



Re-envisioning the Flaneur: Strolling Spaces With Students

In her chapter “Reading Landscapes and Walking the Streets: Geography and the Visual,” Nedra Reynolds argues that concepts from geography can assist composition teachers in their pedagogical approaches to teaching students more “complex notions of space and place that, in turn, serve to complicate our notions of difference” (51). She suggests that “approaches from human geography can teach us about the ways in which cultures adapt to spatial limits or constraints, or how people respond differently to places depending upon race, class, gender, sexuality, or ability” (50).

Perhaps one of the most useful sections of this chapter for composition instructors is Reynolds’ discussion of walking as a rhetorical practice. She argues that “learning to see takes place at street level, through walking” (69). Drawing on Michel de Certeau’s “Walking in the City,” Reynolds theorizes that walking gives students a unique access to the materiality of a place as well as the agency to choose how to interact with the space: “walkers can pause, cross, turn, linger, double-back, and otherwise have control of their actions” (69). In this way, “walking is a continual improvisation, a type of performance that continually privileges, transforms, or abandons the spatial elements in the constructed order” (69). Reynolds ends her chapter with the image of the *flaneur* as a useful concept for encouraging research methods that engage with the space it studies.

The *flaneur* is an “urban rambler, or street prowler” (69) who “embodies the spatial practices of walking as writing, writing as walking; his main focus is to absorb and render the city through walking” (70). Reynolds argues, he “embodies a confident spatial sense that all composers and navigators need” (75). She suggests that this researching and writing practice is “a way of taking materialism seriously” (75).

While I agree with Reynolds that “forms of *flanerie*” are useful as a starting point for material and geographical rhetorics, it is important to question the class-privileged, outsider-observer position that the *flaneur* represents. The *flaneur* is “a wandering spectator, an observer watching but not participating in the scene of modern urban life”; he is “mobile and detached” (71). Reynolds realizes that “because the advantage of the *flaneur* was simply leisure time . . . he is also a very middle-class figure” who differs greatly in his experience of the streets than those whose “means of moving through the world” were “based upon survival rather than entertainment or aesthetics” (74). She views this distance as important for the ability to observe street life without being implicated in it. Donna Haraway critiques this outsider perspective in her work. She argues that “the effectiveness of such representation depends on distancing operations” and thus it is “a representational practice that forever authorizes the ventriloquist” (20). While a practice like *flanerie* seems to engage our students in materiality (they are walking the spaces they write about), it can possibly lead to encouraging our students to speak *for* the people who are part of the space—which becomes problematic if the student is not one of those people.

Reconsidering the point of view of the *flaneur* is integral if we truly aim to get our students to see “how people respond differently to places depending upon race, class, gender, sexuality, or ability” (Reynolds 50). Yet, how do composition instructors make use of Reynolds important ideas for engaging students in the spaces they would like to research and write about, without encouraging an outsider perspective that may lead to superficial (or even stereotyped) observations about cultural differences (see my discussion of “Wildcat Writers”)?

Strolling

I suggest the concept of *strolling* as a useful rhetorical practice and research methodology for first year composition students. This term still incorporates the roaming, wandering aspects of the *flâneur's* walk, while also suggesting a more accessible form of movement. People in wheelchairs stroll on sidewalks; friends stroll together in street; fathers stroll their babies through the park. In a way, strolling is a term that avoids privileging the physical ability to walk and complicates the material privileges of observing a space from a far, on one's own terms. Strolling requires:

- 1) Time and leisure, but also a community. Strolling is not an isolated practice in this sense (though certainly you could go on a stroll by yourself). To stroll a place is to engage it with another person, someone for whom that space has meaning, someone who feels they belong to this space.
- 2) An understanding of spatial practices. Strolling a space *with* someone who is a part of that space habitually, requires that the researcher understand the practices that happen within that space. Often the member of the space will take it upon themselves to describe these practices and assist the outsider in negotiating the space.
- 3) A willingness to form a relationship with the space/community. While the *flâneur* may remain unchanged by his walk through the streets—observing others without communicating with them—the *stroller* strolls the space in a way that encourages interaction with it and its members.

Strolling for Students:

Strolling serves the purposes of English 102 by encouraging students to practice embodied research and by giving students opportunities for locally-based rhetorical analysis. For instance, if students are interested with homelessness as a social issue, have them stroll a local shelter or food bank. While strolling a space students may ask themselves or their guide to respond to the following questions:

- Describe the physical elements of this building/space.
- Describe the social elements of this building/space.
- How do you see the physical and social elements of this building/space relating or not relating to each other?
- How are you supposed to “be” or “act” in this space? Why? How is this ensured?
- How do *you* feel in this space? Who are you in this space? How does this relate to how you are in other spaces?
- Who has power in this space? Why, how? How does that show in the physical aspects of this place?
- Can you imagine this space differently? If you could revise or change this space how would you and why?



Hopefully students come away from this experience with ideas about how social relations are both produced by and produce spatial constructions, as well as questions and issues they would like to explore in public arguments for English 102/104H. Most importantly they practice implicating themselves in their research of social issues. As Donna Haraway reminds us, “This world must always be articulated, from people’s points of view, through situated knowledges” (21). The more we encourage our students to make this apparent in their writing, the better.

Works Cited

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