

***Contested Histories in Public Space: Memory, Race, and Nation.* Daniel J. Walkowitz and Lisa Maya Knauer, eds. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009. 376 pp.\***

Reviewed by Matthew Pratt Guterl

In early 2002, when I last visited Havana, I went with students to the Casa de Africa, an official site warmly commemorating the contributions of African culture, and especially religious practice, to Cuban history. Two things stand out: I remember a giant “Indian”—complete with feathered headdress—in the front foyer, a dissonant, silent figure; and I recall that when we asked if our students might later be taken to a few of the principal historical sites of the local slave trade in the 19th century, we were promptly told that we had “slaves on the brain.” Some public spaces, it seemed, were more officially sanctioned than others.

I thought of that long-ago trip after reading Lisa Maya Knauer’s insightful contribution to this rich and interesting volume. But Knauer’s essay on the Casa de Africa is just one of many challenging provocations here. *Contested Histories in Public Space: Memory, Race, and Nation*, co-edited by Knauer and Daniel J. Walkowitz, presents itself as a radical history of the relation between public space, commemorative practice, and “official” narratives of empire and nationalism. The book is global, though not comparative; 13 essays cover a wide range of public sites—from Cuba to New Zealand and Paris to South Africa—where the narrative offered by the state is generally transformed, challenged, or directly recast by subordinate or subaltern groups. In short, this is less a public history, and more a critique of public history’s default support of the official narrative. The contributors are well chosen, the essays unusually consistent, and the topics, juxtaposed rather than braided, convey precisely what the editors hoped for: that public spaces are used, abused, and “contested,” perhaps especially when the subject turns to the commemoration of empire, no matter where they are.

*Contested Histories in Public Space* is matched, though it has a slightly different emphasis, with the editors’ previously published *Memory and the Impact of Political Transformation in Public Space* (Walkowitz and Knauer, eds. 2004). Together, the two volumes establish public space as a singular artifact of the postcolonial world, but they also destabilize the idea of a singular “public,” choosing instead to describe “multiple publics with divergent and often competing interests and different stakes” (2009:3). In a welcome turn, both volumes diminish the place of the United States. The first collection set it aside completely, leaving it an “absent presence” (Walkowitz and Knauer, eds. 2004:15). The second includes an essay on Ellis Island and another on the Alamo, two decidedly transnational switching points for the histories of empire, immigration, and memory. The overall effect of this diminishment is a bit like stepping out of the shadow of a building to view something in sunlight—everything looks simultaneously breathtaking and unsurprising. Readers of *Contested Histories* should, to be frank, pick up a copy of the first volume too, since they are dialectically engaged and share an interest in establishing public space as an object of radical historical inquiry.

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Like its predecessor, *Contested Histories* emerged, by and large, from a series of initiatives in the *Radical History Review*. But despite their oft-repeated significance in the Introduction and elsewhere as “radical,” the essays—and the editors—routinely emphasize the uneven struggle over public space and commemoration with a welcome overabundance of nuance. There are very few clichés here. The familiar series of dyads—good/bad, indigenous/imperial, and privileged/peripheral—are generally absent, as the editors and the authors delve deeper into more troublesome, but equally rich territory. Essays on the Voortrekker Monument, on British representations of Asia in museums, on a French plaque installed in honor of a Guadeloupian hero, and other similar topics are subtly drawn and complex, rich with historical detail. At its best, the volume seems like a decidedly “glocal” project, as much a contribution to method as to subject, as interested in resolving what Thomas Holt (1995) once called “the levels problem” as it is in a specific clutch of sites. It is sure to have a powerful impact on the way we think about the struggle over space and representation in the dusk of older empires and in the dawn of newer ones.

## References Cited

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