



City Confidential: On the Lyric Mapping of Urban Space

Elizabeth A. Hatmaker
Illinois State University

*Flesh, color, speech:
these exist by the rivalry
amongst little phrases
the struggle to conceive
sounds that palpitate and style the possible:
distant horizons that complicate a ghetto
in the grove, in the shadow of a city
that goes on writing.*

-- Leonard Schwartz,
"As You Run Up the Stairs"

While teaching creative writing, I began to note a pervasive narrative in several of my students' work; they wrote about being lifeguards at suburban Chicago swimming pools. While it seemed a strangely particular narrative, inevitably the trope of the "bored lifeguard" was the backdrop to the same discoveries—that living in the suburbs "sucks," that the consumerism and sameness prevalent to that locale was sapping everyone of their will to live, that they longed to get away and be "real." Throughout the semester the class had been grappling with the idea of the "I," debating its various modes, determining how the first-person subject was constructed both in their work and in the culture at large. Generally, the students seemed both willing to accept that subjectivity was defined by media, fashion, etc., and unwilling to part with the idea that somewhere underneath all that was a unique, "real," and more aesthetically pleasing subject struggling to emerge.

In attempts to differentiate their similar narratives, I began to ask my ex-lifeguards why they had wanted to be

lifeguards, if they had liked it at all, what their background was like. Yet, even when asked these questions, they responded with similar stories. It was as if they had come from the same vague family structure, with the same aspirations, the same feelings about being lifeguards. They were, you know, like everybody else, just struggling to escape being like everybody else. Moreover, I found myself assuming that they all worked at the same pool. This was the assumption that most disturbed me.

I am a lover of swimming pools. When I lived in Boston, I remember taking the commuter rail to lovely scenic beaches only to return happily to my favorite public pool, up from the old Boston Gardens in the North End, along the Charles. Something about the color of the water, the conversations of my fellow swimmers, the difference in temperature between the swimming and diving pools, the system of bodies in the pool brought more pleasure than the ocean. Like Burt Lancaster in the film *The Swimmer*, I find that different pools resonate in different ways. Some evoke romance; some evoke loneliness; others evoke heartbreak. All, however, evoke history and community in some form. Given my fascination with pools, I began to ask each ex-lifeguard specific questions about the size, shape, depth, and general demeanor of the pools at which they worked. After I began to ask about the pool culture from which they emerged, I was pleased to see their revisions become more varied. They began to indicate the differences in being bored at a Naperville (“Naper-thrill” as they call it) pool and being bored in a Skokie pool. Dependent on which type of pool they worked (public, health club, country club, neighborhood, YMCA/YWCA pool), they began to notice different images, different attitudes and expectations, different commodity cultures from which they wished to emerge as individuals. Arguably, the narrative of boredom and escape from adolescent suburban existence remained, but the revisions indicated a more sophisticated notion of identity once the writers had situated their narrative in a specific space.

While it might seem that what is at stake here is a simple lesson in writing with more detail, the problem in these students’ early drafts indicates a larger debate about the state of the contemporary lyric voice. The lyric can be defined as “a short poem in which a single speaker expresses an emotional state or process of thought” (Barton and Hudson 96). How-

ever, this definition (as definitions are likely to do) fails to suggest the tensions involved in the lyric articulation. More usefully, poet Elizabeth Willis describes the lyric as an ever developing “voice as figure,” through which the physical can be spoken as phenomenon and/or subjective identification (Willis 228). The particulars of the voice make the physical landscape aesthetically pleasing, if not always mimetically accurate. The voice suggests the central nature of subjectivity in defining the objective. Yet often the contemporary lyric voice, as articulated by students and professional writers alike, seems to evoke an empty narcissistic projection: The swimming pool is interesting because “I” work there, even if the “I” seems underdeveloped and unengaging. Given the privileging of self, central to the lyric, and the pressure my students feel to define themselves against the trappings of suburbia, it is easy to see why they seek what seems to them a transcendent voice, evoking a speaker different from and superior to their surrounding, even when it might seem to others a voice empty of the ability to distinctively define itself and thus “make the invisible visible” (Willis 227).

