Place-making and Networking: Practicing Local and Transnational Rhetorics

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I've taught and conducted research at the University of Winnipeg for over 25 years—in what was first called the Writing Program and then improved in status and renamed the Department of Rhetoric, Writing, and Communications about 15 years ago. Maybe because I've been rooted in one place for so many years, often with a sense of happiness and accomplishment, my self-identity is tied pretty tightly to my work, which I've always envisioned geo-spatially as generated from a local node that is in turn connected to a North American network. In *Language as Local Practice,* Alastair Pennycook provides a convincing portrait of how language can be understood as uniquely local—flavoured by place and time—and yet remain connected to elsewhere and everywhere, so that it is "the same and different" (25). Most of the questions I have studied about writing and language—particularly in place-studies work I have been pursuing over the past decade—consider how discursive practices express local inflection and energies, while partaking of broader historic and transnational currents, responding to ambient, circulating ecologies. So a sense of being at once rooted and connected has shaped both my identity and inquiry.

While I've never thought of myself as a Canadian scholar drawing on a national tradition, it's also true that until recently I've never liked to think of myself as a "rhetorician"—at least not in the Aristotelian sense of trading in arguments and enlisting arts of persuasion. This scholarly appellation always seemed too weighty, archaic, and honestly a bit repellent, like donning a dusty mask from an ancient drama—like willingly catching one's foot in a trap, peppering one's talk with lost Greek words, and concerning oneself in a busy body way with influencing how others think. Performing rhetoric and attempting to persuade others suits neither my talents nor temperament—I am an introvert, always more interested in art than politics, in interpretation than declaration, in reflection than declamation. Philosophically, I'm drawn to the open-endedness of existentialism and pedagogically to sophist attempts to raise questions and ceaselessly explore. I used to worry that these habits and intellectual turns meant I didn't do rhetoric at all, but have learned to appreciate the term as one that can be stretched and commodious. It is also true that "rhetoric" often appears in a plural form, so that there are spatial, aural, and visual rhetorics, among others. If, as Lunsford and Ruskiewicz have it, "everything is an argument," then I'm happy to place myself among those doing the rhetorical work of reading the world and offering provisional interpretations.

My identity story celebrates the permeable boundaries and fluid connections that invigorate teaching and research in the field of rhetoric at a Canadian university. Never guided or constrained by Canadian practices, I've always been inclined to consult American models to understand best teaching practices and emerging research questions and methodological approaches. My interest in rhetorical inquiry has increasingly been directed towards questions of language and communication in relation to the environment and urban place. In my study of digital communities, urban environments, or local place, my spatial inquiries about discourse practices have connected me to media, feminist, cultural, and urban studies, among other sister arts, and opened gates to developing collaborative research partnerships with colleagues in these other fields.

Local and Transnational Identity and Inquiry: Roots and Networks

When I was hired into the Writing Program in 1990, we were starting something new at our small undergraduate inner-city university. The program design in its overall outline was an import—brought from the United States by an American hired to serve as Program Director for the first few years. All incoming students were to take a mandatory writing course, and given free access to trained peer tutors, a Tutoring Centre, and a Computer Writing lab. The go-forward plan was to develop a suite of cross-disciplinary writing-intensive courses for students in years 2, 3, and even 4, to further support the development of student writing. While the director brought an architectural sketch for the program, many of the details, particularly those related to curriculum, were left open for us to fill in. Some of my colleagues resented being gifted a program with pedagogical gaps, but it seemed to me that if the gaps hadn't existed, we would have had to make them in order to build a program to meet local character and needs.

And there it is: the generative call of the local—the informing awareness that what is needed here is no simple act of reproduction or replication but something better explained as a context-sensitive process of translation. Alastair Pennycook, studying English as world language or *Lingua franca,* provides a fascinating analysis of how language swirls about the globe with what appears at first glance placeless energy. Yet he explains that language in place always bears local inflections and turns, so that, yes, there is a sameness but, no, situated languaging is not all about sameness but indeed produces difference. He says that much like paths are sedimented walks, so "Language practises are sedimented language acts" that reflect place-specific yet ambient practices. English here is not the same as English there. Tracing this pattern more broadly, he refers to the Heraclitus who made the point that we never dip our toe into the same flowing river twice: "that when we step again into a river we are both stepping into the same and not the

same river, or we are and are not the same stepper" (45). To offer a course to students at our inner-/small-/prairie-city university required an act of remaking in relation to the rhythms of local place and the learning culture and practices, rather than taking short-cut routes relying on adoption or even adaptation. While situating curriculum in place was some of the first work I enjoyed on the job, it has continued as the engine of my ongoing pedagogical efforts, for I'm "not the same stepper" and the river of students can always be counted on to keep changing.

