



**Carolina Bank Muñoz, Penny Lewis and Emily Tumpson Molina, *A People's Guide to New York City*, Oakland: University of California Press, 2022. ISBN: 9780520289574 (paper); ISBN: 9780520964150 (ebook)**

*A People's Guide to New York City* by Carolina Bank Muñoz, Penny Lewis, and Emily Tumpson Molina takes on the monumental task of tracing New York's physical, historical, economic, and cultural topographies all while asking us to confront how we produce the city itself. Though New York has not expanded (horizontally at least) beyond its three hundred square miles in the last hundred years it has, as the authors begin, "creatively destroyed itself in place, time and again" (p.17). Tracing our losses is a seductive point of entry for a text focused on New York if only to track the many versions of the city that have existed or will exist. We could easily list all the things we've lost—from middens to queer bars—but such an accounting would only tell us a superficial and partial story. Reassuringly, the authors "don't think that vanishing is the whole of the story of New York ... we also make visible the ongoing presence and assertion of the city's people to claim their city, build and defend neighborhood institutions, and make the streets and homes their own" (p.7). It's a struggle to produce a just and equitable city, and the push-pull between loss and resistance is the strongest throughline of the text. It's clear then that our authors are not interested in reproducing a standard guide that haphazardly connects unrelated points of interest. Instead, the book "makes the straightforward proposition that the life and landscape of New York are products of social power ..." (p. 5). As such, each chapter is devoted to a borough which is further divided into neighbourhood sections with corresponding historic and contemporary sites connected through shared struggle.

Despite its mission to counter the traps of conventional survey texts, the guide still falls into some understandable unevenness which, depending on the reader's own approach to the city and guidebooks, may either be striking or unremarkable. The most obvious example here is length: Manhattan, for example, is the longest chapter while Staten Island is the shortest. It's a

gap that reinforces the former as the centre and the latter as a forgotten borough. The Stonewall Inn—a literal national landmark—expectedly gets two pages devoted to its legacy, while Riis Beach in Queens, home to many a counter-celebration to Manhattan’s corporate Pride, has two brief paragraphs. We of course also see imbalance through the absence or presence of particular sites. For example, New York City’s community gardens are mentioned once by way of the Liz Christy Garden in the Lower East Side. Founded in 1973, the garden is the self-proclaimed first of its kind in the city, a fact impossible to prove given the breadth of these efforts across the boroughs in the 1960s. The authors admit that while the claim is likely untrue given that “[m]any kinds of informal gardens existed before throughout the city” (which then begs the question of what “informal” means here), Liz Christy “could be considered” the first of the movement (p.146). It’s in moments like these where we’re invited to not only fill in the blanks, but question the production of our city’s common knowledge: how does a place *become understood* and widely accepted as what it is today?

As with the Liz Christy section, there is a steady emphasis of the city as full of “firsts” and “mosts” which speak to its relationship to the rest of country. These anecdotes range from New York’s physiography to its real estate, and at times seem to compete with one another: the city is both home to both “one of the most biodiverse places in the Northeast United States” (p.210) (Jamaica Bay, in Queens) and one of the largest oil spills—one and a half times the size of Exxon Valdez (in Greenpoint, Brooklyn). “One in twenty-five New Yorkers today is a millionaire, *excluding the value of their primary residences*” (p.64) the authors write in their introduction to Manhattan, a stunning fact to keep in mind when we later read about the city’s immense cooperative housing density. New York not only “holds the largest number of shared-equity housing cooperatives in the country” (p.288) but is also home to thousands of limited-equity buildings that ensure long-term affordable housing. Obviously, the contradictions between these statistics do not exist in parallel to one another but show how material conditions produce their negations and the ways we expose the unevenness of urban life. To return to our gardeners:

the Giuliani administration notably attacked community gardens as against affordable housing and “anti-progress”, even going so far as to proclaim that “the era of communism is over” (Carlsson and Manning 2010:945), all while sitting on thousands of vacant buildings. It was gardeners’ organising alongside housing advocates that exposed the land scarcity myths that not only stoked real estate speculation but threatened solidarity between neighbours. Today the collective work of groups like the Right to the City Alliance and the New York City Community Land Initiative continue an organising legacy that reveals New York’s spatial abundance. *A People’s Guide to New York City* invites us to not just see the unevenness, but ask how contradictions are routinely produced, exposed, and challenged.

