speeches: exigences, audiences, and constraints. At the time of these speeches, they write, polls reported that the public felt drug abuse was a serious problem. Media reports "helped increase the interest in the problem by providing direct knowledge of it. Bush took advantage of an attitude that the press reinforced" (203). Accordingly, this public concern constrained Bush's choices of which public exigences to address in his official attention. At the same time, of course, Bush's articulation of "the drug crisis" helped to reinforce this exigence as a rhetorical problem that must be addressed. Smith and Lybarger emphasize the mutuality of exigence from the positions of rhetorician and audience, reflecting how both elements help to create the sense of problem. This is a careful modification of Bitzer's model in that the authors link the articulation of exigence(s) to multiple agents and constraints.

In short, Bitzer's theories, as well as the critiques and modifications like those above, have generated a body of scholarship that stretches our own notions of "rhetorical publicness" into a *contextual* framework that permanently troubles sender-receiver models. Returning to Warner for just a moment, however, we might still ask whether notions of rhetorical situation adequately account for the "constitutive circulation" of rhetoric in the social field. Do theories of rhetorical situation allow us to theorize how "concatenation of texts through time" help to create publics? Barbara Biesecker's critique of these models suggests that perhaps the answer is *no*. According to Biesecker, the problem with many takes on rhetorical situation is their tendency to conceptualize rhetoric within a scene of already-formed, already-discrete individuals. For Biesecker, this problem can be seen in the way these models often treat "audience" as a rather unproblematic and obvious site. The trouble, she writes, is that:

if we posit the audience of any rhetorical event as no more than a conglomeration of subjects whose identity is fixed prior to the rhetorical event itself, then . . . the power of rhetoric is circumscribed: it has the potency to influence an audience, to realign their allegiances, but not to form new identities. (111)

Here we arrive at an un(der)explored line of inquiry into one of rhetoric's most familiar and most revered theoretical-pedagogical paradigms. Biesecker's critique points to the way in which various models of rhetorical situation tend to describe rhetoric as a totality of discrete elements: audience, rhetor, exigence, constraints, and text. In other words, despite their differences, these various takes on rhetorical situation tend to be rooted in the views of rhetorics as *elemental conglomerations*.

Louise Weatherbee Phelps proposes a similar critique in her argument that many theories of discourse (and, by extension, we could also say of

rhetoric) represent discourse as “a set of discrete components (units and correlated functions) based on variations and elaborations of the traditional communication triangle” (60). Rhetoric and discourse thus become conceptualized as a collection of elements—often called by such names as speaker-audience-message, ethos-pathos-logos, or rhetor-audience-constraints-exigence. Although such element-based theories of discourse have important explanatory power, continues Phelps, there is also great power in describing

how an element (e.g., the writer as “ethos”) is *discriminated from a flux* and perceived as invariant, stable, and autonomous. . . . Natural and traditional categories acquire greater depth and scope when we . . . temporalize them, interpret them as metaphors, expand their range of variation, multiply their interpretants, pursue their logic to the limit, or treat them in historical-institutional terms. (60; emphasis mine)

Rather than seeing rhetoric as the totality of its discrete elements, Phelps’ critique seeks to recontextualize those elements in a wider sphere of active, historical, and lived processes. That is, the elements of a rhetorical situation can be re-read against the historical fluxes in which they move. While the incarnations of rhetorical situation create complex frameworks for understanding a rhetoric’s operation in a particular social scene, therefore, both Biesecker and Phelps interrogate the effects of building a model around a “conglomeration” of distinct elements in relation to one another.

The weakness of “conglomeration” models is tacitly exposed in Smith and Lybarger’s analysis of Bush’s “war on drugs” speeches, for instance. When Smith and Lybarger discuss the exigences involved in the “war on drugs,” they point to audience perceptions, Bush’s speeches, media images, and the various constraints of all participants. They emphasize the important role that perception plays, since “each auditor will have a perception of the rhetor *and* the message in addition to a perception of the issues, [which means that] rhetorical communication is always in a state of flux that requires the critic to move beyond the strict realism of Bitzer” (200). The exigence is more like a complex of various audience/speaker perceptions and institutional or material constraints. Indeed, because “exigencies are everywhere shot through with perceptions” (197), there can be no pure exigence that does not involve various mixes of felt interests. Their analysis thus suggests a problem of location; the exigence does not exist per se, but is instead an amalgamation of processes and encounters: concerns about safe neighborhoods, media images, encounters of everyday life in certain places, concerns about re-election, articulations of problems and the circulation of those articulations, and so forth. The exigence is not properly located in any element of the model. Instead, what we dub *exigence* is more like a shorthand way of describing a series of events. The

rhetorical situation is part of what we might call, borrowing from Phelps, an ongoing social flux. Situation bleeds into the concatenation of public interaction. Public interactions bleed into wider social processes. *The elements of rhetorical situation simply bleed.*

