

Place

After all anybody is as their land and air is. Anybody is as the sky is low or high, the air heavy or clear and anybody is as there is wind or no wind there. It is that which makes them and the arts they make and the work they do and the way they eat and the way they drink and the way they learn and everything.

GERTRUDE STEIN, "Landscape"

Where do I live? Where do you live? What passes for living where we live? You can work with colleagues for years, talk to hundreds of students on an annual basis, and yet never really know what many of these peoples' apartments, houses, yards, streets, blocks, developments, and neighborhoods look, feel, and sound like. What impact does this detachment have on one's teaching? One's profession? One's students?¹ Academic discourse can be such a placeless discourse: the constant flow of monographs and articles and papers, so many composed as if by disembodied entities detached from any specific locale. How might it affect our reading of such texts if we could see photographs of the scholars' homes or videotapes of their neighborhoods, or if we had insight into their feelings about where they lived?

For four years I have begun my writing courses by having students make written and photographic portraits of where they live. I do this because students can speak with authority about how their neighborhoods make them feel, because students are genuinely interested in learning about each other's communities (partly because it alleviates some of the anonymity college students typically feel, especially at a predominantly commuter campus like mine), and because an awareness of sustainability cannot

exist without a developing awareness of the conditions and limitations of one's immediate environment. I begin this chapter, then, by doing what I ask my students to do. When a friend read a draft of this chapter, he replied that while he found my "place portrait" interesting (in part, no doubt, because he too lives on Long Island), he wondered whether most readers would "give a rat's ass" about my account of this uneventful splotch of suburbia. I'm inclined to wonder this too. Still, my intention here is not to reflect upon my local surroundings as a means of providing local color for narrative effect. My point, rather, is that we need to recognize—even with the landscape of published academic discourse—that who we are and what we have to say is in so many ways interwoven, directly and indirectly, consciously and unconsciously, with our local environs.

Where I'm Writing From

Where the hell is Ronkonkoma?

A CHARACTER IN THE FILM
200 CIGARETTES

I am writing this book at the corner of Lake Promenade and Second Street in the hamlet of Lake Ronkonkoma, in the township of Brookhaven (the largest in New York state), which is located in Suffolk County, a chunk of land that forms the eastern half of Long Island. My house is in the exact center of this island. In 1994 I got a job at St. John's University, which is located in Queens, on the western half of the island, but we moved farther out east because my wife's family is here—her parents, her sisters' families, her aunt and uncle, her cousins—most of them less than five minutes away. Close extended families are always something to celebrate, but such tribal islands are crucial when you live in the middle of a sea of suburban sprawl.²

Sixty thousand years ago a mile-high glacier called the Wisconsin bulldozed its way in slow motion down through Canada and New England and didn't stop until it reached just about where I'm sitting right now. Warmer temperatures caused it to melt and retreat, leaving behind the detritus (mud, sand,

gravel, boulders) that geologists now call the Ronkonkoma Terminal Moraine, a line of glacier droppings (including rocks, called "erratics" or "messengers," sheared off of the tops of northern mountains) that extends all the way to Montauk Point, the easternmost tip of New York State. A few thousand years later the very same glacier came back and did it all over again, dumping another string of debris stretching the entire length of the island, this one running from Brooklyn to Orient Point, the northern fork of the island. When the ice began to melt, the land "began to rebound the way a small boat bobs back up when people step out of it" (Isachsen et al. 177). As the ice retreated, mammoth chunks broke loose, got buried, and eventually melted within the ground, forming kettle holes. One of the largest is Lake Ronkonkoma, the freshwater lake that is a fifteen-minute walk from where I sit. Eventually—perhaps as recently as six thousand years ago—Long Island evolved into its present-day shape, making it, geologically speaking, a baby compared with the rest of the state.

The variety of ecosystems caused by the proximity of outwash and moraines led to hardwood forests, salt marshes, and even prairies (a geological anomaly now thought to be the result of periodic burning by American Indians), which, combined, supported an unusual diversity of flora and fauna. Five thousand years ago, the first humans settled in the area—Archaic American Indians of the Orient phase, followed by American Indians of the Woodland phase. These were the first people to clear forests for agricultural purposes. Contact with Europeans occurred five hundred years ago, and, just two centuries later, most of the American Indian population had disappeared or blended with European ethnicities as a result of factors including genocide, slavery, alcoholism, smallpox, and intermarriage. In the seventeenth century, the four American Indian communities around Lake Ronkonkoma were conned into relinquishing water rights (Curtis 5) to settlers who, from the beginning, had a hard time pronouncing, let alone spelling, the name of the area (local historical documents include, for example, references to "Ronkonkomy Plains" and "Rocconkkemy Pond").³ Three separate townships now abut the lake, and the lack of coordination

between the localities has contributed to the lake's steady decline since the 1950s.

By 1850 the Long Island Rail Road (LIRR) had already spanned the length of Long Island, making wealthy New Yorkers aware of the lake and turning the area into a "millionaire's playground" around the turn of the nineteenth century. Mansions sprouted around the perimeter of the lake, along with dozens of hotels, lodges, and beach pavilions. Postcards from this period show men lounging in flannel bathing suits and children climbing two-story-tall water slides or scampering like mice in giant water wheels. Summer dances were held on Saturday nights in the halls bordering the lake; in winter, scooters and iceboats raced across the ice. During prohibition, houses of prostitution and speakeasies popped up in the surrounding woods, and one could buy "needle beer" that made one's fingers tingle (Curtis 100). During the 1920s, anti-Catholic sentiment helped create an active Ku Klux Klan presence: one conductor on the Long Island Rail Road actually sold KKK outfits on the Greenport line (Curtis 134).⁴

In the 1940s, MacArthur Airport opened two miles away from the Lake. (Our house is situated along one of the flight paths; you can almost make out the passengers in the windows of the Southwest jets that pass overhead.) An auction sale catalog from 1937 advertised the selling of two hundred lots near the lake, emphasizing the easy commute from this "gem of Long Island" to Penn Station via twenty-four daily trains. The population surged as summer cottages were converted for year-round living. (My own single-story, two-bedroom home, while not large by middle-class Long Island standards, started out as a bungalow, and has been added onto three or four times in the last four decades.) A local historian writes that "many new developments appeared, and unfortunately some of the promoters emphasized cheapness rather than quality which attracted some buyers who were less desirable," and that "the crowning blow to the town" came when a significant woodland stretch was sold to developers (Curtis 148). Development continued. Lakeside pavilions were sold, and those left abandoned were burned. In the 1960s and 1970s "unrestricted dumping of fill over the banks of the lake

destroyed many trees and left unsightly yellow gashes here and there on the east side of the lake": "Large sections of the Great Swamp were filled in and the once beautiful lake was becoming an eye sore." In 1975 the entire lake was closed for three days due to pollution from storm drains carrying runoff into the water (Curtis 161).

Today Lake Ronkonkoma is a working- and middle-class suburb, indistinguishable from a hundred other suburbs on the island, most of them spilling into each other so that one's sense of boundaries comes not from any visual sense of "village limits" but from proximity to highways and strip malls. (In his stand-up days, the comedian Jerry Seinfeld, who grew up half an hour away in Massapequa, joked that the town's name was Indian for "near the mall.")

If you walk out my front door and view the neighborhood, you will see streets that are safe and quiet, except on occasional summer days when neighborhood kids and sometimes their fathers race motorcycles, looking furtively at intersections for signs of cops. Up to 25 percent of the homes in the area are rentals converted into two or more illegal apartments. Despite the fact that when the house next door was rented out the new tenants found the basement littered with vials and syringes, obvious drug activity in the neighborhood is virtually nonexistent, save for an occasional teenager shuffling down the street smoking a joint, or a pipe tossed into the bushes. An abandoned shopping cart across the street is evidence of the "sober house" up the street, a home containing eight apartments (all legal, surprisingly) rented out to men trying to get back on their feet. These men are some of the more visible members of the community, walking (their drivers' licenses have been revoked) six blocks to a minimarket for groceries. Because these men are not permitted to have overnight guests, on a few occasions women have spent the night sleeping in cars outside our house.

Like much of suburbia in Suffolk County, the streets here have no sidewalks, just sandy shoulders. The side streets are often very wide—so wide in fact that five, possibly even six, cars could park side by side across the width of the street and still not touch the lawns on either side.

It has been established . . . that suburban streets all over America ought to be as wide as two-lane country highways, regardless of whether this promotes driving at excessive speeds where children play, or destroys the spatial relationship between the houses on the street. Back in the 1950s, when these formulas were devised, the width of residential streets was tied closely to the idea of a probable nuclear war with the Russians. And in the aftermath of a war, it was believed, wide streets would make it easier to clean up the mess with heavy equipment. (Kunstler 113-14)⁵

If you walk five blocks north from our house you will come to a service road that runs parallel to the Long Island Expressway (LIE), with its (increasingly slow-moving) current of 24/7 traffic. At night the hiss of cars in the distance spills in through our bedroom skylight.

In 1998 they started widening the highway, extending the HOV lanes. Although HOV stands for "high occupancy vehicle," in this case two people—even if that second person is a baby—are considered "high occupancy." The HOV lanes have been added to decrease congestion by encouraging carpooling. Traffic, even out here, ninety minutes from Manhattan—off peak—is thick: on weekdays as early as 6:30 A.M. the westbound lane of the LIE can crawl at 15 m.p.h. But studies show the HOV lanes to be ineffective. In a car culture like Long Island's, people are reluctant to carpool (the newspapers occasionally report stories of drivers getting caught in HOV lanes with mannequins sitting next to them or cabbage patch dolls in baby seats), and, even when they do, the time it takes to navigate the crowded secondary highways to pick up one's passengers requires people to get up that much earlier.

