JULIA SATTLER (ED.)

URBAN TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE U.S.A.

SPACES, COMMUNITIES, REPRESENTATIONS

transcript Urban Studies
How did American cities change throughout the 20th and early 21st century? This timely publication integrates research from American Literary and Cultural Studies, Urban Studies and History. The essays range from negotiations of the «ethnic city» in US literature and media, to studies of recent urban phenomena and their representations: gentrification, re-appropriation and conversion of urban spaces in the USA. These interdisciplinary and intercultural perspectives on American cities provide unique points of access for studying the complex narratives of urban transformation.

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Narratives of Urban Transformation
Reading the Rust Belt in the Ruhr Valley

JULIA SATTLER

In the public mind as in the literary imagination, cities around the globe are characterized by their seemingly never-ending capacity to change, to innovate and to invent and re-make themselves. Because they are in constant transformation, cities become projection spaces for people looking at them from the outside and imagining them as sites of opportunity: to become rich, to start a new life. As such, urban areas have seemingly unlimited potential for the re-invention of the self. Cities thus attract newcomers who wish for more and different opportunities than those offered by the countryside, the village, or the small town. Freedom of choice and the liberation from convention and restriction are prevalent themes in urban narratives from New York City to Beijing and back. Of course, and just as characteristically, this freedom is often not found or achieved, thus also making the city a site of immense disappointment.

Representations of cities in literature, as in other art forms and in popular culture, often share an emphasis on spatial density—crowded streets, crowded living conditions, skyscrapers, a lot of traffic—and diversity—of people, of cultures, of colors, of smells, and of sounds. This diversity of impressions makes physical as well as fictional cities, urbanities as well as urbanites, interesting subjects to explore from a historical, cultural and literary studies perspective. The process of constant transformation itself can become the subject of such investigation. How does constant transformation manifest itself? What actually changes in a process of spatial metamorphosis? How is this process represented in written form? How does media deal with it? These questions must also be asked the other way around. How do processes of storytelling and, in fact, the stories themselves shape and change urbanities?

Art can provide alternative renditions of urban transformations and address the complex and non-linear processes behind them. It can create awareness of
the effects of urban transformations—the human dimensions of such developments—that oftentimes are ignored in official texts, for example in campaigns addressing and advertising desired modifications, usually from an economic standpoint. Art can also point to the narrative challenges accompanying large-scale re-development projects that are taking place in cities worldwide. A city undergoing drastic transformation may face not only questions regarding its infrastructure and sustainability, but also the challenge of narrating the new urban environment they create. Such transformation—at the scale of the city or neighborhood—requires a city to re-invent its own story of becoming from its past through its present and future: “Resilient cities need a coherent foundational narrative” and “a credible story” (Goldstein/Wessells/Lejano/Butler 5). A multiplicity of links between the fields of urban and literary studies thus appears, leaving much space for further exploration.

