

THE CITY IN AMERICAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE

EDITED BY

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The Literature of Neighborhood

Carlo Rotella

Like a neighborhood in relation to a city, the literature of neighborhood is a subset of the larger category of urban literature. When you call a work of literature “urban” you take on an obligation to show how the writing responds to the possibilities and challenges presented by the traits that make a city a city. Social scientists have been refining their list of those traits for more than a century; it includes density, anonymity, central place function, high property values, cosmopolitanism, hybridity, the concentration of trade and capital, the production of culture and knowledge, serving as a seat of government, and more. Neighborhoods appear on the list, too, because they are an urban universal, showing up throughout history wherever human beings have settled in substantial numbers. All these general traits that make any city a city present writers with opportunities to tell stories, experiment with form, make meaning, and otherwise exercise the literary imagination. (I say “writers” and “writing” for the sake of concision, but my broad construction of literature goes beyond novels, short stories, poems, and nonfiction to include movies, music, and more.) The same is true of particular aspects of history, landscape, population, or other features that may be distinctively specific to a particular city – unique attributes that make, say, Milwaukee different from Baltimore or El Paso.

We can adapt this definition of urban literature to cover smaller units that compose a city, zeroing in on how literature exploits qualities that make a neighborhood a neighborhood. So, what are those qualities?

To begin with, *neighborhood* is a several-faced, sometimes contradictory term. It literally refers to a spatial relationship (if X is nigh – near – to Y, then X is in the neighborhood of Y), but in common usage *neighborhood* means both a place and a feeling among its residents, both a physical landscape and the flows of people and resources and ideas moving through it. A neighborhood is also both durable and transient. The infrastructure of streets and buildings may be there for the long haul, but any particular order – any particular way of life and the set of material arrangements

supporting it – housed in this container is always taking form, in the process of disappearing, or both at once. And the term *neighborhood* can shrink or stretch in scale to fit a small cluster of buildings or an expansive quarter of the city composed of many named subunits that qualify as neighborhoods in their own right.

We tend to think of ourselves as living in neighborhoods, but the reverse holds just as true: neighborhoods live in us. They aren't just neutral stages on which we act out our lives and feel the effect of large-scale forces. Rather, as the eminent sociologist Robert Sampson puts it, neighborhoods are “important determinants of the quantity and quality of human behavior in their own right,” affecting residents in ways that can be teased apart from overlapping influences like income and race.¹ The places in which we live shape us in long-lasting ways, called neighborhood effects, which show up across the life course in everything from child mortality to school performance to economic attainment to life expectancy. Neighborhood effects also show up in less easily quantified aspects of perception and mentality that we usually think of as personal character, like altruism, sensitivity to disorder, and attitude toward the rule of law.

With all that in mind, we can come at the literature of neighborhood from any or all of several different angles. We can track how neighborhood effects and other such processes show up in plots, themes, and character systems. We can examine how literature responds to changes in the city, the dynamic of succeeding and persisting orders that adds up to the history of neighborhoods. We can consider the ways in which we use neighborhood to think about topics like community or justice or difference. We can parse truth and beauty in the neighborhood literature for their own sake, for art's sake. No matter which approaches we take, we inevitably engage what neighborhood *means*. In considering examples of writing and film-making that bear the marks of the characteristic traits of neighborhoods and exploit their meaning-making possibilities, the selection that follows does not attempt to range across the most important works, periods, or cities. A sample, not a survey, of literature's engagement with some defining aspects of neighborhood, it proceeds by showing how we can read a variety of books and movies together with each other and with the history and sociology of the city.

Looking back at the mid-twentieth century, we can assemble a cohort of novels and other books that together paint a composite portrait of the neighborhoods of the American city as it reached the end of an era. The cohort includes, among others, Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and *Lawd Today* (1963); Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1943);

Gwendolyn Brooks's poetry collection *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945); Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946); Nelson Algren's *The Man with the Golden Arm* (1949); Alfred Kazin's memoir *A Walker in the City* (1951); Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952); Harriet Arnow's *The Dollmaker* (1952); *For Love of Imabelle* (1957), *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1965), and other crime stories by Chester Himes; Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959); and Warren Miller's *The Cool World* (1959). Each of these books devotes a significant share of its energies to imagining a neighborhood and using it as a stage for action and reflection. These are the kind of books that contemporary reviewers credited with saying important things about city life, the American scene, "the way we live now."

