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PsychoGeography as Teaching Tool: Troubled Travels Through an Experimental First-Year Seminar

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In order to create understanding and transformation of the world we must create adventures. Society's emancipation will not be found in the existing structures of the world, but in the cracks and lost spaces.

(PIPS, Providence Initiative for Psychogeographic Studies, n.d.)

As educators we aim to foster understanding and transformation. Cracks and lost spaces, however, are often not the focus of the college curriculum. We teach broader contexts, offer survey courses, and cover a certain amount of material. Only in exceptional situations do we have the liberty to teach outside of the disciplinary boundaries and set our own curriculum. First-year seminar programs are exceptional in that sense; they are offered as non-disciplinary seminars with a limited number of students during their first semester of college; the topic is open and the goal is to teach the skills students need to succeed, i.e., critical thinking, college writing, research methods, and oral presentation skills. Within the privileged space of the college these seminars offer an opportunity to explore “cracks and lost spaces” and experiment with new teaching tools. They also pose a particular challenge for feminist pedagogy; while often addressing “gender studies issues,” the seminars target the student body as a whole and not just the relatively small section of students who choose to sign up for interdisciplinary courses that critically address intersections of race, class, gender, nationality, and sexuality. This article is a reflection on my experimental first-year seminar entitled *Power, Space, and Identity* that I offered in a small liberal arts college in the Northeastern United States. The goal of the seminar was to creatively and critically reflect on the politics of space. Before I summarize my students' writings and discussions and theorize the issues that arose, I give a brief overview of the theoretical concepts I employed and the context in which I planned and taught this seminar. In the concluding section I summarize the pitfalls and the successes of psychogeography as a teaching tool and offer practical suggestions for classroom activities and syllabus design.

In the first five weeks of the semester I asked students to wander around across campus, downtown, in their respective hometowns, and in shopping malls; to write about their experiences, and to share their thoughts with their peers. Such writing about and discussion of experience offered personal access to highly political and often contentious issues in the classroom—questions of class, gender, race, agency, and the body; these issues allowed us to connect feminist theory to the concerns students voiced and the environments through which they wandered. I encouraged the students to think of these journeys as a collection of moments that would take them outside of their daily routine, allow them to get

lost, and sharpen their sense of the spaces and movements across spaces that seemed familiar or “normal” to them. Their writing was supposed to resemble a “travelogue.” The concept of the travelogue originates in 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century travel writings and was significantly modified by postmodern theorists (see, for example, Roland Barthes). As John Zilcosky (2004) summarized, “Barthes’ theoretical descendants have pushed these claims even further, claiming that losing one’s way—literally and philosophically—leads to a deterritorialization of knowledge: literary wandering subverts the ‘arrogance’ of discourse and resists the systematization of the world” (p. 229). Zilcosky aims to investigate if “getting lost really resist(s) discursivity and systematization” (p. 231). He shows that the concept itself does not necessarily lead us to question a system of knowledge and organization. In his travel writings on Tokyo, Barthes, for example, “discovers the thrill of being lost in difference” (Zilcosky, 2004, p. 239). While Zilcosky’s argument follows the history of the politics of travel writing, I saw myself confronted with similar issues in my students’ writing. Confirming a privileged subject position via the “thrill of difference” was a strategy some students employed, especially when they were confronted with their own class or race privilege. Since I was aware of the conservative potential of the concept of “experience,” I assigned the travelogues in combination with theoretical readings and artistic approaches to the politics of space.

I suggested that we understand the situations that the students experienced, presented, and created in their travelogues in connection with the theories of French artist and philosopher Guy Debord.\* He envisioned a kind of “psychogeographical research” of situations in particular spaces as “the study of the exact laws and specific effects of geographical environments, whether consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals.” He suggested a particular kind of wandering, the *dérive*, as “the practice of a passional journey out of the ordinary through a rapid changing of ambiances.” During *dérives* we alter our everyday life experiences of space, since “we must try to construct situations, that is to say, collective ambiances, ensembles of impressions determining the quality of a moment” (Debord, 1975). The assignments asked the students to pay attention to the psychogeography of their

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\*Within recent years, scholars and activists have translated parts of Guy Debord’s work that previously were only available in French and in journals that could be found in archives in France. Ken Knabb’s anthology is most notable in the context. The internet further increased availability of Debord’s work in English translation. Debord, G. (2002). “Introduction to a critique of urban geography.” In K. Knabb (Ed.), *Situationist International Anthology*. (5-8) Bureau of Public Secrets. <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/urbgeog.htm>  
Can also be found here: <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/presitu/geography.html>

wanderings, the effects that the environment had on them as they crossed it, wandered through it, got lost, stopped, and reoriented themselves. Sounds and smells influenced their perception; confusion, exhaustion, anxiety, and pleasure determined the paths they took; the weather, the time of day, and the number of people they met directed their *dérives* and structured their walks across campus, downtown, the mall, and their hometowns. They read theoretical reflections from the French avant-garde of the 1950s in combination with more recent articles by feminist geographers (Duncan, 1996; Massey, 2004) to contextualize their own “voices” as part of a critical, political discourse (see appended syllabus). Nombuso Dlamini (2002) summarizes such an understanding of experience by emphasizing that she encourages “students to talk about their experiences and at the same time struggle to ensure that these experiences are not given privilege over other forms of knowing and learning” (p. 75).

