

# History, Revolution, and Reform: New Directions for Cuba

## Student Text



THE  
**CHOICES  
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BROWN UNIVERSITY

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**PREVIEW**  
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*History, Revolution, and Reform:*  
*New Directions for Cuba*  
**Student Text**

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## Introduction: A Changing Cuba

Some people view Cuba's history as marked by a few short periods of dramatic change—from its struggles for independence from Spanish rule and U.S. occupation at the turn of the twentieth century, to the Revolution of 1959, to the end of Fidel Castro's nearly fifty-year presidency in early 2008 and his death in 2016. More recently, in 2018, Cuba's National Assembly of People's Power selected Miguel Díaz-Canel to succeed Raúl Castro as president. It was the first time in more than fifty years that someone without the last name of Castro became the president of Cuba.

Each of these significant moments of change has sparked a surge of international attention on Cuba. Though some outside of Cuba have viewed the country since the 1959 Revolution as a "place frozen in time," characterized by vintage cars and crumbling buildings, in reality, Cuba is constantly changing.



When Fidel Castro's presidency ended in 2008, Cuba introduced many economic reforms, including legalizing many types of independent businesses like this watch repair shop.

Thomas Leuwardt (CC BY 2.0).

### *What do Cubans think about their history?*

Cubans have very different opinions about their country and its history, particularly about the Cuban Revolution that began in 1959. Led by Fidel Castro, the Revolution fundamentally changed Cuba's government, economy, and society. While it brought opportunities and advances for many, others lost property, jobs, political freedoms, and the positions they held in Cuban society.

These different views of Cuba's past affect how Cubans think about the future. Throughout Raúl Castro's presidency, which came to an end in 2018, Cuba began a series of reforms aimed at improving economic conditions in the country. During Díaz-Canel's presidency, the island has faced challenges that have forced more changes in its economic approach.



A poster for Cuba's Young Communist League (UJC) in Havana in 2012. The poster reads, "All for the Revolution," and shows the faces of Julio Antonio Mella, Ernesto "Che" Guevara, and Camilo Cienfuegos. These men were all key figures in the Cuban Revolution.

Jaume Escofier (CC BY 2.0).

**What is life like in Cuba today?**

Today, life for most people in Cuba is not easy. Wages are low and the economy suffers from periodic shortages of essential goods. Those who oppose government policies and push for democratic reforms are often arrested and detained. Long-standing problems of racism and racial discrimination continue. Thousands of Cubans have left the island over the last five decades. As of 2020, more than two million Cuban immigrants and their descendants lived in the United States alone.

At the same time, many Cubans are proud of gains their country has made over the last sixty years. They are guaranteed free health care and education. Students from around the world come to study in Cuba's medical schools. Many of Cuba's social indicators, such as infant mortality rate and life expectancy, rival those of wealthy, industrialized countries.

Cuba has undergone profound changes in the last quarter century. Many people both within Cuba and around the world wonder what will happen on the island in the coming years. In these readings and the activities that accompany them, you will be asked to step into the shoes of ordinary Cubans on the island and consider Cuba's future.



Jaume Escollet (CC BY 2.0)

**Students reading *Granma*, the official newspaper of Cuba's Communist Party. The government controls the press in Cuba and regularly censors independent journalists, bloggers, and artists.**

The readings trace Cuba's history from the country's precolonial past to its most recent economic, social, and political changes. You will consider these important questions:

- Should Cuba's economic reforms be paired with more political change?
- What type of relationship should Cuba have with its neighbors and the rest of the world?
- What values will be most important to Cubans in the coming years?
- What should Cuba's future be?

# History, Revolution, and Reform: New Directions for Cuba

## Teacher Resource Book

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## The Special Period: Cultural Expressions

### Objectives:

**Students will:** Explore the relationship between politics and popular culture.

Analyze the attitudes expressed in a variety of artistic and cultural sources.

Compare the relative value of alternative sources about Cuban culture and history.

### Required Reading:

Students should have read Part III and completed “Study Guide: Facts and Information—Part III” (TRB 30-31) or “Study Guide: Analysis and Synthesis—Part III” (TRB-32).

### Videos:

The videos used with this lesson are available at <[www.choices.edu/cuba](http://www.choices.edu/cuba)>.

“What role has literature played in Cuban politics and society historically?” (Professor Esther Whitfeld)

“How does analyzing Cuban music help us understand Cuba?” (Professor Jennifer Lambe)

### Handouts:

“Cuban Cultural Expressions During the Special Period” (TRB 35-39)

### In the Classroom:

**1. Discussing the Politics of Art**—Have students brainstorm songs and musicians they think are political. Challenge students to recite specific lyrics. What makes these songs or artists political? What specific things can these songs teach us about our society? What about other cultural sources such as murals, plays, stories, or even jokes? What could a future historian learn about our society by looking at these types of sources?

