7 ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE: WRITING URBAN SPACES

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OVERVIEW

Our sense of place not only affects our perspective, but also the way in which we represent our home to others.[1] It is vital that students learn to write about spaces that civically engage them on a personal level. The structural elements of the built environment that contribute to pollution, dilapidated housing, food and housing insecurity, and natural catastrophe are often ignored in favor of focusing on the violent results of these problems; yet, from downtown arboretums to rooftop hydroponics, undergraduates have sought to argue for compelling solutions through an urban ecology lens for environmental justice. Urban ecology promotes resilient and sustainable urban spaces where humans and nature coexist. When argued in the right way, it can help decrease air and water pollution while enabling new methods of food production, more efficient transportation, and improved housing. This chapter offers students a method of activist writing for building urban environmental justice arguments in genres of papers often expected of college writing courses, such as the personal narrative and the rhetorical analysis. It also gives examples of what environmental rhetoric can look like in the city by highlighting thematic patterns in student essays.

PART I: INTRODUCTION

You wake up one morning, and your sink suddenly vomits up a corrosive sludge as you turn it on, while the power simultaneously goes out. What is your plan? Do you tell the landlord? Call a plumber

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or electrician? Do you need first responders? A lawyer? How much money or tools or parts will you need? Do you have insurance? Who or what is causing this crisis, and how do you make it stop?

Many readers could probably dismiss this question as being outside the realm of possibilities in their lives: maybe you have a brand new home, maybe your loved ones would handle it, or maybe you don't have a sink to begin with. Regardless, there are real living and working environments in cities where the idea of being "urban" might not seem compatible with "environmentalist" rhetoric for constructing arguments or narratives about urban spaces and crises, being that cities are rarely thought of as belonging to "the environment." Donna Haraway, Greg Gerrard, Cronon, McKibben, and other post-human and ecocritical scholars have decried the way in which human civilizations are historically conceptualized as relying upon the unbuilt environment or "wilderness," and yet they are also imagined as separate from that wilderness, given that the wilderness is defined by the lack human settlements. The problem with framing environmentalism as only concerned with wilderness is that it conceals the structural elements of the *built* environment that contribute to pollution, dilapidated housing, food insecurity, and natural catastrophe, in favor of focusing on their violent results, like inner-city crime or poor educational outcomes. We tend to conceptually separate wilderness from manufactured spaces, but it is not necessary to do so; even worse, it harms both the inhabitants of wilderness and built communities. Just as the natural environment must sustain life, human dwellings must also support their inhabitants within the constraints of the natural environment. But the only way to ensure that our dwellings and other places of human life continue to sustain it is if you can get others to care about them too.

However, in a place as diverse as the American city, the invisibility of environmental concerns in select spaces limits the impact of community advocacy. These spaces, from the individual alleys and kitchens to the systems of ghettos and subways, are selectively avoided by the media and the public, creating the perception of them as underwhelming and dangerous spaces that are unworthy of public attention, except in moments of crisis.

In responding to urban issues with new forms of human-environmental interaction that promote community agency and equity, students use the rhetoric of space to lay out the geography of a communicative event, such as the reporting around a chemical spill or the leveling of a slum. Like all landscapes, a rhetoric of spaces may detail both the cultural and material arrangement of people and objects, both synthetic and organic, to lay out the significance of a location. Developing a rhetoric of space in your work

as a critical-thinking college student and citizen of our democracy helps you learn to inscribe a sense of meaning and identity into the places in which you live and work. Being capable of representing your community in new ways also helps you to advocate for those places and critique its competing representations, such as those in the media that you find to be flawed in some way. In writing and reading each other's experiences of the streets in which we live, we can understand the broader forces shaping differences and similarities in experience and formulate even larger networks in resolving the issues presented to the community.