In this essay, I argue that psychogeographical explorations are a highly effective teaching tool. By analyzing my students’ responses and interactions critically, however, I also show that the connections between personal experiences and the political and critical contexts were often more difficult to make than I had anticipated. While the exploratory section of the seminar did raise a lot of questions, we rarely managed to move beyond the questions and towards a transformative political practice. Dlamini (2002) warns that “often putting the principles of critical pedagogy and anti-racism into practice is very complex....The application of these principles can simultaneously eradicate or contradict them” (p. 55). My experience with psychogeography as a critical teaching tool reflects this complexity. The focus of our inquiries has to shift from how and why spaces create certain emotions and behaviors to the question “for whom?” If we combine *dérives* and travelogue assignments with analyses of a variety of literary texts, films, and virtual spaces, we might foster a more reflective and critical approach, “highlight the complex connections between place, identity, and experience, and...provide students with a wide range of discussion topics relevant to why ‘place matters’” (Delaney, 2002, p. 12). During our troubled travels through this seminar, it also became clear to my students and me that it is crucial to explore how spaces are mediated, how this mediation is political, and how it influences our “experience.”

The explicit goal of this seminar was to think critically about movement and space and to explore the psychogeographies that structure, confuse, and complicate our lives. While space is often implied in pedagogical discussions as a factor that influences discussions and decisions (Johnson & Bhatt, 2003), it is rarely taken as a starting point for reflections on teaching and learning itself. As educators, we think about how classroom space is organized and how we can “work” with the spaces we find on campus and in our communities. But what happens when we take these questions as the very focus of analysis and critical

thinking? Such a focus on the perception and creation of space was meant to uncover the making of space (Darder, Marta, & Torres, 2003), as well as of inclusion and exclusion in the classrooms, on campus, and in the different communities that surround us (Marvin, 2004; Johnson & Bhatt, 2003).

### **Concerns, Conversations, and Preparations**

I decided to propose a first-year seminar during my first year of full-time teaching at a small and selective liberal arts college. The idea for this seminar was generated by my engagement with theory and space and by conversations with my students, friends, and colleagues. As I listened to my students' concerns, I realized how much they think about and struggle with issues of space, power, and identity in their first year of college. Three main issues that were part of my discussions with other faculty, staff, and students influenced my decision to plan and offer a seminar for first-year students: the ongoing issue of sexual violence, discussions about drug abuse, and the question of how race and class politics affect life on campus. Further, social life—and the spaces for being social—appeared to be mostly organized around drinking. Students who didn't drink often felt alienated and had trouble making friends; international students, students of color, and inner-city students most often voiced their sense of bewilderment when they saw how their peers “partied.” Related to this sense of alienation, I had many conversations with students and colleagues about questions of diversity, race, and racism on campus. Even though my college put a lot of effort into increasing diversity among students and faculty, I was at times surprised about the assumptions that were made about our students and their wealthy “all-white” suburban background. As bell hooks (2003) states,

white supremacy is easily reinscribed when individuals describe communities of student and faculty as “all-white” rather than affirming diversity, even if it's evident only by the presence of a few individuals. Anti-racist work requires of all of us vigilance about the ways we use language. Either/or thinking is crucial to the maintenance of racism and other forms of group oppression. (p. 37)

Students also told me about their struggles with either/or thinking among their peers and on campus in general. Further, often “the majority of support staff and service workers are non-white” (hooks, 2003, p. 36-37), a fact that is commonly ignored in statistics on diversity, mainly because it points to possibly one of the biggest taboos, the intersection of race and class. A short article in the *New York Times* presented numbers that showed that class structure in America is mostly perpetuated in college education (Brooks, 2005). In short, racialization and social division happen in a very special way during the four years of college (Darder, Marta, & Torres, 2003), and low-income students drop out of college in

disproportionate numbers. I decided to offer a first-year seminar that would address these issues, work with students' experiences, investigate these spaces of power, violence, and exclusion, and provide a critical and analytical vocabulary and tools to change and challenge such politics.

### **Challenges, Risks, and the First-Year Seminar Program**

My college started to offer first-year seminars in the fall of 2005. The brochure about the first-year seminar program states:

A sound liberal arts education should enable students to participate as quickly as possible in a thought-provoking academic discussion...Where appropriate, it is desired that First-Year Seminars address issues pertinent to pluralism and diversity, such as class, race, ethnicity, gender, and inequality. (Criteria for First-Year Seminars, internal document, 2005)

The criteria for first-year seminars are deliberately vague: "Each seminar shall meet the following criteria: writing, critical reading, analysis, student discussion" (Criteria for First-Year Seminars, internal document, 2005). First-year seminars are limited to 16 students, are offered in the fall semester, and are listed non-departmentally. All entering students are expected to enroll in one of the seminars offered and faculty teaching them may choose to act as a pre-major academic advisor, which I agreed to do.

