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### **Review/Reseña**

Young, Richard and Amanda Holmes, eds., *Cultures of the City: Mediating Identities in Urban Latin/o America*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010.

### **Latin/o American City Life in Snapshots**

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As its title suggests, *Cultures of the City: Mediating Identities in Urban Latin/o America*, edited by Richard Young and Amanda Holmes, brings together work in Latin American urban cultural studies. However, as the editors admit in their introductory chapter, it does not offer any generalizations about Latin American cities, or their symbolic representation in cultural texts. Rather, the editors present the collection of articles as ephemeral “snapshots”—glimpses into a dozen cities (11). This

lack of unified message, theme, or theoretical outlook allows for a diverse array of topics but is also the volume's greatest detraction.

Young and Holmes organized the chapters into three broad subheadings addressing urban identities: "Imagining Urban Identities;" "Urban Identities and Cultures on the Periphery;" and "Performance and the Ritualization of Urban Identities." From my perspective as a cultural anthropologist, the volume as a whole would have benefited from attention to those who bear these identities—the urban residents, their perspectives, how the diverse phenomena described in the chapters impact their lives. Within several chapters in this collection, there is unevenness between the analyses of instances of cultural production and claims to resultant identity making.

In the first chapter following the "Introduction," ethnomusicologist Robin Moore, analyzes the popular Cuban music of Gerardo Alfonso. In his music, Alfonso weaves the (often ugly) realities of Havana with creative *bricolage* of Cuban and international music genres. To understand Alfonso's social critique, as Moore demonstrates, the listener must attend not only to the content of his lyrics but equally to the history of the (often contrastive) musical genres that frame the words. Moore's suggestion that Alfonso's music becomes the "constructs, sounds, and images that Havana's residents use to think about their city" (30), however, would be strengthened by a contextualization of the life of Alfonso's music—its audiences, the extent of its popularity, its presence in Havana.

Similarly, Richard Young in his chapter analogizes characters' encounters with Buenos Aires in César Aira's novels to the way Porteños see and experience the city, without referencing actual Porteños or analyzing how Aira's readership receive and understand his work. This drawback notwithstanding, Young's textual analysis of *El Sueño* and *La Villa*, two Aira novels that feature Buenos Aires, reveals interesting facets of the urban experience. The ways in which Aira's characters encounter the city, each from his or her necessarily limited accessibility and point of view, emphasize the city's lack of absolute perspectives and its proliferation of unknowable (i.e. privatized) spaces.

Whereas Young's insights could arguably apply to any city, Geoffrey Kantaris's powerful piece elegantly intertwines three Argentinean films of the late 1990s, postmodern thought regarding the disorientation germane to contemporary capital accumulation regimes, and the socioeconomic realities of Argentinean life. Each of the movies (*Buenos Aires vice versa*, *Pizza, Birra, faso*, and *Mundo grúa*) shows visions of a post-dictatorship, globalized, economically restructured Argentina, which reeks of "latent violence and the refusal of the state to deal with it, of financial mismanagement, urban decay, unemployment, the reappearance of street children, the absurdity of the media's enthrallment to globalization, and above all of fear" (38). The movies, compelling and compellingly described, tackle these realities while incorporating post-modern aesthetics of the "global megalopolis" (39): fragmentation/blindness, velocity/dislocation, and depersonalization/sense of loss, respectively. Together, Kantaris concludes, these films generate stories of personal and collective disintegration through the erasure of historical depth and the fleetingness of the present. Though they too belong to the "televisual regimes of postmodernity and its [concurrent] dematerialization of urban space" (44), each film's final scene depicts a character's recognition of reality—a reflective gaze that arrests the flow of time and suggests the persistence of the past in the present.

At the other extreme, Amanda Holmes describes the overwhelming emphasis on a nostalgic past in two books published in the last decade to celebrate Asunción. Unlike the Argentinean films discussed by Kantaris, the two *asunceno* books completely ignore the social, economic, and political realities of Paraguay. In Paraguay, there is little literary and artistic production dealing with the city, Holmes explains; what does exist tends to emphasize the literary forms of and connections to a Euro-American past. The solution that Holmes finds is a bit confounding: Paraguayans should look to Latin American literary traditions and interpretations of urban representations. Rather than subsume its distinctiveness under yet another region, however, it seems that a solution more in line with Holmes's position would be Asunción's development of

its own unique artistic, literary, urban tradition by coming to terms with and integrating its own political history.

