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The New York Housing Crisis and the Urbanisation of Literary Consciousness in the Era of Reaganomics

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Introduction: for a new literary pedagogy

In *Suburban Ambush: Downtown Writing and The Fiction of Insurgency*, Robert Siegle takes a sweeping, comprehensive look at the New York-based writing of the 1980s and, in the analytical spirit of the times, i.e. 1989 when his book was published, concludes that 'downtown writing will continue to be fun, surprising us with the new possibilities it generates out of the post-structural paradigm within which it works. Part of that fun', he goes on to say on a jocular tone, 'is its challenge to those of us in academia to get into our classrooms intelligently and its insights into our theoretical notions and critical practice. And just as soon as I get the back of my house painted and my shed cleared out, I plan to try a bit of that fun.' (Siegle 1989: 401)

To inflict this detached 'white picket fence' type vision on a kind of writing that was, in great part, engagingly and dissentingly urban is an unfortunate erasure of the 'spatialised politics' that went into its making in the first place. And what better demystification of postmodernist categories than the subtitles which *Between C and D*, the alphabet / Lower East Side magazine, proposes for its issues subversively named: Post-modernist, Post-narrative, Post-narcotic, Post-Literate, Neo-expressionist Lower East Side Fiction Magazine. To paraphrase the quintessentially postmodernist John Barth, Siegle gets lost in the funhouse of his own critical enterprise and fails to remember in the end that downtown writing, apart from being 'smart about ideology' or 'aggressive and reflexive in its uses of language and representation', or 'savvy about discourse and institutions' (1989: 388-393) is, first and foremost, 'downtown', in other words, spatially scaled in the buildings, the neighbourhood and the city where it was produced and received. Thus, recuperating its urban dimensions and salvaging it from suburban ideologies of consent and compliance, becomes a mandatory project, to be taken, yet again, to classroom intelligently.

1. Scales of urbanised consciousness: theoretical endorsements

In this respect, David Harvey's *Consciousness and the Urban Experience* seems to be the best place to start. In very brief, it recounts the history of 'capitalism's successful self-reproduction' through accelerated urbanisation, following the lead of the French Marxist geographer, Henri Lefrebvre in *The Production of Space*. Given the suture between capitalist expansion and the production of the urban, he posits that it is

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imperative to analyse urban space as 'the primary level at which individuals experience, live out and react to the totality of social transformations and structures in the world around them.' (Harvey 1985: 251) Furthermore, in order to carry out the obligatory 'dissection of the urban process', one needs to 'lay bare the roots of consciousness formation in the material realities of daily life.' (Harvey 1985: 251) Arguably, these modes of consciousness formation take shape at the intersection between the circuits of money and capital and five basic loci of power: individualism, especially the individualist uses of money, class appurtenance, the community, the state and the family. The most productive and ambivalent of these is the community due to its capacity to yield collective forms of consciousness that are either 'consistent with or antagonistic to capital accumulation' and more importantly, with consequences upon the other symbolic loci. Notably, the meanings of each site of power as well as the conditions for consciousness formation at different stages in the urbanisation process alter spatially as well as historically.

Thus, I am proposing a concept-stretching of Harvey's notion of urban consciousness formation to analyse the written actualisations and functions of 'literary' consciousness, which coagulates as well as disperses the communities of writers in New York City during the Reaganite pedigree of capitalism. More specifically, I am concerned with the ways in which writers on the Lower East Side, Manhattan's final urban frontier in the 1980s, reject the homogenising and homogeneous qualities of (abstract) space, and thus do not take the production of the urban at face value nor embrace the space of the city as a merely inert container or backdrop. On the contrary, they seek to represent the spatial scales of the building, the street, the neighbourhood and the city from the 'trenches' of resistance against gentrification, eviction, squalor, homelessness, unemployment, the rise of the underclass through increasing segmentation of poverty into poor and very poor, in short, against the ever expanding communities of finance and real estate. A number of writers in 1980s New York confront head-on the avatars of the urban and release the fictional representation of space from its fetishist shackles, by way of dwelling on the urban as a dynamic process rather than as ossified space. It follows then, that its literary critique ought to urbanise, as it were, its own modes of consciousness and enquiry through recourse to debates in urban sociology and cultural geography. Employing postmodernist and poststructuralist perspectives, the most common of all fetishist visions, in order to qualify and evaluate New York City writing suffers from insufficiency and inappropriateness because it severs this writing, very crudely, from the actual material conditions of its production and relegates it merely to experimentalist avant-gardism, a radicalism that remains unexplained and unaccounted for.

