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# Cuban Landscapes: Heritage, Memory, and Place

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Book review of: Cuban Landscapes: Heritage, Memory, and Place, JOSEPH L. SCARPACI and ARMANDO H. PORTELA, Guilford, New York, NY (2009). vii + 216 pp. US\$31.00 (pbk). ISBN 978 1 60623 323 8.

Most tourists tie Cuba to bucolic tropical sceneries, pristine sandy beaches and crystal clear turquoise water besides Spanish colonial architecture, vintage American cars, and smoky cigar-filled rum bars with impassionate *mullatos*. One crucial task of geographers is to overcome this superficial glimpse by resolving stereotypes, elucidating coherences, deepening understandings and diversifying perspectives on certain places. From a geographer's vantage point, for example, Cuba could be associated with manifold natural (palmas reales, royal palms; *mogotes*, limestone haystack hills; *babías de bolsa*, pocket bays) and cultural images (*bodegas*, local grocery stores; *zafra*, the sugar harvest; *latifundios*, large agricultural estates). Regrettably, images are multifaceted, depend on different perceptions and are predominately based on personal experiences. An elegant spatial approach to collect and consolidate these images as well as generalize observations is landscape studies.

Against this setting, the authors of *Cuban Landscapes* ask themselves in the beginning, 'how [does one] approach a tangible and conceptual place they call Cuban landscape?' (p. 1). The authors are aware that the Cuban Landscape carries multiple meanings, with different types of landscapes (natural, historical, sugar, heritage, tourist, informative) (Chapters 2–6) being identified through the lens of 'new cultural geographic analysis' (p. 14). Hereby, they distinguish between *vernacular* (or lived-in, everyday spaces) and *symbolic* (portraying values and power) landscapes, and draw their experiences on vast research trips and decades of residence in Cuba. This eclectic undertaking derives its theoretical basis from diverse authors – building, for example, on AGNEW (1987), APPADURAI (1996), COSGROVE (1998), HABERMAS (1975), LEFEBVRE (1991), LYNCH (1972), and SAUER (1925) – and schools of thought directly or indirectly intertwined with landscape studies scattered throughout the volume. These narrations are followed by a general conclusion with the main objective to extract and showcase the distinct insular features and spatial expressions of *cubanidad* ('Cubanness') formed by vicissitudinous historical periods of colonial, republican and socialist times (Chapter 7).

The book is organized into seven chapters. The introductory chapter places some emphasis on landscape concepts and grants an overview of selected sources (logs, diaries, paintings, media, statistics, academic knowledge) from where to initiate cultural–geographic interpretations. The next five chapters capture peculiar perspectives and attempt to visualize and contextualize specific natural and cultural Cuban images over space and time. Already at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the great German polymath Alexander von Humboldt – referred to as the island's second European discoverer (after the Genovese Christopher Columbus) – made a first universal sketch of the human–environmental relationships in Cuba, recognized its myriad landscapes, and influenced later generations of scientists, writers and politicians (Chapter 2). The description of the historical landscape paves the way for further investigations in the following chapters elaborating on major landscape modifiers (the sugar industry; Chapter 3), icons (historical sites and natural parks; Chapter 4), disseminators (tourism; Chapter 5), and controllers (political billboards; Chapter 6).

This allows cross-referencing and a fruitful combination of different Cuban images constituting principal parts of *cubanidad* over space and time. Economic landscapes of *ingenio*s (traditional sugar mills) with *trapices* (grinding stones for extracting cane juice) run by *colonos* (small-scale farmers) dominated sugar landscapes in colonial times and were substituted by *centrales* (large-scale central sugar plants). Societal landscapes of *bohios* (simple wooden huts with thatched roofs and clay floors) inhabited by *guajeros* (common peasants), *patios* (large urban mansions) of the Spanish colonial authorities, the *criollo* elite (descendants of Spanish conquistadores) or *latifundistas* (land or plantation owners), and rundown former mansions with *barbacoas* (provisional lofts) or *vivendias sociales* (socialist public housing complexes) for ordinary citizens.

The main findings are, firstly, that ‘no single human– environmental action has modified Cuba’s landscape as much as sugar production’ (p. 48) of the centuries-long *sugarocracy* system due to rapid deforestation, soil degradation, expansion of railroads and concomitant societal consequences (slavery, etc.). Secondly, the vast array of insular heritage landscapes (natural sites, national landmarks) carries social significance, cultural meanings, and serves as an inexhaustible pool for identity preservation and mutual values among Cubans. Thirdly, tourism – the favoured sweetheart of the republican administration and long-neglected stepchild of the socialist authorities – is gaining momentum in the *período especial en tiempos de paz* (Special Period in Time of Peace) after the dissolution of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA) and the following persistent economic crisis despite the initial concerns of Fidel Castro about Cuba of once being ‘the brothel of the Caribbean’ (p. 118) and never becoming ‘the island of bartenders and chambermaids’ (p. 114). The reviving of this sector had ambivalent effects on cultural (the desirable restoration of colonial town centres in Havana, Camagüey or Trinidad) and natural landscapes (the degradation and fragmentation of shallow marshes and mangroves ecosystems caused by *pedraplenes*, elevated causeways, connecting the mainland with newly created resorts on offshore cayos). Fourthly, a fine-meshed information landscape systematically penetrates the island and provides a ‘spatial vocabulary’ (p. 163) broadcasting socialist leadership ideology by virtues of expressive political roadside billboards.

In spite of an impressive amount of empirical detail, there are some shortcomings. Centrally, the book lacks conceptual and structural clarity, and a precise focus. Although, the authors justify their approach by the claim ‘that no single theoretical lens consistently informs the study of landscape’ and that ‘landscape is a central ingredient in cultural, political and social systems’ (p. 168), they never provide their own description or definition of what they mean by landscape. For this reason, an impression emerges that concepts from the different schools of thought – for example, AGNEW’S (1987) ‘sense of place’ (p. 145) and APPADURAI’S (1996) ‘ideascapes’ (p. 146) – are randomly chosen depending on what fits best in the respective sections. This conceptual ambivalence leads to the possibility of a trivial attribution of statements (in some text passages, for example, images of Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara are used in the tourism and informational section), which results in frequent repetition of remarks – for example, issues of deforestation (pp. 29, 33, 39, 53, 66, 78, 170) and/or simple recapitulations of comments (the conclusion in Chapter 7 is a compendium of preliminary summaries). Moreover, the relative importance of central themes remains unclear. Certain topics could have been engrossed – for example, the impact of hurricanes, a striking element of Cuba’s natural landscapes which is only slightly touched upon in the introduction (p. 6) and the conclusion (pp. 171–173); the impact of the *general instruction* (in 1521) with the resulting model of the Latin-American City including a *plaza mayor* (main plaza) surrounded by *cuadras* or *manzanas* (regular orthogonal grid) (p. 81); or socialist central parade grounds in Havana

or Camagüey as voices of the information landscape (pp. 109, 141). Some are overestimated (for example, the rather static description of UNESCO Cuban heritage sites; pp. 73–98), while other important features are incomplete (for example, *azoteas*, provisional addition roof structures, as a further vertical dimension in cities) or entirely missing (for example, educational, sport and rural landscapes). Educational (for example, *escuela primarias*, primary schools; *escuelas secundarias*, middle schools; *escuelas en el campo*, rural middle schools), sport (for example, infrastructure – stadiums, provincial facilities; certain disciplines like boxing or *pelota*, baseball; or extraordinary complexes such as Villa Panamericana), and rural landscapes with different types of cooperatives – for example, *Unidades Básicas de Producción Cooperativas* (UBPC), or Basic Units of Cooperative Production; *Cooperativas de Producción Agrícola* (CPA), or Agricultural Production Cooperatives; and *Cooperativas de Créditos y Servicios* (CCS), or Credit and Service Cooperatives – mirror core elements of communal life after the revolution of 1959 and are major pillars in forming the socialist *hombre nuevo* (new man). A last point worth mentioning is the recently triumphal march of the imported acanthodian shrub called *marabú* (*Dichrostachys cinérea*) which has already overgrown approximately 1 million hectares of abandoned farmland and significantly altered the natural landscape (KULKE and SUWALA, 2010; KULKE et al., 2011).

By and large, it must be acknowledged that the authors furnished a substantial holistic view of the island's versatile landscapes and precisely carved out significant pieces of *lo cubano* (another expression for 'Cubanness'), encompassing both natural and cultural elements by means of their academic backgrounds as human and physical geographers. *Cuban Landscapes* provides a valuable read and exerts appeal to different audiences, not only to academics in general and geographers in particular, but also to professionals and visitors for applied pursuits due to numerous and clearly laid out maps, tables, features and photographs.

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