Northamericans looking at Cubans,
Cubanos mirando a los yumas.

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This talk is based on an article I originally wrote for Cuban readers, drawing on my experiences visiting Cuba since 1969 and living and working in Havana between 1992 and 1996. I've recast it here in a form more directed toward Northamericans, in particular Northamericans who visit Cuba, beginning with an attempt to point out some common epistemological pitfalls that we need to be careful in navigating. Let me start with two stories.

The first is about a Canadian, though it might just as well have been an *estadounidense*. It was 1996, and I was eating dinner in a *paladar*, a family run restaurant in Havana, with a Canadian who had been in the country, I think, around two weeks. He had wondered about something I had often wondered about, which was why Cubans, who are so well educated, didn't read books during the very long times they spent waiting for buses. And he had discovered the reason. "What is it?" I asked politely. "Because of the shortage of toilet paper, all the paperback books have long since been used up!" This was patently untrue -- you needed only to look at the many used book stalls on the street, or the crammed bookshelves overflowing in many families' parlors or bedrooms. "Oh, how do you know that?" I asked as politely as I still could. "Oh, a Cuban I was talking with told me so."

The second story is about a Cuban interpreter who was moonlighting for a group of visiting leftist academics, mostly from the U.S. She was not, shall we say, completely

up front with them about the difficulties of her life and some of her doubts about government policies and ideology. She wasn't in any way counter-revolutionary, but she did have a more complex and less optimistic view of things than that presented in official briefings to the visitors. "So, in your conversations," I asked, "did you tell these Americans what you really think?" She didn't -- and not, as the American press would have it, for fear of jail or of losing her regular job or of suffering repercussions in the local Committee for the Defense of the Revolution to which she paid her dues. She gave three reasons for her silence, in the case of a particular American leftist with whom she had made friends: 1) "It's good for people to have dreams. If his vision of an ideal Cuba inspires him to do good work in the United States, why should I tarnish his dream?" 2) "He wouldn't believe me anyway. He's an economist and would cite all kinds of numbers and theories, which I have neither numbers nor theories to refute. I'd just be in a useless argument I wouldn't win." 3) "Maybe an organizer of the event would hear me, and not invite me to interpret next time, and I'd miss out on something that's challenging and fun."

The point of both stories is that most Northamericans visit Cuba with a prefigured image of what they are going to see. They tend to see it, whatever it is, and either ignore or lack exposure to contrary evidence. In the case of *estadounidenses* the problem is compounded by our government's travel ban: we go to <u>see</u> the forbidden or to <u>be</u> the forbidden, or both. That is, we go knowing that Jesse Helms and the Treasury Department

(and Bill Clinton) have told us not to, which adds risk and moral rectitude to the journey. Or we've been granted special permission because the Treasury Department believes, rightly or wrongly, that our visit will contribute to the alleged U.S. national interest in overthrowing the "communist regime." So everything is politically charged from the get-go.

Let me give one more example, more atypical, of seeing what one sets out to see. In the autumn of 1994 the cartoonist Bill Griffith visited Cuba and then devoted a month of his syndicated daily comic strip Zippy to a semi-fictionalized version of his trip. This was some of the best writing about Cuba I've ever seen in the American press, avoiding facile and dismissive judgments while capturing the values and longings and determination of a variety of Cubans in the midst of the período especial. The characters Zippy and Griffy were struck especially by the Cubans' aliveness, their spontaneity, the genuineness of their conversation outside official settings, and the speed with which a visitor could make friends with anyone from a hitchhiking painter to Fidel Castro's older brother Ramón. Griffy mused that he would move to Cuba if it weren't for "th' heat, th' humidity, and th' dictatorship of the proletariat." But Griffith's main impression centered around what is always at the center of his critique of U.S. society, as anyone who reads the strip regularly will see. His explanation of Cubans' aliveness and spontaneity was that Cuba was a country as yet unmarred by the tyranny and homogenization of American mass culture, American brand names, American goods.

So Americans often go to this forbidden territory to find confirmation of what we already think, and we're quick to explain everything we see in terms of the political analysis we already have. This (in addition to our national desire to oversimplify the world) contributes to the tendency of American visitors to see Cuba, as someone has put it, through one eye only: either as paradise or as hell, or sometimes first as one and then, in a later, repentant stage, as the other. I'm struck by the comment of the wife of an old Cuban friend, whom (the wife) I was meeting for the first time. After a while she said, "I don't think you're American. You must be British, or something." When I asked why, she said, "You listen too much."

