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*The Urban Condition: Literary Trajectories through Canada's Postmetropolis*

Eva Darias-Beautell, ed.

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This volume is a compilation of seven chapters (preceded by an introductory chapter by editor Eva Darias-Beautell) that offers critical perspectives on urban representations in Canadian literature. Its academic scope is very much defined by what has been called the “spatial turn” in geography studies (Soja, 1989; Whitters, 2009). This approach differs from previous, more empirical conceptions of geography and space, in that it underscores the importance of lived experiences and social contexts. In urban studies and, more specifically, urban and literary studies, one of the most ground-breaking critical shifts has been to consider the mutually-informative relationship between space and society. Key to these decisive appreciations have been the works of Henri Lefebvre (1974), Michel de Certeau (1980), or Edward Soja (1989), and their influence is patent throughout the seven chapters. Drawing on these theories —whereby space produces social contexts and vice-versa— there is an emphasis on processes rather than on terminated states throughout the volume. All seven papers take an epistemological stance that sees the relationship between the city and its citizens as open and ever-changing.

Affective studies have also been crucial in understanding the dynamics of the spatialization of culture and society. In this respect, Sarah Ahmed’s idea that “emotions are not simply something ‘I’ or ‘we’ have. Rather, it is through emotions, or how to respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made” (2004, 10) is one of the central critical approaches around which the literary analyses presented in the volume revolve. When considering urban spaces as relational and dialectical, emotions become one of the means through which socio-spatial constructions are articulated and mediated. According to this view, emotions are not tacitly accepted as naturally given. As derived from Ahmed’s and Brian Massumi’s (among others’) arguments, emotions are socially constructed and they influence, and are in turn influenced by, lived experience in the city.

The combination of space and affect studies, as presented by the authors of these papers, is not only appropriate, but may even be seen as an inescapable symbiosis.

Spatial and affect theories are put to the test in the specific context of Canadian cities. As an object of literary analysis, Canada presents a series of challenges that are successfully tackled in the volume. As Eva Darias-Beautell notes in the introduction, literary studies in Canada have tended to focus on natural environments, the vastness of landscapes and similar themes in spatial terms. It is only recently that the rapidly growing urban centres and their literature in Canada have attracted considerable scholarly attention (Kröller, 2001). From the turn of the century Canadian literature has been regarded for the first time as fundamentally urban. Preceded and affected by the adoption of Multiculturalism as Official Policy in the 1980s, discourses around space in Canadian cities are inextricably linked to official narratives that emphasize, always in contrast to the US, its position as a tolerant, safe nation. One of the greatest achievements in this volume is to provide alternative views to those hegemonic readings of space. The chapters cover a wide range of interdisciplinary contexts that require attention in order to gain insight into Canada's contemporary sociocultural directions.

The second chapter, written by Jeff Derksen, is entitled "Troubling the Postpolitical City: Space, Politics, and Identity in *The Young in One Another's Arms* and *What We All Long For*." The management of space by agents of authority, and the resulting politics of inclusion and exclusion that work around defining axes such as ethnicity, gender, sexuality, etc., are underscored in this paper. Derksen deals with the concept of "postpolitical," which is defined as a social context of liberal consensus where contradiction and difference are disregarded. However, since space is socially constructed and therefore malleable, agents of dissent may also create and adapt spaces of contestation. Against a background devoid of political dissent, alternative spaces are constructed in order to articulate opposition to hegemonic political views. The novels analyzed in this paper question and trouble the established consensus of the city as space for the circulation of capitalist and commodification practices.

With affect as its main focus, Ana Fraile-Marcos' paper approaches the potential of emotions as epistemological tools. It also relies on the aforementioned notion of urban space as socially constructed. Thus, she contends, the city of Toronto, setting of the novel under study, has been narrated as a safe and tolerant space. In her analysis of Michael Helm's *Cities of Refuge*, the figure of the stranger-other, as derived from cosmopolitan

theories by Ulrich Beck, features as an emotional agent in the landscape of Toronto. She demonstrates that strangers' affective relationships with the city reveal the presence of violent spaces, and that emotions can be instrumental in devising strategies of resistance to that violence. In this way, readings of urban space, alternative to those proposed by mainstream discourses, are both revealed and subverted by the very same subjects that those discourses often marginalize or neglect.

