

# ICWA LETTERS

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THE AMERICAS

Paige Evans is an Institute Fellow looking at Cuba through the lens of its performing arts.

## Necessity Breeds Invention

CUBA, Havana

August 23, 1998

By Paige Evans

Over the course of the past decade, I have searched for apartments in Manhattan, Rome and San Francisco: three of the world's most competitive real estate markets. Armed with these experiences, I thought finding a place to live in Havana would cover at least somewhat familiar ground. But my Havana apartment search has unearthed an altogether new range of variables and challenges. As with many things here in Cuba, I should have known to expect the unexpected.

None of the myriad landlords with whom I've spoken has asked me whether I have a pet, smoke, or earn enough money to cover his or her rent. Also, the selling points they emphasize, like proximity to a hospital where water and electricity are relatively dependable or to an embassy where there is regular police control, are not ones for which I generally look.

In their desperate search for the U.S. dollars needed to buy everything from food, clothing and electronic goods to medicine, Cubans move in with relatives or squeeze into a first-floor bedroom in order to vacate part or all of their homes for rental to foreigners. Thus, despite a reported housing shortage, every Cuban seems to know someone with a spare room or independent apartment available for rental — in dollars.

Because private rentals are a new phenomenon, prices for Havana apartments vary widely and have no apparent correlation to value. Landlords ask for whatever they imagine they can get.

\* \* \*

Vilma, a tiny woman with a piping voice who works at the music "*organismo*," or institute, that is sponsoring my stay here in Cuba, hands me my new Cuban residency card together with the address of Aurelio, a doctor with an apartment to rent. "It is a good location, and I think it is inexpensive."

Vilma does not mention that Aurelio is her brother; he tells me this when I go to see his apartment. After a quick tour of the bedroom for rent and the shared kitchen and bathroom, Aurelio offers me coffee and a seat in his living room. When I ask for water instead, he warns me: "Never drink the water here unless it has been boiled for at least twenty minutes. People here are ignorant about this — they do not realize the harm the water can do them. It has bacteria, especially in the summer. It can give you giardia. I am a doctor. I know."

Aurelio hands me a glass of boiled water, lights up yet another filterless cigarette. He sits across from me and fixes me with a penetrating gaze. He pauses slightly, pensively, then his words flood out in a stream: "I am a doctor.

I am forced to rent out part of my apartment in order to survive. I am not registered as a landlord with the Housing Ministry. If you were to rent the room, we would have to say that we have some sort of relationship... I will, of course, clear my things off a shelf in the bathroom." When I tell him I am looking for something more independent, Aurelio again pauses, staring at me with disconcerting intensity. I discover later that he is a psychiatrist, which may account for his piercing gaze.

As is the case in many Cuban living rooms, Aurelio's television is playing loudly. "The man with the beard" is speaking. Aurelio snaps off the TV, puts on a salsa CD instead. He proudly hands me his collection of 10 CDs, five of which are American. Two of the CDs are of Kenny G., who is very popular here; another is of Maria Carey. I do not recognize the other two American singers. This surprises Aurelio.

Aurelio's face lights up when I mention I attended the International Yoruba Conference. His words again burst out of him: "I am religious! See?" He pulls a necklace of colored *santeria* beads from under his shirt. "These are my colors. That is my saint." He points to a huge, beatific painting of Saint Lazarus on the wall. "And that is Eleggua." A shrine to Eleggua — *santeria's* gatekeeper *orisha*, or deity — represented by a roughly-hewn, rounded block of wood, stands just inside Aurelio's front door.

"Vilma is religious, too. We know a good deal about the religion, and we know many religious people. Real religious people. You must be careful in your research. These days, more and more people pose as *babalaos*," or holy men, "in order to get money from tourists. The fakes! It is terrible for the religion!... I know a Danish woman who bought a string of these beads. You know what I paid for these? One dollar. You know what she paid? Ten dollars! If you ever want to go to a ceremony or meet a religious person, tell me. I will go with you to make sure you are not taken advantage of. I can take you all over the island! To Matanzas, Santiago de Cuba, the Isle of Pines. Many places around the island are important to religious people. You can tell them you are doing research, that you are curious."

He digs through a pile of home-recorded cassettes. "I have a cassette of religious incantations. I can get you any tapes or CDs you want, cheap, on the street. Much cheaper than in the stores. Just let me know what you want. You can also tape them here, on my machine. Any time. Whether or not you rent out my room. They will be much higher quality recordings than you get on most

cassettes on the street... Would you like to hear the religious music?"

