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COMPOSING OTHER SPACES

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HAMPTON PRESS, INC.
CRESSKILL, NJ 07626

REFLECTIONS ON "WRITING CITY LIFE"

Theory and Practice of a Place- Based Composition Pedagogy

Deborah Mutnick

Seeing Manhattan from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center. Beneath the haze stirred up by the winds, the urban island, a sea in the middle of the sea, lifts up the skyscrapers over Wall Street, sinks down at Greenwich, then rises again to the crests of Midtown, quietly passes over Central Park and finally undulates off into the distance beyond Harlem. A wave of verticals. Its agitation is momentarily arrested by vision. The gigantic mass is immobilized before the eyes. It is transformed into a turology in which extremes coincide—extremes of ambition and degradation, brutal oppositions of races and styles, contrasts between yesterday's buildings, already transformed into trash cans, and today's urban irruptions that block out its space.

—Michel De Certeau,
The Practice of Everyday Life

In an eerie coincidence, the first meeting of a 100-level-honors elective I taught called "Writing City Life" was scheduled for the afternoon of September 11, 2001. It would have been a chilling note on which to begin such a course anywhere, but we were situated in Brooklyn just across the river from the burning towers. We could see the smoke darkening the unbelievably blue New York skies that morning and smell the toxic fumes.

discursive and material processes interweave all realms of human activity; intelligent appropriation of the arts of rhetoric depends on knowledge of the material processes that produce society, just as, vice versa, understanding and exerting influence over those material processes require knowledge of particular discourses as well as acquisition of communication skills. Second, to understand the local, especially in today's fast-paced, rapidly changing world, requires knowledge and analysis of global phenomena. Third, and perhaps most crucial to a meaningful experience of site-based composition studies, we need to understand the material and discursive processes by which places are produced. On the basis of these three tenets, I offer a theoretical framework for place-based composition pedagogy.

THE RHETORICAL TURN

The rhetorical turn in urban planning and theory can be seen in two main respects. On the one hand, it signals the emergence of text as a metaphor for the city, permitting places to be "read" and "written," as suggested by Henri Lefebvre's poetic observation: "Space is nothing but the inscription of time in the world" (qtd. in Kofman and Lebas 16). One thinks of layers of sediment, rings of a tree, or the growth of a small town into a big city, all marks of time on the earth's surface; the record of natural and social transformations of space is thus a historical process akin to writing the world. More concretely, maps and architectural blueprints are rhetorical conceptualizations of space in specific contexts that reflect both power dynamics and contested representations of spatial divisions and boundaries. Kevin Lynch's notion of "legibility" in his 1960 book, *The Image of the City*, pertains to the organization of the parts of a city into a recognizable, distinctive, and aesthetically pleasing place. It suggests how people glean meaning and coherence from a city's spaces, routes, and architectural forms, developing a "mental picture" of a city that provides a sense of "emotional security" (4). Legibility thus connotes a rhetorical view of the built city and the social relations that define it as rooted in communication, social contact, and the production and reception of meaningful forms.⁴ Likewise, theorists like De Certeau and Bachelard routinely employ textual metaphors to comprehend the spatial contours of experience, forging a "poetics of space."

On the other hand, on a more practical level, heightened awareness of the role of the rhetorical dimensions of urban planning, particularly with respect to engaging diverse constituencies in policy decisions, has encouraged urban researchers and planners to engage entire communities in deliberations on issues that will affect them. According to Leonie Sandercock, this approach, which she calls "communicative planning," decenters the authority of urban planners to involve entire communities in a process that

Nobody, including me, stayed that day for class. The campus had been evacuated and everyone had left, joining or giving aid to the masses of people on Flatbush Avenue, many having just fled Manhattan over the Brooklyn Bridge in torn, ash-covered clothing. For the rest of the semester, the attack on the World Trade Center and the global drama that was quickly unfolding inescapably became central course themes. Like everyone in those anxious months, we struggled to piece together the facts and gain some insight into 9/11 and its aftermath, but our perspective was limited by our proximity—geographically and historically—to the events. What follows is a discussion of "Writing City Life" in relation to 9/11 and the conclusions we drew at the time, as well as my thoughts now, several years later, about the course and the subject in the larger theoretical context of the intersection between geography and composition studies.¹

A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR A PLACE-BASED COMPOSITION PEDAGOGY

My initial interest in how situating writing instruction in off-campus communities might foster participatory democracy—a Habermasian public sphere—was driven by the widespread belief that a good liberal arts education should prepare students to engage in public discourse and play active roles in society. I hoped that defining the course as a study of the city based on site-specific projects would both teach students the skills needed to participate in public affairs and lead to genuine contributions to the communities in which they did their projects and, later, those in which they lived and worked. This rather idealistic vision, however, like those associated with service-learning and community-service projects, is problematic for several reasons, foremost among them: the elusiveness of the so-called "phantom" public sphere;² the tendency to reproduce asymmetrical social relations and inequities, often in the guise of "charity" or "good will," if they are not critically examined;³ and the consequent mystification of the socioeconomic forces that produce conditions such as homelessness, poverty, and racial segregation.

