THE EMBODIED CITY

Walking and Writing
in the Urban Classroom

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In The Practice of Everyday Life, Michel de Certeau examines two complementary modalities through which urban subjects perceive and interpret their environments. The first, likened by de Certeau to the passive act of reading, involves totalizing models of the city, such as maps and aerial shots, which impose an orderly structure on the chaos of urban space. The second emphasizes precisely this chaos as experienced by walkers immersed in the immediacy of the street, their conscious choices in movement and direction analogous to the process of writing. De Certeau’s dual metaphor can be applied to the act of teaching the city: we may read and study works by urban planners, sociologists, and theoreticians that provide students with abstract models of urban patterns and phenomena (Kevin Lynch’s morphologies, Lewis Mumford’s diachronies, LeCorbusier’s visionary projects), but we can also involve learners in active, participatory experiences of metropolitan environments, encouraging an attitude of creative awareness of both their surroundings and their own embodied presence in urban space. This participatory urban mode that de Certeau equates to writing provides an understanding of writing and being in the city as an active engagement with, and even potentially a transformation of, city structures. Emphasizing the relationship between writing and participatory urban life stimulates students’ comprehension of their agency in both the writing process and their life in an urban space.

To achieve such increased awareness of individual agency in both the academic environment and urban life outside the educational institution is one of the main goals of Marymount Manhattan College, a small liberal arts college on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. The student demographic at Marymount indicates that nearly half of our students come from out of state (48.2% as of the academic year 2005-6); approximately forty-five of these are international students from countries as diverse as Japan, Argentina, and Tanzania. Only a small percentage of those students who hail from New York State are from New York City. Not surprisingly, given our location, and the fact that most of our students are living in New York City for the first time, the city inspires and shapes the teaching practices at Marymount, providing choices of material as well as pedagogical methods. One of the college’s most innovative academic programs is the freshman writing seminar sequence, which consists of interdisciplinary, writing-intensive, theme-based courses developed by faculty across the curriculum. Teaching in the Writing Seminar Program allows professors the opportunity to develop innovative interdisciplinary courses grounded in their own discipline, and to engage in ongoing
pedagogical conversations with colleagues across the college through monthly workshops. While individual sections vary by theme and discipline, in order to establish as much consistency as possible across sections, three paper assignments are common to all writing sections: Critical Response, Comparison/Contrast, and Critical Analysis. Individual faculty members are encouraged to tailor these assignments to their specific course content. Inevitably, several of the many writing seminar sections offered each semester include urban subject matter, inviting students to explore metropolitan culture, both in and out of the classroom, from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. This article offers an account of three such courses—two taught by professors of English, and one by a professor of Dance Studies—that focuses on our attempts at creating an urban learning experience in which the city serves not only as the object of intellectual examination, but also the field of embodied pedagogical practice and methodology.

As a school with large theater and dance programs, Marymount is particularly attuned to providing an educational experience that challenges the mind-body dualism. This interest is apparent in a number of team-taught projects involving collaboration between dance faculty and faculty from other departments, as well as ongoing informal exchanges between colleagues who want to increase the level of physical awareness in their classrooms. These exchanges are part of a broader conversation taking place in North American higher education today, reflecting a growing commitment to holistic teaching philosophies grounded in the concept of practice. Non-Western movement and spiritual practices such as martial arts, yoga, and meditation frequently provide models for such pedagogies, as seen in the work of authors collected in the recent volume *Teaching with Joy: Educational Practices for the 21st Century*, edited by Sharon Shelton-Colangelo, Carolina Mancuso, and Mimi Duvall, that draws on various practices, from Qigong (Tom Schmidt) to mindfulness meditation (Dan Huston). What these different approaches have in common is an investment in pedagogical approaches that emphasize active engagement over abstract conceptualization. Such active engagement requires a rethinking of the body as an active agent in theory and practice. Over the last twenty years Dance Studies, in conversation with other disciplines, has similarly challenged the Cartesian dualism of mind and body to establish bodies as culturally constructed biological entities that are connected with the psyche. With such a complex understanding of embodiment, bodies not only react to their environment but also have the potential to consciously influence and alter social structures. Any movement in an urban environment speaks to this double potentiality of bodies (as reflection and as influence on social systems) and their movements, and in consequence rethinks practice as always embodied and conscious.

The move from abstraction to practice as conscious and constructive is apparent in the work of several twentieth-century thinkers, whose writing provides a useful theoretical framework for our reflections. In addition to de Certeau's conceptualization of practice, the act (*postupok*), developed by Mikhail Bakhtin's in his early work on ethics, rethinks participation in a
similar manner. Bakhtin defines the act, as a “once-occurrence concrete actuality” (7) that cannot be understood through a “non-participant theoretical consciousness” but only through a “participative-affective experiencing of the concrete uniqueness and singularity of the world” (13). This emphasis on participatory consciousness stems from Bakhtin’s dread of all systems: technological, political, philosophical (and one may add educational), divorced from the “once-occurrence unity of life” (7). Bakhtin’s philosophy of the act attempted to shift away from an ethical system based on universal categories to one grounded in the unique, contingent experience of the individual. This emphasis on the contingency of the subject is also central to Pierre Bourdieu’s move beyond the traditional methodological dichotomies of empirical research and theory, the observing subject and the observed object, structure and agency. One of the key concepts through which such dichotomies can be surmounted is practice, a mode that Bourdieu juxtaposes to non-participatory methods of theoretical thinking. The logic of practice, Bourdieu explains, “understands only in order to act” (91), foregrounding the urgency and concreteness of embodied social reality. The intellectual affinity between thinkers as different as Bakhtin, Bourdieu, and de Certeau lies in their shared commitment to the concrete moment of lived individual experience and their understanding of the political impact of such engagement on social and cultural structures.

