URBAN REALISM AND THE COSMOPOLITAN IMAGINATION IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY: VISIBLE CITY, INVISIBLE WORLD

This book tells a story about the transformation of mid-Victorian urban writing in response both to London's growing size and diversity, and to Britain's shifting global fortunes. Tanya Agathocleous departs from customary understandings of realism, modernism, and the transition between them, to show how a range of writers throughout the nineteenth century – including William Wordsworth, Charles Dickens, William Morris, Henry James, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Joseph Conrad – explored the ethical, social, and political implications of global belonging. Showcasing a variety of different genres, Agathocleous uses the lens of cosmopolitan realism – the literary techniques used to transform the city into an image of the world – to explain how texts that seem glaringly dissimilar actually emerged from the same historical concept, and in doing so she presents startlingly new ways of thinking about the meaning and effect of cosmopolitanism.

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Nineteenth-century British literature and culture have been rich fields for inter-disciplinary studies. Since the turn of the twentieth century, scholars and critics have tracked the intersections and tensions between Victorian literature and the visual arts, politics, social organization, economic life, technical innovations, scientific thought – in short, culture in its broadest sense. In recent years, theoretical challenges and historiographical shifts have unsettled the assumptions of previous scholarly synthesis and called into question the terms of older debates. Whereas the tendency in much past literary critical interpretation was to use the metaphor of culture as "background," feminist, Foucauldian, and other analyses have employed more dynamic models that raise questions of power and of circulation. Such developments have reanimated the field. This series aims to accommodate and promote the most interesting work being undertaken on the frontiers of the field of nineteenth-century literary studies: work which intersects fruitfully with other fields of study such as history, or literary theory, or the history of science. Comparative as well as interdisciplinary approaches are welcomed.

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URBAN REALISM AND THE COSMOPOLITAN IMAGINATION IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Visible City, Invisible World

TANYA AGATHOCLEOUS

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Preface

> The metropolis of Britain, and of the world, is a literary mine, which a
> round number of workers with head and hand have been long quarry-
> ing out to the public advantage, and, it is to be hoped, to their own.
>
> Charles Manby Smith, *The Little World of London: or,*
> *Pictures in Little of London Life.*[1]

In the introduction to his 1856 social study "The Great World of
London," Henry Mayhew contends that London is best understood as a
"world" rather than a city because of the vastness and diversity of its
population. Producing a flurry of statistics to make the case for London's
unprecedented scale, Mayhew sums them up by stating: "in every thou-
sand of the aggregate composing the immense human family, two at least
are Londoners."[2] References to astronomy bolster the scientism and
grandeur of his assertions. Comparing the capital city to a "planetoid,"
Mayhew imagines the Earth exploding and London spinning off as a
world in its own right: "If . . . by some volcanic convulsion . . . the great
Metropolis were to be severed from the rest of the globe, London is quite
large enough to do duty as a separate world" (7). As well as seeing London
as a planet, Mayhew projects its social geography on to the world's
physical geography so that "Belgravia and Bethnal Green become the
opposite poles of the London sphere – the frigid zones, as it were, of
the Capital; the one icy cold of its exceeding fashion, form, and ceremony;
and the other wrapt in a perpetual winter of withering poverty" (4).

For Mayhew, London's size is matched only by its sociological com-
plexity, for it is "made up of different races like a world" (4). As he often
does in his better-known work of urban sociology *London Labour and the
London Poor* (1851), Mayhew reads class difference through the lens of
the racial categories employed by Victorian anthropologists. "As regards
the metropolitan people," he states, "the polite Parisian is not more
widely different from the barbarous Botecudo, than is the lack-a-daisical
dandy at Almack's from the Billingsgate 'rough'" (4).[3] But class is not the

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only variable he uses to see London as an "aggregate of *various nations*"
(4) – religious and linguistic differences also contribute to his account
of the city's anthropological variety. The eccentricities of "the Bight of
Benin, who have a lizard for their particular divinity," he notes, are no
more outlandish than the Mormonism and spiritualism practiced by
individuals in the British capital. Global philological diversities, too, can
be compared to those within London for they are "hardly more manifold
than the distinct modes of speech peculiar to the various classes of
Metropolitan society" (5).

Through these comparisons of London to the world as a whole,
Mayhew underscores the magnitude of his own project. "The Great
World of London" was initially conceived of as an encyclopedic collection
of sketches that would encompass all major elements of London society.[4]
Mayhew's elaborate introduction, however, implies an even grander
venture: if London, via his imagery, takes on planetary dimensions, his
local observations acquire universal resonances, providing insight into the
operations of society across a global landscape.

