

# Interweave: The Virtual Places of Rural Space

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Many textile mills in central North Carolina have been repurposed as adaptive reuse development. Through these gentrification efforts, much of the mills' histories have been lost or erased. Drawing from Nicholas Gane and David Beer's (2008) definition of interface as a membrane and Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch's (2012) feminist historiography, I consider how places like the textile mills are different materializations of history that can be accessed through a material engagement with land and space. By viewing the leftover remnants of the mills as an interface to the embodied knowledge of place, I explore how the mills - both the old structures and new construction - produce a virtual interface with the past that connects the community to an inherited, embodied wisdom of the land before, and yet constituted within, gentrification and late capitalist economies.

In their 2018 article in *Rhetoric Review*, Casie Cobos, Gabriela Raquel Ríos, Donnie Johnson Sackey, Jennifer Sano-Franchini and Angela M. Haas trace “the multiple, mutually-informing, and overlapping ways in which rhetoric and culture interface” (p. 141) in order to develop a disciplinary history of cultural rhetorics research. Beginning with rhetorical scholars whose focus was on the cultural production of knowledge, Cobos et al. point to Steven Mailloux's (2006) theory of rhetorical hermeneutics as a progenitor of the field of cultural rhetorics. Mailloux argued for “the use of rhetoric to practice theory by doing history” (p. 42) so that our understanding of intellectual production, especially in but not limited to the academy, would be situated within communities of practice that were culturally and historically constituted.

What might a rhetorical hermeneutics of phronesis produce for composition and rhetoric scholars? What does a cultural rhetorics approach to phronesis teach us about the practical wisdoms of everyday people? In their opening to “Our Story Begins Here: Constellating Cultural Rhetorics,” the Cultural Rhetorics Theory Lab (2014) sets the scene, “working out a relationship to the land, to the lake, to the histories of this place. Building a space in which our work exists alongside those histories. Building a practice we can remember when we're not all together, not in this place/space” (Prologue, para. 4). Elsewhere, Gabriela Raquel Ríos (2015) writes, “land-based rhetorics are literal *acts* of interpretation and communication that grow out of active participa-

tion with land... land-based rhetorics recognize the ways in which nature can *produce* relations” (pp. 64-65). These scholars situate an understanding of literacy, communication, and knowledge within an intimate relationship to and practice alongside the land. Land teaches us something; it has wisdom that we access through “embodied ways of knowing/being derived from land and from with working/living/being with land” (p. 65).

My purpose in constellating cultural rhetorics research with the theme of this year’s conference is to propose a different way of understanding phronesis, or the practical wisdom born from everyday experience. This everyday, lived, contextual wisdom is necessarily tied to places – the land we work, the buildings we live in, the histories of those places, and the cultural practices that are constitutive of place. Within a cultural rhetorics tradition, we might consider how place mediates our relationship to history and works as a kind of material-historical record of different times, different people and different stories. What wisdom can be found in the materiality of place? How might we access that wisdom through specific historical records: official records, unofficial records, and embodied relationships to the land? And finally, in what ways are these different records, different ways of interfacing – different mediating devices that allow us to listen to and learn from our familiar places?

In this essay, I will explore the ways that textile mills in central North Carolina perform wisdoms that are inaccessible through an official or unofficial historical record due to adaptive reuse development, the process of rehabilitating older structures in order to preserve their histories while updating their economic use. While interface theories are largely concerned with the digital screen, I use Nicholas Gane and David Beer’s (2008) definition of interface as a *membrane* to show how an embodied engagement with the mills allows us to access a history that is no longer available due to these gentrification efforts. The leftover traces of the factories, their machines, and their infrastructures creates a virtual interface with the past that connects us to an embodied memory of the land before, and yet constituted within, global labor practices and gentrification.

## Exigency: Listening to Place

In early 2017, I began researching my family’s history in relation to the textile mills of North and South Carolina. My grandfather and great-grandfather had managed Columbia Manufacturing Company in Ramseur, North Carolina, and my grandmother’s family members had worked in the mills and the shops that sold mill goods to area townspeople. I had recently moved to the next town over, to a little neighborhood on the banks of the Haw River

that had once been a mill town. I lived in a shotgun house whose bathroom had only just been added in the late 2000s. My community's and my family's histories were beginning to run together.

