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Rhetorics, Bodies, and Everyday Life
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This article reflects on potential pedagogical implications of *Bodily Arts: Rhetoric and Athletics in Ancient Greece* by connecting it with other recent publications on rhetoric’s rhetoric, space, mobility, as instantiated in everyday practices. The resulting account considers words, images, and bodies as part of the rhetorical enterprise.

The questions posed for the symposium have been on my mind for years while I took *Bodily Arts* from its early days as a dissertation through to its publication as a book. The book’s core claim is that rhetoric, from its inception, was and is a bodily art, and that the particular bodily features (which I argue have been deemphasized and suppressed through centuries of disciplinary specialization and mind-body separation) can be best considered through examining rhetoric’s curious relations with athletic practices and performances. It’s important to note at the outset for those of you who haven’t read the book that the study isn’t just a clever metaphor in the way sports are so often—and so effectively—used today. Ancient teachers of rhetoric—sophists and Isocrates foremost among them—developed early terminology and training practices by repeated and sustained exposure to athletic practice and performance. As the book details, athletes and rhetors shared spaces of training at gymnasia and both performed their arts at festivals.

Methodologically, *Bodily Arts* performs a kind of syncretism, a thinking together of rhetoric and athletics by examining historical evidence for their close connections in ancient Greece. This syncretic approach allows us to suspend what Kenneth Burke would call our
trained incapacity—our inability, in this case, to think together body and mind, learning-performing, and, as is the task of this symposium, past and present.

Since I’ve been working on this study and discussing it at conferences and in journals, the most common question asked by scholars in composition and rhetoric is this: how does your work change what you do in the classroom? This question has tended to throw me for a couple of reasons: first, it assumes that history must immediately and transparently apply to present practices; that a translation of ancient to contemporary practices would be smooth, easy, and apparent as the historical research is being completed. How to answer such questions when my aim is to disrupt prevailing narratives of rhetoric’s history? Put another way, a culminating point in my book is about how the connections between rhetoric and athletics began to fall away almost immediately in the Hellenistic period as ancient sports became more professionalized. Gymnasium structures themselves, as I discuss in the book, reflect a new demarcation of activity as gyms change from closer quarters in the classical era to much more sprawling structures during the Hellenistic period. Thus began a centuries-long process of specialization and deep structural enactment of the mind/body separation.

So if, as my book claims, such specialization has prevented us from even seeing such historical connections in the first place, how does uncovering such connections easily and smoothly reveal new ways to run a classroom in the late 20th/early 21st century? The short answer I’m afraid, is that it doesn’t.

And yet the question keeps coming in various iterations—at lunch, at job interviews, at conferences, in reader reports. Through the years and thanks to informal conversation and formal interviewing processes, I’ve had the opportunity to try out a variety of answers. Sometimes I joke about making students run sprints. One time when this question came up after a discussion of chapter four’s central concept, phusiopoiesis—the production of one’s nature, a set of actions that at times involve severe punishment, and at other times involves overt exploration of desire—I responded with “I think we should beat and have sex with our students.” Such an answer and the rupturous laughter that usually follows expose just how radically different contemporary practices are from ancient practices. In the case of a bodily education, such differences are enacted in space, in styles of pedagogy, and in the sharp divide between mind and body. These questions about applicability, that is, help to reveal how higher education has taken the “life of the mind” to such an extreme that thinking or talking about bodies in classrooms becomes difficult at best.
And yet the work I try to do in the book makes available other possibilities, other ways to think about the lessons of ancient rhetoric. Such lessons are more apparent when I answer the classroom practice question seriously in terms of habit formation, the important lessons of the ancient notion of *kairos* and what a bodily *kairos* might mean for teaching rhetorical situations, the importance of looking outside predictable intellectual sphere for models of thought—sports being only one of them. Gerald Graff, who critiques the “life of the mind” from another angle in his book *Clueless*, is also developing work about “the moves” of argument, and is interested in the usefulness of sports discourse in our classrooms. There’s also painting—Geoffrey Sirc’s chapter on Jackson Pollock as a model for rhetorical invention as inhabiting, and more recently I’ve noticed that David Bartholomae’s syllabus even explicitly encourages students to conceive of his class as an artist’s studio. T.R. Johnson writes compellingly about music, pleasure, and desire. These sorts of models for rhetoric all stretch rhetoric and composition into other sister arts—there’s a real value in doing so—and it’s this very cross-disciplinary impulse that I’m contending rhetoric contained from its inception (Jeffrey Walker’s work on the longstanding relation between rhetoric and poetics is a powerful case in point).

