

Introduction

RHETORICAL VISTAS

How one chooses to read one's self
into the rhetorical act thus is of
great consequence.

—Edward Armstrong,
A Ciceronian Sunburn

If you meander through the University of Texas campus, you will eventually stumble upon the remnants of an old creek hiding among the concrete streets and massive buildings. The campus was built alongside Waller Creek, and it has long served as an urban oasis for nature-loving residents. Its water runs through beautiful limestone banks, which are surrounded by juniper and oak trees. In some places, large trees tower over the cool creek bed. It is easy to forget that you are actually standing in the middle of a busy downtown area and a campus swarming with thousands of students. One retired University of Texas English professor, Joseph Jones, wrote a lengthy book that meditated on Waller Creek's history and the life lessons that could be gleaned from its gentle beauty. Jones tells the story of the creek's beginnings and those early creek lovers who planted trees and cared for them. His poetic meditation reflects how deeply Waller Creek grows in the hearts of many Austinites.

Although the trees in Waller Creek once towered above buildings, many of the oldest trees were destroyed by a particularly harsh kind of development

in 1969. Threats to Waller Creek began in the 1960s, when student numbers at the University of Texas rose dramatically. Construction likewise increased in order to keep pace with the growing population. Space was at a premium, yet the university leadership was undaunted in its grand plans for a large and first-rate campus. Board of regents chairman Frank Erwin was at the center of this vision, and it was under Erwin's watch that the university expanded into its current mammoth state. One of Erwin's most dramatic and controversial decisions was for a massive enlargement of the football stadium. The stadium sat next to Waller Creek, and its enlargement required the destruction of many old oak trees that towered over the creek. Erwin and the board of regents negotiated plans for the stadium in complete secrecy, without any input from students or citizens. When it was finally learned that the oak trees would be removed in order to make room for the expanded stadium, reaction from Austin's population was nothing short of outrage. Students proposed a plan to save the oak trees by building an arch in a corner of the stadium. The board of regents refused to consider their proposal, and Erwin called for construction and tree removal to begin immediately.

Early Monday morning, October 20, 1969, workers arrived at Waller Creek with bulldozers and chainsaws, ready to remove the trees in preparation for the new stadium. But they were met with crowds of protesters who were waving signs reading, "Don't Rape Mother Nature" and "Save Our Trees." Protesters physically blocked the workers from using any equipment, and no trees were removed that day. On Tuesday, workers and protesters again met in the creek. This time, workers managed to cut some branches and limbs from the trees, though the bulldozers were still physically blocked by protesters' bodies. By this time, Erwin was growing angry at the mini-revolt that seemed to be holding up progress on his stadium.

On Wednesday morning, Erwin himself marched down to the creek. He saw the protesters sitting in trees, and the workers afraid to do any work for fear of injuring the protesters. He demanded that construction crews remove the trees immediately. Scores of police vehicles arrived with a seventy-five-foot ladder that was clearly meant to remove protesters from trees. "Arrest all the people you have to," said Erwin. "Once the trees are down, they won't have anything to protest" (Jones 218). Police dragged away protesters, arresting twenty-seven for disorderly conduct. The trees were quickly cut down once the protesters were arrested. Thousands of angry students registered their unhappiness by dragging tree limbs to the university's Old Main administration building. They left the limbs and leaves all over the steps. As the protesters were being dragged away, one elderly man told police that they should "arrest the men responsible for vandalism in tearing down these



Protesters drag tree limbs to the steps of Old Main at the University of Texas. Copyright Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, the University of Texas at Austin, 1969–70.

trees” (“Police Nab” A1). A girl in the crowd told reporters, “I hope a tree falls on them. Not the police—the people responsible for this. I’d laugh. I’d really laugh” (“Police Nab” A1).

For months after the October saga, Austin residents painted Erwin almost as a murderer whose weapon of choice was a bloody axe. During an alumni dinner just two days after the protester arrests, Erwin was presented with the “Distinguished Axe Award.” He was also regaled with a tongue-in-cheek poem written in his honor:

I think that I shall never see
Construction lovely as a tree.
A tree whose hungry mouth is pressed
Because the street must angle west.
A tree that lifted its leafy arms to pray
That Chairman Erwin would go away.
A tree that did in Autumn wear
A nest of students in her hair.
Upon whose bosom axes are lain

While pickets utter words profane.
Poems are made by fools like me
But only Frank can kill a tree. (Jones 225)

More serious protests called for Erwin's dismissal, and the bumper sticker slogan "Axe Erwin" became quite popular. The protest was memorialized only a few months later in the *Cactus*, a student publication, with this headline: "The Issue Was Environment vs. Expansion." If you walk through Waller Creek today, it is hard not to conclude that expansion won the day.

