

Wall, Cynthia. *The Literary and Cultural Spaces of Restoration London*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Pp. xviii, 277. 28 halftone illustrations. US\$59.95 (cloth)

Ruth McClelland-Nugent

Volume 28, numéro 1, octobre 1999

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1016566ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1016566ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (imprimé)

1918-5138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

McClelland-Nugent, R. (1999). Compte rendu de [Wall, Cynthia. *The Literary and Cultural Spaces of Restoration London*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Pp. xviii, 277. 28 halftone illustrations. US\$59.95 (cloth)]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 28(1), 70–71. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1016566ar>

— *In the Web of Class: Delinquents and Reformers in Boston, 1810s–1930s* (1992)— regarding human agency.

As a broad treatment of youth gangs in New York City from the 1940s to the mid-1960s, this study introduces us to neighbourhoods where gangs proliferated, elucidating rituals and behaviour of gang members, including the relationship of gangs to bop culture, and explaining how boys eventually left the fold. He further examines the racism and liberalism in the reaction of authorities to the young men and their menacing presence. Finally he discusses the decline of postwar youth gangs in the 1960s and the resurgence of a different kind of youth gang in the 1970s.

The most important contribution is an analysis of what caused youth gang formation in the early postwar period and what defined youth gangs. In Chapter I, "Remaking New York," Schneider introduces us to the transformations affecting New York City in the 1940s and 1950s. Four key socio-economic factors coalesced to disadvantage working-class New Yorkers. The first was the shrinking of the city's manufacturing sector, which might have absorbed the city's youth in these years. In NYC's racial and ethnically based economy the loss of manufacturing jobs and the economic shift toward the service sector hit African American and Puerto Rican youth hardest. The second factor, the migration of African Americans and Puerto Ricans to NYC, was important because of the youthfulness of these migrants. Overcrowding in poor areas of the city and limited recreational resources, coupled with poor employment prospects for young people, contributed to gang development as adolescent boys fought to maintain control of recreational centres and to defend their neighbourhoods which they perceived as threatened by newcomers. The third factor was urban renewal, which produced new highways and public housing and redevelopment projects, but aggravated conditions for the poor and rewrote ethnic boundaries to produce tension among urban youth in racially segregated areas. Lastly, suburbanization drew the middle class out of the city, leaving behind housing problems that were not politically important enough for policy makers and politicians. Suburbanization or "white flight" led to rapid ethnic succession in several Manhattan neighbourhoods in the early postwar period. The impact of these transformations was further racial and class marginalization, especially for Puerto Ricans and African Americans. While such changes affected all age groups of the poor, according to Schneider, the ramifications for young men were particularly serious.

Schneider explores race, ethnicity and defense of territory in Chapters II–IV, showing that ethnic or racial identity and neighbourhood alone did not explain why young men formed gangs or fought each other. As he illustrates in "Defending Place," ethnicity held symbolic meaning for these youths when they employed a language of ethnic exclusivity, even though gangs were not ethnically homogeneous and gangs of similar ethnic or racial makeup fought each other. Beyond race and ethnicity, Schneider would like us to consider the role of masculinity in the formation and behaviour of gangs.

In the context of postwar New York, poor Puerto Rican, African- and European-American adolescent males had restricted means of creating a masculine identity. It is here that Schneider illustrates the agency of impoverished adolescent boys. As products of mid-twentieth-century economic and social conditions that closed off legitimate avenues for manhood, this generation of adolescents sought out gangs as a way to forge a masculine identity and gain "power, prestige and female adulation." (107) Using gang members' autobiographies, interviews with former members, and gang workers' notes, Schneider is able to explore the central role that masculinity played in these gangs. Schneider is undoubtedly correct in asserting the importance of masculinity; however, as an analytical tool masculinity here is under-utilized, leaving the impression that masculinity is simply an explanation for and description of young men acting tough. As an explanation for rape and murder, masculinity is unsatisfactory. Schneider might have shown us how masculinity, like other identities, is historically specific and relational. We also need to know more about the girls associated with gangs; Schneider might have found Anne Campbell's *The Girls in the Gang* especially helpful.

In writing a book that looks across youth gangs, Schneider has emphasized the common elements of these groups of adolescent males. In doing so he is able to argue convincingly the importance of social class and race/ethnicity in facilitating the formation of a disaffected generation of youth. He then adds onto this commonality of class the pursuit of a masculine identity as an explanation for gang origins and appeal. In trying to deal with youth gangs in this overarching way, however, we lose sight of the variations of what masculinity and poverty meant to adolescents for whom being Puerto Rican, African- or Euro-American was fundamental to their experience. This criticism aside, Schneider has provided us with an enormous contribution to the literature on gangs and also to the history of American youth in the postwar era.

