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Jesse Snider

*Southern Illinois University Carbondale*, [jesse.snider@siu.edu](mailto:jesse.snider@siu.edu)

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## **“Is This Place Inside or Outside?”: Issues of Space in *Kentucky Route Zero***

Jesse Snider  
Southern Illinois University

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*Using the video game Kentucky Route Zero as an artifact and the theories of space and place of de Certeau, I examine “confused spaces:” places that present simultaneously as two or more contradictory spaces. Through the inevitable confusion between my performance/agency as the game’s player and the performance/agency of the characters within the game, I re-examine de Certeau’s idea of the pedestrian through the lens of twice-behaved behaviors, bureaucracy, remembered religion, inside, outside, and the agency to exert perceived change in one’s environment. Finally, I bring what I learned through Kentucky Route Zero into the realm of the physical, as I briefly examine a particular Black Box theater as a real-life confused space and the confusing effect of trying to keep track of all the places a small theater has been and can be.*

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Keywords: de Certeau, Kentucky Route Zero, twice-behaved behaviors, video games, space and place

Kentucky Route Zero is a bit of an oddity in the realm of video games. The game was released/authored by Cardboard Computer in 2013, who describe it as a “magical realist adventure game about a secret highway in the caves beneath Kentucky, and the mysterious folks who travel it.” This reference to magical realism is the first of many references to the works which influenced Cardboard Computer in its creation of the game; the use of the term implies Kentucky Route Zero took influence directly from Gabriel Garcia Márquez and Salman Rushdie. Upon entering the game, the player is introduced to a slowly unfolding procession of theatrical, film, architectural, southern fiction, and historical influences including but not limited to Samuel Beckett, Flannery O’Connor, Volker Schlöndorff, Andrei Tarkovsky, the Great Depression, and Prohibition. Kentucky Route Zero at no point features the killing of enemies, immediately setting it apart from the majority of popular video games; but even within the realm of adventure games, it stands separate. Kentucky Route Zero wears on its sleeve an influential

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Jesse Snider is currently pursuing his doctorate from the School of Communication Studies at Southern Illinois University.

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debt to the text-based adventure games of the 1970s such as *Colossal Cave Adventure* (Crowther & Woods, 1977), *Zork* (Anderson, et al., 1977), and the small university-based collaborative communities which spawned them. The game also features a point-and-click interface pioneered by adventure games in the 1980's and 90's such as the *King's Quest* (Williams, 1983) and the *Monkey Island* (Gilbert, 1990) series. However, unlike those influential titles, it includes no lose state and has no puzzles to solve or dramatic action to resolve; the game instead mainly focuses on character interaction, visual and auditory worldbuilding, wandering, wondering, and quiet reflection.

Consisting of five “acts,” each of which are separated into “scenes,” *Kentucky Route Zero* tackles themes of loss and financial ruin, debt, work, play, space, home, and identity throughout its story – all of which begins with a truck driver named Conway who spends the game attempting to make one last delivery to a street called Dogwood Drive before the antique store for which he works goes out of business. In attempting to find the address, Conway stumbles (or is led) to the Zero, a half-real metaphysical underground highway. This highway, and the locations adjacent to it, is the centerpiece through which *Kentucky Route Zero* uses, intentionally or otherwise, distinctly spatial and performative methods to expound upon its themes. One of the more prominent methods it uses is the deliberate confusion and conflation of inside and outside spaces, and place and the practice of space a la Michel de Certeau (1985).

In this essay, I examine how *Kentucky Route Zero*'s deliberate confusion of inside and outside points to deeper questions about my relation to and conception of space, by examining one scene in the second act of the game: *The Bureau of Reclaimed Spaces*. Along the way, I hope to evoke a little bit of what makes this game so special to me; why it's kept me wandering, wondering, and quietly reflecting; why I've spent so much time inside the game while technically being outside it, and how it affects my perception of space. Then, I open the question of how these reflections might translate to physical, real space by pondering a *Black Box* theater where I find myself unable to see it as an empty room and instead continuously re-live the spaces that the place has been in the past. I've been bugging anyone who will listen (or, at least, not leave) about *Kentucky Route Zero* for years; I might as well sit down for a spell and make it, for lack of a better word, legible.

