

## CHAPTER 18

# BRUTAL(IST) MEDITATIONS: SPACE AND LABOR-MOVEMENT IN A WRITING PROGRAM

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Threads: Local Changes to Workload, Pay, and Material Conditions;  
Professionalizing and Developing in Complex Contexts

Stories about places are makeshift things. They are comprised of the world's debris. . . . Things extra and other (details and excesses coming from elsewhere) insert themselves into the accepted framework, the imposed order. One thus has the very relationship between spatial practices and the constructed order. The surface of this order is everywhere punched and torn open by ellipses, drifts, and leaks of meaning; it is sieve-order.

—Michel de Certeau, *Walking in the City*

The first time we heard an adjunct at UMass Dartmouth (UMD) refer to “the third floor,” we knew that she was speaking to power. Full-time tenure-track offices occupy the third floor. The department’s main office, all faculty mailboxes, the support staff offices—the people and resources “central” to the function of the English department—are on the third floor. The space designated for the twenty to thirty adjuncts (dependent upon program needs)—a single office with five working computers and two banks of desks—is located on the second floor, tucked down a hallway. The office for Part Time Lecturers (PTLs), numbered and named 201B, metonymically stands in for the First Year English teaching pool in the same way “the third floor” metonymically speaks to tenure line faculty. “What is the third floor thinking?” we would overhear in the hallways. “We’ll want to share that with 201B,” we sometimes found ourselves saying. And so, like the title of the British television show *Upstairs/Downstairs*, a metonym of

our relationship was enacted.

Space and resources, this personal, ethnographic, and photo essay will show, are the material manifestations of our institutional discourses. A complex story of space and place requires a complex framework: and so, we will break the generic form of the academic narrative as necessary, weaving anecdote, image, personal reflection, theory, history, and observation into this chapter. Our work here will be composite—like the concrete that is the primary medium of the UMD campus, a compilation of mortar and stones. Anicca, a photographer and creative nonfiction writer, and Michelle, an academic ethnographer, will mix voices and visions to tell this story. To further represent the divisions we are discussing, we will present Michelle’s narrative in the traditional left-justified form of an academic essay. Michelle’s academic argument will ground and scaffold the whole as it narrates history and theorizes the politics of space. Anicca’s photos and personal exposition will punctuate and expand the places we might open out; appearing in italics and aligned to the right. This organization reflects our professional positions. Michelle served as the tenure-track director of the First Year English program at UMD for three years, the “Boss Compositionist” of the site evoked here. The position Anicca holds is named Full-Time Lecturer (FTL), a model of slightly more secure staffing that many writing programs have turned to, that is a unique space “in between” the usual dichotomies of higher ed labor—neither tenure line nor “adjunct,” but still contingent upon annual renewal.



We do not intend for the different texts presented here to read seamlessly, or even as easy poetic compliments to one another. Rather, the juxtaposition of narratives, experiences, and photos visually reinforce the ways that space reflects, shapes, and even reifies our working relationships. The shape of our text, then, demonstrates the parallel existence of tenure-track (third floor) and adjunct (second floor) faculty at UMD, enacting the separate and unequal structures of status, employment, and economic system to which this collection responds. In an essay about space and labor, an essay that will also be about the ways we move, the ways movement shapes our work and our work shapes our movement, you as reader may move between textual passages in ways that resemble how we have moved, making connections between textual cues, spanning juxtapositions, bridging the disjunctions we offer. Just as this collaboration brings us together, allowing us, through language, to create a dynamic space that refuses easy understandings and simple reproductions of power, so we will argue the possibilities of space and practice for the contingent faculty-instructor.

## I

*The interview/site visit for my position was scheduled in mid-February, a time when New England is reduced to a grey slate sky and biting cold. Campus seemed to mirror the weather. I would describe the buildings of our college as bunker-like—bunker-chic, if you will. Oppressive. Heavy concrete rises in stacked geometric patterns above a featureless quad. A beehive of colorless concrete ringed in by parking lots. During my first visit, I wasn't sure how I would or could survive the concrete forms that gave shape to the institution. I couldn't imagine a life here. Maneuvering the concrete hallways seemed a gargantuan task. A few steadfast spruce trees between the building and the parking lot offer me a tiny but important reminder of light, air, and life, outside the imposing grey walls.*

