

THE SEARCH FOR CONNECTION: CUBAN-AMERICAN TIES TO THE ISLAND IN CHALLENGING TIMES

RUTH BEHAR

BRIEFINGS ON CUBA

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Foreword

CasaCuba, the Cuban Research Institute (CRI), and the Kimberly Green Latin American and Caribbean Center (LACC) at Florida International University (FIU) are proud to continue the publication of *Briefings on Cuba*. The purpose of this series is to provide up-to-date analyses of Cuban politics, economy, culture, and society by leading Cuba experts. This is the third instance of the series, inaugurated in 2020, with two essays by Carmelo Mesa-Lago and Rafael Rojas.

In this briefing, Ruth Behar examines a timely issue, the renewed but difficult ties between Cubans on and off the island during the coronavirus pandemic. Dr. Behar explores telling examples of how many Cuban Americans have attempted to bridge the gap between the island and the United States over the past two years. This is a personal, heart-wrenching story for her as well as thousands of Cubans in the diaspora who want to help their relatives, friends, and communities back home, at the same time that street protests have spurred the hope for change on the island. As the author argues, “the pandemic, bringing together Cubans ‘here’ and ‘there’ in virtual space, encouraged greater fluidity between Cubans on the island and in the diaspora.”

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Dr. Ruth Behar is the James W. Fernandez Distinguished University Professor of Anthropology at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. She is a prominent Cuban-American anthropologist and award-winning writer whose work includes academic studies, poetry, memoir, and fiction. She has conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Spain, Mexico, and Cuba, and is known for her humanistic approach to identity, immigration, and the search for home in our global era. Born in Havana, Cuba, to a Jewish-Cuban family, she moved as a child to New York after the Cuban Revolution of 1959. She earned her Ph.D. and M.A. in anthropology from Princeton University and her B.A. in literature from Wesleyan University. She is the author of five scholarly books, including *An Island Called Home: Returning to Jewish Cuba* (2007) and *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart* (1996; 25th anniversary edition, 2022), as well as coeditor of three volumes and editor of *Bridges to Cuba* (1995; 20th anniversary edition, 2015). She has published two novels for young readers and the picture book, *Tía Fortuna's New Home: A Jewish Cuban Journey* (2022). Dr. Behar is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.



Photo credit: Gabriel Frye-Behar

On the Eve of the Pandemic

It was February 28, 2020, and the Obama-era crowds of U.S. travelers, filled with curiosity about a taboo place, had been driven away by Trump's fear-mongering travel advisories. Our Delta flight to Havana was packed with Miami Cubans going to visit family, bearing gifts. We were met by Cuban customs authorities wearing handmade masks fashioned from the same olive-green cloth as their uniforms. No cases of the coronavirus in Cuba yet. But it was coming.

I only had to set foot in Havana to sense how different things already felt. Tourism had faded. Money wasn't circulating. The upscale private restaurants (*paladares*) felt like government restaurants, lacking basic items like chicken on their menus. Desperate Cubans were taking dangerous routes through multiple countries to cross the Mexican border into the United States. The microcosmic world I have studied for years, the Jewish community in Cuba, was suffering. The Patronato, the synagogue in El Vedado that is the heart of the community, was no longer open every day. American Jewish groups that brought aid to the Jews in Cuba had stopped coming and there wasn't enough cash to pay for electricity and other expenses.

Somber as the mood was, all the Cubans I spoke with believed the coronavirus wouldn't reach the island. I too was under the same illusion. A week later, my husband David and I left. Three days later, Cuban news sources announced that three infected Italian tourists had brought the coronavirus to Cuba. Then, on March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the Covid-19 outbreak a global health emergency.

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Déjà Vu and *Recargas*

As the United States went into lockdown, shortages of basic products left our grocery shelves eerily empty. Many Cuban Americans felt a strange déjà vu, experiencing such a sudden paucity of goods. Mirta Ojito wrote a *New York Times* op-ed in April 2020, "I Can't Bring Myself to Stand in Line for Food Again." Of course, we knew it wasn't the same "here" as "there." The toilet paper returned. And those who could, learned to order groceries online for touchless delivery to our front doors while clapping for frontline workers who sacrificed their lives to keep us safe.