One central element of the urban moment was a growing sense that the industrial city that had taken center stage in American culture as it boomed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had reached full maturity, with decline approaching or already under way. Organized around turning raw materials into finished goods in factories, physically dominated by railroad tracks and port facilities and tight-packed districts of workers' housing arranged around manufacturing plants and a monumental downtown, this city bore the marks in its form and function of the great processes that drove urban growth after the Civil War. Urbanization, industrialization, and immigration (which we can extend to include internal migration) had conjured the marvel of Chicago out of prairie and swamp, turned New York City into what many regarded as the world's foremost economic and cultural center, and made global manufacturing capitals out of places like Dayton and Birmingham. Realists, modernists, proletarian writers, and others had set themselves to the task of mapping and chronicling the industrial city, including two of its most distinctive neighborhood orders: the urban villages that housed immigrants in transition from the Old Country to America; and the Black Metropolis, exemplified by Bronzeville in Chicago and Harlem in New York, that grew from the encounter between the aspirational energies of black migrants from the rural South and the constraints imposed by a segregated society. These orders had reached their full flowering by mid-century and had begun to show signs of aging out.

In *A Walker in the City*, Kazin returns to Brownsville in Brooklyn, where he was raised in an intensely parochial urban village of Jewish immigrants from eastern Europe. Visiting the kind of place that upwardly mobile white ethnics at mid-century were already beginning to think of as the Old Neighborhood, Kazin's memoir looks back with both nostalgia and bitterness to his childhood in the 1910s and 1920s, the great theme being his

movement from this closed world of “five city blocks” to what he once regarded as “beyond”: to greater Brooklyn, Manhattan, the republic of America and the republic of letters.² It’s a story of assimilation that also tries to hang onto particularistic roots, to preserve within that Americanness an identity extending back through the Old Neighborhood to the Old Country.

Such tensions, centering on the scale of neighborhood, give Kazin’s memoir much of its inner life. On the one hand, moving outward from the home into the neighborhood is a step in the direction of the wider world, including Brownsville’s connection to diasporic Judaism. On the other hand, the neighborhood’s in-turned quality stands in contrast to another set of cosmopolitan possibilities available on the metropolitan scale – possibilities represented by schools, museums, newspapers, the subway system, and above all the Brooklyn Bridge. In a pivotal passage, Kazin remembers rising up on the bridge as an adolescent, the crowds dropping away below and the vista of lower Manhattan and downtown Brooklyn opening up before him, the scale of his perception and experience expanding until he achieves a transformative epiphany: “Where in this beyond are they taking me?” Compare that to the return to the neighborhood in the next sentence: “Every day the battle with the back wall of the drugstore began anew.”³ He’s referring to handball, but he’s also contrasting the expansiveness of the metropolitan with the claustrophobia of the local figured by that wall. The urban village may attract the nostalgic walker in the city for a return visit to the roots that give him a distinct identity, but by mid-century it has already slipped away in his wake. He’s in motion – he’s a Manhattanite now, a New York intellectual, an American through and through – and the neighborhood’s orders are also in motion, as evidenced by new housing projects and black residents.

Petry’s *The Street*, a classic neighborhood novel, maps mid-century Harlem in ways that reveal the constraints on the prospects of its protagonist, the young single mother Lutie Johnson. Her modest aspirations to a decent living and a better life for her son, Bub, focus at first on her search for an apartment. In a larger sense, she’s trying to find a viable place for herself within the neighborhood’s interlinked economic, cultural, and political structures. In the novel’s opening scene, she’s apartment-hunting on 116th Street between Seventh and Eighth Avenues, out on the street in a position of maximum exposure to the forces at play in the neighborhood: the cold November wind, the lustful attention of men, and the influence of Junto, the white kingpin who exercises power through a behind-the-scenes network extending well beyond Harlem. Throughout

the novel, Lutie's attempts to secure shelter and independence only expose her to greater danger and control by others. When she and other Harlemites try to move up in the world, they discover that the game is rigged against them; when they leave the neighborhood, they find their trajectory bending back inexorably toward it. Harlem as Black Metropolis may well be a vibrant cultural capital, a promised land for migrants from the South like Lutie's family, but it is also a trap, a dead end.

