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The Essence of the Path: A Traveler's Tale of Finding Place

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The Essence of the Path: A Traveler's Tale of Finding Place



Ashley J. Holmes, Georgia State University

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"The lack of collective resentment over dromospheric pollution stems from our forgetting *the essence of the path, the journey.*"

—Paul Virilio, *Open Sky*, 1997, p. 23

Remembering a Journey

Summer 2012, *Kairos*

In *Open Sky*, Paul Virilio (1997) argued that technologies and communication tools—such as the Internet, teleconferencing, and high-speed trains like the TGV—are accelerating at increasing speeds, collapsing both time and space. Virilio advocated for the critical study of speed (dromology) and its effects (dromospheric pollution). He contended that what he termed dromospheric pollution led to a "civilization of forgetting" (p. 25). In other words, the effects of accelerating technologies constructed a society that was so telepresent, so engaged in the live coverage of the current moment, that it had "no future and no past" (p. 25). Furthermore, this dromospheric pollution resulted in the "loss of the traveller's tale" and loss of "the possibility of some kind of interpretation" (p. 33). For Virilio, the acceleration of technologies collapsed the time and the space one might have devoted to documenting a journey and to the reflection and interpretation of that journey. Accelerating technologies such as the Internet, according to Virilio, atrophied "the journey to the point where it becomes needless" (p. 34).

In this webtext, I attempt to capture "the essence of the path," calling attention to my personal and academic journey to find place. This work locates the evolution of my ideas about a composition assignment (multi-genre research) I have taught, and it examines how my experiences across space and time, as well as the places I inhabited,

impacted my teaching of the assignment. Ultimately, through the construction of this work, I intend to complicate Virilio's claim that accelerating technologies such as the Web necessarily lead to a dromospheric pollution that renders the journey needless. Quite the contrary, using the technology of the Web, I intend to decelerate, to give my academic journey a past, and to construct a (virtual) path for my traveler's tale.

The present work might be read as a narrative, a reflection, or a collection of documents. It narrates the journey I have taken personally and professionally over the past seven years. It reflects on the evolution of my thinking about visuals, technology, space, and place as a teacher and researcher. And it collects and displays, perhaps like a traveler's scrapbook, the material manifestations of this journey: seminar papers, teacher reflections, assignment sheets, among other documents. Making time and virtual space to document and reflect on these experiences is an attempt to disrupt the kinds of dromospheric pollution that crowd our busy minds and lives.

Coming to Multi-Genre Research

Spring 2005, NC State University, Post-Human Rhetoric

When I examine my past in an attempt to locate the kernel of experience that evolved into my interest in spatial theories and praxes today, I'm brought back to the final semester of my MA studies at [North Carolina State University](#), to a seminar in post-human rhetoric. My readings of Paul Virilio (1997), Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1983), Jean Baudrillard (1994), and Donna Haraway (1991) began to spark my interest in how technologies affect the ways students learn, compose, and publish their writing. For the [seminar paper](#) in that course, I made the argument that students are increasingly becoming like the cyborgs Donna Haraway wrote about, and I explored how compositionists might reconceptualize writing instruction to meet the needs of this changing student population. Drawing on Jeff Rice's (2002) early work on cool writing and sampling, I advocated for the use of nontraditional research projects in first-year composition, specifically advocating for multi-genre research. Excerpts from this seminar paper—an archival document that helps reconstruct a journey, the essence of *my* path—can be found [here](#).

At first glance, the seminar paper may seem to have little connection to the concepts of space and place I embrace in my current scholarly interests. However, my initial engagement with Haraway's work on cyborgs led to a future interest in Haraway's (1992) "The Promises of Monsters," a work much more grounded in mapping and place. Similarly, though I did not reference his work in my seminar paper, I read Paul Virilio's (1997) *Open Sky* for the first time during the post-human rhetoric course, and I have since revisited Virilio's work, including my use of it to construct and [remember a journey](#) in the present work. When I reflect on my first experiences with the ideas of Haraway and Deleuze and Guattari, I am reminded of how radical they seemed to me at the time and how much my understanding of those concepts changed when I began teaching my version of a multi-genre research assignment. After graduation from North Carolina State University, I began teaching first-year composition full time, and I designed a course project that involved multi-genre research. [Teaching multi-genre research](#) gave me an opportunity to apply the ideas I had first encountered in the texts I read for my seminar paper. Finally, with hindsight, I can now trace a path that reflects on how my experiences in a [Spatial and Visual Rhetorics seminar](#) and the

corresponding [SVR2 event](#) offered occasions on which to revisit my earlier ideas about multi-genre research.

