UNIT 10: The Cuban Revolution 1959-1962
TEACHER GUIDE

▶ OBJECTIVES

_Students will:_

1. Explain why revolution occurred in Cuba
2. Describe basic changes which occurred in the Cuban economy and society during the initial years of the revolution
3. Appreciate the diversity of views on Cuba and how these are affected by a person's life experiences and social class

▶ QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. [pre-reading] If there was an economic revolution in the United States that prevented anyone from being very rich or very poor, how would you be affected? Would you support such a change, or oppose it? What would your concerns be?
2. Describe Cuba before the revolution. What was the main industry? Who lived well? Who suffered poverty?
3. How did the United States influence Cuban affairs before 1959? How did this affect life in Cuba?
4. List basic changes in Cuban society in the first few years of the revolution. For each, decide who gained from the change, who lost, and who was not affected.
5. Why did Mercedes Millán feel she was worse off after the revolution? Why did Sara Rojas feel better off? Do you think more Cubans thought like Mercedes, or like Sara? Why?
6. How does socialism differ from capitalism?
7. In the poem “Tengo,” what do we know about the person who is speaking? What kind of life might he have led before the revolution? What is the most important change since then, from his perspective?
8. What is Lourdes Casal saying about Cuba in her poem?
9. What is a revolution? Think about revolutions which have happened in other countries such as the United States, France, Haiti, Mexico, Russia, China, Nicaragua and Grenada. What did they have in common with the Cuban revolution? In what ways were they different? (See Activity #2)
10. Did your image of Cuba change as a result of the readings? How?

▶ SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

1. In the course of discussions for this unit, certain questions may emerge as especially challenging and divisive. Choose one question
which most concerns the class. (For example: Should a government place limits on how much property a person can own? Would there be a higher standard of living in Cuba if private industry was allowed? Even if people are living better, didn’t they lose their individual freedoms?)

Encourage the students to do additional reading on Cuba, as much as time allows (see Resources). Each student will then develop a one-paragraph position statement on the question. Group students with similar positions into teams and stage a debate. This exercise may be repeated for additional questions.

2. A senior high social studies or global studies class can do a comparative study of revolutions. Divide students into small groups and assign each group one of the countries listed in Question 8. Using research skills, students will find out about the revolution which took place in their assigned country. Questions to focus on:
   • What were the conditions in the country before the revolution?
   • Who wanted change? Who wanted things to stay the same?
   • Why did the revolutionaries succeed?
   • Did the revolution receive help from other countries?
   • How did the revolution change political structures in the country?
   • How did it change living conditions?
   • How did it change the country’s relations with the rest of the world?
   • What aspects of the society did not change after the revolution?
   • What kind of society exists in the country today?

3. Ask a few students to do an analysis of media coverage of Cuba that can be shared with the rest of the class. Examine articles about Cuba in newspapers and magazines, and television coverage if possible. For each example, ask: Who is the author? What sources of information does he/she use? How might this have affected the author’s perspective? What ideas about Cuba are stated? What ideas or assumptions are communicated without stating them directly? How could the author have obtained other points of view on the issues discussed?

Looking at the coverage as a whole, have students ask: What kind of sources are quoted or cited most often? What basic assumptions are taken for granted? What effect could this have on our image of Cuba? What might be the reasons for these media practices?

▶ RESOURCES

1. Hundreds of books have been written about the Cuban revolution, reflecting a wide range of perspectives. Some suggested sources:
   • Medea Benjamin, Joseph Collins and Michael Scott, No Free
Lunch: Food & Revolution in Cuba Today (Institute for Food and Development Policy, 1984). Examines Cuba's food and agricultural system as a way of assessing the revolution's achievements and problems. IFDP, 145 9th St., San Francisco, CA 94103.


- Philip Brenner, From Confrontation to Negotiation: U.S. Relations with Cuba (Westview, 1988). Examines the issues which separate the U.S. and Cuban governments, and argues for a change in U.S. policies.


INTRODUCTION

The Cuban Revolution 1959-1962

After the war of 1898, the United States became the dominant economic power in Cuba. American investors and corporations owned Cuban land, sugar mills, cattle ranches, banks, ports, mines, railways—even the telephone and power companies.

With so many profits at stake, U.S. officials kept close control over who ran Cuba. Gerardo Machado, a corrupt dictator nicknamed “the Butcher,” ruled from 1925 to 1933. After Machado was overthrown, Sergeant Fulgencio Batista took over as army chief of staff. With the support of the United States, Batista became the power behind a puppet presidency.