Highly coercive and symbolically laden, a space—a campus, an office, a desk—dramatically shapes labor practice and reinforces a sense of institutional values. On the one hand, the story to be told is about the character of the campus-space itself, especially as this character seems to support the entrenchment of power differentials and labor inequality in higher education. The architectural style of UMD offers a metonymic backdrop for a deeper understanding of the adjunct-negotiation of space today. Aptly named, “Brutalism,” a highly cost-effective and efficient-to-erect architecture that was favored in the 1960s for industrial, government and institutional structures, the style renders UMD structures into pictures of austerity and discipline—bare concrete, sharp angles,

and built-in furnishings. The discourses of efficiency and cost-effectiveness that characterize the unique features of the UMD design-aesthetic resonate eerily with today's ongoing discussions of the adjunct position—the UMD campus is a space where professional marginalization is built quite literally into the concrete. In fact, Henry Giroux names the current neoliberal restructuring of higher education, the “New Brutalism” —a comprehensive right-wing attack on the ideals that supported the open university of the 1960s resulting in the degradation of faculty governance, a focus on what makes for effective pedagogy, and the increasing marginalization of faculty labor.

## II

*My job here became a means to a full-time position, professional growth, and job stability. Before the start of that semester, I contacted a few members of our contingent or part-time faculty and met with some of them to get acquainted with the program and institutional culture. One of these women looked at me sadly and said, “I don't envy you at all.” This was striking because here I was the outsider, younger than most instructors, with a full-time position, an opportunity many other contingent faculty members might want. My conversations with them made it clear to me that my work was going to be, in large part, about navigating division.*

On the other hand, this story is also about the fight for contingent faculty rights. In 2003, “PTLs” (part-time lecturers/the official name for adjuncts at UMD) went on strike, successfully organizing for more job security, stepped pay increases, and benefits. The stories they tell—about picketing campus, visiting the offices of deans, the provost, the chancellor, posting fliers, and speaking out—demonstrate that resistance takes place in the choices, large and small, that individuals make every day. In turn, the purposeful use of space, sharing of resources, and impromptu collaboration are a means of talking back to those institutional discourses that would devalue adjunct-labor and diminish the professional standing of writing program instructors.

The interweaving of these two stories about the campus architecture and the PTL strike, punctuating points with a bit of the French critical theory of de Certeau and Lefebvre, structuring our narrative visually and layering in photos, brings to light a story about how space and place speak explicitly to the inequities of adjunct labor. Space is too often conceptualized as an unmovable face of the status quo. “The subject experiences space as an obstacle, as a resistant ‘objectivity,’” Lefebvre notes (74). We often experience space as foreboding and totalizing, de Certeau reminds us. The structures of our every-

day lives are often symbols of an unyielding technocratic or social order (de Certeau 93). The buildings of any campus may trick our eyes into exactly this place of misrecognition; the concrete forms, the dark hallways that impose a particular type of passage and order our spaces of belonging, the realities of a small office shared by many instructors, may close down our view—at least for a moment—of the ongoing dynamic activities and active processes of repurposing that constitute daily life.

### III

*Few of these divisions are explicit or easily anticipated; they are most often learned through experience. Or accidents. An example: To recognize the many accomplishments of UMD's "PTLs," my director and I started to construct a bulletin board in the hallway leading to 201B—many of these instructors attend local and national conferences, write books, or publish their creative and scholarly work. We asked for submissions for this bulletin board, but only two instructors in the pool offered to share publications or accomplishments. When we made inquiries about the project, we were met with silence and avoidance. It was a little baffling. Why wouldn't our instructors want us to celebrate their accomplishments? Why wouldn't they want us to post these examples of their intellectual and creative lives where students and colleagues could see them? Later, a friend who works in 201B explained to me that people were angry because they felt that their achievements should be posted alongside those of the senior and full-time faculty at the entrance to the department on the third floor. And so, without realizing it, our efforts became another symbol of the lack of recognition afforded the "second floor."*

But hierarchies, too, are collaborative (Mack and Zebroski), and in this recognition, we begin to imagine a different critical space to occupy. A space of activism and movement. While institutions are physical locations, and while the allocation, arrangement, and furnishing of space create a physical reality that cannot be easily ignored, the movements of laborers within a site are always dynamic, fluid, and uncontained. Fixed notions of the institution as a monolith, as a site of static power, or as the endpoint of our practice, fail to capture the potential of individuals to recreate the institution on an every-day basis. How a space like 201B is used can teach us much about the ways spatial narratives and narratives of work refuse, resist, and complicate one another. A story of possibility, if temporal.

