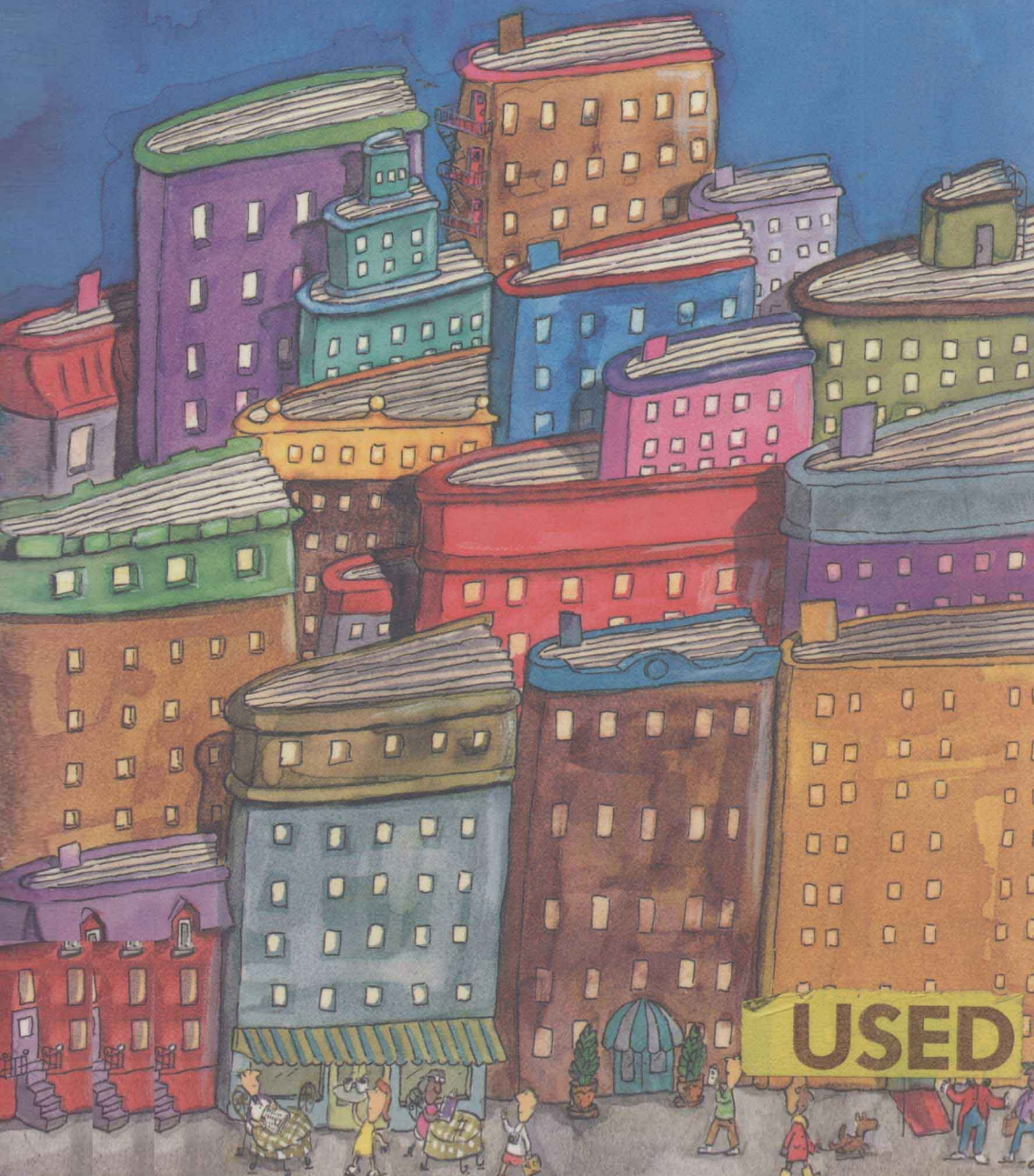


RICHARD MARBACK PATRICK BRUCH JILL EICHER

CITIES, CULTURES, CONVERSATIONS

READINGS FOR WRITERS



Cities, Cultures, Conversations

Readings for Writers



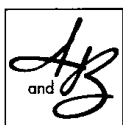
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Preface

WHY CITIES?