### **Kentucky Route Zero**

*Kentucky Route Zero* is my favorite video game – it's mysterious in the Flannery O'Connor sense that “our life is and will remain essentially mysterious” (1969, p. 41), calm, engaging, funny, sad, and intensely citational; I've been bugging my friends about the game for years. One thing I've learned is that when you talk about a video game, and say that one video game is your favorite, people assume that it's one you spend all your time playing. I've collected more than a few virtual coins in my

day, but I can't say that I've spent that much time actually sitting with the program running, looking at and directly interacting with Kentucky Route Zero. Steam, a digital distribution platform, keeps track of how many hours I play of every game I own. At time of writing, Steam says that I have spent 38.7 hours playing the game throughout the nine years since it was released, and at least five of those hours came from re-playing sections so I could pull accurate descriptions and quotes for this essay.

That said, I don't think those people who think I spend an inordinate amount of time with this game are necessarily wrong. Though I haven't spent that much time playing Kentucky Route Zero, it's on my mind a lot. A few friends and I have had long conversations about this game, and it feels like reflecting on a road trip. We try to piece together what happened, what it meant, where it got us, and where to go from here. Jake Beck even wrote a performance that involved one of those conversations (Beck, 2016). During the last scene of *Game (Over) Life*, he recounts a discussion he and I had during one of our many Tuesdays at The Loophole Pub in Denton, Texas, about a scene in the game that is visually inspired by *Le Blanc Seing* (Magritte, 1965), a scene that evokes the feeling of being lost in the woods but at home with the people around you, plunging serenely into the dark, unsure of what comes next. It left an impression on him as it did me. After a quiet moment, he asked out loud what it all meant, and apparently I replied, "Fuck if I should know." Classy language began to elude us as we sunk deeper into conversation about this moving piece that would not leave our heads. We laughed and sat in that head/space for hours, wondering what would come next in the game, letting our minds and words wander to questions of what home means, what family means. I eventually loaded up the jukebox with "Long Journey Home," the bluegrass standard that plays during the scene we discussed. I'll let Jake take the reigns for a bit:

While not the same version as in the game, we both sang along with a sense of reverence. Over the course of the night, we talked at great length in our own bible study, drinking long and hard, filled with a sense of awe and inspiration that we have rarely felt before. I looked up through the bar window out past the neon signs and street lights and saw the creeping darkness kept at bay by a song and a feeling that I wanted to never end. (Beck, 2016)

I think we felt the same: that even though we were in a bar, we were still in the game, along for the ride. Unlike many video games where control is placed in the player's hands with the expectation that they are to embody that character to the point of featuring extensive tools to customize an avatar at the start, in Kentucky Route Zero, the characters already exist. There's Conway (the old antiques delivery driver who valorizes the value of labor) and Shannon (the repairer of outdated technology who can't find work). There's an old dog wearing a straw hat (which have both seen better days); there's Ezra (the boy who has lost his parents), his pet eagle Julian, and

Junebug and Johnny (two humanoid robots who play music and playfully participate in a purposeful state of identity re/construction). I am not them – I sometimes choose what they say, but what they say is never out of character. They all drift together over the course of the game, deciding to journey together for the night, as I do when I open the game. I may not be them, but the more I stop to reflect, to wonder and wander with them, I start to feel like I'm right beside them.

Maybe it's the mood of the game: a slow-paced journey that quite literally is a road trip. Kentucky Route Zero takes place over the course of one night, starting at sunset and ending, presumably, with sunrise - much of the game is set in dark places, but it never betrays you with a jump scare or a horrific image. Kentucky Route Zero is very much about the sense of being comfortable in the dark, about living in a space with a lack of definition, and taking things as they come. Maybe it's the fact that, when I first played Kentucky Route Zero, the game was not yet complete – Cardboard Computer released the first in a series of five “acts” in 2013, taking its sweet time to finish the next act, making sure it was right. I always pondered to myself that I should feel more impatient, even though I was not – the way this game made me feel, the directions my mind took when it was on my mind, all lead me to trust Cardboard Computer. I wanted Cardboard Computer to take as long as it needed to make the thing it wanted to make, even when the gap between acts started lasting multiple years. Though the game is now completed, I always think back that having more Kentucky Route Zero to look forward to was an intensely positive experience in my life.

