

*Sujatha  
Fernandes*

**CULTURE,  
POLITICS,  
EVERYDAY  
LIFE**

*"Fascinating"—Cristina García*

# The Cuban Hustle

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# *The Cuban Hustle*

BUY

# *The Cuban Hustle*

*CULTURE,  
POLITICS,  
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*Sujatha Fernandes*

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Cover art: The annual rap festival in Alamar, on the eastern  
outskirts of Havana, Cuba. Photo by Adam Eastland.

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*For Norma Guillard*

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Acknowledgments ix  
Introduction i

**PART I**  
*Cultures of  
the Special Period*

5

Revolution and Rumba: Cuba in  
the Special Period 9

Alice in Wondertown:  
Interview with Filmmaker  
Daniel Díaz Torres 15

Magín: Feminist Organizing  
in Cuba 22

Vitality in Precarious Conditions:  
Conversation with Artist/Art  
Critic Tonel 32

Public Art and Art Collectives  
in Havana 44

New Cuban Cinema: Race  
and Sexuality 53

The Capital of Rap: Hip Hop  
Culture in Alamar 62

Cultural *Cimarronaje*:  
Afro-Cuban Visual Arts 71

Elio Rodríguez: Of Joint Ventures  
and Sexual Adventures 77

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**PART II**

***Normalization:  
Netflix Meets  
the Weekly Packet***

83

Cuban Rap: Where the Streets  
Meet Highbrow Art 87

Why USAID Could Never  
Spark a Hip Hop Revolution in  
Cuba 90

Stories That Resonate: New  
Cultures of Documentary  
Filmmaking in Cuba 94  
*With Alexandra Halkin*

What Do Cubans Think  
of Normalization with the  
United States? 100

The Repeating Barrio 104

In Cuba, Will the Revolution  
Be Digitized? 111

Afro-Cuban Activists Fight  
Racism between Two Fires 120

Black Diasporic Dialogues in  
Post-Soviet Cuba 129

The Many Shades of  
Fidel Castro 133

**PART III**

***Cuban Futures  
and the Trump Era***

137

The Cold War Politics of  
Donald Trump 139

Hairdressers of the World, Unite!  
(You Have Nothing to Lose but  
Your Locks . . . and a Community  
to Win) 143

How Socially Engaged Activism  
Is Transforming Cuba 152

A Ship Adrift: Cuba after  
the Pink Tide 162

Epilogue 167

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When the Soviet Union began its precipitous collapse in the late 1980s, the severe upheaval experienced by Cuban society, so heavily dependent on Soviet aid and export income, led many to believe that the socialist island would soon follow suit. Cuba was set adrift, economically and ideologically, in a world that was marked by transitions to liberal democracy and the triumphalism of free-market capitalism. The Cuban government began a slow and painful process of extricating the country from the crisis. Over the decade of the 1990s, Cuba was reintegrated into global markets, tourism was expanded, and sectors such as the arts, sports, and medicine were harnessed to provide hard currency, all while the United States tightened the screws of the embargo in an attempt to hasten Cuba's demise.

In the end, Cuba once again defied the odds to survive, albeit in an altered form. The ongoing isolation of Cuba in a digital era and the desperate need for outlets of expression, combined with the high quality of Cuban arts education, state funding for culture, and the new ideas flowing into Cuban society, turned the island into a crucible that fostered all kinds of dynamic cultures. This collection of essays explores "the Cuban hustle," showing how ordinary Cubans have sought to create alternative cultures in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Cuban hustle is part of a long history, dating back to the colonial era, of aspirations for social justice and the fashioning of modes of survival and expressive cultures that would be part of the long fight.

The idea of the hustle draws from contemporary Cuban vernacular, including the notions of *luchar*, *resolver*, *inventar*, and *jinetear*. This vocabulary has emerged to articulate the ways that Cubans negotiate the contradictions of everyday life in the post-Soviet era. Cubans have been forced to find creative strategies of survival, often depending on the black market. When hotel employees pilfer packets of butter from a breakfast buffet to sell on the black market, this is seen not as stealing but rather as *luchando* or struggling. Given the inflationary pressures that reduced the value of basic incomes, the cutbacks in welfare provisions, and a shortage of basic consumer items, Cubans cannot *buy* the goods and services they need; rather, they *resolve* them. This usually means procuring

items on the black market or drawing on informal networks to find solutions. During the 1990s, the term *jinetear* or the act of *jinetismo* acquired the meaning of “hustling,” but it referred to a much broader range of practices, including engaging in sex work, romantic relationships, or friendships with tourists. Another term that gained currency was *pingüino*—young Cuban males who exchanged sexual services with foreign men for money and consumer goods such as designer clothes. Cubans have invented alternative strategies, solutions, and work-arounds for daily survival and finding spaces of pleasure.

