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Cuba: The Big Change

Alma Guillermoprieto

MAY 12, 2016 ISSUE

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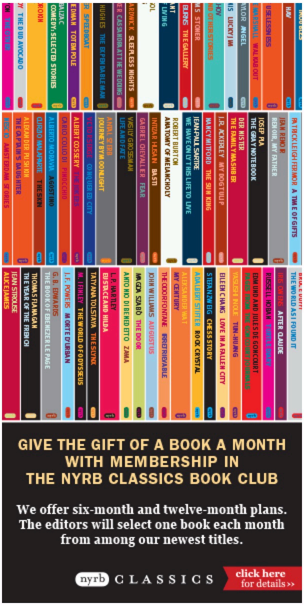
President Obama with Cuban President Raúl Castro at a baseball game between the Cuban national team and the Tampa Bay Rays, Havana, March 2016

One could swear that nothing has changed. The chaotic lines we travelers form in front of Cuba's stern immigration officers; their belligerent slowness; the noise and heat in the too-small room; the echoing shouts across the room from one olive-green-clad person to another (an argument or a conversation about the lunch menu, in Cuba one can never tell which); the parents who stand patiently in line with their children, waiting for them to go berserk.

Still to come is the long line to have our hand luggage inspected, and the longer wait for our checked bags, which, mysteriously, aren't inspected at all, and the exit line that will take us from purgatory into Cuba at last, but not before we've done one final penance waiting for a driver who never arrives, and another ten minutes for a shot of coffee that likewise never arrives, and one last relatively brisk line to change dollars into the confounding Cuban currency-for-foreigners, and a short line for transportation that some three hours after landing is about to take us, finally, into Havana.

And throughout, the increasingly irritated question: Why does it have to be like this? Why, for the fifty-seven years since Fidel Castro rode into Havana at the head of a scruffy rebel army, has it always had to be like this? Really, one could swear that nothing has changed.

And then, BOOM! the new reality. The driver of my spiffy yellow checkered taxi blasts on the air conditioner and lowers the window to shout the week's hit song into the tropical air. He has the manner of someone on a steady diet of coke or Coke, pays no attention to me, fiddles with the radio dial, shouts out another song, nearly sideswipes five ancient cars in quick succession, skids to a halt at my destination, a *residencia particular* where I have managed to find the last available room in the entire city, dumps out my luggage, and screeches away, on the prowl for more passengers, more



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May 12, 2016 • Volume LXIII, Number 8

THE ART ISSUE!

ANKA MUHLSTEIN:
DEGAS AT MOMA

INGRID ROWLAND:
'UNFINISHED' AT THE MET BREUER

JED PERL:
MATISSE AT THE BARNES

JAMES FENTON:
VAN DYCK AT THE FRICK

SANFORD SCHWARTZ:
SURPRISE AT THE GUGGENHEIM

JOHN RICHARDSON:
'GUERNICA' REVEALED

Andrew Nathan: Who Is Xi?

Peter Singer:
Open the Cages!

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE
MAY 12, 2016

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John Richardson

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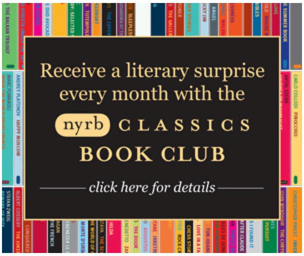
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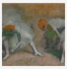
All around in the old, familiar rattletrap neighborhood of Vedado there are more surprises: the sidewalk in front of my building is being replaced; the house across the street is being repainted; the avenue we just turned off of is freshly asphalted; a construction crane is visible just behind a block of delicately collapsing Art Nouveau residences. Everything is changing, or about to change, or promising to change, because the biggest change of all is about to happen. Barack Obama, leader of the Marxist Cuban state's archenemy, is about to land for a state visit at the invitation of Cuban president Raúl Castro. The stock phrase being used in the press is that this is "the first visit by a sitting US president in eighty-eight years,"[1] but of course that's not the point. It's the first visit since the Cuban Revolution, the first since the Bay of Pigs, the first since Fidel brought in the nuclear missiles that made the world freeze in fear of imminent nuclear annihilation in 1962, the first since the United States imposed fifty years of diplomatic and commercial isolation on an island with a population of eleven million.