The problem of the lyric strikes me as one that exists not only in creative writing classes but also more centrally in the very concept of the liberal arts student. Far from simply banking knowledge, the ideal student should be in dialectical transformation with knowledge. The ideal liberal arts student lyrically projects knowledge. They can do more than simply relay knowledge; they are able to embody it and transform it, respond to it as both speaker and audience. While in situating the lyric within the larger framework of liberal arts, I risk sacrificing the very specific poetic tradition of the lyric; I’m convinced that the risk is necessary if we are to consider the implications and place of poetry on the larger academy. At the very least, interest in the “I” voice is central to many in the academy; writing programs, in general, and Writing Across the Curriculum and in-service learning initiatives, in particular, encourage students to develop, through their writing, a rhetorically complex subjectivity. Likewise, rising interest in creative non-fiction indicates not only an interest in a rhetorically complex subjectivity but also an interesting and “readerly” one. However, it is one-sided to merely suggest that students should become more subjective, and more lyric, in their approaches to learning. Indeed, my students’ lifeguard narratives indicate that the problem of developing

a lyric connection depends less on the “I” than on the physical and narrative space the “I” contemplates. More than simply adding detail to their work, these students had to risk conflating their identity with the space of their narratives. They had to risk embodying “Naper-thrill” in order to effectively speak to their readers about it. Indeed, one of the primary problems in teaching the contemporary lyric resides in the lyric’s relationship to the material. My interest in this problem has led me to consider ways in which the lyric can be constructed as a cross-curricular project. As I am, like my students, a product of a suburban environment, I found my answer in the same place many of my students find theirs, on television.

City Confidential airs on the Arts and Entertainment Network on Sunday nights at 8:00 PM, CST. At first, it appears to be yet another “true-crime” exposé program, the type of show that would seem trashy if it were on, say, FOX, or anonymously moderate if it appeared on NBC. However, it retains a veneer of respectability on the more literary A&E. Like its more issue-centered counterpart, A&E’s *American Justice*, *City Confidential* presents a murder, offers suspects, follows the investigation and trial, and offers some final commentary on the effects of the crime. Although many of the murders covered gained national notoriety (the “Amityville Horror House” murder, Florida’s “Lobster Boy” murder case, the murder of San Francisco porn producer Artie Mitchell), some cases are distinctively mundane, the types of crimes (husband kills wife, son kills father) are likely to happen in any city. The charm of *City Confidential* is in the show’s ability to situate the crime in relation to the city in which it happens. Thus the episode about the “Amityville Horror House” murder highlights the Long Island community—its history, its inhabitants, its economy—in which the crime occurred, suggesting how the location itself produced the crime and, conversely, how the crime produces and maintains the community’s space.

The tradition of the *City Confidential* gets its name from a series of crime exposé books produced in the early 1950’s by Jack Lait and Lee Mortimer.¹ Books such as *New York Confidential*, *Chicago Confidential*, and *Washington Confidential* detailed the private, “confidential” workings of cities, highlighting police corruption, drug smuggling, vice, political graft, and, most notably, “red communism.” These cities could be

best understood, Lait and Mortimer argued, not by the buildings, the culture, or the economy of the town alone but by the dialectical and systematic nature of the secrets the city sought to hide in relation to its economy, culture, and citizens. While the citizen might not overtly participate in the vice and corruption of their city, he or she both participates covertly and is formed as a citizen through this participation. Interestingly, Lait and Mortimer never separated their own agenda from the corruption they discussed. In *Washington Confidential* (1951), they write: “We have no hope or aim to make Washington a better place to live in. We don’t give a damn what kind of place it is to live in except that the kind of place we found furnished us with that sole commodity in which we deal—copy” (Lait and Mortimer x). Though they likely did not imagine their unabashed commercial agenda as part of the corruption they detailed, their unabashed lack of civic interest makes it hard to morally disengage them from the city they, admittedly, wanted to profit from.

In fact, their lack of civic interest is something they presume of all Americans. Though the earlier books emphasized larger cities, later anthologies like *U.S.A Confidential* noted the presence of similar “confidential” systems in all American cities. In *Power and Paranoia: History, Narrative, and the American Cinema, 1940-1950* (1986), Dana Polan comments upon the formula for the “Confidentials”: “Crime is no longer the effect of a specific figure of criminality but a quality potentially at work in every person and in every relationship” (Polan 243). This presumption of criminality and corruption suggest the links between the “confidential” and the post-war noir tradition and suggests the divide between Lait and Mortimer’s conservative project and the progressive aims of turn-of-the-century “muckraker” journalism. The “confidential” city is neither reformable nor is it escapable.² In suggesting the link between the “average” citizen and the phenomena of crime, the Lait and Mortimer books denied even the reader a position outside of the narrative, for in the very act of reading the “confidential,” the reader becomes complicit. Subjectivity in the “confidential city” is fraught: the citizen can participate in the illicit activities that define the city, yet can neither escape nor reform the city systems at work.

In offering the dialectic between the individual “subject” (the reader and/or the citizen) and the city space (the “ob-

ject”), and by insisting on the material and social reality of the city space, the “Confidential” tradition offers both a popular form of human geography. In this dialectic, I want to suggest a space for the development of the cross-curricular lyric voice, for thinking about the ways in which poetry (and the traditions that produce it) can feasibly be applied to conversations in the fields of postmodern geography, critical cartography, and urban studies.³ Though I have yet to teach a course specifically involved with these issues, it is my contention that the “city confidential,” in its foregrounding of both the lyric subject responsible for the development of the city and the city responsible for the formation of the lyric subject, is a useful nexus for students of both creative writing and geography to theorize both the located nature of the subject and the subjective nature of location.

