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Role of Civil Society Under Autocratic Regime:
Evaluating Activists' Role in a Nondemocratic Setting to Promote Sociopolitical Awareness

by

Yanet Fundora

Under the Direction of Faidra Papavasiliou, PhD

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2021

ABSTRACT

Activism in Cuba is perceived as an anti-government ideology that deviates from the monolithic, homogeneous socio-political norm. The Cuban government repudiates ideological diversity by implementing repressive regulatory tactics through internet monitoring to criminalize dissenting discourse. The focus of this research will be on cyber-activism in the context of an authoritarian regime. Netnographic methods, coupled with social network framework, will be implemented to collect and analyze qualitative data on the adaptive civil disobedience strategies used by activists to circumvent censorship. Semi-structured interviews rendered insights of social media experiences to express dissent and denounce human rights abuses in Cuba. This research proposes to explore the mechanisms through which activists and the Cuban government resist and contest the legitimacy of ideological differences. This research contributes to the literature of Cuban civil society, activism work in nondemocratic settings and activism's proliferating organizational strategies in the digital world.

INDEX WORDS: Civil society, Digital advocacy, Non-violent resistance, Autocratic system, Social media, Cuba.

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Evaluating Activists' Role in a Nondemocratic Setting to Promote Sociopolitical Awareness

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May 2021

DEDICATION

I dedicate this small contribution to the enormous efforts made by fearless Cuban activists who dissent against the oppressive Cuban dictatorship. This work is for each of the participants who shared their personal stories with me. May you all persevere and succeed in creating spaces where your voices are heard.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe this ethnographic work to all the participants who trusted me and shared deep personal experiences about living in Cuba as activists and what this means to them.

I would like to acknowledge the members of Cubalex, who provided amazing support and answered all my burning questions about Cuban politics and activism. A special thanks to Cubalex's director, Dr. Laritza Diversent for accepting me as an intern to help me with the necessary information to complete this thesis.

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To my husband, Francisco Vargas, for being my biggest supporter: thank you for listening to me and keeping me grounded. This achievement was truly possible because of you.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | | |
|---|--------------|-----------|
| DEDICATION | | IV |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS | | V |
| LIST OF FIGURES | | 3 |
| LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS | | 4 |
| 1 INTRODUCTION | | 5 |
| 1.1 Civil Society | | 14 |
| <i>1.2 Digital Activism in the Public Cyber Sphere</i> | | 17 |
| 2 RESEARCH METHODS | | 22 |
| 2.1 Participants in this Investigation | | 26 |
| 2.2 Netnographic Method | | 32 |
| <i>2.2.1 Netnographic Data</i> | | 34 |
| 2.3 Data Analysis | | 35 |
| 2.4 Research Positionality | | 37 |
| <i>2.4.1 Ethical Concerns</i> | | 39 |
| 2.5 Limitations and Challenges | | 40 |
| 3 THE REVOLUTION AS A PROGENITOR | | 42 |
| 3.1 Gray Quinquennium Continued | | 45 |
| 3.2 The Internet and Cuba's New Civil Society | | 48 |
| 3.3 Gender, Race and State-Civil Society Relations | | 51 |

| | | |
|-----|--|-----|
| 3.4 | The Proliferation of Cyber-Campaigns | 57 |
| 4 | ACTIVIST PERFORMANCES ON AND OFFLINE | 67 |
| 4.1 | Live Streaming Nonviolent Resistance..... | 69 |
| 4.2 | Independent Performances | 72 |
| 4.3 | Private Levels of Repression | 77 |
| 5 | THE REVOLUTION’S ACTIVISM..... | 84 |
| 5.1 | Characteristics..... | 85 |
| 5.2 | Resiliency Surviving a Repudiation Act..... | 87 |
| 5.3 | Motivations and Experiences | 90 |
| 6 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION | 97 |
| 6.1 | Improvising..... | 97 |
| 6.2 | What Kind of Revolution Will Activists have? | 100 |
| | REFERENCES..... | 102 |

LIST OF FIGURES

| | |
|---|----|
| Figure 1 “Yo Me Expreso” campaign..... | 60 |
| Figure 2 "Yo Alzo Mi Voz" campaign. | 61 |
| Figure 3 “La Cola de La Libertad.” Campaign..... | 62 |
| Figure 4 "No a la 370" campaign..... | 66 |
| Figure 5 Independent Performance by Adrian Rubio. | 73 |
| Figure 6 Independent Performance by Maykel Castillo (Osorbo)..... | 77 |
| Figure 7 Screenshot. Credit to Laritza Diversent..... | 81 |
| Figure 8 Screenshot. Blocked Message. | 81 |
| Figure 9 Acto de Repudio. | 88 |

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CDR – Comité de la Defensa de la Revolución

CENESEX – Centro Nacional de Educación Sexual (Centro Nacional de Educación Sexual)

