

essays invite us to think more seriously about the human imprint on the natural world. Instead of the “conceptual tidiness” of scientific evolution, the authors upend abstract teleology and plot a circuitous path that demonstrates “evolution’s darkness as the ungraspable core at the matrix of life itself” (p. 20). I could imagine scholars in various fields learning a great deal from these literary and humanistic provocations into the positivistic sphere of evolutionary science. In disability studies, for example, the question of life and human flourishing remains crucial. Contemporary scholars of disability have been challenging what they polemically call the new eugenics, or the unexamined coercion of prenatal screening and genetic engineering to eradicate abnormality in favor of “healthful” embodiment. *Marking Time* highlights how health, evolutionary advantage, and fitness are hardly unassailable, ethereal truths; rather, these concepts were and continue to be indelibly shaped in the crucible of European colonialism, unconscious bias, and even philosophical contingencies.

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BARBARA LECKIE, *Open Houses: Poverty, the Novel, and the Architectural Idea in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018. Pp. viii + 303. \$79.95.

Barbara Leckie begins her elegantly written and thoroughly engrossing *Open Houses: Poverty, the Novel, and the Architectural Idea in Nineteenth-Century Britain* with a deceptively simple proposal. While topics like sanitation reform and urban geography have tended to dominate the academic conversation about poverty and social reform in the mid nineteenth century, the analogous Victorian interest in architecture, especially architectural housing for the poor, has been significantly overlooked by critics. Not only did the philanthropic fascination with housing explode in the 1830s, but architecture rose into prominence as a new middle-class profession at roughly the same time; moreover, as Leckie points out in three substantial chapters of her book, a trio of the most important novels of the Victorian period—Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House*, George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, and Henry James’s *The Princess Casamassima*—all revolve, in various ways, around the topic of housing for the poor. Both aspects of this argument—that architecture was crucially important to social reform endeavors throughout the nineteenth century,

but yet continues to be almost uniformly overlooked by academics who work on Victorian social reform (Deborah Epstein Nord, Raymond Williams, Anthony Wohl, Pamela Gilbert)—is deftly revealed in chapter 1, when Leckie points out that Edwin Chadwick's infamous *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* was originally published in 1842 with dozens of architectural drawings and plans that were entirely eliminated from the standard edition published by M. W. Flinn in 1965 (p. 43). What Leckie calls the "architectural idea" was at least as central to Chadwick as the "sanitary idea" heralded by most contemporary critics, and, in fact, was a crucial component of some of the most commonly cited reform documents of the nineteenth century, ranging from the 1867 *Agricultural Reports* to the anonymously published 1883 exposé *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London*.

Leckie convincingly argues that all of these major and a host of minor publications embraced the architectural ideal as an ameliorist mechanism, supporting a moral philosophy that architecture can shape inhabitants and that housing is social behavior (p. 6). But they did so by borrowing from the rhetorical style of "exposé narrations" that exploded in popularity at various moments in the nineteenth century, sensational narratives that invited readers to treat poor people's homes as "open" spaces to be entered and explored: "Come inside," the exposé narrative beckons, "look into the house," and see the unimaginable filth and sickness that corrodes the domestic life of poor families at the very heart of the great British empire (p. 4). These exposés seemed to rely, optimistically, on the visual truism that "seeing is believing": if only enough people—middle-class women, government officials, upper-class philanthropists—could *see* the poor in their wretched, contaminated homes, then they would force social change and a reform movement that depended, above all, on architectural transformation.

Leaving aside for a moment the question that Leckie repeatedly asks about whether such visual evidence of slum housing was ever enough, over the course of the century, to compel meaningful social change, *Open Houses* also offers a challenging intervention in debates about the aesthetic and cultural meanings of British Modernism. While the Crystal Palace might be the building style most closely identified with modernity in the nineteenth century, Leckie nominates instead the dilapidated tenement buildings of slum housing like Tom-All-Along's, arguing that the architectural experience of both palace and tenement is essentially the same: dissolving walls, blurred boundaries, transparent ceilings, and the total interpenetration of private housing with public street. While most studies of Modernity overlook the

imagined stasis and domesticity of the nineteenth-century home in favor of the movement and unpredictability of the flâneur-traveled street, houses of the poor reflected, in their very dilapidation and decay, the high Modernist aesthetic of “porosity and transparency” as described in Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades* project (quoted on p. 59).

