

Introduction

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A symbolic city upon a hill has echoed through US national mythology and political discourse since John Winthrop first invoked it in “A Model of Christian Charity” (1630) to warn that the world’s eyes would be on the Puritan settlers and their failure would “open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God.”¹ While later invocations retain this claim of moral exemplarity, they typically revise Winthrop’s caution into certainty of a destiny foretold and, more than occasionally, into a celebration of American diversity. Thus, at the end of his presidency, Ronald Reagan substituted individual opportunity for religious obligation and recast that city as a center of commerce “teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace. [. . .] And if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here.” Reagan’s polis of immigrants resonates with Walt Whitman’s description of the United States as a “a nation of nations” and the cultural pluralism of Horace Kallen’s “Democracy vs. The Melting Pot” (1915), if not Randolph Bourne’s more forthrightly multicultural “Trans-national America” (1916).²

The city of nations has always been contested by another strand of national mythology that regards the urban as alien to a national character defined by the experience of settler colonialism and embodied in the self-reliant yeoman farmer. “Americans are the western pilgrims,” J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur intoned in a canonical passage from his *Letters of an American Farmer* (1782). Once they were Europeans, and in seaboard cities they may so remain. On the western lands, however, they exchange their “ancient prejudices and manners” for the local standards and are “melted into a new race of men,” soil-nurtured and taintless. Theirs are the norms and ideals to which new settlers conform.³ At one level, then, when Americans talk about the city, they are talking about the kind of society that they want to live in, the sort of people they wish to live among.

By the 1970s, the city's place in the national imaginary seemed settled. Events and cultural representations of "the *Taxi Driver* period," to borrow Marshall Berman's phrase that invokes the casual violence and psychopathy of Martin Scorsese's 1976 classic in the depraved-city genre, seemed to signal the city's death throes.⁴ In seeming confirmation of Lewis Mumford's decades-long Jeremiad forecasting the city's progress from polis to metropolis to megalopolis to congested necropolis choking on "the burden of its own magnified expenses," the *New York Daily News* headline blared "FORD TO CITY: DROP DEAD" on October 30, 1975, when the president declined to help New York avert bankruptcy.⁵ No matter that the urban crisis was fueled by government policies (e.g., the Federal Home Loan Bank Act of 1932, Housing Act of 1934, and Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 [the GI Bill]) that established the economic infrastructure for suburbanization, or that corporations were moving industrial jobs to lower-tax, nonunion US regions or offshore, all of which produced a *decongestion* borne out by population data.⁶ No matter, either, that urban areas for decades have subsidized rural areas at the federal and state levels, or that even after cities won home rule, rural-weighted state legislatures continue to constrain municipal governance.⁷ The era's lurid headlines and popular depictions of urban crime captured the public imagination with its images of urban doom. If *Taxi Driver* represented the urban present, *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) quickly became a metaphor for the city's future.⁸

As the 1990s began, a posturban US geography was conjectured in response to these visions of decline. Necklaces of new development on the urban periphery would blend office parks and mid-rise office buildings with moderate density housing and amenities to suit residents' lifestyle expectations. These edge cities (Joel Garreau, *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier* [1991]), would be origin and destination for daily commutes and nights on the town, as drivers skirted dilapidated metropolitan centers.⁹ In the meantime, at least, the mall had become "The New Downtown," Witold Rybczinski insisted, because it preserved the "public order" that cities had sacrificed to "police indifference and overzealous protectors of individual rights." The history of mall development in the United States does not support the causality that Rybczinski proposes, yet his list of deplorables – "boorish adolescents, noisy drunks and aggressive panhandlers" – well captures the sort of grievances that motivated white flight even as it avoids overt reference to race.¹⁰

Rybczinski's story also implicitly acknowledges a change in the definition of citizenship and belonging that arose with neoliberal governance.

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Firstly, malls are not public spaces but spaces of exclusion for people who do not, or cannot, look and act the part of the shopper. Secondly, they definitely are not political spaces where the people to gather to discuss the issues of the day. Steven Downs learned that lesson when he was escorted from the Crossgates Mall in the Albany, New York, suburbs for wearing a t-shirt that read “Give Peace A Chance” during the run-up to the Second Iraq War – despite that he purchased the shirt from one of Crossgates’ shops.¹¹ The pleasure that Rybczinski’s good citizens experienced in malls before the days of active-shooter events and the mallpocalypse – which has spawned a subgenre of ruins photography – was insulation from the anxiety of being discomfited by the sorts of difference or substantive disagreement that animate the public sphere.

