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# Beyond the Region: Cuban Libraries, a Humbling Experience

Stan Steiner  
*Boise State University*



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## ***Beyond the Region: Cuban Libraries, a Humbling Experience***

**Stan Steiner**, Ph.D., Boise State University, Boise Idaho

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*PQ Editorial Note: This is the first in a series of regular columns in PNLA Quarterly focused on ideas or travel outside the PNLA region. We're pleased that this first piece features such an interesting and timely international topic.*

### **Introduction**

Vintage automobiles from 1960 and older cruise the roads with engines that have been massaged over the years to keep them running. The weathered buildings and worn stairways were built to last, but show years of exposure to the elements and multitudes of foot traffic. I stepped into the past on this trip and I am now envisioning Cuba's future in light of the recent US and Cuban talks. Access to much needed materials will truly change Cuba. As librarians and educators we can impact this transition. At present Cuban libraries have very limited resources, yet Cuba has one of the highest literacy rates in the world. How do they manage it?

I recently had the opportunity to visit Cuba with a group of faculty and graduate students from around the United States. We were studying Cuban education systems and exchanging ideas. This was an organized trip through Búsquedas Investigations (<http://researchcubaneducation.com>). At the time, United States citizens could only legally travel to Cuba through educational or medical organizations. One had to apply through the above organization with a research interest before any acceptance is granted. My particular focus was on libraries and what role youth literature plays in the connections between schools and libraries. My interests in these areas come from my work in literacy education with schools and libraries and teaching both youth literature and collection development courses at the university. What I encountered was truly humbling: a beautiful country, kind and content people, music everywhere, buildings in various states of condition, and education professionals and their students hungry for resources and ideas from the outside.

### **A History of Literacy**

Contrary to my preconceived ideas about Cuba, based on my upbringing during the 1960s, the Cuban reality of the revolution movement during the Bay of Pigs was a very different story. Since this column is not about Cuban history I will not go into all the details, but I feel it is necessary to talk about one underlying principle of the revolution: the desire to establish a country with literacy for all. I have included some recommended reading in my reference list and would direct you to Dr. Fillipé Pérez Cruz (2001), a Cuban historian and colleague, for a detailed account. Creating a country where every national could read and write was the goal for new Cuban leadership under Fidel Castro. He believed these elements of literacy foundational necessities in order to expand literature, schools, and libraries.

In 1961 Cuba launched the now well-documented Literacy Campaign (Pérez Cruz, 2001; Richmond, 1985; Suchlicki, 1969). At the time, there was a wide disparity in literacy rates between rural Cuba and the urban areas. It was estimated 40% of the rural population of Cuba could not read or write. Cuban leadership activated 250,000 individuals to go out into rural Cuba and many impoverished urban communities with a goal to teach the people how to read and write. The youngest Brigadito (a teacher in the

movement) was seven years old and the oldest recipient was 102 years old. Many of the Brigadito literacy activists were already teachers. As a result many Cuban urban schools had to close during the year of the Literacy Campaign. Initially, many activists were met with resistance from the farmers who were being asked to house and feed them when they already had limited supplies of food. To overcome the distrust toward Brigaditos/teachers, they helped in the fields during the day and taught the farmers to read and write at night. The activists built trusting relationships along with empowering the illiterates with a new sense of freedom by giving them the ability to read and write. In one year 707,000 Cubans learned to read and write. In 1962 UNESCO declared Cuba free of illiteracy. To this date Cuba remains one of the most literate nations in the western hemisphere.

