

tive power of greed? Why be so defeatist? Why can't we believe that human beings can change? If these are idealistic notions—generally dismissed by mainstream policy makers as naive at best and dangerously ignorant at worst—it's worth noting that they are also little different from the core beliefs at the foundation of most modern societies' value systems and religions. It matters not that Che's vision of a selfless society helped send Cuba's industrial base into ruin; the beliefs upon which he formulated it are very widely shared. In this sense, the Spirit of Che is universal, conceived as a perfect ideal of selflessness.

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Omar Pérez López's adult life can be defined as a struggle to find this elusive moral standard, to discover the essential Spirit of Che. His has been a life of both pain and self-searching, shaped in a powerful way by Cuba's distorted mythologizing of Che. That struggle was made harder by the conflict he has had with the Castro regime and by his unique connection with Ernesto Guevara. In 1989, when the old Cuba was making way for the new, post-Soviet Cuba, the then-twenty-five-year-old Pérez learned for the first time that the larger-than-life Heroic Guerrilla, a billboard-dominating figure in whose presence he and all Cubans had constantly lived, was his father.

While it has never been proven, there is credible evidence to suggest that Omar Pérez López is Che's unacknowledged son. Yet for almost two decades afterward he studiously avoided the limelight, during which time he learned four languages, earned international recognition for his poetry, lived on and off as an expatriate in Europe, and became an ordained Buddhist monk.

Now, as Cubans confront a future without Fidel Castro and contend with the contradictions of a closed political system that presents a socialist face while engaging with foreign capitalists, Pérez emerges as a voice of conscience, a throwback to the lost

spirit of the revolution. Invoking the spiritual values of his father, he calls for a true return to Che's New Man project. Meanwhile, he condemns those who falsely use Che's image to burnish their revolutionary credentials while exploiting it for personal gain, explicitly naming his supposed half siblings as culprits.

With this stance, Pérez seems destined to make himself an unwelcome intruder in the affairs of the mainstream Guevara family, a quasi-official institution in Cuba. The children of Che's widow, Aleida March, are known for their angry attacks against those who crassly commercialize his image. And yet, justifying Pérez's charges of hypocrisy, they also oversee a vast international business operation selling books and other products tied to the rights that the family holds over Ernesto Guevara's name. Meanwhile, the five children of Alberto Korda are locked in their own bitter and highly politicized battle over the worldwide rights to Che's iconic image. Amid all this unseemly conflict, Omar Pérez, an antimaterialist, raises important and timely questions about the true Spirit of Che.

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His story begins further back than this, however, in 1963, on a day when Lilia Rosa López, a beautiful twenty-year-old journalism student in Havana, called on her friend Ida Pérez. When Lilia found Ida at the front desk of the oil institute at which she worked, she was reading *The Technique of Coup d'État* by Curzio Malaparte. In the hands of a receptionist, this weighty text also caught the attention of Che Guevara, who happened to be there on ministry of industries business. Apparently no fan of the Italian Malaparte, a onetime fascist who later converted to communism, Che told Ida he'd bring her a different book. "That's when I began to do what we Cubans call *satear* [local slang for flirt]," López told me during an interview in her home above Havana's Malecón seawall.

After that first meeting, López says, Che returned to Ida's office with the book he'd promised for her and a different one for López called *Corazon* (Heart), a nineteenth-century work by another Italian, Edmundo de Amicis. A short, "sporadic" relationship began. Then, before she even realized she was pregnant, their meetings stopped abruptly in mid-1963 as Che's travel commitments began to take him on lengthy world tours. Ernesto Guevara and Lilia Rosa López had no further contact.

Lilia Rosa says she planned to have an abortion but couldn't go through with it. Meanwhile, she separated from her heavy-drinking husband. Shortly after the birth, however, he returned to claim custody over the boy, delivering a completed birth certificate on which he'd inscribed his own first name for the child as a fait accompli. Worried about the shame to her family and terrified of the political fallout, she revealed her secret to no one but her closest confidantes—no doubt assuming it would stay there. Nonetheless, determined to associate the child in some way with his real father and blessed with a knack for making connections, she got an official to redactor the birth certificate with a new first name for her son. For its inspiration she turned to a book Che had lent her: *Rubaiyat* by the Persian poet Omar Khayyam. Along with other memorabilia from the time she spent with the famous revolutionary, López showed me her copy of this book, which she says her lover never retrieved. A dedication in black pen inside the cover reads, "To Doctor Guevara, a poet of life and of the eternal dream." Signed "Cazeres, Mexico 1954," the book appears to have been a gift from a friend in Mexico City right before Che's historic meeting with Castro.