The pandemic proved devastating for Cubans. Flights shut down and Cuban Americans could no longer travel to the island to bring aid to their families. Tourism collapsed, dashing the hopes of many who had opened Airbnb apartments and created tourist art, boutiques, and restaurants as well as ingenious services for this seemingly boundless market. Cubans with no family abroad had learned to forge commodified "kinship imaginaries" with foreigners, inviting them into their homes where they were treated like family and offered an "authentic" peek into everyday life in Cuba, creating sentimental attachments that led to financial support, as anthropologist Noelle Stout discovered in her research on sex tourism.

The misery of everyday life spiraled out of control. Prices soared and the long lines of the 1970s returned, but now people waited pressed together for hours, wearing flimsy cloth masks and fearing infection. In this dire moment, as Miranda García learned in her dissertation research, Cuban Americans found ways to wire money to Cuban bank accounts through countries like Canada and Spain, but remittances fell sharply in 2020. Sending medicine, clothing, and food to Cuba required using overpriced shipping agencies; it became a luxury for Cuban Americans to support their families. Social and racial inequality in Cuba intensified, as most Cubans, especially Black Cubans, couldn't depend on aid from abroad or what used to be called *fe* (faith, or *familia en el exterior*).

The most notable transformation of the pandemic era was how Cuban Americans turned to messaging platforms to stay connected with family and friends on the island. Cell phone *recargas*—"recharges" of a Cuban phone paid by credit card to an online company in the United States—allowed Cuban Americans to stay in touch. Judging from the array of "recharge" companies that took off during the pandemic (CubaLlama, DimeCuba, HablaCuba, RecargasCuba), this gifting of precious phone time became ubiquitous. Special promotions, like a \$25 recharge that translated to 1,000 Cuban pesos, made possible many relaxed hour-long conversations on WhatsApp.

Scholar and writer Odette Casamayor-Cisneros describes how she and her 68-year-old mother in Havana have "met every night thanks to WhatsApp" during the pandemic, alleviating her mother's loneliness. Political scientist María de los Angeles Torres told me she used messaging apps to conduct research interviews and keep in touch with friends and colleagues, noting that under the pandemic things aren't so different now with how she communicates with people in the U.S. and in Cuba. "I think because of Facebook and WhatsApp, I've been able to have more in-real-time contact with people in Cuba than I've ever been able to have. The pandemic has allowed for a lot of connection." Literary scholar Eliana Rivero evokes this connectedness in a poem about her imaginary communications with Cubans on the island as she herself recovers from Covid in Arizona:

I think of those people in my former hometown of Havana:
Does the virus mutate into tropical forms over there?
How does it feel to be hopeless on top of having had no hope for years?
How do you dance and sing when your voice is mutated into
hoarseness?

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Say This Isn't the End

In those summer months of 2020, as we all watched the virus spread and too many die like fragile moths, I received via snail mail what Richard Blanco called a "keepsake." It was one of 300 copies of a letterpress printing in Maine of his poem, "Say This Isn't the End." As a Cuban-American poet moving between the U.S. and Cuba, Blanco has come to represent the hope for a deeper connection between the island and the diaspora. But this "keepsake" poem went beyond questions of country into the murkiness of mortality.



It is about the search for language when there only seems to be “an ever-present cycle of dismay and reprieve. . . which may continue for years.” Blanco asks himself, “How does a poet address such an emotional morass?” He does so by imagining all that could end. Early on, he imagines losing his mother, through whose eyes he’s always seen Cuba:

...say my mother’s cloudy eyes won’t die
from the goodbye kiss I last gave her,
say that wasn’t our final goodbye...

As the poem unfolds, he dares to think that all that he loves won’t end, and evokes a sweet scene of himself and his husband cooking while listening to Aretha Franklin. Then he conjures the beauty of the ordinary with Zen contemplativeness, observing “sidewalk cracks blossoming weeds.” Toward the end of the poem, he imagines not surviving:

...or say this will be my end, say the loving
hands of gloved, gowned angels risking
their lives to save mine won’t be able to
keep me here. Say this is the last breath
of my last poem...