When our program started, we were aware of being the only Canadian institution with a university-wide mandatory writing initiative, relatively well-appointed with a cadre of some 12 faculty and with tutoring and other resources. At that point, discovering what other institutes in Canada were—or were NOT—doing wasn't particularly germane. We were consumed with the work of installing a program, one in need of revision and layered localization. One of our early tasks, for example, was to assemble a coursepack collaboratively authored by all composition teaching faculty, to provide students with a shared resource to guide them through process and assignment sequences. Our thinking was that students required to take a mandatory course deserved something of a shared curricular experience and to accomplish this we developed shared curricular materials. By building our own book, we experienced first-hand the strengths and pressures of collaborative research and writing, and so we were not only generating place-sensitive materials but also practicing the same sort of self-reflexive and collaborative writing strategies we were encouraging our students to try. We were writing teachers, writing—busy, energetic, wanting success for ourselves and for our students, and probably more inclined to look to each other for direction and lore. It's not that we were isolated or parochial—we engaged Andrea Lunsford for several days of helpful program advising. But on a day-to-day basis, we looked to each other and our students to make decisions about program and focus.

Once the days of the communal/collaborative coursepack writing were behind us—once we relaxed into our task as teachers, paid less attention to the need for collective accountability, and took up individual research projects—I continued working with a colleague to Canadianize several American composition textbooks. While such an undertaking might on the surface be thought to have a nationalistic purpose, this wasn't the case. Doing what I thought of as "soft translation" work, I often imagined myself talking to my students rather than to a generic "Canadian" student. The publisher's reps who courted and signed us told us the success of our books depended on their wide adoption by our colleagues in the UW Writing Program—whose concentration of first-year composition courses was without replication in the Canadian scene. (Program-wide adoption of our texts never occurred, but on the bright side the resilience of this hope likely inspired the reps to re-sign us to further projects.)

In recounting this history of writing for a local student body, I hope I'm not misheard as extolling like some old pioneer the virtues of self-sufficiency and conservative parochialism. My story is not about being stuck in place, and guarding it to keep others and fresh ideas out, but about being responsive to local variety and specificity, as well as informed by outside currents—welcome flows of mostly American scholarship advocating for teaching multi- and cross-disciplinary writing and thinking practices.

Currently, I teach a third-year course (called "Composing Winnipeg: Rhetorics of/and the City") which directly raises the question of how one's identity is rooted in local place, yet enriched by being enmeshed in layers of networks. There's no place like Winnipeg, yet/and we are not alone. We study how for each of us Winnipeg is a blend of collective myths and private moments, so that there are points of intersection as well as a private sense of place fed by memory and experiences whose nature is change. We also study how our city, like others, thrives on circulation and connectivity. We meet our city as a thing that lives and grows. Older theory presents the living city in metaphorical terms, such as in Lewis Mumford's reference to the city as plexus: "The city in its complete sense then is a geographic plexus, an

economic organization, an institutional process, a theatre of social action, and an aesthetic symbol of collective unity" (185). From this perspective, the city is treated as being almost alive, or animate on the basis of the human systems and sociality. More recent theory responding to the world of things and actor-network theory steps away from such human centredness to grant actual life and being to place and objects. For example, Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift argue in *Seeing Like a City* that "humanity is no longer positioned as the primary condition of life but rather as a half-being which must be blended with all kinds of other existences and their fields of sense in order to be sustained" (167). There is a sense of emergence and vibrancy to place-based identity which for me carries over to my sense of who I am as a scholar and teacher—rooted here in Winnipeg, in a connection that grows and changes, in a material urban environment alive with rhizomatic energy, so that there are many live links between here and there.

Dorothy's magical incantation "there's no place like home" has been disenchanted by critical arguments that link an attitude like hers to dangerous pride of place and to power exercises that keep some in and others out, to preserve one's sense of home at all costs. Yet in theorizing a "progressive sense of place," Doreen Massey tells us that we can value local place only by accepting change as key to its nature, as well as by taking onto account that uniqueness of particular places results from the combination of multiple factors and sources; a place is specific and even unique because "each place is the focus of a distinct mixture of wider and more local social relations" (156). To embrace the local, then, does not mean to reject other and outside influences or to insist on sameness and fixed boundaries, but to admire Indigenous characteristics whose nature it is to shift with the flow.

