

## Introduction

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**John Beverley**

The intention of this collection is to run the U.S. economic blockade of Cuba, which is also a kind of cultural and intellectual blockade. Anyone in this country who has had anything to do with Cuba—journalists, scholars, professionals, students, artists, film producers, executives, sports figures, politicians, ordinary tourists—is aware of the major and minor inconveniences the embargo, now over forty years old, imposes. To put this issue together, even the simplest thing, such as calling up a contributor to check on a passage, meant finding inventive and often devious ways of getting around obstacles. To obtain copyright releases, for example (not something the Cuban contributors cared much about, since intellectual work in Cuba has traditionally been in the public domain, but a *sine qua non* for *boundary 2*'s publisher, Duke University Press), required asking friends (and in one case, even strangers) who were visiting Cuba for one reason or other to try to locate the parties whose signatures were needed and bring the signed permission forms back with them, since mail service between the island and the United States is at best erratic. Without e-mail, in fact, the collection would have been impossible. But even e-mail to and from Cuba suffered

*boundary 2* 29:3, 2002. Copyright © 2002 by Duke University Press.

inexplicable crashes and blockages. E-mail messages to someone in Cuba or from someone in Cuba to me not getting through? Well, then, one could triangulate via so-and-so in New York, whose e-mail—for some reason—to so-and-so in Havana, who was in contact with that someone you wanted to reach in the first place, was getting through. And so, months behind schedule, little by little, one way or another—*de cierta manera*—the material for this collection began to accumulate.

But it goes without saying, of course, that one of the unstated aims of the embargo is precisely to make it difficult for U.S. citizens to have access to what Cubans are thinking, writing, creating, and arguing in Cuba today. Successive U.S. administrations have justified the embargo in part on the grounds that genuine freedom of speech is not possible in Cuba. But it is the relative silence imposed on Cuba by the embargo that makes it seem that there is only one voice in Cuba—the voice of the party, or of Fidel Castro—that “civil society” exists only in opposition to the regime and the goals of Cuban socialism, that the only ethically and intellectually honest positions in Cuba are those of “dissidents,” that ideological pluralism and independence of thought exist only among those who have left Cuba. In this way, the defense of intellectual freedom can and has been mobilized against the Revolution, at the same time that the effects of the embargo include a coercive restriction of our own intellectual freedom and access to information in this country.

No one denies that Cuba has one of the most educated populations in the Americas, a population, moreover, that, whatever the controls on news and information it has to put up with (and they are extensive), has because of Cuba's own modern history and global role a broad and sophisticated grasp of what is going on in the rest of Latin America, the United States, Africa, the Middle East, China, Vietnam, Japan, the former Soviet Union, and both Western and Eastern Europe. This is, in other words, not a population that lacks the wherewithal to think for itself. Yet the dominant assumption is that because of repression, Cubans in Cuba cannot think for themselves (this is not to say that it is always easy or possible to speak freely in Cuba).

During the pre-1989 golden age of Cuban-Soviet relations, Cubans, perhaps to mark a distance from their erstwhile ally, were fond of so-called Popov jokes. Popov is the stereotypical earnest but dim-witted Soviet Party hack. Thus, for example (question in a course on Marxism-Leninism course for party cadre that Popov has been obliged to attend): “Popov, what do you call the period of transition between feudalism and capitalism?” Popov, hesitating, and then uncertainly, responds: “Socialism?” There was a prop-

erly Cuban variant of this, involving Popov's Cuban counterpart, "Norberto," let's say. Thus (question in a Cuban party cadre school): "Norberto, what is socialism?" Norberto, hesitating, and then uncertainly, responds: "The period of transition between capitalism and capitalism?"

