

## Delight: The Politics of the Sidewalk

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—*After Ross Gay*

Today, in the chill air and late-leaf redolence of early November, I'm strolling a maze of campus sidewalks, wandering from one task to another. They are like concrete capillaries, these walkways—joining and branching, regularizing the flow of foot traffic, streamlining the normalized ground deemed necessary for walking. (No, not *deemed*, they are necessary: as I was considering this past sentence, I was passed by a fellow student on an electric wheelchair. He zoomed beyond me with a condescending smirk, which I took to mean, “On your right!” or, “Come on dawdler!” I'd like to think we were both smiling.)

Sidewalks *are* necessary, but not their proliferation. The overabundance of sidewalks displays clear institutional discomfort with nature, with imperfection—no mud, no dirt, no natural path. (“Two sidewalks diverged in a yellow wood, and I, I took the sidewalk less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.”—Robert Frost, almost). For example, on the University campus where I am walking, I have seen sidewalks appear almost overnight—if too many people walk off the pre-approved path, if too much mud appears, if too many people revolt from the concrete hegemony, then that new path must be quickly incorporated into mass-produced stone, into order, into the performance of perfection. Humanity must prevail over nature.

The question begs to be asked: If perfection is expected in the ways we walk, where else is it expected? In one's body? In one's practice of belief or non-belief? In one's relationships? These are all connected, much like a sidewalk.

In one of his essays, America's Kentucky-loving, cranky white farming uncle Wendell Berry distinguishes between a path and a road. The path, he argues, must adjust to the land, must notice its surroundings, must live in relationship with nature. The road, on the other hand, must force nature to conform to it. Roads need dynamite to waylay mountains, chainsaws to bow down the ancient forests, the bulldozer, the dump truck, the paver leaving asphalt in its wake like a hellish, industrialized slug. Sidewalks are attempts to join the two, but as always, the mechanized, modern side refuses to share. Sidewalks are always more roads than paths.

So where is the delight? It's found in all the ways that people and nature reject the premise of the sidewalk: All the people who stroll the carefully-coiffed turf (sidenote: did you know that grass is [the largest irrigated crop in the U.S.](#)?); the sidewalk chalk I saw months ago praising in their respective languages, "You'll love Arabic!" "Korean is cool!" "¡Necesitas Estudiar Español!"; the tree whose (*whose*, it's a being, too!) roots gnarl and gurgle out of the ground, breaking out of its carefully prescribed four-by-four plot, interrupting the sidewalk and its argument. Every time I cross a sidewalk fractured by a nearby tree, I remember how faulty modernity's claim to victory over nature really is. The tree's resistance is a reminder that we will not prevail against nature and any attempt to do so will result in great violence—the emptying of marshes, the dumping of sewage into freshwater, the spewing of toxic air into the lungs of the earth and of those people who lack the resources to escape it. To prevail against nature is to buy our own demise. Nature reminds us that we are far less significant, far less in control, than we think ourselves to be. What a gift.

The delight is found in the random curve in the sidewalk before me. Straight line, curve, straight line. Inefficient. Why? Because there used to be a tree there. And the person who built the sidewalk was good enough to build a *path* around it. And now that the tree has returned to the soil, the sidewalk marks the indelible influence of nature on all of us: the need for inefficiency, the joy of taking the longer route, of building a path around the mountain instead of a road through it, of loving who you need to love even when society tells you it goes against the way of things, of allowing yourself the courtesy of living in your own body even if the wide world tells you to change, adapt, adopt the values of the majority. It reminds me of the delight of stopping a moment to sit in the gracious shade and ancient wisdom of an invisible tree.