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**Book Review: Pile, Steve and Nigel Thrift. *City A-Z*. London and New York: Routledge, 2000.**

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James Hanlon

## Book Review

Pile, Steve and Nigel Thrift

*City A-Z*

London and New York: Routledge, 2000.

Air. Borders. Cats. Dancing. Gypsy sites. Home. Invisibility. Madness. Noir. Pigeons. Standing around. Traffic-lights. Under the arches. Vinyl. X-rated. A casual thumb-through of this rather unique contribution to our understandings of cities and city life reveals that this is no ordinary keyword glossary. *City A-Z*, a montage-like compendium of 150 entries written by 50 authors, is rather more akin to the classification of animals Jorge Luis Borges claimed he had discovered in a Chinese encyclopedia. "In the wonderment of this taxonomy," Foucault writes of Borges' finding, "the thing that . . . is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking *that*" (xv). To be sure, nothing contained within the pages of *City A-Z* could be considered so alien to prevailing (scholarly) notions of the city as to thoroughly undermine such notions. But there lurks throughout this work a tacit recognition of the "stark impossibility" of thinking *the city*. Indeed, editors Steve Pile and Nigel Thrift hold the "central paradox" of the work to be that "imagining the city as a whole is a necessarily partial exercise; putting parts of the city together will never add up to the whole" (303). Undeterred, *City A-Z's* contributors turn this paradox into a point of departure for attempts to think and write the city otherwise.

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That *City A-Z* takes up this task in earnest is corroborated by the array of representational tactics the authors draw upon in their efforts to (re)write the city. Not only does this work endeavor to foreground various aspects of the city that one might not ordinarily associate with it, it also recasts some of our more familiar analytical categories in quite uncharacteristic roles. Dolores Hayden's entry on "Gentrification," for example, consists of a poem entitled "Grandmother Evicted in Echo Park," while contributions by Ivan de Costa Marques and John Law, who collaborate on "Roads" and "Slums," resemble passages from a travel narrative. Several contributors, in fact, dispense with standard "social science" models of writing in favor of poetry (as in Hayden's additional entries on "Maps" and "Preservation"), experimental narrative structures (as in Allen Pred's "Heroic monuments" and "Intersections," and Susan J. Smith's "Graffiti" and "Music"), and freewheeling stream of consciousness affairs (such as Deborah Levy on "Dogs," and Adrian Passmore's renditions of "City," "Home," and "Streets," which rank among the work's most imaginatively unruly offerings).

Yet *City A-Z* hardly eschews more familiarly "academic" styles of writing. Although few entries linger for more than a page or two, the work abounds with succinct theoretical engagements such as Marc Augé's "Petrol stations" and "Airports," and Saskia Sassen's "Telematics"; summary historical contextualizations such as Sharon Zukin's "Times Square," and Gargi Bhattacharyya's "Public toilets"; and thoughtfully descriptive pieces such as Peter Marcuse's "Benches," and Arturo Escobar's "Planning" and "Scooters." Scattered amongst authored entries are a handful of diagrams and charts—falling under headings such as "air," "capital," "poverty," "quality of life," and "wealth"—which one would expect to find in (and, indeed, are borrowed directly from) the pages of "standard" urban texts. And of course what would an urbanist montage be without Walter Benjamin, whose contributions include "Bars," "Fire alarm," "Souvenirs," and "Panoramas," and whose variegated corpus clearly serves as an inspiration for *City A-Z* as a whole? As the editors point out in their "Guide to readers" (xix-xxi), this book clearly lends itself to multiple ways of being read. Cover-to-cover and random, exploratory approaches may be supplemented with an extensive, cross-referenced index. In addition, on the inside back cover is printed an ingeniously contrived transit map of themed routes, punctuated by stations that reference the volume's entries, which encourages a sort of semi-structured wander through the text.

If the intent behind *City A-Z* is to "provide not so much an overview as an 'underview' of the confusion and profusion of the city, and an understanding of the city's complexity which is correspondingly modest" (xiv), then the book succeeds quite admirably. One shortcoming of the work, however, is that it struggles somewhat to move beyond the

level of curiosity or conversation piece. Well aware of this concern, the editors conclude with a "technical note" (303-310), which offers a few analytical touchstones and some theoretical import to the work. Where *City A-Z* might fall further short is in its rather subdued treatment of such issues as social inequity and injustice—be they racialized, gendered, sexualized, or otherwise. Allan Pred's four intricately interwoven entries do engage with these sorts of issues, and while they stand, by and large, as the exception in this book, they also suggest that inequities and injustices, however constituted, should not be lost sight of as we grasp for and grapple with different ways of thinking and writing the city.

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