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Relational Literacy

W. Kurt Stavenhagen

Abstract: *In this paper, I propose literacy practices that further shift us from subject-object dichotomies and exclusive language practices to a focus on relationships and multimodality. Based in large part upon Indigenous Scholar Shawn Wilson's concept of relationality, I define a relational literacy wherein we counter an undue abstraction of the environment by mapping interspecies relationships and placing them within kinship narratives.*

In his comedy special, *Cinco*, Jim Gaffigan jokes, “Remember 15 years ago when they were like, ‘Stop buying SUVs, everyone. They’re wasteful and bad for the environment. And we were like, ‘Okay (pause). I’d like to buy an SUV.’”

Gaffigan gets at a cultural meme – that abstract prescriptions and knowledge alone don’t trump personal desire. We all know that by 2050 literacy and life will be largely shaped by climate change. Migration of climate refugees will have mushroomed, coastal cities will be compromised if not under water, and we’ll be in a maelstrom of powerful hurricanes, tornadoes, snowstorms, rainstorms, and fires. Tesla SUVs, anyone?

Though a tremendous amount of scholarship on materiality has been recently pursued among rhetorical scholars,¹ a default within textual studies is to critique and theorize systems models without parsing literacies that prompt more direct care for the natural material world. As communications scholar David Maxcy disturbingly implicates, “the human capacity for linguistic communication alienates humans from the material-physical reality of nonhuman nature” (331). In this essay, I consider further the recasting of the entity of environment as a series of relationships between nonhumans and humans as a way to address the disconnection between our lifestyles and concern for the environment, and more pointedly, disconnections between writing instruction and student care for the environment. With what follows, I review some shortcomings of ecocomposition. I then review Deborah Brandt’s call for particularism, Robert Brooke’s idea for “dwelling in place,” and Derek Owens’s definition of place as neighborhood as means to conceptualize and acknowledge the environment in literacy² classrooms. Turning to the work of Michael Salvador, Traceylee Clarke, and Shawn Wilson, I then survey the role nonhumans might play in such a reconceptualization of the environment. To

1. See Kerry Banazek’s “Carpentry in Context: What Does It Look Like to Be an Ethical Materialist Composer?” (2018) for a helpful overview of the field. Also, to limit the scope of this paper I will not address object-oriented ontology.

2. I define literacy as knowledge making practices that promote particular relationships. I draw from Kim Donehower, Charlotte Hogg, and Eileen Schell’s definition of literacies as “the skills and practices needed to gain knowledge, evaluate and interpret that knowledge, and apply knowledge to accomplish particular goals” (4) and Deborah Brandt’s call for “communicative competence” (507).

complement and supersede other approaches to the environment, I propose multimodal³ literacy practices that prompt us to narrate our relationships⁴ with nonhumans and more fully realize our interconnectivity with them.

From Bifurcation to Place and Distributed Agency

In a 2018 article on how specific places serve as premises of writing, Madison Jones provides a succinct and helpful history of ecocomposition. She notes that for over thirty years, compositionists have discussed the study of ecology and writing. Some have focused on its application in first-year courses, others on the locations of writing, while still others have reconceived of rhetoric and systems of composition as ecologies. Challenging the field to situate writing as interactive with a particular place, she pointedly cites David Grant's and Tim Taylor's works for charting two prevalent approaches to the environment: one as treating it as a metaphor, and the other as using it as a subject. Jones helpfully sets up other discussions by pointing out disjunctions between discourse and materiality. According to Jones, the terms environment and ecology often get applied as metaphors or constructs without acknowledgment of specific materiality outside the classroom. Notwithstanding the recent and perhaps corrective uptake of New Materialism⁵, ecology has been often used as a construct for writing with minimal consideration on how textual practices and pedagogy affect nonhumans. Donald A. McAndrew's "Ecofeminism and the Teaching of Literacy" from 1997 serves as a representative example. McAndrew helpfully argues that ecology and feminism belong in the composition classroom together because they vividly reveal the "patriarchal power grab" and exploitation of nature "bound to social processes that oppressed people" (368). He also brings to light the problematic binaries of man versus culture, and mind over women, nature, and the body. Yet in his collapse of these binaries, he only applies ecofeminist insights to composition practices, missing an acknowledgment of ecology beyond humans. De-centered classrooms and readers and writers get "interrelated in an ecology of communication," but surrounding interchange between humans and non-

3. Beyond "linguistic pathways." (See Patricia Dunn's *Talking, Sketching, Moving: Multiple Literacies in the Teaching of Writing*, 2001).

