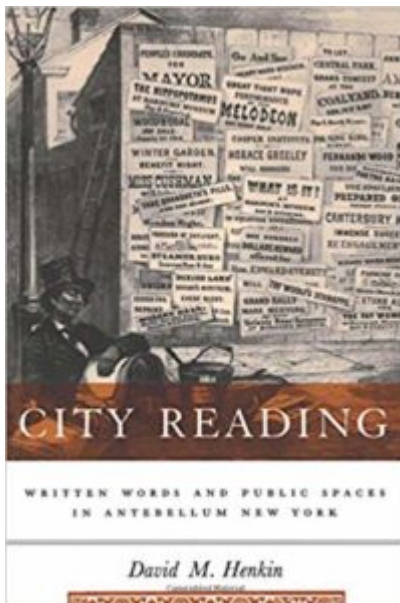
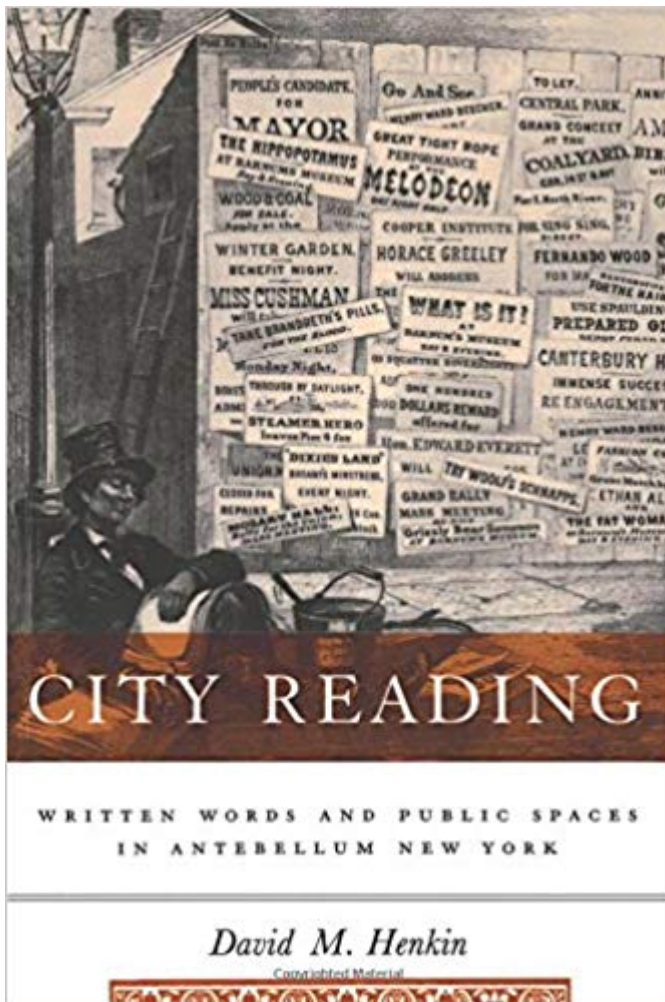


# The Visible Public



City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York

With *City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York*, David M. Henkin has produced a brilliant and exhilarating book. It offers nothing less than an utterly original answer to the question: What is the nature of human experience in capitalist cities, and how might we speak historically of such experience? By extension, the book further takes as its subject the nature of human experience *outside* capitalist cities, in all those niches and regions where the spread of technological change, for nearly two centuries now, has facilitated the introduction of social conventions possessing urban origins. In short, *City Reading* is analytically expansive, sure to alter the way in which one perceives modernity itself.

Henkin's interest lies in the public (that is, outdoor) spaces of antebellum New York. In particular, he seizes upon the presence of written words in the streets of Manhattan, identifying four kinds of "urban texts" that veritably colonized Gotham's environment with printed words in the three or four decades leading up to the Civil War. "Fixed," especially commercial, signs represent the first sort of text treated by Henkin. "Mobile" signs, such as handbills, represent the second; newspapers the third; and banknotes the fourth. Why should these signs, papers, and notes matter? Because Henkin shows that their proliferation in antebellum New York provided the material basis of a new type of social formation: "a new kind of public" (7). As Henkin says of his book, "At the thematic core of this tour of urban texts is the proposition that those forms of engagement and disengagement that characterize big-city living emerged fairly early in New York around the experience of written words posted, circulated, fixed, and flashed in public view" (x).