Why read and write about cities? What can you learn about language from reading and writing about cities? Whether you live in a rural area, the suburbs, or a city, you have knowledge of cities and urban culture in the United States today. When you think about it, your knowledge of cities comes from a variety of sources. You may have firsthand experience with urban environments, or you may have friends or family who talk with you about their urban experiences. But you certainly have a sense of cities and urban life from books, magazines, movies, music, newspapers, school, and television. Because you are surrounded by talk about cities, you have opportunities to think and talk about city life and urban issues. So wherever you live, you have some sense, some idea, of what cities are like, who lives in cities, and how cities figure in the current culture.

This book asks you to bring the knowledge and experience of cities that you already have to the task of improving your writing. What you know of urban culture and the ways you have of making sense of what you hear about cities from your family and friends and from the mass media can be valuable resources for learning more about how to read critically and how to write effectively. As the title of this book, *Cities, Cultures, Conversations*, suggests, our view is that what we think and how we act are both shaped by the ways we use language. What we think about cities—whether we enjoy them or are afraid of them—as well as how we act in response to urban environments—whether we avoid them or seek them out—depend on the ways we talk with others about the perils and promises of city life.

Throughout *Cities, Cultures, Conversations*, we use terms such as *city life*, *urban environment*, and *urban experience* to describe both the direct experience of city life and common knowledge about cities and city life available through the mass media. More often than not, mass media images are more persuasive than direct experience. Even if they have never been there before, many people already have ideas about cities like Miami drawn from the news, from television shows, or from the movies. *Cities, Cultures, Conversations* provides an opportuni-

ty to evaluate critically such images of urban life. *Cities, Cultures, Conversations* also asks you to consider what makes the urban landscape such an important site for communicating our fears and hopes for our world. Critically discussing experiences and perceptions of the meaning of urban life, you will learn reading, thinking, and writing strategies and skills that will be useful in your other courses and in your life as a citizen.

The chapters in this book bring together readings on specific features of urban life: the idea of cities, communities and neighborhoods; crime; urban art; style; suburban sprawl; and politics. The readings have been chosen for what they say and for how they say it. Questions, discussions, and writing prompts in each part direct you to think critically about the topics and to produce various kinds of writing that respond to and build on both your own experiences and the articles you have read.

Cities, Cultures, Conversations includes several features intended to facilitate your ability to bring your knowledge and experience to the task of improving your writing. These features are as follows:

1. To get you started, Part 1 takes you step-by-step through several essays, examining the writing and reading processes, and allowing you to begin to think about cities and urban life through freewriting exercises. As you work your way through this first part, keep in mind that what you already know about cities and that how you already talk about urban life are important. Use what you know and how you talk to take part in the conversation that asks, "Why cities?"
2. Beginning with Part 2, the readings are divided into separate thematic parts.
3. Each part begins with two or more quotes and a brief introduction that explains the issues addressed by the essays in the particular part.
4. Beginning with Part 2, the introductory essay is followed by some prereading exercises. These exercises are intended to get you to reflect on what you already know about the topic so that you can read the essays in each part with your own thoughts in mind.
5. Each essay is preceded by a short introduction that lets you know something about the author and invites you to think about the topic.
6. Every essay is followed by questions for discussion that ask you to reflect on what was said in the essay, to consider the effectiveness of the writing, and to relate the essay to your own experience. In discussions and in your writing, you are encouraged to draw on what you already know, to use your knowledge and experience to make sense of what an author writes, and even to disagree with an author.
7. In Parts 2 through 7, there are several more discussion questions at the end of each part that ask you to relate the essays to one another. These questions also ask you to think more generally about the topic itself and to make some judgments of your own.
8. The longer writing assignments at the end of each part often ask you to go out into your community and talk to people there or to gather information. Just as

we encourage you to bring prior knowledge of and experience with cities to the classroom, we encourage you, through these assignments, to bring what you have learned in the classroom to the people around you and to the places where you live.

