The Heidelberg Art Project as a Site of Literacy Activities and Urban Renewal Efforts: Implications for Composition Studies

Valerie Kinloch

One way to increase our participation in public discourse is to bridge the university and community through activism. Given the role rhetoricians have historically played in the politics of their communities, I believe modern rhetoric and composition scholars can be agents of social change outside the university.

—Ellen Cushman

In "The Rhetorician as an Agent of Social Change," composition scholar Ellen Cushman documents the prevailing divisions, encumbered by power dynamics and spatial privilege, between the university and the surrounding community. She argues, "One of the pressing reasons why composition scholars may not work in the community has to do with deeply rooted sociological distances.... Many universities sit in isolated relation to the community in which they're located" (8). This distance articulates a longstanding process of non-negotiation of meanings within and across spaces marked academic/communal and privileged/non-privileged. Academic spaces such as classrooms, computing laboratories, and libraries, for example, are more engendered with ideals of privilege, power, and literacy than community centers, basketball courts, and the gathering places of front yards and porches.

The non-negotiation of spatial meanings—that of the university and the surrounding community, their purposes, and functions—and the signification of particular spaces as privileged or non-privileged reiterate a narrative of separation marked by location, participation, and labels. This narrative, the existing privileged/non-privileged dichotomy, dis-
guises the fact that both realms serve the other and contribute to the other’s growth in ways marked by discursive interactions, speech acts, writing, linguistic codes and practices, rhetorical agency, and human access to material resources. In other words, this dichotomous relationship is predicated upon and motivated by how identities, politics, and practices are formed by and/or imposed on communities of people. Careful consideration is not usually directed to how “networks of reciprocity” (Cushman 7) can enhance one’s approach, entrance, and passage into multiple spaces of interaction where meaning is negotiated and multiple perspectives are shared. How, then, can an investigation of the relationship between academic spaces and community spaces create channels for people (students, teachers, community residents) to communicate differences, share multiple perspectives, and propose alternative meanings of space? What are the implications of this work on narrowing the divisions between the university and community, teaching writing, experiencing democratic forms of engagement, and confronting multiple interpretations and representational practices in the discourse of spatial literacy?

Drawing on Cushman’s argument that “one way to increase our participation in public discourse is to bridge the university and the community through activism,” I discuss how specific representational practices in one urban community can contribute to the intellectual work of universities, generally, and composition courses, particularly (7). Engagement in urban communities—much like in composition classrooms, where multiple competing and complex discourses are discussed and negotiated—requires people to talk across, by talking with, through, and alongside differences in the production of both extended meanings and written texts (Kinloch, “Poetry” 109). To talk of and participate in such encounters in terms of the dichotomous spatial relationship between the university and the community is to pay attention to the reproduction of spatial distance, the ways language is employed and texts are written (city as text, university as text), and the ways reproduction and language often politicize university spaces as literate/privileged/familiar and community spaces as illiterate/unprivileged/strange. To do this work, I investigate particular historical moments and artistic (literacy) acts in an urban community in Detroit, Michigan. I call attention to the existence of and political statements inscribed within the Heidelberg Art Project (see Figure 1), an outdoor yard-art installation on the city’s east side, to theorize on this project’s embodiment of democratic ideals (representation, freedom of expression, a rhetoric of rights, a language of prosperity).
as relevant to the location, meaning, and discussion of differences (access to resources, the multiple literacy, cultural, and social practices of people) in composition classrooms. I begin by discussing Cushman’s analysis of participatory (scholarly) activism, Holloway’s critique of the changing student demographics within academic spaces, and Reynolds’ talk of “imagined geographies.” The discussion foregrounds a critique of the language, literacy, and representational space of the Heidelberg Art Project in ways that point to the project’s implications for composition studies through talk of Democratic Engagements.

Figure 1: One of the Houses of the Heidelberg Art Project (Photo by V. Kinloch)

A Framework for this Study
The proliferation of research on the spatial metaphors of urban literacy and on the distances between universities and communities are plentiful (Cushman; Flower; McComiskey and Ryan; Reynolds). Cushman, for example, proposes that teachers and researchers of writing “walk between both worlds, the home and the community center” to participate in
the spaces often inhabited by our students and to recognize "the literate activities that already take place in the community" (21, 13). Her proposal is grounded in participatory (scholarly) activism just as much as it is grounded in a new way of perceiving community space as sites of literacy—where reading, writing, performing, and engagement flourish and where community members and participants communicate differences, create stories, and document histories of lived experiences. Furthermore, her work demonstrates how "our" participation in community spaces can reveal the multiplicity of meanings for literacy in and across marked spaces, groups of people, material conditions, and ideological engagements. At the same time, our participation can contribute to how sociological distances between the university and surrounding community are narrowed, how the lack of representation of diversity within classrooms and curricula are discussed, how the changing landscape of and demographics within classrooms and communities are addressed, and how composition scholars can continue to pedagogically and theoretically respond to such divisions and changes.

Cushman responds to such changes (representation and demographics) in the relationship of universities to communities by rejecting their spatial distances. She encourages scholars to situate composition studies within the ideals of participatory (scholarly) activism: "I hope here to suggest ways we can empower people in our communities, establish networks of reciprocity with them, and create solidarity with them" (7). To do this work, she talks of social responsibility and scholarly participation as necessary factors in approaching the work and utilizing the resources within both spaces. Her argument requires that composition scholars consider the civic value of our academic knowledge, purpose, and positions as we work with people in classrooms and in communities.

Similar to Cushman's assertion that academic identities and research agendas "shift focus" to account for the work within classrooms and communities is Karla Holloway's insistence that attention be paid to the changing demographics of communities, which, in fact, affect the demographics of classrooms. Holloway remarks, "Today, our classrooms are different. . . . Our classrooms are populated by the "them" we once studied" (611). Holloway emphasizes the need for teachers and researchers to work in the name of social justice through activism—scholarly and participatory—to critique the existing differences between and among students, and ourselves. Her argument parallels with Cushman's in that "we" should become aware of the representational spaces, realities, and literacies of our students as they enter classrooms. Holloway contends,
"We must challenge our academic communities if they do not look like the neighborhoods that house our urban universities" (616).