Research related to urban cultural studies questions how texts create density and diversity, but also local specificity at different points in time. Ethnicity and gender in urban life, the role of art for practices of place-making, and the incorporation of a location’s past into a contemporary setting are just some examples resonating throughout this publication. This introduction to the collection will briefly outline narratives of urban transformation as they appear throughout the volume. In doing so, it will contextualize the emergence of a focus on urban cultural studies in American Studies and American History departments in the Ruhr. In the second part, I will discuss the idea of reading and writing the Ruhr Valley—the area where much of this research has been undertaken—in dialogue with its U.S. counterpart, the ‘Rust Belt.’ The emphasis in this second part will be on reading and writing the processes of urban transformation that, at least at first sight, resist established narratives. Instead of dealing in growth and abundance, these narratives tell of cities that are shrinking and losing density. Nevertheless, this, too, is a story of transformation, and one that is not necessarily directed backwards. Landscapes once drastically altered by industrialization do not, as one popular story goes, return to the “rural,” but rather transform into something else altogether. Post-industrial urbanism is one key phrase that comes to mind, an abstract phrase that, on the ground, has very specific consequences, not all of which might be visible to us yet. Finding the terms to to negotiate them in different contexts—from the local to the global—is one of the great promises of narrative forms in and through which we address them, as we play with different possibilities of re-writing, re-configuring, re-inhabiting, and constructing possible futures in a transforming place.
The idea of an urban American nation is deeply engrained in the public imaginary of the United States, from the early idea of a “City upon a Hill” to contemporary representations of the United States in Europe and elsewhere. Often, it is cities that are used to represent America.” America, at least in the European imagination, is a mostly urban nation, home to New York City or Los Angeles. These cities might in fact be exceptions to American urbanity at large, but they are celebrated in their iconicity. With regard to New York City, there are very particular buildings or built structures that play a role in such representations: skyscrapers, the skyline as a whole, the Brooklyn Bridge. In Los Angeles, such structures are much harder to make out: maybe Rodeo Drive or the Hollywood Hills offer some of the same level of iconicity. Such images are the ones students of American culture—even those who have never been to the United States—bring to the classroom their first semester. The iconicity of such images makes them useful subjects in establishing American cities as a topic of research-based learning, an activity that is regularly being conducted in American Studies classrooms at Ruhr universities.

When the American Studies and American History programs at these universities agreed to co-operate on a research project dealing with the topic of “urban transformations in the USA” in the spring of 2011, it was in part the desire to investigate the iconicity and representativeness of North American urban landscapes that drove forward the initiative. One major goal of the first large-scale cooperative research project conducted in the Ruhr Center of American Studies between 2012 and 2015 was to reflect on the way processes of urban transformation specifically play out in the rapidly changing urban landscape of the United States. Strengthening the link between American Studies and Urban Studies, the project investigated which key factors play a role in shaping these processes, and how these transformations in turn affect and re-write established narratives about America and its urbanities. Some of the results of the three years of research presented in this volume make evident that urban transformation drives an ongoing narrative in the American context from colonial times until today. This ongoing narrative is a major storyline in American culture that can be investigated from a multiplicity of angles.

This volume therefore looks at urban transformations from transnational and interdisciplinary perspectives, as its contributors come from different national backgrounds, different university settings and different fields of research. The articles in this volume address spatial transformations as they occur in the built environment, but also the changes they cause within urban communities and the
representations those changes in medial forms from art to film, from television series to fiction writing. The articles are not limited to one particular urban community or one specific temporal setting; rather, they outline how urban transformations in the United States impacted and continue to impact the development of specific places as well as the nation as a whole. Still, there are different points of connection and even productive dialogues that can be established between the articles included here, whether due to location or to the narrative strands picked up by the authors in this collection.

One focus of this volume is the urban transformation of New York City, a city that is representative of such processes in the U.S. at large, but that is also shaped by its own global outlook and appeal. In her article, Tazalika te Reh shows how one specific site in New York City, the Studio Museum in Harlem with its focus on Black artists, emerged out of a unique urban community and its historical legacy in the twentieth century. Nevertheless, the Studio Museum engaged in complex conversations about the meaning and identity of American artistic practice that transcended its original setting. It became a site that went on to shape the nation at a crucial time in its history: the Civil Rights Era. In a very different sense, Faye Guenther’s case study of David Wojnarowicz’s representation of the changing environment of New York City and specifically the Hudson River Piers also points to the key roles of art in processes of urban transformation. In this case, art has the potential to re-write a site and preserve it after its physical demolition.

