The Neighborhood Narratives Project:
An Exploration of New Media Technologies

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"when you go back to Sicily
visit my home in Borgetto
it would be my pride and joy
go, embrace my mother for me

I was born in that house
All my feelings are there
All my memories are of that place
And our little piece of land –
My brother will take you to see it
We have vineyards and orange groves. . .

My mother will give you
A jar of our best olives
We'll share it back in America
We'll have a lot to talk about. . ."

From the poem, "What Pasquale wrote me. . ."
In ***Vanzetti's Fishcart*** by Justin Vitiello

Place, according to Yi Fu Tuan (1977) combines a sense of position within society and a sense of identity with a spatial location. As in Pasquale's lament, places have historically been viewed as physical sites, with natural and emotional endowments that speak to the limits of human freedom. New media technologies provide an additional prism from which to view place.

In one way of thinking, place does not have a particular geographical scale; anywhere and everywhere, it results from 'fields of care' and emotional investments. According to Tuan (1977), space is formless and profane except for the sites that stand out because spirits are believed to dwell in them — *spiritual, sacred places*. Natural endowments (climate, topography, etc) modified by successive generations of human activity give a place *personality*. *Sense of place* is borne out of the senses – seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, and tasting. By this way of thinking, neighborhoods are places. They are sacred and hold the stories of spirits, they have personality, and they are experienced by the senses.

Both the old and new technologies of communication strive to capture this emotive, phenomenological conception of place. But for persons interested in new media, places/neighborhoods are more than the nostalgia and longing that Pasquale has for his Borghetto. They are infinitely more complex. The neighborhoods created by new media rely not as much on experience and physical proximity as on the social experience of being connected in a virtual sense. Media artists create a new form of information narrative — one that relies on data to describe the world we live in. The primal, nostalgic sites of longing and loss are overlain with the dialectics of experience, culture, politics, and economics but they are also overlain with a story provided by data from new media. Accordingly, contemporary places are assemblages of technology that rest on a foundation of the past and the present at the same time. It is this simultaneity of locatedness that fascinates and challenges media artists and persons interested in these new technologies.

Despite their seeming simplicity; location, place, and neighborhood (both physical and virtual) are typically thought of as departure points or neutral containers for whatever is built upon them. The technological method of reference via new media is a departure from the experiential method of reference via humanism. Accordingly, any account of location, place, and neighborhood is grounded and tied to a particular disciplinary foundation. All provide a framework in which the analytic and descriptive use of spatial and topological notions can be guided and better understood.

Place, space, and location as situated sites constitute and are constituted by the stories people tell. Neighborhoods

yield themselves to the interpretations and readings of the individuals who traverse them. They are always contested and annotated. What we see is but one layer.

Location aware media technologies raise many concerns about the significance of these privileged concepts like place, space, and location. Unlike other media, particularly visual media such as film, photography, television, etc. which claim to offer a lens through which we can interpret and understand social life; new location aware media make it possible to attach invisible notes to spaces, place, people and neighborhoods. While it does not necessarily produce the placelessness or location neutrality that many claim, it derives its sense of purpose by enveloping the viewer/user and demanding active participation in unearthing the layers of social life that occupy a space and reveal the complex historical, cultural, socio-political and economic contexts that affect location specific interactions.

In this paper we discuss the Neighborhood Narrative (NN) project and its contribution to understanding the problematics around location. Although the new media technologies do not capture the spirit, personality and sense of place of Vietiello's Pasquale, the new media technologies confer on places and spaces a data narrative and a scientific reflection of the world. They unearth a Foucaultian-like archaeology of place, space, and location and rather than merely "following the contours of location specific variables" they instead offer a 'narrative' path to understanding the philosophical and psychosocial aspects of public/private, physical and mediated, local/global relations. Tuters and Varnelis claim the new media technologies have the potential to re-configure everyday life by overlaying a second virtual world over the physical one.

In NN, the urban landscape is a canvas where analogue and digital media, text, sound, and image are applied to real places in order to document the defineable aspects of places that make up their essence and trigger authentic engagement. The goal is to create a set of site specific annotations; such as sound maps, community histories augmented by web sites, audio interviews authored and distributed over the cell phone, site-specific installations that integrate radio and other communications technology, scavenger hunts along with many other types of combinations that when connected would produce a neighborhood narrative. This varied system of urban annotation closely tracks the everyday life of the city. The process encourages participants to combine the skills of the storyteller, the grounded narration by imagination, with the mobile observer of the city who brings a broad overview. Thus NN explores key technologies, ideas, applications, poetics, and humanisms that are shaping the emerging geoweb of spaces and places, and the locational specificities that inform and shape them now and in the future.

Unlike the "sociological, anthropological, political, economic, or cultural perspectives, the new media "deploy spatial and topological notions" to question and demystify discourses of knowledge and power. These new media not so much maintain our connection with a lost place through particulars but they bring the lost place into co-existence with the present. More importantly, they create experiences that defy traditional notions of past, present, or future, and instead embrace the possibility of being in more than one place at the same time or the possibility of different places being experienced in one location. Thus Pasquale's Borghetto is not a place that no longer exists, it may also be an experience that no longer exists.

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