

**Review / Reseña**

Ryer, Paul. *Beyond Cuban Waters: África, La Yuma, and the Island's Global Imagination*.  
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After Cubans took to the streets in protest on July 11, 2021, the country has been the at center of heated political debates attempting to describe the current social climate. Discussions have often weaponized the situation and used it to support or critique an ideological stance—either pro-socialism or against communism and in support of US intervention—which, ironically, has silenced the voices of many Cubans in the island. The reality of the Cuban people is much more nuanced and combines a variety of (sometimes opposing) sociopolitical and cultural influences that together create a unique context. Although it was published three years before the protests started, Paul Ryer's *Beyond Cuban Waters* speaks to these tensions given the fact that his thesis is built upon a fundamental question: what can we learn about Cuba by looking at its relationship with the rest of the world?

The book, more specifically, analyzes the contemporary Cuban experience by examining its connections with two related areas, *La Yuma*, a popular Cuban word used to refer to the global north, in general, and the U.S., in particular, and *África*—a concept, purposefully written in Spanish, used to describe the way in which the continent is

imagined on the island. Divided into four interrelated chapters—plus an introduction and conclusion—the book is an ethnographic study that explores how post-Soviet Cubans build their race and class identities by looking at two distinct “others”: one (*La Yuma*) considered white, cosmopolitan, and successfully neoliberal, and the other (*África*) seen as Black and poor. Ryer’s ethnographic work, mostly conducted in the 1990s and backed up by an extensive literature review, is presented to the reader in a critically self-reflexive and engaging manner. This is an easy-to-read, visually appealing book suitable for anyone with an interest in the Caribbean—or in ethnography. The majority of Ryer’s research focuses on Cuban-African relations, on which he presents an illuminating, in-depth study, although the most appealing section of the book might be that dedicated to *La Yuma*.

*Beyond Cuban Waters* is designed to be read as a whole, as all sections are in substantial dialogue with each other. The introduction situates Ryer’s work within contemporary ethnography and poses some of the overarching questions that drive his research. While Cuba’s revolutionary socialist regime has made its sociopolitical and economic context distinctively unique, he argues, not all Cuban phenomena are truly “Cuban.” Rather, many underscore the island’s transnational connections with other spaces, like former Latin American colonies or ex-Soviet countries. Ryer proposes that examining these connections can bring new insights to our understanding of contemporary Cuba. How do Cubans perceive other geographies? How are notions of “Cubanness” affected by such perceptions (4)? What role does the Cuban diaspora play in this process? These questions are answered in the four chapters that follow. The first two examine how the real geographies of the U.S./Europe and Africa are reimagined in Cuba, serving as the ground for the analysis and discussion that is carried out in the last two chapters. These go on to explore how such imagined geographies impact the identity-building process of Cubans and foreigners (students of African origin, fundamentally) who live or have lived in the island.

Chapter 1, “The Rise and Decline of *La Yuma*,” describes the idealized understandings that Cubans have of the U.S.—and, by extension, Europe and other neoliberal powers—as they associate it with economic success, luxury products, and whiteness. *La Yuma* is equated with the American Dream, but not with any of the systemic problems that affect the U.S., such as racism, poverty, or drug use. In the Cuban imaginary, it has traditionally been built as positive in opposition to *lo bolo* (goods and cultural products associated with the Soviet Union) and with *África*. However, as Ryer argues towards the end of the chapter, after the fall of the Soviet Bloc certain

Cubans have started showing disappointment towards *La Yuma* and demonstrate a growing nostalgia for the USSR. The chapter offers a rich cultural analysis of “yuma” symbols—namely Nike, the U.S. flag, and the Oscars (31)—and provides a variety of case studies to illustrate how the post-Soviet political economy works on the island.

