Teaching an Internationalized American Studies with the Internet

William Bryant

Over the last twenty years or so many Americanists have moved toward the conviction that American culture is best understood within a global context. In the classroom, this conviction creates an imperative to teach an internationalized American Studies that locates American culture amid a complex of interactive world cultures. Within the last few years communications technologies have opened up new possibilities for accomplishing this task. The Internet in particular is a readily accessible channel through which we can see aspects of American culture circulating around the world, changing and exchanging amid the multitude of people, technologies, ideas, information and capital that constitute an increasingly visible global community. But what specific pedagogical strategies can take advantage of the Internet in the American Studies classroom?

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Course:
American Values
Context:
An undergraduate, general education requirement course; approximately 25
students, ranging from first-year students to seniors. The University of Iowa is a major research institution with a student population of about 30,000.
Intentions:
--to teach an internationalized American Studies, using the Internet to (1)facilitate conversations about American culture among students in the U.S., the Netherlands, and Hong Kong, and (2) examine American culture in a global context through the exploration of virtual communities.

An approach I've been experimenting with at the University of Iowa centers on virtual communities. I've asked my undergraduate American Studies students, in a general education course titled American Values, to participate in and analyze virtual communities via the Internet. They also have formed virtual communities of a

sort by entering into extended electronic discussions with American Studies students at Hong Kong University and at Nijmegen University in the Netherlands.

Through our focus on virtual communities and international conversations, we have attempted to initiate a critical dialogue on American culture, one that brings my students' home-grown perspectives into contact with internationalist perspectives. We have used these critical dialogues as a way to contest static, insular constructions of U.S. culture, and to recognize that American social and cultural identities are not fixed or natural but constructed from the cultural exchanges that are a regular feature of our history. We have also used our participation in virtual communities as a means for imagining American culture in a global context, exploring the relationship between a fluid, hybrid, transient global culture and the role and status of place-based community life in America. Our use of computer technology has been valuable in helping us achieve both of these objectives by forging relationships with others and learning through experience. The academic and experiential learning fostered by these exercises helps my students to begin making their own sense of American culture as situated within the global community.

Contexts

Teaching an internationalized American Studies is a way of enacting what Michael Cowan and Eric Sandeen have called the "boundary-crossing impulse" of interdisciplinary study. The goal in my classroom is to get students to think critically about their own culture by crossing both disciplinary and national borders. We recognize that national boundaries and identities are increasingly fluid, permeated continually by the global circulation of people, ideas, values, capital, products and information. This fluidity prompts us to question whether national boundaries are the best delimiters of culture studies. Or, as Paul Lauter asks, "does 'America' have to be seen within a world system, in which the exchange of commodities, the flow of capital, and the interactions of culture know no borders?" (Lauter 3). Incorporating internationalist perspectives into the study of U.S. culture is a way to begin reconceptualizing the boundaries of "America."

There are many ways to include internationalist perspectives in the study of American culture. A variety of fine books, movies, and Web materials offer insight into American culture from non-U.S. sources. But, as Jane C. Desmond and Virginia R. Dominguez

argue, to be most valuable in enriching our understanding of U.S. culture in a global context, American perspectives must be brought into "critical dialogue" with internationalist perspectives. Desmond and Dominguez urge Americanists to create a new paradigm of "critical internationalism" in American Studies by building "internationalist perspectives into the 'doing' of American Studies" (Desmond and Dominguez 479). By bringing different perspectives into dialogue, rather than simply comparing cultures using concepts and discourses from the United States, critical internationalism creates opportunities to reformulate our conceptual categories and assumptions.

Rethinking categories and assumptions ultimately is what we are trying to achieve in our classroom. A persistent challenge in teaching American Studies to U.S. students lies in the fact that, in many ways, they are already experts on the subject. Critical, international conversations can begin to denaturalize and decenter my students' assumptions in a way that imparts to them some critical distance from their own culture. It prompts them to add to their expert understanding of their native culture a consideration of positions originating outside the realm of their own experience and knowledge.

Bringing internationalist perspectives into critical dialogue with the domestic perspectives of my students requires interaction with others. This is the difference our use of technology makes: it provides a means for developing relationships with others, a channel for interaction and experience with geographically and culturally diverse people. Used in this way, the Internet becomes more than a resource for syllabus material: it is, in addition, a forum for both casual and serious deliberation on American culture, a place for collaborative and experiential learning.

