

## ASSESSING EVERYDAY LIFE IN POST-SOVIET CUBA\*

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- AY, CUBA! A SOCIO-EROTIC JOURNEY.* By Andre Codrescu and David Graham, photography. (New York: St Martin's, 1999. Pp. 206. \$25.00 cloth.)
- WAITING FOR FIDEL.* By Christopher Hunt. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998. Pp. 259. \$13.00 paper.)
- CUBA—GOING BACK.* By Tony Mendoza. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997. Pp. 155. \$22.95 paper.)
- REAL LIFE IN CASTRO'S CUBA.* By Catherine Moses. (Wilmington, Del: Scholarly Resources, 2000. Pp. 184. \$55.00 cloth, \$18.95 paper.)
- IMPRESSIONS OF CUBA IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY: THE TRAVEL DIARY OF JOSEPH J. DIMOCK.* Edited by Louis A. Pérez Jr. (Wilmington, Del: Scholarly Resources, 1998. Pp. 150. \$45.00 cloth, \$16.95 paper.)
- CONVERSATIONS WITH CUBA.* By C. Peter Ripley. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999. Pp. 248. \$24.95 cloth.)
- INSIDE THE REVOLUTION: EVERYDAY LIFE IN SOCIALIST CUBA.* By Mona Rosendahl. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997. Pp. 197. \$37.50 cloth, \$14.95 paper.)

In 1990 Fidel Castro announced that in response to a domestic crisis intensified by the overthrow of European communism, Cuba would henceforth enter a "special period in peacetime." The Cuban people would endure the kind of draconian austerity measures associated with a wartime economy in order to preserve a system that had offered limited rewards and considerable hardship since the mid-1980s. Clinging to the defiant new slogan "Socialism or Death," Cuba resisted the winds of neoliberalism and democratization sweeping across Latin America. The island's final "liberation" from direct economic dependence after generations of Spanish, U.S., and Soviet tutelage caused a severe economic contraction. The related shortages of foreign credit, fuel, and food combined to produced layoffs, black-outs, long lines, and chronic hunger. Cuba's vaunted health and education services suffered as well. Social tensions rose, and episodes of popular discontent were reported in the foreign press: anti-government protests, riot-

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ing in central Havana, a dockworkers' strike, purges of dissident intellectuals, and the desperate exodus of tens of thousands of *balseros*. Seasoned Cuba watchers boldly predicted the arrival of "Castro's final hour."<sup>1</sup>

While outside observers have been predicting Castro's fall ever since the revolution's "triumph," the economic and political climate of the post-cold war era lent credence to the forecasts.<sup>2</sup> The Castro regime was now defending socialism against considerable odds: the abrupt break with its Soviet bloc comrades, a more hard-line U.S. policy, and Cuba's increased isolation from its former allies in the Americas and Western Europe. Moreover, the old revolutionary discourse of patriotic sacrifice no longer seemed to appeal to many younger Cubans. They faced a bleak future of consumer shortages, limited opportunities, and a glaring absence of cultural and political freedoms.<sup>3</sup>

In 1993 Cuban policy makers responded to popular pressures and economic crisis with a series of "capitalist reforms" that stimulated modest growth and increased consumption. They legalized the dollar, small-scale private enterprises, and farmers' markets. Inefficient state farms became agricultural cooperatives. And the government expanded its joint ventures with foreign multinationals in tourism and other key industries.<sup>4</sup> But the Castro regime offered no political compromise to the system of one-party rule. Indeed, evidence of stepped-up political repression and cultural censorship increased in the early 1990s.<sup>5</sup> By the century's close, nonetheless, the Cuban government had defied predictions and weathered another crisis.

How did the Cuban people experience and respond to the "special period in peacetime"? How will social historians of the future assess this intriguing era in Cuban history? Several answers can be found in the booming literary genre of travel writing. The past five years have witnessed an outpouring of travelogues penned by foreign visitors to Cuba. Their publication reflects a revival of U.S. interest in the "embargoed island," a place whose politics, culture, and forbidden status provoke a mix of fascination

1. Marifeli Pérez-Stable, *The Cuban Revolution: Origins, Course, and Legacy*, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 173–75; and Andrés Oppenheimer, *Castro's Final Hour* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992).

2. Thus Richard Fagen observed in the late 1960s, "Since 1959 on, there has been no dearth of persons willing to testify to the imminent collapse of the Castro regime." See Fagen, *The Transformation of Political Culture in Cuba* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1969), 159.

3. The divided perspectives of Havana's youth are captured well in the documentary *Cuba Va! The Challenge of the Next Generation*, directed by Gail Dolgin and Vicente Franco (San Francisco, Calif.: Cuba Va Video Project, 1993).

4. This seemingly radical response to external exigencies and domestic pressures proved consistent with a history of erratic revolutionary policy reforms. See Susan Eva Eckstein, *Back from the Future: Cuba under Castro* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), 6–12, 88–127.

5. *Ibid.*, 113–27.

and puzzlement. In writing styles that combine elements of ethnography, journalism, and the spiritual quest, the authors to be reviewed here set out to observe and explain "a society that is still largely closed off to the outside, especially the Western, world" (Rosendahl, p. 6).

