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The Genesis of the Chicago Renaissance: Theodore Dreiser, Langston

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ply too far apart to allow for an honest adaptation of his story. He wanted to show America as it was and to examine it critically; to show the murder on the lake and the motivations behind it as arising out of our belief that everything is possible, that our dreams must always come true. But the source of at least some of those dreams was our popular culture, especially the movies. How could the movies then turn around and call their own *raison d'être*—their ability to make those dreams visible and audible and collective—into question? At the crudest level, the box office was telling the studios what the people wanted. And what we wanted, and what we continue to want, is not subversion and critique, but illusion.

Despite this ultimately gloomy assessment, Merck's own engagement with the subject is substantial. She provides clear, fascinating analyses of the films, giving both plot *précis* and extensive discussions of the cinematic techniques used. And those techniques are discussed not simply for their own sake but as a way to talk about cinematic storytelling. In addition to her own close readings of the various treatments of the novel she provides a good overview of the critical literature on both the novel itself and its place in the naturalist canon. This book belongs on both the literary history and the film studies bookshelf.

—Dennis Loranger, Wright State University

The Genesis of the Chicago Renaissance: Theodore Dreiser, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and James T. Farrell, by Mary Hricko.
London & New York: Routledge, 2009. 229 pp. Cloth, \$95.00.

As American naturalism generates a new force of interest among scholars, Mary Hricko's *The Genesis of the Chicago Renaissance* offers a novel approach to a literature whose geographical and chronological boundaries critics seem eager to enlarge. Identifying her project as the first one to do so, Hricko sets out in her introduction to use Chicago as a literary link between the intertwined lives and works of Theodore Dreiser, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and James T. Farrell. This book's chronological arrangement of these authors according to the first (1890–1930) and second (1930–1950) Chicago Renaissance periods seems consistent with Hricko's effort to determine how the urban fiction and poetry of Dreiser and Hughes influenced later sociological writings by Wright and Farrell. Furthermore, Hricko connects these first and second-generation Chicago Renaissance writers on the basis of their shared participation in the city's literary life, political culture, and socio-economic movements. She argues

that by “embracing the city as his subject,” each author uses Chicago as a “metaphor for the urban experience in American literature.”

Hricko acknowledges the “development of the city novel” as a significant “thread” between these two phases of Chicago’s cultural rebirth; however, her insights into the natural world of the Chicago landscape, as illustrated by these four writers, provide the most food for thought. Through convincing close readings of passages involving the polluted Chicago River in *Sister Carrie* (1900) and *The Genius* (1915), chapter one identifies the city as an “unnatural” place for Dreiser and his protagonists. Similarly, a significant lack of green space exists for underprivileged African-American characters in Hughes’s writings about Chicago’s Black Belt. As Hricko transitions from her first into her second and third chapters, she moves from the socially determined places of Dreiser’s fiction to the racially restricted spaces of Hughes’s first novel, *Not without Laughter* (1930) and his later poems. In chapters two and three, Hricko observes that while Chicago serves as a fallen garden for the underprivileged black characters in Hughes’s and Wright’s works, this Midwestern metropolis rivals Harlem as an intellectual and cultural center for early twentieth-century African-American writers. Hricko convincingly concludes her study with a look at how social, racial, and ethnic disparities exist in the working class urban environments of Farrell’s Irish-American Chicago.

Although she clearly pinpoints the common environmental “influences and relationships” that link Dreiser, Hughes, Wright, and Farrell to one another and to Chicago, Hricko too often collapses “urban realism” with “literary naturalism” and does not explain how the writers do or do not fit into these categories. Her project would thus benefit from a more careful consideration of how these literary-isms reflect, both similarly and differently, Chicago’s transition from a “rural to an urban society.” If Hricko views these Chicago-based authors through their “relationship[s] to the city,” then how does Dreiser’s study of the “[urban] influence on the rural mind” complicate and/or enrich our study of American naturalism and realism? *The Genesis of the Chicago Renaissance* could have addressed this question more specifically, and perhaps further acknowledged the absence of female voices within its collection of Midwestern authors. Nevertheless, through its insightful illustration of Chicago as both an urban and rural metaphor for these four writers, Mary Hricko’s book makes an original contribution to a body of literature that deserves further thought.

—Cara Erdheim, Fordham University

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