Who's Going to Cross this Border?  
Travel Metaphors, Material Conditions,  
and Contested Places

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In “Writing as Travel, or Rhetoric on the Road,” Gregory Clark outlines a social theory of writing opposed to the rhetorical construction of territories. Troubled by metaphors of territory that attempt to describe discourse communities, Clark proposes an alternative in which he recon­ceives “rhetoric as something more like travel” (11). In his view, discursive exchange would “function in the transient space of travel.” That is, to write as travelers, we would move across discursive spaces that continually shift, and we would stop policing the boundaries of discourse communities. Our task in composition would be to teach students to cross boundaries and to challenge territorial conceptions of identity.

Although Clark’s essay echoes the fascination with “movement” that we find in a number of contemporary theories, the travel metaphor implies limited possibilities for women, workers, and the differently-abled. In addition, Clark’s concern with territories might result from an erroneous assumption that places—or their boundaries—are stable, which is a way of defining place that geographers would reject. Travel metaphors and the rhetoric of mobility leave the materiality of place unexamined; the rhetoric of territoriality must acknowledge that places too—and not just identities—are always in flux.

Before going further, I should acknowledge my own position as a writer working in a location that is far from home. Even though I want to question the travel metaphor, I am also entirely complicitous in its appeal. Drafting this essay while on sabbatical leave in England, I write this, in part, as one who traveled here to write, as one who embodies the very privilege of traveling that Clark assumes.1 From this uneasy position, certain that travel isn’t for everyone and isn’t one thing, I hope to illustrate that current theoretical notions of travel, journeying, and border crossing must be tempered by the material realities of people’s lives.

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Clark's article is informed generally by a number of "traveling theories" and invokes the itinerant sophists so important to rhetorical history. Yet it relies on a problematic bourgeois ideal of travel that does not fully recognize that traveling involves difficulties, economic realities, and safety issues; it is also exclusionary by race, sex, class, and abilities. Even if the traveler is not well-to-do or highly educated—James Clifford reminds us that migrant workers, exiles, and nomads also travel—western culture generally admires those who travel for pleasure and enlightenment, and considers the well-traveled more sophisticated, more experienced, or more able to understand cultural differences. Tourism—both concept and experience—is not synonymous with travel; in the elite circles of true travelers, tourists are shunned, especially those who go on group bus tours. Travel writer Paul Theroux insists that tourists are not real travelers, who, he says, go it alone. (In his definition of genuine travel, I can only be a tourist.) In any case, there are clearly degrees of travel and many different forms—all of them complicated by material factors and the interplay of identity with place. No single notion of travel exists, although many of the discourses of cultural criticism seem to promote one view (Wolff).

Clark's proposal ignores the material side: the real consequences of the romantic myth of traveling. Most importantly, imagining writing as travel might mean silencing or erasing those whose labor makes travel possible—or the conditions that make writing possible. For example, didn't servants accompany bourgeois Victorian travelers, and weren't they also traveling? (Clifford 33). Furthermore, it's important to acknowledge that not everyone travels—including those who are burdened by domestic labor or responsibilities, those who are physically disabled, those who can't afford the time off or the expense, those who simply can't leave home, or, quite simply, those who see no need to travel. These questions—when applied to writing as a mode of travel—force us to ask who can afford to write, who has the time and space, or where the motivation to explore new forms of writing might come from.

Still, Clark is tapping into an attraction to travel that has both a long history and much contemporary currency. The tradition of touring the Continent—a prerequisite for an educated young man—continues today with popular study abroad and exchange programs for students, and many faculty travel to conduct research or to teach in foreign countries. Travel literature is a hot commodity in publishing markets, and forms of armchair travel (such as the Travel Channel on cable television) contribute to romanticized notions of travel. Faster and cheaper modes of transport
have made travel more available to the lower middle classes, while seductive electronic technologies make some of us believe that we can travel via the Internet. In these ways, the idea that we can now travel with ease (that is, if we can afford or have access to the technology) is one of the most pervasive and appealing ideas of the current era.

As one result of the seduction of movement and the prevalence of movement metaphors, many writers are imagining new places where the silenced might be heard. Margins and borderlands offer women and people of color a place from which to speak, a site to resist the center while finding or cultivating an alternative voice. And since margins and borderlands are an imagined geography, these places are more accessible. The work of Gloria Anzaldúa—a bilingual writer who works in multiple genres—straddles several boundaries and occupies a space in the borderlands, in the “between.” Rooted in a premise of exclusion, the idea of borderlands or margins offers a theory of communication that seems to be truly empowering and liberating. That is, the occupants of borderlands are outsiders to the dominant culture; they have some freedom of movement and the ability to see from the outsider perspective precisely because they do not “belong.”

Clark neglects these places for a good reason: these sites raise the very problem of territoriality that he wants to avoid. Borderlands and contact zones do depend on a concept of territory. Even though we should not imagine territories as fixed or stable, with clear-cut or rigid boundaries, the empowerment offered by borderlands rests on an assumption that speakers and writers are willing to cross lines and to take risks in unknown places. In addition, concepts of border crossing and boundary transgression and forms of travel ignore the evidence that in the “real world” people don’t move around that much, a point I’ll return to. In the next section, I’ll share some of the work that further unpacks the travel metaphor and turn to the work of composition researchers who have theorized writing as material.

