Reviews


Reviewed by Nedra Reynolds, University of Rhode Island

The building practices of modern cities—new architectural forms—made possible new identities: the department store shopper, the window browser, and the strolling flaneur. From the construction of sidewalks and arcades and street drains, middle-class women, for example, became ladies who lunch. Similarly, new cultural practices in rhetoric and composition are making possible new identities: readers and writers who negotiate urban environments as part of their literacy development and who are asked to take on the space of the postmodern city in an effort to make acts of writing meaningful.

As service learning, tutoring, and community literacy programs invite students to explore local communities, composition studies has become increasingly interested in cities and streets, as illustrated by the theme for the 2002 Conference on College Composition and Communication convention, “Connecting the Text and the Street.” Less than a year later, City Comp appeared, acknowledging all those who work and write in urban communities and signaling the promise of city comp for redefining practices in twenty-first century composition. Across fourteen chapters that range widely in content but are consistent in quality, this collection is not a guide to teaching writing in the city. Instead, City Comp examines the work writing does in the world.

First, what’s not really “new” to this text is the belief that those who teach writing and rhetoric have a responsibility to the communities in which their institutions function. What is new here is the turn to the spaces of cities in order to understand how the built environment works rhetorically to negotiate identities, compose spaces, and redefine practices—the three sections of City Comp. As an important contribution to post-process

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writing theory and practices, this volume offers compelling connections not only to urban studies but also to material rhetorics, ecocomposition, and cultural geography.

Geographers tend to use spatial scales to approach problems, analyze relationships, or impose perspective. Like the zoom-in and zoom-out feature on Mapquest, it's important to acknowledge scale because "perspective" is directly tied to it (Are you walking, driving, or flying over?). From within a city scale, *City Comp* zooms in to neighborhoods, institutions or organizations, writing programs, classrooms, and individual writers; it zooms out as well to include discourses and practices beyond the city, such as rhetorics of composing and theories of literacy and pedagogy. *City Comp* acknowledges that studying one writer's response to an ethnographic research project, as Barbara Gleason does in her chapter, means little without situating Audrey within the Center for Worker Education and her Brooklyn neighborhood communities. In addition, the stories of Renee, Ellie, and Tom—shared by Krista Hiser—mean little without knowing how the GED program operates in the context of San Francisco's Tenderloin district.

On one map, therefore, within the perspective possible from one spatial scale, city comp asks students to read and write about the cities in which they live and work, exploring places that do not appear in the guidebooks or on the tourist maps. In this way, the city becomes the "text" of the class, and composing the city becomes students' rhetorical action, inseparable from ways in which living in the city composes their experiences and identities. This form of city comp grows directly from the local context, and the opening essay—about teaching writing in Birmingham, Alabama—provides an historically situated example of places where the composition classroom embraces the city as both material and rhetorical space (Baker, Jolly, McComiskey, and Ryan). Focused on the urban myths that have constructed Birmingham, students are invited to discover and respond to competing myths of the city as presented in media productions and recruitment materials.

At the level of writing programs, the concept of "mission" shapes curricular innovations and commitments. Ann Feldman's essay forefronts a theme that is the undercurrent of the volume—the idea of partnerships between universities and the cities they call home. While the idea of "urban mission" fluctuates across times and places, Feldman writes about The Great Cities Initiative (at UIC), built upon "a highly participatory view of partnership.” According to Feldman, "A mission that supports fluid boundaries between the community and the university
can provide a productive context for writing instruction.” Lynee Lewis Gaillet discusses the mission of a metropolitan university, including issues of self-perception and the problems that arise “when faculty members are asked to view their teaching, research, and service as distinctively ‘urban.’” A university’s mission also motivates the “Discover Chicago” course at DePaul University, including an immersion week that sends hundreds of first-year students into Chicago, where they take public transportation to the sites of their topics and spend the week walking, talking, and writing. Jolliffe ends by arguing that rather than pursuing abolition, composition programs must design first-year courses that are content-rich, and he suggests the mission of the university as a central core of that content.

On the largest map or from the widest scale, the essays in this volume work to transform identities, spaces, and practices, what Linda Flower calls in the foreword a rhetoric of real places that moves us toward civic participation. On a larger level than a classroom, campus, or city, city comp asks us to confront civic education, as Van Hillard does in his chapter on Hull-House and the ways in which “the urban writing classroom . . . can be usefully understood in terms of civic education, where various models of deliberative rhetoric have traditionally been deployed in the effort to form citizens.” As a model settlement house, Hull-House didn’t merely “sponsor” literacy; “it provided an architectural space for performing linguistically mediated civic roles.”

Civic participation is also the heart of the Jeffrey Grabill chapter, “The Written City: Urban Planning, Computer Networks, and Civic Literacies.” Writing classes can aid community building through the rhetoric of urban planning, Grabill argues—in this case, through a project that gives grant-writing citizens access to data and maps via the Web. A service learning technical writing course worked “to create Web-based tools that will allow the residents of Mechanicsville, a neighborhood in Atlanta, to have a voice in how their neighborhood is constructed.”

The work of rhetoric to transform city neighborhoods is one scale for city comp. Another important purpose involves addressing material and ideological struggles over spaces (Marback). Richard Marback uses urban planners’ idea of place making to demonstrate “opportunities for using rhetoric to address issues of recognition and resources.” Our cities are built by words, words that assign significance to places, and Marback illustrates place making through the Heidelberg Project on the near east side of Detroit, a project that “exists across a number of discourses. It is a place that is made through multiple literacies.”
Also invested in the relationship between the material and the ideological/political, Paula Mathieu explores "how writing can express utopian desires and imagine changes to material culture." Her chapter, "‘Not Your Mama’s Bus Tour’: A Case for ‘Radically Insufficient’ Writing," argues that while composition skills are valuable, "such skills are seldom revolutionary." Mathieu writes about her experiences working with the working poor and the homeless of Chicago on the publication *StreetWise* and asks powerful questions about how writing instruction can help when students needed shelter, food, dental care—in addition to better reading and writing skills. Despite the "radical insufficiency" of what writing can accomplish, Mathieu's group does put together a genuinely utopian, fleetingly revolutionary bus tour of Chicago, skipping the Hancock building but stopping at Malcolm X College or the site where a *StreetWise* vendor was shot, performing the script they had written and rehearsed for weeks.

