On Locative Narrative[21]

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William Gibson's *Spook Country* is the second of his novels to address the post 9/11 era, set "in the same universe" as *Pattern Recognition*, but with a particular focus on the culture of security, multinational crime syndicates, and the rise of geospatial technologies (see Chang, "Q&A: William Gibson"). The freelance journalist Hollis Henry has been sent to Los Angeles by the up-and-coming *Node* magazine—backed by advertising mogul Hubertus Bigend, a central figure in Gibson's earlier novel—to write an article about artistic uses of locative media, her celebrity status as a former indie-rock singer eventually granting her access to the elusive GPS-expert Bobby Chombo, whose is himself the link to a mysterious shipping container. As with much of Gibson's writing, the wondrous encounter of brave new techno-landscapes, once "cyberspace" and now the mixed reality produced by locative media, is at the heart of the text:

> Hollis put the visor on. She could see through it, though only dimly. She looked toward the corner of Clark and Sunset, making out the marquee of the Whiskey [*sic*]. Alberto reached out and gently fumbled with a cable, at the side of the visor…. "This way," he said, leading her along the sidewalk to a low, windowless, black-painted façade. She squinted up at the sign. The Viper Room. "Now," he said, and she heard him tap the laptop's keyboard. Something shivered, in her field of vision. "Look. Look here." She turned, following his gesture, and saw a slender, dark-haired body, facedown on the sidewalk. "Alloween night, 1993," said Odile. Hollis approached the body. That wasn't there. But was. (*Spook Country* 7-8)

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Somewhat reminiscent of the "holonovels" evocatively narrated at the opening of Janet Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck*—3D simulations running on board a 24th century starship in *Star Trek: Voyager*—and Gibson presents a version of the same fantasy, which is imaginative transport into a parallel world. The difference, of course, is that the virtual scene of River Phoenix's death on Halloween night is paradoxically grounded in the physical setting of Sunset Boulevard: neither purely virtual nor purely real, the actor's body is not present and yet is. Gibson is thus at once sketching a picture of invisible (or virtual) geographic annotation—"spatially tagged hypermedia," "the artist annotating every centimeter of a place, of every physical thing" (22)—and mixed reality, the blending of the real and the virtual such that neither can be stabilized as ontologically discrete.

While rich with possibility, what is notable about the scene in front of the Viper Room is that it is an encounter with a dead body that is not reanimated even within the space of fantasy. Moreover, the sensory engagement with a parallel world is almost strictly visual, though the character's perspective is uncertain rather than omniscient or secured. In this sense, the artist's scene is spatially and temporally fixed; it is a synchronic slice, its momentary quality linking it to portraiture rather than theatrical performance. However, it is narratological insofar as plot itself can be simultaneous as well as progressive, that stories have volume and depth, and in that the element of surprise insures sequence. More precisely, this fictional locative artwork is narratological because, as David Herman explains, "narratives should be viewed not just as temporally structured communicative acts but also as systems of verbal or visual prompts anchored in mental models having a particular spatial structure" (*Story Logic* 264).[22] What the River Phoenix scene lacks, though, is interactivity in the sense of a feedback loop or bi-directional channel between the real and virtual worlds, between the street as it is lived and experienced in real time and the street as it is imaginatively and immersively experienced with a head-mounted display. In the fantasy from Murray's Holodeck, this encounter takes the form of a kiss. There is something powerful, though, about preserving an external perspective, a spectatorial position, vis-à-vis the past, about the preservation of the past as past as opposed to re-animating it as fantasy in the form of genre fiction, the usual mode of simu-

[22] Herman, along with Porter Abbott and Gabriel Zoran, have from different perspectives helpfully articulated what we might call a general account of spatio-temporal form in literature. See Zoran, "Towards a Theory of Space in Narrative" and Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*.

lated worlds.[23] History in this context is not pure spectacle; rather it is both traumatic and ordinary. In this sense, Gibson's sketch of a virtual Sunset Boulevard provides a useful lens through which to view the actual locative narratives of our moment, a time when artistic and civilian use of geographic coordinates grows ever more common.

The broad technological context for Gibson's novel is that of the "disappearing computer": the gradual diminishing of screen-based and Internet-based media arts practices and the rise of location and context-aware computing; mixed reality gaming; haptic interfaces; and technologically inflected social sculptures.[24] There are two conceptual poles for research and artistic production in this field, which is generally known as pervasive computing or ubiquitous computing ("everyware"): one concerning participatory, user-driven projects that pose questions about subjectivity, inter-subjectivity, phenomenology, and affect; the other pole concerning issues of urban informatics, the sentient city, spychips, and the Internet of Things.[25] These two poles of artistic production, which roughly correspond to the human and post-human, are by no means mutually exclusive and, indeed, locative media practices often allow for an investigation of the relations between them. What, though, are locative media?

The name comes from a workshop hosted by a Latvian media arts center (2002) and is said to derive from the locative noun case indicating position in Balto-Slavic languages (akin to English pronouns 'in', 'by' and 'on'). The practice, on the other hand, emerges from the recent convergence between site-specific, conceptual, participatory, and land art practices and the widespread use of functional global location data. Completed by the US Department of Defense in 1994, the Global Positioning System (GPS) satellite constellation uses trilateration to calculate latitude, longitude and altitude.[26] After Selective Availability

[23] Building on Espen Aarseth's typological analysis of user perspective, Marie-Laure Ryan articulates a difference between internal and external interactivity with respect to digitally produced fictional worlds. In the former, the user experiences the fictional world from a first-person perspective, traditionally through processes of identification, while in the latter, the user adopts a perspective external to the fictional world and experiences it not as a character but as an observer ("Beyond Myth and Metaphor").