The particular is always in dialogue with its larger national and global contexts. Kornelia Freitag’s article addresses the way the globalization of U.S. cities goes hand in hand with more global perspectives in literature. The literary city becomes a place where different identities are re-negotiated; transnational renditions of American cities are shaped by migration, travel and displacement. The hybridization of urban spaces becomes specifically evident in scholarship on immigrant communities and their contributions to shaping American urbanities, specifically in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. With regard to this volume, this includes, among others, the German American community and the Chinese American community. The spatial and ideological battles examined in contributions by Insa Neumann, Thomas Heise and Selma Bidlingmaier address ethnic enclaves and their representations at different points in time. Bidlingmaier’s analysis of processes of othering Chinatown with foodscape at the center of her investigation and Heise’s negotiation of the role of the urban detective in constructing this crucial setting can easily be read in dialogue with each other. Such reading shows how images from the past are carried into the present as well as how representational patterns from the nineteenth century
linger on today. These representations and perceptions also have an impact on other settings, such as Europe, as elucidated by Erika Mikó’s analysis of representations of the same place—Chinatown—in Hungary in the course of the twentieth century. The barrio and its complexities, the Indian American community, as well as the African American communities and their spaces all shape the urban imaginary in the United States and its representations elsewhere, as demonstrated in the articles by Josef Raab, Kornelia Freitag, Eva Boesenberg, Kathrin Muschalik and Tazalika te Reh. The role of social and political factors in processes of urban transformation should not be underestimated, as both Insa Neumann and Erika Mikó point out in their analyses.

This collection includes studies of urban transformations in the United States by historians, such as Michael Wala’s analysis of the origins of the changing role of Washington, D.C.—also figured prominently around the world, as a quasi-global political capital—as well as contemporary analyses of urban processes resulting out of earlier events and constellations. Processes of change can be initiated by physical transformations, such as the emergence of new infrastructural features. This becomes very clear in Gary Scales’ study of the gas station and how it changed American cityscapes, urban commercial structures, as well as American culture at large over a process of several decades. In their articles addressing the challenges of gentrification, Utku Mogultay and Astrid Kaemmerling also point to the lasting legacy of urban transformations. In these articles, the historical is in dialogue with the contemporary; communities undergo constant shifts as narratives from earlier times are made relevant to their contemporary processes. This becomes clear in Utku Mogultay’s contribution on Pynchon’s rewriting of a frontier process, which uses vocabulary from the twentieth century. Similarly, Walter Grünzweig’s article recovers the origins of the “creative class” that surprisingly do not lie with Richard Florida, but with the “father” of American national culture, Ralph Waldo Emerson. In addition to the ongoing threat of gentrification discussed by multiple contributions to this volume, Nick Bacon’s analysis of the transformation of so-called “podunks” throughout the twentieth century, as well as Barbara Buchenau’s and Jens Gurr’s article dealing with the “story turn” in urban planning and the emerging dialogue between American Studies and Urban Studies demonstrate that disciplinary limits need to be overcome in order to understand America’s vibrant history of urban transformations and the narratives going along with them.

The media plays a crucial role in understanding these processes and, therefore, is itself a leading agent of urban transformation as well as a subject for urban cultural studies. Jon Hegglund shows how the television series The Wire establishes relationships between the human and the non-human—in this case,
between an individual life and a supposedly lifeless cargo container, which is made vivid nevertheless through the camera’s ever-present eye. Focusing on a different medium, Astrid Kaemmerling points out the crucial role of film in developing a counter-narrative for the ongoing gentrification of San Francisco’s Mission District. The ability of art in various media to reflect upon as well as to remember cities that have been erased or threatened by erasure restorative is a common thread that interweaves the articles in this volume. They all deal with very different spatial and temporal settings, but still share a focus on discourses of economic change that collude with processes of urban transformation and that result in economic investment or disinvestment.

Despite the diversity of topics, spaces, communities, and representations addressed here, all articles share a focus on writing and re-writing the city. Processes of urban transformation are both steered and staged by way of the stories circulating in a variety of environments and shapes. Now, in the age of YouTube and Instagram, Facebook and online newspapers, with the support of the “digital humanities” and processes of “thick mapping” (Presner/Shepard/Kawano), the relationship between stories and the city is closer than ever. Urban spaces have for a long time been considered multilayered sites in which different historical, spatial and narrative layers have collided, merged, combined, and re-combined. But today these processes have become much more visible and accessible. It only takes a smartphone to compose one’s personal urban narrative and make it public through web 2.0 technologies. This has great democratic potential, but also adds further layers to an already multifaceted subject.

