

Sanchez, Yoani. *Havana Real: One Woman Fights to Tell the Truth about Cuba Today*. Trans. M. J. Porter. New York: Melville House Publishing, 2011.

As a foreign correspondent back in the 1980s, I realized that Marxist Nicaragua's economy had officially flat-lined on the day that a peasant in the countryside who had helped a colleague with a broken-down car asked to be paid not in the *cordoba*, the country's official currency, but toilet paper. When you can non-metaphorically say that a country's money is not worth wiping your butt with, it's time to face the fiscal facts.

I had a similar economic epiphany about Cuba while reading *Havana Real*, a compilation of posts by renegade blogger Yoani Sanchez about her communist shipwreck of a country. She wrote in 2009 of chatting with a friend named Xiomara who lives in Pinar del Rio, the tobacco-farming province at the far west end of the island.

Four months earlier, Xiomara said, the always-balky distribution lines of Cuba's command economy had reached a new height of glitchiness: shipments of sanitary napkins had ceased to arrive. Though Fidel Castro and his brother Raul have often boasted that they are constructing nothing less than socialism's New Man, they have yet to design New Ladyparts, and Xiomara and her friends were frantically cannibalizing their dwindling supplies of towels and pillowcases to make recyclable feminine pads. "Because of this, we might refuse to go to work," she said (p. 118).

"I imagined a 'Strike of the Period,'" muses Sanchez, "a massive protest marked by the cycle of ovulation . . . There are those who think that the dismissal of officials, or a merger of ministries, is the road to real change. I feel, however, that the triggering spark of transformation could simply be a group of women tired of washing out, every month, rags for their menstrual cycles" (p. 118). If you think blogs offer a useful corrective to the misfocus of the mainstream media in the United States, consider the case of Cuba, where government newspapers (that is, all of them) were enthusiastically reporting that potato harvests had exceeded their quotas at the time Pinar del Rio's women were reinventing the gynecology of the fourteenth century.

Born in 1975, Sanchez began writing her blog Generation Y in 2007. A frustrated philologist (her thesis, *Words Under Pressure: A Study of the Literature of the Dictatorship in Latin America*, pretty much left her unemployable in Cuban academia), she managed to emigrate to Switzerland in 2002 but gave up the expatriate life to return to Havana two years later, bringing with her a set of newly honed computer skills. Because Cuba has no independent newspapers or radio or TV stations, and relentlessly jams the U.S. government's Radio and TV Martí, using cyberspace to attack the Castro brothers' monopoly of information on the island may have seemed an obvious choice—so obvious, unfortunately, that the Castros have taken massive

precautions to make it all but impossible. Cuban officials have for years referred to the Internet as one of the Western world's "mechanisms for global extermination," and the troubles it has caused for their fellow dictators in Libya, Iran, Tunisia, and Egypt have done nothing to moderate their views.

Though Cuba was an early Caribbean leader in computer-networking and hooked itself up to the Internet in 1996, the government has done everything to block access to the Internet for ordinary citizens. Access is available only through government Internet centers and tourist hotels from which ordinary Cubans are banned. The occasional dissident who fakes his or her way in will still find the experience prohibitively expensive (more than \$1 an hour in a country where the average monthly salary is about \$20) and frustratingly slow, since hookups are mostly dial-up.

Nonetheless, Sanchez did just that, posing as a German tourist to write her blog items from tourist hotels, or texting them to friends to be posted from outside the country. (Cuba's antiquated cell phones can text, but do not hook directly up to the Internet.) She quickly gained an international following, with hundreds of volunteers translating her blog into at least fifteen languages. She was soon winning international journalism awards, getting shout-outs from President Barack Obama, and making *Time* magazine's list of the one hundred most influential people in the world.

Generation Y¹ takes its name from the demographic cohort of Cubans born during the 1970s, by which time Castro had reduced the island to an arid economic, cultural, and political moonscape. With almost everything in short supply, Cubans amused and asserted themselves by making up names for new babies beginning with the letter Y, little-used and slightly exotic in Spanish, such as Yoandri, Yusimi, Yunieski. (Creative resistance and aesthetics do not always go hand-in-hand, as Sanchez ruefully admits, contemplating the popularity of the name Yesdasi—a combination of the English, Russian, and Spanish words for "yes" [p. 185].)

It is sometimes poetically suggested, usually by members of Generation Y itself, that they were the first to be born without delusions about Cuban communism. That's an exaggeration. Most of the 125,000 refugees who bolted from the island during the Mariel boatlift in 1980 were young Cubans who already saw their lives at a dead end. And they were hardly the first. The mass murder of illusions began almost immediately after Fidel Castro took power, and the number of Cubans who fled to the United States indicates that there was no doubt in their minds about whose finger was on the trigger.