Naturally this new freedom among the Cuban people increased the demand for schools, print materials, and libraries. Now, over 50 years later I had an opportunity to observe and learn from the Cuban library professionals about conditions today. Each day during this trip our group was with Cuban faculty, teachers, university students, and librarians. We were even blessed with meeting people who were part of the Literacy Campaign. They willingly and enthusiastically shared information and answered a multitude of questions. Our curiosity was similar to going into a candy store and wanting to taste everything. Their eyes would sparkle at me, a newly discovered colleague interested in information about their libraries. Elaborate explanations and details left me wanting more. The library professionals seemed to enjoy their time with me as judged by the many questions I had and their willingness to deviate from the schedule to accommodate my queries. We visited university, public school, and municipal libraries, some not on the schedule. Coincidentally we also took in the Havana National Book Fair, which also was a deviation from the schedule. The overall schedule of events was not just tailored to my interests alone. Others came with questions about the Cuban education system from preschool level to university. In all cases our Cuban hosts made sure we were able to visit schools and interact with staff. Part of my role as visiting scholar from the United States was to give one formal presentation on U.S. libraries. I also had three scheduled roundtable discussions with library professionals including graduate students as part of my experience in Cuba. From these discussions, visiting public schools, universities, sharing meals, and free time wanderings with our Cuban colleagues, I learned the following information about libraries and youth literature. Admittedly some of my findings are based on my perceptions of what I observed and heard. I did not always get to physically experience the practice or events I share in this paper as noted.

### **Libraries and Librarians**

Upon our arrival in Cuba we had some time to wander in Old Havana and the surrounding neighborhoods. I saw my first Cuban municipal library (bibliotheca). We missed the operating hours, but I gazed through the two story windows and saw one information/checkout station near the door, a bulletin board with postings of events, open areas for seating with book shelves along the walls, and a few free standing shelves separating various seating areas. A staircase in the back led to a second floor also visible to me with the two storied glass front. On the second floor I noticed freestanding bookshelves and more seating space. The space looked quite inviting through the window. The atmosphere had a library aura quite familiar to a library lover like myself. From my point of view on the street looking through the window I did not see the continuous shelves full of books so common in our libraries that I later learned was a significant characteristic of Cuban libraries in general.

The first library I set foot in was at the university and considered to be a branch library within the campus. This university did not seem to have one central library, which I learned later was indeed true. Multiple libraries were located around the campus and associated with the disciplines of study. What I observed in this library were tables in the center and bookshelves around the perimeter of the room. I did not notice any computer stations, but we had passed a room with 8-12 computers just around the corner from the library. Outside of this computer

room were tables with several students working on laptop computers. I learned the campus had "Cuban Wi-Fi," but only in the designated areas, not campus wide. I learned the books were for use in the library only. University libraries were open from 8am-10pm M-F with the exception of Medical School Librarians offered 24-hour service. University students could not check out any books. In the rare occasions students were allowed to check out a book it was only because they were in a certain field of study. The example shared with me mentioned a medical student working on a special project who could check out a book for 24 hours only. Proof of student identification proof and a signature on a form were all that was required in these rare cases. For the most part, students could only use the books while physically in the library. The university library director said they were doing more and more digital journals and books, but stated it was limited in their digital collection due to funding. Also few students actually owned a laptop computer.

Our guidelines for the trip explicitly stated we were only allowed to bring items to Cuba in two categories: print materials and/or school and medical supplies. Prior to the trip, our lead faculty member suggested we bring print materials if possible and also alerted us to airline weight restrictions in and out of the country. I did load a flash drive full of some of my articles and brought about 50 picture books to give away. Naturally they were happy to get both, but it was an interesting initial awakening to me about the distribution of these materials. Often when I do presentations I give books to the attendees and thought I would do the same in Cuba. Teachers and librarians are always happy to get free books. In the case of the Cuban librarians and graduate students they decided to pool all the books in one location. The stark bookshelves and their unanimous decision that the books I donated should be kept together, confirmed my prior understanding of Cuba's limited print materials.