In 1952 Batista seized total power in a coup d’etat. He suspended the constitution, and jailed, exiled or killed hundreds of his opponents.

Under Batista’s rule, a few Cubans got rich while the majority lived in poverty. Havana glittered with luxury hotels, gambling casinos and houses of prostitution, some of them owned by U.S. organized crime figures. This was the Cuba that American tourists knew. But in the rural areas, where most Cubans lived, hunger, disease and joblessness were widespread. Medea Benjamin, Joseph Collins and Michael Scott describe these conditions in “On the Eve of Revolution.”

Fidel Castro, a former student leader at the University of Havana, was a lawyer who defended political prisoners and the poor. A year after Batista’s coup, he and others attacked the Moncada army barracks, hoping to set off a revolt against the dictator. The attack failed: Batista’s police captured the rebels and shot many of them.

The survivors, including Castro, eventually were released from prison. From camps in the Sierra Maestra mountains, they launched a guerrilla war to overthrow Batista.

Despite Batista’s abuses, U.S. officials viewed him as an anticommunist ally. They supplied him with weapons and military training. But Batista’s army and government had little support among the people. Many rural Cubans joined the rebels; trade unions and students organized support in the towns. Middle-class Cubans and even some wealthy businessmen and landowners turned against the dictator. In the early hours of January 1, 1959, Batista fled to exile.

The Early Years

The new government led by Castro and his allies moved quickly to reduce the gap between the rich and the poor. New laws placed a limit of 1000 acres on the amount of land that any individual Cuban could own. Property in excess of this limit was taken over by the government. One hundred thousand poor families received formal ownership of the lands they had rented or sharecropped. House rents were reduced by up to 50 percent.

Other policies of the new government aimed at racial equality. Facilities that had admitted only whites—private country clubs, beaches, nightclubs and other segregated places—were opened to all Cubans.

The new leaders also wanted to reduce foreign control over Cuba’s economy. To do so, the government nationalized—took over—land owned by non-Cubans. To reduce Cuba’s dependence on the United States, the government signed trade agreements with Egypt, India, Japan and socialist bloc countries. The most important was an agreement with the Soviet Union, providing for an exchange of Cuban sugar for Soviet oil.
Rebel forces enter Havana on New Year's Day, 1959. Sign says: "We are Cubans, and today more than ever, proud to be. Now or never, long live Free Cuba. Forward, Cubans!"
The land reform had taken away American-owned property in Cuba, while the trade agreements showed Cuba reaching out to the socialist world. U.S. officials and business leaders became alarmed. When the Soviet oil arrived in Cuba, the U.S.-owned refineries refused to refine it. The Cuban government nationalized the refineries. The United States retaliated by canceling Cuba's sugar quota—its right to sell sugar to the United States at preferential prices. Cuba nationalized the remaining U.S.-owned mills, factories and other holdings. The United States cut off exports to Cuba except for food and medicine.

Although many Cubans applauded the Castro government’s actions, some opposed them. Soon after taking power, the new government executed several hundred people who had worked for Batista and who were believed guilty of corruption, torture or murder. Many other Batista collaborators fled to the United States. Wealthy Cubans, especially those whose properties had been taken over, also left Cuba. These groups formed the core of an exile community which strongly opposed Castro.

The Castro government made clear that it would not permit any opposition to the revolution within Cuba. It allowed only one political party. Of course, neither Machado nor Batista had permitted a political opposition to function. But some Cubans were disappointed that the new government did not install a multiparty system with private ownership of property. Many of them also left.

In March 1959, two months after Batista’s fall, President Eisenhower had ordered the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to prepare a plan to overthrow Castro. To make the attack appear Cuban, the CIA recruited Cuban exiles in the United States and trained them for an assault. Aware of the planned invasion, the Cuban government prepared its defense. On April 17, 1961, the CIA’s exile army landed at the Bay of Pigs, on Cuba’s southern coast. Cuban troops turned them back in 72 hours.

The failed invasion did not end U.S. hopes of overthrowing Castro. For the next decade, the CIA, Cuban exiles and American organized crime figures carried out sabotage and assassinations targeted against Cuba. The U.S. also imposed a total trade embargo, cutting Cuba off from vital supplies of food and medicine. These efforts did not succeed in overthrowing Castro, but they made the task of economic development within Cuba more difficult. Faced with hostility from its powerful neighbor, Cuba increased its reliance on the Soviet Union as ally and protector.

