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CUBA DOESN'T WANT CENSORSHIP

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NO CENS

At times you may have wondered how censorship in Cuba works. One would expect that the government that has been so successful in using fear as a weapon also knows how to employ censorship, which causes less damage, anyway, now matter how elaborate it is. Every time the culture of a country becomes a product of politics, civil society runs a serious risk. Censorship, like fear, always has the power to deform people.

In this issue of our newsletter we wanted to bring some examples of how censorship can become a crucial force in dismantling a nation – forcing people who want to live true to themselves and create freely to do it on the sly while making other people escape and, finally, coercing the rest to accept the rules of the game and forget the need to fight for what they believe in.

Orlando Luis Pardo Lazo tells us a fascinating story about hidden censorship in Cuba, Francis Sanchez reveals how he managed to prevent censorship from killing his soul and Lia Villares shows us a photo explaining how censorship sometimes depends on the decision of one person only and how it hardly exists for the privileged few who are in agreement with the political elite. Last but not least, the interview with Anyer Blanco may make us aware of yet another form of censorship - that of seriously attacking someone's soul by forcing the person to do military service.

On the following pages you will find a lot of talk about the human soul, which,

Agnes K

DRIAL

CENSORSHIP

as it is, may be the most vulnerable thing in Cuba these days. The soul represents the essence of the man, it represents our principles, our ideals and our need to create, our need for fulfilment. Yet, many Cubans who have been trapped in the vicious cycle of fighting for survival have suffered irreparable damage to their souls. It could be that the only thing that is actually censored in Cuba is the human soul.

In recent years we have seen many changes in Cuba, mostly in the field of economic development. We have also seen a steep rise of social inequality, which, however, has not been accompanied by expansion of individual freedoms. Cuba may neither be the paradise some people dream about nor the hell others believe it to be, but one thing cannot be denied: it does have censorship. However, even in case of a democratic change, nobody will be spared from it. There are many examples showing that democracy doesn't destroy censorship, it only transforms it. We all face the risk of being censored.

Members of the Cuban opposition usually appeal to travellers visiting Cuba not to look at the island through the glasses of a tourist but try and see the reality of the country. In this issue of our magazine, we want to challenge you to throw away the glasses of a tourist as well as everything you have learned about Cuba so far... Forget about compassion, condescension, Revolution, USA... NO CENSORSHIP.

Koleman

CENSORSHIP WITHOUT CENSORING

Orlando Luis Pardo Lazo

A story about the cuban writer
Jorge Alberto Aguiar Díaz and
his book Adiós a las almas.

2003 was a deadly year for Cuba. In March, the government declared an open war on the citizens. In less than a few hours, the Police arrested over a hundred peaceful dissidents and independent journalists from all across the island. Although the international press nicknamed the most notable of the arrested men and women as the “Group of 75”, there were many others who had been repressed months before (and also after) the event that has come to be known as the “Black Spring”.

Jorge Alberto Aguiar Diaz was 36 at that time and was selling books in the Centro Habana district. He had an honourable amount of books and as a post-Deleuzian idealist, he offered free literary workshops, which he called “labs”, or “clinics of writing”. He was known as JAAD (the acronym of his name) and had a large, enthusiastic fan club, to which I also belonged. We were his audience and we sometimes seemed to look at him as a kind of a generational guru. And he was one, in fact: it was as if he were a cross-breed of Charles Bukowski and Roberto Arlt, embodying the angry desires of the former with the neurotic touch of the latter.

I was his favourite pupil (or perhaps, the bad one). In fact, JAAD's words gave us freedom within the increasingly prison-like, funereal atmosphere of Havana. JAAD wrote opinion columns for the dissident newspaper agency known as Decoro. That's why his home was frequently visited by the State Security. There were always two of them, those secret little agents in plain clothes, coming

on a single Suzuki motorcycle. One of such visitors was the brother of a poetess exiled in the USA, who has recently become an academician. JAAD recognized him but preferred not to say anything (and I prefer to do the same now, for the very same reason).