[24] See EU initiative, The Disappearing Computer, <http://www.disappearing-computer.net/>.

[25] For commentary on the "modern city as a haze of software instructions," see Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift, *Cities: Reimagining the Urban*, 125. On urban computing and sentient cities more specifically, see Mike Crang and Stephen Graham, "Sentient Cities"; Malcolm McCullough, "New Media Urbanism"; and Adam Greenfield and Mark Shepard, *Urban Computing and Its Discontents*. Also see the International Telecommunication Union's *ITU Internet Reports 2005: The Internet of Things*.

[26] For a more detailed history, see <http://gps.faa.gov>.

was discontinued in 2000 and signal errors eliminated, civilians could receive non-degraded signals globally and calculate location to within approximately 10 meters (down from 100 meters).[27] Paul Virilio called a watch fitted with a GPS receiver the "event of the decade" in 1995 (*Art of the Motor* 155), and indeed the advent of single-chip receivers and the development of handheld devices with GPS capability have dramatically changed our technological landscape as well as our understanding of location. In 1999, Ben Russell's foundational "Headmap Manifesto" outlined the media arts practice that was to emerge after the cancellation of Selective Availability by President Clinton's executive order: "location-aware, networked mobile devices make possible invisible notes attached to spaces, places, people and things…/Real space can be marked and demarcated invisibly/What was once the sole preserve of builders, architects and engineers falls into the hands of everyone: the ability to shape and organize the real world and the real space." What Russell describes in these lines is the now-widespread practice of geo-tagging and geo-annotation, working with, in Gibson's terms, the "cartographic attributes of the invisible" (*Spook Country* 22).

The more ubiquitous geo-annotation practices tend to use mobile telephony and wireless networks rather than GPS (as GPS-enabled mobile devices have become more common, this will no doubt change, even if wireless might be preferable for dense urban settings where building heights interfere with the line of sight). In 2003, CFC Media Lab in Toronto began an audio documentary project called *[murmur]* to annotate specific geographic locations with individual stories and memories about the chosen sites. First based in the Kensington Market area, *[murmur]* has expanded to include other neighborhoods in Toronto and parts of Calgary, Dublin, Edinburgh, and San Jose, its participants helping to compile an archive of stories of the everyday, spoken-word recordings that are then delivered to mobile phones in response to a text message. As the project designers explain, "it's [user-generated] history from the ground up, told by the voices that are often overlooked when the stories of cities are told. We know about the skyscrapers, sports stadiums and landmarks, but *[murmur]* looks for the intimate, neighbourhood-level voices that tell the day-to-day stories that

[27] This is not to say that the system is open and non-regulated. In his first term, President Bush asked for, and we can assume received, plans for a GPS shutdown during a hypothetical state of emergency, to prevent "terrorist use" of the US network of GPS satellites. In other words, its information architecture remains fairly centralized. That said, GPS has made media arts practices possible in rural spaces (where there is no telecommunications hardware in the landscape). See Bridis, "White House wants plans for GPS shutdown."

make up a city" (<http://sanjose.murmur.info/about.php>). *[murmur]* suggests whispering voices—its physical tags are appropriately enough green ears—and it suggests underground information, the street signs designed partly to compete with the guerrilla marketing campaigns that are becoming increasingly prominent in urban areas. Similarly, for the massively authored artistic project (MAAP) entitled *Yellow Arrow* (2004-), participants generate poems or chunks of text keyed to individual yellow stickers; readers who locate the stickers then text the given number to receive the message (<http://yellowarrow.net/v3/>). On Kearny at Clay in San Francisco, for example, user Chrixxx has tagged the "Scenic Drive" sign: "A relic of the auto age. Out of place in the density."[28] The tags for projects such as these are often invisible to the unschooled eye on the streets, green ears or yellow arrows indicating the presence of virtual graffiti, but rendered visible through conventional mapping techniques, whether they be hand-drawn or digitally produced (the aforementioned green ears). Projects such as these gesture toward a cartography of the intimate and the quotidian, with users navigating the landscape *via* a subjective atlas or "deep map" that renders the ephemeral monumental.

Unlike commercial applications such as GeoGraffiti and Socialight, the point is not to share consumer information about where to buy a cup of coffee but to contribute to a collaborative archive of oral and local histories, histories that are embedded, situated, in place and time.[29] As one *[murmur]* designer describes the rationale: "Secret histories [are] unearthed, private truths unveiled and tales as diverse as the city itself are discovered and shared" (Sawhney, "*[murmur]*"). Zooming out from projects such as these and extrapolating from the present into a fully encoded future, one where no truths remain private and no space remains untagged, Kazys Varnelis and Anne Friedberg remark: "Given a geocoded, Wikipedia-like interface, it is possible to imagine the entire world annotated with histories, becoming as Freud once wrote of the mind in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, a place 'in which nothing once constructed had perished, and all the earlier stages of development had survived alongside the latest'" ("Place" 35). Just as the disciplinary society records every gesture as

[28] Photographic documentation available from <http://www.flickr.com/photos/yellowarrow/2396160385/in/set-72157606727415217/>.