Cushman and Holloway's discussions of the spatial distances between and production of work (and the changing demographics) within the university and community coincides with the proliferation of spatial metaphors. Composition scholar Nedra Reynolds "examines the politics of space in composition" through an analysis of spatial metaphors, people's participation in writing spaces and in writing acts, and consequences of time-space compression (13). In "Composition's Imagined Geographies: The Politics of Space in the Frontier, City, and Cyberspace," Reynolds investigates the relationship between space—"imagined geographies"—and struggle in relation to the changing landscape of cityspace and composition classrooms during the 1970s Open Admissions Policy at City College. Open admissions opened a conversation and sparked ensuing debates on belonging in cities and in universities:

As composition workers struggled with the impact of open admissions and the demands of an expanding population, they faced working in crowded, inadequate building space populated by speakers and writers of many languages or dialects, few of them closely resembling traditional academic discourse. The feeling of "foreignness" and claustrophobia led to the construction, in discursive terms, of spaces where their struggles could be enacted. The only space big enough for such a struggle was a frontier. (21)

This movement forced community members, educators, researchers, administrators, and policy-makers to seriously consider questions of access, belonging, and rights: who belongs in universities, who has the right to approach, enter, and study in universities, and how does the relationship between universities and the surrounding communities reproduce a separation of people in spaces of interaction based on differences ("foreignness") and struggle? Reynolds' argument, "the only space big enough for such a struggle was a frontier," points to university spaces (writing classrooms, for example) as frontier, where the existence of differences, struggles, and rhetorical practices emerge, flourish, and collide in ways similar to the life and work of the city. In other words, the idea of the university (and composition) as frontier emerges when critical attention is paid to how spaces are socially produced and to how connections among access, belonging, engagement, and power are maintained.

For composition studies, the discussion of socially produced spaces and of what Reynolds calls "imagined geographies," is highly reflected
in the locations named “boundaries and contact zones,” “homeplaces,”
“domains,” “webs,” and “margins.” Such names point to the spatiality of
composition studies as described by “the city metaphor” (Reynolds 25).
According to Reynolds,

An imagined geography big enough to hold composition’s ambitions was
that of the city. Cities offer diversity of peoples and places, models of
cooperation, more sites for public gathering, and more feelings of exhila­
ration, sometimes a keen sense of “survival of the fittest.” A city metaphor
seems richer and more exciting; the bustle of a city implies that work is
getting done./Seeing composition as a city also invokes the places where
rhetoric flourishes—the agora, marketplace, theater, or coffeehouse. (25)

One way to imagine composition studies as an imagined geography (that
of the city, according to Reynolds) is by considering the value of
Cushman’s model of participatory activism. Connecting Reynolds’ ex­
amination of “imagined geographies” with Cushman’s focus on civic
participation requires an exploration of the hows and whys of spaces as
socially produced. For example, the writing classroom as frontier and
composition as city complicate the meanings and roles of space and of
what happens in these spaces: work, engagement, and literacy activities.
As these things become complicated, so does representation: whose
representation, or product, gets represented in the frontier of the writing
classroom and in the city of composition studies? Who owns the spaces
(of the classrooms, the profession, the cities)? Who participates? Whose
narratives are told and how are they positioned as texts that others are to
approach and manipulate?

For teachers and researchers of writing to adhere to Cushman’s
insistence of entering the surrounding community, to follow Reynolds’
suggestion of seeing “composition as a city,” and to acknowledge
Holloway’s argument of the changing demographics of classrooms
requires an articulation of methods for approaching and being ap­
proached by people in communities. The larger implications of approach­
ing and being approached can point to strategies for un-distancing the
separation between the work, ambitions, and values of composition
studies and the community as well as reconfiguring aspects of our
discipline from socially inhibiting to socially explorative of various lived
experiences. The analogous relationship of the work of/within the city
and the university (especially composition classrooms) further implies an
understanding that what is being done and taught in classrooms is often
a result of what is already being done in communities—conversations,
idea exchanges, the scripting of narratives, and the telling/retelling of stories. No longer can a separation exist between the literacy activities of universities and communities. No longer can scholars theorize about community space without physically approaching and entering communities, without listening to the voices and the language of the people who inhabit and travel through the space.

**Listening to the Voices, Critiquing the Language**

To establish a link between university and community work, and to understand how differences affect pedagogical practices, Cushman, Reynolds, and Holloway argue that teachers and researchers of composition studies "attend to the politics of space" as meanings are negotiated and multiple perspectives and representations are shared (Reynolds 13). They recognize the urgency of confronting space as a site of literacy where people live, grow, work, and study. Drawing on this body of research, I argue that the relationship between universities and urban communities be fostered along lines of participation and action through language. A narrative of the Heidelberg Art Project in Detroit, Michigan in terms of urban renewal, language, and literacy will lead to implications of this art project for composition studies.

