Public and Private: The Trialetics of Public Writing on the Street, on Campus, and in Third Space

William Burns

Maybe the private isn’t so private and the public isn’t so public.
—Student essay

My purpose for this essay is to discuss current views of public writing and contribute notions of qualitative research and cultural geography to these conversations. I will also provide two pedagogical examples of how these contributions inform student writing and civic participation in various public spaces. I believe that public writing must identify the actual places and material practices where both the public and the private are experienced physically and spatially, not just socially and rhetorically, if public writing is to have an embodied effect on everyday life.

Public writing expresses the idea that composition teachers and students have an obligation to engage with conversations in the public sphere in order to address other readers, writers, and participants in everyday life. Just a few examples of public writing projects are petitions, brochures, flyers, letters, neighborhood histories/narratives, proposals, community presentations, and commissioned writing needs initiatives from outside academia. This type of writing requires a shared commitment in using literate practices to attend to social problems (Wells 328-29). Public writing advocates like Nancy Welch and Christian Weisser see public writing as imagining and building rhetorical spaces through negotiating discourse and “extra discursive obstacles” (Welch 474) that inform notions of the public. These “extra discursive” conditions are often ideological influences on what constitutes the public and public writing such as class, gender, race, economics, and power relations.

In public writing, writers and audiences reciprocally take and make spaces through acts that are simultaneously verbal and physical. These experiences are meant to propel students outside the boundaries of academic discourse into public spaces, relationships, and discussions that students are invested in and committed to. Part of public writing is to help writers and readers to construct and identify certain notions of the public and the public sphere through social and discursive practices that extend past the closed bubble of the process classroom into more pragmatic and civic areas of shared inquiry and involvement (Wells 335).

The difficulty in assigning public writing assignments is that the public sphere is fragmented, contested, and already occupied by hegemonic forces.
The notion of a totally public space, an area where anyone can be free to say what they please without repercussions, is often believed to be the stabilizing foundation of American society and inalienable right of American citizens. This notion of "the public square" reflects an important tenet of participatory democracy; it is a citizen's civic duty to engage in debate and express one's opinion (regardless of one's status in society) amongst other citizens as a check against the power of the state. Because of "common concerns" expressed in these public forums, government should reflect the wishes and needs of its populace. Therefore, public space, actual physical arenas where these discussions unfold, is an integral aspect of civic planning, building, and presence in a democratic society. And yet many questions arise from this belief: What exactly denotes "common concern"? Can a public space be a neutral vicinity divorced from and devoid of power? Is access to public space totally free and open to all in a democratic society? Is public space beyond state and private control?

The popular belief in an all accommodating, open space where the public can express their principles, as both individuals and groups, contrasts sharply with the "Sphere of Public Authority" (Habermas), a more restrictive and controlled mode of public life which reflects the needs of the state and ruling elite. In this sphere, economic considerations take precedence over political participation as public spaces become harmless safety valves for the manipulation of citizens' rights in accordance with hegemonic control. Hegemonic power is implicit in the construction of the "public," and cannot be removed from public spaces or discussions of the public. Because of this relationship, certain people and groups in society are included or excluded from these spaces and debates. This notion of public space as not as inclusive, "free," or equitable as we are led to believe as American citizens can often be difficult for students to accept and complicated to build into a public writing assignment.

Public writing is not only about who is speaking to whom about what, but who is not or cannot speak to certain people using certain discourses. As Susan Wells notes in "Rogue Cops and Health Care: What Do We Want from Public Writing," the public often is experienced as temporary and unstable meetings of people that cannot be confined to a fixed location with absolute borders and boundaries (332). Because of this lack of a universal, stable site for public engagement, elements of risk, transgression, and confrontation are often elements of public writing. Public writing texts need to address real problems through using a variety of discourses that both include and critique, simultaneously working with and against an amalgam of local and global publics.

While I agree with many of the objectives of public writing, I think that the perceptions and practices of public writing are missing two crucial elements: an understanding of the spatiality and corporeality of actual
public spaces, and a corresponding investigation of how public and private constitute each other in order not to neglect the materiality of public writing. Though the public is fragmented, fluid, multiple, and contradictory, public relationships, experiences, and writing are manifested in actual material spaces, incorporated into literal texts, and are felt through physical bodies. Many accounts of public writing answer the what, how, and why of the public, but the significant question of where is the public is not always highlighted. Where do students locate themselves in public spaces in order to write themselves into or against the public? Where do notions of public and private act reciprocally on each other to aid students in the tasks of public writing? The answers to these questions must involve a more complex view of where, as well as qualitative practices that can engage the interlinking conditions of public and private.