The three writing seminar courses introduced below speak to our commitment to teaching the city as a lived environment and an embodied experience through participatory pedagogical methods. Drawing on the methodologies and perspectives of several disciplines, each of us developed a course that integrates theoretical study of the metropolis and the twin practices of writing and moving through urban space. The courses establish learning in an urban structure in distinct ways; this distinctiveness allows a productive dialogue between the three different approaches. To facilitate this dialogue, not only do we reflect on the different content and structure of our courses, we also emphasize discreet aspects of each course, such as the theorization of embodiment, narrative as product and producer of urban experience, and collage as an example of embodied urban pedagogy. Jens Richard Giersdorf focuses on choreographies of urban movement and writing in order to highlight their political impact. Cecilia Feilla presents literary and embodied voyages in the metropolis as a metaphor for the writing process. Finally, Magdalena Maczynska describes the use of image-based and text-based collage assignments as a structural backbone in her course on the cultural history of urban walking.

**Choreographing the City—Jens Richard Giersdorf**

*First Session: The Politics of Writing Movement:*

The city of Valdrada lies on a lake and is perfectly reflected in the water, mirroring not only the outlines of buildings and the pedestrian movements on its streets, but also the shadows of trees, the closing of a door inside a
house, entangled lovers' bodies on a bed. The citizens' awareness of their city's reflection in the lake makes them consciously perform their lives and construct the urban space around them; the reflection thus achieves the same value as its original, blurring referents and their signs and eventually no longer allowing a distinction between the city and its mirror image. No one can tell anymore which came first, which city is an image in a lake, and which one is created out of stone and movement.

My summary of Italo Calvino's description of the city Valdrada in his ingenious book *Invisible Cities* simultaneously addresses one of the central issues in Dance Studies and establishes the focus of any class on writing about urban movement: how to translate a moving body into writing (53-54). Traditionally, critics, practitioners, and theorists have characterized dance as ephemeral and elusive. Yet, a new school of dance theorists spearheaded by Susan Leigh Foster's structuralist and post-structuralist analyses defines dance and any choreographic practice as leaving considerable traces. These traces are not different from a picture hanging on the wall of a gallery, a theatrical text performed on a stage, or a composition played at a concert. All of these artistic texts change their connotation and social significance from the time of their creation to the various times of their reception. An Impressionist painting can mean something completely different between the time it caused a scandal when first displayed at a Parisian salon and the time when it is auctioned off a century later by Christie's to disappear in the vault of a wealthy art collector. It is the same material object, yet its cultural significance is considerably changed.

Dance performances do not seem to contain the same material weight, yet they leave numerous traces while being choreographed, rehearsed, performed, viewed, and critiqued. For instance, Nijinsky's 1928 original choreography of the *Rite of Spring* was reconstructed by Millicent Hodson in 1992 relying on Nijinsky's unique dance notation and sketches, notes of his dancers, original costume and stage designs, and reviews by dance critics (17-29). The dance was reconstructed for several performances. Yet, the act of reconstructing historical dances cannot always lead to a performance. Often, the writing about dance stands in for the engagement with a past choreography. Thus, writing about dance needs to evoke the dancing and movement to enable a visualization and theorization of the form. In other words, writing has to be choreographed in the same way that the dance was created and performed. This is a political issue because defining dance as ephemeral means feminizing an already female-connoted art even further, thus downgrading it in the hierarchy of art forms.

Such an understanding of writing as a challenge to dance's so-called ephemerality also applies to other movements, such as urban or pedestrian movement. To understand movement in a city and how it constructs urban space, it is productive to define pedestrian movement as consciously choreographed in the same way that a dance is created (Foster 396-97). To set up writing as a challenge to the ephemerality of dance and movement, I provide my students with Calvino's description of Valdrada in our
first session. The text depicts the relationship between two dependent entities, which influence and impact each other, eventually blurring the distinctions between an original and its reflection. Calvino's text can thus serve as a model explaining the mutual relationship between two different texts—movement and writing.

Yet, the example works on two more levels. Calvino's text also establishes the city as created through the movement of its inhabitants as much as through its architecture. Such a definition of urban space returns agency to the physicality and movement of the people inhabiting the city of stone and steel. It allows a focus on the impact of a diverse range of movement—from pedestrian movements on the sidewalks and street dance to a ballet at Lincoln Center. All these movements construct and impact space in unique ways.

Finally, Calvino's narrative is also a beautifully written text, engaging the students with its effective employment of carefully chosen vocabulary, communicating with its structure as much as with its content. Students get excited about the text and experience the impact of clear and efficient writing first-hand. Thus, Calvino's text serves several functions: it is a powerful example of exquisite and intellectual writing; it lays out the methodology of the course; and it establishes the content of the class. Students' comprehension of this triple function sharpens their critical engagement with the text and prepares them for their own writing, demonstrating the multilayered capacity of both writing and urban choreography.

