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### Caribbean Chronicle

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# Caribbean



The following pages present perspectives on life in the Caribbean from professors Cleveland R. Fraser, Terri Bright and Willard Pate, and student Brandon Hinman.

Fraser and Bright were part of an 11-person faculty contingent that visited Jamaica and Cuba July 19-August 8. Fraser, a member of the Furman faculty since 1983 and chair of the political science department, offers a social and political — as well as personal — chronicle of the group's journey.

Bright, who has taught photography and drawing at Furman since 1999, provided the photographs for Fraser's article, reflecting a complementary and yet distinctive view of the trip. Her photographs explore public spaces. She says, "I photograph things run down and worn away, objects used and discarded, familiar spaces that are hurried through or that lead somewhere else. I do not document where I have been as a tourist or travel photographer might; rather, my photographs are fragments borrowed from the social landscape."

Joining Fraser and Bright on the trip were William Lavery and Marian Strobel (history); Janis Bandelin (library); Christina Buckley, Maurice Cherry and Sofia Kearns (modern languages and literatures); Brian Siegel (sociology/anthropology); Richard Stanford (economics and business); and Robin Visel (English).

Hinman and Pate enjoyed the opportunity to visit Cuba last spring, Hinman through a Furman service program and Pate as part of a photography class. Their impressions and photographs appear beginning on page 10.

# Chronicle

A trip to Jamaica and Cuba offers Furman faculty an absorbing look at the sights, sounds and societal changes in two of the most exotic locales in the Western Hemisphere.

By Cleveland R. Fraser  
Photos by Terri Bright

Opportunity. It was a concept that would ultimately serve as a fulcrum for my experiences in the Caribbean.

It struck me with particular force as I stood observing a phalanx of young Jamaicans, trained at the Caribbean Institute of Technology (CIT), busily constructing portals on the World Wide Web for Jamaican and international clients. Through a partnership involving Furman, the Indusa Corporation and the Jamaican government, CIT was a physical manifestation of opportunity.

My impression of these young computer programmers echoed what each of our hosts had noted: they were quick studies. All they needed was an opportunity to work and to be productive members of Jamaican society. One question swirling in my mind, however, was how extensively Jamaica could combine its human resources with emerging technologies to accelerate its development.

But it seems that I have accelerated a bit too rapidly. I had an opportunity to observe life in Jamaica and Cuba over three weeks this past summer through the third iteration of a highly successful faculty development seminar with an intriguing

and intellectually provocative theme: "Transitions."

Underwritten by The Duke Endowment and conducted under the auspices of Furman's Center for International Education and its director, William J. Lavery, the program is designed to expose members of Furman's faculty to societies experiencing profound social, political or economic transformation. Its primary objective is to encourage participants to reflect on their experiences and to incorporate the information collected, sights seen and contacts made into their courses and scholarship. Previous groups had visited Quebec and Prague, two compelling archetypes of national transitions shaped by the persistent and centrifugal forces of language and ethnicity.

Our group was excited by the prospect of traveling to two of the most exotic locales in the Western Hemisphere. The 11 of us were well-traveled and reflected a cross-section of the Furman faculty in age, gender, fluency in Spanish (and Jamaican patois), and disciplines (art, English, economics and business administration, history, library science, sociology, Spanish and political science). We were not only

on a quest for knowledge of things Caribbean; we were also being provided a unique opportunity to make new friends and to teach each other.

Before we boarded the plane to Montego Bay on July 19, we had prepared for our adventure with biweekly meetings during spring term. Each of us gave a 45-minute talk on a topic relating to Jamaica or Cuba in our area of expertise, and we covered everything from the evolution of Cuban cinema to the influence of *Santería* on the religious practices of Jamaican and Cuban society.

Thus, when we touched down in Jamaica, we had a solid base of knowledge to inform our experiences. Even though our time was limited, we had numerous opportunities to develop a more nuanced and original view of Jamaica than most visitors get when they are whisked away from the airport to cavort in hermetically sealed "all inclusive" resorts.

