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Prologue: Urban Hermeneutics and the Problem of the Fetish Space

Quotation has mediation as its essence, if not its primary concern, and claims for objectivity and accuracy are made in relation to representations of representations, not representations of truth. The effect of this has tended to be a closure at the level of representation, which substantially leaves aside the investigation of power relations and their agencies... Pointing to the existence of a received system of meaning, a defining practice, quotation can reveal the thoroughly social nature of our lives.

—Martha Rosler, “Notes on Quotes,” Wedge 2, 1982

Reading about New York City is undoubtedly a labor of intellectual seduction and fascination. Given the growing number of studies on the topic, writing about New York, on the other hand, is bound to be a labor of intellectual reformation: the geographical, cultural, historical reconstruction of knowledge, of the meaning of socio-spatial relations and their representation, whereby the city becomes a currency of interdisciplinary exchange. It is this spirit of interdisciplinary inquiry that governs my project on the politics of urban space in late-twentieth century New York writing, a project comfortably wedged between two significant urban moments in the history of the city: the fiscal crisis of the mid-1970s and the market crash of October 1987. Reformed Geographies, however, is not just about today’s fashionable spirit of interdisciplinary work; it is primarily about a change of critical paradigm, a mode of making different, more complex sense of New York literary and nonliterary “quotations” combined. The book thus produces a critical space that relates meaningfully to multiple spaces of knowledge and representation: urban geography, sociology, history, politics, and not least, the structures of urban experience conserved in archives, in literary or
cultural representations. The production of this interspersed space of knowledge and critique, distilled from selected New York urban literature, relies on the thorough examination of the power relations that underlie the circulation of “quotations” within—and without—their primary disciplinary field, as per Rosler’s opening reflection. 1

My goal is to challenge the emergent field of literary geography with its largely indiscriminate uses of spatial or urban theories, of methodological tools and concepts collected from various strands of geographical research. These borrowings and reformulations do not always take heed of competing, contesting, or alternative discourses within geography; and the consequences are by no means negligible. Such interdisciplinary tentativeness may in fact overlook significant socio-spatial and urban issues that the literary representation of urban space addresses, and may thus belittle the value of literary social constructions as geographical or urban fieldwork.

Through this labor of reconstruction, I hope to solve the need for a revised literary urban hermeneutic, predicated upon interdisciplinary mitigation, a need that arises—conveniently, yet not haphazardly—out of a much-cited literary work: Paul Auster’s *The New York Trilogy*. *City of Glass*, the trilogy’s first act, allegorizes, in a compelling manner, the urban voyeur’s changes in perspective, from his crude oblivion to urban processes to the final realization that the city is the product of social relations and practices. Grounding my project in Auster’s fiction, and mimicking its framing, indicates two strategies of research. First, I propose a critical and incorporated New York trilogy based on the close reading of three novels that are central to my book: Don DeLillo’s *Great Jones Street* (1973), Joel Rose’s *Kill the Poor* (1988), and Jay McInerney’s *Brightness Falls* (1992). This alternative, three-act interpretation mirrors a historical continuum that began in the mid-1970s with the advent of a new regime of economic accumulation, of social and political regulation, named post-Fordism, postindustrialism, or disorganized capitalism. The hallmark of late capitalism is the finance, insurance, and real estate (FIRE) industry, which was the engine of New York’s urban development in the second half of the twentieth century. In the mid-1970s, not only did FIRE irreversibly replace the industrial basis of the city but it also came to be synonymous with the excessive financialization of urban praxis as well as with unfettered real estate speculation. This new industrial regime continued to develop during the 1980s when Ronald Reagan’s neoconservative federalism strengthened its impact and socio-spatial reach in unprecedented ways. The very first shockwave in this regime of accumulation, and dispossession, was the sudden
market crash of 1987, which is also the historical endpoint of my fictionalized trilogy.

Second, my “New York Trilogy Inc.,” as well as its “Mappings,” resignifies Manhattan away from, what I would like to call, a fetish (urban) space. The entire project unravels a multilayered mystification of the city: the urban, political, and social myths that permeate its governing (de)regulatory mechanisms and its historical descriptions; the cultural and literary understanding of New York as a “city of signs” or as reified construct; the solely figurative explanations of space and place; and not least, the mainly textualist, postmodernist interpretations of the (literary) city. Some of these reifications are inherently coded in Paul Auster’s “city of glass” trope; to decode the trope means to reveal the forces and processes that produce and reproduce the city as a composite of relational and intricate urban practices. While Auster’s tale constructs a kind of mystical urban semiotics whereby space is embedded in linguistic systems, and constituted through language and discourse, his story is also strewn with interpretative clues that may eventually help debunk the proverbial city of signs. The following is one possible journey of elucidation.