In other words, at the heart of Henkin's study lie so many acts of reading, a practice usually understood apart from the category of urban experience. "In the historical imagination," Henkin notes, "the nineteenth-century city appears as a place of cacophonous commotion, while the nineteenth-century reader sits in silent solitude, engrossed in the pleasures of a novel" (4). But *City Reading* makes it clear that to wend one's way through the burgeoning world of antebellum New York, its streets increasingly filled with strangers, entailed the reading of one sign or poster or daily or dollar after another. To be sure, this was a markedly different experience than that had by the solitary reader—precisely Henkin's point. For the difference between the lone reader and the reader out on the street, Henkin argues, was the difference between one sort of public and another. It was the difference between an abstract, bourgeois public and a concrete, mass public. It was the difference between an invisible public of isolated readers and a visible public of anonymous ones.

*City Reading* thus offers a counterpoint to the notion of the public prominently advanced by Jürgen Habermas. And in contrast to those who simply lament the decline of bourgeois institutions of public reflection (for example, the coffeehouse), Henkin puts forward a story about a public that succeeded—and in some ways *exceeded*—those earlier institutions. In the vocabulary of this story, perhaps the single most important word is an adjective: "impersonal." For Henkin rightly recognizes the impersonality of modern urban experience as one

of its leading features. He recognizes other significant features of city life too, but Henkin speaks, most of all, about the "impersonal authority" of his urban texts, about the ways in which these texts garnered legitimacy before an undifferentiated public on the streets of antebellum New York.

To consider how the personal authority communicated in a world of familiar faces receded before the impersonal authority wielded in the modern city, let us regard the frenzy of commercial signs that came to mark the outdoor environment of New York in the 1830s, '40s, and '50s. Henkin provides ample, indeed striking, evidence of this frenzy. One is astonished, for instance, to look upon a photograph of lower Hudson Street in which a printer's, a carpenter's, a clothier's, a painter's, and a druggist's signs subordinate all else within the physical environment, including its buildings and people (frontispiece, 50). Henkin establishes that the power of such signs—private signs—owed to their enormity and elevation, and that these traits enabled the anonymous circulation of people on the streets of Manhattan. "In a city," he writes, "where, every day, strangers would arrive with few, if any, acquaintances and no point of entry into a world of face-to-face contact that might orient them, a sign on a building offered direction indiscriminately" (50-51). More than this, Henkin demonstrates that private signs moved toward "typographical regularity" in the antebellum period, toward an "image of uniformity" despite the competing commercial interests represented by these very same signs, so that they consequently gained "an aura of being official" (56, 57). In all, then, commercial signs achieved "an impersonal authority associated with the public sign" of today (65). And in this connection, Henkin introduces the case of New York's Central Park, whose increasing number of signs in the years after 1860 "would have been neither conceivable nor effective without decades of previous sign use in which New Yorkers had grown familiar with words appearing in public" (67).

Today, we are so familiar with the public appearance of words that *City Reading* is thoroughly remarkable for questioning what others have taken for granted. "After all," Henkin submits, "we have come to expect cityscapes to be legible, much as we expect consumer goods to come with labels, instructions, and promotional copy. But there was once something novel in the spectacle of so many words, and something radical in the notion that buildings and streets ought to be marked" (3). Henkin informs us that no small part of this novelty owed to the widespread introduction of cheap daily newspapers, themselves public objects that were sold, scattered, and read on the street. But Henkin is also interested in the papers' "print spaces," and here his analysis merits special attention for its originality (113). For, while much has been written about the penny press in antebellum America, nothing akin to Henkin's interpretation has been proffered. In brief, he poses the daily as a public space in its own right. First Henkin establishes the lack, in the antebellum press, of any clear line distinguishing what we would call "news" and "advertising" from one another. Next he points to the daily's "rectilinear layout" and "even columns," analogizing them to Gotham's grid (117). And finally he identifies the daily's "typographical uniformity" (117). What, then,

was the cumulative effect of these features? "Discrete news stories, tendentious political commentaries, competitive commercial claims, and ostensibly unrelated bits of information blended together in the print columns of the metropolitan press in a characteristically urban juxtaposition of unlikely neighbors that also imbued all of the texts with the appearance of sharing a single, impersonal authority" (119). Put differently (and ingeniously): "In many respects, perusing the columns of the major dailies resembled and paralleled walking down the city's major thoroughfares . . . " (125).

"Perusing" and "walking" seem the right note on which here to conclude. If the act of reading has come unmoored in recent decades, invoked metaphorically in the pursuit of sundry objects of inquiry, then David Henkin has alerted us to all those acts of reading that have literally taken the city as their subject; he has clarified the meaning of those acts; and he has rendered for those acts a history where previously none existed. Ultimately, as well, he has fashioned a book that is itself nothing if not urban in character, so rapid-fire in its delivery that the reader vicariously enters the energetic world of the modern city.

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James Kessenides is completing his dissertation for the department of history at Yale University. The dissertation is entitled "Before Hollywood: A Prehistory of Los Angeles." He teaches history at the University of South Florida, St. Petersburg.