Our lodgings, high on a hill overlooking Montego Bay, had at one time been owned by the Dewars family, and the faint aura of the past still surrounded the place. I spent





time on the veranda taking in stunning vistas, trying to imagine what it must have been like to live a life of colonial privilege. What passed through the minds of the masters of the Great Houses, for example, when the primary crop was sugar and the primary source of labor was African? Did they have any conception of the political, economic and social legacies they would bequeath to Jamaica?

As we began our exploration, all of us were impressed by the dynamism of the Jamaican people, and as time passed important aspects of the Jamaican experience were revealed by the individuals we met. Sean, the driver of our van, confided that he would “do anything to get to America,” where one could see some tangible progress after, say, 10 years of hard work. He was not certain that he would be able to see the fruits of his labor in Jamaica. We sometimes hoped that we would live to see the fruits of our labor, as there are thrill rides less exciting than traversing some of Jamaica’s byways with Sean at the wheel, happily passing (no pun intended) signs with helpful sayings such as “Undertakers Love Careless Overtakers.”

It soon became apparent that the fabric of Jamaican society is held together by the strength and intelligence of its women. This was underlined during our visits to several institutions of higher learning.

At the University of the West Indies, Cheryl BrownDash, UWI’s director of special projects, and her colleague, Lilieth Nelson, provided an excellent overview of the structure and issues associated with Jamaica’s education system. In Mandeville, the provost of Northern Caribbean University, Althea McMillan, certainly seemed capable of holding the university together in the absence of its dynamic president, Herbert Thompson. Her personality filled the room as she filled our heads with information about NCU’s programs and its relationship with the Seventh Day Adventists, a denomination with deep roots in Jamaica.

But these traits of energy and acumen were not limited to academic contacts. Jacqui Francis, the mother of Furman freshman David, invited us to her beautiful home. Beside a burbling pool overlooking Kingston at sunset, she offered a delicious sampling of the fare she prepares for state dinners for the prime

minister. She also impressed us with her willingness to do anything it would take to insure the opportunity for her son to study in the States.

Of course, we encountered inconveniences — no water for a brief time in Montego Bay, power interruptions in Kingston. The country’s primary telecommunications provider, Cable and Wireless, is more commonly known as “Careless and Worthless.” Yet these minor vexations to us were part of everyday life to many Jamaicans.

During a session at the U.S. Embassy, we learned that 30 percent of the population is unemployed or underemployed, that the gross domestic product had contracted between 1996 and 1999, and that interest rates were “high” (35 percent). Over the years, it had become difficult for Jamaica to maintain its competitiveness in world markets for agricultural products such as sugar. Tourism has become a major source of revenue (\$1.3 billion per year), but it was astonishing that Jamaica had been experiencing another form of “tourism.” In addition to the 2.5 million Jamaicans who live on the island, a similar number live abroad, primarily in the United





Kingdom, Canada and the United States.

How did they cope with the challenges of day-to-day living, and how did they express their perceptions of the Jamaican experience? In music — reggae music. Especially the music of one of Jamaica's greatest cultural icons, the late Bob Marley. Its syncopated rhythms and message of protest and redemption followed us everywhere. It drifted up from the modest homes dotting the hillsides below our hotel in Montego Bay. It was the soundtrack in our coach as we navigated the streets of Kingston. It was the music of the people, a means to transcend the often difficult challenges of life.

But Jamaica has echoed with other forms of syncopation. For weeks before our arrival, the capital had been the scene of sporadic skirmishes between rival factions with differing economic and political affiliations and motivations. Their battles led to the deaths of a score of people.

As we prepared to leave Jamaica after our 10-day tour, a Kingston radio station reported that, unbeknownst to us, a 6:30 p.m. to 9 a.m. curfew had been imposed the day before to prevent further violence

in areas we had visited. As we skirted the fringes of these precincts on our way to our Cuban adventure, I spied some graffiti scrawled in white paint on a gray concrete wall: "Yes USA."

**O**portunidad. I had always told students in my course on Latin American politics that, if given the opportunity, and if it were legal, I would be on the next plane to Havana. On July 27, 2001, I was!

