

The Body and Its Politics in Cuba of the Nineties

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The Body Was a Festival

There was a time when Cuba was a festival and the Cuban body proclaimed itself socialist. At that time I was thirteen. Fidel and his young bearded troops crossed the island in caravans from the mountains of the east to the other side and entered Havana triumphantly. Dazzled peasants, heroes and heroines of the sierra, poured into the city. The main headquarters of the dictatorship was converted into a school and called Ciudad Libertad (Freedom City). A white dove rested on the shoulder of the leader. Soon the people (workers, intellectuals, peasants, students, housewives) wore army fatigues. In long early mornings, girls and boys stood guard, with old Mauser rifles on our shoulders, over the sites conquered by the Revolution.

Then there was an invasion in reverse: Leaving the city for the countryside were tens of thousands of young literacy teachers who climbed mountains and hiked over fields instructing those who didn't know how to read and write; but at the same time, they also learned and were transformed by their passage into unknown territory. The neighbors didn't recognize them when, a year later, they returned to their homes, thin and mus-

cular, their uniforms reddened by the earth, garlands of seeds around their necks, and with an air of confidence mixed with sadness. Enormous and varied cultural crossings engendered in the Cuba of the sixties a democratic, egalitarian, dignified, and communal body. To march to the Plaza of the Revolution was another festival. Those millions of us who spoke there with our leaders created a stage on which it seemed that history was being made for all time. City people learned to work the land and to recognize trees, animals, and strange customs. Sunday after Sunday, sweating and crushed together in precarious forms of transportation, on the verge of asphyxiation, we left the city to cut sugarcane and weed fields. I was scrawny, sixteen years old, and middle class, and with my new friends, the happy knights of the people. We were stevedores in the ports and bricklayers in the new schools, built, as the poet said, "by the same hands that caress you." And the stevedores, the bricklayers, the peasants, and the guerrilla fighters soon installed themselves at the desks of the university. We threw everyone in our world into reverse gear: We the "educated" were thick-headed, and the "humble" moved about like kings.

At the end of those years, Che was killed, and then Allende, and three generations of Cubans cried without being able to hide our tears. In a brutal way, a part of us was lost that has been missing since then: the body of a fighter that we pictured torn apart by bullets, raped, or violated, its gaze perhaps suspended and helplessly exhausted.

And it was thus that the socialist body was set up; in this friction and disorder of diverse identities, in conflict and understanding, in tensions between diverse classes, races, ages, and sexes who, for the most part, shared the same project. In the deep memory of our culture there remains, I believe, the treasure of the ductile body, expert in risk, given to solidarity, blessed with Mackandal's gift of metamorphosis, and crazy enough to take deep breaths in a truck with no windows, the Sunday truck, or on a milk train or an overloaded cart, which taught us what every good actor and dancer knows: that the organic performance, the one that produces real action (and is not necessarily realist), arises when the most difficult path is chosen; that profound coherence, which is truth in the act, touches chaos at one of its extremes.

But time passed, and some part of that ductile socialist body with the stability/instability of a loose cord, of fear and joy commingled, froze. We were taught to sacrifice invention for the sake of a myth called "unity," or, rather, "ideological firmness." From the mid-sixties on, an incipient culture of dogma came to confuse participation with speaking in chorus. The rebels

and critics, meaning almost every one of us, unwillingly began a new process of learning. We were taught that the worst sin was to commit an error (it was called a "historical error"). To err was prohibited. We socialist Cubans, who were ourselves a living historical error, the scandal of the manuals of Marxism-Leninism, were prohibited from committing errors! Popular mobilization slowly began to change character, and there was no longer that feverish interchange between heterogeneous subjects, but more an ordered and linear march toward the "goal," a subjection to the structure, a delegation of the power of the multitude to those in central authority. The dance began to transform itself. The minuet began to displace the conga.

This, however, sounds very clear-cut, but it wasn't that obvious. A Cuban is a very complex, divided being, never entirely satisfied. In Cuba, it should not be forgotten that during slavery there were runaway slaves. And in the national soul there is also a runaway slave. Many a socialist runaway slave is still wandering around out there!