**Reading Urban Transformations in the Ruhr Valley**

In the middle of the transitory process of ever increasing media convergence impacting and re-defining urban America and its representations, the American Studies and American History Departments at the Ruhr universities began to formulate some preliminary thoughts on their research project in urban transformations. Since the early 2000s, TU Dortmund University and Ruhr-University Bochum have developed their long-standing cooperative relationship by holding an annual PhD forum, which, in 2010, resulted in the PhD program in “Transnational/Transatlantic Studies” at the RuhrCenter in American Studies. The University of Duisburg-Essen has now joined both the RuhrCenter of American Studies as well as the structured PhD-program as a third partner.
It was not a coincidence that such a cooperation, particularly a collaborative research project on “urban transformations,” emerged in the universities of the Ruhr Valley. The region has undergone immense processes of urban change in the past two centuries—from an agglomeration of rather small towns and villages to a heavily industrialized metropolitan area with a steadily growing population to a region undergoing what is commonly termed “structural change,” or simply, de-industrialization. Beginning in the 1950s, the Ruhr gradually broke with its more traditional industries of iron- and steel-production as well as coal mining. One result—as well as motor—of this long-term process of “structural change” was the emergence of the universities at Dortmund, Bochum and Duisburg-Essen. The Ruhr universities were founded in the 1960s in order to provide a new vision for the region and to educate a population that had before, by and large, been limited to the heavy industries and related fields. They continue to draw their student body from the valley itself as well as from the adjoining parts of North-Rhine Westphalia and to consider themselves firmly located in the region.

The Ruhr’s transformation initiated a turn to new industries and technologies, but also an expansion of service, culture and education. The International Architecture Exhibition Emscher Park (1989-1999) made this expansion visible. Dubbed “Workshop for Industrialized Regions,” this large and multidimensional project re-invented the Ruhr’s mines, steel plants, gigantic industrial halls, and slag heaps as parks, theaters and museums. These sites of cultural activity gave the Ruhr region, which was not exactly known for its cultural contributions, a new reputation. Heavily dependent on public financing, the approach of the International Architecture Exhibition was locally specific in that it tried to preserve the region’s original industrial sites while giving them a new meaning and converting them into post-industrial playgrounds and sites of “aesthetic contemplation” (Barndt 279). In effect, this approach also removed the idea of the working class as a source of collective identity (Barndt 277). Despite the failure to create new jobs in the region—a problem that continues to haunt the Ruhr Valley—the International Building Exhibition strengthened regional identity. This identification of the region with the population is a factor that should not be underestimated. The discussion about the identity and the possible futures of the Ruhr in the early 2000s impacted classroom discussions in a variety of fields at the Ruhr Universities. These discussions included the humanities at the Ruhr Universities, thereby steadily establishing the links between American Studies, American History and fields such as Urban Planning and Urban Geography. Such engagements included collaborative research and
the co-teaching of classes, and, in many ways, they surpass the efforts usually debated by specific disciplines under the general header of the “spatial turn.”

Another large-scale project hosted by the Ruhr Valley was the European Capital of Culture project in 2010. In the years leading up to the project, the status of the Ruhr Valley was the subject of many debates. Was it a loose agglomeration of cities connected via their industrial heritage and its uses for tourism? Or was it, indeed, a “metropolis”? Drawing heavily on the legacy of the earlier International Architecture Exhibition, this project can also be read as an attempt to put the Ruhr Valley on the “global map,” alongside London, Paris and New York City. Financially supported by the European Union, the German state, the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, and a large number of local and regional actors and companies, the European Capital of Culture “RUHR.2010” introduced many storylines to the Ruhr that also resonate with ongoing developments in the United States. The more or less forceful cultivation of a “creative class” and the engineered transformation of depressed urban areas into vibrant arenas through art initiatives and attempts to attract artists to the region are only two examples.

