

The White Board Blues: Objects and Environmental Phenomenology in the Composition Classroom

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Preparing for an essay on material culture, my students at the University of Houston Clear Lake and I were talking about things. Alain de Botton, I told them, grants us with a “projective proclivity,” a tendency to see “suggestions of living forms” and “human characters” in the objects—furniture, typefaces, utensils, buildings—around us (*The Architecture of Happiness* 89).

I lowered the retractable screen while the projector whirled on. I brought up an image of a teapot: pink, squat, with a stout spout. One student spoke up and said it resembled her mother. Another compared it to her kindergarten teacher. Another to a piggy bank. Another to an organ—it’s like a heart, he said, with chambers and valves. The scholar Jules David Prown, I told them, argues it’s like “the female breast.” He associates the restorative, nutritive quality of tea with that of a mother’s milk (*American Artifacts* 19).

Then I brought up an image of a lava lamp. Because we are in Houston, the students mentioned rockets, NASA, space. Someone said, “It’s phallic”—though whoever it was wouldn’t speak up when I asked her to elaborate. Another student said, “It makes me

think of stoners and hippies in the ‘60s, people listening to music, staring into space, tuning out.”

The scholar Jennifer L. Roberts, I told them, elaborates that same point. The “lava” recalls free love, she argues, the blurring of gender roles and sexual identities we tend to associate with the revolutionary ‘60s (*American Artifacts* 172-4). The globs in their juice are free to glop onto each other without conforming to conventional norms. No one’s on top: there’s giving *and* receiving. Watching the “lava” coagulate, you can imagine the anonymous mud-covered bodies at Woodstock, glomming together and separating according to their own private rhythms, entranced into a kind of gelatinous sexual equality.

“Let’s do one more,” I said. I powered down the projector and raised the screen, revealing the white dry-erase board—standard in every UHCL classroom. I knocked on it. “What about this, then?”

The joints in their chairs creaked as we rode out the silence. I uncapped my blue marker and leaned against the board. Before too long some students ventured an interpretation. Many mentioned its featureless surface, its long monotonous expanse across the wall. In that particular classroom, there was a board on three of the four walls. “It’s like snow blindness,” one student said, rising out of her chair and looking warily over each shoulder.

Another brought up the board’s rectilinearity. “It’s orderly,” she said. “There’s nothing but right angles.”

“It’s sterile,” another said.

Others compared it with a canvas, a blank slate, a *tabula rasa*, a screen before the movie starts.

"Those are all structural metaphors," I said. "But what about your relationship to it, as students?"

Joseph, a young man who sat as far away from me as he could, said he treats the board like a buffet. "We're allowed to pick and choose what we want," he said. "If we don't like it, we don't write it down." Ria, a young woman who actively listens, nodding earnestly during class, said the board is intimidating. "It's authoritarian," she said. "It makes me feel I have to be obedient."

This opened up to a discussion of the roles we perform in class. "I stand," I told them. "You sit. I talk. You listen. I put something up on the board. You take it down in your notes."

We were able to laugh at the rigidity of this binary opposition in class. But I drove home that night sped up with my own "projective proclivity." The resonances of the materials in the classroom seemed suddenly pertinent, suddenly significant. I thought of the very size, the very whiteness of the board, comparing it to that other elusive monstrosity, that object of obsession—Ahab's whale. Maybe we composition instructors aren't so unlike the mad captain, in the end.

And I thought of the dry-erase markers: don't they dry up? There's only so much ink one marker can hold; there's only so much one teacher can know, can say, can do for her students ...

And they're so quiet! I thought of the blackboards my teachers had in their classrooms, thought of the frictive ticking of their chalk, the accidental odd screech. Those are the noises of work. But these markers are so smooth the students might take for granted the complexity of the work they present. No one recognizes the well-dressed

woman shouldering a bag burdened with student essays as a laborer. No one recognizes the ink stains on her pockets or the paper cuts on her hands as occupational hazards. We take her subtlety for granted—like the myriad operations and algorithms by which our computers run. These, too, are kept secret by the quiet competence of the objects themselves.

