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Cultures of the City: Mediating Identities in Urban Latin/o America (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), pp. vi+262, \$25.95, pb.**

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Richard Young and Amanda Holmes (eds.), *Cultures of the City: Mediating Identities in Urban Latin/o America* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), pp. vi + 262, \$25.95, pb.

This book is a collection of 12 articles focusing mostly on cultural representations of the Latin American city in film, music, books, photographs, the plastic arts and the news media, covering Havana, Buenos Aires, Mexico City, Lima, Asunción, Bogotá, Recife and Salvador, as well as Latino life in Detroit and Los Angeles. While the editors in the introduction and the author of the theoretical afterword try valiantly, and in my view unsuccessfully, to tie these diverse works together, there are some real connections running through the book. I would characterise the dominant theme as the politics of urban representation, particularly struggles over the right to representation, or the silencing of less powerful groups and uncomfortable realities that are invisible in hegemonic representations.

In one of the stronger pieces Gisela Cánepa discusses struggles over the identity of the historic centre of Lima. When Alberto Fujimori came to power in 1991 he sought to depoliticise downtown Lima by removing street vendors and prohibiting public assemblies in the name of a neoliberal city marketing and tourism development programme. The colonial and republican periods were privileged in the restoration and elites claimed the centre with events that celebrated their *criollo* heritage, excluding Andean immigrants who are antithetical to their desired image of Lima. But immigrant groups are increasingly redefining the historic centre and performing their citizenship by carrying out religious processions that follow syncretic traditions brought from their home towns. Their lively folkloric parades have gained legitimacy because they attract tourist revenue.

A pair of collections of urban chronicles and photographs analysed by Amanda Holmes show how elites in Asunción also prefer nostalgia for an imagined European city to a less heroic indigenous present and uncomfortable aspects of the past. Also concerned about who or what is silenced in dominant representations, Catherine Benamou discusses the invisibility of Latino Detroit in the local and national media, and Angela Prysthon discusses the rise of Recife and Salvador in Brazilian cinema, which present a different view of Brazil from that of the dominant branch of the film industry based in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo.

Andrea Noble's Mexico City has much in common with Cánepa's Lima. National capitals have symbolic importance as centres of the nation. A heroic indigenous past is part of the national narrative constructed in the wake of the Mexican revolution and symbolically inscribed in the capital's 'state-sanctified spaces of civic ritual'. But the indigenous present is still incongruous in modern Mexico City, as Zapatista visits made clear on several occasions between 1999 and 2006. Noble discusses the Zapatistas' use of photo opportunities in Mexico City, particularly during the Zapatista referendum of 1999, to draw attention to that contradiction, playing on layers of heavily charged symbolism in their quest for social justice and 'ethnic citizenship'.

There are parallels between Noble's piece and Anny Brooksbank-Jones' account of Teresa Margolles' 'body art' in Mexico City. Another corner-stone of Mexican national identity is a colourful and folkloric relationship with death, and, like Noble, Brooksbank-Jones gives an interesting account of the history of Mexican myth-making during the revolutionary period. Margolles works in the city morgue and uses shocking

'neoconceptual' art installations based on body parts to confront national mythology with the real-life culture of violence in Mexico City.

Another case of uncomfortable urban realities that are generally excluded from representation is Robin Moore's account of the politics of Cuban music. Through the subtleties of his lyrics and musical form, Nueva Trova composer Gerardo Alfonso has managed to outmanoeuvre the authorities, who control access to music venues, radio stations and record labels in Cuba, to discuss aspects of everyday life in Havana that are normally silenced: prostitution, the contradictions of tourism, food shortages and a lack of intellectual freedom.

While Moore tells us about the evolution of the politics of music during the revolutionary period, Kaptcia and Kumaraswami tell a parallel story about the politics of book fairs in Revolutionary Cuba, which have developed in the context of changing attitudes toward Havana. The revolution was based in the countryside and fought in the name of the peasants. Havana was seen as corrupt and imperialist, and so left to deteriorate. Only after 1981 with the designation of old Havana as a World Heritage Site did Havana begin to be the focus for cultural institutions such as the FERIA del Libro. But these pieces (like the pair on Mexico City and the pair on Buenos Aires) could do better in speaking to one another. While Moore sees Havana as a 'discursive battleground of representation', analysing the politics of lyrics and musical styles, one wonders about the ideological struggles in the pages of the books so hungrily consumed at the FERIA del Libro. And while Kaptcia and Kumaraswami do interviews and ethnographic research to make arguments about the meaning of literature consumption, Moore does not give the reader much idea of how the music of Gerardo Alfonso is received by Havana residents.

This brings me to my main disappointment with the book. The quotes on the back cover make strong claims about the book bridging the gap between the humanities and the social sciences. The editors and some of the authors make the same claim, if not as strongly. While the editors criticise books that 'fall squarely on one side or the other of the social sciences/humanities divide', and claim that half the contributions analyse particular artistic representations of the city while the other half examine the real city, this is really a humanities book that dabbles in the social sciences. Judging from contributor biographies, the vast majority of the authors are from the humanities, and by my accounting seven of the chapters exist entirely in the world of representations, at most applying urban and spatial theory to the imaginary world of a novel or film. The other five step beyond that world to greater or lesser degrees but are still centred on cultural products. Only two – Benamou on Detroit, and Kaptcia and Kumaraswami on the FERIA del Libro – are explicitly the result of social science research.

This book would have made a much more important contribution toward challenging disciplinary boundaries if the authors had truly embraced the arguments of Lefebvre, cited in several of the texts, that spaces of the city are the product of the *relationship* between representations and practices, and had explored the way the lyrics of a song, for example, both reflect and influence the way we think about and thus act in the city. Despite this missed opportunity, and the normal lack of coherence and mixed quality of the contributions in an edited volume such as this, several of these pieces will be useful for scholars with particular urban cultural interests.