


BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Between an Unreachable Future and an Irretrievable Past

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Los cubanos de la isla han construido un futuro nunca alcanzado y los cubanos del exilio se encuentran ante la posibilidad de regresar a una ciudad muy diferente a la que ha perdurado en su memoria.

—Iván de la Nuez, *La balsa perpetua: Soledad y conexiones de la cultura cubana* — Barcelona, 1998

This essay reviews the following works:

Cuban Cultural Heritage: A Rebel Past for a Revolutionary Nation. By Pablo Alonso González. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2017. Pp. xiv + 352. \$84.95 hardcover. ISBN: 9780813056630.

Culture and the Cuban State: Participation, Recognition, and Dissonance under Communism. By Yvon Grenier. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017. Pp. 320. \$110.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9781498522236.

Dictator's Dreamscape: How Architecture and Vision Built Machado's Cuba and Invented Modern Havana. By Joseph R. Hartman. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019. Pp. ix + 316. \$60.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9780822945468.

La nación insurrecta. By Oscar Antonio Loyola Vega. Fabio E. Fernández Batista and David Domínguez Cabrera, eds. Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 2018. Pp. xxvii + 311. paper. ISBN: 978-959-06-2046-1.

Suspect Freedoms: The Racial and Sexual Politics of Cubanidad in New York, 1823–1957. By Nancy Raquel Mirabal. New York: New York University Press, 2017. Pp. xiv + 320. \$30.00 paper. ISBN: 9780814761120.

Sugar, Cigars, and Revolution: The Making of Cuban New York. By Lisandro Pérez. New York: New York University Press, 2018. Pp. 400. \$24.00 paper. ISBN: 9780814767276.

Cuba: A Cultural History. By Alan West-Durán. London: Reaktion Books, 2018. Pp. 288. \$29.99 hardcover. ISBN: 9781780238395.

At some point in the course of the past 50 years or so, the proposition of *la diáspora cubana* gained currency within the academy and among the communities for whom the proposition of diaspora seemed to imply more of a settled presence of a people in residence than a liminal condition of a people in exile. A diaspora is “any group of people

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who have spread or become dispersed beyond their traditional homeland or point of origin,” offers the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Cubans most assuredly meet that definition. Diaspora suggests also something of the permanence of a people having settled in and turned inward to advance a claim to a cultural identity shared among the communities of dispersal. The American Museum of the Cuban Diaspora commits itself “to tell the story of the Cuban Diaspora through the eyes of its greatest artists, thinkers, and creators. These artists . . . have emerged in distant landscapes, and become some of the most important artists of our time.”¹ A diaspora of distinction . . .

Diaspora in this instance as a dispersal of a people registered principally as a presence in the United States. Not exclusively, of course, for Cubans dispersed widely across the middle latitudes of the New World all through the nineteenth century, evidence of a presence readily attested to by the introduction of the Cuban pastime of baseball in the Yucatán, the Dominican Republic, and Venezuela. In fact, the North American mainland has almost always been the destination of choice, ever since Hernando de Soto set sail for Florida from Cuba in 1539.

The prevailing conventional wisdom tends to associate the formation of *la diáspora cubana* as a dispersal occasioned by the Cuban Revolution. This is a curious perspective on the diaspora, actually, historicized principally from within the post-1959 migration and tending to a self-referential memorialization of the circumstances of its origins. In fact, it is an arguable proposition that the diaspora was less a consequence of the revolution than a cause of it. This is to understand *la diáspora cubana* as the experience of a people with a long history of dispersal beyond their traditional homeland, for whom the very condition of insularity seemed always to beckon travel to possibilities beyond the horizon. Diaspora as a matter of recurring cycles of dispersals of successive generations of Cubans spanning more than two hundred years. At times to attend to matters of personal betterment away from the traditional homeland; at other times to tend to issues of political betterment of the traditional homeland. Sometimes to address both at the same time: the personal was indeed often political. “With all, and for the good of all,” José Martí made the point.²

Cubans dispersed northward all through the nineteenth century. Perhaps as many as one hundred thousand Cubans—at midcentury fully one-tenth of the total population of Cuba—traveled to and settled in the United States, arriving as complete families and shattered households, women, men, and children, Cubans of means and of modest origins alike, young and old, black and white, some in search of livelihood and others in pursuit of opportunity, many for education and some on vacation, and still others to plot conspiracies and plan revolution.³

The scholarship on the nineteenth-century dispersals has long tended to favor the history of the working-class populations of Key West, Ybor City, West Tampa, Ocala, and Jacksonville, the many thousands of Cubans who settled within the orbit of the expanding cigar factories of Florida as the basis of community and means of livelihood.⁴ Not without

¹ See the website of the American Museum of the Cuban Diaspora, at <https://thecuban.org>.

