

LA PÉRDIDA DE TODO: PERSONAL MEMORY IN CUBAN
UNIVERSITIES DURING THE SPECIAL PERIOD

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on the remembered experiences of Cuban university students and professors who lived through the economic hardships of the Special Period, following the collapse of the Soviet Union. It draws on published conversations from a roundtable discussion conducted by the University of Havana and Utrecht University, as well as entries from the dissident blog ‘The Havana Times.’ Tracing how state responses to economic hardships were experienced by students and faculty, this thesis investigates Cubans’ often complicated understandings of Revolutionary ideology and the sudden loss of imagined futures alongside the neglect of universities and the impact on the students and faculty that marked the Special Period. Despite historical scholarship exploring the Special Period, university education, a cornerstone of Cuban society and civic culture since the Revolution in 1959, has been largely ignored. Also absent from many historical narratives of the Special Period are individual voices and personal memory. By examining the remembered lived experiences of Cuban students and professors, and positioning them within the framework of improvisation, this thesis unpacks the polemical debate between Cubans who fled the country and those who stayed and committed to the ideals of the Revolution. This thesis further explores the complicated ways in which Cubans viewed the Special Period as a period not altogether that difficult or noteworthy, while simultaneously remembering it as a time of intense scarcity and uncertainty. In doing so, it argues that Cuban university students and professors navigated their realities through improvised, and at times conflicting, senses of Cuban identity, Revolutionary ideology, and economic and material realities.

Lay Summary

This thesis focuses on the remembered experiences of Cuban university students and professors during times of immense economic hardship in the 1990s known as The Special Period. Using three broad property characteristics – definition, value, and boundaries – it explores the ways in which young people and professors improvised their new realities, making do with very few resources. It demonstrates the sudden loss of futures imagined by Cubans at the time as the country dealt with shortages of food, jobs, many material goods, as well as uncertain future facing university graduates. Positioning the experiences of several students and professors who were brought together to share their memories as part of a University of Havana sponsored study, this thesis reveals some of the absences in narratives from the Special Period, as well as ways in which Revolutionary ideology was understood and challenged at the time.

Preface

This dissertation is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Nicholas Thornton.

This thesis was written through close consultation with two primary sources: *Cuba: Período Especial*, published by the University of Havana and Utrecht University in 2017, and the Havana Times blog (<https://havanatimes.org/>). Preliminary ideas for this thesis came out of an unpublished paper for a directed reading course with Alejandra Bronfman, entitled “Educational Scarcity and Improvisation during *Período Especial*.”

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Thali, and Ramón, were not only the most gracious hosts while I was in Havana but also took an interest in my project and talked Cuban history with me at all hours. Much of the of this thesis was written on their balcony just a few blocks from the University of Havana and was as integral to this project as any source I came across. Early encouragement from my family gave me the confidence to even apply to the MA program and I owe them forever for their kind words and understanding, especially when life and academics collided. Lastly, my partner Laura is ultimately the reason why I do anything, and especially why I complete anything. Laura, you're always the most interesting and thoughtful person in the room, and I'm so glad you've been in my corner through this project and life.

1. Introduction

If you stand at the base of the imposing steps up to the University of Havana and look up at the timeworn buildings, you can see patchwork repairs to the iconic stone staircase that reveal themselves through layers of grime. Decades of neglect, followed by brief periods of restoration, stack on top of each other like rock strata. Since 1902 the university has perched on top of a hill near central Havana. It was here that students protested the Batista regime and where Fidel Castro gave one of his first speeches as a politicized figure, for which he was later imprisoned. Since the Revolution in 1959, the university has undergone numerous periods of revival, neglect, repair, and improvisation. In late June of 2018 I was spread-out on a bed in a house, four blocks down from the university, with the air conditioner on full blast. I had spent the morning at the university and had bought three periodicals from a book stand outside the university library. Without warning, the buzzing from the TV in the living room suddenly went quiet and the lights flickered and went out. All down the street, cries of frustration rang out as people flooded onto their balconies shouting. Power cuts like this come unannounced and are a familiar holdover from *periodo especial*, commonly known as “the Special Period.”

In 1991 the collapse of the Soviet Union plunged Cuba into a decade long struggle for critical resources, including fuel, food, and consumer goods. A robust black market appeared and the Cuban ingenuity at work since the lean years immediately following the Revolution was tested to the absolute limit. Fidel Castro declared that Cuba had entered the Special Period in Time of Peace, a plan that had been put in place as a contingency in case of a military blockade of the island, similar to the one put in place during the Cuban missile crisis. In an attempt to weather the worst of the economic impacts and to maintain centralized political power on the island, an intense period of improvised market and policy reforms followed. Cultural reforms

came as well and the State moved to shift Cubans' attention away from the trials at home, encouraging a plethora of conferences, publications, talks, research projects, and artistic works, which sought to bring the Cuban diaspora abroad into the fold.¹ As Ariana Hernandez-Reguant has argued of the State approach during the Special Period:

...for a few years, a strategy of trial and error, rather than a masterplan, seemed to guide the government's actions, as it sought to balance the need for economic remedy with the determination to avoid social change and political opposition; juggling the expressive opening brought by the introduction of new market-driven stakeholders with the need to avoid political challenges; alternating the carrot of economic opening with the stick of political repression.²

Indeed the strategy of trial and error was enmeshed with Revolutionary Cuba, especially where education was concerned. Locked in an anxiety-ridden preoccupation with the future, the Revolutionary government was no stranger to dramatically shifting policies by the time the Special Period came. Anxiety over the future was not just something that the State was preoccupied with, but also the average Cuban. Stomachs went hungry and gas tanks ran dry as Cubans grappled with a crippling lack of resources through the early nineties. The punishing circumstances led to the island nation becoming even more reliant on its population's penchant for improvisation to see them through the most challenging time.

Cuban universities were not immune to the efforts to make do, mend, and improvise. Lacking a highly skilled workforce, the State had to make a series of hard pivots in order to adjust. Austerity measures that were present in the 1970s continued, as the State, being no stranger to large-scale modifications in economic and social policy, moved to lay off university professors. The government chose to invest in technical training schools, favouring medical and

¹ Ariana Hernandez-Reguant. *Cuba In the Special Period*. (Mcmillan Palgrave, 2009) 72

² Ibid. 7

technology fields over the arts and humanities.³ Cuba's subsequent sluggish recovery suggested that "for the last 20 years, Cuba's greatest employment generators are not exactly sectors distinguished by the complexity of skills required in the workforce, which implies a "de facto" underutilization of the training received."⁴ Much like the sugar harvest of 1970 where the country was all but shut down for a year, the State shifted focus abruptly, meaning that through the Special Period, universities underwent myriad changes and reforms in an effort to better align with diversifying the economy. With the State clinging to the Revolutionary pillars of commitment to education, the question then becomes how do we understand the neglect of Cuban universities through the Special Period?

Universities have represented citizenship and the making of the Cuban "New Man"⁵ since the earliest days of the Revolution and were situated by Fidel Castro as one of the crowning achievements of his Revolutionary promise for free education for all. In 1964, Ché Guevara called for Cuba to become a huge school, arguing that rather than just providing increased access to education, the country should build an authentic socialist revolution based on the levels of commitment and consciousness displayed by its people.⁶ In this way, literacy and university education were meant to engage the citizenry in their politics; to be educated was to become a political being, rather than remain a passive recipient of government intervention. The literacy campaign of 1961 marked the beginning of the mass education movement with teaching being characterized as heroic and patriotic. Cuba's media outlets relied heavily on allegories of

³ Sheryl Lutjens. *The State, Bureaucracy, and the Cuban Schools: Power and Participation*. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996) 165

⁴ Brundenius, Claes, Ricardo Torres Pérez. *No More Free Lunch: Reflections on the Cuban Economic Reform Process and Challenges for Transformation*. 1; 2014; ed. Cham: Springer International Publishing. doi:10.1007/978-3-319-00918-6. 224

⁵ The concept of the "new man" appeared in the early days of Castro's Revolutionary government and called for Cubans to adhere to pride and service for their nation and community over material wealth, among other socialist constructs, which is discussed at length by Theodore MacDonald in *Making a New People: Education in Revolutionary Cuba*. Vancouver: New Star Books, 1985.

⁶ Smith Rosi. *Education, Citizenship, and Cuban Identity*. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) 11

combat and struggle for intellectual empowerment.⁷ However ambitious this project was, like so many Revolutionary projects in Cuba, the outwardly expressed value was not necessarily met with a rigorous or sustainable plan by the State. Cuban universities, one of the traditional cornerstones of Revolutionary citizen-making intertwined with Cuban-socialist identity, saw significant change during the Special Period as materials became scarce, enrollment dwindled, and a state-backed shift moved resources the sciences, trades, and technical training centres.