Interestingly enough, many of the projects realized in the framework of “RUHR.2010” did not focus on artists already in the region; rather, the project tried to bring in “creative” people from elsewhere, in order to re-invent the region as if it were a “blank slate,” a “Wild West” or a “frontier.” These were quintessentially “American” narratives that could still gain momentum in the Ruhr, a region said to be as dependent on cars, as “new” and as “man-made” as the urban United States. “RUHR.2010” focused on local redevelopment and in these terms continued the legacy of the International Architecture Exhibition. At the same time, it claimed that the Ruhr needed new “pioneers” to bring about long-desired changes and economic progress. This narrative tried to make the Ruhr Valley resonant with developments larger than itself, to shift the focus away from local specificity and towards global visibility, and to open the region to processes of planned gentrification. Students and faculty of American Studies quickly recognized parallels to a region not entirely unlike the Ruhr, but located in a different context and on a different continent: the region known as the Rust Belt in the United States.

**The Rust Belt and The Ruhr**

The perception of the so-called “Rust Belt”—the region comprising the Great Lakes states and extending into Pennsylvania, New York State and New
Jersey—is not necessarily the most favorable; like the Ruhr, it has struggled with its public image. In stark contradiction to the rising “Sunbelt” states, the “Rust Belt” in the popular imaginary signifies economic weakness, the closing out of jobs and the deterioration of formerly wealthy and well-to-do industrial cities and sites. Not unlike the Ruhr Valley in its importance for the German “economic miracle” after World War II, what is today the “Rust Belt” once was responsible for U.S. industrial and economic success, but it has since fallen from grace, literally left to “rust.” Built for a supposedly eternal industrial age, these cities and towns face the challenge of having to re-invent themselves for the post-industrial era.

The “Rust Belt” city currently most present in the minds of the Ruhr’s citizens is certainly Detroit. The (in)famous coffee table books about Detroit have made its “beautiful terrible ruins” (Apel) well-known even in Germany. In 2013-14, a large-scale, publicly financed project emerged in the aftermath of “RUHR.2010 and used the slogan “This is not Detroit” to revise negative public sentiment caused by the end of auto production in the Ruhr. While the General Motors plant that produced cars in Bochum creates a genetic connection between the region and the city of Detroit, the Ruhr Valley as a whole can easily be linked to the Rust Belt. Indeed, the comparison has been made countless times before, and in a variety of contexts.

In addressing the contemporary “Rust Belt” as well as the contemporary Ruhr Valley, one major challenge is to talk about the ongoing processes of urban transformation and about the post-industrial landscape that has emerged via de-industrialization. To do this productively requires a language that goes beyond lamentation, beyond requiem, and beyond blaming a perceived other, whoever this may be in each particular case. Such language needs to be sensitive towards and address the trauma of de-industrialization that disrupts the ongoing narrative of large-scale industrial production and that also provides potential for new growth that may lead the way toward a post-industrial future with economic and cultural perspectives and possibilities for a new generation. As Andrew Herscher explains, oftentimes when thinking about urban shrinkage, people think of the losses instead of being able to recognize “the possibilities and potentials that decline brings—the ways in which the shrinking city is also an incredible city, saturated with urban opportunities that are precluded or even unthinkable in cities that function according to plan” (6-7). This, of course, necessitates new ways of reading and writing the two Rust Belts, and ways of dealing with such landscapes that go beyond the paradigm and imperative of endless growth.
In recent years, a number of American novels have emerged that resonate well with the situation in the Ruhr and its struggle with urban transformation processes. Among these are, for example, Benjamin Markovits’s 2015 debut novel *You don’t have to live like this* addressing the “inner life” of a large-scale investment project in Detroit as a process of quasi-colonization: Eric Lundgren’s 2013 crime narrative *The Facades*, a story set in the fictional city of Trude, a fading Midwestern industrial capital that has seen better days; and Philipp Meyer’s 2009 masterpiece *American Rust* that resonates with Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* as well as the stream of consciousness found in the works of William Faulkner and James Joyce.