Another productive concept from urban sociology that is amenable to a cultural re-inscription refers to the constitution of the 'local' as a nodal point in extra-local networks such as trends in the national and global economy, the organisation of the international labour market, the resurgent real estate industry, regional community activism, changes in the city's demographic composition, municipal and federalist policies. Indeed, as Michael Peter Smith (2001) demonstrates, the local defies boundary-settings and is a 'transversal site' of resistance, contestation but also compliance and complicity where the power and meaning of place and identity are always under revision. [1] In other words, macro-forces are best apprehended in micro-terms and experientially contained at the scale of the individual, the building, the street and the neighbourhood. In *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed and How They Fail*, Frances Fox Piven (1979) argues that 'people experience deprivation and oppression in concrete settings not as the end product of large and

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abstract processes, and it is their concrete experience that moulds their discontent into specific grievances against specific targets. People on relief experience the shabby waiting rooms, the overseer, the caseworker and the dole. They do not experience American social welfare policy. Tenants experience the leaking ceiling and the cold radiators and they recognize the landlord [but] they do not recognise the banking, real estate and construction system' (Piven 1979: 20). Piven's point about the significance of social location for the design of a politics of defiance may be brought to bear upon the Lower East Side writers' very own socio-economic and spatial location. In other words, low rent housing, squalid residence, homelessness and squatting represent a crucial structural, experiential position which makes these writers' creative efforts exceptionally prone to dissenting literature. This writing is legitimised by the specificities of this experience and, in turn legitimises it.

2. The literary regime of Lower East Side housing practices

Out of the local sectors that are deeply affected by Reaganite 'voodoo economics', I am singling out the housing one, for two main reasons. Firstly, the arts as a whole are used as a strategic driving force of spatial appropriation and domination in the process of gentrification, revamping of the neighbourhood whilst they also constitute a symbolic locus of resistance to speculative real estate manoeuvres, in housing-for-all, anti-poverty and anti-homelessness campaigns. Writers on the Lower East Side take on board the difficult task of opposing the uses of the arts as an instrument of gentrification and redevelopment. In *New York City Notebooks*, Hungarian writer George Konrad writes an eulogy to W.H. Auden's life in New York with an eye to this double bind of culture as both resistant to and compliant with gentrification. 'Auden lived here on St. Mark's place, in no 77. This was the place he chose for himself. The East Village as opposed to the West Village, is now along with Soho and the downtown, the avant-garde of the avant-garde. The wedge moves through the city followed by the bourgeoisie and the established art and the academic world. The artists go in first, they occupy the industrial sections, the poor sections, the ruined buildings, the lofts. Little restaurants begin to open and the street goes more colourful. Then they are evicted and the galleries take their place. *Capital supports, capital squeezes out. Capital loves bohemia.*' (Konrad 1989: 58) Here, Konrad, just like Harvey earlier on, represents the production of urban neighbourhoods as the thinning out of scalar boundaries through the spatially expansive movement of capital and the restructuring of urban environment under its very own guise. The city built in the image of capital is a historically transformative process with the arts, wittingly or less so, at the helm. That this becomes an ironically inverted dedication to a writer who was central to the formation of bohemia in Manhattan is by no means haphazard but highlights the centrality of literary actors in the production of urban space.

