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9 Days in Havana: Reflections

Day one: Arrival

And the rush of hot air almost pushed us back.

We stepped out into the wide but bustling block, that rectangular airport, a loading dock.

Boxes of boxes, labeled “comida para” “jugetes para” diapers, and other unnoticed necessities.

Eyes wide and already

every image shattered and confirmed.

Outside the airport, a billboard splashed with the iconic image of Che, low to the ground and passed by classic American cars, some rusted and hinting of harder times, others shined and spotless in their recent success. Even among those, tin new cars (maybe from Japan?) swerved from between the old bulky figures.

This was the island, so demonized by long ago western disputes...?

We blurred within its borders in Trovadore rhythms drowning out the *Tin ti.n*

Mojitos and lyrical justice wet our dancing virgin feet and we

went to bed still dripping salsa beats from our ears.

Day two:

The morning took us to a writer's frantic measurements scrawled on the bathroom wall of his mountain top mansion. Signs of obsession and genius: a dog graveyard, a notorious nude pool, a furnished study tucked away in a tower.

I'm sure that Cuba is scrawled in the margins of inspired Pulitzer prized novels.

*The luxury of Hemingway's house clashed interestingly with our later discussion of African religions and racial society in Cuba. Our visit to Hamel Alley, and the African dance performance that ensued represented another form of tourism. While both visits served to portray cultural realities in Cuba, Hemingway's house was reminiscent of pre-revolutionary times in the sense that the house seemed to function as a paradise escape, a luxurious vacation house where he could exercise his eccentricities. Hamel Alley, according to our tour guide was a community project to give space to Afro-Cuban religion, art and music, a culture that has been greatly repressed as well as hidden away from Cuban society. Làzara Menéndez¹ discussed in her lecture on Afro-Cuban religion, the many ways it was hidden in plain site from the majority Catholic society but that it has been embraced as a fundamental part Cuban culture. Hamel Alley then, was the public display of what was once hidden.

And from the white walls of Hemingway's house, entrando en la callejon de hamel, dark wonderous colors, and mirrors, a pulsing artery.

They told us "ache pa ti" when we looked off kilter with our cameras and open toed sandals, pushed aside the living for a front row seat view of confused spectacles.

¹ Lic. Làzara Menéndez lecture at the Centro Memorial: Dr Martin Luther King, Jr.

I shuffled uncomfortably, as sensationalism overtook sincere drum beats lost in the necessity of survival. Somehow they have to bring tips home. And sometimes when hunger and cultural commodity negotiate terms we are left in the middle, awkward in the murals' revolutionary glory.

Day 3

This was it, the very center, the seed of solidarity, the source of grassroots extending to all curves of the Earth. Hope and conviction made brighter, the white coats over humbled shoulders of world servants. Who would have thought that it was revolutionary to believe that everyone has the right to live healthy?

*One moment that really struck me when speaking to U.S. American students studying at ELAM (Latin American School of Medicine) was during a conversation in which I asked why a student had decided to study in Cuba. She referred first to the style of teaching. Not only where all grades posted publicly next to the students' names but students were held accountable for each other. She mentioned an example in which a professor called on a student who did not know the answer, he then turned toward her, reprimanding her for not helping her fellow student to understand the problem. All the students want to do well and want the others to do well. The sense of community and solidarity not only extends to the style of teaching which differs so starkly from that of the competitive nature of medical school in the United States but also in regards to the commitment to return home to serve their communities. This illustrates exactly what Steve Brouwer describes in his book "Revolutionary Doctors: How Venezuela and Cuba are Changing the World's Conception of Health Care" when he quotes Ernesto "Che" Guevara: "The campesinos would have run,

immediately and with unreserved enthusiasm, to help their brothers.”² Indeed, the students at ELAM were truly revolutionary doctors.

Day 4

Lush green and fresh like an urban wonderland,
when you live off the land and take the bus home, you wonder what the spaces are in
between.

Only two motors in the whole field, let’s listen to everything; the sound of worms sliding
through the deep brown earth, of insects living friendly among leaves, and the crack and
snap when food is separated from root to root to plate.

Even where the thought was lost we remember pachamama’³, our gift and the only claim to
the land, we own what we can pull from, what we borrow, but what lies underneath the
reaches of our fingertips is our communal nourishment and a promise to future
generations. This is solidarity.

Remember, (Koont told us), every touch of freshness on our plates passed through the
clean and fair labor of these lush urban secrets.

But as oil is slithering back into the spotlight, how many steps back are we willing to take in
the name of progress?

