Becoming Pockets of Hope: The Challenge to Academic Libraries in the 21st Century

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This is a world in which one is condemned to wander across, within, and between multiple borders and spaces marked by excess, otherness, difference, and a dislocating notion of meaning and attention. The modernist world of certainty and order has given way to a planet in which hop-hop and rap condense time and space... No longer belonging to any one place or location, youth increasingly inhabit shifting cultural and social spheres marked by plurality of languages and cultures.

Henry Giroux 1999

Introduction
Libraries have been throughout my life my pockets of hope, my spaces of freedom. I hope to share with the readers what I have learned about libraries and what I see as the challenges facing librarians at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

I will argue that libraries need to continue the struggle to remain as our pockets of hope in academic institutions. Pockets of hope are physical, intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and political communities where participants engage in reflection and action, challenging the despair so widespread throughout our educational institutions today. In these pockets of hope, the presence and participation of all members is seen as essential to their survival, development and future. Together in community these active participants prepare for social and political action. The field of transformative action includes the institutions in which they reside as well as the society at large.

The concept of pockets of hope evolves from research for the book Pockets of Hope: How Students and Teachers Change the World (in press). My co-author and I use the word pockets to demarcate the space and describe their isolation and positionality vis-à-vis institutions and/ or society. In other words, the concept of a pocket identifies these spaces as having values and visions that often stand in contradiction to those of the institution or the society outside their walls. We chose the concept of hope because it is a profoundly political idea that captures the joy as well as the
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sorrow that we found in the pockets of hope we examined. These are spaces that have what Martin Luther King (1992) called an “audacious faith in the future” (178). An unyielding faith in the future describes the strength, courage and determination one finds in these pockets of hope.

Often drained of energy due to the constant lack of resources and ever-increasing demands, educators and students gather in these pockets of hope. Here they replenish their strength with the conviction that they are responsible for transforming their spaces into communities of respect, knowledge, and vision.

Pockets of hope cannot be isolationist spaces that deny their position within the institution or society; instead, educators find in their pockets of hope the space they need to gather in community and think with their allies about how to engage the larger institution, community and society. The objective is to remember and sustain the democratic project in this country which promised equality, justice, and freedom for all.

Protecting and Nurturing Libraries

I see librarians as educators called to protect libraries so students, who are currently facing twenty-first century demands with twentieth century skills and knowledge, can go there when they need to find a safe community. I understand the condition of our youth in the same manner as Giroux: as wanderers and border crossers in a diverse world under tremendous pressure to move at accelerated speeds into cyberspace.

I place my trust in librarians, a trust I developed as a result of a lifetime of experiences in libraries. They provided me with a space of freedom. With their guidance I came to believe that I too could become an intellectual. But, the challenges facing librarians— who are also being pushed to move at accelerated speeds to transform libraries into twenty-first century spaces supporting twenty-first century needs—are immense.

Through the stories I will tell you in the next section, I hope to elaborate how my experiences inform my conceptualization of pockets of hope. I will then discuss my understanding of the political context and its impact on the current climate in education. I finish by re-presenting the notion of pockets of hope and the challenges I see facing twenty-first century librarians.

The Knowledge to be Free

My relationship with libraries has been long and intense. For eleven years I tried to find the answer to one and only one question. Every single course and paper helped me get closer to answering this one question: What happened in Puerto Rico in 1898 during the Spanish American War? Why did Puerto Rico become a colony while Cuba became independent? Understanding this historical event becomes a rite of passage for many Puerto Rican students seeking to understand how we could still remain a colony of the United States. After realizing that I was asking the wrong question, I focused on understanding how Cuba became independent and not why Puerto Rico became a colony. The next part of the story is how I found the answer to my eleven-year question. To relate this story I will use a Latin American literary tradition, magical realism, which we employ to understand our worlds that oftentimes seem too horrible and too beautiful to be real.

The Magical World of Libraries and How They Challenge Definitions of Self, Space and Time.