This mediation of the material experience of poverty by a high aesthetic convention is one answer to the question of why narrative exposés and even visual evidence of slum housing repeatedly failed to change the architecture of tenement life in the nineteenth century. During at least three separate historical moments (roughly the 1840s, the 1860s, and the 1880s), Leckie theorizes, agitation for architectural reform seemed to gain hold of the public imagination, but in the end never seemed to produce social change. “Mediation,” in fact, whether in the form of a narrative exposé or a blue book or a novel, only seemed to generate more mediation: “mediation,” as Leckie uses the term here, is an experience of domestic poverty that gets channeled through generic or aesthetic conventions, as when mid-Victorian novels like Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* promise unmediated versions of real life, but still modeled themselves after exposé narrations by (in Gaskell’s case) inviting readers to “come inside” the shabby interior of the Barton home and to finally see some truth of working-class suffering hidden at the dark center of the house (p. 113). Yet by the time Dickens was writing *Bleak House*, he was beginning to doubt whether print exposés could ever really successfully intervene in housing debates, so he used the novel, Leckie argues, to move us from structure to structure, from bleak house to bleak house, in order to get readers to see and confront what is right in front of us. Likewise, when Eliot shows readers the Dagleys’ ruined cottage through landowner Brooke’s visual preference for the picturesque in *Middlemarch*, Eliot is demonstrating a distrust of the exposé, rejecting the traditional version of realism offered by Gaskell in favor of a mediation on a mediation. Most interestingly, James’s refusal to show us any poor housing in *The Princess Casamassima* (despite the Princess’s obsession with a perpetually deferred plan to tour the slums) is finally a refusal to mediate at all: James warns us about the mechanism of the exposé and then rejects it altogether, offering instead a bookbinder hero, Hyacinth, who constantly reminds us that the content and the medium are inextricable.

Leckie’s book posits novels as both mediations and as architectural forms that mediate on mediation, surely inviting the speculation that all academic work is also a mediation, an exposé, a generic convention, or an aesthetic form. Although Lackie does not meditate on

this directly, *Open Houses* leaves us with both airiness and transparency, as well as a refreshingly Jamesean refusal to disclose any buried secrets at the heart of poverty and its various mediations. Open interpretations without reductive, premature, or overly mediated conclusions are what Leckie hopes for as the story continues: “to the extent that we can relax our hold on an epistemological model that seeks to uncover truth and prize it free from its defining structures, . . . reform efforts will be enabled” (p. 243). This is an engaging model for scholarship, and certainly one that actively participates in several rich academic conversations without foreclosing any questions or forestalling any new debates. Two lingering questions that *Open Houses* engendered in this reviewer, I offer by way of example. The first seems existential: how is the exposé narrative a generic form that still fails us, even when images of children in cages at the southern border are on repeat in a three-network, 24-hour news cycle with both national and global reach? This failure of all mediated looking to actually see and react to open violence in the contemporary United States maps Leckie’s identified epistemological crisis on a long and dismaying historical continuum. The second question, by contrast, seems at first more banal: what do we make of “open plan” houses that deliberately dissolve walls and barriers at the center of the new middle-class home? Is the fetishized perpetual transparency and constant interpenetration of this new architecture of family life the apotheosis of modernity, or is it an aesthetic mediation on those airy and transparent wire cells where separated immigrant families currently live? Leckie’s fascinating book might not provide any nuggets of uncontested truth in response to these questions, but it crucially enables readers to make inquiries, and to connect existential anxieties with seemingly banal cultural preferences, under the constructive mechanism of the architectural idea.

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JACQUES KHALIP, *Last Things: Disastrous Form from Kant to Hujar*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2018. Pp. xiv + 139. \$90 cloth; \$25 paper.

Last Things: Disastrous Form from Kant to Hujar is a wonderful, weird, difficult object. It is, as its title more or less tells, a philosophical work that links Romanticism to contemporary catastrophe through aesthetic form. However, rather than trying to reverse