Mapping the Lyric: Tensions in Contemporary Lyric Culture

A heavy reliance on traditional definitions of the lyric often fails to articulate its changing definitions and attitudes. Thus I don’t wish to attend to specifically genre-based discussions. Instead, I am more primarily concerned with the culture that emerges, the lyric sensibility. Certainly the most prevalent notions of lyric subjectivity come from nineteenth-century Romanticism and from the twentieth-century confessional. Creative writing students, and literary-minded college students in general, are likely to associate lyric poetry with the natural, “rustic” imagery of Wordsworth, as well as the unified sense of beauty and connectedness represented in all of the Romantic poets. They are also likely to identify the confessional moment of self-discovery (the confidential moment?) found in the work of Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell, Wallace Stevens, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton (to name only a few). Beyond literature and creative writing, Romantic sensibilities are likely to be fostered in writing courses, especially those influenced by expressivist pedagogy. Yet these observations, schematic as they are, fail to really articulate the tensions at the core of this lyric sensibility. They describe an attitude towards poetry and writing without really suggesting how this attitude plays out in the contemporary academy. Outside of the creative writing classroom, the same students who are attracted to these glorified notions of the transformative self are often leery of its uses in the profes-

sional realm,⁴ as well as the sincerity of its uses in the classroom.⁵ Instead, I wish to briefly discuss three central problems that confront the liberal arts students' engagement with the lyric: self-reflexivity, proximity, and universality.

Certainly a central academic value at stake in the lyric is in the speaker/writer's ability to discover and re-discover the nature of their subjectivity, to grow as individuals. Yet in *Poetry at Stake: Lyric Aesthetics and the Challenge of Technology* (1999), Carrie Noland notes the double-edged problem of lyric self-reflexivity:

The lyric no longer promises a moment of epiphany in which the subject triumphantly attains its true nature (or union with God). Instead the lyric is redefined as a discourse in which a subject comes to recognize and then negate its past delusions revealing each succeeding figuration of subjectivity, each effort to assume a voice of sincerity, to be histrionic, mediated by objectifying forces previously taken for the substance itself. (62)

Noland's analysis represents exactly what students often fear about studying subjectivity: that they will be found to be the product of everything that they wished to define themselves against. The Naperville lifeguard risks finding out that the voice of "the bored suburbanite yearning to run free" is, itself, the voice that defines the suburban space. Their voice is Naper-thrill.⁶

Noland notes Theodor Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* as a classic representation of modernism in which Adorno posits lyric possibility as "the paradoxical task of simultaneously positing and denying the validity of its own self" (72). Unfortunately, this dialectical move, seemingly full of fresh possibilities for lyric transformation, often seems, to some students, like the bankruptcy of the contemporary lyric. Why write a lyric of self-discovery if the discovery is that the "I" may not be "valid"? Indeed, the recognition that one's subjectivity is consistently in question is always trumped by the need to have a voice able to articulate this paradox. To the degree that students often want a unified and consistently validated *poetic* "voice,"⁷ they are often very sympathetic to the idea that their everyday identities are always in a state of revision. My students often see attempts at redefining iden-

tity (through fashion, interests, trends, etc.) as positive tools for personal growth, even when they are suspicious of the commodity culture that facilitates these identity transformations. Experimenting with who they “are” is often seen as an integral part of the experience of “growing up” and being at college. While they might not be especially excited by the negative functions of the contemporary lyric as such, they often recognize the possibilities of a more multiple notion of identity that can emerge from the negative gesture. Noland, in fact, argues for an evolving subjective voice that integrates, in particular, the varied subjectivities offered in technological advances. The contemporary lyric, for Noland, is embodied in the cyborg, though I imagine there are many other postmodern and late capitalist formations that might represent equally compelling models.⁸

To the degree that the contemporary lyric complicates notions of self, it also complicates the proximity of the “voice” to the world. While the traditional lyric voice is often defined by its phenomenal relationship to the physical (“the visible”), the concept of “voice” in relation to self is a complex one. Olivia Holmes notes the transition from oral to written poetry in thirteenth century Italian poetry and the effect this transition had on the construction of voice: “It was only in alphabetical documents that the acoustic medium was objectified and words were separated from the person who uttered them” (3). With the advent of writing came a separation between the acts of speaking and writing that remains integral to contemporary writing instruction. Even freshman composition students (hopefully) come to learn that the written “voice” and the oral “voice” are different. Not only is their written “voice” structurally and grammatically different from their oral voice, their willingness to manipulate each voice is markedly different. Although many students are comfortable writing a paper that does not represent “their opinion” per se, they are, in my experience, much less likely to verbally articulate a position they don’t believe. Holmes goes on to note the socializing nature that took place as oral texts were replaced by written texts:

Not only does the poems’ placement in a larger macrostructure allow narrativity (and thus history) to enter the poems, but it permits the kind of intricate numerical planning and intratextual relations that

enable the individual pieces to slip outside the immediate circumstances of performance or reception and to exist in a time frame that cycle itself has defined. This text is no longer naively transitive, pointing only beyond itself to the spoken word or sung voice, but intransitive, pointing only to itself and the “voice”—or self—constructed in it. (3)

Holmes thus defines the transformation as allowing, in the same moment, the lyric voice to be social, in relation to other voices and/or history, and to be insular, to craft itself as a construction (à la New Criticism). The social nature of the “voice” is further complicated by the separation of social space into the realms of public and private. In the event that students are willing to verbally articulate insincere positions (and be “yes-men”), it is almost always within a public and/or professional space (where their ability to express themselves is limited by economic and/or political power structures) than in a private space in which they are “free.” Certainly the Romantic pre-disposition towards the rustic and the rural indicates the investment in privatization central to this conception of the lyric, one that fuels the assumption students have that poetry, as opposed to prose, is a private form of communication, best produced and appreciated in solitude.

Related to the social proximity of the lyric “voice,” is the proximity of the “voice” to the ideas it expresses. Leonard Schwartz, in “A Flicker at the Edge of Things,” details his belief in the transcendental lyric in which “. . . subjectivity is again given access to visions—and vision happens when image and idea are no longer separate, the contents of thought and the objects of the eye attaining a kind of synesthesia” (98). To Schwartz, what is significant about the lyric is its ability to articulate the image “before the idea.” Although one could have a series of philosophical debates about the viability of this notion, the idea that the lyric is immediate and unmediated is, indeed, part of its aesthetic appeal. Hyatt Waggoner specifically defines the American Sublime in which “nothing is known, nothing given, everything is discovered or created” (xvii). Thus, the agency of the “private” lyric voice is defined in conflict with both the socio-political elements of “public” space and the *a priori* nature of conceptual space.

To the degree that social proximity is a central tension, certainly the problems of universality also come into play. Thus far, I've discussed the relation of the lyric to the concept of "self," to the "social," and to the conceptual object, but the lyric also resonates as a historically treasured form of individual and social communication. Not only is the formal "beauty" of the lyric supposed to positively influence the reader, the experience of confession is supposed to gratify and transform both the author and the reader (as opposed to the voyeurism central to reading a "confidential"). Influenced by middle-brow cultural advocates like Oprah Winfrey and Bill Moyers, students who want to see poetry (and literature in general) as primarily celebratory and unifying often find themselves at odds with teachers, versed in postmodern and multi-cultural theory, who wish to show how the lyric tradition can be silencing and/or falsely universalizing. On a more formal level, some creative writing teachers, invested in L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, spoken word, and "pomo" literature in general, may, in fact, view the lyric sensibility and the "domestic lyric" (as it is often derisively known) as antiquated—they've gotten beyond the "I."⁹

Though students are most likely to confront formal disenchantment with the lyric in creative writing workshops, the ideological stakes of the "universal" lyric are felt throughout humanities courses. Recently I taught Langston Hughes's "Harlem" in a senior-level literature class and was somewhat chagrined to note that my primarily white students chose to interpret "the dream deferred" as a problem encountered by everyone. When I pointed out the title and suggested that Hughes might not be talking about "everyone" having their dreams deferred, they seemed unwilling to acknowledge that their reading, while certainly all-embracing, might be problematic. Poetry, even to upper-level humanities students, was supposed to make "everyone" feel good. Certainly traditional lyric sensibility, with its status as universal and private, privileges the notion that all poetry can be stripped of social and political meaning and consumed however the reader desires. Often this lyric sensibility—through poetry I can remove myself from the ugliness of "false" social experience into the solitude and union with my noble and true self—ironically fuels the ideological stance that contemporary white middle-class subjectivity should, in a more general sense, allow an uncritical and relativistic notion of public engage-

ment—people don't have to think about what they don't want to think about if it makes them feel bad. For those who teach poetry, it is often hard to oppose this popular form of engagement and risk alienating students from poetry all together, but I find it increasingly hard to image this engagement as especially progressive or transformative.¹⁰