What is paradoxical about the bitter humor of these jokes is that they register the crisis of communism, but in a peculiarly communist or Marxist way, as if they were affirming Marxism in the very act of marking its demise. Antonio José Ponte, represented here by "The Supervised Party," is one of Cuba's most talented younger writers and an explicit proponent of both political and economic liberalization. Nevertheless, the key image he uses to illustrate what he considers the immobilism of the Revolution—the image of the clocks of Paris stopped by Jacobin sharpshooters at the moment of triumph of the French Revolution—is drawn from Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, and Ponte's own piece ends with a profane "illumination," also in the style of Benjamin, that seems to suggest a utopian dimension amidst the despair and misery of the "Special Period" in contemporary Havana.

These cases—the Popov jokes and Ponte's explicit and implicit debt to Benjamin—indicate one of the main themes of this collection: the existence of something like a specifically "socialist" form of civil society in Cuba. Where in general the idea of civil society has been used in contemporary political theory as an anticommunist device (in the most common argument, political struggle in communist societies is seen as the struggle of civil society as such against a monolithic party-state), any observer of the current scene in Cuba will confirm the existence of a set of sensibilities, expectations, values, forms of leisure, and life possibilities that are specific to the Cuban form and experience of socialism even as they constitute a ground from which criticisms of this or that aspect of Cuban socialism or the regime can be made.

In that sense, the real problem for a capitalist restoration in Cuba will be not so much the authority of Fidel Castro and his associates or the political monopoly of the Communist Party—indeed, as in the case of China, both the *nomenklatura* and the party have proven in some ways amenable to working with capital—as the often quite egalitarian values and expectations sedimented in Cuban culture and everyday life during the forty-year *longue durée* of the Revolution. A *longue durée* that is now reaching its end, however? That remains to be seen. Whatever happens, it is clear that Cuba will not simply return to being what it was in 1959.

Like Palestine in some ways, and for some of the same reasons, Cuba represents a point of irresolution within the world system: On the one

hand, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Revolution faces an impasse (what the official concept of “special period in times of emergency” is meant to signify is that while elements of socialism remain in place in Cuba, the possibility of building a fully socialist society has to be put on hold, for the time being or perhaps permanently<sup>1</sup>); on the other hand, the regime insists on maintaining at least symbolically Cuba’s character as a socialist society, and while it has shown itself ready to wheel and deal with everyone from Spanish hotel chains to Francis Ford Coppola and his Hollywood buddies, it resists simply returning to the capitalist fold like the prodigal son. Predictions of the imminent fall of Castro have been a staple of political journalism in the United States, Latin America, and Europe since 1989, when the Cuban economy entered a period of near meltdown. Perhaps the most egregious of these was Andres Oppenheimer’s 1992 opus, *Castro’s Final Hour: The Secret Story behind the Coming Downfall of Communist Cuba*. A decade later, of course, Castro remains in power, and there are slight but significant signs of economic recovery in Cuba, at the expense, however, of opening up the country to global capital and sharpening internal class divisions.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the visibility of the doom-and-gloom school represented by such journalists as Oppenheimer, who echo in a pseudosophisticated, “soft” form the more hard-core revanchist positions of the Miami exile community, there has been a noticeable shift in U.S. thinking about and attitudes toward Cuba, particularly in the aftermath of the Elián González affair (the popularity of Wim Wender’s film *The Buena Vista Social Club*, and the accompanying CDs, is perhaps one index of that shift). Behind the facade of the overtly hard-line, anti-Castro position of the Bush administration (and certainly Bush owes the contested Florida election largely to the political clout and perhaps also to the electoral dirty tricks of the Miami Cuban community), there is a split between “business” Republicans, who favor normalizing relations with Cuba, and “ideological” Republicans, who want to maintain and even intensify the embargo (I write this in the midst of Jimmy Carter’s visit to Havana in May 2002). At the same time, the very difficult conditions of the “Special Period” have led to an ongoing discussion about the project

1. In which case, the features of the Special Period anatomized in many of the contributions here would become simply the new form of Cuban society, politics, and culture.