Despite a resurgent cultural historiography preoccupied with the Special Period, historical analysis of Cuban universities during this time largely focuses on policy and priority shifts by the State. With so much of the historical analysis and popular conversation about Cuban education (and Cuba in general) being locked in a zero-sum argument that pits outdated Soviet-style socialism against a twentieth century Latin America socialist utopia, my hope is to move away from this binary. Here, I adopt an interdisciplinary approach that incorporates my own reflexive encounters and observations in present day Cuba to piece together narratives from those who attended and taught at Cuban universities through the Special Period.⁸ Despite relatively little attention from historians, Cuban education has been written about and studied to some degree by anthropologists, art historians, and educators. Reflexive and interdisciplinary methods in cultural history offer opportunities for non-Cuban historians studying the region to challenge a historical narrative that has favoured looking mainly at political and economic actors.⁹ Often the lived experiences of ordinary Cubans living in extraordinary circumstances

⁷ Ann E. Halbert-Brooks. "Revolutionary Teachers: Women and Gender in the Cuban Literacy Campaign of 1961." (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2013.) 1

⁸ At the time of writing, many of the hardships of the 90s have returned and the country is perilously close to another Special Period. Basic goods were being rationed to prevent hoarding and the black markets that emerged during the Special Period. Eggs and chicken are particularly difficult to come by, as during the Special Period.

⁹ Two excellent starting points are Ariana Hernandez-Reguant and Carla Freeman. Though Freeman works in areas in the Caribbean outside of Cuba, her approaches are self-aware and engage in reflexive and interdisciplinary approaches to cultural history.

have been buried within academic discourse that is either seeking to exonerate or admonish Cuba for its Socialism.

For their own part, Cubans have been making sense of their reality and imagining new futures through decades of Revolutionary projects. If we are to understand more about how Cubans, in this case: university professors and students, lived through and remember the Special Period, historical analysis needs to move beyond the benefits and vagaries of Cuban socialism by examining their intertwined and complex lived experiences. Sources about the social impacts of the Special Period on university professors and students are scarce however. This is likely due to the simple fact that austerity during the lean years of the 90s meant that Cuban scholars were themselves preoccupied with daily survival, or that they were part of the mass exodus of Cubans as the State tightened its belt. Much of what is recorded is made up of contradictory official State reports that simultaneously acknowledge shortages of professors and declining student enrollments while also espousing Cuban university education as a ringing success story in Latin America.¹⁰ The material reality for Cubans during the Special Period was that despite the enormous amount of money and infrastructure poured into Cuban universities since the Revolution, even Cuban officials and educators spoke candidly about issues such as the lack of materials, and low student participation in extracurriculars, among others. What is often missing however, is much in the way of serious critique of the haphazard and improvised nature under which Cuban schools operated. As Quintana Nedelcu asks: “[w]hy after over 50 years of revolution does political and ideological education offer no better results, as recognized by the government itself?”¹¹ Notably Fidel Castro would admit that education continued to face obstacles when addressing foreign criticisms in 2008: “[i]t would seem our country has the most

¹⁰ Danay Quintana Nedelcu, "Cuban Education between Revolution and Reform." *International Journal of Cuban Studies* 6, no. 2 (2014) 213

¹¹ Ibid. 214

educational problems in the world. All of the cables that reach us report on the many and difficult challenges we face: a deficit of over 8,000 teachers, disrespectful and ill-mannered students, lack of training, in short: problems of all sorts.”¹² Fidel’s statement encapsulates the duality of Cuban education, one where critics of the education system are admonished, while simultaneously acknowledging that hardships do in fact exist.

In an effort to procure resources that might perhaps tell a different, or at least more complete story, I visited the University of Havana in the hopes of finding studies published by the university. I knew that institutions in Cuba often have a recorded history of their own and this would be the most likely starting point for my research. Outside of the university library and with admittedly nothing to go on, I stumbled across some periodicals published by the university at a bookstand. Most of the dog-eared and faded books contained articles speculating on pedagogy and classroom instructional hours, as well as the history of the university itself. In and among the journals, I came across a small yellow and grey text with the title *Cuba: Periodo Especial*. Not ready to believe that my extraordinarily precise need for a primary source was in my hands and so easily found (and purchased for 15 CUP, which is roughly \$0.05 US), I flipped through the book to try and glean if it would be yet another volume containing mostly State-approved narratives with bombastic statements about globalism and American tensions as being the main causes of austerity.

Quite surprisingly, *Cuba: Periodo Especial* was published as an international partnership between the University of Havana and Utrecht University in 2017, bringing together a group of handpicked professionals, including some professors and students, for a group interview to share their experiences of living through the Special Period. The original interviews for the book were

¹² Fidel Castro Defends Cuban Education System. 2008. *BBC Monitoring Americas* 2008. Juventud Rebelde website, Havana, in Spanish 20 Jul 08.

held and recorded at the Paseo Hotel, down the street from the university. The interviews, the book's editors explain, were then later transcribed and edited (which included suggestions from the interview subjects) before being published as a one-off periodical.¹³ I share this story of how this book and I came to meet simply to illustrate a point: that while researching outside of Cuba, it seemed as if little to nothing existed of first-hand accounts, yet moments after arriving at the University of Havana, I held in my hands a book of precisely what I needed. While you can wander all over Cuba and see the same ten to fifteen volumes for sale, the bureaucratic desire of institutions to understand themselves means that hyper-specific studies within Cuba are also produced. The mere existence of *Cuba: Periodo Especial* is noteworthy as it illustrates a desire, or at least a willingness from within the University of Havana, to engage with the historical memory of a painful and complex chapter of Cuban history. Also noteworthy in the book are the very personal details of professors and students who had to navigate the challenges of the Special Period while attending and teaching at the university. Their stories at times parallel official narratives around the impacts of the U.S. embargo but in between lie details of riding everywhere on bikes, being chastised for overly socialist beliefs, and not knowing what the future held.

The predominant historical discourse around the Special Period has followed the words artist Ernesto Leal used in a 2010 video installation to describe how the Socialist nation no longer needs ordinary Cubans to prop up its Revolutionary rhetoric: “Ella sola ha desarrollado la sagrad capacidad de construir un pueblo sin personas. (It has developed a sacred capacity to create a People without people.)¹⁴” In my own attempt to “re-people,” the history of the Special Period from the discourse *outside* of Cuba, I will draw heavily from *Cuba: Periodo Especial*.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Guillermina De Ferrari. *Community and Culture in Post-Soviet Cuba*. (Routledge. New York, 2014) 127

Where possible I have tried to include my own observations and respective counterpoints to complicate not just what we think of the Special Period but also *how* we think about it. I hope that I can present the voices that I have selected from *Cuba: Periodo Especial* and other sources with a critical lens that informs my commentary with the memories, absences of memories, and words often coded in double meanings. My criteria for choosing which voices to present here was largely based on those who specifically made a link between their lived experience of the Special Period or made links to their experiences of teaching or learning in a university setting.

Given the improvised nature of higher education in responding to scarcity since the Revolution, I argue that the history of university actors during the Special Period needs to be considered as a vital part of Cuban history that may tell us a great deal about how Cubans experienced one of their most dire eras since the Revolution. Even as people's hopes and futures were challenged, professors and students adapted to conditions marked by extreme scarcity, because to them, for better or for worse, the Special Period was a continuation of the Revolution. Improvising and making do in the face of economic hardship were ingrained in generational approaches to Revolutionary values that existed on a continuum with ruptures and departures from 1959, continuing through the lean state-building years of the 70s and 80s, and then tested even further during the Special Period. By examining lived experiences through the immense pressures of the Special Period, I hope to reveal and re-center Cuban experiences and memories of their personal and local histories by first discussing how education broadly served the state-building period through Cold War reforms, then examine the literature to date about education in the Special Period, move into the personal histories reflected in *Cuba: Periodo Especial*, and finally, add to this discourse the counterpoints and dissenting voices from the Havana Times blog, which offers critical viewpoints from contributors all over Cuba, which is largely absent in

most other historical narratives of the history of the Special Period, which remains largely focused on the pressures in Havana.