This is an early scene of development discourse in Austin. Since then, Austin's growing urban development has become a major flashpoint for many residents. As geographer Joshua Long puts it, Austin "has long served as an ideological battleground between 'developers' and 'anti-growth' advocates" (*Weird City* 3). But development is not just an issue in Austin. It is an issue of growing concern across the United States. In fact, development has become such a familiar issue that it has even made its way into popular culture, including the television drama *The Wire*. One subplot of *The Wire* follows an elusive drug boss, Stringer Bell, who is responsible for some of Baltimore's worst drug and gang crime. As the detectives in the Major Crimes Unit collect mounting evidence against Bell, they uncover his investments in real estate that is part of Baltimore's push for inner-city renovation. In a scene where detectives Lester Freemont and Roland "Prez" Pryzbylewski first make this discovery, they give each other a dumfounded look. "From the looks of things, Stringer Bell's worse than a drug dealer," says Freemont. "Yeah," mutters Prez in agreement, "He's a developer." It is hard to tell whether this statement is meant as a joke or a real evaluation of the depths to which Bell is sinking. In *The Wire*, development plays like a drug, one that spreads misery across the city for the workers and residents displaced by new lofts and flipped neighborhoods.

It is no surprise that *The Wire's* creator David Simon tackles issues of gentrification and development in his highly praised television series. Urban development is an unavoidable fact of life in most U.S. cities. But Simon also reveals another important detail about development in our cities: it's a hard thing to embrace. In *The Wire*, development chips away at people's lives in small ways. Dockworkers and unions watch their jobs dry up as a granary is turned into upscale lofts for the wealthy. In one episode, Nick Sobotka, a young stevedore, tours an open house for a place he can't afford. Nick tells the real estate agent that this used to be his aunt's house, a one-time affordable place in the working-class Locust Point neighborhood. The real estate agent informs him that the neighborhood has been reborn as Federal Hill, where

houses go for close to a half-million dollars. People like Nick, those who once lived in Locust Point, are being displaced from a neighborhood they used to call home. Meanwhile, in later episodes, we follow the twists and turns of developers who grow rich from turning public housing into semiprivatized spaces. Even Stringer Bell gets played by the ruthless developers looking to flip Baltimore's urban spaces into upscale rents.

The changes happening in *The Wire's* Baltimore mirror changes happening in the very spaces where we live, work, shop, and travel. Even if you have not watched a field of beloved trees bulldozed to make way for urban expansion nor had your neighborhood gentrify to unaffordable prices, you have still likely experienced development as it is currently unfolding in your own urban, suburban, or rural space. Unfortunately, as both fictionalized and very real examples of development suggest, the effects of contemporary development are not always positive. As a person who lives and works in these kinds of changing spaces, I am interested in how to intervene in the negative effects of development. Like many others, I find myself wondering how to promote a culture of sustainability and care for our everyday spaces. As a rhetorician, I also seek a better understanding of how discourse about development operates. How do people argue, debate, and deliberate about the spaces where we live, work, shop, and travel? I also want to understand why development continues to proliferate, even though its negative effects are familiar enough to serve as plot points in popular TV dramas.

In *Distant Publics*, I find an answer to these questions in the guise of one figure, whom I call the *exceptional public subject*. The exceptional subject is one who occupies a precarious position between publicness and a withdrawal from publicness. It is a subjectivity thoroughly grounded in *feeling*, which makes this rhetorical position so difficult to change. The exceptional subject can often seem apathetic, distant, uninterested, and even lazy. This subject is exasperating to those of us who wish to promote active participation in the public sphere. But unlike apathetic or lazy citizens, this subject position does not necessarily consider itself outside the realm of public life.¹

Perhaps one of the most paradoxical features of the exceptional subject is that it is produced by the very discourse that rhetorical theorists take such pains to promote: deliberation, argument, counterdiscourse, or just plain exchange of talk. In *Distant Publics*, I suggest that perhaps the best answer to the exceptional subject is not *more* investment in the ongoing public scene of debate. Instead, if we want to encourage development talk that creates sustainable futures, then we will need to cultivate a different kind of public subjectivity altogether. We must create a new rhetorical vista from which we may stand and view ourselves in relation to the current landscape.

