THE PRACTICE OF PUBLIC TOPOGRAPHY: TEACHING PEOPLE TO APPRECIATE ORDINARY PLACES USING BOOKS AND NEW MEDIA

A Dissertation

by

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ABSTRACT

People have a deep need to connect to places, but modernity has weakened many of the traditional ways that people have bonded with localities. Geographers of the past believed that a core responsibility of geography was to describe places. This connection between geography and place education, however, has attenuated as geographers have become increasingly concerned with theory and have eschewed regional geography. This research seeks to revitalize the geographic tradition of topography (writing about small places) by examining its best works, while at the same time exploring new ways to connect people with places. It answers the question, "What lessons can we learn about place writing for non-academic audiences from the genre's best examples, and how can these lessons inform the use of new media to connect people with places?" Examples of excellent topographic books and audio podcasts were analyzed to answer this question.

Based on a study of the topographic tradition, literature on place attachment, and an empirical examination of topographic books, three essential features of a modern public topography are proposed: 1) topography teaches people to appreciate particular places; 2) topography engages the general public; and 3) topography is inherently geographical. Topographic works that incorporate these elements are found to use one or more of three strategies for facilitating the appreciation of place: 1) an explanatory strategy; 2) a poetic strategy; 3) or an experiential strategy. Specific recommendations for the application of these features and strategies to topographic writing are given.

These essential features and strategies were used to analyze audio podcasts about small places. The result is a series of recommendations for the creation of topographic podcasts. To illustrate the utility of these recommendations, a podcast about the influence of the Brazos River on the landscape of Texas's Brazos Valley was produced, along with an accompanying webpage.

This research suggests that while modernity has created significant obstacles to place attachment, a new interpretation of the old geographic tradition of topography has the potential to reduce those obstacles and to help the public to better appreciate places.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"The world will never starve for want of wonders; but only for want of wonder."

-G.K Chesterton, *Tremendous Trifles*

In the twenty years since I first graduated from Texas A&M University, I have lived in nine different places, including a town house in Italy, an abandoned aircraft hangar in Iraq, and a shipping container in Afghanistan. If you count the places I lived before I became an Army officer, the number jumps to 14, already putting me well above the national average of 11.7 moves in a lifetime.[1]

You might think that moving so frequently would make individual places less important to me. After all, one Army base is very like another, and some people I know who move frequently certainly find comfort in the homogeneity of American culture: in national food chains and stores, in television and movies, and in national sports. But if anything, moving so frequently has made me *more* interested in specific places for at least three reasons.

First, living in a variety of places has made me sensitive to the differences *between* places. If I had never left the Southeastern United States, I'm not sure that I would have ever become interested in the way that climate, vegetation, landforms, and

[1] U.S. Census Bureau, "Calculating Migration Expectancy."

culture traits vary across the U.S. It has been the first-hand observation and experience of these differences that has sparked my curiosity.

Second, when you know you will only live somewhere for a short period of time, you can take one of two attitudes towards it—you can either say I don't care to learn about this place, because I'll be gone soon, or you can explore it with a sense of urgency because you want to learn all you can about it before you have to leave. My family takes the latter approach. Every time we move to a new home, we feel like we have to squeeze in every possible experience of that place, because who knows when we'll ever be back? Most of our vacations are taken close to home, and long-time residents are always amazed at the nearby places we find to visit that they never even knew existed.

Third, despite our peripatetic lifestyle, our family still has a strong desire and ability to bond with places. Each of the places we've resided has worked its way into our lives, so that we feel the strong pull of home not just from one place, but from multiple places. Far from making us less interested in places, our mobility has made us more cognizant of the importance of place in our lives.

As a geographer, I find that there are a number of things I want to know about a place soon after arriving so that I can put it into some kind of context. What are the local climate patterns? What kinds of natural vegetation predominate? What animals make this place their home? What kinds of crops are those growing on the side of the highway? What are the major industries? What are the local culinary specialties? Where do the affluent people live, and where is "the wrong side of the tracks?" What historical events have contributed to this place's unique personality?

But it's remarkably hard to find these things out. Sometimes you can find a coffee table book that might give the broad brush strokes, and perhaps a nearby bookstore will have a few local history books. Even in the digital age, though, finding the kind of information that gives a newcomer a solid geographic overview of a place is a difficult task. By the time I graduate with my second degree from Texas A&M, I will have lived in College Station, Texas, for longer than any place in my adult life, and there is still so much that I don't know about it.

We live in a culture and time that offers many ways to avoid connecting with the places we live. Global and national news, pop culture, the internet, mobile technologies, and cheap and easy travel make it tempting to ignore the local in favor of far-away places. But I suspect that there are still a lot of people like me out there who want to know more about the places they live. Who better to help them do that than geographers? The business of connecting people to their homes is not a trivial or unworthy task, as some might think—it is a noble calling that I hope more geographers will hear and have the professional courage to answer.

CHAPTER II

WHY THE WORLD NEEDS PLACE ATTACHMENT

This chapter will lay out the argument that, more than ever, people need help connecting to places, and that geographers are the people who can help them to do that. The first section will describe the threat to place posed by the modern world. The next section will then respond to criticisms that place attachment is a regressive or irrelevant force today, arguing that while there is a potential dark side to place attachment, places are as important as ever, and that a healthy relationship to a place is something that should be encouraged. The final two sections will make the case that healthy relationships with places are an attractive and desirable end, and that the inverse—a world without healthy place attachments—is not a world in which we want to live.

Place Attachment and the Erosion of Place

The Concepts of Place and Place Attachment

Place is much more than just a spot on a map. Volumes have been written, in fact, about the meaning of the word, in disciplines such as geography, philosophy, history, psychology, and sociology. For our purposes, we will use the definition of the geographer John Agnew[1], as elaborated by Tim Cresswell[2], to emphasize three important aspects of place.

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[1] Agnew, *Place and Politics*, 28.

First, a place has a *location*—a position in space relative to other locations that can be described in some coordinate system. Second, a place has a *locale*, a material setting of tangible objects like trees, grass, roads, and buildings. Third, a place has a *sense of place*, a phrase which refers to the meanings that people attach to the locations and locale, the subjective relationships that they form with them, and the ways that they think about them. When one thinks about New York City, for example, the images that come to mind are not limited to the city's location on a map or the view of its skyline. Instead, one thinks about all of the details of New York life that have been imbibed from books and movies and magazines and tourist brochures and personal experiences—the sounds, the smells, the traffic, the food, the ethnic diversity, the pace of life. Place thus has to do not only with the measurable and verifiable facts of location and setting, but also with our emotions, judgments, and experiences of a location, even if those experiences are only vicarious.

This subjective experience of place based on perception is important for two reasons. First, it sets some limits on the scale of a place. Although it has been suggested that from a certain point of view, the entire earth can be seen as a place,[3] we usually think of places as being much, much smaller—as "areas we can directly experience,"[4] as "a circumscribed entity such as a village, town, or city, that can be more or less visually

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[2] Cresswell, *Place: An Introduction*, 12-14.

[3] Tuan, *Space and Place*, location 2745.

[4] Meinig, "Environmental Appreciation," 1.

encompassed."[5] For purposes of this research, place loosely refers to an area no bigger than the size of a large city, or perhaps a few American counties.

The second important implication of this subjective and experiential aspect of place is that it helps us to differentiate *place* from *space*. *Space* refers primarily to the abstract areas and volumes in which people, places, and things exist.[6] When we fill this space with tangible bodies, experience it, and attach meaning to it, it becomes place. The reverse can happen as well: place evacuated of meaning becomes simple space. "Space," writes Ari Schulman, "is like the empty walls of the house, and place the furniture and paintings added later as decoration."[7] Before we move into a new house, it is space to us; when we make it into a home, it becomes a place; when we move away and the house is torn down, it becomes space again.

Another consequence of this experiential aspect of place is that we often form attachments to places. Place attachment can broadly be thought of as "the bonding of people to places,"[8] and the phrase has generally the same meaning as the related terms topophilia, place identity, insideness, and sense of place.[9] Theorists and researchers differ on the details of place attachment, but emotion (often positive, but not always) is a central component in most definitions, and thought and practice are acknowledged to

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[5] Tuan, "Place/Space, Ethnicity/Cosmos," 107.

[6] This is sometimes described as "pure extension."

[7] Schulman, "GPS and the End of the Road," 36.

[8] Low and Altman, "Place Attachment," 2.

[9] Ibid., 3.

play roles as well.[10] Although the social and psychological processes that cause place attachment are not well understood,[11] place attachment is thought to occur for a number of reasons, both individual and social. At the personal level, attachment to place may provide feelings of "control, creativity, and mastery," as well as "opportunities for privacy, personal displays, and serenity."[12] At the group level, place is a matrix in which our relationships with family, friends, culture, and nation occur, and thus place becomes intertwined with those relationships.[13] As a result, place attachment plays an important role in the development of both individual and group identities.[14]

The Erosion of Place

Writers and scholars have been concerned for some time, however, that changes in technology and society have begun to erode our sense of place.[15] In the past, individuals and cultures often developed intense and profound attachments to their homes,[16] in part because long habitation in a single place, coupled with a limited ability to travel, resulted in "island communities." This sort of community has now largely

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[10] Ibid., 3-5.

[11] Gustafson, "Place Attachment in an Age of Mobility," 46.

[12] Low and Altman, "Place Attachment," 7.

[13] Ibid., 7, 10.

[14] Ibid., 10-11.

[15] Cresswell, *Place: An Introduction*, 75.

[16] See, for example, Tuan, *Topophilia*, 99-100.

disappeared as result of easy long-distance travel.[17] The geographer Yi-Fu Tuan also uses the image of an island to describe similar changes to our sense of the history of a place wrought by new forms of communication: "Now, with instantaneous transmission, all news is contemporary. I live in the present, surrounded by present time, whereas not so long ago, the present where I am was an island surrounded by pasts that deepened with distance."[18] In addition to the threats of mobility and instantaneous communication, the rise of the scientific mindset, which prefers the universal and abstract over the local and the particular, also threatens to minimize the importance of place.[19] A frequent theme in historian Joseph Amato's *Rethinking Home*, for example, is a critique of modernity's obsession with the grand and far-reaching at the expense of the local.[20]

In order to elaborate on the potential threats to place attachment posed by modernity, we will examine three different but related views on the state of place attachment in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. First we will consider

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[17] McClay, "Why Place Matters," 5-6, citing Wiebe, *The Search for Order*, xiii.

[18] Tuan, "Place/Space, Ethnicity/Cosmos," 110.

[19] William A. Schambra, for instance, chronicles the twentieth century Progressive program of centralization in the U.S. that championed central planning by experts over local control in "Place and Poverty," 166-168. Brian Brown describes similar tendencies toward centralization and rational planning in "The Rise of Localist Politics," 171-174. Tim Creswell explains the privileging of space over place that occurred in geography in the 1970s in *Place: An Introduction*, 34.

[20] Amato provides this excellent quote from de Tocqueville on the limits of generalization and abstraction: "General ideas are no proof of the strength, but rather of the insufficiency of the human intellect; for there are in nature no beings exactly alike, no things precisely identical; no rules indiscriminately and alike applicable to several objects at once. The chief merit of general ideas is that they enable the human mind to pass a rapid judgment on a great many objects at once; but on the other hand, the notions they convey are never other than incomplete, and they always cause the mind to lose as much in accuracy as it gains in comprehensiveness." Amato, *Rethinking Home*, 188, citing de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 14.

Edward Relph's critique of placelessness; second, Marc Augé's concept of non-places; and third, the phenomenon that Christine Rosen refers to as the new mobility.

Placelessness

The Canadian geographer Edward Relph argued in the 1970s, well before globalization had reached the level that we experience today, that recent changes in technology and society were making it increasingly difficult for people to connect with places. In Relph's view, the world was becoming more *placeless*, a concept he defined as "a weakening of the identity of places to the point where they not only look alike but feel alike and offer the same bland possibilities for existence."[21] The number of significant places in the world was dwindling, he argued, and the landscape was becoming so homogenized that the world was becoming "a placeless geography, a flatscape, a meaningless pattern of buildings."[22] Every place, in other words, was starting to look and feel like every other place. Relph acknowledged that this convergence of places on a single pattern was nothing new—the process has been going on since Greek and Roman times—but what was startling from Relph's perspective was the scale of the current incarnation of the phenomenon, its utter lack of local adaptation, and the shallowness of the experiences that it created. Placelessness, he worried, was so becoming so commonplace that it would soon be the new normal.[23]

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[21] Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 90.

[22] Ibid., 117.

[23] Ibid., 79-80.

Drawing on the philosophy of phenomenology, and particularly from the works of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, Relph advocated a human connection to place based on the ideas of "insideness" and "authenticity." An inside relationship to a place is one in which a person belongs to and identifies with a place.[24] Similarly, an authentic sense of place is one in which a person gains an understanding of a place through direct personal experience, unhampered by stereotypes or social conventions about how that place should be experienced or understood.[25] Thus an "authentic geography" would be one that is "primarily the product of the efforts of insiders, those living in and committed to places, and a geography which declares itself only to those insiders or to those willing and able to experience places empathetically."[26]

But Relph feared that the placelessness of modernity was preventing people from having the types of relationships with place that lead to insideness and authenticity,[27] and instead was encouraging relationships characterized by "outsideness" and "inauthenticity." Relph described outsideness as a sense of alienation, unbelonging, or obliviousness to place,[28] which leads in turn to inauthentic relationships with places. An inauthentic relationship with place occurs when we unthinkingly adopt the dominant attitudes of industrialized consumer societies towards places. Homes in such societies,

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[24] Ibid., 49.

[25] Ibid., 64, 78.

[26] Ibid., 117.

[27] Cresswell, *Place: An Introduction*, 76

[28] Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 49, 51-52.

for instance, become nothing more than "machines to live in,"[29] machines which can be changed as frequently as household appliances, thus reducing our emotional attachment to them.[30] The significance of home is further reduced by its sentimentalization and commercialization in popular culture. Similarly, guidebook-style tourism, Relph complained, had turned the once-educational experience of travel into a mere consumer experience, undertaken more as a token of social status than as out of a desire for an experience of place.[31] Relph claimed that an inauthentic relationship to place can also occur when we consciously adopt a modern "scientific" attitude towards places, purposely detaching ourselves from them and treating them as simple points in space, devoid of individual meaning and context.[32] For Relph, placelessness results in inauthentic relationships with place that are "stereotyped, artificial, dishonest, [and] planned by others."[33] It creates "essentially no sense of place, for it involves no awareness of the deep and symbolic significances of places and no appreciation of their identities."[34]

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[29] Le Corbusier's assertion that "The house is a machine for living in" comes from his book *Towards a New Architecture*, 4, and the statement is cited by both Relph in *Place and Placelessness*, 83, and Brown in "The Rise of Localist Politics," 173. It is worth noting that Le Corbusier's critics have blamed his theories of urban design for producing sterile landscapes that sever social ties—in other words, turning place into space. See, for example, Lewis Mumford's "Yesterday's City of Tomorrow," and Jane Jacobs's *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*.

[30] Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 83.

[31] Ibid., 85.

[32] Ibid., 81, 87, 89.

[33] Ibid., 80.

[34] Ibid., 82.

Relph saw placelessness as being driven by five forces: mass communication, mass culture, big business, central authority, and the economic system.[35] Mass communication, which includes both transportation and communication systems, represents the major technological change that has made placelessness so widespread. Transportation systems allow "the mass movement of people with all their fashions and habits,"[36] spreading mass culture and homogenizing tastes and preferences. Whereas older roads in the U.S. ran to and from and through diverse and authentic places, the modern transportation system creates placeless landscapes in the form of airline terminals and interstates and high-speed rail stations that allow travelers to bypass authentic places entirely as they rush to and from their destinations. And while the modern transportation system encourages the proliferation of placelessness through the movement of people and goods, the communication system does the same through the spread of ideas. Newspapers, magazines, radio, and television all work to standardize tastes and preferences across the nation and world, contributing to the creation of a mass culture that reduces diversity between places. This mass culture manifests itself in the landscape in the form of tourist resorts, theme parks, retail establishments, museums and historical sites, and suburban communities—what Relph calls "synthetic or pseudo-places"[37]—that look the same everywhere, with no distinctive regional flavor or connection to the local environment. Big business likewise creates a sameness in the

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[35] Ibid., 90-121.

[36] Ibid., 90.

[37] Ibid., 118.

landscape, in the form of industrial activity and architecture that destroys the local environment and looks the same no matter where it is located. Corporate headquarters also contribute to placelessness through their "placeless style of international architecture."[38] Central authority, such as government, with its standardized and institutional forms of building and regulation, has a similar equalizing effect on landscapes. And underlying all of this, our economic system, Relph claimed, actively seeks to replicate placelessness in order to gain efficiencies from standardized consumer preferences and modular systems of production and consumption.

Non-place

Like Relph, the French anthropologist Marc Augé sees increasing mobility as a driving force behind a decline in meaningful relationships between people and places. Augé has argued that *non-places* are superseding *anthropological places* as the dominant spatial feature with which modern humans interact. Augé's anthropological place is rich in history, memory, and relationships. His non-place, in contrast, is a transient space characterized by separation from historical and cultural meaning and a lack of deep human interaction.[39] Travel spaces, such as airports, train stations, motels, and interstates are the quintessential non-places for Augé, although spaces of consumer culture, like supermarkets and shopping malls, qualify as well. Non-places, Augé argues, are

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[38] Ibid., 114.

[39] Augé, *Non-Places*, 77-78.

occupying more and more of our lives, in the manner of "immense parentheses" in our social existence.[40]

A key feature of the non-place for Augé is that rather than promoting relationships, non-places create a sense of solitude, as in the way that passengers are made to feel alone in a crowd in an airline terminal.[41] Non-places are thus reflexive—they are experienced as "a turning back on the self."[42] In contrast with anthropological places, which facilitate interaction with people and place, non-places act as way-stations and transit points for large groups of anonymous individuals.[43] Instead of stimulating engagement with other people or with place itself, non-places encourage us to engage with "texts" (signs, labels, instructions, in-flight magazines) communicated by the institutional authority (the airport, government organization, or commercial firm). The non-place is therefore "the opposite of utopia: it exists, and it does not contain any organic society."[44]

Another feature of Augé's non-places is that they exist in a kind of eternal present, divorced from history and the cultural meaning that history imparts to anthropological places. When history is acknowledged in a non-place, it is separated from the present and treated as an exotic display or spectacle, like a window display at

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[40] Ibid., 111.

[41] Ibid., 87.

[42] Ibid., 92.

[43] Ibid., 111.

[44] Ibid., 111-112.

an airport.[45] Non-places are narrowly focused on the present. "Everything proceeds as if space had been trapped by time, as if there were no history other than the last forty-eight hours of news."[46] When this focus on the present is combined with the reflexive solitude of the non-place, it creates "the simultaneous experiences of a perpetual present and an encounter with the self."[47] Under such conditions, there is little chance for meaning to be created through historical association, social involvement, or interaction with place, and thus little chance of the traveler forming strong relationships within the ever-expanding pool of non-places. This is not to say that people do not become familiar with non-places. The sight of a McDonald's in Tokyo may give an American a sense of familiarity that is akin to a feeling of home. But strong affective bonds are rarely formed with these non-places, so that "people are always, and never, at home."[48]

The New Mobility

If the ability to quickly transport our bodies to other places creates a threat to place attachment, so too can the ability to easily transport our minds. Christine Rosen, senior editor at *The New Atlantis*, has written about the ability of new communication devices like tablets and smartphones to make our minds mobile, and what effect this may

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[45] Ibid., 103-105, 110.

[46] Ibid., 104-105.

[47] Ibid., 105.

[48] Ibid., 109.

be having on our relationships to places.[49] Traditionally, Rosen points out, mobility has been understood as movement; but the advent of "mobile technologies" has redefined mobility as "constant contact with each other regardless of where we are."[50] Whereas mobility once meant "getting away," it now means staying in touch. The new mobility has resulted in our being tethered—not to a place, but to a device, and to the virtual world to which it is connected. This feeling has become so pervasive that today, when we say we feel "disconnected," we mean that we are disconnected from the cloud, not from the world around us.[51] The increasing difficulty of getting "off the grid" and away from the constant communication afforded by our smart devices has created a prison out of our own mobility, preventing us from ever actually fully experiencing a geographical place because we are always at least partially immersed in a virtual one. More and more frequently we find ourselves "alone together," neglecting the real world around us as we sit absorbed in our own private digital realities.

Rosen has identified at least three ways that this new mobility transforms our relationship to place. First, it brings "the Outside in," blurring the line between work and home and creating a state of "continuous partial attention," so that home spaces are no longer spaces for full togetherness.[52] Second, it brings "the Inside out" by dragging all the connections and baggage of our private lives into the public space. People have

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[49] Rosen, "The New Meaning of Mobility."

[50] Ibid., 181.

[51] Schulman, "GPS and the End of the Road," 43-44.

[52] Rosen, "The New Meaning of Mobility," 184-185.

intimate conversations on their cell phones in elevators, for example; they check Facebook while strolling in Central Park; and they post their personal frustrations in realtime on Twitter while at work. Third, being connected to all of our usual streams of information and interaction homogenizes the experience of new places. We can never fully appreciate the distinctiveness of new experiences when we are never disconnected from the routine of headlines, sports scores, and celebrity news. Relph complained that mobility made places more alike. Now, as Rosen points out, even our experiences of "authentic places" and "anthropological places" have been made the same because we are never disconnected from the cloud. In essence, our mobile devices have layered a virtual world on top of the real one (what Schulman refers to as "augmented reality")[53] in a way that detracts from our ability to fully experience the latter.[54]

Rosen notes that tech companies like Google are attempting to "engineer serendipity"—to use location-aware technology to notify of us of unique opportunities when we enter geographic spaces. But Rosen argues that actual serendipity happens when we pay attention to the real world around us, instead of becoming distracted by a virtual one. What these mobile systems have really done, she writes, is to make place unimportant for their users, turning it into an obstacle to be overcome by technology and creating the possibility of a constant sense of placelessness. Joshua Meyrowitz showed in great detail in the 1980s how electronic media such as radio and TV wrought

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[53] Schulman, "GPS and the End of the Road," 28.

[54] Rosen, "The New Meaning of Mobility," 184-186.

profound changes in society by altering our relationship to place.[55] Rosen argues that we need to think deeply about how this new mobility may be doing the same, before virtual places overshadow the geographical ones and we undermine "our deeply felt human need for place, for community, and for the unpredictable pleasures of face-to-face interaction."[56]

Ari Schulman makes a related set of arguments in his essay on GPS and other "location-awareness" technologies.[57] Schulman's thrust is that direct, first-hand experience is crucial to developing a sense of place, but locationally-aware devices, like smartphones, distract us from our environment rather than calling attention to it: "the virtual environment," in essence, "becomes the primary environment."[58] These location awareness technologies are ironically named, he notes, since they make us *less* aware of our surroundings "by granting us the supposed luxury of not having to pay attention to them at all."[59] Schulman emphasizes the point by relating an anecdote in which an expert on driverless cars touts the ability of the passenger to completely disconnect from the outside world as a *benefit*, not a drawback, of this looming technology. Location awareness technologies allow us to transcend time and place, Schulman maintains, but

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[55] Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place*.

[56] Rosen, "The New Meaning of Place," 187.

[57] Schulman, "GPS and the End of the Road."

[58] Leshed et al., "In-car GPS Navigation," 6.

[59] Schulman, "GPS and the End of the Road," 35.

not in a good way: they positively encourage us to be somewhere else instead of where we are.

The Arguments Against Place Attachment

Modernity thus presents some serious obstacles to our ability to form relationships with places, in the form of creeping placelessness, the proliferation of non-places, and the advent of the new mobility. Some, however, would argue that because place attachment causes territoriality and conflict, less place attachment is a good thing, and that we are better off eliminating difference and forming a global cosmopolitan culture. Others would argue that globalization has already made the ideas of place and place attachment obsolete. This section attempts to counter these arguments, and the next will show that place attachment is still relevant and can be a force for good in the world.

Place and Exclusion

When considering the concept of attachment to place, critical geographers influenced by Marxism and feminism have tended to focus on the ways in which the narratives of places are created by those in power to exclude, oppress, or marginalize unwanted groups. For these scholars, place can be "a tool in the creation, maintenance, and transformation of relations of domination, oppression, and exploitation."[60] Kay

[60] Cresswell, *Place: An Introduction*, 46.

Anderson's work on Chinatowns, for example, centers on the way in which whites in western North America conceptualized Chinese immigrant areas as dens of vice in order to maintain a moral and geographic distinction between the two groups.[61] Likewise, Tim Cresswell's *In Place/Out of Place* examines the ways in which the more powerful define for the less powerful what types of behavior are appropriate in certain places. And the Marxist geographer David Harvey has written about the way in which place can be used as a tool for categorizing people based on whether they do or do not belong.[62] To Harvey, this is the dark side of the rootedness and authenticity championed by thinkers like Relph. Creswell summarizes the argument in this way: "As long as place signifies a tight and relatively immobile connection between a group of people and a site then it will be constantly implicated in the construction of 'us' (people who belong in a place) and 'them' (people who do not)."[63] Places are never simply the natural home of a group of people, according to Harvey—they are deliberate constructions by the powerful at the expense of the weak. This exclusionary use of place that Harvey describes can be seen, for example, in the proliferation of gated communities in response to fears of urban decay and crime, or in nativist attitudes towards immigrant groups.[64]

But those who would condemn place because of its potential for exclusion run the risk of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Certainly there are many cases of

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[61] Anderson, *Vancouver's Chinatown*.

[62] Harvey, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*, 291-326.

[63] Cresswell, *Place: An Introduction*, 71.

[64] See, for example, May, "Globalization and the Politics of Place."

place being used to foment conflict between groups, but place can also serve as an important positive element in a stable identity. Just because one feels a connection to a place, it does not follow that one must hate other places, or ostracize people who come from other places, or maintain attachment to only one place, or live in the delusion that a beloved place will remain unchanged forever. In fact, it may be that those who are most sure of where they come from are best able to deal with change.

Places do not have to be conceptualized solely as the exclusive, unchanging homes of culture groups. The geographer Doreen Massey has proposed a more open and indeterminate conceptualization of place, arguing that rather than being fixed centers of rootedness and authenticity, places are more akin to crossroads that bring together flows from the outside. For Massey, places are not about boundaries and exclusion; rather, they are nodes along the pathways of continuous movement of people and goods and ideas. Massey has proposed what she calls *a global sense of place*, one that defines place as a process, heavily influenced by the outside world, that serves as a unique site of interaction and as a locus for multiple groups. Massey acknowledges that people may need to bind their identities to place to varying degrees, but because the nature of place is in constant flux, she rejects the idea that this relationship must always be an exclusionary one.[65]

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[65] Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, 146-156.

Cosmopolitanism as Solution

If, as Harvey asserts, attachment to place is an instrument of oppression, some would argue that the solution is to de-emphasize place and cultural difference. If place encourages parochialism and an insider-versus-outsider mentality, then why not abolish place and its exclusionary attachments, and replace it with a single, global, "cosmopolitan" community?

This idea of a cosmopolitan family of humanity has a long pedigree, stretching back at least to the Cynic Diogenes, whose lofty answer to the question of where he came from was supposedly "I am a citizen of the world."[66] The first full-fledged philosophy of cosmopolitanism was developed by Stoics like Cicero, who argued for an ethical cosmopolitanism grounded in a theistic natural moral law, and Marcus Aurelius, who argued that a universal political structure was a natural outgrowth of such a natural law. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant later championed a secularized version of cosmopolitanism, and today the idea finds expression in the works of philosophers such as Jürgen Habermas, Martha Nussbaum, and Kwame Anthony Appiah.[67] Although modern cosmopolitanism is something of an umbrella term, in popular culture the term generally has a positive connotation and is often associated with urbanity, worldliness, sophistication, transnationalism, and modernization.[68] Proponents of cosmopolitanism

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[66] Laërtius, *The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers,* 240-241.

[67] Mitchell, "Making Places: The Cosmopolitan Temptation," 86-89. Jacoby, "Cosmopolitanism and Place," 72.

[68] Mitchell, "Making Places: The Cosmopolitan Temptation," 84-85; Jacoby, "Cosmopolitanism and Place," 72.

charge that the idea that place attachment is a moral good is based on a false "metaphysics of sedentarism,"[69] and that modern identity, rather than being based on an outmoded sense of rootedness, is instead rightly based on mobility.[70]

But the historian Walter Jacoby pictures cosmopolitanism more darkly, seeing it as directly linked to economic and cultural homogenization. The cosmopolitan vision of a united world is, to Jacoby, inextricably linked with externally imposed cultural sameness.[71] Following the literary critic René Girard, Jacoby argues that it is not cultural difference that causes conflict, but likeness and the process of creating likeness that do so. According to Girard, difference brings order, peace, and well-being, while sameness and imitation cause competition and rivalry. The conflict associated with sameness is the result of two simultaneous processes: imitation and self-hate. When we imitate others, we copy their wants, a phenomenon Girard calls "mimetic desire." But in a world of constrained resources, this forces us into a competitive struggle, since we all want the same things. As we imitate, Girard says, we become angry at ourselves for that imitation, because it threatens our separate identity, and thus we lash out in frustration. The Islamic world's anger with the West, Girard claims, comes from both its struggle to imitate the West as well as its self-hatred for that imitation.

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[69] Cresswell, *Place: An Introduction*, 26-27; Gustafson, "Place Attachment in an Age of Mobility," 37-38.

[70] Cresswell, *Place: An Introduction*, 81-82. For a nuanced discussion of place and cosmopolitanism that does not repudiate place attachment, see Tuan's "Space/Place, Ethnicity/Cosmos."

[71] Jacoby, "Cosmopolitanism and Place," 73-74.

