

BOOK REVIEW ESSAYS

A Cultural Revolution: New Directions in Cuban History, 1952–2013

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This essay reviews the following works:

Antiracism in Cuba: The Unfinished Revolution. By Devyn Spence Benson. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016. Pp. xi + 297. \$29.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781469626727.

Revolution within the Revolution: Women and Gender Politics in Cuba, 1952–1962. By Michelle Chase. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015. Pp. xi + 285. \$29.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781469625003.

Revolutionary Cuba: A History. By Luis Martínez-Fernández. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2014. Pp. xi + 371. \$44.95 hardcover. ISBN: 9780813049953.

The Structure of Cuban History: Meanings and Purpose of the Past. By Louis A. Pérez Jr. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013. \$39.95 hardcover. ISBN: 9781469606927.

Haydée Santamaría, Cuban Revolutionary: She Led by Transgression. By Margaret Randall. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015. Pp. ix + 221. \$23.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780822359623.

Scholars inside and outside Cuba have long confronted a daunting range of obstacles in attempting to evaluate the nature and historical significance of the island's 1959 revolution. These have included state censorship and proscribed access to archives, restrictions on scholars' ability to dialogue freely with Cuban scholars and leaders, and logistical difficulties associated with poor infrastructure, facilities, and lack of resources. However, less tangible obstacles have been equally important. Many American and European scholars of the Left have been drawn to Cuba more by their fascination with the revolution's anti-imperialist and Marxist-Leninist projects than because of a sustained interest in the island's history. Conversely, for scholars who are members of the global Cuban diaspora, personal or familial memories of disaffection, dispossession, and displacement have sometimes complicated their efforts to critically evaluate the meaning of the revolution within the broader context of Cuban history.

Given these challenges, it is unsurprising that much of the English language literature on the Cuban Revolution produced before the end of the Cold War was as fervent in its convictions as it was facile in its interpretations of a staggeringly complex period in the island's history. Moreover, despite their radically different assessments of the revolutionary regime and society, right- and left-leaning scholars nonetheless coincided in portraying the post-1959 period as a profound break not only with the United States but with Cuba's own national past. This would begin to change in the mid-1990s following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the onset of the Special Period, which produced a dramatic resurgence of the racialized socioeconomic inequality that had helped propel the anti-Batista uprising and now threatened the revolution's future viability. Social scientists and cultural theorists began to explore the emerging identities, forms of discontent, and popular cultural expressions that challenged previous portrayals of the Cuban state as all-powerful and disputed the notion of Cuban revolutionary ideology as all-encompassing.¹ By the

¹ For a review of this literature see Michael Snodgrass, "Assessing Everyday Life in Post-Soviet Cuba," *Latin American Research Review* 36, no. 3 (2001): 204–220.

first years of the new millennium, scholars from multiple disciplines had also adopted a transnational lens in reassessing Cuban history and society, challenging earlier tendencies to analyze the experience of island resident and diasporic Cubans in isolation from one another.²

Within the field of history, the winds of change also began to blow during the Special Period. In 1994, preeminent Cuban American historian Louis A. Pérez Jr. published *On Becoming Cuban: Identity, Nationality and Culture*, a game-changing reflection on the importance of American popular culture to Cuban identity during the republican period, arguing that Cubans' frustrated aspirations toward a consumer-driven modernity played as important a role as economic inequality and the republic's failed political institutions in sparking the revolution.³ This book, and the broader "cultural turn" which it reflected, catalyzed a new generation of scholars to transcend the field's earlier structural focus in order to reevaluate the importance of questions of culture and identity within the broader trajectories of Cuban history. At the forefront of this intellectual movement were scholars like Aline Helg, Ada Ferrer, and Alejandro de la Fuente, who broke new ground by making use of social and cultural analytical lenses in order to challenge the color-blind narratives that first entered Cuban national discourse during the independence struggle and which have continued to define Cuba's official political culture after the revolution and into the twenty-first century.⁴

