

Places and Spaces: Ecology, Reading, Writing, and Writing Research

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Where do we find our inspiration to write? How does the environment affect one's writing and the reception of a text? Looking into his travels on the road, Justin Charron finds inspiration in the most seemingly unlikely of places and considers the impact of ecology, production, uptake, reception, and writer identity construction.

“Write. Write every day. Write whether you feel like writing or not . . .

Don't give up. Learn from everything”

—Octavia E. Butler

It was somewhere west of Indianapolis when the food poisoning took hold. I was heading east, seventy-five miles per hour down the highway, the sun creeping up over the frozen Midwestern wasteland. The stubs of last summer's harvest stood lonely and erect. Freight trucks dotted the shoulder of the highway. I scanned the signs. My stomach churned. There is nothing more desperate than the lone traveler sick on the road. Removed from all safety nets or connections. They're truly alone, at the mercy of that great enigmatic figure: the road. Truck stops became my oases. I counted the miles, waiting to purge the vile contents of my stomach into the grimy bathrooms where the truckers and soccer moms relieve themselves, where the vagrants secretly express themselves in dreams of corn queens and porno. I leaned against the filth-covered porcelain. *Even here I'm a writer.* There in the bottom of the toilet, among the putrid vomit and stray pubic hairs floating in the shit

In ISU's version of CHAT (cultural-historical activity theory), we use seven terms to help analyze literate activity. **Production** is one of those terms, and refers to the means through which a text is produced. This includes tools and practices (ISU Writing Program).

and piss and cum, there is my writing process. “*No time for poetry, only exactly what is.*” There’s a certain honesty in the disgusting, the repulsive, the rotten glutinous underbelly of the world. Brutal, unadulterated honesty. That invaluable fuel, the stinking backdoor to reality, accesses the world with a level of intimacy that you might otherwise never experience. Examining the physical location about which the author writes reveals yet another relationship that affects the **production** of a work.

For some authors, being able to commit their experience to the written word in the moment isn’t as productive, for others it is. Distance is a significant part of the ecology in which the activity of writing takes place. Some writers find that they are only able to fully appreciate the nuanced complexities of their experience once they are physically out of that environment. For some this only requires a short distance. For others it might mean traveling across the globe and living in an entirely different culture. Sinéad Morrissey, an Irish poet, discussed this when I spoke with her several years ago at a reading of her new collection, *Parallax*. For her, it was being removed from an environment that allowed her to write with precision about her homeland in Northern Ireland.¹ She found that this distance gave her a much-needed change in perspective, to see things through a new lens that wasn’t possible while she was immersed in her life in the Six Counties. Morrissey intimated that for her, in order to be able to write about a place, she had to be physically removed from it. The ecology of her physical space affects her ability to write.

Likewise, I had an opportunity to speak with Tom Sleight about the effect of time and distance on his writing. Sleight comes from a journalistic background and finds that being removed from a situation gives him an opportunity to formulate his impression of an event beyond just recording facts, as he would for journalistic writing. That distance can come in the form of physical distance from a place, emotional distance, or being able to “step away” temporally with the passage of time, or some combination of these three. After he had reported on the war in Iraq, he found himself thinking about the events in a completely different light. He realized that when he had time to consider all of the events he had witnessed he saw what he termed “a moral ambiguity” in the events, where neither party was objectively in

1. Sinéad Morrissey was nice enough to attend a class on Irish poetry I took as an undergrad. It was from her class commentary that I’m drawing here, and her most recent work addresses this idea through poetics, but this isn’t a literary analysis. I would highly encourage you to read through some of the poems from her collection, *Parallax and Selected Poems*, to get a better idea of how she contends with the idea of distance from a place or moment if you would like a better impression of her perspective on the idea.

