1 Four Beginnings

I was born in Dallas, Texas, and brought up in Ho-Ho-Kus, New Jersey, an almost entirely white, middle-class suburb of New York City. Growing up, my experience of the wider world was pretty limited, but my mother, despite her attempts to downplay her working-class East Texas roots in the context of my dad's more patrician banking family, had a strong sense of social justice, equity, and fairness. One of her favorite stories about me concerns an incident that occurred when she was driving me to preschool in Austin, Texas. It was 1976. I was four, and she had recently become a subscriber to *Ms. Magazine*. On that day, I asked about a big building we were passing, one with huge columns like a temple. She told me that it was a Masonic Hall, slyly adding that Masons didn't allow women into their group. When she asked me what I thought about that, she swears that I yelled "That's not fair!" and demanded she pull the car over so that I could go in and talk some sense into them.

Despite my natural inclination toward speaking out, I was raised in a culture of silence. Middle class, white, suburban, and deeply affected by a family member's alcoholism, I always felt as though a secret lay simmering just below the surface of our outwardly calm and prosperous life. I have since found out that this is a pretty common experience for middle-class white people who become antiracist and antipoverty activists later in life. Many of us describe growing up as worried or angry kids, struggling against the shoddy logic and emotional repression that sustain illegitimate power relationships and underwrite white supremacy and economic exploitation.[1] My parents are deeply decent people; they vocally challenged discrimination, worked on political campaigns, and raised two strong-willed, independent daughters. But our family was caught in the web of color-blind racism and class-blind classism: while my parents would not have tolerated a racist or classist joke, they had no close friends of color, and our family never discussed the source—or the impacts—of our money or privilege.

Growing up in a bubble of privilege made me intensely curious; explanations for the structure of our society never quite rang true. Like a little detective, I cross-checked facts, grilled witnesses, followed hunches, researched and read assiduously. I scratched surfaces, was slow to accept the party line, questioned everything. A relentless kid, I realized early that I was living in a sea of what feminist sociologists of knowledge call sanctioned ignorance, a set of culturally endorsed falsehoods and half-truths we are asked to swallow to maintain the status quo. A defiant kid, I was not about to let ignorance and lies define my life. I practiced dissent from a very early age—when I was barely ten years old I wrote a two-page newsletter arguing why people shouldn't hunt deer, duplicated it, and put it on the windshields of every car in my elementary school parking lot. I also showed early political acumen: I managed to convince the elementary school to let me use the photocopier in the front office to reproduce it!

I was bookish, so I did a lot of reading—the *Communist Manifesto*, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* were in my adolescent library, alongside *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*; *Black Beauty*; and *A Wrinkle in Time*. In seventh grade, after my parents' divorce had somewhat narrowed our economic circumstances, I mentioned Karl Marx in a discussion of inequality in an English class, only to have my teacher tell me that he was the "guy who made up the [Aryan] Superman" and that he was, more or less, a Nazi. At the time, I did not know that my teacher was mixing up Marx and Nietzsche and getting Nietzsche wrong, to boot, but I did know, unequivocally, that she was wrong. Two things became clear. The first was that people in my suburban hometown didn't want to talk about economic inequality *at all*. The second was that the things I was being taught in the classroom didn't reflect my experience of the world or my innate sense of right and wrong.

That radicalizing moment also earned me the nickname "Pinko" among my peers, which stuck with me for five long years. After getting the nickname, I followed a pretty predictable path for a middle-class white girl with a budding political consciousness: animal rights activism and vegetarianism in my early teens, environmental activism from age fifteen to seventeen, a quick break for black turtlenecks and moody boyfriends, and then college at a liberal, gradeless state university in California. It was during college that I got involved with community media through a local noncommercial radio station and discovered the Internet, though it was largely an esoteric and specialized realm during my college years, which spanned the early 1990s.

During that time, my activism and thinking about justice began to shift and deepen. I discovered feminism when a women's studies class gave me language to articulate long-held beliefs about sex and gender inequalities. I engaged in antiwar and anti-imperialist organizing after the first invasion of Iraq. I took my first steps into antiracist and civil rights work after hitch-hiking to San Francisco to hear Angela Y. Davis speak at the Western Regional Organizing Conference Against the War in 1991; it was a pro-foundly life-changing experience. While my college campus was diverse in terms of race, nationality, sexual orientation, and beliefs, it was not terribly economically diverse, and though I met a few Marxists and anarchists, and sought out collectives and co-ops in town, there wasn't much of a conver-sation going on about economic inequality.