The first-year seminar program offered me a space to truly challenge my own pedagogical practice (hooks, 2003) and offer a course with feminist content to a more or less randomly selected group of students. I decided to face the fear that I might lose my students' respect once I tried new teaching strategies (hooks, 2003). Colleagues warned new faculty that students might be arrogant due to their highly privileged class status and their general sense of entitlement; the argument is often that students know all too well how to play the power game. The adjective to describe this behavior is "savvy," and their communication skills are considered "smooth." I appreciated these warnings; however, the assumptions and generalization about the students that underlie this statement need to be questioned. Implicitly, a conservative and authoritarian approach to teaching can be justified and re-inscribed; anyone who might get "hurt" by trying to expose the power game could be told that they had been warned and their "failure" once again "proves the point." I am not trying to advocate a naïve understanding of the politics of college teaching and learning, but I propose a more nuanced understanding of the issue at hand. bell hooks (1994) argues that

many students in those institutions feel they are entitled—their voices deserve to be heard. But students in public institutions, mostly from working-class

backgrounds, come to college assuming that professors see them as having nothing of value to say, no valuable contribution to make to a dialectical exchange of ideas. (p. 149)

My assumption, before going into the classroom, was that some students might feel entitled, even “too” entitled; some would be disappointed that they did not get accepted into any of the Ivy League colleges and universities; others, however, would secretly believe that they didn’t really belong in college to begin with. They might be shy and scared when they entered my office for the first time; they might seem almost certain that they would fail. Therefore, as a feminist, my emphasis in the classroom was not simply on having a voice, but “the more crucial question concerns the sort of voice one comes to have as a result of one’s location, both as an individual and as a collective” (Mohanty, 2003, p. 216). This dynamic was one of the very issues I was planning to confront in this seminar.

This required my students to take risks in their intellectual—and in this case also physical—travels. These travels were meant to challenge, provoke, and empower students and trigger their curiosity about “cracks and lost spaces.” I use the term “empowerment” to describe *an ongoing process* in which we learn how to realize our possibilities for action and how to critically reflect on our social and political responsibilities. As bell hooks (1994) points out, however, “empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks” (p. 21). This essay is therefore also a testimony of my own “risky” behavior as a young, white, European-born visiting Assistant Professor in my second year of full-time teaching in the United States. By exploring the “psychogeographies” in the classroom, outside the classroom, in films, texts, and in virtual spaces, it became apparent to me and my students that “power did not represent a static entity, but rather an active process constantly at work on our bodies, and our relationships, and our sexuality, as well as on the ways we construct knowledge and meaning in the world” (Darder, Marta, & Torres, 2003, p. 7).

### **Plans, Concepts, and Course Descriptions**

Starting from the premise that theory should be practical and practices should be theorized, I was hoping to address some of the following questions by giving the class a clear structure that moved from personal explorations and theorizations to textual and visual analyses: What is the value of experience, and what is the status of “evidence” in the context of this class? How do we create a space where such “evidence” can be shared, where students will take risks, and theorize these risks, without turning the classroom either into a “silencing safe-space” or a therapy session without a professional therapist? How do issues of

race, class, gender, and sexuality enter the classroom as categories of experience and of analysis? How does the body matter in this? How can we theorize the body? In this context, how do I deal with my own presence, my voice and authority in the classroom?

In the introductory section of the class, we discussed artistic and theoretical approaches to performing, reading, and writing space, i.e., Transnational Feminism, Globalization Studies, and the French Situationists, and finally, Guy Debord's concept of "psychogeography," which we discussed while students went on their *dérives* (wanderings or explorations) and wrote their travelogues. As a next step I asked the students to move to a more analytical level of writing and thinking and to apply the tools that we explored to case studies, cultural history, and media analysis: The first module analyzed space and history by "reading" Berlin as the capital of the German Empire, the center of Nazi Germany, the divided city, and the global city. I showed documentary and fictional film clips, and we read different narratives of cityscapes. We contrasted these narratives with images of other cities, in the northern and in the southern hemisphere. Second, we investigated the intersection of race, class, and space by looking at youth riots in Paris. We compared these riots to other kinds of social unrest, mostly concentrating on media images and narrations of poverty, the foreign other, violence, religion, and gender. We concluded with a section on virtual space, where we analyzed the creation of virtual social space and identity on sites like myspace and facebook, and explored the dynamics of space and power in video games.

### **Student Travelogues: Main Themes and Questions**

While hesitant at first and unsure of "what they were expected to write," almost all students expressed enthusiasm about the travelogue assignments in the midterm evaluations. The following excerpts from the travelogues and the online discussion forum give a taste of my students' writing and how they applied the tool of psychogeography to issues and topics that concern them. I will not describe the class discussions in detail, but summarize students' written work and reflect on strategies to improve the class design in the concluding section. The reflections are roughly organized according to themes; however, this attempted organization also shows just how interconnected the themes are.

#### *The Small Private College Campus as Trap, Cage, "Bubble" or "Campus Smells"*

The first travelogue on campus already revealed a wide range of perceptions. While some students felt completely comfortable, most travelogues



exposed feelings of anxiety. This made it almost impossible to find an access point for critically reflective discussions in the classroom. One female student reflected on her idea of what college would be like:

The idea that I was a blank slate and could recreate who I appeared to be was so exciting. I was determined to be outgoing and cheerful, and open to meeting new people...Yet there is always judgment or at least perceived judgment. The most uncomfortable for me is walking past older girls on campus....Or fears about the way I'm dressed, or how I look....Being able to have a car is one of those things that is a comforting concept within all of this unsettling change. Because I am able to drive off campus whenever needed, no questions asked, I feel less trapped, less stranded in an unfamiliar place.