Andrea Noble's chapter explicitly depicts such interplay of past and present. Noble describes the photographic re-staging of nationally iconic images by the delegates of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) in Mexico City in 1999. The Zapatistas' incongruous presence in Mexico City alone underlined the failure of the nation to accept them as ethnic citizens—that is, at once full citizens and culturally distinct. (Though, to be fair, the fact that they arrived with immense political capital signals their potency as citizens). Holmes focuses on the recreation of a 1914 scene depicting Zapatista leaders drinking coffee at a Mexico City establishment, an image that came to stand for post-revolutionary pride of the Mexico's indigenous heritage. Holmes convincingly argues that, by referencing this scene, EZLN representatives (even while wearing name tags amidst a crowd of smiling onlookers) inject the taken-for-granted image-myth with radical meaning: 'we're still out of place'; the national historical narrative is false. Noble attributes such meaning-making to historical metonymy, the power of a material object or place (photo, monument, city) to index historical events and even to signal "presence in absence" (196-7).

This technique is captivatingly used by Mexican artist Teresa Margolles, whose chilling work is explored by Anny Brooksbank-Jones in her equally haunting chapter. Forensic specialist-cum-artist Margolles integrates human 'medical waste' from Mexico City's clinics and morgues into her artwork, usually to shock the audience into confronting the death they (we) often ignore. While Brooksbank-Jones connects her work to the Death motifs prevalent in Mexican history and culture, Margolles's work is not just about death and our relation to it. More broadly, Margolles's work hinges on displaying bodily residue of the sociopolitical and economic climate of modern day Mexico City—whether it is the result of the proliferation of urban violence or liposuction treatment. In this piece Brooksbank-Jones also bemoans the usurpation of local (Mexican) artists for international shows in which their work is decontextualized, losing place-based particularity. Margolles's art does not face this risk. The materials she uses, the stuff of her art, is *of* Mexico City—the very bodily

traces of its citizens. Her reliance on viewers' visceral reactions to physical indexes of dead and altered bodies blurs the lines between artistic production and consumption, body and object, essence and artistic representation.

Rudolfo Torres and Juan Buriel, in their chapter, offer a less nuanced example of reality as an object of cultural consumption. The authors link the rise of nouvelle Mexican cuisine in Los Angeles to a postcolonial desire of elites to symbolically possess (devour) the cultural Other. Though evocative, the thesis strikes me as oversimplified; do today's customer's of expensive Mexican-inspired restaurants believe themselves to be eating 'authentic,' 'refined,' or even 'anaesthetized' Mexican food? Are there not plenty of Mexican-owned restaurants in LA, ones that 'feel more authentic'? If *nouvelle* versions of every type of cuisine exist, why belabor the Mexican-inspired? Moreover, the trend can be alternatively interpreted as paying tribute.

Perhaps these questions are beside the point. Torres and Buriel's primary concern is not the origin of the cuisine but the workers preparing (and supplying) the food. Indeed, the entire food industry of the United States relies on Latino/a workers, who have little chance of upward career mobility. Torres and Buriel propose unionization to this serious problem, though the reliance on flexible and undocumented labor by owners and workers alike renders such a proposal unlikely. For the time being, U.S. residents will continue to consume the fruit of Latino/a labor.

Another instance of cultural commodification plays out in Gisela Cánepa's chapter. In Peru, Andean migrants lay claim to Lima's urban space by carrying out religious celebrations in the public spaces of the city. Cánepa argues that these festivals have in effect re-politicized public space, long depoliticized in Lima after Alberto Fujimori's governance. Though the migrants are co-nationals, the Limeño elites act analogously to Torres and Buriel's depiction of LA's elites. That is, they sanction cultural display when such performance may be commodified as an object of tourism (i.e. part of 'development'); otherwise, it's delegitimized (147) and forced to be invisible.

Contrary to the conspicuousness of *latinidad* in LA (even if the visibility of Latino/a labor and culture is controlled by an elite, as Torres and Buriel claim), Latinos/as in Detroit face a different challenge. Catherine Benamou explores how local and national imaginaries of Detroit have failed to keep up with its reality. Benamou argues that Detroit's Latino population—consisting of a century-old Mexican community now significantly bolstered by recent influxes of mostly undocumented Latino/a (not Mexican) workers—has been overlooked as both a potential market and political base, “ghettoizing this community, positioned neither to consume nor to be consumed” (101). Benamou seems uncomfortable with such ambiguous positionality, even while recognizing its advantages. Perhaps this is because Benamou reinforces the ‘peripheral’ status of Detroit's Latino community<sup>1</sup> by her adopted perspective, that is, by focusing on how the community is viewed by outsiders.

In like manner, Angela Prysthon examines the multiplication of cinematic images of a socially, politically, and economically marginalized and visually underrepresented region of Brazil, the Northeast. According to Prysthon, recent representations of the cities of Recife and Salvador range from the stereotyped to “ethnographic naturalism” (130), contributing not only new perceptions of the region to the national imaginary, but also actual economic resources to these cities by way of the film industry. Though Prysthon's chapter would have benefited from more detailed descriptions of the films, their characters, and their status and reception within Brazil, Prysthon lays fertile ground for further exploration of “how a city is both transformed and transforms itself via its mediatic representations” (131).