So you think traffic on Long Island is bad now? Stick around. In a mere 22 years, it will be unbearable unless something is done.

That's the prediction of a team of consultants hired by the state Department of Transportation.

Their study, released by the department last week, makes it clear that existing and planned HOV lanes on the Long Island Express way aren't going to solve anything. . . . The forecasters say that by 2020, the amount of time Long Islanders are delayed in traffic will nearly double. The 1,091 miles of congested lanes

during the morning rush will increase by a whopping 75 percent. And it will take longer to get where we're going; the average travel speed during morning and evening rush hours will decrease by 17 percent.

... The big problem is that Long Island's highway system is close to overflowing already, according to the experts. Even a small increase in the number of cars on the road can cause big problems. (Adcock)

Yet construction of the new lanes continues. By the time they are finished, the LIE will be twelve lanes wide in places: the outside shoulder, three lanes of traffic, an on-off lane for entering and leaving the HOV lane, and the HOV lane itself—times two. (See Figure 1 for a construction photo.)

If you want to walk more than five blocks north from my house you will have to walk under the LIE, which means crossing a busy service road. Continue for another five blocks and you will find yourself looking at Lake Ronkonkoma. Although the lake is described as "the jewel" of the community, there is no boardwalk, sidewalk, or even pathway encircling the lake—just a perimeter road (dangerous to walk on due to lack of shoulders), scattered homes in some areas, a restaurant, low-income apartments, and a trailer park. There are three beaches, but each resides in one of the three localities bordering the lake, so residents are permitted to use only one of them. (See Figure 2.)

If you walk several blocks east or west from my house you will arrive at busy four-lane streets (seven-lane, if you count the wide shoulders and the center turning lanes), which serve as effective pedestrian barriers, boxing in and thereby defining the parameters of our little "neighborhood." Both roads were widened in the last decade. One street has a light that sometimes changes color before you can reach the other side; the other is an artery connecting the expressway to the Long Island Rail Road and, beyond that, Veteran's Highway. I am reluctant to take walks with my son in this direction because the traffic on Ronkonkoma Avenue is constant and fast-moving (I was nearly run over early one morning while walking to the train station). On the other hand, living so close to the Ronkonkoma LIRR station (see Figures 3 and 4) is helpful since I take the train to work. (My daily commute is almost two hours, each way: a fifteen-minute walk

Photo by Derek Owens

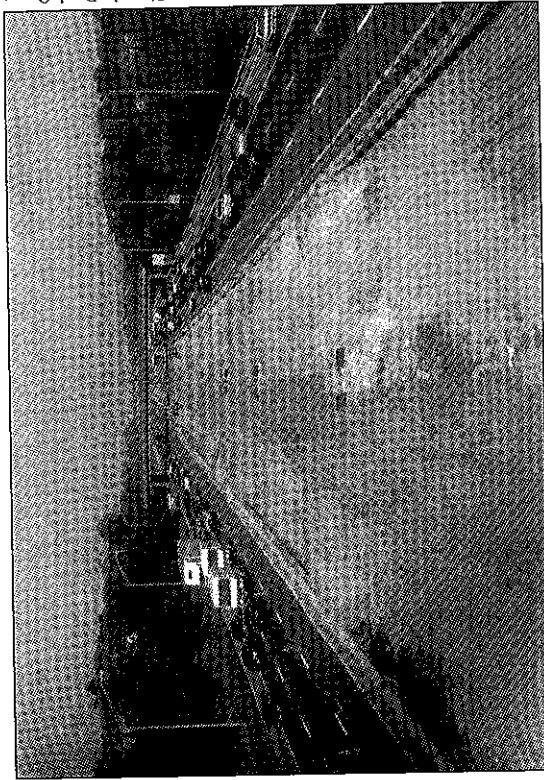


FIGURE 1. May 14, 1998, 3:55 P.M. Looking down at HOV lane construction on the Long Island Expressway from the Ronkonkoma Avenue overpass between exits 59 and 60, about forty-five miles from Manhattan. "The Long Island Expressway was built without rapid transit—and without provision for rapid transit in the future. And as each section of the superhighway opened [beginning in 1955], it was jammed—with traffic jams of immense dimensions. [Robert Moses'] dream became a nightmare—an enduring, year-after-year nightmare—for tens of thousands of other men. Year by year, the huge road bulled its way eastward, through Queens, across Nassau County, deeper and deeper into Suffolk; it would take fifteen years to build it out to Riverhead. And as each section opened, as each piece of Moses' largest road-building achievement fell into place, the congestion grew worse. The Long Island Expressway's designed daily capacity was 80,000 vehicles. By 1963, it was carrying 132,000 vehicles per day, a load that jammed the expressway even at 'off' hours—during the rush hours, the expressway was solid with cars, congealed with them, chaos solidified. The drivers trapped on it nicknamed Moses' longest road 'the world's longest parking lot.'" (Caro, *Power Broker* 949)

to the train station, a one-hour train ride to Jamaica, Queens, a fifteen-minute wait for the Q30 or Q31 bus, and another twenty-to twenty-five-minute ride to campus.)

If you choose to walk south from my house you can go only two blocks before coming to a wooded acre of (for the moment)⁶ undeveloped land, which ends at the railroad tracks. A tall fence



Photo by Derek Owens

FIGURE 2. A view of Lake Ronkonkoma (obstructed by low-income housing).

prevents one from crossing the tracks, which are electrified and will cause third-degree burns and possibly death if one touches the third rail. It is in this wooded plot of land that in the late summer of 1997 I found, hidden amid the black oaks and scrub pines, the remains of a campsite.

They had been living in two ripped tents, the smaller one erected inside the larger one, apparently in an attempt to keep out rain and mosquitoes. Filthy clothes and broken furniture were strewn everywhere. From the smell of the cheese and chopped meat left in a plastic foam cooler, and the remains of a cat coated with maggots and wrapped in a blanket, the site had been abandoned for several weeks. (See Figure 5.) The next day I made an attempt to clean it up but only got so far as to fill a half a dozen garbage bags before I grew too disgusted and gave up. In the process, I found a shoebox of old photographs and a diary. The two squatters had been teenage girls who had taken to living back here in this tiny patch of woods, subsisting for a time by cashing in on a stepfather's social security checks. I wondered what had caused them to leave so suddenly.

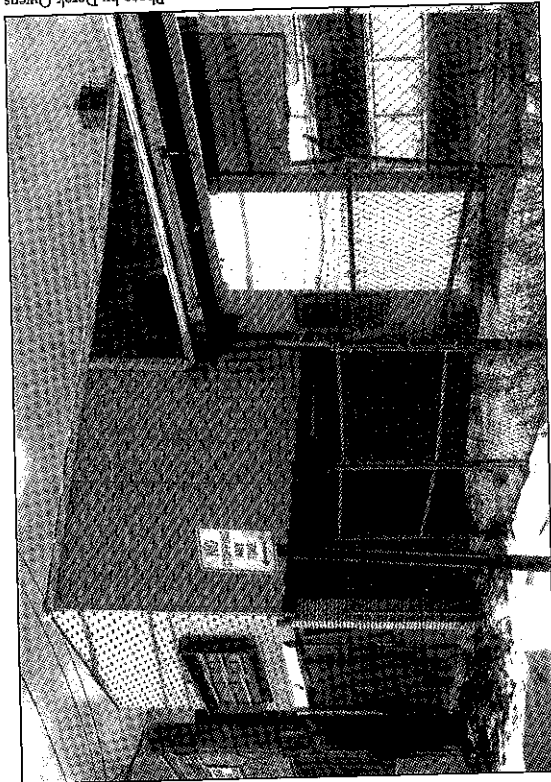


Photo by Derek Owens

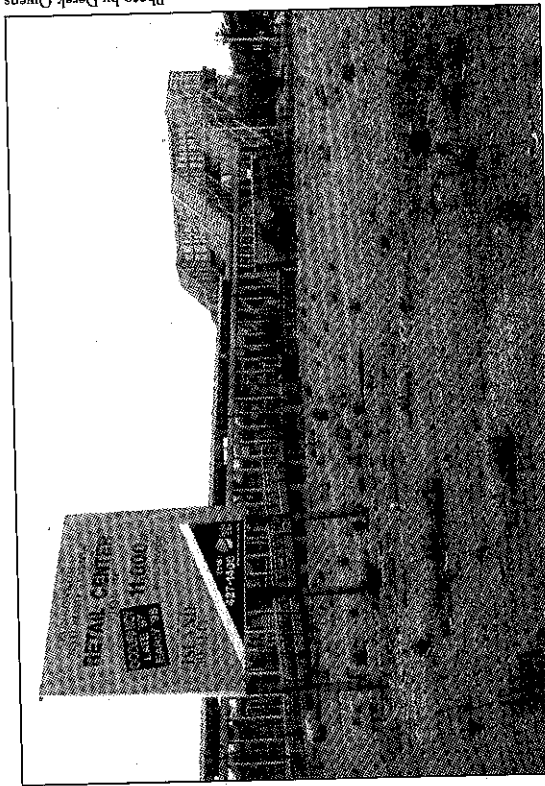


Photo by Derek Owens

FIGURES 3 AND 4. Abandoned stores and empty lots at the Ronkonkoma train station. In 1995 a new multimillion-dollar train station was built here, this being the busiest LIRR hub east of Queens. But the new station has not led to the revitalization of local businesses. A billboard in the center of an empty lot next to the train station promises future stores as early as 1997, but as of 2001 the lot remains empty.