Virtual communities are the tools we use for gaining this experience, but we find that they are more than a means to an end. Rather, they become an object of study in themselves, as we examine the topic of community in American culture and as we attempt to imagine U.S. culture in a global context. Virtual communities are comprised of people who meet and communicate through computer bulletin boards and networks. Participants can be from anywhere; interaction can be casual and perfunctory, or sustained and complex. As Howard Rheingold writes of his own virtual communities, "we chat and argue, share emotional support, make plans, brainstorm, gossip, feud, fall in love, find friends and lose them, play games, and metagames, flirt, create a little high art and a lot of idle talk. We do everything people do when people get

together, but we do it with words on computer screens, leaving our bodies behind. Millions of us have already built communities where our identities commingle and interact electronically, independent of local time or location" (Rheingold).

The proliferation of virtual communities prompts many questions about the status and role of place-based communities in contemporary American life. Do VCs contribute to the dissipation of public space and community life, or do they compensate for it? Do VCs revitalize civil communication and the institutions it sustains, or do they create an illusion of civil association that provides a sense of affiliation without obligation or accountability? What happens to identity when people form relationships without ever seeing one another? What happens to people's relationship with the physical world when they "leave their bodies behind?" Framed by readings and discussions, my students' investigations of virtual communities lead them toward a consideration of the history and evolving state of community life in America. In addition, bringing the question of VCs into our examination of community allows us to integrate the experience of using computer technology fully into the content of the course.

The questions raised by virtual communities also reflect a more general set of issues emanating from globalization. As Frederick Buell writes, there have been two primary critical responses to the contemporary globalization of communications, markets and cultures. One sees it as a means for the "deeper penetration, integration and postmodern hyperdevelopment" of capitalism; the other identifies in globalization an "uncertain-creative kind of hybridity" that decenters communication and creates a "greater complexity of positions from which to speak." According to this second response, "Tighter communicative integration of the globe means, potentially, the splintering of national communities locally and the creation of a heterogenous transnational public sphere globally" (Buell 550). Participation in virtual communities is a manageable way for students to experience and ask critical questions about the implications of such a transnational public sphere. Is it a site for the formation of new alliances and the sounding of diverse voices, or is it a largely univocal extension of a dominant multinational cultural order? Or, perhaps, something in-between? Regardless of where their investigation leads them, students are prompted to consider the possibility that they live increasingly within the complex interactions that are created at the intersection of virtual/global space and physical/local space.

Virtual communities are also a route by which to think about and

experience the U.S.'s role in global culture. As Paul Giles argues, American culture viewed from an international perspective might itself be considered "virtual," appearing as a collection of aestheticized "symbolic points of reference" independent of the U.S.'s national borders. The United States, says Giles, "crucially appears to Europe as a signifier rather than a signified, a global power whose strategic interventions now center around the fields of information and representation rather than military force." Images, values, symbols, the ideals of freedom and individualism, and other conceptual touchstones emanating from U.S. culture and history comprise a "virtual image of America, which emerges significantly as the nexus of international media and communication, a space outside the framework of 'rooted' European [and presumably other] traditions." From this space outside — this borderless, postnational, global space — "virtual" America unsettles and creates "interference" in other cultures. In places like Britain, according to Giles, "the American conception of the world" that pervades the processes of globalization, "enjoys at its point of reception the paradoxical effect of decentering anachronistic social hierarchies and introducing new spaces of mobility and difference" (Giles 543).

Through our investigation of virtual communities and our international conversations, we begin to inquire into the extent to which a globalized "virtual" America permeates national borders and cultures. For example, we find that the governing values that shape the customs and discourses within virtual communities often coincide loosely with those attributed to virtual America: freedom of information, exchange and expression; equality and democracy; acknowledgment of and respect for difference; an individualism characterized by the presumed right to control one's own representation. In identifying these values, it is important to recognize, along with Giles, that within global culture they tend to function aesthetically rather than strictly ideologically; they do not function as metanarratives essentializing either the United States or virtual space; rather, they appear as simulacra, virtual images of freedom, equality, individualism, and so forth.