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Contents

Preface ix

PART 1	Reading, Writing, and Talking about Cities	1
Introduction	3	
Cities	3	
Cultures	5	
Conversations	10	
Thinking, Reading, and Writing More Critically about Cities	13	
Getting Started: Think about What You Already Know	14	
Reading Critically	15	
A Nice Place to Visit, but ... JUDITH A. MARTIN	16	
Annotating	18	
A Nice Place to Visit, but ... (Annotated) JUDITH A. MARTIN	19	
Summarizing	22	
Answering the Discussion Questions	23	
Using Your Own Experiences for the Writing Prompts	24	
Continuing the Conversation	25	
Disneyfication of the Metropolis: Popular Resistance in Seattle STACY WARREN	26	
Representing Urban Decline: Postwar Cities as Narrative Objects ROBERT A. BEAUREGARD	35	
Reexamining Your Experiences and Your Environment	42	
Niki's Window: Detroit and the Humiliation of History JERRY HERRON	45	
Making New Sense of the Conversation	53	
Part 1 Discussion Questions	54	
Part 1 Writing Assignments	54	

PART 2 Neighborhoods and a Sense of Community 55

Introduction 58

Prereading Assignments 60

Houselessness and Homelessness JIM BURKLO 61

Homeplace: A Site of Resistance bell hooks 68

The Rough Adventure of the Street... JEROME CHARYN 77

Our Fortified Ghettos CAMILE JOSÉ VERGARA 82

A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood MARY KAY BLAKELY 89

Is Yellow Black or White? GARY OKIHIRO 101

Silent Dancing JUDITH ORTIZ COFER 107

I Just Wanna Be Average MIKE ROSE 116

Part 2 Discussion Questions 123

Part 2 Writing Assignments 124

PART 3 Crime in Our Cities 125

Introduction 127

Prereading Assignments 129

Guns Aren't the Only Issue DARYL F. GATES 130

Live from Death Row MUMIA ABU-JAMAL 134

One Violent Crime BRUCE SHAPIRO 143

War in the Streets MIKE DAVIS with SUE RUDDICK 150

True Crime CHERYL RUSSELL 159

Saving Youth from Violence: Charting New Paths to Safety
FRED M. HECHINGER 168

Turning Youth Gangs Around LUIS J. RODRIGUEZ 176

Part 3 Discussion Questions 182

Part 3 Writing Assignments 183

PART 4 Expressions of City Life in Urban Art 184

Introduction 186

Prereading Assignments 188

Art and Context: A Personal View DARIA DOROSH 189

Graffiti: Tunnel Notes of a New Yorker	LEONARD KRIEGEL	200
As the Sun Sets We Rise: The Life and Times of a Graffiti Artist	CHAKA JENKINS	207
(Inter)Cultural (Inter)Connections	JUDITH M. McWILLIE	214
The Rap on Rap: The Black Music That Isn't Either	DAVID SAMUELS	220
When Black Feminism Faces the Music, and the Music Is Rap	MICHELLE WALLACE	231
The Iconography of Chicano Self-Determination: Race, Ethnicity, and Class	SHIFRA M. GOLDMAN	236

Part 4 Discussion Questions	246
-----------------------------	-----

Part 4 Writing Assignments	247
----------------------------	-----

PART 5 Cities and Suburbs 248

Introduction	250
--------------	-----

Prereading Assignments	252
------------------------	-----

The Buy of the Century	ALEXANDER O. BOULTON	253
Stressed Out in Suburbia	NICHOLAS LEMANN	259
The New Black Suburbs	DAVID J. DENT	266
Secession of the Successful	ROBERT B. REICH	278
Separate and Unequal	DAVID MOBERG	288
America's New City: Megalopolis Unbound	ROBERT FISHMAN	295
Edge City	JOEL GARREAU	301
Park Slope: Notes on a Middle-Class "Utopia"	JAN ROSENBERG	308
Let a Hundred Cities Bloom	PETER SHAW	314