By *Blade Runner*’s year of 2019, however, the city’s comeback was widely touted. The twenty most productive metropolitan areas were generating 53 percent of the nation’s gross domestic product.¹² Development booms in San Francisco, Seattle, and New York could make the real estate-led financial crisis of 2008 seem another lifetime, another world. New York City mayor Bill de Blasio felt sufficiently flush in that year to reject Amazon’s proposal to establish a second headquarters in Queens. Rust-Belt Pittsburgh, an archetypal industrial city and subsequently a prime example of postindustrial decline as it shed double-digit percentages of its population each decade from the 1950s through the 1980s, today boasts a diversified economy driven by its medical, academic, and financial sectors. The former Steel City’s rejuvenation as “a global innovation city” committed to climate leadership seems to validate Richard Florida’s argument in *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002) that cities’ viability rests on their ability to attract people who create “new ideas, new technology, and new creative content,” along with the financial, legal, and business professionals who underwrite, protect, and disseminate those products, as well as cities’ success at providing the mix of cultural and recreational amenities necessary to retain that class.¹³

The limits of this sunny account are apparent in the fate of such Rust Belt cities as Detroit, Youngstown, and Gary, and the condition of New Orleans a decade and a half after Hurricane Katrina, which, despite the city’s importance as a port, is the most prominent example of how federal and state governments routinely shortchange cities. These cities’ fates remind us, as Florida somewhat concedes in *The New Urban Crisis: How Our Cities Are Increasing Inequality, Deepening Segregation, and Failing the Middle Class—and What We Can Do About It* (2017), that urban revival is concentrated in what he calls superstar cities, whose leading enterprises

function within multinational networks of production, finance, and trade rather than as nodes in regional or even national production and distribution networks. These global cities outcompete regional cities, which continue to experience disinvestment by states, the federal government, and the private sector.

The ill effects of the urban revival are not limited to still-declining second- and third-tier cities, however. If the city's future is no longer *Blade Runner*, then neither is it the diverse yet close-knit-neighborhood ideal embodied by Jane Jacobs's West Village, anchored by the White Horse Tavern, then "a smoky place with a mixed clientele of artists, dock workers, meatpackers, gays, and nurses from a nearby hospital," Richard Sennett recalls, not a pilgrimage site for literary tourists. If the streets were "run-down, with a visible population of rats," and thus clearly marked by decline in the eyes of lenders and urban planners, such neighborhoods were nevertheless vibrant and viable, Jacobs trenchantly argued.¹⁴ Superstar cities' real-estate booms destroy these neighborhoods as they inexorably price out of local markets their working classes, their artists, writers, musicians, and assorted bohemians that who were the archetypal urban creative class, increasingly, they price out their middle-class families as well.

The older urban landscapes that Sennett has described as a "a thick impasto of experience[s]" of difference – the populace, certainly, but also built environments layered with history and stained with evidence of use – give way to nostalgic simulacra of urbanity that appeal to tourists and new, upscale residents.¹⁵ A James Rouse-inspired festival marketplace that inverts the relation of the heritage site and its gift shop to conjure soft-focus tableaux of local history as marketable ambiance for themed shopping and entertainment experiences, a retro stadium that incorporates elements of the disused industrial landscape into its design, and a privately managed downtown park, preferably with a view patterned on New York's High Line, or, if not, then certainly programmed to attract a targeted demographic (who may rent the park for private events) instead of to gather the citizenry in its diversity, all define a way of urban life and a topography of induced urban memory that becomes normative.¹⁶

As these projects spur further nearby development, they displace yet more residents and businesses, and they exacerbate existing racial and class divisions. The quality-of-life issues that Rybczynski cited in his paean to the mall return, except that instead of urbanites fleeing homeless panhandlers, they now demand that the homeless and panhandlers be removed. Meanwhile, developers remake neighborhoods to accommodate the

amenities of “suburban life in the city.”¹⁷ Not only in New York and San Francisco, but also in nonboom cities such as Houston, new high-end apartments and condominiums feature rooftop parks with dog runs and outdoor movie nights – even if they are sited across the street from public parks; onsite gyms, restaurants, and lounges further reduce the need to interact with the city. The city is thus redefined by the creative-class strategy that, like neoliberalism generally, conceives cities in market terms, not as experiments in people of different backgrounds living together and governing themselves.