CIR – Comité Ciudadanos por la Integración Racial (Committee for Racial Integration)

EFI – Escuela de Formación Integral (comprehensive training school)

FMC – Federación de Mujeres Cubanas

PCC – Partido Comunista de Cuba

MSI – Movimiento San Isidro

MININT (Ministerio del Interior de la República de Cuba)

UNPACU – Unión Patriótica de Cuba

1 INTRODUCTION

In 2018, on a windy July day in old Habana, art curator, activist, and historian Yanelys Nuñez marched with striking confidence towards El Capitolio, the former chambers of Cuba's congress before it was dissolved by the 1959 Revolution. An audience of tourists and locals sat on the steps of the capitol unaware of the developing events. Nuñez was wearing a green blouse, shorts, a headwrap, and was accompanied by two allies who prompted Nuñez to speak – “Yanelys, why are you doing this today!?” The camera moved around to get a view of the capitol and Nuñez picking excrement out of a plastic bag to spread it all over her arms, legs, chest and face, she replied - “I do this because Cuban artists are being trampled by the government and we aren't criminals.” Nuñez carried out the performance a day after the arbitrary arrest of artist and activist Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara, who was initially scheduled to execute the act but was detained and charged with “public disorder” (Diario De Cuba, 2018). The nonviolent protest was an act of civil disobedience towards law decree 349, which delegitimizes artistic work and institutionalizes censorship by inhibiting artists from performing in private or public spaces without the Cuban state's approval (Deibert, 2020). With only a few thousand views on Facebook and just over 18,000 on YouTube, Nuñez's performance and Alcántara's arrest ignited social media dialogues. Maintaining the momentum, the activists quickly mobilized to continue peacefully protesting decree 349 and prepared a concert inside Alcántara's home located in Old Habana's San Isidro neighborhood. This event was violently interrupted by the Cuban state Security, formally called Departamento de la Seguridad del Estado, who surrounded the neighborhood with their military force (DDC, 2020). Witnessing the violence taking place, the neighbors streamed the altercation via Facebook live, while physically intervening against the

police to free the activists. As a tribute to the courageous act by the neighbors, activists named the movement, Movimiento San Isidro (MSI) (Movimiento San Isidro website). Ethnographic data derived from recorded and live-streamed events like these provide insights of the political actions and offer an opportunity to examine organic civic participation by ‘ordinary’ people. Their devices with social media access are able to bypass censorship and offer their publication as they live their daily experiences.

As communities use social media to support political positions and to influence policies, it is evident that restricting access to digital platforms favors anti-democratic practices and is beneficial to the Cuban government. This investigation contextualizes the historical events that established measures that continue to inhibit and discourage civic participation among the Cuban population. Examining the Cuban politics of digital access to political cyber-spaces, gives a sense of the prevailing political climate and the efforts of civil society actors at gaining political presence. Internet access is the ultimate space that offers a sense of individual autonomy, facilitates horizontal communication among affiliated groups and decentralizes information dissemination. These mechanisms work in direct opposition to the centralized Cuban government. Therefore, the state curtails internet use, but not without resistance from activists. This project documents how the dissident community utilizes digital campaigns and nonviolent acts of resistance while sustaining oppression from the government.

Cuba was the last country in Latin America to join the digital world in 1996 (Hoffman, 2011, 5). It also lags behind the rest of Latin America in percentage of individuals with internet access (World Bank, 2018), and social media platforms did not become accessible to the Cuban public until 2015 (Dye, 2016). Even more recently, in 2017, the first SMS text messages were sent between users in Cuba and the United States (Juventud Rebelde). Increasing access to

Internet Communication Technologies (ICT) (Greitens, 2013) has provided leading Cuban activists with a new arena and a broader communication network. Cuba's internet growth has drawn scholarly attention. However, less attention has been paid to new forms of digital activism spearheaded by civil society dissidents and opposition groups. Cuban Social mobilization has been proliferated along with internet growth. This project explores digital advocacy, the goals and concerns among Cuban cyber-activists. It also examines the digital adaptive strategies of civil disobedience implemented by activists to resist censorship through nonviolent action to promote socio-political awareness and denounce human rights violations.

The rise of the blogosphere and social media use in Cuba have created spaces for communicating prompting civic agency discourses and political debates but have also heightened online dissent management (Vicary 2015, 7). The independent watchdog advocacy group, Freedom House measured the civil liberties and political rights of all nations in an effort to expose autocratic repressive techniques and promote democracy. The organization issued a report about the global trends of social media as instrumental to the decline of democracy. The study assessed 65 countries, including Cuba, and determined that surveillance and manipulation of social media by authoritarian regimes have dangerously increased each year in the past five years. In 2019, 47 of the 65 evaluated countries revealed high rates of arrests of users who post dissenting opinions. The authors of the report, Adrian Shahbaz and Allie Funk bring attention to the effects of civil liberties in the digital era emphasizing the reduction of free and safe “online space for civic activism” under autocratic systems (Shahbaz, 2019). Online dissent management schemes suppress freedom of expression, discredit political opposition and drown out critics. Cuban civil society (on and off line) has to work its way around a state-supported labyrinth of censorship. Opposition groups, independent journalists, activists, artists, (artists) and human

rights defenders focus on the broad ranging scarcity of basic food items and medicine, police abuse, gender and racial discrimination, the overall decay of social services, and the economic uncertainty. Most concerning, activists bring attention to the discrimination against a large part of the population without access to dollars. Without the foreign coin, a large part of the population is unable to access the internet or purchase food and other commodities at prices posted in the foreign currency.

