

Place Blogging: Local Economies of Attention in the Network

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PLACE BLOGGING: LOCAL ECONOMIES OF ATTENTION IN THE NETWORK

a dissertation

by

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Abstract

This study examines the emergence of place blogging as an online genre designed to foster a deeper sense of place and to share local knowledge. Focusing on a period between 2003 and 2006, it spotlights a transitional moment in web culture when the relationship between online life and offline life is undergoing an important shift. The bloggers highlighted in this study offer a ground-level view of how ordinary writers and readers participate in the transition to what Eric Gordon calls “network locality,” a condition in which the experience of place is increasingly mediated by networked technologies. Because networked life creates an information-saturated environment in which place must compete with everything else for an increasingly scarce resource—human attention—place bloggers redefine blogging as a way to more deliberately and regularly invest attention in place. To do so, they remediate older genres to create a blogging style that differs from the political and technology blogs that were popular at the time: some draw on nature writing and diary writing (essayistic place bloggers) while others tend to draw more heavily on genres of local journalism (journalistic place bloggers). A rhetorical analysis reveals how genre remediation offers place bloggers a range of strategies for managing the flow of attention between self, place, and audience as they interact around digital objects in the network. These insights offer important contributions to scholarly conversations interested in examining how online forms of rhetoric continue to evolve and how our ideas about place are adapting to life in a networked society.

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Preface

This dissertation on place began with a displacement. In August 1997, I moved from Newgard Avenue in the Rogers Park neighborhood of Chicago to Boston, where I was about to begin a graduate program in English. I didn't realize it at the time, but every mile that my friend Ken and I drove in our borrowed Chevy van was storing up potential energy for my academic work, creating exigency that would flow into the project that follows.

The transition from Chicago to Boston proved to be much more difficult than I had expected. When I left Chicago, I could imagine all the gains of moving to a new place while still young and unattached, but I had a harder time appreciating the losses I would accrue in the process. As I settled into my over-priced Boston apartment and threw myself into Romantic poetry and critical theory, I was overcome by a profound sense of dislocation, a deep sense that I had just left behind not just an address in Chicago but also a sense of identity that now seemed painfully distant. In one sense, I was participating in an academic rite of passage in which I was being "educated for the road," as Eric Zencey has put it, groomed to take my place as a "rootless academic" able to relocate again once it came time to find a job. I soon realized I also was participating in more general cultural patterns of mobility that leave many of us conflicted about our relationships to place.

In order to make sense of my disorientation, I shifted my academic studies to nature writing, where the issue of human beings' relationship to the environment was of central importance. This helped me diagnose my sense of ennui and better understand the role of rhetoric and writing in re-constructing a sense of place. But just as these interests

took hold, I also began spending time learning web design, both for my teaching and for my own enjoyment. I found myself trying to reconcile the need to deepen my connection to place and the amount of time I was spending online. Ulises Mejias articulates the particular anxieties I was working through:

I realized then that my concern was related not to the amount of information I had to process everyday, but to my ability to turn that information into something I could apply in interacting with my immediate environment. With some worry, I started to notice an increased lack of relevancy that my immediate surroundings were acquiring, a lack of relevancy that seemed to be in direct proportion to the time I spent online. In other words, my apprehension seemed to be motivated by a desire to want to make online experiences relevant not just to my life in some abstract, virtual sense, but to my life as an individual embedded in specific social settings. (“[Re-approaching](#)”)

I attempted to work through these anxieties by combining what initially seemed to be separate spheres, life in place and life online, by exploring the rhetoric of place on the web. As early as September 2002, I began designing a website I called [*The Whereproject*](#):

This website is one graduate student's attempt to explore the question *Where am I?* in an online setting with the hope that it will offer insights into pedagogy, sustainability, web technology, and how to grow a sense of place in my urban environment.

At this point, I locate myself as graduate student at Boston College, a resident of the Allston Village neighborhood of Boston, a former resident of Chicago, a native of Fargo, North Dakota.

Along with this general description on the homepage, I posed the central questions that I hoped to answer by developing the site:

Where am I? How does one foster a rigorous sense of place in the midst of unreflective mobility, environmental irresponsibility, economic injustice, and advertising bombardment? How does one develop an ethical obligation to one's place, however short or long we inhabit it?

Are there ways to employ web technology to reconnect ourselves to place and foster sustainable lifestyles, or is the medium such that any message it touches will be determined by a distancing, alienating affect on experience and place-sense?

In what ways can web technology help enable me to rethink my graduate education in the humanities, to use it to overcome the insular, isolating, overspecialized nature of academic life?

The sections of the site reflected the heuristics for invention I would use to shape my writing—Map, House, Neighborhood, City, Destinations—and I set out to collect material in these spheres that radiated out from my most immediate environment to all the places that I had traveled to and come from. As the site grew, I realized what I needed was a tool that would make it easy to update the site on a regular basis, and it was not long before I discovered a relatively new form of web publishing called blogging.

The Whereproject in its blog format developed slowly during the next few months until, in October 2003, I began preparing a conference proposal that would explore the relationship between place and the web. During my research I stumbled upon an online community of bloggers who were also interested in place, sparking a moment of self-recognition which I noted in a blog entry:

This evening as I was trying to decide what to submit to the 2004 Computers and Writing Conference (since the deadline is this week), I ran across a great wiki on place-based blogging called *Ecotone: Writing about Place*. Now that I know that there is at least this community, I'm inspired to kickstart this weblog and continue my investigation into the genre of place-based blogging. Skimming through the site led me on a breathless scurry through numerous related sites and now I'm looking forward to exploring them more. But for the moment, I'm tired of being in front of the computer and I'm feeling like going out for a walk, now that I know that *Ecotone* is the kind of site I've been looking for. (Lindgren, "[Ecotone](#)")

Many of the *Ecotone* contributors began blogging about the same time I did, and as I began to explore the discussion generated by their community, I realized that we all were caught up together in a particular cultural moment when place and emerging communication technologies were intersecting in new ways. While I continued to nominally maintain my own place blog, I found it more compelling to investigate the collective story that we seemed to be part of, a story that began with the *Ecotone* bloggers but led me to other place bloggers located in completely different corners of the web. Though I initially positioned myself as participant-observer, I gradually resigned myself

to being primarily an observer trying to tell a broader narrative than I could by focusing on my own blogging. By understanding how and why they blogged the way they did, I hoped to better understand my own impulse to put place into the network.

During my years of researching and writing about place blogging, my relationship to place has evolved as I have begun a job and moved to new neighborhood in Boston—from Allston, a Boston neighborhood where I never felt connected—to Jamaica Plain, which reminds me of my old neighborhood in Chicago. The blog entries I have posted in recent years describe the process of getting to know Jamaica Plain from the inside, by biking new routes from here to work, watching the seasons change in the numerous nearby parks, attending neighborhood meetings and other community events. The entries describe the process of buying a condo and how being a homeowner has changed my relationship to the neighborhood, giving me a deeper investment in getting to know where I am.

In the final weeks of writing this dissertation, I have become more aware of my need to connect with my physical neighbors, particularly after one of them ended up dead on the sidewalk across the street from my condo. Garibaldis Pena, 27, was shot three times as he put a car seat into his sister's car, the latest installment in a cycle of gang violence that usually seems far removed from this quiet corner of Boston. Though troubled neighborhoods in reality are only a few blocks away, they often feel socially and culturally far removed. While this incident does not make me any less happy to live here, it does make me more sensitive to the complexity of urban life and how my narrow

perspective obscures the other layers of experience going on around me. And it reminds me that I have a lot to learn about where I am and what it means to know my neighbors.

Moreover, as I finish this project the worldwide economy is in freefall towards what looks to be a deep and difficult recession. At the same time, we appear to be living in a bubble in the attention economy, a period of overheated investment of attention that is leading us toward a crash of its own kind, what we may someday recall as “The Multitasking Crash” or “The Attention-Deficit,” as Walter Kirn predicts in his essay “[The Autumn of the Multitaskers](#).” However, there can be an upside to these trying times if they force us to connect with our friends and neighbors more deeply and help us regain a commitment to living within our means, both economically and attentionally. We will need all the help we can get, and in the pages that follow I highlight the local economies of attention place bloggers have been building in their quiet corners of the web, using their blogs to imagine more sustainable ways of managing attention and relating to places. Their work can serve as a valuable resource to us in the ongoing process of figuring out where we are and what it means to live there responsibly, both in the neighborhood and in the network.

Introduction

On May 20, 2004, Fred First reflected on his first two years of blogging with the following post in [*Fragments from Floyd*](#):

I marvel at how things have turned out—and are still turning—since May of 2002. What seemed at the time like an ending and a featureless void for a future has morphed wonderfully into so many opportunities for exploration and creation and discovery. I could never have imagined. Two years ago I began to see myself not so much by what I do for a living as where it is that I do my living. I began to chronicle the extraordinary things in an ordinary life, frankly, because I did not know what else to do.

Now, I can't conceive of not having this journal and my reader-friends, some whom I have never heard from but know you are there visiting Goose Creek from time to time. And the best part—and the intended end of all this, inasmuch as there were intentions—through the blog...I am meeting people locally and getting involved in what I used to call “real” community. Now, I don't make such a hard-edged distinction, because what happens via the weblog is also real and is real community. (“[*A Thousand Points of Light*](#)”)

Like many bloggers, First has found a medium to facilitate a daily writing practice that documents his personal experiences and connects this writing with an online community of interested readers. But First also makes clear that this blog has a theme that grows out of a particular need—“Two years ago I began to see myself not so much by what I do for a living as *where* it is that I do my living” (italics mine). This concern with *whereness*

reflects the unique qualities of First's blogging, which takes as one of its central concerns the relationship between identity and place. This is no simple relationship, however, as one can see by First's post. He seems to blur the distinctions between metaphorical and literal geographies and he testifies to the way his blogging connects him to actual communities, even as he is quick to resist any easy binary between his "real" community and his online community. First suggests that his practice of writing online helps connect him not only to a group of online writers, but also to the physical places that shape him.

First began to gather around him a network of like-minded bloggers who shared a commitment to reflecting on what it means to be in a particular place. Eventually this shared interest coalesced into a wiki they called [*Ecotone: Writing about Place*](#). On their homepage, they described their mission:

The *Ecotone* wiki is intended as a portal for those who are interested in learning and writing about place. It came about as a meeting spot for a number of webloggers who write extensively about place in their own blogs and were wishing to work more collaboratively, as well as raise awareness to this genre of weblogs. ([*Ecotone*](#))

The site aimed to define place blogging as a genre that encourages participants to construct a deeper sense of place through the medium of social networking software. During its active existence between 2003 and 2005, the *Ecotone* wiki served as a meeting place for more than 50 bloggers to discuss their interest in place and blogging. Their routine of posting bi-weekly topics provided a heuristic device to aid in the process of

invention, spurring *Ecotone* writers together to produce more than 300 posts on a variety of topics during the two-year span.

Meanwhile, other forms of place blogging, variously called “local blogging” or “hyperlocal blogging,” were emerging in parallel to the *Ecotone* group in other corners of the web.¹ Simon St. Laurent started his blog, [*Living in Dryden*](#), in November 2003 where he writes for a local audience about local issues that impact the town of Dryden, NY. He has written about the practice of local blogging both in his blog and in a series of articles for O’Reilly Media in which he argues for the importance of blogging about local politics rather than politics on a national or international scale. Other locally-focused group blogs have emerged to offer a similar style of user-driven “hyperlocal” content often know as “citizen journalism.” One of the well-known early examples was [*Baristanet*](#) which began in May 2004 in Montclair, NJ and now receives 5000 daily visits by users interested in reading and commenting on a range of local news and information. Lisa Williams began a similar hyperlocal blog called [*H2otown*](#) in 2005 to gather news about Watertown, MA, an experience that prompted her to wonder how many other similar sites might exist on the web. In August of 2006, she bet Jay Rosen of *Pressthink* that she could collect 1000 independent placeblogs in the US, a project that led her to create [*placeblogger.com*](#) to publish her growing list and invite others to contribute their own blogs. Williams began writing and speaking on what she learned about the growing online citizen journalism movement through documenting hundreds of blogs from around the country.

At the time the earliest of these place bloggers were getting started, blogging as a genre had gained a high enough profile in the public consciousness that the basic

characteristics of the form were fairly well known. They knew that blogs were “frequently updated webpage with dated entries, new one’s placed at the top” (Blood, “[Weblogs](#)”), and there were numerous well-publicized examples of what people typically did with blogs. Andrew Sullivan and Glenn Reynolds had established their pioneering political blogs, and *Talking Points Memo* had played an important role in drawing attention to the racially-tinged comments that cost Trent Lott his position as Senate majority leader. Anonymous blogger Salam Pax had gained a wide audience for his writing from Iraq and the term “dooood” emerged as a way to describe the act of being fired for blogging about work topics, thanks to Heather Armstrong’s pioneering experience. Despite Armstrong’s notoriety, most casual observers of blogging at this time might have assumed the genre was mostly about politics and technology and were written mostly by men, based on the examples most commonly cited in the mainstream media.

However, other strains of blogging were floating around the web, leaving plenty of space for bloggers to explore varied approaches to the genre. Some documented the details of their everyday lives in the form of public diaries while others used blogging to share their interest in particular topics, from knitting to French cooking to avian flu. As place bloggers, I would argue that we blogged out of a need to figure out where we were, as a form of digital wayfinding in a changing cultural, technological, and environmental landscape. Many of us were transplants, trying to put down roots in new places, often after having uprooted many times in the past. Many of us were keenly aware of how places around us were rapidly changing even once we decided to stay put. And many of us shared concerns about how our relationship to place impacted the health of the

ecosystems we all depend on for health and survival. There are many ways to respond to the needs we felt, but we turned to blogging as one way to rebuild our connections with place, connections we felt we could not take for granted or assume would come to us automatically.

As Michael Curry has observed, there is always “a close interconnection between the technologies available for communication and representation and the ways in which people have conceptualized space and place” (“Discursive” 502). As more and more of our everyday experience is mediated by networked communications, it becomes important to ask what affect this mediation has on the way we relations to place. In particular, it is useful to situate place blogging in the transition from early forms of web culture to what is commonly called Web 2.0 (also known as social media participatory media, social networking software) which created new and complex ways to maintain social relationships and share information. At the time that blogging emerged, the relevance of geographic places for our sense of identity and community seemed uncertain as life in the modern work was increasingly mediated by networked technologies that appeared to allow us to transcend the limitations of place.

Residential mobility, environmental change, and technological developments all have conspired to change the ways in which we attempt to put our lives in context. What does it mean to be here, now? Who are our neighbors? What local information can we trust? What feels like home? Place blogging has now become one of the many different strategies people adopt to answer these questions, and the story of place bloggers like First is an account of how people use the technologies available to them at any given

cultural moment to explore the relationship between *who* they are and *where* they are, as Wendell Berry as put it. Paying attention to their experience offers insights into the persistent importance of place even in an increasingly networked and globalized society.

This study examines the emergence of place blogging as an online genre designed to foster a deeper sense of place and to share local knowledge. Focusing on a period between 2003 and 2006, it spotlights a transitional moment in web culture when the relationship between online life and offline life is undergoing an important shift. The bloggers highlighted in this study offer a ground-level view of how ordinary writers and readers participate in the transition to what Eric Gordon calls “network locality,” a condition in which the experience of place is increasingly mediated by networked technologies. Because networked life creates an information-saturated environment in which place must compete with everything else for an increasingly scarce resource—human attention—place bloggers redefine blogging as a way to more deliberately and regularly invest attention in place. To do so, they remediate older genres to create a blogging style that differs from the political and technology blogs that were popular at the time: some draw on nature writing and diary writing (essayistic place bloggers) while others tend to draw more heavily on genres of local journalism (journalistic place bloggers). A rhetorical analysis reveals how genre remediation offers place bloggers a range of strategies for managing the flow of attention between self, place, and audience as they interact around digital objects in the network. These insights represent an important contribution to the scholarly conversations that are exploring how online forms

of rhetoric continue to evolve and how our ideas about place are adapting to life in a networked society.

According to Barry Wellman, the transition to a networked society is a cultural paradigm shift in which the social ties that in the past might have rooted us in particular places are now dispersed over multiple locales, a society in which place identity is more commonly shaped by “surfing life through diffuse, variegated social networks” than by a close identification with a particular, bounded geographical location. In a networked society, Wellman says, “boundaries are more permeable, interactions are with diverse others, linkages switch between multiple networks, and hierarchies are flatter and more recursive.” Instead of limiting ourselves to one group, we “cycle through interactions with a variety of others, at work or in the community and our “work and community networks are diffuse, sparsely knit, with vague, overlapping, social and spatial boundaries” (Wellman et al. “[The Social](#)”).

In the past, knowing where we were was made easier in that the reach of our social networks mapped more closely to the dimensions of our physical communities, forming what Wellman has called “little boxes” in which friends and relatives tended to live in the same neighborhoods or in nearby areas and community was created by face-to-face meetings and regular encounters in shared spaces; however, several cultural shifts have undermined this way of organizing society: our family arrangements have changed as more of us are divorced and more couples work outside the home more frequently. Our longer commutes mean we spend more time shuffling between work and home and less time fostering relationships with our immediate neighbors; and technological changes in

transportation (cars, freeways, air travel) and long distance communications (telephones, computers) make the distances between people and places seem smaller (Wellman et al. [“The Social”](#)).

Community has always extended beyond physical neighborhoods, as Wellman points out, but until recently we did not have the social and economic forces extending our social networks across distances nor the technologies to easily maintain those distant ties. As a result, many of our relations are disembedded, to use Anthony Giddens’ term, pulled up out of the local contexts in which they might have been rooted in the past and resituated in more dispersed contexts, often held together through ubiquitous and increasingly personalized digital communications tools (21). As William Mitchell observes, we “now increasingly live and work within a culture of presence, rather than one of propinquity” (93) one characterized by what Melvin Webber has called “community without propinquity.” Community is frequently shaped more by interests shared among individuals without reference to location than by the kinds of relationships that form among people who need to get along because they share a common physical place (51).

Networked technologies, then, change our sense of context—what is relevant to us, what is close to us, what affects our lives. In the networked society, what is important is not proximity but connection, and networked technologies are particularly good at helping us make connections regardless of our location. This is what has been exhilarating about the rise of the web—we now can learn about what is happening in other parts of the world in real time and foster relationships with people who in the past

would have been too far away, out of the context our lives. Such benefits would suggest that the network is better at situating us in a global context than in local ones, raising the issue of what affect this might have on our ability to pay attention to what is happening at the level of physical locale, to the seemingly more limited, circumscribed world of our mundane place-based lives.

From this perspective, it might seem odd that place bloggers would turn to the web to foster a deeper sense of place. Indeed, during the early days of the web, the assumption that local knowledge was at odds with networked experience seemed commonplace, as we tended to think of online life and “real” life as very different arenas, the difference between the “space of flows” and the “space of places” or between the world of atoms and the world of bits (Castells 409; Negroponte 4). The early utopian rhetoric of the web tended to celebrate cyberspace as an alternative to normal life that allowed us to transcend the limitations of our bodies and physical places. In his 1996 book *Being Digital*, Nicolas Negroponte, founder of MIT’s media lab, predicts that cyberspace would render place irrelevant:

In the same ways that hypertext removes the limitations of the printed page, the post-information age will remove the limitations of geography. Digital living will include less and less dependence upon being in a specific place at a specific time, and the transmission of place itself will start to become possible. (165)

Negroponte views the concreteness and specificity of place as an impediment to modern existence, and he imagines a future in which technology would fully domesticate place into a harmless backdrop for our digital lives:

If I really could look out the electronic window of my living room in Boston and see the Alps, hear the cowbells, and smell the (digital) manure in summer, in a way I am very much in Switzerland. If instead of going to work by driving my atoms into town, I log into my office and do my work electronically, exactly where is my workplace? (165)

Negroponte imagines the web liberating us from the limitation of our bodies in place, the inconvenient quality of only being able to be physically in one place at a time. Networked technologies enable consciousness to extend well beyond the local, beyond where our bodies can be. Communication across distance is not new, of course, but the ease and speed with which we can now interact digitally has brought us to a new generalized state of space-time compression (Harvey 240).

Not everyone has accepted the notion that place is meant to be transcended, however; skeptics have objected to the utopian rhetoric of cyber-evangelists such as Negroponte which seemed to represent a naïve denial of the body, a Gnostic fantasy with ethical consequences for the fate of local communities and the environment. For Negroponte, Switzerland is reduced to a scratch-and-sniff wall-hanging next to his computer, and it clearly is not a place he imagines taking his atoms for a walk, where he could risk stepping in some actual (analog) manure. Stephen Doheny-Farina, also writing in 1996, cautions that virtual communities of interest could be functioning as compensatory mechanisms that indicate the "geophysical community is dying." He warns that "as we invest ourselves in the simulation, the simulated phenomena disappear" (27). In this view, the web can be seen as contributing significantly to a crisis of

“placelessness” in contemporary culture.ⁱⁱ Such anxieties about the death of place and the rise of the virtual have been figured vividly in science fiction works in which cyberspace offers an alternative to the despoiled physical world, but where the virtual turns out to be as nightmarish as the real. William Gibson’s seminal depiction of cyberspace in *Neuromancer* portrays an urban wasteland where cyberpunk “console cowboys” prefer the virtual world of the matrix to the urban wasteland of “meatspace” and where super-intelligent computers conspire to consolidate their power over humanity. More recently, *The Matrix* imagines a world where the machines have won, where networked life has become so real that users don’t realize that the Matrix is designed to keep them ignorant of the fact that their bodies are being used to generate power for their mechanical overlords. In both visions, what happens in the virtual world can still kill you—characters die from the violence they experience while “jacked in” to cyberspace—suggesting that virtual is not truly an escape from or an alternative to the real.

It was this rather caricatured view of the relationship between place and the web that place bloggers inherited from the first iteration of web culture. The way the early discussion of cyberspace was constructed forced people to take sides: either you were for place and against technology or you were for technology and against place. The very act of putting “place” and “blogging” together into a single term, then, was an assertion of resistance to this line in the sand, this polarized way of thinking that failed to capture the complexity of lived experience, both the benefits and pitfalls of life in the networked society. At the time place blogging emerged, the shift to Web 2.0 was well underway, a time when web technologies were becoming more collaborative and user-

friendly, allowing a vast number of average users to begin publishing content and socializing online. Online social networks increasingly overlapped with and reinforced physical communities, and the web increasingly became not where one went to escape from ordinary life but where everyday life took place.

The simplistic choice between “real places” and “virtual places,” then, proved to be a false one for many people. Barry Wellman argues that the “hypesters, pundits, and wired scholars” were shortsighted in their early declarations that the internet was “a place apart,” pointing to widespread research showing “that physical space and cyberspace interpenetrate as people actively surf their networks online and offline ([“Physical Place”](#)). In considering the relationship between place and the network, Mark Nunes suggests that we are now in a new stage of looking at the internet, one in which “the prophecies of the 1990s are being replaced by the banality of the network” (xxvii). As networked technologies become a more seamless part of our everyday lives, Rodney Jones asserts, cyberspace “does not create a ‘separation’ of spaces so much as additional layers of space within which participants can maneuver” (143). Eric Gordon calls this new stage of the internet “network locality,” a term which describes a “changing media landscape, where the relationships between user and information, body and space, local and global are shifting to accommodate emerging patterns of media consumption” ([“Towards”](#)).

Network locality resists the technological determinism implicit in early cyber-rhetoric that assumed network technologies will have necessary effects on our relationship to place, either emancipating us from the limitations of place and embodiment or undermining our ability to connect in meaningful ways with local places

and ecosystems. If we view place blogging as participating in the emergence of network locality, we remind ourselves that technologies are cultural constructions that change in response to evolving individual and cultural uses. The question then becomes, as Christine Hine puts it, “How do people manage the coexistence of flows and places ... ? What kinds of narratives still get told, where, and to whom? How do people interpret their locations, their connections, and their histories? (85). In May 2003, the *Ecotone* community of bloggers began attempting to answer these questions for themselves as they define place blogging. Beth Adams offered this description of their endeavor:

It's really fairly radical what we're doing—I think so anyway—we are taking rather old-fashioned ideas about "relationship to place" and translating those forward into a world dominated by technology that allows us, for the first time in the history of the world, to be anywhere. We need to somehow get across that we are grappling with this and its effect on us as human beings, but that it's not about rejecting or criticizing the future, but rather about examining a new paradigm and embracing the best of it to create new kinds of place, while sharing all that's wonderful about the natural world wherever we find ourselves—because we ourselves find this grounding, interesting, and meaningful. (“[Running Discussion](#)”)

The *Ecotone* members view place blogging not as a form of alternative reality but a way to mediate their sense of place, to connect in meaningful ways with their physical environments. Place bloggers are not particularly interested in virtual places as alternatives to physical places, but neither do they dismiss technological mediation as

necessarily an obstacle to meaningful engagement with place. In other words, they do not seem to believe either that life in the networked society makes the local obsolete or that a deep sense of place can be cultivated only through physical encounters with places. They are less concerned with where place ends and cyberspace begins and more focused on the particular ways blogging enables people to foster a deeper sense of place.

It is not surprising that place bloggers would feel comfortable viewing the networked technologies as both part of the problem and part of the solution, since we now are used to turning to the network for an increasing number of personal and social tasks. In doing so, we now accept responsibility for creating and maintaining our social networks, and we look less to traditional groups, neighborhoods, or communities to supply our basic needs for belonging and help us figure out who we are. In what Wellman calls “networked individualism,” the “person has become the portal” now that we each have our own cellphone, e-mail account, IM name, Facebook profile. In this arrangement, “the person, rather than the household or group, is the primary unit of connectivity,” making use each the manager of our own customized social networks, our own “differentiated portfolio of ties” (“[Changing](#)”). Similarly, it’s increasingly common to view our sense of place as a something we must deliberately construct rather than something we inherit simply by residing in a community over time. Place blogging emerges in part as a response to this need and the desire of individuals to figure out where they are.

But locating ourselves by way of the network is not without its challenges, as Ulises Mejias points out:

Reapproaching the local through the network is not simply a case of arriving right back at where we started after a process of dislocation and re-location. It's not simply reaching our nose around the back of our head. The mediated near that the network delivers is a slightly different near, familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. (*Networked* 26)

Mejias and Gordon describe how network technologies are revising the way we make sense of what is near and how we define what is “local” (“[Towards](#)”). It used to be that the near had value because interacting across distances involved moving physical stuff, whether one’s own body or other material goods, or paying to access expensive communication networks. One could grow a sense of place with less effort because one’s life was lived in the spatially proximate world of physically-bounded communities. When network technologies came along, they increased the ease and decreased the cost of interacting across distance, bypassing the constraints of spatial proximity in favor of social proximity. Information flows from node to node without regard to how close they are in the physical world; as Mejias describes it, what once was “spatially proximal” is now “socially proximal—what we feel is relevant to us socially, regardless of whether it is spatially near or far,” and this allows information to function as “the social glue that allows networks to transcend distance” (“*Networked*” 13, 9). Our friends and family are near because we are connected to them through networked technologies, and our stuff (at least our digital stuff) is near at hand because we can bring it up through laptops or mobile devices wherever we are (“[Towards](#)”).

The notion that nearness is created through social proximity and ubiquitous computing suggests that these interactions are frictionless and free. However, just as the apparently immaterial ether of the internet is based on very concrete server-farms that require staggering amounts of energy, so also are there real costs to the energy we expend interacting online. A critical audit of the costs of network locality reveals that the very ease and speed that has enabled the web to redefine the near—to move beyond the finite limitations of our bodies and locations—eventually collides with another barrier: the limitations of our attention.

I would argue that if the web can enable us to forget that our bodies can only be in one place at a time, it does so by creating the illusion that our *minds* can be in more than one place at time. Despite the “myth of multitasking” which would have us believe that “kids these days” have evolved the ability to pay attention to many things at once, neuroscience has shown that the mind only focuses on one thing at a time and when we multi-task we simply are actually “switchtasking,” shifting quickly between multiple objects of attention. While our relationships and our stuff might feel nearer to us than ever before, we are working with a finite capacity to pay attention to it all, and the costs of living beyond our means are becoming increasingly apparent (Crenshaw 17; [Kirn](#)). In Linda Stone’s view, we have moved into a state of what she calls “continuous partial attention” in which we can each exist as “a live node on the network.” She argues that this “always on, anywhere, anytime, any place era has created an artificial sense of constant crisis” as we “stretch our attention bandwidth to its upper limits ... as if we expected our personal bandwidth to keep up with the ever increasing bandwidth that

technology offered” (“[Attention](#)”). In her book *Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age*, Maggie Jackson warns that co-mingling of online life and offline life brings with it the risk of chronically attenuated attention:

The physical and virtual worlds are always with us, singing a siren song of connection, distraction, and options. We rarely are completely present in one moment or for one another. Presence is something naked, permeable, and endlessly spliced. (63)

Jackson paints a dystopian picture of networked individualism in which “to cope and to keep up with our pulsing personal orbits, we live in worlds of our own making, grazing from separate menus, plugged into our own bedroom-based media centers.” Jackson argues that this stretched state of attention has turned contemporary culture into “the land of distraction” where “attention is restless and untethered, a wandering thing,” making us attentional nomads constantly on the move from one momentary resting point of awareness to the next (63, 67).

In a network society, information is abundant and social connections proliferate with greater ease and speed, and in this context place is just one more element competing for the finite amount of attention each of us has to allocate.ⁱⁱⁱ The phrase “paying attention” has long served as a “metaphor we live by,” to use Lakoff and Johnson’s terminology, a metaphorical concept that we use to make sense of the world (9-10). However, this metaphor has taken on risen in conceptual status in recent years as scholars and writers have begun to describe our current relationship with information as an “attention economy” (Davenport and Beck; Lanham; Goldhaber). Richard Lanham points out that if

economics is the “study of how humans allocate resources to produce various commodities,” then it would seem that in an information society like ours, information would be the scarce resource that we have to figure out how to allocate. But in fact, the reality is exactly the reverse. We now have far too much information, and it is attention that is in short supply, making it a valuable commodity that we need to spend carefully (6). As Davenport and Beck point out, we are all both “producers of information, seeking the attention of consumers” and “information consumers ... with a limited amount of attention to bestow upon the world.” How we distribute our limited attention, our “attention portfolio,” is based on our values and what we think we can gain from the exchange, which could be many different things: to “learn something, change something for the better, fix what’s broke, or gratify another human being” (11).

Lanham describes the attention economy as a massive reversal in the relationship between “stuff,” the material products and resources that used to be the base of the economy, and “fluff,” the immaterial layer of information and expression that now has gained prominence. In a society “where information and stuff have changed places,” Lanham argues, the role of human communications in culture—what used to be called “rhetoric”—takes on a new importance. While rhetoric “has traditionally been defined as ‘as the art of persuasion,’” Lanham argues, “it might as well be called the economics of attention” (21). Lanham asserts that in this context the new economists are the artists, the designers, and the writers because they are the ones best equipped to deal in the cultivation of human attention. Likewise, I would argue, place bloggers are in a unique position to explore the relationship between stuff and fluff in the attention economy

because they both care deeply about the materiality of place and are actively shaping an important new tool of information exchange.

One productive way to define place blogging, then, is as an effort to manage and exchange attention in a way that fosters a deeper sense of place. Aware that place is just one among many objects that jockey for our attention in the attention economy, place bloggers are concerned about the personal and corporate costs of failing to invest our attention to the local. We can make an analogy with the food production and consumption: improvements in transportation technologies make it possible to have grapes from Argentina in January, but there are hidden costs to the environment in maintaining this kind of relationship to our food, costs that do not figure into traditional cost-benefit assessments. Similarly, if our attention is a limited resource, then we need to figure out whether the web's tendency of pulling us toward a global perspective might be undercutting the attention we are allocating to the local. Place bloggers are interested in assessing some of these hidden costs of attention, and they aim to create what we might call local economies of attention, ways of managing and exchanging attention that deepens our sense of place. This provides another level to the meaning of place in the context of network locality: it not only grows from our physical experience of proximity and from the relationships and digital stuff we experience as nearby in network; it is also simply a product of *what we pay attention to*.

To understand more concretely how this works, we need to look closely at the specific practices of actual bloggers as they attempt to construct a sense of place and share local knowledge in the network. To this end, this study zooms in on bloggers who

are defining place blogging during a pivotal period when cyberculture is undergoing the transition to network locality, roughly between 2003 and 2006. I focus largely on the group of bloggers who gathered around the *Ecotone* site, a loose network of like-minded bloggers looking for others with whom to explore the idea of place. While I will suggest that they may have been the first to explicitly define “place blogging,” I will also highlight others who were exploring place blogging in parallel with the *Ecotone* group: Simon St. Laurent, blogging mostly on his own, began advocating the notion of “local blogging” about six months after the *Ecotone* site was launched and Lisa Williams began gaining attention for her quest to collect place blogs in the summer of 2006. I will refer to the blogging of St. Laurent and Williams as “journalistic” place blogging in order to contrast it with the more essayistic qualities of the *Ecotone* group, but the differences between journalistic place blogging and essayistic place blogging represent poles on a continuum rather than competing options, differences in emphasis that foreground the common goals of place blogging to construct a sense of self-in-place and to share meaningful local knowledge. These strains of blogging have the same DNA but have evolved under slightly different generic conditions, and studying these variations allows us to better understand both how genres evolve and how they shape the relationships bloggers have with place.