This foundational scholarship opened the way for a third wave of Cuban scholars who would make use of innovative cultural approaches to reassess the history of the Cuban Revolution within and across the island's borders. Five recently published books exemplify this consolidating "cultural revolution" in Cuban history, offering new insights into the distinct experiences, worldviews, and forms of expression adopted by white or black, rural or urban, gay or straight, and young or old Cuban men and women, both on and off the island, since the beginning of the anti-Batista insurgency, highlighting the forms of agency they have expressed in embracing, accommodating or resisting revolutionary mandates.⁵ Collectively, they serve to firmly ground the history of the revolution within the longer trajectory of Cuban nationhood, shedding new light on the ways that "average" or marginalized Cubans have understood and negotiated the accomplishments, failures, and unfinished business of the ongoing revolutionary project.

The first of these books is Louis Pérez Jr.'s *The Structure of Cuban History: Meanings and Purpose of the Past* (2013). In it, Pérez trains his characteristically wide-angled lens on the revolution in order to assess its place within the broader processes of cultural continuity and change that have defined 150 years of Cuban history. Drawing upon nineteenth- and twentieth-century Cuban literature, media, historical scholarship, and the speeches and writings of the island's leading civic, intellectual, and artistic voices, the author traces the emergence of a shared notion of "Cuban"—forged during the nineteenth-century *independentista* experience and organized primarily around the needs of a people at war—that would continue to drive collective understandings of nationality and the national destiny through the sweeping political, economic and social transformations of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Pérez focuses on the collective emotional consequences of the island's failed struggle to free itself from Spanish rule, an arduous thirty-year campaign that led not to the creation of the egalitarian, raceless republic envisioned by José Martí and Antonio Maceo, but instead to humiliating occupation by the United States. The devastating loss of national sovereignty for which Cubans had sacrificed all led to the emergence of a popular narrative of unfinished revolution through which the island's citizenry expressed their frustrated aspirations to political participation, inclusion, and social justice, as well as their as-yet unfulfilled desire to take their place among the modern nations of the world. It also left the island's citizenry with a latent resentment of the US that would increasingly assert its way into public life by midcentury. Pulling back from overdetermined structural explanations of the road to the 1959 revolution, Pérez convincingly argues that the anti-Batista uprising was a product of Cubans' "interior history," organized around popular memory of a heroic but ultimately unfinished struggle for liberation that was fundamentally incompatible with the character of the republic and its quasi-colonial relationship with the US (13).

² See María de los Angeles Torres, *In the Land of Mirrors: Cuban Exile Politics in the United States* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999); Damián J. Fernández and Madeline Cámara Betancourt, eds., *Cuba, The Elusive Nation: Interpretations of a National Identity* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2000).

³ Louis A. Pérez Jr., *On Becoming Cuban: Identity, Nationality and Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

⁴ Aline Helg, *Our Rightful Share: The Afro-Cuban Struggle for Equality, 1886–1912* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Ada Ferrer, *Insurgent Cuba: Race, Nation and Revolution, 1868–1898* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Alejandro de la Fuente, *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

⁵ See Lillian Guerra, *Visions of Power in Cuba: Revolution, Redemption, and Resistance, 1959–1971* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), and Anita Casavantes Bradford, *The Revolution Is for the Children: The Politics of Childhood in Havana and Miami, 1959–1962* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

In framing Cuban history as an unfolding conversation between Cubans and their memories of the nation's unfinished independence struggle, Pérez reveals deep continuities between pre- and postrevolutionary Cuba, in the process raising questions that (until recently) few scholars have thought to ask. Why did Cubans, the majority of whom would have identified as anticommunist before 1961, so overwhelmingly support the rapid transformation of a moderate nationalist insurgency into a far-reaching socialist revolution? Why did many Cubans of the propertied classes who stood to lose position and privilege and wealth nonetheless support the revolution's radicalization? Pérez suggests that the answer lies within an all-encompassing Cuban value system, forged in the hundred years before the M-26-7's 1959 victory, that imagined liberation first from Spanish and then from US domination both as precursors to the fulfillment of Cubans' aspirations to social justice and as ends in themselves. It was thus perhaps inevitable that Cubans would see the triumph of the revolution as the fulfillment of the nineteenth-century independence struggle, and that US opposition to Castro's government would only serve to fuel the long-burning fires of nationalist vindication, providing the island's new leadership with the space needed to veer left in defiance of the moderate constitutional vision of its (initially) anticommunist proponents.