Despite what she said, I don’t mean to except myself from the tendencies I describe. Look at what I did with my other friend’s -- the interpreter’s -- comment about not telling the American leftie economist what she really thought. “I know this is true because a Cuban told me so . . . ” AND because it made sense to me in terms of what I already thought. I’ve certainly written things about Cuba in the past that I’m a little embarrassed to look back on now.

Here’s a personal example, from 1984, that may explain this psychology in a more positive way. It's been a long afternoon of meetings at Editorial Pueblo y Educación. My guide and sometimes interpreter has to leave, but I'm deep in conversation with three middle-level editors and assistants, a conversation that turns out to be more useful than the one with the chief editor that had gone on before. We all assure the guide that we can

manage in Spanish and that these three women can put me on the right bus to get me where I belong. The conversation is more of an effort now, though, because my Spanish at that time is not so good, and as we get to talking about Dashiell Hammett it takes me a minute to mentally translate La llave de cristal into The Glass Key.

When I do, an important bond has formed. One of the editors and I have discovered we both have the same favorite Hammett novel, which is, moreover, probably the least-well known of his novels in the U.S. It's not just the fact of the coincidence that is important, but the obstacles of travels and visas and travel ban and language that we've had to overcome to find it out.

By the time we've jumped these hurdles and passed through the giving and taking of bus directions, and I've recognized the Linea tunnel and gotten off the bus more or less at Paseo as described, my discovery about The Glass Key is invested with more sense of importance than it may actually have. To me it stands for (among other things) the breadth of culture and reading among Cubans, their sophisticated taste, and their understanding of American electoral-machine politics (the background of Hammett's book). I think this is a common type of experience, and it's one reason why many visitors who return from Cuba after short trips think they've learned more than they actually have. The experience of conversation across boundaries is a high, and that high allows us to elevate the importance of any particular conversation that we choose.

So that’s one side of the coin I’m trying to present -- the side of Northamericans

looking at Cubans and Cuba. To sum up, this side partakes of the rather negative American tendency to know it all, and the more positive one of liking to leap over cultural barriers, liking to meet the other midway, both of them leading to a tendency to jump to conclusions about what was seen. It could be argued that this is true of all visitors to foreign places, but I don't think so. It seems to me, for instance, that foreign writers visiting the U.S., from Martí on down, display much more of a tone of wonder, of delight in describing the strangeness of the beast, of their fear, respect, or suspicion toward the beast, but not a sense that the biochemistry of the beast's entrails is transparent to the eye.

In any case, the coin of Northamericans visiting Cuba also has an opposite side: that of the Cubans looking at *los yanquis, los yumas*, these strangers in their land. I've noticed a tendency on the part of Cubans to think that no foreigner can possibly know or learn anything complicated about Cuba, no matter what or how. This applies particularly to non-speakers of Spanish, though there also jokes that indicate the belief that a *gallego*, a Spaniard, can be made to swallow anything. The stereotype about *los bolos*, the Russians, at least in hindsight, is that they didn't understand anything because they never bothered to try.

Let's consider the Cuban use of the word "foreigner" in the first place. You stand at the desk of an office building and the receptionist calls upstairs and says, without the slightest self-consciousness, "*Fulano*, there's an *extranjero* down here to see you." The same thing happens on a phone call to, even, the department of International Relations of

the Ministry of Education: "*Fulana*, there's some foreigner on the phone to talk with you."

In the U.S., to call someone a "foreigner" is xenophobic and impolite and often racist as well. It happens a lot, because xenophobia and racism are widespread. But you don't call someone a "foreigner" to their face unless you're eager, or at least willing, to cause offense. The concept of foreigner, here, cannot be separated from the idea of intrusion, danger, threat. In Cuba, as near as I can tell, the statement that one is a foreigner is mostly a statement of fact, plus there's a touch of exoticism because the place is an island after all. This is not to deny there is a political element, involving threat: foreigners, especially American ones, may be suspected -- with cause -- of carrying anything from ideological infection to explosives. Nor is it to deny that, in current conditions, a foreigner is someone with access to hard currency and goods. But neither of these implications is what I have usually felt. Cubans by and large call foreigners "extranjeros" matter-of-factly, much as they call each other "*negra*" or "*jabao*," much as they refer to one-eyed people as "*tuertos*," one-armed as "*mancos*," none of which is done linguistically or culturally in the United States. And the semantic content is primarily that "extranjeros" are exactly that -- *extraño*, strange. They dress strangely, they talk strangely, and they probably eat strange things too. The do not know the right way to cook rice, or to peel yucca, and they probably have such barbaric habits as drinking coffee with dessert.