The *Ecotone* community is particularly useful as a case study not because it was trend-setting or unique, but rather because they both practiced place blogging and talked about what they were doing at the same time. The creation of the *Ecotone* wiki temporarily formalized an otherwise organic network of bloggers around a common

project and this affords them opportunity to articulate what they mean by place blogging. Since the community wiki they create is designed as a site for place bloggers to gather, they first have to define what they mean by place blogging and anticipate what meanings a diverse audience might bring to the table. The *Ecotone* community, then, offers a useful case study not because their notion of place blogging is the definitive one, but because they left a rich transcript of their conversations at a formative juncture in the development of blogging. This transcript, when read together with the journalistic place bloggers who emerged at the same time, provides an important snapshot of this transitional moment in media culture.

Part of my task in this study has been to reconstruct a coherent narrative out of what was from the start a complex and constantly shifting network of blog rolls, hyperlinks, and comments, a record of interactions that can feel closer to orality than to literacy at times. This project is, in part, an act of cultural preservation, an attempt to reconstruct one small chapter in the vast narrative of cyberhistory, to archive a narrow slice of internet culture with as much texture and richness as possible. Creating such a narrative after the fact is also an act of interpretation, one that necessarily reveals some things and conceals others depending on the particular lenses through which I choose to view this material. The arc of the narrative I create here is not the only way to tell this story, and it is not even necessarily the story the bloggers I follow would have told. I tell it this way in order to highlight this particular transitional moment in web history and foreground the cultural work these bloggers do in bringing about the conditions of network locality.

Broadly speaking, I approach this topic through the lens of rhetorical analysis, examining how people use language to get things done in culture. For the most part, I have taken a close look at the texts produced by place bloggers, their blog posts, their comments, and the discussions that they have elsewhere on about what they are doing. While I have interviewed some of the bloggers I follow and have even met with some of them in physical places, my research is not directly about places themselves or the cultures in those places. Rather, I am interested primarily in how blogging works as a rhetorical form and how people use blogs to develop their relationships to places, questions I explore by reading texts closely and by situating texts in larger cultural and discursive contexts.

My goal is to put this subject in a set of contexts which enable us to take seriously both halves of the term “place blogging,” to see how place modifies blogging and how blogging can shape how we think about place. To do this, we need to examine blogging as a genre, by which I have in mind something more than a particular set of formal characteristics (“short, informal posts organized in reverse chronological order”) or even just a particular subject matter (place). Rather, I view genre in the way that Carolyn Miller has defined genres as “typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations,” socially recognizable patterns that help people figure out how to communicate in particular cultural contexts (159). When people need to get things done rhetorically, they turn to the genres available to them and these provide the shared set of conventions and expectations that make communication possible. Moreover, this choice is tied to a sense of cultural *kairos*, a sense of timeliness or appropriateness of this rhetorical strategy in

the particular interpersonal or cultural context. Place bloggers are motivated by the desire to foster a deeper sense of place and share meaningful local knowledge with others. This study investigates why they turn to blogging and how using this particular form influences how they accomplish their goals. However, genres are not simply static, formal containers for rhetorical action; rather, they are constantly shaped by the people who use them. Examining place blogging allows us to see how the rhetorical goal of fostering a sense of place contributes to the ongoing evolution of blogging as a form, and it offers insights into way this evolution depends on the adaptation, or re-mediation, of older genres into a new one.

I would argue that place bloggers turn to blogging as a form because basic time-oriented structure provides a heuristic for allocating attention to place over time. Place blogging does not have the obvious spatial components of other online tools like map mash-ups or *Second Life*; instead, it provides a mechanism for approaching place through *time*. Here I have in mind both meanings of time in classical Greek rhetoric, *chronos* as quantitative time that is regular, measureable, and structured, and *kairos* as qualitative time that is present in the moment of rhetorical timeliness and human activity. The *chronos* of blogging refers to the expectation of regularity and the sense of obligation that can result; if one fails to write with at least a modicum of frequency, then it can become more difficult to maintain an audience who expects new content on a regular basis. The *kairos* of blogging refers to the expectation that authors will write with timeliness, that they will post soon after whatever thought or event gave rise to the blog entry. The dual nature of blogging time—regularity and timeliness—encourages a writing practice in

which the content of the blog gradually accumulates, leaving snapshots of experience along the way to mark the passage of time. For place bloggers, this time-base structure acts as a heuristic device that helps create the habit of engaging with place—not a habit that enables us to act without thinking, but rather a habit of attention that enables us to intentionally construct a deeper sense of place.

In the context of place blogging, the ability of bloggers to allocate attention to place is intimately tied to having others read and comment on their blog posts and then spending time reading and commenting on other blogs in return. This interaction with others is a central motivation for putting place into the network: it provides a way to construct a sense of place through discourse with like-minded people. While each of us has a sense of place that reflects our individual subjectivities, environmental psychologists Dixon and Durheim point out that place identity is not an individual creation but rather is produced in “the flux of human dialogue.” Place-identity is “something that people create together through talk: a social construction that allows them to makes sense of their connectivity to place and to guide their actions and projects accordingly” (32). Eric Gordon and Gene Koo describe this dialogic formation of place as a “placeworld,” the “sense of collective place that emerges from the conscious and deliberate discourse of a defined group of people,” that forms “when a group brings a place into shared relevance” (218, 206). In their formulation, “places become placeworlds when their inhabitants imbue them with meaning through communicative action. (206).

Understanding how bloggers construct and maintain a sense of audience is central to understanding how place blogging manages attention for its users. While the impetus

for place blogging may arise from the individual desire to allocate more attention to place, it only works because it is part of what Rodney Jones calls a “social attention system” in which attention is exchanged in order to accomplish a variety of person and social goals.^{iv} Every post a blogger makes about place is an allocation of attention to place, and having others allocate attention by reading or commenting provides an investment that makes the blogger want to keep writing. From the readers’ point of view, this expenditure of attention requires a withdrawal from that limited store of time and energy that they have to give to their own places. However, reading-attention is also an investment that can have returns in other ways: 1) investing attention by reading and/or commenting increases the chances that others reciprocate the investment, and 2) they gain insight by reading how others interact with their places.

In the chapters that follow, I will trace how place bloggers experiment with these subtle dynamics of attention flow to foster local attention economies—the way they appropriate and reshape older genres, the way they explore notions of place and the self, and the ways they attempt to situate their audiences both in the network and in places. As I do so, I will be participating in scholarly conversations from several disciplines in order to attend fully to both elements of the topic—both “place” and “blogging.” While I primarily approach this subject matter from a rhetorical studies point of view and situate myself in conversations about reading and writing in the context of digital media, the findings of this study also contribute to conversations about place that normally take place in cultural studies, human geography, and sociology.

Chapter one explores how place blogging does not emerge *ex nihilo* at the hands of *Ecotone* members but rather through an evolutionary process in which something new grows from what came before. The *Ecotone* community defines place blogging by pushing away from certain existing blogging practices and drawing on older print genres that they “remediate” or reuse in the context of a new online medium. In particular, they push against politically-oriented blogging that dominates public perceptions of the form at that time while they embrace the more personal “online diary” style of blogging. As they focus on place as a topic for blogging, they also draw heavily on environmental literature, or writing nature, and genres like the journal and diary that have a strong chronological element. The definition of place blogging crafted by the *Ecotone* community is inevitably shaped by the genre ecosystem in which it evolves, and they view the “structure of attention” that results as a heuristic to help them more deliberately allocate attention to place, to foster a stronger personal sense of place over time.

Chapter two examines the ways *Ecotone* members view blogging as a way to foster a coherent sense of self-in-place, responding to the adage “You can’t know *who* you are until you know *where* you are.” As *Ecotone* members discover, however, *where* is actually plural in many cases: their sense of self-in-place is actually made up of many places, both where they are now and other places, past and present. While *Ecotone* bloggers give their individual blogs priority in representing the self, their blogs do not necessarily create a one-to-one alignment between one place and one self. Rather, *Ecotone* bloggers view place as one way of filtering the set of digital objects they have assembled to stand for themselves in the network. In discussions of place identity within

the *Ecotone* community, it becomes clear that while they value having a meaningful relationship with place, they are not expecting place to ground their sense of self in any simplistic way. A blog does not reflect the individual's unitary relationship with a single physical location so much as blogging helps users construct and maintain a *multi-local* self, one not only rooted deeply in where they live but also connected in meaningful ways to other places where they used to live or where they occasionally visit. In other words, the *Ecotone* group comes to view place blogging as a tool for inventing and maintaining the multi-local self over time.

If it turns out that the self is made up of many places, it also becomes clear that the audiences *Ecotone* bloggers write for are also located in many places, most of which are different from where they actually live. Chapter three explores how *Ecotone* bloggers find themselves negotiating between the value of paying attention to their own places and the desire to cultivate an audience of readers, most of whom live somewhere else. It becomes clearer that the way blogs enable people to allocate attention to place is intimately intertwined with the exchange of attention between people and places via the network. The way *Ecotone* defines place blogging makes them heavily dependent on outside investments of attention. Managing their own attention to place depends on distant audiences who they must position as visitors because they do not share the same physical places, but maintaining these relationships inevitably requires them to allocate some of their attention to other places where they do not live. While they see blogging as a heuristic device, a kind of lens that helps them zoom in on their own places, they also value the perspectives of their distant audiences, a view that requires them to zoom out to

view their own place from the broader vantage point of the network. *Ecotone* bloggers find that accounting for real costs of managing attention to place is more challenging than they first realized.

Perhaps the accounting would be easier if they simplified their approach: write about the place where you live and for an audience who lives there; or put differently, perhaps a true local economy of attention requires keeping the circulation of attention closer to home and avoiding dependence on outside investment. As I explain in chapter four, this is the approach that characterizes journalistic place blogging, a strain of place blogging that evolves independently of the *Ecotone* group under a different set of generic and cultural conditions. Like the *Ecotone* bloggers, Lisa Williams and Simon St. Laurent begin blogging to figure out where they are, and they define place blogging in reaction to the overcharged political blogging that dominated public perceptions of blogging at the time. Their definition of blogging draws more directly on journalistic genres, genres which foreground the creation of local knowledge more than the presentation of the self. Instead of constructing an audience of travelers and tourists, journalistic bloggers intentionally cultivate an audience of neighbors, and the closer alignment between audience and place creates a different pattern of attention, one in which the exchange of attention between authors and readers overlaps on a shared physical location. Journalistic place blogging draws attention to the affordances of physical proximity, the particular quality of interactions that are possible because people relate to each other both online in the network and offline in a shared locale.

In chapter five we return to the *Ecotone* group where we find that First's place blogging has continued to develop, an evolution we can trace through a series of blog posts that illustrate how he negotiates between an audience of visitors and an audience of neighbors, between the benefits of gaining greater attention through networked interactions and the responsibility for how these interactions might be organizing his readers' attention to place. The challenge for First, as for other *Ecotone* bloggers, is how to create interesting writing that will attract the attention of a supportive audience without also creating desire in readers for places that are not their own, in effect diverting attention that they should be allocating toward their own places. As he continues blogging, Fred's involvement with his local community grows and he begins to blog more frequently about matters immediately relevant to a growing audience of local readers. In the end, First works to maintain an audience of both visitors and neighbors, creating an example of local economy of attention that succeeds, however tentatively, to balance the beneficial reach of the network with a grounded commitment to a particular place.

While First and the other place bloggers I follow did not create the conditions of network locality on their own, the narrative of their evolution reveals the significant legwork they have done in figuring out how to practicing place in ways adapted to life in a networked society. Unless we choose to go off the grid and cut ourselves off entirely from the current social and economic system we inhabit, we must find ways to live a networked life that also allows us to foster healthy and sustainable relationships with the physical places where day-to-day existences takes place. Place blogging attempts to

create a form of network locality in which networks and places are mutually constitutive, where the networks mediate our experience of place and places in turn influence the shape of networks. Place bloggers are not particularly interested in virtual places in themselves as alternatives to physical places, but neither do they dismiss technological mediation as an obstacle to meaningful engagement with place. They avoid the temptation to believe either that life in the networked society makes physical location obsolete or that a deep sense of place can only be cultivated through physical encounters with places. Instead, their blogging practice affirms that physical places still matter and they find ways to use the web to connect both to people across the country and people across the street.

Place bloggers assert these connections must be forged through a deliberate and ongoing investment of attention, both online and offline. According to Lanham, the ability to negotiate between places and flows is a vital skill for functioning in an attention economy:

We need to learn how to move more adroitly and self-consciously between stuff and fluff. We must understand better than we do now the paradoxical relationship between things and what we think about things. A comprehensive economics of attention will include both these ways of looking at the world and how we are to relate to them. It must be built on the perceptual oscillation that allows us to focus both in our minds at once. (22)

They are keenly aware of what Gordon articulates as the ethical stakes in network locality: “if we’re really interested in enhancing human connections and place

identification through computer augmentation, how do we negotiate the user's focus? How do we use the technology to build meaningful places and relationships, and not just meaningful networks?" ("[More Thoughts](#)"). They make the connection between a view of place as something dynamic that must be constructed over time and the practice of keeping a blog, which commits the blogger to a nearly daily habit of writing.

As a result, place blogging is not just a way to represent place as something finished or stable, but it is a way of *practicing* place as an ongoing process. This study highlights the particular strategies place bloggers adopt to build local economies of attention, rhetorical practices that realize the potential within blogging to concentrate attention on place rather than dispersing it into the endless extension of cyberspace. These localized attention economies do not strive for insular self-sufficiency; rather, they simply seek to create sustainable flows of attention that make it easier for people to allocate larger portions of their awareness to place. Paying attention to how place bloggers negotiate the relationship between networks and places offers insights into the challenges and opportunities many of us face as we attempt to locate ourselves the changing landscape of the networked society.

1. Remediating Attention

A year and half after Fred First begins blogging in July, 2002, he posts an entry entitled “About Place” in which he wonders how many others share his interest in place blogging:

What does it mean to have (and want to share) a “sense of place?” This sense of wanting to find or share one’s connectedness to his or her surroundings...urban, suburban or rural...finds expression in a quiet corner of the blogging world. I know of only two places where such “blogs about place” are identified and grouped (Bowen Island Journal and Rebecca Bloods Webloggia). But surely, in the varied posts of all the tens of thousands of bloggers across the globe, there are many, many entries that celebrate nature, beauty, natural and local human history, or culture attached to location. What is it that “place bloggers” hope to express? Why do readers come to read? Is there potential to grow a sense of community within this niche within the growing weblog-way of self-expression? ("[About Place](#)")

At the time that First writes this, blogging is a new but recognizable genre, having had several years to take root in the public consciousness. However, he expresses the desire to define blogging more particularly to reflect the traits of his own blogging practices as well as others. First predicts that many others share a common rhetorical habit of writing about nature and place, and he is intent on finding ways connect with like-minded bloggers.

These bloggers begin to find each in part when Chris Corrigan of the blog *Bowen Island Journal* begins treating place as a way to categorize blogs. In December 2002, he creates a sidebar heading entitled “People Blogging Places” under which he lists several blogs that focus on place, including First’s *Fragments from Floyd*:

- [hmmn](#)
- [Notes from a Hillside Farm](#)
- [Notes from Pure Land Mountain](#)
- [Fragments from Floyd](#)
- [Race Rocks Log](#)
- [Rural Dreams](#)
- [Dervala.net](#)
- [London and the North](#)
- [Field Notes](#)
- [Nature Notes](#)
- [Hunkabutta](#)
- [Northwest Notes](#)

(“[People Blogging Places](#)”)

According to Corrigan, this way of categorizing blogs begins gaining visibility when blogger Flemming Funch posts an entry in January 2003 describing how Corrigan had introduced him to “geographic blogging.” He likens it to having a webcam focused on a

place such that “you could always go and see how it looks there right now.” Soon after this, well-known blogger Rebecca Blood contributes to the emerging visibility of the genre by adding a category to her blog directory with the heading “weblogs of place,” under which she lists *Bowen Island Journal* and several other bloggers who would later become participants in the *Ecotone* circle of place bloggers:

- [*Bowen Island Journal*](#)
- [*Field Notes*](#)
- [*Fragments from Floyd*](#)
- [*Nature Notes*](#)
- [*Northwest Notes*](#)
- [*Notes from a Hillside Farm*](#)
- [*Notes from the Pure Land Mountain*](#)
- [*Viviculture*](#)

(Blood, “[webloggia](#)”)

This modest attention from Blood and Funch is enough to enable several like-minded bloggers to find each other, and soon the idea of a more collective approach to place blogging begins to emerge.

In early May 2003, First begins to nurture this network of bloggers through an exchange of posts and comments, and on June 15 he takes the lead in suggesting the creation of a website for place bloggers. According to First, a collaborative post he wrote with fellow blogger Lisa Thompson a few weeks early titled “Now Showing: Sunset and

Clouds” was a seminal moment: “The AHA! light went off for me and Thompson, and the idea of some kind of collaborative effort among ‘place bloggers’ began in my mind and hopes” (“[History](#)”). In a comment posted on Thompson’s entry, blogger Allan Hollander recognizes that these posts were the beginning of larger project to define place blogging: “I would love to see this category coalesce more as a genre. Working collaboratively like you and Thompson have done in your DuoBlog today is a good step towards this” (qtd. in Thompson, “[5.9.2003](#)”). First reports that he and others have begun to discuss the possibility of “promoting a greater visibility and stronger sense of community within blogs that are already (self- or outsider-) identified as ‘blogs about place’” (“[About](#)”). Blogger Beth Adams agrees with the “idea of having a central place where people who do this can post particular entries about ‘place,’” and she sees its potential to “increase the readership for these sorts of ruminations on nature and our place” (“[Some Thoughts](#)”). It is not long before these discussions, initially scattered among emails, posts, and comments, find a common forum in a wiki created by Hollander, soon to be called *[Ecotone: Writing About Place](#)*. From the beginning, the interest in forming an online community of place bloggers is tied self-consciously to the definition of genre. Early in their discussions, First reports that googling “place blogging” or “blogs about place” results in very few hits, and he observes that “of the ones with our meaning, they are all ours, many related to last week’s COV [post in Carnival of the Vanities]. This is a very new term and we may be able, really, to define it for the first time” (“[Running Discussion](#)”).

In their article "[Blogging as Social Action: A Genre Analysis of the Weblog](#)," Carolyn Miller and Dawn Shepherd suggest that the attempt to define place blogging is a rhetorical marker worth paying attention to: "When a type of discourse or communicative action acquires a common name within a given context or community, that's a good sign that it is functioning as a genre." Genre, in this sense, is more than just shared formal features of literary texts, as the term often denotes; rather, genre is more like a shared structure or context in which communication happens—something almost like a place. In *Genre and the Invention of the Writer*, Anis Bawarshi speaks of genre as "both a habit and a habitat—the conceptual habitat within which individuals perceive and experience a particular environment as well as the rhetorical habit through which they function within that environment" (84). Bawarshi compares genres to ecosystems, asserting that genres are not "merely passive backdrops for our actions or simply familiar tools we use to convey or categorize information; rather, genres function more like ecosystems, dynamic sites in which communicants rhetorically reproduce the very conditions within which they act" (80,82). Similarly, Charles Bazerman asserts,

Genres are not just forms. Genres are forms of life, ways of being. They are frames for social action. They are environments for learning. They are locations within which meaning is constructed. Genres shape the thoughts we form and the communications by which we interact. Genres are the familiar places we go to create intelligible communicative action with each other and the guideposts we use to explore the unfamiliar. (16)

For digital media scholar Janet Murray, the creation of new genres, particularly digital ones, is important for providing ways to manage our attention: “The invention of a genre ... is the elaboration of a cognitive scaffold for shared knowledge creation,” an act that extends “the joint attentional scene that is the basis of all human culture.” In [“Cyberinfrastructure as Cognitive Scaffolding: The Role of Genre Creation in Knowledge Making,”](#) Murray argues that the work of “inventing and elaborating genre conventions allows us to focus our attention together; the invention of more coherent, expressive media genres goes hand in hand with the grasping and sharing and of more complex ideas about the world.” In this sense, genres are what Richard Lanham calls “attention structures,” mechanisms that help us make sense of the barrage of information that makes up our daily lives, mechanisms that, as scholar Rodney Jones points out, we need to provide “some way of knowing what to attend to and what not to attend to” (Lanham 21; Jones 52). Genres, then, are a particular kind of attention structure, a rhetorical one located in the interactions people have through and around texts.

The *Ecotone* community is interesting for the degree of self-consciousness with which they approach the formation of place blogging. Not only do the early writings of the *Ecotone* community represent the first articulation of “place blogging” as a term, they also provide a rich meta-commentary on why they started blogging individually and why the group formed. Discussion of how to define the online community—what to name it, how to organize the site, how to pick topics for collective blogging, how to categorize different blogs—become wrapped up with the question of what place blogging is. In the process they must both define place blogging in a way that distinguishes it from the

dominant modes of blogging at the time and in a way that makes place blogging appeal to the widest range of people possible. Defining place blogging, then, is an evolutionary process rather than an act of *ex nihilo* creation, and tracing the path of this development reveals the particular ways the *Ecotone* community use blogging to connect with place. Moreover, when First describes a desire both to find and to share one's relationship with place, he indicates that blogging is not simply a genre for expressing place sense once it is formed; its also generative in nature, part of the process of constructing a sense of place. This chapter details the way *Ecotone* bloggers come to define place blogging as a structure of attention meant to help individuals construct a deeper sense of place, and it traces how this definition evolves out of the cultural and generic conditions that make up this moment in web history.

Evolving Structures of Attention

The *Ecotone* group's effort to define place blogging is only possible because they already know what blogging is. By this time blogging has hit the public consciousness: scholar Barclay Barrios declared 2003 the "[Year of the Blog](#)" while in 2004 Merriam-Webster awarded *blog* "[Word of the Year](#)" honors and ABC news designated bloggers as [People of the Year](#). A year earlier, two of the first book-length treatments of blogging appeared, *The Weblog Handbook: Practical Advice on Creating and Maintaining Your Blog* and an edited collection, *We've Got Blog: How Weblogs are Changing Our Culture*, both by Rebecca Blood, one of the seminal voices in defining and popularizing blogging through her popular blog, *Rebecca's Pocket*.

In Blood's account of blogging history, the first weblogs were defined by the formula "links with commentary, updated frequently" and were created by internet enthusiasts as a record of their explorations of the rapidly burgeoning web. The rise of free and user-friendly blogging software like Blogger initiated a dramatic rise in the "short-form journal" which was less focused on the web and more on the author's personal experiences and reflections, a shift from "filtering the web" to "filtering a single life" (*We've Got Blog* xi). But even as Blood delineates these two basic kinds of blogs, she also describes the ongoing diversification among the thousands of blogs in existence by September 2003: "topic-oriented weblogs, alternative viewpoints, astute examinations of the human condition as reflected by mainstream media, short-form journals, links to the weird, and free-form notebooks of ideas." As the variety of blogs multiply, it becomes difficult to identify what blogs hold in common beyond a rather bland formal definition: "frequently updated webpage with dated entries, new ones placed at the top" ("[Weblogs](#)"). The fact that the *Ecotone* bloggers are already trying to redefine blogging for themselves testifies to the fact that the blog has always been "an infinitely malleable format," as Blood observes ("[Weblogs](#)"). The ongoing adaptability of blogging leads Miller and Shepherd to suggest that it "may no longer be accurate to think of the blog as a single genre," and it now may be less meaningful to discuss blogging in general than to examine distinct varieties of the genre, such as war blogging, political blogging, academic blogging, or—for the purposes of this study—place blogging.

Genres are not static collections of platonic formal characteristics but dynamic, evolutionary phenomena that help us examine the way patterns of discourse arise from

particular cultural moments and evolve as cultural needs change. Carolyn Miller has defined genres as “typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations,” socially recognizable patterns that help people figure out how to communicate in particular cultural contexts (151). Because culture is always changing, genres are never static forms, leading Catherine Schryer to define genres as “stabilized-for-now or stabilized-enough sites of social and ideological action” (204). In contrast to the seeming fixity of older genres, online genres dramatize the dynamic, adaptive nature of genres by continuing to evolve with remarkable speed. Miller and Shepherd describe blogging as “an evolutionary product, arising from a dynamic, adaptive relationship between discourse and kairos,” and they consider blogging as a rare chance to witness a process akin to what evolutionary biologist call “speciation,” the development of a new species, or in this case, a new genre.

While it is significant in itself that *Ecotone* bloggers spend time and energy to articulate place blogging as a distinct term, it is important not to overstate the newness of place blogging. Digital genres as structures of attention are never new constructions; they are always rehabs that reuse and expand on past forms. In describing the relationship between new media and urban space, media scholar Stephen Graham explains,

far from being a complete and revolutionary break with the past, new media maintain many intimate connections with old media, technologies, practices and (electromechanical) infrastructures and spaces (telephone, broadcasting, electricity, highway, streets, airline, logistics systems, and so forth). Therefore, the so-called “information age” is best considered not as a revolution, but as a

complex and subtle amalgam of new technologies and media fused on to, and

“remediating,” old ones. (18-19)

Remediation is David Bolter and Richard Grusin’s term to describe the way new forms of media are always both new and old, always building off of and transforming older forms while never leaving them behind completely (see also Brooks et al. “Remediation, Genre, and Motivation: Key Concepts for Teaching With Weblogs”). As Miller and Shepherd argue, we can only understand the cultural function of genres by identifying the “ancestral genres” whose “genes” get passed on to the new genre and continue to shape and constrain the rhetorical possibilities this new genre offers. They identify several main branches of the blogging family tree and outline the related genres that inform blogging:

- “genres of political journalism: pamphlet or broadside, the editorial, and the opinion column,”
- “journal and the diary, along with the newer electronic genres of the home page and the webcam,”
- “genres of collecting and organizing information: clipping service or media monitoring service, commonplace book.”

If Miller and Shepherd are working to define blogging as a process of speciation, this study attempts to describe blogging in the “process of adaptive transformation,” one in which place bloggers adapt the genre of blogging to respond to more particular rhetorical exigencies. While place bloggers tend to incorporate many of the ancestral genres described above into their blogging practice, they also include several others to create a this localized adaptation of blogging.

Thus, while genres in digital networks are more pliable and fluid, this does not provide *Ecotone* members a carte blanche to define place blogging however they want to. Because of this connection with past forms of communication, genres are not neutral conduits of meaning or tools for accomplishing goals. While rhetors might use genres to act in culture, it is also true that genres act on those who use them. In other words, genre both creates the structure that enable us to say new things while at the same constraining and shaping the way we say them. The process of identifying traces of ancestral genres in emerging web genres can help us examine cultural change and the way people navigate their way through shifts in social conditions:

The appearance of a new genre is an event of great rhetorical interest because it means that the “stabilized-enough,” negotiated balance between innovation and decorum has broken down and a new one is under development. The imprints of ancestral genres can give us insight into what aspects of generic exigencies are no longer addressed, how the new stability is negotiated, how rhetoric accommodates change and accommodates us to change. ([Miller and Shepherd](#))

In defining place blogging, the *Ecotone* group must negotiate between the existing conventions offered by blogging and the qualities of ancestral print genres; in doing so, they fashion place blogging as a structure of attention that reflects the influence of both.

The Problems of the Political

A couple of weeks after First and Thompson’s collaborative post, this emerging circle of place bloggers is given another opportunity for collective blogging and they use this to begin pushing away from mainstream blogging. On May 20th, 2003, Corrigan

announces in his blog that “our little place blogging community has shown up on this week’s Carnival of the Vanities,” a blog carnival^v with a conservative political bent (“[May 20, 2003](#)”). At First’s request, Susanna^{vi} from *Cut on the Bias*, the host for that week, takes the unprecedented step of offering First and company a “place blogging” section in her post. Though political blogs are her “personal obsession,” Susanna welcomes the opportunity to feature something different since she acknowledges there are “so many blogs out there with beautiful, contemplative writing on other aspects of life ([Susanna](#)). First, like Corrigan, expresses the growing sense of community felt by the eight bloggers who have submitted examples of “writing of or about place”:

This group-blog happened as a result of some conversation that’s been going on twixt a half-dozen of us. Could be that in weeks to come, there will be a place where this little niche of the blogosphere can grow in scope and sense of community. It’s not ALL about politics, you know! Stay tuned! (“[Heads-up](#)”)

By asserting that blogging is not all about politics, First articulates what becomes a collective desire among the *Ecotone* bloggers to define place blogging as something different from one of the dominant forms of blogging at time: blogs about technology and blogs about politics. Hollander suggests that place blogging is “leading-edge” in moving toward a phase of the web where it will seem obvious to use blogging to connect with place:

As the blogosphere expands, people are going to want to find other things to talk about than just politics and technology, and weblogs as a means of expression will start to be used by regionally-minded individuals and groups. In California there

are a zillion watershed-and-the-like oriented groups (e.g. Friends of the Navarro River), most of whom by now have their own web pages, so many that it would be a major job to try to catalog these, but few if any keep something resembling a weblog. Weblog-consciousness hasn't hit these folks yet. But it will, in time.

([“Running Discussion”](#))

As First puts it, developing the “niche” in the blogging world would “allow the enthusiastic participation of a lot of thoughtful bloggers who, like myself, feel marginalized by the strident tone of the pervasive warblogs and its relatives. We want to emphasize much more what we are moving toward, however, than what we are moving away from, I think you’ll agree” ([“Running Discussion”](#)).

The beginning of the Iraq war in March 2003 looms large in the cultural landscape in which *Ecotone* forms a few months later. Blood describes how the events of September 11, 2001 and the beginning of the Iraq war gave rise to strains of political blogging that remediated the newspaper editorial, generating vigorous debates about the merits of blogging as an alternative to or replacement for traditional journalism.

“Warblogs” emerged after 9/11 as a means for people to respond to the attack and gather information related to the “War on Terror.” According to journalism scholar Stuart Allen, “these blogs devoted particular attention to the perceived shortcomings of the mainstream news media with regard to their responsibility to inform the public about possible risks, threats, and dangers” (107). Writing in 2002, journalist David Gallagher describes the rift that emerged between old guard bloggers and these newcomers, between the techies who played a prominent role in early blogs and designed the technologies that brought

blogging to the masses, and the war bloggers whose blogs “quickly reached a level of public and media recognition that other blogs had never achieved.” As a consequence, Gallagher observes, “some latecomers now think Weblogs are inherently political,” an impression that irritated some blogging old-timers who felt “the diversity of Weblogs is being overshadowed by the attention-getting style of war blogs” ([Gallagher](#)). According to Glenn Reynolds, arguably the godfather of warbloggers, “the Weblog world before Sept. 11 was mostly inward-looking—mostly tech people talking about tech things” while “after 9/11 we got a whole generation of Weblogs that were outward-looking” and aimed toward a broader audience of readers ([Reynolds](#)). Reynolds portrays this shift as a change in attention, from one that used to be insular and irrelevant to one that is engaged with important public events and open to a wider range of people ([Gallagher](#)).

For the early *Ecotone* members, the war was one important context out of which their motivations for blogging emerge. *Ecotone* blogger Alison Kent marks the anniversary of starting her blog with reference to the beginning of the Iraq War: “Feathers of Hope Turns Three...A week and a bit after Cassandra Pages (it’s how I remember to look for this date, apart from the anniversary of the start of the Iraq War, which is mostly why we started blogging)...”(“[Feathers](#)”). In a comment, Miguel Arboleda (“Butuki”) remarks,

Congratulations! To both of you. I do want to say that I think it is largely do to both of you that a lot of us starting out at around that time found one another.

Ecotone helped define our voices and the mood in which we wrote. It brought

together a lot of people who were still groping around in the dark of both blogging and outrage against the war. (“[Congratulations](#)”)

While these remarks suggest that the war was instrumental in spurring them to begin blogging, it does not necessarily motivate them to blog about the war directly. Rather, place blogging becomes a way of objecting to political events on the world stage by focusing their attention and energies in another direction.