2. Education as State Building: Cold War Reforms

In order to tell the story of how professors and students remember the Special Period, I think it is helpful to look at the generation before, that is, the first “class” of post-secondary students and professors following the 1959 Revolution. As part of the ongoing Revolutionary project, Fidel Castro sought to consolidate power and cement ties with the Soviet Union throughout the sixties and seventies. With the afterglow of the Revolution fading, the largely propaganda-based and improvised government now had the task of addressing the very real obstacles facing Cuba’s economy that had not been planned for, in some cases at all, in most cases with little detail. Following the massive operation of the Literacy Campaign of 1961 which saw Cuba reach unprecedented levels of literacy, the new Revolutionary government began a series of sweeping reforms and initiatives to begin tackling some of the country’s most dire socio-economic realities through education. At the Congress on Education and Culture in 1971, key educational problems were identified by Minister Castillo Más. One of the most pressing issues cited was the lack of teachers and materials, as well as sluggish construction and maintenance of schools.¹⁵ How the state responded throughout the seventies begins to lay the groundwork for understanding the level of improvisation undertaken by the State during the Special Period.¹⁶

The 1971 Congress began a sweeping series of developments called *perfeccionamiento* in an effort to adjust to slow-moving growth. Reform was seen as “perfecting” socialism, not departing from it, which would remain a theme into the Special Period and is critical to

¹⁵ Sheryl Lutjens. *The State, Bureaucracy, and the Cuban Schools: Power and Participation*. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996) 79

¹⁶ Although not discussed here, there are personal accounts of those who were sent into rural areas to teach basic literacy. A common book available in Cuba is ‘A Year Without Sundays’ which despite its obvious Revolutionary rhetoric, contains personal stories that offer revealing glimpses into attitudes of teachers during the Literacy Campaign.

understanding changes of economic and educational policy as the State's effort at continuity rather than a departure from socialism. Through the 70s, Soviet advisors were brought to the island to address inefficiencies and lack of development in higher education. This period saw much attention paid to improving overall educational quality but also sweeping revisions of classroom content, particularly at the university level.¹⁷ University enrolments grew rapidly following the Revolution, increasing from 20,393 in 1963-64 to 190,535 in 1979-1980.¹⁸ As the new Cuban State improvised its educational apparatus, this massive demand on limited resources made available by the Revolutionary government may well have started a cycle of scarcity. The State also placed greater emphasis on technical schools to meet the demands of the Revolutionary economy, signaling a move towards a technocratic state that increasingly valued medicine and technology over the arts and humanities. This trend would continue through the Special Period, with new pivots which represent at least one through line that places higher education approaches in the 1990s as something that may have its beginnings much earlier. Despite its name, *perfeccionamiento* also came with a host of challenges. Reforms were often made without much thought to how they should be implemented, with one Party education official admitting that: "[w]e made mistakes and many times had to correct them."¹⁹ Although this comment may seem innocuous, it is an example of the coded language Cubans used to describe challenges they faced, especially for those who worked at the educational administration level. "Correcting mistakes" became the *modus operandi* through the 1970s, with reports and public admonishment of corrupt educational officials becoming commonplace.²⁰

¹⁷ Sheryl Lutjens. *The State, Bureaucracy, and the Cuban Schools: Power and Participation*. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996) 79

¹⁸ Ibid. 80

¹⁹ Ibid. 81

²⁰ Lutjens gives an excellent account of the State's centralization efforts and subsequent effort to root out poor performing bureaucrats and instructors through the 80s. *The State, Bureaucracy, and the Cuban Schools*. 86-87

Complaints of processes being overly bureaucratic continued to plague the decades of the Cold War.

Amidst the challenges facing Cuban education during the 70s and 80s, the Mariel Boatlift at the beginning of the 1980s cast a cloud over the island. As thousands of Cubans fled the island, economic conditions in Cuba were met with slapdash solutions and poorly executed endeavors on massive scales which saw Cuba hugely indebted to the USSR. Fidel Castro, seeing a need to lift the political pressure release valve, declared that anyone who wanted to leave should do so. By the end of 1980, some 125,000 Cubans took him up on his offer.²¹ Among these were many university professors and public intellectuals who had simply had enough of waiting for the Revolution to be completed.

²¹ Edward Walsh Washington Post Staff Writer. "17 Americans Summoned Home: Carter Moves to Stop Cuban Boatlift." *The Washington Post (1974-Current File)*, 1980.

3. Historiography of Universities during the Special Period

The Cuban Revolutionary State has considered education a priority for all Cubans, as a necessity for civic engagement.²² Prior to and immediately following the Revolution, numerous community organizations, student groups and collectives complemented (or sometimes countered) the formal educational process, such as La Federación Estudiantil Universitaria (FEU).²³ Historical research into the ways in which these groups may have shifted focus or responded during the Special Period however is startlingly absent. Ariana Hernandez-Reguant's *Cuba in the Special Period*, although not primarily preoccupied with education during that time, represents one of the seminal works that considers the cultural history of the period and has been invaluable for providing frameworks under which to consider Cuban university education. In particular, the essays in *Cuba In The Special Period*, offer frameworks under which to look for double meanings, as well as understanding absences and improvisation as important cultural markers in and of themselves.²⁴ This has been especially helpful given that much of the historical analysis of education in the Special Period has relied upon official government sources, which are often barren of specific details and prone to rhetoric that focuses on Revolutionary values as opposed to nuanced reality or cited specifics. As a result, editorializing by official state resources happened throughout the 70s and 80s represented Cuban educational realities as mirroring that of official narratives. I think it is important to reflect on my own positionality here as a non-Cuban scholar. I study and work at university in Canada and I have largely conducted my research from English language sources outside of Cuba. Despite my own socialist political leanings, I too have

²² Rebecca Herman. "An Army of Educators: Gender, Revolution and the Cuban Literacy Campaign of 1961." *Gender & History* 24, no. 1 (2012) 95

²³ For detailed, although polemic, history of the FEU and how Castro brought them and other student groups under centralized authority following the Revolution, see Jaime Suchlicki's *University Students and Revolution in Cuba, 1920-1968*. University of Miami Press, 1969.

²⁴ Ariana Hernandez-Reguant. *Cuba In the Special Period*. (Mcmillan Palgrave, 2009) 6

fallen victim to tantalizing rhetoric that did not necessarily include accurate representations of the lived Cuban experience, if any were present at all. I hope to use the narratives within *Cuba: Periodo Especial* to illustrate the ways in which Cuban professors and students influenced the State, while aware that I am approaching this as a non-Cuban and the potential trappings and shortfalls that entails. My research methods have largely been extractive, quite literally taking sources out of the country; I doubt whether this project has much utility to the average Cuban. My aim or my hope is that this study will help clarify and reveal new lines of inquiry for non-Cuban scholars and highlight possibilities to work alongside Cubans and Cuban historians to better understand the country's local and personal historical memory. If we continue to conduct history apart from the island where there is only the long shadow of the State under which ordinary Cubans must find a way to live, our narratives will continue to place Cubans on the fringes, isolated and relegated.

In keeping with historical approaches to Cuba since the Revolution, much of the historiography of Cuba since the Special Period has focused on the policy changes that accompanied the massive economic upheaval of the Special Period. As Hernandez-Reguant has argued, "teleologies of transition loomed in the background for cultural scholars," with regime change becoming the focus of much of the scholarship of the Special Period.²⁵ Where non-Cuban scholars have studied education during this time, their arguments often parrot the official resources they are granted access to, mostly being government records or visits to officially sanctioned and selected schools.²⁶ What is unfortunately lost in these educational studies is a methodology with any mention of scarcity or having to make do and improvise, thus giving the illusion that education during the Special Period and beyond was a well-oiled machine, present

²⁵ Ariana Hernandez-Reguant. *Cuba In the Special Period*. (Mcmillan Palgrave, 2009) 10

²⁶ Noah W. Sobe, and Renee N. Timberlake. "Staying the (Post)Socialist Course: Global/local Transformations and Cuban Education." in Vol. 14, 351-367: Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2010.

only with the challenges that are often chalked up to the conditions created by the decades long US embargo.

The enticing story of possible regime change is likely part of the reason why historians have focused so heavily on policy changes, rather than personal lived experiences. It is also notable that even at the state level, improvisation was central to conducting business. The improvisation at the state and local level points to the need to understand education in Cuba as a non-linear process, regardless of the strength and fervor of educational rhetoric in the country. At the time of writing, much of the popular discourse around Cuba continues to be “what comes next?” presuming that Cubans and the State have a preoccupation with the future rather than their present and very real past. Despite the relative lack of sources that engage in cultural history, interest in Cuba’s cultural authenticity grew during the Special Period. Increased access to the island meant that scholars arrived in droves to exhume data and eventually, “...sought to generate firsthand accounts that would counterbalance these orientalist representations of Cuban life and dispel images of socialism as a monochromatic society.”²⁷ Although scholars have generated counterbalances to exoticism and misunderstandings of Cuba, and in particular, Cuban socialism, it cannot be overstated that the allure of regime change and Cold War dialectics remains in many of the discussions of Cuban education.

