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# Recursivity: Navigating Composition and Space

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# "Recursivity: Navigating Composition and Space"

The recursivity of the writing process is closely related to the recursive process by which the pedestrian navigates the built environment. The writing process, like the act of walking through a city, involves a conscious mediation between complex tasks. When teaching composition, we recognize the importance of emphasizing the recursive nature of the writing process. Here, we are referring to composition as a recursive practice--that is, one with complex, recurring subprocesses-as proposed by Janet Emig in her highly influential *Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders* (1971). However, it is difficult to explain recursivity to classes whose only experiences with writing consist of five paragraph themes or timed writing prompts. Students entering American universities are unaccustomed to processing and producing information through non-linear strategies.

In teaching the writing process, instructors stress that a writer produces a final draft by moving between prewriting, writing and rewriting. In doing so, instructors often employ a discursive strategy which relies heavily on metaphors of movement. Writers *wander* between the stages of the composition process. Writers *search* for essay ideas while in grocery stores or bars. Writers *jump* from stage to stage. Indeed, instructors employ this language to allow students to visualize, and spatialize, a process that is sometimes more than a little arcane. Instructors emphasize the places where students write to help students actualize a process which seems to lack a clear procedure.

We would like to explore one thematic approach to composition that allows students to place themselves more clearly within the mediatory discourse enabled by the writing process. This thematic approach necessitates an extension of our conception of writing beyond the written traces—drafts, outlines—that result from the process. Instead, we would like to think about where and how these written traces are produced. We will connect our discussion of possibilities for the composition classroom to the central metaphor and methodology underlying Michel de Certeau's *L'Invention du quotidien*. The discourse of the pedestrian parallels the complex series of tasks negotiated by the successful writer. Recursivity, the means by which this discourse is produced, is a difficult process that students must internalize. The successful student writer learns to understand the complex process that leads to the final draft. However, while we consider the stages of idea development, we must also incorporate the places of idea development into our pedagogy. The final product of the student's writing process is a synthesis of this stimuli, which may consist of ideas, facts gathered through research, input from proofreaders, etc., absorbed, evaluated, and

recombined by the writer. The writer negotiates ideas in the same way that the pedestrian navigates through space. While composition instructors already consider the stages of idea development, we contend that an effective pedagogy must also incorporate the *places* of idea development.

#### The Pedestrian's Discourse

Following the cultural eruption in Paris in May 1968, the French Ministry of Culture urgently needed to understand the changing cultural practices of the country. The 1974 *Cultural Practices of the French* dealt with consumer identity through extensive graphs and figures. It was, essentially, a statistical composite of culture. In the same year that this was released, Michel de Certeau received a commission from the Ministry of Culture to develop a more theme-based study of possible cultural trends. Along with Luce Giard and Pierre Mayol, the principal researchers for *L'invention du quotidien II, habiter, cuisiner*, Certeau sought to outline the cultural logic underlying standard daily practices.

In L'Invention du quotidien I: arts de faire, translated into English as The Practice of Everyday Life, Certeau develops a stance that enables the citizen-consumer to occupy a position of power.

Certeau's position is nearly the opposite of that supposed by Michel Foucault.

While Certeau and Foucault are both interested in the relation between the individual and a monolithic power structure (expressed most famously as the panopticon by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*), Certeau maintains that the individual, and individuality, can survive, while Foucault views all practices as tainted and made possible by this centralized power. As Mohamed Chaouki Zine points out in "Mystique et Mystére du Pouvoir: Michel de Certeau et Michel Foucault":

L'organisation de l'espace comme instrument utilisable pour discipliner et assujettir les corps donne aux dispositifs du pouvoir leur raison d'être. Foucault montre les fonctionnements d'un pouvoir opaque et omniprésent dans chaque énonciation, [...] ou, selon le mot si cher à de Certeau, "arts de faire" stratégiques et tacticiens détournés et transposés par les ruses de la masse. Le pouvoir est partout là où l'acte épuise son énergie d'actualisation et de mouvement [....] Foucault isole le geste reproduit de son cadre discursif afin d'organiser l'espace visible pour qu'il soit un réseau de contrôle individuel et collectif. [The organization of space as an instrument utilizable to discipline and punish the body provides apparatus of power with their reason for existing. Foucault displays the functions of an opaque and omnipresent power evident in each enunciation, [...] where, to use the phrase so dear to Certeau, strategic and tactical "arts of living" are distorted and transposed

by the ruses of the mass. Power is always found wherever action exhausts its energy in actualization and movement [....] Foucault isolates the gesture reproduced in his discursive framework in order to organize visible space because it is a system of individual and collective control.] (Zine 3)