And then came the rumblings of the information revolution. There in the heart of the Silicon Valley, while working as the development director for a community radio station, I discovered this fascinating new thing called the World Wide Web. I hacked my way through HTML, started making Web sites (for the Mosaic browser!), and moved up the coast to San Francisco to start my post-college life in 1995. Those were strange days in the Bay Area. For a young woman like me with racial and economic privilege, a college degree, no family obligations, and some working knowl-edge of computers, it was a remarkable time of freedom and excitement. I set myself up as a freelance Web site developer, found a $300 per month room in the Mission District, and started one of the first cyberfeminist 'zines, a short-lived snarky online periodical called *Brillo*.

But even in the heady atmosphere of the dot-com boom, it would take a powerful brand of denial to not see that something was amiss in the middle of the Silicon Valley miracle. Though my vision was limited by my privileged social and economic position, I was not blind. It was clear to me at the time that I was part of the massive wave of gentrification that swept through San Francisco neighborhoods like the Mission, South of Market, Hayes Valley, and the Western Addition. Public housing began to disappear, replaced by coffee shops, Internet cafes, and the kind of stores that display two items of clothing in a big white room. In the three and a half years I lived in San Francisco, the vibrant diversity of the city waned visibly and rents in my neighborhood tripled.

In the mid-1990s, in the circles I was running in, it was not unusual for people to ask you at parties, only half ironically, "Have you made your first million yet?" It was, many believed, the American Dream manifest: all you needed was a good idea, some sweat equity, and a garage, and the digital economy would bestow on you its mighty gifts. I understood the itch for

the million. Straightforward greed was not what was tying my brain in knots. What I had trouble wrapping my head around was Silicon Valley's unique way of combining utopian fervor with blatant dissociation from reality, a cognitive dissonance that led me to a personal crisis of conscience and eventually drove me out of the Bay Area.

People around me seemed to believe that the high-tech economy was going to lift all boats—lead to better outcomes for everyone—but they were ignoring the obvious evidence of increasing economic inequality that I saw around me every day. How could people simultaneously think they were all going to get filthy rich *and* make the world a better place for everyone? The people commending the economic miracle in Silicon Valley seemed to be suffering from a kind of collective, consensual blindness, blocking out the gentrification, the skyrocketing rents, and the toxic environmental toll of high-tech industry. The increasing disparities were evident if you only had the will to look.

The solutions I found at the time, and the contributions I thought I could make, focused on access to technology. I believed that one of the key ways to mitigate the more disastrous impacts of the high-tech economy was to make the tools of the information revolution more widely available across disparities of gender, race, class, language, ability, and nationality. I began volunteering at Plugged In, a well-known community technology center in the Whiskey Gulch neighborhood of East Palo Alto, the poorest city in San Mateo County. Whiskey Gulch was an economically challenged but culturally rich neighborhood down the street from Stanford University, a community squeezed by gentrification pressures, education system short-comings, and a lack of stable, living-wage jobs. Plugged In provided youth from the community computer access, technology classes, and employment training at its University Avenue address until 1999, when developers razed East Palo Alto's downtown, including Plugged In's original home, and replaced it with a Four Seasons Hotel, a convention center, and an IKEA store.

Back in the Mission District, I started free Internet and World Wide Web literacy classes for poor and working-class women through a community arts organization called Artists' Television Access. The classes concentrated on larger social issues—the Internet's birth in the defense industry, economic justice issues in the neighborhood, and gender issues online—as well as practical skills, such as using the Internet and the Web to find information, HTML authoring, and graphic design. But I had doubts that these piecemeal efforts could address the systemic, widespread economic inequalities I was witnessing. What drove me back east and into graduate

school was a combination of this concern—that my activism was not really addressing the root causes of economic disparity in the high-tech economy—and the steadily increasing feeling that I was going crazy. Why did I insist on examining the goose laying the golden eggs while everyone else was drinking lattes, doing yoga, and cashing in their stock options?

So, in 1997, I fled the triumphant arrival of the "new economy" in Silicon Valley and went to live beside the Hudson River in the historic city of Troy, New York. My experiences in the Bay Area traveled east with me and remained on my mind. These formative experiences—my work in community technology centers, the publication of *Brillo*, and my experiences with magical thinking during the Silicon Valley "miracle"—mark the beginning of this book. I was a committed community technology practitioner for nearly ten years, and I believed that access to technology was a fundamental social justice issue in American cities.

I was wrong.