Sheryl Lutjens’ 1996 book *The State, Bureaucracy, and the Cuban Schools* is one of the more complete listings of specific details regarding education reform leading up to and during the Special Period. However, Lutjens’ use of government sources suggests that the State’s focus of the Special Period was one of opportunity for educational reform. Lutjens’ use of official sources is likely one of necessity rather than choice, as few other sources exist beyond the plethora of glowing state reports, *Granma* articles, and official declarations. This does however

²⁷ Ibid. 13

skew the narrative to be one of superficial acquiescence to the superiority of Cuban education in Latin America: a very state-constructed premise. Still missing from the inquiry are the details social historians might search for: how did educational reform affect families, were university enrollment decreases impacted at all by ethnicity, what sectors did teachers and professors who left the profession move into, if any?²⁸ Lutjens is able to provide quantitative data for decline in university enrollments and teachers leaving the profession but little else is mentioned in terms of cultural factors in her work. This is less a condemnation or evidence of insufficiency in Lutjens' work, rather a reality that likely highlights the very real limitation brought about by a lack of sources which position Cuban's lived experiences as a resource for inquiry.

Many of the other studies from the 1990s and 2000s focus on the State's push for tourism, legalization of the American dollar, and the slow process of gradual economic reforms that were to run parallel to socialism but without indication of the social impacts of the mass layoffs. An example of scholarly preoccupation with State improvisation and policy of the Special Period is Fidel Castro's nebulous "Battle of Ideas." Locked in what Laurie Frederik called "perpetual state of self-defined" (and continued self-defining) crisis, Castro launched a campaign to "rescue" cultural traditions and promoted it to Cuban intellectuals and the public.²⁹ This project loosely sought to re-energize Revolutionary commitment by promoting a *cubanidad* that placed tradition and daily routine at the heart of national identity, instead of only animosity towards American capitalist aggressors. The Battle of Ideas represented a manufacturing of cultural crises alongside harsh material realities and meant that the state stayed nimble in its response to mounting political pressures, even if such measures were not premeditated or well thought out. State crackdowns on political groups and artists during the Special Period may well

²⁸ This final question is at least somewhat answered as many Cubans who have left academia, like so many others in Cuba, have found opportunities working in tourism.

²⁹ Laurie Frederik in Hernandez-Reguant. *Cuba In the Special Period*. (Mcmillan Palgrave, 2009) 90

tell us why such a gap in historical analysis and evidence about Cuban education exists from this time.

The State's series of economic *rectificaciones* re-created and re-purposed Revolutionary ideology to suit its needs. In April 1986, at a major speech to mark the successful suppression of the Bay of Pigs invasion, Fidel Castro equated corrupt economic actors to mercenaries and called for a revolutionary counter-offensive to defeat them.³⁰ Reviving Revolutionary fervor galvanized state-wide initiative and did serve to placate some tensions, although historical narratives leading up to the Special period tend to overlook the fact that many Cubans simply risked everything to leave. As Cubans again fled the island in droves, Castro was able to brand those who left as counterrevolutionaries; to stay and struggle was *be* Cuban.

Essential to the survival of the Cuban-Socialist state project has always been the ability to improvise and make quick pivots to suit state needs and to respond to global and local pressures. In this way, the fissure of historical analysis of Cuban education during the Special Period may mirror the shortage of educational materials on the island during this time. As Lavinia Gasperini argues:

The austerities accompanying Periodo Especial have strongly cut back the production and distribution of textbooks. To deal with these shortages, schools work hard to maintain books in good condition. Most of the books currently in use were published around 1992. Students continually rebind books and repair other learning equipment and school furniture as part of their weekly "labor education" (*educacion laboral*).³¹

Within *Cuba: Periodo Especial* there are voices that explain the harsh material realities of the Special Period, even if they do not (unsurprisingly) directly challenge Castro's hegemony.

Within the source I had stumbled across, one of the contributors helped confirm why the gap in

³⁰ Jorge F. Pérez-López. "The Cuban Economy: Rectification in a Changing World." *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 16, no. 1 (1992): 115

³¹ Gasperini, Lavinia, and World Bank, Washington, DC. Human Development Network. 2000. *The Cuban Education System: Lessons and Dilemmas. Country Studies: Education Reform and Management Publication Series, vol. 1, no. 5.* Education Reform and Management Team, The World Bank. 11

resources exists. Lourdes González, a public relations specialist working with one of Havana's most important book publishers, Casa Editorial Abril, recalled: "abrupt decrease in publications and print runs contributed to the absence of important recognized texts, authors in the diversity of genres and topics in universities, schools, libraries, and bookstores, without discounting the lack of knowledge for the younger generations."³² Gonzalez went on to express how shocked she was when, in 1990, she had to abandon her work translating the writings of important Cuban thinkers into foreign languages in order to join "activities that made us grow in some way."³³ Gonzalez was ostensibly referring to the myriad of self-reliance activities that the average Cuban was encouraged by the State to undertake in order to ration material goods and provide food for oneself. Accompanying the need to repair and rebind books was Revolutionary rhetoric, equating the ability to mend and "tighten belts" as hand-in-hand with the Revolutionary project. Creativity, ingenuity, and improvisation where there was lack of resources were indicative of the Special Period. As teacher shortages increased and school materials, and indeed the schools themselves, fell into disrepair, teachers and scholars were forced to improvise. As Cuban physicist Ernesto Altshuler explained of trying to conduct science during the Special Period in his 2017 book *Guerilla Science*: "I was looking further afield for new phenomena, seeing scientific instruments in everyday objects, attacking and retreating from serendipitous findings like a guerrilla. Facing challenges became a natural part of my way of doing science."³⁴ Altshuler also detailed how mail exchanges trying to have research published were punishingly slow due to gas shortages so he worked out an unofficial agreement with the post office to pick up and deliver all of the mail for the University of Havana with some colleagues on mass-

³² Bell Lara. 114

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ernesto Altshuler. *Guerrilla Science Survival Strategies of a Cuban Physicist*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017. doi:10.1007/978-3-319-51624-0.

imported Chinese bikes.³⁵ Once at the university, Altshuler and his colleagues would sort out all of their mail from academic journals first, in order to give timely responses and not miss publication deadlines. Given the challenges of a more-or-less improvised system of State reactions to the Special Period, it would make sense that educational improvisation by professors and academics would follow. The perception, as Ariana Hernandez-Reguant argued, “was that both among the public and scholars, was that political change would be the ultimate outcome.”³⁶ It should also be noted however that even in the time of the Literacy Campaign of 1961, many textbooks being used to educate farmers and Cuba’s rural citizenry were old Spanish workbooks, similarly held together with little else than sheer will and still in rotation today. The cobbled together state of classroom textbooks mirrored the many ways the improvised nature of many sectors in Cuba struggled to produce enough critical resources at home. When the sugar industry was thriving, Cuba was able to import mass quantities of fuel, food, and military equipment, largely from the Soviets. The Special Period, more out of necessity than political will, became synonymous with the ever evolving need to change direction without a moment’s notice. While economic change was offered in fits and starts, it was done so as necessary adjustments to ensure the survival of the Cuban Revolutionary state.

³⁵ Ibid. 6

³⁶ Hernandez-Reguant. *Cuba In the Special Period*. (Mcmillan Palgrave, 2009) 9

4. Professors and Students Remember *Periodo Especial*

Three professors from the University of Havana and one from the University of Utrecht served as editors of *Cuba: Periodo Especial*. While they do not explicitly state how their interview subjects were selected beyond demographics that includes gender, race, and regional representation, their introduction declares that “the collection of life experience has often been undervalued in [Cuban] academics,” and goes on to suggest that the Special Period is probably best captured through the memory of Cubans’ lived experiences.³⁷ This marks a substantial departure from the generally bureaucratic educational reports that can often obscure more than they reveal by churning out statistics that can be: contradictory to other reports.³⁸ It is also noteworthy that the interview subjects were brought together to improvise narratives of their memories of the Special Period, which effectively collapses understandable timelines of the periodization of the Special Period, for recalling the Special Period is in many ways to also acknowledge the ongoing material challenges of Cuba’s present. Despite the influx of foreign tourist cash, Cuba remains beholden to agreements with a few friendly governments and an increasingly fractious and wrought relationship with the United States. The fact that *Cuba: Periodo Especial* deals with the memory of the Special Period tells us something of its purpose and existence, mostly again, that it is unlikely that many other few first-hand accounts exist from professors or students. Indeed, some of the interviewees allude to the fact that they were either unaware that they were living through a historically noteworthy time, or they were simply too preoccupied with dealing with the everyday needs at hand.³⁹

³⁷ José Bell Lara, et al. *Cuba: Periodo Especial*. (La Habana: Editorial UH, 2017.) 11

³⁸ As an example, reports of 1-10 teacher ratios often conflict with other reports of mass teacher shortages, especially at the primary and secondary level. While visiting Havana in January 2018, I observed mass groups of students on staggered time tables throughout the day to allow more students to attend school. The improvised nature of classrooms has been in play since 1959.