Every library I visited throughout the entire trip reflected these same characteristics: Very limited books available to students and patrons; most were paperbound unless they were older books printed in a time when Cuba was not isolated and more prosperous. Only a handful of books had multi-colored pictures beyond the covers. Students in the public schools checked books through the school librarian who used the municipal library collection. Municipal libraries were available for public use at all levels. Check out periods varied from several days up to two weeks for a book. Patrons had to sign a form asking for basic information to checkout a book. There was no mention of using library cards. The checkout stations I saw were not computer operated. When I asked about lost books they said it was rare and when it happened parents/patrons replaced them with another of the same title or another book entirely. I never saw any of the classroom libraries so common in US schools. Perhaps this was for two reasons. One was space. Class size was usually limited to 25 students. The classroom did not have room for much more than the student desks, a TV stand, and desk or table upfront for the teacher. Another was funding. My conversation with the school librarian indicated she worked closely with teachers. Every librarian held a degree in library science. Every class had a library time/class with the librarian. Most of these meetings take place in the classrooms, but on occasion, more common in the middle and high schools, students would come to the designated library space in the school. There is a national library curriculum for K-12 students that all librarians are trained to follow as they teach lessons to the various grade levels. The content of the curriculum includes the appreciation of literature and many lessons are taught using literature as a starting point. As students get older, lessons from the librarian focus on the research process and how to write a topic report. Interestingly enough, this research topic paper was often based on writings from José Martí, a national hero, whose lifetime work toward gaining Cuban independence serves as a foundation to their curriculum and overall beliefs about education. Librarian faculty stated that literature was used throughout the curriculum. I was told several times in various meetings the first purpose of librarians at all levels are to promote the love of reading. This made me think about what we might learn from the Cuban focus on reading versus the U.S. move to a Common Core Curriculum with less emphasis on the aesthetics of reading.

Each municipal library had a room dedicated to their children's literature collection. Students were allowed to peruse, read, and attend programs all in this limited space. My understanding is that larger programs probably took place outside the libraries (which I will address later), or in the vestibule area of the library since this was the largest open space of the public libraries I visited. I did not see any auditoriums or special rooms for lectures or programs in the municipal libraries. They may exist in some libraries, but I did not see any in the libraries I visited. I learned Cubans used a community space in the cities that offered the Pioneros Program. In some ways the Pioneros Program buildings reminded me of our YMCAs. This larger space was similar to a school in layout and the Pioneros Program offered a variety of on going classes for students as part of their school curriculum. This Pioneros Program is the place they received their arts including dance, painting, music, and drama. This community space also introduced students to technical fields including: tobacco industry, health care, tourism, teaching, electrical, construction, etc. This is where the students received social studies and arts-related curriculum. This center was a busy place with kids coming and going and lessons going on in every available space. Students took public transportation to and from this building throughout the day. This was all part of their school day. They also served handicapped students in the Pioneros Building too. The Pioneros Building did not have any library.

As mentioned, every librarian from the elementary level to universities and municipalities is certified, which contrasts with many states in the US. In Cuba certification required a minimum of a Masters level degree with an optional Ph.D. in Library Science if desired. Dissertation topics on the importance of literature are quite common according to my Cuban professoriate colleagues. The BA Degree was called the Science of Communication and Libraries at one university. Course work included the national curriculum from youth to adult, information systems, management, handling, library pedagogy, literature (both youth and adult), and various specialized subject disciplines on librarianship. Technology in the way of access and e-materials, though limited, is one of the more popular and more focused topics among the librarian professorate today.

Teachers and librarians with doctorates were not just at universities. They were also in the K-12 schools and municipal libraries. This was one way to increase their salaries, but teachers were not allowed to freely work on advanced degrees without the recommendation from the school principal. Their thesis was determined by a real problem in the school where they worked. Their principal posed a problem to promising teachers at the beginning of their formal university graduate work. Solving this problem became part of their graduate studies. I am not sure principals were involved in the dissertation topic at the doctorate level as they were for master's level degrees in library science.

The host university granting library science degrees also produced a journal. Graduates and faculty were active in the Cuban National Library Association and affiliates, in addition to local professional meetings. It was clear to me library colleagues had a good working relationship as I met with librarians from all levels in my lectures and visits to the libraries. Coincidentally on one excursion, I happened to be visiting a municipal library and in walked a retired librarian. They all greeted her warmly and I learned she was still volunteering her services through helping on children's programming.

I learned the municipal librarians in Cuba also had youth programs for toddlers and older children including summer reading programs. The summer programs always start and end with a large community event in the streets including vendors with materials geared toward kids and the promotion of reading.