Talking back to historic US representations of Cubans as politically immature and susceptible to authoritarian rule, a vision of nonwhite postcolonial peoples that persists in the American imagination today, Pérez suggests that some Cubans may have chosen to acquiesce to Castro's increasingly authoritarian rule, consciously prioritizing the form of external sovereignty over the substance of domestic self-determination. He allows for the possibility that some of those who publicly embraced the new regime may have done so because they saw it as the lesser of evils available to a small Caribbean nation in the shadow of its American neighbor. Carrying this argument forward in time, the author further suggests that it was Cubans' shared commitment to preserving national autonomy at all costs, rather than the increasingly repressive efforts of the imploding socialist state, that held the nation together during the prolonged crisis that followed the collapse in 1991 of the Soviet Union. While this logic may seem illogical or infuriating, even heartbreaking, to some outside observers, it is nonetheless wholly consistent with the 150 years of interior history so vividly recounted in Pérez's book.

The metanarrative of unfinished revolution that informs Cubans' unswerving dedication to the notion of *patria o muerte* is not a new one, at least not to those who take seriously the way that the island's people have long written, discussed, and performed their own history. What is new in this book (which should be required reading for Latin American and US historians as well as US diplomats assigned to postcolonial nations) is its bold assertion that "the cultural transformations transacted in the course of the nineteenth century *independentista* experience were as decisive to the formation of the ideal of nationality as the political objectives were to the goal of national sovereignty" (9). In *The Structure of Cuban History*, Pérez decisively elevates the question of culture to a place of prominence within the field of Cuban history, directing our analytical gaze simultaneously backward and forward in time in search of broader and deeper explanations for the processes of continuity and change that have long animated national life.

Luis Martínez Fernández's *Revolutionary Cuba: A History* (2014) similarly emphasizes the importance of cultural approaches to understanding the Cuban Revolution. This accessible and meticulously researched survey text makes use of the existing secondary literature, original archival sources as well as excerpts from poems, novels, photographs, oral history, jokes and gossip, as windows on "the material and emotional realities of the revolution" (5). Clearly and logically organized around seven threads of continuity that provide an overarching structure for analysis of the post-1959 period that reach deep back into the island's republican and colonial past, the book also follows Pérez's lead in highlighting the traces of the nineteenth century that continue to animate Cuba's national life today. Among the most compellingly argued and analytically useful of these threads is Martínez's argument for an understanding of Cuba as a "persistent plantation," highlighting the extent to which the island's history, social organization, economics, and culture have been shaped by the sugar agro-industrial complex. He brings the widely accepted critique of the sugar industry as a source of the island's most pressing problems in the prerevolutionary era into the study of the revolutionary period, offering a poignant analysis of the Castro regime's repeated, and repeatedly unsuccessful, efforts to free the island from the grip of sugar plantations.

Martínez also highlights another aspect of the revolutionary era's continuity with the past through his articulation of the notion of a persistent "counterplantation," linking the idea of the colonial era plantation as a space of struggle in which Afro-Cubans resisted their enslavement through violent revolts, maroonage, and daily forms of resistance, to the diverse quotidian ways that Cubans have resisted revolutionary directives—including flight from the island. In doing so, he offers an important reminder of the agency that nonelite Cubans have long exercised in response to myriad forms of oppression and repression, while

offering a broader challenge to the “before-and-after framework that obliterates the manifold continuities tying the pre-revolutionary era to the era of the revolution” (11).