The Impact of Revolution: Cuban Voices

By the end of 1960, about 80 percent of the Cuban economy was socialized, or in government hands. The Cuban state owned and ran sugar mills, oil refineries, factories and banks. The profits from these enterprises were used to develop the country. The government built roads, schools, medical clinics and houses. Education and medical care became free to everyone.

These measures meant that most people had more money in their pockets than before the revolution. They could buy more—more food, more clothing. This soon led to problems as the supply of goods did not increase fast enough to meet the new demand. Many things hindered production. The U.S. trade embargo cut off the supply of raw materials and spare parts; many skilled professionals and technicians left the country. Poor planning and management, and even bad weather played a part. Within a few years, food shortages were a serious problem.

Before the revolution, if an item was in short supply, its price rose, and only richer people could buy it. The new government preferred to share scarce goods fairly without regard to income. This new system was called rationing, and it was applied to essential goods such as milk, meat, shoes and clothing. A rationed item was priced low, so everyone could afford it; but each household could buy only its share and no more.
How Cubans viewed the new system depended in part on their circumstances before the revolution. Those who had lived comfortably, like Mercedes Millán, were now less well-off. They were unhappy with the changes in their lives.

But a majority of Cubans had been poor before the revolution. For them, conditions improved. Sara Rojas, whose family had endured grinding poverty and hunger, now could give her children an adequate diet. With education free, students from even the poorest families could go to college, opening up a new world of opportunity for Cubans like 17-year-old Genoveva Hernández Díaz. And for the many people of color in Cuba, like Leticia Manzanares, the end of racial segregation meant a different life.

Perhaps the deepest change was the sense among ordinary Cubans that they—not foreigners or wealthy Cubans—now owned the country. Nicolás Guillén, Cuba’s leading poet until his death in 1988, captured this feeling in his well-known poem “Tengo.”

Equally important was pride in having ended extreme poverty. Although Cubans continued to lack many things, no one went hungry or died for lack of medical care. For a third world country it was an astounding achievement, and one which many wealthier countries could not claim. Díogora Alonso, a founding member of the Federation of Cuban Women, expresses this joy in “Two Poems for My Granddaughter.”

For many Cubans, even those who disagreed with some actions of the revolution, there was also pride in standing up to foreign control. Cubans had fought to abolish slavery and Spanish colonial rule. They had rid the country of a U.S.-supported dictator. Now, they would work to solve the hardest problem of all—building a society that would give all Cubans the chance for a better life. Poet Lourdes Casal, a Cuban who lived in the United States until her death in 1981, reflects on this proud history in “I Live in Cuba.”

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**Cuba in the Caribbean**

Revolutionary Cuba showed that an underdeveloped country could triumph over hunger, disease and illiteracy. It also showed that small nations in Latin America and the Caribbean did not have to bend to the will of the powerful United States.

At the same time, the Cuban example demonstrated how difficult it was for countries which produced just one major export—such as sugar—to break away from dependence on that crop. Nor had revolutionary Cuba achieved self-reliance. Soviet aid and trade continued to be crucial to its economy.

As newly-independent Caribbean nations faced the task of development, some people argued that Cuba’s radical reforms could provide a model. Others disagreed, pointing to Cuba’s tightly-controlled political system. In addition, U.S. disapproval made it difficult for countries to consider Cuban-style changes. Yet the revolution’s survival, so close to the United States, continued to provoke admiration, hostility and controversy, and to provide a continuing reference point for other countries in the region.
On the Eve of Revolution

I, Black Simón Caraballo, and I have nothing to eat today. My wife died in childbirth, My house was taken away.
I, Black Simón Caraballo, now sleep in a vestibule; I have a brick for a pillow, my bed is on the ground. I don’t know what to do with my arms, but I will find something to do:
I, Black Simón Caraballo, have my fists clenched, have my fists clenched, and I need to eat!

—Nicolás Guillén, “The Ballad of Simón Caraballo”

Observers around the world were surprised in 1959, when, after only two years of fighting, a ragtag revolutionary army of fewer than two thousand managed to defeat a well-equipped army of thirty thousand. But a look at the social, economic, and political life in prerevolution Cuba will help explain why the vast majority of Cubans from all classes supported the war against the Batista dictatorship, even if only a handful of them actually took up arms.

