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Review of Digital Detroit: Rhetoric and Space in the Age of the Network

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Digital Detroit: Rhetoric and Space in the Age of the Network, by Jeff Rice. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012. XII + 247 pp. \$39.95 (paperback).

In 1971, rogue Wayne State geographer William Bunge (placed on a federal list of dangerous intellectuals) published *Fitzgerald: Geography of a Revolution*, a radical polemic about how everyday citizens of a Detroit ghetto could challenge oppression and become geographers of their own neighborhoods. Forty years later, Jeff Rice (formerly a Wayne State professor himself) revisits Detroit geography, but this time largely from his laptop (and without, I hope, the same kind of federal harassment). For while Bunge's *Fitzgerald* and Jeff Rice's *Digital Detroit* share similar terrain, as well as a love for the city in all its contradictions, Rice isn't looking for a revolution. In fact, he's looking to change our entire vocabulary around urban spaces *away* from narratives of revolution and stability, progress and retrenchment, destruction and renewal—the kinds of binaries that have taken over both the ways we talk about, and actually experience, cities like Detroit. Instead, Rice navigates us through an odd and thrilling travelogue of the Motor City by finding the bonds and connections between the cultural scraps and bits that constitute the essence of a city and its inhabitants—the networks that bind the diverse experiences of Detroit together.

America's image of Detroit has long revolved around pictures of urban decay, poverty, and violence, as reproduced through endless images of empty factories, riots, and abandoned storefronts, and personified in figures such as disgraced mayor Kwame Kilpatrick, whose story begins with native-son promises to revitalize the city, and ends in corruption, betrayal, and imprisonment. Rice does not negate these common mediated experiences of Detroit, but finds greater meaning in their connections to other cultural fragments, and shards of memories; he takes, in his terms, “the ambiguity of practice as central to what Digital Detroit is about,” thus “allowing spatial meanings to avoid the total theory or grand narrative gesture (Detroit is in ruins/Detroit is about to be rejuvenated)” (225). In this way, Rice follows Henri Lefebvre by understanding space as a set of social relations, and yet transposes that set of relations onto digitized networks “where meanings

come together, break apart, form hubs, connect and disconnect.” For Rice, to conceive of Detroit “not only as a physical space is to engage in a project about invention, rhetoric, and how we engage with spaces of meaning. It is to think about relationships” (6). His office building at Wayne State, for example, becomes a central point (or an “interface”) where he can connect the high rise’s past lives as headquarters of Detroit’s public school system, as the foundation of a fraternal secret order, and as home of the legendary WXYZ station. The language of network rhetorics allows Rice to enhance the meaning of each of these pieces of his building’s history by bringing them into conversation with one another.

Thus, Jeff Rice re-assembles his Detroit like a Ford jerry-rigged with old and new parts—creating a postmodern assembly line where songs, photos, websites, films, brochures, magazines, architecture, and city streets are piled on to the frame of the city. *Digital Detroit* takes us from Faygo soda to 50 Cent, from Henry Ford to *Hardcore Pawn*, from Detroit Metro Airport to Dylan’s performance at Cobo Hall in 1965. Rice believes that these everyday materials, spaces, and pop culture events “motorize” each other, as they all contain “metadata” storing their histories, location, status, and origins (69). The layout of the book coheres such metadata around particular sites in Detroit—some obvious landmarks, but also ones that have personal significance for Rice. While the opening chapter lays the theoretical ground for networks and rhetoric, Chapter Two builds on this foundation by showcasing Woodward Avenue, a central Detroit artery that crosses through Rice’s old workplace, but also a typical symbol of the urban wasteland narratives that Rice is challenging. Here, Woodward instead becomes a set of lanes for exploring new-media “folksonomies,” or ways of classifying information according to desire and emotion rather than through more systematic, “rational” taxonomies. Chapter Three centers on the aforementioned Maccabees building, whose chaotic history frames a discussion of how urban architecture can unite a host of disparate associations—in this case, from public education to secrecy to broadcast media. Rice’s careful

networking of these layers emphasizes how a different type of literacy is required to “read” urban spaces, spaces that he finds more apt for digital metaphors and the “imaginative, nonlogical, patterned interface informational technology alludes to” (119). In Chapter Four, the oft-photographed beauty and decrepitude of the Michigan Central Train Station provides a compelling basis for exploring “circulation,” as opposed to mere symbolic representation, in considering public spaces. Rice follows the massive abandoned station through its eventful circulation into films, art, even blogs—and finds the stationary landmark the very definition of a moving, complex network. Finally, Rice concludes on the 8 Mile neighborhood, immortalized by Eminem on film, and historically a kind of borderline between white and black Detroiters. He uses the site to reflect on the “additive” power of networks—they don’t resolve the tensions of a city like Detroit, but they gather contradictory propositions together, and these contradictions are where Rice finds the best source for new inventive strategies.

