

Life on the Verge

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Cuba on the Verge: Twelve Writers on Continuity and Change in Havana and Across the Country

edited by Leila Guerriero.
Ecco, 285 pages, \$26.99

1.

It was late afternoon on March 22, 2016, when the sun came out in Havana. This was back when it was hard not to feel, in Cuba as in the United States, that history was progressing in a hopeful direction. It was the last day of Barack Obama's historic visit to Havana. He had come to further the remarkable thaw in US-Cuba relations that he and Raúl Castro had announced more than a year before. That morning, Obama proclaimed to his Cuban hosts that he was in Havana "to bury the last remnant of the cold war in the Americas." And then the outgoing US president, reveling in this impressive foreign policy achievement, doffed his suit jacket to take in a few innings of baseball before continuing on to José Martí International Airport. Just as the gray weather lifted, he flew off into the sunset.

The soft light filling the city matched the hopeful feeling along the jangling street in central Havana down which I walked to San Cristóbal, the restaurant where the Obamas had dined their first night in town. It occupied what was once the family home of its proprietor, a cheerful, round-faced Afro-Cuban chef named Carlos Cristóbal Márquez. Cristóbal had first opened his place, he told me, as a *paladar*—one of the small private eateries that Fidel Castro allowed enterprising Cubans to open in the late 1990s to provide for themselves some of what his state could not after the Soviet bloc's collapse.

In 2011, Fidel's brother and successor legalized still more forms of private enterprise. Raúl Castro did away with the old rule that limited seating to twelve, allowing San Cristóbal to grow into a full-fledged restaurant, with a parrot squawking at customers from one corner and walls filled with Catholic bric-a-brac and old photos of boxers and singers. Though not the fanciest or most famous of Havana's new night-spots, its homey vibe recommended it, Cristóbal said, and the Obamas' friends Jay-Z and Beyoncé had hung out there during their visit to Havana.

Perhaps as important to Obama's travel planners and the Cuban security services with whom they coordinated his moves was the fact that Cristóbal was known and liked by the state officials who came and told him, a few days beforehand, that he should be ready for a VIP. "It was only that night when the carload of Secret Service agents came," he told me, "that I knew whom I was

cooking for. A few minutes later, up pulled *la bestia*." The arrival in Havana of the presidential limousine, nicknamed the "beast," had prompted much excitement in this car-mad country. Cristóbal showed me a photo of his staff posing with the car, and one of himself with the Obamas. He insisted that I stay for dinner and eat with an old friend of his, also visiting from abroad.

Cristóbal's friend was a short, mustachioed man in his sixties who introduced himself as Umberto. He was unmistakably Cuban, but his new colored shirt and the confidence with



Havana, Cuba, December 2016; photograph by Ken Light

which he ordered red wine suggested that he hadn't lived here for years. The business card he handed me confirmed that he split his time between Madrid and Miami. He had been able to obtain an EU passport because his grandfather had been Spanish, but now he devoted most of his time to the new travel agency he'd opened in Florida to help Americans tour Cuba with the aid of old contacts like Cristóbal.

Umberto showed me a grainy photo on his phone, which he said had been taken around 1986. It showed two men dressed in olive drab, surrounded by several more men in similar attire. One of the men was Umberto. The other was Raúl Castro. "That's when I was in charge of a boxboard factory in Villa Clara," he said. He'd done a long stint as an officer in the Revolutionary Armed Forces in the 1970s and 1980s before becoming head of the factory, a position in the state economy then typical of men with military experience. "Nowadays," he told me, "Raúl inspects factories sometimes. But none of these guys are still making cardboard." Many of them, he explained, now work for one of the tourism companies owned by Cuba's military, with names like Gaviota and Habaguanex, whose buses ferried his clients to hotels also owned by the army.

When I stopped by Cristóbal's place in November 2017, I thought of Um-

berto. The previous year had been marked by Fidel Castro's death and Donald Trump's election. Cristóbal's precious photo of the Obamas now hung near his boxers and singers. But few Americans were among the tourists sipping mojitos nearby: the number of visitors from *la yuma* (the US) the previous two winters had decreased drastically, thanks to Trump's reescalation of US-Cuba tensions and a travel warning from the State Department accompanied by new restrictions on Americans traveling to the island. Cristóbal's business, now trading on its reputation as the Obamas' spot in Havana,

was doing fine. The general mood here, though, wasn't good, with the US again estranged and Raúl Castro, who had announced his intention to retire from the presidency in early 2018, cutting back on economic and other reforms. I asked after my dining companion from that weekend when much seemed possible. Cristóbal said he hadn't seen Umberto since.

