In my view, writing that focuses on “place,” whether urban or rural, is compelling because of the possibilities for challenging students to think critically about the ways in which geographical areas become inscribed with meanings and, in turn, how places inscribe people with identities. At heart, *City Comp* is a book about the connections between urban places and writing, and how such connections represent multiple, often contradictory, perspectives appropriate for students and teachers to explore in composition classes through reading and writing. McComiskey and Ryan state that the “unifying thesis” of *City Comp* “is that practitioners of rhetoric and composition who learn to read and write and teach in urban spaces must understand both the common and the unique qualities of city contexts, responding in productive ways to the special exigencies, both opportunities and obstacles, presented to them in their own universities” (10).

The “opportunities and obstacles” faced by writing teachers in urban contexts are explained in the three-part organizational structure of the book, focusing on “identities, spaces, and practices” (10). “Negotiating Identities” refers to the “complex and varied” identities urban students bring to their writing classes while “Composing Spaces” examines how “universities, teachers, and students define their roles in connection to the material and social geographies of their cities” (11-12). “Redefining Practices” centers on the challenge found by teachers and administrators at urban universities “to serve both the students we encounter in the classroom and a broader population of urban citizens” (13). As these sections suggest, the opportunities and obstacles emerge from the same source, namely the understanding of and negotiation with a multiplicity of perspectives via the act of writing.

According to the editors, the essays are influenced by “cultural studies, critical discourse analysis, and feminist media studies,” though traces of cultural geography and spatial theory can be seen as well (3). As a result of these influences, essays in *City Comp* connect the material conditions of urban areas with the teaching of writing, thus treating cities as texts. The book rests on the premise that students and universities are written by their urban surroundings while simultaneously writing those surroundings.

In “Negotiating Identities,” the essays explore predominant historical narratives located in particular urban areas that play a role in constructing student or institutional identity, and then offer alternatives to that identity by constructing competing narratives. Elizabeth Ervin and Dan Collins’s “Writing Against Time: Students Composing ‘Legacies’ in a History Conscious City” uses the concept of the “rhetorical ecosystem” (40), which examines the relationship between place and discourse to examine the ways in which students from two schools challenge
the accepted historical narrative promoted by the City of Wilmington. Krista Hiser’s “A Paragraph Ain’t Nothin’ But a Sandwich: The Effects of the GED on Four Urban Writers and Their Writing” offers case studies of the ways in which students’ identities in San Francisco are entangled with their performance on the GED. As Hiser shows, GED test performance has a profound effect on the identities of students already struggling to get by, and such a test neglects what strengths the students have as writers. Though these essays are engaging and well-written, the issues raised are not restricted to only urban students or schools.

In “Composing Spaces,” the essays focus on how the understanding of urban spaces can be enhanced through the study and teaching of writing and in turn how the study of composition and rhetoric can enhance understanding of—and possibly change—urban spaces. Jeffrey T. Grabill’s “The Written City: Urban Planning, Computer Networks, and Civic Literacies” recounts his and his students’ efforts in a tech writing class to create a website that enables residents of Mechanicsville (a neighborhood in Atlanta, Georgia) to participate in the urban planning of the city. Grabill’s essay shows students actively involved in community building as they seek ways to make the website user-friendly for their intended audience. In “Speaking of the City and Literacies of Place Making in Composition Studies,” Richard Marback suggests that the concept of “place making,” or connecting rhetorical practices with material conditions, can lead to a greater understanding of the ways in which ideologies constitute a part of the spatial conceptions of the city (in his case, Detroit), thus often controlling the distribution of resources and respect. Marback focuses on Tyree Guyton’s Heidelberg Project, a found-art creation stretched over several city blocks that draws many visitors as well as mixed reactions from Guyton’s neighbors and city officials. In various writing assignments Marback asks students to uncover these contradictory perspectives and explore their historical and cultural significance.

In “Redefining Practices,” essays examine how urban contexts can lead to change in institutional structures and practices when writing teachers and WPAs seek ways to capitalize on those contexts. In “Composition by Immersion: Writing Your Way into a Mission-Driven University,” David A. Jolliffe recounts how DePaul University implemented a class called Discover Chicago in which students choose to volunteer with an organization that aligns with their interests, say, in music or writing. Working with a DePaul instructor, students write extensively about their experiences volunteering, and, ultimately, take on a larger research project that grows from their “immersion” (159). Jolliffe suggests that, because students are “learning about” something, they take their composition class seriously (169). Complementing Jolliffe’s suggestion that composition classes can connect to the city in meaningful ways, Lynée Lewis Gaillet’s “Writing Program Administration in a ‘Metropolitan University’” discusses how her position as WPA at Georgia State University in Atlanta enables her to design composition classes in ways that take advantage of her university’s metropolitan status. She offers a brief description of
a pilot composition class, and then suggests what she would do differently next time around.

The essays cover a variety of urban contexts, and address the teaching of a range of students, from first-year composition students to secondary English teachers to non-traditional, working class students. The editors claim in the Introduction that, in their experience, students in cities lead more complex lives or are more willing to tackle complex subjects than students who attend rural schools and are “happiest to play in the safe zone of freewriting and formal essay structures” (3). Having taught at a rural school in North Carolina, I have found this not to be the case, and I wonder about the effect such suggestions, however slight, may have on teachers’ views of students because it implies that students’ lives outside urban areas are simple. Non-urban students lead different lives, yes, but not less complex. Further, I wonder about the possibilities for such a suggestion to limit readership to those teaching only in urban areas. That would be unfortunate, because this book has much to offer composition teachers, whether urban, rural, or somewhere in between, in terms of thinking about the relationship between writing and places.

One provocative element of a couple of essays rests on questioning the act of writing as a means to effect change in material and social circumstances. Paula Mathieu’s “‘Not Your Mama’s Bus Tour’: A Case for ‘Radically Insufficient’ Writing” questions the efficacy of writing to change perceptions and economic conditions of the homeless, and includes a riveting example from students performing in homeless street theater. Mathieu concludes by marveling at the effort and collaboration undertaken by her writing students to produce their play, yet she laments how the students still have their student loans when the play closes. Hiser’s essay raises similar questions about the possibility for writing to enact change as well. Of course, the book contains many essays that show students participating in their urban contexts in positive ways.

Although I have only touched on a few representative essays from City Comp, all the essays in this book are worth contemplating by a writing teacher interested in taking more complicated approaches to places. As a teacher at a small rural school in Pennsylvania, I find this book useful because it challenges me to re-think my writing assignments in which I ask students to consider how identities are linked to specific areas and how writing can help them understand how such identities are created. In addition to numerous examples of the ways discourse and urban spaces are inextricably linked, City Comp suggests ways to re-design classes that critically examine places and spaces, and students’ roles within them. Most importantly, McComiskey and Ryan have collected a batch of essays that show how students, schools, and programs in urban areas are continually in a process of becoming. These are interesting projects with social ramifications, but there is no reason any teacher could not do similar projects in non-urban areas. I am glad to have them as a guide.

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