Complicating Travel
Perhaps best known for recent theoretical work on travel is anthropologist and ethnographer James Clifford, whose *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* is an extension of his influential article, “Traveling Cultures.” In much of this book, Clifford’s purpose is to broaden the scope of travel to include “an increasingly complex range of experiences: practices of crossing and interaction that troubled the localism of many common assumptions about culture” (3). What if
“dwelling,” “home,” “the local,” “the neighborhood” were not seen simply as the opposite of travel but as concepts that make the notion of travel possible? Clifford’s idea of dwelling-in-travel or travel-in-dwelling complicates the relationship between the two. Clifford outlines the issue he addresses:

“Travel” denotes more or less voluntary practices of leaving familiar ground of difference, wisdom, power, adventure, an altered perspective. These experiences and desires cannot be limited to privileged male Westerners—although that elite has powerfully defined the terms of travel orienting modern anthropology. Travel needs to be rethought in different traditions and historical predicaments. (90-91)

Clifford acknowledges that feminist theory in particular has complicated any notion that home is a safe or immobile place and has challenged the binary oppositions between the private space of home and public spaces abroad. As Janet Wolff points out, Clifford’s effort to broaden the notion of travel and to recognize feminism’s contribution nonetheless reinscribes the fundamental problem with travel metaphors. In “On the Road Again: Metaphors of Travel in Cultural Criticism,” Wolff analyzes the gendered nature of these metaphors and ultimately rejects them, arguing that some discourses are “too heavily compromised by the history of their usage.” Most interested in how the metaphors and ideologies of travel operate, Wolff writes, “My argument is that just as the practices and ideologies of actual travel operate to exclude or pathologize women, so the use of that vocabulary as metaphor necessarily produces androcentric tendencies in theory” (180). She asserts that travel metaphors are rife with serious implications because “there is something intrinsically masculine about travel” (184).

Although she acknowledges the exceptions—that women do travel and that much research has been done, for example, on Victorian lady travelers—Wolff also believes that the suggestion of “free and equal mobility is itself a deception, since we don’t all have the same access to the road.” Interestingly, in spite of her strong objections to travel metaphors, Wolff finds borderlands, exile, and margins less problematic because all imply dislocation from a given and exclusionary place (189). Geographer Geraldine Pratt also sees the promise of borderlands “perhaps because the focus is shifted . . . to a socially constructed place in which difference and conflict is constructed and lived” (243). As long as place metaphors do not suggest neutrality, they can certainly provide inspiration for those seeking sites of resistance.
Nevertheless, since spatial metaphors construct reality and don’t simply reflect it, the problem with travel metaphors remains. Travel metaphors construct our cultural notions about acts of traveling because liberating travel metaphors—such as those that Clark employs—represent only men’s experiences with travel. What we need, as Clifford says, is a way of talking about travel that acknowledges and includes a range of experiences with or relationships to travel—and, I would add, to place. In this vein, Pratt, who is concerned that the rhetoric of movement privileges detachment from place, recommends more attention to the meaning of dwelling, a point she takes from Stuart Hall (242-43). In particular, we must ask how can languages of travel and dwelling acknowledge fundamental differences in people’s socio-spatial worlds and their unequal access to modes of travel or their reluctance to cross borders.

Whether the keyword is travel or journey or border crossing, how we get there is a crucial part of the equation that is often conveniently ignored. Why do we go, with whom, and under what conditions? These are precisely the questions about materiality that travel metaphors neglect. As Christina Haas points out in the context of literacy, “ignoring the materiality of literacy, its basis in bodily movements and habits, is no longer possible” (227). I want to turn now to two studies of writing that do insist on materiality and that resist a theory of writing based on some form of disembodied movement.

Moving Toward the Material

More composition scholars are beginning to recognize that social theories of writing require a direct acknowledgment of the material ways in which writers and texts interact. In Writing Technology: Studies on the Materiality of Literacy, Haas makes the most fully developed case for the relationship between writing and the material world. Starting from the premise that writing and technology constitute one another, Haas wants to see writing as an “embodied practice” and its tools as cultural artifacts. She is interested in bodily acts of writing and the relationship between a writer and his or her text, at least as it can be investigated via empirical methods:

The spatial and temporal metaphors that writers use to describe their text sense problems . . . then, make a great deal of sense because computers transform writing in the realm of time and space—that is, the realm of the bodily. It is through these worlds of time and space that writers move as they produce written discourse.

Hence, the body . . . is the mechanism by which the mediation of the mental and the material occurs. (226)
To make her argument about the materiality of literacy, Haas considers the act of writing in terms of a connection between the body and familiar practices (she makes a passing reference to Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of “habitus,” which I’ll return to below); however, she concentrates primarily on individual writers and their relationships to their texts. What Haas doesn’t pursue is the ways in which bodies engage in acts of writing under certain physical or material conditions. The body, of course, is imprinted with and affected by the spatial and social world in which it moves. While the writer in the garret is not an image endorsed by social theories, it’s nevertheless true that writers need a place to work: a place to sit, a surface, and lighting (see Brodkey).

