

2016

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Recommended Citation

Peter C. Alexander, *Cuba 2015: Reflections on the Midwestern People of Color Legal Scholarship Conference Annual Meeting*, 34 *LAW & INEQ.* 511 (2016).

Available at: <http://scholarship.law.umn.edu/lawineq/vol34/iss2/6>

Law & Inequality: A Journal of Theory and Practice is published by the
University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing.

Cuba 2015: Reflections on the Midwestern People of Color Legal Scholarship Conference Annual Meeting

Peter C. Alexander[†]

Introduction

In 2015, the Midwestern People of Color Legal Scholarship Conference, Inc. (MWPOC) held its annual meeting in Havana, Cuba to celebrate its twenty-fifth anniversary.¹ Thirty-four law professors and their guests met for a two-day retreat and two days of joint meetings with Cuban professionals.² Our purpose for traveling to Cuba was not to lecture our hosts or to have them lecture us—rather, we sought to engage in a bilateral learning experience.³ We were eager to learn about the culture and history of the island nation only ninety miles from Key West, Florida,⁴ and the Cubans with whom we met were equally curious about the plans of their giant neighbor to the north, now that relations between our two nations have begun to thaw.⁵ Both groups had plenty to share and plenty to learn.

The following poem represents the highlights of the trip, as I

[†]. Former Dean and Professor of Law, Indiana Tech Law School and Southern Illinois University School of Law. B.A., Southern Illinois University Carbondale; J.D., Northeastern University. I wish to thank my Planning Committee co-chairs, Professor Emerita Linda Crane and Professor Kim Chanbonpin for their many hours of collaboration and cooperation which resulted in the historic twenty-fifth anniversary gathering of the Midwestern People of Color Legal Scholarship Conference, Inc. (MWPOC).

1. See *Professor Lewis Presents in Havana, Cuba and Boca Raton Florida*, CLEV.-MARSHALL L. FACULTY (Aug. 2, 2015), <http://cmlawfaculty.org/2015/08/02/professor-lewis-presents-in-havana-cuba-and-boca-raton-florida/>.

2. *Cuba First*, SUFFOLK U. L. SCH. (Aug. 20, 2015), <http://www.suffolk.edu/news/60876.php#Vu9VEJwrLIV>.

3. See *id.*

4. See Sandra H. Levinson, *Cuba*, ENCYCLOPÆDIA BRITANNICA, www.britannica.com/place/Cuba (last visited Mar. 20, 2016).

5. See, e.g., Press Release, The White House, Office of the Press Sec'y, Fact Sheet: Charting a New Course on Cuba (Dec. 17, 2014), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/12/17/fact-sheet-charting-new-course-cuba> (outlining President Obama's policy approach to relations with Cuba). For an overview of the relationship between the United States and Cuba between 1959 and 2016, see *Timeline: U.S.-Cuba Relations*, COUNCIL ON FOREIGN REL., <http://www.cfr.org/cuba/timeline-us-cuba-relations/p32817> (last visited Mar. 20, 2016).

remember them. The theme for our 2015 meeting was “I See Things as They Are,”⁶ and I thank all of my colleagues, whose participation in the MWPOC Annual Meeting helped to make this once-in-a-lifetime trip even more memorable.

Reflections

I SEE THINGS AS THEY ARE

Long lines, hurry up and wait,
and we haven't even left Miami!

What will they be like? Poor? Middle-class?
Scavengers? Beggars? Haters?

What will they look like?
Me? The opposite of me? Somehow “foreign”?

What will my experience be?
Friendly? Confrontational? Confusing? Antagonistic?

We touch down in Havana, and it's
long lines, hurry up and wait.

Customs . . . check!
Health desk . . . check!
Luggage . . . check!
Immigration . . . check!
Tour bus . . . check!

The drive into the city reveals
people . . . moving around, getting things done, living life.

