

## Concrete Impressions: A Poetic Vision of Cuban Graffiti

Stephen Cruikshank  
University of Alberta

### TEN LETTERS

"Revolución" lays stagnant, plastered on a wall trying to penetrate hearts  
With graffiti blue letters that resonate with the sky.  
The word perforates Old Havana  
Like a dog that marks its territory announcing, "*Todavía estoy aquí.*"<sup>1</sup>  
To its left a mural of Che stares at me and hammers history down my conscience And  
I am lost in the mix of colour, concrete, and collage.  
An easy feat.  
For these ten letters are a morpheme of political labyrinths  
Where roads of the past clash with the present  
Emitting generations liable to forget, Something  
the concrete never does.  
Rather it just sits in time beside curbs and asphalt,  
Consistent, constant, contained,  
The place where polemics confronts only the eyes.



---

<sup>1</sup> *Todavía estoy aquí*: I am still here.

1.1. "Ten Letters": The word "Revolución" is written boldly on a wall in Old Havana  
with a mural of Alberto Korda's infamous photo of Che visible to the left.

## DOMINOES

A group of older men gather in Holguín Around  
a square table and coarse chairs, Talking of  
dominions and dominoes.  
A table is laid bare under sunlight,  
That glares dully upon numerical patterns and rattletrap hands.  
Here bodies soak in the shade of the concrete walls—  
Walls grafted with the ink of youth,  
Graffitized posts of modernity that have not come;

An image of youth juxtaposed with tradition.

A hand slaps a domino piece down as fast as Batista fled And  
mutters hesitantly, "*trancado compay*"<sup>2</sup>:  
No more *fichas*<sup>3</sup>, a standstill, a victory in hiatus.  
Hands scatter, counting options, crunching numbers  
As the outcome boils under a turbid cloak of colour  
That reveals a game of wit merged with a collage of concrete:  
A mohawk, a tatted neck, gothic dolls, block letters, a bicycle.  
A clash of vibrant backdrops behind a stalemate;

A facade of paint over dominoes of men.

---

<sup>2</sup> *Trancado*: A state of a domino game where all domino pieces have been played by all four players. At this point, the domino numbers are counted on both sides with the winner being determined by the player that holds the least amount.

<sup>3</sup> *Fichas*: Domino pieces.



1.1 "Dominoes": A group of men gather around a dominoes game mid-day in Holguín, Cuba.

## AMOR CUERDO

Show me a prudent love  
And I will tell you about Che peeping over dumpsters,  
Glaring across *el paseo de prado*<sup>3</sup> at *jineteras*<sup>4</sup>  
That beg me for my wallet that comes with my soul.  
I will tell you: *Amor cuerdo, no es amor.*<sup>5</sup>

Show me a sane love  
And I will tell you about the colours red and blue:  
Red for *el sangre* and blue for *el mar*,<sup>7</sup>  
The hues of Caribbean history  
That will tell you: *Amor cuerdo, no es amor.*

Show me a frugal love  
And I will tell you about *un hombre nuevo*<sup>6</sup> Waiting  
on food stamps to feed his children Who play  
*pelota*<sup>7</sup> with bottle caps and sticks.  
Here they will tell you: *Amor cuerdo, no es amor.*

---

<sup>3</sup> *Paseo de prado*: A primary boulevard running through Old Havana.

<sup>4</sup> *Jineteras*: Cuban prostitutes.

<sup>5</sup> *Amor cuerdo no es amor*: "A sane love is not love."

<sup>7</sup> *el sangre*: blood; *el mar*: the ocean.

<sup>6</sup> *Hombre nuevo*: A reference to Che Guevara's marxist inspired philosophy of the "New Man".

<sup>7</sup> *Pelota*: The Cuban word for its national sport of baseball.

Show me a lucid love  
And I will tell you about Martí's America,  
Of *guantanameras* and *guajiras*<sup>8</sup>  
That see the walls of a past stare down realities of the present, Their  
eyes telling you: *Amor cuerdo, no es amor.*



1.2. "Amor cuerdo": A quote from José Martí is displayed alongside Alberto Korda's infamous photo of Ernesto Che Guevara painted on a concrete wall in Old Havana alongside the boulevard paseo de Prado.

### THREE LETTERED ART

Ah, so this is ART:  
Abstract Revolutionary Trade.  
Abstract in a cement gallery covered with shingles of rusty tin,  
Revolutionary in the nostalgia of dusty streets of stone avenues, The  
trade of a commerce that sells little *mulatto* faces.

So this is ART:  
Three letters sold for three letters,  
ART for CUC,<sup>9</sup>  
A Trinitarian triptych of paint.  
The value of a face in a frame  
Exchanged for the value of a face on a bill:  
*Cuadros por rostros; caras por fulas.*<sup>12</sup>

*Yumas* enter the credible gallery underneath the crumbling gravel,<sup>13</sup> The  
perfect customer, a marketable clientele:  
CUC in wallets, a lust for souvenirs.  
Upon the pavement they declare:

---

<sup>8</sup> *Guantanameras* (Women from the city of Guantanamo); *Guajiras* (Women from the country). The words allude to the classic Cuban song "Guantanamera" derived from Martí's poem "Yo soy un hombre sincero".

<sup>9</sup> CUC or *pesos convertibles*; the higher of two currencies in the Cuban economy.

<sup>12</sup> "Frames for faces; faces for money" <sup>13</sup> *Yuma*: Cuban slang for "foreigner".

*Certamente, questa è l'arte di cultura.*

*Certainement, cela est vrai art.*

*Certainly, this is pure art.*

The rugged turf of decaying walls and jagged walkways  
Are their tell-tale of authenticity.

Thus we are given ART:

The wallets of *yumas*,

The faces of *mulattos*,

Dusty cement, palm trees, and paint.



1.3. "A.R.T.": A small art gallery is exhibited in Old Havana.

### FIVE CONCRETE SLABS

*Volverán* Cuba says<sup>10</sup>

While the last soldiers of the Cold War  
Lay frozen in time on concrete walls  
Like leaflets of taboo legality, An  
evangelistic campaign of justice. Yet these  
graffitied ghosts that aspire hope Echo on  
the concrete:

*No mires atrás al recuerdo.*<sup>11</sup>

*Volverán* Cuba recites:

Five caged faces speak in image—  
Not words, but history; not appeals, but alacrity.  
They speak a mixture of mnemonics and prospect.  
Yet as time reverts to the essence of bars,  
And family, the sentiment of nostalgia, The  
concrete echoes:

---

<sup>10</sup> *Volverán*: "They will return".

<sup>11</sup> *No mires atrás al recuerdo*: "Don't look back in memory." The phrase alludes to a line in Roman Labañino's poem "ausencia".

*No mires atrás al recuerdo.*

*Volverán* Cuba promises:

Reminiscing on wall plastered faces:

Imitations of Gerardo, reflections of Fernando,

Mirrors of Ramón, mimes of René, and echoes of Antonio;

Bodies lost to the past while obliging the future Through

concrete slabs that echo:

*No mires atrás al recuerdo.*



1.4. "Volverán": A depiction of the "Cuban five," five Cuban intelligence officers convicted in Miami of conspiracy to commit espionage. From left to right: René González, Ramón Labañino, Antonio Guerrero, Gerardo Hernández, Fernando González)