**Urban Movement as Text**

The course endeavors to open up the notion of dance to choreography more generally in order to include organized and pedestrian movement and their constructive impact on urban space. Such theorization postulates city space as choreographed as opposed to built—hence the title of the class, “Choreographing the City.”

Marcel Mauss' categorizations in *Techniques of the Body* and Michel de Certeau's “Walking in the City” become key introductory texts that establish the cultural construction of movement as well as urban movement as text. Mauss worked on the forefront of ethnology with his involvement in founding the *Archives Internationales de la Danse* in France in 1931. He established the impact of different cultural structures on everyday movement in order to create an archive of body techniques that would document and preserve corporeal knowledge for an understanding and mapping of human societies. Mauss' key text, *Techniques of the Body*, allows students to comprehend movement as not naturally given, but culturally created by observing and comparing simple pedestrian movements in Western and non-Western societies (455). For instance, walking is described as taught and learned in distinct ways in different cultures rather than universally and unconsciously executed (Mauss 458).

De Certeau expands on the cultural construction of movement by observing its productive capacity. This theoretical move shifts agency from
the social and spatial into the choreographic by establishing movement as not only influenced by cultures and environments but also as a process that has the capacity to manipulate and change social structures. In his essay *Walking in the City*, de Certeau theorizes urban movement as an appropriation and re-enactment of spatial structures (97). Yet, he also assigns walking the potential to transgress a place’s configuration by expanding and contracting it (de Certeau 99-101). This latter statement is important because it communicates to students the impact of movement on the material urban environment and the re-structuring of the city space according to citizens’ needs and physical actions.

The course’s initial critical reading of the texts by Calvino, Mauss, and de Certeau establishes three crucial concepts for any understanding of embodiment and urban spatiality: the choreography of writing as a structural engagement with urban movement, cultural constructions of pedestrian movements, and urban movements’ impact on social and spatial configuration. To enhance the students’ comprehension of the complexity of these three concepts in relation to the organization of a city, the main part of the course examines distinct choreographies of urban space. The readings cover such diverse appearances as the destructive power of Balanchine’s ballet productions in 1950s and 1960s New York City (Garafola); the disruptive potential of choreographed mourning during the display of the AIDS Quilt on the National Mall in Washington, DC (Gere); the choreography of protest during the World Trade Organization’s meeting in Seattle (Foster); the racially and sexually affirmative dance of Voguing in 1990s New York subculture (Jackson, Muñoz); and the world-changing organized walk across the inner-German border on the day of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 (Giersdorf).

These examples combine a negotiation of aesthetic and choreographic principles with political goals. Yet, most of all, these diverse texts rethink city space as non-fixed and as cultural. If only momentarily, pedestrian movements and choreographies have the potential to restructure cities, alter their layouts, challenge urban materiality, and push against cities’ boundaries. To capture such multifaceted capacities of movement, the authors of these texts creatively engage with city space as an architectural and cultural place and the conscious alteration of cities’ space through the effective choreography of diverse movements. I guide my students to expand their theoretical comprehension of urban spatiality and movement, and to develop their writing skills by critically analyzing these texts.

**Three Assignments:**
*Walking in the City, Site-specific Performances, and Community Movements*
The first two assignments speak to the concurrency of the course’s theoretical and practical goals by requiring students to engage with the movement of the city’s diverse communities in action and writing. Responding critically and creatively to a brief walk through the city, students fulfill the first assignment with a combination of a rigorously structured short essay...
and an accompanying creative depiction of the walk. The essay requires the students to demonstrate their ability to structure an academic argument with clear topic, thesis, method, and scope. This pedagogical strategy steers the students away from simple reflective writing to a more analytical practice. The creative part of the assignment emphasizes this analytic engagement with the city by asking the students to pick an appropriate medium for the depiction of their walk. In order to make this decision, students have to identify key elements of their walk and comprehend their own agency in making such decisions. Only then are they able to decide if a poem, a series of photographs, a short video, a drawing, or a song might be the best depiction of their walk. A presentation of the students’ work in class allows them to experience very different representations of the same city and to realize the impact of their own movements and decisions on the creation of their individual views on city space.

The second assignment deepens the students’ comprehension of individual agency by asking them to compare an outdoor and an indoor performance in the city. The assignment defines performance in line with more recent definitions of the term in Performance Studies, by including every day performances. Thus, students are able to observe a drummer on a subway platform, an audition at a dance studio, a community fashion event, but also a homeless person speaking on the streets, and a banker yelling into his cell phone. Indoor performances often display a more rigorous structure, are more product-oriented, and most likely involve some monetary component, whereas outdoor performances are seemingly less structured and focused on process. Monetary exchange is often voluntary in many outdoor performances. These structural principles introduce several productive issues, for instance access to space, governing laws of space, public versus private space, preferred building structures for such spaces, and a whole array of identity categories, such as class, race, and age. Informed by the discussions of class material and the experiences from the first assignment, students are equipped to construct their observations into a sophisticated comparison, addressing the influence of specific urban spaces on individual performances.

