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In recent historical accounts, city walls are more than markers of spatial division: interpreted as meaningful structures, they can tell us a lot about the societies that plan and erect them, write on them and about them, or demolish them. In her innovative and intellectually stimulating account, Guadalupe García, Associate Professor at Tulane University in New Orleans, understands the fortifications of colonial Havana “as a metaphor for the ways in which Spanish dominion unfolded in the region; their multiple and changing functions reveal the intricacies and transformations of colonial rule over centuries of Spanish government” — and, in fact, beyond (p. 7). Drawing on research in archives and libraries in Cuba, Spain, and the United States, García analyses colonial forms of urban governance across the longue durée in the Spanish Empire’s most important Caribbean port city. García uses the walls as an entry point into an analysis of urban colonial spatial and racial segregation. Scholars have often narrated the history of Havana as a ‘Spanish’ or ‘criollo’ urban space, a “‘Latin American’” or possibly even European „exception in an otherwise Atlantic and Caribbean region” (p. 11) — and thus, in effect, as a ‘white’ city. García, in contrast, situates the port city within Atlantic history, emphasizing the black presence in this urban space — and the spatial and cultural manifestations of a colonial politics of exclusion.

Garcia opens her book with a „ground-breaking event“ (p. 1): the city walls’ demolition in 1863. The fortifications had divided the city into the what then were the dense intramuros with its narrow alleyways, and the open space of the extramuros. Yet the walls signified more than that. Partly prompted by the city’s 1555 invasion by the French corsair Jacques de Sores, in the late sixteenth century colonial officials had begun designing a city to „ exclude and protect“ (p. 3). The walls enclosed a space through which Spanish colonial commerce flowed and where its wealth was concentrated. Auspiciously situated, Havana’s natural harbor quickly became the gathering point of Spanish galleons on their return trip to the imperial metropole, packed with the silver and gold extracted from the colonial possessions on the Latin American mainland. The empire legitimated its rule through urban form — and the port city Havana, formed by the flows of colonial commerce and power, was a prime example for this process.

The walls as they first emerged in a 1603 plan by Cristóbal de Roda, about a decade after Havana had officially been recognized as a city by Philipp II, created the distinction between the carefully planned grid that the intramuros were to become and the extramuros. Havana’s fringe was also not the Cuban countryside where slaves worked the sugar and tobacco plantations: a blank space on de Roda’s map, the extramuros became a liminal border zone. The conceptual distinction between the „two Havanas“ (p. 34) already well formulated in the early seventeenth century, it took until the final decades of the century for this vision to materialize in stone: after a convoluted process, the walls were completed in 1680. However, the extramuros were „outside the city but within the empire“ (p. 45) — and, as the city was expanding, became a space of colonial planning. As García shows, the many projects for colonial reform across the eighteenth century, and particularly after the British occupation of the city in 1763, in­verted the relationship: now the open space of the extramuros, was where grand boulevards could be constructed, where white well-to-do habaneros promenaded, and hence where ‘civilization’ thrived. The intramuros, in contrast, were increasingly associated with racial mixing and disease, result of the lurid sanitary conditions in the walled city.

An 1807 edict unified the city’s urban legal body: colonial planners stopped distinguishing between intramuros and extramuros. Stimulated by the massive growth of colonial census taking and record keep-

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1 See Tracey, James D. (Hrsg.), City Walls. The Urban Enceinte in Global Perspective, Cambridge 2000, here esp. part III.
ing, this rendered residents on both sides of the walls “hypervisible” (p. 126) as objects of urban planning. Hygiene measures and urban infrastructures were conceived to enable a new topography and ‘orderly’ mobility beyond the walls. Yet, as in the preceding century, new forms of urban governance entailed new forms of racial segregation. Since the late eighteenth century, the sugar industry was booming, increasing the demand for enslaved laborers. In the nineteenth century, slavery was declining, while the population of Cubans of African descent, free and enslaved, was growing; a black bourgeoisie was also emerging by mid-century. Perceived as a threat by what was now the white minority, colonial regulations constrained the access of Cubans of African descent to housing and jobs in the city. Alongside, urban cultural forms also reacted to black mobility. Figurations performed in blackface and blackvoice showcased “who would be excluded from the emerging society” (p. 125). Only towards the end of the century was ‘Cubanness’ not principally imagined in opposition to ‘blackness’ – an effect of black Cubans’ leading role in the independence struggle.

The dwindling legitimacy of colonial rule was also a result of transnational transformations concentrated in Havana. Steamships brought evermore immigrants and tourists to the city; American visitors were startled by the proximity of “el elemento civilizado”, embodied by a ‘refined’ habanero upper-class, and the poverty and disease defining the poorer urban quarters. The idea of civilization, García shows, allowed for competing visions of the city’s and Cuba’s future, reformist visions intended to buttress colonial presence as well as visions of Cuba libre. The actual fighting during the Cuban wars of independence was concentrated in eastern Cuba, but the politics of reconcentración, the re-settlement of rural populations to the island’s western cities, decisively changed the demographics of Havana. This perceived ruralization was also falsely associated with the diseases that infested the city, thought to have been brought there by migrants from the countryside. In effect, Havana ceased to be perceived as an exemplary space of colonial urban governance, further delegitimizing Spanish rule. American interventionism in Cuba solidified with the 1898 occupation. However, it was not the caesura as which scholars often depict it, García argues: after the end of Spanish colonial rule, foreign imperial presence was still legitimized through urban governance, and the “degree” (Ann Laura Stoler) of Cuban sovereignty was still a matter of debate.

García’s rich and thought-provoking offers a lot for scholars working in different fields. It revises the view of urban Latin American as a “world without walls” (Richard Kagan); the inclusion of port cities like Havana reveals a more nuanced picture. García is rightly cautious of applying models drawn from European urban history to her case. However, the Latin American historian’s subtle study of this walled yet open urban space invites comparisons to colonial and port cities around the globe. García’s sensitive reading of the walls as part of a wider cultural and social history of segregation in the Cuban capital and major Caribbean port is a major addition to the historiographies of Latin America, of port cities, and to the wider field of global urban history.


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