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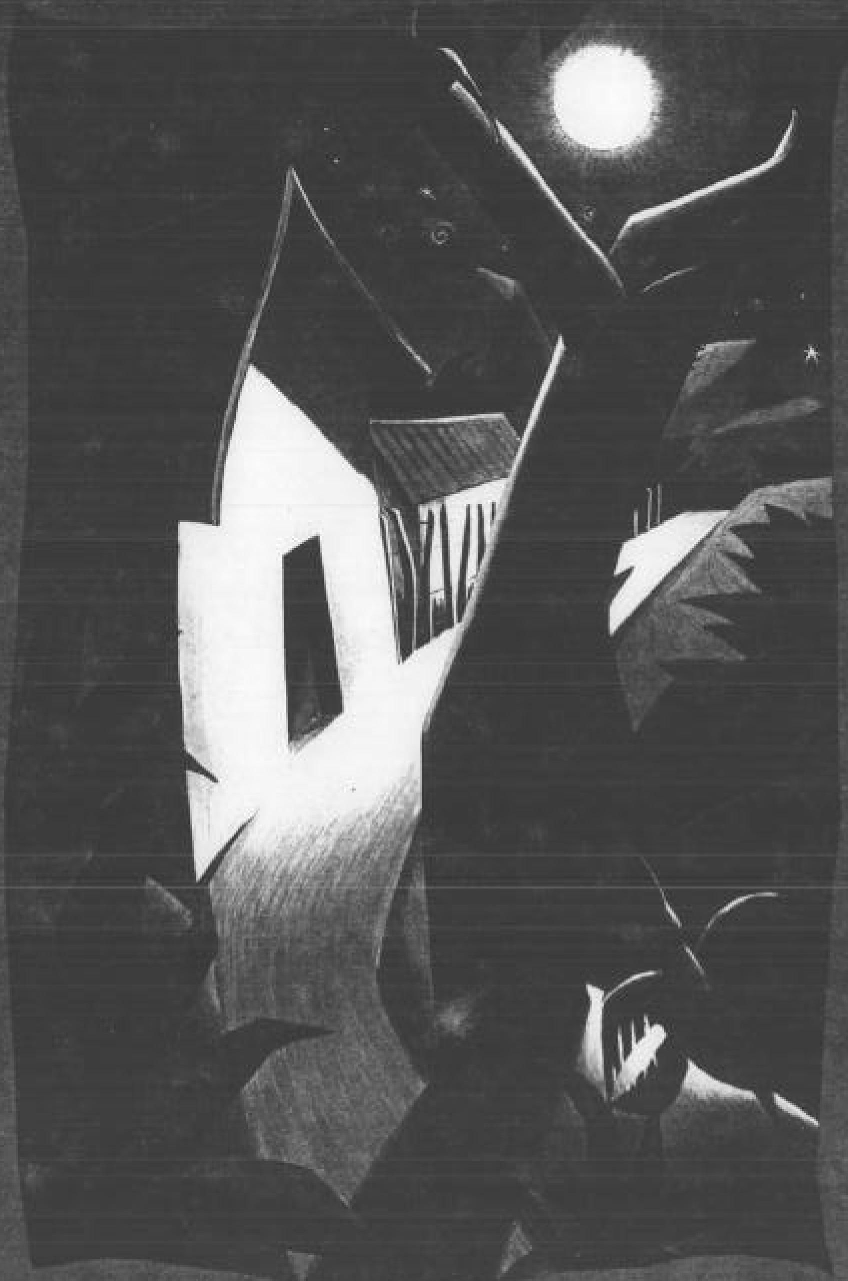
CULTURAL READINGS FOR CONTEMPORARY WRITERS



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space into public-to-private hierarchies, with gates and doors to control boundary crossings, has reflected this. Nolli's famous map of Rome vividly depicted it. Now, as cyberspace cities emerge, a similar framework of distinctions and expectations is—with much argument—being constructed, and electronic plazas, forums, lobbies, walls, doors, locks, members-only clubs, and private rooms are being invented and deployed. Perhaps some electronic cartographer of the future will produce an appropriately nuanced Nolli map of the Net.

Working with the Text

1. This chapter from Mitchell's book *City of Bits* is titled "Soft Cities." Was it inevitable that "cyberspace" would be described as a city? He speaks of electronic environments as providing "a new urbanism freed from the constraints of physical space." In what ways does he argue that cyberspace is like an "urban" environment? What constraints (if not physical ones) does he say are present even in these new environments?