The description of college as a trap was reflected in other travelogues as well. Often, this trap related to the social scene. Many students confirmed an observation a male student made that "the majority of the girls I saw pass by me were always on the cell phone which was almost used as a protective shield." A female student responded to the class discussions in the online discussion forum: "I think it's harder for men to understand just how vulnerable many women feel at night....Even verbal exchanges, especially those sexually charged, can be terrifying." While female students expressed feelings of vulnerability, one of my male students felt uncomfortable for a different reason. He stated that the people he passed as he wandered around dark corridors "obviously thought I was a shady character and were checking me out to see if something was wrong." The observations can be summarized by two statements: "I felt judged—and was rather upset with myself for my own self-consciousness—and wanted to leave immediately"; "I love this college but I am very limited here." These comments, made by female students, raised questions of gender, power, and identity and led to a discussion of safety and sexual harassment on campus.

The other dominant observation in the campus travelogues concerned the smells. A student simply stated that her "dorm smells like beer and sometimes bleach." Another travelogue offers a sensitive description of the psychogeography of a dormitory:

In the dorm I noticed two tall turquoise columns facing me, and a Cinderella-like staircase diverging at the top left and right. Next came an indescribable stench; not being able to decipher the true source of this smell I glanced over to a yellow stained wall, hoping that it wasn't urine, and then looked over to an over-packed garbage can.

The same student later observed a different dormitory:

When I walked into the dorm, I knew for sure someone had vomited in the nearby bathroom. It was Saturday night so I was guessing people were already sick from the excess of alcohol. At this point I was angry since I realized people were taking college for granted by drinking and forgetting that it was a place for learning not for partying and wasting brain cells. This place or house as the college calls it became almost a rotten bar that you can find in a lonesome town.

Even when entering the academic buildings students appeared sensitive to the smells:

The smell of the ultra-disinfectant detergent in the laboratories made me nauseous and I suddenly started to feel dizzy and unacquainted with the place that I was in. However there is one area that I noticed and caught my eye: a small cage with a little mouse. This is the only place where I was able to find some sort of connection with the natural world. But as I looked back around the room I was lost again. Feeling very scared I ran out of the building and sprinted towards Palmer Hall (all names are pseudonyms), one of the last dorms on campus.

Strangely, the mouse trapped in a cage in the science building gave the student a sense of connection to what he called “the natural world.” It also described, however, the feeling of being lost and trapped, limited, and under permanent observation that other students voiced in their travelogues. We addressed the fact that this “bubble” is also supposed to be a “safe-space.” One of the questions on the assignment asked the students to find where “the bubble” ends, to leave campus and to re-enter (See Appendix A, Course Syllabus). To my surprise, almost no student actually managed to leave college property on their first *dérive*: “However, the campus started to become more of a forest rather than a college; there were almost no visible lights and it felt as if I was no longer in ‘the bubble.’” It turned out that the student had not left the bubble, as he rightly states, it only “felt as if” he had actually left.

#### *Downtown: Race and Class?*

The next week, their second assignment required the students to actually leave campus. While I had asked the students to walk across campus by themselves, I assigned the second travelogue with a partner. To my surprise, after their second excursion to the small and yet-to-be revived downtown area of a small, formerly industrial town in New England, students predominantly stated that they would rather have done the exercise alone, and that “all in all this trip was much less successful a *dérive* than the last.” One student found the exploration disappointing because she did not carry out an idea she had while reading about the French Situationists who had suggested using a map of Moscow while walking around in Paris. My student wanted to use this idea to explore the

small downtown area of this economically depressed New England city: “I found it much easier to become fully involved in my games when I was alone. Also, I was disappointed because I forgot to bring my map of Moscow. I wanted to use it in my explorations.”

At the same time, however, most students felt more comfortable “walking aimlessly” in the anonymity of town than they did on campus. One female student explained: “When I was on campus I felt uncomfortable because it was so much more personal....In town I was just another pedestrian.” I specifically asked them to pay attention to class and race as they were walking. One student observed that “different lifestyles and class were incredibly evident....On campus I rarely have to think about class difference.” A white male student mentioned his experience in what he called a “Hispanic music store” and stated that he and his friends “were the only white people in there.” He felt unwelcome and left after just a few minutes. In response to that, a female Hispanic student posted the following response:

I can relate to the experience at the Hispanic music store; often times I get the feeling of not belonging at the college. As a Hispanic woman I have experienced gender and ethnic stereotypes everywhere. I completely understand the feeling of not belonging and I strongly believe that none of us should leave a place because of that. I feel as though you are not doing anything to help stop racism by leaving the music store or any other place in which we may feel uncomfortable. In our class, the diversity is not visible at all and that has not caused me to drop the class or drop college. I had a lot of situations back home where I was not accepted and I continue to try and stop this.

With her entry, the student pointed to the very challenge the class faced: diversity was not visible in the classroom. In my idea for the seminar, however, I had counted on such diversity. The silence following the critical assessments that this student offered points to one of the most significant failures of the seminar: we did not manage to confront this question of who has the privilege of belonging—or at least not feeling self-conscious—in most spaces. The silence indicated that the seminar did not “guide students toward seeing how racisms and the maintenance of racial hierarchies have structured space in ways that are detrimental to almost *everyone’s* interests” (Delaney, 2002, p.11-12). While this student response showed that everyday spaces are racialized, the silence of most of the other students indicated that her comment might have triggered thoughts about white privilege and a sense of white guilt, but did not lead to a critical reflection on whiteness, space, and power. From the position of privilege, only the “other” is affected by racialization.

Another group of students simply stated that, compared to their hometown “this town has a much more urban and somewhat dilapidated quality to it.” This feeling of “otherness” made some of the white students feel liberated:

We walk into a parking lot and my friend spies a stairway leading up to a rooftop. I am a little bit hesitant at first, but then as I slip back into the sort of game I have been playing I realize that I can go anywhere I like. This game is called “vagabonds.” I pretend I am a wanderer in some run down city in Louisiana. We climb the stairs up to the roof. The view is lovely.