4. See Malea Powell and the Cultural Rhetorics Lab for their definition of knowledge as constellations of relationships, and their tradition of naming the places of writing and conversations in their texts. I define relationships both as subjective realizations and objective realities. The purpose of the literacy of naming human and nonhuman relationships is to move from a separation of ontology and epistemology toward a realization and honoring of relationships, often by experiencing and storifying them.

5. Here I am thinking of its emphasis on distributed agency, ambient rhetoric, and Paul Lynch's push to make the classroom less a place of critique and more one of chronicling and mapping concrete problems. See again Kerry Banazek's recent (2018) helpful overview of the field and proposal for rhetoricians to envision themselves as ethical materialist composers. See also Lynch and Rivers' edited collection *Thinking with Bruno Latour in Rhetoric and Composition* (2015), Thomas Rickert's *Ambient Rhetoric* (2013), and Lynch's article, "Composition's New Thing: Bruno Latour and the Apocalyptic Turn."

humans is not acknowledged. As Grant notes, “environment-as-metaphor” approaches helpfully “posit an ecology of information” but often do so by sacrificing consideration of the natural environment (209).

The problem seems to be rooted in how discourse and the natural environment are conceptualized as dualities. Though much of Sidney Dobrin and Christian Weisser’s work weaves together strands of place as discursive iteration and place as situated locale, as Matthew Ortoleva and David Grant critique, Dobrin and Weisser’s separate semiosphere and biosphere is problematic. In *Natural Discourse*, Dobrin and Weisser foundationally define ecocomposition as the study of relationships between environments (natural, constructed and even imagined places) and discourse (speaking, writing, and thinking) (8). As such, they claim the relationship between discourse and place is dialogic and reciprocal. Furthermore, ecocomposition “foreground[s] the fact that discourse always occurs within particular environments, that these environments are integral to the construction of language and knowledge, and that particular acts of communication have their own nature according to the circumstances and locations that precipitated them” (14). In these instances, Dobrin and Weisser clearly underscore that nature or environment shapes and is shaped by discourse, and that particular locations influence human communications. Yet they further define ecocomposition as drawn “from disciplines that study discourse (chiefly composition, but also including literary studies, communication, cultural studies, linguistics and philosophy)” merged “with work in disciplines that examine the environment (these include ecology, environmental studies, sociobiology and other ‘hard sciences’)” (6). Here and elsewhere in their work, the environment is defined more as a biological entity and domain of science, and discourse estranged from it. Grant critiques similar moves of bifurcation by Dobrin and Weisser as keeping nature “separate from discourse” and theorizing it “mainly as a tool representing external reality” (202). Ortoleva concludes that Dobrin and Weisser’s dual semiosphere and biosphere risks loss:

Ecocomposition is a generative concept and can result in critical practice; however, its broad treatment and bifurcated nature can remove it from the ecological exigence currently affecting all levels of the biosphere, micro and macro. As a result, the focus on the human habitation of the biosphere is lost, as is the connection between the semiosphere and the biosphere originally suggested by Dobrin and Weisser. (69)

As Grant and Ortoleva helpfully delineate, the definitions of the environment as a metaphor or biological entity risk externalizing nature and severing writing and communication from the environment. What are needed are more holistic means to account for humans inhabiting nature and the role and construction of language within an environment. Recommending ecological literacy supersede ecocomposition, Ortoleva further states we need to address “the way language is networked across dimensions of human activity, and also the way these networks of language affect the ecological communities to which we belong.”