The Cuban state does not allow criticism or questioning of their actions and the Cuban citizens do not take part in any part of the decision making process, even at the community level. When activists attempt to question or challenge the authorities, the state responds with tactics including internet blackouts, arbitrary arrests, threats, routine harassment, seizing of devices, restriction of mobility, and draining mobile data plans. This leaves the dissenting voices unable to access the internet for random periods of time. As a response to the growth in social media activity, the state issued Law Decree 370. Broadly, this decree criminalizes the digital dissemination of information “contrary to social interests” of the nation (Gaceta Oficial 2019, 12) and claims ownership of “the principal means of social communication, in any of its forms and on any of its mediums” (RSF, 2020). The official position of the government in Cuba is that activism represents an anti-government and anti-Cuban ideology that deviates from the imposed monolithic sociopolitical norm. The concept of civil society in Cuba is considered a “Trojan horse” of “ideological subversion” (Hoffman, 2011, 10-12) that promotes deviant ideologies counter to the communist party.

Through the holistic lens of virtual ethnography, I argue that social media access promotes the development of Cuban civil society and advances efforts to reclaim political discursive spaces by and for Cuban citizens. Cyber-activism literature in non-democratic settings

addresses government surveillance and marginalization of dissenting voices through censoring tactics (Chang & Lin, 2020). Other studies incorporate analysis of Cuba's internet access, availability of devices (Dye et. al, 2016), debates about civil society, or lack thereof (Armony et. al, 2015, Crahan et. al, 2005). Still, the field could benefit from a virtual ethnographic approach to elucidate Cuban civil society's efforts at collective action to demand access to fundamental human rights. The objectives of this investigation are to document and understand the strategic methods used by activists to achieve long-term goals, understand how activists identify themselves in the sociopolitical arena, categorize the embodied objectives of the social movement, and trace how the criminalization of activist work transmutes between the digital world back to the offline world with severe consequences. This work will fit into the larger academic context of civil disobedience, practices of nonviolent resistance to authoritarianism and the development of civil society advocacy in the digital realm.

As my focus is on cyber-activism, I approached my field site from a digital ethnographic perspective following ethnographic methods adapted for the online world. This project is based on participant observation as the fundamental ethnographic methodological framework, which captures activist work in its social and cultural context, but I employed this framework in the digital realm. To understand the tactics, organizational patterns, influence, but also lived experience of Cuban cyber-activism, I participated in the online worlds in which they operate and collected data on their interventions as well as the responses and reactions these interventions elicited. Some of this work took place in the context and as an extension of my work with Cubalex, a human rights organization that monitors human rights violations in Cuba and offers free legal services to Cuban dissidents targeted by the Cuban government. As part of my work with Cubalex, I was responsible for monitoring the Cuban internet sphere for instances

of human rights violations and use of force against activists. For this research, I also engaged in the Cuban online sphere as a participant, supplementing this type of monitoring with a broader engagement with the actions themselves. In other words, I followed activist groups, independent journalists and befriended many activists on Facebook. The participation involved witnessing live streams, posts, comment sections and reading independent newspapers originating from Cuba. I also followed the official media sources from the Cuban government to gain knowledge of the narrative and understand how it conflicts with activism work. Following netnographic methods, I observed public cellphone and computer-mediated interactions of social media spaces. My observations of civic action included the modes of civil organization, narrative styles and themes, networks of content dissemination and nonviolent resistance tactics. To understand the reasons to engage in activism work, which address the socio-political goals and challenges of activists, I then sought to supplement my data with semi-structured ethnographic interviews with ten prominent activists of the Cuban internet and five Cuban citizens living in Habana whose identity will be protected. The five anonymous citizens are not affiliated with any groups but identify as “closet activists” because they choose when to speak or conceal their true opinions of the political environment for safety reasons. The political gravity of the situation increases the need for discretion and further prohibits the disclosure of names. I was deeply concerned for the safety of my collaborators since five of them are not vocal about their views and maintain a low profile in online spaces. Therefore, I have chosen to blend their identities and stories, and use pseudonyms to quote them directly. I merge five identities under three pseudonyms: Yulisa, Lisi and Luis.

