Introducing glocal earth

Have you ever tried to locate your home using the online program Google Earth? I tried this recently. The program opened with a satellite image of the Earth against the black background of space, North America the default continent that loomed large in front of me. I typed in the simple six character postcode for my home in Norwich, United Kingdom (UK). Within seconds the globe had spun around and was speeding towards me – initially a blur of blue ocean, green vegetation and brown built-up areas, rapidly disaggregating into clusters of trees and the edges of buildings. The process made my stomach lurch, producing a sensation of roller-coaster vertigo. The dive from space to the hill that I live on, and the house that I live in, lasted approximately five seconds: a bewildering movement from global to local; a near simultaneous experience of inhabiting – of dwelling – in both a planet and a place.

For me, this is what is conjured up by the contemporary notion and phenomenon of glocalisation. Not only does this describe a collapse of temporal and spatial scales to produce simultaneous experiences and productions of macro and micro. It also combines with a post-dualist ontology that affirms a dynamic situatedness in both the local and the global; potentiating a corresponding embodied knowledge of comprising and constituting – of being and becoming – both a reflective and constitutive part of a whole.

Arguably, a key idea and practice distilling something of the zeitgeist of contemporary globalization phenomena is an intensification of
‘glocal’ organization. This clever term originates from Japanese business practices in the 1980s (Wikipedia, 2006) and was later popularized in the English-speaking academic world by sociologist Roland Robertson (1997). In combining and mutating the distinct terms ‘local’ and ‘global’ into a single word that signals an emerging geography of ‘glocality’, the term becomes an attempt to capture the interpenetrations of global and local social and spatial scales that are enhanced by rapidly globalizing digital communications technologies – particularly the buzzing trans-boundary connectivity and cyberspace imaginaries made possible by the internet (Dery, 1996; Bard and Söderqvist, 2002). It has been taken up by business in considering the provision of local services globally; in the customization of global corporate outputs for local circumstances (as in McDonald’s attempts to woo local appetites via culturally-relevant menus, also see Towers, 2004); and in the amelioration of homogenizing tendencies through local agential and hybridizing uptakes of products and services (e.g. see http://www.glocalforum.org). A wealth of anthropological studies also are describing and theorizing the cultural hybridities produced via proliferating interactions between emplaced communities and global contexts, thereby shedding light on the negotiation of individual and social identities in these otherwise rather destabilizing circumstances (see, for example, Gupta and Ferguson, 1997; de Neve and Donner, 2006). As such, these explorations take seriously Massey’s (1994:147) proposition that ‘we rethink a sense of place that is adequate to this era of time-space compression’.

The multiplicitous social movements and resistances contesting the social and environmental consequences of contemporary globalization processes similarly celebrate, and are infused with, the simultaneously emplacing and dislocating sense of place that is glocality. Popular slogans central to these mutinous and inspirational movements – The personal is political!, Think global, act local!, Unity in diversity!, and so on – thus play keenly to a sense that emplaced actions can effect significant socio-political changes in broader contexts. Unsurprisingly, a range of overlapping poststructural organizational metaphors also are significant in both describing and inspiring such ‘glocal’ organization. As elsewhere, these are animated by an exponential uptake of the internet and other new communications and media producing technologies, as key organizational tools in producing both social movement contestations and identities.

As theorized by feminist scholars such as Donna Haraway (1991, 1997), Rosi Braidotti (1996) and Sadie Plant (1998), as well as cyberculture theorists such Kevin Kelly (1994) and Mark Dery (1996) and philosophers of