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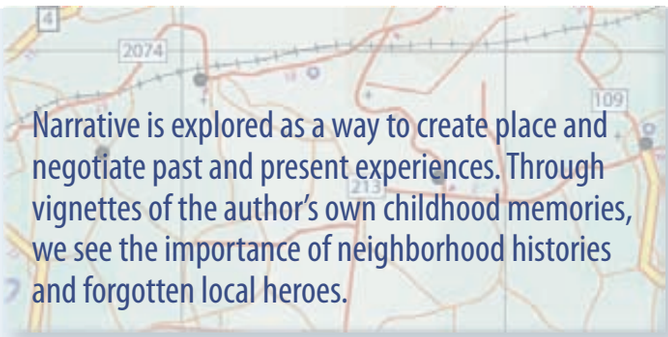

Narrative is explored as a way to create place and negotiate past and present experiences. Through vignettes of the author's own childhood memories, we see the importance of neighborhood histories and forgotten local heroes.

Excavating the Cityscape Through Urban Tales and Local Archives

SHARIF BEY

A "cityscape" is defined as an artistic representation of an urban environment. Artistic representations can take shape through narrative, mythology, performance, or visual metaphor. Cities are extremely complex and dynamic entities, offering substantial assets toward the re-envisioning of art education in contemporary society. This article explores the potential of narrative for unveiling the curricular value of places within our city neighborhoods. Through story, places become cultural sites for exploring, connecting, layering, and contesting meanings (Carpenter, 2003). In this era of prevailing mandated standards emphasizing the coverage of state and national history, teachers seldom afford their students the opportunity to learn from their own neighborhoods (Taylor, Carpenter, Ballengee Morris, & Sessions, 2006).

While scholars (Blandy & Hoffman, 1993; Lai & Ball, 2002; Powell, 2010; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Trafi-Prats, 2009) have explored the merits of the urban landscape to art education, the unique local archives and oral histories of these places provide further opportunities for multilateral curricular explorations (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Rolling, 2010; Carpenter, 2003; Tavin, 2000; Thomas, 2005). Here I draw upon personal narratives using my Pittsburgh neighborhood as an example to illustrate how stories can validate local content as assets to contemporary art education. While there are many fruitful excavation sites for constructing narratives within the cityscape, in this article I advocate for the assets found in my local auto mechanic's garage and boxing gym.

above
Figure 1. Beltzhoover, 1968, Gearing Avenue. Then trolleys carried passengers through most of the major streets. Photo courtesy of David Wilson.

right
Figure 2. Beltzhoover, 2012. Beltzhoover Avenue is the site of two of the few remaining commercial properties in the community. Photo courtesy of Jamil Bey.

Elders, Community, and Story

In 1947 my paternal grandparents and their 11 children moved from the Hill District, a large predominantly African American community located in central Pittsburgh, to Beltzhoover, a smaller community on the Southside. At the time, Beltzhoover was a diverse and self-sustaining community with countless businesses, all owned and operated by African American, Irish American, and Italian American families. Beltzhoover's South Hills Junction, one of Pittsburgh's major transportation hubs, made the community an optimal location for those working in the downtown area. Trolleys carried people to work across the three rivers and up and down the mountainous terrain (see Figure 1). Beltzhoover thrived well into the 1970s. Families and homeowners took pride in their community. Yards and vegetable gardens were well kept, luxury cars lined the streets, and Beltzhoover boasted of one of the hottest nightclubs in Pittsburgh.

As a result of the declining steel industry, by the early 1980s Beltzhoover lost a significant portion of its population and subsequently transformed into a predominantly African American neighborhood as White families and business owners moved away (N. Bey, personal communication, June 9, 2010). The vacant storefronts on Climax Street, where we lived, often compelled my brother and me to ask about our neighborhood's history (see Figure 2). Our queries prompted my father and uncles to share stories about Beltzhoover in the 1950s. Thanks to our elders, Beltzhoover's boarded storefronts came to life as settings for amazing stories about their childhood mischief. Tales varied based on points of view or one's ability to recollect; we often heard multiple versions of the same story. While some focused on the details of events or time periods, others further illustrated the characteristics of people and places. Shattering voices, uncanny imitations, and thunderous laughter were the norm. Following these reenactments our elders engaged in debates about past events and people who had long since passed away. As a result, we took advantage of opportunities to reconstruct stories after listening to multiple testimonies. Despite the economic and moral decay taking hold of our city, the inspiring stories of my elders provided education, amusement, and a source of communal pride. I am thankful to descend from a family who shares a passion and talent for storytelling. Their stories continue to serve me in my teaching and in my studio practice.

