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# Urban Underworlds: A Geography of Twentieth-Century American Literature and Culture

reviewed by [Chris Moffett](#) ♦ April 13, 2011

**Title:** Urban Underworlds: A Geography of Twentieth-Century American Literature and Culture

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*Urban Underworlds* is a haunted book. Posing the question of why the imagery of the underworld plays such a forceful and recurrent role in late nineteenth and twentieth century American Literature, Thomas Heise argues that the specter of the underworld is an effect, to put it bluntly, of the bifurcating logic of capitalism's uneven development. If the city's underbelly exposes itself time and again—in forms as disparate as the progressive muckraking of Jacob Riis' turn of the century *How the Other Half Lives*, the critical engagements of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and the postmodern fragmentation of Don DeLillo's *Underworld*—it is because the city is the shifting material battleground upon which the meaning of narratives is being worked and split by the forces of capital. Heise reads these narratives against the transformations of the city, shaped as they were by, among other forces, the great influxes of immigrants, the regulating drives of Fordist production, and the elusive networks of global capital. If the underworld is the natural place to tell the story of poverty and waste, of race and riots, of deviant sexuality and myriad criminalities, it is because these are the negative frames by which urban challenges and anxieties surrounding “surplus population” were made intelligible and controllable. This was accomplished, for example, through pathologizing difference as deviance, quarantining through zoning and segregation, and re-norming through re-development and the progressive establishment of acceptable forms of identity and interaction (p. 8).

The attempt to locate “the real city” is thus always swept up in a kind of fiction as well, making literature a more suitable domain for examining the workings of capital and urban planning than might be imagined. Linking the new technological vantage point on the divisions of the city afforded by skyscrapers and the seductively totalizing bird's-eye view of sociologists and urban planners, Heise recalls Michel de Certeau's invocation of the Greek myth of Icarus upon climbing the Empire State Building. Missing the opportunity to see from this height just how

ancient and continuous the narrative threads of the urban underworld are, Heise nevertheless rightly notes that far from raising us *above* fiction, the perceived clarity of such a bird's-eye view *is itself a fiction*, obscuring as much as it makes visible. Rather than bestowing omniscience, height thrusts us back onto the tragic narrative of Icarus' own hubris and fall.

Thus, if all too easily *Urban Underworlds* masquerades as a work of literary criticism notable for taking seriously the urban geographies that serve as backdrop, its deeper wager is that, in turn, we cannot understand the city without understanding the *fictional* force of the underworld. This means seeing not only the ways in which any number of salacious, even progressive, fictions can serve as a sleight of hand covering and justifying the urban shuntings of capitalism, but also the ways in which narratives can work from the bottom up, writing new forms into the text of the city itself. This vision, running underground through the intersecting tunnels of Heise's account, comes to the surface most directly in the figure of Ismael Muñoz, the graffiti artist of DeLillo's *Underworld*. Heise writes, "Ismael alternates between a life above and a life below, all the while writing on trains, transforming them into kinetic art that is a self-assertion in an overbearing city. His art connects both worlds—upper and under—in a rush of hurling metal..." (p. 243). The art of fiction, Heise seems to be suggesting, is a force to be reckoned with. Reflecting the bifurcated realities of capital, *Urban Underworlds*, in following the tracks these urban narratives follow, also shuttles between worlds: "Since the concept of an underworld is formulated 'up above' in the discourse of sociology, urban planning, and criminology, and deployed 'down below,' *Urban Underworlds* is by default an exercise in looking from two opposing perspectives" (p. 6).

It might be more appropriate to say that it involves *moving in two different directions*, like the graffiti-bearing subway car. While often telling essentialist tales of people stuck where they are, it is the journey that gives the underworldly narrative its form. It is a question of descent and emergence, capture and escape, sacrifice and renewal. If we find ourselves for a moment at the top of a crest, with the city laid out before us, it is only to embark on a downward journey. Rather than being a simple affair, moving between these two perspectives has a disorienting effect. Just as de Certeau, in traversing to a position of height above the city, evokes not just tumbling Icarus but also the labyrinth built by his father Daedalus, Heise turns, toward the end of this winding book, once again to the disorienting effect caused by this doubling of movement around a common axis. He writes:

The swirling transformations in work, technology, and urban space at the end of the twentieth century has been like a gyre turning in two directions simultaneously, a centripetal vortex drawing the rich and the poor into the city and a centrifugal whirlwind scattering money and labor across the globe. (p. 226)

On the one hand, this disorientation is part of the attraction, like the slumming tours popular in turn of the century New York in which real and perceived threats generate a kind of amusement ride thrill for the bored bourgeois. And closer to home, Heise quotes the theorist Frederic Jameson on the squalor of the postmodern city, "urban decay has assumed the status of a sublime ocular phenomenon that produces a 'strange new hallucinatory exhilaration' in spectators" (p. 238). And yet, on the other hand, one can find in these "swirling transformations," the challenging productive space in which identities are lost and formed, the tensions of urban space are grappled with, and new engagements experimented with. In short: the possibility of an urban

art. Responding to Jameson's claim that the disorienting architecture of the postmodern city "stands as something like an imperative to grow new organs, to expand our sensorium and our body to some new, yet unimaginable, perhaps ultimately impossible, dimensions," Heise proposes that, beneath this language of organic mutation, is a "deeper stratum of politics and ideology," the very elusiveness of which literature is potentially poised to transform into art (p. 224).

The image of the underworld thus shimmers between these two movements, perhaps inextricably intertwined. But *Urban Underworlds* is not haunted by the specter of the underworld itself—the elusiveness of the under city—which constitutes the book's very subject. As we are guided through narratives of urban fallenness, winding in a labyrinth across the decades, we discover that it is not even haunted by the real and fictional narratives of the inhabitants of these underworlds, the lives of which this book takes pains to bring into fine-grained focus. Instead it slowly begins to dawn on us that it is haunted by us, its readers. With no proper place or role in the narratives unfolded before us, we pass through as shadowy figures, both there and not there. We might surmise that we too are split between simultaneous perspectives: from above, academics drawn to making sense of the urban form; and from below, urban readers attempting to decipher the graffiti written in the city's literature of hurling forms. The unsettling vortex/whirlwind effect of *Urban Underworlds* is to place us, unspoken, as privileged viewers of this discourse on urban narratives, wondering through what ghostly points of contact we might participate in the unfolding scene.

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