2. Mitchell makes the distinction between "virtual communities" (imaginary places constructed entirely on the Internet) and "site-specific communities" (physical places served by an electronic network). What are some of the characteristics of each? What are their differences? What kind of impact might an electronic community network (for a site-specific community) have on the actual physical community? What might an electronic dimension add to or take away from a local place? Find an example on the World Wide Web of a community network like the Cleveland Free Net that he describes. How is the local place represented electronically? What kinds of groups, activities, or relationships are represented there?

3. A significant portion of Mitchell's discussion concerns "public cyberspace"—the need to create and preserve "public" spaces on the Internet that people can share. Here he sees many parallels to urban planning. What are some of these parallels? Do you agree with his assertion that "some part of our emerging electronic habitat should be set aside for public uses"? Where are those public spaces in your physical community now? Could they be replaced, created, or enhanced with public electronic spaces?

4. How do Mitchell's metaphors of "cities" for cyberspace compare to the tendency of early Internet theorists to refer to cyberspace as a frontier? Do "soft cities" retain any frontier qualities, or do they represent the "civilized" version of cyberspace?

5. Toward the essay's conclusion, Mitchell says: "In economically disadvantaged communities, where adequate public facilities of a traditional kind do not exist, the possibility of providing public cyberspace may become an important community development issue. Increasingly, communities and their planners will have to consider tradeoffs between investing scarce resources in creating or upgrading parks and community buildings and putting the money into effective electronic networks." Do you agree with him that this is a "tradeoff"? Would significant electronic resources providing "public cyberspace" substitute for "upgrading parks and community buildings"? Could "public cyberspace" provide alternative space for the economically disadvantaged?

Understanding Community in the Information Age

STEVEN G. JONES

■ Steven G. Jones, who received his doctorate in communication from the University of Illinois, currently teaches at the University of Tulsa in Oklahoma. He has written extensively about popular music as a form of communication and published *Rock Formation: Music, Technology, and Mass Communication* in 1992. He also edited the collection *Cybersociety: Computer-Mediated Communication and Community* (1995), in which the following essay appears, as well as the more recent *Virtual Culture* (1998). Of his work, Jones has written, "My own particular interests have led me to examine the mediation of reality, of authentic experience and its interpretation, as we devise and develop technologies of simulation like virtual reality." In "Understanding Community in the Information Age," he raises a central question about virtual communities: "Can [computer-mediated communication] be understood to build communities and form a part of the conduct of public life, as other forms of communication seem to, or does CMC problematize our very notions of community and public life?"

Whether by choice or accident, by design or politics (or some complex combination of each), the United States (followed closely by many other countries) is embarking on a building project the likes of which have not been seen since the Eisenhower era. Indeed, there are startling parallels between the current project, the "information highway," and the one spurred on by both world wars, the interstate highway system—not the least of which is the reliance on the word "highway" and the romantic connotations of the open road (and that Vice President Al Gore, Jr.'s father was instrumental in the development of the federal highway system). Another parallel is the initially military motivation for highway building (established by Thomas Jefferson, among others) and the military origins of the most prominent information highway, the Internet, in defense department computer networks linked to university research centers. 1

Patton (1986), in his history of the U.S. interstate system, says that it was 2

> the most expensive and elaborate public works program of all time, offer[ing] a vision of social and economic engineering. It was planned to be at once a Keynesian economic driver and a geographic equalizer, an instrument for present prosperity and the armature of a vision of the future. It was at once the last program of the New Deal and the first space program. (p. 17)

The information highway being vociferously championed by the Clinton administration and by Vice President Al Gore also combines ideas about the economic and

social direction of the United States. It is in a sense the first program of the new New Deal and, some say, the last space program. Patton's comments about the effects that interstates have had on cities and communities bear especially close scrutiny, as they evoke images of what the information highway may as well do to social formations. Highways, Patton says,

> have had monstrous side effects. They have often rolled, like some gigantic version of the machines that build them, through cities, splitting communities off into ghettos, displacing people, and crushing the intimacies of old cities. . . .
> While promising to bring us closer, highways in fact cater to our sense of separateness. (p. 20)

Critical to the rhetoric surrounding the information highway is the promise of a renewed sense of community and, in many instances, new types and formations of community. Computer-mediated communication, it seems, will do by way of electronic pathways what cement roads were unable to do, namely, connect us rather than atomize us, put us at the controls of a "vehicle" and yet not detach us from the rest of the world.