\* \* \*

Norma, a neighbor of my friend Raphael, is a renowned Cuban geneticist with an apartment to rent. She is a short, pudgy woman in her late 50s, with bleached blond hair and a squinty smile. Evidently her 1940s ranch-style home once belonged to a U.S. millionaire. We sit in deck chairs on a patio beside the empty shell of a swimming pool, whose colored tiles are crumbling with lack of maintenance. Raphael comments that no one in Cuba could maintain a pool these days, with the supplies, chemicals, and money needed to do so.

Unlike many Cubans, Norma has been able to travel internationally, due to her work. In the mid-1980s, she spent six months doing genetic research at the Albert Einstein Institute in the Bronx; she then spent another six months in Rome. She croons: "New York! I adore New York! What a place! The action, the life! The city that never sleeps. It is the center of the universe! And Rome! Rome is enchanting! All that history! The most beautiful city in the world!"

"I do not know what to say about the apartment. I don't want to insult Norma's home; but at the same time, I don't want to be misleading."

Norma shows me the apartment at the back of her house: a dingy bedroom with a functioning air conditioner, a cramped bathroom, and a kitchenette; all completely lacking the charm of Havana's colonial buildings. I do not know what to say about the apartment. I don't want to insult Norma's home; but at the same time, I don't want to be misleading. Luckily, Norma offers me an out. She tells me she isn't registered to rent out the apartment, has no intention of registering. She argues she wouldn't mind paying the "*impuesto*," or tax, but she doesn't want to deal with the perpetual hassle of the Housing Inspector. Once private landlords are registered in the Cuban Housing Ministry's computer, they cannot change status; the inspector continues to check up on their homes and impose the costly monthly tax of \$250 per room rented, whether or not a landlord happens to have renters at any given time.

I tell Norma that, as a U.S. citizen here for two years, I need to do everything legally. I want to have cards printed and an international phone line installed; I need receipts for my rent; etc. She says we can claim I am a friend staying in her home for free — an arrangement that would not require her to register as a landlord or pay the dreaded *impuesto*. She has spent time in NYC doing research, she could have established a friendship with me there. Such an arrangement would be accept-

able to the housing authorities. When I ask how much she wants in rent, Norma asks for an exorbitant sum — more rent than I paid for a larger apartment in New York — despite the fact that she would not need to cover the hefty rental taxes.

\* \* \*

I meet Paolo, an Italian professional photographer based in Havana, at a party celebrating two brothers' initiation into *santeria*. Just the night before, 40 goats, roosters, and chickens were sacrificed to Eleggua, the initiates' *orisha*, in the Central-Havana living room where Paolo and I are introduced. The room has since been thoroughly cleaned: no evidence of last night's slaughter remains. Today, the living room is flooded with kids ecstatically pulling candy from a piñata in honor of the childlike Eleggua. Paolo stealthily weaves between the children, snapping photos. The initiates' mother, who is visiting from Tucson where she lives with her American husband, tapes the kids on a brand new video camera. A little boy dances playfully in front of the camera; two others stare, transfixed, at its viewfinder.

The two 20-something initiates are receiving visitors in the dining room next door. They have changed their elaborate costumes since I arrived: now, instead of gingham knickers and tops in Eleggua's colors of red and black, they are dressed in elaborate, red-and-black jackets, pantaloons, and caps reminiscent of Elizabethan court jester costumes. Dried-grass skirts cover their pantaloons, and red paint streaks their cheeks, upper lips and chins, giving an African flavor to their otherwise European-style costumes.

Palm fronds hang from the dining room's ceiling and cover half its walls and floor. The dried, salted carcasses of birds and fish, as well as other objects like cigars and plastic children's toys from Tucson's Toys-R-Us hang among the palm fronds. A wooden bowl holding two bone horns and offerings of dollar bills and peso notes sits on the floor at the initiates' feet. Urns filled with stones, water, silver bangles and shells, and plates heaped with roasted meat line the floor of the room. Paolo photographs the scene as visitors prostrate themselves before the initiates, blow the horns to communicate with Eleggua, and intone ritual chants.

