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What Are Universities For?

On Classrooms, Doorways, and Rectangles

Walking out of Cobb Hall at 1:20 in the afternoon, Monday, Wednesday, Friday: sometimes I accidentally said “*gracias*” to the person who held the door open for me. It was the kind of slip that felt revealing: about how I was claiming a language that was not my own, probably in a mangled and mispronounced way, and possibly to someone who understood the constellation of meanings that Spanish holds far beyond the walls of the Spanish 101 classroom I was just leaving. But my mind felt gooey and was lagging behind in the class that I had just been in. And then there was that one afternoon when I held the door open for someone else leaving Cobb, and they said something that sounded like German to me, and then I knew that other people’s minds were working just as slowly and gooiily as mine was.

I don’t hold the door open for anyone anymore on Monday, Wednesday, or Friday. That was yet another unmentioned ritual that had to go when classes were moved online. Now I don’t need to walk out of one classroom and into another: I close one tab and then frantically search my email for a link to another tab. I’m on mute the entire time and that saves me from that awkward “*gracias*” that was always embarrassing. This is one of the worst pandemics of history, and as of now there are over 170,000 confirmed mortalities worldwide. The inability to humiliate myself in the everyday exchange with a stranger, that awkward millisecond of shared space in a doorway, should not even be mentioned next to the losses that have been borne in the past few months and the hardships are still being lived through today. But after clicking into my third Zoom lecture in a row in one day, all I could think about was how I missed that ten-minute transition, that spatial transformation that meant leaving one classroom and one world of ideas in order to enter another: and the way that that brief walk revealed just how immersive and intellectually gooey a well-taught classroom can be, so much so that it makes it hard to mentally leave it.

I know how this sounds. Were traditional classrooms ever intellectually gooey anyway, even outside of Zoom? Just because we’re in a crisis, that does not give us the excuse to put on rose-tinted glasses and gloss over the problems of “pre-pandemic” life. Foucault powerfully diagrammed the sterilized, oppressive, and factory-like infrastructure that supports the modern

classroom. Classrooms are spatially enclosed. They keep students separated, contained behind closed doors down a hallway. The professor projects his legitimacy and authority onto thirty, forty, or even two hundred students as he stands at a big desk or lectern makes them do things that they do not necessarily want to do. He exercises authority over the subject that he is teaching, but also over the students, and the students' bodies: to do something as banal and essential as use the restroom or get a drink of water, one must ask permission first and prepare even to be apologetic about it.

In the context of language classes, Edward Said nuances the power the teacher wields when talking about "the Other," the non-Western world. There are power relations latent in the way that Cobb classrooms are filled with students studying various regions of the world, often without those from those regions represented in the classroom; and the fact that there is not necessarily a corresponding classroom studying us in the same way in that region shows the awkward imperialist imbalance of institutionalized knowledge. I love my Spanish professor, but she is burdened with the impossible task of recreating a vivid, dynamic, and textured cultural reality inside of a room filled with desks and a whiteboard. Before the pandemic hit we knew this, and we mourned the artificiality of language classes, and the sterile nature of knowledge learned from a textbook in a classroom instead of experiencing it organically. Now that we are even further isolated from each other, in panoptic, recorded rectangles on Zoom, we realize just how precious it was to wander through the messy shapes of human bodies instead of the rectangular grid collage that represents a zoom classroom.

The question remains: What are universities for? My answer is that they are there for something gooey, atmospheric, and unnoticed; that comes apparent when you move between those proto-universes of information; something that slowly seeps into your mind until your old habits and instincts are returned to you in a language that you never knew you could speak, until then suddenly a new version of you bursts out when you're holding doors open for your classmates. Power, authority, legitimacy-- they are all built into the structure of the university, how could they not be? But, the best we can do is identify it, diagram it when we can, and rely on our respect for each other to gain more and more empathy with the places and people we study. Pre-pandemic University life had its problems, but what gentled them was the shared spaces that we co-inhabited, the random interactions in between, and the way that our lagging, transitioning minds were mentally in-sync with the strangers we ran into.

Perhaps this is a rigid and conservative definition of *university*; perhaps, because of my (privileged) angst, right now I am only emphasizing what I am missing from my classes online. But I miss when your mind and your body are moving so fast that they can barely keep pace with each other, and I wish I could hold the door open for someone at 1:30 on a Monday, Wednesday, or Friday.