Review Articles

Cuba in the Balance

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The December 2014 “Obama accords” between the governments of the United States and Cuba significantly alter the travel and trade policies that have been enforced for the past five decades. They also foreshadow a potential dismantling of longstanding ideological debates that have too often framed external critical appraisals of creative art and culture in Cuba. The root issue of the U.S. economic blockade continues to affect Cuba’s social development. Yet it will come as no surprise that the impact of any change, whether economic, ideological, social, or cultural, at first at least, will not be equally shared by urban and rural populations.

In Trumpets in the Mountains, Laurie Frederik opens an often obscured window on rural life, culture, and art in contemporary Cuba. The book documents her experiences working with four theater groups—one in the central Escambray Mountains and the remaining three in Oriente, which Peter Hulme terms
“Cuba’s Wild East.” The remote and mountainous far eastern tip of the island figures significantly in Cuba’s political history: two wars of independence in the late nineteenth century, an agricultural uprising in the 1930s, Fidel Castro’s rebel army hidden in the Sierra Maestra Mountains in the 1950s, and the Guantánamo Bay U.S. Naval Station made infamous after September 11, 2001.

From the late 1960s to the 1980s, the Escambray Mountains became the site for the development of the celebrated “New Theater” movement that sent leading professionals to the countryside to create theater for, and with, the rural peasant or campesino population. The results were exceptional. The groups Teatro Escambray and Teatro La Yaya assume a legendary character within the history of the modern Cuban theater. But during the Special Period in the 1990s, with its negative economic growth and severely reduced access to consumer goods and services, the effects of the U.S. blockade of international trade with Cuba became increasingly marked. It is in this context that Frederik studies the Teatro de los Elementos, in the Escambray region, and three theaters in the province of Guantánamo—La Cruzada Teatral, El Grupo Realengo 18, and the new Laboratorio de Teatro Comunitario.

The study focuses strictly on rural populations that remain isolated from the metropolitan cultural center in Havana. Adapting Gayatri Spivak, it asks: “‘Can the campesino speak?’ Or were they spoken for [Frederik’s emphasis] in spite of the best intentions of the Revolution and of revolutionary arts?” (p. 20). But these are loaded questions with ideological as opposed to anthropological underpinnings. Frederik’s method is experiential. She literally lives with the groups as they develop their performances. The experience with the Teatro de los Elementos provides the most poetic rendering of both the method and the aesthetic process. In 1958, a man-made lake inundated the town of Siguanea to build the Hanabanilla Hydroelectric Plant. Much of the land belonged to the latifundista Pepillo Hernández and the town was sold to the Dallas-Telcom company at the behest of Hernández’s friend, Fulgencio Batista. Forty years later the play Ten mi nombre como un sueño (“Remember my name, as if it were a dream”) was created, using testimonials by former Siguanea residents, photos from the 1950s, and inventories of the properties and possessions left behind by those displaced. The theater group floats on the lake in a rowboat to understand the underwater topography of the town, its streets, houses, and cemetery, et cetera, and visits the area of the hydroelectric plant (which does

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