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Composition's Imagined Geographies: The Politics of Space in the Frontier, City, and Cyberspace

We must be insistently aware of how space can be made to hide consequences from us, how relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life, how human geographies become filled with politics and ideology.

—Edward W. Soja (6)

It is helpful to remind ourselves that one of the things a university does is alter one's sense of geography.

—Mary N. Muchiri et al. (178)

In their recent article on “Importing Composition: Teaching and Researching Academic Writing Beyond North America,” Mary N. Muchiri and her co-authors challenge our assumptions that composition is “universal” in its uses and applications, and that writing instructors and writing students do not occupy particular geographic locations. Muchiri et al. remind readers that composition is very much a product of North America and of capitalism and illustrate what happens to composition research when it is exported—how it changes in a different, de-localized context of its origination. “Importing Composition” highlights some of the assumptions that form the basis of U.S. research on academic writing—assumptions that sometimes seem “bizarre” in a new context (176). In our limited notions of

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geography, we make assumptions about serving the world in our writing classes: “The teacher in New York or Los Angeles may look out over a classroom and think, ‘The whole world is here.’ It isn’t” (195).

In its analysis of contemporary writing instruction—informed by imports and exports, journeys, the local and the global—“Importing Composition” contributes to a geographic study of composition that asks us to confront many of our assumptions about place and space. My purpose here is to extend that contribution by using concepts from postmodern geography to explore how spaces and places are socially produced through discourse and how these constructed spaces can then deny their connections to material reality or mask material conditions.¹ Cultural geography invites us to question the relationships between material conditions and imagined territories, a relationship I identify here as the politics of space, and asks us to attend to the negotiations of power that take place across and within a number of spaces: regional or topographical, domestic or institutional, architectural or electronic, real or imagined. Making a geographic turn enables me to examine the politics of space in composition with three general aims: (1) to interpret some of composition’s most enduring spatial metaphors as “imagined geographies” responsible, in part, for composition’s disciplinary development and identity; (2) to illustrate the effects of time-space compression on composition’s workers; (3) and to argue for a spatial politics of writing instruction that denies transparent space and encourages the study of neglected places where writers work.

Attending to the politics of space can begin with simple observations about where writers and writing instructors work—in a variety of institutional, public, and private spaces (some of them difficult to categorize as either public or private): the academic buildings of our offices, computer labs, and writing centers; the cafeterias, libraries, and classrooms of our campuses; the large conference hotels where we meet to exchange ideas and socialize; the kitchen table, desks, or computer corners in our homes. These actual locations for the work of writing and writing instruction co-exist with several metaphorical or imaginary places where we write, study writing, or create theories about writing: webs of meaning, research paradigms, home departments, discourse communities, frontiers, cities, and cyberspaces.

Composition workers have long had to deal with the politics of space, whether this has involved trying to reduce section sizes, find a room to establish a writing center, or stake out disciplinary territory. In carving out areas to call its own, composition has created imagined geographies that hold a number of implications. A writing center, for example, occupies a certain number of square feet in a campus building, but it also occupies an

imaginary place where writing is taught, learned, or talked about very differently than in a lecture hall or around a seminar table. Edward Soja, in *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*, defines postmodern geography as the study of the social production of spaces or studying the linkages among space, knowledge, and power (20). The social production of spaces takes place in all discourse arenas, wherever rhetors are “inventing” the boundaries of inquiry, the agendas of research, or the languages of arguments. How have composition theorist-practitioners imagined the spaces of writing, writers, and writing instruction? “Where” have they placed the work of composition studies as a field or discipline, and what implications do these real or imaginary placements hold? After demonstrating the endurance of one of composition’s most important imagined geographies, the *frontier*, and the emergence of two more, the *city* and *cyberspace*, I argue that these imaginary places for writing and writing instruction have been rendered benign, or anesthetized by the influence of transparent space; that we have neglected the relationship between material spaces and actual practices; and that we need to attend to the effects of time-space compression on composition’s workers.

Spatial Metaphors in the Discourses of Composition Studies

Spatial metaphors have long dominated our written discourse in this field (“field” being one of the first spatial references we can name) because, first, writing itself is spatial, or we cannot very well conceive of writing in ways other than spatial. In “The Limits of Containment: Text-as-Container in Composition Studies,” Darsie Bowden asserts that composition “is especially rife with metaphors because composing involves complex cognitive activities...that are difficult to talk about and understand” (364). As Bowden’s analysis suggests, many of our metaphors in writing and composition studies involve or depend on imaginary conceptions of space. From bound texts to pages to paragraphs, sentences, and words, we read and write in distinctly spatial ways. We read from left to right (in most languages), and we scan pages up and down or rifle through a stack of pages from top to bottom. We are accustomed to margins and borders that frame texts for us and page numbers or arrow icons that mark our place. (How often have you found a remembered passage by its placement on a page, its position in the text?) Academic and professional writers are comfortable with manipulating textual spaces and know that the tasks of organizing and presenting information—with spatial constraints all around—constitute one of a writer’s biggest challenges. Techno-revolutions are changing our notions of texts on pages, most of us realize, and the days of container metaphors for texts may be numbered.

Jay David Bolter's *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext, and the History of Writing* thoroughly demonstrates that writing specialists would be hard pressed to imagine or explain writing in terms other than spatial. From *topoi* to transitions, we make decisions throughout the writing process based on spatial relationships; for example, where an example goes or what point connects to what claim. To control textual space *well* is to be a good writer; in fact, controlling textual spaces is very much tied to both literacy and power. Chris Anson identifies some commonly-accepted practices that are really about writing teachers' efforts to assert control over textual space—rules about margins and double-spacing, about where the staple or paper clip goes, about where the writer's name and the date belong—all of these practices or rules are about control, which as he points out, might slip away from us in the age of electronic writing.