Significance of Community Narratives

Through the 1980s, Beltzhoover organized an annual spectacular community day parade in which all of the local business owners participated alongside organizations, workers' unions, drill teams, musicians, clowns, and Clydesdale horses (see Figures 3 and 4). As a child I began to question the apparent disconnect between the represented African American professionals/rich history of our community, and my school lessons. On one rare occasion, master storyteller and Beltzhoover native Temujin Ekunfeo visited as a guest speaker. Ekunfeo, who initially trained as an anthropologist, is a neighborhood icon with more than 40 years of storytelling experience. Donned in West African garb and long beaded necklaces, Ekunfeo captivated us with his stories each year during our community day festival. His tales ranged in influence from Yorba to comedian Buddy Hackett, and instilled a great sense of community pride. He weaved in his knowledge of African folklore with our familiar urban reality (see Figure 5). For years to come I wondered why teachers did not host more Beltzhoover residents as storytellers.

As elders pass and historical structures are demolished, teachers and elders face additional challenges when attempting to prompt neighborhood histories to expand upon through meaning-making activities. How do we rediscover the once vital places, people, and events of our community histories? Who tells the "valuable" stories in our neighborhoods? What is the benefit of pursuing these stories for art education pedagogy?

Narratives can validate people and places, which are otherwise forced to play a marginal role in our school curriculum (Kovach, 2005). The stories that are told, as well as those that are not told, equally shape the identities of people and places within our communities (Carpenter, 2003). Through telling,

above
Figure 3. Beltzhoover Community Day Parade, c.1986. Brass band marches down Gearing Avenue in front of boarded storefront (formerly Italian owned shoe repair and tailor shop). Photo courtesy of Nicole Stevens.

left
Figure 4. Beltzhoover Community Day Parade, c.1986. Beltzhoover "High Steppers" marching down Gearing Avenue. Photo courtesy of Nicole Stevens.

narrators can learn about themselves and others can learn about particular people, lifestyles, and time periods. Through these exchanges students can play a critical role in how their neighborhood histories are remembered by envisioning "alternative realities and engaging in remaking their worlds" (Holloway & Krensky, 2001, p. 358). Narrative and storytelling are forms of oral history. Oral history is the recording, preservation, and interpretation of historical information based on the tellers' personal experiences and opinions. In the following section I will discuss two sites where one might collect oral histories in exploring the identity of a neighborhood and its evolution.

Taggart's Garage

As a young boy I discovered an auto mechanic's garage while wandering in the alley behind my uncle's house. I am sure I had experienced the interior of a mechanic's shop before then, but there were a few things that distinguished this one from the others. It was not located in a strip mall or in an industrial park—it was in our neighborhood. It was not a commercial garage but it contained many similar visual elements including: tools, racing posters, pin-up girls, automotive advertisements/calendars, and a keen scent of oil and gasoline. There were usually a few other cars on jack-stands in the large driveway outside of the main garage where John Taggart, the owner, worked. Taggart, a house painter by trade, was in his early 50s and learned auto mechanics as a boy in rural Georgia. There in his alley, teenage boys worked on their own vehicles alongside him. Taggart generously shared his years of experience and all of his state-of the-art tools. At the time I was less concerned with mechanics and more interested in listening to older boys in the alley talk about their teenage interests.

After discovering the garage I spent less time playing in the yard and more time listening at the fence or trying to get a glimpse of the mysterious covered racecar next to Taggart's workstation. All one could see were its giant bald tires and many of us were overwhelmed by the car's mystique. After looking more intently I noticed that some of the posters and photos gracing the walls of the shop included photographs of a younger John Taggart wearing a racing helmet at the wheel of various racecars. Others told me that before my time, Taggart cruised his racecar down Climax Street in the annual community day parade. As boys, my brother and I loved to watch Evel Knievel, a popular daredevil from the 1970s, attempt impossible feats on his motorcycle. It was uncommon for boys like us to associate with racecar drivers. We often fantasized about performing our own stunts in Taggart's racecar during the Beltzhoover parade.

