



Luis Martínez-Fernández. *Key to the New World: A History of Early Colonial Cuba.* Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2018. 236 pp. \$74.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-68340-032-5.

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Commissioned by Casey M. Lurtz (Johns Hopkins University)

A large part of Cuban history gravitates toward two periods: sugar and slavery in the nineteenth century and the revolution of the twentieth. Luis Martínez-Fernández, a historian at the University of Central Florida, admits in the introduction to his admirable *Key to the New World* that most of his own work falls into these two camps, making him all the more eager to “get out of my historiographical comfort zones” (p. 1). His aim in this book is to provide a wide-ranging overview that includes major developments, key themes, and a discussion of the historiography of this often-overlooked period of Cuba’s history, and he manages this with great success. This work provides a concise narrative that covers a great deal of ground concerning precolonial and early colonial Cuba. Martínez-Fernández also makes a point of shifting the reader’s gaze away from the ever-present Havana to the equally important Santiago de Cuba, offering a more balanced picture of the island’s history.

Key to the New World unfolds across eight succinct chapters. Drawing from the Annales school’s idea of a “total history,” the first chapter is devoted to the physical structure of Cuba. While geography may not necessarily be destiny, the island’s position between the Caribbean Sea, the Gulf of Mexico, and the Atlantic, as well as its location at the crossroads of North, Central, and

South America was fortuitous. Martínez-Fernández begins, however, with a time when Cuba had periods of not being an island at all. During the Miocene epoch, some 23 to 5.3 million years ago, Cuba was connected by land to the Bahamas and the southeastern United States. Although today the island is surrounded by rising sea levels, this period of connection is a poetic starting point for its history, especially as later Cuba’s insularity “strongly influenced the course of its history and culture” (p. 13).

The next three chapters examine arrival and settlement of humans, with the earliest people coming around 5000-4500 BCE, possibly from Central America, and later with the Arawak-speaking people, in at least five distinct waves. Chapter 2 moves through these early years, discussing what is known about the earliest people and the lives of their ancestors, the Tainos, who would encounter the Spanish. Chapter 3 turns to the Columbian exchange. Much of this chapter is devoted to a summary of the world of Christopher Columbus and the social and scientific developments that led to his voyage. Martínez-Fernández also draws from the work of Edmundo O’Gorman in reflecting on the question of the invention—rather than “discovery”—of America. From there, chapter 4 moves into Spanish ideas about “conquest,” with Martínez-Fernández explaining the *reconquista*

and the implementation of the *encomienda*. He also engages with the ideas of Ángel Rama, who has argued that the conquerors were only able to perceive of the Americas as a sort of *tabula rasa*. As with the previous chapter, this one also gives a helpful explanation of the foundations and mechanism of Spain's nascent empire, while weaving in and out of Cuba's history.

Chapter 5 discusses the development of creole society, or, in this case, societies, with one orbiting Havana and the other around Santiago. Alongside this, two economies developed. The cattle ranching and tobacco farming around Havana was augmented by serving the Spanish fleet by the 1540s. Santiago, meanwhile, turned to smuggling, taking advantage of its proximity to Saint-Domingue and Jamaica, which also brought French, Dutch, and British contrabandists in contact with the island. These traders came into contact—and at times joined—a diverse society, with the surviving indigenous people, free and enslaved black people, and Spaniards from many regions of Spain, including the Canary Islands. The resulting mix is what Martínez-Fernández calls in chapter 6 the Cuban *ajiaco*, borrowing the metaphor first coined by Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz. The *ajiaco* is both a traditional stew and a way of describing the long-simmering blend of indigenous, African, and European peoples in Cuba. Martínez-Fernández goes a step further, offering it as “an allegory for Cuba's conquest and early colonization,” given that the dish includes an Amerindian yucabase, the pork and beef brought by the Spanish, and the plantains and yams added by Africans (pp. 110-11).

The book then turns to the issue of defense in chapter 7, a growing concern throughout the seventeenth century. As well as defending the fleet, the island faced its own security challenges in the form of attacks on its cities. Martínez-Fernández helpfully outlines four rough phases of this period: the French corsairs from 1521 to 1559; English smugglers around 1558-67; English piracy in

1568-84 and privateering around 1585-1603; and two rounds of Dutch privateering in 1594-1609 and again in 1620-48. Spain responded with a flurry of fort-building, including the construction of El Morro, La Real Fuerza, and La Punta around Havana's harbor.

Sugar, Cuba's best-known export, is the focus of the eighth and final chapter, and in some ways, this brings the book full circle to the first chapter's geological explanation for the rich soil that would allow the crop to thrive. In this period, sugar was mostly grown alongside other plants, and most land was devoted to rearing livestock. However, sugar's appearance in the seventeenth century demanded the existence of enslaved labor and racialized social hierarchies. By the 1590s sugar mills were in place, and by 1603 there were some thirty-one active plantations. Martínez-Fernández proposes the idea of the “sugar revolt” to describe these “early plantations” in the seventeenth century, highlighting the differences in scale to the sugar “boom” in other places, such as Barbados, around the same time (p. 152).

From the earliest geology to the beginnings of the sugar economy that would go on to dominate the island, Martínez-Fernández paints a comprehensive picture in just over two hundred pages, making it ideal both for the general reader interested in Cuba and as a resource for teaching this period of Cuban history. It is a welcome addition to what can be hoped will be a growing body of work on early colonial Cuba.

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