

**Molly McGlennen. *Our Bearings*. University of Arizona Press, 2020. 72 pp.
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"It's not difficult / to draw a line between each mile marker: / city lake, / Manifest Destiny, / a southern AME church," writes Molly McGlennen in "Footbridge III" (9). *Our Bearings*, McGlennen's second full-length poetry collection, undertakes as its project "a poetic mapping of Indigenous urban space," a reconfiguration of "Western knowledge systems that rely on progressivist tellings of history and amnesic cartographies of disengagement and partition" (xiii, xiv). Moving through skyways and waterways, forests and archives, *Our Bearings* covers an impressive amount of ground. Evoking Guy Debord's "technique of rapid passage though varied ambiances," McGlennen's poems enact a psychogeographical drift through Minneapolis, offering alternative modes of poetic and physical circulation (Debord, 62).

Through its attention to the overlapping strata of time and human presence beneath the surface of the city's grids, *Our Bearings* seeks to expose the ideologies inscribed in the concept of public space, since "[g]eography only illuminates for some" (25). In a series of poems centered around Fort Snelling, headquarters for government troops during the Dakota War of 1862, McGlennen's speaker interrogates the rhetorics of authenticity and accuracy around the National Historic Landmark. With its terse imperative phrases, "Visitor's Guide" emphasizes the abrasive experience of Fort Snelling's slick simulacra:

Locate map or not: it's never drawn to scale.
How could it be.

Look up: Actors greet you
and reenact *the times*.
Dressed appropriately.

Salute each flag. Revel in accuracy. (24)

Poems like "Visitor's Guide" challenge the implied universality of public space with its "metaphors of *meeting-place*" and narrowing of experience to "*the times*," particularly in these places dedicated to the public performance of memory (24).

The Fort Snelling poems create an interesting juxtaposition with the “Forewarning” sequence, which shifts the scene to Minikahda, the “*oldest country club west of the Mississippi*,” on land appropriated from Oglala Lakota Chief Swift Dog (33). The golf course here is the ultimate wasted space: “Imagine walking these manicured fairways that stretch for hundreds of yards. Designed to avoid the / rough” (32). “Forewarning II” troubles the stability of the club’s narrative of originality and authenticity, symbolized by Swift Dog’s shield which “hangs in the clubhouse / now posing as an original artifact” (33). The speaker imagines Swift Dog reclaiming his shield, which has been annexed as the country club’s logo, and this counternarrative haunts the “manicured fairways”: “Swift Dog, beyond the fringe, eludes / the ghosts. Shadows the water, / the center—a shield, for stories. For protection” (34).

Our Bearings conceptualizes circulation as resistance, whether in terms of stories, letters from parents to a child forcibly removed to a state school, or bodies in motion along the skyway system and the Snake River. This idea of circulation makes its mark on McGlennen’s poetic forms as well. In the “Snake River” sequence, for instance, the concluding line of each poem is taken up in a slightly altered form as the opening line of the next poem in the series: “the sweet ache of long days / that a body fragilely stores” becomes “[o]ur bodies store / river stories” (43-44). Through formal choices like these, McGlennen offers a vision of circulation as cyclical and drifting, “[a]lways moving toward home” in opposition to Manifest Destiny’s and late capitalism’s linear and expansionist motion (40).

While the city’s public spaces in *Our Bearings* often conceal histories of erasure and violence, McGlennen also demarcates more utopian zones of circulation, like the commons described in “Ode to First Ave.” Here, the iconic music venue functions as a point of confluence, carrying “the heat of gathering-places across years of resilience, / across generations of people folding the luminary of hope / into their purses or pockets and walking out into the night” (66). Throughout the collection, McGlennen emphasizes sociality as key for shared space’s utopian possibilities. She draws sharp contrasts between solitary moments like the speaker’s experience at Fort Snelling, mediated through visitor’s guides and actors performing scripted reenactments, and other moments where social relations are reciprocal and communal.

One such moment appears in the “Bonfire” sequence which opens the “Fire” section. In “Bonfire I,” the speaker invokes the echo as a figure for a shared body of cultural and poetic knowledge across time: “Cast these lines out / on the water— / wait for echoes” (57). Later in the poem, these echoes sound in the form of poetic citations:

Recall all the story carriers before us
 when we tend to these lines:
*The fish just all jumped
 and broke the surface
 at once,*
 one Shinob poet says,
*if you're quiet enough,
 you see things like that.* (57)

Here, "Bonfire I" calls for quiet attention to the echoes, a living model of poetic circulation where, by "tend[ing] to these lines," the speaker enters an ongoing discourse below the surface of the city's map. This vision of circulation creates a sense of simultaneity and copresence across time in the same way that, in an earlier poem, pollen samples from the bed of "a city lake named / for one audacious secretary of war" can "detail a Dakota settlement of century past" (8).

In "Formulary for a New Urbanism," one of the founding documents of the Situationist International, Ivan Chtcheglov claims that "cities are geological. You can't take three steps without encountering ghosts bearing all the prestige of their legends. We move within a closed landscape whose landmarks constantly draw us toward the past" (2). *Our Bearings'* critical and capacious gaze drifts across the cityscape, attending to "traces / of cupmarks, tools, messages" from the past, but equally attuned to living presence (60). McGlennen's counter-cartography of Minneapolis offers a compelling model for engaging with urban space where

the mnemonic pegs are how
 to recall the medicine of story
 encircle the node
 which is to say mode
 of learning observation (36)

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Works Cited

Chtcheglov, Ivan. "Formulary for a New Urbanism." 1953. *Situationist International Anthology*, edited and translated by Ken Knabb, Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006, pp. 1-8.

Debord, Guy. "Theory of the Dérive." 1959. *Situationist International Anthology*, edited and translated by Ken Knabb, Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006, pp. 62-66.