Between Apocalypse and (E)utopia: Narrative In and Out of Cyberspace[1]

Michael Blitz, Dan Collins, Nancy Dunlop, Ellen Grimes, Annie Knepler, C. Mark Hurlbert, Paula Mathieu, and Derek Owens

Preface

Agenda

This is a story beginning in the classrooms, offices, libraries, and neighborhood meeting rooms where we work. It is an ensemble piece about listening, collecting, photographing, recording, sometimes late at night when the world seems to show itself, or in the morning before the senses are barraged by colors and the sounds of waste and loss: TV, shouting, crying, commercials, pounding, and traffic. Sights and sounds to remember and retell in story—a history of the places in which we live.

Some of our students have little to do with online neighborhoods: their real neighborhoods, too often rife with boredom, alcohol, street pharmacists, and gunshots, require immediate attention. What can we learn from students who are aware of the need to respond to, work within, or get out of their existing neighborhoods? What stories do these students tell? How can academics, perhaps too eager to turn cyberspace into a substitute for local, geophysical communities, hear them?

Similarly, many teachers, given the exigencies of budgets, material limitations, lack of technical support, or just lack of desire, don't see the urgency to prioritize the technological jump in education either. The narratives they (would) tell too rarely register in the national agenda to promote cybertechnology's benefits.

This article is an attempt to put some of these resistant pieces together, to make a different story, one we hope will interrupt, in, at least some small way, the stories of success circulating in the media and in our schools, the stories of 'excellence' that attach themselves

to anything, it sometimes seems, having to do with computer-oriented education. To interrupt, with testimony, quotation, and image, the unparalleled consumption and waste: 'free' university portal sites, rife with advertising, telling students what they need to consume to belong or not belong, the belief that all courses can be distanced, the belief that the best way to make an education relevant is to make it responsive to corporate interests and economic planning.

Personnel

Michael Blitz directs the Thematic Studies Program of John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York.
Dan Collins teaches English at Cape Fear Community College.
Nancy Dunlop teaches in an interdisciplinary program called "Project Renaissance," at the State University of New York at Albany.
Ellen Grimes and Annie Knepler work with The Neighborhood Writing Alliance, which runs community writing groups in Chicago neighborhoods and publishes the writing from these groups in The Journal of Ordinary Thought.
C. Mark Hurlbert teaches writing at Indiana University of Pennsylvania.
Paula Mathieu directs a library, writers' group, and computer literacy center for homeless and low-income men and women in Chicago.
Derek Owens teaches writing at St. John's University.

Process

We first came together as a group to design a multimedia installation which juxtaposed versions of apocalypse and utopia for the 1999 Conference on College Composition and Communication in Atlanta. For the installation, we created a multimedia performance space where audience members could visit a number of different 'stations' featuring a slide show, video presentations, architectural environments, interactive displays, and other modes of critical discourse often underrepresented at academic conferences. Later, some of us recreated the installation at the 1999 Project UNLOC conference in Pittsburgh. Here we turn the installation into prose, which we present in the form of a mosaic: pieces of a time from several places fitted together to tell a larger story of culture, cyberculture, and those left out.

Our piece includes texts by college students and homeless writers, reprints of postcards by homeless and neighborhood writers in Chicago, and quotes from various published texts. To make this article, we met with students and recorded them, worked with writers in computer labs, and prepared postcards from the materials homeless writers so generously offered for publication and public education. These students and homeless writers told us of life on the streets, in and amidst housing projects, clubs, subways and buses, bodegas, high rises, empty lots, city parks (including the good ones), broken glass, garbage, or mines and mills—many of which are closed—small town bars and party scenes, fields and woods, too many with rusted out cars and water heaters, slag heaps, and green and orange streams of mine spillage. This work tells a story about lives and places in degrees, simultaneously or alternatively, under siege and/or moving toward restoration.

This article, then, is about trying to find ways to hear the suppressed narratives, to document the experiences of students, community literacy center patrons, tutors, and teachers who seek both face-to-face contact as well as measured promises about technology.

Making a Mosaic With Many Eyes (With and Without Computers)

> Unfortunately, the major question about computers is not whether they serve you or your organization or your business well. I wish it were so simple just to take this personal view. We must look at the totality of how computers affect society, and life on Earth. We need to dredge each dimension of their impact and put it all together into one picture before we can judge their existence as beneficial or harmful. (54)
>
> —Jerry Mander. *In the Absence of the Sacred: The Failure of Technology and the Survival of Indian Nations*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1996.

How many pictures, how many people, how many stories will it take to assemble the 'one picture' Mander recommends? To get the proper perspective(s), how many unseen pictures, invisible people, unheard stories would have to be included?

Why do some stories, people, and places make it into cyberspace, and why don't others? How might various student stories and photographs fill in certain blanks within this conversation? How might we use online or any kind of narrative to point to places on the map largely unexplored within the conversation? How might we fill in the spaces with student and teacher narratives that get lost in the everyday shuffle (not to mention in the cybershuffle)?

A Question of Access

> Bill Gates . . . America's richest man increased his net worth by 2.1 million dollars an hour in the past year.
> —*Forbes* October 12, 1998

Thirty-eight of the wealthiest 400 Americans make their money directly from computer hardware, software, or the Internet. Four of the richest ten Americans are in the computer business: Bill Gates ($58 billion), Paul Allen, another Microsoft man ($22 billion), Michael Dell of Dell Computers ($13 billion), and Steven Ballmer of Microsoft ($12 billion) (see *Forbes* October 12, 1998).

Given these numbers, we ask ourselves: where does the celebratory rhetoric about computers come from? Who, really, gets to do the celebrating? Who has access to this party? When we encourage students to 'get online', what are we endorsing?