Paolo tells me his Cuban wife is about to give birth to twins. They have decided to raise their children here in Cuba, rather than in Brooklyn or Italy, because, as Paolo explains it: "Cubans are such warm people, and they love children. Dangerous things like drugs and handguns aren't a problem here like they are in the

States. Kids can actually still enjoy their childhoods in Cuba. It's just when they grow up that the frustrations begin to defeat them." Paolo has been searching for a larger apartment to accommodate his growing family. When he finds one, the one-bedroom apartment where he has lived for three years will be available to rent.

As he shows me the one-bedroom the following day, Paolo says: "Now they're afraid to rent this place. They had a neighborhood meeting last night, where people said the Housing Ministry plans to crack down on illegal renters. They're not registered to rent. They could rent the apartment to me, because I am a friend of theirs; they could say I was staying there for free. But they could never afford the fine — U.S.\$1,500 — if the Housing Inspector found out they were renting illegally."

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Teresa and Armando are an elderly couple with an independent apartment on the upper floor of their airy, colonial home. Armando was once a distinguished mathematics professor at the University of Havana; now, he is frail and forgetful. A band of skin around the periphery of Teresa's face is darkly stained from black hair dye.

After Teresa has shown me the apartment, we sit in their living room, where Armando serves me a strong, sweet rice wine he distilled himself. "I can teach you how to make it. I used to make it for my older son, who loves this wine." He passes me a framed wedding photo. "This is him at his wedding last year. He married a woman from New York. They were married in a Catholic Church." Here, Teresa interjects: "I am Catholic. My mother was Spanish. I go to the Catholic Church on 25th Street every Sunday."

Armando hands me a second photo, of three rows of mechanics in BMW uniforms. He points to a mustachioed young man. "This is my younger son. He lives in Fort Lauderdale, too. He is very intelligent. He already makes 95,000 dollars a year, and he has only been in the United States for five years."

Teresa heaves a great sigh. "Our entire family left. Everyone. Some of them live in Florida. New Jersey. A few live in Spain... Are you sure you want to stay in Cuba for two whole years? I'll bet you won't last two months. Things are too hard here! There was a Canadian man living next door. He arrived in Cuba with all these grand ideas, the Canadian Che Guevara. For the first month, he rode a bike to get around the city. In this heat! But he could not stand it. He bought himself a car. What choice is there? Who ever heard of a city without

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public transportation?!... Then the Canadian moved out to Siboney, the wealthiest area of the city, where the finest people live. Now he has central air conditioning, his car has air conditioning. He lives in comfort." Teresa shakes her head. "But for us, with pesos...*No es facil.*" She shrugs defeatedly and again intones the common Cuban refrain: "*No es facil.*" "It is not easy."

As Teresa speaks, Armando strokes the balding belly of one of their three ancient dogs. When she pauses, he launches into a lengthy history of the beloved pooches. He tells me where each dog came from, how they get along, what their individual personalities are. Evidently the lone male dog, who limps around on creaky joints, is highly territorial. He barked rigorously when I arrived. If I lived upstairs, this could prove a boon, for security reasons. Security is a major concern in Havana. Most apartments here have iron gates, secured with padlocks, covering every window and door. In these hard times, the city's break-in rate is high — particularly in foreigners' homes, with their coveted and costly possessions.

Teresa brings the conversation back to the apartment upstairs. "If you decide to rent here, the entire floor would be yours. I only pay the tax for renting out one room, though, so you could not leave your computer in the living room. Books you could leave, the books could be mine, and clothing, other things. But the computer you would have to put away. And your baggage, of

course. Your baggage you must keep in your room. That way, we can tell the Housing Inspector Armando and I are using the other rooms, that they are common space. The Inspector never goes upstairs, but in case he does — I could not afford the fine."

She pauses, and her brow knits with worry. "I have already promised the place to an Italian who has stayed with us before. He is a nice man, he has always been good to us. But he fraternizes too much with Cubans. I would rather rent it to you. You seem like a serious person. A single woman: that is good. An intellectual. The men tourists bring *jiniteras* [prostitutes], into your home. Some of those girls are only 16 years old! Who knows how they will behave?!... The Italian is older, but he has a young Cuban girl — "

Teresa runs a forefinger along the skin of her opposite forearm, a gesture sometimes used by lighter-skinned Cubans to indicate brown or black skin. "She brings her friends into the house, not people of the finer class. The sort of people who practice that religion you are so interested in, *santeria*. I do not know those people; they come into my home at all hours of the day. They might steal things, rob my house. Your friends would be a different class of person. Academics. Intellectuals... Cubans do not like renting out their homes to strangers, you know. We do it because we have to. How else can we survive?" □