*City of Glass* relies on the combined potency of secrecy and revelation for its impact as an engaging narrative; the gradual design of a semiotic cartography of New York places the production of space at the core of the dual process of (re)search and discovery. In brief, Quinn, writer of mystery novels, is already in the midst of an unstable identity problem, torn between his authorial alter ego, William Wilson, the pseudonym under which he publishes, and his narrator Max Work, who makes an excellent fabricated role model. The plot thickens when Quinn is mistakenly called up to carry out the task of solving a mystery for Peter Stillman, the son of a former professor at Columbia University. The son had been his father’s guinea pig in an experiment on the relationship between linguistic development and the environment in order to have some primeval lingua franca restored to him through total spatial isolation. Quinn starts to play the role of Paul Auster, the detective, in search of Peter Stillman’s father who is about return to New York after years of absence following his imprisonment for the scarring and mutilation of his son. The story displays the kind of intricacy one always finds in well-written detective novels: mistaken identities, suspension of disbelief, interpretations of clues, missed opportunities, unsolvable judgments and dead-end roads, a tight focus on slippery character roles, and, in this case, a paradoxical denouement at which point “the story goes [even more] obscure. The
information has run out and the events that follow this sentence will never be known. It would be foolish even to hazard to guess.”

City of Glass is mainly concerned with the city qua Babel, with language and storytelling, and not least with solving the puzzles of identification: of Peter Stillman’s father and of Quinn's own persona. “The question is the story itself, and whether or not it means something is not for the story to tell,” (3) Auster tells us on the first page of the novel, turning the promise of urban representation, heralded by the title, into a narcissistic narrative. The story shows a strong penchant for other narratives, in other words for quotations outside the realm of urban socio-spatial relations. Quinn, his writing, and his detective investigation, become the paradigm of fictional narcissism whereby the relation between his stories, or Stillman’s story, and other stories takes precedence over ostensible linkages between the story and the world. Stillman’s own lab-like confinement of his son connotes this utopian dream of the total severance of spatial scales—the body/the room/the home versus the street/the urban—as well as a symbolic emptying of the productive, social, relational, and purposive contents of space, which define it in the first place.

The metafictional streak of the novel has a noticeable influence upon the representation of urban space. It lends to Quinn’s pleasurable and inquisitive movements across the space of the city a glass-like urban consciousness, which is oblivious to material urban realities. Quinn does possess an active spatial consciousness marked by his obsession with movement and with the self-sufficiency of bodily gestures, which movement implies. He carefully observes this in his own strolls across the grid of the city as well as in the tiniest moves that Stillman’s disabled son makes. Movement in itself is meaningful and separates the self from the space across which motion takes place. The reflective recording of the changes that movement through space triggers for the spatialized self is in itself a type of documentation that highlights the significance of movement as autonomous, yet disregards the body’s connection with the materiality of urban space or its place within a network of spatial relations.

New York was an inexhaustible space, a labyrinth of endless steps, and no matter how far he walked, no matter how well he came to know its neighborhoods and streets, it always left him with this feeling of being lost. Lost, not only in the city, but within himself as well. Each time he took a walk, he felt as though he were leaving himself behind, and by giving himself up to the movement of the streets, by reducing himself to a seeing eye, he was able to escape the obligation to think, and this, more than anything else, brought him a measure of peace,
a salutary emptiness within. The world was outside of him, around him, before him, and the speed with which it kept changing made it impossible for him to dwell on any one thing very long. Motion was of the essence . . . By wandering aimlessly, all places became equal, and it no longer mattered where he was. On his best walks, he was able to feel that he was nowhere. And this, finally, was all he ever asked of things: to be nowhere. New York was the nowhere he had built around himself, and he realized that he had no intention of ever leaving it again. (4)