The accumulation of wealth by relatively few people in the computer industry is as much a part of the 'teaching in cyberspace' story as are the pedagogical successes, failures, and the student writing that takes place there. It also explains much of the celebratory rhetoric surrounding computers: if you have all the money in the world, you can create any aura you want. The current prevailing belief, inside and outside of universities, is that online computing is essential, the future, the solution, etc. But is it? Is it necessary? Is it worth the cost, taken in broad cultural terms? These are tough questions because the powers that create celebratory technological rhetoric are also making real changes to the world, making computers more and more necessary: fewer 'real' bank tellers, fewer non-computer jobs, cheaper airfares online than over the phone. Will applying for public aid one day require Web access?

Computers: How many of the people in Indonesia who build these machines have access to them? Are *their* stories recorded in cyberspace? Or anywhere? Is their labor figured into the celebratory rhetoric of computing? Can we teach in ways to bring the production end of computing into this celebratory story?

And where do old computers go to die? Are discarded 386s and 486s building mountains in landfills now? Currently computers in the U.S. are being disposed of at a rate of 10 million a year. This presents a huge solid waste problem. If the rate of disposal continues, 150 million computers will have been thrown into landfills by the year 2005 (see www.engl.uic.edu/~stp/global/1.htm).

Semiconductor manufacturing (the semiconductor chip is the 'brain' of the computer) is a time consuming process that requires many chemicals. On average, the production of one eight-inch wafer requires 3,787 gallons of wastewater, 27 pounds of chemicals, 29 cubic feet of hazardous gases, and 9 pounds of hazardous waste. (For more information visit the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition Web site at http://www.igc.org/svtc/svtchome.htm.)

Many educators and students already know that if cyberspace as technopotential is the only window of opportunity offered to us and to our students, we are done before we begin. So we create our own doors—or help students do the same. It is about unlocking the creative potential inherent in various constructions of space, including the potential to tell counter-narratives of work and hope, and even hopelessness, as well as stories of 'eutopia,' the 'good place' (as opposed to 'utopia,' the noplace) that must still be within our grasp.

If I sound resentful or bitter about rich people, it is because I am. I am one of those people who you would describe as 'dirt ass poor.' Every time I want something, I can never buy it. I have no insurance or health care, so if I ever get sick, I have to make myself feel better. My parents just cannot afford to send me to the doctor. I have been to the dentist twice in my life. Once when I was six, and another time just three years ago. The only reason I went was because I was in so much pain that I had no other choice. To this day, the bill is not fully paid. I know money cannot solve problems, but it does help. I am an eighteen year old girl who, unfortunately, has to work her butt off to help pay the bills in her house, not to mention her college tuition.

I live in what I consider to be the worst neighborhood in Queens. My backyard is located in the heart of Queens. I live in a town that

was bought for a drink. In 1655, Dutch settlers bought the land from local Indians for eight bottles of liquor, as well as guns, blankets, and lead. I feel oh so privileged to live in a town bought for booze and guns. Jamaica was called Rustdorp, or 'Peaceful Village.' It is funny that it was called peaceful, when now it is such a dangerous town. Jamaica is not only the worst neighborhood [in Queens], but probably the poorest too. I have not done any census of the financial stability of the inhabitants of Jamaica, so do not take my word for it. But I do know that I am poor.

All I do is go to school and then go to work. There is never time for me to just hang out with my friends and do completely nothing at all. Still, I do realize that I have so much more than other people. I have a place I call home, I have food, clothes, and friends. I wish I could have more, but I'm doing fine right now without actually having more.

Robert writes:

Robert needs a job. Robert needs more education. I stopped going to school my junior year. I got in a fight . . . with the teacher. I was kicked out for two weeks, and I played basketball. Then I enrolled back in school. That first Monday back, me and the teacher got into another confrontation, and then they kicked me out again, permanently.

I went back to the same school, Marshall High, to enroll in night school. I was determined to get my diploma and I wasn't going to let no one stop me. But unfortunately, that same teacher was the teacher at night school, and we got into it again. This time I was kicked out of school and couldn't come back again, period.

After that, I started to look for jobs. And then I started thinking I didn't need a high school diploma to get a job. My first job was at Chicago Park District. It was a summer job. I did landscaping—cutting grass, picking up papers with the stick and the bag. Minimum wages. I did that the balance of the summer.

Then I got a job at a table company. Labor work there, on an assembly line, putting together tables. When they come down the line, putting on glues or nails with an air hammer. That didn't last too long. It wasn't enough money.

Then I moved on to Sunbeam. I found a good job there working on the line. I liked it. My job was putting together lawn mowers and snow blowers. And then we put them in boxes and put them on skids to go the warehouse. I liked the pay, the pay was good. I stayed there a little over a year. And then they laid me off, for lack of work. The department was closing down.

Cyberspace isn't yet public space [it just plays a part in] widening the gap between people forced to inhabit public spaces like libraries and street corners and those who are able to spend even more time enjoying the benefits of the private space of their studies.

> —Jamie Daniel. *Virtual Communities? Public Spheres and Public Intellectuals on the Internet.*

[Here] indeed is one of the paradoxes of the Internet—it has become a forum for the most wide-ranging populist discussions the US has seen, even though it is daily being encroached upon by the interest of capital determined to make it another arm of the expansion of the means of consumption.

—Paul Smith. *Millennial Dreams: Contemporary Culture and Capital in the North*. New York: Verson, 1997. 228.

Computer-mediated communication will bring knowledge, pleasure, community, economic development, personal liberation and the salvation of American civilization.

—Newt Gingrich, quoted by E. Diller

It's the End of the World As We Know It, And I Feel . . .

I don't know about you but this doesn't sound like the world that my parents always told me would be out there for me. It doesn't seem like all those people who preach that the world will always go on as it once did could automatically be completely wrong. There must be a way for us to stop this runaway train that I like to call Apocalypse . . . . I strongly believe that the end of the world is closely upon us. I think that over the last 100 years or so that we have done too much to Mother Nature to reverse our effects in just a few short years. This coupled with the fact that nobody wants to change how they act or how they live their lives will be the downfall of our planet. Based on everything that I have read or have seen on TV, I think that there will be no more human life on this planet in the year 2020. The few that do survive the nuclear holocaust will not have the survival skills to regenerate the human species. Oceanic life will flourish with the extinction of man and maybe one day another species will walk on this earth. Maybe this time they won't kill themselves.