When Virginia Woolf called for a room of one’s own for women writers, she meant it literally, as Anne Aronson recognizes in her study of several adult women writers, “Composing in a Material World: Women Writing in Space and Time.” Aronson identifies the challenges of space and time that make it difficult to engage fully in process writing for all but the firmly middle-class, middle-aged student with a spacious home, grown children, and a supportive husband. The results of Aronson’s surveys and interviews provide support for Woolf’s position and challenge Ursula LeGuin’s claim that one needs only paper and pen to write (see Aronson 297).

Metaphorically, perhaps, writing can be travel for the women of Aronson’s study. Yet, in the ordinary world, writing often occurs in a corner of the bedroom or at a kitchen table in a full household (Aronson 289-90). Despite our fundamental theoretical stake in writing as a social act, the social circumstances of writing—being surrounded by other people who have needs or desires—can distract from the writing, from getting the work done. While Clark is right to question the consequences of the territorial notions of discourse communities, writing as travel disregards the material conditions necessary for the labor of writing and ignores the cultural differences that writers face while on the road.

Haas and Aronson provide two different ways of seeing writing as embodied practice. I want to approach the same goal from a different direction in an effort to understand how embodied practices develop in real and imagined places (see Soja). My project, therefore, is informed by cultural geography, qualitative research, and a sense of the material shaped by ordinary and mundane landscapes. Starting from the view so familiar in cultural and postmodern theories that space is socially constructed (and that identities are constructed as bodies move through the socio-spatial world), I set out to discover students’ sense of place—
however contested and layered it may be—and what their experiences might tell us about metaphors of traveling, journeyming, or border crossing.

In order to begin the process of imagining writing through and against travel metaphors, I have been studying geography for several months (with an emphasis on cultural geography). Given the fortunate circumstances of being a tenured professor who earned a sabbatical leave, I was able to make arrangements to live in England and to study geography at the University of Leeds during the spring of 2000. I must admit to “going out in search of difference,” the very criticism that Clifford makes of anthropological fieldwork (85). As someone who only recently acquired the means to travel (the money and the time), and as someone who is not immune to the cultural capital of travel (especially as fellow academics and intellectuals practice it), I could not resist the temptation to move away from the United States—from my university and professional contexts—for a semester abroad. After six months, I can now understand why travelers have insisted on the potential of travel to enlighten or to change one’s point of view—at least temporarily. This is why feminists have often argued for the outsider perspective; it also explains why cross-disciplinary research is growing. Anxious to make the familiar assumptions of my own discipline seem strange, I devoted myself to trying to understand another discipline in a different country. In particular, since composition studies as a recognizable discipline doesn’t exist in the United Kingdom, I was forced to think differently.

In the next section, I suggest some of the contributions that cultural geography can make to analyzing difference and to rethinking our fondness for metaphors of movement. After an overview of cultural geography, I turn to a discussion of some of my qualitative research in a cultural geographies class at Leeds. The mapping interviews that I share below suggest that travel can be local; that even local travel can involve risks or uncertainty; and that most people stick very close to home. Moving through the world—whether from one country to another or one neighborhood to another—does not occur casually.

Cultural Geography: The Study of Difference
Despite stereotypical notions, geography is not simply the study of state capitals, rivers, and major exports. Cultural geography, in particular, is the study of the interaction of humans with the earth, and it may inform and be informed by sociology, anthropology, history, and other disciplines. Cultural geographers study the ways in which cultures are contested spatially and how identity and power are reproduced in the
everyday—in mundane, ordinary landscapes. Firmly located in the social sciences, but with some influence from the humanities, cultural geography’s most significant contribution “may well be to insist on the materiality of the terms place, space, landscape, location” (Gregory et al. 8). According to Linda McDowell, cultural geographers examine how the increasingly global scale of cultural production and consumption affects relationships between identity, meaning and place. Attention is focused on the ways in which symbols, rituals, behaviours and everyday social practices result in a shared set or sets of meanings that are, to greater or lesser degrees, place-specific. Thus a geographic perspective has become central to the cultural-studies project more widely. . . . (“Transformation” 147)

Generally, cultural geographers insist that the construction of identity be understood as a spatial process, but a process that resists what Michael Keith and Steve Pile call a “one-to-one correspondence between the image and consumption of a place and its reality” (7). For example, just because someone spends his or her whole life in one place—a neighborhood or a house—the result is not a stable identity. In their attempt therefore to understand how identities are constructed in space—through experiences with place—cultural geographers insist on explicitly material notions of culture, not abstract ones. In Maps of Meaning, Peter Jackson approaches cultural geography through Raymond Williams’ cultural materialism, resisting explanations of culture that are divorced from materiality. In Williams’ view, “culture cannot simply be reduced to ideology, narrowly conceived, because it is part of a social and political order that is materially produced” (Jackson 47). According to Jackson, Williams’ concept of structures of feeling is particularly important for cultural geographers because it connects to the important geographical idea of a “sense of place” (39).

In Marxism and Literature, Williams identifies structures of feeling as “meanings and values as they are actually lived and felt” and “specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships.” Intended as a cultural hypothesis, structures of feeling can be used to understand art and literature in particular—that is, “their specific kinds of sociality” (132-33). Williams asserts that social forms become social consciousness “only when they are lived, actively, in real relationships” (130). Cultural geographers such as Jackson are attracted to Williams’ concept of structures of feeling because experiences within landscapes or the built environment are often very much like responses to art and literature.
These responses are materially produced but are not simply aesthetic.