**Note:** You may wish to come up with examples of songs or lyrics beforehand to prompt students during class.

**2. Analyzing Art During the Special Period**—Distribute “Cuban Cultural Expressions During the

Special Period” to each student and divide the class into groups of three or four. Have students recall what they know about the 1990s in Cuba. What caused the Special Period? What was life like for most Cubans?

Play the videos of Professor Lambe and Professor Whitfeld. What does Professor Lambe say is the value of analyzing Cuban music? What does Professor Whitfeld mean when she says that literature has played a “critical role” in Cuba?

Tell students that in this lesson they will act as historians, seeing what kinds of information they can gather from a variety of cultural sources. Have students carefully follow the instructions on the handout.

**Note:** Songs by Anonimo Consejo, can be found on YouTube.

**3. Making Connections**—After the small groups have gone through the sources and completed the questions, have everyone come together in a large group. Call on groups to share their responses to the questions. What attitudes were expressed in different selections? What did students learn about Cuba during the Special Period from these sources? What kinds of information were students able to get from each source? Which source do students think provided the most information? The least? Are these types of cultural expressions political?

How might a historian use art and cultural sources such as these? What can art teach us about society? Have students think about the intended audiences for these different pieces. For example, were the different selections produced for friends? strangers? fellow Cubans? Foreigners? How might an artist shape a piece according to his or her intended audience? How might the pieces be different if they were for different audiences?

### Homework:

Students should read the “Options in Brief” in the student text.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

## Cuban Cultural Expressions During the Special Period

*Instructions:* In this activity, you will interpret five different kinds of sources that will give you a better understanding of Cuban attitudes and concerns during the Special Period. Imagine that you are a historian looking to gather as much information as you can from the sources. Go through each set of sources carefully with your group and underline sections that you think are important or interesting. (For the art piece, jot down notes about what you and your group members think is important or interesting.) After going through each set of sources, answer any questions that follow in addition to the following two questions for each individual source:

1. What is the tone of this piece? For example, is it angry, sad, hopeful, sarcastic, proud, etc.?
2. What did you learn about Cuba from this source? For example, did you learn something about Cuban attitudes, about Cuban culture, or about life during the Special Period?

### Hip Hop

*Hip hop became increasingly popular in Cuba during the Special Period, especially among young people. Most hip hop performances in Cuba are in open venues that are easily affordable to average Cubans, instead of in exclusive clubs or hotels. In the 1990s, hip hop shows were routinely shut down by the police and the music was labeled “imperialist.” Then, in 1998 the Minister of Culture declared that hip hop was an expression of cubanidad (Cuban cultural identity) and the government began to support the annual hip hop festival in Havana. Some popular Cuban artists have performed overseas, and others have signed recording contracts and moved abroad. The following are selections from three hip hop songs.*

#### Title Unknown

*by Anonimo Consejo*

The solution is not leaving  
New days will be here soon  
We deserve and want to always go forward  
Solving problems is important work.

#### A Veces

*by Anonimo Consejo*

You think it’s not the same today, [as it was when  
Black people were slaves]  
The official tells me, “You can’t go there, much less  
leave here.”  
In contrast, they treat the tourists differently.  
People, is it possible that in my country I don’t  
count?

#### Tengo

*by Hermanos de Causa*

I have a dark and discriminated race  
I have a workday that demands and gives nothing,  
I have so many things that I can’t even touch them,  
I have facilities I can’t even set foot in,  
I have liberty between parentheses of iron,  
I have so many benefits without rights that I’m  
imprisoned,  
I have so many things without having what I had.

## Literature

*The following pieces are selections from Cuban novels. The first piece, Yocandra in the Paradise of Nada, was originally published in France in 1995, and the author moved from Cuba to France that same year. The second novel, Dirty Havana Trilogy, was first published in Spain in 1998. The author lives in Havana.*

### From Yocandra in the Paradise of Nada

by Zoé Valdés (Translated by Sabina Cienfuegos. New York: Arcade Publishing, 1997), p.77-82.

Though it's not time yet, the workday is over. The power went off again, and the copying machine, the computer, and the typewriters are all electric. The new girl who's working on the database lost everything because she didn't save in time. Tomorrow she'll have to start all over and input the same information, and probably the power will go off again just as she's on the verge of reconstituting the database, and so she'll have to start all over the next day from scratch. And so on and so forth, time without end, amen.

It has rained and the parking area doesn't have a roof, so my bicycle is soaked. The pavement is muddy. My clothes are going to be a total mess by the time I get home. I'll have to carry up some water to wash them, to wash myself, and to make dinner. With any luck, the power will not have been cut off at my house...in which case, the motors will have kicked in and filled my secret reservoirs with water, and I won't have to carry it up eight flights. (I had to install the tanks very early in the morning, because the law allows only one tank per apartment and I now have three, hidden in the air vents.)