[29] With the GeoGraffiti tool, users post or access voice notes while at a specific physical location; local, user-generated information). Socialight is a social networking service optimized for mobile use; again, users can leave sticky notes in specific places. The difference between the two is that Socialight pushes information based on user location. Because they both rely on user-generated content, the databases are fairly sparse. See <http://geograffiti.com> and <http://socialight.com>.

evidentiary, such that every move, every external manifestation of an internal will, can be calculated and assessed, the current doxa tends toward complete information mapping, the marking up of the physical world at every scale, micro to macro. Here we can update Paul Virilio's account of the networked battlefield as a paradigmatic instance of optical command and control; it is not a "general system of illumination" but a general system of annotation "that will allow everything to be seen and known, at every moment and in every place" (*War and Cinema* 4).

In some sense both the fictional locative work in *Spook Country* and global art projects such as *[murmur]* offer their audiences a history of place, and it is not accidental that the impetus tends to be the recording of human and non-human events (such as floods or storms) in a given location. One can certainly see why geo-annotation would gravitate toward sites weighted with historical content such as grave markers and monuments and foreground narratives of loss. Here we might reference the second locative work in Gibson's novel: a grid of white crosses, a continually updated monument of American fatalities in Iraq. Locative media, then, seems to have at its core a drive toward memorialization, not a strict recovery but a remembering of the past. Metaphors of mining are prevalent—histories are "discovered" and "unearthed"—so as to present an archaeology of place. But archaeology here is not limited to the human; rather it accounts for the symbiotic, or ecological, relation between people and place. An illustrative example of locative media as an archaeology of place is Paula Levine's *Mediascape: Land & History* (2005), a GPS-controlled narrative walk that explored the "forgotten cultural and environmental history" of the Market district in San Francisco, remembering the indigenous peoples who once lived there, the lost natural environment of marshes, wetlands and ocean and all of the accompanying natural habitats (see <http://newmediafix.net/daily/?p=680>). An archaeology of place unfolds or reveals a history, but it also situates the past as co-inhabitant with, rather than precursor to, the present.

My essay revolves around two locative narrative works that participate in the practice of narrative archaeology so as to respond to the economic geographies of the 21st-century city, but through a specifically literary register: the first, J.R. Carpenter's web-based writing project *in absentia*, addresses the neoliberal reorganization of the city of Montreal, more specifically gentrification and the transfer of public space to private owners in the Mile End neighborhood. *In absentia* uses the Google Maps application programming interface and keys

narrative bits to particular locations on the map. Part fictionalized memoir, part textual sampling, and part user-generated content, it manifests a pronounced collage aesthetic both in form and in content. The second work I address in this essay is Jeremy Hight, Jeff Knowlton, and Naomi Spellman's *34 North by 118 West* (2002), situated in the post-industrial rail yards of downtown Los Angeles. Users (at once readers and actants) were organized in groups of 3-5 people and equipped with headphones, a GPS receiver and tablet PC displaying a map of the Santa Fe Railroad depot that formerly occupied the site. They were then instructed to walk to hotspots that triggered narrative fragments spoken by voice actors. There is a long-term tradition of sited and mobile narrative—indeed one could think of the religious practices developed around the Stations of the Cross and the design of pre-modern cathedrals, not to mention twentieth-century art performances such as Janet Cardiff's *Missing Voice*—but *34N118W* is the first GPS-enabled narrative and in this sense the first of this still-nascent genre.

in absentia and *34N118W* are linked by theme and context (the reorganization of urban space), genre (literary historiography), and practice (site-specificity). But they also share an articulation of place that is not reductively material. In other words, the idea and image of the city that emerges from these works is thoroughly hybridized, social, communal, and networked; it is at once actual and virtual. To pursue this point, we might also think about locative narratives as engaged in the project of representing space as it is lived and experienced. While practically sited in concrete or material space, e.g. a former railyard, they also endeavor to represent "spatial events," "events that take place in time and space, where the event is characterized by its *duration*, *intensity*, *volatility*, and *location*" (Batty, "Thinking about Cities as Spatial Events" 1). As we will see, then, both *in absentia* and *34N118W* are engaged with processes of decay and urban renewal, with patterns of use, and with city spaces in flux. Moreover, these two locative works invite us to think about the implications of spatialized narrative for narrative. Treating the map as a space for inscription with hot spots or trigger points for the narrative fragments literalizes the notion of navigable text, offering, as Jeremy Hight suggests, "multiple non-linear experiences and informational narratives in a [prescribed] space" ("Views from Above" 3). The thematic and aesthetic aims of early hypertext and cybertext, which place a premium on non-linearity and the notion of reading as physical action, are thus in some sense

finally realized with readers equipped with mobile media devices and invited to navigate portions of the city.[30] As much locative media tends toward gaming paradigms and various modes of multi-sensorial engagement, it is worthwhile to think further about the as-yet-unfulfilled potential of these media for literary production. Such speculation need not involve naïve techno-boosterism, nor need it involve a new theory of narrative. Rather, one need only think, with Marie-Laure Ryan and others, in terms of transmedial narratology, that which preserves the essential kernel of narrative—sequentiality and story—across different media platforms (see *Avatars of Story*). Thus, an important difference between the locative commons (as it is constituted by geo-annotative practices) and locative narrative is that the latter allows for the authorial implementation of the conventional control structures of narrative: sequence and repetition. *in absentia* invites contributions but the narrative voice is clearly scripted and woven throughout the many lexia that annotate particular sites on the cartographic interface. Locative narrative, then, is particularly well positioned for the literary work of imaginative transport that necessarily preserves the gap between here (the physical space of the reader) and there (the fictional world).