In order to rethink rhetorical publicness as a context of interaction, therefore, this article proposes an augmentation to our popular conceptual frameworks of rhetorical situation. Rather than primarily speaking of rhetoric through the terministic lens of conglomerated elements, I look towards a framework of *affective ecologies* that recontextualizes rhetorics in their temporal, historical, and lived fluxes. In what follows, I want to propose a revised strategy for theorizing public rhetorics (and rhetoric's publicness) as a circulating ecology of effects, enactments, and events by shifting the lines of focus from *rhetorical situation* to *rhetorical ecologies*. Like Biesecker, Phelps, and Warner, I want to add the dimensions of history and movement (back) into our visions/versions of rhetoric's public situations, reclaiming rhetoric from artificially *elementary* frameworks. While one framework does not undermine the other, I argue that this ecological model allows us to more fully theorize rhetoric as a public(s) creation.

Situs, Situation, and the Idea of Place

We might begin this conceptual augmentation by exploring some etymological tropes that remain buried within our popular theories. Consider the following: tracking the Latin roots of "situation" brings us to the key words *situare* and *situs*, both of which resonate with our definitions for location, site, and place. The Latin word *situs* is closely tied to the originary position of objects. (Significantly, this term still has currency in legal vocabulary as reference to the places in which a crime or accident occurs, or the location of property.) By definition, then, *situs* implies a bordered, fixed space-location. Consequently, the concept of "rhetorical situation" is appropriately named insofar as the models of rhetorical situation describe the scene of rhetorical action as "located" around the exigence that generates a response. We thus find a connection between certain models of rhetorical situation and a sense of *place*. But the public existence of *situs* is complicated. As Steven Shaviro points out in *Connected*, the social does not reside in fixed sites, but rather in a networked space of flows and connections. "The predominant form of human interaction . . . is *networking*," he writes (131). Moreover, this "networked life" is a matter of actual, historically-shaped forces of flows themselves. Shaviro explains:

[T]he network is not a disembodied information pattern nor a system of frictionless pathways over which any message whatsoever can be neutrally conveyed. Rather, the force of all messages, *as they accrete over time*, determines the very shape of

the network. The meaning of a message cannot be isolated from its mode of propagation, from the way it harasses me, attacks me, or parasitically invades me. (24; emphasis mine)

Temporarily bracketing the rather ominous perspective that Shaviro brings to this sense of connection, we find that networks involve a different kind of habitation in the social field. To say that we are connected is another way of saying that we are never outside the networked interconnection of forces, energies, rhetorics, moods, and experiences. In other words, our practical consciousness is never outside the prior and ongoing structures of feeling that shape the social field.

At the same time, life-as-network also means that the social field is not comprised of discrete *sites* but from events that are shifting and moving, grafted onto and connected with other events. According to Shaviro, “The space [of networks] can be exhilarating, disorienting, or oppressive, but in any case it is quite different from the space of places” (131). Our sense of place tends to remain rooted in an imaginary that describes communities as a collection of discrete elements, like houses, families, yards, streets, and neighborhoods. Nevertheless, Shaviro explains that place should be characterized less in terms of this sense of community (discrete elements taken together), and more in the interactions *between* those elements—their encounters in the crease and folds:

What’s crucial about the space of places is rather something other than “community”: the fact that, in large urban agglomerations, networking is less important than . . . *contact*: the serendipitous encounters between strangers. . . . These sorts of encounters happen in the pedestrian-friendly spaces of older large cities. . . . The space of places is less that of nostalgically idealized traditional communities than that of turbulent urban modernity. (132-133)

In this way, place becomes decoupled from the notion of *situs*, or fixed (series of) locations, and linked instead to the in-between en/action of events and encounters. Place becomes a space of contacts, which are always changing and never discrete. The contact between two people on a busy city street is never simply a matter of those two bodies; rather, the two bodies carry with them the traces of effects from whole fields of culture and social histories. This is what it means to say that the social field is networked, connected, rather than a matter of place, sites, and home.