2. Oppenheimer’s spectacular miscalculation, it is worth noting parenthetically, did not prevent him from becoming an authority on Latin America in the U.S. media, where he could be heard most recently as part of the chorus of champions of democracy prematurely celebrating the failed military coup against the elected government of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela.

of the Revolution and its expectations for the future that are shaping policy and thought in Cuba itself in significant ways.

*From Cuba* seeks to represent this discussion, a discussion which, of necessity, has had to engage all of the practical and theoretical problems posed by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the crisis of the “great narrative” of Marxism itself; the possibilities and limits of the nation-state and nationalism in the context of globalization; the question of what it means to think from a situation of historical catastrophe; the role of civil society and formal democracy in post-Communist societies; the question of women’s liberation and gay rights, and of continuing—some will say even increasing—racism and discrimination directed against black Cubans; the impact of multiculturalism and postmodernism on recent Cuban art and culture; and so on. The main criterion for inclusion in the collection is that the authors represented here are still either resident in Cuba or have their main residence in Cuba and write from that situation. Without wanting to privilege “staying”—the regime has sometimes made “staying” in itself a badge of honor in order to discredit or relativize the authority of intellectuals and artists who have left for one reason or another (and there are often good reasons to leave)—the collection seeks nevertheless to represent the problematic of “those who stay,” via rigorous and contemporary (on the whole, though some important pieces are from the early and mid-nineties) statements in a variety of genres (essay, poetry, short story, interview, chronicle, performance) that assume fully the dimensions of the crisis of the Cuban model of socialism and the extreme difficulties and contradictions—both external and internal—it faces.

One thing I hope the collection will show is that there is considerable realism and ideological diversity in current Cuban discourse. But, given the continuing polarization between Cuba and the United States, widespread dissatisfaction in Cuba, and competing policy lines within the regime and the party, there is also anxiety and tension around open discussions of the current situation. In an intellectual version of *jineterismo* (the practice of young men and women in Cuba selling sexual companionship to tourists for dollars), some of what is produced in Cuban culture today is “for export,” so to speak: that is, on the one hand, an apologetic, rhetorical revolutionary “officialese” produced by the regime; on the other, “dissident” discourses calculated to win the approval of U.S. and European audiences and the exile community in Miami, but not necessarily representative of core positions in Cuba itself. The material I chose for this special issue seeks a balance between these alternatives. Whatever the strength or limitations of the

writing included here, I think it is fair to say that it is writing by Cubans for Cubans, but also writing that, in translation, allows us to listen in.

The contributors include figures from an older, pre-revolutionary generation, such as Cintio Vitier and Fina García Marruz, who have resurrected a kind of Catholic-utopian nationalism in the place of an increasingly bankrupt orthodox Marxism, or the respected literary critic Ambrosio Fornet—something like Cuba's Lukács, if he will forgive me the comparison; others whose coming of age coincides with the triumph and consolidation of the Revolution in the sixties, such as the late Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, perhaps Cuba's most important modern film director, or the poets Miguel Barnet and Nancy Morejón; younger figures, some identified with the Revolution, such as Rafael Hernández, one of the intellectuals who opened up the influential discussion of the concept of civil society in Cuba, or Fernando Martínez Heredia, whose essay "In the Furnace of the Nineties" is considered by many a definitive statement of the crisis, or the literary critics Margarita Mateo and Desiderio Navarro; others with more critical or dissident positions, such as the art critic Gerardo Mosquera, the poet and independent journalist Raúl Rivero, the writer José Prats Sariol, or Antonio José Ponte, mentioned earlier; others who are in some ways politically unclassifiable but who maintain lives and careers in Cuba and an identification—sometimes tragic—with the country's fate, such as the poet/critic Víctor Fowler, the poet Reina María Rodríguez, or the performance artist Tania Bruguera.

