

Book Reviews

Gandolfo, Daniella (2009) *The City at Its Limits: Taboo, Transgression, and Urban Renewal in Lima*, University of Chicago Press (Chicago, IL), ix + 288 pp. \$60.00 hbk, \$22.00 pbk.

Within the growing body of recent ethnographic studies on Peru, there is a notable scarcity of work on contemporary life in the capital, Lima, especially in English. A welcome addition is Daniella Gandolfo's recent book, *The City at Its Limits*, which uses a particular transgressive moment during a 1996 public protest (in which female street sweepers stripped naked in public view) to explore the tensions and contradictions underlying municipal campaigns for urban renewal in the historic city centre. The administration of Alberto Andrade, Mayor of Metropolitan Lima (1996–2002), serves as the backdrop to the book and offers a distinct perspective for understanding the authoritarian governance of President Alberto Fujimori (1990–2000) by highlighting the contentious relationships between the national government and Lima's mayoral government.

The City at Its Limits is skilfully written, using an unconventional style that alternates between four 'diary' chapters and three theoretical 'essay' chapters. The backbone of the book comes from the essay chapters, titled simply 'beauty', 'filth', and 'nakedness'.

Perhaps the greatest strength of this book is the way in which Gandolfo creatively uses the literatures on these theoretical themes to draw significant links between architectural and human beauty, cleanliness, and orderliness. The links are not always direct or explicit, but subtly woven between and through the essay and diary chapters. The chapter on 'beauty' begins the inquiry by bringing colonial concepts of civilisation and social order to bear on an important discussion about how principles of urban planning and renewal can become tools of social repression and exclusion. Changing ideals of social organisation and spatial separation are then examined through 'filth' in a chapter outlining how perceptions of urban (and moral) cleanliness have become entwined with debates over public health. The final essay chapter explores how public nakedness can at times serve as an act of violence that strips individuals of their personhood, while at other times public nakedness – such as voluntary nakedness in protest – can serve as 'an act of aggression against society' (p. 207).

Most of the ethnographic descriptions and analytical discussions concerning the historical events motivating the book – Andrade's 'recuperation' programmes and the struggles between the municipality and the semi-autonomous urban cleaning services – are found not within the essay chapters but within the 'diary' chapters. These chapters read as creative imaginations (the author describes them as 'fictions') through which she hopes to illuminate the book's themes and simultaneously to capture (and 'perform') her own subjectivity as a researcher. They bring an intimacy to the conceptualisations of taboo, not so much through ethnographic accounts of *others* but through poignant forays into the author's *own* intimate moments (going to the morgue with a distant cousin, for example, or seeing her mother naked after reconstructive breast surgery). Unlike traditional academic writing, and also unlike typical diaries, these chapters continuously intersperse the 'diary' moments with long and footnoted theoretical discussions. In all, these 'diary' chapters recreate something of the author's intellectual journey and firmly position the book within a narrative of returning to 'home' (in this case to the author's native Lima) to conduct research.

The book's richness in detail emerges primarily from a careful combination of historical writings (such as Spanish chronicles), recent archival research (especially media of the 1990s), and social theory (principally Georges Bataille), with each essay chapter moving all the way from Peru's colonial history into the contemporary moment. This richness is not consistently matched, however, through ethnographic description. The book's ethnographic components primarily emphasise intimate events that changed the author's own perspective, and her friends and family are featured throughout. While these examples support the book's theoretical themes, they do not reliably shed light on the key historical events that otherwise define the book's storyline or illustrate the broader social and political context. Two excellent (though isolated) descriptions of formal meetings the author held – one with Mayor Andrade and one with a woman who stripped naked during the 1996 protests – reveal precisely how powerful it could be to incorporate more current ethnographic narratives involving other individuals and communities. For example, ethnographic discussions of the complex relationships between different organisations of municipal workers and street cleaners, or the broader positioning of these organisations and their protests during the Fujimori years, would have been welcome additions.

In juxtaposing the ideology behind the urban renewal projects of Mayor Andrade with the social and cultural significance of the public display of nakedness during protest, *The City at Its Limits* offers a novel approach to theoretical considerations of ideologies of urban order, of norms and transgressions. The book is innovative in both

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its writing and theoretical approach, and will be of particular interest to scholars of Latin American cities and to others interested in innovative styles of anthropological writing.

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