This Page Does Not Exist

Fall 2005, Elon University, College Writing

I taught multi-genre research for the first time when I began a full-time lectureship at [Elon University](#) in Fall 2005. At the request of Elon's [Center for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning](#) (CATL) in Fall 2006, I reflected on this assignment and shared materials online, which used to be found at a CATL gallery site. However, the gallery I created in 2006 no longer exists; now, users are brought to the home page of CATL instead. In what seems to be a recent website redesign for the university, the gallery site, *my* gallery site, has been moved or taken down. This has likely resulted from the fact that I am no longer employed by Elon; CATL now showcases more up-to-date [galleries of faculty teaching projects](#): names and faces that crossed my path and others that are unfamiliar, unknown.

When I began drafting [this webtext](#), the gallery with my assignment was still an active page on Elon's website. During the process of drafting and revising, in the timeline of moving towards publication, the site was taken down. In fact, for a time during my drafting, the link to my gallery site produced a 404 error message, reading "this page does not exist." My first response was surprise and frustration. This gallery was part of *my* journey, something I wanted to document in *my* path. While the content and ideas are still mine, at least in Microsoft-Word-documented-plain-text, the HTML pages and control of the virtual space that used to house them are not. I had felt ownership of the virtual space that was never really mine to own. I was made to feel that a chapter (or a page) out of the book of my life had been taken away from me, erased, inaccessible. This page does not exist. Did it ever exist?

In this case, as an accelerating technology, the Web eclipsed my journey in the ways Paul Virilio (1997) argued in *Open Sky*, collapsing the time and space of my path, resulting in the loss of the path. And yet the journey still exists; [this page](#) does exist. From the archives of my computer, I revived the Word documents with the content of my gallery submission. Reformatted and reconstructed excerpts from the teaching reflection that used to be housed in an online gallery through Elon's website can now be found within the pages of this webtext. Though the Internet can collapse time and space, accelerate, and make the journey needless in some cases, it can also provide a forum in which to re-construct one's journey, perhaps in a new light.

As I reflect back on this moment of my journey, I believe teaching the multi-genre assignment that I first researched for my [seminar paper](#) in post-human rhetoric gave me the opportunity to test my arguments and to gather student feedback. I was able to witness students' excitement with the process of conducting research and to help them apply their rhetorical skills to engage the assignment's nontraditional form. In the three years I taught at Elon University, I became an avid proponent of the multi-genre assignment and of pedagogies that challenge [essayist models of literacy](#). I began sharing the assignment and its success with colleagues, and I gave a presentation on the project at the 2007 [Conference on College Composition and Communication](#).

When I consider how these experiences helped shape my journey toward finding place, I am reminded of the link between materiality and place and how many of my students' projects were rooted in a strong connection to place. For example, one student conducted research on the history of her family's winery, another student on the reactions of persons in her hometown to different preparations of North Carolina pork barbeque, and yet another on conflict-free diamonds. Each of these projects, like many other student projects, was strongly rooted in a particular place and the community, history, and culture surrounding that place. Since first teaching the multi-genre assignment, I have increasingly worked to have students root their work in a particular [place](#).

