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Women Write About Che

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Margaret Randall, *Che on my mind* (Duke University Press, 2013).

Lucia Alvarez de Toledo, *The Story of Che Guevara* (Harper Collins, 2011)

Helen Yaffe, *Che Guevara: The Economics of Revolution* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009)

In the last five years, three women have written biographies of Ernesto “Che” Guevara after five decades his life story being solidly in the hands of men. The question is: do women write biography differently?

Lucia Alvarez de Toledo is the most explicit about the issue of being a woman biographer. She points out that *The Story of Che Guevara* (Harper Collins, 2011), has been written by a Latin American, a native of Buenos Aires and a woman. Whatever the advantages of those territorial factors, it seems clear that her account benefits as well from her talent for critical analysis and willingness to go over old territory to find facts anew. No less important is its vantage point: a woman’s point of view. Partly because Alvarez was her subject’s contemporary and compatriot, this biography provides interesting details of and insights into Che’s youth and the environment that shaped him, information either unknown to or ignored by earlier biographers. And then there is the female factor. She states in the biography’s introduction: “Finally, because I am a woman, I feel no need to compete with Che in the macho stakes or to cut him down to size. Many of the men who have written about him seem compelled to attack him, as if the mere fact that he once existed casts a doubt on their masculinity.”

In 1963, she had a job as a rookie journalist writing, producing, and presenting a weekly program on a nation public radio station about the life and music in Britain and the Commonwealth on Radio Municipal de Buenos Aires: “Because I had had an English education.” Directly following her show in the line-up was Jorge Luis Borges’s program. She was young, and soon left

Argentina for Great Britain, returning in 1989, after twenty-five years abroad. It was then, with the cool distance of time, that she undertook to consider the life of Che.

By my calculation, Alvarez took twenty years to produce her book. Longtime literary agent Charlotte Sheedy notes, “In my experience, a biography requires at least eight to ten years.” The extra ten invested here have served us well. Alvarez seems to have interviewed a great number of Argentinians, including family, friends – to be precise: whole families of friends – and to have visited every site that played a part in Che’s life. Her version of the story starts traditionally, with the beginning of the subject’s life, but the writer began her own search with a trip to Bolivia, and to the village of La Higuera where Che was killed in 1967. Before making this journey, she went to a big bookstore in Buenos Aires run by Che’s youngest brother, Juan Martín Guevara. His shop is called *Nuestra América*, named for a famous essay by the nineteenth-century Cuban revolutionary José Martí. When Alvarez visits, it is 1989, and she sets the scene with a reminder to us, or perhaps tells us something we didn’t know. “A democratic government had been installed and Juan Martín had just been released from jail, where he had served eight years of a twelve-year sentence for revolutionary activities, and had contracted chronic viral hepatitis.” So, Alvarez tells us, this book is not *entirely* about Che. She opens a number of windows, so it’s possible to see what it was like to be Che’s parent, sibling, friend, or simply fellow Latin American. Do women see the story of a person, of a life, differently? Do they, as a matter of course, feel that it is important to chronicle members of the person’s family?

Alvarez’s story of Che’s life opens at a moment of vulnerability—he’s a child with asthma—and introduces him as the son born into a family similar to her own, living under the same social and

cultural influences. “We were marked by the same background and political events: Peron and Eva; de facto pro-Nazi military presidents; an economy directed by the UK; an intellectual life heavily influenced by French thinkers, every since our founding fathers looked to the encyclopaedists and Jean-Jacques Rousseau in drafting our constitution and laws; the all-pervading right-wing Roman Catholic church; the Spanish republican exiles; the crude onslaught on our culture by the dominating economic power of the USA.” It isn’t the life of a hero that she narrates, but a broader history.