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Until Omar was twenty-five, he always assumed his father was Benito Pérez, who died shortly after the startling alternative story emerged. But the truth is, the young man looked nothing like



Omar Pérez López, Havana, May 2007.

him and instead bore an uncanny resemblance to one of the best-known faces in the world. And when I met Omar, by now forty-two, in November 2006, the similarity still seemed present. It was impossible—certainly after so much research looking at one single face—not to find a striking familiarity in the dark, expressive eyes and shoulder-length wavy hair of the man who greeted me in the front bar of my Old Havana hotel. And as I was to discover, Omar Pérez's appearance was not his only Chelike attribute.

"Let's start at ground zero," he began. We were to start with the moment of reckoning, one that arose out of Pérez's relationship in 1989 with a group of poets, novelists, essayists, and artists who were exploring new political and cultural ideas for their country's uncertain future. Within this cross section of the Cuban intellectual scene, there were a few who had gotten wind of a titillating story concerning the young man—presumably through a network that incorporated his journalist mother. One thing led to another.

"They told me," Pérez said. "This was something quite known. It was no secret for anybody, except for me." It was not until some time later that his mother confirmed the account.

Some skeptics see the timing of the story as suspicious—as if it were planted to throw Pérez off. Either way, his first response was to forget about it. "Probably this was too much of a shock for me to have a conscious reaction," he said. Yet it was also because "at that time, I didn't have the patience to reflect on this."

Most of his energy was going into the new writers' organization, which bore the name *Paideia*, a Greek word meaning both education and culture. Its members had some edgy ideas on how to open the Cuban art and literary scene while protecting its left-wing roots. They discussed these ideas in a rarefied intellectual setting and eschewed the kind of urgent activism that young people elsewhere were embarking upon. While the *Paideia* members discussed European postmodernists and probed the theories of Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, Vaclav Havel's supporters were taking to the streets of Prague. Chinese students were occupying Tiananmen Square, and East Berliners were preparing to smash down the wall that divided their city. There was "a surrealism to this attitude," said French social commentator Jean-François Fogel in a posting to his Spanish-language blog on Latin American literature. "In an island wounded by the collapse of the Soviet camp, amid a daily life of total scarcity, these young Cubans thought the most urgent thing to debate was philosophy and art."

Still, if anyone was going to develop a more confrontational posture as *Paideia* found its activities more restricted, Omar Pérez was. "In his ways of interaction, either with the authorities or with us, Omar was the most radical of all of us," recalls his friend and fellow poet Rolando Prats-Paez. "I remember his impatience at what he perceived as an excess of diplomacy and his patronizing disdain . . . for anything he might have thought was too compromising or purely tactical."

Readers will find similarities between this character description and the feisty demeanor of Pérez's putative father. But Prats-Paez cautions against an after-the-fact reading that attributes too much biological determination to the young poet's personality traits. He and others from the group were suspicious of the timing of the son-of-Che story, which disrupted their movement and put their charismatic colleague in a difficult position. Pérez would never be the same. "True or false, this story made Omar a hostage to a symbolic identity he had already carved for himself," Prats-Paez said. "Omar did not need to be the son of someone he already was in his own terms. Somebody else needed that. A castration took place: that of an individual and a whole generation who were embarked on writing their own history."

Whether genetically derived or otherwise, Pérez's defiance put him on a collision course with the Cuban state. In 1991, with Cuba's Soviet lifeline cut and its finances hitting rock bottom, he, Prats-Paez, and six others signed the Third Option manifesto—a title that seemed ahead of its time, as if borrowing from the future middle-ground terminology of Tony Blair and Bill Clinton. It offered a minimal program of political liberalization that respected the socialist foundations of the Cuban revolution, one described as a "democratic alternative" to U.S.-backed "neo-annexationist" free market solutions. This path, the authors argued, was the only guarantee of true "economic independence, political sovereignty, social justice, and human rights."

