

HOW THINGS FALL

WHAT
HAPPENED TO

THE CUBAN
REVOLUTION

ELIZABETH
DORE

APART



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For Johnny

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‘Life is not what you lived, but how you remember it.’

Gabriel García Márquez

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Contents

PROLOGUE	1
1 The Narrators	5
2 Backstory	8
3 Fidel's Fall, An Omen	13
 PART 1: THE 1980S	 17
4 Mario Sánchez Cortéz	21
5 Alina Rodríguez Abreu	32
6 Juan Guillard Matus	37
7 Racism	55
8 Esteban Cabrera Montes	58
9 Barbara Vegas	70
10 Fidel Castro	75
11 Pavel García Rojas	80
 PART 2: FIDEL AND THE COLLAPSE, 1990-2006	 97
12 Mario Sánchez Cortéz	103
13 Alina Rodríguez Abreu	128
14 Juan Guillard Matus	134
15 Esteban Cabrera Montes	148
16 Barbara Vegas	173
17 Pavel García Rojas	176
18 Alejandro Espada Betancourt	187

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PART 3: INEQUALITY, 2006-20	205
19 Mario Sánchez Cortéz	211
20 Alina Rodríguez Abreu	238
21 Juan Guillard Matus	253
22 Raúl Castro: The General	267
23 Esteban Cabrera Montes	270
24 Barbara Vegas	286
25 Pavel García Rojas	288
26 Alejandro Espada Betancourt	306
<i>Conclusion</i>	320
<i>My Thanks</i>	322
<i>Endnotes</i>	323
<i>Index</i>	333

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Prologue

Cuba is not the country it used to be. If you were a Cuban born on the island in the vicinity of 1975, you grew up with the promise of equality. You remember watching your classmates eating identical sandwiches and feeling: ‘We are all part of the whole.’ You were on the verge of adulthood when the country of your childhood vanished, following the fall of the Soviet bloc. You and your neighbours went hungry. Water and electricity were off more than on. Factories shut and fields of sugarcane lay idle. Fidel Castro announced that the Soviet Union had collapsed, but he did not explain what had happened. The US Congress tightened the economic blockade. ‘We will wreak havoc on the island,’ said the congressman who sponsored the bill, ‘Fidel’s days are numbered.’ Cubans – perhaps you were among them – joked that Fidel’s remaining days in power added up to a very big number.

Instead of laying the foundation for a self-sustaining socialist economy, the leadership that came to power after Fidel introduced market measures. They opened the island to tourism, legalised the US dollar and encouraged people to launch little businesses. The changes temporarily propped up the economy but ruined the country. The fortunate few who could rely on remittances turned to private enterprise and black marketeering to survive. Cubans called them *los nuevos ricos*, the new rich. Children asked

their parents why some classmates brought ham sandwiches for lunch while they brought bread and dripping. ‘Their families have dollars; we are just poor workers.’

Fidel vowed to rein in *los nuevos ricos* and rekindle Cubans’ collective spirit. But the new leadership wanted to soften the rules governing private enterprise – even if it intensified inequality. Raúl Castro, Fidel’s successor, declared, ‘If we do not change we will be swept away.’

Purging Fidel’s closest allies, Raúl announced that his government would ‘update the economic model’. It was a euphemism for laying off public sector workers and expanding the private sector. ‘Do not rely on the state to solve your problems; rely on yourself,’ was the government slogan. It turned the founding principles of the Revolution on their head.

Raúl promised that the market opening would lift everyone’s standard of living. ‘No one will be left behind.’ Many people were sceptical of the changes and opposed them. They feared losing their jobs, however poorly paid. They lacked the means or the inclination to start a small business. There was something else: many Cubans still believed in the promise of equality.

Los nuevos ricos and prominent economists opposed the new policies but for different reasons. They believed the economic opening was too halting and they called on the government to reduce regulations that held back the operation of market forces and slowed the rise of inequality.

The government’s pro-market policies culminated in a historic declaration. Raúl Castro announced that egalitarianism, widely considered the Revolution’s greatest achievement, was in fact one of its greatest errors. He said that guaranteeing all Cubans had a job and food discouraged individual initiative and promoted laziness. ‘The notion that Cuba is the only country in the world where you can live without working must be erased forever.’

