

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Catalina Neculai (2014) *Urban Space and Late Twentieth-Century New York Literature: Reformed Geographies*. New York: Palgrave, 240 pp., ISBN: 978-1-137-34019-1.

Publications in interdisciplinary studies analyzing New York City literature have become increasingly compartmentalized into specific time periods in the effort to better understand the integral literary movements of the city's history. These developments allow for a compressed examination of the overlapping spaces specifically at play in the gentrification and capital components that have helped to shape modern day New York City. Catalina Neculai's recent effort utilizes literary case studies to examine critically both space and place, ranging from the mid 1970s to the 1987 stock market crash. Through the course of five chapters, Neculai utilizes the backdrop of the finance, insurance, and real estate (FIRE) industry to map the literary output set during this period within Manhattan, demonstrating how literature serves as a measurement for the impact of political, socio-spacial and community transformations leading up to Black Monday. Divided into two core sections, the work establishes within "Mappings" the groundwork for the "theoretical, historical, cultural, literary and methodological endorsements" (Neculai, 2014, p. 13) unveiled in the case studies. These studies compose the second part, "A New York Trilogy Inc.," in which Neculai unpacks the implications surrounding the production of urban space as increasingly influenced by the FIRE industry. Specifically, Don DeLillo's *Great Jones Street* (1973), Joel Rose's *Kill the Poor* (1988), and Jay McInerney's *Brightness Falls* (1992), chart this particular section of history, exposing the implications of the three elements of the FIRE industry.

The two chapters of "Mappings" are arguably the strongest section of Neculai's work, since they explore the problems advanced through the shift from the urban to the suburban and the economic challenges left in its wake. Tracing the urban degeneration and regeneration of the period, the concept of the "urban frontier" rises to the forefront of Neculai's argument, as the politics of capital is entwined amidst the tropes of urban spacial discourse, ranging from the construction of infrastructure to the multiracial communities inhabiting New York City. Neculai is careful not to assume one single theory on the representation of space in literature; therefore, what becomes apparent is the complexity surrounding the inner- and outer-workings encapsulated within the settings of the novels analyzed. The study of space requires an awareness of the political environment, be it the Reaganomics of the era or the re-zoning of urban areas. Problematic terminologies of urban space arise, however, when attempting to delineate boundaries within a community: "A geographical project of spatial defrosting ought to explore the conceptual correlations between the materiality of space and its metaphoricity in order to give the due cultural dimension to urbanized or spatialized politics" (Neculai, 2014, p. 36). The metaphorical, symbolic and figurative implications contained in literary texts should not be discarded, but rather, they

should be investigated for the ostensible discursive channels into the physical geography in which they are set.

The art culture has long been considered vital to the urban culture of New York; during the 1960s and 70s, the redevelopment of the city progressed with these cultural assets in mind. Economic and cultural worlds were deemed integral, as culture often became “a bargaining tool used to mediate between the implementation of grandiose infrastructural projects...and the conservation of an authentic street and community life” (Neculai, 2014, p. 52). This mating brought the cultural scene into a more central spotlight, with such high profile artists as Andy Warhol touting art and business as apt bedfellows. A substantial argument can be made for engaging authors in the process of urban documentation—including Jacob Riis, Henry Roth, John Dos Passos—as fiction depicts the realism of the urban condition. There are two types of urbanism, Neculai posits: a consuming urbanism and an engaging urbanism. The two are disparate in literature through the authorial depiction of characters either observing the externality of events and critiquing them, or having an “awareness of urban material relations, processes, and practices in which the self takes part” (p. 56). The urban author must make a choice between representing a surreal image of the city or engaging with the reality of the special setting of the novel. Interestingly, Neculai observes that the finance industry and its link with urban development is less often the subject of literary texts (which is partly why Neculai places such emphasis on the literary merit of *Darkness Falls*). The uptown and downtown dimensions of housing issues emphasize the urban experience, and writers, if they approach the finance industry, often do so with a focus on “resistance and opposition” (p. 74) and the perceived ineffectiveness of tackling the giant powers. Establishing this foundation, Neculai moves forward to the next section in order to elucidate the presence of the FIRE industry in the literature.