At present, most of us do nothing. We look away. We remain calm. We are silent. We take refuge in the hope that the holocaust won't happen, and turn back to our individual concerns. We deny the truth that is all around us. Indifferent to the future of our kind, we grow indifferent to one another. We drift apart. We grow cold. We drowse our way toward the end of the world.

—Jonathan Schell

I am afraid that twenty-five years from now, we will have to ration vegetables and water and all natural resources. Due to the destruc-

tive rate that we are currently undergoing, the earth will no longer be able to produce the necessary components for life forms to continue living. There won't be bountiful resources to splurge. Our appetites for consumption are and never will be satisfied. We can blame the ruins that are ahead all on our own greed. People do not consider the fact that the trees are absorbing the CO2 produced by our transportation, factories and other mechanisms that make carbon dioxide. The trees we chop down to put up housing and business create more disasters for the future. Water, the vital source to continue living, we are vigorously infesting with poisons, which in turn kills the life forms in the water and causes less food that will be available for us all. We have and are still managing to destroy our home and we won't stop until we destroy ourselves.

> Something is broken, and it is not even clear God is the glue. To be alive and even reasonably aware at the end of the millennium requires us to ask of ourselves, of our families, of our leaders: will the human experiment continue?
>
> —Charles B. Strozier

I do feel we are headed for extinction. I don't know how much we care about this or how much we believe this horrible truth. Whether we face it or not, we are aimed for an explosion.

As it is right now, I feel we will be surrounded by buildings that will be everywhere, like wheat in a field. There will be no more gazing out the window at birds on a tree during the spring. All there will be is poorly kept buildings with no sense of individuality or creativity. There will be no sitting in a park, enjoying the scenery. There will be no time or place for solitude. Life will be more stressful, more demanding, and more meaningless, just a repetitive pattern. Everything will become so clustered and overwhelming. We will live life like robots, going to work and coming home to our living quarters, only to sleep a few hours and go back to work again. Our motivation? That's simple, we want to afford more material things, so we work more and longer hours. We will come to expect this kind of living and conditions, it will be a learned behavior. Spending less time with our children and instilling no values or morals in them. They will see what the elders are doing and do twice as much damage when they become adults. This generation will be more competitive than the previous. And so I am seeing a

pattern: there is only one concern and that is to make a lot of money, not much else matters. I only wish that I am completely wrong and that I witness a reformation in the thinking of mankind. Humans need to find significance in what they do.

> I believe the catastrophe story, whoever may tell it, represents a constructive and positive act of the imagination rather than a negative one, an attempt to confront the terrifying void of a patently meaningless universe at its own game, to remake zero by provoking it in every conceivable way.
>
> —J. G. Ballard

. . . 6, 5, . . . Despite all the technology and inventions which the next millennium will welcome us with, we, the human race, with time will forget the true purpose of our existence on this planet. The human race will lose its value and meaning in favor of the machines, computers, and other self-dependent, self-operating devices. We will not be able to step outside our houses (cubicles?) until some mechanical appliance will give us permission to do so. Most likely solid food will become obsolete. Good, old, country style steak might be substituted by some tasteless pills (but they are good for you!—the advertisement might say), alcoholic, carbonized, and non-water beverages could be outlawed (there is a health freak in charge), pollution might be restored but we will not enjoy it. Our every step could be monitored, telling us what to do, what to eat, how to live. Is the advancement in technology really worth it? . . . 4, 3, . . . 2, 1, 0 . . . .

> Extinction isn't something to contemplate; it is something to rebel against.
>
> —Jonathan Schell

Not to be negative, but I really don't think that on January 1, 2000 we could all wake up and love one another. I just don't think that it is humanly possible . . . . You need to look at the future and who is going to be the future. We the college students now will be the next generation in charge. What a scary, and intriguing thought.

It is the educator's job to resist our increasingly apocalyptic culture by designing pedagogies aimed at helping students wrestle with the possibility of constructing eutopia. The only sane response to our cancerous consumer culture is not some Baudrillardian embrace of hyperreal McAmerica, but to relearn the art of making good places. This is an educator's responsibility: to reject the cynicism that fuels our consumerist addictions, and fashion instead pedagogies aiming toward the construction of local eutopias. Sometimes cyberspace will play a role in this project. And sometimes it will be necessary to turn our backs on it and look instead at the nonvirtual places we drive through, walk on, sleep in.

(In Cyberspace You Can't) Stand In the Place Where You Live, Part I

> Our relationship with the places we know and meet up with—where you are right now; and where you've been earlier today; and wherever you'll be in another few hours—is a close bond, intricate in nature, and not abstract, not remote at all. It's enveloping, almost a continuum with all we are and think. (xi-xii)
> —Tony Hiss. *The Experience of Place: A Completely New Way of Looking At and Dealing With Our Radically Changing Cities and Countryside*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991.

> [R]especting humans means never giving up on anyone, since all people are capable of living dramatically differently from the way they have lived so far. (71)

> It seems that there is a great deal of truth in the clever remark that a nation is a collection of people who hate their neighbors and share a common illusion about their ethnic origin. (160)

> —Avishai Margalit. *The Decent Society*. Trans. Naomi Goldblum. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1996.

For cyberprophets like William J. Mitchell, a place is only good if it is in the middle of everything: people unfortunate enough to live in "the sticks" will "feel cut off and far from the center of things" (115). But for him the value of spending time in urban hubs is defined only in relation to capital. In the past, he writes, people hung out in urban centers because that's where the information was, information that could be used to make money (115). From Mitchell's perspective both rural and urban places are ultimately undesirable and unnecessary: "as networks and information appliances deliver expanding ranges of services, there will be fewer occasions to go out" (100). As Professor of Architecture and Media Arts and Sciences and Dean of the School of Architecture and Planning at MIT, is Mitchell saying it is better to stay indoors, navigating the Infobahn, than it is to walk around the streets of Cambridge? If so, is this what we want to be teaching students: that sedentary mouse clicking is a more civilized way of 'meeting people' than walking around neighborhoods?

