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**Alan West-Durán. Cuba: A Cultural History. London: Reaktion Books, 2017. 288 pp. ISBN: 978-1780238395.**

Pilar Cabrera Fonte

Augustana College - Sioux Falls, pcabrera@augie.edu

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Pilar Cabrera Fonte  
Augustana University

The latest book on Cuba by scholar and poet Alan West-Durán is an introduction to the island through an encompassing look at a wide range of cultural manifestations and their most significant connecting threads. It is pleasantly written and rich in compelling detail—its author is the chief editor of a major encyclopedia on Cuba and has written *Tropics of History: Cuba Imagined* (1997) among many other related works. If in *Tropics* West-Durán offers a view of Cuban history “through the minds and images of some of its most perspicacious writers and artists,”<sup>1</sup> here the lens is much more open. As such, this new cultural history is ideal for a reader first approaching the subject. To the scholar of Cuba or Latin America, the book offers many a new discovery and plenty of insightful analyses crisscrossing the popular and the erudite. West-Durán strives to avoid dichotomist stereotypes of Cuba and simplistic accounts. His desire is to find a just middle point: “Arenas would describe Cuba under Castro as a type of hell; Fidel would see it if not as paradise, at least as on the way to constructing a type of promised land. As always, the reality lies somewhere in between” (174). Although one may argue for the inclusion of a couple of influential works or figures mostly absent from the discussion (the film *Alice in Wondertown*, for example, or Yoani Sánchez), the narrative is nonetheless balanced in its examination of diverse trends and works.

The pull of gravitas in this account is the historical present—even as that slippery dimension is ominously altered since late 2016 in ways that necessarily escape the frame of this book. Even so, West-Durán neatly explains the uncertainties and reticence lingering in Havana in the wake of the most auspicious moment of Barack Obama’s visit in March 2016. The six chapters extend chronologically from 1898 until that year, but plenty of cross-temporal references keep the reading vivid and appealing. Besides the authors that one would expect to encounter in such a history (José Martí, Julián del Casal, Jorge Mañach, Lydia Cabrera, Lezama, Piñera, Arenas, etc.) this book includes in each chapter a variety of mediums and genres. The incorporation of the photographic art contributes greatly to the presentation of Cuban society, as in the discussions of poignant photos from the Republican period by Walker Evans and Emilio Molina, or the Revolutionary period by Alberto Korda and several others. Similarly, discussions of films serve to approach relevant sociopolitical transformations such as the revolts against Gerardo Machado (*A Successful Man*) or the economic suffocation of the Special Period (*Life is to Whistle* or *Suite Habana*). All genres of music are fittingly present in this rendering of Cuban cultural history, and the same is true for the visual arts. There is, furthermore, a most welcome inclusion of commercial cultural products, such as the *I Love Lucy* American show (illustrating transculturation), and the radio serials of Félix B. Caignet.

West-Durán’s closing image in this narrative is one of history as a conversation (sometimes a struggle to death) with a living past. The stress of this book lies indeed in understanding the critical present of Cuba and its future alternatives in light of its past. The ancestral spirits that dwell in the *ngangas* of the Regla de Palo religion, and the zombie—for the “Concluding Remarks” follow a discussion of the zombie film *Juan of the Dead*—represent two extremes of that dramatic engagement with the past. This concluding vision of Cuban history is

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<sup>1</sup> West-Durán, Alan. *Tropics of History: Cuba Imagined*. Westport: Bergin & Garvey, 1997. p 4.

compelling for several reasons. Linked both to the human body and the earthly elements that constitute the *nganga* (“blood, bones, plants, protein, hair, and so on”-54), the image underscores a notion of identity rooted both in cultural genealogy and in attachment to place. West-Durán thus contests imagined futures of Cuba imposed from without—he opens this final section discussing a vignette published in the *New Yorker* in 2015 that depicts Cuba as an amusement park of sorts, McDonald’s restaurant included. The implication of both diversity of voices and openness to the unexpected is also patent in his closing vision of Cuban history as a flowing conversation (“a river than never rests”).

This book accounts well for what the author calls the “fourth super-power—from below: Cuba’s African heritage” (7)—the other super-powers in Cuban history being Spain, the U.S., and the U.S.S.R. West-Durán’s reckoning with African heritage goes well beyond the section on Afro-Cuban religions, or the one dedicated to *afrocubanismo*, and, appropriately, extends throughout the whole work. In fact, in the concluding image of Cuban history as a dramatic conversation/struggle, we find an expression of his contention that a “kind of warrior aesthetic” is characteristic of Cuban history and connects to the origin of Afro-Cuban religions in warrior cultures (69). The closing reference to the *nganga* of Palo Monte represents resistance to Eurocentric domination and evokes “the notion of revolutionary violence to affect change” that West-Durán rightly sees as “paramount” in Cuban history (69). Yet, all the playful and satiric elements in his final discussion (the *nganga* coming from a reference to a song by Frank Delgado which invites Harry Potter to prove his magic against the palero’s, the zombies from *Juan of the Dead* ...) combine in a picture much more complex than one of unidimensional confrontation. I would specifically recommend this book for the college classrooms to provide students with an overview of Cuban history that is as removed as possible from tiresome, and that constantly moves forward through music and images.