In this book, I try to explain the source of my misunderstanding and describe the changes that took place in my thinking between 2001 and 2004, when I was working in the YWCA community, engaged in the research that became the basis for this book. In 2001, as part of my doctoral work in science and technology studies, I set out to construct community-based technology training programs with an emphasis on peer education and the design of locally relevant tools. This work took place at the Sally Catlin Resource Center and later its associated technology lab, both programs of the YWCA of Troy-Cohoes.

Influenced by my work in community technology centers and the policy rhetoric popular at the time, I initiated a project designed to close the digital divide by providing situated technology training, asset-based community development, and workforce preparation for low-income women. But women in the YWCA community repeatedly disputed and disrupted the digital divide frame. As my relationships with them developed, they described their struggles to meet their basic needs in the high-tech economy and their significant, often troubling, interactions with the tools of the information revolution. When given the opportunity, my collaborators even smashed the machines. Literally. Gleefully.

"If I Had a Magic Wand, I Would Bomb All the Fucking Computers"

When I started interviewing women at the YWCA of Troy-Cohoes in the summer of 2003, I had been working in the YW community for nearly two years. One interview, with Ruth Delgado Guzman, exemplifies the

challenges women in the YWCA community posed to digital divide framings and begins to illustrate how their insights shifted my understanding of high-tech equity. Ruth and I met through the Women's Economic Empowerment Series, a nine-part sequence of popular education workshops that I co-designed and facilitated with YWCA staff member Christine Nealon during the summer of 2002. Ruth later became a member of Women at the YWCA Making Social Movement (WYMSM), our collaborative research and social justice group.

Ruth is an engaging, eloquent Puerto Rican woman who was completing her master's degree in education at Russell Sage College in Troy at the time. Deeply committed to the well-being of children and hoping to become a high school guidance counselor, she kept me laughing with her sharp wit and inspired me with her abiding interest in social justice. Our interview took place in late July. The windows of the Sally Catlin Resource Center were open over State Street, and the center was flooded with light. Oscillating fans worked to move the warm air in the room as we talked about information technology (IT) and social justice. Other members of the YW community typed quietly on the public computers, and the intercom cut in and out of our conversation, announcing phone calls and visitors for residents and staff. Ruth was quick to name the goal she felt we both shared: creating a "technology for people." She described her experiences with technology as generally "very, very positive," and explained that she believed very strongly that technology could be used as a tool of social change.

However, she expressed reservations about most scholarship that describes women's technological inequality, and about the public policy geared toward alleviating it. She insisted,

People who say that women are afraid of technology, or don't know how important it is, are missing the point. . . . When you're just surviving, you're in survival mode. You don't think about technology, you don't think about the latest anything. You are surviving. And that takes your whole life—just to survive. . . . Especially women! Women love to learn and are able to learn. They really like technology and want technology. If you offered women a system that they created, for everyone, they would want it, they would engage with it. But it's not like that.

Computers, software, and Internet architecture are designed for financial people and for business people, for professionals, she argued. "But where are the mothers," she asked, "or people who work and struggle to stay afloat? The homeless?" Digital divide policy, she insisted, does not address social and economic justice issues central to the lives of people who struggle to meet their basic needs. "It's not technology that will make our

Box 1.1
WYMSM Member Profile, Ruth Delgado Guzman

"If you find the courage to keep going, that changes everything."

I am a fighter. I have resiliency. I like to improve myself. What I learn in books, in theory, I put it into practice. I work for my dreams.

I ended up in the YWCA because I had a breakdown, emotionally. I was doing my master's degree and I was by myself in the residence halls, with no family nearby. I had to stop taking a few of my classes because I couldn't handle it. That's why I moved to the YW: to be in the residence you have to have at least nine credits. The move was devastating. It hurt my self-esteem, it was demeaning, but I wanted to keep going with my studies. The move to the YWCA was tough. There is a stigma about living there. There is also a stigma about emotional problems if you face them and say something about it. Being a minority also.

WYMSM helped me stay in school. You guys helped a lot. [Not everyone in WYMSM] lived at the YW, or went through what I went through, but we were all intellectually at the same level. Sometimes I feel like I don't fit—I'm a square peg in a round hole—so for me, being able to relate to people like me was very important. To be able to see you, and hug you. Warmth! Human warmth. There were so many things: drum circle, sitting down to discuss things, having coffee, HTML classes. I could ask you things I couldn't ask anyone else. So I related to you, I developed rapport with you, and that helped me.