Secondly, the urbanisation of writerly consciousness, be it individual or collective, is most strongly motivated and beefed up by housing practices, for life and writing on the Lower East Side are inextricably entangled with residential blight, abandonment, arson, evictions, DIY homesteading projects. In other words, the 'housing moment' of the 1980s is most radical in its socio-spatial manifestations and features the production of a reformative consciousness via 'low rent' urban culture, that is commensurate with the inner city housing projects on the Lower East Side. [2] The outlook on the relationship between housing and writing in keeping with a 'creative destruction' principle enables a reconsideration of the housing crisis in the

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1980s as a positive, rather than negative, possibility. The full range of fictional and non-fictional writings in New York City exemplifies this productive, cultural u-turn in urban crisis. The proliferation of represented spaces becomes as much an indicator of crisis as its outcome. Quantitatively, Peter Marcuse suggests, clusters of real or imagined stories of urban crisis and decline abound at 'critical breaking points; and the 1980s are, beyond doubt, watershed years in the city's history of housing. [3] Thus, *I take the representation of houses and housing practices to be constituent of the housing system per se, by virtue of its being an ideological solution, resolution and avoidance of its in-built contradictions and crises*. [4]

The 1980s do witness the ethnographic construction of housing via documentary, journalistic and fictionalised representations with different foci of concern. Major papers and magazines like *The New York Times, East Village Eye, Village Voice, Soho Weekly News* dedicate extensive expository and analytical space to the housing situation. The crisis also gave birth to *City Limits,* the magazine of housing activism which shows that changes in the physical and social architecture of residence epitomised by the tenement call for *changes in the tactics of appropriation, re-appropriation and domination* of this material space by *all* the actors on the housing stage. Originally standing for the 'container' of the poor, the tenement thus becomes the front-line of the struggle for housing.

By the same token, there is a proliferation of urban cultural magazines – going hand in hand with the increase in the number of small presses - most of them combining various media of expression from drawings, paintings and photography to poetry, fiction and even socio-geographical analyses like the article on the Tompkins Square Riots by geographer Neil Smith published in the *Portable Lower East Side* (Smith 1989). *Between C and D* and *The Portable Lower East Side* are almost exclusively dedicated to poetry and story telling. They aim to perform the role of literary urban manifestoes. Joel Rose and Catherine Texier, the editors of Between C and D argue for a sustained 'urban archaeology' which the writers in their magazine seek to perform, 'choosing to explore the underside of life, the frontier where the urban fabric is wearing thin and splitting open.' (1988: xi) Texier joins in with her numbered 'Scenes from New York Life' series whilst Rose publishes in the magazine chunks of his novel *Kill the Poor* which tells the story of a tenants corporation on the outer fringes of the Lower East Side. If urban archaeology is the essence of Between C and D, The Portable Lower East Side defines its urban consciousness in terms of a 'low rent' ethos, which Kurt Hollander, the editor of the magazine, proposes as its common denominator. 'Low rent' writing is the ground zero of literary activism and resistance against the upsurge in speculative real estate redevelopment, overtly sponsored by the conservative policies of the Reaganite federal regime and Edward Koch's municipal administration. [5] Hollander's review that 'low rent' prose is 'the proof of how *great culture* tends to follow low rent' may be easily disputed given the highbrow connotation of 'great culture' which reinforces the low-high binary that he is trying to dismantle in the first place. (Hollander 1994: xvi) It must be acknowledged that much of the prose and poetry on the Lower East Side does not reach beyond the place and moment of its composition and fabricates an enclosed, segregationist representation of the neighbourhood; also, some does qualify as junk literature. However, most of the writing is noteworthy because it builds up the terrain of personal and collective struggles, which constitute the very definition of life in the neighbourhood. Moreover, it has the merit to draw attention to the modes of social interaction and differentiation, to the constructions of peripheral identities within a highly heterogeneous and divisive community thrown, almost against its will, on a housing stage under the command of capital. These stories speak to