Mayhew's reading of London as not only *a* world but *the* world is
characteristic of Victorian city writing. In 1851, a journalist in *Table Talk*
wrote that "London is not a poetical place to look at; but surely it is
poetical in the very amount and comprehensiveness of its enormous
experience of pleasure and pain . . . It is one of the great giant representa-
tives of mankind, with a huge beating heart."[5] The grandiose adjectives
he used to describe the city – "comprehensive," "enormous," "great,"
"giant," and "huge" – suggest how unfathomably vast London appeared
to Victorian observers.

Proffering an "enormous experience of pleasure and pain," London's
sublime ambivalence made it an appealing literary ("poetical") subject – as
did the notion that it was representative of "mankind." Henry James also
stressed London's representativeness: "London is indeed an epitome of the
round world, and just as it is a commonplace to say that there is nothing
one can't 'get' there, so it is equally true that there is nothing one may not
study at first hand."[6] For James, London is both a way to imagine a global
whole ("the round world") and to consume it, both materially ("getting")
and mentally, through exposure to boundless knowledge.

From metaphors such as these to entire novels by writers from Charles
Dickens to William Morris, a significant range of writings use London as
a way to apprehend global modernity. This book shows how urban
realism, the chief mode used to represent the British capital in the
nineteenth century, brought the modern idea of the world-city into being.

As Britain's capital and economic center, London was, of course, a symbol of the nation and the "heart of the empire." But with the new and fast-expanding networks of trade, finance, post, steamship, telegraph, print, and immigration that took shape over the course of the nineteenth century, it became unmistakably linked to the world beyond the nation as well. This unprecedented level of connectivity produced both dreams and nightmares, giving shape to a city literature as richly evocative as it was deeply equivocal.

How did the city come to represent both the pre-eminence of the English nation and the world as a whole? In early to mid-nineteenth-century fiction, the countryside *is* the country, as Raymond Williams famously wrote.[7] Novels such as Jane Austen's, in his account, focus primarily on knowable communities situated in provincial landscapes; the bounded social networks delineated by these works stand in metonymically for social relations in the nation at large. Yet, by mid-century, the city came into prominence as a literary subject and the scale of imagined community changed dramatically. While Austen's geographies, according to Edward Said, extend beyond the English countryside to the imperial peripheries, she nonetheless focuses on a bounded and coherent community: "this particular web," as George Eliot puts it in *Middlemarch*.[8] The city, by contrast, was imagined as a complex, incoherent web of interconnections that spanned the entire globe. In works by authors ranging from William Wordsworth and Charles Dickens to Arthur Conan Doyle and Henry James, London stands for human society conceptualized at the national *and* the global level simultaneously.

The city's global dimensions, moreover, were not always understood in imperial terms. Critics such as Joseph McLaughlin and Ian Baucom have argued that the city posed a negative challenge to English identity because, as Baucom puts it, London represented an "imperial 'without' inside the national 'within.'"[9] Writers like Mayhew, he contends, "rewrite the map of the city as a map of English and imperial space."[10] While indebted to these critics in my understanding of the role of empire in the imagination of urban space, I emphasize the double valence of the Victorian urban vision: the city did provoke a turn to the country as the site of authentic Englishness, but it also inspired attempts to sublimate its threatening plurality into an image of global community. The dislocating effect of the city, in other words, was not only viewed negatively as a sign of otherness but positively, as a spur to visions of collectivity.

Tracing the depiction of the city in literature from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth, I show that two forms drawn from

visual culture – the sketch and the panorama – allowed Victorian writers to move between the fragmentary view from the street and a distant, all-encompassing overview. I call this melding of city and world *cosmopolitan realism*. Employing shifts in perspective from *polis* to *kosmos* and back again, realist writing produced both a sense of detailed, accumulative local knowledge and an ideal of totality. Together, these different scales allowed for a sense of human community designed to give shape and meaning to the inconceivable complexity of the modern world: a world made newly visible by the alienating forces of imperialism, capitalism, and technology at work in the city. Writers did not merely reflect a new global consciousness, then, but used the city to shape it – and to relate it to quotidian experience.

