

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Johanne Sloan, ed., *Urban Enigmas: Montreal, Toronto, and the Problem of Comparing Cities*. Carleton Contemporary Series #2. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006, 312 pp., \$29.95 paper (978-0-77353-182-6), \$80.00 hardcover (978-0-77353-181-9).

At the risk of breaking the rules of book review writing, I would like to begin by describing what the book is not. It is important to do so because the title and the cover could easily lead the reader to expect a comparison of Montreal and Toronto along different measurable variables. Indeed, inscribed on the cover are the letters MTL and TO, over which are two sets of boxes, some of which are checked. *Urban Enigmas* does not add to the growing list of metropolitan area rankings, feeding the insecurity of regions vying for positions on the global city stage. In fact, there is not a single table in the book. And many readers will be relieved by a total absence of mention of the “creative class” concept, otherwise ubiquitous in the contemporary urban sociology literature.

The book, the outcome of a collaborative research project entitled “The Culture of Cities: Montreal, Toronto, Dublin and Berlin,” purports to compare cultural traits of Montreal and Toronto. But nothing is done systematically in *Urban Enigmas*. Rather, in this book, which is more about ideas than facts, each chapter takes its own approach to the exploration of the culture of the two cities. Consistent with cultural studies’ phenomenological epistemological base, the book departs from mainstream social science perspectives. A brief description of four of the chapters illustrates its diversity of content.

The chapter by Michael Darroch and Jean-François Morissette on the play entitled *The Dragonfly of Chicoutimi* describes the conditions that led to the production of the same play in the two cities and its reception by their respective media. What makes the play so relevant to the theme of the book is that it is a monologue written in simplified English laid upon a French grammatical structure, which allowed it to be performed without translation to Francophone and Anglophone audiences alike. It is about a Francophone from Chicoutimi who recovers speech after a long period of aphasia, but then can only use English words. The message of the play was interpreted differently in the two cities. In Montreal it was framed in the context of Francophone anxiety in the face of the

overwhelming influence of the English language and North American culture, whereas in Toronto immigrants related easily to the difficulties, illustrated by the very theme of the play, of living in a language other than one's mother tongue.

Perhaps not surprisingly, it is comedy that brings out the sharpest differences between the two cities — or more accurately between Canada's two linguistic communities. Greg Nielsen compares sketches from the *Air Farce* on CBC and from the Radio Canada *Bye Bye* television show, a spoof of the year, which ushered in the New Year over three decades. The *Air Farce* sketches reflect unwavering antipathy towards separatism, which chimes with English Canadian sentiments. On the other hand, the *Bye Bye* sketches present both animosity and ambivalence towards English Canada and Confederation. Nielsen demonstrates how respect for a divided Francophone public opinion on these matter demands a more nuanced approach to comedy in the case of *Bye Bye* than of the *Air Farce*.

Particularly evocative of the difference between the two cities is the specific nature of their respective film festivals, addressed by Dipti Gupta and Janine Marchessault. The Toronto International Film Festival opens a window on main stream cinema, consistent with the image of Toronto as the Hollywood of the north. In contrast, the *Festival des films du monde* is much more international in nature and oriented towards specialized audiences. In a sense, such a distinction may reflect differences in the cultural orientation of the two cities — Toronto drawing from and contributing to North American mass culture, Montreal attempting to connect with world culture via the specificity of its cultural context. The situation is complicated, however, by a disjunction between the *Festival des films du monde* and the local film industry, a source of animosity and resulting political backlash against the festival.

The final chapter of the book, by Kieran Bonner, is about capturing the essence of a city, as Jan Morris, the travel writer, does so well. The chapter explores how cities manage to preserve their specificity in the face of economic globalization, since without distinctive traits, there would not be any essence left to discover. Jan Morris characterized Montreal as being trapped in an irresolvable cause, while in her eyes Toronto appears to be engaged in a permanent compromise. She states her preference for the vitality associated with the irresolvable cause.

Discussions of the cultural traits of the two cities are prefaced by two chapters, one by Alan Blum and the other by Jean-François Côté, devoted to setting a theoretical context for the book. These chapters are largely preoccupied with the concept of comparison, which they explore from a philosophical rather than a methodological perspective. These are erudite chapters, which draw from the works of Wittgenstein, Simmel, and

Bakhtin, among others. The two chapters also acknowledge difficulties in defining the identity of cities, associated in large part with the overlapping of this identity with that of individuals and societies. There is also the issue of the complexity of cities, the most complex artefact produced by humans, with the possible exception of language. Such complexity raises problems regarding the selection of objects of comparison given the impossibility of comparing cities as a whole. It is unfortunate that the content of these early chapters is given little consideration in the remainder of the book, no doubt a reflection of its idiographic approach which accounts for the strong individuality of its chapters and the originality of their content.

If this approach can be credited for the originality of the content of the book, both its ideas and objects of study, the resulting absence of systematic investigation of the cultural specificity of the two cities leaves important themes unexplored. This is notably the case of differences in the theatre scene of the two cities — the importance of musicals in Toronto and more conventional forms of theatre in Montreal. The book also suffers from the absence of a conclusion, which could have summed up the numerous cultural differences identified in the different chapters, discussed their respective importance, and perhaps used this information to attempt to draw out the cultural essence of the two cities. For example, it would have been worthwhile to discuss the validity and respective merit of dichotomies presented at different times in the book: the linguistic duality and integrative approach towards immigrants of Montreal and the multicultural and increasingly diasporic identity of Toronto; and the more clichéd opposition between Montreal depicted as lively, entertaining and culturally active, and Toronto seen as functional, business focussed and staid.

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