Jackson also sees a relationship between structures of feeling and Bourdieu's concept of habitus. Habitus attempts to represent how social behaviors (or habits) are inscribed on the body, which is a result of "the sedimented history of particular practices" (Jackson 39). The concept of habitus brings together social class and learned behaviors, the body and the material, and habits and practices. Like Williams' structures of feeling, habitus is an attempt to theorize the social as an actively present process. The two concepts also have in common the analysis of class differences. Williams acknowledges the historical variability of structures of feeling, as well as "the complex relation of differentiated structures of feeling to differentiated classes" (134). In his general study of "taste," Bourdieu proposes habitus as a structure through which to read differences of social identity: "an agent's whole set of practices . . . are both systematic . . . and systematically distinct from the practices constituting another life-style" (170).

Habitus has become a useful concept for scholars interested in the study of social practices. Haas makes use of it in her discussion of the materiality of literacy: "Any embodied practice, including writing, is habitual . . . (cf., Bourdieu). . . . [a] habit is a kind of remembering in and by the body" (228). Significantly, Clifford also finds it useful in his consideration of anthropology's changing positions on travel: "we may find it useful to think of the 'field' as a habitus rather than as a place, a cluster of embodied dispositions and practices" (69). Bourdieu's concept of habitus, as these references to it illustrate, doesn't neglect the body or material circumstances; both together form practices.

Williams' concept of structures of feeling, especially when combined with Bourdieu's concept of habitus, gives cultural geographers a more complex notion of a sense of place, one that attempts to account for difference (Jackson 39). This is important because a sense of place cannot be treated as singular or stable; neither can the identities that are shaped within it. Places (or territories) are contested by competing and shifting interpretations of their meanings, and these meanings are tied to signs and symbols that carry cultural weight. (A telling example is bell hooks' "Homeplace," a radical reinvention of home as a site of resistance.)

Habitus and structures of feeling, when applied to a material sense of place, might help to account for the gap between metaphors of travel and the tendency for most people to stay home. As a set of embodied practices, habitus keeps us in our place, so to speak, or defines the tactics and strategies we may rely on for moving through the world. Modes of
transport or preferred pathways are part of one's habitus, as are clothing and style, gestures and movement, accent and expressions. As the interview data below illustrates, a person's sense of place—while a result of many layered effects—is quite directly related to his or her body in space.

Studying how people construct and reproduce a sense of place is one of the greatest challenges to cultural geographers. Such an investigation is difficult methodologically and requires qualitative research, since check-the-box surveys cannot capture the complex relationship between identity and place. More important, however, is the need to account for and analyze the implications of different senses of place—what does it matter or what does it mean? Through the interpretive framework of cultural geography and the use of qualitative methods, I have tried to understand what university students' sense of place might illuminate about our understanding of cultural difference, and what the implications might be for a material approach to learning and writing.

In order to explore the relationship between the spatial and the social in a concrete and practical way, I interviewed eight students in a Cultural Geographies class at the University of Leeds about their experiences in getting around the city and in living and working there. My purpose was to explore the everyday material existence of university students as it was played out in the "mundane landscape" of their lives: the campus, the surrounding area, their housing, and the other places of their social and spatial lifeworlds. My questions were these: What places did these students believe were contested, or which places did they avoid or feel excluded from? How are their experiences in space shaped by their identities as students? In what ways do they name difference geographically?

These managed conversations took place with volunteers from the third-year Cultural Geographies module in which I was a participant observer in the spring term of 2000. While participants were certainly not representative of the student population at Leeds—they were all white, third-year students seeking BA degrees in geography—I believe that they make valuable contributions to our understanding of the relationship between the social and the spatial. Here's how the interview project began. During a workshop early in the term, the lecturer asked students to do a version of a mental mapping exercise as a sort of prewriting activity for their research project on a place new to their experience. Tom (all names are pseudonyms) gave pairs of students a photocopy of an Ordnance Survey map of Leeds and asked them to identify four types of areas: no go, ethnic, conflict, and normal. Using colored markers, students were
to shade in or outline these types of areas and discuss their shadings.

I was immediately struck—and troubled—by Tom’s terms for these categories. I wanted to ask: “Normal to whom? No go for whom? Doesn’t it depend on gender, race, class, modes of transport, and abilities?” I didn’t raise these questions that day, but the classroom activity sparked my interest in one-on-one interviews with students about their mental maps of Leeds. I combined, then, a form of mental mapping with one-on-one semi-structured interviews. The interviews, like the activity in class, asked students to sit with an OS map of Leeds and colored markers and to talk about their personal definitions of and experiences with the following categories (changed slightly from those in class): “no go,” “ethnic,” and “desirable.”

The interview transcripts (a total of approximately seventy-eight pages) touch on a range of issues well beyond the three categories. The eight students (four men and four women) talk about their main modes of transport and the habitual routes they use in getting around the city; they describe types of housing that work as signifiers for them; they share anecdotes of feeling fearful or excluded; they discuss how they have “come to know” about certain places; and they make comparisons between Leeds and their own hometowns. For the purposes of this essay, however, I will limit my discussion to the boundaries and territories that constitute students’ experiences in the everyday and to the ways in which their identities as students determine their experiences with space and place. Most strikingly, analysis of the interview transcripts supports the argument of feminist geographers Geraldine Pratt and Susan Hanson “that most people are fixed in and by space. Understanding these processes provides one way of seeing differences as socially constructed” (12).