When created via computer interfaces, texts burst out of their containers, as Cynthia Selfe and Richard Selfe have argued. One of the reasons that word processing has been so revolutionary to writers is that it allows for easier, faster manipulation of space: sentences, chunks, or paragraphs can be deleted or moved in seconds. Because readers orient themselves spatially within printed texts—"How many more pages?"—Bolter explains that spatial disorientation is, in fact, one of the problems or challenges of electronic writing, where "the reader seldom has a sense of where he or she is in the book" (87).

Because writing teachers recognize both the spatial nature of writing and the importance of controlling textual as well as disciplinary space, compositionists have developed a rich repertoire of memorable spatial images and referents, everything from webs of meaning to turf wars. Spatial metaphors have served to establish what composition should be or to lament what composition has become. For example, claims of composition as a discipline have called on the lofty spatial metaphors of paradigms and "domains" (Phelps) or on the more mundane: inside Stephen North's sprawling, junky house of lore resides a group of sad occupants who live in the basement (Miller). Feminist readings of the field have concentrated on the domestic spaces of composition, where underpaid women are assigned primarily chores and housekeeping tasks (Slagle and Rose; Neel). In our discussions of economic and political issues about composition, we refer to heavy course-loads as teaching "in the trenches" because composition occupies the "low" position in the academy, akin to a carnival (Miller).

Generally, as composition has encountered postmodernism, metaphors of inside and outside, margin and center, boundaries and zones have become increasingly familiar, appealing, even comfortable. Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary*; Carolyn Ericksen Hill's *Writing on the Margins*; and Mary Louise Pratt's "arts of the contact zone" identify three of the most popular

spatial metaphors for discussing issues of difference and diversity or for asserting where the work of composition studies should concentrate. Perhaps the most appealing spatial metaphor right now is Gloria Anzaldúa's "borderlands" (*La Frontera*), where cultures are mixed and mingled and where geographic borders do not hold. Imagining spaces where differences mingle is important to a field characterized by interdisciplinarity and populated with some of the most marginalized members of the academy: per-course instructors, teaching assistants, and first-year students.

Despite composition's affinity for spatial metaphors, and despite rhetoric's attention to spaces for public discourse, there has not yet been a concerted effort to examine composition's geographies, nor have composition scholars typically looked to the disciplinary area of geography studies. Composition and geography have undergone similar changes in recent decades due to the impact of new technologies, and both fields are pursuing a growing interest in spatial theories.²

Geographic Literacy: Yet Another Crisis

Geography is, literally or etymologically, *writing the earth*, yet composition studies has not drawn much from it, exploring instead the terrains of history, philosophy, linguistics, and cognitive psychology. The lack of engagement so far between composition and geography is particularly striking in light of the fact that both fields remain so marginalized among academic disciplines and that both have been targeted by media-driven campaigns regarding literacy, composition in the mid-1970s and geography in the mid-1980s.

Like composition studies, geography has experienced the national media attention of a declared "literacy crisis." Approximately a decade after the claims that schoolchildren could not read or write, the media began reporting on survey and test results showing that college students guessed wildly on geography tests and were unable to read a map, identify important countries, or name boundary rivers or mountains.³ With the collapse of several subjects into "social studies," American students had become geographically illiterate. Surveys confirmed that nearly 70% of all secondary students had no formal course work in geography, and the media were eager to report the most egregious examples of ignorance; for example, the belief that Canada was a state ("Teachers Lament").

In 1985, in response to "deterioration of geographic knowledge," two professional organizations set forth new guidelines for the teaching of geography in elementary and secondary schools, and Congress designated a "National Geography Awareness Week" in 1988 "to combat a widespread

ignorance of geography" ("Redoubling"). The National Geographic Society pumped over two million dollars into the D.C. public school system alone, for teacher-training, a high-tech classroom, atlases, maps, and software (Horwitz A8).

Now, just ten years after the nation-wide concern with geographic ignorance, interest in geography is said to be soaring, with a declared "Renaissance" in geographic education (ABC World News). From inflatable globes to such popular programs and games as "Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego?," American schoolchildren have improved test scores. Geography's fortunes are changing because of a new push towards geographic education—complete with corporate sponsorship—and because of near-revolutionary changes in map-making technology (Hitt).

A driving force behind geography's renaissance is economics: the interest in geography aligns sharply with the expansion of multi-national capitalism across the globe. Satellites, cable, NAFTA, and the information superhighway—all of these developments have motivated politicians and educators to argue that American students need to be able to navigate these new horizons for commercialism. Functional illiteracy is bad for the goals of capitalism, and educators recognize the urgency of knowing more about other places and cultures in order to be competitive in the world market. A new urgency about geographic literacy accompanies other signs of the impact of time-space compression, or the belief that the planet is shrinking, with a general speed-up in the pace of everyday life.

Time-Space Compression

Our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are today dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time

—Fredric Jameson (16)

The huge campaign to remedy the geography literacy crisis gained momentum, in part, by changing conceptions of space in our late-capitalist economy. With technologies that allow the rapid, almost instantaneous, transmission of information and ever-faster modes of transportation, our world is perceived to be "smaller" than it used to be, a phenomenon known as *time-space compression*. First named by Marx as the annihilation of space through time, time-space compression means more time to work and thus more profit (Massey 146; Harvey 293; Soja 126). As spaces seem to shrink, time seems to expand—and the illusion that there is more time would allow capitalists to get more out of workers. "Time-space compression refers to movement and communication across space, to the

geographical stretching-out of social relations, and to our experience of all this" (Massey 147). The perception that the earth is shrinking to the size of a "global village"—a perception that benefits the expansion of capitalism—is important to contemporary geography studies and to any examination of the spatial turn in postmodernism.

