



**Monika Pietrzak-Franger, Nora Pleßke, and Eckart Voigs
(eds.), *Transforming Cities. Discourses of Urban Change*
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Reviewed by

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The collection *Transforming Cities* offers a transdisciplinary approach to the variety of contemporary and historical urban changes from the viewpoint of the metropolises of London, Dublin, Amsterdam, and Hong Kong. Scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds create a fascinating perspective on the urban transformations with all their social, ecological, demographical, and sustainability-related impacts and challenges. Discourses of imaginary and fictional cities from literature, films, and TV series intersect with the discourses of real, produced, commercialized, globalized, materialized, and lived cities. As the editors note, 'the contemporary city discourses are inevitably dominated by tropes of change' (13), which is the gathering idea of this volume. The book 'explores dialogues between urban discourses located in the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first century' (9) and the editors consider that all the contributions resonate with two big questions related to urban transformation: the issue of heritage, and the emotionalization of the urban fabric (18–19).

Six out of the collection's twelve chapters focus on the imaginary and real space of London; in some of the other chapters, London plays a significant role. The contributors focus mainly on neo-Victorian London, and the volume could be especially

inspiring for those interested in neo-Victorian studies. Neo-Gothic and neo-Victorian London is the focus of the contributions of Susanne Gruß and Nadine Böhm-Schnitker, among others.

The volume also offers multiple interesting perspectives on the global megacity from other points of view. The concept of a 'bio-city', referring to the complexity of the relationship of the urban and the natural in contemporary cities, is central to the first two chapters of the volume. Vanessa Miriam Carlow's contribution explores how the changes to the London Green Belt also transform narratives about it, and how we can read these narratives critically. Julia Faisst proposes in her contribution that 'biophilic cities have become urban literature's main subjects' (43) and reads Teju Cole's *Open City* (2012) as a contemporary version of Passos' *Manhattan Transfer* (1925). I found her thoughts about an ecocritical flâneur especially fruitful in opening a discussion on the urban nature of our time. For Cole's flâneur with an ecocritical perspective, the environment is not only something to experience, like for many earlier flâneurs, but also something to analyze. And Cole's flâneur's attempt to model himself on his modernist predecessors is doomed to fail in the city space, where "the urban and the natural have become interchangeable terms" (48).

Two of the chapters approach the theme of urban change from a postcolonial perspective. Antonija Primorac analyses Dublin as the screen double of London in the neo-Victorian TV series *Penny Dreadful* and *Ripper Street*. Dublin becomes 'a peculiar simulacrum of Victorian London' (16) and it is striking that Primorac compares this use of Dublin as London's body double with the concept of 'writing back' in postcolonial literature (141). To screen an 'authentic' Victorian London, producers 'turn to the imperial metropolis' colonial copy' (140). Primorac's reading brings to mind the use of Helsinki as a double for Moscow and Saint-Petersburg in many films produced in the second half of the twentieth century – even if the reasons for this usage were different.

Elizabeth Ho reads Dung Kai-cheung's *Atlas. The Archeology of an Imaginary City* (1997, English translation 2012) in the context of the significant years of 1997 and 2014 in Hong Kong's history. She analyses the use of maps in the protests of the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong in 2014, and shows how the movement 'feminized the city' (160). In her interpretation, the Umbrella Movement transformed Hong Kong in same the way that we can read the changing city in *Atlas*. During the 79-day occupation, informal ad-hoc maps, often hand-drawn by the protestors, appeared in the streets of Hong Kong, offering an alternative to the official maps. Ho quotes the statement in *Atlas* that those who create maps have 'possession of the power to create fiction' (159, [21]), of which this way of protesting gave a powerful example. In her reading, Ho proposes a very fruitful and complex perspective to the relationships of literary fiction, the city, power, politics, and maps.

The volume also thoroughly explores questions about sexing the city/space, such as by placing representations of prostitution and slum narratives in the contexts of urban discourses during different eras.

Sarah Artt's analysis of the figure of a prostitute in the TV series *Maison Close* as an anti-flâneuse is a welcome addition to the (still somewhat narrow) research on the possibility of a female flâneur in fiction. According to Artt, the figure of the anti-flâneuse characterizes the city in fiction, but she is under constant surveillance and can only

observe her own little world (103). Associations of Amsterdam with prostitution and the centrality of the Red Light District 'in the city's history, lore, economy and [...] public reputation' (107) are the material for Joyce Goggin's exploration of the transformations of prostitution and changing attitudes towards it in the city through the centuries. Prostitution has been aestheticized, industrialized, and globalized, and Goggin concludes that all the attempts to gentrify the district 'seem to be destined to remain both partial and contested transformation' (121).

The irritation about the 'lack of social and/or political concerns' in the aestheticized postmodern interpretations of the city is one of the starting points for Christian Gutleben (165). He examines the political responsibility of neo-Victorian fiction, taking sexing the city in John Fowles's novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) as one example. According to Gutleben, neo-Victorian fiction associates slums with prostitution 'again and again' (167). Gutleben asks a question that is key to this volume and to wider critical discourse on neo-Victorian writing: 'Where is the neo-Victorian working-class heroine or hero, and even more importantly, where is the working-class neo-Victorian narrator?' (168). Marie-Luise Kohlke's exploration of popular televisual slumming narratives in neo-Victorian fiction resonates well with the dialogue of Gutleben's contribution.

Nora Pleßke examines the geographies of entertainment in nineteenth- and twentieth-century London as 'produced by and producing urban transformation' and spectacularization of the metropolis in the twenty-first century (213). Commercialization of urban space and the growth of the tourist industry, as well as emotionalization of the city space, are transforming the city spaces and urban experience inescapably. In this relation, city-dwellers as consumers are an interesting field to research in the future, too.

This volume offers a rich selection of different ideas and concepts to interest readers. Its engagement with questions concerning the 'eco-fiction of bio-cities', the possibility of an 'ecocritical flâneur', and the 'anti-flâneuse', for instance, form promising starting points for further reading and thinking.

Its true transdisciplinary approach is one of the great strengths of this volume. The introduction gives an effective overview of the content and helps a non-specialist reader to orient themselves theoretically and thematically within the volume and the discourses it explores. The only thing apparently missing from this superb book could be a selected bibliography or 'further reading' section in the end, which might be useful and interesting to readers who are looking for research outside their own disciplinary field. But, of course, one can also mine the bibliographies at the end of every chapter.

Transforming Cities is a deeply inspiring and thought-provoking book for any reader interested in urban literary studies or imaginary cities, as well as the ecological, social, and global transformations of megacities today. In the introduction, the editors compare Victorian London, as an icon of a new urban modernity of the nineteenth century, with Asian megacities, which became icons of globalization of the twenty-first century (11). The reader is led to consider urban change more globally. My hope is that urban studies continues to develop this transdisciplinary approach and give it an even more global orientation in the future.

Note on contributor

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