In developing another thread of continuity, that of “many Cubas,” Martínez takes up the challenge to monolithic unifying narratives of Cuban nationhood previously articulated by Helg, Ferrer, and de la Fuente, acknowledging the persistence of profound differences and inequalities between black and white, rich and poor, rural and urban, and island-based and diasporic Cubans. Disappointingly, however, he does not explicitly include male and female in the list of differences that have led to the creation and persistence of many (unequal) Cubas throughout history. He partially compensates for this omission in his discussion of another of the book’s threads of continuity, the “island on horseback,” in which he begins to allude to a gendered analysis by linking cultural constructions of masculinity to the patterns of militarism, political violence, and *caudillismo* throughout Cuba’s history. However, this argument is largely descriptive rather than diagnostic. Martínez misses the opportunity to offer a deeper critique of the gender relations that sustained machismo and militarism on the island and fails to clearly articulate the ways that both men and women and shifting constructions of masculinity and femininity have served as agents of change in Cuban history.

As a result, Martínez’s depiction of the “island on horseback” runs the risk of reinforcing the idea of Cubans as passively accepting strongman leadership. Despite this shortcoming (one I hope the author might address in a subsequent edition) the book as a whole offers a coherent, engaging, and fair-minded survey of the post-1959 period that successfully uses cultural approaches to provide a more comprehensive picture of life on the island during the Castro years, while firmly embedding the revolutionary experience within the broader narratives of Cuban history. It is well positioned to become one of the standard texts for introductory courses on Cuban revolutionary history.

In *Haydée Santamaría: Cuban Revolutionary* (2015), the American radical poet, essayist, and photographer Margaret Randall continues her life’s work of documenting the participation of women in postcolonial and socialist revolutions. Her latest book is an intimate and emotive portrait of the life of Santamaría, perhaps the most important female figure of the Cuban Revolution. Santamaría participated in the 1953 attack on Santiago’s Moncada Barracks (officially celebrated as the beginning of the revolutionary struggle) before founding Casa de las Américas in 1959. Santamaría would direct the island’s preeminent cultural institution, promoting and improving access to the arts on the island, supporting politically and socially progressive artists around the world, and leading many of the revolution’s most successful cultural diplomacy initiatives until her death by suicide in 1980. However, despite her lifelong dedication to the revolution, the island’s almost exclusively male Communist Party leadership viewed her decision to take her own life as unworthy of a revolutionary; as a result, Santamaría was barred from receiving a state funeral and memorial services, and subsequent public discussions of her life failed to fully acknowledge her profound contributions to the revolution.

In seeking to reclaim a rightful position of prominence within recent Cuban history for Haydée, Randall’s book offers an important corrective to narratives that all too frequently continue to view the island’s story through an uncritically male-centered and masculinist lens. With that being said, it must be noted that Randall is not a historical scholar; the author herself warns readers that the book was written by “a poet, not a historian,” a fact which becomes evident in the book’s opening pages. The first chapter offers a simplistic retelling of the anti-Batista insurgency, portraying Fidel Castro’s M-26-7 and the Sierra Maestra guerrilla campaign as having “won the war” while downplaying the decisive role of a multifaceted urban resistance. It also blithely characterizes the establishment, radicalization, and institutionalization of the revolutionary regime after 1959—a process that marginalized and finally forcibly excluded many of the insurgency’s key leaders while provoking the exodus of millions of the revolution’s early supporters—as “the sometimes messy job of incorporating other progressive forces ... into a cohesive governing body” that would “construct a society that politically, economically and socially was the antithesis of its predecessor” (5). In portraying the revolution as a unified and “perfectly coordinated” social movement whose triumph would produce a radical break with the island’s past, Randall uncritically reproduces the Cuban government’s official version of its own history and sets the stage for an exploration of Haydée Santamaría’s life and times that is more defined by the author’s ideological fervor than intellectual rigor (4).

Randall’s stated intent to of “looking at tensions and trying to decipher how this woman negotiated multiple contradictions” is at odds with her desire to maintain a triumphalist narrative of Cuban revolutionary history, one that extends far beyond the recognition of its accomplishments, among which must be counted its sustained support for the arts, through Casa de las Américas and other revolutionary institutions. Despite the claim that her book employs a “rebel and feminist lens,” there is nothing particularly rebellious or feminist in this reading of Haydée’s life story nor of the story of the revolution (13). Instead, even though she paints a sensitive picture of womanhood in conservative midcentury Cuba as a “narrow space” limited by “economic status, education and culture” (to say nothing of race), Randall goes on to praise Haydée

for transcending “gender, class, racial, sexual and cultural prisons” at the same time that she unwittingly paints a picture of a woman whose life and death—indeed, whose very sense of self—appear to have been structured by an ongoing struggle to negotiate these very limitations (16).