As soon as I put my feet on the pedals of my Chinese bike, I began thinking of you.... I met you at the teachers' college, during one of those trips I made to bribe the dean. You were studying geography, and we hit it off right away.... I would sneak out of the apartment to go and meet you, and on borrowed bicycles we would ride off together to the Malecón [a stone walkway on the seawall in Havana], gabbing and making fun of the world.... We

laughed so loudly and insolently that not only did we spook those who yelled at us, but we made the cops' hair stand on end. One guard of the...Committee for the Defense of the Revolution, reported us to his superiors, maintaining that at least two nights a week we went—*by bicycle!*—to the Hotel Deauville, where we sat for hours and hours, on the jetty overlooking the sea, smoking Populares, Cuban filter tips. The guard strongly suspected that we were using the glow of our cigarettes to send signals to the Yankee imperialists....

If you were to come back today, you'd be completely shocked. Havana is sad, dilapidated, broken down. Look at that man over there, at the corner of G and Seventeenth, the one poking around in the garbage cans with a spoon. He carefully cleans the greasy plastic wrapping and then gulps down the rotting remains of whatever he finds. He couldn't be more than thirty. I don't want to stop. I pedal faster and faster, recklessly risking life and limb as I cross the avenue. I don't want to see the truth. My generation was not prepared for it. I know there's wretchedness throughout Latin America, but other countries didn't experience revolution, didn't have to listen to the...[nonsense]...about "building a better world." I can't see this better world....

We survived, with stomachs bloated and closed for repairs. Nothing existed. Only the Party is immortal.

I'm stuck with my bicycle on the narrow second-floor landing of my building. Hernia, who had taken up arms against the sea and all sorts of other troubles, appeared, brandishing an airmail letter. Without a word or gesture, she hoisted my bike and helped me carry it up to the third floor.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

### From *Dirty Havana Trilogy*

by Pedro Juan Gutiérrez (Translated by Natasha Wimmer. New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2002), p.135-136.

I started out walking slowly. On Saturdays there aren't many buses running in Havana, hardly any at all. It's best not to worry. So my aunt is dying of cancer, so there's practically no food, so the buses aren't running, so I don't have a job. Best not to worry. Today there was a front-page interview in the paper with an important minister, a show-off. He was fat and he had a big smile on his face, and he was saying, "Cuba is neither paradise nor hell."

My next question would have been, "So what is it, purgatory?" But no. The journalist just smiled contentedly and used the quote as the front-page headline.

I was relaxed...feeling at peace with myself. Not worried at all. Well, there are always worries. But for now I was able to keep them at a distance.

I pushed them a little way into the future. That's a good way to keep them blurry and out of earshot. A woman was living with me. I had gained back a few pounds. And I was alive, though I had nothing to do. Surviving, I think it's called. You let yourself glide along, and you don't expect anything else. It's as easy as that.

Two big, fat, flabby, ugly, white, red, peeling, slow, self-absorbed tourists were walking very slowly past the National Museum. Yes, that's exactly how they looked. The man had a cane and an enormous heavy suitcase. I couldn't imagine what he was carrying in it. Apparently, they were out for a stroll on a calm, sunny Saturday afternoon. The woman was just as repugnant as the man. The two of them were dressed for fall in an icy fjord city. They were sweating, and they had a stunned look on their faces as they stared all around. They consulted a guidebook with great deliberation and gazed at the historic ship and historic airplanes under the historic trees. Nothing made sense to them.

### Jokes

*In Cuba, as in many countries, people use humor to express political dissent and complaint. Chistes, or jokes, are particularly popular in Cuban culture.*

Cubans have a lot of rights. You know what they are? Education, health, housing, and stealing from the state.

One man wrote on a wall: "Down with You-Know-Who." And another started writing "Down with..." then looked over his shoulder, didn't see any State Security, so wrote the letter "F." There was a tap on his shoulder and a secret policeman stood there. "Excuse me," the man said, "I can't remember: Is it Flinton or Clinton?"