The passivity the board produces bothered me most. As my students pointed out, we encounter a dry-erase board in contexts of education and instruction, spaces where there is a transfer of information, knowledge coming down from the expert to the novice, the educated to the ignorant. Ideally, the board could be a *topos* where our commitments—even our identities—are communicated, contested. We could turn the board over and look down at it, share it, use it the way Pollock used a canvas, smearing our handprints and languages and actions all over it.

But, because students are used to staring at screens and surfaces, used to taking in information and feeling something instinctively about it and then laying it aside forever, I worry they will see the white board as just one more thing to stare at—and then through. I worry I will become just one more entertainer in their lives, one more person they can turn on or tune out when I'm not enough. They stare at the expanse of the board, 20 feet wide, five feet high, and they look at me in front of it, clutching my little marker—it doesn't seem fair.

Environmental Psychology

"Do the attributes of a room influence how we act in it?" Royal Van Horn, the professor of education, asks. "I am reminded

of the answer ... every time I walk into a university lecture hall and see a hundred students with notebooks on their tablet-arm chairs just waiting to receive the pearls of wisdom the room has told them I will deliver" ("Kids, Tools, and Ray Bradbury's Basement").

My students projected their lives onto the objects I showed them, just as they bring their histories and their identities with them into a classroom. A white board might seem "authoritarian" to a student who lacks confidence in her intellectual power. It might seem that way to a woman in her early 20s when her professor is a tall, broad-shouldered man in his 50s. But it might seem interactive to a student who's always been encouraged to speak his mind, or indifferent to a student who's in class just to get the credits.

These relations between the space and the student, subtle as they are, unknown as they are probably even to the student himself, become a part of the environment—even change the environment. These relations have become the object of rhetorical inquiry for composition scholars like Richard Marback, who argues that writing about them "creates opportunities ... to address issues of recognition and resources by asking us to imagine new possibilities for occupying places through a critical rearticulation of actions, objects, and words" (147).

This "critical rearticulation" has been happening more and more at an institutional level. Universities and the ambitions of architecture have always been sympathetic, at least in theory. Places of higher learning, the thinking goes, need spaces in which learning is compelled upward, awarded a noble glow. This has become more and more tricky, though, as universities welcome greater enrollments than ever before but remain bound by physical (and economic)

constraints. Inspiring architecture is expensive. Students, above all else, must have spaces to park, to eat, to exercise, and to study—especially as more and more students are working to pay their way through school, and fewer and fewer are making their homes on campus at universities like UHCL (and other commuter schools in Houston, such as Houston Community, Lone Star, and San Jacinto colleges). As Dittoe and Porter argue, "Utilization rates continue to drive most funding decisions" (26).

Nevertheless—coinciding with the development of environmental psychology as a discipline—institutional attention has been paid to transforming spaces that are already in place. Architects and engineers are moving away from mathematically derived models toward adaptive, responsive designs that seek to follow changing educational paradigms.

One way of doing so has been to transform heretofore "dead" interiors into "learning spaces," making more prudent use of hallways, cafeterias, common areas, plazas, and instructional rooms (Lei, Ellis, Dittoe and Porter, Zernike). It is producing for students places to gather and interact when they are not in the classroom. This design turn has caused architects and engineers and university administrators to reconsider the knowledge they inherited about what works for students. "The adage about the weakest link is truer in school design than in any other building," Ellis argues. "A single compromise may jeopardize a student's education" ("Fit for Purpose" 46). Ellis includes research suggesting that even flooring can "have a profound effect." For example, tile—which is much cheaper than carpet—creates poor acoustics, and "causes as many as one-third of all students to miss up to 33 percent of verbal communication in the classroom" (46).

Lei assembles a table of “major college classroom physical attributes” that research shows can equally influence students and instructors during the learning process. (See Table 1). It can be an attribute as simple and subtle as daylight, he argues, that affects not only student performance but instructor evaluation.