For close to eleven years I lived in the protected space of the Wellesley College library. Of course, I went home because I had a family, but my imagination, my spirit, stayed at the library. This library is a magnificent building in the middle of a New England campus. In there I could read how the United States invented Cuba and Puerto Rico for the people of this country. I called these my hundred years of solitude since I read over one hundred years of documents. In the process I learned how the United States was created, with its dreams, its strengths, its weaknesses and its contradictions.

I realized then that libraries hold magical books called the Congressional Record and the Messages of the Presidents, which I, a Puerto Rican, could read. At first, I wondered when someone would figure out that maybe I should not have access to these books and come take them away. But, I figured, this was a protected castle with a defensive moat around it. In this pocket of hope or protected space, all those who entered were safe.

The magical books I was reading had orange dust—real dust, and really orange. Every day for many years I was covered with this magical dust, which made me feel very powerful. My power came from the knowledge I had: I understood what had happened in 1898 and realized that what I knew, unlike land or sovereignty, could never be taken away.

Wellesley College, the place where the castle exists, is itself an institution that, like libraries, stands as a contradiction to the society. The moment you enter the library you feel that in the universe of Wellesley, women are at the
center of the institution; not at the margins, but at the center. Like Wellesley, many libraries are also spaces of women and this, in itself, contradicts the universe outside its walls.

There were two desks in the middle of the central room in the library. In these two desks sat the most powerful women in my universe: the reference librarians. I came to believe that if they could not find the book I was looking for, they would actually write it at night so I could have it in the morning. Such was their commitment to helping all students find the knowledge they were seeking. Unlike other spaces in my life, they did not care about my accent or where I came from. In this space I could become an intellectual; they believed it, and in the process they convinced me. In the adjoining room sat another powerful woman: the documents librarian. She held the keys to a world of knowledge and understanding. I also came to believe that she was friends with some of the men I was having my imaginary conversations with; wherever they were hiding, she would find and bring them to me so I could figure out what had happened.

After many years in this magical space, I began to joke that I had become an integral part of the library; very much like the furniture and the walls. This was my very own space: a free zone, a space of knowledge, and a space of struggle.

Halfway through my doctoral work, I needed to work and naturally, I went to the library. I started working in the reserve room and became part of the world of the librarians.

It was then that I started meeting other very powerful people who I will call the feudal lords, also known as the faculty. They usually came down the day before classes began with a list of one hundred articles, fifty of which they needed for the first two weeks. And, by the way, they would say, "here are the names of the books where these articles came from, could you photocopy them?" And then there was the one student who "misplaced" for good one of the fifty articles (the one I just photocopied) from one of the feudal lord's courses the night before fifty other students had to read that very article. Following the model of infinite patience that I had learned from the other librarians, I resolved the problem for this student, her peers and the faculty who never knew that a minor catastrophe had been averted. The faculty did not need to walk into class to discuss the very article no one had read.

I went to MIT after leaving Wellesley, but I always returned to do my research. After graduation I went to work at Salem State College and my office was, of all places in the world, in the library.

Now at Harvard I want to tell you another story about another library and in doing so, I hope to give another example of a pocket of hope navigating safely in turbulent waters. Our school is struggling to be diverse, not just to have students and faculty of color, but to be diverse in its curriculum and pedagogy. Moreover, we speak about it publicly which inevitably generates tension. Students, administrators and faculty of color often feel exposed, spoken about, in the spotlight. White students, administrators and faculty often feel guilty, needing to change, in the spotlight. Classes are intense, discussions are intense and public forums are very difficult. In essence, we are doing what is supposed to be happening in the U.S.: figuring out how to end the segregation in which we live both at home and in schools.

In the middle of this storm stands another magical space, Gutman Library. When you come into the space you will find a family room with sofas where students can have conversations. The sofas are located in the middle of the room signaling a space for students to relax, have conversations and build communities. To the back of the sofas are a series of computers. Importantly, the space between the computers and the sofas is such that students working in the computers are often speaking with those sitting in the sofas. The clear message the library sends through the arrangement of the physical space is that dialogue and community are highly valued.