> The grave problem with E-mail is that it creates the sensation of being part of a community of people working, creating, and playing together for the common good. But the sensation is only that, for at the end of the day when you in Vermont and your E-mail correspondent in western Texas go to sleep, your climates will still be different, your soils will still be different, your landscapes will still be different, your local environmental problems will still be different, and—most important—your neighbors will still be different, and while you have been creating the global community with each other, you will have been neglecting them. (22)
>
> —David Ehrenfeld. "Pseudocommunities." *Rooted*

> *in the Land: Essays on Community and Place*. Eds. William Vitek and Wes Jackson. New Haven: Yale UP, 1996. 20-24.

> Because professors tend to be rootless, they are systematically ignorant of a key aspect of an integrated life, the life that is, after all, a primary goal of a good liberal arts education. They are woefully ignorant of the values of connectedness to place.(16)
> —Eric Zency. "The Rootless Professors."

Surfing the Internet and zooming along the information superhighway are master narratives perpetuated by middle class folk for whom surfing might still be considered a valid recreational choice, and the cultural memory of Sunday drives in the country remains accessible. But most of our students don't surf and the only superhighways around are constantly clogged with traffic. Even as they acknowledge the need to be computer literate for the purpose of landing a job, many of them are suspicious of or indifferent to all the claims for technological education. And they are right to be, for while the millions their colleges spend on technology every year alters the look and feel of their campuses, the neighborhoods they return to at the end of the day remain the same.

In *The Wired Neighborhood* (Yale UP, 1996), Stephen Doheny-Farina says "we do not need electronic neighborhoods; we need geophysical neighborhoods" (xi); "the further we surrender ourselves to this ersatz frontier, the greater our placelessness" (18). Still, he doesn't reject infotech, just insists that we use it to "fix our dissolving communities" (161). Doheny-Farina calls for community nets, civic networking, and organizations involved in online and offline community development (121-137; 189-202). A question in an e-mail message he received from a member of a forum on community computer networks sums up the challenge:

> How can we restructure a community computer network so that we are able to recreate more stable geographic communities where people have more time to

> spend with each other, both as families and as neighborhoods? (36)

We need to think of information technology less as capital and more as catalyst: less preoccupation with the quantity of computers on campus, and syllabi on the World Wide Web, and more attention to how a university's networked activities do and do not spill into surrounding local communities and the neighborhoods of its students and staff.

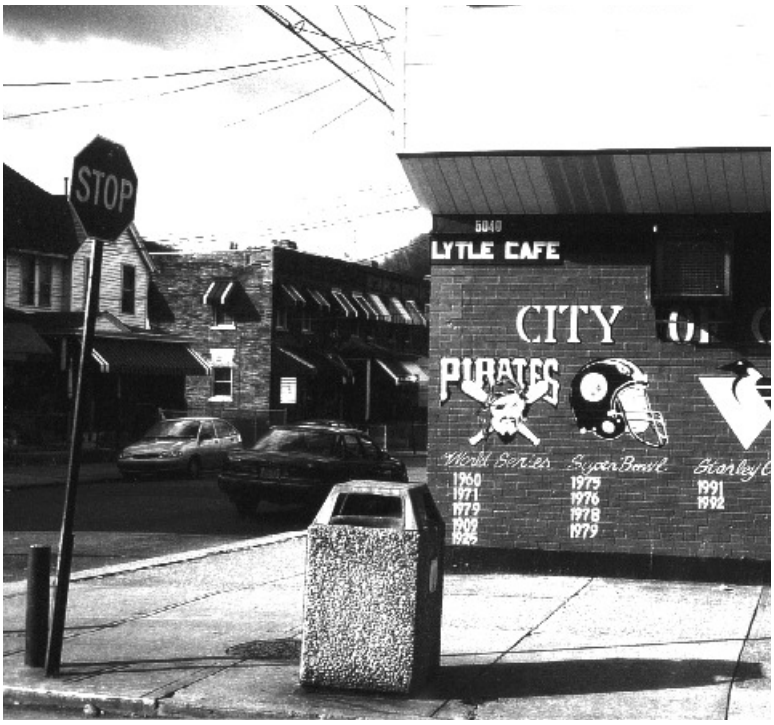
> Academics in all disciplines ought to work to acquire a kind of dual citizenship—in the world of ideas and scholarship, yes, but also in the very real world of watersheds and growing seasons and migratory pathways and food chains and dependency webs. What we need is a class of cosmopolitan educators willing to live where they work and to work where they live, a class of educators willing to take root, willing to cultivate a sense of place. These educators could then exemplify in their teaching and in their lives their own manner of accommodation to the fruitful tension between local and universal, particular and general, concrete and abstract. In an age when humanity's relationship to nature is so in need of careful, farsighted attention, this much is clear: academics do a disservice to their students, and to the future of human culture on the planet, if they do anything less. (18)
>
> —Eric Zency. "The Rootless Professors."

Why should we assume online technology, and our ability to use it, will help us get a good night's sleep? Do the concerns, fears, and day to day realities our students present us with offer an entirely different set of keys worth considering? To what extent have our

students been left out of the conversation? If academics lived in the kinds of neighborhoods our students live in, would we even be spending our time with online narrative literacies?

How audible is the community college voice in the corporate driven technoenthusiastic rhetoric of cyberspace? How audible is the voice of community service organizations? So the academic stories we can tell in cyberspace or when we get back are partial; incomplete but useful to the extent that they buttress preexisting celebratory narratives.