These same contradictory desires limit Randall’s analysis of Santamaría’s tenure as director of Casa de las Américas. Randall correctly notes that in assuming this position, Haydée had accepted the incredible task of “founding and heading an arts institution that would do nothing less than break the U.S. blockade” (18). Randall also rightly points out that her success in at least partially achieving this objective, and that she did so with a sixth-grade education, was nothing short of remarkable. However, instead of offering deeper insight into the intelligent, competent woman who deftly managed a globally preeminent cultural institution within a highly restrictive political context, Randall retreats into a gendered sentimentality, eulogizing Santamaría as “Casa’s soul” and describing her as a “magical,” deeply intuitive, and self-sacrificing maternal figure.

In the end, Randall’s impressionistic biography fails to move beyond the cognitive dissonance produced by her desire to pay tribute to a woman she deeply admired and to denounce her erasure from revolutionary history, while simultaneously clinging to a triumphalist narrative of a male-led and deeply masculinist revolution. As a result, while *Haydée Santamaría* is successful in highlighting the centrality of culture to the island’s national life and international relations after 1959, it fails to offer anything approaching a critical analysis of revolutionary history or the complex and often contradictory gender politics that have animated it.

Readers seeking a more scholarly examination of these topics would do well to turn to Michelle Chase’s *Revolution within the Revolution: Women and Gender Politics in Cuba, 1952–1962* (2015). In this thoughtful book, Chase issues a direct challenge to official narratives that hold up Haydée Santamaría and Celia Sánchez as unique among Cuban women in playing a decisive role in the revolution, asserting that while “women were important but exceptional actors in the Sierra Maestra ... women’s participation in the urban anti-Batista struggle was the norm” (9). She draws on a wide range of sources, including the pre-1960 mainstream and clandestine Cuban media, firsthand accounts of the urban opposition movement, US consular dispatches, as well as the post-1960 exile press, to recover the crucial roles played by thousands of women in the anti-Batista uprising and in shaping the revolution’s approach to women’s issues and gender relations in the first three years after Fidel Castro assumed power, while also critically analyzing how ideas about gender propelled the processes of insurgency and revolutionary consolidation.

In the book’s first three chapters, which focus on the struggle to topple the Batista dictatorship, Chase invites readers to shift their gaze away from the celebrated male leaders of the Sierra Maestra and to refocus on the urban resistance, where women’s participation, though more diffuse and less documented, was nonetheless central to the collapse of the Batista dictatorship. In doing so, she crafts a dynamic relational history in which notions of both femininity and masculinity, inflected by other categories of social difference, including race and class, were equally implicated in driving the revolution. Her wonderfully nuanced analysis further reveals the ways that both traditional and more progressive ideas animated the revolutionary process. While demonstrating that many middle-class urban women sought to participate in the revolution as a way of escaping conventions of womanhood that largely confined them to the home, Chase argues that they nonetheless participated in the opposition movement *as women*, mobilizing under notions of maternalism and moral authority and within semipublic spaces like movie theaters, department stores, and churches that were understood as implicitly female. Moreover, female members of the underground also frequently organized protest actions to coincide with funerals and vigils, engaging in public performances of grief and loss that reinforced traditional notions of female suffering, spirituality and self-sacrifice while “domesticating” the masculine violence of the anti-Batista struggle for a middle-class Catholic audience by highlighting male bravery, paternal responsibility, and sexual virtue (46).

In the book’s final three chapters, Chase takes on top-down narratives of women’s emancipation after 1959 that credit the island’s new leadership with a visionary commitment to eradicating gender inequality. She contrasts the Castro government’s initial efforts to reform family life—through mass marriage ceremonies and the legitimization of the children of informal unions—with the spontaneous activities of M-26-7 affiliated Women’s Brigades, which launched their own grassroots initiatives to aid female factory and domestic workers two years before the launch of highly publicized state retraining programs for household servants, sex workers, and other women deemed in need of revolutionary redemption.