The sofas are always occupied by students from all races, ethnicities and languages. For students of color this is the safe space at the School, the space where they feel they can relax and be who they are, freely. Recently, a beautiful and inspirational exhibit of Native American art stood powerfully to the right of the students. A Native American student worked with John Collins, director of the library, to bring this art to the school. To the left of the sofas is the reserve desk. Behind this reserve desk is an African American man, a father figure and friend to many. His work behind the scenes is to care for the students. Of course, this is in addition to his work in the library. He advises students, laughs with them and helps them solve their problems. Two years ago he went to a Chicano student's wedding in California. He was one of the most important people in this student's life at HGSE.

Gutman Library is a pocket of hope that provides students with a safe space in which they can speak and listen, feel valued and find the knowledge they need. In this space, librarians have created a community standing in a time warp as a contradiction to the accelerated and often dehumanizing speed at which the rest of the university moves.
some students Gutman is a space of peaceful silence while for others it is a space for engaged dialogue. Like the Wellesley College library, Gutman will be remembered by students as their very own space where they could be free to become powerful intellectuals.

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I name libraries as pockets of hope since I have learned in my years as a student, as a librarian and as a faculty member that those who were immensely powerful in my life did not have as much power in the university as I had imagined. This became particularly evident when, in public schools, countless outsiders descended on libraries and began speaking with authority about what was needed to move into the twenty-first century. The work and expertise of librarians in these discussions were often not recognized but assumed, not rewarded but expected.

Years of close observations of libraries both as an insider and an outsider also gave me an important insight, and in this insight I find great hope: there is a great deal of resistance, a women’s kind of resistance, taking place in libraries. I believe this women’s way of resisting is essential to preserving these magical spaces and having them continue being spaces of freedom, hope and caring. But, I worry about the fragility of spaces such as libraries for two reasons: the first I will call the global technological competitive race at the expense of democracy, community and inclusion. The second is the dangerous acceleration of life and learning at the expense of humanity.

Dehumanizing Education
I begin this part of the discussion with my reading of the political landscape and the context I believe frames the dilemma we are facing today. Since 1993 and as a result of the publication of the report A Nation At Risk (1993) by the Department of Education, the national discourse has moved to argue that the disconnection between the education students receive and the production of workers for the twenty-first century generates a "crisis" in education which inevitably will result in an economic crisis. For the record, this has not happened, but the crisis has not been redefined or challenged. This report signals the urgency of producing competitive workers:

Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world... What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur—others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments.

The report, A Nation Still at Risk (1998) co-authored by conservatives Chester E. Finn, Jr. (president, The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation); William J. Bennett (Empower America); E.D. Hirsch (University of Virginia), Diane Ravitch (Brookings Institution) among others, recognizes that. "[a] decade and a half later, the risk posed by inadequate education has changed. Our nation today does not face imminent danger of economic decline or technological inferiority." But, we are still in crisis since "[e]mployers report difficulty finding people to hire who have the skills, knowledge, habits, and attitudes they require for technologically sophisticated positions."

Both political parties agree with the "crises" as defined by both of these reports. The national discourse converges around the idea that there is an urgent need to retool education so as to support the competitiveness of the U.S. in the international arena. The process of retooling begins with the recognition that youth and adults don't have the skills necessary to participate in the new global economy.

The report Twenty-first Century Skills for Twenty-first Century Jobs (1999), prepared by the U.S. Department of Commerce, Education, Labor, the National Institute of Literacy, and the Small Business Administration summarizes the problem:

Global competition, the Internet, and widespread use of technology all suggest that the economy of the twenty-first century will create new challenges for employers and workers... if Americans value a high quality of life for all, there is no choice... these new forms of organization and management cannot succeed without additional investments in the skills of U.S. workers.

The United States’ urgency in competing at the high end of the global economy requires a shock to the educational system to produce this new high-performance worker by shifting the curriculum as fast as possible. The fundamental difference between the political parties becomes the specific way to shift gears. For conservatives, the preferred strategy is to dismantle the public education system through charter schools and vouchers. Ultimately, this means transforming public institutions into private, profit-
making ventures responding directly to the employment needs of corporations. For liberals, the solution seems to be to continue tinkering with the system via high-stakes tests for students and teachers. Again, both parties agree on fundamentals with each providing palatable solutions for their different constituencies.