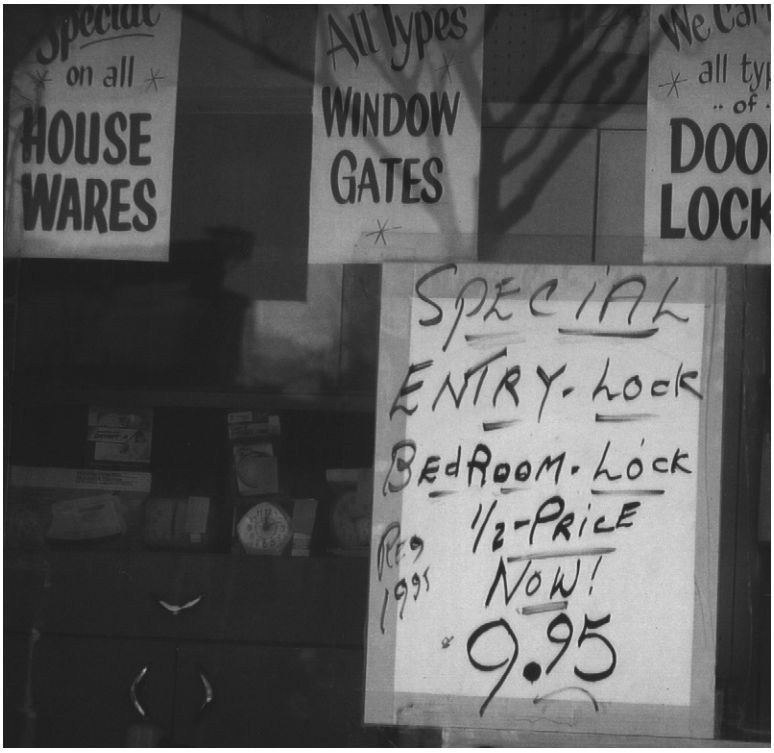
(In Cyberspace You Can't) Stand In the Place Where You Live, Part 2



When we ask our students to write about what they are burning to tell the world—the world they write about is not cyberspace. And it is not utopia:

Born as a coal mining town, Clayton still thrives on as a single support town . . . . Main Street, though deserted by businesses that never survived, still contains the occasional store. The pharmacy so cleverly named after the town, the flea market that graces us on

the weekends, the grocery store that changes its name biweekly, the [beer] distributors that keep coming, and the bars that flourish in all this jumble, make Clayton the . . . town it is today. For the most part, it could be said that Clayton's basis for survival depends on the survival of the human liver . . . . So summer night after summer night, continuously without even one night's break, and weekend after weekend, no matter how cold it would become, the youth of Clayton did what they did best.



When I was ten years old, my mother and I had a secret from the rest of the world that we hoped and prayed no one ever found out about. You see, we lived in a project in Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn and every day we faced violent crimes in our streets and right in our own building. Our apartment, which we shared with my aunt and three cousins, was kept secure with locked gates on all of our windows and three locks on our door. The only thing was that none of those locks actually worked. Can you believe that? We had deadbolts and key locks but they were all broken. The locks on our window gates were broken, too. Anyone could have

walked right into our home and raped us or killed us. We were six females in an apartment that was basically wide open for any crime that anyone could want to do to us. I don't remember why we couldn't get the locks fixed or replaced, but I would bet that the landlords just didn't care to get around to it. Anyway, we used to pile up furniture against our front door every single night just to try to keep our door safe from the outside world.

I'm burning to tell the world that I am lonely. It seems strange to want to tell strangers that I am lonely; their knowing this will not reduce the loneliness. This place. This city—New York City—my 'home'—is a lonely crowd of millions of people. I live in a neighborhood of non-neighbors. I say this because even though we all live near each other, we don't know anything about one another. I come and go, and so do they, and we don't say a word to each other. We ride the elevators and look at each other suspiciously. What's he thinking he can do to me? What would I like to put over on him? This is neighborly? I see communities on the TV that look so friendly. Everybody knows everybody else. Neighbors listen to each other. They make friends, even fall in love. But since I came to this city 7 years ago from my home in a small village of Barbados, I feel friendless, loveless. It's not that I don't have friends or feel love. It's just that I feel this city stripping love and friendship right out of me.

I love city life. Every Friday and Saturday night I go out dancing with my girlfriends. We meet guys and dance until 4 o'clock in the morning. By the time Sunday comes, I have partied hard all weekend! There's no place like Manhattan for a good time in the clubs. So it may seem surprising that what I'm burning to tell the world is that I am worried about all this fun. It's true! When I go back to work and school on Monday, and I ride the subways and walk through my own lousy neighborhood with litter and broken bottles and prostitutes, I worry about what I'm going to do when the partying stops. 'Cause someday the dancing is going to stop and I will have to be a 'grown-up' in this city. That scares me. This city is not too friendly once you stop being a 'kid' having fun.

The people in my town don't do much more than drink and work at the local plants . . . . I'm not putting down these plants; my dad works in one . . . . He makes good money, but it is nothing I would want to do for the rest of my life. I couldn't handle going to the same dirty building every day doing the same thing.

(In Cyberspace You Can't) Stand In the Place Where You Live, Part 3

My neighborhood, Woodhaven, is a small area in Queens with a lot of houses close to each other. My house is one of the bigger ones, with a front lawn, it is green and white with a lot of windows in the front. It is a nice house and well kept, I love this house and would bring it with me if I was going to move. This was a great neighborhood when I was younger because there was always something to do. When you watch those old movies and there are tons of kids gathered in the street playing games. This was my neighborhood all the time. Crowded streets full of kids having great fun without the parents having to worry who they were playing with because we all knew each other. This was a community!

Now things are a lot different. The neighborhood is changing and not for the better. I was never scared of walking around late at night, now I am petrified. It is scary when you constantly have to be paranoid and watch your back. This happens in a lot of places around us, but this makes me a more defensive person at all times. It is hard to trust people. There are so many negative qualities in my personality that can be brought out from living in this neighborhood. This upset me because I used to enjoy the neighborhood so much.

