

# BOOK REVIEW

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Anamaria Schwab-Frîncu

*Deadly Dwellings in Manhattan, New York: Three Recent American Novels*

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In *Deadly Dwellings in Manhattan, New York: Three Recent American Novels*<sup>1</sup>, Anamaria Schwab-Frîncu tackles a topic and a series of concepts that generated, particularly in the recent years, a plethora of fascinating essays: space and time in an urban context, particularly in the case of a city that seduced the imagination of many generations all over the world, the most notorious of New York's boroughs, that gives the city's skyline, Manhattan – or, to use the Lenni Lenape Native American word, Mannahatta, the land of many hills. In a book published only a few years ago, Catalina Neculai was rightfully saying that “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.”<sup>2</sup> This is precisely what the reader perceives when reading Schwab-Frîncu's essay: the author's fascination with the city, on one hand, and on the other, the reforming intellectual labor that brings about a fresh understanding of the city, starting from a few philosophical concepts and from the literary and cultural theories of the '70s, and using as examples three important novels where New York is central, novels that have been less discussed in previous approaches. Two of these novels are written by

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<sup>1</sup> Schwab-Frîncu Anamaria. *Deadly Dwellings in Manhattan, New York: Three Recent American Novels*. Iași: Institutul European, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Neculai, Catalina. *Urban Space and Late Twentieth-Century New York Literature. Reformed Geographies*. New York: Pelgrave Macmillan, 2014.

E.L. Doctorow, *The Waterworks* and *Homer and Langley*, and the third one by Steven Millhauser, *Martin Dressler*.

The first half of the book focuses on theoretical issues, such as the city's spacial and temporal structure, but also its cultural layout, discussion that is followed by a focus on "a hermeneutics of suspicion", with focus on theories of the 1970', as mentioned before.

Schwab-Frîncu underlines a paradigmatic shift from the prominence of time and temporality in city studies, in the first half of the twentieth century, to insistence on "space and spatiality after the 1970s". As a result of this shift, the city is not perceived anymore mainly as a place *shaped by history*, therefore having a rather passive role in history. The city becomes *a shaper of history*, an active agent in determining the course of history. Thus, in the last decades, place has come to play a more pregnant, active role than time. Moreover, the city is less and less seen as an entity that is necessarily in conflict with the individual, as it was reflected in the naturalistic and realistic novels of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but as being "already embedded in our deepest experiences, perceptions and judgments, almost indistinguishable from them."<sup>3</sup>

In a time of "intense, radical urban transformations" with sprawling cities that have become "an absolute reality, encompassing all other forms of spatial organization," how relevant for literature is the modern city, in this case, Manhattan, New York, a type of place where physical, but also symbolic change is less probable than in other American urban areas? One possible answer is that "It is no longer possible – neither for writers nor for ordinary citizens – to link modern urbanity with a larger sociological or historical evolution"<sup>4</sup>, owing to the fragmented character of our culture and the consumption practices that further increase its complex character." In her study, Schwab-Frîncu has a radically different take on this matter. In a nutshell, she intends "to contradict such affirmations and show that the modern city is still employed in fiction, not necessarily out of nostalgia, but with a view to a critical dialogue between two epochs – the past one and the present one."

The author also addresses "a secondary theoretical issue" in the discussion of space and time (space rather than time) and the modern city: the changes that occurred in literature at the end of the last century, changes that occurred in a moment of "postmodernism's weakening in America." The point

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<sup>3</sup> Keunen, Bart and Bart Eeckhout. "whatever happened To The Urban Novel? New Perspectives For literary Urban Studies In The Era of Postmodern Culture." *Postmodern New York City: Transfiguring Spaces – Raum Transformation*. Ed. Gunther H. Lenz and Utz Riese. Heidelberg: Winter, 2003. 56-70.

<sup>4</sup> Keunen, Bart. "The Decline of the City as Modernist Symbol: City Imagis in Postmodern Urban Fiction and in Collective Memory." *The Urban Condition: Space, Community and Self in the Contemporary Metropolis*. Eds. Ghent Urban Studies Team. Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 1999, 359-377.

that she wants to make in her study is that “destabilizing postmodern elements still persist and act even within a city literature which abandoned the experimental stage of endless semiosis typical of earlier postmodernism.”

To explore Manhattan as it is reflected in literature, Schwab-Frîncu starts by investigating a number of novels from the '80s and the '90 that deal with New York, in which the city “is the disembodied, surreal world of clubs, drugs and floating images, dominated by media and the new technologies which induce a state of mind verging on schizophrenia or paranoia,” but in the end she focuses on “three historical novels whose atmosphere is consistently Gothic and which thus participate to the (popular) cultural tradition that sees New York as a place of corruption, madness and death,” novels that also offer a larger temporal and cultural perspective of 20<sup>th</sup> century Manhattan, underlining similarities between the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the present day New York City excess. The authors of these novels “give present itself more depth and meaning through focusing on the past.” As a result of this, our possibly limited comprehension of contemporary phenomena such as material excess in the city, the profusion of representations and simulacra, intense commodification or egotism is further enhanced and enriched.” Manhattan, as reflected in these novels, seems not to have changed much since the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the same obsessions haunting it then and now.

As the author points out, “One of the key topics in the present study is the late nineteenth century New York City *dwelling* seen in the specific context of urban industrialization, commodification, and excess, and in connection to the idea of possessive individualism.” One feature in particular comes to the foreground: the rectangular grid plan of streets and lots that defines Manhattan’s structure since the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

One other aspect discussed in this study is the place that the city has in the American imagination, with, on the one hand, reflections of the myths of American exceptionalism, and, on the other hand, the dismantling of these myths through the “destructive potential resulting from egotism, excess, corruption and violence.”

Using as a theoretical background David Harvey’s idea of “space-time compression,”<sup>5</sup> Schwab-Frîncu attempts to make the reader better understand the necessity of rewriting the past of New York in fiction. The novels discussed in the study “strive towards enriching New York’s sense of the past, adding to it a fictional dimension that helps dilate such a past while at the same time rethinking both the city’s former times and its present.”

For a theoretical foundation of the analysis of the three novels brought into discussion, the author reviews recent perspectives in cultural and literary

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<sup>5</sup> Harvey, David. *The Condition of Postmodernity. An Inquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, Oxford: Blachwell, 1989.

theory, such as the two types of hermeneutics that have developed after “the earlier, self-reflective, metadiscursive postmodernism” – “a continual hermeneutics of suspicion that blends together poststructuralism and neo-Marxism, and a later hermeneutics which is more trustful to the human being seen especially as an ethnic other.” It is the first category that the author favors, a category that attacks “the idea of a unitary, coherent self and that of an exceptional Western culture, which it sees as a generator of excessive materialism and avid consumption.”

All the aspects mentioned up to this point lead to three intense and very interesting chapters dedicated to the novels chosen by Schwab-Frîncu, chapters that constitute the core of her study. In this review, I insisted on the first half of the book, which is in fact a theoretical introduction, to give the reader an idea of the author’s approach. The discussion of postmodernism in the American fiction is an ongoing one and contributions such as Schwab-Frîncu’s are more than welcome. At the end of her study, Schwab-Frîncu leaves room for a possible new study: “A separate, more focused study may be needed to consider exclusively the shapes that postmodernism may take into our century’s fiction, which at the moment constitutes an open-ended debate.” We can only look forward to reading such a new study, authored by Schwab-Frîncu.

## References

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