Table 1: A consideration of major college classroom physical attributes	
Size	Small or large
Shape	Square, rectangle, oval, trapezoid, or semi-circle
Seating arrangement	Flexible or permanently attached to floor
Technology system arrangement	Location of modern technology Availability of modern technology
Interior lighting	Intensity (high or low) Multiple light settings Source (natural or man-made)
Thermal condition (Classroom temperature)	Hot or cold Temperature extremes (frequency and duration)
Color selection	Intensity (light, bright, or dark color) Multiple color patterns (distinct pattern)
Noise level	Frequency (frequent or sporadic) Duration (long or short) Intensity (loud or soft)
Source: Lei, “Classroom Physical Design Influencing Student Learning and Evaluations of College Instructors: A Review of Literature,” 129	

This is supported by Kate Zernike, who refers to “a 1999 study done for the California Board for Energy Efficiency, which tracked 21,000 students in three school districts in three states.” Each district, Zernike reports, “had students with similar backgrounds but different teaching styles, building designs and

climates.” The study concluded:

In Capistrano, Calif., students in classrooms with the most daylight improved 20 percent faster on math tests and 26 percent faster on reading tests over one year than students in classrooms with the least. Moving a child from the classroom with the least daylight to one with the most produced the same improvement as moving that child from the lowest to the highest performing school in the district.

In Seattle, the second of the three districts, the amount of daylight was “a more potent predictor” of student performance than sex, class size or whether the student came from a single-parent household, the study found. There and in Fort Collins, Colo., students in classrooms with more daylight had scores 7 to 18 percent higher than those in classrooms without daylight (“The Feng Shui of Schools”).

Many universities have studies like these in mind as they expand with new buildings and make themselves over from the inside. The development of environmental psychology alongside new architectural aims represents an acknowledgment of the necessity of student-centered design. This suggests a new approach to recruitment and retention, as well.

Nevertheless, as Dittoe and Porter argue, function still trumps form, old buildings still evoke old paradigms—especially at public

universities, where funding is limited.¹ Because of these economic realities, they argue, “Purchases of furniture and other equipment still are based mostly on traditional teaching styles—a simple desk, lectern and rows of tablet arm-chairs remain the classroom standard. Libraries still are filled mostly with sturdy oak tables and chairs ready to stand and serve for decades” (27).

I experienced this at the University of Houston’s main campus, where I taught first-year composition as a graduate student. My classroom in the fall of 2008 was in Agnes Arnold Hall, which dates to 1966. According to Stephen Fox, the building was “the first on campus to engage in sectional manipulation and the integration of outdoor with interior space.” (The campus at large, however, was not at all integrated in 1966.) Busy with students, Agnes Arnold is positioned between M.D. Anderson Library and the University Center Underground, a cavernous food court with arcade games and big-screen televisions and work tables; Fox argues the building is “one of the liveliest venues on campus” (152).

Our classroom, though, was atrocious. I am just paranoid enough to have suspected I was the subject of a hidden-camera sensory-deprivation study. There were no windows. The walls were cinder block. Painted teal. (Our school colors are red, white, black.) They were empty of posters, charts, periodic tables, mirrors, even motel art—anything that might have reinforced the practices—*invention, inquiry, observation*—I was hired to teach.

1 For example: I graduated from Ball State, in Muncie, Indiana, the kid brother of the more renowned state schools I.U. in Bloomington and Purdue in West Lafayette. During our commencement ceremony, as I went up to the stage, I was handed a leather folder, emblazoned with the university crest, that, when it was opened, revealed not my diploma but a no-postage-necessary flyer soliciting alumni donations. I’d been an alum for about two seconds.

The floors were tiled. The desks were wooden, the tops of which had been cut to hell by bored vandals, inked up with what Eugene Ionesco might call “superior slogans”: *Go Coogs!* only one among them. A folding table leaned lengthwise against the wall like a custodian on break. There was a disassembled pencil sharpener near the door, its shavings barrel nowhere to be seen. An overhead projector sat on a “media” cart rammed into the corner, cables hanging from it like stale licorice. (I will say that I was able to request the daily use of a laptop and digital projector through the university’s prompt and punctual IT Services.)