For social historians, travel literature provides insights into those aspects of everyday life that aroused the curiosity, the acclaim, or the condescension of foreign visitors.<sup>6</sup> As outsiders curious about Cuba, travel writers do not take daily life for granted. They observe the food, housing, street life, and social interactions that would escape the casual observer at home. They record their ethnographic observations, intersperse them with extensive interviews, and color them with insightful vignettes. These first-hand accounts therefore complement the predominantly institutional and policy-driven scholarship on contemporary Cuban life.<sup>7</sup>

The seven publications under review here include a mid-nineteenth-century travelogue, a recent anthropological study, and five contemporary travel books. Aside from Mona Rosendahl's ethnography, they are neither intended for an academic audience nor written by scholars of Cuba. The majority were published for a reading public that made travel writing one of the most popular literary genres of the 1990s.<sup>8</sup> The travelers differ in the nature of their visits and the political baggage they carried to the island. Their journeys lasted from thirteen days to eighteen months. While most confined their travels to the Havana-Santiago-Varadero tourist corridor, several ventured out to document life in *el interior*. Each account reflects the ideological biases that a recent LARR review identified as a hallmark of Cuban studies.<sup>9</sup>

6. William Beezley offers a noteworthy example, to which this analysis is indebted, in *Judas at the Jockey Club and Other Episodes of Porfirian Mexico* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987).

7. Current restrictions on research, a possible dearth of government archives, and the unreliability of basic statistical evidence augment travel writing's value as a primary source for social historians. For example, one journalist recently found Cuba's 1985 per capita gross domestic product calculated at rates ranging from \$2,058 (by dissident Cuban economists) to \$3,652 (U.S. Chamber of Commerce). Related figures for 1996 varied between \$900 (*Columbia Journal of World Business*) and \$1,200 (National Bank of Cuba), a significant discrepancy that reveals a conspicuous trend. See P. J. O'Rourke, "Cubanomics," *Rolling Stone*, 11 Nov. 1996, 108–13.

8. Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan, *Tourists with Typewriters: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Travel Writing* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), vii–x. Along with first-person travel narratives, the genre includes anthologies, reprints of travel classics, photography books, and abundant guidebooks for this age of mass tourism. In addition to the works reviewed here, other recent Cuba travel accounts include Tom Miller, *Trading with the Enemy: A Yankee Travels through Castro's Cuba* (New York: Maxwell Macmillan, 1992); Stephen Smith, *The Land of Miracles* (London: Little, Brown, 1997); Jacobo Timerman, *Cuba: A Journey* (New York: Knopf, 1990); and *The Reader's Companion to Cuba*, edited by Alan Ryan and Crista Malone (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1997).

9. See John Kirk and Peter McKenna, "Trying to Address the Cuban Paradox," *LARR* 34, no. 2 (1999):214–26.

Some authors make their opposition to socialism clear at the outset (Codrescu, Mendoza, and Moses). Others balance praise for the revolution's achievements with apprehension about its repressive underside (Hunt and Ripley). Like many journalists who reported on the Soviet Union in the 1980s, they all pay considerable attention to the struggles and perspectives of ordinary Cubans. Read collectively, these first-hand accounts provide a balanced, sometimes troubling, but often entertaining account of everyday life in contemporary Cuba.

### *The Nineteenth-Century Travelogue*

Perhaps no other Latin American country has welcomed as many foreign travel writers as Cuba. The island's geographic, economic, and cultural links to the United States ensured that most of those visitors came from that country. *Yanquis* have ventured to the island in search of pleasure, profit, and political pursuits since the mid-nineteenth century. Travel books describing their Caribbean adventures became best-sellers as early as the 1840s, generations before the War of 1898 sparked a tourist stampede to Cuba.<sup>10</sup> *Impressions of Cuba in the Nineteenth Century: The Travel Diary of Joseph J. Dimock* typifies this early travel writing. It describes the natural environment, the daily life, and the economic and political conditions of colonial Cuba. Moreover, Dimock spiced his first-person narrative with the sense of Yankee superiority that would trouble U.S.-Cuban relations for generations to come. The publishers therefore promote *Impressions of Cuba* as both an account of colonial Cuba and an expression of the U.S. sense of Manifest Destiny.

An introduction by editor Louis Pérez offers a brief biographical sketch of Dimock. The thirty-two-year-old Virginian ventured to Cuba to visit his family's sugar estates in 1859. Pérez locates Dimock's business travels in a context of U.S.-Cuban economic relations, annexationist politics, and mounting anticolonial sentiments on the island. Pérez concludes with a bibliographical essay on nineteenth-century Cuban travel writing that offers little critical commentary on the literature.

Dimock spent two months in Havana and the nearby countryside. His diary entries suggest that his unspecified "business affairs" left ample time for leisurely pursuits. He dined, rode horseback, shopped, visited the opera, and frequented the cockfights. At one point, he rightly apologized for the "many repetitions" and "the rambling style of my journal" (p. 71). But

10. George Black, *The Good Neighbor: How the United States Wrote the History of Central America and the Caribbean* (New York: Pantheon, 1988), 1–16. Adriana Mendez Rodenas analyzes mid-nineteenth-century travel writing on Cuba in *Gender and Nationalism in Colonial Cuba: The Travels of Santa Cruz y Montalvo, Condesa de Merlin* (Nashville, Tenn.: Vanderbilt University Press, 1998).