One principal way the novel develops this theme is through the "drama of representation," a literary work's more or less veiled reflection on the processes that produced it. *The Street* is full of images of creativity that raise questions about authorship: a musician trying to figure out whether he has composed a new melody or reproduced one he has heard somewhere; Lutie trying to find her voice by singing along with the jukebox, solo, and in front of a band; the rage-filled super of Lutie's building, Jones, tracing the outlines of several mailbox keys and then merging the copies into a synthesis that "wasn't really a copy" but "seemed to embody all the curves and twists of the others."⁴ Characters struggle with the problem of who gets to create a representation of their life, to what extent such a creation might be original or derived from another author's work, and who benefits from it. Lutie, trying to shape her own narrative, discovers that while the blues tradition and other aspects of black culture may produce stories that her neighbors in Harlem find vivid and meaningful, those stories lack authority in the wider world. Her singing, for instance, moves audiences at the corner saloon who share her experience but doesn't succeed in securing the money she needs to get out of Harlem. Compare that to the written representation of Lutie's life provided by an Italian American immigrant family via a letter of recommendation that (temporarily) gets her out of Harlem and into a job as a domestic in suburban Connecticut.

Lutie's comparisons of herself to Benjamin Franklin, whose autobiography provides a template for American narratives of self-making, underscore how her attempts at self-authorship keep running up against the limits of race and gender given form in the boundaries of Harlem and the forces bearing down on her on 116th Street. "You better get your dinner started, Ben Franklin," she says to herself, dismissing her daydreams of triumphant self-authorship as she walks home from her subway stop. On the way she passes children chanting "Down in Mississippi and a bo-bo push!" as they jump rope on the sidewalk, and then she encounters Bub, working as a shoeshine boy.⁵ The street scene, with its references to Franklin and Mississippi and menial work that portends frustrated upward

mobility, exemplifies how *The Street* uses its depiction of the neighborhood to show that the mature Black Metropolis has failed to deliver on the promise it once seemed to extend to migrants from the South.

In the decades after the Second World War, as the urban village and the Black Metropolis continued to show signs of breaking up and giving way to succeeding orders, neighborhood literature responded to the challenge of representing cities in transition. This often took the form of stories of decline, but we can also see neighborhood literature tracing the contours of the urban present and future as it took shape. From Claude Brown's account of his adventures in heroin-plagued Harlem and Beat-era Greenwich Village in *Manchild in the Promised Land* (1965) to the *Godfather* movies' (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972, 1974, 1990) account of the Corleone family's trajectory from Lower East Side immigrant idyll to assimilation, fragmentation, and regret in suburban Long Island and beyond, those stories bear the marks of deep shifts in urban life.

A second great folk migration to a second mid-century promised land, of white city dwellers to the booming suburban periphery, interlocked with the migration of African Americans from the rural South to the inner city. At the same time, US cities underwent a great shift in form and function as the industrial city began to age out in earnest, with manufacturing jobs departing northern inner cities to relocate in the suburbs, southern states, and other countries. The postindustrial metropolis, primarily organized not around turning raw materials into finished products but around handling information and providing services, rose around and through the receding industrial city. The emerging order's distinctive forms – highways and airports rather than rail lines and port facilities, steel-and-glass office towers rather than redbrick factories, high-rise housing rather than tenements or bungalows – layered over earlier cityscapes. Government policies pushed the process via urban renewal initiatives like slum clearance and the construction of monumental housing projects, and by fostering suburban growth with highway construction and loan practices encouraging home ownership. The transformation also brought new layers of neighborhood order: the second ghetto, the signature form of which was those towering housing projects; the postwar barrio, fed by fresh migrations from Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, and other parts of Latin America; professional and neobohebian districts filled with college-educated knowledge workers; the white-ethnic enclave, a fortified remnant of the urban village no longer embedded in a patchwork of similarly Old World-derived neighborhoods; and suburbs growing with

such speed that by the 1980s they had collectively reset the norms of American life.

