



ETHNOGRAPHIC SNAPSHOT

Internal and Internalised Borders of Havana

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In this ethnographic snapshot, I reflect on the experience of the internal borders of Havana. I consider how these borders become internalised, impacting everyday lives and the movements of my research partners across the city. I focus on the marginalised citizens whose legal status and place of living make the borders especially apparent. My interest lies in how the internal borders are set up and embodied in the context of Cuba and reflected in everyday experiences. I use my encounter with Ramón to present the varied experiences of the border through two radically different positionalities: that of Cubans who migrated to Havana and myself as a foreigner being able to move freely through the city.



A Casual, but Risky Stroll

I met Ramón, a trained musician from Santiago de Cuba in his late twenties, during my 2019 field trip to Havana. He accompanied two Spaniards, whom I had met earlier, on their last night in the city. One of them gave Ramón a suitcase full of clothes as a gift for spending the last few nights with him. Ramón could not get through on his wages from his profession and survived thanks to informal work that also involved entertaining tourists. He could be considered a *pinguero* – a male sex worker who engages in sexual relations with gay tourists. After finishing our drinks, I decided to accompany Ramón and one of the Spaniards to Parque de la Fraternidad from which they wanted to go further into town. As we left the narrow streets of Old Havana and entered Paseo del Prado, Ramón became visibly distressed. He feared the unwanted attention of police officers he noticed in front of *Capitolio* on the other side of the street, notorious for harassing Cubans in the company of foreigners. If the policemen decided to check his documents, they could fine or even deport Ramón as an undocumented internal migrant to the capital.



Figure 1: View of Paseo del Prado, the main street connecting Old Havana with Parque de la Fraternidad, from the stairs of Capitolio. Photo: Oskar Lubiński. April 2018.

Ramón was one of many other Cubans affected by the regulations of Decreto-Ley 217 from 1997. In an attempt to limit massive migrations towards the capital, the decree prohibits Cuban citizens from changing their residence to Havana unless authorised by the local government. At the time, the entire country was experiencing an unprecedented economic crisis, but Havana with its economic importance and growing tourism sector offered better quality of life than other provinces. The city's neglected housing infrastructure with many houses on the brink of collapse was not able to maintain this growing population. However, neither the law nor precarious living conditions lowered the number of migrants who prioritised economic opportunities available in the capital over the difficulties such a move entailed. The most visible effect of Decreto-Ley 217 was perhaps the growing number of informal settlements on the peripheries of the city. Located just outside the administrative borders of Havana, they were not only subject to police control but also lacked access to basic infrastructure such as water or electricity.

In this ethnographic snapshot, I reflect on how borders can be experienced within the territory of a capital city in an island nation. My decision to use the word "borders" while referring to the spatial divisions in Havana serves to emphasise the experience of many internal migrants in Cuba who run the risk of deportation just by living in the city without government authorisation. I consider how these borders become internalised, impacting everyday lives and the movement of my research partners¹ across the city. By embracing Veena Das's (2004: 227) postulate to "shift our gaze from the obvious places where power is expected to reside to the margins and recesses of everyday life", I focus on the marginalised citizens whose legal status and place of residence make the borders especially apparent. Yael Navaro-Yashin in her account of the Turkish-Cyprus border investigates "the mark of the material border (or the border as a tangibility) in the subjectivities and imagination" (2012: 71), as her interlocutors evoke feelings of confinement but also anxiety related to crossing the border from the Turkish to the Cypriot side. I find these marks of the material border reflected in how my research partners in Cuba interacted with the urban space of Havana. I am interested in how the enforcement of regulations and policing practices targeted at Cubans contributes to setting the internal borders. These borders become embodied and reflected especially in the ways in which urban spaces are navigated by internal migrants in Cuba. The encounter with Ramón serves to reflect on how the experience of the internal border

¹ Rather than use the term informants or research participants I prefer to use the term "research partners" in order to emphasise the active role my interlocutors paid in my research and recognise their agency in the process (see Bloch 2021).

differs between two radically different positionalities: that of Cubans who have migrated to Havana and myself as a foreigner.

Internalised Borders

Thankfully, the encounter I described at the beginning of the snapshot ended well – Ramón was able to return to his house undisturbed. Nonetheless, the mere fact that he exhibited anxiety just by seeing the police officers is worth considering with more detail. Decreto-Ley 217 was, in a way enforced through his body, reflected in the anxiety he felt and in the fact that his appearance identified him as potentially violating the law. His darker skin colour identified him as *trigueño*,² which would be the first quality that could attract police attention. Then his engagement in informal work and lack of an officially sanctioned address in the capital would threaten his possibility of staying in Havana.

A sign, “La Habana. La capital de todos los Cubanos”, was visible at every entrance to the city. It pointed to the open character of the city and framed it as a common good belonging to “all Cubans”. This statement contradicted the situation for those who lacked permission to live in the city, and paradoxically, it was not even the experience of most Havana residents, especially not those with darker skin, who were especially not to feel welcome in the city. In an internal orientalising discourse (Hernández-Reguant 2005), those who came from Oriente, the Eastern provinces of Cuba, lacked education, *cultura* – broadly defined as cultural formation and values. *Orientales* were singled out for their behaviour and the colour of their skin – usually darker than the rest of the population – and therefore negatively viewed by other *habaneros* and prosecuted for crossing Havana’s borders. Association between Blackness and marginality was a common one in the Cuban context. Although the numbers of Black tourists and foreign students have been growing, it was still a common assumption that a Black person was Cuban. Various black researchers were also subject to police control due to the colour of their skin (Berry 2021; Queeley 2015). It was thus that in this country, where official ideology prides itself with eliminating racism, skin tone was the first marker of who was allowed to stay or not. While not uncommon in tourist-based economies, this reflects how phenotypical markers associated with locality affect one’s way of being within certain spaces and navigating them.