**The Narrative**

In November 1991, the city government of Detroit, Michigan, under orders by a former mayor of the city, Coleman Young, ordered the demolition of four abandoned houses on the city's east side (Figure 2). These houses were ordered to be demolished not because they were abandoned; in fact, they had been lavishly decorated with bright colors, polka dots, and baby dolls collected by artist Tyree Guyton (see Figure 3). Former resident of the area and controversial artist of the project, Guyton remembers witnessing the influx of crime, prostitution, and drugs in this neighborhood during the 1970s and 1980s (a neighborhood once marked by its working-class families, homeowners, and family-owned businesses). The refurbishing of this neighborhood, particularly on Heidelberg Street, caused heated debates over meanings of urban space in Detroit. Guyton, through his outdoor yard-art installation, forced people to publicly confront painful aspects of the city's history: the cataclysmic violence of the housing and race riots of 1943 and 1967; the closing of major industries (the Hudson's Department Store, the Ford Motor Company); the resulting increase in unemployment in the city; the abandonment of city space (stores, neighborhoods, community centers);
and the expansion of suburban space (businesses, communities, schools). Guyton’s Heidelberg Art Project artistically confronts this history by igniting public debates over representational meanings of privileged/non-privileged locations as well as urban space abandonment and renewal. Heated debates over meanings of urbanity reinforce the distance in and of privilege: Former mayors Coleman Young, Dennis Archer, and their representative board members viewed the project as “just a lot of junk” that deadened the image of a city undergoing renewal (Bruch,
Kinloch, Marback 377). Here is where the dilemma of abandonment and renewal becomes so important in the discourse of spatial literacy and "imagined geographies" (Reynolds 25). The ways Guyton addresses community abandonment in Detroit—by collecting and displaying found objects in empty lots, on old houses, and on sidewalks—pose a need to reevaluate how people talk about renewal and whose representations of renewal get represented. One way to talk of renewal and representation in Detroit is by first "bringing attention to a neighborhood that the city
seemed to have forgotten” (Lyman). The forgotten and the re-membered become synonymous with the dismembering and remembering of Detroit: communities much like Heidelberg and its residents are dismembered then forgotten as narratives of location and geography; abandonment and renewal are posited by nonresidents. So, too, are communities and residents re-membered as new narratives are scripted that engage in the act of remembering—however much fantastical and/or romanticized—what and how places and people used to be and what they have become.

One can argue that Detroit’s city government engages in the dismemberment of Heidelberg’s community space by “threatening to rob Detroit of an art work that has shown us how to find magic and laughter, hope and faith in a blighted neighborhood” (Colby). On the other hand, it can be argued that the city government addresses abandonment and renewal through acts of re-membering—piecing together the parts (the physical objects, material conditions, and rhetorical dimensions of reading and writing urban space) through public narratives that glamorize the lives of urban residents and the problems of spatial abandonment. Problems include concentrated poverty, class divisions, and unemployment. Even in the face of such problems, Guyton’s Heidelberg Art Project interrogates the dismemberment of this Detroit community by extending the debate over meanings and representations of urban space: who gets the right to define his community, whose representation of his community is made public, and who gets to speak for the literacy acts and activities in his forgotten community.

The debates caused by Guyton’s project parallel debates in composition studies over who best represents literacy education. For composition scholars, one response to the Heidelberg Art Project would be that while it attempts to make use of mundane commodities (household appliances, old shoes and dresses, belts, baby dolls, car parts) to talk about the larger problems of abandonment (dismemberment, poverty, illiteracy), its vocabulary is not accessible to the residents living with abandonment. The inaccessible vocabulary reiterates a distance between the literacy acts/activities occurring in community space and the dominant narratives of privilege that attempt to dismember and re-member community space.

The inaccessible vocabulary (language used to maintain spatial distance—academic/communal spaces, privileged/non-privileged spaces—and the non-negotiation of meanings/representation) is vital to the Detroit’s city council because it maintains power dynamics. Instead of addressing how meaning and representation of space can be re-
imagined through civic participation (Heidelberg project, community involvement, and the presence of visitors who travel to the project), city officials have defined what interaction, participation, and renewal should not resemble. They should not resemble Guyton’s colorful project that is marked by polka dots (marks of life and hope), discarded car parts (signs of abandonment), and used toys (symbols of unavailable commodities). The city officials’ message privileges the politics of spatial distance and maintains political control between residents and city officials, and an urban community and a political community group. Such privilege, for rhetorician James Berlin, must be critiqued if the relationship between power (dominant narratives and cultural codes) and representation (whose narratives are narrated, written, and made public) is to be disrupted in literacy education and in “a participatory democracy” (Berlin 52). In “Revisionary History,” Berlin writes, “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” (52). Berlin raises significant concerns: how to read the signs of Heidelberg so as to avoid misinterpreting meanings of abandonment and struggle; how to read the space of Guyton’s community so as to write and speak of its existing literacy activities; and how to avoid sanctioning the community’s acts of remembering and remembrance in the dominant narratives of spatial meaning, representation, and participation. Furthermore, Berlin’s sentiments address the paradoxical relationship between the distance of spaces and the privilege of certain narratives (academic, political) over others (communal, artistic). In this way, Berlin challenges educators to rethink literacy from reinforcing social differences through privileged cultural codes to bridging the divide between dominant and subordinate narratives of literacy. And in much the same ways that Berlin calls for a re-thinking of what literacy across spaces can do, Guyton calls for a re-thinking of what renewal of an urban community can resemble.

By participating in the renewal and redefinition of his community, Guyton does what Berlin calls for: he re-imagines spatial representations of Detroit through the Heidelberg Art Project. He also confronts the failed urban renewal programs that have dismembered his community. In much the same way that Cushman makes sense of her community through participatory activism, Guyton makes sense of the conditions of his community through an artistic representation. He brings public attention to his community in ways that make “the Heidelberg Project one of the most visited sites in a city scrambling to find ways to attract people”
(Lyman). While Cushman believes composition scholars should first understand how involvement in local communities is connected to civic responsibility and literacy acts, she, too, does what Berlin suggests: makes use of a specific, accessible vocabulary that supports involvement in community activities—"empower people"; "create solidarity"; "effect social change" (Cushman 7). Much like Guyton, she realizes that any talk of community participation should include talk of how "social change can take place in daily interactions" (12). Berlin and Cushman's illustration of making unprivileged spatial narratives relevant to the work of composition studies supports Guyton's efforts of renewing unprivileged city space through use of the Heidelberg Art Project. The project is described as "one of the most life-affirming places in the entire city" in the presence of casinos, sports arenas, and a revitalized downtown district (Heidelberg).