2.

"On the verge." It's a phrase that has been applied to Cuba at many moments during its recent history: in the mid-twentieth century when the island seemed always on the verge of revolution; in October 1962, when the United States' discovery of Soviet missiles here put the world on the brink of nuclear war; in the late 1990s, when the Soviet Union collapsed; in the early 2000s, when Fidel Castro stepped down; and in the current moment, after Castro's death changed little but when dramatic shifts in Cuba's external relations and halting if significant internal reforms make everything seem in flux.

The phrase appears in the title of an excellent new anthology of essays on Cuba's current state, compiled by the Argentine journalist and editor Leila Guerriero, who well understands that feeling "on the verge" here isn't new.

As Iván de la Nuez—one of six Cuban writers among the twelve in the anthology—puts it, "For a long time now, the only political reality in Cuba has been a state of transition." What convinced an American publisher that now was the right time for such a volume are the same developments—détente, Obama's visit, Fidel's death—that have prompted more than a million Americans to visit the island over the two years since Obama ended the US's failed policy of "isolation."

But like the cool stars of *The Fast and the Furious*, whose last sequel was filmed in Havana's streets, Cubans

have by and large kept their calm during these dramatic moments. In December 2014, in the days after Obama and Castro announced their normalization of ties, a legion of foreign press landed in Havana looking for festive street scenes and asking questions about what the future held. They found people more interested in finding their day's tomatoes. Nuez provides an explanation for this attitude. "This transitional situation has become enormously comfortable," he writes. "It manages an endless limbo without a future."

Anyone who has spent time in Cuba knows Nuez doesn't mean material comfort—goods are scarce. It's anyone's guess when eggs will next appear in the neighborhood commissary, and buying a chicken for dinner still

means breaking the law. But much has also changed since the lean and tenuous 1990s, when Fidel Castro enforced a policy of arresting any Cuban caught with foreign currency. Today every Cuban, in or out of government, knows that getting by requires some hustle *por la izquierda* (to the left) of the official economy. Many Cuban families include not only a few members who live in Miami but also some who travel to Ecuador or Spain and return with bags of socks or toasters to sell. Their hustles are abetted by the country's social safety net, however threadbare, and by the truth that Cubans still don't pay rent. Their capital, moreover, alone among major cities in the Caribbean basin, has safe streets not run by gangsters. In Havana today it's more common than you might think to meet a Cuban who worked for a couple of winters as a custodian in Newark, say, but chose to return to the island, where housing is free and the weather is better.

Guerriero's contributors, eschewing political prognostication, instead describe daily life's contradictions and wants. Leonardo Padura, Cuba's foremost living novelist, frets over what it may mean for Cuba that young people here now seem to be forswearing baseball, the game that he and his father's generation made an icon of national pride, for the deeply un-Cuban

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sport of soccer. Abraham Jiménez Enoa, who helped found the intriguing new web magazine *El Estornudo* (“The Sneeze”) in Havana, describes the concerns of a young *jinetero*, or gigolo (literally “jockey”). Having left his rural childhood home to make a living sleeping with women tourists from Canada and France, the *jinetero* observes, “What little I’ve got in this world, I owe it to my cock.”

Enoa’s *Estornudo* colleague Carlos Manuel Álvarez recounts a visit to his father in Miami. The essay begins with his finding his dad living in a miserable one-room apartment in Hialeah, eking out rent by fixing air conditioners. It ends with them collecting coconuts from yards across South Florida to sell for seventy cents apiece to a Cuban wholesaler. Everything in the wholesaler’s plastic warehouse “smelled like Cuba.... Memories, people, slang, the spiritual exhaustion dotted with ingenious jokes, and the solidarity of contraband.”

If understanding Cuba requires following Cubans abroad, sympathetic and engaged outsiders also have their place. Patricio Fernández, a leading journalist in Chile, finds a curious new elite in Havana. Although similar in many ways to elite groups across South America—its tiny size, its members’ light skin—Havana’s elite is composed not of lawyers or plutocrats but of artists. Their critical spirit is well represented in the collection by Wendy Guerra, a novelist and poet who has published mostly in Madrid and who writes these days for *The Miami Herald*. Her contribution here, particularly welcome for its treatment of a subject whose makers and chroniclers in Cuba have been overwhelmingly male, is titled “Glamour and Revolution.”