The final assignment addresses the course’s main focus on the constructive potential of movements and their impact on city space. The assignment builds on the comprehensive analysis of all readings by asking the students to investigate a unique example of an urban community’s corporeal engagement with and alteration of cityscape. As in several of the readings, the community’s movement chosen by the students does not have to be a dance. Rather, the students are encouraged to explore and participate in any organized movement vocabulary—such as parades, festivals, or street performances—to understand the importance of the movements for the definition of groups of individuals as a coherent community and the potential for the movement to create a space inside a city for the community. Based on their research and participation, the students are also asked to find the appropriate structure for writing about the community’s choreography of the city, successfully analyzing and mirroring
the movement and the city in their text. In my experience teaching this class, the three assignments pose two major hurdles for the students. The first difficulty is the leap from their understanding of writing in high school to college-level writing. Often, students might enter college with writing skills that emphasize descriptive and evaluative writing with a focus on appropriate language skills. With the first assignment, the students have to shift to an analytical and critical perspective, which requires a heightened awareness of structure and language. To ease this transition, I combine the analytical short essay with a creative part in the first assignment. This combination allows students to tap into their creative potentials, whereas the short essay introduces analytical and critical thinking. Students from any of the creative arts taking this course usually do not have a problem with this assignment. Yet, most of the students from other majors are not always as familiar with creative expression. To bridge this gap, I decided to have the students present the first essay in class. The presentations demonstrate to them a variety of approaches to the assignment, thus providing an experience and appreciation of the impact and importance of creativity in academic writing. The second essay then builds upon this knowledge by requiring the creative part to be integrated into the actual writing. Students understand and enjoy this integration.

The move from the second to the third assignment poses a second challenge for the students. Whereas the first two assignments dealt with specific academic methods, such as critical response and comparison, the last assignment asks for an analysis of the impact a community has on urban space. Initially, students are overwhelmed by this assignment and as a result fall back into a descriptive mode. Only through repeated references to the strategies already utilized in the first two assignments, and clear guidelines for the integration of theoretical material on the issues, are students eventually able to rise to the desired level of academic writing. At the end, the last draft of the final essay represents a major academic accomplishment for the students and, at the same time, provides them with a sophisticated comprehension of mobility of city space and their creative agency in the choreography of urbanity.

Literature and the City—Cecilia Feilla

A course on literature and the city is necessarily a course about place—real places and imagined places, and the areas in between where the real and the imagined blend into new urban and literary experiences. Place thus serves as the governing metaphor structuring students’ journey through the physical and written spaces of the city in my writing section, as they explore the relationship between the city as a physical entity and the city as it has been imagined in literature and theory. My goal is to foster a complex understanding of the way writing has articulated and ordered ideas about the city, and the way the city and its transformations have in turn influenced writing. Students engage a wide variety of literary (Whitman,
Crane, Poe, Auster, Dos Passos, Calvino), popular (film noir, comics, television), and theoretical (Benjamin, Simmel, de Certeau) texts, as well as take a number of walking tours in the city. Such intellectual and embodied voyages into the spaces—written and physical—of the metropolis also provide a metaphor for the writing process itself. In this way the city becomes an extension of the writing classroom, a space in which students move and navigate between written and urban texts and practice. My aim is for them not only to engage analytically, somatically, and creatively with the urban texts they read and write in the class, but also to develop a deeper understanding of their own place within the urban environment that both shapes and is shaped by their writing.

The City as Text
An excerpt from Lewis Mumford’s monumental work of urban history, The Culture of Cities (1938), provides a useful starting point for students to begin thinking and talking about the city as a physical entity with a particular history and form:

The city is...a conscious work of art, and it holds within its communal framework many simpler and more personal forms of art. Mind takes form in the city; and in turn, urban forms condition mind. For space, no less than time, is artfully reorganized in cities: in boundary lines and silhouettes, in the fixing of horizontal planes and vertical peaks, in utilizing or denying the natural site, the city records the attitude of a culture and an epoch to the fundamental facts of its existence. (11-12)

Mumford’s conceptualization of the city here and in the rest of the passage—as a consciously-created artwork, as the organizing principle of human endeavor, as superimposition of the spatial and temporal, as communal and individual, formal and formative—provides many avenues for discussion. Students readily grasp the way in which the urban environment shapes the way its inhabitants think and perceive (“urban forms condition mind”), and come to appreciate the ways in which the city’s physical form records and communicates a culture’s ideas, values, attitudes, and aspirations (“mind takes form in the city”). Mumford’s dynamic historical model allows us to arrive at a notion of the city as an evolving construct, one that, like a text, forms a framework of places, objects, identities, allegories, and symbols through which we can understand the changing patterns of human experience and relations. This initial discussion engages students with some of the central concepts and themes we pursue later in the course, and prepares them to extend Mumford’s notion of the dynamic relationship between mind and city, internal and external, to their reading of two poems about New York City: Walt Whitman’s “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” (1856/1881) and the “Proem” to Hart Crane’s The Bridge (1930).

Whitman’s “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” and Crane’s “Proem” to his epic poem of American history present distinct articulations of the relationship between the city’s physical reality and the inner vision of the poets. In
Whitman’s poem, the ferry on which the solitary speaker crosses the East River between Manhattan and Brooklyn represents the essential bond between the poet and humanity, and among past, present, and future; Crane’s “Proem,” written over seventy years later, updates Whitman’s vision in light of the technological innovations of the 1920s, replacing the ferry with the Brooklyn Bridge, which for him symbolizes the “bridge” between spiritual and material, past and present, natural and urban.