Connecting History with Renewal
One way of understanding the premise of Guyton's project and of connecting the work of the community to the university is by acknowledging the factors (housing and job discrimination, power dynamics, the closing of industries, riots) that excluded black, immigrant, and other urban residents from the peripheral power of mainstream Detroit. This disorientation is related to Detroit's undying image along lines of representation. In Afterculture: Detroit and the Humiliation of History, cultural studies scholar Jerry Herron writes, "Detroit is the most representative city in America. Detroit used to stand for success, and now it stands for failure" (9). To occupy such a position in American history, that of being the instead of one of "the most representative" cities, lays claim to the importance of space, both occupied and unoccupied. The space of Detroit, in the aftermath of World War II, represented industrial capitalism and a thriving social order: at the corner of Brush and Piquette Streets stood the Studebaker Automotive Plant; East Grand Boulevard housed Packard Motors; in Highland Park stood the first Ford Motor Factory; and on Woodward Avenue opened the largest Hudson's Department Store.

Yet, Detroit's affluence, by the late 1950s, was vanishing: Studebaker Automotive and Packard Motors both closed by 1957; in the place of the Ford Motor Factory in Highland Park stands, however temporarily, a Farmer Jack grocery store decorated with wall plaques and signs that salute Ford. In the space of the downtown Hudson's Department Store stood piles of dirt, dump trucks, and hard hat construction workers—all
of which have been replaced by Campus Martius, the acclaimed cross-roads of downtown Detroit. In many ways, Herron is right to characterize Detroit as "the most representative city" because of the city's history with migration, immigration, industrial capitalism, plant closings and layoffs, Black Bottoms and Paradise Valley. This is a city that still feels the effects of its past as its future is being sorted out—one of casino gambling, high-rise loft living, expensive corner cafes, and overpriced and insufficient parking, all surrounded by forgotten communities and a once successful but now partially dismantled Heidelberg Art Project.

What is being overlooked in discussions of Detroit's renewal is the descriptive language used to critique the city's spatial organization. Social theorist Camilo Vergara discusses Detroit by using a descriptive language that chronicles decay and reinforces failure as the city attempts to re-member/renew itself. In his article, "Postindustrial City," Vergara observes, "The downtown contains the most awesome concentration of emerging ruins in the nation" (660-61). His talk of "emerging ruins," for example, supports his implication that the failure of Detroit has as much to do with abandonment (who can afford to leave Detroit, who cannot) as it has to do with representation. The failure to discuss abandonment and representation of Detroit and of other American cities with the people who live in the spaces indicates, for Vergara, how "fortification epitomizes the ghetto of America today, just as back alleys, crowded tenements and lack of play areas defined the slum of the late nineteenth century" ("Our" 83).

Vergara's painful analysis makes public the need to combat Detroit's urban decline: buildings are left abandoned (downtown J.L. Hudson's Department Store from 1980-1998; the Highland Park Sears Building); communities with overly protected houses, guard dogs, and barbed wire have abandoned appearances (Canfield and Chene Avenues; St. Joseph and St. Aubin Streets; Mack Avenue and Grady Street); and schools resemble tall fortresses (Columbus Middle School; Central High School; Cass Technological School). Fortification of communities is not a direct result of economic status, education, and motivation. Oftentimes, it is a result of the politicized language used by nonresidents to maintain spatial distance between communities considered privileged and nonprivileged. Detroit, then, "is the most representative city in America" because it is highly characterized by politicized language (decay, decline, fortification) that ignores the language and voices of the people who inhabit the space. This politicized language has serious consequences for Detroit's renewal.
Consequences of a Language of Decay
The politicized language used to publicize Detroit’s decay and fortification motivated people to reinvest in the city. Former Mayor Dennis Archer (1993–2001), Governor John Engler (1990–2002), City Councilman Gill Hill (1990–2002), and corporate leader Mike Ilitch proposed ideas for renewal. Corporations such as GM, Compuware, and the MGM-Grand and Motor City Casinos took an interest. However, their reinvestments have not adequately responded to dismembered areas like those on the outskirts of both Indian Village and Grosse Pointe or the communities circling Detroit’s Renaissance Center and hovering off of East Jefferson Avenue. Instead, their reinvestments contribute to spatial dismemberment in that renewal is occurring around poverty, homelessness, crime, scholastic deterioration, and language barriers. For example, multimillionaire Ilitch believes erecting a new baseball stadium that draws thousands of fans each season helps in the renewal of Detroit. This stadium, across from his well-known State Theatre, Fox Theatre, and his newly named Hockey Town Café, is expected to improve the look of the city, particularly on Woodward Avenue, the collapsed business district of Detroit prior to 1990. But what Ilitch does not realize, or does not want to admit, is that building new businesses does not solve the problems of a city like Detroit: the homelessness, poverty, unemployment, and segregation are still evident. His efforts of renewal perpetuate decline in that he does not help to alleviate the social problems in Detroit’s forgotten urban communities; instead, his new businesses bring white suburban sports fans back into a city they left behind (dismembered). This way of renewal does not privilege those communities (Cass Corridor, Highland Park, and communities surrounding the Heidelberg Art Project) that have been distanced by postindustrialization.

Ilitch’s efforts point to the possibility of continued fortification in Detroit, specifically in the urban communities that circle Woodward and Cass Corridors and range from Greenfield to Plymouth Avenues, Twelfth to Twentieth Avenues, East to West Grand Boulevard. One way to combat fortification is through a language of prosperity (hope, beauty, renewal, community involvement) that includes the voices of urban residents affected by abandonment. This language can be employed to critique, for example, Vergara’s analysis of urban America:

WHAT DOES IT MEAN to live in a windowless world lined with sharp things that protect by threatening to cut, puncture and impale? A world characterized by animals that bark and bite, crude warning signs, bars that
keep some out but may also prevent escape? A world defined by security
guards and razor-ribbon wire, by streets, hallways and nights that don’t
belong to you? People in these neighborhoods express their dislike of
fortification but accept it as inevitable. ("Our" 87)

"People" accept it as inevitable because of the ways Itlich and former city
officials rhetorically understand decline as inevitable in the renewal of
urban communities. If urban communities are to be renewed, then the
lives of the residents—their voices, struggles, and lived experiences—
should dominate such efforts. Uncovering the implications of living in "a
windowless world" in relation to renewal efforts can result in a language
of prosperity used by residents, social theorists, and academics. This
language privileges, among other things, the literacy activities within
such spaces.