Jacoby believes that far from resolving conflict, cosmopolitanism may only exacerbate it by minimizing difference and promoting sameness. He sees a secure identity based in place as at least a partial solution to the loss of identity caused by globalization. But Jacoby is cautious about fully endorsing what he calls "the fetish of roots" as "the answer to modern anomie," citing its frequent use in fascist thought and genocidal movements.[72] The best he can offer is a warning that cosmopolitanism is a double-edged sword.

Mark Mitchell, however, proposes a middle path between the extremes of Harvey's fear of tribalism and Jacoby's warnings of a global monoculture, one which he calls *humane localism*. Mitchell sees three strands in the history of cosmopolitanism: *ethical cosmopolitanism*, "the view that human beings owe moral duties to all other human beings by virtue of a shared moral status"; *political cosmopolitanism*, "the view that ideally human beings are (or should be) moving toward a common political organization where common moral goods can best be realized"; and *cultural cosmopolitanism*, "a consequence of globalization whereby, through mass media and ease of travel, cultural particularities are dissolved into a universal culture."[73] Mitchell accepts a form of ethical cosmopolitanism that requires the treatment of other human beings with respect, but which simultaneously acknowledges that we owe "special duties to certain individuals either by virtue of unique relationship or proximity."[74] He rejects

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[72] Ibid., 81-82.

[73] Mitchell, "Making Places: The Cosmopolitan Temptation," 85.

[74] Ibid., 94.

the much more stringent form of ethical cosmopolitanism advocated by Nussbaum that demands "positive duties to all human beings regardless of relationship or proximity,"[75] on the grounds that "humanity" is far too abstract a term for people to embrace in daily practice.

While Mitchell accepts the weaker form of ethical cosmopolitanism, he argues outright against political and cultural cosmopolitanism. His reasons for doing so are fourfold. First, Mitchell asserts that human beings have a strong need to belong, to love, and to be loved. But love, he explains, has limits. It is far easier for people to love and belong to a local circle of family and friends and neighbors than it is to love and belong to an abstract notion of humanity. Thus love and belonging, along with the cultural practices and institutions that facilitate them, are best expressed at the local level. Second, political and cultural cosmopolitanism operate at a scale that is too large for "human flourishing." As "embodied creatures," he notes, "we occupy a particular space and time . . . and therefore our existence is in some respects necessarily local."[76] Mitchell thus argues that political and cultural cosmopolitanism work against human flourishing by superseding the local scale at which it takes place. Third, Mitchell's view of human nature, grounded in the Christian tradition that sees humans as fallible and problematic creatures, makes political cosmopolitanism untenable, as it requires entrusting too much power into the hands of a single global elite. And because cultural cosmopolitanism facilitates political cosmopolitanism, it too should be rejected. Fourth,

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[75] Ibid., 95.

[76] Ibid., 96.

Mitchell argues against cosmopolitanism from an aesthetic perspective, maintaining that a world without cultural differences is aesthetically uninteresting. "Tolerance," he notes, "is only possible in a world of real difference."[77]

In place of cosmopolitanism, Mitchell proposes his philosophy of humane localism, which celebrates and emphasizes the local, but embraces other peoples and cultures through its acceptance of the weaker form of ethical cosmopolitanism. He describes humane localism in this way: "In short, humane localism is rooted in respect, not in homogeneity; in love of one's place, not hatred of other places; and in the realization that human flourishing is best realized in the company of friends and neighbors sharing a common place in the world."[78] From humane localism flows the notion that rootedness should be encouraged in a process that Mitchell calls "cultivating the art of place-making," which, among other things, endorses the development of a sense of stewardship through local education, since "as one becomes familiar with the particulars of one's place, one is better equipped to act as a steward and therefore better able to pass on to the next generation that which one has inherited and tended."[79]

Cosmopolitanism as Fait Accompli

Thus far I have attempted to counter the argument that cosmopolitanism is a preferable alternative to the parochialism that place attachment supposedly engenders.

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[77] Ibid., 97.

[78] Ibid., 101.

[79] Ibid., 100.

But there is a related view that sees cultural cosmopolitanism as a fait accompli. From this perspective, the forces of globalization and homogenization, such as those described by Relph, have already done much of their work. As people, both rich and poor, have become increasingly connected and mobile, the role of place in identity, and the importance of place attachment, have waned in concert.[80] Place and place attachment, in other words, are well on their way to becoming irrelevant and obsolete.

While it is certainly true that mobility and communication have widened the number of places to which people are exposed, this does not mean that place or attachment to place has become less important. Rather, what has happened is that the ways that we form and maintain place attachments has changed. Per Gustafson's thorough review of the empirical literature related to place attachment and mobility highlights the complex realities of place attachment in a highly mobile world.[81] For example, although quantitative studies have found that more mobile people show less attachment to their homes, highly mobile people have still been shown to crave a sense of place and to form strong bonds with places.[82] Nor is place attachment something that can simply be measured on a numerical scale: studies suggest that there are major qualitative differences in the types of attachments that people form with places. For example, although long-time residents often form positive bonds with a place, this is not always the case. Sometimes these feelings of belonging transmute into feelings of

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[80] Cresswell, *Place: An Introduction*, 81-82.

[81] Gustafson, "Place Attachment in an Age of Mobility."

[82] Ibid., 38.

nostalgia as a place changes. In other instances, long-time residents feel out of sync with a community, and become frustrated when they lack the means to leave. In some instances, people cut all ties with a former home when they depart, while in others, those who emigrate maintain strong involvement and a sense of identity linked to their former home. And place attachment does not always occur simply as a result of time spent in a location: mobile newcomers may bond strongly with a place they have deliberately chosen to live, often out of a sense that their new home is more consistent with their goals and personality.[83] These studies reinforce the idea that mobility does not simply obviate the importance of place.

Likewise, empirical research also suggests that as people become more mobile, they adapt to their new mobility by making connections to places more quickly[84] and by forming attachments with multiple places.[85] A study of military employees in Italy, for example, found that many had become attached to their current as well as past residences, and those with a greater history of mobility developed bonds more quickly.[86] Some mobile people have been found to create a sense of continuity for themselves by serially moving to similar types of places, while others maintained attachments to their former homes through travel, communication, and media.[87] People with multiple homes

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[83] Ibid., 39-40.

[84] Ibid., 41.

[85] Ibid., 40.

[86] Ibid., 41.

[87] Ibid.

have been found to experience multiple strong attachments,[88] and travelers have even demonstrated attachment for the types of spaces that Augé has termed non-spaces.[89] Finally, people who have formed multiple place attachments may harbor different sentiments for different places: the kind of emotional bond formed with a childhood home, for example, may be fundamentally different from the one formed with a summer cottage.[90] Nor are all mobile people the same—some form strong attachments with place, others become unrooted.[91] Clearly mobility is not simply the undoing of place attachment—rather, it seems that mobile people differ from sedentary people in the number and kinds of attachments that they form with places.

The Importance of Place Attachment

Despite the placelessness of modernity, the dangers of sedentarism, and the hypothetical advantages of cosmopolitanism, both place and place attachment continue to be important forces in the world. Under the right circumstances, sense of place and place attachment are not things to be shunned or feared. Healthy place attachments are instead a good thing, and something that we ought to encourage.

Like any other good thing, place attachment is best enjoyed in moderation. Too much affection for a place can leave us shackled to it, afraid to venture outside its

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[88] Ibid.

[89] Ibid., 42.

[90] Ibid.

[91] Ibid., 45.

boundaries. We become parochial and myopic, shunning the unknown in favor of the known—privileging place over space. When our identity is too closely tied up with a place, a threat to place becomes a threat to ourselves. Outsiders or those who fail to conform to our conception of place may be looked upon with hostility and xenophobia, as inferior or untrustworthy, or undeserving of our aid.[92]

But too little attachment to place can be just as damaging. When we "liberate" ourselves from place, we risk radical individualism and isolation.[93] A world without attachment to places is a world of Augé's non-places, a world in which we drift in and out of spaces as individuals, never giving places our full attention, never forming relationships with fellow travelers or our environments, never giving places meaning beyond their roles as spaces of transience and transaction. A world without place attachment would be a world of airports and parking lots and shopping malls. When we care nothing for places, our personal identities are weakened,[94] and places become

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[92] Harvey, as noted earlier, makes the case for place as a tool of exclusion in *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference.* A less critical consideration of ethnocentrism can be found in Tuan's *Topophilia*, 30-44. For a discussion on the safety of the known place compared to the risk of unknown space, see Tuan, "Place/Space, Ethnicity/Cosmos," 103-105. McAllister provides a short but vivid description of immobility and traditional place attachment as a form of oppression in "Making American Places," 188-189. For a summary of the current empirical literature on possible disadvantages of place attachment, see Lewicka's "Place Attachment," 218. The disadvantages she enumerates include "decreased mobility, and hence restricted life opportunities…or unwillingness to move in the face of natural dangers," as well as the potential for "an overly strong psychological sense of community [that] may be detrimental to children's development."

[93] McAllister, "Making American Places," 189-190, 198-199.

[94] McClay, "Why Place Matters," 8.

simply backdrops for anomie. A lack of place attachment results in a world in which space predominates over place.[95]

Places are so central to human experience that we cannot simply ignore our relationships to them. The vast majority of us spend most of our time in a small, circumscribed network of spaces: our homes, our workplaces, our places of worship, our sites of recreation. Over time, these places come to exert a strong influence on our lives, weaving themselves into our personal stories. Even Relph's inauthentic places and Augé's non-places can become places when they are sites for meaningful experience, as when shopping malls and fast-food restaurants become key sites of social interaction for teenagers.[96] Experience of place is thus a fundamental aspect of being human.[97]

And because place is so central to our existence, human beings exhibit a strong need to connect to places that must be nourished, not denied. The French writer Simone Weil claimed that "To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul."[98] The historian Joseph Amato similarly argues that local history is of crucial importance because it "satisfies an innate human desire to be connected to place.

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[95] McClay and McAllister put it thusly: "In losing 'place' and succumbing to the idea that a website can be a place and that digital relationships can substituted for friends and family, we risk forgetting this reality of our embodiment, risk losing the basis for healthy and resilient individual identity, and risk forfeiting the needed preconditions for the cultivation of public virtues. For one cannot be a citizen without being a citizen of some place in particular; one cannot be a citizen of a website, or a motel." McClay and McAllister, *Why Place Matters*, x.

[96] For example, see Lazzari, "The Role of Social Networking Services," 3.

[97] Numerous philosophers, including Plato, Aristotle, Martin Heidegger, Robert Sack, Edward Casey, and J.E. Malpas have argued that place is a central aspect of human life, and not simply a social construct, as Harvey argues. Cresswell provides an excellent survey of the philosophical arguments for place in Chapter 2 of *Place: An Introduction*.

[98] Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 43.

It feeds our hunger to experience life directly and on intimate terms."[99] And the historian Wilfred M. McClay makes the case that place attachment is not simply a luxury or nostalgic foolishness, but that is a requisite ingredient for human happiness and freedom.[100] Empirical evidence also suggests that both the desire and the ability to form place attachments remain surprisingly strong even today.[101] Given the centrality of place in our lives and our strong need to connect with places, surely we should encourage strong and healthy place attachments, rather than discouraging them in favor of a weak and abstract cosmopolitanism.

Strong, positive relationships with a place are also a prerequisite for caring about a place.[102] Unless we have developed strong ties with places, what, other than self-interest, could motivate us to donate our time, money, and energy to making them better? To learn that a passing acquaintance has been diagnosed with cancer makes us briefly sad; but we are much more likely to become activists for cancer research when the diagnosis is given to a loved one. It is care that calls us to action when action is needed, and if we fail to develop strong reasons for caring about places, we will never be

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[99] Amato, *Rethinking Home*, 4.

[100] McClay, "Why Place Matters," 8-9.

[101] Lewicka, "Place Attachment," 209; Gustafson, "Place Attachment in an Age of Mobility."

[102] Notions of care, nurture, and home are important themes in the writings of Martin Heidegger, Edward Relph, and Yi-Fu Tuan. See, for example, *Cresswell, Place: An Introduction*, 29; Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 37-41; Tuan, "Place/Space, Ethnicity/Cosmos," 104-105; Tuan, *Topophilia*, 99-100; Tuan, *Space and Place*, Chapter 11.

moved to improve them.[103] And when we care about a place, that care can also extend to the people who inhabit it. Once we accept the notion that "I live here," it is only a short distance to acknowledging that "we live here."[104]

There are other reasons to encourage place attachment apart from the centrality of place in our daily lives and its potential to stimulate stewardship. Empirical studies, for example, suggest that place attachment is related to a number of measures of individual well-being, including greater life satisfaction, stronger social ties, greater trust, and less egocentrism.[105] An attachment to place can give us a sense of satisfaction and control that is unavailable when we work at larger and more abstract scales: because the results of our care are visible on a daily basis, focusing our efforts on our immediate environment can provide positive and recurring reinforcement, enhance relationships with our neighbors, and give a sense of control over our lives. Localism has also been held out as an antidote to the centralization and creeping sameness of modernity, and ultimately to the alienation that these trends cause. Amato, for example, has championed local history as "a powerful anodyne in a mass era characterized by gigantic proportions

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[103] Strangely, the empirical evidence for a connection between place attachment and defense of place is somewhat mixed. See Lewicka, "Place Attachment," 218-219. While attachment to place does not always produce place-related action, some studies do suggest a link between place attachment and resistance to threats to place. Brown provides a compelling example of the way that place attachment and care for place can reinforce each other in "Place and Poverty," 163-165. Likewise, the episode "Esperanza Garden" of the popular radio show *Radio Diaries* is another good example of the link between place attachment and the desire to improve a place. Numerous examples of urban communities banding together to oppose gentrification also emphasize the point.

[104] Jonathan Smith, personal conversation, 15 April 2016.

[105] Lewicka, "Place Attachment," 218. The studies that Lewicka sites are all correlational, so it is unclear in which direction causation runs: do these factors of well-being cause greater place attachment, or does greater place attachment cause well-being? Regardless, it appears that a healthy attachment to place is part of a suite of desirable factors influencing our outlook on life.

and crushing statistics,"[106] and McClay offers the cultivation of a strong sense of place as a strategy for resisting "the steady homogenization of the world."[107] Brown likewise sees the frustration and alienation caused by large organizations and centralized planning as the key drivers behind recent trends towards localism in both business and politics,[108] and Schambra portrays place-based approaches to poverty as an alternative to the one-size-fits-all approaches at poverty reduction advocated by social planners.[109] The historian Ted V. McAllister makes an even more fundamental argument for localism and attachment to place, maintaining that they are the very cornerstones of citizenship and democracy.[110]

None of this is not to argue that we should avoid developing relationships with far-away places. As Yi-Fu Tuan has written, displacement is often necessary for growth,[111] and travel frequently sparks the recognition of difference.[112] We can form positive relationships with the places we visit just as easily as we can with the places we live. But just as we first learn to create positive relationships in the home, the best

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[106] Amato, *Rethinking Home*, 8.

[107] McClay, "Why Place Matters," 7.

[108] Brown, "The Rise of Localist Politics."

[109] Schambra, "Place and Poverty."

[110] McAllister, "Making American Places." Amato, quoting the historian Constance McLaughlin Green, makes a related point in justifying the importance of local history, noting that it is in the history of the local that one finds "the grassroots of American civilization." *Rethinking Home*, 4.

[111] Tuan, "Place/Space, Ethnicity/Cosmos," 105-107.

[112] Meinig, "Environmental Appreciation," 1.

location to learn and practice a positive relationship with place is where we spend the bulk of our time.

Healthy relationships with places are like healthy relationships with people, and they have the same potential to bring us joy, satisfaction, and fulfillment. A healthy attachment to place is one in which a person sees a place clearly, recognizing its faults as well as its merits, while at the same time acknowledging a sense of connection to, and responsibility for, that place. A healthy attachment to place recognizes the interdependence of people and things, both living and non-living, in a place. It acknowledges the impact of a place's past on its present, its relationships to other places, and its uniqueness. A healthy relationship with place allows a place to become a part of one's identity, lending strength through rootedness, but not so much a part of one's self that identity crumbles without it.[113] A healthy relationship with place recognizes the importance of *this* place, without denying the value of *other* places. This is not to be so naïve as to suggest that all of our experiences of a place should be positive. Like our relationships with people, our attachments to place are complicated, blending intellectual understanding with complex combinations of emotions like happiness, sadness, wistfulness, and anger. But a desirable place attachment channels all of these thoughts and emotions in a positive direction. In a way, an ideal relationship with a place is like an ideal relationship with one's family. We may not always agree with or approve of our

[113] For a discussion on the way in which place, or "thereness," can serve as an anchor in times of change, as well as a poignant example, see McClay, "Why Place Matters," 1-3.

family members, but ideally we share a sense of connection and responsibility developed through shared experience.

What Are the Stakes?

This chapter has laid out the argument that the modern world has made it more challenging for people to connect to place, and that while attachment to place admittedly has a dark side, healthy relationships with place are an important human need that should be properly nourished. The next chapter will explore the concept of topography as a vehicle for place appreciation, while Chapters IV and V will analyze a selection of the best books about places to provide some examples of how good place writing might be executed. Chapter VI will consider how technology associated with the new mobility might be appropriated in the service of place attachment, and Chapter VII will offer some thoughts on the future of public topography. An example of a topographic podcast and accompanying webpage are offered in the Appendix.

The modern world's relationship with place is something of a paradox. Modernity has thrown up serious obstacles to the development of meaningful relationships with place; but at the same time, both our desire and ability to form and maintain place attachments remain strong. But one has to wonder how long this situation can exist in tension. It seems difficult to believe that healthy relationships with places can forever withstand the proliferation of non-places and the increasing distraction of mobile technology. Unless we recognize the problem and take action to correct it, we

risk a profound change in our relationship to the world that may have regrettable consequences for its societies.

CHAPTER III

PLACE APPRECIATION AND PUBLIC TOPOGRAPHY

The previous chapter argued that place attachment is a fundamental feature of human experience that has the potential to enrich our lives substantially when we channel it in healthy directions. While the modern world has made connection to place more difficult, people still show a strong desire and ability to bond with places. This chapter will argue that we can make it easier for people to bond with places by stimulating an *appreciation of place* through *public topography*. It will also argue that public topography is fundamentally a geographical endeavor, and that geographers are the natural heirs to the tradition of public topography. The chapter will conclude by describing three essential features of public topography, and three strategies for pursuing it.

Place Appreciation

Given that place attachment is a desirable quality, how can we encourage attachment to place in the face of increasing mobility and landscape homogenization? Tuan and Relph suggest that attachment to place grows out of cultural immersion, experience, and deep familiarity.[1] Empirical research tends to confirm this view—in numerous studies, the single strongest predictor of place attachment is the amount of

[1] Tuan, *Topophilia*; Relph, *Place and Placelessness.*

time spent in a place.[2] This would seem to pose a problem for place attachment as personal mobility increases—the less time we spend in places, the less chance we have of forming strong bonds with them. But research also suggests that our ability to form bonds with places is flexible, and that highly mobile people can respond to mobility by forming attachments more quickly and by forming different types of attachments than those formed by long-time residents.[3] Assuming that the trend towards greater mobility is not likely to reverse itself anytime soon, is there anything we can do to encourage this formation of healthy place attachments without the benefit of long residence?

One way to quickly facilitate the formation of bonds with place is through the encouragement of *place appreciation*. The term *appreciation* in this context is borrowed from a little-known essay by the geographer D.W. Meinig entitled, "Environmental Appreciation: Localities as a Humane Art." Meinig's article, published in 1971, declared that America needs a formal education in what Meinig termed *environmental appreciation*. Meinig defined *environment* as "that which we live amidst . . . It is 'place' or 'locality' . . . at a human scale . . . [that] we can directly experience."[4] Similarly, he used the term *appreciation* not in the sense of "approval," but in the sense of "to perceive distinctly . . . to be keenly sensible of or sensitive to."[5] Meinig noted that despite the fact that there is much to see and learn right outside our front doors,

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[2] Lewicka, "Place Attachment," 214-215. Other strong predictors of place attachment include home ownership and strength of community ties, 216-217.

[3] Lewicka, "Place Attachment"; Gustafson, "Place Attachment in an Age of Mobility."

[4] Meinig, "Environmental Appreciation," 1.

[5] Ibid.

Americans habitually ignore their surroundings.[6] He argued that in order to connect people to place, we must arrest this tendency to remain oblivious to the world around us. In essence, he argued for a kind of mindfulness of place that is the antithesis of the new mobility described by Rosen.

The sense in which Meinig used the word "appreciation" is the same as the sense in which it is used when we talk about "art appreciation"—a process which involves training the mind to attend to the world in such a way that we are cognizant of its meanings and complexity. And just as the serious appreciation of music and literature is enhanced by formal education, Meinig argued that we can facilitate the connection of people to their environments through a formal education that encourages the appreciation of place. Such a project, Meinig wrote, would inspire people to walk around their towns and wonder why they look and function the way they do. It would seek to understand how people perceive and experience the world around them, and how we can help them to do so more deeply. It would explain to inhabitants how their landscape has been shaped by a combination of nature, technology, history, and culture into a reflection of cultural values. It would provide a "social geography of neighborhoods"[7] that explains how all the pieces of a particular community function as a holistic system. And it would explain how what goes on in the locality fits into trends and processes at the regional, national, and global scales. To facilitate all of this, Meinig contended, we need books that explain localities through a combination of words and maps and images, coupled

[6] And this was in 1971, long before the invention of the smartphone!

[7] Meinig, "Environmental Appreciation," 6.

with educational field guides that drive these points home. Meinig called for, in short, a literature of place appreciation.[8]

The ultimate goal of this literature of place appreciation is to stimulate people's curiosity about places, to intrigue them enough to pay conscious attention to their surroundings. I contend that if we teach people to appreciate places in the way Meinig described, to really pay attention to them, warts and all, then this can encourage them to experience those places for themselves, and in the process, form their own healthy relationships with places. Ideally, they will eventually come to see themselves as stewards of those places, whether they live in them or not.

Such a literature of place appreciation would be extremely valuable for mobile newcomers who want to quickly connect to a new home. But it could also be useful for those who have experienced a place over a long period of time and have already developed strong attachments. Even long-time residents can be taught to look at their homes in new ways, to notice things they have never truly seen or understood before, to gently challenge their knowledge of familiar surroundings. How many people have lived in places all their lives, and yet never thought to ask the types of questions that newcomers ask right away?[9]

To be clear, place appreciation is *not* the same as place attachment. One can appreciate modern art without liking it, in the same way that one can appreciate the skill

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[8] Ibid., 8.

[9] An excellent example of this idea of rethinking the mundane and looking at familiar places with new eyes can be found in Nathanael Johnson's *Unseen City: The Majesty of Pigeons, the Discreet Charm of Snails & Other Wonders of the Urban Wilderness*.

of an athlete without being a fan of his sport, or in the way that one can appreciate the logic of an adversary without acquiescing to her arguments. I am not advocating that we sugar-coat the stories of places to induce people to fall in love with them. Rather, I am arguing that if we tell intellectually honest but empathetic stories of localities, we supply the raw material that people need to develop strong relationships with places, should they choose to do so. We are not pushing people to form attachments to places—we are simply setting the conditions for this to occur.

The Topographic Tradition

One way of contextualizing this literature of place appreciation is to think of it as an extension of the European tradition of topography. In modern American usage, the word *topography* is generally used to mean terrain or relief. But in Europe, the term has traditionally had a broader connotation, referring to the study and description of place, with a focus on local culture as well as the natural and man-made features of the landscape.[10] The word comes from the ancient Greek words *tòpos* (place) and *graphia* (writing), and literally means "place writing," or "place description." Both Plato and

[10] This split between the American and European (especially English) senses of topography is exemplified by this quote from Lester E. Klimm during a 1937 geography round table discussion: ""In the search for a definition of culture, I wonder if we have rather hindered than helped our attempt to get the picture straight when we depart from the Englishman's use of the word 'topography.' The Englishman considers that the word topography includes not only the surface of the land, but the material culture on it. The Englishman does not accept the terminology that we use, and the setting off of things that man has put on the map in some different color, or some different symbolism. The old English studies into topography, into county topography, were just as much interested in the distribution of graveyards and churches and the lay-out of farms as they were in the surface of the land." "Round Table," 173.

Aristotle explored the concept of *tòpos* and the related idea of *chora*, or region,[11] but Ptolemy is credited with first placing topography within the context of a set of scaled, descriptive terms that also included *chorography* (the description of regions), *geography* (the description of the earth), and *cosmography* (the description of the earth in relation to the rest of the universe).[12] Later commentators elaborated on Ptolemy's definitions, and in Renaissance Europe *topography* came to mean the graphical representations and verbal descriptions of small places such as castles, cities, and rural districts.[13] In practice, topography has often been closely intertwined with the study of local history, such as the French and Spanish provincial histories, and the German, Italian, and French town and city histories.[14]

English Topography

In England, local writing tended to focus on the countryside, and to emphasize the landscape and culture to a greater degree than elsewhere in Europe.[15] Beginning with the journals of William of Worcester in the late fifteenth century,[16] English writers developed their own style of rural place writing that combined county history with

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[11] Creswell, *Place: An Introduction*, 25.

[12] Sitwell, *Four Centuries of Special Geography*, 2, citing Broc, *La Géographie de la Renaissance*, 66-67.

[13] Fiorani, *The Marvel of Maps*, 98; McLean, *The Cosmographia of Sebastian Münster*, 111-112.

[14] Simmons, *English County Historians*, 2-3; Amato, *Rethinking Home*, 2.

[15] Simmons, *English County Historians*, 3.

[16] Hoskins, *Local History in England*, 18; Simmons, *English County Historians*, 4-5.

descriptions of local society and its physical setting.[17] Chiefly authored by country squires and local parsons, and consumed primarily by the local gentry, Anglo topography was historically preoccupied with local antiquities and the estates and the genealogies of landed families. Its geographical content was often sparse, superficial, and descriptive.[18] Many of these works were massive undertakings, running to hundreds of pages in multiple volumes, taking at times decades to produce, frequently self-financed, and rarely remunerative.[19] Written largely out of personal interest and local patriotism on the part of their authors,[20] they also served as a way of supporting the aristocratic claims of local gentry;[21] as a reinforcement of the importance of the county in English governance;[22] as a record of the rural way of life during a time of perceived rapid change;[23] and as a method of creating and buttressing the nascent and burgeoning English national identity.[24]

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[17] Brayshay, "Introduction: The Development of Topographical Writing in the South West," 1-2.

[18] Berry, "Landscape, Taste and National Identity," 248-249; Hoskins, *Local History in England*, 24-30; Richardson, "County Histories: England"; Brayshay, "Introduction: The Development of Topographical Writing in the South West," 4; Hunter, "On English Topography," 13.

[19] Simmons, *English County Historians*, 5, 17-20.

[20] Simmons, *English County Historians*; Brayshay, "Introduction: The Development of Topographical Writing in the South West," 3-4.

[21] Hunter, "On English Topography," 13.

[22] Brayshay, "Introduction: The Development of Topographical Writing in the South West," 4; Berry, "Landscape, Taste and National identity," 248.

[23] Brayshay, "Introduction: The Development of Topographical Writing in the South West," 3.

[24] Ibid.; Berry, "Landscape, Taste and National Identity."

While remarkable for their times, to modern sensibilities these works often appear to be enormous collections of unrelated facts,[25] without any unifying themes or attempts at synthesis or explanation.[26] Most recreational readers would find them tough going today, and the sheer size of the library of English topography makes it difficult to know where to enter the tradition. Interested readers might begin by browsing published catalogues, such as Gough's *British Topography* (1780), many of which are now available on-line. These catalogues take in a wide range of surveys, histories, rambles, and regional geographies.[27]

Readers who delve into this literature will find that English topography boasts some large collections. In the early nineteenth century, for instance, George Alexander Cooke (who we may count as a geographer on the strength of his *Modern and Authentic System of Universal Geography*), published numerous topographies of British counties,[28] as well as a walking guide to the city of London.[29] Between 1891 and 1905, all of the topographical items that had appeared in the *Gentleman's Magazine* between 1731 and

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[25] Consider, for example, this statement on the character of topography from the English topographer Joseph Hunter: "What may be regarded as the prima stamina of a topographical work, is a personal survey of every place mentioned in it, and every object described in it, making notes upon the place, and trusting as little as possible to recollection." *On English Topography*, 13.

[26] Hoskins, *Local History in England*, 30.

[27] For examples, see Gough, *British Topography*; Hoare, *Catalogue of Books Relating to the History and Antiquities of England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland*; Upcott, *A Bibliographical Account of the Works Relating to English Topography*; Anderson, *The Book of British Topography*; Sonnenschein, *A Bibliography of Geography*, 317-332.

[28] See, for example, Cooke, *Topographical and Statistical Description of the County of Gloucester.*

[29] Cooke, *Walks Through London*.

1868 were collected, classified, and published in a multi-volume set.[30] The editor of this collection was Lawrence Gomme (1853-1916), the noted folklorist and co-founder of the Victoria History of the Counties of England (which began in 1899 and has published 230 volumes to date).

Among the numerous English county histories and topographies, Walter Rye's *History of Norfolk* was considered by contemporary reviewers to be one of the best. Published in the series of Popular County Histories, Rye's book goes well beyond simple narrative history, and takes in learned discussions of toponyms, historic architecture, the everyday life of peasants, the gentry and the religious orders, and features three long chapters with detailed suggestions for walking tours in city and countryside. It does not include the sort of panoramic overview that a geographer might desire, but this defect could be remedied by a detailed map.

The Ramble is an interesting, and often enjoyable, sub-type of English topography that flourished around the turn of the nineteenth century, when walking tours became a popular recreation for literate city dwellers.[31] As one author of this genre put it, all men would benefit from "an absence for awhile from the feverish excitement of the city," and for this purpose there is "nought like a solitary ramble among the mountains."[32] The chief advantage of the Ramble is that the progress of the walker gives the topography a narrative structure, while the incidental mishaps and humorous

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[30] See, for example, Gomme, *English Topography Part XV (London)*.