We tell this story because we have been moved to think critically about how individuals occupy and put space to use. If institutions are both rhetorical in

nature and a unique location in time and space (as claimed by Canadian sociologist Dorothy Smith), then individuals must negotiate the sense of order and purpose that circumscribe the spaces they occupy, choosing how they respond to material conditions as they take up practice (LaFrance and Nicolas). Even as we recognize their limitations and the ways these spatial allocations do and do not serve individuals within a hierarchical system of labor, storytellers do no one any favors if we misrecognize the complexity and possibility, the liminality, these spaces afford.

## CONCRETE CAMPUS: HOW DO WE UNDERSTAND SPACE?

Let's talk for a moment about Brutalism. It was a style that arose in France and Britain in the 1950s and '60s, led by the legendary French modernist Le Corbusier. The name comes from the French "béton brut," meaning raw concrete. It's just by chance that in English "brut" sounds like "brutal," but the name has stuck for good reason. Brutalist buildings tend to be, well, a little brutal. They're usually made of industrial materials, especially concrete, a substance most people associate with highway ramps or gun emplacements rather than great architecture.

—Robert Campbell, *Paul Rudolph's Brutalism*,  
*Reworked*, at UMass Dartmouth

The titles of articles that deal with architectural designs like UMD's campus are telling: "In Praise of Ugly Buildings" one *Boston Globe* piece is named. "Celebrated and Reviled" is the title of another. As the quotation above relates, the architectural style of UMD is not just unusual and not just largely unappealing to the eye, it is—with little exaggeration—*brutal*. The entire inner space, from floor to ceiling, is shaped from concrete. The hallways, the stairs and walkways, the classrooms, the meeting rooms, the offices are all concrete. Architecturally, the campus buildings are utilitarian value on display. Floors. Walls. Ceilings. Benches. Stairs. Window Wells. Made of durable, unmovable, inexpensive, industrial concrete.

One wonders why anyone would think that was a good idea.

But, this utilitarian aesthetic was actually the point, according to *Boston Globe* columnist, David Hay. The UMD campus (designed by Paul Rudolph), as most architecture designed in the Brutalist aesthetic, is a political statement cast in concrete—an attempt to demonstrate the contradictions of over-valuing economy and utility. The Brutalist form seeks to make real the aesthetics of frugality and institutional power that inform the construction of public sector buildings. Metonyms of power. "Many of Brutalism's earliest champions were English," writes Hay.

In the 1950s, architects Peter and Alison Smithson famously promoted a philosophy dubbed the New Brutalism. It promised a raw and rough materiality that had a social and artistic purpose. “Brutalism tries to face up to a mass-production society, and drag a rough poetry out of the confused and powerful forces which are at work,” [the Smithsons] wrote in *Architectural Design*. “Up to now Brutalism has been discussed stylistically, whereas its essence is ethical.” (n. pag.)

Rudolph designed many buildings on these same principles; making visible what state power would be pleased to have us forget.



On campus, lore tells that busloads of architectural tourists come to admire the buildings Rudolph designed. On the flip side, campus lore also notes that student tour guides have been known to tell visitors that Rudolph was a Satanist. Those of us who have lived and worked in buildings designed under Brutalism

cannot help but feel dismay . . . much like state power, anyone who works in one of these buildings must take on an uneasy relationship with it. The hardness. The darkness. The cold lack of comfort. The space will act upon you whether you like it or not. Concrete buildings are marked by a number of issues—because bare concrete is porous, it dirties readily and literally cannot be cleaned or polished. Because concrete cannot easily be patched, concrete structures are prone to leaks and cracks.

“Dirty D” our students call campus.

#### IV

*The divisions are physical as well as symbolic. The people I met that first summer and spent time with, all members of the adjunct faculty pool, became elusive in these hallways, existing a floor down, teaching heavy course loads and commuting between multiple institutions. Though some receive benefits and have union representation, their work is “contingent” on the demands of the program and remains unstable. Performing unrecognized advising work, attending meetings for which they do not get any compensation, they are allowed to remain invisible. Over time, I came to realize how important it was for me to be diligent in my interactions; I needed to reach out repeatedly. I needed to offer myself in service and collaboration. These efforts and the tenuous relationships built from them over time certainly still remain imperfect. My unique subject position as a person who isn’t exactly part of the third floor, but who is also separate from the second floor, a person who is interstitial or “between,” has worked for and against me in various ways. I am never sure of my next steps.*

On the best days, campus feels inhospitable. On the worst days it is an unmovable reminder of our place in a system of inequality and disenfranchisement.

