




TRANSLATORS' RINCON de TRADUCTORES CORNER



Waiting for the Revolution: Cuba, the Unfinished Journey (excerpt)

by Gustavo Gac-Artigas

translated by
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Introduction

Gustavo Gac-Artigas is a Chilean writer, poet, playwright, actor, and theatre director. A corresponding member of the Academia Norteamericana de la Lengua Española (ANLE), his poetry has been published in the *RANLE* (ANLE's Literary Review), *Enclave* (CUNY), *Multicultural Echoes* (CSU-Chico) *ViceVersa*, and other literary magazines. In 1989 he received a Poetry Park Award (Rotterdam) for his short story *Dr. Zamenhofstraat*, and in 2018, his novel *And All of Us Were Actors, A Century of Light and Shadow* (2017), translated by Andrea G. Labinger, was first runner-up for the 2018 International Latino Book Award. As a fiction writer he has published: *Tiempo de soñar* (1992) *¡E il orbo era rondo!* (1993), *El solar de Ado* (2003), and *Y todos éramos actores, un siglo de luz y sombra* (2016). Forthcoming, *Cómo quisiera* a trilingual Spanish, English, French poetry collection. He is the author of *Fragmentos*, a series of short videos in Spanish, conversations with the audience about the pathways to literary creation. Gustavo has been a guest writer/speaker at multiple professional conferences, and is a regular contributor of opinion articles to *Agencia EFE*, *Le Monde Diplomatique* Chile Edition, and *Impacto Latino*, NY.

The text included is an excerpt from *Esperando la revolución. Cuba: el viaje inconcluso* [Waiting for the Revolution: Cuba, the Unfinished Journey] (Ediciones Nuevo Espacio, 2019), a chronicle of ten days in Cuba, where dreams and reality face off sixty years after the triumph of the Revolution. A chronicle that offers us a critical, revealing, fresh, and bold look at Cuba today, interspersed with humor, lyricism, surprising images, and stinging reality. An encounter between the dreams of a young idealist who, at the end of the sixties in southern Chile, set off on a road trip whose final destination was Havana, the beacon of the Revolution, and the reality of the children and grandchildren of a place that was called the first free territory in Latin America. Through various manifestations of a Latin America constantly at the boiling point, the author's journey turned into a lengthy tour of world theaters, exile on French soil, and another period of wandering, this time along the roads of



his beloved cordillera, finally arriving at his destination 51 years later, on June 20, 2019, to confront dreams and reality in ten days that shook his mind.

The excerpt includes a selection of loose and discontinuous fragments of the original work to give the reader a taste of the varied aspects of life in Cuba, as experienced by the author in the ten days he spent on the island.

About the translator

Andrea G. Labinger is a professor emerita of Spanish at the University of La Verne. She holds a PhD from Harvard, and specializes in translating Latin American authors, among them Sabina Berman, Carlos Cerda, Gustavo Gac-Artigas, Mempo Giardinelli, Ana María Shua, Alicia Steimberg, and Luisa Valenzuela. Three of her novel translations were finalists in the PEN Literary Competition and her translation of *And All of Us Were Actors, A Century of Light and Shadow* by Gustavo Gac-Artigas was runner-up in the 2018 International Latino Book Award. In 2013, *World Literature Today* listed her translation of Liliana Heker's "The End of the Story" among the "75 notable translations of the year."

Gesell Dome, Labinger's translation of Guillermo Saccomanno's *Cámara Gesell*, was awarded a 2014 PEN/Heim Translation Fund grant. Published by Open Letter Books in 2016, the novel was a finalist for the Firecracker Award, sponsored by the Community of Literary Magazines and Presses.

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***WAITING FOR THE REVOLUTION:
CUBA, THE UNFINISHED JOURNEY***
(Excerpt)

Fidel: *Let's go.*

Che: *We can't.*

Fidel: *Why not?*

Che: *We're waiting for Godot.*¹

When you receive this telegram, I will be on my way to Cuba. Notify my parents.