The general sensations of a shrinking planet—busier, noisier, and more crowded—triggers the temptation to look out over urban classrooms and think "the whole world is here." Other examples of time-space compression include: (1) satellites beaming events "around the globe"; (2) the weird sense of mobility that comes from "surfing the net" or from exchanging e-mail with someone in Johannesburg or Berlin or Seoul; (3) the "really there" feeling enhanced by big-screen televisions or expensive sound systems in theaters; (4) Microsoft's slogan "Where do you want to go today?" and (5) the IBM slogan "solutions for a small planet." Notably, these examples are from business, the media, and technology—forces that have combined to give us an onslaught of everyday images about how small our world is and how easily traversed.

In *The Condition of Postmodernity*, geographer David Harvey claims that the history of capitalism has been characterized by this speed-up in the pace of life. Harvey explains that time-space compression forces us "to alter, sometimes in quite radical ways, how we represent the world to ourselves" (240), the consequences of which "have particular bearing on postmodern ways of thinking, feeling, and doing" (285). These postmodern effects have by now become quite familiar: a dominance of images, where the images themselves become more real than reality: "reality gets created rather than interpreted under conditions of stress and time-space compression" (306). We get the false sense of going somewhere when we log on and having been somewhere after we log off. Through the ability of technology to simulate travel, we think we're "experiencing" a different culture, otherness, or diversity, but we're not even leaving the comfortable (or crowded) confines of our homes or offices.

As technology and capitalism have combined to make time-space compression more common and familiar, one alarming result has been the idea that space is negligible or transparent. This consequence is related to what Jameson identifies as "a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality, . . . perhaps the most supreme formal feature of all the postmodernisms" (9). As space flattens out, time becomes both harder to notice *and* more important; the masking of *time* through the changing boundaries for *space* has consequences for workers, students, women, for all of us. Time-space compression masks the politics of space by producing the illusion that, for example, electronic gadgets can overcome space and create more time. There are distinct dangers in believing that space does

not matter, and a number of geographers or spatial theorists have named this threat *transparent space*.

Transparent Space

Transparent space assumes that the world can be seen as it really is and that there can be unmediated access to the truth of objects it sees; it is a space of mimetic representation.

—Alison Blunt and Gillian Rose (5)

It is easy to take space and time for granted because they are such an obvious part of our everyday existence; they become routine because there doesn't seem to be anything we can do about them. However, it is important to challenge the idea of a single and objective sense of time or space, against which we attempt to measure the diversity of human conceptions and perceptions. Time-space compression leads us to believe that space is no big deal, that every divide is smaller than it seems, but feminist and other cultural geographers insist that divides are real, that differences are material and concrete, and that space cannot be treated as transparent or "innocent."

In *Space, Place, and Gender*, Doreen Massey explains that the "usual" explanation for time-space compression is internationalized capitalism, but that such an explanation is "insufficient" for women:

The degree to which we can move between countries, or walk about the streets at night, or venture out of hotels in foreign cities, is not just influenced by 'capital'. Survey after survey has shown how women's mobility...is restricted—in a thousand different ways, from physical violence to being ogled at or made to feel quite simply 'out of place'—not by 'capital,' but by men. (147–48)

Time-space compression is a "high theory" concept that feminist geographers have tried to make more practical and more concerned with the everyday. As Elizabeth Wilson notes, feminists are more interested in policy issues related to space—women's safety, street lighting, or the dearth of public transport—than in theoretical or conceptual considerations (148). Massey and other feminist geographers are working towards notions of space as paradoxical, provisional, contradictory, fragmented. A notion of paradoxical spaces helps feminists to resist "transparent space," which is a particularly dangerous notion for women and other minorities because it denies differences or neglects the politics of space, especially in domestic or everyday environments. Documenting women's relationships to space has

resulted in numerous studies of the home or neighborhoods—locales particularly important for women. Whether women find themselves in public space or private homes, real or imagined communities, they often experience those spaces as oppressive (Gillian Rose 143–50). Their experiences and emotions in domestic spaces are so geographically-rooted, they can vary with the floor plan—women can get angry in the kitchen, for example, but not in the bedroom (Blunt and Rose 2).

Even spaces presumed to be safe are often a threat to women. College campuses provide a good example of this image, especially as they are represented in typical media shots (especially recruitment or fundraising videos or photographs). The stately buildings, wide green lawns, and gatherings of people, presumably engaged in collegial exchanges, give the impression of harmonious intellectual activity in a tranquil environment. I spent four years on one of the most attractive college campuses ever to appear in a brochure, Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. The buildings match. Framed in buildings of southern Georgian architecture, red brick with large windows trimmed in the (exact) same shade of creamy yellow, the campus is famous for its gardens and landscaping. The serene appearance, however, masks the politics of space; for example, the numerous “keep off the grass” signs that dot the lush green lawns or the threat to women who dare to walk alone at night.

I began to think more about the politics of space after Jane Marcus visited Miami University and, struck by its wealth and privilege, spoke about the material conditions at her institution, City College, where instructors were lucky to have an office with a desk at all; forget about photocopying, a phone, chalk, or paper. If your walls weren’t covered with graffiti and you had a chair, you were truly lucky. Then I read Jonathan Kozol’s *Savage Inequalities* with an undergraduate course, a book which details the educational injustices done to students in cold, damp, dark classrooms, with falling plaster and trashy playgrounds. Place does matter; surroundings do have an effect on learning or attitudes towards learning, and material spaces have a political edge. In short, *where* writing instruction takes place has everything to do with *how*. When, for example, open admissions’ policies went into effect, writing-center directors found themselves fighting for the most modest of spaces. Hard-won writing centers were often located in basements or tiny rooms, far from the heart of campus activity.

Some composition scholars *have* recognized issues of transparent space. In the February 1996 CCC, Ellen Cushman uses photographs and community history to show how “the Approach,” a granite walkway leading up the hill to RPI in Troy, NY, illustrates “deeply rooted sociological distances” between the university and the community (8). The Approach is not simply a set of steps and pillars in disrepair—not transparent space—but a

symbol of the wide gap between town and gown, a gap that is economic and political. Cushman's material analysis of a physical location resists the notion of transparent space. It is more typical in composition texts, however, to find notions of space that reach beyond the physical confines of classrooms or campuses, to think bigger and wider, to imagine frontiers, cities, and cyberspaces.

