

Cuba in Waiting

By Conger Beasley Jr.

Book Review/Essay:

Violet Isle: A Duet of Photographs from Cuba, by Alex Webb and Rebecca Norris Webb, with an afterward by Pico Iyer. Radius Books, 2009.



Alex Webb and Rebecca Norris Webb are a husband and wife photography team who have, over the past 20 years, lived and worked in the Caribbean, with a special focus on Cuba. Between 1993 and 2008, they made 11 trips to the beleaguered island. The photographs of the people and the purlieus, primarily of the two major cities, Havana and Santiago, are absorbing and evocative. Radius Books of Santa Fe, New Mexico, has recently issued *Violet Isle: A Duet of Photographs from Cuba*, a point-counterpoint selection of their photos, with a graceful and informative afterward by Pico Iyer.

Cuba, as anyone who's been there knows, lends itself seductively to the allurements of the camera. Everything about the island, not just the sexy, feline grace of the people, makes for interesting picture-taking. The streets, houses, buildings, walls, interiors, animal life (especially the birds and cats) gain fresh perspective under the Webbs' keen eyes. Their photos have an almost collage-like effect, image layered upon image in a diaphanous stacking of detail.

There's lots of standing around in these pictures, people looking, watching, waiting—for what? The Castro brothers finally to die? To my eye, these photos suggest that the revolution that shook the Western hemisphere in 1959 seems to have sputtered to a halt. The prevailing feeling is one of melancholy, the languor of a people who, having participated in one of history's great social transformations, find themselves immured in an aftermath that has left them sadly incomplete and unfulfilled. *Violet Isle* is

a portrait of a once-daunting society in serious decline, shorn of the insurrectionary zeal that 50 years ago made it a power to be reckoned with.

Fifty years of economic mismanagement by the Castro brothers, compounded by a rigid embargo by the United States, deeply crippled the country, and by the 1990s Cuba was near collapse. In 1991 the Soviets officially withdrew their troops from the island and ended their economic involvement. With their primary backer removed from the scene, the Cuban people were subjected to an austerity program that further throttled their already precarious standard of living.

The Webbs' photographs raise an important question regarding Cuba's half-century of alienation from the global community. Cut off from the rest of the world, the country managed to avoid any kind of real development, with the result that cities like Havana and Santiago seem preserved in a kind of amber composed primarily of tropes and images from the 1950s. The dilapidated buildings along the *Malecon* (waterfront) reflect an earlier era when the island was a Spanish colony.

One evening during a visit to the island in 1995, I had dinner with several young engineers who had just graduated from a prestigious academy in Havana. Because of the strapped economy, there was a moratorium on the construction of nuclear power plants. The issue of safety was paramount. Cuba could not afford a faulty facility that would cast doubt on the competence of its technological elite. The situation for the scientists was dire. "We have nowhere else to go," they said sadly. "We don't have anything to practice on. Here we are, trained and ready, eager to help our country, wanting to take part in something, and our hands are tied. It's like playing tennis without a ball."

It is useful to contrast the Webb photos with those taken by the American photographer Walker Evans when he visited Cuba in 1933. Back then, the island was in the clutches of a brutal despot name Gerardo Machado y Morales. Poverty was endemic; the streets were filled with starving people. Periodically, quixotic cadres of students, journalists, and union activists launched attacks against

the government, which were put down with ruthless fury. Evans' signature black-and-white photos, published in a portfolio after he returned to the States, depict the terrible poverty that plagued Cuba before the 1959 revolution. Today, while there are no more beggars in the streets, while there is universal literacy and health care, there's also an abundance of *jineteras* (prostitutes) eager to provide a service for North American and European tourists in return for precious American dollars.

I remember beggars in the streets of Havana in 1950 when I visited in February of that year with my parents and older brother. We flew in a two-engine Martin 404 propeller-driven aircraft from Miami and stayed at the Plaza Hotel in the old section of the city. We did the standard touristy things. We went to the perfume factory. We went to the cigar factory. We went to the Bacardi rum factory. We visited Morro Castle (which later served as a prison for anti-Castro dissidents, most famously the writer Reinaldo Arenas).

One afternoon while our parents drank cocktails with friends at Sloppy Joe's, my brother and I sat at a corner table and slurped down sticky sodas clotted with pineapple slices and maraschino cherries and read Spanish comic books. There was no television. I remember a radio blaring nimble, skip-quick rhythms. The walls of the famous watering hole were paneled with slick tiles. The waiters wore white shirts, black bow ties, cummerbunds, and snug jackets. It was Carnival time, and the streets were full of revelers. My brother was 13 and I was 9. After a while we got bored and wanted to look around; our father told us not to wander too far.

Out in the streets, away from the shelter of Sloppy Joe's, beggars shuffled up to us, palms extended. A few derelicts in ragged clothing sprawled across the curbs like sacks of rubbish. Elegant men in linen suits and straw hats read newspapers and smoked fragrant cigars. They sipped coffee and pink aperitifs and gazed appreciatively at every woman who sidled by. My brother and I wore our own little suits and hats, scions of the mighty (all White) North American middle class, perfect clones of our dapper, well-heeled parents, full of curiosity and good cheer, at the same time understanding virtually nothing of what was going on under the

surface of what we were witnessing. My parents were generous tippers, and for the moment that seemed to be enough, if the obsequious response of the people who waited on them was any indication. Everyone appeared to be having a good time, especially the visitors down from the States; the energy was rhythmic and sensual. One night, a parade shook and shimmied on the street below the balcony of our room at the Plaza Hotel, huge glistening floats like chunks of wedding cake carrying scantily clad women and gyrating men, tooting horns and rapping drums and clacking maracas.

The Webbs have been photographing Cuba since the 1980s. They show a country caught in the grip of a kind of psychological malaise. Few traces of the Cuba that Walker Evans found remain anywhere on the island, and that's a good thing. But there's a paradox here; the people in the Webb pictures look tired, fed up, uneasy. Certainly they are proud of what they have accomplished in the way of social reform over the past 50 years, but the time has come to move on. To what? No one seems to know. To a purer vision of the Marxist ideal? Hardly. They've had enough of that. To their inevitable cultural effacement by the colossus of the North? That seems more like it. Once the embargo lifts and the neon and the franchises and the fancy shops arrive, and Cuba is transformed into another supply-side cog in the global trade free-for-all, look out then.

Violet Isle is an engrossing collection of images, richly textured with multiple visual layers, featuring birds and small animals in cages. The symbolism is subtle and effective. Rebecca Webb in particular captures the sense of an entire population caught up in a maze (curiously) of its own making.

Alex Webb excels in contrasting images of light and dark—huge walls dazzlingly lit by the tropical sun, *habaneros* caught in the depths of shadowy arcades, their faces and bodies webbed with shafts of golden sunlight. At the same time there's something disturbing about these images, something out-of-whack. Whereas in the Walker Evans' book the subjects look distraught and downtrodden, in the Webb book they seem edgy and evasive—so different from the photos taken in the early 1960s, in the early days

of the revolution, when the *barbudos* (bearded ones), fresh from defeating Fulgencio Batista and the CIA at the Bay of Pigs, were full of swagger and pride. A lot has changed since then. A lot more is going to change.

NOTE: The spring 2008 issue of *New Letters* featured photographs by Rebecca Norris Webb on its cover and inside, including images from Cuba.

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