

ICWA LETTERS

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THE AMERICAS**

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Havana-Oriented

HAVANA, Cuba

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By Paige Evans

Oriente, Cuba's mountainous eastern region, has always played an important role in the country's politics and culture. It was the cradle of Cuba's Wars of Independence against Spain and its Communist Revolution, as well as the birthplace of the influential musical genres *trova* (descended from Spain's strolling, guitar-playing troubadours) and *son* (precursor to today's popular salsa). Oriente's largest city, Santiago de Cuba, was the country's first capital, and today it maintains a thriving, distinctly Caribbean culture. But Havana, at the opposite end of the island, has been Cuba's political, cultural and economic epicenter for over 500 years.

While on a recent trip through Oriente's five provinces, I met several Orientales who had lived or longed to live in Havana. Their strong, mixed reactions to my new home reminded me of peoples' polarized reactions to my primary home, New York City. Except, of course, for the fact that life is so very different here.

* * *

BAYAMO, Granma Province

Lolita, a hefty, moon-faced woman with eyebrows plucked thread-thin and an ample gut, serves Daniele and me a lunch of fried chicken, fried plantains and french fries, all dripping grease. Sacks of cement tower beside our table in a teetering stack; the empty Frixinet, Havana Club and Coca-Cola bottles decorating the shelf above us rattle in accompaniment with a faulty power saw's erratic vibrations; and a relentless din of hammering pounds through the Bayamo home where Lolita's family has lived for three generations.

Though a faded sign saying "Lolita's Cafe" still hangs from the limb of a mango tree in the courtyard, this is no longer officially a *paladar* — a restaurant run out of a private home. After Lolita fell ill last year, she could not continue running both the restaurant and overseeing renovations on her home; now she operates the eating place clandestinely, on a smaller scale. This way, too, she avoids regular inspections, substantial monthly taxes and buying a license to run the *paladar*.

My friend Daniele (who, though not conventionally religious, has an affinity for San Lazaro) asks Lolita about the mammoth icon of the lacerated saint standing in her living room. Stemmed glasses of wine and beer, bunches of dried roses and a crystal bowl filled with coins and half-smoked cigars lie at his feet. Lolita shouts with a strong country lilt over the construction's racket: "I put that San Lazaro there as a *promesa*. I promised San Lazaro that if he cured me, I would put his statue in my living room. And he did. I never used

to believe in San Lazaro, but now I believe.”

Wedging her filterless cigarette between pursed lips, Lolita lifts her polyester pajama pants leg to show us a scarlet patch of calf. “Bacteria were eating away at my leg. I went to a doctor who said he could not cure me. But he recommended a *curandera* who had healed him when he was ill. I did not believe in healers, but I was desperate. I went. There was a long line of people waiting for the *curandera*. She is famous. She spoke to me over bottles of boiled water. She told me someone was working *brujeria* — witchcraft — on me. My husband’s ex-wife had put a spell on me. The healer told me to bathe with special flowers. She cured me.”

Lolita waves a fleshy pink hand at her big belly. “What you see here is not what I really look like. People say my face is the same, but I used to be thin — and stylish! Whatever I wore looked good on me. My husband’s ex-wife is older. She is a black woman, and she is not pretty, like I was. She was jealous of me with my husband. She put a bad spell on me. She tried to kill me.

“I want to get away from that woman and her *brujeria*. I want to move my family to *La Habana*. Life is better there. My husband’s brother works in the military in Havana. He can find work for my husband and son. He can help us. I know Havana is more expensive than it is here, but at least we can earn dollars in Havana! And we can get many things there on the black market.”

Lolita stamps out her cigarette butt angrily in the ashtray beside my plate. “Things here in Bayamo are bad. Very bad. Tomorrow, they will get worse. Tomorrow begins *el puno del pueblo* — the punishment of the town. Starting tomorrow, we will not be able to get anything on the black market anymore. No milk, no gasoline, no sugar. Imagine! How can we live without sugar?!”

The hammering ebbs for a moment, and Lolita rubs her temples wearily. “I have not slept for three days. I have been working day and night! I am dying of exhaustion. I am fixing up the house for a *permuta*.” Cubans can pass along their homes to family members, but they are not allowed to sell them. With *permutas*, Cubans exchange homes without officially exchanging money. Two homes rarely have precisely the same value, though, so one party usually slips money under the table.

Lolita lights another cigarette and waves it at a splotch of wet cement on the wall. “Do you know how difficult it is to get building materials — like cement, or wood — here in Bayamo? And expensive! And nobody wants to work. You hire someone, they start working, then they disappear. It is as if they do not need the money... This house has to be really big to do a *permuta* for Havana. We need to find a large family whose home

in Havana is too small for them, who need much more room. So I am adding on to the house. We have been working on it for two years already! We need to complete the third floor, and then we will be finished.”