Imagined Geographies: Frontier, City, and Cyberspace

In what follows, I offer three extended examples of sites where time-space compression and transparent space have played out in the discourses of composition studies. While I hesitate to make the argument that time-space compression "causes" the creation of these imagined geographies, these three sites offer powerful examples of the social production of spaces in composition. In addition, their features and metaphors illustrate how material conditions can be ignored when a pioneering spirit takes hold.

The Frontier of Basic Writing

As composition workers struggled with the impact of open admissions and the demands of an expanding population, they faced working in crowded, inadequate building space populated by speakers and writers of many languages or dialects, few of them closely resembling traditional academic discourse. The feeling of "foreignness" and claustrophobia led to the construction, in discursive terms, of spaces where their struggles could be enacted. The only space big enough for such a struggle was a *frontier*.

From the first day of Open Admissions at City College, more space was needed for writing instruction. *The New York Times* reported in October of 1970 that tutoring was taking place in coat rooms while classes were being held in former ice skating rinks and supermarkets. At John Jay College, the square feet per student shrunk from 93 in 1969 to 31 the following year. "With lounge space scarce and college cafeterias jammed, many students study, do homework and eat their lunches sitting on corridor floors and stairways," and this crowding was reported in October, before the weather forced all students inside (Buder). Nearly everyone associated with the Open Admissions program has commented on the overcrowded conditions; Adrienne Rich's famous essay on "Teaching Language in Open Admissions" refers to the "overcrowded campus where in winter there is often no place to sit between classes" (60), and she gives another account to Jane Maher: "the overcrowding was acute. In the fall of 1970 we taught in open plywood cubicles set up in Great Hall [where] you could hear the noise from other cubicles; concentration was difficult for the students" (109).

The crowded and otherwise inadequate material conditions at City College led to composition's first imagined geography—and perhaps its most enduring spatial metaphor for arguing composition's legitimacy as a discipline. Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations* opens with pointed attention to the local environment and to a very concrete physical space: she sits "alone in [a] worn urban classroom," reading with shock and dismay the folder of "alien" student essays (vii). The worn urban classroom, however, is soon replaced by a metaphoric location, larger and more romantic—the frontier: "the territory I am calling basic writing...is still very much of a frontier, unmapped, except for...a few blazed trails" (4). Instead of concentrating on the worn urban classroom as a site for the study of basic writing, Shaughnessy creates a guide for teachers "heading to [a] pedagogical West" (4). She admits the flaws of her map—"it is certain to have the shortcomings of other frontier maps, with doubtless a few rivers in the wrong place and some trails that end nowhere"—but what is important here is that she does not map the classroom, or the urban college spaces, or the city of New York (4). A concrete physical location, then, is erased by the more powerful American metaphor of the frontier.

Shaughnessy's early reviewers eagerly picked up on this frontier imagery because it allowed inexperienced, tentative, even resistant writing teachers to feel like brave, noble conquerors. Harvey Wiener, for example, describes Shaughnessy's book as the map, compass, and guide for those who dare to venture—or who would be sent—into the "jungle of trial and error" where teachers must "hack branches" through students' tortuous prose (715).

One way to read Shaughnessy's construction of the frontier metaphor is to see it romantically as desire for the open space of the frontier, in reaction to the crowded, chaotic conditions of City University in an Open Admissions system. Shaughnessy was, undoubtedly, surrounded by overwhelming needs and demands, and all of her biographers or reviewers connect her frontier imagery to her regional identity, formed in the Black Hills of South Dakota. For example, Janet Emig writes in her eulogy for Shaughnessy, "Mina could not be understood without understanding that she came from the West" (37). To read Shaughnessy's work through the lens of the Western motif is tempting not only because of her family roots in the West, but also because of the contrast provided by her move to New York City and her major life's work spent in crowded, urban classrooms. Imagining her homeland and her own identity as a strong prairie-dweller gave her a form of escape from the multiple and oppressive institutional structures of City College. In this version, sustaining her practical, perhaps even vocational, emphasis can be draining and frustrating because of the enormity of the task; thus, Shaughnessy looks to the West for energy and a sense of mission.

Others have interpreted Shaughnessy's frontier metaphor through the realities of her workload and the crowded material spaces of City College. Robert Lyons claims that "her frequent allusions to the pioneer role of basic writing teachers and to the 'frontier' experience of such work had more to do with her sense of taxing work loads than with nostalgia for her Western past" (175). Indeed, Shaughnessy worked herself to exhaustion, suffering a brief physical collapse in 1971 (Lyons 175). For teachers in the trenches, hard work defines their experience more accurately than large expanses of hope and possibility.

Metaphors of the frontier result from dominant ideologies of space, place, and landscape in the US: the more the better; own as much as possible; keep trespassers off; if it looks uninhabited, it must be. Canonical in American studies, F. J. Turner's thesis, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893), claimed that pushing west into the frontier was the most defining aspect of the American spirit, that the social, political, and intellectual development of the U.S. can be traced along the line of Western expansion. Settling the frontier, according to Turner, reenacted the history of social evolution. Turner's thesis, along with more recent studies from literature and film, can help to explain the power of the frontier metaphor in composition studies. As critics have shown, Western films capture the harshness and supposed "emptiness" of the landscape. One cinematic shot of rock and desert puts into place "an entire code of values," especially the lure of "infinite access": "the openness of the space means that domination can take place".... The blankness of the plain implies—without ever stating—that this is a field where a certain kind of mastery is possible" (Tompkins 74–75).