3 If that is to be so, it is not premature to ask questions about these new formations. What might electronic communities be like? Most forecasters, like Howard Rheingold (1993), envision them as a kind of ultimate flowering of community, a place (and there is no mistaking in these visions that it is place that is at stake) where individuals shape their own community by choosing which other communities to belong to. Thus a paradox long haunting America is solved in a particularly American way; we will be able to forge our own places from among the many that exist, not by creating new places but by simply choosing from the menu of those available. Another of the many questions we must ask about electronic communities is: What is the nature of individual members' commitments to them? In the physical world, community members must live together. When community membership is in no small way a simple matter of subscribing or unsubscribing to a bulletin board or electronic newsgroup, is the nature of interaction different simply because one may disengage with little or no consequence? . . .

4 Computer-mediated communication will, it is said, lead us toward a new community: global, local, and everything in between. But the presence of chaos inexorably draws us away from that ideal as the need for control becomes greater and greater. It is most accurate to claim, as Carey (1993) does, that when it comes to proselytizing CMC, "these are ideas that people want or need to be true merely because it would be bewildering to be without them" (p. 172).

5 It may as well be "bewildering" for us to create and learn the norms of on-line worlds, for to learn them is a complex process. It may bring people together insofar as such learning is often collaborative, but it is equally as often frustrating and off-putting. Nevertheless, there is a sense that we are embarking on an adventure in creating new communities and new forms of community, and that sense is fueled by two motives: first, that we *need* new communities and, second, that we *can* create them technologically. Such motives, in turn, arise from what Soja (1989) has called "postmodern geographies," the tensions caused by differentiation and homogenization in the (re)production of space. In the case of CMC, what allows for the reproduction of space is the malleability with which identity can be created and

negotiated, an issue several of the authors in *CyberSociety* take up. Consequently, one must question the potential of CMC for production of social space. Could it perhaps *re*produce "real" social relations in a "virtual" medium?

6 It is more likely that social relations emerging from CMC are between the two poles of production and reproduction. Pushing too close to either pole puts at risk whatever new social construction of reality may arise. And yet any new social formations are at risk of being mythologized and incorporated into the "rhetoric of the electrical sublime" that Carey (1989) identifies. All media, for instance, have been touted for their potential for education. Radio and television, in particular, were early on promoted as tools for education, and CMC is no different. In an article on computer technology in schools, one author wrote, "At a time when American schools are receiving less and less money to cope with growing social upheaval, telecomputing seems to offer a glimmer of hope, enlivening both teachers and students even as it compels a striking realignment of relationships within the classroom" (Leslie, 1993, p. 90).

7 There is no doubt that CMC is linked inextricably to education. Even the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) now seeks

> to develop community-wide education and information services. These publicly accessible interactive services will take full advantage of widely available communications and information technologies, particularly inexpensive computers linked by telephone lines.
> Who will mobilize the development of high-quality, non-commercial, educational and public services that will provide all Americans with the opportunities for learning, staying healthy, and participating in cultural and civic affairs—services crucial to the well-being of society as a whole? (from 1993 solicitation guidelines)

The CPB's comments parallel those made when radio and TV were introduced (the emphasis then was on broadcasting in the public interest, convenience, and necessity). Even Jaron Lanier, a pioneering virtual reality programmer and engineer, has said, "Television wasn't planned well enough and I think it's been a real disaster in this country" ("Virtual Reality," 1992, p. 6). Similarly, Quarterman (1993) has said, "Radio and television produced a different society. Computer networks will, too. Perhaps this time we can avoid a few mistakes" (p. 49). Such comments obfuscate the power behind decisions that go into planning and organizing media. Who will plan, how will we plan, and how will we account in our planning for unanticipated consequences? Media regulation in the U.S. has hardly been the most successful enterprise. Why should we believe regulating CMC will be different?

8 At the heart of comments like Lanier's and Quarterman's is a pervasive sense that we can learn from the "mistakes" we believe we've made using older media. Computer-mediated communication (and computers generally) gives us a sense that we can start over and learn from the past. Their comments point out that we have a fundamental need, or at least hope, for something better to come from future media.

9 But what exactly are we hoping *for*? The answer to that question is necessarily linked to questions about who we are hoping to be as a society, and that, in turn, is tied to issues of identity and discourse. Who are we when we are on-line? The

question becomes even more important as new technologies are developed for creating "agents" or "alters" that roam the network for us when we are away from our terminals. . . .