While *Ecotone* members appreciate the visibility gained by their presence on Carnival of Vanities, several express reservations about being associated with what they see as a politically conservative circle of bloggers. Thompson describes her discomfort:

BTW, I had a total of nine visits from COV, probably one of them from myself checking the link. It was a bit disconcerting being in the company of so many war bloggers. No matter what we find ourselves doing, I think it would be great to continue posting to COV just so we keep our peaceful, placeful approach to life in front of people. Balance, ya know :-). (“[Running Discussion](#)”)

Their desire to remain outside the crossfire of American political debates surfaces more clearly when Rebecca Blood suggests a topic for collective blogging on “place and patriotism” related to the Fourth of July: “Does love of land strengthen love of country, or does it somehow soften your pride in your country and ideals, and connect you with something that seems more real or more permanent?” Kent responds,

Wow, Rebecca, nothing like throwing out a BIG one! I’m not sure you caught all the earlier discussion about trying to widen this to outside the US and even North America. A couple of the people I’m hoping will contribute won’t even know

what the Fourth of July means, at least in the sense of what it seems to mean to most Americans. I know I hide somewhere every year till it's over, having an innate fear of flag-waving. So I guess I wouldn't be a good person to blog about its relationship to place, though others might. ("[Potential](#)")

Adams suggests that a topic on "love of land/love of place" might be more politically neutral. She recounts reading passages from Elias Chacour's *We Belong to the Land*, an account of Palestinians' sense of place, when speaking on the Middle East conflict to a group of dairy farmers in upstate New York. Because he focuses on how a "place that has been farmed and tended and observed with love for generations becomes part of one's blood and identity," this proves an effective way to open up dialogue in what could otherwise be a politically charged discussion, allowing them to pay closer attention to the lived experience of place that goes deeper than political boundaries. Adams is open to keeping Blood's suggestion on the list, but she would like to reframe it to "be broader and more inclusive for people writing from anywhere" ("[Potential](#)").

Kent agrees with Adams's approach, not just because it makes the topic more international and inclusive, but also because it promotes what she sees as a simple but radical notion:

That understanding people and their relationship to place/land will probably make you less likely to bomb them (and their land). This isn't an intellectual understanding; it's a sense of shared experience, as you mention about the dairy farmers (whose land looks and feels totally different from Palestine) who could

instantly grasp the land/place connection with farmers halfway round the world.

(“Potential”)

This “sense of shared experience” should be the frame for place blogging, Kent asserts, not politics as it has been typical of much blogging that that point. Instead, Kent along with the rest of the *Ecotone* group, shifts the emphasis away from politics to the representation of ordinary experience of place.

In doing so, *Ecotone* is pushing against the political emphasis of warblogs in part because this brand of blogging had come to dominate public perceptions of what blogging was. However, the debate between the “original” techie blogs and the new war blogs could be viewed as a squabble among participants in a common approach to blogging that Rebecca Blood first termed the “filter blog,” a blog that is mostly focused on content outside the author’s personal life. By contrast, the “personal journal” blog type has a more inward focus, emphasizing the author’s everyday personal experience. As Herring et al. put it, “the content of filters is external to the blogger (world events, online happenings, etc.), while the content of personal journals is internal (the blogger’s thoughts and internal workings)” (“Bridging” 2). Herring et al. argue that history of blogging has been written from the perspective of filter blogs, which garnered the most attention from mainstream media and which were typically authored by men. This history effaces the parallel history of journal blogs, originally known as online diaries, a strain of blogging that emerged just as early, if not earlier, than filter blogs, and was dominated by female authors.^{vii}

In “[Blogging in the Early Republic](#),” historian W. Caleb McDaniel argues that a similar misrepresentation happens when people make arguments about the historical precedents for blogging by pointing to prominent literary figures like Thomas Paine, Martin Luther, George Orwell. Such comparisons can lead to the wrong conclusion: “Treating these highly influential writers as analogues for bloggers serves a particular understanding of blogging as primarily political. Moreover, it perpetuates a picture of the blogosphere that is skewed toward elite and highly visible blogs.” Rather, McDaniel argues that a better comparison to make is between bloggers and relatively obscure and ordinary writers like Henry Clarke Wright, a antebellum reformer and “inveterate journal keeper” who wrote about events in his daily life.

This bias toward filter blogs is evident in how blogging detractors respond to blogging around this time. One of the most common strategies of criticism is to dismiss blogging as hack journalism, characterized by preponderance of opinionated rants with little or no journalistic research. Alex Beam dismisses the blogosphere as a “journalistic medium where no thought goes unpublished,” seeming to conflate the journal blog with the filter blog as a way of dismissing blogging as a whole (C1). Similarly, Gary Trudeau’s *Doonsbury* arouses the ire of many bloggers with a comic strip lampooning bloggers as impoverished, self-absorbed, and disaffected hacks who lack the talent to make it as real journalists. Journalist Howard Kurtz introduces blogging in a manner that subtly mocks what Blood celebrates as the empowerment of ordinary voices: “Welcome to the blogosphere, a rapidly expanding universe where legions of ordinary folks are launching Weblogs—blogs for short—with such titles as “Ramblings of a Blue-Collar

Slob” and “The Brigade of Bellicose Women”—that feature lots of reader feedback” (C1).

Lurking beneath many attacks on blogging is a discomfort with the very ordinariness that seems to characterize much blogging practice. However, this ordinariness—average people writing about everyday life for small audiences—turns out to be what defines blogging in an importance sense and it is one aspect of the nascent blogging genre that *Ecotone* members are attempting recover in their definition of place blogging. Scholar Steve Himmer notes that for many critics of blogging, it is not just that blogs are “characterized by mundane, banal, sometimes embarrassing personal content ranging from what the author ate for lunch to specific health problems and sexual issues,” but it is also that this personal content is “frequently intermingled with commentary on politics or culture, making the personal, the public, and the political inseparable” ([Himmer](#)). In Himmer’s view, the tendency of blogs to “elevate the ordinary” represents one of its salient characteristics that both marks its distinctiveness as a form and makes it more resistance to commoditization. Seth Godin describes journal blogs that focus on personal content and everyday life as “cat blogs”—“blogs for and by and about the person blogging” and that are “about your cat and your dating travails and your boss and whatever you feel like sharing in your public diary.” Godin argues that unlike blogs that are designed to cultivate as many readers as possible, “the vast majority of people with a cat blog don’t need or want strangers to read it” ([Godin](#)). While these bloggers may actually want strangers to read their blog, they are not primarily motivated by the desire of growing a large audience.

If we plotted these bloggers on a graph with audience along the x axis and number of bloggers along the y axis, they would land squarely in what Chris Anderson, editor of Wired Magazine, calls the “[Long Tail](#),” also referred to as a power law distribution in network theory. In his essay “[Power Laws](#),” Clay Shirky describes how the Long Tail affects the statistical distribution of readers in blogging:

1. Blogs-as-mainstream-media—blogs with a larger readership that become “a broadcast outlet, distributing material without participating in conversations about it.”
2. Blogging Classic—“blogs published by one or a few people, for a moderately-sized audience, with whom the authors have a relatively engaged relationship.”
3. Blogs-as-dinner-conversation—“the long tail of weblogs with few readers.”

The long tail tends to be a “high trust” environment where bloggers value the ability to know commenters and interact with them on an ongoing basis ([Driscoll](#)). As Clay Shirky points out, fame necessarily places limitations on the ability of bloggers to know and interact with their readers: “the mere technological possibility of reply isn’t enough to overcome the human limits on attention” (*Here Comes Everybody* 93). While A-list bloggers like Glenn Reynolds or Andrew Sullivan might gain the most number of readers, one could argue that their position in the peak of the distribution graph represents only one segment of the broader experience of blogging. Shirky predicts that the difference between “A-list” bloggers and “long tail” bloggers will only increase:

The term ‘blog’ will fall into the middle distance, as “home page” and “portal” have, words that used to mean some concrete thing, but which were stretched by

use past the point of meaning. This will happen when head and tail of the power law distribution become so different that we can't think of J. Random Blogger and Glenn Reynolds of Instapundit as doing the same thing. ("[Power Laws](#)")

The difference is in how attention is exchanged in these two different kinds of blogging—for the A-list blogger, readers give the blogger their attention the same way old media always used to while for long tail bloggers, attention can travel in both directions. By pushing away from the high profile political blogging characterized by war blogging and other political styles, *Ecotone* bloggers situate themselves in the “long tail” and affirm those qualities of blogging that encourage ordinary people to write about ordinary life.

The Affordances of Time

If filter blogs of the political variety are what *Ecotone* bloggers are moving away from, what they are moving toward becomes a matter of discussion. In choosing to align themselves with the personal journal style of blogging rather than filter blogs, the *Ecotone* bloggers establish a connection between blogging and ancestral genres such as the journal, diary, or logbook, all of which are organized chronologically and involve writing regularly. On the *Ecotone* wiki page "[Place Blogging Description](#)," First characterizes some place blogging as “journaling in the context of the ‘where’” which highlights “personal space in place” and “reflections of one life (yours) passing through and being changed by place (weather, seasons, birth-death, aging, personal growth).” Corrigan’s list of place blogging traits begins with “logs of natural activity and cycles, including flora and fauna, geological and meteorological notes, sometimes with

description, sometimes without.” These genres foreground chronological affordances—the forms are characterized by the regular accumulation of written material over time.

When Alison Kent and Alan Hollander begin *Feathers of Hope* in 2003, they recognize continuities between their emerging practice of blogging and their daily habit of keeping a print-based log book, a habit which had begun a few years earlier when they found themselves in a rustic house in the mountains nine miles from Santa Barbara. The beauty and isolation of this place led them to not only to begin sketching and writing poetry, but also to keep a daily log book in which they entered a short post detailing aspects of the weather, wildlife, and gardening in their immediate surroundings. “We knew this was going to be an intense experience and so we had to make some serious choices about what we were going to be doing,” Kent recounts. “The minute we said we wanted to live in this place we decided to keep a log book of the experience. We were really committed to the idea of keeping a daily entry about where we live” (Telephone interview).

After moving to Davis, CA, Kent and Hollander realize their need to orient themselves to a new (and less picturesque) place and they decide that “writing would be a good way to do it.” In March 2003, Hollander begins reading political blogs and decides he wants to begin keeping a blog, but he has not found anyone else writing about place. When they begin blogging together, they make a conscious choice to write about their bioregion as a central organizing topic (Telephone interview).

However, blogging about place does mean they stopped keeping a log book, which in Alison’s mind is a different experience. In her estimation, the blog invites a

much broader range of topics, while the log book is fairly focused on short daily entries describing the immediate locale. The significant difference comes down to audience and geography:

While anyone is able and welcome to read our logbooks, nobody ever does, because they are physically bound, literally and figuratively, in our living room. *Feathers of Hope* extends the space that this shared activity has created and also the scope of our joint writing. The weblog is a place where I can write something—this, for instance—and know that at least fifteen, and probably many more, people than that will read it. One of them lives in Davis; another in Sweden; another few in England; another in Australia. Many are in North America. (“[The Transformation](#)”)

Place blogging remediates the log book in such a way that blogging feels like something new, and yet still feels familiar enough that Kent can say, “In my mind and in my heart it still feels very close to writing in a log book” (“[The Transformation](#)”).

While Kent and Hollander’s blogging remediates aspects of the naturalist’s log or field notebook, Corrigan suggests that place blogging just as easily shares affinities with the notebook of the ethnographer or journalist. As he describes it, place blogs sometimes are “notes on the particular character of a place, which may be purely sociological,” focusing on “the noosphere” rather than “the biosphere.” This view grows out of the exigencies that shaped his own blogging experience after moving from Ottawa, Ontario to Vancouver, BC:

In many ways this part of the country is like another world. Geographically I am as far away from my birthplace in Toronto as London is from Cairo. When I moved here I had a very strong sense on myself as an outsider, and the gift of this perspective is that I am able to see things here almost like an anthropologist. I am no longer a fish unaware of the water. My writing immediately began to take on the flavour of a participant-observer account of my life, and that perspective stays with me to this day. ([“Place Blogging Description”](#))

Whether the material is nature or culture, place blogging finds its roots in part in those genres whose goal is to collect fragments of observations and information that the writer gathers over time, without necessarily crafting them into a finished whole or crafting meaningful connections between these fragments.

Ecotone contributor Lorianne DiSabato was a regular journal-keeper and essayist before she began blogging, and she points the connections between place blogging and both forms. As she describes it, her writing routine began each day after breakfast when she walked the dog and then returned home to write six pages by hand. Roughly every two weeks she composed an essay that she distributed to an email list of selected people. DiSabato turns to Thoreau as a predecessor in this movement from journal to essay:

Anyhow, it occurs to me that Thoreau didn't keep a journal because he WAS famous; he became famous because he kept a journal, and mined those journals to write essays, and then made the effort to share those essays with a less-than-enthusiastic public. Somehow, Thoreau just kept writing even though virtually nobody bought his first (self-published) book, leaving him with a bookshelf full

of unsold copies.

No, Thoreau didn't top the best-seller list, nor did he ever appear on Oprah. (Can you imagine THAT interaction!) Poor ol' Hank just kept writing, writing, writing because his hero & close neighbor, Ralph Waldo Emerson, asked him after his college graduation whether he kept a journal. "So today I start," Thoreau wrote in his first entry. And the rest, as they say, is history.... (["Egotism"](#))

This routine began to evolve in to blogging late in December, 2003:

So here the experiment begins. After keeping a hand-written journal for years & years, now I'm trying to see whether I can "convert" that writing online.

"Everyone's doing it—why can't I?" In reading lots of other blogs these past few weeks, I've found it to be an addictive and oddly delightful genre: so, can I do it? (["So here"](#))

This conversion involved a shift in audience from journaling for herself and writing essays for a limited audience to blog posts that combined elements of both journal and essay. The influence of essay writing is particularly visible in DiSabato's blogging practice: each post reads like short essay representing the mind at work. In any given post, DiSabato weaves together photographs, personal experience, descriptions of places in her neighborhood, and philosophical reflections on life and place, taking what seems at first like disparate elements and weaving them together into a meaningful whole.

While the connections between journaling as a print genre and blogging might be obvious, the *Ecotone* blogger put particular stress on the importance of chronological affordances of blogging, the way the daily habit writing inherent in blogging provides an

attention structure for paying attention to place over time. Hollander asserts that blogging is well-suited for writing about place because it facilitates attention to place over time, such that “the fragments from your posts will build up into quite a portrait of the place you have ties to” (“[This is a related reply](#)”). By turning to blogging as a way to engage with place, place bloggers remind us that place is as much a product of time as it is of space, and that it is not just a static set of spatial relationships but a complex arrangement of activities performed in a shared location over time. In philosopher Philip Brey’s definition, place is “an area or space that is a habitual site of human activity and/or is conceived of in this way by communities or individuals” (240). Landscape designer John Brinckerhoff Jackson asserts that the way we experience place is not something given simply by being in a place but is constructed through repeated action in a location: “A sense of place is something that we ourselves create in the course of time. It is the result of habit or custom ... A sense of place is reinforced by what might be called a sense of recurring events” (5). Geographer David Seamon describes how a sense of place is constructed through repeated, often rather mundane, interactions with particular locations—and people in those locations—over time. It is often the habitual patterns of embodied experience in places, the routines of everyday life that shape to our every day lives and enables use to make our way through much of our activities without having to give them much conscious attention (Seamon 158). Geographer Timothy Cresswell summarizes these process-oriented approaches to place as “constituted through reiterative social practice—place is made and remade on a daily basis.” In this view, “place provides a template for practice—an unstable stage for performance. Thinking of place as

performed and practiced can help us think of place in radically open and non-essentialized ways where place is constantly struggled over and re-imagined in practical ways” (39).

Place bloggers are drawn to the affordances of blogging in large part because they are looking to create habits that help them construct a more meaningful sense of place. For many, moving to a new place means that they must self-consciously figure out where they are and create the habits of engaging with their location that allow a sense of place to emerge. In other cases, places around people change in ways that render them unfamiliar and illegible. If the power of the network is created in part through the “destruction of space by time,” as Martin Dodge and Rob Kitchin suggest, place bloggers see blogging as a way to re-construct place by *way of time*, in particular, by the habits of rhetorical action the blogging as a form requires (14). In particular, nearness in time—the nearly daily frequency of blogging—becomes another way of constructing proximity in the network; playing on our seemingly innate tendency to speak of time spatial term, place bloggers see the regular engagement of place through blogging as a way to create connection and nearness.

The very chronological structure of blogging is central affordance that makes it attractive as a heuristic for writing about place. Several years after the *Ecotone* group, Lisa Williams would define place blogging for users of *placeblogger.com* in a way that foregrounds the importance of duration and time: “A placeblog is an act of sustained attention to a particular place over time” suggesting that blogging helps foster habits of attention (“[What’s a placeblog?](#)”). While blogs are not unique among web-based forms in

constantly changing, they make time a defining structural element by hard-coding the chronological organization of entries. In considering why place bloggers choose this form of networked expression to explore place, the chronological organization of blogs is significant. Eric Gordon and Gene Koo observe that “spatial metaphors” of networked online games like *Second Life* seem to make them “naturally suited to supporting location-aware groups” and indeed other forms of locative media and online mapping applications tend to foreground the spatial aspects of network locality (14). Instead, blogging as a medium foregrounds the temporal through relentless chronological organization.

The Resources of Nature

As the *Ecotone* community continues to develop their definition of place blogging, several members contribute to a wiki page called “Place Blogging Description” where they collect share their ideas in process. First and Corrigan each create lists of characteristics that could read as inventories of ancestral genres. Corrigan evokes the personal essay when he describes place blogs as “collections of stories of the writer’s engagement with a place, including the land and culture of a place,” and the ethnographer’s notebook when describes blogs as “notes on the particular character of a place” more generally. First points to local history as a way that bloggers explore “how your life is just so because of the history of where you live” (“[Place Blogging Description](#)”).

Both Corrigan and First mention genres that approach place by way of nature. Corrigan’s list of place blog qualities begins with “logs of natural activity and cycles,

including flora and fauna, geological and meteorological notes, sometimes with description, sometimes without.” First’s list highlights ways of writing about the natural world that include natural history writing made up of “observations that promote understanding or reflect relationships with non-human species and habitats” and reflections on “how your activities or those of your community impact the living systems for good or ill.” He also includes landscape description, a “descriptive/immersive narrative of the landform that surrounds you” that involves “painting word pictures so those from other types of country can be vicariously in your woods, prairie, beach, mountaintop, etc)” (“[Place Blogging Description](#)”).

Corrigan adopts a quote from environmental writer Barry Lopez as the manifesto for his blog, but it also summarizes the emerging ethos of the *Ecotone* community:

Over time I have come to think of these three qualities—paying intimate attention; a storied relationship to a place rather than a solely sensory awareness of it; and living in some sort of ethical unity with a place—as a fundamental human defense against loneliness. If you’re intimate with a place, a place with whose history you’re familiar, and you establish an ethical conversation with it, the implication that follows is this: the place knows you’re there. It feels you. You will not be forgotten, cut off, abandoned.

Lopez goes on to ask, “How can a person obtain this? How can you occupy a place and also have it occupy you? How can you find such a reciprocity?” His answer is “to become vulnerable to a place” by opening one’s self up to place in a way that creates intimacy as it would in any relationship. The result for Lopez is the possibility of

cultivating “a sense of belonging, a sense of not being isolated in the universe” (qtd. in Corrigan, “[May 16, 2003](#)”). Lopez is among the American nature writers who literary scholar Scott Slovic examines in his book *Seeking Awareness in American Nature*, in which he highlights the concern prominent environmental writers have with the perceptions of place and the process of cultivating attention to the natural world. Since Thoreau, the nature writing tradition has represented a strain of the American literary tradition in which the relationship between self and other has been of paramount interest. The nature writing tradition drew on the personal essay tradition in its representation of the mind at work, but it focused on exploring how individuals makes sense of who they are in the context of ecosystems, as part of one species among many. With the increasing awareness of a worldwide environmental crisis in the 1960s and 1970s, cultivating an individual awareness of one’s place in nature gained political urgency, as knowing where one was in a deeper sense became an ethical stance that prepared one for political action on behalf of threatened environments.

As Slovic has argued, nature writers have long used the genre as a mechanism for paying attention and for exploring an evolving relationship between oneself and one’s environment. According to Lawrence Buell, author of *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*, “environmental literature launches itself from the presumption that we do not think about our surroundings, and our relation to them, as much as we ought to” (261). Paying attention to our environment, whether natural or human-made, does not seem to come naturally. Our tendency both in everyday life and literary texts is to treat the environment as little

more than setting, as the rather non-descript background for our actions. Environmental texts are designed to raise our awareness toward that which we usually ignore:

Perhaps the commonest attraction of environmental writing is that it increases our feel for both places previously unknown and places known but never so deeply felt. The activation of place-sense that comes with this vicarious insidership is apt to subside quickly, however, unless it is repeatedly jogged. Whether from laziness or a desire for security, we tend to lapse into comfortable inattentiveness toward the details for our surroundings as we go about our daily business. (261)

If lack of awareness to place is the equivalent of casting place as simply a backdrop to one's life, rather than a character, the environmental text aims to make place a character in one's personal drama.

The tendency to draw on environmental non-fiction is a natural outgrowth for many *Ecotone* members, given their interests and occupations: First was trained as a biologist, DiSabato wrote a dissertation on American nature writing, Hollander and Kent are avid birdwatchers, Corrigan frequently quotes Lopez for the inspiration for his blogging, Chris Clarke, another *Ecotone* blogger, is a science writer. The influence of nature writing is already evident in the nascent stages of *Ecotone* at the end of April 2003, when Rebecca Blood had already referred to First and company as “modern day Thoreaus” (“[The Weblog Handbook](#)”).

This initial bent toward equating nature and place becomes more pronounced as the site develops. Visually, the site's design suggests a “natural” ethos, with an earth-tone background color and a banner image depicting what appears to be a gravel road

disappearing into the distance. The flat topography and the appearance of the dirt road suggest a rural setting, but the grass and bushes near the road appear uncultivated, reinforcing the natural feel of the scene and the site.

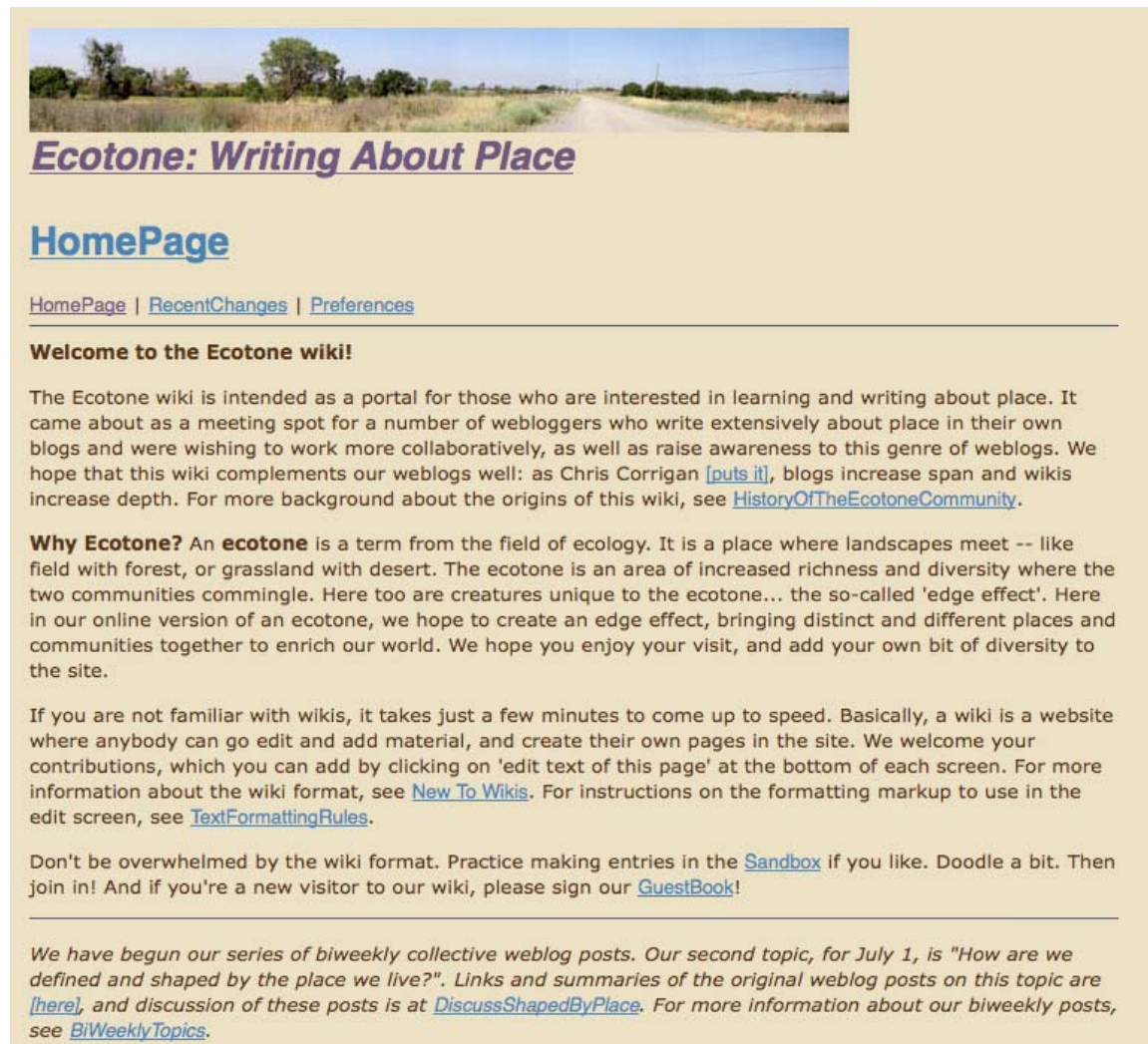


Image 1: Screenshot of *Ecotone* wiki, [July 2, 2003 revision](#).

The site's name further reinforces the natural ethos of the site:

Ecotone: term from ecology. A place where landscapes meet—like field with forest, or grassland with desert. The *Ecotone* is an area of increased richness and diversity where the two communities comingle. Here too are creatures unique to

the *Ecotone*... the so-called ‘edge effect’. Here in the online *Ecotone* community, we hope to create an edge effect, bringing distinct and different places and communities together to enrich our world. Enjoy your visit. (“[Choosing](#)”)

After First posts his description on the wiki, Holland wonders if the “connotations of this term are too biological,” given what seems to be the agreed goal to make the site as inclusive and welcoming as possible to those “whose focus is the cultural aspects of place, rather than nature.” He wonders if the introductory text on the front page will make this clear enough to visitors (“[Choosing](#)”).

While the *Ecotone* group wants to avoid what they see as the narrowness of political discourse, they also express concern that in foregrounding environmental literature in their approach they may end up defining place too narrowly by equating it with “nature,” and they want to clarify that place blogging is made up of more than “just blogs from the ‘beautiful and unspoiled,’” as Adams puts it (“[Some Thoughts](#)”). As First articulates the problem, “we do run the risk of being misunderstood, as tree-huggers or Thoreauvian sissies or pith-helmeted bellybutton gazers, and more helpful discussion like this I think is the order of the day” (“[Running Discussion](#)”). Adams observes that place bloggers can easily be pigeonholed in much the same way she sometimes feels mischaracterized as a resident of Vermont: “Everybody assumes you’re about cows and white steeples and fall colors.” For place blogging to generate a wider audience, they will need to counteract the assumption that it is “rural and kind of retrograde—even scolding and rejecting of technology and ‘progress.’” Hollander agrees that it’s “really important not to confine ‘blogs about place’ to being mostly about nature.” In his view,

Blogs that write strongly about urban place certainly qualify, and seem just as unheralded in the blogosphere as our rural nature-oriented ones do. Snooping around on the Eatonweb Portal, I found examples ranging from a psychogeography of Portland, OR, to blogs about the Boston subway system and the London Underground. That's good place-oriented stuff! (["Running Discussion"](#))

Early on in the project, this misperception becomes evident in causal conversations with bloggers who would otherwise seem likeminded in their interest in place. Adams gives the example of Nancy from *Under The Fire Star* who "is interested in our efforts but has been politely staying on the sidelines" because identifies as a "city" blogger and feels that she should find a group that shares this interest. Adams feels it would be a shame to lose her involvement, and suggest creating a broader list of categories such as "city" and "international" that would allow bloggers like Nancy to feel welcome (["Running Discussion"](#)).

To address this perceived overemphasis on nature, *Ecotone* writers tap into those elements of the nature writing tradition that take seriously the ordinariness of the environment in whatever form it takes. Environmental writers are sensitive to the fact that most of our lives are shaped by the repeated encounters with the local, but the very repetitiveness that often enables us to feel rooted in a place also serves to dull our sense of what is there. For this reason we see writers like Thoreau describe having "traveled a good deal in Concord" and nature writer Jon Hanson Mitchell describes the need to explore the "undiscovered country of the nearby" (qtd. in Buell 262). Whether it is Aldo

Leopold watching the “sky dance” of the woodcock every summer evening on his Wisconsin farm; Thoreau describing a battle of ants in the woods near Concord; Mary Austin noticing the reaction of Coyotes to changes in the moon and the desert animals huddled in every fence post shadow; or Annie Dillard professing, “I would like to get to know grasses and sedges—and care”—nature writers tend to be captivated by what we might easily think of as “ordinary nature.” While nature writing often pays tribute to the striking and sublime aspects of the natural world, they simply do not begin or end there. Rather, nature writing grows out of an author’s ability to see what is happening in a backyard patch of woods or a neighboring wetland, to awaken perception to the normally unnoticed aspects of the living surroundings, to know the environment in a way only earned through the repetition of ordinary encounters.

Kent emphasizes this aspect of the nature writing tradition when she discusses her place blogging practice. While First and Thompson blog about what most would consider “picturesque” places, Kent describes Davis, a college town in the Central Valley of California, as a “cross between Berkeley and North Dakota”:



Image 2: Allan Hollander (“[Our Secret Kansas](#)”).

Agricultural land surrounds the house we rent, the guest house of a ranch house. Our landlord owns 40 acres of prime agricultural land which he leases to Campbell’s Soup. The wind blows all March and April; once the fields get

plowed, that translates into a lot of dirt blowing around. The field immediately to our south is owned, somehow, by the Shriners, who have no compunction about getting it sprayed. Spraying, in this context, means application of pesticides by small plane, usually very early in the morning. ([“Pondering”](#))

But she speaks with affection about the place she calls home, describing the progressive culture of food co-ops and bicycling, the chance she has to bike to work each day, and the enjoyment she finds in birdwatching on nearby Putah Creek.

Kent reinforces her point by referencing another generic resource when she recommends John Stilgoe’s book *Outside Lies Magic: Regaining History and Awareness in Everyday Places*, a guidebook for exploring ordinary landscapes. Kent describes how for Stilgoe exploring “takes on an almost sacramental quality” and how he takes his landscape history students at Harvard out to explore “non-picturesque places—abandoned railway tracks, for example,” encouraging them to examine “what these altered landscapes tell us about our past and our relationship with the landscape” (Kent, [“Great Comments”](#)). Stilgoe describes the book as “a straightforward guidebook to exploring,” a guidebook not to the new and exotic landscapes of leisure travel, but the ordinary, familiar landscapes that surround most Americans in their urban and suburban environments (17). By offering a guidebook to ordinary places, the implication is that we no longer understand the very places we should know best. Stilgoe describes his subject as “landscape, the built environment, ordinary spaces that surrounds the adult explorer,” places usually “not meant to be interpreted, to be read, to be understood,” and he asserts that “exploring ordinary landscape sharpens all the skills of landscape” (11). Like

environmental nonfiction, Stilgoe's guidebook to ordinary places models ways of paying attention to places. While the offers some information of particular places, its goal is to empower us as reader to explore our own places with a set of heuristics that help us see things we would not see otherwise.^{viii}

Kent suggests that the *Ecotone* group should take a similar approach and ground their definitions of place blogging in the shared ordinariness of place:

Maybe it's because I live in a place
that is simply NOT spectacular,
where it's easy to overlook the
overlookable (we were just out
looking for grasshopper sparrows in



Image 3: Alison Kent ("[Coastal Migrations](#)").

some vernal pools, which may look to some just like weird depressions in a cow pasture, but which host entire ecosystems) that I want to encourage more and different people who write about "place" (even if they're not sure that's what they are doing) to join us. ("[Running Discussion](#)")

Kent suggests that the appeal of the *Ecotone* project "will lie in explaining to those who 'aren't sure' they blog about place that they really do." If they can make it clear to potential participants that they all come to place from different angles—First through his rootedness in the Appalachians, Hollander as a geographer, Kent through "a poetry workshop focusing on the Putah Creek watershed"—then this might "trigger the corresponding 'AHA! That happened to me too! Maybe I qualify!'" In Kent's view, "it's

very exciting to me to think that this might get folks quite outside our cluster to think harder about place, even if only sporadically” ([“Running Discussion”](#)).

