

Fall 2007

City Comp: Identities, Spaces, Practices

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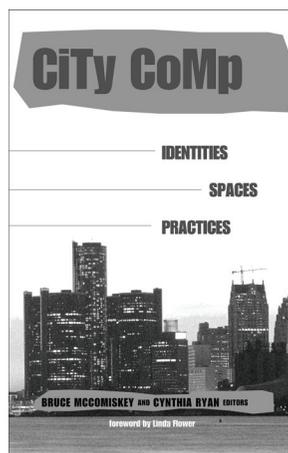
Recommended Citation

Rai, Candice S. "City Comp: Identities, Spaces, Practices." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2007, pp. 119–21, doi:10.25148/clj.2.1.009511.

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City Comp: Identities, Spaces, Practices.
 McComiskey, Bruce and Cynthia Ryan, Eds.
 New York, NY: State U of New York P, 2003.
 256 pp. ISBN: 978-0791455500. \$21.95.

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Since the “rhetorical turn” of the 1980s, many urban universities have reevaluated their responsibilities to surrounding communities, as well as their role in contributing to the health of the communities to which they belong. These commitments are indicated through deeper concerns with community-university reciprocity and partnership, and in increased institutional support for community-based engaged scholarship.

The fourteen essays in *City Comp: Identities, Spaces, Practices*, edited by Bruce McComiskey and Cynthia Ryan, engage in a wide-ranging and lively dialogue about the politics and practices of teaching composition in urban universities and communities. *City Comp* illuminates the experiences, practices, possibilities, limitations, and theoretical concerns of writing teachers and administrators who work in cities such as Detroit, Chicago, Pittsburgh, San Francisco, and Birmingham. The authors draw from cultural and rhetorical studies, feminism, critical discourse analysis, ethnography, spatial theory, and urban studies to discuss literacy programs in both university and community contexts.

Two intersecting strands unite the essays in *City Comp*: the first is a commitment to framing writing as an act situated in contexts that both enable and constrain the possibilities for action and persuasion; the second is a call to ground pedagogical practice in concrete material and politics conditions. It is no accident that the editors identify spatial theorist Henri Lefebvre as one of their touchstones. Lefebvre, whose work weds the rhetorical with the material, taught us that the city is comprised of rich and contradictory histories, representations, politics, and practices that both structure and are structured by dynamic social energies. “Every language is located in space,” Lefebvre argues, “Every discourse says something about spaces (places or sets of places); and every discourse is emitted from a space” (132). Accordingly, McComiskey and Ryan urge compositionists to perceive city spaces as “rich material and ideological resources

for composition students who are attempting to situate important personal and social issues in context” (12).

City Comp is divided into three sections that, as stated by the editors, “demonstrate the complex ways in which cities are identified, how these representations are played out in everyday living and learning spaces, and the crucial role writing teachers and administrators play in devising practices that meet the needs and peculiarities of unique city contexts” (16):

- The first section, “Negotiating Identities,” examines the various ways that urban composition students negotiate their identities within the complex narratives, institutions, and politics of their respective cities. Essays in this section balance theoretical and practical concerns of teaching writing in college classrooms, a GED course, and a community literacy group.
- The second section, “Composing Spaces,” focuses on literacy practices that occur within the diverse urban geographies outside of (and in relation to) the university, and on the ways that individuals can use rhetorical skills to enact change and intervene in local city spaces.
- The third section, “Redefining Practices,” explores pedagogical and administrative practices within specific urban universities, and offers narrative guidelines for institutionalizing community-based writing and research courses and programs.

City Comp is a comprehensive study of community-based writing programs, concrete pedagogical practices, theories of literacy, and program administrative concerns. Although all of the essays in the volume are commendable, I turn now to a brief discussion of three representational essays. In “Myth, Identity, and Composition: Teaching Writing in Birmingham, Alabama,” Baker et al. provide a theoretical basis for a composition course that asks students to understand the city not only as a material space, but also as a “rhetorical space from which they can draw ideas and contribute their own” (31). The essay describes concrete activities and writing assignments that hone research, rhetorical, and writing skills by situating students within the contradictory representations of Birmingham in public discourse and within the University of Alabama’s problematic institutional history.

In “‘Not Your Mama’s Bus Tour’: A Case for ‘Radically Insufficient Writing,’” Paula Mathieu describes a community literacy group she directed for two years for a Chicago street newspaper intended to empower the homeless. Mathieu is attuned to the limits of writing instruction in the face of the profound material realities of writers in her group, many of whom are—or are at risk of becoming—homeless in a city that faces an affordable housing crisis. Mathieu argues that teaching writing as “radically insufficient” means accepting the “challenge not to overestimate the adequacy of teaching writing skills to meet the local needs of the participants; ... a challenge to encourage the personal goals and identities of writers, while helping them find ways to take part in broader discussions of poverty, homelessness, and education; a challenge to demand the impossible while acknowledging the limitations of the possible” (76).

In “Speaking of the City and Literacies of Place Making in Composition Studies,” Richard Marback builds on Lynda Schneekloth’s and Robert Shibley’s concept of “place making” as a “material act of building and maintaining spaces that is at the same time an ideological act of fashioning places where we can feel we belong, where we create meaning, and where we organize our relationships with others” (146). While acknowledging the uneven distribution of resources and the limits of local action, Marback argues for a critical pedagogy based on “place making” that asks students to engage with the political and ideological contradictions within contested urban spaces. Specifically, Marback turns to Tyree Guyton’s Heidelberg Project, a public art initiative housed in several abandoned Detroit city blocks, as an example of deploying rhetorical agency as a way to intervene in systems of power by redirecting meaning and resources. Claims to “place” are arguments for what it means to live and act in a particular place; as such, self-representations of place are critical precursors to action.

City Comp would serve urban writing teachers, program administrators, literacy practitioners, graduate students, and rhetoric and compositionists who are community and action oriented and who are committed to teaching writing as a thoroughly situational act and tool for action. Although this volume is most useful for people working within urban contexts, the pedagogical concerns and project suggestions would no doubt be applicable to rural institutions.

With the ever-increasing currency of terms like “civic engagement,” “engaged scholarship,” and “service learning,” it should come as no surprise to anyone that the research university is on the “engagement” bandwagon. However, this proves to be a double-edged sword: while greater interest in community-based work promises exciting possibilities and broader institutional support, it also necessitates thoughtful curricular and program design for ethical and just interactions with community partners. Service learning scholars Barbara Holland, Andy Furco, and Jeff Howard offer a promising research agenda for what they call “engaged scholarship” that seeks to avoid what Ellen Cushman refers to as the “hit-it and quit-it” model of community-based research (40) where students raid the community for data before returning to the classroom to write essays on their findings and experiences of personal growth. Engaged scholarship, in contrast, works with community partners at all levels from shaping the research agenda to determining appropriate learning outcomes to the distribution of finished products. *City Comp* offers theoretical and practical guidance for writing teachers and administrators who are interested in the possibilities for such work.

Works Cited

- Cushman, Ellen. “Sustainable Service Learning Programs.” *College Composition and Communication* 54(2002): 40-65.
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