Old buildings, run-down and dilapidated,

6. The theme of this year's annual meeting was suggested by MWPOC Planning Committee co-chair Linda Crane, and it is from an essay by José Julián Martí, who is one of Cuba's most revered national heroes. See TOM GJELTEN, BACARDI AND THE LONG FIGHT FOR CUBA 35 (2008). Martí, who lived from 1853 to 1895, was a political force and literary great who spent most of his life fighting for Cuban independence. *José Julián Martí*, ENCYCLOPÆDIA BRITANNICA, <http://www.britannica.com/biography/Jose-Julian-Marti> (last visited Mar. 20, 2016). The phrase “see things as they are” is from Martí's 1891 essay, *Our America*. JOSÉ MARTÍ, *Our America* (1891), reprinted in OUR AMERICA: WRITINGS ON LATIN AMERICA AND THE STRUGGLE FOR CUBAN INDEPENDENCE 84, 86 (Philip S. Foner ed., Elinor Randall et al. trans., 1977) (“To govern well, one must see things as they are.”).

forgotten as the Revolution pushed on.⁷

Beautiful trees and flowers and colorful fabric
wrapping the heads and bodies of our hosts.

Old American cars, beautifully restored, and
new Chinese and Russian cars zipping everywhere.⁸
Bicycles, bike-taxis, and thousands on foot.

Walking throughout the city, you see
Cuban neighborhoods, tenement living,
underwear drying over balcony railings, broken windows,
double-locked doors, wash-water thrown onto the street,
unmarked and unprotected construction trenches in the streets.

Locals tell us about Cuba, the U.S.,
their optimism about the island's future,
and the changing relationship with the U.S.
They act as tour guides, translators, *jineteros*,⁹
New/old buddies . . . all for one or two CUC.¹⁰

Our Cuban hosts tell us about
History
Oppression
Poverty
Equality
Race bias

Gender bias

7. For a discussion of the Cuban Revolution and its aftermath, see MARIFELI PÉREZ-STABLE, *THE CUBAN REVOLUTION: ORIGINS, COURSE, AND LEGACY* (3d ed. 2012).

8. The old American cars are modified leftovers from the 1950s and are symbols of the strong relations our countries once shared. See MARIO RIZZI, *REAL HAVANA* 32 (2016). Recently, however, Cuba has built close relations with China and Russia, so vehicles from those countries are beginning to fill the streets. See *id.*

9. *Jineteros* are Cuban hustlers who often earn a living from tourists “through illegal or semi-legal economic activity.” *Id.* at 31–32.

10. In order to purchase anything in Cuba, one must use Cuban currency. *Id.* at 35. There are two types of currency in Cuba: the convertible peso (“*peso convertible*”) and the Cuban peso (“*moneda nacional*”). *Id.* at 35–38. The convertible peso is abbreviated “CUC” and pronounced like the English word “cook.” *Id.* at 35–36. The CUC is traded at the same value as the U.S. dollar, and it is the currency that most foreigners use in Cuba. *Id.* at 36. The Cuban peso is the historical currency used by the majority of Cubans. *Id.* at 36–37. The Cuban peso has lost considerable value, and one Cuban peso equals 0.04 CUC. *Id.* at 37.

Color bias

Sexual orientation and identity struggles.

And we learn that Cubans are just like us!

They want a better life for their children.

They want more money and more things.¹¹

They want to preserve their heritage and collective identity.

We and our hosts both want to preserve
self-determination and culture.

We both want to improve infrastructure and opportunity.

We both want to exchange more experiences,
learn more about each other,
and live in peace side-by-side.

I traveled to Cuba to see things as they are.

I saw that things are very much like they are at home,
and I can't wait to see what happens next!

Conclusion

Our brief visit to Cuba left each of us with fond memories and a desire to return to the island in the future. The Cuban people were warm and welcoming, and the government officials with whom we interacted were cautiously optimistic about Cuba's improving relationship with the United States. Cuba is anxious to welcome U.S. guests and U.S. businesses into their country, but Cuba is also a paradox: It is, at once, a nation still living in the 1950s and a country trying to demonstrate that it is no longer an underdeveloped, Cold-War orphan.

Future visits like ours by lawyers and the other professionals who were a part of the MWPOC delegation will help further the optimism and progress that we saw, and which is sure to continue.

11. For a helpful explanation of the new economic and private initiatives that have been implemented by Cuban President Raúl Castro, see Linda R. Crane, *Cuba Revisited: From Revolution to Evolution*, 12 SEATTLE J. FOR SOC. JUST. 873, 873–912 (2014).