The government's austerity programme provoked enough opposition for it to be scaled back, but public sector layoffs combined with private sector growth altered the character of society. In Fidel's final years the state employed approximately eighty-five per cent of the working population. When Raúl Castro stepped down fifteen years later, forty per cent of the labour force was employed in the private and cooperative sectors working as part time, casual workers. A minority were self-employed microentrepreneurs. The shift from public to private employment, from secure to casual labour, from collective to individualised work reflected the advance of market forces. It also contributed to an increase in racism as Cubans of African descent lost out to white Cubans in the emerging market economy.

When Raúl Castro passed the presidency to his chosen successor in 2018, some island Cubans had more economic freedoms than at any time since Fidel had come to power in 1959. They were free to run a small business, hire and fire workers, make money, go bankrupt, sell their house and buy another, run a restaurant, get hired and fired on a nod and a whistle, go back and forth between Havana and Miami, run contraband, sell sex, vacation in Paris, own a smartphone and live off remittances. Other Cubans encountered a different kind of freedom. They were free to be poor and hungry.

The government attempted to maintain single party politics, but conditions had changed. Fidel's power rested on charisma, the promise of equality, fear, and Cubans' sense that they were a part of something larger than themselves. Fidel's successors lacked the vision and the resources to rule in the old way. When it became clear that market forces would not improve the lives of more than a tiny minority of the population, the leadership relied on repression and emigration to maintain control.

This book tells the story of modern Cuba through the life stories of seven islanders of the post-Soviet generation. These men

and women grew up in the 1980s, a decade of relative comfort and equality. They came of age with the economic collapse of the 1990s, when they started questioning the ideology that governed their everyday lives. As young adults they faced poverty and shortages. A few encountered opportunities to make money and join the ranks of *los nuevos ricos*.

For six decades the Cuban government and Cuban exiles have portrayed the history of modern Cuba. This book tells Cubans' stories of their first-hand experiences of the Revolution.

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1

THE NARRATORS

Mario Sánchez Cortés is Director of Digital Technology at the Ministry of Industry. Born in 1975, he has lived his entire life in two rooms in a tenement in San Isidro, a poor, majority-Black barrio in Old Havana. Mario is an iconoclastic member of the Communist Party who felt free, in the interviews, to question the Party's aims and methods.

Alina Rodríguez Abreu is a filmmaker who shot to fame when her documentary about Havana's squatter settlements, *Buscandote Havana* (*Looking for you Havana*), was censored but subsequently won a prize at the Havana International Film Festival. Born in 1984, she lived on a tidy street in San Miguel del Padrón, an outlying Havana suburb known for poverty and criminality.

Juan Guillard Matus, a school dropout, is a rural jack-of-all-trades and talented raconteur. Born in 1968, he lives alone in a small cabin in Santa Ana de la Laguna, a two-hour drive east of Havana. The crux of Juan's life story is how he, an Afro-Cuban, felt the wounds of racism when he was growing up.

Esteban Cabrera Montes was a black marketeer and political rebel. Born in 1974, he lived with his brother in a 1950s subdivision on the outskirts of Havana in the house they inherited when their mother died in the late 1980s. Twice Esteban tried

to escape by crossing the Florida Straits on a raft. Leaving was an obsession and, finally, he succeeded.

Barbara Vegas was born in 1972 and lived most of her life in a house on the verge of collapse in a majority Black neighbourhood in Regla. After quitting or losing one job after another she was hired as a night guard at the nearby Casa de Cultura and subsequently rewarded for her hard work with a promotion. She was appointed the head of administration. When we first met Barbara, she was applying for membership in the Communist Party and despite the Party's preference that women not complain about their partner's failure to do housework or childcare Barbara did just that. Her husband's machismo, and the subsequent burden of having to do everything alone, is a central theme of her life story.

Alejandro Espada Betancourt was born in 1985 and grew up in a spacious ranch-style house in Boyeros, an outlying Havana district. His father lived part of the time with him and his mother, and part of the time with his wife and their two children in Vedado. It was a very Cuban arrangement. At the age of nine Alejandro was diagnosed with leukaemia. With severe shortages of medicine, his mother persuaded government officials to allow her to take him to Miami for treatment, where he fell in love with PlayStation. After returning to Cuba, and graduating from university first in his class in industrial engineering, Alejandro had a plum job at Cuba Ron, the state company overseeing the rum industry. On the side he ran a small business in the underground digital economy. In 2015, Alejandro moved to Miami to join his mother who had left some years earlier. But the primary motivation for the move was that he wanted to live better than his state job plus his illicit business would allow.

When I interviewed Alejandro in Miami in 2016 he was trying to put on a good front. Finding work, an affordable place to live, and a big second hand car were more difficult than he had imagined.

