

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Culture, Identity, and the State in Cuba

Yvon Grenier

St. Francis Xavier University, Nova Scotia, Canada
Email: ygrenier@stfx.ca

This essay reviews the following books:

The Cuba Reader: History, Culture, Politics. 2nd ed., revised and updated. Edited by Aviva Chomsky, Barry Carr, Alfredo Prieto, and Pamela María Smorkaloff. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019. Pp. xi + 744. \$32.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781478003939.

Picturing Cuba: Art, Culture, and Identity on the Island and in the Diaspora. Edited by Jorge Duany. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2019. Pp. xii + 320. \$35.00 paperback. ISBN: 9781683402091.

The Cuban Hustle: Culture, Politics, Everyday Life. By Sujatha Fernandes. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020. Pp. ix + 184. \$24.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781478009641.

Entangled Terrains and Identities in Cuba: Memories of Guantánamo. By Asa McKercher and Catherine Krull. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019. Pp. xxiv + 188. \$90.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9781793602770.

El árbol de las revoluciones: Ideas y poder en América Latina. By Rafael Rojas. Madrid: Turner, 2021. Pp. 302. ISBN: 9788418895029.

Beyond Cuban Waters: África, La Yuma, and the Island's Global Imagination. By Paul Ryer. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2018. Pp. x + 240. \$39.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780826521194.

Dancing with the Revolution: Power, Politics, and Privilege in Cuba. By Elizabeth B. Schwall. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021. Pp. xi + 298. \$34.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781469662978.

The books reviewed in this essay were written or edited by historians or by sociologists or ethnographers interested in historical trends. History does not run from the past to the present; it flows from the present to the past, meaning from current preoccupations. Considering this small sample of recent books, what could those be?

First, all the books, as expected, concern politics in Cuba, a country that best illustrates the dictum that “politics is everywhere.” But there is a catch. For essentially two reasons—the myth of a permanent and omnipresent revolution ruling the country, and the paucity of political data coming from Cuba—the politicization of everything is the fig leaf of a

general depoliticization, where talking about politics does not require discussing “who gets what, when, and how,” to use Harold Lasswell’s classic definition of politics. If politics is everywhere indistinctively, it is nowhere in particular.¹

Second, the growing interest in identity politics in North America and elsewhere, especially race, is central and possibly ascendant in Cuban studies, since it is evidently popular with younger generations of scholars.² No doubt influenced by the seminal works of scholars like Alejandro de la Fuente and Ada Ferrer, new works on identity revisit patterns of discrimination and oppression, how people self-identify as members of a group or groups, and how they can change their mind about it, with the result that identities are fluid, constructed, and sometimes contradictory. It is interesting how the vocabulary used to capture such a slippery target borrows from business lingo (as in *negotiating* identities) or even seafaring (*navigating* identities), for lack of precise sociological terms for phenomena that are one thing (ultimately an essence) and its opposite (a temporary and elusive assemblage).

Third, one can detect a disinterest in grand narrative (except in Rojas’s book), not in the old sense of the postmodern critique of modernity, but rather as a preference for individuals’ life trajectories as members of an oppressed class, race, and ethnic group, or groups where their life stories can be examined (in this dossier, dancers, for instance).³ This bottom-up approach, somewhat reminiscent of the social and cultural history of the Soviet Union led by historians like Sheila Fitzpatrick, has its limitations. For one, small-N studies may yield thin or unfalsifiable conclusions, predetermined by the selection process. On the other hand, several of these books provide support for Paul Ryer’s contention that long-term, close-contact ethnographic fieldwork has “the capacity to challenge poorly founded theories and superficial presumptions” (160). One immediately thinks, in the case of Cuba, about facile periodization (the exuberant 1960s, the grey 1970s, etc.), cookie-cutter accounts of collective identity, and what Mexican poet Octavio Paz called the ideological “cárcel de conceptos.”

Not that all these books represent these trends in equal measure (with Rojas as a counterpoint), or that these trends are completely new. But together they point to the parameters of new scholarship on an island that tends to repeat itself.

Forward to the past

A good place to start is the second edition of *The Cuba Reader*, edited by the three original editors (historians Aviva Chomsky, Barry Carr, and Pamela Maria Smorkaloff) plus Alberto Prieto. The book proposes an introduction to the history, culture, and politics of the island nation from 1492 to the present. Although the editors claim that this is “not a *Reader* whose main focus is the Cuban Revolution” (3), more than half of the book covers the past sixty years of the nation’s history. There are quite a few readers covering “the Revolution,” but from the Taíno to Díaz Canel, this book stands on its own shelf.

¹ On that point, see Yvon Grenier, “Cuban Studies: the Siren Song of *La Revolución*,” *Cuban Studies/Estudios Cubanos* 49 (2020): 310–329. See also the last chapter of Grenier, *Culture and the Cuban State, Participation, Recognition, and Dissonance under Communism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2017), on social sciences in Cuba, entitled “Faking Criticism.”

² See Anita Casavantes Bradford’s review essay “A Cultural Revolution: New Directions in Cuban History, 1952–2013,” *Latin American Research Review* 54 (1): 248–254.