At this stage, we can introduce a further layer to the discussion of the potential of locative narrative with a complication of the framing question: what are the cultural, artistic, and literary possibilities of locative narrative specifically in light of the doubts that have been raised about the capacity of locative media itself to resist capture by military, commercial, and policing operations? Such skepticism has been voiced most clearly by Andreas Broeckmann, who argues that the locative media movement is "something of an avantgarde of the 'society of control'" (cited in Graham, "Exhibiting Locative Media"). How might we recuperate or defend this arts practice in response to such a charge? First, we need to engage its critical assumptions. What lies behind and indeed authorizes such an argument as Broeckmann's is a philosophical critique of the instrumental rationality of GPS and GIS. Brian Holmes pushes further to elaborate on the global communications network as a "hyper-rationalist grid of imperial infrastructure": "a Cartesian worldview has been built into the computerized technology of graphic [geographic?] information systems], which are undergirded by megaprojects of military origin, or…'imperial infrastructure'" ("A Reply to Coco Fusco"). Moreover, he argues, "the questions of social subversion and psy-

[30] Kate Armstrong draws a similar connection in "Data and Narrative: Location Aware Fiction."

chic conditioning are wide open, unanswered, seemingly lost to our minds, in an era when civil society has been integrated to the military architecture of digital media" ("Drifting Through the Grid"). So, too, Jordan Crandall has powerfully and persuasively followed that critical trajectory outlined by Paul Virilio to comment on "armed vision": the targeting perspective produced by the "new surveillance and location-aware navigational technologies" ("Operational Media").

To follow this line of thought, perspective is embedded into the very transmission of signals, which were only recently purposely degraded in the interests of U.S. national security. The visualizations produced by what we might call embedded signals—such as Google Earth—build an interpretation; they begin from a certain perspective. As we well know, the killer app for GPS is literally that: missile guidance. Historical and geographic knowledge can be produced from a number of different perspectives and positions, but the overarching frame, the imperial infrastructure, the ideology that structures the image, remains the same. This embedded perspective has produced what Judith Butler has in another context called "not seeing in the midst of seeing," our blindedness to the forcible frame ("Photography, War, Outrage" 826). Signal, receiver, and interface all at once command and produce a perspective, a way of seeing, an interpretation, an inflection. Locative media, then, are embedded media, with clear ideological, political, and cultural framing (see Hemment, "The Locative Dystopia"). We must then ask: where are the pockets of resistance to this form of embedded media, the moments of disturbance or sites of interruption? If it is the case that locative media adopts the frame of military technologies, a militarized way of seeing, to what extent, and indeed how, can locative narrativize theorize or otherwise negotiate the forcible frame?

After the cancellation of Selective Availability, locative media has followed a familiar trajectory: shifting from military control to civilian use, from regulation by the professional industrial class to exuberant experimentation by amateur tinkerers. So, too, there has been a shift in the production of geographic knowledge, which is now both top-down and bottom-up. Examples of what is variously called tactical, radical, or counter-cartography include *The People's Atlas of Chicago*; Los Angeles Urban Rangers, *Malibu Public Beaches*; and the Counter-Cartographies Collective *Disorientation* guides to UNC Chapel Hill and Berkeley. In such exercises, use and function are clearly not first principles. Maps and mapping forms are appropriated so as to recognize and analyze structures of power and the new cartographic work aims to be "temporal, anti-monumental,

and easily reproducible" (Mogel, "On Cartography" 107). Counter-cartographies take many different forms but the endgame is an interrogation of geographic knowledge formulated strictly according to Euclidean conceptions of absolute space. To that end, they often encourage tailoring, tinkering, and customization so as to produce subjective rather than objective knowledges. One representative project is *PDPal* (2002-2004), in which users were invited to identify, annotate, and spatially tag particular locales, thus producing a personalized sense of place, a subjective view of the city, "your city, the city you write," the city "composed of the places *you* live, work, and remember" (Bleecker, Paterson, and Zurkow, *PDPal*). PDPal combines the annotative, the psychogeographic, and the phenomenological. Rather than using GPS, the calculus of rational, measurable cartography, and adopting what Stefano Boeri calls "zenith vision," that which presumes a single, neutral observer who adopts a line of sight on the horizon that freezes and flattens all before her into a calculable, two-dimensional frame, PDPal experiments with "the construction of relative, emotionally based maps" ("Eclectic Atlases" 117). More literally on this point is the BioMapping project, which uses Galvanic Skin Response devices that measure the affect of the wearer in relation to her geographic location. As with one implementation in San Francisco, "People re-explore their local area by walking the neighbourhood with the device and on their return a map is created which visualises points of high and low arousal" (Nold, *BioMapping*). In that affect and memory function as the metrics by which space and time are calculated, these annotative projects self-consciously profess to dissent from the spatial imaginaries and geographies produced by the use of GPS data and Cartesian mapping methods. Their objective, in other words, is to produce maps that reflect concrete or fixed space, while also attending to lived space, space as it is both conceptualized and produced by its inhabitants.

Such cartographic exercises endeavor to build what the Art Director for *[murmur]*, notes as "an entire, opposite, one-a-kind, popular mythology of a city at a citizen level" (Toman, "[[murmur]]"). "The target is to conceptualise how the perception of the city differs from participant to participant depending on their everyday habits" (Weskamp, "Habitat Perspectives"). We might note here that even the semiotics of the *[murmur]* interface are those of the hand-made, bottom-up production. Contributors choose sites that have deep psychic associations, such as childhood homes and other dwelling places, as well as those that are resolutely quotidian, and they often overlay the public with the

personal, tagging a civic space with an account of subjective experience of that space (as with a romantic encounter in a public square). Place is invested with affect in a project of "do-it-yourself urbanism," written in what one artist calls Psychogeographic Markup Language.[31] As is no doubt clear from the invocation of the discourse on psychogeography, projects such as those I have just outlined are ultimately about subjective mappings and individual histories. I would thus like to situate a difference between geospatial media projects concerned with individual subjects and those using locative techniques and technologies to create spaces and narratives held in common—in other words, which aim to articulate a collective, whether in the form of a city, a neighborhood, a commons, or even a social totality. There are two familiar critical touchstones here: Fredric Jameson's hopeful vision of a global cognitive mapping, which would "enable a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of a society's structures as a whole" (*Postmodernism* 51). Second, Alberto Melucci's commentary on "submerged" networking:

> What nourishes [collective action] is the daily production of alternative frameworks of meaning, on which the networks themselves are founded and live from day to day….This is because conflict takes place principally on symbolic grounds, by challenging and upsetting the dominant codes upon which social relationships are founded in high density informational systems. The mere existence of a symbolic challenge is in itself a method of unmasking the dominant codes, a different way of perceiving and naming the world. ("Social Movements and the Democratization of Everyday Life" 248).

But how much of a symbolic challenge does locative narrative present in the end? On this point, Alison Sant's dissertation research has been clear: "although many collaborative mapping projects undermine their own base maps by layering them with collectively defined concepts of space; including participants' emotions, itineraries and memories, these annotations are inextricably linked to the predefined foundations of the map they overlay." In other words, locative media artists too often overlook and thereby stabilize the base map, with its static and Cartesian construction of urban space. As she suggests, "the majority of them adopt the plan view instead of experimenting with alternate projections, such as the panoramic, horizontal, or three-dimensional perspectives that

[31] "With PML you can create/record your own experiences, you can use them at other times to alter your experience of space, and as such behaviour, and you can also share your library of PML data with friends" (Hou Je Bek, "Do-It-Yourself Urbanism").

Figure 1: J.R. Carpenter, ***in absentia***

would emphasize the subjective nature of the route ("Redefining the Basemap" 2). GPS drawing would in this regard be anathema, as would such publishing experiments as the recent Penguin-sponsored work by Charles Cumming, *The 21 Steps*, which uses Google Maps as the literal background for an interactive spy thriller based on John Buchan's *The 39 Steps*.

The preferable model for Sant and others is Guy Debord's *Naked City* because of its emphasis on the route, on dynamism, flow, movement, temporality. However different the two historical moments and contexts—and we should remember the difference—there are certain points of continuity between the Situationists and current locative media practices: in both there is shift away from a totalizing, omniscient, objective perspective, but neither completely surrenders to the view from below. Rather, perception seems to be comprised of the two perspectives (neither top down nor bottom up but a combination thereof). Moreover, just as we must think about Situationist practices as responses to the functional rationalization of modern capitalism, we must also think about locative media practices as responses to neoliberalism, the capsular society, and society of control. As compelling and necessary as counter-cartographic exercises and neo-Situationist paradigms might be, however, it might also be productive to re-consider navigation itself. In other words, why should we draw the line at a re-orientation of perspective, at the phenomenology of seeing, even at imagination? Why should we revive Situationist concepts in order to think about the post-industrial and post-welfare city? What if our most radical examples of walking in the city are not walking at all? I refer or course to parkour and street riding: the so-called extreme navigation of urban environments, the transgressing of physical obstacles (fences, planters, concrete dividers) with intense physicality and ingenuity. The passive lines of the *dérive* have surely given way to the gymnastics of tracing the line, perceiving and then constituting a path where none seemingly exists.

The charge that locative media is insufficiently attentive to, and thereby supportive of, its own "imperial infrastructure" communicates the persistent worry that artists do not have sufficient critical distance from the capitalist, technological, scientific, ideological systems within which they are working. In other words, to suggest that using GPS-enabled devices to produce art is necessarily to adopt a militarized logic and way of seeing is to rehash the old problem

of critical disinterest. The common assumption is that distance is necessary for critical reflection, that proximity necessarily produces corruption. But if we have learned anything from the Yes Men, and from tactical media practitioners more broadly, it is that critique and critical reflection are at their most powerful when they do not adopt a spectatorial position on the (putatively neutral) outside, when they do not merely sketch a surface, but penetrate the core of the system itself.[32] For this reason, I find compelling the increasingly frequent calls to use locative media to study matrices of production and distribution (see, for example, Tuters and Varnelis, "Beyond Locative Media"), a key example of which is Esther Polak and Ieva Auzina's MILK project, which maps the delivery and export routes of small-scale Latvian dairy farms. On the whole, I think we might recuperate locative narrative and defend the practice against the charge that it is the avant-garde of the society of control on the basis first of its investment in *and* articulation of relationality, intersubjectivity, and the participatory and second on the basis of its speculative imaginary, its reframing of place such that the present is defamiliarized and such that we understand place to be both actual and virtual, physical and networked. I read *in absentia* and *34N118W* as visualizations that diagnose, analyze, assess—in other words as counter-models of the present rather than utopian visions of the future.

J. R. Carpenter's *in absentia* (see figure 1), a serial fiction project that ran from June 24-November 30, 2008, asks: "What traces do people leave behind when they leave a place? What stories spring from their absence?" Motivated by the gentrification of the Mile End district in Montreal, Carpenter sets out to "haunt" the neighborhood with the stories of real and fictional tenants who have been unwillingly exiled from their former residences. Carpenter describes the urgency behind her writing:

> I'm drawn to the contradiction inherent in being in absence. In recent years many long-time low-income neighbours being forced out of Mile End by economically motivated decisions made their absence. So far fiction is the best way I've found to give voice these disappeared neighbours, and the web is the best place I've found to situate their stories. Our stories. My building is for sale; my family may be next. Faced with imminent eviction I've begun to write about the Mile End as if I'm no longer here, and to write about a Mile End that is no longer here. ("*in absentia* launch party")

[32] I make this case in *Tactical Media*.