Confined Spatiality: Keeping Yourself to Yourself

In “Geography and the Construction of Difference,” Pratt and Hanson point out the tension between postmodern views of experiencing space and more everyday and down-to-earth realities:

Much has been made of the shrinking world, of the increasing ease of travel and communication, and of the resulting homogenisation of space around the globe. Although the world is indeed increasingly well connected, we must hold this in balance with the observation that most people live intensely local lives; their homes, work places, recreation, shopping, friends, and often family are all located within a relatively small orbit.
The simple and obvious fact that overcoming distance requires time and money means that the everyday events of daily life are well grounded within a circumscribed arena. (10-11; emphasis added)

A passage from my interview with "Elaine," which highlights students' reluctance to stray from well-defined student areas, offers considerable support for Pratt and Hanson's assertion. Here's the passage in full:

I: Anything else you want to say about your map of Leeds?
E: Not many details are there? [laughs]
I: Well, why do you say that? Why do you suppose that is?
E: It's just a general knowledge that I don't really have of the area; I think I know Leeds well, but all I know is Headingley to the city center. I know the city center quite well, so that's a general lack of details thing.
I: Well, do you think that's because you're a student?
E: Uh-huh.
I: And your particular place and time in life?
E: I think so but not necessarily, because when I was working in Comet [a retail store] back in the summer there were people there that didn't have a clue about north of Leeds or where I live.
I: Any part?
E: Yeah, and most of them had lived there all their lives.
I: So it's not necessarily about being a student? It's about . . .
E: It's like your neighborhood is your whole life, isn't it? It's like your surroundings; it's like how, say, in this year we're living here and someone else is doing something else, but this is our area so people go back to their neighborhoods; they identify it to a point with their neighborhood and that's if you've got everything there then you didn't need to go out of it and because if you're safe in this area where you live because that's where home is.
I: So you haven't really felt compelled to explore the areas of Leeds that you don't know?
E: No, not really, no. I suppose it brings questions of home into it, doesn't it? Because Headingley is my home at the minute, so therefore that's where I'm going to spend the majority of my time.

All eight of the participants comment on their own neighborhoods and their limited knowledge of the city of Leeds. Mitchell says, "I don't really know too many areas of Leeds because when you're a student you're only really going between the university, your house, and the city center." He repeats the point about his ignorance of Leeds twice more. Anna puts the issue rather succinctly: "Because I have no need to go very
far out, my knowledge of Leeds is pretty much concentrated into that student area or where students live.” Zoe compares her limited sense of place in Leeds with her similar experience in London: “I don’t really feel like I know Leeds at all because I only know a narrow corridor. [ . . . ] In London I only knew my borough; I only knew that really well; I didn’t know that much of the rest of London at all.” Julian believes that most people’s familiar territory occurs within a limited radius: “I only know sort of a limited area. I think you’ll find this with everybody else: they’ve got a sort of chunk of Leeds that they know quite well, a sort of radius. I’ve got a radius of about five miles either side of which I know quite well—which is everywhere within walking distance basically.”

Some students are quite matter-of-fact about their ignorance of the city, while others seem a bit regretful that they have not done more to explore a wider range of places. Sheila, in particular, seems to feel that as a geographer, she has somehow let down that side of herself; however, she explains her tendency to stick to student areas in terms of security and convenience:

S: I’m totally ashamed of myself for the fact that I’ve just basically been on this road here, which is just basically where students live. The town center and . . .

I: Between the city center and . . . ?

S: I’d say even as far as Headingley.

I: Just up the A660, right?

S: That’s it. That’s the area where students all live; that’s where all the pubs are. The clubs are in town. The area that I’ve functioned in is so restricted I’m almost ashamed of myself.

I: It’s not because you’re afraid; it’s because . . .

S: No, it’s because everything I want is here [taps finger on map], which is really bad. I’ve got friends who’ve gone out into the countryside and explored all around, but I’m bored with that because that’s what it’s like when I’m at home [in Wales]. Everything I want has been along this road, and students do feel quite secure there, I suppose, as well.

I: Well it’s their culture.

S: Yeah, put it this way: [ . . . ] I wouldn’t not go to Bramley for the day because I’m a student, but I wouldn’t want to live there amongst . . . I’d want to live . . .

I: With students?

S: Yeah! Definitely, and that’s probably some sort of security issue there, and there’s four cinemas, there’s all my friends, there’s loads of pubs, and it’s just . . .
I: Convenient?
S: It's convenient, yeah, which I'm quite ashamed of. I should've been around a bit more but . . .
I: Well, it's about who you are right now, I guess.

Students are able to name the reasons for their restricted knowledge of Leeds—namely, the convenience and a desire to share in "student life," defined in part by being surrounded by other students. If "everything they need is there" in the student neighborhoods, why should (white, middle-class) college students venture into unknown territory? They rely very much on what friends and acquaintances have told them about certain places—"things they'd heard"—as well as their own impressions of places formed through their regular routes through Leeds. Except for Sheila, they accept their confined spatiality as a fact of life, a reality connected either to their position as students or to their given geographic location. As McDowell observes, "for many people in the world, everyday life continues to take place within a restricted locale," and "the 'localization' of most of everyday life is indisputable" (Gender 2-3).