SVR2 Event

Fall 2008, University of Arizona, Spatial and Visual Rhetorics Seminar

Moving West

In 2008, I moved across the country from my home state of North Carolina to Tucson, Arizona, to begin my PhD studies at the [University of Arizona](#). The significance of space and place became even more apparent to me as I experienced cultural and geographical shock during this period of adjustment. As my husband and I drove west, we began to more fully comprehend the meaning of "big sky," and the tall trees that lined the roads in North Carolina slowly thinned out, giving way to an immense desert expanse dotted with saguaro cacti. My entire spatial orientation was different in Tucson. Surrounded by mountain ranges to the North, South, East, and West, I could now situate myself cardinally. Pondering the closest big cities to Tucson, my conception of distances changed. Whereas a five-hour drive from Raleigh, North Carolina, to Washington, DC had seemed so far, a similar six-hour drive from Tucson to San Diego, California, seemed somehow closer. My experience of moving west brought issues of space and place to the forefront of my awareness and interest.

Spatial and Visual Rhetorics Seminar

Enrolling in the [Spatial and Visual Rhetorics seminar](#) in my first semester at the University of Arizona, I had the chance to expand my knowledge of spatial rhetorics, building on my earlier experiences with visual rhetorics. Ultimately, the course allowed me to re-engage with the [multi-genre research project](#) I had been teaching in first-year composition at Elon University. For our culminating seminar project, the [SVR2 event](#), I wanted to again share the multi-genre assignment I had grown so fond of and which I believed fit nicely with the rhetorical focus of the English 102 course at the University of Arizona. For the SVR2 event, I prepared a pedagogy-based presentation for teachers of the English 102 course, giving them ideas for how to incorporate visual rhetorics into their curriculum. My materials for the SVR2 event, including assignment sheets for teaching multi-genre, can be found online [here](#). Below is an excerpt from the SVR2 event brochure that describes my presentation:

Are you looking for an innovative way to teach research and rhetoric in English 102? Look to multi-genre research (MGR) projects as a fresh alternative to the research paper or annotated bibliography. MGR projects require students to employ academic research methods, but the final product is a nontraditional combination of visually rich texts. Students become acutely aware of rhetorical situations and genre conventions, composing an argument that may result in poetry alongside an academic summary or a

grocery list with an obituary. In this workshop, I will provide an overview of the assignment, share example student projects, and discuss ways you might implement this assignment for the Controversy Analysis and/or Public Argument assignments in English 102.

The SVR2 event gave me an opportunity to reflect on how the assignment might fit with new course goals and expectations in the University of Arizona's English 102 curriculum. At the event, I organized my presentation space as an informal circle of chairs welcoming participants to gather, listen, respond, and brainstorm teaching ideas. As I had experienced in past teacher presentations on multi-genre research, the participants were perplexed by the assignment until they began seeing sample student projects. Once teachers envisioned the possibilities of what students might produce, their imaginations and interests were piqued. I found the teaching sessions I led to be highly productive, as teachers collaboratively brainstormed the many ways they might employ multi-genre research methods in their own courses.

My project for the SVR2 event was still firmly grounded in visual rhetoric. However, the spatial rhetoric readings from our course initiated another moment of personal reflection on this assignment. Once again, I found myself re-engaging with the multi-genre assignment I had first written about three years ago in my [seminar paper](#) on cyborg student writers. Equipped with spatial theories I read in the seminar, I encountered the multi-genre project from a new perspective; I began to consider how to ground the work in [space and place](#) when I next taught the assignment.

Finding Place

2011, University of Arizona, Tucson

Taking Root, Finding My Place

My move to Tucson in 2008 brought me to a wholly unfamiliar place, resulting in new images and notions of "[home](#)." My experience of being uprooted is [common to many academics](#), and it is one that I will encounter again as I move and attempt to take root after a national job search this year. Eric Zencey (1996) wrote about this phenomenon and what he called the "ethos of rootlessness . . . in academe" (p. 15). Zencey argued for a "rooted education" that entailed professors including "local content in their courses" (p. 19). Furthermore, Zencey called for educators to "live where they work and work where they live," "to take root," and "to cultivate a sense of place" (p. 19). Though I encountered Zencey's work after my move to Tucson, my reflections on the past draw a connection between my initial sense of placelessness and my developing desire to discover a new home. In fact, connecting myself, my teaching, and my scholarship to place has become an important way for me to embrace, understand, and take root in Tucson.