The notion of place has also recently become much more complicated in the theoretical frameworks of both cultural geographers and rhetoricians. In *Geographies of Writing*, for example, Nedra Reynolds argues that it is important “to understand geographies as embodied, and how the process of social construction of space occurs at the level of the body, not just at the level of the city or street or nation” (143). What we normally take as “sites”

are not only comprised in a *situs* or fixed location. Reynolds explains that these “sites” are made up of affective encounters, experiences, and moods that cohere around material spaces. This is why sites are not just seen, but (perhaps even more so) they are felt (147). She gives the example of certain students with whom she worked during her study in Great Britain. When questioned about their city, the students had no trouble at all identifying the “bad” and “good” parts of town. Although these “good/bad” sites may even have fairly solid boundary markers (*east of the freeway, downtown, southside of town*), we might argue that these sites are not only comprised *as such* through their location or collection of elements. Instead, they obtain their descriptions as good/bad sites from the affective and embodied experiences that circulate: feelings of fear or comfort, for instance.

Even in those spaces that are more obvious examples of bordered sites, we find it increasingly difficult to speak in terms of fixed place. Take the example of cities, which cultural geographers Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift thoroughly rework in *Cities: Reimagining the Urban*. According to Amin and Thrift:

[C]ontemporary cities are certainly not systems with their own internal coherence. The city’s boundaries have become far too permeable and stretched, both geographically and socially, for it to be theorized as a whole. The city has no completeness, no centre, no fixed parts. Instead, *it is an amalgam of often disjointed processes and social heterogeneity, a place of near and far connections, a concatenation of rhythms* (8; emphasis mine)

The city itself is less a *situs*, say Amin and Thrift, than a certain way of processing. In fact, it may be more appropriate to rethink “city” less as a noun (implying a *situs*) and more of a verb, as in *to city*. We *do city*, rather than exist *in the city*. Amin and Thrift argue that cities are more about movements and processes than the elements that materially construct their borders. They explain, “We certainly take circulation to be a central characteristic of the city. . . . [C]ities exist as a means of movement, as means to engineer *encounters* through collection, transport, and collation. They produce, thereby, a complex pattern of traces, a threadwork of intensities. . . .” (81). Amin and Thrift thus move away from the site-model framework of urban spaces, which renders the city as a kind of “container” for the unique elements that the city envelops.

The site-model would imagine, for example, that Austin is a container for the local elements within a given space, much as New York is a container for another set of local elements. Talking about those two different cities merely involves talking about the different elements held by the same (kind of) container called “city.” New York might thus be described as containing more diverse population elements than Austin; or perhaps Austin could be described as a container for more conservative political elements. Yet Amin

and Thrift suggest that the city-as-container does not adequately describe the city as an *amalgam of processes*, or as a circulation of encounters and actions. Rather than relying upon the container metaphor, therefore, they offer up an ecological metaphor in order to read the city:

[I]t is only by moving beyond the slower times of the city's built fabric—which seem to form a container—to the constant to and fro of the movements which sustain that fabric that we can begin to understand what a city is. . . . The city becomes a kind of weather system, a rapidly varying distribution of intensities. (83)

Though cities are indeed *sites* (or can even be described in terms of borders, boundaries, and containers), Amin and Thrift suggest that these *sites* (the *situs*) are sustained by the amalgam of processes, which can be described in ecological terms of varying intensities of encounters and interactions—much like a weather system.

From Situs to Distribution

What does this discussion of cities and sites have to do with the rhetorical situation? For one thing, we find in the early models of rhetorical situation a notion of rhetoric as *taking place*, as if the rhetorical situation is one in which we can visit through a mapping of various elements: the relevant persons, events, objects, exigence, and utterances. But this place-based perspective becomes troubled when attend to the ecological models that cultural theorists (such as Shaviro, Reynolds, and Amin and Thrift) have developed alongside site-specific models of social processes. In *The Wealth of Reality: An Ecology of Composition*, Margaret Syverson performs one such alternative framework by arguing that writing is a radically *distributed* act, rather than an isolated act of creation among individual elements. According to Syverson:

[T]he knowledge involved in “writing” . . . depends on activities and communications shared in interactions not only among people but also interactions between people and various structures in the environment, from physical landmarks to technological instruments to graphical representations. . . . Our theories of composition have been somewhat atomistic, focusing on individual writers, individual texts, isolated acts, processes, or artifacts. (8)