² José Martí, “Discurso en el Liceo Cubano, Tampa,” November 26, 1891, in José Martí, *Obras completas* (27 vols., Havana, 1963–1966), 4:279.

³ In 1892, the Senate Committee on Immigration estimated that between fifty thousand and one hundred thousand persons traveled annually between Cuba and the United States. See US Congress, Senate, Proceedings of the Cuba and Florida Immigration, 52nd Congress, 2nd Session, Report No. 1263 (Washington, DC, 1893), 66–67.

⁴ See Manuel Deulofeu, *Héroes del destierro. La emigración. Notas históricas* (Cienfuegos, 1904); Gerardo Castellanos y García, *Motivos de Cayo Hueso: Contribución a la historia de las emigraciones revolucionarias cubanas en los Estados Unidos* (Havana, 1935); Juan J. E. Casasús, *La emigración y la independencia de la patria* (Havana, 1953); Nestor Carbonell y Rivero, *Tampa: Cuna del Partido Revolucionario Cubano* (Havana, 1957); José Rivero Muñoz, “Los cubanos en Tampa,” *Revista Bimestre Cubana* 74 (January–June 1958): 5–40; Durwood Long, “The Historical Beginnings of Ybor City and Modern Tampa,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 45 (July 1966): 31–44; Diana Abad, “Las emigraciones

reason. Women and men within a self-aware working class—that is, “ordinary folk”—otherwise overlooked lives, coming together in common purpose as party to and participants in the making of a new nation. “The working people,” José Martí declared in 1892, are the “backbone of our coalition.”⁵ What is there not to like about this history?

Two substantial but very different histories—Lisandro Pérez (*Sugar, Cigars, and Revolution*) and Nancy Raquel Mirabal (*Suspect Freedoms*)—direct the reader’s gaze northward, to expand the diasporic tableau of the nineteenth century to include much-welcomed and long-overdue attention to New York. Lisandro Pérez has written a finely granular history of Cuban New York, a story rendered with affection for both Cubans and New York: “to give New York its due,” Pérez affirms. And indeed, New York has received its just due. Pérez plumbs deeply into the interior history of Cuban New York, a deft display of mastery of finely etched and carefully assembled details as a chronicle that most assuredly makes a touchstone contribution to the history of *la diáspora cubana*. In fact, however, Pérez is not especially interested in placing the Cuban presence in New York within the narrative arc of the diaspora experience. He is instead drawn inward into the community itself to tell the story of daily life in Cuban New York from the inside out, a street-by-street account of Cubans at home and at work, at places of prayer and in locations of plots.

In stages and by degrees, Pérez skillfully links the personal histories of Cubans in New York to the political history of Cuba. The Cuban presence in New York was registered first in lower Manhattan, Cubans of means attending to interests—self-interests, to be precise—having to do with matters of trade and commerce, almost always about sugar, to take “advantage of the traffic between South Street and the Cuban ports,” Pérez comments. But Cubans in New York could not escape the remorseless logic through which factors of class and race acted to configure the social stratifications of neighborhoods. Pérez provides a thoughtful analysis of the changing midcentury demographics of Cuban communities, from middle class to working class, from white to black, which in New York was also often experienced as a people pushed outward, mostly northward—“uptown,” as New Yorkers are wont to say. Cuban New York was itself a reflection of the far-reaching transformations overtaking the multiple and multifaceted constituencies that organized around Cuba Libre. The changing *independentista* demographics also implied the need to accommodate diverse voices and divergent visions of the meaning of Free Cuba, circumstances that “helped to usher a new era in the development of émigré political activism,” Pérez correctly notes, resulting in “a more broad-based and self-reliant revolutionary movement.”

This is New York as a place of a gathering of Cubans, not exactly as huddled masses but as a people acting in concert in discharge of agency, self-conscious protagonists engaged in making history and at the same bearing witness to history in the making. Cubans arrived to New York as poets and novelists, slave holders and the descendants of slaves, representatives of the professions and from among the vocations, revolutionaries and reactionaries, almost all in varying degrees as purveyors of change, propounding a vision of and bearing a plan for what a new Cuba might look like. In a matter of mere days, Pérez writes, José Martí “became convinced that in the city he would find opportunities.” Very much in keeping with the lyric of the song “New York, New York”: “I’ll make a brand new start of it/In old New York.”

cubanas en la Guerra de los Diez Años,” *Santiago* 53 (March 1984): 143–184; Rolando Alvarez Estévez, *La emigración cubana en Estados Unidos, 1868–1878* (Havana, 1988); Gerald E. Poyo, “With All, and for the Good of All:” *The Emergence of Popular Nationalism in the Cuban Communities of the United States, 1848–1898* (Durham, 1989); Gary R. Mormino and George E. Pozzetta, *The Immigrant World of Ybor City* (Urbana, 1990); Sarah McNamara, *Ybor City: Crucible of the Latina South* (Chapel Hill, 2023).

