

Two Tales of A Single City - New Urban Cultural Studies Perspectives on New York City

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Abstract:

The monographs of James Peacock and Christoph Lindner both add to the urban studies scholarship on the city of New York, yet with two distinctly different foci and respective interdisciplinary approaches. James Peacock's *Brooklyn Fictions: The Contemporary Urban Community in a Global Age* marks the first treatment of the New York City borough of Brooklyn and literary representations of it as singular and separate from its dominant neighboring borough, Manhattan, thus closing a gap in existing scholarship on New York City. By contrast, Christoph Lindner's *Imagining New York City: Literature, Urbanism, and the Visual Arts, 1890-1940*, as should be apparent from its title, takes the whole city of New York as its field of inquiry while impressing with an innovative structure and a convincing interdisciplinary approach.

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Lindner, Christoph. *Imagining New York City: Literature, Urbanism, and the Visual Arts, 1890-1940*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. 240 S., broschiert, £19.49, ISBN 978-0195375152.

Peacock, James. *Brooklyn Fictions: The Contemporary Urban Community in a Global Age*. London: Bloomsbury, 2015. (Bloomsbury Studies in the City). 272 S., Hardcover, £59.99, ISBN 978-1441132536.

A great number of books have been written about the city of New York and its literary representations. Curiously, none has so far been exclusively concerned with the city's most populous borough, Brooklyn. As such, James Peacock's *Brooklyn Fictions: The Contemporary Urban Community in a Global Age* then marks the first monograph that exclusively and specifically deals with, as the book's very first sentence in the introduction reads, "books about Brooklyn" (1). Peacock states that there is no one single genre that "Brooklyn fictions" are made up of, but rather that they are characterized by "the diversity of their themes, genres, and narrative voices" (ibid.). Peacock covers a time spanning from the 1950s until today and discusses a diverse set of novels ranging from Jonathan Lethem's *The Fortress of Solitude* (2003) and Paul Auster's *The Brooklyn Follies* (2005) to lesser-known crime novels such as Reggie Nadelson's *Red Hook* (2005). To find a workable focus for his analysis Peacock structures his monograph along certain specific themes he identifies in his Brooklyn novels corpora. These themes include, for instance, race relations, immigration, and gentrification and authenticity.

Methodologically, Peacock's pioneering effort is coupled with his interdisciplinary approach of analysing representations of Brooklyn by making use of literary analysis and enriching it with the approaches of literary sociology and sociological theory by writers such as Gerard Delanty, John Urry, and Zygmunt Bauman. The book thereby usefully combines methods of literary criticism and sociology, synthesizing those approaches and using them to make light of the complexity of the real and imagined urban space of Brooklyn.

One of the most prolific characteristics of Brooklyn that Peacock identifies is connected to the borough's "vexed relationship with Manhattan" (7). As Peacock establishes in his first chapter, "A Small Town in a World City," Brooklyn has often been read as a place characterized by "local, small-town, somewhat old-fashioned community values," and contrasted with Manhattan's "obsessive aspiration" (18). This establishes the central importance of the concept of

“community” within the discourse about Brooklyn which Peacock traces and reads in the “Brooklyn fictions”. Peacock then uses his remaining chapters to show, by using different Brooklyn novels as case studies, the prevalence of the idea of “community” and how it is used to fashion a certain specific imaginary of Brooklyn. To substantiate his main claim, Peacock stresses Miranda Joseph’s ideas in *Against the Romance of Community* (2002) in which she claims that “community, far from being separable temporally, spatially, and conceptually from global capital, is constituted by it” (28).

An exemplary reading of this can be found in chapter 5, entitled “Old Frontiers and New Picturesques - Fictions of Brooklyn Gentrification.” Peacock discusses various novels dealing with gentrification, beginning with Paula Fox’s 1970 *Desperate Characters* and L.J. Davis’ *A Meaningful Life* (1971), and going on to Joanna Smith Rakoff’s *A Fortunate Age* (2009) and Amy Sohn’s *Prospect Park West* (2009), among others. Here Peacock demonstrates how “certain novels of gentrification [...] rely on a picturesque idea of Brooklyn community as quirky and village-like in contrast to sleek, urban Manhattan” (25). Thus, Peacock manages to thoroughly discard and deconstruct a powerful myth about Brooklyn, namely that of the “small town in a world city.”

