



**Circulation and the City: Essays on Urban Culture.** Edited by Alexandra Boutros and Will Straw. Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010. 306 pp. ISBN: 9780773536654 (pbk).

What type of relationship do you have with your urban environment? When it comes to my own, I would have to say it is marked by a certain feel, an affection. I experience a sense of place that is both familiar and navigable, but also a space that is infused with excruciating disappointments and serendipitous encounters. Most days I make a long trek to campus, or to the bookstore where I work, or for coffee somewhere. I see the same people every day. The same sites. I make my life here within the fabricated and improvised spaces of streets, surveillant apparatuses, and emotionally resonant neighbourhoods. What would it mean to treat my daily perambulations around this city as so many calculated responses to a central problematic: the idea of more or less normal or abnormal disposition of individuals, relationships, and concepts? How are we affected by and, in turn, how do we affect our experience of lived environments?

This is the problematic that a wonderful new book, *Circulation and the City: Essays on Urban Culture*, adopts to great effect. Alexandra Boutros and Will Straw have assembled a rich collection of essays that approaches the question of circulation as a crucial corollary to exuberant declarations of how spatial and conceptual developments have transformed our lives in the twenty-first century. As Boutros and Straw insist,

Circulation may name both the reining in of behaviours (their integration within tightly controlled circuits) and their loosening (their capacity to break free from authority). The difference between these uses embodies a longstanding tension in writing on cities, which inevitably strains to capture both the regulatory order and the fleeting ephemerality of modern urban life. (p. 1)

The great strength of *Circulation and the City* is its collective effort to abide in an urban space that embodies both these rigidifying and anarchic tendencies. Whereas many contemporary analyses express a valorization of one of these movements over another, these essays are productively mired in the complex and often contradictory interchanges of formal and processual forces. The space we inhabit is at once home and frustratingly inhospitable. We shape, and in turn are shaped by, our surroundings in an incessant feedback loop. As the editors declare, “The city never is but is always becoming through the circulation of images, things, languages, ideas, and perhaps, about all, people” (p. 20, emphasis in original).

*Circulation and the City* is divided into three sections: The Mobile City, which focuses on how the contours of the urban environment are both constrained and stretched to the limits by language and technology; City Traffic, which brings together issues around deportation, religiosity, and mass transit; and City Circuits, which draws on issues of waste, mobility, and gentrification. All of these themes reflect in their own unique way the fundamental question “How can the contemporary city be defined and understood in the face of a fluidity and mobility that always links it to places, both literal and conceptual, outside of itself?” (p. 10). The space of the city becomes, on one hand, a site for administrative deliberation on how to infuse flows of people and infor-

mation with efficiency and purpose, and, on the other, an opportunity for experimentation and inspired non-compliance.

The essays that comprise this collection take both diverse and intellectually stimulating methodological approaches to their objects of study. Jennifer Gabrys' fascinating take on ethereal particles and wirelessness is a highlight. Considering the issue of smart dust, those "tiny wireless sensors that could be released en masse, so that countless machines are in constant relation, coordinating information about an environment," Gabrys explores the constitution of a tireless and ubiquitous system of monitoring and calibration (p. 49). It is at this microscopic level, a miniaturized world of "telepathetic correspondences," that information gathering and coordination is occurring more and more (p. 57).

Alan Blum conducts a much-needed interrogation of Richard Florida's apoplectic excitement over the possibilities of the creative city. Blum explores the contradiction at the heart of Florida's work, "how in his world the subject is assumed to see itself as both normal (mainstream) and special ('creative') while not understanding that it is impossible to be both" (p. 73). What the creative city thesis mobilizes, then, is both the utopian aspirations of the city and the anxiety that such massifications inspire. Blum suggests attending to how the constitution of the "normal" life venerated by capitalistic forces and creative city dwellers renders imperceptible the affective aberrations and tumultuous unforeseen events that can actually vitalize a city.

Tobias van Veen's provocative rhythm-analytical study of the contours of urban space provides another novel approach to issues of urban becoming. Van Veen draws together Henri Lefebvre, Deleuze, and Guattari as well as Hardt and Negri to produce a challenging and dynamic account of the relational thickness of urban environments. Questions of virtuality, revolution, and rhythm abound. Rhythm, what van Veen calls the "motion-movement of differentiation," provides generative force in the constitution of urban space (p. 169). Indeed, he writes, "it is through the common of the throng that intervention—rhythm as movement—becomes possible" (p. 186). Through a very theoretically dense reading of Lefebvre, we are provided with the theoretical and practical resources to think rhythm as constitutive elements of subjective experience. The attunement of our bodies to rhythms at molecular, sub-personal, and molar entities becomes the sensorial basis for a political project with great political potential for fending off stasis and normalization.

Amanda Boetzkes' contribution investigates the constitution of a time and space in-between catching subways and waiting for the next. Boetzke approaches this intersection of animated passengers and potential passengers and the buskers who offer their services at the Lionel Groulx Station on the Montréal subway. For Boetzkes, "[i]t is not simply a crowd that is produced at this exchange; the flow of traffic concentrates around the busker, forming an invisible stage" (p. 140). Here an experience emerges and is made available to participants, a "sudden inversion of an alienated modern condition, as decayed human connections are revived through the coalescence of an audience and the demarcation of a stage" (p. 141). All kinds of forces are at work: emotionally resonant songs done for itinerant passengers, the accelerant of sheer immediacy, and innumerable other dynamics that together make for the eventful nature

of the busker-commuter assemblage. Boetzkes' vivid description of the broadly involved composition of a space for performance is quite compelling. Brief connections, lasting transactional relationships, all without a centralized command centre—what occurs at the Lionel Groulx Station can be seen as an exciting emergent phenomenon, but also a quite quotidian achievement.

Boutros and Straw have drawn together an impressive number of scholars who take as their objects of exploration how processes of circulation, including language, diasporic communities, and second-hand goods, can be seen to typify the urban milieu. "Immigration and deportation, tourism, cultural practices like raves, the movement of commodities through the city, the transmission of wireless signals, the cacophony of language in the city streets," (p. 10) all represent the myriad ingredients that constitute the urban admixture. In examining these diverse processes, *Circulation and the City* is a significant contribution to what might be regarded as the study of the temporarily durable and the permanently ineffable qualities of cultural life in the city. What the editors describe as the "ontological" (p. 20) quality of the urban environs makes for a truly riveting account of how we are situated within both familiar and unfamiliar spaces of interaction and change.

*Circulation and the City* brings together 11 researchers working on questions of what it means to truly *be* in the city. These investigations into modes of "being urban" demonstrate how shifting political and economic forces are generative of wildly inventive and, occasionally, startlingly predictive ways of dwelling in these spaces. They are united by a continual foregrounding of this process of becoming. Indeed, while many analyses seize on the intractability of conceptual categories such as race, gender, class, ability, or the technological, this wonderful volume fruitfully focuses on how contemporary urban life is constituted by an environment of "intermediary phases" (p. 1). *Circulation and the City* provides a strong argument for the intermediary as a fruitful and theoretically productive space for research.

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