The Heidelberg Art Project and a Language of Prosperity
The theorization of urban communities as "windowless," "threatening,"
and "dangerous" is supported in the language of decay used by Vergara—
"wanderers and madmen; shopping carts" ("Postindustrial" 662). In
contrast to this descriptive language stands a creative endeavor envi­sioned by one man and brought to life by the participation of many others.
This endeavor is aimed at revitalizing a poor black community on and
around Heidelberg Street, cleaning up the ugliness of abandonment left
behind from postindustrial bliss, and returning hope to the forgotten
residents who constantly fight for urban renewal. Such endeavors repre­sent educator John Dewey’s view of democracy in terms of "genuine
reality" and experiential learning. Democracy, according to Dewey, "is
the sole way of living which believes wholeheartedly in the process of
experience as end and as means; ... the task of democracy is forever that
of a freer and more humane experience in which all share and to which
all contribute ("Creative" 394). Guyton’s project embodies the ideals of
Dewey’s democratic thought along lines of representation, experience,
and participation: Guyton demands that people gather in the streets,
experience the found objects, feel the dismemberment, talk about com­munity abandonment, and propose strategies for renewal.

The importance of the Heidelberg Art Project far exceeds its use of
bright colors, polka dots, baby dolls, and other useless commodities. Its
value extends beyond Heidelberg Street, the project’s founder, and the
people living amid the project who either embrace or reject the project’s
presence in their community. Heidelberg’s significance in terms of
implications for composition studies is embedded in its purpose: to get groups of people into the community to participate in literacy activities and to replace an overly politicized language of decay with a language of hope, of prosperity.

The language of prosperity that Guyton uses to describe his outdoor yard-art project as a site of hope, possibilities, and community action is also the language he uses to talk about the place of black people, communities, and power in Detroit. This language, “demonstrative of [his] own protests against the loss of black forms of life,” values the experiences of urban residents and their dismemberment from Detroit’s renewal efforts (Kinloch, “Black” 84). Specifically, “Guyton draws from the lives of the urban poor and makes their experiences and human spirit visible to people who have come from all over the world to see his work” (Heidelberg). By privileging the lives of the residents, Guyton pays attention to the significance of community involvement (Cushman), spatial politics (Reynolds), and Democratic Engagements (Kinloch) by redefining urban communities as meaningful sites of interaction. His redefinition is based on acknowledging the lived realities of urban residents and using a language of prosperity to critique their realities.

Guyton draws attention to the actual people who live in urban communities by making their lives public. One of the houses destroyed under the Coleman Young administration in 1991, The Babydoll House, was decorated with naked, broken baby dolls as a way to publicize child abuse and struggle. When questioned on the use of controversial images, Guyton responded that his art is driven by his need to “talk about life here in the area, to talk about the craziness” (Heidelberg). He talks about the craziness such as crime, unemployment, and violence by using his decorated houses—The Babydoll House, O.J. House, Fun House, Your World, Tire House, Lost and Found House, Polka Dot Tree—to address representations of urban decay. By addressing such representations, Guyton is acknowledging the cultural codes of power and representation that affect identities, behaviors, and attitudes. Guyton’s overall point, to use the words of Berlin, is to make people “aware of the cultural codes . . . that attempt to influence who they are [and to] encourage [them] to resist and to negotiate these codes . . . in order to bring about more personally humane and socially equitable economic and political arrangements (50). To do this, Guyton presents a cultural oasis that publicizes the tokens left behind from industrial collapse, historical failure, and abandonment: baby strollers and toys, a replica of the Rosa
Parks Civil Rights bus, and a forgotten but important black consumer culture (Bruch, Kinloch, and Marback).

Basing his art project on the lives of people who live amid the decay to address the cultural codes of division, Guyton encourages them to assert a sense of power in scripting their own narratives. Unlike Itlich or the owners of the MGM-Grand or Motor City Casinos, Guyton uses urban space to empower people. He encourages them to define their own “equitable economic and political arrangements” (Berlin 50) by privileging and publicizing (voicing) their discourse. His use of urban space in this way is similar to how public policy theorist Robert Beauregard talks about urban decline. In *Voices of Decline: The Postwar Fate of US Cities*, Beauregard contends that commentators who create narratives of urban decline “stifle the indignation and outrage that is the appropriate response to the injustices and inequalities of urban America” (306). Commentators use the city as a symbol and scapegoat for the decline, segregation, and fortification brought about by a “flawed political economy” (306). Beauregard notes that this way of talking over and about city space silences the voices of those directly affected by decline. He writes, “To the extent that the discourse expresses the thoughts of those allowed to speak and be heard, and to the extent that it functions to tame rather than eliminate the causes of that which most threatens us, it serves primarily to legitimate the world as it is” (306).

To legitimate urban decline without addressing the disparities that lead to decline in the first place reiterates how a vocabulary of privilege dominates conversations about urbanity. This vocabulary, according to Beauregard, “informs the spatial decisions and moral positions of individuals, households, businesses and institutions as they reflect on the spreading implications of declining cities” (307). He continues, “By reading and listening to urban commentators, people understand why it is . . . that cities must be left in decline, the middle class must move to the suburbs, minorities are confined to inner-city neighborhoods, and funds are spent on redevelopment” (307). Beauregard knows all too well how people are influenced by political commentaries that critique city conditions through the reproduction of narratives that distance residents from material and representational privileges of authority and voice. He recognizes the two-sidedness of decline: on the one side are the people and the actual spaces left disrupted by decline, and on the other side are “the growth and prosperity created when fleeing households and reallocated capital enhance other communities” (309). So while decline is a bad thing for the people who cannot afford to escape it, decline proves to be
a good thing for the people who decide to leave the city for suburban and rural areas.