Syverson argues that rhetoric and composition “has posited a triangle of writer, text, and audience,” which “has tended to single out the writer, the text, or the audience as the focus of analysis” (23). This isolated view fails to highlight what Syverson calls the emergent ecological process of writing. Rather than focusing on the familiar “triangle” that places various elements into a static relation with the other elements, Syverson maintains that “we can speak of the distribution of . . . [text composing] across physical, social, psychological,

spatial, and temporal dimensions. . . . [T]he social dimensions of composition are distributed, embodied, emergent, and enactive” (23). Syverson’s ecological approach places the “scene” of writing into a field that is distributed and socially situated. Writing is thus more than a matter of discrete elements (audience, a writer, text, tools, ideas) in static relation to one another (a writer types her ideas into a computer for an audience who reads the text). Rather, writing is distributed across a range of processes and encounters: the event of using a keyboard, the encounter of a writing body within a space of dis/comfort, the events of writing in an apathetic/energetic/distant/close group. A vocabulary of “distribution” points to how those elements are enacted and lived, how they are put into use, and what change comes from the in-processes-ness itself.¹

Much like Syverson has done in her own work, we can tune to a model of public rhetoric that sets its sights across a wider social field of distribution. Such attunement is important if we want to account for rhetoric’s (public) operation in the social field. That is, if we are to explore how rhetoric circulates in a “practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity,” as Raymond Williams puts it (132), we need a model that allows us to discuss such movement. Rather than imagining the rhetorical situation in a relatively closed system, this distributed or ecological focus might begin to imagine the situation within an open network. Returning to Amin and Thrift’s notion of a city as a weather system, or an agglomeration of processes, we recall how we saw that “city” might better be conceptualized in terms of a verb—as in *to city*—as opposed to a noun. This grammatical oddity parallels the ways we speak in terms of *rhetoric* as a verb: we *do rhetoric*, rather than (just) finding ourselves *in a rhetoric*. By extension, we might also say that rhetorical situation is better conceptualized as a mixture of processes and encounters; it should become a verb, rather than a fixed noun or *situs*. This kind of foregrounding within an affective field offers the possibility of a vocabulary that reveals a wider context for public rhetorics.

To borrow another conceptual metaphor, we are speaking about the ways in which rhetorical processes operate within a viral economy. The intensity, force, and circulatory range of a rhetoric are always expanding through the mutations and new exposures attached to that given rhetoric, much like a virus. An ecological, or *affective*, rhetorical model is one that reads rhetoric both as a process of distributed emergence and as an ongoing circulation process. Deleuze and Guattari give us one example of such an affective rhetoric in their introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus*, where they write about the *becoming* of evolutionary processes that happen between two or more species. Rather than a hierarchical transmission of genetic information, evolution involves a kind of sharing and an emergence that happens in the in-between of species. This is what Remy Chauvin describes as an “*aparallel evolution* of two beings that have absolutely nothing to do with each other” (quoted in Deleuze and Guattari, 10). For example, write Deleuze and Guattari:

[Consider] Benveniste and Todaro's current research on a type C virus, with its double connection to baboon DNA and the DNA of certain kinds of domestic cats. . . . [T]here is an *aparallel evolution* . . . [between] the baboon and the cat; it is obvious that they are not models or copies of each other (a becoming-baboon of the cat does not mean that the cat "plays" baboon). . . . [T]ransfers of genetic material by viruses or through other procedures, fusions of cells originating in different species, have results analogous to those of "the abominable couplings dear to antiquity and the Middle Ages." Transversal communication between different lines scramble the genealogical trees. (10-11)

The image of a viral/genetic connection between baboon and cat (two beings that, in Chauvin's words, have absolutely nothing to do with each other) suggests a new kind of model for thinking of rhetoric's "transversal communication" and travel in the world. A given rhetoric is not *contained* by the elements that comprise its rhetorical situation (exigence, rhetor, audience, constraints). Rather, a rhetoric emerges already infected by the viral intensities that are circulating in the social field. Moreover, this same rhetoric will go on to evolve in *aparallel* ways: between two "species" that have absolutely nothing to do with each other. What is shared between them is *not* the situation, but certain contagions and energy. This does not mean the shared rhetoric reproduces copies or models of "original" situations (any more than the shared C virus turns a cat into a baboon). Instead, the same rhetoric might manage to infect and connect various processes, events, and bodies.