As Peacock writes in his introduction, “the sheer number of Brooklyn novels published in the last century [...] make a fully comprehensive study impossible” (1). By selecting certain works along proliferating themes within those texts, *Brooklyn Fictions* manages to capture many of the most prevalent narratives and discourses about Brooklyn today. Although one cannot help but think that broadening and opening up his primary source material beyond the scope of novels might have benefitted the convincing power of his argument about Brooklyn, *Brooklyn Fictions* nonetheless constitutes an important contribution to the study of cities, their representations in general, and New York City and especially Brooklyn in particular.

The title of Christoph Lindner’s monograph *Imagining New York City: Literature, Urbanism and the Visual Arts, 1890-1940* already points at the similarities the book shares with *Brooklyn Fictions*, while at the same time spelling out the main differences compared to Peacock’s contribution. Whereas Peacock focuses on Brooklyn as a distinguishable borough within New York City, Lindner’s scope is the city as a whole and thus seems adamant on taking the reader on a journey to all of the city’s distinct boroughs and neighborhoods. Nevertheless, the emphasis within the book is on Manhattan, overshadowing all other boroughs and thus staying within the history of the preferential treatment Manhattan has received in scholarship on New York City numerous times before.

Methodologically, like Peacock’s work, Lindner’s book constitutes a further interdisciplinary effort and thus combines approaches from literary study with visual culture and the study of material culture, thereby convincingly mastering the task of interpreting its vast variety of different primary source materials, ranging from “literature, film, visual art, architecture [...], and

urban planning and design” (9). Lindner also makes use of the concept of the “urban imaginary” as used by Lefebvre, Soja, and Andreas Huyssen, among others – an early indication of the importance of spatiality and spatial thinking for Lindner’s argumentation and analysis.

This is also apparent in the structure Lindner chooses for his book. He divides his book into two major subsections connected to two complementary spatial perspectives on New York City: the first chapter on the vertical perspective is entitled “Skylines,” and following it is a chapter on its horizontal counterpart, “Sidewalks,” and how both have “come to emblemize key aspects of the modern urban condition” (ibid.). Lindner argues that New York City has frequently been “constructed, experienced and imagined along vertical and horizontal lines, a dynamic [...] particularly conspicuous during the boom years of architectural and infrastructural modernization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (ibid.).

In “Skylines,” Lindner analyses how the modern skyline developed in New York City and how it “acquired symbolic and cultural significance” (10). Lindner conceives of the New York City skyline as a “highly unstable space to read and interpret” (ibid.) while showing how this figures in novels, visual arts, photography, film, urban planning, and design. He traces this lineage of the modern skyline up to Daniel Libeskind’s design for the World Trade Center’s redevelopment, reading Libeskind’s planned Freedom Tower as a “space for liberation and renewal” (53), distinguishing itself from earlier manifestations of high-rise New York which were often represented in “terms of congestion and deformity” (ibid.).

In the chapter “Sidewalks,” Lindner contrasts this with an analysis of the ways in which New York City can be read and interpreted in its horizontality. He analyses different “sidewalk practices” – such as “window shopping, street-walking [...] and crowd watching” – and combines those readings with deliberations on diverse phenomena, such as the New York Subway, tenement housing as represented in Stephen Crane’s novel *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893), Jakob A. Riis’ photography, and the fairly recently built High Line Park in Manhattan. Lindner reads the park as offering a re-configured space for the urban practice of “street-walking” and thus considers it as a “reinvention of the urban promenade” (175) as well as a nostalgic reimagining of a “bygone era of industrial urbanism” (174).

By juxtaposing the vertical and horizontal dimensions of the urban imaginary of New York City and by analysing his many examples in an incisive and rigorous manner, Lindner crafts a convincing argument about the importance and prevalence of the spatial dimension of the imaginary to our understanding and configuration of New York City.

Both *Brooklyn Fictions* and *Imagining New York City* succeed in contributing novel ways of “reading” and analysing New York City, adding new layers and ideas to already existing scholarship on the city. Their well-executed interdisciplinary approaches, rich analyses, and structural inventiveness combine for two tales of a single city that make for worthwhile and insightful reading for anyone interested in New York City or cultural representations of urban spaces, in general.