the right, and that determining who was in the right or wrong was a fool's errand. He found it was much more interesting, much more honest to write from a place of moral ambiguity rather than from a place of judgment. He attributes his position on this to his years of heroin addiction when living in New York City. He recalled a day when he was in Tompkins Square Park, after years of sobriety, when he saw a guy whom he guessed to be about sixteen years old, strung out and nodding off in the park. His initial reaction was to lecture the young guy, but stopped himself, "Who am I to lecture him? If I'm honest, I enjoyed my days using heroin. I mean, hell, I didn't do it because I didn't enjoy it. I really did. I totally enjoyed it. Was it dangerous? Yes. Was it the best decision I've made? No, but I enjoyed it, so who am I to be the old guy lecturing him?" Sleigh addresses this experience and others in his collection of poetry, *Station Zed: Poems* if you're interested in reading some examples of how he contends with moral ambiguity and his past (Sleigh). This plays a central role in Sleigh's **production**.

Unsurprisingly, not a lot of students that heard this knew how to take it. He made it clear that he was in no way advocating drug use. His point was that we should look at events from a perspective of distance and not cast judgment on a situation, just observe and record. Sleigh and Morrissey found that brutal honesty comes with distance from an event. Seeking out different environments and writing in those new surroundings, or about your experiences there, shapes the work you produce, how you produce it, what genre you write in, how others receive your work, generates expectations for your work, and places your writing in a relationship with texts that have been produced before it and after it. The ecology of the surroundings in which you work affects what you produce and how you read in complex and often unexpected ways. That said, **ecology** doesn't just mean one physical location—it can include the physical location, an author's experience of that location in the moment, and the memory and recreation of that experience in moments of writing later; and even the impact of a later physical location where they are when they write on that memory experience. For me, the open road is a space that is conducive to writing, or at least the writing comes easier after I've been driving for some distance.

Ecology is another CHAT term, and refers to the mere backdrop for our purposeful activities when creating a text. Ecology is the environmental factors that exist beyond our control that may affect our text (ISU Writing Program).

For some authors, being able to commit their thoughts, feelings, and immediate impressions in writing is of utmost importance. Others find that their craft and the process of writing (through text or speaking) must be immediate, such as in battle rap. In the case of battle rap, if the composition is not composed in the moment the composer is often derided

as being unauthentic, or “notebooking,” a derisive term for a type of cheating where a participant is using previously composed material that was written in a notebook. This chiding might even come in the form of hand gestures by the other competitor, mocking them, signaling that the material was prewritten with a hand gesture, mimicking a person writing with a pen and paper.² For one of the better examples of the fluidity with which MCs compose their work and the spontaneous nature of their composition, check out MC Supernatural’s performance at the 2008 Magic Convention where he freestyles, taking cues from random objects passed forward by audience members.

The genre an author chooses to work in can help to determine the level of immediacy with which they work. Likewise, the immediacy with which an author needs to work to convey their thoughts, feelings, and impressions influences the genre they choose to work in. Observing the ways that the place, or **ecology**,³ in which a writer works and the interplay between genre and immediacy required by the subject matter should be something of note for a writing researcher. No matter the genre in which you are working, your surroundings and the distance you have from the event affect your ability to convey that experience, as well as the environment that you are working in at the moment.

In some instances, distance is required. In others, distance is detrimental to the writing process. Learning how to unpack this information and seeing the connection of ecology, the intended **reception** of the work, and the exigency which the writer of a text is responding to, offers a different level of insight beyond what one can access from simply observing the text as an isolated artifact, disconnected from the moment that prompted it, the events, and the places that inspired the author of a mentor text. A greater distance from the moment of inspiration affects the reception of a text.

Reception is another CHAT term, and refers to the how a text is taken up and used by others (who will read the text, how others will use the text or repurpose it, etc.)

2. This same type of gesturing is seen in b-boy circles. I had seen it before, in cyphers in San Diego, and in New York City during the mid-nineties, but never really paid it much mind until I saw it again at an international hip hop festival I attended. I questioned a friend of mine who is an MC, and he explained it to me . . . Even though I already knew what it meant, it seemed that the years had not been as kind to my memory as one would wish. If you watch closely, you can see similar behavior and heckling in movies like *8 Mile*, or in numerous videos of freestyle battles.