Appreciation of the aesthetic message these buildings project is one way to surf this spatial *dis*-ease. And there is much to appreciate. According to the UMD history website, the campus began with the state recognition of the promises of education. A rising tide lifts all boats, so to speak. At the tail end of the Gilded Age (1895), the Massachusetts legislature chartered the New Bedford Textile School and the Bradford Durfee Textile School in Fall River, a move to educate the children of textile workers and to increase the economic strength of the region. Both colleges continued to expand through the last century, fed by G.I. bill enrollment waves and the increasing economic diversification of the region. In 1962, the legislature merged the two institutions to create the Southeastern Massachusetts Technological Institute (SMTI) and in 1964, 710 acres outside



of North Dartmouth were dedicated to a formal site for the institution. And so, Paul Rudolph designed the first buildings on campus, using this style embraced by state governments for its cost effectiveness and by others for its edgy-alignment with working class sympathies and cultural critique. In 1969, the campus became Southeastern Massachusetts University and in 1991 the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth.

## V

*In winter, in particular,  
there is one hallway I avoid.  
From the doorway, I must turn,  
left and left and left,  
up and up the spiraling concrete  
across many steps worn through the center.  
Pieces of aging concrete crumbling  
under my feet.  
I pray no student falls here.  
I hope that I, too, remain moving.  
Sometimes workers come and make attempts  
at repair.  
But the steps mostly remain broken.*

And so campus history tells us that the ligaments of industry and economy are always beneath the veneer of twenty-first century higher education.

Institutions so often perpetuate the issues they were created to address.

## VI

*201B—the PTL Office:  
Six long desks.  
One round table.  
Five computers in various states of function and dysfunction.  
Difficulty connecting to Wifi.  
A dingy carpet.  
five to ten instructors sharing space, grateful not all of the pool  
is vying for the space on any given day.  
Freshman writers trying to find their teachers.  
Copy codes,  
punched with an awareness of paper limits imposed by administration.*

*Work being done quietly;  
jokes being told;  
secrets being shared.  
Whispers,  
resignation, and resistance.*

How do we read such a space? How do we read the 201B/third floor divide in light of this history? Lefebvre refers to the “space of social practice,” which he describes as “the space occupied by sensory phenomena, including products of the imagination such as projects and projections, symbols and Utopias . . . ” (12). Space for Lefebvre is regularized by the state and social forms of domination. The space of UMD, at once Rudolph’s remarkable vision and the face of state power (or intentional neglect), is ordered by levels and highly personal geographies—our offices are ordered in ways that recognize the prestige granted to us by the institution. Thinking through Lefebvre, the space is both a place of “habitation” and a “tool of thought and action” (26); and so through our labor (another name for movement and action), the space is imbued with socio-political and personal significance, despite its rigidity and coldness. This is a theory that easily maps onto the descriptions I’ve leveled above, where space and place are so clearly layered with the contests of meaning entailed in the creation of a public institution, so clearly evocative of the other inequities of labor and value in high education.

## VII

*Some of the instructors in the 201B office jokingly refer to it as “the cauldron” and they avoid working there. They will instead meet with students in the library or in an empty classroom. But 201B is also a place where some instructors choose to dialogue about the challenges of their position, a place to share teaching materials, ideas and solidarity. Some of the instructors refer to themselves as a “cohort” (a reminder that many started their work in the FYE as graduate students, taking their first appointments as “teaching assistants” to supplement their graduate study in the professional writing program). Many will step up for others, helping direct someone else’s students to advisement and/or office hours, creating space for each other to conference while they are also trying to prepare to teach, respecting the boundaries of space with personal possessions, or nominating a person to communicate with administration around issues like a leak in the ceiling, broken equipment or a need for office supplies. With little reward, they persist with grace. It’s always struck me, too, that these instructors know more about our campus as a whole—they traverse*

*it, move more freely between points, make temporary spaces temporarily theirs to meet the needs of students. After all, they teach in the most far-flung rooms on campus, have the least access to computer labs close to the department that has employed them, they have no permanent professional space. The PTLs have found ways to work around these collective constraints. Conversely, most full-time faculty are afforded the ability to perform their work with students in the sanctity of their own, private, offices.*

And so, too, the resonance.

Of the third floor and second floor divide, office space allocation, access to the tools that make work within these spaces possible—desks, chairs, computers, printers, photocopiers, and all those other essentials—the power differentials of office and resources allocation for part-time, adjunct instructors are so clearly cast within these topoi. These positions and the spaces allocated them are not accidents of history, even if they are the result of complex issues related to design and institutional status. We can read this metonym in no other way; the lack of resources faced by adjunct instructors at UMD is the product of broader efforts to shrink the power of public institutions, the result of a class war eroding middle-class institutions, and the face of a neoliberal turn in public discourse that questions the value of the liberal arts, enacting corporate models of education as job training. These forces would seemingly pull apart civil institutions to make way for the privatized, the militarized, and global capital. The position of the contingent faculty instructor exists in a landscape of scarcity, economic contraction, and political uncertainty.