One of the primary arguments in this book contends that our current habits of public discourse and debate themselves are cultivating public subjects who are not oriented toward making sustainable interventions in rhetorical crises. Instead, exceptional subjects imagine themselves to be part of a wider public simply by feeling (whether the feeling is one of injury, nostalgia, ambivalence, or any other kind of feeling). The problem is not that public subjects feel. Rather, the problem is that feeling too often serves as the primary connective tissue to our public spaces. The fallout from such feelingful relationality is what this book is all about. In the chapters that follow, I frame citizen nonparticipation as an effect of certain rhetorical patterns within current public discourse rather than a symptom of disengagement or misinformation. In other words, our habits of public discourse can paradoxically contribute to the demise of healthy public discourse. Although public opposition to development is vocal and rhetorically engaged, the case studies presented in this book reveal that many common responses also cultivate an attitude of exception among some subjects who feel that they are unaffected by the scene of deliberation. Ironically, instead of democratic engagement, the common patterns of response to development can actually lead to some measure of disengagement.

Although *Distant Publics* discusses exceptional subjects in light of urban development, this exploration could have been accomplished through analysis of other public debates. I have chosen to focus on development, however, because this issue affects almost everyone. I must admit that I am not a disinterested researcher on the issue of development. I am an advocate. As I argue in chapter 1, too many years of careless development in urban landscapes have led to a crisis. Now is the time to rethink how we can respond to the changes happening in our everyday spaces. I want to change how ordinary citizens approach the topic of development. Of course, I can always get involved in my local community in various ways. But, as a teacher of rhetoric and writing, I also have another unique advantage. I can encourage students to be different kinds of subjects—not ones who disconnect from their local spaces, but ones who relate differently to the world around them.

My goal is not to call for a universal state of intervention. It is unrealistic to expect everyone to become an activist about development issues; nor is such a goal even desirable. Instead, I am more interested in questioning and changing the modes of production where public subjects are concerned. My goal is to find strategies for reorienting a publicness that is not based in feeling as a starting point. I hope to interrogate the techniques and technologies used to help people see themselves as beings-in-the-world. This interrogation is a rhetorician's way of intervening firsthand in the public crises around us.

By transforming how people think of themselves as public subjects, we can perhaps begin to encourage more people to see themselves as subjects who can and should intervene in the many different crises we currently face.

Rhetoric and Place

I am certainly not the first in rhetorical studies to sound an alarm about place and its problems. Rhetorical theorists are increasingly concerned with the many crises of place. Not only are there a number of collections in composition studies devoted to rhetorics and place, but some scholars have turned their attention specifically to the intersection of rhetoric and development. In the past few years alone, we have seen growing interest in a new urbanist influence on community identity (St. Antoine), urban renewal and its influence on public life (Fleming, Makagon), the changing character of neighborhoods experiencing redevelopment (Simpson), and local debates over issues of zoning and land use (Olson and Goodnight). Every year, several panels on space and place appear in the major rhetorical studies conferences, including the Rhetoric Society of America biannual conference, the Conference on College Composition and Communication, and the National Communication Association's annual conference.

It makes sense that rhetoricians are interested in place and its crises. Issues of development, community planning, and gentrification are not only the concern of disciplines like urban planning or cultural geography. In his introduction to the collection *Landmark Essays on Rhetoric and the Environment*, Craig Waddell explains why a topic like the environment is relevant to a discipline like rhetoric. "Classical rhetoric was fundamentally concerned with public deliberation about matters of policy," writes Waddell. "Prominent today among those things about which we make decisions and into which we therefore inquire are matters of environmental policy" (xi). Likewise, Elenore Long argues that rhetoricians are called to serve as activists, insofar as they are primarily concerned with what they can do to improve the quality of public deliberations about our world under pressure (15). Many rhetorical scholars want to improve the quality of public deliberations about our local and global spaces that are increasingly under pressure from thoughtless, harmful, or simply excessive development.

However, I want to suggest an approach to place that differs slightly from popular approaches in rhetorical studies. My approach, which I call a "publics approach," understands publics and their discourse as the best site for making interventions into material spaces. In other words, rhetorical theory and rhetorical pedagogy can make a difference to the current development crisis not by interrogating "place" but by helping to shape different kinds of

subjects who can undertake different kinds of work. In order to describe exactly what a public approach entails, I will briefly contrast its methodology from several popular approaches to place in rhetorical studies. It may help to consider what kinds of questions these various approaches would pose. Different rhetorical approaches to place are not mutually exclusive or even conflicting, but they do pull the analyst's attention in multiple directions. While I believe that all of these approaches are important and correct, I simply want to suggest one additional path that may open up new possibilities for those of us who teach and work in the realm of rhetoric, writing, and communication. In order to begin sketching the kinds of questions posed by these rhetorical approaches to place, I will turn yet again to the trees.

