

STAY OR GO

The special period in the 1990s (after the collapse of the Soviet Union) is a difficult topic. There was a lack of food, electricity and general needs. Everything in our cultural landscape changed. Because of this, there were more exiles. I have lived outside the country, and I know what that is. I'm the only one of my friends that stayed in Cuba. I stayed because of my family and because I found a sense of purpose here. This is my country. My kids are five and twelve and, when they are adults, they'll do the best they can—whether it's here in Cuba or wherever. ● When Cubans from the middle and upper classes left because they didn't agree with the new government after the revolution, they tried to reconstruct Cuba in Miami. Ana Lopez, a Cuban-American playwright from the University of Tulane, created the concept of “La Gran Cuba” (“The Great Cuba”). Cuba is not its geographical borders. It's the sum of people's sentiments for it, of the longing to belong. Even when people leave the country, they still yearn and care for Cuba. ● Right now in Cuba, we are living the American way of life—not in terms of the economy, but in the way that you live there day-to-day. Why should I feel the need to move from Cuba when I have the same life here that I would have anywhere else? ● When people leave Cuba, there is this idea of literally buying into the other culture without carrying the tradition of Cuban culture with you. It's called “Coca-Cola Amnesia.” They consume things that are a part of this new culture and let the pretty, fizzy bubbles go to their head—erasing the memory of their old culture.

EMBARGO

Nothing would change if the embargo were to be lifted. Maybe more tourists would come, but in Cuba, our political situation wouldn't change. Cubans of our generation grew up during the revolution, and their lives and minds have only ever operated with the embargo in place. If you can't change someone's mind, you can't change anything. ● It's hard to predict how Cuba would change if the embargo was lifted. On the one hand, there would be an influx of goods, and that could strengthen the government. But there would be more cultural exchange with companies coming here and providing employment, which would create a loosening of dependence on the state. The simultaneous tendency toward stasis and change are in conflict. Who's to say which one would triumph? ● The U.S. blockage is a farce at this time because there are numerous states and companies in the U.S. that are doing direct business with Cuba. The only real losers in this farce are regular Cuban people in Cuba, Cuban-Americans and the American economy. The U.S. maintains the economic blockade because its policy has been to consider the “embargo” an extreme expression of its disapproval of the Castro regime after 1962. In February 1962, President Kennedy called for the embargo of Cuba using the 1917 Trading with the Enemy Act as a pretext. His actual motivation was the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion and Castro's later declaration of his Marxist leanings and plans. Of course, the last thing Kennedy did before signing the blockade into law was to buy up all the Cuban cigars his aides could find. ● We are bemused by the idea that Cuban culture would be affected by lifting the embargo. There's been a relationship between Cuba and the U.S. for more than a hundred years, and the embargo has been much shorter than that. Embargo or not, Cuban culture has always existed. In spite of the embargo, there has been a strong cultural influence from the U.S.: The way we dress, our way of speaking and the very language we are using right now.

FIDEL & RAÚL

If the current government manages to allow sufficient economic and socio-political reforms prior to Raúl Castro's death, there could be a transition to a more democratic form of socialism. In the 1990s, Fidel was preparing at least one or two younger men, like Felipe Pérez Roque, to follow in his footsteps. But with Raúl's rise to the presidency, there has come a replacement of younger, higher level people with the oldest and staunchest of his cohort—not a good sign for transition. I really want Cuba to handle its own transitions and not the U.S.—and particularly the right-wing element of the Cuban exile community—to have a hand in it. ● Raúl acknowledged early in his tenure that the system had to change or perish. That's not to say that I expect much progress or positive change to flow but that the stranglehold will be ever so slightly lifted. ● Fidel is a decorative figure. A symbol. When Fidel dies, I don't believe much will change in Cuba, unless international pressure forces a democratization of the country. ● When Raúl dies, the system will die with him. The country will sink into an abyss, into anarchy. ● Raúl is the people; Fidel is the revolution. Now that Fidel has put Raúl in charge, it's clear that he's preparing for the transition after his death. Cubans—Fidelistas—are concerned. “Is Raúl a good man? Will he continue the ideas of Fidel?” Raúl has begun to make changes, including allowing the privatization of businesses. When I was in the Soviet Union, I lived that moment of transition to Russia. They did what I think Raúl is creating: The appearance of privatization. This lie will keep people happy for a while. But it will not solve the biggest problem: People need money to have a choice beyond survival.