Part II: The SHOWED Method

Communicating effectively is a crucial skill for solving wide-scale problems in something as complex as an urban environment. General techniques for this kind of writing have been previously addressed in "Public Writing for Social Change," from *Writing Spaces, Vol. 4.* Yet regardless of whether you are tasked with writing in an analytic or narrative mode, you will need to articulate your specific ecological problem and its relevance to the reader in order to mobilize them in some way towards a solution.

Urban ecologists and public health officials around the world have used the SHOWED method to conceptualize their writing topics through providing opportunities to people "who seldom have access to those who make decisions over their lives" (Wang et al. 1391) to visually document their environment. It is a practice of sending advocates into their own communities of interest to photograph, draw, describe, or collect other depictions of the realities they perceive. SHOWED itself is an acronym rooted in the teaching philosophy of critical theorist Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) and stands for a set of research questions that one poses in response to the problematic imagery collected from an environment. From these questions, a logical sequence to the sections or paragraphs of the analysis or narrative becomes possible in framing an urban problem and highlighting the environmental solution. I invite you to draw upon common themes from Section III to "fill in" the components of the SHOWED schema below:

- S: What do you SEE here?
- H: HOW is it problematic?
- O: How does the problem relate to OUR lives?
- W: WHY does this issue exist?
- E: How do people become EMPOWERED in response to the issue?
- D: What do we DO about it?

There are obviously more questions that one could ask about the problem. For example, let's say your issue is income inequality in your neighborhood leading to evictions during the COVID pandemic. Obviously, access to safe shelter is a key tenet of environmental justice. One aspect of this issue is the way that poor and rich people talk about each other in the neighborhoods to decide who should live where. Does your community think that the government should raise taxes on the rich to pay for eviction deferrals? Should universal basic income pay for rent? You use the SHOWED method to narrow down an issue to a specific topic and begin to generate explanations. The way in which one responds and the evidence they choose to use is dependent upon genre: i.e., narrative or analysis.

Using SHOWED for Analysis

A student of mine was concerned about the condition of public schools and institutions in his North Philly neighborhood. He began with an image from Google Streetview, which the *Philly Voice* published to depict the rowhouse displays outside of North Philadelphia's Urban Crisis Response Center, and Streetview images of an entry point to the Northeastern suburbs used in the same local news source. Juxtaposing the conditions of streets, schools, and housing in a part of North Philly (also popularly known as "the Badlands") with the relatively affluent parts of nearby Northeast Philadelphia, he was able to use the SHOWED method to make his problem clearer in analysis (see reprinted images below). Essentially, he wanted to highlight that the selective visibility of marginal spaces such as "the Badlands" is part of defining them as ghettos that are selectively avoided by the media and constituted as unworthy of public attention, except in moments of crisis. Through its own environmental neglect, the city is able to "blame the victims" for creating the Badlands, while also neglecting to improve their public services, from school quality to sanitation.

Figure 1: Rowhouse displays outside of North Philadelphia's Urban Crisis Response Center (Source: Dominic McNeal)

Figure 2: Northeastern Philadelphia Rowhouses (Source: Dominic McNeal)

This student's analysis had to back up his position with evidence. If you were to apply the SHOWED questions to his imagery, how would

you answer them, and what kind of evidence would the analysis need? In Fig. 1, we see that there is a crowded set of partially inhabited, ivy-covered rowhouses graffitied with the statement "I WANT TO LIVE" next to a coffin, which is also labelled with a sign claiming "All Lives Matter." In Fig. 2, we see newer rowhouses further back from the street, with lawns and walkways to the backyards, and ample parking. We cannot problematize these pictures without understanding how they are connected: while merely a few blocks apart, these spaces have very different socioeconomic, racial, and cultural groups, who either directly profit or suffer from the segregation of their communities and the way in which their local taxes fund local services. Since property taxes are used to fund a good portion of school budgets, for instance, one community has a much higher-performing school than the other because a poorer community will inevitably have lower-value properties on which to pay taxes, and because a good deal of rentiers whom make up low-income groups will not be paying property taxes, such that the schools in their region will have less resources to work with.