Dimock punctuated his uneventful narrative with observations on Cuba's flora and fauna, its abundance of food and natural resources, slavery and working conditions in the sugar industry, and class and race relations on the island. Cuban society was heavily armed, on guard against banditry, "negro insurrection," and filibustering. Dimock commented frequently on the Spanish military presence and noted the simmering hostility toward colonial authorities in Havana.

Dimock's own anti-Spanish sentiments matched those of the Cubans. Throughout the text, he alluded to the Spaniards' ostensible laziness, mendacity, and poor hygiene. Thus unlike most travel writers of today, Dimock was an unabashedly ethnocentric "man of his times." He repeatedly expressed a firm belief in Manifest Destiny, white supremacy, and Yankee ingenuity in all economic pursuits: "In the hands of an industrious, thrifty, and go-ahead population, Cuba would blossom like a rose" (p. 85). Dimock therefore anticipated the day when Havana "becomes Americanized" (p. 13). In the meantime, his insights into the absence of political freedoms, the repression of anti-government dissent, and the heavy presence of Spanish troops suggest why colonialism endured another forty years. Read cautiously, such nineteenth-century travelogues can provide rich material for historians of Cuba and of U.S. foreign relations. *Impressions of Cuba* would be a valuable text for undergraduate courses in both areas of history.

### *Travels in Post-Soviet Cuba*

Joseph Dimock's diary embodies the interventionist mentality that boosted American neo-imperialism in the Caribbean basin. After 1898 increasing numbers of journalists, soldiers, businessmen, and adventurers recorded their impressions of a region ripe for exploitation. George Black's regrettably out-of-print book *The Good Neighbor* documents the extent to which Dimock's ethnocentric attitude lived on among such writers into the 1950s.<sup>11</sup> A new style of travel narrative emerged in the later 1960s to chronicle Cuba's experiment with socialism. Louis Pérez notes that these "generally sympathetic" treatments of socialist Cuba reflected government policies that limited travel to visitors known for their lack of political hostilities.<sup>12</sup> The revival of tourism in the 1990s generated valuable revenues

11. Black, *The Good Neighbor*, 31–105; see also Fredrick B. Pike, *The United States and Latin America: Myths and Stereotypes of Civilization and Nature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), 154–296. Earlier examples of the genre include Basil Woon, *When It's Cocktail Time in Cuba* (New York: H. Liveright, 1928); and Sydney Clark, *Cuban Tapestry* (New York: R. M. McBride, 1936).

12. The following accounts appear commonly in university libraries: Warren Miller, *90 Miles from Home* (Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown, 1961); Elizabeth Sutherland Martinez, *The Youngest Revolution* (New York: Dial, 1969); John Clytus, *Black Man in Red Cuba* (Coral Gables, Fla.: University of Miami Press, 1970); Andrew Salkey, *Havana Journal* (New York: Penguin,

for the Cuban state. But it also opened the doors to a new generation of travel writers unencumbered by government restrictions and welcomed by a Cuban population eager to speak with foreign visitors.<sup>13</sup>

Readers of these contemporary travel accounts will learn much about socioeconomic conditions on the island. The authors universally describe what first strikes foreign observers: the island's crumbling infrastructure, Havana's lack of traffic, the crowded buses, the empty shelves, the long lines, the idled young Cubans. These observers highlight the dearth of commerce and the abundance of socialist propaganda. Probing deeper, they describe the economic changes most visible to the casual observer: increased tourism, the fledgling private sector, and the "dollarized economy." They then describe the social consequences. Most authors emphasize the facets of Cuban reality that the revolution ostensibly abolished, from crime and prostitution, to class differences, to what Cubans refer to as "tourist apartheid."<sup>14</sup> Given their outsider status, few of these authors came to understand the inner workings of Cuba's political system. Yet none departed Cuba without a heartfelt appreciation of the Cuban people's capacity to endure severe material hardships without relinquishing their sense of humor and spirit of generosity.

Peter Ripley's *Conversations with Cuba* captures best the sweeping changes that confronted Cubans over the course of the 1990s. Like so many "radical students" in the 1960s, Ripley drew inspiration from Cuba's young middle-class revolutionaries. This professor of African American history visited the island in 1991 on "a quest to comprehend his vestigial romance with the revolution" (p. xv). He returned five times more between 1992 and 1999. Ripley thus witnessed Cuba's rapid descent into abject misery as well as the market reforms that stimulated a partial economic recovery. He conveys how distinct generations responded to these changes by means of "conversations" with several families in Havana. In late 1992, he saw an

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1971); Ernesto Cardenal, *In Cuba* (New York: New Directions, 1974); and Lee Chadwick, *Cuba Today* (Westport, Conn: L. Hill, 1975). Meanwhile, a legion of Cuban émigrés have penned memoirs that cast a contrary view of social and political conditions on the island. See Louis A. Pérez, Jr, *Essays on Cuban History: Historiography and Research* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995), 158.

13. In addition to the publications reviewed here, a number of magazines also published reports from contemporary Cuba. More informative accounts include Robert Stone, "Havana Then and Now," *Harper's Magazine*, Mar. 1992, 36–45; Marc Cooper, "For Sale: Used Marxism," *Harper's Magazine*, Mar. 1995, 54–65; Joy Gordon, "Cuba's Entrepreneurial Socialism," *The Atlantic Monthly*, Jan 1997, 18–23; Alma Guillermoprieto, "Love and Misery in Cuba," *New York Review of Books*, 26 Mar. 1998, 10–15; Saul Landau, "The Revolution Turns Forty," *The Progressive*, Apr. 1999, 24–32; various authors, "The Cuba Issue," *Cigar Aficionado*, May–June 1999; and John Putnam, "Cuba," *National Geographic*, June 1999, 2–36.

