

## NARRATIVE 14.

# DISPLACEMENT IN THE CLASSROOM

**Charlotte Kupsch**

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

For me, the experience of being a TA and a graduate student has always been synonymous with geographic displacement. When I moved to Lincoln, Nebraska, several years ago to begin my Ph.D., I had never taught before, and I'd never lived outside my home state of Wisconsin. In my mind, these sources of newness were intertwined: How could I teach when I couldn't even see the ground beneath my own feet? When the places around us appear hazy gray on our mental maps, how can we construct the spaces of our classrooms?

It is difficult to be a new TA, and it is harder still when one is acclimating to the overwhelming newness of one's entire life. Even the weather is different in Nebraska, where storms rip across the plains in what seems like seconds, where I learned I could count on arriving to my office drenched in rainwater or soaked in sweat—one of the two. Mindful of my obvious gender and my visible youth, I sought professorial authority in blazers and loafers, as if these objects could root me to the ground in ways that my own body could not yet achieve. We may think the body and the mind are separate until we stand or sit in front of a class and feel every movement, every breath, amplified. Can you know where you are in your classroom if you do not know where you are in your city? Can you know where you are in your work if you do not know where you are in your body?

For academics, the classroom feels familiar because it is where we have spent so much of our lives; we may forget that it is a space that we create, a social concept we perceive individually but agree upon collectively. I understand this now because the overwhelming displacement I felt as a new TA drove me to study the concept of place itself—classroom as place and city as place, of course, but also the page as place, the narrative as place, the idea as place. The classrooms we teach in are more than material, more than imagined; they are confluences of hundreds of trajectories, assemblages of bodies, ideas, pens, laptops, coats, air conditioners, beliefs, orientations, perspectives—

For me, being a TA has been entirely about striving to understand place. And the experience of displacement is compounded by the expectation of transience.

Even as I lean as far as I can into embracing my new home, on these flat plains I can see all the way to the next geographic move, the next displacement that this career demands, and the ways I will, always, have to begin again.