In the country at large, the cultural divide between multiethnic, more liberal cities and whiter, more conservative exurban farm and factory towns was exacerbated by hysterical backlash against election of Barack Obama and disparate rates of economic recovery from the Great Recession. Reaction included the Tea Party and Constitutional Sheriff movements and the mainstreaming of once-fringy white- and religious-nationalist movements that crystallized around the campaign and presidency of Donald Trump, who tirelessly stoked racial and regional resentment and animosity. Despite being the most urban-identified of presidents and someone who embodies all the moral flaws ascribed to urbanites by centuries of country-party ideologues, Trump claimed electoral victory by running against cities as enclaves of feckless elites, as zones of “American carnage” inhabited by immigrants and minorities, and as responsible for the loss of individual autonomy and a climate of moral drift. All in all, his rhetoric reprises (far more vulgarly) the dominant themes of what T. J. Jackson Lears calls “the crisis of cultural authority” at the previous turn of the century.¹⁸ In the election and mishandled-pandemic year 2020, and with the powers of the presidency at his disposal, Trump augmented his rhetoric with rolling paramilitary deployments to American cities targeting, first, protesters against police violence and then black and brown urban populations.¹⁹

The simultaneous ascendance and vilification of the American city fairly demands a fresh look at what the city means and has meant in US literature and culture. The twenty essays written for this volume bring the resources of literary and cultural history and criticism to bear on the representation of cities and city life and what these texts tell us about the city’s promise and its unresolved problems. The organization of the first two sections takes its cue from architect Robert Venturi and planner Denise Scott Brown’s definition of the city as “a set of intertwined activities that form a pattern on the land.”²⁰ Section one considers particular kinds of urban space, while section two focuses on the experience of the city from diverse subject

positions and efforts to find or to impose patterns of significance on the city. The division is hardly absolute; we may find patterns by studying built landscapes and the flows they induce (the work of urban planning), while, conversely, we can see ephemeral patterns of human activity over time change the meaning, function, and appearance of built space, as when new waves of residents refunction existing infrastructure to support their ways of life. Neighborhoods and bohemia may both be conceptual spaces formed by social behaviors and senses of common identity, yet they are also mappable (although bohemia is mobile) and marketable by real estate agents, planners, and politicians, while neighborhoods become slums through policy choices that accelerate disinvestment and out-migration, or gentrified by an influx of speculative capital and wealthier residents. Nevertheless, the division allows more sustained considerations of the spatial relations and patterns of experience characteristic of cities.

In the opening two chapters, David Henkin examines the role of the printed word in conceptualizing the social structure and field of experience of the emerging public sphere as the US city transitioned from premodern to modern – from knowable community to world of strangers – in the nation's first half century or so; then, John Fagg examines the arts of the urban public sphere as they develop over the ensuing two centuries, focusing on the street as site where denizens enact the everyday politics of belonging together and the spectacular politics of mass protest. The following quartet of chapters discusses the elemental space of city life, the neighborhood. Carlo Rotella begins the unit by proposing a literature of neighborhood, a space compounded of bounded location and affective associations that give it meaning; people make neighborhoods, he argues, yet neighborhoods also shape the lives they support. The neighborhoods that most interest him are products of histories and memories of migration, industrialization, and subsequent deindustrialization. Thomas Heise next critiques the discursive process by which certain neighborhoods become *ghettos* and *slums*, the shifting connotations and uses of those terms, and ways they have shaped and continue to inflect public attitudes toward those spaces and their inhabitants. Ana María Manzanás Calvo and Jesús Benito Sánchez turn our focus toward the space between neighborhoods. Deploying the Derridean analytic of *hostipitality*, they read intracity borders as contact zones in which relations between those who belong and those who are marginal, precarious, or excluded are negotiated in narratives that either reinscribe or undermine the border's effectivity. James Peacock then takes up a specific the conflicts generated by the spatial and discursive practices of gentrification. Reading novels of gentrification, he shows how,

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at their best, such narratives meld attention to perspective, affect, and (inter)personal conflict with attention to larger social and economic transformations going on in cities and render textured and nuanced accounts of a process often seen, as he says, through a lens of “Manicheanism and moral reductionism.”

