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Doubling Back on the City as Text™ Walkabout

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I had been hearing about City as Text™ (CAT) for some time from my honors dean, Sara E. Quay, and from faculty members who had participated in CAT programs around the nation and internationally. So when Sara asked if I would like to participate in the Rotterdam City as Text Faculty Institute, I was prepared—in a broadly conceptual sense. Needless to say, Rotterdam was fabulous, the Institute was eye-opening, and I was converted.

Bringing that energy and set of ideas back to my own honors foundations class was a way of preparing the students to look with new eyes, not just through a disciplined or focused gaze. Honors students often arrive at a critical moment; they have demonstrated maturity and purpose, resolve and dedication, but they are not yet locked into a unidirectional pattern of task and completion. They can still be encouraged to wander off-script and appreciate aspects of the world that, under usual circumstances, they might regard as distracting or insignificant. And where better to start than in their own small college town, which they likely know only in terms of its supermarkets and quickest ways to the interstate highway.

Taking the ideas that I had engaged in Rotterdam into the classroom, I greeted my HON200 students with the news that their first assignment would be an exploration—a walkabout in CAT terminology—in downtown Beverly, Massachusetts. Too well-mannered to groan, they listened attentively as I explained the walkabout (as an Australian, I found particular resonance in this term), organized them into groups, and encouraged them to “notice as much as you can, filter nothing.” I had become particularly concerned about the reach of television shows such as *The Amazing Race*—with its encouragement of American contestants to see the world not in its complexity but as the shortest route between an entry and exit point: the world as a gameboard, with prizes for avoiding “distractions” such as local culture, routines, and people—or worse, *Survivor*, which looks like a Dickensian study abroad program with its “eat or be eaten” social Darwinism and tokenized representations of “exotic culture.” CAT might well be the antidote; its prize was deliberate encouragement to stop, get lost, read, make connections, chat, or taste, reshaping individual expectations in a new (or old) location. I did not want our students to think of “place” as a set of boxes to be checked before returning with a completed worksheet but as a multidimensional set of realities with social, physical, historical, political, infrastructural, and commercial layers.

Beverly, a small but historically significant coastal town north of Boston, offers exactly the right combination of suburban elements and lived complexity for our honors students to explore in nuanced and conscious ways. Beverly is locally famous for its enormous nineteenth-century shoe factory. The factory itself closed long ago, but its giant footprint now supports an equally giant set of commercial complexes, a micro-Beverly with businesses, restaurants, cafes, and professional offices. When the shoe factory was at its peak, Beverly was a largely working-class town with a set of beachfront mansions. When “the old shoe” ceased operation and eventually became several acres of white-collar activity instead, Beverly’s demographics experienced a sudden shift. The town’s working-class families—hitherto employed, housed, and organized largely by the shoe factory—lost their clear role in the community. Many found work in other Beverly operations or moved away, but

the coherent working identity disappeared. Beverly mutated into a middle-class community. The building of the Cummings Center on the old shoe site meant that Beverly's income remained stable; instead of taxing many working-class salaries, Beverly now taxed a solid number of middle-class salaries. With this demographic shift in identity, Beverly started to attract or strengthen other services; colleges, small businesses, real estate developments, restaurants, and big box stores all moved in to cater to Beverly's now up(per)-market citizens.

The remaining working-class families now worked not for a single giant industry but for a variety of smaller organizations across a larger physical space. Their share of Beverly's housing space remained largely the same; they lived in the triple-deckers that fringed the old shoe's campus. They had once walked to their jobs in the factory, and their children had walked to the nearby state-run schools. The middle-class, white-collar workers who moved into the new Cummings Center offices bought the houses closer to the ocean or in the leafy, well-heeled parts of the town once owned by industrial barons. Beverly still had its working-class community, but it no longer dominated the town's routines or rhythms. It was not a case of gentrification—the incoming middle classes were not buying up and occupying working-class housing—but the end of Beverly's manufacturing era altered the town's social and economic profile in profound ways. These strata of old and new, working class and middle class, are discernible if one takes the time to notice them.

The divide between the old and the new Beverly can be seen in Beverly's two arteries: chic, elevated Cabot Street and dowdy, sunken Rantoul Street. Cabot Street has always been the town's literal and figurative "high street." Elevated above the flatter area that housed the shoe factory campus, Cabot Street supports Beverly's churches as well as the Town Hall and the major banks; it shares its physical elevation with the larger, wealthier houses that occupy the leafy streets between Cabot and Beverly's spectacular and well-maintained oceanfront. Rantoul Street, by contrast, parallels the railway line and marks the low-income, light industrial area of the town's lower reaches. Its waterfront is the broad, muddy mouth of the Bass River. The side streets that connect Rantoul and Cabot

typically begin with low-income, multi-family houses at the Rantoul end and then give way to larger, more elaborate single-family homes and smarter retail or service operations up at the Cabot end.