What *is* true, however, is that Generation Y was the first raised without any hope—in the wake of the Bay of Pigs and the Cuban missile crisis—that the gringo cavalry up north would ride to its rescue. And it was just reaching adolescence as the rest of the communist world imploded in 1989, leaving Cuba to stand alone without massive Soviet subsidies for the first time.

¹ The English version can be accessed online at: www.desdecuba.com/generationy/.

Castro referred to what followed as a “special period.” In her masterful introduction to the book, M. J. Porter, who translated *Havana Real*, offers a less euphemistic description: “[A] time of terrible scarcity—when a word, *alumbión*, was coined for the unusual situation of electricity being on; when fried grapefruit rinds took the place of meat in the national diet; when, it was rumored, melted condoms sometimes stood in for the cheese on a concoction that was anything but ‘pizza’” (p. ix).

Cuba is in somewhat better economic shape today, mainly because the Castros have firmly attached it to the teat of Venezuela, where narcisso-Marxist Hugo Chavez has opened the spigots to aid estimated as high as \$5 billion a year, comprising about 15 percent of Cuba’s entire economy. Even so, economic desolation colors nearly every page of *Havana Real*. Sometimes ironically, sometimes wearily, and sometimes with simmering rage, Sanchez describes daily life in a country where a shopper lucky enough to find a pineapple in the market and wealthy enough to buy it must also be prudent enough to conceal it in a bag on the way home, “to hide this queen of the fruits, this obscene symbol of status, from the jealous glances of others” (p. 7).

It is a country so drab and miserable that sometimes it seems it must be a Kafkaesque fantasy or a dystopian film. “What I see on television bears so little resemblance to my life that I have come to think that my life isn’t real,” writes Sanchez. She continues, “. . . that the sad faces on the street are actors who deserve Oscars; that the hundreds of problems I navigate just to feed myself, get transportation, and simply exist are only lines in a dramatic script; that the truth, so adamant are they about it, must be what they tell me on the National Television News” (p. 9). This is magical realism, Cuban style.

Havana Real is, in its own way, a more damning indictment of communist society than were the horrifying accounts of Soviet labor camps in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago* and *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, or *Against All Hope*, Armando Valladares’s Cuban prison diaries. The atrocity stories in those books were dismissible by the Ostrich Left as regrettable but understandable security excesses, like the American prison camps in Guantanamo Bay: After all, they must have done *something* to be locked up, right?

But the only prison in *Havana Real* is Cuba itself. This is how people live—ordinary people whose only crime is having had the bad luck to be born into a totalitarian suzerainty so suffocatingly potent that children, asked what they want to do when they grow up, reply simply: “Leave.”

Sanchez, who describes her first blog post as “halfway between a scream and a question” (p. 1), often reminds me of a sort of inverted Winston Smith, the doomed little bureaucrat of George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Smith rebelled against the totalitarian state of Oceania in the only way he could, by keeping a secret diary in which he scrawled, over and over, “I hate Big Brother!” Sanchez’s resistance to the Castro brothers, too, mostly takes the form of acts that are heartbreakingly futile: her refusal, for instance, to walk the threadbare aisles of Havana’s markets with her shopping bag open.

“I keep it folded in my pocket, so I don’t look like I’ve been devoured by the machinery of the waiting line, the search for food, the gossip about whether the chicken has arrived at the market,” she writes. “*In the end, I have the same obsession with getting food, but I try not to show it too much*” (p. 6).

The comparison is not perfect. Where Winston Smith blasphemed Big Brother in secret, Sanchez’s defiance of the Castro brothers has been startlingly public. In her first three years, her 500 blog posts drew one million reader comments; across its linguistic platforms, Generation Y gets fourteen million hits a month.

Yet sometimes the parallels to Smith are stunningly literal. Sanchez recounts in wonder Raul Castro’s first big speech after taking over for his brother. It was delivered on July 26, 2007, a date that for the Cuban Revolution is the equivalent of the Fourth of July in the United States: the anniversary of the 1954 attack on a military barracks that marked the beginning of Castro’s five-year armed struggle to depose the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista.

As most of the country watched on television, anxious for clues about whether and how Raul might diverge from his brother’s path, Raul made a promise that was little noticed by the international news media but stunning to his countrymen: milk, enough so that every Cuban could drink a glass whenever he wanted. The promise might seem puny and pathetic to the rest of the world—that a government in power for more than half a century was offering the presence of milk in the markets as a utopian landmark—but to Cubans it was grandiose beyond belief. “To me, someone who grew up on a gulp of orange-peel tea, the news seemed incredible,” writes Sanchez. “I believed we would put a man on the moon, take first place among all nations in the upcoming Olympics, or discover a vaccine for AIDS before we would put the forgotten morning *cafe con leche*, coffee with milk, within reach of every person on this island” (p. 11).