Coupled with the need to produce a skilled global worker at an accelerated speed is the need to move away from the idea of a multicultural, multiethnic, multilingual and, therefore, diverse nation. In this perspective diversity of ideas, languages, cultures and visions derail the project of a country unified and focused on the urgent priority of producing a competitive labor force. In the 1990s, federal, state, and local actions against immigrants and students for whom English is a second language included: California's propositions 187 (seeking to prevent illegal aliens from receiving public benefits), 209 (dismantling affirmative action) and 227 (dismantling bilingual education); English-only bills introduced in Congress; the raising of TOEFL and SAT scores for admittance into public colleges.

Presumably, a nation that embraces the idea of diversity and the different outlooks such diverse backgrounds generate would not move as fast or as coherently as the crisis identified by A Nation at Risk and A Nation Still at Risk seems to require. In other words, the project of producing global workers might find resistance, obstacles, even challenges to the fundamental premises generating policy.

Responding to the call to quickly reproduce global workers meant standardizing students through the "core knowledge" curriculum (Leistyna, 1991), testing them on this curriculum through high-stakes testing, and homogenizing them through the "...current system of language and allusion that is dominant in the nation's economic and intellectual discourse" (E. D. Hirsch as cited in Leistyna, 176). Language here is broadly defined to mean "standard" English and the "allusion-system of the marketplace" (187). In this view, "[t]olerance of diversity is at the root of our society, but encouragement of multilingualism is contrary to our traditions and extremely unrealistic" (197). Transforming potentially resistant citizens who may continue to believe that their cultures, languages, visions and dreams are of equal value to the "dominant" culture into passive, acculturated workers becomes the priority of those demanding their standardization.

I see a very dangerous polarization emerging across private and public education, K-12 through higher education, which seems to replicate the national discourse. We are asked to choose on focusing either on diversity or technology. Those who speak from the political position favoring technology over diversity argue, without any historical evidence, that if only African Americans and Latinos would pass the high stakes tests that permeate the country today we would be able to move into the twenty-first century. If only we would forget our cultures and become like Richard Rodriguez, who in Hunger of Memory (1983) argues for the value of enforced amnesia, we would "make it." Finally, if all of us had access to computers and the latest technology, then we would be set for life. Racism, sexism, homophobia and classism apparently evaporate in the twenty-first century thanks to new technology and skills that will give the country the edge needed to win in the global economic competition. And, we will live happily ever after.

There have been casualties in the process of producing standardized, global workers at high speeds. Recently, a mother in a Boston Public School asked for advice from school administrators, teachers and parents on how to deal with her son who was feeling intense pressure from the impending high stakes test as well as the impending teacher's strike. According to this mother, she was left to deal with the ever-increasing stress in this 10th grader's life. Other parents sitting around her agreed with her assessment of a situation where students are facing increasing pressures which they or their parents are unable to address.

Coupled with these institutional pressures are the new demands placed on "border youth", who are asked to cross constantly between the different worlds (school, home, internet, media) they inhabit. According to Giroux (1999) these border youth's world has been "...refrigured as space and time mutate into multiple and overlapping cyberspace networks" (103). The result is that youth "...reorder their imaginations through connections to virtual reality technologies and lose themselves in images that wage a war on traditional meaning by reducing all forms of understanding to random access spectacles" (103). In this dehumanizing "random access spectacle", adults are not present and kids, alone, surf the web and the world.

A series of questions for educators who share this reading of the political context and the challenges facing young people today are: How do we educate our "border youth"? How do we create spaces where a humanizing education can take place? How does education reconnect with a democratic project?

Revisiting Pockets of Hope
Committed and compassionate educators who, together

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with their students, are feeling the pressures to comply with the production of the twenty-first century global workers, respond by creating pockets of hope. Here students realize that education does not need to be inhumane, uncaring and impersonal. Instead, these communities provide counter examples and constant reminders that an educational institution can be a site of possibility and hope.

Educators in these pockets of hope recognize that the diversity of participants generates a wealth of knowledge that enriches the community; in turn, lack of diversity diminishes these communities in unacceptable ways. Consequently, educators in these pockets of hope make a central commitment to creating communities that value all members and their unique contributions.