To explain why the issue exists, you must then posit a theory. In this student example, he argued that these regions are not just physical places that become sites of struggle over human rights in urban areas. In highlighting urban "pathologies" to address an issue rather than its effects on a community, the media appeals to an audience to imagine the impoverished culture of the ghettoized urban folk as non-deserving of political rights. This mass media-dominated narrative appeals to the suburban ideology of what urban "decay" should "look like" to justify the continuation of its existence.

How do you wrap up analysis in a satisfying way? The student wanted to begin his conclusion by explaining the first steps towards empowerment that a community can take, before ending with a call to action (i.e., the "E" and "D" in SHOWED). He pointed out that hyper-invisibility of ghettoized communities is dependent on outside evaluations that try to limit the community's power to define itself and leverage action to improve its environmental conditions. By redefining the community's limitations as assets and training individuals to highlight the inequities created by the urban environment, he showed that it was possible to empower community advocates to voice their public concerns. For instance, he was able to use his research into the school district achievement scores for the largest North and Northeast Philadelphia public schools, producing a graph that he was able to include in his paper showing the differences in math and English proficiency and AP enrollment (see below). This kind of evidence

helps to support community activists in presentations to stakeholders, such as school district officials or politicians, where the problem needs to be succinctly conceptualized.

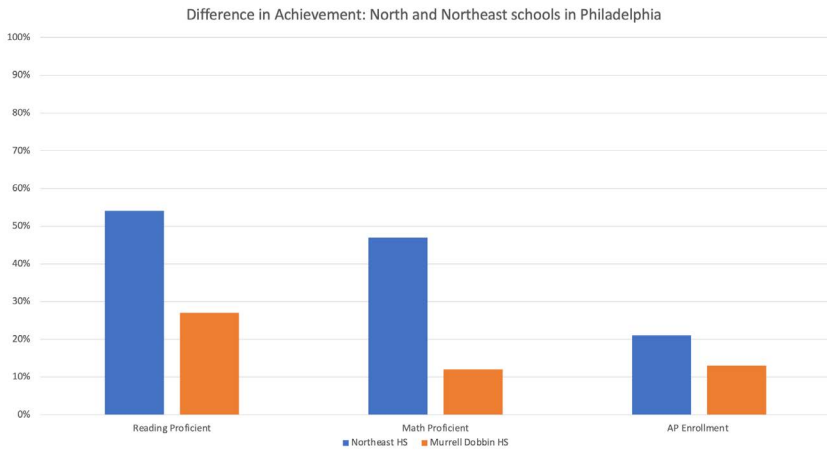Difference in Achievement: North and Northeast schools in Philadelphia

Figure 3: A Student Example of a Graph for Problematizing the School Environments in Philadelphia (Source: Dominic McNeal)

But more literate eyes on the street and more education in the community only serve the causes of ecological sustainability if they are informed by environmental initiatives in cities. For instance, one student has recommended that campus arboretums, already a hallmark feature of many flagship universities, be extended via public-private partnerships to increase their urban foot traffic as well as their visibility as a site of biological research. She even proved, using local press, that people were commenting and calling in since the 1980s to use the local campus arboretum to entertain tourists and visiting relatives, as a way to promote its expansion. Another student started a coalition of rock climbing enthusiasts with the local Forest Service to create cleanup sites at nearby bouldering and rock climbing sites that were hard to reach without training, and had become defaced by heavy traffic in recent years. Through their careful study of the problem, students have produced a variety of creative responses to environmental issues facing their cities that are not only effective, but also fairly viable with relatively few resources.