14. Tourist apartheid refers to the systematic exclusion of Cubans as visitors from the island's tourist hotels and resorts, making these places enclaves where native employees serve a foreign clientele.

“idled and bored younger generation” relinquish their earlier pride in the revolution, take to street hustling, and contemplate emigration (pp. 81–100). Three years later, however, Havana once again “radiated a feel of energy and enthusiasm.” As a result, Ripley’s closest young confidant forsook a future in Miami and expressed renewed optimism in a Cuba “where we don’t have the very rich and the very poor, and we try to take care of each other” (pp. 138–41). “Paulo” comes to symbolize “a restless generation” eager to capitalize on the pace and scope of changes ushered in by increased tourism and a dollarized economy. It is notable that Ripley’s older informants did not share Paulo’s sense of possibility.

Ripley’s own idealism waned with the decade, as his narrative reports. Initially, the Cubans’ renowned hospitality supported a spirit of optimism often belied by his observations. “It was not as though Cuba lacked problems,” he noted in 1995, “it had lots of them, like not enough to eat” (p. 139). Ripley’s onetime sympathy for the revolution collapsed in 1999, when he witnessed crackdowns on street hustlers and the private business sector by an increasingly visible state security apparatus. He then admits “that Cuba felt like a regulated society . . . , the sort of place many Americans always assumed it to be, where people acted as though they were watched” (p. 238). *Conversations with Cuba* offers little analysis of Cuban government policy. What, for example, caused persistent food shortages—a failed agricultural policy, shortages of hard currency? At times, Ripley decries the U.S. trade embargo as the underlying causes of Cuba’s problems. Yet he also chastises the Castro government for instituting reforms like the development of tourism that “recklessly threaten Cuba’s revolutionary society and the visions and hopes it inspired, including my own” (p. 104). Readers should also bear in mind that most young Cubans do not enjoy the opportunity to hustle tourists in the way that Ripley’s urban informants do. Those minor quibbles aside, his eloquent travelogue chronicles how the seeming economic success of the reforms of the “special period” brought opportunities to a few, while “Havana had become a city with downcast eyes and a cop on every corner” (p. 239).

Editors have also responded to the public’s fascination with Cuba by publishing a growing number of travel-related photography books. Tony Mendoza’s volume stands out for its integration of provocative photographs with an informative text. A photography professor at Ohio State University, Mendoza traveled to Cuba in 1996 with cameras, notebook, and an unusual set of political baggage. His upper-class family had emigrated from the island in 1960, when Mendoza was eighteen. He thus returned from “exile” with a keen sense of nostalgia and a heartfelt enmity for the Castro government. The result of his three-week visit is *Cuba—Going Back*. Mendoza selected eighty-one full-page black-and-white photographs to accompany a narrative based on personal memories and interviews with more than two hundred Cubans.

Mendoza narrates a story of dissidence and survival. His admittedly unscientific survey found that only five of these onetime sympathizers now “wholeheartedly . . . supported the revolution.” Why would they? By the author’s telling, the revolution improved education and combated discrimination, but Cubans enjoy no political freedoms and fear a notorious prison system ensuring that “there are no Lech Walesas in Cuba” (p. 137). Personal freedoms are lacking as well. Government restrictions limit what Cubans study, who they can work for, and where they may live. More significantly for Mendoza, the “shortcomings of socialism” have produced economic hardships greater than those of the 1950s. The author analyzes Cuba’s high cost of living and describes the arts of *resolviendo* (“getting by”), especially the workplace theft and black marketing that led to skyrocketing rates of imprisonment for “economic crimes” in the 1990s. Small-scale entrepreneurs provided Mendoza’s most intriguing interviews. Several suggested that the Cuban government tolerates poverty and constrains private initiative to inhibit the degree of economic independence that would facilitate opposition politics. Mendoza agrees. He therefore ends *Cuba—Going Back* with a call for lifting the travel ban that prevents U.S. tourist dollars from empowering Cuba’s future agents of change.

Mendoza is a superb documentary photographer. As noted by the promotional blurb on *Cuba—Going Back*, his images present “a portrait of a resilient people awaiting the inevitable passing of the socialist system that has failed them.” Using the artist’s prerogative, he selected, cropped, and contrasted his photos to convey his point of view. The book juxtaposes dilapidated mansions in Havana’s neighborhood of El Vedado with a spiffed-up “government house” in the same district. Prerevolutionary Fords and Buicks appear as neglected wrecks, not the polished relics portrayed in tourist brochures. An image of a “government stand in Havana with nothing to sell” contrasts with “Havana shoppers wistfully looking at the items displayed in the windows of a dollar store” (pp. 34–35). Mendoza’s photos poignantly depict the class distinctions made visible by the dollarization of Cuba’s economy. The consumers at the hard-currency shops seem well-to-do compared with the locals queued up at peso stores. Mendoza’s black-and-white photos relate well to the text. But the sepia-toned prints cast a consistent haze over an island so often celebrated for its colorful landscapes. Viewers should therefore consider how these images would convey different impressions if set under the tropical sun or against an aquamarine sea.<sup>15</sup>

The combination of documentary photography and travel narrative is also employed in *Ay, Cuba! A Socio-Erotic Journey*, Andre Codrescu’s witty but biting account of his trip to post-Soviet Cuba. Born in Romania, Cod-

15. For the contrasting style of a *National Geographic* photographer whose selection of images and format creates a more romanticized picture of the island, see David Alan Harvey, photographer, and Elizabeth Newhouse, *Cuba* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999).

rescu is a poet, essayist, and regular commentator on National Public Radio, which sent him to the island on a thirteen-day assignment in 1997. His personal history prepared him well for the mission. As a nineteen-year-old, Codrescu fled communist Romania in the 1960s. Thirty years later, the self-described “anarchist-liberal” departed for Cuba expecting to find the “infinite boredom and constant low-grade terror of a post-Stalinist regime” (p. 13).