Students' identities as students—their embodied practices—keep them from venturing into certain areas where they have had strong feelings that they weren't welcome or would feel "out of place." At my suggestion, students use the term "no go" to name and discuss places where they personally would not feel safe. Anna talks about one "no go" area, determined for her by one (accidental) drive through the area and information from others:

A: I wouldn't feel comfortable walking down Chapeltown at any time just because I'm obviously not . . . I don't think I would fit in there. I mean, the kids that hang about on the streets there, [. . .] the people who are sort of my age tend to be hanging around in, we call 'em pikeys which is like Adidas pants, and all the girls have their hair scraped up onto their heads and spiral perms with blonde hair. Just by standing there, it'd be obvious that I wasn't one of them, so I just wouldn't stop.

Students are well aware of the features that mark them as students, and they use these differences to explain their isolation from many areas of the city. Elaine couldn't really name the specific areas but says of some areas in south Leeds, "Just because of my position in Leeds at the moment as a student, they wouldn't appreciate us going there." When I ask her to elaborate, she admits that she is stereotyping the areas or basing her notions on hearsay, but she also is clear that her reluctance to enter these
areas comes from her identity: "Just because I'm, mind, a student with student feelings, putting myself into one of these council estates wouldn't be a wise thing to do; you just don't go there—for your own safety."

These students have good reasons to worry about their own safety: most of the participants mention incidents when they have experienced abuse or have felt vulnerable because of crimes against students. Elaine clarifies that things can happen even in daylight, even in residential areas: "I've had little groups of kids throw stones at me and stuff." Liam talks about being spat upon as he walked by "kids who sit on walls," but he emphasizes that he doesn't take it personally. In naming "no go" areas, Liam describes an area near his house: "There's footpaths down at the bottom of that—I wouldn't actually go up there for fear of getting abuse shouted at me every now and again; well, all students do I suppose, but then there's bricks in there and I wouldn't walk down that way at night." While he seems quite casual about the verbal abuse, Liam avoids an area where greater physical harm could be done. In addition, both Sheila and Anna narrate the details of a crime scheme in this area of Leeds in which (male) students are grabbed off the streets at night, taken to cash points, and forced to withdraw money to give to their attackers. This pattern has been repeated three or four times over a few months, and most students are well aware of it.

In less threatening ways, however, students are also made aware that they are unwelcome in certain areas, that they are trespassers in areas that "belong" to other social groups. Half of the students interviewed talk about their tentative status, even in neighborhoods (in this case, Hyde Park) full of student dwellers. Mitchell says, "I know people who live in the Hyde Park area and they've had their next door neighbors who've been Asian come round and knock on their door and say 'Why are you living here? This is an Asian area.'" Anna has a similar story to tell about who belongs in certain neighborhoods and who doesn't:

A: I went to a friend's house [in the Hyde Park area], and we were all sitting in the lounge having a cup of tea when some kids started climbing on the bars in front of the windows, climbing across the bars [imitates them]: "Oy, mister, give us this, give us that." My friends can't put any of their washing out, and there are literally bars over the windows to stop the kids coming in. Inside the house is their territory—as soon as you step outside the house, then it's almost like it's Asian people's territory.

I: They'll ask you things like . . .

A: "What are you doing here? What are you doing here?" If you're in
the way, or if you’re wanting to get past them, it’s fine: you keep yourself to yourself. But if there’s any attempt to mix in any sense, then I’d be nervous about it, definitely. So you tend to sort of keep yourself to yourself and walk with your head high and hope that no one will bother you.

Anna echoes what David Sibley, in *Geographies of Exclusion*, calls a liminal zone: spaces of ambiguity where the categories of inside/outside, public/private, or home/street become blurred or uncertain. He explains that for “the individual or group socialized into believing that the separation of categories is necessary or desirable, the liminal zone is a source of anxiety” (33). If students are in their homes, they are “safe,” but Anna’s anxiety begins when she has to enter the streets and move through the neighborhood.

Anna and the other students do not challenge the claim that they don’t belong; they recognize that other residents are far more permanent, with more of a stake in the area. Some students are willing to admit that they don’t always make “good neighbors.” Mitchell talks about how students don’t care for their houses (because they’ll lose their security deposit anyway). Elaine, however, describes an “anti-student sentiment” that she claims is held by most locals: “Oh, it’s just that the locals think that we come in and make loads of noise and create rubbish and get drunk—that we’re hooligans. They’ve just got quite a lot of negative feelings against us.”

Sheila thinks the anti-student attitudes result from the very limited form of contact between the two groups: the Asian businesses provide services to students, and students are interested in or dependent on the Asians only as “service providers.” The students are consumers, and the businesses need them to survive:

S: Yeah, the only thing I do dislike about [Hyde Park] a lot is the fact the community’s so divided—students and the Asian families and businesses. The only thing you ever come into contact with people for unfortunately is to buy burgers from the takeaway or to take taxis. [...] I think that students are really resented by the locals because we can really misbehave.

I: Despite their economic clout?