[31] See, for instance, Smith, *Rambles Round Guildford*.

[32] Thorne, *Rambles by Rivers*, 68.

incidents of the road enliven the more sober passages on local geography and history. As one such author put it, "if we would gain the attention of a child, we tell a story," and this is why he writes "in the first person, touching upon history and legend in such manner as to interfere as little as possible with my narrative."[33]

Topography in the U.S.

In the United States, the term *topography* took on a somewhat different meaning than in England. Nineteenth-century Americans generally used the word to describe a survey of some portion of the national territory. This is why, between 1838 and 1863, reconnaissance missions to the western territories were conducted by the Army's Corps of Topographical Engineers. Geographies of individual states were also called topographies.[34] With this usage Americans roughly followed the lead of Varenius, who in 1650 defined topography as description of a tract smaller than a country "of considerable extent."[35]

The American states, however, were not only much larger than anything the English would classify as topography; they were also in many cases of such arbitrary outline as to make a coherent account of their geography very difficult to write. The common practice was, therefore, simply to preface a state history with a short account of

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[33] Tompkins, *Marsh-Country Rambles*, v.

[34] See, for instance, Hinton, *The History and Topography of the United States*.

[35] Varenii, *Geographia Generalis*, 2.

its rivers, mountains, soils and prevailing climate[36], leading the great American topographer William Darby to complain about the "artificial lines of the political subdivisions."[37] Darby's *View of the United States* (1828) should be seen as a landmark in its call for recognition of the country's natural regions. Darby's contemporary Timothy Flint should also be seen as a founder of topographic writing, although his locality was the vast Mississippi Valley.[38]

Americans also wrote Rambles, although few writers were so addicted to walking as the English. Like their English counterparts, these books typically combined the record of a tour, remarks on scenery, and reflections on local history, literary associations and (sometimes) geography.[39] The last was present in a book of European rambles, written for schoolchildren by the American geographer Roderick Peattie. As Peattie put it, "whenever any formation of the earth or difference in climate makes two regions in which customs differ, that is geography."[40]

The first true American Ramble may have been Cook's *Brief Summer Rambles Near Philadelphia*, which first appeared as newspaper articles in 1881. Like the English topographies, this was written "to remind our people how many pleasant places, how

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[36] See, for instance, Allen, *The Natural and Political History of the State of Vermont*; *An Account of Louisiana*; and Ramsay, *The History of South Carolina*.

[37] Darby, *View of the United States*, 484.

[38] Flint, *Recollections of the Last Ten Years*; Flint, *A Condensed Geography and History of the Western States or the Mississippi Valley*.

[39] For example, see Hoyt, *Rambles in Whittierland*; Wilson, *Rambles in Colonial Byways*.

[40] Peattie, *Rambles in Europe*, 74.

much picturesque scenery . . . how great a body of interesting annals and tradition and instructive history there are within a few hours ride from the city by rail or river."[41] Another early example of this genre is Porter's *Rambles in Old Boston*, an antiquarian inquiry into "the early history and topography of Boston."[42] This was followed by Bacon's *Rambles Around Old Boston*, another antiquarian exercise in which we find three gentlemen "sauntering through the crowded old streets of the modern city, imagining the Old Town of the Past."[43]

Local History in America

Notwithstanding the examples of American topography discussed above, much of the place-based writing in the United States has been done under the rubric of "local history." While early colonial examples of this genre can be found from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,[44] the nineteenth century is generally regarded as the high point of interest in American local history[45], and the bulk of these writings dates from the 1840s[46]. For most of the 1800s, American local history was similar to the English county topographical histories in that it was primarily written by gentleman scholars who had

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[41] Cook, *Brief Summer Rambles Near Philadelphia*, 3.

[42] Porter, *Rambles in Old Boston*, vii.

[43] Bacon, *Rambles Around Old Boston*, 4.

[44] Pasternak, *A New Vision of Local History*, 22; Kammen, *On Doing Local History*, 2.

[45] Pasternak, *A New Vision of Local History*, 20.

[46] Kammen, *On Doing Local History*, 2. The 1876 Centennial in particular spurred great interest in local history.

the requisite learning and leisure time for such undertakings. It also resembled the English tradition in its focus on compiling local facts in the form of landscape sketches, descriptions of historically important locations, settlement and church histories, and biographical information about prominent citizens. An excellent example of this English style of topography and local history transplanted to America is B.F. Thompson's three-volume *History of Long Island*, first published in 1839. As with the English topographies, works like Thompson's generally avoided controversial topics, and most were devoid of any form of synthesis or serious explanation.[47] Other examples of early American local history include Orsamus Turner's *Pioneer History of the Holland Purchase of Western New York* (1849) and *History of the Pioneer Settlement of the Phelps and Gorham Purchase* (1852). An even earlier example is David Dudley Field's *History of the Towns of Haddam and East Haddam* (1814), a slim volume filled with facts that its author allowed "cannot be expected to interest any, except the inhabitants of Haddam and East Haddam."[48]

Authors of nineteenth century local history in the U.S. wrote for a host of reasons. In some cases local writing was a form of boosterism, used to attract new settlers, to showcase a community's progress and level of civilization, to keep up with neighboring localities, or to stoke local pride and vanity. Local history also commemorated the past by honoring local heroes, by praising the positive qualities of early settlers, and by saving documents and oral histories from the ravages of time.

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[47] Pasternak, *A New Vision of Local History*, 29-30.

[48] Field, *History of the Towns of Haddam and East Haddam*, 1.

These works often served didactic purposes as well, taking the form of moral instruction emphasizing the value of hard work and the attainability of success, and, of special interest for our purposes, to induce affection for and attachment to a place.[49]

By the late 1800s, however, the patricians who had once written local history had begun to find other uses for their leisure time, and the field of local history became commercialized. While amateur local writing in both England and America had rarely been profitable, for-profit publishing companies began to churn out subscription-based local histories, so-called "mug books" that featured pictures and biographies of local notables who could afford to pay to memorialize themselves and their families in print. These formulaic books, which followed a near-identical structure and told a similar story of the heroic rise of a town out of the wilderness, were written not by locals, but by publishing company staff writers, and were the nineteenth century equivalent of the "coffee table book."[50]

By the early twentieth century, public interest in local history in America had begun to wane, partly due to the changing economics of the publishing industry, and partly due to the air of modernization and change inherent in the era.[51] At roughly the same time, a strong push towards national synthesis had begun to develop in the incipient discipline of professional history. Despite the fact that several regional

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[49] Kammen, *On Doing Local History*, 1-25; Pasternak, *A New Vision of Local History*, 28-29.

[50] Kammen, *On Doing Local History*, 11-14; Pasternak, *A New Vision of Local History*, 30-31; Russo, *Keepers of Our Past*, 150-164. The description of the nineteenth century "mugbooks" as coffee table books is from John Long's and Peggy Tuck Sinko's "The New Local History," 96.

[51] Kammen, *On Doing Local History*, 14-15; Pasternak, *A New Vision of Local History*, 41.

historical societies were founded during this period, some influential historians within the newly-formed American Historical Association had begun to argue that national history should be the discipline's true focus. These scholars disdained local and popular history as both vulgar and irrelevant, and when they did address local matters, it was only as validation of a national historical narrative.[52]

Since the 1960s, local history has rebounded somewhat in both academia and the popular press. Professional historians have pursued numerous methods for writing local history over the last several decades, and new avenues for popular publication have opened as well. Numerous books on how to write local history are now available, and oral history has become quite popular.[53] But what is significant about this resurgence is that it has taken place almost entirely under the rubric of "history," with little emphasis on the traditional topics of topography. The topographic focus that made English local history so unique and so accessible has somehow been lost over the years in the practice of American local writing.

Public Topography

Modern topographic writing is something of a scarce commodity in America. This is unfortunate, because topography in the European sense has the potential to greatly enhance our appreciation of place. Because topography often deals with the elements of the landscape that we see every day, it provides the perfect entry point for the lay person

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[52] Pasternak, *A New Vision of Local History*, 34-39.

[53] Ibid., 55-57.

into an understanding of the natural, cultural, and historical significance of the world around him. But modern works of topography are exceedingly difficult to find. Travel writing is common enough, and a few local interest books can occasionally be found in a city bookstore. But the kind of penetrating exploration of a locality meant to facilitate the appreciation of a place in the way that Meinig described is still conspicuously absent. This is partially due, no doubt, to the lack of economies of scale in local writing: works of local interest rarely accrue audiences large enough to make them financially profitable. But the situation is also perhaps in part a result of the fact that geographers, the intellectual heirs of topography and chorography, have largely eschewed these descriptive pursuits in recent decades in pursuit of more theoretical knowledge.

Topography is essentially geography at a small scale. But unlike historians, geographers have not experienced any sort of early twenty-first century Renaissance of local studies. This is regrettable, since topography integrates many of geography's core traditions, including the study of landscape, human-environment interaction, and the study of phenomena in the context of place. Geographers once saw topography and chorography as core responsibilities of the geographic discipline,[54] with some even arguing that the synthesis of information about places and regions constituted the pinnacle of the geographer's art.[55] Open almost any issue of *The Annals of the*

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[54] For examples of attempts by geographers to systematize chorography, see Hartshorne, *The Nature of Geography*; Minshull, *Regional Geography*; and Spate and Learmonth, *India and Pakistan*, 407-410.

[55] Yi-Fu Tuan, for example, wrote that "Regional geography that succeeds in capturing the essence of place is a work of art," in "Humanistic Geography," 273. For other examples, see Dryer, "Genetic Geography"; Barrows, "Geography as Human Ecology"; Sauer, "The Education of a

Association of American Geographers or *Geographical Review* from the first half of the twentieth century and you will inevitably find one or more examples of this synthetic type of place writing. But unfortunately, this kind of scholarship has fallen out of favor with geographers today, and scholars who aspire to do this kind of writing are often dismissed as "mere describers" and "popularizers." Geographers produce comparatively few works about places today, and many of those that are produced serve as case studies rather than topographies.[56] Unfortunately, this reduced interest in the writing of topography for the general public has coincided with the increasing challenges to place attachment identified by writers like Relph, Augé, and Rosen.

I suggest that what America needs today to help overcome the challenges to place attachment posed by modernity is a reinvention of the topographic tradition: a new "public topography," grounded in geography and tailored for modern general audiences. The central purpose of this public topography is to teach people to appreciate specific locales in the hope that appreciation and first-hand experience will eventually lead to healthy relationships with places. Public topography, in essence, tries to answer the questions, "What is this place like?" and "How did it get to be this way?" It teaches people to read landscapes in new ways, to experience places for themselves, and to empathize with others' experiences of place. Public topography shows people that small

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Geographer"; Hart, "The Highest Form of the Geographer's Art"; Lewis, "Beyond Description"; Abler, "What Shall We Say?"; Demko, "Geography Beyond the Ivory Tower."

[56] Personal conversation with Prof. Jonathan Smith, 15 April 2016.

places are important and interesting, not just as case studies or as illustrations of national or universal phenomena, but as unique and special entities in and of themselves.

Public topography is not a resuscitation of the old English topographies, nineteenth century American local history, or the old "mug books." It is a reformulation of the venerable tradition of place writing for a new century. I contend that such a reformulation has three essential features. First, public topography is inherently geographical. Second, its primary purpose is to teach people to appreciate particular places, not abstract concepts of place. And third, public topography is engaging, delivered in a way that resonates with modern sensibilities and grabs the attention of the general public. I also argue that there are at least three strategies for facilitating the appreciation of a place through public topography: an explanatory approach, focused on an intellectual understanding of a place; a poetic approach, centered on the aesthetic, emotional, and subjective aspects of locality; and an experiential approach that encourages the direct appreciation of a place. The next two sections will describe each of these essential features and strategies in more detail.

Three Essential Features of Public Topography

Public Topography Is Inherently Geographical

The first essential feature of public topography is that it is inherently *geographical*. Since ancient times, topography has been closely related to geography and chorography, and the idea of place has long been a central concept within geography. Geographers are thus the logical heirs to the topographic tradition. While all topics that

expand our understanding of a particular place are theoretically suitable for inclusion in public topography, this geographic connection to topography means that we should first approach places from the point of view of the geographic traditions. Geographers may argue about what exactly constitutes those traditions, but I suggest the use of Alan Baker's "four principal discourses of geography" (which is descended from Pattison's four traditions of geography) simply because this has proven to be a durable schema, and because it covers many of the core practices of geography.[57]

Baker proposed four major areas of geographic enquiry: landscape, environment, location, and regions. Landscape refers to the natural and cultural features we see on the surface of the earth; environment to the relationship between humans and the natural world around them; location to the spatial relationships between things and places; and regions to the study of interrelated phenomena within their locational contexts. In thinking about what might go into a public topography, then, we ought to start with these traditions.

In terms of landscape, we might explore why an area lacks significant relief; why certain types of trees prosper there; or why a particular architectural style is prominent. In thinking about environment, we might consider how the soil and climate influence the types of crops that are grown in an area; how natural hazards like flooding or drought have influenced economic and cultural practices; or how human activity has influenced the natural flora and fauna of a place over time. Thinking about spatial relationships

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[57] Baker, *Geography and History*, 7-8; Pattison, "The Four Traditions of Geography."

might lead us to consider the ways in which racial, ethnic, and income groups are spatially distributed within a place; the situation of a city in relation to other cities and transportation networks; or the way in which different types of land use are allocated within a county. Contemplating these topics from geography's regional perspective, we attempt to synthesize all of this information and describe the features that make a place unique as well as those that make it part of broader spatial systems.

It is this focus on the geographic traditions that distinguishes topography from its sibling local history. While there will often be considerable overlap between the two fields, the difference is largely a matter of emphasis. If we think of topography as geography at a small scale, then we can think of the relationship between public topography and local history as analogous to the relationship between their parent fields of geography and history. As Baker wrote,

> Geography and history are different ways of looking at the world but they are so closely related that neither one can afford to ignore or even neglect the other. Moreover, each of them offers not just one perspective upon the world but multiple perspectives upon the characters of peoples, places and periods … The fundamental difference between them is better expressed in terms of history's focus upon periods and geography's focus upon places, fully recognising that both periods and places were (and are) peopled and were (and are) constructed and experienced by people. Historical geographers tell us stories about how *places* have been created in the past by people in their own image, while historians tell us different stories about how *periods* have been created in the past by people in their own image.[58]

It is because of this close relationship between geography and history that topography and local history were so frequently interwoven in the English county writings and

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[58] Baker, *Geography and History*, 3-4.

American local histories. Topography is inherently historical, but its focus is not on history. Local history asks the question, "What happened here?", while public topography asks the question, "What is this place like, and how did it get to be this way?"

Public Topography Teaches People to Appreciate Particular Places

The second essential feature of public topography is that its purpose is to teach people to appreciate *particular* places. As I have said, the kind of appreciation I am referring to here is the same kind that we mean when we talk about art or music appreciation. Music becomes more interesting when one can, for example, recognize variations on a motif, understand the differences between major and minor keys, distinguish the various instruments of the orchestra, and understand how a composer fits within the context of the history of music. In the same way, even a familiar place becomes more interesting when one can distinguish between its various types of wildflowers, understand the historical and cultural significance of its buildings, recognize the songs of local birds, and contextualize the founding of a town within the history of settlement of a region. Just as art appreciation teaches the student to see a painting in a new way by opening his mind to details like composition, color, and brush stroke, public topography seeks to help people see the complex details of a place in new ways, transforming a relationship with place from one of ignorance and uninterest to one of curiosity and discovery. While the relationship of a place to larger scales is an important part of topography, the emphasis is on appreciating the particularity of place.

It is vital to emphasize that the purpose of public topography is not to teach people to appreciate "place" in some abstract sense, or to teach principles for learning to appreciate *all* places. Rather, the emphasis in public topography is on a particular place: *this* town, *this* city, *this* county.

Nor is public topography a set of case studies: its purpose is not to profile a place as an example of a general type, although this style of explanation may often be a useful tool for topographers. It may be highly instructive, for example, to explain the physical layout of a Texas railroad town in terms of a generic model of railroad towns.[59] But unlike most scholarly writing, in which the particular's only purpose is often to prove the general, public topography seeks to foster an appreciation of a unique place. Thus an explanation of the ways in which a particular Texas railroad town *differs* from other similar towns—for instance, why it became a rail hub while its neighbor did not—would be just as necessary in a public topography as explaining how this town fits a general model. Part of the mission of public topography, then, is to help people not only to see places as part of a greater whole, but to help them develop a taste for the uniqueness of places as well.

This desire to connect people with, and educate them about, individual places means that public topography has much in common with traditional travel writing. The American cultural and literary historian Paul Fussell has pointed out that traditionally, travel was considered to be not a holiday, but work (the word is etymologically related to

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[59] For an example of this style of geographic writing, see Hudson, "Settlement of the American Grassland."

the Latin word for an instrument of torture).[60] Until the advent of leisure tourism, travel was considered a form of study, with the purpose of improving the mind, and extensive travel guides, like the 34-volume Medieval Town Series, were written with this end in mind. The true travel memoir was conceived to be "a record of inquiry and a report of the effect of the inquiry on the mind and imagination of the traveler."[61] But the modern tourist guide, Fussell maintained, is in contrast a type of literature that facilitates "passive travel" and is more akin to "chatting" and "smug boasting" than serious reflection on the nature of a place.[62]

Public topography is thus more akin to traditional travel writing than modern tourism guides in that it encourages a deeper understanding of and interaction with place. What chiefly distinguishes public topography from travel writing (aside from the specifically geographic nature of public topography) is the fact that while travel writing is focused primarily on the far-away, the foreign, and the exotic,[63] public topography is written chiefly for residents. It will certainly appeal to visitors, but its primary audience is not composed of transients and tourists. By presenting familiar places through new lenses, public topography aspires to make residents see their homes in a way that makes them as exciting as the foreign ports-of-call that are the subject of much travel writing.

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[60] Fussell, *Abroad*, 39. Francis Bacon also makes much the same point in his essay "Of Travel."

[61] Fussell, *Abroad*, 39.

[62] Ibid., 40.

[63] Ibid., 203.

Public Topography Engages the General Public

The third essential feature of public topography is that it must engage the general public. Public topography's primary audience is not the academic researcher, the university student, or the policy professional, but the curious and intelligent non-specialist. She may be a visitor, a newcomer, or a longtime resident of the place in question, with enough interest in her surroundings to give a topography a chance. But we must assume that she is essentially a voluntary audience. She reaps no reward from an engagement with topography other than the satisfaction of curiosity, and perhaps a certain amount of entertainment. Her "ability to exit," therefore, is much higher than that of a professional reading an academic journal, or a student auditing a lecture, and topography must thus compete for her attention with any number of other ways she could spend her leisure time.

Public topography must consequently be far more engaging than an academic journal article or college lecture, and at least in presentation more akin to feature journalism, travel writing, and popular literature. It cannot be delivered in the "just-the-facts" approach of a business report or a hard news story. Unlike the encyclopedic English topographies and early American local histories, public topography must weave description and explanation into a compelling narrative that the audience is loathe to put down. Early topographies were essentially reference tomes; the new public topography must be far more enjoyable.

To do this, topographers must take note of the ways in which today's popular media grab and hold an audience. The voice of topographic writing, for example, must

be more inviting than the voice of academia or hard-news journalism. Topographers will have to employ many of the techniques of good storytellers, including descriptive language, conflict, suspense, sympathetic characters, and dialogue. And they must be willing to step outside the confines of the topographic book, which for centuries was the primary way, aside from oral history, of educating people about places. Even Meinig, writing in the 1970s, advocated principally for *books* about places. But the twenty-first century has ushered in many more options for delivering topographic content, and confining topography to books is simply antiquarian. Radio, television, websites, podcasts, smartphone apps, YouTube channels, museums, theater, and public art can all qualify as public topography, as long as the principle purpose is to further the public's understanding of a specific place.

Topographers must also keep in mind that modern audiences are much more variegated than in the past. The old English topographies and early American local histories were written by and for a cultural elite. Modern American audiences, however, would find the family trees of local notables of little interest. Public topography must strive to reach a much broader and more diverse audience by exploring the making of specific places from numerous perspectives. This is not simply a matter of social justice or political correctness. Telling the story of a place from more than one point of view adds variety and interest, and even well-known places can be made to seem fresh and interesting when described through unfamiliar lenses.

None of this emphasis on the public nature of topography requires that it should be of an inferior quality to scholarly work. Public topography should be as factually

correct and well-researched as any academic journal article. But the content must be delivered in a much more attractive and accessible package if it is to achieve its purpose of engaging general audiences.

Three Strategies for Public Topography

Good public topography, then, should be both geographical and engaging to the public, with the ultimate aim of encouraging the appreciation of particular places. But how does one go about producing this kind of topography? Chapters III, IV, and V will examine several exemplary topographic works to see how this can be done. Each of these works employs one or more of what we may call *topographic strategies*. These are the *explanatory strategy*, the *poetic strategy*, and the *experiential strategy.* Each of these approaches represents an ideal type, a particular way of describing a place that emphasizes some of its aspects while de-emphasizing others. Few works employ only one of these strategies, but some hew more closely to these ideal types than others. As we shall see in Chapter V, some of the most successful topographic works artfully blend these strategies into hybrid approaches that combine the strengths of each.

The Explanatory Strategy

The geographer Pierce Lewis has long been a proponent of place writing for the general public. In his 1985 Presidential Address to the Association of American Geographers, Lewis argued that the central purpose of geography should be to provide the public with what it really wants from geographers—that is, "an accurate and vivid

description of the surface of the earth."[64] He proposed that one approach to providing such descriptions is the *intellectual* approach, which involves explaining why places are located where they are, how that location has influenced the development of that place, and how the lessons learned there can apply to other places.

This intellectual mode of geography storytelling is akin to what we will call the *explanatory* strategy of topography, which seeks to explain how a place functions and how it came to be that way. Contrast this with the old English topographies and early American local histories, which were primarily catalogs of descriptive facts, or in the case of the nineteenth century "mug books," a form of assembly-line storytelling and self-gratification. Explanatory topography does more than simply catalog or describe facts about a place, or shoehorn them into a familiar narrative—it integrates, synthesizes, and interprets data about a place to show how it became what it is.

When we consider a local church, for example, we are not simply interested in a description of its architectural details and a list of the tombs in its graveyard. Instead, we are interested in questions such as, where did the materials come from? Who built it? Who financed it? Why was it built in this specific spot? How is it similar to or different from other churches being built nearby, in other parts of the country, at the same time, before and after? Do its architectural elements have some meaning beyond simple decoration? Who worshipped there? What was a period worship service like? How did the construction of this church fit into broader regional and national movements in

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[64] Lewis, "Beyond Description," 466.

religion, culture, and architecture? These are the types of questions that explanatory topography seeks to answer. This strategy encourages an intellectual appreciation of place by going beyond the simple recording of surface details and the easy retelling of familiar myths. It takes the facts of a place and connects them within an intellectual context, making them relevant and understandable in a way that illuminates the distinctiveness of each particular place.

The Poetic Strategy

Lewis contrasted this intellectual style of geographic writing with a second style that he termed the *aesthetic*, a kind of writing meant to engender strong emotions about a place through "description so vivid that it moves our emotions by the sheer power of its clarity and beauty, without any necessary attempt to move our minds."[65] Lewis's aesthetic approach to geography is similar to the second of our three topographic strategies, what we will call *poetics*.

The term poetics is most famously associated with Aristotle's analysis of theatrical and poetic works, in which the philosopher attempts to identify the principles for their proper construction. Aristotle held that poetry, by which he meant both theater and verse, is capable of expressing truth in non-positivistic ways—in other words, it communicates truths that are not simply matters of fact. From this perspective, Aristotle's *Poetics* can be read as a rebuttal to Plato's attack on art as irrational,

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[65] Ibid., 469.

emotional, and misleading.[66] In Aristotle's view, poetry is not a diversion from the balanced life, but an integral component of it. Tragedy, for example, does not merely arouse a sense of pity—it leads to the purging of pent-up emotions, bringing about a more balanced emotional state for the audience.[67] Poetry does not provide simple exposition or entertainment: it also possesses the capability to affect a deep and positive spiritual change in the receiver. If the purpose of rhetoric is to convince a person to do or believe something, then the purpose of poetics is to make the audience *feel* something. Poetics in general can thus be thought of as a "theory of language that moves you" through persuasive images.[68]

Like Aristotle's poetry, poetic writing about place seeks to make an emotional or spiritual impact on the reader. A poetic approach to topography is not focused on *explaining* a place from an intellectual perspective, from the point of view of the scientist. It is primarily an *aesthetic* description, from the point of view of the artist, that attempts to touch the reader's senses and emotions. The radiant beauty of a sunset, the electric excitement of a thunderstorm, the pride of local heroism, the poignancy of cultural loss—all of these are unmeasurable, empirically unjustifiable characteristics of a

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[66] House, *Aristotle's Poetics*; Janko, *Poetics I;* Culler, *Literary Theory.*

[67] Janko, *Poetics I.*

[68] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*; Culler, *Literary Theory*. The phrase "a theory of language that moves you" comes from a personal conversation with Prof. Jonathan Smith.

place that nevertheless contribute to its sense of place and which can only be conveyed through poetics.[69]

In addition to moving the reader through its powerful descriptions, poetic topography can also move its audience through a focus on personal experiences with and relationships to a particular place. These are also aspects of place that cannot be simply observed and measured—they are the result of a complex web of lived experiences and emotions that are created through interaction with a place. Memoirs and oral histories of a place, for example, can be poetic approaches to place writing that allow us to glimpse this more personal and intimate component of place.

Poetics, in short, is the aesthetic and subjective counterpoint to the intellectual and objective explanation. It acknowledges that place is not only understood with the head—it is experienced with the heart as well, and for this reason we can never completely describe a locality in objective terms alone. We might describe an area in terms of its average precipitation, minimum and maximum temperature, soil types, median income, racial composition, and population density, but unless we vividly describe its aesthetic features and tell the stories of its human experiences and emotions, we have not done it justice. This is one reason why Meinig calls environmental appreciation a humanity, not a science. Places are unique, like works of art, and they require an understanding of context and human experience to be understood. Poetic topography, like Aristotle's poetry, recognizes that place writing should be more than

[69] Certainly these aspects of place are subjective, and different writers will have different feelings about the same event. This does not make them any less true. It simply means that there is never one official topography of a place.

description or diversion—it should move us by speaking truths that science cannot speak. As Blaise Pascal famously wrote, "the heart has reasons, which reason doth not comprehend."[70] Reason alone can never explain the beauty of a landscape, or the complicated emotions associated with a strong personal attachment to a place.[71]

The Experiential Strategy

A third strategy that topographers may use is the *experiential strategy.* While the explanatory and poetic approaches seek to kindle appreciation for a place by providing second-hand knowledge of it, experiential topography encourages its audience to gain knowledge of a place through first-hand interaction. Let us compare topography to the appreciation of a fine painting. Explanatory topography explains why and how a particular painting came to be. Poetic topography describes the emotions the painting evokes, and the relationships and experiences surrounding the work. Experiential topography, by contrast, asks us to try our hand at painting the masterpiece itself, in order to learn first-hand the skill required to create it, and to form a personal, kinesthetic connection with the work. Explanatory topography typically does this through the use of tour guides and field guides, which we shall consider in Chapter V. Its hallmark is that it encourages its audience to learn about a place by getting out and experiencing it, rather than by simply reading about it. In some ways, this may be the most powerful

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[70] Pascal, *Monsieur Pascall's Thoughts, Meditations, and Prayers*, 202.

[71] Reason cannot comprehend, for example, why people find the idea of Le Corbusier's "machines for living in" repugnant, but the heart has its own reasons for doing so.

topography of all, since personal experience often produces the most memorable connections with information.

Conclusion

Chapter II argued that healthy attachment to place is something that we ought to encourage. This chapter has argued that the best way to do this is by fostering an appreciation for places through the use public topography, a reimagining of an old geographic tradition. Based on that goal, we have outlined three essential elements of good topography and three strategies for producing it. The next two chapters will provide some suggestions, structured around these elements and strategies, for the writing of book-length topographies based on an analysis of great examples of place writing.

I want to make it clear, however, that I am not trying to dictate *rules* for topography. Meinig declared that his project of environmental appreciation would need not a template, but a variety of experiments. I wholly agree. What I seek to provide here are *suggestions* for public topography based on its purpose as I see it, and on what strike me as successful examples in this genre. Others have, and undoubtedly will, discover their own paths to exemplary place writing. I am attempting here to develop a general philosophy of topography, not an exact science.

CHAPTER IV

EXPLANATORY AND POETIC APPROACHES TO TOPOGRAPHIC WRITING

Chapter III made the case that place appreciation can be facilitated through public topography, and it laid out the essential features and strategies for this type of place education. This chapter and the next will examine some exemplary specimens of place-writing to find out what makes them so successful. This chapter focuses on explanatory and poetic topography, while Chapter V is concerned with experiential topography and hybrid approaches.

Data and Methods

The books discussed in this chapter and the next were selected from a much larger pool of books about places drawn from several sources. Every issue of *Geographical Review* and *The Annals of the Association of American Geographers* between approximately 1900 and 1950, for example, was examined for reviews of topographic books. In other cases, books were added to the list through the recommendations of well-known geographers or other experts on place-based writing. Some were written by well-known geographers, and some were included because they had won awards or simply because they sold well. This search resulted in an initial pool of approximately 200 books.