The correlations between an ostensibly unlimited New York and the flâneur’s psychological experience of the city are evident in this description, which makes urban space both abstract and solipsistic. Documenting space as a mere construct of the mind is Quinn’s preferred mode of urban observation; yet, his spatial voyeurism is not just an inconsequentially aesthetic or psychological perspective. Even though aware of the transformative sweep in the urban landscape, he does not record the diverse socio-spatial relations and the changes in the built environment, so visible in New York’s neighborhoods during the 1980s. This deliberate nihilistic urban vision has the force to erase the differences between places and to even out an inherently differential and uneven city. His gaze performs and reproduces a malign function in relation to place and place-making, similar both to the mechanisms and the ideology of capital. Quinn assimilates decay and urban blight with blankness and emptiness, and since the seeing “I” cannot explain nor tolerate its contents, this space may be refuted and razed off by the gaze, and consequently by the “I.” In the same fashion, the gentrifying mechanisms of capital in New York actively controlled the systematic dilapidation of neighborhoods, their demolition, and subsequent revamping because urban space is constantly produced by the forces of capital “in [capital’s] image” and represents a necessary “fix” for the movement of capital.4 Therefore, the implications of the gaze for the production and reproduction of urban space may be less innocuous than a story about itself leads its readers to believe.

Quinn (and by way of consequence, Paul Auster) is unable to enact an observational and experiential shift from the abstract qualities of movement in space—space as the changing position of the body and space as emptiness that can be filled—to the intrinsic diversity, unevenness, and material complexity of the places he traverses and inhabits.5 Ever so slightly, his experience and idea of urban space change meaning once he starts to follow Stillman’s father and is constrained to write down every move Stillman makes, to map his spatial
motions onto the received, official maps of the city in order to anticipate a potentially vengeful return to his son. In his red notebook, he first charts part of the West Side, around his hotel, between the Hudson and Amsterdam Avenue, a perimeter large enough to allow for his centripetal wanderings. Once again, Quinn is imminently drawn toward spatial abstractions, since this is the map of the abstract space of the city, produced and controlled by real estate investments and zoning laws; it is historically fixed, seemingly stable, and hegemonic to boot. He then draws a number of juxtaposing maps, which correspond to the geometry covered by Stillman’s movement within this abstract space of the West Side. Nevertheless, in the act of reading these maps, Quinn remains bounded by a linguistic interpretation and construes these topoi as the encoding of the letters in the “Tower of Babel.”

True, he had created the letters by the movement of his steps, but they had not been written down. It was like drawing a picture in the air with your finger. The image vanishes as you are making it. There is no result, no trace to mark what you have done. And yet, the pictures did exist—not in the streets where they had been drawn, but in Quinn’s red notebook… Quinn’s mind dispersed. He arrived in a neverland of fragments, a place of wordless things and thingless words. (86–87)

The representation of urban space in terms of graphical language reinforces the emptiness Quinn bestowed upon it at the beginning, with one difference: the awareness that movement cannot produce spatial relations as such, except as image and abstract geometries that lack the material correlative objects, identities, and relations of places. Through writing, Quinn’s rhetorical and cognitive mapping stays locked in the realm of the figural and reproduces a fetish space that deliberately conceals material power relations of production and social reproduction. He pays no regard to the unevenness of places but rather relegates this inequality to the spatial lexicon of the imagination and the sensual: the inexplicable “neverland of fragments.”

An important transition that the City of Glass protagonist makes from spatial fetishism to an acknowledgment of material spatial relations occurs when Stillman’s reuses of urban matter as “a junk heap” challenge his linguistic cognition of space. The former’s attraction to New York follows the repulsive seduction of dereliction and fragmentation: New York as “the most forlorn of places, the most abject” where he basks in the pleasure of “an inexhaustible storehouse of shattered things” (94). Stillman collects junk, “objects worthy of investigation,” and coins new names for them, thus recycling the urban
detritus at street level. Unlike Quinn’s alphabetical grasp of space, Stillman regards space as relative to the matter—the junk—that composes it while the act of renaming this matter would be akin to some revolutionary reconfiguration of space. Stillman’s understanding and manipulation of space are just another fetishizing gesture because these objects are divorced from the context of their production, consumption, or abandonment while the urban junk certainly connotes the expanding blight and dereliction at the geographical scales of the neighborhood and the urban.