S: Yeah, when we come back in September (for the summer holidays we all go home to our respective homes) the taxi drivers always say, “Oh I’m so glad to have you back.” You know, students do bring most of the money into the area’s businesses, especially all the takeaways.
Hyde Park, a neighborhood near the university occupied by both students and Asians, is the epitome of a contested place, where the local businesses’ economic dependence on students has bred an attendant feeling of resentment of them. In this space, students realize their economic clout but are equally aware of their temporary status as residents. The mix of social differences—beyond “race” or “class”—causes boundaries or borders to shift and slide; those unsure of their place use tactics such as Anna’s strategy of “keeping herself to herself” in order to get through territory that belongs to others.

This raises the question of how students or other “trespassers” recognize boundaries and borders. How do they know when they don’t belong? Sensing where boundaries lie and who can cross them constitutes a type of knowledge or understanding that’s extremely difficult to name or to research. Julian might claim “intuition,” but he depends upon the visual, as the following exchange shows:

I: Well, there aren’t any parts of Leeds that you recognize as being scary, dangerous?
J: They’re the areas that I don’t go to; this is the funny thing, I know. I just know not to go there.
I: Right, how do you know? You’ve heard or . . .
J: Well, I’ve started walking up towards it and as soon as I get near it alarm bells start ringing. You know, because you notice that everything’s boarded up, there’s nobody about the estates, there’s lots of damage—the whole place is terribly rundown. It’s like walking into a war zone; it’s like suddenly turning up in Bosnia [laughs].
I: So it’s physical, actually, kind of . . .
J: Yeah, you see burned out cars, you see broken windows, you see high security fences everywhere and rubbish strewn everywhere and a few kids perhaps running around the place looking wild.

The visual is crucially important in our encounters with place, a point that many geographers stress because of the long tradition of reading landscapes. We rely heavily on what we can see to make judgments about places; however, as the interviews demonstrate, students also depend on accounts from others, including what they have been told in their social geography lectures and what they know from years of living in this culture. For example, all of the students interviewed consider the same types of housing either desirable or undesirable: back-to-back terraced housing is the least desirable, while detached houses with large gardens are the most desirable. Visual evidence, therefore, joins with a host of
other factors to signal to students what areas fit with their own histories and identities. However, while Julian sees a "war zone" and turns around to leave, *people do live there*. What is "no go" for Julian, then, is someone else's home. Boundaries that create anxiety for one person can create security for another.

These students' accounts of their experiences in and reactions to these places raise a number of difficult issues that I cannot do justice to here, but the passages above do seem to confirm that geographic investigations can tell us a great deal about the construction and reproduction of cultural difference. As Sibley says, "In the interaction of people and the built environment, it is a truism that space is contested but relatively trivial conflicts can provide clues about power relations and the role of space in social control" (xiii).

**Who's Going to Cross This Border?**

Although an increasing number of writers in composition studies are advocating border crossing, these interviews as well as geographic evidence of confined spatiality suggest that the liberating promise of border crossing may only be for those willing to travel. Travel, even the mundane kind, is desirable to those who have the time, access to affordable modes of transport, and either a confident sense of negotiating space or a feeling of safety in new environments. For example, in *Mental Maps*, Peter Gould and Rodney White report on research that asked residents of Los Angeles to draw their own mental maps of the city. After questioning a wide range of groups, the researcher then created composite maps from their responses. Unsurprisingly, the higher the income and the whiter the neighborhood, the richer and more wide-ranging were residents' representations of Los Angeles. White respondents from Westwood represented tourist areas and the coast, for example, while black residents in Avalon identified main streets leading to downtown. Other districts were only vague entities. Finally, Spanish-speaking residents in Boyle Heights constructed the smallest mental maps of all, representing only the immediate area, the City Hall, and the bus depot (Gould and White 17). Without built-in safeguards afforded by various privileges, many people are simply not willing or able to explore unknown areas.

As geographers understand, many people want to stay in what they perceive to be secure, familiar areas. This fact challenges our theoretical attraction to the metaphor of border crossing. Educators might pay attention to the overall pattern within these interviews—limited though they are—that students want to remain in comfortable territories. Maybe
students are so challenged intellectually—asked to travel and move and change—that they are more content with staying put physically. This experience might hold true as well for many academics or intellectuals who are content to remain in their offices or labs or at the same university for decades. When we wonder why it seems so hard for people of all educational backgrounds to embrace difference, this geographic evidence might clarify how truly difficult it is to travel. Furthermore, acts of trespassing require considerable cheek. As hooks recognizes, “Locating oneself [on the margin] is difficult yet necessary. It is not a ‘safe’ place. One is always at risk” (“Choosing” 149).

In addition, although territorial metaphors in discourse theory may be objectionable, territory claims do get reproduced in the everyday, especially in contested places such as ethnically and economically diverse neighborhoods. Pratt and Hanson name this process a “hardening of boundaries around spatially-defined social groups” (11). If boundaries do become hardened by difference, this fact has implications for those researchers interested in pursuing projects that extend outside the college or university setting. In particular, service learning courses and community literacy projects are giving teachers, students, and other citizens opportunities to work in different areas of town, with different forms of texts (see, for example, Gere; Cushman; and Peck et al.). As these movements grow and evolve, however, it’s important to acknowledge the threat of new or unfamiliar places. Places characterized by difference—different types of housing, shops, or residents—may be uncomfortable for many people, not just students. The first question to ask might be: How are we to try to make these places less strange? How do we overcome this (ideological) inclination to stay home? But the better question might be: should we? What are the consequences of our traveling into, or even trespassing in, neighborhoods where we don’t “belong”? In any case, our ideas that people should “broaden their horizons”—or the value we place in learning about difference, especially through forms of travel—is clearly a middle-class value not necessarily shared by others.