Detractors of the Cuban revolution commonly assert that Cuba was already fairly developed before the revolution. Cuba’s per capita income in the 1950s—about $500 per person—was higher than that of any other Latin American country except oil-exporting Venezuela and industrialized Argentina. Cuba’s “food availability” was outdone by few other third world countries. Even for “meat availability”—the ultimate benchmark in the West of prosperity on the food front—the island nation could boast of 70 pounds per person annually, about twice as much as Peru.

But for Simón Caraballo and the 1.5 million other landless farm workers, marginal farmers, and jobless Cubans, such per capita figures would have seemed a cruel taunt. Half of rural families tried to get by on incomes of 45 pesos per month. And while 70 pounds of meat were theoretically “available” annually for every Cuban, in fact only 4 percent of farmworker families ate meat regularly, according to a 1956-57 Catholic University Association survey. Only 2 percent of the families consumed eggs on a regular basis. Only 11 percent regularly drank milk.

In prerevolution Cuba, as in most parts of the world today, diet depended on income. If you had money, you could eat as well as anyone in the United States or Western Europe. But in prerevolution Cuba, there was tremendous inequality in income distribution.

Since most Cubans lived in the countryside and tried to make a living from agriculture, control over land was a key factor. At the top of the economic ladder were the owners of the huge sugar plantations and cattle ranches which sprawled across the countryside. On the eve of the revolution, the largest 9 percent of all farm owners possessed 62 percent of the land, while 66 percent had only 7 percent. At the bottom were some one hundred thousand tenants, sharecroppers and squatters who owned no land at all.

Preventing landless people from “squatting” on land so they could grow their own food and make themselves less dependent on seasonal
wages was a "major concern" of the large landowners, according to a U.S. government report. In some areas, notably the Sierra Maestra where Castro set up camp during the war against Batista, squatters were driven off the land by armed agents of the landowners or even by the army itself.

For both rural and city dwellers, employment was critical. Some seven hundred thousand Cubans—one-third of the working population—were unemployed for most of the year. In addition to the landless farm workers, the poorest people included the unemployed in the shantytowns of Havana, Santiago and other cities. For them, life was a struggle for survival, living hand-to-mouth, doing odd jobs, washing cars, selling lottery tickets, stealing, or begging.

There were also, of course, the rich, the tiny minority with the lion's share of the income. Historian Hugh Thomas estimates that there existed more millionaires, per capita, in Cuba than anywhere else in Latin America. More Cadillacs were sold in Havana than any other city in the world in 1954.

The rich in the big cities lived in guarded residential areas, tropical versions of Chevy Chase or Beverly Hills such as the zone known as "El Country Club." "Society is to be found in the Yacht Club by day and the Casino by night," an American visitor wrote in 1946.

The Poor Majority

In the countryside, two-thirds of the houses were palm-thatched huts without toilets or even outhouses. Less than 3 percent of all rural houses had running water, and only one in every 14 families had electricity.

In the cities, the poor lived as squatters in makeshift shacks or paid high rents for cramped tenements called solares. Recent arrivals to the cities lived in slums with such names as Llega y Pon, "come and squat." Minimum sanitary facilities were often lacking. One-fifth of the families, with an average family size of five, lived in single rooms.

Literacy and schooling reflected the same inequalities as living conditions. Cuba in the 1950s boasted four universities, although they were closed down in response to faculty and student protest during the final two years of the Batista dictatorship. But open or closed, universities meant little to most Cubans. The World Bank's data showed that "while 180,370 children start the first grade, only 4,852 enter the eighth grade." By 1958, approximately one-half of Cuban children of primary school age (6 to 14 years) were not attending school at all.

Illiteracy was common: one out of four Cubans over ten years of age could not read and write. But this national average masked a significant rural/urban difference: illiteracy in the countryside was 42 percent, while it was 12 percent in urban areas.

Health services followed the same pattern of inequality. While Cuba had the highest ratio of hospital beds to population in the Caribbean, 80 percent were in the city of Havana. Havana province had 1 doctor for every 420 persons, but rural Oriente province had 1 for every 2,550. Unsanitary housing and poor diets made curable diseases widespread.

These enormous inequalities meant that while the middle and upper classes lived well, the vast majority of Cubans needlessly suffered from hunger and poverty—despite the fact that Cuba was a nation of rich natural endowment.

Dependency on the United States

Up to now we have only hinted at what was a major stumbling block for Cuba's development: its extreme dependency on the United States.