Celia de la Serna, Che’s mother, Alvarez tells us, was usually the first in the Guevaras’ social set to adopt a new idea, and had her hair cut short, like a boy’s, wore trousers in public, and had a personal bank account. Further, we learn, she was fluent in French, read French literature, and liked poetry. Alvarez (now in native *porteña* mode) depicts a thoroughly modern woman. As one biographer (Jon Lee Anderson) noted, Che’s birth came seven months after his parents were officially married, but Alvarez explains that this would hardly have been an issue. Socially, such arithmetic was not something these families, the Guevaras and the de la Sernas, worried about. Alvarez claims that Che’s mother, Celia, did not flout social conventions, she was unconcerned by them and simply had other priorities. Is Alvarez coming to the defense of another woman? Is she defending her social set? Or is she defending modernity itself? 1920s modernity, whether in Buenos Aires or Shanghai, required a little bit of anarchy, something akin to the ‘shock of the new.’ Alvarez tells a story about Che’s mother that has a distinctly woman’s touch. As Celia left church one day after attending mass, the priest accused her of indecent dress—she wasn’t, he observed, wearing stockings. She was, in fact—sheer nylons. She laughed at him and reached deep into the pockets of her skirt to yank on the tops, making the stockings shift a bit and so

proving that her legs were covered. (Who, among us readers, does not stop to reflect upon what it must have been like to have a self-confident mother like that?) A little story, perhaps, but one that explains a lot about style, her comfort with confrontation, her *joie de vie*. It takes familiarity with sources to collect a story like this. Early biographers can be excused for not including, or overlooking, this sort of detail, so busy are they trying to put a whole life in place. It takes time.

Alvarez is particularly insightful in appraising the influence of Ana Lynch, Ernesto's paternal grandmother. Born in San Francisco, she came to Argentina at age twelve, arriving with her parents. They'd returned from exile to reclaim their land in Portela, in the province of Buenos Aires. When she married Roberto Guevara, she took over the management of her own estate, which was within a much larger ranch, Estancia San Patricio, which belonged to her father. She built a large house with eleven bedrooms, several baths, and a huge dining room, because "hospitality was paramount," explains Alvarez. Ernesto and his family spent many of the summers from 1934 to 1940 in this place. Here, he seems to have forged his social identity. He couldn't compete with the boys who played guitars (and got the girls), but he could excel on horseback. "When [his grandmother] had a full house, as many as fifteen or twenty riders could be seen galloping across her fields." He would be among them, and the girls would invite him to dances; since he could not dance, they would invite him for the afternoon so they could teach him. He never learned to dance but he did find out that conversation and charm could win out. From his grandmother, Alvarez suggests, he inherited his love of the outdoors. She would take him – they would go together in the evenings—to inspect the fruit trees and the stables. At the end of her life, he stayed by her bedside, nursing her. In doing so, he resolved to become a doctor.

With Alvarez as guide, you're never far from the situation of the time, the history of the era. She reminds us that Carlos Saavedra-Lamas, Argentina's foreign minister, received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1935 for negotiating a peace treaty between Bolivia and Paraguay to end the 1932-35 Chaco War. Also, that the Spanish Civil War strongly informed Argentina's cultural identities, as citizens might be pro Franco or against. Argentina gave asylum to adherents of both sides, and so sides were inevitably taken, lines drawn. Che's uncle, Cayetano Cordoba-Iturburu, a communist, a poet, and a journalist, was sent to Spain for the evening paper, *Critica*, as a war correspondent. During the year he was away, his wife, Carmen de la Serna (Celia's sister), and their children moved in with the Guevara family. Because Cayetano tucked his articles inside personal letters (to keep them out of the hands of Franco supporters who might intercept his newspaper's mail), everyone in the Guevara household got news from the Spanish fronts before even *Critica's* editor.

While the Guevaras were living in Alta Gracia, a well-known general from the Republican side took refuge in the town. He'd defeated Franco's troops at the Battle of Guadalajara, blocking the *generalissimo*, for a time, from entering Madrid. Alvarez writes that Che, who was about eleven, and his brother, Roberto, followed the battles, pinned flags on a huge map to mark both Franco's and the Republicans' movements, and were well familiar with the name and story of this general. "General Jurado was a modest man, unlike the Argentine generals, who modeled themselves on their German counterparts. He never spoke of his own exploits but always praised his men and the officers under his command." She says that Che was "riveted" by Jurado's stories. Although Jon Lee Anderson (*Che*, Grove Press, 1997), is especially good at explaining this early

association with a famous revolutionary general, therefore possible mentor, it was only when I read this version that I was able to see this boyhood experience as the source for Che's hitherto inexplicable desire, and ability, to be a great tactician during the Cuban Revolution. His pleasure at commanding a platoon and delight in forsaking his role of doctor, which he did with impunity.