In composition studies, it’s important to understand the ways in which writers feel alienated from certain discourses or institutional practices, or why new forms of reading and writing are so difficult. Because the academy suffers from an acute “hardening-of-the-boundaries” as a result of its ideological function to define and enforce social difference, this makes it difficult for its members to think outside of the box. How can we imagine spaces where the borders are continually shifting? Margins and borders are comforting in some ways to those of us accustomed to
knowing our place—in a text or in an institution. From one-inch manuscript margins to the differences between business writing and technical writing, we recognize and abide by dozens of spatial practices in the everyday. The clearer the boundaries, the more confident we are about keeping some out or letting some in; however, this “border mentality” has made boundaries more important than the places themselves. We are so intent on figuring out where the borders lie—and who can cross them—that we may be neglecting the places constructed by those borders. Because writers don’t just “cross over” the margins of discrete discourse communities from alienation to acceptance, we need a sense of place—for texts, classrooms, and cultures—defined by contestations and differences that extend well beyond boundary lines. Places—whether textual, material, or imaginary—are constructed and reproduced not simply by boundaries but also by practices, structures of feeling, and sedimented features of habitus. Theories of writing, therefore, should reflect this deeper understanding of place. Writing is an act of inhabiting discourses, not just moving through stages of a process. Writing is made possible by forms of dwelling as well as forms of travel; writers dwell in ideas to make them their own. Writers squat intellectually, so to speak, before moving on. Investigating encounters with place and space may help us to reconsider the kinds of movement (and stillness) that characterize acts of writing and that invite engagements with difference. As long as travel does not denote disembodied movement, and as long as dwelling places are not constructed as free from conflict or resistance, then both are equally important to a cultural theory of writing.

Exploring the spatial practices that inform our lives would give us a richer understanding of socio-spatial differences, especially those differences that extend beyond the visual. More insight into writers’ sense of place may offer strategies for helping them to navigate textual space more confidently, as Haas’ work suggests, with more awareness of the connection between the body, practices, and the significance of habits. We also need more studies, like Aronson’s, of the places where writers work—or can’t work because of material conditions. Writers work in places that inform their identities as writers, and we don’t know enough yet about the conflicts and resistances that go on in the interaction of place and identity. Finally, rather than advocating travel to get us away from the discourses of territoriality, we should work toward an understanding of the contested spaces that keep people divided.

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Notes

1. A sabbatical leave from the University of Rhode Island and a grant from the Center for the Humanities at URI made this research possible. I am particularly grateful for this support after learning more about the realities of being an academic in the U.K. I also want to thank the School of Geography at the University of Leeds, especially Graham Clarke, Kate Housiaux, and Matt Stroh, whose help was simply invaluable. Thanks also to the anonymous readers at JAC.

2. Marback has contributed much to the development of a material theory of rhetoric. He writes, "Rhetoric is always already embodied. Meanings are made, then, through the ways we occupy, and are asked to occupy, spaces and texts... A material rhetoric that situates corporeality, spatiality, and textuality in each other can become a powerful critical tool" (86-87).

3. Jackson observes that in response to a disturbing "denial of human agency in contemporary social sciences," geographers have turned to the humanities (20).

4. The body is, of course, the geography closest in. I must unfortunately neglect the huge literature on the body in feminist and sexuality studies. See chapter two in McDowell’s Gender, which engages much of this scholarship.

5. Leeds is a growing city of over 700,000 residents. Just half a mile from the thriving city center, Leeds University has a student enrollment of 21,000. Because of a serious shortage of on-campus housing, most of these students live off-campus in the areas of Headingley (where I also lived), Hyde Park, Woodhouse, and Meanwood.

6. For research and context regarding mental maps, I rely on Gould and White and Wiegand and Stiell. To ensure that my interviews were methodologically sound, I reviewed the work of qualitative researchers in my own field (Kirsch, Ray, Nelson) and took the opportunity to learn from some new ones (Burgess, Delamont, Valentine).

7. Ellipses that appear in brackets ([...]) indicate that I have cut out a passage from the transcript to sharpen the speaker’s point or to eliminate what I consider to be distracting wordiness.

8. Students recognized, however, that the term “no go” is quite specific in social geography as places where the police refuse to go. It is a term that evolved in Northern Ireland (see Keith).

9. Although I’m a bit uncomfortable using the blanket term “Asians,” it is the term that students used. More specifically, however, this area is populated by Pakistanis, and Hyde Park does have one of the largest concentrations of ethnic minorities in Leeds—much less, however, than areas of Bradford, which is widely recognized to have the largest ethnic minority population in the north and is just a few miles from Leeds. According to the 1991 census, over fifteen percent of Bradford’s population is composed of minority groups.
Works Cited


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