Cuban Entries, May 12-20, 2001

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Callaloo, Volume 26, Number 1, Winter 2003, pp. 67-72 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/cal.2003.0011

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by Susan Fraiman

Translation

Most of us do not speak Spanish. True, a couple are fluent and a few more can string together paragraphs, but the rest of us settle for gamely pronouncing *buenos dias,* and call it a day. Working with a translator to present a conference paper raises an interesting question. What is my relation to this amiable, competent, middle-aged woman who holds the power of translation? Is she my tool, obliging dummy, empty receptacle for my voice? And if I'm tempted to think of her in this way, how can I right the political wrong of doing so? Would it be better for me to sit while she stands, or should I stand while she sits? Both sit? Every time one of us carelessly says "America," she calmly changes it to "*los Estados Unidos.*"

Dollars

We are told not to bring plastic or traveler's checks, so our pockets are crammed with dollars. Cabs to Old Havana cost $5, dinner is about $15, and there's no need to change our money. We go by taxi to a street blocked by music and dancers, where every building is covered by festive murals. Weaving our way through the crowd, walls rising up on either side like bright flags, we are overcome by the friendliness of *Habaneros.* A woman from whom I have just bought a necklace beckons me to follow. She points out a *Santería* shrine before leading me through a narrow doorway. It's the muralist's gallery, and one of our group is already there, looking through a pile of paintings. Would I like to see some? Would I like to dance? Would I like a *mojito,* rum and mint in a paper cup? Men approach anxious for conversation, offering cigars, marijuana, *Habaneras.* Can we change some pesos? Can we deliver these letters to the U.S.? As if I were getting beer for underage kids, I buy a pricey box of baby formula for a gentleman with alcoholic breath, who waits outside the store. By the time we get back to the Hotel Presidente, we are exhausted by our privilege and considerably more guarded. How do you balance between wanting to share your wealth and not wanting to be ripped off? In our group, we answer this question differently, and by the end of the week, there is palpable tension between those perceived as undertipping and those perceived as overtipping.

Three of us are waiting in line at Coppelia park, famous for its ice cream, and find ourselves chatting with two cosmopolitan Cubans. One man speaks perfect English, the other perfect French, and both seem glad for the chance to converse across national boundaries. Later we admit being braced for the hustle, but it never came—just surprisingly open talk over surprisingly undistinguished ice cream. Where did you learn French? From a Canadian friend. What do you think of the Revolution? Its ideals are good, of course, but day-to-day is difficult. No chance to travel, they explain sadly. But you get food coupons, subsidized housing, free healthcare, public education? *Oui, c'est vrai.* And how much do you earn in your job at the store? $20 a month.

Sex

My *Havana Handbook* promises sex in the city. "Promiscuity is rampant," it leers, and even revolutionary women "routinely shorten and take in their uniforms to show their legs, outline their backsides." On the cover is a tawny exotic dancer with a bold gaze. "The *mulatta* is particularly revered among Cuban males for her perceived sexuality," the guide continues. Some of us notice that the *mulatta* is particularly revered by foreign tourists as well. We see lopsided couples in restaurants, beautiful beige girls with beefy European men. I am especially shocked to see schoolgirls, literal schoolgirls with backpacks and uniforms, leaning into the cars of single men. Later, I read in a book by a Cuban exile about the new class of sex workers or *jineteras* that sprang up in the 1990s when Cuba began encouraging tourism. The book also informs me that my pre-teen prostitutes were actually *botelleras,* females hitching rides with chivalrous male comrades due to the lack of public transportation.

Revolution

It strikes me as bold and righteous to take Batista's ornate Presidential Palace, with its Mirror Room and Gold Room, rename it the Museo de la Revolución, and line it with rusted weapons, bloodied shirts, and photos of determined rebels, striding through the jungle. We are amused to find a poorly-lit corridor called "Corner of Cretins." Accompanied by grotesque cartoon figures, the captions read: "Thanks, Batista, for helping to enable our Revolution." "Thanks, Reagan, for helping to reinforce our Revolution." "Thanks, Bush, for helping to consolidate our Revolution."

The Fábrica de Tabacos Partagás, a working cigar factory founded in 1843, is a highlight on the tourist beat. We hardly know what to think of our stroll through the three-story colonial building, which takes us gawking by line after line of concentrated, highly-skilled manual workers. We admire the quick-fingered sorting of leaves: these for wrapping, those for combustion, others for flavor. The elaborate layering, packing, rolling, clamping, and cutting by senior artisans, culled from the ranks of apprentices, specialists in a certain cigar, which they roll exclusively for an entire career. Next the calibration by color: morass of browns arranged by trained eyes into a spectrum of shades from olive to fawn. Even the making and packing of boxes is carefully, artfully done, and all in the hush of an unmechanized, unairconditioned space, that couldn't have changed much since the mid-19th century. We file by the

pungent smell and obscene image of an older woman, who works by herself with a mouthful of cigar as big as my wrist. The room for rolling has rows of tables like desks in an austere Victorian schoolroom. At the front is a long table facing the others. This is where the Reader sits, playing a role as old as the New World. Our guide tells us the Reader reads newspapers in the morning, romances in the afternoon—since most of the rollers are women, she explains with a smile. I ask her how the factory has changed under socialism. Perplexed by the question, she pauses before offering, "Well, we make many more varieties of cigar than we did before the Revolution." But do the workers have a say in how the factory is run? Are they unionized? Are they satisfied with their jobs? Oh yes, she assures me. And they vote on many issues—for example, they decide which romances to read.