At another battlefield, Iroel Sanchez, president of the Cuban Book Institute, was sitting on his Taliban throne. In 2001, JAAD won a short story award in the “Premio de Pinos Nuevos” literary contest with his book entitled “Adios a las almas” (Farewell to Souls). A part of the award was the publication of the book by the “Letras Cubanas” publishing house and indeed, the book came to be published in 2002. Apparently, the censorship in Cuba was gradually becoming skilled in the art of circumventing scandals, averting collateral damage and avoiding making more martyrs.

Yet, JAAD began to be subject to hidden pressures and blackmailing, both from the Ministry of the Interior (Political Police sponsored by the Castro clan) and from the Ministry of Culture (literary sergeants paid by Abel Prieto and Miguel Barnet). After all, “Adios a las almas” was introduced at the International Book Fair of Havana and it seemed that it started circulating. The book immediately became a best-seller, which was both unexpected and suspicious, considering the fact that there had been no official promotion campaign. In just a few weeks, the thousand copies that had been published disappeared from the shelves of Havana book stores and nobody heard about the book's sales volumes any more. Ahem...



JAAD's friends congratulated the author on his success, but he didn't celebrate. He had an intuition, which later proved prophetic. The thing is, State Security always carries out its operations in the realm of the invisible. It never shows its face. That's the sinister essence of any left-wing dictatorship. Also, JAAD couldn't forget how much he was pressed to stop publishing his critical pieces as a member of the Decoro group on the CubaNet website.

“Come immediately to this address. Bring money. It's in your interest.”

In 2004, after more than a few warnings and threats, he got a permission to travel to Spain on account of his being married to a Spanish woman. Before that he had been warned that he could be put to prison with the members of the Group of 75 on a charge of enemy propaganda. He had also been told that something unpleasant could happen to his closest family, including his daughter. The government wanted to get rid of his presence in Cuba and in the end, they succeeded.

Several hours before he was to board the plane, he got an anonymous phone call: “Come immediately to this address. Bring money. It's in your interest.”

JAAD, book and adventure trafficker, couldn't resist the temptation and went there. I'm his witness.

When he got to the address, he found a book distribution warehouse of a company belonging to the State book empire run by Iroel Sanchez. The man who was waiting for him was an old acquaintance of his from the Centro Havana district. He told JAAD: “You'd better sit down or you'll fall back.” (Actually, that's just my bad, self-censored transcription of what he really said, which was: “...you'll shit yourself with shock.”)

They entered the warehouse and in one of its large naves there were several metal containers, one of them padlocked. The boy took out a bunch of keys, chose one as if at random and opened the padlock. What JAAD saw inside was a kind of aleph – as if the whole, unique universe were condensed in a few square meters of the most populated neighbourhood of Havana.

Actually, the belly of the padlocked container was filled with an intact edition of the book “Adios a las almas”. The books were not only intact, they hadn't even been released to the public. In fact, the storybook was published only formally, to fool the public and it was withdrawn from circulation. That was the reason why the government spread rumours that “Adios a las almas” had become a best-seller and soon sold out.

The boy had strict orders to sort the books out with “damaged books” and turn them to pulp for recycling. What a perverse kind of palimpsest, what a crooked demonstration of tropical despotism of an obsolete regime, which despises any form of free Cuban culture. The boy had been postponing his destructive task on the

books for quite some time, but it was not for sympathy with the author. His hesitation had purely financial motives. I bet the boy had surely traded even with his soul, selling it to Death.

Now, this boy, this employee of Iroel Sanchez, asked JAAD for a dollar for each copy of the book he wanted to save. A difficult dilemma for a writer, indeed. How many books of his own could he save and how many can he bear to see crushed, without being able to do anything?

JAAD had saved a few euros for his journey – the currency was quite new in the island at that time, you wouldn't see it very often. So he bought almost half a thousand copies and paid the boy about 300 euros in total. He put the books in a box and carried them away to his flat on the second floor at the corner of San Miguel and Escobar streets.

He hardly managed to find a taxi and get to the airport on time. In Madrid airport, his recent wife was awaiting him (they aren't married any more). JAAD had left half of the copies of his only book (it still is), the worst-seller entitled “Adios a las almas”, in Havana. It seems that JAAD has always been between two waters, as if he were a Christ of totalitarian scams. Caught between carnal passion and passion for literature.

