

John Wyatt Greenlee class observation  
Mon, 10/29/2018, 9:05-9:55am  
Barton Hall track

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JWG's FWS, "One Foot in front of the Other: Walking in Life and Literature," meets three times a week for 50-minute sessions. Two weekly sessions are in a traditional classroom setting; one is ambulatory, conducted while walking on an indoor athletic track.

At my request, I observed one of JWG's ambulatory (Monday) classes, where the assigned reading was a difficult text, cap. 7 ("Walking in the City") of Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (tr. 1984). JWG had assigned this text, he told me, in preparation for discussing with his students 'walking as an act of resistance': "it gives them a theoretical framework to consider later readings like Lewis or Raj Shehada's *Walks in Palestine* that show/use walking as forms of dissent" (e-mail 18.x.2018). JWG also cautioned that ambulatory classes typically – ironically – "cover less [textual] ground" than traditional, sit-down classes, and that a session on a text as dense as de Certeau might prove particularly creaky. He nevertheless graciously allowed me to visit this session.

In actuality, this turned out to be one of the most interesting and rewarding classes I've attended in many years, be it as instructor, student, or observer. I always feel I learn from interactions with JWG, but this occasion hit a notch above the standard I'm accustomed to.

JWG began by randomly dividing his students (a total of nine women and six men; one person was absent this day) into four groups and sending them out to take three laps around the track, during which they were to identify and discuss three issues in de Certeau's text: 1) three important points; 2) three incomprehensible things; 3) the author's thesis. At this stage, JWG let students parade on their own; he explained he typically does so at the beginning of each class, though he usually only allots 1-2 laps for simpler texts. (He also noted that one of the randomly assigned groups typically circulates counter-clockwise, a practice I could witness in real time; he did not, however, feel the need to call students' attention to this practice as an instance of 'walking as an act of resistance.' Perhaps he will at some future point.) At the end of their laps (ca. 15 minutes), students were invited to jot down the results of their discussions on post-it posters JWG had hung on a nearby wall, and – though this particular exercise was new to them – students all fell in readily and indeed eagerly.

JWG then asked students to read each other's postings and gathered them all for discussion of their findings. Students proved willing to participate with little or no prodding; JWG had mentioned to me that one of the advantages of the ambulatory classes is that even the reticent students tend to speak in them. At this stage, JWG mostly let students take quality time articulating what they failed to understand in de Certeau's text. His invitation for them to do so struck me as charming: "There is a lot I don't understand about this text, and I'd like some company in my lack of understanding." Nor did he bother to correct misguided statements or highlight especially perceptive ones: he simply elicited them for now. I found his tactics for prodding student participation wonderfully engaging; when a specific question elicited no responses, for instance, JWG gracefully backed away from it into a different question that got students thinking about the same issues from a different perspective.

Having established that de Certeau's thesis was proving elusive, JWG sent his students to take another lap around the track. I don't recall his exact prompt, but I suspect he must have asked them to double down on identifying the author's concern and argument; he may have asked them to focus specifically on the role of speech (and writing) in de Certeau's discussion. This time, JWG accompanied the four

groups, bounding from one to the other to listen in, comment, and prod. It was clear from the students' reactions that they were accustomed to this routine, and that his presence was welcomed as an enhancement to their conversation, not an intrusion.

At the conclusion of this lap, the class again gathered for a general conversation, led by JWG. Students made wonderfully acute and often creative (I thought) observations about de Certeau's key metaphor of speech/writing :: walking/governing. One student noted, for instance, the way in which speech easily embodies and allows for dialectical variation and community building; another described speech as 'three-dimensional', in contrast with the 2D flatness of writing; a third reflected on the unrehearsed and ephemeral nature of speech (JWG rightly challenged the student to consider also interim forms, such as prepared political speeches); and so on. (No one specifically noted that speech allows for dialogue and even polyphony much more readily than does writing.) The conversation culminated with JWG's directive questioning, something to the effect of: "If writing is, for de Certeau, a medium of repressive, analytic, and coercive government, then what is speech for him?" The students (nicely, I thought) embodied the answer he was fishing for by resisting his pressure to articulate it. Finally one especially thoughtful and bright student replied to the effect that "de Certeau argues that speech resists all that, but I disagree with him – his very ability to analyze its function undercuts his claim that it embodies an alternative." JWG briefly and respectfully engaged with the student, expressing his own disagreement with her assessment but helping to highlight her contribution.

At the end of the class (as at the end of every ambulatory class, he told me), JWG had students fill out a brief Qualtrics survey about the class: what worked well, what didn't, etc. He explained to me that he did this regularly as a way of gathering data about the format, with a view towards publishing a scholarly article on it. I don't know whether or to what extent he has shared this plan with his freshmen; it might serve as a beautiful illustration for them of the way in which we marry pedagogy and research in our work.

I had few, if any, criticisms to offer JWG. Gender dynamics, for which I am always watchful, did not seem to disadvantage either the women or the men (perhaps thanks to the high ratio of women in the class). Though many students took part in the discussion quite eagerly, a few – including the only (?) visibly URM student – were more reserved, and could easily, thanks to the mobile format, avoid attracting attention to themselves; in any single session, this is hardly a problem, though clearly it is something JWG should be (and, I believe, is) aware of and keeping tabs on. Audibility proved challenging at times, at least for me; the students' younger ears and brains seemed less troubled by ambient noises, and during class conversations they occasionally drew closer together of their own accord, which I thought was another badge of honour for JWG's pedagogy.

I am grateful to JWG for giving me the opportunity to witness this stimulating class.

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