Yet to the degree that the lyric can be used in problematic universalizing discourses, especially in the classroom, the production of lyric poetry, itself, offers possible ways out of universalizing discourses. As Carrie Noland notes, Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*, while arguably critical of "sincere" notions of selfhood, remains a testament to the power of the lyric to express the angst of its own impossibility—an arguably sincere gesture. While it might be easy to critique the hegemonic lyric tradition as such, it is always important to note the variety of anti-hegemonic spaces such as the Nyorican Café, the St. Mark's Poetry Project, and the Electronic Poetry Center (to name only a few) as useful spaces for lyric transformation. Even formally, as Elizabeth Willis notes: "the aesthetics of 'language' or 'post-language' writing . . . are primarily lyrically driven . . . but there has been a shift within contemporary lyric practice, whereby the overall structure and strategy of the lyric is overlaid or mixed with other influences, forms, and rhetorical sampling, often in significant ways" (228). The lyric tradition, even when contested formally and ideologically, has the ability to resurrect, to revise itself in relation to the changing landscapes it phenomenolizes.

Within the classroom lyric poetry, even when presented as a private and universalizing discourse, retains the ability to imagine the transcendence of political difference. While I was disturbed by my students' inability to historically and politically contextualize Langston Hughes' poetry, they were, nonetheless, engaged and thoughtful about the poem. Though I found their responses, on one level, solipsistic and naïve, I want to be careful not to ignore the empathy of their response. Indeed, if they can't imagine the "dream deferred," on a personal and emotional level, it is unlikely they will understand it for anyone else or be moved to work against the forms of racism detailed by Hughes.

Thus, within its tensions (and there are certainly more than I've noted here), the lyric tradition remains central to issues that are aesthetic and social, formal and ideological.

As a poet and as a teacher, I am invested in this tradition not as an object of study, but as a mode of inquiry. While the “lyric” as such, is studied in both creative writing and literature classes, and while the ideology of the Romantic lyric sensibility is prevalent both in the classroom and the culture at large, I want to use the production of the lyric subjectivity as a tool of continuous conceptual revision of, among other things, the “objective” map, the “confidential” city, and the concept of postmodern space.

The space of the city¹¹ has long been interesting to writers, especially poets. In *Le Spleen de Paris*, Baudelaire notes: “the experience of great cities [is] musical without rhythm and without rhyme, supple enough and abrupt enough to adapt to the lyrical movements of the soul, to the undulations of reverie, to the paroxysms of consciousness” (qtd. in Ramazani 200). The city space, almost by definition, provides a better environment than the rural countryside for describing the evolving industrialized subjectivity. As industrialization spread, the Romantic “noble savage” became a subject ill suited to contend with the changing spaces the lyric had to define. While distrust of the city continued, as is clear in the “city mysteries” of the 1850’s as well as in noir fiction and film of the twentieth century, the city became a space one couldn’t dismiss. In contrast to the often lurid tales of the city, the desire to celebrate the city emerged in turn of the century poetry such as Joseph Clarke’s “Manhattan: an Ode” and Hart Crane’s “The Bridge.” Beyond celebrating the urban space specifically, contemporary “geographic poetry” contends with the complexities of subjectivities, the fracturing, silencing and naming involved in maps. In *Giscombe Road*, poet C.S. Giscombe traces the naming of a road (and portage) in British Columbia for a Jamaican ancestor, a racial and ethnic “other” to the region. Beyond documenting the strange geographic naming, he articulates a more open-ending vision of what maps might do: “[the] meaning the map of sound got fleshed out so/it, the map got to be more/than a ‘document of voice’ but/ a way of/ bending north (out of range, peripheral, and sourceless)” (Giscombe 14-15). Inevitably, the location cannot escape being named by (and for) the subject (even the marginalized one) any more than the subject can escape being named by the location, though, for Giscombe, the wish remains that, through the map, the subject might court a different type of transcendence. Geography works to invite

escapes, a driving to a “periphery,” yet it also works to offer comfort and grounding in what seems to be an infinite and multi-faceted world. In *The Lure of the Local*, landscape artist Lucy Lippard notes, “The intersection of nature, culture, history, and ideology form the ground on which we stand—our land, our place, the local” (7).

This pervasiveness of lyric interest in the city space (and space in general) suggests to me the ways in which, artistically, geography has already implicitly invaded the contemporary lyric sensibility and, thus, the creative writing classroom. Thus I am interested in the uses of lyric production within geography classrooms. As maps and geography are of interest to lyric poets, the lyric, even if it isn’t identified as such, is of growing interest to the contemporary urban geographer. Though I must admit to having far less experience with students of geography than with students of poetry, the literature is replete with examples of cross-disciplinary interest and similarity.