Quinn’s realization that Stillman’s city junk is a replica of socio-spatial inequality happens during one of his longest and most memorable strolls akin to slumming and described with the highest regard for its street-by-street and block-by-block itinerary. The long-awaited transition from abstract space to urban space as a field of social relations takes effect during this walk, which is worth recapitulating due to the vividness and precision of its accompanying urban travelogue. It brings about the promise of Quinn’s most radical comprehension and interpretation of space, the morphing of space into the disturbing concreteness of place. Quinn starts on the West Side and walks downtown on Broadway to 72nd Street and Central Park West to Columbus Circle, turns eastward to Madison Avenue where he cuts across the midtown via the Flatiron district toward SoHo, the Washington Square of the West Village, and the Bowling Green of the Financial District. He then passes through the Lower East Side and is northbound again on the East Side to the United Nations building where he decides to stall and record the essentials of this journey. The documentation is again quite lengthy, yet it does not follow Stillman’s steps through the streets of the city but the human brokenness of the neighborhoods, whether upscale or squalid. Walking eastward, Quinn unwittingly mimics the advancement of real estate capital through “block-by-block” gentrification and large-scale redevelopment, while he undergoes a crucial transformation from a movement-driven spatial consciousness to the awareness of urban space as mainly the social reproduction of poverty and homelessness.

All of a sudden, New York is no longer emptiness or pure geometrical mapping but produced through the spatialization of social relations in history. “Today as never before: the tramps, the down-and-outs, the shopping-bag ladies, the drifters and the drunks. They range from the merely destitute to the wretchedly broken. Wherever you turn, they are there, in good neighborhoods and bad” (129). The description carries on and concentrates on the kind of hierarchical social roles these people of the cardboard city perform. Quinn
oscillates between the observation of social behavior—à la Jacob Riis—and the recording of a spectacle through an empowering gaze that has the ability to comprehend, categorize, classify, and interpret. However, Quinn’s endeavor to make sense of “the state of is-ness that was the ground on which the happenings of the world took place” (133) is cut short by another self-reflective gesture, a citation adapted from Baudelaire: “Wherever I am not is the place where I am myself” (132). Via the insertion of yet another text into this urban tale, Quinn imaginatively removes himself as the agent of spatial observation from a place too uncomfortable to watch, and divests himself of any capacity and responsibility to produce change. The intertextual foregoes the deeper penetration of the social world around him whilst it still speaks to issues of place formation, identity, and social belonging. More significantly, Quinn remains conscious that the visible social landscape of the underclass needs further consideration; and still, he precludes this necessity with a symbolic gesture by closing the red notebook.

Instead of trying to comprehend or at least cast doubt on the forces that produce this uneven urban space, Quinn totally transforms the crude reality of homelessness into mock-reality and role-playing. Motivated by his attempt to track down Stillman’s every “comings and goings,” he withdraws all his money from the bank and takes residence in a dark back alley just outside Stillman’s hotel. This self-induced homelessness is eased away into a kind of experiment in solitude and frugality—rather than sheer dereliction—where the absence of shelter and food are mere inconveniences that may just prevent him from carrying out the task of observing his target. When the money runs out, Quinn leaves his spot in the alley and makes his way to the home on the Upper West Side where he realizes that someone else is living there whilst he was evicted for not paying his rent in months. Confronted with the reality of eviction, his former underground, incognito performance as a homeless person takes on a true social meaning. Not being able to retrieve his old life and incapable of questioning his new socio-spatial position of evictee, Quinn then goes to Peter Stillman’s apartment, which is paradoxically empty, and squats the back room in total seclusion, just like Peter Stillman once did in his father’s experiment. Unlike Stillman’s test though, Quinn writes in the red notebook and “speaks the words into the air, into the walls, into the city,” (157), compulsively connecting with the world outside the room. Eventually, he disappears without a trace whilst the final sentence in the notebook expresses a terrible skepticism about the power and limitations of language to keep alive the referential
connection with the world and with the other geographical spatial scales. He concedes that the notebook—that is to say, the material space of writing—is utterly limited: “‘What will happen when there are no more pages in the red notebook?’” (157). For the first time, space matters beyond its semiotic symbolism.

**Breaking the “city of glass”**

I have introduced *City of Glass* as a springboard for my undertaking and a template for the kind of literary representation of the urban that construes the city as the ultimate fetish space, whose mirroring transparency cannot refract any deeper observations of its processes, structures, or agencies. Quinn’s piecemeal urban revelation does gesture toward an understanding of space as constituted through social relations. This is, after all, the main lesson that post-positivist radical geography has taught us: space is socially produced and social relations themselves are inherently spatialized. However, his representation of the city does not transcend its mythopoetic resonances; Quinn may be easily cast into the paradigmatic role of writer and critic of the postmodernist city, the city of aesthetic playfulness and indeterminacy, masking its own transformative spatial, socioeconomic, political, and cultural forces.