He suggests bioregionalism as one way toward developing such ecological literacy. Particularism and bioregionalism offer an initial means past the impasse of considering the environment as metaphor or mass impersonal entity. In an essay collection on the

future of literacy studies in the February 2018 issue of *College Composition and Communication*, Deborah Brandt claims Shirley Brice Heath's ethnographic approach marked a significant turn in literacy scholarship whose adopters continue to refute the idea of the "universality as some sort of new, replacement society that offers abstract socialization into universal abstract discourses" (506). Brooke also critiques mainstream education that often "points elsewhere: to history happening in other parts of the world, to migration as the means of personal advancement in the corporate industrial complex, to an ineffective form of citizenship" (163). Like Brandt, he emphasizes a robust locale of learning that reverberates with global influence but has within it a sense of dwelling in place.

Derek Owens's *Composition and Sustainability: Teaching for a Threatened Generation* defines the environment in ways that complement both Brandt's advised particularism and Brooke's idea of dwelling in place by revising the environment as neighborhoods. Taking up Ellen Cushman's challenge of envisioning rhetoricians as agents for social change, Owens has students question all aspects of their home neighborhoods—social, economic, and environmental—and then explore ways to "make them more livable" (76). In the process, he exposes a false reification of nature as sanctum apart from our daily living⁶ and exposes the false binary between human welfare and the welfare of nonhuman species. Complementing Brooke's idea of dwelling, Owens demarcates nature/environment as more than a scientific domain, metaphor or even a place of social bidding. The environment is considered a place of habitation and desire.

In this sampling, Brandt, Brooke and Owens invite literacy practices that thoughtfully regard human inhabitation. One can sense in the establishment and interrogation of place as neighborhood an engagement with what about a place makes for affect, attachment and commitment. Rather than engage the environment as an abstract entity or metaphor, we engage ourselves and language as resident. This appeal to a sense of "home" within language has much to offer, yet the capture of a more robust sense of place within the literacy classroom is still elusive. Notwithstanding Owens's uptake of place as neighborhoods, as Brandt makes apparent, most colleges are perceived as transient by faculty, students and the public. Unlike Owens's university, many other universities do not draw students from nearby communities. In enacting even parts of Owens's pedagogy, instructors must often contend with the reality that many students have not lived in the university neighborhood long and as such are not deeply tied to places on or around the college campus. As Brandt further notes, universalism still thrives in universities because students are "disconnected from families and home communities" and faculty are often "transplants too" (506). While Brandt, Brooke, and Owens offer ways to invigorate place as more than an abstraction of the environment, mutual material and discursive engagement remains a challenge.

Nominalism as a Root Cause for the Abstraction of Nature

A further answer to this dilemma may lie in examining the methods of our naming of the environment and the occlusion of its inhabitants. In his posthumanist treatise

6. Michael Pollan's book on "second nature" is especially a helpful text to expose this idea with students. See also William Cronon for a full history of how nature was made a park, "free" from the contamination of human influence.

From Nature to Creation, Duke Professor of Theology and Ecology Norman Wirzba argues that John Duns Scotus's rules of naming still inhibit our understanding of the environment. Medieval philosophers John Duns Scotus and William of Ockham propagated nominalism: the claim that the names we give things are independent of the reality they represent. Wirzba contends nominalism superseded a naming of nonhumans based upon experiential understanding.⁷ As he chronicles, naming used to be based on the Latin *sappere*, "having a taste for something in one's mouth." Since the Enlightenment, however, concepts get named more so by human cultural convention rather than by a responsiveness to nonhumans. He shares the example of being handed baby plants and being told one is a flower, another is a weed, and a third is a vegetable. For most, the labels will prompt us to treasure the flower, plant the vegetable, and discard the weed (18). The upshot is that nonhumans get categorized into scientific names and predicated by other names that demarcate their usefulness and value relative to dominant, mercurial human sensibilities. How we label nonhumans predicated our relationship with them and our comprehension of the "environment."