My selection is, of course, to some extent arbitrary and accidental, as in all such anthologies. Although I have visited Cuba often in the last twenty-five years and have good friends and contacts there, I am not a Cuba specialist. My choices for this collection depend, then, to a large extent on the suggestions and good services of those friends and contacts. Any connoisseur of the artistic and intellectual scene in Cuba today will have his or her own list of half a dozen or so names that should have been included. Some I simply didn't know about; some were, for one reason or another, unavailable. I do think the voices and positions included here, however, are representative of a range of positions in dialogue or debate among intellectuals and artists in Cuba today. And while not everyone who should have been included is in this collection, many of those who are would be in any comprehensive anthology of contemporary Cuban writing.

The core idea of "from Cuba" as a principle of selection also began to unravel somewhat in the process of putting together the collection. One of the characteristics of the current situation is that the once familiar dialectics of "those who go"/"those who stay," exile/loyalty to the Revolution,

the island/the diaspora, “inside” and “outside,” are themselves shifting dramatically, a fact several of the contributions here attest to (I am thinking in particular of Antonio Eligio’s piece on recent Cuban art and Fowler’s impressions of his visit to the United States, “A Traveler’s Album”). There are several figures I intended to include when I first conceived the idea of this collection two years ago but who have left Cuba in the interim (for example, the self-described postmodernist Emilio Ichikawa Morín). There are others who, by the time this volume appears, may well also have left Cuba for good. And there are others who, as noted, have begun to “circulate” between Cuba and the diaspora. One of the key contributors here is Haroldo Dilla, whose work is, to my mind, the most incisive portrait of Cuba in the Special Period from a position sympathetic to the goals of Cuban socialism if not its reality. Dilla used to be affiliated with the CEA, the Center of the Study of the Americas, one of the prestigious think tanks set up in an expansive moment by the regime precisely to think out of the box of socialist orthodoxy. But the CEA was closed down in 1996, it is said on the initiative of Raúl Castro, for exceeding its mandate, and Dilla now works as a researcher at FLACSO (Latin American Faculty for Social Sciences) in the Dominican Republic. Yet his essay here, on the political dynamics of the Special Period, begun in Havana and completed in Santo Domingo, is “from Cuba” in some sense.

Clearly writing “from there,” on the other hand (specifically from Madrid, which has become a new center, rivaling Miami in some ways, for Cuban émigré culture), was the late writer and filmmaker Jesús Díaz. I met Jesús several times in the eighties and felt an immediate affinity with him. We shared some of the same political experiences and inclinations (for example, both of us were closely involved with the Nicaraguan Revolution). Jesús, who began his career as one of the young Turks of the Cuban Communist Party, became, in his influential films and novels, one of the sharpest portraitists of the inner contradictions and dangers of the revolutionary process. If he had remained in Cuba, he would certainly have been included here. Indeed, he would have had pride of place. Fed up with the frustrations and difficulties of Cuban life and seeing little chance of major change, Jesús never returned to Cuba from a research fellowship in Germany in the early nineties. Migrating eventually to Madrid, he founded there what is probably the most important Cuban émigré journal, *Encuentro de la cultura cubana*. As the title (which unintentionally but nevertheless unfortunately recalls the CIA-financed *Encounter* of the Cold War years) suggests, the idea of *Encuentro* was to provide a forum in which Cuban intellectuals in Cuba could dialogue with those who, for one reason or other, and at one

time or other, chose to leave, like Jesús himself. And to some degree the journal has been able to accomplish that (several writers represented in this collection have published in *Encuentro*, and Antonio José Ponte in particular is on the current editorial board).

But, by the fatal logic that tends to turn every conversation about Cuba into a shouting match at some point, whatever its initial good intentions, *Encuentro* has become in effect an exile publication, which rarely has anything good to say about Cuba and which publishes primarily those intellectuals in Cuba who are explicitly identified with a dissident or “liberal” position, like its own. As such, it cannot represent the full array of intellectual and artistic voices “from Cuba”: Intellectuals in Cuba who are pro-Castro or who, despite criticisms and reservations, remain committed to the project of the Revolution are less and less likely, I believe, to publish anything more than a rebuttal in its pages.

