

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

JOHANNE SLOAN (ED.), *Urban Enigmas: Montreal, Toronto, and the Problem of Comparing Cities*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007, xi + 298 p.

Urban Enigmas is an edited collection of articles based on a collaborative research project, *The Culture of Cities*, undertaken between 2000 and 2005. Utilizing the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, art history, communication and film studies, and literature, this book claims to initiate a distinctive approach both to the city and to culture. The focus of the analysis is on the idiographic qualities and cultural peculiarities of Montreal and Toronto in the face of the convergent forces of globalization.

The volume opens by situating the problem of comparing cities in theoretical and methodological terms. The contributors then move on to a comparative analysis of selected cultural scenes of urban life in Toronto and Montreal, mainly within the contexts of Quebec and Canada, but also with references to global forces. The volume ends by once again taking up the methodological challenges of the theorization of cities.

Urban Enigmas presents some contemporary re-articulations of theoretical contributions primarily by Georg Simmel, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Walter Benjamin. The book begins by Alan Blum's philosophical treatise on conceptualizing the identity of cities and the function that comparison plays in forming identity. Bringing together Simmel's concept of individuality and Benjamin's comments on the mimetic faculty, Blum conceives identity as being constantly constructed through a dialectical tension between seeking resemblance and difference, as "an animistic relation to the self and the other" (47). It is here that comparison gains its momentum: the question of our (cities') identity/individuality always necessitates comparison and rests upon our (cities') need to make a place (difference) in an ever homogenizing world. Accordingly, for Blum, the comparison of cities is not limited to scholarly practices. It is also an ordinary social practice, implicit in everyday encounters, in the stories of city visitors and those which accompany homecomings. These comparative narratives embody certain interests in emplacement, hence are fundamentally a comparison between home and other places. Blum remains unclear on how one could systematically analyze these diverse narratives, except for proposing "the comparison of places as a mutual honouring of peculiarities" (17). While the gist of his argument correctly accentuates that city dwellers and the city are mutually constitutive, in the absence of a critical consideration of "the city" as a material, socio-

political construct, Blum's philosophical articulations risk essentializing the city, culture, and identity.

Grounding Blum's philosophy in cultural sciences, Jean-Francois Coté offers an epistemological perspective for conceptualizing contemporary cities in order to decipher their cultural uniqueness. Coté criticizes political economy approaches – for what he assumes – as their unwillingness to focus on cities' cultural particularities. He argues that combining Simmel's aesthetic definitions of the city as a portrait with Bakhtin's literary theory of chronotope is valuable in reviving idiographic orientations. As this would permit one not only to aesthetically analyze the city as a chronotope, but also depict the chronotopes of the city, which attests many different cultural temporalities and spatialities that coexist in any particular moment of the city's existence. Nonetheless, the conflation of the "cultures" of cities – as the title of his article reads – into the "culture" of cities, which is the focus of the article, may leave readers confused. The latter is seen as the embodiment of the dialectics between identity and difference in the process of regeneration of the ways that cities are experienced. It also gives birth to representations that belong to a cultural tradition which forms the process of civilization. Here, civilization turns into a vague, yet repeated, concept which often appears to stand for Western civilization.

Kevin Dowler closes the first part by emphasizing the socio-psychological conditions under which comparison is practiced. He does so through juxtaposing the double appearances of Marseilles in Walter Benjamin's essays: "Marseilles" (1929) and "Hashish in Marseilles" (1932). In "Marseilles," Benjamin levies a harsh judgment upon the city for its refusing to surrender itself to the flaneur's strategies or simply for being "the other" (the proletarian) of the bourgeois, bohemian Paris. Once intoxicated by hashish, Benjamin shows an altogether different disposition toward the city in his latter text. There, the proletarian ugliness of Marseilles suddenly "appears as the true reservoir of beauty" (102). Dowler's reading analyzes the mediatory role of imagination and desire in relation to (false) consciousness, as well as the relationship between material space and disposition in making sense of place and in organizing differences between places. He weds Benjamin's double-Marseilles to the radical contingency and uncertainty of meaning in the Zizekian sense: "the anxiety of the potential recognition of the lack of certainty" (95), upon which, most often, identity (hence difference, hence comparison) and clichés are based.

The case studies begin by Michael Darroch's and Jean-François Morissette's examination of linguistic experiences and the cultures of language use in Montreal and Toronto. They explore *The Dragonfly of Chicoutimi* (1995), a bilingual play which was staged in both cities, yet by different directors and at different times. Building upon Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia, they examine the relation of language to place in the action of the play; audiences' reaction to the plays in each city as articulated in journalistic criticisms; and the way the relation of language to place was staged differently by Montreal- and Toronto-based directors. While in

Montreal the threat of identity loss got the momentum, in Toronto the thrust was the phobia of linguistic assimilation. Readers without a knowledge of French will find this chapter a bit confusing as the authors have assumed their readers would be French-English bilingual.

Looking into the cultures of urban laughter and publicly voiced opinions about civic amalgamations in each city, Greg M. Nielsen investigates how state-sponsored broadcasts discursively form and represent national identities and local politics in the name of national unity. He examines the weekly CBC radio series *Royal Canadian Air Farce* (1972-96) and the year-end Radio-Canada television comedy *Le BYE BYE* (1968-98). Simmel's definitions of objective and subjective cultures and Bakhtin's concepts of answerability and dialogism are deployed to analyze how nation(s) are imagined in the cultures of urban laughter, and how debates over local democracy in each city are utilized for negotiating citizenship within and beyond the nation. These urban cultures differentiate two very unique normative horizons for imagining the nation(s). Yet neither is aware of what the other is laughing about, hence the normalization of everyday racism and sexism – aspects which Nielsen does not deal with in critical depth.