### **The Gaston Trust for Imagined Architecture**

The introduction to Act II of Kentucky Route Zero introduces the “Bureau of Reclaimed Spaces,” the player's first stop along the Zero. The Bureau hires accountants, bureaucrats, and artists as clerks who review and pass judgment on proposals to re-zone buildings and areas for other purposes. The player is briefly placed in control of Lula Chamberlain, an installation-artist turned Bureau clerk who, after receiving a rejection letter for an annual fellowship which would allow her to quit, can halfheartedly review a proposal involving a hospital building that closed when it could not maintain health code but could see new life as an automobile dealership which has comparatively lax standards. The player chooses whether Lula accepts or rejects the proposal, and she then moves on to the next one, which involves a distillery's potential as a cemetery. The game then returns the player to Shannon and Conway, the former of which Conway met while trying to find the Zero, who have just arrived at the Bureau along with their old dog companion (which, due to my choices earlier in the game, is nameless). Here we learn that repurposed spaces are not something with which the Bureau deals from afar; the Bureau itself is a reclaimed church. Shannon nearly immediately asks, half to Conway and half to the building

itself, “This is weird, but . . . do you think we’re inside or outside right now?” After Shannon asks this, the player is then prompted to choose Conway’s response from a list of three: “Inside,” “Outside,” and “Both.” Though the literal definitions of inside and outside certainly apply, an examination of the context surrounding Shannon’s inquiry, both in-fiction and otherwise, points to the significance of her question regarding how humans perceive and live space.

Lula’s rejection letter during Act II’s intro sequence was from the “Gaston Trust for Imagined Architecture,” a direct reference to Gaston Bachelard, who examines how architecture can “influence the creativity of poets” in *The Poetics of Space* (Bachelard, 1958). The church which the Bureau reclaimed contains numerous other subtle references to Bachelard’s work. Televisions lining the brick walls of the Bureau constitute installation art that display images reflecting Bachelard’s definition of intimate spaces: a fragile bird’s nest made from various discarded human-made items and a description of the importance of maintaining proper lighting in preventing motion sickness on an elevator. The Bureau sits alongside an underground river, and hermit crabs along the dock repurpose empty inkjet cartridges and dense chains of paperclips as shells. Bachelard utilizes the metaphor of the seashell as a concept for “home,” a “clear division between inside and outside,” viewing the home as a space that fuels creative work that can only be produced in seclusion from the outside world. Despite this view, he argues that inside and outside should be treated less as a binary and more as a dialectic, implying that home is at least as internal as it is external – inside cannot exist without outside, and vice versa.

### **Random Access Self-Storage**

The presentation of the Bureau itself provides further context for Shannon’s earlier inquiry – is this place *inside* or *outside*? The building that houses the Bureau is visually presented, however stylized, as a cathedral, designed as a mixture between the striking architectures of St. Bride’s Church in East Kilbride, Scotland and Mariendom (“Mary’s Cathedral”) in Velbert, Germany; but no worship happens here at the Bureau. Clerks sift through endless, poorly organized boxes of paperwork and undergo endless and fruitless routine, which seems to be a nod to Beckett’s notion of habit, the actions we take to make sense of the world but from which we never learn (Counsell, 1996). The church congregation was displaced by the Bureau when the Bureau moved into the building. The congregation temporarily occupied a self-storage facility owned by the Bureau elsewhere on the Zero but quietly dispersed when none of the storage units at the facility were large enough to fit the entire congregation. The pastor eventually left too but left behind tapes of his homilies. The only person remaining is Brandon, a janitor who has taken up the task of playing the sermon tapes every night to an empty building, sometimes listening in but never quite believing. After listening

to a tape, Brandon tells Conway, “OK, that’s it. Next, there are some rituals that you and I aren’t allowed to participate in, I don’t think. And I don’t remember them anyway.” He knows, or thinks he knows, what the place is supposed to be, and despite his lack of the tools to treat it as such, he follows that knowledge without question. Given these contexts, Shannon’s question seems to gain an extra layer of meaning – what is the Bureau? How is it being used, and how can she use it?

De Certeau provides insight in *Practices of Space* (1985). The words space and place are commonly used synonymously to point generally towards a location, but de Certeau differentiates between the two as distinct, but not binary, concepts. De Certeau asserts that place involves a view from the top, that urban environments are designed by bureaucrats, city planners, and others in power in order to dictate the actions and behaviors of those who exist within those environments. Place is proper, static, and institutionalized. Space, on the other hand, is the view from within— space is practiced place. While place is univocal and domineering, space is subjective, multivocal, and dynamic. Space contains within it the possibility of tactical intervention, where the pedestrian gains the ability to exert agency over their environment. Where place is the sidewalk, space is the path worn into the grass by those who wish an alternate route.