As we grew older we continued to visit Taggart's garage on our way to the local recreation center where we listened to him recount his exploits in a thick Southern drawl. He was a demonstrative man with skillful comedic timing. According to Riessman (2008), when narrators act out stories their presence offers a sense of immediacy, which opens up a multilateral space for questioning and incorporating others' stories, queries, and reinterpretations. Past actions appear as if happening in the present, for time collapses as the past and present fuse. The speaker's experimental involvement engages the listener emotionally, creating a "two way narrative contract between

Figure 5. Beltzhoover resident and master storyteller Temujin Ekunfeo shares a story with Phillips Elementary School children, 2011. Photo courtesy of Temujin Ekunfeo.

teller and audience" (p. 109). Seemingly the foretold stories in the garage activated the various images—advertisements, racing wheels, car accessories, and bikini-clad girls—which all merged into our own imagined stories. For years to come, Taggart's garage became the set for many of our stories and imaginative explorations.

After I purchased my first used car, I inevitably began spending more time at Taggart's garage. Few of us could afford the upkeep of our vehicles. Although he was usually busy working on engines to supplement his own income, Taggart always found time to teach us basic car maintenance. Taggart also was an avid fisherman and sometimes fished with some of the young men in the community. He was a great role model who taught us self-reliance and cautioned us to do our own tune-ups, break replacements, and oil changes, eliminating the need to depend on anyone else. He would often jokingly exclaim, "If you learn how to do this, you won't have to give all of your money up to the White man!" Through Taggart's garage we gained exposure to a complexity of issues through various stages of our lives. Despite the troubles and apparent dangers of our neighborhood, his garage provided us with a safe environment where we could explore and indulge our curiosities.

Fats' Gym

As adolescents, my younger brother and I also spent time watching young men train at the "Warrington Boys Club," better known as "Fats' Gym," just a block away from Taggart's place. A full-size boxing ring, posters of prize fighters, punching bags, free weights, and sweaty young men in their late teens lifting, throwing jabs, and jumping rope occupied the basement level of this large old apartment building on Warrington Avenue. Fats, an old boxing trainer who lived upstairs, facilitated this transformative space for young men who could have otherwise easily found trouble in the city streets. Fats kept many young men on the straight and narrow throughout their turbulent adolescent years. A select few were even trusted with keys to the facility and supervised serious fighters in the evenings. Although the equipment left something to be desired, Fats gained sponsorship for his program through Pittsburgh City Parks, making it free for all. Fats was a loving but strict old man with high hopes for all of his fighters, both in and out of the ring (R. Lee, personal communication, June 14, 2010). He was a well-respected member of the community who cultivated a climate where drugs, alcohol, foul language, and nonsense were not tolerated. Although I never personally experienced the benefit of Fats' wisdom or discipline, I witnessed him quickly set young men straight on many occasions.

My friends and I were too young to train, but for us working with Fats was a right of passage. We longed to one day dance in that ring with aspirations of making our elders proud. Many teenage boys trained there with hopes of winning the National Golden Glove Tournament. This was the road to the Olympic tryouts and possibly the beginning of a professional fighting career. While few young men advanced beyond the regional championship, Fats' Gym was still a positive alternative to teenage mischief and a neighborhood landmark in the 1970s and '80s (J. Bey, personal communication, May 2, 2010). Sadly, the gym was torn down shortly after Fats passed away in the early 1990s. A vacant lot now stands in the place of this once favored hangout. On warm summer evenings one can sometimes find older men smoking cigarettes and arguing in the lot where Fats' Gym once stood. They often have entertaining debates complete with blow-by-blow reenactments of "who did what and when" during training sessions and at the Golden Glove Tournaments decades before. Because of its profound impact on generations—as a residence, training facility, neighborhood hang out, or even as an overgrown city lot, Fats' Gym is open to multiple readings, connections, and debates about local histories and lived narratives (Carpenter, 2003).