The second group of activists requested that their names be disclosed because they demand visibility and awareness of the movements they represent. Their names can be easily

searched online attached to articles where they express similar views. Thus, anonymity in their case is not the issue. Instead, exposure provides them with protection from abuse or from being charged with a summary offense which can lead to being sentenced without right to jury or trial. All the interviewed activists agreed that although there are severe consequences to their work, exposure affords them with gaining notability and community status.

The data produced holistic content that represented the lives of the interviewed. These methods brought together digital interactions that were related to political events in the offline world. They provided a close view of the participants' activism styles and collaborative alliances. Ethnographic data and historical context frame the examination of the political participation in online discourse by civil society actors. The development and accessibility of digital platforms facilitates the expansion of public opinion spaces, which, in turn are important spaces to exercise autonomy. As a result, community members can practice civic agency and advocacy via the internet. The experiences activists shared during interviews compliment the participant observation and media analysis components of my investigation.

Censorship in Cuba interferes with the pluralization of voices in civic engagement and encourages self-censorship. The institutionalization of censorship sent a long-lasting message that deterred political dissidence since the revolution. To understand how activists operate under circumstances of state-imposed censorship, I provide historical context of major events that have impeded the organic cohesion and engagement of civil society. I explore the parameters and development of the most current civic participation in Cuba through the examination of censorship practices implemented by the state to prevent dissident activity. I also analyze nonviolent performances by activists and their use of digital technologies as instruments of resistance against ubiquitous repression. Further, I examine the digital adaptive strategies of civil

disobedience implemented by activists who promote socio-political awareness, denounce human rights violations and strive towards a politically diverse public sphere in their communities.

My investigation of Cuban digital activism pays close attention to the literature on civil society to understand the contextual meaning and relationship between grassroots movements and the government. I begin in the next section to review the abstract space where civil society is located within a community, its functions, and how it relates to activism work in nondemocratic settings. The main theoretical concept I draw from is Antonio Gramsci's framework of hegemony and civil society. Here, I contextualize how the Cuban dissident community's internet availability fits within the autocratic socio-political space of the Cuban Revolution. Then, I enter a discussion of the public digital sphere in the context of activism through the lens of cyber-utopianism, looking at how digital technologies facilitate communication to democratizing ideologies and modes of organization. Through this view, I argue that digital tools expand the political discourse arena and empower the development of civil society within the cyber-space.

In chapter 2, I discuss the research methods I implemented to observe online interactions of activists on the social media platform of Facebook. I discuss what are netnographic methods and why it is an ideal approach for this type of investigation. I also introduce the participants I interviewed and the organization of Cubalex which helped me gain community access for this research. Here, I cover which are the concerns of the activists I spoke with and what they want to address in the Cuban society. In this chapter I also cover my research positionality and how my identity has influenced this research.

In chapter 3, I introduce the historical context of the laws and government initiatives that institutionalized drastic social changes with the goals of achieving societal homogeneity. These historical political decisions contextualize the current circumstances faced by activists and

dissidents, because the profound rejection of ideological diversity altered the functions of civil society. Then, I explain what internet accessibility looks like in Cuba and discuss how social media has increased the development of several digital campaigns. Following, I discuss some of the campaign's activists developed within one year.

Chapter 4, I focus on the camera-wielding strategies activists use as performative nonviolent resistance. In this ethnographic section, I describe observations of live streamed experiences from the headquarters of the resistance which is also the home of activists. This section also includes two independent performances by Adrian Rubio and Maykel Castillo, two MSI members. Each protest performance is unique due to their personal circumstances at the time of the protest. This section also expands on the Gramscian theory of hegemony as the dominant political ideology permeates the family nucleus.

Chapter 5, I discuss acts of repudiation as counter activism and favored tool of the repressive regime to humiliate members of the dissident community. This section provides some historical context of acts of repudiation and the characteristics. Ethnographic data derived from online observations and interviews reveal these acts of repudiation are highly traumatic and violent for the victims. In this section I also discuss how activist, and dissidents remain engaged and motivated when facing all dimensions of discrimination, they suffer as consequence of their work as activists.

Lastly, in chapter 6, I conclude this investigation highlighting that Cuban activists will face more challenges as they continue to decipher aspects of transitioning into democracy. Currently, most of the dissidents' efforts focus on the arbitrariness of state repression and as a result, they have to improvise on their performances depending on the encounters with the political police. Although activists are severely mistreated and constantly harassed by the police,

their only protective mechanism from certain incarceration is the visibility they have gained through social media. The performances and safety of their activism work depends greatly on internet access and increased visibility.

