

Beal, Sophia. *Brazil under Construction: Fiction and Public Works*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Beal's excellent monograph exemplifies well an important socio-demographic point about Latin America and a concomitant one regarding cultural studies relating to Latin America. The socio-demographic point is that Latin America is now a continent of major metropolitan areas, of veritable megalopolises, which are mainly the capitals of the individual countries (Brazil is, of course, the major exception). One leaves to the historical demographers the elaboration of theses as regards to how and why this has happened, but the simple fact is that the overwhelming majority of Latin American countries require defining in terms of these often vast cities and what that means for local economies, political processes, and cultural institutions. The Argentines say that God is everywhere, but he only holds office hours in Buenos Aires, a piece of wit that is perhaps unfair to the real human life that goes on outside of Buenos Aires and the whole range of non-Porteño cultural production, but it captures well the way in which globalization has also meant the emergence of national overarching urban centers. One of the nicknames provincials have for Santiago de Chile, Santiasco (*asco* = something disgusting), sums up the often difficult relationship between center and periphery in Latin America.

The concomitant point is that Brazilian cultural studies, both that signed by Brazilians and that signed by their American and other foreign counterparts, is increasingly interested in the relationship between the megalopolis (for it is the monster cities that most fascinate) and cultural production. It is not so much a matter of the fact that production, distribution, and consumption of culture necessarily takes place in these centers; after all, one can easily point out classical works that continue to sell well even when their focus is not the contemporary urban phenomenon (e.g., Jorge Amado's Bahia is hardly the modern city). Rather, it is the fact that the geometric growth of Latin American cities (often the result of internal as much as continental and international migration into them) provides complex new themes of lived human experience that culture is designed to address. Cultural criticism is now examining with increasing interest the urban cultural production that has come so much to the fore in the past generation.

Beal's book exemplifies well both these points, in her attention to the phenomenon of urban growth in the several Brazilian cities that exemplify so strikingly the urban turn: the legendary symbol that is Rio de Janeiro; São Paulo, the continent's first industrial center and current financial center; Brasília, the overnight sensation of the new capital built in the middle of nowhere and now a major urban phenomenon, just as it was intended to be. (The Argentines toyed in the 1980s with moving their capital south to the port city of Viedma, but one balks at attempting to imagine a Brasília-like phenomenon taking place in that remote corner of the province of Buenos Aires.)

Beal's specific focus in her study is the organizing concept of public works: lighting in particular, but other infrastructure issues necessarily—and necessarily carried out mostly by public initiative—to create nineteenth-century urban modernity. One can easily inventory the other sorts of public and semi-public phenomena necessary for modernity, such as efficient food distribution, organized commerce, systematic education, multiple transportation networks: all of these brought with them prominent material manifestations (e.g., the Central Market, the Municipal Train Station). But the lighting of the city was a literally visible seal of modernity and, as a man-made phenomenon, countered the dusk-to-dawn limitations of received nature.

Two things flow, in terms of the traces of these projects of modernity, in cultural production. One is the material presence of the modern city of visible public works as part of the narrative backdrop of texts: the trappings of the city show up in the frame of photographs or artwork, the characters in novels flee by car through illuminated streets, poetry is not only written sitting in a bar or at a café table, but the existential ambience of those locales may be directly evoked by the words and texture of the poems themselves. Secondly, the texts may actually address, as themes in a basic way, the material parameters of the city, such as the textile factory in Patrícia Galvão's proletarian novel, *Parque industrial* (1933) or the imposing Copan commercial and residential building in Regina Rheda's *Arco sem Noé* (1994).

I mention the foregoing examples as part of the larger context, not as the works Beal discusses. Her choices range over a respectable inventory of Brazilian writing and filmmaking: more than the highly selective case study examples

on which I focused in studying São Paulo, but certainly not so many as to make her volume a survey with little room for close textual analysis. Beal does deal in detail with specific texts, and this makes her work definitely an example of intelligent cultural studies rather than a socio-historic overview. I particularly liked her concluding examination of the short fiction of Férrez and Luis Rufati's collections of short fiction in which the grand dreams of Brazilian urban modernity have become transformed into the grotesque apocalypses of contemporary São Paulo.

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