There is an interesting connection between private and public selves, spaces, and discourses in that the notions of public and private are not mutually exclusive but are permeable, interactive, reciprocal and mutually constitutive. In my public writing assignments, students are asked to question the division between public and private. These investigations of how public spaces are influenced by private interests and how private spaces are shaped by public experiences are intrinsically important to locating the where and why of writing. Public writing assignments must acknowledge that one can’t go into a public space without our private notions of space, people, and language, and vice versa. Public writing must also identify and intervene in habitual spatial, social, and composing practices that structure public and private behavior, constructing notions of public and private “normalcy,” “common sense,” or “deviation” from accepted, ideologically validated and embodied experiences.

Borrowing from cultural geographer Edward Soja’s concept of realandimagined spaces, this essay relates my attempt to construct a special category of spatial, social, and discursive experience for a public writing pedagogy: publicandprivate. Publicandprivate denotes spaces, identities, and discourses in which notions of public and private are so closely linked that to separate the terms and experiences would be to lose sight of the interconnectedness and reciprocity of these relationships. Publicandprivate combines Nancy Fraser’s concept that the public and private are intertwined cultural and rhetorical labels with the ecocompositional view of public and private as intersecting and overlapping ecosystems. By utilizing these ideas, I hope to suggest to students that public and the private are not stable categories, but are multiple and contested material, social, and discursive conventions, expectations, and purposes that structure our everyday spatial practices, identities, and communication.
Public and Private: The Paradoxes of Public Writing in Third Space

My first contribution to public writing is to add notions of the private to the thinking and practices of public writing through utilizing cultural geography, "paradoxical space," and Edward Soja's concept of Third Space. Yet before I suggest these conceptions and practices for public writing, I would like to examine how public thinkers imagine notions of public and private.

In their critiques of Habermas, authors such as Fraser and Richard Sennett have noted that definitions of public and private are not absolute, clearly delineated, or mutually exclusive. Our experiences of public and private are actually the result of historical situations and ideological representations influenced by social, cultural, political, and economic forces. Habermas's view of the public sphere as a single, consentual site where all citizens are accommodated and brought together by a common concern seeks to leave out individual private issues from public discourse. Fraser and Sennett redefined public and private as cultural experiences that cannot be completely divided from each other nor divorced from the material and social conditions that constructed them. How one understands, constructs, and lives public and private depends on a number of factors, some within the individual's control, some beyond one's control.

As an example, Fraser notes that, historically, those in power often see themselves as the "universal class" and their concerns are expressed as the "common concerns" of the public. The majority ideology of the public sphere is dominated by the male bourgeois class that often discriminates against women and minorities in order to control and/or exclude dissenting discourse, belief systems, and physical presences in public spaces. Because of this "bracketing of inequalities and difference" in the public sphere, the private interests of the male bourgeois class becomes a transparent ruling majority with hegemonic control and dominance hid behind the façade of "public" and "common concerns."

Our sense of what constitutes the personal and the private is constructed by and constructs our sense of the public and our public practices. Though these keywords of public and private are crucial elements of the social practices of writing, engaging exactly how, where, and why these experiences and relationships actually affect each other is not often included in public writing assignments. If they are, it is often through the specter of privatization of public spaces and resources by corporations, the state, or market forces, and their effect only on public agency and the available means of participation, cooperation, and coordination of civic action. The notion that private enterprise has some how tainted the all-inclusive, unrestricted freedoms of public spaces neglects the material, social, and discursive realities
that, historically, public spaces have always been under the control of some institution or power interest (Mitchell 119-21).

Public accommodation and presence has always been a struggle, contested through various competing and negotiated public and private spatial, social, and discursive behaviors. This total separation of the “free” public and the “self-interested” private and the use of the public to “bracket” and remove differences between people has been critiqued by Fraser as being a very narrow and insular way to enact and imagine public and private relationships and experiences. By removing discussions of the private from discussions of the public or by demonizing any sort of private aspect to the construction of public space creates the illusion that pure public and private spaces, identities, and discourses can be accessed, utilized, and lived.

These interests in the effects of spatiality, physicality, and materiality on our senses of public and private find a correspondence in the field of cultural geography. Cultural geography is a field of study that sees space as a site of social and ideological production and reproduction (Jackson 23). Identity is constructed through experiences of place as historically contingent and geographically specific contexts in which we live our lives. Our sentimental connections to place, our body language, our accents, and the way we see the world are not innate but involve complex mental, physical, and cultural influences and experiences. As a way to illustrate this concept in class, I often use analysis and deconstruction of geographical stereotypes (all New Yorkers are rude, all people from Maine are bumpkins, etc.) drawn from the media and students’ backgrounds to discuss how place can affect how we think, act, write, and interact with other people. Our experiences of space and materiality, therefore, are informed by embodied practices, ideological beliefs, and communicative and discursive forms that come together to structure everyday life (Minca).