3. You can also think of ecology as being far more than just the physical space that inspired a writer or where you are when you read a text. In order to fully consider ecology, we can look at the availability of access to internet, where and in what position you are in when reading or writing, the weather, the background noise of loud roommates, the lighting of a particular room, how the environment makes the space feel more conducive to writing research, and any other host of other influences that fall under the banner of ecology. That said, this article is focusing on the impact of physical space as it pertains to writing.

For me, the experience of being in a place connected to literature alters my state of mind—my mode of thinking—and evokes an emotional response that urges me to write. On one of my many journeys, I found myself standing in the middle of U.S. Route 66, that old and, in many places, abandoned artery that stretched from Chicago, through Normal, south and then west through the broad expanses of the Mojave Desert, all the way to California.⁴ I woke up in the morning and grabbed a cup of cranberry juice from the front lobby’s “continental breakfast,” which amounted to little more than a narrow selection of store-bought muffins and bagels, coffee (decaf or regular), and a pitcher of cranberry juice. Standing there I felt a sense of connection to the place I was in, but also connected to the experience of being in that place with texts I had read previously, like Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* and Kerouac’s *On the Road*, and the emotion that they conveyed through their texts.

There I stood, one foot on each of the double yellow lines, staring straight down Route 66: the road of legend. This was the same strip of asphalt that the Okies had traveled down, searching for escape from the dust bowl in the thirties, that Neal Cassady and Jack Kerouac had gone screaming down in Neal’s Studebaker at one hundred miles per hour, bebop blaring through the speakers, nothing behind them and everything ahead. Here it was, in all its grit and filth, years of wear and tear. The buildings that lined the street looked like they had been frozen in time. Everyone packed up and headed home just like any other day, but they never returned. The billboards still stood out in the fields, watching for travelers that would never come, their sheets hanging like torn black tarpaper flesh, exposing open wounds of dry rotting boards, preserved by the dry southwestern air. An old streamlined



Figure 1: Photo of Bear Mountain, taken from the dash of my car long after Indiana.

4. You may be asking “What does a trip across the southwestern U.S. have to do with writing research?” and that would be a fair question to ask. The specific location is mostly irrelevant to the larger concept and how this is applicable to writing research, however, the idea that I am circling around is that living is research. Living adds to and affects how you understand all of the things that you have already learned and will learn—**antecedent knowledge**—plus the information you have yet to experience. It changes you as a person—at least if you take the time to be aware of how conscious living changes you.

diner stood, its tubes of neon lettering long extinguished and as cracked as the asphalt beneath my feet. It was there, in that place, that moment, I realized what Kerouac had been getting at: that *On the Road*, or *Sur le Chemin*⁵ as he referred to it in his early drafts, was never about the road, the glorious exploits of two guys crisscrossing the continent, the women, the nights listening to wayward travelers—bums to some—sing about their sweethearts whose affections they had probably never known, or pissing off the back of the truck under the Wyoming night sky. It was about the journey, the path that we're all on, and the connections we make with the people we encounter throughout our lives.

Could I have arrived at this same conclusion through a close reading of the text itself? Possibly, but being out there in the broad expanses, being in that place, in that moment, was something that brought the text screaming back to life and smacked me in the face. The only other experience I can equate with it is the difference between looking at a picture or watching a video of the Grand Canyon and actually going there, feeling the breeze blow up out of the canyon, the smell of the pines lining the rim of the canyon, feeling its immensity, the cold painted black steel rail in your hands, knowing that it is the only thing separating you from this enormous vacuous presence. A picture just can't convey that sense of smallness, that sense of wonder, and the complexity of the beauty of that moment, of that place.