On the one hand there was the mendacious State ready to do something wicked, spending Cuban people's money on a futile endeavour of printing and recycling “questionable” books, without even bothering to present them to readers. On

the other hand there was the pleasure as a substitute of death and life in the truth: escaping from fossilized Fidel and pretending to be an intellectual, far away from the raw material he was made of – Havana.

Almost nobody in the world knows how the Cuban State recycles published books without even releasing them. I'd like to warn all famous Cuban writers not to be so confident about the sales of their books in the island. Leonardo Padura and Pedro Juan Gutierrez, for instance, may also have been censored without censoring.

A decadent decade later, JAAD is still living in Spain, displaced and abandoned by the State and by God, suffering 1959 misfortunes without complaining. The storybook “Adios a las almas” is a rare and valuable thing that almost nobody has had the luck to get hold of. Hopefully we, Cuban readers both inside and outside Cuba, will bear in mind to save this author before it is too late. One euro per book will do.



Los escritores Jorge Alberto Aguiar Díaz (izquierda) y Orlando Luis Pardo Lazo
| Foto de Lia Villares |



CENSORSHIP IN ART



Lia Villares, CubaRaw

“When an independent gallery in Cuba (that is, one that runs independently from the State) decides to stage an exhibition, it is subject to censorship. On August 30 this year, we opened the first exhibition entitled *Vida plena, mente tropical* (“Fulfilling Life, Tropical Mind”) held by the CubaRaw independent photo agency in the El Circulo gallery house.

Gradually, we managed to print all photos – except one named *Montaña* (“Mountain”), which was part of the series entitled *Efecto de Halo* (“Halo Effect”) created by Luis Trapaga. It was rejected for being 'pornographic'.

It's certain that there does exist some kind of 'eroticism' in Cuba – commercial, intended for tourists, perfectly acceptable. Yet, if you want to print a large-size photo that you want to exhibit, you have to go to a State photo lab, whose manager decides if it's acceptable or not – that is, if it can be printed or not. The same applies to the Cuban flag: you can find it on bags, necklaces, bracelets, sweaters, etc., but if you want to use it in a slightly more symbolic way, you are entirely dependent on the opinion of the manager of a photo lab.”

Interestingly, managers of such establishments are members of the Army. The reason is that everything related to printing and unofficial publications is very sensitive with regard to propaganda. Thus it happens that the military officer operating the printer actually decides what is art, what is pornography, what is subversive, what is politically correct and what isn't. How intriguing! I doubt that the subject of “Art Assessment” forms part of the academic standard at military schools.

Yet, if you visit the Havana Biennial exhibition, you will be able to see extremely subversive and aggressive things and shocking images that can only be exhibited because the artists who created the works have the approval of the government. So, if you are backed by the government, you don't have to worry about censorship.”

Montaña (Mountain) by Luis Trapaga, (last picture in the series, bottom right)



Anyer Blanco

by Agnes Koleman



**“That Wasn't the Career I Had
Chosen”**

When he was jailed, Anyer Blanco was an 18-year-old student of music. Six years later, when he was leaving the prison, he was a dissident. He was put behind the bars for having deserted from the Active Military Service and he served the entire sentence, not a month less, as a result of showing sympathies for the opposition during his confinement. Perhaps his experience may help us gain a greater understanding of the way how the military service in Cuba works, an issue people don't really talk about.

You were put to jail because you refused to do the compulsory military service. Such cases are not very common in Cuba. Do you think it's because young Cubans truly believe, as some government websites and Juventud Rebelde say, that “the Active Military Service in Cuba is both a legal obligation and a duty taken on with integrity and pride”? It's not a secret that young Cubans growing up in Cuba are forced to pass through this stage of their youth. The Active Military Service (El Servicio Militar Activo - SMA), which used to be called the Mandatory Military Service, is governed by a law requiring every Cuban, when he turns 18, to serve for two years in the Revolutionary Armed Forces (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias - FAR). Though the official press manipulates the information offered to the public, many young people don't even want to learn the truth. Young recruits (that's what the young men sent to the SMA are called) are treated as slaves, getting a monthly pay of 15 Cuban pesos (about 0.6 convertible pesos - CUC). But that's not everything. They are also subjected to insults, humiliation, unjust punishment and even to starvation. I don't think that any young Cuban would feel “proud”

under such circumstances, as the Juventud Rebelde newspaper maintains.