The frontier metaphor appears again and again in the literature of composition studies, often as a way of establishing or confirming composition's disciplinary status. Janice Lauer, for example, in an article which begins by asking, "Is this study a genuine discipline?" reinscribes Shaughnessy's frontier imagery. Lauer traces "the field's pioneer efforts" as it "staked out [the] territory [of writing] for investigation" (21). She characterizes composition's early theorists in "their willingness to take risks, to go beyond the boundaries of their traditional training into foreign domains" (21). According to Lauer, composition's "dappled" character as a discipline holds both advantages and risks: composition can be a "rich field of inquiry" or "a terrain of quicksand":

The immensity of unexplored land presents a subtle seduction, drawing newcomers by promising not to relegate them to tiny plots in which to work out the arcane implications of already established scholarship. But once committed, some individuals have difficulty finding entries or end up losing

their way because the role of pathfinder is challenging and thus ill-suited to everyone. The field's largely unmapped territory, therefore, has rewarded some handsomely but been fatal to others. (25)

To construct composition as a risky venture, not for the fainthearted, as Lauer does, gives composition studies a tough image: if only the fittest can survive, then it must be worthy of the status of a discipline. Joseph Harris has argued that Shaughnessy mistakenly assumed the frontier of basic writing was unoccupied, and the frontier metaphor has problematic colonialist echoes that are fairly obvious (79). Harris also makes the case that the frontier metaphor is actually quite innocuous; it gave teachers of literature a dose of missionary zeal about teaching writing to underprepared students, but also allowed them to imagine that they were not changing but simply extending the reach of the curriculum (80). Naming basic writing a frontier served to mask the politics of space—the real material conditions that crowded students into classrooms with overworked and underpaid teachers.

The frontier metaphor endures because composition's professional development was dependent on sounding "new," bold, untamed and exciting without really changing the politics of space at all. Frontier was an important imaginary space for the early days of open admissions because it seemed to invite "vision," hope, and wide expanses of possibility, but the frontier metaphor was also a reaction against the overwhelming work and responsibility that went along with educating larger, more diverse populations of college writers. Composition's development and growth meant changes in its imagined geographies, and after a brief investment in the geography of "community," composition needed a more powerful and diverse space in which to imagine its work, subjects, and practices—the *city*.

Composition as City: Postmodern and Rhetorical Spaces

As composition grew and developed, different settlements sprang up all across the wide frontier, communities characterized by differences in philosophy, political allegiances, or research methods. Acknowledgment of the diverse communities within composition was one way of demonstrating its legitimacy, but the appeal of the community metaphor soon wore thin, replaced by evocations of the city. Naming composition a city marks a moment of maturity in its history, but there are consequences to any imagined geography, and the politics of space can be either illuminated or disguised by images of the modern city.

As a second generation imagined geography, "community" offered tremendous rhetorical power. As Joseph Harris explicates, the metaphor of

community is “both seductive and powerful” and “makes a claim on us that is hard to resist” (99). However, like the notion of frontier, community too often assumed transparent space—where there are clear insiders or outsiders; where differences may not be so welcomed or encouraged; or where the goal of consensus silences productive dissensus (Trimbur 608–10).

Composition scholars were quick to recognize that a warm, fuzzy notion of composition—where like-minded peoples cooperate harmoniously—would not serve the diverse populations of composition dwellers. If the frontier metaphor characterized composition as a tough field, community sounded too “wimpy,” and composition continued to need authority or legitimacy within the academy. “Community” was also not geographically loaded enough to be appealing and enduring, not in the ways that frontier and city are geographically expansive and symbolically romantic. In other words, community did not last long as an imagined geography in composition because its spaces were just too limited. An imagined geography big enough to hold composition’s ambitions was that of the city. Cities offer diversity of peoples and places, models of cooperation, more sites for public gathering, and more feelings of exhilaration, sometimes a keen sense of “survival of the fittest.” A city metaphor seems richer and more exciting; the bustle of a city implies that work is getting done.

Seeing composition as a city also invokes the places where rhetoric flourishes—the agora, marketplace, theater, or coffeehouse. The city, therefore, offers at least two ideologies or dominant sets of images and metaphors: 1) city as an embodiment of postmodernism; 2) city as a reflection of democratic ideals. The material conditions of the city are more “in your face” than those of the frontier, which assumes a blank plain; the politics of space, therefore, seem more obvious in the city or less difficult to identify. Still, notions of the city differ ideologically, and too many views of the city glamorize its appeal.

Contemporary geographers often turn to the city to illustrate their claims about postmodernism. Edward Soja reads Los Angeles as the perfect example of “the dynamics of capitalist spatialization”; LA is *the* capitalist city (191). One view of the city emphasizes simultaneous stimulation and terror, where postmodern subjects feel most keenly a kind of 21st-century panic: the fear of being crowded; that all the space is being taken up; that the planet is overpopulated and toxic. Simultaneously, however, caught between contradictory desires, we also want the excitement and exhilaration of a city. The goal of postmodern city life is not to achieve stable orientation, but to accept disorientation as a way of life.

To invoke a city is, on one hand, to identify composition with postmodernism since crowded urban streets, like busy visual images, are more

postmodern. On the other hand, unlike postmodern geographers, Harris and Lester Faigley want to claim the democratic, rhetorical, or public images of the city; for example, the idea that cities revolve around a center (Soja 234–35). In contrast to the frontier, cities have a central location, a “polis,” or a “heart” (as in “in the heart of the city”). Thus, the city seems a more appropriate, more invigorating site for the exchange of ideas: there is a central place to meet, an especially appealing notion for rhetorical scholars interested in the gathering places of ancient cultures and in public spheres for communication.⁴

The city seems a more sophisticated image for composition’s maturity than that of the frontier because it invites a more paradoxical notion of space and represents a different kind of work. Composition as a city invites more diversity because many different activities can go on simultaneously and, following the logic of traffic lights, no one will cause accidents or pile-ups; everyone cooperates. To navigate a city requires more experience, skill, or wits than to navigate a small community, and the alienation or anonymity are outweighed by the opportunities or stimulation. The frontier signifies the hard physical labor of sod-busting and planting and harvesting, with a landscape of plains or rolling hills, capped by big skies. The city holds bolder or more complicated signifiers, but corporate work images come to mind: high-rise office buildings, with photocopiers and air conditioning and water coolers, where the politics of space are both enhanced and complicated by modern architecture and technologies.