USING SHOWED FOR NARRATIVE

The narrative style of writing is distinct from genres of analytic prose for many reasons, but these formal differences are due to the fact that they address a unique rhetorical purpose: analysis takes information apart in order to highlight new insights from the topic, while narrative synthesizes information into a story-like format with a beginning, middle, and end. How do you make your story meaningful in relation to the details of the environment that shapes your needs and wants? If one is, for instance, a female member of an immigrant community that only has access to rudimentary medical care in her area, her narrative of experiencing this disparity is evidence enough for the SHOWED method to help articulate the problem in an alternative mode. A student stated in her personal narrative that "[i]f you ever ask a woman if she's felt dismissed and discriminated against at the doctor's, it is more likely she'll say yes than no." (Casarez 2). Why not ask her what happened, then? We can learn to identify the problem just as easily through her story as we can through rhetorical analysis of evidence from other sources.

The introduction sentence still involves giving an overview of the community issue—in the student's instance, discrimination and low-quality healthcare spaces resulting in limited access to services for vulnerable communities of people. However, from this point the narrative essay can include paragraphs addressing the SHOWED components in any particular order that serves the plot and keep the reader interested in the issue through your anecdote. The student richly describes what she sees when commuting with her mother to see her grandmother at home and in the hospital, due to diabetes and dementia-related complications. Traversing her hometown to the outskirts near the Mexican border, she comments that it feels like moving from the "second to the third world," and that an insurmountable set of socioeconomic conditions make it difficult to bring quality care into the border town environment. Despite the beauty of the sunsets and the "cool air drying her face" on the long drives, the periods of "empty" and "abandoned" lots and buildings remind her that "[t]here are millions of lives that are lost due to health complications that could have easily been treated, but the lack of medical care […] has caused unnecessary disparities and deaths." (Casarez 3).

She then explains that this problem relates to our lives because many patients suffer not so much from their disease as from an environment plagued by a lack of adequate medical attention and supplies. Despite the pain and suffering she witnesses and vividly describes, she realizes that "the longevity of [her] great-grandmother's life was most likely cut short due to

the fact that medical attention was not nearly as comparable as that of the attention in first world countries." (Casarez 4). A border had separated the community across generational lines, and it taught the author that certain groups were left vulnerable as a result. However, it also taught her that these issues affected urban environments more broadly.

Just as in the analytic genre, your narratives still require a unifying theory that answers the question as to "why" this issue exists. In continuing with the same student, she theorized early on that "In many underdeveloped countries, education is not nearly as good as the education here in the States, and I would love to spread my knowledge and support." (Casarez 4). This awareness becomes a motivating factor in studying medicine herself. More specifically, she also implies that her grandmother's lack of adequate dementia care is a larger problem because "in most countries neurological disorders are often treated last, for many people are ignorant to them." (Casarez 4). Thus, she is able to move into the final sections of her reflection upon the experience by explaining the consequences of ignoring the problem of a lack of access to care for chronic and debilitating disease. She proposes that these medically disenfranchised communities can become empowered by the organization of larger numbers of minority doctors and funding for their education, especially if it is earmarked for doctors intending to return to serve in their communities post-graduation.

Her call to action involves leading by example, because the narrative itself is oriented towards reflecting upon what her experience can teach her (and, by extension, the reader). While she wants to study neuroscience specifically, she refers to the narrative as the reason why she hopes "to aid in research focused on neurological disorders. Alongside that, [she] really wants to help families like mine down in Mexico. [She] wanted to help people receive treatment to prevent stories like my grandmothers." (Casarez 5). While she welcomes more doctors willing to do this work with "disadvantaged people here in Arizona, I believe that my help would prove significantly more beneficial in Mexico" (Casarez 5) where inequities in healthcare are even more exaggerated. The conclusion returns to the issue and again emphasizes the need to address the problem or mystery, but it is also her place to leave the audience with a strong impression of the need for her solution and how it can ease the problem. Narratives are not merely justifications for solving a problem by describing the environment at hand; they can be a form of knowledge in themselves, or a lesson on how we can protect and improve upon that environment. Students have written about their experiences, such as personal health crises, attending rallies, or road cleanups, where subjective experience can yield valuable information.