Of the section’s final three chapters, two move beyond the city in different directions. Kathy Knapp considers suburbia – the lifestyle descriptor associated with extra-urban domicile, not the element of political geography whose instances range from spectacularly wealthy to “inner-city” poor, from overwhelmingly white to single-minority ethnoburbs – by way of the aesthetic and pedagogical work performed in *The New Yorker’s* pages by female fiction writers who imagined a version of postwar liberalism’s aspirational suburbs less isolated and alienating than the contemporaneous version imagined by John Cheever, John Updike, and other male writers in that magazine. Knapp then extends her revisionary analysis with a turn to writers more recent and ethnically diverse whose work remodels those suburbs for equally diverse inhabitants and a recent online spat about who “owns” the literary suburbs. John Carlos Rowe crosses national borders in order to conceive the transnational city with attention to how US neo-imperialism both destructively “Americanizes” cities elsewhere and some of the consequences of those overseas adventures on the cities of the homeland. In this way, he foregrounds what is overlooked when the transnational city is understood through its imbrication in the global circulation of capital and information or a focus on the diasporans and refugees that populate the world city without acknowledging the US role in uprooting peoples.

Ruth Salvaggio closes the first section with an examination of the transnational culture of rim cities that suggestively complements William Boelhower’s chapter on the emergent biopolitics of the industrial city that opens the section on urban lives; both chapters attend to the patterns that collective life makes at the scale of the city. Focusing on New Orleans, Salvaggio elaborates an eco-poetics of place whose dominant element is water, the key to the city’s geography and development, and a controlling metaphor for a culture constituted as the confluence of indigenous, African, and European peoples, music, poetry, and song. Boelhower examines Modernist and immigrant aesthetic representations of the emergent technological order of the twentieth-century metropolis, finding in them aesthetic expressions of the new anthropology that Marx had forecast and Gramsci confirmed: that crowds, technology, and media would give rise to a field of forces as much or more than an arrangement of spaces, thus, in its

own way, to liquid cities defined for inhabitants by the experience of vertigo.

Those immigrants figure in the following two chapters. Joseph Entin's examination of US labor literature focuses on immigrant workers' importance to the labor movement and their hope to redraw the social geography of capitalist cities as one of three moments in the laboring city's literary history, along with the Great Depression and the waning of labor solidarity since the Reagan-era onset of the postindustrial economy. Using Italian American fiction and poetry as his focus, Fred Gardaphé follows the ambivalent path toward suburban whiteness traveled by descendants of white immigrants of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as they migrated from ethnic enclaves, and how that experience is formally represented in the transition from realist to modernist narrative structures, and he engages with authors and critics who argue for forward-looking ethnic memory concerned less with reasserting lost ethnic ways than recovering traditions of critical engagement with American society and culture common to the earlier narratives. In a chapter conditioned by the shifting class and racial geographies discussed by Entin and Gardaphé, Brian Tochtermann engages the evolution of realism over more than half a century of crime fiction and film, attending to these stories' role in framing popular understanding of urban problems and their solutions (including models of white masculinity from Philip Marlowe to Mike Hammer and Dirty Harry), the political exploitation of these narratives, African American cinematic responses to the world those narratives project, and the rise of the critically engaged crime series typified by David Simon and Ed Burns's string of Baltimore-set dramas.

Moving from what Tochererman calls the death-wish city to apocalyptic urbanism, Sean Grattan deploys Kim Stanley Robinson's Hurricane Sandy-influenced novel *New York 2140* (2017) as a window onto the discourse of apocalypse. The question this chapter pursues is what comes after the end, what modes of postapocalyptic and post-anthropocentric living might then arise because, Grattan notes, even as the apocalyptic genre portrays the destruction of one world through irreversible choices made that predate the narrative present, it clears a space to imagine new social forms better suited to the ends of life. The section closes with Erik Mortenson's critical engagement with twentieth-century bohemia, particularly the Beat movement's opposition to then-dominant cultural and social norms, the ways that revolt was recaptured as style, and the question of what remains today of interest in bohemia as a resistive and creative space and a utopian gesture.