### VIII

*People who work on the third floor become adept at sidestepping a recycling container placed directly in front of the single women's bathroom to catch a drip whenever it rains. We speculate about why the leak cannot be fixed—physical improvements and facilities maintenance inhabit a mysterious realm beyond our grasp. We all just adjust.*

*The container has been used to catch the rain for the full five years I have been in my position.*

And yet, Lefebvre also cautions us against overdetermining our reactions to these circumstances of space and labor—space is a complex system of codes, he reminds us. A layering of historical-production, culture, and meaning. But, these codes never have a “one-to-one” relationship (36). As I noted in the introduction, Lefebvre recognizes that as individuals, we experience space in the mo-

ments where it limits and determines our efforts: “[A]t times as implacably hard as a concrete wall, being not only extremely difficult to modify in any way but also hedged about by Draconian rules prohibiting any attempt at such modification” (74). But we can resist, repurpose, and recast those meanings: “The texture of space affords opportunities not only to social . . . but also to a spatial practice that it does indeed determine, namely collective and individual use: a sequence of acts which embody a signifying practice even if they cannot be reduced to such a practice” (74).

## IX

*I have learned in my brief years here just how shaped I am by space—my emotions, my confidence, my ability to work well are influenced by the physical forms around me. I don't think I am alone in this. A favorite topic of conversation amongst colleagues is how difficult it can be to concentrate on our work with water trickling in around the edges of windows or a layer of ice frosting the inside of an office during winter. It's often so cold that inhabitants wear gloves and hats at their desks. We stash illicit heaters by our feet. We make cynical jokes about how bleak it is. And in a way, there is a solidarity in that too.*

And so we encounter 201B/the second floor as doubly encoded. Yes, it is marginal to the third floor's more recognized location for departmental activities. And this marginality has its drawbacks, including a separate copier, little actual desk space shared by many, and a lack of privacy for student meetings, personal phone calls, or conversations with colleagues. Historians of composition, such as Miller and Strickland, have reminded us that the nature of our labor in the composition classroom has been and will be fundamentally misunderstood, undervalued, and under-recognized. 201B speaks to that history, making it real, reinforcing the message that these classes and their teachers are not central to the mission of the university. Institutional status shapes a larger experience that is semiotically telling.

But in the same moment, the collective and individual use of this space cannot be circumscribed so easily.

## X

*My first semester teaching, I was scheduled in RM 114 or, “the room under the stairs” as I came to think of it. A former storage room now converted to a classroom, the space held about twenty elementary school type desks. The slim windows, nearly below ground, are dingy and don't open. My laptop and*

*whiteboard markers were of little use; the room offered a chalkboard (but, no chalk) and an ancient overhead projector that didn't work. The layout of the room made it difficult for all students to see me at all times. At the end of the class—a developmental writing section with students who I view as some of the hungriest, most important learners at our institution—I made an offhanded apology about the room, offering to find us a new one. One student remarked that he just figured it was because the class was “remedial.” As if he and his classmates did not expect to be treated with the same courtesies granted “regular” students.*

Space is also the site of resistance: the movements of those who do and do not use 201B, these movements often unnoticed and temporal, represent a constant shifting of power and affiliation. Inner and outer worlds of these instructors always overlap and take on highly individualized meanings—201B becomes the site where PTLs meet in small groups to organize communications with the union. It becomes a site avoided when interpersonal conflicts erupt between instructors. Leaving personal items or teaching materials is discouraged, but people leave folders, handouts, textbooks, and boxes of files on tables or in drawers out of need, defiance, neglect, or forgetfulness. (Who cleans or organizes such a space? Who is responsible for its upkeep and character?) This very personal relationship to an impersonal space and its use will always escape the totalizing influences of institutional discourse. Space can never be entirely mastered. People misappropriate it. Traverse it. Reassign its use. Occupy or refuse it. Ignore it. Ultimately, space allocations are semiotic allusions to power structures. Those with institutional privilege prefer to ignore these gestures. Those without power must live in them.

For space requires movement and action. And movement and action require purpose. And so our daily routines echo with dominant notions of our status, our value, our place.