³ To mention two recent edited collections that experiment in that direction: *The Revolution from Within: Cuba, 1959–1980*, edited by Michael J. Bustamante and Jennifer L. Lambe (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), identifies methodological paths away from grand narratives, while *Making the Revolution, Histories of the Latin American Left*, edited by Kevin A. Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), argues that the Left was more focused on combating patriarchy and racism than most of us remember.

Divided into nine sections, from “Indigenous Society and Conquest” to “Perspectives on Cuba’s New Realities,” it features the voices of Cubans from all walks of life, including slaves and prostitutes, combining songs, poetry, fiction, journalism, political speeches, and many other types of documents. In this, it is quite in tune with current interests in history from below and the voices of the subalterns. This revised and updated second edition contains over twenty new selections that “explore the changes and continuities in Cuba since Fidel Castro stepped down from power in 2006.” Revision of the previous selection of texts is minimal, however.

No anthology on Cuba (or review of such reader) will satisfy everybody. The editors refreshingly address this question head on: “We sought to give the book a chronological and thematic balance, rather than a schematic political balance” (3). In both the first and second editions, critical perspectives are mostly restricted to voices from the Left who have qualms about some policies but not about the polity itself. An exception could appear to be the few texts from US government sources, but they are presented as incriminating evidence rather than legitimate criticism. To be sure, the eye catches the names of prominent voices critical of the regime in the table of contents, but their texts were published either before they went into exile (Carlos Franqui, Haroldo Dilla, Juan Antonio Blanco) or do not concern the regime explicitly (Lillian Guerra on Cuban-Americans in Miami, Iván de la Nuez on *reguetón*). That being said, most texts are appropriate, and the editors’ self-confessed bias gives the collection a certain coherence that anthologies often lack.

As the subtitle indicates, the volume focuses on three overlapping themes: history, culture, and politics. On history, the overarching theme of the section on colonialism, to which other dimensions are consistently tied, is racism: specifically, slavery and its key role in the sugar industry. The section on independence is short and includes classics from national heroes such as Carlos Manuel de Céspedes and José Martí. That this independence was incomplete—Cuba “became a U.S. protectorate instead of an independent nation” (111)—is made clear in the next section, the longest in the book, covering the period from 1902 to 1959. They call this period “Neocolonialism,” a term that acquired currency in circles close to *oficialismo* only after 1959. This choice arguably turns significant developments—for example, the 1933 revolution, the abolition of the Platt amendment in 1934, the 1940 Constitution (horizon of most anti-Batista proclamations and manifestos), the democratic experiment of 1940–1952—into historical cul-de-sacs, or a mere prelude to what, for the editors, is plausibly the one and true year of independence: 1959.

For the period prior to 1959, the editors highlight culture by using literary texts as historical *testimonios*. But for the book’s first section on culture itself, understood as an autonomous field of action, the starting date is 1959. The only text covering the rich artistic and intellectual life of the republic before that fateful year is a short and rather dull account by Loló de la Torriente of the 1920s and 1930s, added to the second edition and published in Cuba in 1985.

On cultural policy since 1959, one looks in vain for what is unmistakably the foundational text: Fidel Castro’s 1961 speech remembered as “Words to Intellectuals” (1961). In it, he famously declared his *mot d’ordre*: “Within the Revolution, everything [is allowed]; against the Revolution, nothing [is allowed].”

On the third organizing theme of the collection, which is politics, the total number of texts on the political system (constitutions, relations between branches of government, elections, policy-making process in general) is zero. Among the dozens of authors, I count one political scientist: the Cuban academic Rafael Hernández, who studied literature before completing a master’s degree in political science at . . . El Colegio de México.

A quick suggestion for a potential third edition: do include something on the political system, and for the contemporary period, have at least one text on the environment. The “Suggestions for Further Reading” are also long in the teeth.

The Cuban Hustle is a short collection of essays and interviews, many already published years ago in magazines like *Green Left Weekly*, *NACLA Report on the Americas*, *LASA Forum*, and especially the *Nation*. Its author, Sujatha Fernandes, is an Indian-American-Australian sociologist at the University of Sydney with expertise on urban social movements, art and politics, and global Black culture. (An article by her on this topic appears in *The Cuba Reader*.) *The Cuban Hustle* runs parallel to her previous (and more substantial) book on Cuba, entitled *Cuba Represent! Cuban Arts, State Power, and the Making of New Revolutionary Cultures*, also published by Duke University Press in 2006. In fact, it uses some of the same material.

The catchy title is somewhat misleading: her main concern is social activism around issues of race and sexuality, mostly in the artistic community, not hustling per se (*resolver*, *jinetear*, and so on).⁴ Her main argument is that since the 1990s, “forms of cultural expression” related to race and sexual orientations have been marked by increased dialogue and engagement at two levels: with the global market and with state institutions. To illustrate this, she examines examples of youth cultures, cinema and documentaries, Afro-Cuban music and art, digital communities, and feminist organizations such as Magín (mid-1990s), among others. While the materials pieced together can overlap, Fernandes convincingly makes the case for closer analysis of everyday forms of participation, dissonance, and creativity.