The Platt Amendment, forced into the Cuban constitution in 1901 during U.S. military occupation, gave the United States the right to intervene whenever it decided a government was not "adequate." The United States landed troops in Cuba in 1906, 1912, and 1917. Even after the Platt Amendment was eliminated from the constitution in 1934,
the U.S. government remained the dominant influence in Cuban politics.

Much of the Cuban economy was in the hands of U.S. companies and U.S. investments ran the gamut: manufacturing, commerce, petroleum refining, agriculture, mining, transportation, electricity, tourism.

Americans owned nine of Cuba's ten largest sugar mills in 1955, produced 40 percent of the island's sugar, and controlled 54 percent of the total grinding capacity. Cuban branches of U.S. banks held almost a quarter of all bank deposits. The telephone service was a monopoly of American Telephone and Telegraph. The U.S.-owned Cuban Electric Company had a virtual monopoly on electric power—and charged rates even higher than

Before the revolution, an estimated 25% of Cubans were illiterate. In 1961 the new government launched a literacy campaign. Here, a 13-year-old boy teaches an older man to read and write in Oriente Province.
those in the United States.

Standard Oil, Shell and Texaco refined imported crude oil. Procter and Gamble, Colgate-Palmolive, Firestone, Goodrich, Goodyear, Coca-Cola, Pepsi-Cola, Canada Dry, and Orange Crush all had subsidiaries in Cuba. U.S. citizens, often connected to the Mafia, also owned many of the island’s hotels and ran the thriving gambling casinos and drug trade.

Every year the U.S. Congress made the single most important decision to the Cuban economy—the “quota” of Cuban sugar that could be imported into the U.S. market at the relatively high prices of U.S. domestic producers. Over a 35-year period, Cuba exported about 60 percent of its sugar production to the United States. Cuba’s economy was not only dependent on a single crop but on a single customer.

Under the U.S. quota system Cuba received a comparatively good price for its sugar (though for only a part of its total production). But there was little prospect that Cuba’s share of the U.S. market would grow. Indeed, throughout the 1940s and 1950s, the amount of Cuban sugar purchased by the United States consistently declined.

Given the gross inequalities in Cuban society, the poverty and hunger, the disease and illiteracy, and the astonishing waste of agricultural resources, it should come as no surprise that thousands and thousands of Cubans from every walk of life took to the streets to welcome Fidel’s band of revolutionaries on New Year’s Day, 1959.


Vocabulary

**landless farm worker**: someone who does not own land, but works as a field hand for wages. Traditionally a very poorly paid job.

**marginal farmer**: someone who owns a small amount of land and grows just enough to survive

**peso**: unit of Cuban currency

**tenant**: someone who grows crops on land belonging to another, and pays rent for using the land

**sharecropper**: someone who grows crops on land belonging to another, and gives the land owner part of the crop in exchange

**squatter**: someone who moves onto vacant lands for the purpose of living or farming

**shantytown**: area of poor shacks
MERCEDES MILLAN

"These aren't good times we're living through...

My life has changed so much! Before, we had everything, now we don't. I stay at home most of the time so it doesn't matter how old my clothes are. I wear the few clothes I have only to go out, so they last a long time. I had so many before that I still have enough. I can say sincerely that I don't worry about myself, but it's different with the children. They're growing, so their clothes don't last very long and their shoes wear out. You can't expect a child's shoes to last as an adult's do.

The worst problem is food. That's what really affects me, not the lack of money. There are so many things that are simply not available. It's worse for the children because adults understand what it's all about and can manage. I really hurts, though, to see that the children can't have what they need. I can't say we've ever gone hungry, but it's annoying to lack some things we really need or would like very much to have.

Meat and milk are the two most important foods in my home. We get one liter of fresh milk a day for Eloyitos [her 3-year-old son]. He drinks milk for breakfast, lunch, in mid-afternoon, and at dinner. The girl gets six cans of milk a month, and my husband and I get three cans of milk a month each. So we have a total of one liter of fresh milk a day and twelve cans of condensed milk a month.

That's not enough. It doesn't matter if I don't have it, but we don't get nearly enough for the children. Some days we've done without breakfast because there wasn't any milk, and we never drink milk at lunch. We also have bread with butter for breakfast, if we have any, but we haven't seen butter for a long time.

These aren't good times we're living through, at least for us. Others may have now what they've never had before the Revolution, but not us. Only people who had nothing at all before the Revolution are better off now. We were never rich but we had what we needed. My children lack things I never lacked.