In our class discussions, we did not confront the possibility that class differences on campus are simply more hidden than in the downtown streets and why that might be the case. Nor did we theorize the fact that, in spite of their different—higher—class status, white students tended to romanticize “difference” and imagine themselves blending into the downtown community. It only later became clear to me as I was reflecting on this experience that in spite of the one student’s response to the Hispanic music store experience, the excursion into the downtown area failed to confront the issue of class and racial privilege.

#### *The Mall: Consumption, Identity, and Sexuality*

The least popular assignment of the four travelogues was the mall. It was the mall travelogues, however, that spurred the most heated discussions about gender. One male student who felt comfortable in almost all places prefaced his travelogue by stating that he was “very familiar with malls,” that he goes “to malls all the time to just hang out.” He observed, however, that as he paid close attention to the environment he saw that “there were cameras all over the place.” A female student described the mall as a space of contradiction: “Shopping has always been a contradiction for me. I love shopping....At the same time, I would wear sweats for the rest of my life if I could.” The most common reaction to the *dérive* in this typical suburban mall was that of “claustrophobia.” One student describes:

Ever since middle school, I have always hated going to malls. I have mall anxiety. Back in middle school I used to have to go to the mall all the time because that is what my friends would do after school or on Saturday afternoons. I always sort of pretended I liked it, but in the back of my mind I would be wishing we could leave. I hate the florescent lighting, the noisy crowds, waiting in line to try on overpriced clothing. Something about the mall always makes me feel cranky.

The discussion about the psychogeography of the mall did not crystallize around the issue of private versus public space and the rules and the surveillance

that define this shopping-space, as I had expected, but around sexuality, gender, and advertising. A male student stated in his travelogue: "I wasn't conscious of my class, race, but of my gender identity. I felt uncomfortable being in this store and especially uncomfortable when I was walking around the mall with a bag from this store." The bag with its logo made him feel "emasculated." He related this feeling to an experience in an advertisement in another store: "I saw a man without his shirt on, which I really don't want to see....I didn't like seeing all these men without their shirts...I didn't feel so uncomfortable, but rather aggravated because of their sales campaign." A female student describes the same store:

I pass stores [...] and I am shocked at how obvious they make the fact that their whole advertising campaign is based around sex appeal. In Scott & Barman (pseudonym) for example there is a HUGE picture, right at the entrance, of the midsection of a shirtless male model with his pants unzipped and halfway off.

In the class discussions following this mall experience, we talked about sexuality, body image, and advertising. A female student summarized her experience in the mall as less of a personal, creative psychogeography but more a reflection on cultural identity commercialization: "I did not focus on details as much as concepts or overarching themes and ideas about much of the American lifestyle. I was not moved to play any games or be creative in any way while in the mall."

Most students agreed that the mall does not allow the mind to flow "freely." Again, the students felt trapped in a highly mediated and prescriptive space without being able to clearly present any reason for these feelings. I was surprised by the fact that students felt offended by the combination of commercialized and sexualized space. While for one student it was clearly also an issue of sexual identity, the general consensus that the mall was unpleasant and uncomfortable also points to a class position: The slightly scruffy mall with the chain stores did not match the kind of identities my students wanted to construct for themselves.

### *Class, Identity, and More Cages*

While, to my surprise, our discussions about the mall focused on sexuality and the body, I expected the visit home to trigger questions of class. While most students addressed the issue in their travelogues, it proved to be difficult to foster a critical dialogue about it. Many students expressed a sense of surprise about just how clean and groomed their neighborhood really was, and they distanced themselves from that display of wealth:

For some reason I felt completely alienated in my own neighborhood... All of the houses were so well groomed they appeared to be fake....The difference was

enough to make me feel like I was trespassing.... It is just bizarre how sheltered I was before I came here.

While some students experienced this homogeneity as “too perfect” and “bizarre,” other students admitted that “this homogeneity does seem to hold the neighborhood community together.” One student reflected on the politics of race in her homogenous neighborhood:

everything seemed far too perfect...but I, a fearless traveler, walked onward... hazy line between public and private...it is only public to those who live here....I was raised by my white grandparents to live a completely “white” lifestyle, I can see the discomfort some neighbors exhibit when dealing with the sweet, though very large, black man.

Another student reflected on what it means to be “normal” in certain neighborhoods:

It really opened my eyes to what other people’s lives are like, and skewed my perception of what was “normal.” In my hometown I often was confronted with this word because I, along with my family, and our lifestyle and belongings, were [sic] often labeled as “weird” by my peers. It seemed like everyone lived the same life in this town, and this life was “normal.”

A male student “recognized that most kids, lacking imagination or any other resources, would sit around and drink in basements.” When asked if his own family was rich, a student observed:

I can still recall kids asking me if I was rich. I always maintained, as a sense of pride, that I was not rich and it was only my large family that required such a house. Why it was a source of pride I am not even sure. Perhaps even than I recognized the hypocrisy of being rich, especially when being rich causes one to value themselves over others. Of course it could have been the fact that I did not want to draw attention to myself, but either way, I vehemently denied having anything to do with large sums of money.

