

For Cuban Artists, Censure is the Norm

Viewpoint: The Cuban government systematically accuses artists and journalists of conspiring against the state, creating a climate of persecution and fear.

[Coco Fusco \(author/Coco Fusco\)](#)

January 7, 2022



A busy street in Havana, Cuba. (Pedro Szekely, Flickr)

On June 26, 2021, state security agents arrested Cuban artist Hamlet Lavastida. He had just returned to Havana after a year at an artists' residency in Berlin. He was accused—but never charged—of “inciting to commit a crime” because of a proposal he shared in a private chat to stamp currency with opposition movement logos. His idea was never realized in Cuba, yet authorities alleged that he had come home to lead the July 11 protests and that he was an agent of an imperialist conspiracy to overthrow the regime. It was the same Cold War story that the Cuban government has peddled about its opponents for decades. Lavastida was held for three months before being expelled from the country.

In their effort to blame last summer's island-wide rebellion on artists, Cuban authorities have arrested the island-based co-creators of the Grammy award-winning song “Patria y Vida” and subjected several other “artists” to harassment, house arrest, and detention. Although a younger generation of politically minded artists has been challenging draconian laws curtailing expressive freedoms since 2018, the July 11 protests were sparked by videos shared on Facebook groups by everyday Cubans, as Carla Colomé explained in [an essay](#). Lavastida, who was out of the country while frustrations mounted during the pandemic, was already in jail when the uprising began. Nonetheless, his “instructors” (the Cuban term for interrogators) wanted him to confess that he was being “handled” by two foreigners—the Polish mother of his son and me. Interrogators demanded that Lavastida confirm that I worked for the National Democratic Institute (NDI), a U.S. NGO with ties to the Democratic Party, and that he was following my orders.

The mother of Lavastida's son, Aga Gratkiewicz, works in real estate and has never been employed by the Polish government, and I do not work for the NDI. I am a Cuban-American artist, writer, and college professor. Since the 1980s, I have conducted research on the island and collaborated with Cuban artists on films, exhibitions, and cultural exchanges. I have never applied to the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) for funding. In 2014, I taught in Brazil on a U.S. State Department-funded Fulbright Fellowship, and in 1989 I lectured about Latino filmmaking in Brazil under the auspices of the United States Information Agency. As an artist, I have received funds from several European, Latin American, and Middle Eastern governmental bodies in the form of commissions and honoraria, none of which would lead most people to conclude that I have been compelled to serve the interest of any government.

“Cubans are subject to laws that penalize dissenting views and criminalize financial support from organizations connected to U.S. governmental agencies.”

But the Cuban government insists that these are signs of conspiracy. Like their counterparts in Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Russia, Cubans are subject to laws that penalize dissenting views and criminalize financial support from organizations connected to U.S. governmental agencies. If a Cuban artist or journalist is paid by a U.S. government-funded entity for just one text, performance, or artwork, their entire professional life will be rendered politically suspect. But Cubans don't have to actually receive funds from foreign entities to be vilified for doing so in state media. Any cultural producer who expresses critical views of Cuban government policies and practices is likely to be targeted as an enemy of the state.

Internationally recognized cultural figures such as independent journalist Yoani Sánchez, artist Tania Bruguera, and dramatist Yunió García Aguilera are caricatured in Cuban state media as mercenaries that are getting rich

on the U.S. government payroll. It doesn't matter that García Aguilera's theater company operated under government contract until it was shut down last month, or that Sánchez's digital newspaper *14yMedio* is entirely financed by private investors, or that Tania Bruguera funnels income from her art sales as well as private donations into her Institute for Artivism (INSTAR). It doesn't matter that Cuban independent media outlets with U.S. financing only pay islanders \$35 to \$100 for their articles and videos, or that independent cultural producers lack the right to form business organizations of their own, or that independent journalists are barred from obtaining press credentials in Cuba and independent artists are punished for their dissidence by losing the permit to sell their work.