From these definitions of cultural geography, public writing can draw a crucial connection between the material, the social, and the discursive, as space, materiality, and the body become the forums through which public and private discursive and social experiences become incorporated. In order to interpret and practice this sense of “paradoxical” space for assignments, public writing could utilize the work of Edward Soja to justify the inclusion of simultaneous but often contradictory spatial experiences in a composition class. Soja is a cultural geographer who sees spatial awareness and orientation as a trialectics of spatiality in terms of First Space, Second Space, and Third Space.

First Space is the space of literal physical perceptions, of materiality, and of the body. First Space represents a spatial, social, and historical awareness that can be empirically measured and tends to privilege objectivity. First Space epistemologies concentrate on accurate descriptions of surface appearances, material conditions, and mapable geographies (Soja 74-78). Second Space is
the space of imagination and conceptual thinking, of the mind, metaphor, and belief. Second Space reflects spatial, social, and historical knowledges produced and reproduced through thought, imagination, and discourse. Representations of Second Space are reflective, subjective, introspective, and individualized (Soja 78-81). These are the imagined geographies and cognitive maps of thinkers and artists who are concerned with images and ideas. Third Space is the space of lived experiences that brings together First and Second space awareness retaining the reciprocal and contradictory relationships between these different spatial knowledges.

As an example of how Soja’s ideas can come together in terms of composition and rhetoric, I often reflect on my work in different writing centers. Writing centers have a material size, shape, and layout that influences where we tutored (First Space). As a staff, we had a way of thinking and talking about our particular writing center and what we did there that often involved using either business or clinical metaphors (Second Space). Because of the material and discursive conditions of the particular writing center, how we tutored, how we imagined tutoring, and how we treated the people who came to the writing center came together in a literal and metaphoric environment that affected the lived practices of the tutors, supervisors, and student writers in the writing center (Third Space). Conceiving of and describing student writers in ways that saw them as either “clients” or “patients” influenced and was influenced by the physical site of the writing center and how we set up, arranged, and utilized writing center space (as an “office” or “examining room”). These First and Second Space experiences affected how we interacted with or “cured” the students, and how we saw and conducted ourselves as tutors, “managers,” or “caregivers” in the Third Space of our particular writing center.

Third Space is labeled as “realandimagined” as one word, indicating that the binaries that structure conceptions and perceptions are mutually informing and if separated would destroy the lived connections between the two (Soja 80-82). Soja uses the example of the city of Los Angeles as reflecting a Third Space heterotopian “exopolis” (238) where its citizens’ conceptions, perceptions, and lived experiences are often multiple, contested, reciprocal combinations of spatiality, imagination, and social practices that, though they often clash, are actually mutually constitutive, continuously constructed and reconstructed in a type of “hyperreality” (244).

For public writing, Soja’s trialectics of spatiality could be revised to construct a trialectics of public writing in which the spatial, the social, and the discursive are all conceived, perceived, and lived as ways to engage paradoxical experiences of public and private spaces, relationships, and discourses. For my public writing projects, I use, and encourage students to use, the trialectical term publicandprivate as representing a paradoxical Third Space perspective on how these two spatial, social, and discursive

34 Composition Studies
experiences inform each other and cannot be separated. Soja's idea of Third Space seems to have exciting potential for public writing, but the question of what Third Space looks like, feels like, where it is, and how one gets there provides problems for application in terms of teaching and practicing these types of assignments. Public writing needs to construct actual opportunities for Soja's Third Space consciousness and perspective for both instructor and students by presenting the public and the private as a kind of Third Space, realandimagined conceptions, perceptions, and lived experiences.

For my public writing assignments, students are asked to analyze how assumptions, "lore," history, media representations, embodied dwelling, and personal structures of feeling (memory, fear, nostalgia) create realandimagined places in everyday life. Recording these observations and reflections (whether in writing or through other media) are a crucial aspect of investigating the interconnected experiences of not only Third Space but also for realizing a publicandprivate consciousness for a public writing project.

In the next section of this essay, I would like to provide qualitative strategies of how public writing can engage "paradoxical," Third Space experiences. Though there has been much theorizing on the links between the metaphoric and the material in public writing, assignments need to focus on the actual lived connections between the public and the personal as ways of understanding how the spatial, the social, and the discursive produce the practices of public writing, teaching, and civic participation.