The YWCA helped me to grow and have more depth, because I saw situations that you don't normally see, when you are in the bubble of your family or your limited experience. If I hadn't been living at the YWCA, maybe I would not have gotten involved with the things that I did. WYMSM helped me grow emotionally, physically, spiritually. It was holistic in a way that I was able to say, "Oh, my God. I can do it. I am resilient." I kept going because there were other people I could help. I was not the only one who was suffering. As a matter of fact, there were others who were worse off than me. It made me realize that I could share myself. That helped me.

Five years from now, I want a good job. I miss the drum circles that I used to do at the YWCA, and the group therapy I did for different kinds of people. I am a school counselor, and I didn't do that kind of work in the schools. Eventually, I would like to have my own clinic where we will mix rhythm and music with emotional and spiritual growth. I would like to keep helping people. But to do that I need financial means, which is why I need the job. My relationship is also one of the things that I'd like to have together in five years.

Whatever circumstances you have in your life, if you find the courage to keep going that changes everything. You will have a sense of accomplishment. We all have a lot of potential, but sometimes we don't know it and don't tap into it, because of self-esteem or abuse, or whatever we go through. We have to learn from it and make a commitment to keep learning and growing.

Based on a phone conversation that took place on May 31, 2009.

lives better. That will make us 'haves,'" she explained. "It's social condi-
tions, financial conditions, the environment. Technology is just a little part
of it . . . it's not *justice*."

Technology for people would be different from universal access to exist-
ing computer systems, she argued. It would mix systems "designed by
women, for everybody" with educational programs combining functional
goals such as finding housing with technology skills training such as Web
searching in order to increase people's well-being financially, emotionally,
socially, and intellectually. She joined WYMSM primarily to have oppor-
tunities to brainstorm about building such systems.

Community technology centers around the country and the world have
gone a long way toward fulfilling Ruth's vision of a technology for people
by tirelessly wiring communities, providing them with affordable access
to information and communication resources, nurturing generations of
trainer-activists, and preparing the ground on which community-produced
content can grow. This is powerful, crucial social justice work performed
by committed and innovative people and organizations. But these efforts
are primarily redistributive, focused on providing access to the tools of the
information revolution to communities that, it is assumed, lack such
access. This assumption has led some to characterize low-income commu-
nities as technology-poor.

But people struggling to meet their basic needs do *not* lack interaction
with IT. As I describe throughout this book, if women in the YWCA com-
munity are any indication, poor and working-class women have a great
deal of interaction with IT in their everyday lives, particularly in the low-
wage workforce and the social service system. The assumption that poor
and working-class people lack access to technology, broadly generalized,
has led to policy and community organizing approaches that are practi-
cally misguided. In solely redistributive schemes, marginalized communi-
ties—and the people who live in them—are seen only as products of lack
and destitution, not as vast reservoirs of assets, resources, networks, exper-
tise, strength, hope, passion, and innovation. The assumption of commu-
nity deficit blinds many policymakers and community organizers to the
real world of IT, to the true relationship between technology and poverty,
and to the hope for high-tech equity.

I admit that when I started, I held this misconception too. I came to
this project convinced that distributive approaches were the linchpin of a
more just information age. As a committed community technology prac-
titioner, I used my skills to increase access and teach technical proficiency
to close the digital divide. But women in the YWCA community routinely

challenged my assumptions, both implicitly and explicitly, and over the course of my first two years in the community, I slowly realized that I was laboring under false pretenses. One class we offered at the YWCA, "How Does the D@mn Thing Work?," provides a poignant example of why I was forced to reconsider my presumptions.

The workshop was loosely structured around the demolition of an unusable donated computer.[2] We took the cover off the machine, handed out screwdrivers, told participants that it was going into the Dumpster anyway, and then let them do whatever they wanted to it. As parts came out of the computer, we passed them around and told everybody what each part did. For a few minutes, women carefully extracted networking cards and hard drives from the PC and gingerly examined them. After a bit of time and some convincing—they were particularly concerned about waste, wanting to be absolutely sure that no one in the YW or elsewhere could use the computer before they took it apart—they started to believe they could do whatever they wanted to it, and the demolition began. They hacked at the computer. Broke pieces off, and then broke them into smaller pieces. Put the pieces on the floor and jumped on them. Tore apart bundles of wires, wedged off covers to see the motors and chips—all with a palpable sense of glee.