³⁹ Bell Lara, et al. *Cuba: Periodo Especial*. 2017. 85

The three primary questions that the interviewees were asked were: “what do you remember about this period?; in what political processes did you participate?; and finally, what factors explain the resilience of the Cuban community?”⁴⁰ The questions themselves are telling of the front loaded manner in which official Cuban studies frame the Revolutionary past. To focus the line of questioning to be around participation in political processes and the resilience of the Cuban community is to root the entire conversation firmly in Revolutionary understandings, which may have coloured how interviewees remembered their pasts. One might well imagine that had they been asked about the pressures they felt at home, or what changes they noticed, if any, in their classrooms, the survey might well have yielded very different answers. Nevertheless, the fact that professors from the University of Havana, with international collaboration, have a revived, if limited, interest in exploring some of the social dynamics of the Special Period, then perhaps they have also opened up a space for discourse around the history of the Special Period even if unintentionally. It says a great deal that this study exists at all and was deemed important enough to sit down and organize a conversation about memory during the Special Period as this would seem to indicate that there is a reckoning with this difficult past that was left incomplete.

While *Cuba: Periodo Especial* certainly still espouses Revolutionary ideology, the existence of the study shows that Cuban scholars have shown interest in their own lived experience during the hardships of the 1990s, even where non-Cuban historians have largely not. I would argue that as material conditions were still somewhat precarious in Cuban universities when the book was published in 2017, there may have been a desire to unpack the near distant past as a way of understanding a still uncertain future. I would argue that Cubans’ desire to know

⁴⁰ Ibid. 12

their own personal and local histories is an attempt to locate themselves within their present while simultaneously imagining what their future may look like.

Generational attitudes do not shift significantly in *Cuba: Periodo Especial*, although there is some sense that younger Cubans felt a responsibility to uphold and to continue living according to Revolutionary values. For Ángela Peña, a sociology professor at the University of Havana, she sensed the deep frustrations her parents had felt. Peña's parents had two children in the relatively prosperous eighties, only to be blind-sided by the sudden hardships of the Special Period: "It was a very complex family situation because of the expectations adolescents have. I always think of my parents' frustration... the change was, I repeat, terrible in my house. My dad was a pilot for Cubana de Aviacion, he travelled during the 80s. I enjoyed those years but suddenly the 90s meant the loss of everything from the economic point of view."⁴¹ The unexpected bottoming out of hope is a common theme in sources about the Special Period where dissident voices are heard but its presence in a study produced by the University of Havana is more unexpected. However, elsewhere in the book the blame for austerity was placed on uncontrollable external sources, which although not voiced by Peña directly, may indicate why it is spoken about with such seeming candor. It could also be that Peña's comments are illustrative of how Cubans speak about issues they commonly face. There is some degree of latitude given to how Cubans talk about hardship if their experiences are not being blamed on the Revolutionary project.

As an example of how negative experiences can be portrayed in official studies, Peña also recalled her political involvement with her Revolutionary upbringing at home, as well as her involvement in the Cuban Youth. The latter did not endear her to her fellow classmates, who called her crazy for being a member: "[F]or what I had been educated in during my childhood, it

⁴¹ Ibid. 83

did not align [sic] to a certain extent with the expectations that my classmates had of what my political participation should be... I do remember having those differences with the other teenagers who shared the social space with me.”⁴² What Peña divulges could be interpreted in a number of ways. On the one hand, an admonishment of the lack of Revolutionary zeal from her colleagues is a familiar trope in academia produced within Cuba and possibly echoes the sentiments of the Peña’s parents’ generation, who had acquiesced to the State commitment to Cuban Socialism. In that sense, Peña’s comments fall within the realm of Castro’s “Battle of Ideas,” which sought to reinvigorate Revolutionary ideology amidst the economic crisis of the nineties. At the same time, the Battle of Ideas was not understood as a monolithic movement towards Revolutionary ideology so much as it was a tentative expansion of what it meant to be Cuban and maintain some sense of cultural unity, which included the Cuban diaspora in the newly emerging *cubanidad*. Peña’s discomfort of feeling ostracized by her peers also reveals that teenagers during the Special Period were not all strict adherents to the Revolutionary project.

Peña’s interview also reveals something provocative about the shadow cast by Castro over vast majority of Cubans during the Special Period who did not grow up during the Revolutionary years. Peña mused that the Mariel Boatlift marked a sudden crisis of faith for Cubans who looked to Fidel to guide them through the tumultuous years of scarcity.⁴³ Peña recalled how some classmates told her a story in 1994, when she was fifteen or sixteen years old, of how boys were throwing rocks at those departing on rafts and as soon as word came that Fidel was coming down to the site of the departure and the boys started crying out “Viva la Revolucion!”⁴⁴ Peña continued, “That is what I remember. At the time I never thought that I would have to talk about this in the future. I mean, I’m remembering it now. But it is this feeling

⁴² Ibid. 84

⁴³ Bell Lara. 84

⁴⁴ Ibid.

that he is a person who impacts the social imaginary of Cubans and this managed to sustain this [the Revolutionary project]. My concern now is the future.”⁴⁵ For Peña and others, the predominant question, perhaps during the Special Period and certainly carrying into the present, was how to maintain Revolutionary fervor without the figure of the Castros. The memory of the Special Period, at least for Peña, becomes loaded with an existential crisis of a future with uncertainty, not just economically, but on a national/Revolutionary level as well. Even the book contains the dedication: “A Fidel, su conductor. (To Fidel, our leader/teacher)”⁴⁶

That Peña found it noteworthy to be reminiscing about the Special Period at all also lends support to the idea that the Special Period was a time that existed on a continuum of struggle and improvisation for many Cubans, rather than a new epoch of scarcity. This could be vital to how we consider constructed memories of Revolutionary Cuba, for it is all too easy for non-Cuban scholars to position the Special Period as something extraordinary or indeed, “special.” Peña and the interviewees of the *Cuba: Periodo Especial* did not minimize the hardships of the 90s and their precarious economic realities nor do they necessarily see their reaction to this time as remarkable. Instead their concern when remembering the Special Period lay preoccupied with their past and present-day concerns for their future, especially a future where the continuity of Castro rule is disrupted. At the time of Peña’s comments, Fidel Castro was still alive and Raúl Castro was still in power. Since then, former Minister of Higher Education, Miguel Díaz-Canel, has been elected by the Party and as a hardline Marxist, he has promised continuity. Peña’s fixation with the future in her constructed memory of the past is telling of how for some Cubans, their memories of the past recall imagined futures as an ever present fixture, or perhaps more

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

accurately, memories anxious with waiting for a Revolutionary future that seemed to be a moving goalpost rather than an achievable reality.

Elsewhere in *Cuba: Periodo Especial*, Yarina Amaroso, a professor at the University of Computer Sciences in Havana, admitted that her political involvement as the General Secretary of Youth in the Ministry of Justice helped her conceptualize the changes that were occurring during the 90s. She mentioned the Constitutional Reform and followed a pattern of the sometimes narrow but socially significant ways in which Cubans are permitted to participate in politics. For Fidel, this participation was essential to maintaining socialist hegemony. Under the guise of reform, Fidel's Battle of Ideas could draw attention away from the smattering of protests in Havana that arose during the Special Period. For Amaroso, her political involvement ensured a sense of continuity between the fall of the Socialist Soviet bloc and the new Cuban socialist imaginary. But most interestingly in Amaroso's account, is that thrown in among the details of her political involvement, she recalled becoming a mother during the crisis: "[F]rom the family point of view, I had my daughter. That is to say, she is of that generation: she was born in 1993, therefore we were branded as mad mothers. How we dared [to have children] in that period! And I think that moment was when the birth rate began to decline."⁴⁷ Revealed within an otherwise ordinary account that follows familiar policy-laden accounts, is Amaroso's sense of determination to continue a life she had envisioned for herself: to continue life as normal. Amaroso also recalled her pregnancy amidst a broader cultural trend of a declining birthrate, a hugely significant detail that is only briefly mentioned. Though it is one small line, we may learn much from within otherwise obscured accounts by reading for these rare glimpses into the personal challenges students and professors faced.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 77

For others, the Special Period was a challenge within the broader context of the ongoing Revolutionary project. Giselle Armas, listed only as a professor at the University of Havana, offers a clearer window into the challenges faced by professors in the classroom with students who were born prior to the Special Period and who had little formal connection to Fidel Castro or the Revolutionary project:

That is why I tried- based on the same book that is here [referring to the 1965 article *El socialismo y el hombre en Cuba* by Che Guevarra] to read them a bit about the history of the Batista dictatorship; the difference between the supposed capitalism that many times they, now with the opening of the Cuba-United States relationship, see as the economic opening and the material needs that are going to be fulfilled, what they have always wanted.⁴⁸

What Armas refers to here is the legalization of the American dollar and the opening of tourist-only stores in Havana, which saw the latest consumer goods flood into Cuba as regular *mercados* sat empty. Armas' admonishment of capitalist thought and the valuing of material goods as being in opposition to *cubanidad* is familiar metaphor of material goods being the antithesis or externalization of "good" Cuban character, whether it be hoarding increasingly scarce food and essential goods, or pining after flashy electronics and American fashion. Armas' account demonstrates how fraught the Cuban consciousness was during the Special Period. Indeed today, the dual economies continue to divide Cubans, on the one hand offering economic stability and access to otherwise non-existent consumer goods, while simultaneously increasing wealth disparity and being in direct competition with socialist values.