Thus, even as they strive to initiate a "critical internationalism" in their study of U.S. culture, my students are prompted to consider that the technological environments that facilitate those dialogues, and the terms of the exchanges themselves, can be shaped by American culture, and that this can be a very significant way in which American culture functions within a global context. This point is amply demonstrated in our discussions with Dutch and Hong Kong students, which necessarily take place in English, with-

in a technological environment structured by American assumptions about the procedures for communication and expression.

Even so, within that environment students encounter the ongoing give and take of cultural exchange. They see aspects of their own culture reflected back to them in adapted and altered forms. In turn, they recognize ways in which American culture absorbs and adapts influences from abroad. The hybridity of cultural identity, in particular, becomes intensified in virtual/global space. As Rheingold writes, "we who populate cyberspaces deliberately experiment with fracturing traditional notions of identity by living as multiple simultaneous personae in different virtual neighborhoods" (Rheingold). Similarly, Buell marks the increasing heterogeneity of cultural identity as a characteristic of global, postnational culture. One encounters in small town Minnesota, for example, "a Hmong teenager who composes rap music, plays hockey, and dates Chicano boys or girls." Buell notes that this "new kind of heterogeneity neither assimilates nor stays territorialized in ethnic neighborhoods like 'Chinatowns'"(Buell 557). Rather, it becomes highly visible and pervasive. As they engage the questions of identity raised in virtual space, where the topic is constantly foregrounded and so much of participation is structured around self-representation, students consider the ways in which ongoing, transnational cultural exchanges can render identity hybrid and malleable. Certainly, this is one of the principle insights they gain from talking with Dutch and Hong Kong students about their daily lives.

Another feature shared by postnational American culture and virtual communities is "placelessness." Neither is necessarily grounded in a physical location, which raises many questions about the relationship between people and their natural environment. When neither individuals nor communities nor cultures identify their connection to a place, what becomes of that relationship? What happens when place ceases to be relevant to the formulation of identity? What are the consequences of a loss of responsibility and affection for the land, a loss of "local soil and local memory," as Wendell Berry puts it (Berry 155)? Virtual communities, like postnational American culture, frequently find their populations dislocated and transient, their experience of place metaphorical. My students begin to recognize and respond to this feature of contemporary American culture through their engagement with virtual communities.

Using computer technology to teach American Studies is most productive, I believe, when the technology can provide opportuni-

ties not otherwise available, and when its use can be integrated into the content of the course. Virtual communities and international conversations allow us to acquire experiences and form relationships that extend beyond our classroom, and beyond the borders of the United States. VCs also highlight for us a variety of critical issues and questions concerning community in America and the function of U.S. culture globally. As they participate in virtual communities, discovering what they are, how they function, and what implications are attached to them, students acquire tools and ideas for analyzing their own cultural lives on both a local and global level. As Buell notes, global culture appears "centering and decentering, catastrophic and creative all at once." The same is no doubt true of American culture and virtual communities as well. Getting my students to encounter and experience these uncertainties is a step toward helping them make their own sense of American culture and values in a global context.

The Project

Professor Hans Bak of Nijmegen University and I began roughly three years ago considering the possibility of a computer-mediated joint project. We were part of a consulting team, sponsored by the Salzburg Seminar, dispatched to the American University in Bulgaria to advise on the start-up of a new American Studies program. Our team determined, among other things, that the Internet could be used to help compensate for AUBG's relative isolation and lack of texts on American culture, speeding the program's entry into the international community of American Studies instructors and students and providing access to digitized materials too expensive in hard copy. While the AUBG American Studies program was not yet ready to integrate computers into its curriculum, Professor Bak and I began to see the potential benefits of linking our students via the Internet. Our two programs enjoyed an existing relationship that could be extended electronically, enriching our students' study of American culture by providing access to new perspectives and experience.

