

**CUBA: THE INTELLECTUAL DEBATE
OR
THE LITTLE WAR OF EMAILS**

THE “B”s (by first name of author, alphabetically)

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Belkis Cuza Malé

Translated by Regina Anavy and Gustavo Loredó

Although the debates around the situation of intellectuals and artists in Cuba are always interesting, this time I didn't have the slightest interest in opening my mouth because neither Luis Pavón (alias Leopoldo Ávila) nor the fat Quesada nor Papito Serguera deserve that I waste my time naming them. Unfortunately they have survived while many of their victims have not.

Everyone knew in the cultural environment of the 1970s that Luis Pavón and the others responded only to the policy of Fidel Castro, the only one who for almost five decades has dictated and repressed not only culture, but also the entire Cuban society. Nothing was done in Cuba that didn't have his approval or was not by his order. Pavón then responded to the army, led by Raúl Castro, but everything emanated from the commander-in-chief. The UMAPs, the attacks by Leopoldo Ávila in the *Verde Olivo* [*Olive Green*] magazine, and the parameters under which cultural policy was implemented were all conceived and engineered by Fidel Castro. It was he who named as "rats" those 75 renowned intellectuals who dared to protest the arrest of Heberto Padilla and then denounce the poet's self-criticism, carried out under police pressure.

These protests now by certain writers on the island before the tribute to Pavón and group have only one purpose: to defend what has effectively cost them years of suffering and humiliation. Some of them are victims now rehabilitated, because as a result of the Padilla case they ended up in factories or, in the best of cases, in subordinate jobs in libraries.

And it should be clarified that if they fell out of favor then, it was simply and merely because at some point or other they spoke out against the revolution, with the aggravating circumstance that some were homosexuals and State Security didn't stop setting traps for them, thus creating new crimes. Of course, they were never dissidents because, except for Antón Arrufat—part of this group now—who wrote *Los siete contra Tebas* [*The Seven Against Thebes*] and was awarded in 1968 along with *Fuera del juego* [*Out of the Game*] by Heberto Padilla, which provoked the ire of the repressors, the others were limited to commenting in hushed tones or with foreign writers visiting Cuba about the political situation at that time.

Most of those who now write agitated messages of protest have risen up the ranks in official Cuban culture, some to high levels. They are "national prize-winners" for literature, constantly traveling abroad on official missions or invited by universities and institutions around the world. They have published their books in Cuba and abroad and have even obtained international awards rigged by the Cuban government. Suddenly, all that is in danger, and fear makes its appearance.

But did you hear any of them raise their voices when two years ago the 75 writers, journalists, and dissidents who are still in prison today were imprisoned, except for a few who have been released? What have they said then and now? Who then defended his colleague Raúl Rivero? Has anyone dared to ask for justice for Dr. Oscar Biscet? Who

denounced the imprisonment of Reinaldo Arenas, René Ariza, Heberto Padilla? Or the execution of the writer Nelson Herrera, or years later the outrage and imprisonment of María Elena Cruz Varela and Tania Díaz Castro? Or who protested when at the end of the sixties Virgilio Piñera, and many other writers, were separated from the UNEAC, that “shell of figurines,” as Heberto Padilla called it at the time? No, those national literature awards only serve so that some can believe they’re truly great writers. So that Antón Arrufat can sing the praises of the Minister of Culture who returned him to the fold as the prodigal son, or Carilda Oliver Labra loses her memory.

In one of those texts written from Cuba, Reina María Rodríguez, “the girl on the roof,” says that Heberto Padilla asked to return to Cuba several times and was always denied permission. If that had been true, she would be talking about something that I don’t criticize, since exiled Cubans have been traveling to Cuba since 1978, but it was not like that in the case of Heberto, who never requested such permission. He knew very well what this would mean to him: a political game that didn’t interest him.

On the contrary, Reina María Rodríguez was the emissary who tried to “seduce” Heberto with the idea that he should visit Cuba. After that congress in Sweden, she never tired of playing the game that was clearly assigned to her by State Security. It was she who made arrangements, encouraged by *la Cantante*, the singer, a sinister character who was then hanging around Heberto. I know very well that each and every one of these official writers maintains close contact with the State Security agents.

And I’m not talking through my hat. At the UNEAC headquarters, while I was working there in the editorial office of *La Gaceta de Cuba* in 1975, I and all the others were required to attend a tribute to the officers who “attended” the writers and artists. And what would not be my surprise to discover that everyone present greeted their “partner” with hugs and winks.