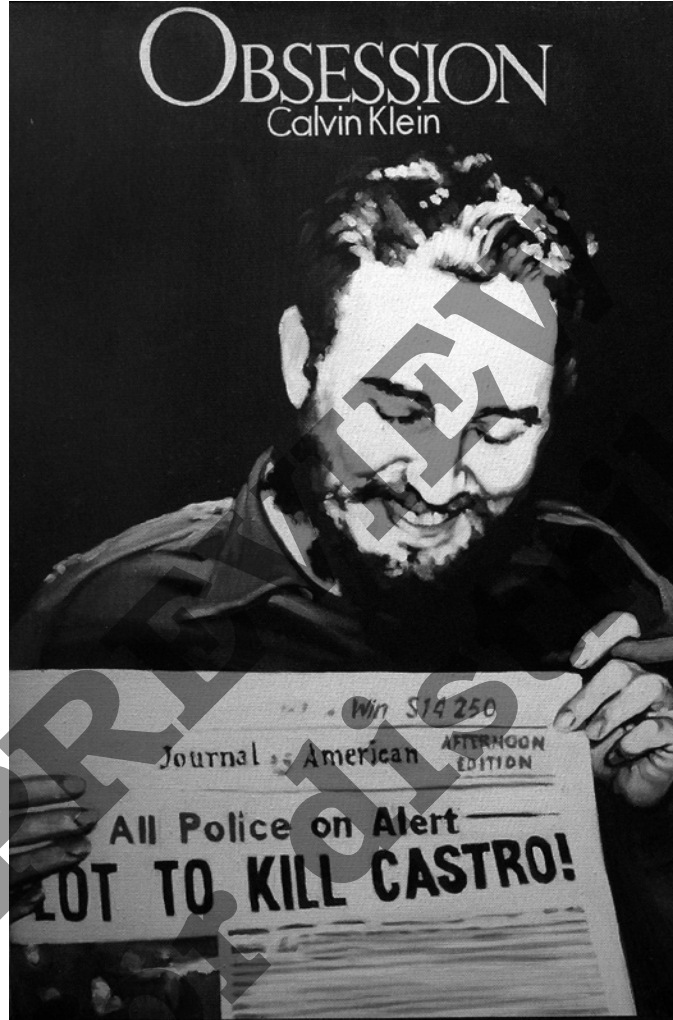
*(This joke was especially popular in 1998, when the Pope visited Cuba for the first time ever.)*

Do you know why the Pope is coming to Cuba? To visit hell, to meet the Devil, and to see why eleven million people still believe in miracles.

A drunk is on a street corner screaming, "Fidel, degenerate, assassin, you are killing me of hunger!" The police arrive and beat him for insulting the Commander-in-Chief. The drunk protests, "Why do you hit me? There are many Fidels." "Yes," says the police officer, "but there is only one with those characteristics."

## Art

Art has long been a vibrant part of Cuban culture. The following painting is entitled “Obsession” and was created by José Ángel Toirac in 1996. It is part of a series, *Tiempos Nuevos* (New Times), which includes other pieces of Fidel Castro with brand names such as Marlboro and Yves Saint Laurent.



### Extra Questions

1. From your reading, what do you know about the photo this painting was based on?
2. Why do you think the artist chose the brand Obsession? Who do you think the artist implies is obsessed? Could there be more than one answer to this question?

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

## Songs

*These two pieces are selections from songs by Carlos Varela. Varela is a performer of nueva trova, a type of music that combines traditional folk music styles with lyrics that use metaphors and allegories and thus can have multiple meanings. This type of music originated in Cuba in the 1960s and is now popular in much of Latin America. The following selections are from songs recorded in the late 1980s.*

### Guillermo Tell (William Tell)

William Tell didn't understand his son

Who one day got tired of having the apple placed  
on his head,...

William Tell, your son has grown up,

And now he wants to shoot the arrow himself.

It's his turn now to show his valor with your cross-  
bow.

Yet William Tell did not understand the challenge:

Who would ever risk having the arrow shot at  
them?

He became afraid when his son addressed him,

Telling William that it was now his turn

To place the apple on his own head...

William Tell was angry at the new idea,

And refused to place the apple on his own head.

It was not that he didn't trust his son—

But what would happen if he missed?...

William Tell failed to understand his son—

Who one day got tired of having the apple placed  
on his head.

### Extra Question

In the first piece, who do you think William Tell might represent? (Hint: who is an important person in Cuban society that people might not want to speak of by name?)

### Tropicollage

He left in a Havanautos rented car

Heading to the beach at Varadero,

Havana Club in the sand,

Smoking a cigar

And taking pictures,

Leaning against a palm tree.

Returning to the Habana Libre hotel,

He hired a Turistaxi to go to the Tropicana night  
club.

On the way to the airport,

He left believing

That he really understood Havana.

He took with him

The image they wanted him to have.

And in his Polaroids

And his head he carries

Tropicollage.

He never went to the real Habana Vieja

Nor to the barrios

Of workers and believers.

He took no photos

On the city reefs

Where a sea of people swim.

He never saw the construction workers,

Cementing the future

With bricks and cheap rum.

Nor did he meet those guys

Changing money 5 for 1.

That too is my country,

And I cannot forget it.

Anybody who denies it

Has their head full of

Tropicollage.