This idea of a socialist *cubanía* (Cuban identity), not so easily decipherable, nor as univocal as some believe, could be associated with the notion of the compound body elaborated by the North American Marxist writer Randy Martin. According to Martin, the compound body generates social scenarios in which a multiplicity of differences interlace. This requires, therefore, a theoretical instrument that helps to think the physical constitution of complex social relations. This body is not single but multiple, not a being but a principle of association that rejects the categorical division between the self and the society, between the personal and the mediated, between presence and absence.

The compound body is always/already in movement. It is the work between the differences that constitutes it. This mobile body creates scenarios of adjustment, resistance, or subversion in the face of the dominant logics. It is our potential for obedience or revolution.

Every social process consists then, for Martin, in the incarnation (flesh, desire, strength) of this multiplicity, in the in-corporation of this swarm-like dynamic. The idea of a compound body offers a way of thinking about politics (and eventually socialism) in terms of the question Martin formulates for us: How is the difference between those united in the nation to be worked out? Put another way: How to mobilize the oppositional-creative potential of the body, and promote a democratic relation between differences in such a way that that overflow of energies constructs a project, achieves some level of totality and coherence? (Here I understand the word *project* in the sense of desire, mobilized toward the accomplishment of some kind of alternative

sociality.) One would have to rethink socialism, which will be socialist only if it is democratic, as a *mise-en-scène* and an egalitarian coordination of diverse affiliations and cultures oriented toward liberation. The critical and creative movements of the compound body generate structure and authorities, and this puts the socialist state before the paradox that the only strategy that guarantees the democratic orientation of the project, that is, the strategy of stimulating the work of the compound body, is, at the same time, the one that relativizes the state's power of control and that, therefore, also weakens the sacred character every form of power tends to attribute to itself.

And the Crack Widened

It might be useful to put beside Martin's idea of the compound body Victor Turner's well-known anthropological concept of social drama. According to Turner, social drama occurs when the flow of life in the community is interrupted by a sequence of events that alters its normalcy. This "dissident" sequence channels desires and tries to introduce values distinct from the ones consecrated by the traditional order. According to Turner (I am paraphrasing), the first phase of a social drama would be the breach (or "crack") and consists of a dissident faction materializing some transgressions (violation of a taboo, protests, behaviors that in some way alter the norm). The crack, as it widens, sets off an alarm for the legitimate order. There is a sense of uneasiness. The second phase is the crisis as such, when the community is clearly divided in two, and the leaders of one or the other band recruit followers. Then fights break out, perhaps physical confrontations and violence. Turner notes that these processes, because they imply an intense destabilizing of the social order and of the codes that allow identification of the norm, give way to a special liminal parenthesis in the life of the community. This liminality is configured as a shifting frontier zone where each value remains momentarily suspended, and anything can happen. Oscillating practices and thoughts, which mix the old and the new, consensus and outrage, proliferate. The experience of the community is tinged with ambivalence and hybridization. From the appearance of the crack and its sequel of crisis, the traditional order multiplies the confirmative rites in order to remind the community of the sacred values on which it is constructed. In the third stage, reparation, the crisis is settled or loses intensity. The confirmative rites continue, possibly accompanied by rituals of punishment, for example, public trials to disqualify the rebel faction. The fourth and last phase (which does not always occur) is schism. If it does not

succeed in imposing itself, the opposing band abandons the territory, physically or symbolically; it migrates, and in the other space it will try to promote its model of alternative sociality.

In the eighties, cracks and uneasiness were more and more evident in Cuban society. Three decades of relative stability had not transpired without consequences. The potent and cohesive body was born from the festival of the sixties. Twenty years later, something gray was clearly installed in the Cuban society: sovietization, dogma, authoritarianism. With the years, the socialist festival lost its shine.

In 1986, a character in the play *Accidente*, by the Escambray theater group, said, "Lately, we have dedicated ourselves to producing steel and we have stopped producing human beings."