It was my sense of the failure of *Encuentro* to engage fully with the work of intellectuals and artists who have remained in Cuba that was one of the inspirations for this collection. But the fatal logic of extreme ideological polarization happens from the other side, too. I very much wanted to include something by Abel Prieto, the open-minded and charismatic Cuban minister of culture—himself a talented writer of short fiction—who was one of the main forces behind greater tolerance and pluralism in the cultural field in the nineties. I met Abel at—of all places—the University of Minnesota around 1980, when we were both up and coming nobodies, and I kept in touch with him off and on over the years. He was one of the first names that occurred to me for this collection. I sent him at least a dozen e-mail messages over several months asking him to give me something of his to include. His response was silence, as if my messages weren’t getting through (so I made sure to follow up with personal entreaties from mutual acquaintances in Cuba, again to no avail). Abel is no doubt a very busy man, with more important claims on his time than a special issue of *boundary 2*; but I have learned to understand from previous experiences in Cuba that this kind of “polite” silence, if you will, is a way of saying no without saying no directly, particularly to foreigners like me, whose good opinion might be important in some small measure in the future.

There was a moment, early on in this project, when I wanted to include in the collection a piece by Fidel Castro himself. Through a mutual friend, I was offered the text of a speech on globalization Fidel gave at the South Summit two years ago. To have been able to list *el comandante* himself in the table of contents in simple alphabetical order was part of the



image of Cuban intellectual life I was hoping to present: that there was not a single, monolithic voice, that Fidel's voice was certainly a commanding one, but not the only one. But that hope turned out to be illusory, like so many others connected to Cuba. My intermediary got wind of the fact that I intended to include a piece by a noted dissident (his characterization was stronger: a "counterrevolutionary"), and he let me know in no uncertain terms that it would be inappropriate for Fidel to appear in such company. He also withdrew his own contribution. For a brief moment, I thought the project was about to unravel, that everyone who felt more or less the same way was going to follow that lead, leaving me essentially with the "dissidents" already represented by what I saw as the failed project of *Encuentro*. But the others "stayed," and that in itself is already a sign of a change.<sup>3</sup>

I need finally to indicate my personal stake in all this. For intellectuals and activists of my generation, the generation of the sixties (I am months away from my sixtieth birthday), the Cuban Revolution represented the possibility of a break with both the claustrophobic culture of Cold War capitalism and the authoritarian version of socialism—famously dubbed by Che Guevara "goulash communism"—represented by the Soviet Union and the "People's Democracies" of Eastern Europe, a break that coincided fortuitously with our own coming of age. Jean-Paul Sartre was one of the first major European intellectuals to declare his solidarity with the Revolution, seeing it as a concrete embodiment of his own existentialist ethics of engagement. I was a great fan of Sartre at the time (before structuralism, as it were). But the book that really galvanized those of us who were in college in this country in the early sixties was C. Wright Mills's *Listen, Yankee*, which began with an injunction that is worth repeating today:

No matter what you may think of it, no matter what I think of it—Cuba's voice is a voice that must be heard in the United States of America. Yet it has not been heard. It must now be heard because the United States is too powerful, its responsibilities to the world and to itself are too great, for its people not to listen to every voice of the hungry world. . . . If we do not listen to them, if we do not hear them well, we face all the perils of ignorance—and with these, the perils of dangerous mistakes.<sup>4</sup>

3. I would like to think that Fidel might have actually enjoyed the rough egalitarianism of being lumped together in alphabetical order with both loyalists and dissidents—the mantle of power, after all, weighs heavily—but I am not sure that would be the case.

4. C. Wright Mills, *Listen, Yankee: The Revolution in Cuba* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1960), 7.