Given this classroom to analyze, environmental psychologists and architects would shudder. How, in a space like this, one not only uncooperative but unremittingly hostile, is a student to feel welcome to learn? How is an instructor to teach in a space like this, when “the goal,” as Zernike argues, should be “to make [spaces] less institutional and more like home”?

Place or Non-Place?

Like home. But not home. Though it is logically possible to imagine a space in which every student’s (and instructor’s) needs are considered, it is practically inconceivable. Thoughtful architecture and environmental design (and the reflective practices of critical pedagogy) notwithstanding, a classroom contains too many other independent variables to be entirely determinable. One of these is the instructor. Others are the students. Some others are the “physical attributes” of the classroom, as Van Horn and Lei argue, including objects like a white board.

But another still is the ontological nature of the classroom, which might be understood best as a “non-place.” This is Marc

Augé's term for the temporary, transitional spaces in the modern world that refuse our identity, occlude history, and prevent relationality (52).

Ideally, a composition classroom would be a "place," as Augé, Michel de Certeau, and others understand it. Places, for Augé, "can be mapped in terms of three simple spatial forms, which ... in a sense of the elementary forms of social space ... are the line, the intersection of lines, and the point of intersection" (57). Similarly, De Certeau defines a place as "the endpoint of a trajectory."

Simple enough. But a geometrical definition is not satisfactory. Both Augé and de Certeau seek a phenomenological definition. Both require "the actor" in space bringing a place into being.

This requires, as Augé explains, a reason for the actor to be in space *for and with other actors*. To illustrate this, Augé connects the mythos of Hestia, the goddess of the hearth, with that of Hermes, the god of "the threshold and the door, but also of crossroads and town gates" (58). Thus, the reasons people are drawn into and held by a space, *plus* the ways they move into and through that space, *plus* their actions there, create a place.

But there is still more to consider. The primary requirement of a place is that it have language—*host* language, that is. De Certeau argues that place is created through stories told about it. These stories then constitute a *strategy* on the part of actors who "have to make do with what they have" (18) to connect with each other. Their language, then, allows them to "speak" their own place (to bring it into being) despite what stories might already be there *in space*. An analogy from Maurice Merleau-Ponty captures this more

elegantly: "The space could be to the place what the word becomes when it is spoken" (qtd. in Augé 80).

And the word must be understood. "Place is completed," Augé argues, "through the word, through the allusive exchange of a few passwords between speakers who are conniving in private complicity" (77). Language, then, is a means of the intersection of lines and the points of intersection. Language is a means of connection, when it transcends for the actors the merely constative—language about the space—and becomes for them *productive* of a place. Augé refers to Vincent Descombes: "The [actor] is at home when he is at ease in the rhetoric of the people with whom he shares life. The sign of being at home is the ability to make oneself understood without too much difficulty, and to follow the reasoning of others without any need for long explanations" (108).

A place, then, is essentially temporary, an indeterminate *topos* where actors are using language to understand each other and be understood by each other. Where they speak is where they meet.

But what is a non-place? And why might a classroom be understood best as one? De Certeau argues that a non-place is a negative place; when a place is given a proper name ("*Paris* is 50 km ahead," "Eat at Joe's," "First-year Writing I meets in AH 208") it becomes less than its name. "These names," he writes, "create non-place in the places; they turn them into passages" (qtd. in Augé, 85). When the name appears it *eclipses* the place.

Augé writes: "'[P]lace' is formed by individual identities, through complicities of language, local references, the unformulated rules of living know-how; non-place *creates* the shared identity of passengers, costumers,

or Sunday drivers" (101, my emphasis). Please note the verbs. Places, Augé argues, are spaces we bring into being with language, spaces we actively create through communication; non-places are spaces done to us, spaces that leave us passive. "Non-places," Augé writes, "are there to be passed through." They deny identity. These non-places include airports, subways, taxi cabs, elevators, hotel rooms. Augé argues that "[t]he space of a non-place creates ... only solitude, and similitude" (103).

This contrasts with the Hestia/Hermes connection he uses to describe a place. Where there might be a "threshold" to cross toward the other or a "door" to open, where there might be a "hearth" where our lines lead and where their intersection will happen, there is "solitude."