That same year, 1986, the Cuban state launched the so-called process of rectification of errors and negative tendencies, whose ultimate objective seemed to be a broader democratization of Cuban socialism. It was in the midst of this process (we will never know where it would have taken us) that an amazing break in the history of the twentieth century transformed all Cuban political scenarios. The Berlin Wall fell in 1989, and the Soviet Union liquidated itself in 1991. Overnight, Cuba lost 80 percent of its markets, and we were left alone, with no oil, no allies, no foreign currency, and no possibilities for imports or exports. The country, basically dependent on imports, was on the verge of collapse. A much broadened Council of State, presided over by Fidel, met daily throughout 1992 and 1993, and decided the means of distribution of the scarce material resources that remained. The survival of the country depended literally on what the most recent ship brought in its hold. This was so exactly—and dramatically—the case, that I fantasized at the time an image I can still conjure up today: an office furnished in mahogany, a very large window looking over the roofs of Old Havana, and in the background the open sea, placid and blue. From the window Fidel looks at the port with binoculars and identifies the ship that is just dropping anchor. Then, always standing, and being observed by his ministers of state, he picks up the telephone and gives instructions. He exchanges plain words with each minister, who are all very tense. Some stand. He is like Lenin at the Smolny Institute, taking the pulse of the nation, on the eve, in this case, of a catastrophe. In 1992, Cuba could acquire only a third of its usual imports, historically concentrated in food supplies and oil.

The crisis that Turner speaks about was precipitated. A high-stakes social drama began, which, as I write these pages, has not yet, in my view, ended.

In 1991 and 1992, the Cuban population lost weight in a disturbing way, and a serious epidemic of neuritis affected the vision and motor skills of thousands of people. Today, this strange illness still persists in Cuba, without being pandemic, and the state has kept in place preventive measures to fight it. Its outbreak, around 1991, is attributed to the sudden deterioration of nourishment, which touched all sectors of society, combined with the extraordinary increase in the physical expenditure required for day-to-day survival (something analogous to war situations or concentration camps, which was how much of the medical literature consulted at the time by Cuban researchers reported it). It goes without saying that the birthrate fell sharply, and since then this indicator (1.3 babies per family—who could be the .3?) has remained constant.

Of course, the United States hastened to reinforce its blockade. But what is also true is that the tragic destabilization that the potent and cohesive body of the sixties underwent at the beginning of the nineties had antecedents. Already it suffered from fissures and maladies. For decades, an endogenous dysfunction had been installing itself in the Cuban social body, which taught, and continues to teach today, the public and the private sides of our being to live separately. Frictions, sometimes very painful and always paradoxical, began to develop between the immense creative potential of the people, encouraged by the Revolution, and the structures implemented by the state. This dysfunction operated in diverse arenas—political, economic, ideological, cultural, and spiritual. Not by chance, a significant number of characters in Cuban drama and dance of the eighties committed suicide or went crazy on stage or used their naked bodies to make subversive statements. Art, in its anticipatory character, incarnated the drama of this body, on the one hand potent and cohesive, on the other divided, impaired, sometimes desperate and fragmented, subject to a profound conflict with itself.

During the first half of the nineties, theater and its public, more numerous than ever, provided a space for complex critical reflection about visceral questions of belonging and identity that, in the midst of the evident crisis, official discourse, deliberately simplistic and resistant to any kind of unauthorized problematization, left abandoned. It was in this context that a new slogan began to appear in Cuban society, apparently justified but underneath consciously disqualifying all critical thought: “This is not a time for theories.”

I recall, among the dozens of performances of this period, *Fast Food*, a dance solo by the great artist Marianela Boán. The public was gathered

outside a well-known theater, waiting to enter the auditorium. Suddenly, the dancer came through the doorway and displayed her thin body, which seemed to the onlookers to be charged with a strange excess of energy. She carried a dinner plate and a metal spoon, rough, prisonlike utensils, which, of course, were empty. The choreography borrowed something from those sterile objects. Her body, that of a virtuoso dancer, broke up and recomposed itself fleetingly in a minimalist combat that posed strength and assertion against tiny, microscopic movements. And this incandescent body executed at the end the horrendous, impeccable act of eating its own fingers. This final gesture concentrated all our energies, all our greed and our courage, as we watched. Pale, in black leotards, without makeup, her performance said: hunger. We all had different hungers, but we accepted the offering of her vigor and her rigor, played out on the very threshold between street and the stage.

The Deflated Bicycle

As in *Fast Food*, projected at the beginning of the nineties with incredible intensity was a socialist body that, concentrating its energy to the limit, acted in all ways imaginable in order to survive, many times with exemplary dignity. And this body, which today is no longer famished, since the country has succeeded in initiating a slow economic recovery since 1995, continues to find multiple strategies of resistance; but it cannot fully mobilize its socialist, critical, and communal potential. It does not always make the history it desires.

