

# ANNA VELTFORT'S *GOODBYE, MY HAVANA*: A Saga of History, Idealism, and Undying Love

Linda Gao

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**Book Information:** Goodbye, My Havana: The Life and Times of a Gringa in Revolutionary Cuba, *Anna Veltfort, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019 Oct. 8, 240 Pages.*

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Anna Veltfort—or “Connie”—was a sixteen-year-old teenager when her stepfather Ted, a committed American communist and a zealous admirer of the Cuban revolution, brought her entire family to Cuba in 1962. This was the second time for Veltfort to live in a foreign country—ten years before, she and her mother Lenore left their native Germany, ruined by the cruelty of war, and entered the United States to seek a new life. A German American “gringa”, Veltfort became an outsider in Cuba who struggled to adapt to a new language, a new culture, and a new way of life. She also started to explore her sexual orientation, a newfound attraction to women, which violated the norm dictated by the revolutionary government.

Forty years later, Veltfort transcribed her experience in Cuba into *Goodbye, My Havana*, an autobiographical memoir in the format of a graphic novel. The graphic memoir can be seen as a *bildungsroman*—a genre that shows the psychological growth of the protagonist from youth to adulthood—as it reveals Veltfort’s daily life in Cuba, her romantic relationships, as well as her youthful exploration of life and her inner self. The book also sheds light on crucial historical events in that era, such as the state’s oppression of the LGBTQ community, and its cultural purges; the impact of both permeate Connie’s everyday life. An autobiographical microhistory, *Goodbye, My Havana* tells a story of disillusionment, salutes the power of the arts and love, and shows a historical consciousness that acknowledges the complexities of history and the significance of memories.

This book serves as a microhistory that looks into post-revolutionary Cuba through an individual’s lens; Connie’s personal life interacts and intersects with broader historical movements, suggesting a theme of a national disillusionment that manifests at the individual level. Microhistory is a genre of history-writing that focuses on the life of an individual or a small community whose experience is reflective of a larger historical context. Connie’s perspective, seeing through the rhetoric of utopia, reveals a dystopian reality of wealth disparity and social injustice. As westerners, Connie and her family enjoy a privileged life in Cuba, with special rations and access to luxurious hotels and clubs, from which the Cubans are strictly excluded.<sup>1</sup> The social life at the paradisaical seaside Sierra Maestra hotel, with an enormous swimming pool and soft white sand, almost mirrors the opening scene of Mikhail Kalatozov’s film *I Am Cuba*, where the western tourists enjoy an extravagant life that clashes aesthetically with the poverty and harshness endured by the Cuban communities.<sup>2</sup> Coincidentally enough, Connie has been invited to play a rich, pre-revolutionary western tourist in this “deliciously extravagant, weird, historic film.”<sup>3</sup> Connie’s first discovery of the reality for poor Cubans takes place when she visits the

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<sup>1</sup> Veltfort, *Goodbye, My Havana: The Life and Times of a Gringa in Revolutionary Cuba* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), 35, 42, 75.

<sup>2</sup> Mikhail Kalatozov, *I Am Cuba*.

<sup>3</sup> Veltfort, *Goodbye, My Havana*, 45.

family of Maritza, her first girlfriend. The western *técnicos* and diplomats at the beach, like Connie's family, are de facto "revolutionary tourists" who substitute the pre-revolutionary vacationers with a different name; the social gap remains intact, even though the revolution is claimed to have healed it.

Connie's exploration of her adolescence and sexual orientation coincides with the state's homophobic suppression, resulting in a disillusionment that contests the revolutionary promises of freedom and human dignity. Beginning with the Great Purges of 1965, "counterrevolutionaries" and homosexuals are put into public trial and humiliation at Veltfort's university. The press constantly spouts homophobic sentiments that demean the LGBTQ community—or simply any group divergent from the "heroic guerrillero" aesthetic—as "the scum of society."<sup>4</sup> Military Units to Aid Production (UMAP) are built: they are agricultural labor camps where these "perverts and deviants," including Connie's college friend Gustavo Ventoso, are put into forced labor to be "re-educated". On the same page with UMAP are newspaper headlines on the "Tricontinental Conference of African, Asian, and Latin American Peoples," which portrays Cuba as the helm of the world's anti-colonial movement with Castro as its heroic leader.<sup>5</sup> The juxtaposition of the two events produces a bitter irony that creates an almost surrealist disillusionment. Later, Connie and her second girlfriend, Martugenia, are assaulted on the street, but are then accused of homosexuality by the attackers. They go through a humiliating public trial and become pariahs at the university. As the state's homophobia aggravates, the influence of politics on the individual's life becomes increasingly inexorable, which ultimately culminates in Connie's departure from Cuba. This tragic farce of homophobia contests Guevara's famous statement in his speech "Socialism and Man in Cuba" (a speech that is also cited by Veltfort's book on page 65): "the true revolutionary is guided by great feelings of love."<sup>6</sup>