The final essay's placement speaks to the political commitments of this volume; bigger than a city, the ideas here urge us to reexamine the core assumptions of the profession, or the relationship between literacy and social inequities. Patrick Bruch in "Moving to the City: Redefining Literacy in the Post-Civil Rights Era," illustrates how the public and academic rhetorics of the Civil Rights era were "supplanted in many ways by the backlash compromise rhetorics of the 1970s post-Civil Rights era." A post-Civil Rights urban agenda for composition would redefine mobility through literacy and would "challenge the culture of poverty thesis that ignores forces such as institutionalized racism." By pursuing the mobility of all groups in relation to others, writing instruction does not simply replace one expert discourse with another but participates in "changing what writing means." Students write as urban citizens when they combine the study of innovative literacy practices with traditional academic literacy practices to "enact the theme of urban literacies" (228).

The first attempt at something like city comp—attention to the particular needs and demands of urban environments for literacy and education—occurred with Mina Shaughnessy’s *Errors and Expectations* and the situation of City College in light of open admissions. However, where Shaughnessy was unapologetically invested in academic discourse as the means to students' educational success, city comp (and *City Comp*) advocates multiple discourses and practices, especially when the rigid forms of "test" literacy choke the interest and enthusiasm of engaged learners. Hiser's "A Paragraph Ain’t Nothin’ but a Sandwich" chronicles
the efforts of "Ellie" to write the perfect "sandwich" paragraph in order
to pass the GED. As we might expect, as she revises to satisfy required
paragraph structure, Ellie's ideas become abstract, thin, and meaningless
to her. In her effort to negotiate a new identity for herself—that of literate
person—Ellie smacks up against traditional literacy practices that don't
respond to the particularities of space and time.

What can readers find in this volume if they teach writing on a
suburban campus, or in a small college town? Readers will find exciting
accounts of learning projects that range from Discover Chicago (Jolliffe)
to the Heidelberg Project in Detroit (Marback), to the Mechanicsville
Project in Atlanta (Grabill), and readers will get glimpses into campus
and community life from Pittsburgh to Wilmington to Las Vegas. Not
intended for duplication on other campuses—because they just can't be—these projects illustrate processes of developing literacy and learning
opportunities from within local contexts, or offer models for responding
to particular circumstances in ways that connect curriculum and
community. But I don't want to suggest that everything here is exportable.
In fact, quite the opposite. Hillard, for example, urges readers to "value
the supremely spatial aspect of instruction as it is located in particular
urban geographies and architectures, spaces characteristically different
from spaces of rural or suburban education." This is why, after reading
this collection, I'm almost envious that I don't teach in a city. It is the built
environment, the architectures, in large part, that make possible urban
comp: the streets, landmarks, public buildings, and the dozens of sites for
civic participation. While the site-specificity is important, however, City
Comp does also offer new ways to imagine the work of writing and writing
instruction. As Jolliffe suggests, for example, "What if college writing
instruction were more of an experience and less of a class?" Rather than
teaching students to compose paragraphs, we should be helping them to
compose knowledge—knowledge of and from their local environments,
wherever they may be.

City comp, therefore, offers possibilities for changing the ways we
imagine students, places, and practices. The response to skeptics who
may ask why composition needs city comp or City Comp (Does that mean
it also needs rural comp?) is that theories of literacy need to do more than
just acknowledge difference; theories and practices should be developed
directly from and enacted through the lives of people, their homes and
neighborhoods and daily pathways. City comp is more than just writing
the city; it is a commitment to making writing matter for those who occupy
urban environments for writing and learning. The best essays in this
collection—and there are many—speak to the theories, practices, and politics that rhetoric and composition should subscribe to in a twenty-first century context.


Reviewed by Kenneth J. Saltman, DePaul University

For years Henry Giroux's scholarship has insisted on making youth central to the discourse of politics and democracy itself. He has attentively tried to link the crisis of youth to the crisis of democracy, and The Abandoned Generation represents a culminating effort in that direction. Giroux has long argued that central to any notion of democracy is a social contract in which youth symbolize the future. For the first time in history, Giroux argues, particularly under the Bush administration, that social contract is no longer in effect. Youth are no longer seen as a social investment but rather as the object of social scorn. There is no logic in this neoliberal, right-wing agenda for a way to talk about youth to make an investment in their future, financial or otherwise.

One flank in the war on youth hits kids materially with poverty, lack of medical care and adequate housing, and crumbling schools bereft of books. This economic abandonment is thoroughly documented in The Abandoned Generation through description and stunning doses of statistical information. Giroux writes,

The hard currency of human suffering as it impacts on children can . . . be seen in some of the astounding statistics that suggest a profound moral and political contradiction at the heart of the United States: 20 percent of children are poor during the first 3 years of life and over 13.3 million live in poverty; 9.2 million children lack health insurance; millions lack affordable child care and decent early childhood education. . . . When broken down along racial categories, the figures become even more deplorable. . . . In 1998, 36 percent of black and 34 percent of Hispanic children lived in poverty, compared with 14 percent of white children.

A second flank in the war against youth is symbolic. Conservatives, liberals, and some progressives participate in scapegoating youth for