Certeau does not deny the existence of a dominant monolithic point by which a political and economic structure observes and controls its citizens. Instead, he stresses that this structure enables practices at the periphery. As Certeau notes in "Histoire de Psychanalyse entre Science et Fiction," "derriére 'le monothèisme' des processus panoptiques dominants, nous pourrions soupçonner l'existence et la survie d'un 'polythéisme' de pratiques disséminées ou cachées, dominées mais non effacées par le triomphe historique de l'une d'elles" ["behind the 'monotheism' of the dominant panoptic processes, we are able to suspect the existence and the survival of a 'polytheism' of disseminated or hidden practices which are dominated but not erased by the historic triumph of one over all"] (Certeau 42).

For Certeau, the consumer is not a docile or manipulated subject. Instead, the process of consumption enables the consumer to interact with and affect change in a western capitalistic society. Throughout *Arts de Faire*, Certeau relies on his discussion of the pedestrian in order to develop his conception of the citizen as active participant in civic life. The unifying characteristic of the power of the consumer-citizen is the extent to which actions imply creation, the ability to "make" something hidden and individual from the received materials and patterns of cultural practices. The "practice" of everyday life is based on the process by which practical objects or discourses are derived from daily activity. The practice of the consumer citizen, Certeau asserts, manages to avoid systemic control. We only have to consider the opposition Certeau establishes in "Walking in the City" between the "panoptic" view of a starkly utilitarian Gotham City taken from the top of the World Trade Center, itself indicative of Fredric Jameson's conception of the systemic totality of a globalized capitalism, and the rich heterogeneous texture of the human text, which exists at street level, among cabbies and bike messengers and Prada-clad sophistos.

But Certeau also mentions other practices: notably talking and reading. As Michael Sheringham points out in "Michel de Certeau: The Logic of Everyday Practices":

By virtue of a commonality rooted in the paradigm of enunciation, each of the everyday activities on which Certeau focuses in detail--primarily walking, talking, and reading--can be seen as metaphorically related to the other two. Walking is a mode of reading the spatial

environment; reading is a mode of journeying; speaking involves narrativisation which links space together as in walking, and so on. These metaphorical links are not merely fortuitous. In fact it is this inherent metaphoricity that makes these activities--in their everyday manifestations--representative of everyday practices, those operations which, like metaphor, cut across established boundaries and hierarchies. It is insofar as they partake of the creative potential and mobility of metaphor itself that everyday practices are inventive. (Sheringham 34)

The connection between mobility and communication doesn't surprise us. The term metaphor is itself based on the Greek for "transport." And our own daily practices are clearly situated within the fiber-optic confines of the information age. But Certeau focuses most specifically on walking. The pedestrian, unlike the motorist or the subway passenger, is not absolutely trapped by the machinery of the power structure. The pedestrian, whose movements are unscripted, guided by the greater trans-political laws of chance and fate, escapes the gaze of the glazed eye perched on the power pyramid.

## The Language of Sprawl

Certeau's theoretical position is well known, and his opposition to Foucault insightful. But how can we apply his ideas to our particular teaching situations? Both authors teach at the University of Florida in Gainesville, a town with a population of approximately 100,000. The University itself numbers around 60,000 students, and over 40,000 of these are undergraduates. The city itself can be divided into two fairly recognizable sections: a town-university corridor and an exurban fringe, filled, like anywhere in America, with the sprawling trappings of Generica. The main "hub" of this exurban area, Butler Plaza, is located just outside of the city limits. In this way, this strip (which features a series of connected parking lots nearly five miles long) escapes any standards the city may impose in order to regulate development and maintain any sense of civic identity.

Most of the undergraduates come from South Florida, the largest urban area in the state, which includes Dade, Broward, and Palm Beach counties. According to J. Howard Kunstler, author of *The Geography of Nowhere* and *Home from Nowhere: Remaking Our Everyday World for the 21st Century*, South Florida is, developmentally, "in some respects...even worse than northern New Jersey or Los Angeles, the prototypes of highway strip development. The buildings were farther apart, set back farther from the highway, with immense parking lots. And the relentless flatness of the Floridian landscape, its lack of topographic features, only added to the sensation of being lost in a surrealist painting, a panorama of strange, cartoonish objects (the buildings) all verging into a

single vanishing point along an abstract horizon" (Kunstler 209).