Place-Based Education

Zencey's claims in the "Rootless Professors" align with the growing interdisciplinary place-based education movement. A branch of new or critical localism, David A. Gruenewald and Gregory A. Smith (2008) define place-based education as "a community-based effort to reconnect the process of education, enculturation, and human development to the well-being of community life" (p. xvi). Methods of place-based education vary considerably, ranging from investigating local histories to going

on nature walks. My interest in place-based composition pedagogy coincided with my own personal quest for a place-based education about my new city. Thus, when I had the opportunity to teach multi-genre research after the [SVR2 event](#), I considered ways to engage students in my courses with the places and spaces that surrounded them.

Drawing in part on readings from the Spatial and Visual Rhetorics seminar—specifically, Nedra Reynolds (2004) and Michel de Certeau (1984)—I reconsidered the possibility of a multi-genre research project that asked students to critically examine the spaces, places, and communities they inhabit. Whereas in the past students were free to choose any topic they wished for the multi-genre research project, in this iteration, I asked students to choose a local issue that affected a community of which they are a part. I wanted to situate the project in the lived, material realities of my students; I wanted them to see their local places and communities as sites with rich possibilities for inquiry and research.

Reynolds' (2004) examples of streetwork and de Certeau's (1984) theorization of walking both led me to require students to get out of the classroom and into the places they were researching for their multi-genre projects. In addition to the more traditional forms of library research, I asked students to conduct some form of ethnographic research (e.g., observation, informal survey, interview). These methods encouraged students to experience the spaces and places they were writing about and to apply their research to the material locations and conditions of those places.

For these place-based, multi-genre research assignments, students chose to connect with a variety of communities and places. One student conducted research related to the University of Arizona campus community; more specifically, she examined university admissions policies. Based on her library and ethnographic research, she constructed a multi-genre project in the form of a mock admissions packet with materials (brochure, video, calendar) for an incoming student. Another student conducted research on xeriscaping, a form of landscaping that reduces water use. This topic very much connected to Tucson as a place located in the desert. Yet another student composed a multi-genre project that argued for including more organic foods in children's diets. She designed a packet that could be sent home to parents of local elementary school students in a nearby neighborhood. All of these students applied their research to a local context and situated their projects within the places they live and learn.

In the end, I believe that asking students to critically consider place in relation to their multi-genre projects led to compositions that were enhanced by local resources: the culture, the people, photographs of places, brochures from local businesses. The search and the journey of that line of inquiry became exciting for students, and I saw it manifested in their final multi-genre projects.

The Importance of Decelerating

This newly formulated, place-based, multi-genre research project emerged slowly and over many years: Starting first with a [post-human rhetorics seminar](#) and a [paper on cyborg student writers](#), it was articulated and re-articulated with the goals in writing programs at Elon University and the University of Arizona, shared with other instructors at a [seminar event](#), and ultimately revised in light of readings about space and place. My reflections here trace this evolution of ideas and attest to the importance of slowing

down, remembering our past, and documenting the journey. Digital technologies like the Web may be accelerating at rates that collapse time and space (Virilio, 1997), but we can still look for ways to use technologies to interrupt the acceleration, making virtual spaces and places for deceleration. Blogs, personal webpages, and online journals can and have functioned in these ways.

However, Paul Virilio's caution reminds us of the importance of balancing immaterial online spaces with material places. Virilio argued that "with the advent of world time..., *the perspective of local space is vanishing*" (p. 125). We have the chance to reclaim local spaces before they vanish. Positioning our teaching and scholarship within the local places in which we live and work may slow the acceleration of our vanishing spaces. Furthermore, when technologies erase parts of our journey, as in the case of my [teaching gallery page](#) being taken down, we must remember that we can also use technologies to reconstruct and document those journeys for ourselves and others. In this way, technologies invite us to reflect on our experiences in new ways and trace the evolution of our ideas and experiences, as I have done here. Attending to our academic journeys through reflective practice helps us remember, document, and preserve the essence of the path.

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