This was my first historiographic project, not a scholarly pursuit to any degree, so I visited with my local library which had amassed a sizable collection of newspaper clippings and records of the textile industry in the nearby counties. What I found surprised me: nothing on the mills *as they were*, but overwhelming coverage of the mills amidst their massive closures in the 1980s and 1990s. Even more, a development project, a huge housing development that was slated to bring in millions of dollars in revenue to the community, had spurred new development and adaptive reuse projects of the mills in recent years. This was the subject of much community dialogue, specifically how gentrification would affect local residents, and so the library had archived hundreds of op-eds that discussed the new use of the mills: as shopping districts, co-operative groceries, yoga studios, and fine-dining restaurants.

What struck me about this experience with the archives was that I could physically walk to the mills, touch them, buy things in them, and yet have no historical or cultural context for reference. Where was their history, and why was it so elusive if they were still physically standing? It was as if I was pushing a button on a device to open up a place and something was malfunctioning. I no longer had the family histories of the textile factories; the stories of the mills had started to fade as my family members passed away or lost their memories due to disease. There were so few left in the community who had worked in the mills, even though many were open up until the late 1990s. Without a historical record *or* an oral history, I was overcome with the question of how we would remember, how we would access, how we would interface with those histories and continue to learn from a place that was so integral to people's identities in the central Piedmont region. I was listening to place and only hearing its physical traces speak back.

## From Story to Theory: Frameworks

In this essay, I am interested in exploring the ways memory is inscribed into these physical traces and how "users" interface with land, structures, and buildings to access that lived knowledge of place. I specifically use a definition of place as the medium by which space is practiced. In her 2012 CCCCs address, Malea Powell writes that space is

a place that has been practiced into being through the acts of storied making, where the past is brought into conscious

conversation with the present and where—through those practices of making—a future can be imagined. Spaces, then, are made recursively through specific, material practices rooted in specific land bases, through the cultural practices linked to that place, and through the accompanying theoretical practices that arise from that place—like imagining community “away” from but related to that space. (388)

In my own understanding of the space of central North Carolina, I see the places of the textile mills as an accumulation of layered histories and cultural practices, some of which overlap with others, some of which colonize and enslave others, and some of which exploit and capitalize on the labors of others. While the relationship between place and space has long been theorized, Powell’s invocation of land is different, and one that applies to the place of the mills, where land-based practices have long been used to practice community before and after the mills. Further, while land is the material on which the textile mills are built, they are material entanglements of and with land: they are both designs imposed and relationships with land. They are traces of land bubbling up from the ground. When we access buildings, though they may be human-made, we also touch the land that those buildings are on, the histories and cultural practices that the land carries. By using the term “land” in this paper, I am specifically leaving room for the ways human-made things, including buildings, emerge from relationships with land.

In considering the relationship between these elements, I ask the following questions:

1. How do we listen to the wisdom of physical space? What does it say?
2. How is this knowledge different than a historical record or an oral history?
3. In what ways are these historical engagements different interfaces with space?

I will examine these questions in the context of two adaptive reuse spaces in central North Carolina: the Chatham Mills Label Factory in Pittsboro, North Carolina, and Carr Mill Mall, formerly Alberta Mills, in Carrboro, North Carolina. These two spaces house coffee shops, co-operative groceries, upscale restaurants and boutiques, and office space. For the most part, their histories prior to their adaptive reuse states are inaccessible through traditional archival means.

I use two frameworks to address these historic sites: interface theories that resist an explicitly digital understanding of interface, and feminist historiography which prompts us to listen for new historical patterns and materializations.