The literature of neighborhood bears the marks of these changes and exploits creative possibilities opened up by them. Shifting from New York (the setting of both *A Walker in the City* and *The Street*) to Chicago, we can trace the consequences of the postindustrial city's emergence in, for instance, Mike Royko's *Boss* (1971), in which the dean of US metro columnists offers a nonfiction portrait of the greatest machine mayor of his time, Richard J. Daley, who presided over the unmaking of the neighborhood order that had shaped him and his city. We can see the change as well in the difference between Gwendolyn Brooks's early poetry, celebrated for its exquisitely wrought observations of life in the kitchenette buildings and on the street corners of Bronzeville, and her later work, which pursues an aesthetic of the second ghetto in portraits of Blackstone Ranger gang members whose "country is a Nation on no map," "sisters who kept their naturals," and a Rangerette who "sighs for Cities of blue and jewel/Beyond her Ranger rim of Cottage Grove."⁶ In David Mamet's play *The Old Neighborhood*, middle-aged Jewish characters whose families moved away from the South Side of Chicago during the great white flight of the 1960s look back at the urban village they left behind in their socioeconomic wake and lament its passing. "Oh, Bobby, it's all gone," says one. "It's all gone there. You knew that."⁷ In *The Hottest Water in Chicago* (1992), the essayist Gayle Pemberton takes a walk through Mamet's old neighborhood, South Shore, and surveys the shuttered storefronts, heaps of garbage, and idlers on its desolate main drag, 71st Street – visible consequences of the capital flight that attended the departure of Mamet's characters and their neighbors.

Stuart Dybek is the writer whose work most richly captures the layering of Chicago's – and perhaps any American city's – neighborhood orders. Born in 1942, Dybek grew up in Pilsen/Little Village, a formerly industrial area southwest of the Loop where residents with roots in Bohemia, Poland, and other eastern European places gave way in the 1950s and 1960s to those with roots in Mexico and Central America. Dybek's short stories and poetry, a body of work spanning half a century, return again and again to the seemingly bottomless well of inspiration provided by coming of age in a neighborhood in transition. The ghosts of an older city appear to Dybek's characters as "apparitions in broad daylight": peddlers with horses and wagons; a "mute knife sharpener pushing his screeching whetstone up alleys"; El trestles, bridges, and tenements encased in decades of pigeon droppings; a Brigadoon-like restaurant that serves life-saving sauerkraut

soup; grandparents and other Old World figures whose incantatory foreign speech, music, and folkways seem at once alien and intensely familiar.⁸ These ghosts appear in the wrinkles and gaps of an emerging neighborhood order. Factories and icehouses close down, jukeboxes ring with Mexican polkas and waltzes that sound eerily similar to the Polish and Czech tunes they have replaced, blues-derived music and other aspects of black culture pervade the scene as African American neighbors move into adjoining areas, and young people coming of age have to reckon with a new set of facts of life that include the realization that schooling – not the manual work done by parents and grandparents – provides the best shot at achieving upward mobility.

The drama of representation follows a similar logic in Dybek's work. "Blight," one of his finest stories, tracks a crew of postadolescent friends, nascent storytellers who experiment with poetry, fiction, songwriting, and musicianship as they navigate a difficult historical moment, "those years between Korea and Vietnam," and a layered landscape in the throes of transformation.⁹ The city has slapped the label of Official Blight Area on the neighborhood and begun tearing down its aging factories, railroad tracks, truck docks, industrial dumps, scrapyards, and workers' housing to make room for expressways and other urban renewal projects. Hallucinatory glimpses of Mayor Daley give visionary form to the decisive influence of downtown interests on the neighborhood. Feeling at once grounded and adrift, the characters try to make sense of their situation by turning it into narrative, into literature, into beauty. "Blight" can be read as an account of how its narrator, Dave, wandering this transitional neighborhood scene with his friends, assembles the wherewithal to narrate the story by filling his toolkit with a syncretic variety of literary equipment made available to him in encounters with Old World, Mexican, and black cultures; youth culture's beatniks and hippies; and a college literature course taught by a professor whose Chicago accent changes the opening of Shelley's "To a Skylark" from "Hail to thee, blithe Spirit!" into "Hail ta dee, blight Spirit!" The story Dave tells is not just of the urban village's decline but also of opportunities for meaningful, even ecstatic, experience available in the overlaps of persisting and succeeding neighborhood orders. It is also a story of striking literary gold: the drama of representation locates creative opportunity, as well, in the neighborhood's mishmash of cultural possibilities.