This larger pool was then reduced to a sample of 28 books that were analyzed using a set of questions derived from the essential features of topography and the topographic strategies. Nine were eventually selected for detailed description here. These final nine books were selected first and foremost because they fulfill many of the requirements for topography proposed in Chapter III, and because each book selected is exemplary in at least one of those areas. A primary characteristic of these books, for example, is that they encourage the appreciation of a particular place. In keeping with the scale of place outlined in Chapter II, most of these books focus on relatively small places, meaning smaller than the scale of a U.S. state, and frequently on the scale of a few U.S. counties or smaller. Not only does this scale accord with our definition of place, but this is a scale at which it is possible for a person to really see and get to know a place over time, in a way that is quite difficult for the average person to do at larger scales. In a few cases, the books focus on much larger areas, but these examples are included because their approach can be easily adapted for smaller scales. In all of these books, the place is a central character in the story, not just the setting or a supporting member of the cast.

In keeping with the "public" aspect of public topography, all of the books presented here are written in plain language and are easily accessible to general audiences. None was intended primarily for academic audiences, nor do they require any prior knowledge of specialized concepts or language. While they vary in their ability to engage and hold the attention of general audiences, all are books that the average person with an interest in a place might willingly read. All of the books touch on one or more of

the geographic traditions described in Chapter III, and all are examples of explanatory, poetic, or experiential topography, or a combination of these approaches. Only non-fiction books are considered. While novels and short stories often relate a strong sense of place, public topography as defined here is a non-fiction genre. Finally, all of the books in these two chapters are in English, and all are focused on places in the United States.

In Chapter III we noted that books are not the only media for promoting place appreciation—the goals of topography can be achieved through wide variety of other media, one of which we will consider in Chapter VI. One may wonder, then, why an analysis of topographic books occupies two chapters in this work. Despite fierce competition from digital platforms, books are still a uniquely useful medium for communicating complex geographic ideas. Authors of books have far more liberty to present evidence, develop arguments, and expound on themes, than, for example, the producers of even very long film documentaries. Books tend to have more longevity than media that depend on electronic delivery, like websites or TV programs, and books still maintain an air of authority that more ephemeral media forms lack. Although books are not as popular as they once were, they remain a powerful way to educate people about places. And because books have long been the primary means for educating people about places, they represent the largest existing sample of topography.

The books in this chapter and the next have been grouped into four categories based on the topographic strategies they best represent: explanatory topographies, poetic topographies, experiential topographies, and topographies that hybridize these approaches. For stylistic purposes, these topographic strategies are also referred to

throughout this discussion as approaches, modes, or styles. In the pages that follow, we will consider each of these categories in turn, assessing its pros and cons and describing what lessons might be learned for public topography based on the sample books. At the end of Chapter V, we will consider some lessons that apply to all four categories.

Explanatory Topography

Chapter III argued that good public topography is not only descriptive, but explanatory as well. Public topography cannot just describe what a place is like —it must also explain how it functions and how and why it came to be the way it is. This explanatory approach towards place writing has a strong tradition in the discipline of geography, particularly in the subfield of cultural geography. In this section we will consider two examples of great explanatory topography: Pierce Lewis's *New Orleans: The Making of an Urban Landscape*, and Frances Dunwell's *The Hudson River Highlands*.

New Orleans: The Making of an Urban Landscape

The geographer Pierce Lewis's classic book *New Orleans: The Making of an Urban Landscape* is an excellent model for explanatory topography. Originally published as a short volume of three chapters in 1976, the book was updated and republished in 2003 with five new chapters describing the changes that New Orleans has

undergone in the intervening 27 years.[1] Both the original book and the second edition have been lauded by geographers.[2] The book has been called "a model of how to do urban geography,"[3] and has been hailed as a classic of historical geography. Throughout the book, Lewis uses geographic theory to explain how broad forces and trends have been influenced by the city's unique location and history to create one of the most distinctive urban landscapes in North America.

Lewis begins with an overview of the city itself, explaining the characteristics that make New Orleans unique: its foreignness, its visual character, its dependence on water-borne trade, and its status as a physical, cultural, and economic island. Lewis then analyzes the city in terms of two time-tested geographic concepts, site and situation, to tease out the city's complicated relationship with the Mississippi River and its surroundings. In the final chapter of the 1976 edition, he examines the stages of the city's metropolitan growth in four chronological phases: New Orleans as a European City, as an American Western capital, as a maturing city, and as a modern city amalgamated with its suburbs. In the second section, written nearly 30 years later, Lewis describes the major changes to the city that have occurred since the first edition, beginning with the extensive redevelopment of the riverfront areas and the port, then moving to the dramatic metropolitan crises precipitated by the 1980s oil bust. Lewis next

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[1] The major social changes that have befallen New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, however, would make a third edition most welcome.

[2] Jones, "Review of *New Orleans*"; Sinclair, "Review of *New Orleans*"; Crutcher, "Review of *New Orleans*"; Hagelman, "Review of *New Orleans.*"

[3] Sinclair, "Review of *New Orleans*," 117.

examines the impact of these sea changes on the city's population geography, and he considers the growing importance of the tourist industry. His final chapter, written only two years before Hurricane Katrina, is a prescient warning about the vulnerability of New Orleans to floods and hurricanes.

One reason that Lewis's topography is so compelling is that, unlike the early English and American topographers, Lewis does not simply describe a place: he explains how it came to be the way it is in clear and compelling language. In Chapter III, for example, Lewis takes what could be a deadly dull topic—the site, or physical setting, of New Orleans—and does a masterful job of explaining how natural levees, local elevation, drainage patterns, soils, climate, and natural transportation routes have all had a profound influence on the development of New Orleans. Similarly, Lewis explains with a storyteller's flair the processes that influenced the development of the city's urban landscape, including street patterns, architecture, port facilities, and the explosive rise of the suburbs. Lewis does an equally fine job of demystifying the city's spatial patterns of land use, race and class, economic activity, and tourism. From beginning to end, Lewis integrates and synthesizes these various geographic processes and their results into a coherent narrative that leaves the reader with a clear understanding of how history and geography have created the New Orleans we see today.

Throughout these explanations, Lewis deftly shows how large-scale abstract forces are influenced by local geographic and historical conditions to create a unique sense of place. Frequently he does this by setting New Orleans within a national context and comparing and contrasting it with other cities under similar conditions. In describing

the mid-1980s oil bust that eviscerated the New Orleans oil industry, for example, Lewis explains with just the right amount of detail how turbulence in international oil markets and global politics precipitated the crisis, and why the implications were different for New Orleans than for Houston. Likewise, Lewis tells the intertwined stories of gentrification and the rise of a strong gay culture in New Orleans, noting both similarities and differences with other cities, like San Francisco, that have undergone similar transitions. A comparable pattern can be seen in Lewis's description of the process of white flight and central city deterioration in New Orleans, which Lewis sets against the backdrop of national urban trends, while at the same time explaining how local history and geography influenced the results. These descriptions of how, why, and to what extent New Orleans converges or diverges from larger patterns strikes a harmonious balance between two extremes: at one end, the view that places are mere reflections of national and global trends, and at the other, the equally extreme idea that places are worlds unto themselves, with no connections to the larger outside world.

Lewis's perspective as a geographer is evident everywhere in the book. The influence of the environment tradition in geography is clear in his analysis of the city's physical site as well as in the discussion of natural hazards like flooding and hurricanes. The location tradition is obvious in discussions of the spatial distributions of race, class, and economic activity. Landscape is also a central feature of Lewis's narrative, in the form of explanations of vernacular and commercial architecture, the transformation of the Riverwalk, and the impact of tourism on the built environment.

This focus on the geographic perspective is one reason why the book is so engaging for general audiences. Unlike historians, who focus primarily on events of the past, Lewis starts with the landscape that we see today, and then uses history to explain its evolution. This is a powerful way to interest people in a place, because it starts with the things they see. Moreover, Lewis's geographic perspective, though familiar to geographers, feels like a fresh and innovative way to understand a city to those unaccustomed to it. The lack of geographic education in American schools means that few Americans have ever been introduced to geographic ideas in any systematic way. Although regrettable, this unfamiliarity can be an advantage to topographers, since the simple act of viewing the world through a geographic lens can pique a reader's curiosity and draw him in.

The book has other features as well that make it attractive to general audiences. Foremost among these is Lewis's eminently readable writing style. His prose is not weighed down by heavy abstractions or technical language. Rather, theoretical concepts are always explained in plain language and grounded in local description. His prose is energetic and at times witty, his diction is superb, and his sentence structure pleasing and varied, making the book a pleasure to read. While his focus is not on landscape description per se, Lewis occasionally paints vivid word pictures of the New Orleans area, as when he describes St. Tammany Parish, where rapid suburban growth has been overlain on a traditional Upland South landscape. Lewis always seems to use just the right amount of detail. Whereas some place writers become bogged down in the minutia of local history, Lewis's explanations possess depth without becoming overwhelming.

Rather than inundating the reader with names and dates likely to be soon forgotten, Lewis takes a more restrained approach, and the result is that themes are better understood and retained. Lewis's extensive use of maps is also a major draw. As a geographer, he clearly understands the power of good maps in geographic description. Taken together, all of these features result in a book that engages the intellect while at the same time remains enjoyable to read.

Viewed as a work of public topography, the book is not perfect. While it certainly gives readers a good intellectual appreciation of New Orleans, there is no attempt to suggest how readers might get out and experience the city for themselves. The cartography, originally produced for the 1976 edition, is outdated and could stand revision. And while Lewis's vivid writing style and attachment to the city certainly make this more than simple exposition, there is little attempt to engage the vibrant human communities and daily life that constitutes much of New Orleans's character. None of these criticisms are necessarily deficiencies of the book—they are simply the result of decisions made by the author and publisher on what the book should attempt to achieve. Later in this chapter and in the next, we will examine some books that make excellent use of these more aesthetic and experiential aspects of topography.

The Hudson River Highlands

Frances Dunwell's *The Hudson River Highlands* is another fine example of explanatory topography. Like Lewis's *New Orleans*, Dunwell's book has received praise

from reviewers.[4] But rather than focusing on one of America's great urban areas, Dunwell centers her narrative on one of the nation's most scenic and historic waterways, a 15-mile portion of the Hudson River in southeastern New York known as the Hudson Highlands. The book traces the history of the area from colonial times to the present, focusing less on the spatial and morphological themes that Lewis favors, and more on the historical processes that have led to the creation of the region's unique landscape and its meaning within American culture.

One reason that Dunwell's book is successful as explanatory topography is that, like Lewis, she uses history not as an object of study itself, but as a way of showing how the landscapes of the Highlands came to be. In the first chapter, for example, Dunwell describes in easy-to-understand terms the geology and geomorphology of the Highlands, and how the resulting rocky soils and dramatic relief delayed development and kept the region wild and inhospitable longer than adjacent areas. This forbidding physical geography, coupled with the region's position along a major commercial waterway that also served as a significant barrier to east-west land travel, made it a strategic choke point during the Revolutionary War, an event which also inscribed itself into the landscape and toponymy of the Highlands. Monuments to important wartime events continue to dot the region, for example, and the ruins of Revolutionary-era defensive positions such as Fort Putnam still stand. New names for places and features in the Highlands first appeared on military maps during this period, Dunn explains, and the

[4] See Duffy, "Review of *The Hudson River Highlands*," and Terrie, "*Review of The Hudson River Highlands*." Although both of these reviewers laud Dunwell's work, for some reason academic geographers seem not to have given the book much notice.

famous U.S. Military Academy at West Point was established shortly after the war on the site of a crucial wartime fort.

The landscape began to change once again in the early nineteenth century as America's largest and most modern iron foundry was founded at nearby Cold Spring, and demand for furnace fuel led to the deforestation and environmental degradation of the area. Dunn details how local industry foundered in the mid- to late nineteenth-century, and how the comparative fresh air and wild scenery of the Highlands gave it a reputation as a healthy and therapeutic refuge from disease-ridden New York City. Construction of mountain resorts and vacation lodgings changed the landscape of the area yet again, and local names were purposely changed from their supposedly duller and more prosaic antecedents, like Butter Hill, to more dramatic and poetic appellations, such as Storm King Mountain, which was thought to be more in keeping with the region's new character as a wilderness get-away. At the same time, the Highlands was becoming a suburb for wealthy railroad barons, who began to build many of the grand estates and homes that can still be seen in the area today. Dunn tells of a gradual crescendo of conservation efforts that resulted in much of the Highlands being protected as a state park in the early twentieth century, and the way in which the landscape was altered by the construction of highways, bridges, and tunnels during the same period. Dunwell's topical and chronological approach goes a long way towards helping the reader understand how the landscape of the Hudson Highlands has changed over time, and how the elements of its current landscape have been successively lain down through the years.

A second reason why Dunwell's account of the Highlands is a strong example of explanation in topography is that, like Lewis, Dunwell does an excellent job of showing why the Highlands are unique, while at the same time placing them within their larger regional and national context. In her account of the region's rise as a popular nineteenth century tourist destination, for example, she gives a clear and detailed picture of the experience of a contemporary tourist, drawn from diaries, guidebooks, paintings, and other period accounts. But she also seats this detailed local description within a larger framework of changes in transportation technology, nationalism, attitudes towards nature, and art. Similarly, the story of the drive to create a public park to preserve the beauty of the Highlands is told primarily from the local and regional perspective, but the narrative is also enriched by references to contemporary national trends in conservation and preservation. Likewise, Dunwell's description of the struggle to prevent environmental deterioration in the Highlands is solidly based in local history, but her explanation of its contribution to the national environmental movement gives it added scope and importance. Like Lewis, Dunwell successfully highlights the individuality of the place without forgetting that it exists within a web of external relationships.

Dunwell does not confine her explanation solely to the physical evolution of the landscape—she also explains how people have perceived the Highlands over time. During the colonial period, for instance, Dunwell uses evidence from travelers' accounts, journals, maps, and folklore to show that the Highlands were seen by early settlers as a threatening place, plagued by dangers both natural and supernatural. During the war, the region came to be seen as crucible of American heroism and national identity,

inextricably bound up with Revolutionary heroes, like George Washington, and the American fight for independence. Later, in the early eighteenth century, a new interest in the beauty of wilderness, combined with the works of local Romantic painters like Thomas Cole and writers like Washington Irving, gave the region an aesthetic and spiritual appeal. Other events of the eighteenth century, such as the establishment of West Point, the region's rise in popularity as a tourism destination, its establishment as an influential center for picturesque landscape design, and its colonization by wealthy industrialists, all combined to give the region considerable social cachet and embed it within the national consciousness. In the twentieth century, the Highlands came to be seen as a battleground for preservation against environmental damage from industry, and it became the focal point of a national fight over the construction of a major power plant along the river. For Dunwell, this is not just the story of how a landscape came to be—it is the story of how a place became a sacred place. Dunwell chronologically layers meaning upon meaning, showing how the various perceptions of the Hudson Highlands have accreted over time to form a place that has come to be viewed as a national treasure because of its scenic and historic importance.

This interpretation of the Highland's history as the story of the sacralization of a place comes directly from Dunwell's perspective as a conservationist and environmentalist, as well as from her personal experiences with the region. For decades before and since writing this book, Dunwell has been an active conservationist and preservationist in the Hudson Highlands. As both her Preface and Epilogue make clear, her explicit goal is to communicate to others the history and beauty of the Highlands, in

the hope that they will be moved to protect this place and others like it. Her story of the Highlands is essentially a justification for their importance and a call to action for their protection. This purpose, one may note, resonates closely with the goals proposed for topography in Chapter III. True to the goals of public topography, Dunwell uses the history and geography of the Highlands to encourage appreciation, attachment, and ultimately stewardship of the region.

Like Pierce Lewis's account of New Orleans, Dunwell's *The Hudson River Highlands* is a prime example of explanatory topography. Dunwell ably uses the historical record to explain the evolution of this famous New York landscape over time, emphasizing both its uniqueness and its connection to regional and national processes. Dunwell also seeks to explain how the Highlands have been perceived during different historical periods, and how those various perceptions have been combined over time to create a landscape with layered meanings. Finally, Dunwell's work is an excellent lesson in the way that explanation in topography can be used to facilitate both place attachment and stewardship through intellectual appreciation.

Lessons in Explanatory Topography

What lessons can we learn about the practice of explanatory topography from these two works, especially in terms of the essential elements of topography proposed in Chapter III? To begin with, these books provide concrete examples of encouraging the appreciation of particular places through explanation and synthesis rather than simply description. Whereas older styles of topography were more like catalogs, modern public

topographies weave together the myriad aspects of a place into the story of how it came to be and how its development fits into broader contexts. Pierce Lewis explains with great skill the combination of local and national forces that shaped New Orleans into the city we see today, and Frances Dunwell does much the same for the Hudson Highlands. But at the same time, these authors also keep in view those features that make their subjects unique. Neither Lewis nor Dunn ever treats place as if it were shaped solely by deterministic outside forces. Rather, both authors recognize the way in which local conditions interact with wider processes to create different results.

Another lesson contained within these works is that explanatory topography is *intentional* about encouraging the appreciation of particular places. In other words, topographers do not write only with the intent of producing a detached scientific account of a place, but with the aim of fostering appreciation and attachment. Dunwell has been deeply involved in the protection of the Hudson Highlands for decades, and she makes it clear that her goal is to convince people to care for and preserve this place. Lewis has less personal experience of his subject than Dunwell, but he admits in his introduction that he has grown to love New Orleans, warts and all, and his enthusiasm for the city is clear in his text. These places are important to these authors, and their works are shaped by their desire to share what they know about them with a wider audience. This is not to say that all explanatory topographies should be laudatory—the stories of some places may be tragic, and Lewis recognizes that a rosy future for New Orleans is by no means certain. But what is important to realize is that explanatory topography *starts* with an intention to help readers move towards a fuller intellectual understanding of a place that

ultimately enriches the reader's relationship with it, and this intention cannot help but shape the resulting work.

These books also teach us that good explanatory topography can pull in and engage the public in at least two ways, with the first being through presentation. Books like these illuminate the evolution and function of places in a way that is aesthetically pleasing as well as educational. Topographers writing for the public must, like Lewis and Dunwell, hone their writing skills and become adept at explaining complex topics in clear, lively, and attractive language. In particular, they should work to master the art of descriptive, evocative writing about landscapes, a skill not often nourished in academia. Explanatory topographies do not have to be page-turners, but the kind of vivid prose that these writers employ can go a long way towards making them more enjoyable. Lewis and Dunwell also show that the use of high-quality maps, photos, and diagrams can liven up explanations of place, while at the same time furthering understanding.

The second way that explanatory topographies can engage and intrigue readers is by leveraging the third essential element of topography: the geographic perspective. The public's general unfamiliarity with geography as anything more than the memorization of maps means that topics like landscape change and meaning, perception of place, spatial relationships, and human-environment relationships can seem to be an entirely new way of looking at the world. Before Hurricane Katrina, for example, few New Orleanians likely gave much thought to the way that the physical conditions of the city's site have interacted with cultural processes to produce a city singularly at risk for hurricane-induced flooding. In the same way, it is likely that only the rarest of visitors to

the Hudson Highlands has thought to wonder how local and national perceptions of the area have evolved over time. Just by engaging the core traditions of geography, then, topographers have already staked out refreshingly uncommon perspectives that makes their works both attractive and thought-provoking for general audiences.

Poetic Topography

Explanatory topographies like those we have just considered are focused on helping people to understand places with their minds. Poetic topography, in contrast, attempts to make people understand places with their hearts. If explanatory topography is a "facts" based approach, then poetic topography is a "feelings" based approach. Poetic topography has two related aspects. First, poetic topography facilitates an *aesthetic* appreciation of place through descriptive language that appeals to and educates the reader's emotions and senses. Second, poetic topography provides the reader with *subjective* understandings of a place gained through exposure to the experiences and perspectives of people intimately involved with it. While explanatory topography tells the story of a place from the point of view of the outsider, the scientist, and the satellite, poetic topography describes a place from perspective of the insider, the artist, and the person-in-the-street. Poetic topography is the up-close and personal view of a place.

Southern Comforts: Rooted in a Florida Place

This aesthetic and subjective approach to place is at the core of Sudye Cauthen's *Southern Comforts: Rooted in a Florida Place*. Published in 2007 by The Center for

American Places and winner of a Florida Book Award for nonfiction, *Southern Comforts* is a collection of essays written between 1987 and 2007 about Cauthen's hometown of Alachua in northern Florida.[5] The book is divided into three parts. The first, written while the author lived in Alachua, focuses on the countryside and the rural hamlets surrounding the town. The second, written while Cauthen attended graduate school at the University of Mississippi, deals with the town itself. The third, written 15 years after the first two sections, describes Cauthen's return to Alachua after a long absence. In beautifully crafted prose, Cauthen blends together geography, oral history, memoir, and personal observation into what is less a wide-angle landscape portrait than a series of intimate snapshots of a place. Whereas the result of explanatory topographies like those written by Lewis and Dunwell is to create a sweeping panorama that makes a place intellectually intelligible across space and time, Cauthen's essays provide us brief but emotionally-charged glimpses of her own complicated relationship with Alachua.

Part of the complexity of that relationship stems from Cauthen's relationship with her parents. Cauthen associates the countryside around Alachua with her father, a farmer whose love for the rural life was matched only by that of his daughter's. Her joy at rambling the back roads around Alachua, exploring its landscapes, and recording the stories of its inhabitants is palpable in the first half of the book. Her poetic descriptions of cotton gins, crumbling graveyards, tobacco farms, church services, and fox hunts make her a kind of Floridian Charles Kuralt, and one can sense in her writing the strong

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[5] Like Dunwell's book on the Hudson Highlands, Cauthen's work seems to have escaped the notice of geographers. For reviews from other disciplines, see Hallock, Janz, and Pillatzki.

attachment she feels for this place. Her relationship with the town and her mother, on the other hand, is more complex. Cauthen's unease with, and "instinctual distaste" for, the town life that her mother prefers is clear in the second half of the book, as is her strained relationship with that stern maternal disciplinarian who is governed by the fear of what other townsfolk might think. Cauthen's eloquent descriptions of her childhood memories of town are a poignant mixture of love, regret, and sadness.

Another factor complicating Cauthen's relationship with Alachua is that for Cauthen, the past and present are always commingled in the landscape. Cauthen never sees Alachua only as it is, but also as it was, simultaneously projecting her personal memories of the past like an overlay onto the present. But as an avid student of archaeology, history, oral history, and folklore, she sees not only her own story in Alachua's surroundings, but those of others as well, from Native Americans, to Spanish explorers, to white ancestors, to black neighbors. For Cauthen, the past, present, personal, and public all share the same space, and the result is that her descriptions of Alachua often make it seem as if all of time were happening at once.

There are other, more familiar challenges for Cauthen's relationship with Alachua: the distance that comes from physical separation; the wistfulness and loss that come with age and change; anguish over the history of Southern race relations. But despite these complications, Cauthen never ceases to feel the irresistible pull of Alachua. For her, self and place are inextricably linked. It is impossible for her to tell the story of Alachua without at the same time wrestling with her own story. Facts of geography and history and descriptions of the landscape are intertwined with her own personal

narrative, and the reader often feels like both student and voyeur. The result is that one never gets the bird's eye view of place provided by Lewis or Dunwell—instead, one sees fragments of Alachua through the human lenses of memory and emotion, a perspective that rarely disturbs the calm surface of more expository kinds of topography. Cauthen confesses that she often felt too close to the town to write about it, and the kinds of incisive criticisms that she makes of her home must have required great courage to put to paper. Her pain is obvious, for instance, when a neighbor accuses her of being "a traitor to [her] people," and one suspects that these are the principal reasons for the book's long delay between the writing and the publication. For these reasons, Cauthen's work is a fine example of the subjective perspective of poetics.

But *Southern Comforts* also does an excellent job at the aesthetic side of poetics. Cauthen's writing is lyrical, literary, and pleasing—one reviewer aptly noted that it is the craft of writing, rather than history or geography, that takes center stage in the work.[6] The book is replete with descriptive writing that stirs the senses and emotions. From poetic descriptions of the physical geography of Florida, to revealing anecdotes about how power is wielded in a small town, to vignettes of creeping development and the disorientation it causes, Cauthen's writing is sensuous, descriptive, and emotionally powerful, if ultimately pessimistic.

Although Cauthen is not a geographer, *Southern Comforts* makes good use of geographic themes. Place, for example, is a central concept for Cauthen. The book is

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[6] Janz, "Review of *Southern Comforts*," 127.

structured is around the twin places of town and country, and much of the book describes Cauthen's struggle to understand the role that Alachua plays in her identity. Landscape is also a recurring topic for Cauthen, and her descriptions of urban, rural, past, present, and changing landscapes are compelling. Environment and the connection between land and people, whether Native Americans, tobacco farmers, or her cousin Leon, is also a strong theme in this work. The locational or spatial perspective gets somewhat short shrift, although Cauthen does consider Alachua's relative location as this affected its history, and she makes a point of describing the physical segregation of white and black neighborhoods in the town.

As to whether *Southern Comforts* teaches readers to appreciate Alachua as a place, the answer is a qualified yes. Cauthen gives us a deeply personal and complex glimpse into her own life and the life of the town. This is the quintessential insider's view, a perspective that is almost completely absent from works like Lewis's and Dunn's. But at the same time, we never feel like we see the big picture. The effect is like focusing on a series of beautiful and intricate tiles, without ever zooming out to see the mosaic they combine to create. The reader is left with a powerful emotional appreciation for Alachua, but is left wanting an intellectual understanding of the place.

Cauthen's emotional honesty, however, combined with the quality of her writing, is what draws the reader in and keeps him reading. Ultimately it is Cauthen's attention to both aspects of poetics—the subjective perspective and a sense of aesthetics—that makes *Southern Comforts* satisfying to read. It is not a cheerful story, and its author

never really seems to make peace with Alachua, but in the end she seems to simply accept the power that the place has over her:

> Fastened by my parent's lives and those of our ancestors whose ashes compose that venerable soil, I am forever wedded to place. Indisputably, I am marked by conflicting allegiances to the country in my father and the town in my mother. My family is the land, Victorianism, alcoholism, evangelicalism, fire and damnation, all as sweet to me as the dark ribbon of cane syrup Grandmother Cauthen poured into my clabber bowl at her kitchen table on the Monteocha farm.[7]

PrairyErth (A Deep Map)

If Sudye Cauthen's *Southern Comforts* is a poetic insider's account of a place, William Least Heat-Moon's *PrairyErth (a deep map)* is a poetic outsider's view. While Heat-Moon's best-selling and critically-acclaimed 1982 book *Blue Highways* described his 13,000 mile odyssey across the backroads of America, *PrairyErth*, which was published in 1991 and which spent three months on the *New York Times* Bestseller List,[8] is a rambling exploration of a much smaller area: a little-known patch of rolling prairie and pasture land in the Flint Hills of east-central Kansas known as Chase County.

It would be an understatement to say that Chase County is sparsely populated. In 1991, the county population was 3,013, with a population density of 4 people per square mile, and those numbers have changed little over the last 150 years. For a sense of

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[7] Cauthen, *Southern Comforts*, 133.

[8] As with Dunwell's and Cauthen's, Heat-Moon's writing seems to have flown under the radar of academic geographry journals. For a selection of reviews from other sources, see Klinkenborg, "Cameos of Kansas; Theroux, "The Wizard of Kansas"; Wydeven, "Review of *PrairyErth*"; and Sherow and Isern, "Review of *PrairyErth*."

perspective, there are 20 times more cattle in Chase County than people.[9] But despite its small size and relative obscurity, Heat-Moon gave Chase County six years of his careful attention, and *PrairyErth* is the result. The book is a collection of loosely connected essays that reveal the discoveries that Heat-Moon made during his ramblings around Chase County, and there seems to be hardly a corner of the place into which Heat-Moon failed to poke his nose.

His discoveries are organized geographically. The book is divided into 12 chapters, each named for and corresponding to the U.S. Geological Survey quadrangle that it describes. Each chapter is composed of a collection of quotes and five essays. The first essay of each chapter is always an overview of the area, while the last essay is always set in a local town (although a "town" in Chase County may contain as few as five people). Written in a personal and literary tone that is worlds apart from that used in more explanatory topographies like Lewis's and Dunn's, the essays blend a wide variety of topics and sources (including history, geography, landscape study, ecology, archeology, and oral history) with rich descriptions and first-person narrative to produce a portrait of a small place unusual for its style, depth, and heterogeneity.

Heat-Moon's prose excels on the aesthetic side of poetics, and much of what makes *PrairyErth* an engaging read is the author's exceptional skill with the English language. Particularly pleasing is his talent for using descriptive writing to bring the place, its landscape, and its people to life. His descriptions of the prairie itself are highly

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[9] U.S. Department of Agriculture, "Census of Agriculture."

evocative. While exploring the area around a prominent local hill, for example, he describes "gossamer strung out in the slow wind like pennants ten and twelve feet long and silver in the sun," while the hill pulls him toward itself "as if it were a stone vortex in a petrified sea."[10] The prairie is "a chamber of absences where the near was the same as the far,"[11] a "paradigm of infinity, a clearing full of many things except boundaries."[12] Even the air draws his attention: "I saw air, and I said, good god, look at all this air, and I recalled a woman saying, Seems the air here hasn't ever been used before."[13]

Many of the most memorable passages concern prairie fire, which for centuries has arisen like "a grizzly ravenous from hibernation,"[14] set on devouring everything in sight. His narrative of witnessing a prairie fire at night is especially vivid, as is his description of the role that fire plays in the seasonal battle between forest and prairie. "Chase County is setting itself afire as it does each spring so that the prairie may remain prairie here on this moist land between woodland and plains, where, at the edge, the last line of eastern trees waits like wolves watching just beyond the pale of the campfire."[15]

But even though Heat-Moon, a Missourian, is an outsider looking in on Chase County, *PrairyErth* shines in the way that it tells the story of a place through stories of the people closest to it. There is, for example, Slim the cowboy, one of the few

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[10] Heat-Moon, *PrairyErth,* location 1358.

[11] Ibid., location 1362.