For me, the question was increasingly difficult precisely because since I started on this project I had not taught first year composition—and let’s face it, since I work in an English department, this is the course most people have in mind when posing that question. And further, I’ve often thought the question would be easier if it were coming from people who teach speech instead of writing. That my work translates so differently in these institutional spaces points to how disciplinary specializations reinscribe deeply held Western beliefs about speech as presence/writing as absence that Derrida so rigorously reads back to Plato. Such a view nudges questions about the body over to speech and communications departments. I once jokingly accused a communications chair of nabbing custody of performance in the divorce between speech and English versions of rhetoric.

At stake in this book and the questions it raises is the question of rhetoric’s province—not just in terms of disciplinarity, but in terms of its practice and its effects. Is the art confined to rational argumentation, or is it much more fuzzy than that? Rhetoric’s very tendency to stretch or spill over into other arts or disciplines suggests what nearly everyone already knows—almost intuitively—that rhetoric isn’t just a cerebral, conscious process, that it’s messy, unpredictable, and that, at some level at least, the body is involved. In asserting this, I am not alone—I join a long line of thinkers and scholars, too many to cite
here, but I know their names are rattling around in your heads and mouths. Many of them are part of this very symposium. The question of rhetoric’s province, of course, as Janet Atwill’s book on the liberal arts tradition demonstrates, leads to questions of what gets taught, and how, about where our theories of rhetoric are allowed to move. Aristotle himself begrudgingly admits in Book III of The Rhetoric that concerns of the body raised by delivery must be considered by the aspiring rhetor. Jeffrey Walker culls a brilliant point about the body and non-reason in his work on Aristotelian pathos ( “Pathos and Katharsis”), and scholars in this room have variously attributed such an emphasis to the sophist Gorgias, to whom we owe what Ekaterina Haskins calls “a critical appreciation of the ambivalent potential of nonrational discourse” (16). Scholarship in speech communications and composition is ranging into the realm of visual rhetoric, of spatial rhetoric, into questions of affect in public and classroom discourse, and there’s all sorts of fascinating work in writing studies and composition about bodies in classrooms that I cite in my book and that have been published since my book went to press. So it is this point about the “something else” of rhetoric—its nonrational, messy, affective, bodily aspects that scholars are beginning to consider most pointedly—that I want to mark emphatically as I turn to two very recent conceptions of rhetoric which offer new ways to think about the question of (and now I’m more or less quoting from the symposium materials) how the revised account of classical rhetoric I’ve advanced might change the disciplinary and pedagogical practices of our field. I helped write that question, and now it’s time to try a new answer.

The first formulation of rhetoric I want to consider can be found in Wayne Booth’s new manifesto of rhetoric entitled The Rhetoric of Rhetoric. Here, Booth makes all sorts of compelling arguments for the relevance of rhetorical studies today—arguments that stem from his frustration with the contemporary political scene, and the inevitable persistence of what Booth terms “rhetrickery” (xx), which as you might already know or could easily guess more or less means something like “bad rhetoric.” For me, though, one of the most interesting features of the book is the definition of rhetoric Booth puts forward. He describes rhetoric as “the entire range of resources that human beings share for producing effects on one another: effects ethical (including everything about character), practical (including political), emotional (including aesthetic) and intellectual (including every academic field)” (xi). This definition cites the most contemporary elements of Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric (think “available means”) by tacitly invoking much of the newer work in rhetorical studies, especially work in visual rhetoric and rhetoric of new media—recent
work that, as Booth’s definition suggests, is already encouraged by the three appeals of Aristotelian rhetoric, the appeals my students have come to chant along with me as a refrain-like string, “ethos-pathos-logos.” Earlier in Booth’s discussion of rhetoric, it is clear that the range of resources easily includes bodies and faces—“Are you not,” Booth asks, “seeking rhetorical effect when you either smile or scowl or shout back at someone who has just insulted you?” So it is a definition that doesn’t worry about disciplinary purchase on “the word,” “the image,” or even “the body,” but rather sees words, images, and bodies as all part of the rhetorical enterprise—the range of resources—for producing effects. Also noteworthy in Booth’s definition is the absence of the word persuasion, which has frequently served to narrow the province of rhetorical studies.

The second formulation I want to draw on today shares with Booth the suspension of a belief in persuasion as a sufficient synonym for rhetoric, and seems to cast aside along with it Classical Rhetoric as a whole. This formulation can be found in Martin Nystrand and John Duffy’s *Towards a Rhetoric of Everyday Life*. For those of you who are familiar with Nystrand and Duffy, my citation of it in a symposium on classical rhetoric might seem counterintuitive: after all, they define rhetoric precisely *against* what they call “classical arts of persuasion,” which they see as dealing mostly in “the affairs of government and men” (ix). To be sure, such a definition has its uses, but it seems to restrict more than it explores, and as such, it seems at odds with other accounts of ancient rhetoric, namely those offered by the scholars at this symposium, as well as the one put forward for students in *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*, a textbook I coauthor with Sharon Crowley.