Even though it was packaged in this deliberately socialist framework, the Third Option manifesto prompted a swift backlash from the regime. At the Cuban Communist Party's national assembly three months after it was signed, a senior party member attacked the group's "petit bourgeois vision" and its "mediocre reading of history." A harsher crackdown was administered, causing some of its supporters to flee into foreign exile—they are spread around the world in places such as Mexico City, São Paulo,

Vancouver, Barcelona, and Miami—while a few of those who stayed ended up in jail.

The treatment meted out to Pérez, the most outspoken of the dissident group, seemed soft—at first. Whether his secret identity was a factor is not clear. Either way, his mother's lobbying paid off, as she obtained permission for her son to attend a studies program in Siena, Italy. (This was her last act of support. López had by then distanced herself from her son's controversial politics. They would not speak again for more than a decade.) Immediately upon return to Cuba, however, Omar Pérez was ordered to attend a labor camp in the province of Pinar del Río, where he spent a year picking tomatoes. The camp, nicknamed France, was modeled, as with others across the country, on one established on the Guanahacabibes Peninsula by industry minister Che Guevara in 1962. Founded on Che's plans to cultivate a revolutionary work ethic among ministry employees, that camp took in state functionaries and factory managers found "guilty of errors and transgressions committed in the performance of their duties."

Yes, Pérez acknowledges, it is ironic that Che's son spent time in a penal system he'd designed. But with characteristically philosophical insight, he adds, "What is irony in the end? Irony is a kind of sign which is hiding something. It is a kind of phony light which is telling you that behind this comicality of life, there is something to learn. It is not just mockery or ridiculousness. It is a sign."

For inmate Pérez, his detention was a sign to contemplate his parentage. And in that effort he found support from Hilda Guevara Gadea, the Mexican-born daughter from Che's first marriage, who was then working as a librarian at the Casa de Americas cultural center. Meeting Hilda "was the first time I had the opportunity to talk to somebody else who was also close to my father, and to talk about him as a person, not an icon," Pérez said. Hilda, as she was sometimes known, was the black sheep of

what might be described as the Cuban revolution's first family. When Hilda Gadea brought Che's three-year-old daughter to Havana, she was warmly welcomed by her now-famous father, whose letters to his eldest daughter reveal a genuine fondness. But after he died, relations with the Cuban side of the family broke down—partly, it seems, because of her maverick ways. She'd married a Mexican left-wing revolutionary and had spent a stint in Italy in the 1970s, exposing herself and her children to a world outside the protective bubble erected around her Cuban half siblings. Her eldest son, Canek Sánchez, became a heavy-metal musician and is now active in Cuban exile politics in France.

The eldest of Che's children—she was eleven when he died—Hildita had a relatively well-formed memory of him, making her a valued source of information for Pérez. And as a kindred rebellious soul, she helped him struggle to find his place in the world. “She was a very unconventional person. She didn't want to be in any way whatsoever one of her father's representatives on earth . . . Of course, she cherished her father, but she was not very diplomatic about it,” Pérez told me.

Hilda also had a dark, self-destructive side: She was prone to heavy drinking and bouts of depression. And she kept a huge secret from Pérez: She had cancer. Three years after they met, a brain tumor killed her. “It was another one of those shocks,” he said. “You have time to rest for a while and ask yourself some questions before you rush off in a hurry on some kind of project or work or whatever. So she died, and I went on.”

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From there, Omar Pérez's personal journey would take him into Buddhism and eventually to what he now describes as a psychological kinship with his father. But he deliberately sought a low profile. Luckily, he lived in Cuba. Only in a place with a heavily

muzzled press would a juicy story like this one stay untouched by probing journalists. His name briefly appears in a couple of the more thorough Che Guevara biographies, but it is absent from most. He has a single-line reference in Wikipedia's online Che entry, and a few anti-Castro websites have talked up the story of Che's illegitimate son doing time in one of his father's prisons. Apart from these few references, though, Omar Pérez is off the Che radar screen.