Both modernist and postmodernist critiques with a semiological inclination have indeed tended to mystify urban space to various degrees, which has also significantly influenced critical analyses of the “city in literature.” For instance, Richard Lehan’s intellectual and cultural history of the literary city, published in 1998, devotes the last section of his remarkably dense and comprehensive transatlantic project to the passage from modernism to postmodernism, which, in terms of representing the city, marks a transition “from myth to mystery.” If the reference point remains T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, then “After the Wasteland,” one of Lehan’s chapter titles, is bound to be a deepening of urban incomprehensibility and alienation alongside the exacerbation of those sentiments of antiurbanism which characterized the modernist project in the first half of the twentieth century. His fictional, architectural, and cultural evidence builds on urban mythical constructs in the utopian or the dystopian mode that range from Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* and Paul Auster’s *The New York Trilogy* through to the Ur-critique of architectural postmodernism, Jameson’s analysis of the Bonaventura Hotel in Los Angeles. Lehan reinforces the representation of the city as an emporium of signs and symbols which, he argues, become
decentered and free floating in absence of a transcendental signifier (post-structuralism to the rescue!).

Having entered the postmodern world of urban signs, we find the problem of reading more complex. As free-floating signification eliminates meaning, interpretation become equivalent to paranoia, which is the end-result of any self-enclosed system. We are left with a sense of diminished humanity, of the anonymous and superfluous, of human isolation and fragility, of anxiety and greater nervous tension. Lacking transcendence, the city cannot go beyond what it consumes; the mind cannot go beyond itself. Critics no longer argue about whether postmodernism is merely a realignment of modernism. I think that most would agree that postmodernism creates a totally different kind of reality: whether we are talking about the city or the literary text.

If we leave aside the truly problematic, spatially denotative, crossing over into a postmodern world, we may agree that the signs, both consumed and consuming, have increasingly proliferated as signposts and tapestries of the postwar metropolis. Still, the reading of these urban signs for their latent signifieds (read: structures, agents, processes, power relations, hierarchies, and networks) grows to be a mandatory urban literary project. Exiting “the straits of postmodernism,” in Peter Brooker’s phrase, means to affirm that the late twentieth-century city is produced and socially reproduced by capital in its latest phase of development by means of social forces that employ urban signs in order to propagate and keep in place the domination of this kind of capitalist spatial order. Myth itself becomes a tool of spatial production, appropriation, and domination in the hands of capital and, most often that not, at the expense of labor. The removal of the postmodernist mask signifies a shift from aesthetics, style, and a semiotic urbanism to production processes, social networking, stakeholders’ governance, active participation, and grassroots resistance. It also means, implicitly, the recognition of the dynamic and ever-changing qualities of these urban processes, which are at once social and spatial, economic and cultural.

That is why “reading the city [as] another kind of textual reading” is an interpretive proposition that may overlook the socio-spatial complexities in urban fictional representation itself. Through its textual markers, literature may confidently play a leading part in a cultural project that unravels the forces and mechanisms which (re)produce the urban. Due to its equally peculiar and iconic urban development, New York City is the perfect location for such geo-literary work. Felicitously, some late twentieth-century New York writers
did not disregard the material production and social reproduction of the urban order or the transformations of their communities. *Au contraire*, writers became somehow akin to geographers and took overt interest in the literary articulation of spatial knowledge: short stories, novels, and poems alike, became the writers’ own responses to the changes that were taking place in their neighborhoods and in the city. Unlike Quinn in *The New York Trilogy*, or unlike novelists such as Paul Auster, these geographical writers did not close the notebook mesmerized by the sweetness of the city. Instead, they continued the act of documentation, and disseminated these urban annotations and reflections amongst their audiences via literary magazines and organized public readings for the simple reason that consciousness-raising was part of the community’s infrastructure of resistance and contestation. Most of these grassroots literary acts are the “low-rent,” downtown writings produced in the neighborhood trenches of the Lower East Side. Other, high-rent texts have themselves tackled “the urban question” in ways that also challenged and restructured the urban literary genre. This select New York literature is, therefore, as much about literariness and geographical knowledge as it is about the politics of community life.