Part 5 Discussion Questions	319
-----------------------------	-----

Part 5 Writing Assignments	320
----------------------------	-----

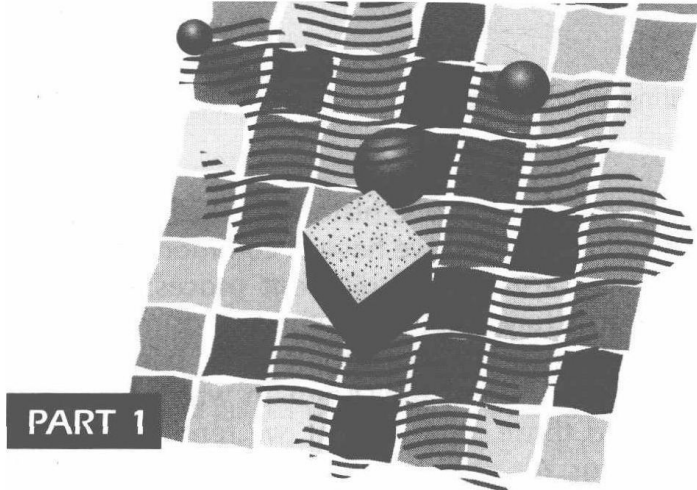
PART 6 What Happened in L.A.? 321

Introduction	323
--------------	-----

Prereading Assignments	325
------------------------	-----

Letter from L.A.	WILLIAM BROYLES JR.	326
------------------	---------------------	-----

City Lights	LEWIS H. LAPHAM	332
Civil Disorder in Los Angeles: Justice Will Be Served	GEORGE BUSH	339
Bloods/Crips Proposal for LA's Face-Lift	BLOODS and CRIPS	344
The Real Lesson of L.A.	BILL BRADLEY	351
Learning to Talk of Race	CORNEL WEST	358
Heat Wave	JOYCE ANN JOYCE	365
Home Is Where the <i>Han</i> Is: A Korean American Perspective on the Los Angeles Upheavals	ELAINE H. KIM	371
Pathfinders	PETER MEDOFF and HOLLY SKLAR	389
Part 6 Discussion Questions		400
Part 6 Writing Assignments		401
PART 7	Urban Styles	402
Introduction		404
Prereading Assignments		407
First Impressions	STUART EWEN	408
The Return of the White Negro	E. JEAN CARROLL	416
Punks in LA: It's Kiss or Kill	JON LEWIS	426
Off the Street ... and Into the Future	CHARLES GANDEE	438
Body Language	KATHERINE BETTS	445
Deep Clean	EDWARD ZUCKERMAN	452
Low Riders, High Stylers	SCOTT MARTIN	458
Jiving with Java	MICHEL MARRIOTT	463
Part 7 Discussion Questions		467
Part 7 Writing Assignments		467



PART 1

Reading, Writing, and Talking about Cities

THE ABILITY TO READ, write, and speak in accordance with the code sanctioned by a culture's ruling class is the main work of education, and this is true whether we are discussing ancient Athens or modern Detroit. These rules are of course inscribed in a rhetoric, a systematic designation of who can speak, when and where they can speak, and how they can and must speak. Educational institutions inculcate these rules, determining who is fit to learn them and who has finally done so—in other words, who is authorized to be heard. A rhetoric codifies these rules for the members of a society. It is therefore never simply a set of disembodied principles that discuss the way language is used for purposes of persuasion or communication. It is a set of strictures regarding the way language is used in the service of power. It designates who may have access to power and who may not, doing so in a way even more effective than legal sanctions with all of their punitive devices. To use Althusser's term a rhetoric serves as an important ideological state apparatus. It affirms economic, social, political, and cultural arrangements, doing so in the name of passing on to the young the "natural" rules that govern discursive and, more important, non-discursive practices. A society rarely, if ever, of course sees its rules regarding discourse as a social construction designed to serve a particular set of power arrangements, offering these rules instead as normal, "in the nature of things."

—James Berlin

IN LOOKING AT HISTORY with a subtle historical sense, I also have in mind the fundamental question: What do we have in common? By history, I mean the human responses to a variety of different processes over time and space—various social structures that all human beings must respond to. In responding to these circumstances, the problem has been that most of us function by a kind of self-referential altruism, in which we're altruistic to those nearest to us, and those more distant, we tend to view as pictures rather than human beings. Yet, as historical beings, as fallen and fallible historical beings, we do have a common humanity. We must not forget our long historical backdrop. The present is history—that continues to inform and shape and mold our perceptions and orientations.

