

Caribbean culture, but after 600 pages the reader gets very little sustained discussion of the nature and cultural accomplishments of these societies. Winston James looks at the intellectual dimension of culture, but one chapter and fleeting references in the introduction are woefully inadequate for a complex region distinguished for its relatively long history of exceptional creative and performing arts as well as architecture.

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Anke Birkenmaier and Esther Whitfield (eds.), *Havana Beyond the Ruins: Cultural Mappings after 1989* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2011), pp. xiv + 329, £59.00, £16.99 pb.

A great deal of cultural studies research has looked at the Cuba of the post-1990 crisis years – usually focusing on notions of dystopia, collapse, disillusion, social fragmentation and so on – and, within that focus, has tended to concentrate on Havana, as the two editors observe at the start of this collection. However, little has actually been written exclusively about the city during that period. Instead, historians have often set contemporary Havana in a historical context of chaotic but luxuriant evolution but left out of their depiction any analysis of the city as it is currently, rather than as it was. Yet the fascination of cultural studies, and indeed of Cuban authors, with the dilapidated city that Havana seems to have become has created an orthodoxy that sees the ‘city in ruins’ as a metaphor for ‘the revolution in ruins’ after 1990. Indeed, that has also been the theme picked up by a flood of media visitors, certainly driven by the travel industry’s enticement to ‘see Cuba before it changes’.

Hence, the editors clearly intend this collection – based on a Latin American Studies Association symposium in 2007 – to address that imbalance, or at least question the underlying orthodoxy. Whether it does so is a moot point, perhaps inevitably in any such conference-based collection, where the convenors are at the mercy of the variable quality of the participants’ contributions. However, it has to be said that, despite such fears of unevenness in quality, the overall success of the book is positive, with many of the pieces addressing the basic issue with acumen, objectivity and subtlety.

The volume is divided into three parts. Part I (‘Mapping Havana: Citizenship and the City’) brings together six essays on different aspects of the physical and lived space of Havana. Without doubt the best of these six are Mario Coyula’s ‘autopsy of a utopia’ (his 2007 diatribe against the architectural dogmatism and cultural philistinism of the *quinquenio gris* and beyond, which finally created a ‘deterioration of civic culture’: p. 50), which stands out for its perspicacity as much as its caring passion; Patricio Del Real and Joseph Scarpaci’s fascinating study of informal self-construction through the prism of the *barbacoa* (the self-built, and often dangerously jerry-built, mezzanine floor that serves as a means of creating space in a woefully limited and overcrowded dwelling); and above all, Jill Hamberg’s magnificent and detailed study of the evolution and complex nature of Havana’s ‘slums’. The latter two essays both resist notions of Cuban ‘exceptionalism’ by setting Havana within a context of Latin American urbanisation and shanty town creation, but Hamberg especially gives us a revealing picture of ‘slums’ that can often be something other than

the familiar, degrading and poverty-stricken dwellings that one expects; as an exercise in solid, detailed, objective and thoughtful writing, her essay is a gem.

The other three chapters of part I are less successful. Quintana's exposition of an FIU project (on Havana's unique opportunity to avoid the architectural and urbanising ravages of the 1960s to 1980s) is all too short, and somewhat light as a result, while the two that open and close the section (by Velia Cecilia Bobes and Rafael Rojas) tend to wax lyrically – Bobes wistfully and Rojas polemically (the latter writing, with a characteristic sharpness of critique and tongue, on the literature emanating from Havana during that period) – but ultimately add little to the book's overall aim, since they largely perpetuate the conventional vision of 'the ruins' of Havana and of the associated metaphor of the ruined 'utopia' of the Cuban Revolution.

Part II ('Havana's Shifting Margins') is generally more even in quality. Broadly covering the cultural manifestations of the Havana of the period, it tends to reflect less self-consciously and analyse more precisely than the two literature-focused critical essays of part I. Two chapters adopt a more or less chronological approach: Sujatha Fernandes' tracing of the evolution, and role, of the musical forms that carved out an identity for a particular urban generation and social sector – rap and hip-hop – is typically astute and sensitive, going beyond the conventional 'music as resistance' pattern of much writing on the subject, while Jacqueline Loss' very specific study of the visual and plastic arts of a particular time and place acts as a prism for discovering how Havana's artists came to terms aesthetically and ideologically with the seminal but now abandoned Soviet past. Two other essays – Emma Alvarez-Tabio Albo's study of the theme of Havana's ruins as seen by successive generations of writers and artists, and Laura Redruello's analysis of the work of Rolando Menéndez as seen through a geographical 'tour' of the places where his works are based – focus more on the physical spaces of the city. The former is enthusiastic and more positive about the normally damned 1980s (the 'citizens' decade') because of their innovative and democratic character, while the latter is a more familiar exercise in textual exegesis. A textual approach is also adopted by the final chapter of part II, Cecelia Lawless' reflective study of Pedro Juan Gutiérrez's Havana, not so much the 'underbelly' that many see, but rather an unseen and hidden city.

The final part ('Coda') simply brings into play two reflective rather than analytical pieces. Antonio José Ponte's lament for the artificial and un-Havana-like reconstruction of Habana Vieja and José Quiroga's collage of impressionist pen-pictures are interesting, if characteristically jaundiced, but they seem a curious appendage to a collection which has a great deal to recommend it in some parts but comes up short in others. Indeed, one great disappointment is that the two editors, who have always succeeded in saying interesting and challenging things, do not include any major contribution of their own, simply sharing the introductory overview: one cannot help thinking that the whole collection would have benefited considerably from their reflections or analysis, perhaps in place of some of the thinner contributions. However, aside from the odd weakness of the collection, there is still more than enough solid material here to interest us all, by focusing welcome attention on a topic that is much described but little understood.

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