Still, to be in a non-place is not to be placeless. You are in space. You are somewhere. "[T]here is always a specific position," Augé reminds us. "But [the things present there] play no part in any synthesis, they are not integrated with anything; they simply bear witness, during a journey, to the coexistence of distinct individualities, perceived as equivalent and unconnected" (110-111). In a non-place, the actions and the objects and the words, as Marback might argue, trap you in yourself. They prevent you from "the fact of intersection"; they prevent you from "practic[ing] space," which for de Certeau "is to be other and to move toward the other" (110). To be in a non-place is to have the identity you would present if you could be replaced with anonymity. You become an imposter. You lose your relationality; you lose your history. You lose your language, and thus become *misplaced*.

Conclusions

"Alone, but one of many," Augé writes,

"the user of a non-place is in contractual relations with it" (101). This contract establishes the terms by which the actor interacts with the space. A non-place "designates two complementary but distinct realities: spaces formed in relation to certain ends (transport, transit, commerce, leisure), and the relations that individuals have with these spaces" (94).

Certainly a classroom is "formed in relation to certain ends," which include for the student a good grade, credits on a transcript, practical skills, personal growth. The space of a classroom implies this contract. Students are there only because they paid tuition that allows them to be; they are there only because they completed the necessary prerequisites; because they achieved the minimum SAT or ACT score; because they enrolled in the section of the course determined to meet in that classroom and not some other one.

Augé argues, "[T]he user of a non-space ... is reminded, when necessary, that the contract exists. ... The contract always relates to the individual identity of the contracting party" (101). He likens a shopping cart in a grocery to such a reminder; it can take the form in a classroom of a syllabus or a required textbook. These indicate to the student that she is there in that space because it has been "formed in relation to certain ends." There are certain chapters she has to read, certain assignments she has to complete.

Is a classroom, then, a non-place? Is this what makes learning and teaching so indeterminable?

Fortunately, a classroom promises some things a non-place cannot. For one, the lines of students' lives do lead into a classroom, where there is then the

intersection of these lines and the fact of intersection. Friendships, partnerships, even relationships, originate here.

Students use language, too, commiserating with each other, working in small groups, raising their hands to answer questions, reading their essays aloud, presenting their research. Their use of language confers on them an identity. *She's the one who brings up her grandma. He's the one who quotes Derrida.* These mannerisms and obsessions identify.

A classroom does not necessarily imply solitude, and it does not necessarily reward it—or require it—as a non-place does. Augé argues that a non-space “deals only with individuals” who are “identified ... only on entering and leaving.” In a non-place your identity is essentially partial, reducible to a Social Security number, a government ID, a PIN code, a birth date, a destination. But a student asserts more and more of her whole identity time and time again in the classroom during a semester, whether with her instructor or with her peers; her identity is confirmed whenever she speaks aloud. The student can be seen as the other, moving toward the other. She can become an actor in the classroom. She has the potential to create the story of that course, as de Certeau would argue, bringing a place into being.

Say, though, that some other student feels alienated from his peers and from his instructor, whether because of his age, or race, or sexuality, or perceived lack of preparation, or deeper emotional issues. He chooses not to speak aloud, not to interact with the instructor during office hours, not to participate in discussions or group work. Though he would be other, he would not be moving toward the other. Any possibility of relationality he would decline. Though *the*

opportunity for this, for the intersection of lines, and *the potential* of the fact of their intersection exists, the student might never grasp that opportunity or accept that potential. The classroom would be a non-place. His identity would be reducible, conferred on him by his student ID or number of absences or grade.

“Place and non-place,” Augé argues, “are rather like opposed polarities: the first is never completely erased, the second never totally completed; they are like palimpsests on which the scrambled game of identity and relations is ceaselessly rewritten” (79). A classroom, then, might be understood best as neither one nor the other. It is always capable of becoming the other. Its essential instability, its indeterminacy, suggests opportunity and potential. It is not up to the composition instructor alone to create of his classroom a place. But he would do well to appeal to Hestia and Hermes, to suggest that his students open the door and cross the threshold and gather around the white board—our hearth, as it were.

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