In an effort to address such concerns, which so often arise when we situate the teaching of writing in spaces other than the classroom, we need to understand the underlying dialectical processes that produce them. Although the theoretical framework outlined below by no means exhausts explanations for social—specifically spatial and rhetorical—production, it lays out an approach to place-based writing that enables both an appreciation of the aesthetic and emotional value of "being" in what are always local, specific, concrete places, and a critical perspective on the complex, global processes by which such places gain their unique character. First,

nonelite or minority constituencies, is a measure of the influence of the rhetorical turn. Although it by no means resolves the tension between expert and lay opinions, nor in most cases represents a fundamental change in dominant ideology and policy goals, the turn does present a different set of possibilities in public sphere discourse, which both professionals of various sorts and lay constituencies have begun to recognize and seek out.

THE DIALECTIC OF LOCAL AND GLOBAL

Far more dramatically than I could have imagined, teaching "Writing City Life" underscored the necessity of analyzing local conditions in relation to global contexts in an era increasingly marked by "time-space compression" caused by capitalist expansion, technological advances, and intensifying economic and social polarities worldwide. The dialectic between the global and the local is increasingly complex as we catapult into an age of global markets, accelerated change, and instantaneous cellular and electronic connections. Debates over the globalization of capital underscore the need to think dialectically without collapsing the local and the global into one and the same. Despite the ubiquity of Coca Cola and McDonalds, and off-shore corporations, the assertion that there has been a globalization of capital suggests a degree of development in Third World countries that simply has not occurred. On closer examination, these phenomena point not to the spread of capital, but to the intensification of capitalist exploitation, an ever-more brutal policy of imperial conquest of markets and nations by a voracious military-industrial complex. This process spurs corporate flight from First World countries to the cheapest, least regulated Third-World locations, which in turn aggravates exploitative labor practices abroad and declining employment and wages at home.

Thus, to understand local conditions, whether at home or abroad, requires analysis of global economic relations. The connection between local and global realities is especially striking in cities, which depend by nature on a "market place with ties to people and places in every corner of the planet, people and places that remain invisible, unknown and unimagined as we consume the products of their lives" (Cronon, qtd. in Harvey, *Justice* 232). In his first-year geography classes, David Harvey routinely asks his students where their breakfast originates as a way to broach the issue of U.S. dependence on cheap labor in Latin America and elsewhere. This lesson, notes Harvey, lifts the veil of what Marx called "commodity fetishism" to reveal the exploitation and oppression concealed in the production and circulation of commodities. In other words, we cannot enjoy that morning cup of coffee in the "core" without the sweat of third world laborers who make subsistence wages—less than \$3 a day—in the "periphery." With this knowl-

is "always situated, multimodal in its research methodologies, and deeply rhetorical" (qtd. in Grabill 132). Both the benefits and potential pitfalls of communicative planning can be seen in an example germane to "Writing City Life" in the complex process of rebuilding lower Manhattan after 9/11. Although city officials and planners have sought to include residents and victims' families in the decision-making process, their perspectives have often been ignored, demonstrating the degree to which public involvement has come to be assumed as essential to such projects, yet is frequently subordinated to larger, corporate and political interests.

Part of the attraction to discourse theory among researchers in fields like urban planning, geography, and anthropology is its emphasis on agency and consciousness of multiple, contending perspectives. Although theoretical and other explanatory discourses enable us to define, name, and comprehend reality, they tend to exclude nonexperts from engaging in them and, consequently, never fully represent or account for social diversity and the complexity of experience. Moreover, they function ideologically to regulate beliefs and behavior by appearing to delineate reality. Narrative accounts can challenge those discursive structures by exceeding their boundaries and recovering the fullness and diversity of experience—new data, as it were, from which to draw possibly different conclusions. Because narrative can also simply reproduce dominant discourses, we need to subject stories to critical examination—theory—as well. As Susan Griffin puts it, "Theory pales when faced with the complex world of experience" while "the realm of experience longs for more than knowledge" ("Red Shoes" 10).

Ethnography, in particular, provides a key tool for capturing the fine-grained, narrative richness of places through close observation and participation in specific urban groups, projects, and communities. Ethnographic and oral history interviews give researchers, including students, eyewitness accounts of everyday life in a neighborhood or organization. Gathering perspectives from local residents can illuminate histories and issues that developers, planners, and researchers may not anticipate. Such accounts can democratize the decision-making process by taking multiple points of view into consideration. In "Writing City Life," I hoped that narratives of the city, both ethnographic interviews and the students' own experiences as researchers in public spaces, would (1) create new knowledge based on their encounters at a variety of urban sites, and (2) provide rich data that could be subjected to analysis and in turn lead to a deeper understanding of the critical local and global issues of urban life. Reflecting the interdisciplinary, synergistic impulse behind such projects, the rhetorical turn in fields ranging from landscape architecture and urban planning to public art constitutes an alternative to both the abstraction of modernism and the simulations of postmodern culture" (Potteiger and Purinton ix). The acknowledgment by researchers and planners of the usefulness of such methods, especially with

edge, students can begin to make other critical connections between everyday life for even the poorest U.S. resident and the abysmal conditions experienced by the vast majority of the world's population.