Situations Unbound: City Problems

In order to explore what this shifted emphasis on rhetorical ecologies might look like in our scholarship, I would like to take an example of a public rhetoric from my adopted Texas hometown, Austin. When I first moved to Austin in 1992, the economy was less than ideal. While Austin is a place of state government affairs and bureaucracy, the city economy was far from being competitive with larger Texas cities like Dallas or Houston. Few graduates from the University of Texas remained in Austin for the jobs; you stayed because you loved Austin.² But this all changed in the mid- to late-1990s, when the technology boom brought new infrastructure into the city. Thanks to an onslaught of dot com startup companies in the area, as well as bigger companies like Dell Computers, Austin quickly became a major player in the technology sector. The city earned the nickname "Silicon Hills," which echoed its close connection with the technologically saturated areas known as "Silicon Valley" and "Silicon Alley." Almost overnight, Austin became a major player in the financial and technological sector.

As a result of this growth, Austin experienced significant changes to its entire economy. Not only did the city's population explode, but real estate

prices and median income also began to climb. According to a 2002 city council whitepaper on Austin economic development:

Local economic growth in Austin has been extraordinary in recent years. A combination of corporate relocations and expansions, rapid population growth, extensive investment in technology and Internet-related start-ups, and the meteoric rise of Dell helped make Austin among the five fastest growing metropolitan areas in the United States over the last decade. Since 1990, per capita personal income has risen from \$18,092 to \$32,039 (during 2000), more than 280,000 jobs have been created, and the average price of a home sold has grown from \$87,600 to a current estimate of \$199,500, a gain of almost 130 percent. (“Austin’s Economic Future”)

Because of the growth in income levels and a more professional population, many large chain stores began to view Austin as a viable market for retail outlets like Home Depot, Barnes and Nobel, Starbucks, Target, Borders, and other “big box” franchises. Locally owned businesses in Austin quickly began to feel the sting of increased rents in those areas that had previously been affordable. Higher costs of operation forced many smaller local businesses to either move outside of their long-established sites in central Austin or close down business completely. Sound Exchange, a popular local record store in the heart of central Austin (commonly referred to as “the Drag”), is one example of a business that was forced to shut down its operation due to higher rent. Whereas Sound Exchange’s rent had previously been \$2800 throughout the 1990s, the new lease in 2003 climbed to \$4369 per month (Gross). After serving as one of the most unique independent record stores in Austin since 1977, Sound Exchange finally closed its doors in January 2003. The business was quickly replaced by Baja Fresh Mexican Grill, a national fast food chain.

In Austin, the experience of Sound Exchange is hardly unusual. As journalist Lacey Tauber writes in a story for the Austin Independent Media Center about local businesses along the Drag:

On the south end, Captain Quackenbush’s (aka Quack’s) coffee house moved out more than two years ago to Hyde Park. The smell of incense no longer wafts down the street from the A-frame of Good Gawd, what used to be a filled-to-overflowing vintage and costume shop, now relocated to South Lamar. Banzai Japanese and sushi restaurant and its smiling Buddha mural are nowhere to be found. In their place sits the new home of Diesel clothing company, a branch of a major corporation that can set shoppers back more than \$130 for a pair of jeans. . . . Continuing up the Drag, more corporate faces appear. A long-vacant area is now home to Chipotle Mexican Grill, a business that is partially owned

by the McDonalds corporation. Where the old Texas Textbooks once stood, Tyler's shoe and beach shop . . . displays a giant Nike logo. ("Is Austin Slowly Losing its Character?")

By the time I began teaching first-year writing at The University of Texas in 2001, the Drag's main businesses consisted of The Gap, Chipotle Mexican Grill, Diesel, Urban Outfitters, Barnes and Nobel, and Tower Records. In less than a decade, the Drag lost several independent bookstores, music stores, coffee shops, and other small businesses. It was difficult not to sense the palpable transformation that was moving throughout the city.

In 2002, two local businesses, BookPeople Bookstore and Waterloo Records, decided to take a stand against the city's plan to give tax-breaks for a large Border's Bookstore to open up directly across from the two shops. According to Steve Bercu, the owner of BookPeople:

I was talking with the owner of Waterloo Records about our struggle to stop the City of Austin from providing incentives for a developer who planned to put a chain bookstore across the street from our stores. I suggested that we get some bumper stickers that said "Keep Austin Weird," put both our logos on them, and then give them away at our stores. We decided that we should buy 5,000 stickers and see what our customers thought. (Bercu)

These 5,000 stickers were so popular that the stores immediately ordered another 10,000 and then 25,000 stickers. Almost a year later, nearly 60,000 stickers had been distributed. Soon enough, other Austin businesses joined the call to weirdness. Local businesses began to sell t-shirts that featured their individual logos on front and the same "Keep Austin Weird" logo on the back.