De Certeau makes a connection between the grammatical and the spatial - where language is the unspoken system of words and symbols that are meant to constitute comprehensible communication, and speech is a specific utterance of that language, place and space act similarly. “The act of walking is to the urban system what the act of speaking, the Speech Act, is to language or to spoken utterance” (de Certeau, 1985). This use of the lingual aligns with Ferdinand de Saussure’s link between *la langue* and *la parole*, which would seem to lend to space and place a distinct structuralist flavor (de Saussure, 1916). However, the Bureau resists clear distinctions between the “signifier” and the “signified” (Carlson, 2004). A church occupied by an inefficient-to-the-point-of-being-useless bureaucratic system and a self-storage unit used only by a church with no parishioners may seem a hopeless use of space, but as de Certeau posits, the individual calls the possible into existence via the very act of walking.

### **Nameless Interiors**

The act of walking, when viewed through de Certeau’s lens, manifests the reframing power of social performances, which “reclaim, short-circuit, and resignify the citational force of the signed imperatives” (Conquergood, 2016). One who walks, who explores and experiences and constructs a space, does so betwixt and between the authority of place and the possibility of space.

Even in the Bureau of Reclaimed Spaces, that hopeless combination of sacred form and bureaucratic content, the player can trigger a change through walking. The second floor of the Bureau is a conference room, and

Kentucky Route Zero gives the characters no actual need to go there in the critical path of the game. Conway and Shannon are at the Bureau to find the address of Conway's last delivery, and to do so, they must experience the effects of the Bureau's disorganization by taking a confusing route through the building – the receptionist directs them to take the muzak-filled elevator to the fifth floor, where a bitter accountant named Greg says that they are in the wrong place and should take the elevator back down to the first floor. There, Lula directs Conway and Shannon up the elevator again to the fourth floor, where the two find boxes upon boxes of paper documents containing absolutely nothing useful. However, if the player decides to make a detour to the conference room and have Conway and Shannon walk through a crowded meeting out to the balcony overlooking the Bureau's lobby, the camera will eventually and slowly pan farther and farther to the right. This movement eventually reveals a massive church organ placed on an adjacent balcony that had always been there – just out of sight, above where the scene began, where Conway's old dog sits guarding the delivery truck. A shirtless, bearded man in swimming trunks is sitting on the organ's bench, grilling a hot dog over a charcoal grill, and turns to play the organ only once the player finds him by walking where they were never directed to walk. As the music starts, the player is left to explore as all the lights in the Bureau dim, as do the noises of paper rustling and telephones ringing – even the irritating muzak in the elevator is silenced.

By intervening, attempting to breach (or at least fully explore) the game's possible paths, the player helps call into existence an unexpected moment of serenity, an interruption by music during which the Bureau building's former status as a church suddenly reasserts itself, a reminder that there are those who still remember the history of the space or are at least willing to play along. The fact that Kentucky Route Zero links that call into walking is not unique in the video game world, as many have elements of exploration, but the context of its ruminations on space/place and inside/outside gives that walking a layer of significance. Ben Babbitt, Cardboard Computer's composer, remarked in an interview that the process of writing music for a church organ was difficult, especially so when so few players would ever find it (King, 2015). However, Babbitt and the rest of Cardboard Computer felt determined to give the player these reasons to intervene.

Even those employees in the Bureau, who do not walk, play along when the old man in the swim trunks starts playing the organ. When Conway and Shannon pass the conference room on the way to the balcony, the projector screen around which several employees are standing is blank. The employees silently turn their heads towards the two protagonists, noticing their interjection but not doing anything to rectify it. As the lights dim with the organ music, and the church reasserts its presence, the projectors flick on, previously lacking the light levels necessary to work properly. Displayed now are slides of crude white lines on sometimes blue and sometimes



orange backgrounds, the light from the projector bouncing off the screen, illuminating the Bureau employees against the now darkened conference room floor. The white lines create unlabeled charts explaining parallaxes, a perceived shift in the position of an object when viewed from a different perspective (Filitz, 2013). One slide displays two eyes on top of one another on the left, an X in the middle with an object at the center, and three different boxes on the right; each eye sees the object as being in front of a different box. Another slide illustrates how the transit of Venus, the rare astronomical phenomenon resembling a solar eclipse, was instrumental in determining the solar parallax: the triangulation that allowed scientists to estimate the distance between the Earth and the Sun - the first step in determining the size of the visible universe.