What was I to make of this merry destruction? How was I to reconcile the tangible wave of frustration that set off the demolition of the computer with the hope and optimism expressed by Ruth Delgado Guzman for building a technology for people? When I began to do interviews a year later, I probed women in the YWCA community about their everyday experiences with IT. Where, I asked, did they come into contact with IT in their daily lives? What were those experiences like? Their answers were surprising. Some women certainly responded in ways digital divide scholars and policymakers would have predicted: they spoke at length about the inequitable distribution of technology, declared their desire for better access, and described their day-to-day use of IT to find important information and support their social networks.

But the majority of women I interviewed in the YWCA community talked about a different kind of experience with technology altogether, an experience marked not by technology lack or deficiency but by technological *ubiquity*. They described their extensive use of computers in the low-wage workforce—about half of the women I interviewed had been data entry or call center workers. Others talked about encountering computers in the social service system. They described welfare caseworkers who blocked eye contact by hiding behind a computer terminal. They described

their feelings of hopelessness and frustration when caseworkers couldn't find their information in "the system," a feeling intensified by the computer's apparent power to decide their family's fate. In their experiences with the databases of Medicaid or Social Security, many described feeling that they "became a number," and complained that the computers "find out everything about you." Surveillance technologies such as metal detectors and fingerprint machines, they argued, turn public agencies such as schools and social service offices into prisons. Several voiced suspicions that regional initiatives like the local Tech Valley development were going to result in higher rents in exchange for a few jobs for the college-educated, benefiting a small percentage of area residents and disadvantaging many. These concerns are broadly structural and impossible to address by redistributing IT or providing access to computers.

The role technology played in the lives of women in the YWCA community was characterized by ambivalence, not absence. They were optimistic about technology's potential but concerned about its real-world impacts. They expressed strong conflicting emotions in interviews and at public events: hope for a better future, excitement about new innovations, anger over continuing injustice, and cynicism about efforts that used technology to alleviate that inequality. Smashing the computer could be read, I realized, as an effect of the extraordinarily complicated relationship women in the YWCA community had with technology, even as an attempt to take power back from a symbol of the system. In a later interview, Veronica Macey, a participant in the workshop, confirmed this interpretation:

That taking apart the computer thing really helped [engage women who feel out of the technology loop]. Because I know I never saw [Patty] at any computer type stuff before and that seemed to help her get into it. . . . What's in the inside guts? I can break it apart! It's not this big scary thing, I can *kick* it and things come off. That helped. Stuff like that that shows that computers are not these big infallible immortal objects.

Initially, I thought that the computer-smashing incident was a quirk, an outlier. But evidence of the ambivalence of women in the YWCA community continued to mount. For example, they would engage in technology training courses meant to prepare them for the high-tech workplace while strongly expressing their doubts that the training would in fact lead to a sustainable job. Even now, after my time at the YWCA, I continue to experience poor and working-class women's ambivalence in the face of IT. Engaged in a new project about the citizenship impacts of welfare admin-

istration technology, I was recently talking to an interviewee who had faced many struggles accessing public assistance, among them a series of technical glitches. Near the end of the interview, I asked her, if she had a magic wand, what one thing she would do to change how technology is used in the social service system. She replied, "If I had a magic wand, I would bomb all the fucking computers."

Women in the YWCA community were quite reasonably conflicted about their relationship with technologies that are simultaneously symbols of knowledge, power, and opportunity and instruments of their surveillance, discipline, exploitation, and oppression. Critical ambivalence is a sign of incipient analysis:[3] women in the YWCA community were noting the mismatch between the image of computers as the route to social and economic progress and their own experience of the technology as intrusive and limiting. Too often, policymakers and scholars misread this ambivalence as "reluctance" or "inability" to engage with technology and technological training rather than seeing it as the ground from which a critical consciousness about the relationship between technology and inequity grows. It was not until I got past my own class- and race-based assumptions about technology that I began to understand this critical ambivalence and use it as a resource in our efforts to make IT a tool for social change.[4]
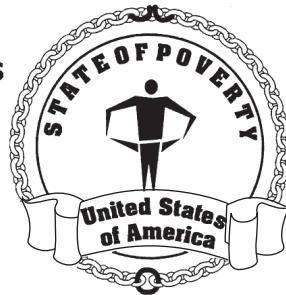
Life in the State of Poverty

On March 21, 2002, WYMSM held its first major public event, an open forum recognizing Hunger Awareness Day during which community members were invited to try to survive one month on a Rensselaer County welfare check. The event, which used a State of Poverty simulation exercise designed by Missouri-based Reform Organization of Welfare (ROWEL),[5] occurred in the gymnasium of the YWCA. On the walls and on refrigerator boxes, student interns, residents, staff, community members, and their children had painted a cardboard city. At tables that ringed the room sat residents of the YWCA—resourceful women, young and old, African American, Latina, and white, native-born and immigrant, mostly struggling to meet their basic needs—prepared to play roles they were intimately familiar with as customers and clients. For this day, they would experience these roles from the other side of the desk. They would be the bankers, pawnshop owners, welfare caseworkers, teachers, and police. They would be the politicians and power brokers; they would run community services and local businesses. One participant was even charged with running

Figure 1.1
Hunger Awareness Day event flyer.