Each of these cases brings out the strengths of this book. Certainly, *Digital Detroit* is theoretically rich with the de Certeaus, the Lyotards, the McLuhans, the Virilios, and the Jamesons—but while Rice’s facility with these is impressive, this is not what makes his book memorable. For while he does extend theory around space and new media, his greatest contribution may in fact be methodological. With his emphasis on process, rhetorical scholars will especially appreciate how Rice effectively blurs the lines between invention and arrangement, offering not only an innovative way to order public space and critique Ramist schematics, but also an engaging model of working with cultural artifacts. Furthermore, Rice’s focus on affect memorably lessens the sense of detachment we prize too often in scholarly writing. In fact, the most vivid demonstrations of Rice’s networked rhetorics come out of his own personal associations to Detroit—the nostalgia for his dad’s brief ownership of a Model T, his poignant identification as a Jewish educator passing a temple on Woodward Avenue while having to contend with Henry Ford’s anti-Semitic specter over the city,

and the humor of including a choice photo of himself as awkward teen in full Rolling Stones regalia (accompanying a moving passage about his love of Detroit's late, great *Creem* magazine). Music, in fact, is probably the best example in *Digital Detroit* of Rice's gifts, as he seamlessly spins Blind Arthur Blake, Blondie, Gordon Lightfoot, Victoria Spivey, and the MC5 into the web of his networks; rhetorical critics rarely can sufficiently account for the power of pop music, and Rice is an outstanding exception. Through both his innovative methodology and his model style, we get a fully formed appreciation of a city's relationship to its inhabitants.

Of course, with such a novel approach, Rice leaves a few troubling questions. One problem is that the reader can get lost in the network. Like a particularly tangential hour of internet searching where you wonder, "how did I get to Russian kalashnikovs from vegan cookbooks?," Rice can leave us puzzled over how we got from *Robocop 2* to banking advertisements, or from Malcolm X to the 1984 world champ Tigers. Rice is sometimes that gregarious but distracted guide who doesn't always remember to look back and make sure his readers are with him; his explorations into "folksono(me)s" and "satisficing" can get lost in Derrida-style wordplay, and while his aversion to easy meanings is admirable, the reader has to be prepared for that kind of provocative, but ultimately inconclusive style. Rice also risks, at times, over-idealizing the power of the network. The internet has become increasingly ordered by massively powerful institutions—and Rice likely knows of the pitfalls in relying too heavily on digital vocabularies in a world where the web no longer connotes unfettered networking and creative exchange. Finally, Rice rightly finds the question of the "secret" that will "save the city" as part of Lefebvre's "urban illusion" (125)—however, if a city is a random network, then readers might have trouble imagining a sense of commonality in urban spaces that can translate into social capital needed for change. The ensuing question, then, is what of Detroit? Rice would surely bristle at this question, as he consistently resists, understandably, the impulse to offer any set of prescriptions for the city. But the reader cannot help but sift through the scraps and bits

of Rice's Detroit and wonder: what do we do with it all? A *Digital Detroit* is still a material Detroit, and casting the city as a series of contradicting fragments can sometimes risk de-politicizing the material conditions facing the city's residents. If one of Rice's lasting arguments is that the city is too complex for narratives of decay and renewal, what do the people do that are living there?

Ultimately, though, Rice's methods of rhetorical invention can serve as the match to ignite novel ways of thinking about urban spaces, even if he stops short of forecasting Detroit's future. And matching Rice's methods and energetic style to actual digital modes of visualization could be potentially more revolutionary than anything William Bunge drew up. We can only imagine what kinds of new maps of Detroit (and other urban spaces) we might create—and a wide interdisciplinary audience will find something in *Digital Detroit* to spur these new kinds of geographic imaginations. For, in the end, any book that concludes with the connections between Bruno Latour and Ted Nugent deserves our praise. *Digital Detroit* is a deeply felt tour of the neural pathways of this troubled genius of a city—a strange GPS trip more enamored with the routes than the destination. In the process, Jeff Rice has given us a formidable pile of new maps and alternate directions to consider.

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