

President Obama's first intervention in April 2009 at the Organization of American States in Trinidad and Tobago point to a new start in economic and political relations with Latin America, including Cuba. Ultimately, a reconciliation needs to take place of two confronted visions of Cuba: one based on the increasingly irrelevant portrayal of the island as the last refuge of outdated Cold War ideologies, the other, represented by Castro himself, as the country that brought to life Martí's own vision in 'Our America'.

In sum, Balfour's latest edition of his acclaimed biography of Fidel Castro is a very well-written book demythologising both the revolutionary process and its historic leader. It is extremely easy to read from cover to cover. Seeing history as a story, those who know little about Cuba's revolutionary process will appreciate the ease with which pages flow and key events are analysed in a clear yet detailed manner. On the other hand, those who know Cuba's history well will also find much to enjoy in this biography, especially its judicious remarks and cool detachment, something not always obvious in much of the literature about the Cuban Revolution.

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Esther Whitfield, *Cuban Currency: The Dollar and 'Special Period' Fiction* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), pp. 277, \$67.50, \$22.50 pb; £14, pb.

Though always unpleasant, historical and economic crises offer windows to examine culture and society. Charles Dickens' view of the Industrial Revolution and John Steinbeck's picture of the Great Depression in *The Grapes of Wrath* testify to this theme in literature. Esther Whitfield's *Cuban Currency* graces Latin American comparative literature with an insightful interpretation of Cuba in a post-Soviet era. To be sure, Cuban fiction was alive and well before the unravelling of the USSR and the specialised trade bloc that afforded the island favourable terms of trade. However, the author shows the connections between the 'Special Period in a Time of Peace' and how artists and writers push the state's level of tolerance; sometimes intentionally and sometimes not, but always with the passion of writers plying their trade. The burgeoning literature of post-Soviet Cuba written on and outside the island continues to blossom, and if social scientists believe that they have little to learn from their colleagues in the humanities, Whitfield will prove them wrong.

We learn that the changes in the 'Special Period' have been no less profound than the massive statisation that took place after the 1959 Revolution. The author's 'dollar' represents the commodification of Cuban culture, ranging from the benign export of Che images, tee-shirts and the like, to analyses of how Cuban prostitution corrupts the foreign tourists and voyeurs who come to the Caribbean in search of authentic culture, fiery *mulatas*, Hemingway, and the crumbling façades of Old Havana. This is comparative literature at its best because the author combs through a vast array of fiction by authors ranging from hard-core exiles to those who remain on the island and are still 'tolerated' by the state. Principally, though, Cuban writers such as Pedro Juan Gutiérrez, Antonio José Ponte and Zoé Valdés provide the raw material through which Whitfield explores the Special Period and the commodification of Cuban culture. Through this rich pool of fiction, the reader bears witness

to how Cuba becomes an ideological theme park consisting of crowded tenement houses, multiple aesthetic codes, and an array of illegal activities. Whitfield's aim is to answer the questions:

How does the partial dollarization, if not the complete globalization, of Cuban society and literature shape fiction of the subsequent years? How do Cuban writers, implicated in the dynamics of international publishing whether they live in Cuba or abroad, acknowledge a readership whose expectations are vastly different from those of the domestic and non-commercial markets in which their work would previously have circulated? (p. 33)

Heady questions are these, and readers searching to pigeonhole the author's assessment of the vast literature of Special Period fiction will not find an easily compartmentalised answer (as is so often the case, sadly, in Cuban studies). Of course, there is Zoé Valdés' reference to the Comedian in Chief (Commander in Chief) in her *I Gave You All I Had*, but there is also the tale of heroism among the characters in Ponte's writings and Pedro Juan Gutiérrez's *Dirty Havana Trilogy*, where the tourist 'seen' consists of individuals whose dignity and identity is no more than an international adjective: German, Canadian or Italian. In this venue, the Cuban is empowered to dominate and exploit the foreigner without the latter having any sense of her/his sensation.

Whitfield offers a cogent overview of the many subtenets of Cuban fiction. As she does so, we are treated to a literary and intellectual interpretation of this island of eleven million. The power of the written word is a welcome medium to counter the often superficial account of life there. 'Tourists do not merely move around Havana, however. They look, recording what they see, and photography increasingly becomes the medium through which Havana is made recognizable abroad ...' (p. 124). Professors teaching courses about the island will immediately recognise rich opportunities to combine *Cuban Currency* with Cuban film; old (*Lucía*), not so old (*Fresa y Chocolate*), as well as cinema produced outside the island (*El arte de hacer ruinas*, for example, by Antonio José Ponte).