In these texts, in which the protagonists navigate economic and personal situations that are difficult at best, the de-industrialized landscape of the Rust Belt becomes a central character in the story. Often speaking from the point of view of a generation that was not yet born when de-industrialization hit the Rust Belt the hardest, these texts use narrative to open up new ways of dealing with a landscape that has been left behind by the companies that once made it rich and famous. The landscape depicted by such texts, once termed “post-American” by Rebecca Solnit (2007), is shaped by holes and gaps, by memory and by loss, which become the source of new hope. While these texts address decay, abandonment and the long-term consequences of what is oftentimes named “the urban crisis,” they do so by giving a concrete “face” to the effects that were triggered by de-industrialization. Such texts can serve as important resources for dialogues across the Atlantic, as they have the potential to reveal similarities and differences, and to initiate processes of coping with such losses and, finally, healing the wounds of loss. As Sherry Lee Linkon states in her article on “Narrating Past and Future: Deindustrialized Landscapes as Resources,” the potential of these texts lies in the fact that they “use deindustrialized landscapes to construct the imagined past as a resource for the present” (40), and oftentimes also cast a future for these places that builds on the past: “[t]he potential for future growth, they suggest, is based on remembering the strengths of the past” (41).

This becomes specifically evident in Meyer’s *American Rust*, which is—at least in some ways—an urban exploration novel, in which the protagonists Isaac English and Billy Poe, two young men from the imaginary Pennsylania town of Buell—the name of the town certainly echoing the pioneer of ecocriticism, Lawrence Buell—interact with the landscape left behind by the industry. The novel can be read as a bleak portrayal of a region and as a tale about a population that has been brutally failed by the American Dream. It alludes to the economic
and social problems that are haunting Buell, once “the center of steel production in the country, in the entire world” (8), “a place that had recently been well-off, its downtown full of historic stone buildings, mostly boarded now” (3), and a city now confronted with “small-town budgets and big-city problems” (120). *American Rust* productively addresses the challenges of living in an America after the American Dream and in an industrial region that has lost its industry. It can therefore be read as a haunting novel of a “post-American” landscape, of the transgression of boundaries, and of the exploration of post-industrial spaces.

As the story is told by several narrators: Isaac English and Billy Poe, the young men who have grown up in Buell and remained there; Harris, the police officer, who is concerned about rising crime rates and growing instability in the population of the town; Grace, Billy Poe’s mother, who had once dreamed of a better life and had her ideas literally crushed by de-industrialization; and finally Lee, Isaac’s sister, who has left Pennsylvania for an education at Yale and a husband who cannot really understand her background. The reader is confronted with many different perspectives of the developments in Buell, as different genders, social backgrounds and age groups speak out in the novel.

At one point in the story, Isaac English commits a murder and tries to escape to California on freight trains that take him across the Rust Belt, almost all the way to Detroit. Isaac soon picks up on the problems he encounters in other settings, relating them back to the situation in his hometown and making evident that Buell is not the only town severely affected by the process of de-industrialization; rather, there is a region made of towns and cities just like Buell, and all of them are suffering from the aftermath of de-industrialization. Abandonment, shrinkage and empty factories mark the landscape formerly shaped by industry.

Buell’s de-industrialization is traumatic for Harris, the police officer, who compares the industrial ruins of Buell to the “abandoned temples in the jungle” (53) he saw in the Vietnam War. Grace, Billy Poe’s mother, compares the destruction of industrial facilities in the Rust Belt to the events of September 11:

She remembered when everyone came out to watch the two-hundred-foot-tall and almost brand-new blast furnaces called Dorothy Five and Six get toppled with dynamite charges. It was not long after that that terrorists blew up the World Trade Center. It wasn’t logical, but the one reminded her of the other. There were certain places and certain people who mattered a lot more than others. (45)