There was a history of US-Cuban relations before that, too, and every Cuban remembers its bitterness. The Spanish-American War of 1898 was the United States' imperial adventure in the Caribbean. It did not end when, after three years of occupation, Cuba agreed to sign the Platt Amendment. Essentially, the amendment allowed the US to take over Guantánamo and obligated Cuba to consult with and obey the US at every move. It was in force for thirty-three years. It's impossible to understand the long hold Fidel Castro had on the imagination of so many of his compatriots—and so many disenfranchised citizens in Latin America—without this past. Cannily, and also wholeheartedly, he embodied the hero who led a heroic people in their fervent defiance of the Yanqui. Lest they slip in their convictions, a billboard in front of the former US embassy permanently shouted at the *señores imperialistas* that Cubans felt no fear of them whatsoever.

The anti-imperialist sign disappeared when Obama and Raúl officially reestablished relations in July 2015, and now a visitor might suspect that anti-imperialist socialism has been replaced by a sort of cargo cult whose deity is Obama. What, I asked, was that enormous decrepit building in which children could be heard at play? It was a collapsing school that would soon be fixed. A gulch-like street, a dysfunctional distribution system, all would be fixed: Obama was coming!

The apartment I shared with a colleague reminded us constantly of how tough everyday life still is for Cubans, despite the changes. Far above the standard for the typical Cuban dwelling, it required constant coping. Nothing worked properly in the kitchen, starting with the sixty-year-old stove, whose burners went from gas-belcher to towering inferno in seconds. There were two knives, neither of which could cut through a pepper I'd stuck in my luggage. Water set to boil in a dented tin pot soon developed an oily gray skin. At night, one of Havana's pet-sized cockroaches winked its antennae at me from behind a threadbare dishtowel.

Nothing could be wasted: the hangers in the bedroom closet whose lower wire had rusted away had been carefully clipped so that the remains could still be used to hang blouses on. Every wall was a different color, according to what small amount of paint the owner had been able to scavenge on a given day. All this was the best the Cuban economy could provide in the bonanza years of the twenty-first century, and only because the owner had relatives abroad who could help finance the apartment's renovation. "Now with Obama," the owner said, in expectation of renewed trade between the two countries, "I hope I can really put this place together."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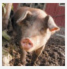
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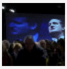
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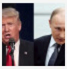
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Timothy Snyder

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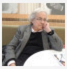
Tim Parks


Syria's Poet Speaks
Jonathan Guyer

The joke on everyone's lips was that Obama should stay in Havana for a month, because in preparation for his three-day visit more had been done to fix up the place than in the previous half-century. In fact, the visit is happening because enormous change has already taken place, most of it at the urging of Raúl Castro, but there is only occasional grudging recognition of that. "Things are better," an outspoken woman I know said, "but not enough."

There is no more of the desperate hunger that afflicted everyone in the days following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Microwaves, rice cookers, and, most significantly, cell phones can all be legally purchased, and my outspoken acquaintance can shout her objections to the way things are at the top of her voice, not sharing my concern that someone might hear. (A concern that keeps me even now from identifying almost everyone in this story. The list of Cubans punished for speaking to foreign journalists is too long, and repression of the formal opposition too active, to take any sort of freedom of expression for granted.)

"What I want to know," my acquaintance exclaimed loudly, "is why it takes the Revolution half a century to correct each mistake?" This is an exaggeration—there were mistakes, like the concentration camps for homosexuals and Seventh-Day Adventists set up in the 1960s, that were rectified in mere years instead of decades—but it is tangentially related to the question that must trouble the mind of those responsible for the huge current changes: How many mistakes can safely be corrected? When the house you live in is falling apart, how much can you tinker with the plumbing, the windows, the door jambs, and the supporting walls before the whole edifice collapses around you? This is the question whose answer Raúl Castro has been exploring since he came to power eight years ago.