The Bureau employees had loaded their projectors with mathematical proofs that different perspectives can create alternate meanings and modes of thought, and stood waiting for the right moment to display them. My understanding of the Bureau of Reclaimed Spaces' goal is, at its core, to document and help materialize the ways in which individuals, organizations, and communities view places as different spaces: just because someone sees a building one way does not mean that the building cannot be seen differently. However, buried in paperwork, the people at the Bureau seem to have internalized this purpose, but the fluorescent lights of their bureaucratic space were too bright for them to see it. On paper, this building is an office, and paper is all that seems to exist here at the Bureau. However, once the church reasserts its presence, and the Bureau is practiced in two ways at once, the lights dim to the point where that paper is illegible. Once the lights dim, and I, the player, explore the building under new light, the Bureau employees continue watching Conway and Shannon as they pass in the other direction, still wordless, but with new meaning.

### **Paperclip Labyrinth**

The Bureau and its employees, under the harsh lighting of an office environment, seem to have fallen under the trap of textocentrism, a mindset which places more importance on the written word than on any other form of expression (Conquergood, 2016). Despite the Bureau's previously mentioned goal, which is a process that inherently evokes the liminal space between places (McKenzie, 2016), the Bureau has lost the ability to deal with such abstractions. Conway and Shannon experience this contradiction firsthand during their elevator shuffle up and down the floors of the Bureau: once they finally find Lula on the first floor, they ask if she can help them find Dogwood Drive, the street on which Conway is meant to make his last delivery. Lula remarks that she once lived on a Dogwood Drive, in a "Grimy old house ... basement full of insects, attic full of birds" (she may also, depending on the player's choice of response, crack a theatre joke about her arthritis: "My joints have been collaborating for years, it's only natural that they'd want

to kill each other now.”).

However, she says that her Dogwood Drive cannot possibly be the same Dogwood Drive that Conway is looking for, as the Bureau itself has renamed it. Dogwood Drive is a common street name, she says, and that used to be fine – until they decided to digitize their records. “The computer has no sense of ambiguity,” Lula tells them, “so it proclaims an error. ‘Name collisions,’ they call them.” In order to keep the computer happy, the Bureau had to shuck abstractions: her Dogwood Drive became Pale Dogwood Drive, and there might also be Large-leafed Dogwood Drive, or Himalayan Flowering Dogwood Drive, and the only way to know for sure which of those Dogwood Drives is Conway’s Dogwood Drive is to head up to Archives & Records on the fourth floor. Lula explains that their computer is off-site and that they keep a name change log on paper up there, but even that documentation is incomprehensible. “It’ll be filed under ‘O’ for ‘odonyms,’ probably. Or ‘G’ for ‘generic,’ or maybe ‘S’ for ‘specific.’ Depending on which part of the street name was changed.” As mentioned above, Conway and Shannon find nothing in those paper logs to help them, no matter how hard I try, which prompts Lula to send them to the self-storage/church described earlier, but this horrible and confusing paperclip labyrinth contains the Bureau’s inherent contradiction. In creating a system to document and track places, the Bureau lost track of what makes those spaces special: how the spaces are reclaimed and performed, what makes them alive.

“Analysis presupposes a corpse” (Turner, 1982, p. 89). The Bureau’s attempts to legitimize and document different spaces is a failure simply due to space’s illegible and shifting nature. Systematization and documentation for the sake of analysis is not inherently bad; the Bureau, like Zora Neale Hurston’s white man researcher, is “a fool not because [it] values literacy, but because [it] valorized it to the exclusion of other ... modes of knowing” (Conquergood, 2016, p. 46). Space is never static, though it can resemble static: the static between television and radio stations that muddles what is legible and marks an inbetween-ness. Space is performed, and space performs; space is “simultaneously lived, perceived, and conceived” (Hamera, 2006). Space is only as stable as the people present within it; and documentation requires some form of stability. The people who make up the Bureau, the accountants and bureaucrats and artists, in creating its paperclip labyrinth to map spaces, are searching for a way to make their job easier, but in doing so, they separate themselves from the crossroads, from “subjugated knowledges” that so elude inscription (Conquergood, 2016, p. 38).