CMC, of course, is not just a tool; it is at once technology, medium, and engine of social relations. It not only structures social relations, it is the space within which the relations occur and the tool that individuals use to enter that space. It is more than the context within which social relations occur (although it is that, too) for it is commented on and imaginatively constructed by symbolic processes initiated and maintained by individuals and groups. The difficulty in defining space is clear in the zeal with which many have latched onto other derivative terms. For instance, yet more evidence of the prophetic nature of rhetoric about CMC is the pervasive use of the word "cyberspace," coined by William Gibson, a writer of fiction, to put a finger on a space at once real in its effects and illusory in its lack of physical presence. The "space race" of the 1950s and 1960s is indeed over. We no longer look to the stars and the thermodynamic engines that will transport us to them but to sites unknown and unseen (perhaps unseeable) and the ever smaller electronic engines that seem to effortlessly and without danger bring this space to us.

But is it even possible to pin down space to any particular definition? As Benedikt (1991) correctly observes, "Space, for most of us, hovers between ordinary physical existence and something other" (p. 125). Where we find it hovering is, as Soja (1989) notes, in "socially produced space, [where] spatiality can be distinguished from the physical space of material nature and the mental space of cognition and representation, each of which is used and incorporated into the construction of spatiality but cannot be conceptualized as its equivalent" (p. 120). . . .

The importance of CMC and its attendant social structures lies not only in interpretation and narrative, acts that can fix and structure, but in the sense of mobility with which one can move (narratively and otherwise) through the social space. Mobility has two meanings in this case. First, it is clearly an ability to "move" from place to place without having physically traveled. But, second, it is also a mobility of status, class, social role, and character. Like the boulevardiers or the denizens of Nevsky Prospect described by Berman (1982), the citizens of cyberspace (or the "net," as it is commonly called by its evanescent residents) "come here to see and be seen, and to communicate their visions to one another, not for any ulterior purpose, without greed or competition, but as an end in itself" (p. 196). The difference between those on the net and those on the street is encompassed in a distinction made by Soja (1989): "Just as space, time, and matter delineate and encompass the essential qualities of the physical world, spatiality, temporality, and social being can be seen as the abstract dimensions which together comprise all facets of human existence" (p. 25).

In cyberspace, spatiality is largely illusory (at least until Gibson's accounts of its visualization are realized), and temporality is problematized by the instantaneity of CMC and the ability to roam the net with "agents," software constructs that are automated representatives able to retrieve information and/or interact on the net. What is left is social being, and that too is problematic. Is the social actor in cyberspace mass-mediated, a mass-mediator, a public figure, or a private individual engaged in close, special interrelation? As Soja sees it in a summary of the dialectic between space and social life,

> The spatio-temporal structuring of social life defines how social action and relationship (including class relations) are materially constituted, made concrete. The constitution/concretization process is problematic, filled with contradiction and struggle (amidst much that is recursive and routinized). Contradictions arise primarily from the duality of produced space as both outcome/embodiment/product and medium/presupposition/producer of social activity. (p. 129)

No matter how ill-defined the space of cyberspace, the space we occupy as social beings is as affected by CMC. As Gillespie and Robins (1989) note, "New communications technologies do not just impact upon places; places and the social processes and social relationships they embody also affect how such technological systems are designed, implemented and used" (p. 7).

Soja's comments and the questions that arise from them speak to the heart of the many contradictions and problems embodied in CMC. On the one hand, it appears to foster community, or at least the sense of community, among its users. On the other hand, it embodies the impersonal communication of the computer and of the written word, the "kind of imitation talking" Ong (1982, p. 102) aptly describes. In that fashion, CMC wears on its sleeve the most important dichotomy that Jensen (1990) identifies in her book *Redeeming Modernity*. Jensen writes that traditional life, supposedly, "was marked by face-to-face, intimate relationships among friends, while modern life is characterized by distant, impersonal contact among strangers. Communities are defined as shared, close, and intimate, while societies are defined as separate, distanced, and anonymous" (p. 71).

Can CMC be understood to build communities and form a part of the conduct of public life, as other forms of communication seem to, or does CMC problematize our very notions of community and public life? . . .

Communities formed by CMC have been called "virtual communities" and defined as "incontrovertibly social spaces in which people still meet face-to-face, but under new definitions of both 'meet' and 'face'. . . . [V]irtual communities [are] passage points for collections of common beliefs and practices that united people who were physically separated" (Stone, 1991, p. 85). In that sense, cyberspace hasn't a "where" (although there are "sites" or "nodes" at which users gather). Rather, the space of cyberspace is predicated on knowledge and information, on the common beliefs and practices of a society abstracted from physical space. Part of that knowledge and information, though, lies in simply knowing how to navigate cyberspace. But the important element in cyberspatial social relations is the sharing of information. It is not sharing in the sense of *transmission* of information that binds communities in cyberspace. It is the ritual sharing of information (Carey, 1989) that pulls it together. That sharing creates the second kind of community that Carey (1993) identifies as arising from the growth of cities during the late 19th and early 20th century, the one