For Armas, her project was to correct her students, whom she felt had no sense of the country under Batista: "[o]ne of the things that I explained to them about the resistance of the Cuban people was the difference between a socialist society, in which social justice was sought... I told them 'Look at the resistance of the Cuban people and how the Cuban people felt

⁴⁸ Ibid. 86

the Revolution;’ 1994 arrives and I begin to talk about the events of Mariel.”⁴⁹ Armas’ invocation of the Mariel Boatlift in the 1980s, where some 100,000 Cubans fled in makeshift rafts for Florida, is interesting as she pairs it with 1994, when a similar crisis hit and another 35,000 Cubans took to all manner of transports to make the ninety-mile trek across the ocean to Florida.⁵⁰ Castro in both cases declared that anyone who wanted to leave could go, but rebuked them for turning their backs on their homeland. Although these porous water border openings were only temporary, the sentiment was echoed by Armas: “...those who stayed did so because they wanted to, out of conviction.”⁵¹ These views run counter to the overwhelming evidence of the furious set of reforms and their subsequent rollback that Castro applied during the height of the crisis, which temporarily quietened some of the most critical domestic Cuban voices. In this way, the reforms of the Special Period represent something of a departure in that they sought to acquiesce a growing critical voice against the Cuban government during the crisis, whereas reforms that had started in the 1980s were brought about almost entirely for economic reasons. But even as reforms in the Special Period were offered, so too were certain other freedoms cracked down upon, and any new areas of relative freedom being offered were all done so with the distinct expectation of compliance in return.

For university professors and students, their very existence was mitigated by the complicated reality that “Cuban intellectuals—like visual artists before then—had to negotiate diverse intellectual circles while acquiescing to revolutionary ideology and hierarchy, for it was precisely their official status within the island that endowed them with a cultural capital desirable

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Edward Walsh Washington Post Staff Writer. “17 Americans Summoned Home: Carter Moves to Stop Cuban Boatlift.” *The Washington Post (1974-Current File)*, 1980.

⁵¹ Bell Lara. *Cuba: Periodo Especial*. 2017. 86

abroad.”⁵² The relative freedoms afforded to scholars to study abroad and attend academic conferences meant that they were also steadily, if not explicitly, brought back in line with a unified *cubanidad*, if not official Revolutionary rhetoric: “[w]e can have a very fertile terrain: educate the people a little and have possibilities and perform politics.”⁵³ It is within this precarious place where it is possible to better understand a common thread with the approach of university professors and students: that to improvise and make-do was tantamount to performing citizenship but also *cubanidad*. Whether the cause of such resilience was an invention of the Revolutionary government or the necessity met by citizens, or some combination of those and other factors, Cubans in universities found ways to navigate their personal and local as they also sought to accommodate and inform fluctuations by the State.

The delicate and precarious offering and withdrawing of freedoms by the Castro regime allowed the State a way in which to ride out the worst inward pressures and criticisms by acting as a pressure release valve on those most poised to cause political problems. Under that framework, Giselle Armas’ reflections on those who “chose” to stay does not necessarily ring false but illustrates the complicated and nuanced nature of choice that Cuban academics had during the Special Period. It should not be concluded however that all public intellectuals served as instruments of the State, rather that the realities they navigated in order to have relative access to freedoms within global academic spheres meant that voicing support for the continued Revolutionary project was expected in return by making do with what was available.

⁵² Ariana Hernandez-Reguant. *Cuba In the Special Period*. (Mcmillan Palgrave, 2009) 6

⁵³ Bell Lara, et all. *Cuba: Periodo Especial*. 2017. 125

5. The Special Period: Students and Professors Respond

Many Cubans left the island through the Special Period, unable to continually pivot and improvise in reaction to an ever-changing future. This created opportunities for others, as the Cuban artist Tonel points out: the vacuum created by many prominent artists leaving Cuba allowed for an emerging generation of young artists to have a level playing field during a time of deep economic and racial stratification.⁵⁴ It is highly likely that mass layoffs and the exodus of academics from Cuba created a similar vacuum within higher education. By the early 1990s some 40% of Cuban teachers were under 30, which suggests that many university professors possessed only a Bachelor's level education. At present, it is still not unusual for university instructors to be the same age or younger than the students they teach.⁵⁵ Unfortunately, there has been little to no research done into whether organized youth movements or younger academics were able to maneuver differently in this vacuum in order to create new opportunities in the absence of an established old guard of academics. As we shall see in *Cuba: Periodo Especial*, as well as in the Havana Times blog, distinct challenges faced university professors who were seldom older than their students.

In 'Education, Citizenship, and Cuban Identity,' Rosi Smith conducted a range of interviews with Cuban youth, largely of the *emergente* generation, that is, youth who were born in or lived through the Special Period.⁵⁶ Smith concludes that despite overwhelming and probably well-founded caution towards outside researchers:

I encountered inspirational professionals who were proud of the projects that they had directed and delivered for scant financial reward, whose motives returned always to

⁵⁴ Ariana Hernandez-Reguant. *Cuba In the Special Period*. (Mcmillan Palgrave, 2009) 181

⁵⁵ Sheryl Lutjens. *The State, Bureaucracy, and the Cuban Schools: Power and Participation*. (Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 1996) 108

⁵⁶ Generations in Cuba, particularly when considering "youth" can encompass people into their 30s, as many still live at home with their parents as a result of the high unemployment and relatively low university enrollment from the Special Period. This has also meant that a large swath of youth "emerging" from the Special Period have ended up with little future to move towards, at least as we may understand it, as a direct result of the Special Period.

social justice and to the development of the young people with whom they worked, in whom they clearly had a huge amount of faith and emotional investment. In all cases, it was evident that they were conscious of the social meaning and repercussions of their work and that this concern was considered legitimate in official discourse—a recognition enviable to many educators in neoliberal countries.⁵⁷

That Cuban youths would express frustration at many studies and popular conversation only “talk of the bad” signals that both the isolation felt on the island nation and the critical narratives produced from foreign scholars are at play here. Cubans are both aware of how little people outside of their own country seem to know and are also simultaneously inundated with messages that say as much, however the latter does not erase the former. As one of Smith’s interview subjects simply exclaims: “...some things have been done well and others have been done badly, but I can’t say that no, “No, I don’t like the Revolution,” because I live here. I live here and I haven’t been anywhere else that would allow me to draw comparisons.”⁵⁸

As for the scarcity of historical inquiry into the narrative of Cuban experiences of education during this time, Rosi Smith has argued that Cubans themselves remain aware of the challenges and failings of the Special Period, however, their mistrust of foreign journalists and intellectuals has made it difficult for scholars to engage in critical historical discourse of the education system.⁵⁹ My own experiences conducting research in Cuba has meant that while people are eager to talk, often the seriousness of the Special Period is minimized, either as something that only lasted a few difficult years, or as an era devoid of political upheaval. Indeed, many reports of Cuba’s education still remain glowingly congratulatory of the literacy campaign, access to free higher education, and vocational placement from university.⁶⁰ Such studies mask the stark reality of unemployment and disenfranchisement that many young Cuban graduates

⁵⁷ Rosi Smith. *Education, Citizenship, and Cuban Identity* (New York: Palgrave macmillan, 2016) 222