Raúl Castro is the fourth of seven siblings born to a Cuban household cook and a poorly educated Spanish immigrant who made his fortune growing sugar cane on the eastern tip of Cuba—initially for the United Fruit Company. Like his older brother Fidel, Raúl grew up as a *judío*, or Jew, the quaint term used by conservative Catholics in Cuba for unbaptized children. (Raúl's father did not marry his mother until he was twelve, and so the Castro children could not be baptized.)

Raúl seems to have determined from the start that he could not be anything like his strapping, handsome, charismatic, brilliant brother. Small and unprepossessing, he did poorly at school and became expert at dominating the background. He was with Fidel during his rabble-rousing university days in Havana and at his spectacularly failed assault on a military barracks in the eastern city of Santiago in 1953. He was by Fidel's side during the exile years in Mexico, and also on the creaky old yacht that in 1956 carried several dozen men to their disastrous landing in a Cuban mangrove and subsequent near annihilation by the dictator Fulgencio Batista's troops.

Along with Ernesto Guevara, known as Che, Fidel went on to create a guerrilla army—the Ejército Rebelde—in the island's eastern mountains. In part because the United States withdrew its support from Batista, and also thanks to a courageous civilian opposition, the rebel army triumphed. On January 1, 1959, Batista fled Cuba, and one week later Fidel entered Havana. Raúl immediately and cheerfully ordered the execution without trial of several dozen of Batista's alleged torturers and assassins. Raúl then went about the task of consolidating a military force capable of defending the island against a US invasion. For the next forty-eight years the younger brother pursued this task, keeping his opinions to himself and rarely appearing in public. Anyone who stopped to think about it, however, knew that he was inevitably the second-most-powerful man in the country.

Because he ran an army, it was assumed that he was rigid and unimaginative, but those close to the Castro brothers' inner circle spoke of Raúl as the tolerant one, the one who made sure all family members were made welcome at the weekly meals hosted by him and his wife—a former debutante and MIT student who joined Fidel's movement from the beginning. Unlike his brother, he had a quick, self-deprecating sense of humor and a pragmatic turn of mind. In 2006, when Fidel was taken sick and announced his temporary retirement, positions in the National Assembly—the regime's legislative body—were shuffled in order to place Raúl in the direct line of succession. Two years later, when it became evident that Fidel could no longer return to power, Raúl was confirmed as leader of the Cuban state.

The changes began immediately. "I won't speak for very long," said the man who had spent the better part of his life listening to his brother put others to sleep in the course of all-night monologues. And indeed, the newcomer has since distinguished himself by making few and short, to-the-point announcements, and then doing more or less what he says he'll do. Since he took power, cell phones became legal, unused state land was turned over to private farmers, and for the first time in more than half a century ordinary Cubans have been able to purchase and sell property and travel abroad.

The Internet, so feared by hard-line conservatives in the government, became accessible to anyone with the money to pay for it, or the Cuban skills needed to get around the pay barrier. Pornography, most foreign stories about Cuba, and local, independent online publications are still blocked. Perhaps most importantly, within months after taking power, Raúl told the actor Sean Penn that he would consider meeting with Barack Obama if the then Democratic candidate were elected president.

Fidel's brother has clearly been thinking ahead in a way the aging Fidelistas in the Cuban Communist Party have not. He may be trying to modernize Cuban socialism to the point where it is capitalist and open enough to accommodate the restless generations who are now under forty-five years of age; he may be dreaming of something like a Norway-under-the-palm-trees or, more likely, China-on-a-daiquiri. Perhaps he has the sense that the revolution is finished, that there is no future in the old dogmas and failures, that sixty years of poverty and repression are enough, and that he has no real power to control the inevitable future. Perhaps he is simply trying to ensure, finger in the dike, that a newly capitalist Cuba does not slide into a morass of corruption and cynicism.