Tamara Myers
Department of History
University of Winnipeg

Wall, Cynthia. *The Literary and Cultural Spaces of Restoration London*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Pp. xviii, 277. 28 halftone illustrations. US\$59.95 (cloth)

"All that had been familiar, settled, phenomenologically given was suddenly and entirely swept away. ..." Cynthia Wall's description of London after the Great Fire of 1666 could equally apply to those who think they know the world of Restoration literature. Upon reading this book, literary and cultural historians will be moved to reconsider the influence of physical change on literature, while material and urban historians may wish to explore the literary avenues which are constructed in the wake of catastrophic events.

Within three days, the Great Fire of 1666 destroyed four-fifths of London. Londoners, challenged to adequately express the enormity of their loss, turned to the familiar: the biblical and classical vocabulary used in sermons, for example. Walls argues they also invented new forms when faced with allusions which "are sud-

denly troubled because in fact they are no longer metaphors." (21) Even grammatical constructions of past and present emphasized change: the city that *was* versus the city that *is* versus the city that *should be*. Post-Fire grids and maps, contrasted with Tudor birds-eye-view renderings, demonstrate the tremendous shift in spatial sensibilities brought on by the Fire. Walls argues effectively that resistance to "new" designs was rooted, not merely in mercenary concern, but also in a "deliberate, insistent, and widespread cultural preference for recovering the London known and lost, rather than creating a London new and unknown." (40)

In the midst of this interesting argument, Walls misses the opportunity to link her study to the political and social contexts in which it existed. In light of her argument that culture may supercede mere function, it is curious that Walls ignores the contemporary political re-imagining involved in the so-called "Restoration" of Charles II, in 1660. What better example could she have of an English preference for retaining the form of the old (the monarchy), even when dealing with the fact of the new (increased Parliamentary authority)? As Susan Staves demonstrated in 1979's *Player's Sceptres*, this curious tension between old and new modes of authority were evident in the fictional writing of 1660–1690. Particularly tantalizing and disappointing in this regard is Walls' presentation of Charles II's first royal declaration regarding the rebuilding. It is a document full of change, but with concern for the forms of the past. Yet Walls draws no connections among material, political, and rhetorical concerns. In choosing the Great Fire as the only delineating factor in her work, Walls seems distressingly monocausal. Surely the Civil Wars, Restoration and Glorious Revolution deserve more attention than this.

This disappointing lack of wider context particularly weakens the second half of the book, "Inhabiting London." It seems uncomfortably related to the first section of the book. Chapter 6, "Narratives of private spaces: churches, houses and novels," is based in large part on the works of Defoe. In and of itself, this chapter provides a refreshing look at the novel and its visualization of space, particu-

larly when discussing the conceptualization of streets. But in relation to Walls' wider argument, the reader is left unsatisfied. Walls cheerfully glosses together "private" and "hidden", equating the underground nature of Dissenter meeting houses with "private" space. Yet weren't Dissenter congregations hidden precisely because they were a matter of *public* legislation and national concern? Religion was emphatically not a matter of private conscience in the era of the Test Acts. (And the material spaces of London's churches had been a matter of public concern long before the Great Fire — it is probably not an exaggeration to say that both Laud and Charles I lost their lives in part because of their regulation of these public spaces.) As Susan Amussen and Carole Pateman, among others, have argued, the household is not necessarily "private" in the seventeenth century. By treating households and churches as "private" spaces, Walls is as heavy-handed in a material which demands more subtlety.

But even when the reader is left unsatisfied by the limits of the book, one cannot help but be delighted by the observations it presents: the sense of communal city ownership, for example, engendered by the fire. Walls does an inestimable service in linking the worlds of the material historian and the literary critic. Physically, the book is beautifully designed, a treasury of the necessary maps and figures which illustrate her arguments regarding the conceptualization of space. This is not an insignificant consideration in a book with constant spatial references. Indeed, her chapter on the shifts from Tudor "bird's-eye" views to cartographically precise post-Fire maps and grids, is one of the most gripping and convincing of the book. Overall, Walls is daring and insightful, if not always complete, in her own re-mapping of Augustan literary topography.

Ruth McClelland-Nugent
Department of History
Dalhousie University