⁵⁸ Ibid. 221-222

⁵⁹ Ibid. 173

⁶⁰ Lavinia Gasperini. Washington, DC. 2000. *The Cuban Education System*. 13

have faced throughout their post-Revolutionary reality. Cuban accounts of the Special Period, whether written during the 90s or are more contemporary reflections back, differ wildly. While official sources from the University of Havana and Institute for Educational Improvement (IPE) tended to concentrate on the resilience of professors, state-aligned narratives are still important to read as a part of the history of the most severe years of the crisis, especially as so few other sources exist. Indeed, even the periodization of the Special Period cannot be agreed as being strictly from the period 1991 and on. In the civilian-run Havana Times.org blog, contributor Dmitri Prieto unlocks how many have come to see the Special Period:

People don't agree on whether the "Special Period" has already ended or continues on (26 years later, almost half of the post-Revolutionary era in Cuba). The 1990s were years of grave structural economic crisis and society also changed. Today, many of these changes can be seen, especially with respect to the generations that were born and/or grew up after 1990: there's no doubt about it, many of the ways that Cuba understands and lives its reality today, aren't the same as before.⁶¹

It may also be that for many young Cubans, the Special Period is not that special for the simple fact that they have known nothing else. Much of the scarcity that they experienced in the 1990s continues to inform Cubans' daily lives. For the previous generation, austerity and increased state involvement in university direction had started in the 70s and carried on through the 80s, as Cuba left its state building decade following the Revolution and sought to align all levels of education with the needs of the economy.

The State's educational and political focus during the Special Period targeted vocational trades which brought about a heavy reliance on agricultural and technology, away from the old standard-bearers for civic engagement: the arts and humanities. For instance, Lavinia Gasperini has written about how total hours of history taught in primary through middle school, according to a 1995 census, show that history falls well below the total average number of hours spent on

⁶¹ "Was The "Special Period" A Cuban Invention?". 2016. Blog. *Havana Times.Org*. <https://www.havanatimes.org/?p=122225>.

Mathematics and Spanish/Literature.⁶² Whether this is a significant change from prior to the Special Period is not clear but there remain notable discrepancies between technical training and humanities-based instruction. Simultaneously, in an effort to provide some relief to an intensifying pressure on the State to act, the government sought to distance Cuban identity from politics and economy.⁶³ These seeming contradictions by the State in terms of focus and reach illustrate the complexities not just of trying to understand the nuances of the Cuban state approach but also the backdrop on which ordinary Cubans were trying to navigate their realities.

Perched atop a hill in Vedado, the University of Havana sits with its imposing stone columns gleaming down on the hectic city below. But beyond this mortar and marble entrance, the buildings are largely in disrepair, with some buildings left entirely to rot with roofs collapsed in, and even the great stone steps leading up to the university are cobbled together with rushed cement patchwork.⁶⁴ As university enrollment dropped significantly during the Special Period, the State continued to shift focus away from the humanities and towards the sciences and technical training schools. Moving towards technical training and vocational schools was not new however, as higher education had been steadily reoriented to the needs of the economy over the course of the 70s and 80s. Demand for higher education also presented problems, as enrollment planning was adopted in 1970-71, and extended through the early 80s. Personal and academic performance of students served as the primary criteria for post-secondary placements, alongside technical training and work experience now running alongside traditional university education.⁶⁵ This meant that even as Cuba sought to quickly reorganize the economy and education in order to produce more work-ready graduates, choices for study had already been

⁶² Lavinia Gasperini. Washington, DC. 2000. *The Cuban Education System*. 29

⁶³ Ariana Hernandez-Reguant. *Cuba In the Special Period*. (Mcmillan Palgrave, 2009) 71

⁶⁴ On my most recent trip to Havana in July 2019, some major repairs of buildings had begun.

⁶⁵ Lutjens, Sheryl. *The State, Bureaucracy, and the Cuban Schools: Power and Participation*. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996) 102

limited in the decades leading up to Special Period. Additionally, the opening of the country to more tourism meant (and continues to mean) that even with a post-secondary education, tourism remains a much more lucrative career than working for the state.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Rosi Smith. *Education, Citizenship, and Cuban Identity* (New York: Palgrave macmillan, 2016) 193

6. Voices of Dissent: Cubans Write Against the Special Period

Invention and improvisation seem to be the dominant through-line for memory of the Special Period, whether Revolutionary buy-in is present or not. *Cuba: Periodo Especial* is a unique source that offers a glimpse into the challenges that Cuban university professors and students faced. However, some of the contributors neither glowingly congratulate Castro, nor castigate Cuban socialism as outdated and tyrannical. Yet their narratives do tell us something about how this period is remembered within a constructed framework of struggle being inherently Cuban. Their sentiments place the Special Period as something not altogether that difficult or noteworthy, while simultaneously remembering it as a time of intense scarcity and uncertainty, pointing perhaps to the notion that dealing with scarcity and uncertainty were already parts of the Cuban experience prior to the Special Period.

One place where more critical opinions and memories can be found is in a Cuban-based blog: the *Havana Times*, which has been active since 2008. The blog contains some counterpoints to *Cuba: Periodo Especial* that stress some of the more trying aspects of the Special Period. For example, Irina Pino, a writer from Miramar, reflected back on her experience during the Special Period: “I would walk around Old Havana with a gay friend of mine who had the complexion of a European. We would dress up as foreigners to be able to access certain stores Cubans weren’t allowed in... Our disguises also allowed us to make some foreign friends who invited us out to eat and other places.”⁶⁷ Here Pino illustrates the tension between the allure of access to consumer goods and foreign capital, as well as access to Cuban culture in Havana itself, as something that was out of reach from most Cubans. Given the values espoused above by professor Giselle Armas, we can well imagine the scolding someone like Pino might receive in a

⁶⁷ Irina Pino. 2014. "Cuba's 'Special Period' Remembered". Blog. Havana Times. <https://havanatimes.org/?p=102373>.

university classroom. This tension demonstrates that Cubans were improvising within the constraints of their circumstances, whether they supported the Revolution or opposed it.

That is not to say that conflicting ideologies, desires, or emotions cannot exist in any one person, and in fact, that may be the case for many Cubans. However, we also see again in the Havana Times blog the dialectics of the Special Period being framed as a polemical debate between those who would flee and those who would stay and commit to the ideals of the Revolution. For Pino, life during the Special Period was complicated: “[d]espite the circumstances, we managed to have a good time and even plan adventures. It’s true we went hungry often and faced many hardships, but we invented ways of riding out the storm, good Cubans that we are. It’s no accident we have been christened as ‘the kings of invention.’”⁶⁸ It is quite possible that Pino was playfully mocking Revolutionary values with “good Cubans that we are” but Pino’s account also demonstrates that even within a usually dissenting source like the Havana Times, there are memories present of the Special Period as something made livable by ingenuity and improvisation. At least in some cases, it may be a holdover from responding to decades of the US embargo. For another blogger, Dmitri Prieto, invention had nothing to do with Revolutionary values but rather worked directly against or in spite of the State:

“Inventing” became a synonym for “working in the informal economic sector”, but there were real inventions too, precarious technologies conceived to maintain daily life, in the city and in the countryside, at work, at home or on the go. Society managed to sustain itself off of its own inventions, and much of the typical authoritarian government distanced itself or withdrew from certain private environments.⁶⁹

For many young Cubans, the Special Period is not particularly special, mostly for the simple fact that they have known no other period. Additionally, much of the scarcity brought about by the

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Dmitri Prieto. 2016. “Was the ‘Special Period’ a Cuban Invention?” Blog. Havana Times. <https://havanatimes.org/?p=122225>

worst years of the Special Period continue to inform Cuban's daily life as they write about and remember the lean years of the nineties. Although the Havana Times blog remains for the most part a dissenting source, it is one of the freely accessible places for Cubans to voice their opinions to a non-Cuban audience. The reality may remain that daily life for Cubans is also one of polemics and political navigation, and that the complexities of university professors and students mirror the complex realities of Cuban life during the Special Period. Depending on the situation, support for or rallying cries for change may be held by the same individual.

While not a direct admonishment of the State, Gonzalez's account is an example of how reading for criticism and emotional reactions to the adaptations required by Cubans during the Special Period points to the complicated ways in which Cubans understood and traversed their world. Moving beyond an overly simplistic reading for overt challenges to the official state rhetoric, even where it may be simultaneously present, allows us to begin to see a larger picture of dual worlds occupied by ordinary citizens. Indeed the "dual realities" so often suggested by scholars is well represented, if not immediately apparent, in *Cuba: Periodo Especial*. For Gonzalez, and the contributors to *Cuba: Periodo Especial* and the Havana Times blog, the opportunities presented by market reforms, including access to foreign tourist dollars, came with political and personal sacrifices, ones that often meant that a person's hopes for what their future contained was uprooted. Whether those trade-offs were seen as necessary and as a part of a greater good by those such as Gonzalez, or as an avoidable snatching of the future by those such as Dmitri Prieto, historical events are often inscribed and encoded as emotional connections to one's past and imagined future rather than a simple and reductive zero-sum game of cost-benefit evaluation of the past.