Pavel García Rojas is an opposition activist. Once a fervent Fidelista, his narrative is a conversion story in which his current political stand is a prism through which he remembers the past. I interviewed him many times between 2012 and 2018 in the apartment in El Cerro that he inherited from his father who left.

Born in 1976 and growing up in Miramar, a once elegant Havana neighbourhood, Pavel fondly remembered the egalitarianism of his youth. Following the fall of the Soviet bloc he had an emotional breakdown and questioned his faith in Fidel, in socialism, and in the USSR. After studying history in the University of Havana's distance learning programme, Pavel enrolled at the privately funded Escuela Internacional de Cine y Televisión (International Film and Television School), hoping to become a film director. Subsequently he worked as an administrator at the Film School.

At the end of 2014, Pavel's life changed dramatically. He was arrested en route to a demonstration, a political installation organised by the Cuban artist Tania Bruguera, and spent the next few days in jail. Pavel was fired by the Film School and ever since has been in and out of jail for a night or two for participating in anti-government events. Pavel writes regularly for online opposition publications to support his family.

Pseudonyms

I have changed the narrators' names for security and legal reasons. At the beginning and the end of each interview we asked the narrator to grant us permission to publish their life story, and we told them that we were changing their names. Although many narrators subsequently said they would be happy for me to use their real names, I decided not to.

Most of my Cuban colleagues on the project, the interviewers, asked me not to use their real names, and I have abided by their requests.

2

BACKSTORY

This book had a fortuitous beginning. At a conference celebrating Latin American women in 2000 I found myself sitting next to a smartly dressed woman at breakfast. She turned to me and said, ‘If you had funding for a large research project what would you do?’ I immediately said, ‘I would do an oral history study in Cuba. I want to know how ordinary people feel about living the Revolution.’ ‘What a coincidence,’ she said, ‘I am in charge of the Ford Foundation’s funding for Cuba.’

I first visited Cuba in 1972, when I was a graduate student studying Latin American history at Columbia University in my home town, New York City, and ever since wanted to conduct life history interviews on the island.

Several years after she and I met, I went to Havana to seek research collaborators and government authorisation. As the US embargo prohibited US foundations from funding Cubans’ salaries and expenses, the Swedish Agency for International Development fortunately had agreed to co-finance the study. I met with academics and writers in Havana and Santiago, and soon had a team of ten Cuban and three British research collaborators. What I didn’t have, and wouldn’t for another few years, was permission to do the study.

The Cuban researchers and I made the rounds of officials in Havana who might help us secure approval. A vice-minister who

asked to remain anonymous said, ‘Your project is beautiful. I’d like to help, but remember Oscar Lewis. In Cuba oral history is taboo.’

*

In 1968, Fidel Castro invited Oscar Lewis, a famous US anthropologist, to interview Cubans about their lives. ‘It would be an important contribution to Cuban history to have an objective record of what people feel and think... This is a socialist country. We have nothing to hide; there are no complaints or grievances I haven’t already heard,’ Castro reportedly told Lewis.¹ Lewis accepted, and with Ruth Lewis, his wife, and a team of young Cuban sociologists, he began interviewing people in several Havana neighbourhoods. Eighteen months later, in 1970, top Party officials abruptly terminated the project, and Raúl Castro accused Lewis of working for the CIA, though almost no one outside Cuba believed it. The most likely reason the study was closed was that Cubans acted exactly the way Fidel had predicted. They complained. They talked about their grievances. They described the government’s accomplishments and its faults.² The Lewises were told to leave soon after Fidel announced that the historic campaign to harvest a record-breaking ten million tons of sugar would fall short of its goal. Its failure was the government’s first major setback, and led many Cubans to question the revolutionary project. In that atmosphere, Cuban politicians did not want foreigners – or Cubans for that matter – interviewing people at random. Fidel still wanted an oral history of life in the Revolution, and in 1975 asked his close friend Gabriel García Márquez to write one. After a year of research, García Márquez abandoned the project, apparently telling friends that what Cubans said did not fit the book he wanted to write.³

In 2004, after umpteen attempts to get the project approved, I was on the verge of calling it quits when teammate Julio César

González Pajes suggested we appeal to Mariela Castro, Raúl Castro's daughter and the country's leading champion of LGBT rights. 'She has a reputation for fighting lost causes,' he said. The next day we met in her office at the National Centre for Sex Education (CENESEX), and she said without a moment's hesitation, 'Your project is exciting. I can't promise I can get it approved, but I will try.'