The Lyric Map: Poetry and Geography

In *The New Nature of Maps* (2001), J. H. Andrews reviews the essays of one of the more prolific cartographic philosophers of recent history, Brian Harley. Though he died in 1991, Harley’s influence remains challenging, especially in its cross-disciplinary aspects. Andrews notes: “The peculiar quality of Harley’s achievement may best be appreciated by inventing a game for map historians. Tabulate the specialized vocabularies of cartography, philosophy, and the aggregate of all other academic subjects in three columns. Choose one term at random from each column. Whoever combines these terms into the most arresting and plausible short sentence wins the round” (3). Though Andrews is clearly dismissive of the “arresting and plausible [*lyric?*] short sentence,” he notes Harley’s warm acceptance of the cross disciplinary possibilities of the map. While Harley’s use of political theory, philosophy, and rhetoric often vex cartographers, he offers, for others, ways of thinking about the often insular and highly technical world of maps.

Beyond Harley’s political critiques of map-making— he critiqued, among other things, the “silencing” of non-hegemonic structures in maps¹²— his interest in the marginal decoration of maps, the colors used, and the scripts (and names) used to define space makes his critiques especially

approachable to non-geographers. He was one of the first cartographers to be interested in the map as more than an objective and empirical tool, as he noted, “My position is to accept that rhetoric is part of the way all maps work and that all maps are rhetorical texts. . . . we ought to dismantle the arbitrary dualism between ‘propaganda’ and ‘truth’ and ‘artistic’ and ‘scientific.’ . . . for there is no description without performance” (Harley 163). It is clear that he thought good maps could offer the empirical uses of the atlas and more broad philosophical, historical, and aesthetic dimensions at the same time—“both decorative and geographic images on a map are unified parts of a total image” (Andrews 11). Certainly this would seem a high order for mapmakers, but it is also one that the lyric sensibility seeks to address.

In his focus on the aesthetic of maps, Harley was able to note their formal construction and the complicated ways in which the stylized uses of font and color complicate representations of physical space. Much as the twentieth century L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poet finds the multiplicity and semantic disharmony between word and meaning to be significant, urban geography tracks the ways in which city space is defined by similar disharmonies. In *Cities in Space: Cities as Place* (1990), David Herbert and Colin Thomas note a central problem in locating a stable definition of city space: “Of the three components of townscape—plan, architectural style, land use—the former is the most resistant to change whereas the later is the most dynamic. Discord between form and function will occur as changing land uses produce the need for functions to adapt to built forms [that] were originally designated for different purposes” (126). In much the same way that urban geography students must contend with former industrial spaces being converted into “yuppie loft spaces,” creative writing students must contend with the changing signification of words and poetic style within ostensibly stable notions of genre. Therefore, the urban geographer and the poet have similar struggles (and productive possibilities) in defining and re-defining the form/usage binary in both space and in language.¹³

To the degree that cartographers like Brian Harley seem overtly interested in lyric concerns, I note with interest the ways in which urban geography and lyric poetry have similar descriptive characteristics as objects of study. Both the city and the lyric are defined as giving centrality to the ideas,

spaces, and subjectivities that surround them. While I've already addressed the problematic social centrality (the "voice" as universalizing and as presupposing the idea) of the lyric, the city presents similar problems. Historically, cities have been defined specifically by their central economic position in a region. In 1933, Walter Christaller described the city in his definition of central place as "mediator of local commerce with the outside world" (qtd. in Carter 27). However, one of the central tenants of postmodern urban geography is to problematize this centrality: the city space cannot function locally in an increasingly globalized and technology-based economy. In "Exploring the Postmetropolis" (2001), Edward Soja notes the pervasive transitions between the modernist (definable by central place theory) and the postmodern city. Of many factors, he notes the shift to a post-Fordist and globalized market economy, the rise of technology based and service-based communities, and the rise of the Carceral cities in the form of gated communities and the abandonment of "public" space as central to this transition. Certainly my students' understanding of cities is influenced more by Soja than Christaller, though I imagine few are aware of it. Of my suburban lifeguards, I discovered that one worked at a pool in a gated community. When I asked him about it, he was unable to articulate what a "gated" community was and how having a gate on one's community might influence one's subjectivity and ideology. While students of geography are more likely to understand these "objective" differences, I wonder if these students are able to articulate these differences in relation to larger ideological, aesthetic, and subjective concerns. Perhaps they can, and if so, I want to put them in conversation with students of poetry.

The ideology of privatization is noted both by Edward Soja, and more explicitly by Mike Davis in *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (1990) and *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (1998). *City of Quartz* offers a project similar (though more progressive) to that of Lait and Mortimer; through maps, newspaper articles, specific ethnic and sub-cultural histories, and urban renewal planning, he offers a vision of the changing spatial/political landscape of Los Angeles. In *Ecology of Fear*, he offers perhaps the most unnerving equation between the lyric sensibility and postmodern geography as he defines the relationship between subjectivity and geographic space in opposition to

one another. Much as the Romantic poet wishes to escape the demoralizing city for the privileged rural space, the middle and upper-class have, in the face of what Davis calls the “Third-Worlding” of urban space, fled the city to suburbs, gated communities, CID (Common Interest Developments), and “panic rooms.” Davis charts the rise of public hysteria surrounding gangs, pedophilia, and drugs, commenting on how these urban fears, as well as the responses (gated cities, “no tolerance” police policies, surveillance and profiling) effect both the map and the urban subjectivity: “Any post-Burgess mapping of urban space must acknowledge the power that bad dreams now wield over the public landscape” (387).