The great irony of the project is that Dare-Dare, the art center that accepted the work, was itself evicted and the launch party held days before the center was forced to move. *In absentia* gives voice to the desire for dwelling in the context of forced mobility and the desire for public or shared place in the neoliberal moment of privatization. What, though, can we say about *in absentia* with regard to its use of the Google Maps API (with the critique of the artistic use of the base map in mind)? In my view, this is a paradigmatic instance of confronting urban planning on its own terrain and a site-specific engagement with the instruments and technologies of population management. Here Carpenter's framing of her text as an "interruption" of "a sterile satellite view of my neighbourhood" is particularly apposite (Carpenter, "IRQ: J. R. Carpenter"). Also, in the artistic renderings of the base map, particularly its pastiche effect, we are made aware that maps and interface alike are art material, tools, canvas; in other words, they are not necessarily stabilized as geographic truth. Rather, the map itself becomes a fictional object; the layers flattened in such a way that the base map is not the frame. In other words, the interface does not stabilize the map as locus of objective, geographic knowledge.

In that part of the content of *in absentia* is user-generated, we might read it in the context of collaborative and counter-cartographic projects that articulate community and produce maps held in common. *in absentia*, after all, is about a neighborhood and quite in sympathy with David Rokeby's proposal for a Neighborhood Markup Language (NML): "I decided to try and imagine a new kind of social frame, a way of reactivating the shared experience of public space, enabled by the properties of convergent devices." We could think, too, of *Urban Tapestries*, the "public knowledge commons" and collectively authored database of everyday life in the UK predicated upon a vision of what they call an "anthropology of ourselves" (Proboscis, *Urban Tapestries*).[33] This is true public space as Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* might envision it: people acting to create a world in common based on, or incorporating, differences. Locative narrative art practice can thus be read in terms of Nicolas Bourriaud's commentary on the "relational aesthetic": art situated within "the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and *private*

[33] User-generated databases of stories and photographs—"verbal, visual, and audio ephemera already tagged with a geographical coordinate" (West and Proboscis, *Urban Tapestries* 3)—often have a materially temporal aspect in that they record the status of property (dates of sale, purchase, closure, and loss, as well as processes of rehabilitation and degeneration); timetables and patterns of use (e.g. delivery schedules); festivals and celebrations.

symbolic space" (*Relational Aesthetics*, 14). If *PDPal*, for example, was about customization, building your own city, *in absentia* provides by way of contrast a synthesizing of individual contributions, a way of establishing community. What we see in it is an appropriation and overcoding of geospatial web with personal *and* communal affect, experience, and empathetic identifications.

A quick detour to describe another locative narrative will further emphasize the difference between a work that takes individualization as its foundational category and those that foreground relationality and sociality. Teri Rueb's *itinerant* (2005) is an interactive sound work based in Boston Commons, a "patchwork narrative" that stitches together excerpts from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and an untitled text written by Rueb. GPS tracks the user's movement as she walks throughout the Commons and audio files are triggered when she enters the grid on the map where they are placed. Since the text is based on Shelley, the themes of alienation and techno-scientific hubris are to be expected; further, the central character in the contemporary text is presented as the doppelgänger to both doctor and creature, linked *via* the theme of wandering: "I catch myself staring, like Shelley's *Frankenstein*….I am haunted by the memory of this life born into solitary existence, wandering the globe in search of a name, an identity through progeny—a creature living outside the rhythm of biological time" (transcribed in Rueb, "On *Itinerant*"). The themes of wandering and navigation is further emphasized through the sound files that capture movement: footsteps on pavement, in water, on leaves and grass, the rolling of a grocery cart. People—the crowd, the commons in the Commons—are represented through sound files of inaudible conversations, which form the background noise to the "real" physical sounds of the crowd as the user walks along the paths. While the narrative content of the two source texts suggests alienation and a "solitary existence," *itinerant* is itself manifestly concerned with connectivity.

In keeping with the archaeological metaphors often employed to analyze locative narrative, we now look backwards to the first project of its kind: *34 North by 118 West* (2002) [see figure 2]. Situated in the former site of the primary passenger and non-passenger rail yard in downtown LA, now a somewhat-derelict industrial zone, *34N118W* reminds us of the extent to which urban spaces are coded with social and economic relations. Somewhat like Jules Dassin's *Naked City*, urban infrastructure is one of the key themes: GPS is linked to railroads and there are references in the content to telegraphy, ship reports, and morse code. By his own account, Jeremy Hight, the author of the fictional

Figure 2: Jeremy Hight, Jeff Knowlton, and Naomi Spellman's ***34 North by 118 West***

text, researched the history of the freight yard and discovered the surprising and macabre stories of the line watchers, workers who were on suicide watch and charged with cleaning human debris off the tracks:

> 35 years I cleared the tracks. Those men, along the rails, tired. Death by train we called it. They waited and wandered. Hoped…for the sound that comes too late To take them from this life. It was my job to assist…to help…kind words…or help clear the tracks after the impact….Such failures. My failures. Such small horrors. (1946)

Such stories are not to recall the past but to invent it, make things present. What is at stake in the notion that stories can make things present? Here the dead bodies are reanimated in writing—the storyteller can make us see—but they are not brought back to life. In other words, the storyteller can make things present but there is also the knowledge of inevitable loss, of the gap between the dead, material body and the writing. One of the reasons this text has the power that it does is that it never ultimately closes that gap. As Hight explains, "the artifacts

experienced were not immediate, but were imagined and invisible, ghosts of what had been forgotten, shifted away from or erased" ("Views from Above" 3). Spectrality is paradoxically always present: railyard workers, "ghosts of former resonance" ("Locative Dissent" 1), appear by reappearing. The past is reanimated, spectralized, in the present. In this sense, to return to the opening of my essay, Hight's project actualizes what Gibson's novel imagines, which, as we recall, is River Phoenix's virtual presence on Sunset Boulevard.