Professor Bak and I wanted our students to engage in a common body of material, to talk with one another, and to share their work. At the time I designed our joint project, the theme of "community" was already a major component of my American Values course. I looked to virtual communities as a way to extend that theme and to integrate the use of computers into the course content. I collected a group of readings concerned with place-based and virtual

communities, outlined a virtual community analysis project, and determined that a bulletin board, rather than email or a chat room, would be the best vehicle for conducting and managing conversations. WebCT was a logical software choice, since the program and server space are available to anyone teaching a course at the University of Iowa, the sites are accessed via the Internet, and the software features both a self-contained bulletin board and a platform for posting course materials (1).

The project asked students to participate on two levels. The first consisted of ongoing informal conversations. Not knowing for certain what would be of most interest and value in these conversations, and curious to see how students would relate to one another without a lot of structure imposed by the course itself, I elected not to intervene much in these exchanges, but to let students take their conversations in whatever direction they pleased. I asked all students initially to introduce themselves, talk about their interests, studies, backgrounds, and so forth. I also asked them to say something about their sense of place, the place they come from, since "place" was a key component of my class's study of American values. Prior to beginning the project, my students discussed a number of readings and movies dealing with place in American culture. They also talked with one another on the bulletin board about their home towns, discussing city versus rural life, for instance. By the time they began writing to their international counterparts, my students had a vocabulary and a set of concepts that helped them frame at least this portion of their conversations. Apart from this initial bit of guidance, however, the conversations were driven almost exclusively by the students.

The second level of participation involved reading and responding to four articles and analyzing a virtual community. Instructions for these exercises, the articles themselves, and guiding questions that accompanied each article were all available on the WebCT site. I called this structured portion of the project "Community, Place, and Placelessness." The articles included "The Work of Local Culture," by Wendell Berry; "A Slice of Life in My Virtual Community," by Howard Rheingold; "Civic Networks: Building Community on the Net," by Scott London; and "Virtual Communities: Abort, Retry, Failure?" by Jan Fernback and Brad Thompson. Berry argues that community must be rooted in geographical place. Rheingold says that virtual communities can help satisfy our need for community in a world where place-based community is disintegrating. London argues that "civic networks" established on the Internet can strengthen geographical communi-

ties. Fernback and Thompson suggest that virtual communities can exacerbate the problems of place-based communities. With a set of guiding questions in mind, students posted a response to each article and responded to the posts of others. Though we discussed both the readings and the unstructured conversations in class, all student work on computers took place outside of class.

Students also spent time in a virtual community of their choice, discovering what sorts of people participate, who is excluded, how they represent themselves, what customs and norms seem to characterize the community, what holds the people in the community together, what sort of relationship the community has with the physical world, etc. I presented this portion of the project as an exercise in ethnography, asking students to immerse themselves in the communities while framing their experience within a set of critical issues stemming from our readings and discussions. In their write-ups, students identified and outlined an issue centered on the topic of community in America, presented the results of their "field work," then applied those results in their analysis of the issue.

Once the outline of the project was in place, I asked Professor Staci Ford at Hong Kong University if she and some of her students would like to participate. Adding students in Asia to the mix, I hoped, would enrich the diversity of perspectives and experiences contributing to the project. In the spring of 1998, the first semester of the project, 40 HKU students were added to my 28 students and the 21 students from Nijmegen. Participation in the project was a required element of my course. It took the place of two course papers that otherwise would have been required. Because it was a pilot project, however, participation from the Nijmegen and HKU students was voluntary. Students at these two schools received extra credit. As a result, many but not all of them participated in the informal conversations. No student at Nijmegen or HKU elected to do the full virtual community analysis.

In the fall 1998 semester, HKU students joined mine in extended conversations. The introductory American Studies course at Nijmegen is offered only in the spring, so no Dutch students participated. Professor Ford made participation in the project a required element of her course, so some 80 HKU students were involved. I taught two sections of American Values, comprised of 25 students each. Therefore, I matched roughly 40 HKU students with each of my sections. The Hong Kong students did not participate in the virtual community readings or analysis, though mine did. Based on the previous semester's experience and the number of students involved, the conversations alone seemed enough to

coordinate and monitor in the Iowa/HKU exchange.

In the spring 1999 semester, Iowa/Nijmegen conversations will be a required part of both courses, while HKU students will join on a voluntary basis. We plan to experiment with organizing conversations around themes common to our courses. My students will also do the virtual community analysis as described above.

