

Fall 2007

Geographies of Writing: Inhabiting Places and Encountering Difference

Donelle Dreese
Northern Kentucky University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/communityliteracy>

Recommended Citation

Dreese, Donelle. "Geographies of Writing: Inhabiting Places and Encountering Difference." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2007, pp. 123–25, doi:10.25148/clj.2.1.009512.

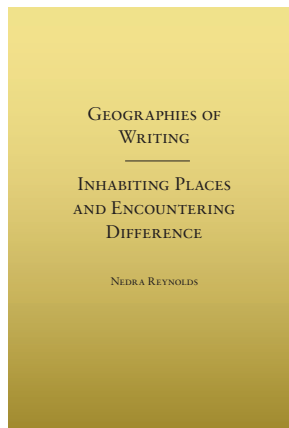
This work is brought to you for free and open access by FIU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Community Literacy Journal* by an authorized administrator of FIU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dcc@fiu.edu.

Geographies of Writing: Inhabiting Places and Encountering Difference. Nedra Reynolds. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois Press, 2004. 224 pp. ISBN: 978-0809327874. \$30.00.

Reviewed by Donelle Dreese

dreesed1@nku.edu

Assistant Professor, Northern Kentucky University



Geographies of Writing is a well executed study of the importance of space, location, and movement in composition studies and clarifies the profound connection between writing, where we are, and where we are going. Acknowledging the frequently overlooked centrality of place in composition, Reynolds's work takes readers through the dynamic interplay of Edward W. Soja's trialectics involving conceived space, perceived space, and lived space to show the relationship between different ways the mind constructs public and private spaces, and thus informs writing. Reynolds begins her discussion exploring the various ways that place is constructed through travel metaphors, romantic frontier metaphors, and the idea of the borderlands as a metaphor for a place where cultural differences converge.

But how people experience place does not always coincide with our imagined perceptions as Reynolds suggests, and spaces are often defined only in terms of movement rather than for forms of dwelling. For example, Reynolds discusses how technologies such as cell phones contribute to a discourse of loss as the vast increase of cell phone use is an indicator of the need for connection. She argues that while cell phone use frequently offers the opportunity to the speaker to notice and announce where they are, private conversations now frequently occur in public spaces, and situations for traditional uses of space as gathering places are no longer available as spaces become increasingly regulated and privatized. Reynolds argues that composition studies frequently foregrounds place metaphors and undermines actual material conditions of places because the actuality of place is less attractive. This is where composition offers an opportunity for advocacy. If we see places as sites of injustice as well as metaphors, students and writers may feel more compelled to move toward a sense of social responsibility and possibly change.

For the purpose of her study, Reynolds effectively repositions geography as a social science that involves the interaction between people and places. In order to involve oneself in a more material experience of place, Reynolds argues that learning to see a place at street level will provide opportunities that may be uncomfortable, but it will help writers to navigate space in ways that are more meaningful and possibly encounter difference. Coming to an understanding of how place and identity are intimately connected is dependent upon seeing, walking, and paying attention to our surroundings.

Basing much of her research on interviews with students at Leeds University School of Geography, Reynolds investigates how students define and experience place and communities through memory and mental mappings; she also discovers how the ideas about the sense of place are quite complex and informed greatly by the socio-economic and cultural backgrounds of the interviewees. Certainly pertinent to this discussion is Reynolds's coverage of exclusionary places, spaces deliberately designed to resist inhabitation or any kind of experience beyond simply moving through. One example is city parks where the benches are designed so that they can only be used for sitting, thus excluding the homeless. Appropriately, Reynolds argues that this kind of territory of exclusion works counter to efforts among civic engagement or service learning projects that frequently require an encounter with difference as part of their learning and literacy goals. According to Reynolds, "sending students off campus serves to magnify cultural differences between the college students and, say, the homeless person, the migrant farmworker, or the community leader they've been assigned to encounter" (113). The potential problem with this form of cultural geography is that it may encourage zoo-effect forms of observing the other, which will undermine the value of the interaction and promote an imperial posturing of the university. Additionally, Reynolds is not convinced that meaningful encounters with difference actually take place under the auspices of assigned projects.

So why do we feel that we need to go somewhere else to find environments fertile for writing opportunities? What happens if we choose to stay where we are? Reynolds suggests that there are plenty of opportunities to study geographic exclusion without venturing into neighborhoods where one may not be welcome and that part of inhabiting any place is to know what boundaries can be crossed and which should be left alone. Encounters with difference can be found in one's own home, on the street, in the workplace, at the university, even within discourses and texts themselves. While Reynolds's discussion exists primarily within the realm of academic and university situations, her book offers a valuable opportunity for interrogating and scrutinizing the desire to move out into the community to promote literacy.

Reynolds concludes her study reiterating that material spaces are as valuable as metaphorical spaces and learning to inhabit a space can provide opportunities for writers to understand boundaries in relation to the interaction between what lies within and what lies outside the border. Most importantly, Reynolds defines a place not in relation to material conditions or maps, but as a "lived event" that shifts daily and impacts our configurations of our own identities, which also shift as we dwell in, and move in and out of, postmodern territories. Mirroring the theoretical framework of ecocomposition, Reynolds's work provides a useful guide that would be particularly engaging for graduate students as an introduction to writing as a spatial endeavor, informed by cultural geography, and envisioned through a postmodern perspective.



Geographies of Writing should open the door to continued discussions about boundaries, communities of acceptance and exclusion, and how to encounter difference in ways that are ethical and productive.