The methodology, mode, and generic structure of *34N118W* is that of narrative archaeology, the use of "data from within and beneath the landscape" (Hight, "Views from Above" 6). Narrative archaeology is not simply a layering over flat, two-dimensional representations of the city, but rather an investigation of vertical flows, movements, and energies. In such a practice, "time and its artifacts are thus presented vertically to navigate and uncover" (Hight, "Narrative Archaeology"). Here we have only to remember the objective of *Yellow Arrow*: "deep mapping." Not only does one dig down into the past in order to understand the present on the surface, but one also reads for axial and lateral connections with other nodes (or spaces) on the map; one reads so as to decode the complex processes inherent in the "production of space." Narrative archaeology, then, is less about synchronic semiotic structures—a vertical slice—than it is about diachronic structures (processes, events, lived experiences). Hight also speaks of the conceptual and historiographic work of his piece in terms of "layers in time agitated into being" ("Floating Points, Locative Media"). Metaphors of layering suggest interpenetration and influence, rather than necessarily distinct ontologies, spatialities, and temporalities. The layers themselves, then, are not to be understood as stable; certainly the rhetoric of haunting suggests impermanence and flow. Even the audioscape, with its jammed phrases and overlapping voices, produces a sense of dynamism and flux. Aural and visual perspectives alike are neither singular nor stable. And without a stable perspective, narrative representation cannot construct a distance between participant and territory, cannot allow for an objective, and objectivizing, zenith perspective, a privileged vantage point from which to perceive the whole of the city. Moreover, the landscape, the cityscape, is not situated in the background, a mere backdrop or setting for the narrative content. Rather, any notion of foreground and background must be fundamentally unstable not only when one thinks of overlapping textual, acoustic, visual, and temporal layers, but also when one thinks of the layering and co-presence of physical spaces and electronic networks (mobile telephony,

GPS, RFID). In other words, *34N118W* articulates hybrid spaces rather than metaphysically distinct spaces. As the artists note, "We were very conscious of keeping the experience from blotting out the real world." Though it incorporates the imaginary, the space of fiction, it does not offer seamless transport into a virtual world, the hallmark of immersive experience; rather it offers an interplay "between what is imagined and referenced and what physically, at present, is" (Hight, "Narrative Archaeology").

However, I might note at this point that this affirmation of mixed reality is not without its detractors. There are certainly those for whom the network society, together with modern processes of spatio-temporal compression, has resulted in dislocatedness, or a fundamental disconnection from a purely material place. Here we might invoke Marc Augé's commentary on the phenomenology of non-place, ephemeral spaces, spaces of transit, in-between spaces that "do not contain any organic society" (*Non-Places* 112). A more practical case is made by Howard Rheingold and Eric Kluitenberg, who argue for disconnectivity, the ability to withdraw, which, they suggest, should "be enshrined as a basic right for all" ("Mindful Disconnection" 31). In their terms, disconnectivity means going off the grid, checking out and dropping out, a fantasy of return to non-mediated place. It might even mean opting out of the general system of annotation. Rheingold explains: "Although I have devoted decades to observing and using participatory media—from tools for thought to virtual communities to smart mobs—I want to propose that disconnecting might well be an important right, philosophy, decision, technology, and political act in the future" (29). I think, however, that disconnectivity, which is after all about individual affect and experience, is perhaps a less liberating or enabling idea than we might think. No one would dispute the value of enjoyment, but it is in my view both reliant on Situationist tropes of play and experimental behavior and somewhat limited in its vision of the self and psyche of the individual at the expense of the collective re-imagining of mediated places and mediation itself.

The audioscape or acoustic space, whose "centre is everywhere but whose margins are nowhere," presents a clear contrast with the linearity of visual space, notably identified by Marshall McLuhan ("The End of the Work Ethic" 101). From the 2D models of the twentieth-century urban theorists (with their iconic concentric circles), we have moved to 3D models of locative narrative with a true participant-observer and vertical navigation. But we might even push further and consider the space of locative narrative in 4D terms: deep, wide,

high, simultaneous. In other words, locative narrative is not simply a "space to be walked through." Rather, it is like much contemporary art:

> It is henceforth presented as a period of time to be lived through, like an opening to unlimited discussion. The city has ushered in and spread the hands-on experience: it is the tangible symbol and historical setting of the state of society, that 'state of encounter imposed on people,' to use Althusser's expression, contrasting with that dense and 'trouble-free' jungle which the natural state once was, according to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a jungle hampering any lasting encounter. Once raised to the power of an absolute rule of civilization, this system of intensive encounters has ended up producing linked artistic practices: an art form where the substrate is formed by inter-subjectivity, and which takes being-together as a central theme, the 'encounter' between beholder and picture, and the collective elaboration of meaning. (Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* 15)

What, finally, do we make of the replicatory or reiterative techno-aesthetic by which locative narrative speculates upon the embedded histories of place? *34N118W* and *in absentia* both offer a rethinking and rearticulation of place, for their conception of place does not rely on antimonies of place and flow or place and non-place, conceptual and indeed even categorical distinctions that suggest an ontological and metaphysical separateness: place as material and embodied vs. flow as immaterial and disembodied. In that it historicizes one of Marc Augé's spaces of transit, perhaps we might also read *34N118W* as a filling in, and populating, of non-place (see figure 3). In turn, the sense of place is shot through with flow, with non-place; in other words, neither project is predicated on ontological distinctions between material and immaterial.