At the outset of *Ay, Cuba*, Codrescu envisions Cuba as a laboratory of what he calls “pre-post-communism.” He thus searches for precursory evidence of trends that characterized the Soviet bloc during and after the fall of communism: the party apparatchiks-turned-oligarchs, the xenophobic nationalism, the criminality and prostitution.

Codrescu’s quest for parallels leads to unexpected discoveries. He interviews ruling party “reformers” advocating a Cuban-style perestroika. He meets dissident science fiction writers enjoying an unexpected degree of cultural freedom. He encounters Texan evangelicals “intent on saving the shriveled souls of atheists” (p. 33). And he visits a Havana slum inhabited by eastern Cuban migrants and finds it remarkably free of the crime and drugs that plague other Caribbean nations. Codrescu nevertheless uncovers surface parallels to the desperate poverty and coercive politics of post-Stalinist Romania. But the Cuban people’s generosity, fun-loving spirit, and candidly critical views of their government force him to reconsider his assumptions about socialist societies. Unfortunately, Codrescu’s brief visit rarely strays from the beaten track of Cuban tourism, as reflected in David Graham’s snapshot-like photography. The limitations of time and place inhibited the author from adequately testing a “pre-post-communist” paradigm that would serve historians and *cubanólogos* well in the future.<sup>16</sup>

Historians of Latin America have long benefited from the personal memoirs penned by U.S. diplomats stationed around the region. The nature of their service requires attention to socioeconomic conditions and political affairs, and their posts bring them into contact with well-connected local informants. Catherine Moses worked and traveled for twenty months as the cultural affairs officer at the U.S. Interest Section in Havana. In writing *Real Life in Castro’s Cuba*, she hopes to improve future U.S.-Cuban relations by helping U.S. citizens understand a country “cut off from the Western world for more than three decades.” Despite her presumptions about “the bankruptcy of the Revolution,” Moses delivers a relatively balanced account of the Cuba she witnessed in 1995–1996.

The book’s eighteen short chapters cover a wide spectrum: health and education, living standards, the private sector, tourism, the press, religion, and more. At times, the account reads like a U.S. State Department

16. For a brief but provocative comparative analysis of communist Cuba, Eastern Europe, and Asia, see Pérez-Stable, *The Cuban Revolution*, 197–201.

report on Cuba. A chapter entitled "Loyalty to the Revolution" describes the government's *pan y palo* mixture of Big Brother with "a safety net of food, shelter, and health care" (p. 8). "Triumphs of the Revolution" explains the unraveling of that safety net in the 1990s. Another chapter considers "the question outsiders always have": "Why Don't They Rise Up?" Moses discovers an answer in "the pervasive presence of State Security, the culture of mistrust, and the fear of change" (p. 81). Even so, several of her inside sources suggested the possibility of civil war in Cuba. Her concluding chapters on family, community, and religion explain how the Cubans' "joy for life," their "willingness to help one another," and their diverse faiths "have kept the society from falling apart" (p. 146).

The insights gleaned from diplomatic work distinguish *Real Life in Castro's Cuba* from bona fide travel writing. Moses recounts the 1995 accords that ended the *balsero* exodus and established new guidelines for legal Cuban immigration to the United States. She also explains the complicated and frustrating process by which Cubans now apply for the immigration "lottery." Moses relates her own duties monitoring the plight of the *balseros* returned to Cuba. Under the terms of the agreement, the U.S. diplomatic corps visited deportees across the island "to check that they were not facing harassment and discrimination" (p. 112). None were suffering in these ways, but several had departed again before Moses even arrived.

A chapter on U.S. foreign policy entitled "Good Intentions" analyzes the diplomat's efforts to promote the cultural exchange mission of the so-called Cuban Democracy Act. This assignment helped Moses cultivate a personal network of "independent" academics and professionals, staff members of nongovernmental organizations, and opposition activists. Her tales of how the government intimidates such dissidents through constant surveillance, intermittent jailing, unemployment, and coerced exile explain why "there is no organized 'Opposition' in Cuba" (p. 126). Her office distributed to such individuals a range of publications: the *Miami Herald*, literature on human rights and "free-market economics," and even former Vice President Al Gore's *Earth in the Balance* ("much in demand"). Government efforts to impede this flow of ideas centered mainly on books dealing directly with Cuba. Moses therefore considers the cultural exchange mission a growing success despite the Castro government's hostility, although she fails to note the negative effects of U.S. policies that deny travel visas to most U.S. citizens.