My initial impression of Cuba was paradoxical: upon our arrival in Havana's new international airport, we walked through a hall bedecked with flags of many nations — including, in the far corner of the hall and partially obscured from view, the flag of the United States. I was also surprised to discover another tangible symbol of home: the U.S. dollar. Even revolutionary Cuba had been unable to resist the "dollarization" occurring throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. *¡Viva la revolución!*

On a personal level, my time in Cuba, especially in the cities, provided an opportunity to relive my early childhood through a showroom

of vintage automobiles. A 1956 Buick, a 1959 Ford Fairlane — each had an analog in my memory. I was particularly taken with a 1959 Buick on the streets of Havana; it was identical to one that filled my first-grade teacher, Mrs. Sobiak, with excitement and pride, emotions palpable even to a 6-year-old. Alas, my quest to detect that rarest of vehicular species, an Edsel, was unsuccessful! But my excitement was not diminished even when our hosts at the U.S. Interest Section referred somewhat dismissively to these vehicles as "Frankensteins." They still looked great to me.

We began our exploration of Cuba by traveling to Santiago de Cuba, the province and the city noted for its tradition of resistance, and the scene of two of the most important events in recent Cuban history. We visited the Moncada barracks, still pock-marked from the gun battle between the forces of dictator Fulgencio Batista and a rebel force of a little over 100 men led by young Fidel Castro. Mounted on July 26, 1953, the attack failed. Castro was captured, tried and sentenced to a long term in prison.

During his trial, he uttered some





of the most famous words in Cuban history: “Do with me what you will. It does not matter. History will absolve me!” And in early January 1959, it seemed as if Castro’s prophetic utterance had been fulfilled, as he stood on the second floor balcony of Santiago’s town hall and gave one of the first speeches celebrating the victory of the Cuban revolution and of the movement named to commemorate the events of July 26, 1953.

As we departed Santiago de Cuba on our way to Camagüey, Trinidad, and then to Havana, I tried to imagine what it must have been like when Castro and his victorious comrades began their procession to the capital. I was struck by the relatively large numbers of people standing by the roadside, arrayed as if they were well-wishers to cheer us on to our ultimate objective of the Hotel Parque Central in Havana. In fact, they were actually travelers waiting for a ride, and they stood anxiously by as some of their number were conveyed by all method and manner of transport, from trucks (many Russian) to motorscooters (many Eastern European). Nestor, our Cuban driver, noted that by law

drivers of multipassenger vehicles must stop and pick up passengers. Certainly a pragmatic way to overcome the shortage of public transportation.

As we traveled down the motorway, there seemed to be another shortage as well: automobiles. It might have had something to do with the price of fuel, because when we pulled into a service station to fill up with diesel, the tariff was approximately \$2.25 per gallon.

**F**ields planted with sugar cane, bananas and avocados eventually gave way to rolling hills, and ultimately to flatter terrain more suited to livestock and industrial concerns. As we traversed the country from east to west, the scenery and the confinement provoked reflection on the role that agriculture, especially the cultivation of sugar and tobacco, had played in Cuba’s economic and political development.

Even today, Cuba’s economic well-being is intimately tied to world demand for sugar and its derivatives (especially rum) and for tobacco products so highly prized by smoking aficionados. And while Cuban socialism included efforts to diversify

the economy through industrialization (with assistance from the former Soviet Union and its allies), the results, even before the collapse of Cuba’s communist benefactors, had been mixed. Indeed, the factories we passed did not seem to be too busy. Did encouraging foreign investment, as well as foreign visitors, constitute a way out of Cuba’s economic malaise?

One of my most vivid recollections of our time in Camagüey is of ascending to the roof of the Gran Hotel to view the city’s skyline. This pivotal spot offered a striking view of red tile roofs topping facades of great beauty. I was especially impressed with the church spires piercing the burnished sky in all directions. Many of them were active or under renovation, and one of the most impressive was the painstakingly restored *Catedral de Nuestra Señora de la Candelaria*, a center of great celebration during Pope John Paul II’s Cuban visit in 1998. Additionally, the spires belied the existence of other denominations and their houses of worship.