It is because of these conditions that the immigration rate to Western capitalist countries—particularly cities—has skyrocketed, dramatically altering the demographics in cities across the United States and Europe. As Jane M. Jacobs points out in her analysis of empire at the turn of the 21st century:

It is not that the distinction between core and periphery, haves and have nots, has gone away—it is devastatingly present. But the “where” of this geography is increasingly confused: First World cities have their Third World neighbourhoods, global cities have their parochial underbellies, colonial cities have their postcolonial fantasies. (“Conclusion” 69–70)

At issue, Jacobs argues, is not that imperialism in a postcolonial world has given way to “global urbanization” or a “postmodern’ urban” reality, but rather that it has produced “more fractured patterns of cultural appropriations” (71). These patterns invert colonial ideologies into “regimes of desire” in which the “other” is sought out as a sort of multicultural commodity, transforming both First-World cities to which Third-World immigrants flock and postcolonial cities grappling with socioeconomic fragmentation and instability. The polarities created and intensified by this process could be seen, for example, in the list of World Trade Center victims, which included CEOs at top financial firms and immigrant cooks and dishwashers without green cards whose families were afraid to file claims for fear of deportation.

In addition to the reliance of capitalist countries on commodity production in poor, Third-World countries and the postcolonial realities of First-World cities as global microcosms, the dialectic of local and global forces plays out on the political stage. Although the United States has been relatively insulated from the siege conditions that many urban centers around the world have endured for decades, if not centuries, the 9/11 attacks brought home the reality of the geopolitical dynamics of the 21st century. Because the emotional impact of the attacks was so visceral, especially in New York City, this dialectic was hard to discuss, and for many even to discern, that semester in “Writing City Life.” Although the dominant geopolitical voice of the Bush Administration’s denunciations of Islamic terrorism was loudly heard, accompanied by much flag-waving locally, critical perspectives on the relationship between U.S. foreign policy and 9/11 were—and continue to be as of this writing—rebuked and often silenced.

Regardless of one’s analysis of the attacks, the event unmistakably signaled a turning point in U.S. history: The American people would now have to contend with the violence and bloodshed that has enveloped so many places as nation states and nomadic—mostly fundamentalist but also political—organizations contend for power in a post-cold war world now dominated by the United States and its allies. My purpose here is not to present a detailed analysis of 9/11, but rather to show how the attacks and their aftermath exemplify the dialectical play of local and global forces. As is commonly known, although still officially and routinely denied, the U.S. government had close ties with both Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden; hence, our foreign policy over several decades helped create conditions that contributed to the growth of terrorism in the Middle East and, at least indirectly, the attacks on 9/11. When the planes struck the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on that bright blue September day, people in New York City and Washington, DC, tragically experienced this reality firsthand on a very local level. Years later, as I write, it behooves us to imagine what it must be like to live—day in and day out—in Baghdad or Abu Ghraib. In addition to the suffering of those held hostage by war in *their* homeland, the list of consequences of 9/11 for us in the United States includes: the enactment of the Patriot Act; the creation of Homeland Securities; the illegal detention of thousands of people; enormous military expenditures sapping the domestic budget for housing, education, and social services; endless “orange” alerts; domestic wiretapping; and the chilling fear of another attack.

THE PRODUCTION AND CONTESTATION OF SPACE

The material world shapes us and we, in turn, shape the world through our labor and, in crucial respects, discursively. But that leaves unanswered the question of how that world and its social relations and institutional forms come about in the first place. We tend to assume space and time are natural, pre-given phenomena, but according to the historical-geographical materialist perspective of geographers like David Harvey and Ray Hudson, space and time are produced by material processes. For those of us in the humanities, theoretical developments in geography and related fields of urban planning and urban studies are particularly interesting because they integrate a vast array of scientific, social, and aesthetic points of view. Committed to a materialist, dialectical method, Harvey and Hudson seek to work through the intricacies of arguments arising from social, aesthetic, and postmodern theories and aesthetics that privilege time over space, becoming over being, and vice versa, to understand the interaction between the spatialization of time and the history of spatial forms, patterns, and

practices. The tendency of social theories to view space as secondary to historical analysis obscures the role that spatial forms play in the process of social change, while the focus of aesthetic theories on spatial forms—architectural, artistic, and textual—suffers from inattention to questions of flux and change, the impermanence of structures. “By playing these two currents off against each other,” Harvey writes, “we can, perhaps, better understand the ways in which political-economic change informs cultural practices” (*Condition* 207).

Central to the geographical-historical materialist perspective, which I am suggesting is a key to answering critical questions about social difference, division, injustice, and inequity that students encounter when they write in and about spaces outside the traditional classroom, but also, arguably, within it, is an analysis of capitalism. Hudson underscores this in explaining why he chooses Marxist theory as “a point of departure”: “Thus, it is of utmost importance to stress that we live in a world in which capitalist social relations *are* dominant, the rationale for production *is* profit, class and class inequalities *do* remain, and that wealth distribution *does* matter” (2). Although production generally is the process whereby human beings transform the material and natural world into usable products, capitalist production is specifically oriented toward commodity production in which commodities are produced for the purpose of exchange and profitability. Because use value remains a vital component of all commodities and places, conflict arises both among groups with competing interests and between use value and exchange value. For example, citing De Certeau’s term *pedestrian rhetoric*, Harvey acknowledges the role that agency plays in the process by which space is literally made and remade as people walk through a city (*Condition* 214). This *space of enunciation* suggests an alternative to Foucault’s totalizing sense of entrapment by space understood as so many containers of power. But at the same time, Harvey understands how space is determined by practices that over time become mythologized or naturalized to reproduce social institutions and beliefs. It is through understanding the social and material processes by which space and time are produced that we can, in turn, illuminate what often seem to be fixed, inexchangeable realities. For feminist geographers, it has also been critical to unpack the categories of class and capitalism to forge a “politics of difference across race, gender and sexuality” and assert “multiple forms of resistances and alliances articulated at different sites and at different times” (Watson 294). This rethinking of spatial divisions has generally not meant an abandonment of Marxist theory, as Sophie Watson suggests, but rather “that new perspectives bring a fresh light to old problems” (295).