Then he comes full circle and imagines the end as being filled with possibility, an end to what we need to wake up from, what he describes in his author’s note as “our mortal greed for immortality” that doesn’t allow us to “accept being part of a larger fate of existence and circumstance.” He concludes by imagining what he calls a “a more sincere hope” that will emerge from the pandemic:

I say this may be the end
to let us hope to heal, to evolve, reach the
stars. Again I’ll say: heal, evolve, reach,
and become the stars that became us—
whether or not this is or is not our end.

Richard Blanco wrote this poem in Maine, a place that couldn’t be farther from Miami and Cuba, both geographically and culturally. Maybe I read too much into it, but this writing about “the end” seemed like a premonition of what was to come on the island—a movement toward “an end,” and an inchoate yet urgent desire for a new beginning.



A Howl

The pandemic, bringing together Cubans “here” and “there” in virtual space, encouraged greater fluidity between Cubans on the island and in the diaspora.

Then the protest organized by the 27N movement on November 27, 2020 awakened Cuban Americans to how Cubans on the island were making public their growing disaffection. According to the 27N manifesto, “more than 300 intellectuals, artists and journalists convened at the Ministry of Culture to demand the recognition of our rights and freedoms as citizens.”

And then J-11 took place. The disaffection became very real, very visible. On Sunday, July 11, 2021, protests spread from San Antonio de los Baños to Palma Soriano as videos and photos circulating on WhatsApp and Facebook called people to the streets across the island. In an outcry of despair fueled by hunger, electrical outages, summer heat, inequality, anti-Black discrimination, and the fear of Covid, thousands of Cubans felt empowered to take to the streets and call for *libertad*.

At the forefront were young Black Cubans with a ready-made anthem in the rap song, “Patria y vida”—an inversion of the revolutionary slogan, *Patria o muerte* (Fatherland or death). The government banned the song, fined anyone who played it in public. But the video of the song circulated clandestinely on flash drives and became the soundtrack of the bicitaxis in La Habana Vieja. It spoke of a sense of betrayal. The utopian future that had been promised, to poor Black Cubans especially, since the start of the revolution hadn’t arrived and yet they were expected to show their gratitude to the revolution for everything it had “given” them.

*El pueblo se cansó de estar aguantando,
un nuevo amanecer estamos esperando
(The people are sick of putting up, we're
waiting for a new dawn)*

Chanting *patria y vida*, images and videos of protesting Cubans circulated globally on the internet and were seen by millions. President Miguel Díaz-Canel responded by blocking the internet, arresting demonstrators and dissident artists, and sending as many as six hundred of them, some as young as sixteen, to prison terms of five to thirty years.

Responding from the island with sympathy for the protesters, the famed crime writer Leonardo Padura stated, “A howl had been produced from the guts of a society that demanded other ways of managing life.” He added: “Cubans need to recover their sense of hope and be able to imagine a possible future... hope that cannot be recovered by force.”

Speaking as a Black Cuban woman of the diaspora, Casamayor-Cisneros stated, “We are suffering, for our people in Cuba, for ourselves, for the future of the nation. Dreadfully, uncertainty looms over our days.” Speaking to the global left that idealized the Cuban revolution, she concludes with the unanswered question, “On what grounds to build utopia?”



Thousands in the Cuban diaspora took to the streets in Miami, Washington, D.C., and New York in support of the J-11 protesters in Cuba, staying connected afterwards by such symbolic acts as emblazoning their clothing with “Patria y Vida” and #SOSCuba. As Richard Blanco commented in an email, in standing up for human rights, rather than taking a political hardline against Castro or pushing to maintain the embargo, Cuban Americans garnered more empathy than they ever did before: “I think that’s an important shift away from a political appeal toward a humanitarian appeal,” literary scholar Lucía Suárez observed in an e-mail. “There was a different solidarity amongst Cubans globally asking for relief from suffering, food shortages, and democratic restrictions.” The protests, Suárez said, were about “a growing humanitarian need to not only survive but to live a decent, safe life. Somehow, the revolution is a specter that no longer has bearing.”