But Nystrand and Duffy don’t need classical rhetoric as an restrictive oppositional force against which to define rhetoric as “the ways that individuals and groups use language to constitute their social realities, and as a medium for creating, managing, or resisting ideological meanings” (ix). The definition continues: “The discourses of institutions and popular culture are rhetorical in the sense that they *situate us in our worlds*: they shape our ideas about ‘the way things are,’ who we are, where we belong, and guide what we talk about and what we say (and don’t say)” (ix). As the textbook I just mentioned tries to make clear, ideology, resistance, and the creation and circulation of values have always informed definitions of rhetoric—ancient and contemporary. What I value about the Nystrand and Duffy collection is its attention to “the rhetoric of everyday life,” which they describe as “the rhetorical character and dynamics of language in mundane contexts especially beyond school” (viii). This
move to the everyday uses of language is a move that stretches scholarship in rhetoric and composition beyond the first year composition classroom, and more importantly, I’d argue, it’s a move that the richest notions of classical rhetoric—especially the ones included in this issue—encourage all along.

Even though Booth and Nystrand and Duffy formulate rhetoric quite differently, both formulations—implicitly or explicitly—respond to ancient practices and conceptions of rhetoric, and both try to urge those conceptions further, into broader domains, into conversation with other disciplines, and most pointedly for my purposes, to account for rhetoric’s extra-discursive, non-rational features. John Ackerman’s piece in the Nystrand-Duffy collection makes all three of these moves. Entitled “The Space for Rhetoric in Everyday Life,” Ackerman’s essay draws heavily on Henri Lefebvre’s brilliant *Production of Space* in an attempt to figure space as rhetorical, and rhetoric as spatial. The core argument—“that the pressure of everyday life as a spatial concept will necessarily transform our imagination and our involvement in rhetorical studies” (86)—shows how the three moves I mentioned above (attention to rhetoric’s sphere, interdisciplinarity, and its extra-discursive, non-rational features) can be performed simultaneously; in fact, they all animate each other. I want to reiterate that Nystrand and Duffy and the scholars whose essays they collect are not the first to argue for these moves or notice these capacities of rhetoric. My argument is that these capacities are not only noticeable in rhetoric’s earliest moments, but were in fact being actualized then. It’s only through our trained incapacity, our inherited emphasis on rhetoric as a rational, cerebral, and yes, verbal endeavor that we have for the most part tuned out such features.

A pressing question for this symposium, and for Booth, if not for Nystrand and Duffy, is: can we teach the non-rational, bodily, nonverbal features of rhetoric to our students? And to what end? My short answer, which I’ll offer through brief description, is of course we can, and the ends may surprise us. Upon reading the Nystrand-Duffy collection, I became more convinced that the collection, in addition to urging a necessary move beyond attention to first year composition (FYC as Sharon Crowley likes to call it), also contains the possibilities for moving FYC beyond itself—or at the very least, moving the classroom outside of the classroom. And given the happy fit with a Freshman Studies program at The University of Pittsburgh, whose motto, “the city is our campus,” fits nicely with Nystrand and Duffy’s (and Booth’s) notions of rhetoric, I refined my regular first year course, which already has a particular focus on ancient rhetoric, to see if my students and I couldn’t test my theory that the lessons of ancient
rhetoric are more easily considered, learned, and practiced in the context of everyday life than in the delimited space of the classroom. The new title of the course, “Rhetorics, Politics, and Everyday Life,” together with its texts (Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students and The New York Times) seek to, as I put it in the course description, “introduce students to the art of rhetoric, its terminology, principles, and everyday uses.” The description continues,

Rhetoric got its starts alongside democracy in ancient Athens, where citizens gathered to deliberate about public issues such as what young people should study in school, the merits of Sophocles’ latest play, or whether or not to go to war. As a class, then, we will study the methods and terms of the ancients, but we will do so in light of everyday rhetorical strategies of contemporary politicians, journalists, and artists. We will venture out into Pittsburgh to consider the “ethos” of people, cars, and buildings. We will examine the local arts scene—theatre, museums, film—as instances of rhetoric. We will follow political issues and their rhetorical transformations in The New York Times. In these ways, the seminar will explore the age-old art of rhetoric as it is practiced here and now. The course will also be a regular occasion for lively rhetorical exchanges.