> formed by imaginative diaspora—cosmopolitans and the new professionals who lived in the imaginative worlds of politics, art, fashion, medicine, law and so forth. These diasporic groups were twisted and knotted into one another within urban life. They were given form by the symbolic interactions of the city and the ecology of media, who reported on and defined these groups to

> one another, fostered and intensified antagonisms among them, and sought forms of mutual accommodation. (p. 178)

Such a formation is reoccuring in the discourse within CMC and without it, in the conversations its participants have on-line and off, and in the media coverage of electronic communication, electronic communities, and virtual reality. . . .

THE ILLUSION OF COMMUNITY

17 Issues of identity ought to be front and center with those of community as CMC develops. As Cheney (1991) correctly claims, "One's identity is somehow related to the larger social order. However [there is] disagree[ment] . . . on what kind of relationship this entails" (p. 10). What is most important is that identity is related directly to the increase in size of social organizations. The necessity to "keep track" of individuals by way of Social Security numbers and other bureaucratic devices that connect an individual to a larger entity make identification a matter of organization too, rather than a matter of self-definition. Cheney's (1991) comment that "there has been a transformation of the term 'identity' from its 'sameness' meaning to its 'essence' meaning" (p. 13) is significant precisely because identity as mediated in cyberspace carries no essential meanings. Alliances based on "sameness" may form and dissolve. Yet the ideas that Cheney borrows from Burke that assist him in developing a definition of identity "associated with the individual that must draw upon social and collective resources for its meaning" (p. 20) do not apply equally in CMC. CMC users may use similar resources to develop and structure meaning but without the affective alliances that Cheney implies are necessary.

18 Rheingold (1993) attempts to define how identity will be constructed via CMC:

> We reduce and encode our identities as words on a screen, decode and unpack the identities of others. The way we use these words, the stories (true and false) we tell about ourselves (or about the identity we want people to believe us to be) is what determines our identities in cyberspace. The aggregation of personae, interacting with each other, determines the nature of the collective culture. (p. 61)

One might suppose the same is true as to the aggregation of particular traits that determine the nature of the individual. However, the symbolic processes that Rheingold elides through use of such words as "encode" and "unpack" (themselves taken from the language of computer software) are fraught with unproblematized assumptions about the work that humans perform in search of their own identities and those of others. Interaction ought not be substituted for community, or, for that matter, for communication, and to uncritically accept connections between personae, individuals, and community inadvisable.

19 It will be unfortunate, too, if we uncritically accept that CMC will usher in the great new era that other media of communication have failed to bring us. It is not, as virtual reality pioneer Jaron Lanier says, that television has failed us because it "wasn't planned well enough" ("Virtual Reality," 1992, p. 6); it is that organization and planning are not necessarily appropriate processes for constructing or recapturing the sense of community for which we are nostalgic. Bender (1978) sharply criticizes those who seek "to recapture community by imputing it to large-scale organizations and to locality-based social activity regardless of the quality of human

relationships that characterize these contexts" (p. 143). Instead, Bender finds community in the midst of a transformation and asks us to heed his call that we not, by way of our nostalgia, limit definitions of community to that which "seventeenth-century New Englanders knew" (p. 146), although with electronic town hall meetings and the like we seem to be doing precisely that. One example can be found in Rheingold's work. Although often critical in much of his writing, it is clear from the comparisons that Rheingold (1993) makes to other forms of community that what he calls "virtual communities" are predicated on nostalgic (and romantic) ideals:

> It's a bit like a neighborhood pub or coffee shop. It's a little like a salon, where I can participate in a hundred ongoing conversations with people who don't care what I look like or sound like, but who do care how I think and communicate. There are seminars and word fights in different corners. (p. 66)
>
> Virtual communities might be real communities, they might be pseudocommunities, or they might be something entirely new in the realm of social contracts, but I believe they are in part a response to the hunger for community that has followed the disintegration of traditional communities around the world. (p. 62).

Of course, it is difficult to imagine what new on-line communities may be like, and it is far easier to use our memories and myths as we construct them. What is more important than simply understanding the construction we are undertaking is to notice that it is peculiar and particular to the computer. Because these machines are seen as "linking" machines (they link information, data, communication, sound, and image through the common language of digital encoding), to borrow from Jensen (1990), they inherently affect the ways we think of linking up to each other, and thus they fit squarely into our concerns about community. Media technologies that have largely been tied to the "transportation" view of communication mentioned earlier were developed to overcome space and time. The computer, in particular, is an "efficiency" machine, purporting to ever increase its speed. But unlike those technologies, the computer used for communication is a technology to be understood from the "ritual" view of communication, for once time and space have been overcome (or at least rendered surmountable) the spur for development is connection, linkage. Once we can surmount time and space and "be" anywhere, we must choose a "where" at which to be, and the computer's functionality lies in its power to make us organize our desires about the spaces we visit and stay in.