This was four years before the escalation that would lead the United States, and my generation, into the Vietnam War. *Listen, Yankee* was a brilliant act of ventriloquism, in which Mills created from a mosaic of his interviews with the young revolutionaries in Cuba a synthetic voice speaking to a North American reader in a series of what he called “letters,” explaining different aspects of the social, historical, and ideological forces behind the Revolution. Mills was no fool, and much of what he had to say holds up well; but some of his predictions or hopes—for example, that Castro’s revolutionary dictatorship would give way in time to new forms of mass democracy, or that Cuba would not necessarily become communist or be drawn into the Soviet orbit—were clearly too optimistic. There has been a lot of water under the bridge since *Listen, Yankee* appeared in 1960, and we have all modified our initial enthusiasm for the Cuban Revolution in one way or another (for some, like Ronald Radosh or David Horowitz, the lesson of what they now take to be a youthful indiscretion has led them to the neoconservative right). Like the Revolution itself, Mills was expressing essentially a modernist conception of intellectual agency, development, and national liberation struggle. Where he created from many voices one voice—the voice of someone like himself—to speak for the Revolution, my ventriloquist gesture here—a consciously postmodernist one—is to allow many voices to speak for me. Yet, there is still something of that initial identification and enthusiasm in what I do here, expressed not so much as a defense of the status quo of Cuba as a desire to keep open a horizon of possibility that the defeat of Cuban socialism would surely eclipse. My hope is that the dialogue this collection sets up, between different voices in Cuba itself, and between those voices and ourselves and Cubans in this country, could be the framework of a new kind of territoriality in which the huge promise of the Revolution can somehow remain alive, and perhaps emerge anew. I do not think it diminishes it to call that territoriality, which can exist at present only perhaps as a textual space, utopian.

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It remains for me to thank those who helped put this project together. The idea of doing this collection in the first place came from Paul Bové, whose example, friendship, and support are implicated in it. Meg Havran performed the difficult task of closely editing sometimes murky manuscripts and attending to the myriad details that are involved in an enterprise such as this. Roberto Fernández Retamar, Desiderio Navarro, and, especially, Luisa Campuzano of Casa de las Américas in Havana were fundamental in secur-

ing much of the material included here, even as they sometimes disagreed with some of my own choices. On the other side of the political aisle, so to speak, José Prats Sariol played a similar role. Ernesto Grossman, Esther Gottlieb, and George Yudice were also helpful as “couriers” and in other ways. In a way, I owe the initial inspiration and many of the contacts for this special issue to my former student Goffredo Diana. A word finally about the translations. Unless otherwise indicated, they are by Dawn Duke, a graduate student in the Department of Hispanic Languages and Literatures at the University of Pittsburgh. Working way beyond the call of duty, Dawn provided rough drafts in English of the material that I subsequently reworked. The superb translations of the poetry of Reina María Rodríguez and Omar Pérez are by Kris Dyskstra and Nancy Gates Madsen. The Cuban American novelist Achy Obejas provided the fine translation of Tania Bruguera’s performance piece. Marta Hernández at Duke translated Carlos Aguilera’s “Trip to China.” Sujatha Fernandes at the University of Chicago was one of my “couriers” between Havana and Pittsburgh; she also obtained and translated a group of Cuban rap songs that I hoped to include (unfortunately, we could get copyright permission for only one of them). My Cuban American neighbor down the road at Carnegie Mellon University, Kenya Dworkin, contributed in a number of important ways to the translations. The new Duke University Press journal *Nepantla* provided us with a translation of Desiderio Navarro’s “In Medias Res Publica,” and the University Press of Florida provided us with a translation of Rafael Hernández’s important essay “Looking at Cuba,” which is part of a forthcoming collection of his work. I personally revised and sometimes reworked slightly all the translations, so the ultimate responsibility for their accuracy is mine. I do want to say, in this respect, that I am not always sure we—the translators and I—solved correctly all of the linguistic puzzles these texts presented. In the interest of readability, I also introduced some changes or cuts in the texts that their authors may not approve of. I hope these betrayals—inevitable in any translation—are minor, however, and that the end result captures at least partially their personal voice and views.