"illegal activities" for the town. Together, we were prepared to create an imaginary community for the public to inhabit for a single hour, in an effort to highlight the ongoing struggles of families trying to survive the always stingy and often unjust system of public assistance.

We had worked since January to plan the event, in collaboration with Hunger Action Network of New York (HANNYS), Statewide Emergency Network for Social and Economic Security (SENSES), and students and faculty from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. After a series of two workshops held at the YWCA under the title of Women, Simulation and Social Change, a core group of academics, YWCA residents, YWCA staff members, and community members emerged to form the collaborative group, WYMSM.[6] The group was central to the planning of the Hunger Awareness Day event: we helped write the press releases, recruited participants, gathered props, spoke at the press conference, and prepared food for a community meal to follow the event. Most important for our values and mission as a group, we spent considerable time recruiting community members who had actually experienced poverty—women we considered the real experts—to play community resource provider roles so that they could educate the general public about their experiences.[7]

Moments before our start time, Jes and Christine stood at the doors with the sign-in sheets; Jenn, Patty, and Coffee held notes for their speeches; community resource people sat at their tables and gathered their paperwork and props; documenters checked the battery levels in their video cameras and set their white balances; I stood in the middle of the room with my clipboard and my whistle. And we waited. The first big group to arrive was from Sand Lake Baptist Church, mostly women, mostly in their seventies and eighties. Then grade-school students, ten- and eleven-year-olds from the Susan Odell Taylor School; then members of the Ironweed Collective, an anarchist group from nearby Albany. Then people just streamed in. We had no idea who they were, but more than ninety people came.

We gathered the crowd briefly for a press conference. A representative from a statewide antihunger organization laid out recent changes to welfare and how they would affect hunger in New York. Rensselaer faculty and WYMSM member Nancy D. Campbell spoke of the need to build relationships between communities and universities. Executive Director Pat Dinkelaker spoke about the rich community of the YWCA of Troy-Cohoes, describing how the organization was building a grassroots movement to fight hunger in the Capital Region. Finally, it was Coffee, Patty, and Jenn's turn. They described their experiences, Coffee quickly, Patty in a shaking

Figure 1.2
Women, Simulation, and Social Change workshop, November 12, 2001. Visible are, clockwise: Chitsuge (Chris) Mapondera, Virginia Eubanks (laughing in back), Patty Marshall, Jennifer Rose (at computer).
*Photo*: Pat Dinkelaker

Women, Simulation, & Social Change *Working Group*

We're seeking volunteer staffers to help run the ROWEL "Life in the State of Poverty" simulation game to honor Hunger Awareness Day at the YWCA on March 21, 2002.

Are you interested in promoting social change and fighting poverty?

Do you have an afternoon to spend educating Troy public officials and citizens?
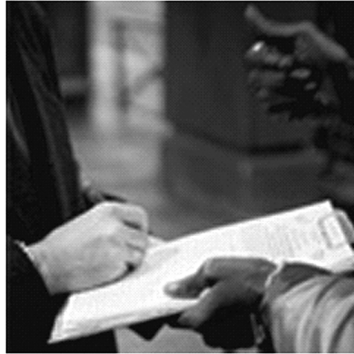
If so, you're invited to a planning workshop

Women, Simulation, and Social Change

This workshop will lead to opportunities to work on a media autobiography project in collaboration with the RPI Community Outreach Partnership Center in the future.

Discussion! Doorprizes! Animal Noises!

Figure 1.3
Women, Simulation and Social Change working group flyer. WYMSM grew out of this initial group.

voice, and Jenn speaking from her heart without looking at her prepared notes. "Maybe," she said of the simulation that the public was about to undertake, "if everyone experienced this, even for an hour, maybe we could get together and we could *do* something. Make change."

After the press conference, I welcomed the public and explained that the object of the simulation was to sensitize participants to the day-to-day realities of life faced by poor and working-class people and to motivate them to organize to reduce poverty in the United States. I reminded them that the exercise was a simulation, not a game: the statistics and situations used were accurate, based on real-life experiences of low-income families.