20 The question remains, though, whether or not the communities we may form by way of CMC will, or even ought to, be part of our public culture. If so, then perhaps it would be best to not understand them as communities. As Bender (1978) writes, "Our public lives do not provide an experience of community. The mutuality and sentiment characteristic of community cannot and need not be achieved in public. We must be careful to distinguish between these two contexts of social experience" (p. 148). The manner in which we seek to find community, empowerment, and political action all embedded in our ability to use CMC is thereby troubling. No one medium, no one technology, has been able to provide those elements in combination, and often we have been unable to find them in any media. CMC has potential for a variety of consequences, some anticipated, some not. A critical awareness of the social transformations that have occurred and continue to occur with or

without technology will be our best ally as we incorporate CMC into contemporary social life.

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Working with the Text

1. Jones argues that "critical to the rhetoric surrounding the information highway is the promise of a renewed sense of community and, in many instances, new types and formations of community. Computer-mediated communication, it seems, will do by way of electronic pathways what cement

roads were unable to do, namely, connect us rather than atomize us. . . ." Elsewhere he questions the "potential of Computer Mediated Communication for production of social space," and he asks if CMC can "reproduce 'real' social relations in a 'virtual' medium."

What does he mean by "real" social relations? That is, what seem to be Jones's criteria for what makes social relations "real"? Do you think that CMC can produce "real" communities and "real" social relations? Are these new social relations positive? Is CMC connecting us or atomizing us? Do you think this issue can be evaluated or resolved at this point? Does it matter? Use any online communication with which you are familiar as a point of departure for this discussion.

2. Quoting communications theorist James Carey, Jones makes a distinction between the use of communications technologies for the "transmission" of information and their use for the "ritual sharing of information." The implication is that while the transmission of information is important, it is the "rituals" of communication that hold groups of people together as communities. Based on your experience of "cyberspace"—whether in E-mail, MOOs, MUDs, IRC, chat rooms, or newsgroups—what would you say are the "ritual" dimensions of communication online? How are they like and unlike the rituals of communication in everyday life—or the rituals of communication in a newspaper or on television?

3. When speaking of some people's hopes for the potential of online communities, Jones asks, "But what exactly are we hoping for?" "The answer to that question," he continues, "is necessarily linked to questions about who we are hoping to be as a society, and that, in turn, is tied to issues of identity and discourse. Who are we when we are on-line?" Jones implies that there is a close relationship between individual identity and the identity and character of a community. How does individual identity contribute to a larger communal identity in an online environment? How does the nature of an environment—in this case a "socially produced space"—shape the behavior of individuals? How might the ability to sign on and off at will, or the ability to represent identity any way we like, affect the kind of community that individuals can form online?

4. Jones notes that some people believe that new online communities are filling a need for community that is lacking in modern society. Do you agree with that view? Do you think that online communities compensate for something that is missing? Do people who participate in online communities find something that they need but don't get elsewhere? If you have participated in online communities and conversations, consider how your interactions are similar to or different from those in your everyday life.

Sex, Death, and Machinery, or How I Fell in Love with My Prosthesis

ALLUCQUÈRE ROSANNE STONE

■ In the following introduction to her 1996 book, *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age*, Allucquère Rosanne Stone posits that we are passing from a "mechanical age" into a "virtual age." This new age is characterized by a "gradual change that has come over the relationship between sense of self and the body, and the relationship between individual and group." As computers become, as Stone puts it, "arenas for social experience," our notions of selfhood, space, and communication may well undergo drastic changes. Stone teaches at the University of Texas at Austin.