Results

Participating in conversations with international colleagues has prompted my students to think carefully about what can and cannot be fairly stated about American culture, to think in new ways about the meaning and the parameters of American culture, and to consider, perhaps for the first time, how non-Americans might perceive and experience American culture. Though the project at this stage leaves much room for improvement, it has provided me and my students with a unique opportunity to internationalize our study of American culture. Critical internationalism in American Studies scholarship ideally generates a new kind of international research, one that, as Desmond and Dominguez write, "truly decenters U.S. scholarship, while challenging it with new formulations, new questions, and new critiques"(Desmond and Dominguez 485). Critical internationalism in the American Studies classroom, similarly, can highlight and challenge what students presume about American culture by introducing perspectives that originate in other cultures and experiences. It can give my students new questions to ask and new tools for thinking about their own American lives. Among the collective group of students from all three countries, it places the topic of American culture in a critical space not dominated by any single discourse but open to multiple perspectives. With refinement and practice, such international exchanges can become increasingly effective at harnessing the synergy generated by multiple perspectives, creating new modes for thinking about American culture in a global context.

The conversations among Iowa, Nijmegen, and Hong Kong students have taken a variety of forms but often have started with discussions of popular culture, international travel, personal relationships, and university life. Much of what emerges from these conversations is a recognition of commonalities, including a familiarity with movies, television shows, and consumer products, similarities in interests and experiences, and a respectful curiosity about day-to-day life in different cultures. Through such small talk students begin to see the contours of a global culture they all partici-

pate in. It can be a revelation to Iowa students that people in Holland and Hong Kong are as familiar with American movies and music as they are. In a conversation about American popular culture, Dutch students may tend to be more critical, where Hong Kong students are enthusiastic, but in neither case have students expressed a sense of being invaded or overwhelmed by American culture, as many of my students originally expected. If anything, American students are surprised by the realization that American popular culture does not really "belong" to them, but gets folded into the fabric of everyday life by their international colleagues.

Once students have explored similar interests and experiences, they often are willing to take up matters more directly academic or political, especially when these subjects have been the focus of course content. Many of my students come from small farming communities, for example, which intrigued the Hong Kong students familiar only with city life. Explaining Hong Kong attitudes toward Mainland China, HKU students have identified farming and rural culture as a stigma Hong Kongers attach to their poorer neighbors (and usually acknowledge it as unfair). In response, my students have drawn upon their readings and in-class discussions, offering some historical context for American attitudes toward cities and the countryside. My students from rural backgrounds often take pleasure in describing a facet of American life very dear to them, but which they feel is generally under-represented among the exported images of America. The opportunity to share their experiences and describe their values in this way gives them an awareness of how global technologies can influence international perceptions. They are quick to note the differences between their experience and the dominant, world-wide representations of American life.

Unlike my students, many of the Nijmegen and HKU students study American culture and English in preparation for international careers. They are thus keenly interested in how Americans perceive and treat "others." HKU students in particular have been curious about the status of Asians and Asian-Americans in the U.S. In the following excerpt, what began as a discussion of the importance of English skills in America evolved into a conversation about race and privilege. It typifies the free-for-all character of the conversations, revealing a variety of dispositions that challenge students in both countries to assess their assumptions about American culture:

I have heard that White Americans may treat immigrants who come from Asia or Africa only as second-ranked or even lower status citizens, but "Why do they do so?" Is it because White Americans want to make difference from those immigrants or is it because they want to build up the White American community to isolate immigrants? What do you think about identity? If you have any idea, please share with me! Jeffer

I definitely have to say that not all Americans treat immigrants like second class citizens. The people you are referring to who do treat these people this way are ignorant people and they do not represent the feelings of all Americans. Molly

Hello Molly! Do you think that Asian Americans can only achieve real equality by achieving success in wealth and education? Also, do you think that Asian Americans would be treated much better by White Americans if they can speak good English? Sara

Jeffer- I agree with Molly that not all immigrants are treated poorly but I think that there is an idea in the US at the moment that immigrants, especially those who don't speak English, aren't really American. For example, the Latino population is growing very quickly right now and many of them speak Spanish. Especially in the southwest, laws are being passed to make sure all the schools are taught only in English. This doesn't actually help teach the Latino kids better because then they can't understand what's going on but it looks better to the public. As to the question of how to achieve real equality, I don't really know. If by equality you mean having the same rights and privileges under the law as everybody else, theoretically all anyone has to do is become a citizen. But if you mean, how can an immigrant be treated just like all other Americans, that's more complicated. I think to truly do that you have to lose part of your past, and that usually includes losing