Veltfort's microhistory pays generous attention to the social and cultural aspects of life, where culture and the arts are rendered as retreats from and weapons against disillusioned reality and suffocating totalitarianism. The book gives the reader a holistic tour of popular music and films during the period that have enriched the youths' lives—from the Beatles to Bob Dylan, from *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), *Modern Times* (1936), and *Ivan the Terrible* (1944) to *M.A.S.H.* (1970). Veltfort depicts with great passion the Salón de Mayo, which takes place during an ephemeral moment of freedom and openness, as well as Allen Ginsberg's visit to Cuba, where he introduces her to Bob Dylan. Veltfort then records Cuba's denouncement of Pablo Neruda, the suppression of the 1961 film *P.M.* (for containing "no heroic milicianos in their uniforms defending the fatherland"), and the arrest of the Cuban poet Heberto Juan Padilla.<sup>7</sup> Yet a significant moment is when a Mongolian student secretly asks Connie if she remembers the full lyrics of "San Francisco" and "Yellow Submarine," a transient episode that only occupies a single page, but nevertheless shows the spirit of freedom inherent in music and the arts, with which Veltfort piously identifies. For the young people, culture and the arts are powerful channels for expressing themselves and keeping their ideals alive, even against government suppression.

Veltfort's book, in the format of a graphic novel, inherits this expressive power of art. While other works of history are solemn and black-and-white, Veltfort's delicate drawings, brilliantly colored and layered with details, present an immersive

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<sup>4</sup> Veltfort, *Goodbye, My Havana*, 70.

<sup>5</sup> Veltfort, *Goodbye, My Havana*, 84-85.

<sup>6</sup> David Deutschmann, *Che Guevara Reader: Writings on Politics & Revolution* (Melbourne: Ocean Press, 2003), 225-226.

<sup>7</sup> Veltfort, *Goodbye, My Havana*, 160.

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experience of the post-revolutionary Havana that is vivid and alive. Veltfort explores the expressionistic capacity of color: drawings that depict the family's five desperate months stuck in Mexico are permeated with gloomy blue, while the scenes of Connie and Martugenia being beaten on the street and interrogated by the police are overwhelmed by red, which expresses emergency and fear, as well as an unspoken anger.

Besides the extraordinary artistic quality, Veltfort's work exemplifies historical accuracy by weaving various real primary sources into the narrative. Veltfort incorporates into her drawings copies of newspaper headlines, posters, magazine covers, photos, and other materials, including an actual Court Summon that has her real name "Anna Veltfort" on it. These inserted sources not only show a detailed authenticity of the work, but also remind the reader of a larger historical process in which individual lives are embedded. At the end of the book there is a detailed "Notes & Sources" section, where Veltfort identifies each of her sources. In her "Acknowledgements," she elaborates on other sources she relies on: photos of the city obtained from Cuban friends as background references, Marta Eugenia Rodríguez (Martugenia)'s detailed diary and official report during their time in the Sierra Maestra mountains, and Martugenia's confirmations and corrections of anecdotes narrated by Veltfort—a rigorous process of history-writing.

In fact, Veltfort has been keeping an internet archival collection since 2007, called "Cuba: Connie's Archive," where she stores documents, newspapers, music, poetry, literature, graphic arts, proclamations, and other traces of the era, all of which are ephemera of her Cuban life.<sup>8</sup> While the story-teller is transformed into a historian, the nature of her narration is also twofold: it is both a work of history and a primary source, like an oral history record. The Wikipedia entry on "Ideological Diversionism" cites Connie's archival collection and her story as testimony: "as the personal case of Anna Veltfort, an art history student at University of Havana bears witness to it."<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Connie's story is cited as a trust-worthy primary source in the scholarly work *Visions of Power in Cuba*, which also gives credit to her archive by citing the "personal collection of Anna Cornelia Veltfort."<sup>10</sup> Connie's legend fully reveals the charming power of historiography: A witness and participant from her time becomes a historian in her effort to tell a story. This process demonstrates a historical consciousness—by contributing individual memories to the universal knowledge, Veltfort actively shapes the process of history-writing.