Christopher Hunt went to Cuba without a visa. After being mesmerized by a Castro interview on television, the former journalist and now professional travel writer was told by friends that meeting the Cuban leader would be "no problem" because "Fidel loves foreigners." His quest to find Castro becomes the comical backdrop of *Waiting for Fidel*. The interview proved elusive. Indeed, when Hunt informed Cubans of his intention, he was met with nervous silence (from older Cubans), knee-slapping hysterics

(from young men), and stern warnings to avoid mentioning “the bearded one” by name.

After waiting four weeks in Havana, Hunt embarked on a three-month journey to retrace the route of Castro’s 1959 Liberty Caravan from Santiago through the central Cuban plains and back to the capital. Along the way, Hunt visited mountain villages, provincial cities, and country hamlets. He traveled the way Cubans do, hitching rides, crowding onto open truck beds, and suffering the uncertainty and delays of what passes for public transportation in Cuba. Hunt thus experienced what one rural host called “the real Cuba” (p. 118). Hunt’s professionalism as a travel writer is evident in the way he spices his articulate narrative with concise episodes of history, insightful dialogue, and picaresque vignettes.

As *Waiting for Fidel* retraces Hunt’s journey, he assesses the revolution through personal observation and Cuban eyes. He initially considers it “a qualified success,” given Cuba’s high standards of health and education in an otherwise poor country. His Cuban informants offer a range of political outlooks. Hunt discerns divisions along both generational and prerevolutionary class lines. He finds loyalty strongest among “the country folk and mountain men” of the eastern province of Granma. But he uncovers notable regional differences among urban Cubans. Midway through his journey, the perplexed author contrasts “the dark view” of Havana with the civic pride and “generally brighter picture presented in Santiago” (p. 94). Taking the reader west through Holguín and Camagüey, Hunt hears of rising crime rates and the privileges enjoyed by the political elite. He uncovers an enduring racism among white Cubans. He also learns of *peligrosidad*, the vaguely defined crime used by the state to jail dissenters for their allegedly dangerous talk or behavior. He contrasts tales of desperate immigrants with the voices of those who stay on due to patriotic pride or reports of the struggles faced by Cubans abroad.

Back in Havana, Hunt synthesizes the voices of discontent from across the island. Yet he remains optimistic about Cuba’s future. He celebrates the declining effectiveness of the Revolutionary Defense Committees, the system of political vigilance that once fostered fear and quiescence. Meanwhile, economic reforms have improved diets and public services since the early 1990s. Hunt’s entertaining and well-balanced account of post-Soviet Cuba conveys poignantly the cynicism, despair, generosity, and humor with which Cubans confront an uncertain future.

### *Politics and Ideology in Everyday Life*

Mona Rosendahl’s ethnography takes readers to a place and time when Cubans suffered fewer hardships and shared a stronger faith in the Castro government: Oriente province in the late 1980s. Promoted as the first ethnographic study of Cuba in twenty years, *Inside the Revolution: Everyday*

*Life in Socialist Cuba* investigates how “the hegemonic political ideology, centralized political structures, and the planned economy pervade everyday life” in rural Cuba (p. 156). The study analyzes the transmission of socialist ideology, its translation into practice, and its refashioning into a “folk version” of the official revolutionary discourse by ordinary Cubans. The first chapter outlines the methodology.

This Swedish anthropologist conducted her fieldwork in “Palmera,” as she calls the municipality of mountain villages and coastal towns where work in agriculture (coffee), public services, and (now) tourism supports thirty thousand inhabitants. Her sponsors at Cuba’s Ministry of Culture recommended the site for unspecified reasons. Although Rosendahl acknowledges research limitations—from political restrictions to self-censorship—she finds the environment “much more open than I had expected” (p. 26). Her observations and interviews offer rare and valuable insights into life in provincial Cuba.

The first three chapters of *Inside the Revolution* analyze the local economy and gender relations. Consistent with nationwide figures for the late 1980s, socioeconomic conditions in Palmera “gave one the impression of well-being” (p. 10).<sup>17</sup> Relatively abundant food supplies, full (male) employment, and extensive social services compensated for overcrowded housing and shortages of consumer goods. The second chapter examines consumption and distribution. Rosendahl analyzes household economies, the rationing system, and *emulación socialista*, the workplace incentive program through which Cubans earn the right to purchase housing or appliances. In a section that fascinated this reviewer’s undergraduate students, she explores Cuba’s culture of reciprocity, meaning “the giving, receiving, and repaying of information” about erratically distributed goods. Helping family and friends procure scarce goods is a form of economic survival originating in prerevolutionary customs of generosity. Chapter Three demonstrates how “traditional attitudes regarding gender issues” have undermined Cuba’s “official” ideology of gender equality. The region’s agricultural labor force and political leadership thus remained predominantly male. The local Federación de Mujeres Cubanas “does not function very well” (p. 76). And regional party bosses bolstered their legitimacy by emulating the machista traits of courage, strength, and audacity embodied by “the heroes of the Revolution.” These chapters on reciprocity and gender illustrate one of Rosendahl’s central theses: that traditional ideas are practiced alongside the official socialist ideology as forms of economic survival, weapons of cultural resistance, and styles of political leadership.