My goal in this section is for students to develop an understanding of the relationship between the external city and the internal one the poets describe, between the historical and material city of the poet’s present and the mythical or transcendent vision of the poet’s imagination. To this end, I organize a field trip into the city in order to walk in the footsteps of Whitman and Crane. The itinerary involves taking a water-taxi from lower Manhattan (South Street Seaport) across the East River to the Fulton Ferry dock on the opposite shore in Brooklyn. We then walk through Brooklyn Heights and return to Manhattan by foot over the Brooklyn Bridge. Students thus experience the complex movements and perceptions of the poems somatically, enabling them to realize the way the physical and intellectual changes of perspective in each are a function of one’s place within and in relationship to the city: as part of the cityscape on the street and shore of Manhattan, as passenger on the ferry-crossing, as observer from a distant shore; then as walkers over the Brooklyn Bridge, reintegrating into the city by foot, becoming a part of its overall design. I hope students arrive at a sense of the horizontal motion of Whitman’s poem as they move across the East River, its being in-between and its moving forward and backward over time and space, united by the perceiving mind. With the walk back over the bridge, I hope they will be opened to the vertical thrust and drop of Crane’s poem, the downward gaze of “bent” walkers and the soaring arc (“curveship”) of the Bridge which raises the eyes ever upward in what was for Crane the bridge’s power as a metaphor of the spirit. As he said of his poem, “I have attempted to induce the same feelings of elation, etc.—like being carried forward and upward simultaneously—both in imagery, rhythm, and repetition, that one experiences in walking across my beloved Brooklyn Bridge” (qtd. in Caws 133). The physical experience of walking thus reinforces our study of poetic form and the way literature is both a product and a producer of urban experience—a dynamic interaction between self and environment, real and imagined.

Before we embark, I direct students to take notes during the excursion and provide a list of questions and guidelines to help them focus and record their sensations and impressions. In class, I ask students to write a reflection on what our excursion added to their understanding of the poems, as well as to their understanding of the connection between the city and the writing process. These written exercises provide pre-writing for the first formal written assignment, which is a close analysis of one of the poems. As students begin developing a focus, thesis, and argument for the paper, I draw connections between their perambulations in the city and the practice of writing,
encouraging them to detect patterns and areas of clarity as they move between and among different sites and texts, creating their own textual grids and walkways. One of the greatest difficulties students experience with their writing is developing a unique and arguable thesis. They often feel they have nothing new to say or add, and generally have difficulty moving from description to a focused argument that engages the themes and concepts of the course. Starting with personal narrative allows students to connect with the experience and with their writing in a familiar and "low stakes" form; then through reflection writing, I steer them through the process of generating ideas and practicing close analysis (e.g., to recognize patterns and insights in their own writing, to identify ideas they might explore further, etc.). Just as one's position in relationship to the city—whether on the sidewalk or at the top of a skyscraper—renders a different image of the cityscape, developing a thesis is about finding one's place in relationship to the material. Sharing their pre-writing in class helps further illustrate the way each student brings a particular perspective to the readings, and the many forms writing can take to represent the same event or text. Our excursions into the city thus supply common reference points throughout the semester from which we can draw analogies and examples when discussing concerns and difficulties students are having with their writing.

The Text as City
Building upon their first voyages in writing and walking, students turn to the next assigned reading: Edgar Allan Poe's short story, "The Man of the Crowd" (1851). With this text, we move from the city as constituted by the poet, whose inner feelings and sensations embody an urban vision, to the city as constituted by the crowd. Poe's narrative provides a complex paradigm of the city dweller as a reader of urban signs and systems, but also raises issues of legibility and the limits of knowledge that complicate the relationship of internal and external in the metropolis.

Poe's narrative is structured into two parts, each of which represents a different mode of perceiving the urban environment. In the first, the narrator sits in a café watching the city crowd pass by during rush hour, content in his ability to classify each individual and group he sees by type. As night falls and the character of the city and crowd changes, the narrator becomes intrigued by a particular passerby—an enigmatic old man who defies easy classification—and is compelled to follow him onto the busy city streets. The second half of the story follows the narrator as he enters the urban text as an active participant rather than passive viewer, and grows in mystery and phantasmagoria as the narrator's grip on reality becomes increasingly tenuous. When the narrator suddenly finds himself face to face with the stranger, rather than finding the truth he was chasing, he finds that the man of the crowd is a blank: "[he] does not allow [him]self to be read" (181).

Poe's story provides a situation students can relate to immediately: people-watching. We discuss the way this uniquely urban pastime presents the city and its inhabitants as spectacle to the viewer's gaze (the view from
the café window is depicted in cinematic terms: "the rapidity with which the world of light flitted before the window" [183]). We consider the uncanny nature of the crowd, made up of individuals yet unknowable collectively, and how this might reflect a fascination with and horror toward the growing urbanization of society. Our main focus of discussion and writing, however, is the differing modes of perception depicted in the two parts of the story: the narrator’s confident and surveying position outside the crowd in the beginning of the story as opposed to the changed and limited perception as he walks the streets becoming part of the crowd ("my vision deceived me" [184]). Students are prompted to identify three specific differences in the narrator’s relationship to the crowd in the beginning and at the end of the story, with particular attention to descriptions of seeing and watching, and how they construct the narrator’s sense of himself as an observer and reader of urban signs.