Guyton did not choose to escape the effects that urban decline imposed on the city of Detroit. Instead, he created the Heidelberg Art Project as a way to publicly respond to the decline and as a way to give value to mundane commodities. His use of car tires, shoes, belts, baby dolls, and bicycles showcase the junk that was left in Detroit when plants closed and industries left, when capital moved away from the city's downtown district to Dearborn, Plymouth, Troy, Warren, and other neighboring suburbs. He uses discarded objects to profess his own vocabulary of decline that accounts for, as Beauregard would argue, the physical representations of urban space. In particular, the wild display of mundane commodities opens up a new way of talking about Detroit by forcing the dilapidation within urban communities to become just as important as the city's new stadium, casinos, and multimillion dollar housing developments. To do this, Guyton makes the space of his community visible and valuable by offering urban residents and visitors a way to participate in re-membering and scripting their narratives of space.

The painted sidewalks and street posts, the insignia of biblical references on the sides of houses, and the monument at the street's end that stands in remembrance of murder victims obscure the structures and rhetorical practices of urban planning and of literacy. At the same time, these images speak to why composition scholars should examine how people use language and creativity to confront human conditions. Guyton uses his art project to present a cultural invention, a public display, of the elements of a labor-intensive history that communicates anger, frustration, struggle, and survival.

Guyton uses the language of urban decline and the literacy within urban space to galvanize into action both his community and the city of Detroit. This galvanization was sparked by how the visionary statement of Guyton's found objects “reversed the neglect of his neighborhood and correspondingly focused attention on the community's needs” (McWillie 14). To do this, Guyton first realizes that “by isolating decay and decline in large cities, the discourse [of privilege] additionally subverts a society-wide sharing of responsibilities for the dire conditions faced by those too poor or too powerless to flee them” (Beauregard 324). Second, Guyton pays close attention to the ways that urban communities are often fortified. Finally, in critiquing the lack of effort of city officials to clean up the decay, he makes public the ways that a privileged vocabulary just
does not work. He does these things by publicly displaying the physical representations (communities and residents) and the emotional pains (of isolation and neglect) left behind when people, businesses, and money moved out of the city.

**Language and Literacy Practices of the Heidelberg Art Project**

Guyton uses a language of prosperity to make sense of the mundane commodities, poverty, and other social culprits left in the city from postindustrialism. He publicly addresses the dilemmas of decline by using the project to reawaken the space of postindustrial collapse in his community and by demonstrating the beauty of urban space. Without isolating decline to urban Detroit, he calls people back into the space to publicly view the decay, ugliness, trash, and junk as art. By doing so, he turns decline into an amalgam of struggle and hope. The language that he uses is not only spoken, but also visible. Unlike Vergara who claims, "neighborhoods are replaced by a random assortment of isolated bunkers, structures that increasingly resemble jails or power stations," Guyton replaces decline with colors, polka dots, and the objects that people who escaped the city forgot to take with them ("Our" 83). He subverts decline away from Heidelberg Street to the civic responsibility of the people, businesses, and residents who left the city in disarray. Guyton transforms a neglected community—scarred by abandonment, suburban expansion, and unemployment—into one in which participation, interaction, and literacy activities flourish.

In doing these things, Guyton pays attention to how urban communities are fortified by confronting disintegration in Detroit. Former Mayor Young said it best in 1974 when he told the editors of *Ebony*, "In the mid-1970s, the continuing disintegration of large American cities is precipitating a national urban crisis threatening the very existence of the nation" ("Three" 35). This crisis is still lingering in Detroit. It is a crisis that urban planners and city officials promised would be removed with the elimination of slums and urban decay, an elimination that would stanch abandonment. This proved wrong, and as Beauregard asserts, "Urban decline was no longer a list of curable ills but a fundamental contradiction" (165).

The strategic failure of renewal efforts created visible boundaries between the wealthy and the poor, commerce and culture, the downtowns of large cities and their urban neighborhoods, suburban expansion and urban decay. Respecting boundaries and assuming that adding more money and living places in the city would rectify the city’s “curable ills”
(Beauregard 165) led to racial apartheid in that public areas became unaccessible to and unused by urban residents. These circumstances, and the need to "capture the complex ways power is negotiated at micro levels of interaction between people" (Cushman 23), led Guyton to create the Heidelberg Art Project. The project, respecting no limiting boundaries, physical or social, and working around urban planning theories while not being restricted by the imperative of consumption, addresses abandonment and racial apartheid. It does so in much the same ways that Cushman addresses the collaboration between the university and the community: through social change that admits to the sociological distances between and across spaces, peoples, literacies, and perspectives. When this distance is reiterated for matters of privilege, there is often a resulting failure to acknowledge the diverse perspectives, situated knowledges, language skills, and rich experiences of people—community residents, artists, students, and ourselves.

Looking Back at Detroit's History: Lessons and Implications
In making clear how and why this project is a site of literacy practices, we must return to the Detroit of the early 1900s. In 1915, the number of families owning homes (40,471) was incomparable to the number of families (100,356) living in the city (United). In 1919, the same year of the historical tragedy of America’s Red Hot Summer, a house with six rooms, no toilet and no bath on Saint Antoine Street in Detroit was home to "fifteen regular tenants and a varying number of transients" (43). In 1920, the Detroit Board of Commerce surveyed the housing conditions of working-class families in Detroit and concluded that there was a "general movement of population to the outer edges of the city" (Levine 43). In the 1930s, Detroit began to experience the rapid infusion and subsequent segregation of Southern blacks who, by 1933, were on "public assistance, a mode of life reducing them to the marginal subsistence level" (Butler 5). By 1932, the worst year of America’s Great Depression, the national toll of unemployment reached 15 million, causing the devastation and eventual "shrivelel" of the automobile industry in Detroit (Pitrone 85).