In the story's final scene, Dave has moved away from the neighborhood, presumably to some professional or (small-b) bohemian area father north, but he comes back for a visit. He's in a bar, the Carta Blanca, when the

jukebox stops playing and he hears “the bells from three different churches tolling the hour.” Because the bells don’t “agree on the precise moment,” their ringing overlaps – a figure that resonates with the overlap of neighborhood orders that shaped the sensibility shared by Dave and his friends. The bells trigger an epiphany in which he first remembers the terror of disoriented dreams “in which I was back in my neighborhood, but lost, everything at once familiar and strange,” and finally finds the terror transmuted into wonder: “and then in the dream I would come to a corner that would feel so timeless and peaceful, like the Carta Blanca with the bells fading and the sunlight streaking through, that for a moment it would feel as if I had wandered into an Official Blithe Area.”¹⁰

As the postindustrial city matured in the final decades of the twentieth century and the opening years of the twenty-first, the shape of its social and cultural landscape became easier to discern. Its characteristic neighborhood orders displayed a range of familiarity and novelty to which the typological terms commonly available as descriptive labels – ghetto, barrio, yuppie, hipster, gentrified, and so on – did not always do justice. Neighborhood literature took on the task of mapping this emergent city with greater nuance: in, for instance, the contrast of downtown Manhattan’s professional-bohemian loft districts to the post-1965 immigrant enclaves of Queens in Chang-rae Lee’s *Native Speaker* (1995), the rendering of the borderland between North Oakland and Berkeley as an interracial contact zone in Michael Chabon’s *Telegraph Avenue* (2012), or the mosaic of racial and artistic formations in Boerum Hill and other parts of Brooklyn in Jonathan Lethem’s *The Fortress of Solitude* (2003).

One city that experienced a postindustrial renaissance in neighborhood stories was Boston, which had been a cultural capital and manufacturing center in the nineteenth century before entering a long decline that spanned much of the twentieth. Boston remained a provincial backwater until the 1980s, when a so-called New Boston began to emerge, a city centered on its flourishing education, high-tech, biotech, and finance sectors. As this developing layer matured, Boston’s reputation in the nation and the world changed again, thanks not only to its economic revival but also to increasingly widespread recognition that educational institutions, with which Boston had long been uniquely well endowed, were ever more essential engines of growth in the postindustrial city. Another significant factor contributing to Boston’s revived cultural identity and growing prominence was an improbable movie boom, encouraged by a state tax credit incentive, that put fanciful renditions of Boston neighborhood stories, manners, and mores into global circulation.