Taking It to the Streets: Public Writing and Streetwork

Though discussions of public writing often focus on the need for it to have real life effects, there has been little analysis of how material conditions and spatial awareness influence social practices and rhetorical expressions that can be utilized to access and contribute to various publics. In this sense, public writing needs to add a qualitative research aspect to public writing assignments in order to analyze how actual public spaces influence how public writing is conceived, perceived, composed and received. Cultural geographers often utilize a qualitative method called streetwork in which to encounter places, using field work, observations, informal interviews, maps, recordings, diagrams, material artifacts, body rhetorics, and sensory experiences to examine the connections between the spatial, the social, and the discursive. In streetwork, practitioners open themselves up to the experience of a place through unplanned, unstructured transitory site visits in which data is collected and processed through both the theoretical lens of cultural geography and through one's own feelings, perceptions, and understandings. These activities often emphasize the connection between description and critical analysis in order to "question the extent to which people and place are indivisible" (Burgess and Jackson 151).
The idea of Burgess and Jackson's streetwork method is not to ground one's self in a research site but to dwell and move, change perspective, see similarities and differences, to be both outsider and insider, and to shift between those identities and spatial positionings in order to analyze one's own encounter with place. Streetwork asks its practitioners to keep their senses open to individual and collective habitual practices that familiarity has naturalized, experienced as "common sense" and "instinctual" for its inhabitants and travelers. Doing streetwork asks researchers to use a variety of qualitative practices (positioning, data collection, observations, taking field notes, short informal interviews with inhabitants), work both individually and collaboratively, and decide on how to present research findings to an audience.

Though Burgress and Jackson call for an "unstructured" approach, I have found that writing students do need some preparation before going out into the field in terms of ethical practices, and so we will often discuss the objectives and procedures of streetwork in class. Each student composes a research plan before their streetwork, using it as a rough guide in order to maximize data collection. These methods, though not "traditional" academic research practices, do fit the spatial, social, and rhetorical foci of public writing pedagogy.

The use of streetwork for writing students was pioneered by Nedra Reynolds and her "Mapping the University" project (Geographies of Writing), but I wanted to add the component of Third Space thinking, dwelling, and writing to this assignment, especially in terms of how students locate themselves in public and private zones. Public writing students need to analyze their construction of a sense of place through learning how to dwell, focusing on their own and other people's everyday spatial practices. Students are encouraged to observe similarities and differences between their strategies and tactics of navigation, movement, and inhabitation and those of the people who dwell and move through the space too.

For public writing, streetwork could be utilized to analyze and deconstruct public and private binaries as well as notions of insider and outsider spatial and social identities. This critique would ask its practitioners to experience different kinds of spaces as being intrinsic to the construction of public and private identities, relationships, and discourses. Public writing assignments could use streetwork to analyze how notions of the "public," and the "private" construct and are constructed by "real" everyday spaces and material conditions designated as public or private in which the writing, texts, and responses will be situated. These research methods could help to suggest how writers can use material conditions and body positioning, movement and inhabitation that occur in public spaces, to produce accessible public forums that would reach the most inhabitants and dwellers in a given public space.
I have also found myself utilizing aspects of streetwork to help bolster academic research through asking students to write about the actual physical "search" for resources and materials: how the material and spatial practices of research (where resources are) influence what they research, how they use sources, and why they accept or reject the credibility of sources.

As Nancy Welch notes, public writing imagines and builds rhetorical spaces but also needs to anticipate extradiscursive obstacles as well (477). The construction of public and private material, social, and rhetorical spaces often involve struggles not only with writing but with visibility, voice, and presence experienced through verbal, social, and physical appropriation and resistance. Public writing assignments need to have and account for spatial repercussions and consequences, as well as ways to research, critique, and represent both the metaphorical and physical struggles of public writing.

Public writing and writing assignments have to be located somewhere spatially and physically. They cannot be disembodied or transparent ideals but must become an active part of the environment that constitutes public spaces, public identities, and public discourses. In this way, public writing is not only rhetorical and social, but also material, "real," a crucial part of the actual conditions of public life writ large on the spaces that people inhabit and dwell in throughout the course of everyday life. Some compositionists such as Charles Lowe and Terra Williams have suggested that the current "where" of the public is located in virtual spaces and electronic environments such as web blogs. The question raised by "blog as public space," outside of the technological and economic issues of access and participation, is what are the material consequences of virtual public and private spaces? Where are the actual physical, embodied experiences and relationships that give so much meaning and significance to public and private spaces?

Though blogs could be seen as a metaphor for public and private space, the lack of material and spatial interactions produce absolute and transparent conceptions of public and private space. Blogs suggest aspects of Habermas's public sphere of total accommodation and passivity as bloggers and readers only interact in discursive ways. What happens to ethos and kairos without qualitative, embodied experiences? Digital environments can be seen as the ultimate in disembodied public spaces as the transparency of technology has erased spatial and physical repercussions of presence and occupation, constructing spaces of spectacle rather than ones that encourage intervention into everyday life. If one is to construct an effective counterpublic it has to be located somewhere in material life, like bell hooks's margins, Gloria Anzaldúa's borderlands or Fraser's subaltern counterpublics.

Qualitative methods like streetwork aid public writing in engaging literal places that have lived connections to the rhetorical and the social relationships that impact various conceptions, perceptions, and lived experiences of the public and public spaces. Public writing projects need to include physi-
cal and spatial analysis with qualitative research in order to more precisely understand what "public" and "private" are and could be, and how, why, and where public writing becomes public.

