

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

DE BARROS, JUANITA, *Order and Place in a Colonial City: Patterns of Struggle and Resistance in Georgetown, British Guiana, 1889-1924*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press. 2002. 0-7735-2455-X. 251 p. Index.

In *Order and Place in a Colonial City*, Juanita De Barros does an excellent job of documenting and contextualizing social conflicts situated in the changing landscape of colonial Georgetown, British Guiana. The core theme of the volume centers on elite attempts at enforcing their notions of 'order' versus the rituals of resistance of the non-white urban poor. De Barros seeks to remedy what she identifies as a major gap in the historiography of the Caribbean: the relegation of urban life to the margins of historical inquiry, stemming from what she acknowledges as an understandable fixation with plantation history amongst historians of the Caribbean. Indeed, comparatively little has been published on urban social spaces in the Caribbean, and not because such spaces do not exist or have no significance to the populations of the territories concerned. Researchers interested in achieving a more rounded appreciation of the social and cultural history of the colonial Caribbean should benefit from the materials in this volume. On the other hand, the main themes of the text will be familiar to those who are already well versed in the history of social conflict and cultural resistance in the Caribbean.

De Barros has conducted an impressive range of research across numerous archives and libraries in the search for new urban paradigms that reflect wider Guyanese and West Indian patterns. Overall, the volume is written in a fluid and accessible style that most readers will appreciate. The author excels at bringing to life events recorded in static documents, whether these concern market activity or street gangs. De Barros' chapter on a topic that less skilled writers might have rendered insipid—hawkers and the milk industry—is instead finely textured and quite engaging.

Early on in the volume, the author establishes cultural creolization, respectability, reputation, hegemony and resistance as central themes of the text, especially in seeing urban spaces as intimately tied with Creole cultural productions. De Barros' approach involves a focus on images of self and other played out through narratives and social engagements with the city. She also takes us through an economic history of Guyana, outlining industrial shifts, the growth of the urban middle class, political organization, and the growth of Georgetown with the decline of the sugar industry. One of the recurring cultural themes of the text is the link

between sanitation, modernity and civilization in the eyes of the elites, and their link between dirt and immorality. “Sanitarian discourse”, as De Barros calls it, often drawing on the work of Mary Douglas, is a prominent feature of the volume and occupies a large part of two of the seven chapters. To a lesser degree, the author reintroduces “respectability” and “reputation” as the two contending principles of Caribbean cultural life, drawing on the work of Peter Wilson.

While one might assume that a focus on the history of a city might have tied in with larger interests in “space and place” in contemporary cultural theory, this volume tends to cast the cityscape (a term also used by De Barros) as a somewhat inanimate container or utilitarian platform for unfolding social events. The focus of the volume is on the *use* of public spaces in creating a public sphere—this emphasis is decidedly distinct from one that sees public spaces as both outcome and medium of social relations. As a result, we do not really appreciate how public spaces themselves further conditioned, shaped or informed public action. While the introductory chapter provides a brief synopsis of some of the theoretical contributions of Gramsci, Eagleton, Raymond Williams and Habermas, description throughout the volume—while exceedingly well written and structured—tends to progress without an overt theoretical framework. Sometimes the theoretical shortcomings of the text may be apparent in the somewhat unconvincing use of “play” as a concept that covers all manner of social conflict, including lethal confrontations with a high body count.

This volume, like any other, cannot be everything to everyone. Nevertheless, certain absences in the text are striking and needed to be justified. The author’s focus on “creolization” really involves only four of the many ethnic groups of Guyana: Africans, East Indians, Portuguese and Anglo-Europeans. Though the author’s lists of population statistics clearly indicate the presence of other ethnic groups in the city—such as Amerindians—the opportunity to provide a unique insight into a totally neglected area of Caribbean research (e.g. urban aboriginals) is thereby lost. More striking is the complete absence of any discussion of architecture—the physical and aesthetic setting and expression that is symbolic of social and cultural history. There are numerous photographic images of buildings and streets throughout the volume, but these are not integrated with the text, apparently serving an illustrative function alone. With the many strengths of this volume taken into account, it is not so much the history of a city as it is the history of class struggle in a particular urban location.

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