As such, how can they be expected to understand you? Therefore any foreigner, no matter how long he has lived in the country, must be told, if there's a conversational reference to Jorge Perrugoría, that he is the actor who starred in the film Fresa y Chocolate -- this, in a country whose inhabitants can tell you what American actor won the Oscar for what film in what year and playing opposite whom and directed by whom. Or such has been my experience, at least. Even less could I convince any new acquaintance, or even many long-standing ones, that I knew who the past and present Communist Party chairman for Havana were, and what job the former chairman had gone on to next. Or the price of black market eggs on the street. Or that I might have a clue how to fillet the *jurel* or *chicharro*, the small and bony fish that comes on the ration. Or that I understood both the official bureaucratic and the unofficial political distinctions between the Ministry of Education, MINED, and the Ministry of Higher Education, MES. All these things were, well, simply too Cuban for a foreigner -- particularly an American, given our know-it-all tendencies -- to understand.

What's fascinating about interaction between Cubans and Americans, however, is that none of the above gets in a way establishing real relations of affinity and affection. We have these "ties of singular intimacy" (delightful phrase rescued by Louis Pérez from the grasping clutch of William McKinley) that bind us together in good ways and bad, both exploitative and generous ones. One of these many ties, I've been thinking lately, is the opposites-attract effect of one country being an extremely cosmopolitan one (thanks

both to its immigrant population and to its expansionary imperialism) and the other being insular by virtue of being an island, compounded by thirty-five years of economic and cultural blockade. Each of these positions brings with it a certain fear, and therefore a certain need for reassurance -- which reassurance the other position is well suited to provide.

To toss out for your consideration an over-generalization, an *isleño* will tend to fear being provincial or irrelevant to the rest of the world, while a cosmopolitan will fear being empty, having no center. When the interaction is good, positive, and two-way, the *isleño* feels less isolated as a result, less *guajiro* as it were, while the cosmopolitan feels less distant from the authentic (human, or spiritual, or moral) sources of things. We each need each other to make us feel less *other*, perhaps.

To exemplify this in the case of Cuba, I want to reach further back into the past, to my experience in 1969-70 in a canecutting camp populated by members of the Cuban Union of Young Communists and the American Venceremos Brigade -- not so much to what happened there as to what happened afterward. I've since talked to quite a few Cubans who worked and lived with us in that camp -- whose politics and whereabouts, now, are all over the map -- and without exception it was a deep emotional experience for them. I'm not entirely sure why, but a piece of it is that, while they were committed in 1969 to being the wave of the future, the engine of history, and while they were equally committed to the idea that the First World was the wave of the past, it still blew their

minds, still validated their commitment, that we had come all that geographical and social distance in order to see and identify with them. Maybe we couldn’t actually understand them (and they could take with a heap of salt our claim that we were going to make a revolution in the belly of the beast), but it mattered a great deal that we cared to come, look, and share some experiences with them.

Again, there was a parallel dynamic on the other side. An American friend was recently working on a film about the 1969-70 Brigades, interviewing many participants, and he found the same lasting emotional residue. Whether these U.S. participants ever again had anything to do with Cuba or not, whether they still saw Cuba as a model for progressive politics or not, the experience in Cuba had made them (us) more sure of what we were about. One reason is that we, the cosmopolitans, could relax in Cuban nationalism, and in Cubans’ comfort and pride in their own culture; if they could know so clearly who they were, maybe we could know who we were too. I remember a Saturday afternoon or Sunday, no work, a trip to the beach (Jibacoa, perhaps) where there was food and beer. It felt like a political banquet of some sort, with speakers and translators perched at a head table on a platform, but the Cubans began to sing and dance. At a political event, they got drunk and sang and danced? I hadn't seen spontaneous singing and dancing (no drinking) at a political event since the early years of the Civil Rights Movement, which came out of the traditions of the African-American church. Also, there was the question of the <u>words</u> to the songs. Our Cuban comrades were singing a song

with the refrain, "*Los cubanos ni se rinde ni se vende*." The American sitting next to me began to argue that this was not proletarian internationalism, that the lyrics should be "*los* *comunistas* *ni se rinde ni se vende*." But the Cubans refused to admit that the distinction was important. When I saw that these people could get off on national pride, without worrying that nationalism had its downside, I found this as enchantingly distant from my own Vietnam-era experience as their desire to sing and dance at a meeting.

I feel tempted to try to wind up these reflections with some tidy conclusion. The singular intimacy between *isleño* and cosmopolitan is a dialectical synthesis of the two sides of the coin, the two directions of the gaze. Or at least, "where id was, there shall ego be," so we can each go forward in our investigation of the other with more consciousness of what's lurking underneath. But I won't. I'll try to let these stories speak for themselves, like Cuban jokes (*cuentos*), rather than summing up a moral as a Northamerican preacher of sermons would do. Which may indicate I've learned something after all.