The political challenge is to articulate universality in a way that is not a mere smokescreen for someone else's particularity. We must preserve the possibility of universal connection. That's the fundamental challenge. Let's dig deep enough within our heritage to make that connection to others.

We're not naive; we know that argument and critical exchange are not the major means by which social change takes place in the world. But we recognize it has to have a role, has to have a function. Therefore, we will trash older notions of objectivity, and not act as if one group or community or one nation has a god's-eye view of the world. Instead we will utilize forms of intersubjectivity that facilitate critical exchange even as we recognize that none of us are free of presuppositions and prejudgments. We will put our arguments on the table and allow them to be.

—Cornel West

THE CITY HAS ALWAYS BEEN man's single most impressive and visible achievement. It is a human artifact which has become an object in the world of nature. Cities are a plural phenomenon: There are many of them, but though each has its individual history, they all seem to exemplify similar patterns. The most basic of these is the interpenetration of past and present. On the one hand there is the visible city of streets and buildings, frozen forms of energy fixed at different times in the past and around which the busy kinetic energy of the present swirls. On the other hand there are the subconscious currents arising in the minds of the city's living inhabitants from this combination of past and present. These currents include the city's ties with the realm of the dead through its temples, cemeteries, and ceremonies as well as its old buildings, and also its functions as the seat of secular power, embodied in kings, governments, and banks.

—Burton Pike

INTRODUCTION

Cities

Why cities? When we think of cities we think of places that we can point to on a map, places like Baltimore, Kansas City, Newark, Portland, and San Antonio. But cities are more than just places we can find on maps, where a lot of people live and many things have happened. Cities are also places that have meaning, significance, and value for us because of what they represent in the wider culture. In this part we will ask you to explore the question, Why cities? by asking you to talk and think and read and write about what cities are, what we know about them, how we know about them through our culture, and how we represent them in our conversations. Doing this will introduce you to the themes of this book: cities, cultures, and conversations. Trying to answer the question, Why cities? will also lead you to appreciate how representations of urban culture are linked to issues of learning writing.

Anyone who has experience with contemporary culture through magazines, newspapers, television, radio, music, or the movies has ideas about the meaning, significance, and value of cities. As a consumer of mass media images and as a participant in contemporary culture, you not only have a lot of knowledge about cities, you also use that knowledge when you communicate with others. When you hear or read about a particular city, almost automatically you draw upon what you previously heard or read about that city to judge what you are hearing or reading now. Using the widely available cultural knowledge of cities and urban life in this way, you take part in challenging and even perpetuating the meanings, significance, and values cities and urban spaces have in contemporary American culture. To begin to demonstrate this to yourself, complete the following freewriting exercise.

1 Freewriting Exercise Take a few moments now to write down on a separate sheet of paper all the things each of the following cities evokes for you: Anchorage, Alaska; Birmingham, Alabama; Cleveland, Ohio; and Denver, Colorado.

Looking at your list, you should discover that even if you have never been to any of these cities, you have ideas and opinions about them. Compare your list to the lists of other members in your class. How do they compare? Do people who have been to, or even lived in, Anchorage, Birmingham, Cleveland, or Denver have different lists than people who have never been to any of these cities? Talk about the lists in class. How would you account for the differences? When you compare lists among people who have never been to any of these cities, how similar are they? Where might these similarities come from? What do these similarities tell you about how people form impressions of cities?

Our ability to communicate with others is often helped or hindered by the similarities and differences in our perceptions. What we think about certain cities, and even how we respond initially to people from those cities, therefore

greatly influences our abilities to communicate by providing us opportunities to identify shared assumptions, meanings, points of view, and values. The ways in which we talk and write about cities are, therefore, also functions of the way we have learned to perceive those places and the people who live there. Whatever individual perceptions we have, we generate these perceptions through our responses to others. Because we create our individual perceptions out of widely available information, we can say that the assumptions, meanings, points of view, and values we collectively create and negotiate through our talk about cities come to us from a variety of widely available sources.