This course description both confirms and refutes Nystrand and Duffy’s claims about an everyday rhetoric, valuing everyday discursive practices and yet refuting the restriction of ancient rhetoric to activity in the Athenian assembly. Taking cues from the freshman studies program and a title from Nystrand and Duffy, I created a rhetorical analysis unit called “rhetoric in the city.” What used to be a set of classes leading up to an analysis of a print advertisement has become a mobile, lively, in-the-city analysis. For this unit students went in groups to Starbucks and other locales of their choice and watched people of Pittsburgh move around and through the place, interact briefly with each other, with the workers there, with their personal technology, and with the space. Another class meeting took place at the nearby Carnegie museum of Art where we ventured to see how art and the everyday function rhetorically. In preparation for the visit, I circulated Booth’s definition of rhetoric, which helped students to see how all the rhetorical concepts and movements we’ve been talking about so far point to Booth’s emphasis on effects. Here, we discussed the workings of kairos to create openings for discourse, the circulation of ideologies through commonplaces, and we discussed them as rhetorical effects. We then talked about how the course itself was designed to help us notice rhetorical effects, to consider and respond to them, and ultimately to produce them.
When I first suggested that we think about art as rhetorical, the students, initially perplexed, began to discuss the many ways art can function rhetorically. For this point we examined an assortment of letters to the *New York Times* editor about the recent installation of “The Gates”—an art exhibit featuring 23 miles of saffron-colored silk panels on frames wending through New York City’s Central Park. These letters, which argued variously about the nature of art, about the sanctity of their park, and about the beauty (or ugliness) of the installation—some compared the “saffron” hues to the loud oranges of a construction site, others to the vibrant colors of spring. The letters illustrated how rhetoric so often works in cumulative bursts—how, for example, “The Gates” reproduced multiple rhetorical effects, eliciting familiar topoi about art and economics, “ownership” of Central Park—even the sanctity of nature. Here was an instance of art occasioning two related and reciprocal kinds of rhetoric: 1. rhetoric as provocation—wherein the art itself provoked response—and 2. rhetoric as public argumentation (as played out in the letters). We thought we’d carry some of the same questions to the Carnegie International Museum. And we were not disappointed.

Upon entry we encountered a multi-screen video installation entitled “Küba.” The physical installation comprises forty television sets, mostly from the 1960s and 1970s, set atop tv stands of the same vintage, and each with its own chair. The artist, Kutluğ Ataman, is known for his commitment to lived reality (Horrigan 2), and it shows. Each television is named for a person living in an alternative community in Istanbul, Turkey, called Küba, a place where, according to the museum description “freedom and individual rights are valued over traditional laws and established norms” (1). Each tv runs a video loop of that person sharing stories about his or her life in and relation to Küba. On television 18, Doğan, a socialist radical, details his relationship to his torturer, Garip. Television 32 features Eda a young mother who speaks about her violent husband and how she’s never seen the sea. On television 21, Hatun, another socialist radical describes a time when she and other women smuggled bullets in their bras and then details the beatings and torture that ensued. On TV 24, Soner, a young man who grew up in Küba, divulges his intimate knowledge of American popular culture and the profits of cd piracy.

Needless to say, this exhibition captured my students’ interest. Class discussion about the museum visit, which began in small groups and then expanded to the whole class, focused on how the installation mimicked a neighborhood with common dreams, convergent histories, and shared yet individuated spaces. They talked about how they were at first overwhelmed by the number of televisions but that the
televisions, each with its own chair, beckoned them to enter the installation, to move around, to sit, to listen. They talked about how while they were sitting and reading subtitles at one television, the sounds of the voices from the other television formed a murmerous sonic backdrop. One small group discussed the different effect of the simultaneous, uninterrupted videostream versus the more traditional documentary form that a filmmaker like Gutman might have used. The Kūba exhibit thus served to illustrate for the students how space and the visual can function rhetorically, by beckoning them, convincing them to come, sit, illustrating rhetoric’s capacity to transport bodies—a capacity the sophist Gorgias named long ago when he discussed how discourse itself may have transported Helen to Troy. In order to find such lessons, in order to enliven ancient rhetoric, perhaps we should move around ourselves—some would say parapatetically.

Our classes can really take seriously Aristotle’s notion of rhetoric as an art of discovery. They can do so by attending to the material, mobile activities of everyday lives as lived in cities and parks, streets and museums, and even, yes, hallways, mailrooms, and classrooms, all of which routinely yield something like Aristotle’s “available means” or Booth’s “range of resources that human beings share for producing effects.” Put another way, the discovery, use, and effects of such “available means” of rhetorical action transpires through bodies, spaces, and the visual as much as it happens through the presumed twin-media of rhetoric—the written and spoken word. It is these vital, mobile, situational aspects of rhetoric that concern scholars like Booth, the authors in the Nystrand and Duffy collection, as well as so many scholars whose work appears in the pages of our field’s leading journals, on programs at RSA, Cs, and NCA. These bodily and extra-rational features of rhetoric, I offer, were just as crucial for the ancients—the challenge is knowing where to look and how to listen for these sorts of already-built-in lessons.

References


