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Introduction: Building Bridges and Weaving Webs

Elizabeth Sutton

University of Northern Iowa, elizabeth.sutton@uni.edu

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Introduction: Building Bridges and Weaving Webs

Part of the journal section “Forum: UNI’s Ecology”

Elizabeth Sutton “Introduction: Building Bridges and Weaving Webs”

1. The impetus for this forum was the UNI Creating a Responsible Environment Showcase (UNI CARES) event held in April, 2016. The goal of the showcase was to bring together the various domains (or disciplines, as it were) of researchers, teachers, students, and staff who contribute to active learning, expanded thinking, and environmental renewal at UNI. Correspondingly, the Provost’s Common Read brought diverse groups of students, faculty, and staff together to discuss the broader implications of Andrea Wulf’s biography of Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859), *The Invention of Nature*. I want to take some of the themes raised in these events and use them as threads to weave a web of relation among the pieces gathered here, and more broadly, to reflect on UNI as our shared home, our οἶκος with an ecology that we together create.^[1]

2. Humboldt (like many indigenous peoples before him) saw the earth as an organism, an interconnected web of life forms and processes. We might think of the interconnected strands in a web as like little bridges, each connecting to another and contributing to a larger, permeable, multidimensional, and flexible structure. Both webs and bridges bring phenomena together.^[2] The example of a bridge that Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) used in his essay “Building Dwelling Thinking” (1954) suggests that the bridge collects and unites the fourfold of earth, sky, mortals and divinities into a “thing,” the bridge.^[3] The entity of “bridge” becomes a place for dwelling, its creation and being-what-it-is unified. To oversimplify, Heidegger’s concept of dwelling is about *letting things be free to be what they are*. For humans, dwelling is both verb and noun: it is the freedom to create, grow, nurture, and cultivate. To dwell is to integrate and be with phenomena dynamically, because we cannot separate our own being from any others’. At UNI we build a web of connectivity, of care through our teaching, research, and service; when all are integrated, we dwell.

3. In his remarks about the common read, Jim Wohlpart considers how humans may limit ourselves by enframing (by staying within constructed boundaries), and asks us rather, to consider ways we might, through our teaching and learning, build a “holistic and integrated way of knowing the world;” how through our actions and conversations, we might build dwelling thinking at UNI, together, mindfully. This forum collects just a few examples of how faculty, students, children, and community members come together and re-imagine their—and others’—connection to each other, time, and place. Re-imagining, indeed, is a first step in building a holistic way of knowing. Forums such as these, UNI CARES, and the many events and discussions we each engage in, if we engage openly, listening, can help build webs of connection from threads across disciplinary frames, fostering re-imagining. In each of the

pieces collected here, UNI students and faculty demonstrate spaces where dwelling thinking happens, where engagement with diverse members of the local community—from recent immigrants to artists, from prairie ditches to limestone fossils—facilitate and build caring relation because we listen, we re-imagine, we grow in knowledge and empathy.

4. I want to take and use these metaphors of bridge and web to think about UNI’s ecology and how we might think of the UNI campus and expanded community as a flexible dwelling, a matrixial web,^[4] a shared household, that is built and sustained by each of our participation in its creation and care. By honoring co-creation as part of being (and being part of UNI), each of us—faculty, staff, students, administrators, Cedar Valley citizens, alumni, birds, bees, feral cats, insects, native grasses and flowers, butterflies and foxes—is free to be, grow, emerge. The showcase created a space for UNI’s community to come together, listen, learn, and connect.

5. Capturing these ideas visually, UNI Art students’ performance piece of a “Web of Life” holds open space for dwelling (and) thinking. [\(Figure 1\)](#) Throughout the showcase, the students used surplus clothing collected from thrift stores to create a large web.^[5] They invited attendees of the showcase to work with them to weave various shirts, scarves, pants, and vests into a colorful, soft, and dynamic net. At the end of the showcase, students together raised the completed web, the clothing transformed into a floating matrix. The students walked through Maucker Union holding the web aloft, bringing each other outside, across the plaza, and into the UNI Museum. Enveloped by fabric, the students moved together, separately mobile but synchronized as one. The web wrapped around bystanders, enfolding individuals who might otherwise not have participated in either art or a sustainability initiative. Once in the Museum, the students let go of the web and emerged from its threads, along with the others wrapped in its flow. All were present in a space created by the web, the movement, the moment, and now were in the exhibition place of Eco-House.

6. Sustainability is not just about “environmentalism”—it is about sustaining spaces for dwelling thinking, spaces of freedom to learn and to be, together. The showcase was meant to create such a place, gathering us all together to share our individual talents and skills and use them together to build a campus that honors the interconnectedness of being and life. There is so much going on at UNI that is outward, expansive, caring. Now, perhaps more than ever, we need to explicitly and mindfully use our skills, talents, and activities to integrate with each other, with place and with life, in order to safeguard UNI, and Earth itself.

[1] As many people in the United States broadly use it today, “ecology” suggests the study of relationships among organisms and their environments. The original definition is from Ernst Haeckel, a German zoologist who defined ecology as such in 1866. While increasingly complicated over the years, “ecology” retains the implicit recognition that life is structured by relation and interconnectedness.

[2] It is worth noting that webs and bridges are also highly gendered in the ideologies of Western philosophy and art history. Architecture was associated with rationality and therefore, masculinity. Weaving of course, was associated with women and therefore demoted to a craft.

[3] “to build is in itself already to dwell.” Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 146.

[4] Matrix too, is a coming-together of the several, an originary web of presence and absence. It has been defined by psychoanalyst and painter Bracha Ettinger as a borderspace of subjective co-emergence; the I and non-I come together, neither being fully present nor fully absent, but co-constitutive of each other, in traces of past in present. Bracha Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, Brian Massumi, ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006). See also Griselda Pollock, “Femininity: Aporia or Sexual Difference,” in *Bracha Ettinger, Matrixial Borderspace*, Brian Massumi, ed. (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 37.

[5] Part of the research conducted for this piece included students’ investigating clothing donations and clothing waste. Much of the clothing “donated” to thrift stores gets thrown away or shipped to third-world countries, where it is either sold or thrown into landfills there.



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