Like many other researchers, she notes that the arrival of new commercial and foreign stakeholders in Cuban culture during the 1990s made possible greater financial and artistic independence from the state. But she goes further: global market forces have progressive taste! For her, the “exoticization of Afro-Cuban themes by the global market, combined with the development of a folklore tourism and the prioritization of the African presence in the Americas by international foundations such as UNESCO, gave a degree of legitimacy to representations of African identity, and Afro-Cuban artists took advantage of these openings to talk critically about race” (71). What is more, themes of sexuality and Afro-Cuban spirituality were seen as “particularly appealing to international audiences, given the attractiveness of exoticized difference as a marketable commodity” (54–55).

On the new disposition of artists to cooperate with state institutions during the 1990s, she writes that after the more confrontational period of the 1980s, “artists and activists now sought to negotiate with state officials and penetrate state organizations” (7). She notes, but arguably does not sufficiently account for, that many, perhaps even most of them left the island during the early 1990s. They chose exit, not accommodation. But never mind, among the ones who stayed, many opted to join government organizations rather than being hopelessly marginalized.

Fernandes frequently finds herself in the awkward position of documenting cases of censorship and co-optation by anonymous government officials without following the causality link all the way to the political system in place, which she supports. Fortuitously, she is interested in global issues that are politically determined but that can spare specific political analysis. Racism and homophobia exist everywhere—in fact, for her, racism is less of a plague in Cuba than in the United States. Intolerance of political opposition per se is not her main concern. Censorship and government control are to be contextualized, if one is not to become “simplistic” or “stereotypical” about it, like Freedom House or American mainstream media. “In the dystopian Trump era,” she writes, “it is important to keep alive the memory of what Fidel Castro and others of his generation stood for” (135). That memory and a slightly depoliticized approach to social activism

⁴ On that topic, see Tanya L. Saunders, *Cuban Underground Hip Hop: Black Thoughts, Black Revolution, Black Modernity* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), and Coco Fusco, *Dangerous Moves: Performance and Politics in Cuba* (London: Tate Publishing, 2015).

enable thoughtful portraits of social actors, at a safe distance from tough questions about who is in charge.

Slicing up the cultural field

The two following books deliver in-depth analysis of the cultural field.

Polish writer and diplomat Czesław Miłosz (1911–2004) once wrote about socialist realism (the ideal-typical cultural policy of communist regimes) that “it strengthens modest talents and mutilates great ones.”⁵ That is invariably done in the name of bringing culture to the masses, at the cost of mowing down any deviation (artistic or personal) on the procrustean bed of the New Man. An interesting case study to test this proposition is ballet, a highbrow, high-class and hyper-perfectionist art form curiously appreciated by communist regimes to show that the best can be brought to the rear guard. In *Dancing with the Revolution*, the young scholar Elizabeth B. Schwall examines this subfield of cultural activity, but with an up-to-date focus on race and sexuality.

Schwall talks about “dance makers,” defined as an “expansive term that refers to performers, teachers, choreographers, company directors, and students” (3). The author is an amateur dancer and a professional historian who is currently an assistant professor of history at Northern Arizona University. This is the book version of her PhD dissertation, completed at Columbia University in 2016. Much of her material, including visual and audiovisual, was collected from digging into government archives normally inaccessible to the public. The access was granted because of the right timing (Obama presidency) and because unguarded officials, being justifiably proud of the history of ballet and dance since the revolution, had no reason to fear politically discomfiting finds by the intrepid young scholar. (They were wrong.)

Schwall offers what she calls a “revisionist” or nontraditional interpretation. On ballet, she contends that “traditional narratives about ballet emphasize victimization by neglectful (at best) and tyrannical (at worst) governments before 1959, which contrasted sharply with enlightened, supportive revolutionary leaders” (12–13). But on race, for instance, she contends that “ambivalent efforts to foster racial equality through choreographic inclusion predated 1959, and exclusionary legacies of the earlier era persisted in revolutionary times” (67).

Although the analysis covers the period ranging from 1930 to 1990, five of the seven chapters deal with the post-1959 period. The word *revolution* in the title is not a synecdoche for all things Cuban since 1959. It refers to something Fidel Castro actually said in March 1959, on a television news program, when commenting on dance under the new regime: “Here the only one with whom one needs to dance is the Revolution [Aquí con la única que van a tener que bailar, aunque no quieran, es con la Revolución]” (11). A year before his famous “Words to Intellectuals” speech, Castro had already formulated the idea that in the public realm, political expediency, not due process, determines what is allowed, when, and how.