## XI

*Don't get me wrong, there are a lot of things I love about working here. In fact, in most ways, I love my job. Despite the physically difficult space, the darkness, the heavy brutalism of it all, unexpected beauties appear. A custodian brings a plant to my office, a dean works long hours as an ally for the betterment of all students and faculty, other instructors take me in, guide me, mentor me into a professional life that I had little to no experience with before taking this position. And yet, the beauty of the people I encounter here cannot erase the impenetrable nature of the concrete forms we inhabit.*

## CALLING FOR MORE MOVEMENT AND RECOGNITION

Representational space is alive: it speaks. It has an affective kernel or centre: Ego, bed, bedroom, dwelling, house; or: square, church, graveyard. It embraces the loci of passion, of action and of live situations. . . . Consequently, it may be qualified in various ways: it may be directional, situational, or relational, because it is essentially qualitative, fluid, and dynamic.

– Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*

The regional and architectural press may be surprisingly vocal about Rudolph, the historical need to preserve even ugly/uncomfortable buildings, and the working class history of the UMD campus, but it is notably silent about the moment of labor history when the adjunct instructors on the UMD campus went on strike. There are no titles to call up, no op-ed pieces, no news coverage at all. A troll through the *Boston Globe* archives turns up a single voice—a letter to the editor. In this letter Andrew Nixon, institutionally unaffiliated (though from the letter’s tone, he is likely one of the striking workers at UMD), explains the reasons instructors at UMD have decided to stand up for better working conditions:

Today, 35 percent of the school’s faculty are classified as part-time. Collectively, they shoulder so much of the teaching load that without them, the university could not fulfill its basic mission. Like their full-time colleagues, they are committed, well educated, successful in the world outside of teaching, and experienced. Unlike their full-time colleagues, they receive low pay without benefits. Although many have taught 10 years or more, they are classified as “visiting” and survive on annual or semester contracts that arrive two weeks before classes start. Part-timers are paid at a rate roughly half that of the lowest-paid full-time professor. Most make under \$20,000 a year. Many are limited to teaching one course a semester for as little as \$3,000. Working “part time” can also mean teaching 100 percent of a full-time teaching load without full-time pay. Unlike their counterparts at the Amherst and Boston campuses, Dartmouth’s part-time faculty members have no health or pension plan. (Nixon)

This letter stands in as one of the only public recognitions of the successful organization of PTLs on the UMD campus. The strike allowed adjunct instructors to effectively negotiate for stepped pay increases, job security, and benefits.

It also taught them the power of their movement and collective action.



## XII

*I cannot help but reflect on how many things have changed for me as an inhabitant of this space, as a participant in our program. Though the physical form of this institution has not changed, my movement within it has become more fluid, more nuanced, less resistant in some ways, more so in others. I now see students I know in the hallways and feel a deep loyalty to them. I move more freely through the space without getting lost and I run into colleagues with whom I stop and talk about how smart, bright and dedicated our students are. I have become a faculty advisor for a sustainability initiative on campus, and we move into the outdoor spaces of campus together. We talk about change and campus community. Like many here, the work I do with students is a consistent source of joy.*

And it is this movement that is key.

The instructors who work for the First Year English program determined—well before my arrival on campus—that an office could not determine them.



Working against the metonym of rigid separation and reified hierarchy, these writing instructors carry on this tradition even now, engaging in active and invigorating collaborations and moments of mindful resistance, repurposing, recoding, and reappropriating the spaces they had been “granted” by the powers that be and working to reconceptualize the most effective sites of their labor. They co-create curricula. They share handouts and activities. They discuss a collective response to institutional policies that recast the value of their labor. They become active members of campus initiatives outside of English. They develop important long term relationships with colleagues in other departments. While the spaces they occupy are often temporary, depersonalized, and sometimes unauthorized—a crowded office, hallways, open and public spaces, remote corners, parking lots and the quiet of a car; almost always borrowed and so subject to interruption, distraction, and, at times, eviction—this fluidity and dynamism is an element of their strength.

In his piece, “Walking and the City,” Michel de Certeau echoes Lefebvre’s concern for the overly simplistic ways we imagine space—we read the structures that order our lives as symbols of an unmoving technocratic, social order. The buildings of a city, or a campus like UMD, may trick our eyes into exactly this



place of misrecognition; the concrete forms, the clear channels for our passage, and clear spaces of belonging may eclipse our view—at least for a moment—of the dynamic activities that do not fit those molds.