In detailing how activist women pushed the new government’s male leaders toward more transformative ideas about gender relations, Chase offers a close reading of the processes of conflict and collaboration that linked different groups of Cuban women to one another, to revolutionary organizations, and to the nascent state and its leadership, exploring their competing motives and visions for the future as well as the myriad ways they worked with or against the new regime’s male-dominated power structures. She carefully traces

the emerging rivalry between the “new” left activism of younger, noncommunist and M-26-7 affiliated women who had been active in the urban insurgency, and the women of the prerevolutionary Marxist left, most of whom had not participated directly in the anti-Batista struggle. At the same time, Chase correctly notes the limits of postrevolutionary women’s activism by noting how the ongoing celebration of the heroic *barbudo* army served to reinscribe a hypermasculine and militaristic politics (à la Martínez’s “island on horseback”) that simultaneously marginalized women’s concerns as peripheral to the “real” revolutionary struggle and justified the disbanding of all grassroots women’s organizations and their replacement by the state-led Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) in 1960.

Centering women’s experiences and perspectives in a provocative reconsideration of the Cuban Revolution, *Revolution within the Revolution* disrupts official narratives that depict prerevolutionary Communists’ rise to dominance within the Castro government as a harmonious and inevitable process, while demonstrating that revolutionary leaders’ attention to women’s issues after 1959 was reactive rather than proactive, a response to the vast but forgotten grassroots mobilization of women in Cuba’s urban centers after the revolution’s triumph. Providing a much-needed corrective to scholarship that reads the revolutionary state as the exclusive source of innovation and social change, the book discredits once and for all the notion of the revolution as a total break with the past by convincingly demonstrating that, as far as relations between men and women were concerned, “revolutionary Cuba exhibited surprising continuity with republican Cuba” (10).

Devyn Spence Benson’s *Antiracism in Cuba: The Unfinished Revolution* (2016) turns a similarly critical historical lens on triumphalist narratives of state-directed social change that officially declared the eradication of racism on the island in 1961. Drawing on government documents and speeches, Cuban newspapers and periodicals, oral histories, and books and films from the pre- and early revolutionary periods, Benson offers readers an unflinching analysis of the equally significant achievements and failures of the revolutionary government’s three-year antiracism campaign. While acknowledging her intellectual debt to historians like Ferrer and de la Fuente, Benson argues that earlier scholarship’s notion of a “return to racism” implicitly reinforced official narratives crediting the revolution with eliminating the most visible markers of racial discrimination by 1961 and attributing “residual” racism to the persistence of prejudice in “private” spaces. Instead, Benson turns a critical lens on the strengths and shortcomings of state-led antiracist campaigns themselves, in order to convincingly demonstrate that “racism and antiracism coexisted and infiltrated every part of Cuba’s dramatic social reform program” and therefore limited the transformative power of official antiracism (20).

In the book’s first two chapters, Benson explores the early revolutionary regime’s decision to tackle racial inequality, a surprising decision given the anticommunist M-26-7’s unwillingness to directly address questions of race during the anti-Batista struggle. She attributes this reticence to the revolutionary leadership’s embrace of a color-blind vision of equality inherited from the island’s celebrated nineteenth-century independence leaders, as well as to lingering negative associations between Afro-Cubans, the prerevolutionary (and explicitly antiracist) Communist Party, and the Batista dictatorship. Benson accordingly argues that Castro’s decision to launch an antiracist campaign was not sparked by a visionary politics of racial equality but rather should be understood as a strategic response to pressure from Afro-Cuban intellectuals and club leaders, and as a means of securing black Cubans’ support as domestic dissent and US opposition began to grow.