Chilean Postal Service, Valdivia, September 1968

I didn't have enough money to add a signature. I was thumbing my way, like dreams.

Journey's End

I closed my eyes and drifted off, drifted off only to awaken

I traveled in dreams, without a horizon, lost in the clouds, trying to make my mind go blank in order to write.

Cuba, 60 years after the dream, Cuba the imaginary, Cuba the lighthouse, Cuba the complement to May of '68 in my beloved Paris, to the Prague Spring on my beautiful Street of the Alchemists, Cuba the first free territory of Latin America, Cuba the cry that arose at student demonstrations in Chile, demanding that the doors to the university be opened to the world, or in support of a squatter district, or adding a cry of *Hasta la victoria siempre* to a *Ho Ho Ho Chi Minh, we will fight until the end.*

¹ Translator's note: Both this opening dialogue and the title of the work itself, *Waiting for the Revolution*, are the author's nod to Samuel Beckett's iconic play, *Waiting for Godot*.



Arrival

It took me fifty years to arrive, with certain detours along the way, of course, from the time I left Valdivia, in southern Chile, in the year 1968.

And it wasn't revolutionary tourism, the obligatory visit of a left-wing intellectual of the era; everybody went, one after another; everybody had a photo taken with Fidel, a photo with Che, a photo to memorialize the occasion, even if later they would erase it from their memory, all of them, all but one, Gabo². But of course, Gabo had lived through one hundred years of solitude, and I, I never managed to grow the student revolutionary beard of the times, and I traveled by foot; I wasn't Wendy and I wasn't going to Castroland.

I had witnessed the invasion and death of the Prague Spring.

But let's get back to the present: what are fifty years in the life of a writer, what are sixty years in the life of a combatant, what are fifty years in the life of a dreamer?

I had trouble lifting my hand luggage into the overhead bin on the plane.

I've never traveled through life in a straight line, not even when I first learned to walk, but that's a different story, and I had already begun following the wrong curve in the road, the good one.

The first sensation – not thought – was of the burning air embracing my body, my pores opening to release many years of accumulated sweat, like an act of purification before entering Cuba.

I called on Marx, Lenin, Fidel, Che, Allende, the Orishás, Saint Barbara, and today, writing these lines, I realize that I had forgotten to call on the Party.

Maybe that was why I had never gotten there before, for that reason, and also because I had been in Prague in August of 1968.

² Translator's note: Gabriel García Márquez, renowned Colombian author of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, who supported the Cuban Revolution until his death.



Landing

The airport was a disappointment – insignificant, the same as any provincial airport, with no personality. It didn't sway to the rhythm of the tropical breezes, it didn't whisper the songs of Compay Segundo, its bureaucrats didn't flash warm smiles – in fact they didn't smile at all, or else they smiled police officers' official smiles.

The immigration officer took me back to memories of the RDA: dry, cold, steely gray eyes, defending access to the kingdom like a wall of immovable principles, arrogant, possibly because of the provenance of my passport, suspicious of what she saw.

"*Bienvenido*³," she said, handing me back my passport and visa. I missed the customary *compañero*⁴. I never thought that one day I would miss being called *compañero*, and yet I did. You can't always write a first page by forgetting the past, and my past pursues me.

A brightly lit corridor, bureaucrats chatting excitedly among themselves, ignoring us: Good? Bad? No, simply indifferent. How I would have loved to have been ignored in other times!

At the end of the corridor, before the space opened up, two tables and five white coats blocked the exit: health inspection! They changed the film on me, or rather (and this was hardly the same thing), a Resnais film suddenly flooded my memory, *Night and Fog*, cloudy and gray; this one, bright and shiny; that one, the barrier between life and death; this one, a protective barrier. Resnais' barrier led to life or death; the Cuban one led to my past or to my future.

The white coats blocking my way made me cough convulsively; five heads turned around, staring at me inquisitorially.

I went through.

I was in Havana.

³ Translator's note: Welcome.

⁴ Translator's note: *Compañero*: greeting among leftist militants, used to demonstrate a shared ideology.