The essay’s contents would perhaps be more fairly reflected by a title whose first word wasn’t “Glamour” but “Gender.” But this fact in itself suggests much about gender roles and femininity in what’s surely the sole nation with exclusively female airport security officers, who invariably wear fishnet stockings and high heels with their uniforms. Guerra reflects on how Havana went from one of the world’s most stylish cities in the 1950s to a place where, as a result of the cult of the bearded guerrilla in the 1960s, it was “impossible to find the time or space for contemplating or attending to the self.” She describes how people discovered ways, in ensuing decades, to live as they wanted—using shoe polish as mascara, sewing new dresses from the lining of old suits, passing around a single pair of lacy *blúmers*. As an art student living in a coed dorm, Guerra absorbed the ethic of sexual freedom that, despite the revolution’s outward puritanism, seems to have helped people brave its privations (“our promiscuity became essential: a vital ingredient in our collective memory”).

The “macho Leninism” of Fidel’s revolution has made it impossible to imagine a woman in any position of real power. But Guerra also sees much to appreciate in a society where girls have, for five decades now, had equal access to education; where women can get divorced or take up with a new lover or partner; where getting a free abortion from the national health service is easier than going to the dentist (this

helps explain the extremely low birth-rate). Near the end of her essay, Guerra writes:

The body as the sole space of freedom, our sexuality, our complex relationship with our own customs, surveillance, witchcraft, scarcity, the informer culture, our detachment, our complicated relationship with power, the decisive control of politics over our entire lives, censorship, music, rum consumed as an everyday drug to help us bear the impossibility of taking our own existence by the reins, our ownership by the state, and the interpersonal relationships forged over years of resistance—these are challenging things to narrate.

But the fact that Guerra can narrate them from Havana, where she still lives with her jazz pianist husband, suggests much about how Cuba has changed since the heavy days of *Before Night Falls*, Reinaldo Arenas’s account of being jailed for his writings and his homosexuality in the 1970s.

Twenty years ago, when I began visiting Cuba, the vigilance of Havana’s neighborhood CDRs—Committees for the Defense of the Revolution—meant that anyone criticizing Fidel behind closed doors signaled that they were talking about him by stroking an imaginary beard. By the time he died, people were telling jokes about *el Viejo* in the street and cursing Raúl as they wished. The state publishing industry, though it did in 2016 decide to publish George Orwell’s *1984*, remains far from expending any of its precious paper on writers as overtly critical as Arenas or Guerra. But you can glean a lot about the state’s approach to free expression from the large photograph that, until recently, greeted visitors to the Fábrica de Arte Cubano, Havana’s most popular space for *outré* art. It depicted a propaganda billboard that bore a familiar message—“We have and will have SOCIALISMO”—but that was crumpling and had fallen over.

3.

Crumpling and fallen over is how Fidel Castro’s foes in Miami and elsewhere long loved to picture him; his demise was imagined as the moment when Communist Party rule would crumple, too. When Fidel died, on November 25, 2016, the party was firmly in control. The nation that had long served as his nemesis had just elected a con-man-turned-TV-star to be its president. Eulogists noted that Castro had always promised that he’d only expire once the US began to fall apart. Against expectations, his passing didn’t prompt rioters to seize Cuba’s streets or a flotilla of exiles to speed south in cigarette boats to reclaim their due. It prompted a solemn nine-day period of mourning during which the Comandante’s cremated remains were driven the length of the island in a little green jeep.

All along the five-hundred-mile route from Havana to Santiago, the eastern city where Castro came of age and now lies interred under a single huge boulder inscribed with the word FIDEL, people greeted one another not with the customary *Buenos días* but with *condolencias*. Some who lined the roadway dabbed at tears—though

many were students or workers whose presence was compulsory. Whether their abiding feeling toward the old man was hateful or fond, most of the Cubans I encountered during the cortege’s last days seemed to recognize the gravity of the circumstances. The mourning period ended with Raúl Castro taking the stage in Santiago’s Revolutionary Square to send off his brother. In his hoarse voice, the eighty-five-year-old recounted, for what felt like the last time, the mythic tale of how he and Fidel had crash-landed a boat from Mexico onto a nearby beach and then, with their driven band of apostles, repaired to the mountains of the Sierra Maestra to make a revolution.