Part III: Urban Environmental Themes for Approaching Your Essay

Common themes of the urban ecology framework that students can frequently address include 1) confronting benign neglect of urban environments, 2) desegregation of urban environments, 3) highlighting and responding to pollutants or natural catastrophes/climate change, 4) reframing gentrification as urban recolonization, and 5) enhancing accessibility to urban environments. Each theme is merely a conceptual grouping of the most common patterns identified in student writing, but they nevertheless have a significant history and impact on public policy and our cultural practices. In each section, readers can learn about the significance, applications, and popular examples of the theme before moving on to learn about ways other students have employed them in their assignments.

Urban Segregation: Where it all Started

Segregation, be it religious, ethnic, racial, or otherwise, has not only a cultural impact, but also an environmental one as well. It can produce material damage to the living conditions of the more vulnerable groups in a society, as well as require forms of policing to separate people that can damage the environment itself. However, individual student advocates and popular environmental movements have worked to highlight the injustices of systems that rely upon segregation. Common student topics have included school district funding inequalities, policing/ICE practices, political gerrymandering, the construction of gated communities, housing deficits, the neglect of public projects, and the history of mortgage redlining in their area. These are only some of the possible issues you might address, but beginning from one of these topics can serve as a lens into the significant cultural differences in signage, language, architecture, and types of institutions that form the human ecology of segregated areas.

In *Barrio Anita,* an historic Mexican neighborhood near our university in Tucson, for instance, it was the ethnographic research from the students' historical analysis and resulting artworks that contributed to the continuing success of the *Barrio Stories* project and fundraiser, which is aimed at preserving historic neighborhoods from being bulldozed. Indeed, you can consult the *Barrio Stories* Project online (http://www.barriostories.org/barrio-anita/), where it has been hosted as a contemporary digital archive since 2018, to learn more about the specific ways in which communities are collaborating to promote the equitable inclusion of their neighborhood in the city environment. Working with Anita residents looking to reestab-

lish an official neighborhood association, project artists designed the culminating event as a way to organize collaboration for addressing growing environmental issues, such as poor drainage in the face of flooding, the dereliction of historic housing and schools, and lack of serviceable public roads.

Why is segregation so important to study in the context of urban ecology? Because urban authorities attempt to exert individual control through division and classification (who, where, and what someone is), there will inevitably emerge a hierarchy of spaces in which some communities are more or less environmentally disposable for the sake of industry and economy. Through division and representation, often inequitably, States turn portions of cities into thriving cultural centers and commercial zones, while relegating dangerous industries, violent crime, and public housing to other areas.

Differential Exposure to Pollutants or Catastrophes: a Bayou Tale

Hurricane Katrina famously demolished large swaths of New Orleans, leading to starvation, dehydration, and death among those trapped in their attics and on their roofs, turning the majority-Black 9th Ward into a swamp and the majority-White Chalmette into an oil spill. The streets had not even been drained before the Whites in Chalmette, fearing the takeover of their enclave by outside investors and non-White tenants, attempted to legislate a 2006 city ordinance requiring that owners rent their property to blood relatives. This legal move sought to protect the racial makeup of the community, but it did nothing to rebuild the city or the broken levees (Wise 12). Just a bit further upriver, in another majority-Black and working-class area of the bayou, the petroleum refineries financing the Louisiana state and city budgets were simultaneously poisoning the communities now popularly known as "Cancer Alley" (Baurick et al.). Media and research over the last few decades revealed the extent to which the petrochemical corridor between Baton Rouge and New Orleans have adversely exposed working class minorities to pollutants, in addition to catastrophes like Katrina. Surveying the petroleum plants, researchers found that they only hired "between 4.9% and 19.4% African Americans" (Berry 3), which is very low relative to the surrounding population. Thus, the manufacturing plants in Cancer Alley poisoned African American people while simultaneously excluding their communities from job opportunities.