It started this afternoon when I looked down at my boots. I was emerging from a stall in the women's room in my department. The university was closed for the holidays. The room was quite silent except for the distant rush of the air conditioning, imparting to the cramped institutional space the mechanical qualities of a submarine. I was idly adjusting my clothing, thinking of nothing in particular, when I happened to look down, and there they were: My boots. Two completely unremarkable boots. They were right where they belonged, on the ends of my legs. Presumably my feet were inside. 1

I felt a sudden thrill of terror. 2

Maybe, I suppose, the boots could have reminded me of some long-buried trauma, of the sort that Freudians believe leads to shoe fetishism. But my sudden fear was caused by something quite different. What was driving me was not the extraordinariness of the sight of my own boots, but the ordinariness of them. They were common as grass. In fact, I realized that I hadn't even thought about putting them on. They were *just there*. If you wanted to "get real ugly about it"—as they say in Austin—you might call it a moment of radical existential *Dasein*, in the same way you might say déjà vu again. I had become transparent to myself. Or rather, the *I* that I customarily express and that reflexively defines me through my chosen personal style had become part of the wallpaper. 3

This is hardly a serious problem for some. But I tend to see myself as an entity that has chosen to make its life career out of playing with identity. It sometimes seems as though everything in my past has been a kind of extended excuse for experiments with subject position and interaction. After all, what material is better to experiment with than one's self? Academically speaking, it's not exactly breaking new ground to say that any subject position is a mask. That's well and good, but still most people take some primary subject position for granted. When pressed, they may give lip service to the idea that perhaps even their current "root" persona is also a mask, but nobody really believes it. For all intents and purposes, your "root" persona is *you*. Take that one away, and there's nobody home. 4

Perhaps someone with training in drama already perceives this, but it was a revelation to me. In the social sciences, symbolic interactionists believe that the root persona is always a momentary expression of ongoing negotiations among a horde 5

Thinking and Writing: *Critical Questions Revisited*

1. The Borders of a Community

Consider a specific community to which you belong (or have belonged) that is clearly delineated in terms of both geography and culture. It could be a town, a city neighborhood that is identified by its own name, a suburb, your college or university, a region of the country with which you identify strongly, or the geographic and cultural place that you consider "home."

Analyze the identity of this community in terms of the issues and concepts raised in this chapter. To what extent—and how—is it imagined? Would most of its inhabitants define it in essentially the same way? What symbols represent it? What are some of the stories or myths surrounding its past or present? How coherent is it internally? How is it viewed as being different from neighboring or "rival" communities? How does its representation on maps define its perceived prominence or importance? What are its borders, and how well are they defined? Is it marked by any "frontiers" where interactions with members of other communities take place? What is the nature of these interactions? Do the physical dimensions of place influence its inhabitants' sense of personal identity? Finally, you might also consider how your analysis of this smaller community contributes to—or contradicts—your understanding of larger national communities.

2. Frontier Line Versus Border Zone (Frontier/*La Frontera*)

In her essay on the American frontier, Patricia Limerick says, "If the idea of *la frontera* had anywhere near the standing of the idea of the frontier, we would be well launched toward self-understanding, directed toward a realistic view of this nation's position in the hemisphere and in the world." The distinction that Limerick draws between the American idea of the frontier and the meaning of a "frontier" in other countries is a very important one. In part, the distinction to which she refers is the difference between a line or edge, on the one hand, and a zone, on the other. In the history of the American frontier, the "frontier line" was the place where "civilization" met its opposite. The concept of that meeting point was part of a narrow interpretation of the progress of history, and of the movement of civilized peoples from east to west.

However, the idea of *la frontera* is very different. It is closer to two related definitions presented in other chapters of the "interactive spaces" between cultures: Mary Louise Pratt's notion of the "contact zone" (a place where two cultures meet in an asymmetrical power relationship) and Gloria Anzaldúa's idea of the "borderlands" (a geographic, psychological, and cultural space where differences meet). Limerick, Pratt, and Anzaldúa's focus on borderlands and zones is part of a large and significant shift that has been occurring in the study of culture during the last few years. In this newer way of looking at cultural history, cultures are not seen as separate entities but rather as interdependent—defined from their very roots by the existence, proximity, and mixing of other cultures.

In part, what is implied by the difference between "frontier" and *la frontera* is that the latter provides a way of seeing borders as places of ongoing negotiation between different groups, value systems, and cultural perspectives. In a paper, explore the difference between seeing a border as a frontier—a rigid boundary between cultures—and seeing a border as a "borderland" or "zone." How would these two ways of considering borders differ? What are the implications of their differences for constructing cultural differences? How would each view deal with the creation of images of "otherness"? What are the implications for believing in a sense of cultural purity or integrity? Are there issues in American culture today that are divided along lines that are related to this split between seeing cultural differences along a "frontier" as opposed to a "borderlands"?