Nevertheless, according to a Marxist analysis of the production of space, in particular, the city, the two primary forces at work are the accumulation and circulation of capital and class struggle. This fundamental

understanding of the “organization and geographies of production” illuminates “why some possibilities are realized but not others, and why those that are realized exist in the particular ways they do” (Hudson 6). What distinguishes capitalism from other modes of production is the relationship between capital and wage labor, in which labor-power is a commodity that produces surplus value—profits—over and above the use value produced by socially necessary labor. This process of production results in spatial differentiation and identity formation based on the requirements of the system as a whole. It is this process that accentuates the contradiction between the meaningfulness of places for human beings and their role in the process of production and profits. Use value correlates with human need for places to be sensuous, meaningful, and emotionally satisfying, whereas exchange value operates to produce profits through the accumulation and circulation of capital. Thus, Hudson concludes, “There is an ongoing tension arising from the attempts of people to develop coherent and meaningful places and capital’s ceaseless search for profits that lead it to flow in and out of places” (282).

This tension has been highly visible in the deliberations about 9/11 victims’ compensation and the debates over plans for a memorial and reconstruction of lower Manhattan. For example, the conflict between people and profits was evident in the failure of the City of New York and the Environmental Protection Agency to address the problem of asbestos removal and the persistent medical problems, especially respiratory ailments, from which many residents suffered. It was also apparent in the outraged response of many victims’ family members to the 2004 Bush reelection campaign’s use of 9/11 in TV ads to promote his candidacy as well as the broader political criticism and activism of the 9/11 family members who started the antiwar organization, “Peaceful Tomorrows.” The first architectural firm awarded the bid was so loudly opposed by thousands of New York City residents that the Bloomberg administration had to rescind its offer and begin the bidding process all over again. One of the main concerns was that the firm had sacrificed aesthetic value for lower production costs, ignoring the deep emotional attachment to the site and its meanings.

IMPLEMENTING A PLACE-BASED COMPOSITION PEDAGOGY

The multitudinous ways of rendering, reading, writings, and speaking about space and time—maps, blueprints, public meetings, speeches, plans, policies, theories, essays, novels, poetry, and so on—are symbolic representations of past, present, and future places. Our attachment to places reflects both their centrality and sensuousness in our everyday lives and their

abstract market value. This conflict, often invisible, between what Marx called *use value* and *exchange value* is evident not only in economic transactions and physical transformations of space, but also in the ways we talk and write about places. From inner-city poverty, gated communities, and anxiety over property values to how we see the northern and southern hemispheres in relation to each other and how whole continents were carved up and renamed, issues of space and place are crucially important for us all as we negotiate our immediate everyday concerns and grapple with larger, global questions of social organization and welfare. Because they are rhetorically enacted, defined, contested, and redefined, such issues are especially suitable subjects for composition in two respects: Places are produced by material *and* discursive processes that reinforce the rhetorical aims of rendering, informing, and persuading, and they illuminate the materiality of language itself and the "conflict and struggle"⁵ involved in its production.

In summary, the sort of place-based composition pedagogy I am proposing can accomplish interrelated key goals. First, to take the city or another place not only as a topic, but also a site for teaching writing, offers an opportunity to practice what James Paul Gee calls the "secondary discourses" necessary for full participation in academic, work, and public life (23). Such investigations require a critical analysis of the production of social spaces (including texts) and their local and global complexities at the same time they might enable us to make surprising correlations between walking streets in a "space of enunciation" and writing a sentence. Second, linking rhetorical and spatiotemporal studies can create new possibilities of inquiry and practice toward the recuperation of a contemporary public sphere. Harvey's trenchant analysis of the material basis for the production of difference embraces a dialectical method that grants neither process nor thing privileged status. Form is constantly changing in a palimpsest of the city, layer upon layer, in relation to social processes, which can never operate apart from the material constraints they confront. The sort of public sphere envisioned here would seek not only to unite communities in the face of urban crime, for example, but also to exert a critical consciousness that reveals how "urban crime" serves as a code for racism and contempt for working-class people.