[12] Ibid., location 1367-1369.

[13] Ibid., location 1374-1375.

[14] Ibid., location 1339.

[15] Ibid., location 1279-1280.

remaining traditional cowhands in the area, and a one-time fiddle player of local renown. There is also Blanch Schwilling, the octogenarian whose stubborn persistence and pride of place kept the town of Bazaar (population 12) alive long past its natural life span, and Jane Koger, the feminist rancher who runs her own all-female cattle operation. Some of the most compelling perspectives, however, come from those who have weathered the harshness of the plains' natural hazards: its fires, floods, droughts, and tornadoes. Residents of Saffordville like Tom Bridge and Edith McGregor explain the experience of living in a flood plain where flash floods are a regular occurrence, and the way in which the adversities they shared brought families together and sometimes tore them apart. Chase Countians also relate the terror of growing up in fear of tornadoes and the memories of their destruction. In this way, Heat-Moon uses the subjective perspective of poetics to create a window into the life-world of the inhabitants of a place.

Though many of these stories contain material from oral history interviews conducted by Heat-Moon, he also reaches further into the past for first-hand accounts of life on the prairie, quoting, for example, from the diaries of pioneer woman Elizabeth Marden, and from George Catlin's wonderfully dramatic 1841 account of a massive prairie fire. And while these various personal perspectives add much color to Heat-Moon's account of Chase County, they are never just simple window dressing—he uses each one to draw a larger portrait of life in Chase County through the years, focusing in particular on the relationship between the people and the land.

Geographic themes are strong in *PrairyErth*. Landscape, place, and the connection between people and the environment, for example, are major concerns for

Heat-Moon, and he ranges far and wide to investigate them. His landscape interests are broad, traveling from geomorphology, to botany, to toponymy, to graffiti, to archeology, to architecture, to cemeteries, to Main Streets, to ghost towns. He returns frequently to the ways in which the people of Chase County are influenced by the land and its climate, how they view their relationship with the land, and the impact that their actions have on the prairie ecology. In fact, Heat-Moon has made it known that one of his fundamental motivations for writing the book was his belief that modern Americans fail to sufficiently connect with their land and their history, a major problem in his view, because he sees the land and human respect for it as a vital source of moral and ethical values. Through the production of a deep and moving account of a place that many Americans think of as empty and boring, a virtually unknown place in a quintessential "fly-over" state, Heat-Moon hoped to show that the ordinary and the local are anything but boring. His aim was to prove that if attention to history and geography can make a tiny and obscure place in Kansas interesting, other people will recognize that the places they live have depth as well, and they will work to establish and nourish connections with those places.[16]

While *PrairyErth* is perhaps one of the best extant examples of the use of poetics in topography, it has its faults.[17] For one, it may be too much of a good thing: Heat-

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[16] O'Hara, *Return to PrairyErth*.

[17] The reviewer Thomas D. Isern is particularly critical, describing the book's organization as "scatterbrained," and complaining about topical selection bias, noting that "the impression is that the author looked for something in Chase County, didn't find it, and so wrote about himself instead." Isern, "Review of *Prairy Erth*," 108.

Moon is insatiably curious and anything but laconic, resulting in an exhaustiveness that led reviewer Paul Theroux to compare the book to Melville's *Moby Dick*, and not necessarily in a good way.[18] At 624 pages, this is a very long book about a very small place. Verlyn Klinkenborg, reviewing the book for the *L.A. Times*, suggested that "Six years—the length of time Heat-Moon spent in Chase County—would be about long enough for reading *PrairyErth."*[19] There is also Heat-Moon's tendency towards digression, which, when combined with the book's geographic structure and its attendant lack of narrative or rhetorical arc, results in a book that resembles a pleasant but ultimately destination-less amble across the countryside. "You can crack *PrairyErth* at almost any page and find something worth reading," writes Klinkenborg, "but it feels much less profitable to approach it as a 'thoroughfare reader' intent on getting somewhere."[20]

Like Cauthen's *Southern Comforts*, *PrairyErth*'s focus on the up-close view common to poetic works comes at the expense of the wide-angle view generally adopted by more explanatory authors. The end result is that the reader gets a more intuitive feeling for Chase County than a broad intellectual understanding of it. Heat-Moon's own advice for appreciating the prairie is also good advice for appreciating *PrairyErth*: "take the numbing distance in small doses and gorge on the little details that beckon."[21]

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[18] Theroux, "The Wizard of Kansas."

[19] Klinkenborg, "Cameos of Kansas."

[20] Klinkenborg, "Cameos of Kansas."

[21] Heat-Moon, *PrairyErth*, location 515.

PrairyErth is perhaps best described as a late 20th-century poetic reinterpretation of the old English topographies: Wydeven called it a "throwback to the American Renaissance."[22] Klinkenborg likewise described it as "a peculiarly nineteenth-Century work...a compilation of remarkable facts and stories that thread their way, non-sequentially, back in time,"[23] and Theroux likened the book to Gilbert White's *1789 Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne*, calling it "a home-grown oddity, something that would rather uncertainly be catalogued in a library under 'Topography.'"[24] Klinkenborg and Theroux especially seem to regard the book as a pleasant but quaint curiosity, which perhaps says more about our modern preference for classifying knowledge into abstract topical categories than it does about Heat-Moon's book. But despite its eccentric reputation, *PrairyErth* has much to teach topographers about the poetic use of language in the pursuit of the public appreciation of place.

Lessons in Poetic Topography

So what can these two books tell us about writing poetic topography? First of all, poetic topography, much more than explanatory topography, excels at teaching readers to appreciate how people interact with places at a personal level. Both Cauthen's account of Alachua and Heat-Moon's of Chase County, for instance, give strong voice to individual people who have deep knowledge and long experience of their respective places. Both

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[22] Wydeven, "Review of *PrairyErth*," 133.

[23] Klinkenborg, "Cameos of Kansas."

[24] Theroux, "The Wizard of Kansas."

authors also use multiple perspectives to tell the story of a place from different angles. Cauthen, for example, differentiates between the experiences of town folk and country folk, and whites and blacks, while Heat-Moon gives voice to the aged and the eccentric.

To maximize this advantage, topographers aiming to write poetic accounts of place should plan to spend a significant portion of their research time conducting interviews and reading primary sources such as journals and diaries. Similarly, authors of poetic topography will need to gain the skill of "putting themselves in their subjects' shoes" in order to render faithful accounts of the subjective experience of place. Topographers should also realize that this focus on differing subjective viewpoints can be both a strength and a weakness: poetic topographies allow us to see the fine detail we might miss in the wide-angle view of explanatory topography, but a strong bias towards the micro view sometimes makes it harder to appreciate the macro. The emphasis on real people and their experiences is nevertheless a strong draw for this type of topography, since readers are naturally interested in the stories of other people, often more so than they are interested in the abstract phenomena that predominate in explanatory topographies. Choosing the right balance between the close and wide perspectives may be one of the greatest challenges of writing topography.

Geographic topics are less obvious in poetic topographies than in explanatory topographies, but they are no less important to the approach. Themes like landscape change, landscape meaning, and spatial relationships tend to be woven into the stories of poetic topographies rather than being major topics for organization and discussion. Poetic writers must therefore think carefully about how these topics will be addressed in

their work to prevent this critical element of topography from becoming merely ornamental. Because of the focus on subjective experience, human-environment relationships will likely move to the foreground in most poetic topographies. *PrairyErth*, with its persistent focus on the culture-environment nexus, is probably the better model of the two for keeping these sorts of geographic themes at the forefront, but both works could do a better job of addressing these topics more systematically.

In terms of grabbing and holding the attention of the public, poetic topographies rely heavily on the use of fine writing and human interest. Both Cauthen and Heat-Moon are clearly writers first and topographers second, and their commitment to the beauty of their language is at least equal, if not superior to, their desire to tell the story of a place. The enjoyment of their prose is a prime draw for the reader. Poetic topographers, then, must become accomplished writers, to an even greater degree than those writing explanatory topographies, in order to keep readers engaged. Like Cauthen and Heat-Moon, poetic topographers must also become experts with the skillful use of characters, dialogue, and anecdotes to give their accounts of place a human face.

Although both books discussed here use some maps and photographs, they rely on them less than more explanatory works. This absence is not a necessary feature of poetic topography, however—some books that employ strong poetic elements, such as Goin's and Starrs' *Black Rock*, Wood's *Everything Sings*, and Beug et al.'s *Regina Secret Spaces,* also have strong visual components. Descriptive prose is not the only way to move readers, and poetic topographers should be ready to think hard and be creative when it comes to finding alternative ways to communicate the aesthetic side of place.

Advantages and Disadvantages of the Explanatory and Poetic Strategies

The analysis of these four books suggests that there are respective advantages and disadvantages of explanatory and poetic topographies. One advantage of the explanatory style is that it provides the reader with a kind of intellectual "big-picture" of a place. After finishing a well-written explanatory topography, a reader feels as if she has a good understanding of the way a place works as a system and how it came to be—its physical and cultural landscapes, its spatial arrangement patterns, the relationship between its people and the environment, its connections with other places and scales, and how these characteristics have changed through time. The book ends with the reader in a state of mental satisfaction, with a sense of knowing that she has learned a good deal more about a place than she knew in the beginning.

This sense of intellectual satisfaction is one of the strongest positive features of explanatory topography. But this topographic style has disadvantages as well. For one, because these works often deal with higher levels of abstraction, the subject matter can be less concrete and visceral than in more poetic works. In particular, the absence of flesh and blood people in the form of sympathetic characters is keenly felt—people in general tend to be simply part of the story in explanatory topography, and individual, multi-dimensional humans rarely make an appearance at all. A related disadvantage of explanatory topographies is that because they are fixed on the far-away view of a place, the reader never really gets a good feeling for what it is like to live and breathe in a location. He rarely sees how a place's residents relate to each other, their place, and the

outside world, or how the place shapes what they value and how they think. In short, he rarely gets the close-up or insider's view.

Both of these features of explanatory topography—a tendency towards higher levels of abstraction and a lack of characters with whom readers can empathize—can make it challenging for an author to hold the reader's attention. The ability to bring a place alive through excellent descriptive writing, therefore, is critical for explanatory topography, and Pierce Lewis, for example, does a fine job of this, making abstract concepts of place come alive through his prose. But even great descriptive writing cannot entirely make up for the absence of what journalists might call "the human interest" angle in explanatory topography, and topographers should always be alert for ways to humanize their work. John Fraser Hart's *My Kind of County* is a good example of this. Hart uses many of the conventions of explanatory topography to describe Door County, Wisconsin, but he also uses numerous examples and photographs of local people to illustrate his points, making the book far more compelling than it would be without these human connections.

Poetic topographies are almost the reverse of explanatory ones in terms of pros and cons. In their favor, poetic topographies do what explanatory ones often do not: they describe the feeling of actually experiencing a place. Poetic topographies tend to include all of the reader's senses, not just the eyes and the mind, and they frequently employ sympathetic characters to add human interest. Rarely is the narrator a disembodied voice hidden from view in poetic topography: frequently she is in the thick of things, living the place and relating that experience to the readers through descriptive writing that

recreates a place's color and tone in scenes and stories. Nor do poetic topographies shy away from emotion. Heat-Moon's descriptions of tornadoes in Chase County, for example, relate the terror felt by those who have lived through them. This reliance on experience, sensory details, narrative, and emotion can make the story of a place more memorable than the more logical, fact-based descriptions found in explanatory topographies. But while poetic topographies excel at describing a place up close and from a lived perspective, they rarely give the reader the intellectual satisfaction that comes with the systemic understanding provided by explanatory topographies. The scenes and stories are not commonly linked together by any grand design that encourages the reader to step back and put all his newfound knowledge in perspective.

Explanatory and poetic topographies are thus two sides of the same coin: one based in science and observation, the other based in art and experience. Both are valuable strategies for teaching people to appreciate places, and ultimately for creating closer connections between people and places. In the chapter to follow, we will consider a third form of topography, the experiential form, and consider some ways that we might mitigate the disadvantages of these three approaches by using hybrid strategies that combine the best of each.

CHAPTER V

EXPERIENTIAL AND HYBRID APPROACHES TO TOPOGRAPHIC WRITING

Chapter IV explored two broad approaches to topography, the explanatory and the poetic. This chapter considers a third kind of topography, experiential topography, and then examines a book that attempts to combine the best of two topographic approaches. It concludes by identifying some universal considerations for all four types of topography.

Experiential Topography

Experiential topography, like explanatory and poetic topography, helps people learn to appreciate particular places. But explanatory and poetic topographies are passive, second-hand ways of learning to appreciate place. Experiential topographies, on the other hand, emphasize appreciation through direct experience, based on the assumption that the best way to understand a place is to get out and experience it for oneself. While explanatory and poetic topographies are intended to be read in the comfort of one's own home, experiential topographies are meant to be read while out and about. Because they encourage people to physically interact with places and to develop their own relationships with them, experiential topographies may have a greater capacity for creating connections between people and places.

Tour Guides vs. Field Guides

Experiential topographies can be subdivided into two types: tour guides and field guides. A topographic tour guide, as defined here, is a book that tells one exactly where to go to see certain types of geographic phenomena. Tour guides might provide, for example, walks through historic districts, guides to local landmarks, or driving tours along scenic roads. In all of these cases, tour guides will identify the locations of notable features and provide pictures, descriptions, and interpretive information to help the reader understand what he is seeing.

Topographic field guides, on the other hand, help the reader to identify and learn about the geographic phenomena a person might encounter during her own explorations of an area. A field guide to trees, for example, might help the reader to identify local trees, provide discussion on variations of local trees, address the geographical distribution of local tree species, and explain how local trees fit into an ecological context.[1] Field guides, however, do not usually provide specific directions for finding a specific type of tree.

Both topographic tour guides and topographic field guides help readers to identify geographic features they may see while out exploring, but tour guides do so in a more spatially structured and precise way. Tour guides and field guides each have their own advantages and disadvantages as experiential topography, a topic to which we shall return later.

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[1] Wyckoff, *How to Read the American West*, 21-23.

Topographic Guides vs. General Purpose Guides

General-purpose tour guides and field guides (as opposed to their topographic equivalents) are widely available. Local bookstores often have bookcases full of tour guides, especially for well-known places. Naturalist-style field guides, such as those for identifying wildflowers, birds, and mammals, are also easy to find. But true topographic guides—those whose purpose is to teach people to appreciate the geography of small, particular places—are less common. One feature that makes topographic guides different from more readily available guides is their focus on small places. Field guides are often written for states and large regions, but field guides for more localized environments, like counties, are rare. A second key difference between topographic guides and their more commonly available counterparts is that topographic guides emphasize the value of ordinary places as much as that of big cities and major tourist destinations. New York and Los Angeles surely deserve the many tourism guides that have been penned about them, but small cities and towns and rural areas off the beaten path can be just as interesting. The mainstream focus on large regions and popular places is understandable, and likely due in large part to the fact that the small geographic scale of topographies does not support the large market sizes needed to make publishing profitable—a problem that we shall return to in Chapter 5.

A third unique feature of topographic guides is their deep geographic perspective. Most field guides found in bookstores are tightly focused on the natural environment, and tend to be heavily specialized on a single topic such as flora, fauna, history, or architecture. Popular tour guides are often focused on the cultural and historical aspects

of place, but their descriptions are frequently short, disconnected, short on explanatory power, and sandwiched in-between sections on shopping, dining, lodging, and nightlife.[2] In contrast, guides that help the reader to understand human-shaped landscapes or the relationship between human activity and the natural environment, and that combine a variety of geographic subjects, are challenging to find. The best topographic guides should integrate description and explanation of the cultural and the natural landscapes, and synthesize a variety of geographic topics to give readers a balanced sense of a place.[3] In the next few sections, we shall consider four examples of what good experiential topography might look like: two in the form of field guides, and two in the form of tour guides.

Topographic Field Guides

Field Guide to California Agriculture

The *California Field Guide to Agriculture*, written by the geographer Paul Starrs and the photographer Peter Goin, is similar in many ways to the numerous general-purpose field guides available in most bookstores. Published as part of the comprehensive series of California Natural History Guides, their 474-page volume has

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[2] Not all tour guides are so superficial, of course. Some European tour guides in particular, such as Baedeker, Blue, and Michelin, provide a prodigious volume of educational information about their destinations. While this content often overlaps with geographic concerns, these guides focus primarily on history and culture and are not explicitly based on the geographic traditions.

[3] Examples of guides that focus more heavily on the geographic tradition of landscape include McAlester's *Field Guide to American Houses*; White and Willensky's *AIA Guide to New York City*; Dolkart's and Postal's Commission's *New York City Landmarks*; and Muir's *Shell Guide to Reading the Landscape*.

many features of the field guide genre—a small page size, making it easily stored in a coat pocket; beautiful full-color illustrations; a large, state-wide scale; and a well-thought-out identification key. But what makes it stand out from many other field guides is its subject matter. Unlike its sibling guides, which deal primarily with natural topics like flora, fauna, and geology, the *Field Guide to California Agriculture* focuses on the archetypal nexus between humans and the environment—the cultivation of food. To my knowledge, this is the only agricultural field guide published for a general audience in the United States.

Agricultural landscapes are familiar to many who venture outside of big cities, but few have the skills to interpret what they see. Starrs and Goin attempt to rectify that situation by providing readers with the intellectual tools required to understand the extensive and economically important landscapes created by farming and ranching in California, and, "in the process, to encourage exploration and discovery."[4] The book is divided into four sections. The first gives a broad overview of California agriculture, including background on regions, climates, and land use. The second section is entirely visual, consisting of various artful photographs of California agriculture. The third section, the longest in the book at nearly 300 pages, is a practical guide to California livestock and crops. The crops are grouped, unusually, by height, a categorization the authors thoughtfully chose because it eases identification from a moving car, the platform from which most people have a view of local agriculture. Color photographs of

[4] Starrs and Goin, *Field Guide to California Agriculture*, xx.

crops and livestock are provided, along with identification tips and intriguing background and context. A helpful table of crops cultivated by season is also given. The final section of the book is organized geographically, and here the authors describe in some detail each of the different agricultural regions and districts in California.

The writing style is attractive and friendly, unlike many guidebooks, which often tend to be somewhat wooden. Although about three-quarters of the book is reference material, it reads quite easily. The entries for individual crops and livestock are interesting and engaging enough to be read for their own sake, and not simply for purposes of identification. Each entry gives just enough background and context to help a non-specialist appreciate those things she would otherwise fail to understand, or perhaps even notice, in an agricultural landscape. The section on bees, for instance, explains how flowers are pollinated, as well as the surprising economics of the bee industry. Each entry is like a mini-magazine article on the topic. Despite the use of a large amount of agricultural census data, the book is far from boring. These features, together with a vast number of high-quality photos and maps and a user-friendly layout (which includes colored tabs for easy navigation), make for a stimulating and satisfying package.

In many ways, the *Field Guide to California Agriculture* could be considered a model for experiential topography. As a field guide, it teaches readers to appreciate the agricultural landscapes they frequently drive past, but lack the education to understand. Its logical organization, its clear and pleasant writing style, its beautiful color photos, and its attractive maps make it engaging for lay audiences to read. And with its focus on

landscape, human-environment interaction, and spatial distributions of agriculture, it covers nearly all of the major geographic traditions. Every state ought to have a book like this.

The book's one failing from a topographic perspective, however, is its focus on the state as a scale of analysis, a scale at which few people have the time to fully explore.[5] But it is easy to imagine how such a guide might be scaled down for a much smaller area. A county-sized version, for example, would be much more manageable for readers, who could more readily assimilate the smaller number of crops and livestock in a more constricted area, and would be more likely to encounter on a regular basis the agricultural landscapes they read about. If combined with some elements of the tour guide, a field guide like this could also very easily facilitate local exploration and discovery. Such a book might include scenic drives, for example, that roll past typical agricultural fields, and explain what crops a reader is likely to see in those fields at what time of year. Or it might give the locations of agritourism spots or local farmer's markets, and what type of products might typically be found there and when.

Especially for city-dwellers, highway-side agricultural landscapes can be some of the most aesthetically pleasing but intellectually mystifying to be encountered. A field guide like Starrs's and Goin's, particularly if sized down to a more local level, could bring immense enjoyment to those who have often wondered what crops are growing by

[5] American states also frequently have arbitrary outlines that do not always conform to other geographic considerations.

the side of the road, and consequently bring them into closer connection with their local environments.

How to Read the American West

Like the *Field Guide to California Agriculture*, geographer and photographer William Wyckoff's *How to Read the American West* uses the traditional field guide format as a vehicle for explaining geographic phenomena. Instead of focusing on agricultural landscapes, Wyckoff helps readers to identify 100 general landscape types found in the eleven most-western states. The landscapes are organized into eight topical groups, a structure which allows Wyckoff to emphasize commonalities, connections, and variations. Each major section has its own introduction of a few pages, and each landscape type is pictured and described in a page, sometimes more. Wyckoff's approach was inspired by the classic 20th-century guidebooks of Roger Tory Peterson, and each entry attempts to help the reader understand a landscape type, its context, and its geographic distribution. The extensive introduction provides an excellent overview and offers useful sections such as "How to Use This Book" and "Tips for Navigating Western Landscapes." Wyckoff's approach clearly encourages active exploration and appreciation of these landscapes, and he recommends that readers take not only the book but a camera, a notebook, and a sketch pad on their geographic explorations. The end of each chapter is supplemented by extensive notes, and beginning on page 395, there is a thoroughly annotated section of further reading.

Like Starrs' and Goin's work, Wyckoff's 400+ page guide is well-written, visually pleasing, and richly illustrated with high-quality photographs, maps, and diagrams. Its bite-sized landscape descriptions mean that readers do not have to read the whole thing at once, but can enjoy it piece-meal while in the field, and the topical organization makes it easy to find relevant content. The book is chock full of geographic themes, including wilderness, agriculture, the extractive industries, culture, transportation networks, scale influences, and urban and recreational landscapes. "Whether you are walking through a farm town or a suburb," Wyckoff promises, "this guide will help you make sense of what you see."[6]

Like Starrs' and Goin's field guide, Wyckoff's book is excellent topography in every dimension but that of scale. Rather than focusing on a small area, Wyckoff tackles the entire American West. But again, it is not difficult to see how his approach could be adapted for smaller areas. A scaled-down landscape field guide could focus on one or at most a handful of counties, which might boast a small selection of general landscape types, such as pastures, churches, or barbecue joints. The range of landscapes to be described in a more constricted area is likely to be much smaller, allowing for greater depth of description than Wyckoff has the ability to provide. In some cases, there might be only one example of a landscape type in the area, such as a university campus, and in that situation the text could focus on that particular landscape, thus taking advantage of some of the aspects of the tour guide. Even for topographers who elect for a different

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[6] Wyckoff, *How to Read the American West*, 5.

structure, Wyckoff's book still provides a good example of the types of landscapes that a topographer should consider and a model for how to explain them.

Topographic Tour Guides

Topographic field guides like the ones described above help the reader to identify and understand elements of local landscapes wherever they appear. Topographic tour guides go one step further by telling the reader exactly where to find specific features in the local landscape. Books of walking tours, for example, are often available for large urban areas, and even small towns frequently have pamphlets available with pedestrian tours of downtown and historic areas or driving tours of rural areas. Typically these tours focus on notable and historic locations and structures, such as old homes, architecturally interesting buildings, memorials, public spaces, and sites linked to important historic events and personalities.

Chicago In and Around the Loop

As the title implies, the focus of Gerard R. Wolfe's *Chicago In and Around the Loop: Walking Tours of Architecture and History* is the evolution of the Windy City's built environment, and Wolfe has assembled 12 walking tours of varying lengths centered upon this theme. Through these walks, Wolfe strives to provide the reader with a first-hand understanding of how the city has grown and developed over time, along with an understanding of the history behind its great landmarks and the architects responsible for them. Each tour includes a map of the walk, with stops clearly

highlighted, a selection of black and white photos to help orient the reader to the main sights, and brief descriptions of each of the stops. The entries are well-structured, and while some locations receive more in-depth treatment than others, none are so brief that they leave the reader wanting more (as with the maddeningly short descriptions in some guides, such as the *AIA Guide to New York City*[7]). Nor are any of the entries so long that they cannot be easily read while walking the streets of Chicago. Also included are pictures and descriptions of buildings now gone from the landscape, to give the reader a sense of how the city has changed over the years. Thankfully Wolfe avoids cluttering the book with travel information like lodging, dining, or shopping—for this information, he refers readers to other publications.

Wolfe's interest is primarily in architecture and its history in the city, so topics like race, class, politics, natural environment, and human-environment relations receive scant or no attention. But the book is nevertheless far more detailed and focused on the landscape and how it came to be than the average tour guide. Completing all of the walks in the book would take quite some time, so the book would be best used by those who live in Chicago or who visit it frequently, but a reader who successfully finishes them all would have an admirable understanding of Chicago's landscape, as well as an enviable personal experience of its spatial form.

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[7] White and Willensky, *AIA Guide to New York City*.

A Streetcar to Subduction

The content of experiential guides is often rigidly linked to whether the area they describe is urban or rural. Urban guides like Wolfe's walking tours of Chicago, for instance, often focus on architecture and history, while guides to rural and wilderness areas frequently concentrate on wildlife, vegetation, and earth science. Clyde Wahrhaftig's 1984 book *A Streetcar to Subduction, and Other Plate Tectonic Trips by Public Transport in San Francisco*, is a delightful departure from this stereotype. Originally written for scientists attending the 1979 Fall Annual Meeting of the American Geophysical Union in San Francisco, then rewritten and published for non-specialists in 1984, Wahrhaftig's slim 76-page volume details seven excursions to geologically significant sites in and around San Francisco using public transportation, and includes trips by bus, boat, rail, street car, and foot. Wahrhaftig's introduction includes a short explanation of the theory of plate tectonics for lay audiences, along with a discussion of the theory's implications for the geology of San Francisco. Each outing comes with clear instructions for the use of local public transportation for the tour, as well as diagrams, photos, maps, and a detailed discussion of the geology to be seen along the way. Walking instructions for pedestrian side trips to points of geologic interest are given as well.

While its prose is not scintillating, the book is nevertheless written at a level that non-specialists can easily understand and appreciate, although the complexities of San Francisco's geology makes for a challenging read in places. The book even provides a brief detour into history and social geography, including instructions on how to date houses in San Francisco based on their architecture. The book could use an update: the

last revised edition was published in 1991, and the detailed instructions on public transit lines are certainly out of date. But *Streetcar to Subduction* is a fantastic and much-needed example of how earth science topics like geology and geomorphology can be incorporated into topographic guides, particularly for urban areas.

Lessons in Experiential Topography

What lessons can we glean from these four experiential topographies? One is that, although field guides and tour guides both stimulate the appreciation of particular places through experience, each sub-genre has its own advantages and disadvantages in this area. For example, because field guides do not tell a reader where exactly to go, they provide a more flexible and personal experience. They are more likely to promote independent exploration, and greater personal involvement with a place is likely to result in greater personal meaning and attachment to a place than might be produced by a more directive tour guide. But because they require more independence, field guides are probably better suited to readers who already have some knowledge of an area than they are for newcomers or visitors. It helps little if one knows how to identify a post oak, for example, if one does not know where to find a post oak in the first place. Field guides are also better suited when there are many local instances of the phenomena being described. It would make little sense to have a field guide to help a reader recognize Victorian houses, for example, if there is only one in the county. Why not just tell people where it is rather than how to recognize it?

Tour guides, on the other hand, are better suited for readers who are unfamiliar with an area. They are often organized geographically, and readers can use them to pinpoint examples of phenomena. Tour guides are particularly helpful for planning excursions. They are also useful for identifying phenomena that are one-of-a-kind, such as a specific historical building. But because they are pre-packaged, and because the author has done most of the work for the reader, they provide less of an exploratory adventure and are perhaps less likely to make a strong impact than discovering things for oneself.

One of the advantages of the small scale of topography, however, is that we can easily combine the approaches of field guides and tour guides. Guides at a smaller scale could blend elements of the tour guide and the field guide, telling the reader how to identify things that are common, but also directing him to specific examples and giving the locations of sites that are unique. The smaller scale of topography might also allow for more in-depth descriptions than would be the case for a state or region, although authors must remember that these guides are meant to be read in the field, so too much detail may defeat the purpose.

Another lesson we can draw from these samples is that we need more of certain kinds of guides. We do not need topographic guides modeled on modern tourism guides—these tend to be brief and shallow and oriented towards vacationers. Instead, we need more detailed educational guides, like the ones presented here, that can guide in-depth explorations of places over time. We also need field guides for small places, since most field guides are written for states and regions, even though the kind of out-and-

about exploration advocated by field guides is probably best done on a small scale. Finally, we need tour guides for ordinary places. Big cities and tourist destinations have plenty of books about them already, but less famous places can be just as interesting and easier to explore, especially for those who already live there.

For experiential topographies to engage and hold the attention of general audiences, they need clear and lively prose that explains specialized concepts in common language, just as explanatory topographies do. But the entries in topographic guides should be relatively short to allow them to be read in the field, and entries should be accompanied by a generous use of color photographs, maps, and diagrams to aid in identification and explanation. The organization and layout of guides also requires more care than other types of topographies, again to facilitate field use. Although guides are primarily meant for use on the go, they are much more satisfying if they provide a short section of explanatory material at the front of the book that helps to put entries into a broader context. Finally, experiential topographies benefit greatly from the inclusion of "Further Reading" section in the rear, so that readers whose interest is piqued by a guide's pithy entries can learn more if they so desire. In almost all of these respects, the *California Field Guide to Agriculture* and *How to Read the American West* are excellent models that can be creatively adapted to smaller scale regions.