⁵ José Martí, “La proclamación del Partido Revolucionario Cubano el 10 de abril [1892],” Martí, *Obras completas*, 1:387–390.

Nancy Raquel Mirabal offers a different perspective on Cuban New York, at a time in which Cubans appeared to have completed the migration uptown, settling mostly in Harlem and Washington Heights and into the Bronx. Mirabal skillfully situates Cuban New York within the paradigmatic narrative of *la diáspora cubana*, to address the “historical trajectory of Cuban diaspora politics,” attentive to “Cuban diasporic consciousness and community,” and to engage the “common diasporic parlance of temporalities.”

The Cuban presence in New York provides Mirabal something of a diasporic laboratory in which to examine an expanding population of color who received Martí’s vision of “for all, and the good of all” as convertible currency. The experience of diaspora as an occasion for Cubans of color to register a presence among the constituencies of Cuba Libre, determined to prevent the legacy of racism of the colony from developing into the heritage of the republic. Mirabal does well to direct the reader’s attention to the “diasporic constructs of nation and nationalism,” and in the process—with something of a disarming but arresting casualness—poses a question capable of turning the premise of *la diáspora cubana* on its head: “can diasporic revolutionary and nationalist thinking ever be transferred back to the island?” The moment of truth is well narrated in Mirabal’s account, with the diaspora of color coming home after 1898, returning with an agenda in hand and plans in mind, “to take those ideas born in exile and apply them to a nation in the making.” Things did not work out as planned.

The experience of diaspora developed into a familiar way for Cubans to be in the world at large, expressed most commonly in the vernacular of the nineteenth century as *destierro*, something of a condition of banishment and exile. But *destierro* often also implied the expectation of return. Pérez and Mirabal agree—if for different reasons—that *destierro* served as the occasion to imagine distance from old and envision proximity to the new, like the experience of Cubans in New York who, Pérez suggests, derived meaning from the “unfolding spectacle of democracy and modernity.” To contemplate another way of being, to ponder another way of becoming. Cubans returning home emboldened with new knowledge and imbued with new ways, returning changed and bearing change: “diasporic thinking,” Mirabal affirms. Ill-omened change indeed, feared Spanish Captain General José G. de la Concha at midcentury. Cubans returning to the traditional homeland “with new habits, ideas, and dangerous affectations,” de la Concha warned, “with tendencies contrary to the institutions that govern us”—in sum, “frankly subversive ideas.”⁶

History was destiny. The act of dispersal replicating itself over successive generations—with a nod to “the repeating island” of Antonio Benítez Rojo⁷—thereupon to reach deeply into the normative determinants from which the premise of *lo cubano* obtained plausibility. The experience of diaspora developed into something of a well-practiced tradition. Few were the urban households that did not include at least one voice to speak knowingly of life in the diaspora: those first-person accounts told and retold at family gatherings, often accompanied with a display of souvenirs and a showing of old photographs, the experience of diaspora passing from one generation to the next in the form of family lore. The narrator in Miguel Barnet’s novel *Vida real* (1984) remarks on the “typical Cuban custom” of arriving to New York and “within a few days being photographed on a street in the Bronx or Manhattan in front of a very expensive car, wearing a coat and velvet hat . . . or standing in front of a luxury hotel and saying: ‘I work here.’”⁸

Diaspora as a family tradition. In 1952 journalist Rubén Ortiz Lamadrid accompanied his eight-year-old son to New York. He remembered his experience twenty years earlier,

⁶ José G. de la Concha to Ministro de Gobernación, July 2, 1851, *Boletín del Archivo Nacional*, 16 (January–February, 1917): 394–395; José G. de la Concha, *Memorias sobre el estado político, gobierno y administrativo de la isla de Cuba* (Madrid, 1853), 63.

⁷ Antonio Benítez Rojo, *La isla que se repite: El Caribe y la perspectiva posmoderna* (Hanover, NH, 1989).

⁸ Miguel Barnet, *Vida real* (Havana, 1986), 174.

having arrived to New York “without speaking a word of English and only \$48 in my pocket” to escape political repression and economic depression during the 1930s. To travel to New York with his son years later, Ortiz Lamadrid explained, was “to open the door for him to a new world, under better circumstances that were available to me . . . I have wanted to show him the way, familiarize him with the environment, to remove all the unknowns about this great country, to which sooner or later, for one reason or another, a great majority of we Cubans must travel at some time in our lives.” Mission accomplished: “My son now knows the way. Now the politicians can, if they wish, condemn his generation the way ours was condemned to emigration, voluntary or forced. [He] knows how to flee the debacle of his nation.”⁹ Rehearsal for diaspora.