Photo by Derek Owens

FIGURE 5. Squatters in suburbia.

Despite the filth they left behind, part of me admired them. In Ronkonkoma, like most suburbs, teenagers, along with elderly persons, are the ones most victimized by the absence of a public commons, of meeting places, of coffee shops or bookstores or independent movie theaters or parks. As a result, many teenagers skulk around in small bands, knocking over fences, stealing the occasional mailbox, and parking at night in the dark beneath shot-out streetlights to hang out, get stoned, or have sex (twice I've found used condoms on the shoulder outside our house, and, once, a discarded early pregnancy test kit in the bushes).

As a teenager I visited my old suburban chums back on Long Island from time to time and I did not envy their lot in life. By puberty, they had entered a kind of coma. There was so little for them to do in Northwood, and hardly any worthwhile destination reachable by bike or foot, for now all the surrounding territory was composed of similar one-dimensional housing developments punctuated at intervals by equally boring shopping plazas. Since they had no public gathering places, teens congregated in furtive little holes—bedrooms and basements—to smoke pot and imitate the rock and roll bands who played on

the radio. Otherwise, teen life there was reduced to waiting for that transforming moment of becoming a licensed driver. (Kunstler 14)

One writer has suggested, not completely tongue in cheek, that it is the sameness of the Long Island landscape, perfected early on in that famous suburb of Levittown, that makes Nassau and Suffolk county produce more than their share of kidnappers, serial killers, snipers, teenage killers, spouse murderers, and other dangerous individuals. In "Long Island, Babylon," Ron Rosenbaum implies that the inability to situate oneself psychologically or physically within a specific space distinguishable from other spaces leads to psychosis. Moreover, Rosenbaum sees the percolation of antisocial behavior on Long Island as a harbinger for the rest of the country:

Long Island, after all, was supposed to be the future *before* the future. We always had a head start on the life cycle of suburban baby-boom culture because we were the first-born burbs of the baby boom; a burbland created almost all at once, very fast and virtually ex nihilo, right after the war, a self-contained social organism. An organism whose sociobiological clock started ticking a little earlier than subsequent burbs, and whose shrill alarms now seem to signal that it has raced through its mature stage and is now rocketing headlong into the social-organism equivalent of senile dementia. (628)

Others have called attention to what some see as a disproportionate number of famous crimes associated with Nassau and Suffolk county (Demoretcky; Jensen; Wacker). Two weeks after the April 1999 high school massacre in Colorado, an article appeared in the *New York Times* speculating about the role of suburban sprawl in fostering the kind of environment where such tragedies occur: "At a time when the renegade sprawl of suburbs themselves is being intensely scrutinized, the troubling vision of a nation re-pioneered in vast tracts of disconnected communities has produced uneasy discussion about the psychological disorientation they might house" (Hamilton, "Suburban Design" F1).

At least the two squatters near my house had made, for a piece of their summer, a hovel of their own away from others'

eyes, tucked away by the tracks in a copse of trees sandwiched between the Quality Muffler Shop and a dirt parking lot owned by the LIRR. As disgusted with them as I was for having defiled that place, I am more ashamed of the planners and architects and developers, and their backers, who have bequeathed to other people's children what James Kunstler calls "a landscape of scary places, the geography of nowhere, that has simply ceased to be a credible human habitat" (15). If their community leaders had exhibited no imagination in designing neighborhoods and had polluted the environs with industrial parks and strip malls, one could hardly criticize these girls for desecrating their own hidden home, which was, after all, distinctly *their* mess, and not a copy of a copy of someone else's idea of what a home or neighborhood should look like. Embarrassing as it was, this pathetic campsite had become, for a few weeks, their space, an island constructed in the center of an island marked by unchecked sprawl.

Where My Students Are Writing From

To be sure, much of my discontent here on Long Island is the result of growing up within walking distance of rivers and woods in upstate New York; my childhood was spent wandering up and down the Chemung River in "Mark Twain Country." And obviously there are good and even great things I have not mentioned about Long Island: being a ninety-minute train ride away from Manhattan, and just twenty minutes away from ferries to Fire Island; the pine barrens farther east and the still relatively undeveloped landscape of the north fork, with its farms and wineries; the beaches, of course. There are activities in nearby Connetquot State Park, and a growing number of film festivals in Nassau and Suffolk county. For the most part, the neighborhoods around here, albeit nondescript, are peaceful, safe, and pleasant.

But it's hard for me to keep from focusing on the darker side of living here: the "tens of thousands" of aging fuel tanks (the primary source of home heating in Nassau and Suffolk counties) buried in back yards throughout the island, many of them leaking (Fagin, "No-Win"); the 41,901 gasoline and oil spills in Nassau, Suffolk, and Queens as of April 1998 ("Spills of the

Island"); the fact that M.T.B.E. (methyl tertiary butane ether), a toxic and possibly carcinogenic gasoline additive, is "rapidly moving through the region's groundwater, penetrating drinking water supplies" (Rather, "Contaminant" LI1); the presence of the Brookhaven National Laboratory a few miles away from here, which surrounding residents have for years suspected to be the cause of suspicious cancers in their neighborhoods (Nelson); the fact that baby teeth collected on Long Island over a three year period as part of the "Tooth Fairy Project" show high levels of the radioactive carcinogen strontium-90 (Rather, "Babies' Teeth"); a history of graft and governmental corruption throughout the rest of the township of Brookhaven, sometimes referred to as Crookhaven, which much of the public seems to take in stride (Halbfinger, "Scandal"); predicted increases in mosquito-borne diseases and coastal flooding, especially on the south shore, due to an expected annual rise in temperatures over the coming decades—an April 1999 *Newsday* article features maps of coastal neighborhoods that might be gone in fifty years due to rising sea levels (Fagin, "Trouble"); a recent study indicating that commuters like "most of the 18,000 people who ride in [to Penn Station on the LIRR] every morning from Ronkonkoma" are, because of their lengthy commute, sleep-deprived (Halbfinger, "I've Been Sleeping"). And then there is the continued loss of open space due to the constant building of new homes, new malls, and new industrial parks, and, at the same time, the absence of parks, pedestrian centers, commons—the "good places" that people go out of their way to be in.

But what also bothers me about my frustrations over where I live is my guilt when I consider that in the eyes of my students I have made it: to many of them this is "the country," the land of suburban milk and honey that they dream of moving to and dying in when their ships come in. For where I live is so much better than where many of them do. When I get off the train at eleven o'clock at night and walk the half-mile home, the streets are safe and pleasant. Although our house was burglarized not too long ago, this happens everywhere, and there is little crime to speak of in the immediate neighborhood. The fact is, we're very lucky to have a quarter of an acre of property—far more land than most Americans have—which offers us ample space for my experiments

in vegetable gardening, a tree house, half a dozen enormous maples and oaks, a number of small perennial gardens, and plenty of yard for Ryan and his cousins and friends to enjoy. If the surrounding area is not exactly what I would consider a "good place," at least we've managed to make our private compound compensate to some degree. My son thrives in our backyard, which at age three he actually referred to as "paradise" (although if he were fifteen, too old for backyard romping but too young too drive, he might characterize his home a little differently). Were my students to see how I lived, I imagine some would be amused or disgusted by their spoiled professor's whiny portrait of his neighborhood.

After reading their papers over the years, I've come to realize that many of my students are not happy with where they live. Most live in Queens, Brooklyn, the Bronx, or Nassau county, and more often than not they are disappointed, discouraged, and bored with—and, not infrequently, scared of—their places. This is not to say they never have fun, or that they feel their hangouts and street-corner gatherings have no redeeming qualities. But when I ask students to write about where they live, what I get are sketches of homes and buildings and blocks marked not by joy but by monotony, restlessness, violence, and neglect.

A number of my students who live in New York City were once country kids who in some ways have never fully gotten used to living in the city.

I lived on a farm [in Korea] with my grandmother during the first seven years of my life. . . . [T]he adults and the children usually gathered around the front lounge eating meals, telling stories, and resting from work. . . . Living on the farm allowed me to realize that the most important and valuable things about living are to appreciate neighbors. . . . In Brooklyn, most of my neighbors . . . are too busy performing their own life. They have to run their businesses and take care of family problems. It is too much for them. . . . We are losing beauty of life such as forgiveness of each other, belief in each other, and loving each other. . . . My family and I now . . . operate within the new way of living without feeling guilt. The result, "I am just like them."

EUN HEE

This morning I looked out from my terrace [onto Jamaica Avenue in Queens] at the bus stop. Of course because of the season, there are many who are cold, and have been waiting for that Queens bus to come for at least twenty minutes. . . . My surroundings are totally different from my parents' surroundings at my age, especially my father's. He was brought up on a huge estate and farmland. They had horses and all kinds of other animals. Tons of trees, different sizes and bearing different fruits. An endless walk if you were up to it. I only know this from my visits to Guyana, and from pictures I've seen. . . . I wish we could have traded our "places".