This global consciousness, I argue, is critical to our understanding of Victorian realism. It also sheds light on literature's contribution to secularization. If secularism, as scholars such as Vincent Pecora contend, is not simply a critique of religious paradigms but a transformation of them, cosmopolitan realism represents one of the concrete forms of secularism's alchemical work.[11] From the saintly iconography that influences the journalistic sketch tradition to the Renaissance allegories that inform the novelistic schemas of writers from Dickens to William Morris, religious paradigms permeate the texts of cosmopolitan realism, functioning not just as the residue of older forms but as a means to imbue urban narratives with moral meaning. While it is not controversial to claim that realist writing was indebted to religious epistemologies as well as to scientific ones, my contention is that by secularizing religious paradigms writers sought not merely to universalize the moral meanings of their texts but to *globalize* them, locating them within a historicized vision of the contemporary world.

The scientific specificity of urban realism, with its attention to particular locales, class, or ethnicity, anchored and differentiated the abstractions of universalism in order to situate them in the "real world" of capitalist modernity. If cosmopolitan realism sought to conceptualize human community at a worldwide level, it did so with the perplexing and recalcitrant inequities of urban existence as a symbol for what would have to be overcome globally. The visible world of the *polis*, in all its grim materiality, was a constant reproach to the invisible, idealistic world of the *kosmos*.

Cosmopolitan realism, therefore, was both utopian and dystopian in outlook. It was a realist*ic* cosmopolitanism, critical of those forms which preceded it. While Enlightenment cosmopolitanism, in Kant's seminal articulation, was optimistic in its correlation of international economic

exchange with the coming of "perpetual peace," the Victorians, from mid-century onwards, tended to be less sanguine about the progress of globalization.[12] In one of the period's most famous and trenchant critiques of capitalism, *The Communist Manifesto* of 1848 by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, the "cosmopolitan character of production and consumption in every country" is inseparable from the malign effects of the bourgeois "exploitation of the world market." Yet even the *Manifesto* insisted on a utopian side to this development: "National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature."[13] This profound ambivalence about cosmopolitanism, and hence about Western progress, is echoed in each of the texts I examine, which struggle in different ways to read the visible face of the city as the sign of an invisible world of solidarity to come.

The Communist Manifesto's conditions of production are as relevant to cosmopolitan realism as its ideological stance. Published in several languages and addressed to an international audience, the work was itself an example of the new *Weltliteratur* heralded by Marx and Engels. As such, the *Manifesto* helps to explain why cosmopolitan realism emerged when it did. Mass population shifts in London had radically changed the scale and composition of the city by mid-century. This, together with the new global networks of communication and travel, and a burgeoning culture of urban spectacle – brought to the forefront of national consciousness with the 1851 Great Exhibition – inspired literature's global turn. But writers were also self-consciously reproducing and shaping their own conditions of production. British writers, in particular, were operating in an increasingly global literary marketplace; moreover, they were publishing in a city competing with Paris to position itself as the center of a "world republic of letters" (in Pascale Casanova's influential phrase) and had access to new and growing markets in the colonies.[14] Texts concerned with cosmopolitanism as an idea, in other words, were written in a public sphere defined by cosmopolitanism as a material condition. For Marx, the internationalization of literature represents an opportunity for political progress – one of the ways in which capitalism will sow the seeds of its own demise. But for authors less assured about the trajectory of globalization, yet more invested in the material success of their writings, such as Dickens and Conrad, this widening purview is at once a threat to the national culture they both held sacred and a bewitching opportunity to speak both for, and *to*, the modern world as a whole, rather than merely Britain. A heightened

consciousness of global space, therefore, helps to shape their conceptions of the novel's ever-broadening boundaries.

The globalization of the literary marketplace and a sense of the inter-penetration of national and international space only intensified in the twentieth century, but modernist city writers, in forfeiting the unifying perspectives of cosmopolitan realism, struggle to imagine the city as a site of community. While urban cosmopolitanism has been more readily associated with modernism than with Victorian literature, I show that modernist writers turn from the dislocating spaces of the city to new forms of temporality to imagine community. The experimental ways in which modernist and postmodernist writings depict cosmopolitan cities have been the subject of a number of recent studies; this book expands these narratives to show how Victorian literature helped to make the now-familiar connection between city and world feel organic to urban living and its ongoing narratives.

Today it is commonplace for all kinds of narratives, from novels to films to non-fiction, to draw intricate connections between metropole and periphery in the service of a global ethos. A 2008 news story, for instance, connects demand for coltan – a rare metal used to manufacture Sony Playstations – with the exploitation of children and civil war in the Congo, where the metal is mined, in order to draw attention to the hidden costs of Western consumerism.[15] I seek to illustrate how our ability to tell stories such as this one, which connects micro-level concrete detail (a small piece of a gaming device) to a macro-level map of global capital and international politics, is bound up with the history of urban literary realism.