Veltfort presents a story that acknowledges the complexities of history. After arriving in Havana, she soon comes to realize that even within a small leftist group there can be many divisions (Stalinist, Trotskyites, Maoist, etc.), and that there are many versions of narratives that create different meanings out of the same revolution. When she is asked by the Americans about the lives of gay people in Cuba and the oppression they faced, she finds it difficult to explain and replies: "Cuba isn't monolithic. The country's really a collection of fiefdoms—some more tolerant, some more repressive."<sup>11</sup> Her story reveals the many faces of her Cuban years without reducing it to a monolithic judgement. The spirited youths, lively music, colorful puppet shows during rural projects, and witted tricks all testify to the richness, optimism and vitality of their lives even when facing the starkest disillusionment. By recording even the most seemingly-irrelevant details, such as making a condom

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<sup>8</sup> Anna Veltfort, *Cuba: el archivo de Connie*.

<sup>9</sup> "Ideological Diversionism," *Wikipedia*, accessed February 27, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Lilian Guerra, *Visions of Power in Cuba: Revolution, Redemption, and Resistance, 1959-1971* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 415.

<sup>11</sup> Veltfort, *Goodbye, My Havana*, 180.

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Christmas tree that shocks the school, Veltfort stubbornly refuses absorption into a singular narrative of victimhood that denies the warmth and joy of the past. Just like what she says in “Epilogue”:

My love for Cuba, for my friends there, and for the aching beauty of Havana, never wavered, despite the decay and disillusionment of the ensuing years.<sup>12</sup>

A totalitarian regime is powerless to destroy ideals rooted in people’s minds and the inextinguishable pursuits of joy and happiness. In this sense, *Goodbye, My Havana* no longer operates as a simple historical account of a specific time and space, but as a literary artwork, it serves as a testimony to our universal capacities. Anna Veltfort, the bard-like narrator of this revolutionary saga, shows the ultimate beauty of friendship, humor, art, and love—more long-lasting than violence and fear.

The book’s documentary detailedness and expressive ability demonstrates the power of story-telling, the power of creating narratives against oblivion. On Veltfort’s internet archive, she tells us the purpose of her work: “It has been my purpose to portray, from my perspective and personal experience... a reality erased and forgotten for many.”<sup>13</sup> The goal is to keep memories of the past alive, because securing our memories is the best weapon against a totalitarian regime—which uses oblivion as a machine to rule—and to secure our own humanity. The hope, as opposed to the disillusionment that shivers throughout the story, lies in the conviction that memories and narratives have an inherent power of their own. *Goodbye, My Havana* is ultimately an individual’s tale against disillusionment and oblivion, and a salute to the highest beauty of memories, freedom, and love.

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<sup>12</sup> Veltfort, *Goodbye, My Havana*, 215.

<sup>13</sup> Anna Veltfort, “Adiós mi Habana: Un comic autobiográfico de Anna Veltfort,” *Cuba: el archivo de Connie*, July 20, 2017.

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- . *Cuba: el archivo de Connie*.
- . *Goodbye, My Havana: The Life and Times of a Gringa in Revolutionary Cuba*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019.

### Appendix: A Macro- and Micro-history

- 1962 Feb. Connie’s Family arrived in Cuba
- 1962 Oct. The Cuban Missile Crisis
- 1962 Oct. Police crackdown on homosexuals, prostitutes, and pimps
- 1964 *I Am Cuba* was made
- 1965 The Great Purges of 1965
- 1965 Allen Ginsberg visits Cuba
- 1965 UMAP was established
- 1966 Jan. The Tri-continental Conference of African, Asian, and Latin American Peoples
- 1966 July Cuban government denounced Pablo Neruda
- 1967 Mar. Social Research projects in the countryside, “Facing the Country”
- 1967 Sep. Connie and Martugenia were beaten, interrogated, and trialed
- 1968 The “Year of the Heroic Guerrillero”
- 1968 Arrest and Trial of “The Microfraction”; Ted lost his job
- 1968 Mar. The Revolutionary Offensive, campaigns that obliterated Havana nightlife  
“We Must Be Like Che”
- 1968 Aug. Soviet Union’s invasion of Czechoslovakia; Castro stood with SU
- 1968 Sep. Operation Hippie
- 1969 UMAP dismantled, due to foreign pressure
- 1970 The 10-million-ton sugar harvest was officially denounced as a failure
- 1971 Mar. Heberto Padilla was arrested and jailed
- 1971 Apr. First Congress of Education & Culture
- 1971 The Cultural Purges of 1971
- 1972 Connie left Cuba