In 1990 and 1991, bicycles inundated the city and transformed the landscape. Distances and time changed entirely throughout the country. One went to work or to the theater by bicycle or on foot. I recall having arrived, like almost everyone else, dead tired and on foot at a performance of the *Ópera ciega* by Victor Varela in 1991. A year and a half later, in 1993, under similar circumstances, I attended the subversive *Niñita querida* by Carlos Díaz, and *Manteca*, and many other theatrical or dance performances, which we went to as if to church, seeking to take communion, on our uncomfortable, rickety possessions.

Millions of people climbed onto heavy Chinese bicycles in 1990, but, while still popular today, they aren't quite the phenomenon they were back then. In 2000, with the introduction of new economic measures that have dollarized the economy and encouraged foreign investment, there are more private and business vehicles in Havana now than in the last forty years, but

public transportation continues to be inadequate, as it has been since 1989. The self-employed plumber who carries his family of four on his Chinese bike, the brilliant doctor, the engineer who is also a Popular Power delegate (one of the best), the clerk, the actress, the teacher, the researcher, my good friend (who rides 40 kilometers each way every day, which his skeleton supports good-naturedly)—all continue to ride their bikes. I would say that it is not for the love of sport that these Cuban bicycles keep rolling. The precious energy of many people is squandered under the same tropical sun that puts the satisfied tourist to sleep on our beaches. Covering dozens and dozens of kilometers each day, for more than ten years now, Cubans have become ecologists in spite of themselves. Recently, a curious new professional has been added to the caravan of bike riders: the bicycle-taxi driver (*bicitaxista*), who charges in dollars, who often has a university degree, and who, using sheer muscle power, takes the same delighted tourist of the previous scene, now wrapped in the arms of his girlfriend for hire (*jinetera*) for a ride along the Malecón, through Miramar or Old Havana. False ecology. This body produces evil. I would say that the Cuban bicycle of the nineties contaminates.

Our Hand Hurts from Waving Good-Bye So Much

Traditional historiography scorns the quotidian. Because, in fact, it can't capture the everyday, as it was. It can't re-present it. Nevertheless, there are rhythms, tensions, attacks, and convolutions—vibrations of the body that make history. Therefore, I will relate my own experiences of August 1994 on the long Havana coastline, on the wharfs of the old idyllic Almendares River, on the white beaches to the east of the capital. That summer, we swimmers had to move to one side in the water to get out of the way of the rafts of the *balseros* setting out toward the open sea. Very young navigators or whole families abandoned the island on these precarious vessels. Responding to the maneuvers to destabilize the regime plotted in Washington or Miami, the Cuban authorities did not interfere; it was all the same to them. They allowed the *balseros* to depart on their own terms and at their own risk. And our hands hurt from waving so many good-byes. We wished people we didn't know a favorable wind, people exposed to death, separated and vulnerable, beyond any political position. A whirlwind of scarcity, disillusion, and illusion threw them off the island, their skin daubed with grease against the sun on those mythological rafts, made from anything, totally picturesque and pathetic. I made myself stay there in the water, watching

the *balseiros*, so as to experience the concrete materiality, the blood pulse of belonging to a country, the cement that binds the nation. Brotherhood, anguish, sand, tears, profound silence, blue sky. From that moment on, in the theater performances of the nineties, actors and dancers raised their hands in farewell and gazed for a long time at the horizon. The Cuban of the nineties was always going away. His or her soul remains divided in or outside Cuba. And I say *soul* because I can't find a better way of naming this hand that hurts us and feels like it will fall off from waving so many good-byes.

The Flying Cat

The copulation of the cat with the marten
Doesn't engender a cat
With Shakespearean and star-spangled fur,
Nor a marten with phosphorescent eyes
It produces the flying cat.
—José Lezama Lima

In the nineties, there was a need for rituals. I will mention only the most recent: the parade of millions of people along the Malecon, mobilized in all parts of the island to demand the return of Elián González, which went on for seven months. All of you know the story.

I quote the testimony of a Havana father: "My boys, 16 and 17 years old, who are in high school in Havana, attend staged meetings and marches dressed in T-shirts that endlessly repeat, depersonalizing, automatizing him, the face of a boy. My children march in military fashion surrounded by their teachers while someone, loudspeaker in hand, repeats to them the only slogan allowed, which they must shout only at the moment when he orders them. The person with the loudspeaker insists on the pause so that the slogan can be heard clearly: 'Save / Elián.'"