In American cities of this size and shape, automobile travel is the norm. According to 1990 statistics taken from the Federal Highway Administration's Nationwide Personal Transportation

Survey and the Bureau of the Census' Journey to Work Survey, approximately 90% of all urban trips are made by automobile (Winston 13). Furthermore, as these cities grow, continuing their sprawling developmental patterns, the actual length of trips taken by automobile increases as well. As Clifford Winston and Chad Shirley indicate in *Alternate Route: Toward Efficient Urban Transportation*,

"vehicle miles traveled in urban areas increased 70% from 1980 to 1994 while urban road mileage increased only 30 percent" (Winston 14). This figure tells us that Americans nationwide are spending more time in their cars. For most of us, this is no surprise. But, the increase in vehicle miles traveled indicates that most Americans perceive long commutes as the only way to traverse their cities. And, in most cases, they are right. The 30 percent increase in urban road mileage paired with the great increase in overall miles also hints at the decentering of the American city. As corporations center their operations in suburban office parks, workers are often forced to commute across the city from one suburb to another.

Or, looked at from another perspective, these figures show us that sprawl style development doesn't, paradoxically, grow fast enough to support citizens' needs: the greater number of miles traveled also indicates that shopping center, grocery stores, post offices and other urban essentials, are often located far from suburban homes.

And many American cities are made up almost entirely of automobile-oriented infrastructure. While 22 percent of London and 24 percent of New York are taken up by streets and parking lots, a sprawl-style city like Los Angeles may use up to 75 percent of city space to accommodate the car.

We provide this information in order to situate the practice of walking and, along with it, of reading and speaking, in relation to American urban reality. Certeau's usage of walking as a liberating practice has highly influential precursors in European thought. The social position of the *flaneur*, a free-wandering, wine-drinking poetry-writing pedestrian whose daily actions serve to counter the regimentation of bourgeois ideals, was invented by the French symbolists and venerated in works like Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs de Mal* and Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*. But is the position of the *flaneur* even possible in contemporary American cities?

How much *joie de vivre* can be crammed into a five lane crosswalk sprint? Figure 1 depicts a fairly standard intersection of two main arterials from a pedestrian's perspective. The contemporary

American city is, almost uniformly, built from intersections like this.

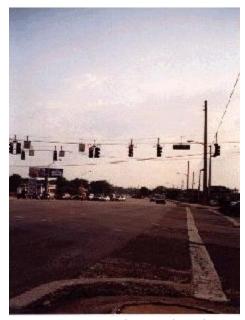


Figure 1: Archer and 34th

In "Walking in the City," Certeau uses New York as an example of a place conducive to pedestrian practice. But New York is one of a very small number of American cities which features European levels of population density and public transportation usage. US Dept of Commerce figures from 1988 show New York with the highest population density of American cities, with 8677 people per km. A large sprawl-style city like Houston, on the other hand, numbers 1074 people per km. New York's density, which actually exceeds London's 5000 people per km, fosters a pedestrian culture.

The practices of everyday life instilled by sprawl-style cities, on the other hand, inhibit the walker. However, the inaccesibility of American cities to pedestrians is an indirect result of poor development plans. As Charles L. Wright points out in *Fast Wheels, Slow Traffic: Urban Transport Choices*, the development plans for such cities "are based on the implicit assumption that motorized traffic must predominate and that space and expense for nonmotorized modes should come out of what is left over (if anything) after the motorized modes have been taken care of; road space is for motor vehicles, not people" (Wright 190). Such assumptions form a set of cultural expectations internalized by most students.

The shape of Gainesville hints at the impact of these assumptions on a physical space.

Undergraduate admission rates at the university increased throughout the nineties. While first year students are encouraged to live on campus, on-campus housing cannot currently accommodate the increased number of students attending the university. Student housing developments along Archer Road have proliferated as a result. Their development parallels the success of the Butler Plaza shopping area, also located off Archer Road. Developmentally, Butler Plaza mimics the South Floridian aesthetic.

The rows of palm trees, which are not common in this number to a city located fifty miles from the Atlantic Ocean, attract student consumers by presenting a familiar landscape. The main entrance to the shopping center (Figure 2) beckons the driver with long, even rows of palms.



