

*The Cubalogues: Beat Writers in Revolutionary Havana.* TODD F. TIETCHEN. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010. xiii + 194 pp. (Paper US\$ 29.95)

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*The Cubalogues* promises to explore an oft-commented but ill-comprehended episode of U.S.-Cuban cultural intercourse: the Beat writers in Havana and Havana in the Beats ... or how the Cuban Revolution irrupted into the consciousness of the United States' nascent New Left in the early 1960s and how this drew some of the most prominent exponents of the Beat aesthetic southwards to experience, and perhaps participate in, what C. Wright Mills called "a spontaneous anti-capitalist democracy in its becoming" (in Tietchen p. 39).

Tietchen sets the scene of this Beat extrospection with great skill. Hemmed-in and harried by a rigid "rational world paradigm" (Walter Fisher, in Tietchen p. 40) with rabid anti-communism at its core, and by a bullish assertion of heteronormative order, the Beats allowed their imaginations to wander in what Tietchen calls a "quest for anti-nationalistic conceptions of human community and 'stranger' expressions of political subjectivity" (p. 29). In revolutionary Cuba in the early 1960s, the quest seemed to have come to an end. Captivated by the precedence of praxis over ideological premeditation, by the endemic and effervescent spontaneity, and by the apparent permeability to transnational cultural exchange, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Harold Cruse, Marc Schleifer, Amiri Baraka, and others beheld the Cuban Revolution as an epiphanic "true world forum" where the analogical myopia afflicting Western metaphysics would quickly be cured (C. Wright Mills, in Tietchen p. 44).

Tietchen's analysis of the diverse Beat responses to Cuba beyond this utopic first impression is also commendable. Through the *bildungsroman* of a carnivalesque train journey down the spine of the island to hear Fidel Castro speak, he traces a coming-of-age among these authors, both in their growing impatience with the more politically vapid fringes of Beat and in a cooling of their original fervor for the Cuban revolutionary experiment.

Regrettably, Tietchen's reading of the Cuban cultural and historical contours among which this bifurcation of the Beat and revolutionary paths took place is stymied by some of the same "presumptuousness" toward the communist Other for which he roundly criticizes U.S. opinion-makers of the day (p. 158). First, he leaves certain terminological ambiguities unchallenged.

Echoing Cuban author Gabriel Cabrera Infante's vitriolic anti-Castroism, Tietchen claims that "cosmopolitanism" had been classified as a cardinal sin in Cuba by mid-1961. While hostility to cultural currents from Paris, London, or the Beat capitals of San Francisco and New York certainly became evident in Cuban cultural policy as the 1960s progressed, this could be alternatively interpreted as an ideological salvo against perceived cultural imperialism, rather than a determined turn toward expressive autarky. Hence, while Greenwich Village gurus received a frosty welcome by the mid-1960s, writers and artists from the "non-aligned" world were received with enthusiasm as Cuba recalibrated its cultural compass southwards and eastwards. A year after Allen Ginsberg was unceremoniously expelled, for example, Cuba opened its borders to delegates from more than eighty countries as the "Tricontinental" conference infused Havana with a different kind of cosmopolitanism.

Second, Tietchen's portrayal of the summer of 1961 and the pronouncement of Castro's contentious *Words to the Intellectuals* as marking a cataclysmic schism in Cuba's cultural trajectory glosses over some critical historical nuances. His assertion that the formal alliance with the Soviet Union "effectively shut down Havana as the site of an open and improvised intercultural" (p. 48) masks both the turbulence of Cuba's relations with the USSR throughout the 1960s and the stubborn survival of heterodox aesthetic visions well beyond the alleged demise of what Cabrera Infante called Cuba's fleeting "cultural renaissance" (in Tietchen, p. 10).<sup>1</sup>

Third, and perhaps critically, Tietchen (and the Beat writers he follows) simply cannot see eye to ideological eye with Castro and the revolutionary regime. Whereas Tietchen describes Cuba as only "momentarily open to a host of politically progressive intellectuals" (p. 1), the early 1960s' literacy campaign, urban housing and land reforms, nationalization of key economic sectors, and the ever-present mass mobilization that animated many of these projects could be perceived as placing the "progressive" mantle firmly on the Cuban Revolution's shoulders.

Tietchen and the Beats simply don't share the same "revolutionary" paradigms with Castro and his acolytes. The writers from the United States (and many of their Cuban counterparts) advocate revolution through committed cultural insurgency that deploys the "stranger" and more spontaneous relations between human communities to dissolve the "prosaic nature of conventional (and reified) political realities" they see blighting the geo-politically bipo-

1. Although the 1961 closure of the Cabrera Infante-edited cultural supplement *Lunes de Revolución* can almost certainly be attributed to cultural Machiavellianism, the ideological idiosyncrasies of later literary and filmic projects such as Edmundo Desnoes's *Memorias del subdesarrollo* (1965), Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's *Muerte de un burócrata* (1966), and José Lezama Lima's *Paradiso* (1966) belie Tietchen's description of Cuba's ferrous cultural policy post-1961.

lar world (p. 43). The insular revolutionary idiom is perhaps more “rational” (in the C. Wright Mills’s sense), or at least more pragmatic as the guerrillas in government sought to erode the cognitive frontier between *nación* and *Revolución* to thus conquer an idiosyncratic interstice amid capitalism, communism, and one hundred years of radical Cuban nationalism: “First and foremost comes the Revolution itself,” said Castro in his 1961 *Words* to anxious intellectuals. “Only later will we concern ourselves with other matters.”

Without sensitivity to this mutual misapprehension, and without cognizance of cultural movements as “sites of intense rhetorical or argumentative activity” (p. 10), the history of the Beats in Havana and Havana in the Beats can perhaps be only partially understood.

#### REFERENCE

CASTRO, FIDEL, 1961. Discurso pronunciado por el Comandante Fidel Castro Ruz, Primer Ministro del Gobierno Revolucionario y Secretario del PURSC, como conclusión de las reuniones con los intelectuales cubanos, efectuadas en la Biblioteca Nacional el 16, 23 y 30 de junio de 1961. <<http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1961/esp/f300661e.html>> (accessed 25 May 2001).

*The Devil in the Details: Cuban Antislavery Narrative in the Postmodern Age.* CLAUDETTE M. WILLIAMS. Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2010. x + 206 pp. (Paper US\$ 18.00)

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In *The Devil in the Details*, Claudette M. Williams invokes “a nuanced notion of antislavery” to “breathe new life” into nineteenth-century works of fiction. She specifically focuses on works of fiction published before the abolition of slavery in Cuba in 1886 that present antislavery sentiment as “a political instrument.” As articulated in the introduction, she proposes alternative ways of thinking about and understanding the works covered. While the book is divided into chapters that may be read independently, major themes