

ICWA LETTERS

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BPE-19
THE AMERICAS

Paige Evans is an Institute Fellow looking at Cuba through the lens of its performing arts.

Differing Views

HAVANA, Cuba

August, 1999

By Paige Evans

July 26th, the 46th anniversary of Castro's rebel attack on the Moncada army barracks, also marked the three-week anniversary of my arrival in Cuba. That afternoon, a white-haired Cuban-American named Tony stopped by my Havana home in a taxi. I'd only known Tony for ten days. Though we disagreed vehemently about many things, a sympathetic bond had developed between us. We were, after all, both U.S. citizens in Cuba.

Earlier, when the cash I'd brought to Cuba began to run dangerously low, I phoned Tony — the friend of an American I'd met *en route* to Havana — to ask if he'd bring me money when he came to Havana. Tony understood the complicated logistics between the U.S. and Cuba (everyday transactions like international money transfers don't exist between the neighboring enemy nations) and stowed the cash in his underwear as he traveled via Canada, thus ensuring its safe arrival in Havana.

Rafael, a sweet-tempered Cuban, was in the cab that day with Tony. We went first in search of a good cigar, stopping at international hotels (the only places open over the holiday) until Tony found something to satisfy his nicotine craving.

We then made our way to the home of Sylvia, who ran a state-owned publishing house and was working illegally for Tony, editing a collection of articles about Cuba. In her youth, Sylvia was an ardent Revolutionary; decades later, she was still a loyal Communist Party member. Anyone in her position of authority had to be.

Though divorced, Sylvia was still living with her ex-husband, as neither of them had anywhere else to go. This situation, though uncomfortable, is not uncommon in Cuba, a country with an exceptionally high divorce rate and severe housing shortages.

Sylvia offered us coffee and lemonade. I asked for milk in my coffee; when Sylvia exited to the kitchen, Tony reprimanded me for it. He told me milk's costly in Cuba and most people don't have it. Chagrined, I trailed Sylvia into the kitchen and told her I wanted lemonade instead.

After we finished our drinks, Sylvia's driver escorted us to the nearby home of Roberto, one of the journalists Sylvia had commissioned to write articles for Tony's book. Roberto's wife, Juanita, rushed to turn on fans as we arrived. It was excruciatingly hot in the living room, and the fans offered scant relief. Two other commissioned authors were also there: Carolina, a chain smoker with thinning hair and a disarming scowl; and Marco, an attractive younger man with an intense gaze. All three writers work for the

state-run newspaper, "*Granma*," where Marco is Roberto and Carolina's boss.

* * *

The air in Roberto's living room was thick with tension as Tony opened the meeting. Tony introduced himself, Rafael and me; then he explained his own close relationship with Cuba and made a few jokes to warm things up. The writers remained silent and guarded. None of them laughed. At Sylvia's suggestion, Tony hadn't yet paid them for their work: she believed they wouldn't follow through on rewrites if paid in advance. I wondered whether this lack of pay might account for the writers' distance and reserve.

After the preliminaries, Tony critiqued Roberto's article on Cuban architecture. He praised Roberto's treatment of Cuba's architectural history but questioned why he didn't discuss current developments or project into the future. In response, Roberto growled: "What future?" Tony argued that things in Cuba seemed to be changing, that money was starting to come in; and Roberto rebutted: "You have to live in Cuba to understand pessimism." Tony countered that he understood well the difficulties in Cuba and might entitle his book "*No Es Facil*," or "It Is Not Easy" — a common Cuban refrain.

The conversation then turned to Roberto's article on sports. Roberto believed that Cuban sports had become overly politicized. Castro — a die-hard sports fan — has invested huge resources over the years into training athletes. Cuban athletes have fared well around the world, and the government lauds sports as one of the great successes of the Revolution. But as a matter of principle, the Communists refuse to remunerate athletes with increased salaries, offering them other perks instead, like cars and spacious apartments. This has caused mounting discontent among Cuba's athletes, who witness the mountains of money sports figures earn around the world and demand similar bounties for themselves. Many fine Cuban athletes have consequently defected to countries that allow them greater mobility and financial gain.

