

**Gillian Jein, *Alternative Modernities in French Travel Writing: Engaging Urban Space in London and New York, 1851–1986* (Anthem Press, 2016)**

The experience of travelling to a city may not be just a matter of crossing geographical boundaries, it can become a process of creating new forms of identity especially when these cities have their unique spatial significance. Gillian Jein finds herself obliged at the beginning of her book to answer some fundamental questions that will certainly arise in the reader's mind. To answer the question: 'Why the French travellers?' she sets the main concern of her book to be an understanding of 'urban modernity': 'the prismatic interrelation of travel writing and the urban environment as open, mutually engaged modes of making meanings for modernity' (2); a task that can be achieved by '[tracing] the emergence of networks of representation ... as a mobile constellation of intersections, or "crossings", between different national, cultural and historical identities' (2). As the traveller usually brings into awareness a set of alternative interpretive positions from which to view the modern city, the 'French traveller' represents someone who brings to bear on London and New York 'perspectives of political, historical and ideological difference, which combine to weave threads of externality into the fabric of these cities' modernity' (2).

The discourse leads to more questions like 'why the traveller?' and 'why the city?' The traveller stands out as the outsider who enters, engages and departs the city within more temporally and spatially restricted frameworks that differ from the spatio-temporal borders of the inhabitant of the city. Cities are conceived of as spaces where social, political and historical relations undergo constant negotiation and where the realities and representations of urban life are in persistent and dynamic states of becoming: 'cities constitute one of the most complex spatio-temporal sites of identity formation' (2). Hence, travel writings are discussed as some experience to explore the notion of exchange out of which 'narration' emerges as a moving, spatial practice.

Another question comes out: 'why London and New York?' The author finds in the 'French perspectives' of London and New York 'a contextual mesh' that is so relevant to the themes of interest to the book: 'exchange, movement, meaning-making and their bearing on urban modernity' (3). Such a reading of urban modernity, represented in these two capitals of modern Western culture, will help her unbind other traditional or monolithic readings that represent it as a homogenous, undifferentiated entity: 'in this way, we will speak of "modernities" in the plural to challenge better universalist notions of "civilization" and of "modernity"' (3). From the French perspective, it becomes clear that London and New York represent alternative models for the cultural, visual and architectural expression of modern Western civilisation (4). Whereas London represents 'the architectural manifestations of England's constitutional monarchical government' (3), New York 'brings into awareness yet other tensions inherent in French conceptualizations of the modern self on an increasingly transnational and technologically mediated global scene in the twentieth century' (3).

Book reviews: *Alternative Modernities in French Travel Writing: Engaging Urban Space in London and New York, 1851–1986* by Gillian Jein. Abdel-Fattah M. Adel. *Transnational Literature* Vol. 10 no. 1, November 2017. <http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

Thus, Jein, a lecturer in French Studies at Bangor University whose research in French urban cultures focuses on the aesthetics and politics related to the articulation of urban spatialities, embarks into some spatial practices of French travel writing from London's Crystal Palace in 1851 to the skyscrapers of New York in the 1980s. This book, which came out of her doctoral research with its survey-like nature, investigates how eight French writers: Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Dyssord, Jules Janin, Alfred Leroy, Paul Morand, Georges Perec, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jules Vallès, produced in their travel writings possible meanings for life in the modern city. The spatial planning of these cities, and the way they are seen and represented, is a key element in formulating alternative identities that are the product of the multiplicity of urban modernities which in turn reproduce the historical and cultural differences of the 'West'.

The theoretical framework that the author uses to explain how these writings produce the city brings together some 'strands of theory, context and poetic analysis'. A survey of some influential theoretical approaches for understanding cities (Chapter One) leads to some spatial practices that work on two main axes: the city 'as a material condition' and the city 'as a narrative space' (19).

Two urban travel accounts of London: Jules Janin's (1851) and Jules Vallès' (1876), show how these writings produced a French space in Nineteenth-Century London (Chapter Two). While both works are concerned with two different architectures of London, they both exhibit 'a consciousness of space as a material configuration of modernity' (65). In contrast to these accounts of orderly London, the disorder of interwar and World War II London as revealed and reconstructed by Jacques Dyssord and Alfred Leroy (Chapter Three) show how 'spaces of disorder,' 'the secret city' and 'dark tourism' perform 'in correspondence and contrast with the monumentality of more official sites' (107-8).

Shifting to New York (Chapter Four), the city 'considered by many to be the capital of the world', manifested the shift of power in the 'West' from the 'imperialist Europe' that dominated the nineteenth century's imagination of civilisation to the 'new global political order increasingly dominated by the capitalist market economy and American foreign policy' (139). The writers discussed in the chapter, like George Duhamel, Simone de Beauvoir and Albert Camus, represent the city's architecture arrangement as the 'American order' through their European identity (140). More accounts of New York (Chapter Five), like Georges Perec (1980) and Baudrillard (1986), shift the focus from the previous 'simplicity of the outward geometric' as represented in the 'panoramic of the crowd' toward the 'complexity of the spaces in-between the lines representing the 'multiplicity of the urban identities' (172). More questions are raised by examining if the 'interpretive mode of travel' that is applied to travel discourse as a means of producing social space can instil 'a proper sense of mobility' (171).

Working at a somewhat sophisticated conceptual level that is located on the intersections of cultural geography, politics and aesthetics, the book is preoccupied in all its aspects of analysis with the question of modernity and the challenges it poses to the travel writers about their sense of their place in the world. These challenges are clear in the notions of French identity as it was

negotiated in relation to other centres of the 'West'. 'Urban Crossings' was an earlier suggestion for a title of the book that clearly expresses its central theme. Thus it manages to explore the dialectical relationship between spatial entities (city structure and architecture) and the representations of the urban life, contributing much to body of work on urban cultural studies and modernity.

**Abdel-Fattah M. Adel**

University of Bisha, KSA