Impressive secular shrines also beckoned. The city is the birthplace of Cuba’s celebrated Afro-Cuban





poet, the late Nicolás Guillén, one of the first to give voice to the aspirations of this segment of Cuban society. The house of his birth attracts visitors and scholars from the world over. During a visit to a museum housed in a former children's hospital fronting the scenic *Plaza San Juan de Dios*, an exhibition of local artists featured a number of mixed-media pieces celebrating the return to Cuba of Elián González. It would not be the last time we would see artistic tributes to this "victory" of Cuba over the United States.

**T**rinidad, a UNESCO World Heritage site, was wet. The cobblestones of this picturesque city were sometimes only glinting submersibles as torrents of rain washed over our visit. Many of its museums were closed due to the inclement weather.

But all was not lost, for in this "city of museums" resided one of Trinidad's most resourceful curators of Cuba's heritage. For almost 60 years, city historian Carlos Zerquera had been transcribing *by hand* a priceless trove of documents dating from the late 1500s. Señor Zerquera

graciously shared an hour with us to detail the difficulties of preserving records debilitated by time, weather, water and insects, and to offer his impressions of the sweep of Cuban history.

Our continuing exploration of the city led us to two very distinct residences. One, occupied by a couple who had lived there for 50 years, had relatively spacious living quarters with high ceilings. In addition, our hosts pointed out fragments of frescos dating from the last century which they had covered with a protective layer of paint, hoping that these delicate works of art could someday be restored. Our second visit took us to a much more modest residence, shared by a larger number of people. From our brief stays, it is difficult to know which was more representative of a typical family. My suspicion, however, is the latter.

**F**inally, our methodical march of discovery had reached its final destination — Havana. Almost immediately I made my way to the *Malecón*, the city's arcing seaside thoroughfare, which on this sultry evening was choked with carnival revelers. Among the crowd,

multihued spandex seemed to be the uniform of choice. Strolling along this famous boulevard, I was quite surprised that most buildings were in a sorry state of disrepair. Beautiful examples of various architectural styles had suffered the corrosive effects of time, weather and, it seemed, a balky revolutionary order.

As I passed a row of crumbling facades, one edifice offered a glimpse of the district's past and perhaps its future. Freshly stuccoed and painted, it housed the local Committee for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR). Draped across its entrance were slogans such as *En Cada Barrio, Revolución* ("In each barrio, revolution"), and *Barrio x Barrio = Revolución*. But almost directly opposite this bastion of *Fidelismo*, the carnival's soundtrack was not the percussive rhythms of the rumba or samba but the polished American pop of the Backstreet Boys and the hip-hop-based bombast of Kid Rock. In this festive, almost surreal environment, it was difficult to comprehend what revolution was being made or defended.

The Museum of the Revolution, situated in the former Presidential Palace, provided some additional





clues. As we ascended a broad staircase to the first exhibition rooms, we noticed the busts of four men resting on marble pedestals: José Martí, Cuba's national hero; Simón Bolívar, the "Great Liberator" of Latin America; Benito Juárez, one of Mexico's most notable presidents; and Abraham Lincoln. I was aware that Castro admired Lincoln, but it still was surprising to realize that he had presumably permitted Honest Abe's likeness to continue to reside here.

This visit also brought home the randomness of events that combine to link our two societies in peculiar, poignant ways. In this case, one of the artifacts displayed at the museum was the engine of a U-2 reconnaissance aircraft shot down by Cuba during the Missile Crisis of October 1962. The plane was piloted by Greenville resident Rudolf Anderson, Jr., whose sacrifice is memorialized in Greenville's Cleveland Park. To paraphrase former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, it is indeed a funny old world.

Just how is that world perceived by the people of Cuba, who have lived only under

the banner of socialism? Moreover, what outlets exist for the younger generation to express their visions of Cuba's past, present and future? An afternoon visit to the flat of Alexis Esquivel provided a delightful opportunity to explore these questions.

