

**Urban Space and Late Twentieth-Century New York Literature**, Catalina Neculai, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 256 pages, £53.50 (Hardcover), ISBN: 1137340193,

At the 2013 Association of American Geographer's (AAG) conference in Los Angeles, Bob Catterall, the editor of the journal *City*, challenged a panel of prominent urban thinkers to read more broadly when thinking about cities. His actual words escape me, but the constructively critical tone in which he said has stuck: he seemed to be addressing a perceived lack of confidence, creativity, and adventurousness. As if responding directly to this challenge, Catalina Neculai opens her book with a clear statement regarding what it is about: "a change of critical paradigm, a mode of making different, more complex sense of the New York literary and nonliterary 'quotations' combined" (p. 1).

On the one hand, as urban scholars, we are mostly familiar with a common body of nonliterary work dealing with New York – by Jane Jacobs, Neil Smith, and Sharon Zukin, to name a few – and work that addresses it even as the analysis branches out in terms of disciplinary focus, space, and time, as does the dearly missed Marshall Berman's book on modernity. On the other hand, some of us turn to poetry and novels to help illustrate experiences of urbanity, either for ourselves or in the classroom: for example, Baudelaire's *Paris Spleen* or Teju Cole's *Open City* are two of my favorites for teaching. Neculai, however, is not satisfied with keeping these two types of discourses apart, and instead strives to "produce a critical space that relates meaningfully to multiple spaces of knowledge and representation: urban geography, sociology, history, politics, and not least, the structures of urban experience conserved in archives, in literary or cultural representations" (p. 1-2).

To undertake this project, Neculai grounds herself in two research strategies. First, she aims to capture the historical arc of the emergence of the finance, insurance, and real estate (FIRE) industry and its critical representation across a selection of three novels: Don DeLillo's *Great Jones Street* (1973), Joel Rose's *Kill the Poor* (1988), and Jay McInerney's *Brightness Falls* (1992). Second, and drawing on David Harvey's (1985:251) assertion that analyses of urban life must "penetrate and demystify" potentially fetishistic readings, Neculai's project "unravels a

multilayered mystification of the city: [two of which are] the urban political and social myths that penetrate its governing (de)regulatory mechanisms and its historical descriptions, [and] the cultural and literary understandings of New York” (p. 3). By combining a close reading of the three novels as “literary ethnographies of urban space and community places in the manner of anthropological ‘thick description’” (p. 15) with other writings from newspapers and socially inflected literary magazines, she constructs a formidable archive to examine with and against some of critical urban geography’s primary tools.

The primary theoretical contribution of Neculai’s book, and the reason why I firmly believe that all urban scholars would stand to gain from reading it, is her challenge to Henri Lefebvre’s (1991:14-15) indictment of literature as not being “special enough to provide the basis for a ‘textual analysis’” of space. For Lefebvre, the fact that literature is always already beholden to space as setting and not the product of social relationships precludes it from serving as a critical analytical lens. Neculai, however, maintains that by shifting the Lefebvrian focus to the nature of the represented space of literature – how and why it has been politically, economically, and historically produced in a particular way – recuperates literature as a potential source of insight into the production of social space. Or, in Neculai’s words, we can come to see urban narratives as “aesthetic conjunction[s] between socio-spatial, economic, political and cultural practices and the formation of a peculiar and singular urban consciousness” (p. 48).

Undoubtedly the prevalence of New York literature makes this approach less than readily transferrable to most urban locales, but Neculai’s excellent, if sometimes sprawling, argument built on novels that “document and critique the city’s productive processes and hierarchical networks of urban agents” (p. 79) could inspire other researchers interested in New York, as well as other cities. Although there is insufficient space to recapitulate the details of Neculai’s analyses here, it is worth mentioning some of her broader arguments to give a sense of the depth to which Neculai develops her analytic.