Taking into account how these selected moments have been overlooked in how people tend to remember early Detroit, as a place benefiting from the downtown location of the Hudson’s Department Store (1900s), a city profiting from industrial capitalism (1930s), and a place where civic participation was marked by extravagant holiday festivals and parades (1935–1970), brings us to the present moment of Detroit. This present moment is doing the same thing that the past moment of
Detroit did: ignoring the struggles of urban residents and their communities while resurrecting tall, gaudy buildings that serve as fortresses from urbanity. Present Detroit, much like Detroit in 1915, is ignoring the voices of the people who are actually living in the decline. These voices, heard only in the space controversially marked fortified, seek community renewal. These voices are synonymous with the words of a nameless citizen living in Detroit in 1915 who expressed his wishes for the city in the article, "A New Year's Wish for Detroit":

I wish it [Detroit] could be a place to live in; supremely that—a good place to live in. . . . I wish all plagues stopped at their sources: the plague of preventable disease; the plague of unnecessary hardness; the plague of inhuman greed that lives off others; the plague of thinking we are not one family within this great and many-chambered house we call Detroit. . . . I wish it to be a city where life holds the first place and the means of life are made secondary. (*Detroit* 4)

The wishes of this citizen are similar to the goals of Guyton's project in that both want the city to be free of indifference and inequality. Beauregard's argument that it is necessary to give meaning and voice to "the lives of the people who experienced, vicariously or otherwise, urban decline" works in this instance (5). It works because Guyton, much like the citizen in 1915, uses language to effect change in his own community: Guyton gives himself access to the effects of urban decline by insulting the failed efforts of Detroit's urban renewal programs and initiating a new way of publicly confronting city decline and fortification. The art project is his mode of representation: the brightly painted polka dots, the piles of belts and shoes, the toys, the useless household appliances and car parts, the bold statements on the sidewalk and sides of houses are forms of expressive writing that ask people to remember the past. Guyton's situated knowledge is located in larger conversations of justice, power, democracy, meaning, and responsibility in urban space. The project is engendered with rhetorical practices that point to the obvious: efforts of renewal are productive only when multiple perspectives and modes of representation are a part of the conversation.

In acknowledging past conditions of Detroit (housing discrimination, industrial capitalization/deindustrialization, racial boundaries) to reopen the space of the city, Guyton's project, in the words of Thomas Sugrue in *The Origins of The Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, also points to the history of exclusion of black people in the city:
Detroit blacks were entrapped in the city’s worst housing stock, half of it substandard, most of it overcrowded. They lived in overwhelmingly black neighborhoods, a reflection of the almost total segregation in the city’s housing market. Detroit’s black population had doubled between 1940 and 1950, but the pool of available housing had grown painfully slowly. (33)

By remembering these times and knowing that such times are just around the corner, Guyton makes available a language of prosperity in which decline becomes understood as an effect of people’s fears with the Great Migration and then their experience with suburban expansion. Decay becomes understood in terms of increased death rates of poor black people, and renewal becomes a motivating factor for civic participation. In as much as the project confronts decline, decay, and abandonment through use of forgotten commodities, it also confronts the pain of survival in urban communities through its display of monuments in memoriam to the violent deaths of black people in the city. Community activism and rhetorical acts of remembrance and participation in urban renewal efforts are at the heart of Guyton’s art project.

Additionally, as a public art installation, this project raises a number of controversial issues. It questions the common humanity of people—black people to white people to immigrants, poor people to wealthy people—in terms of race, power, and democracy: “In those neighborhoods, residents wait for the slow process of demolition to reach their streets. There is nothing that elevates their complaints beyond the ordinary, so no one leaps to their rescue” (Newman). It also addresses the erosion of black communities and the growth of distant white communities as a result of postindustrialization: “It’s a shocking commentary on life in the inner city” (Newman). This project also questions the objectification of a group of people, mainly urban blacks, for financial growth and land development: “Around the city, residents everywhere are watching their property values plummet, thanks to the abandoned, burned-out hulks [buildings] that squat on their blocks.” Overall, the art project addresses the liberal interpretation of individualism in regards to community building. The mystification of these issues perpetuates a degree of powerlessness and voicelessness of black urban residents that reinforces the language of decay commonly used to talk about America’s urban reality (Vergara).

The Heidelberg Art Project and Composition Studies
The Heidelberg Art Project holds the promise of re-imagining what
composition studies is all about by understanding space and its material representations as significant in the conception of democratized literacy. The project challenges composition scholars committed to the idea of democratic literacy to better account for the dynamics of privileged and unprivileged discourses in urban spaces. Discussion of the project and its purpose provides a critical vocabulary to debate the future direction of the profession, theoretical scholarship of literacy, and pedagogical practices for educating students by collapsing the distance between university and community.

In many ways, the project is representative of the struggle of many students to acknowledge their experiences (with race and class, linguistic diversity, reading and writing competencies, and histories) by engaging these experiences in spaces of literacy (the writing classroom, the community center, Heidelberg Street). Much like how Guyton rejects the systematic categorization and victimization of his community as dilapidated, many students refuse to be victims of a system that encourages mastery of academic skills but limits the development, through meaningful classroom engagement, of voice and multiple perspectives. As a site of urban literacy, the project represents the struggle for institutional change in the education of students in classrooms and in the lives of people in surrounding communities.