Another lesson is that we need more field and tour guides written from geographic perspectives. Urban tour guides, for example, tend to focus almost exclusively on buildings, architecture, and history. But there are so many other geographic topics that could be explored, including geographies of race, class, politics,

and culture, and the way that these geographies become inscribed in the landscape. Works like *Streetcar to Subduction* and Nathanael Johnson's *Unseen City: The Majesty of Pigeons, the Discreet Charm of Snails, & Other Wonders of the Urban Wilderness,* prove that topics usually associated with wilderness areas, such as ecology, geology, and human-environment relations, can successfully be explored in urban areas as well.

We should also use the geographic idea that places are where numerous phenomena all come together and interact to encourage us to produce broader and more integrated guides to places. So many field guides and tour guides, for example, are narrowly focused on one topic. Can we not synthesize geographic topics like history, architecture, culture, geomorphology, and biogeography into guides that create deep maps of places, like that produced by William Least-Heat Moon in *PrairyErth*? Rather than a book that tells us how to recognize every tree in a county, we might be better served by one that teaches us to recognize the three most obvious architectural styles, the five most common trees, the seven most heard birdsongs, and the ten most encountered crops. We need experiential topographies that help us to identify the most common natural and cultural elements of our local environments, saving us from having to buy numerous field guides that contain more information than we need just to get a feel for a place. Those detailed field guides might be very useful the longer we live in a place, but when we are just starting out, we are likely to want a much less specialized work.

Topographic guides like the ones described here are a valuable tool for teaching people to appreciate the geographies of particular places, especially their landscapes. Experiential topographies encourage people to discover a place for themselves, and at

the same time they help readers to interpret and contextualize their personal observations. They help people to identify and better understand the things they see everyday, and in this way they give meaning to what might otherwise be meaningless elements of the landscape. But they do not just tell us what places mean in the type of one-way conversation that is typical of explanatory and poetic topography. By encouraging people to get out and experience places for themselves, experiential topographies facilitate the development of personal relationships with place, connecting us more fully to them. As Nathaneal Johnson, the author of *Unseen City*, points out, simply being able to identify a thing and call it by its name gives it a new layer of meaning, and through this process we become more tethered to and familiar with a place.

Hybrid Topographies

The books discussed so far in this chapter and in Chapter IV were selected because each excels at a particular topographic strategy. But few of these works employ a single topographic strategy exclusively. Pierce Lewis, for example, waxes poetic at times about New Orleans, and his affection for the city is clear in his prose. Sudye Cauthen's essays of experience and memory in North Florida are leavened with explanations of local history, geography, and culture. And as we have seen, tour guides and field guides employ an important explanatory component in order to place field observations and experiences in a broader context.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to find topographies that balance multiple modes equally well. In this section, we will examine a book that manages to successfully balance the explanatory and poetic approaches in the same work.

Ceremonial Time

John Hanson Mitchell's book *Ceremonial Time: Fifteen Thousand Years on One Square Mile* (1984) is a masterful combination of the explanatory and poetic strategies. The book, the first in a series of six about a single square mile in eastern Massachusetts, chronicles the 15,000-year history of Mitchell's home, a patch of ground known colloquially in the nineteenth century as "Scratch Flat." Still in print after 30 years, the book earned Mitchell an Editor's Choice Award from the *New York Times Book Review* as well as an honorary Ph.D. from Fitchburg State University.[8] Organizing the book chronologically, Mitchell begins with the impact of the last glaciation on Scratch Flat's geomorphology and ecology, describes the character of the area and its inhabitants during the Pre-Columbian period, and takes the reader on a journey from its colonization by the Puritans right on up to its present state of suburban and industrial development. Alongside historical and scientific accounts of Scratch Flat, Mitchell inextricably weaves Native American legends, Anglo-American folklore, personal experience and reflection, and a fascinating cast of characters associated with Scratch Flat through the ages.

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[8] "Biography: John Hanson Mitchell."

Ceremonial Time fluidly combines exposition with narrative and artful descriptive writing, all in a clean and flowing prose that makes the book a joy to read.

One of the features that makes *Ceremonial Time* so interesting is the way that Mitchell seamlessly intertwines objective and subjective perspectives on the history and geography of Scratch Flat. Mitchell declares at the beginning of the book that part of his goal was to seek out and accept all of the various data sources he could find on the place. This included, for example, authoritative sources such as academic research on the geology, history, anthropology, and archaeology of Scratch Flat and the surrounding region. But Mitchell also sought out much less conventional sources of information. A recurring theme in the book, for instance, is how Native Americans adapted to changing conditions, both natural and cultural, on Scratch Flat, and how they viewed the area's history. This aboriginal perspective is drawn in part from interviews and associations with local Native Americans, but Mitchell also integrates other accounts, including those of Greek immigrants, dairy farmers, black agricultural workers, leftist historians, aging hippies, New Age tech entrepreneurs, and believers in reincarnation who claimed that Scratch Flat had been their home in a previous life. Folklore is also an important part of Scratch Flat's story, and Mitchell enlivens the tale with local stories of Indian spirits like the mischievous Glooscap; the Puritan fear of the Devil in the Wilderness; the legend of Enoch Pratt, whose ghost supposedly still roams the area more than two centuries after his death, searching for his betrothed; and the story of Mary Louise Dudley, a local woman accused of witchcraft who ultimately died under suspicious circumstances. To Mitchell, these more poetic aspects of Scratch Flat's sense of place are every bit as

important as the more explanatory and scientific ones. "Myth," Mitchell tells us, is simply "history told in metaphor."[9]

Mitchell also draws heavily on his own experiences and reflections over years of living in the area. Interestingly, his insistence on including multiple perspectives of Scratch Flat history puts Mitchell in the position of being both insider and outsider. As a resident of Scratch Flat and an inveterate nature lover, he has a deep visceral love for the place and is uniquely qualified to tell its story. But his experience with other people who see Scratch Flat from a different perspective, particularly Indians and working-class blacks, makes it clear that his experience is not everyone's.

The fusion of these narratives is never clunky or contrived. One never has the feeling that Mitchell is including multiple perspectives simply for the sake of political correctness. He clearly has a deep and genuine desire to see his home through many sets of lenses, and he entwines these different stories so skillfully that in the end they become one. *Ceremonial Time* is an excellent (and unfortunately rare) example of balancing multiple perspectives in a pleasing way.

Another aspect of *Ceremonial Time* that makes it so engaging is Mitchell's use of narrative elements, such as memorable characters, evocative descriptive writing, and scenes, to put a human and poetic face on Scratch Flat. Interspersed with exposition on the human and natural history of Scratch Flat are narratives of Mitchell's experiences with his neighbors and his explorations into the wild areas of Scratch Flat. In Chapter 6,

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[9] Mitchell, *Ceremonial Time*, location 214.

for example, Mitchell relates the story of how he and his friend The Red Cowboy, his "guide to glacial history and [fellow] connoisseur of edible wild food,"[10] attempt to forage for their food on Scratch Flat for several days, and he uses this story as a springboard for discussion of early Indian agriculture in the area. Also memorable is local eccentric Toby Beckwith, "amateur archeologist, raconteur, dramatist, dreamer, and sometime farmer."[11] Mitchell's account of Toby's thundering diatribe against a local developer at a town meeting is not only entertaining and memorable, but it also helps to illustrate the tension over local development perpetrated by "the men in khaki",[12] as Mitchell calls them, those "highway engineers and planners with white shirts and clean fingernails."[13] But perhaps the most memorable character in the book is the taciturn and enigmatic Wampanoag medicine woman Tonupasqua, who is Mitchell's spirit guide to the Indian view of Scratch Flat's history. Tonupasqua comes and goes throughout the book, but Mitchell's description of a nocturnal trip into the woods of Forge Pond with Tonupasqua and fellow Native Americans for a religious ceremony sticks out for its atmosphere, drama, and suspense. As entertaining as they are, these characters and stories are not just colorful additions to the narrative. These compelling descriptions of real people in real situations in a real place add greatly to our poetic understanding of a Scratch Flat, while at the same time making the book enormously pleasurable to read.

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[10] Ibid., location 98.

[11] Ibid., location 98.

[12] Ibid., location 3127.

[13] Ibid., location 3114.

These structural elements aside, what thoroughly permeates the pages of *Ceremonial Time* is Mitchell's philosophy of creating connections between people and ordinary places. Early in the book, Mitchell makes it clear that he is committed to what we have already defined as fundamental elements of topography: the importance of the local, the worth of the ordinary, and the value of a personal connection to place. Scratch Flat, of course, is not the kind of place that Fodor's writes tour guides about. There is nothing monumental for the traveler to see, and no important dramas of national history were enacted here. But Mitchell, like all good topographers, knows that what he calls "that undiscovered country of the nearby" can be just as intriguing to those with an interest in learning to appreciate it.

> Wilderness and wildlife, history, life itself, for that matter, is something that takes place somewhere else, it seems. You must travel to witness it, you must get in your car in summer and go off to look at things which some "expert," such as the National Park Service, tells you is important, or beautiful, or historic. In spite of their admitted grandeur, I find such well-documented places somewhat boring. What I prefer, and the thing that is the subject of this book, is that undiscovered country of the nearby, the secret world that lurks beyond the night windows and at the fringes of cultivated backyards.[14]

Mitchell has written a book about one nondescript square mile that has remained in print for 30 years and that has spawned five sequels. This is proof enough that in the right hands, the local and the familiar can be just as fascinating as the exotic and the celebrated, and Mitchell's work is a graduate class in how to do that.

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[14] Ibid., location 405.

At the same time that Mitchell affirms the dignity of the parochial (in the best sense of the term), he shows that he understands how learning to appreciate a place is intimately connected with becoming attached to it. He explains this fundamentally topographic attitude towards place in the introduction to the 30th anniversary edition, in which he describes an encounter with a German fan of the book who showed up at his home, as many others had done, without invitation.

> It was she who summed up, I think, the enduring fascination with this particular work. It was a sterling portrait, she thought, of what she called in German *Heimat*. The term, which was sullied during the Nazi era with overtones of racism and xenophobia, translates as "home, or homeland." But by extension it suggests habitat or sense of place, a devotion to or understanding of a singular territory. The Spanish have a better term, *querencia*, which can be translated as animal's territory but also has overtones of a deep understanding or identity with a singular area, a region, or in some cases a district within a city, as in La Macarena, the gypsy quarter of old Seville. The Hopi have an even more accurate phrase— tuuwanasaapi— which means "place where you belong." You don't have to be from the place to feel it; when you get there, you will know.[15]

Among the books discussed in this chapter, *Ceremonial Time* stands out for its ability to explain the changing landscape of a place in terms that are both explanatory and poetic, and to do so in a way that makes it a joy to read. Straight explanatory topographies like Lewis's *New Orleans* and Dunwell's *The Hudson River Highlands*, while well-written and extremely informative, are completely missing the personal and poetic elements that make *Ceremonial Time* so endearing. And unlike more poetic topographies, such as Cauthen's *Southern Comforts*, the facts never become overwhelmed by the subjective experience. The result is a classic work of place writing

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[15] Ibid., Location 289.

that, despite the small geographic size of its subject, has plainly worked its way into the hearts of a very large audience well beyond the confines of Scratch Flat.

Lessons in Hybrid Topography

What do hybridized approaches like Mitchell's have to teach us about the art of topography? Perhaps the most important message they have for us is that we do not necessarily have to choose between the advantages and disadvantages of explanatory, poetic, and experiential topographies. Instead, we can combine the approaches, compounding the benefits and mitigating the deficiencies of multiple strategies. Like *Ceremonial Time,* journalist John McPhee's two books *The Pine Barrens* and *Coming into the Country* combine strong descriptive writing, personal perspectives, narrative elements, and explanatory material into a form of place writing that combines the best of explanatory and poetic topographies. This style, in fact, has a name: the narrative explainer, a subset of the popular genre of creative non-fiction used today by many writers of magazine and newspaper features and nonfiction books.[16] These works combine many of the elements of novels and short stories with careful factual research to produce some of the most readable and popular writing available. Topographers could profit greatly by studying this genre.

Syntheses of explanatory and poetic approaches are not the only possible fusion. The explanatory and experiential approaches can also be easily combined. Geographer

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[16] Hart, *Storycraft*, 183-202.

Jim Kimmel's *Exploring the Brazos River*, as well as many of the books from the Writers' Program of the Work Projects Administration's *American Guide Series* published during the Great Depression (such as *Houston: A History and Guide*,[17] and *Beaumont: A Guide to the City and Its Environs*[18]), are good examples of mixing scientific and historical explanation with an experiential component. None of the books in this sample couple the poetic strategy with the experiential, nor do any combine all three. But such syntheses are not impossible, and they could result in creative and original new directions for topographers willing to try.

Universal Lessons

The Power of Themes

Having studied examples of the three major topographic strategies, as well as one example of a hybrid approach, we can now consider some lessons about topography that cut across all styles. One such lesson is that themes are often more powerful and memorable than details. This lesson is more easily seen in the poetic topographies described here, but it applies equally well to explanatory topography. Although much of Dunwell's writing about the Hudson Highlands, for example, is focused on the details of historic periods and events that shaped the region, she organizes all of the myriad facts into easy-to-remember themes related to the way that people have perceived the Hudson Highlands through time. Authors of both poetic and explanatory topographers will

[17] Writer's Program of the Work Projects Administration, *Houston*.

[18] Federal Writers' Project of the Work Projects Administration, *Beaumont.*

sometimes need to show restraint by focusing only on the facts and details that support those major themes and jettisoning interesting but extraneous information. Overloading the reader with facts and descriptions, as Heat-Moon has a tendency to do in *PrairyErth*, is ultimately counterproductive. Facts have a way of being easily forgotten, while themes tend to linger on in the mind.

Good Writing Is a Must

A second lesson is that, as noted before, attractive writing is essential to topography, especially the explanatory style. Physical geography in particular can be dry and uninteresting in the hands of a stodgy writer. Compare for example, Albert Perry Brigham's descriptions of Cape Cod's physical geography to the works of Harlan Barrows or Edith Poggi.[19] Brigham's style is fresh, breezy, and inviting, while Barrows's and Poggi's are stuffy and tedious. Varying but uncomplicated sentence constructions, diverse but untechnical diction, expressive similes and metaphors and analogies, and organizational creativity can all make topography more lively. Colorful characters and anecdotes can also help to animate a place, as in *Charles Kuralt's America* or Roderick Peattie's *The Black Hills*. A strong use of visuals, such as clear diagrams, color photographs, and especially well-designed maps, also adds interest and helps to reinforce points in the text. James Shortridge's *Kansas City* and Banis's and Shobe's *Portlandness* both provide particularly good examples of this. But topographers should keep in mind

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[19] Brigham, *Cape Cod and the Old Colony*; Barrows, *Geography of the Middle Illinois Valley*; Poggi, *The Prairie Province of Illinois*.

that these various strategies for grabbing and holding reader interest must never be ornamental—they must always do double duty, enticing the reader to continue his journey, but at the same time helping to explain and illuminate the place under study.

Insiders and Outsiders

A third lesson is that, while explanatory topographies tend to be written from the outsider's perspective and poetic topographies tend to be written from that of the insider, both types of topography can be written by either insiders *or* outsiders. Frances Dunwell, for example, had worked in the Hudson Valley for many years before penning her book, thus giving her valuable insight on the area which she put to use in her research. Pierce Lewis, on the other hand, writes about New Orleans from an outsider's perspective, a position which allows him to perhaps remain less biased by experiences and prior associations, and to feel fewer inhibitions when he takes a critical approach. But Lewis notes in his acknowledgements that as an outsider, he relied heavily on the advice and help of "in-the-know" insiders as a guide for understanding the city and shaping his research. Sudye Cauthen, as the quintessential insider who grew up in Alachua and maintained strong family and emotional ties with the place, is well-positioned to write a poetic topography. But William Least Heat-Moon, who is an outsider to Chase County, uses extensive interviews, historical research, and field excursions to paint a portrait of the plains that is deeply poetic and personal.

The Geographic Perspective Is Interesting

A final lesson to be drawn from these examples is that the geographic perspective itself can be a way to generate interest in a place. Most adults today have never had a geography course, and concepts like site, situation, relative location, landscape change, landscape meaning, culture-environment relations, and spatial distributions can seem like novel concepts to non-geographers. Simply exploring a place from the perspective of the geographic traditions can be an eye-opener for many readers. The challenge for most topographers will be in deciding what balance of geographic topics to include. Unlike many of the geographers who produced the often dull regional geographies of the mid-twentieth century, and who tended to be overly formulaic in their inclusion of geographic content, topographers would do better to follow the advice of geographers like John Fraser Hart and Pierce Lewis, who recommended that geographers should allow the place itself to suggest the right balance.[20] In some places, the human-environment connection might be relatively strong, while in others spatial distributions might be a much more interesting topic. Authors, too, will differ on what topics they deem significant—some may take an economic approach to landscape change, while others will favor a critical approach. The point is that while there is no one way to explore the geography of a place, a geographic perspective can provide a fascinating viewpoint for a public largely unused to encountering it.

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[20] Lewis, "Beyond Description"; Hart, "The Highest Form of the Geographer's Art."

Structure

One aspect of topography that applies to all of the approaches discussed in Chapters 3 and 4 is structure. All the topographies analyzed in these two chapters use one or more of three basic organizational formats: topical, chronological, and geographical. Topographers who opt for topical structures tend to organize their books based on particular themes. Pierce Lewis, for example, organizes *New Orleans* into chapters on various subjects such as the city's site and situation, its morphological growth, the redevelopment of its riverfront, and its population geography. Other topographic books that use a topical format include *The Black Hills*, *Portlandness*, and *The Pine Barrens,* and almost all field guides, including the *California Field Guide to Agriculture* and *How to Read the American West*, tend to be organized topically as well. Based on this sample, the topical structure seems to be more commonly used in explanatory and experiential topographies, although there is no reason that such a design could not be used for poetic topographies. The poetic atlas *Everything Sings*, for example, employs a topical arrangement.

A broad topical division frequently used in topography is the distinction between physical geography (a place's relief and "natural" landscape) and human geography (its cultural landscape and the spatial distribution of cultural features). Explanatory topographies, especially those written by geographers, tend to start with a discussion of a place's physical geography, setting the scene for later human interaction with the environment. Poetic topographies tend to be less structured in their approach to this division, weaving facts about physical and human geography into their narratives.

Other authors eschew a topical organization in favor of chronological or geographic approaches. James Shortridge's *Kansas City*, for example, uses historical periods to organize its explanation of the evolution of Kansas City's landscape over time. Authors like Cauthen and Heat-Moon, however, use geography as the organizing theme. *Southern Comforts* is organized into sections based on the geographical distinction between country and town, while *PrairyErth* uses the unique conceit of USGS topographic quadrangles as its underlying structure.

It is important to note, however, that few books use only one of these structural devices. Dunwell's *Hudson River Highlands*, for example, is arranged topically, but also chronologically, and Lewis uses a chronological structure both in his chapter on the development of the city, as well as a way of separating the first and second halves of the book. Books based on journeys, such as John Graves's *Goodbye to a River* and *Charles Kuralt's America*, use both chronology and geography simultaneously as their narratives unfold across time and space. Similarly, books that mix storytelling with explanation, like Mitchell's *Ceremonial Time* or McPhee's *Coming into the Country*, may combine chronological, geographical, and topical approaches at different points within the same work. Clearly, any number of combinations of approaches to these three structures can work. As with the specific mix of geographic topics to be included in a topography, much will depend on the specifics of a particular place and a particular author.

Conclusion

The past two chapters have analyzed exemplars of the three ideal types of topographies: the explanatory, the poetic, and the experiential. Examples of each have been described in some detail, and major lessons for their construction have been identified. We have also considered some ways that these approaches can be hybridized in practice, and enumerated some lessons that apply to all of these strategies.

Books continue to be an important medium for communicating with people about place. But the options available to topographers have grown enormously as digital media and the internet have dramatically cheapened and expanded the range of content distribution platforms available. Books may still be an important way of connecting the public to place, but they are not the only, or perhaps even the best, means. In the next chapter we shall consider a low-cost alternative to the topographic book—the topographic podcast.

CHAPTER VI

BEYOND BOOKS: TOPOGRAPHIC PODCASTING

Thus far we have considered how topographers can help the general public to appreciate particular places by writing topographic books. But new media distribution platforms, stimulated by expanding access to the internet and the growing ubiquity of mobile devices, have opened up new ways for geographers to educate people about places. Websites like Lulu.com and CreateSpace.com, for example, allow authors to self-publish their books either in print or electronically, while blogging sites, like Wordpress and Tumblr, allow topographers to deliver over the web the same kind of written and visual information published in topographic books, without the expenses of traditional publishing. Low costs for personal computers, video recorders, audio recorders, and editing software, coupled with easy downloads and streaming to smartphones from free distribution platforms like YouTube and iTunes, have made it easy to create, distribute, and consume place-based video and audio as well.

In this chapter, we shall consider how topographers might use audio podcasting, a popular and low-cost form of distributing audio programs via the internet, for public topography. We start by reviewing the history and logic of podcasting's recent popularity, as well as academic research on its use for educational purposes. We then analyze a sample of podcasts about particular places to learn how the goals of public topography might be achieved using this new platform.

Background

Reasons for Topographic Podcasting

Audio podcasts have numerous advantages for connecting people to places. First and foremost is the growing popularity of the medium. While podcasts date back to 2004, three years after the release of Apple's first iPod (the word is a portmanteau of "iPod" and "broadcast"), early programs were dogged by amateurish production, competition from other fledgling tech platforms, and a dearth of advertisers in the wake of the 2008 financial crash. The form saw a decline in 2009, but since 2014 it has experienced a major rebound, both in terms of listenership and media attention.[1] *New York Magazine*, for example, pointed to "a golden age of podcasting" in 2014, led in part by the phenomenal popularity of the program *Serial*, which reached 5 million streams and downloads faster than any podcast in iTunes history, and which as of 2015 had been downloaded more than 95 million times.[2]

Podcast consumption has gone up by every measure over the last few years.[3] The number of available podcasts has increased dramatically, with the number of podcasts on iTunes, for example, doubling between January 2013 and September 2015, and close to one-third of all podcasts on iTunes launching between June 2014 and June 2015.[4]

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[1] Roose, "What's Behind the Great Podcast Renaissance?"; "2016: The Year the Podcast Came of Age."

[2] Clark, "Here's the Future of Podcasting"; Roose, "What's Behind the Great Podcast Renaissance?"; Greenberg, "Podcasts are Saving NPR"; Kornelis, "The Podcast Resurgence"; Vogt, "Podcasting Fact Sheet."

[3] Vogt, "Podcasting Fact Sheet."

[4] Morgan, "How Podcasts Have Changed in Ten Years."

Awareness of podcasting has also increased substantially since 2006, with 49% of Americans over the age of 12 reporting an awareness of podcasting in early 2015.[5] Podcast hosting services have seen a steady increase in both uploads and downloads of podcasts between 2012 and 2015 as well.[6] Most importantly, listenership is dramatically up: between 2007 and 2015, active listenership went up by 130%[7], and an estimated 46 million Americans consumed one or more podcasts a month in 2015.[8] The rising popularity of podcasts has been credited with saving the venerable National Public Radio (NPR) from financial oblivion. In 2015, NPR was on the way to breaking even for the first time in six years, due in part to increased revenue from podcasts.[9] Major media outlets have begun to produce their own podcast awards and listening guides,[10] and Ira Glass, creator and producer of *This American Life*, has been a guest on both *The Tonight Show* and *The Late Late Show*.

The resurgence in popularity of podcasts has been driven by several trends. Improved production quality, better aggregation software, and the rise of indie producers

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[5] Vogt, "Podcasting Fact Sheet."

[6] Ibid.

[7] Rosenblatt, "Podcasts Ready for the Big Time."

[8] Greenberg, "Podcasts are Saving NPR."

[9] Ibid.

[10] Bromwich, "After 'Serial"; Eadicicco, "The 10 Most Popular Podcasts of 2015"; Fisher, "The 10 Most Downloaded Podcasts of 2014"; Harrison, "25 Essential Podcasts"; Kornelis, "The Podcast Resurgence"; Locker, "The 10 Best New Podcasts of 2015"; Standley, Taylor, and McQuade, "The 50 Best Podcast Episodes of 2015."

and podcasting networks have all played a part.[11] But two factors have predominated: increasing advertising dollars and growing smartphone ownership. Podcasts have proven to be highly effective advertising platforms, a fact which has attracted advertiser revenue and further fueled podcast growth,[12] while smartphones have made downloading and listening to podcasts much simpler.[13] As of 2014, 63% of podcast downloads were from mobile devices, and that number is likely much higher today.[14] Smartphones have essentially turned radio into an on-demand service similar to Spotify and Netflix,[15] and entrepreneurs are betting that today's broadcast radio content will soon shift to the smartphone.[16]

Audio podcasts are popular with audiences in part because, unlike video, they can be consumed while the eyes are occupied elsewhere.[17] Listeners can drive, exercise, perform household chores, or execute any other task that requires the use of the hands and eyes but does not require complete mental concentration. For this reason, radio listenership remains high: more than 91% of American adults listen to the radio weekly,

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[11] Roose, "What's Behind the Great Podcast Renaissance?"; Greenberg, "Podcasts are Saving NPR."

[12] Greenfield, "The (Surprisingly Profitable) Rise of Podcast Networks."

"2016: The Year the Podcast Came of Age."

[13] Clark, "Here's the Future of Podcasting"; Greenfield, "The (Surprisingly Profitable) Rise of Podcast Networks."

[14] Vogt, "Podcasting Fact Sheet."

[15] Roose, "What's Behind the Great Podcast Renaissance?"; Greenberg, "Podcasts are Saving NPR."

[16] Greenfield, "The (Surprisingly Profitable) Rise of Podcast Networks."

[17] Roose, "What's Behind the Great Podcast Renaissance?"

and 44% of that listening takes place in cars.[18] Not surprisingly, most podcast listeners consume their podcasts while driving,[19] and industry-watchers predict that as cars become increasingly connected to the internet over the next decade, podcast listenership will explode.[20]

The growing demand for audio podcasts means that topographers who practice their craft through audio podcasting will have the potential to reach large audiences who might not have the time or inclination to read topographic books. But aside from its growing popularity, there are at least two other reasons that topographers ought to consider podcasting as their medium of choice. First, the episodic nature and wide range of acceptable lengths for podcasts gives topographers immense flexibility. Individual podcast episodes can run anywhere from two minutes to over an hour, and topographer's can tailor the length and complexity of their episodes based on the material and the preferences of their audiences. And because podcast episodes are typically produced as part of a regular series, like television shows, podcasting gives topographers the opportunity to provide listeners with numerous episodes about a place, allowing for the exploration of diverse, topics, perspectives, and voices. At the same time, the open-ended character and on-going production of a podcast series avoids the confining structure and finality of a book. The combined result of these characteristics is that when

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[18] Greenberg, "Podcasts are Saving NPR."

[19] "2016: The Year the Podcast Came of Age."

[20] Clark, "Here's the Future of Podcasting"; Roose, "What's Behind the Great Podcast Renaissance?"

episodes are aggregated over time, a series of podcasts, even short ones, can cooperate to create a strong sense of place for listeners.

Second, low production and distributions costs for audio programs mean that even those with few financial resources can produce and publish professional-quality broadcasts. This is particularly important for public topography, because as was mentioned previously, the genre's relatively small audience size and the high fixed costs of traditional mass media make topographic projects a risky financial venture for full-time content creators and for-profit publishers. New media platforms, though, have diminished the role of cost as a barrier to entry. While these new media platforms are not likely to make public topography any more lucrative, they do make it possible for those with small budgets, such as academics, teachers, students, and enthusiastic amateurs, to publish topographies unencumbered by the problem of paying for high fixed production costs through economies of scale.

Third, web distribution platforms like iTunes, Stitcher, SoundCloud, and dedicated podcast websites allow not only for the wide and free distribution of content by topographers, but also the collection of feedback from listeners through comments. Few independent book authors have the resources to "focus group" their manuscripts prior to publication. But topographic podcasters, in contrast, can gather information about the effectiveness of their podcasts and continually improve them as the show is produced.

One potential disadvantage of the podcast format for topography is that audio is a challenging medium for geographers, because traditional geographic topics such as

landscapes and maps are often best apprehended visually. But radio is at the same time an evocative medium. Music, interviews, sound effects, and ambient sound can all be combined to create striking images in the mind's eye, and the integration of podcasts with visual materials on the web offers the ability for podcasters to provide ample visual supplementation.

Research on Educational Podcasting

Because public topography is essentially a form of education, it bears some similarities to formal classroom-based instruction, and the use of podcasts within traditional educational settings has been well studied. Studies generally fall into one of three categories: podcasts as classroom supplementation; student-generated podcasts; and podcasts in support of field learning. In the case of podcasts as classroom supplementation, researchers have studied student response to the use of audio and video podcasts to enhance traditional lectures, discussions, and distance-learning classes.[21] In one study, several lectures were entirely replaced by video podcasts.[22] In all cases, student feedback was generally positive, although researchers uniformly cautioned that podcasts should be used to supplement, not replace, traditional instruction. Other examples of the use of podcasts to supplement class materials include their use in

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[21] Dale and Pymm, "Podagogy"; Fernandez et al., "Podcasting"; Hill and Nelson, "Evaluating the Perceived Effectiveness of Video Podcasts"; Brown, "Podcasting and Vodcasting"; Hill et al., "Integrating Podcast Technology."

[22] Winterbottom, "Virtual Lecturing."

preparing students for presentations and graded work;[23] as a medium for delivering feedback on student work;[24] to facilitate the transition to a university environment;[25] and to facilitate the use of library resources.[26]

A second area of study has been the use of student-generated podcasts to enhance classroom learning. In these studies, university students research, write, perform, and record their own podcasts either as a graded assignment for a class or as a voluntary extracurricular activity in fields as diverse as geography, engineering, the performing arts, information technology, and business.[27] Studies have found mostly positive outcomes, including a more creative learning environment, increased autonomy, cross-disciplinary engagement, enhanced teamwork, and greater experience in communicating complex scientific ideas to non-academic audiences. In some ways, this vein of the literature parallels the public outreach and general-audience orientation of public topography, although the research cited here is focused on the benefits for student content-creators rather than on audience satisfaction. Although outside the scope of this chapter, this research suggests that there may be learning benefits associated with student-produced topographic podcasts in high-school and undergraduate education.