Defining place blogging as an aid for paying attention becomes a way to create more space to accommodate the variety of ways people approach place. After moving to Bowen Island, Corrigan begins to document his experience of this place through his blog and he becomes more aware of how blogging is helping deepening his relationship with Bowen Island:

As I have been writing about my life here, I am increasingly conscious of how blogging has brought a sharper awareness and attention to my life here. For me, blogging place is drawing attention to links in the elements that make up the landscape. As this blog has evolved, I have become acutely aware of the landscape that is forming in my mind and heart of who I am and what Bowen Island is as a place and what relationship exists between us. (["June 15"](#))

Corrigan asserts that the “links to the land” are formed by deliberate attention to place over time and that blogging is a medium that fosters such attention, a theme that that is restated often in the early *Ecotone* posts and discussion. Nancy from *Under the Fire Star*, describes an immediate connection she made between blogging and place-based writing: “When I first began to think about what I wanted to do with a blog, the thing that came to mind was to chronicle a particular life in this particular place.” While “people don’t really see the places where they live,” Nancy feels lucky to have her awareness of place heightened by her ex-pat vantage point in India:

Most people don't really see the places where they live. I'm so lucky to have pulled up my roots and transplanted myself to a strange place. No matter how long I live here, it will always be somewhat exotic to me. I see it. Little things tickle me—or annoy me—every day. It keeps me on my toes. Because things are so interesting, peculiar, irritating, I want to share them with others. Look! Can you believe this? ("[Blogging](#)")

For Nancy, place blogging is a way for her to document and share what she is seeing around her on a regular basis. For Adams, blogging is a tool that helps her achieve a “more constantly observant frame of mind”:

One thing I've been grateful for is that blogging about nature and my surroundings has made me get out more and turn on that mental recorder—that's very welcome, from the perspective of this chair and desk, especially after the longest and most inhospitable winter I can remember. ("[Some Thoughts](#)")

Following on these comments, Kent frames blogging as mechanism for seeing: “Place, as Beth Adams at *Cassandra Pages* points out, really does involve wearing a certain set of lenses. Mostly, it sort of means just opening your eyes” ("[Great Comments](#)"). Adams contends that careful cultivation of attention ought to be what place bloggers are known for:

If we want to be taken seriously as writers, thinkers, observers and recorders of place, I think that seriousness and attention are what need to be emphasized. Personally, I'd like to read someplace, “Some of the best writing and most

innovative thinking on the web is being done by people who call themselves ‘place bloggers.’” (“[Running Discussion](#)”)

Ecotone bloggers, then, construct place blogging as not just a genre for *representing* place as a finished product but also as a heuristic for paying attention that provides the material for representation.

In the end, the group sticks with the name *Ecotone*, despite its natural connotations, because the “poetic richness” seems to outweigh any concerns they may have. As Corrigan puts it,

Ecotone is beautiful as a name for this endeavour. It conjurs up the blending of ecologies, the fact that our blogs kind of dwell on the edges of blogdom, the idea that we are connected in an ecology of blogging and the fact that we are making music here together, singing the tones of eco.

I will stamp my feet and protest in the strongest terms if we have to change it! But that’s just my opinion... :-) (“[Choosing](#)”)

Even Nancy from *Under The Fire Star*, who identifies as a city blogger, adds a supporting opinion to the discussion, as she finds the “the notion of boundaries between two things is very attractive” and she suggests the full site name that they eventually decide on: *Ecotone: Writing About Place* (“[Choosing](#)”).

In defining place blogging, then, *Ecotone* bloggers attempt to provide enough generic room to accommodate a wide variety of experiences and ideas about place. What ties them together in this formulation is the conviction that place blogging helps to foster a personal sense of place, to respond to the adage, “You can’t know *who* you are until

you know *where* you are.” By pushing away from political blogging, they align themselves with the type of blogging that focuses on personal experience and affirms the value of ordinary life as the subject of one’s blog. By drawing environmental literature and nature writing, they affirm the value of seeing the self as intimately connected to place. And by taking advantage of the chronological affordances of both blogging and the journal/diary traditions, they are able to view place identity as something constructed over time through the habit of paying attention to where they are. In other words, place blogging is defined as a way for individuals to more effectively allocate attention place and in doing so construct a sense of self-in-place by way of the network. But as we will see in the next chapter, putting one’s self and one’s place into the network this way is not without consequences, requiring *Ecotone* bloggers to negotiate slightly differently relationships with both.

2. Inventing the Self-in-Place

Shortly after *Ecotone* online community takes shape, Fred First is asked to provide a history of how the group emerged, and he responds wryly, “Of course this project arose at just this time because we all had a pre-adapted desire to do it, and then we found each other!” (“[History](#)”). In First’s view, the emergence of *Ecotone* was no accident, and he encourages the group to construct an historical narrative that reflects this perspective: “We have to go back behind the first meeting to the places we each come from in our philosophies and land ethic and place relationship, to make the current ‘history’ seem the fortuitous and timely coming-together that I believe it has been” (“[History](#)”).

By using the phrase “pre-adapted desire,” First displays an awareness that our motivations to write derive both from individual agency and cultural context. Behind First’s history of the *Ecotone* community are basic questions that can be asked of any rhetorical situation: Why write now, and by extension, why write this way? In the case of the *Ecotone* community, the questions can be posed more specifically: Why does this group choose to write about place and why do they choose blogging? For Carolyn Miller and Dawn Shepherd, answering this question always requires looking at the cultural context in which certain genres for communication are available and why they seem the most appropriate to meet needs of those using them ([Miller and Shepherd](#)). Genres carry with them their own set of affordances that shape what they do best and why people might choose them to accomplish particular goals.

The previous chapter examined the efforts of the *Ecotone* community, efforts to define place blogging as a distinct genre by drawing deliberately on existing genres, by remediating the journal or diary, the personal essay, and elements of the nature writing tradition. The definition of place blogging that the *Ecotone* group create would seem to accord well with what Miller and Shepherd assert is one of the defining uses of blogs: to create a self and present it to an online audience. In their view, blogging is a “contemporary contribution to the art of the self,” a particular mechanism for self-disclosure that emerges in the late 1990s. Rebecca Blood supports this view when she asserts that weblogs of all kinds share a dedication to fostering a personal voice, and as a form they representing “nothing less than an outbreak of self-expression,” “an unprecedented opportunity for individual expression on a worldwide scale” (“[Weblogs](#)”). Miller and Shepherd describe the cultural kairos that gives shape to blogging as one in which the boundaries between public and private are being renegotiated, in which many people are more comfortable with forms of mediated voyeurism and exhibitionism, characterized by an impulse toward self-disclosure and a keen interest in observing the often personal details of other people’s lives. Miller and Shepherd observe that “the technology of the internet makes it easier than ever for anyone to be either a voyeur or an exhibitionist—or both,” allowing users to share “unprecedented amounts of personal information with total strangers, potentially millions of them” ([Miller and Shepherd](#)). In this context, self-disclosure has both intrinsic and extrinsic goals: self-disclosure can be personally meaningful as a form of self-expression or it can be intended to benefit others in a broader community.

While some forms of internet discourse have reveled in the possibility of reinventing an online self that is quite different from an offline self, Miller and Shepherd observe that bloggers seem more interested “in locating, or constructing, for themselves and for others, an identity that they can understand as unitary, as “real.” In their view, the blog can be seen as effort to cope with the fragmentation nature of post-modern life, “as a particular reaction to the constant flux of subjectivity, as a generic effort of reflexivity within the subject that creates an eddy of relative stability. Infinite play, constant innovation, is not psychically sustainable on an indefinite basis” ([Miller and Shepherd](#)). The social function of blogging is, at least in part, about the ongoing construction of self in response to these changing social and cultural conditions.

Michael Curry suggests that “fragmentary identities” among people in the modern world arises in part “from the proliferation of types and scales of the places within which their actions and utterances take place (“New Technologies” 11). Both the experience of moving from one place to another and of having places change around us push place bloggers toward a notion of place that is bounded and permanent but something that is in flux and something that needs to be created. Place bloggers, then, represent an effort to adapt blogging to respond to particular social conditions—residential mobility, rapidly transformed physical environments, and quickly changing communication technologies—in order to articulate a genre that helps foster a deeper sense of place. If blogging is concerned with the representation of self, place blogging is about constructing a sense of self in place, what has variously been called a sense of place or place identity, rootedness, topophilia, community sentiment, local sentiment, place attachment ([Cross](#)).

However, putting place into the network requires it to take a form that the network can recognize, namely a collection of objects that each stand for a fragment of place experience. But how, then, do fragments of place in the network offer a remedy to our fragmented subjectivities? Fragmentation is only a problem if place is something unified and singular to begin with. However, this chapter examines how the discussions of place identity within the *Ecotone* community reveal that their relationships to place are actually *multi-local* in nature and that they do not expect place to ground their sense of self in any simplistic way. While *Ecotone* bloggers turn to blogs to represent themselves in the network, their blogs do not necessarily create a one-to-one alignment between one place and one self. Instead, managing a set of digital objects through place blogging offers a mechanism for constructing a meaningful sense of self-in-place out of the many places that have shaped who they are.

Place as a Digital Object

For members of *Ecotone* community, place blogging is a way to form deeper connections to place. To adapt Mary Hufford's terms for describing folk culture, place blogging is a "genre of place" a "place-linked form of expression" that is "deeply implicated in the construction and maintenance of place, and in the attachment of people to places" (232). In this formulation, genres of place are "linked" both by emerging from particular locales and by serving to connect people to those locales. But "linked" takes on different connotations when used in the context of communication in digital networks where hyperlinks create the pathways from page to page around the web and digital objects circulate as nodes connected to other nodes.

When Chris Corrigan describes how he began blogging about place, he recalls how it was the power of linking in blogging that attracted him, the way weblogs “link ideas, places and people together creating communities and relationships.” But what makes place blogging different from other forms of blogging is the connection it enables people to make to place, and Corrigan imagines other meanings for “linking” that revise the early definition of blogs as primarily a filter for web links:

Instead of linking to other places on the net, we are linking to places period. We draw connections together between elements that we notice in the land around us. Barry Lopez describes this as “landscape,” when you link together elements of a territory and give them meaning. And giving them meaning is what makes us intimate and friendly with the land. ([“Place Blogging Description”](#))

Though Corrigan distinguishes between linking to web pages and linking to places, the contrast he creates is not precisely between the real and the virtual, between online and offline. Rather, the exact meaning of place and linking has multiple meanings. Place is something created as we make connections between our experiences and observations of the locales we inhabit. In the context of another discussion on the *Ecotone* wiki, Corrigan describes place blogging in similar terms:

But when the subject of blogging is “place” there is something else that happens too. The writer links to the land. These links are not necessarily hyperlinks or photographs, but instead are written projections of the writer’s relationship with the land. Assembling these notes together creates a landscape, and in continuing to assemble this picture, one creates a communal relationship with the place and,

ultimately with the readers of you and your place. I'm glad to see other bloggers of place taking up the thinking on this. ([May 16, 2003](#))

Corrigan here seems to describe place blogging in contradictory ways. On the one hand, he seems insistent that place blogging is about making links to places themselves, not just to other material on the web. In doing so, he aligns place blogging more with the diary-style blog, which takes writing personal experience as its subject matter, than with the filter-style blog, which concerns itself with linking to material that is already online. Such a distinction suggests the filter-style blog is about online life while the diary-style blog is about life offline, about personal experience as it happens in real life. But as writer Joe Clark has argued in describing early weblog culture, the more life takes place online, the less the distinction makes sense:

Since so many leading Weblogs are written by folks in the Internet biz, their entire lives are online. You can write up what you did with your real-life friend yesterday, but you can't link to that experience. You can link to what your online friend blogged yesterday. The annotated-list-of-links Weblog form, then, becomes one and the same with the diaristic form for Webloggers in the Internet demimonde: Links are diaries because life is the Web. (59)

One need not spend all one's time online for Clarke's broader point to be true: the more our lives are mediated by online life, the more comfortable we become making our experiences, whether offline or online, into objects that can be linked to.

These digital objects are, of course, what defines the web, what David Weinberger has called "small pieces loosely joined." Since places, like any other

experience, cannot be linked to without taking a form that the network can recognize, then “the links to the landscape” Corrigan describes must be links to places that have taken digital form. Corrigan acknowledges as much when he describes blogs as “written projections of the writer’s relationship with the land” and that “assembling these notes together creates a landscape.” Places, then, turn out to be representations of the experience of place that are collected into a particular form we now call a blog. As Johndan Johnson-Eilola points out this is typical of the texts we create online: “For better or worse—or, in fact, for better and worse—texts no longer function as discrete objects, but as contingent, fragmented objects in circulation, as elements within constantly configured and shifting networks” (208).

However, the circulation of these “contingent, fragmented objects” is not simply random and chaotic. The pieces that constitute the web take a wide variety of forms, and the interactions that happen around these fragments—what Ulises Mejias calls “object-oriented sociality”—often solidify into recognizable patterns made possible by specific structures of communication (*Networked* 33). Blogging represents one form that digital objects take: we recognized the primary unit of a blog as a post, an entry posted by a single author with a particular timestamp and title. Structurally, blogs are defined by the way posts are arranged in reverse chronological order with the newest entries on the top of the page and later ones pushed down until they are archived. Interaction around posts happens through comments, another kind of digital object that adheres to blog entries in its own pattern of conversation and response. However, while objects may begin in one arrangement, they often are reassembled and reused in multiple contexts, both within a

particular blog—through archives and categories—as well as in contexts far removed from the originating internal network of the author’s blog. Because a blog is not an airtight container for these objects, individual posts are free to circulate throughout the web and in other contexts.

Corrigan and the rest of the *Ecotone* community are attracted to the particular form digital objects take in blogging, particularly the way blogs are structured to accumulate posts over time. Rebecca Blood asserts that this accretion of content is what gives the blog its particular power as form of self-representation, as “these fragments, pieced together over months, can provide an unexpectedly intimate view of what it is to be a particular individual in a particular place at a particular time” (“[Weblogs](#)”).

Similarly, Hollander asserts that blogging is well-suited for writing about place because it facilitates attention to place over time, such that “the fragments from your posts will build up into quite a portrait of the place you have ties to” (“[This is a related reply](#)”). As First observes, such fragments—observations about nature, notes on local history, photographs of the landscape—sometimes can be sprinkled throughout blogs that might not identify as “place blogs,” mixed in with posts about “politics or pets or pottery, which leads him to speculate that there will be plenty of bloggers who would “find company with other similar offerings,” if they simply knew now to find them. While tradition print-based journals and essays may portray the emergence of the self over time, they are not presented in a serial form but rather as finished works. A journal entry may be a distinct piece of a journal, but it will always appear in a particular place in that work—it is fixed there. By contrast, a blog entry has an identity as a distinct object, held in place

initially in the frame of the blog, but because of its database nature and its existence as a node in a network, it could appear in many other contexts.

When place is put into the network, then, it enters as discrete digital objects representing fragments of experience and information about a particular place. Like First's vision of "tens of thousands of bloggers across the globe" creating "many, many entries" on nature and place, Corrigan sees blogging as a mechanism for assembling short-form representations of an individual's experience of place over time. Blogging is a fundamentally temporal medium in which accumulated posts are presented in reverse chronological order in a way that represent the evolution of thought rather than a finished work. Unlike wiki pages, blog posts are generally not edited once they have been posted; readers assume that entries are "as-is" and the thoughts and information in the post are tied to the moment in time it was created. Though blog posts might not change once posted, they are in fact under constant revision as the blog in which they are embedded continues to change. The meaning of any post might be revised by the commentary of subsequent posts or by comments of other readers. As Himmer puts it, any aspect of a blog "is unavoidably altered by the addition of a new post" and for this reason "there is no completion of a weblog—there is always the possibility, and usually the implied promise...of an additional post to come" ([Himmer](#)). A blog then, is best thought of as a practice rather than as a product or a finished work, a practice in which the representation of this process is part of the form. In contrast to wikis where changes are tracked but secluded in "history" of each page, blogs make the development of the blog visible

throughout its development. The structure of the blog suggests that the *blogger*, not just the site, is being revised.

Importance of Individual Blogs

For *Ecotone* bloggers, the blog brings fragments of place experience into a meaningful frame that represents the self as a work in progress. For this reason, it is important for the group to clarify the relationship between individual blogs and the collective site, and way they structure the community reflects the desire to maintain the integrity of individual blogs. Several participants are concerned that *Ecotone* not detract from the writing they are already doing on their blog, and they begin to consider ways to collect posts of individual blogs on a shared topic. Rather than adopting a blog carnival format which is hosted on member sites or using a external aggregating service, the group decides to build on the existing wiki that they had been using heavily for several weeks.

Corrigan takes the lead in formulating some structure for the groups activities, suggesting that they post place blogging topics on the 1st and 15th of each month and invite anyone who is interested to post responses on their individual blogs. A link to each post would be added to a wiki page for that topic, followed by any ongoing discussion participants would like to have. Hollander describes the arrangement this way:

I would very much like to see the wiki grow to be a general forum for discussing place and placelessness, one's relationship to landscape, what is meant by a sense of place and so on, rather than being an adjunct to the writing we do on our blogs. Architecturally I think the two poles for our writings should be our own

individual blogs and the wiki, rather than having the community discussion take place in a collaborative weblog. (“[Running Discussion](#)”)

In Corrigan’s mind, these two poles are important because they preserve the integrity of his own blog while providing collective topoi for invention:

For me this will ensure that my own blog stays focused on Bowen Island (because that’s why I write it) while at the same time contributing to the discussion on topics that I care about. I probably won’t post on every bi-weekly topic, but if something grabs me, I’ll put it up there. (“[Potential](#)”).

The way Corrigan describes it, Bowen Island is its own topos, a literal place which provides a heuristic for invention, while the *Ecotone* network provides an additional set of topoi which prompt him to blog about his place in other ways. Moreover, the blog remains identified with the individual writer and his sense of place, as distinct from whatever collaboration might happen on the *Ecotone* wiki.

This alignment of place, self, and blog might suggest a rather unified construction of place. The titles of some *Ecotone* blog might suggest an alignment between self and place:

- [Fragments from Floyd](#)
- [Bowen Island Journal](#)
- [Mulubinba Moments](#)
- [London and the North](#)
- [The Middlewesterner](#)
- [Creek Running North](#)

- [Pure Land Mountain](#)
- [Northwest Notes](#)
- [prairie point: A view of the world from a garden on the Blackland Prairie](#)

Such titles suggests that each blog is coextensive with a particular place, and by extension, that place *blogging* by definition requires a place *blog*.

However, other *Ecotone* bloggers consider place a central theme in their blogging without defining their blog entirely or exclusively in terms of a particular place, referring to place in their subtitles or as one category of blog posts:

- [Feathers of Hope: A weblog on nature and place, the design arts, politics, and baseball...](#)
- [Lifescapes: "Notes about writing, landscape, and life in the Texas Hill Country"](#)
- [Cirrus: "Musings on the finger lakes weather, the bioregion, place-based spirituality...or sports!"](#)

Blogger Wendy Rogers from *Other Wind* remarks after being invited by First to join the early discussions at *Ecotone*, "I'm glad to be included, even though I am not exclusively a place blogger." The emphasis is not on place blogs as a discrete works or textual artifacts, or even place blogger as a category of self-identity, but rather on place blogging as a practice that could adopt various degrees of emphasis, from the overall theme of a blog to one category among many.

Lorianne DiSabato describes her blogging as more post-modern in sensibility than traditional nature writing, and she tends to see place blogging as a way to experiment with notions of both self and place:

One of the joys of blogging is the experimental nature of it all: one day you can try your hand at a serious post; the next you can experiment with a lighter, more zany voice. In a word, blogging provides a forum where you can let all of your personalities (if you happen to have several) out of the bag, each with a day and a spotlight all their own. ([“One Year”](#)).

As a transplant to Keene, DiSabato sees her blog as a way to actively construct a sense of place and describes “writing about place to create a place myself” (Interview). As a result of these attitudes toward both place and the self, reading DiSabato’s blog means traveling with her through a wide range of representations, from earning her doctorate to going through a divorce, from picturesque images of the New Hampshire countryside to the backsides of ordinary buildings in Keene.

After proposing definitions of place blogging that range from the careful observation of ordinary places to the ethical imperative of ecological responsibility, Lisa Thompson from *Field Notes* offers a few closing words cautioning against rigid definitions:

Lisa here—I feel a strong inclination to leave our definition as loose, as inclusive, as possible. I’d prefer to draw a context rather than a conclusion. I just began to blog in August last year, but really only in earnest this year. Much of the writing I’ve done there hasn’t fit my original idea of what I’d be doing, and I’m still

finding my way. I plan to keep following the threads that pull me: those that follow long-standing interests, new loves and discoveries, and those dangles I just can't ignore.

Not everything I write about will be/is about place, or about "Inverness." But what holds it all together, perhaps, is that it is all informed by place, by my connection to place, my embodiment in place, and as Chris so beautifully put it, in "placing the whole kit and kaboodle in the context of a world culture." ("[Place Blogging Description](#)")

The comment of blogger Coup de Vent from *London and the North* suggests that the community and blogging itself able to accommodate the fragmentary senses of place that many of its members have:

Hi. Coup de Vent here. It's been great dropping into people's blogs this way. I like having the time frame for the bi-weekly posts. It's interesting that I hadn't considered my blog as a Place Thing until Pica asked me if I'd be interested in joining in the wiki. I'm still thinking about what it means to be known that way.

In itself, it also creates another place to belong. ("[Running Discussion](#)")

By providing Coup de Vent with a term with which to identify her blogging, the *Ecotone* wiki provides a rhetorical habitat to support a deeper engagement with place. But it does not require place to be defined in a stable or unitary way. Place, in this sense, is one slice of the self, a filter that can be applied that presents a sub-set of digital objects which represent the self-in-place.

Writing a Relationship to Place

The first two topics the *Ecotone* members decide to blog about collectively offer more details about what kinds of selves they feel they are constructing: “How did you come to write about place?” and “How do places define us or how we define ourselves in relationships to place?” Of the 36 bi-weekly topics, these are the only two phrased as questions, reflecting this early period in the group’s formation when they are engaged in reflecting most self-consciously about why they blog about place and what they mean by “place” itself. For many *Ecotone* bloggers, their relationships to place is complicated because they have moved often, and they have connections and attachments to more than one place. Their sense of place is fragmented, and writing is one way to construct a stable sense of where they are. As First puts it, place is not a given due to how often we move today:

In our times, sense of place is elusive, a longing-for rather than a possession. We pay a price for our mobility, our rootlessness. Few have a “homeplace” to go back to, or even the pictures that Beth can hold in her hands and say “this is, or was, my place.” We create a sense of place and attach it to our present-day surroundings as a way of creating identity. Perhaps this is central: we exist in context of place, take from it our notions of who we are. (“[Discussion June 15](#)”)

Mobility prevents us from creating what would seem to be a normative, singular attachment to a place as a stable grounding for identity, and this can undermine our sense of who we are and where we belong.

In her post, Patricia Perkins foregrounds the way mobility defines her sense of place and of self: “Not having a place gives rise to yearning and learning about what it is to have one.” She creates her complicated sense of place out of what she learns from the places she encounters as a traveler:

I write about culture and about place from my peculiar vantage point because I’m obsessed with it, fascinated by it, drawn again and again into its stories. I once read that people write because of some lack in themselves, and this might be true of me. I have fallen in love with a place—the Berkshires of Western Massachusetts. I have given it years of myself, years of words and praise. And married a man who can’t STAND it there. Too cold. Terrible people, according to him. And so, the one place I might have claimed as my own is denied me, as long as I stay married to this guy, at least. Which looks likely. He’s a misplaced person, too. Born in Algeria, transplanted by violent politics to France, and transplanted again by love to the States. ([“My Place”](#))

Perkin’s self-identification as a traveler is unusual among the *Ecotone* writers, most of whom are more interested in dwelling than in traveling, even if they happen to live overseas. But many of the *Ecotone* writers share experiences of mobility of one form or another, and many attribute their motivation for writing to the need for deeper connection to where they currently live.

Wendy Rogers from *Other Wind* recalls moving frequently while growing up in Vermont, Virginia, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee, having a “home in all these places, but never a hometown. Rogers is able to recognize the benefits of moving—

it made her “more open-minded, more diverse in experience and thought” and “less frightened of change”—but she also recognized that each move she experienced “had an opportunity cost” that left her “slightly rootless.” As a result, she writes, “For roots I have memories, each home a different flavor, each its own lovely tone,” and she confesses, “I’ve always dreamed of far away places, places that could perhaps be mine.” After a trip to San Diego, she describes the surprising sense of connection she feels to the seemingly “ordinary” place where she actual lives, and the consequent desire to write about that connection:

I dreamed about what it would be like to live that close to the ocean. Yet when we came back to Knoxville, I felt comfort at seeing the trees. Here were my trees, so many and so striking in their late winter starkness. They washed over me, like coming home must feel. I don’t think I realized before right then that I had formed such an attachment to this place.

...

Now, even though I still dream of other places, of making changes and traveling, the pull to stay and live in this region grows in me. I can think of many reasons why I’ve finally felt a profound connection. I’ve lived here longest. I spent my childhood (or at least the part of childhood during which I went outside) in West Virginia, another piece of Appalachia, so many of my happiest memories contain the same imagery by which I’m now surrounded. I’ve married a man who could never really seriously think of leaving this place. Whatever the reasons may be, a new sense is emerging in me, and I want to hold it, to know it better. Sometimes, I

write it down—see that tree there, that hill, they look like this, feel like this. I want to remember each time the sense of home tiptoes up on me, each time I know that I am kin to this beauty all around me. I claim this place with my words. I am making claims now, tiny claims of nativity. (“[On Coming](#)”)

For Rogers, blogging about place is an act of belonging, and the effort to actively connect her identity to this particular place and continue exploring the emerging sense of place as it happens.

While many place bloggers write out of the experience of mobility in their own lives, many also write out of a sense of past rootedness. Corrigan observes after reading the posts for the first bi-weekly topic, “it seems as if our love of and connection to place is informed by childhood experiences.” Hollander describes his image of his childhood house:

I carry this image with me; indeed it defines the sort of place I aspire to live in. A house, not a large one, built with character and craft. Places to roam—a walker’s landscape, not one solely for the automobile. Nature, both in the backyard and nearby. Hills to climb, cycle up, and cycle down. And when I fancy myself an inheritor of the Arts and Crafts tradition, I needn’t look far from home to realize why (“[Natal](#)”).

For Adams, her connection is to Beaver Meadow, a tiny hamlet in the hills of central New York where she grew up:

I write about place, in both a particular and a broad sense, because I’ve realized that I was given something precious that most people in our culture simply don’t

have. A sense of deep connection and belonging—to nature, to place, to the mystery of existence and creation: these are our birthright as human beings.

(“[Sunday](#)“)

Adams describes her commitment to writing about place as an inheritance bequeathed to her from several generations of women in her family. When she was 12, her great aunt Inez gave her a “book of stories she had written about her childhood back in Beaver Meadow,” a collection that became meaningful to her later in life: “Of course I didn’t appreciate what she had done until much later, when I had moved pretty far away myself and was starting to think about my own identity and where it had come from.” Her mother and grandmother also contributed their place-based writing to this inheritance:

My own grandmother, who wrote me letters about her garden until she was 90 years old, and my mother, who just sent me an email about finding gooseberry bushes in the woods across the road and with whom I’ve prowled countless woods and shorelines, also conveyed the same messages about the importance of place in the midst of chaos, confusion, and change. (“[Sunday](#)“)



Image 4: Elizabeth Adams (“[Sunday, June 15, 2003](#)”)

The deficiency Adams feels in relation to place stems less from the experience of having left a place than from the “the enormous sense of loss” she feels in “observing the changes in attitudes and destruction of the environment that have taken place” since her

family moved away from their home in Beaver Meadow. Moreover, she mourns a more general sense of alienation at the root of modern life, what she sees as a “fear of nature” and a “sense of hunger, longing, and homelessness ... As we’ve paved over our meadows and plastic-wrapped our foods, we’ve obliterated the paths designed to take us back to our origins and the truth about ourselves; we’ve encapsulated our souls” (“[Sunday](#)”). Adams makes explicit an important element of the culture *kairos* out of which place blogging emerges, namely, the global environmental crisis:

And so I write about place in the hope of awakening that inborn spark of recognition; of de-mystifying the web of connectedness between 21st century humans and the living earth; and of perhaps offering a safe passage, comfortably cushioned with words, into silence, wonder, and love. Without those, I don’t think there is much hope of awakening a sense of responsibility toward this fragile earth. (“[Sunday](#)”)

For her, the construction of a place-based sense of identity is ethically and politically necessary to begin addressing the causes of this crisis and to begin imagining solutions.

Adams confesses that it has taken her a while to appreciate the experience of place she had growing up: “It’s taken me a while to begin to the grasp the nature of the torch I’d been handed at age twelve.” However, she also realizes that the goal is not to return home to rediscover her heritage or even to write about her currently place in the same style as these women. Rather, the point is to “enter as seriously into relationship with my particular place in time and space as these women had, to learn from it, and to find my own ways of passing it on. What they had done was to capture the beauty of lives

lived simply and attentively, and in doing that to tell me, ‘Here is something that will see you through’” (“[Sunday](#)”).

Hollander observes that sense of place does not require a commitment to sedentarism:

What strikes me when reading these pieces is that there doesn’t seem to be any connection between a sense of place and a sense of rootedness. Some of us are strongly rooted, others of us are given to peregrinations, yet we all write with a strong awareness of place. Rather, it’s as though there’s a faculty we’ve all developed to a good degree, call it geographical curiosity or geographical imagination. (“[Discussion June 15](#)”)

Mobility does not necessarily undermine a sense of place, while rootedness does not guarantee tophilia. What matters is the ability to imagine the connection between one’s self and where one is and to cultivate a meaningful, ethical relationships to the places one inhabits. Fred First describes the need to see places as more than just object:

It seems to me that many see themselves merely as objects within place, places that are artificial, often ugly and energy-draining, perhaps engendering a protective blindness to the subjective state in which we see ourselves as not separate from but belonging to, changed by, part of “place.” Tourist travel can easily turn place into object, and tourists can be mere objects within it. I feel more and more than even life-residents in many places are becoming tourists there (“[Discussion June 15](#)”)

Here we see the influence of the nature writing tradition in its effort to imagine place as not just the backdrop to human activities but another character in the drama of human existence.

In her post, Thompson dramatizes a similar conviction about the importance of cultivating relationships with place through writing:

I've come late to a love of the land, to an affinity for place. It snuck up on me while I was consumed with matters of the heart and other fiery occupations. One day I was tightrope-walking along, juggling fireballs and swords, minding my business, when I became aware of a familiar sensation. I felt a dull ache in my heart and tension in my belly, like love, but not directed at any two-legged beast, but towards the very ground. ("[6.15.2003](#)")

But this love of place is complicated and time-consuming, more like marriage than dating, full of passion but a passion that must be constantly nurtured:

Blake says that you can't stay in the "walled garden of the lover" forever. If you try to hold onto that fire and passion, you'll fall all the way down to the "valley of isolation," to cold self-pity. In order to keep progressing, you have to increase the heat of that passion with constant creativity. Like a marriage, this love of place. And like marriage, it requires art and imagination if it is to soar. I no longer have that land in Mexico, it slipped through my fingers like sand slips from barren shores. I can't dig my hands into her soil, or smell her sweet, fetid womb, or hear the waves from my bed, but I can keep her alive with my love through words. ("[6.15.2003](#)")

While her metaphor here is one of marriage, she is not exclusive in her place relationships since she writes about the beach where she previously lived in Nayarit, Mexico, and the place where she currently lives, the Point Reyes Peninsula in California. As with Adams, relationships with past places inspire new relationships with place, even as a one maintains emotional bonds where one used to be:

Meanwhile, I began to see the complexities of the land around me through the eyes of a friend who had love for it. I learned from him how to sit or walk quietly through a landscape and let it reveal itself. We ate cereal on our sun-drenched deck and looked up at Mounts Vision and Wittenberg and Point Reyes Hill, watched the birds come and go in our yard, saw them return in season to build nests in our trees. ("[6.15.2003](#)")

Coming to know a place, for Thompson, is not a disinterested endeavor but is only made possible through relationship, both with other people and with place.

Corrigan and Thompson describe the connections between place and self in Emersonian terms, as a correspondence between self and place, as nature as metaphor for the self. For Chris, the Bowen Island where he lives is a "rich psychological metaphor":

Moving to an island affects us deeply. We cannot escape the idea that our connections to the outside world are severed, and we turn instead to the inner connections for our reliance and sustenance. For me, physically



Image 5: Chris Corrigan ("[July 04, 2006](#)")

moving here was accompanied by a psychological and spiritual inward turning as well. It invited me to explore my inner resources and creativity. And this whole place is populated by many people who have taken this triple journey inward, so we invite each other to play with the notion continually ... Eventually, we take the shape of the island itself: windswept shorelines exposed to the elements, and rich and verdant interiors full of growth and solitude.

Being an islander does not mean isolation; it means knowing where your edges are and constantly creating connections, following trails and exploring details. You grow aware that the limited landscape in fact draws you deeper in so that it becomes an infinite journey through fractals of detail. The island and the soul become holograms, every part reflecting the whole and encompassing the perfect fullness of its presence. It's impossible to live for long on the surfaces. ("[July 1, 2003](#)")

For Lisa, the reclusive, private nature of her place fits her personality:

But informing those relationships is a tendency to the solitary. It's palpable. In Ireland, they say that it's the job of elders to be weird, to stretch your being out into the furthest reaches of your most particular self, in order to show the young that it's okay to explore the eccentricities of the soul. Well, you see a lot of that here. Even the flyers on the post office bulletin board reflect a rich, weird inner life.

