

Chris Krause

Walkabout: Patchogue, New York

I depart my house on Friday the eleventh, 3 PM. It is a freezing day, but I can hope for none better in this cold northern clime. It probably would have been better to do an assignment like this later in the spring, as temperatures nowadays rarely exceed thirty degrees, and today is in the mid-twenties. Snow banks are still visible on the sides of the road. Patchogue is a suburb, but like all places on Long Island, is quickly becoming urbanized and is home to a dense main street which would not be very different from any street in Brooklyn or Queens. I'm walking from my home on Bay Avenue, about a mile from the bay, and it should take about twenty minutes to reach the library. As I leave I notice some familiar sights, prostitutes and other unsavory types marching along the street to the "Bay House" – a low-rent motel, operated by a slum lord, which functions as a haven for these sorts of people. Most of them are middle aged, and seem to have been defeated by life. Once I walk beyond the environs of the Bay House I proceed northward to Main Street and pass the various homes of childhood friends, most of which have moved on by now.

As I approach Bay Elementary School I come across a throng of Hispanics loitering in front of Bay Deli, a business adjacent to the school. I know these fellows to be gang members, and it is rumored that the owner of the deli sells drugs out of it. One of my mother's friends got into a fist fight in front of that place, as he was frustrated the police would do nothing to remove their presence next to the school. I won't be visiting that establishment on my "walkabout" – I prefer to remain in one piece. Besides, I don't speak Spanish well enough to converse properly. This part of Bay, as it nears Main Street, is prone to some dangerous traffic, mainly connected with the Hispanic communities on the east side of the road. The three blocks leading up to Main Street are Hispanic enclaves, and speeding "rice burners" are known to fly east to west at unreliable speeds, only nominally skirting the rules of the road. This

Hispanic population is a fairly new development, there were few when I first moved to Patchogue some fifteen years ago, and they now seem to dominate public space in the area. Few of them speak English, and with their arrival came a new wave of gang and drug related activity. I know from prior research that this group has been the focus of many new library services at the local public library, services which in December won the Patchogue-Medford Library national recognition, including an award presented by First Lady Michelle Obama. It has been the aim of the library over the past decade to help improve English literacy and social integration.

I finally cross the railroad tracks leading into the heart of the town and pass some industrial parks, the streets littered with trash, and the fumes of oil and industry clearly noticeable. At the crossroads between Bay Avenue and Main Street I stop for a moment and look about. There is a tattoo shop to my east, filled with young, scowling people and a tire shop called "Tires Incorporated" to my west. The streets are filled with a sort of new pseudo-urban poor, while the well to do appear to be driving about. Even when it is warm out, this trend, teenagers excepted, is mostly adhered to. Only the central heart of mainstreet, with its shops and newly built, stylish eateries attract the middle class. On the peripheries, such as where I stand, there is only poor, many of whom are transported here through the system of public busing. There is a major bus stop five minutes walk to my east; I used to take the route to Suffolk County Community College during my undergraduate years.

I march west toward the library, avoiding some heavy and dangerous traffic. It becomes more and more like "the city" (New York) every year here in Patchogue. I can't help but noticing on the edge of Main Street proper a heavy concentration of Hispanic stores, economic eateries and services. They are inhabited by only Hispanics, and there is an active bustle of people here. The Hispanics tend to stay to themselves and travel in entire families. The smell of Mexican food is heavy on the air, gushing outward from several restaurants. Spanish is spoken here as a primary language. Clearly these people

are the future of our community, at least from superficial appearances, and library service must continue to adapt to cater to them. The massive church across the street from this Hispanic chain of businesses is inactive and dark inside.

I am now entering the center of the town. In recent years the local government has called to revitalize the area. This has resulted in mostly superficial additions: prominent Christmas lights, lanterns on the sidewalks, some new parks and decorations during other holidays or seasons. Surprisingly, while one would not expect nonsense like this to attract new business, it actually has. There are number of stylish eateries in the center of town, bordering on fancy, and also several high-end shops and boutiques. These are new additions and are run with a sheen of professionalism. They replaced what were essentially family run businesses of yesteryear. I remember in my youth hanging out at a “LAN center” – a business with computers for networked gaming – that was run by the parents of a fellow classmate in middle school. The building is now occupied by a chain jewelry store.

Main Street is also an active meeting place for teenagers, although as it is quite freezing out, there are few today. They frequently hang out in the library for recreational purposes, as well as cut through it to get the part of town on the south side of the street. This creates a bustle of activity in the library, a good deal of which is not related to library services. The youth also like to loiter around the library building and drink, as well as at other places on Main Street, behind buildings. I’d think that the youth would cause hassles for the library staff, but it’s also a population of patrons which would need to be considered. How to engage such a technology dependent generation is a significant problem of contemporary library science: the services they default upon have issues, and we librarians must do our best to help educate and guide assuming teenagers to good information retrieval skills.

It might be worth mentioning that the Patchogue-Medford Library is located right on Main Street, at the center of town. Accordingly it is at an ideal location for community activities and as a social

meeting point, which it is clearly being used for this day. I observe large groups of children inside as I pass. Children represent a major demographic of users. The library even has an entire section “Homework Central” – dedicated to the needs of school children, and the reference desk there is often swamped by dozens of individuals and multiple families.

Clearly Patchogue is at a crossroads: in some regards it is a poor, rapidly expanding and place prone to violence and poverty. In another light it is home to a stable, although stagnant middle class, which has influenced the construction of new businesses in the town center. The library will have to provide services to a large population of ESL patrons, a new generation of youth, as well as the old generation of Baby Boomers who inhabit the fringes of the suburbs. The library will have to function as a social center, as well as a place of learning and of storing and accessing knowledge. Luckily, smart administration has essentially accomplished this call to arms, as accentuated by December’s national award. Still, the library will have to continue to constantly be dynamic, with its thumb on the pulse of a community in flux; else it will lose its utility.