Though the Boston of Harvard, MIT, and other educated elite precincts does show up repeatedly (as in the beginning of *The Social Network* [David Fincher, 2010]), and though information-handling knowledge workers do appear (as in *Fever Pitch* [Peter Farrelly and Bobby Farrelly, 2005], in which a teacher and a tech wiz meet cute), a handful of neighborhoods associated with deeply rooted remnants of the industrial-era Irish American urban village have been heavily overrepresented in Boston movies. Southie (South Boston), Charlestown, parts of Dorchester, and aging districts of workers' housing in outlying former manufacturing hubs like Lowell form the heartland of the composite geography mapped by movies that make a substantial effort to establish a Boston feel. The list includes *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* (Peter Yates, 1973), *The Brinks Job* (William Friedkin, 1978), *The Verdict* (Sidney Lumet, 1982), *Good Will Hunting* (Gus Van Sant, 1997), *Monument Ave.* (Jonathan Demme, 1998), *Next Stop Wonderland* (Brad Anderson, 1998), *The Boondock Saints* (Troy Duffy, 1999), *Mystic River* (Clint Eastwood, 2003), *Fever Pitch*, *The Departed* (Martin Scorsese, 2006), *Gone Baby Gone* (Ben Affleck, 2007), *Black Irish* (Brad Gann, 2007), *What Doesn't Kill You* (Brian Goodman, 2008), *Shutter Island* (Scorsese, 2010), *Edge of Darkness* (Martin Campbell, 2010), *The Town* (Affleck, 2010), *The Company Men* (John Wells, 2010), *The Fighter* (David O. Russell, 2010), *Ted* (Seth MacFarlane, 2012), *The Heat* (Paul Feig, 2013), *Black Mass* (Scott Cooper, 2015), *Spotlight* (Tom McCarthy, 2015), *Patriots Day* (Peter Berg, 2016), *Manchester by the Sea* (Kenneth Lonergan, 2016) – plus various sequels, television shows like *Wahlburgers* and *SMILF*, and yet more films and shows currently in production (like Showtime's *City on a Hill*) that will have been released by the time this chapter sees publication.

As Dennis Lehane (several of whose novels have been adapted into Boston movies) and others have pointed out, the movies' idealization of Boston's avatars of the Old Neighborhood has taken place as the areas of the city that once exemplified the industrial neighborhood order have lost much of the white-ethnic and blue-collar tribal culture rooted in manual labor and a set of institutions that included the parish church, saloon, union hall, immigrant social club, and neighborhood-level organizational strata of the white-ethnic political machine.¹¹ Contemporary Boston is a majority-minority city, and educated professionals from elsewhere have descended in force on former white-ethnic enclaves.

In the Boston movies, though, the Old Neighborhood retains its potency, a theme that has grown familiar to the point that it has been routinely parodied by comedians on late-night TV. From an aerial

establishing shot of a neighborhood we drop down into a landscape of close-set triple-deckers that house insular, no-r-pronouncing Sullivans and McSomebodies whose connections to the neighborhood equip them with weapons-grade accents, class resentment, and urban skills. In *The Town*, Doug MacRay (Affleck) eludes an FBI lockdown of Charlestown by taking to the rooftops, commandeering a city bus, and otherwise deploying regular-guy local knowledge to prohibitive advantage. In both *Gone Baby Gone* and *The Departed*, the mere association of the runty protagonist with the Old Neighborhood (Dorchester in the former, Southie in the latter) causes other characters to quail in his presence even when they have the advantage in force.

These movies deploy the equipment of genre fantasy to consider – among many other subjects – what has been gained and lost in the changes that shaped the postindustrial city. They are, in part, *about* the possibilities opened up by this transformation. Sometimes that aboutness can be found right on the surface of the movie: there's a scene in *The Company Men* in which a man walking through a silent, rusting, broken-windowed shipyard rhapsodizes about a lost masculinity founded in manual labor. Sometimes it is buried a little deeper, as in a scene in *The Fighter* in which Charlene (Amy Adams) confronts Micky (Mark Wahlberg) at his apartment. The neighborhood vista, established in a long shot of wood-frame walkups in the foreground with brooding redbrick buildings that once housed textile mills in the background, establishes the context for Micky's prowess as a boxer and also for the characters' vulnerability. Lowell has made them tough, but it has also made them fear that they might be losers. Sometimes the meditation on change comes in drastically compressed form, as when Krista (Blake Lively) explains to Doug in a neighborhood bar in *The Town* that encroaching new immigrants ("Somalians") and knowledge workers ("yuppies") need to be reminded that there are still "serious white people in Charlestown." And *Good Will Hunting* remains the mother of all Boston movies because it resolves the tensions between old and new Bostons by imagining a character from Southie who has impeccable blue-collar neighborhood credentials and is also smarter than the eggheads at MIT and Harvard. As he says to an improbably snooty grad student, "You dropped a hundred and fifty grand on a fuckin' education you could have got for a dallah fifty in late chahges at the public library."