> your old language and customs or at least learning new ones. I don't necessarily think that this is a good thing but it's how it is. -Katie
>
> Sara, personally, I think a good education and good grammar are the keys to being accepted anywhere, whether in your own country or another. I know when I was in Japan, I didn't speak very good Japanese and therefore I was look upon as not fitting in. Molly

In this discussion, as in many others, my students have defended and criticized American culture, resisted essentializing conclusions about American life, placed topics into historical and local context and situated their experiences within an international context, frequently all in the same conversation. Nijmegen and KHU students, in turn, have gained a greater exposure to the diversity of American experiences and dispositions. They also have gained an opportunity to become more astute critics of the representations of American culture they encounter in their daily lives. For all students, these conversations tend to focus attention on the permeability of cultural borders, on the continuous, dynamic relationships between local and global cultures, and on the ways in which these relationships can influence individual and community identities and values. One of the primary benefits of this kind of exchange lies in getting students not only to recognize the global culture they participate in, but to think critically about it as well.

An awareness of a shared global culture, facilitated by technologies, markets and international institutions, can also inspire a self-reflexive acknowledgment of privilege and power. My students come to understand that their participation in global culture, like the participation of their international colleagues, rests upon English skills, education, and access to technologies, institutions and economic resources. The underlying terms of engagement in their international conversations are structured by knowledge, resources, and cultural assumptions that are imbedded features of their American experience. Recognizing this helps them locate and evaluate their own positions within the grid of power and resources that comprise global culture. They also come to understand that their international colleagues are not typical of people world-wide; the qualities that allow entry into virtual space accrue to people who, whatever their geographic location, have access to particular resources, skills and privileges.

Based on their course evaluations, my students overall have regarded their international conversations as one of the most valuable and enjoyable aspects of the course. The opportunity to talk with fellow students around the globe is a unique opportunity for experiential learning that prompts them to look at their own American lives in new ways. Through these exchanges we have internationalized our approach to American Studies to a degree and in a hands-on, participatory way that would not have been possible without computer-mediated communications. Because they have been left to conduct conversations on their own, some students have at times felt a lack of direction and a need for more guidance. As I seek to improve the project, I hope to find a better balance between unstructured conversations that generate a wide variety of topics, and guided, more narrowly focused discussions. Such guided discussions, however, would involve the development of topics and directions, and possibly the use of materials, that are compatible with the aims and content of multiple courses. This would require a degree of coordination and planning that so far has not been possible in this project.

I had originally hoped the virtual community analysis component would complement the unstructured, informal conversations by providing a body of material and a focused set of objectives students at all three schools could engage in together. Participation during the first semester of the project was voluntary at Nijmegen and HKU; given the fairly extensive demands of the virtual community component, it was perhaps not surprising that none of the international students found time to join in, though some did respond to some of the readings. By the end of the first semester it was also apparent that any shared materials and exercises would need to be integrated more generally into the content of all courses, and that readings must be carefully selected to suit a broad range of English skills.

The virtual community component did not depend upon participation from all sides, however. I asked my students to find a virtual community that interested them and to spend several weeks talking with people and observing as full participants. Because there are so many virtual communities to choose from, and because they vary so drastically in form, content, level of activity and so forth, just identifying one they are attracted to can take a substantial amount of time for some students. Therefore, the earlier in the term the project starts, the better. We have also learned from experience that VC participants are much more receptive and welcoming as a rule when students do not simply interrogate them about their

involvement in VCs for the purposes of completing the assignment, but rather become participating members of the community themselves.

