

CUBANOGRAPHY FOR DUMMIES

CUBANOGRAFÍA PARA

PRINCIPIANTES

Orlando Luis Pardo Lazo

*Comparative Literature
Washington University
St. Louis*

1.

Historians are in the search for heroes. Academics are in the search for accuracy. Poets seem to be in the search for despots. In any case, the image of an island within the Island —claustrophobic Cuba— has been used and abused by our hemispheric imagination.

It is the notion of the Island —capital I; the capital of countercapitalism— as intimate isolation, regardless of how intimidating that is to us, the Cuban *compañeros*, inmates for life under the socialist spell of Fidelity —capital F; fossil rhetoric of the caudillo in chief Fidel. It is the notion of a nation that mutates into this magical momentum only to mesmerize foreigners. In particular, visitors coming from highly developed democratic countries, in front of which Cuba plays the revolutionary rumba of being the victim —capital V: “*hasta la Victoria siempre.*”

O Ché, can you see all the lonely people in the paradise of proletarians and peasants, now turning into entrepreneurs who deserve financial credit but shun free markets and the luxury of a life in liberty? For what’s at stake here is the legitimacy of totalitarian utopia on Earth, as our unsinkable —unthinkable— piece of Cuba floats ninety miles south to the south: somewhere you have never traveled, with people you cannot touch because we are too near.

Cuba as the source of all social sorceries, while Cubans are sacrificed for the sake of the sacred search for another America. But Cubans refuse to represent the U.S.’s alternative and instead we escape in mass to Hialeah, where Marx is exorcised by the Mall. O Ché, the last of the Mohicubans. America, you’ve given them all and now they’re nothing.

2.

Cuba is much more than this, surely —sugary. Cuba still is —from abroad— illusion. And more than illusion —from within— it is instinct. And in the center of all of our Cubas there lies Havana, the glamorous ruins of a city that never seems to awaken but somehow is never put to sleep —nor to her knees. Womb, woman, wunderkammer, wonderkafka, Castro’s castle, Havanoma.

Havana is the reckless recombination of a bountiful Babylon and a punitive Pompeii. Ideological iconoclasm versus industrious indigence. Xenophilia versus fear of the unknown. Beauty of barbarism, constant carnival, boring home. Havana is the most conflictive and cosmopolitan hotspot against authoritarian authority, a city prone to contamination from the outer world —is there intelligent life on Miami?— and even with the WWW, in a country —clowntry— where the State telephone company monopolistically provides zero private access to the

Internet. Our holy black market which is in Havana.

For what matters in Cuba is not accountability but control. Little Brother General Raúl Castro has promised that in February 2018 he will step down, after 59 years since 1959. Sensational symmetry for the headlines of half the world, except Cuba. The Realpolitik of Washington now approaches and applauds the Raúlpolitik: remix of repression and reforms to enshrine a self-transition from dictatorship to dictatorship —Castros 3.0 demodynasty. For “stability” is the most suitable synonym of “establishment” —status quo— in this new era of engagement with the Caribbean *cabron* —crony communism.

All these collateral advantages can recently be read in the facades and the faces of La Habana and its habaneros. The city behaves like the dear dictionary of a dead tongue taken to its limit: a *vocabulary* to translate the paradigms of both profits and propaganda. Quite a mission for the experts in semiotics of the Central Committee of the one and only permitted political party: a P.C. —Partido Comunista—to the image and likeness of an elite gerontocracy and military corporation. Post-communism is already giving way to neo-consumerism.

The look of the habaneros and their Havana reflect such an imminent implosion. It's hard to recognize their formerly familiar faces and facades. The new investments are violently vanishing the provincial spirit of socialism as the measure of all buildings. Plastics are subtly substituting metals and concrete, even in the creaking chairs of the open-air cafés —when the scorching sun allows it; if the tax-inspector bureaucracy of a still closed society allows it.

The local commercial colors are curiously a copy-and-paste —without copyright— of many classic international companies, from fuels to cokes. Clothing in Cuba rhymes with importing to Cuba —the cheaper, the more fashionable: the American flag being the best-seller after decades of criminalization of its use. Younger generations care more about reggaeton superstars than about the martyrs of a Revolution they largely ignore. Like in a terror TV series made in Habanywood, a sudden syndrome of amnesia is

taking over totalitarianism. Television can be tougher than tanks.