There has been an upswing in theory examining locality as a positive ethos and place to centre one's thinking—what Lucy Lippard refers to as "the lure of the local" whose attractant has become sharper for us as we encounter waves of transnationalisms and spend hours in virtual space. Lippard tells us that learning the layers of local place provides a sense of balance and even a helpful sense of home place; she refers, too, to

the values of Indigenous peoples who identify with rather than manage and own the land as "infinitely appealing to dis-oriented culture" (15). An appreciation for site-specificity is also seeing a revival in design and architecture, with influential theory emerging that encourages designers to think not only about users but also about elements and features of the particular environment itself. While place awareness can lead to responsiveness to such elements as local materials, customs, and colours, some theory advocates the desirability of forming an even deeper connection to place—a deeper immersion, so that one is aware of the multi-layered and sedimented nature of place, and can, as a result, respond in a more satisfying and total way. National and regional expression differ, according to architect Harwell Hamilton Harrison, who prefers the specificity of localisms to broader abstractions; differentiating between the two, he declares that "regional expression at its highest is . . . a picture of liberation, of expansion, of diversity" whereas, at its highest, national expression involves "consolidation" and imposes a kind of abstraction based on what is imagined to be a shared mythos/ethos (61). This suggests that going local or staying within one's immediate region and avoiding more widespread nationalistic impulses can be understood as a gesture of accountability and authenticity, as well as one that taps into generative energy. Rather than finding a model that fits all and fits in, locality demands awareness of particularity and peculiarity. It can be a way to flout convention.

Our program responded to needs in place, but did so on the basis of being informed by circulating intellectual and pedagogical currents. My own story echoes this pattern of movement and connectivity—as a scholar of language and culture in place, I am always interested in considering how theory and ideas that have bloomed elsewhere go to work here.

Cross–disciplinary Affiliations: Department of Rhetoric Writing and Communications [and Others]

I came to Writing and Rhetoric in the first place by crossing disciplinary fields. When I started with the Writing Program in 1990, I had just completed my dissertation in English and published it as a book called *Aspects of the Female Novel*—borrowing E.M. Forster's approach to the generic novel and adapting it to study fiction by women. I was able to transfer this approach to studying the narratives produced by our writing students who were given the typical first-assignment task of writing self-stories about their literacy history and identity. This study was published by Inkshed as a monograph called *Two Sides to a Story,* examining the stories students write for signs of gender. While this second-wave approach may be somewhat outmoded in the current climate that recognizes feminisms and multiple genders, I am remembering the book here as an important first move of many I've made to bridge disciplines.

This gesture aside, however, when I started teaching in the Writing Program my interests became for a time discipline-specific as I devoted myself to the exhilarating prospect of helping students improve their writing and in some cases improve their lives. There was a lot to learn and do. Education theory was full of riches I needed to gather: liberatory pedagogies (particularly attached to Friere), writing process theories from the field of early education, collaborative learning theory, as well as new approaches to invention and freewriting (Peter Elbow), error (Mina Shaughnessy), and acquisition (Ilona Leki). As I started into this work, I often felt underprepared by having taken a degree in literature and wished I'd found my way to graduate school in an American university with courses in Composition theory. Over recent years, I've had an opportunity to reverse my thinking on this. When our writing program was recast as a Department of Rhetoric, Writing, and Communication, my interests and research broadened when more teaching options opened up. I explored narrative and then ethnographic writing and practices, both storied methods of research

that involved personal experience and situated understandings. This concern with location and one's place in knowing broadened into an interest in spatiality and placemaking. My interest in writing, then, became connected to knowing about communication and sociability, matters of culture and place. In a fascinating study of how we know the city through mediated images, James Donald suggests that the question of how to be at home in the world is at heart a communication question. Phrasing the question in friendly terms—"How can we stroppy strangers live together without doing each other too much violence?" (147)—he gave it a collective urgency that I couldn't ignore.

