Coffee Shop Writing in a Networked Age

Michael J. Faris

Today I drove roughly ninety miles to Caffetto, my favorite café in Minneapolis, an establishment with wireless Internet, rich black coffee, tables with access to electrical outlets, and a ping-pong table in the basement. I sit alone, typing on my MacBook Air, sipping on coffee, and listening to the conversations around me and to the rockabilly playing through Caffetto’s speakers. The clientele today is mixed: a few people working alone on their laptops (some with headphones, some without), some reading books silently, and a few small groups chatting lively. I first discovered Caffetto a few months ago when I was driving to Minneapolis and tweeted at a friend who lives there, asking him if he knew any coffee shops that would be good writing environments. He responded with a few suggestions as I arrived in the city; I looked up Caffetto on my iPhone, followed the vocalized directions from my phone, parked, checked in on Foursquare, bought coffee, and began working.

I have long been a coffee shop writer. Although I had a quiet apartment in grad school with only one roommate (in the same program), and although I had a fellowship that provided an office away from the louder, cluttered graduate student cubicles, I still avoided campus for the actual writing of my dissertation, only trekking onto campus for teaching, office hours, meetings, and errands. My typical morning commute involved packing up my laptop, books, and printed drafts into my messenger bag, walking to a café, ordering coffee, and sitting down to write. Now, as an assistant professor, I find myself
on campus a lot more, but the office is for office things (meeting with students or colleagues, catching up on email, doing paperwork, etc.), whereas my real workspace for extended writing is one of the two local cafés across the river from campus. These locations for writing offer something that the isolation of an office cannot: a lively, social atmosphere with ambient sounds, movements around me that serve not to distract but to help me focus, and my own ability to move. Additionally, writing in a coffee shop offers me a clean starting space, not cluttered like my office or apartment, but a place that I can shape and mold for the writing task at hand: Figure 1 gives one example of my workspace at a coffee shop. When a writing location becomes stale (when I get frustrated and need a change of scenery) or distracting, I can easily pack my bag, walk or drive to another café, and resituate myself for a new writing session. And sometimes, when I'm in a real slump and need to be rejuvenated to refocus, I drive to a nearby city that provides more options (a practice I relied on a few times when I was particularly frustrated with my dissertation). I have attempted to show an aspect of my mobility in Figure 2, which plots my Foursquare check-ins at coffee shops over the last four years.

Absent in these images are my own body and the presence of others in these locations, who provide company by the presence of their bodies, movements, and sounds, making me feel less isolated writing in public. When I was in

Figure 1. Editing a print draft and writing in a Wisconsin café, 2012.
graduate school, a group of fellow graduate students across the disciplines and I used a Facebook group to network with each other, using the site to share what our locations were like that day (too loud, too cold, lots of open outlets, and so forth) and to arrange meet-ups to make writing less isolating. The importance of others’ presence to my writing is what makes some arguments against our culture’s increased digital engagement seem so foreign to me. Some argue that people are becoming isolated behind their screens at coffee shops and thus not connected to others or to their physical location. This was the case with one friendly gentleman who interrupted me as I was writing my dissertation in a Starbucks so that he could lament the decline in public deliberation in coffee shops. Cafés, he opined, were meant for face-to-face discussions, and he was concerned for the future of face-to-face sociability with everyone behind their laptop screens.

But I do not find myself isolated, alone, or lacking a sense of place in coffee shops; instead, I feel camaraderie with fellow laptop workers, and I delight in hearing others’ conversations and having the occasional interaction with someone else. Rhetoric and writing studies asks us to attend to the particularities of writing: the moments and movements, the locations, the material objects, the networks. What critics of laptop use in public spaces miss in their assumptions about what occurs in coffee shops are the ways that objects, people, and
places come together in different and complex ways. Coffee shops have a place in public imagination as sites for face-to-face conversation, but the valorization of these sites as primarily about face-to-face conversations often ignores how literacy practices have always been central to coffee house culture. This grand narrative—that coffee shops are symbolic of a decline in face-to-face sociability—places a predetermined narrative on these spaces that ignores the complex relationships between people, technologies, and environments. Sites of writing can be sites of personal pleasure and complex relationships among individuals and spaces, whether writers are working alone or are coworking on collaborative projects. My personal pleasures of writing in coffee shops are many: the freedom of movement; overheard conversations; sharing my location with others via Foursquare or Facebook; changing up my writing environments; being greeted by baristas who recognize me; serendipitous conversations about technology, local issues, and politics; sipping on a bold cup of coffee and eating creamy potato soup as I draft these words.

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