As years passed the neighborhood became filthier by the trash on the street and graffiti painted all over the buildings. Now the neighborhood is too overcrowded, all the buildings and stores around are discount stores that cheapen the neighborhood. Trash is thrown on the streets and just blows around. It seems like no one cares because no one cleans up, they just keep littering. We trash our neighborhood and let others do the same and we question why? What went wrong?

Now I walk around and feel like I do not know anyone around me. On Jamaica Avenue a block from my house, there are so many unnecessary stores such as dollar stores, pizzerias on every corner, cheap clothing and shoe stores that bring down the standard of the neighborhood . . . . I walk down the streets of my neighborhood and do not admire how it looks, basically I am repulsed by the neglect and ignorance.

Everyday when I walk down my block, I become sad at the sight of such decay and deterioration that has become a little too familiar in this world. The fact is I hate where I live. Now, do not get me wrong, I LOVE New York. It is just that I hate the state in which I see it becoming. I live in Jamaica, Queens, and I never spend any of my free time there. It is just an ugly place. If you were to walk down the block, you would see a tiny street jam-packed full of cars and no children playing in the streets. The street is so tiny that you cannot possibly play anything, let alone ride a bike without getting crushed by the passing cars. All of the houses are gated and locked up like a prison. No one has a front yard, and if they do, it is most likely a cement patch leading to the front door. The best part about my neighborhood is the fact that you might be lucky and live on a street that has more than one tree on it.

I see this in other neighborhoods and I am beginning to see it start in even more communities. The exact same things may not be happening to every place, but New York City IS starting to deteriorate more and more everyday. It is like a disease; it just keeps spreading and spreading and no one is immune . . . .

What is the big deal about living in an 'ugly' place? Well first off, it changes our society. People become less inclined to socialize and have an active community life. This in turn leads to isolation. Why would you want to live in a place where you are isolated? People need to socialize and without it, we become stressed or depressed. People have enough stress already, so why would anyone want to add on to that. Secondly, why would you want to subject children to that kind of place? Children should grow up in an atmosphere that promotes socializing and allows them to play and have fun without fear. Also the fact is that when there is absolutely nothing to do, then these children or teenagers will turn to alcohol, drugs, and sex. I might as well add criminal activities to that list. Everything in our society is related and when a thing starts to collapse, you should move out of the way because in time that one thing will affect everything else.

The area in which I live is called Washington Heights. The majority of the people who live where I do are Dominican. When asked why they came here they would say that they came to save money to send back to family members. Or to save enough money to build a house and move back. A great number of the people who come to the United States do not know English and do not have many skills. This is the reason why many of these people turn to the drug business. These people make more money in one day than a regular blue-collar worker would make in a week.

I have a couple of associates who are involved in this business. One of my friends got shot while working one night. He was standing on the corner when he saw that one of his friends had a gun to his face. My friend ran over to the gunman and therefore was shot three times. Fortunately only one bullet hit him in the arm. My friend is now handicapped in one arm. He has to go to therapy every week but that did not stop him from returning to the corner when he was released from the hospital. The only thing on his mind right now is revenge and making more money. My friend says that if he ever finds the guy who shot him he will personally kill him. And so the tragedy continues and the vicious cycle is maintained alive. My friend will end up in jail and the other person dead.

Wish You Were Here (Wish I Was There)

The authors of the following postcards are members of two separate intellectual communities. The postcards themselves were created by community-based writers in Chicago. They are all members of writing workshops sponsored by the Neighborhood Writing Alliance, which runs workshops with adults in libraries, social service agencies, and schools in inner-city neighborhoods in Chicago. The writers meet weekly to read and discuss their writing, and publish selections from their writing in the *Journal of Ordinary Thought* (JOT), a magazine that is distributed for free throughout the community. For the postcard project, each writer picked a short piece of their own writing and an image from one of the JOTs that they liked. Some of the writers came to a computer lab at the University of Illinois at Chicago to learn how to design their postcard on a computer. The respondents are students at the State University of New York in Albany.

"Dream"
Sandra Shepard

What do I see when I look out my window? I see land, lots of land. I see children playing and laughing happily. I see mother and father without the worry of providing for these kids. I see beautiful, safe homes, trees and green grass everywhere. I see lots of love and true friendship, the sky and clouds so beautiful and clear. That's what I see when I look out my window. Dream . . . just dream.

(response on reverse:)

Dear Sandra,

I have the same dreams. All I see out of my window is concrete. Sidewalks, streets, and other apartment buildings. Occasionally the lonely half-dead tree . . .

Dream . . . keep dreaming because I know for sure that one day it will be reality for me.

"On the Right Side of the Street"
Perry Wilkes

Everything is fine today and I'm very happy because I have no problems at all. I feel if I continue to do the right things, everything will be at its best for me. God has been a great help in my life, and my mom has been a very great help also. I know I need to be more open with people if I expect to get the help I need, and that is something that's very hard for me at this time, but things will get

better day by day.
I am a student at the Jane Addams Resource Center. I've been missing a lot of days lately and I know it's very bad for my record with the school. REST, my Mom and many other people in my life know I can do better. It is time to stay on the right side of the street, Perry, if you want things to continue to be better in your life

(response on reverse:)

Dearest Perry,

Recently I fight every day to be happy. I was depressed because of school grades, money problems, a bad relationship, and missing home. I am also a student at SUNY Albany. I started attending Sunday mass again, and praying to God for strength to stop crying and be able to laugh and be happy again. I have gotten my strength back. Every night I lay my head down and thank God for giving me life, and know that tomorrow is another day. I sought help when I was in need, from God, teachers, and good friends. My parents (and especially my mother) comforts me and gives me great advice to stick it through (school), and try my hardest. All of this helped me tremendously. I have learned this past freshman year that you do have to take life one day at a time.

