

**Embodied Place As Community:  
The Live & Digital Performance of Real Places and Landscapes of Memory**

by

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“Place is latitudinal and longitudinal within the map of a person’s life. It is temporal and spatial, personal and political.”<sup>1</sup> Lucy Lippard, *Lure of the Local*.

**Definition of community:** Community is often referred to in terms of commonality of place (physical geographical location) or common interest or concerns.<sup>2</sup> In this paper I will be focusing on the interplay between place and community, primarily considering community formed around location.<sup>3</sup> Community is that which joins the individual and society and Place is the *where*, the *location*, the physical *environment* in which human existence plays out. Place is deeply embedded in the human psyche.<sup>4</sup> Place is the location of our experiences of birth, life, and death; the setting of human drama. (Place remains a solid given in human life; it remains as fundamental to our embodied existence as gravity.)

As many scholars have noted, place and landscape has the ability to “give shape to and locate human communities, by providing cultural memory and a sense of belonging”<sup>5</sup> (such as the communities nestled in the dip of a valley or the rise of the surrounding redwood laden Pacific Coastal Ranges). Each of us forms relationships to the place where we were raised, instinctively and culturally reacting to the geographical circumstances and physical environment which surround us. These performances

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<sup>1</sup> Lucy Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New York: The New Press, 1997), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Ferdinand Tonnies, “On Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft,” reprinted from *Community and Society: Bemeinschaft and Gesellschaft* by Ferdinand Tonnies, translated and edited by Charles P. Loomis (East Lansing, MI: The Michigan State University Press), 223-231. [www2.pfeiffer.edu/~lridener/courses/GEMEIN.html](http://www2.pfeiffer.edu/~lridener/courses/GEMEIN.html).

<sup>3</sup> For example, see: Tobin Nellhaus, and Susan C. Haedicke, “Introduction,” in *Performing Democracy: International Perspectives on Urban Community-Based Performance* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2001), 12.

<sup>4</sup> “The search for homeplace is the mythical search for the axis mundi, for a center, for some place to stand, for .something to hang on to.” Lucy Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New York: The New Press, 1997), 27.

<sup>5</sup> “Landscape has provided a basis for locating new communities of nationhood in a kind of collective cultural memory of belonging. Monuments and landforms have come to be seen to give history and shape to human communities, nations included.” Mike Pearson, and Michael Shanks, *Theatre/Archaeology* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 39. This is Pearson and Shanks’ rephrasing of statement by Thomas 1994:143, cited earlier in their book on page 11, a sentiment shared by Lucy R. Lippard in *The Lure of the Local*.

(*MorningStar* and *Re-Membering Harmony*) tell the story of the environments which to a great deal, shaped the local communities, which in turn shaped me.

These are the stories of two rural community performance projects:

- first *Morningstar* (a new musical written and produced by Nick Alva as directed by Michael Fontaine<sup>6</sup>) is based on the life and times of Lou Gottlieb's commune of that name;
- and second an ongoing project with the Occidental Center for the Arts *Re-Membering Harmony* (a site-specific performance influenced by the work of The Talking Birds).

**Locating the Work:** As a theorist and practitioner of Digital Theatre, much of my preceding scholarship and praxis has focused on cyperplace (or a virtual sense of place and community).<sup>7</sup> In addition to being rooted in the local rather than the virtual, this paper is evidence of ongoing work with the performance of place and the acknowledgement (and possible rekindling of) place-based community. Both these works relate to placed communities set with in specific time period.

The place is west Sonoma County California, specifically the town of Occidental and it's surrounding rural communities.<sup>8</sup>

The time is the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (beginning around the time of the 1960's Summer of Love in San Francisco less than 100 miles to the South).

**Positionality:** I fully acknowledge that as a scholar, I am not an unbiased observer<sup>9</sup>, but an active participant in the creation of the performances, and an active questioner of the regional social events which framed my own experience and those of my generation. I openly acknowledge the duality of my role as participant and commentator, and the stickiness of overlapping layers of fact, fiction, experience and memory. In a sense it is an identity piece. In the process of examining place-based community as evidenced in the treatment of first a commune, and later a rural public school, this examination is meant to be an unpacking of the place-based multiplicities which form identity—both through official culture, counter-culture, and other (private as well as communal memory).

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<sup>6</sup> Performed in May of 2008 at the Spreckels Performing Arts Center in Rohnert Park, California.