Aesthetic Spaces and Visual Ethnography

Garoian (1999) describes places like Taggart's Garage and Fats' Gym as aesthetic spaces, which can engage community, young and old, in critical discussion. The men who frequented these places often partook in significant exchanges about the social and economic challenges Beltzhoover has endured since the close of Pittsburgh's steel mills and the local Volkswagen factory, and the subsequent population decline. Not only will they share the neighborhood's history leading up to its current obstacles, but they also will provide an intimate connection between the community's past and present conditions. Some might candidly share their personal shortcomings with drugs, crime, and unemployment or the triumphs over these hurdles. Through their respective narratives these spaces become sites for teaching and learning—platforms for revisiting, sharing, analyzing, and contesting cultural, political, and historical points of view (Tavin, 2000).

In the past 50 years Beltzhoover has lost more than one-third of its population. Like many urban communities, the socioeconomic realities of fleeing industry left our neighborhood in shambles. The vacant storefronts that sparked our imaginations are now non-existent; therefore, they no longer prompt oral histories or evidence past economic endeavors. Beltzhoover children now dwell in a landscape of ruinous homes and litter-filled lots, but with the help of oral histories, local archives, and

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social networks, students and teachers can engage in exchanges that sustain and recreate significant neighborhood memories that can restore community pride.

Powell (2010) encourages students to take on the role of visual ethnographers in their arts research endeavors. Visual Ethnography explores the potential of visual media (commercial advertisements, photography, artifacts, texts, video, and hypermedia) and associated representations in social research (Pink, 2001). According to Lai (2010) Visual Ethnography is "not just about studying the field using visual media… It is also about investigating cultural objects and artifacts that are themselves highly organized visual representations with embedded meanings…" (para. 2). Lai (2002) suggested that in addition to collecting and deploying audio-visual media in ethnographic research that we "move beyond visual representation to form refreshed views on things, objects, systems, and archives" (p. 2).

Encouraging students to learn from people and places through collecting and interpreting objects, images, and oral histories resituates art rooms as sites for facilitating research as well as places for creative explorations. While Kimberly Powell (2010) explores visual ethnography on trips to Brazil along with her students, and Dan Serig offers his graduate students opportunities to utilize this methodology in their travels through Ecuador (personal communication, October 11, 2011), students can also rediscover their own neighborhoods through visual ethnography.

In addition to preserving one's community history, teachers can empower students to make their own archival contributions by sharing that which they find of significance in their attics, basements, garages, and family albums. In 1997 Mark Klett, Director of the Rephotographic Survey Project of the 1970s, embarked on a project referred to as Third View. Klett, along with his team of photographers, spent several years re-photographing historic western American landscape photographs (geographical surveys of the 1860s and '70s), which they initially documented in 1970s. In the final series of photographs, his team employed visual ethnography as they additionally interviewed locals and collected other relevant materials for interpreting sites and their

top
Figure 6. Beltzhoover, 1918 (Gearing Street from Lafferty Avenue). The neighborhood was still in its formative stages. Local businesses were beginning to thrive. Many of the roads were not yet paved. Photo courtesy of Pittsburgh City Photographer Collection, 1901-2002, AIS.1971.05, Archives Service Center, University of Pittsburgh.

center
Figure 7. Beltzhoover, 1963, "Second Site" (Gearing Street from Lafferty Avenue). My two older brothers frequented the A & P store and Laundromat on Gearing Avenue (pictured here in the far right corner) in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Three bars, a restaurant, and a hotel occupied the same block. Most of these businesses have been closed and boarded since I could remember. Photo courtesy of Jamil Bey.

bottom
Figure 8. Beltzhoover, 2012, "Third View" (Gearing Street from Lafferty Avenue). The entire block of businesses is now leveled. One modest cinderblock structure, Beltzhoover Community Center (not in view), was since erected in the early 1990s. One would never know that Beltzhoover was once a self-sustaining community by the looks of it today. Photo courtesy of Jamil Bey.

evolution over time (Klett, Bajakian, Fox, Marshall, Ueshina, & Wolfe, 2004). Through the execution of "Rephotography" students can connect local and family histories to their current relationship to their neighborhoods (see Figures 6-8). Although it is primarily utilized as social media, Facebook can also be a useful research tool for locating community residents and exchanging historical photographs (see Figures 9 & 10). In addition to collectively creating "Rephotographs," teachers and students can record and interpret data as they:

- Conduct community fieldtrips to once thriving areas.
- Invite elders to the classroom to share oral histories and neighborhood memorabilia. Like the aforementioned boarded structures, these stories/images/objects can prompt memories and evoke poignant exchanges.
- Visit personal and public archives and neighborhood centers. Many city and transportation center archives hold digitized photographs of most neighborhoods.
- Recreate/reinterpret historical gaps (those aspects of people, places, and events that can not be located) through various media (writing, performance, and/or visual arts).