Humberto Lopez, who in addition to his job as a Cuban TV newscaster is a member of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party, has devoted many Friday night programs in the past year to slandering artists and journalists as lackeys of the United States. Similar accusations appear regularly in *CubaDebate*, *Granma*, and state-sponsored blogs. The underlying presumption, which is often accepted unquestioningly by foreign supporters of the Cuban government, is that the Communist Party should have the sole right to speak for the Cuban people and that if citizens do not submit to Party leadership they will be led astray by foreign interests or the so-called "Miami Mafia." It is an argument that denies Cubans the capacity for independent judgment. It infantilizes islanders and denigrates the exile community, which is compelled to bankroll a government it rejects—since the government benefits from any money sent to the island—in order to provide for relatives and friends that remain in their homeland.

“Regardless of the truthfulness of their accusations, crude Cuban state media campaigns produce a chilling effect.”

Regardless of the truthfulness of their accusations, crude Cuban state media campaigns produce a chilling effect. Editors of an independent cultural magazine edited abroad acknowledge that once Cuban state media accuses them of receiving U.S. funds, the island-based contributors employed by state institutions cease association with them to avoid losing their jobs. European embassies in Havana have always supported Cuban cultural activities, but independent intellectuals' relations with them are treated as suspect. Curator Claudia Genlui was dismissed from her job at Factoria Habana in 2019 because she lectured on Cuban independent art at the Czech Embassy. Yanelys Nuñez Leyva was fired from *Revolución y Cultura* magazine because she co-created the Museum of Dissidence website, for which she and artist Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara received a Freedom of Expression of Award in 2018 from the London-based Index on Censorship.

While some visual artists and musicians can support themselves through sales of their work, often with the help of the internet to locate markets outside state channels, many cultural producers find themselves in dire economic straits once the state retaliates, rendering them unemployable and even homeless—state security often intimidates their landlords into evicting them. Some have sought scholarships abroad. In the past year, *El Estornudo* contributors Mario Luis Reyes and Mónica Baró, who once reported from Cuba, have resettled in Spain, while cofounder Abraham Jimenez Enoa, who is forbidden from leaving the island, no longer appears on the masthead. Others have sought financial support from NGOs with a human rights or pro-democracy focus in the United States, Latin America, and Europe.

The San Isidro Movement, for instance, reached out to the National Democracy Institute in 2019. “Things got to the point that Luis Manuel (Otero Alcántara) didn’t even have money for public transportation. We had lost our jobs, but we wanted to continue our work,” said member Iris Ruiz about the decision. Since then, some members have traveled to Europe and South America under the auspices of NDI and the Argentine NGO CADAL , and NDI aided Ruiz in traveling to the United States for medical treatment that she could not get in Cuba.

“In the past four years, escalating tensions between the arts sector and the government have politicized a younger generation of artists, musicians, journalists, and filmmakers.”

In the past four years, escalating tensions between the arts sector and the government have politicized a younger generation of artists, musicians, journalists, and filmmakers. These cultural workers had been accustomed to operating in a gray area of Cuban culture that is neither state run nor state sanctioned. They traveled frequently, sold their work themselves, circulated their work online, and performed in private venues. Since 2018, when laws were introduced to curtail independent cultural activity and penalize anyone who posted critical commentary about the Cuban government online, they have grown increasingly vocal about their disaffection, producing critical commentary, internet campaigns and music videos, live stream conferences, and on the ground reporting on the excesses of Cuban officials. Like the rest of the population, they depend on Cubans in the diaspora to recharge their cell phones. Facebook is their alternative public square, even though ETECSA, the state telecommunications company, may intermittently block dissidents’ internet access.

After the historic sit-in involving hundreds of artists at the Ministry of Culture in November 2020, which led to the formation of the 27N movement, ministers rejected artists’ demands for dialogue. In retaliation for continuing to speak out, the artists experience expulsion from state jobs and unions, restrictions on travel, house arrest, fines, hostile interrogations, and detention without trial. And continuous accusations in state media serve to intimidate the rest of the population. In foreign media sympathetic to the Cuban government, a focus on U.S. funding for pro-democratic activity adds fuel to the fire by giving credence to the Cuban state’s position that dissent on the island is orchestrated by the United States. Furthermore, the characterization of NED funding as necessarily and exclusively subversive does not account for the fact that [NED finances progressive projects \(https://dialogopolitico.org/debates/la-sociedad-civil-en-las-americas-entre-la-sumision-autoritaria-y-la-autonomia-democratica/\)](https://dialogopolitico.org/debates/la-sociedad-civil-en-las-americas-entre-la-sumision-autoritaria-y-la-autonomia-democratica/) in numerous Latin American countries that are U.S. allies such as Guatemala, Brazil, and Colombia.