Dancing is also a metaphor for the idea of partnering with someone, in this case the government in place. Schwall uses terms like “wiggling room,” “navigating,” and “mundane muddling through” to illustrate how dance makers often push the envelope and haggle with the government (Batista or Castro) to secure protection and resources. There is also a fair bit of haggling within the dance milieu itself, in particular around issues of race and inequalities. Schwall documents the tension between white and upper-class ballet and brown and black popular dance like rumba and mambo, showing that “ballet

⁵ Czesław Miłosz, *La pensée captive*, trans. from Polish by Czesław Miłosz and André Prudhommeaux (Paris: Gallimard, coll. Essais, [1953] 1988), 206. My translation.

artists wielded impressive power and that racialized and classed values—an investment in whiteness and elite sensibilities by way of ballet—became entrenched in ideas about national culture” (36). Meanwhile, “African-descended dancers performed, taught, choreographed, wrote letters, traveled, and took risks to further their careers. Their efforts met with exciting opportunities along with frustrating limitations as choreographers devised, and audiences selectively embraced, a whitened rendition of blackness to represent Cuba on elite stages” (65). Furthermore, although it is not presented as a key variable like class and race, a great interest of this book stems from the evidence she found in government-held archives of the “homophobic state and its proxies” keeping a tab on the sexual activities of male ballet dancers (100).

Many pages deal with the extraordinary impact of the international star Alicia Alonso (1920–2019). Throughout her life she promoted ballet within Cuba and became a cultural ambassador during her many tours abroad. On February 25, 1955, Schwall writes, the Ballet Alicia Alonso “danced at a special gala in commemoration of Batista’s ‘inauguration’ ceremony that day” (31). That did not prevent Batista from cutting the company’s government subsidy. Alonso changed the name of the company to Ballet de Cuba “in hopeful anticipation of greater official support” (32). On October 28, 1958, she told a Venezuelan newspaper: “To me, Machado, Grau, Prío, Batista and Fidel Castro all mean the same thing. I am apolitical and have never voted” (35). After 1959, however, Alonso danced enthusiastically with the revolution, and in exchange, she got recognition, support, and some protection for her male dancers. Meanwhile, cabaret dancers fell on the “counterrevolutionary side of history” because of their association with the Batista-led tourist industry.

On political expression, Schwall makes the case that after 1959, “bodily movement became an important medium for political expression in Cuba” (3). Because it could, “the state came to control the press and censor art, but movement arguably offered greater opportunity for ambivalent messaging given its nonverbal physicality, ephemerality, and general lack of fixity in contrast to literature, film, visual art, theatre, and music” (3–4).

All in all, modern dancers have “experienced harsh aggression on the part of a homophobic state,” but “they also continued creating and found unprecedented support in the span of a few years” (117). Much was done in Cuba to bring dance and in particular ballet—a notoriously white and upper-class art form favored by Fidel Castro and by communist leaders of the Soviet bloc as well—to the masses. On that, both the government and dance makers found in each other’s a willing partner.

In sum, *Dancing with the Revolution* represents an original contribution based on solid new material. On the political side, one looks in vain for an examination of the evolution of cultural policy or the role of state cultural institutions, as the words “power and politics” in the subtitle seem to promise. But this is Cuba, so it was only optional, even when the ambition is to offer “important insight into Cuban politics writ large” (3).

Another invaluable contribution on cultural development in Cuba is made in a collection edited by Jorge Duany, an anthropologist at Florida International University and director of the Cuban Research Institute. *Picturing Cuba* endeavors to examine “art, culture, and identity on the island and in the diaspora” since colonial times. The project is perhaps too ambitious, which would explain why there are so few books attempting it. *Picturing Cuba* does take politics into account, without the ambition of providing political insights per se. Its focus is on a fragment of the cultural field, an approach that could be considered traditional and ageless, but new enough, apparently, since there are very few books on the same topic.

Dedicated to Emeritus Professor Juan A. Martínez (1951–2020), the book includes fourteen chapters as well as more than forty color plates of Cuban art spanning more than four hundred years, all speaking to the overarching and all-too-Cuban theme of this collection: the search for and affirmation of Cuba’s national identity. As Duany puts it: “Several

generations of Cuban writers and artists on the island and abroad have drawn the contours of their ‘moveable nation,’ according to different historical junctures, geographic locations, and ideological perspectives” (1). The book seeks to “expand readers’ knowledge and appreciation of Cuban history and culture, as well as Cubans’ contributions to various U.S. communities, especially in South Florida,” by delving into several “defining moments of Cuba’s artistic evolution from a multidisciplinary perspective, including art history, architecture, photography, history, literary criticism, and cultural studies” (5).

The volume is divided into four main parts: the origins of Cuban art in the nineteenth century, the consolidation of Cuban art during the first half of the twentieth century, the development of Cuban art after 1959, and Cuban art in the diaspora. Contributors were asked to explore a list of topics including the construction of Cuban national identity or *cubanía*, the contribution of the African legacy to Cuban art, gender and the visual representation of women, the emergence of a Cuban diasporic identity through the visual arts and architecture, and the relationship between Cuban-American and other Latino artists in the United States (5–6).

The list of authors speaks to the contours of Cuban and Cuban-American visual art as a cultural subfield (*champ culturel*, to use Pierre Bourdieu’s concept) with its own characteristics: bicultural, transnational, subject to the vagaries of bilateral relations but feisty and entrepreneurial, and sponsored by a phalanx of patrons, philanthropists, collectors, curators, and amateurs of great art. If there is something like a Cuban nation out there, above and beyond all the discord, it is largely due to Cubans enjoying and promoting Cuban art wherever they happen to live.