CHARISSE

It seems like it was yesterday when [in Ecuador] I used to chase the chickens and the ducks of the farm, when I used to ride my bicycle along the riverside, when I used to take those never-ending baths in the river or just to run across the corn and soy fields. . . . My grandfather colonized these territories around the 1916's. These were fertile fields, apt for stockbreeding and banana production. He dedicated his entire life to his farm that one day would belong to his sons and daughters. . . . Fifteen years have passed by. My grandmother still lives in Quevedo. Our family is trying to maintain those values that kept us once together, preserve our family roots. . . . [M]y heart still longs for those good days when I used to be woken up by the noisy but enchanting trilling of the rooster.

VIOLETTA

When I look back to my childhood and see that special place of mine, I feel sad and melancholy that I do not have it any more. I lived there my first five years and they were fantastic. It was a very small community (only thirty to forty houses) call Lemons . . . located about four to five hours away from the capital of Guatemala.

. . . All the people from this community were very close to each other. If a person had an economical problem everybody would get together and help them solve their problem. All the kids were also united when it was time to play. . . .

Nowadays [in Brooklyn] people do not care about their neighbors, not at all. They do not care about their sufferings, they are egotistic and indifferent to each other. . . . [W]here I grew up in Guatemala was like a little reproduction of the biblical Eden. . . . People were always helping you and giving you their support when you needed it. They were like an extension of

your own family. I would like to go back someday and live there the rest of my life. If God gives me the opportunity to do it, I am sure I will in the future.

CLARA

Some of my students are refugees, having recently emigrated from war-ravaged countries.

I want to write about growing up in Tbilisi Georgia. . . . Recollecting my childhood I see the faces of my friends I grew up with: boys and girls, Georgians and Russians, Armenians and Jews, Ossetians and Azerbaijanians. . . . Every family lived its life, had its own problems, but these problems were often resolved by mutual efforts, people were together for better or for worse. They pulled together in hardship and joy—they arranged weddings and family occasions: and when misery or disaster knocked at the door, you could always count on your neighbor or friend, you could always lean on somebody's shoulder. . . . [A]ll of a sudden everything turned upside down and vanished in the past.

War!!! Blood and tears, black mourning clothes of mothers and sisters who lost their sons and beloved ones, exhausted, gloomy faces of men, fears and misery in every family, disaster in every heart. . . . But what is the most scary, is vicious and bloody instinct in the eyes of youngsters! Nothing is sacred any more. There is anarchy and chaos all over. Once you cross the border between life and death, there is no way back to your childhood. You can't hide behind your mother's skirt and she, your mother, can't protect you any longer, because she might be assaulted or even be murdered in Abkhazia or Svanetia by one of your contemporaries. Tooth for tooth, eye for eye, blood for blood. . . .

ANNA

If I was to choose one place that means something to me it would have to be the basement of my house [back in Bosnia]. Remembering these times sometimes requires a lot of emotional courage. . . . [T]hose six walls of concrete provided protection necessary for my family. . . . In the month that war began, we used it as a shelter against grenades. Mom brought some blankets to cover the floor against the cold, and huddled us together in one corner listening to the grumbling that went on outside. You couldn't tell if it was day or night, but I remember staring at the ceiling while everyone slept. I was looking, I guess, for an explanation, and as if the ceiling had the answers I spoke out loud, conversed with it. Eventually I would fall asleep without my answers. I didn't mind sometimes; some things are better left unsaid. . . . Even though

it's just walls, it protects you when you need it. I guess you don't know what you have until you're cornered and hopeless.

MARTA

My students also comment on excessive development in their neighborhoods.

The developments that are supposed to be going underway in Nassau [Country] are attempts to just eat up land and destroy our environment. It's what I like to call "Lego City." Remember as kids when we used to play with those Lego pieces? We used to build cities, cars, spaceships, etc. The whole city built of Lego was the only place your Lego men would live in—no progression, no mobilization. It was safe to say that your little people had their lives planned out since the moment they came out of the box. . . . In Nassau they are creating something called the Hub, which is just one huge Lego City. This is meant to lessen traffic and make the motorists comfortable so they can get to work on time. I hate this concept that people live to work, I always thought that it was to live to live life. Instead we are wasting our lives suffering just to be able to pay the rent.

OSCAR

I grew up on a beautiful island in Greece called Chalkis. My hometown had a dazzling beauty that I just can't describe. It was like a paradise God created for himself. . . . My house was right across from the sea. One of my favorite things to do was to stand on my balcony and watch the enchanting view with my field glasses. . . .

The place I used to love is not the same any more. . . . Enormous forestland used to cover the place all over! . . . There were olive trees and fig trees all around. Now, all you can see are dark, empty spaces. People set fires in order to buy these lands and make profit off of them. The street which was once closed to automobiles and open only to pedestrians is now full of vehicles. The noise is unbearable. The atmosphere is not clear anymore. I take my field glasses now but I can't see on the other side even when it's sunny. . . . When I'm thinking of Chalkis now—and I'm doing this quite often actually—I feel really sad. I don't want to live to see the day when I won't have the will to go back there.

ANGELA

They write about traffic congestion and commuting difficulties.

I have been living on Linden Blvd. right off Flatbush Ave. for two years now. I hate it. Whenever it is possible I find some reason to be away from that place. . . . The streets are not safe to walk on, they are designed solely for the purpose of the drivers, without caring about the people that live and pass through these places. Even the buildings look identical. . . . I am disgusted by my neighborhood and its surrounding area. It is not a place for people to live in with all that hustle and bustle going on. Whenever I am in my neighborhood I either stay inside or I go out to escape the place.

NATALIE

Traffic congestion is an especially horrible problem that exists in my neighborhood. Early morning rush hour, midday and afternoon rush hour are the worst times to be on the streets, not to mention a busy Saturday. Sundays are moderately quiet since this is the rest day to get ready for the madhouse you are sure to encounter the next morning.

Crossing the street is no easy feat to accomplish. You have to be constantly on the lookout. The streets are always packed and everyone is out for themselves. The dollar vans [private commuter vans that compete with public transportation services] stop in the middle of the street to pick up a passenger, while holding up traffic or nearly causing an accident. People drive crazily cutting people off any chance that they get, no one wants to slow down to let anyone cross the street even when the sign says WALK. . . . It is not uncommon to hear profanity being shouted to other drivers, or to see people giving each other the finger. . . . The constant flow of traffic that passes through the neighborhood is not that great on the roads either. There are many rough spots and potholes all over.⁷

ROXANNE

They write of the boredom and monotony in their communities.

I live in the most boring neighborhood in the entire United States of America! Nothing ever happens on my block [in Queens] or in the surrounding areas. You can go outside at 10:00 A.M. and stay out until 5:00 P.M. and not see anybody or see anything happen. . . .

My block has 36 houses on it. Every house looks the same. If we did not have addresses, you could never tell which family lived in which house. . . . The only people that can have any type of fun are the licensed drivers. Even with a license, we do not

Place

really have that much fun. The friends of mine that have licenses either go to school, work, or both. They have little, if any, free time. Even the licensed drivers have boring lives in my neighborhood.

Anybody with at least half of a social life and a normal personality should not even visit my neighborhood! My block and its surrounding areas can take the life out of even the most exuberant person. There is no real hope of any sort of life ever coming to this area. If I had the opportunity, I would leave here. This is not the place for any child to grow up in.

ROSS

When I think about Jewel Park, the word "hate" comes to mind. . . . You see, many people I know, including myself, complain about hanging out at the park, and yet, we still end up hanging out there. It's a chance for many young Filipinos to all hang out together [but] there is never a day that passes without a fight. Jewel Park has taught me that this so-called "flip [Filipino] scene" that I am a part of is not all that it is cracked up to be. . . . The bad memories outweigh the good ones. Then again, if we had no Jewel Park, where would we go to talk?

RACHAEL

If you were to take a walk down [my] block you would be looking at apartment buildings about four stories high, with fences surrounding them and a flight of steps leading up to the front doors. The only difference you would notice is the color of the buildings. I think there should be some kind of difference rather than making everything so similar and dreary. When I go out I like to be able to look around and take in the different sites, but in a neighborhood such as mine that is impossible. Everywhere you turn you would be confronted with the exact same things, no matter what direction you turn to. . . . I'm much better staying inside where I can move from room to room which at least holds a different picture in each. . . .

JOANNE

Many of my students are all too familiar with poor living conditions and dirty apartment buildings.

I live in the southern part of Manhattan in an apartment building beside the East River. . . . The lounge is gloomy when it rains. The hallways of each floor are lighted with insufficient fluorescent light bulbs. . . . Once, two robbers hid behind the staircase

door; when they saw my neighbor open the door to her apartment, they pushed her in and stuck a gun at her. This is why living near the staircase can be dangerous. . . . In this neighborhood there are all sorts of sad things happening. Teenagers getting pregnant, people getting shot once in a while, and kidnapers kidnapping children are the things that my parents do not want us to get influenced by. . . .

ZHU

I live in Flushing right off Parson Boulevard, which is very commercial. The traffic makes it annoying to get anywhere around my neighborhood. And added to that is the annoying people all around screaming at you to move or cursing at you cause you took their parking place. I can honestly say that there are no nice people in my neighborhood. The next thing that's not good about my house is the building itself. It's always dirty, or the elevator doesn't work, or it smells. My building always has some kind of garbage smell roaming around the halls which really stinks. What makes it worse is that if you're in the hallway waiting for the elevator the smell follows you around like it sticks to you on your clothes your hair etc. Next we have the garbage lying around the hallways or we have dogs pee on the floor in the middle of the hall so it's gross to see. You would think with all the money the tenants pay for rent they could clean the hallways and the entrance. And last but not least the elevators are always broken. I really can't blame all this on the owners of the building or the super, the tenants are also to blame. They just don't care and they make it hard for those tenants who do care.

