

## BOOK REVIEW

HÄRKÖNEN, HEIDI. *Kinship, Love & Life Cycle in Contemporary Havana, Cuba: To Not Die Alone*. Palgrave Macmillan. 2016. 247 pp. ISBN 978-1-137-58075-7 (hardcover). DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-58076-4.

This book can be conceptualised as an ethnography of emotions in the lifecycle of a group of low-income residents in Havana. Covering important life-altering cycles, such as coming-of-age, motherhood, old age and dying, this ethnography represents how global and national phenomena affect people in their daily, most intimate spaces. In this respect it is an innovative contribution to the anthropology of Cuba, as it focuses on the realm of emotions, such as love, desire and fear of death, to convey how people cope with macro-economic and political crisis.

Härkönen provides an analysis of gender relations—how gender is lived, enacted and experienced—across specific situations and relationships over time. This particular temporal dimension grants the analysis a powerful insight into how gender categories are influenced by political and historical changes. In a political context where passion has played a key role in shaping people's allegiances (see Hamilton 2012 and Fernández 2000), it is surprising that such little attention has been paid to the passions—negative and positive—that infuse Cubans' daily lives. Furthermore, gender relations have underpinned most of the Revolution's political and economic policies: from the conceptualisation of Guevara's New Man, to the women's 'revolution within the revolution', the intended subversion of racial inequalities, the transformation of marital laws, and more current policies against domestic

violence. The revolutionary project's aim to transform Cubans' consciousness has always had a gendered dimension, aptly contemplated in this ethnography.

It is the main concern of those who are the focus of this study not to die alone. This is a telling element emerging from an ethnography of gender relations, as it implies the profound importance of maintaining a strong social nexus that will outlive the person, so that when it is time to die, others will accompany one till the end. Death is fundamental in informing social relations throughout a lifetime. A focus on the minutiae of people's lived experiences as a point of entry into an analysis of the state is an important contribution of this work, which adds a gendered voice to recently published ethnographies of everyday life in Cuba (see for example Gordy 2015; Gold 2015).

A comprehensive introduction covers the literature review on the different levels of complexity behind the study of gender in Cuba: sexuality, cohabitation, kinship, race relations and the material domain of the reproduction of social life. The second chapter focuses more specifically on the nature of gender relations through the trope of care and reciprocity. It considers these relations not only in the sphere of individual life, but also in terms of the political life of the revolution, and across time. With a strong ethnographic content, Chapter Three focuses on the relations that coalesce around the production of life throughout the

cycles of pregnancy, childbirth and the early life of a new-born. Chapter Four moves further along the life cycle to contemplate the ritual coming of age of fifteenth birthday parties, illustrating how kinship and gender relations are fashioned through this ritual, and their changing meanings through time. Chapters Five and Six continue the analysis of the centrality of care in the definition and continuous negotiation of social relations, both mediated by love as well as sexual desire, and the importance of these negotiations across time, as old age brings the immediacy of death to the fore. Chapter Seven elevates the level of analysis to that of the state, contemplating the gendered relations between people and state, and the impact of the dialectics of care in fashioning revolutionary discourse, so that the state is conceptualised as caretaker, and categorised within familial kinship ties. Understanding the importance of time in the conceptualisation of gender categories—that is, the interactions between gender, race and age—is the concern of the concluding chapter.

The analysis of matrifocality is an invaluable contribution at a time when kinship networks are articulating new economic and political relations in the face of emerging corporate power on the island (Gold 2016). At a time when the role of the state in Cubans' daily lives is changing as the state retreats from its economic centralisation, and the influence of Cuban-Americans in the daily life of the island is increasing due to the normalisation of relations with the US,<sup>1</sup> a view of Cuba's affective relations may prove an essential historical document.

## NOTES

- 1 These may well be overturned, since the presidency of Trump in November 2016. At the time of submission of this book review, Trump had not yet overturned Obama's moves to normalize relations between Cuba and the US.

## REFERENCES

- Fernández, Damián J.** 2000. *Cuba and the Politics of Passion*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Gold, Marina** 2015. *People and State in Socialist Cuba: Ideas and Practices of Revolution*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gold, Marina** 2016. Capitalist Ventures or Solidarity Networks? Self-employment in post-Soviet Cuba. In Luis Fernando Angosto-Ferrández and Geir Henning Presterudsteun (eds). *Anthropologies of Value: Cultures of Accumulation across the Global North and South*. London: Pluto Press.
- Gordy, Katherine** 2015. *Living Ideology in Cuba: Socialism in Principle and Practice*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- Hamilton, Carrie** 2012. *Sexual Revolutions in Cuba: Passion, Politics and Memory*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

MARINA GOLD  
RESEARCHER  
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL  
ANTHROPOLOGY  
UNIVERSITY OF BERGEN  
margogold@gmail.com