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Artist Voices

Tania Bruguera, Coco Fusco, and Vanessa Garcia are some of the most vocal activist-artists, or “artists,” in the diaspora who have responded to J-11 by speaking out in support of Cubans being suppressed, censored, and jailed for asserting their human rights as artists and citizens.

Tania Bruguera, an international art figure who maintains residency in Cuba, is boldly confrontational with the Cuban government, referring to it as “counter-revolutionary” because it doesn’t represent the will of the people. In frequent Twitter posts, she calls on Cubans to unite on and off the island in opposing the government. Her call for inclusivity among the Cuban people (hashtag: #TodosSomosUno) appears in a November 2021 tweet: “What is important now is... is that we are one *pueblo* (people) and that includes those who live outside of Cuba. Those inside and outside, we all deserve the right to decide the future of our country.”

Artist and critic Coco Fusco has spoken out on social media and in writing and lectures on the intimidation of artists and journalists critical of the Cuban government. She raised awareness of the detainment of Hamlet Lavastida, Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara, and *El Estornudo* journalists, and campaigned for a boycott of the Havana Biennial in November 2021. Rather than taking aim at the Cuban government, she directs her critique at the silence of progressive institutions and individuals outside of Cuba while Cuban artists are repressed for demanding their rights. Though boycotting the Havana Biennial, Fusco will be represented in the April 2022 Whitney Biennial in a film she made about a different island, Hart Island, where New York City’s unclaimed pandemic dead are buried.

Miami-based novelist and playwright Vanessa Garcia, who identifies as an “ABC” (American-Born Cuban), has taken on the cause of Cubans struggling for their rights since J-11. Garcia views herself as continuing her grandparents’ fight for a free Cuba. On July 22, 2021, in an essay entitled “My Pen Echoes Cuba’s Chant for Freedom. I Am the Bridge,” she wrote. “Right now, as the people of Cuba throw themselves to the street and ask for liberty, I am called to be their echo across water... It is my responsibility to amplify the voice of those living on the island. Those whose internet is being cut off intentionally, in an attempt to silence the Cuban people once more. Still, people slip their voice into WhatsApp messages when they’re able to use cell phone data, they ask, in these messages, to be heard. I must relay those messages.” Her role as messenger, bridge, and amplifier for Cuban voices shows the strong connection felt by second-generation Cuban Americans toward the island.

Retrospective, Introspective, Prospective Gazes

The February 22, 2021 online issue of *The New Yorker* ran historian Ada Ferrer's essay, "My Brother's Keeper," a heartbreaking piece about the emotional inheritance of the split between the island and the diaspora. It focuses on Ferrer's pained relationship with her half-brother, Poly, left behind in Cuba by her mother in the early 1960s because his biological father, a member of the revolutionary police, refused to let him go. By the time Poly left in the 1980 Mariel exodus, the psychic damage had been done. He never let her mother forget she'd abandoned him in Cuba. The unraveling of his life, the rage and violence with which he treated Ferrer, her mother, and her sister, left them scarred and scared, even as they tried to love him and seek his forgiveness. With strange poetic justice, Poly and his mother died within days of each other at the height of the pandemic. This personal essay was followed a few months later by Ferrer's sweeping historical tome, *Cuba: An American History*, and Ferrer has used this charged moment to reflect on the tensions and trauma of the U.S.-Cuba relationship. Her scholarship and her personal life, so deeply entangled, give her a unique authority to speak of how the two nations might one day enact a new narrative of peace.

Renowned Cuban-American children's author Margarita Engle reclaims forgotten voices from Cuban history in verse novels that look to past struggles but resonate with dreams for a just future. In *Your Heart My Sky* (2021), two young people rise above the hardships of *el periodo especial* in 1991, while in *Rima's Rebellion: Courage in a Time of Tyranny* (2022) a young Cuban girl joins the fight for women's suffrage in the early twentieth century. When I told Engle I was writing about diaspora responses to J-11, she emailed, "I am heartbroken. When I'm heartbroken, I write hopefully, so yes, July 11 changed me. I am writing without traveling, which adds to the sense of being powerless, but we are not powerless when we use our freedom of expression."