Despite of all of the mass media praise of the Cuban education system, reading is now quite ridiculous when you can ride 24/7 a tourist car along the Malecón seashore —and as a bonus-track rent fast-sex in hard currency, not in the almost fake Cuban pesos. Most local top athletes have relocated themselves to professional leagues abroad. As autochthonous music is increasingly about the incorporation of international billboard hits, and even about the imitation of our own *criollo* tradition, because to sell well a song needs not to be Cuban but rather sound like Cuba —just as Ché Guevara has become a pop fetish in Havana fairs, after being himself a cruel cultural censor.

All kinds —and kitsch— of ephemeral experimentation in Grand Old Habana are putting the splendor of eternity under attack in a kind of unkind Brave New Havana. Cinemas are turned into discos. Collapsed structures become pleasant parks. Relics are irreversibly rated as relative. Morality is for morons. Ruins are to be reconstructed, maybe leaving behind a Rosetta stone as a reminder of scarcity: *Stranger, this was Havana in the time of the Revolution.*

That's why European aristocrats and Cuban American tycoons are rushing in herds “to see the Island before it changes”, since the mausoleum is always more rewarding than a contemporary community. And that's why, in order to lift the U.S. embargo as well as the tropical Iron Curtain, the masterminds of the White House and the Plaza de la Revolution are talking about “normalization”, a concept that bypasses the question of whether Cubans will ever enjoy their right to live “normal” lives in a “normal” country —whereas “normal” is in fact the antonym of “normalized”.

In any case, pragmatism on the Island nowadays relies much more on the police than on the Parliament. The Ministry of the Interior leaves no space inside for individual initiative. The State Security is the State as such. In consequence, the Cuban people have learned how to pretend that they believe in the government, so that the Cuban government may pretend to believe

in them back. Hypocrisy, not History, will absolve them all.

This is the perfect scenario for less solidarity and more impunity, which explains the appalling apathy of habaneros with, for example, the activists of a civil society which, in turn, are quite habanemic in their demonstrations of dissent. The risible rationale could be that, as each and every Cuban begin to oppose official speech, it would soon become redundant to tolerate any legal opposition on the Island. *Cubansummatum est!*

3.

In *Memories of Underdevelopment*, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's film based on the novel by Edmundo Desnoes, the protagonist looks out over a known but already unrecognizable Havana in the early 60s. He is all alone, as befits all witnesses to the end of the world, because his family and friends have just packed themselves off into exile, in a pedestrians' plebiscite that continues today. Indeed, after 1959 Havana ceased to be a haven for immigrants and became a source of emigrants: a transient city, a springboard, half catapult and half catacomb.

The hero of the film cannot help but utter a sentence full of sarcasm toward his insular environment, evoking the title of "The Switzerland of America," pompously assigned to Cuba under the capitalist Republic (1902-1958). And, with his voice over —mind in off—, he compares that other landscape of memories with the radically real Havana that now looks to him —at him— like "a cardboard city." The abyss of absence has always been the *causa efficiens* of all of our havanostalgias. *Sic semper fidelis.*

A similar *apocubalypse* of objects and organs is described in the poem "Requiem" by Jesús Díaz, where Havana appears like a contrite prostitute, with her "clitoris guiding the mariners like a lighthouse to the bay," being formerly polyglot and gluttonous, but suddenly repentant and forced into a Revolutionary *mea culpa* —"mea Cuba", Guillermo Cabrera Infante dixit—, in a fit of martial discipline, like a committed guerrillera, until "sadness dried up her

sex," "heartbreak stripped the flesh from her lips," "the great silence deafened her," and "ugliness killed her at last," reducing Havana to a decrepit simulacrum of the once demonic city. Decency as a disguise to survive devoid of democracy.

I have felt that eloquent silence too, during the noisy mega-parades of Workers' Day on May 1st, and most strikingly while Fidel Castro talked and talked for hours and hours to one million habaneros standing on their feet. The voice of the crowd crystallizing in the harangues of the super hero, its minimal polyphony sequestered by the monologue of the Maximum Leader. It is the same "strange silence" of "The Last Days of a House" by Cervantes Award winning Dulce María Loynaz, a poem published precisely on December 31st, 1958 —on the eve of the Revolution takeover—: "silence without profiles, without edges" that "penetrates us like deaf water, like a tide lifted by the moon."