Sensations

The second sensation was a leap into the past: haggling, haggling over prices, not because people were trying to cheat you, as you could read in the expressions of mistrustful tourists, but rather bargaining for the pleasure of making contact, of measuring yourself in the arena, knowing from the start that both parties would emerge triumphant, that defeat doesn't exist.

In Cuba no one pays the first asking price; what's more, to do so is considered offensive.

It all brought me back to Greece, where I haggled over everything, from a dish of octopus to a Comedy mask, Comedy always being cheaper and less respected than Tragedy. It brought me back to Tunis, where I haggled with the Hammamet Theater for one extra minute in which I, in turn, might bargain for love with La Bella entre las Bellas⁵, in an eternal game that would change our lives minute by minute.

Cuba is a land of elections, not the kind you might be thinking of – in that type the result is known from the start and makes no sense – I'm referring to life's important choices: a modern taxi or a shiny, old one for a postcard photo that doesn't reflect the driver's tragedy or dreams.

In order to make those important life choices eminently clear, we chose to stay at the small apartment of a young *cuentapropista*, or private entrepreneur, on Calle Peña Pobre in Old Havana, rejecting the luxury hotel that the conference offered us in Varadero, with its unlimited drinks and food, but where the sweet-and-sour odor of cheap liquor and the drunks stumbling from bar to bar on shaky legs, and the tables of endless, tasteless food where undistinguished dishes, pretentious plates of rice, chicken, and pork alternating with pork and chicken, tasted more sour than sweet, when the "all you can eat" was challenged by the humble, but proud "we eat whatever there is," and, just as when I was a child, and my mother said there was enough for everyone, we knew that to ask for more was to ask

⁵ Translator's note: Affectionate name term used by the author, in his autobiographical novel *And All of Us Were Actors: A Century of Light and Shadow*, upon first seeing the woman who would later become his wife: "the most beautiful of all beauties."



for less for my parents' plates, so too did we understand that the all-you-can-eat-and-drink policy in the luxury hotel meant less to eat for some Cuban family.

For its hidden, endless pleasure, I will always prefer the humble, delicious, curled-up shrimp to the haughty lobster, dry and stuffy, but smiling so as to charge more, that strumpet of the seas.

Through the taxi window we saw the scars left on the city by the destructive march of capitalism. What we didn't see was the construction of socialism. Years ago, I visited East Germany, where I observed the ruins of capitalism and the building of socialism: they were the show window of the new society, but something was missing: it was gray; it was sad; Berlin was monochromatic. Of course, it sat in the shadow of a wall, and walls, even defensive ones, are dangerous.

You never know where the enemy lurks.

In Cuba there was no gray: it was a painter's palette exploding under the sun; there were smiles; worn-out sandals beat a tired, but musical rhythm on the stones of the *Malecón*; palms and people swayed in the wind. It was a picture-postcard image, but for me, something was missing: I still hadn't found the soul of her people.

I lay down in bed to rest, closed my eyes, and marched into the past, afraid to awaken in the present.

At midnight I awoke from a dream in which Vargas Llosa was propositioning my wife, and she was flirting with him with a conspiratorial smile, like characters in a novel. I woke her: "It wasn't Vargas Llosa," she said to me sleepily, "it was García Márquez."

I spent the rest of the night awake, even though I had downed a couple of mojitos at La Bodeguita del Medio: you've got to make memories.

Dawn was breaking in Old Havana.



Day Two

Between our arrival and the next day, the pharmacy awaited me. Since everything in Cuba is recycled and nothing is wasted, Dr. José Martín Soro's pharmacy was now a bar, one that retained the doctor's sign and his name.

From the ancient shelf they took down a small, dark brown bottle, inside of which a thick, amber liquid kept ideas from evaporating.

They gave me three drops in a glass of mineral water, as there was no other kind, and the kind they did have evaporated before hitting the glass.

As the third drop fell, a black cloud crossed my path: the blockade.

The blockade is a crime.