I'm listening for ways to become weirder. ("[7.1.2003](#)")

For both Corrigan and Thomson, this sense of correspondence between self and place is not something that comes “naturally” or is something that is inherited from being in the place they grew up. Rather, it is a construction that grows from deliberate engagement with place over time.

A Multi-local Sense of Place

For most *Ecotone* members, however, the relationship between their identities and places is more complicated, even conflicted. When considering the question of how they have been defined or shaped by place, many find it difficult to answer in any simple way. For Kent, it is a question that creates anxiety because she does not feel like any place defines her:

I’m sure, at least, I’m not defined by the places I’ve lived: not by Davis, nor by Santa Barbara, nor by Cambridge, Massachusetts, nor Cambridge, England, nor Paris, nor Birmingham (UK, university), nor Montpellier (junior year abroad), nor Derbyshire (boarding school), nor Madrid, nor least of all by Tiburon, Tiburon in Marin County, California, across the Golden Gate Bridge from San Francisco, where I spent the first five years of my life. (“[How we](#)”)

As someone with citizenship in both Britain and the US, she is a “permanent expatriate” who has always been defined by the place she does not currently live.

For Miguel Arboleda his mixed ethnicity and geographic mobility means that he does not lean on nationality to define his identity:

As a German/Filipino/only-discovered-at-twenty African American who grew up in Japan, the States, and Germany, who has been traveling since he was two, and

was stateless until twelve years old, places as defined by humans, such as the arbitrary endowment of nationality or the invisible barriers of borders, never gave me any sense of belonging to a place. (“[As a German](#)”)

For Wendy Rogers, even though she was born in single culture, she has developed a sense of place that has been dispersed by mobility: “I’ve lived in several places—suburban mid-sized towns, a real ‘suburb’ of a large city, a small city. North. South. Homogenous. Multi-Cultural. So, I haven’t had one place erode me into form over many years.” She also feels that her relative youth is a reason that it is difficult to feel defined by place:

I haven’t lived here long enough, or lived long enough at all, I think, to have enough vantage. We can’t help but be formed, wherever we are, by the individuals we know, the culture that envelops us, and the moments through which we move. We are tied to place, since our activities and chances are tied to place. I’m still too close to see my big picture, but I know one is forming. So, I keep an eye out. (“[On Coming](#)”)

Coup de Vent is literally between two places, travelling regularly between London and her home in the country. She identifies more with her backpack as a place and with all the people she’s read or known in the past (“[How I am](#)”). Another *Ecotone* contributor, Joel Sax avoids describing a clear correspondence between himself and his place: “I’m neither this address nor is this address me. We’re converging facts and when we brush against each other, we make changes.” But he is also sensitive to the invisible affect of our actions on distant places:

My effects on the larger landscape are much more subtle: our cars contribute to the haze over Mount Santiago. This typing may disturb a skunk or a raccoon who is wandering through the complex. Our trash gets taken away to an unseen landfill. I'm not just shaping this place, in my own small way, but I am shaping sites beyond my vision, my hearing, my sense of smell, my taste, my touch. I am one of millions in this moon-shaped plain running from the Santa Monica Mountains to Camp Pendleton. I'm a human cormorant, discharging my guano, whiting the landscape. ([Sax](#))

Nancy from *Under the Firestar* describes how she cannot fully identify with her adopted land her as an expatriate in a foreign environment, given her status in a globalized world where resources are scarce: "I'm like one of the fancy plants which are dying out of our garden. I am expensively watered, fed and temperature-controlled. I am always aware of this" ("[How Are We](#)").

Ecotone blogger Kurt Brobek makes the distinction between being defined and being shaped. He is defined by the suburbs where he now lives but also is shaped by other places he has experienced in the past:

If I had to I could probably count the moments when I have been one with and changed—irrevocably—by place. My spiritual interests may have been decided when I took my first communion in a Catholic church in a Buddhist country, living for two years as a child in Bangkok. They were confirmed and enlarged taking long walks on the land surrounding Pleasant Hill, Kentucky, a Shaker village, and again roaming the knobby hills that comprise much of the land owned

by the Abbey of Gethsemani. Again, my contemplative nature may have been developed by moments of wonder gazing at mountain vistas while hiking the Appalachian Trail in Virginia, or of ecstasy observing the tides that beat against the rocks of coastal Maine, considering the way those waves have worn rock to smoothness. Here in the suburbs, I have fallen in love with particular trees, and mourned their passing, or have seen myself changing slowly with the changing light of each surprising season. ([“Thoughts”](#))

For Brobek, like other *Ecotone* writers, place identity is not defined in any simplistic way by his currently location, but rather includes experiences of past and distant places that he carries with him and that inform his sense of place now.

While *Ecotone* bloggers are motivated to write because their sense of place feels fragmented, it turns out they do not want to be defined by place if it means denying the fragments of their selves in exchange for a singular, stable, bounded sense of place. While they recognize need to define themselves in relationship to place, it turns out place is multivariate and complicated, more characterized by what Margaret Rodman terms “multilocality” than by a unitary sense of place (646). In fact, the concept of place itself appears to emerge from having experienced more than one place throughout their lives. In discussion following the first bi-weekly topic, Corrigan observes, “So much of this writing touches on how we became aware of ‘place’ as a concept by moving away from the places where we were born,” an insight with which several others in the group seem to agree. First comments,

Your second point is well taken, as well, Chris. As I think back over the past two weeks in a writing workshop (as a student) surveying the literature of Appalachia, I'm impressed by how many poets and writers live in other parts of the country and the world now, but write with passion about their home's hills and hollers and homefolk back in Tennessee or Virginia. Certainly, moving away does offer the chance to 'rise above your raisin', in that it allows one to see familiar places from the vantage point of an outsider, seeing it again, for the first time. (["Discussion June 15"](#))

Similarly, Adams describes place as a concept born of mobility:

I didn't think about that whole concept of "home" or being shaped by a landscape until I moved from it. People also push us into examining our identity and sense of place. Like Traveler Trish, I married into a Middle Eastern family. They immigrated here in the 1940's and became a mirror for examining my own many-generational background and questioning all sorts of things I'd always taken for granted. They also had an entirely different sense of place and way of carrying it with them wherever they went that was fascinating to me. (["Discussion June 15"](#))

Place, then, is a relational category that only really becomes meaningful when it is used with reference to more than one location.

The place blog can be seen as a mechanism for putting these fragments of place identity in a meaningful frame, an interface for digital objects that represent these varied experiences of location. For First, blogging provides a format and an audience for weaving together fragments into a portrait of the self:

Weblogs have given some word-hunters like me the purpose, the accountability and the audience for their stories. And these “fragments” of daily life that I write—about the dog, the creeks, the garden and travel through midlife—each show, for better or worse, some small truth about this one-of-a-kind life. Taken together, the inconsequential details—a memory, an insight, a hope revealed—weave the fabric that is uniquely each of us. (“[Good Neighbors](#)”)

Scholar Kylie Jarrett describes the blog as “a database of the Self, an interface into the data set which is the blogger’s life, reflecting the self-determined algorithm which the author has used to bring order and to define the limits of that data set. The “database subjectivity” that emerges from the blog suggests that the self-in-place constructed through the blog is always a work in progress, just as places are not static or unitary entities ([Jarrett](#)). Every encounter with the blog interface brings up the newly added fragments of place experience and the arrangement of objects is filtered and reordered to display different configurations of the self.

Place blogs, then, do not simply reflect an existing sense of place; rather, they participate in the “creative production of identity.” As Cresswell puts it,

Place is the raw material for the creative production of identity rather than an a priori label of social practice. Place in this sense becomes an event rather than a secure ontological thing rooted in notions of the authentic. Place as an event is marked by openness and change rather than boundedness and permanence. (39)

By writing regularly and attentively about their experiences of place, place bloggers construct a unique discursive space in which to explore the increasingly complex

relationship between life online and life in places. Place bloggers acknowledge the complexity of place:

One of the greatest difficulties in rethinking the nature of the place of new information technologies is not people who can't imagine themselves being in two places at once, but rather those who fail to see that they are anywhere at all, who instead act as though the world is a set of locations in space, and they are standing outside of it. ("New Technologies" 12)

Place bloggers, by asserting this particular genre of blogging, attempt to construct a heuristic that helps reminds us that we are *somewhere*, however complex this experience might be.

If the individual acts as the portal to place in the framework of networked individualism, then what users in the network are interacting with then they encounter a place blog is not a singular place—Fargo, or Paris, or Floyd County—but a multivariate, shifting set of digital objects that may line up with a single place in only fleeting or partial ways. For Coup de Vent, blogging is a kind public art installation ground in a particular locale:

My partner, Paris, was in London this week. She saw a bloke get off a bus who was wearing a t-shirt from the Whitney Museum in New York. Across his chest it read "Site Specific Installation." That's me and my weblog—a site specific installation, an illuminated manuscript—a way of mapping time and place, emotion and fact. (["How I Started"](#))

Like a site-specific art installation, place blogs are designed to be displayed and encountered in specific places, and their meaning is defined by where they are. But they are best thought of as performance pieces in that they are never finished and they most constantly reinvented in order to accurately represent the ongoing construct of the self-in-place.

3. Zooming in on Place

When Fred First reflects on the *Ecotone* bi-weekly, “How you came to write about place and why,” his response is, “I live in a unique and beautiful world and enjoy creating images of it in words and pictures. I want others to know this place and share the experience of living here” (“[Writing about Place](#)”). It matters for First that his blogging is rooted in a particular location:

Fragments from Floyd comes every day from a literal address—the same desk in the same green valley of Southwest Virginia. Many blogs’ political or technological opinions and fact-streams have no bearing to their location of origin—which may even change from day to day now that road-posting and hand-held blogging is possible. Other weblogs, fewer in number, could be thought of as “where-blogs.” For these bloggers, place is central. (“[Where-Blogs and Place](#)”)

While most blogging operates largely without reference to place—even in spite of place—Fred wants to emphasize the centrality of location for kind of blogging he and the *Ecotone* bloggers feel they are doing. However, Fred does not reject the affordances of blogging that allow users to interact with others across distance. In an interview with Rebecca Blood, First recalls that it was both love of place and the desire to overcome geographic distance that motivated him to begin blogging:

But then—and this marks what I consider the real START of the blog—in early June I wrote a piece (Summer Lightning) about my ambivalence, feeling sad and disappointed with how I had been treated by “professional” peers but at the same

time excited at the possibilities of a deeper grounding in the where of my life. I posted it to Fragments, and soon I got an email telling me how powerfully that person had felt my words, and how it had touched them and given them hope. I wanted and needed to reach other people then, to build community, because we live in a very physically isolated place and I was further isolated by my newly-unemployed status. I think that this was my core need—to listen to others and to be heard, and to make a difference, to be a part of something. (“[Bloggers on Blogging](#)”)

First figures place blogging as an act of hospitality to visiting readers who do not share his sense of place:

I write about place to invite strangers to know and understand my world, perhaps to see their world differently having come here. I’d like to think they may have new and useful landmarks on their maps when they leave here. So perhaps I write, too, as an open page of hospitality, a way of saying “my house is your house, and my creek and valley, likewise.” (“[Writing](#)”)

By positioning his readers as travelers and visitors, First suggests that he is writing *about* place but not primarily *for* place: he blogs about his life in Floyd County but not primarily for others who live in Floyd County.

While most *Ecotone* bloggers have some local readers in their audience, they tend to be writing for audiences who share an interest in place but may not share the place itself. Lorianne DiSabato writes entries that are deliberately and attentively grounded in the town of Keene, NH and the surrounding areas. But she’s not from Keene and she

admits to being an outsider there. When asked in 2004 if she knows anyone in Keene who reads her blog, she responds, “Keene doesn’t know I exist” (Personal Interview). She knows someone a few towns over who reads her blog, and her landlord is at least aware that she’s keeping a one, but her audience by and large is made up of non-local readers. To say Keene doesn’t know she exists is not mean as a judgment on the reading habits of Keene residents or the depth of place-connection that DiSabato has created there. Rather, it suggests something important about the relationship between audience and geography in place blogging.

As Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford describe in their classic essay on audience, sometimes we write with particular people in mind and writing effectively requires us to know as much as we can about this audience (what they call “audience addressed”). At other times we have to imagine an audience of diverse readers about whom we may know very little, in which case we create roles we ask our readers to take on as they experience our text (“audience invoked”). In the context of place blogging, audience addressed can become more concrete: A blogger may literally know the *audience’s address*, and this knowledge of the audience’s geographic location informs the blogger’s rhetorical approach.

On the web, of course, blog posts can travel well beyond an addressed audience, and blogging about place for this imagined audience also affects the way we position readers in relation to the places being described. In this context, audience proximity is not just a way to create a sense of psychological intimacy between author and audience; it can also have a geographic relevancy when you want to know if you can assume your

audience shares knowledge a place. If your text references local places and people without explanation, readers who are familiar with that place will feel like insiders; those who are not will feel like outsiders. Conversely, taking time to explain local places can make an outside reader feel welcomed as a visitor while boring the local readers who may feel like they are no longer being addressed directly.

As the *Ecotone* group discusses their blogging practice, they begin to wonder if blogging about place for a distant audience might be working at cross-purposes to their goal of deliberately allocating attention to their own places. What exactly counts as place when investing one's attention? Does it matter whether the place is yours or someone else's, whether it is nearby or far way? Does reading and commenting on another blog represent a good investment of attention or is it simply a diversion. This chapter focuses on how blogging is constructed not out of individual investments of attention alone but rather through exchanges between bloggers and their audiences. As an aid for paying attention to place, place blogging always involves a tension between the near and the far, and the perspective it gives must constantly be negotiated. The challenge for *Ecotone* bloggers is to understand how digital objects, which circulate in the network without regard to physical distance, can help steer the flow of attention to place rather diffusing it in the endless reach of the network.

Blog as Place

In his seminal book *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, Howard Rheingold describes the sense of place people felt with the WELL, one

of the first and most well-known online communities. “The model of the WELL and other social clusters in cyberspace as ‘places’ is one that naturally emerges whenever people who use this medium discuss the nature of the medium.” He observes, “I’ve changed my mind about a lot of aspects of the WELL over the years, but the sense of place is still as strong as ever.” In the *Ecotone* bi-weekly topic for August 15, 2003, “[Weblog as Place](#),” *Ecotone* members reflect on this the place-ness of blogs as Coup de Vent from *London and the North* asks the group, “Is your weblog a place in itself?” In her response to the prompt, Rana from *Notes from an Eclectic Mind* recounts regularly being corrected by a former professor every time she spoke of the internet as a “place.” Several *Ecotone* writers come to her support by testifying to what First calls the sense of “placeness“ they have experienced in their blogs (“[So happy](#)”). Fezoca from *The Chatterbox* explains how her blogs have literally become a room in her house:

After writing daily on this weblog for almost three years, I could say that it has become a place. Not only a metaphorical or virtual place, but a real physical space. I feel like this weblog is an extra room in my house—the one with the funky pink wallpaper—where I go every morning, or sometimes in the afternoon or night, and jot down my thoughts. (“[Weblog as Place](#)”)

Similarly, Rana’s blog has become part of the woodwork of her private life:

What began as a drawing board for the book I’ve been talking about writing for years quickly evolved into an alternate dimension, a private public space vital to my days. I now feel that I live my private life in a bedroom, two closets, a bath, and a blog. (“[Weblog as Place](#)”)

Rana's seemingly contradictory notion of "public private space" suggests the way these imagined spaces become places not through individual expression alone but through the interaction with other bloggers. Allan Hollander suggests as much when he asks:

Is there something special about weblogs that make them possess more of a sense of place than other online fora? Place has always been an important metaphor for the web—witness the use of "home page" and "web site"—and perhaps the combination of the graphic design elements of the web and the prominence weblogs give to the individual writer's voice enables a strong sense of place. And a weblog is happiest when other people stop by—it is always reaching towards community. (["A Place In Cyberspace"](#))

This "reaching toward community" is evident in the way Beth Adams describes her sense of proximity to other bloggers despite physical distance:

My blog feels so much like a "place" that I sometimes feel if I looked around the corner, the commentators would be gathered for dinner! I think the reason we are all a little perplexed by this is simply that this way of interacting—using our minds but not our physical presence—is so new. (["Ian, thanks"](#))

While Adams imagines her readers gathered for dinner, Alison Kent similarly views her blog as a site of hospitality, a place where fellow bloggers might join her for tea:

I write this with a cast on my left leg, on a laptop (which is conveniently on my lap), looking out the back window to oleander bushes which despite the increasing heat are still miraculously blooming. The space makes it seem as though these fifteen (or more) people are in the room with me. The weblog seems

to be an extension of my living room. It is always in need of some tidying, but hey, everyone's welcome anytime. The kettle's on the stove. I'd get it for you if I could get up.... ("[The Transformation](#)")

What is more, these interactions often spill out into other places, further blurring the boundaries between blog and life. As Rana describes it, "I began to litter my sentences in 'real life' conversations with references to what other bloggers were writing about on their sites. Like taking out a room in a crazy apartment building, I started to get to know the neighbors." ("[Weblog as Place](#)")

Rheingold describes his experience of the WELL as an online replacement for the "third places" that have steadily declined in recent decades:

There's always another mind there. It's like having the corner bar, complete with old buddies and delightful newcomers and new tools waiting to take home and fresh graffiti and letters, except instead of putting on my coat, shutting down the computer, and walking down to the corner, I just invoke my telecom program and there they are. It's a place. (9)

What makes the WELL a "place" is the regularity of interaction: "The feeling of logging into the WELL for just a minute or two, dozens of times a day, is very similar to the feeling of peeking into the café, the pub, the common room, to see who's there, and whether you want to stay around for a chat" (11). The sense of proximity here is created not by physical nearness but by synchronicity and habit: communication happens in something close to real time and it happens regularly over time. Virtual community is formed largely out of habits of rhetorical interaction with people in shared online spaces.

Calling Attention to the Physical

Experiencing the web as a rhetorical place is not unique to place bloggers; what is unique is the way this rhetorical place is designed to foster a deeper sense of connections to offline places. We begin to see this in the way place bloggers highlight the physical locations of their blogging:

This weblog is located in downtown Davis, California, USA. My visitors come from different places and are familiar with different languages and cultures. They stop by for a couple of minutes and get entertained by what they find here. They can talk to me while visiting or only pass through in silence—with a smile on their faces, though—for that I guarantee! (“[Weblog as Place](#)”)

Though Fezoca provides a geographic location for blog, she gives no indication that the visitors she mentions are dropping by in the flesh. In doing so, she articulates what appears to be a deliberately ambiguous relationship between where she tends to be blogging from (not the literal location of the server hosting her blog) and those she interacts with there.

While there is a resonance between the topic of place blogging—place—and the sensation of “placeness” that habituated online interactions can engender, *Ecotone* bloggers are not entirely willing to leave the body and the physical nature of places behind. In one post, Chris Corrigan exhorts the reader:

Look very closely at these words. If you lean into your monitor you will see that they flicker a little. Peer even closer and you see that each letter is made up of little squares. Take a magnifying glass to the screen and you notice that there is

space between the pixels.

This weblog is about a place, but it lives everywhere. At the moment it lives right in front of you, little more than light shining in your eyes. Reading it may invoke a feeling of being here on Bowen Island, but it is not Bowen Island itself. It lives only on your monitor. Once I publish the words, they reside as tiny 1s and 0s on a server in Vancouver. When you reach them via a URL they fly at the speed of light to where you live and they embed themselves in your context. (“[August 15, 2003](#)”)

While Corrigan acknowledges significance of our “mental landscapes” in how we experience places, he is hesitant to speak of weblogs as places:

But are weblogs places in themselves? I don’t believe so. Come to Bowen, swim with me in the phosphorescence on a late summer evening with crickets and nighthawks chirping away and you will know what it is like to be consumed by place. The next click you make will take you away from this weblog, but it’s not that easy in real life. When we are in place, we are rooted. We cannot leave without some part of us remaining behind, stretched out behind us, eventually catching up to where we now find ourselves. But with this weblog, perhaps with any weblog, we skim the surface, reside in the moment perhaps even try to peer into the depths. (“[August 15, 2003](#)”)

Similarly, Chris Clarke from *Creek Running North* prefers to make a clear distinction between the physical places he writes about and the representations of these places he creates:

Put it this way: There's about a ten-inch section of one of my shelves that's filled with nature writing from Nebraska and Kansas: *Swallow Summer*, *The Last Prairie*, *PrairieEarth*. But my shelf is not a prairie. Last night I watched a rerun of the documentary *Cadillac Desert*, Marc Reisner wryly grinning into the camera to narrate the Owens Valley War. But the television contains neither Reisner nor the Valley: both are dead, more or less.

I write in this weblog about place, when I'm not writing about me and my relationship with myself as I see it. But Pinole Creek does not at any point along its length flow through this Pinole Creek weblog: you are less likely to hear treefrogs in this blog than you are to taste salt by touching tongue to blue ink on a map of the bay. ("[August 18, 2003](#)")

The sentiments of Clarke and Corrigan are far removed from the early utopian rhetoric of the web which promoted increasing virtualization as an inherent good and which viewed the web as new kind of place that would allow us to transcend our bodies and make geographic distance irrelevant.

In an earlier post entitled "[Of Pilgrims and Place](#)," Kurt Brobeck wonders whether the "web is in some ways an inhospitable environment for writing about place" because it requires us to view everything through the screen of a computer:

Everything we write, every image we post, every Web site or Weblog we visit is supported by technology. I can't look at Fred's barn on Goose Creek without powering up my computer, logging on to the Net, and typing in a URL. Nor will the image be visible without the server on which it resides and a complex set of

nodes facilitating communication between our two computers. When all this goes right, I may be rewarded with a very lovely two-dimensional image, but this image is not the thing itself. My interaction with life on Goose Creek is not as participant but rather as voyeur. ([“Of Pilgrims”](#))

This mediated experience is inferior to actually visiting First in person, to the embodied experience of “feeling the cool air coming off the creeks and the jostling of one’s body while driving up a gravel road.” Likewise, the pleasure of viewing one of First’s photos is far inferior to “the pleasure of taking a walk through the wet pasture across the road from his house, or eating ice cream topped with Ann’s homemade hot fudge sauce on their upstairs porch.” In this sense, the effect of digital mediation on place is “unavoidably reductionistic” ([“Of Pilgrims”](#)).

He highlights what he sees as a difference in perceptual pace between computer-mediated experiences of place and more direct, embodied experiences: “The way I interact with the web is all about motion, whereas the way I interact with nature is all about stopping.” By contrast, his experience of his garden “requires qualities of slowing down, of paying attention, of observing not just that which is in the picture frame but everything which is outside it, as well.” In Brobek’s view, the web plays into a tendency in Western cultures toward a kind of Gnosticism which views the web as a new evolutionary development that will allow us to transform what it means to be human by transcending the limits of bodies and places. Brobek worries that significant aspects of our humanness “do not make it through the filter of technology,” aspects such as “breath and bone, flesh and blood, embodied spirit” that are necessary “for us to truly understand

the nature of place” ([“Of Pilgrims”](#)). Brobek represents an ongoing critical attitude that informs the *Ecotone* community, an ethical impulse that seeks to guard against the Gnostic qualities of the web that might distract individuals from meaningful, embodied engagement with actual places

Environmental education scholar C.A. Bowers argues that the more time we spend in cyberspace, the less time we spend cultivating “high context” knowledge and gaining the intimate understanding of ecosystems that we need to preserve the health of our environments, a criticism that would suggest that the web is particularly ill-suited for helping people develop an ethical relationship with place (65). Citing anthropologist Edward Hall, Bowers, argues that “high-context” knowledge traditional has been created by embodied, face-to-face experiences of place, knowledge absorbed, often implicitly, through participation in place-based communities over time and passed from one generation to the next through coherent, relatively tight-knit networks of relationships (65). In Bowers view, “to digitize thought and aesthetic expression is to abstract them from their multilayered cultural and ecological contexts” and for this reason they are part of the problem, not part of the solution, when it comes to our relationship with place and the environment (54). From this perspective, blogging, by virtue of being a networked digital form of communication, participates in a broader cultural trend in which embodied, local knowledge is undermined by computer-mediated ways of knowing and experiencing the world.

Members of the *Ecotone* community share many of Bowers sentiments, particularly the deep commitment to environment protecting and sustainable living. They

would agree with him that digitally mediated engagements with place are no replacement for the face-to-face, embodied experience of the environment, whether natural or built. Where Bowers takes a hard line in equating face-to-face with “high-context,” place bloggers are interested in exploring wider range of options in attempting to enrich a sense of context for their lives. Instead of the contrast between high-context and low context, we might more productively speak in terms of “low-bandwidth” and “high-bandwidth.” Face-to-face interactions will always have what technology pioneer Mitchell Kapor has termed high “emotional bandwidth,” while blogging and even more sophisticated 3D forms such as *Second Life* and other networked games will always be in some way lower-bandwidth than our physical experience of the world. However, the tradition of environmental non-fiction or nature writing demonstrates that low-bandwidth forms of mediation can play an important role in cultivating meaningful relationships to place; in this tradition, reading and writing about the environment has never been viewed as a substitute for getting out and spending time in the nature world, but rather as a way to enhance and augment one's practice experience of place.

This, of course, does not remove the need to reflect critically on the effect that digital technologies might be having on our relationship with place, but place bloggers avoid dismissing digital media out of hand simply because they offer mediated experiences. In this sense, *Ecotone* writers eschew what Ulises Mejias calls a “vulgar” understanding of virtuality, one which “exhibits a bias for temporal/spatial nearness and against mediation: it claims that direct, unmediated interaction is always best” (*Networked* 101). Place bloggers come to accept the notion that experience of place is always mediated, if

not by reading or blogging, then by the glasses on our face and the ideas in our heads. All we can do is attempt to examine as best we can how our mediations work, to assess what they both reveal and conceal in framing our experiences of the world.

Lenses for Seeing

In a discussion of their posts on how they are defined by place, First observes that several responses to the first bi-weekly topics that “quite consistently the reader learns more about the internal landscape of the writer than the external.” Corrigan replies that “landscape only really exists inside” because the it is “the connection we make between the elements of the physical world and the meaning we give them that creates the landscape.” He continues by asking, “Why is a mountain view beautiful? It has nothing to do with the mountain, only with the meaning we pile on that mountain. In fact the word “view” should give it away. Our view of things first causes us to perceive the world around us and then we shape it, and in so doing, shape ourselves” (“[Discuss Shaped](#)”).

In the context of place blogging, views of place are constructed on a daily basis, as post after post accumulate over time. Within this heuristic framework, the obligation to post regularly provides incentive to look again at place, to come back around the familiar to see what might become visible at another glance. The act of putting one’s place into words on a regular basis becomes a lens for focusing attention. For Alison Kent, writing is not just a way to represent what we see: rather, it is itself a way of seeing. As Annie Dillard describes it, “Seeing is of course very much a matter of verbalization. Unless I call my attention to what passes before my eyes, I simply won’t see it” (30). When describing how she began to start writing about place, she is tempted to begin thanking

all the places she's known that have inspired her, but she has to give attribution first to writing itself: "But for me the writing came first, and Venice taught me the connection between them. By writing I learned to think about place, which in turn made me SEE it. And the cycle continues ... looking makes me listen, makes me alive to the infinite transformations around me that make a place THIS place ("[Water](#)"). For Kent, it is possible to have deep relationships with place without writing, but writing provides an interpretive



Image 6: Alison Kent ("[Camera](#)").

mechanism to make sense of them in different ways, to create a narrative of identity that connects the various places that make up who she is.

While writing is the most common mode of expression for *Ecotone* bloggers, they also take advantage of the multimodal affordances of blogging. Adam's metaphor of "turning on that mental recorder" becomes more literal as they turn on recording devices such as digital cameras, as in First's description from [*Fragments from Floyd*](#):

In my life, the real lenses of the camera (and the microscope, during my biologist life) have made me more acutely aware of the beauty and form of "ordinary" things, given me a different appreciation of things than I might have had without looking closely and with interest and awe through these wonderful devices that focus the mind on detail. Photography is an important part of my exploration of place, and in some ways, the images that I share from time to time are as important as the words, bringing my place immediately into yours, bridging both

distance and the otherness that separates strangers. Through my lens, you can see through my eyes, share my sight, insight, and vision. (“[Writing About Place](#)”)

For First, the lens camera and microscope operate as literally and metaphorically to describe the mediating role his blogging practice place in helping him pay attention to place:

Lenses are real, and they are metaphors for anything that lets us or makes us see the world differently. Each of us has a “philosophical lens” that molds our thinking and our writing. It clarifies, magnifies, distorts, and colors our perceptions and understanding of the reality around us. When I write about my particular place here on Goose Creek, I portray it through a refracting lens that bends and molds my view of life in a way that is unique, even from my neighbor’s. Yours lens, too, is as distinct as your thumbprint, and when focused on that ground under your feet, your words about what you see, and your pictures offer us worlds about you in your place we would never have known. (“[Writing About Place](#)”)

There are no claims to objectivity here since all perception of place is mediated, either by material forms—something as simple as my eyeglasses—or the ideological and cultural lenses that refract our perceptions of the world in less concrete forms.

Indeed, digital photography becomes an extension of place blogging practice, extending the composition process out into physical places and connecting it back to what takes place later in front of a computer. For Lorianne DiSabato from *Hoarded*

Ordinaries, photography provides a heuristic for seeing that can foster a Zen-like attentiveness to ordinary places:

I'm always surprised when people compliment me on the photos I post on my blog, for these are snapshots of the most ordinary kind. Walking around Keene with a leash in one hand and a digicam in the other, I simply record what I see: there is very little "art" or intention behind it. And yet, this kind of simple seeing is indeed the very

heart of meditation practice: without judgment or preconception, what is it

that falls before your eyes at any given moment? Without judgment or preconception, can you love that sight as if it were your very last? ("[Getting \(re\)acquainted](#)")



Image 7: Lorianne DiSabato ("[Getting \(Re\)Acquainted](#)").

While digital photography is perhaps the most common way to incorporate visual media, Kent and Alan Hollander also include sketches with their posts, a practice that has carried over from keeping a place-based logbook. The place bloggers, then, are broadly interested in exploring the affordances of blogs and other technologies to figure out in what ways these tools can act as heuristics for paying attention.

Hollander identifies his relationship with place as tied to the technologies he uses to engage with places. As a geographer by profession, he often interacts with geographic data using the latest geospatial technologies, and yet he recognizes the limits of these technologies in helping him develop a deep sense of place. He recalls writing the following poem to keep from dozing off at conference on internet map services:

Glowing screens
—managers stare
World a geodatabase.

Putah Creek saunter
—A hawk enters my haiku.

Who is the wiser? (“[Of Space](#)”)



Image 8: Allan Hollander (“[Gelly Roll and Wash](#)”).

The first two stanzas depict the dark side of modern spatial technologies, which he explicates more fully:

The danger in our modern world of geodatabases, remote sensing technologies, and GPS mapping tools with sub-meter accuracies, is that what cannot be conveniently georeferenced and placed in computer maps gets forgotten about. These spatial tools are eminently technologies for the managerial mindset, designed to support the archetypal “decision-maker.” Lost here is any notion of place as narrative, or place as history. (“[Of Space](#)”)

The remainder left out by these spatial technologies is what motivates him to blog about place, what he describes as “the almost mystical striving for awareness of a particular

locality.” The humanistic approaches of John Stilgoe and John Brinckerhoff Jackson help offset the distant, detached interaction with place characterized by his professional work as a geographer. His poem contrasts the distant, detached interaction of seeing the world through the lens of geographic data with the embodied experience of walking along the creek near his home where his encounter with a hawk symbolizes the possibility of relationship in and with places. In the context of this post, the contrast is also between two ways of engaging with places—GIS systems and blogging—and in his formulation blogging offers a more humane interface for helping him address the “mystical striving for awareness of a particular locality:”

I was always one for a saunter anyway. As John Stilgoe puts it, cycling along at 11 miles an hour is an ideal way to explore the landscape (at such a speed one can gaze straight through picket fences), and wandering on bicycle or foot is deep in my bones. If every place has tales, trying to write them down is a worthy way to bring them to light. (“[Of Space](#)”)

Hollander draws a connection here between sauntering and blogging, between embodied engagement with place and the act of telling stories, both of which are contrasted with the rather bloodless, data-driven approach to mapping.

As the “information superhighway,” the internet is designed to move large amounts of information quickly and to expedite the flow of attention to as many places as possible. To counter this, *Ecotone* bloggers attempt to create a momentary “information walkway,” a rhetorical practice that encourages us to shift perceptual gears in order to encounter our world at a local scale. A blog post about place, whether made up of

writing, photographs, or sketches, represents a moment of slowing down and deliberately allocating attention to the particularities of local.