### **Youth and the Role of Literature in Cuba**

As mentioned earlier my first observation in school libraries was the lack of books. While many of U.S. libraries are abundant with books, the school libraries I visited in Cuba had far fewer bookshelves and no shelves were ever filled to capacity. Most of the bookshelves in school



libraries were only a third to a fourth filled with paper books. These books were often larger in size, more like our picture book size varieties. I did not see many hardcover books in the school libraries. Many of the books on the shelves were textbooks and they too were paper. In my conversations with the elementary and secondary librarians, I learned that students were allowed to check out the storybooks, but textbook checkout had restrictions similar to university libraries. Elementary school librarians used the municipal libraries based on proximity. School librarians would check out the books and then in turn allow the elementary students to check them out from him/her. Incidentally, the only male librarian I met was at the university level.

The Ministry of Education is the main supplier of books to the school and municipal libraries. They provide compulsory and newly published books. Parents donate books to the libraries. I was told each Province has a publishing house. They are the main publishers of the books used in the schools.

Naturally municipal libraries had a greater abundance of volumes for their patrons. As a children's book enthusiast I observed their collections were still limited given the population size in both rural and urban settings. I did learn that patrons with larger municipal libraries could check out up to three books at one time. Public school librarians were an exception to this rule because they acted as book liaisons to the children they served. As noted most books in each of the libraries were paperbacks. When asked about the binding and limited color in Cuban children's books I discovered it was simply due to lack of resources. Hardback/board books require more resources and paper bound books take up less space. Longevity of the books was less of an issue, but several librarians expressed the changing look of books in Cuba included more books with colored pictures throughout the pages. Librarians exhibited an exuberant excitement to see the books I had brought as gifts. They found the quality and colored illustrations astonishing. One of the library science professors stated they hoped they would have more color in their children's books in the near future.

### **Children's Literature Awards**

Cuba has had a long history of taking pride in their authors and in youth writing. In 2014 the Golden Age Award for writers and illustrators marked its 125th anniversary. Jose Marti, founder of this award was a big proponent of encouraging writing among youth. His book *The Golden Age*, is given to children at their primary school graduation. Each year the Ministry of Education distributes Golden Age Award winning books to every library in the country.

Adult writers of children's books may also participate in the Latin America Award for children's literature founded in 2009. Cuba is also active in the International Board on Books for Youth (IBBY). In Cuba, authors are part of a National Union of Writers and are subsidized by the government and by book sales. This allows them to be full time writers. Cuba also created the Martin Colorin Award for youth writers. The submissions for this award may be poetry or narrative. Many of the winning authors present in communities throughout Cuba.

### **Other Related Observations**

We were also fortunate enough to catch a book festival while in Cuba. I learned that I actually caught the same traveling book festival twice in two different cities. In February of each year the book festival travels from one large city to another. In each of the two cities we attended, the festival lasted for three days. On our first day in Havana we learned about the book festival and took cabs to the old Castillo Los Tres Reyes del Morro (Morro Castle named for the three Magi in the Bible) in Havana Bay. This was a perfect location as the castle was now a designated historical site with a lot of open space for crowds of people, food vendors, and stages for a variety of musical performers. We had to enter through a large gate with a bridge that crossed over a 20-30 foot deep, dry moat. It was clear the moat had been waterless for sometime. With no threat of attack and modern warfare technology it had out-served its purpose in the late 1800s. As we came into the courtyard hundreds of people were gathered around food vendors and performing

musicians. Others were strolling along the fortress walls. There was a clear ambiance of celebration among all the people.

At the fair in Havana I was looking for book vendors, but I did not see any until we walked into the inner building, a long string of rooms with two separate entrances in each side of the walls. Each room had a book vendor and the larger rooms had multiple vendors. Some vendors were specifically selling children's books, but the majority were books for adults. The few children's book vendors I did see had a limited number of books. There were plenty of workbook type print materials for children. A couple vendors focused on books about the Cuban heroes and the revolution; most common were books about Marti, Castro, and Guevara. This is where we also ran into books in English to my surprise, and I quickly learned they were sellers from Canada and England. No vendors from any US publishers existed due to the embargo.