Meanwhile, Raúl has internal opposition to face, starting with his brother, who still speaks for the old *históricos* in the Party. On the Monday following Obama's visit Fidel published a meandering, querulous "reflection" about "Brother Obama," whose point was hard to decipher, other than the fact that Obama trod Cuban ground not during his time in office.[2] The gates for Fidelistas to air their irritation in virtually all the government-controlled media were thus opened, although by and large the protests are contorted pieces of writing, because they can attack Obama but not Raúl.

In a phone conversation from Mexico, the respected Cuban historian Rafael Rojas, who has not been allowed to return to his country since 1994 but studies it closely nevertheless,[3] pondered the array of forces supporting and opposing Raúl Castro. "There is the [internationally recognized] opposition within Cuba," Rojas said, "but it has little visibility inside Cuba because of its lack of access to media. Also—and this is a delicate subject because it generates controversy—it is affected by the dynamic of its dependence on the US-Cuban opposition based in Miami. However, there is another, invisible, opposition," Rojas went on. "A reformist current within the various ministries sets itself apart not only from the orthodox, official line, but from Raúl himself. It believes that change must come more quickly."

It's not easy to see how the economic transition could go much faster: the difficulties are everywhere, and many people argue that without economic reform political reforms cannot prosper. A recent online debate among economists in Cuba and abroad examined the vexing issue of the Cuban peso (CUPs)—what Cuban salaries are paid in—versus Cuban convertible pesos (CUCs), which are pegged to the US dollar and can be changed into foreign currency.[4] They are worth about twenty-five times as much as the lowly peso.

With the peso, and their ration card, Cubans and only Cubans can go into one of the miserable bodegas that dot every neighborhood and get their ever-diminishing rations of soap, rice, beans, cooking oil, and not much more, and also buy the few extra things the bodega has for sale but not always, like fruit juice or batteries. It is now possible for Cubans to buy items with CUPs in formerly CUC-only stores. Everyone agrees that both currencies should be unified as soon as possible, but one problem is that peso items are heavily subsidized.

Then there is the question of the surplus value, to use an old Marxist term, that the Cuban government extracts from its workers. Although the private sector has grown exponentially since Raúl Castro's reforms, about 70 percent of the labor force still works for the state, earning an average of six hundred pesos—about $25—a month. In recent years the state has allowed a skill-based range of wages for its workers, and so some doctors now make as much as $67 a month. By comparison, though, the owner of the private home I stayed in is allowed to charge, in CUCs, the equivalent of $35 a night per guest, in each of two bedrooms that are fairly steadily occupied by tourists.

Meanwhile, the state is taking in an estimated $2.5 billion a year by renting out its doctors to more than sixty different governments. But it only pays those doctors some $300 a month while their stint lasts, plus less than $200 that are deposited monthly in a Cuban account, as a sort of inducement to doctors to return home after their tour of duty. In essence, the urgent task of unifying the two currencies will require the government to stop budgeting in funny money, find enough income to raise wages from their current indecent levels, and somehow fend off the almost inevitable inflation that will follow.

A member of the Catholic opposition I talked to one morning pointed out that the full-throttle development Cuba needs will leave tremendous inequality in its path, and indeed, I couldn't see how the future was going to be anything but grim for someone like a taxi driver I'll call Marcelo, who drove me around a few times. He was old enough to remember "a little bit" of how bitter prerevolutionary times were for his family, who were poor and black. Under Fidel, on the other hand, he had gotten free health care, a good education, and served abroad in a diplomatic position; it was no wonder that he was a proud member of the Communist Party. Now retired, he owned a rusty, rattling Russian Lada, perhaps twenty years old, whose gearshift popped out of its box every time he accelerated. The motor tended to go AWOL at stoplights, the floor of the trunk had rusted through, and the doors opened only from the outside.

