BOOK REVIEW

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Reviewed by Mark Ginsburg

In this informative and accessible volume, Sujatha Fernandes provides insights into the views and actions of cultural workers (rappers, hip-hop performers, filmmakers, artists) and other citizens (including hair stylists) in Cuba. Fernandes divides the book into three chronological parts, one focusing on the Special Period (the 1990s, following the demise of the Soviet Union), a second examining the short “normalization” period associated with the Barak Obama–Raul Castro re-opening of embassies, and the third illuminating the period of renewed hostility of the Trump years. Unfortunately, after the book was published, Cuba’s reality became worse due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, Trump’s (re)inclusion of Cuba on the US’s list of state sponsors of terrorism, and Biden’s reneging on his campaign promise to reverse Trump’s ratcheting up of the economic and media war against Cuba. While Fernandes calls attention to efforts by the US government (notably USAID) to foster Cuban citizens (especially Afro-Cuban hip-hoppers and rappers) to revolt and try to overthrow the Revolution, she highlights how other Cubans focused their discourse and activism – often in communication and concert, but sometimes in conflict, with government officials – to reform certain aspect of Cuban society. The book, which includes chapters previously published in outlets such as NACLA Report on the Americas and The Nation, gives particular attention to individuals and groups that critiqued and sought to change how
the Cuban government and society treated Afro-Cubans, women, and individuals identified as LGBTQ+. With regard to the latter set of issues, the book went to press before the Families Code was overwhelmingly approved by a referendum after extensive public debates in Cuba in September 2022, which recognizes a diversity of families, including those led by homosexual as well as heterosexual partners. Fernandes bases the various chapters on her observations during extended visits to Cuba, interviews with key informants, and analyses of documents and other products of the people she features. The volume serves as an important source of information on the dynamism of Cuban reality, documenting how everyday life and concerns changed from one period to the next, but also how different groups, and even different individuals within the same group or category, varied in their perceptions of their situation and their conceptions of how they or their government should address the challenges they faced. In the Introduction Fernandes explains that “the idea of the hustle draws from Cuban vernacular … that has emerged to articulate the ways Cubans negotiate the contradictions of everyday life in the post-Soviet” periods. Her book shines a light not only on the contradictions Cubans encountered, but also on how as individuals and groups engaged in creative ways to resolve or seek to change these contradictions. What stands out is not only Cubans’ creativity, but also their resilience to maintain their dignity and sovereignty in the face of challenges, many of which result from the 60+ years of the US’s economic, commercial, and financial embargo (perhaps better labeled as a blockade), as well as restrictions on travel by Americans as well as Cubans.