Reina María Rodríguez has twice won the Casa de las Américas Prize, has published all her work in Cuba, has traveled non-stop, even to the United States, and her rooftop is more popular than the well-known house of Marina¹ in Havana in the 1950s. Heberto Padilla is dead and can’t refute Reina María Rodríguez, but I’m not going to remain silent now, when I see how they intend to continue dirtying his memory. Because going to Cuba in the circumstances that “the girl on the roof” was looking for was a surrender to the regime that humiliated and imprisoned him. It was not the first time that Heberto received emissaries from Cuba attempting emotional blackmail. Let each one say what he wants about Luis Pavón and his cronies. It’s a good way to know what people are really thinking, here and in that “velvet exile.”

January 26, 2007

¹ A house of prostitution.

Belkis Vega

Translated by Regina Anavy and Gustavo Loredó

Hello, Gustavo,

Thank you for sending me the discussion. I don't know how to join the analysis, but I feel that I need to do it. If you can, send this opinion to whoever you want. Although I confess that it is difficult for me to express myself and organize my ideas in this way, I don't want to stop doing it because I think that the resurrection by TV of those who we believed to be corpses cannot be allowed without a reaction of rejection. I want to add my considerations to those who have made their analyzes so far. Deep and well-argued reflections have been written, and it's important that they don't stop here.

I was studying Design when Pavón was president of the CNC and Armando Quesada was in charge of Theater and Dance, and I remember perfectly the tragedy of the *parametrados* and the almost total destruction of some theater groups, as well as the censorship in the field of literature. I was personally familiar with this, since I was involved in University TV, and, as such, was one of the scriptwriters and assistants for the TV program *6 and 30 p.m.* These "orientations" were cultural, in relation to the treatment of art and literature on television, with the personal additions of Papito Serguera.

I will never forget the impression of almost conspiracy that one felt when reading Lezama or Dulce María, the sad memory of finding Cintio Vitier and Fina García Marruz working hours in a cubicle at the National Library, exposing yourself to being pigeonholed as an ideological diversionist because you liked the Beatles and not the Casino or Mozambique,² the possibility that your friends would have their hair cut in the middle of the street or you would have to lower the hem of your skirt to be able to enter school. Someone told me a few months ago that Armando Quesada was working on TV, and I didn't want to believe it. He now resurrects himself as the protagonist of programs along with Serguera and Pavón. I didn't watch the programs but what I have read here is enough for me. I think it's really regrettable and more than regrettable, it's worrisome.

I think that we are in an internal ideological confrontation between a Marxist, revolutionary thought versus a flattened, pamphlet thought. That is why I also believe that the debate should not be limited to this exchange of emails. As Zenaida says, it's time for voices to be raised and heard!

Another Message from Belkis Vega

Look at the past from the present. I believe that this has been a principle for most of the Cubans who have been participating in this debate.

² Casino and Mozambique were Cuban dance rhythms in vogue during the sixties and seventies. Others that followed were promoted by the Government to fill the void left by international youth music, which was considered "ideological diversionism" and therefore banned.

Ever since I can remember being able to reason I have been hearing the same paralyzing phrase repeated over and over again: “This is not the time; this is not the place ...”

As for those of us who believe that being a revolutionary means being transformative, nonconformist, and critical, we have also procrastinated by waiting for that time and place that never arrives. And always for the supposedly noble and unifying but also paralyzing purpose of not giving arms to the enemy, without realizing that a paralyzing stagnation is a very efficient weapon.

It happened to me one more time last week when I tried—naively?—to bring some of the concerns that we are exchanging to the theoretical debate that was taking place at the Television Festival. It happened that it was neither the time nor the place. I think many of us are no longer willing to wait any longer. I think that we have lost many things in this waiting; life has passed us by in this waiting.

I remember that during the most critical years of the special period, a friend told me that each Cuban should be asked if he wanted to continue living in Cuba and if the answer was affirmative, give them the party card directly. It seemed like a very good idea. I think that most of us who are still here have proven again and again that we are interested in the social project of the Revolution, in its broadest sense: as a humanist project that aims to rescue and defend human dignity and develop a society that meets the growing needs of its men and women. This seems elementary but many have forgotten. Neither our society is perfect nor are any of us. It’s essential to talk about mistakes, assume them, reflect on them, and try not to repeat them.

I have always wondered who has the right to decide that they are the guarantors, the censors, or the classifiers of what is revolutionary or not. It’s very easy to look up a dictionary and remember what the definition of revolutionary is. Sheep are not revolutionary. Men and women with a vocation for sheep would never have raided the Moncada barracks. To propose this, you had to want to transform the world. It was necessary to dream big to storm the sky.