Consider the example of Philadelphia. Philadelphia is commonly referred to as the “city of brotherly love.” In addition, most people who do not live in Philadelphia, or who have never been there, think of it as the location of the *Rocky* movies or as the home of the Liberty Bell or even as the place where racial tensions led police to firebomb the homes of African American separatists. If we only know of Philadelphia through the movies, or through history books, or through news accounts, we only have a partial picture of the city. Philadelphia is all of these things; it is a location for popular films, a historic site, and an urban landscape torn by racial tensions. But Philadelphia is also more than just the sum of these things. As a city in which we can locate our dreams of heroic struggle, as in the *Rocky* movies, or our nightmares of racial violence, as in the firebombing of the MOVE home, Philadelphia communicates our hopes, dreams, anxieties, and fears about living in the United States today.

As the example of Philadelphia suggests, even though not everyone lives in a large city, or even in a major metropolitan area, everyone has experience with representations of cities. Whether you live in a rural area, the suburbs, or a city, you have knowledge of cities and urban culture in the United States today. When you think about it, your knowledge of cities comes from a variety of sources. You may have firsthand experience with urban environments, or you may have friends or family who talk with you about their experiences. But you certainly have a sense of cities and urban life from books, magazines, movies, music, newspapers, school, and television.

Pause for a moment and consider what you know about a city such as New York. We know a lot about New York City from the television shows *NYPD Blue*, *Seinfeld*, and *David Letterman*. What do you know about New York City from newspapers and magazines such as the *New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, or the *Village Voice*? Through music we have images of New York as the “city that never sleeps.” What perceptions of New York City do you have from movies such as *Clockers* or *Taxi Driver*? And while it may seem trivial, representations of New York City are available in commercials as well, as when a character rejects a picante sauce because it is “made in New York City!”

To make explicit some of the specific sources for your images and representations of cities other than New York, complete the following freewriting exercise.

2 Freewriting Exercise Identify as many different sources as you can for representations of specific cities. Describe those representations of spe-

cific cities. So, for example, whether or not you like their music, you could describe what you know about Los Angeles from Coolio, Ice-T, or NWA. Draw from as many different kinds of media as you can, including books, magazines, school, and television, and talk with friends and relatives.

Compare your lists and descriptions with the lists and descriptions of others. Discuss among yourselves the similarities and differences of your lists. What cities and sources have you included that they have not? What cities and sources have they included that you have not? How do you account for these differences? What do the differences say about you? In what ways might these differences influence your relationships with others?

The point of identifying all that you already know about cities is not simply to demonstrate to yourself the wealth of images you have about places you may never have been before. That we can have so much information available to us about places we have never experienced suggests that those places serve as important sites for our exchange of attitudes, beliefs, and values with others. What matters most then is that you act and think and communicate in certain ways through your use of those images. Because you are surrounded by talk about cities, you are influenced to think of cities in certain ways at the same time that you are influenced to act in certain ways toward city life and to talk in certain ways about urban issues. So wherever you live, you have some sense, some idea, about what cities are like, who lives in cities, and how cities figure in the current culture. Through your use of representations of cities, you choose what you will say and do and what you won't say and do, where you will go and where you won't go, who you will talk to and who you won't talk to.

Before proceeding to the next section, discuss these points with the other members of your class. To begin the discussion, consider the following questions: What do the representations of cities so far discovered and discussed ask you to do? Do they invite you into cities? Do they scare you away? Just how do you respond to these representations? Do you seek out city life or avoid it? Why do you respond one way as opposed to another? Further consider the way representations of cities influence your talk. How do you talk about cities? Do you talk positively or negatively? In what ways does your talk about cities match talk available through the mass media? In what ways does your talk differ from talk in the mass media? How would you explain these similarities and differences? And finally, what does your talk about cities say about your attitudes, beliefs, and values?

Cultures

By using this book to read and write about cities, about our experiences of them, about our attitudes toward them, and about our ways of representing them, you are investigating the many ways in which we make sense of our world and find our place in it. You are investigating the ways we use language to orient our-

selves in the world; by reading and thinking and writing about cities you therefore have an opportunity to develop new ways of using written language to orient yourself and your actions in contemporary culture.

