



***Pedro Juan Gutiérrez's Dirty Realism: Reinventing Cuban Spaces,* by Lori Oxford (2023)**

Damon Reed
University of Florida

Oxford, Lori. *Pedro Juan Gutiérrez's Dirty Realism: Reinventing Cuban Spaces*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2023. 159 pp. ISBN 978-1-66691-003-2.

Lori Oxford's foundational study on the work of Pedro Juan Gutiérrez calls into question the reader's understanding of time and place as she explores the complex and oftentimes contradictory relationships between utopian, dystopian, and heterotopian spaces in Gutiérrez's writings about Cuba's Special Period (1991–2000). For Cubans, this was a period of extreme economic calamity following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Cuba's strongest political and economic ally. Although Gutiérrez's writings illustrate experiences during the Special Period, Oxford situates her work in the historical, social, political, and economic conditions of the island both after the triumph of Fidel Castro's revolution in 1959 and during the Special Period. Oxford's analysis offers rich insights into the inextricable relationship between Gutiérrez's writing and quotidian experiences on the island, which he depicts through his journalistic and autobiographical approach to writing. In addition to providing a rigorous textual analysis of Gutiérrez's Series *Ciclo de Centro*

Habana/Central Havana Cycle (1998–2003), Oxford shares insight into the author himself by including an interview with Gutiérrez in the book's appendix.

Each of Oxford's chapters probes a different avenue of Gutiérrez's *Ciclo de Centro Habana* while analyzing varying conceptions of -topian space. To do this, Oxford addresses the ways that the various works in *Ciclo de Centro Habana* relate to the chapters' themes. The work's first chapter, "Juxtaposed Spaces," provides the theoretical framework for the study, as Oxford introduces Michel Foucault's concept of *heterotopia* and the ways in which such spaces are innately comprised of unexpected juxtapositions. She then applies Foucault's theory to carceral spaces, among others, and their presence and function in Gutiérrez's series. In "La nada cubana," the second chapter, Oxford emphasizes the nothingness that characterized Cuban life during the Special Period. From empty store shelves to empty stomachs and social calendars, one of the key experiences that permeate Gutiérrez's narrative is absence—a reality that extends beyond the pages of Gutiérrez's novels and into the Cuban socio-cultural fabric. Expanding on her previous chapter, her third, "Putting the 'Dirty' in Dirty Realism," considers how Gutiérrez's

works fit *neatly* into that literary genre, as filth, excrement, and other bodily fluids are omnipresent in the novels' narratives and settings. This chapter also examines the ways in which the characters monetize their bodies in order to survive dire financial situations as well as the gendered implications of sex work in Cuba.

Returning more intensely to her emphasis on heterotopian spaces, Chapter 4 investigates the presence of "Death Spaces" in Gutiérrez's works, as spaces and instances of death are, according to Foucault, the paramount example of heterotopia. Violence is a consistent theme throughout Gutiérrez's series, and Oxford investigates the ways in which -topian spaces overlap within the context of the characters' mortality. In her chapter on "Spiritual Realms," Oxford illustrates how many of the utopian promises of the Christian tradition have manifested as dystopian reality for the Cuban people. She also highlights the importance of recurrent references of Afro-Cuban syncretic religions, like Santería and Vodun, on the island. Here, Oxford provides additional insights into the social complexity of such spiritual practices in Cuba, given the history of Spanish imperialism in the Americas. Throughout Gutiérrez's series, he references external works of literature and art, which Oxford discusses in her chapter "Intertextualities." Given the array of such allusions, Oxford's study demonstrates how an understanding of them can enhance the reader's interpretation of the series, even when such references are understated. In her conclusionary chapter, "Cuba from Afar," Oxford builds upon an established tradition of Cuban diasporic thought by assessing how Gutiérrez's narrators engage with foreign environments and the psychological shifts that occur when they are abroad. For example, although their lives were subjectively better in Europe, Gutiérrez's characters long for the *barrios* of Central Havana.

Responses by scholars, politicians, and activists to contemporary Cuba vary across the political spectrum. While some have derided Castro's Cuba as a socialist dystopia, others continue to hold out hope for the failed promises of the 1959 Revolution and its attempt to create a social utopia. Given the island's propensity to generate politically polarizing discourse across a broad swath of political and ideological contexts, examinations of Cuban culture have been fraught. Despite these tensions, Oxford's study analyzes Gutiérrez's works through the lens of the island's social, political, and economic history, and in so doing, strikes a non-polarized balance. Among the many strengths of Oxford's study is her ability to discuss a diverse range of topics and novels while simultaneously maintaining references to -topian spaces, albeit in differing degrees. If it were not for her skillful organization of the book and superb prose, the variety of themes discussed in her study could have easily become distracting or disjointed, yet Oxford masterfully avoids this. While Oxford's chapter on "Intertextualities" is somewhat disconnected from the overarching themes of her study, given the scant amount of scholarship on Gutiérrez's writings, Oxford does well as to expound upon the importance of these references—even if they are unknown to the reader—making this study an even more foundational piece of scholarship on Gutiérrez's *Ciclo de Centro Habana*. Therefore, the inclusion of this chapter supports a deeper understanding of Gutiérrez's works.

Above all, Oxford's study is a testament to years of research on the topic and the cultivation of a personal connection with the author himself. Her beautiful writing style and the care with which she engages with Gutiérrez's complete series will ensure the importance of this study to future researchers not only of Gutiérrez but also of contemporary Cuban literature and culture. This study will prove useful to inter-

disciplinary scholars from literary and cultural studies to sociology and history. Due to the accessibility of her writing, this work will also be of interest to fans of Gutiérrez's literary production more broadly, as Oxford lays out and summarizes complex theoretical frameworks that make her study palatable for undergraduate and non-academic audiences as well.