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[23] Edirisingha, Hawkridge, and Fothergill, "A Renaissance of Audio."

[24] France and Wheeler, "Reflections on Using Podcasting for Student Feedback."

[25] Edirisingha, Hawkridge, and Fothergill, "A Renaissance of Audio."

[26] Jowitt, "Perceptions and Usage of Library Instructional Podcasts."

[27] Lee et al., "Talk the Talk"; Dale and Pymm, "Podagogy"; Alpay and Gulati, "Student-led Podcasting"; Kemp et al., "Student Produced Podcasts"; Kemp et al., "Diversifying Assessment"; Powell and Robson, "Learner-generated Podcasts"; Fuller and France, "Securing Field Learning."

A third category of study has been the use of podcasts to support field learning. Jarvis[28] and Dickie,[29] for example, found that the use of video podcasts to facilitate the use of equipment in the field by students in physical geography and GIS was especially valuable and appealing. Wissmann,[30] inspired by the use of audio tours by museums and other tourist sites, explored the use of podcasts as a replacement for a traditional instructor-led urban geography trip. Integrating audio narration with period music, interviews, and an interactive workbook, Wissman and fellow faculty at Johannes Gutenberg-University Mainz, Germany, created a self-guided geographic field trip in three cities of Germany's Rhine-Main area for their undergraduate students. Response from students was overwhelmingly positive.

Public topography and traditional education share a similar goal of using the podcasting medium to enhance learning, and the literature cited here suggests that podcasts can be effective as educational tools. But these studies are of limited use for public topography for two reasons. First, of all the studies cited here, only one deals with the use of a podcast to enhance appreciation of a particular place. Second, though it is encouraging that podcasts have been used to successfully enhance learning in the classroom, public topography is fundamentally different from formal geographic education in that the general public consumes podcasts out of a desire for entertainment as well as learning, and the public's ability to "tap the off button" is much greater than it

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[28] Jarvis, "Supporting Experiential Field-based Learning."

[29] Jarvis and Dickie, "Podcasts in Support of Experiential Field Learning."

[30] Wissman, "Tuning the Field Trip."

is for students. Research to date on podcasting in education in general and geography in particular has been narrowly focused on the pedagogical benefits of podcasting, as opposed to how to make podcasting an attractive and useful tool for non-student audiences. This chapter, therefore, attempts to determine what techniques can be learned from the best practitioners of place-based podcasting that might help geographers to connect people to places through topographic podcasts.

Data and Methods

To discover what lessons place-based podcasts might have for topographic podcasting, a sample of podcast episodes was selected for analysis. The podcasts analyzed can be placed into one of two categories. The first of these categories consists of individual episodes about particular places produced by national podcast series, such as *Planet Money* and *This American Life*. These popular shows, often produced by public radio organizations like National Public Radio or Public Radio Exchange, routinely appear in lists of the most downloaded podcasts on the web. Their large audiences, experienced staffs, and extensive resources attract some of the best audio story-tellers in the country. While these podcast series sometimes produce individual stories about particular places, they are not as a whole topographic in their subjects. The huge popularity of these stories with listeners, however, makes them an important source for lessons about developing individual topographic podcast episodes.

The second category of podcasts analyzed here are local podcast series focused on a specific region or place. These shows lack the notoriety, resources, and large

audiences of the nationally-known podcasts, but they specialize in telling local stories. These shows, then, are useful for understanding how to produce a series of related topographic podcasts. A third category of topographic podcast, the audio tour, is briefly considered, but was not extensively studied in this sample.

To identify the best examples of topographic podcasts from the national shows, the most popular English-language podcast series were first identified on iTunes. While other podcast-hosting sites exist, Apple's iTunes continues to dominate the medium with the largest podcast directory available.[31] The 24 most-popular podcasts in iTunes as of 21 March, 2016, were identified, and the list was then narrowed down to nine podcast series that could reasonably be assumed to include some topographic content based on the series' subject matter. To these nine podcast series, an additional four that are recommended as stand-outs in Jessica Abel's book *Out on the Wire: The Storytelling Secrets of the New Masters of Radio* were added, and another six were culled from other sources, such as recommendations from major newspapers and periodicals. The archives of each of these were then searched for place-based episodes, and episodes were previewed for quality and topographic content. Five national series were eventually selected for analysis. See Table 1 for a list of all national podcast series analyzed.

Because of their smaller audience sizes, popular local podcast series are more difficult to find than podcasts that draw national listenerships. In this case, place-based podcast series were identified by analyzing the websites of public radio stations in major

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[31] Morgan, "How Podcasts Have Changed in Ten Years."

metropolitan areas, since these stations often produce high-quality local material. Other series were found through Transom.org, a website dedicated to encouraging great storytelling in radio, and through internet searches. A sample of the most recent episodes from each of these series was selected. The final pool of local podcast series is given in Table 1. A list of all episodes mentioned in the following discussion can be found in the References section, although this list represents only a fraction of the more than 85 episodes analyzed.

Table 1. List of podcast series analyzed.

National Podcasts	**Local Podcasts**
This American Life	Curious City
Radiolab	HOME: Stories from L.A.
Planet Money	Nature Notes
99% Invisible	Under the Sun
Radio Diaries	The Modern West

Once selected, the individual podcast episodes were listened to and evaluated in terms of the three essential elements of public topography and the three topographic strategies identified in Chapter III.

Lessons in Topographic Podcasting

In the rest of this chapter, we will explore some of the lessons that can be learned about topographic podcasting from examples of the best national and local podcasts about place. Many of the podcasts considered here effectively blend elements of the explanatory and poetic strategies of topography more readily than topographic books, so rather than presenting the lessons by topographic strategy, as we did in Chapters IV and V, these lessons will be organized in terms of the essential features of public topography. We will begin by considering how good topographic podcasts can help people to appreciate particular places. Second, we will look at some examples of how place-based podcasts go about engaging the public's attention in a highly competitive media environment. And last, we will look at the kinds of geographic themes of which topographic podcasts make use.

Appreciating Particular Places

Like topographic books, one of the main features of topographic podcasts is that they help people to better appreciate particular places. Podcasts and radio programs produced by local public radio stations are especially good at this, and they go about doing so in a number of ways. Here we look at two broad strategies for structuring podcasts that help us to appreciate local places: one which combines the geographic constraint of place with a more general defining element; and one which combines a place with a set of local themes that help to illuminate that place.

The Structure of National vs. Local Podcasts

National and local podcasts often differ in their conceptual structures. Podcasts aimed at national audiences, for example, tend to organize their shows around some combination of topics, themes, structures, and production values, but do not limit their stories geographically. *99% Invisible*, for instance, uses the idea of mystery to focus on design and the built environment, exploring "the thought that goes into the things we don't think about."[32] *Radio Diaries* tells "the extraordinary stories of ordinary life" by giving audio recorders to ordinary people, then helping them to edit them into first-person documentaries.[33] *Planet Money* explains the workings of the world economy through the eyes of real people using plain language. The show's website puts it this way: "Imagine you could call up a friend and say, 'Meet me at the bar and tell me what's going on with the economy.' Now imagine that's actually a fun evening. That's what we're going for at Planet Money."[34] In all of these cases, the podcasts are shaped by a set of unifying ideas, but they draw their story material from all over the world.

Local podcasts, on the other hand, broadcast to much smaller and more geographically defined audiences, and consequently they tend to organize their shows much more strongly around the notion of place. Local public radio stations in particular have been especially vigorous in attempting to understand how place can be better leveraged in the production of their programming, and their research has shown that

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[32] "The Show."

[33] "About Radio Diaries."

[34] "About 'Planet Money.'"

listeners *want* audio programs that help them to appreciate particular places. A 2006 study[35] commissioned by the Public Radio Program Directors, for example, concluded that local public radio audiences have a strong sense of place, and that the mental maps upon which that sense of place is based are more aligned with environment, history, and culture than with political boundaries. The study also found that listeners are not content with stories that stop at these perceived boundaries—they also want to know how local issues are connected to issues at greater scales, so that stories are framed beyond the "merely local." Nor do local public radio listeners simply want someone to read local headlines to them or to host local call-in talk shows. Instead, they have a strong preference for programming dedicated to local topics that displays the same depth and intellectual quality as that found in national and global scale stories. "Like NPR does to national," wrote one listener, "if they could do that to local, that would be dynamite."[36] Interestingly, these findings dovetail quite closely with many of the characteristics of public topography as we have defined it here: a desire to engage people more deeply with local places; a sensitivity to the ways that places are unique yet connected to the outside world; and a focus on geographic topics like environment, history, and culture. In short, the results of this study clearly demonstrate that audio listeners want topographic audio stories.

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[35] Walrus Research, "A Sense of Place."

[36] Ibid., 2.

Place Plus a Broader Theme

Local podcast programs often satisfy this desire for deep place appreciation by starting out as if they were a national show—in other words, by identifying one or more characteristic topics, themes, structures, or production philosophies that define the show—and then constraining the podcast further by focusing it on a particular place. A common example of this is Marfa Public Radio's *Nature Notes*. In nearly 200 short episodes of five to ten minutes each, *Nature Notes* educates its listeners on the topics of vegetation and wildlife in Texas's Chihuahuan Desert and Llano Estacado using field audio recordings and interviews with experts. By combining the theme of the natural world with a particular region, *Nature Notes* gives local listeners a deep appreciation for the diversity and beauty of the ecosystems that surround them. Another example of this strategy is Bill Barol's well-received *Home: Stories from L.A.*, which illuminates the culture and cultural landscapes of Los Angeles in 20-30 minutes long stories, each related in some way to the theme of home. By combining the idea of home with a geographic area, Barol is able to connect topics as disparate as a monument to the Beach Boys, a Route 66 ghost town, and the rise and fall of the San Fernando Valley as a pop culture icon, while at the same time giving listeners a sense of what makes L.A. unique. WBEZ Chicago's *Curious City* takes a different tack, combining the geographic constraint of the Chicago metropolitan area with the production conceit of using listener questions about the region to drive local stories using audio podcasts and multi-media web articles. While these example podcasts vary greatly in their content and style, all three begin with a broad theme or production style, then geographically constrain it. The

result is a set of shows that have the conceptual and thematic consistency of one of the major national podcasts, but which are also focused on helping people to appreciate local places.

Place Plus Local Themes

WLRN Miami's podcast *Under the Sun* represents another way to conceptualize local podcasts aimed at helping people to appreciate places. Local stories, producer Wayne Grech believes, must first and foremost evoke a sense of place, and that sense of place is defined by "the shared lived experience of a region or people."[37] As a result, Grech and his team think about South Florida not just as a set of borders on a map, but also as a set of well-defined themes. Stories for the program do not have to necessarily reinforce the conventional themes of the place—they can contradict and challenge them as well—but episodes of *Under the Sun* cannot simply be *set* in South Florida. They must also relate to one or more of its place-based themes as well.

One of these themes for South Florida is "American served with café con leche,"[38] which speaks to the way in which Latin American migration to South Florida in general, and Miami in particular, has modified the region's culture and landscape over time. The episode "American Fare at 'La Vaquita,'" for example, chronicles the adaption of a local chain known as the Farm Stores to the region's changing demographics. While the stores, which began as a series of local groceries in the 1950s, continue to sell their

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[37] Grech, "Local Radio with a Sense of Place."

[38] Ibid.

line of traditional American dairy products, they have remained relevant by also offering Latin American desserts like *pan cubano, flan,* and *tres leches*. In the city of Hialeah, in fact, the stores are known to almost everyone not by their official name, but as "La Vaquita," a Spanish-language reference to the cow in the company logo. Another episode, "3 Cent Coffee," elaborates on this same theme by exploring local nostalgia for a pre-Castro Cuba through the eyes of local restaurateur Rolando Blanco, who, in an effort to honor the memory of his boyhood home, began selling café Cubano for the same price that it sold for in 1950s Cuba: three cents.

Under the Sun probes not only cultural themes, but natural and environmental ones as well. In the episode "Red Tide: Of Bonds and Blooms," producer Ari Daniel Shapiro touches on the strong link between the people of South Florida and their beaches in his report on harmful algal blooms, and how they impact the health of local people and marine populations. Similarly, "A Man and His Mangoes" tells the story of local tropical fruit scientist Richard Campbell and the annual mango festival he sponsors through the Fairchild Tropical Botanical Garden in Coral Gables, a story which plays on the familiar image of South Florida as a unique and exotic tropical biome within the predominately subtropical and mid-latitude continental U.S.

Grech writes that when he and co-producer Alicia Zuckerman first developed *Under the Sun*, it had all the ingredients of a great program, with the exception of these regional themes. But until these themes were identified, the show never really came together. The simple commonality of stories occurring within the same set of borders was in and of itself not a compelling linkage between them. Instead, Grech and

Zuckerman found that each story had to relate to what the Miami poet Campbell McGrath, paraphrasing the scholar of myths Joseph Campbell, calls "the local mythology"—the big, overarching beliefs about a place that make it distinctive from other places.[39] This use of place-based themes is Grech's and Zuckerman's way of ensuring that the wide-ranging stories they produce are not just *set* in South Florida, but they are also *about* South Florida.

We can see another example of this use of local themes to keep place in the foreground in *Curious City*'s episode entitled, "Why The 1992 Loop Flood Is the Most Chicago Story Ever." The story could easily have been written as a generic news item about soggy basements, but *Curious City* tells the tale of the city's 1992 Chicago River flood in terms of distinctly Chicagoan themes: bitter city politics, a history of cronyism and corruption, a characteristic inattention to infrastructure maintenance, and a location along the Chicago River, all of which combined to create a disastrous situation caused by the characteristics of the city itself. The difference these themes make is the difference between a story that happened in Chicago and a story that could *only* have happened in Chicago.[40]

How does one identify these local themes? Zuckerman suggests that researchers should "pay attention to what locals first talk about when they pick up a visitor at the

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[39] Grech, "Local Radio with a Sense of Place."

[40] The idea of a story that could have happened in a place versus one that could ONLY have happened in a place comes from a personal communication with Prof. Jonathan Smith.

airport." Themes like "weather, traffic, [and] sports," she says, "can define a city."[41] Grech adds that his favorite tactic is "to interview a local poet who writes about your city." Poets, he says, "spend all day thinking about this kind of stuff."[42] This use of local themes to shape stories, Grech explains, is what separates those who write about national and international topics from those who tackle local ones. "Universal stories aren't enough for local listeners," he writes. "They want to hear local stories that illuminate and offer insight into their hometown, that enrich their experience of local life. That's why local is harder than national. And better."[43]

Place Plus Something Else

Whether these topographic podcasts combine a place with a broader topic or style, or whether they combine a geographic region with a set of localized themes about that area, the formula they suggest is "appreciation = place + something else." These examples indicate, in other words, that the idea of a place itself is not enough to create an interesting show: some other element is required to focus it sufficiently for listeners. For *Nature Notes*, that "something else" is flora and fauna. For *Curious City*, it is an innovative system for collecting and answering listener questions. For *Under the Sun*, it is local themes. For public topographers, that "something else" can be geography. As we shall see later in this chapter, the four geographic traditions described in Chapter III

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[41] Grech, "Local Radio with a Sense of Place."

[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid.

provide a strong intellectual thread that can help to define a podcast, while at the same time being broad enough to provide plenty of podcast material.

Engaging the Public

Topographic podcasts can help audiences to appreciate particular places, but they can only do so if people choose to listen to them in the first place. Media consumers today have a vast array of alternatives vying for their attention, and even within the medium of podcasting, competition is fierce. To effectively connect people with places, topographic podcasters must create podcasts that stand out in a crowded field. Unlike news reports, academic journal articles, and classroom lectures, topographic podcasts cannot simply be produced in an "institutional voice" designed to maximize the efficiency of information transmission.[44] Because the "NEXT" button on a smartphone is always only a finger-tap away, topographic podcasts must be not only informative, but engaging as well. The best topographic podcasts keep audiences listening by using a variety of techniques that we shall consider in this section. We will begin by examining the use of narrative elements in topographic podcasts; how to find an intriguing angle for a topographic story; and how audio production style can add interest to a podcast. We will then reflect on the use of supplementary web material in the creation of topographic podcasts; the use of poetic presentation; and finally, the use of experiential podcasting to facilitate place appreciation.

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[44] Hart, *Storycraft,* 64-65.

Narrative in Topographic Podcasts

Many of the topographic books we examined in Chapters 3 and 4 are descriptive and expository: they describe what places are like, and explain how they came to be that way. Their authors seek to make them more engaging in a number of ways, such as through the use of clear and attractive writing, visual aids, a geographic framework, and multiple subjective perspectives. But we noted that at least one topography, *Ceremonial Time*, also used elements of narrative storytelling to achieve a new level of engagement. Storytellers have long known—and cognitive scientists have now substantiated—that narrative stories are "psychologically privileged," meaning that they are easier to understand, easier to remember, and more enjoyable to hear than other forms of communication.[45] Recognizing this special power of stories, print journalists in the 1950s began to adopt narrative elements of novels and short stories for non-fiction use, and the modern result of that effort is the genre of creative non-fiction, one of the most popular forms of writing today. This use of narrative storytelling has spread to radio journalism, and many of the most listened-to nonfiction podcasts, such as *This American Life*, *Snap Judgment*, and *Serial,* use strong elements of narrative storytelling in their programs.

The Pulitzer-prize winning author Jon Franklin defined a story in this way: "A story consists of a sequence of actions that occur when a sympathetic character

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[45] Willingham, "The Privileged Status of Story."

encounters a complicating situation that he confronts and solves."[46] In his article "The Privileged Status of Story," professor of cognitive psychology and neuroscience Daniel Willingham breaks a story down into four basic elements, known as "the Four Cs":

> The first C is **Causality**. Events in stories are related because one event causes or initiates another. For example, "The King died and then the Queen died" presents two events chronologically, but "The King died and the Queen died of grief" links the events with causal information. The second C is **Conflict**. In every story, a central character has a goal and obstacles that prevent the goal from being met. "Scarlett O'Hara loved Ashley Wilkes, so she married him" has causality, but it's not much of story (and would make a five-minute movie). A story moves forward as the character takes action to remove the obstacle. In *Gone With the Wind*, the first obstacle Scarlett faces is that Ashley doesn't love her. The third C is **Complications**. If a story were just a series of episodes in which the character hammers away at her goal, it would be dull. Rather, the character's efforts to remove the obstacle typically create complications—new problems that she must try to solve. When Scarlett learns that Ashley doesn't love her, she tries to make him jealous by agreeing to marry Charles Hamilton, an action that, indeed, poses new complications for her. The fourth C is **Character**. Strong, interesting characters are essential to good stories, and screenwriters agree that the key to creating interesting characters is to allow the audience to observe them in action. F. Scott Fitzgerald went so far as to write, "Action is character." Rather than tell us that Scarlett O'Hara is popular and a coquette, the first time we meet her we observe two men fawning over her.[47]

These four elements of a story can be used in topographic podcasts to keep the reader engaged using the privileged status of the story, while at the same helping him to better appreciate a place. For example, the episode "Americans in Paris" on *This American Life* attempts to explore, through the eyes of Americans living in Paris, the strong relationship that some Americans develop with the city. One of its subjects is

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[46] Franklin, *Writing for Story*, 71.

[47] Willingham, "Ask the Cognitive Scientist."

black lawyer and author Janet McDonald, whose book *Project Girl* tells the story of her attempt to define her identity while being torn between the primarily black Brooklyn projects where she grew up and the overwhelmingly white world of the Ivy League where she went to college. Ultimately McDonald moves to Paris because it represents, for her, a place where American stereotypes of race and class do not define who she is, and she can escape the feeling of never being completely at home in either the black ghetto or upper-class white American society. Through McDonald's story, we learn much about race and class in Paris, including how being a well-to-do black American in Paris is a far different experience than being a black immigrant from Africa. Although McDonald's story is not told in the standard linear chronology of many narratives, it nevertheless employs all of the four Cs to simultaneously unfold McDonald's experience and describe how those experiences have been shaped by place. McDonald is clearly the main character in this story, and the conflict is the sense of dislocation she feels as a result of failing to fit into either of the two worlds she inhabits in America. Via a series of causally-related experiences and complications that she describes in the episode, she eventually moves to Paris, where her sense of unrootedness is finally resolved and she experiences for the first time a sense of belonging.

Characters in a narrative do not necessarily have to be people, and this is true of many topographic stories in which the place itself is the main character. The episode "Super Bon Bonn" from *99% Invisible*, for example, tells the story of the German city of Bonn, which went from being a small vacation retreat for the wealthy in the early twentieth century to the provisional capital of West Germany just after World War II. But

the reunification of Germany and the movement of the capital back to Berlin brought Bonn its conflict: how does a city with an economy based almost entirely on government activity cope when the government moves away? The story examines the way in which that conflict and its attendant complications manifested themselves in Bonn's built landscape, and how Bonn managed to eventually resolve its problem for the best. Bonn is not the only character in the story—a local Bonn resident, a reporter, and the show's host all provide a human aspect to the story—but clearly, the main character in a story can be the place itself.

Sometimes events in the real world fit the definition of a story quite nicely; more often than not, however, the situation is far more complex. Like many other forms of expository and descriptive writing, topographies rarely have all of the elements of a story as Franklin and Willingham have defined them. Sometimes there is no sympathetic main character, conflicts are resolved by outside forces, or a complication is never brought to final resolution. For this reason, many topographic podcasts employ *elements* of narrative stories to create tension and interest, without employing the entire story model itself. When this happens, Willingham advises us to use at least *some* elements of the four Cs to add interest to explanation when it is appropriate.

The most important of the four Cs, Willingham points out, is conflict, and many topographic podcasts use some type of conflict up front to hook audiences and keep them listening until the end. *99% Invisible*, for example, uses the idea of mystery to

generate interest at the beginning of its episodes.[48] Each episode explores the mysterious and often surprising backstory behind some often-ignored aspect of design or architecture. Episodes frequently begin with some surprising statement, situation, or question, which generates a sense of conflict that lasts until the mystery is resolved. For instance, in the audio documentary "The Biography of 100,000 Square Feet," producer Ben Temchine explores the question of how San Francisco's UN Square, designed by the famous and highly influential landscape architect Lawrence Halprin, became a gathering place for drug addicts and the homeless—what many consider to be in essence a failed public space. Similarly, "Penn Station Sucks" tries to solve the riddle of how New York City's Penn Station went from being one of the country's most beautiful train stations to a place that is universally reviled by New Yorkers. *Curious City* uses a similar technique to create tension and hook the listener: each episode is a journey to answer a listener's question and resolve some riddle about Chicago as a place, often with the help of the listener herself. In both of these series, the desire to find the answer creates the conflict at the start of the show, and the listener is hooked from the beginning until the resolution at the end.

Finding the Angle

Sometimes the narrative of a place has all the elements of a story, but still falls short of fully engaging an audience because the story is simply uninteresting. In that

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[48] Norton, "This is Radio."

case, finding an engaging story about a place may require a topographer to look at the place from a different angle. The journalist Alex Blumberg, who has produced stories for two of the most popular podcasts on National Public Radio, *This American Life* and *Planet Money*, and who now owns his own podcasting company, suggests using the "what's interesting" test on a potential story angle: "I'm doing a story about X. And what's interesting about it is Y."[49] If that sounds like a boring story, Blumberg says, try solving for a different Y—in other words, find a more interesting angle on the same topic. Oftentimes, a seemingly boring place can become fascinating to listeners just by finding the right perspective from which to view it. *Planet Money*, for example, routinely takes abstract and potentially stultifying economic topics and turns them into the audio equivalent of page-turners. For example, in the episode "Unpayable," the Planet Money team explores how Puerto Rico came to default on $72 billion worth of debt in 2015. While this story could have been told in dry and dismal economic terms, Planet Money makes it come alive by explaining how this debt default is intimately linked with Puerto Rico's unique political status, its rum and pharmaceutical drug industries, and the retirement savings of a little old lady. By pursuing these surprising angles and by foreshadowing them in the first few minutes of the show, *Planet Money* hooks its listeners early on and keeps them listening to the end, and in the process helps us to understand how the unique circumstances of Puerto Rico have interacted with the global economy to create a situation with tragic consequences for real people.

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[49] Blumberg, "Alex Blumberg."

Production Style

The use of narrative is not the only way to make topographic podcasts engaging for the listener. Successful podcasts about places also combine interesting narration, skillful editing, interviews, ambient sound, historical audio, re-enactments, music, emotion appeals, and humor to create what we will call an "engaging production style."

The podcast *Home: Stories from L.A.*, for instance, has what might be called a "traditional" production style, of which the episode "Growing Up 818" is a good example. The episode, which tells the story of how the San Fernando Valley came to be "the iconic American suburb and… industrial powerhouse that cranked out everything from beer to cars, and moon rockets to The Brady Bunch,"[50] is essentially a well-produced audio documentary, and it has a correspondingly polished tone. Writer and narrator Bill Barol's performance is excellent, and he judiciously fuses explanatory narrative segments and interview excerpts that tell the story with snippets of music and on-location sounds that set the tone and establish a sense of place. At the beginning of the episode, for example, the sound of road noise, GPS instructions, and the Beach Boys in the background signal that Barol is narrating the introduction from his car, evoking a specific time and place in American culture, while at the same time underscoring the importance of the automobile and pop culture in the Valley's history. While Barol makes full use of the advantages of the audio medium, his approach is nevertheless conceptually similar to explanatory topographies like Pierce Lewis's *New Orleans*, in

[50] Barol, "Episode 5: Growing Up 818"

that Barol is telling the story of a place as a tightly-scripted explanatory narrative, with the added benefit of being able to include evocative sound to more fully set the mood and bring the place to life.

The popular NPR series *Planet Money* takes a somewhat different approach to engaging the listener through its production style. Like *Home* and many other contemporary podcasts, *Planet Money* is a narrated podcast, in which the narrators tell a story, and all the other elements of engaging production support that task. But *Planet Money* has a much less formal style than *Home*. For one thing, *Planet Money* adds interest by frequently using two narrators in dialogue with each other, a technique used by many podcasts today. While *Planet Money*'s producers do write scripts, they try not to refer to them when they record the show, making the dialogue come off as more spontaneous and fresh.[51] The resulting interplay between the hosts makes the show seem more conversational and less scripted.

Planet Money field recordings are also two-way dialogs, in which the reporters frequently interact with people in their natural settings, with all their accompanying ambient sound. This interaction between the reporters, the people to whom they talk, and the surrounding environment helps to make the show feel less stilted, while the on-location audio recordings help to create a sense of place. In the episode "Boom Town, U.S.A," for example, the reporters travel to Elko, Nevada, as it undergoes a gold mining boom. To get the feel for the town, they go to a local bar for karaoke night and talk to

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[51] Bajak, "Stacey Vanek Smith Makes Economics Reporting Fun."

local miners, whose energetic antics both in the foreground and the background help to simultaneously enliven the show and set the tone for a city undergoing a major resource boom. Other interviews are conducted in a gold mine itself, and the heavy machinery working in the background is quite effective in helping to picture the scene.

Planet Money uses other techniques as well to make its production style engaging. The show frequently leverages humor, for example, to make the show inviting. The narrators often make jokes and references to pop culture, and laughter and levity are routine parts of the show. Narrators often use colloquial rather than formal language, and popular music at the beginning and end gives the show a contemporary and less stodgy feel. Combined with many of the narrative elements discussed earlier, such as interesting angles, surprise, and suspense, these ingredients all come together to create a show that is enormously fun to listen to, while at the same time one that educates the listener about important economic topics.

The production style of *99% Invisible* occupies something of a middle ground between *Home* and *Planet Money*. The episode "Port of Dallas," which tells the story of late nineteenth century and early twentieth century attempts to turn Dallas, Texas, into a port city by making the Trinity River navigable, is a representative sample. Like "Growing Up 818," the format is that of an audio documentary, mixing excellent scripting with audio from multiple sources, including interviews, mood-setting music, historical audio clips, and period newspaper quotes read by actors. But like "Boom Town, U.S.A.," the episode also adds interest through the use of multiple narrators, humor, and an air of mystery. Taken together, these decisions about production style

result in a show that takes a potentially mundane topic about a well-known place and invigorates it through an interesting production style.

One of the most complex, original, and audacious uses of audio production style to help listeners appreciate a place can be heard in *Radiolab*'s episode "Galapagos," which tells three separate but related stories about challenges to ecosystems on the Galapagos Islands. The production style of "Galapagos" is worlds away from the more traditional audio documentary format used in "Growing Up 818." While the episode uses many of the same raw materials as other podcasts, like music, narration, interviews, and ambient sound, *Radiolab* relies heavily on editing to tell the story of a place in an innovative way. For example, rather than writing detailed scripts for their episodes, the narrators of *Radiolab* take part in multi-hour recording sessions that include ad-libbed banter between the storytellers. When edited down, the result is a program that sounds less like a written script and more like a spontaneous conversation among participants.[52] *Radiolab* also seamlessly edits these studio conversations together with external audio, such as interviews, music, ambient sound, and (unusually for modern radio) sound effects. When combined with a compelling narrative arc, the result is a uniquely fluid and intense style of storytelling that sounds at once spontaneous and sophisticated. In "Galapagos: In Real Time," for instance, the voices of reporters, scientists, and narrators are all merged with music and birdsong to create a flowing but gripping narrative of the three species of finches battling extinction in the Galapagos. At its apex, this production

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[52] Spiegel, "Alix Spiegel"; Abel, *Out on the Wire*, 121-124.

style can result in episodes about places that rise to the level of art pieces, as in Jonathan Mitchell's brilliant story "City X," which combines an almost-constant use of sound effects, music, and short speech snippets to explore the connection between the people of an anonymous Midwestern city and their mall.