Expressions of guilt, denial, surprise, and distancing dominated the reflections on the students’ own class backgrounds. While the comparison between their suburban neighborhoods and a mostly working class, formerly industrial city triggered a sense of rich guilt in some students, others used the comparison to once again depict the dilapidated and poor as somehow romantic:

This town seems to absorb the destruction of its town with passive denial. It is organic, growing and rotting at the same time. The people there are not locked in place, they do not seek a paradise, but a living and they do not adhere to any static ideal. My town, on the other hand, was an expensive creation meant to

satisfy the whims of some of the more powerful people looking for quaint small town to raise their beautiful children in, a static picture of a leisurely upper-class suburban town.

Others relativized the homogeneity by pointing out that the metropolitan center is not too far away:

However, when I decided to go on a walk through my neighborhood I started realizing what kind of place I lived in. Compared to this town it is the white rich suburbia that everybody would call it. However, it is only 30 minutes out of New York City and there is a very diverse community.

As this last assignment showed, the travelogues did not necessarily solve any issues or answer any questions, but they uncovered various levels of tension and contradiction and in some cases, allowed the students to reflect critically about their own positions and assumptions. Some of the most contentious issues, however—questions of social class and race—were only touched on superficially, and the students and I hesitated to push the inquiries further when the issues surfaced in class. One student summarized the experience of writing the travelogues: “One can see where one stands in this world and can discover ways to play with this and change it.” What we did not manage to confront was who has the liberty—or privilege—to play with what kinds of identities and at what cost. The playful approach often relies on a mediated perception of space; we imagine ourselves as actors in a film or characters in a video game. This reflects the main accomplishment as well as the dangers inherent in teaching a course that starts with “experience.” The travelogues showed that our experiences and our strategies are highly mediated; they showed how and even why different people experience spaces very differently. However, they did not foster a critical reflection on the connections between experience, media, and the politics of space and power.

### **Final Projects**

The final projects reflected these tensions and further point to the limits of this experiment. The female students in the class chose to carry out creative projects that involved the body. Two students painted a collection of sheets of paper—and each other—in front of the campus center. They referred to their project as “the situation” and aside from helping them to bond with each other, they both described this act as “liberating.” A group of three female students and dance majors performed three site-specific dances on campus; one on an empty lawn, one in front of the crowded dining hall during lunch hours, and one on a busy overpass that connects the campus with the athletic center. In both projects,

the question was how people passing by would react to this disturbance of space. The students expressed their surprise at how uncomfortable it made people—and even other students—who saw them and how they seemed to try to avoid the “situations.” Another female student created a situation online with two different myspace.com-profiles of herself, one an over-sexualized depiction of a young “Asian” woman, the other one of a self-proclaimed “dork.” Her findings were by no means surprising; however, it was disturbing to her just how predictable the online community was.

All the male students who chose the creative option for the final project used media and technology, photography, film, and cell phones to investigate spaces. The use of technology put them more in the role of the observer, documenter, and interpreter of space and less of an actor within spaces. One student, however, created a situation by speaking loudly on his cell phone in public to see what the reactions of the other people would be. His interest mostly lay in observing others’ reactions and in secretly filming people as they passed him.

Both male and female students chose to carry the idea of the situation, psychogeography, and the travelogue to virtual space. They proposed to do *dérives* through the Internet and through video games to investigate issues of power, space, and identity. It was striking to me, however, how unwilling, afraid, or uninterested the male students seemed in confronting the question of their own physical bodies, whereas the female students focused their attention on this very issue. Male students chose to pursue a mediated investigation of spaces and they presented their experience of space as mediated.

### **Reflections, Corrections, and Suggestions**

My students’ engagement with their final projects, as well as their enthusiasm about the travelogues and concepts like *dérive*, psychogeography, situation, and space—terms that they had integrated into their active vocabulary by the end of the semester—suggest that the course altered the way they understood spaces and critically reflected upon their roles within them. “Cracks” had opened up—some empowering, some thought provoking, and some troubling.

The most unsettling realization for me, however, was that the “experience” of space could serve as both a tool to uncover and a way to reaffirm social borders and obscure positions of power and privilege. Even though the travelogues clearly showed that experience is always mediated and that we make sense out of our perceptions by connecting them to narratives, stories, and images, we failed to make this the focus of our theoretical reflections in the first few weeks of the semester. When we started to analyze films and text in the following weeks, the students offered a far more analytical perspective.



The syllabus design did not force the connection between the exploratory/experiential and the analytical approaches to space. The travelogues should have been integrated more clearly into the analytical content-modules and the media analyses. It was not until we discussed virtual spaces in the final module of the class—following our analyses of films and texts on Berlin (history and space) and Paris (violence and race)—that students themselves suggested integrating the travelogue concept with the highly mediated spaces of the Internet or video games from the beginning. While I asked students to present on different forms of virtual space—blogs, online journals, sites like myspace and facebook, and video games—some students suggested to me that they would like to write a travelogue through virtual space and video games. The writing that resulted from these virtual *dérives* was inspired and critical and connected various themes from earlier class discussions to questions raised by virtual space and Internet communities.

