

Selina S.L. Lai

All roads lead to the american city

Review of International American Studies 2/3, 34-36

2007

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.



ALL ROADS LEAD TO THE AMERICAN CITY

Edited by Peter Swirski, Hong Kong UP, 2007, ISBN: 9789622098633, 162pp

Selina S.L. Lai

University of Hong Kong

Peter Swirski, author of the bestselling *From Lowbrow to Nobrow* (McGill-Queens UP, 2005), has another excellent book on offer. Where *From Lowbrow to Nobrow* explored literary taste cultures and categorizations of art, *All Roads Lead to the American City* (2007) is a collection of interdisciplinary and intercultural essays on the urban culture in America. Investigating literature, films, cultural myths, history and social geography of the United States, as Swirski writes in the introduction, the interlinked essays put

some of the greatest as well as the 'baddest' American metropolises under the microscope. Examining the role of the roads that crisscross and connect the cities, it looks for ways to understand the people who live, commute, work, create, govern, commit crime and conduct business in them. (2)

The central chapter of the book, written by the editor himself, 'A Is for American, B Is for Bad, C Is for City: Ed McBain and the ABC of Police and Urban Procedurals', focuses on Ed McBain, the late great American mystery writer, and his connection to New York City. Swirski brings his readers to the heart of the city from the hardboiled era where private-eyes meandered the mean streets, to the present-day scenes of organized crime and organized police work. McBain has drawn praise from both the mass audience and the literary mavens for the world's longest running crime-fiction soap, the 87th-Precinct police procedurals, which provide perhaps the best urban perspective of the American metropolis. The most tantalizing illustration of the city as both intriguing and menacing, the editor enthuses, is McBain's personification of the city as femme fatale: 'Ritzy and glitzy one moment, cheap and downright sleazy the next, she still seduces all white belonging to none. Only now she's no longer a player making her moves in the city. Now she *is* the city' (57).

On either side of the central chapter are essays by Priscilla Roberts, Gina Marchetti, Earle Waugh, and William Kyle. The first three authors share the common theme of the American dilemma in search of identity on the individual, communal, and national level. In chapter one, Priscilla Roberts asserts that the agglomeration of city life gave rise to a 'perennial ambivalence' of Americans towards the city. Echoing McBain's tableaux of the city as femme fatale, Roberts brings into discussion the conflicting

emotions toward 'the attractive but dangerous opportunities urban life potentially offered' in North American history (8). The closing of the frontier worried many as 'the end of the sturdy American spirit of self-reliance, individualism, and physical hardihood' (12). Entering the twentieth century, Taylorization and proletarianism of workers began to undermine individuality and personality. As represented in the road movie, it is not the urban life that is celebrated, but what Roberts observes as the nostalgic 'lone ranger facing the wilderness and his own weaknesses' (25).

In line with Roberts, Earle Waugh notes the gradual departure of the American spirit from the religious notion of betterment as the nation moves itself toward the capitalistic world of machinery: 'Gone, now, is Kemble Knight's rugged road to Boston, gone is the City of God, gone the New Jerusalem, gone the grandeur of vision' (94). Rather than by moral and physical betterment of the community, the new roads are increasingly defined by official 'state' need, and by 'those who control the cultural priorities of public space' (84). Exploring the work of American writers from the colonial time to the present, Waugh remarks that while symbolizing the American triumph over the unruly continent, the road creates tension and ambiguity concerning the variegated American identities. Between 'the wasteland of the human soul and the heart of the American city', Waugh sees 'madness' and 'conspiracy', and 'the loss of a unifying destiny' in the literary representation of city streets (95). The decaying American city, writes the writer in his denouement, 'is enshrined in literature precisely as that city becomes the image of the global mega-city—and that without the refined constraint of betterment' (95).

In chapter two, Gina Marchetti states that the ambivalence of the American identity comes from encounters with the 'other'. Whereas Roberts and Waugh address the problem of race especially within the African American community, Marchetti depicts the struggles of Asian Americans after the Second World War through Tajima-Peñas's 1997 movie *My America... or Honk if you Love*. Instead of freedom and status symbol, the road and the city for the ethnic minority mirror the perennial search for identity and civil rights. Although there is an increasing domination of the immigrant working class in urban politics, the modern society is fraught with the prevalence of stagnating racial inequality. The question is, quotes Marchetti from Tajima-Peñas, 'not how people become real Americans, but how America has become its people' (33). Studying the work as the road movie as well as the city film, Marchetti believes that the road does not end in the city. Rather, the road is (to use the title of Waugh's chapter) 'just a passin' through'.

The concluding chapter, William Kyle's '*Urbs Americana—A Work in Progress*' is an enthusiastic guide into the socio-graphical restructuring of the US from pre-1830 to the present day. Continuing Roberts's socio-cultural account of the road and Waugh's essay of 'space' and 'place' in the modern city, Kyle bases his discussion on John Borchert's five epochs of the evolution of US transportation, William Kaszynski's four phases of the history of American roads, and John Adam's four eras of intra-urban structural evolution. The chapter solidifies topics addressed in the previous chapters: the interplay between (im)migration and settlement, continental expansion and (sub)urbanization, urban ethnic communities and employment patterns, as well



as change of social structure under the continuous alteration of the geographical limits and human resources throughout the nation's history.

Cities, as Swirski writes in the introduction, 'for the most part, *are America*':

Their values and problems define not only what the United States is, but what other nations perceive the United States to be. They are the tone-setters and pace-setters for the country and the continent, if not the entire world. Roads, on the other hand, and their impact on the American culture and lifestyle, form not only the integral part of the historical rise-and-shine of the modern city but a physical release from and a cultural antidote to its pressure-cooker stresses' (1).

Whereas traditional academic discussion focuses on either the road (from Hilaire Belloc's *The Road* to Michael Sweeney and Janet Davidson's *On the Move: Transportation and the American Story*) or the city (from Lewis Mumford's *The Culture of Cities* to Howard P. Chudacoff and Judith E. Smith's *The Evolution of American Urban Society*), *All Roads Lead to the American City* combines these thematic threads, which has yielded a highly original book. Drawing on an eclectic array of sources (popular fiction, movies, poetry, popular songs, and case studies), this interdisciplinary and intercultural study runs through the vein of the American city with a socio-cultural and geo-historical sweep. Evocative, observant and edifying, *All Roads* is a rewarding read for both academics and the public at large.

WORKS CITED:

- Belloc, H. (1923) *The Road*. Manchester: C. W. Hobson.
- Chudacoff, H. P. and J. E. Smith. (2005) *The Evolution of American Urban Society*. 6th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Mumford, L. (1938) *The Culture of Cities*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1938.
- Sweeney, M. and J. Davidson. (2003) *On the Move: Transportation and the American Story*. Washington DC: National Geographic Society.
- Swirski, P. (2005) *From Lowbrow to Nobrow*. Montréal/ Ithaca: McGill-Queen's UP.