As quickly as possible, I split attendees up into twenty-six families—single moms and their children, elderly couples, and nuclear families—and gave them a packet of information to read about their roles, their resources, and the goal of the simulation: provide for your family's basic needs for one month. We asked them to be as realistic as possible about the roles they were taking on, introduced them to community resources (the landlord, police, bank, pawnshop, food bank, employment office, social services, etc.), and I blew my whistle to start the first of four fifteen-minute "weeks" of life in the state of poverty.

At the end of the one-hour month, we gathered together to discuss the experience. In a big circle, participants reflected on their attempts to fulfill their basic needs: obtaining or keeping shelter; maintaining utilities, gas and electric; buying food; making loan payments; keeping their children in school. They told stories about what had happened to their families, speaking with great emotion about how community resource people responded to their needs (or didn't). One woman complained that the landlord had taken her rent money, but because she hadn't asked for a receipt, the landlord reported her to the police as not having paid, and she was evicted. Others protested that the lack of good community resources, such as affordable child care or reliable transportation, kept them from meeting their goals despite Herculean efforts. One participant said she found the experience so frustrating she was nearly moved to strike her simulated "wife." A YWCA community member playing a social service worker described her struggles to help participants navigate the system, which ended too soon when she was "shot" by the illegal activities person in an attempted robbery.

It was not all hardship and frustration. Participants helped each other, trading extra resources among families, trying to succeed through mutual aid. Pat Dinkelaker snuck in during the event and started organizing participants into simulated social movements. Halfway through the discussion, they stood up en masse and declared their intention to end poverty in the real world—by fighting to reform welfare, advocating for affordable day care, organizing to raise the minimum wage. Women from the YWCA community who played roles as community resource people spoke eloquently about how realistic the simulation was and how much it meant to them to be able to help members of the general public understand their experiences and develop a more accurate picture of poverty in our community.[8]

At a WYMSM meeting a week later, we discussed our experiences and described our favorite moments. All of us were proud that we had

Figure 1.4
Hunger Awareness Day discussion.
Photo: Pat Dinkelaker

pulled off this enormous event. Coffee said, "After my speech . . . I felt good about myself, I felt really good. I didn't know I could do that. . . . That's a powerful thing, you know what I mean? That you can do these things. You can plan to do them and do it right." Coffee, Patty, and Jenn each mentioned speaking at the press conference as their proudest moment of the event. But when answering the question, "What was the most profound experience you had?," nearly everyone in the group mentioned moments when new understandings were reached, new empathies formed across the barriers of difference. For example,

Jenn: The most profound thing I experienced at HAD was . . . listening to one of the kids from school, at the end when he spoke. He couldn't have been more than ten, but it was really amazing. It was like, whoa!
Virginia: Do you remember what he said?
Coffee: He kind of said, the way he lives, he figured [that] was how everybody else lives. Things are different [for other people], and he didn't know that. . . . He thought everyone was like [him].
Jes: [That] little boy said that he never knew what it was like. He was like, "*This worked*." Hopefully it will change at least the way *he* thinks because of how he's been raised. I was like, "Yeah!"

The Hunger Awareness Day event demonstrated some of the rewards of participatory projects: the energy and impact of consciously structured collective process, the power of voicing your own experiences and joining

with others to reshape your world. It hinted at the complicated relation-ship between personal experience and expertise in mass mobilization, and gestured toward the transformative power of experiencing information firsthand rather than just reading about it. The event also illustrated some of the challenges of participatory work. Participatory projects, even those that are committed to ending poverty, often ignore or marginalize the voices of poor and working-class women. A sustained commitment to social justice organizing can be hard to uphold in the face of people's basic, pressing needs. Forming relationships across the lines of race, class, and gender is difficult. But despite these struggles, WYMSM agreed that there was a moment, standing in the circle at the end of the simulation, when everything just clicked, when people talked honestly and intelligently about power, privilege, and poverty. A moment when we all had hope.

This Is a Love Story . . .

Remembering that moment, and honoring it, means that this book is also a love story about collective process. Many people fall in love with collec-tive activity—social movements, mass mobilizations, encounter groups, cults, even gathering in the neighborhood bar. The flush of recognition and belonging, the heady erotic charge, and the comfort of unified action are as much a part of joining a social movement as they are symptoms of falling in love with an individual. As romantic mainstays, "together at the barricades" or "fighting together against all odds" are almost as popular as "love at first sight." Falling in love with a practice, like falling in love with a person, is easy. It is staying in love, the ongoing act of loving rather than the attainment of the love object, that is hard. This is particularly the case when the parties involved are deeply dissimilar, when love reaches across the boundaries of difference or challenges fiercely held social norms. Maybe this is why so many stories of star-crossed love end in death.