REVOLUTION

There was this big man (Fidel) that, together with many, did necessary and grandiose things in response to a historical moment. These were good, positive things: Possibilities for poor people, attention to public policies and health care for people without. These things still exist today. But my generation (I'm 41), and maybe a little of the next generation, believe that the act of revolutionizing, of progressing, can't be and shouldn't be stopped. We do this through literature, art and music. And a little bit of common sense. So now is the time to ask: Where are we now? What is the way—the direction—of today? We must renounce this romantic dream of “Cuba,” this utopian idea of the collective, and start treating each citizen as an individual. ● My view of revolution is very personal and painful. In my case, I grew up with this idea that everyone has equal rights to everything. But the reality is very hard, very different. Since Eastern Europe fell, it was a good occasion for us to rebuild Cuba in our own way. Sometimes we think that we are in the worst situation in the world. Maybe this is because we are an island, and people who live on an island think in a different way. Sometimes you also have to think about what people in other countries are experiencing. ● There is a massive generation gap between those who remember a pre-Castro Cuba and those who do not. The result is two-fold. You have one group who believes that the control and military force are the proper and just way to rule. Their psychological perspective is driven by their military training and has led to the mentality that the current state is both fair and proper. Then, there is the other group that has seen and perhaps experienced what freedom is. This group of young and driven people has led to human rights movements. It is now a matter of nurturing the positive and freedom-driven groups to uplift and encourage the youth of Cuba. I'm over seventy years old now, and I've been a member of the Communist party for fifty years. In fact, I'm an official in the party. In the late 60s, I confronted a higher up because I didn't agree with certain procedures. ● I had no fear to do this because Communism isn't about just following an ideology. It's about responding to the ideas of other people that are really invested in what you do and those who believe in you. I'm a Communist: One who feels connected to the ideas. ● The country has experienced constant militarized control from the Castro brothers since the 1959 revolution. Institutionalized military service at a very young age and military schooling have led to generations that no longer remember a pre-Castro free Cuba but only a stagnant 1959 scene that shows no real change in sight. In Cuba, the “Socialism” title is merely a way to appease its international partners. Don't forget, Cuba is in fact a Communist nation that controls all aspects of daily life: Media, religion, social and individual freedoms, politics and economics.

CONFLICT KITCHEN

The current Cuban version of our restaurant serves traditional Cuban dishes and beverages.

Conflict Kitchen is a take-out restaurant that only serves cuisine from countries with which the United States government is in conflict. Each Conflict Kitchen iteration is augmented by events, performances and discussions about the culture, politics and issues within each country upon which we focus. The restaurant rotates identities in response to current geopolitical events.

The text on this wrapper comes directly from interviews with Cubans living both in the United States and Cuba.

www.conflictkitchen.org

MEDIA

Before I studied journalism, I wanted to be a writer. I was traveling a lot and thinking about the problems of the world. In 1999, I was in Poland during the year of solidarity, and this experience opened a window to socialism for me. I came back to Cuba and finished my high school studies. Very quickly, I realized that I didn't want to be a journalist. Here in Cuba, there is a big problem with journalism. It's not journalism; it's like a science fiction! You read the newspaper, and you say, “I don't live in this country.” ● We definitely have underground media. However, it's extremely dangerous and difficult to access these forums. People like Yoani Sánchez, who has a blog called Generation Y, write about daily oppression in Cuban life and the political actions needed to resolve this. Underground forums like these are lifelines for people in Cuba. However, there needs to be more done to help expand these efforts. ● Since most Cubans have little information about what's going on in the U.S., it's not important to them. Remember that most people don't have Internet access. You can't get American newspapers. Our family and friends don't talk about the U.S. But, of course, elections are always big news here. The fact that an African-American Democrat was elected to be president was really significant in Cuba. There were expectations that our relationship with the U.S. would improve, just as we expected with Kennedy, Carter and Clinton.

HEALTH CARE

I had surgery at the hospital for the elderly, and it was similar to staying in a hotel. Pretty good service and the food was amazing. I just got out of the hospital and look at how positive I am. My son treats pediatric patients and he's one of the most prestigious doctors in the city. The problem with the hospital is not that the government doesn't actually keep them operating effectively; the problem is that they're pretty old. Most hospitals were built in the 1940s and '50s, and the buildings and equipment need to be updated. We are a poor country, and we just don't have the money to fix them. I'm not going to blame the system or government, but I will admit the problems. I will also say that I'm very proud of our health care. ● The health care situation is not simple. By law, everyone in Cuba is entitled to much more and better medical treatment than here in the U.S. (and it's free). But the extreme lack of resources makes it very difficult for the Cuban health care system to deliver properly on its promises. Much of the equipment involved in routine diagnostics and treatments is from the U.S. and because of the blockade, Cuba must buy and pay for replacement parts through a third country. This is extremely expensive and not efficient. Some countries also demand cash payments and do not offer credit. So, preventive care in Cuba is wonderful, for the most part, but more serious health care is compromised by the economic and political situation. Also, there are certain hospitals for foreigners and others for common folk.