WINSOME

Many of my students know too well how poverty can turn urban neighborhoods into unsafe zones.

With the increasing gang related crimes, people fear to go and just walk around Chinatown. I, personally, witnessed two crime situations in Chinatown when I was helping my mom when she was a vendor. I was standing there folding some clothes when I heard a loud noise. Thinking that it was just some sort of fire-cracker, I did not really look around or care too much about it until I saw this guy limping on the street. He fell and I saw blood on his upper thigh. After seeing that, I feared to go to Chinatown and help my mom out and I was scared to see that she had to work on such dangerous streets. . . . I saw another person get shot. . . . like four times and the last one in his head.

SUE

The crime rate has gone up in my neighborhood [in Brooklyn]. I was never scared of walking around the streets 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. When I come home late at night, I always have my key ready, I lock up the car and run with full speed to the front door. It is so hard to trust people. There are so many negative qualities in my personality that have been brought out by the changes of the neighborhood.

I used to see myself as a light-hearted person, not really worrying too much. Now, I do not open up to meeting new people. I find it very hard to trust people. This all started after I was mugged on the train. I had a knife put to my neck. This was one of the most horrifying things that ever happened to me. Because of this I will never be the same, I look at people so much differently. The attitude I have now is everyone is out for themselves not caring about anyone. This is a really negative attitude but, I do not know how to change it.

PAULINA

As for my neighborhood [in Brownsville, Brooklyn], my two biggest complaints are that of its violence and its state of underdevelopment. As for the violence, I don't mean like I hear gun shots every night (although it happens more than I'd like). I mean mostly robberies and gang violence. Many people close to me have been robbed either in or close to my building. These people include my mother, sister and best friend who have all been robbed on separate occasions. All of them at either gun or knife point. And all too often, you hear the tales of "this one" or "that one" and what happened to them last night while they were on their way to "wherever." I have to constantly look over my shoulder and to both of my sides when walking from the train station in the evenings. As far as the gang violence, that's something pretty new, that started out small and harmless, if you can call it that, and has grown into an outrageous problem. I'm sorry, but one shouldn't have to worry about what colors they're wearing when they're in their own neighborhood or anyone else's. But we do. If you wear the colors of one gang in another gang's "territory," you become a blind target for any amount of things to happen to you.

NANETTE

My students write of places dominated by boredom, drugs, and poverty.

On the corner of 50th St. and 4th Ave. a small store stands. Santiago's is a street corner bodega in the Sunset Park section of Brooklyn. A dumpster and a pay phone surround the store, a dumpster to drink your drink after purchasing it from Mr. Santiago himself, and a pay phone where you can return your beeps while you were getting drunk or high. This is a corner where every imaginable temptation is put upon you. I should know, I spent two of my high school years atop that very dumpster.

Mr. Santiago didn't care whether you were twenty-one or twelve, if you had the cash in hand you got what you wanted, beer, cigarettes, anything. . . . If you got caught by the cops drinking or smoking you would blame it on Juan. Juan was a made-up person that we blamed everything on. Then there's a person by the name of Angel, his name was really Erik but we called him Angel, because to all the drug addicts they thought of him as God. Like an umbrella salesman he stood by the telephone waiting for any business to come his way. From crack to glue he had everything, and to many of us he was kind of like a big brother.

This corner gave most of us kids a sense of security and a closeness that only a father or a mother would give to their son. If it wasn't Angel looking after us, it would be each other. I can remember Christmas, as poor as everyone was each of us would get what we wanted, whether it was Nintendo or a leather jacket we got it. Even Mr. Santiago would give out free sodas and cheese doodles. . . .

[Whenever you travel out of the neighborhood] you envy the places you see because your economic status holds you prisoner in the neighborhood you don't want to live in.

LUIS

Sometimes students express pride in neighborhoods they depict in very negative ways, which might sound hypocritical were not that this is the only neighborhood they have.

Where I live now the streets smell like urine and there are cracks in the sidewalk. There is graffiti everywhere. It is boring most of the time because there is nothing to do. The people are rude and impolite, and have bad attitudes. Most of them are junkies and are just rotting away. My neighborhood looks like an old abandoned western town.

I live in Coney Island in a small area called Brighton Beach. The D train is right behind my house, so it is pretty noisy. . . . The neighborhood looks like it's decaying. It has potholes, wild grass growing out of the sidewalks, crack pipes and condoms all over

the streets. The street that I live on is the infamous Oceanview Avenue, where the ladies of the night come out to do their jobs. About three to four ladies work the block every night from twelve a.m. to five a.m. The houses across the street are no more than fifteen steps away. Each house is no more than five feet away from each other, which makes the neighborhood look tightly packed.

It does have its good sides. There is plenty of public transportation, grocery stores, and clothing stores. But it seems that things are getting worse as I get older. . . . Things have changed. Instead of saying hello people say "do you have a problem?" or "do you need some weed?" But as I walk down Oceanview Avenue, I feel that I am with the street because it is where I come from. . . . There is a bond between the people [in this neighborhood] that is unbreakable. There were times when I was starving and people would offer to buy me food. I do not think it would bother me if I could not find anything good about my neighborhood. Regardless, I love it because it is where I was born and raised. . . . I would not want it to change for anything in the world.

RAVI

In one of the slum streets of the Bronx, stands a six story high building that is painted in gray and orange. That's the one I call home. About four other buildings stand adjacent to mine. In three of the corners there is a Bodega and in one corner there is a laundromat. The artificial trees that were placed in front of every other building are either without leaves or no longer existing. . . . Teenagers and drugs rule the streets. As you enter my block you see a lot of teenagers standing in the corner stores and in the buildings. Their hobbies are to use drugs, sell drugs, stay out late, drag race, make rap music, and protect their lives from their enemies. You see them hiding out in your building whenever the cops are around the neighborhood. They influence younger children into dealing drugs. All I am describing is what I see and have always seen since I have lived here. Stereotypes of the Bronx are cruel and sometimes false; my intentions are not to add to these stereotypes.

My neighborhood could be better. You are not really living in fear because of what could happen to you when you step out the door, but I'm not saying you are safe either. My streets are full of low life teenagers that are making their life off dealing with drugs. . . . Then again, half of these youngsters don't know any better because they grew up in the streets and refuse to surpass this corrupt life.

[And yet] I would feel awkward if I moved away to a better neighborhood. There have been times that I've gone on vacation to places that are truly amazing in respect to the atmosphere. Yet I can't get used to these places. For example, I visited Florida one summer and I just couldn't see myself living there for the rest of my life. It was beautiful. It was safe. It was boring. It was not home! My neighborhood has more negative qualities than positive ones, but I don't think it's that bad because it could be worse. I would not like to live here for the rest of my life, but where would I go? and would it still be home?

SANDRA

They tell of lives and communities shaped around work.

I live in Elmont, "the gateway to Nassau county." It is part of the great wall of China dividing Queens from the "innocence" of Long Island. It is a sea of suburbia, littered from wall to wall with two story houses and garages. . . . My town serves for the most part as a resting stop for many working, middle-class people on their way to and from work. You might say that they live there, but I don't equate "living" with working all day then coming home to rest before returning to work in the morning and going to and from the city for work. . . . There is too much to do. Too much work not enough time. Why do Americans choose to live like this? This cannot be the "American Dream." The "American Dream" is like Bigfoot, people have heard of it and claim to have seen it, but no hard evidence of it exists.

RICHARD

They write about the crime in their neighborhoods.

I presently live in Fresh Meadow, Queens, an urban neighborhood with one family houses. Most houses are landscaped with beautiful flowers and shaped bushes on the front lawn. . . . At night the neighborhood gets really dark and each block only has one street light which is right in front of my house. This is bad because many times there are burglars who try to break in houses where there are bushes covering the windows and try to break in through there. If your house is not protected by an alarm system, motion light, or an attack dog be ready to see your house vandalized or the steering wheel of your car stolen. That has happened to my house two times. The neighborhood may be peaceful and pretty to the eye of the beholder but at night prowlers use that to their advantage. My garage has been broken into . . . which caused

my father to tint the windows so people wouldn't be able to see inside. Almost every house is protected by a different alarm system and if not they might probably be equipped with flood lights which make a person feel like they have been spotted by a police helicopter.

ELLEN

I grew up on New York's crime side of Brownsville, Brooklyn. My family and I lived in the 289 projects building on Blake St. I lived there for nine years. I wish I could have grown up in a much better environment, but I didn't have any control over that. Brownsville is the type of neighborhood that people have nightmares about. When I was growing up I constantly saw drugs being sold, teenagers gambling in the hallways of my building, drunks passed out on the front steps. I could never forget the time that my dad and I saw a lady getting robbed. I was about seven years old. My dad was walking me to school one day at seven o'clock in the morning. We heard a loud scream and ran to the next floor. We saw the back of the man who took the lady's pocketbook. What happened on that morning was on my mind all day. That night before I went to sleep I thought about my life in the projects. I wanted to get out and move away, anywhere. I knew if I didn't I'd end up dead or selling drugs. See people in the projects have no motive to move out, so very few people move out. So I thought that this was the place I was going to spend the rest of my life. When I was a kid I had the attitude that school didn't matter, my goals in life didn't matter because I'm going to end up dying in the projects anyway. Brownsville's school was the worst, teachers passed kids easily and I was one of those kids. There were many bad values that came out of living in Brooklyn.

