

## Moonbeams and Rectangles

In Havana's Plaza de Armas every morning of the week, hundreds of men and women strain to pull low-slung, steel-wheeled wagons to their reserved spots, where they begin unloading boxes of books, home-made folding display racks and tables. By ten a.m. or so, they are displaying thousands of titles. Most are products of a publishing industry that thrived during the optimistic days of the revolution, but has now been cut down to almost nothing by shortages of everything from paper to ink to electricity to run the presses. There is also a terrible shortage of anything to buy with Cuban pesos, which is why in January 1998 we saw schoolteachers, accountants, pharmacists, architects and even surgeons who had given up their state-salaried jobs to peddle whatever they could — including books — to foreign visitors.

When I first went to Cuba, in December 1973, there was no free market for anything, no need for dollars for basic necessities, and books were so cheap nobody could imagine a resale market. They were published massively, in huge editions often on crumbly paper made of *bagazo*, or sugar-cane pulp, and distributed to all parts of the country to be sold for less than the price of a beer. Books were considered necessities, needed to feed the literary hunger of the newly literate masses —since the 1961 nationwide literacy campaign, when schoolchildren had taken lanterns and primers to the homes of peasants and workers, had been an enormous triumph.

We were all revolutionaries then — everybody I knew, in or around my generation — or were trying to be. The war in Southeast Asia, the bloody repression of black militants at home, the coup in Chile just months earlier, made any other stance seem like complicity in horror. I would have gone years earlier, in defiance of the US Government, but I couldn't get a Cuban visa — as an independent radical I had no party or movement to vouch for me with the Cuban authorities. Then the Center for Cuban Studies in New York began organizing tours, and I joined one of US college faculty invited by the University of Havana.

Like all visitors in that period, I was tremendously impressed by the intense, widespread political mobilization — everybody was organized into something — that made possible big changes with small resources. Housing construction by volunteer brigades, new schools in the countryside, health clinics spread throughout the land, and so on. I had worked in slums of Venezuela and as a social researcher in Puerto Rico, two Caribbean societies where the poor were despised as a drain on the national wealth and feared as its potential destroyers. Thus the state's main concern was to control them. In Cuba the poor were called *el pueblo*, the people, and regarded as the state's greatest resource. Their efforts to become less poor and to increase their own powers of understanding were the great engines of change.

But such intense social mobilization is by its nature intolerant of dissent, and I had run into middle-level bureaucrats who were extremely intolerant. "*Cuadrados*," Cuban satirists called them —a play on the much-used term *cuadro*, or cadre, meaning a well-disciplined party worker. *Cuadrado* is literally "square," but to convey the Cuban emphasis on rigidity and angularity of vision rather than lack of sophistication, I'll call them "rectangles." One such rectangle was the director of the sociology department of the University of Havana whom I met in his office in December 1973.

He had received copies of two essays I had just published, based on interviews I'd done in 1969 and 1970 of new emigrants from Cuba. The bourgeoisie had long since left, so the men and women I had interviewed in Chicago had been cane cutters, truck drivers, factory workers

and small craftsmen, and I wanted to know why workers would flee a workers' state. For "freedom" — *libertad* — they all said, but what did that mean?

For almost all of them "freedom" meant greater economic opportunities, but often there were other things troubling them in the new Cuba. Quite a few were racists, upset that blacks in Cuba were now allowed on all the beaches and were ascending to important posts — *libertad* for them meant the freedom not to associate. And almost all the men were sexists, more or less appalled by the new "liberties" of women in Cuba — one man said to me, "It's a scandal! In Cuba today, a woman isn't governed by her father, or her husband. You could almost say she governs herself!" *Libertad* was a problematic concept. It was good for some people — males — but not for others.

But the most common complaint was that they were fed up with demands to join things—the trade union, the militia, the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, the "voluntary" work brigades, the frequent rallies, a hundred other activities to "construct socialism" — and to do so enthusiastically. *Libertad* for these Cubans meant not having to be mobilized, or at least, not so often, and feeling free to say "no" once in a while.