Book prices floored me! Paperback children's books were the equivalent of one or two dollars. Adult novels were not much more. We could not use our tourist pesos to buy any books. We learned the vendors only accepted the national Cuban pesos. Fortunately at the second book fair we were able to trade our tourist pesos with our hosts. I don't think that is common practice, but our hosts were enthralled that we wanted to purchase books too. According to Cuban law, as USA tourists we were only allowed to take artwork and print materials out of the country.

I made a discovery about the value of the two Cuban currencies at lunch one day. In Pinar del Río we stayed at a motel that was across the street from the university. Each day the food vendors would be on the street adjacent to the campus. Our motel had only two choices for lunch, a personal-sized pizza or a grilled ham sandwich. Across the street we could get four variations of the same type of sandwich, cold drinks, café, and 2-3 flavors of smoothies. We only had tourist currency, which they took, but gave us change in national pesos. The same sandwich at the vendor cost about \$1.25. At the motel it was about \$3.00 and in the tourist area of Havana it was about \$5.00. Lessons learned in Cuba, as is the case any time you travel, eat where the locals eat to get the best prices. My discovery about the two Cuban pesos controlled by the government may explain some of the contentedness among the local people I observed. I did not see homeless or unhappy people. I saw buildings in various conditions due to the inability to get materials, but not poverty as we have witnessed in the US. I also never felt threatened at any time. We wandered into neighborhoods outside of the tourist areas too. Music was everywhere creating a festive feeling. One evening we strolled through a plaza full of youth hanging out. Everywhere you looked there were kids listening to a boom box and others were playing instruments. They were jamming and clearly having fun based on the looks on their faces.

### **Challenges and Recommendations for Future Librarians Visiting Cuba**

As the U.S. and Cuba continue to negotiate and lift the embargo many opportunities are going to be available to visit Cuba. I would go again in a heartbeat. The lifting of the embargo will greatly impact Cuba and the people. On one hand it was nostalgic seeing all of the pre 1960s cars so well preserved, but it was also disheartening to see all the buildings that were never completed or in various stages of deterioration due to lack of materials. Allowing an influx of investors will take all of this away in a matter of time. The surge of money into the Cuban economy will have a tremendous impact on everyone in Cuba. There will be a lot of discussion about this over the next decade. I would like to focus my closing remarks on the future of Cuban libraries and my recommendations for helping Cubans have more access to print and the world via the Internet.

If you are going to Cuba take books, journals, useful printed materials and allowable electronic versions of the same to leave with the librarians. New technology is in need as well, from computers to Internet access. The ability to communicate with Cubans in an open dialogue will be rewarding for all. Sharing ideas for youth and adult programs between countries could bring some welcome changes. Spend time visiting the libraries, book festivals, and book vendors (I never saw any bookstores, only street vendors selling books). I am sure access to outside liter-

ature will initially be alarming to many Cubans. The university librarians, knowing this is likely the future for Cuban libraries, are craving these materials and very curious about what developed countries have done to enhance libraries.

We can learn from Cuba and how they promote literacy. A strong conviction to get everyone literate through prioritizing the enjoyment of literature is to be commended. Cross-generational teaching and making an effort to reach out to the rural and inner city communities is sound thinking. There is a reason Cuba has more doctors per capita than any other country. It is all tied to literacy and the value of an education.

If you travel to Cuba, spend time talking to the locals. Get outside of the tourist destinations so you can see and meet people. Plan on hearing some music and observing local art. Visit the museums and historical locations that tell a side of history we did not hear in the United States. Eat the food, which has a distinct flavor and culinary uniqueness. Viva de Cuba!

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**Stan Steiner** dubbed "The Bookman" by his students, is a professor of children's and young adult literature at Boise State University. His areas of expertise are multicultural literature, reading motivation and book development. He has authored/coauthored more than 75 articles and 5 books. Throughout his career he has been active in ALA, ILA and NCTE including serving on the John Newbery and Pura Belpre Award Committees.