In the previous section, you read and wrote about the fact that, whether we realize it or not, most of us read and write and talk about cities and urban experiences every day. From newspapers and magazines to TV news, political speeches, and movies, we are all surrounded with language about what it is like to live in an urban setting. Through this language, we gain images of places many of us have never been to. The bustling business world of Wall Street, the gleaming skyscrapers of Dallas, the crime-ridden inner-city streets of Washington, D.C., the glitter of Las Vegas, the mosaic of separate ethnic areas in Los Angeles, and the aging, abandoned factories of northern industrial cities like Detroit are all images that any of us can picture. Each of these images—a fast-paced financial center, towering glass buildings, crime-ridden inner cities, and abandoned factories—represents the city as a certain kind of place. By representing specific cities as certain kinds of places, we are in a way determining our potential actions in those places. We would, for example, expect to have completely different experiences in Las Vegas and Detroit. So when we go to those places, we go expecting to do some things and not others.

3 Freewriting Exercise Take a few minutes to consider how our representations of places influence our actions in those places. Discuss the following questions with the other members of your class: Just what influence might representations of Las Vegas and Detroit have on our actions? How accurate or effective are they in telling us what these cities are like? And in telling us what these cities are like, how accurate or effective are they in telling us what contemporary American culture is like? And in telling us something meaningful about cities and contemporary culture, how forcefully do these representations influence our actions?

Like any language, the language about cities used by the media, by politicians, and by us and our friends encourages us to think about cities in certain ways—and not to think about them in other ways. This language also encourages some types of action and discourages others. For example, an advertisement for perfume may picture the city as sophisticated and cultured, whereas an advertisement for an automobile may picture the city as noisy and congested with traffic. At the same time, a political candidate's speech may depict the city as criminal and dangerous. Each of these images tries to shape our ideas about cities and influence our actions within them, encouraging us to desire a particular fragrance or a new car, or to "get tough on crime" by building more prisons and hiring more police officers. As these examples show, the ways we represent cities in pictures and in print have everything to do with how we are asked to feel about cities—whether we consider them glamorous or decayed, inviting or dangerous. They also have everything to do with what we do in response to our per-

ceptions. Images and discussions of cities are thus also about what we want to do in cities: Do we want to shop there for things like perfume? Do we see ourselves participating in urban life from within a car? Or do we want to hire more police and build more prisons in order to make cities more safe?

Shopping, driving, and even “getting tough on crime” are all features of contemporary urban culture. Culture can be defined as the vast range of activities people engage in day after day. Of course, culture is not simply the sum of everyone’s everyday activities; culture can also be defined as what we value most in our social lives. What people do with their lives on a daily basis expresses what they value most. For example, the daily activities of fighting crime and of spreading information about crime demonstrate how much of an issue people believe crime is and what they consider important to do in response to crime. Crime prevention is thus an activity that communicates shared as well as competing values and perceptions. As such an activity, crime prevention is part of our culture. By thus investigating daily activities such as crime prevention, we are investigating cultural activities. By thinking about crime prevention in terms of how people represent their activities and the value of those activities, we are investigating culture itself.

Take a few minutes now to clarify for yourself just what you think culture is by freewriting in response to the following prompt.

4 Freewriting Exercise Illustrate urban culture by describing all the day-to-day activities and practices that constitute it. Include not only descriptions of all the things people do as participants in an urban culture but also explanations of what those activities mean. Why do those activities matter? Also, what makes those activities distinctly urban?

Exchange your descriptions and explanations of urban activities with the other members of your class. There are probably some explanations that you all seem to agree on and others that you do not agree on. Talk for a few minutes about your agreements and disagreements. Use the following to get the conversation going: As a class, define urban culture. What daily activities does your definition of urban culture include? What mass media representations of cities support this definition? What representations contradict it? Now generate a list of activities that might be considered urban but are excluded by your definition of urban culture. Are these activities promoted or not in the mass media? Through the general culture? Why?

For the most part, what people believe about cities today is communicated through their culture, and by what they do in and with cities. Thus, perfume and car ads, political speeches, and urban images in rap music influence what we think about Los Angeles, Chicago, Miami, or Memphis. By reading ads and listening to speeches or songs, we are participating in contemporary culture. When we agree with, challenge, disagree with, or reflect on the representations of cities made available through ads, speeches, and songs, we are negotiating the representations of cities available through contemporary culture. In negotiating rep-