Given this, our analysis should not begin and end with listing contradictions. As the guide weaves through each borough, another dynamic that becomes clear is distinguishing the moments when New York is *indicative* of a process from when a story is *particular* to the city. It’s an interpolative exercise that reminds us of the more literal questions of geography: how do we responsibly take what we know from one place to make an assessment about another? For the most part, the guide sees New York as a lens to understand power at every scale. The authors “selected places whose stories could be seen as emblematic of the social forces they put in motion or continue to propel” (p.15); to do so, the guide introduces a process in one borough and unfolds it throughout the others so that individual sites highlight local and national transformations. One could follow the development of a federal project like urban renewal by way of East Tremont in the Bronx, which hosts a section of the Cross-Bronx Expressway, through Manhattan’s San Juan Hill—a Black and Puerto Rican neighbourhood razed in the 1960s to make way for Lincoln Center. We can similarly follow the partnership between capital and policing through the 19<sup>th</sup> century’s wealthy militias like the Upper East Side’s 7<sup>th</sup> Regiment Armory which famously crushed strikes and popular protests, to the “broken windows” policing strategies that transformed Midtown’s landscape from redlight district to tourist playground. But again, with each story of destruction comes a story of defence: the Bronx was not solely a testing

site for organised abandonment (Gilmore 2008), but a cornerstone of labour organising through institutions like SEIU 1199, which as the authors outline was the largest union recognition campaign in the US at the time of its founding in 1958. As for policing, one only need learn from the many actions within Manhattan’s Tompkins Square Park (p.148-150), the marches in Staten Island’s Tompkinsville Park in the wake of Eric Garner’s murder (p.307), or the uprisings of 2020 to trace our ongoing resistance to state violence.

Resistance is in the bricks-and-mortar landscape as well, and the authors occasionally combine sites to further elucidate a shared history. Their Brooklyn chapter, for example, links Starr Bar, Mayday Space, and Brooklyn Commons—places known for their dual organising and socialising functions—under the shared header of “Bushwick and Boerum Hill”, two noncontiguous neighbourhoods about four miles from each other. It makes iterative albeit not spatial sense to place these sites alongside one another, since they all emerged as “‘movement spaces’ ... where the movements of the city have met, hatched their plans, educated themselves, connected with each other, done their work, celebrated, and more” (p.299). Combined, the three spaces suture two neighbourhoods together to tell a broader history of leftist organising. In so doing, instead of simply *populating* our existing mental map of the city with locations that keep neighbourhood boundaries intact, our authors create a countertopography of the city where areas are connected across space and through shared experience (Katz 2001).

We can read *A People’s Guide to New York City* and outline a personal geography of our own movement lineage. It’s a timely project especially as the past two years have given us much to review, resist, and grieve. However, the guide reminds us that we’re supposed to do more than reflect; we’re supposed to connect struggle at every scale to the bigger whole in order to produce a city that actually works for us. This is the difference between a guidebook and a field guide: while the former is a passive text that offers advice and direction to the novice traveller, the latter assumes that we are experts of our landscape and thus helps us further identify the patterns. Fittingly then, the guide closes with four thematic tours that cover Chinatowns, environmental

justice, immigration in Queens, and capitalism and its protests on Wall Street. The tours are another reflection of the guide's thesis: no destruction is ever total. Not only because there is always another threat to solidarity around the corner, but because destructive actions leave behind witnesses—the ones who see the patterns and organise. *A People's Guide to New York City* is a text for those who read the landscape for shared struggle.

## References

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