The contrast between what has remained working-class territory and the more recent wave of middle-class residents becomes clear in a walkabout. My students are aware of Cabot Street, with its hipster coffee shops and boutique retail stores, but despite likely crossing or even driving along Rantoul Street on their way to Stop & Shop or Salem, they cannot bring it to mind or name it during discussions about their CAT project. Some of them are surprised that they are being sent to walk around the Rantoul Street part of the town. “Why are we going there?” they ask; “What do you want us to look at?”

At this point, I invite them to tell stories about their own towns and what they have discovered through the years. What parts of their town are promoted? How? I ask them to describe their towns to their classmates: where do they begin and what do they emphasize? Why? And then I ask them to tell the reverse story: think about what you did not mention. Why did you choose not to include the commuter rail station, the strip malls, the car repair, and the construction businesses? Now tell your neighbors about *those* aspects of the town. How do they connect with the parts that you did mention? Who lives/works there? How do you get to these parts? How do these parts identify themselves? What sorts of signage, infrastructure, vehicles, bumper stickers, or social interactions do you see in these parts? Once they have absorbed the idea of the city as a multi-dimensional operation, with its high- and low-profile identities as well as its interstices, alleyways, and liminal sections, they are eager to “get lost” in the eight-block Cabot/Rantoul section of Beverly.

Before the pandemic, I would anchor our walkabout at a comfortable Cabot Street institution, the Atomic Café. I would give the students their final instructions and send them out for an hour’s walk. Meanwhile, surrounded by the Atomic’s reliable internet, soft alternative rock playlist, and extensive choice of chai teas, I would set up my laptop and wait for them to return. As they filed back in, they would be full of excitement about their adventure. They

would show me photos of urban curiosities and immediately want to recount their richest observations, conversations, brushes with temporary housing or poorly monitored parking areas, changes in garden size as they walked between the streets, and contrast between the elegant Belgian waffle house on Cabot and the down-at-the-heel Chinese restaurants on Rantoul. This initial debrief would take place in the Atomic rather than after we had returned to campus so that the freshness of the experience was more available to us.

Back in class, we would talk about City as Identity: what does Beverly *think* it is? What, when you also consider what is off the beaten path, is Beverly *actually*? We would examine the town's web presence and discuss exactly who gets to decide what Beverly's public identity might be and how that identity is sustained. What aspects of Beverly's identity are missing from the town's "official" story of itself and why? Did they see inequalities in resources between the two street levels? What was needed? Where could one report these needs or sponsor remediation? Where did they see abundance? What did that abundance look like? Did the different locations have a gender identity? Did they see differences among how individuals used or operated in these spaces according to gender identity? The students then presented analysis of the observations they had collected on their walkabout, and their CAT experience set us up for other examinations of lived experience, including a Major-Furniture-Showroom-as-Text project later in the semester.

This last "pandemic" fall, the students still did their CAT projects, but they completed their walkabout on their own time, without setting out from or meeting back at the Atomic afterwards. I was sad not to be sending them off in person from the Atomic, but the circumstances also allowed me to reflect on my role in the process and ask some questions about the assumptions that I might have inadvertently stitched into our CAT project. I am now rethinking the "anchoring" aspect of the walkabout experience. Why, for example, did it seem natural for me to start, wait, and finish at the comfortable, familiar, middle-class, and well-resourced Atomic Café? Was I confirming for my students that, in returning to this upscale coffee shop on the smart street, they were venturing

away from and returning to normal space? Did setting out into the complex world from this point suggest that the other side of this exercise was the obverse of normal, that the well-groomed Atomic was “us” while the low-budget eateries on Rantoul were “other.” Why didn’t we start on Rantoul and treat Cabot as the figurative bottom of the walkabout exercise? Asking the students to spend some time discussing what they had experienced around the plastic tables in the Beverly Jade or China River restaurant might help to destabilize the implication that middle-class Cabot was Beverly’s public face while Rantoul was its service entrance. Pointing out to my students that Beverly residents do more business on or near Rantoul (for the supermarket, clothing alterations, major pharmacies, gas stations, Dunkin’ Donuts, Post Office, commuter rail, take-out restaurants, and liquor store) than on Cabot (the picture framing place, gift shops, real estate offices, museums) might also indicate that Beverly’s self-promotion as a “garden city by the sea” with historical links to General Washington and at least two U.S. presidents is more socially and historically complex than they might first realize. By encouraging the students to find evidence of their town’s social history, our exercise teaches students that they need to start by recognizing Rantoul Street as central to, and not the outer edge of, the “real” Beverly.

I have come to recognize in this space between fully immersive walkabouts that I should still think of myself as a student of CAT, always available for new insights and inspirations. If I want to impart some of the wonder that I felt on Rotterdam’s Nieuwe Binnenweg or in the corridors of its city hall or in the narrow indeterminate space between its beautifully preserved fifteenth-century port and the twenty-first-century low-income apartment blocks behind it, I need to be able to still get lost in my own neighborhood. I, too, still need to walkabout, look, chat, feel, taste, hear, and think about the never-static complexity of human spaces.

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