Though the exterior of her home is ravaged, Lolita does not plan to redo it. Cubans often renovate the interiors of their homes but leave decimated facades, to avoid attracting the attentions of the DTI, the Department of Investigations, whose officials can examine people’s lives and finances if they are noticed affording luxuries like home improvement.

When Lolita returns to the kitchen, her 25-year-old nephew Pacho, who led us to his aunt’s *paladar* on his Chinese Flying Pigeon bicycle, sidles up to our table and announces: “I want to go to Havana, too. This place is dead. There is nothing to do here! Of course, the streets are cleaner in Bayamo. They are safer. Everybody follows the traffic laws. But all we have here are monuments to dead revolutionaries! I studied to be a veterinarian. But there is no work in it in Bayamo! The only business in Bayamo is pork. Everybody here has a pig. They make ham. Most people have a chicken, too. In Havana, there is development. In Havana, there is action. There are possibilities. I am dying to go there.”

Pacho slumps into a chair at the table opposite ours with a defeated sigh. Glancing toward the kitchen to make sure his aunt is securely inside, he leans over to Daniele and whispers: “Can you give me a dollar, friend?” Daniele is with a foreigner; so Pacho smells access to dollars. Pacho’s plea startles Daniele, who rebuts that Lolita owes her nephew a commission for bringing in our business. He clearly hopes this will end the conversation, but Pacho persists: “Please, friend! I am a Cuban, too! I am just trying to get by! My aunt will not help me. She is the Devil. And she is crazy! She will never move to Havana. Who would trade a house in Havana for a house in Bayamo? What big family is she going to find where everybody agrees to come here, a dead town that is stuck in the past?!”

SANTIAGO DE CUBA

Noel, a squat 36-year-old with an explosion of curls, has been showing me around Santiago, Cuba’s second largest city, on his newly refurbished 1949 Triumph motorcycle. As we near the corner where his friend Lazara works, he tells me: “This neighborhood is *en candela*.” *Candela* — literally, flame — is probably the most commonly used word in the Cuban lexicon. It carries a wide range of connotations, from highly positive to extremely negative. Most often, though, it suggests the latter. Noel elaborates: “This is the poorest and most dangerous part of Santiago.”

Noel turns onto a side street lined with vendors of *santeria*-related wares: herbs and flowers, shells, beads,

stones and sacrificial pigeons. We stop at a wheeled booth laden with heavy-headed sunflowers (symbols of the *orisha* Ochun) and fiery pink gladiolas (symbols of Babalu Aye). Lazara, a pitch-skinned woman sitting on a stool behind the booth, jumps up and hugs Noel with a fervor that belies her frail frame. She deftly finds extra stools and pours us thick, sweet coffee from a thermos.

As we sit down, a towering adolescent appears and hands Lazara a hunk of raw, fatty meat. She inspects his merchandise with a critical eye, pays him, and wraps the meat in a tattered plastic bag. While doing this, she chats with me: "I know Havana. I lived there for 14 years. I went to Havana when I was young to make a life for myself. But it was too hard. It is such a frantic place! So fast! Religion is a business there. People use it to make money. That is no way to treat religion. I became a *santera* five years ago, when I moved back to Santiago. Religion is purer here. It is stronger."

Lazara stuffs the hunk of meat into her shoulder bag and slips two small photos from inside her *Carnet de Identidad's* plastic casing. One is a black-and-white picture of a stately older man in a Panama hat and traditional *guayabera* dress shirt. Lazara says: "This is my father. He was the director of the Ballet Folklorico Cutumba. Do you know them? They are an excellent troupe. When I came back to Santiago, I danced with them. I am a dancer. That is my profession. I can dance every style, but rumba is what I like to dance best."

The other photo is in color, of a young man with a bemused, gap-toothed smile and a corn-rowed pixie on his lap. Lazara explains: "This is my son with his daughter, Sandra. Sandra is atomica. She is only three years old, but you should see her dance! I came back to Santiago when my son was 17. He had lost interest in his schoolwork and was spending his time at the beach trying to meet tourists. One day, he told me: *Mami*, I met an old man at the beach today who talked with some tourists, and they offered him a beer. Then they offered him another. The old man ended up drinking 20 beers with the tourists. And they gave him 100 dollars and a radio on top of that! That was my son's dream — some myth about 20 beers and 100 dollars dropping from a tourist's pocket into his hands! I took him back here to Santiago, where we have family. Here in Santiago, my son has better examples to follow."

SANTIAGO DE CUBA

The Trova Festival, a five-day marathon of traditional music played by groups from around the island, is in full swing at Santiago's renowned Casa de la Trova. A seven-piece band from Cienfuegos plays a rousing song about a woman's hips for a seated audience of Cubans and foreigners. Inspired, a drunk, toothless local

leaps to his feet and dances, suggestively swiveling his *cintura*. He bellows "Viva Cuba!" and flashes a thumbs-up sign at pale, *mojito*¹-drinking Germans dressed in tropical prints. When the band takes a break, the tourists exit in a flock.