The phrase "Keep Austin Weird" quickly passed into the city's cultural circulation, taking on the importance of a quasi-civic duty. One pledge pitch for a local public radio station told listeners, "You too can work towards keeping Austin weird by pledging to keep KOOP Radio 91.7FM on-the-air." In certain parts of Austin, it is nearly impossible to go for very long without finding some display of the slogan on a t-shirt, bumper sticker, tote bag, mug,

or a local business's billboard vowing to "keep it weird." Ironically enough, the injunction to "Keep Austin Weird" has even erupted at the level of city politics. In a 2002 white paper on Austin's economic development, the city council formally acknowledged the reality of "weird Austin" and its effect on the life of the city itself:

[Q]uality of life, an umbrella term that loosely covers variables such as recreational and cultural amenities, overall cost of living, diversity of local residents, and a sense of place . . . is an increasingly important asset. This is especially the case in Austin, where there is a strong sense that the above factors combine in a unique and special way. ("Austin's Economic Future")

The white paper footnotes that this "strong sense" of uniqueness is "[e]ncapsulated in the popular bumper sticker 'Keep Austin Weird'" ("Austin's Economic Future"). With this public incorporation of the slogan, the city council legitimated the rather intangible weirdness as a very real element of Austin's everyday existence.

At this point, one familiar question seems appropriate: *What is the rhetorical situation here?* Using Bitzer's model of rhetorical situation to read Austin's "weird rhetoric," we might describe the "big box" influx as (in the eyes of many Austinites) an exigence, or an imperfection marked by urgency. Certain rhetorical bodies involved in this scene, like BookPeople and Waterloo, chose to make the exigence salient by evoking it specifically as a problem to a number of audiences—Austin residents, city government, etc. There were also a number of constraints upon anti-big boxers, including a reluctance to be seen as undermining free and fair competition. While this is only one possible (and quite truncated) reading of this scene's rhetorical situation, we can already begin to see how this model can be useful for reading the complex relation of elements within public scenes.

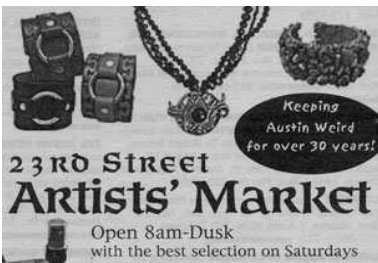
But, at the same time, we can also bracket these analytical terms in order to bring something else into focus: the lived, in-process operations of this rhetoric. Here we're simply shifting field and ground of the same scene. Because the rhetoric of "weirdness" is distributed through ecologies that expand beyond audience/rhetor/exigence, we begin to see more about its public operation by bracketing these terms for a moment. Consider the ways in which this rhetoric has circulated in the social field. The original rhetoric has been expanded in the course of new calls, which adopt the phrase and transform it to fit other purposes. The University of Texas Liberal Arts' college gives away shirts that are very similar to the "weird" shirts, though they feature the slogan "Keep Austin Liberal Arts" in place of the earlier motto.

Likewise, the Austin Public Library circulated many popular bumper stickers that also kept the same "weird" font, but instead featuring the words,



“Keep Austin Reading.” Similarly, new businesses that emerged as replacements of older local businesses have begun to adopt the “Keep Austin Weird” slogan as advertisement. Older businesses, too, have started using the phrase as a way of promoting themselves in local publications. Even the corporate giant Cingular Wireless has created an advertisement in local publications that prominently features the phrase “Keepin’ Austin Weird” beside their corporate logo. The obvious irony in Cingular’s use of this phrase relates to the “weird” slogan’s origination in a movement against big business and non-local corporate interests in Austin.

These various rhetorics overlap through a kind of *shared contagion*, though the calls for local business support, the promotion of Liberal Arts, and the encouragement of literacy are hardly overlapping in terms of their *exigencies* or even their *audiences*. At the same time, of course, the “weird rhetoric” receives an increased circulation through these kinds of affective transmission.



In fact, even the increasingly popular counter-slogans manage to illustrate a kind of distributed ecological spread of this rhetoric. Appearing on t-shirts and bumper stickers throughout Austin, there is the “Make Austin Normal” campaign, which was the brainchild of a University of Texas business student who wanted to make a point of (and a profit from) what he sees as the ironic popularity of the “Keep Austin Weird” slogan. Of course, the “Make Austin Normal” campaign is hardly unique. While walking along the one of the main city streets of central Austin one spring day, I stumbled across a piece of white paper pasted on the side of a newspaper stand. In all block letters, the words read: “Keep Austin fucking normal. Conform. It’s just easier.” Upon seeing a picture of this homemade sign, my friend laughingly commented, “Doesn’t this person realize just how *weird* this sign is?” While my friend meant this comment in jest, it addresses another aspect of what I call “rhetorical ecologies.” Not only do these counter-rhetorics directly respond to and resist the original exigence, they also expand the lived experience of the original rhetorics by *adding* to them—even while changing and expanding their shape. The anti-weird rhetorics of Austin add to the “weird rhetoric” ecology through a practice of mixture and encounters of extended proximity.



