



The Mobile Story: Narrative Practices with Locative Technologies

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Review of

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I am sitting on the floor in my eight-month-old daughter's nursery, typing quietly on my laptop and trying desperately not to wake her. She is a monster when she doesn't nap for an hour in the afternoon, and, frankly, I fear her wrath. I have silenced the ringer of my iPhone, but I have forgotten to close the window, and I can hear my next-door neighbor yell-talking into his cell phone as he often does while pacing around his back yard. I decide not to risk shutting the window; instead, I hope the tenor of his pronouncements and the tinny hum of the disembodied voice coming through his speakerphone will somehow blend into soporific white noise.

As a new dad, I often find myself worrying about what kind of techno-future my child will inherit. When will she demand a smart phone, and how will this device affect her social interactions, her attention span? Will she be phished on Facebook? Will her mom and I have to include warnings about Tinder predators in our first sex-talk with her? Will Facebook and Tinder even exist when she reaches adolescence? Our pediatrician instructs us to avoid screens altogether, to read books *as books*—page-bound material objects—to confine ourselves (for the time being, at least) to the antiquated relics of print culture. In short, I fear that fatherhood is turning me into a Luddite.

It is with a mix of relief and resistance, then, that I attempt to tune out my surroundings and review *The Mobile Story*. The collection promises to investigate the future of storytelling in what contributors Oppegaard and Grigar deem “the epoch of pervasive media” (18). More specifically, it examines the relationship between narrative practices, mobile technologies, and definitions of place. To this end, the text is largely concerned with theorizing how people use portable electronic devices to reinvent storytelling as they participate in location-based social networks (LBSNs) and location-based mobile games (LBMGs). For the former, think Foursquare, Yelp, or other apps that allow users to broadcast

and comment on their locations; for the latter, think Pokémon Go, Ingress, Geocaching, or other technologies that use GPS to transpose gameplay onto city streets.

To engage wholeheartedly with this collection, readers may need to radically question their assumptions about three things: (1) what creative writing is, (2) how mobile media affects our consciousness, and (3) what the future of narrative might look like as stories literally change shape within the contexts of rapidly evolving technologies. It should be noted that the collection is in no way intended for use in a traditional creative writing workshop, or at least not the normative sort that grew out of Iowa's twentieth-century MFA paradigm. Rather than restrict storytelling to craft- and page-bound notions of literary fiction and so-called "creative nonfiction," it explores the larger contemporary poetics of cultural narrative. That is, it takes the "story" far off of the page, out of the writer's workshop, and beyond the confines of print culture to explore its relevance for gamers, coders, techies, digital archivists, and conceptual artists, as well as more plebian users of mobile devices (like myself and my neighbor). As a consequence, it leaves readers responsible for teasing out the collection's implications for the study and practice of creative writing as an academic discipline.

As the collection requires readers to reconsider conventional notions of creative writing, it also asks them to reconsider assumptions about mobile technologies. Farman insists upon the following premise: rather than our cell phones and tablets distracting us from our surroundings—as popular lore would have it—these devices might actually better connect us to our immediate contexts. In reaction to common complaints that characterize these technologies as isolating or diverting, Farman states, "What mobile media storytelling projects demonstrate, in contrast, is that someone can be staring into a mobile device and be more deeply connected to the space and the others in that space than other people might perceive" (6). Oppegaard and Grigar suggest, even more dramatically, that mobile storytelling has the potential to "reverse the alienation and separation epidemic of contemporary life" (18). Here, mobile media is neither the symptom nor the cause but, rather, *the solution* to problems of geographical and social estrangement. Cynical readers might find this idealism a bit much; to my ears, it echoes the early promise of the modern novel and the humanities' historic faith in "great books" pedagogy—both of which suggested that the practice of reading good literature could create better, more humane, connected, and empathic people. Of course, as Terry Eagleton pointed out quite some time ago in *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, the atrocities of the twentieth century—including two world wars and countless acts of destruction—seem to have left readers and writers disillusioned with that promise.

Nonetheless, evidence of the *potential* of storytelling technologies to bring electronics users out of isolation appears throughout the collection. In "On Common Ground: Here as There," Paula Levine discusses Marc Rene Gardeya's project, *The Berlin Wall*, which uses cell phone technology to enable visitors to more deeply connect to a story of place through an experiment with augmented reality. As Levine explains, Gardeya's work uses GPS and a downloadable browser to "resurrect" the Wall at the site that formerly separated East and West Berlin, allowing visitors to "see the Berlin Wall on their cell phone

screen, overlaid on the physical location before them.” As visitors pan across the site with their phones, the wall appears “roughly to scale in the place it once stood” (150). Arguably, this visualizing of history provides visitors a more tangible connection to the past of what is now a unified city. The project not only grounds visitors in a more visceral understanding of the site but, as Levine argues, provides them the potential to better identify with previous generations who lived under separation—to see how it was—and, in this sense, experience what Levine calls throughout her chapter an “empathic narrative.”