Whereas the arguments developed by Torres and Buriel, Cánepa, and Benamou rely on a rather vague and unspecified category of “an elite,” the chapters by Antoni Kapcia and Par Kumaraswami and Héctor Fernández L'Hoeste focus on the impacts of concrete government actions. Antoni Kapcia and Par Kumaraswami reflect on the events and importance of the 2006 Havana Feria del Libro. The authors argue that the wildly

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<sup>1</sup> As designated by the volume's subheading under which it appears, “Urban Identities and Cultures on the Periphery.”

popular book fair signals to its residents and to Cuba the reemergence of Havana as “an urban cultural space, after decades of neglect” (182).<sup>2</sup> Kapcia and Kumaraswami celebrate “defiantly socialist” Cuba, resistant to globalization and achieving “a deeper reality of organic relationship among writers, state, publishers, and readers” (180). The authors do not, however, acknowledge that the Feria’s success stems from cultural values (e.g. reading, appreciation of the arts, learning of the foreign) inculcated by the state through decades of control and isolation. The fair, including its selection of books, is itself strictly controlled by the government. In effect, Kapcia and Kumaraswami are correct in that it is an effective tool of local identity, and, I would add, nation building.

I expected Fernández L’Hoeste to similarly celebrate Colombia’s efforts to implement Bogotá’s more-or-less successful mass transit system in other cities, such as Cartagena, Barranquilla, Cali, Medellín, among others. However, Fernández argues that the exportation of the mass transit model functions as a hegemonic reorganization of public space. Though Fernández references ways in which mass transit is intertwined with key aspects of urban life, such as the structure of the labor force, he falls short of substantiating his bold claim that a homogenization of Colombia’s urban mass transit systems will “standardize urban experience throughout the national territory” (161). Fernández’s other critiques leveled at the TransMilenio system—such as its socioeconomically lopsided benefits, courting to the needs of the wealthy, or its disavowal of some place-specific transportation needs—warrant attention, but its impact on inhabitants’ negotiation of identity (165) requires further evidence. An explanatory model that demonstrates how the mass transit system impacts urbanites’ sense of place, belonging, and group affinities (i.e. identity) would have strengthened Fernández’s claim of the TransMilenio project’s hegemonic manipulation of the masses.

Throughout this volume, the authors generally make assumptions about the impact of the object of analysis on citizens’ identities, without exploring the processes by which this might happen. Abril Trigo’s

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<sup>2</sup> This statement is a bit at odds with Moore’s chapter, which insinuates that Havana has long had a vibrant popular music scene. More accurately, Kapcia and Kumaraswami refer to past *state* neglect of Havana as an urban cultural space.

“Afterword” offers a theory of identity formation that would seemingly compensate for this lack. However, Trigo’s chapter sits incongruously alongside the preceding thirteen. In his ambitious theorization of the contemporary urban condition, Trigo synthesizes an eclectic and sometimes dizzying array of the twentieth century’s most influential social thinkers (postmodern mainstays ranging from Althusser to Lacan to Bourdieu to Harvey). Trigo depicts subject-formation primarily defined at once by libidinal consumption practices—integrally shaped by the regimes of capital accumulation we refer to as globalization—and by the dialectics of social praxis and the exercise of memory. I do not do justice to Trigo’s essay here; it should be read on its own terms. And this is precisely my point: though Trigo refers to the other essays in the volume, he does not illuminate them. His sophisticated rendering of modern subjectivity lacks historical and cultural particularity, thereby making it a theory about nowhere and no one in particular. Whereas the reference to Latin America is a unifying feature of the thirteen preceding chapters—the authors think and interpret their objects of analysis through the lens of the concept of Latin America—there is nothing particularly ‘Latin American’ about Trigo’s essay.

Moreover, Trigo’s emphasis on “alienating work and alienating consumption” (200) disregards the rich examples of meaningful cultural production described in nearly every chapter. Even when belonging to the country’s nation-building or cultural elites, even when undeniably and inevitably influenced by the “urbanized global experience” (1), the artists, practices, and events described in this volume are entangled in and products of particular place-based experiences.

On the whole, the topics and arguments of the volume’s individual contributions are easily accessible to a wide, non-expert audience. This book would appeal to those interested in examples of symbolic representations of the city (especially in film, literature, music, and art) in Latin/o American contexts. I recommend approaching this volume *à la carte*; readers would gain the most by choosing individual chapters according to their topics of interest.