In representing the city as a place of either postmodern exhilaration or democratic participation, scholars and theorists may be glamorizing the city and overlooking some of the material realities—the same problem that exists with the frontier metaphor. Visitors to cities almost never see the ghettos, for example, and tourists are herded—through promotional materials, transportation routes, and hotel locations—to the most attractive sites. In addition, time-space compression works to make city-dwellers believe that technologies to shrink space have actually resulted in more time. As most commuters will attest, however, “having more time” is not exactly their experience. As cultural geographer Peter Jackson points out, ideologies of city and frontier do not differ all that much: “frontier ideologies are extraordinarily persistent even in the contemporary city, where they reappear as ideologies of ‘pioneering’ or ‘homesteading’ in the urban ‘wilderness’” (111). Thus, Turner’s thesis is once again reinforced—that the pioneering spirit is deeply American, and that American ideologies celebrate pioneering myths.

While the appeal of frontier turns on the American fantasies of space and place (that it is endless; the more the better; that space can be mastered), the appeal of the city turns on busy visual images, heightened adrenaline, movement, and a desire for public space or mutual co-existence with others.

As Shaughnessy found out, however, work in the city was just as hard and taxing. Both of these appeals are present in a potent geographic site—*cyberspace*. Cyberspace is an imagined geography where visitors or homesteaders can be simultaneously stimulated and terrified, where order and disorder co-exist, and where the frontier metaphor continues its hold over our collective imagination. Cyberspace and its attendant electronic technologies also offer the most representative example of time-space compression, where space seems to shrink as time seems to expand.

Cyberspace and the New Frontier

Space is not a scientific object removed from ideology and politics; it has always been political and strategic

—Henri Lefebvre (qtd. in Soja 80)

As electronic writing technologies radicalize the work of our field once again, with an impact probably as large as that of Open Admissions, the pattern repeats itself: in the face of some confusion and an overwhelming sense of responsibility, the frontier beckons. It is tempting to call cyberspace “the new frontier” because it offers a sense of excitement and possibility in the face of otherwise frightening changes, and those influences combine to make cyberspace the latest imagined geography.

The frontier metaphor served well during the Kennedy Administration to justify the space program; now the frontier extends beyond space, into new imaginary territory called cyberspace. Without NASA-level technology and equipment—with only a PC and Internet access—“anyone” can go there, making it far more accessible. It is not difficult to illustrate the dominance of the frontier metaphor in discourses of electronic technologies. A core course in the telecommunications MA at George Mason University is titled “Taming the Electronic Frontier” (Cox). The Electronic Frontier Foundation lobbies to stop legislation limiting the freedom of computer users. Howard Rheingold’s *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* addresses the idea of domesticating space—making a home in unfamiliar territory, staking a claim, naming it ours. Even the moral code of the frontier is reproduced: “The Internet has been like the Wild West before law and order was brought to it” (Vitanza 133). When two hackers meet in the OK corral for a shoot-out, the good guy usually wins (Markoff 121).

Composition, like Star Trek and NASA, is so completely “American,” as the Muchiri essay argues, that the temptation to claim a new final frontier is strong and appealing. Despite the attractiveness of naming cyberspace a new frontier, cyberspace is not transparent space, as several scholars have

recognized. Emily Jessup says it quite succinctly: "The land of computing is a frontier country, and, as in the development of most frontier countries, there are many more men than women" (336). Women and other disenfranchised groups will have to follow the maps, tracks, and instructional manuals written by the techies, mostly men who got to the colony first. Concerns of colonialism have been addressed by invoking democracy—claims that cyberspace offers more opportunities for voices to be heard, that "anyone" can participate. This view has its critics, too; for example, Mark Poster claims that promotions of Internet news groups and other virtual communities as "nascent public spheres that well renew democracy" are "fundamentally misguided" because they "overlook the profound differences between Internet 'cafes' and the agoras of the past" (135). Cyberspace is not transparent space, and dominant sexual-social politics are reproduced on the Net (Tannen, Bruckman): crimes have been committed in MUDs and MOOs, with rape and death in "the Bungle case" on Lambda-moo (Dibbell).

Granted, much about cyberspace is hugely inviting: chat rooms and emoticons and a "web" of access to information (and to "community"). The notion of the web, familiar to composition through both Janet Emig and Marilyn Cooper, touches on ecological metaphors that many writing teachers found more inviting than other mechanistic metaphors for the writing process. The World Wide Web has the same inviting ecological tenor, and the implication is that strands seem to connect the whole world, stretching across and enveloping many sites. At odds with these "warm and fuzzy" notions of the WWW are some material realities: the whole world is *not* in the Web. Issues of access aside, the metaphor of a web also evokes entrapment. Webs, as any fly knows, can be sticky traps for the negligent or gullible; not all of us are safe in a web. A web has thousands, if not millions, of intersecting strands. What I want to know is, how do I get around in here? And how do I get out when I want to leave? (If it weren't for the "Back" and "Home" icons on the newer Web browsers, I would still be lost in cyberspace!)

A lot of Net users find it hard to leave—not only from confusion but from a sense that virtual spaces are more inviting or attractive. When they devote themselves to screens and keyboards, online participants are removing their actual bodies from physical spaces, and that creates another set of problems for geopolitics. As Stephen Doheny-Farina argues in *The Wired Neighborhood*, participation in online communities removes people from their geophysical communities—the streets and schools, sidewalks and shops that make up a neighborhood. People have understandably turned to virtual communities to fulfill some of their needs not being met by physical communities, but Doheny-Farina critiques claims that the Internet's chat rooms are new pub-

lic spaces. Admitting his own fascination with MediaMOO, in one chapter, Doheny-Farina shows how the supposedly public spaces are more accurately a maze of private rooms, where one's participation ("socialization") is dependent upon one's technical expertise, including one's skill as a typist (61). Settling upon the analogy of virtual communities being like airport bars, Doheny-Farina admits to the compelling nature of these online enterprises, but repeatedly notes the seduction, even the danger, of ignoring the politics of space in our daily environments.