Readers should not avoid this book simply because they are unfamiliar with Cuban fiction, either in its original or in translation. Whitfield's translations are spot on because she handles Cuban slang refreshingly well. Every verbatim citation carried out in English translation is properly footnoted in the original Spanish. For the most part, the political and historical account of modern Cuba and Havana is objective and accurate (even though this reviewer's last name is misspelled in the book; abolition did not occur in 1882 as noted on p. 102, rather the *patronato* (tutelage) did not end until 1886; and Old Havana's restoration did not commence immediately after its 1982 designation as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO, as suggested on p. 25). In her conclusions, Whitfield draws on the analogy used by Ponce and other ruinologists, that the future of the island will be rebuilt brick by brick and not overnight as idealists might dream (p. 154).

The author's afterword notes that the dollar had already been withdrawn from circulation, and Fidel had proclaimed the end of the Special Period, just as the book project neared its end. She opted to keep the Special Period in the title and, instead, use the so-called termination of the economic crisis as 'an opportunity to put [her] words in the past tense and consider the last sixteen years as a bygone era rather than a present to keep pace with' (p. 155). Both *Cuban Currency* and the island's fiction are a gift to all because of their power of analysis and their ability to stretch the imagination across time, space and ideology. Like the character Tom, in *The Grapes of*

Wrath, who comments, 'I'll be ever'where – wherever you look', there are glimpses of Cubans in this corpus of literature that are both unique and widespread.

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Fred Rosen (ed.), *Empire and Dissent: The United States and Latin America* (Durham NC and London: Duke University Press, 2008), pp. xvii + 263, \$79.95, \$22.95 pb; £50.00, £12.99 pb.

The focus of Fred Rosen's edited volume is on 'the interaction of imperial power with the dissent and resistance it has engendered' in Latin America. Today, this power is largely *economic*, with Washington insisting upon a neoliberal growth model whose most perverse consequence, Rosen continues, is increased inequality. Although Latin Americans who oppose this inequality and neoliberalism's other shortcomings 'have been treated as though they simply do not understand the dynamics of human nature and the "real" world', this volume is intended to demonstrate not only that the critics understand quite well, but also that they have no intention of conceding to the Washington Consensus.

Five of the nine chapters that follow Rosen's introduction are case studies of how Latin Americans are currently resisting US hegemony. Those five cases are preceded by four chapters grouped together in a section labelled 'Historical Reflections', two of which are useful and two of which have only the most tenuous tie to US–Latin American relations. One of the mysteriously incongruent chapters is Gregory Dowd's discussion of eighteenth-century Native American resistance to British colonialism in the US Midwest; even less obviously relevant is John Oldfield's discussion of the British public's resistance to the slave trade. That leaves two chapters of historical reflections. One, by Alan Knight, provides a helpful roadmap to understanding US policy, guiding readers' attention to the distinction between formal and informal empire (the latter being more characteristic of the United States), to the functions of imperialism, to the mechanisms for fulfilling these functions (with a brief but provocative discussion of the export of US cultural norms), and to the differences between US power in the circum-Caribbean region and in the rest of Latin America. Knight notes that throughout the region Latin Americans' 'collaboration is more common than resistance', but he admits to having no idea why: 'Whether the Latin American taste for U.S. material benefits is thoroughly opportunist and self-interested, or based on some deeper cultural empathy, is a riddle I would not try to answer.' What Knight knows is that the stick has historically rested alongside the cultural carrot: 'The markets threaten swift sanctions against those who stray too far from the Washington consensus.'

Carlos Marichal closes the section of historical reflections with a useful chapter on the US government's role in debt negotiations from 1945 to 2005. Focusing on Mexico and Argentina, Marichal gives some attention to the Cold War era, emphasising, for example, how 'international and multilateral banks funnelled substantial sums of money precisely to the military dictatorships and authoritarian governments that reigned in Latin America in the 1970s, most of them with clear support of the Pentagon'. But the focus is upon the more recent evolution away from *bond* finance to *bank* finance, which has facilitated a herd mentality: vast mountains of petrodollars flowing quickly in and just as quickly out of emerging markets, sometimes