"State Street Drive"
Nannette Banks

It ain't no fun
Ridin' through the hood anymore.
Preacher use to preach about it sayin'
Only the walking dead live there.
Mother use to mother about it sayin'
Brothas on the corner only want nothin' more than
a brown paper bag full of false hopes and dreams.
Teacher use to teach about it sayin'
There's a message in that bottle and by the time
You've taken that last swig, you've just swallowed
Failure. Now that can be addictive.

(response on reverse:)

Dear Nannette,

I'm not really sure what to write. Your poem just stood out to me. I believe it is very powerful and moving. It helps me see life in a way in which I cannot fully understand. Thank you.

"An Imperfect World"
Anita Jones

This is not a perfect world
Free of gangs, guns, drugs, and war.
This is not a perfect world
Filled with dreams of love, hope,

and peace for all.
This is not a perfect world
Filled with perfect people, senses,
and make-believe fairy tales.
This is not a perfect world
Filled with roses, deep blue seas, trees,
and all kinds of wild things.
This is not a perfect world
Where respect, manners,
and friendliness just happen.
This is not a perfect world
Where we all agree and step on each
other's feet at the same time.
This is not a perfect world
In spite of your race, creed, or color.
It doesn't matter if you're
rich or poor.
This is just an imperfect world filled
with all of its imperfect people
and other sorts of
imperfect things.

(response on reverse:)

Dear Ms. Anita Jones,

After reading your work, it makes me realize that this world can be very cruel. I think a lot of times individuals get so caught up in themselves that they forget that we are all part of a 'larger picture.' If people would take one moment and stop being so egocentric, the world would be just a little less imperfect. We have the ability to have just as many good qualities as bad—I think. If we didn't, I don't see how we could have existed for so long. I grew up in New York City, and I think Chicago is very similar and I think that part of the city 'spice' is that there are so many different flavors of people—like you said. If anything I like to think that that is a good thing. On the way to perfection perhaps?? I dunno.

"Snapshot of My Neighborhood"
Myra Robinson

Rising like a large orange pumpkin, the sun comes up. Some peole are standing at the bus stop. Some are walking down the street.

The grass is wet from the dew that has fallen. Flocks of birds are flying overhead. The sound of sirens breaks the silence. Police cars are going down the street, coming from everywhere. Off they go, to where I don't know.

(response on reverse:)

Dear Myra,

I don't know what to say. I lived in a high class suburban neighborhood where I had little experience with situations like this. I now go to college in the city and can identify with your situation a little, but my school is uptown and I fear I will never fully understand your predicament. Thank you for sharing with me your story.

"So what do you think about all these computers?"
the Professor Asked Some Freshmen Students

Gigi is a freshman student who works 40 hours a week (in front of a computer, entering data) and takes 15-18 credits per semester. She also works as a volunteer in a mentoring program, with the NAACP, with Feed the Homeless, and in a local soup kitchen. She also sings in a choir. When asked why she seemed to have an ambivalent attitude toward computers, she replied: "The computer is almost like TV: the more you watch it, the more you stay there to see what happens. But the majority of that is going to be junk, so I'll use my time in other ways. I should be doing something else."

She went on to explain that in her Queens neighborhood she had more respect for the people who spent their time outside, talking to neighbors, meeting each other. The 'computer nerds' she equated with couch potatoes: always inside, wouldn't come out to meet their friends, etc. Those who were computer literate, therefore, were the invisible ones in her neighborhood. But living in a working class black community, she said, meant that that percentage of computer nerds would have been rather small anyway.

When other students in her class were asked for their thoughts on computers, some replied:

Too damn expensive. And you have to keep on buying the stuff. To buy into technology is forever.

Too much work. I work six days a week, 35-40 hours a week, plus I take five classes. I have to take care of my younger brother whenever my parents get called away to PR. I'm in charge of the phone bill; my dad used to be in a factory, but got laid off. There's a lot of stress. I have to use my girlfriend's computer to get my schoolwork done, but if we get in a fight, then I can't write my paper. And I'm in too much debt already to buy a computer.

The Internet is too fake . . . it doesn't relate to what you do everyday. I'm getting by working my butt off . . . the Internet draws you away from your hands.

I went to this college so I could speak one on one with my professors, not e-mail them all the time.

All this hype about computers, you lose the human approach. Students should address why neighborhoods are the way they are . . . people need to talk in person . . . express things from the heart.

Teachers should tell students to go outside, walk around, look around, breathe the air.

Our motive in recognizing critiques like these is not to wave some neo-Luddite flag or revel in trash talk against technology. Our stance of course is not 'anti-technology' (wheels, clocks, stairs, toothbrushes are technology), nor 'anti-computers': as educators and writers all of us depend upon e-mail, HTML, scads of software. We just want this article to be an essential reminder among other essential reminders.

The following represents one of the really useful purposes of Web technology. This particular community did not need the Web in order to exist, or the technology of the Web in order to fill their days. But they used the Web to teach and tell others of another (hopefully more helpful) way to live. Through the Web they made the local health they are constructing available to other localities: spreading the word in order to spread health, the World Wide Web as a catalyst for narratives about community-making and local eutopia building.

Report from Kanatsiohareke

One of us teaches in Project Renaissance, a first-year, interdisciplinary program at the State University of New York at Albany. Students are required to perform community service as part of their curriculum. In this case they visited a traditional Native American community in upstate New York, called Kanatsiohareke (Ga-na-jo-a-lay-gay), which is a breakaway community from the Akwesasne Indian Reservation. Student journals and photographs, along with statements by Clan Elders, have been gathered on a Web site.

Oh. My. God . . . . Where has our professor taken us? That was my first reaction to Kanatsiohareke. Arriving at the community at night, my eyes could only focus in on a few dilapidated looking buildings and one large barn from which light was eerily seeping through the cracks in the door. It was not an appealing sight. Getting out of the van in which twelve of my classmates and I were sardined into, I could not at all foresee what the weekend held in store for me. After unpacking my bulky and slightly overweight bags from the back of the van, I followed the others as we made our way towards the only brightly lit building I could see and silently hoped for a weekend I would enjoy.