Here, the companies who have taken charge of the process of tearing down Dorothy Five and Six are not being blamed or declared responsible for conditions in the Rust Belt; they are not even mentioned. At the same time, it
becomes clear that the population in Buell obviously matters less than others; the demise of the industry was not televised. The younger generation in American Rust voices concerns about the fact that the jobs opening in the Midwest concern the demolition of empty industrial plants. They fear that “one day even that work would end, and there would be no record, nothing left standing, to show that anything had ever been built in America. It was going to cause big problems, he [Poe] didn’t know how but he felt it. You could not have a country, not this big, that didn’t make things for itself. There would be ramifications eventually” (289). There is a distinct feeling in Buell that the “glory days are over” (94), and that there is nothing better to come than the reminders of the industrial past scattered over the landscape. Buell is never going to bounce back and have the role it once had: “You wanted to believe in America, but anyone could tell you that the Germans and Japs made the same amount of steel America did these days, and both those countries were the size of Pennsylvania” (94). The steel companies were the town’s resource; there were no alternative plans or maps for a time after the end of steel production—there were no other industries and no redevelopment plans.

As suggested by the analogies drawn to Vietnam and to September 11, one gets the impression that in this text de-industrialization came as a terrible surprise to the town and its population. It was an unexpected event that one would have never thought possible, much like the destructiveness of the war in Vietnam or the September 11 attacks. The authorities failed to make plans for a future after the industrial age or to insure the interests of the regional population, which are simply cast aside. The out-migration of those still able to leave is addressed throughout the novel, and not without lamentation: “More and more the population of the Valley seemed to split between the very old and the very young, it was either retirees or fifteen-year-old girls with baby carriages, there was no one left in the middle” (135).

**Explorations in Rust**

Despite its pervasive bleakness, the text makes evident that there is a lot of potential for positive change. As urban explorers, Isaac and Poe have found new ways of interacting with the landscape surrounding them by entering former industrial facilities and getting to know them intimately:

The plant was half-collapsed, bricks and wood became piled on top of the old forges and hydraulic presses, moss and vines growing everywhere. Despite the rubble, it was vast and
open inside. Plenty of souvenirs. That old name plate you [Poe] gave to Lee, pried it off that big hammer forge, polished the tarnish off and oiled it. A minor vandalism. No, think of all the people who were proud of those machines, to rescue a few pieces of them—little bit of life after death. (9-10)

Moving through these decaying structures and finding “souvenirs,” the young men discover that the plant might be abandoned, but not entirely deserted. The factory building is also a space of reminiscence; the memory of the workers lives on. What was once there serves as a reminder of the industrial past and a marker of identity. According to the British social geographer Tim Edensor, industrial ruins, such as leftover factories, constitute “marginal sites which continue to litter the increasingly postindustrial landscapes of the West, now bypassed by the flows of money, energy, people, and traffic within which they were once enfolded” (829). These places defy the idea that the industrial past can be reduced to a museum display and that the unwanted memories of the past can be forgotten. Industrial ruins constitute alternative spaces for new forms of anesthetization and interpretation; there is no organizing or structuring principle, no fixed hierarchy, but rather, these spaces are fleeting and open for appropriation. This freedom to create, and to create independent of official narratives, is the great potential of these sites. As Edensor states:

[the lack of intensive performative and aesthetic regulation in these spaces makes evident the hidden excess of the urban order, the surplus of production, the superfluity of matter and meaning which violates order and disrupts the capitalist quest for the always new. (833)

Urban exploration is not necessarily a democratic practice; in many cases it is a leisure activity for the children of those who did not get abandoned by the industry. But in American Rust, young people from inside the community explore these ruins as they try to make sense of what has been left behind by the earlier generation with urban exploration pointing to alternative ways of seeing the de-industrialized factories of Buell as a resource. It becomes a strategy for these younger people from Buell, the children of displaced industrial workers, to understand what has transpired in the city and to engage with its past.