This spirit of creativity and imagination has been carried over into Cuban cultural life. Given the shortages of materials for art, music, and film, artists found new and original ways to make their art. Cuba’s first hip hop DJ, Ariel Fernández, improvised a set of turntables with Walkmans as the decks. Without access to the internet, Cubans found ways to download and circulate material on flash drives in a phenomenon known as the Weekly Packet. In the search for spaces of cultural expression in the small provinces outside the city, artists took over abandoned factories and turned them into cultural centers. Conditions of scarcity have provided the impetus for a culture of spontaneous improvisation.

I first visited Cuba in 1998, curious to see what a socialist country looked like. I encountered a society marked by growing divisions of class, gender, and race. Practices such as sex work that were made redundant by the revolution had become visible once again. Those on state salaries were unable to make ends meet. There was a restless, discontent younger generation. Yet as I returned to Cuba over the years, I began to see how a seething undercurrent was regenerating Cuban social life with the development of feminist and antiracism movements, as well as vocal criticisms expressed within cultural movements such as documentary film and public art. I visited Cuba again at the end of 2017, about a year after Donald Trump was elected to office with an agenda to end rapprochement with Cuba and an open policy of confrontation and regime change. These essays cover that twenty-year period of Cuban history, documenting the sheer inventiveness of ordinary Cubans as they hustled not only to survive, but to create meaning in a time of turmoil.

For the most part, the Western media has been preoccupied with the idea of Cubans as trapped within a one-state autocracy, yearning for political and consumer freedoms unavailable to them. Cubans are generally depicted as repressed entrepreneurs: a world of small businesspeople, dissidents, bloggers, and others who want freedom of speech and freedom of commerce. The progression of Cuban society is its journey toward capitalism, the evolution of Cubans to become more like us. All of this betrays a deep failure to understand Cuba on its own terms. There are many trajectories and models that loom large in the

worldviews of Cubans, from the black radical tradition in the United States to the model of Chinese market socialism and the Pink Tide revolutions that swept Latin America. Some want more space to speak out critically or engage in commercial activities. And the growing presence of corporations such as Airbnb and Netflix is fostering new capitalist rationalities. But we must also understand the ways that consciousness and modes of being are deeply interwoven with and shaped by values of collectivism, egalitarianism, and voluntarism, derived from the socialist and postindependence past.

These essays depict a society in transition, but not necessarily one that is moving in a unilinear direction toward an embrace of capitalism. Rather, they reveal a range of utopic and liberatory visions that often take a socialist worldview as the horizon of the taken-for-granted, while also reflecting the multiple influences that have come to play a role in Cuban society from antiracist, anti-capitalist, feminist, and LGBTQ movements to open source information sharing, gamer culture, rock, hip hop, and reggae.

The dismantling of the Soviet Union, with its oversized influence over Cuban society, created the space for a range of groups to assert themselves in the post-Soviet period. This groundswell of self-organized cultural and activist movements presented a new challenge for the Cuban government. While the government could find ways to manage and collaborate with emerging actors, in other respects they presented a deep challenge to existing orthodoxies. Hence we see the dance of promotion and deflection, sponsorship and censorship that marks the relationship of these movements with the Cuban state in the post-Soviet era.

There is an emphasis in these essays on antiracist movements in Cuba and particularly forms of black cultural expression such as hip hop and visual arts. Among the inequalities that became more visible during the 1990s, racialized poverty was at the fore. This was particularly glaring in a society that had at its core the promise of lifting up the most marginalized and eliminating racism. As black Cubans were more likely to be stuck in the stagnant state sector, with few opportunities or capital for setting up small businesses and little access to the tourism industry, they began to see once again the need for independent self-organization. The critiques were first articulated in cultural forms such as hip hop, by black youth who felt shut out from both the gains of the revolution and the promises of the new Cuba. Through the period of normalization and into the contemporary period, black Cubans have asserted their demands of inclusion and equality.

The second decade of the new millennium has been a time of historic and unprecedented changes in US-Cuban relations, from the resuming of diplo-

matic relations between the two countries under Barack Obama, the first visit of a US president to the island in nearly a century, and the death of the larger-than-life leader Fidel Castro to the reintroduction of travel restrictions, sanctions, and removal of embassy staff under Donald Trump. Under the Trump administration, there is the ongoing threat of foreign intervention and covert attempts to undermine Cuba's sovereignty. But as the closing essays attest, even these moves cannot undo the ongoing collaborations between grassroots groups in both countries and the pursuit of local community projects based in ideals of social justice.

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