
Place

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

GERTRUDE STEIN, "Landscape"

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

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

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

Where I'm Writing From

Where the hell is Ronkonkoma?

A CHARACTER IN THE FILM

200 CIGARETTES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

Photo by Derek Owens



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

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

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



Photo by Derek Owens

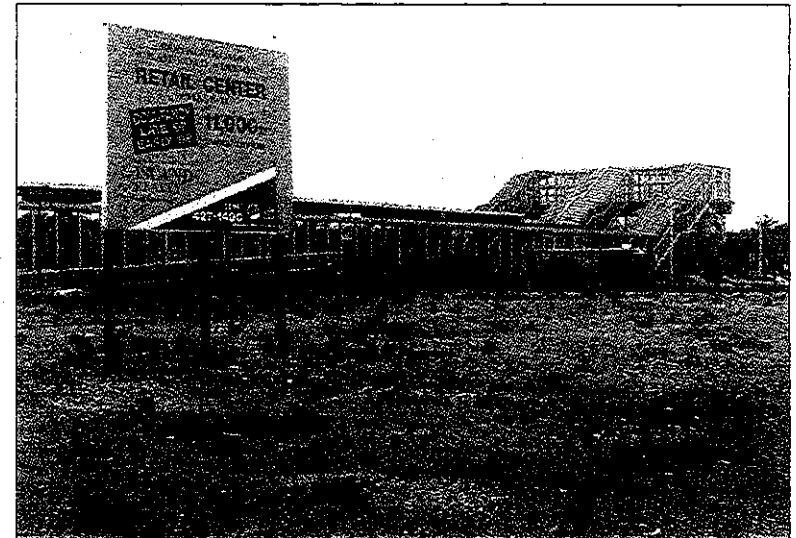


Photo by Derek Owens

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

Photo by Derek Owens



FIGURE 5. Squatters in suburbia.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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