Magnum Photos

A living room in Havana with a poster of Fidel Castro at right, 2015; photograph by Carl De Keyzer from his book Cuba, La Lucha, *which includes an essay by Gabriela Salgado and has just been published by Lannoo. His photographs are on view at the Roberto Polo Gallery, Brussels, through May 15.*

There wasn't much life left in the old thing, but Marcelo, in his healthy sixties, could still have two decades in front of him, on a government retirement income equivalent to $7 a month. What was his future going to look like when his old workhorse gave out, now that the only way to make ends meet is to work for foreigners and get paid in CUCs? He didn't answer the question, nor did he resume his usual cheery banter during the rest of the ride, and one could easily guess that his loyalties lay with Fidelista traditionalists rather than the reformist Raúl.[5]

Whether he sees this transition to its conclusion or gets swallowed up by it, Raúl Castro doesn't have much time: he has announced his retirement following the general elections of 2018, when he will be eighty-six, and he is pressing for a two-term limit for all public officeholders. This, in fact, might be the only thing he and Barack Obama have in common: two leaders on their way out, bent on consolidating a legacy that their successors won't be able to tear apart.

On the day of Obama's arrival the streets were weirdly empty, as if most of the people of Havana had decided to stay away from any potential trouble.[6] But with each passing hour they grew bolder. Soon enough, buildings emptied and crowds gathered wherever the arrival of motorized police heralded an imminent sighting of POTUS. People cheered awkwardly, not quite sure how to express the thrill they felt.

There was similar awkwardness between the two leaders: smiles and friendly chatting that reporters with Obama noticed even beyond the photo-ops, and a press conference Raúl Castro found so annoying, baffling, unnecessary, and threatening that he talked to his son through the first reporter's questions, which happened to be about human rights. Obama, in his cocky, king-of-the-hill mode, then insulted his aged host with a theatrical wink at the audience as the old man fumbled with his earphones. Eventually, an angry Castro challenged the reporter to give him the names of any political prisoners and the press conference ground to its embarrassing end.

Although US media declared Obama the winner in the encounter, it hardly mattered that the presidents failed to charm each other or that Castro failed to win over the public. Obama is as skilled at public relations as any US politician, and the leader of a monolithic state hardly needs charm. Both sides got what they came for, which for the United States was to establish a mutually advantageous relationship with its neighboring country. For Cuba, it meant first and foremost doing away with the embargo, as Raúl Castro explained to Sean Penn years ago, but this will be for Congress, not Obama, to decide.

The major lobby for a change in the ground rules went to Cuba along with Obama. Warren Buffett was there, and Google too, along with the presidents of Paypal and Airbnb and representatives from various airlines who have negotiated the rights to land 110 flights from the United States to Havana every day. At a press briefing for journalists traveling with Obama, Deputy National Security Secretary Ben Rhodes added that GE and Caterpillar would like to persuade the Cuban government to buy their products. Also at the briefing was the chair of the US Chamber of Commerce, Carlos Gutiérrez, an exiled Cuban who as George W. Bush's commerce secretary had campaigned hard against any rapprochement with the Castro regime. He came forward to intercept questions about human rights by assuring everyone that "the right to make a living" was a basic human right that would expand through US investment.

The excitement of the investment suitors and their sense of possibility were mirrored everywhere. Tourists strolled through Old Havana in their thousands, thrilled by the absolute newness of the place and relishing the absence of things that Cuba no doubt will soon acquire. Havana is the city where one is not chased and intruded on by loudspeakers blasting music in every store: there are no stores, or almost none. There are no advertisements; no traffic jams; no shopping malls; no twenty-four-hour Internet and its accompanying addictions; no supermarkets with their endless rows of choices. A vacation in Cuba is a respite from capitalism.

During the long, harsh decades under the regime created and led by Fidel Castro, these austerities were not a source of pride. What moved young people all over the world and what Cubans of the revolutionary period valued about themselves was instead their own resilience, their courage, and their spartan gift for unwavering commitment to a cause. Those days of heroic faith are over, and perhaps soon the reflex habit of repression will end too, and there will be no more political prisoners, who still number in the dozens, and no censorship. "Years ago it was difficult to hear our music [in Cuba] but here we are," Mick Jagger said in decent Spanish. He was addressing an enormous crowd in Havana that gathered for a historic free concert by the Rolling Stones the day after Obama left. "Times are changing, no?"