Furthermore, Che's father was a founding member of a pro-Allied group. Argentina remained neutral during the Second World War, but was contradictorily both pro-German and dependent on British trade. Citizens were invited to monitor and report any activities by Axis powers, particularly anything that might lead to, or assist, a German invasion. His group discovered a Nazi spy network operating out of La Falda, only 80 kilometers from Alta Gracia. "A hotel with a powerful radio transmitter was in touch with Berlin every night." His father's group went to inspect, taking Che, then twelve, with them. When the group filed reports, they were ignored. By the age of fifteen, it would seem that Che was well on his way to attaining a sophisticated, global and political education.

In 1942, the Guevara family moved to Cordoba, where Che's father partnered with an architect. Again, Alvarez gives us an unexpected, even disconcerting, detail. The family moved into a new house built on land prone to landslides. Large cracks soon developed in the outer walls and ceiling (apparently you could see the stars). Che's father dealt with this by simply moving the children further into the building, away from those faulty outer walls. Although the house was located in a respectable residential area, *Nueva Cordoba*, a shantytown stood literally next door, and the homes next to the family's lot were made of cardboard, discarded zinc and tin sheeting. In Cordoba, Che met Alberto Granado, from a humble background, but interested in

biochemistry and determined, like Che, to make a career in medicine. Che and Granado eventually travelled together the famously documented motorcycle trip often cited as the catalyst of Che's future life, his destiny to confront social injustice and the gap between rich and poor. Although his relationship with Granado and their trip was clearly important, it also seems likely that Che's awakening might have started right here, with the cracks in his own house, and the slums next door that Alvarez describes so clearly – in tandem with his fortuitous friendship with a humble, intelligent and ambitious friend.

None of these books are particularly about the war. Margaret Randall writes: “A lifetime of reading, conversations, emotion, and firsthand experience has gone into this book.” She spent ten crucial years in Cuba, invited first in 1967 as a poet, and as the editor of a literary magazine. Then, in 1969, she arrived on the run, a young mother who had demonstrated against the Mexican Government's participation in the massacre of students in the Plaza at Tlatelolco. A week after Tlatelolco, Randall tried to get into the athletes' village to protest the 1968 Mexico City Olympic Games just when the police were targeting protesters who might shine a bright light on Mexico's repressive and sometimes violent government. It is easy to recall the explosive quality of those Games through one of the strongest photographs of the 20th century, taken on October 16, 1968, of two American athletes, Tommie Smith and John Carlos, their black-gloved fists raised as they accepted their medals. They were banished from the games immediately, and Margaret Randall, like many others around the world, stepped up her protests. “I'd participated in the movement through the pages of *El Corno Emplumado*” (the literary journal Randall edited), “and more directly: joining the information brigades, translating movement materials for

dissemination in other countries, hiding and feeding the hunted, distributing flyers on city buses.”

Noticed for her efforts, by the summer of 1969, Randall and her family were forced into hiding. It began one day when a man claiming to be a representative of Mexico’s Social Security Administration, rang her doorbell and claimed that she was an illegal immigrant. Her partner, poet Robert Cohen, showed him her Mexican passport as proof of citizenship, and the man pulled a gun and took off with her document. Frightened of what might happen next, they began moving from house to house until they could get out of Mexico, and Cuba offered asylum. Without a passport, Randall stayed behind until she could find someone to give her a fake document while Robert left with the children, including their three-month old baby. Finally she managed to get a very unconvincing document. Her route was extremely roundabout, leading her to Prague, where, for nineteen days, she waited for a seat on a plane to Cuba but kept getting bumped from her place in the queue. She tells of her sadness to be separated from her baby, but also recalls how disconcerted she felt in her disguise, a chic and respectable get-away dress, of navy-blue and yellow knit, put on day after day, when embroidered Mexican indigenous blouses were her style, and more comfortable . She finally arrived in Havana and was reunited with her family. The Revolution (what Cubans call their government), put them up in the Hotel Capri until an apartment became available, but suggested that the baby remain in a state nursery until then. Logical, for Randall could see that her child was well cared for, she agreed, but it was also a heart- wrenching decision not to be able to take care of her own child. Of course an apartment didn’t materialize overnight, and their separation was prolonged. Thus began Randall’s residence

in Cuba, the low-budget, high-expectation utopia, her feelings a mixture of gratitude and self-doubt, optimism and humiliation.