<sup>7</sup> Previously much of my work focused on online mediated performance, using Access Grid videoconferencing to create new works within the ArtGrid community demonstrating a multiplicity of shared place.

<sup>8</sup> It is a region which has seen historical/cultural events from the Bear Flag Revolt, Camp Meeker logging camps, train robberies by Black Bart, Luther Burbank's botany, *Peanuts* creator Charles Shultz, to the Hippie and back to the land movement, solar and organic and multiple other grass-roots movements. It is the area where I was raised.

<sup>9</sup> My experiences of these community events may differ to other performers/participants.

***MorningStar:***

The first performance I will be discussing, *Morningstar*, (written and produced by Nick Alba) is a new musical rooted in local history—conflict between (placed people<sup>10</sup>) immigrant settlers and a new wave of counter-culture settlers going “back to the land.” It is the conflict between “hippies” and “normals.”

**Place and times**

Set in the late 1960’s, the play draws directly from interviews and historical documents<sup>11</sup> (including newspaper clippings, commentary, photo submissions, and statements of belief) published as a collection by the former residents of the Morningstar commune situated in the hills just East of Occidental (North of San Francisco).

**Summary of Story (cultural conflict and deeding land to god)**

The story is one of cultural conflict and ideological inspiration. The play tells the story of Lou Gottlieb, a member of the “Limelighters” folk group, who, inspired by the natural beauty of the region moves from the city, to piece of property he owns in the country. Ramon Sender (fellow musician and organizer of the Trips Music Festival, a major music event in San Francisco at that time) joined Lou camping in the redwoods with his wife, Gina. Lou allows other friends to visit and soon word is out that no one is being turned away. The idea of open-land (a physical manifestation and precursor today’s open-source philosophy) is based on the idea that access to the land is denied to no one.

Although a core of goodhearted hippy settlers begin to farm the land, working and playing together; for the most part, the commune forms accidentally, simply by *not* refusing access to any of the wanderers who came. (These included: seekers of enlightenment, gardeners, young parents, Vietnam veterans, beat poets, LSD experimenters, radicals, bikers, and numerous teens who found themselves abandoned in the Height-Ashbury after the failed “Summer of Love”<sup>12</sup>). The population ebbed and flowed daily with peak numbers reaching up to 350-plus a day.

Eventually make-shift buildings emerged and the County of Sonoma (alerted by some concerned neighbors complaining about safety campfires—and more likely cultural issues like nudity and drug use) got involved. The County took legal action, on grounds of sanitation and building code issues, charging inadequate facilities for a “organized camp.” After a series of hefty fines, Gottlieb seeks to make a stand on the issue of open

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<sup>10</sup> See Lippard, *Lure of the Local*.

<sup>11</sup> Note the similarities from the historical document and play. For example, in the play, one of the characters says: “Deeding the land to God challenges the imagination worldwide. It offers us all to participate in the solution of many contemporary problems: ecological, sociological, psychological, international, and theological. It offers a haven to heal the sick.” *MorningStar*, 95. In the Morning Star Scrapbook, the text is written: “Deeding land to God is an idea which challenges the imagination all over the world, because it provides an opportunity to participate actively in the solution of many contemporary problems, ecological, sociological, psychological, international, and theological.” *Morning Star Scrapbook*, 181.

<sup>12</sup> Gottlieb helped the cause of the Diggers, allowing them to prune and harvest apples to give to the needy city dwellers.

land, (his right not to force people off his property), by deeding the land to God.<sup>13</sup> After multiple legal battles, in a landmark decision, the appellant court declares God not a natural person, and unable to hold title to a deed.

### **Place/and Time through Media**

As the Digital Media Arts designer, I used digital images, to lend an air of historical authenticity and help modern day audiences connect to the social/political times, as well as to give a sense of importance to the role of the actual place in the creation of this place-based community (the beauty of the land which inspired people to want to settle there, thus forming the commune). On three walls of the open  $\frac{3}{4}$  seating arrangement, screens projected a timed series of images depicting: images of the land today, historical photos of life on the commune, newspaper clippings documenting the court battle, and artistic renderings and animations interpreting the religious and other ideology of the times.<sup>14</sup>

*Show samples: Images (samples of land today, historical photos of life on the commune, newspaper clippings documenting the court battle, and flash, Mary, and Adam and Eve—no nudity today.)*

In general the response was quite positive; people commented that the media added a whole new dimension of reality to the play, acting like another character. One audience member about my age, commented that he really didn't realize it was "here" and "really happened" until he saw the local *Press Democrat* and *San Francisco Chronicle* newspaper clippings projected on the walls during the court scene. The newspaper clippings "made it real" for him. Thus digital media, assisted in expressing the reality of place which was the actual location 'world of the play.'