In analyzing the internal contradictions and flawed utopianism of cosmopolitan realism, this book tells a story about the transformation of mid-Victorian urban writing in response to London's growing size and diversity and Britain's shifting global fortunes. Its argument unfolds in two sections, one focused on mid-century and the other on the *fin de siècle*. Part One historicizes cosmopolitan realism, taking the moment of the Great Exhibition and London's subsequent canonization as world-city as its central axis. Part Two moves from the tentative cosmopolitanism of mid-century writers to its efflorescence at the turn of the century, when the word appeared with increased frequency in literary and journalistic writing.

Because it charts the rise and fall of cosmopolitan realism – a form of writing linked to Britain's role in the world – *Urban Realism and the Cosmopolitan Imagination* departs from customary understandings of

realism, modernism, and the transition between them. While many
studies of urban realism emphasize the canonical novels produced
between 1850 and 1870, such as those of Charles Dickens, Elizabeth
Gaskell, and William Makepeace Thackeray, my broad definition of
realism expands its temporal parameters. I treat as "realistic" works that
rely on visual and empirical modes of knowledge to represent urban life
but that are also invested in the invisible world beyond the city. I therefore
see texts at either end of the century, such as Wordsworth's *The Prelude*
and General William Booth's *In Darkest England*, as part of the same
epistemological project. My emphasis on cosmopolitanism, however,
shifts realism's center of gravity to the end of the century, for I argue that
the proliferation of narrative styles at this time – Doyle's detective novel,
James' naturalism, Morris' romance-allegory – can be read as efforts to
address urban writing's sense-making capacities to an ever-widening
terrain.

Diachronically, the chapters of this book trace the development of
cosmopolitanism as a formal endeavor from the 1850s to the end of the
nineteenth century and into the twentieth in order to show how urban
realism was instrumental in shaping a global imaginary. Synchronically,
each chapter looks closely at two or more contemporaneous texts that are
generically disparate but formally similar. The chapter structures showcase
a range of different genres – poetry and prose (*The Prelude* and Bleak
House in Chapter 2), high and popular literature (*The Princess
Casamassima* and *A Study in Scarlet* in Chapter 3), and fiction and non-
fiction (*News from Nowhere* and *In Darkest England* in Chapter 4) – but
demonstrate how each pair of texts, in using the city to imagine the world,
employs similar formal juxtapositions. Thus both Wordsworth and
Dickens use the sketch and the panorama as verbal-visual modes; both
James and Doyle use an aestheticist version of realism along with novelis-
tic romance; and both Morris and Booth use a combination of allegory
and ethnography to construct socialist utopias. The lens of cosmopolitan
realism, then, helps to explain why texts that seem glaringly dissimilar
emerge from the same historical context.

The Introduction situates the argument I outline here historically and
within current critical debates. Chapter 1 begins the story of cosmopolitan
realism by tracing the wide range of ways the word *cosmopolitan* and its
variants were used in the period and foregrounding the role of different
cultural forms – in this case, the Great Exhibition and the middle-class
periodical – in codifying and circulating the word's different meanings.
Subsequent chapters look at how the disparate scales of realist writing are

leveraged to contend with specific notions of cosmopolitanism and the singular balance between local and global that each requires. At mid-century, the sketch and the panorama are used in tandem to view the world as a unified human family. Chapter 2 examines the generic origins of cosmopolitan realism in this formal combination. Through a reading of William Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (1850), among other texts, I argue that the fragmentary view of the street and the worldwide view from above allow authors to register the anxieties of difference without abandoning a sense of solidarity with humankind. With their intrinsic contest between local and global perspectives, the sketch and the panorama laid the foundation for cosmopolitan realism.

Over the course of the century, the antithetical scales of urban writing were adapted by increasingly radical and disenchanted writers to fit their more explicit engagement with ideals of global community. The second half of the book focuses closely on individual texts to trace the fate of realist convention in the hands of these writers. Each chapter in this section shows how the disparate scales of sketch and panorama became exaggerated and attenuated over the course of the century. While the *fin de siècle* is traditionally seen as the death-knell of realism, my emphasis on scale allows us to see literature's formal changes as the intensification rather than ossification of realist representation. Thus the sketch tradition becomes more explicitly scientific and ethnographic in the works of Arthur Conan Doyle, William Booth, and William Morris, such that the degree of difference revealed threatens to pull the city apart. In order to restore a sense of unity to their urban portraits, *fin-de-siècle* writers self-consciously use older and more robust – though less convincingly realistic – modes of imagining shared meaning, such as romance and allegory. The contradictions of realism, in its attempt to chronicle details and distinctions yet discern from those observations the means of transcending difference (through humanist or Christian universals), are more readily visible in these later works.