7. Conclusion

Like many non-Cubans who have spent time in Cuba, I have many questions which persist and feel nearly impossible to answer. It is unlikely that many sources like *Cuba: Periodo Especial* exist, although I do hope more will be produced. I have to acknowledge that within my project I am contributing to a long history of extractive and subtle (and at times, not-so-subtle) exoticism for the Caribbean isle that dared to find its own way. Regardless of what the fate of Cuba holds, or how Cubans remember their history, it is my sincere hope that my efforts here work to complicate our all too often simplistic narrative of Cuba. As a university student and professional, I feel a duty to and kinship with educators and students globally, but must confront my own views with the unique and nuanced experiences of local actors who express their own hopes, desires, and misgivings that are separate from whatever kinship I feel.

A few days after I had submitted my proposal for this project Fidel Castro died, followed by the selection of a new president, the naming of the first Prime Minister since before the Revolution, and a new draft of the constitution. Everything was seemingly about to change or was changing as I did my research. Prior to these events, the 2008 visit by Barack Obama (and almost as importantly: The Rolling Stones) seemed to bring the promise of meaningful change and an “opening up” of Cuba. Familiar Revolutionary billboards now sat alongside billboards encouraging political participation. When I was arriving into Havana in July of 2018 to begin my research, I asked my taxi driver if he felt things would change in Cuba with the recent election of the former Minister of Higher Education, Miguel Díaz-Canel. He paused a moment to think and then his tone turned sarcastic as he laughed and said that nothing would change until the Revolution could be completed. When I think back to that moment and our subsequent conversations, his comments reveal the space he occupies in between the State’s ongoing

Revolutionary project and a promised future that seems to constantly be eluding Cubans where material realities trump any ideology. While ordinary Cubans navigate their extraordinary present, they remain unavoidably linked to their remembered past and the delivered and undelivered promises of the Revolution. Being in a near constant state of having to improvise has resulted in a cultural, perhaps even national, identity framed around not just invention and improvisation but also inescapable uncertainty.

If educational scarcity and state and personal level improvisation existed long before the Special Period, university education in the nineties seemed to mark more of an existential crisis of exactly what the point of a higher education was at all, without the implied promise of economic mobility. The sudden loss of that future that Peña felt marked a distinct juncture in how she conceived of her own future, as she was forced into waiting for an undetermined future. Within *Cuba: Periodo Especial* there is a distinct lack of mention of the future. For a volume whose main purpose it was to ostensibly remember and understand (or perhaps to reconstruct) the past, this may not seem to be all that significant. However, the absences within Cuban historical memory are often as noteworthy as what is discussed.

When talking with Cubans and reading Cuban news, whether it is from State or civilian sources, the Special Period is often referred to as a difficult time that lasted somewhere between five and ten years. Yet at the time of writing, some of the material shortages of the nineties have returned following new broadened and enforced sanctions put in place by Donald Trump, threatening to drive Cuba into another Special Period. On my last visit to Havana in July 2019, my host Mary was somewhat embarrassed about the shortage of eggs available for breakfast, and long lines for rations and simple supplies has returned. Although not nearly as pronounced as the shortages that accompanied the Special Period, waiting and scarcity never really left and now the

island faces increased challenges as the U.S. ramps up the embargo and as Cuba's few allies struggle with their own precarity.

A major flaw in historical inquiry into the Special Period, are the voices from the Cuban diaspora. We know almost nothing of the experiences of professors, academics, and students who fled or defected during study abroad programs, though we know by Cuba's continued reliance on young professors with few qualifications that the retention of highly educated and experienced educators at all levels in education has remained a major challenge for decades. The individual and collective lived experiences and narratives of professors and students who left Cuba during the worst years of the Special Period may illuminate many of the gaps and silences in the historical record. Ramón, the father in the house where I stayed during my first research trip in June 2018, showed me pictures of him visiting his brother a couple of years earlier and laughed about how much weight he gained when he visited, although he also complained that American food was nowhere near as good as Cuban cuisine. While it has not been my aim with this project to explore the Cuban diaspora, it remains a weakness in this and many Cuban historical analyses to have one or the other but not the two together, even if it were to be decidedly non-cohesive.

In trying to place Cuban experiences of university within the broader Revolutionary context, Danay Quintana Nedelcu reminds us of the reforms that began before the Special Period and continued through the 2010s: "the design of the reforms does not provide for the modification of the Cuban socio-political model."⁷⁰ It is imperative to remember this if we are to seriously engage in a history of Revolutionary Cuba that exists on a continuum informed by the lived experiences of ordinary people that is in turn informed by their interactions with the socio-

⁷⁰ Danay Quintana Nedelcu. "Cuban Education between Revolution and Reform." *International Journal of Cuban Studies* 6, no. 2 (2014) 208

political. For Cuban professors and students leading up to and the Special Period, as now, it is not as simple as understanding their experiences on a model of compliance with or resistance to the socio-political. It is instead the liminal spaces in between their own needs, desires, and dreams rather than a looming monolith of State ideology.

Cuban historians have been slow to adopt interdisciplinary methods. Scholarship done on Cuba has remained largely Havana-centric, with very few studies citing higher education beyond the University of Havana. Without sources that appreciate the importance of localized and community-based education, particularly in rural areas, or considering the universities in Santa Clara, Cienfuegos, Camaguey, Pinar del Rio and others, it will be very difficult to provide a history of education during the Special Period that is appropriately nuanced and appreciative of *multicubanidad*. Additionally, there exists a great opportunity to begin to find voices from the Cuban diaspora of teachers and professors who left the island throughout the decades following the Revolution. And within the island, it must be the case that many who have left academic institutions have been forced to improvise new lines of work but how do they conceptualize their educational experience amid the fraught years of the Special Period?

By examining the lived experiences of professors and students, where possible, and trying to restore agency to the voices of ordinary Cubans, I believe a more complete, although also more complex, history of Cubans during the Special Period may emerge. As Cubans remember the Special Period in volumes such as *Cuba: Periodo Especial*, the improvisation and resilience of Cuban professors and students, whether part of a Revolutionary zeal or a defiant wish to imagine a new world, meant that for Cubans, their conceptualization of the Special Period may deem it in fact not all that special, but rather a continuation of their feelings that lay

somewhere between reality and utopia.⁷¹ That is to say, with the ever moving goalpost of the Revolutionary promise, Cubans are largely continuing a tradition of memory where struggle, uncertainty, and the need to improvise are so enmeshed in the cultural psyche, that the lines of where one era of struggle ends and a new one begins, begins to blur. For generations of student born before the Special Period, the promise of a university education was not equated with economic security or upward social mobility, as was the case for students born during or after the Special Period. The ideal of a utopic Revolutionary Cuba is a slippery and impossible to obtain target, which means that Cubans remember their own encounters of hardship on a continuum framed by having to make do or leave. In this way, without some record of collected memories from the students and professors who left Cuba during the Special Period, the nature of the Revolutionary historical struggle remains incomplete.

When I visited Havana in July 2019, two new mega hotels along the Malecon were nearing completion and the demolition of the iconic Pan Am games display that sits in front of the now abandoned U.S. Embassy was well underway. Elsewhere in the city, various building projects have been abandoned for however long it takes for materials to arrive or labour to be available again. When I visited Casa de las Americas, I was given a full tour by the centre's director, seemingly because they do not get many foreign visitors and staff sit and sweat under fans that push hot air around. When visiting the bookshop and thumbing through the same twenty or so books that have been for sale there forever, I asked the man who ran the shop if he had anything about Cuban education or the Special Period; becoming quite animated, he began rummaging around and brought me a book about the literacy campaign. He flipped through the pages and pointed at the pictures of teachers in the countryside and then pointed to himself. He

⁷¹ Danay Quintana Nedelcu, 'Cuban Education between Revolution and Reform.' *International Journal of Cuban Studies*, (Vol 6, No. 2. Winter 2014) 206

swelled with pride and then looked at me for a moment and asked in English “do you like Ché?” “Of course,” I answered. He went into the back and came back with a large orange Ché poster, which he put on top of the stack of my books. When I think back to this simple exchange, I am struck by how under my nose stories of Cuban education had been. There are stories of education during the Special Period everywhere, it just takes someone to collect them. I am very thankful and optimistic that this work has begun and is being conducted by Cubans themselves.

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