ECONOMY

The salary for our public teachers doesn't motivate them to provide quality education and excel in their profession. A few years ago, there was an expectation of increasing the salaries. A doctor, for example, makes about 700 to 800 Cuban pesos a year. But what a person actually needs to live is more like 8,000 to 12,000 Cuban pesos. And raising salaries is not a potential solution because the government can't afford it. In the past, you could live off of a much lower salary. Why? You could stretch your money and do more with what you had. The currency had more value. The biggest problem are the two currencies: The Cuban pesos and the convertible pesos (equivalent to the dollar). You see, for tourists, the exchange rate is 1:1. For Cubans, the exchange rate is about 25:1 (Cuban peso to convertible). It hasn't created two economies; it's created two social classes. ● So here's a common contemporary joke: There is this drunk guy on the street and the police try to pick him up and the guy says “No, no, no. Don't worry, you don't need to harass me. I'm a porter at the Hotel Nacional de Cuba, the fanciest hotel in Havana.” The police are impressed, so they decide to help him out and give him a ride home. When they get to his house, his wife opens the door, and the police say, “Here is your husband. Is he really a porter at the Hotel Nacional de Cuba?” And the wife says, “Oh, what the hell are you talking about? He's not a porter, he's just a neurosurgeon!” The joke is descriptive of a very common scenario in Cuba where porters make more than neurosurgeons since porters, who work in the tourist industry, earn convertible pesos (equivalent to the dollar) as opposed to government issued Cuban pesos (worth only 1/25 of a dollar). ● Ideally, I'd like to move to more of a Chinese economic system, where they have socialism but still have the idea of an open market. ● Many people say that Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez is a monkey, a marionette and a puppet for Cuba. That's incorrect. For us—for Cuba—Chavez is good. He's sold us oil for a good price. And, in return, we send many, many people to Venezuela to work. Doctors, teachers—whatever they need, they come to us. Before the Venezuelan revolution, all their income went to the States and to England. Fidel has prepared the Cuban people for anything: For bad times, for good times. His project is a good one. Look, we don't want the world to solve our problems. Our problem is ours. Do we try to solve your problems? ● Because of the high level of education in Cuba, there is an amazing collection of professionals, doctors and engineers. Other countries with socialist tendencies, like Venezuela, don't allow these professions to flourish. It's true that each country has its own economy, and the one profession that gives Cuba problems is tourism. Tourism appeals to the pressures of other economies, including the pesos in relation to the dollar. For this reason, tourism is an invasive economy. You wouldn't want Europeans visiting America and start circulating Euros into the U.S. economy, would you? ● Many Americans fail to know that at the time of the revolution Cuba's per capita GDP was higher than that of most of the countries in post-war Europe.

ARTS

This year is the 11th Havana Art Biennial. It's going to be in public spaces and have direct exchange with the public. I don't think Havana is ready for that. There are so many levels of bureaucracy that will limit the artistic possibilities, such as art concerning politics. The public is always ready to participate, and this is very gratifying for artists. It's just the bureaucracy that will stop this interaction from happening. ● Back in 1993, many people in my town would rig their antennas to get U.S. programs. My first exposure to modern music was hip hop on Soul Train (Public Enemy, Q-tip and Busta Rhymes). I liked everything about it: The sound, the flow, the energy. In 2001, the Minister of Cultural Affairs gave a speech saying that he was about to legalize rap music. No one ever knew that it was illegal! The government began institutionalizing rap music as a way of controlling it. There are very few spaces for youth to express themselves in politics. We do that through hip hop. For us, it's the music of this generation's coming revolution. ● Humor is inherently political. Before the revolution, humor was synchronized with life and responded to politics and corruption. Even dictators like Batista knew the power of humor. He persecuted comic artists. After the revolution, the political corruption stopped, but the directness that one asks for in humor stopped as well. When the official press refused to reflect reality during the 1980s and the special period that followed, we were fortunate that the visual arts stepped up to provide a space to criticize those in power once again through humor. ● Casa de las Américas, which promotes art and literature of Latin America and the Caribbean, is the second institution that was established in Cuba after the revolution. It's a public institution, not a governmental one. I have to tell you this because, in Cuba, everything is the government. The House of the Americas was founded by a heroic woman, Haydée Santamaría, who fought as a guerrillera with the revolution. Attracted by the success of the revolution, artists, intellectuals, writers, painters and theater people came through the house to Cuba from the whole of Latin America—very avante-garde. Throughout Latin American history, there have been difficult moments. The house has been the place to negotiate and discuss these moments via culture. It's about creating a network through culture.



**COCINA DEL
CONFLICTO**