I have not put many restrictions on what types of virtual communities students may join, or even what counts as a virtual community, leaving it to students to evaluate the degree of "community" they encounter in virtual space. Students have elected to join elaborate virtual cities, in which they can rent apartments, visit stores, and move in and out of numerous chat rooms. Others have participated in online forums organized around much more narrowly focused discussions and interests. Some students have been fortunate in finding active, welcoming VCs in which they enjoy spending their time. Others have drifted from one unsatisfying experience to another, finding themselves excluded from conversations, stranded in largely dormant environments, or put off by the tenor of discussions and the people they encounter. For the purposes of the project all of these experiences can be brought to bear on the larger questions the course addresses: What is the relationship between virtual communities and place-based communities? What cultural values are at work at the intersection of global/virtual space and local/real space? What do virtual communities tell us about American culture in a global context?

Generally I have been pleased with the quality of my students' virtual community analyses. Students often are initially intent on forcing a choice between VCs and real communities: they want to argue either that VCs will never replace real communities, or that VCs are rendering place-based communities obsolete. With some prodding, however, students can be guided toward an approach that recognizes the co-existence of virtual and real space, and explores the complex cultural exchanges that flow between the two. I have found, for example, the trope of "character" to be valuable in framing our thinking about the relationship between traditional and virtual communities. We explore a traditional notion of community as a place where the character of individuals is nurtured and directed away from the excesses of individualism. We also identify as a tenet of American individualism the opportunity to make and re-make one's character, to become a new "character" by erasing the past, migrating, ascending socially, etc. The creation of "character," as both a standard of community and an individual identity, becomes a framework for analyzing the individual's experience of virtual communities, the norms of behavior and civility within VCs, and the malleability of personal identity in virtual space. Students who focus their analyses in this direction fre-

quently have drawn parallels between the mythic story of the Euro-American frontier experience and the discourse surrounding virtual space, in which individuals find new beginnings as self-constructed characters, unencumbered, ideally, even by race, gender, sexual orientation or physical ability. The trade-off for this individual freedom, they recognize, can be dislocation, an absence of stable community, and a lack of trust in the characters they meet.

The relationship between the individual and the community in virtual space can mirror cultural values undergirding American notions of place-based community, but with a sometimes unsettling degree of unreality, or hyperreality. The values that seem to operate in virtual space, many of my students have recognized, often appear as versions of values traditionally associated with American culture: freedom of speech, individualism, equality, free enterprise and others. The fact that virtual communities—and, indeed, virtual space more broadly configured—can be comprised of people from all around the world highlights the influence of American ideals in global culture. In some cases these values can be enforced by VC moderators, or by group pressures, but often online behavior is unmoored from any substantive accountability or sense of obligation to place or to others. Freedom of expression, for example, sometimes leads in virtual space to a cacophony of disembodied voices unconstrained by norms of civility or social consequences. The effect can be that of a hyperreal, virtual version of American ideals that functions "aesthetically," as Giles puts it, rather than ideologically. In turn, students have found mirrored in American life a hyperreal version of community and identity characteristic of global/virtual space, as when they themselves adopt amalgamated cultural identities, pieced together from multiple cultural influences, unattached to any particular group or local place.

The goal of the virtual community analysis component of our online project has been to explore the intersection of virtual and real space. This exploration has led us toward a consideration of American culture's relationship to global culture, emphasizing the permeability of cultural borders and the presence of a technology-mediated global space that interacts continually with real, local American places. Together with our international student conversations, this look at virtual communities has been an important step toward studying American culture within a global context. Through their use of computers, students have been able to participate in a segment of global culture, to experience it first-hand, and to analyze it within a framework of ideas and issues aimed at internationalizing American Studies in the classroom.

Notes

[1]The students and instructor access their WebCT site via the Internet, so anyone with Internet access can get to the site, provided they have a log-on ID and a password (issued by the instructor). Within WebCT the instructor can upload both text and graphics files, post lecture notes, provide outlines and study guides, set up a bulletin board, use chat rooms, private mail, and other features. I've used my course WebCT site not just to facilitate conversations, but also to post my syllabus and schedule, provide course readings, maintain a calendar, provide course-related Web links, post announcements, etc. I elected to use the WebCT bulletin board rather than the chat room because, especially with international students, it would have been very difficult to get everyone online at the same time. The WebCT bulletin board can be divided into any number of "fora," which I have used as a way to manage student conversations. All students were divided equally among five fora. Though all messages posted were available for all to read and respond to, I held my students accountable only for those conversations taking place in their assigned fora.

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