Problems of access, unequal power, the negotiation of private and public interests, and what Harvey calls the "geography of difference" remind us that a search for the elusive public sphere might begin not just with an academic study of the city, but with a walk through its streets, a conversation at a café, or a visit to a corporate headquarters or neighborhood nursery school. A place-based composition pedagogy—one that combines learning about the social processes that produce an edge city or a soup kitchen with the theory and practice of multiple, competing discourses—

might contribute to the development of "a requisite poetics of understanding for our urbanizing world" (Harvey, *Justice* 438). Without such an understanding, neither our students nor we will fathom the social conditions that give rise to our individual and collective problems, nor will we develop the communicative means to participate effectively in their amelioration. Unless we do so, De Certeau's prescient vision of "urban irruptions" from the top of the twin towers, so shockingly reduced to rubble, will prevail (91). The phantom public sphere will reproduce existing conditions—and endless tragedies like that which so strangely coincided with the first meeting of "Writing City Life."

"WRITING CITY LIFE" AND THE PRODUCTION/ ANNIHILATION OF SPACE⁶

My initial conception of the course was that it would combine reading accounts of city life with on-site research at diverse urban sites, culminating in a final essay in which students would be asked to incorporate critical reflection and analysis into a story about urban experience. Its two-fold aim was for students to learn about modern urban history through the required reading and to develop a civic interest in the city's prospects for the future through their participation—especially *vis-à-vis* their writing—in an urban community, organization, or project. In other words, I hoped that the course texts would not only address contemporary urban issues, debates, and history, but also encourage students to engage in public discourse in a variety of contexts. This aspect of the course would be furthered by field projects in which students entered unfamiliar public spaces, negotiated relationships with individuals there, observed and reported on firsthand findings, and began to contribute through critical narratives to our knowledge of city life.

As a primary text, I used Miles, Hall, and Borden's *City Cultures Reader*, an anthology with a wide range of classical and contemporary scholarship on urban spaces, architecture, policy, history, and culture. The reader essentially gave us a vocabulary and syntax for talking about cities. We learned, for example, about "Edge Cities"—new, sprawling, post-war urban forms in which corporate offices, supermarkets, and white-collar workers predominate; the concept of "legibility" as a way of articulating the coherence and identifiability of a city's parts in relation to one another; and gentrification, the often brutal—if rewarding for some—process by which neighborhoods are converted from low scale to upscale through real estate and commercial development. The reader's multidisciplinary thrust and aim of reflecting current debates on the future of urban spaces structured the course around a heady set of propositions about the city viewed

as: a geographical place; built objects (e.g., airports, hospitals, factories); constellations and arrangements (e.g., gridded or irregular streets, compact or dispersed business sections, and low- or high-rise buildings); cultural practices that create social spaces and relationships; invisible exchanges and flows of money, ideas, and data; and common beliefs (e.g., cars stop at red lights). We began to think of the city in terms of its spectacular, temporal, and historical aspects, a "possibilities machine," in the words of Henri Lefebvre (qtd. in Miles et al., 2).

A referent to which we returned throughout the semester was the contrast between Le Corbusier's modernist vision of urban planning based on rationality, order, efficiency, and sterility and Jane Jacobs' highly influential vision of a city oriented to safety and well-being, sociability, and everyday public interactions on the streets of familiar, well-trod neighborhoods. From Indra Kags McEwan, we took the sense of the city as "a surface woven by the activity of its inhabitants" (19)—as "made" or "emergent," rather than fixed and merely functional. We read about the rise of the manufacturing sector in Ernst Bloch's description of Ludwigshafen, an industrial town built across the Rhine River from Mannheim that was dirty and barren—"a proletarian-capitalist mixed reality without a mask"—yet inspired an exhilarating sense that "something turned around here because where the age is matching emerges here" (143). This double vision of cities' drabness and their enormous energy meant more in light of what we were reading—and had experienced firsthand—about the collapse of the manufacturing sector, the ascendance of a service economy, and its effects on income inequality, homelessness, and unionization. Together with Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin, we wondered whether the current rapid shift toward information labor, home-based technologies, and flexible labor would, as Barry Smart suggests, "encourage a retreat from public life and public space" (qtd. in Graham and Marvin 135) in a "dystopian (American) urban future" (136). If so, would the shift thus exacerbate class polarization and exclude already disadvantaged groups that lack the means to participate in the new technological order? At the center of the course was the question of how we as residents of the city could participate—intervene—materially and discursively in its everyday life.

Along with the reader, I assigned Lisa Belkin's *Show Me a Hero*, E.L. Doctorow's *World's Fair*, and Lee Stringer's *Grand Central Winter: Stories from the Street*. On the first day of class, we saw John Sayles' movie, *City of Hope*; on the last day, we saw Marc Singer's haunting documentary, *Dark Days*, about homeless communities living in underground tunnels in New York City. Each of these narratives captures the rich complexity and conflicted nature of urban life. Belkin tells the story of Yonkers, New York, and its stubborn resistance to a court-ordered plan to desegregate housing, costing the city millions of dollars in court fines and exposing the

racist assumptions of White middle-class homeowners' concerns about property values and safety. In Doctorow's novel, a young Jewish boy bears witness to the depression years in The Bronx, depicting the lives of second-generation Russian-Jewish immigrants struggling to attain middle-class status as war looms and the triumphal future announced by the 1934 World's Fair turns gaudy and lackluster. Stringer provides a very different perspective of urban life in his firsthand account of what it means to be homeless in New York City, puncturing myths about poverty and providing an insider's view of the city's underbelly. In addition to contributing to our expanding frames of reference for our key term *urban*, these books reinforced the contradiction between human need and profitability and raised questions about the role of the public sphere in addressing both underlying issues and surface conflicts.