A rehearsal practiced during the post–World War II years with something of a clairvoyant lucidity. Mirabal extends the account of Cubans in New York into the 1950s, by which time *la diáspora cubana* has settled into an established community of neighborhoods in the Upper West Side having little to do with Cuba. Mirabal’s Cuban New York develops into a story of the travails of the “*colonia hispana* in the great city of New York,” women and men absorbed with the pursuit of dignity and well-being as permanent residents in New York.

Perhaps a missed opportunity to “reconnect” *la diáspora cubana* with the traditional homeland. Cuba was entering a profound structural crisis that would serve as pathway to revolution by the end of the decade. An expanding population projected to double from six million to eleven million between 1956 and 1980, entering the wage-labor market of an export economy that had settled into a condition of chronic stagnation: an estimated forty thousand women and men annually reached working age in an economy unable to generate more than approximately eight thousand new jobs yearly. The economist Leví Marrero despaired: “What will be the fate of Cuba if we double our population . . . without changing our economic structure?” Marrero could contemplate only one possibility: a vast emigration, perhaps as many as 2.5 million Cubans—approximately one-quarter of the population—migrating to the United States.¹⁰ Diaspora as a Cuban destiny.

The practice of diaspora thus expanded fully into something of a national custom: a people seeming to have acquiesced to the eventuality of living beyond their traditional homeland as something of a fate foretold. Diaspora as an attribute of *lo cubano*, Cubans would tell themselves, an experience so commonplace that Fernando Ortiz included living in “other lands, gaining exotic customs and manners” as *un factor humano de la cubanidad*, what historian Ramiro Guerra y Sánchez characterized as a facet of “la psicología del cubano.”¹¹ An experience to which Cubans seemed to have readily adapted, at home away from home, certainly consistent Máximo Gómez’s observation in 1888 that “the Cuban has a great facility to assimilate himself immediately to the country to which he goes.”¹²

To imagine diaspora in the form of heritage serves to deepen an appreciation for Pablo Alonso González (*Cuban Cultural Heritage*): heritage as an ensemble of cultural assets, Alonso González argues persuasively, with which “to construct usable pasts for grounding a discourse of national identity and collective memory.” Alonso González directs attention to the memorialization of history as a condition of dialogue: heritage to inform the foundational narratives of nation, thereupon to serve as a means of moral sustenance and source of cultural continuity, a past endowed with didactic purpose and instrumental function. Alonso González writes of the “practice of heritage” in the form of programmed

⁹ Rubén Ortiz Lamadrid, “Veinte años después,” *El Mundo*, October 3, 1952, A-6.

¹⁰ Leví Marrero, “Cuba: 11 million dentro de 25 años,” *El Mundo*, November 14, 1956, A-6.

¹¹ Fernando Ortiz, “Los factores humanos de la cubanidad,” *Revista Bimestre Cubana* 45 (March–April 1945): 164; Ramiro Guerra y Sánchez, “La historia y los factores históricos: introducción al estudio de la historia de Cuba,” *Cuba Contemporánea* 26 (August 1921): 326–331.

¹² Máximo Gómez to Francisco Carrillo, July 27, 1888, in *Máximo Gómez: Cartas a Francisco Carrillo*, ed. Hortensia Pichardo (Havana, 1986), 93.

arrangements as “heritage preservation” and “heritage management,” that is, to curate heritage in the form of *patrimonio*.

The project of “heritage preservation” after 1898 could deploy only what was most readily available and immediately accessible, of course, which in this instance implied the need to utilize the existing built environment of the colonial past as the means for imagining the republican future. Heritage to mediate the transition between colonial dissolution and national formation. In fact, strategies of urban planning in the service of “heritage preservation” did not fare well. The attempt to transform Havana into an object of a post-colonial nostalgia, “preserved as a symbol of national identity,” Alonso González notes, was unable to resolve “the contradiction between preservation and modernization.”

But it was more complicated. The project of postcolonial heritage preservation was itself transformed into an elite-driven undertaking in the service of “cultural nationalism,” a way “to connect the nationalist agenda with a project of state modernization and the construction of an imagined community.” Precisely how the “practice of heritage” was to insinuate itself into the popular imagination as an all-inclusive means of collective coherence is not clear. In fact, Alonso González indicates, it did not. “Heritage preservation” developed into “a contested site” and “a tool for the renewal of political hegemony for the elites.” The effort “to develop a modern conception of heritage” succeeded only in “creating elite cultures rather than national cultures,” and more: “the Republic failed to provide an interpretation of collective events and identity shared by all Cubans” resulting in the “lack of a coherent, rich, and highly developed approximation to history.”

