

H-Net Reviews

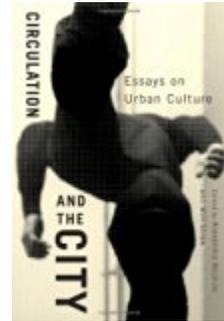
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Alexandra Boutros, Will Straw, eds. *Circulation and the City: Essays on Urban Culture*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010. vi + 306 pp. \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7735-3664-7; \$32.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7735-3665-4.

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The Circulatory Turn?

Although anthologies of academic essays have moved beyond the realm of the traditional Festschrift to become a standard academic genre, these ubiquitous volumes are often uneven in their quality and utility. Even when an essay collection claims to provide a central theoretical impulse for its project, the relationship between the individual essays often seems a bit contrived. After working through several problematic anthologies recently, it was a pleasant surprise to read *Circulation and the City*, edited by Alexandra Boutros and Will Straw. *Circulation and the City* succeeds where so many other anthologies fail: it not only defines and defends “circulation” as a theoretical approach to urban studies, but also demonstrates how useful the concept of circulation can be across a sampler of diverse disciplinary approaches. One of the reasons for this success may be the collection’s institutional history: the essays rise out of the “Culture of Cities” project, a Canadian research collaboration that brought together scholars from diverse disciplines and invited them to focus their research on the cities of Montreal, Dublin, Toronto, and Berlin. The anthology is the result of the group’s mandate to “forge and refine conceptual resources for the interdisciplinary analysis of urban culture” (p. 4). The book delivers a broad toolbox of conceptual resources about circulation. The introduction provides a focused set of definitions and well-rounded review of theoretical literature to the practical applications, and three sections—“The Mobile City,” “City Circuits,” and “City Traffic”—provide an overview of diverse approaches. The individual essays navigate the perpet-

ual problem of urban studies—addressing the irreducible complexity of urban phenomena while still remaining theoretically coherent.

Why circulation? The concept, as the editors point out, includes contradictory impulses. On the one hand, the term refers to the tightly controlled circulatory systems that move information, products, and people through strictly regulated urban spaces. On the other hand, circulation also describes the “scattering and dispersal” that contributes to the ephemeral elements of the city that resist observation and description (p. 6). This apparent contradiction, as the editors demonstrate, is one of the strengths of circulation as a theoretical and methodological approach: it engages the tension between the ordering and chaotic forces that make up urban modernity. But does this recent focus on circulation really constitute a “circulatory turn” in critical theory, or does it merely add new temporal and dynamic dimensions to the tired “spatial turn” (p. 7)? Cultural poetics, for example, rejects the notion of a text as reflecting a time, place, idea, or population, instead seeing the text as being embedded in larger cultural, historical, aesthetic, and/or ideological discourses.[1] The term “embedded” reveals the static notion of these texts as fixed places on a discursive network. Approached from the standpoint of circulation, the cultural artifact can no longer be seen as merely a conduit for ethereal discursive impulses. Instead, the artifact itself is seen as subject to the different rhythms that move it through spaces, populations, and

events: rhythms of commuting, emigration, tourism, the news cycle, gentrification, decay, and the nomadic physical and virtual wanderings of the modern urban subject.

Cities are, of course, not merely the place where circulation happens. Urban spaces are created, dismantled, and reshaped by circulation. They function as transitional points in the circulatory process, nodes in a system that attract, absorb, and transform the people, things, and ideas that circulate through them. Boutros and Straw see their volume as an investigation of the different mobilities that make up urban landscapes and dreamscapes. The volume presents different theoretical concepts to grapple with the different cultures of circulation that exist simultaneously in the city, and the many phenomena that accompany these heterogeneous circulations. Using ideas from such diverse disciplines as media theory, anthropology, communications studies, and philosophy, the authors of the various essays present different tools for measuring and conceptualizing such phenomena as the intensity of movement, the material traces of historical rhythms, and the tensions between global and local circulations. The reader is confronted with discipline bending terms, such as *rythmanalysis* (Gaston Bachelard and Henri Lefebvre), many of which still might count as neologisms for urban studies scholars from different disciplines. Through most of the collection, however, the theoretical and technical concepts are grounded in the study of real artifacts, resulting in a volume that serves as an accessible field guide to the different disciplinary approaches to circulation in its urban context.

The highlights of this collection are the essays that use practical examples to illustrate the theoretical potential of circulation. Jennifer Gabrys investigates the epistemological ramifications of so-called smart dust, nanobots that could blow through the city and, through their own circulation, monitor the circulation of other electronic media. The opposite of GPS, these robot-particles would provide a meta-ether that could track the varied electronic practices of an urban population. Jenny Burman focuses on the circulation of “illegal” populations in Toronto and Montreal, and the public memory of people who have been deported, or, to use the current government euphemism, “removed.” Building on the concept of mobility that has been developed in cultural studies over the past decade, Burman explores the social circuitry of cities where movement is a luxury reserved for urbanites with advantageous social and legal status. Boutros examines the interplay of global and local religious practices in cities dotted with pilgrimage sites, sacred spaces, and other permanent or ephemeral spaces

charged with religious meaning. By using specific examples, such as Montreal’s population of Haitian practitioners of Vodou, she provides insights into the literal religious “movements” of urban diaspora. Straw also focuses on local institutions in Montreal as he contrasts the “fast city” of transportation and movement of goods with the “slow city,” the places where the accumulation of historical sediment and post-consumer detritus tends to interrupt and impede mobility. Alexander Sedlmaier and Barthold Pelzer compare the flow of crowds and scarce goods at East Berlin’s “Centrum” department store on Alexanderplatz with the overabundance of goods at the famed “KaDeWe” (Kaufhaus des Westens) in West Berlin’s central shopping district. Through their readings of two works of literature from the eighties, Sedlmaier and Pelzer show the way that Berliners imagined the flow of consumer goods in the two halves of a divided city. Literary scholars will be particularly interested in Amanda Holmes’s investigation of the figure of the Parisian *flaneur* as it is imported to Buenos Aires in Adolfo Bioy Casares’s *El sueño de los heroes* (1954). Wandering through the city in the tradition of Charles Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin, and Franz Hessel, the protagonist, Gauna, explores the shifting rules of class, politics, and movement in the Peronist capital. Focusing on very specific places in two cities, Amanda Boetzkes investigates musical and theater performances that take place on one specific subway platform in Montreal, and Kieran Bonner looks at the gentrification of Dublin’s Temple Bar district. Other contributions to the anthology are more focused on theoretical, philosophical, and political ideas of circulation, and will appeal to a different set of readers.

Circulation and the City is above all else a timely anthology. We have all recently watched in fascination as the courageous, technologically savvy young populations of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Bahrain circulated Twitter messages among themselves as they gathered to protest in the face of official government forces. Circulation is the theoretical approach that will provide us with the language to describe what we have seen, and this collection in particular will prove useful to those who wish to acquaint themselves with the practices of circulation studies. The volume contains eleven essays, each ranging from roughly twenty to fifty pages in length. The editors wisely allowed each contribution to include a reasonable number of endnotes, which is very helpful for a reader who is venturing into a new discipline. The volume also includes a comprehensive bibliography and biographical sketches of the contributors.

Note

[1]. In the introductory essay to his edited volume, for example, H. Aram Veese lists five “key assumptions” about cultural poetics. The first of these states that “every expressive act is *embedded* in a network of material practices” (my italics). See H. Aram Veese, “Introduction,” in *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veese (New York: Routledge, 1989), xi.

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