However, Castro’s focus on increasing labor opportunities and access to public spaces for Afro-Cubans—framing racism as “a situation the government could resolve” rather than excavating and eradicating antiblack ideas and attitudes—as well as his competing desire to distance Cuba from the US by downplaying the depth and scope of racial discrimination on the island, limited his ability to fully address the roots of Cuban racism (55). At the same time, Benson demonstrates that white revolutionary leaders frequently resorted to paternalistic discourses that framed Afro-Cubans as passive and grateful recipients of revolutionary initiatives designed to move them out of blackness and backwardness in order to integrate them into revolutionary citizenship.

In the book’s fourth chapter, Benson analyzes the temporary and often self-serving transnational alliances formed between white Cuban revolutionaries, Afro-Cuban leaders, and African Americans during the early years of the revolution, challenging readers to “push beyond the pattern of celebrating alliances among the aggrieved and begin to see the ways in which marginalized groups exploited one another” to further their causes (156). As one example of this dynamic, Benson persuasively argues that state-led tourism campaigns inviting African Americans to “experience first class citizenship” on the island played a key role in the revolution’s antidiscrimination efforts. However, Afro-Cuban accounts of their continuing experience of discrimination in the same hotels, restaurants, and recreational centers that the government promoted to African Americans threatened efforts to forge a solid alliance between the new revolutionary state and African Americans. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that Afro-Cuban critiques had all but disappeared from the Cuban press by 1960.

Benson concludes her analysis of the three-year antiracism campaign in Chapter 5, where she gives us a close examination of the revolutionary canonization of murdered Afro-Cuban literacy instructor Conrado Benítez in 1961, a media-driven process that coincided with the proclamation that racial discrimination had been eradicated on the island. Careful textual analysis reveals a shift in revolutionary discourse that made use of the figure of Benitez to frame black Cubans as loyal soldiers and grateful clients of the state, closing the door on further debates about the persistence of racism at a moment when, according to the regime's white leadership, the threat of US invasion demanded unity across color lines. However, in an epilogue that decisively rejects the depiction of Afro-Cubans as passive recipients of revolutionary reform—or, conversely, as victims of state repression—Benson reflects on the subtle ways that some Afro-Cuban intellectuals, especially black women like filmmaker Sara Gómez, continued to search for spaces from which to resist discriminatory ideas and practices and to insist on the value of blackness within revolutionary culture in the late 1960s.

Antiracism in Cuba demonstrates how Afro-Cubans participated in both creating and contesting revolutionary integration and antidiscrimination policies, ultimately pushing a recalcitrant Castro regime to go beyond what was originally intended in its antiracist efforts. In this way it resonates with other recent scholarship that reimagines 1959–1961 as a contingent and conflict-ridden period in which a colonial past and revolutionary present collided and the destiny of the revolution was “up for grabs” (21). Shedding painful new light on the extent to which the disjuncture between national goals and Afro-Cuban aspirations has been a defining characteristic of the island's history since the wars of independence, Benson conclusively reframes the 1959 antiracist campaigns as “another chapter in the history of Afro-Cuban inclusion and exclusion, rather than a complete break with the republican past” (18). In doing so, she casts justifiable doubt on the ability of any government, no matter how revolutionary, to eliminate social inequality from above.

The five books reviewed here offer important new insights into the post-1959 period even as they point toward new ways of interpreting the *longue durée* of Cuban history, using a range of critical cultural lenses to read the revolution in light of the nation's history—and the nation's history in light of the revolution—while simultaneously incorporating previously understudied individuals and groups into the ever-evolving story of an expanded, expansive, and border-crossing Cuban nation. Together, they contribute to ongoing efforts to craft a new metanarrative of continuity between the pre- and postrevolutionary period. Perhaps more importantly, these works help to nuance our understanding of the power of the revolutionary state, often imagined by supporters and detractors alike, and to the detriment of deep historical understanding, as all encompassing. In the best of these volumes, the Cuban nation is still an unfinished project; its “radical” revolution appears cautious, conservative at times, even as culture becomes a palpable and progressive historical force that has pushed past state-sanctioned visions for ameliorating social inequalities. Read in the light of their collective insight, future studies that continue to imagine the revolution as a moment of radical disjuncture or that uncritically praise (or condemn) the revolutionary state's transformative social agenda will seem myopic or naïve, if not disingenuous.

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