In reality, support from U.S. government sources accounts for only a portion of the monies that islanders use to express criticism, and the Cuban government itself receives USAID support through the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations. According to the Havana Consulting Group, the Cuban diaspora sent [\\$3.72 billion in remittances \(https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-policy-remittances-cuba-what-are-some-viable-options\)](https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-policy-remittances-cuba-what-are-some-viable-options) to Cuba in 2019, constituting the country’s third largest hard currency reserve. Part of that money goes into telecommunications and island-based independent cultural production. Enterprising Cuban artists, writers, and filmmakers have used crowdfunding to finance their ventures for more than a decade, and savvy Cuban

influencers solicit subscriptions from their regular viewers. The stream of grievances that everyday Cubans air on social media is made possible by remittances from exiles, not the U.S. State Department.

Expatriate Cuban businessmen back the news outlet *CiberCuba*. *El Toque* podcasts get support from RNW Media in The Netherlands. *Periodismo de Barrio* receives funding from Sweden and Norway. Some of the digital publications that receive funding from U.S. government-funded NGOs are not entirely dependent on those funds either; they draw income from advertising and ancillary publishing ventures. The majority of the U.S. monies distributed for work in Cuba, as detailed by Tracey Eaton in his *Cuban Money Project*, never reaches Cuba: it is spent in Spain, Florida, and Mexico on operating expenses, salaries, technology, and internet costs of digital publications, and on production expenses for Cuban cultural events held outside the island. Editors at publications that do receive NED grants consistently point out that their content decisions remain independent and that their funders only require accounting of expenses. The oppositional media outlets that espouse the most conservative political views, such as ADN Cuba, are based in Miami, where all Spanish-language news leans heavily to the Right, whereas publications with offices in Europe and Mexico tend to have a more liberal and culturally focused editorial line.

Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel's claims that Cuban independent artists and journalists are part of an ongoing media terrorism campaign echo the accusations made against dissidents of prior eras. But much has changed in the last 20 years. Internet access has expanded the general population's ability to communicate, share concerns, and inform themselves using sources outside state channels. Decreased dependency on waning Cuban government support for culture coupled with escalating repression of artists has emboldened a sector of Cuban society that had once preferred to defer to authority in exchange for economic privileges. The more the Cuban government wields power over artists through violence, the more artists and intellectuals will identify with victims outside their milieu who suffer similar mistreatment.

Now, the recent decision to dismiss cases against a handful of white and highly educated artists while dozens of poor protesters of color face long prison sentences is being criticized by activists as a move designed to exacerbate class and racial divisions, thereby alienating artists from "*los cubanos de a pie*" (everyday Cubans). According to Prisoners Defenders, there were [842 political prisoners](https://www.prisonersdefenders.org/2022/01/04/2021-955-prisioneros-politicos-en-cuba/) (<https://www.prisonersdefenders.org/2022/01/04/2021-955-prisioneros-politicos-en-cuba/>) as of December 2021. Multiple news sources have reported that dozens of Cubans are being subject to summary judgment, including minors. The artists and journalists that are shining a light on this injustice do not need the U.S. State Department to encourage them.

Coco Fusco is an artist and writer and the author of Dangerous Moves: Performance and Politics in Cuba (Tate Publications, 2015). She is a professor at The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art.

Editors' Note: *This piece forms part of NACLA's continuing coverage and analysis of recent protests in Cuba, their evolving aftermath, and the wide-ranging responses they have elicited from left circles in the Americas and beyond. To read other pieces in the series, click on the titles below.*