Esquivel, a young Afro-Cuban artist whose paintings and multimedia installations have been exhibited in the United States, had also invited some of his friends in the artistic community to join us. We did not detect any Socialist Realism in the slides, paintings and lithographs our hosts shared with us. Rather, their work was provocative and "derivatively original."

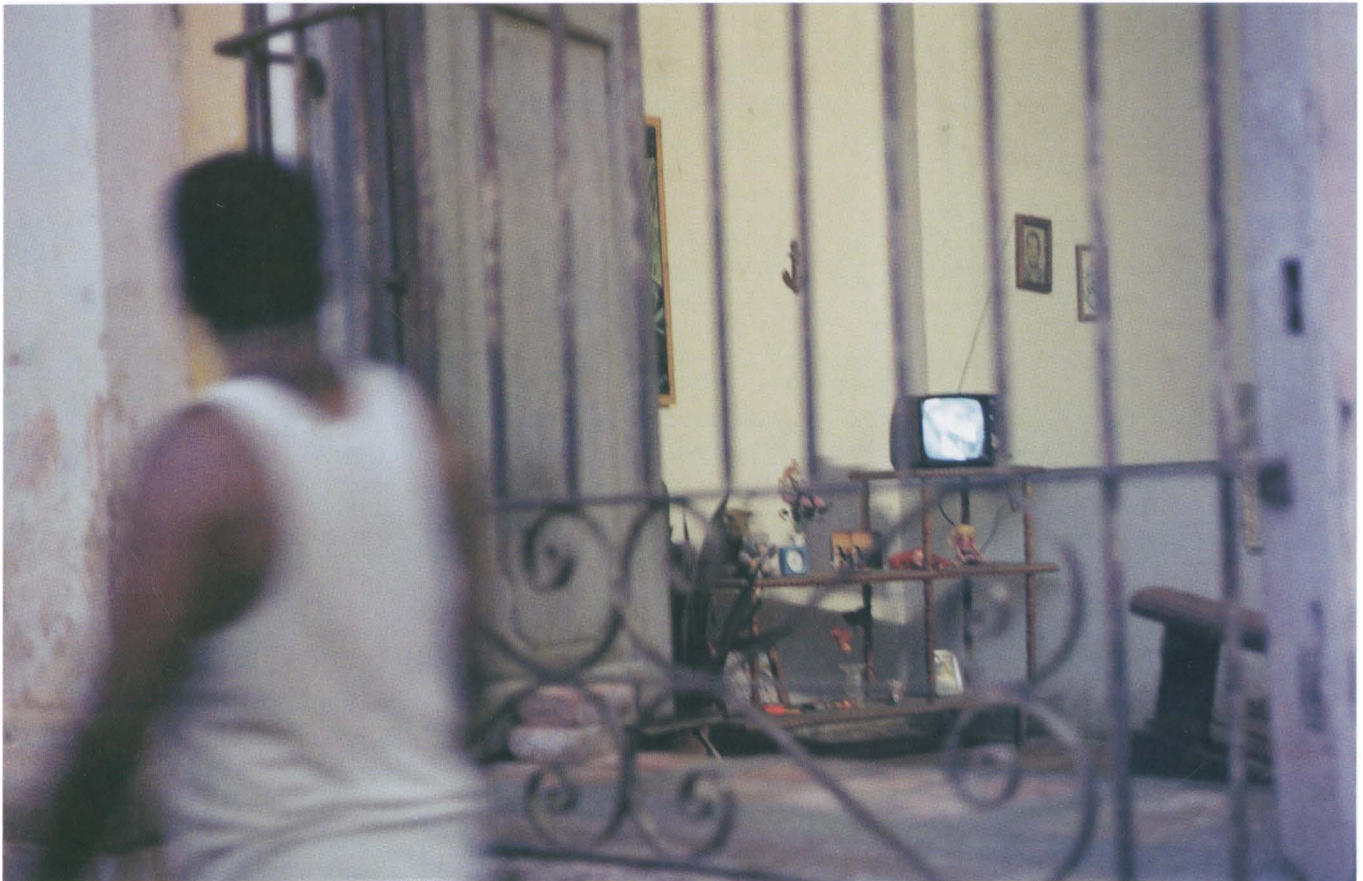
For example, taking a cue from Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, one of Esquivel's most notable paintings is a depiction of 13 Cuban presidents arrayed around a manatee, an extinct species in Cuba and perhaps a symbol of the rapaciousness of the old order. Another of Esquivel's colleagues directed the viewer's attention to salient issues in Cuban society through a series of soup cans modeled after those made famous by Andy Warhol. (The tag line on each can was "America's Favorite Revolution.") Yet a third