In the second part, Neculai establishes the connections between the FIRE industry and the adoption of literature as a platform for reaction to the industry’s machinations. “A New York Trilogy Inc.” follows a systematic method of analysis, as each of the three chapters begins with an introduction to the novel, moves into a more narrowed historicization of the period and concludes with a close reading of the text. For *Great Jones Street*, the underground counterculture movement and the production of the music industry are seen as analogous with the “circulation of capital and the transacting of financial instruments” (Neculai, 2014, p. 86). DeLillo’s novel, Neculai suggests, emphasizes the decadence of the “Me Decade” and depicts the social shifts occurring in the country, poignantly surrounding an anti-establishmentarian stance—a growing movement of distrust for the social structures around us. The underground culture and the street, with its own form of community, propels the search for the self, as the protagonist, Bucky Wunderlick, remains intentionally isolated from his musical fan base, being more content in his room or wandering through the streets. We can also find further correlations existent between the secretive nature of investment and capital transactions within the FIRE industry, as they are akin to the underground world of drugs and rock ‘n’ roll. Community has often been used by corporate influence in order to encourage the gentrification of a neighborhood geographically connected in space and scale; yet, as Neculai demonstrates, DeLillo places strong emphasis on privacy, in discernable contrast to the marketplace and the financially motivated manipulations of public urban space.

Moving from the spatial and the self, the study of *Kill the Poor* shifts focus to the low-rent aesthetics of the macrostructural housing concerns. Beginning with reference to Jacob Riis, Neculai argues that the Joel Rose's novel is "about the frontier of homesteading and gentrification," encouraging an "awareness of housing matters, especially regarding the laws, state, practice, and overall public and private structuring of the material and social architecture of housing on the Lower East Side" (p. 118). A principle driving point, housing reform is often initiated by desire for change from within the residential community. In order to establish this argument, Neculai devotes significant space to an overarching review of the history of housing projects in New York. In *Kill the Poor*, the quintessential conflicts between tenant and landlord become representative of the macrosocial issues within low-rent housing across the city. Ethnicity is intricately connected to housing among the poor—specifically with the difficulties in securing and maintaining residency—as the exclusion of certain members of the community leads to a dominant control of the real estate (part of the FIRE industry) by more wealthy members. The commodification of housing in *Kill the Poor*, delineated through Neculai's reading of the text, illustrates many of the complexities within the low-rent aesthetics of New York.

In the final case study, Neculai's examination of *Brightness Falls* rounds out the analysis of the FIRE industry in New York literature by exposing the intricate nature of speculative finance. Neculai begins by defending McInerney's novel as an exemplar of "ethnographic research" (p. 151), thereby moving it beyond the limitations of the blank fiction classification (a genre typically perceived as focusing on the superficial and pop culture) that it has typically received. Urban space is represented in the form of lived and perceived space, as the novel "delineates those practices that produce urban space and regulate urban social reproduction taken *from within* the field of literary production, represented by New York's publishing establishment, *into* literary production per se, through the novel itself" (Neculai, 2014, p. 170). *Brightness Falls*, along with the novels in the two previous chapters, exhibits an acute awareness of hierarchies; in this work, the financial networks represent the interests of the stockholders while the city is partitioned spatially into occupational districts. Set during the Black Monday stock market crash of 1987, the novel revolves around economic agendas of the finance and publication industries and incorporates the language of the finance industry; in this context, Neculai convincingly locates the nexus of the novel in the special interconnections between the individual and the corporate industry.

As a thorough period analysis of select literature depicting Manhattan, Neculai's work is an admirable addition to the growing body of work honing in on specific urban spaces. While at times a tedious read due to its dense prose, each of the chapters may be read individually, but the work certainly proves more rewarding and connective within the larger scope of the project. The reach of the FIRE industry is soundly exposed throughout the case studies, and it becomes clear that the texts under analysis are materially more rich with urban space representation than previously thought. Grounded in archive and detailed research, scholars of urban space will find Neculai's publication both rewarding and exemplary for future research.

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