Chapter 2, “*África* in Revolutionary Cuba,” describes the other great external (imagined) geography that affects the contemporary Cuban experience. Focusing first on the government-led interventions in the African continent, and then on the presence of African students in the island, Ryer concludes that *África* is imagined as beginning below the Sahara and is understood to be the opposite of what *La Yuma* represents—Black, backwards, and poor. Ryer sees a latent contradiction in the way Cubans imagine *África*—on the one hand, they see it as underdeveloped, but on the other, they celebrate the island’s African roots (67)—which, according to him, responds to the fact that, “despite its problems and poverty,” Cuba imagines itself as “Western” (69). Similar tensions affect African students living in Cuba, who are discriminated against in terms of race, yet tend to enjoy more economic privileges and a greater mobility than most Cubans. In fact, many of them deal with this discrimination by purposefully attempting to adopt “*Yuma*” characteristics that differentiate them from ordinary Cubans (82). Ryer calls this “classificatory embarrassment,” considering it to be a challenge to the island’s racial classification system, where skin color tends to be directly associated with wealth (87-88).

Chapter 3, “Color, *Mestizaje*, and Belonging in Cuba,” describes Cubans as fundamentally “brown,” always racialized in opposition to the white tourists, but whiter than African Blacks. Ryer proposes that race in Cuba is a partially artificial construct, deeply intertwined with class, and which may vary depending on its association with more “*Yuma*” or “African” attributes. The chapter includes plenty of illustrative ethnographic anecdotes and offers a valuable discussion on the different ways in which racial categories are perceived in Cuba versus other geographies—especially in North America. The last part of the chapter examines the existing contrasts between the way the revolutionary government has dealt with issues of race, and how Cubans themselves build their racial identities. While these analyses are compelling, the chapter would have benefitted from a more detailed discussion of the term “*mestizaje*,” which is used profusely throughout the chapter but not sufficiently problematized—Ryer warns that it “impl[ies] a priori purities and ‘fix[es]’ pure identities” (93) but does not fully consider its colonial and racist implications.

Finally, Chapter 4, “Beyond a Boundary,” focuses on the unavoidably hybrid identity, defined by two or more geographies, that characterizes African students in Cuba. The chapter, which offers a specially detailed account of students of Sudanese and Saharan origin, focuses on their experiences as their return to their home countries after having spent their formative years in Cuba. Ryer pays special attention to the relationships that these students build with their Cuban families—a socially constructed “kinship” (146)—and with their communities in their country of origin, to which they bring back “cultural remittances,” or “ideas, values, and expressive forms” after having lived in the island (149).

The book includes a variety of illustrative pictures and abounds in ethnographic anecdotes and interviews that make it entertaining and accessible for a general reader. The major highlights of its critical analysis are its brilliant and engaging insights on the imagined geographies of *La Yuma* and *África*, but the general conclusion to which it arrives—that, in opposition to two purely white and Black “others”, Cuba is a fundamentally mixed nation—deserves further discussion. Ryer notes that many Cubans imagine the national category to be “mestizo, mulato, mixed,” and argues that this perception is the result of comparing Cuba with a racially pure “elsewhere” (160). This assumption can be problematic, as it ignores the fact that the idea of Cuba and other former colonies as “mixed nations” has long been criticized as a tool that erases existing race struggles. Perhaps what the book is missing is an updated use of sources. Despite the fact that it is presented as a twenty-first century study, most of the ethnographic work and many of the supporting secondary sources go back to the 1990s. Some of its references and observations seem outdated or in need of a more critical analysis—for example, an ethnographic observation on the term “Afrocuban” as being frequently “resisted by those it purports to describe” (108), when recent Black and Cuban cultural production openly utilizes it.

For a reader that is looking for scholarly material on Cuban studies, the book might need to be supplemented with more recent works on race, class, and gender dynamics in the island. Still, *Beyond Cuban Waters* offers an easy-to-read, quality ethnographic study that provides a very useful insight into the country’s relationship with two of the closest regions in its imaginary. At a time when Cuba is being brought to the center of polarized sociopolitical discussions, Ryer’s research helps situate the nation in a global context while promoting a better understanding of it in a post-Soviet era.