Take the honey bee, for another example. When I was growing up, my Dad, my brother and I had a sideline business wherein we kept 120 hives, and harvested about 5000 pounds of honey per year. I earned an allowance and bought my own hives. I then sold honey harvested from the hives to help pay my way through college. My brother took it even further—he studied apiculture at Ohio State University, and now manages 4000 hives as a commercial beekeeper. Since 2006, in the U.S. we've lost about a third of our honey bees every year, up from previous losses of 15% per year prior, a problem that has greatly affected my brother. The phenomenon that burst on the scene was labeled CCD—short for colony collapse disorder—a mysterious occurrence wherein thousands of bees abscond the hive to leave only a handful of young bees and the queen to subsist and eventually die. In part, my doctoral dissertation addressed the lack of thorough representation of bees in this crisis.

Soon after the crisis erupted in the U.S. in 2007, documentaries and full-length nonfiction books pummeled the point that without honey bees' pollination, we'd lose a third of our food supply. Apocalyptic rhetoric reigned. Rowan Jacobsen ends the first chapter of his nonfiction work *Fruitless Fall: The Collapse of the Honey Bee and the Coming Agricultural Crisis* with this warning: "The losses threatened an ancient way of life, an industry, and one of the foundations of our civilization" (5). The documentary *Silence of the Bees* (Shultz) ends similarly with an emphasis on bees as pollinators: "The future of our food supply rests on the tiny honey bee. . . Scientists warn that the steady decline of pollinators could trigger a crisis bigger and more immediate than global warming." And a key EPA memo, written in the early stages of the crisis, prioritizes bees as pollinators:

7. See also Carol K. Yoon's *Naming Nature: The Clash between Instinct and Science*. Yoon chronicles her amazement at how folk taxonomies around the world, regardless of language or culture, follow a remarkably similar form of order (her naming of it with the German word *umwelt*) and how scientific classification had waged a "two-hundred-year-long battle" against such natural order. Nominalism and scientific classification can both be defined as potent forces occluding nature.

“exposure through contaminated pollen and nectar and potential toxic effects, therefore, remain an uncertainty for pollinators” (“Clothianidin Registration”).

In this discourse, bees become abstract, pluralized functionaries. Labeling them as “pollinators” reduces them to a functional economic input for agribusiness that renders them machines rather than biological entities. In *Network*, Clay Spinuzzi exposes how the consignment of human labor strips agency from people, a point that applies to non-humans too. He states in the construct of generic labor one is “assigned a given task, with no reprogramming capability” (168). Such assignments, according to sociologist Manuel Castells, “presuppose the embodiment of information and knowledge beyond the ability to receive and execute signals” (qtd. in Spinuzzi 168). As such, laborers can be conveniently replaced with machines. What is true for the human is as true for the nonhuman. Just as such a label defines knowledge not as residing in us but getting moved through us, when bees are labeled as pollinators, knowledge is understood as not residing in them but getting moved through them. As forced laborers to act the role of machines, bees get stacked in square boxes, hauled on flatbed trucks, and plunked down in the center of a monocrop desert.

While one could argue that labeling bees as pollinators rhetorically plays to human bias, the point remains: lost in this agribusiness representation is a more full and informative representation of honey bees’ embodied communication. What of their mass genocide, numbering in the billions? What of their individual shaking in pain, falling off of flowers, and absconding from the hive to leave behind “healthy bees” in a last-ditch effort to save it? What of the loss of the brilliance of a superorganism’s mind? What of their resiliency and amazing resistance to dozens of chemicals over the last forty years? Given that language has historically “alienated” humans from the material reality of nature, language scholars have an important role in narrating the emotional experiences we have with nonhumans and identifying names and metaphors as valid approximations of nonhuman communication. “Science cannot tell us about the screaming” (Maxcy 331; 334).