The final three chapters of *Inside the Revolution* examine the political system. Rosendahl dissects the practical meaning of “democratic centralism,”

17. Eckstein presents figures on per capita gross domestic product and caloric intake in *Back to the Future*, 220, 226.

in which the exclusive Communist Party oversees a host of mass organizations through which Cubans participate in the building of socialism. Chapter Four offers an intriguing study of Poder Popular, the elected assemblies in charge of “debating” and implementing but rarely initiating economic policy. In a notable display of how centralism trumps democracy in Cuba, Palmera’s delegates never challenged a directive from Havana. Yet it is through Poder Popular that Cubans file all manner of requests and register complaints most vocally without fear of reprisal. Participation levels in Palmera’s municipal assemblies were therefore high and the criticism often intense. So was the ensuing frustration when local delegates failed to act on popular demands. Rosendahl sketches intriguing biographies of Palmera’s political bosses. Her insightful vignettes demonstrate the paternalism, charisma, and egalitarianism with which these small-town leaders related to “ordinary Cubans.” Their local and working-class origins further bolstered the respect they enjoyed, as did the unique content and the style with which they delivered their political rhetoric. Chapter Five examines this “language of the Revolution,” from its ideological packaging of socialism, historical memory, and patriotism to its top-down transmission by party activists, schools, and the Cuban media.

The final chapter, “Revolutionary Acts,” analyzes how Cubans express their political outlooks. Rosendahl divides Palmera’s political spectrum into four segments: *militantes* (Communist Party members), loyal nonparty members, reluctant supporters, and opponents.<sup>18</sup> Militantes and loyalists are eager political activists who often hold positions of leadership in the community. Most supporters “are rather uninterested in politics” and “take part in mobilizations and mass organizations reluctantly” (pp. 163–64). The opponents advocate “a complete change in the system.” No Palmerans protest openly. Whereas “a good revolutionary is one who acts,” Rosendahl argues, “the easiest form of protest is to show indifference to or withdrawal from political activities” such as volunteer work or political assemblies (p. 144). But in small-town Palmera, few of the locals who confided their dissent to the author ever risked losing their jobs or social standing through what Rosendahl calls “covert and hidden” expressions of protest. It therefore becomes difficult to gauge where reluctant support ends and indifference begins.

Despite this obstacle, Rosendahl concludes that loyalty outweighed dissent. She discovers a “deep discontent with the lack of democratic rights.” But she concludes that most Palmerans “just wished for change within the socialist system” (p. 22). Why? The revolution brought significant improvements to a region that suffered isolation, poverty, and brutal repression during the 1950s. More important to Rosendahl, a relatively high percent-

18. According to Rosendahl, 14 percent of Palmera’s adult population held party memberships, compared with the national average of 10 percent (p. 91).

age of locals participated directly in some aspect of the revolution, whether the insurgency, international missions, work brigades, or mass organizations. Rosendahl's interviews also suggest how a historical memory of what she calls "hard times antes" still sustains revolutionary loyalties across generations.

Yet Palmera is no more typically Cuban than Havana. The eastern region is rural and proud of its historic role as the cradle of the revolution. Class differences between party leaders and ordinary Cubans remain minimal in Palmera compared with the capital. Moreover, Rosendahl conducted her primary fieldwork before the special period. Based on several return visits in the mid-1990s, she defends her earlier conclusions nonetheless. Arguing that "there is no simple connection between the standard of living and loyalty to the revolution," Rosendahl finds that one-time loyalists continued to believe that the hard times would pass and pledged to defend the revolution that they helped build. But the effects of the special period also galvanized the opposition camp by confirming their earlier beliefs, hardening their attitudes, and swelling their ranks (pp. 178–79).

Several shortcomings mar *Inside the Revolution*. At times, Rosendahl's "left-wing ideals" appear to cause her to amplify Palmera's voices of loyalty. Given Cuba's record on human rights, she presents a surprisingly limited treatment of political repression and the resulting culture of fear and mistrust emphasized by other foreign observers.<sup>19</sup> The study also lacks the historical background on the Cuban Revolution and the province of Oriente that one would expect the author to provide. The question of race is conspicuously absent, given the historical Afro-Cuban presence in eastern Cuba. Finally, readers may question Rosendahl's theoretical deployment of James Scott's theory of resistance alongside Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, which Rosendahl reduces to an Althusserian notion of ideological domination. Cuban socialism may be a "hegemonic ideology" among party militants. Ordinary Cubans may fashion their own "folk versions" of the official revolutionary discourse to make sense of everyday life. Yet the state's repression of alternative ideologies—and Rosendahl's own recognition of political dissent—hardly support her stance on the ideological hegemony of socialism. Fortunately, this theoretical confusion does not undermine the work's empirical contributions. *Inside the Revolution* provides a rare ethnographic study of economic conditions, social relations, and local politics in rural Cuba. Rosendahl's analysis of how national political institutions and mass organizations function at the local level illuminate the strengths, contradictions, and limitations of "democratic centralism." Yet this

19. Readers may find Rosendahl's comments on political repression cursory and belated. Not until the final chapter does she acknowledge, "The Cuban system is often called totalitarian and repressive. I would describe the Palmeran system as marked by strong social control" (p. 146).

study demonstrates the extent to which the Cuban Revolution remains a negotiated one in which local citizens engage in everyday forms of ideological and material resistance to express their discontent and pressure local leaders to address their needs.