Distribution, concatenation, encounter. This public scene forces us into a rather fluid framework of exchanges—a fluidity that bleeds the elements of rhetorical situation. Indeed, the (neo)Bitzerian models cannot account for the amalgamations and transformations—the *viral spread*—of this rhetoric within its wider ecology. When we temporarily bracket the discrete elements of rhetor, audience, and exigence in the “Keep Austin Weird” movement, we attune to the *processes* that both comprise and extend the rhetorics. Indeed, the rhetorical process itself plays out between the sites of these elements: the call is currently circulating on shirts and cars, it is mocked and pushed against, and it is distributed across purposes and institutional spaces. It circulates in a

wide ecology of rhetorics. To play off Shaviro's words, the force of "messages," as they accrete over time, determine the shape of public rhetorics.

A New Model: Distributed Rhetorical Ecologies

Although the standard models of rhetorical situation can tell us much about the elements that are involved in a particular situation, these same models can also mask the fluidity of rhetoric. Rhetorical situations involve the amalgamation and mixture of many different events and happenings that are not properly segmented into audience, text, or rhetorician. We must therefore consider whether our popular models reflect the fullness of rhetoric's operation in public. Rhetorical ecologies are co-ordinating processes, moving across the same social field and within shared structures of feeling. The original call of Austin's "weird" rhetoric, for example, has been affected by the actions, events, and encounters that form "small events loosely joined"³ as a kind of rhetorical-event neighborhood. Even when a multi-national corporation like Cingular coopts the phrase, placing it within a completely antithetical context from its origin, we find that Cingular's rhetoric *adds* to the (original) rhetoric of "weirdness" in Austin. They mark two different situations, of course—complete with different exigence, audience, rhetors, and constraints. But Cingular's rhetoric co-ordinates within the same neighborhood as the anti-corporate rhetoric. Thus, in the course of this evolution, the "weird rhetoric" receives what we might call an extended half-life in its range of circulation and visibility, as well as a changed shape, force, and intensity. Like a neighborhood, the amalgamation of events can both extend the street's visibility (or impact) and its very contours.

Consequently, though rhetorical situation models are undeniably helpful for thinking of rhetoric's contextual character, they fall somewhat short when accounting for the amalgamations and transformations—the spread—of a given rhetoric within its wider ecology. Rather than replacing the rhetorical situation models that we have found so useful, however, an ecological augmentation adopts a view toward the processes and events that extend beyond the limited boundaries of elements. One potential value of such a shifted focus is the way we view counter-rhetorics, issues of cooptation, and strategies of rhetorical production and circulation. Moreover, we can begin to recognize the way rhetorics are held together trans-situationally, as well as the effects of trans-situationality on rhetorical circulation. As urban scholar Helen Ligggett writes, "presentations of situation [can be] understood as somewhat open-ended processes involving relays and connections that are both theoretical and practical" (2). In other words, we begin to see that public rhetorics do not only exist in the elements of their situations, but also in the radius of their neighboring events.

By shifting the ground and field in this manner, we add the dimension of movement back into our discussions of rhetoric. Brian Massumi illuminates

the dilemma of movement's absence in our theories: "When positioning of any kind comes a determining first [in our theories], movement comes a problematic second. . . . Movement is entirely subordinated to the positions it connects. . . . The very notion of movement as qualitative transformation is [therefore] lacking" (3). We hear echoes of Biesecker's critique here that rhetorical situation too often imagines an audience as a "conglomeration of subjects whose identity is fixed prior to the rhetorical event itself," which circumscribes the power of rhetoric as movement. Massumi's hope is that

movement, sensation, and qualities of experience couched in matter in its most literal sense (and sensing) might be culturally-theoretically thinkable, without falling into either . . . naïve realism or . . . subjectivism and without contradicting the very real insights of poststructuralist cultural theory concerning the coextensiveness of culture with the field of experience and of power with culture. (4)

Our rhetorical theories can thus acknowledge the affective channels of rhetorical communication and operation by "testifying" to them. Such testimonies would invent new concepts and deploy them in order to theorize how publics are also created through affective channels.