In the sudden calm, a reedy, mixed-race guy with rumpled cheeks and pointy white shoes introduces himself to me as 'Lino' and recites with rote enthusiasm: "Many excellent troubadours have played in this Casa de la Trova, as you can see." Lino indicates a wall thickly coated in orange high-gloss paint and hung with oil portraits of men -- black, white and mixed-race — all wearing dignified expressions.

When I tell him my name, Paige, Lino informs me: "*Pech* means luck in German." When I say I am from the New York, he asserts: "My son has family in *El Norte*," [or 'the North,' as Cubans sometimes call the United States.] "His mother, from whom I am separated, has family there. You could say my son has *pech* — he has luck. All Cubans with family in *El Norte* have luck. They get dollars from their family. They are rich. Things are much easier for them. I have no one in *El Norte*. I have no luck."

Countless Cubans I've met with family in the States swamp my mind. There is Maite, whose only sister moved to Key West 39 years ago, just after the Revolution. Maite has advanced lung cancer, and, though her sister lives only 90 miles away, Maite fears she will never see her again. Then, too, there is Nati Revuelta, the aristocrat-turned-Revolutionary who fell in love with Fidel Castro during the Revolution and mothered his daughter. In the years since, every member of Nati's family has moved to the U.S. and Spain. As Nati puts it: "I am the end of the line here in Cuba. My entire family has left. I am the Last Mohican. That is not a nice or comfortable place to be. But you learn to survive."

When I tell Lino I've been in Cuba for eight months, his tone becomes grimmer, less unctuous: "Ah, then you know how it is here in Cuba. You know what we Cubans must do to survive... I studied computers for five years in Germany. I could not wait to get back to Cuba, to the sun and the sea. You know what I missed most? Our bananas. There are bananas in Germany, of course. Big, beautiful bananas. They look perfect, but they have no flavor. In Cuba, our bananas are small and ugly. But they are delicious! The first thing I did when I got back here was to buy 20 bananas and eat them all at once.

"But I could not find work in Cuba. I have barely even seen a computer here in the last 12 years. I went to Germany again, to get an advanced degree in computers, when my son was a small child. I thought it would help me find work." He barks a bitter laugh. "When I

¹ A potent cocktail of sugar, mint and rum

was returning to Cuba, I still had some German money. So I bought my son a chocolate bar and a little truck in the Berlin Airport. He was so excited when I gave them to him! He does not have many toys. He sat down on the floor right away and started playing with them. My son did not know what chocolate was. He was playing with it like it was another truck! That made me very sad.

Lino shrugs resignedly. "Even with my advanced degree, I could not find work in computers in Cuba. Now, I make a dollar here, a dollar there from German tourists. They come to Cuba on package tours and travel all over the island on air-conditioned buses. They stop here in Santiago for a short time. They do not know the city, and often they have no Spanish. I help them, and they give me dollars. I do not want to live this way, but it is what I must do in order to survive. I am too old for this sort of thing. I could not be a regular *jinitero* [male prostitute], at my age.

"I want to move to Havana. There are more tourists in Havana, more ways to make a dollar. But I am afraid to go there. Are there really police on every corner in the touristic neighborhoods now? If a policeman asks for my *Carne* and sees I am from Santiago, or if he asks for my work papers and sees I do not work for the state, he could arrest me for being a *jinitero*. They could put me in jail for eight years! What would my son do without me for eight years?

"Many *jiniteras* have returned to Santiago from Havana because they do not want to be put in jail. They are

so young — only 16 or 17 years old — and they sell themselves to whatever tourist will pay them sixty or seventy dollars for the night. It is a pity. Some of them do it out of necessity. They help their whole family with the money they make. But some of them do it because they have no shame. It is an easy way for them to get a new pair of shoes, or to go to a nice restaurant, or to get themselves a drink.

"At least I do not steal. Very few people in this country dedicate themselves to stealing, or to dealing drugs. More do it now, of course, because people's necessities are so extreme, and everything is so expensive. But compared with the rest of the world, we have very few professional thieves. I advise my son: 'Never steal. That is no way to live. It is not an answer to your problems.' But truthfully, I do not know what to say to my son about his future. How can I tell him to work hard and get a good education, when I could use my own degrees to wipe my ass, and they would be more useful to me than they are now?"

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When planning my ICWA Fellowship, I considered living in Santiago de Cuba. Now, having visited Oriente, I am assured Havana was a better choice. It has richer and more dynamic performing arts than anywhere else on the island. Besides, Havana suits me. Though its streets are relatively empty of traffic, and though life here sometimes moves at an aggravatingly sluggish pace, the city has a pulse. And for this native New Yorker, that heartbeat feels like home. □