### *Conclusion*

Like earlier generations of travel writers on Cuba, the authors reviewed here offer escape and adventure by introducing readers to a forbidden island and a fascinating people. At times, a certain prerevolutionary nostalgia seeps into their accounts of the sugar barons' old mansions, the once posh hotels and casinos, and the wide-open nightlife that made Havana so notorious and attractive. None of the other authors, however, revive the unabashedly ethnocentric style of travel narrative exemplified by Joseph Dimock's diary. Nor do they offer up contemporary Cuba as an island ripe for exploitation by industrious entrepreneurs.<sup>20</sup> And rather than make bold predictions about the fate of socialism, they share the Cuban people's own uncertainty about the island's future. These authors also provide valuable insights into how "ordinary Cubans" experienced what now appears to be a special period of indeterminate length. Their oral interviews and personal observations afford contemporary Latin Americanists and future social historians much to contemplate and analyze.

Collectively, these accounts suggest some nascent similarities between post-Soviet Cuba and its Latin American and Caribbean neighbors. Cuba is in some senses catching up. Tourism is now the island's fastest growing industry, providing needed jobs when government layoffs fostered mass underemployment. Dollars remitted by immigrants through both legal and illegal channels offer families a means of raising their living standards beyond the subsistence level. Rural migration from eastern Cuba toward the capital appears to be growing, despite government efforts to stifle urbanization and repopulate the Sierra (Hunt, pp. 113–14). Rural-urban migration is generating new social tensions, from frustration over overcrowded housing stock to racial hostility toward the predominantly Afro-Cuban easterners. Although far less visible than elsewhere in Latin America, Cuba's informal economy burgeons as hard currency, goods, and services circulate beyond the government's capacities to tax and regulate underground commerce. Legions of black-market peddlers, street hustlers, and widows with a spare room to rent supplement their meager earnings through such entrepreneurial forms of survival. Meanwhile, travelers and Cubans both comment frequently on the increasingly visible distinctions between Cuba's

20. For an example of this point of view, see Christopher Howard, *Living and Investing in the "New" Cuba: A Guide to Inexpensive Living and Making Money in the Caribbean's Most Beautiful Tropical Paradise* (Miami, Fla.: Costa Rica Books, 1999).

haves and have-nots, a status measured not in salaries but access to even a few dollars.

Fundamental differences between the everyday lives of Cubans and other Latin Americans overshadow these parallels. While their neighbors embrace Latin America's most recent transition to electoral democracy, Cubans enjoy basic political and personal freedoms only in exile. Moreover, Latin America's rapid implementation of neoliberalism has entailed a radical break with past economic policy and sharply redefined state-society relations. In Cuba, in contrast, the long-term social consequences of Cuba's "capitalist reforms" remain unclear. Meanwhile, the state continues to play a central role in the economic life of the country.

Finally, when viewed in a comparative Caribbean perspective, class divisions, racism, and economic dependency on tourism remain less severe in Cuba. Why, then, do travel writers focus seemingly unwarranted attention on these developments and the host of social ills that allegedly beset Cuba? For one thing, travel writers attuned to Cuban history recognize the reappearance of the most infamous features of prerevolutionary Cuba: social inequalities, "tourist apartheid," crime, and prostitution. Long commonplace from Tijuana to Rio de Janeiro, these social problems assume a significance disproportional to their present level of development. For example, just as Cuba's tourism industry remains in an infant stage relative to its Caribbean neighbors, so does the trade in sex (and drugs) differ quantitatively and qualitatively from Havana in the 1950s.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, the dollarization of Cuba's economy fostered visible class divisions. But Cubans with access to dollars possess relatively few of them, and Cuba's austere living standards remain relatively equal. Do Cubans living through the special period perceive a return of the old ways? Indeed they do. Whether spontaneously or in response to travelers' queries, they acknowledge and decry such developments frequently. As Rosendahl learned in Palmera, drawing historical comparisons between the socialist present and "the tyrannical past" remains one of the safest and most effective means by which Cubans express their discontent with their current conditions.

Like the Cuban people, travel writers contrast prerevolutionary and post-Soviet Cuba to recall what the revolution changed and ponder the changes that remain. But these travel accounts offer few glimpses into how Cubans compare their present condition not with the 1950s but with the relative prosperity from the 1970s through the mid-1980s. In these years of growing per capita incomes and rising consumption, blue-collar *habañeros* could enjoy the beaches of Varadero. Do memories of better times under

21. Rosalie Schwartz, *Pleasure Island: Tourism and Temptation in Cuba* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 210–12. On the government's most recent and apparently successful efforts to remove sex workers from Havana's public spaces, see Silvana Paternostro, "Sexual Revolution: Communism versus Prostitution," *New Republic*, 10 July 2000, 18–23.

socialism explain the current resiliency? How did the onset of recession, renewed shortages, and the heightened repression of the later 1980s prepare Cubans for the special period?

Also conspicuous in their absence are sustained discussions of labor relations in this ostensible workers' paradise. Detailed descriptions of conditions in the sugar industry were once commonplace, as Dimock's diary attests. Readers learn that the special period ushered in factory closures, underemployment, and wages below subsistence. But Cubans still work. How have working conditions and labor relations evolved in Cuba's factories, fields, and offices? How do workers fare in the new joint-venture industries like tourism? Have they sacrificed customary labor rights to gain access to dollars? For the sake of posterity, all these questions are worthwhile issues for future travelers, reporters, and ethnographers to raise. In the meantime, the new Cuba travel writing offers valuable and entertaining insights into how ordinary Cubans experienced and responded to the "special period in peacetime." May the peace outlast their hardships.