Day 5

*CENESEX was a startling reminder of how much we are lacking in the United States. The
idea that the programs and center were state funded continues to astound me. To imagine
the same resources like abortion and sex change surgery being readily available and

² Brouwer, Steve. “Revolutionary Doctors: how Venezuela and Cuba are Changing the World’s Conception of Health Care.”

³ Notes taken during a visit to the organopónico lecture in Alamar

supported by the government is a fantasy, especially when we see our current administration continue to attempt to legislate the removal of reproductive rights and essentially enacting a war against women. While we have made strides in terms of LGBT rights like the end of the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy, we seem far behind Cuba, where sex-change operations are free. Nevertheless, when we look at the struggles Cuban queers have had to go through we can still hope for improvement and progress in the United States. John Hess, reviewing the film *Gay in Cuba*, notes the documentary’s telling of the harsh and unfair realities faced by queer youth during the homophobic policies made during the establishment of the revolution.⁴ These included raids, unwarranted arrests, mistreatment in jail, and in some cases deportation. But the queer youth represented in the film are an inspiration because as Hess describes “The young gay men and lesbians have grown up inside the Cuban Revolution and reject its long governing machismo, stuffy bureaucracy and political Puritanism without rejecting the Revolution itself. Rather, they base their rejection on revolutionary principles.” CENESEX for me, was the manifestation of this. It is the continued dialogue of gender and queer rights’ place in the revolution.

Day 6

La musica de Havana Viejo lingers in the cobble stone steps of freshly painted buildings surrounding the plaza. Two steps away and you are still time traveling.

Most colonial homes don’t remember past glory but still display scars in rotted wood and crumbling walls. At night, families lean against unsteady doorframes, peeking into narrow and softly lit alleys. Conversations echo in the stone, loud and festive.

⁴ Hess, John. “*Gay Cuba.*” *Jump Cut*, no. 41, May 1997, pp. 122-124

*The day spent at the Centro Pablo spoke to the continued relationship Dickinson will have with Cuba and Cubans. It was amazing that they shared that creative space with us and exchanged artistic perspectives in the way of Carl's photography, despite the politics of our two countries. The same day, I went with a few students to visit a souvenir market. It opposed so many values of the revolution and confirmed the many criticisms Cubans had of recent changes in policy and their affects on class stratification. During a conversation with a student from the University of Havana, it was pointed out how the dual currency system (the cuc and peso) serve to exacerbate class differences. They discussed with us how most Cubans cannot afford to pay 5 cuc for a lunch and those that can are those who work in the tourism industry. The market demonstrated exactly that, a capitalist blemish on Cuban soil.

Day 7

Los pioneros:

Jose Marti dijo que "Los ninos son la esperanza del mundo." Red uniform and revolutionary innocence, they were fountains of wisdom, more cognizant than some of my peers.

History exploded from a child's mouth and he raised his fist in triumph.

When does the education of the people's struggle begin but at the inception of experience and the moment of self-perception?

*The visit to the elementary school was an amazing experience. One of the most memorable moments was a young boy's telling of the how and why the revolution came about and his emphasis on the event with a victorious fist in the air. I know that many people on the trip were uncomfortable with this because it was viewed as a type of indoctrination but when I

think about the education received in U.S. American schools, it shares the same sense of idealistic nationalism just less impassioned and definitely less informed. Another important factor was that the school was named after an important figure in Venezuela's history. Upon entering the school one could see a Venezuelan flag and framed photo of Venezuela's president, Hugo Chavez. This marked a representation of international solidarity. Cuba related to the independence struggles of other nations in the Caribbean and South America and physically marked them.

Day 8

Veradero was the paradise that killed the Caribbean, the gateway to a history of exploitation.

An escape of pina coladas and watered down exchanges amidst the softest sand underneath tired feet.

We were worn down by the sun's glare but reveled it in, the perfect neglect, the perfect tourist.

Day 9: Departure

Remembering a full moon over Havana

and I am at the very end of this fellowship, churning through rags and flags, thorns already bloodied from the loose ends of diplomatic compromise.

You see, they took deep breaths together,

shared lungs holey and withered, straining against chants of the masses when there was no more clean air to breath.

Revolution began with their feet, in spirited stomps,

Drum dreams thumping up against their chest.

This wasn't just about hunger pangs

more than the raging stones they swallowed to fill the empty spaces inside.

Aren't we all hungry?

This was about northern colors bleeding from behind their flag,

about nations being bought in fluorescent lit supermarkets next to the coca cola

for less than pennies.

This was about

people instead of power

y yo te digo,

que yo estoy con Cuba.