### XIII

*For better or worse, a part of me has learned to resist less. I can forget the concrete at times, the black mold that blossoms on the walls (marking the third floor entrance to the English department) in the wake of certain leaks, the wind blowing in my office window, the stains that cannot be removed, the sounds of construction drowning out my conversations with students during office hours, the constant emails welcoming another “vice provost of something” (hired at a hefty salary while our departmental budgets get cut). These are the places that feel like compromise in ways that I am not proud of. I am surprised by my anger and frustration. Emotions which also make it possible to continue forward.*

But so much of our lives take shape “below the thresholds at which visibility begins” as de Certeau writes (93). The forces that demand allegiance to ideals of space cannot overwrite, erase, or eradicate the networks, the trajectories, the many decision-points, or the rich experiences that circulate through and repurpose them. Because we move, because we work, because we interact as individuals, we *cannot* be totalized. In the interplay between these stories of space, history, and daily practice, what emerges is a story of possibility. Again, de Certeau:

Linking acts and footsteps, opening meanings and directions . . . become liberated spaces that can be occupied. A rich indetermination gives them, by means of a semantic rarefaction, the function of articulating a second, poetic geography on top of the geography of the literal, forbidden or permitted meaning. They insinuate other routes into the functionalist and historical order of movement. (105)

To misunderstand these spaces as only temporary, as only marginal, is to forget the power—the *poetic geography*, to draw from de Certeau—that comes of everyday movement.

There is no way to discount the problem of 201B and the lack of resources that restrict the workday and work practices of the adjunct instructor at UMD. The space is simply unacceptable. Too small. Too crowded. Too restrictive. For an administrator of an important first year program, there is no other response to the deplorable conditions granted these instructors of the first year writing

classes. But to understand this situation as the only story to be told loses sight of the rich possibilities that were claimed by these workers in the 2003 strike and the possibilities that await those who embrace continuing collective action.

#### XIV

*It is late February again and with a heavy workload, I end up in my office later into the evening than usual. I turn on my space heater and I lock my door. I am in a time capsule. Outside no one moves or walks; there is no sound and no light. The motion sensor flickers off the the weak fluorescents that line the narrow, dim hallway. My slim window looks out over more concrete . . . I am barely aware of night falling. I work until my head hurts and even past that.*

*When I am ready to leave, I steel myself against the isolation and venture out down the hallway. I have been working on the handbook we are developing for our First Year English program, a document whose language enacts the authority of the institution over the labor of FYE instructors. I reflect that, though this is my first full “professional” position in the academy—most of my experience has been as a contingent laborer—my experiences as the Assistant Director of the program are often incongruous to that adjunctified-identity.*

*Based on my title and because I have my own office on the third floor, I am generally perceived as being aligned with the third floor, with tenure-line faculty or even the university’s administration. But to some of the people on the third floor—senior male literature professors in particular—I do not completely belong either. I am not tenure track, I hold an M.A. in composition, and it is often clear that they do not recognize composition as a scholarly field. The work I do reflects those subject positions. On one small window of the heavy, steel fire doors that lead to the stairwell, there has long been a sticker. It reads: “PTVL means exploited professor.” This remnant of the 2003 PTL strike calls up an era that feels long gone. And, yet, it is still so present it shapes my every action.*

*I make my way home in the dark.*

Even as the spaces granted adjunct instructors at UMD are, as we noted above, almost always temporary, depersonalized, and unauthorized, this reality and constraint upon space imposes a remarkable fluidity and dynamism upon the movements of these resilient laborers. Movement between sanctioned and unsanctioned sites of practice (the movements instructors tell me they were proud to take part in during the 2003 strike: occupations of key administrative offices, picketing, letter writing, meetings) become both a form of resistance and a way to revise the story told. In composition, we have long known that our margin-

alization as a field also allows us to imagine a different form of resistance—this most often takes the form of a critical consciousness shared by many members of the field. We discuss the political dimensions of our work; we imagine the transformative potentials of our pedagogical work. As Mack and Zebroski suggest: “A commitment to transformation is what draws people together and makes it necessary to write in the first place” (163).

After a number of months of working with instructors in 201B and fretting over the limitations the shared office imposed and represented, I also came to learn that the space afforded a number of things that having a private office on the third floor did not. Because there were no walls between them and no doors to close, instructors in the adjunct-office collaborated freely on assignments and classroom designs, investing deeply in the community-of-practice they had built over the years. They shared their personal lives and their teaching materials with equal openness. They built relationships with their officemates in between classes, discussing textbooks, pedagogical approaches, and lesson plans. The public nature of 201B meant that there were always witnesses to difficult student outbursts or student dilemmas, and someone else on hand to answer questions, troubleshoot, and pass the time with. Those with more experience supported and mentored those who had just joined the teaching pool. New faces enlivened and reinvigorated the familiar with questions and excitement.