JORGE

They write of communities suffering from abandonment and neglect.

If you were to drive through Hempstead today you would see something totally different. You would see large abandoned buildings with weathered bricks falling apart, appearing to almost barely hold up this massive architecture, obviously not maintained. The doors which were once actively revolving doors are now boarded up and matted with graffiti tags. During the summer when you drive by you are sure to see a small forest of weeds growing out of the cracks which have formed in the desolate parking lots. A few letters still remain of what used to read,

"Abraham & Strauss," now Abr-ha- &-trauss. It has done some good being that now these letters are the home of a few birds' nests. . . .

DAN

The dream of my parents brought them to a nice area called Cliffside Park, New Jersey. In the early 1970's and throughout the mid 1980's, Cliffside Park was a town that had character. It was clean, the people were nice, trouble was rare and only good things could be said about the town. It was your average town, average people lived here, and now it has changed because greed entered everyone's mind. . . .

When I played little league baseball, the field was well manicured. Now, the grass is sometimes so high, when the baseball hits the infield it slows down so much that it can't make it to the outfield. The tennis courts are cracking, sometimes no nets are put up, or the net is broken. You find broken glass or rocks on the field. There are two manholes on the field which are covered by Astro turf. . . .

My overall person is defined by my environment, but to what exact extent, I'm not sure of. When I was younger, I was a hard working individual, now, I feel like an aging veteran who has lost a step or two. Something is not right, because I am only twenty-one years old.

WALTER

They write of communities that lack a sense of community.

My town [in Brooklyn] is very small. In my block, it has just two big, white buildings. People might think that it is very pleasurable to live here. Yes, it looks clean and nice, but I can not feel anything from it. It is just like one big matchbox. My neighbors and me, we are living in a box. . . .

My place has some serious problems. First, we have lack of communication with each other. . . . All my neighbors hate noise. They close their doors and windows just like their minds. . . . [T]hey close their minds everyday, and do not want get involved with anything that happens. We are too busy to care about our own problems. We have a robber in our building but my neighbors or even myself do not recognize him because we do not know each other's faces.

ESTHER

I have lived on 91st Road in Queens Village for almost fifteen years. . . . I can look around and say that our block is growing

with the times. . . . The beauty of the block has also been taken away. Favorite trees of mine have been torn down by the city. . . .

I remember the first couple of days after I moved to 91st Road and earned the title "Mayor of the Block." I must have been about four then and would walk up and down the block and introduce myself to any new face I saw. I remember playing in the house, tag, red light/green light, spud and ice cream parlor in the street. . . . Now you have to worry about not being killed when crossing the street.

As I grew older I started seeing that many families were leaving for summer homes on Long Island. The block became lonely at times and my friends and I would put on shows for the neighbors. We would practice on the front lawn between two bayberry bushes that my neighbor said everyone used to have. We would dance and put on skits and when it was all over we would get candy and listen to [an elderly neighbor] tell stories about the neighborhood as it once was.

Now at eighteen years I sit less and less on my steps. I see that that sense of unity will never be the same and is shamefully forgotten.

ROSA

Even my affluent students, who live in what many would consider desirable areas, can find their places wanting in fundamental ways.

My neighborhood [in Nassau county] is extremely quiet. You never yearn to get away because there is never anything to escape from. In the morning we awaken to the beautiful sounds of the birds singing. No one is ever bothered or annoyed by others. It is a very safe environment, in which everyone always has their privacy and it is never threatened. On a warm evening you could sit in the yard and the only sound you will hear are the crickets, which totally relaxes you. It is overall a tranquil environment which seems ideal to the outsider.

Although my neighborhood is peaceful, alongside of this comes solitude, which at times can be frustrating. Loneliness is not rare in such an environment. Many times I feel as if I live in no man's land. There are never any people in the streets or outside their homes which makes me feel as if I am the only person alive for miles and miles around. I can never seek help or comfort from my surrounding society, due to my fear of rejection. I shut people out due to my belief that they show no concern for anyone other than themselves. . . .

ANGELA

Boredom and Hyperboredom

Of course, not all of my students' accounts are tinged with frustration. In every class there are those who write about how fortunate they are to live where they do. One student writes of how her neighborhood block association provides a rich and supportive community, making her home at 89th Avenue in Hollis (Queens) so desirable that she can't imagine living anywhere else. Another student loves her home in New Hyde Park so much that she talked her father out of selling it. Another complains about the negative stereotypes she hears about Brooklyn, none of which match the reality of her community in Gravesend, where the houses are kept neat and attractive and the neighbors shovel each other's walks in winter: "I do not think I would change anything," she writes of her neighborhood. "It has everything I think a good neighborhood should have." Another creates an idyllic portrait of Broad Channel, an urban village in Jamaica Bay, near the Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge and Rockaway Beach. Some of my students live in gated communities, which they tend to adore for their security, privacy, recreational facilities, and peace and quiet. Increasingly, now that our university has built dormitories and is attracting a growing number of students from all over the country, students will sometimes write about suburban and rural homes near woods and creeks and wildlife. Not surprisingly, my students who like their neighborhoods so much they never want to leave write of places with three recurring characteristics: a mixed-use community (homes, business, and services all in close proximity, usually in walking distance) with low crime and good public transportation. These students emphasize the presence of restaurants, stores, schools, parks, and easy access to bus and subway lines that can take them into Manhattan in thirty to forty-five minutes: "I have everything I need here," many of them write.

But while many students are happy with where they live, in my four years of reading these portraits I have seen the majority of my students express dissatisfaction and frustration with their communities. And while, as the preceding excerpts reveal, some of my students are nervous and fearful in what they call "active" (high-crime) neighborhoods, the majority who express discontent are not so much afraid—I doubt that more than ten to twenty

percent of the students in any of my classes live in areas where gangs and robberies are a concern—as they are bored. This connection between place and boredom is worth examining more closely, especially if, as I suspect is the case, it is the majority of our students who are bored with where they live.

While the following excerpt from one of my student's papers is more extreme than most I receive, particularly in its cavalier account of racism, vandalism, and violence, I don't think the omnipresent boredom running throughout the piece is unique to this person's experience. In this passage, which I quote at length, Mike tells of how he and his fellow high school students in southern Nassau county would spend their weekends hanging out at a strip mall parking lot, clustered around an all-night convenience store.

[The strip mall] was a chain of five stores including an I-Hop [International House of Pancakes] and a Philly Cheese Steak located in the center of a rather enormous parking lot that always seemed a bit unnecessary for such a small grouping of establishments. On weekend nights the site attracted large numbers of teenagers from the local Oceanside school district that had been designated as a hang-out for years. While I attended the high school, the numbers late on a Saturday night would swell to well over three hundred kids in the parking lot alone with absolutely nothing to do. It must be an intriguing sight to the common passerby on their way to Long Beach, witnessing over three hundred high school students gathered in the parking lot of the last commercial enclave before the bridge to Long Island's barrier islands. It wasn't like there was some major attraction there. One would think that 16 and 17-year-old kids would want to do something interesting. All during the school week kids would promise themselves that they would not end up at 24 [an all-night store], but there they would be, sitting on someone's car eating a cream cheese bagel.

... The situation was one of boredom. . . . No one ever wanted to be there, but in the end you would be there. Kids would always complain about how pathetic the site was but from as far back as I can remember there would always be at least fifty plus kids there every late weekend night. Often it would be the same kids that claimed to loathe it, myself included. The place intrigued me so much because it attracts the entire high school no matter who you were. It was not an isolated hang-out for one group, but the hang-out for the entire school. It wasn't the place

where kids would spend their whole night but it was where they would be at the end of the night. After a typical night of over-drinking and busted parties it was the place to go when it was all over. By one AM the place was full and would remain that way for another two hours. . . .

It was with striking consistency that the weekend always went down in this fashion. If you ever heard the stereotype that Long Island kids spend their high school years getting drunk and high, well that's not so far from the truth from where I stand anyway. . . .

When we did arrive at 24 we did precisely what we intended to do, get sober fast. That's where we got our bagels that helped absorb the alcohol in our systems. There were ample dark allies behind the store chain for urinating and vomiting. . . . The place represented many of the negative things that youth can be brought to when they have nothing to do. I watched people too drunk to stand on all fours vomiting up their insides for hours on the pavements. I saw my friend lose his scholarship to Cortland on a drug bust and I saw fistfights that were over parking spaces. The entire situation was a breeding ground for bickering amongst one another. Why did the night go wrong, whose fault is it we're here, stay away from my girlfriend, get off my car. We argued about such stupid things. One would be surprised how often these quarrels led to actual violence among "friends."