### **Music**

The music, a central focus of the play, was written by members of this place-based community as it extends across time to include the temporary community of its theatrical re-enactors. While many pieces were composed by Nick Alba and members of his music group The Round (many of which were in the show or related concerts), the majority of songs (as well as some visual and written content) were written in the 1960s by actual

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<sup>13</sup> It is interesting to note a precedent for Gottlieb's line of thought, in that the serenity of the land had also inspired previous owners, a Benedictine Lay Order to contemplate donating to the Catholic Church.

<sup>14</sup> Originally, I had hoped to bring the actual place into the theatrical location, through broadcasting real-time images of the Morningstar landscape, (but we did not have a reliable internet hookup on location). Although, the digital media was basically what I referred to as "a glorified slideshow" [meaning that it felt low tech—my job (and occasionally that of my assistant, Peter Rogers) consisted primarily of on site photography, digitizing and editing historical documents, some Photoshop collage, Flash, and PowerPoint, and one interactive audio to visual element], it was more media than local audiences expected.

commune members back in the day, including Ramon Sender, and members of the counter culture community Joe Dolce and Alicia Bay Laurel.<sup>15</sup>

It is the music which best expressed the values and ideals of the era. The bodies of the ensemble provided the spectacle, both band and singers were on stage with very minimal set. (There was a platform upstage and audience on three sides.) (And it is the songs themselves that reached across the decades in unseen ways and extend the community through the generations (tying the present to the past). It was Alicia's song "In the Morning" (a clean, lilting work song in the Quaker fashion), a song I had learned in my youth, which brought me in the acting ensemble of *Morningstar*.<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, it was the music that unbound the audience's memories as many former Occidental Choir members and folk music enthusiasts or aging hippies, hummed and clapped along to familiar songs.

### **Inhabiting Morningstar The Play: Embodying the Communal**

In many ways, the production of *Morningstar* the musical was a temporary invocation of the Morningstar community. As actors began to find their characters and the temporary community that is fed by ensemble theatre work, actors began to inhabit their characters and participate in a growing sense of warmth and communitas. Outward signs of this parallel backstage/onstage/and original hippy behavior include:

- singing together,
- eating together,
- working together on a main task,
- discussing the beliefs presented (riffing about politics and peace),
- doing yoga as warm-ups to focus energy,
- celebrating together (drugs?),
- dressing from communal clothes,<sup>17</sup>
- and interacting with and caring for multiple generations (everyone looked after the children in the cast and valued the reminiscing of old-timers who were there on both sides of the hippy/normal battle).

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<sup>15</sup> Ms. Laurel was a resident of nearby Wheeler Ranch, an outgrowth of the County-enforced exodus from Morning Star, and the author of the counter culture tome, *Living On The Earth*.

<sup>16</sup> As I diligently scanned pages upon pages of historical photos, I sang *In The Morning*. Lyrics by Alicia Bay Laurel "In the Morning, In the Morning with the first light we rise, and keep your mouth closed and open your eyes. In the morning in the morning, when the first light is new, Come rise ye and roll ye in the sweet morning dew. Rise ye early by morning dew..." I sang to myself a song I learned as a child from my mom's singing in the Occidental Community Choir. It was the chance to sing that song with others that convinced me to join the Morningstar play temporary-community and risk embodying hippy characters which were counter to my core beliefs (or so I thought).

<sup>17</sup> The hippy costumes were collected from individual's wardrobes and redistributed according to roles and their assigned color palette. Costumes: I was conscripted to be the costume designer. The color pallet was as follows: Trips festival dancers wore garish trendy day-glow colors, in contrast to the Morningstar hippies, or children of a new dawn were in shades purple, rose, yellow, naturals/browns, where as the citizens or "normals" wore black, white, grey and lipstick red, the Divine Mother other spiritual characters wore greens and blues.