Questions about identity and affiliation matter. When we were recently given a chance to reflect on our departmental status and practices—embarking on a process of self-review—an obvious place to target our inquiry was the very naming of our department, triadic in its embrace of rhetoric, writing, and communications. We noted that longer-running and well-established departments had names announcing their singular focus and purpose—be it English, History or Psychology—and some of us were eager to follow this lead. With only twelve full-time faculty members, might our reach be too wide and disparate? Might we be offering a little bit in each of these three areas, nothing deep in any? A solution, it was argued, might lie in choosing one term as key and then building around that as a foundational concept. We could then have a clearer picture of who to hire, how to develop courses, and how to explain our area of expertise to students. Yet, a rub arose in deciding which term would dominate and which recede.

For me, the issue was less of favouring one horse in the race than of disliking the undertaking itself: paring down our department title and putting up fences to mark off our field of inquiry seemed like a bad move. Why would we want to establish borders and boundaries? Why confine ourselves to studying school writing and academic conventions (writing and composition); OR to delivery and argument-oriented prose (rhetoric); OR

to media-oriented matters (communications)? Why not continue pursuing a broad-based examination of discursive activity and cultural forces, all forms of socio-technological communications?

Perhaps if we had been forced to choose only one term, we could have chosen "rhetoric" as the dominant marker, for it is true that recent theory moves have begun to establish it as a commodious term. In studying *Ambient Rhetoric,* Thomas Rickert presents a picture of the world as a multi-layered network of rhizomatic activity, and reminds us that "rhetoric must be understood as enmeshed with and within its surroundings" (159). By taking language and persuasion out of a subject/object framework and placing them in an ambient perspective, he also reminds us that language is not transactional and referential but relational and responsive to the world. (189). Yet if we understand rhetoric as an ambient concept, and discursive activity as relational and interactive, then attempts to hive off the term as if it were a discrete field of study seem counterproductive.

There are compelling arguments for seeing all knowledge as fluid and non-disciplinary. For example, drawing on education theory, design theorists Hannah Rose Mendosa and Thomas Matyok ask us to see the landscape of knowledge in fluid terms and suggest that doing so discourages our habit of mapping and dividing it up, as if into sections and tracts. There are cross-currents and waves, and thus models of disciplinarity enforce artificial and even damaging restrictions. Studying Marshall McLuhan over the last decade has provided me with another scholarly guide committed to making the arguments that the process of gathering knowledge crosses disciplines—that the Western and modernist drive for specialization has led to small-minded splintering of what we can know and that reaching wide is a possible way back to wisdom. As Elena Lamberti notes, McLuhan's epistemology can be described as an assemblage in mosaic form, meaning that he is concerned with collective interplay rather than with solitary activity, with simultaneity rather than linearity, and thus with education unbounded by disciplinary compartmentalization: "McLuhan uses his *mosaic*

to question traditional ideas of *knowledge* and to move the reader from a *linear* (logical, ordered, exclusive) to an *acoustic* (non-logical, simultaneous, inclusive) perspective" (32).

McLuhan says of himself that he is a generalist who seeks cross-disciplinary connections to expand understanding: "I consider myself a generalist, not a specialist who has staked out a tiny plot of study in his intellectual turf and is oblivious to everything else" (*Playboy* 27). The object of his inquiry is nothing less than "the total cultural environment" and he recommends as a corrective pedagogical practice that whenever we find ourselves attached to a figure, we then seek to expand our sense of that figure by studying the influential and ambient ground surrounding it, both visible and invisible. His text for students, *City as Classroom,* provides a series of perceptual outdoor exercises that continue to be effective prompts to help students abandon habit and sleepwalking to become aware of the world, words, and ambient patterns.

Go Big: Rhetorical Studies as Moveable Feast

I want to end my reflection on identity and rhetoric with the reference to McLuhan's teaching text, *City as Classroom,* because it is one that speaks out against practicing pedagogies that are restrictive, and endorses instead expansiveness and connectivity, encouraging learners to take inner and outer voyages aimed at overcoming limits. Certainly, McLuhan is a beacon of cross-disciplinary energy, calling all engaged in learning to keep asking questions and crossing borders. I'm currently co-editing a journal on McLuhan and the arts—it's hard to miss how McLuhan looked to artists for guiding wisdom and allowed his love of Joyce as word- and world-maker to echo throughout his wide-ranging socio-technological theories. As if picking up from his lead, current city theory—touching notes in the keys of rhetoric, writing, communication, among other fields—continues exploring

"the fictive and fantastical" in urban writing as a way to challenge "not so much our understanding as the basis of our perception of what can and can't exist in the shade we can both see and not see" (Amin and Thrift, 93).

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