Segregation on the Lower Mississippi from St. John's Parish to St. Bernard's Parish has left minority groups vulnerable to pollution and en-

vironmental disaster, but it is not a phenomenon unique to the South. Students can apply the notion of environmental racism and injustice to a variety of topics that help highlight the multiple mechanisms whereby legal and social practices subordinate the needs of environmentally vulnerable communities to global economic interests. Questions you might ask to identify topics related to your own community might include: where are carcinogens concentrated? Where are they spreading? Where are nuclear waste facilities, heavy metal processing sites and toxic chemicals, such as those in Cancer Alley? What might we suggest for the target audience to respond to climate change, natural disasters, and manmade pollution in their city spaces? Shall they coordinate harbor cleanup proposals, carbon tax proposals? A letter-writing campaign to improve public housing and homeless shelters around your university in response to intensifying climate conditions?

Benign Neglect and the Denial of Services

How does a community become vulnerable to catastrophes like the Katrina in the first place? What makes a community transform into the ghetto as it is recognized on TV? It is not a self-imposed process of destroying one's own home; rather, some spaces are targeted for benign neglect and the denial of public and private services by the larger political economy of the city. This "benign neglect" (69) is a term used in a 1970 government memo by Daniel P. Moynihan, LBJ's Secretary of Labor who would later become Nixon's Advisor on Urban Affairs, to describe his strategy for hollowing out the culture of an area through the defunding of public services, and a simultaneous crackdown on crime. This policy shift resulted in the planned shrinkage, intentional dereliction, and the knowing deprivation of basic services in American inner cities since the end of the Civil Rights Era.

So, how have students reimagine and redefine ghettoes, such that their narratives and analyses capture the problems confronting their communities without giving policymakers rhetorical opportunities to blame the vulnerable, and leave them in "benign neglect?" With topics such as food deserts, water and electric outages, the lack of transit, and police brutality, students have been able to compare the ways in which certain communities are systemically exposed to both more violent policing and crime, a relative lack of healthy food, a relatively slow reaction time for first responders or city workers, and more blackouts, sewage spills, and plumbing issues, than the surrounding regions. Using this information, you can make a significant case for reframing these problems as opportunities for empowerment. From attending and recording a narrative of the goings-on at school

district budget meetings to analyzing urban rezoning proposals, you can produce creative solutions to benign neglect that demanded accountability from their municipality while also highlighting opportunities for collective agency.

Gentrification as Urban Recolonization

Urban reinvestment through gentrification is often seen in urban ecology as a kind of "colonizing" the city through opportunistic outsiders. The central concern of both scholars and activists is that gentrification is defined not by enhancing or refining the community inhabiting an area, but by wealthier people moving in, improving housing, and attracting new businesses, typically displacing current inhabitants in the process. In my own walks in downtown Tucson, I have followed the Tucson streetcar development quite closely. While it started as a gaping ditch in the middle of downtown's historic streets, it slowly grew into a bustling cornerstone of pedestrian commerce. New, flashy buildings went up on street corners where dilapidated lofts or brick warehouses had stood. Gone were so many of the homeless, the graffiti and the murals. But so too went businesses that had served those neighborhoods and Barrios for generations. Cafes and community centers were bought out by fancy restaurateurs and high-end art galleries. Microbreweries and gastropubs replaced corner stores and local bars, and many historic homes started to disappear behind the imposing concrete-and-glass of the new condos and apartments.

But in order to interrogate this "colonizing" aspect of gentrification in your work, you must ask the questions: why do people need to leave their neighborhood as it is improved? If a city is looking to improve an area, why not empower those who already have a stake in occupying it, rather than prioritizing those who already have the resources to move where they please? And how might a city do so? A good example of a place to start might be the Gary, IN "Art Archive + Guide" (https://www.destination-gary.com/gary-art-archive-guide), which presently contains over 194 documented installations and community initiatives aimed at neighborhood renovation that address structural decay and environmental degradation without displacing its inhabitants. it is a living archive representing a diverse range of creative contributions seen in one of the nation's most prosperous 20ᵗʰ Century Steel Towns, which has in more recent years become emblematic of white flight, crime, and pollution. It also recognizes the many ways of art-making and place-making. Mapping and documenting new, old, and lost temporary, semi-permanent, and permanent artworks that enhance the buildings, storefronts, and historic sites of Gary will be an

ongoing archival project that can serve as a model for other cities to revitalize their environmental image without sacrificing their culture.