Naturally I know this is a process, a phase, and that we're not the only ones affected. Thousands of people are involved. Some have benefitted from the changes, while others, like us, have suffered. There's no point in saying that everybody is gloriously happy—you can't cover the sun with a finger. Happiness would be having all the problems solved, having shoes and all the food you need. My goodness, there are so many things I want!

It's all very hard, especially for people with our standard of living. As I said, most people here in Cuba are living better now than before the Revolution, but we aren't. I don't say this merely because of myself—it's my children I'm thinking of. They've occasionally had to do without a coat or a pair of shoes, or even food. It hurts when one's child says, "I'd like to eat such-and-such," and there isn't any. Knowing that we have enough money to buy it makes it worse in a way. I don't ask for luxuries, only for necessities, understand. Well, they say these are years of transition. I certainly hope so.

Vocabulary

**liter**: just over a quart
SARA ROJAS

"My children’s lives will be different from mine ..."

I think the Revolution is trying to make a new kind of people, so I guess it must be a new idea. But as for communism, I don’t know a thing about it. I don’t know what it is or how it began. I know no more about it than if I lived in China. Somebody is going to have to teach me. What I do know is that before the Revolution we poor people had no money to buy things with and now we may have to stand in line, but at least we have money to buy whatever the stores get. For me that’s the greatest thing the Revolution has done.

Since the triumph of the Revolution anybody can get an education for their children whether they’re in the city or on the farm. Some little country girls who were brought here to Havana to study are now nurses and schoolteachers. They cleaned our barrio⁶ of children, let me tell you. All the kids were sent to Havana or Santiago⁶ or someplace else to study. That’s one of the most valuable things the Revolution has brought about.

When I was young, my keenest longing was to study and have a career. I wanted to learn a lot so I could get out of that place. I wanted to be a teacher; when I was little I’d get other kids to play school and I’d be their teacher. I’d write down the letters and numbers for them on a piece of cardboard. It was nothing but a dream and I knew it. In those times it wasn’t easy to give one’s children an education. If I’d ever had the opportunities my children have now, I’d have been ... ay, something great.

It’s such a joy to see one’s children studying and know that someday they’ll have a career. I feel very proud to have a son who’s studying.

I always hear Fidel’s speeches over the radio or TV, but I’ve never seen him personally. I love to listen to him because he never lies to the people. If there’s going to be a food shortage, he tells us about it ahead of time. That’s what I like about him—he’s conscien-
tious and never tries to deceive us.

The truth of the matter is that with such a large family as I have, if things were still as they used to be, my kids would be sleeping on the floor. The wages my first husband earned cutting cane would simply not have been enough to support eight children. When I was married to him I had only five, and even so they didn’t have enough clothes and shoes. That doesn’t happen now. When my number comes around⁰, I can go shopping and buy whatever they need because I’ve got the money.

I have more food now than before the Revolution. Now I can buy my quota of rationed foods every month, but before the Revolution there were times when I didn’t have a peseta⁰ for food. When relatives come to stay without their rations I run out of food sooner, but even so, my children and I never go hungry.

My children’s lives will surely be different from mine because they have opportunities I never had. With their opportunities and my brains, what couldn’t I have done!

Vocabulary

barrio: neighborhood
Santiago: second-largest city in Cuba
when my number comes around: Certain items, such as furniture, were sold on a rotating basis to part of the population at a time. A household could buy when the number for its group was announced.
peseta: unit of Cuban currency

GENOVEVA HERNANDEZ DIAZ

“Nothing is impossible now ...”

Before the Revolution, women didn’t have nearly as many opportunities as they do now.
If they weren’t prostitutes, or mistresses to military men, it they didn’t sell themselves to some boss or some dictator, they didn’t have a chance. You may be sure the only other opportunity was to be a servant, scrubbing floors or taking in laundry. But now women are independent, free. A woman can work in the daytime, and if she wants to study, she can go to night school. Who ever studied before the Revolution? What money did they have to study with? What facilities for study were there?

Now a woman chooses her own goals and works toward them in her own way, and she no longer allows herself to be dominated by men. I mean, I don’t let myself be dominated, and as far as I can see nobody else does either. If I’m about to do something that’s right and good and some man says no, I go ahead and do it. Before, if a man said no to a woman, she had to obey.