Reading the Trees

Twenty years after Frank Erwin told police to arrest the protesters sitting in Waller Creek's oak trees, another oak was almost destroyed in Austin. This was Treaty Oak, a five-hundred-year-old live oak tree that was the only remaining tree in what was once a group of fourteen trees called the Council Oaks. Legend has it that Stephen F. Austin signed the first treaty with Native Americans under the oaks. Even though some historians now say this legend is a hoax, the huge tree has remained a dramatic and much loved part of Austin's history. Treaty Oak stands 50 feet tall, with a massive spread of 127 feet. It is no understatement to say that generations of families have played beneath the oak. In May 1989, city officials began to worry that the tree was suffering from oak wilt. Its branches and leaves looked sickly and lifeless. A test of the soil beneath the tree revealed something even more disturbing: the tree had been poisoned. More tests showed that someone had intentionally doused the tree's soil with huge amounts of Velpar, a highly toxic herbicide that is typically used by farmers to clear large swaths of land. After a criminal investigation, a mentally unstable man named Paul Cullen was arrested for the tree's poisoning. Cullen admitted that he poisoned Treaty Oak as part of an occult ritual meant to capture the tree's spirit so that he could win a woman's affection. Cullen fully intended to kill the tree by dumping enough poison to kill twenty-five large oaks (Harrigan).

Although Treaty Oak was poisoned by a mentally ill man, some people articulated its destruction alongside other tree removal cases due to development. Days following the poisoning's discovery, a leading story in the *Austin Chronicle* encouraged readers to resist seeing the event in isolation. "Groves of oak trees are presently being destroyed" to complete an access road for a new housing development, announced the story, and Austinites continue to see "ploughing [of] trees to make room for new roads and houses" (Forrest 11).

In a handwritten poem left at the base of Treaty Oak, one anonymous writer mourns the many deaths of trees caused by human development: “Hundreds of you / Fall everyday / The Lungs of the World / by our hands, taken down / Forgive us, Ancient One.”² A local poet, Robin Cravey, tells a similar narrative in his poem “Treaty Oak,” which laments, “The treaty signed within your shade could not / retard the progress of the axe and saw / Your grove-mates fell, your hills were paved and bared / but you we set aside in a little plot. And while the ancient forests daily fall / we cast proud words in bronze: This one we spared.” Austin singer Bill Oliver also articulated this connection with his song “Hard Time for Oaks,” written shortly after the Treaty Oak poisoning. Oliver sings, “In Austin, it’s been a hard time for oaks / Hit by wilt, hit by the dozers / If it’s disease, or if it’s machine, the oaks around here / Will tell you the times have been mean.”

In the months following the terrible incident, people left thousands of letters, cards, notes, pictures, and other personal mementos at the base of Treaty Oak. A small portion of these artifacts has been archived at the Austin History Center. When I asked to see the holdings, the archivist brought up hundreds of papers for me to inspect. “If you want to see more,” she smiled, “just let me know. This is only a little bit of what we have downstairs.” I browsed through children’s drawings and letters that all seemed to be addressing an actual person. They were personal and intimate. Some even referenced inside memories between the writers and the tree. One card read, “Get well soon. You and Austin mean the world to me. T. G.” Another note simply said, “Hang in there, kiddo.” Children drew pictures of the tree and wrote words like “Get well soon” and “I love you” alongside their images. After arborists pruned limbs of the tree, the city began to sell relics carved from its wood. Residents bought pencils, furniture, bowls, vases, and small coins all made from the dead branches of their beloved oak.

Although no literal connection existed between the oak’s poisoning and other instances of tree removal due to development, some public discourses articulated an implicit relationship between them. The common thread in Austin’s many tree deaths seems to be the intentional harm caused by human greed or evilness. At least, this is one narrative that has circulated throughout the city’s public sphere. “Austin’s modern history of crimes against trees wends its way through the Treaty Oak arborcide of the late Eighties back to the mass murder of the late Sixties,” writes *Austin Chronicle* contributor Louis Dubose, “when UT Regent Chair Frank Erwin routed a group of students out of a grove of oaks and cypresses he wanted bulldozed to make room for the expansion of Memorial Stadium.”

