

Peter, Swirski (ed.), *All Roads Lead to the American City*
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All Roads Lead to the American City (2007) is edited by Peter Swirski, Honorary Professor of American Literature at the University of British Columbia and Head of American Studies at the University of Hong Kong. This slim, albeit densely printed, volume takes students, teachers, and general knowledge seekers on an intellectual journey across several of the fields of inquiry grouped under the general term of ‘American Studies.’ Organized into five chapters, the volume combines original methods of analysis with a remarkably reader-friendly introduction to the history, film, religion, geography and literature of urban America.

The collection begins with a contribution from Priscilla Roberts, a historian who dissects the socio-historical and political factors that have contributed to the ‘perennial ambivalence’ of the urban culture in America. Roberts succinctly describes increasing suburbanisation in America since the late-nineteenth century, focusing on socio-historical factors such as convenience and attraction of the suburb. Provocatively inverting the book’s central thesis, Roberts’s chapter shows the importance of the continuing American rejection of the ‘big cities’ by shedding new light on the fact that “roads may not only lead to but also be a means of escaping the city” (25). This metaphor of the road details the rise of urban culture in America.

The second, more intimate, chapter moves on to the road as a metaphor of contemporary American culture. Gina Marchetti, a film scholar, invites readers to follow in the footsteps of a ‘road movie’ filmmaker, Renee Tajima Peñas, in her work *My America*, where Tajima Peñas conducts a search for her own identity through the eyes (and camera lens) of an Asian American. In direct contrast to the road movie, Marchetti describes the city movie as a documentation of “urban life almost like a living organism with its own diurnal rhythms of waking up, preparing for the activities of the day, and going through daily routines” (38). It is this kind of city movie that maps out America in specific ways.

Swirski’s own chapter, which is in many ways the heart of the collection, puts *Urbs Americana* under the microscope by reviewing the critical role crime literature plays as a social document, which is part of what he calls “nobrow aesthetics.” Blending social and narrative analysis with vivid discussions of Ed McBain’s police procedurals, Swirski argues that crime literature is not necessarily fictitious, but is quite often a manifestation of how writers often “wrote about what they saw around them” (56). Swirski’s chapter fascinatingly demonstrates that crime literature can realistically manifest the twentieth-century city of New York in this exciting hardboiled era.

Innovatively building on the aesthetic, moral and religious aspects of the road and the city, the following chapter performs an examination of the myths and dreams of American road literature and is written by a literary and religious comparativist, Earle Waugh. The metaphor of the road is further revealed as “a kind of refracted American

identity, as a prism indicative of basic American values, precisely because the road is capable of encompassing and representing so many themes” (71). Waugh’s literary-cultural examination gives a new focus to the study of America.

Swirski’s collection ends with William John Kyle’s essay exploring the development of *Urbs Americana* from the perspectives of historical settlement, demographic expansion and socio-political structuring of modern American cities. This fifth essay is a fitting conclusion with a central message which is relevant today, as both American citizens and policy makers are facing a continuing challenge of “how to alleviate the inevitable disparities in the quality of urban life for all citizens” (123). Informed by the current socio-cultural knowledge of the American city, the book’s central theme, which is suggested in the title, springs from the juxtaposition of the road and the city. As Swirski wrote in the introduction, “we need research integrated across the *entire* spectrum of the humanities and social sciences to evaluate the transformations currently underway, if we are to understand where *Urbs Americana*, and with it *Urbs Asiana*, *Australiana*, *Europeana*, and even *Africana* are headed” (4). Remaining true to his word, Swirski offers a cultural synthesis in this interdisciplinary collection, which is aimed to appeal to anyone interested in “the greatest as well as the ‘baddest’ American cities” (back cover). Swirski’s volume thus has the potential to become an influential textbook in American Studies, as there is currently none other quite like it available today.