Why did you refuse to do the military service? I graduated as a music teacher with specialization on Cuban music. In the first year of school they told us that we would not be recruited to the SMA but that we would do some kind of social service instead – it was supposed to be for 5 years and we were to serve in a place designated by the Ministry of Culture. However, before they assigned the place for me, I was forced to join the military service. And that's when all the humiliation, harassment, forced labour, and 15 Cuban pesos a month started. That wasn't the career I had chosen to pursue.

So they failed to give you the opportunity they promised, to do that alternative social service? On the website of the Ministry of Defence, the government declares that “Each male citizen must spend two years in the Active Military Service. The Ministry of the Revolutionary Armed Forces may decide that the service in the Army be substituted by alternative forms of service, provided that adequate military training of the man is guaranteed.” This seems to suggest that



one can choose between doing the military service or doing it... Precisely. I wasn't given the choice I had been promised. I don't agree that any country should have obligatory military service. In my opinion there are fair alternatives, such that give one freedom to join the Army or not. Moreover, in case of Cuba, the issue has a very perverse undertone because the government justifies the obligatoriness of the military service on the grounds that there are economic reasons and that the country needs to defend the Revolution (indeed, the same justification is given to almost any wrongdoing in Cuba). As you said, they are trying to present it not as an obligation but as a matter of pride.

What exactly were you accused of? How long did you stay in prison and why? I decided to run away from the military because I was sick of so much rottenness. Unfortunately, or perhaps rather due to my lack of experience and desperation, I took the AKM-47 rifle I was given when on guard duty. I was sentenced to 6 years in prison on charges of desertion and other military offences.

Did the fact that you were imprisoned have anything to do with your joining

the opposition? Yes. Behind the bars I met some prisoners of conscience from the Group of 75. One of them, Luis Enrique Ferrer Garcia, was the one who opened my eyes and made me see the reality of my country. I have already said on several occasions that he was the first teacher to give me lessons on freedom, democracy and human rights. He also put me in touch with his family, in particular with his brother Jose Daniel Ferrer Garcia, and with other members of the opposition we founded the Patriotic Union of Cuba (UNPACU).

What did the imprisonment mean for you? For me it was a time of inner growth. I dedicated the 6 years in prison to reading books, to overcoming my inner fears, strengthening my brave spirit, nurturing the desire to overcome all the obstacles and, most of all, I had time to think about my future. Let's say it was an acid test for me – my university of life.

Do you know any other young man who had problems for refusing to do military service as you did? I know many. Some try to feign pathological conditions, they injure themselves or seek any possible excuse to avoid the SMA. Others, when they are already in the

military units of the Revolutionary Armed Forces, commit some kind of misconduct, they make protests or simply cause some damage in order to be discharged as unfit. The problem is that many of them end up in military prisons. Moreover, they sometimes have problems to find work or continue their studies after they finish the military service.

Do you think that there is any possibility that the military service could soon cease to be mandatory in Cuba? I don't think the current regime will cancel the Active Military Service, because, as I have already told you, it's part of the regime's paraphernalia. Besides, it's a cheap source of labour for the government. On the other hand, I do believe in a change in Cuba, a change that will give rise to a democratic country where human rights are respected, including the right to refuse to do military service. It may take a long time, longer than we thought, but there are many of us who believe in such a change.

Name: Anyer Antonio Blanco Rodriguez

Date and place of birth: July 28, 1987, Santiago de Cuba.

Favourite meal: Paella with seafood. I love seafood. My daddy took me fishing along the coast of Santiago de Cuba since my early childhood and that's where my passion for this kind of food comes from.