Michel de Certeau’s notions of the “walker” and “voyeur” in The Practice of Everyday Life provide a useful theoretical model at this point to reinforce what students have observed in the Poe story and experienced in their excursion to Brooklyn. I ask them to summarize de Certeau’s ideas of the walker and voyeur and to identify specific passages from the story that might serve as examples of each. The formal writing assignment is an application of de Certeau’s categories to Poe’s story. As students begin the writing process, I draw connections between de Certeau’s modes of engagement with urban experience and the practice of writing. Peter Elbow’s discussion of writing pedagogy in, “The Loop Writing Process,” a chapter in Writing with Power is particularly germane here. Elbow uses the metaphor of a “voyage out” and “voyage home” to describe the two modalities involved in the writing process. The “voyage out” refers to the production of writing (free-writing) in which, as he explains, “you have to lose yourself to lose sight of your topic” (75). Like walkers in the city who escape “the imaginary totalizations produced by the eye” (de Certeau 101), Elbow’s free-writer lets “goals, meanings, and end-products slip partly out of mind in order to allow for restructurings of your mind and new points of view that would be impossible if you kept your eye on the goal all the time” (75).

Once students have produced enough writing—through brainstorming and free- and focused-writing—they can begin the “voyage home.” This entails looping back to reflect on the writing already done. Like the voyeur, the writer now “see[s] the whole” (de Certeau 99) and imposes an order on the seeming chaos of the initial writing process. I continue the metaphor of text-as-city and city-as-text as students progress to the first draft. I ask them to imagine their essay as a city: Which parts promote leisurely sauntering or strolling? Which force the reader to rush through? Are there signposts and traffic lights? What does the reader see as he or she proceeds: open avenues or cluttered sidewalks?

Integrating experiential learning activities effectively into the larger goals, concepts, and themes of the course is always a challenge, particularly in terms of student writing. The paradigm of viewer and participant
provides a practical pedagogical model for introducing students to writing and reading about the city, and helps them navigate the abstract concepts through practical experience. Marymount students are generally creative and dynamic, and perform well with physical and directed exercises. Much of my work in the writing seminar focuses on guiding students beyond personal responses to the literary and theoretical works under consideration, to develop more academically rigorous analyses and synthesis of them. Our textual and physical explorations of the city reinforce and repeat the modalities of viewer and participant necessary for effective college writing, and are aimed at encouraging students to view themselves as active agents in the metropolitan environment, both inside and outside of the classroom. By theorizing the real and imagined city and promoting embodied urban practice, this paradigm serves to engage students intellectually and somatically with the increasingly complex urban texts they will encounter in the rest of the course and allows for spontaneous learning opportunities. One student, for example, excitedly reported to the class that a Walt Whitman poem (“To You”) was featured as one of the Poetry in Motion selections posted in New York City subway cars. This made for a fruitful learning opportunity in which students applied their critical reading skills to a new poem by Whitman, as well as discussed what the physical and rhetorical context of the subway contributed to the poem’s meaning and readers’ experience of it. In this way, embodied pedagogical approaches can promote in students a richer understanding of the way that writing, by imposing imaginative order on the disorder of urban life, provides an extension of the city’s real spaces in which its many perspectives, paradoxes, and potentials can be embodied.

**Collage in the Urban Classroom—Magdalena Maczynska**

The collage is a quintessentially urban art form, foregrounding the construction of meaning, by both artist and audience, in the midst of an unstable perceptual universe. My twenty-first century students are well equipped to understand the language of collage, as I discovered from their enthusiastic responses to the Dada work of Grosz, Höch, and Heartfield, and to Renata Adler’s non-linear urban short fiction. Far from being confused or put off by the structured chaos of such compositions, students enjoy their “random” and “absurd” appeal, readily drawing analogies between the studied pieces and their own efforts at negotiating the semiotic shock of New York City. This enjoyment and understanding inspired me to develop an urban-themed composition course in which the collage plays a central structural role, offering insights into both the modern metropolis and the craft of writing. Throughout the class, the collage assignments accompany and support the student’s work on their academic essay portfolios, providing models for the individual and collaborative aspects of the creative process.

“Walking the City” is a course about the movement of minds and bod-
ies in an urban environment. Not only do we read authors interested in walking (Walter Benjamin on flânerie, Guy Debord on the dérive, Michael de Certeau on walking rhetorics, Judith Walkowitz on gendered Victorian streetwalkers), but also engage in acts of strolling and drifting (what one of my students referred to as freewalking) in the streets of New York City. The collage assignments are linked to these acts of movement, integrating the students' cognitive and physical engagement in the exploration of urban space. In the course of the semester, we work on three pieces inspired by the collage method: the first constructed from found objects, the second from found words, and the third from original language composed by students. While the first two projects require literal excursions into New York streets in search of material, the last and most complex assignment builds on these patterns of exploration to help students develop and structure a substantive piece of argumentative writing about the city.

*Working with Found Objects*

I first introduce the form of the collage as part of an early lecture on modernist urban avant-garde movements. We focus particularly on George Grosz and John Heartfield's 1919 work "Life and Work in Universal City, 12:05 Noon" as well as a series of pieces by Kurt Schwitters in which random urban detritus becomes the raw material for creative composition. The follow-up homework assignment asks for small-scale collages assembled from found urban objects. Imitating the method of Schwitters, students walk around the city collecting ticket stubs, newspaper fragments, discarded wrappers, broken pieces of various materials, etc., and combining them into original images. The most obvious purpose of the activity is to help students understand the collage form as practitioners rather than passive consumers of a prepackaged art history lesson. More importantly, however, the task offers an exercise in alert observation and focused selection, two skills fundamental to the craft of writing.