. . . I remember when the clerk at the steakhouse was hitting on my friend's girlfriend in Spanish so we trashed the place. . . . Now many of these kids are drunk, but they are also hopelessly ignorant white kids who just look for an excuse for more mischief. At any rate . . . the all county linebacker/tight end that was her boyfriend immediately exchanged words with the clerk, and we encouraged him. After all most of the crowd had left by then and we were just looking for something to do anyway. Naturally the half sober ones knew to leave before real trouble started. . . . Trash cans were flying. Garbage was to become the most effective weapon against the evil cheese steak guy. The fact that he was Hispanic made it even worse. The first thing we did was to immediately empty the five trash cans on the tiled floor of the poor man's establishment. The smell was not pleasant. Alarmed, the man threatened us, and once again in Spanish no less. The poor guy really started to panic when we threw the cans themselves at him, and then our empty 40 bottles. When the glass started a-breakin' this guy really started a-shakin'. By now the man was terrified, hiding in the corner of the kitchen room clenching what I perceived to be a small wooden club of sorts, praying for the arrival of the Nassau PD. As a final touch to an eventful

evening, my enraged football friend jabs at the window with a solid blow. . . .

The only explanation I could give as to why people would want to hang out in a stupid parking lot by the hundred, would simply be because there is nothing to do on this stupid island. When you're under 18 your choices are limited to begin with. Oceanside doesn't even have a decent movie theater in a population of over 40,000 denizens. It's all houses on the fringe and all stores in the center of town.

. . . Perhaps my biggest gripe with 24 is that . . . I managed to waste so much time there doing nothing that I could consider special to me.

There's a lot to unpack in a narrative like this. Mike's contempt for his peers, his community, and himself makes me wonder to what extent poorly designed neighborhoods become catalysts for self-hatred. And the racism and xenophobia in Mike's conflicted narrative recall how both played a role in the original construction of suburbia. What stands out to me most, though, is Mike's implicit awareness of the degree to which boredom is a condition of place. Or, more precisely, how bad places—places that are not pedestrian-centered, that lack accessible public transportation and affordable housing, that do not include a mixture of retail, housing, entertainment, and light industrial spaces as well as parks and open public spaces—create the conditions for extreme boredom. And the most vulnerable inhabitants are always people in their teens and twenties.

Ray Oldenburg finds that suburban ennui arises most clearly in the behavior of city-dwelling adolescents who find themselves visiting the suburbs:

[T]he visiting teenager in the subdivision soon acts like an animal in a cage. . . . There is no place to which they can escape and join their own kind. There is nothing for them to do on their own. There is nothing in the surroundings but the houses of strangers and nobody on the streets. Adults make a more successful adjustment, largely because they demand less. But few at any age find vitality in the housing developments. David Riesman . . . once attempted to describe the import of suburbia upon most of those who live there. "There would seem," he wrote, "to be an aimlessness, a pervasive low-keyed unpleasure." The word he

seemed averse to using is boring. A teenager would not have had to struggle for the right phrasing. (6)

This phenomenon might actually be something much worse than boredom, something Sean Desmond Healy calls hyperboredom. In *Boredom, Self, and Culture* Healy distinguishes between the two. Boredom is the kind of temporary restlessness that everyone experiences on occasion—kids on rainy Saturdays, people waiting in line, students suffering through lectures on MLA style. But Healy describes hyperboredom as “an aberration peculiar to mankind,” something “comparable to an agonizing and chronically painful disease” (10, 28). In a state of hyperboredom, “all people, objects, relations, and activities are permanently, and it seems unaccountably, stripped of interest, and . . . the search for anything of interest itself appears utterly uninteresting, worthless, or totally ineffective” (44). “Hyperboredom is the escalating apprehension of the void; the nihilism of the masses; the largely unconscious, unacknowledged sense that the bottom has fallen out of the world” (92).

At the root of hyperboredom is the misconception that self and world are separate, and as long as a “self/world dichotomy is maintained,” hyperboredom isn’t going to go away (Healy 65). As Maturana and Varela have written, “every act of knowing brings forth a world” (*Tree of Knowledge* 26); action and cognition are always interembedded and inseparable. But hyperboredom happens when we forget this—or, more precisely, when we spend our lives living in places that were designed without our needs in mind: our need to feel attached to a place; our need to be able to find economic, cultural, and spiritual sustenance without driving long distances; our need to see what is good about ourselves reflected in the places we spend our lives in.

When humans were more preoccupied with the daily need to survive, hyperboredom did not exist: “With one’s nose close to the soil . . . there is no room for hyperboredom. There is no alternative, no other realm of possibility; every grain of rice, every drop of water, every drain or saving of energy has meaning, significance, importance. Life may be appallingly hard, often boring, but never hyperboring” (Healy 65–66). A hyperbored culture on the other hand no longer finds its local physical universe com-

PELLING—and, so long as the self is understood to be detached from that universe, attempts at cultivating self-worth and finding meaning within one’s home territories are going to be thwarted.

The violence, boredom, and depression running through my students’ narratives are never removed from the formal conditions of their local environments. In a “town” like Mike’s, where the residential areas are kept separate from commercial zones, where one must rely on cars since cheap, efficient, and frequent public transportation is nonexistent, and where opportunities for people his age to creatively express and entertain themselves are almost nil, the resultant hyperboredom, or cynicism, or ennui—call it what you will—is not something these kids created but something they inherited. Certainly Mike’s disgust with himself at the close of his essay is understandable—by his own admission he did squander a healthy chunk of his high school years. But more tragic is the degree to which what passes for community is no more than a gathering of mildly desperate individuals where mindlessness and misery become inevitable. Middle class kids living in the suburbs self-medicate and purge after-hours in the no-places of strip mall parking lots. Urban kids experience the same thing, only the threat of violence and the level of desperation for so many of them can be considerably higher, due in no small part to the fact that people in such communities are prevented from owning property—for, if the sense of displacement underlying the malaise in Mike’s world is palpable, how much more so for people who don’t even have twenty square feet of backyard to work with, and who can only design their interior spaces in accordance with apartment regulations and building codes.

Educators have a responsibility to help students resist the cynicism and hyperboredom of contemporary, consumer culture by discovering the kind of self-worth that comes from being amazed at one’s local worlds. But to do this we must first learn all we can about the environments our students live in, day after day, and give them opportunities to testify about what is wrong and what is good about those worlds, what they think should and shouldn’t be changed, and we must provide them with a vocabulary with which they might critique their environments

and develop an awareness of what exactly it is about one's environment that can make a person miserable, bored, angry, tired, scared, depressed. Without this fundamental awareness of why places are the way they are, and why they have these effects upon us, it will be difficult to imagine ways of reconstructing them.

An Out of Place Profession

In one of her lectures, Gertrude Stein said that Americans "are abstract and cruel," having "no close contact with the earth such as most Europeans have. Their materialism is not the materialism of existence, of possession, it is the materialism of action and abstraction" (72). If abstraction and cruelty are closely related, then the academy fosters its own peculiar brand of meanness. For while place surely matters in the academy, it tends to do so in the form of various real estate battles associated with the acquisition and preservation of institutional power. The local places that students and staff and faculty go home to after leaving the university behind remain largely invisible, supposedly unrelated to the activity of the academy, despite mission statement rhetoric about serving community and helping students become responsible citizens. "Place" and "placement" are important academic issues—but place as power, as access, and always as defined in the academy's terms.

Students take placement tests so that they can be placed into programs that either stigmatize or reward them and which, in the case of the former, one might eventually place out of. In some institutions like mine, a limited number of slots are reserved for those students in "honors" programs, who have access to "honors" classes. While a "developmental writing" course and an "honors composition" course can be held back to back within the exact same classroom, the intellectual property value of that room fluctuates accordingly. The irony is that, regardless of the course taught, the room itself is drab and uninteresting. At their worst, such classrooms are advertising arenas: when I was a graduate student at a state university, the only decorative elements in the classrooms I taught in were advertisements for Citibank charge

cards and discount flights to Cancún, turning the classroom spaces into advertising environments used (for free) by corporations.

Faculty status can also be interpreted in terms of real estate, as academic rank is all about moving upwards into professional gated communities protected by tenure. An academic department is rarely a unified tribe but more often a piece of institutional property zoned for three different working classes. Increasingly, the majority of department members—adjuncts and graduate TAs—live in migrant camps, sharing office space semester by semester and having no voting rights in matters affecting the status of their positions in the departmental plantation. Junior faculty get to live in the main house, enjoying to some extent the fruits of the migrant laborers, but they too are still boarders, signing year-long leases. Senior faculty are permanent residents, some of whom have considerable say in determining which junior faculty must be forced out and which can be admitted to the upstairs level. But again the irony is that the actual physical spaces inhabited by the faculty are not much different; the migrant workers are crowded together in their offices in ways full-time faculty are not, but the offices are mostly still the same size, and everyone is subject to the environmental conditions of the building—which, if they are anything like the one I work in, fall short of meeting OSHA health regulations.

Institutional power and prestige are clearly matters of place. Administrators and faculty continually jostle for more desirable campus real estate, always at a premium, and they are ever aware of the status (or lack thereof) that comes with office location. Academic labor is a matter of place, as those at the top of the administrative food chain get the largest and most lavish offices, while adjuncts and staff get the windowless cubicles. At a predominantly commuter campus like mine, transportation is a daily struggle over place: on the way to and from work students, faculty, staff, and administrators fight their way through traffic, competing for a better space in a faster lane on the expressway, and, until recently when a new parking garage was added, if they arrived on campus too late in the day (i.e. after 8:30 A.M.), all except those with reserved parking spots often had to literally wait in lines for parking spaces, sometimes for as long as fifteen

minutes. Those who use mass transit spend their time standing on crowded buses and trains.