Toward Relational Literacy

In their landmark award-winning article “The Weyekin Principle: Toward an Embodied Critical Rhetoric,” Michael Salvador and Tracey Clarke specifically propose “both a different way of listening to and a different way of speaking about the environment” (245). Based upon their lengthy study with the Nez Perce, Salvador and Clarke advocate we adopt principles from their practice of *weyekin*—a responsive caring for a species of animal or plant who is a manifestation of a virtue. Like Maxcy, they claim humans cannot “socially construct” the world through discourse. Constitutive theories of language denigrate nature as having no value “beyond that assigned through symbols” and instantiate a dualism between humans and nature, and between linguistic and nonlinguistic communication that perpetuates “the subjugation of the nonhuman world” (244). Claiming that both nature and bodies speak, they propose nonhumans be understood through embodied listening and time spent observing and chronicling the “lifeworld” of an animal or plant; that organism’s symbiosis with their watershed, weather, and other flora and fauna. Salvador and Clarke emphasize that in advancing

the *weyekin* principle, the researcher does not ignore critical rhetoric but rather attends to the “corporeal experience of the nonhuman world so as to articulate the symbolic-material tensions obscured by predominant systems of meaning” (248).

This attending to corporeal experience is squarely affective. When I show to students YouTube excerpts of bees falling off of flowers due to pesticide poisoning, things get personal, even confessional. Students express their loneliness and loss for their home pets. One said they felt guilty for missing their cat and asking about them more than their parents (to which others laughed and agreed). Another shared how from years of working at a stable, she observed horses had complex social orders and references to each other. Another almost sheepishly admitted to loving to sit and watch the black squirrels scamper about on campus. These presumed “side point” confessionals brought up cultural scripts of what is deemed acceptable knowledge-making (literacy) about animals in the academy. We discuss U.S. culture and the university culture that make it unin-
tellectual or militant to acknowledge animals, animal suffering, and our affections for them. Many thought it was because we kill so many and we don’t want to admit it; others said we don’t want to admit that we too are animals; still others discussed the duality between the mind and body that makes us uncomfortable with discussing affections; that the academy is the province of rational discourse, and that discussion about animal welfare would mire us in subjectivity. Yet, is there any other way? Ecology is more than a systems theory for writing or an analog for compositional practices, and the environment is more than the domain of science or one more category added to that of gender, race, and class within our field—categories that already suffer from undue separation.⁸ Mapping relationships with nonhumans is an opportunity for the language arts to realize the environment afresh and address its imminent demise.

Key to this project is recognizing relational literacy as a communal process and a way of building knowledge. In *Research is Ceremony*⁹, Indigenous (Cree) Scholar Shawn Wilson shares stories and dialogues to invite readers to experience “a process of relationships that form a mutual reality” (71). Furthermore, there is “no one definite reality but rather different sets of relationships” (73). Similar to systems theory models proposed by New Materialists (for example, Bruno Latour’s *Politics of Nature*), agency gets distributed. The difference is that in this case, ontology and epistemology get blended as a communal act; reality gets configured (and reconfigured) by the ongoing process of relationship. Subjects only take shape in relationships. They cannot be independent and still maintain their shape (8). Wilson shares, for example, how in his Cree language there is no word for chair. Rather, there is a word for the phrase “the thing you sit on.” There is also no word for grandmother; only the phrase “your grandmother” or “my grandmother” (73). In Cree culture, you can’t be a grandmother without being attached to someone. One cannot define the essence of a human or nonhuman without reference to a relation.

According to Wilson, the land grounds these relationships, often making time perceived as relative to a place and its inhabitants. In a transcript of a talking circle between Wilson and his Indigenous co-researchers, Lewis Cardinal shares how he desires schools

8. See Dobrin for a lucid, almost eviscerating critique of how ecocomposition had been taken up by the field (124).

9. Cited in Google Scholar 2088 times as of 23 December 2018.

expose students to more experiences in the outdoors. Having hunted and fished in the bush for a month, he remembers how “time slows down” and “you have a relationship with a black bird, a bear,” and “suddenly the whole reality is different. You feel plugged in; you feel part of everything” (Wilson 105). The upshot? One then becomes a “guardian” for the “intergenerational relationship that forms between Indigenous people and sacred knowledge and place” (114).