1.1 Civil Society

To examine activism in a non-democratic context such as Cuba, it is necessary to first define the meaning and role of civil society. Habermas describes civil society as an independently created community partnership with guaranteed “basic rights” and with inclusive access to the “political public sphere” (1996, 75), meaning, that for a society to enter a discursive space, it ought to be a society that encourages autonomous and pluralistic voices in the public space. Habermas also characterizes the public sphere as “a network to communicate information and points of view,” where the plurality of opinions opens channels for civic action and engagement at community level (1996, 360). In addition to creating spaces for dialogue, Armony et al. (2005) define civil society as groups of community members who organize to mobilize resources and influence the state’s policy-making process. Horizontal networks of dialogue between coalitions, institutions, associations, and informal networks help maintain a channel of communication with political authorities, with the central goal of securing and advocating for public interests (Armony et.al, 2005, 3). In Cuba's case, Armony et. al (2005, 19) emphasize that a characteristic aspect of the state is that no pluralistic social participation can compete to exert influence over the government. The curtailment of a diverse civil society is a mechanism implemented by the Cuban Communist Party to frustrate the emergence of systems of government accountability. Executive orders institutionalized by the PCC (Partido Comunista de

Cuba) manipulate and discourage civic engagement through processes that codified the penalization of dissenting opinions.

For the benefit of this investigation, I find the most fitting definition of the term *civil society* is the one offered by Antonio Gramsci, a Marxist philosopher, political theorist and founder of the Italian Communist Party. He conceptualizes civil society as a battlefield where diverse ideologies and worldviews are debated by organizations and institutions. Civil society is anything that is not representative of the government but instead a free space for society to hold debates. Joseba Macías (2016) further explains Gramsci's theory by stating that when dominant beliefs gain intellectual control over structures that reproduce cultural ideologies, these can impose new ways of thinking and create habits in the people and society. Institutions like churches, schools, news outlets, and other communication mediums influence society's morals by transmitting codes, values and meaning (Macías, 2016, 18-19). Structures and institutions determine associations and the organization of systems to assimilate individuals into functioning and behaving according to the prescribed cultural norms (Noruega, 2011). Gramsci also differentiates between political society and civil society. For him, civil society is the intellectual space where meanings, values and ways of living are established, while political society applies dominant and coercive methods over the society (in Kumar, 1993, 382). Civil society in Gramscian theory, does not fit within the economic sphere of a society but it is a battleground to debate existing hegemonies. The framework applied throughout this paper follows the Gramscian theory because the ruling party of Cuba has maintained hegemony through coercive mechanisms implemented by the political society. The Cuban Revolution of 1959 secured ideological hegemony with persuasive force through constitutional amendments, which positioned the Revolution as the supreme model to dictate political, social, and cultural

behaviors. The result was the transformation of moral values of the citizens to build the Revolution's vision of socialism, which has been effectively fortified with the representative symbols of the Revolution: Fidel Castro, Socialism, and the Revolution as a historical marker. This hegemonic formulation leaves no discursive space for critique or opposing ideologies from questioning the Revolution (Tulchin et al. 2005).

Cuban activists and human rights defenders do not fit into the dictated parameters of the Cuban Revolution, which is why throughout this paper I use the concept of dissident community. To clarify, I follow the definitions of dissent & dissidence as stated by the Cuban museum of Political Dissidence. *Dissent* is the act "to separate from a common doctrine, belief, or conduct" and *dissidence* as an "action or effect of deciding. A serious disagreement of opinions" (Museo de la Disidencia). Although the dissident groups are very diverse, the second reason to categorize these groups under the label of dissident community is because due to the hegemonic influences of the state, some grassroots groups are not clearly defined (Crachan et al. 2005, 5). The Cuban state does not recognize these groups as part of the Socialist state and offers no tolerance towards critical voices. In this manner, the dissident community consists of 350 independent groups with unique ideologies and purposes. These can be categorized under human rights groups, political parties, cultural organizations, and labor associations (Fernandez, 2003, 592). The core characteristic that makes these groups autonomous is their impetus to exist in opposition to the Cuban state. Dissident practices in the virtual world are a new medium through which users can support and engage with each other to exchange ideas, opinions and create identities separate from the institutional ideology. My observations indicate that civil society is publicly communicating social media platforms to construct a democracy. As artist Luis Manuela Otero proposes during his live streams, "I don't want us to take down the dictatorship. I want us to

construct a democracy.” The increased use and reliance on social media platforms as a democratic space has propelled the dissident community into a transition process of self-development and group solidarization in cyber-space.

1.2 Digital Activism in the Public Cyber Sphere

Cuban civil society functions in a transnational manner with exiled Cuban allies. Working globally with the advantage of technology; opposition groups, activists, human rights defenders and independent journalists are able to resist government restrictions. Digital tools have increased civic engagement and autonomous participation in political discourse. Ayers and McCaughey (2003) refer to political activism on the internet as cyberactivism, due to the interactive actions afforded by social media technologies. Sandor Vegh (2003, 71) simply describes cyberactivism as political movements relying on the internet. Authors, Neumayer and Svensson (2016) offer that activism is political participation consisting of marginalized voices and opinions, while digital advocacy is described as an act that seeks to claim political presence (Johansson & Scaramuzzino, 2019). As public space, social media networks facilitate ideas exchange and self-representation (Bonilla, 2015). For the purpose of this research, I include my personal understanding and parameters of virtual activism, as the mobilization of ideas through social media tools and the implementation of strategic alliances to carry out long-term goals to achieve socio-cultural and political changes.

