



## The Idea of Cuba

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### [Hazel Kahan](#)

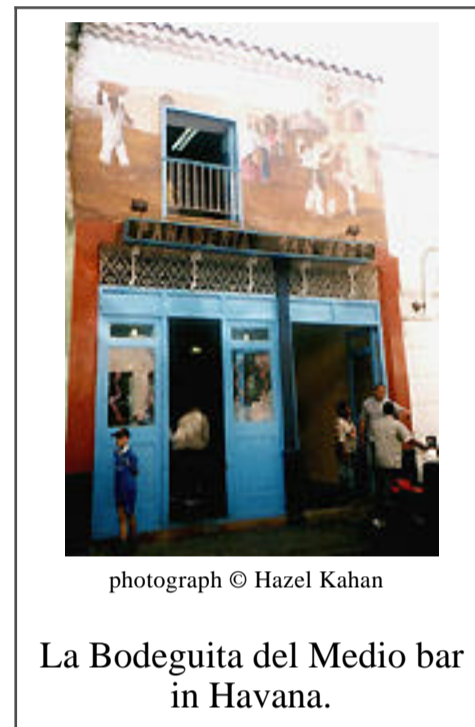
*I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth. (Isaiah, 49:6)*

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### I

It's December 31st, 1999, the eve of the millennium, and it's my first time. My companion and I are shamelessly excited by seeing *Havana* posted on the departure board at Jamaica's Montego Bay Airport. Excited, but also anxious at how close we are to what is, for Americans, forbidden territory. Soon after the Cuban Airlines plane lands at Jose Marti Airport, I ask the official to stamp my notebook instead of my passport; he lifts his eyes and acquiesces with an ineffable smile. *I'm in Cuba!*

As the taxi enters Havana, I imagine Fidel and Che on their triumphant entry into the city forty years before, riding on open trucks, intense and exhilarated, wearing dirty uniforms, bearded and very young. Over the next days, I draw and write and film my observations of the culture the Revolution created, unaware that my acute and insightful impressions are actually mundane, similar to those of many other first-time travelers to Cuba. I do not know then that I am seeing only the first of the faces Cuba presents.



Along with the one million tourists who came to the country last year, I ogle the colorful ruins, the noble, poignant decay of glorious buildings and sumptuous mansions — one Kodak moment piled onto another. It's a shame, my friend and I say, shaking our heads in agreement, they really should start restoring these things. They could sell them for millions, we exult, dulled to just how much capitalism has fashioned the lens through which we look. The famous old Detroit cars are all around us, those capacious, indulgently chromed, tail-finned beauties. We peer past their thickly painted, patched bodies into our own orgasmic replay, courtesy of the silver screen, of the glamorous Forties and cruising Fifties. Once the embargo is lifted, we divine and opine, those babies will be worth a bloody fortune. And then, we observe, as thousands have before us, how sexy the women are, how friendly everyone is, how ubiquitous the music is and how stupid the embargo is. We sneak in a bit of nationalist pride about Hemingway, boxing, and baseball as, drinking *mojitos* while puffing on Cuban cigars, we nod and confidently predict the return of the Cubans who "had to leave" the casinos and the sea-sun-sand, the cool island that we have been cool enough to discover and select as the site from which we will enter the twenty-first century. As for those Miami Cubans, we say, oh yes, you can be sure they'll be back. No doubt they can't wait, we say, pleased by our own political sagacity. Yes, they'll come back as soon as Castro kicks the bucket and we, America, start to do business here again. It's all just waiting to happen.



photograph © Hazel Kahan

Castro and Hemingway.

We stare at the fading revolutionary slogans, the exhortations to continue *la lucha*, to hold fast to the struggle; we smile as the beautiful, ubiquitous face of Che Guevara reminds us that history is not always relegated to the past. As the first onslaught of impressions subsides, we realize that the slogans occupy the places where advertising billboards should be. It begins to dawn on us that we have not seen or heard any advertising for over a week, a disorienting visual silence, the absence of a presence.

By January 3, 2000, the date of our departure, the breathlessness of my first day has faded. Now I am confused, seduced, distracted by the mystery of Cuba, by my sense of how little I have really discovered. I look out of the plane window and wonder what makes me so certain that Cuba will call me back.