We traveled on June 20; on the fifth of that month, the last authorized cruise ship had entered San Francisco pier in Havana, due to the tightening of external policies by the President of the United States. In the distance, the canticle of Brother Sun sank gradually below the horizon as tourists ran about aimlessly, abandoning the shoulders of the cruise ship, while the Cubans waited on the pier.

"Taxi? A Lulú-Marilú doll for the little girl? I've got the best in Havana, the real thing, not for tourists, mister."

The phrases and smiles remained silent, waiting, waiting for something to change.

"Change? Better than the official rate; the official rate never changes."

To blockade a people, to blockade nascent private enterprise, aspiring entrepreneurs, is a crime. Those who suffer are from the ranks of the people; they *are* the people. To block contact between human beings is inhumane, and everything that is inhumane is stupid; to isolate the isolated is to condemn them to live behind bars, stop them from dreaming, deny them sustenance for developing their thoughts, force them to think of a world of enemies and unyielding borders instead of an open, fraternal world where we all have rights, those same rights that are so often trampled by the powerful. To deny contact between two hands is to surrender that contact to weapons, be they ideological or those of the vultures who feed on confrontation.



What they couldn't blockade is the tongue of the Cuban people. No one can stop them; they loosen their tongues and it's like unleashing the storms from the very bottom of the Caribbean, to one side and another or to no side at all, with or without direction. They need to speak. I'm talking about those that have a tongue. They make you dizzy. I'm not kidding, I don't know why people offer you rum all the time when a simple conversation is sufficient, and just like with alcohol, when tongues are loosened, they rise up, toss you from one reality to another, ultimately making you realize that reality doesn't exist, and then, laughingly, abandon you to your fate.

I broke the blockade, what I couldn't break is the internal blockage; that is more difficult and more dangerous. To blockade the blockage is a double crime.

I didn't break the blockade,
it's just that there are walls and there are walls.

And between both walls? I wondered.

Crossing the threshold of the first *paladar*⁶ I encountered, I replied to the "Hello, mister" in my beautiful language, *Hola, hermano*.

I ordered a dish of "whatever you have," but not a very big one; I had to leave room for my thoughts.

Cars

Old, gleaming, brightly painted colors where, ironically, red predominates, without catching the unwary tourist's attention. Laughing women, their blonde manes floating in the wind, allowed themselves to be driven up and down the *Malecón*, not realizing that more often than not, the ancient convertible has undergone as many plastic surgeries as they themselves have, and that its original ragtop has been hammered off by a clever auto body artist, transforming it into an object of desire for the tourists to ride back to the past, to their lost youth.

⁶ Translator's note: Literally "palate". Noun used in Cuba to refer to mostly family-run private businesses introduced in the 1990 as a counterpart to state-run restaurants for tourists seeking a more vivid interaction with Cuban reality and looking for homemade Cuban food. Before 1993 they were illegal.



The films I watched at the Normandia Cinema in Chile, where the scratched celluloid transmitted its scars to the curtain when the house lights went off, returned today from the past on the streets of Old Havana.

I recognized the clothing, not the actresses: Marilyn, Jane, Joan, Bette, Zsa Zsa, Mae, and Marlene, adding her boozy voice. From the streets they were observed by the shadows of Anna, Gina, Simone, Katy, and – descending the staircase and closing the twilight of the myths – Gloria Swanson.

I grabbed a taxi.

I can't resist the call of celluloid love.

.....

On the Third Day He Rose from the Dead

It was at the intersection of Cuarteles and Monserrate. He crossed the street: "Good morning, I want to warn you that you can't change money outside of authorized locations."

He might be from Washington

He might be from Havana.

¡Ay, mamá!

Involuntarily I moved my feet, and La Bella, her hips.

"When you buy water," he went on, "make sure they open the bottle in front of you. Any other water isn't potable, but some bad citizens refill empty bottles."

He didn't say anything about the ice in the mojitos or daiquiris or ice pops.

"You can't buy cigars outside of authorized locations. Havana is the safest place in the world; I can guarantee that nothing will happen to you. I'm not a policeman, I'm from the Party."