While one might note the differences between these two movements from urban space (one based on a desire for aesthetic purity, one based on fear), their similarity can be felt in the desire many students display for the separation of aesthetics from issues deemed “public.” My poetry students either didn’t want to sully Hughes’ poetry with discussions of racism and historical context or perhaps they feared the repercussions of discussing racism in a public setting. Though the thing my suburban lifeguards wanted to avoid was conflation with the suburban (albeit middle-class, privileged, and, in one case, gated) spaces from which they emerged, their parents likely saw the suburbs as a safer and better space with which to identify. As Davis notes in both texts, this escape from the urban space functions to decrease funding for public spaces/programs (parks, museums, schools, community art programs¹⁴) and increase the middle-class Bill O’Reilly-supported sensibility that such spaces and programs are unsafe for middle-class citizens and that their funding represents a “theft” from “private” interests and revenue. In this articulation, one hears echoes of Lait and Mortimer’s overt capitalistic endeavor in creating the *Confidential* books: the city is for enhancing individual freedoms and profit—period.

Urban geography, especially the work of Soja and Davis, offers more varied representations of the functions and representations of the city and in the subject influenced by geography. In these representations, they suggest clear and frightening drawbacks to the popular separation of individual from geographic space. However, this separation still remains central to the romantic lyric tradition that influences young writers, as well as to the idealized American subjectivity: the

safe, financially-secure, consumer. Given my experience with creative writing students, I see this tension between subjectivity and geography as both a pervasively unproductive writing block and, potentially, an engaging tension to explore with geography students whose study of postmodern geography and map-making is more clearly influenced by theories of subjectivity. How, then, do we re-theorize this tension with both students of geography and creative writing? What might such theorizations produce?

Lyric Mapping and the Geographic Subject

Though the relationship between artistic process and urban geography is not new, it has, as often as not, yielded dissatisfaction from artists. Popular modernist projects such as Lucio Costa and Oscar Neimeyer's Brasilia plan and Le Corbusier's "machines for living" models were met largely with disdain and futility from both Bauhaus and Situationist artists: Guy DeBord and Jorn Asger noted, "Urbanism renders alienation tactile" (qtd. in Salder 50). Yet urban geographers are much more hopeful about such collaborations. After noting the lack of sustainability of such current models as the global city, the electronic city, the "edge" city (suburban model), and the competitive city, Tim Hall writes of the "creative city":

A characteristic of the current wave of urban creativity is the innovative utilization and compilation of skills derived from artists, designers, educators, and entrepreneurs with new technologies . . . At the moment this creative capacity is expressing itself in a number of small-scale, locally-oriented milieu within European states. These creative communities have broken down barriers that have existed between, for example, art and technology and work and leisure, in the solution to the problems that have found themselves facing. Indeed the failure to precisely define exactly what is meant by creativity in the urban context is the main thing limiting understanding of the process at the moment. (163)

Hall's excitement regarding collaborations between urban geographers and artists, as well as the feasibility of such collaboration and what these collaborations can produce, is

gratifying. In addition, his concern over “the failure to define,” directly suggests how urban geography and creative writing might be useful to each other. The fact that geographers are often more receptive to the collaboration than artists (of course, the Situationist aesthetic, in its overt avant-gardism, likely does not represent popular tastes) is yet another process to map. Many artists may, in fact, view the creation of physical space as distinctly secondary, if complementary, to the creation and maintenance of human relationships and systems. However, if we can, in the academy, foster discussions between these groups, the process of “urban creativity” can better be defined in conjunction with the creative city projects in development, current aesthetic movements, and evolving pedagogical and institutional theories. Perhaps we might, together, conceive the “creative university.” If, as is the case at least with my lifeguards, the current city and suburban space represents something to escape, it would seem of interest to both determine what factors make the space so distasteful and to work collaboratively to make these spaces more pleasing and productive.