The authors, all highly specialized, enjoy disrupting easy dichotomies between traditional and *vanguardia*, home and exile, and political allegiances. Among the many great artists discussed are Amelia Peláez (1896–1968), Víctor Manuel García (1897–1969), René Portocarrero (1912–1985), and Wifredo Lam (1902–1982), formed at the Fine Arts San Alejandro National Academy founded on January 11, 1818, in the San Agustín Convent in Havana. They also analyze the Cuba’s *vanguardia* painters of the 1944 exhibition at the MoMA in New York, and the modernist generation of Cuban architects (the so-called *Generación de los Cincuenta*) active on the island between the late 1930s and 1959. The contribution of the diaspora is almost impossible to exaggerate. For instance, the rambunctious generation of the 1980s left the country en masse by the mid-1990s: artists such as José Bedía (1959–), Antonio Eligio Fernández (Tonel) (1958–), Flavio Garcandía (1954–), and Glexis Novoa (1964–), among many others. A personal regret of mine is the omission of Antonia Eiriz (1929–1995), one of the best contemporary painters in Cuba and a master for many prominent members of the Cuban artistic community in the island and abroad, especially her students at the Cubanacán National School for Art (e.g., Tomás Sánchez and Ever Fonseca), where she taught from 1965 to 1969. There is also an excellent chapter on modernist generation of architects—the so-called *Generación de los Cincuenta*, active from late 1930s until 1959—authored by Victor Deupi and Jean-François Lejeune.

In his concluding chapter, Duany expresses the wish that “the visual arts may serve as cultural bridges across the Florida Straits” (11). Always a work in progress, to be sure, but the book shows that it is already a reality.

Slippery identity

Entangled Terrains and Identities in Cuba, Memories of Guantánamo features the extensive memoirs of Alberto Nelson Jones, a black Cuban born on the northeastern coast of Cuba in the poor immigrant barrio of La Güira, Banes, in 1938. Jones grew up in poverty, like many West Indians who worked in Cuba’s “company town.” His grandparents came

from Jamaica to work on the United Fruit Company's plantation in Banes. In that town, where Fulgencio Batista was born, "we never felt Cuban." Then, his family move to Guantánamo, "the most Americanized place in Cuba," in the hopes of getting a job at the US military base at Guantánamo Bay, where he eventually worked. "When we arrived in Guantánamo, we walked into a cinderblock house with running water, a toilet, electricity; it was night and day—it was heaven" (17). During the 1940s, Guantánamo's population was composed of Cubans, Americans, Italians, Germans, Arabs, English, Chinese, Canadians, Haitians, Pakistanis, Virgin Islanders, Puerto Ricans, "and people from every English-speaking Caribbean island" (20).

Jones deftly describes the communities and neighborhoods, each with a cachet of its own. He offers a personal account of the impact of the US base in the community, mixing some material progress with enduring misery and exploitation. Jones is particularly eloquent on his love of schools and the teachers he had, and on racism: white on black, but also black on black (from Haiti), and even black on Cuban Hispanics.

His involvement in the revolution was sincere but limited, as he spent part of it working at the US base and being "viewed with suspicion from both sides of the fence." He reveled in the *efervescencia* of the revolution, and still remembers a speech Fidel Castro gave in February of 1959, in which he denounced racism and "declared illegal all forms of discrimination in the country" (82). Thanks to the new regime, a university education became possible for him and for many Cubans, including black Cubans. He graduated from the University of Havana in 1968 and obtained an enviable position as a veterinary laboratory director. And then, during the early 1970s, a climate of "hysteria, fear, dishonesty, and setting scores was everywhere" (124). He ran afoul of the government and was wrongfully sentenced to eight years in jail (he served four and a half years). His description of the trial and the life in prison—"slow, monotonous, and dangerous"—is vivid. He was released in time to depart for the United States as part of the 1980 Mariel boat lift.

Jones's reminiscences are introduced and discussed by the "authors" of this book, two Canadian scholars: historian Asa McKercher, who has published some fine work on Canadian foreign policy toward Cuba, and sociologist Catherine Krull. They lean on Jones's testimony to feature their own theoretical preoccupation with identities, as well as transnationalism, border crossing, and empire. Jones brings Cuban history to life, and they bring it back to identity politics and border studies. In the prologue, the introduction and conclusion to each chapter, the parallel comments and notes on Jones's reminiscences, and yet again in the epilogue, they go back, perhaps too insistently and repetitively, to Jones being a "transnational person" in a "transnational space between nation and empire," in constant border crossing in the real or metaphorical sense. For instance, they write that for Jones, "prison life proved wearisome and seemingly interminable—another boundary crossed" (151).