Perhaps no other community felt the regime's intolerance and persecution more consistently over the years than artists, but now they are finding a sense of renewed opportunity and purpose in the Cuban moment. In Old Havana an installation by the artist Felipe Dulzaides recreates the school of theater at the legendary National Arts Schools, which survive in ruinous condition in the suburb of Cubanacán. The schools were a favorite project of Fidel Castro, who put the architect Ricardo Porro in charge of the project. Porro himself designed the dance and visual arts schools, and recruited two friends, the Italians Vittorio Garatti and Roberto Gottardi, to design the music and ballet schools and the theater school, respectively. But the vanguard architecture of the schools was censored by the revolution before all the buildings could be finished.

Ricardo Porro died in Paris in 2014, Garatti returned to Italy years ago, and the school of theater survives in fragile disrepair, as does its own wry eighty-nine-year-old architect, Roberto Gottardi, who still lives in Cuba. At the adventurous art gallery in Old Havana where Dulzaides is presenting his homage to the school and its architect, he showed me a video and photo installation, and an exquisite scale model of the school made by Gottardi's students. Now, perhaps, the National Arts Schools themselves might one day revive. “Gottardi has spent the last fifty-two years trying to figure out how the theater school can be completed,” Dulzaides said. “To me, that is the perfect metaphor for the Cuban Revolution today.”

—April 13, 2016

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1 Former president Jimmy Carter went to Havana in 2002 and 2011. Following negotiations with then President Fidel Castro, he went on state-controlled television in 2002 and introduced Cubans to Oswaldo Payá’s democracy project, a signature-collecting campaign in favor of free expession and freedom of association, which most had never been able to hear of. He subsequently watched a baseball game, after throwing the first ball at Castro’s insistence. In 2011 he participated in talks intended to improve relations with the United States. ↩

2 An indispensable book by William LeoGrande and Peter Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba* (University of North Carolina Press, 2014), traces the repeated efforts by Fidel Castro and each of his counterparts in the White House, from Eisenhower to Obama, to understand each other and reach working agreements on points of conflict or mutual interest. ↩

3 Rojas was granted a four-day courtesy visa in 2009 on the occasion of his father’s death. ↩

4 “La Unificación Monetaria: Un Desafío de Enormes Proporciones,” *Cuba Posible*, February 22, 2016. ↩

5 The dissatisfaction with recent reforms felt by the rank-and-file of the Communist Party of Cuba is expected to be aired at the Seventh Party Congress, to take place on April 16–18. Several articles in the official press have pointed out that the all-important Sixth Party Congress of 2011 approved dramatic economic reforms—allowing hundreds of thousands to work in the private sector, for example—only after extensive and effective consultation with the base of party members. There has been no equivalent lengthy discussion period prior to the Seventh Congress. A member of the reformist wing of the party I talked to countered the critics by saying that the current proposed reforms are merely extensions or improvements of the reforms approved in the 2011 Congress. ↩

6 This wasn’t true of the well-known opposition group Ladies in White, who tried to march as usual down the Quinta Avenida. *The Washington Post* has a video online of what happened; see “Cuban Protestors Arrested Ahead of Obama Visit,” March 20, 2016. Primly, the security forces assigned female police to shove the female protesters into police vans. The protest group, well recognized abroad, has little visibility in Cuba because its actions are not mentioned in official media. Nor was there any news in the government press of the more than five hundred arrests of dissidents in the weeks prior to Obama’s visit. In virtually all cases these days, protesters are released after a few hours, although occasionally they are beaten or interrogated before their release. ↩

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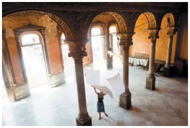

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