Silvia Caporale-Bizzini's "Cities of Belonging: Shifting Perceptions of the Urban in Italian Canadian Writers" looks at three novels that offer accounts of Italian diasporic experiences in Canadian cities. Her diachronic perspective allows for a broad study of dialectical relationships between Canada and Italy—the latter understood as the "mother country"—in different stages of identity construction processes. She contends that urban representations, in the novels she analyzes, are deeply connected with their protagonists' development of diasporic—or post-diasporic—subjectivities. These range from a problematic adaptation to a Canadian environment in the case of Maria Ardizzi's *Made in Italy*; to the articulation of complex emotional "walkscapes" in Pietro Corsi's *Winter in Montreal*; and to the mapping of spaces of belonging in *College Street* by Olindo Chiocca. (Un)belonging emerges as both space- and gender-coded, and like space itself, it is socially constructed and therefore adaptable, crucial features to be considered when dealing with diasporic experiences of the city.

Isabel González Díaz focuses on the gender-transgressive narrator of *Loose End*, by Ivan E. Coyote, as "they" move around East Vancouver. The chapter closely follows pedestrian practices in the novel, and their potential to transform the city in queer terms. This idea (shared by many of the authors featured in this book) derives from Michel de Certeau's notions of walking as a strategy of narration and resistance. Through the act of walking, the narrator is able to create a queer time and space, thus opening urban spaces to non-normative lived experiences. In doing so, new meanings are inscribed into the urban landscape, pushing the limits of heteronormative restrictions and politics of exclusion. This chapter aptly emphasizes the need to locate social and individual relationships in spatial terms, in order to best understand current dynamics of representation, inclusion/exclusion and ways of being in the world.

María Jesús Hernández Lerena's chapter on Don Austin's hypertext *ned after snowslides* is a novel contribution in that it departs from the analysis of the more traditional printed format and instead delves into the narrative possibilities of virtual texts. The use of links

and audio-visual materials, the fact that selected content may open up different narrative routes and sequencings of meaning, result in ways to move around the hypertext that closely resemble the randomness and aimlessness of the *flâneur* walking the city. The narrator in this half-narrative, half-poem hypertext exploits these techniques in order to report his experiences in the snowed-over city of St. John's, as he deals with feelings of loneliness and despair after a heartbreak. Thus, living in the city after a paralyzing snowstorm is metaphorically juxtaposed with the narrator's estrangement. It is in the virtual spaces of the hypertext, whose intricate connections, in turn, parallel the urban landscape, that this metaphor takes shape and is utilized by the narrative persona.

Aritha van Herk's "Invisible Restlessness in the Yearning City: The City Classified and Consumed; or Joyfully resonant" also contributes to redressing the traditional notion of the city as physical stage, detached from action and character development in literature. Van Herk examines several texts in order to distinguish between the "consumable city" and the "yearning city." She argues that, when interpreted as mere background and exploitable space, the city becomes alienating. In contrast, it is when attention is paid to relational dynamics between the city and its inhabitants that a much more significant practice of both living and writing the city emerges. As a result, cities, seen in these spatial-social terms, echo and reflect the emotional weight that they contain and help create. To articulate the city as personified is a productive narrative strategy which allows for a deep understanding of the city that its consumable/consuming aspect fails to represent.

The last chapter, "Unexpected Architecture: The Diagonal City in Timothy Taylor's *Story House*," deals with the symbolic connections between architecture and narrative texts. Here, Eva Darias-Beautell implements a diagonal reading of the city of Vancouver in Timothy Taylor's novel *Story House*. The effect of emotions is clearly felt in this diagonal analysis of architecture and text, a conjunction that generates an epistemological shift which departs from geometrical explanations of architecture and urban space. This approach helps illustrate some of the tensions that emerge between the city as designed space and the city as lived space, a distinction that is well supported by Michel de Certeau's theories on strategies of resistance. In the novel, these tensions play around the main characters, whose own perspective on Euclidian architecture is challenged by this dialectical reading of space.

In short, this volume is a very well-balanced account of important concerns with Canadian urban and literary studies. Its critical basis is clearly defined and coherent among the chapters. At the same time, each individually offers a different and necessary perspective on interdisciplinary aspects connected with space, society, and representation. In the particular context of Canadian cities, these critical approaches prove decisive to question Canada's implicitly accepted *status quo* of safety and benevolence. This is even more imperative in the current climate, where these discourses are politicized in opposition to Donald Trump's more oppressive policies. Alternative versions to hegemonic narratives of space must be put centre stage to acquire a broader and deeper view of socio-political and cultural trajectories. This volume epitomizes the work of a Spanish-based international Canadian Studies network, whose impact is also noted in well-received volumes such as *Literature and the Glocal City* (2014), edited by Ana María Fraile-Marcos. It also engages in a wide conversation on urban representation in Canadian literature such as that put forward by scholars like Justin Edwards and Douglas Ivison (2005). In its fusion of space and affect studies this volume offers a unique perspective on the impact of the city as lived space on modes of literary representation in Canada. Its meaningful methodology and its thoroughly researched contents make it a worthwhile addition to ongoing Canadian sociocultural dialogues.

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