I read Colina’s writing and went through the list he makes of Cuban films not shown on TV. I also recalled how many of the filmmakers who began directing at the Hermanos Saíz Association Workshops in the 1980s are no longer here. And I remembered my recent sleepless nights when I tried to find a proposal so that the analytical, reflective, and critical works of some of the young Cuban filmmakers didn’t remain in the space of a sample; so that these young people could find their space in our Cuba—that of all Cubans—and not have to look for it in other latitudes like so many.

It hurts me, it lacerates me, I don’t understand the exclusive policies.

Knowing the mistakes, analyzing them, learning from them. Being dissatisfied, wanting to be better, criticizing what was badly done to amend it, respecting and taking differences into account. Does any of this sound “not revolutionary”?

A few months ago, a Miami TV channel showed the incomplete documentary *De buzos, leones y tanqueros*, made by young Cuban filmmakers studying at the Instituto Superior de Arte. This documentary had been recognized in some festivals in our country and selected by specialized critics as among the most significant made in 2005. Channel 41 of Miami TV held a manipulative debate on its content. The director of the documentary wrote to the channel stating that he considered this manipulation a violation of his rights. Many people in Cuba found out from comments about that showing in Miami that this documentary existed and tried to see it, but the documentary is not shown publicly; it circulates “underground.” Something similar happened with Eduardo del Llano’s fictional short, *Monte Rouge* and with other works; these are just two examples.

And I always wonder if it is not much more beneficial to bring these works to a public debate. Show them on TV, make a panel where the creators of the works can debate opinions with journalists and other people. In short, are we going to continue extending the controversy about our reality, the one we live every day, until we get a right time and a suitable place that never appear?

There are many works that are made within the revolution by Cuban artists and writers who are HERE and who have every right to have their own voice and to draw attention to aspects of our reality to which a solution MUST be sought.

Criticism, self-criticism; jumps from the quantitative to the qualitative, unity and struggle of opposites: these now seem like Martian words and phrases for many in our country.

Where have the principles of dialectical materialism gone? Those that not even our young people study anymore. Not even the fall of socialism in Europe has made me think that Marx was wrong in his formulations. History has proven that it is much more complex to apply Marxism to everyday life than to theorize it. But out of curiosity I would very much like to know how many people in our country today know what characterizes a society as socialist. Any of us at any time can expose ourselves to being questioned as revolutionaries by some officials who claim to have the right to catalog the revolutionary and the non-revolutionary and who confuse the dogmatic with the revolutionary.

It’s no secret to anyone that all this generates self-censorship, and I think that all of us have self-censored a lot. There are battles that we have won when we have defended our works and our positions in a courageous, energetic way and with solid arguments. The examples that Colina exposes referring to the film *Alice in Wondertown* or the refusal of the ICAIC filmmakers to the decision to be unified with the ICRT are proof of this.

The controversy must come out of our emails. I think it is essential to find a way for these debates to spread and open up participation. I think that this analysis of the gray five-year period that began here and will be deepened with Ambrosio Fornet’s conference and subsequent exchange should serve as a starting point to re-appropriate our own history, go forward and find many opportunities here and now where we Cuban men and women can reflect on our reality in order to transform it.

Reflections Provoked by the “Loving” email written by Paquito de Rivera to Fefé Diego

Some would be better off keeping quiet ...

And I don't say this because of intolerance, much less because I don't respect difference in thought.

I say it simply because I think it's better to keep quiet up when you cannot express thought with consistency and respect for others.

It's really a pity to find such a big contradiction between musical talent and the ability to disclose ideas with a minimum of argumentation and depth.

A few years ago I was at the Miami International Film Festival, exactly the year in which the festival bravely decided to show Fernando Pérez's film *la vida es silbar* [*Life is to Whistle*], widely interpreted as critical of the Castro regime], exposing it to the punishment of losing part of its financing by showing a work by a Cuban from here.

After the exhibition of the films, you could attend jazz concerts in a hotel—I think it was the Sheraton. Well, there I was one night willing to enjoy the musical talent of Paquito de Rivera and what was my astonishment to hear him make unpleasant and vulgar jokes about the situation of the child, Elián González, whom his family in Miami didn't want to return to his father.

Never in Cuba did I hear Paquito oppose the UMAP or criticize Marx or question the socialist definition of the Cuban Revolution.

As much as I have tried to remember, I don't remember any “courageous” position of Paquito de Rivera against all the terrible things that according to his list have occurred in our country.