Randall stayed for ten years, and, over the subsequent four-and-a-half decades as a writer, has turned to her Cuban experience often. Recently, with this tangible memory to draw upon, she decided to consider the legacy of the international hero known as Che, assassinated on October 7th, 1967, just before her first trip to the island. The Cuba she knows has always been a country in mourning. Early in the book, Randall also reflects upon his death, reminding us that he was captured in a remote village in Bolivia, held in a school house and a young woman and teacher, probably better educated than anyone else in the town, tried to help. “The men were soldiers, firmly under the command of their superiors. Their meager paychecks demanded obedience to a chain of command.” So it was: “A woman alone brought the doomed man sustenance and a few friendly words.”

Randall’s account of Ernesto Che Guevara is deeply reflective. “My sources are mostly secondary, my intuitions those of a poet,” she says. Yes, but her first-hand experience is an enormously-important primary source, and what gives this slender, beautifully-written volume vitality and credibility. This writer experienced the pain and exhaustion of a revolutionary life and a woman’s life, trying to feed her family in a time of shortages, trying to find a job, hoping to fit in.

Surely, it must be something of a dilemma in the wake of a dead hero. She was only one step removed, remember, having arrived in Cuba one year after his death in Bolivia. In school, her

older children were being taught to wish, or at least to say, that they could be like Che. Randall spends some time considering his severity, his high moral code, how it played out when set as an ideal, and what it had been like to live in the shadow of this great person. Randall's conclusion, drawn from a decade of living in Havana, and being the witness to loss of esteem among her friends and children, is that he had set impossible standards. It had been impossible to live within a moral code as severe as Che's. For the Cubans to have chosen him as their man to emulate, had been a mistake; it had been setting the bar too high. I, myself, could not measure up, she seems to be saying. Would a male biographer write that?

Randall gives clear, simple, often fresh, definitions. Che's internationalism, to her, is simply his "purposeful crossing of borders and his claim that wherever hunger and want existed, he felt called upon to intervene." This, she calls one of his most important legacies. Some form of internationalism is de rigor among youth today, and goes under the name of global exchange, catholic mission, and global outreach. "I hate nationalism... I am thrilled by the person able to breach fabricated frontiers and follow his or her heart in an effort to learn, teach, share, and alleviate suffering," she writes, but regrets "his failure to take into account the racial and cultural contradictions inherent in his presence in Africa and in the Andean region he chose for his final theater of operations in Latin America. An insatiable need to carry the revolution to other lands clouded his vision." But this book is not about the war or the Che we know as a hero. Even the best-considered studies of Che, she says, focus more on his guerrilla life and do not give weight to his thought. Randall, foremost a poet, doesn't rail against, but quietly points out he was more a man of thought and not just a man of action, and this legacy is the greater of the two. "But Che was an original thinker, and one who contributed a great deal to our understanding of the

problems inherent in trying to change society so that exploitation is a thing of the past and human beings may reach their full potential.” She turns to a passage from Che’s long letter, written in 1965, published under the title *Socialism and Man in Cuba* as an example: “I would like to explain the role personality plays, individual men and women who lead the masses that make history. This is only our experience, not a prescription for others. It is not a matter of how many pounds of meat one has to eat, or of how many times a year one can go to the beach, or how many pretty things from abroad one might be able to buy with today’s wages. It’s a matter of making the individual feel more complete, with much more inner wealth and much more responsibility.”