The process through which local histories are accessed is not often modeled in our teacher education programs; therefore, those teachers who don't have pre-established connections in the community may face challenges when attempting to implement local historical projects. However, teachers can solicit the support of local historical societies, YMCAs, senior and community centers, or churches to find the advocacy they will need to launch a community history project or suggest a knowledgeable and friendly community guest speaker. Teachers can also model their projects on those with successful outcomes throughout the country.

Joan Bryant, Associate Professor in the Department of African American Studies at Syracuse University in New York, is the primary investigator of the Black Syracuse project. The aim of the project is to document the public history of Syracuse's once thriving African American population. Using the work of photographer and community activist Richard Breland as its foundation, the project combines video-recorded oral histories—digital preservation of materials from local groups, churches, and individuals—and conventional archival materials.

top
Figure 9. Beltzhoover, 1908, Chalfont Street. Beautiful Beltzhoover homes and freshly paved road. Photo courtesy of Pittsburgh City Photographer Collection, 1901-2002, AIS.1971.05, Archives Service Center, University of Pittsburgh.

center
Figure 10. Beltzhoover, 2012. Chalfont Street is now sparsely populated. Much of the neighborhood has been reclaimed by the Pennsylvania landscape. Photo courtesy of Jamil Bey.

bottom
Figure 11. Martin Irons & Clara Brown, 1956 (now part of the Black Syracuse Archive and oral history project). Photo courtesy of Richard Breland.

Our cityscapes offer infinite possibilities for locating meaningful connections.

The project has sparked exhibitions and programming in the Syracuse area and will culminate with an online historical database (Holmes, 2011) (see Figure 11). Through contextualizing these data, students can make personal connections, re-acquaint themselves with their neighborhoods, and embark on experiences beyond conventional art curricula. These spaces compel us to challenge cultural assumptions, question social narratives, and critically examine our respective stances on a diversity of issues (Carpenter, 2003). As students learn through elders' stories they can look comparatively at the physical, social, political, economic, and demographic changes in their neighborhoods.

Conclusion

It is critical that educators validate local content to assist students in creating spaces wherein they can work toward sustaining the identities of their neighborhoods. In this article I discussed some of the people, places, and events that made an impression on me during my childhood. While I made efforts to illustrate their importance through short vignettes, their physical presence, testimonies, and associated artifacts can facilitate deeper connections and extensions of meaning. I suggest that teachers invite their neighborhood elders into the classroom or take fieldtrips to their homes or former workplaces. Whether these places are dormant or operational, they yield possibilities for negotiating past and present experiences. Students might explore the history of these boarded grocery stores or those of which are now under new ownership. For example, they can consider the circumstances that led to the ownership of a family-owned Beltzhoover store changing hands from an Italian family to an African American family to its current owners, a Korean family, who do not reside in the community. How has this environment changed socially, economically, and visually? What was the climate when these communities thrived and the dilapidated, graffiti-covered garages sheltered new luxury cars? These spaces must be reactivated as gardens for planting metaphors where teachers, students, and community members alike can weave narratives and reap lost legacies.

Without places wherein one can renegotiate the relationship of past and present events and experiences, individuals and communities can become alienated from their own histories (Coombes, 2003). By evoking conversations on lived histories through artifacts and various media, community members and students can play an active role in how our neighborhood histories are remembered. From mom-and-pop stores to the legacies of Fats and Taggart, our cityscapes offer infinite possibilities for locating meaningful connections to our urban neighborhoods. By way of the art classroom, students can reactivate perceivably dormant spaces, rediscover forgotten local heroes, and impress upon collective memories through making connections, deconstructing meanings, or making artistic creations.

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