Creating a pocket of hope entails the reconceptualization of time and space. Entering these pockets of hope feels like entering a time warp. Time moves slower than the accelerated and dehumanizing speed characteristic of our institutions and of society. Peaceful and quiet moments, so rare outside these pockets of hope, give students moments of silence in which to think, learn and dream. Alternatively, in pockets of hope there are always multiple conversations taking place, some are loud, some are intense, others are relaxed. But, speaking and listening—which we seem to value less and less these days—are highly valued in these spaces. Those who envision a "good" classroom or library as monolingual, rigid and joyless find the spaces I speak about unnerving. For me, these are exciting and engaging places: these are our multicultural, multilingual pockets of hope.

Transforming the physical space means that every detail insures that students feel welcomed, at ease and cared for. Carefully chosen pictures, furniture and technology representing the realities, hopes and aspirations of our students reaffirm that this is a space for all, particularly for those who are seldom welcomed in other spaces in their lives. Evidence of a humanizing and compassionate space can be found everywhere, inviting students to get off the fast-paced conveyor belt that dominates their daily lives.

In these pockets of hope, the physical space, clearly in congruence with the principles of inclusion and community, generates much more than a sense of physical comfort. Educators signal in multiple ways that students are human and therefore deserve a caring and compassionate teaching and learning community. As Donna Kerr (1996) observes, "[i]t is in the richness of these associations . . . that the self finds the sanity of authentic reflections. For its survival, the soul requires a space in which reflections are authentic. Only in such a space can the soul dance. Only in that space can one find comfort" (47). Recognizing the need for these rich spaces where students and educators’ souls can dance, educators endeavor to re-envision all aspects that constitute their communities so as to care for and sustain the emergence of powerful intellectuals.

A pocket of hope welcomes the whole student, inviting them to bring their personal as well as their political, spiritual and intellectual life into the space. Their humanity, intellect, spirit and political dreams are nourished by the wealth of knowledge found in libraries and in classrooms. In pockets of hope educators encourage curiosity, creativity and taking risks so that the students can figure out the answers to their own questions. Finding knowledge is always seen as an adventure, as a joyful exploration resulting in an autonomous, powerful intellectual. This, I believe, is one of the most precious gifts librarians and teachers give their students.

I know that the kinds of spaces I speak about exist. I know these are not the product of my imagination. But, it is only because I have had the privilege of experiencing these magical spaces, where what one imagines is possible becomes a concrete reality, that I can tell you without any reasonable doubt that it is possible to create pockets of hope for our students. For those who have not experienced the kinds of spaces I speak about, it is unimaginable to think that education could be something different than stepping on the conveyor belt moving from school to work. I believe that in order to break the national spell that tells us that education is about producing global workers at accelerated speeds, students need to experience education in our pockets of hope. The transformation of students who have experienced the freedom to think and learn about life and living is quite remarkable. They move from being passive spectators in other people's dramas to active participants demanding an education for life and not simply an education for work. This, I believe, is the task at hand.

A Call to Resistance and Action
I place my hope and my trust in librarians and I call on you to protect our libraries. Remain committed to the idea that students are complete human beings who thrive in communities that are inclusive, compassionate and visionary. Every detail and every aspect, including technology, must support the humanity and the dreams of our students and our own dreams.

As I was finishing writing this article, I felt really old-fashioned. I should be speaking about the latest techno-
logical advance, the latest something or other. I want to speak about technology, but only technology that advances the needs of people in community; technology that advances a democracy that includes everyone, not just those who survive by being the fittest, but each and every one of us.

I place my trust in women and those who embrace those attributes that we associate with being a woman. Our students need the nurturing, loving and caring spaces that we associate with a woman’s way of living. I place my hope in a woman’s way of resistance where, patiently but firmly, we choose community above alienation. We choose humanity. We choose freedom.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century I place my hope in librarians, creators of pockets of hope, and in libraries, the protective, loving and caring places where students can learn to live in their world and dream about a healthy and humane future.

Works Cited