Randall sees in Che a man of tenderness, curiosity, and charts his evolution by studying his relationships. Che’s first wife, Hilda Gadea, is the one who provided him with a political education and introduced him to revolutionary circles. He had benefited from her, but didn’t love her. Then again, a true revolutionary has a different set of priorities. Randall uses the phrase “authentic revolutionaries,” who are warriors whose private life always comes in a distant second to revolution. She studies his relationship with Fidel (and finds it solid and compassionate); considers Benigno, Che’s apostle of revolutionary action, a soldier who accompanied him to Africa but, who, in the end, loses faith in the revolution, and certainly in Fidel. She ponders Benigno’s departure, his loss of faith, and although she, herself, feels that Fidel, at the end of his life has been nothing less than corrupt, by always looking the other way, she remembers the young Fidel with admiration.

However privileged, and despite his good looks, innate military skill, upper-class background, stable and loving parents, and good education, *he never felt bound to uphold those traditions*. Therein lay his power, she writes. “In the end he betrayed his class privilege as few other have.” She reminds us that at Che’s death, Fidel invoked his innovative spirit in a eulogy to the Cuban people, and called him ‘an artist.’

Randall has written over 100 books of poetry and prose. When I asked her to confirm this, she replied: yes, but some were quite small. Like Margaret Duras, she recycles some of her subjects, looking from a slightly different angle at Haydee Santamaria, Che, and feminism. It is her privilege to do so. Of course, like the food prepared by a grand cook, we do not mind that she follows the same recipe.

For absolute proof that Che was a man of thought, we can turn to Helen Yaffe’s study. London-based historian and graduate of the London School of Economics, Yaffe has given us a book like no other, the first of its kind describing Che the economist, Che the bank manager, the Che Guevara we didn’t know all that much about. *Che Guevara: The Economics of Revolution* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), has two components: a study of the relevant documents created by Guevara in Cuba after the 26th of July Movement took power; and testimonials given by men and women who worked at Che’s side from 1959 to 1965. And that, of course, is what brings this academic and sometimes dense study to life, interspersed, as it is, with droll observations and ironic memories of Che from people who directly experienced his personality. “This history is almost as much about their own [lives] as it is Guevara’s,” she writes. It is a testament of his dynamism in the role of part philosopher, part math teacher during the years when the country

was a fledgling revolutionary nation, wanting to do it alone and desperate to get it right. These co-workers often quote as well as describe Che, and so this book presents a fresh portrait of a young man who was often funny, sometimes sweet, clearly driven. That heroic Guevara, so easily conjured up in the mind's eye from Korda's famous photograph of a troubled rebel statesman, gives way to another image altogether: a fatigues-wearing Ben Bernacke, perhaps, or Gordon Brown reduced to hunting clothes. Yaffe's Che played a bigger role in modern Cuban history than the other one, the warrior. He put together the Budgetary Finance System that is still relevant today and unique to socialism.

Yaffe is a good storyteller, and however dry or tough or simply curious portions of the subject might be (emulation, for instance), she finds a way to make her subject, and the situation in Cuba during those primary years of the Revolution, very real, when it fell to Che to figure out how to produce enough goods to keep Cuba going. To do that, he read, he studied, he thought, he cajoled, humored, scolded, wrote policy, and he prevailed. Under Guevara, work would become a social duty (as he tackled unemployment), and volunteering would become the norm (to increase productivity). He planned for a future modern economy. "Guevara set up nine research and development institutes which included 'green medicine', nickel production, oil exploration, sugar byproducts and the chemical industry." Some, like green medicine, have come to fruition only now. Yaffe tells us, step by step, how he promoted education and training; established account, investment and supervision systems; saw all of Cuba as one big factory and demanded that all workers participate in management (and vice versa). She could have subtitled her book: "Winning the war was the easy part," which is a quote by the man himself.

Yaffe based this book (initially, a doctoral thesis) on documents to which she was given access: manuals, annual reports, personnel assessments, management board reports, factory inspection reports, economic perspectives documents, and transcripts of the internal bimonthly meetings of Ministry of Industries led by Guevara. These, in addition to 60 personal interviews she conducted with nearly 50 of Guevara's closest collaborators, have provided us with absolutely new (to readers outside Cuba) sources. Hers is a huge contribution to the world of scholarship.