While I am no expert on computers and writing or electronic technologies, my lack of expertise is precisely the point: Most people aren't, and we are the ones entering frontierland well behind the first settlers. The material spaces have changed but the challenges and responsibilities have not. Much as Shaughnessy sat in her worn urban classroom wondering how to help her stunningly unskilled students through the tangle of academic discourse, I sit in a new, well-equipped computer classroom and wonder how I can guide my students through the maze of electronic writing technologies—or if I should turn my composition classes into Computer Literacy 101, Advanced Word Processing, or Introduction to the Internet. Our field is beginning to feel very keenly the responsibility for educating students about electronic writing technologies, and that creates a new level of anxiety (and stimulation) akin to city life. From my experience at a fairly large state university in the Northeast, most of my first-year students are not computer-literate or computer-comfortable. Their high schools in this and surrounding states did not exactly pass out laptops as students walked through the security terminals. Most literacy workers are more affected by budget constraints than by a technology explosion, so expectations to educate students in electronic discourses and computer technologies—while also helping them to think more critically, write more fluently and persuasively, and edit more carefully—becomes an overwhelming responsibility.

The frontier, city, and cyberspace are three imagined geographies that illustrate how composition's socially-produced spaces have served to give composition vision and a sense of mission but have also served to mask the politics of space. In the concluding section below, I want to turn to more unfamiliar material places that need our attention, especially in their implications for workers and working conditions.

Between Spaces and Practices: Geographic Possibilities for Studying Composition

As this section suggests, time-space compression affects composition's workers on a daily basis, in concrete ways that need our attention. A spa-

tial politics of writing instruction works to deny transparent space and to attend to neglected places, in their material rather than their imaginary forms, where writers and writing teachers work, live, talk, daydream, or doodle. I'm particularly interested in the increased demands on *time* because technologies have shifted *space*, along with the ways in which technology has increased responsibilities and workloads while material spaces for writing instruction continue to crowd or deteriorate. Composition needs to develop ways to study space differently that might close the gap between imagined geographies and material conditions for writing, between the spaces and practices or that might confront the way that time-space compression creates illusions about "more time" and "overcoming" spatial barriers.

First, instead of thinking bigger and wider, as composition has typically done—using large imagined geographies to situate and validate composition studies as a discipline—now it is time to think smaller and more locally. And while there have been plenty of studies of classrooms or writing centers or writing programs, a geographic emphasis would insist on more attention to the connection between spaces and practices, more effort to link the material conditions to the activities of particular spaces, whether those be campuses, classrooms, office, computer labs, distance-learning sites, or hotels.

The material spaces of campuses, schoolyards, and classrooms across the country—especially those in economically-devastated areas—are marked by ceiling tiles falling onto unswept floors, in rooms with graffiti, trash, and no chalk, or no chalkboard. Classrooms are crowded and too hot or too cold, or with badly filtered air. Certain buildings on many campuses are said to be "poison," where a disproportionate number of illnesses develop, including cancer.⁵ To neglect these material realities in qualitative studies of writing instruction is to ignore the politics of space, the ways in which our surroundings or location affect the work that is done there. In research studies of all types, there is scant attention to the conditions and context affecting participants and researchers alike: the weather, the room, the amount or quality of space.

To illustrate, the teaching assistant offices at my institution are referred to, variously, as the pit, the rat's nest, or the hole, where the walls are paper-thin dividers; where there's only one phone for roughly 24 instructors; and where occupants last winter had to dodge buckets and trash cans strategically placed to catch rain leaks and falling plaster. Any outsider would immediately recognize the status of the teaching assistants based only on the appearance of their office space. Moving beyond a "thick description," a qualitative study of this space would have to account, in the fullest possible ways, for the material conditions of this office which have everything

to do with the work that gets done there. Even newcomers to the academy recognize that the larger or nicer the office, the more senior its occupant, and they don't need a member of a space allocation committee to tell them that.

Perhaps more important than a spatial-politics approach to qualitative research, understanding more about how time-space compression works would enable us to both acknowledge and address working conditions in writing instruction, an issue of the 1990s that will not go away in the new century. Time-space compression creates the illusion that we have "shrunk" space or overcome wide distances; with such a notion comes the conclusion that without travel time, workers can produce more. The capitalist equation—less space equals more time—makes issues of worker exploitation even more complicated for writing instruction.

Issues of working conditions are near the top of the agendas of our professional organizations, with CCCC and MLA having passed or considering resolutions committed to the improvement of the status of non-tenure track faculty in composition studies. Given the complexity of trying to make any concrete or measurable changes, it seems that one way to improve the status of non-tenure-track faculty in composition is to examine closely the spaces in which we ask them to work, the conditions of those spaces, and the assumptions about time and space that control workers' daily environments.

With laptop computers, around-the-clock access, and the option of asynchronous dialogue, the idea that workers can be productive from "anywhere" at "any time" permeates our culture. Composition workers are just now beginning to recognize how new technologies have affected our workdays, as this passage illustrates:

In theory, email should create more time. But even though readers can chug along at their own paces, individual paces may not always be in sync.... [In participating in Portnet, an online discussion], I was desperate for time. Because of my teaching and professional schedule, my email communication had to wait until evening—late evening. My commitment to Portnet faltered somewhat the first time I turned on my computer at eleven o'clock p.m. and discovered more than forty Portnet messages waiting for me. The next night over eighty Portnet messages appeared on the screen.... between...more than twenty posts from my students...and another ten from local colleagues on various matters (Dickson, qtd. in Allen et al. 377).