As the song of the sea still resounded in my ears, I'm not sure if he said "I'm *from* the Party" or "I *am* the Party," or if there's a difference.

"Responsible for the security of this section of Old Havana" echoed in my ears.



“We’re deployed because many American agents have come here to spread lies about the revolution. They go around asking questions and talking.”

I had just left one of my staircases, the building that justifies them, and the souls that inhabit them; all three had spoken to me. I felt like I was being observed. My staircases, my spirals, always have two directions, and I never know which way I’m going and where Beatrice⁷ is.

The marble exploded into a thousand pieces inside my head. Those who had opened their rooms and their hearts to me, regarded me sadly; the other guy, the Party member, with an expression that came from my past. On his chest he proudly displayed a little badge, that served as a sort of decoration. It read: “My name is Fidel.” I was tempted to ask him, didn’t he die?

I spoke, translating his language into modern times and adapting mine to ancient times, and hurled myself into the void and into my memories. The deeper I plunged into the past, the more I distanced myself from reality, the happier my *compañero* became: he even embraced me – my body, not my ideas.

Otherwise, I’d really have been screwed.

I returned, I returned to the time of hope, to the triumph of the revolution, to Fidel’s entrance into our lives, the living Fidel, that is, not the little badge. In my journey to the past, I found him and could speak with him – not with Fidel, but with him, the Party.

He took my picture in front of the headquarters of the Vilma Espín Federation of Cuban Women – a sign of progress. He told me that there were very few Party officials, that the admission process was very selective, that one had to prepare, that they had certain privileges. To prove this, he gave me half of the Havana cigars that the Party had given him, 25 of them, so that the smoke of its principles would surround me.

It was a land of *santería*⁸ and principles.

⁷ Translator’s note: Allusion to Italian poet Dante Alighieri’s Beatrice.

⁸ Translator’s note: A system of religious beliefs characterized by the worship of gods derived from the syncretism of African religions and Roman Catholicism, santería arose during the Spanish colonial period. It is widely practiced in Latin America, especially by people of African descent.



“See you around, *compañero*,” he said as he walked away.
I removed one step from my staircases. “Later, *compañero*,” I replied, as I hid the step where he couldn’t find it.
And it was from Carrara, I said to myself with a hint of nostalgia.

.....

Shoot the Piano Player⁹

The conference began: I was to read on the first day about my own writing. I trembled: in my paper I spoke of censorship, and I knew censorship all too well. I had no idea how my audience would react.

I had stopped by the market; the tomatoes were prohibitively expensive. Then I calmed down and was glad that I had defiantly worn a white shirt. White shirt, red shoes, just in case.

I talked, I talked about creativity, I talked about the sources of creativity, I quoted Ai Weiwei, a Chinese dissident; in a country where one pays for being a dissident, one pays with silence, a thundering silence that smothers one’s voice.

I talked about Evstuchenko, who was condemned to the editorial wastelands; doors were closed to him; his readers’ minds were opened. Twenty-six years later, his voice emerged again from the depths, every bit as vibrant as when it emerged in ’68 in the amphitheater of the southernmost university on the planet, in Valdivia, Chile.

There are moments when what lies beneath is what shines brightest, when darkness illuminates, when artificial light is blinding, when certainty doesn’t exist, when doubt is the polestar.

⁹ Translator’s note: Allusion to the Truffaut film starring Charles Aznavour.



I talked about all of that as the shadows enfolded me, and yet I was happy, the veil of the temple was torn in two; a girl in the front row smiled at me; sitting beside her, my wife warned me: “Be careful, remember Vargas Llosa.”

Wasn’t that García Márquez? I was struck by doubt, and to hell with the literary allusions – this time I want certainty.

Afterward, everyone embraced me; I saved my skin. Once more they hadn’t understood, or else they understood me all too well. In magical Cuba, behind every saint hides an *orishá*.