Moreover, neither is grounded in any notion of geographical truth: even their maps are not accurate, but fictional and artistic fabrications. The map used in *34N118W* is 70 years old, which is to say that it is an aesthetic rather than utilitarian artifact, its indexical relations broken. As the artists note, their project is an "attempt to locate poetry within this [GPS] system." (Hight, Knowlton, and Spellman, *34 North by 118 West*). Their notion of place is paradoxically grounded in epistemological uncertainty. What is after all true or not true in these narratives? What is history and what is fiction?

Overall, then, I would like to suggest is that the still somewhat-rare practice of literary locative media could offer a powerful and productive reframing of what has been termed the "imperial infrastructure" of the Cartesian base map. It could do so by imaginatively speculating upon place in such a fashion so as to circumvent or otherwise contest the zenith perspective enforced by the codes of

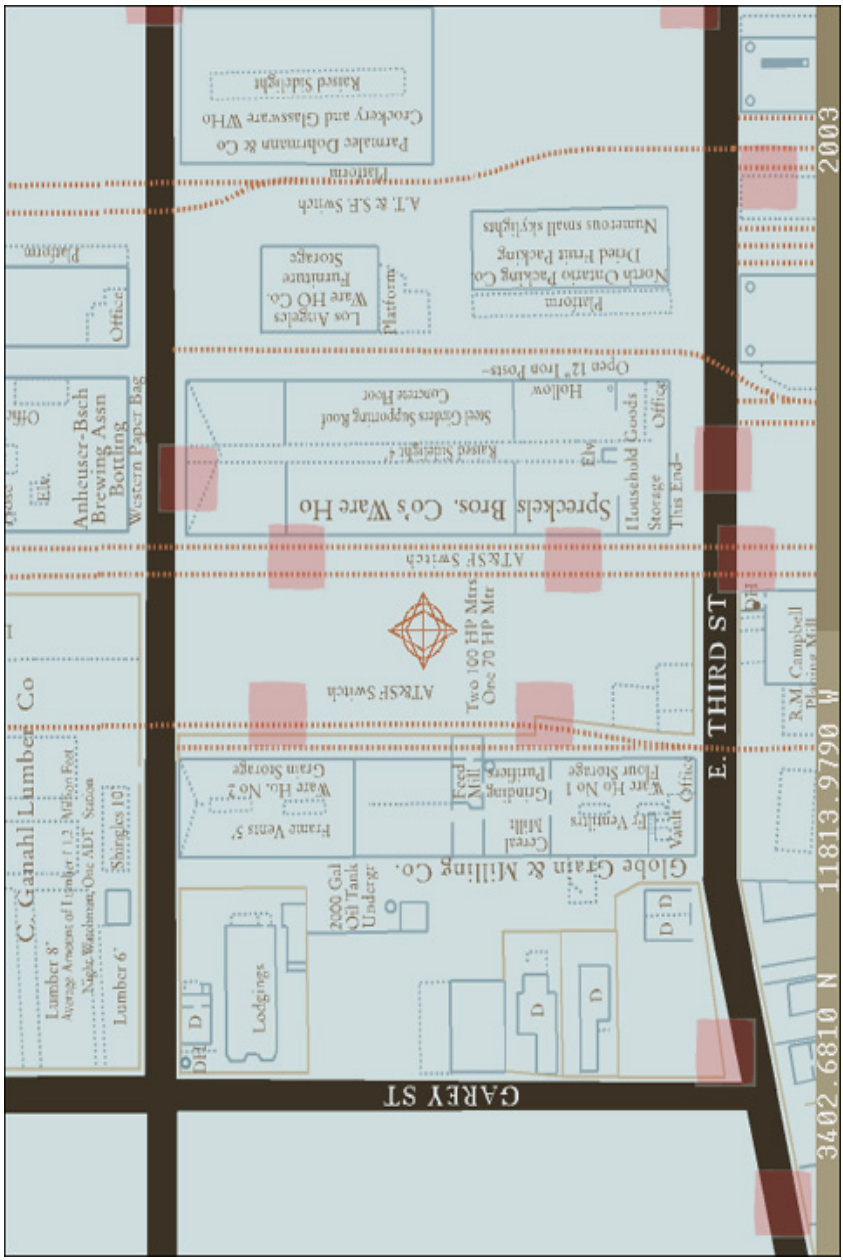

Figure 3: 34N118W

urban planning and technologies of surveillance and control. Locative narrative is paradoxically about rootedness, albeit in flux, a "geography of somewhere." Its slow mobility, which is usually walking rather than driving, is not the speed of the so-called "kinetic elite" but of purposeful, slow, meditative engagement.[34] Together, *34N118W* and *in absentia* should be understood as counter-image, as a diagnosis of contemporary problems of encapsulation, neoliberalism, demographic and economic fear. They inhabit but also reveal and thematize the forcible frame. Counter-image is a powerful and productive critical tool. It means learning to inhabit the world in a better way and it offers"ways of living and models of action within the existing real." Erratum: Bourriaud, 13

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[34] On chronotopia and such issues as the global kinetic elite, see Armitage and Roberts, "Chronotopia."

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