**Mapping the Public and Private: Pedagogical Examples**

In this section I would like to share two examples from composition classes I have taught where public writing incorporates qualitative research methods, cultural geography, and examinations of how public and private are symbiotic experiences. I share these examples not to say that these are new, revolutionary, or groundbreaking techniques or assignments but to show how the spatial, the social, and the discursive can come together in a public writing project. These assignments draw from different fields of composition and cultural geography; in particular, spatial composition (Nedra Reynolds's mapping assignments), ecocomposition (Julie Drew's "politics of place" and discursive mapping), material rhetoric (Richard Marback's city spaces as forums for resistance and participation) and critical geography (David Harvey's cartographic consciousness and identities). All of these earlier projects involve traditional writing and research workshops, class discussions, conferences, and selected readings. The inclusion of geographical rhetorics, like maps (which encompass spatial awareness, social analysis, and alternative discourses) were my attempts to bring the Third Space perspectives and paradoxical spaces to public writing assignments and texts.

My public writing pedagogy connects Drew's literal map making as a composition assignment with Reynolds's use of mapping metaphors and practices as representative of how real and imagined spaces construct a writer's sense of place as well as the actual acts of composing for a specific writing task. Drew and Reynolds's strategies were built upon in order to construct and practice the notion that maps are rhetorical texts which utilize overlapping concepts of the physical, the cognitive, and the ideological to help writers understand the social production of public and private spaces and writing. The use of literal and metaphorical maps in a composition class help students analyze what, how, and where public and private writing is conceived, perceived, and lived.

In terms of readings for these projects, I tried to follow Sidney Dobrin and Christian Weisser's ecocompositional view of textual production over textual consumption. I only used three preparatory readings: one from cultural geography (Peter Jackson's "The Mall and the High Street"), one from public writing (Don Mitchell's "The End of Public Space?") and one from qualitative research (chapters in John Trimbur's *The Call to Write*) as prompts for written responses, field notes, and class discussions. I much prefer students to read actual spaces and people in order to produce their own personal and public experiences and relationships rather than consume
secondary accounts of spatial and social encounters. In this way, spaces, things, and social relationships are read as rhetorical rather than merely "highlighted" as literary texts and than regurgitated back through reading journals and essays with no qualitative, physical consequences.

The objectives of my public writing assignments are to analyze how different types of students, classrooms, campuses, and geographical areas will influence who, where, how, and why of public and public writing. If the "public" is imagined as overlapping and competing ecosystems and habitats that are symbiotic (micro and macro publics, strong and weak publics, mainstream and subaltern publics) than academic communities as a part of public and private life cannot be left out of constructing trialectics of public writing. Public writing assignments have to consider the types of publics constructed and negotiated by the specific spatial, social, and discursive conditions of the classroom and the academic institution in which classrooms, teaching, and assignments are situated. How these private spaces, people, and discourses are connected to other larger public spaces, social identities, and conversations become the heart of the public writing experience.

These types of spatial, social, and discursive relationships must also consider the public roles and identities of the students engaging these public writing assignments and how their status as a certain kind of student influences how they interact with the public of the university and the publics of their everyday lives. Just as all spaces and discourses contain elements of public and private, so do the students who inhabit, dwell in, and write about public spaces. Students bring in and take out these public and private experiences whenever they enter and exit the classroom, university, personal, and community spaces. These relationships will influence how, why, and where students construct notions of the public for a public writing assignment.

My first example is from my writing classes at Southern Connecticut State University (SCSU). SCSU has a large commuter community with many working, non-traditional, and part-time students. In my writing class, I had first-year to fourth-year students so the status, roles, and obligations of the students varied greatly. The surrounding geography of SCSU is the city of New Haven, so the publics for this assignment had a distinctly urban feel.

Because of the roles and responsibilities of the students in my class and considering the time, material, and social obligations of my students, this public writing project asked students to research a problem centered in a community in which they felt they were a member (home, work, school, political, social, or cultural) that had both public and private concern and significance for the students. The assignment called for students to do streetwork in their chosen community by composing a map which traced their research in these spaces and included material artifacts. They were then to write a public document that addressed the problem, proposed changes, and was to be distributed in the geographic area where the problem was
located. Finally, students needed to write an accompanying essay reflecting on their personal experiences while completing the project. Some of the maps/documents/essays I received from my SCSU classes focused on unsafe working conditions at various jobs, construction on and off campus, hazardous driving conditions on various streets, and problems in living in dorms or in off campus apartments.