These final weeks also marked the time of the semester when it became clear to most students how the analytical and the experiential elements in the class were connected. At the beginning of the semester, the students themselves had raised questions of race, class, and gender in their discussions of the travelogues and their description of experiences while wandering across campus, downtown, and in the mall. They did not connect their own subject positions and experiences to their critical reflection of spaces in film, literature, and news media. Their writing was, for the most part, analytically advanced; however, there was a clear disconnect between their creative and exploratory voices from the travelogues and their textual and media analyses. In the virtual space module that followed, the students had little difficulty identifying their own questions and applying them to their findings. On the one hand, one could simply argue that this was the process of learning how to analyze literature and contextualize such an analysis historically. To some degree, this seemed to be the case. On the other hand, the semester plan itself could reflect a more integrated approach to theory and experience. If the descriptions in the travelogues are not integrated into this critical discussion, certain “experiences,” as described above, can become tools for re-asserting privilege, re-inscribing and normalizing class and racial boundaries, and romanticizing the “other.”

A more integrated structure of assignments would have fostered a more in-depth pursuit of the theoretical and practical implications of these observations. While the personal experience allows for these issues to be voiced in the classroom, the safe-space of the fictional is sometimes instrumental in triggering a more theoretical discussion. For example, my students offered critical analyses of the depiction of white majority cultures and their overt racisms in German film. They confronted issues of police brutality, violence, and constructions of masculinities when we discussed the depiction of “ghetto” cultures in European

film and media. In the first section of the course we had investigated majority cultures on campus and in their neighborhoods at home. We had discussed issues of poverty and violence in the areas surrounding our private college campus. The topical connection between the two sections was obvious; however, the structure of the syllabus and the assignment did not integrate them as well as it appears to be possible. A critical discussion of European ghetto films, e.g., the French film *Hate* (Kassovitz, 1995), could be followed by the exploration of poorer downtown districts and working-class neighborhoods; one week an assignment could ask students to analyze the depictions of shopping-spaces in a film from the 1920s in conjunction with excerpts from Walter Benjamin's (1999) *The Arcades Project*; the next week the students could go out to the mall to see and explore the shopping spaces, malls, centers, or super-centers, in their neighborhood. Or a discussion of sexual violence in *Nightshapes* (Dresen, 1999), a fictional film that follows a collection of odd couples through the violent and dark night streets of Berlin in the 1990s, could be followed by a travelogue assignment across campus at night. In addition to allowing for a direct topical connection between the travelogues, the content modules, and critical media analysis to foster a more in-depth critical discussion, these kinds of assignments motivate the students to explore, write, and think about how theory and fiction connect to the physical world that surrounds them. Some of my students found themselves in different states of discomfort and disorientation, and others managed to explore new spaces or disrupt the flow of the spaces that made them uncomfortable in order to draw attention to this discomfort or to alter or claim the space. A more integrated, mixed-media structure might emphasize the "complex connections between place, identity, and experience" (Delaney, 2002, p. 12) that David Delaney deems necessary for a critical pedagogy of space that does not induce guilt, but stimulates imagination.

The discussion of my students' work and these reflections seek to uncover dissent (Mohanty, 2003) and "cracks and lost spaces" (PIPS, n.d.), so that teaching and learning can claim to produce a student-centered, academically rigorous, and challenging learning environment for a first-year seminar. It further suggests that psychogeography is a strategy that fosters connections across boundaries, different cultural spaces, and historical periods. It only succeeds as a teaching tool, however, when it asks us and our students to turn these connections into a personal commitment to transform definitions and functions of spaces—in our analyses, in the classroom, and in our social actions.

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### **Author**

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### **Appendix A**

#### **Syllabus**

## **Space, Power, and Identity**

### **Course Description:**

What kind of space makes us feel comfortable? Where do we feel confused, lost, or anxious? Why do we choose certain paths? What is a safe-space? How do space and time intersect? What do class, race, and gender have to do with space? How is space sexualized? These and other questions will guide us

through our investigations of the politics of space. Our academic discussions will be supplemented by field trips and artistic explorations. In the first section of the course you will write about and reflect upon your own travels to different spaces and share your thoughts in classroom discussions. We will explore campus, downtown, the mall, and other spaces together and in small groups. At the same time, we will discuss a variety of theoretical texts and artistic approaches that will allow you to theorize your experience. After this exploratory introduction, we will analyze representations of space in fictional texts, films, media representations, and virtual reality in different historical and cultural contexts. The final weeks will be devoted to your projects. Over the course of the semester you will be introduced to a variety of ways to think academically and critically about space and power and you will be encouraged to pursue your own theorizations. Be ready to critically reflect on how the spaces we live in and move through shape our thoughts, actions, and identities and how these mechanisms can be exposed, challenged, and possibly changed.

### **Assignments:**

The types of assignments in this class will vary; I will hand out instructions and questions and often you will have a choice. You will write a selection of papers and critical reflections, but you will also plan and carry out creative projects over the course of the semester. The course is designed to teach academic research skills and provide the tools to apply this research to your personal interests and questions. This will require many visits to the library and hours in front of your computer, but it might also include performances on the green, excursions to the art studios, the technology lab, and the coffee shop for peer interviews etc... You will also give a few short presentations over the course of the semester in order to improve your oral skills. For your final project you can write an essay, a short story, make a film, "create a situation," do a "mapping" (i.e., a visual art project), or design virtual space.

### **Objectives:**

This course aims to:

- Improve your writing skills
- Teach you how to do academic research
- Help you to develop your oral communication skills

- Familiarize you with a range of theoretical approaches in the fields of Cultural Studies, European Studies, Gender and Women's Studies, and Political Geography
- Increase your media literacy
- Introduce you to college life and learning in general
- Create new spaces...

You will learn:

- To take a critical and analytical perspective on how spaces and identities are created and influenced by questions of race, gender, class, and sexuality
- Just how disoriented we can get, once we start to pay attention to our environment
- And how to get a sense of orientation in spite of this fact...