For example, Guyton’s replica of the Rosa Parks bus represents past public struggles—locally and nationally—over freedom, liberty, and fair treatment of black people. The project’s insignia of biblical scriptures and names of biblical figures such as “God” and “Noah” signify the presence of faith in the community. The memorial at the street’s end is a symbol of public remembrance of the victims of gun violence in Detroit in 1994. The broken, cracked hubcaps depict the increase in the community’s broken family units; the stuffed animals represent child’s play, or in other words, the lost childhood of youngsters forced to take on adult responsibilities (caring for the family; working to help pay bills, making sense of decay). Taken together, “the Heidelberg Project and its intended meanings are,” according to one of my former English students, a collection of images. These images are going to affect everyone in a different way. Some people are going to see junk thrown on a ratty street in the ghetto. Some people are going to see art in a place that does not enhance it—they believe it belongs in a museum. I see a group of images in the form of visual art that is enhanced by the chaotic habitat you find it in. I believe that these images are reflections of greater political, religious,
personal, and institutional statements that people need to begin addressing. ("Student")

In this reading, the project gets inscribed as a site of literacy through public struggle in much the same way that the writing classroom gets inscribed as a space where struggle is addressed, critiqued, and written about. For these reasons, a critical, theoretically informed understanding of space that addresses differences in literacy and rhetorical practices would promote location (classrooms and communities) and experience as significant in the education of students and in the making of citizens. It is Dewey who writes, "Education which does not occur through forms of life, forms that are worth living for their own sake, is always a poor substitute for the genuine reality, and tends to cramp and to deaden" (John 430). Guyton's genuine reality, marked by his dedication to renew community space, is reflective of the participatory activism advanced by Cushman, the spatial politics of geographies articulated by Reynolds, and the changing demographics of learning spaces discussed by Holloway.

In examining the Heidelberg Art Project, I argue that literacy becomes more readily available from an institutional context to a more public context. Narratives of and experiences with literacy occur everywhere, inside and outside of classrooms, in libraries, restaurants, airports, homes, recreational centers, malls, and in our conversations with people as we walk down the street. Important here is how these narratives and experiences allow us to identify with one another at the same time that we confront our differences. For composition scholar Linda Flower,

The question is, how do we talk about culturally significant issues across such differences? We stand within a history that had alternately marginalized and ignored the knowledge of the powerless and then (when we must listen) domesticated and assimilated the experience into mainstream and middle class schemas. As academics we stand in a profession more accustomed to speaking "for others" than listening to their unanticipated, resistant meanings. (39)

Both Flower and Guyton are concerned with finding ways to discuss culturally significant issues that are not relegated to marginal standards. In relation to academic knowledge and settings, emphasis on talking across difference plays itself out through the cultural, geographical, and social practices students bring into our classrooms. As students walk into
our classrooms, we should value their experiences and perspectives as we work to “uncover the complex representations of reality that they hold” (Flower 62).

In understanding the diversity of classrooms and urban communities, composition studies can continue to embrace differences as relevantly significant in our research. We should continue to investigate the literacy practices of people in such public sites as the Heidelberg Art Project in gaining a better awareness of how differences in location and literacy enhance our own professional research and affiliations. To do this is to find ways to sustain learning environments that address literacy in reading and writing levels that students bring into the classroom; to create exercises and assign readings that propagate the significance of participatory involvement in producing agents of social change; to appreciate the diverse forms of literacy in communities, homes, and classrooms so as to encourage Democratic Engagements of people along lines of inquiry; and to enter the communities surrounding our universities as we listen to the voices of residents.

Flower says it best when she writes, “But ultimately, I am convinced, talking across difference depends on an ability to listen, to question, and to stand “ready to pursue” the complexities of other people’s reading of the world” (64). Guyton’s reading of the world of urban Detroit points to a spatial politics of literacy and writing instruction: his responses to urban decay interrogate the stereotypes often used to write off the potential of such areas by making available a hybrid discourse situated in action and language. It is our job, then, to listen to his story and to question it in relation to our classroom practices.

Guyton’s project speaks to how an understanding of urban space and its literacy practices, deeply rooted in participatory involvement and action, can make public the material conditions of communities surrounding universities. The amount of attention paid to representations of urban decay such as mundane commodities, graffiti designs, uncollected trash, overpriced corner stores, broken street lights, or unpainted houses is the amount of attention needed to examine representations of urban prosperity. Such representations include expressions of artistic creativity, visible signs of cultural activities, concerned parents and neighbors, an extended family network, access to after school facilities (community centers and parks), a shared language of safety, familiarity, territorial ownership, and civic responsibility. Guyton’s Heidelberg Art Project facilitates this type of engagement at the same time that it informs how we enter and examine communities surrounding universities.
Democratic Engagement

Underlying this paper’s focus on narrowing the divisions between university and community spaces and on accounting for the literacy activities of Detroit’s Heidelberg Art Project is the idea of Democratic Engagement. Cushman’s participatory (scholarly) activism, Reynolds’ “imagined geographies,” and Holloway’s focus on changing demographics all point to a need to confront sociological distances in and across spaces marked academic/communal, privileged/non-privileged. This confrontation can lead to how people approach, critique, and document the existing realities of literacies in multiple spaces as well as create communicative channels for residents, artists, teachers, and students to exchange ideas.

The implications of this work on narrowing spatial divisions, teaching writing, experiencing democratic forms of engagement, and confronting multiple interpretations and representational practices in the discourse of spatial literacy are plentiful. Guyton’s variegated writing style (use of bright polka dots, biblical insignias on the sides of houses, painted messages that cover the street’s surface, a decorated replica of the Rosa Parks bus) demonstrates explicit connections between how stories are told and how stories get represented. Furthermore, Guyton’s economy of expression demonstrates how words and their multiple constructions/meanings create provocative texts that demand an audience, that call for participatory action, and that require a rethinking of engagement with words, language, and literacy activities in community and classroom spaces. The Heidelberg Art Project, much like composition classrooms, houses multiple discourses and encourages differences in meanings and perspectives to be discussed as texts and extended meanings are produced (Kinloch). For such reasons, I believe the project, much like the composition classroom, speaks to the ideals of Democratic Engagements in its use of a language of prosperity, its display of cultural codes, and its focus on human engagement with space, words, and ideas. The Heidelberg Art Project teaches us to stretch out words and images as we turn them inside out to discover and respond to new meanings of people in sites of learning—universities and urban communities.1

Teachers College
Columbia University
New York, New York
Notes

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Works Cited