First, DeLillo’s novel is organized around three scenarios involving, first, an erstwhile famous musician residing on Great Jones Street whose manager moonlights as real estate investor; second, an international drug trafficking operation/commune, which not only occupies the top

floor of a tenement but also violently expands in the neighborhood; third, a cast of peripheral, largely downtrodden characters from the neighborhood who relate to the neighborhood in terms of utility rather than profit. Neculai argues that this conjunction of these three narratives exposes how the FIRE industry came to reorganize spatial scales from the body up to global capital, dominate the production of urban space, rework relationships between private and public space, and entrench social relations based on capitalist exchange. Temporally, this novel anticipates her other two selections, because it exposes “the uneven spatialized socioeconomic and cultural practices of its time whilst engaging with alternative modes of urban representation...” (p. 111).

Joel Rose’s *Kill the Poor* is much more spatially constrained in that it directly addresses housing and gentrification on the Lower East Side. Neculai’s grounding of its narrative in relation to Jacob Riis’s documentation of the squalid living conditions in late 19<sup>th</sup>-century New York, as well as the 1980s magazine *City Limits*, which focused on housing issues and “constitute[s] an unprecedented platform of socio-spatial activism” (p. 115), gives the reader a temporal and critical orientation. Although a story of a “pioneer” returning to save a portion of his family’s historic neighborhood, Neculai affirms that “Rose’s tale is fraught with macrostructural housing issues such as severe cuts in federal spending on public housing, the pitfalls of homesteading as the DIY solution to the housing crisis, or the perils of the ‘trickle down’ ideology of luxury housing development” (p. 117).

Finally, Neculai turns to Jay McInerney’s *Brightness Falls*, a novel which “brings together the workings of the financial market, the publishing industry, and authorial production in a multilayered narrative...” (p. 151) to create a striking representation of the social dynamics preceding the 1987 stock market crash. In direct confrontation with Lefebvre’s shunting aside of literature as a productive element in socio-spatial analysis, Neculai claims that both its explication of how finance is reshaping publishing industry and the uneven topology of the city as setting, makes the novel a powerful analytical tool for understanding “the way in which finance capital ultimately came to condition the functioning of the city” (p. 171).

In closing, Neculai’s approach opens new analytical territory for urban scholars striving to work between disciplines. In a world of even more seamless capital mobility and social

interconnectivity than the era which Neculai addresses, it seems even more important to turn to the rich archives being constructed around the globe. Neculai's book has given me a new lens to use while reflecting on my recent literary adventures to a neoliberalizing Bolivia, courtesy of Peter Mountford's *A Young Man's Guide to Late Capitalism*, and the social upheavals following urban terrorism in Madrid via Ben Lerner's *Leaving the Atocha Station*, while awaiting the publication of Teju Cole's nonfictional work, *Radio Lagos*. Make this discipline bend.

### Keith Harris

University of Washington

### References

- Baudelaire, Charles 1947, *Paris Spleen*, New Directions Press, New York.
- Berman, Marshall 1982, *All that is Solid Melts into Air*, Simon and Schuster, New York.
- Cole, Teju 2012, *Open City*, Random House, New York.
- Cole, Teju (forthcoming), *Radio Lagos*, Random House, New York.
- DeLillo, Don 1973, *Great Jones Street*, Vintange, New York.
- Harvey, David 1985, *Consciousness and the Urban Experience*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford.
- Jacobs, Jane 1961, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Random House, New York.
- Lefebvre, Henri 1991, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, Wiley-Blackwell, New York and London.
- Lerner, Ben 2012, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, Coffee House Press, Minneapolis.
- McInerney, Jay 1992, *Brightness Falls*, Bloomsbury, London.
- Mountford, Peter 2011, *A Young Man's Guide to Late Capitalism*, Mariner Books, New York.
- Riis, Jacob 1957, *How the Other Half Lives*, Hill and Wang, New York.
- Rose, Joel 1988, *Kill the Poor*, Paladin Grafton Books, London.

Smith, Neil 1996, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City*, Routledge, New York and London.

Zukin, Sharon 1989, *Loft Living*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick.