

Urban History Review Revue d'histoire urbaine

URBAN HISTORY REVIEW
REVUE D'HISTOIRE URBAINE

McNamara, Kevin R. *Urban Verbs: Arts and Discourses of American Cities*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996. Pp. vii, 310. 16 black and white figures, bibliography, index. \$39.50 (US)

Deborah Schnitzer

Volume 26, numéro 1, octobre 1997

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1016670ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1016670ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (imprimé)

1918-5138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Schnitzer, D. (1997). Compte rendu de [McNamara, Kevin R. *Urban Verbs: Arts and Discourses of American Cities*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996. Pp. vii, 310. 16 black and white figures, bibliography, index. \$39.50 (US)]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 26(1), 56–57.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1016670ar>

"knowledge about." Such an epistemology was keenly cultivated in the "New Journalism."

After his transfer to the academic milieu, Park continued to see his role as similar to that of a city editor, or "a captain of inquiry." He served as leader of a team of empirical researchers — selecting topics for study, guiding the investigations, shaping the final analyses — much as what an editor did at the time for a daily metropolitan press.

In adopting what he saw as the primary advances of the new urban journalism, Park did not desert an appreciation of the contributions of European social theory. In particular, he sought intellectual guidance from the work of Simmel: actually, Lindner argues that Park "Americanized" Simmel. Society as process rather than as structure was an underlying focus throughout the Chicago School's research. Yet, Park sought to "correct" Simmel's overly-philosophical approach with a greater degree of empiricism.

Lindner points out that the Chicago sociology of the 1920s intersected two worlds — that of the reformer and that of the reporter. Urban journalism represented a new attitude toward the social world. A "reporter in depth" and a "sociological field researcher" shared a commitment to understanding that world in all its richness. Without the momentum of urban journalism, sociology would have been less able to overcome the shortcomings inherent in the social gospel ideology to which many social commentators were so passionately attached. Lindner has made a valuable contribution in underscoring this point. To dismiss the Chicago School as nothing more than "journalism in disguise," as some critics have done, represents a superficial understanding of the evolution of urban sociological analysis.

Aside from documenting his main argument, Lindner presents additional analyses which are of considerable value. For example, he briefly demonstrates how some of Park's students — for example, Nels Anderson and Clifford Shaw — in their own work adopted some of the techniques and approaches of urban reportage. The results, of course, are what remain as classics in urban sociological studies. Lindner also reviews how the increasing "interest in real life," which journalism nurtured, influenced the growth of "naturalistic literature," as evident in the novels of Theodore Dreiser.

One possible weakness in Lindner's treatise is the need for better integration of the material. The logic of presentation of the different sections is not always clear. The book could have benefited from a tighter flow between sections. Lindner is insufficiently critical of Park's inability to evolve elaborate theoretical statements from empirical observations. The "chains of empiricism" are repeatedly evident. Yet, the weakness in his epistemology is only briefly mentioned.

Overall, this is a very rich study of the origins of the Chicago School and of the intellectual influences on Robert Park. That he saw a sociologist as in reality a poet, committed through "intui-

tion and sensitivity" to dissecting "the ossified shells of conventional thought," suggests why this discipline still has much to contribute to the study of the urban world.

Peter McGahan
Department of Social Science
University of New Brunswick / Saint John

McNamara, Kevin R. *Urban Verbs: Arts and Discourses of American Cities*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996. Pp. vii, 310. 16 black and white figures, bibliography, index. \$39.50 (US).

My background includes twentieth-century literary studies and inter-art explorations that involve verbal and visual signs, and so the opportunity to explore Kevin McNamara's analysis of the representation of urban realities in built landscapes and narrative, journalistic, and cinematic forms is a welcome one, consolidating as it does, my appreciation of the correlations that exist among media as they respond to contemporary sociological, political, economic, and spiritual values.

The "trajectory" of *Urban Verbs*, McNamara advises, takes the reader from "the rise of the American industrial city to what is often remarked as its obsolescence" (p. 209). Beginning with Henry James's *The American Scene* (1907) — which exhibits the potential anarchy of turn-of-the-century New York in relation to James's nostalgia for "a more homogenous, more pastoral city" — *Urban Verbs* takes us to "the romance of metropolitan life" in Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900) and the idealizations of 1920s "visualist" Hugh Ferriss's *Imaginary Metropolis*. The study moves next to William Carlos Williams's *Paterson* (1946-63) whose "archaeology," McNamara advises, recognizes the significance of vigour, dissonance, and provisionality within urban actualities, contrasted with film-noir resistance to urban energy and the desire for containment in anti-urban pieces like *The Naked City* (1948). McNamara concludes with a discussion of the sensitivity to "urban heterogeneity" (p. 221) exhibited in the 1960s plans and projects of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, a sensitivity commensurate with McNamara's own allegiance to pluralism: "conflict is not just a demon fretting the naked city, because we can work together even as we pull apart. In this, if in anything, lies the vitality of American urban culture" (p. 248).