Social media platforms are the most popular ways to engage in digital activism because it expands the political space of marginalized voices (George and Leidner, 2019). Data gathered globally from hundreds of campaigns to analyze trends in digital activism found that Facebook and Twitter are preferred platforms for digital civic engagement (Edwards et. al, 2013). The use

of social media platforms has mobilized and organized masses to act against state-sanctioned violence (Bonilla, 2015), to protest against gender-based violence (Puente, 2011), to advance gay rights (Chua, 2014) and to oppose governments through web-supported technologies (Neumayer & Svensson, 2016). Cyber political access has multiplied the diversity among Facebook groups and pages where debates regarding Cuban politics and social concerns take place. Online activism facilitates horizontal communication which fosters pluralization and democratic participation of civil society actors (Puente, 2011, 335). Chang and Lin (2020) offer the optimistic perspective of cyber-utopianism. This perspective views internet-capable devices as the reason why civil society gains independence from the state's influence and control. Members of civil society exposed to other ideologies and information can change attitudes, political interests, increase knowledge, and as a result feel empowered. A second point provided in the study is that ICTs (Internet Communication Technologies) are low-cost coordinating tools that aid social networks to mobilize collective work (875). In the context of Cuban activism this is not the case because internet access is very difficult for the larger part of the population. However, activists still find the means to access the internet because they recognize the advantages of the technology in civic engagement.

Cyberactivism engages in strategies that vary considerably between contexts and are variably effective or ineffective. Online advocacy provides activists with unique opportunities but also creates new vulnerabilities. Increased internet accessibility means more surveillance of online and offline interactions. Further, activists that use new online tools to denounce human rights violations are likely to be exposed to cyber-security attacks on their personal accounts. Cuban activists are at high risks of attacks in the online and offline world (Ikenberry, 2003). The violence experienced by Cuban activists is unpredictable and pervasive.

Greitens (2013) conceptualizes three dimensions which authoritarian regimes use to regulate the online world: censorship and limiting access to information, population surveillance and data monitoring, the adaptation of online content to favor the state (Greitens, 2013, 263). The case studies of authoritarian political systems in China and North Korea demonstrated how different nations regulate the virtual world, the surveillance style, and implemented activism to favor the governments (Greitens, 2013, 268). Similarly, Daniel Grinberg (2017) outlines how Ethiopia's authoritarian regime uses political and digital censorship methods on citizens. Grinberg details the negative consequences of "multifaceted digital surveillance" on opposition party members and journalists (435). The author explains the invasive nature of surveillance methods in personal cell phone devices and how they are used as evidence against activists to justify arrests (436). Similarly, in Cuba, Law 370 penalizes the dissemination of information that is "contrary to the social interest, morality, good customs and integrity of people " (Gaceta Oficial, 2019,12). The decree gives state functionaries power to review or monitor information that may be shared (sent and received) in any format and does not specify which social media platforms are monitored.

When an online user successfully connects to the net, censoring methods steer online participation. A three-year study by the Oxford University Computational Propaganda Research Project released an analysis of the trends of social media manipulation of 70 nations, including Cuba. The study examined qualitative data of computational propaganda and cyber-troop activities (Bradshaw, 2019). Cyber-troops are agents or political actors that are commanded to perform in favor of a political party or government. Bradshaw and collaborators identified that state sponsored cyber-troops are deployed to promote political propaganda to manipulate public opinion by harassing and bullying political dissidents online (Bradshaw, 2019, 5). The study also

revealed that Facebook has the highest cyber-troop activity especially in authoritarian regimes. Social media platforms have been regarded as spaces of democratic free speech but tactics to increase disinformation, incite violence corrode trust in democratic associations and institutions. The report concluded that algorithmic propaganda and cyber-troops used in social media are being used in 3 major ways by authoritarian regimes: suppressing fundamental human rights, discrediting political opponents and drowning out dissenting opinions (Bradshaw, 2019).