While we were waiting, the team met to work out exactly what we would do if the project went ahead. We decided in which provinces we would work and how we would select narrators. We agreed to conduct largely unstructured interviews because we wanted narrators to talk about what was important to them, not what we thought was important, and to start off each interview with a deceptively simple request, 'Please tell us the story of your life.' We conducted pilot interviews and drew up a short questionnaire to gather information about their family, education and work.

In 2005, one year after we first approached Mariela Castro, the project was approved. It was inaugurated at a ceremony in the Aula Magna of the University of Havana, and highlights of the event were broadcast on TV.⁴

We quickly discovered that many of the plans we drew up sitting around a table were not doable, and we ended up interviewing pretty much wherever and whoever we could. We improvised. At first I thought improvisation was a problem; soon I realised it was also a strength. We learned from our mistakes and adjusted the way we did things as we went along. About half of the team located interviewees through informal networks of acquaintances, relatives and co-workers, and half through official channels. The results of this two-track selection process surprised us. Although people said that Cuban society was deeply divided between supporters and opponents of the government, we learned that the divide was greatly exaggerated. Facing common

hardships, the majority of the people we interviewed expressed similar hopes and grievances.

Another unexpected discovery was that so many people were willing to tell their life stories pretty much the way they remembered them. We had anticipated that interviewees would self-censor, and many did at the beginning. But telling the story of your life is often cathartic and many narrators said words to the effect, *I never said this to anyone before, but it feels good to say it*. We promised the narrators we would disguise their identity; we also reminded them that in Cuba anonymity only goes so far. Neighbours might inform. State officials might discover who they are.

Their openness generated problems. After listening to the black marketer Esteban's interviews, Mariela Castro suspended the project. The ghost of Oscar Lewis kept me awake that night, and a week later I left Cuba not knowing when I might be back. Six months on I received a message from Mariela saying it was possible we could negotiate an amicable accord. When we met in Havana, she said the study could continue, but under less formal arrangements. I and half of the team accepted her conditions and we resumed interviewing, though less frequently. I took advantage of the shuffle to expand the pool of interviewers by asking younger, less politically attached, researchers to work on the project. Although I did not know it at the time, most of the Cubans I first invited to join the team were members of the Communist Party.

From 2004 to 2018 we interviewed 124 Cubans, some of them numerous times, Cubans living in the provinces of Havana, Artemisa, Santiago, Matanzas, Holguin, Sancti Spiritus, Bayamo and Granma. Approximately half of the narrators were from the City of Havana and its outlying districts.

When we began the project in 2004, many narrators believed that conditions in the country would improve. I didn't know

then that we would be recording interviews over a span of fifteen years, and that taken together they would be a chronicle of the transformation of the Cuban Revolution.

Eventually, the audio interviews and electronic transcripts will be publicly available.

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12
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Endnotes

Chapter 2

1. Lewis, Ruth M. 'Foreword', in Oscar Lewis, Ruth M. Lewis, and Susan M. Rigdon (eds), *Four Men, Living the Revolution: An Oral History of Contemporary Cuba*, Urbana and Chicago Illinois, University of Illinois Press, 1977, pp. viii–xi.
2. Ruth Lewis, the project co-director, wrote, 'Was it possible to record an honest, believable life history in socialist Cuba? ... We believe the life histories ... are as honest and revealing as those we have collected elsewhere... The advantages of a long autobiography [is it] allows the basic personality and outlook of the informant to emerge.' Lewis, 'Foreword', in Lewis, Lewis and Rigdon, *Four Men*, 1977, p. xxviii.
3. Gerald Martin, Lecture at the University of Southampton, 26 April 2010. See his book *Gabriel García Márquez: A Life*, London and NY: Bloomsbury and Alfred A. Knopf, 2009; Jon Lee Anderson, 'The Power of Gabriel García Márquez', *The New Yorker*, 27 September 1999, pp. 56–71.
4. Mariela Castro, Paul Thompson, dubbed the father of oral history, and Miguel Barnet, author of *Biography of a Runaway Slave*, gave the keynote speeches. See them on the Cuban Voices project website. www.southampton.ac.uk/cuban-oral-history

Chapter 3

1. Discurso pronunciado por Fidel Castro Ruz, Presidente de la República de Cuba, en el acto por el aniversario 60 de su ingreso a la universidad, efectuado en el Aula Magna de la Universidad de La Habana, el 17 de noviembre de 2005. www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/2005/esp/171105e.html

Part 1: The 1980s

1. In 2018, the wage ratio in the United Kingdom was 201:1 and 265:1 in the US www.statista.com/statistics/424159/pay-