How is it then possible to operate a necessary change of critical paradigm that would do justice to such literary representations of the urban and would not simply recapitulate geo-cultural readings that are commensurate with an insufficiently urbanized hermeneutic? The solution lies in rethinking urban fiction away from apologetic formulations that make of it a mere textual fabrication, at best, or “no more than a makeshift mental category [and] a discursive convention,” at worst. The literature of the urban may be spatially redefined as the outcome of the writers’ fieldwork and akin to fictional ethnographies. Its specificity as literature does not acquire secondary import; quite on the contrary, urban literary economies gain special status amongst other cultural genres, like public art or political graphics, which have more easily urbanized and spatialized their strategies of representation and critique due to their organically activist civic participation in urban affairs. For instance, the antigentrification and antihomelessness art campaigns organized in New York by the DIA Art Foundation stand out as some of the most sustained artistic and ideological responses to a city that was becoming genteeel, paradoxically through impoverishment, eviction, and the creation of a residual urban landscape lacking public advocacy. The DIA campaign was documented by Brian Wallis in the collection *If You Lived Here* (1991) which gathered together not only the clusters of artwork and photographs but also the live debates
amongst sociologists, artists, and urban activists. In the same vein of politicized action, the Centre for the Study of Political Graphics (CSPG), headquartered on the West Coast in Los Angeles, has been concerned with the distinctive features of urban protest graphics as a deliberate artistic strategy of socio-spatial, economic, political, and cultural reappropriation, rememorization, and empowerment. One of their exhibitions, “We shall not be moved,” has borrowed its title from a 1984 housing movement on the Lower East Side and features thematic strands such as gentrification, homelessness, resistance, and neighborhood activism.

In this fermenting cultural context of dissent and refutation of mainstream hegemonic urban practices, the question regarding the role performed by literary representation is of utmost importance. Was literature an outmoded and inefficacious type of urban representation or did it also have the capacity to reform the ways in which urbanites experienced and understood New York City? Does this literature of the urban produce knowledge of the city that can throw light on the New York experience of the 1970s and the 1980s? In trying to give an answer to these questions, I argue that a process of “urbanization of [literary] consciousness” took place in the city’s communities of writers, which led to engaging literary representations of urban space and, more significantly, to the representation of the diverse community spaces and vernacular localities upon which both consciousness and representation were predicated. This dialectical relation between consciousness, materiality, and representation was conducive to a literary symptomatology of the urban produced and reproduced at the junction between capital, labor, and social processes, out of which emerges a (New York) city that cannot be ossified into heavy-weighted rhetorical formulae or reducible to an internalized, kenotic space (as per Quinn’s recordings in City of Glass). The socioeconomic, historical, and political reconfiguration of spatial scales (the urban, the community, the home, and the body) occurred in tandem with the reproduction of the city’s literary communities, of their emblemsatically urbanized and spatialized writing.

The urbanization of literary writing is a central argument to make in order to distinguish further authentic narratives of the urban from merely local “stories from the city.” In other words, fictions that take place in New York but do not engage with the conflicting relations and struggles over the meaning and function of space are not urbanized by default. The issue that needs to be addressed here is primarily one of scale and of power structures, since urban space as socially constructed is “always and everywhere an expression of the
medium of power.” These conflicts and contradictions in defining and using space are also spatially scaled and so, endemic to neighborhood and community building. In this respect, the relation between space and place is one between ideological enforcement (from above) and vernacular resistance (from below). On the one hand, New York’s macro-political, economic, and socio-spatial trends are indicative of “an articulation of concrete historical practices and modes of production,” in the transition from a Fordist to a post-Fordist regime of accumulation and mode of regulation, whereby the FIRE industry consolidated its dominant values. On the other hand, these systemic challenges did not remain without response from the local communities. In literature, poetic or narrative responses enact molecular socio-spatial structures of feeling, experience, and urban practices, which relate to “more immediate, urgent, ephemeral circumstances, tactics, measures, actions and changes,” performed by local actors at different juncture points in the history of the city. That is why the New York literature produced amidst these spatially scaled, conjunctural practices from the mid-1970s until the late 1980s offers excellent support for a most viable and timely shift in critical paradigm.