When Tony critiqued Carolina's article on Cuban literature, calling it overly broad, Carolina argued it was impossible to do the topic justice when she couldn't discuss certain key literary figures for fear of governmental recrimination: "Many major Cuban writers are not mentioned here. In the eyes of the government, they do not exist. Like Guillermo Cabrera Infante, one of our most important writers. After he left the country, he wrote a book criticizing Cuba. So he no longer exists. Or Zoe Valdes, who is living in France. Her books are very popular all over the world, but they are not sold in her native Cuba. If I mention these authors in an article, I could lose my job."

Carolina spoke with mounting urgency, stabbing the

air with her filterless cigarette for emphasis. "In an article on Cuban music, I cannot mention Celia Cruz or many other key figures. I must pretend they do not exist! Tell me. How can I write an article on Cuban music without mentioning the legendary Celia Cruz? How can I write an article on Cuban cinema without mentioning Tomas Guterrez Alea, whose film *GUANTANAMERA* the man with the beard publicly denounced?!"

I quietly asked Rafael whether Alea's films were produced by Cuba's state-run movie company. He nodded, explaining that filmmakers and musicians have generally been allowed freer reign in their criticism than journalists and other writers.

"Counter-Revolutionary" writers like Zoe Valdes and Guillermo Cabrera Infante no longer exist in the eyes of Cuba's totalitarian government, and their works cannot be officially mentioned or marketed. Like so much else, though, the works of these and other banned artists are available on Cuba's thriving black market. Pirated videotapes of Alea's films can be bought or rented from small-scale, private entrepreneurs; and Zoe Valdes' books, brought into the country by visitors from abroad, are widely circulated.

Marco spoke up for the first time. He described "*Granma's*" editorial meetings, where subjects and points of view for upcoming articles are dictated at the start of each week. Roberto interjected: "'*Granma*' does not publish articles *about* the U.S., it publishes articles *against* the U.S." As Marco explained it, "*Granma's*" editors and writers understand what subjects and perspectives are permissible, and they tailor their articles accordingly. Juanita, emerging from the kitchen carrying a tray of syrupy black coffee in demitasse cups, said they practiced "auto-censorship." The writers joked about calling this "journalism."

By now, the meeting's atmosphere had warmed up significantly. Only Sylvia remained silent; she was clearly uncomfortable with the turn the conversation had taken. Rafael whispered to me: "This is a difficult position for Sylvia to be in. She works in an official capacity and cannot be openly critical of the government. She must be perceived as very loyal to the Party. And she is the one who called this meeting."

Tony told the writers he did not want any of them to jeopardize their jobs or do anything illegal. (The fact that the entire project was illegal was a different matter. Cuban law forbids citizens to earn money outside of their salaried jobs, but most Cubans are forced to find alternate sources of income in order to survive. The Cuban government is aware of this situation and generally turns a blind eye to small-scale money-making schemes.)

Still, Tony, a U.S. citizen, didn't pay the writers directly. After he finished giving notes, he stepped out-

side discreetly to hand Sylvia the agreed-upon fees, which she'd then pass along to the writers once their rewrites were finished. When Tony and Sylvia reappeared, Juanita carried in a tray of "Cuba Libres" — rum and Cokes with a squeeze of lime — which everyone drank. The meeting broke, and warm goodbye kisses were exchanged all around.

* * *

Over dinner that night, I asked Rafael why the writers felt free to criticize the government in front of Sylvia, a Communist Party member (Communists make up less than 10 percent of the Cuban population). He said most Cubans are so fed up with the situation in their country that they complain openly about it. Indeed, I'd been struck from the start by how freely Cubans communicate their discontent — even in front of me, an unknown U.S. citizen.

On my arrival at Havana's Jose Marti Airport, a

young Cuban working in tourism complimented my *Lonely Planet* guidebook with a single qualification: "The writer is too kind to our President." His openness surprised me. Afterwards, though, it occurred to me he might have been testing me for my reaction. Then it occurred to me he might have been doing both things — genuinely criticizing Castro and spying for him — at the same time.

* * *

A young Cuban entrepreneur whose parents are high-up Communist officials warned Tony not to attend any more gatherings like the one on July 26th. The Cuban government, he argued, doesn't look well on Americans they perceive as fomenting dissent. Before Tony told me this, I hadn't much thought about my own role in the meeting. I'd been mostly silent, after all. But I realized then how very careful I had to be even as an observer in this Through-The-Looking-Glass world, where things both were and were not as they appeared to be. □