Figure 2: Butler Plaza

The buildings of the development exhibit features characteristic of the Art Deco/Mediterranean hybrid which dominates South Floridian architecture. The rows of Tuscan columns (Figure 3) line the front of the entire development. Spanish tiles and stucco, used here in a coffee booth surrounded by a vast sea of asphalt (Figure 4), are common features in South Floridian housing and retail developments.



Figure 3: Rows of Tuscan columns



Figure 4: Spanish tiles on free-standing coffee booth

The campus and town on the other hand, are much more closely aligned with a southern Gothic style of architecture. Here, brick is the primary material. Even without the elaborate features of southern gothic structures such as this university building (Figure 5), the new Union Street development downtown (Figure 6) connects to a regional architectural vernacular through its use of materials.



Figure 5: University Auditorium



Figure 6: Union Street Project

The traditional neighborhoods surrounding the university and the downtown feature elements like wide sidewalks, tree-covered streets, and a proximity between residential and commercial zones that allows for pedestrian level human interaction. In fact, because of the great number of tree-covered streets throughout the city, Gainesville has been awarded distinction as an American Tree City. This streetscape in the Pleasant Street neighborhood (Figure 7) features a

barrier of trees and on-street parking separating pedestrians from moving vehicles as well as wide front porches which welcome interaction on a pedestrian scale.



Figure 7: Pleasant Street

Furthermore, the town boasts a strong African American community, a healthy civic culture, and one of the highest levels of public transportation usage in the state (a figure determined by total number of riders, and not on a per capita basis). With its large number of bike paths and instreet bike lanes, Gainesville is one of the most bicycle friendly cities in Florida.

## **Drivin' and Cryin'**

Our purpose, however, is not to lament the urban sprawl affecting Gainesville or to blame such development patterns on undergraduates. Instead, we intend these examples to illustrate how these factors also affect the difficulty of teaching composition strategies, and, most importantly, of inculcating critical thinking skills.

New students actively resist the new role as pedestrian available to them in Gainesville. Student government campaigns, for example, are routinely won on the promise of increased student parking. Some students resist the role of pedestrian as much as, and for the same reasons, they resist the "wandering" necessary to produce strong and creative writing.

The logic of the auto culture, for instance, is based on grids and linearity. The disembodied vantage point Certeau attains at the top of the World Trade Center is as disembodied as the vantage point of the driver in traffic. Indeed, the driver, unlike the pedestrian, craves the totalizing authority accessible only from the panoptic position. Consider the popularity of traffic radio (with reports

every five minutes) in cities like San Francisco or LA, or the debates in Congress regarding the viability of auto trains guided by magnetic tracks embedded in the nation's highways.

Such practices obviate Certeau's formulation of a "walking rhetoric" that engenders a stylistic metamorphosis of space. Our students, and many of us, might read Certeau or Foucault and attempt to intellectually free ourselves from the overriding influence of the panopticon, but we view it, in the form of our friendly "Eye in the Sky" traffic reporter, with envy and dependent devotion: who else can get us past that nasty chemical spill on the Interstate?

The pedestrian, on the other hand, is engaged in an entirely different, non-linear process of navigation. The driver must deal with tasks sequentially. Once a task is completed, it is forgotten: the driver must then concentrate on the next situation. The driver, unlike the pedestrian, must always focus on the immediate future.

In *Relations in Public: Microstudies of the Public Order*, E. Goffman discusses the pedestrian as a vehicular composite of clothing and flesh. Goffman contends that the pedestrian interacts with the physical environment through a process called scanning:

As the individual proceeds along his course, he scans the flooring immediately in front of him so that he will have time to sidestep small obstructions and sources of contamination.

Here, too, is a structured scanning that is performed without much awareness. (Goffman 16) The pedestrian performs a sophisticated but autonomic measure of the physical dimensions of the environment. Such processing, because it is autonomic, is not consciously filtered by the pedestrian. But the fact the pedestrian does not consciously filter this information does not make this information insignificant. Indeed, the sensory details absorbed through scanning surpass the largely visual stimuli processed by the motorist in a tightly enclosed climate controlled vehicle.