I went into that weekend with the mindset that this was basically just another girl scout-type camping trip. A trip which I had experienced before and just hoped would work out as I was spending time with people I really didn't know, performing some kind of manual labor, and then going back home with this as a memory of a weekend spent with my English class.

A small group of traditional Mohawk Indians has recently bought back a portion of their homeland in the Mohawk Valley of upstate New York. The land consists of some 400 acres of rich farm land and dense forest. Their return to this place where Iroquois longhouses used to stand fulfills the prophecy of the Mohawk spiritual

elders who predicted that the grandchildren would return to their homeland. Founded on the principles of Iroquois longhouse tradition, Kanatsiohareke has a warm, wholesome atmosphere, lofty goals, a strong work ethic, and is free of alcohol and gambling.

Jonathan [one of the permanent residents] led a talk circle for a good hour. This is a matrilineal Mohawk community. They believe that the spirits led them here. This whole way of life/living is basically what I would constitute as living out a religion. It is beautiful how they are passionate and dedicated to one goal of keeping their community sacred and Mohawk tradition alive. They have a vision. He couldn't find the word to describe what he wants to do for the community so he said 'resurrection,' but what he means is 'revival.'

Two little kids came into the barn. The little skinny blonde one is hanging off the ladder that is leading up to the haystacks. Not very safe.

In a lot of ways I worry about the future generation.

The students worked side-by-side with the community residents to help them tend to the grounds. Tasks included building a dam, preparing fields for planting in the spring, tending to the livestock and stables, hauling timber, splitting and piling firewood, winterizing buildings, housecleaning, and cooking.

Never in my life have I ever envisioned myself doing anything as humble as scooping manure. As I first walked into the darkened stall into the muck, the stench of the excretory substances hit my nostrils within a second and nearly knocked me over. I was going to have to shovel this stuff all weekend?

Amazingly though, I had a great time. Working in the barn renewed my awe of nature and it made me think about the use of

horses and other animals from when these same Mohawk people's ancestors walked the earth to how they're used and treated now. It made me question, with all the advancements made in technology and medicine, do we really know more about animals today than what the Mohawk tribe knew hundreds of years ago?

We spent all morning chopping and hauling wood . . . . We sat on the back of the truck. It was cold. The wind blew at us like we were cutting through cold blankets of air. If you faced the wind head on you couldn't breathe because of the force. We went to three sites and hauled three truckloads back. The first trip Phil cut

the wood into reasonable pieces that we rolled down the hill and carried. On the last trip he cut the wood into huge pieces and we had to put everything into it to even barely lift it. I think he did it on purpose just to see us struggle. Spoiled city kids, he was probably thinking but it was a lot of fun. I overcame my fear of bugs in bark. Jamie and I carried all the ones with millipedes, centipedes, and spiders in them.

In return for their services, students were given lessons in Mohawk traditions and mythology, with a special focus on Native American healing practices and how vision quests can bring about holistic healing.

Woke up at 7:30. It is so quiet, so peaceful, so beautiful. The sun is shining through the glass window above my mattress. The cold air hits my skin but it is refreshing. Everyone is rolled up in sleeping bags and sleeping soundly.

This feeling of affection for my snoring classmates hits me. Sleeping, they're so human, fragile, yet filled with potential. We all have dreams. We're all different but in a strange way, I've really come to appreciate them.

A Tale of Two Cities

[The City of Bits] will be a city unrooted to any definite spot on the surface of the earth, shaped by con-

nectivity and bandwidth constraints rather than by accessibility and land values, largely asynchronous in its operation, and inhabited by disembodied and fragmented subjects who exist as collections of aliases and agents. Its places will be constructed virtually by software instead of physically from stones and timbers, and they will be connected by logical linkages rather than by doors, passageways, and streets. (24)

—William J. Mitchell, "City of Bits." *Space, Place, and the Infobahn*. MIT P, 1996.

In immersing ourselves in the electronic net, we are ignoring our real, dying communities. (8)

—Stephen Doheny-Farina, *The Wired Neighborhood*.

Postscript

Many academics are excited about the electronic revolution. And as teachers and scholars, we too make use of e-mail, desktop publishing, and Web sites in order to help students to design and present the types of narratives we share here. Certainly, were it not for computer technology, it's likely this group would not have contemplated a collaboration like this. Thus, we are not claiming a critique separate from our own practices; we acknowledge ourselves as consumers and producers of the technological apparatus about which we worry.

We do worry, however, that submersion in mediated technologies allows us to ignore our immediate neighborhoods and the people who live in them. We fear what happens when the use of cyberspace becomes our distraction, replacing or supplementing, for instance, TV. How many of us really need our Web pages? What stories are these pages telling about our commitments to luxuries or to sustainable, healthy living? We fear that our college and university administrations are pushing the 'charge' button for online offerings without taking substantive steps to consider which students receive the necessary goods, the technology, to make the connections. We fear the ruthlessness of those who promote slogans such

as 'access for success' while denying the systemic roadblocks to success, while hoarding the resources that make many dreams come true. We feel that it is the educator's job to resist the development of what seems to be our increasingly apocalyptic culture by designing pedagogies aimed at helping students wrestle with the possibility of constructing eutopia, the 'good place,' or at least a healthy world in which to live.

The connection to 'the future of narrative in cyberspace' is this: people who aren't, largely, statistically speaking, here, in cyberspace, owning server space, charging with credit cards, and telling their stories in the here and now, are even less likely to be in the various 'heres' of the privileged in the future. Educators have meaningful roles to play in countering this future.

Notes

[1] Left margin and right margin quotations running throughout this assemblage present a contrapuntal call and response. All passages in italics, excluding the preface and postscript, are the writings or spoken words of students or community members.


PROJECT
and
Ourselves in
Cyberspace
Understanding
Narratives,
Literacy
UNLOC