### **Course Policies:**

This is a **first year seminar** – regular attendance and engaged participation are crucial for the success of this course. I reserve the right to assign an F for anyone who misses more than three classes unexcused. Make sure to come prepared, read the assigned text for each class, view the films, and be ready to respond. We will also discuss our projects on the course discussion board. You will be required to respond online once a week to our questions and class discussions. All assignments have to be handed in on time. Computer/printer failure is no excuse. Make sure to **communicate** with me if you have any questions, concerns, or problems!

### **Grading and Evaluation:**

You will be graded on your written work, your engagement in class discussions, and the projects you undertake over the course of the semester. I will provide careful feedback and work with you individually to improve your writing and research skills and to help you in pursuing your own academic and artistic interests. This class is graded on effort and progress; the emphasis is on critical thinking and creative engagement with the material.

Break Down of Grades:

Travelogues, Essays: 45 %

Class Participation, Discussion Forum, Oral Presentation: 40%

Final Project: 15%

**Schedule and Content Modules (Subject to Change):**

**1) Introduction: Psycho-Geographies**

	<b>Class: Topics, Themes, Films</b>	<b>Assignments and Projects Due in Class</b>
<b>Week 1</b>	9/4 Introductions, Disorientations, Definitions, Hide and Seek	
	9/6 "Situationism," "Psychogeographies," "Derives," "Parcours" Travelogue One: The Bubble?	Prepare your Answers to the Questions about Space for Class Discussion
<b>Week 2</b>	9/11 Discussion Travelogue One Special Topic: Trauma, Memory, and Space Travelogue Two	Travelogue One: Campus Read: Excerpts in Knapp
	9/13 "Maps" Information Literacy Tutorial (Library)	Read: McDonough, (Optional: Sadler) Online Response
<b>Week 3</b>	9/18 Discussion: Travelogue Two Social Positioning, Race and Class Writing Center Presentation	Travelogue Two: Downtown, Read: bell hooks
	9/ 20 Introduction: Downtown vs. the Malls Mall Trilogy (Short Film), Space and Surveillance Travelogue Three	Read: Vyse, Precarias a la Deriva, Online Response
<b>Week 4</b>	9/25 Discussion: Travelogue Three Gender and Consumption Suspicious Behavior	Travelogue Three: Mall Read: Duncan
	9/27 Public and Private Spaces, Safe Spaces? Explain: Travelogue Four	Look up Policies, be prepared to respond, Online Response

**2) Space and History: Example Berlin**

Week 5	10/4 Discuss: Travelogue Four  Intro: Space in Film and Literature, Example Berlin, Clips, Introduction	Travelogue Four: Home? Nature? Read: Excerpts <i>Berlin Alexanderplatz</i>
Week 6	10/9 Berlin: An Archeology of the City: The 1920s, Discussion Film and Text	Watch: <i>Symphony of a City</i> Finish Excerpts <i>Berlin A.</i> Online Response
	10/11 Berlin: Archeology Continued: Hitler in Berlin, Clips <i>Olympia, Murderers are Among us, Downfall</i>	Read: Catchen (Fotoessay)
Week 7	10/16 Berlin Divided, Film Discussion, Clips: <i>Redupers, Paul und Paula, Solo Sunny</i>	Watch: <i>Wings of Desire</i> Read: Fragments of a City
	<b>10/18 no class, professional conference</b>	Watch: <i>Nightshapes</i>
Week 8	10/23 Berlin United? Clips: <i>Herr Lehmann, Good Bye Lenin</i>	Read: Mennel
	10/25 Berlin Today, Clips: <i>Leere Mitte, Lola Rennt</i>	Paper: Film and The City (On <i>Nightshapes</i> or any other Berlin Film)

### 3) Space, Race, and Power: Ghettos in Paris?

Week 9	10/30 Histories and Presents of the Ghetto	Read: The New Berlin Wall
	11/1 Paris and the Ghetto, Short Film	Read: Benjamin and Media Reports
Week 10	11/6 Comparisons: Europe and the US Race Riots? Class Riots? Gender and Violence	Watch: <i>Hate (La Haine)</i>
	11/8 Comparisons Continued, Kanak TV: White Ghetto?	Paper: Film Response (on Race and Space)

### 4) Virtual Spaces and Final Projects: Blogs, Boards, and Games

Week 11	11/13 Discussion: Recap – What happened so far? How did your space	
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	change? Ideas for Final Projects	
	11/15 Virtual Spaces: Games	Read: Media, Articles
<b>Week 12</b>	11/20 Games	Research: Games, virtual space and identity

### **Thanksgiving... “Family Spaces?”**

<b>Week 13</b>	11/27 Virtual Spaces: Blogs, Boards	Research: Blogs
	11/29 myspace.com, facebook etc...	Paper/Project: Virtual Spaces
<b>Week 14</b>	12/4 Queering Space – Experimentations, Situations, <i>Parkours</i> , <i>Derives</i>	Work on Final!
	12/6 Queering Space – more Experimentations, more Situations, Queer Temporalities, Queer Spaces and Lifestyles (Halberstam)	Work on Final!
<b>Week 14</b>	<b>12/11</b> Summaries and Final Projects	
	<b>12/13 Last Class – Situations and Geographies</b>	

### **Appendix B**

Additional Course Readings and Films\*\*:

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\*\* Editor Note: The author included these references as an additional resource for the reader.

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