



## UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

[Review of: S. Martínez (2007) Decency and excess: global aspirations and material deprivation on a Caribbean sugar plantation]

Baud, J.M.

**Publication date**

2010

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

New West Indian Guide

[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Baud, J. M. (2010). [Review of: S. Martínez (2007) Decency and excess: global aspirations and material deprivation on a Caribbean sugar plantation]. *New West Indian Guide*, 84(1/2), 127-129. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41850564>

**General rights**

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

**Disclaimer/Complaints regulations**

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

nerve?" The answer to her rhetorical question comes from her own scholarship, decades of research and intellectual queries, her relations with her students and colleagues, the guidance of her own mentor, Dr. Elsa Goveia of the Department of History, UWI, Mona, and from Jamaica's women, "who constituted one of the society's most vital elements." *A Historical Study of Women in Jamaica 1655-1844* made history and as a classic has a legacy of its own.

*Decency and Excess: Global Aspirations and Material Deprivation on a Caribbean Sugar Plantation*. SAMUEL MARTÍNEZ. Boulder CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2007. xiv + 227 pp. (Paper US\$ 29.95)

MICHIEL BAUD

Centre for Latin American Research and Documentation (CEDLA)

University of Amsterdam

1016 EK Amsterdam, the Netherlands

<J.M.Baud@cedla.nl>

Sugar plantations in the twentieth-century Dominican Republic have a very bad reputation, due to the abhorrent labor conditions under which contract laborers from neighboring Haiti had to work. The Haitians were often "sold" to the plantations by state authorities during the governments of "Papa Doc" and "Baby Doc" to do the dirty work of cutting cane, which Dominican laborers refused to do. The Dominican authorities were implicated in subjecting the Haitian sugar laborers to inhuman treatment and depriving them of basic human rights. The presence of Haitian labor on the sugar plantations was tolerated, but in the rest of society Haitian immigrants were systematically persecuted and discriminated against. Different governments actively supported forced and often unlawful repatriation of the Haitian laborers after the sugar harvest.

Samuel Martínez's *Peripheral Migrants* (1995), a meticulous study of the plight of Haitian migrants in the Dominican Republic, established his reputation as one of the most important scholars in the field of Haitian-Dominican migration. Now, in *Decency and Excess*, he draws on both old and new fieldwork to focus on the life of Haitian laborers on one of the remaining Dominican sugar plantations, Consuelo in Monte Coca. His main purpose is to understand the logic of life in these "nowhere" places, to understand the perceptions and worldviews of those living in them, and ultimately to unravel the paradoxes of life on the margins of the global world. On the one hand, sugar

laborers lack any access to basic modern communication and have effectively even lost contact with their families in Haiti. On the other hand, they have been able to create new patterns of life and “decency” in which the consumption of modern, “global” goods plays an important role. As Martínez puts it, sugarcane workers in Monte Coca “seek to transcend deprivation, degradation, exploitation and violence, and try to realize their own visions of what it means to live decently, against tremendous material obstacles” (p. xi).

In this short and passionate book, Martínez takes readers along a complex road to a place where few academics have ventured – a place which, as he observes, “no one calls ‘home.’” His insider perspective allows him to present a wonderfully detailed and humanistic ethnography of a group of people who are often ignored. In doing so, he focuses especially on the issue of consumption which he views, following an increasingly influential school of anthropologists, as an important field of agency and identity. He begins by describing how all the residents of the *batey* wanted to be photographed with their most precious belongings, such as radios, motorcycles, or even refrigerators, reflecting the extent to which their material belongings were part of their existence as human beings. For Martínez, who sees consumption and property as clear symbols of power relations, habits of consumption are simultaneously part of people’s microsocial lives and a connection to power relations on a macrosocial and even global level. The Haitian workers are intricately linked to formal and informal plantation hierarchies that reflect not only class differences, but also nearly imperceptible differences between workers based on age, color, personal histories, and material possessions.

The power of this book is in the ethnographic detail, often supported by photographs, which brings readers close to a quite incomprehensible reality. In a long passage entitled “Home Improvement in Hell,” Martínez beautifully describes the way the Haitians try to improve their houses and to make the *batey* into a more livable environment, demarcating tiny gardens, installing makeshift benches, and decorating their kitchens. These private improvements stand in stark contrast to the neglect and filth in the public space. Other passages are devoted to the use of leisure (including sexual behavior), festivities, and religious expressions. These ethnographic vignettes provide varied and rich insights into the lives of sugarcane workers.

The present review cannot do justice to either the wealth of empirical data presented in this book or its varied theoretical excursions. Martínez does not shy away from taking clear positions. In a number of cases, he criticizes recent interpretations and goes back to the dons of Caribbean studies, Eric Wolf and Sidney Mintz. One could argue that the ambitiousness of *Decency and Excess* has resulted in a book that falls somewhere between a study of theories of modernity and globalization and a full-fledged ethnography of sugarcane workers in the Dominican Republic. It is possible that readers interested in the rich ethnographic material presented by Martínez may be

slightly put off by his dense theoretical reflections. If, however, they are patient, they will be amply rewarded by unique information and insights about this “nowhere” world in danger of being forgotten. It is the great merit of this book that it sheds light on the abhorrent reality and oppressed lives of the sugarcane workers in this part of the Caribbean without denying them their agency and humanity. Martínez has been able both to show the poverty and deprivation in which these workers have to live, and to make clear how they succeed in creating new forms of decency and providing their lives with material and immaterial meaning.

## REFERENCE

MARTÍNEZ, SAMUEL, 1995. *Peripheral Migrants: Haitians and Dominican Republic Sugar Plantations*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.

*The Caribbean City*. RIVKE JAFFE (ed.). Miami: Ian Randle, 2008. xiv + 358 pp. (Paper US\$ 29.95)

GARY W. MCDONOGH  
 Program in Growth and Structure of Cities  
 Bryn Mawr College  
 Bryn Mawr PA 19010-2899, U.S.A.  
 <gmcdonog@brynmawr.edu>

Despite complex global histories and the recurrence of vital social issues and solutions across multiple but distinctive cities, Caribbean urbanism has not yet gained the academic attention that has made other areas of Caribbean studies central to widespread debates. Although we have edited volumes by Robert Potter (e.g., *The Urban Caribbean in an Era of Global Change*) and a synthetic overview by Alejandro Portes, Carlos Dore-Cabral, and Patricia Landolt (*The Urban Caribbean*), most urban studies have been more local or national, dominated by academic production in the Anglophone and Hispanophone Caribbean.

This exciting collection edited by Rivke Jaffe, however, embraces the diversity of the wider Caribbean, from colonial times to the present, while drawing on multidisciplinary approaches. It provides a broad introduction for global urbanists, mapping out critical Caribbean issues including urban