Perhaps. In fact, the measure of the success of the memorialization function of “heritage preservation” is difficult to ascertain properly. Alonso González posits a long view of the post-colonial environment, a periodization schema that spans the years 1898–1959, looking forward from the vantage point of 1898. From this perspective the record of the republic is sordid indeed, resulting in what essayist José Sixto de Sola decried as early as 1913 as “el pesimismo cubano:” Cubans as a disillusioned and disheartened people, unable to “enter the spirit of the new personality of the nation . . . and others who do not believe in it, who have no faith.”¹³

But these same years can also be imagined as a time of prerevolutionary formation, looking backward from the perspective of January 1, 1959. From this vantage point, the triumph of the Cuban Revolution, in fact, offers powerful corroboration of the success of “a coherent, rich, and highly developed approximation to history.” The revolution emerged from the history it sought to redress, disposed to weaponize heritage in discharge of a moral warrant of historicity of purpose and more than adequately fulfilled the memorialization function of heritage. Few would challenge the proposition of January 1, 1959, as vindication of heritage: “I allowed myself to be carried away by a long-awaited wave of faith and hope,” wrote novelist Juan Arcocha, speaking for millions of Cubans in 1959. “At last! It was possible to believe in Cuba.”¹⁴ This sounds very much like the triumph of heritage writ large.

Alonso González is especially persuasive in chronicling the phases attending the “practice of heritage” in the decades after 1959. This is heritage, again, in the service of political purpose, that is, “culture and heritage as fundamental means with which to ensure internal support and legitimacy,” Alonso González offers. Indeed: never with a greater sense of urgency than during the years of withering adversities of the Special Period—the past summoned to arrest flagging morale and reverse faltering resolve. History was everywhere, invoked as a recurring remembrance of a past with a bright future, to serve as a standard to live by and live up to—another version of the “practice of heritage”—Cubans enjoined to keep faith with a past “associated with moral duty,” wrote essayist

¹³ José Sixto de Sola, “El pesimismo cubano,” *Cuba Contemporánea* 3 (December 1913), 275.

¹⁴ Juan Arcocha, “¿Qué es la revolución?” *Revolución*, August 26, 1959, 2.

Lisandro Otero.¹⁵ “Compromiso con nuestra historia,” exhorted Havana billboards all during the 1990s.

But the past as a source of moral fund of collective sustenance was not inexhaustible, Alonso González correctly notes. A heroic past indeed, properly celebrated as *cien años de lucha*, but when deployed anew to imply the onset of another *cien años de lucha* could not but have dispirited a struggle-weary people. Once upon a time Cubans celebrated the prophetic power of their past: a past with a future. The historically conditioned logic of struggle and sacrifice in behalf of the just nation and means of collective fulfillment—“for all, and the good of all”—so very much at the core of the early mystique of the Cuban Revolution, seemed to ring hollow in the early twenty-first century. Cubans disappointed with the outcomes to which their efforts had contributed. It is possible to imagine many Cubans today looking in baffled askance at the promise of the national anthem: “Morir por la patria es vivir.” The islandwide demonstrations in July 2021 suggest that the disposition to self-immolation inscribed in “patria o muerte” has been supplanted by desire for self-fulfillment promised in “patria y vida.” Alonso González is most assuredly correct to suggest that Cuba “might be running out of pasts to consume.” Not the end of history in the Fukuyama sense. Perhaps more insidious: the loss of faith in history.

And always the diaspora looming in the background. Heritage has served the Cubans well against “the growing influence of U.S. neoimperialism,” Alonso González contends. Not as clear, however, is the capacity of heritage to contain the “growing influence” when that influence arrives in the form of the diaspora. To return to Nancy Raquel Mirabal’s question: can diasporic thinking “ever be transferred back to the island?” A similar thought appears to have occurred to Alonso González. “Without doubt,” the book ends, “heritage will be a terrain of dissonance for Cubans, both on the island and abroad, in the years to come.” Without doubt . . .

What is for Pablo Alonso González a built environment riven with contradictions between preservation and modernization is for Joseph Hartman (*Dictator’s Dreamscape*) an undertaking of single-minded purpose. Hartman offers new perspectives on the eight-year presidency of Gerardo Machado (1925–1933), beckoning the reader to give Machado a second look. No easy task. The scholarship on the *machadato* long ago settled into a time-honored consensus: a regime of repression, corruption, thuggery, torture, and assassination. Even the most intrepid revisionists stay clear of Machado.

Hartman enters the nether world of the *machadato* with lucid clarity, mindful of a reign of repression that often rose to the level of “state terrorism.” Repression as a means of modernity, a method of governance adopted to bring Cuba into the twentieth century to fulfill the dreams of a new national identity—at all cost. This is crash modernity, not quite on the scale of the Great Leap Forward, to be sure, but with aspirations no less vaunted. “Monumental ambitions,” Hartman writes of Machado, determined to realize “modernization and progress,” something of “a mimetic stew of modernization, nationalism, and the collective dreamworks of capitalism and modernity.” What is for Pablo Alonso González heritage to build on is for Hartman heritage to build for: the built environment less to commemorate the colonial past than to celebrate the future of “a modern republic in the process of becoming.” Modernization prevails over preservation, to transform Havana into “an ideal sign of urban heritage and national unity.” But this is also the repeating island, and the styles Machado selected for representation of modernity often tended toward the reproduction of monuments and statuary from the colonial era, the “repetition of colonial history in the public monuments,” offers Hartman: “coloniality mingles with modernity.”