By exerting media censorship and limiting public sphere participation Cuba's authoritarian government opposes "political pluralism" (Hoffman, 2011, 6). However, growing opposition and political dissidence has emerged since the internet became available in Cuba. Stephani Vicari (2015) analyzed the developments of the Cuban blogosphere. She arrived at the conclusion that blogging exposes users to topics which contribute to reclaiming the political discourse arena, even under state censorship (Vicary, 2015, 493). Vicari's research shows that 90% of the blogger sites in Cuba expressed political opinions about domestic related matters (2015, 509). The creation of the blogosphere has brought forth virtual social interactions that provoke users to engage in political debates. Accessibility to the net to create blogging sites bridges a gap and circumvents the lack of civil liberties and other limitations faced by Cuban dissident society. Yet, the challenges persist. The Cuban authorities exert complete control to limit connectivity by blocking and monitoring internet users regularly. An assessment done by Freedom House analyzed the levels of digital freedom of the net in Cuba by looking at three categories: obstacles to access, limits on content and violations of user rights (Freedom House, 2019, 25). Cuba was rated as the 4th worst country in internet access and labeled as "not free." Even though internet access is a doorway to democratizing ideologies, social media platforms and data consumption behaviors facilitate the collection of detailed user information

which easily increases surveillance and user self-censorship (Ikenberry, 2003). The Cuban state uses the Internet as a tool to oppress freedom of expression and increase population surveillance through methods like blocking signals, filtering content, taking down internet service and also inducing self-censorship (Nam, 2017, 540).

2 RESEARCH METHODS

This investigation draws from fieldwork conducted through WhatsApp group chats and two social media platforms. The purpose of these methods is to gain access to activists and political dissenters living in Cuba, to determine which mechanisms are implemented by activists and allies in nonviolent resistance against the oppressive tactics of the government as they organize in reclaiming political discourse space. To address the overarching question of this investigation I opted to do a remote ethnography. Using online tools to perform a digital ethnography afforded me the ability to evaluate the digital participation of Cuban activists in social media platforms. The nature of my inquiry led me to engage in the analysis of Cuban cyber-activism through the critical observation of computer-mediated interactions. Using virtual ethnographic methods of participant observation and semi-structured interviews, I joined public forums, followed activists, independent journalists, and digital newspapers on Facebook. However, this was limiting because the dissident groups I sought out to research restricted access of outsiders to prevent attacks from pro-revolution supporters. After a failed attempt to simply join online groups to research activism, I realized most online users were cautious when speaking to me. I needed to build rapport with the activists and my initial method would have taken too long to gain their trust. This is when I decided to reach out to Cubalex to work with them as an intern. Cubalex is a nonprofit organization that provides pro bono legal assistance to victims of human rights violations and groups in vulnerable situations in Cuba. The organization defends and promotes human rights through national and international law representation. The human rights law perspective captivated my interests because it is an ideal approach to activism work. I chose to work with Cubalex because the organization had a strong online presence. Also,

Cubalex's social media demonstrated a wide network of Cuban activists. Cubalex holds significant social status among Cuban activists and affiliation with the organization increased trust and access to more prominent figures of current Cuban activism. When I presented my interests to Cubalex's director, Dr. Diversent, a plan was devised to monitor social media platforms to assist and document social denunciations deriving from victims in Cuba. The Cubalex team had become aware of a growing number of human rights violations denunciations made online by Cubans living in the island. A mutual interest to tap into virtual networks would benefit Cubalex's purpose to represent victims of violations and grant me entry to groups of human rights activists and political dissidents in Cuba.

As a method, online content monitoring provides a closer view of the situations experienced by individuals who are stigmatized for demanding human rights and freedom to dissent against governmental processes and institutions. I chose a public social media platform as the main field site for participant-observer activities. My field site is dozens of Facebook pages and groups. I conducted observations of over 150 hours of live-streamed Facebook videos from activists and conference-style streamed videos from independent magazines. I read posts and the comments sections from public Facebook groups of Movimiento San Isidro (MSI), Movimiento Cubano por la Libertad de Expresión (MOLE), Alza Tu Voz among many others. Independent journalists and activists managing these pages and groups use the live stream feature in Facebook to engage their audiences in a sociopolitical discursive space that is not available to Cuban citizens in the offline world. Although social media platforms are regarded as public space (Bonilla, 2015) with access to a larger audience of friends and followers, I sought verbal consent from activists, independent journalists and five acquaintances who want to remain anonymous, to use and analyze the information shared on these pages. The content feed produced by the

Facebook groups was monitored several times a day by members of Cubalex and me. All relevant content was shared through a private Cubalex WhatsApp group chat where the members worked to categorize themes and trace all denunciation posts made by online users. This process allowed me to identify patterns of the repressive attacks from government state Security and activism efforts. Since, gaining community trust is paramount, I created a private Facebook profile to demonstrate my Cuban identity, affiliation to Cubalex and alliance to the dissident community. A separate profile also allowed me to participate in online public conversations with other users. In addition, I described my ethnographic and anthropological research objectives on my profile.

My profile photo indicated I had visited a neighborhood in old Habana and uploaded several photographs of other places in Cuba with my family. Over my profile image I used a photo frame which indicated support for the Cuban “Exprésate” campaign. My profile biography included a description regarding the anthropological investigation about online interactions and Cuban activism. Also, since I started my research using this profile, I posted twice each month a brief disclosure of my ethnographic research intentions and encouraged my online friends to ask me any questions. Part of the research proposal to the Institutional Review Board was to present to the online public audience my investigation interests and goals. All the observed virtual content took place in public Facebook forums.