   Sometimes both the lover and the beloved die—as in *Romeo and Juliet*—but usually it is the free spirit, the boundary transgressor, the social upstart, the poor one. It is almost always the woman who is sacrificed to liberate her male lover. In *Love Story*, the preppy lives, never having to say he's sorry, and the scholarship girl who loved above her station succumbs. In *Harold and Maude*, free-spirited, car-stealing septuagenarian Ruth Gordon teaches cloistered, bored, death-obsessed heir Bud Cort to live and love more fully, and then commits suicide. More recently, Wynona Rider and Charlize Theron taught Richard Gere and Keanu Reeves, respectively, to cherish every moment before conveniently perishing, in *August in New York*

and the 2001 remake of *Sweet November*. As someone who believes in the transformative potential of social movements and the limitless power of love, I find the popularity of this narrative—the impossibility of sustaining passionate commitment across difference—troubling.

As a feminist, I also find the pile of dead girls disturbing. Like the character that Spike Lee calls the "magical Negro,"[9] whose special powers exist to get a white protagonist out of trouble or to teach him about his faults, the "sacrificial girl" in these films is an object only, a means to the end of increased self-knowledge for the male protagonist. After he realizes his own deficiencies, what use is the girl? If she doesn't quickly get out of the way, the cameras fade to black as soon as the improbable match is made—think *Pretty in Pink* or *Pretty Woman*. The mundane but crucial questions of maintaining a relationship across difference are never explored. When they go out, who pays? How do they deal with their families during the holidays? Raise their kids?

Similarly, we have a million stories about diverse groups of people uniting in a final showdown against evil; the entire *Star Wars* franchise is an obvious example. But we do not have many stories that show us how hard, and how rewarding, it is to *actually* forge and maintain alliances across difference. We don't often see the realities of the three-hour meetings, the lost opportunities, the hurt feelings, the passionate misunderstandings and the day-to-day difficulties of organizing across class, race, gender, nation, and sexuality. As with star-crossed love, even when we dare to believe that organizing across difference is possible, we seem to find the details terribly boring. Easier just to posit some mythical "Movement moment" when differences are put aside, to deify a superhuman charismatic leader who turns divisiveness into coalition, or to mourn the sacrificial lambs, who become a rallying cry for unity. Easier to ignore or forget the day-to-day heroism of ordinary people coming together to transform their world.

Perhaps a love story is a lot less romantic if we deal with the details, the practice of loving, rather than the climactic plot point of falling in love. But love isn't something you "fall into." Love is an action, something you do, a choice you make in every moment. The romantic story—the one without the details—offers an impoverished model of love, one that relies only on luck, chemistry, and short-lived and often one-sided sacrifice. This unattainable myth misrepresents both loving practice and collective process; it is a pale imitation of what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called "the long and bitter, but beautiful struggle for a new world."[10] We should demand more.

Figure 1.5
A closing exercise in the Women's Economic Empowerment Series—knitting participants together. Left to right: Cosandra Jennings, Ruth Delgado Guzman, Jenn Rose, Nancy D. Campbell.
Photo: Pat Dinkelaker

Actual struggles to build relationships across difference are both fascinating and inspiring. In this book, I try to capture some of the everyday triumphs and failures that followed from trying to use technology as a tool of social change in a small city in upstate New York. This book is a love story, but it is not a very romantic one. Over time, our collective work in WYMSM became an attempt to create a love story with no "sacrificial girl," to build and sustain relationships between free people engaged in meaningful struggle in the real world. The process demanded that we conquer fear, build alliances, and try to speak our deepest truths. The story I tell here is about taking risks and creating spaces where vulnerability results in transformation rather than in physical and emotional harm.[11]

I am sure that a story about collective social transformation is not what you expected from a book about the profoundly rational world of computers, public policy, and high-tech economic development. That may be because we tend to think of technology as a destiny, not a scene of struggle; a product, not a site of possibility; a static, ahistoric thing, not "an ambivalent process of development suspended between different possibilities" (Feenberg 1991, 14). We often see technology as only an object, cut off from social relations, floating in space like HAL in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. But technology embodies human relationships, legislates behavior, and shapes citizenship. Our mistaken assumptions about technology's static "thingness" prevent us from recognizing the real world of IT, and from realizing what Ruth called "technology for people."