These arguments didn't fit into my Cuban colleague's rectangular view of the world. First, I shouldn't have bothered interviewing people who had abandoned the fatherland. They were worms — *gusanos* — from whom nothing worthwhile could be learned. Secondly, there was no racism in Cuba, as my interlocutor, who was both black and important, was proof. As for sexism, that battle had been won by the enlightened work of the Party, the proof being the many women participating in cultural and economic activities. We never got to the part about mobilization. In sum, the views of my *gusanos* were of no consequence and by publicizing them, I had done a disservice to the Revolution. Like everything else, social science had to be either within the Revolution or against it; friendly challenges were not permitted.

I'd been back several times, but the 1998 trip was my first since the sudden disintegration of the Soviet Union had forced the country into its "special period" of acute scarcity. My compañera had not been back since that January 1974, when her group and mine crossed paths in the Hotel Nacional. Our trip in January 1998 celebrated an anniversary of our encounter with each other and with Cuba.

Not quite the 25<sup>th</sup> — it had actually been only 24 years since I first saw her walk past me and a couple of American buddies on her way to the coffee shop. One of my travel companions called out, "Hey! Do you speak English?" She stopped and said she did, but said it in an Argentine accent, so I cut in with my Venezuelan Spanish and — so much for the monolingual buddies. So, in the fall of 1997, when she faxed the Hotel Nacional for a reservation, she had exaggerated slightly. To our immense surprise, the manager faxed back, in effusive Spanish, that the hotel was "delighted to learn that you and your husband met here 25 years ago. As our anniversary gift, we invite you to spend New Year's eve with us." Invited! Gratis! For one of the busiest nights in the year in what has become again one of the classiest and priciest hotels in Cuba! (Naturally, we moved to a much cheaper place the next night.) So instead of blowing a couple of hundred bucks on a room, we blew it on the seven-course meal and champagne and party hats with all the other foreigners in the hotel dining room, with a big band to entertain us. That is, after first visiting the exact spot outside the coffee shop where I first chatted her up.

The next day, New Year's Day 1998, we explored the refurbished ballroom, foyer and grounds and took a chilly dip in the hotel swimming pool, none of which we'd been able to do in 1974. Back then, the old luxury hotel, formerly a casino run by Meyer Lansky, had been turned into a workers' resort for distinguished Cuban cane cutters, Russian technicians, and miscellaneous foreign delegations like ours. The elevator operators had instructions to let us

off only at the lobby or our own floors, segregated by sex. (Fortunately, I had discovered the location of a nearby “posada,” a trysting hotel.) The pool had been taken over by slender, long-limbed blonde ballerinas in their underwear, a troupe from the Soviet Socialist Republic of Ukraine.

But in 1998, there were no Ukrainian ballerinas — there wasn’t even a Ukrainian SSR any more. Instead Cuba was preparing to receive a Polish pope. It was also engaged in a massive get-out the vote campaign for national elections — with a single slate of candidates, of course. Cuba had changed in many ways, even as the fundamental mechanisms remained the same. Some of the changes were jarring. The hustlers peddling counterfeit cigars, pedicab rides, contraband shellfish, or themselves, we were prepared for. We’d done our reading and talked to recent visitors. But I was startled to see wooden effigies of Che Guevara, carved and posed like the figurines of saints found everywhere else in Latin America, here being hawked to French, Spanish, German, Mexican and other tourists. And of course there were T-shirts reproducing the famous Korda photograph of Che as “The Heroic Guerrilla.”

(Cuba is such a small society, the Havana intelligentsia so intertwined, that it should have been no surprise when we ran into Alberto Korda himself at a party in the home of another photographer. A fashion photographer before the revolution, he told us he’d first met Fidel and Che when he was summoned to shoot them playing the very un-Cuban game of golf — Fidel had noted President Eisenhower’s devotion to the game, and wanted to demonstrate that revolutionaries could play it better! Korda didn’t remember the score.)

The booksellers in the Plaza de Armas were also trying to make a buck on the Bereted One, prominently displaying collections of his essays and speeches. I didn’t need them, though. I remember well the enthusiasm he inspired in many of us for “moral incentives” as an alternative to the corrupting temptations of money.

