

Cuba Represents!: Cuban Arts, State Power, and the Making of New Revolutionary Cultures

SUJATHA FERNANDES, Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2006.

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Following the resignation of Fidel Castro, there seemed to be anticipation for a period of transition and perhaps even a "new revolution" in Cuba. However, the "new revolution" had already started, as this book clearly shows, and Cuba has been undergoing a state of transition since the early '90s. Furthermore, "transition" and "change" are not new concepts in Cuban history. As early as 1947, Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz had already noted that the island's history is a saga of constant change, evolution and revolution, and is always in an ongoing "stage of transition." Paradoxically, change is the most constant feature in Cuban history.

The cultural revolution in Cuba began just over 15 years ago, with the onset of "the special period in times of peace" announced by Castro in 1990, as a response to the economic crises following the fall of the Soviet Union. The new measures were primarily economic, but they had a strong social and cultural effect. Among other measures, the regime opened the island to tourism, which was ideologically seen as a "mal necesario," and this created a new ambience in the country that had previously been isolated. The "relaxation of the rules" encouraged private enterprises such as restaurants, rental of private rooms, and market stalls. It not only created a new capitalist state of mind, but also allowed expression through art of certain aspects of criticism of Cuban society and even of the regime's policies.

In this swiftly flowing and easy-to-read book, Sujatha Fernandes helps us to decipher this intriguing new "openness" and what may seem to be freedom of expression in some areas of Cuban culture which Fernandes terms "artistic public spheres." She looks at these public spheres of expression and their interesting relationship with the regime. She focuses on films, the visual arts, and Rap music.

In the chapter "Old Utopias, New Realities" dealing with cinema, Fernandes mainly concentrates on two films that reveal marginalized sections in Cuban society: homosexuals in "Fresa y chocolate" (Gutiérrez 1994); and Afro-Cubans in "La vida es silbar" (Pérez 1998). But more than anything else they deal with Cubanidad, nationality, society, and the values of the revolution. As Fernandes shows, these supposedly controversial films fit well into the agenda and rhetoric of the state during the Special Period. "Fresa y chocolate" she rightfully claims, in spite of its controversial theme, "was the first significant attempt to unify the Cuban public behind the socialist state in the post-Soviet period." The filmmakers did not call for abolishing the values of the revolution. On the contrary, they demanded "the re-articulation of the revolution on more inclusive values."

The same goes for the thriving Cuban Hip Hop scene-Cuban rappers do not condemn the revolution; if anything, they hail the revolution's values and criticize Cuban society for having shifted away from revolutionary ideals.

Rap music is in fact the main focus and most interesting part of the book. The regime's embrace and appropriation of this musical genre is fascinating and has social, racial, and anti-US roots. Fernandes' personal involvement as a singer and

percussionist in rap bands, and her passion for the subject, are reflected in the pages of the chapter "Fear of a Black Nation" dedicated to Cuban Hip Hop. Her account makes you want to read more about the issue, and hear the music. In a way I wish Fernandes had dedicated the whole book to this subject. As a participant-observer, Fernandes gathered impressive ethnographic data and "inside" information about the Cuban Hip Hop movement, somehow lacking in the other cultural spheres she covers.

Particularly interesting and vivid are the pages dealing with women rappers. Cuban music has traditionally been considered a male domain, but in recent years we have seen an increase in female participation, especially in genres such as Timba and Hip Hop. Fernandes monitors the progress of female involvement in the Cuban Hip Hop world and brings to light the voices of some of its main players. She shows how the genre has helped increase the awareness of feminist concerns in Cuban society. A notable feature of Cuban Hip-Hop, according to Fernandes, is women rappers who are openly identified as lesbians.

Fernandes gives many examples that show how race, class, and sexual oppression are openly discussed and challenged within the public sphere of Hip Hop. Social issues such as racism and Jineterismo (hustling and semi-prostitution), are also tackled in other musical genres developed in the '90s, such as Timba and Nov sima Trova, which Fernandes fails to deal with. These should have been included considering the generalized title of the book. But I agree with Fernandes that they are expressed in a louder voice and in a particularly direct manner in Hip Hop. A good example is a song by Magia MC entitled "Me llaman puta" (They call me Whore).

Social issues including racial and gender discrimination, lack of material goods, poverty, tourist apartheid, homosexuality, Jineterismo, are all addressed in these new critical art forms. Why does the Cuban regime allow it, or even seem to encourage it? Fernandes asks these questions and brings forth the answer. It is important to understand, as Fernandes emphasizes, that this openness does not mean a free and independent art production scene. On the contrary, the state continues to monitor and shape domestic cultural production and reception. It is a game of give and take between society and the state, which gives a certain leeway but at the same time tightens its grip. While the state might allow more freedom of speech in certain artistic public spheres, it uses this only in order to consolidate its control over art and culture. All forms of the arts are controlled and supervised by government offices and agencies. It is interesting that Rap music is supported more than other contemporary genres.

Fernandes is a political scientist, dealing with issues such as state power, cultural politics, and hegemony; however, she is careful not to fall into the trap that many writers on Cuba fail to avoid: of "taking sides" and mixing ideology parameters constructed by either side in their investigation. In spite of the author's political science background, the book has a refreshing interdisciplinary approach. It is written with great passion and charm, and is another important publication in a limited but growing body of literature documenting and analyzing what is perhaps the most interesting and significant period in Cuba's recent history, starting in the early '90s and continuing to our present day.

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