There was a definite air of authenticity about the process/event.<sup>18</sup> In rehearsal backstage, and later through email cast members shared their own stories of “back in the day” (ex: Claudia who played Divine Mother—told us of how she went “back to the land” and drove a hippy bus to Alaska) and discussed moments of convergence between fiction and reality. People in the cast shared stories of wearing their own or their parent’s clothes.<sup>19 20</sup> During the rehearsal process as the script was edited by the director, multiple voices from the ensemble spoke about their time at Morningstar. (Steve Fowler was a neighbor of Morningstar sympathetic to the commune who ended up playing “the heavy” or the neighbor who reports the commune to the County officials. The actor playing Wilder Bently is a friend of the poet. It turns out the actor playing a local “normal” citizen was in fact a teacher from the town’s public school at the time. And of course, many of the kids playing hippy children are the grandchildren of hippies.)<sup>21</sup> The cast also had the unique honor of meeting commune residences, and in some case the characters they played.<sup>22</sup>

Each night after the show, we lined up at the exit to greet the audience and heard multiple stories how they had lived on or near the commune.<sup>23</sup> In a sense it served a real purpose of reconnecting and rekindling “the members of the tribe.” The audience was genuinely pleased with the production and so many came that the show sold out (we received many requests for additional performance dates which lead to a follow up concert performed

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<sup>18</sup> *Personal Reflections: But there was also a good deal of theatrical fantasy in the staging; evidenced by the lack of nudes, excrement, drugs... Ok, my bias is showing. Clearly, despite some audience assumptions, this was not an easy project for me to work on, especially as an actress. Many of the experiences from this era were painful memories, and the play sparked discussion within my family as to the “real reason” for my parent’s divorce. In graduate school East Coast colleagues often assumed that I was “a flower child” but my views tend to be a bit more complex than left or right. As a product of Regan Era (and the “just say no” campaign), in junior high I launched a one person campaign to get my parents to stop smoking pot. Unlike some of my fellow cast members, my views on drugs remain negative. I’d like to state jokingly, that his show was my first time wearing tie-dye in public on purpose.*

<sup>19</sup> One woman’s daughter wore a hippy vest her grandmother had made for mother as a child; I danced onstage in my mother’s “crazy paisley” satin caftan I used to play dress-up in as a child. Lyric from one of the cut songs.

<sup>20</sup> I shared this with the cast: “Personal effects: I’m looking forward to my mom’s reaction when she sees I used her dress (that I used to play dress-up in) for the Trips Festival and her diaper bag for me as Pam’s bag. It is really touching to see the little girls Zara and Sophie, back stage wearing my scarves that I used to play dress up in when I was their age.”

<sup>21</sup> See Program from *MorningStar*, April, 2007.

<sup>22</sup> Jonathan/Ramon, Gina/Gloria, I met my character’s step-daughter.

<sup>23</sup> “I did talk to a couple of people who knew Lou and said he was very charismatic. It turns out my aunt’s friend is a neighbor of Morning Star and she told me that she cried when she saw the reenactment of the bulldozing. It turns out the county parked their machines on her land without permission and proceeded to demolish Morning Star. She said that she was their and saw the county was harassing the hippies w/ helicopters and riot gear.” From what I shared with the group via email.

locally and in San Francisco<sup>24</sup> and had the sense of a Morningstar reunion (especially at the packed reception).

Elements from the play (and past) seemed to spring to life. As part of my research as media arts/ actress/ and costume designer,<sup>25</sup> I visited the site of the formerly active Morningstar commune and current Wheeler Ranch communes.

Like my character Pam (who opens the show as a seeker of the past) I sought the real places and met the people at both locations. At Wheeler Ranch I observed, and participated in the annual mayday (Maypole) celebration, a real-life hippy celebration mirroring the one which took place marriage scene in the play.

Although I looked the part of Pam (my character) with my long skirt and long hair; as a drama-ethnographer,<sup>26</sup> I proceeded with undue caution and trepidation.<sup>27</sup> The following is what I shared to the Morningstar cast about my visit:

- On the first of May, I attended the May Day festival at Wheeler Ranch and saw hippy culture alive and well.
- Hitchhikers.<sup>28</sup>
- People were so warm and welcoming (exchanging hugs as freely as names). There were people of all ages from toddlers and their strong young mothers, sages (such as the man waving a feather at the wind that I referred to as Gandalf for obvious reasons).
- Astute kids playing in the grass,
- Wilder Bently (the poet from the play),
- Bill Wheeler who owned the historic (open) ranch,<sup>29</sup>
- I learned about my character,<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Featuring Joe Dolce and Alicia Bay Laurel—writers of much of the music. November 15, 2008, at the Community Music Center, San Francisco, CA.

<sup>25</sup> Note that, much like communal living, the production of *Morningstar* became a way of life for me for many months.