All these readings and topics I had more or less anticipated. But the terrorist attacks on 9/11, as many said that day and after, changed everything.

* * *

The Sunday following the attacks, the *New York Times* published a special section called "The Fragile City," with articles by, among others, Tony Hiss, Jill Eisenstadt, and Dalton Conley. Hiss recalls the disturbing history of the Twin Towers, modernist icons of power that "seemed oversized and inhumane" in the 1970s when they were built, but gradually became "a centering point" for the region; after 9/11, he concludes, "The smile of the skyline had missing teeth" (3). Recalling her wedding at Windows on the World in 1990, before the first attack on the Twin Towers, Eisenstadt observes they were "linked to our future, and had become a symbol of endurance, strength, luck" (3). Conley reflects, "The social stability of a sharp-edged skyline is no match for global struggles. Distance has totally collapsed, and the Twin Towers are the ultimate metaphor for that collapse. Afghanistan is New York. Palestine is New York" (6).

These meditations on the legacy of the Twin Towers and the meaning of the terrorist attacks informed my students' and my thinking about urban development generally. The first time the class actually met, a week after 9/11, I showed Sayles' movie, *City of Hope*, which tells several intertwined stories in a fictional "every city" run by corrupt politicians who want to tear down a slum and build a high-rise complex called Galaxy Tower, which has the backing of a group of international developers. The plot brings together Greek, Italian, Irish, Latino, and African-American communities whose various alliances and divisions, and class, ethnic, and ideological conflicts become the real focus of the film. One subplot, for example, involves a random assault by two black youths of a jogger, who ironically turns out to be an urban studies professor, after their encounter

with a racist, White police officer. Picked up by the police, the boys accuse the jogger of sexual harassment, and a local Black nationalist takes up their cause when he overhears their story at the local precinct.

The nationalist is at odds with a liberal Black city councilman depicted as the voice of reason, but soon to be enmeshed in bitter compromise. Convinced by a retired Black politician that he has to stick by the boys' story if he wants to become an effective leader, the councilman dissuades the heterosexual professor from pursuing his legitimate complaint against the boys. Sayles' film encapsulates the key themes I wanted to address in the course: the politics of urban development, the growing polarization between rich and poor people, and the struggles for power between and within social groups. Like the written texts, the film also enacts the multiple stories, voices, and experiences that constitute city life, marked by asymmetrical power relations and often brutal, unfair competition for visibility, audibility, and space.

These struggles are vividly depicted in Belkin's narrative of White resistance in Yonkers, New York, to a plan to disperse low-income public housing residents from high-rise developments to "scattered-site townhouses" with individual entrances and fenced yards in middle-class neighborhoods. It was here that we first encountered Oscar Newman's idea of "defensible space." According to Newman, a major cause of crime in high-rise public housing projects is the preponderance of communal property—elevators, stairwells, and garbage receptacles—that no one claims. Thus, giving low-income families a sense of ownership and pride in their homes deters urban crime by isolating the criminal "because his turf is removed" (Newman "Introduction"). The same term of *defensible space* surfaced in Anthony Vidler's discussion in the *Times*' coverage of the attacks of "a civic debate over whether to change the way Americans experience and ultimately build urban public spaces" (6).

Situating this civic debate in a long history of concerns about urban blight and—since the First World War—vulnerability to aerial attacks, Vidler contrasts Le Corbusier's vision of the city as "glass and steel" towers amid a "vast urban park" to a vision of community, so evident in New York City after 9/11, a sense of connectedness bred by "the street as a site of interaction, encounter, and the support of strangers for each other" (6). His argument brought to mind Jane Jacobs' ideas about safety and public contact, reinforcing our juxtaposition of her with Le Corbusier as a way of understanding the debate over the future of urban centers. Thus, we could compare the idea of defensible space in relation to protecting cities from external enemy attack to the use of the same term by the architects of the Yonkers housing plan to mean a defense against the urban decay caused by high-rise projects that nobody owns or maintains. At the same time, however, we reflected on whether Jacobs' terms, especially her emphasis on

safety and her idealization of urban life, with its tendency to elide or erase difference, could be construed to support policies of exclusion and defense against "others." In what sense, we could ask, was the fear of an external enemy attack provoked by an event like 9/11 comparable to the fear of urban crime? Whose fear was it? What was the primary purpose of the Yonkers housing development? Whose interests did it really serve?

As important as the readings and discussions were in giving us a language—a discourse—for talking about urban culture, the real work of the course lay in the field projects. I had developed contacts with policymaking and service organizations that focus on a variety of urban issues and community needs, including The Center for an Urban Future, a policy think tank formed in 1996; Place in History, a nonprofit organization founded in 1997 by young alternative urban planners; the Brooklyn Young Filmmakers Center, a group that supports community building and economic development in low-income and ethnic communities through the vehicle of filmmaking; Elders Share the Arts, an organization linking cultures and generations through the arts in senior centers, schools, and other community settings; and the EPA Hudson River Cleanup Project.

