Space, Place, and New Ecologies by Marilyn Cooper

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Marilyn M. Cooper

Why begin a response to the new ecologies of writing with a photo of a pristine wilderness like Isle Royale National Park? Like all national parks, Isle Royale is neither pristine nor a space set apart from everyday living: it was shaped by material forces that made it an island inhabited at various times by moose, spruce, fishermen, Indian copper miners, wolves, orchids, backpackers, cottagers, lake trout; it was shaped by economic and political forces that saw it as a tourist destination, a source of lumber, copper, and fish, and then designated it as a wilderness national park. Like all places, in other words, it has emerged from space with the passage of time (cf. Reynolds 181 n1). And like all ecologies, its emergence involves not only human action but also that of all other animate and inanimate beings and physical forces.

We yearn for a place to connect.

Fitzgerald sees in hyperlocal journalism a nostalgia for neighborhoods and for the individual and group construction of identity that neighborhoods provide the space for. She refers to Yi-Fu Tuan, who, like Reynolds, "speaks of place as growing out of interaction and experiences with spaces" ("outside.in") and argues that place blogs provide such spaces only to the extent that participants can participate in telling their stories of their neighborhoods. Narrating places is a way to hold onto — or continue — connections that matter. She muses, "I've always been intrigued by how my memories and emotions are connected to place. . . . As a Southerner, place is intrinsic to my identity" ("background stories"). Technologies like place blogs may be "becoming the tools with which we convey, broaden or deepen and construct collective identities through relationships to both people and places" ("conclusions"). Like the aborigine songlines in Australia and Western Apache stories that link to landscape features, place-making is "a way of constructing social traditions and, in the process, personal and social identities" (Basso 7). Kinloch's students are engaged in a similar project (see "Within ten years").

Within ten years all of us will say, "I used to live here."

Places change, often in ways people find distressing. With the establishment of the national park, cottagers on Isle Royale were forced to give up their summer homes. But as the literacy narratives constructed in the project Kinloch describes demonstrate, what individual people and groups do always affects the direction of change. Khaleeq talked about "how local histories and lived experiences are central factors in the preservation of community space." Mr. T, "Whether he realized it or not, . . . was relying on media texts, in this case the video camera, to narrate his story of belonging, place, place-making, and place-taking." Places are ecologies; they change through the interactions of the beings and forces that constitute them. So it matters a lot what stories get told, and how often. Kim said, "We should just keep on fighting and keep on talking, give our opinion. . . That way our voices will be heard." This is the kind of work Fitzgerald observes too in hyperlocal journalism and that Baldwin does in her book "Becoming Wilderness," where she concludes, "the Park Service's move toward labeling Isle Royale simply as 'wilderness' and overlooking what that word once meant on the island has the potential to obscure a fascinating and complex history of people interacting with and protecting their environment" (51-52).

Where are the women in this space?

With Autumn Stanley, DeVoss asks why women seem so invisible, in DeVoss's case, in the space of digital production. She suggests that one reason is that many women resist the regime of intellectual property, with its focus on individual ownership. Women may prefer (or be socialized to prefer) "to create, share, produce, and distribute outside of this system" ("stanley"). Another explanation might be that women are more comfortable with a focus on places as ecologies, places of interaction and collaboration, rather than as hierarchies structured by individual achievement. DeVoss sees women's digital productions as saying "I will not be the sole author of this. I will not be the only name attached to this project. I will not own this idea exclusively" ("conclusions"). Reduction of the complexity of interactions that enable all production is habitual in American society, so focused on the individual. Baldwin notes how in the dedication ceremony of Isle Royale as a national park, "the forests, the residents, and the wilderness movement disappeared from the Isle Royale National Park story" (Baldwin 49). Instead, all focused on the efforts of a few men: two neswpapermen at the Detroit News and two Michigan congressmen. Similarly, intellectual property practices work neither to facilitate nor to protect women who share resources and images in digital spaces: media culture resources are jealously guarded against even marginal use in YouTube videos, and images shared on Flickr are exploited by businesses (who do not share their profits). Like Wilson et al., DeVoss sees the public domain as a place that facilitates rearticulation, and thus as "inherently profeminist." To make good on this promise, it will be necessary to shift the habitus of American society away from patriarchal individualism and toward ecofeminism.

Space has its own set of appeals.

We create places from spaces continually and most often not intentionally. Lingis says, "Appropriate and effective movements arise where the body's inner 'music of the muscles' [Heidegger, Being and Time] picks up the sonorous or silent refrains outside" (First Person 14). Murray sees architecture as a form of writing with space that arises similarly: "We experience volumes through our skin; our bodies help us read space." She quotes Bachelard: "Space that has been seized upon by the imagination cannot remain indifferent space . . . It has been lived in, not in its positivity, but with all the partiality of the imagination." And Alexander, who says, "When a building works, when the world enters the blissful state which makes us fully comfortable, the space itself awakens. . . we need to understand space as a material which is capable of awakening." We compose by living; in our living, we participate in the emergence of ecologies.

This place is so alien.

"Since students today are used to constant and simultaneous input from different sources, we can easily become bored with traditional, linear texts" (The Normal Group).

Rhodes and Alexander's installation was intended as a "thirdspace," not a stable, always-the-same place (Reynolds 5), but a space designed to be "somewhat disorienting to viewers" (Alexander and Rhodes, "Installation Rhetoric"). The "rumors" on the "Installation Remediation" page emphasize this aspect of the installation: "This space is so alien." "This feels so weird." "I've never been here before." "I really don't get it." All new spaces are weird — until histories emerge and make the space a place. At the same time, no places are stable; they are always new to someone, and they are always changing. The weirdness of media installations is familiar and understandable to those who frequent modern art museums; they know how to read them. In the context of a rhetoric and composition conference, such installations are not encountered so often. The disorientation here urges us to consider the materiality and embodiment of composing in other not always-the-same places like college writing classrooms, to consider how our body's location and desires and how we imagine our bodies change those places.

The situations that give rise to the data are lost.

In "Standards in the Making," Wilson, Hisayasu, Sayers, and Bono argue for metadata standards that enable cross-readings and rearticulations that lead "toward new knowledge about literature, culture, history, and society," knowledge that often takes the form of narrations. This, to them, is what's new about the new work of composing. Both distance and contingency are important criteria for standards that succeed in this goal: distance allows rearticulation (see Sayers, synthesis layer), while contingency emphasizes the multiple ways in which data (images, texts) can be located vis-a-vis other data. Wilson says, "To practice SITM, we must be open to situational data — wherein data are never truly packagable, but are necessarily mapped . . . and therefore contingent (synthesis layer). This is also what's new about ecologies, places where data are situated but among which new connections continually emerge. Making/tracing these connections is the work of composing, as Wilson et al's mentor here, Bruno Latour, argues: "the text . . . [is] the functional equivalent of a laboratory. It's a place for trials, experiments, and simulations" (149).