The second stage of the project involves the presentation of individual pieces to the rest of the class, followed by writing a one-page artist statement for a hypothetical exhibition. Both tasks encourage reflection, oral and written, on the underlying and often unacknowledged principles governing each composition, helping students conceptualize the unconscious rules and patterns they had applied in their work. This act of analysis, through which students arrive at a better understanding of their own creative processes, illustrates the interplay between the free flow of invention and the discipline of critical consciousness, what Peter Elbow calls immersion and perspective, involved in the construction and communication of meaning. The reflective work continues after the individual pieces are combined into a large-scale meta-collage and displayed in the English Department hallway. In a final class discussion, students consider how the meaning of their own work has been altered or extended by this act of collective publication, a conversation that elucidates the dialogic and contextual nature of meaning-making.
Working with Found Words

The next collage-based exercise uses words, rather than objects, as its raw material, exploring urban public language, while reinforcing the competencies and skills (observation, selection, awareness of rhetorical choices and context) practiced in the previous assignment. Unlike the first project, however, the second one requires significant collaboration, laying the groundwork for the peer-group feedback sessions that will become central to the students’ work throughout the semester. Rather than creating individual pieces that later become the building blocks of a collective display, class members are divided into small groups (four is a good number) and asked to work together on conceptualizing, structuring, and producing their collages.

The starting point for the found words assignment is the opening section of Ivan Cultchegov’s 1953 essay “Formulary for a New Urbanism”:

We are bored in the city, there is no longer any Temple of the Sun. Between the legs of the women walking by, the dadaists imagined a monkey wrench and the surrealists a crystal cup. That’s lost. We know how to read every promise in faces—the latest stage of morphology. The poetry of the billboards lasted twenty years. We are bored in the city, we really have to strain to still discover the mysteries on the sidewalk billboards, the latest state of humor and poetry:

Shower-Bath of the Patriarchs
Meat Cutting Machines
Notre-Dame Zoo
Sports Pharmacy
Martyr’s Provisions
Translucent Concrete
Golden Touch Sawmill
Center for Functional Recuperation
Sainte-Anne Ambulance
Café Fifth Avenue
Prolonged Volunteer Street
Family Boarding House in the Garden
Hotel of Strangers
Wild Street. (1)

Chtchegov’s poetic list gleaned from the streets of Paris serves as a model for the semester’s second urban stroll, the purpose of which is to notice and write down fragments of metropolitan language, including signs, street names, billboards, fliers, stencils and graffiti. (Having read Walter Ong’s essay on graffiti as writing, students are particularly alert to this last form of city language.) Following the gathering of linguistic data, small-group members share and discuss the lists they had assembled, seeking a consensus as to which words and phrases will become part of the group’s collective piece. The structuring and presentation of the final composition is also the joint task of the entire group.
In addition to the obvious advantage of building trust and becoming comfortable with group dynamics in preparation for later peer-feedback sessions, this exercise allows students to examine the private and communal connotations of the words they have collected, highlighting the crucial role of discursive communities in exploring and stabilizing meaning. Moreover, having completed the first class project, students are now comfortable with the process of collage production, and can turn their attention more closely to the urban textuality under analysis. This transition from images to words capitalizes on most contemporary students’ facility with understanding and manipulating visual data, encouraging a transfer of those skills to the realm of the verbal. Finally, as working with found rather than original language carries none of the anxiety associated with revising one’s own writing, students become comfortable with the idea of re-conceptualizing, re-configuring, and discarding material. Promoting such flexibility is perhaps the most important contribution of collage work to the writing process.

**Working with Your Own Words**

The semester’s last collage–inspired assignment is a “collage essay” that prepares the class for work on their final argumentative essays by modeling effective invention strategies and exploring problems from multiple perspectives. The exercise was inspired by Peter Elbow’s use of collage in the writing classroom, as outlined in his essay “Using Collage for Collaborative Learning” and illustrated in *A Community of Writers*, a composition handbook Elbow co-authored with Pat Belanoff. In Elbow’s model, students work in groups to create a composition of written fragments centered around a theme, moving between solitary acts of writing, and collective acts of sharing (“weak collaboration”), as well as selecting material, agreeing on a focus, and composing larger wholes (“strong collaboration”). Elbow names several significant benefits of the collage method: it forces students to articulate their tacit writerly decisions; it overcomes the disadvantages of traditional collaborative writing assignments, such as student frustration, silencing of minority voices and catering to the lowest common denominator; it provides a satisfying balance between solitary and communal activity.

My modification of Elbow’s ideas includes emphasizing the urban character of the collage form, as well as making use of collage work throughout the entire semester, preparing the way for the final “collage essay” with the preparatory “found objects” and “found worlds” pieces. The benefits outlined by Elbow are thus distributed over several exercises: the first project, assigned at the beginning of the class, encourages reflection and the articulation of implicit authorial choices; the second, assigned at the point in the term when students begin their peer-group work, foregrounds group collaboration. By the time we reach the third project, students have already engaged in extensive peer-group work, so the emphasis is shifted back to the individual writer (another departure from Elbow’s model, in which the “collage essay” is a strongly collaborative activity).