Questions about working conditions multiply, too, when considering the impact of distance-learning, the latest rage in the competitive world of higher education, especially in areas of the west and midwest where

towns and cities are far apart. Questions should arise for composition programs about how distance-learning changes our ideas about writing instruction and our common practices involving, as just one example, peer response groups (that is, f2f meetings between writers). What happens to classrooms, libraries, "memorial unions," or lecture halls, especially on some already-deteriorating campuses, many built on the cheap in the late 1960s and early 70s? Should colleges invest more in electronic technologies than in buildings that invite gatherings? Some colleges, in an effort to combine community outreach, distance learning, and keen competitiveness, have all but eliminated central campuses. For example, Rio Salado Community College in Tempe, Arizona, "has no campus and educates 34,000 students in places like churches and shopping malls, and, increasingly, at home on their computers" (Applebome 24). What happens, then, to the geopolitical spaces of university campuses, especially in light of Doheny-Farina's concerns?

Despite the growing attention to new spaces for the work of our profession, the material sites for composition extend beyond offices, classrooms, computer labs, or cyberspaces. Many of the debates, discussions and conversations about writing instruction take place in hotels or on conference sites distinguished by huge buildings in the downtown areas of major cities, and these sites are especially prone to being treated as transparent space. With the growth of CCCC in the last 50 years, our meeting sites have had to expand and change to accommodate the growing numbers, and site selection for our annual meetings has become the most highly-charged, time-consuming, and hotly-politicized issue of the CCCC Executive Committee in recent years.

First, on a very practical level, CCCC's annual meeting, held in the spring months of every year, requires 35 contiguous meeting rooms and 1,500 sleeping rooms for a four-day gathering of over 3,000 members. Those numbers and needs alone make it difficult to find cities that can serve our membership, and the equation is complicated by the desire to represent fairly or sensitively every diverse constituency within CCCC—to attend to a complicated variety of geographic, economic, and political concerns. While the effort to rotate the locations by region has been in place for years, increasing efforts to accommodate political concerns have made the process of site selection fraught with difficult decisions about "whose" interests count more or which cities have the least offensive laws or statutes. An inept process of site selection was finally challenged after the Executive Committee decided to go to Atlanta for the 1999 convention. Some members of the Gay and Lesbian Caucus announced, in response, that they would boycott that convention, citing in particular their exclusion from the process of selecting convention cities. Since then, the CCCC Officers and Executive Committee

have worked to institutionalize the voices and concerns of various caucuses within the organization, making communication across the membership a more integral part of the site selection process (culminating in a recently-named “Convention Concerns Committee”).

What does it matter where we meet? First, convention sites are tangible examples of the politics of space in composition—where discourses, practices, and people meet in a geopolitical space—and convention hotels and cities also represent some of the neglected places where the work of writing instruction is impacted by geophysical factors. Second, beyond the large concerns about the personal safety of CCCC members, there are many small material realities that affect many things about the success of a conference site. For example, when we are occupied with transportation woes, the cost of a meal in a hotel, or the lack of women’s bathroom stalls, time and energy are taken away from conversation about writing, about students, about our programs and ideas. When hotels don’t have a central meeting place, or the main lobby is hard to find, or the levels are oddly numbered, members waste time finding each other and sacrifice time talking or listening or engaging.

Imagined geographies have served their purpose in composition’s identity-formation and will continue to shape a sense of vision and possibility for writing teachers and researchers. However, the imaginary visions must be more firmly grounded in material conditions: traveling through cyberspace, for example, does require hardware and software, and meeting in hotels does mean that workers must serve and clean up after us.

A spatial politics of writing instruction would not call for a new frontier but for a more paradoxical sense of space to inform our research and practices and to approach the study of the social production of spaces in a field already committed to examining the production of discourse. Most importantly, a spatial politics of writing instruction would resist notions of transparent space that deny the connections to material conditions and would account for the various ways in which time-space compression affects composition’s workers.

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Notes

1. Many of the geographers I have been reading have been influenced by Henri Lefebvre and by Foucault’s later writings, particularly “Questions on Geography” and “Of Other Spaces.” Michel de Certeau’s *The Prac-*

tice of Everyday Life has been tremendously helpful in thinking about the rhetoric of negotiating space (see esp. “Walking in the City” 91–110) and the connection between spaces and practices. Feminist geographers

draw from a range of landscape studies, women's travel writing, and colonialist theories, and urban geographers are likely to frame their work with postmodernist architecture; the fascination with Los Angeles is particularly striking (Jameson; Soja; Harvey). My turn to geography is one response to John Schillb's challenge to rhetoricians: that we should be explaining and illustrating postmodernism for those who cannot (or will not) read Fredric Jameson. In an RSA presentation in May, 1994, Schillb demonstrated this claim through a reading of a Clint Eastwood film, set at the Hotel Bonaventure in Los Angeles.

2. Composition scholarship is increasingly interested in spatial theories and the importance of locations. A quick review of the program for the 1998 CCCC Annual Convention program yields at least a dozen panel or forum titles with such keywords as space,

place, landscapes, the politics of space, the public sphere, postmodern geography, or travel. See also Gregory Clark's 1998 CCC essay, "Writing as Travel, or Rhetoric on the Road."

3. For example, a 1988 Gallup survey showed that 75% of Americans age 18–24 couldn't locate the Persian Gulf on a world map and 25% couldn't find the Pacific Ocean (Horwitz A8).

4. Most recently, Harris has offered *public* as a better keyword than *community*. See *A Teaching Subject*, pp. 107–10.

5. The campus building I work in is just plain filthy, one result of severe budget cuts, and the conditions do affect the morale of workers. The state of the bathroom, while it may "bond" the women on my floor, does not exactly promote worker loyalty or productivity.

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