These exchanges are a rich starting point for analysis, what Gerard

Hauser calls “vernacular rhetoric,” or networks of nonofficial spaces in which discourse on public matters emerge (*Vernacular* 14). Consider what questions different approaches would encourage us to ask. For instance, one of the most common approaches to place in rhetoric and composition scholarship investigates how spaces are textualized (as well as how texts themselves are spatialized). This approach is rooted in an analogy between “composing” texts and “composing” spaces. Because spaces are constructed, or written, an intellectual bridge often connects the two inquiries. The collection *City Comp: Identities, Spaces, Practices* is an example of how this analogy is used in rhetoric and composition studies. The various essays emphasize how, in the words of editors Bruce McComiskey and Cynthia Ryan, “Urban spaces . . . are texts” (13). Or, as Richard Marback writes in his contribution to *City Comp*, “We can never walk into a cityscape that has not already been inscribed by others and that is not always already inscribed on us” (“Speaking of the City” 143). Urban spaces are thus regarded as primarily representational. This approach sees spaces and places as texts that signify a range of histories and debates. Just as a text is composed and rewritten, a city is also composed through the discourses and debates of its contemporary and historical residents.

The composing link does bridge together the work of cultural theorists like Michel de Certeau, Henri Lefebvre, and Roland Barthes, all of whom study signification and the realm of place and space. If places are “empires of signs,” to use Barthes’s phrase, then does this not make place a rhetorical matter? “To make a sign in place is to give signification,” writes Sid Dobrin. “To signify is to assign meaning, to produce a place, to occupy that place. To occupy that place is to produce that place; to produce that place is to occupy it, to write it in the script of hegemony” (“Occupation” 27). Here Dobrin echoes the work of de Certeau, who has helped to make space and place viable subjects for writing studies. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau imagines standing high above the city from the World Trade Center, where he watches the pedestrians moving on the sidewalks below. These are the “practitioners” of the city, writes de Certeau; the ones who “follow the thicks and thins of an urban ‘text’ they write without being able to read it” (93). These walking bodies are in the process of writing culture through their trajectories, paths, habits, and avoidances. The stories composed through walking will become inscribed upon the city in any number of ways, constructing cultural maps and texts. Much like the city street scene, culture is comprised of manifold stories and shaping fragments. This is the textualizing of place, which is convenient for people who make a living by studying texts.³

If we examine the scene of Waller Creek and Treaty Oak as signifying compositions, or as textualized spaces, we might be led to ask how these

places are assigned meanings, as well as what kinds of meanings those places help to create. How are their significations composed through public discourse? We cannot ignore the much larger social meanings that trees have had for millennia. By removing trees, Erwin was not simply getting rid of a beloved landmark. Trees have long been inscribed with meanings of life and vitality. Tree removal, by comparison, is weighted down with the heavy signification of death, murder, and decay. Public accounts of the incident framed Erwin as a kind of murderer (“only Frank can kill a tree”). Death was a recurring theme in many of the protests that happened before and after the trees’ removal. An articulation was thus easily formed between development and death, thereby rhetorically placing antidevelopment protesters on the side of life.

Similarly, the fact that Treaty Oak was poisoned led to another articulation between development “poisoning” in Austin, beginning with the Waller Creek removal, and the workings of an insane man. In this way, familiar binaries between (good) nature and (bad) culture are reified. Development itself is posed as a direct challenge to the natural world and those who love it. The transhistorical character of local articulations between development and death are aided by the fact that trees have such significations. By comparison, this same articulation may have been more difficult if Erwin had removed a beloved statue, or if Paul Cullen had decided to toss paint onto a favorite community mural. Popular sentiment against ruthless development was aided by this articulation, which depends upon the circulation of prior significations concerning trees and life.

Another recent approach to place in rhetorical studies is the theory of textual-spatial ecologies. This approach is especially popular in composition studies, and it is partly born out of a frustration with the discipline’s historical misunderstanding of writing’s physical and spatial embodiment. On one hand, it might seem like space and place have been part of writing studies’ agenda for a long time. As Nedra Reynolds points out in *Geographies of Writing*, we draw liberally on spatial metaphors in order to construct an image of ourselves (27–35). We are a “field” that is obsessed with its own “location” in the academy. We talk about “sites of struggle,” “scenes of writing,” and “working in the margins.” Yet, such metaphors do not accurately reflect a disciplinary embrace of spatial thinking. Dobrin rightly points out that the discipline is much more devoted to temporal inquiry: composition’s history, development, and its historical figures (“Occupation” 28). The focus on writing in place is often merely a backdrop to the larger obsession with composition’s own temporal narrative.

As a corrective to the lack of investigation into spatial theory, some com-