I introduce the “collage essay” project at the end of the semester, as
the class is preparing to work on their final academic essay focused on exploring a selected urban phenomenon. The open-ended character of this assignment puts the burden of finding a topic and formulating a thesis on the student, a task requiring a significant preparatory period of invention. The “essay collage” assignment allows room for such a process of discovery. After students have identified preliminary essay topics, we spend two class periods producing a series of short, non-graded pieces centered on their emerging ideas. These may include: (1) drafting lists of questions the essay intends to answer, (2) identifying the “voices” in the argument and writing short dialogue scenes involving impersonations of these voices, (3) freewriting, (4) illustrating, (5) creating catalogues, (6) narrating real or fictional events pertaining to the topic, etc. (For more creative invention exercises, see chapter nine, “Metaphors for Priming the Pump,” in Peter Elbow’s Writing with Power). Students complete the project by selecting and assembling their pieces into individual “collage essays” (for two examples of student work in this genre, see chapter fourteen, “Cut-and-Paste Revising and the Collage,” in Elbow’s Writing with Power). This process allows student writers to explore urban topics in a familiar urban medium, and prepares the ground for students’ subsequent scholarly analyses of the same subject matter.

Using the collage as a framework for the entire semester allows students to experiment with the form at increasing levels of complexity, reflecting their growing sophistication as writers and observers of city life. The skills introduced in the first iteration of the assignment are revisited and reinforced in later stages, while the transition from image-based to text-based work fosters creative flexibility. All three collage-based activities accompany and support the course's major written assignments by emphasizing skills of observation and composition, providing analogies for the writing process, highlighting the importance of the author-audience relationship, and building a writing community. Students are asked to physically engage with urban space as walkers and observers, as well as examine the foundation of verbal meaning in “what is felt nonverbally and bodily” (Elbow, “Using Collage” 176). Far from being an entertaining add-on, these creative projects constitute a fundamental part of the course’s structure, integrating the theoretical study of the city and the practice of writing in a participatory, embodied learning experience.

The greatest challenge of such an embodied pedagogical approach, especially when working with students accustomed to a more traditional course structure, is communicating the conceptual significance of activities that may at first be perceived as trivial or merely fun. While the class was happy to engage in the creative collage projects and urban walks, the relevance of these exercises to broader course goals was not always immediately apparent. Ongoing in-class reflection, oral as well as written, on both the physical excursions into the city and their pertinence to the course’s formal written assignments helped students articulate and clarify these connections. Such reflection, in addition to aiding
the goals of the class, encouraged a deepened awareness of urban space as experienced and constructed by each individual learner, frequently becoming the source of inspiration for the semesters' final essay projects.

While student reflection helped bridge the gap between the theoretical approaches presented in course readings and the immediacy of urban experience, the transfer of skills from non-verbal to language-based assignments was more difficult to ascertain. Some aspects of this transfer—the increased cohesion of peer groups, for example—was evident as was the heightened attention to questions of structure and composition in individual student portfolios. The metaphor of collage continued to inform both discussions of the assigned readings and discussions of student essays throughout the semester, providing a useful tool for the understanding as well as production of urban discourse. These examples of transferability, however, were not universal, and will require reinforcement in future semesters.

Conclusion

Focus on the theme of the city in the composition classroom can take many forms and pose many challenges, as students face the complex task of negotiating between the verbal and the physical experiences of urban space. Such a focus, however, can also be the source of surprising inspiration, allowing for the development of a writing pedagogy that draws on the embodied and participatory nature of the urban experience. In the three writing seminar courses discussed above, the qualities of embodiment and participation are foregrounded both as a subject of intellectual inquiry and as pedagogical principles, reflecting Marymount Manhattan College's institutional commitment to a curriculum that promotes experiential learning and an active involvement with our extended campus: New York City.

The Marymount Writing Seminar Program is designed to serve as an introduction to the rigors of academic writing. Because the courses provide an introduction to college-level work geared toward transitioning students from high school to college, one of the challenges is to strike a balance between material that most students will find readily accessible and material that will challenge students to push beyond their current boundaries. By requiring students to engage with assignments and activities they might find challenging or downright difficult, the three courses discussed in this article help students to recognize not only how much they have learned over the semester, but also the exciting educational opportunities that await them in future course work and within the urban community. These city-themed writing sections serve the additional function of introducing first-year students, from diverse majors and backgrounds, to the complexities of the urban experience. For many first-year students, the class provides the first exposure to the metropolis as a subject of intellectual inquiry and as a consciously inhabited social environment. Learning to negotiate these new identities, urban as well as academic, presents a number of challenges for both students and instructors—from difficulties with
bridging the conceptual gap between theoretical models and personal experiences of the city to the practical struggles of addressing different skill levels of first-year writers and encouraging intellectual rigor and curiosity beyond specific tasks and assignments. As students engage in exploring the physical, social, political, and cultural construction of metropolitan space in these writing courses, they begin drawing analogies between non-verbal and verbal acts of producing meaning. Thus, the city becomes not only a rich source of subject matter for the beginning college writer but also a useful and multifaceted metaphor for the complexities of the writing process. Fostering awareness and understanding of the relationship between these two elements in the urban classroom provides exciting opportunities to extend learning beyond the campus walls to promote a more holistic approach to the first-year college experience.

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Contributors

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