<sup>26</sup> See Program from *MorningStar*, April, 2007.

<sup>27</sup> I was ill at ease (for I had less than idyllic memories of forcibly spending time on a commune in Oregon as a child). The group was very accepting and displayed many of the characteristics I remember from my youth.

<sup>28</sup> I was met upon the road by a group of hippies walking with their children and ended up giving the kids a ride. The road was tough (and I half expected to see part of the car come off) but the people were friendly and the day was beautiful.

<sup>29</sup> Once glowing side by side in a photograph with Lou Gottlieb, who now looked like (and perhaps fancied himself) Hugh Hefner (today).

<sup>30</sup> I found out from him that Pam is alive and living in New York and that she was a short fire-ball type, who I somewhat resembled. I got the sense that in addition to being arrested for kicking a policeman

- There were some kids just learning to walk,
- Young 20-30-somethings talking (as they must have decades ago) about leaving the city for the land and following their bliss, on the edges there were a few burnt old shells of men staring out of from behind empty eyes, a trio of good-hearted musicians, a young snake handler, and a lot of tie-dye. I was surprised to see McDonald's hamburgers laid among the tabuli on the [communal] feasting table, but some how not surprised that the facilities were the trees. The May pole itself, was a wonderful beautiful mix of marry confusion. Everyone going their own way, weaving a messy, lovely pattern.
- I came back to rehearsal that night more loose and flowing than I ever remember (that day I had been Pam).
- The production has challenged me a lot, to think about who I am and where I come from.<sup>31</sup>

*Where these two meet :*<sup>32</sup>

Like the commune which is no more, the next piece is about another focal point of community was central to life in Occidental and is absent from the town. In this image there is a junction between these two performances. Here the Hippies of Morningstar are engaging in community meeting with the town's folk. Here we have the meeting of two communities in the center of Occidental at the site of Harmony Union School, the subject of the next performance.

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**Re-Membering Harmony:**

This work is a project currently in process by myself and members of the Virtual Performance Collaborative<sup>33</sup> for the Occidental Center for the Arts.

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in the nuts, she must have been very free with her body (which really influenced my playing of the character and my looseness of stance.)

<sup>31</sup> My deepest appreciation goes out to Nick for creating this piece and everyone who has made this experience possible. As you can tell, the production has challenged me a lot, to think about who I am and where I come from. The questions it has provoked about my family (and my mother's choice to divorce), my self (and my personal choices as a young adult and my beliefs today), the times (which were not "electric" for me)...it has not been easy, but it has been a growing experience. When I went to Wheeler Ranch, I approached the people with respect as an adult, rather than as a fearful child. I spoke to one of the young mothers who was excited that I was raised as a here hippy child and had the opportunity to give her some advice. I indicated that being raised that way can be a good or bad experience, (that counter culture rules are still rules) and that it is important to listen to your children and see how they are responding to their environment. It was a blessing to be able to speak that and see that she listened. Through this process I realized that I am the child of hippies, and that's ok.

<sup>32</sup> See Coyote Rick Unonao, *The Morning Star Scrapbook* (Occidental, CA: Friends of Morning Star, Date unknown-possibly 1973).

The subject is the site of the former Harmony Union Elementary School, in Occidental California. The project is intended to create a repository of local oral history and a site-specific performance devised from community memory of the local place. The working title *Re-Membering Harmony*, alludes to both honoring the memories of the community and rebuilding a sense of membership in the past and coming public institutions in that place.

### **A place for community:**

For years Harmony had stood as an emblem and site of community, central to the experience of being from that part of the world. Before it was built, west county children had been taught in one-room school houses.<sup>34</sup> It was the Harmony Union School district which unified the population that otherwise would have been somewhat isolated in the nooks and crannies of the local landscape.

Between from the 1950's/60's through the early 2000's Harmony school was a functioning rural public school, serving a wide area of West Sonoma County (from Bodega to the outskirts of Sebastopol). For many years children attended the school from Kindergarten to 8<sup>th</sup> grade (including this scholar). In the late 1980's a middle school was added, but in the 2000's the middle school was moved to a new site Salmon Creek School in nearby Freestone. In the dot.com and post dot.com era, property prices had risen so high in the west county, that the population shifted to a retirement age population. As younger families were squeezed out due to the high cost of living, the school age population dropped, additional grades were transitioned to the new facility, and Harmony Union School sat vacant.