The church congregation, displaced then dispersed, is a victim of the Bureau’s inability to fully comprehend its own subject matter. Shannon is right to be confused as to the status of this building – from the outside it is a church, and from the outside it is labeled an office; on the inside it is an office, and on the inside it is a disfunctional map of dead, forgotten spaces. Shannon, Conway, and I are dragged across this graveyard – various office

workers serving as tour guides that tell us what does what, what goes where, and where to go – a tour that literally never ends without our intervention. When we first get to Lula’s floor, we are greeted at the door by some paper pusher or another who asks us what we need. “Oh no, Lula is far too busy,” he says, and directs us towards Clerk Metzstein to get us set up with the proper paperwork. We lack the form he needs, so he passes us on to Böhm, who passes us to MacMillian, who passes us back to Metzstein (the names of these clerks are taken from the architects who designed the two churches after which the Bureau is modeled, effectively trapped and forgotten inside their own creations). Conway’s dialogue options are to chat with them, ask questions, and try to make sense of the required documents before moving along in this infinite loop, but I can also pick one dialogue option below all those: “SHANNON: ‘Let’s skip it – which one of you is Lula Chamberlain?’”

Shannon helps me cut through the red tape. Shannon is the one who questions the proper, and lets me see that there are other paths through this environment than the one created by the people who run it. I credit Shannon for my inkling to have her and Conway wander to the side of the second floor conference room balcony, to find the organ, to see a glimpse of what this place looked like before, what it can still look like given the right conditions. Like Bowman, who never actually found Stonewall’s arm (Bowman, 2006), I – sorry, Shannon – never got a clear answer, a sense of what this building is, but practicing our agency as pedestrians (de Certeau, 1985) was still a site-desacralization that allows me (me? I think it’s me) to cognitively remap the Bureau, and see the stories and performances that constitute the space within. In seeing that the Bureau can be practiced in two different ways helped me to contextualize all the other ways it can be used – a fort, a jungle gym, a bear cave. In walking, Conway, Shannon, and I call a possibility into new existence – a place practiced as two spaces. In walking, we call forth and restore the past (Schechner, 2016). “What the map cuts up, the story cuts across” (de Certeau, 1984). After the old man in the swim trunks finishes playing the organ and the music falls silent, the lights raise again; the Bureau is restored, and nobody says anything of it. But I remember.

## Conclusion

Though Shannon’s inquiry certainly questions the literal definitions of inside and outside, after spending so much time reflecting on, wondering about, and wandering through the Bureau, “Do you think we’re inside or outside right now” becomes a question that simultaneously asks other questions: What is the purpose of this building? How should I feel, act, and move here? Am I welcome here? Should I be here?

Though I am not often presented with a place that defies definition in quite the same way as the Bureau of Reclaimed Spaces, these questions certainly trouble me as a performance scholar. When I walk into the

Communication Studies department's black box theater at UNT, the same feeling of confusion strikes me that Shannon had when walking into the Bureau of Reclaimed Spaces. I often see the black box used as a classroom, and I have used it that way as well. But while people are learning (being taught?), I cannot unsee all the spaces this place has been for me: a laboratory, a stand-up stage, a state fair, a karaoke lounge, a family dinner, a ship, a carnival, a harlequin romance novel, an infinite void. I chose, they chose, we chose to practice that place as all these different spaces, and I should, they should, we should be here. Most of the people that helped create those spaces we experienced are gone now, moved on to wherever life brought them, but while I walk new spaces into existence, I still remember what came before and am always excited about what comes next. This place, a simple black room, has fostered my creativity as an artist at least as much as my home ever has. This place is and has been and forever will be all of those spaces. I might not know how to feel, act, move when this remembrance overwhelms me, but I know that however I feel, act, move is as much an act of creation as it is a citation. When I think about all the spaces this place can be, the room feels huge. It feels like I am outside. When Shannon asks Conway whether they are inside or outside, I always have Conway answer, "Both."

In our scrappy little black box, sometimes my attention gravitates towards the podium while I wait for the next lecture or set of instructions; and sometimes at the ground, the dirt specks or glitter or feathers marking the presence of other stories in this room that I never experienced. Sometimes I go sit on the riser in the corner, which now sits atop where I once operated a little corn dog stand.

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