I think a lot about the future. Nothing is impossible now, so whatever I propose to do, I can do. I intend to achieve a great deal; but then, who doesn’t? Writing is my vocation. I’d like to be an excellent teacher but I also want to be an outstanding writer. My ambition is to write something that’s good for our fatherland, perhaps about our Revolution, so that future generations will know how we lived. Someday I’ll be one of its representative people. That’s my dream and I know that someday I’ll wake up and find it’s come true.

**LETICIA MANZANARES**

“It doesn’t matter whether you’re black or white …”

As far as I’m concerned, the Revolution hasn’t made any changes in my life. I worked before and I work now. I see a better future for my children, though. Right now, the main problem of the Revolution is giving everybody food and keeping the children well nourished. We can make do with the clothing they give us even if it isn’t much. Housing is a big problem too—there are many people in great need of a better place to live—but still, to me the gravest problem is the shortage of food.

Before the Revolution I sometimes felt it was unfair that I should have so little when others had so much. Oh well, that’s the way things have always been. It’s still happening. A lot of Cubans are living off payments for the houses they had before the Revolution. Others still have money from before and live on that without having to work.

Racial prejudice has changed since the Revolution. Now everybody can go to the same clubs and beaches. In that we’re all truly equal now … Before the Revolution the blacks and whites each had their own separate social clubs. For instance, in Morón there were three separate social clubs, the Colonia Española for the wealthiest whites—doctors, lawyers, and so on—the Liceo for white people who weren’t so high up, and the Unión Fraternal for the colored people. And there was a fourth club, the Unión de los Ingleses, for the colored people who came from Jamaica and Haiti. There were many of them in the countryside working as farmhands and cane-cutters.

Nowadays colored people have better work opportunities, because they can study more. Before the Revolution only rich white people had a chance to study. None of the poor, black or white, could afford to stay in school long enough. Now everyone can go as far as they want in school and everybody has the opportunity to work.

Only yesterday the school director sent for me to tell me my two girls have the ability and the vocation for teaching. She wants them to get scholarships to study education. It would take four years, just like basic secondary school. If they get a diploma for teaching and later want to study something else, they can go to the University for four more years. I told the teacher I’d agree if the girls liked the idea.

My own life is already made and shaped, so
all my hopes for the future concern my children. If they get to do something worthwhile, I'll be at peace. I hope they take advantage of their opportunities to study and be whatever they like so they can be happy and secure. Nowadays it doesn't matter whether you're black or white, rich or poor—you can pick the career you want. You can be a doctor, a nurse, or anything else you like. That's one very good thing this government has done, and after all, it's one of the most basic things. As for the rest, one can always manage.

Cuando me veo y toco,
yo, Juan sin Nada no más ayer,
y hoy Juan con Todo,
y hoy con todo,
vuelvo los ojos, miro,
me veo y toco
y me pregunto cómo ha podido ser.

Tengo, vamos a ver,
tengo el gusto de andar por mi país,
dueño de cuanto hay en él,
mirando bien de cerca lo que antes
no tuve ni podía tener.
Zafra puedo decir,
monte puedo decir,
ciudad puedo decir,
ejército decir,
ya míos para siempre y tuyos, nuestros,
y un ancho resplandor
de rayo, estrella, flor.

Tengo, vamos a ver,
tengo el gusto de ir
yo, campesino, obrero, gente simple,
tengo el gusto de ir
(es un ejemplo)
a un banco y hablar con el administrador,
no en inglés,
no en señor,
sino decirle compañero como se dice en español.

Tengo, vamos a ver,
que siendo un negro
nadie me puede detener
a la puerta de un dancing o de un bar.
O bien en la carpeta de un hotel
gritar que no hay pieza,
una mínima pieza y no una pieza colosal,
una pequeña pieza donde yo pueda descansar.

Tengo, vamos a ver,
que no hay guardia rural
que me agarre y me encierre en un cuartel,
ni me arranque y me arroje de mi tierra
al medio del camino real.

Tengo que como tengo la tierra tengo el mar,
no country,
no high-life,
no tennis y no yacht,
sino de playa en playa y ola en ola,
gigante azul abierto democrático:
en fin, el mar.

Tengo, vamos a ver,
que ya aprendí a leer,
a contar,
tengo que ya aprendí a escribir
y a pensar
y a reír.

Tengo que ya tengo
donde trabajar
y ganar
lo que me tengo que comer.
Tengo, vamos a ver,
tengo lo que tenía que tener.
READING

I Have

When I see and touch myself,
I Juan-with-Nothing only yesterday,
but today Juan-with-Everything,
with everything today,
I cast my eyes around,
see and touch myself
and I wonder how it all came to be.