Yet he has also lived a separate public life. Both his well-regarded poetry and his work as a translator have attained him a status in literary circles at home and abroad. Essays and articles by and about him have been published in different languages, along with interviews in which he talks about poetry and philosophy. Pérez, who is fluent in English, French, Dutch, and Italian, has spoken and read his Zen-inspired work at conferences, met foreign publishers, and has lived for some time in Italy and Holland. In all these settings, the question of his parentage rarely comes up.

Pérez's decision to isolate his Che connection from the rest of his life allowed him to create his own independent intellectual space in a way that Aleida March's children never could. “I had a chance to live a, so to speak, normal life. And I think this is ideally what my father wanted for his children,” he told me during our first meeting.

Che's other offspring, those officially recognized as such, share the same intelligence and quick wit. But although they grew up with privileges and protection, their identities were subsumed in the Che myth. Forever associated with official representations of their father as a loving family man, the Guevara March children were roped into Cuba's public construction of the Che myth. And this continued into adulthood. The two eldest children, Aleida and Camilo, frequently attend official events around the world in their capacity as “Los hijos de Che.” To some, they are noble

guardians of their father's legacy, spreading the word of his great deeds while taking on greedy capitalists who exploit his image. To others, they are opportunists living off his name. Neither label is fair. It's easy to forget that the Guevara March children are forced to share their father with millions of people.

When I met Aleida Guevara, a trained medical doctor and the family's *de facto* spokesperson, she shared intimate memories of her father and spoke thoughtfully about the challenges of living in his shadow. But when I asked whether the family would ever recognize Omar Pérez, her tone changed to one of contempt. "The first thing is that my father was totally respectful of all of his children, always. He never had relations with anybody else, ever," she said. "Second, he loved my mother so very much and did not even marry her until he had a legal divorce from his first wife, Hilda Gadea. So how could he have an adventure with another woman and have a child? It is the most enormous of stupidities!"

Then, shifting gears again, she adopted a more sympathetic, if still patronizing, tone toward Pérez. "Look, he had problems with the military service and his mother made up this issue to get him out of it, but they left it at that. They didn't say anything more about it and the poor man has had all those doubts in his head . . . We told him that if he wants, he could have a DNA study, and we would not have difficulty with this. [But] he did not respond."

When I relayed this to Pérez, he was shocked. He claimed he'd never before received a single communication from the Guevara family on any matter, let alone an invitation to have a DNA test. He had no idea what to make of this apparent highly belated offer directed through an unconnected third party—one that will of course have to be taken up eventually if this question is ever to be settled. But he had a sharp rejoinder to his supposed sister's claim about his motivation: "Does she think we could just make it up in front of the secret police and get away with it? Does she

think they would believe me? As if to say, I'm the son of Che Guevara, and they would say, oh, really, okay, well, we'll let you go, then." He laughed. "Why don't you try that sometime? Maybe you could say you are the son of a Kennedy. Maybe that will get you something. Give it a go."

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Pérez has no desire to get into a public fight with his supposed siblings. Rather, he'd prefer to be left in peace to explore his connections to Che as part of his religious pursuits. In the mid-1990s, in the aftermath of his political problems and as he was still coming to terms with his identity, Pérez met a Che Guevara–admiring French monk who converted him to Zen Buddhism. (Monk Kosen Thibaut, a.k.a. Stéphane Thibaut, had just published a book, *Inner Revolution*, whose cover superimposed the image of a meditating monk with that of Korda's Che.) From there, aided by the analytical and meditative tools afforded by this religion, he began to develop a unique perspective on the legacy of the man he believes to be his father. The value of the ideas he has since developed lies in the focus they give to the spiritual dimension of the Che phenomenon and its interplay with the real flesh-and-blood human being behind it. That in turn provides a framework for understanding different aspects of that phenomenon, whether it is the idealism conveyed by the Korda image's use as a political banner or the force of collective human behavior that keeps the icon in public view and turns it into a recurring fashion trend. With Pérez's perspective on the icon, we find the *idea* and the *image* of Che merged into a force that relates to a deep human longing, a desire to be something that this man, this face, represents.

Pérez believes Che was searching for a nirvana-like spiritual essence during his final guerrilla campaigns, an idea he explained by posing a question about human attachment to material exist-