Favourite book: El hombre mediocre (The Mediocre Man) by Jose Ingenieros. I like the philosophy of the author and the comparison he makes between mediocrity and genius.

Favourite film: A Most Wanted Man (2013). I like the way the scriptwriter plays with the script and the plot that shows you the real powers of the Police of one nation. Also, the film criticises the fact that the USA always has the final say on certain issues.

Favourite public figure: Hillary Clinton. I think it's a woman of great wisdom and suspiciousness.

Favourite city: Prague. For its metropolitan life and efficient, public transport free of exhaust gases.

Favourite quote: "No matter how powerful a dictator is, he's just a man. Don't be scared." by John Paul II.

SAVING OUR SOUL

Francis Sánchez

**How start fighting for freedom
every day from scratch**

At a time when the socialist bloc, or the “old world” as we now commonly call it, was collapsing, I used to stay up every night, listening to the news on international radio stations. I was so eager to hear about the events in the turbulent world and I felt so excited that, oblivious of time, I didn't even feel sleepy.

I wrote to my older brother, who studied at the Communist University in Moscow, and to my surprise, it was me who was bringing information about the latest events in the Eastern bloc countries to him, as if I was the one staying abroad. I even told him to buy some erotic calendars, which started to be sold in the streets of the Soviet capital – something I knew but he, no wonder, didn't.

The radio stations of the communist capitals axis (Radio Moscow, Radio Berlin and Radio Prague) were very much alike. They broadcast the same propaganda, usually with just fine nuances but sometimes, on the other hand, with significant differences arising from different national contexts, which aroused my curiosity. I enjoyed jumping from Radio France to Radio Netherlands and other stations on a Russian transistor radio of the brand Selena, which belonged to my father. In fact, that radio became the vehicle of my fantastic trips. I felt extremely excited when tuning radio stations, being free to select the one that I pleased but doing it almost secretly in order not to attract the attention of the

guards of the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution roaming the streets of the small town where I was living.

When the communist regimes of the Eastern bloc collapsed, people talked about a “domino effect” and Cuban expatriates all over the world were overflowing with optimism. But could this chain reaction travel across the vast ocean and reach our island? Common people living under the totalitarian regime in the interior of the island knew that it was almost impossible, they didn't believe that Cubans would form human waves and fill the streets just as the people in Eastern Europe did. Our situation was different and one of the reasons why it was different was the lack of connection with the rest of the world – even a remote one. Moreover, we lacked connection with one another, at least minimum one. A paralysed mass sweating with fear, we didn't know how and we simply couldn't go with the flow of history.

The disappearance of the socialist bloc did have a direct impact on Cubans, but a different one. Masses did rise up, but only to try to flee the country as quickly as possible, putting out to sea on their rafts in an attempt to escape the hunger and scarcity resulting from tying off of the umbilical cord with Moscow. The era is now known as the Rafters Crisis.

I have participated in a good many of projects to leave the island on a raft – with my cousins or with strangers. Yet, for some reason I always ended up staying in the island. It was a race against



time. I got married in 1994 and both me and my wife knew that the promise of freedom was short-lived, that it was necessary to seize the moment and fight for it on an individual basis and that it would involve some risks; it was clear to us that soon it would be too late to chase the dream. We were trying to do our best

**“In the
circumstances of our
lives, I try my best to
stay true to myself,
to be myself, no
matter what
happens”**

until the very last chance we got. Then the doctor confirmed that my wife was expecting our first child and that was it for us. We realized that we had no right to risk our baby's life and we knew that we would never betray the little one by leaving him or her in the island. That's why we abandoned the plan of fleeing from the island and turned our backs to the sea.

I still feel that if I had left on one of those rafts, a wide range of possibilities would have opened up for me: what could I have done if I had managed to escape on time? What would my life look like? That's

something I'll never know. To tell the truth, neither the process of adaptation to the life in the island nor any of the things I have done since then are something I would be proud of. I have spent my life waiting without hope, as most Cubans have. Being unable to achieve my individual and civil freedom in a system that thwarts any demonstration of personal fulfilment and creativity other than that which fits the tight political mould, my inner compass kept guiding me to another kind of freedom: the spiritual one. The subjective sense of conquest it gives me has perhaps been the best promised land I could have ever reached.