Wanting to believe in the Revolution, I assemble what evidence I can. There are no swarms of beggars as in Mexico, for example, and even the dogs, all cut from the same miniature-coyote mold, look jaunty and well-fed. They tell us Havana is very safe, and that criminals and police alike are generally non-violent. We feel secure walking along the Malecón at night, but I notice Cubans being asked to show their papers and wonder if the cops are really so benign. One day in the Old City, I see two men in fatigues ride by on a scooter. The soldier in back is twisted sideways, carefully clutching an enormous, white-frosted cake.

Two of us are pulled from our feminism panel at the Casa de las Américas for an interview on Radio Havana, a government-run station. The host is a British expatriate who has an English-language show. On the way to the studio, he mentions that his boyfriend is black, and that Cuba has its own form of racial profiling. Our host tells us to speak freely about race, gender, and sexuality in the United States, and we do. He also tells us his name is Michael, but on the radio he calls himself John.

Across from the hotel is a school whose air of joyful laxity impresses me. I suppose I expected grim regimentation—like those images of collectivized Chinese kids under Mao, reciting in creepy unison. How else achieve 98% literacy overnight? Yet every morning we wake to raucous evidence that Castro's Great Literacy Campaign has neither quelled nor unified the voices of Cuba's young. Are these children noisier than ours, or is it just that we've never had recess at the foot of our bed? Going to the window, I look out over a large, open courtyard where groups of kids form and dissolve, reflecting the tides of middle-school games, rivalries, and intrigues. I also observe surprising variety of dress; unisex

uniforms of red shorts and white shirt appear to be freely interpreted, with many children wearing only one or neither part. As I watch, a circle forms, and the school day begins with a formal assembly. A few students drift in late, but no one is posted to mark them tardy. Their parents linger for a few minutes, listening to songs and announcements, before leaning in for a goodbye hug. Cuban parents are famous for indulging their children. What I see out my window, I think to myself, is children doted on by the State. With this thought, I am partly consoled for not getting a room on the side with an ocean view.

Faith

Word spreads that several from our group have been granted an audience with a *Santería* priest, or babalao. Those who arranged the visit are already familiar with *Santería*—Cuba's popular religion combining Catholic and Yoruban elements—and they are no less devout than fluent in speaking of their personal saint or *orisha.* At the other extreme are the skeptics among us, who want nothing to do with spirits and divination, or so I interpret their blithe departure for beach or museum. And then there are those of us wavering in the middle between doubt, interest, hope, and curiosity. This last feeling gives us pause; we don't want to worship for coldly ethnographic reasons. Finally, I decide to claim the spiritual promptings more audible to me in recent years and join those arranging for a second wave of visits.

Our babalao is rather celebrated, priest to heads of state and Olympic athletes. He lives in Miramar, an exclusive part of the city, and his house is said to be spectacular by Cuban standards. I am mildly disappointed to arrive at what strikes me as a perfectly nice, mid-size home, complete with concrete garage. It is here in the carpark that our holy man conducts his business. Even so, we expect an ethereal being in flowing robes, and can't help smiling to find a paunchy man in an Old Navy t-shirt. We sit on aluminum porch chairs waiting to be called one by one, in some mysterious but deliberate order, for our turn with the babalao. I think of it as waiting for a therapy session (and it could be, for the number of dollars we hand over) with shades of a confessional, intimations of a palm reading. There are chickens wandering around the garage, and we are nervously pleased to discover a shrine in one corner, strewn with a few too many feathers. The first of our party emerges in tears. He knew everything about me, she says. I couldn't believe it. I'm totally converted. It was one of the most amazing experiences of my life. She is shaking with emotion. A second one disappears into the presence of the priest. After fifty minutes she returns, less overwhelmed, but no less impressed by the accuracy of the babalao's reading. He knew how many children I have, she marvels.

I am chosen to go next and am led into a small, unfinished room off the main garage. Instead of a lawnmower, there are pillows and fabrics spread along one wall, and several young men seated on the floor against another. I sit opposite the babalao in the only chair, while a helper manipulates shell, stone, and a kind of rosary. He gestures to me to pick a hand. It's the shell. He taps the necklace in an intricate Morse code.

Which hand now? The shell again. Over and over like a child's game, keeping score on a notepad. Which hand now? This is all a little too mechanical for me, though not uninteresting, and just when I'm beginning to think perhaps this thinner man is actually the babalao, Old Navy takes over, studying the notepad as he speaks to me in English. Check your eyes and breasts, he tells me. These are your vulnerabilities. Have you had any trouble with your eyes? No, not really. Are you sure, he presses? Well, I forgot to bring my lens solution with me. He nods. Your mother is dead, he says. I shake my head, no. There are two men in your life. Not really, I don't think so. Your first husband has contacted you recently. Wrong again. I only have one husband, but wait. It's true an old boyfriend just e-mailed out of the blue. You need to slow down, he tells me. What's your hurry? Where are you going? What's your hurry? He asks this smiling and shrugging like a Jewish uncle. Now he's beginning to make sense, and I listen more attentively as he draws me out about my good luck, bad spirits in my house, delays in my writing. Write! he admonishes me. You will have success if you write! He has put the notebook down, and like a good shrink, tunes in swiftly to many of my wishes and fears, needling me about them with a warmth and humor that I find charming. Slow down! Write! As I leave, he tells me to put four glasses in my yard, filled with water; water and sugar; coffee; and flowers. I carefully write it all down.

There is one more North American sitting on a porch chair. When he comes out, he is looking down in disappointment. The babalao told him to find a woman and have babies. I wanted to believe in him, my colleague says ruefully. I was ready for this, very open, but he kept telling me I need to marry a fertile woman. And that doesn't work for me, since I'm gay.

Cathedral in Old Havana

Photo by Marcus D. Jones