When I visited the school, on a holiday trip back from college, I was struck by seeing the buildings abandoned. All the life had run out of the place, and the East part of the town of Occidental as well.<sup>35</sup>

Scholar, Anthony P. Cohen writes, "Community is that entity to which one belongs, greater than kinship but more immediately than the abstraction we call 'society.' It is the

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<sup>33</sup> <http://vpcblogger.tripod.com>. Nadja Masura, PhD, Peter Rogers, MA, Apryl Rene, MFA, with additional members in Michigan, New York, and Texas.

<sup>34</sup> The Western Sonoma County Historical Society, *Images of America: Sebastopol* (Charleston, NC: Arcadia Publishing, 2003), 78-79.

<sup>35</sup> Author Peter Singer reminds us that unlike global world of accelerated travel and information we now live in, "For most of the eons of human existence, people living only short distances apart might as well, for all the difference they made to each other's lives, been living in separate worlds. A river, a mountain range, a stretch of forest or desert, a sea—these were enough to cut people off from each other." Peter Singer, *One World: The Ethics of Globalization* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 10. And although rail and later automobile travel existed in the region, his statement still recalls aspects of the region's rural experience. I can still recall being trapped at school when roads were cut off by flooding in my youth. It was the yellow school bus that connected that delivered us to school, the place where we would meet our neighbors and learn how to be citizens.

arena in which people acquire their most fundamental and most substantial experience of social life outside the confines of the home.”<sup>36</sup> The school was a place for building the foundations of community, and the site of public meetings. In the 1970’s the school became the site the dialogue between culture and counter-culture communities, as parents worked with the school board to create both Alternative (progressive interdisciplinary and multicultural teaching) and the reaction to it (the A+ program).

This past August, I returned to the abandoned school site as a digital technology consultant for Steve Fowler, director of the board for the Occidental Performing Arts Center. In addition to housing and retail space, part of the property will remain public as it has been donated by the developer to the Art Center.<sup>37</sup> I was so struck by the change in the site, (broken glass, missing buildings, graffiti, emptiness) that as we surveyed the grounds, I could not help remarking on the feelings of disorientation, or rather *displacement*.

I mentioned to board director Fowler that I felt something should be done to commemorate the place’s memory as a school (the town’s collective memories) and help the community transition into seeing place a new. He suggested I put something in front of the board, and in September I proposed this project and it was accepted within a week.

In the opening of the proposal, I stated: “I’m here to propose a Site Specific Performance to honor the place Harmony school held in the lives of the members of this community for many years. By documenting and sharing oral histories and visual records of individuals with the larger community-- at the place where these memories originated, we could create an upwelling of community involvement in the transformation of the place from a school to a complex including the Art Center. The interactive event would include the live and mediated performance of the past within the halls and on the very walls of the present location.”

The following is from the Project Statement for the Harmony Memorial Project (Remembering Harmony):<sup>38</sup>

The school site is currently in transition. Where once there was a playground where we played softball, soon will stand houses. Where once there were classrooms, soon there will be offices. Where once there was a cafeteria, will be a performing arts center. [We] invite the community to claim this transition of place by inviting members of the community to get involved in our Harmony memorial project.

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<sup>36</sup> Anthony P. Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1985), 15.

<sup>37</sup> See Robert Digitale, “Developer brings vision to Occidental, Forestville,” in *The Press Democrat*, September 4, 2008

<sup>38</sup> <http://www.occidentalcenterforthearts.com/>.

### **The Formation of a Process: The Talking Birds**

In my dissertation, “Digital Theatre: A ‘Live’ and Mediated Art Form Expanding Perceptions of Body, Place, and Community,” I spend a chapter on the interplay between digital media and the place of performance, within this I discuss the insightful work of The Talking Birds.

### **On Talking Birds From My Dissertation**

According to the group, their process for creating new works is to first find a location that interests them and has a special resonance or significance for the local community. Once the place is identified, the Talking Birds make a connection with the community to discover the place’s history and to trade ideas, share resources, conduct research, and learn local oral histories. Janet Vaughan said that they interview people, asking them: “what would you like me to know about (this place)?”<sup>39</sup> Place holds a special interest for Talking Birds. Vaughan says that, as a group, they specialize in “acts of transformation.” She said that they are also interested in shifting peoples’ perception of a place for the next time they visit. In the show, *Undercurrents*, images of the past were projected back onto the place where they originated, in a production which seemed to have a sense of being imbued with memory, animated with the spirits of the past.<sup>40</sup> Walker said, “Past, present, and future exist on the same place at the same time, kind of like the lay line principle - that becomes the opportunity to see that experience of place...compacted history by overlapping...past intervenes.”<sup>41</sup> There is a duality inherent in site-specific stagings, a tension between past and present places. In a sense a public place was being infused with private memories, from archival material and community member’s recollections.