There are some recent signs of curdling in the Boston movies' attitude toward the neighborhoods and working-class white masculinity they have conventionally idealized. For instance, *Black Mass*, a nasty little gangster movie, and *Spotlight*, an Oscar-winning prestige production on

the model of *All the President's Men* (Alan Pakula, 1976), share a thematic emphasis on systemic rottenness at the core of the Old Neighborhood. And comedies like *The Heat* and Seth Meyers's much-viewed trailer for an imaginary movie called *Boston Accent* make fun of the in-turned parochialism that has been transmuted into a heroic virtue by the Boston movie boom. The rise of Donald Trump may well have taken some of the bloom off the notion of a potentially unreconstructed white working-class identity – though the viral “Be a Masshole, not an asshole” political ad, in which a buzz-cut regular guy straight from Boston-movie central casting (“Manhattan clam chowdah? The fuck is that?”) defends transgender rights in a bar, would suggest that such an identity can also be invoked in support of conventional blue-state purposes. Despite or perhaps in part *because* of the varying and potentially conflicting ideological resonances of white working-class identity, Boston remains one of Hollywood's go-to locations when it wants to think about locality. A handful of neighborhoods in Boston have, in that sense, come to stand for the very idea of “the local.” Their vigorous global circulation via Hollywood's distribution networks have helped restore Boston's status as a cultural capital.¹²

Like cities, the stories we tell about them accrue in layers. Though the shock of the new attracts literary attention, persistence is often a stronger force than succession in shaping our storytelling routines, especially when it comes to neighborhood. That's because it is typically easier to recognize signs of the established order's enduring qualities or its incipient fall than to assemble a coherent vision of the emergent future from piecemeal glimpses of its arrival. Looking back through the neighborhood literature stretching back to the middle of the twentieth century, we can see emergent orders in abundance, but we can also discern a powerful investment in the notion that familiar older orders still exert a shaping force on city life. This is in keeping with what social science tells us about the “stickiness” of neighborhood effects: a neighborhood's reputation tends to last even through repeated transformations of its social order, and even an exhausted order that has receded into the underlying structure of a neighborhood can still exert an influence on what comes next: subsequent landscapes, stories, ways of knowing the world or being in it. To move through a neighborhood, in the material world or on the page or on the screen or in the mind's eye of memory or fantasy, is simultaneously to inhabit multiple superseded versions of that place, each exerting its own ghostly neighborhood effects.

Notes

1. Robert J. Sampson, *Great American City: Chicago and the Enduring Neighborhood Effect* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), p. 22. See also Rotella, *The World Is Always Coming an End: Pulling Together and Apart in a Chicago Neighborhood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), pp. 1–23.
2. Alfred Kazin, *A Walker in the City* (New York: Harcourt, 1979), p. 17.
3. Kazin, *A Walker in the City*, p. 108.
4. Ann Petry, *The Street* (Boston: Beacon, 1985), p. 292.
5. Petry, *The Street*, p. 64.
6. Gwendolyn Brooks, *Blacks* (Chicago: David Company, 1987), pp. 447, 459, 449.
7. David Mamet, *The Old Neighborhood* (New York: Random House, 1999), p. 29.
8. The knife sharpener appears in Stuart Dybek, *The Coast of Chicago* (New York: Knopf, 1990), p. 85; the restaurant appears in Dybek, *Childhood and Other Neighborhoods* (New York: Viking, 1980), pp. 122–38.
9. Dybek, *The Coast of Chicago*, p. 42.
10. Dybek, *The Coast of Chicago*, p. 71. In greater depth, see Rotella, *October Cities: The Redevelopment of Urban Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 108–15.
11. Dennis Lehane, “Introduction: Tribalism and Knuckleheads,” in Dennis Lehane, ed., *Boston Noir* (New York: Akashic, 2009), pp. 12–13.
12. See Rotella, “The Boston Movie Boom of the 21st Century,” in Johan Andersson and Lawrence Webb, eds., *The City in American Cinema: Post-Industrialism, Urban Culture and Gentrification* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), pp. 153–74.