In *Human Aspects of Urban Form: Towards a Man-Environment Approach to Urban Form and Design*, Amos Rapoport compiles a comprehensive survey of the multisensory inputs which help individuals to perceive, and navigate through, environments. The pedestrian's experience, unlike that of the motorist, is incredibly reliant on sound, tactile sensations, kinesthetics, air movement, temperature and smell. Indeed, the needs of the pedestrian echo pedagogical expectations of advanced thought. Rapoport observes:

An environment comfortably stimulating from a car becomes monotonously boring on foot while what is interesting on foot becomes chaotic in a car [....] The two environments need to be quite different in terms of noticeable differences and perceptual organization; at high speeds one needs distant views, simplicity and large-scale while at slow speeds one needs

small-scale, intricacy, and complexity. (Rapoport 242-243)

The motorist is trapped in a linear sensory dynamic, while pedestrian movement is intrinsically recursive. Rapoport adds that:

Motorist's perception is affected by the length of time each element is in view and also the criticality of the task. The pedestrian has each element in view as long as he wishes and can satisfy his interest in it because of the low criticality of this task. When pedestrians are harassed by traffic their task becomes critical and they cannot perceive the environment in the way appropriate to their speed--this is a common problem. (Rapoport 243)

For the pedestrian, a single task rarely dominates the process of navigation. The single task which most often dominates pedestrian navigation involves car dodging. But the urgency of such a task overwhelms the pedestrian. In a car-free situation, the pedestrian assigns a low criticality to single tasks, navigating in such a way that the intermingling of separate tasks creates a complex discourse between pedestrian and environment.

Students in introductory composition classes at the University of Florida are learning to navigate through at least two different landscapes:

1.a pedestrian landscape enforced by university regulations which prevent first year students from acquiring on-campus parking permits (although, as mentioned earlier, the number of first-year students currently exceeds the amount of on-campus housing, so that students move from home to theme-style apartment complexes in the exurban wasteland.
2.a cognitive landscape engendered by our composition program's commitment to teaching the writing process.

Here, our connection to Certeau is most significant. Walking, traversing a built environment, is, above all, a way of reading, and, by extension, of producing new readings, of creating new texts. These means of perception are altered by students' everyday experiences at the University of Florida.

A composition course organized as an examination of the form of the urban environment would, then, seek to produce the disorientation and cultural reexamination students experience on study abroad programs. On study abroad trips, students use the host city as a primary text. By navigating through the city, these students learn to question their own cities, their own practices of the everyday. Indeed, as Edward T. Hall indicates in *The Silent Language*, such cultural reexamination is the main benefit of foreign study:

Culture hides much more than it reveals, and strangely enough what it hides, it hides most

effectively from its own participants. Years of study have convinced me that the real job is not to understand foreign culture but to understand our own. I am also convinced that all that one ever gets from studying foreign culture is a token understanding. The ultimate reason for such study is to learn more about how one's own system works. (Hall)

However, in home campus experiences, many composition instructors view the urban fabric as an optional text, at best. In order to more effectively engage students through the writing process, we suggest that instructors and students critically examine the social and political implications of settings most consider mundane and everyday.

## The City in the Classroom

A successful application of the strategies we outline in this article would use both the city and students' culturally-determined perception of its workings as texts. Swinford, an avid bicycle commuter, organized an assignment around the issue of student parking. He incorporated readings from *Stuck in Traffic*, a book which deals with the American over-reliance on the automobile; newspaper articles on local public transportation services and bike trails; and campus maps. Students were to devise and defend plans which would significantly solve problems with traffic congestion and parking availability on campus. Students were to defend their plans using principles of traffic congestion outlined in *Stuck in Traffic*, note advantages accruing from implementation of the plan, and include a campus map which featured any additions or demolitions (of buildings, roads, or transportation facilities, for example) resulting from the plan. In order to facilitate the students' ability to "see" the campus as an area of possibility, Swinford asked the students to arrive at class a different way for each day of a week. Students were encouraged to try different transportation modes and paths. The students were asked to describe their observations from each day's commute in a short (2 pg.) paper. The traffic plan was due the following week.

Students explored a wide range of possibilities in their plans, and remarked on the impact of the inclusion of the campus map in their argument. Parking garages were built and demolished, bike lanes were widened and extended, specific bus routes were replanned. The transportation and research components of the project encouraged students to use services and transportation modes that many were initially resistant to. Their bus trips and bike rides helped them to explore the area, while also realizing its possibilities.

This example hints at one direction instructors may pursue in order to incorporate the theoretical concepts we explore into their pedagogy. Many other possibilities abound. Some include incorporating the discourse of public meetings into composition assignments, asking students to

analyze their home cities, or linking a writing assignment to an urban "mission" that students

develop individually. But, our discussion is intended to question pedagogical practices, and not

merely prescribe remedies. We emphasize the importance of considering the politics of place in the

composition classroom, and stress that our discussion is intended to encourage wandering both in

and out of the classroom.

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