3. The Borders of American Identity

In her essay about the Buffalo Bill Museum, Jane Tompkins discusses how accounts of the exciting exploits of Buffalo Bill "play to an inward territory: a Wild West of the psyche that hungered for exercise." Similarly, Patricia Limerick refers to the American frontier as occupying the "uncertain turf along the border between the imagined and actual." In what ways have the imagined and the actual interacted in the cultural construction of America's identity within its geographic boundaries? In what ways has the American frontier always been an "inward territory" as well as a physical one? Looking particularly at works in this chapter by writers such as Frederick Jackson Turner, Patricia Limerick, and Jane Tompkins, discuss the imaginative dimensions of American identity that grow out of the presence and creation of the American frontier. How does Turner connect what are often invoked as "characteristic American values"—individualism, democracy, egalitarianism—to the geography of the United States? How does the construction of those values translate into American folk mythology and images of the American past? How are these "mythic" constructions at odds with historical reality?

4. Limits and Freedom in Imagined Communities

One of the themes running through many of this chapter's readings relates to limits and freedom. In an earlier chapter's essay about the idea of "community" in the Western United States, Daniel Kemmis claims that the essence of "community" comes from the notion of people living within the limits of their environment. In other words, despite whatever physical proximity, economic and social interdependence, or shared values bring people together as a community, the real shaping "boundaries" of that community come from coping with scarce or limited resources. It is interesting to juxtapose that idea with those William Mitchell presents in this chapter about cyberspace. Mitchell believes that locations in cyberspace will develop as "electronic cities," a "new urbanism freed from the constraints of physical space." Indeed, it is the wide open nature of cyberspace—along with its seemingly limitless space and resources—that attracts people to it as a "new frontier." Of course, a similar perception of abundance and limitless land and resources invested the American frontier with such idealistic importance in the first place.

Considering these ideas, write an essay in which you analyze one or more aspects of the relationship among limits, freedom, abundance, and the space in which we imagine our communities. You could approach this topic from the perspective of new computing technologies and the concepts of limits and abundance, such as the metaphors and images we use when thinking about cyberspace (through media images of the Internet and computers, for example). Or you might consider people's attraction to online communities or the use of online resources to offer content and services. How do people working with online resources represent the idea of limits? In what ways are we attracted to "space" (cyberspace, outer space, or any open space) as a place where the tensions of "scarcity" (as they are felt in urban spaces, for example) are absent? Do you think this view of "space" is true?

How do people talk about countries, nations, or regions in terms that imply a limit of resources? To what extent are debates in the United States about immigration, "free

trade," or "buying American" products debates that mix cultural, social, and geographic arguments in the context of limited resources?

5. Describing and Analyzing an Online Virtual Community

Analyze one of the many kinds of virtual communities, such as a MUD, an interactive Web site, an ongoing chat group, or a discussion space. How is this particular kind of social space a community? What criteria are you using to define a community? What are the members of this community like? Are they diverse or similar? What brings them together? What keeps them together? Using this community as a focus, discuss how online communities differ from communities in physical or geographical space. Or, if you select an online network based in a geographical space (such as a city free-net), consider how the online interaction of people in this community relates to the physical space it embodies. How might online communities enhance face-to-face contact? How might it detract from it? What about an evolving sense of ethics, behavior, and conduct? How do people know how to act within this community? Who enforces the rules? How is authority or hierarchy constructed in this community? What needs or desires do online communities fulfill?

CHAPTER **seven**

THE WORLD'S NEW BORDERS:

Globalism Versus Tribalism

Joel Garreau: *The Nine Nations of North America* [essay]
Guillermo Gómez-Peña: *The '90s Culture of Xenophobia: Beyond the Tortilla Curtain* [essay]
Lewis Lapham: *Who and What Is American?* [essay]
Ronald Takaki: *A Different Mirror* [essay]
Richard Rodriguez: *The Fear of Losing a Culture* [essay]
Elaine H. Kim: *Home Is Where the* Han *Is: A Korean American Perspective on the Los Angeles Upheavals* [essay]
Gerald Early: *Understanding Afrocentrism: Why Blacks Dream of a World Without Whites* [essay]
K. Anthony Appiah: *The Multicultural Mistake* [essay]
Gloria Anzaldúa: *La conciencia de la mestiza / Towards a New Consciousness* [essay]
Howard Rheingold: *Disinformocracy* [essay]
William Greider: *One World, Ready or Not* [essay]
Benjamin Barber: *Jihad vs. McWorld* [essay]

Critical Questions for *The World's New Borders*

How are communal identities changing? How are group identity and national identity increasingly at odds in the United States? In what sense is America a global crossroads? What kinds of tensions does this situation create? What impact does it have on American values and ideals? How are borders within the United States and throughout the world changing? How are the world's populations increasingly interconnected? To what extent are these changes economically