Sanchez’s estimation of the likelihood of the promise’s fulfillment was evidently shared by cooler heads in the Cuban government. The line about the milk did not appear in the official government newspaper *Granma*, either in print or online. And when the speech was rebroadcast on television, it had skillfully been edited away. Winston Smith, whose job was rewriting old newspaper clippings and retouching photos every time the government shifted policy, casting all evidence of the past down a “memory hole” to an incinerator, would surely have smiled in recognition.

Smith might also have been amused at one of the reasons milk is in such short supply through official channels: Farmers give newborn female cattle names like Brave Bull and Stud Ox, reporting them as male to agricultural apparatchiks, so they won’t be required to sell their milk at the government’s low-ball prices. The epidemic of cattle transgenderism is considerably less horrifying than a related phenomenon that Sanchez calls “cow suicide”—strapping the heads of the animals to railroad tracks, then reporting them killed in accidents to evade the official ban on slaughtering beef for consumption (pp. 39-40).

Sanchez's modern-day Cuban cowboy stories are reminders of why communist economies don't break down more completely than they do: the black-market production and distribution channels created by canny peasants to evade state restrictions. In the crumbling cities, even something as basic as water must often be obtained through the black markets. As water mains fail, the residents of have-not neighborhoods must buy from the haves.

Some of that illicit meat and milk will ultimately find its way into covert Havana shops, as will much of the awesome amount of state property liberated each year by government employees. Sanchez realized the ubiquity of black-market transactions when one of her friends used them as an excuse to quit the Communist Party and its endless, droning meetings. He told his party comrades he was too ashamed to face them anymore because he was buying black-market groceries every single day:

"But Ricardo, what are you talking about?" [asked another party member, his eyes welling with revolutionary sympathy]. "Most of us here buy on the black market."

"[T]hen I'm leaving," [snapped Ricardo, in his best I-wouldn't-join-a-club-that-would-have-me Woody Allen voice.] ". . . because I don't want to belong to a party of hypocrites." (p. 133)

The story is funny, but its underpinnings are not. The Havana gossip mill hums every day with stories of massive new corruption, scandals in which entire warehouses full of goods disappear, stolen not by the grunts who sweep the floors but the commissars who run them. The few foreign products finding their way into Cuba as the result of joint production deals with the government are disappearing as the foreign investors walk away in disgust at the corruption. "The State has been looted by the State itself," Sanchez broods. "We are a country in the midst of a liquidation sale, while many wearing the olive-green uniform take the opportunity to make off with what little we have left" (p. 199).

Unlike some of the so-called independent Cuban bloggers who believe that the country's problems are not systemic but merely an excess of bureaucracy and a few undemocratic individuals in high places, nothing that can't be cured by a little dose of good-government socialist reform, Sanchez recognizes that the island's Marxist economics is inextricably intertwined with its political totalitarianism. That's why, she observes, Cuba's sporadic economic liberalizations never last long before they're rolled back.

In 1994, she recalls, a loosening of restrictions on the small private restaurants known as *paladars* (the word is actually Portuguese, enviously lifted from a fictional restaurant chain in a popular Brazilian *telenovela*) briefly let a thousand culinary flowers bloom: "A stroll along the streets of Central Havana confirmed that the previous scarcity hadn't been born of an incapacity to produce, but rather from ironclad State controls on private ingenuity," Sanchez writes (p. 34). But officials quickly slammed the lid on the opening when they discovered that successful *paladar* owners not only

threatened economic orthodoxy (creating restaurant chains, planning the launch of a gastronomic magazine, and generally turning into Mini-Me Donald Trumps), but also developed bourgeois desires, including better cars and trips to Paris. For their customers, it was back to the regular menu, which Sanchez glumly recounts after returning empty-handed from another trip to the market: Rice with a beef bouillon cube. Rice with a hot dog. Rice with a bacon bouillon cube. “[O]r the delicacy of ‘rice with a chicken-and-tomato bouillon cube.’ This last one has a color between pink and orange that is most amusing” (p. 76).

Her irony may soon change to genuine nostalgia. Whether through application of science-fiction-movie medical technology or horror-movie necromancy, the Castro brothers—both in their 80s—show appalling signs of immortality. Not so with their patron saint Hugo Chavez, who if he survives his country’s October presidential election is unlikely to have similar luck with the cancer for which he has already undergone three surgeries. Regardless of which way Chavez leaves Venezuela’s presidential palace, his successor is unlikely to continue the gargantuan flow of aid to Cuba. Merely cutting off the supply of flea-market-priced oil—two-thirds of Cuba’s supply comes from Chavez—will turn the island into an economic zombie. Don’t be surprised if Sanchez’s next book is a collection of condom recipes.

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