Chapter 3 examines aesthetic writing to demonstrate how the sketch of the urban type gives way to the microscopically detailed perspective of the refined aesthete: a figure who is more interested in individual sensory impressions than in the shared encyclopedic systems to which sketches belonged. At the same time, global space is no longer held together by the panoramic overview of the realist narrator – whose conciliatory vision is unviable in the fragile, divisive urban landscape of *fin-de-siècle* literature – but by the less realistic plot devices of conspiracy and romance. Despite their obvious stylistic differences, then, both Arthur Conan Doyle's

A Study in Scarlet (1887) and Henry James' *The Princess Casamassima* (1886) have similar formal concerns. Their urban investigators shun the explicit discourse of political reform visible in earlier city writing and assume the distanced aesthetic pose of the Wildean dandy. This stance, however, does not signify political disengagement because it depends upon the ability of the aesthete figure in each novel (Holmes and Hyacinth) to maintain a global perspective: both novels make the case that the sublimity of urban space, with its infinite connections to life elsewhere, is the ultimate source of aesthetic experience. Yet they both also retreat from the radical implications of that vision and use hackneyed romance tropes to overlay the difficult ethical and existential questions they open up with more familiar, less disorienting forms of narrative.

Socialist internationalism had a far more explicitly political vision than aestheticism, for its practitioners imagined a world united by a new egalitarian order. But even the most radical versions of socialist thought drew upon the sociological discourses of urban reform that took shape earlier in the period. In Chapter 4, I show how the spatial dynamics of city mapping were adapted to the narrative visions of socialist internationalists to create new forms of cosmopolitan realism. In 1890, General William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, published a treatise that called for the spread of Christian work communes from London to the entire world. A pull-out map accompanying his work shows a heavily allegorized London spilling out on to the globe; the map draws on the religious iconography of Renaissance emblem books to depict the sins of the city and the salvation that lies beyond it. Unexpectedly, William Morris, whose anti-colonialism and secularism made him Booth's ideological opposite, uses similar techniques in the utopian novel he published in the same year as Booth's work. If religious allegory is the panoramic perspective that unites the worlds of Booth and Morris, the cartographic "sketches" of their texts map them squarely on to late-Victorian London. The antithesis between local and global in the work of these two very different socialists is starker and more contradictory than those in earlier texts of the period.

By the twentieth century, modernist city writing associates cosmopolitanism predominantly with the unifying but oppressive power of global capitalism, international power politics, and an accompanying sense of worldwide calamity. Chapter 5 examines two influential urban modernist novels, *The Secret Agent* (1907) and *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), to show how the concept of subjective time and the end of time counters the homogenizing effects of "official," globalized time, replacing the dyadic visual paradigms

of Victorian city writing. Individualized time is connected in both novels to urban anonymity and the disintegration of community in the city, but is also figured, more positively, as an antidote to time standardization in allowing for moments of expanded sympathy towards strangers. Both novels evoke a post-human future in which nature has reclaimed city and nation, thereby positing a new biological concept of human kinship that must be asserted in the face of its tangible vulnerability. By contrasting the cosmopolitan visions of Victorian and early twentieth-century writers, this chapter sheds new light on the formal experiments of modernism, while stressing the uniquely Victorian utopianism of urban realism. The genres of modernism can be attributed at least in part to the way that its practitioners sought to critique or reject the Victorian novel's spatial imagination of social cohesion.

The conclusion explores the legacy of Victorian cosmopolitan realism in contemporary visual spectacles such as the London Eye and urban cinema. That recent urban texts are staged against a global landscape is undisputed; I argue, however, that the formal experiments and disparate scales of realist representation re-emerge in the depiction of that landscape. Works such as Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) and Stephen Frears' film *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002) take up the nineteenth-century fascination with the city in their exploration of multi-cultural community and globalization but shift the central point of view from the urban investigator to previously marginalized figures, such as refugees, struggling immigrants, and, in the case of Patrick Keiller's *London* (1994), disaffected queer intellectuals. Though fragmentation is taken for granted in the postmodern text, the urban fictions I examine emphasize connection alongside disconnection in order to situate the experience of radically disparate city-dwellers within the context of globalization and postcolonial history. In doing so, they throw into relief the limited perspectives of Victorian cosmopolitanism but also illuminate the utopian visions of community that realism still enables.