Assessing the Costs of Audience

The metaphor of place blog as lens suggests a tool that the individual uses to manage his or her individual attention, possibly obscuring the collaborative nature of seeing that *Ecotone* members value in their place blogging practice. Alison Kent emphasizes the collective nature of perspective on place:

I'd like to think this perspective can be altered over time and by the perspectives of others. If not, nobody would ever go to a photography or landscape painting exhibit—we seem to have a need to see through the lenses of others. Which is why I believe this wiki is really on to something.

Who was it—Nancy from the Fire Star—who spoke of seeing the knife grinder through the “filter” of this assignment? That’s kind of how I feel, at the moment—everyone here, collectively, is giving me a new lens or series of lenses through which to view not only the environment here, with which I’m quite familiar, but the environments of others, some of which I’ve never seen. —Alison (“[Discuss Shaped](#)”)

The image Kent presents is of passing a lens around from viewer to viewer to look both one’s own place and the places of others.

Lisa Thompson admits being intrigued by the possibilities of social connections that would network her sense of place, connecting her writing with the writing of others around the world: “I sit here in Inverness writing about my place on the earth, while other

Bloggers of Place and other lovers of some place sit in respective spots around the world. We can collectively build quite a portrait of every place ([“5.9.2003”](#)). Similarly, Kurt Brobek expresses his pleasure in being able to “visit” First despite having voiced some reservations about what seemed like the Gnostic tendencies of the web: “Speaking for myself, this shortcoming of the web is not a black or white problem. Thanks to the web, I’ve had the pleasure of spending an afternoon with Fred and Ann on Goose Creek, before getting back on the road to Burma Shave” ([“Of Pilgrims”](#)). Having just distinguished clearly between visiting First’s blog and visiting him in person, he attests to the pleasure of interacting with Goose Creek in a way that playfully conflates the real and the virtual.

In First’s view, the benefits of putting his sense of place into the network is that his attempts to connect become linked to other like-minded bloggers around the country:

When we write about place we explore particular coordinates of geography and landform and private experience, guided by our own life maps, seen through lenses that can bind me to your world across the globe’s wide curve. And doing so connects us person to person, territory to territory. It puts real places on the representational map that is the *Internet*. Can this writing about place bring us into each other’s world and build “real” community? I trust we will see. ([“Writing”](#))

First uses the map as a metaphor for individual place identity as explored through writing, but blogging in particular allows writers to view themselves through a networked lens which creates and reveals connections between people and their places, merging individual maps of place the larger “representation map” of the internet.

Corrigan describes the function of his blog: “to capture my experiences for myself, for my family who are scattered across North America and for friends in Israel, South Africa, America and the UK” and “to introduce my readers to these places in a more concrete and connected way ([“June 15”](#)). Blogging allows him to maintain geographically dispersed social networks, and like First he positions his readers as tourists or visitors and himself as their guide:

I have even begun posting stories of my life here on [an interactive GeoLibrary](#) which in essence returns the stories to the place that birthed them, and coincidentally introduces my readers to these places in a more concrete and connected way. A project that started in exile, now continues with an exile’s eyes, writing a landscape that surrounds and holds me, and constantly inspires. ([“June 15”](#))

For Corrigan, then, place blogging is a way of maintaining relationships with people who he no longer lives near, reflecting the importance of local knowledge for maintaining relationships: it is difficult to know people well if we know nothing about where they are. But having this audience also serves to provide an opportunity to construct place identity through discourse. The way Corrigan describe it, place blogging is a form of social media which serves not just to construct and reveal our network of social relationships, but also our networks of place relationships, the connections between ourselves and the places to which we belong.

These projections of place sense circulate in the network such that people form connections between each other based on their experiences of place. As Corrigan puts it,

People who blog places are making sense of the land in which they live and are situating themselves both in that space and in the greater and wider space that is constituted by the minds of their readers. If my weblog is read in South Africa, then my inner landscape of Bowen Island is projected there, and the reader there makes the connections between my writing and his or her life. It is not a hyperlink but it does bind us together and it extends something of this place all the way out to you, wherever you are. ([May 16, 2003](#))

In reflecting on what she does in her blogging, Beth Adams expresses the desire to examine place “both from an intimate and a broad perspective”:

It seems to me that everything I write is somewhat about “place,” if we extend that definition concentrically to be one person’s place in her locality, her region, her country, her culture, the world’s culture, the life of the spirit. On another axis you might also say I’m writing about one person’s place in time, extending forward (into questions of technology, science, human impact on practically everything) and backwards (toward a greater understanding of myself in history). ([“Some Thoughts”](#))

Place blogging, then, scales from the most personal and local of topics to the broadest possible issues of ecology and sustainability, as well as from the concrete to the abstract. Adams wonders if “there is a place in the blogosphere for this sort of searching and conversation,” one that might remain “grounded in writing about our most fundamental “place” relationship—with nature” ([“Some Thoughts”](#)). As, Chris Corrigan frames it, this is not an either/or proposition:

The act of blogging place, it seems to me, is an act of both placing one in intimate proximity with one's surroundings and placing the whole kit and kaboodle in the context of a world culture. Anyone in the world anywhere in the world can theoretically read Bowen Island Journal. Edward Hall or Marshall McLuhan might argue that this means that Bowen Island (at least as I see it) is extended to the world. It encompasses the world. ("[Place Blogging Description](#)")

Ecotone bloggers want to take advantages of the affordances of the network to create new possibilities for sociality and interaction, but they want to also foster closer attention to the physical locations in which they live. The group seems to agree that even our physical, embodied experience of place is always shaped by our the ideological lenses with which we must necessarily see the world, so the goal is not to rid ourselves of lenses, but attend more thoughtfully to the particular kinds of mediation we choose. What we see here is a consensus that paying attention to digital objects must in some way *count* as paying attention to place. If this is the case, then a wider audience creates more opportunities to interact around the digital objects that stand in for place.

The importance of reading other peoples blogs is not as an escape from the limits of one's geographic situatedness, but as means of engaging more fully with one's own place. One might increase one's knowledge of geography—as a tourist might—but what one gains from reading other place blogs is not just knowledge of another place, but insight into other ways to engage a place—heuristics and ways of thinking that one can bring back to blogging about one's own place. For First the ultimate goal is not simply to

expand the range of one's personal map to include more places in a general sense, but rather to gain insights into one's own relationship to place:

Maybe I think and write about place because, as I believe Wendell Berry has suggested, if you don't know where you're from, you won't know where you're going. In some small or great way, it may be possible in writing on this topic to help each other know where we're going by better understanding the places from which we have come. ("[Writing](#)")

In other words, the goal of place blogging is not to become more familiar with Floyd County or Davis, California, or Bowen Island in itself; rather, place blogging, in First's formulation, only serves its purpose if readers return to their own place having gained insights that deepen their own sense of place where they are. Because a place blog is not itself a substitute for the place it represents, its job is not to keep people there. Place blogs are only rhetorically successful if they convince readers to leave them.

However, this raises a question: if place blogging enables individuals to enhance their attention to place, at what level of zoom? For the allocation of attention in a place blogging network to be a two-way street, participants must be willing to zoom out from one's local place and attend to your relationship to another member's local place. The interactions with geographically distant readers create a tension when one of the stated goals of attention exchange is to counter the bias of the network toward the global rather than the local.

The tension that place bloggers must deal with is that the internet as a medium makes it very easy to move between a local perspective on our lives to a global

perspective—and everything in between. As Steven Johnson argues this perspective is part of shared cultural perspective that shapes the way we perceive the world. As Johnson has observed, most periods in history have characteristic “ways of seeing,” such as “the fixed perspective of Renaissance art, the scattered collages of Cubism, the rapid-fire cuts introduced by MTV and the channel-surfing of the 80’s.” Johnson argues that the view most characteristic of this era is what he terms “the long zoom,” exemplified by:

satellites tracking in on license-plate numbers in the spy movies; the Google maps in which a few clicks take you from a view of an entire region to the roof of your house; the opening shot in “Fight Club” that pulls out from Edward Norton’s synapses all the way to his quivering face as he stares into the muzzle of a revolver; the fractal geometry of chaos theory in which each new scale reveals endless complexity.

For Johnson, these do not just represent a way of perceiving the world, but a conceptual approach that enables us to move “from the scale of DNA to the scale of personality all the way up to social movements and politics—and back again” (“[The Long Zoom](#)”).

While the networked affordances of blogging make it easy to zoom both in and out, bias of the web is to often to zoom out, undermining an efforts to pay attention to place at the scale of the most local and ordinary. *Ecotone* blogger Maria Benet describes the way reading other place blogs has allowed her experience places in deeper ways:

As I started to read more blogs, I found myself drawn into the worlds of other people. Day in and day out I followed them, as some followed me, I suppose. It wasn’t long before the worlds they described in their blogs became almost as

familiar to me as my own. Is it any wonder then that when it came to going to Pittsburgh or London, I didn't feel as if I were leaving the familiar outlines of my home? Quite the opposite; I could hardly wait to see the landscape—the shapes and colors of the place—that was not so much backdrop, as an other character in their daily narratives. (“[Impalpable](#)”)

In this sense, place blogging has succeeded in making places come alive as more than just setting but also as characters in the lives of those writing about them.

But the problem she faces is that these places are not her places, and in this sense she while she may be gaining insight into Place in a phenomenological sense, she's not necessarily deepening her connection to her own place. Benet describes the way place blogging can sometimes create a conflict between the time one spends in front of the computer writing and the time one spends in embodied engagement with places:

Once I migrated my blog to Movable Type and people started to stop by, and I, in turn, started to travel farther in the worlds of blogs, my walks in my physical neighborhood became less frequent and I spent a lot less time in my garden, or even caring about it. My focus shifted to worlds that came to me first in words only. At first, it was intoxicating to find out about the state of certain flowers in some other blogger's garden in Vermont, for example—even as my own rose bushes, just out of view of my office, began to fail. To know where in London one can have good Lebanese food, to take another example, made me feel, somehow, a bit more worldly—or rather, a bit more as if my neighborhood just got bigger, even as I was eating leftovers from my fridge because I didn't have the

time to go exploring restaurants or grocery stores within a wider circle of my physical neighborhood. ([“Impalpable”](#))

If the practice of place blogging is grounded in the embodied experience of one’s own place, then a tension will always exist between the attention one gives to digital objects and the attention one gives to place.

In Kurt Brobek’s view, one of the hazards of online discourse for place bloggers is that the impulse to zoom out creates desires that can distract us from the work of attending to the local. As Brobek describes it, his “interaction with the web, and with webloggers, is conditioned by longing”—“longing for knowledge, longing for consumer goods, longing for self-expression, longing for community, as well as plain old eroticized longing.” In Brobek’s experience, “A typical session online may bounce me around and against desire for all of these. That desire may be exhausted, but never sated.” He contrasts this cultivation of desire with “a love a place...built not on desire for something I cannot have, but on appreciation, perhaps accrued very slowly, for that which I do have, for that which has already been given to me and which graces my life” ([“Of Pilgrims”](#)). For Brobeck, then, managing attention toward place through exchanges with a distant audience comes with risks:

The risk is that I will behave like the newly converted, unable to see that while the web can put me in touch with smart and interesting people like Cassandra [Beth Adams], it can just as easily separate me from the guy who lives next door whose tree shades my lawn in the afternoons. ([“Of Pilgrims”](#))

This word of caution serves to articulate what will be an ongoing concern for *Ecotone* bloggers: the need to take advantage of the networking benefits of the web while still staying grounded in the concrete realities of place, that which lie outside the network.

As we will see in the next chapter, however, this does not represent the only way to frame these issues. Other strains of place blogging that emerged independently of the *Ecotone* group have avoided these tensions by shifting the scope of their audience and simply blogging for “the guy next door” instead, offering another strategy for organizing attention around place.

4. The Lure of the Local

In a February 2, 2004 blog post entitled “[Blogging Locally](#),” Simon St. Laurent imagines a middle landscape between blogs focusing on national and global topics and those centered on individuals:

I suspect the world has enough blogs where people comment on national and international politics, and know there are an ever-growing number of blogs on people’s own personal lives. Something in between those poles seems to me to be missing, though—blogs about particular places. Two months ago, partly to see if it could work, I started one focusing squarely on Dryden, New York.

In his first blog post two months earlier, St. Laurent describes beginning his blog being disappointed by the results of the 2003 local elections. Despite having invested time campaigning for the Democratic Party, Republicans won several important positions on the town board, earning them 5-0 majority. This setback caused him not just to reflect on the place where he lived, but to do so publicly in a blog:

The whole process has me thinking a lot harder about where I live and why, and a blog seems like the right place to do it. Thinking in public is kind of strange, and sometimes even embarrassing, but it also seems worth doing. There isn’t a whole lot out there on Dryden, and it’s taken us a few years to figure out where we are. Maybe this will help some folks find their way around, and heck, maybe it’ll be interesting generally. (“[A Long Few Weeks](#)”)

At the same time this local political event focuses St. Laurent’s attention to place, he realizes that his local newspaper is a poor source of local information. The larger

newspaper from neighboring Ithaca covers Dryden but because its small size, Dryden only garners several stories each week (“[Blogging Locally](#)”). If he is to figure out where he’s at, it appears he will have to do it by finding and publishing information about Dryden on his own.

While the *Ecotone* group remediates such genres as the journal, the essay, and environmental non-fiction, St. Laurent’s approach points to another parallel strain of place blogging that draws on local journalism instead, offering a kind of “citizen journalism” that invites comparisons with traditional newspapers and genres of journalistic non-fiction. In this chapter I will examine two bloggers as case studies, Simon St. Laurent of *Living in Dryden*, whose blog focuses on the small town of Dryden in upstate New York, and Lisa Williams whose group blog *H2otown* is centered on Watertown, MA, a suburb of Boston. Like the *Ecotone* community, St. Laurent and Williams define place blogging in reaction to prevailing popularity of political blogging at the time. While the *Ecotone* group—what I call “essayistic place bloggers”—tended to write *about* place but not *for* place, “journalistic” place bloggers tend to write both *about* a place and *for* an audience in that place. The aim of journalistic place blogging tends to put more emphasis on sharing local knowledge than on fostering a personal sense of place, especially as this knowledge can encourage members of a local audience to become more engaged in their place as citizens. Instead of constructing an audience of visitors and tourists, journalistic bloggers intentionally write for their neighbors, creating a flow of attention in which both bloggers and audiences are investing in the same place. While one could say these two strains of blogging share the same DNA, they have

evolved under slightly different conditions and studying the variations that result offers insights into both genre formation and the construction of place.

Locating Political Discourse

Like essayistic place bloggers, St. Laurent and Williams are trying to figure out where they are, and they turn to blogging as a way to do this. In his second post entitled “[Where I’m at](#),” St. Laurent situates

himself and his blog explicitly: “I live at 1259 Dryden Road, Ithaca, NY 14850.” In the next few days, he proceeds to work his way down the road near his house, systematically documenting his neighborhood by taking photographs



Image 9: Simon St. Laurent (“[People drive by](#)”)

house-by-house and posting them on his blog.

If you live in one of these houses and don’t like the picture, let me know. I’ll be happy to take a different picture or, if you feel your privacy has been invaded, take it down. If you have questions, please contact me.

I hope people find this interesting, and I’m hoping to carry on with it for a while. Historical societies and similar groups spend a lot of time trying to find pictures of buildings, especially labeled pictures of buildings. Maybe this will someday make their lives easier, at least for around here. (“[Photos](#)”)

Because these houses belong to his neighbors, he situates himself as an insider and constructs a local audience by expressing a sense of responsibility to them. This writing

not only attempts to deepen his sense of place personally but also to create local knowledge that contributes to the collective identity of his place.

Initially he wonders if he will have enough material to post an entry every day, but within a few months St. Laurent realizes how much there is to know about Dryden. He begins to cultivate an audience of mostly local readers:

At this point it's clear that there's more than enough going on in Dryden for stories every day. There is an incredible amount happening here, and only a fraction of it can make the paper. Some of it is routine, but even in the routine there's a depth I wouldn't have guessed before.

It's also clear that at least some people are interested in reading it. Traffic has increased slowly but consistently since I put the site up, and a good proportion of it seems to be local, not just driven by search engines or their spiders looking for new content. ([“Six Months”](#))

As he continues to blog, he documents the details of community and political life in the Dryden area—updates on local meetings, legal notices, tax maps, and online resources relating to the area—increasingly finding more resources to draw on as he creates local knowledge for his audience.

Williams describes her self as “a stay-at-home mother with a very eccentric side project—a hyper-local newsblog,” a project that over time has helped earn her a reputation as an authority on citizen media. She began writing not as a “townie” but as a newcomer to Watertown who wanted to figure out where she was: “I didn’t start H2otown because I was a booster about it. I started it because I was an idiot about

Watertown ... What I lacked was the time to discover and think, so this was my method for getting connected to the place” (“[Digging Deeper](#)”). Williams depicts the scene of her blogging:

I didn’t know quite what to make of it, but I was delighted and obsessed by it, too.

I saw 2AM a lot, still awake and adding stories to H2otown, sitting in the dark in a futon chair in my living room with my notebook computer in my lap while the TiVo showed replays of Town Council meetings recorded earlier off local access cable. (“[If I Didn’t](#)”)

Williams gathers her information from a variety of sources: 140 RSS feeds pulling in Watertown-related content, paper newsletters from Watertown organizations, local events and meetings she attends in person, and contributions from *H2otown* members. She freely admits her status as an amateur and often is self-deprecating about her news-gathering skills; at the same time she highlights how much she is able to cover by herself that newspapers cannot, suggesting how much ordinary bloggers can accomplish given enough time and enough willingness to learn.

When describing their motivations for place blogging, St. Laurent and Williams, resemble the *Ecotone* bloggers in that they attempt to define place blogging by pushing away from the political blogging of the time, particularly as it focused on national issues and was characterized by a strident, partisan ethos. As Fred First puts it, place blogging emerges as “niche” in the blogging world because it “allows the enthusiastic participation of a lot of thoughtful bloggers who, like myself, feel marginalized by the strident tone of the pervasive warblogs and its relatives” (“[Running Discussion](#)”). Similarly, Williams

views placeblogs as a way to avoid “the type of polarizing discussion about politics, culture, and the economy that’s the product of journalism that happens at the 30,000 foot level” (“[What’s a placeblog?](#)”). The political conversations in Dryden were mostly about national issues because of the many challenging national and global events that dominated the headlines. St. Laurent also suggests that “the transient nature of a lot of residents” made it easier to focus on national politics, since they had less connection to local life and access to local information was less readily available. But St. Laurent expresses a desire to “step out of those conversations” because “they often combine intense polarization with a sense that there isn’t much for (most) individuals to do about them” (“[Why I’m not](#)”).

These sentiments must be seen in the context of broader hopes that the internet could usher in a new era of civic discourse, one not dictated by the mainstream media or partisan divides of the past but driven by egalitarian grassroots participation by ordinary people. Matt Welch, in his article “[Farewell to Warblogging](#),” recounts coining the term “warblogging” to describe the outpouring of citizen-driven media in response to the September 2001 attacks. For a short time, he experienced blogging as a grassroots movement characterized by critical thinking, humor, an aversion to the culture wars, and generous non-partisanship. But these halcyon days proved to be short-lived as the debates around the response to 9/11, the war in Iraq, and the 2004 election soon fractured along party lines. Welch observes that the 2000 election was described by experts as the most partisan in history, but after 9/11 polls showed that the polarization between Republicans and Democrats had already increased. As he looks back at 2001, he confesses that he

“can’t shake the feeling of nostalgia for a promising cross-partisan moment that just fizzled away. Americans are always much more interesting than their political parties or ideological labels, and for a few months there it was possible for readers and writers alike to feel the unfamiliar slap of collisions with worlds they’d previously sealed off from themselves.”

Welch’s sentiments would appear to confirm what legal scholar Cass Sunstein asserts in *Republic.com 2.0*, that the internet could actually be undermining democracy by making it easy for people to cordon themselves off from views they disagree with and cluster more tightly with those who share their ideas, creating an “echo chamber” effect. In a 2008 discussion with Yochai Benkler of Harvard’s Berkman Center for Internet and Society, Sunstein cites research that suggest when groups of people who share similar views get together, their discussions tend to encourage more extreme positions than they would normally have taken. In his view, the ability to filter the web in a personalized way creates fragmentation and isolation rather than exposing people to views they normally wouldn’t encounter. To counter this tendency, the web needs to be designed in the way Jane Jacobs argued healthy cities are designed—to encourage serendipitous interactions with people who are different from us. Yochai Benkler counters that the tendency to talk to people who agree with us is a natural way for humans to interact, and that we should not fault the internet for failing to cure us of this. Instead, we should contrast the web with traditional media and recognize the ways that the web creates greater opportunities for ordinary individuals and groups to set the media agenda, deciding for themselves what information they want to consume and how they want to organize themselves. In his

view, the mass media produces passive consumers while the internet creates more possibilities for users to both consume and produce information ([“Our World Digitized”](#)).

Journalistic place bloggers appear to share Welch’s and Sunstein’s concerns regarding the polarizing tendencies of online public discourse while also sharing Benchler’s more sanguine approach. For St. Laurent and Williams, the solution is not to reject blogging about politics, but to ground political discussion in the local. As support, St. Laurent cites no less than the godfather of warblogging, Glenn Reynolds of *Instapundit*, one of the most well-known political blogs. In an early 2004 post entitled [“Blogging: the Next Wave,”](#) Reynolds advocated for a turn to local politics in blogging. In Reynolds view, local politics are under-covered because the topic is considered less interesting than national or international news, and local papers are often understaffed and lack the resources to cover news that the average local resident would like to read. Reynolds argues that local bloggers can step in to fill this gap by covering local events, not just “opining” but actually gathering information from town meetings and public records and even posting original photographs and video when possible. Reynolds also opens the door for the non-political to get involved: “If politics isn’t your interest, local blogs focusing on the music scene, restaurants, or retail can do just as well.” While Reynolds assumes that upcoming 2004 presidential elections would keep warblogs and conventional political blogging in the spotlight into the fall, he predicts that over the long term blogs focused on other areas will have the most potential for growth and for affecting the world on a day to day basis” ([Reynolds](#)).

Calling All Local Bloggers

St. Laurent does not see much evidence that people have begun blogging locally, but he wonders if he is not looking hard enough. In an April 19, 2004 post on the O'Reilly blog, "[Looking for locally-focused weblogs](#)," he puts out a call for anyone else who might be blogging about place: "While weblogs' ability to connect people regardless of their geographic location has produced some fascinating stuff, I'm looking for weblogs that focus squarely on a particular area." Simon defines what he has in mind:

My criteria are fairly simple. The weblog should focus primarily on local politics, where local is something smaller, preferably much smaller, than a county, state, or province. I don't mind pointing to subcategories of weblogs with broader perspectives, so long as what I'm pointing to is mostly local. Local weblogs can be from any country, not just the US, though that's what I've listed so far. They don't have to be in English, and they don't have to focus on politics, either.

By first suggesting that place blogging should focus on local politics, St. Laurent aligns place blogging closely with journalism as a genre, but he also quickly loosens the definition to include blogs that include content on other topics and which might not discuss politics at all. ("[Looking](#)")

St. Laurent compiles a modest list and eventually provides a link to another list being created at the *Personal Democracy Forum* which would have about 500 blogs on its list by 2008 ("[All Blogotics](#)"). On January 1, 2005, Micah Silfry posts a similar call for local blogging:

If 2004 was the Year of the Big Nationally-Influential Political Blogs, could 2005 be the year that blogs that focus on state and local politics come into their own? And I mean blogs written by passionate amateurs, not the “Politics1[stateabbreviation].com” sites that are useful aggregators of local political news, but gathering places for conversation and debate influencing the local political and journalistic scene. (“[Silfry](#)”)

Like St. Laurent, Silfry suggest that political blogging on a national level had run its course and he proposes local blogging as an alternative to the prevailing blogging practices.

Collecting lists of placeblogs would appear to be a common impulse among those interested in place blogging. On August 1, 2006, Williams announced on her blog that she bet Jay Rosen of *Pressthink* that she could find “1,000 local newsblogs—placeblogs—in the U.S.” Williams defines place bloggers in way similar to St. Laurent:

Placeblogs are weblogs written about a geographical area: a town, a city, a county. They’re a running log of what’s happening there; they’re not newspapers, although they may contain “random acts of journalism”; they’re about the lived experience of a place. (“[The Thousand](#)”)

Like the *Ecotone* group, Williams turns to natural metaphors to describe placeblogs. In a talk on place blogging at the “Citizen Journalism Unconference 2006,” she describes herself as a “web botanist” and she proposes a “natural history of placeblogs” describing the conditions that have made the emergence of place blogs possible and the demographic qualities that indicate the kinds of communities “most likely to sprout a

placeblog” ([“Placeblogs”](#)). To convey what she sees as the bottom-up, user-generated nature of place blogs in contrast to traditional news media, she characterizes place blogs as “a weedy, hardy species, growing and surviving in the places you’d least expect” ([“The Thousand”](#)). She also stresses the uniqueness and authentic voice represented in these blogs:

And the other thing I want to tell you is that so many of them are absolutely delightful—funny, sharp, unique. This is not the voice of the America that has been made bland and generic by the spread of chain stores and identical bendervilles; in these blogs, the specific, uncopyable, indestructable personality of communities in the US is still in there, like a pilot light in an unlit stove.

([“8/9/2006”](#))

Place blogs are depicted as an antidote to homogenizing forces that would undermine the authenticity of place, as springing “from a fiercely non-generic America that’s not about big-box retailers.” In her mind, the pleasure of place blogging is “the pleasure of being able to produce something from beginning to end, rare in our modern industrialized world where most of us are a small part of a large machine; the joy of craftsmanship that comes from being allowed to stick at something long enough to get better over time.” Williams is motivated to create this list because she feels that the examples of “citizen journalism” and “hyperlocal blogging” offered by the media tend to obscure the uniqueness of placeblogs by pointing to the same well-known examples over and over, which she feels is unfair to the hundreds, if not thousands of place blogs that she believes exist all over the country. Eventually she receives a grant to design what she hopes will

be the first and largest directory of place blogs, a site called *placeblogger.com* that is launched in January 2007.

While both St. Laurent and Williams point to problems with their local newspapers as part of the reason they begin blogging, they make it clear that they think local blogging necessarily competes directly with traditional newspaper organizations. A long-standing “journalism vs. blogging” debate has remained persistent despite repeated attempts to put it to rest (Rosen, “[Bloggers vs Journalists](#)”). Critics of “citizen journalism” and blogging often portray these newer forms as rivals to mainstream media that seeks to create “journalism without journalists,” producing news without the standards or training that defines professional journalism as result. While the term “citizen journalism” has been useful as a way to highlight the ground-up nature of hyperlocal blogging, Williams recognizes it is risky to use because it “focuses any comparison between weblogs and newspapers on what newspapers do well.” As Williams puts it, “to look at what I like to call placeblogs as bad newspapers is a bit like looking at a cat and saying it’s a lousy dog because it doesn’t fetch” (“[I do all](#)”). If places blogs are “fusions of news and schmooze,” as Jan Schaffer puts it, then unfairly accuse hyperlocal sites as pushing schmooze *as* news (8). Williams argues that place blogging is often dismissed as being “minor,” but to criticize place blogging this way is to fundamentally misunderstand its goals and its strengths as a genre (“[Placeblogs](#)” 8:39).

When defining placeblogs and how they relate to traditional journalism, Williams is quick to underplay the comparison with traditional “news” and insists that place blogs are defined precisely by the content that would not make the local paper. While there

might be some overlap between place blogging and newspaper content, it may not necessarily be very much. As Williams puts it, “A lot of the attention of a placeblog will be simply on things that would not never make the newspaper” and, in fact, it is exactly this “minor” content that might qualify more directly as “news.” In reference to *H2otown*, she argues it would cease to exist without such content: “If you took out the part about pizza crusts or personality then nobody would go to the site, you’d kill it.” Consequently, she feels called to defend the ordinariness of such content on the grounds that it is “important to the people who live there, that’s part of their conversation that they’re having about their place” (“[Placeblogs](#)” 9:15-9:35). Sheldon Rampton, *editor of PR Watch*, observes that such content did not always fall outside the purview of the local newspaper. Before the 1950s, it was common for local newspapers to feature news like, “Mr. and Mrs. Joe Green went to Chicago to visit their daughter-in-law. They had a nice visit” (“[Placeblogs](#)” 28:00). While Williams acknowledges that some traditionalist journalists find such “country correspondence” tedious (she cites one recent commenter who described it as “gargling barbed wire”), she argues that what matters is that such information is valuable to the people who read those papers. For this reason, place blogging can be seen as a way to fulfill to a niche met by the local newspapers that disappeared during mid-century shifts in newspaper publishing. One of the joys of place blogging, in William’s experience, is the opportunity it gives her to define for herself what is “important enough to cover” and she asserts that we will only appreciate the value of a placeblog when we see it as a “sustained attention to place over time” that foregrounds “the lived experience of a place” (“[If I didn’t](#)”; “[Placeblogs](#)” 8:52).

The Ethos of Attention

Williams admits that it can be difficult to find local places interesting, especially for those looking in from the outside, and she confesses, “I used to find Watertown boring until I started to really pay attention. This attention allowed her to realize that places, when viewed closely from the inside, are “gnarled and lively as any Russian village ever to grace the pages of Dostoyevsky” (“[If I didn’t](#)”). Similarly, St. Laurent lists among his reasons for blogging locally the fact that his “neighborhood—from the 13/366 overlap to ‘downtown’ Varna—is just plain interesting” and the people who are there are “fascinating, and real.” The problem is that blogging conversations pitched at the national level tends to attract more than their share of attention by being “loud and continuous” and frequently “brutally polarized.” Such conversations, St. Laurent argues, dilute the energy people have to attend to the politics immediately around them: “National politics seem to blot out people’s attention for more local issues, and even keep people who could work together on local projects from doing so” (“[Why Local?](#)”).

The main problem, in St. Laurent’s view is not polarization and helplessness, but “lack of knowledge and often lack of interest” (“[Why Local?](#)”). As a result, he views the goal for his blog as “changing things at the margins, helping people who are slightly interested become more interested, and helping people who are interested enough and find local news too weak to find more information” (“[Four Years](#)”). After several years of his blog, he is able to assess that the site has “made a small dent in lack of knowledge, covering maybe 3% of what’s important in Dryden” and it is serving as “an index to

further sources of information.” While “lack of interest is still a general problem,” he is encouraged that “it seems like politics is waking up here again ([“The Problem”](#)).

While Williams and St. Laurent begin their blogs to help them pay attention to place and figure out where are, they come to view their goal as cultivating the interest of their readers. Creating a compelling blogging persona is one way that Williams does this:

H2otown is written in the third person by a nerdy, self-absorbed, high-tech-gizmo-loving narrator. Writing in this persona allowed me one big thing the local newspaper wasn’t allowed: to be funny. And in Watertown, being funny is being truthful. ([“If I didn’t”](#))

In typical self-deprecating fashion, Williams attributes her ability to enjoy paying close attention to the local to a kind of “nerdiness”: “A nerd is a person who can sustain attention in something long after a normal person has lapsed into a coma. Patiently, the nerd sits, until the object of its attention cracks and reveals its strange and fantastic inner life” ([“If I didn’t”](#)).

Williams credits *Baristanet* with helping her understand the role that one’s blogging persona can play in a citizen journalism site. *Baristanet*, one of the first and most well-known of examples of online “citizen journalism,” was started in May 2004 in Montclair, NJ. It now receives 5,000 daily visits and was named by Williams as the number one place blog in America. Debbie Galant, co-founder of *Baristanet*, makes it clear that while she has “dwelled in, or near, or at least been somewhat associated with, some of the most hallowed halls of journalism,” she sees what she’s doing in *Baristanet* as something different:

Like my father, I'm a publisher. But I'm not sure I'm a journalist. Journalism is nonfiction. It belongs with history and politics and business and current affairs. I read, and write, novels. I'm more interested in why the pool is closed tight on a sunny day than in the town government's master plan. I'm more interested in a little girl's enchantment by the National Press Club 40 years ago than I am by the powerful men and women of the National Press Club today, and the powerful men and women they cover. (["The Walter Winchell"](#))

She proceeds to create a vivid distinction between the mainstream national media and her role with *Baristanet*:

Now, on the other hand, I dwell in the journalistic equivalent of a roadhouse—a neighborhood newsblog—where I stand behind the counter, a dirty dishtowel over my shoulder, barking at the rowdies in the corner to keep it down, serving up mugs of draught and occasionally pulling up my skirts to show a little ankle.

(["The Walter Winchell"](#))

Elsewhere, Galant figures the site as a favorite coffee shop “where the baristas remember your drink order” and its “‘baristas’ give its readers exactly what they’ve come to love—a mix of original reporting, as well as aggregated news, all with *Baristanet*’s unique voice and perspective.” Readers make themselves at home there through the comments and other content that they contribute in response to posts or to events happening around town (["About Baristanet"](#)).

While an ethos characterized by humor and irreverence can help cultivate interest in local blogging, simply presenting one's self as a local blogging for locals can also

serve to contribute to an effective ethos. In Jay Rosen's view, this is what makes the difference:

From a journalism professor's point of view, the significance of placeblogs is the intimacy factor—neighbor-to-neighbor rather than professional-to-public communication. A placeblog about the Rittenhouse Square area by a pro who lives in Overbrook Park wouldn't make any sense. That and the fact that every prescription for survival in the newspaper biz says: go local, that's your niche without typically noting that others may be better at that niche. ([“Check Out”](#))

The ethos of a neighbor writing for a neighbor is constructed out of both proximity and amateurism: it matters that someone lives nearby and is not getting paid to say something about local issues from somewhere else.

Cultivating Local Audiences

St. Laurent further foregrounds the issue of audience proximity by arguing that place bloggers should be actively cultivating a local audience: “It's great to publish material that can reach a wide audiences. Sometimes it's also great to publish for a smaller audience ([“Looking”](#)). The suggestion that one's goal might be to cultivate a smaller audience runs counter to common assumptions about what makes a blog successful—namely, how many readers one has. By contrast, the success of a local blog is measured by its ability to foster deeper local involvement over time: For St. Laurent, a shared sense of local is one way to create commonality that can give political discourse longevity beyond the typical election cycles: “Issues and places seem to drive long-term interests better than candidates; even when the elections are over, the issues and places

remain.” St. Laurent observes that the specificity of local issues has a richness that can ground and enliven interactions between those who share a common locale:

Talking about local issues almost always means talking about the concrete, and people’s own hopes and fears come to the surface easily. It’s not (usually) about political party or ideology, but rather about how best to get things done, and how to choose which things need to get done. The variety of perspectives is amazing, and the overlaps and crossovers in how people would like to prioritize are both marvelous and perplexing. The hard part is getting them talking. (“[Why I’m not](#)”)

As Williams points out, “news is a conversation starter” but these conversations often want to travel to material that would not generally make the newspaper. The problem, however, is not just that newspapers are not covering all the local “news” that people would like to discuss, but that “the civic space for those types of conversations has shrunk.” Local blogging provides another space for these conversations to flourish in a way that does not just encourage the expression of views but also *listening*, which St. Laurent points out, is “a crucial political skill, given the time and focus to adjust messages over time” (“[Why I’m not](#)”).

But what differentiates a community of locally-based bloggers from a placeless community of interest like the popular technology blog *Slashdot*? In Rosen’s view, “what makes it different is the town. The town is a “player” because the writer’s connection to it, and the readers’ with all their connections make the site go. There’s already a huge amount shared before the site does its magic” (“[It’s different](#)”). For Rosen, it matters that Williams both blogs about Watertown and sleeps in Watertown. A community of interest

whose focus is a local place becomes a community in the traditional sense: “a human settlement on earthly soil—the second oldest we have, after the wandering tribe.” As Rosen puts it, “a lot of meaning is built up around it, even though we are investing more and more of ourselves in our other memberships, including cyber ones (“[Apparently](#)”). A site formed as a community of interest depends on connections to be formed by the work of the site alone; in this way, Slashdot and *H2otown* function in much the same way. However, readers of a place blog based in a particular place bring with them pre-existing connections and relationships that might be activated automatically even before the site has done any work to connect them.

Creating an audience of physically proximate readers changes one’s sense of responsibility. John Udell gleans two “laws of local blogging” from talking with St. Laurent. First, “responsibility is inversely proportional to community size.” Blogging locally makes it difficult to remain anonymous, and in St. Laurent’s view, this affects the tone of his writing and the way he interacts with readers and neighbors. In his experience, “the level of responsibility increases as the size of community decreases” and the content of his blog “has to be a lot more accurate because people will call you on it” (“[Simon](#)”). While members of a community of interest will also call each other on inaccuracies in content, St. Laurent suggests that there is something different being called on something in the local grocery store rather than just in a comment. As Karl Martino puts it in a discussion of Lisa Williams place blogging,

The closer you are to a subject, the more you know about it. The more responsibility you have to it. Especially if your subject matter lives down the

block from you. There is certainly something to be said for this. I'm not sure there is anything more courageous in media than a reporter with local focus. ("[Sorry](#)")

In some cases, a reader down the block is not the same as a reader across the country, and blogging a neighbor about your shared place makes a difference for both involved.

St. Laurent's second law of local blogging is, "Don't make people spit out their coffee." For St. Laurent, blogging locally creates a "tight feedback loop" which tempers the bombastic, polarized rhetoric that political blogging tends to encourage at a national level:

Dealing with the threshold where people don't really trust what they read is something I worry about pretty consistently. My usual rule is that nobody should have to spit out their coffee when they're reading it. I have a neighbor up the hill who's a conservative Republican, and I count on him to tell me when I've gone too far. Having that kind of tight feedback loop makes it possible for me to write things that I know will appeal to a lot of people. ("[Simon](#)")

Writing for the "neighbor up the hill" makes St. Laurent more concerned about sharing local knowledge for the good of the community than about advancing particular political views. In other words, blogging locally makes it more difficult to create what Sunstein calls the "echo chamber" in which you only interact with those who agree with you (116).

Blogging for a local audience can have the added benefit of enabling people who live nearby to meet each other. St. Laurent recalls how the early promise of the web seemed to be in its ability to connect people from around the world with shared interests who previously would have been prevented by geography from getting to know each

other. But recently a shift has taken place and “we’re learning about how these technologies can help us communicate on a much smaller scale, helping us look beyond the walls and property lines of our homes to connect with our neighbors ([“Spreading”](#)). One of the benefits of cultivating a local audience is that interactions on one’s blog can enrich and grow one’s local relationships more broadly. As St. Laurent describes it,

Writing about the community has also pulled me out of my house and deeper into the community. I’ve met many times more people locally in the last year than I’d met in my previous five years of living here. My mental rolodex is long since exploded. I’ve joined the Historical Society and the Town’s Democratic Committee, and wound up the Chair of the Democratic Committee. Blogging always seems to end up making people participants, and that definitely has happened to me. It sure wasn’t what I expected as I was setting up Movable Type! ([“A Year”](#))

Baristanet founder Debbie Galant relates a similar experience:

From my viewpoint, the satisfaction comes when I walk down the street and have one person after another greet me—people whom I didn’t know 18 months ago. It comes when wives tell me this is the first time their commuting husbands ever knew anything about the life of the town. When big-time journalists blackberry me from the train to let me know that there’s “suspicious activity” at the station and they wonder what’s going on. When mayors from two of the towns we cover post comments. When a tiny item we run about a church bingo game generates a huge crowd the next week. ([“The Walter Winchell”](#))

In Galant's view, it is this "sense of connectedness" that makes local blogging both "different than blogging and different than journalism."

The Need for Neighbors

For Galant, Williams, and St. Laurent, place blogging matters because it has a concrete effect on the quality of the relationships they have with the people who live near them. St. Laurent states this most explicitly when he describes his need for neighbors as one of the reasons he blogs locally: "I'm convinced that we're all going to need our immediate neighbors more in the future." He proceeds to explain what he means by this:

Why? Because pretty much everything that's made it easy to ignore our neighbors depends on cheap energy. I don't see much hope for thinking that energy will stay cheap, as worldwide demand is increasing much faster than supply. Some key parts of our supply may be peaking or even declining, and neither ethanol nor hydrogen will magically provide us with more cheap energy. (Nuclear energy and alternative sources may help buffer that, but "too cheap to meter" doesn't exist.) We're going to have to adjust to gasoline, natural gas, and electrical prices climbing, and will have to figure out how to economize on a lot of things that once seemed cheap. ("[Why Local?](#)")

Here St. Laurent makes a direct analogy between the local food movement and local economies attention: cheap energy has "made it easy to ignore our neighbors," and by extensions, to not pay attention to the local.

Two months earlier in a June 28, 2007 post titled "[Eat local](#)," St. Laurent had announced that he and wife intended to eat locally as of August 1 that summer,

attempting to limit themselves to foods that come from New York and Pennsylvania. Eventually, he hopes to be able make his local eating even more local, though he acknowledges that our systems of production no longer support what used to be the way everyone ate: “There’s no reason why everything we eat couldn’t come from Dryden—except that the world isn’t organized that way any longer. New York State still has tremendous agriculture, though, and we hope it’s organized enough for us to find our way.” Similarly, the web has not been structured to encourage local economies of attention that help manage attention toward local places and communities. Part of what place bloggers are doing is trying to create interest in the local by offering alternative economies that make it easier to allocate attention towards place.

Williams describes how *H2otown* creates a local economy of attention that enables her to foster deeper attentiveness to place, much like Thoreau claiming, “I have traveled a great deal in Concord.” After having children made travel and residential mobility less part of her life, she found an outlet in place blogging: “H2otown allows me to substitute traveling deeper for traveling farther” (“[If I didn’t](#)”). For place bloggers like Williams, choosing to blog at a local scale brings about a change in perspective and affects the way we view the people around us. As St. Laurent states it,

When we start thinking about people in huge numbers, it’s easily to abstract away their humanity, and treat them as blocks. When we focus on people in smaller numbers, we can start to see what we have in common with them, and what we don’t have in common, and work on ways to build that commonality—even when it’s difficult. (“[Why Local?](#)”)

While *Ecotone* bloggers expressed their commitment to seeing place as more than the backdrop for human action but as an actual character in our personal stories, St. Laurent sees local blogging as a way to keep our neighbors from blending into our surroundings:

Our neighbors aren't just part of the landscape—they're our community. People who can help us, and people we can help too. We may not agree with our neighbors, and we may sometimes not even like our neighbors, but all of us together will define what happens to the place we share. ("[Why Local?](#)")

Place blogging in itself is not enough to help us re-connect people with places and re-invest in our communities, but it is one important way to create local economies of attention in a networked society: "Building those connections is what Living in Dryden is all about. The site itself can't create the connections among its readers—but hopefully it makes it easier for you to build those connections" ("[Why Local?](#)").

5. Geographies of Audience

Two years after Fred First began *Fragments of Floyd*, he describes how his sense of audience has evolved. Initially, First saw the opportunity to tap into the sense of community that blogging can create with a broad, geographically dispersed audience:

The weblog began as a personal journal, but from the beginning, there was the ultimate hope of connecting to others—to gain some sense of community, even living as isolated as we do in rural Virginia. Over the months, readers have visited *Fragments from Floyd* from all over the world, but just a few of them have come from my home state, fewer still from my neighborhood (“[Good Neighbors](#)”).

He marvels at how blogging has enriched his social network: “Who would have thought words from a remote and quiet place could find their way to so many homes and connect mine to so many other lives?” But he also is aware of how slow he has been to develop a local audience of readers. Though Floyd County is “technologically sophisticated as rural counties go,” the geographic statistics for First’s site have “consistently shown many more bloggers visiting *Fragments from London* than from all of Virginia combined,” and he’s surprised by how many local residents still seem to be unfamiliar with blogging as a genre (“[Good Neighbors](#)”).

At the same time that he begins to extend his social network beyond his geographically isolated locale, he expresses the desire to have this network include more people who live near him:

While I have not blogged as a way of trolling for work, influence or friends, I have hoped ultimately for a local purpose and local flesh-and-blood connections

and involvement. The doors I want to open via contacts made through the radio, blog or newspaper are not about profit, but more about expanding our neighborhood beyond this isolated but beautiful place we live. I also am seeking new challenges and passions in this transition from what I used to do to what I will do in the future—something, I hope, that will involve writing, photography, education (outside the classroom) and community building. (“[Good Neighbors](#)”)

The emergence of a local audience for his writing comes less through blogging and more through a traditional print media—the local newspaper. In December 2004, First is asked to write a regular column in the Floyd Press, the local print newspaper, and he speculates on how this will create the possibility of running into members of his audience in his local community: “So now, I will meet my readers in the library, pass them on the street, sit at the next table at Oddfellas.” Reflecting how this will be different from his experience of audience as a blogger, he speculates:

I think there will be a different accountability, immediacy and tone, perhaps, when I get into stride with the local column. I am hoping to write myself into the column rather than have it academic, remote or as writing for its own sake. I’d like to foster exchange (via links to my email and weblog) and perhaps encourage more folks my age to read more, write more, and consider weblogs for their stories, ideas, memories and concerns about our county. (Email interview)

His instincts as a blogger make him seek to push readers from the printed page back to his blog where conversation can continue, and he hopes that connecting with reader in the

paper might help those without any experience with blogging to consider trying it, both as readers and writers.

As First begins his experiment with writing for a traditional journalistic outlet, he makes it clear that he is prepared to do it by his experience as a blogger:

Your kindness and encouragement in the last two years, dear Fragments readers, gives me a certain peace in this new medium of local print. The rapport and community that has grown from our daily conversation in the weblog encourages me to trust my own best advice now: tell your story in your authentic voice; do the best job you can to make the reader hear and feel what you do; have a thick skin; and grow with the opportunity. (“[Good Neighbors](#)”)

The value of a diverse, geographically distanced audience has played a vital role in Fred’s growing confidence as writer, and now his dedication to writing about Floyd County is beginning to spill over into the local community. As he describes it, he is ready to write for a local audience now that he has spend two years writing every day about that same place for people who do not live there. This evolution in audience and exigencies demonstrates once again the fluidity of the self and the complexities of place, and it reflects how place blogging has emerged as a response to these conditions. For place bloggers, exploring the relationship between one’s audience and one’s geographic location is a necessary part of writing in the genre, a constant dialogue that will continue as long as one keeps blogging.

This chapter examines a snapshot of First’s blogging practice as way to illustrate the challenges in attempting to strike a balance between the benefits of gaining greater

attention through networked interactions and the responsibility for how these interactions might be organizing readers' attention to place. First depends on readers to motivate him to write and to foster his deeper attention to place, but he hopes that the exchange will also benefit readers by widening their experience of the world. In doing so, he constructs his audience as tourists and raises the question of what effect this might have on the reader's attention to place and what the responsibilities of both host and visitor might be in this exchange of attention.

Ecotone bloggers recognize the benefits that can be gained from having geographically-distant audiences: they can often be much larger and more diverse, and viewing one's place through the perspective of outsiders can have a defamiliarizing effect that can allow one to see it with fresh eyes. However, great as it may be great to have an audience of interested readers from around the world and to visit a variety of places through others' blogs, this can also serve to attenuate and diffuse a place blogger's attention to place. As we saw in the previous chapter, journalistic place bloggers suggest that the most efficient way to organize attention around place is to write *about* place and *for* place, to manage the infinite reach of the network by cordoning off one's audience and creating an alignment between who one blogs for and where one lives. While there is an attractive focus to this approach, First's experience suggests that it may be possible to create a healthy local economy of attention that still includes investments from the outside—from distant audiences—as long one as is aware of the tradeoffs involved. This chapter examines the work First does to negotiate these tradeoffs as he creates space in his blogging practice for both visitors and neighbors.

Caveat Emptor. Be a Careful Tourist.

In the discussion after the *Ecotone* bi-weekly topic “On Coming to Write about Place,” First describes what he see as a dangers of not cultivating a sense of connection to place:

It seems to me that many see themselves merely as objects within place, places that are artificial, often ugly and energy-draining, perhaps engendering a protective blindness to the subjective state in which we see ourselves as not separate from but belonging to, changed by, part of “place.” Tourist travel can easily turn place into object, and tourists can be mere objects within it. I feel more and more than even life-residents in many places are becoming tourists there.

(“[Discussion June 15](#)”)

The issue of tourism as a stance towards place had been on First’s mind since the early interactions with future *Ecotone* members. First and Lisa Thompson met through the listings on *Rebecca’s Pocket* and on May 6, 2003 they teamed up to post what they called a “duoblog” entry entitled “[Now Showing: Sunset and Clouds, or Cultural Tourism in the Southern Mountains: What’s For Sale?](#)” in which they do a close reading of an advertisement for North Carolina.



Image 10: “Now Showing” from visitnc.com

First thinks he recognizes the place represented in the ad, Bald Mountain on the border of North Carolina and Tennessee. While First earned this view by hiking up the mountain under his own power, the ad would suggest that the experience of nature is a commodity available for purchase, in the same way you would pay for a movie at the local cineplex, or more precisely, at a historic art house theater, as the 50s-style marquee suggests. But First is disappointed when he learns what he thinks is a “sacred place of natural solitude” is actually privately-held property not more than a few miles from the nearest television. Similarly, the advertisement suggests that what is on display is a pristine view of nature when it obscures the economic forces behind its appearance, that the land is being bought, sold, and developed at a rapid rate and the representation of nature is designed to sell this exchange of nature as a commodity. First objects to this attitude toward place:

But then, isn't advertising all about seeming, illusion, and inflating expectations?

I am generally resistant to the idea of being “marketed.” Call me a “reluctant tourist.” And I’m especially vigilant when it comes to buying into advertising that sells the places where things make their homes—people, plants and animals. In much of the marketing of mere mountain aesthetics, things portrayed are not as they seem, and in this perhaps lies the heart of my unrest with the Clouds and Sunset image. (“[Now Showing](#)”)

Too often, First argues, we are already predisposed to fall for the deceptive presentations of advertising because our experience of nature is so shallow, “trivialized by pith-helmeted TV Aussies mock-wrestling with ‘deadly’ reptiles.” Mobility undermines any

meaningful engagement with place and when we do encounter nature we usually settle for a highly mediated version through TV and movies or a comfortably packaged one. As First puts it, “people still love ‘nature as scenery’ and come to the southern mountains in a huge wave to consume it as a rustic peep-show” (“[Now Showing](#)”).

Since our entertainment and our tourism demand little of us, First argues, the result is a deepening ignorance of place. Most people now lack the basic ecological literacy that enabled previous generations to be able to identify the plants and animals around them, much less the awareness to be able to recognize the complex environmental effects on a local place caused by distant industrial pollution. The science taught and practiced in the contemporary university is little help; instead of the holism and personal voice of the traditional naturalist, biology has been “reduced to mathematical formulae and base-pair sequences,” enabling us to study nature “without getting our boots muddy.” This ecological literacy means that tourists are willing to consume places with much less discernment, and locals are willing to sell their place at nearly any price. In First’s view, outsiders who approach other places as consumers, and insiders, locals who make a deal with the devil by selling their place with purely financial values in mind. Outsiders consume without any deep knowledge of the place. Locals sell their place in order to make ends meet and by doing so enable the destruction of the natural world that attracts consumption.

Thompson’s close reading of the scene points out the rhetorical effect the ad is meant to have on viewers. The stark wilderness scene appeals to our love of the sublime in nature, something that removes us from the banality of ordinary experience. At the

same time, it uses the 50s-style marquee to appeal to our nostalgia for “a time when life was simpler, when our needs were fewer—an unspoiled time.” Nature too is unspoiled, the ad suggests, by juxtaposing the two, and suggests that the viewer can take in the spectacle of nature as one would watch a movie, albeit in a restored art-house theatre. However, as Thompson points out, the metaphors clash in that nature is no longer “unspoiled” once the billboard is planted in the middle of it (“[5.6.2003](#)”). The ad reduces nature to what is most easily sellable and consumable:

Sunsets and clouds are nature at her most showy, superficial self. Sunset and clouds can be seen from an outdoor cocktail bar. No understanding of ecosystems, trans-continental migration, or even the changing of seasons are required: only that we look up, and certainly not that we look within. (“[5.6.2003](#)”)

Both Thompson and First end their posts with a warning to tourists. Thompson reminds the reader that true understanding of the natural world must be earned through first-hand time and attention. Nature:

reveals herself over time spent on hard-scrabble walks, after hours spent lying in grasses and listening to birdsong. She reveals herself only to the careful heart, the watchful soul. And as a wise woman once said, “Better to wander alone in the wilderness than follow a map made by tourists.” (“[5.6.2003](#)”)

In First’s final line is a simple warning: “Caveat emptor. Be a careful tourist.” (“[Now Showing](#)”)

Blogging the Gold Rush

In March 2005, these reflections on the ethics of representing places take on renewed relevance when First receives an email from a Floyd County neighbor who is advertising the sale of his home, situated on the ridge just above First's home. In a post entitled "[The Real Estate](#)," First posts the description of the property and ends with the aside, "And once again, that commission check from ReMax would be a nice token, don't you think? And I'm wondering if I shouldn't just go ahead and get my real estate license and blog and work at the same time!" One commenter, Carl responds, "Yes you should...and per my earlier comment, someone (you?) should set up a group of concerned investors to drive new development in a preservation oriented direction....Let me know if you're interested in the latter; there's gotta be a way a CPA can be a part of that!"



Image 11: Fred First ("[Morning Missed](#)")

Another commenter, Scott Chaffin, points to the potential hazards of blurring the boundaries between blogging and selling places: "Sounds like a good plan to me, chief, except you're gonna start filling up that valley, and then where will you be?" ([Carl; Chaffin](#)).

These cautionary sentiments give First cause to reflect in an April 3, 2005 post titled "[Blogging the Gold Rush](#)":

Floyd County has been called “Virginia’s best kept secret.” It is a secret no longer, and some of us who blog are wondering if we should keep singing the praises of life here. Are we part of the problem, or can we be instrumental in bringing about purposeful and intentional change to the area by what we write about our lives in town and county? Is it okay to chronicle the day-to-day (which as journal-keepers we would do regardless of where we lived) even if our words and images may make others decide to travel or move here?

First observes that Floyd County has become attractive to retirees and young families for its slower pace and smaller scale, and the blogs he and others in Floyd County keep have become resources for those considering a move to the area:

Potential residents or visitors search for information about our area, and come across the blogs of those of us who live here. They read generally good things about Floyd because we are generally positive in our writing. Floyd County bloggers—myself, Doug Thompson and Colleen Redman—are mostly pleased with our lives here, and say so in our blogs. Doug and I grab snapshots of bucolic landscape with our cameras on our walks and drives around southwest Virginia, and are happy when readers are moved by what they see. But are we unintentionally advertizing a gold rush? (“[Blogging](#)”)

There are clearly economic and cultural benefits to the growth of tourism and relocation in rural areas like Floyd County, but First also describes the growing concern in the county with regards to the changes growth can bring. Though First admits there are “warts and defects” to where he lives, those who move do not always seem fully aware of

the trade-offs involved in moving to a rural area. As a consequence, the very same people who come to Floyd to escape the city often end up bringing the city with them, once they begin to want access to the amenities they took for granted in the urbanized areas they left behind. Since providing these conveniences would require the development of shopping malls, theaters, and restaurants, the desires of newcomers can end up destroying the very qualities that drew them there in the first place.

First believes that this pattern can be averted with proper planning, but the threat is real: “It is possible to love a place to death. And other small communities have sold out to the promise of jobs and tax dollars, and the golden goose has died an ignoble death at the hands of her hopeful caretakers. And there is no bringing her back.” At the end of the post, First expresses his intentions to continue blogging as he has been, describing the pleasures of living in Floyd County for anyone interested in reading:

Floyd County blogs will laud its beauty, its uniqueness and its lifestyle as we describe our daily comings and goings. We’ll be happy to meet newcomers and visitors who read our websites looking for slices of life from the town and county. But be aware of the responsibility that falls on visitors and new residents to understand what it is that makes Floyd worth visiting. It is a charm easily lost if those who come cannot accept it, warts and all, and be patient as things change at a pace and in a way that preserves what is best about living here. (“[Blogging](#)”)

While First extends hospitality to his readers, he also places responsibility on those who might come to Floyd through his blog to be aware of the impact their visit or move might have on the place.

A lively comment discussion ensues in which readers around the country weigh in with their experiences of growth in small towns and rural areas. Many share stories of place they live or once lived having been overcome by development and changed into far different places. Several offer concrete recommendations to those moving to places like Floyd County, such as remodeling existing homes rather than building new ones and trying to buy locally. Others recommend land trusts as a crucial strategy for counterbalancing the inevitable market forces that would tempt locals to subdivide and sell their land in ways that would spur destructive growth patterns.

Some like Suzy share First's concerns but are optimistic that Floyd County can maintain its character in the face of growth:

Thanks for writing about this.

I grew up in NoVA and it would break my heart to see any of the SWVA counties—esp. Floyd—any more NoVA-fied.

Is it inevitable that as more people, and more money, come into our area from the North that sprawl, bad manners, gentrification, and general marginalization of Southern culture will follow suit? I sincerely hope not, but your essay here makes good sense, as I think folks in this region need to be very proactive about making sure the tourism and development we get is really the kind we want. I'd love to see more discussions on this, even if they get a little thorny.

Development is a scary thing, but I think that Floydians are plenty creative & resourceful enough to come up with a plan for the future that doesn't put today's residents on the cultural and economic defensive. ([Suzy](#))(Suzy, 2005)

Others like fellow *Ecotone* blogger Patricia Perkins are blunt in their assessment of what First must do:

Dream on, dear Fred. I spent two months touring the USA the summer of 2003, looking for communities that had managed to stay attractive. They are few and far between. Unless you—and some very determined and like-minded friends—can get ON the planning commission, the voice of McDonald’s will simply be louder. They will argue for just a little place out at the outskirts...and before you know it, Floyd will be ringed, like almost every other American town, with ugliness and parking lots and fast food joints, car parts, Wal-Mart, and Motel 6. If you are hoping YOU won’t have to get involved (and I know you already are, to a certain extent), think twice. Serious, determined, committed activism is the only thing that has saved Boulder, Colorado, Eureka, Arkansas, and the one or two other places I discovered that had escaped ruin as places of beauty and grace.

(“[Dream](#)”)

In her view, whatever role First’s blogging may or may not have in affecting readers, political action is the only force that will have an actual impact on keeping Floyd Country from being destroyed by growth.

The Rest of the Story

First’s fellow Floyd bloggers, David St. Lawrence and Doug Thompson, weigh in to reflect on their role as local bloggers writing about their place for people reading from a distance. St. Lawrence suggests they have a responsibility to write about the “warts” of Floyd County as a way to inform those considering coming to there:

You seem to have hit a nerve with your thoughtful post. Even more telling are the comments from those who have “been there and done that.”

Perhaps we should spend more time telling the world “the rest of the story” as Paul Harvey was wont to say. Every township has its armpits and Floyd is no exception. A few photos of the creative countryside auto repair facilities that dot most back roads might deter the SUV onslaught for a while.

An article about the “White Elephant” industrial park building cum skating rink/abandoned warehouse might deter the settlers, but might pique the curiosity of an entrepreneur. ([St. Lawrence](#))

St. Lawrence speculates that blogging about place in a way that highlights both its benefits and downsides might serve to attract those with the healthiest perspective:

Perhaps that is where the bloggers will wield influence in the future. We are the media of the future and our comments are being read by more people every day. If we write to attract the people who can contribute most to the Floyd of the future, we may have a profound effect on the course of Floyd history. Writing responsibly is always a necessity. It will not hold back the course of history, but it will give us early warning of the consequences of



Image 12: Fred First ([“The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly”](#))

our actions. ([St. Lawrence](#))

He projects forward into the future to imagine bloggers having to answer to the next generations for the role they played in destroying what was once a beautiful rural area:

In a few short years, if we continue to glorify Floyd as an idyllic retreat, we may become the “early settlers” pointing out to our grandchildren where the last trees stood, or recalling a time when there was only one traffic light in town.

Ah, the bittersweet joy of discovering paradise. ([St. Lawrence](#))

Doug Thompson agrees that bloggers have a responsibility to tell the full story of a place, both good and bad, but he suggests that in the end it will be political action more than blogging that has the most effect on the future of Floyd County:

Yes, we must tell all the story. Studies show 60 percent of city dwellers who move to the country return to the city within five years. They find the country life too limiting and they first try to bring more city amenities to their doorstep and—failing that—return to whence they came.

We must talk about the brutal winters, the unresponsive county government, the provincial attitudes and even the Ladybugs that cover the floors and walls. Septics back up, wells run dry and the power goes out. The doctor is 45 minutes away.

But we also must do our part to preserve the things that brought us to (or back to) the county. That means a commitment of time and resources.

Unless we do, those who came to Floyd County to find a refuge will be packing and headed for another refuge in a few short years. ([Thompson](#))

With their emphasis on representing the less picturesque aspects of Floyd, Thompson and St. Lawrence point to the influence of the pastoral tradition on how they and First portray rural life, a tradition that has a long history of lauding the benefits of life in the country over life in the city, often in a way that effaces or ignores those aspects of the scene that might not accord with this goal. They gently suggest that while this mode of representing place might come the most naturally for First in portraying Floyd, he might have to consciously work against the tradition in order to create a more well-rounded picture.

Write from the Heart

A few months later, First posts an entry titled “[Blog It And They Will Come](#)” in which he continues to wrestle with the issue of what effect his blog might be having on the health of Floyd. He summarizes the admonishments from his readers: “Fred, if you keep writing about Floyd and its charms, it won’t be long before it grows to become a place not like the one you photograph and write about.” First is at a loss to know how to know how to respond, and he confesses, “Frankly, it is a conundrum from which I don’t know how to escape.” It seems that following the original call of blogging has betrayed him:

Write from the heart. Write what you know. Write every day.” This is the discipline and mission that launched this blog three years ago. Short of moving to some seedy part of a large and very ugly metropolis, if I write what I know and describe and photograph what I see every day, then I seem doomed to save the village by destroying it. (“[Blog it](#)”)

Writers naturally represent the places they love, and though they may also speak of those fragile aspects of the place they need to protect, they cannot keep readers' curiosity from being peaked or from them wanting to visit. But in the end, "the writer who cared so much and wrote so passionately and often for his special forest or unique genus of prairie grass has been the cause of the very problem he set out to prevent." He wonders aloud to his audience if other bloggers have experienced this conundrum and if so, what they have done to deal with it.

He acknowledges that for those who come looking for information on Floyd County, his blog is likely to be the first one they encounter. However, he claims that this visibility did not create the impulse to find out about Floyd. Instead, it might confirm someone's intent to further investigate and even visit Floyd. But First insists his blog "doesn't actively encourage businesses to relocate here or strip malls to mushroom on the streets of town—as some of my doomsaying advisors warn." In fact, he asserts that he frequently expresses his concern about the threats to Floyd County by unplanned development and he is well aware that the place as they know it will be destroyed unless they take measures to curb the pace of growth. First admits that he "may have passively become somewhat of an ambassador for Floyd, as are other Floyd County bloggers," but he wants to be clear that none of us is actively trying to "sell" Floyd County. At most, blogs "may indirectly provide the kind of information about living here that you don't get from a Chamber of Commerce or Parkway brochure."

As Floyd County bloggers, we do have a responsibility to show both sides of living in a very rural, isolated and slow-moving Appalachian county. But if we

write what we know, we can hardly avoid adding Google hits for the word Floyd.

Our words and images do not have advertisement at their root. They may,

however, have it as their fruit. And herein lies the rub. (“[Blog it](#)”)

Blogging about place may provide a mechanism for paying attention to place and sharing one’s sense of place with other, but putting place into the network, whatever one’s intentions, provides means for it to circulate in ways that one cannot always control.

Karen gently insists in her comment that blogging about place can never be an neutral act:

Back to the basics of physics. Something observed is different from the same thing prior to observation...just observing changes the thing.

Never mind writing about it. Or advertising it. Or inviting others to come and share.

Yes, there is responsibility in what we write, but it is at our own peril if we attempt to fly in the face of the laws of physics.

And no, remarking the dew on the lily is not, not, not the same as inviting the hordes to come and pick it. ([Karen](#))

Others argue that those who read First’s blog and might be influenced are a self-selecting bunch. As Carl puts it,

I think that those who read your blog will come for what you write about and will not be of the ruinous ridge raider variety. In fact, they could conceivably do more good than harm as they perhaps build in harmony with the land as opposed to those who come for other reasons... (“[I Think](#)”)

Similarly, Chris Corrigan testifies that his blog has in fact influenced others to move to Bowen Island, but he does not see this as a bad thing:

I can't even tell you how many people have told me that Bowen Island Journal was the thing that made them move here. It must be a half dozen or so now. Thing is that I like them all, and they have all made excellent contributions to island life. So maybe it's not a bad thing—if our readers are joining us, it bodes well. (“[I can't even](#)”)

[Cindy Lee](#) comments that while First's blog did not convince her to move to Floyd, it did provide her valuable local knowledge that informs the way she now inhabits the place:

I find your blog very informative. I planned on moving to Floyd well before I found your blog, I had all ready bought the property, but before visiting your blog I did not know about the ecology of the area. I did not know that Floyd was set on a plateau and that water was at such a premium. Walking and driving through the county water seems so abundant. I did not know that water does not flow into the county and what comes from the sky is about all there is. Because of what I have learned from your blog I am rethinking the type of septic system I plan to install. I want to be as water friendly as I can. Although my house will sit on a hill side I have no intentions of taking the top off of it so I can have a 360 degree panoramic view. People are going to move to the area you give some of us something to think about and an incentive to change as little as we can. Keep up the good writing! ([Cindy Lee](#))

Jim takes issues with the notion of a place blogger having any responsibilities to represent his or her place in particular ways, absolving First of the guilt the guilt he might feel:

I disagree that you or anyone else has a “responsibility” to write about Floyd.