Politics suffuses Jones's account and their comments, but the use and abuse of power per se is not their main concern; Cuba was a Spanish colony, then it became a "colony of the United States" (34). In the first revolutionary government, communists (presumably not Fidel Castro) "quickly marginalized and intimidated their more liberal counterparts" (xix). They talk about Fidel's "assumption of power" (xix), and leave it at that. Jones's trial and imprisonment was an injustice, but they insist that "even today, Alberto does not necessarily blame the revolutionary government for his arrest and punishment" (151). He is a "Dialoguero" rather than a hardliner," the authors write approvingly (xxii). Indeed, he traveled between the two countries and became a public activist against the US embargo. Apparently, giving long interviews inspired him to publish his memoirs under his own name: *Mi vida, mi verdad: Memorias de Alberto N. Jones* (independently published, 2020).

McKercher and Krull do not engage with the literature on the methodological pitfalls of *testimonio*. Jones's account is theoretically retooled but it is never questioned, conceivably because it broadly matches what they found in secondary literature, as well as in public archives, on Guantánamo, the US base, and race relations in pre-Communist Cuba. On these subjects they are evidently competent.

By all accounts, Jones is an extraordinary man who enjoys telling his story. Arguably, he should either have been listed as a coauthor or at least be mentioned in the title or anywhere on the cover page. In word count and in substance, this book is largely his.

Cultural anthropologist Paul Ryer presents *Beyond Cuban Waters* as “a semiotically oriented, ethnographically rooted study of everyday Cuban geographic imaginations about the world and Cuba's place in it, working from within the republic and its diasporas” (3). Ryer is the director of Scholar Programs at the School for Advanced Research in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

There is no single research question in *Beyond Cuban Waters*. Rather, it is an archipelago of essays, where the author dives into his “geographies of imagination” with two sets of tools: secondary literature on race and cultural identities, and interviews and observations in Cuba, realized over the course of eighteen months spent as a student with D-2 residency at the University of Havana.

The first chapter, entitled “The Rise and Decline of La Yuma,” discusses the possible origins of the term—either rooted in a popular western movie about Yuma, Arizona, or “simply derived from a mispronunciation of ‘US man or of ‘United States’” (26–27)—and then makes the case that “depending on context and intonation, the designation of a person as a *yuma* may be factual, envious, or critical—perhaps because it bespeaks more familiarity than conventional or official terms such as *Americano* or *estadounidense*” (27). Ideal typically, La Yuma refers to an idealized conception of the United States, contrasted with “the largely silenced poverty of socialism, Africa, and the third world” (45). However, in cultural studies, identities are always shifting; in this case, the author observed two phenomena: a “declining popular enthusiasm for La Yuma” (44), and what he calls a “Cubanization of *yumanidad*—of *yuma*-ness” (41), more or less separate from any external category.

The second chapter “traces the shape (and silences) of the contemporary popular category Africa in Cuba” (57), using interviews with Cubans who participated in *internacionalista* missions in Africa. About four hundred thousand Cubans were dispatched to a dozen African countries from the early 1960s, then their numbers declined precipitously with the resolution of the Angolan War and the end of Soviet aid in the early 1990s. One of his findings is that Cubans “presume Cuba's own higher status as more developed” than Africa (69), rather than assuming postcolonial equality in sync with South-South solidarity.

The third chapter, entitled “Color, *Mestizaje*, and Belonging in Cuba,” examines the “interplay of race and place in Cuba” (89), raises “the question of the nature of the category ‘Afro-Cuban,’” and considers “links between color classification and behavior, and briefly locate[s] these categories in Cuban history” (89). Ryer notes that if the category of “Afro-Cuban” or “Afrocuban” “is almost ubiquitous in English-language scholarly work on Cuba, no such term is used in a like manner in normal Cuban speech. *Afrocubano* exists as a recognizable word and even has a certain scholarly space, corresponding to the afro-cubanismo movement of the 1920s and 1930s and to studies and publications concerned with folkloric culture” (108). As Inuits have dozens different word for snow, Ryer observes that Cubans have a luxuriant vocabulary to label nonwhites. He provides his own list of observable classification of persons (twenty-three types), eye color (two), hair (six), and noses (two) (104–106). Needless to explain, these categories are ever changing in reality and in the assessment of ethnologists. Interestingly, he points out that the category of *Afrocubano* is “not in common use among the population, but is often resisted by those it purports to describe” (108). This can be explained by the salience of the time-honored

discourse on race in postrevolutionary Cuba, according to which Cubans are all equal and united in the same nation-building project, rather than just separate but equal, let alone separate and unequal.

The last chapter revisits the topic of “borders of belonging and *cubanidad*,” insisting that such categories do not have a “stable core or essence.” And yet, there is enough of a core or essence to explore the concept of “one-and-a-half” identity, meaning “someone who is born and partly raised in one cultural and linguistic setting but displaced to another during adolescence, becoming entirely and distinctively bilingual and bicultural” (125). Here he examines mostly Africans who came to Cuba as participants to work-study programs and who decided to stay, progressively evolving from, to give an example, Sudanese to Sudanese-Cubans, and then possibly to Cuban-Sudanese.