I have, let's see,
I have the joy of walking through my country,
everything in it belongs to me,
I walk through my country,
inspecting the things I didn't have
and couldn't have before:
the cane harvest
the mountains
the city
the army,
Now forever mine
Now forever ours
Now forever yours.

A brilliant panorama
Of sun, star and flower.

I have, let's see,
the pleasure of going where I please
I, peasant, worker, humble man
I can go for example
into a bank
and talk to the banker
not in English
not as señor but as compañero as we say in Spanish.

I have, let's see
that as a black man
no one can stop me
at the door of a ballroom or a bar.
Nor in the lobby of a hotel
telling me there's no room
not even the smallest room, let alone a suite,
a small room where I could rest my head.

I have, let's see,
that there is no more rural sheriff
who seizes me and locks me in jail,
who expels me from my land,
into the street.

I have the land and the sea,
no country club,
no discoteque,
no tennis court and no yacht,
only beach to beach, wave to wave,
gigantic blue open free:
in short, the sea.

I have, let's see,
that I have learned to read,
to count,
I have learned to write
to think
and to laugh.

I have that I have
a place to work
to earn
enough to eat.
I have, let's see,
I have what was coming to me.

—Reprinted from: Vol. 2 of Obra poética 1920-1972,
collection of Guillén's poems edited by Angel Augier.
(Havana: Instituto Cuban del Libro, 1972). Poem first

Vocabulary

señor: Sir
companiono: friend, comrade
Dos poemas para mi nieta
Two Poems for My Granddaughter

1
Pronto sabrás que te llamas Vanessa y luego que Vanessa es el nombre de una mariposa de colores. Después aprenderás otras palabras como bomba atómica, napalm, apartheid y tendrás que explicarte también los significados de esas palabras.

1
You'll soon know your name is Vanessa and then that Vanessa is the name of a brilliant butterfly. Then you'll learn other words like atomic bomb napalm apartheid and we'll have to tell you what those words mean as well.

2
Vanessa me pregunta qué es un mendigo; contesto casi sin pensar hojeando un libro: “el que pide limosnas.” Entonces, vuelve a preguntarme y un poco molesta: “y, qué es pedir limosnas?” Dejo el libro y la miro la miro muy fijamente la miro entre lágrimas la beso y la vuelvo a besar y ella se queda sin saber qué pasa.

2
Vanessa asks me what a beggar is and absentmindedly, thumbing the pages of a book, I say: “someone who asks for alms.” Then she asks again, more insistently, “what is asking for alms?” I put down my book and look at her I look at her long I look through my tears I kiss her and kiss her again and she doesn’t understand why.

Mi nieta no sabe lo que es un mendigo mi nieta no sabe lo que es pedir limosnas. Dan ganas de correr por las calles felicitando a todos los que pasan. Dan ganas de salir por las calles tocando a todas las puertas y repartiendo besos. Dan ganas de salir por las calles.

My granddaughter doesn’t know what a beggar is, my granddaughter doesn’t understand asking for alms. I want to run through the streets congratulating everyone I see. I want to go out into the streets knocking at all the doors and kissing everyone. I want to go out into the streets.

READING

Vivo en Cuba
I Live in Cuba

Vivo en Cuba.
Siempre he vivido en Cuba.
Aún cuando he creído habitar
muy lejos del caimán de la agonía
siempre he vivido en Cuba.
No ya en la isla fácil
de los azules
violentos
y las soberbias palmas
sino en la otra,
la que asomó en el hálito indómito de Hatuey,
la que creció
en palenques y conspiraciones
la que a empeñones construye el socialismo,
la del heroico pueblo que vivió los sesenta
y no flaqueó
sino que oscura,
calladamente,
ha ido haciendo la historia
y rehaciéndose.

I live in Cuba.
I've always lived in Cuba.
Even when I thought I existed
far from the painful crocodile
I've always lived in Cuba.
Not on the easy island
of violent
blues
and superb palms
but on the other,
the one that raised its head
on Hatuey's indomitable breath,
that grew
in palenques and conspiracies,
that staggers and moves forward
building socialism,
the Cuba whose heroic people survived the
sixties
and didn't falter
who's been
darkly, silently
making history
and remaking herself.


Vocabulary

Hatuey: Arawak chief who resisted the Spanish takeover

palenques: guarded communities set up by slaves who had escaped from the plantations