

Gelato and a Balmy Evening Ride in an American Convertible: To Be or Not to Be in the New Cuba

by Ruth Behar

When I first started traveling to Cuba in the early 1990s, the few tourist stores had dark curtains in their windows. They allowed only a few people inside at a time, part of a concerted effort to hide their goods, suppress the desire for the vast world of material things unattainable to the majority, curtail envy, and control the viral spread of resentment. This tension is echoed in the 1985 Cuban film *Lejanía* (Parting of the Ways), by Jesús Díaz, which portrays an exiled mother in Miami who returns to Cuba after a decade away. She arrives loaded with suitcases full of clothes and electronics for the son she left when he was a teenager, but he refuses to accept the gifts, finding her consumerism repugnant.

I left Cuba as a child with my parents and returned as an anthropologist. I was in a strange role, able to move between the comforts of the emerging tourist industry and the decaying socialist sector that could no longer meet people's most basic needs. The years following the fall of the Soviet Union were a time of hunger and scarcity, and I wanted to slip money into the pockets of everyone I met. But most Cubans back then still believed in volunteerism, working for the good of the people and the

ideal of giving without putting a monetary value on human relationships. So I held back, not sure whether to offer charity, fearing I'd be taken for an obnoxious returning Cuban flaunting my privilege.

That era has ended for sure.

I traveled to Cuba several times in 2015 to take the pulse of the island in the aftermath of restored diplomatic relations with the United States. Havana's José Martí Airport is now barely able to handle the numbers of US travelers passing through, taking hours to transport luggage to the carousels. Hotels are packed, upscale restaurants require reservations, and hipster spots such as Café Madrigal, with its exposed brick walls and edgy art, are bustling. Vendors peddle tourist tchotchkes on every corner and street musicians sing the "Chan Chan" song for a tip. Local entrepreneurs sell services from hairstyling to tutoring (the public education system isn't what it used to be) to other Cubans. Stores are stocked with everything from Nikes and knockoff Dolce and Gabbana T-shirts to toilet seats (in scarce supply until now). Elders on the street hawk a tube of Colgate or a razor in its package. Those still working at government jobs that provide a free lunch will try to sell their sandwich and soda for a profit.

This year, everything I've seen

and done in Cuba has become part of a complex reckoning, a need to respond to the question everyone is seeking to answer: What has changed in Cuba? But a more personal question has also haunted me: Who do I want to be in the new Cuba? A few experiences have left me uneasy about my own participation in the Cuba that is emerging.

One took place in a new gelato place in the gentrifying Habana Vieja zone, a crossroads of tourist sites, galleries, boutiques, restaurants and local residents with no running water in their apartments. Helad'oro is a private business that only accepts the Cuban convertible currency (CUC), pegged at 13% above the US dollar. (Government salaries are in the Cuban peso, and most people earn the equivalent of \$20–\$30 a month.) It offers gelato in flavors such as mojito and pineapple. Prices are less than you'd pay in Europe or the US but expensive for the average Cuban. On the day I was there, a Cuban artist-friend and I chose simple one-scoop cones and sat down on the slippery new orange plastic chairs. As we dug into our gelato, we saw two boys, aged 10 or 11, their faces pressed against the shiny glass windows, staring at us. They were Afro-Cuban and clearly from the neighborhood. A blond, German-speaking tourist family, with two children the same age as

the boys outside, also sat down for gelatos. When they saw the boys staring, they invited them inside and offered to buy them a treat.

A male employee scolded the boys for bothering the customers and ordered them to leave. Apparently, it was not the first time the boys had begged for ice cream. The couple purchased the gelato anyway and brought it to the boys outside and they stood eating it there until the employee drove them off.

Ice cream is a political subject in Cuba. The state-run Coppelia, where the superb Tomás Gutiérrez Alea film, *Strawberry and Chocolate*, begins and ends, is a socialist ice cream cathedral created soon after the Revolution in 1966. An outdoor pavilion surrounded by banyan trees, it has the capacity to serve up to 35,000 people a day. Coppelia was a utopian effort to bring ice cream to the people. If you're willing to wait on a long line, you can still get affordable ice cream in Cuban pesos, or an expedited line caters to those who pay 25 times more in CUC. In the early 1990s, when milk was scarce and one meal a day was all that most Cubans could hope for, people would line up at dawn at Coppelia to buy ice cream for breakfast. A wide range of flavors was offered in the early days, when the Russians subsidized the economy, but the moment the Special Period hit Coppelia was reduced to offering only one "feminine" and one "masculine" flavor, strawberry and chocolate (thus the title of the movie). Flavors to this day remain limited and the quality of the ice cream has deteriorated. Not surprisingly, a reviewer on Trip Advisor raved about Helad'oro and its "all natural ice cream," exclaiming, "Forget the very low-standard Copellia" (sic).

Although the gelato was indeed

delicious, I felt sad consuming it while the neighborhood kids were being mistreated. It felt to me like a portent of the times ahead and the daily injuries of class division and humiliation that are spreading in Cuba, even as exciting opportunities arise for those in a position to benefit from them. I am a child of exiles and can't ever forget that, but I guess a part of me has always wanted to believe in the ideals of equality and justice symbolized by the Revolution. It has been heartbreaking to observe the disintegration of those ideals in everyday life. How is it that Cuban doctors have managed to reduce infant mortality below US rates, yet little boys in Havana still beg for gelato? That wasn't supposed to happen in Cuba.

I had another uneasy experience at the end of a week I spent with a group of scholars and artists who enjoyed seeing all the signs of the cultural and artistic rebirth in Cuba. On our last night in Havana, we took a breezy ride in six classic American cars, impeccably restored convertibles painted in colors from serene blue to flamingo pink. The vintage cars seemed to have been waiting all those years in Cuba just so Americans would come back one day and take a spin in them.

It was a perfect balmy evening for a ride, but the thrill of being driven around ocean-misted Havana like a 1950s movie star died when we passed a crowded bus station and I saw fellow Cubans waiting to catch a bus home for the equivalent of a penny. They looked weary. I turned away, afraid to catch their glance.

Moments before sunset, the fleet of gaily painted automobiles, sounding their singsong horns, stopped at the Plaza of the Revolution in time for us to see the outlined images of revolutionary heroes Che

Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos burst into bright lights. It was a beautiful sight, definitely worthy of a picture. Everyone was snapping photos. Soon I couldn't help myself; I did, too. Dutiful child that I am, I thought of my parents: Would they be upset? I wasn't sure anymore to which Cuba I belonged—the Cuba of the people waiting for the bus; the Cuba of exiles like my parents, who'd left and didn't want to return; or the Cuba of people like me, coming back with our privileges and our nostalgia to see how the island is changing.

Cuba's independence leader, José Martí, who spent years as an exile in New York, once wrote that he had two countries, "Cuba and the night." As we left the plaza and drove on to dinner at one of Havana's most exquisite restaurants, I found myself saying a prayer under my breath: May Cuba find its way through the long dark night that lies ahead.

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