In July of 2006, I traveled to Coventry England to I meet with The Talking Birds, and interview their three core members Derek Nisbet, Janet Vaughan, Nick Walker.<sup>42</sup> I observed (and assisted in archiving) them in the process of creating two new place oriented works, *Three Doctors* set at an abandoned hospital, *Jonah and the Whale* (set in giant metal whale). I was impressed by the methods of the group, watching them plot out

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<sup>39</sup> Derrick Nesbit, Janet Vaughan, and Nick Walker, in “The Search for Digital Theatre,” by Nadja Masura, <http://www.digthet.com/visits.html>, and in discussion with the author, July, 2006.

<sup>40</sup> This ghosting is also due to the doubling of the images of bodies from the past mixed with the healthy bodies of the students alive in the present, vigorously reenacting past dancing and swimming. Some of the historical images were projected, while others were recreated in video or by the live actors onstage in actions representing the former life of the resort. Viewing the website’s archival images of the production, there is a sense of a pleasant haunting, as the projected light finds a projection surface on screens behind the performers, set on the promenade facing the sea, while gaps between screens caused the light to spill over and glint eerily like beacons from the beach (backstage). Talking Birds, “About *Undercurrent*.”

<sup>41</sup> Nick Walker, in “The Search for Digital Theatre,” by Nadja Masura, <http://www.digthet.com/visits.html>, and in discussion with the author, July, 2006.

<sup>42</sup> The group consisted of those members skilled in writing/directing, audio/visual media, physical-costuming/sets--- and added actors/musicians as needed (similar to the skill set of the VPC.)

the space and hone scripting and performance. Through research and interviews, they reinvest their places with the stories that made them places rather than edifices. After the visit I kept in email contact with the group. For the Harmony project I contacted Nick Walker about mentoring me in the process.<sup>43</sup>

### **Project Description (as listed on website)**

As an inaugural arts project, the OCA is showing its commitment to becoming a place for community by commissioning the Harmony memorial project which will:

1. Research the school and collect and digitize information
2. Conduct interviews or records of oral history
3. Create a log of these digital records
4. Use these records to create a site-specific event – at Harmony/OCA which involves the community.

In order to honor the memories of Occidental’s former Harmony school and those parents, students, teachers, and staff who constituted it, we’d like to ask you and yours to contact us with any photos, stories, or artifacts you’d like to share.

The process will be one of researching records about the school, collecting oral histories on video, digitizing and editing materials, creating a digital repository accessible to the public, devising a script or framing structure for an on site public event/performance, mapping out the site for performance, media, and interactive elements, creating and testing media and interactive triggers, directing performers including school children in the staging of the event.

### **Progress**

At this point I am in the researching stage and am beginning to collect oral histories. Thus far, I’ve contacted the local library annex and governmental offices and historical societies/museums and I’ve hooked up with the librarian from the school district and I have digitized old year books and composing a list of students, staff, and teachers.<sup>44</sup> “As tedious as it has been collecting names, it’s amazing to see generations of students change as they pass through the school. One can really get a sense of patterns, of families, of students moving to town from other schools or teachers moving to town with

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<sup>43</sup> “What I would be looking for from you and the Talking Birds, would be occasional email correspondence about suggestions about how to proceed in the information gathering, content creation, and staging steps. This way I could follow my own instincts as a deviser and media maker with the confidence of working with a professional...Would you be open to mentoring me or sharing the basic steps of your process as well as pithy quotable remarks?” From my email. He agreed and since then we have corresponded via email. I’ve received his initial enthusiastic feedback on the project and its outline and sent him interview questions as well as, queries about backgrounds for video surfaces as well as online video submission. Much of the project is owed to my observation of the process of the Talking Birds.

<sup>44</sup> I hope to meet with a “local historians” in later in January. Until recently, I have spent a good deal of time digitizing remaining yearbooks from the Salmon Creek Library and typing a composite list of former students, faculty, and staff listed in them.

their kids, how aids become teachers, and teachers become principals, -- it's like a microcosm of life in a small town."<sup>45</sup>

To the end of collecting interviews, I have post a partial list of both student and faculty alumni on the Art Center's website as well as their news letter, and contacted all names give to me by the board and sign up sheets at the local Friday Market. When I return from this conference I will be working with the OCA's PR member to reach out through local media, TV, radio and newspaper, and attending a town-hall type meeting in Occidental on the development/center site and talking about the project. I also intend to use online social networking sites to find willing participants to send in video of their response to the questions which are posted online.

