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## **Cities of Words: Recent Studies on Urbanism and Literature**

John M. Ganim

MLQ: Modern Language Quarterly

Duke University Press

Volume 63, Number 3, September 2002

pp. 365-382

REVIEW

[View Citation](#)

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*MLQ: Modern Language Quarterly* 63.3 (2002) 365-382

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[Access article in PDF]

Review Essay

Cities of Words:

# Recent Studies on Urbanism and Literature

John M. Ganim

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***The City in Literature: An Intellectual and Cultural History.* By Richard Lehan.** Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998. xvi + 330 pp.

***October Cities: The Redevelopment of Urban Literature.* By Carlo Rotella.** Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998. xii + 358 pp.

***Apartment Stories: City and Home in Nineteenth-Century Paris and London.* By Sharon Marcus.** Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999. x + 323 pp.

***White Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth-Century American Novel.* By Catherine Jurca.** Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001. viii + 238 pp.

The city is one of the great subjects of literature, both ancient and modern. Not surprisingly, the study of the city in literature is a mature enterprise. Hundreds of scholarly books are devoted to the representation of the city in specific works or authors throughout various periods. That scholarship has relied on a certain conception of the city, on a stark distinction between city and country, resolving itself into the themes of urbanism and antiurbanism. But the notion of the strict separation of the urban and the rural, embodied in such iconic images as the walled city of the Middle Ages, the fortified city of the seventeenth century, the Puritan stockade staring out into the primeval forest, even the smokestacks of the industrial city viewed from the refuge of its hills, has given way to urban conglomerations that can be mapped only by satellite, a landscape in which nature is preserved only by culture. The identification of city life with civilization itself, growing out of both etymology and a Whig sense of progress as defined by urban commerce, has been called into question, especially in America, where the [End Page 365] centripetal development of corporate cores encircled by acres of poverty, so often reflected in the urban landscapes of science fiction and cinema, has replaced some of the older icons of the city.

New theories and practices of urbanism and city planning have complicated the assumptions behind the old polarities and have accorded new importance and new complexity to space as a category of analysis and criticism. Why should space be regarded as dead, asked Michel Foucault a quarter century ago, and time valorized as dialectical, dynamic, and creative? <sup>1</sup> Foucault was honing a position forged a decade before, in the early 1960s, by Henri Lefebvre, who elevated the analysis of space to the same position as that of other historical materials, dissecting its politics, its ownership, its relations to power. <sup>2</sup> Postcolonial theory has replaced the vocabulary of time that has dominated our thinking about nations since Romanticism with the vocabulary of space (location, position, opposition, construction, nationhood, coloniality). Feminist urbanism, most famously the work of Dolores Hayden, has pointed to the ways in which space itself is fraught with the implications of gender and has suggested how critical the concept of the domestic is to understanding architecture and urbanism. <sup>3</sup> Geographers such as Edward W. Soja have helped us think in terms of regions as well as cities and have delineated the complex multilayerings of different "cities." <sup>4</sup> In city planning circles the totalizing plans of modernist urbanism have given way to interventions and concerns for context. [End Page 366] The very concepts of the city and the urban are being transformed into different and as yet unnamed configurations.

Indeed, there is an ongoing debate about the nature of the posturban. During the Progressive Era

improvements for working-class and immigrant residential areas and grand Parisian neoclassical monuments for city centers dominated the design of American cities. From the 1920s on the so-called Chicago school of urban sociology studied the demographics, planning, and social relations in the classic industrial cities of the East and Midwest, replacing the sanitizing metaphors of progressivism with a gritty understanding of the experience of urbanism. These movements depended on traditional thinking about centers and peripheries, about circulation and service zones. In the 1950s and 1960s Jane Jacobs wrote her eloquent defenses...

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