² The five main identifiers of race in Cuba consist of *negro* (black), *mulato* (mixed race), *trigueño* (wheat-coloured skin), *blanco* (white) and *chino* (people with Asian origin).



Figure 2: View of one of Havana's informal settlements. Photo: Oskar Lubiński. April 2018.

Paradoxically, the agents of the state who control and repress the migrants from Oriente and other parts of the country are migrants themselves. For a long time now, the police force in Havana has been sourced from the Eastern provinces of Cuba, and police officers are not influenced by family and neighbourhood ties developed over the years of living in the city they work in. I heard, however, that low salaries forced even police officers to choose informal housing – one of my friends who in the early 2000s lived in an abandoned hotel told me police officers were among the squatters. Most of the Cubans I talked to, regardless of their social status, had a very negative view of the police. The officers were seen as uneducated, corrupt, and abusive of their power, and at the same time useless. I was told they were too afraid to venture into the informal settlements and rarely, if ever, acted upon denouncements of theft and other crimes, leaving people to take matters into their own hands. All this created a feeling of lawlessness where internal borders created spatial exclusion and prevented the entry of state-appointed officials into dangerous areas, while also allowing for randomly targeted repressive actions by the police.

Not all migrants faced the same situation. The internal borders have a porous character and are therefore constantly negotiated. Even informal settlements differ in their legal status, creating different dimensions of exclusion. In some cases, the Cuban government reacted to the arriving migrants by sending social workers to the informal

settlements in order to register the inhabitants and identify their needs, providing them also with access to electricity, water, and state-provided care. In areas that were not registered and therefore unrecognised, inhabitants faced a constant risk of being harassed and they lived under exceedingly difficult conditions.

It was within the “formal” areas of the city that borders were acted upon and internalised. Ramón was forced to hide from the police officers, people engaged in informal trade, and took the risk of being harassed by the police and even, in the worst case, deported from the city. One of my interlocutors who had to hide from the police asked me once, “is it possible to be illegal in your own country?” His question denounced the absurdity of a situation where a nominally socialist country creates laws and regulations that generate social and spatial exclusion. It was the internal and internalised borders that made the division between citizens manifest. The mere act of changing one’s place of residence to Havana without authorisation was thus synonymous with becoming a marginalised citizen stripped of basic rights. The internal borders would become apparent and internalised since staying within them put the migrants at constant risk.

Border-exempt

In contrast, I as a foreigner was exempt from all these borders and never experienced them personally. Coming back to the opening anecdote, the two Spaniards and I hardly paid attention to the police officers. Our white skin provided us with immunity that was not offered to Cubans. We were free to move wherever we wanted. Havana’s border simply did not exist for us in the same way as it did for Ramón. I can recall only one time when I was approached by a policeman in Cuba. He asked my friend and me if we were a couple or not. A few days later, he approached my friend on the street and asked her for a date. Whether going to the peripheries of the city or walking around in the middle of the night, I was never disturbed by any officers.

If anyone tried to establish internal borders for me, it was my research partners. It was in a way an expression of care rather than an attempt at repressing me. Community projects operating in the marginal areas that I worked in were under constant observation by the government, especially when they invited foreigners. My safety when venturing into peripheral areas was another concern. Cubans told me they could be held responsible for anything happening to a foreigner “in their care”. However, every person had a different perception of the location of the borders between “dangerous” and “safe” areas. One lady who ran a shop in front of a settlement, serving mostly its inhabitants, told me she never entered the settlement because of the dangers there. At

the same time, Aymaris, who lived in a wooden house in that settlement, would never let me go back alone to the main road after dark. “La calle está mala” [The street is bad], she would say each time, and insist on accompanying me through the “formal” area of the neighbourhood. Whenever we reached the street before the main road, she would consider it secure enough and let me continue on my own.

Even though I was reminded of the danger of constant mugging, my going around the city was marked by relative freedom. My presence could sometimes be more of a threat to my interlocutors. In a way, I was a “moving border” – I had to be protected from harm but could also bring unwanted attention and surveillance from the state officials. My status as a foreigner allowed me to take more liberties than most of the Cubans I met.

Conclusions

Ramón’s history, just as much as those of other internal migrants to Havana, points to the processes through which borders become internalised. Borders are therefore not only materialised in the form of fences or walls, but also manifest through embodied practices and interactions in physical spaces. Violating borders in any form can bring physical violence and prosecution. Because of that, migrants such as Ramón try to make their presence unnoticed to avoid unwanted attention. In this case, the legal status of being a Cuban citizen rather than affording protection is what creates exclusion as the migrants are subject to regulations that do not concern non-Cubans. Cuba is, of course, not unique in this situation, as many countries historically have limited and also today limit the mobility of their citizens. The prohibition of vagrancy, categorising citizens and their access to certain areas, or simply practices of harassing certain groups with or without it being based on any established law, remain common practices across the world. My intention has therefore been to show the complexity of “borders” that may form within the territory of one’s own country and impact lives and everyday practices of navigating urban spaces.

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