Heritage politics in another guise, of course, another mode in which the clash between an idealized past and an envisioned future seemed to have lost sight of the needs of a

¹⁵ Lisandro Otero, *Llover sobre mojado. Memorias de un intelectual cubano (1957–1997)* (Mexico, 1999), 12.

people in the lived present. These tensions were roiling within the *machadato*, issues that Hartman addresses with cinematic clarity and forensic precision, attentive always to the myopia of a modernity undertaken from within a collapsing economy dependent on the diminishing receipts of sugar exports. The reader cannot but be in awe of the assortment of rich and high-quality illustrations of architectural blueprints, maps, and photographs that serve as the graphic corroboration of the “dictator’s dreamscape.” The photographs of construction sites in progress suggest something a time-sequenced documentation of the dimensions of Machado’s built environment, from inception to completion. Riveting. The premise of the built environment of the *machadato* to imply the need to look “forward to potential futures, as well as backward toward imagined histories and continuities,” Hartman suggests, to tell “a story about the nation’s past, present, and future . . . telescoping back to the colonial plantation and projecting forward to Cuba’s revolutionary future.”

Alan West-Durán (*Cuba*) does not so much look forward or backward as much as gazes inward, to examine the ways that diverse cultural forms have contributed to the sensibility of *lo cubano* as “a way to tell the story of Cuba’s history.” Culture in this instance is examined principally in the form of literary production, the plastic arts, and the performing arts and integrated into the context of a historical narrative spanning the years between 1898 and the 2010s.

West-Durán has written a comprehensive survey of Cuban cultural production through which to interrogate belief systems, social practices, and popular culture, offering an understanding of aesthetic forms within the social circumstances of their production, circulation, and consumption. Not always an easy task. Even the best efforts to align Cuban cultural production with Cuban history—and West-Durán is among the best—face the daunting task of keeping up with a history having often failed to live up to the expectations of its protagonists, often reducing writers and artists to a condition of soul-searching bafflement.

Almost immediately, and perhaps inevitably, West-Durán crosses the threshold into the diaspora, something of a ranging meditation to contemplate the “authenticity” of cultural production originating beyond the traditional homeland by artists “whether they live [in Cuba] or abroad.” The repeating island to reproduce the experience of the nineteenth century. Writers, poets, and artists who emigrated often continued to complete novels and write poems, to produce art and compose music. Does cultural production within the diaspora properly constitute—to use Pablo Alonso González’s term—“heritage” of the larger cultural stock of *cubanidad*? West-Durán is unambiguous: “You do not have to live on the island to be Cuban, nor is your art any less Cuban if not created on Cuban soil.” Per the lyric of the Orishas’ title song: “*Sé que me fui de Cuba/Pero sé que Cuba no se fue de mí.*” Indeed, some of the most finely articulated expressions of *cubanía* have originated from beyond the traditional homeland. “Distance (*distancia*) and remoteness (*lejanía*),” observed Cuban poet Cintio Vitier, born in Key West, “will always exercise a decisive role in the formation of our sensibility,” thereupon to recall that the first “lyrical illumination” of Cuba—“*Himno del desterrado*” by José María Heredia—was written in exile.¹⁶ To which Lisandro Pérez would surely add the name of that other Cuban away from the traditional homeland, José Martí, whose experience in New York “allowed him to develop politically, intellectually, and personally, and made it possible for him to sharpen his vision of the world.” Diaspora as epiphany of *cubanidad*. “I have had to come into exile to discover that, after all, I am Cuban,” novelist Luis Ricardo Alonso speaks through his protagonist in *Los dioses ajenos* (1971).¹⁷

¹⁶ Cintio Vitier, *Lo cubano en la poesía* (Havana, 1970), 88. See José María Heredia, “Himno del desterrado,” in *Obras poéticas de José María Heredia* (2 vols., New York, 1875), 1:304–307.

¹⁷ Luis Ricardo Alonso, *Los dioses ajenos* (Barcelona, 1971), 201.