The dialectic of identity takes off to new heights with Ryer’s dizzying analysis of hybridization, dehybridization, doubly hyphenated identities and the “1.5 paradigm that can be productively stood on its head” (125–126). In his conclusion, Ryer quotes anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s bon mot that cultural analysis is always incomplete. While it may be true of any social sciences, or science tout court, this book leaves one to wonder if identity studies is particularly open to infinite deconstruction.

La revolución como espectáculo de ideas

Bucking the trend favoring identity politics, small-N research design, and the facile leaning on the enchanting brand of politics without power, *El árbol de las revoluciones* by Rafael Rojas uses a wide-angle lens to stage the revolutionary ideas that shaped modern Latin America. Traditional (and perhaps more typically “Latin”) is also Rojas’s predilection for books as building material (his blog is called *Libros del crepúsculo*) and the great thinkers who write them (e.g., Tocqueville, Arendt, Hobsbawm), rather than academic journals and methodological debates between professors on, say, rational choice versus institutionalist theories of revolution. Archival research and individual interviews with the wretched of the earth are not his cup of tea either.

The title of the book is somewhat cryptic, beyond the hint that a single logic is at play behind all revolutions. A more evocative title, in my view, could have been the one he used for an article published in 2007: “La revolución como espectáculo de ideas.”⁶

Rojas is a prolific Cuban-born historian and public intellectual who, like many of *El árbol*’s protagonists at one point or another, lives in exile in Mexico.⁷ It may not be extraneous to mention that his brother is Fernando Rojas, the Cuban vice-minister of culture, and his father, Fernando Rojas Avalos, was president (rector) of the University of Havana from 1980 to 1992. Rojas’s writings divulge a liberal/social-democratic sensibility, which positions him on the opposition side of the Cuban regime that emerged from the turn to communism around 1961. But while he is at his best discussing intellectual *polémicas*, he is not himself very polemical. I would call him a Seurat historian, a pointillist who paints huge canvas with small touches of content analysis.

El árbol de las revoluciones covers ten revolutions: “the Mexican from 1910 to 1940, the Nicaraguan of the 1920s, the Cuban from the 1930s, the Brazilian under Vargas, Argentina under Perón, the Guatemalan from 1944 to 1954, the Bolivian from 1952, the Cuban from

⁶ Rafael Rojas, “Anatomía del entusiasmo: La revolución como espectáculo de ideas,” *Encuentro de la Cultura Cubana* 45/46 (Summer–Fall 2007): 315.

⁷ Rojas has published twenty books (and counting), including *Historia mínima de la Revolución cubana* (Madrid: Turner, 2016) and *Las repúblicas de aire: Utopía y desencanto en la revolución de Hispanoamérica* (Madrid: Taurus, 2009). Two of his most recent books examine the Mexican Revolution: *Los libros de la derrota: Revolución, contrarrevolución y exilio en México, 1910–1920* (Mexico City: SEP; Academia Mexicana de la Historia, 2020) and *La epopeya del sentido: Ensayos sobre el concepto de Revolución en México, 1910–1940* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 2022).

the 1960s, the Chilean from 1970 to 1973, and the Sandinista that triumphed in 1979.” The book may not cover every revolutionary spark, but it scans deep and wide, going back to the roots of the “tree” in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ideas (early republicanism, liberalism, and constitutionalism).

The Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes once said that the twentieth century started and ended in Sarajevo (from the First World War to the Bosnian genocide in 1994). In Rojas’s account, the *siglo de la revolución* in Latin America started with the Mexican Revolution and petered out with Violeta Chamorro’s victory in Nicaragua. For him, “the concept of revolution achieved its greatest splendor since the fall of Porfirio Díaz in 1911” with Fidel Castro’s triumphant entry into Havana. The sui generis experience of the Cuban Revolution became a model for many young revolutionaries throughout the continent, triggering what Jorge Castañeda called the “thirty-years’ war” (1960–1990) between guerrillas and brutal military and para-military forces.⁸

The book offers ten chapters regrouped in three parts corresponding loosely to successive periods. The first part covers the end of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth. Rojas looks at paragons of late republicanism, mostly influenced by eighteenth-rather than nineteenth-century liberalism (Montesquieu and Rousseau rather than Tocqueville and Stuart Mill), such as José Martí, Ruy Barbosa in Brazil, Carlos Eugenio Restrepo in Colombia, Francisco I. Madero in Mexico, and Hipólito Yrigoyen in Argentina. This agenda was superseded by the Mexican Revolution and what Rojas calls “republicanismo de izquierda,” “republicanismo social,” revolutionary nationalism, or “naciente populismo,” a tendency that dominated the panorama in the revolutionary Left until the Cold War.

While the part of the book that examines Cuba is probably the most robust, the book’s main contribution may be Rojas’s demonstration of the impact of the Mexican Revolution and how it was a crucible of revolutions in twentieth-century Latin America.