In addition, I've shot video and stills of the place in transition (bulldozers, trees coming down, vandalism etc.). Lately, I've been researching the environmental impact studies on the school in its various forms and working on digitizing the old school blueprints. I have made contact with current Harmony school teachers who taught at the Occidental site as well as staff. One former teacher, has lent me his photo archives, and I am hopeful that I will be able to involve his students in a later stage of the project.

While I have not yet reached the devising stage, many possible ideas for staging are beginning to emerge: motion triggered sound tracks of the voices of students running in the empty hallways, projected footage of trees cut and tractors plowing, layering images of past and present, kids games projected on the houses where the playfield used to be, live students attending class in the absent classroom, the voices of students reading their student wills, interviews from the video interviews projected on walls, the opportunity for visitors to add their memories to the log and performance in real-time, and much more...

As the project unfolds, many things surprise me, about the interconnectedness of the community. The contractor who is being paid to resurface the site went to school there, and it was his family, his grandfather who donated the land.<sup>46</sup> Like the coincidence of finding a cast member in Morningstar had once been a former teacher of mine, I hope that people continue to come out of the wood work, and reclaim the community place that lives in their memory.

## **Conclusions:**

As Anthony Cohen points out in *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, individuals have always created communities in order to shape and maintain their sense of belonging and self-worth. Community has been called a "god word"<sup>47</sup> or "warmly persuasive

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<sup>45</sup> From my email to Nick Walker of the Talking Birds.

<sup>46</sup> He too expressed the strangeness of the transition, of bulldozing the field where he planted trees and learned to play sports.

<sup>47</sup> "...a power invoked to provide symbolic unity in the face of real differences within the group." Bruce McConachie, "Approaching the 'Structure of Feeling' in Grassroots Theater," in *Performing*

word”<sup>48</sup> for its ability to call forth unified behavior when invoked. By invoking the word community, it is often materialized, and thus has the characteristics of a speech-act.<sup>49</sup>

In the case of these two performances community has been created or invoked through the retelling of public and private memory. In a sense we can make visible the landscape of human memory by mapping place in terms of the coordinates of latitude, longitude, and time.<sup>50</sup>

Through Devising and Creative Collaborations, community of interest can be formed through Performance giving strength to the living echoes of the place-based communities of the past. People are drawn into acts of participation by the word *community*,<sup>51</sup> and participation in common interest activities, like performance, creates community.

In the case of *Morningstar* the conflict between formation of new community within preexisting community, based primarily on place (referred to as a veritable “garden of Eden” due to its natural beauty). The hippies longing for what previous settlers had and were willing to work on land, but were not landed. In the case of the Harmony project, again the change in the age of the population (among other factors), has shifted the human use of a public place. In the staging of both situations, past communities are acknowledged, and present communities are strengthened and even build by those participating. As I told one Re-membering Harmony interviewee, by participating in this community memory log, adding her memories as part of a collective memory, she was evidencing the community’s past and creating its continuation.

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*Democracy: International Perspectives on Urban Community-Based Performance*, Susan C. Haedicke, and Tobin Nellhaus, eds. 29-57 (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2001), 37.

<sup>48</sup> Baz Kershaw, *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 191.

<sup>49</sup> “In one sense it is limited in space and time to the moment of enunciation, but in another sense it is implicated in the iterative structures of a language system, which perpetuates itself through repetition of previous enunciations, thus establishing reliable and recognizable categories of meaning.” Ellen Mortensen, *Touching Thought: Ontology and Sexual Difference* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2002), 24.

<sup>50</sup> Lucy Lippard writes “Artists can make connections visible. They can guide us through sensuous kinesthetic responses to topography, lead us from archeology and land passed social history into alternative relationships to place. They can expose the social agendas that have formed the land, bring out multiple readings of places that mean different things to different people.”

<sup>51</sup> Once present at an event or communal interaction at a given meeting place, individuals often precede with a heightened awareness of their presence in relation to others (or to the imagined larger group), and go about the group activity with varying levels of being aware that their presence (and participation) is part of forming the community. As individuals begin to sense their part in a larger whole, community is actualized.