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pressing urban and housing questions about the "standardisation" of residential blight inflicted upon the Manhattanite lowly, the peripheral groups, dubbed, in the most recent sociological idiom, the *underclass*, largely Latin American and Asian. *The Portable Lower East Side* dedicates a number of special issues to Songs of the City (subversively titled so), the Eastern European, Asian and Latin American Communities of writers, and one to the 'Crimes of the City'. An expression of collective consciousness and daily struggles in the 'urban trenches', to use Ira Katznelson's phrase, these magazines do not enter into competition with one another on the New York writing scene. Their marketing strategies are meant to subdue marketing principles as such and their contributing writers – amongst them Ed Sanders, John Farris, Patrick McGrath, Lynne Tillman, Ron Kolm, Huber Selby, David Wojnarowicz, Jerome Charyn, to name only a few - migrate from one magazine to the other and thus coagulate a heterogenous writerly community and a differential writerly space, that is coterminous with the space of the community.

A last point I would like to make and which I signalled briefly at the beginning is that the formation and reformation of urban consciousness is not only spatially determined but it also evolves historically. The oldest housing projects on the Lower East Side bear the names of the two most important 19th century housing activists and documenters: Lilian Wald, who extensively worked with the Charity Organisation Society in the latter half of the century and Jacob Riis, whose *How the Other Half Lives* remains, even for the writers of Reagantown, the representation of the tenement and its housing practices, par excellence. *How the Other Half Lives* is the socially conscious materialisation of Rii's inner city flâneries and, more significantly, the writing imperative derivative of the first widespread housing epidemic in the 1880s. He astutely placed the tenement at the heart of the city's real problems whilst he also identified it, quite insightfully, as the very solution to those problems. The tenement was a new site in New York's architecture of residence and already ridden by aggravating crises. 'The tenement has come to stay', writes Riis, 'and must itself be the solution of the problem with which it confronts us. This is the fact from which we cannot get away however we may deplore it.' (Riis 1957: 215) Not only does this point to the cyclicality of crises in the housing sector, which literature ought to take heed of and in doing so 'harvest the justice', but it also equates the state of the tenement with a perennial state of decline and, by way of extent, with a constant state of struggle by its residents seeking to get out of the residential mire. In the 1880s, Riis writes a cautionary tale that downtown writers, one hundred years later, will take up again and redraw it in keeping with a new stage in the city's urbanisation process.

Conclusion

The discussion sketched above is merely a glimpse into a larger project on the spatial reformation of literary modes of critical reflection regarding urban narratives. Its stated aim is to provide a space of representation, in Henri Lefebvre's terms, a kind of spatialised knowledge of 'textual' urbanism, which is as much grounded in the practices of urbanism as it is infused with symbolic, yet still publicly available and publicly circulated, urban (use) values. The writing on the Lower East Side during the gentrification decade of the 1980s presents us with such a 'textual' platform, which is a singular opportunity to rehabilitate literary studies amongst geographers; in other words, to show that a literary aesthetic of spatial relations *is* possible, one which does not fetishise space through an all too excessive postmodern (or spatially

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postmortem) figuralism but engages with its productive processes and does not hesitate to unravel them.

Notes

[1] On the redefinition of the everyday in urban settings, see the chapter 'Re-presenting the Local: Beyond Communitarian Metaphors' in Michael Peter Smith's *Transnational Urbanism*, pp. 101-123.
[2] See Janet Abu-Lughod's *New York, Chicago, Los Angeles. America's Global Cities.*. In her history of New York City, she dates the moment of the formation of 'civic consciousness' back in the 1930s when the New Deal city model –based on actor and state participation – is implemented and 'First Houses', the first public housing in New York City, built up.
[3] Marcuse (1996: 191) discusses 'advanced homelessness' as the main feature of the transition to the post-Fordist city. Amongst the quantitative data in support of his thesis, he lists the proliferation of stories about homelessness in *The New York Times*. This is a very productive finding for the purposes of my demonstration insofar as the resurgence of writing informed and informing the housing situation in the 1980s is concerned.
[4] More on the question of idelogy and representation see Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious,* in the chapter ‚On Interpretation', pp. 71-2.
[5] See Kurt Hollander's 'Introduction' to *The Portable Lower East Side*, his insider's critique of one of the most controversial cultural projects on the Lower East Side.

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