Producing Rhetorical Pedagogies

One implication of conceiving rhetorics in ecological or event-full terms relates to rhetoric and composition pedagogies. More specifically, I argue that this augmented framework can emerge at the level of *production*. In her discussion of classrooms as (potentially) protopublic bodies, Rosa Eberly argues that rhetoric is a process, not a substance that inheres in the collection of traits within a given text. Instead, she continues, "Rhetoric is thus *not only understood but practiced* as the powerful architectonic productive art that it is" (293). Emphasizing production should not mean falling into the trap of "real vs. artificial" writing situations, but instead should stress the ways in which rhetorical productions are inseparable from lived encounters of public life. Richard Marback calls this inseparability a "material theory of rhetoric," which "would articulate the impact of material and representational practices on each other" (87). The kinds of pedagogies I would like to pursue attune to this *mutuality* of material practice, embodied experience, and discursive representation that operate in public spaces every day. By way of concluding my discussion, I want to briefly highlight one way that this ecological publicness can inform our pedagogical *practices* in order to place greater emphasis on production in the classroom.

Whereas research is often considered by students (and even some teachers) as a process *leading* to public production and circulation (a means to an end, so to speak), we can look to the logics of a generative research method

that takes the circulation of effects *as* an aim. Some of the most compelling “live” examples of generative research are city blogs, or weblogs (often written by individuals) that track the life of a place through images, text, comments, and links to relevant stories and sites. Take the example of G. Schindler’s photoblog, which documents the life of Austin and its urban spaces through images. The blog writer, or “blogger,” tracks the city in what we might recognize as a kind of local-research-in-the-wild. Schindler is a stalker of sorts, documenting local places without any other *telos* beyond the documentation itself. His images are unframed by extra commentary or descriptions, allowing the reader to simply drift through the city in a kind of *derive*. Through his images of signs, storefronts, abandoned couches, and handmade lost pet flyers, Schindler captures the (extra)ordinary details of life in the city. Instead of attempting to give readers the “true” version of Austin, he documents his own encounters with/in the city.

Images from Schindler’s photoblog



Call it generative research. These encounters can be tracked among (student) users as an example of how representations of place—like Austin—are constructed discursively, visually, affectively, and link-fully. Moreover, because this kind of documentation is public, often open to comments and citation in other blogs and websites, the “research” grows in social waves. The networked nature of blogs puts research into a circulation that becomes linked, put to other uses, transformed. In fact, without such citation and use by others, a blog is as good as dead. After a bit of caveat-ing, we might even dub it an act of “open source” research, exposing the myth of research as a personal process that only *later* leads to a public text. The photoblog’s logic turns documentation into a kind of social production in itself.

Rather than thinking *only* in terms of audience, purpose, clarity, and information, therefore, the logic of the photoblog focuses on the *effects* and *concatenations* of our local ecologies. Bringing this logic into the realm of our own rhetorical pedagogy, we are reminded that rhetorically-grounded education can mean something more than learning how to decode elements, analyze

texts, and thinking *about* public circulations of rhetoric. It can also engage processes and encounters. Not “*learning* by doing,” but “*thinking* by doing.” Or, better yet, *thinking/doing*—with a razor thin slash mark barely keeping the two terms from bleeding into each other. This is a rethinking of the “in order to later” model, where students learn methods, skills, and research *in order to later* produce at other sites (other sites in the university or workplace, for example). This one-way flow can be radically revised in everyday settings, where rhetorical ecologies are already spatially, affectively, and conceptually in practice. As Eberly puts it, “[r]hetoric matters because rhetoric—*which demands engagement with the living*—is the process through which texts are not only produced but also understood to matter” (296; emphasis mine). This “mattering” is not fully explained only by a text’s elemental properties, but also in the sense of *material effects and processes*. When we approach a rhetoric that does indeed engage with the living, hooking into the processes that are already in play, then we find ourselves theorizing rhetorical publicness. We find ourselves engaging a public rhetoric whose power is not circumscribed or delimited. *We encounter rhetoric.*

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Notes

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1. Perhaps we can rephrase this notion of distribution in terms of music: the lived experience of listening to a song cannot be framed only in terms of its constituent parts; the experience also includes the distributed processes of *hearing*—and, in my apartment with the bass turned up, even *feeling* the song.
2. Jokes used to circulate about Austin being the only city in the United States where the 7-11 employees also happened to have PhDs.
3. Here I purposefully play off David Weinberger’s *Small Pieces Loosely Joined*, which makes a similar kind of argument about networking and social ecologies.

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