Accessibility to Urban Environments

Your sensory experience is your first set of ecological instruments. Trust your senses in the environment, and your topic can arise from a variety of subjective experiences that allow you to identify the material and immaterial borders that make spaces harder or easier—even painful or pleasant—to pass through and access. Of course, there are examples of spaces that are segregated according to handicap access for the deaf and blind or physically disabled, but also the way in which buildings and transit are structured around gendered norms in bathroom design. An older building on campus, for instance, only had one bathroom at each floor in the stairwell. Was this because they had gender-neutral bathrooms in Tucson before the World Wars, or more likely because there were primarily white males at the universities at the beginning of the 20th Century? Other students also highlighted certain spatial practices that are permitted or forbidden according to patriarchal norms of conduct, such as the proper places to breastfeed, or dress cis-gendered. By contrast, it is interesting to think of places where women or children in general are excluded in the design of campus and workplace environments.

In order to help you understand how to approach this theme, you might study the architecture of an older campus building: what kind of experience does it encourage, and what does it restrict or ignore? You might notice that there is a concentration of flowers and trees right at the entrance as a way to invite the walker in. You might notice that there is not brail on the signs, or that the hallways or bathroom stalls might be too narrow to accommodate a wheelchair. I once had a student who commented on the pleasant fragrance upon entering a courtyard garden. She was interrupted by another, who claimed upon entering the garden that "it smelled like shit" because he had to take the wheelchair ramp, which was only accessible behind a putrid dumpster. This experience taught all of us that, through the five senses, there are limitless ways to positively and negatively experience a space or how to access it. Who did or did not have power over designing it thus sets the norm of the environment, determining who will be able to access it, and how they should do so.

Part IV: Conclusion

Lots of first year writing assignments fall into narrative and analytical genres of essay-writing. Whether you are assigned a genre research project, a rhetorical analysis, or a personal literacy reflection, they fall into two general categories of approach: one is either telling a story, or breaking down an object of study. It should therefore be noted that writing in the narrative as opposed to the analytic genre typically requires a different set of skills. One typically reads a novel and a dishwasher self-help-manual with different intentions in mind, and thus the texts have differing arrangements.

But let us think of these genres in terms of their tactical relationship to representing an urban environment: obviously, narrative tells a story with a plot, sensory detail, dialogue, and concrete imagery that allows the reader to experience a space. Rhetorical analysis uses a claim, topics or themes of approach, and components that are classifiable in their character or relation to each other in order to support the thesis about the space. They enable you to do different, but no less important, actions for your community. On the one hand, narratives should "grip" the reader with what it "feels" like to be in such a space, or to understand how it is to live in that space through its representation. On the other, analysis allows you to "look back" at the representations of your community, or at those of others, and reflect upon how they are emphasized in their portrayals. The former allows you to move a readership to action based upon a story, the latter protects the community from the biases of a depiction by explaining the biases for the reader.

From automated cleanup vehicles to carbon taxes, you can join other students in advocating for a better world in which you can actually see a future for on this planet. We do not have to do away with cities altogether in order to make our environments livable again—nor should we. While they are imperfect, cities still represent the greatest attempt at human collectivity in our social history. We just need to reimagine the ultimate function of our collectivizing, and our methods of sustaining it.

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Teacher Resources for "Understanding Environmental Justice: Writing Urban Spaces"

Overview and Teaching Strategies

Maintaining a healthy democracy requires a literate citizenry capable of articulating the significance of their sociopolitical environment based upon a rhetorically compelling explanation of the issues confronting their local context. Therefore, it is vital that students learn to write about spaces that civically engage them on a personal level; over the past three semesters of gathering feedback on my teaching social justice and urban studies in first-year writing courses, students have voiced this civic interest towards writing about environmentalist themes related to their local spaces that can be tied to social justice discourses more broadly. Their lived spaces are overwhelmingly urban, necessitating a rhetorical framework that addresses common environmental themes observed in built environments (i.e., cities) to fit student interests while also developing a method for scaffolding their ability to research and write on their selected issue using critical awareness of the sociopolitical context that gives rise to that issue.