Whereas West-Durán is concerned principally with cultural production, Yvon Grenier (*Culture and the Cuban State*) concentrates on cultural policy. What is for West-Durán “some negative aspects of state involvement and control of the arts” is for Grenier a regime of “authoritarianism, censorship and repression [as] part of the Cuban reality.” West-Durán approaches culture largely as a matter of common ground from which an emerging national identity assumed form. Grenier examines culture as terrain contested between artists and intellectuals, on one hand, and the state, on the other: “a key battlefield in the construction of the new order.” Grenier makes persuasive use of personal histories as a way to examine the strategies deployed by individual artists and writers to arrive at a *modus vivendi* with the State, or not, navigating scrupulously within the ambiguities of what “can be said, when is the right time and what is the right place to say it.” Pablo Alonso González writes approvingly of “heritage management”; Grenier writes critically of “the curator state.” Alonso González sees museums as a contribution to the “construction of a national identity” and a “key instrument for establishing national communal bonds by linking citizenship, culture, and the nation-state”; Grenier sees museums and other cultural centers as the means used by the state to “‘curate’ artistic activities and pre-empt improper conduct.” To a greater or lesser degree, both Alonso González and Grenier are actually saying the same thing: the state has an abiding interest in the mediation of the terms of national affiliation and the regulation of the content of national culture.

And always the looming presence of the diaspora. Grenier makes the common error of judging post-World War II Cuba from the outside, to comment on “a rich urban culture, starting with the capital Havana, where the cultural life was one of the most vibrant and sophisticated in Latin America” and that Cuba was “the most important center of commercial radio and television production in Latin America.” Yes indeed—plenty of argument can be made about Cuban well-being relative to Latin America. But the oft-repeated favorable comparison with Latin America fails to appreciate the unique Cuban malaise. The circumstances of daily life in Latin America were not the standards by which Cubans measured their well-being. The United States was. In fact, the acquaintance of the diaspora with the United States was not always a felicitous experience. One of the more insidious aspects of the dispersal was the opportunity it provided Cubans to draw comparisons that were both invidious and inevitable, to marvel with envy and to smart with embarrassment at Cuba’s “backwardness.” Dispersal contributed powerfully to deepening Cuban discontent with conditions on the island. Increasing numbers of women and men came to see their own society as outsiders—and did not like what they saw. Cuban self-esteem was often bruised by diasporic encounters. Contact with “foreign material values,” novelist Lino Novás Calvo brooded in 1935, provoked “a corrosive resentment toward everything Cuban [thereupon] to consider it inferior,” what Jorge Mañach characterized more generally as a Cuban “inferiority complex.”¹⁸ US State Department intelligence could not but contemplate uneasily the political implications of a psychological condition of inferiority, commenting in 1953 that the Cuban people were “sometimes influenced by a sense of inferiority, which promotes exaggerated nationalism.”¹⁹ The many ways that the diaspora contributed—in Leninist terms—to the subjective conditions of revolution.

The legacy of dispersal also serves to inform Grenier’s examination of the politics of official cultural policy, with a nuanced appreciation of the ways that the custom of diaspora has often acted to mediate or otherwise mitigate tensions between artists and the

¹⁸ Lino Novás Calvo, “El pathos cubano,” in *Homenaje a Enrique José Varona, en el cincuentenario de su primer curso de filosofía (1880-1930)*, ed. José María Chacón y Calvo (Havana, 1935), 224; Jorge Mañach, *Pasado vigente* (Havana, 1939), 222–223.

¹⁹ Office of Middle American Affairs (MID), “Cuba: A Summary of Situations, Interests, and Policies Affecting the United States,” February 20, 1953, File 737.0012-2453, 1A: 1950-1954, General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59, National Archives, Washington, DC.

state. The “massive exodus” of artists, writers, and academics during the Special Period, Grenier writes, “reduced the competition for recognition in Cuba and made the ones who stayed more valuable in the eyes of the regime.” The diaspora at work: as a means of reprieve for artists who departed and a source of relief for those who remained. “It is important,” Grenier astutely notes, “for the regime to treat the ones who are famous and who remain in the country with some mansuetude.”

Pressures to emigrate originate from many sources, of course, often less from within Cuba than from without. Artists and writers who do indeed become “famous” cannot but ponder the advantages of an enhanced life lived beyond the traditional homeland. Grenier comments on novelist Leonardo Padura being “constantly asked” why he “continues living there.” Judging Padura as “the best writer in Cuba” and one of Cuba’s “greatest cultural assets,” Grenier appears persuaded that some writers—Padura, for example—may indeed find the fullness of fulfillment in the diaspora, to ask rhetorically if in fact Padura “would be more valuable to us, and a better writer, in exile?”

A collection of articles republished posthumously as *La nación insurrecta* by Oscar Antonio Loyola Vega (1949–2014) provides perspectives from within the island. In a score of essays written over the course of a career spanning more than four decades, Loyola Vega dedicated attention to the long nineteenth century to examine the epic wars of national liberation, including the Ten Years War (1868–1878), the Little War (1879–1880), and the War for Independence (1895–1898). These are familiar accounts, very much hewing to the prevailing conventions of the historiography in Cuba of the past fifty years. Loyola Vega pays customary homage to the personalities of independence—*los próceres*, as Cubans are wont to say—including Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, Ignacio Agramonte, Antonio Maceo, and José Martí, with thoughtful attention given to the Cuban way of war, the evolving social content of *independentista* thought, and the frequent political clashes within the ever-changing constituencies of Cuba Libre.