used the medium of the movie poster to place Afro-Cubans in contexts formerly the domain of their lighter-skinned counterparts. Indeed, one recurring theme that informed much of this group's creative energy was the desire to depict the relationships between race, gender and revolution, and to question whether or not 42 years of transformation had brought Cuba any closer to a society without prejudice.

Here he was again — Elián González, this time improbably nestled in the arm of Cuba's national hero, José Martí, who was pointing an accusatory finger at something. But what? It turned out that this specimen of state-supported art was positioned directly across from the U.S. Interest Section. The site was the scene of massive demonstrations supporting young Elián's return to Cuba.

For one gazing at this image, the message the artist (and the Cuban government) intended to convey was obvious: how dare the imperialists refuse the request of a father for his son to be returned home. But I suspect that Cuban wits, or American visitors to their





country's mission in Havana, have considered an alternative interpretation: that one of Cuba's most revered icons is holding the symbol of its future protectively to his side and pointing his finger toward this symbol of the United States not in censure but in approbation! Could it be that Martí is whispering to Cuba's youth, "There lies your destiny?"

**W**hat conclusions can be drawn from these two island nations? Both are lands of diverse beauty. Both share the legacies of a colonial past based on the production of sugar, coffee and tobacco, and the importation of labor from Africa. Both have been led by forceful and charismatic personalities. Both face important political and economic challenges. Both continue to grapple with issues of race and gender. Both have looked to tourism for economic salvation. Both are societies in transition.

When one thinks of Jamaica, typical notions are of hand-holding honeymooners strolling along pristine beaches in front of tourist enclaves, spicy jerk pork, tasty fryfish, akee and breadfruit, dreadlock-bedecked rastamen taking sacramental tokes

of ganja, and the scablike bauxite mines that provide employment and wealth. It is a culture that has grappled with the consequences of violence as an expression of discontent. But it is also the young programmers at the Caribbean Institute of Technology who may help Jamaica realize its vision of becoming the "silicon island" of the region. It is the engaged students and faculty at its institutions of higher learning. It is a country that seems to have moved beyond former prime minister Michael Manley's belief that the Cuban model might have something to offer Jamaica.

And what of Cuba? One thinks of Fidel and Che, Cohiba and Montecristo cigars, Havana Club rum, old cars, the percolating rhythms of the rumba, and even the ghost of Ernest Hemingway sipping a daiquiri at El Floridita, or a *mojito* at the Bodeguita de Medio, two of his favorite Havana watering holes. But as this island nation of 12 million moves into the new millennium, Cuba is also *paladares* (private restaurants) and dollars, new hotels and coastal tourist enclaves, and the secondhand book market on the *Plaza de Armas* in Old Havana.

It is a collection of talented young artists.

Its future, however, is clouded by conjecture surrounding an important transition: Who will ultimately lead Cuba after Castro? Obviously, no one knows how events will unfold when Castro is gone. The official Cuban position is that it will be business as usual when his brother, Raul, assumes power. The official U.S. position is to effect a "peaceful transition to a democratic Cuba."

The path that Cuba takes will in large measure be dependent on the ability of the regime to establish a viable economic base on the one hand, and to address the delicate question of political reform on the other. Moreover, it must address problems caused by a diaspora of its own, which has had a profound influence on the relationship between Cuba and the United States. Perhaps the time will come for both countries to seize the opportunity to reconsider their relationship.

I look forward to that day. 🍷