



## Economy and Employment

**Overview:** This activity explores the physical signs of despair across many Ohio communities that have suffered economic downturns and are no longer vibrant population centers.

**Tags:** rustbelt, economy, employment, poverty, revitalization

**Theme:** Establishing Place

**Time:** 60 minutes

**Materials:** paper, pens, participant handouts

**Participants:** 3-25

**Room Configuration:** Flexible

### Activity

**Introduction:** Initial Questions (5-10 Mins)

1. Review objectives for the session. Ask the audience if they have any initial thoughts, questions, or concerns. Use this as a time to help provide clarity for the audience in regards to the session.

**Engagement:** Read Aloud Procedure (15-20 Minutes)

1. On a piece of paper, ask the participants to describe the community in which they live in 1-2 sentences.
2. Introduce the participants to the text (*Walking Past Abandoned Houses, I Think of Eric*, by Barbara Costas-Biggs). Read the full passage to the audience. Then read back through, pausing at the different sections of the text, and asking the discussion questions indicated below. Allow brief discussions if participants show interest in a certain section of the reading or discussion question.

**Conclusion:** Wrap-Up and Next Steps (15 Minutes)

1. Announce that 15-minutes remain for the session.
2. Summarize the main points of the discussion.
3. Wrap-Up questions below to help recap the session. Finish by speaking about the manuscript, additional resources, etc. Exchange contact information and continue further conversations if needed.

## Reading:

### *Part 1*

This poem wanted to start in a condemned house, so I took a walk to show the poem this town and asked: which one?

The poem shrugged. Shattered windows rendered black, no flicker of blue aquarium television light. Fast food wrappers

an altar, piled on the porch. A small pink running shoe hole worn in the sole stuck in a chain link fence.

**Discussion Question 1:** What does this description of place remind you of? How does it compare to the place you thought of when we asked you to describe your community? If you had to guess where the setting of this poem took place, what would you say? What types of factors influenced your answer? Why did the poem “shrug”?

### *Part 2*

Fifteen years ago, while I was drinking flat beer in a dive bar, my friend Eric died after getting high from a transdermal

oxycodone patch. He wrote poems I will never forget: he found his mother dead, her fingers

gnawed to bone by rats. His glasses always broken, crooked, taped, his cheeks and arms scabbed.

This poem can't imagine. It wasn't this house but probably one like it, peeling clapboard,

busted plumbing. This town smells burned out and the burning no longer comes from the foundry

or the coke plant or steel mill. We are falling in on ourselves, shooting heroin into our veins.

**Discussion Question 2:** What sticks out about place in this section? What connections do you see to your own community?

### *Part 3*

These houses—empty of furniture, food, clean clothes  
laughter, shampoo—are helpless, their dirty glass eyes

begging to see something other than broken smokestacks,  
shoes strung on powerlines.

The ears that heard hooves on the brick that sleeps  
under pavement are long gone.

There was no Narcan for Eric, and no Narcan  
for wrecked Greek Revivals

*(from Walking Past Abandoned Houses, I Think of Eric. Barbara Biggs)*

**Discussion Question 3:** The author suggests that this place is unlikely to be revived. Do you agree about the places you inhabit? Have they changed? If so, why? What would it take to bring them back?

*These Community Conversations are funded by the Ohio Humanities Council. For further information, as well as information on rules for use, please see [OpioidsOhio.org](http://OpioidsOhio.org).*