## II

Six months later, Havana has changed. The city's tempo is different, the mood has shifted, a flow of foreign money is starting to trickle through the city's veins. Scaffolding is clothing the buildings, replacing decay with loving restoration; small, shiny new cars are rubbing some of the luster off the de Sotos and Chevies. Prices are higher. As the United States continues its prim enforcement of the embargo against Cuba, the Spanish and the French, the Venezuelans and Canadians have stepped into the breach, learning the country and steadily forging alliances. Does this mean it is only a matter of time before Cuba becomes just another victim of globalization, just another carefully marketed brand?

Maybe not. The more time I spend in Cuba, the more clearly I see that Cuba has a powerful, hidden weapon. Somehow, Cubans have never forgotten what Cuba is, or what it means to be a Cuban. Surprisingly, to an American, the Revolution lives on, though many of its manifestations have been discredited.

The Cuban idea has transcended decades of political isolation, material deprivation, faltered support from the Soviet Union, and the "Special Period" that followed. Indisputably, at this very moment, people are hungry in Cuba — there is simply not enough to eat. Medical care is free, but there is insufficient medicine. Education is free, but there are too few books. Artists receive state support, but they don't have enough paint and brushes.

The US trade embargo, along with the collapse of the Soviet Union, has made it impossible for Cuba to import the farm equipment, oil, and chemicals necessary for modern intensive agriculture. By default, the country has become a world-class example of organic farming, environmentally sound transportation (bicycles!), solar energy, and pest management without pesticides. Even if by necessity rather than choice, Cuban farmers are remembering and applying the old ways.

Cubans are angry with Fidel but proud that he has wiped out illiteracy, that money is not a barrier for getting a university degree or a hospital bed. Cubans will tell you Fidel is tiresome, loquacious and perhaps brutal too, but they also insist he is not corrupt, that he does not take from the people or build monuments to himself. His personal life is shrouded in mystery, perhaps to the improvement of his image. He is not powered by a public-relations machine.



photograph © Hazel Kahan

A *santería* ceremony on the eve of the millennium.

Because the idea of Cuba remains vital, I now see, Cuba might well resist the culture of consumption and the moral crisis that seems to be overtaking it, a crisis manifested in demonstrations in, among other places, Seattle, Washington, Prague, and the French countryside. These demonstrations tell me I am not alone in resisting the vortex into which the so-called developed nations are being sucked by what is labeled, without irony, as "progress." We denizens of the consumer culture must face the possibility that we might have more to learn from Cuban culture than Cubans have to learn from us.

Could this embattled island become, as Israel from ancient days had hoped to be, a light unto the nations? Such

questions cannot be honestly answered without serious attention to the full paradox of the Cuban dialectic. Always in the back of my mind are images of Cubans who choose escape on inner-tube rafts... images of bunched people in front of dimly lit government centers waiting for their forlorn rations of eggs and pork and soap. I cannot forget the desperate and only partly successful attempts of the Cuban government to attract people from the cities to work in the countryside. It is hard for any American to forget the years of messages about human-rights violations we have heard from journalists, politicians, and Cuban-American spokespersons. Who could ignore the barricades around the Cuban UN mission in New York City?

Against this background, I pose my recent perceptions of Cuban life. In two visits to Cuba, I have seen that it's a hungry country, yes, but one with enough compassion to send a thousand medical professionals to Haiti! According to *The CIA Fact Book*, it's a country where 96% of the people are able to read and where three out of four are employed by the state. Eighty percent of Cubans own their own homes, and the rest pay a highly subsidized rent. Yet — though a vigorous barter system and black market circumvent some of the economy's gross inadequacy — nothing can diminish the sheer exhaustion that a daily struggle for survival creates. Poverty, I have noticed, not ideology, gnaws at Cuban optimism and hedonism, competing with the deep intimacy of Cubans' own history and their conviction that the Revolution was against corruption and greed. For older Cubans at least, history and faith bring a certain patience — they have waited so long for the next thing; they can wait longer. What troubles their sleep is the question whether the children will continue to remember and believe.



photograph © Hazel Kahan

Havana streetcleaner.

