The poems and essays in Letters to My City combine two decades of field experience, research, personal observations, and stories told to the author, a third-generation Los Angeles native, by his grandfather and other family members, to interrogate all sides of Los Angeles, its streets, its people, its neighborhoods, as a means to examine the postmodern metropolis.

TEACHING GUIDE

Letters to My City
by Mike Sonksen
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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the role of oral history in this book? Why are individual people’s stories just as important as the official historical account?

2. What is the idea of sharing authority and why is it so critical in Letters to My City?

3. Letters to My City discusses dozens of specific neighborhoods. Why are there so many neighborhoods and specific locations within the text?

4. Letters to My City pays tribute to writers, teachers, musicians, community artists, activists and many others. Why is it important to celebrate these people?

5. Letters to My City discusses geography and local history, what are some meaningful locations to you?

Recommended Classes:
- Creative Writing
- Creative Nonfiction
- Oral History
- Los Angeles History
- Poetry
- Hybrid Writing

Keywords:
Los Angeles / City / Literary History / Spoken Word / Southern California / Activist / Altar / Art Deco / Biodiversity / Boosters / Cartography / Displacement / Elegy / Garden City / Gentrification / The Great Migration / Landscape Vernacular / Oral History / Public History / Redlining / Riparian Watershed / Sharing Authority / Social Realism / Sustainability / Wetlands / Zeitgeist

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6. Considering that the author of *Letters to My City* is also a tour guide. Why do so many of the pieces incorporate lists and pieces of information? How is the book like a city tour?

7. One of the recurring themes in the book is gentrification and redevelopment in the city. Have you seen changes in your own local landscape or built environment?

8. Intertextuality is a literary device used throughout the book, what role do the many allusions throughout the book add extra meaning or deeper layers of understanding?

9. There’s a poem about the Los Angeles River and the decline of nature across Southern California, what are some local environmental issues in your locale?

10. Throughout *Letters to My City*, there’s repetition of several key ideas, what function does repetition play in this work? How does repetition reinforce the book’s themes and the book’s spirit?

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**POSSIBLE ASSIGNMENTS:**

**Poetry Assignments:**

The following are poetry forms that are used in this book. You can find more lengthy and explicit instructions to write these specific forms online and in poetry textbooks. Next to the title of each form, is the name of an example of the form in *Letters to My City*.

- **Abecedarian:** LA A to Z is an abecedarian that uses a lot of alliteration
- **Acrostic poem:** Luis J. Rodriguez
- **Elegy:** One for Wanda
- **The Golden Shovel:** Sometimes
- **List Poem:** A Field of Great Streets
  - LA Authors,
  - Ode to Women Writers,
  - Watts to Leimert Park,
  - Land of a 1000 Dances
- **Ode Poem:** Ode to Los Angeles River, Ode to LA Women Writers, One for Wanda
- **Place poem:** The 562, The 626, Homage to Little Tokyo
- **Write a poem about your favorite writer:** One for Wanda
**Sestina:** The 626

**Villanelle & Time/Place: Chronotype:** Write a poem where the first line names a time & place.

   The Riots were the Week before My Prom

**Prose Assignments:**

Many short prose assignments are listed below and the pieces listed next to the assignments are examples.

**Book Review:** (These three listed here are all book reviews.)

   Iconic Vision
   Chester Himes essay
   Woman’s Building—Terry Wolverton

**Ethics/Manifesto Essay:** Write an essay about your belief system.

   Community Not a Commodity

**Mapping Assignment:** Chester Himes essay discusses how Himes mapped the city. Ask students to map significant sites in the city and write an essay connecting these sites and the significance in their life. They can also draw a map to accompany the short essay.

**Neighborhood Profile:** Write a history of a specific neighborhood.

   The History of South Central
   Florence Firestone
   North Long Beach
   City Terrace

**Oral History:** Write a short prose piece based on a story you either lived through or were told by someone in your family.

   Driving the 105

**Remembrance Essay:** Huell Howser, Michele Serros

**Restaurant Profile/Review:** Otomisan

**Write about your favorite street:** Garvey Avenue

**Write about a landscape or city drive:** The Cascades

**Write about your favorite teacher or someone who influenced you:** Ms. Navarrete piece

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