At the other end of the production spectrum from *Radiolab* is *Radio Diaries*, a program that gives audio recorders to ordinary people, then edits the resulting tape into short radio pieces. *Radio Diaries* typically focuses on subjective personal experiences, but occasionally those personal experiences help to illuminate a place. An excellent example of this is the episode "Esperanza Garden," which tells the story of a vacant lot in a poor neighborhood of New York City. Neglected for decades by its owner, community residents turn the blighted space into a much-loved community garden, which is eventually destroyed by a developer to make way for a luxury apartment building. As with many of the episodes from *Radio Diaries,* there is no narrator or music in "Esperanza Garden"—the story is primarily told (with the help of some skillful editing on the part of the *Radio Diaries* team) by the people involved, using on-the-scene recordings collected over a long period of time. The result is a stripped-down, bare-bones production style that is nevertheless extremely engaging and emotionally powerful because of its intimacy.

Poetic Presentation

"Esperanza Garden," with its emphasis on personal experience and use of evocative first-hand audio, represents a decidedly poetic approach to topographic

podcasts. Audio podcasts, in fact, can be provoke strong emotional reactions in listeners, engaging them with the emotive power of music, the suggestiveness of ambient sounds and sound effects, and the expressiveness of the human voice. We have already seen that many topographic podcasts use music and ambient sound to strategically set a tone and to establish a sense of place. But topographic podcasts also use the voices of people who have strong relationships to places to help make a powerful emotional connection with the listener. In *This American Life*'s "Georgia Rambler," for example, producer Chuck Salter uses the voice of farmer Windell Cleveland, who refused to sell his farmland despite the inundation of surrounding property as part of a reservoir, to build a plaintive and nostalgic portrait of a man deeply attached to his family's land. Similarly, *Radio Diaries*' "The Last Man on the Mountain" uses unnarrated audio of protagonist Jimmy Weekley, who refused to sell his family home for the creation of a mountain top removal mine, to evoke the sorrow and bleakness of Weekley's fight. Likewise, the producers of *99% Invisible*'s "The Sunshine Hotel" use the scratchy smoker's voice of the manager of the last flophouse in New York's Bowery neighborhood to narrate a moving picture of the realities of life at the bottom rung of society. In all these cases, the voices and experiences of a real person creates a powerful emotional connection with the listener, who feels compelled by that connection to continue listening to the story.

Like John Hanson Mitchell in *Ceremonial Time*, many producers of topographic podcasts realize that different people experience places in different ways. Bill Barol is cognizant, for example, that "Growing Up 818" is the story of San Fernando Valley primarily from the perspective of white middle and working class teenagers of the 1960s

and 1970s, and he acknowledges this fact by providing a brief contrast with the very different experiences of blacks and Hispanics growing up in the Valley at the time. *Curious City*, in attempting to answer the question of what a Chicago tourist might have seen in 1910, considers how the travel experiences of people from different economic and ethnic backgrounds would have varied at the time.[53] And in *This American Life*'s "Georgia Rambler," nine different reporters tell stories from counties surrounding Atlanta, Georgia, from nine very different perspectives. A benefit of the serialized nature of podcasting is that multiple perspectives can be explored over time, as the same topic might be covered from multiple points of view in multiple episodes.

Like Sudye Cauthen's *Southern Comforts*, the limited and subjective nature of these poetic accounts opens very small windows into the lives of places. But as with hybrid approaches in written topography, emotion and subjectivity can often be supplemented with broader perspectives to provide a more balanced account of a place, and many of the topographic podcasts examined here combine the subjective view of a place with explanatory material. Narration and interviews with experts, for example, are often counterpointed with experiential narrative to give a balanced view of a place. The *Curious City* episode "Chicago's Tornado-Proof Delusion," for instance, combines powerful eyewitness accounts of a devastating tornado that hit the suburb of Oak Lawn in 1967 with scientific information about tornado activity in Chicago to produce a story that is at once emotionally moving and intellectually stimulating. In a similar fashion,

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[53] "What Tourists Did in Chicago in 1910"; "If You Toured Chicago in 1910."

the *Radio Diaries*' audio documentary "The Chamizal: A Town Between Borders" layers the personal memories of people ejected from a contested area along the U.S.-Mexico border with historical perspective and explanatory narration, creating a sense of place that is simultaneously cerebral and empathetic. In all these examples, producers combine explanatory topography with poetic perspectives that both enrich our understanding of place, while at the same time making the story of that place more relatable and engaging.

Web-based Supplemental Material

One of the potential disadvantages of using audio as a medium for topography is that we lose the ability to supplement our text with visual aids. As noted in Chapters 3 and 4, photographs, maps, and diagrams can add immeasurably to an account of a place and can thus make a topographic work much more engaging. But because podcasting is a web-based technology, topographic podcasters are not limited to audio alone. Many podcast creators host and distribute their content not only on popular podcasting services like iTunes, but also on their own websites, where they can provide visual materials that enhance their audio stories. Programs like *This American Life*, *Radiolab, 99% Invisible, Planet Money*, *Home*, and *Under the Sun* all maintain websites that offer short synopses of their episodes, as well as supplementary material such as photographs, maps, videos, and transcripts.

Of the topographic podcasts analyzed in this sample, the undisputed king of visual supplementation is WBEZ Chicago's *Curious City,* which maintains the best accompanying website bar none, far better even than the national shows. Nearly all their

podcasts are enhanced by some combination of web articles, links, photos, videos, maps, and interactive graphics. And the articles are not simply transcripts—they are stories in their own right that complement, rather than mirror, the content in their associated podcasts. Some webpages are truly impressive artistic multimedia experiences, such as "If You Toured Chicago in 1910," which allows the user to tour early twentieth century Chicago as one of four characters: a New York journalist, an Iowa farmer's daughter, an African-American schoolteacher from Natchez, Mississippi, and a thrill-seeking 23-year-old clerk from Toledo, Ohio. Each character follows his or her own personalized tour, complete with period photographs and postcards written home. Another excellent *Curious City* story entitled, "What If the Great Chicago Fire Never Happened?" explores what Chicago might have looked like had it never lost a substantial portion of its built landscape to fire in the late nineteenth century. Using maps, historical photographs, and artists' interactive renditions of alternative landscapes, the *Curious City* team considers how the city might have developed differently in terms of buildings, neighborhoods, construction materials, architecture, morphology, and civic identity. *Curious City*'s supplementary web materials are a terrific example of how web content can be used to augment audio podcasts and to draw listeners in further once their interest has been piqued by an audio story.

Experiential Podcasts

While the bulk of the podcasts sampled here were not intended to be field guides to places, it is worth noting that a valuable sub-genre of audio podcasts encourage people

to experience places for themselves. Audissey Guides, for example, provides free audio walking tours of cities like Houston that can easily be downloaded to and accessed from a listener's phone.[54] Likewise, the National Railroad Passenger Corporation, otherwise known as Amtrak, teamed with the Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences at Texas A&M University to produce a series of over 100 podcasts meant to be listened to as travelers look out train windows on the line between Chicago and San Antonio.[55] The episodes are short—only about one to four minutes each—but they touch on topics as diverse as Chicago immigration, Ozark mining, and the ivory-billed woodpecker, and they provide an excellent example of how audio podcasts can be used to help people understand landscapes as they experience them.

Radio producer Pejk Malinovski, who produced the audio tour "Passing Stranger: The East Village Poetry Walk" for the Poetry Foundation, points out that the potential market for these types of experiential topographies is huge, and that many of the lessons of radio and podcast story production apply to audio tours.[56] For example, like other topographic podcasts, "Passing Stranger" uses interviews, narration, and music to enhance the listener's experience of a place, in this case of the East Village in New York City as an important site in the history of American poetry. A website version of the tour supplements the audio file, and depicts the walking route on an attractively minimalist hand-drawn map. Clicking on tour stops opens the audio for each stop, along with visual

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[54] "Audissey Guide to Houston."

[55] "Amtrak Route Podcasts."

[56] Rosenthal, "Passing Stranger."

aids such as photographs, video, and maps. Malinovski notes that while there are similarities between audio tours and other types of podcasts, there are some important differences as well. Timing travel between sights is an important consideration for audio tours, for instance. "Geography," Malinovski says, "becomes your editor."[57] Another of Malinovski's lessons is that less music and ambient sound are required in walking audio tours, because they compete with the sounds of the environment in which users are already immersed. Malinovski advises, though, that the greatest challenge in creating an effective audio tour is creating a sense of place through good description and a strong story, a challenge common to all types of topography.

Tools of Engagement in the Service of Place Appreciation

In this section we have discussed a number of techniques that topographic podcasters can use to engage listeners and to keep them interested through to the end. These include the use of narrative elements; the use of interesting story angles; engaging production styles; poetic presentation; the use of web-based supplemental materials; and audio tours. It is important to remember that, as with engagement techniques for topographic books, these tools cannot be used simply to entertain audiences. Instead, they must at the same time always work to enhance our understanding of particular places.

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[57] Ibid.

Focusing on Geography: Place, Landscape, Environment, and Space

So far we have considered what this sample of topographic podcasts can teach us about the first two essential elements of public topography articulated in Chapter III: teaching people to appreciate particular places, and engaging the general public. We shall now assess how these podcasts stack up in terms of their ability to satisfy the third element of public topography—its fundamentally geographic nature.

Place

Recall that the place tradition in geography involves the synthesis of the many differing aspects of a place within a locational context to provide a holistic understanding of that place. This idea of a place as a "gathering" of phenomena is by far the most common geographic tradition represented by the podcasts in this sample. Some of these podcasts, for example, attempt to achieve this synoptic view of place by using a style similar to that used by the explanatory topographies discussed in Chapter IV. The *99% Invisible* episode "Soul City" is a good example of this approach. In a 35-minute audio documentary that features both historical audio tape as well as contemporary interviews, producer Katie Mingle describes how the civil rights and black power movements of the 1960s gave birth to the idea of Soul City, North Carolina. A planned city for African-Americans, Soul City was first proposed by civil rights leader Floyd McKissick and eventually funded as a part of a larger project of city building by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Administration. Like nearly all the other cities created under the HUD initiative, Soul City ultimately failed to attract the investment,

industry, and residents it needed to grow and thrive, and the project was officially abandoned in 1979. *99% Invisible*'s account of Soul City is a finely crafted, if brief, portrait of the life of a place, one that walks the listener through the city's life from inception to its ultimate demise and attempts to give an account of the various factors that influenced its existence.

Other episodes in this sample approach the geographic tradition of place from a more poetic angle, attempting to bring together multiple subjective viewpoints to create a more complete sense of place. *This American Life*'s "Scenes from a Mall," for example, explores the many facets of a suburban Nashville shopping mall from multiple individual perspectives, including those of teenagers hanging out in the mall, employees who work at the mall's various shops, and from the security office that few shoppers ever see.

While these episodes represent two of the three topographic strategies suggested in Chapter III (the explanatory and the poetic), both nevertheless represent a single approach to the geographic tradition of place in topographic podcasts—that of using a single episode to tell the self-contained story of a place. When national podcasts like *Planet Money*, *99% Invisible*, and *This American Life* tackle places as their subjects, this one-off approach is their primary tool. The advantage to this one-episode strategy is that it delivers the story of a place in an easily-digestible, one-serving portion, usually in a half hour or less. This may be exactly as much information as some listeners are interested in consuming about a place. But the level of detail possible in such a short production is woefully less than that provided by the topographic books we examined in

Chapters III and IV, and for many places, such an approach may do little more than expose the tip of an iceberg.

A more in-depth approach to the geographic tradition of place is to use the serialized nature of podcasting to produce multiple episodes about a locality, thus more completely bringing together the numerous facets that constitute a place. This is the approach that *Curious City* and *Nature Notes* use, and for those listeners who yearn for a deeper appreciation of a particular place, this is by far the preferred format. By producing and publishing individual podcasts on a regular basis over a long period of time, topographic podcasters can vastly increase the number and kinds of stories they can tell, allowing them to communicate a much more nuanced sense of place. Pursuing a multiple-episode strategy, in fact, allows topographers to diversify even beyond what might normally be included in a topographic book. All three of the topographic approaches discussed in Chapters III and IV, for example, might be used in a single podcast series over time. One episode, for instance, might explain the spatial distribution and economics of local agriculture, while the next explores what the life of a local farmer is like, and the third provides a driving tour of local agricultural sites. The same topic might also be approached from multiple subjective perspectives in multiple episodes, so that one story looks at a place through the eyes of a farmer, one through the eyes of miner, and one through the eyes of a real-estate developer. And topographic podcasters have the freedom to pursue all the geographic traditions through the life of their podcast, perhaps discussing a local landform one week, the spatial distribution of

wealth the next, and environmental issues related to resource extraction the following week.

Topographic podcasters also have enormous latitude in how they organize their podcast episodes within the series. Many podcasts are listened to in no special order, so that each topic is a short, easy-to-consume package that stands on its own, unencumbered by the need to fit into the rigid organizational structure of a greater whole. But podcasts can also be linked together in a defined order to better build on previous episodes and to more easily bring out recurring and overarching themes. The number of episodes in a series is limited only by the number of interesting stories that a topographer can tease out of a place. Whether the episodes build on each other or not, listeners who tune in for the full series will have a sense of place that can be equal to or better than what they might acquire from reading a full topographic book.

One way that a topographic podcast might differ from many of the serialized podcasts available today is in the organization of its accompanying website. Many podcasts host their files on their own websites, as well as through services like iTunes. Often, episodes are simply listed in the order in which they were released. A topographer might instead sort podcasts into primary and secondary levels. The primary level of podcasts could be the first episodes that a new listener might download, giving her a comprehensive, one-over-the-world view of a place. Secondary order podcasts would provide a more detailed examination of particular topics. Episodes could be grouped topically as well as geographically, perhaps even tied to an interactive map, and would in some ways mirror the organizational structure of the *Field Guide to California*

Agriculture discussed in Chapter V. This kind of careful organization of the podcast website would greatly increase a listener's ability to quickly assimilate information about a place, and would make the listening process less of a randomized treasure hunt.

Landscape

While place may be the most prominent of the geographic traditions in this sample of podcasts, landscape is a close second. Many of the landscape-related episodes in this sample were produced by *99% Invisible*, which has a strong architectural influence and, until recently, was produced out of the offices of the Arcsine architectural firm in Oakland, California. The majority of the podcast's more than 100 shows are focused on some aspect of the cultural landscape. These landscape stories are not simply about how to identify architectural features or date buildings, but they instead often delve into the historical, philosophical, and social contexts that led to the landscapes in question, as well as the cultural meaning they hold. The episode "New Old Town," for example, explains how, following the almost total destruction of Warsaw in World War II, the Soviet Union rebuilt the Polish capital's Old Town in a particular way, using the reconstructed landscape as a way of discouraging nostalgia and emphasizing the bright future envisioned under Communist rule. Similarly, "Kowloon Walled City" investigates the unique historical circumstances that led to the development of Kowloon, at one time the most densely populated city in the world. A *de facto* autonomous city within a British-controlled enclave in mainland China until it was torn down in 1993, Kowloon was known for its unique urban landscape, and the episode describes how even after its

destruction, that landscape continues to work its way into popular culture, such as through its use as the setting for numerous video games.

Curious City also has a strong landscape component in its reporting, and the show frequently partners with the Chicago Architecture Foundation to produce stories on the city's built environment. Episode topics have included, for example, why the city has a large number of "two-flat" apartment buildings; how Chicago skyscrapers are able to stand on swampy soil; why Chicago is the biggest market in the U.S. for revolving doors; and what a ban on "For Sale" signs in the Oak Park neighborhood has to do with the urban geography of race.[58]

Despite their shared interest in architecture and landscapes, *99% Invisible* and *Curious City* differ greatly in the scale and breadth of their landscape reporting. The former tends to produce a greater number of single episodes about the landscapes of individual places around the world, while the latter produces fewer episodes on landscape, but all their landscape stories relate to the Chicago area. Due to the smaller number of landscape types and interesting background stories to be found in a small place, *Curious City*'s approach of mixing landscape episodes with episodes on other local subjects is probably more suited to topographic podcasting. But *99% Invisible* provides an excellent model for how these less frequent landscape episodes might be produced, and the idea that there is much more to a landscape than what can presently be seen is a powerful way of approaching stories of the built environment. Landscape

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[58] "The Tale of the Chicago Two-Flat"; "Building Skyscrapers on Chicago's Sandy Soil"; "The Swinging Times of Chicago's Revolving Doors"; "Not in Your Front Yard."

episodes for a topographic podcast might explore, for example, why certain styles of buildings or certain types of land use predominate in an area. They might identify architectural styles that predominate in different time periods in a small place, or explain the history behind landscape features like civic monuments and cemeteries.

Given that landscapes are often perceived as visual phenomena, both shows' producers do an excellent job of bringing them to life in the listener's mind using vivid descriptions, music, and ambient sound. There is perhaps a lesson here for topographers of all stripes—that places and their landscapes are experienced not only visually, but with other senses as well, including hearing, smell, touch, and occasionally even taste. When describing the things that make places unique, topographers ought to strive for a judicious use of all five senses in their descriptions. Both shows also make excellent use of web-based supplementary material to provide photographs, maps, and video to augment their excellent audio representations of landscapes.

Environment

The third geographic tradition we identified in Chapter III was environment, defined by geographer Alan Baker as "studies of the earth as the home of humanity."[59] This includes not only the study of features of the natural world, such as relief, weather and climate, and flora and fauna, but also the interaction between humans and nature, whether that means the influence of the physical environment on humans, or the

[59] Baker, *Geography and History*, 72.

influence of humans on the environment. Geography, of course, is not the only discipline which interests itself in these issues—meteorologists, geologists, biologists, ecologists, anthropologists, and economists, among others, all share an interest in these topics, and environmental issues such as climate change, drought, hurricanes, water pollution, and resource extraction have made major headlines in recent years. It is unsurprising, then, that a fair number of the podcasts in this sample exhibit environmental themes. Marfa Public Radio's *Nature Notes*, mentioned earlier in this chapter, has produced a large number of short podcasts on natural topics in West Texas, and Wyoming Public Radio's podcast *The Modern West* has devoted about a third of its total podcasts to regional human-environment issues. Other podcast series considered here have produced one-off episodes on environmental topics, such as *Radiolab*'s "Galapagos"; *99% Invisible*'s "Unseen City: Wonders of the Urban Wilderness"; *Curious City*'s "Chicago's Tornado-Proof Delusion"; and *Under the Sun*'s "Red Tide."

Given that environmental issues are widely covered in the podcasting world, what can topographic podcasters add to the mix? The major contribution that topographers can make to is to focus their environmental stories on the small scale and the nearby, since many national podcasts focus on big environmental stories that appeal to large audiences. *Nature Notes*, "Red Tide," and "Chicago's Tornado-Proof Delusion" are all good examples of how topographic podcasters might help listeners to appreciate the environment of a small place. Potential podcast topics in this vein might include a profile of a bird species that visits the local area each year; a story of a plant or animal that is identified with a region, in the way that alligators, for example, are associated

with the Everglades; or an explanation of why particular weather and climate patterns occur in a place, and how they have influenced local settlement and agriculture from pre-Columbian times to the present.

Space

The fourth and final geographic tradition that we identified in Chapter III is the geographic tradition of space, or what Baker called the "locational discourse." Remember that in this context, "space" refers to describing and explaining spatial distributions. Of the four traditions, this is the least represented in the sample of podcasts considered here: only two episodes, both by *Curious City*, make any real effort to explain spatial relationships. "What if the Great Chicago Fire Never Happened?" looks at how the spatial structure of Chicago might have developed differently if major parts of the city had not been razed by fire in 1871, while "Why Chicago Has So Many Mattress Stores" considers the economic geography of bedding sales in Chicago. Although it is possible that the sample is biased, the more likely reason for this lack of podcasts about location and space is that it is primarily the geographer who tends to think about the world in spatial terms, and few podcasts have an avowedly geographic basis.

This lack of emphasis on spatial relationships suggests that it may be through the illumination of spatial issues that topographic podcasters can make the most original contributions to public topography. This use of audio to describe spatial relationships may seem counterintuitive at first, since geographers tend to rely heavily on maps, which are explicitly visual tools, to explain the locational distributions. But many of the

podcasts studied here find alternative ways to deal with stories that might otherwise be explained through visual means. Economists, for example, make frequent use of charts and graphs to explain financial issues, but *Planet Money* dispenses with such visual aids altogether, and perhaps even does a better job for it. *99% Invisible* deals extensively with cultural landscapes, which might be otherwise better represented through photographs, but it manages to tell compelling stories about built environments through sound only. What both of these podcasts have in common is that they focus their stories primarily on *processes*, which lend themselves well to narrative storytelling approaches. In this way, they are similar to explanatory topographies like Lewis's *New Orleans*, which tells the story of how various historical and geographical processes created the spatial relationships we see in New Orleans today.

Books like *New Orleans*, Dunwell's *Hudson River Highlands*, and Shortridge's *Kansas City*, in fact, could provide plenty of material for numerous spatially-based podcast episodes along the lines of those produced by *99% Invisible*. Atlases like *Portlandness* and *Everything Sings* also provide a wealth of ideas about the types of spatial stories that might be produced. For example, the evolution of Portland's historic Chinatown and the migration of Asian businesses to the Jade District, as described by Banis and Shobe in *Portlandness*, would make fascinating podcast episodes, as would their map of the locations of industrial zones along Columbia Harbor. This underutilized spatial perspective, delivered in the form of audio podcasts about ordinary, local places, has enormous potential to help people appreciate not just the places in which they live, but to appreciate the geographic perspective in general.

Balancing the Geographic Traditions

One of the characteristics of national podcasts like *Planet Money* and *This American Life* is that they define their content by picking a theme to explore, and then searching the entire world for the best stories related to that theme. Local podcasts series like *Curious City*, on the other hand, limit themselves geographically, but then pursue a wide variety topics within that geographic boundary. One of the advantages of using geography as a unifying theme for topographic podcasts is that while it provides an intellectual thread that ties together various topics related to a place, the geographic traditions are so broad that they allow tremendous latitude in selecting stories. Even for a place as small as a few rural counties, topographic podcasters could produce many episodes using the themes of space, place, landscape, and environment before running out of material. Perhaps the greatest challenge for topographic podcasters is balancing the wide assortment of story possibilities opened up by the geographic perspective.

Conclusion

This chapter has proposed that audio podcasts can be an effective way to help people appreciate particular places. A number of podcasts about places were evaluated to determine what lessons they might contain for topographers who wish to venture into this medium. Lessons included how to augment the idea of place to better define a series; how to use narrative elements, unusual angles, production style, poetics, supplemental material, and experiential podcasts to engage listeners and keep their

interest; and how these topographic podcasts relate to the three essential elements of public topography outlined in Chapter III.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

Throughout this dissertation, I have argued that a healthy relationship with a place can be an incredibly rewarding thing, and that despite the obstacles imposed by modernity, people still have a deep hunger to connect to places, especially the places where they live. I have hoped to show that one way to facilitate this connection between people and places is to encourage their appreciation through the practice of public topography. It is important to note here the deliberate use of the word *practice.* Although theories of place and place attachment provide an important grounding for topographers, public topography is about *producing* topography, not theorizing it. For this reason, this research has been focused on examining real examples of place writing to provide guidelines for would-be topographers (including myself), rather than on extensively exploring place as a theoretical concept. And while much of the analysis in this research has relied on critique as a way of arriving at lessons about producing topography, the point of this dissertation is not so much to criticize the work of more experienced place writers, as it is to help aspiring topographers produce great topography, whether that be in the form of books, podcasts, or some other emerging new medium.

Because this vision of public topography is a practical one, an important component of this research has been to create an example of what good public topography might look and sound like, using the lessons identified in Chapters IV, V, and VI. To that end, the Appendix to this research contains a link to a 25-minute podcast

that tells a story of the influence of the Brazos River on the landscape of the Brazos Valley in Central Texas. The podcast was created by the author using many of the lessons outlined in this dissertation. Accompanying the podcast is a companion website that provides supplemental maps, photographs, references, and suggestions for experiencing the Brazos River.

Though a significant part of this research has focused on topographic books, perhaps the provided podcast, combined with the analysis in Chapter VI, will spur future topographers to think creatively about how they might facilitate place appreciation in the general public. As I have noted before, relatively low prices for consumer electronics and wide access to the internet have made it possible to distribute topographic content in any number of exciting and inexpensive ways, such as through websites, videos, interactive online maps, social media, and smartphone apps. While these media forms do not have the professional cachet for academic geographers that books do, they have the potential to be extremely effective ways of stimulating place appreciation.

In thinking about the future of public topography, and who might produce these new topographic works, it is useful to think about the incentives (or lack thereof) for its production. Public topography faces many of the same challenges as local history. As noted in Chapter IV, local topics often have trouble generating a large enough audience to make them financially attractive for professional authors. While a topographic work might be read by many people over several decades, this is of little use to a writer who needs to generate a livable income. Academics writing books about places for popular publishers often run into the same constraint of audience size, so that in both cases,

much of the existing writing about small places is focused on well-known or iconic locations, such as Chicago or San Francisco.[1] Within academia itself, a preference for the large scale and the nomothetic, coupled with a general distaste for writing for popular audiences, means that few early- or mid-career geographers will be inclined to celebrate the peculiarities of small places for the general public. None of this is to say that professional authors and academics never write about small, ordinary places, but the practice is the exception rather than the rule, and rarely is it profitable, financially or professionally.

For these reasons, it is likely that much of the best public topography will be produced by the amateur, in the original and best sense of the word—a person who engages in an activity out of love rather than out of a desire for payment. Both the noted British local historian W.G. Hoskins and the American local historian Joseph Amato came to the same conclusion for the field of local history. "If local history is to be renovated," wrote Amato, "it will depend on the commitment of talented amateurs seeking to understand what has and truly is happening at home . . . They may be community college teachers, people from the ranks of the burgeoning retired, or stray and odd individuals intent on grasping the place where destiny has delivered them . . . Their passion will be to fathom the singular place that imprinted their mind with indispensable memories and a willingness to rethink home."[2]

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[1] See, for example, William Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis,* or Rebecca Solnit's *Infinite City: A San Fransciso Atlas.*

[2] Amato, *Rethinking Home*, 6. See also Hoskins, *Local History in England*, 5-7.

The practitioners of topography will likely come from a similar pool, and to that pool we should add students. The availability of computers, internet access, and digital recording devices at many secondary and post-secondary institutions means that the young are well-poised to contribute to the topographic tradition. As noted in Chapter VI, there are demonstrated pedagogical advantages to using podcasting as a learning tool, and students guided by the right teachers could produce excellent topographic works. The average student will not have the time to write a topographic book, but short podcasts, interviews, web articles, and interactive maps are well within their reach as research projects, especially within geography courses.[3]

But just as students could hardly be expected to create good representations of place without some guidance, other would-be amateur topographers often lack the conceptual and methodological tools for producing high-quality topography. Even the most ardent supporters of local history have recognized this fact within their own discipline. At a practical level, a lack of training in basic historical techniques has often led to shoddy work. At a more theoretical level, amateur local history has been criticized for a narrowness of vision and a disinterest in change. Local history's practitioners, even its defenders point out, often cling to a cherished, sentimentalized, and frozen image of history, one that is wedded to the distant past at the expense of the recent past and the present. Their lack of theoretical background, while refreshing in some ways, can at times blind them to macro-scale trends, preventing them from connecting phenomena at

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[3] For an example of this, see Blinn College's website "Brazos Geography" at www.brazosgeography.org.

multiple scales.[4] Professional historians with a passion for local history have thus taken it upon themselves to write numerous guide books for amateur historians that provide both practical and intellectual guidance.[5] Hoskins, quoting Samuel Butler, pointed out in fact that "There is no excuse for amateur work being bad. Amateurs often excuse their shortcomings on the grounds that they are not professional: the professional could plead with greater justice that he is not an amateur."[6]

Just as a small contingent of sympathetic historians has taken up the call to guide amateur local history, geographers should do the same for amateur topography. Good place writing that helps people to appreciate particular places is exceedingly hard to produce. We need handbooks written by geographers that provide for the layperson, in plain language, explanations of useful geographic concepts (like place, region, scale, landscape, and diffusion), together with the practical skills required for creating good topographies in a variety of media. In addition, we need those same geographers to practice what they preach, writing great topographies that amateurs can emulate. The goal is to give practicing amateurs the tools they need to approach topography as a craft, rather than simply as a hobby.

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[4] Amato, *Rethinking Home*, 5-7; Gerber, "Local and Community History," 213, 216; Hoskins, *Local History in England*, 4, 30; Kammen, *On Doing Local History,* 18-19; Russo, "Some Impressions of the Nonacademic Local Historians and Their Writings," 42.

[5] For examples, see Amato, *Rethinking Home*; Hoskins, *Local History in England* and *Fieldwork in Local History*; Kammen, *The Pursuit of Local History* and *On Doing Local History*; and Kyvig and Marty, *Nearby History*.

[6] Hoskins, *Local History in England*, 4.

I am not so naïve as to believe that we will see a renaissance of topographic writing by geographers or amateurs anytime soon, if ever. Even in its heyday in England, topography seems to have been a something of a fringe activity for the eccentric. But I do hope that both amateur topographers and professional geographers will consider applying their enthusiasm and talents for understanding and explaining places to the task of public topography. The pay may be abysmal, and the chances for winning widespread acclaim are slim, but participating in such a worthy pursuit has the potential to be tremendously satisfying and enriching for both author and audience.

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APPENDIX

The podcast and website described in Chapter VII can be found at http://thedisappearingriver.weebly.com.