This taps a deep memory for me. As first-generation German-American, I often felt in between worlds since my parents were not always accepted in mainstream American society. Going on long bird walks with my Dad and then long walks with my dog in the woods became a way of processing difference by way of communion with nature. I still take long walks and find myself often in similar suspended states of reflection that Cardinal describes, one complemented by the German concept of *Waldeinsamkeit*. *Waldeinsamkeit* parallels Wilson’s idea of relationship that goes beyond a subject-object relationship and is grounded in appreciation and a sense of timelessness. The word cannot be fully translated from German but roughly means the personal and reciprocal sense of deep connection in the woods. As my father told me, the word means a personal form of abiding solitude *with* the woods; “they are woods that know your imprint.”

A relational literacy invites this process of knowing from deeply abiding with non-humans in a locale. It presupposes respect and defines that we affect and are affected by a constellation of named and unnamed relationships. When I come home from walks in the woods, I notice I’m almost always less talkative and more meditative. Perhaps in part this is because though I seek moments of communion with nonhumans, I can’t predict how and to what extent that will happen. Perhaps too I more fully realize that the trees don’t have to be explained as much as they have to be valued for their ongoing interplay of exchange. I get the privilege of walking into a world that can exist often fine without me, even as it beckons a reciprocal relationship.

Coexisting Constructs to Further Define Relational Literacy

Rather than the dialogic between environment and discourse often purported in ecocomposition, I propose some coexisting constructs¹⁰ to inform a relationality between us and nonhumans and encourage further definition of relational literacy.

- *Writing—Speaking—Embodiment*. One aim here could be to discuss how physical presence-based communication and virtual reality differ. Another could be to chronicle and interpret communication between species. Following those in the field that cite New Materialism, how might we further theorize and chronicle presence-based languages of embodiment, pheromones, sights, sounds, and touch?
- *Biology—Socialization*. Reminding ourselves that we are objectively related to every sentient being grounds relational literacy. Yet also noting that subjective loyalty to kin is a natural predilection of many species helps us realize “nature” as a personal form of relationship. As relational quantum mechanics suggest, objects have location only relative to other objects. By defining our kinship with parts of nature we better locate ourselves. In his book on bioregionalism, landscape

10. With indebtedness to Robert Yagelski’s *Writing as a Way of Being* for inspiration.

architect and professor Robert L. Thayer states we often contemplate three questions: “Who am I? Where am I? What am I supposed to do?” yet we fester on the question “Who am I?” in isolation. As a result, “we substitute shallow awareness of the entire globe for whatever deep wisdom and affection we might have had for a specific place” (2). When instead we settle down, and “stop searching for the hyperreal elsewhere,” we come to terms with nature and culture (xiv). We can then probably better ask how global awareness of interconnectivity can co-exist with place-based culture.

- *Reception—Action.* Thanksgiving roots many Indigenous People’s sense of place and action. How might a cultivation of gratitude for specific relationships ground our activism? For example, a food activist might first chronicle her/himself as receiving organic food, the relationship with the CSA farmer, and the offerings of the soil as gifts, much like the Haudenosaunee open their meetings by citing a Thanksgiving Address and realizing themselves as a community of one mind with the Earth.¹¹ How might cultivating thanksgiving for nature make its ownership as resource relative?
- *Time—Place.* Asking when and where helps define the environment in concrete, narrative, phenomenological terms. Climate change for me is the fast warming of neighborhood hardwood forests in the spring, causing great harm to maple trees. Realizing climate change in my neighborhood (place) in spring (time) gets me to more readily realize climate change. Experiencing time and place helps define nature. A sunset dictates how the landscape is experienced. In turn, the contour of the land and water dictate how the sunset is experienced. As humans, we are wired to respond to the interplay of the phases of sun and moon in relationship to land, water, plants, and animals. How might we further chronicle and demarcate experiences of time and place?
- *Emotions—Thought.* As a binary, this has been well-debunked by scholars and scientists, yet how often does this construct of “emotional flexibility” (Wenger 27) still get undercut in curriculums? Is it ok to be joyful about our discoveries in the academy? What does it mean to “chase an idea”? Conversely, can we just sit and chat about an idea without always arriving at answers? This coexisting construct also addresses the false belief that if we only share enough facts with enough intensity, people will do the right thing, and it challenges the belief that critique (building critical minds) is the main job of the academy. How might we borrow from the wisdom of religious traditions that have long defined the “heart” as the impetus of the mind?