The second part features chapters on Sandino’s “republicanismo cristiano,” for whom “the doctrinal referent of solidarity with Latin America . . . should be Mexico [el referente doctrinal de la solidaridad con América Latina . . . debería ser México]” (111), and briefly with the other revolutionary leader next door, the Salvadoran communist Farabundo Martí. Some of the best pages concern the Cuban revolution of 1933, about which he writes that its leaders (Ramón Grau San Martín, Fulgencio Batista, and Antonio Guiteras) “admired the great neighboring country [admiraban al gran país vecino].”

The third part includes three chapters: “El concepto de revolución en Cuba,” “Entre Guevara y Allende,” and “Nicaragua y el ocaso de las revoluciones latinoamericanas.” In the first, Rojas solemnly steps back to the great thinkers of modernity (Michelet, Tocqueville, Marx, Nietzsche) to set the scene for a key chapter in the book. This revolution started as a variation on previous revolutions on the continent, with reformist, agrarian, and constitutionalist aspirations before the abrupt turn to sovietization. Fidel Castro went from saying that the revolution “is not communist” in 1960, to saying “it is Marxist-Leninist” in 1961, to saying that the Marxist-Leninist turn was the inevitable culmination of Cuba’s struggle since independence, to finally asserting in 1973 that he was already Marxist-Leninist at the time of the Moncada barracks attack in 1953.

Tellingly for Rojas, the Sandinistas were only partially inspired by the Cuban model; the 1987 constitution of Nicaragua is largely pluralistic and democratic (286). The Sandinistas’ electoral defeat in February 1990, only a few months after the downfall of the Berlin Wall, spelled the “twilight of Latin American revolutions” (“Ocaso de las revoluciones latinoamericanas” is the title of the last chapter). For him, it signified “the exhaustion of the nondemocratic options for the left [el agotamiento de las modalidades no democráticas

⁸ Jorge Castañeda, *Utopia Unarmed: The Latin American Left after the Cold War* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1994).

de la izquierda]” (291). Probably controversial is his view that Venezuela’s “Bolivarian revolution” is not a revolution *stricto sensu*, in spite of its use of revolutionary symbols and icons. Chávez came to power “por la vía democrática” (291).

Rojas’s emphasis on ideas and texts (including constitutions), while appropriate when discussing, for instance, the split or tensions between *apristas* and communists, or the positions of major thinkers such as José Carlos Mariátegui, or the ideational context that gave birth to leaders like the Colombian Jorge Eliécer Gaitán or the Cuban Eduardo Chibás, arguably bears less fruit when examining the Vargista or Peronist “revolutions,” the failed revolutions of Farabundo Martí in El Salvador (1932) and Sandino in Nicaragua, or the “progressive military” regime in Peru (1968). I may be showing my political science roots again, but it is possible to give too much importance to ideas, utopias, and “illusions” (Claude Lefort), and not enough to resources, social classes, and political processes and institutions. For the Cuban Revolution, the works of Sam Farber and Jorge Domínguez, for instance, constitute great complements to Rojas’s important and original work on the realm of ideas.⁹

Additionally, Rojas could sometimes be clearer in the concepts he uses. What are the exact contours of the concept of revolution, and what does he mean exactly by populism (“clásico” or “cívico”), “neopopulism” (207), or even democracy? Does the mid-twentieth century PRI really belong to the category of “izquierda democrática”? (218). Were all revolutionary tendencies “agrarian,” or just the ones that did not promote state farms, as in Cuba starting in 1963?

This caveat aside, *El árbol* is a masterful book which I hope will be available in English translation. There are many books on individual revolutions but only a few covering the whole region,¹⁰ or ideas and power in the region,¹¹ and none matches its depth of analysis on revolutionary ideas and ideologies. What is more, Rojas’s work shows that ideas are embedded in institutions and vice versa, even when the passions make us forget the interests.

Dr. Yvon Grenier is professor of political science at St. Francis Xavier University in Nova Scotia, Canada. He is the author of *Culture and the Cuban State: Participation, Recognition, and Dissonance under Communism* (2017), *Gunshots at the Fiesta: Literature and Politics in Latin America* (with Maarten Van Delden, 2009), *From Art and Politics: Octavio Paz and the Pursuit of Freedom* (2001; Spanish trans., with Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2004), *The Emergence of Insurgency in El Salvador* (1999) and *Guerre et pouvoir au Salvador* (1994). He edited (selection of texts and introduction) a book of political essays by the Mexican Nobel laureate Octavio Paz, entitled *Sueño en libertad, escritos políticos* (2001). Professor Grenier is a board member of *Cuban Studies/Estudios Cubanos*.

⁹ See Samuel Farber, *Cuba Since the Revolution of 1959: A Critical Assessment* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2011); and Jorge I. Domínguez, *Cuba: Order and Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978).

¹⁰ See, for instance, Gilbert M. Joseph and Greg Grandin, eds., *A Century of Revolution: Insurgent and Counterinsurgent Violence during Latin America’s Long Cold War* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); and Castañeda, *Utopia Unarmed*.

¹¹ In *Redentores, ideas y poder en América latina* (Barcelona: Random House Mondadori, coll. Debate, 2011), Enrique Krauze examines mostly but not exclusively revolutionaries. His approach is very similar to Rojas’s.