## Feminist Historiography of Place

In Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch's (2012) *Feminist Rhetorical Practice: New Horizons for Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy Studies*, critical imagination plays an integral role in a feminist rhetorical practice. Using Geertz's notion of tacking in and tacking out, Royster and Kirsch suggest that we "look back from a distance...in order to broaden our own viewpoints in anticipation of what might become more visible from a longer or broader view, where the scene may not be in fine detail but in broader strokes and deep impressions" (p. 72). Feminist historiographies often use this tacking in and out approach to "envision the possibilities of women's practices...and to bring intellectual rigor to the analytical task" (p. 76). Terese Guinsatao Monberg (2008) points out the ways that traditional feminist historical lenses do not listen for certain stories to be told, and Royster and Kirsch's critical speculation allows us to hear cultural difference in such a way that we are able to see what is missing in the traces that are left.

These theorists are especially useful in considering how we might tack in and out in order to listen to nonhuman historical actors, material places in particular. I bring these feminist historiographic practices into an ecological focus and ask what we might hear or see when we recuperate the stories that land must be telling alongside and entangled with the human record. Alison Jones and Kuni Jenkins (2008) propose a post-interpretivist view of history by considering what happens when we foreground the materiality of events rather than interpretations of what happened, whether official records or oral histories. By explaining how the site of a Maori and British meeting materializes three different accounts as real and separate events, Jones and Jenkins show how histories are differentially materialized via geography and memorializing practices. Here, there is power in being able to reject a recorded history and to propose other realities that have emerged from material accounts.

While all of these scholars have focused on the materializations of human history *by* humans, their work leaves room for the idea that land itself might produce a different materialization of history. Land is not simply a historiographic text that has events etched *on* it; it produces its own histories that are evident in its traces, in both geographic formations and entanglements with human-made things. In what ways might these physical traces speak back actual events? What marks does history leave on the land, and how might we learn and act upon that emplaced wisdom? A feminist historiography of place must necessarily focus on this materiality and the ways that physical traces *are* a historical record. It must also consider the ways that our embodied access to those materializations transfers a kind of wisdom or understanding of our own lived experiences contextualized within that history.

## Place as Interface

In addition to thinking of the ways place might serve as historical materializations in addition to our own official and unofficial records, I situate a reading of the mills within an understanding of place as *interface* to history. Many scholars have been interested in the affordances of the digital screen as an interface (Galloway, 2012; deSouza e Silva, 2006; Kember, 2016). Alex Galloway (2012) argues that the interface is an *effect* of new media ethics, a relationship to simulation and information. The interface is the glass-sided mobile device that offers a new kind of access to place – navigable, inhabitable space inside the digital – which consists of “pathways for connection” (Schaefer, 2011, p. 64). Adriana de Souza e Silva and Jordan Frith (2012) define the interface as “something that makes a connection between two parties but...becomes part of that system, influencing how they interact with each other” (p. 2). These interfaces are transformative of both users and messages sent between users. Our mobile devices recondition how we interact with place *as* we interact with it.

But our internet-enabled devices are not the only surfaces that allow us to access information, create simulation, or become enmeshed within a system. “Users” of a landscape have access to both physical and theoretical or conceptual space, as places “carry the resonance of things” (Brewer and Dourish, 2008, p. 965). When we access land, we access these resonances and synthesize old information with new, a process that reflects the fluid mechanisms of location-aware interfaces like mobile phones and geo-tagging technologies. James Waldram (1997) writes that through the land, information “forms a constant loop in which new information is interpreted in the context of existing information” (qtd. in Castellano, 2000, p. 23). In this way, I find Nicholas Gane and David Beer’s (2008) definition of interface much more useful, as it leaves room for the idea of land-as-interface. In their chapter on interfaces in *New Media: The Key Concepts*, Gane and Beer define interface as a “membrane” (p. 62). I am drawn to this definition particularly because of its fluidity: skin, water, grass, brick, cellphone, Jacquard loom, and our own embodiments – all are interfaces through which we experience different material entanglements, give and take information, and are transformed by that exchange.