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The final section's five chapters place contemporary theory and literary texts (broadly construed) in dialogue to explore how theories inform our understanding of representations of urban space, life, and processes, as well as how literary texts may challenge and revise theories. Sophia Bamert and Hsuan L. Hsu supplement literary studies' spatial turn, which draws on the work of Marxist geographers with work in critical race theory to produce a more robust account of literature that engages the spatial imaginaries and practices responsible for the distribution of space and population in American cities. In a cognate study of two post-Hurricane Katrina texts, Arin Keeble argues the need to supplement trauma theory, which rewards readers with its attention to the manifold vectors of urban trauma – violence, uprooting, catastrophe, precarity – at which literature has always excelled, with the analytic of systemic and slow violence that lays bare the less-visible factors that often precipitate, and at other times intensify, traumatic effects on cities and urban populations, which both Dave Eggers's *Zeitoun* (2009) and David Simon and Eric Overmyer's *Treme* (2009–13) undertake to foreground.

Johannes Voelz places Michel Foucault's security dispositif in dialogue with a literary image of security mechanisms derived from city literature to examine the management of circulation in cities; rather than simply confirm the presence of a security dispositif, Voelz explicates the limitations of security theory as applied to literary fiction, which, he argues, evinces a structural need for moments of insecurity and free circulation. Approaching the question from a different angle, Andrew Pilsch crosses between science fiction, primarily Ann Leckie's *Imperial Radch* trilogy, and speculative theoretical interventions into urban systems, notably Benjamin Bratton's *The Stack* (2016), to limn the possibilities of an intelligent city no longer conceived, as it long has been for philosophers, planners, social scientists, and literary critics, as a spatial expression of Western humanism. Douglas Reichert Powell closes the section with an "outsider" view that argues for the importance of dialogue between urban studies and critical regionalism. While aesthetic regionalisms of the first half of the twentieth century regarded the city as the threatening Other of, the nation's regional cultures, Powell deploys critical regionalism's practice of relation to diversify Appalachia and to relate it to the Rust Belt, inner cities, and the principally urban media ecology whose representations significantly determine how these regions are perceived via Appalachian artists' and writers' critical engagements with J. D. Vance's monolithic construction of Appalachian culture in *Hillbilly Elegy*, a polemical memoir published in 2016 and quickly embraced by pundits as explaining the year's

presidential election. The volume closes, with a coda that asks what American literary history may teach us about the practice of democracy as an undertaking of collective self-governance and an ethical orientation toward others.

Despite best editorial efforts, three planned chapters did not materialize. A chapter on the narratives of urban form and city life that have guided urban planning and the cities they created – such as the City Beautiful’s emphasis on unifying the whole and creating public space, the City Efficient’s emphasis on speed and commerce, the Garden City’s and New Urbanism’s nostalgic communitarianism, Jane Jacobs’s city of neighborhoods – would have highlighted the context implicit in the literary and cinematic texts discussed here. The other two chapters concern subjects nevertheless discussed elsewhere in this volume. African American writers, directors, and African American urban experience are, indeed, well represented throughout the volume, but the literary, visual, and musical history of the African American city, its Afrofuturist projections, and the struggle for rights and recognition, in the forefront as I write in the month after the police murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, deserves the sustained attention of a chapter.²¹

Likewise, issues potentially germane to the topic of ecological criticism are notably developed in Sean Grattan’s extended treatment of Kim Stanley Robinson’s climate crisis novel, Arin Keeble’s discussion of two Hurricane Katrina narratives, Sophia Bamert and Hsuan Hsu’s engagements with environmental racism, and Ruth Salvaggio’s ecopoetic approach to New Orleans as a rim city, the last of which takes us notably beyond the frame of the city as degraded space common to much American ecocriticism, perhaps a legacy of the agrarian exceptionalism that has run through the disciplinary imaginaries of American studies and American literary studies and a strand of urbanist thought stretching from the garden city to New Urbanism.²²

If the political and cultural divide between urban and rural provides something of an occasion for this volume, some caveats must be enumerated. First, if conservatives are now foremost in denigrating cities, there have been – and still remain – significant strains of left anti-urbanism. Second, as Reichert Powell rightly cautions, no region is nearly as homogeneous as this dichotomy would have it, and third, rural American regions, notably Appalachia, have been dogged by accounts of pathological monoculture similar to the diagnoses proffered for inner-city poverty.

With respect to the first caution, the historiography of American literary history and the disciplinary history of American studies reveal a tradition of