One thing has always been clear to me with regard to dirty politics and thought police in a totalitarian regime: I knew that they want to deprive me of my soul and my personality. In an analysis of a Bolshevik soldier who drove out the Nazis, Sandor Marai discovers that there is an interest greater than a mere confiscation of material things: “They wanted to take everything we had and not only that, they wanted to take away our souls.” For this reason, in the circumstances of our lives, I try my best to stay true to myself, to be myself, no matter what happens. It's the best way of achieving freedom on a daily basis. It allows one to live to the fullest in the small crevices of one's private life within the hardened society.

I have found such crevices of life in poetry, in its language and the space it provides. I have published books,



The artist Francis Sanchez
| Photo courtesy of the author |

sometimes they have been censored, but still, I feel that my pain isn't so big as that of others, for example of a friend of mine, who was sacrificed – his colleagues denounced him for being a member of the Secret Police after he had come up with some schemes against one of my texts. He suffered an emotional collapse and within a few days he had a heart attack. I think of him as a victim – and perhaps they had indeed robbed him of his soul.

In general, I would say that Cuban culture as part of a reality distorted by lies and pretence suffers from lack of conscience. People are trying to do their best to cope with the difficulties, to survive. They keep living with their masks on, both in the island and in exile. As for me, I've decided to maintain a free will and consciousness, not to allow fear to paralyse or deform me.

Recently I've come across a shop offering a short-wave radio. Full of excitement, I immediately bought it, hoping that it would provide an alternative information channel making up for the lack of the Internet. Such radios haven't been available in Cuba since the fall of the Berlin Wall and I have even heard that home appliance repair shops had been ordered to stop people from using these appliances. Imagine my frustration when I discovered that most of the radio stations I used to listen to can no longer be tuned here; they have moved their broadcasting to the Internet, satellites, mobile applications, etc. Tonight I heard that even the Spanish Radio Exterior will not be available any more – I mean that we, the Cubans, will not be able to tune it from next month onwards.

Shipwrecked on dry land, I have been trying to figure out what I am supposed to tune up and what kind of cosmic vibrations I should stay connected with. I start fighting for my freedom every day from scratch.





Visual Poem by Francis Sánchez





HUMAN RIGHTS

On October 15 this year, the rapper known as El Critico (The Critic) was sentenced to 6 years in prison

From time to time, censorship in Cuba claims a victim, as in the case of Angel Yunier Remon Arzuaga, musician from Bayamo known under the name of “El Critico” (the Critic), member of the rap duo “Los hijos que nadie quiso” (The children whom nobody wanted).

El Critico has paid a high price for exercising freedom of expression through his songs. In March 2013 he was brutally arrested after various “acts of repudiation” perpetuated in the course of several days. For what? Just for speaking to a group of people outside his house about the need for a political change in Cuba. He was accused of an alleged crime against State Security and had been detained in custody until the trial, which took place on October 15, 2014. The court sentenced El Critico to six years in prison. His crime? Making songs against the government. The artist himself gives the best explanation in one of his songs – Mi delito (My Crime) (EL PRIMARIO y JULITO feat. LOS HIJOS QUE NADIE QUISO):

“Yo no inventé lo de los actos de repudio/ yo no hundí el remolcador 13 de marzo/ yo no fui el que asesinó a Boitel/ yo no soy el culpable del Mariel/yo no reprimo al que piense diferente/ yo no tranquilé a 75 inocentes/ mira cuantos delitos en la gaveta tú has guardao/ este sí es mi delito/ hablar de lo que tú no has hablao”

“I did not invent the acts of repudiation / I did not sink the tug on March 13th / I was not the one who killed Boitel / I am not guilty for Mariel / I do not repress those who think differently / I did not lock up 75 innocent people / Look how many offenses you have kept hidden under lock and key/ Yes this is my crime /To talk about what you have not”

For more information on the situation of human rights in Cuba, visit www.eyeoncuba.com



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