As night falls, an image, face down. Oscar Alberto Martínez, age 45. Around his neck, a tiny arm clings to the security of her father, face down, a little body half hidden in her father’s undershirt, half naked in her father’s undershirt, subject to life, to death,

Giddyup, Papá,
Giddyup, Daddy,
we’re almost there,
it was Angie Valeria
23 months old
the ladies ride at the walk
the gentlemen ride at the trot
and the horsemen at the gallop
gallop, gallop

the poor
swimming toward death
at the gallop,
gallop,
gallop,
the current sweeps them away
they were crossing the Río Grande.



The bodies appeared, face down, inches from the dream of a better life. They had waited two months for their papers, requesting asylum at the border between Mexico and the United States. They managed to arrive from El Salvador; they grew desperate, they wanted to celebrate the baby's second birthday in the Land of Opportunity.

They tried to swim across the Río Grande.

Angie Valeria slipped her little arm around her father's neck to hug her savior. The other Savior, El Salvador, the land where she was born, was awash with violence.

At the bottom of the water, in the depths of the river, two little girls came together, the headless Cuban child who appeared floating in the Caribbean, and Elvira, the Salvadoran, her face stuck to her father's back, both children headless, both of them with severed dreams.

23 months, 23, nearly the same age as my granddaughter.

One of them escaped violence, the other, non-violence; one dreamed, the other dreamed; both might have played with my granddaughter one day, all three of them saying *It's my turn, I'm next*, it's my turn to dream.

My granddaughter gliding down the slide in the playground; Elvira clutching the security offered by her father; the headless Cuban girl, her body in Havana, her head and her dreams sailing somewhere, waiting for Charon to join them back together.

It's my turn to dream.

I cried.

"It's your turn to cry, Grampa,

Cry.

Feel better now?"

Night was falling in Varadero; night reigned in the United States; hope drowned along the border.

¡Ay mamá!

Where do the bodies come from

For I find them . . .

.....



The Last Night I Spent with You¹⁰

On the last night, a storm, lightning, and sparks lit up Old Havana. Havana doesn't let anyone leave: it rips itself apart, it tears you apart, sets you aglow, makes you shiver, screams at you from its heart: Don't forget me, remember: fifty years ago, I was your first love.

Sixty years later the dream was fulfilled; they destroyed it and returned us to our starting point.

We entered times of sadness.

Day Ten: Spirals

I traveled back, took the plane; it was a round-trip dream; I closed my eyes, and parodying Neruda, exclaimed: Cuba in my heart!

When I opened them, a beggar was walking between the rows of cars, holding up a sign:

I am homeless

I am hungry

any help is good

God bless you

I was in America.

Havana, June 2019
New York, July 2019

¹⁰ Translator's note: "La última noche que pasé contigo," famous Cuban song, interpreted by Eydie Gormé and the Trío Los Panchos.



Rincón de Traductores/Translators' Corner

Disponibles en/available at: <http://cervantesobservatorio.fas.harvard.edu/en/translation-corner>

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2. RT/TC 002 (2019). "Like a Night with Legs Wide Open". Author: José Alcántara Almánzar (Dominican Republic); Translator: Luis Guzmán Valerio; Genre: Short Story.
3. RT/TC 003 (2019). "In the Parks, at Dusk" and "I Only Think of You". Author: Marina Mayoral (Spain); Translator: María Socorro Suárez Lafuente; Genre: Short Story.
4. RT/TC 004 (2020). "The Guide through Death" and "The Fat Lady". Author: Guadalupe Dueñas (Mexico); Translator: Josie Hough; Genre: Short Story.
5. RT/TC 005 (2020). "The Case of the Unfaithful Translator". Author: José María Merino (Spain); Translator: Erin Goodman; Genre: Short Story.
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7. RT/TC 007 (2020). "Miguel Hernández' Speech to His Companions in the Ocaña Jail". Author: Miguel Hernández (Spain); Translator: Constance Marina; Genre: Speech.
8. RT/TC 008 (2020). "On the Road to Houmt Souk". Author: Soledad Puértolas (Spain); Translator: Francisca González Arias; Genre: Short Story.
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