Maybe you can clarify? I like the fact that you like Floyd, and that I can read your log and stay in touch with my memories of Floyd; however, the saying, “Hell is other people” is too true. My guess is that employment and wages are the main drivers of population growth and NOT blogs, so Floyd has little to fear. ([Jim](#))

And Clarence suggests that its possible to overstate the effect that blogs have on the visibility or desirability of places: “Here’s what you really need to worry about...Should Oprah Winfrey ever decide to do a show about Floyd...talk about unwanted attention” ([Clarence](#)). He suggests that while the potential for drawing attention to Floyd is certainly there simply because its in the network, the vast nature of the web makes it unlikely that it will gain an inordinate amount of visibility.

The Desire for Place

An October 11, 2005 post titled “[Blog as Beacon: Anyone?](#)” First writes what appear to be his final thoughts on the ongoing discussion of the effect his blog might be having on Floyd. First confesses that he has been distracted from his normal blogging practice by the grind of preparing to teach his class at a nearby college and by world events that have been weighing on him. He feels like he has not been grounded in the observation of his immediate surround that has characterized much of his blogging over

the years, and he thanks his readers for bearing with him through the rhythms of his writing:

I'm far away from the place I live now, even though it is just outside my window—far from the creeks, from the changing season, from the feel of the air and sound of morning. I am temporarily disconnected from my roots in the visual, the sensory, the details of



the very here, very now. And

Image 13: Fred First (“[October Barn](#)”)

since this blog has pretty much been all along a blog about place, it is not altogether the same voice, the same feel, or the original ‘brand’ of blog it has mostly always been. You understand: if one writes from the heart, and writes what he knows, if he writes open and honest, the patterns will change. And change back, ebb and flow, for richer or for poorer. And so it goes. Thanks all, for your tolerant sharing in this fragmented life.

He acknowledges that his need to write about place is now tied to the responsibility he feels to his audience, to the readers and commenters who have invested their attention in his blog over the years.

He reflects back on the why we began his blog and how his originary impulse was find an audience of any likeminded readers, wherever they might be:

Three plus years ago in a galaxy far, far away, I turned on a virtual beacon signal from a remote place—not quite a desert island, but in those days, I felt almost that isolated from the rest of the world here on the edge of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The signal went out every day, in the mornings, usually: Hello, anyone. If you’ll read what I write, I’ll tell you who and where I am. Where, mostly. I’m hoping to find kindred souls, and particularly those who live near me or who share some of my love of the place most of you have never heard of. It’s called Floyd, Virginia. These are fragments of daily life from this desert place in my life, this far-away beautiful place in the planet’s geography. Please acknowledge. Anyone? (“[Blog as Beacon](#)”)

Many people did respond and in this particular post his commenters are eager to reassure him that they continue to value his blogging, particularly those who live far away in urban areas and see his blog as a way to connect with the rural life that they long for. Cowtown Pattie expresses her appreciation for the effect First’s writing has on her: “We, your readers, are the ones owing the thanks. There is such a sense of peace, of calm that flows through your writings. When I need to take a break, I head to my virtual Floyd home. I hope not to be a messy houseguest. Thanks for leaving the lights on” ([Cowtown Pattie](#)). Kenju, like several others, professes to be daily reader of *Fragments from Floyd* “for the sense of calm and serenity and wonder you provide, along with a reverence for nature that I find inspiring” and he implores First to keep blogging: “Please don’t quit; we will bear with you when you don’t have the time” ([Kenju](#)). Kathy praises the quality of First’s writing on whatever topic he chooses, but she hopes that First will continue to

write about his locale: “I do hope, however, that the ‘world just outside your window’ will get your attention every few days at least, so we can enjoy nature with you, and be refreshed” ([Kathy](#)).

Other commenters read First’s blog because it taps into their unfulfilled desires for the pastoral life he represents. For M. Lawless, First’s blog is a way to reconnect with a rural past that he longs for from their current state of urban exile:

We’re far from homes—prisoners of our livelihood. We’re from Piper’s Gap, Buffalo Ridge, Meadows of Dan, Mouth of Wilson. We’re from Stuart, Hillsville, Willis...and Floyd. We’ve been homesick for decades. Some of us will get back home when we can.

We know you’re busy, but we need a favor. Don’t stop opening that window to the world we left. Forget about the “current and dreaded events” for a moment. Take a good look, a deep breath and a good listen. Don’t write about it if you don’t have the time—you will sooner or later. We’re so tired of the collective. We need to read what’s on the mind of one gentle soul who lives in the gentle place that was our home. We’ll find your beacon.

You are VERY much appreciated. Thank you for everything. ([M Lawless](#))

From Anne’s vantage point in Los Angeles, First’s blog is an escape from what she experiences as the stress and banality of urban life:

You are coming through loud and clear; your signal is being heard far and wide in this US of A. From way down South in LA, I read your words every night, after the busyness, the everyday mundaneness, or sometimes the frustration of a day. I

read, I think, I imagine visuals to expand your photos, and just plain relish the idea of life in your quiet, serene, lushly landscaped part of Virginia.

From a small city subdivision of cookie cutter homes, lined up like dominos on a board, I dream of living on the side of a mountain, or deep in a valley, somewhere in the western N.C. mountains, or in Virginia. You give each and every one of us many gifts from the heart.....your time, your thoughts, your view of the world outside of your window and your view of what's happening in the grand scheme of this wide world, our planet. If you will keep on sending out the beacon, we will keep on receiving. That's a promise. ([Anne](#))

These responses to First's post indicate the relevance of what Terry Gifford calls the "discourse of retreat" typical of pastoralism, which in its simplest form reflects an desire to "escape the complexities of the city" (46)(Gifford)

In a 2006 interview with Rebecca Blood, First describes how his audiences needs for writing has felt constraining as well as enabling:

My blog became "branded" in its first year as a quiet place free from discord, a refuge of sorts when so many blogger voices of the day were brash and strident. Should I veer from this quiet center—as recent politics and environmental and public health issues have demanded I do—I am scolded by readers to "not disappoint" in the words of one commenter. And I feel compelled to change as world events change, and at the same time, to hold firm to my commitment to wonder, reflection and an eye to detail too often missed when we become angry or fearful of things beyond our control. ("[Bloggers on Blogging](#)")

First quotes a comment on a February 14, 2003 post in which he urges his readers to read a speech Senator Robert Byrd of West Virginia in opposition to the impending war in Iraq:

Fred, I have enjoyed your fine articles about life in Floyd...but you will lose me with political discussions, especially if the ideology is the same as Sen Byrd.

Please don't disappoint... (["Bloggers on Blogging"](#))

While the audience of geographically distant readers has sustained and encouraged First's his attention to place, it can also be a inhibiting force insofar as the pastoral mode can demand certain political compromises in order to satisfy the desires of readers. In this dynamic, distant readers agree to allocate their attention to First under the condition he present a rural idyll that allows them to temporarily forget the realities of their actually urban or suburban settings.

Putting place into the network, then, can create flows of desire and attention that authors cannot entirely anticipate or control. In the end, First acknowledges how important his audience has been in motivating him to keep writing about place, but he resists being held responsible for their relationships with place, whether with theirs or his. His approach is one of generous hospitality: the beacon he sent out over the network has created a host of new relationships both in Floyd County and beyond, and First wants all of them to feel welcome:

Bloggers have said hello who never heard of Floyd and will never come here but feel they know this place, even the family dog, through this journal. Bloggers have come here, met me in town and had coffee or shared a meal with me, some even spent the nights here. Bloggers have found ties to families and land in Floyd

they rarely see now, living across the country or the world. They check in from time to time to see that life goes on here in these gentle mountains, come to watch the seasons change. And bloggers have moved here, not because of this journal, but reinforced perhaps by the images and stories, knowing with greater certainty that this is, indeed, a place where they will fit in. There have been so many unpredictable encounters and friendships and opportunities that have come because real people have heard the ping of the daily beacon. I am here. Join me. ([“Blog as Beacon”](#))

First is willing to concede his influence on some who have moved to Floyd, not as a direct cause but as a confirmation for impressions they already had. In the end, he asserts the position of host and distances himself from the notion of being a real estate agent he jokingly entertained earlier: “Good to ‘meet’ you all, and I appreciate your participation in the smallish community of those who know and love this part of southwest Virginia along with me” ([“Blog as Beacon”](#)).

Reasons to be Proud

In a April 20th, 2008 post [“Reasons to be Proud: Our Town,”](#) First observes from a distance of two years that the concerns voiced in this discussion thread are being addressed in part through the town’s practice of “adaptive re-use” in which older downtown buildings are renovated as an alternative to big box stores and strip malls. He is glad to report that “the old has become new—without abandoning the comfortable scale and pace of the old—is a noteworthy—and newsworthy—feature of today’s downtown Floyd. Small is beautiful. Other towns are noticing how this growing phase is

shaping up..." First still harbors some fear that these very successes could end up attracting more population growth and development than they want. He wonders, "In all this make-over, can prosperity happen without becoming the Midas touch?" and he acknowledges that Floyd must continue to plan carefully to avoid the fate of other small towns that now "lay buried somewhere in the sprawl, gobbled up by the smothering suburbs created by loving a place to death." Despite these concerns, First is cautiously optimistic:

That there is a risk of this happening in Floyd is certain. But contrary to the county seal, there are many who believe that we do not need not grow in the all-too-common big-box ways of small towns these days to prosper. But finding that balance between what we get and what we give away is necessarily at the center of all the discussions I've been involved with.

There is a large measure of caution here, of measuring twice before cutting once. And so far, the balancing act seems to be keeping Floyd on its feet, and only occasionally do you have to sit through more than one light change at the single traffic light in town. (["Reasons"](#))

First returns to this topic that began several years earlier with an update, and in doing so shows importance of the discussion that happened in his comments. Though First's early audience mostly came from around the world and he did not write primarily for an audience of local readers, the discussion that occurred in his comments over the course of several blog posts suggest an evolution in audience was underway. In fact, it is the dialogue of voices from around the country with locals from down the road that enabled

First to become more aware of the how is blogging might related to the local issues affecting Floyd County.

In the fall of 2008, much of First's blogging looks similar to the blogging he was doing six years ago. On November 21, he marks the change of seasons by photographing the first occurrence of ice: "The margins of the creek are just beginning to crust over with ice. Some of the ponds between home and work are showing a thin glaze of ice in patches on the surface" ("[Iceman](#)"). On Nov. 25th, he describes a visit to farm in nearby Grayson:

Getting out of the car at the home we were visiting, I was struck by the radiant light from the two tractors waiting patiently in the monochrome barn. They seemed almost alive, animated cartoon machinery granting a splash of otherworldly color on the grayest of early winter days. ("[Visiting](#)")



Image 14: Fred First ("[The Iceman Cometh](#)"; "[Visiting the Neighbors](#)").

On other days, though, he sounds like Simon St. Laurent or Lisa Williams, as when he describes his recent attendance at a community meeting to discuss spraying near power lines along a tributary of Back Creek in western Roanoke County. On November 17, he posts the details of a meeting to take place later that week at the county administrative

building, and then on Thursday after the meeting he offers to write up his notes from the digital recording he has made.

Moreover, the writing that began in his blog has spilled out into other media and settings. In April 2006, First published *Slow Road Home: A Blue Ridge Book of Days*, an edited and expanded collection of blog posts from his first few years of *Fragments of Floyd*, and a second collection is due to be published in 2009. He has also become a regular essayist on Roanoke's NPR station, he writes a regular column, *A Road Less Traveled*, in the Floyd Press, and he periodically presents a photo-memoir of photographs, music, and spoken work to live audiences around the area.

While First's place blogging began in the essayistic mode of the *Ecotone* group, he gradually adopts many traits of the journalistic style as he writes with increasing frequency both about his place and for those in that place. First refused to choose between either mode, however, and he provides useful examples of someone who is not afraid to use all means at his disposal to connect with place, drawing on a variety of genres, both online and print, as well as a variety of audiences, both local and distant. In First's approach to blogging, both neighbors and visitors have place in his circle of friends, and though the complexities of network locality can often make it challenging to situate everyone comfortably in one place, he manages to make everyone feel welcome.

Epilogue

Place bloggers acknowledge that in an attention economy saturated by networked communication technologies, we have to take seriously the role our online practices play in constructing place, both individually and collectively. In *Placemaking: The Art and Practice of Building Communities*, architects Lynda Schneekloth and Robert Shibley assert that “to decide to be someplace as members of a community demands that we become active placemakers again, that we participate with others in our communities in thoughtful, careful responsible action” (18). The term “place-making” reminds us that not only are we shaped by place but we are actively contributing the place as an ongoing event, as Kalay and Marx note in their essay “[Architecture and the Internet](#)”:

Places are the product of human intervention: they have to be created, through practice and appropriation, and made to fit into the culture of society. Place-making is the conscious process of arranging or appropriating objects and spaces to create an environment that supports desired activities, while conveying the social and cultural conceptions of the actors and their wider communities.

Traditionally, place-making has been the work of design professionals like architects, planners, and others in related environmental design fields. While these professionals may be able to design the physical aspects of spaces, they have less control over what people do in spaces or how people think or feel about them. If placemaking is a “process of creating conditions that afford, or encourage, the emergence of a particular sense of place,” then forms of network locality like place blogging have a role to play in the ongoing process of making places ([Kalay and Marx](#)). In particular, place bloggers are

concerned with the ways attention is managed and exchanged as it travels between places and flows, and their blogging practice aims to increase the amount of it that stays local.

It is no accident that place blogging emerges just as one era of attention is giving way to another. As Linda Stone describes it, in the last two decades we have increasingly adapted to a condition of “continuous partial attention” in which we have become accustomed to the feeling of low-grade crisis. But “this 24/7 thing isn’t feeling so good and more and more people want to feel better” and desires for new ways to manage attention have been growing. Rather than the mantra “connect, connect, connect,” we want to protect our selves from the potentially limitless demands of the network and more carefully filter our interactions than we may have in the past. We want a deeper sense of belonging with more manageable “networks of interconnected communities” rather than with the “me and the rest of the world” network we’ve been trying to maintain. And we want to spend more energy in deliberately “discerning opportunity” rather than constantly “scanning for opportunity,” asking ourselves “what do we REALLY need and want to pay attention to?” As Stone puts it, “We have gone from asking what do I have to gain to asking what do I have to lose?” Since “attention IS our scarcest and most valuable resource,” what “we do with our attention defines us” (“[Attention](#)”).

The effort to construct local economies of attention is a response to what Ulises Mejias describes as the ethical challenge of network locality: “to assume responsibility for how we use and apply technologies, find ways to contextualize online experiences as part of the same (not a separate) reality, and develop a normative model to assess the appropriateness of our actions as they extend across both the online and physical realms”

(“[Re-approaching](#)”). As architect Malcolm McCullough argues, the need to design better relationships between places and flows only increases as digital technologies become more pervasive:

Life takes place. Our accumulated experience of intentional setting means a great deal to us, both as individuals and as societies. Design practices that foster this experience never go out of style. Perception of place may be subjective and fleeting, but grounding life in effective contexts remains absolutely necessary. As place bloggers have demonstrated, grounding identity does not mean that sense of “context” we construct will be simple or unitary, a view McCullough shares:

Resorting to nostalgia hardly helps in doing this, however; there is little to be gained from understanding place mainly as something lost. At least to the more mobile and networked of us, place has become less about our origins on some singular piece of blood soil, and more about forming connections with the many site of our lives. We belong to several places and communities, partially by degree, and in ways that are mediated. (171)

Place bloggers have done their part to craft structures of attention to help foster a deeper sense of place without denying how complicated our experiences of both places and networks can be.

Network locality requires that we view networked experience as of one piece with the rest of our lives and that we understand both the benefits and limitations of allowing the network to mediate our sense of place. Eric Gordon and Gene Koo describes network locality as the “the ligament that connects the space of flows and the space of places,” a

metaphor that suggests the tension inherent in trying to maintain singular view of our lives in place and our lives online when these are often figured as two alternate realities (7). But this place can also be dynamic site of creativity and invention, as the *Ecotone* community suggests in explaining their choice of a name:

Why *Ecotone*? An *Ecotone* is a term from the field of ecology. It is a place where landscapes meet—like field with forest, or grassland with desert. The *Ecotone* is an area of increased richness and diversity where the two communities commingle. Here too are creatures unique to the *Ecotone* ... the so-called “edge effect.” Here in our online version of an *Ecotone*, we hope to create an edge effect, bringing distinct and different places and communities together to enrich our world. We hope you enjoy your visit, and add your own bit of diversity to the site. ([*Ecotone*](#))

The *Ecotone* metaphor suggests a particular relationship between real and virtual, blogs as rhetorical places where genre ecosystems mix and merge. Indeed, place blogs might best be viewed as generic ecotones where an ecosystem of traditional place-based genres overlaps with a new ecosystem of digital genres to create a rich discursive environment where inhabitants adapt and take root. While new media might appear to work as a disembedding mechanism that attenuates social relationship across space and time, place bloggers attempt to construct place blogging as a tool for re-inhabitation, a rich “edge effect” created out of the blurring of real and virtual.

In January 2005, the *Ecotone* wiki effectively came to an end. Wiki spam was blamed for the community's disbanding after two years of collective blogging about place, but it may simply have reached the end of its natural lifespan, as seen with innumerable other online communities. Meanwhile, the journalistic strain of place blogging of Lisa Williams and Simon St. Laurent seems to have continued on where the *Ecotone* community left off; judging by the ongoing growth of *placeblogger.com*, place blogs that write about place for a local audience seems to be thriving. Are we to conclude that journalistic strains of place blogging have won out in the evolutionary development of the form and essayistic place blogging is now fading away? Where is place blogging going from here? I would argue that essayistic and journalist place blogging represent different but complementary approaches to negotiating the nuanced relationship between author, audience, and place in the network. Together they offer a range of strategies for both expressing the subjective experience of place and for sharing local knowledge in a particular geographic community.

Essayistic place blogging tends to take advantage of the affordances of the network to foster a wider audience of geographically distant readers, and it draws motivation from describing their local places for people who live elsewhere. Essayistic place bloggers are willing to allocate portions of their attention to distant places in order to benefit from the de-familiarizing effect that writing for non-local readers can offer. Ultimately, however, their goal is not simply to travel to other place through blogging; rather, they hope their networked interactions will help encourage each other to pay closer attention to their own individual places. Journalistic place bloggers, by contrast,

deliberately gear their blogging toward readers who live in the same place. While essayistic place bloggers focus more on fostering a deeper sense of self, journalistic place bloggers put greater emphasis on creating local knowledge that will benefit others who live in the same place. They experience less pull to zoom out from their local places as the overlap between where they write and where their audience is keeps both blogger and readers focused on the same place.

However, the attentional zoom for journalistic place bloggers is not quite as easy to calibrate as it first may appear. Stephen Johnson has used the term the “pothole paradox” to describe the challenge hyperlocal bloggers face in creating interest for networked audiences when even slight changes in readers’ location can shift their relationship to the blogger’s content. As Johnson describes it, news that a particularly nasty pothole on your street has been fixed would be important and interesting information to you and your immediate neighbors, but it could seem irrelevant to someone a few blocks away. According to Johnson, local happenings like “the delicious Indian place that at long last opens up in your neighborhood; the creepy science teacher who finally retires at the local public school; the come-from-behind victory staged by the middle-school lacrosse team” could all be meaningful events to those who live near each other, but will be “mind-numbingly dull if they’re one county over—much less on another coast” (“[The Pothole](#)”).

But place bloggers demonstrate that “mind-numbingly dull” is a largely a product of how place is conceptualized and audience is constructed. Essayistic place blogging tends to frame place in a way that those who live elsewhere might also find interesting.

For example, they might reflect on the broader human significance of potholes, by weaving this particular experience of potholes together with the memory of traveling in Italy as a youth or by making a connection between local potholes and world-political events like the war in Iraq. This representation of potholes travels differently in the network because it tends to be oriented toward communities of interest, those who share an interest in place more generally or family and friends wanting to keep in touch with the blogger in particular. Clearly, not every incidence of potholes warrants the kind of reflection characteristic of essayistic place blogging, where more time and energy is devoted to describing individual bloggers' sense of place and putting it in context for those not intimately familiar with the blogger's locale. Other subject matter will only be meaningful because it is timely information that can be acted on locally and that might affect the health of one's shared community.

By constructing audiences made up of both people who share our locations and those who do not, we create possibilities for exploring the complex connections that make up our placeworlds in the digital age. We still live much of our lives in fairly limited local areas, but we maintain relationships with people around the world and our places themselves are shaped in material ways by globalized forces that originate well beyond our locales. Without a local audience, place blogging is limited by the constraints of networked individualism; without an audience beyond the local, place blogging loses the potential to keep us aware of our shared human experience of place and the connections between places around the world. Place blogging still can work with one

approach or the other alone, but I would argue that it reaches its full potential when it creates audience of both physical proximate and distanced readers.

Mitchell Thomashow argues that cultivating a complex understanding of place, one that takes into account forces of globalization and macro-level environmental issues like global climate change, requires us to modulate our perceptual pace. On one hand, it is challenging to foster a deep sense of place if we only encounter places at the speed of a car or a broadband connection rather than at the pace of walking or biking. On the other hand, he also acknowledges the important knowledge that can be gained both from observing the world from a car window and while at a desk surfing the web (156). What is important is knowing how to recognize the particular affordance of each observational mode, and how to thoughtfully modulate one's perceptual pace.

While the web was first imagined as the “information superhighway,” place bloggers are interested in cultivating web-based forms of mediation that function more like information *walkways*, rhetorical practices that encourage us shift perceptual gears in order encounter our world at scales we might otherwise miss. In this sense, using place blogging to foster a local economy of attention empowers users to more thoughtfully and ethically move between the local and the global in how we monitor the health of our local communities and develop a deeper sense of place.

It would appear that place blogging may have a kindred spirit in what has been called the “slow blogging” movement. A play on the name of the “slow food” movement, the term has been around since Barbara Ganley first defined it in 2006 and Todd Sieling posted a “A Slow Blog Manifesto” to articulate some tenets of the approach, but it has

resurfaced at the time I write this, with a November 2008 article in the *New York Times* titled “Haste, Scorned: Blogging at a Snail’s Pace” as well as numerous blog posts discussing the idea (Ganley, “[Slow](#)”; [Sieling](#); [Otterman](#); [Perlmutter](#)). This comes just after seminal blogger Andrew Sullivan penned an essay “Why I blog” in which he emphasizes immediacy as one of the defining traits of blogging: “It is the spontaneous expression of instant thought. As a blogger, you have to express yourself now, while your emotions roil, while your temper flares, while your humor lasts” ([Sullivan](#)). Slow blogging asserts an alternative to the compulsive immediacy that characterizes political blogs like Sullivan’s and offers voice to those frustrated with the frenetic pace that blogging has appeared to require of its users. Even A-list bloggers have shuttered their blogs after burning out, unable to handle the demands of audiences who expect constant posting. Social media scholar danah boyd observes a trend toward less frequent posting among many bloggers, and points to “micro-blogging” applications like Twitter as the emerging tools of choice for those needing a faster mechanism for posting (qtd. in [Otterman](#)). Compared to Twitter, blogging already feels slower, making it easier for slow bloggers to frame blogging as an antidote to information overload rather than a part of the ailment.

Barbara Ganley’s slogan for slow blogging is “blog to reflect, tweet to connect” and in her practice, blogging is meditative in nature, what she describes as “that slow place” (qtd. in [Otterman](#)). The photo used in the *New York Times* article has with her laptop next to a pond, suggesting that “place” is not just a metaphor for blogging but an important part of her practice of slow blogging itself.



Image 15: Caleb Kenna for *The New York Times* (Otterman, “[Haste, Scorned: Blogging at a Snail’s Pace](#)”).

Since she left her job as a writing instructor at Middlebury College earlier this year, she describes having more time for taking daily walks around her Vermont environs “in a slow-blogging kind of way”:

I am lucky to live in a place as beautiful as this—from my door every day I walk for miles across the farmlands. An 18-mile loop trail crosses our neighbor’s land, but mostly I prefer to range pathless with dog and camera across fields and scrublands (“[Walking](#)”; “[Thoughts](#)”).

Like Fred First or Lorianne DiSabato, she explores with camera in hand and returns to weave her photos and reflections together into essayistic meditations. Since leaving her job, she has also started a non-profit designed to create what she calls “Centers for Community Digital Exploration” in rural communities around the country, centers she describes as a new kind of “third place” meant “to help ease the digital divide, and to help

people reap the benefits of the internet and web practices while also staying connected to our lived-in communities lest they crumble around us while we're glued to our computers and cellphones and iPods." Her vision is to fuse online education with place-based education—"Simultaneously. Together. In tension," as she puts it—a vision of network locality where people can gather physically and online (["Thoughts"](#)).

It is not difficult imagining Ganley and First having a good deal in common were they to cross paths either in the blogosphere or at in person. Instead of asking Twitter's question "What are you doing now?" they are keenly interested in asking the question "Where are you now?" And instead of answering it at the pace of micro-blogging or of the average cell-phone user, it does so in blog entries posted at a relatively slower pace, typically over the span of days rather than minutes. While they both appreciate the power of the internet's "long zoom," they tend to prefer the "long take," to borrow a cinematic term, as a disciplined way of seeing that keeps attention focused on place longer than is typical or even comfortable ([Arti](#)). Place bloggers and the slow blogging movement together remind us that our relationship to blogging, as with any technology, is not deterministic. While technologies come with affordances and conventions that shape what we do with them, we also have agency as users—we can create the tools even as we take advantages of the benefits they offer.

I am reminded of an entry First posted after his discovery that someone had dumped a 55 gallon drum of waste oil into Goose Creek, which runs through his

property, at the same time that was battling spam attacks on his blog. He concludes his post with this reflection:

There is no way to catch this slug of a human who did this. I would be perfectly willing to accept that this same person left Goose Creek and went back home to their regular job: propagating weblog comment spam. There are facets of human nature with which I am



Image 16: Fred First (“[Sludge, Up Close and Personal](#)”).

thankfully not often in contact—while some of the prisoners in Iraq have become quite familiar with them, I fear. God help us overcome the varied ways we find to reap pollution, corruption and hatred on the earth and each other. (“[Sludge](#)”)

Here we see a place blogger who ultimately is not interested in creating online communities as a way of compensating for the loss of actual communities and environments. In this post, First weaves together his observations of his backyard, the political situation in Iraq, and the affects of spam on online communities. First can imagine that similar flaws in human nature might motivate a person to commit both comment spam and environmental crime, and while he knows that the oil in his creek has different material affects than the spam affecting his blogging software, he frames them in a way that reflects the experience of network locality, as we have been discussing it in this study. For First and other place bloggers, place blogging continues to be a genre

well-suited to connect these varieties of “place” and to explore the complexities of their experiences over time as they pay attention to where they are, both in their back yards and in the network.

Appendix: *Ecotone* Bi-Weekly Topics

Date Range

June 15, 2003-November 15, 2004

Basic Statistics

Topics: 34

Unique bloggers: 55

Total number of posts to bi-weekly topics: 312

Average posts per topic: 9

20 Most Frequent Contributors (# of posts)

Feathers of Hope (Numenius)	26
Feathers of Hope (Pica)	24
P.	22
Alembic	21
Fragments from Floyd	18
Hoarded Ordinaries	16
cassandra pages	16
London and the North	14
Via Negativa	12
Laughing Knees	11
Mulubinba Moments	11
Bowen Island Journal	8
under the fire star	8
Switched At Birth	8
Notes from an Eclectic Mind	6
Other Wind	5

prairie point	5
ODonnellWeb	4
Field Notes	4
Pax Nortona	4

77% of posts were contributed by the 20 most frequent bloggers

50% of posts were contributed by the 8 most frequent bloggers

Other Contributors (# of posts)

Beginners Mind	4
bird on the moon	3
travelertrish	3
g r a p e z	3
ChickenLil	3
Creek Running North	2
Cirrus	2
Coffee Sutras, The	2
Bowen...Bowen...Bon	2
Panchromatica	2
older and growing	2
Middlewesterner, The	2
Brain Crayons	1
Northwest Notes	1
iDEATH	1
Guild of Ghostwriters	1
Chatterbox, The	1
OnePotMeal	1
Geek Icon—And, Wendy, There Are	1
frizzyLogic (qB)	1

Lifescapes	1
Flyleaf	1
First-n-Main	1
Punctilious	1
Pure Land Mountain	1
rubysuz	1
Slow Reads	1
ever so humble	1
D’log	1
Conscientious	1
unganisha.org	1
Concrete, Steel and Stone	1
WhereProject, The	1
World of Pure Imagination	1
WriteOutLoud	1

Notes

ⁱ For internet-related terms such as “the web” or “email,” I have adopted the conventions of *Wired Style*.

ⁱⁱ According such books as *Country of Exiles: The Destruction of Place in American Life* (1999) and James Jasper, *Restless Nation: Starting Over in America* (2000), we are a culture that has worshiped mobility from its inception and the economic changes of the last half-century have allowed us to act on these originary impulses to an exaggerated degree. We now suffer from an epidemic of mobility and an imaginative deficiency that makes it difficult to realize the costs of mobility. What is more, even when we do settle down, the kinds of places that the majority of Americans now inhabit—the suburbs—tend to further discourage a deep sense of belonging, asserted by jeremiads against sprawl such as James Howard Kunstler’s *The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America’s Man-Made Landscape* would argue.

ⁱⁱⁱ This cultural shift has been in the works for some time and can be traced to numerous communication and technological developments, but the emergence of the internet has offered a perfect tool for growing information exponentially. Kevin Kelly describes the internet as a copy machine that “copies every action, every character, every thought we make while we ride upon it.” This copying process is so efficient once something is put into the internet, “it will continue to flow through the network forever, much like electricity in a superconductive wire.” Our economy now also rides on this “super-

distribution system” which has forced some momentous shifts in the way we think about the value of information. Kelly states it simply: “When copies are super abundant, they become worthless. When copies are super abundant, stuff which can't be copied becomes scarce and valuable.” For this reason, “money in this networked economy does not follow the path of the copies. Rather it follows the path of attention, and attention has its own circuits” ([Kelly](#)).

^{iv} As Jones argues, “all interpersonal communication is based on attention: getting attention and ‘paying attention.’ Not only is attention organized around behavior, but behavior is organized around attention” (152). Likewise, Charles Derber claims that “without attention being exchanged and distributed, there is no social life. A unique social resources, attention is created anew in each encounter and allocated in ways deeply affecting human interactions” (2). Jones points out that most studies of attention have focused on it as set of individual “cognitive mechanisms” such as “ alertness, orientation, detection, facilitation, and inhibition.” However, in social settings, “attention is not just an individual cognitive process, but also a kind of commodity that interlocutors trade in interactions.” Jones argues that we need to view attention as being made up of two facets, the “cognitive attention system” in which individuals “mentally distribute their attention across various activities they are involved in” and the “social attention system” in which participants “display attention and ... interpret displays of attention by others” (153).

^v A blog carnival is “a blog-post that contains links to posts on other blogs.” See Bora Zivkovic’s “[Blog Carnivals and the Future of Journalism](#)” for more description.

^{vi} When the full names of bloggers are unknown, I will simply reference their first names or screen names.

^{vii} In a study of blogs content collected from March through May 2003, the period when the *Ecotone* period is forming, shows that personal blogs were statistically more common (70%) and were more likely to be authored by women. Herring et al. argue that “by privileging filter blogs and thereby implicitly evaluating the activities of adult males as more interesting, important and/or newsworthy than those of other blog authors, public discourses about weblogs marginalize the activities of women and teen bloggers, thereby indirectly reproducing societal sexism and ageism, and misrepresenting the fundamental nature of the weblog phenomenon” (Herring, “[Women](#)”).

^{viii} Stilgoe’s book can be seen as one of a group of books that were designed as guidebooks for exploring ordinary places: Grady Clay’s *Close Up: How to Read the American City* and *Real Places: An Unconventional Guide to America’s Generic Landscape*. Farbstein, and Kantrowitz’s *People in Places: Experiencing, Using, and Changing the Built Environment*, Tony Hiss’s *The Experience of Place: A completely new way of looking at and dealing with our radically changing cities and countryside*, Morrish and Brown’s, *Planning to Stay: Learning to See the Physical Feature of your Neighborhood*. Witold Rybczynski asserts that Stilgoe has written “a little Baedeker of ordinary America that informs, charms, and saddens, all at the same time.” In *Close Up*, Clay explicitly sees his book as a Baedaker’s guide, a term used to describe his later books, *Real Places*: “Heavily illustrated by maps and photos, Clay’s vivid Baedeker

reveals anew what's oft concealed right-before-our eyes—and what it could become via his dynamic ‘way of seeing.’” On the back cover of *Planning to Stay*, a blurb by Public Art Review shares the travel guide metaphor: “The principles and basic approach can be applied to any vicinity...Think of it as a Baedeker’s Guide to your neighborhood.”

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