Raúl has barely appeared in public since. This hasn’t slowed rumors that he too is unwell. Whether or not that’s so, he has said repeatedly that at the end of his second five-year term as president, he will hand off power to a successor picked by the Politburo and ceremoniously voted on by Cuba’s National Assembly. The succession had long been scheduled for February 24, but in December it was postponed until April 19, due to major damage caused by Hurricane Irma and resultant delays to the local party elections by which the members of the National Assembly are appointed. Barring further changes, April 19 remains the date on which Raúl Castro, though he will still be first secretary of Cuba’s Communist Party, will stand down from leading Cuba’s civilian government.

Predictions about his replacement have varied over recent years. Some once-likely picks have grown too old, while several others—notably Felipe Pérez Roque, the charismatic former foreign secretary, and Carlos Lage, the talented economic czar—have been purged from the government in ways that recall the old joke that the best way to keep from getting your head chopped off is to keep it down. Since the Seventh Congress of Cuba’s Communist Party in 2016, the most commonly mentioned successor has been Miguel Díaz-Canel, a party secretary from the provincial city of Santa Clara who was named first vice-president of the Councils of State and Ministers in 2013. Little is known about Díaz-Canel beyond the facts that he spent years riding his bicycle to work in his hometown before he climbed the party ranks and that he’s fond of quoting Che Guevara in his speeches at party meetings.

The mere fact that Díaz-Canel was born in 1960, after the Revolution, has informed speculations about what kind of leader he’d be. So has his rumored fondness for rock music and the Internet. Cuba’s new leader, as Iván de la Nuez observes in *Cuba on the Verge*, will in any case have a life story very much like those of his compatriots. He will be a man who answered the call to volunteer when he was young, and who fought imperialism in one of the cold war’s hot zones (in Nicaragua, in Díaz-Canel’s case). He will have a family that’s split between Cuba and the diaspora. He will have sworn allegiance to socialism but also be familiar with “latrines, promiscuity, solidarity, and the cruelty of massification.”

Some have described his task as bridging the dogma of elders with the desires of their grandkids for *el Feisbu* (Facebook) and flashy, reggaeton-style fashion. But Cuba’s next president will serve at the pleasure of a party under

Raúl Castro's control, and of a military whose officer corps remains thick with loyal *Raulistas*. Castro's people aren't going anywhere. Nor, one suspects, is a ruling party that's given its armed forces the biggest stake in Cuba's new economy. Since Obama's visit, further market reforms have not been forthcoming, although many Cubans hunger for them. The party is plainly determined not to give up too much control too quickly, but it also has chosen not to crack down unduly on weird art and growing Internet access. As Cuba's old nemesis contends in Washington with the stormy tenure of its own new president, the island will continue to be run by a party devoted to Leninism in name and to its own preservation in practice.

4.

Seen from Cuba, the ascendance of Trump at first invited bemusement. He seemed to represent a throwback to the 1950s, when Havana was run by New York mobsters who lined the city's oceanfront with shiny casino-hotels. Everyone in Havana knew that Trump had made repeated attempts in the early 2000s, before it was legal, to pick up where Meyer Lansky (who built his Riviera Hotel not long before Fidel seized Havana) left off. "This is a time for doing business, and Trump is a businessman," became a kind of mantra in Havana. Many Cubans thought Trump could be good for US-Cuba relations. What this hopeful stance didn't account for, as they soon learned, was that mounting a campaign for the US presidency as a Republican still requires appeasing hard-right Cuban-Americans in Miami. Even more important was Trump's sheer will, once in office, to undo as many of Obama's achievements as possible.

On June 16, 2016, keeping a promise to the Cuban American National Foundation and to his former Republican rival Marco Rubio, Trump gave a speech in Miami announcing his intent to "cancel" Obama's deal with Cuba. He said he would roll back the permissions granted US firms to do business in Cuba, and once again ban Americans from traveling there unless they went with a licensed group.

As with much verbiage that's issued from his White House, the full implications of these proposed changes—which notably didn't include preventing US airlines from flying to Cuba, and actually left many of Obama's policies in place—weren't entirely coherent or clear. In November 2017, the administration formalized the new regulations, whose imprecision still frustrated many (including Rubio), but did see Trump's Treasury and Commerce Departments issue a list of several dozen hotels, stores, and travel agencies owned by the Cuban military where vacationing Americans are now officially banned from spending money.