Perhaps the most fanciful retrospective work to emerge in this period is Emilio Cueto's *Delivering Cuba Through the Mail: Cuba's Presence in Non-Cuban Postage Stamps & Envelopes* (2021), a vibrant examination of Cuba's presence in the stamps of the world. Cueto was sent to the United States by his mother in 1961 through the Pedro Pan Operation and didn't see her again until his first visit back in the 1970s. Fascinated by how Cuba lives in the imagination of non-Cubans, Cueto learned that Cuban images have appeared in 1,232 stamps around the world. He remarks, "To find a Havana Coco taxi in a Burundi stamp, a native crocodile in Djibouti, a rare mushroom in Argentina, a baseball player in Tajikistan, a chess champion in Laos, a TV personality in Mongolia, and Cuba's coat of arms in the Order of Malta is, indeed, surreal!" With a vision inclusive of both revolutionary and exilic representations, he documents stamps bearing images from Desi Arnaz and Celia Cruz to Fidel Castro and heroic images of the Cuban Revolution. Asked how he could embrace such opposed representations of Cuba, his response may seem optimistic in our fraught moment but still carries meaning: "My house is a metaphor for what Cuba should be. We should be able to live together with opposite views."

The artist María Magdalena Campos-Pons aims to revitalize her native city of Matanzas through collaborations with local artists on restoration projects that look to the future. Her own work examines her Yoruba and Chinese heritage and her family's ties to Regla de Ocha, or Santería, and how they emerged from the context of sugar and slavery. She gathers donations to fix ruined buildings and help

artists build studios and gallery spaces in Matanzas, wishing to make it “a city that is aesthetically and economically sustainable and worthy of living in.” Her project, “Intermittent Rivers,” includes plans to revitalize the riverbanks of the city. Calle Narváez, pressed against the Río San Juan, is now filled with cafés and art installations. Next to be developed are the banks of the Yumurí River by La Marina, a historically Black community with strong Ocha traditions. As she told me, “The only thing worth fighting for is love. I don’t want to fight for capitalism or communism. My aim is to help people, so we can all survive. Covid doesn’t care who you are. We are living in this moment. I want to make things better together with others. The future is unity, to survive, to save this little piece of planet, *este pedacito de planeta*.”

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An End for Now

My aim in this essay was to be the ethnographer-bricoleur and create a collage of responses from Cuban Americans during these “challenging times,” when it is difficult to know how to speak, how to act, even what to feel. I am not a brave person and as I wrote this essay in the harsh January cold of Michigan, I felt a chill not from the weather but from the fear of the response to my words. In Cuba, when I finally return, will I find myself no longer welcome, added to the list of those turned back at the airport? Here in the United States, will other Cuban Americans say I’m too soft on the regime? Some may complain I didn’t define who is Cuban American. Are we all one—the exiles, *Marielitos*, *Balseros*, *mulas*, those who crossed a jungle and thirteen countries to get here? I suggest we are one in that all of us come from a departure, from a nation that couldn’t hold us in for reasons that perhaps had to do with the need for freedom or perhaps more trivial things that still mattered.

In Spain, a month before the J-11 protests, Padura was asked what problems he’d wish to see resolved on his return to Cuba. He responded, “My dream, which I hope will come true one day, is to be able to walk to the corner, to the *shopping* [center] that’s sixty meters from my house, and go buy some yogurt. I’m addicted to it and need to eat it in the morning for breakfast. So my dream is, one day I’ll go buy yogurt in Cuba without suffering. During these months of the pandemic, I’ve looked for it in Guanajay, in Bauta, I’ve stood in line for four hours. I hope one day I’ll buy it on the corner without any fuss. Am I asking for too much or too little?”

We are left with the question of what will be the new beginning that so many long for and have only started to imagine. Has Cuba tired of dreaming of utopias? Is it time for Cuba to become a normal country in these not yet normal times? The future must be shaped by all of us Cubans, on the island, outside the island, and we’ll need to dream both big and small at the same time.

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