Logic of lunatics, mystery of materialism, delusion of dialectics: thesis, antithesis and synthesis according to the Gospel of Saint Socialism. Extraterrestrial moon that bounces in the film *Memories of Over-Development*, the saga of Edmundo Desnoes shot in 2010 by Miguel Coyula. Here the protagonist languishes in the velvet exile of the U.S. academy —again with no family on the horizon—, only to finally become a hermit in his search for defeat along the deafening deserts of the West, the spot where neither God nor the State can harass him anymore with the tetragrammaton C-U-B-A. So that he can concentrate on being the absolute witness that looks out again over his lost city in the early 00s. A virtual Havana, with its cracks recalling the factual scars of an uncivil war.

This iconography of a bombed city has a deliberate effect. It is the ultimate artwork of the Castro Revolution, according to Antonio José Ponte in the documentary "The New Art of Making Ruins". Otherwise, the official discourse based on the permanent danger of an imperialist invasion would be meaningless —or worse, humiliatingly hilarious. It is as if Havana once needed that decaying debris as proof of its brutal battle during decades, but is now reduced to decorative paraphernalia only to touch the

hearts and pockets of leftist tourists: things that you, Americans, wouldn't believe —like tears in the ruins.

4.

Cuba used to be a crossing-over of rainbows. White sands of Guantánamo, wastelands of lime and salt. The green first and then brown leaves of the aromatic plantations in Pinar del Rio, tobacco temptations. Sea cyan of the never-ending beaches of Varadero, with luxury hotel resorts that duplicate it into azure. Stale olive-green of the one and ten million uniforms of the militia, soldiers, sailors, pilots, agents, and surgeons: grass, hills, valleys, mountains, reptiles, and birds. The red of industrial nickel, indistinguishable from the tiles forged for roofs to last several centuries, except in this. Bluest skies that are born out of the claustrophobic horizons of the Island. Orange, gold, amber, violet sunsets to heal the yellowish citizens' skins. Black dreams.

But Havana is deep gray. Ocher in sepia. Visionary and blind, merciful and myopic, barefoot and still bragging, amid low clouds and high columns, the city relies only on the miraculous static of its old scaffolds: layers upon layers that challenge the laws of urban archeology.

The contrast between Havana and Cuba can get so tense that some days they don't belong to the same country. Havana is a Manhattan-like miniature; Cuba is plainly a part of the Caribbean. Language differentiates these two twins. Ideology splits their idiosyncrasies apart. Race, cuisine, dance, seduction and copulation rites. Havana is a cut-up of the rest of the country —the rests of the country—, yet habaneros already live in a daily diaspora, they detach spontaneously from the Cuban question: their Cubanity resides in some other space and time still to come.

As a counter-citizen of this hidden Havana Planet, I carry the shroud of my city upon my shoulders, moving away from it maybe never to return, but still shouting the most populist despair of poet Virgilio Piñera: "Havana, open up and swallow me down!"

In fact, by staying in Havana we cannot return to our home. Only by escaping from home we can find Havana everywhere and beyond.

5.

Historians, academics, and poets are together in the search of a treacherous treasure that only politicians find without the need of searching: a piece of power. In the case of Cuba, the image of an island within the Island creates a bubble of exceptionality that somehow has turned Cubans into the least Latin Americans of all Latin America.

And it's logical, for the non-stop narrative of Fidel Castro composed the opera-rev of a revealed origin plus a transcendental sense of destiny: the accurate accords of our totalitarian teleology. Now, when His Revolution is already on mute and expressed only by inertial flashbacks, as a caste of heirs and epigones rearrange the egalitarian equation —so that they can keep in position even after stepping down from position—, we common Cubans still cannot behave accordingly. We are either childish or criminals, Cinderella citizens who have lost their talisman in chief, so that participation, responsibility and demonstration will always rely upon others. So that the "capital of all Cubans", as the official propaganda calls La Habana, does not belong to individual habaneros in their decorative roles —whether still exiled in Havana or already inhabiting the city of their hearts once in exile.

O Ché, can you see all those collectivized people in the paradise of post-proletarians and pre-peasants, who pay their limited licenses of entrepreneurs while they remain in denial about free markets and the luxury of a life in liberty? Cuba as the subsidiary of all social sorceries, while Cubans are sacrificed for the sake of the sacred search for another global hegemony, in an inhumane geography urged of gorgons and the inhumation of the individual. O Ché, could you conceive of the New Man as the longest and most winding road from capitalism to capitalism? Cuba, you've given us all and now we're nothing.