In the intervening months, however, a strange drama in Havana has had more of an impact on American-Cuban relations than these hazy tweaks to rules

governing how curious Yanks may visit the island. The first reports of a mysterious "sonic attack" on US diplomats in Havana emerged last August. The State Department confirmed that twenty-one members of the embassy's staff had been sent home with a range of ailments, from confusion and dizziness to hearing loss. Some of them had reported hearing mysterious high-pitched sounds before taking ill.

The Trump administration leapt to condemn Cuba not merely for failing to maintain its diplomats' safety but for perpetrating the "attack" that sickened them. Raúl Castro protested that he was just as mystified about what had



President Obama at a wreath-laying ceremony at the José Martí Memorial, Revolution Square, Havana, March 2016

happened as the Americans, and even invited the FBI to Havana to investigate—an unthinkable step a few years ago. Many informed observers believed him. In 2017, there were plenty of parties with an interest in driving the US and Cuba apart—the Chinese, the Russians, Castro-haters in Miami—but Cuba's cash-strapped government certainly wasn't one of them. Moreover, the Americans' initial explanation for what had happened was extremely fishy.

Scientists and acousticians agreed that the notion of a "sonic weapon" causing the symptoms described, whether by directing audible sounds or microwave (low-frequency) or infrasound (high-frequency) signals at human targets, was pure science fiction. Some clinicians opined that the mysterious illness was consistent with a viral infection. Others blamed a mystery toxin or poison (this was where the story began to smell a bit like Vladimir Putin). Many observers, pointing to "psychogenic" factors, argued that the embassy workers' condition seemed at least partly to be born from group hysteria—from them growing convinced, as their colleagues took ill from unrelated causes, that their ailments had an evil sonic source.

In January, the FBI ruled out those victims' theory, stating that its investigation had found no evidence that sound waves could have harmed them.

Last month, a team of specialists who examined them at the University of Pennsylvania agreed; MRIs of victims' brains showed no damage to their white matter. The Penn doctors' report, however, also stated that several victims did exhibit "concussion-like" symptoms without having had concussions—and were thus suffering from a new syndrome caused by agents unknown. This hypothesis was quickly embraced by Trump's State Department, but met with widespread skepticism from doctors, including in an editorial published alongside the report in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, emphasizing that further study is needed to determine what really befell these Americans in Havana.

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Not that any of this, one suspects, much matters to Trump. The "sonic attack," whether manufactured in Havana or elsewhere, was an ideal cause both for issuing a stern warning against Americans visiting Cuba and for recalling all but a skeleton crew of US embassy staff from their posts. Last September 29, the US expelled fifteen Cuban diplomats from Washington and all but ended the US embassy's consular functions in Havana.

Since Trump took office, only one of the several "working groups" set up by the Obama administration and its Cuban counterpart to confront issues ranging from cybersecurity to human trafficking has met even once. The new era of US-Cuba cooperation was already ailing before Trump's actions killed it. In reinforcing its trade relationships with Russia and China, the Cuban government has shown that it would just as soon get its foreign investment elsewhere.

But geostrategy aside, those who've suffered most from the US embassy's closure are Cubans.

This building is where 200,000 of them have come each year, per an accord in place since 1994, to get the papers they need to reunite with their families by plane rather than a leaky raft. More recently, thousands have come to the embassy to apply for a coveted five-year visa that allows them to visit the US as tourists and to build lives traveling back and forth. Everyone in Havana had a story about some sibling or friend who'd spent months saving \$160 to book a visa appointment but who, now that the embassy is no longer taking such appointments, was simply out of luck and cash. On my last visit to Havana, in November 2017, the JetBlue flight I boarded from JFK was nearly empty.

That month the humble neighborhood around the embassy, usually a hive of Cubans lining up to enter, was empty except for some old men playing dominoes. The embassy's locked gates looked like they were rusted shut. More rusty still was the permanent steel proscenium on the square opposite it, built on Fidel's orders in 2006 to host mass demonstrations against *el imperio*, but which hasn't been used for that purpose in years. On the seawall across the road, young lovers cuddled in the dusk, their legs intertwined or overhanging the waves. On the verge, as ever. Of what, it wasn't clear. □

—March 7, 2018