Yet, while place matters in the abstract as an agent for preserving and denying power, an even larger problem is the fact that the significance of place does not factor into the design of either the campus or the university's various curricula. College campuses—even the ones with sprawling lawns, the obligatory ivy, immaculate landscaping—evolve with little or no attention paid to ways in which the architecture and landscape reflect or instill cohesiveness among different departments and offices. And curriculum, which at least in theory is the intellectual glue of the academic institution, is ethereal, abstract, and detached from the local universe of surrounding neighborhoods, from the students' and employees' neighborhoods, and from the campus itself.

In *Place and Placelessness* Edward Relph, referring to the placelessness one finds in the development of suburban and urban fringe, defines "subtopia" as "a set of apparently randomly located points and areas, each of which serves a single purpose and each of which is isolated from its setting, linked only by roads which are themselves isolated from the surrounding townscape except for the adjacent strips of other-directed buildings" (109). This is exactly what we have in the college campus, where departments, libraries, and administrative offices are arranged without any logical connection to each other. The result is an arbitrarily designed campus instead of a network of offices and meeting places arranged to further cross-disciplinary communication and collaboration.

More problematic than the physical layout of any campus are our placeless curricula, the existence of which Eric Zencey traces to the academy's insistence on hiring only members of a cosmopolitan professoriate. In his essay "The Rootless Professors," Zencey attacks the academy for promoting an insidious antilocalism, with dire effects.

As citizens of the *cosmo polis*, the mythical "world city," professors are expected to owe no allegiance to geographical territory; we're supposed to belong to the boundless world of books and ideas and eternal truths, not the infinitely particular world of watersheds, growing seasons, and ecological niches. Most pro-

fessors get their jobs through national searches, and while we may have our preferences for specific regions of the country, most of us are living wherever we could find work. (15)

Faculty are deemed best suited to their jobs when they are aliens and strangers who, Clint Eastwood-like, ride into the university from parts unknown, from places deemed exotic because they are anywhere but "here." Though the majority of American college students attend institutions in their home states, they are taught, by and large, by cosmopolites, a class of transient exotics. "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" (Zencey 16).

In response Zencey calls for a shift toward "rooted education," which would require an end to the academy's discrimination against locals, allowing them instead a greater role in the shaping of curricula, as well as turning the landscapes and communities surrounding the campus into laboratories, and enabling faculty to make a concentrated effort to work within regional organizations as forums for discussing "a curriculum rooted in locale . . . rather than being a political alternative to or a pale reflection of the agenda of the national organizations" (19). This approach is not to be confused with "multicultural inclusiveness," which "tends to perpetuate a politics of placeless identity rather than a politics of rootedness in place" (17). Indeed, the academy's embrace of multiculturalism is often distinctly anti-indigenous. In *Victims of Progress* John Bodley argues that what indigenous peoples share first and foremost is an identification with the land that is fundamentally different from that understood by consumer peoples. Bodley quotes a member of an indigenous tribe: "What most unites us is the defense of our land. The land has never been merchandise for us, as it is with capitalism, but it is the support for our cultural universe" (167). In contrast, industrial civilizations are "cultures of consumption" where "standard of living [is measured] in terms of levels of material consumption" (4). In other words, the basis of "indigenous culture" is a cultivated knowledge of the facticity of the local physical universe. Implicit

unique: creating a space where students write and share stories about where they live, a space where they might come to see ways in which their needs and desires reflect the condition of those communities, and, hopefully, begin to think of their local environments not as separate, incidental landscapes but as extensions of themselves. (And for those students who choose a service-learning option—see “Service-Learning Project” in Appendix B—there are opportunities for them to further realize the role they can play in the ongoing construction of those communities.)

Yet for all its simplicity, I’m convinced that this kind of inquiry into one’s local surroundings is precisely the kind of exercise that has to happen in a variety of courses, within and outside of English studies, if we are ever to begin thinking of ourselves within the context of sustainability. As educators we pride ourselves on teaching something called critical thinking, but often at the cost of promoting local thinking. “Higher” learning aims upward, away from the mundane, the everyday, the provincial. We see this represented literally in the number of colleges and universities intentionally built on hills rising above surrounding communities. What we need more of is *lower* learning, thinking that keeps bringing us back to the local conditions of the communities that we and our students return to once we leave the classroom.

In *The Power of Place: How Our Surroundings Shape Our Thoughts, Emotions, and Actions*, Winifred Gallagher documents how geomagnetic fields and tectonic strains might account for the blackouts, electrical disruptions, and mass sightings typically associated with UFO experiences and with religious visions reported at sacred sites (79–98). Unfortunately, people find imaginative stories about alien visitations more captivating than the mystery of strange geophysical forces beneath their feet. Similarly, I don’t think it’s too much of a stretch to call a sizeable portion of academic publications, removed as they are from “local matters,” cerebral distant cousins of the Elvis-on-a-UFO discourse published in tabloids. Ellen Cushman levels a related critique, directed particularly at scholars of cultural studies whose work never makes any visceral impact within the populations of local at-risk neighborhoods:

within that culture is a stewardship of “the land,” maintaining a balance of bioregional relationships. The academy, in contrast, seeks cultural and ethnic diversification separate from identification with any local landscape. How could the inherently anti-indigenous university promote cross-cultural awareness when place has been taken out of the equation?

Unfortunately Zencey’s insightful critique is too simplistic—would that the problem before us were just a matter of turning more towards local talent and incorporating local communities into the curriculum. But in recent years the academy has indicated that it is not just against local scholars but against full-time faculty in general. With this in mind, the irony of Zencey’s critique is that, given the outsourcing of full-time positions to part-time adjuncts, we now have more local instructors than ever before. The influence of such faculty on shaping the curriculum in any substantive way is minimal at best, however, since these are people whom the university has failed to invest in by paying them decent salaries or giving them benefits, let alone private offices with phones and computers. Because their influence cannot extend beyond the (overcrowded) classes they teach—adjuncts and TAs almost never serve on committees and, given their semester-by-semester status, have no long-term impact on curricular reform—whatever local talent exists in the academy is not just severely uncompensated for its labor, but largely untapped, ignored, and unsupported.

I know that when I have my students investigate the places where they live, and explore why their homes make them feel the way they do, I am not necessarily helping them lead sustainable lives, nor am I doing much to counteract the university’s dismissal of the local. After all, there are more than eighteen thousand students in my university alone, and only twenty-five in each of my writing courses, where we spend just three or four weeks writing and discussing the places that matter to them. I know that such written testimonies need to be conducted within a continual, cross-disciplinary investigation into the relationships between self and place, far beyond my own attempts at giving students opportunities to imagine better communities (see the “Eutopia” assignment sequence in my course assignment packet in Appendix B). What I’ve done is admittedly simple and hardly

I'm not asking for composition teachers to march into the homes, churches, community centers, and schools of their community. I'm not asking for us to become social workers either. I am asking for a deeper consideration of the civic purpose of our positions in the academy, of what we do with our knowledge, for whom, and by what means. I am asking for a shift in our critical focus away from our own navel, Madonna, and cereal boxes to the ways in which we can begin to locate ourselves within the democratic process of everyday teaching and learning in our neighborhoods. (12)

What Cushman is asking of us—to self-consciously locate ourselves within the local worlds of our students' neighborhoods and explore ways of making them more livable—is an essential component of a pedagogy of sustainability. The composition classroom lends itself remarkably well to sharing and exploring such narratives. When students tell stories about the failings and the attributes of their neighborhoods, and the psychological, economic, cultural, and spiritual effects these places have on them, the classroom arena has the potential to become decidedly local. Such classroom spaces let students know that the status of their communities is not something beyond the proper domain of the academy, but a vital part of the curriculum. Certainly, telling tales about one's town or neighborhood and what's good or bad about it is only a first step towards fulfilling the objectives of a sustainable pedagogy. Ideally such introspection and critique would evolve into extended service-learning and research projects throughout the curriculum, aimed at sustainable renewal and community revitalization. But a first step is to create sustained classroom spaces where students can think critically about the past, present, and future of their communities, and where we not only listen to these narratives but also imagine ways in which our pedagogies and curricula can facilitate the redesigning, the revitalization, and the preservation of these local environments.

Work

Our epoch has been called the century of work. It is in fact the century of pain, misery and corruption.

PAUL LAFARGUE, *The Right to Be Lazy*

In *Teaching Composition as a Social Process*, Bruce McComiskey writes: "Most writing teachers agree that their courses prepare students for 'life' in the 'real world,' but few teachers have theorized what sort of 'life' they wish for their students, and even fewer describe the condition of this 'real world.' Yet, these are crucial tasks that those in academia cannot ignore" (113). But the conditions of this "real world"—which, to a large extent, is another way of saying "the world of work"—are rarely confronted and critiqued anywhere in the curriculum. Considering our career centers, business curricula, and job fairs, as well as the language of mission statements about creating future leaders and professionals, such a claim might seem misplaced. But when we explore the facts about work, or, more precisely, the nature of what I call "workpain," the academy seems to be in a state of disinterest and denial. This turning away is evident in English studies, which continues to take money from increasing numbers of graduate students who, after being exploited as cheap labor while training as scholars, critics, and would-be professors, are paid back with advanced degrees that, in an age of academic downsizing, are of questionable value. Much of the "crisis" in English studies comes down to our failure to help the students who pay our salaries get decent work. But even in the sciences and technology-oriented disciplines—academic arenas with better track records in placing their students in "desirable" careers—scant attention is paid to the miserable reality that too often passes