But Loyola Vega also casts an occasional glance beyond the traditional homeland to acknowledge the larger Pan-American dimensions of the Cuban wars of independence, to situate the liberation project within the larger context of the Americas and to accord proper recognition of the importance of “independentismo continental.” Cubans having dispersed widely into the Americas to acquire Hemispheric perspectives on their wars of independence. Loyola Vega’s account of the nineteenth century is richly informed with an appreciation of the contribution of the “strong émigré enclaves in Central America, the Caribbean, and Spain, but most of all in the United States,” whose support was vital to the cause of Free Cuba. Special importance is accorded to “the geographic diaspora of Cuban émigrés not only in the United States but also in Central America and the Caribbean.”

But acknowledgment of the importance of the diaspora is accompanied with a warning to tread lightly. Loyola Vega situates his perspective fully from within the armed ranks of Cuba Libre, from among the soldiery (*mambises*) of the Ejército Libertador and within the republic-in-arms of Jimaguayú. The importance of the diaspora to the cause of Free Cuba notwithstanding, Loyola Vega calmly insists, responsibility for the future of Cuba was properly the prerogative of Cubans on the island, specifically in the custody of the *mambises* who bore arms in defense of *Cuba Libre*. “All revolutions,” Loyola Vega affirmed, “unfold and respond to the specific necessities that are derived from the reality from which they emerge”—in this instance, a reality knowable only to Cubans who defended the cause of Free Cuba within the experience of armed struggle. And to the recurring question of the role of the diaspora in shaping the future of Cuba, Loyola Vega is unequivocal: the future of Cuba belongs to Cubans in Cuba. A position that recalls the stern admonition offered by Tomás Estrada Palma—from New York—in late 1895: “Those [Cubans] who wage war, those who fight on the fields of the *patria* under the dictum of ‘Independence or death:’ they are the only representatives of the Cuban people (*el pueblo cubano*) Neither the Cubans on the island who find themselves outside the fields of

battle nor the Cubans of the emigration have any right to meddle in anything related to patriotic dignity.”²⁰

These are deep histories that contribute depth and dimension to an understanding of the Cuban past. Deep histories indeed—often siloed histories, to be sure, organized into discreet ontological formulations separate and apart from all other histories. It is perhaps all too easy to slide into passive acquiescence to the oft-repeated proposition that Cuba is different. Whatever else may separate the Cubans from the Americans they share a common belief in their condition of exceptionalism. Certainly one would do well to heed the counsel of Ben Nobbs-Thiessen to be wary of “the exceptionalist tendency in migration studies.”²¹ Of course. But still . . . Cuba is different. What other people have been the recipient of the US visa largesse contained in the Cuban Adjustment Act (1966), whereby by merely stepping foot on the US mainland—“wet foot, dry foot—was sufficient to guarantee paroled residency entry in the United States, making for what Susan Eckstein has correctly identified as “Cuban privilege.”²² A diaspora welcomed, a diaspora encouraged.

And perhaps too the historical continuities of a dispersal spanning nearly two centuries also serves to render “the exceptionalist tendency” as a plausible proposition. The experience reaches deeply into the sensibility of *lo cubano*. At times as *destierro*, often as *exilio*, frequently as *emigración*: all the multiple forms through which the experience of *la diáspora cubana* was lived. Not everyone would agree with Nancy Raquel Mirabal’s breathtaking pronouncement that “the Cuban nation was scripted in the diaspora.” On the other hand, the experience of the dispersal beyond the traditional homeland most assuredly must be acknowledged as having contributed to the traditions of the homeland.

The diaspora perhaps caught up in the endless loop of the history of the repeating island. A people bound together among themselves as a way to remain bound to the traditional homeland. Some with the expectation of the right of return in the hope of participation in the realization of an idealized future that can never be. Some with no expectation of return but bound together by the memory of an irretrievable past that never was. To recall the words of the protagonist Luz Marina in Virgilio Piñera’s play *Aire Frío* (1959): “Me paso la vida buscando una salida, una puerta, un puente. Debe haberla, pero nosotros no acertaremos nunca a descubrirla.”²³

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²⁰ Tomás Estrada Palma to José de Armas y Céspedes, September 3, 1895, in *Partido Revolucionario Cubano, La revolución del 95 según la correspondencia de la Delegación Cubana en Nueva York* (5 vols., Havana, 1932–1937), 1:281.

²¹ Ben Nobbs-Thiessen, “New Waves of Immigration and Departure in Modern Latin America,” *Latin American Research Review* 56 (December 2021): 956.

²² Susan Eva Eckstein, *Cuban Privilege: The Making of Immigrant Inequality in America* (New York, 2022).

²³ Virgilio Piñera, “Aire Frío,” in *Teatro completo*, ed. Rine Leal (Havana, 2002), 189.

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