One cannot deny the influence of the vociferous, voluble, charismatic dictator, speaking endlessly about everything — a perpetual state-of-the-union message that also reminds Cubans about their imperialist enemies — a single uninterrupted voice speaking over decades — the unrelenting nature of which has protected the message and prevented its disintegration. Talk about branding! Fidel is a brilliant marketer. Yet it may not have been he who sold Cubans their idea of themselves.

By the end of my second visit to Cuba, I have seen that it is actually a place where time is remembered, not forgotten as Western journalists often propose. Cuba remembers ancient values such as respect for elders, nurturing of children, the grace of community and sharing, and the blessings of conviviality. Tales of child abuse, guns in schools, teenage suicide are incomprehensible to Cubans. Hearing that these horrors are present in so-called developed nations like the United States reinforces the Cuban people's belief in their own system. They spend a lot of time talking to each other in cafés, in parks, at the beach, and around the family dinner table. Far more than sporadic state-controlled television broadcasts, these conversations shape the perceptions of ordinary Cubans. Judging from my own conversations with shopkeepers and park attendants, the ancient shared values are woven organically within the Cuban culture's fabric. Cubans do not need synthetic external exhortation for the renewal of these values. Because Cuban self-knowledge runs so deep, I have come to see, post-embargo Cubans are unlikely to embrace American values and consumer culture. "We've been looking at America from ninety miles away for years now. We know what it is," a Cuban writer told me.



photograph © Hazel Kahan

*Santería* dancers.

The arts are vibrantly alive in Cuba. Music and dancing are an integral part of daily life. Perhaps these expressions of the human spirit have not yielded to despair and bitterness because they have not been stained by money. Perhaps survival through cooperation creates a spiritual resilience that survival through competition will never achieve. Then again, perhaps I am a hopelessly naive romantic to believe that money can be taught to flow differently in Cuba than it does in the United States, along channels unique to Cuba's spiritual topography, in a place where revolution may, after all, fulfill a promise, even if it diverges from the vision of the *barbudas*, the bearded ones.

### III

It's three months now since I returned home from my second trip to Cuba. I continue to have these questions: When Cuba is returned to a legitimate place among the nations, can it and will it become an exemplar by remembering its purpose and by holding intact an idea of itself that does not create false needs through advertising? Is Cuba evolving an utterly new and enlightened hybrid of socialism and capitalism? Will the increasingly hard-hearted "developed" economies be reminded how people are meant to live among each other and how families are meant to treat their children and elders?

Or do such utopian expectations place too great a burden on Cuba? Here are some other questions that imply a grimmer scenario: When last year's million visitors double and triple, will Cuba's people be strong enough to resist what the sheer volume of tourism can do? Will the now-intact idea of Cuba crumble as Cuba becomes just another country pummeled by the monster we call *progress*? Change is coming, and it's coming fast: I have seen it in the distracted response of the hotel receptionist and in the glazed eyes of the elevator attendant as they spend more of their time now with tourists than with their families. Will the Miami Cubans, by now so "American," return to Cuba, and, if they do, will they replace the organic farms with chemical agribusiness? Will they tear down Havana's old buildings so casinos and resorts can sprawl in their stead?

Maybe. But I'm betting that Cuba will not forget its idea of itself. I'm betting it will use its hard-earned learning to become the first truly enlightened nation of this millennium.

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#### BOOKS OF INTEREST

John Blackthorn, *I Che Guevara: A Novel*, William Morrow & Co, January, 2000, 352 pages, \$24.00.

Christopher P. Baker, *Havana Handbook*, Moon Travel Handbooks, 2000, 368 pages, \$16.95.

Oscar Hijuelos, *Empress of the Splendid Season*, Harper Perennial, 1999, 342 pages, \$13.00.

Christopher Hunt, *Waiting for Fidel*, Houghton Mifflin, 1998, 259 pages, \$13.00.

Patrick Symmes, *Chasing Che*, Vintage Departures, 2000, 302 pages, \$13.

Zoe Valdes, *I gave you all I had*, 320 pages, Arcade Publishing; 1999. \$24.95

Pico Iyer, *Cuba and the Night*, Knopf, 1995, 234 pages, \$22.00.

#### WEB SITES

[The CIA Fact Book: Cuba](#)

[The Center for Cuban Studies](#)

[The Cuban Government's site](#)

[Cuban poster art](#)

[Live Cuban music](#)



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In front of a Salvador Gonzalez mural in Calle Hamel, Havana.

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