

BOOK REVIEW

Cuba Beyond the Beach: Stories of Life in Havana. By Karen Dubinsky. Toronto: Between the Lines Press, 2016. ISBN: 978-1-77113-269-5. Pages 1-216.

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Focusing in on the complexities and contradictions of Havana, Queens University-based historian Karen Dubinsky takes her readers into intimate city spaces to examine Havana in a critical time of transition. The city's trans-national positioning as a central node of Cuban culture is introduced within a context of the city's divergent but shifting relationship with its two northern neighbours, Canada and the United States. The book claims to be "about the potential and limitations of relationships across the multiple boundaries that separate the First and Third worlds" (7). Social networks contribute to life for *habaneros*, as the author is "persuaded by those Cubans who characterize their daily reality as more *sociolismo* than *socialism* – more a reciprocal network of favours among friends (*socios*) than an abstract state ideology (socialism)" (7). *Sociolismo* is later defined as socialism "in spite of the state" (146). This sets a tone for a book that focuses in on the lives and lifestyles of city dwellers with whom the author successfully claims intimacy with through return visits, teaching engagements, and temporary residencies in a city that has persistently attracted her interest.

Canada functions here as a white flag and sometimes-strategic space the crafting of policy, as in 1953 when Cuban opposition parties met in Montreal to plan a strategy against Batista (11). Our warm relationship with Cuba is like "that one bad friend you had in high school" with trade and educational ties besides, yet Canadian support for this rebellious outpost wasn't always cut and dry (12-3). While Cuban migrations to Canada to the tune of 20,000 have occurred, with some Cubanness existing in our own far-flung corners, importantly, "we are nowhere equal in our mobility" (18). At play here is the left intellectual West's problematic fascination with Cuba as a socialist paradise, with Cuba emerging from the ashes of its revolution as a site of "decolonized cosmopolitanism" for outsiders (20); Cuba surfaces in the 1960s as a global site for the intersection of left-wing ideals.

These tendencies play against apolitical tourism, which sits uncomfortably alongside a real Cuba's "backward-pointing" nature (22). The book's angle on Havana's complexities is made analogous to Pedro Almodóvar's idea that he could make a film every day by merely "plant[ing] a camera on a street corner," this setting the aesthetic tone for the book's eclectic style (25) especially in its focusing in on the *gente de zona* or "people of the neighborhood" and the sounds of the city that reflect or mirror the dreams and aspirations of its inhabitants (26-7). The first chapter begins in the "cultural hub" of Vedado and follows Vivian, a "life-long Vedado resident" who is "emblematic of her generation of old *Fidelista* ladies" (29-32). Stark statistics describe the wage economy and its relationship to prevailing patterns of poverty and consumption, with almost half of the population not meeting "basic food needs." The Cuban food shopping climate is divided into *agromercados* for vegetables, fruits, pork and illegal products like seafood or potatoes on the

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one hand (The Market) and mini-supermarkets on the other (The Shopping) where precious items like tomato sauce or vinegar may be kept under glass (34-5). Added to this division are state-subsidized stores in the form of *bodegas* and *panaderías* that might confound non-Cubans by virtue of their association with *moneda nacional* (MN) and the *libreta* or “little book” allotment system that used to provide more in the way of luxury or desirable consumables and today accounts for a mere 30% of the caloric intake (36-7). This multi-dimensional economy is shaped by “inconsistencies, bureaucracies and incongruities,” creating a “shopping chaos that simply boggles the mind” (37). Bicycles and “beautiful cakes” also occupy a place here, as do *pregónes* or “little tunes” that often characterize street vendors and have more recently made a comeback, contributing to the complexities of the Cuban “soundscape” (42-3, 46-7). Dubinsky’s *pregoneros* are reminiscent of the sounds and scenes one might witness elsewhere in greater Latin America; they might occupy a comfortable place alongside the vocal donut vendors of East Los Angeles.

The account is a personal one, with urban encounters shaped more by observation and inquiry than engagement with any Cuban present or past that might be distilled through archival research. Dubinsky’s knowledge of the city is intimate and her sources are eclectic and diverse. The author’s subjectivities are present in this book, in her role as a visitor passing “unnoticed” (52) in the Cerro neighborhood of Havana, and through the friendships formed with locals that provide unique social and cultural insights into understudied elements like gay culture and community. Her community of gay friends may exercise certain social freedoms: while overt political oppression is absent, these Cuban lives are shaped by economic modesty and gender equality within the confines of households. Local watercress wine versus French wine becomes an object of conversation, as do emerging travel opportunities to the US. Cuban street culture and its impact on female visitors also inform training for her students, before they might encounter the ubiquitous *piropos* and *groseros*, or flattering and aggressive remarks (57).

The second chapter explores Cuban sound culture and the author is its keen anthropologist. Here, the wonderful free music of the street competes with professional and popular musicianship (72-4). In Havana, “concerts are like conversations” (76), the death of musical icon Santiago Feliú “registered like a bomb,” (92) X Alfonso’s songs blend social commentary with reverence for Afro-Cuban spirituality (108) while his *Fábrica de Arte Cubano* serves as a cultural hub; music is a cultural text, with meaning, imbued with creativity and life. In the next chapter, the “new economy” is discussed, including the rise of *cuentapropismo* (self-employment) and a “kiosk economy” by which small-scale private enterprises might flourish, allowing for an ease of pressure upon an already-present “underground” economy (114-5). Havana’s “real estate boom” proved to be a “positive human rights step” according to one US think-tank, yet housing remains “one of the most serious problems in the city” (129, 132) and the new economy’s arrival – *La Nueva Cuba* – effectively generated “more stuff” and “less state” (152).

A final chapter considers how Cuba fits into the broader globalized world and its new technologies, and Cuba is assessed as still highly dis-connected. *El Paquete Semanal* offers a profitable mix of technological fixes, referred to as “the weekly package” or “Google of Cuba” by US media and “Internet of the poor” by Cuban Victor Folwer (158). The book succeeds in untangling order from disorderly circumstances and realities, and embraces Cubans’ persisting “spirit of disobedience” (125) as a leitmotif that knits together multilayered complexities marked by incremental changes over time. Finally, it reiterates Leela Gandhi’s idea that “small acts of

friendship” might help sway or at least mitigate “the overwhelming logic of global inequalities” (23-4), offering a compelling read that is at once nuanced, accessible and direct.