11. The Haudenosaunee is the oldest living participatory democracy. Their central fire is in Onondaga Territory just south of Syracuse and they have a longstanding tradition of sharing a Thanksgiving Address at their gatherings. Their storifying place has deepened my relationship to their original lands, and I am grateful to have experienced the Thanksgiving Address as given by Onondaga Clan Mother Frieda Jacques.

Pedagogical Practices of Relational Literacy

To conclude, I offer three pedagogical practices of relational literacy. One is to invite Indigenous experts as guest lecturers, create talking circles, or take students on field trips to sacred Indigenous sites. Ceremonies might be scripted and conducted to lament and right the intentional erasure of Indigenous people and their wisdom. To build sustainable knowledge cultures, we need to regularly acknowledge the failure and intentional genocide of humans and nonhumans propagated by European colonization. The literacy classroom can lead

Another practice we might prioritize is deep-mapping places. English, Irish and Osage William Least Heat-Moon's *PrairyErth* still has resonance.¹² How might we recover the layers of stories in a place by researching and using paper, ink, and digital recorders to weave autobiography, history, archeology, weather, folklore, and interviews? Observing small plots and producing wonderful "mash-ups" of human and nonhuman culture regularly yields a rich sense of place.¹³ Digital video can chronicle the relationships. Using a GIS (geographic information system) online map, one can link to media of a location, thus inviting spatial narratives. One of my students produced a video that featured such mapping after realizing that a family of raccoons regularly pillaged the dumpster adjacent to his dorm. Not only did he come to appreciate their territorial aggression, but he learned train tracks become corridors for the migration of raccoons, deer, and coyotes (among others) into and out of cities in the northeastern U.S. and Ontario, Canada. Deep mapping serves as a form of deep listening for the interconnections between species.

Concept mapping offers yet a third possibility. Drawing webs of the subjective relationships construed between ourselves and nonhumans makes the chronicle of our perceptions visual and offers a basis for self and group analysis. Whether paper or digital, concept mapping can help us identify the relationships we hold with humans and nonhumans. Similar to deep mapping, it invites multimodal language practices, but in this case, more forwardly identifies what we might label as causal and requisite relationships. What gets mapped? What doesn't? Concept mapping can open us to a discussion about the distance we place between ourselves and others, and how we might establish new relationships that nurture mutual environmental health.

Finding Home in Kinship

In relational literacy, the environment gets configured as a set of presence-based relationships. In kinship, we furthermore realize and name the roles individuals play within the web of a community. In kinship narratives, relationship gets baked in. Honoring sentient beings as kin breaks the false binary of humans vs. nonhumans at the core of environmental crises. At times I call one of our family cats, Cosette, "my kid." At other

12. See also Robert Brooke and Jason McIntosh's "Deep maps: teaching rhetorical engagement through place-conscious education."

13. See Bridie McGreavy and Tyler Quiring's archival story-telling of folk clamming on the coast of Maine as one example: <http://nest.maine.edu/clamcam/>

times, when she's frisky and needs space, I'll call out, "hey, girl" or "you go, girl." She's a pet, her own being, and a mother's daughter. Tracing and admitting these relationships, especially that of honoring her original kin, helps me realize the roles I play and the power dynamics I am prone to acknowledge or not acknowledge. It invites me to respect her presence. At best, we experience each other as truly and honorably as we can, calling forth affection as I admit power dynamics. We coexist; we share space, air, earth, and resources. We share energy and embodied minds – the fierce intelligence of wit, and a will to live. And we honor sentience as the heart of knowledge.

Considering kinship, inviting dialog, and mapping relationships help move us past the impasse of subject/object dichotomy and the abstraction of the environment as a field of objects outside ourselves. Experiencing and defining relationships with nonhumans also address a disconnection between our values and actions, shifting us from the merely pragmatic question of "what can they teach us?" to the wonder of "Who are we here with?" and "What kinds of minds populate this world?" (Safina 20).

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