My development of a literary urban hermeneutic in terms of this dual, historical, and material conjuncture, is reflected in the very architectural design of the book that presents a meaningful structural symmetry. The first part, entitled “Mappings,” consists of two chapters meant to extend the premises and explanations sketched above with a view to offering essential theoretical, historical, cultural, literary, and methodological endorsements for my own literary urban fieldwork. Reinforcing New York as the urban laboratory par excellence, chapter 1, “The Paradigmatic Exceptionality of New York: Scaffolding a Radical Literary Urbanism” cross-examines the mythical urban constructions in the second half of the twentieth century underlying not only individual and collective perceptions of the city, but also public urban discourse. It further explains New York’s evolution as a process of demystification of urban mythology, from about the advent of the New Deal until the end of the welfare state, in the late 1980s, in order to underscore the singularity of the metropolis as well as the readability of the socioeconomic, political, and cultural forces that shaped its fate. Thus grounded in the increasingly disorganized urbanism of twentieth-century New York City, the chapter then telescopes debates in geography about the rather marginal function of literature in the production and representation of space and argues for a meaningful use of literary evidence for geographical insights. In order to articulate a radical spatial turn in literary studies,
I subsequently review some of the “home,” geo-literary initiatives that rework concepts and methods developed by post-1970s geographical thought. The main aim of this double-faceted incursion is to find a common denominator between geography and literary studies that overcomes the anxiety of figuration contained in “literariness” as the feature of writing whereby space is figuratively rather than socially or materially coded and explained. I highlight the versatile character of literature and its unique inclusiveness that allows for its evidentiary use in the analysis of urban space, which becomes most evident in the case of New York-based writing of the 1970s and 1980s.

Expanding the historical and theoretical tale, chapter 2, “Downtown, Uptown, and the Urbanization of Literary Consciousness” draws upon David Harvey’s notion of “urbanization of consciousness” and extends its reach to include the literary urbanized consciousness as both literary creativity and critique. The implication is not that pre-1973 literary consciousness was non- or preurbanized but that, in the 1970s, there occurred two major types of entwined changes that would subsequently alter representational, ideological, and critical modes of making sense of the urban: the political economic crisis and its ensuing transformations along the lines of a radical socio-spatial reconfiguration. The urbanization of literary consciousness meant that, under the pressure of these changes, writers showed enhanced awareness of these urban transformations through their writing and more importantly, the awareness that individuals and communities were no longer mere passive pawns and consuming subjects but agents of change, voluntary urban actors and stakeholders. The implication is that critics must also change the way in which they interpret such urbanized literature. Highlighting the role that culture played in the development of the city, the chapter proposes a revision of the New York literary canon in keeping with reversible and visible shifts from the literature of the city to the literature of the urban. Through literary “creative destruction,” stylistic and thematic continuities and ruptures tend to coexist. In this context, the last section embarks upon a journey through the local, yet citywide, literary and cultural projects of the 1970s and 1980s, which are the downtown magazines published by small, independent presses with high enough print-runs to increase their visibility and impact in the city, nationally as well as transnationally. The downtown archives of the Fales Special Collection at the Bobst Library, New York University, bear witness to the wide dissemination of New York magazine writing and writers in New York, in the Unites States, and beyond. “La prochaine vague: le retour de la Beat génération à New York’” (“The Next Wave: The
Return of the Beat Generation to New York”) benefited from sustained foreign and domestic publicity in both literary journals, such as *Panorama literario USA* or “The Phoenix Literary Section” of the *Boston Phoenix*, and in commercial magazines like *Elle*. Because comprehensiveness is not the aim of my investigation, I do not tackle the complex dynamic of the circulation of these magazines, which other studies have already generously accomplished. I produce instead a close reading of a sampling of short stories and poems that reveal the strong engagement of New York’s downtown writers with material urban practices, the outcome being a scaling of literary economies of the urban and the local. The chapter also commands a rethinking of the uptown-downtown duality and its implications for a literary urban hermeneutic, based upon a reading for socio-spatial unevenness in place of duality.

The second part of the book, “A New York Trilogy Inc.,” is a critical recasting of literary New York through the in-depth interpretation of the infrastructural novels chosen as case studies: Don DeLillo’s *Great Jones Street*, Joel Rose’s *Kill the Poor*, and Jay McInerney’s *Brightness Falls*. Capitalizing on their specific differences, I base my entire demonstration on these literary ethnographies of urban space and community places in the manner of anthropological “thick descriptions.” The complexity of their examination is methodologically supported by the consistent use of other significant literary and non- or para-literary texts and discourses, which are meant to bring grist to the theoretical mills constructed in the first part of the book, to increase interpretative reliability, and to enlarge the evidentiary corpus. Incursions into local and mainstream newspaper archives operate in tandem with cultural and social magazine documents while cinematic representation supplements, in places, the literary. The logic of the narratives’ arrangement, and therefore of this three-act interpretation, abides by the project’s historical chronology and signposts the development of the FIRE industry, of an urban regime of finance, insurance, and real estate that increasingly conditioned and took command of the production of urban space and its social reproduction during the 1970s and the 1980s.