I don't even remember that he tried to criticize the Stalinist stage of the USSR, since he didn't dare criticize “the terrible” things that were happening around him.

It seems that at that time he assumed the same attitude as the rest of the Cuban writers and artists “who have so irresponsibly supported such a bloody regime,” according to what he says. I don't know then what courage he is talking about. Or courage for him is to insult in a public email an exceptional musician like Carlos Santana for deciding to have a T-shirt with the image of Che Guevara.

Neither have I heard that the so-brave Paquito de Rivera opposed the invasion of Iraq or protested about the lack of attention to the victims of Katrina, or perhaps felt some small concern for the African continent. It's more probable that all this seems very good to him.

I agree with Boris Iván that it would be better for him to create music, because it seems that using language doesn't suit him. Perhaps if he had stayed in Cuba, he would be able at these heights to reason and write in a more consistent and less vulgar way.

However, I do remember other voices who questioned in their time the stage of Cuban culture that has been the object of debate these days with the participation of many Cubans from here and there.

Some voices were more timid, others stronger. There weren't a lot, not enough, but there were some.

As there have also been voices in other moments that, for example, supported the plastic artists of street art, the filmmakers of *Alice in Wondertown* or of *Guantanamera* and the theater artists of *Manteca*,³ when these artists and their works were questioned.

Luckily, more voices are now participating in this necessary analysis of a part of our recent history, and luckily this debate has encouraged the participation of people of different positions and opinions.

Of course something very important is missing, and it's the opening of the debate outside the circle of writers and artists who have email.

I already know, Paquito, that you don't even know who I am or what I do.

I also know that with this email, I'm exposing myself to your insults.

I don't mind. I believe that now the only important thing is to tell you that, luckily for both of us, I'm not interested in being your travel partner, either.

³ *Manteca* was a Cuban dramatic comedy, written by Alberto Pedro Torriente and premiered in Havana in 1994. It used symbolic language based on Cuban slang to satirize the figure of Fidel Castro.

“Betty”

Translated by Regina Anavy and Gustavo Loredó

Hello, Desiderio,

For all those who have followed the debate from the moment it began, for all those who have disseminated messages so that more people can understand and believe—like many of those who write—that everyone, regardless of our height or hierarchy as intellectuals, must have opinions and knowledge of what happens before our eyes, it’s very difficult to accept that the end of this story is cooked up behind closed doors and that we settle for an edited version (as has always happened) of reality.

Then don’t complain if the people are “mass,” if they don’t know how to identify the new Pavones when they see them, or if they don’t know the contribution of those who take risks to move things in favor of the development of an advanced social thought that guarantees the future.

I imagine that the idea is not yours, but just as you didn’t accept Pavón on TV, you don’t have to give in now to having your quorum chosen by others. It’s a concession that goes against what you stand for.

Boris Iván Crespo

Message to Enrique Colina

Enrique,

I congratulate you for your always deep and acute reflections. This society, this country, for a while has been needing to change a lot of things in order to improve in various directions. To continue dragging old and hypocritical policies of distribution of the artistic product, old informative and editorial dogmas and archaic cultural patterns will only lead us—even more—to statism, inertia, apathy, and double standards that already suffocate us in any direction we look.

Hopefully those ideological officials of the PCC hear you and are encouraged to do what you propose. And I would tell you even more: if it is not broadcast live, it will be edited by colleagues, not by three but by five members freely chosen in the meeting after that debate and who don't have public or political positions of any kind. And the final edition will not be monitored by the PCC. It would be a true show of confidence on their part towards the Cuban intelligentsia, towards that intelligentsia that they themselves boast so much about when it suits them. It would be an example of a first opening, of a true and controversial round table. And the best gift to the people, to those ordinary people who are always underestimated, but who support them and because of whom they occupy those political positions.

But you know what? I highly doubt it. That would be like asking a coconut tree for ripe mangoes. Already the first negative sign is the evident control of the conference when it is done by official invitations, because now the guests will go by commitment, and those truly interested in attending and who are not invited will be left with the desire. As a friend said, it seems that they bought the fish and now are frightened by its eyes.

Anyway, I wish you luck if you are one of the guests at the Casa de las Américas. Hopefully they won't allow the five-year color to change. Because after everything that has happened up to now (more than 20 years later), if the color had to be changed it would be to a darker gray. And hopefully the elected won't let Ambrosio's conference turn into one more political tribune to repeat "the same phrases, the same words" and thus "fulfill the plan."

A hug, Boris
January 26, 2007