In the text, the younger generation has also developed its own strategies of approaching the situation as a whole:

The Valley was recovering. Only it would never be what it had been and that was the trouble. People couldn’t adjust to that—it had been a wealthy place once, or not wealthy but doing well, all those steelworkers making thirty dollars there had been plenty of
money. It would never be like that again. It had fallen a long ways. No one blinked at taking a minimum-wage job now. He had not been old enough to see it fall is why it didn’t bother him. He just saw the good parts. That’s a gift, he decided, to only see the good parts. Because we’re the first ones to grow up with it like this. The new generation. All we know. But things are improving in different ways. Right now, from where he was sitting, there were patches of woods that he remembered being overgrown fields when he was younger. Oak, cherry, birch, the land going back to its natural state. (97)

This observation by Poe is one of the most important and complex passages in the text because it makes evident that those who have grown up at the edge of the post-industrial age have their own ways of seeing the landscape around them. Of course, the dialogue between “nature” and “culture” in this passage reminds readers of ruin imagery, “assert[ing] the redemption of social ruin through signs of new life in nature” (Apel 75), and thus ruin photography. At the same time, this passage goes further. Poe understands that it is very hard to come to terms with the fact that the region has seen better days economically and to get used to the idea that there is no way the region will regain its past importance. This narrative struggle hits especially close to home for those who have witnessed the fall. Poe’s stance is different because he is removed from the industrial age: he “[grew] up with it like this” (97). His stance enables him to observe that there is no standstill despite the end of the industrial age. For him, something new is developing out of the old; nature takes back the factory complexes. Growth in a place that is considered “empty” is a sign of recovery and change: “He did not see why people would ever want to leave here” (97). To Poe, thinking about the former situation is not tragic, and neither is the current state of the land. The land is “recovering,” even without new investment. Here, the past is reconciled with the present. The post-industrial landscape in American Rust is not an empty frontier to be discovered by new pioneers; rather, it is a frontier enriched by what industry has left behind. Future developments in such a landscape can only be built on the past; the past is not erased.

Out of American Rust emerges the idea of the Rust Belt as an alternative space, a post-capitalist and post-industrial space that is not a failure, but an opportunity for new discoveries and new ways of living in the future. Unlike many tales of urban exploration that can be found on the internet, American Rust provides a coherent story of what happens when a community comes undone and how it comes undone. It thus challenges similar kinds of narratives by “urbexers,” as urban explorers often refer to themselves. These narratives are not interested in the causes and social consequences of de-industrialization, but focus on the aesthetic potential of the de-industrialized landscape (Apel 60-61).
The novel, by contrast, explores the reasons behind ruination and addresses the long-term tensions caused by extensive urban transformation. The novel perceives the post-industrial world as a process that always signifies a social transformation and the stratification of a community. It does not disregard the displacement of the population, but points toward processes of healing by acknowledging what has been lost in the first place. Even though the novel does not end on an optimistic note, leaving all problems solved, it still points to the idea that there is a future for the characters—one that might be different from their established plans.

In these terms, the book resonates with the Ruhr’s ongoing struggle to deal with the long-term consequences of de-industrialization. It makes evident that the significance of the past cannot be ignored after the emergence of a new generation that outwardly does not have anything to do with the industry. It also makes clear that any meaningful future will have to engage with the industrial past—despite fancy slogans and the ongoing quest for visibility in the international arena. At the same time, such engagement must make sure not to silence the industrial workers who inhabited these sites in the first place.

**Narratives of Urban Transformation**

Narratives addressing, in a multiplicity of ways, urban transformation processes are highly complex documents that speak to the many crises resulting from change. They make visible the challenges as well as the opportunities resulting from such developments. These may not always be of the economic but also of the narrative kind. Artistic practice lends itself to exploring urban transformations, making visible processes that would otherwise remain hidden, making them bearable by commenting on them, contextualizing them. They can also help resist the imperative of economic growth, working as counter-narratives to storylines investors and others may want us to believe.

This is not only true for *American Rust* or other novels that address the de-industrialization of the Rust Belt. It is also true for the articles in this collection, whether they address New York City, Los Angeles, or even no space in particular. The essays highlight the social and narrative consequences of urban transformations, which amount to an American cultural narrative. It is a narrative that prominently defines the American nation and its potential since its beginning, and one that cannot and should not be neglected any longer.
WORKS CITED