Also on the list were several larger organizations, such as the African Burial Ground and the Lower East Side Tenement Museum. Two of the 12 students in the class ended up working with Place in History, one with Elders Share the Arts, and one with the EPA. Another chose to research the African Burial Ground, an 18th-century cemetery in lower Manhattan for persons of color unearthed during the excavation of a new office building in the early 1990s. The other students chose their own project sites and subjects, with my guidance, including a local soup kitchen, a community bookstore converted in the aftermath of 9/11 into an information and rescue supply center, a kindergarten society that runs four preschools in low-income Brooklyn neighborhoods, a study of two Colombian immigrant communities, and an oral history of a firefighter who was part of the rescue effort at Ground Zero.

In class, we used both the field projects and the readings as theoretical tools for connecting new knowledge about urban life with that which the students brought with them to the course. For example, when we discussed a unit on "memory, imagination, and identity," including Gaston Bachelard's reflections on mapping interior being onto exterior space in what he calls "a topoanalysis of all the space that has invited us to come out of ourselves" (166), we wrote about memories of the city (New York or elsewhere) in relation to identity. One student, Amy,⁷ now in her 30s, remembered her job as a 17-year-old waitress at a Brooklyn neighborhood diner as a "social experience" of interaction with people of all ages. In particular, she developed a fondness for "the oldest generation." She writes, "I found myself walking them home, giving back their tips and visiting them

in hospitals. . . . My memory of this part of my life is where my 'person' started to form."

For their final essays, I challenged the students to subject stories like Amy's to critical analysis. Why, after all, did it matter that Amy's "person" started to form at a neighborhood diner in Brooklyn? What did such memories tell us about urban existence and social reality? What theoretical understandings, such as our sense of Bachelard's poetics of space as a sort of personal mapping—"we cover the universe with drawings we have lived"—could be applied to the task of rendering personal memories and perceptions of urban life in the larger context of the history and culture of cities? Could the students, for example, find evidence in their own stories or the stories of the people they encountered at their sites to support Bachelard's assertion that exterior space imprints us and we then come to know the world through our own impressions of it?⁸ I suggested that the students view their own and others' stories as traces of memory that would locate, contextualize, and animate the urban sites they had researched.

In keeping with McEwan's metaphor of the city as "a surface woven by the activity of its inhabitants," I delineated several threads for students to pursue: their own experience as researchers in terms of their social location (gender, race, class, nationality, geography, etc.) and their sense of personal connection to their research projects; the stories of their contacts at the sites as recorded in field notes, interviews, and oral histories; and, finally, the analytical dimension of the essay in light of theories of cities, such as the development of the "Edge City," the impact of information technologies on urban economics, and the notion of defensible space. In a post-9/11 article in *Lingua Franca*, Marshall Berman calls upon New Yorkers to engage in public dialogue as a first step to rebuild the city. Correspondingly, I asked students to address the public dimension of their projects, specifying the role that public discourse had played in what Berman describes as a "chance to *participate*" in city life and "*talk*" to reach a "shared vision" (11). What new concerns had arisen, I wondered? What did the relationship between the larger, global implications of the terrorist attacks and their local impact tell the students about cities in the 21st century? To what extent was the impact of 9/11 evident at their respective sites? To what, if any, extent, in relation to their projects, was Conley right that Afghanistan is New York? Palestine is New York?

Bob, the senior who finally settled on the African Burial Ground (ABG) for his project, was unable to conduct on-site research because the ABG offices had been located at the World Trade Center. The tragedy resonated not only in the ghostliness of his search for contacts, but also in the comparison he made between our collective grief over the losses of 9/11 and this nation's historic indifference to the legacy of slavery so evident at the burial ground. As Bob explains in his paper, the ABG was discovered in

1991 when archeologists surveyed land in lower Manhattan in preparation for the construction of a new federal building. Controversies arose not only over what to do about the discovery of the Black cemetery, believed to have been the site of 20,000 burials between the late 17th century and 1796, but also who would have control over it—White or African-American researchers. On the basis of the 427 remains and artifacts unearthed, scientists cite malnutrition and murder—bullets suggest some slaves may have been killed at the point of resistance—as the major causes of death. Referring to Rosalyn Deutsche's discussion of artists' documentation of homelessness as a way to focus the "blurred social picture" created by "the erasure of history and the loss of social memory" (201), Bob states:

The ABG is a representation of New York City's "buried" past. The city "is more than a set of relationships and a congeries of buildings, it is even more than a geopolitical locale—it is a set of unfolding historical processes. In short, a city embodies and enacts a history" (Deutsche 201). The discovery of the African Burial Ground is a reminder that the history of the city is always unfolding. The evidence of the past that the ABG preserves is part of that historical process. The conditions and struggles of those who once lived in New York City are found in the burial ground.

Another student, Julianna, chose the Lower East Side Tenement Museum as her field project. Although she was born and raised in the Lower East Side, Julianna had never visited the museum, which depicts the stories of immigrants from more than 20 countries between 1863 and 1935. In the introduction to her final essay, Julianna strikes two chords, one celebrating the ethnic diversity of her neighborhood, and the other puncturing the myth of the American dream for immigrant communities. As a high school student in midtown Manhattan, she recalls that classmates automatically assumed living on the Lower East Side meant living in the projects. In her essay, she remembers having retorted defensively, "I don't live in the Projects, I live in Co-ops." In retrospect, however, she realizes that her family, too, "was part of the poverty that I witnessed every day . . . my family, just like everyone else, was living on the Lower East Side due to affordable housing."