The return of Elián to Cuba on 28 June 2000 ended the most gigantic and protracted ritual of "loyalty to fatherland" ever to take place on the island. But there have been others, on other occasions. Recently, I heard on Chilean radio that Cuba's Council of State conferred on Elián's father the Order of Carlos Manuel de Céspedes for his extraordinary efforts in bringing his son home.

In the mid-nineties, for the first time anyone could remember, Fidel wore civilian clothes. Forty years of olive drab uniforms fell under the weight of the inevitable mixtures of the liminal, ambiguous, and frontier zones set loose by a social drama.

Today, the rituals of pairing the cat and the marten are many in Cuba. The latest, most visible example is the meeting of Fidel and Pope John Paul II. The Pope offered a mass before more than 1 million people in the Plaza of the Revolution in January 1998. On that memorable day, the Roman Catholic Pope blessed the fervent multitude at his feet, behind whose backs rose the huge mural of Che Guevara that presides over the Plaza. The Pope thus stood facing Che, and with his back to the famous statue of José Martí and the tall tower which is his monument.

Alberto Korda, who took the classic black-and-white photograph known throughout the world of Che with his beret, star, and mystic gaze, was in the crowd that day and captured the following image in color: the mural of Che in the background, his features very visible, outlined in metal; in the foreground white, black, and mulatto faces. High above their heads is the image of a Catholic Virgin; a Cuban flag, which some arm raises, appears in the midst of the heads, Che, and the Virgin. The sound track of this superproduction achieves a similar impact: The Pope (“the old man,” as the Cuban people lovingly called him) dialogues with the human sea, as Fidel has done so many times before, from the same place, breaking protocol and responding to the overly familiar crowd that chants, “John Paul, amigo, the people are with you,” “We see, we feel, the Pope is real.” The same habitual choruses are directed toward Fidel but with different names. Fidel, in civilian clothes, smiles soberly from a discreet location to the left of the main altar. This story is called, in honor of the image in Lezama’s poem, “The Flying Cat.”

The study of today’s Cuba from the angle of the body and its political connotations intrigues me. I hope to return to these and other themes, which, for the moment, I only wanted to outline, unless my hand may also have to wave good-bye. One would need to think about, for example, the hypothesis that the nineties engendered a “loose” body, not only in the sense of freed or untied but also in the sense of “escaped,” thrown out of gear, in some way autonomous or alone. This is how, at a certain level of analysis, formations such as the self-seeking or prostituted body, the body of illegality and “hustling” (*bisneo*), and also of anomie, appear to me. The body of exile. The loose body generates multiple scenarios, from the picaresque to self-exile to madness and suicide. And it occurs to me that a usurping, chameleonlike body also proliferates, which opportunistically installs and deletes identities: a chameleon body that goes to meetings of the Committee for the Defense of the Revolution with a cellular phone—a totally unobtainable object for ordinary Cubans—in order to make its nou-

veau riche status clear and “to kill with technology” our picaresque pre-modernity, which in return asks this yuppy: What do you “plug” that into? There is, I believe, an aspect of this loose or dislocated, usurping or travestied, body that has renovative and critical force, that is subversive and has allure. Besides, as a friend warns me, perhaps it is not as dislocated as it seems; it forms networks, links, at its level. But that deserves another discussion.

What have I been trying to tell you? That we socialists no longer know how to “make” socialism. That is not news. “And yet it moves.” The Cuban body, the bodies of men and women, has passed through a difficult apprenticeship. Now, perhaps, we need confidence in our own strengths or we will misidentify them. Some—many, probably—are tired and prefer not to think, and walk to the beat of the loudspeaker for reasons of prudence or routine. But a community that has given so much democratizing energy in this world (and perhaps other generations I will not live to see) will find a new way to ride the bicycle, and the bicycle will become again a matter of play and technique (that is freedom), and we socialist cyclists will be able to tangle with and crash into each other without feeling guilty, impelled toward ourselves, directly through the eye of the needle, pedaling toward what will be the ecology of freedom rather than the ecology of necessity.

(A baroquely decorated bicycle appears on stage, and I invite the audience, whoever so desires, to get on. I get on, we get on many bicycles, and leave the conference room pedaling.)

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