There are many appealing dimensions to McNamara's commentary. Intrigued by the languages disciplines develop to name and excavate their chosen terrain, my understanding is enlivened by the way he "reads" urban texts, referencing, for example, the "direct speech" of "individual buildings" (p. 22) to explore the economic and sociological forces that support the "argument" of a particular design — like the functionalist approach that encourages Ferriss to dress-down the "architectural signifier" (like Pound's castigation of the word) to curtail its circulation (p. 119).

As interestingly, McNamara pursues the dialectic between signifier and signified to measure the "regime of space construction" articulate in the structural grid that controls conversations in *The Naked City* (p. 207), examines the desire to "increase the legibility of designated public areas of cities" achieved within the City Beautiful movement (p. 214), and releases the postmodernist irony constructed by Venturis's and Scott Brown's "formal analysis of the historical sources and visual logic of space and signage in the commercial vernacular" (p. 220).

And, while I have learned a great deal about how urban centres have been represented visually and verbally, there are some problems within McNamara's analysis that trouble my regard for the project overall. First, McNamara often does not pursue the verbal artifact in terms of its own techniques of construction. He identifies the "restless analyst" situated in Central Park in James's *American Scene* (pp. 19, 166), for example, but makes no attempt to identify the rhetorical strategies and literary figures James employs to create the persona within this pseudo-autobiographical form. As perplexing, the reader must reconstruct the chronological and recursive development of essential critical vocabularies whose meanings fluctuate throughout McNamara's commentaries. No initial provision, for example, is made for the range of meanings the author relies on in his discussion of modernism as a period concept. The single term seems to promote contrasting styles because an internally coherent approach that could comprehend the diversity among various emerging modernisms is infrequently attempted. In the chapter on Ferriss, then, modernism suggests an "heroic and unifying vision," a "reunification" of "signifier and signified" buoyed by beliefs in coherence and wholeness (pp. 114-16): "In most familiar images of the artist as agent of cultural reunification, he (our canonical high-modernist is all but inevitably male) wills a coherence out of the fragments that are all that remains of an earlier, healthier culture; think of ... T.S. Eliot shoring fragments against his ruin a decade later" in the *Waste Land* (p. 114). In the subsequent chapter on Williams, "a more historical-minded modernism is evident in varying degrees in works about civic culture by several American modernist poets" including Eliot and the same shored fragments (p. 138). While the fragments generated by Eliot's allusive method expose the co-presence of representational and non-representational values in his long poem and modernism generally, McNamara under-develops the dialectical nature of this tension between description and construction as intrinsic to Eliot's practice as it is to Williams, Dreiser, and James.

Another weakness in McNamara's text concerns the often frugal nature of the connective tissue that could more systematically integrate the various chapters, as well as the sometimes incompatible analytical approaches that create uneven experiences for the reader. Thus the predominantly dense, polysyllabic prose, which assumes a working knowledge of the primary texts and an insider's grasp of sociological, economic, and literary theorists, steps aside for chapter-long and some-

times superficial plot summary of both *Where the Sidewalk Ends* and *The Naked City*.

While I suggest that overall the commentary on the verbal and cinematic artifacts does not equal the quality of the detailed and concrete analysis that distinguishes many of the primary architectural sites selected for *Urban Verbs*, McNamara has provided someone like me with contexts and possible correlations that confirm why the representation of urban myths, cultures, sites, and vocabularies is important to the study of literature.

Deborah Schnitzer
Department of English
University of Winnipeg

Sawada, Mitziko. *Tokyo Life, New York Dreams: Urban Japanese Visions of America, 1890-1924*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1996. Pp. xvii, 268, 11 halftone illustrations, 9 tables, 2 maps, bibliography, index. US\$40.00.

The subject of *Tokyo Life, New York Dreams*, the history of the small number of Japanese emigrants to the East Coast, may seem narrow. But Mitziko Sawada's treatment of the subject fills in gaps found in a number of other studies.

For example, Sawada adds another dimension to studies of early twentieth century Japanese immigration to the United States, the majority of which have focussed primarily on emigration to the Pacific States, by revealing how different the Japanese in New York were from their West Coast countrymen in terms of their class, urban origins, and the cultural baggage that they brought with them. Unlike these earlier studies which have relied mostly on English-language sources, Sawada also examines the Japanese literature, which helped shape the emigrants' ideas about other peoples, such as that of a "homogeneous, mysterious and exotic American Other" (p. 12). In addition, Sawada provides a balance to studies of Japanese-U.S. relations during this period, which have concentrated on American pressures to restrict Japanese immigration, by revealing how the Japanese themselves took the initiative in addressing this problem. She observes that after 1908 officials in Japan banned the emigration of labourers and tried to limit passports to their more educated, middle-class countrymen in the hopes that they would convey a more positive image of Japan to Americans.

It is these preferred travelers to the United States, the *hi-min* or so-called non-immigrants, who are the subject of Sawada's eight-chapter study. Chapter 2 describes the average New York *hi-min* as a man over the age of thirty, who had mistakenly envisioned an easy transition from a Japanese to an American urban world: they might have arrived in the United States as students, businessmen or professionals, but many could find