In a strange sense, this kind of work also “resurrects” some of the lore affiliated with writing workshop pedagogy. An adage that may sound all too familiar to creative writing students’ and teachers’ ears—“show, don’t tell”—gets reinvented here. Of course, for narrative writers of the future (or those who currently use locative technologies), showing vs. telling is less concerned with a choice between exposition and imagism, as defined by the technology of the printed page, and more concerned with the relationship between storytelling and software. Storytellers who engage in locative work have to choose what to *tell* through text or text-messaging or dialogue or sound recording and what to *show* within the contexts of augmented realities—not through prose descriptions of image or action or setting but through visual effects created by the sort of software that enables transpositions of past, present, and future places, familiar and unfamiliar cultures.

Contributors to *The Mobile Story* suggest these choices are perhaps best epitomized in *34 North, 118 West*, one of the classics within the developing canon of mobile narratives. The project reveals how locative storytelling can enhance visitors’ connection to place through the uncovering of others’ concealed stories; in this sense, it functions as part recovery project and part collage. Designed by Jeremy Hight, Jeff Knowlton, and Naomi Spellman, *34 North, 118 West* invites participants to walk through the Freight Depot area of downtown Los Angeles equipped with a tablet and headphones. Using GPS, the software “tracks your position in the neighborhood and triggers audiovisual narratives when you enter hot spots” created by the authors (Barber 96). These narratives present visitors with fragments of the area’s history through visual images and recorded voices, so that the material present meets the symbolic past, and overlaying stories enhance visitors’ experience of place.

Perhaps the most accessible and convincing chapter to reveal mobile storytelling’s potential as a solution to the problem of estrangement is “Enhancing Museum Narratives: Tales of Things and UCL’s Grant Museum,” which offers readers an interdisciplinary case study that not only reveals how mobile narratives can facilitate more substantial interactions among people and places, but also how these narratives can combine strains of authorship to contest the authority of a singular “official” story. Here, Ross et al. focus on the Grant Museum’s QRator project, an experiment that relies on Quick Response codes, pixelated 2-D bar codes linked to different kinds of media: e.g., text, websites, videos. These codes are used to offer information more expansive than the limited space a typical gallery label provides and thereby increase visitors’ engagement with objects on display. The QRator project’s initial function may seem quite similar to that of the conventional audio tours that many museums provide. However, unlike audio tours, in which visitors passively listen to an authoritative narrative, QRator

allows visitors to effectively coauthor the stories of the objects on display. As Ross et al. explain, Qrator encourages users to “write back to the QR codes” with their subjective commentary (283). Different commentaries then become archived to create a kind of polyphonic story that uses multiple voices and perspectives to narrate the life (or lives) of an exhibit:

Visitors’ narratives subsequently become part of the museum object’s history and ultimately the display itself, via the interactive label system, which will allow the display of comments and information directly next to the artifacts. This shift in focus from content delivery to narrative construction, it can be suggested, reflects an ongoing societal shift in digital media from static, centralized control to user-generated content and personalized learning. (283)

The QRator experiment may represent a departure from the old master narrative, but what if this “user-generated content” devolves into the base discourse typical of the Comments section of YouTube and across the Internet?

Thankfully, the most refreshing essay in *The Mobile Story* is also the most cynical—and the most relevant to creative writing. In “Location is Not Compelling (Unless It is Haunted),” Mark Sample takes issue with the superficiality of much location-based mobile technology that relies on “check-in” commentary. He argues that the majority of mobile narrative projects—even those designed in consultation with historians and museum staff—offer only “history ‘lite,’” which he describes as “little different from a Fodor’s guidebook” and deems a “consumer-based, trivial use of technology” (72). In response to this problem, Sample advocates playful subversion, or what he calls a “critical and creative misuse of technology” that reveals the problematical relationship between material contexts and virtual overlays (73). He insists that instead of checking-in at an existing location and posting comments (as a Foursquare user might), storytellers should invent and review nonexistent places. To this end, he provides examples of his own inventions: “the Office of Incandescent Light and Industrial Runoff” (at George Mason University) and “the Treehouse of Sighs” (at his home street address) (73). He further uses these examples to describe his vision for a conceptual game called *Haunts*, in which teams of players “tag” public locations with “fragments of a fictional story” so that the surreal and unreal *haunt* “real” check-in locations, and thereby disrupt habitualized, noncritical uses of technology.

Sample’s work undoubtedly offers the most immediate implications of *The Mobile Story* for poetic production and writing pedagogy. It makes me wonder what a fiction workshop could be if it reimagined the teaching of narrative in a way that enabled students to intervene critically and creatively in public digital spaces. How might creative writing students augment realities outside the classroom and craft stories across media platforms? How might they collaborate with software designers to explore new choices in craft—choices that were simply not available within the workshop legacy that has dominated most creative writing classrooms? Of course, the collection as a whole prompts larger and, at the same time, more personal questions: What exactly will the future of storytelling look and sound like? After my daughter and her generation have gained exposure to screens, familiarity with digital cultures, fluency with coding and multimodal composition, how will they tell the stories of their hyper-mediated lives?