Chapters by Nicolas Demaria Harney, Johanne Sloan, and Dipti Gupta and Janine Marchessault are among the most comprehensive case studies in this volume. Using ethnographic examples related to Italian Canadians in Montreal and Toronto, Harney links the spatiality of ethnic processes regarding the production and use of space to the ways ethnic groups are socially organized. He shows how the deterritorializing processes of globalization necessitate reterritorializing and how the latter are located not only within the discursive territory of Canadian multiculturalism and Quebec nationalism but also within the different diasporic projects originating in various regions of Italy. Italian immigrants in both cities exhibit striking similarities in their uses of and claims to space. Three modes of place-making are analyzed: individual, collective, and corporate. In one way or another, all these spatial practices and constructed social spaces valorize particular “authenticities” by normalizing ideologies of the dominant institutions which aim to ensure a coherent, traditional, and patriarchal narrative about being Italian in Canada.

The possibility of articulating critical interventions in the historical consciousness of a city by means of public art is Sloan's focused theme. She examines the projects of two artist groups during the 1980s: *Public Access* in Toronto, and *Fleming and Lapointe* in Montreal. Sloan explores how the category of alternative public art has been constituted and how this was interpreted in the two cities during the time when Montreal's economic slump, material disintegration, and inexpensive lifestyle stood vis-à-vis Toronto's visible prosperity, expansion, and gentrification. Both groups critically engaged their artistic works with the social, everyday urban environment of their respective cities. Yet the material disparities between the two cities resulted in *Public Access*'s questioning Toronto's

virtual space of commercialization, while Fleming and Lapointe re-animated the neglected materiality of Montreal.

The commodification of urban culture is scrutinized by Gupta's and Marchessault's article on Canada's two largest film festivals: the Toronto International Film Festival and Montreal's Festival des Films du Monde. Some of the complex mechanisms that these mega-events employ to negotiate with each city's unique cultural aspects are examined in relation to the kinds of public cultures which they produce within their respective urban centres. Their study highlights how the festivals' eventual prosperity or the lack thereof have been related to their incorporating or neglecting the institutionalized cultures of each city. Montreal's and Toronto's festivals are differentiated by how they have engaged with their respective locales and how the rhetoric of internationalism has been capitalized and exchanged within each societal culture.

Jenny Burman focuses on idiosyncratic manifestations of cultural differences in the two cities. She proposes the concept of "diasporic city" for addressing a change in the appropriation of urban spaces by hybridized residents (à la Homi Bhabha) with dynamic attachments to transnational collectivities. This conceptualization is rationalized through her interpretations of some recent examples of popular music and film produced in the two cities by artists with non-European cultural affiliations. While "multicultural" is conceived solely within its ideological connotations, "diasporic" is understood in terms of the opposition/indifference to the former (265). Montreal is seen to be more committed to a bicultural multicultural rhetoric, shunting its so-called allophones into cultural margins, whereas Toronto is perceived as an influx, diasporic city. Burman's hypothesizing "diasporization" overlooks questions of race, gender, and class, which play imperative roles in the social construction of any collective imagination, diasporic or otherwise.

And finally, Kieran Bonner ends the volume by questioning the kind of writing that might do justice to the culture of cities through reading the travel essays of Jan Morris on Montreal and Toronto. Morris rejects a high degree of theorization about urban experience in favour of an immediate and personal testimony. Juxtaposing Morris's approach with global city discourses (particularly Saskia Sassen) and the nostalgia of the new urbanism, Bonner calls for orientations which privilege the concept of place in theorization.

Despite the book's claim to represent an interdisciplinary study of urban culture, it reads more like an eclectic collection. In the absence of any concluding chapter, readers remain uncertain as to what one does with conclusions pointing mostly to local differences. For those familiar with the vast literature on cities, the book does not appear successful in articulating a critical theoretical synthesis. Indeed, the claimed distinctiveness of the volume might only be its rejection of Marxist and political economy analyses in favor of more culturalist approaches consistent with post-structuralist trends. This is particularly true in the

chapters by Alan Blum, Jean-Francois Coté, and Kieran Bonner. While the case studies would be appealing for their outlining the empirical diversity of local urban cultures, only some may help theoretically to illuminate the evolving nature of Canada's two main cities in the high age of globalized, neo-liberal capitalism.

Given the collection's content, readers from diverse backgrounds in the social sciences and humanities, who are interested in cultural aspects of the urban problematic, will find some useful insights here. Yet, the book is most accessible to those with graduate and higher-level educations. There are also some conceptual misassumptions, which carry significant political implications. The tenor of most chapters has implicated difference with local particularities and globalization with homogeneity and convergence. Time and time again, "the city" is conceived as an actor, an entity that acts, compares, and competes; thus an erasure of dominant socio-political groups which act in the name of a particular city. Furthermore, given that both Montreal and Toronto were settled as European colonies, other obvious missing descriptors are those of postcolonialism and postimperialism. One of the constructive aspects of this collective endeavor is, indeed, highlighting a need for more critical, comprehensive engagements with the contingency and particularity of global forces in our cities as valuable interventions in the politics of both explanation and praxis.

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