One of my students who I will call Maria mapped a New Haven City block in her community where an abandoned church was converted into a strip club which was applying for a liquor license. Maria did qualitative research in the community she felt would be most affected by this event. She wrote a petition against the club which was attempting to acquire the license and distributed her petition throughout the neighborhood. She also composed a map of both her neighborhood and her research process starting with her initial ideas to the actual paths she took while distributing her petition and documented these processes using photos, drawings, and artifacts. The map identified where she received the most signatures for her petition, what times were the best, and what areas people congregated in. Maria noted in her map that bus stops were the best place for her to talk to people and get signatures as people had to wait for their transportation. Maria even included a bus schedule as an artifact in her map to reflect this strategy of dwelling and communicating.

Maria collected a hundred and fifty names for her petition and went before the New Haven City Council to present the results of her petition. The meeting was broadcast on public access Citizen's TV in New Haven, and she included a videotape of the session as part of her final portfolio. Maria's essay not only detailed her experiences doing the streetwork of collecting signatures, but also addressed her ambivalent personal feelings over living in this community. Maria's essay described her own history in the neighborhood. She wrote of places and people she both loves and hates—frustrated by the lack of opportunities and frightened by dangerous situations, while also full of good times and memories for her, her family, and friends. Maria admitted that her community had a “bad public reputation” but that all of the important, positive events and experiences of her life occurred there.

For Maria, the site of the public and private experience of this project was her race, self-described as a Latina, a corporeal and cultural place where public and private come together. Being a Latina influenced who she saw as her public and what kinds of publics she was a part of (women, Hispanic, New Haven citizen, and American citizen) all of which also impacted her personal relationships and goals. Maria called her neighborhood “her community” but admitted that she didn’t know many people who live right next to her and because of this felt “strange” intruding on their “private space” by asking for signatures in public places. Maria concluded her essay
by stating that private people need to get together to form neighborhood pubhcs in order to solve the problems of their communities.

My second example comes from a writing class I taught at the University of Rhode Island (URI). This writing class was 98% first-year full-time residential students from a variety of different states, who were in learning community clusters sharing blocks of classes. The surrounding geography of URI is the small town of Kingston, an area that reflects a rural New England.

Because of my students’ “newness” to campus geography and their unfamiliarity with surrounding communities, the public writing assignment for my URI class was to research campus spaces that act as entry points for outside communities into the campus-places where outside publics and campus publics meet. The assignment called for students to do streetwork in these liminal zones and create a group presentation/map about the space, write a public document for the inhabitants of the space, and an essay detailing their personal experiences with the project. This assignment asked students to identify the different kinds of campus spaces that include the publicandprivate, and how both insider and outsider status is constructed through material conditions, social identities and relationships, and discourses on the URI campus. Some of the maps/documents/presentations/essays I received from my URI classes focused on unlit walkways along the boundaries of the campus (nicknamed the “Rape Trail”), traffic from people coming in to see sporting events, finding space at various dining halls that are open to the public, and vandalism of fraternity houses bordering the business district.

One of the groups researched the Fine Arts Center, a building that contains classrooms, a theater, a box office, and a lobby where both students and “outside” visitors dwell. This group did streetwork under two different conditions: during the day, when they mingled with students in the lobby who were waiting to go to class, and then at night, when they observed theatre goers who came from off campus to see a performance.

The group developed a presentation about the theater lobby using classroom conditions, bodily performances, and material artifacts to recreate the different spatial experiences, positionings, and discourses of both day and night publics of the Fine Arts Center (FAC). For their presentation, the group created two different kinds of maps: the first identified the student-centered private and communal locations of the lobby during the day, while the second focused on the uses of the lobby by visitors from off campus attending a performance at night.

These maps traced the commonalities and differences of these two publics in terms of the use of spatial conditions and body positioning (where and how people congregated, dwelled, sat, stood, moved), social identities and relationships (who was there, different appearances, roles, status) and discourses (body language, spoken conversations, material rhetorics, official and unofficial texts). The group integrated these maps into their presentation.
and “revised” the spatial conditions of our classroom using artifacts (flyers, programs) from the lobby as well as bodily appropriations of the classroom furniture to model the different types of spatial, corporeal, and material experiences they observed during their streetwork.

For their public document, the group wrote a pamphlet about the FAC that they placed in the lobby for students, faculty, staff, and visitors to read. This two-page pamphlet focused on their concerns about the commercialization of a campus space, critiquing the advertisements and sponsorship of the FAC by different corporations and businesses. The pamphlet detailed the pros and cons of this sponsorship that turned campus space into consumer space. This concern over the privatization of a student-designated space reflects many of the concerns of privatization that public writing advocates also share. But where different audiences would encounter the pamphlet was just as important as what the pamphlet said.

The group used additional streetwork to identify the best places for the various publics of the FAC lobby to encounter and read their pamphlet. They analyzed where different people sat, dwelled, stood, moved, and conversed in order to maximize the pamphlet’s contact with different types of readers. The question of where to place their public writing to enhance the chances that members of different kinds of publics would read it necessitated expanding their understanding of who constituted the publics that shared this space, and so social analysis was an integral part of their spatial analysis.

Although they felt that their primary audience was the URI student public, the group then had to deconstruct the notion of there being one “student” public as they quickly noted that residents and commuters (although both members of the URI public) utilized the lobby in many different ways and configurations. There was no official “URI Public or Private Space” but a series of spatial and social conceptions, perceptions and uses that composed a contested material text called the FAC lobby. For this group, their project identified the FAC lobby as intersecting public and private zones of ambiguity that affect each other through material spaces, the people who inhabit it, and the discourses they are invested in.

The group’s essays focused largely on how perceptions of public and private depended on specific spatial and social conditions like time of day, specific events, and if they felt included or excluded from the people that inhabited the space. Some students discussed their feelings of having “outsiders” come to their university as being awkward, as if “strangers” were coming into their “home.” Others felt it was important for there to be public and private zones of contact on the URI campus, because it reminded them of their personal connections to the “outside world.” Public and private zones like the Fine Arts Center lobby made them feel that they were simultaneously part of the outside world as well as part of the URI community too. These liminal zones made them feel less isolated and more in touch with
what's going on in the world outside URI. And yet these public and private zones also were sometimes intimidating and threatening as well, as students reported feeling less safe or in control because they could not immediately identify the status, identities, and purposes that these “outsiders” brought with them onto campus.

Most interesting was the feeling that these public and private zones were taking away from the private spaces of students in the name of extending the public of URI into outside communities. Although their public document was concerned with the question of privatization of URI public spaces, the group's essays all seemed more troubled with the “publicization” of private, personal spaces for students to “escape” from the pressures of living a public life, sharing the campus with roommates, fellow students, and the rest of the extended URI community. This need for private student spaces, spaces occupied by students to fulfill physical, social, and discursive needs, was often addressed by transforming or appropriating spaces that were underutilized by the majority of the URI public or removed from institutional public surveillance. Often these students found themselves coming together as private communal groups to help each other cope with the stress of acclimating to the first year resident experience out of shared personal necessity rather than turning to public institutional services. This group looked to the Fine Arts Center lobby as a place to “hang out,” blow off steam, to gossip, to read and write, and to become spatially, socially, and discursively orientated to the URI community both as individuals and as members of a collective.

Bringing It All Back Home: Public Writing and Public Homespaces

As these examples show, public writing needs to incorporate more spatial and physical experiences and presences into its conception, perception, and lived practices regarding what constitutes the public and what constitutes writing. Public writing cannot neglect the different scales of the private (from individual to collective to corporate) in constructing the public and vice versa for an assignment. The contribution I hope to make to conversations about public writing is to ask public writers to consider not only the material and spatial conditions which construct the notions of public and public writing, but also to not neglect the private spaces, identities, and discourses which are also constructed and influenced by public writing as well. Public writing could be utilized to add spatial and material critiques and consequences into the objectives of a composition course.

Public writing research, practices, and pedagogies could benefit from considering how our understandings of the public and private are bound together and cannot be bracketed from each other or from the spatial, the social, and the discursive. All spaces incorporate elements of the public
and the private depending on specific and collective material, social, and discursive conventions, expectations, and purposes that will influence which designation is privileged over the other. Public writing projects should offer corresponding inquiries into the material, social, and discursive construction of the private as an integral aspect of the identities, texts, and experiences of public spaces. As spaces incorporate notions of both private and public, all writing for a composition class also negotiates public and private significance as well. Public writing projects need to suggest private reflection and personal investment in the spaces, people, and discourses affected as a shared physical, social, and textual experience.

The analysis of these relationships between public and private needs a spatial and qualitative methodology to encourage public writers to see how these fluid notions of public and private are materialized in actual locations and sites. The use of streetwork procedures could be a way to identify how notions of the public and private and public writing construct and are constructed by “real” everyday spaces and material conditions designated as public or private. These research methods could help to suggest how writers can use material conditions to produce accessible material forums which would reach the most inhabitants and dwellers in a given public space. Public writing can’t neglect the private in constructing the public for an assignment and not just in terms of privatization but the effects of a more personalized understanding and experience of the private for writers. The loss of private space to public concerns could be an equally important area of inquiry for public writing projects too.