The process of developing a more public lyric sensibility cannot occur, however, without imagining both how we, as subjects, embody space and how space defines our subjectivity. As we live in a time when city space is defined by the “City Confidential” and by the assessment of postmodern geographers like Soja and Davis as a dangerous and alienating space, this project seems fraught with classroom resistance (to what degree will students resist geographic subjectivity, i.e. “being Naper-thrill?”). Interestingly, however, I submit that students already implicitly accept, or at least fear, the idea that spaces might produce subjectivity (my students clearly imagined that, without escape, being “Naper-thrill” was inevitable). I think it is their attitudes towards their geographic subjectivity (being “Naper-thrill” is never a good thing) that are more pedagogically challenging to me than their complex acceptance. While I have suggested the “City Confidential” genre, with its populist sensibility, its appealing luridness, and its historical contextualization, as a useful site for classroom collaboration, it is this very genre that needs to be reformed in its pedagogical use. Lait and Mortimer’s conservative vision of the possibilities of the city are certainly problematic, yet the methodological approach

they use can, I think, transcend the negative message of their texts.

In this essay, I have suggested that the lyric subjectivity is central not simply to the development of creative writing skills (i.e. making their creative work more detailed and interesting) but to situating the phenomenal relationship between students and the knowledge they embody and transform in the academy. A geographically situated lyric subjectivity offers students, whatever their field of study, a more civic-oriented subjectivity. What students learn in college can affect broad changes both in the communities in which the students work and in the ways students think about the idea of community. The interplay of these ideas is central to how they define themselves as students and citizens, as producers and consumers not only of products, but also of the relationships that structure their reality. As geographer R.J. Johnston notes: "Creative change can be achieved only by understanding how society operates to structure space within the urban systems and then, by producing programs which will affect the operations, not just the outcomes" (25).

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Endnotes

- ¹ This tradition can be traced back even further to the “city mysteries” of the mid 19th century. Novels such as George

Lippard's *Quaker City*, trace the lurid corruption of Philadelphia. For a full account of this tradition, see Michael Denning's *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America*, M. Denning. (New York: Verso, 1987).

- ² James Ellroy's book (and the subsequent film) *L.A. Confidential* illustrates this point admirably.
- ³ Though my students come from a suburban rather than an urban space, many postmodern geographers note the ways in which suburban space is defined in relation to urban space, an idea I will explore later in the text.
- ⁴ For a provocative case study about student resistance to critical literacy pedagogy (which promotes a more ideologically-centered construction of self), see *Collision Course: Conflict, Negotiation, and Learning in College Composition*, R. Durst. (Urbana: NCTE, 1999), 48-63, 120-4, 129-41.
- ⁵ On the subject of student resistance to confessional writing, see *Fragments of Rationality: Postmodernity and the Subject of Composition*, L. Faigley. (Urbana: NCTE, 1992), 111-31, 225-42.
- ⁶ I am reminded here of the beginning of *Red Harvest*, when the Op thinks that he mishears the town name, Personville, pronounced as "Poisonville" only to discover that every resident calls it that.
- ⁷ For a detailed study of the growth of the lyric "voice" and its critical reception in the 20th century academy, see *The American Poetry Wax Museum: Reality Effects, 1940-1990*, J. Rasula (Urbana: NCTE, 1996).
- ⁸ For example, many of my students use the model of the D.J. to articulate how a subject can subtly change, transform and sample experiences and how he/she might creatively mark shifts between experiences.
- ⁹ For a detailed examination of popular criticism of MFA-based poetics, see *Poetic Culture: Contemporary American Poetry between Community and Institution*, C. Beach. (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1999).
- ¹⁰ The conservative nature of this larger ideological stance is highlighted in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, F. Jameson (Durham: Duke UP, 1997); Laurent Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays of Sex and Citizenship*, L. Berlant. (Durham: Duke UP, 1997); and *The End of Politics: Cor-*

- porate Power and the Decline of the Public Sphere*, C. Boggs (New York: Guilford, 2000).
- ¹¹ Though my primary interest is in urban geography, there are numerous programs emerging in rural studies. While I have limited knowledge of these programs, I would certainly not want to make the connection between the contemporary lyric and the city overly exclusive.
- ¹² For more on the cultural coding of empty or silence spaces, see G. McDonogh, "The Geography of Emptiness," in *The Culture of Meaning of Urban Space*, R. Rosenberg and G. McDonogh, eds. (Westport: Bergin & Garvey, 1993), 3-15.
- ¹³ For specific theorization on maps and the contestation of social and ideological meaning, see *Pleasure Zones: Bodies, Cities, Spaces*, D. Bell (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2001); *From Nowhere to Everywhere: Lesbian Geographies*, G. Valentine, ed. (New York, Harrington Park, 2000); *Putting Women in Place: Feminist Geographers Make Sense of the World*, L. Domosh and J. Seager, eds. (New York: Guilford, 2001); and *Globalizing Cities: A New Spatial Order?*, P. Marcuse and R. van Kempen, eds. (Malden: Blackwell, 2000).
- ¹⁴ New York's St. Mark's Poetry Project, a community-based experimental writing project run by Bernadette Mayer, is often threatened by such cutbacks.