I bought instead *La música, lo cubano y la innovación*, by Leo Brouwer, and a slender volume of poems, *Melancolía de otoño*, by Dulce María Loynaz, without really understanding why. Now I think I understand that impulse. They symbolized for me two different truths about Cuba: Brouwer, the explosive growth of cultural opportunities that came through the revolution, and Loynaz, the cultural price of narrow-minded, “rectangular” mobilization. Brouwer was not yet 20 when Batista fled and Fidel entered Havana in January 1959. His career as composer and performer of *avant-garde* work for guitar and orchestra would have been much harder, perhaps impossible, absent the new institutions created by the revolutionary government. The National Chorus was established in 1959, the National Symphonic Orchestra in 1960. The revolutionary government awarded artists scholarships for study abroad, which permitted young Brouwer to study at Julliard and Hartford University. When he returned to Cuba in 1961, he was appointed as teacher in the Havana Conservatory. That such a serious artist could make a living from music you can’t dance to, and that he could find not only an international, but even national audience in an island nation in the Caribbean, are remarkable facts.

When I picked up his book in the Plaza de Armas in 1998, it was partly because I aspire one day to play some of his simpler pieces. But also, Leo Brouwer’s little book, sized for a worker’s hip pocket and — originally — priced for a worker to buy, reminded me of why I had once been so hopeful of the revolution. It was sad seeing it for sale in dollars, at a price way beyond the budget of the Cuban musicians and musicologists likely to get the most out of it.

Dulce María Loynaz was just a name to me, but one I’d heard and thought I should know better. She was born into a literary family in Havana in 1902; Federico García Lorca, Juan

Ramón Jiménez and Gabriela Mistral all stopped in. In the 1940s Dulce María published her best-known poetry, a travel journal and a novel.

Then, beginning in 1959, the year of the beginning of the revolution, she ceased writing poetry. She still gave lectures on Latin American literature and presided over the Academia Cubana de la Lengua, which met in her home. Her silence was interpreted as her way to avoid the sweeping politicization of the new Cuba. Or maybe she just didn't have anything she thought worth saying, in the midst of the almost constant turmoil called "construction of socialism." Hers was an apolitical art, a notion that didn't fit into the rectangular mentality of the revolutionary culture bureaucracy, and her work was ignored. Nevertheless, she remained in Cuba and lived to see the "special period," when everything changed.

One big change was that, in 1990, Cuban publishers were suddenly told that they would have to finance their own operations — the state would guarantee only their salaries. And even that isn't much of a subsidy. For example, the novelist and essayist Reynaldo González is head of the Cinemateca Nacional and thus near the top of the salary scale; he told me he makes 320 pesos a month — which he worked out on his calculator to be US\$14.20, not enough for him to purchase one of his own books.

So besides having to scrounge up whatever dollars they could for their own sustenance, the people running the publishing houses had to find capital to import paper, computers and everything, and it was up to them to sell their products (formerly distributed by the Instituto del Libro). It was no longer possible to publish more than a few very limited editions without foreign financing. This could come either from the cultural agencies of governments, or through joint ventures with foreign publishers expecting to make a profit. Thus, they had to find titles that would appeal to one or the other.

Meanwhile, Dulce María Loynaz's early work had been rediscovered by Cuban writers, themselves tired of the thematic monotony of the officially approved, "rectangular" literature. And in 1992 a Spanish jury awarded her the most prestigious prize in Spanish letters, the Premio Cervantes. It became permissible, even fashionable, to speak of her and read her in Cuba again. The Casa de las Américas — Cuba's most important literary institution — currently has a book of critical essays on her displayed prominently on its website.

*Melancolía de Otoño* ("Autumn Melancholy") was published in 1997, the year of the poet's death, by a new publishing enterprise in the family name, "Hermanos Loynaz" in Pinar del Río, Cuba, with financing by the "Most Excellent City Council of Jerez de la Frontera, Spain." In such joint ventures, the Cuban publisher typically gets half of the books to sell, still at the controlled, peso-denominated prices. Cubans who can will snap these up for resale in dollars, which is why so many books, including new ones like Dulce María's, end up in the Plaza de Armas.

*Melancolía* is a collection of mostly very short, very early writings — written before she was 20, that age of melancholy — and that she had never sought to publish. Mostly for good reason, but there are some gems. One, though written decades before the revolution, describes in two lines the problem and the virtues of *cuadrados*, in Cuba or anywhere.

Hay gente que si pudiera, arrancaría los rayos  
de la luna, para amarrarse los zapatos.

There are people who would, if they could, pluck out the moonbeams  
to tie their shoes.

Sometimes, in order to keep going, tying your shoes is what you really need to do. But then, after 30 or 40 years of trucking on the path to socialism, even some of the *cuadrados* want to bend the rectangles enough to peer out at the moonbeams.

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