## XV

*The stairs, once navigated,  
lead in the colder, wetter months  
to a pool of water that must be crossed.  
Some mornings, it is a slab of ice,  
inside,  
blocking my way.*

These activities, too, were the result of spatial politics. A culture of whole-person teaching and learning took root organically and authentically. An administrator cannot make such things blossom or thrive. These practices—infused as they were with the everyday and the personal—circulated well below the range of “official” program discourse. A hidden reservoir of strength and meaning.

## CONCLUSION

My arguments for more space for the instructors of first year writing were met with stories of the other adjunct instructors for other departments and programs

at UMD who had no dedicated office space at all. I argued that our students needed private spaces to discuss grades and delicate topics. I argued that our instructors could not teach effectively if they did not have full access to more and better working equipment. I argued that we were the only first year program that served the entire first year class—that alone should afford us the same sorts of resources as a full department or more prestigious program. My appeals were ineffective. And, as I heard about more and more tenure-track hires being required to share office space, I began to realize that the institution's growth had not been supported by adequate space-planning.

The student body and faculty numbers were growing.

Campus buildings were not.

So it often is with smaller branch campuses. When public institutions are under fire, economic limitations and spatial relations shape instructional moments as much as any teacher might. Within this infrastructure, we lived the material conditions that were the products of much larger historical and cultural structures.

And so, if I could not procure more space, I determined to work against the second floor/third floor metonym. Purposeful movement between the second and third floors—as well as movement to other offices on campus as I invited our instructors to travel with me to meetings, to other campuses in the region, and to national conferences—became a way of resisting the metonyms of power that were handed to us all. Over and again, we rewrote the values ascribed to our movements as instructors, as employees of a state institution, and as colleagues. Marginality be damned. We would find a way to speak together. We would find a way to create an ongoing conversation that defied proscriptive forces.

My efforts seem meager in retrospect: visiting 201B as often as possible, dropping in to say hello, to check in, to hang out. On coffee dates with instructors, we sat on the median between floors, between offices. Several instructors co-authored with me, attended national and regional conferences with me, and welcomed me to their workshops and classrooms.

There was power in meeting these colleagues in the stairwells and walkways, saying hello, and chatting with people in between classes and in borrowed corners, of course. There was a different sort of power and pride in our movements to national and regional conferences—where we all presented as experts and innovators, offering insights that extended the important ongoing conversations we had about student writers and writing instruction. When we claimed local spaces of traffic and bustle as our checkpoints, standing for as long as we could between floors, between recognized spaces for formalized interaction, we told each other stories about our teaching that might otherwise not leave our assigned locations. On other campuses and in other cities, we claimed, as well, our knowledge for ourselves and our institution.



## XVI

*I sometimes sign my emails: “Yours in the concrete.”*

These efforts to break down metonyms of power and movement were always imperfect, too often incomplete in one way or another, and did not undo the larger social orders that had led to the deeply hierarchical stratifications we were seeking to overcome and rewrite. (I was still the “Boss” and I do not intend to write us as heroes into the stories of 201B. Many of the stories of that office, will *never* be mine to tell.) But the moments of resistance and collaboration we hoped to create (meetings, shared spaces, collaborative projects, co-authored publications) had the ability to *disrupt the rote ways these stories played out between the divergent spaces that were ours*. As such, they held deep resonance for us—and were our primary means of holding the line against the spatial and institutional discourses that would diminish the status of our professional endeavors. In the struggle to reconcile the discourses of the field with the on-the-ground conditions for writing instruction, the architecture of UMD and the PTL strike of 2003 taught me that it is not enough to simply sympathize with instructors around the sorts of material constraints that our designated spaces and managerial discourses impose.

*We must actively pose our work and our movements on campus to erode the*

*metonymic structures that reify and prescribe value to our labor. We must actively work to hear, to tell, to promote a different sort of story.*

These stories, we hope, cultivate a deeper understanding—and even celebration—of the adjunct use of space.

## XVII

*Let the cement surfaces of this campus speak:  
there are leaks in the hallways and offices.  
The edifice always . . .  
eventually . . .  
cracks.*

## AFTERWORD

A year and a half after submitting this chapter, UMD opened ten “FTL” lines, similar to the lines held by Anicca, for English to staff the FYE program. These positions would be full time teaching positions with a 4/4 load, offer benefits, longer term contracts, and more integration into the life of the department. Several PTLs applied for the positions, excited by the prospect of more security and more recognition of the service they were already providing to the English department. The hiring committee interviewed a handful of the PTL applicants, but after the first round of interviews continued the hiring conversation/process with only a select few who were ABD or held a Ph.D.

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