This chapter can be taught as part of a social justice, environmentalist, or urban studies theme, within units that accord with most first year writing curricula, such as personal reflection narratives and rhetorical analyses. Part I highlights why it is important to study rhetorical themes in urban environmental justice, while Part II describes the SHOWED method you can use in class to prompt students to collect spatial data for analysis through the lens of the given topics as a starting point. The essay concludes with a description of the five most common environmental themes under which we can suggest topics for student writing. They are also free to generate new themes grounded in the data, using a deductive approach to answer the questions and formulate a topic.

Students may have to develop different sets of skills to collect and analyze data; however, these can be major-specific and benefit students in their discipline-specific literacy. For analysis of photography and video, graphical representations, and particularly dense or jargon-laden sources on a topic, getting instructor feedback on their questions and the scope of their research is important. Teaching students how to narrate their experience and use it as data for representing environmental injustice is another necessary skill set. Therefore, I have included several activities and reading

questions to help teachers map their unit and for students to effectively comprehend and apply the chapter.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some examples of environmental issues in your own neighborhood that might fit under one of the five themes in the chapter?

2. Typical environmental issues in the city involve a certain region being compared to others in order to establish an exploitative or neglectful relationship between them. Can you think of any other themes besides the five listed that might fit this criteria?

3. Select a picture of your community from the internet that you feel most positively represents it. Now select one that you feel most negatively represents it. Explain the difference between the two and why you selected them, and then answer the SHOWED questions to express a problem that relates the two.

4. Do you think it is more useful to write about an urban environmental issue through the narrative or analytic mode, based on the examples you read about in the chapter? Why?

Activities for Analytical or Narrative Writing Assignments

1. In a first year writing unit on urban ecology or environmental justice that requires an analytical piece of writing, the first session before engaging in the photovoice methods of the chapter would focus on creating and sharing urban maps around communities of interest. Then, groups or individuals could generate some word clouds about those spaces regarding concepts they connote with it. After that, students can think about how others have represented these places, by doing a quick media or image search for a point of reference. This experience will allow them to triangulate their experience among others who co-construct the meaning of that space. Hopefully, as they begin to gather data (perhaps through the third discussion question attached with the chapter), this ini-

tial discovery will shape their final essay towards synthesizing their own feelings about place with the formal research of others. These opinions might include those of cultural geographers, sociologists, folklorists, autobiographers, urban planners, real estate specialists, politicians, or others who speak on a particular issue affecting the area.

2. For a narrative product, it is more important that students learn the elements of craft, such as plot, rich description, sensory detail, and figurative language, than it for them to spend time developing the kinds of critical data literacy needed for rhetorical analysis. However, it must still relate an urban injustice in such a rhetorically compelling way as to advocate for change. An assignment that could address these two needs would use urban narratives, even canonical literature if the instructor is so inclined, to connect their experiences of environmental injustice with an understanding of various techniques for expressing them. For instance, in the urban novel *Bleak House*, Dickens satirized Mrs. Jellyby for her "telescopic philanthropy" (see Chapter 4, which is titled with this term). She dedicates her life to charity in Africa while her children, neighbors, and local Londoners went unclothed and ill-fed. She could not see that the East Londoners lived in dark and airless tenements that "Africans," whom she so monolithically patronized, would decline flat out. Have the students read the sections on Mrs. Jellyby and then really challenge them by asking how they may see any local analogies in their own experience. At the same time, have students highlight the basics of craft within the passage: instances of dialogue, creative use of punctuation, rich description, sensory details, figurative language, etc.