There are a number of common denominators and points of convergence that permit the safe and logical juxtaposing of these three fictions of the urban and of their corresponding analyses. First, these case studies are designed to offer a literary history of New York City from the early 1970s until the late 1980s, with the closing of the Reagan political and economic scene. Second, they underscore the significance of representing the production of space and scale—especially
the neighborhood and the urban—in an indispensably historicized fashion. Third, these novels represent the city as a game of stakeholders involved in various power matrices, intimately entangled with economic and cultural roles on the music, underground, real estate, finance, and publishing markets. Lastly, given their literary function, the stories place the issues and conundrums of representation at the heart of the spatial matter, under the banner of both compliance and resistance. In other words, *Great Jones Street*, *Kill the Poor*, and *Brightness Falls* map cultural, political, socio-spatial, and economic acquiescence and dissent. At first glance, this comes across as a necessary antinomy that is spatially illustrated by the duality of a downtown and uptown urban aesthetics. Upon closer scrutiny, however, all three novels gesture toward overcoming Manhattan’s socio-spatial, ideological, and cognitive duality by way of charting unevenness and subtler local differentiations at work.

In light of these preliminary considerations, chapter 3, and the first case study, “Scale, Culture, and Real Estate: The Reproduction of Lowliness in *Great Jones Street*,” stresses the challenges that the representation of space poses and attempts to make two arguments. From a larger historical perspective, it proposes a way of comprehending the 1970s as a decade of profound spatialization and scaling of experience as well as a heightened awareness of these processes. In a micro-level analysis of the novel, it shows how scale is constructed through the joint mechanics of cultural markets and the underground economy and the manner in which countercultural production, underground rock music in particular, is mainstreamed and incorporated via privatized real estate practices, FIRE’s first firm foothold in a city on the brink of fiscal bankruptcy. Chapter 4, “*Kill the Poor*: Low-Rent Aesthetics and the New Housing Order” focuses on the connections between homesteading, the production of gentrifiers, and the formation of the ethnic underclass. It develops out of an urbanized aesthetics of the 1980s housing moment, which comprises official histories, autobiographical stories of family living in the neighborhood, and imagined stories that equip actors with modes of (mis)understanding gentrification, and that refract, at the same time, the gentrifying forces. Based on a palimpsest-like interpretation of these housing narratives, my argument is that the populist urbanism of homesteading on the Lower East Side did not succeed as a DIY project because of the inability of housing actors and tenant constituencies to build a consensual alliance. Instead, factionalism and class divisions at the bottom of socio-spatial hierarchies prevail, which equates DIY redevelopment with the failure to constitute a local homesteading regime.
based on common goals and agendas. Moving away from housing to the finance economy, the last case study, chapter 5, “Uneven City: Brightness Falls and the Ethnography of Fictitious Finance,” builds upon the interface between the publishing industry and speculative finance, which pumps up the speculative FIRE bubble during 1987, the year of the crash. The chapter shows the dislocation of a presumably stable yuppiedom, accentuated by urban socio-spatial unevenness. It closes the circle—and the trilogy—that began with Great Jones Street by reinforcing the alliance between the culture industry (publishing) and the finance economy, the city as a spatial structure of colliding and collusive stakes, while refashioning the representation of bohemia through a recurrence of Great Jones Street, under siege, this time, from FIRE and AIDS.

The book concludes with the “Epilogue: The Politics of Urban Writing and the Hegemony of FIRE,” which reflects holistically on the project. It capitalizes on the politically transformative impact that urban narratives might have (had), and which only a sociological analysis of the relationship between authors and audience might have been able to indicate, during a chunk of history when the communities of writers and readers were living in such unprecedented propinquity. The conundrums of the politics of urban literature are particularly interesting to debate from the historical angle of the consolidated and already natural hegemony of the industry of finance, insurance, and real estate, and the ensuing, post-1987 crises. Such a historical and cultural supplement brings into quick view not only the urban transformations in New York after the 1987 crash but also some of the continuities and/or discontinuities in the political aesthetics of the urban. Briefly mentioning Jay McInerney’s The Good Life, the epilogue also suggests the possibility of a centrifugal positioning in literary urban hermeneutics away from Manhattan into the other New York City boroughs and the adoption of an interurban, regional, or transnational comparative approach, from similar cultural, theoretical, and documentarian angles as those articulated in this book.
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