A constructive example for the link between public and private in actual material spaces is David Coogan’s investigation of “public homespaces” for service-learning wherein students researched a community-based organization involved in urban public housing issues. Public homespaces are actual public spaces, resources, and relationships that are “inclusive, nurturing, and responsive to the developmental needs of all people” (Belenky, Bond, and Weinstock qtd. in Coogan 463), but the emphasis on “home” suggests more personal, intimate connections between public citizens and community places. Public homespaces are public and private spaces as they “blur boundaries between the private sphere of personal development and public sphere of argument and advocacy” (Coogan 471) in order to resist public and private dualities and other spatial, social, and discursive binaries. Public homespaces can be seen as subaltern counterpublics, places of civic potential that make explicit the connections between public and private commitments. Through spatial, social, and discursive “circulation,” public homespaces help to reclaim public and private spaces through intertwining cultural contexts, personal connections and collective support for educational and political investments in the spaces, roles, and rhetorical practices of specific communities.
I think that exploring the notion of Coogan’s “public homespaces,” spaces, activities, and discourses that incorporate explicit acknowledgement of the interconnected material relationships of the individual and public communities, may be a way to better understand the conventions, expectations, and purposes of public writing. Beginning with the metaphoric and material concept of “public homespaces,” I suggest using streetwork and cultural geography as a means of adding more rigorous qualitative and theoretical aspects to public writing assignments.

Constructively blurring the boundaries between the public and private in spatial, social, and discursive ways could be a response to the needs of students trying to situate themselves in and navigate community, campus, and private spaces. Their geography often includes public and private places like Maria’s neighborhood, the FAC lobby, and student spaces like dorm rooms and classrooms that are shared with different types of people with different spatial, social, and discursive practices, needs, and concerns. But why stop at public homespaces? Why not private communalspaces? The need to push literal and metaphoric spatial conditions, social relationships, and discourses that exhibit public and private experiences into Third Space consciousness should be a major priority of public writing.

Notes

1. A possible response to this view of exclusion from the public sphere is the work of Gerard Hauser. Hauser believes that the public sphere is a rhetorical space formed around competing discourses rather than material places or people’s identities and status. Because it is a rhetorical space devoid of materiality and political power, the public sphere has permeable boundaries and tolerance. Because it is not bound to any one space or class, the public sphere can accommodate institutional/hegemonic discourse as well as “street” and oppositional rhetoric simultaneously. How well these discourses reflect common meanings and shared interests or “public opinion” validates one discourse over another. Therefore, graffiti can be more reflective of a common concern or belief than a government edict, political speech, or major media outlet. It is through negotiation and merging of these competing discourses (both official and unofficial) that public opinion is formed. Though focusing on the rhetorical aspects of the public sphere is helpful to public writing assignments, the question of whether discourse (and the public sphere) can ever be divorced from ideological or material factors is one that must be addressed by public writing.

2. Material rhetoric is “a mode of interpretation that takes as its object of study the signification of material things and corporeal entities—objects that signify not through language but through their spatial organization, mobility, mass, utility, orality, and tactility” (Dickson 297-298). Material rhetoricians analyze how different kinds of sensory discourses, materialities, and body practices
inform each other to produce multiple meanings, readings, and ways of composing. For material rhetoricians, ideology is not only internalized through consciousness, but is inscribed on bodies, material conditions, and things. And yet the term “material” is often used ambiguously by material rhetoricians to cover a variety of experiences: is materiality spatial, physical, tangible, corporeal, objective, subjective, or all of these? Is it the same materiality of Marx’s historical materialism or is it an embodied perspective of multiple realities?

3. Focusing on urban environments and city rhetorics, Marback’s view of the potential of material rhetoric is its ability to not only “listen to the language of objects and things such as cities to acknowledge that they do somehow speak to us, listening to messages of cities and being written upon them” (141) but also to provide entry into contributing to the city environments that his students write about. Marback’s utilization of material rhetorics as prompts for writing assignments asks students to write about, on, and with the urban conditions that construct personal and collective identities and agency for the inhabitants of the city.

4. For Harvey, maps are ideological instruments and can be used as propaganda because they project and “objectively” validate a representation of the material world that is constructed to reflect dominant social institutions in order to naturalize their privileged readings of space. Harvey contends that different social institutions create a demand for different kinds of geographical knowledges in order to stabilize and justify their consolidation and exercises of power. From these geographical knowledges come cartographic identities and consciousnesses as ways that space, maps, and mapping are used to impose and naturalize capitalist forms of personal and political colonization and exploitation.

5. Maria is a pseudonym.

6. Unfortunately for Maria, the club got its license.

7. Though Gil Scott-Heron once noted “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,” could Public Access TV be utilized as a subaltern counterpublic?

8. Perhaps a composition project analyzing the practices and discourse of eminent domain using streetwork and public documents to access and contribute to these public conversations?

9. One could also draw parallels to bell hooks’s notion of “homeplace” as a site of resistance, recuperation, and renewal for oppressed peoples.

Works Cited


Wells, Susan. "Rogue Cops and Health Care: What Do We Want from Public Writing?" *College Composition and Communication* 47.3 (1996): 325-41.
Copyright of Composition Studies is the property of Composition Studies and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder’s express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.