

Book Review

Beal, Sophia. *The Art of Brasília: 2000-2019*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

The central argument of *The Art of Brasília: 2000-2019*, Sophia Beal's second book and second contribution to Palgrave Macmillan's New Directions in Latino American Cultures series, is to correct what Beal considers the outdated reputation of Brasília as a cultural wasteland. While many artists and scholars have contemplated the birth and infancy of the national capital Juscelino Kubitschek ordered built from scratch in a mere few years (construction began in 1956 and the city was inaugurated in 1960), Beal points out the lack of scholarship dedicated to how Brasília and its art scene have evolved in the twenty-first century. *The Art of Brasília* offers readers an upbeat update to a conversation that has predominantly focused on the ways Brasília has failed to serve as the shining example of equity and modernity its designers intended it to be. Here Beal argues that over the past two decades Brasília's artists have had substantial success in humanizing and democratizing the capital, often critiqued as soulless and segregated along socioeconomic and racial lines, by creating art rooted in a sense of place and geared toward sharing counter-hegemonic perspectives and bringing about positive social change in the city.

Beal is a literary and cultural scholar whose published work to date has primarily dealt with questions concerning public space and urban development in Brazil. *The Art of Brasília* is thematically linked to her first book, *Brazil under Construction: Fiction and Public Works* (2013), in which she analyzes literary representations of massive construction projects undertaken by the Brazilian government since the beginning of the twentieth century. *Brazil under Construction* includes a chapter devoted to literature narrating the construction of Brasília and life in the early days of the new capital's existence. *The Art of Brasília* therefore functions in part as a continuation and expansion of this facet of Beal's research.

In addition to shifting the conversation on Brasília temporally, from its foundation and early years to its more recent past and present, *The Art of Brasília*

also achieves a spatial shift from the wealthy, centrally-located Pilot Plan toward the surrounding working-class administrative regions of the city and the art its residents have produced. Doing so allows Beal to analyze a broader range of art forms and artistic voices. The book includes chapters dedicated to João Almino's novel *Cidade Livre* (2010); poet Nicholas Behr's multimedial text *Brasília-Z: cidade-palavra* (2014); Adirley Queirós's film *Branco sai, preto fica* (2014); the capital's many forms of verse competition; the work of black contemporary Brasília poets Kika Sena, Marcos Fabrício Lopes da Silva, Nanda Fer Pimenta, Katiana Souto, Meimei Bastos and Tatiana Nascimento; and the cultural magazine *Traços* (2015-present) and its showcasing of the city's street art. Beal deftly maneuvers between different art forms and areas of study, demonstrating at the start of each chapter a firm grasp of key scholarship and theoretical concepts prior to delving into her analysis.

In order to discuss such a wide array of contemporary Brasília art, Beal must first provide a methodological framework for her study as well as a historical context, which she lays out in the first and second chapters of her book. The opening chapter locates Beal's research within the realm of urban studies; Beal draws on the theories of Michel de Certeau, Henri Lefebvre, Doreen Massey, and James Holston, among others, to create a conceptual framework for her analysis. Building on Lefebvre's concept of "the right to the city," Beal invents her own term, "the creative right to the city," which she conceives as "citizens' ability to (1) have public space be a site where they can come together to enjoy and make art and (2) represent their city publicly via the arts" (17). This idea connects the diverse artists whose work she considers; despite their different backgrounds, each strives to reshape imaginaries of Brasília according to their own personal perspective on the city. Most of the artists appearing in *The Art of Brasília* participate in moments of creative communion, transforming the way public spaces throughout the capital are perceived and used. The second chapter provides an admirably succinct summary of Brasília's complex history, and would make for a wonderful introduction to the city for undergraduate or graduate students.

The Art of Brasília's most enthralling chapter may very well be the seventh, in which Beal analyzes the poems and artisan chapbooks of six present-day young black Brasília poets, most of whom are women and several of whom identify as LGBTQ+. Here Beal's analytical prowess shines especially bright, as

she invents the concept of “insurgent books”—borrowing from Holston’s idea of insurgent citizenship—to describe the role that creating physical books plays in these poets’ struggle to assert their right to occupy space in the literary sphere as well as the city in which they live. According to Beal, these poets achieve their goals via the combined tactics of written poetry and spoken performance by blurring the lines between entrepreneurship and artistry. Beal provides deep analyses of select poems, pointing out how they denounce normalized hegemonic violence, celebrate nonconformity, and reimagine, resignify and reclaim public space (171).

Every chapter in *The Art of Brasília* consists of a well-wrought, concise examination of the cultural production of a particular contemporary Brasília artist or group of artists. Beal has written a well-balanced and absorbing book, and its variety of perspectives and mediums assures that it will contain something of interest to anyone who studies Brasília or contemporary urban Brazil in general. *The Art of Brasília* goes a long way toward filling the gap in scholarship on Brazil’s third-largest metropolis, providing a microphone for counter-hegemonic artistic voices active in the political center of the country.

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