This theme resonates later on when she describes a painting in the tenement museum of "a road leading to a house surrounded by tall trees." She views the picture as "ironic because it is meant to portray the American dream. The image of the picture bothers me because . . . it promotes the dream of coming to America, having your own beautiful house with your family and living happily ever after." The hallway and the painting are "sugar coating," hiding walls that are "dingy and filled with cracked,

chipped paint." In her conclusion, she observes that the Lower East Side continues to change: "This urban area is going through major transformations. For instance, the drug dealers are pushed out, the streets are being cleaned up, and the Projects are undergoing renovations. Once the Projects are renovated, rents will be raised and low-income families will be forced out of their homes. The cost of a studio apartment is now over one thousand dollars. . . . I am not yet affected by this massive rent increase because I live in a rent controlled building. However, I still live in fear that the comfortable and vibrant community of the Lower East Side, which is my home, will soon be taken away to serve corporate America."

Thus, by the end of the semester, we could begin to understand how Newman's concept of *defensible space* against urban crime assumes an "us" and a "them" that plays out in global as well as local events and policies.⁹ Like Sayles' story in *City of Hope* of eviction in the name of urban renewal, *Dark Days* climaxes with Amtrak's decision to evict the homeless men and women from their makeshift homes in the subway tunnels. Remarkably, assisted by the Coalition for the Homeless, they prevail in a lawsuit and surface from their underground world to move into newly painted, sunlit apartments. More hopeful than the Malthusian thinking that informs Newman's philosophy, as Bob observed in his final reflection on the course, *Dark Days* enabled us to imagine another sort of defensible space in "the courage and will to live" of the survivors who built and maintained homes and communities in the bowels of the city's subway system.

Although we did not, I believe, at the time have the theoretical language necessary to connect all the dots between the students' findings and the terrifying disappearance of the Twin Towers from the New York skyline after the planes hit, by the end of the semester, we could begin to see that the annihilation of places occurs routinely in our society in processes like gentrification, urban renewal, deindustrialization, and homelessness, and that, although such erasures are not as visible or earth-shaking as those rendered on 9/11, they may well be just as devastating in the long run for their victims.

NOTES

1. Interest among composition scholars in the relationship between rhetorical and spatial concerns has grown since I taught "Writing City Life," with the publication of several important articles and edited volumes shortly preceding and following the fall of 2001, including Nedra Reynolds' "Who's Going to Cross this Border? Travel Metaphors, Material Conditions, and Contested Places," followed by her book, *Geographies of Writing: Inhabiting Places and Encountering Difference*; Ed Nagelhout and Carol Rutz's *Classroom Spaces and Writing Instructors*; and Bruce McComiskey and Cynthia Ryan's *CityComp: Identities, Spaces, Practices*.

2. See Bruce Robbins' *The Phantom Public Sphere* on debates over whether a viable public sphere exists today. For a discussion that specifically addresses the difficulty of the concept in relation to composition studies, see Susan Wells' "Rogue Cops and Health Care: What Do We Want from Public Writing?"
3. See Bourdieu on reproduction theory generally and, more directly related to composition studies, Bruce Herzberg's critique of service learning as unintentionally reproducing the dominant ideology when students work at sites like homeless shelters or soup kitchens without a critical apparatus with which to analyze their experience.
4. For a very interesting critique of Lynch's notion of "legibility" and Jacobs' "livability," see Malcolm Miles' "Legibility and Livability: A Critique." Miles reviews the meanings and applications of both terms and then goes on to criticize their formalist and universalist tendencies, leading to phenomena like Disney's Celebration, Florida—a concocted, nineteenth-century style, micro-managed community—and, more generally, a "private sector new urbanism" that promotes "a freedom from urban ills rather than a freedom for urban interaction" (9).
5. See, for example, Min Zhan Lu's "Conflict and Struggle in Basic Writing."
6. The phrase *annihilation of space* is part of the process that David Harvey calls "time-space compression," in which the spatiotemporal reality seems to speed up and shrink as a result of technological advances, such as the railroad, airplane, satellite communications, the Internet, and so on. But Harvey argues that this so-called *annihilation* heightens competition for space rather than decreases its significance in a post-Fordist economy dependent for profits on capital flight, deindustrialization, and other spatial transformations (*Condition* 293-94).
7. All students referred to herein have been given pseudonyms.
8. "Each one of us, then, should speak of his roads, his crossroads, his roadside benches; each one of us should make a surveyor's map of his lost fields and meadows" (Bachelard 166).
9. Here one cannot help but think of the post-9/11 realities of color-coded alerts, train and bus bombings in Western urban centers, and the prospect of "them" and "us" becoming paradoxically and simultaneously indistinguishable—as we look around to see who the next perpetrator may be among us—and ever more rigidly stereotyped on the basis of racial profiling and other more vicious defenses against crimes large and small. Here, too, we might look to a work like Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* to understand the different etiologies, performers, and effects of criminal offenses.