How did she get access to all those records and make contact with all those people? Being from the UK and a student of Marxist economics helped, but she found encouragement and good records management in Cuba. "Since the 1970s the Cuban government has improved access to its society and archives for foreigners – eager to disseminate information about its economic and social welfare successes." Having worked extensively in the archives of the Cuban Council of State's Office of Historical Affairs, I, too, am a benefactor of this policy. While there are quite a lot of scholars and journalists who write extensively about Cuba, a good many seem to avoid consulting primary sources by carrying out research in Cuba. Some, in fact, avoid it like the plague, and receive rich contracts for their effort (or lack of it). What, you might ask, is that about? We should take our hats off to Yaffe for making a clarification. There are two camps, she writes – or, as in boxing, two corners: Cubanists versus Cubanologists. She admits that total objectivity is impossible, but "post-1959 literature on Cuba has been particularly subject to interpretation bias." It is the freshness of the material (historical proximity of the Revolution), which, only now, fifty years later, is being sorted out; and the ideological confrontation between

capitalism and socialism at play here. Of course, the fact that the U.S. plays host to the conflict should not be underestimated. Cubanologists came first. “By the mid 1960s, a centre for Cuban studies was effectively formed by the CIA. Its objectives were to compile information for planning future actions against the Revolution and to depict the Revolution negatively for a global audience. This meant denying all positive achievements of the Revolution, deriding official Cuban sources of information and disseminating misinformation about life in Cuba.” Then, the Pentagon, following the unsuccessful Bay of Pigs invasion, commissioned several academic investigations. Out of these grew academic schools of thought that preach a kind of gospel against the Revolution (Cubanology) which believes that history was interrupted in 1959, and once the Castro brothers leave this earth, the country will resume where it left off. She traces the term to a 1970 conference organized by the Library of Congress. Cubanologists believe that only Fidel, and now Raul, is the author of Cuba’s domestic and foreign policy, and other often-heard arguments, such as Cuba was dependent on the US from Teddy Roosevelt to 1959, replaced by a similar dependence on the USSR until 1990, followed by reliance on Venezuela in the 21st century. Yaffe, who has looked closely at Cuba’s economy, disagrees with this. She observes: “Sources from within Cuba are dismissed as ‘ideological’ or unreliable – as if scholars and workers on the island lack the capacity for reflective thought and were mere sloganeering bureaucrats, repeating official declarations. Dissidents, on the other hand, enjoy a special status in the western academic community, regardless of their previous ideological or institutional position. Once they renounce their political commitment to the Revolution and sign up to undermine its viability, then ‘Overnight, they become independent intellectuals with the keys to credibility in their pockets’, noted Cuban political scientist Rafael Hernández.” Yet, after 50 years, the Cubanologists have failed to explain why Cuba still exists, or how the country works,

or even how it stays afloat. So the time has come for the advent of a new group of academics. “More sympathetic to the goals and achievements of the Revolution, ‘Cubanists’ from across the social sciences began to fill the void – writing about Cuba as a country, not a doctrine.”

Which brings us back to Che Guevara, and his stamp on the Cuban economic system – and its pertinence today in Cuba and around the world. There are emerging revolutionary states that need to build new societies, ones that are cooperative and attempt to create social equality; and here, Che’s contribution might become a place to begin, a template, history to ponder and follow. Since most young revolutionary countries don’t come with a booming economy, but are poor, impatient, newly-independent yet often angry, chances are they are not going to look to Wall Street. How Cuba – how Che – crafted his economic policy might be a light that will help them build an economy or provide a guide or a path to follow. After all, it was Fidel who claims that discovering Marx was like finding a map in the forest. Well, this book might be something similar.

Che wrote a *Manual for Factory Administrators*, which encourages workers to get involved in management and stipulates that factory administrators visit the factory floor; and top management, himself included, must visit factories on a regular, bi-weekly basis. “Factory visits provided an opportunity for thousands of workers to meet and talk directly to management personnel...” and an obviously immensely important occasion. In 1996, I visited the Antonio Cornejo Cigar Box Factory in Central Havana. In the lobby, placed in an alcove so that it looked a bit like a shrine, was a machine for producing cigar boxes that was once used for Che Guevara

on one of those visits. The plaque stated that he had used the machine for four hours, and, from that day onward, it had been retired from use. It seems not to have mattered that the valuable piece of equipment had been taken out of production. Che had touched it. And like the iconic statue it had become, they had painted it silver.