## Interfacing With the Mills

In explaining how feminist historiographies of place intersect with interfaces of place, I have shown how place speaks back a history to us that is at times only accessible through a physical entanglement with its remnants. The textile mills of central North Carolina are only one such set of places that speak

their own histories, but I choose them as an artifact for this particular framework because of the peculiar ways they create a *virtual* relationship to the knowledge of the past. A place might be in literal ruins; it may no longer be standing or may have been completely erased. It might be accessible through the interface of a museum, but the archival process can disembody a place from its *emplacement*, its context, and its life. The mills, on the other hand, *are* living, extensions and erasures of relationships between people and practice. They are a unique artifact because they are both *there* and *not there*, only there through their leftover, at times aesthetically intentional, remnants.

How do we interface with place? By embodying it: by walking, talking, touching, and sensing it (Pink, 2012). My interface with the Chatham Mills Label Factory and Carr Mill Mall involves a slow kind of ambling through their hallways. It involves an intentional sensing: paying attention to the feeling of the floorboards creaking and foundations sagging in certain places, grazing my knuckles against the painted over bricks. It involves looking in places that are not looked at: up, between the rafters; under, in the crawl-spaces or boiler chambers; behind, in the storage barns where old machines are housed; around, at the land formations bumping against the building; or between, in the spaces where shops join together. An interesting result of the adaptive reuse development of these spaces is that they are intentionally compartmentalized to accommodate many businesses in one location. With that, there are pockets of old building structure that are essentially forgotten. Then there are the things that are hiding in plain sight: the old electrical piping used as light fixtures, the rafters which create a lofted aesthetic to the building, or the gas valves used as display for a set of earrings and a necklace. Such a walking, talking, and sensing interface also presupposes a given human embodiment that cannot be ignored. Some histories will materialize for me because my body is white, female, fat, and rural. Other bodies will have other histories materialized for them: histories of Indigeneity and colonization, histories of enslavement and the cotton industry, and even more contemporary histories of immigrant communities and corporate agriculture.

While the structures of the mills are clearly still intact, their socialities are erased through many different mechanisms, in particular the adaptive reuse gentrification process. However, this walking-and-sensing method shows me the ways that textile workers *were* in that space - how they bumped against it, broke it in places, used it, negotiated it. Things carry the traces of their use, but they also carry the traces of those who used them (Novotny, 2015). By touching the gravel of a broken brick painted over with latex white paint, I am entering several communities of practice: the bricklayer who built the factory, the millworker who scraped across that particular brick, and the laborer hired by the developer to wash over everything. All of these socialities are accessed

through one single brick. Whereas the historical record cannot account for these layers of cultural experience, none are replaced in light of the other if we pay attention to what place itself has to communicate; all are present simultaneously in that single physical structure.

This experience of the mills is what is so strikingly *virtual* to me: that my interfacing with a place so intimately apart of my family history involves both hidden and obvious features that are inscribed with varying layers of history, capitalism, work, leisure, and commerce. The mills weave old and new information together and create a subject in me that is both connected and disconnected to place, a hybrid being feeling her way around the walls. But they are also synthesizing that information themselves, collating the touch of early capitalist economies with the touch of late capitalist economies. New forms entangle with old to create an *effect* of a place, a virtual experience of both history and contemporary economy.

## Conclusion: From Place to Wisdom

Through a material engagement with place, we gain access to a different kind of engagement with history, one that shows the traces of activity, both economic and social. Though their “membranes” are not the same kind of aluminosilicate glass found in our mobile and internet-connected devices, the surfaces and textures of place allow us access to different kinds of information, different kinds of embodied knowledge - knowledge that is not only *emplaced* but *of* place. In this essay, I have explored the ways my interfacing with the virtual place of the textile mill has granted me an understanding of the meaning-making and sociality of my ancestors’ and relatives’ lives as workers there. But I argue that place is always materializing a record of history and calling us to interface with it. For the places we encounter that have lost their histories to development, colonization, disaster, or neglect, we may not be able to use the archive or even the spoken word as an interface to understand and connect with our pasts. But the physical places themselves, their traces, their hauntings, carry those histories with them and create virtual spaces through which we might learn of other embodied, emplaced wisdoms, ways of being and knowing in the world.

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