



**Cătălina Neculai**, *URBAN SPACE AND LATE TWENTIETH-CENTURY NEW YORK LITERATURE. REFORMED GEOGRAPHIES*, New York: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2014, 256 pp., ISBN 9781137340191, £53.50 (hardcover)

### **When off-springs speak they speak Big (Apple)**

*Urban Space and Late Twentieth Century New York Literature. Reformed geographies* is an extremely well-framed intervention into a series of debates that occupy the space of New York Studies in the

21<sup>st</sup> century, namely the field of contemporary intersections of New York fiction and non-fiction, archival material, urban, human and cultural geography, urban politics and history. Catalina Neculai thus builds a solid interdisciplinary argumentation meant to reshape the cultural-materialist history of New York between the fiscal crisis years of the mid-1970s through to the Market Crash of October 1987. The author argues convincingly that representation—the literary, the documented, and the archival—encodes and negotiates the changes in the production of urban space in New York City during the consolidation of the Finance, Insurance and Real Estate (FIRE) industry in the 1970s and 1980s. In the first two chapters of Part One, “Mappings,” the author astutely offsets the potential reductionism of postmodernist fetishist and aestheticist constructions of the city by mobilizing theoretical work on geographical literary studies, geographical theories—with priority, the cultural/Marxist/radical ones—, instruments, and methodologies, with a view to “giving literature the spatial autonomy (as fieldwork) it needs in order to assert its value for geographical analysis, for spatial and urban knowledge making” (p. 45). According to Catalina Neculai, the “urbanization of literary consciousness,” as developed by a number of American writers (e.g. Don DeLillo, Joel Rose, Jay McInerney), calls for an “urban documentarian approach,” best suited to express the writers’ “overt literary engagement with processes of urbanization underlying the (re)production of urban socio-spatial practices” (p. 55). The “documentarian approach” in the manner of anthropological “thick description,” as *modus operandi* in the book, is set in the Prologue, by

the author's close reading of Paul Auster's *City of Glass*, with a view to offering an ethnographic rendering of the material realities of the fictional works under scrutiny meant to raise important claims for geographical knowledge as well. Equally instrumental are the literary writings sampled from downtown magazines and analysed in Chapter 2, as they are literary evidence of activist engagement with urban space, in the way they "voice the concern with housing as a space of representation, [...] as a site of conflict, and not least as systemic policies" (p. 67). The outcome of the author's enterprise being a "rethinking of the uptown-downtown duality and its implications for a literary hermeneutic, based upon a reading for socio-spatial unevenness in place of duality" (p. 15).

Part Two of the book, "A New York Trilogy Inc.," focuses on a three-fold case study analysis—Don DeLillo's *Great Jones Street*, Joel Rose's *Kill the Poor*, and Jay McInerney's *Brightness Falls*—of counterculture and the underground economy, of homesteading and 'low rent' fiction, of the finance industry, publishing and 'financial writing' with the overt purpose of offering radical opportunities for revisiting both the space of representation and the represented space of urban decline and growth through a geocultural reading for the unevenness of urban space (pp. 15-16). The literary corpus under discussion serves well Catalina Neculai's audacious agenda, that of compiling a new (literary) urban hermeneutic.

Thus, the third chapter, "Scale, Culture, and Real Estate: The Reproduction of Lowliness in *Great Jones Street*," the first case study, argues for a revised view of the 1970s, one which focuses on "profound spatialisation and scaling of experience," (p. 16) emerging from the dynamic of privatization, "FIRE's first firm foothold in a city on the brink of bankruptcy" (p.16). It then offers Don DeLillo's *Great Jones Street*'s particular version of urban life as an allegory for the 1970s New York culture, which faces "spatialization and scaling of the self," along with the "loosening" or exploration of the self, inasmuch as in the 1970s, the stress moved away from grand, master narratives to fragmented, individual ones.

The fourth chapter, "*Kill the Poor*: Low Rent Aesthetics and the New Housing Order," the second case study, examines New York in the 1980s, specifically, gentrification and urban redevelopment through the lens of what it calls "a low rent aesthetic." Joel Rose in his novel *Kill the Poor* presents "a neighborhood *modus vivendi* founded on the corporatist

logic of gentrification and the participatory agenda of homesteading, on socio-spatial and ethnic conflicts, all from the perspective of a low rent aesthetic engagement with the housing order” (p. 117). By reading the Lower East Side cartography the novel deploys, Catalina Neculai argues convincingly that “the populist urbanism of homesteading on the Lower East did not succeed as a DIY project because of the inability of housing actors and tenant constituencies to build a consensual alliance” (p. 16).

The fifth chapter, “Uneven City: *Brightness Falls* and the Ethnography of Fictitious Finance,” the third case study, investigates Jay McInerney’s *Brightness Falls* in the context of changes in finance in the 1980s, including the crash of 1987. The chapter “builds upon the interface between the publishing industry and speculative finance, which pumps up the speculative FIRE bubble during 1987, the year of the crash. [...]. It closes the circle—and the trilogy—that began with *Great Jones Street* by reinforcing the alliance between the culture industry (publishing) and the finance economy, the city as a spatial structure of colliding and collusive stakes, while refashioning the representation of bohemia through a recurrence of Great Jones Street, under siege, this time, from FIRE and AIDS” (p. 17). By recourse to a complex interdisciplinary apparatus, Catalina Neculai succeeds in showing that the novel transcends “the so-called blank fiction genre,” thus marking its importance amongst other writings of the time.

Very much like a number of New York writers, who, back in the 1970s and 1980s, dared to tread where the sociologist, the urban geographer, or the documenter treads by professional default, and to engage head-on with the hard city of socioeconomic networks (p. 60), Catalina Neculai, through her seminal book, trespasses new territories for the philologist who she is, and in the process, she manages to make a powerful statement—namely, that written culture, just like visual arts, can telescope urban change. One must only know *how* to read the signs.

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