Granted, standing in the middle of that road wasn't the same experience that seeing the Grand Canyon was, but the impact, and having that experience as a point of reference when reading a text that leans so heavily on it for setting and metaphor, had the same level of impact. Reading those same books with that point of reference, that antecedent experiential knowledge, opened up the texts to me in an entirely different way. Whether you're a "creative" writer,⁶ writing a business proposal, a lab report, a literary analysis, or some other genre you might encounter, the knowledge and

5. "On the way" or "on the path"—the original working title of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, mistranslated from French to English by Kerouac in his original working drafts of the novel (Kerouac).

6. I want to emphasize that I am of the mind that all writing is creative, albeit in different aspects and to varying degrees. Even a business memo requires a degree of creativity in wording, approach, and other stylistic choices. A good friend of mine who is a software engineer and a person that has a genuine appreciation for a variety of different types of writing had this realization when looking at job applications and noticed one in particular that was formatted like the back of a My Little Pony package, rainbow graphics and all. At a presentation on post-grad life, an alumnus who had worked for Google before starting his own tech startup talked at length about stylistic choices in resume cover letter writing. The example that stood out the most, and ultimately landed the applicant the position, began not with an explanation of career goals, objectives, or how this position figured into their career path, but with, "I'm scared"—the most honest first line of any application he received. It was also the most honest and attention-grabbing of several hundred applications that he received. If a lowly job resume can be approached creatively, what genre can't be? Of course, there are some genres that afford far less opportunities with more stringent conventions, but even then, there is room for stylistic choices and creative approaches

experience you have with a place will change how you approach reading that text or composing one yourself.

Getting out and living is something that plays into my process, even if it's an academic article or a literary analysis. While I was doing preliminary research for an independent study on Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, the opportunity to take several road trips came up. The first of these road trips found me flying to Prescott, Arizona. In the months preceding the trip I had developed a habit of writing poetry. As part of that habit, I used my iPod as a place to jot ideas down as they came to me. Writing happens everywhere. As we flew into Phoenix Airport, I watched out the window. On my iPod, I wrote:

Arrived in Phoenix and sallied forth from our plane like Mallory setting off into the great Himalayan abyss. We wound our way through the great concrete complex; a shrine to the modern necessity immediate travel and found the remainder of our luggage as it spewed out of the belly of the plane, ejaculated down onto the conveyor in some sort of pornographic display of our fellow travelers belongings. Rushed down the conveyors walkways, rushing us, urging us to, yes, yes, yes, coming out onto the street, the explosion of rush hour traffic dashing across our deprived senses. Thrown into this sea of sonic debauchery, we were like fresh meat thrown to the wolves that lurked in the jungles north of Da Nang. The great black fingers of the Rockies, their out-stretched arms reaching out with crooked arthritic fingers grasping in desperation for Phoenix across the floor of the great southwestern. The acrid smell of the burning desert, the scent of the charred chaparral lingered in the air. City was surrounded by long strings of freight cars; the Mid-western vagrants of the rails that lie about waiting to be called up once more; a call that would never come. They were a string of dirty soot stained pearls of wisdom from bygone eras. On the horizon, palms reached their long necks high above the buildings, awkwardly pearling out like gangly, Dahli surrealistic long neck giraffes above the zoo, while the distant mountains stood looming over the sad lonely grave of the valley.⁷

7. As troubled of a relationship as I have with technology, it has become an integral part of my production, regardless of the type of writing I'm doing. Being able to capture a thought wherever it might occur to me and being able to access that information on a more manageable platform (like my laptop) is essential. It's handy, and it's convenient in that I can't lose it as easily as a piece of paper. Using a typing app or the notes on my phone has allowed me to capture the info/thought/idea in a format that is accessible and has the benefit of being an editable file, unlike a physical paper note that I'd only have to type up once I got to somewhere where I could sit down with my computer . . . Besides that, I absolutely cannot stand hand-writing things. I figured out that I type much faster than I am able to hand-write, thanks to my mother for taking the time to teach me how to type on the old manual typewriter in my family's business office. Heavy, clunky, and downright wonderful. That thing gave a real sense of accomplishment with every line you finished typing. Bing!

Uptake is another term we use in the Writing Program. It is the process we go through to take up a new idea and think about it until it makes sense (ISU Writing Program).

I wrote this down, trying to capture my gut impression, or my **uptake** of the experience, the first words that came to me to describe the impact of what I was seeing, experiencing. I thought this was going to be fodder for more poetry in the spirit of Beat poetry. What it turned into is a novel I've been working on for about four or five years now. A

far cry from the series of one-page poems I thought was going to come out of this sketch.

I don't want you to get the impression that I'm advocating for everyone to take off on wild cross-country escapes. Not everyone can. The opportunity to make that trip across most of the country on the cheap (i.e. at very little to no cost to me) doesn't come along for everyone. Flip back to that moment where I realized the brutal honesty of the disgusting. Staring down into that vile toilet, wishing I had never even heard of the Midwestern casual dining franchise, I understood that I was seeing an aspect of the world that is honest in a way I had seldom seen. There was another moment on that road trip that gave me a sense of connectedness that isn't easily conveyed, not easily explained through materialism, but that is rooted in the physical space; the **ecology**.

Thinking back to those moments in the Love's truckstop bathrooms, after the toxins had been effectively purged from my stomach, I took refuge in a motel in western Ohio before setting out on what I thought was going to be the next-to-last leg of my journey. Several hundred miles, and a few days later, I departed my brother's house nestled in the hills of West Virginia and pushed north. I made my way through the Appalachians of western Maryland, out across the rolling hills of Pennsylvania-Dutch Amish country with its horse drawn carriages and roadside apple pies that were unfortunately out of season during the bitter mid-January days—veering northeast in New Jersey straight toward the sprawling metropolis that is New York City. A place that is at once one of the single most amazing and beautiful places, and worst examples of modern civilization, all rolled into one. But remember, there's beauty in that ugliness—something that someone once described as “the beatific” New York City, home of the dumb saints, the holy goofs.

I was just south of Paterson, New Jersey, when the thought hit me. Several miles, a gas stop, and a brief conversation with the attendant, and I found myself meandering down around Bear Mountain, that round-shouldered giant standing guard on the western bank of the Hudson River north of the city. I crossed the toll bridge and turned back south. Not more than a couple hundred feet from the end of the bridge, there was a turn-off for a scenic overlook. I pulled in, grabbed my copy of *On the Road*, and one of

the beers that I had hauled with me from Montréal, the first destination of the road trip, only to realize that the beers had partially frozen in the trunk of my car. Turns out sweatshirts don't make for great insulation. Yes, I keep a book with me on road trips, especially solo road trips. Always bring a book when you travel. They make for great company.

I hopped the rusted steel rails put in place to keep tourists from wandering too close to the cliff that dropped down to the rocky bank of the Hudson below. The sun hung low over Bear Mountain as I cracked the beer open and lit a cigarette. I looked out at the eagles soaring over the reach of the shimmering blue water as it flowed south. I flipped through the dog-eared pages of the book until I found the passage that I had thought about way back south of Paterson:

I started hitching up the thing. Five scattered rides took me to the desired Bear Mountain Bridge, where Route 6 arched in from New England. It began to rain in torrents when I was let off there. It was mountainous. Route 6 came over the river, wound around a traffic circle, and disappeared into the wilderness. Not only was there no traffic but the rain come down in buckets and I had no shelter. I had to run under some pines to take cover; this did no good; I began crying and swearing and socking myself on the head for being such a damn fool. I was forty miles north of New York; all the way up I'd been worried about the fact that on this, my big opening day, I was only moving north instead of the so-longed for west. Now I was stuck on my northern-most hang-up. I ran a quarter-mile to an abandoned cute English-style filling station and stood under the dripping eaves. High up over my head the great hairy Bear Mountain sent down thunderclaps that put the fear of God in me. All I could see were smoky trees and dismal wilderness rising to the skies. "What the hell am I doing up here?" I cursed, I cried for Chicago. "Even now they're all having a big time, they're doing this, I'm not there, when will I get there!"—and so on. (Kerouac)

I shut the book and tucked it into the pocket of my heavy coat. I lifted my beer, "Here's to road trips, to Jazz, to you, Jack, *un canadien Français*, born *en Nouvelle-Angleterre* to another."⁸

8. Yes, I'm fully aware that there are some serious mental gymnastics going on here. *Why?* You may ask. It relates back to a quote from Jack Kerouac's journals, "I am French Canadian, born in New England. When swear, I often swear in French. When dream, I always dream in French. When I cry, I always cry in French." Of course, this is translated to English from Kerouac's mother-tongue: Québécois French. In the moment, and having a limited level of fluency in French, I was left with only the ability to say what I wanted through code-switching mid-sentence. Saying New England in French gives a sense of distance from the place, of being *from* there, but never feeling fully a part of that place. It's mere happenstance that I, and Kerouac, happen to be from that region. It's never been home in any real sense if you believe that old adage, home is where the heart is. If that adage holds true, *mon cœur est à Montréal*. That's where home is.

I finished the half-frozen beer, trying in vain to muster enough warmth in my hands to melt its contents. I climbed back over the rails into the parking lot and walked down the narrow shoulder of the road. It's still there, that filling station where Kerouac tried to find shelter from the rain. It's a tourist information center these days; a rack of maps and attraction brochures stood outside. I stood there taking it all in. This was the place of Kerouac's first ill-conceived attempt at heading west, and here I was, coming to the end of this, the first of many journeys, a waypoint in a much longer journey that can't be plotted on maps, its destination beyond the measure of longitude and latitude. It was under the eaves of that building, the former filling station, that I understood that the "road" wasn't a road, but a path: The Way. I had been trying to figure out this feeling, the push-pull, the imperative to leave home, but always feeling drawn back. It was there under those eaves that I understood that it was the road, not the concrete, asphalt veins that crisscross America that were the road, but an internal path, the way to growth, to understanding, to connecting to something beyond the physical spaces, beyond that which we can measure, quantify, statistically analyze and compare. I was *sur le chemin*. I had been my whole life.

By this point, you're probably wondering what the hell this has to do with writing research, or writing at all. We often think of writing as that static activity. We think of texts as something on a shelf, in a library, artifacts catalogued and deposited among the long rows of shelves of libraries, conversation pieces placed like trophies atop a mantle to impress company like trophies—evidence of intellectualism.

Though time certainly changes a place, there is something that remains of that moment of inspiration that we are able to access if only we are still enough, quiet enough to hear the breaths of the past that echo in those places. These experiences, the feelings, the sense that there is something about being in a particular place that adds an entirely different dimension to a text that you've read, that connects, that roots your writing in the experiences of past generations. That's what this 'ecology' thing is all about, not just whether or not you could read outside because of the weather. It goes far beyond that. It is often difficult to explain. It's not neat, it's messy and complicated, not easily conveyed to someone that hasn't taken the time to quiet their mind and exist in a place, experiencing it for all that it is: beautiful and crudely wonderful. The ecology of a text is much larger, an integral piece of the text that affects all of the other categories of a cultural-historical activity theory analysis of a genre, or a specific mentor text.

I don't recall who said it, but I heard this piece of advice while I was finishing my undergrad, sometime in the last three semesters of that period,

“I am a writer until I put down the pen. Always be writing.” I think of it a little bit differently. Writing, and for that matter, writing research, is an ongoing process. Every day is part of your writing process. Everything you do is research. It only takes stopping and appreciating the experience of the lived life to understand this. That includes the spaces that we move in. It’s not something easy to do, but it has proven immensely valuable to me. Get out into the world and be still. Listen for the echoes, give yourself space to hear them, be present where you are—wherever that may be. For me, living, purposefully, consciously living, is my writing process. Always live, always be writing.

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