Che aimed to give socialism a democratic, participatory character. There was a plan for workers to speak out but there was also the Plan of Demotion: “Directors had to spend one month a year working in a job at least one level, and preferably two, subordinate to their own,” Yaffe writes. “The plan applied to the minister (Guevara), six vice ministers,” and the list goes on.

In addition, Guevara established a Department of Inventions and Innovations, and would personally interview the designers with the best solutions and send it on to be manufactured. The designer would be lauded – given ‘vanguard status and social applause’ for his no-pay, but highly-personal contribution to the country, and Yaffe traces the Cuban ability to create under pressure back to Che’s respect for the worker committed to improving production and overcoming shortages. It was from the Department of Inventions and Innovations that Tomás Gutierrez Alea created the great film, *Death of Bureaucrat*. There is plenty of new film material to be found in the pages of this book, equally comedic.

“In the 1950s, 95 per cent of capital goods in Cuba and 100 per cent of spare parts were imported from the US... Before the Revolution, Cuban or foreign managers in Cuba could telephone

orders to the US for replacement parts or technical assistance which would arrive in Havana on a shuttle boat within two days. There was no culture of stockpiling for future security,” she writes, “so even once the blockade was anticipated, administrators did not build up reserves. They often waited until machinery parts were totally worn out before ordering mechanics to make replacements.” And from this was born the Committees for Spare Parts in 1960. The situation required nothing less than success. Workers rose to the occasion and kept the country in business, however Rube Goldberg the effect; and this realization of workers’ participation in devising ways to keep machinery in production is considered to be among Che’s greatest achievements. A culture rose out of this, and moved into all aspects of Cuban life. Today, the owner – who is probably also the driver – of one of those old, American cars used as a peso taxi, who picks up riders along a given route in Havana – perhaps starting in Playa, then along the length of 23rd Street through Vedado to Central Havana, along the Malecon, to end up at the Capitol Building in Old Havana – has no plans for retirement. He has never been just an owner, or driver or mechanic. He has had to be a machinist as well, re-creating bits and pieces of the car as the need arises. In that man and his car is a bit of Che.

Being a researcher in Cuba requires a certain amount of acquiescence to overall conditions, for it is a country that always seems to be in dire straits. Helen Yaffe arrived in the mid-90s, when the country was well into the Special Period, or what they call full austerity following the cessation of Russia’s foreign aid, a young girl traveling with her sister, fresh from a London that was perhaps at its most opulent since the Second World War. But she traded in a life of technical, architectural, and gastronomic comfort to become a researcher during those years in Cuba. I have met Yaffe and Randall -- and they both know and have written about my work. No one who lives

and works there gets off easily, so I doubt Alvarez found it a piece of cake, either. I worked in the libraries and archives of Havana in the Special Period, as well: no electricity, windows wide open to deal with the heat, data taken down on a laptop that soon ran out of battery, would then rapidly switch over to long hand and painfully-slow notes, written on paper that was always scarce, even hard to purchase in the diplomatic shops, and placed on a desk that, within minutes, was covered in dust once the windows were open. I was under the impression that things had been better in the 70s. But Randall lived there and describes another Havana. One day she was with Che's sister, Celia Guevara, and they stopped in the Havana Libre Hotel to use the restroom. Che's sister came out of a stall holding up a small square of newsprint, with a pained expression on her face. One of the squares, meant to be used as toilet paper, carried her brother's face.

Cubanists wear the achievement of their research like a medal, survivors in this land of sacrifice. Hard work and sacrifice, in the revolutionary lexicon, are the keys to success. According to our man in Havana, Che Guevara, this is especially true if coupled with love. Yaffe went on to marry a Cuban, and have a baby who, somehow, even in chilly London, managed to teach himself to dance as soon as he could stand up. Viva Cuba!

