

Maria Diana Fulger

The Cuban Post-Socialist Exotic

Contemporary U.S. American Travel Narratives about Cuba

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Maria Diana Fulger

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about Cuba

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# 1. Introduction

As travel writing has been gaining more attention as a field of study over the past couple of decades, scholars are gradually becoming more aware of its significance as a narrative space where history and politics take shape. The “production of ideology” is inevitable alongside the “production of narrative,” claim the editors of *Politics, Identity, and Mobility in Travel Writing* (Cabañas et al. 2). Thus authors of travel writing emerge as major contributors to the “modern production of knowledge,” where the personal and the political intersect and interact (3). Invested with the power of transforming cultural reality, travel texts “represent actual political conditions” and “propose real-world political interventions in the places where the traveler goes” (2). Therefore, the representations of culture that emerge in travel writing can be at the same time “liberating and subjugating” (4).

There is an entire market of travel books about Cuba that emerged in the 1990s in the United States, as well as various forms of media representations, from documentary films to photography. During the so-called Special Period, when travel from the U.S to Cuba became possible through various language and research programs, U.S. American citizens with few or no connections whatsoever to the Cuban-American community flocked to the island searching either for a confirmation of their preconceptions or simply out of curiosity about a country that had until then been out of their reach for decades.<sup>1</sup> The travel narratives that took shape as an outcome of those journeys are an intricate maze of perspectives and personal impressions, which translate history and politics with a considerable dose of sentimentality. These narratives are emotional, personal, charged with expectations, and intimate in all aspects of human contact. There is a hunger for experiencing the Cuban ‘reality’ that emerges vicariously in these accounts, which likely feed the expectations of the U.S. American readership. It suffices to say then that the diversity of topics and identity constructs that one discovers in these narratives matches the degree of fascination with which their authors start on their individual-turned-public adventures. By proliferating stereotypes of race, gender, and sexuality; by creating nostalgic renderings of Cuba’s colonial heritage, political rhetoric, national myths, and ideology; and by solidifying metaphors of normative models of conduct derived from paternalistic principles and exotic imageries of an ‘essential’ Cuban identity, U.S. travel literature about Cuba during the Special Period exerts a certain amount of power over the imaginations of its readers.

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<sup>1</sup> The economic crisis which took place in Cuba during the last decade of the twentieth century, and which is known by the name of *el Periodo Especial* (the Special Period), represented a crucial turning point in the island’s socio-economic landscape and political direction. The term *periodo especial* refers to “Cuba’s economic decline from 1990 to 1995 after the collapse of the Soviet Union” (West-Durán, “Rap’s Diasporic Dialogues” 15). The Special Period was declared in September 1990 and reached its lowest point in the summer of 1994, increasingly recovering after that (Kapcia 217).

As a general premise, metaphoric constructs have always governed the U.S. American stance on Cuba. According to critic Louis A. Pérez Jr., “Cuba entered the American imagination early in the nineteenth century principally by way of metaphor: depictions fashioned as a function of self-interest, almost always in the form of moral imperative in which the exercise of power was represented as the performance of beneficence” (*Cuba in the American Imagination* 2). From the mid-nineteenth century up to the Cuban Revolution in 1959, U.S. American travel writers for the most part glorified the natural setting of the island, and journalists conjured up the brave image of helpless Cuban citizens in pitiful need of guidance from the United States, who had stoically held out in the face of the Spanish oppressive powers. Meanwhile tourist brochures teased the North American tourist with images of sensual bodies and performances of ‘exotic/erotic’ Afro-Cuban art. Present-day U.S. American travel books authors such as Lea Aschkenas, Christopher Baker, Peter Ripley, Catherine Moses, and Ben Corbett struggled to counteract such naïve representations. Although their ‘use of metaphor’ does not ‘imply mischievous intent,’ the outcome of their journeys often unfolds along similar lines to those of travel writers who came before them: glorification of the island’s ‘untamed’ nature; superficial presentations of Cuban folklore with little insight into its socio-political implications; romantic depictions of poverty; exotic renderings of the black body, etc. The implications of such categorizations are reminiscent of ‘othering’ processes which had been affecting the power balance of Cuban-American relations to the advantage of the latter. From the U.S. plans of annexation of Cuba in the mid-nineteenth century, throughout the U.S. political involvement in Cuban internal and external affairs as stipulated by the Platt Amendment of 1901, and up to the support that dictator Fulgencio Batista was granted in the 1950s, the United States assumed the role of a culturally superior nation, a monopolizing force in the economic affairs of the country, and a political mentor to an ‘inexperienced’ Cuban state, newly unfettered from Spanish colonial power at the dawn of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup>

The U.S. American national discourse of the nineteenth century paved the way for a policy of savior-protector to develop by the turn of the twentieth century. Many travel writers from the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries positioned themselves within that discourse. After the Cold War, the field of travel writing underwent some changes, at least in literary terms, as the variety of travelogues, personal memoirs, and ethnographic accounts about Cuba allowed for stylistic diversity.<sup>3</sup> While many travel

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<sup>2</sup> The War of Independence ended in 1898 with the victory of Cuban segregationist forces over the Spanish colonial forces (Suchlicki 71).

<sup>3</sup> The end of the 1940s saw the world already in the middle of a so-called cold war, a state of tension between the Western Block and the Eastern Block over worldwide political and military influence. In the Americas the United States was trying “to keep the hemisphere from turning red” by bringing capitalism to its southern neighbors (Schwartz 116). According to Blazan, the Cold War was not really a conflict between West and