The task Cubalex conducts is that of gathering evidence of repressive tactics, but from this, I was able to look at data to trace activists’ performative work. Although the combined efforts of the endeavor are intertwined because the victims who make online denunciations tend to be political dissidents, my focus laid elsewhere. I wanted to learn about activism efforts in Cuba and its challenges, while the organization centered on gathering evidence of human rights

abuses and offering legal advice to the victims. Cubalex's focus is to transnationally support activists in Cuba, but this research concentrates on the ethnographic aspects of online dissent and contestation of political discursive spaces through the perspective of human rights. Working with the organization allowed me to interview a group of 10 salient intellectuals and artists who live in Cuba. Some activists whose cases are handled by Cubalex for legal advice and other procedures were approached by the director and me to participate in a series of interviews. Dr. Diversent wanted to provide a space for activists to speak about their challenges while I was also interested in the ethnographic data the opportunity could provide.

In collaboration with Cubalex, I developed a sequence of questions tailored to the background of each interviewee. The interviews performed with Cubalex then became part of a weekly Facebook series called "Defensores." Initially, these interviews were live streamed on Facebook, but we quickly learned this added a new layer of challenge. Each time we attempted to contact a scheduled participant for the live interview, the signal would fail, their mobile data disappeared, and we were simply left staring at a frozen image. It was decided by Alain Rafael Dueñas, Cubalex's tech specialist that interviews needed to be recorded after midnight when internet use decreases. Participants were also asked to download a VPN to enable the Zoom application on their phones or laptops. We also learned to not make any announcements on social media about upcoming interviews because it coincided with mobile data plans being drained and internet blackouts for the activists. We had to work around the censorship by pre-recording the interviews and then releasing the edited version on Thursdays of each week. This way, we could announce the interviews with anticipation but avoided the censorship tactics. In preparing activists on what to expect of the interviews, I maintained contact via WhatsApp and explained what the interviews entailed. I provided them with a set of questions beforehand to give them

time to prepare and requested photographs of them engaged in their work. The images were used to make the advertisement content to announce the interviews.

2.1 Participants in this Investigation

Once the participants and I had established a relationship through Cubalex, I explained to the participants my research intentions separate from the organization. A total of ten agreed to participate in semi-structured interviews and six of them remained in contact throughout this investigation. For the interviews, I followed protocols of confidentiality to protect the safety and identity of my interviewees. However, the participants recruited via my work with Cubalex are recognized figures and all ten of them feel safe with me using their actual names. During the interviews, I focused on learning about their reasons for activism, how they arrived at the decision to confront authorities with their work, and what are their hopes for the immediate and distant future. The conversations focused heavily on the challenges, the limitations of their efforts, the roadblocks systematically installed by the government to impede them from engaging in civic action. The interview process was difficult because data messaging and calls are very expensive for Cuban activists. Therefore, I decided to make a contribution by depositing directly on each cellphone account through the cellphone application CubaTel. It is important to mention, this is the only direct form of material contribution I could safely offer them.

The activists interviewed in this project approached their activism style in diverse ways according to their background formation and careers. I began the interview process with Lartiza Diversent, a civil rights lawyer with a strong commitment to defend human rights in Cuba. A little over a decade ago, Laritza had a blog about laws in Cuba while also working as an independent journalist. A year later, in 2010, she founded the nonprofit Cubalex to offer legal

advice and representation to inmates and activists in Cuba. However, seven years later, Laritza and the Cubalex team were pushed into exile by the repressive political police. After a brief but difficult transition as newly arrived migrants, the Cubalex team revamped their work efforts and picked back up where they had left off. Now Cubalex offers the same legal advice transnationally from the United States to Cuban dissidents. Laritza said she was threatened to never return to Cuba because she would be charged with a fabricated crime. Aside from feeling passionate to defend human rights and expose injustices, Laritza is driven by the hope to see her mother again, who had to stay in Cuba. Laritza works hard to get reports written to engage international actors to address human rights violations in Cuba. She wakes up at random times of the night to work, to reply to text messages from individuals asking for her help. People who live in Cuba text her to the Cubalex WhatsApp number that is displayed on the website and on the Facebook page. Laritza addresses all requests and questions with utmost care and urgency. Her level of dedication to advocacy work is admirable.

Alain Rafael Dueñas is the content and video producer of Cubalex. Alain shared some of his childhood memories and how he grew up “always a rebel” never fitting within the cultural norms of Cuban society. Alain said that growing up in Cuba the pervasive ideology was constantly present in the school system where the students have to repeat “Patria o muerte” and “Seremos como el Ché” (We will be like Ernesto *Ché* Guevara). Alain said that as a young boy the constant chanting of slogans created a neurological synapsis in his brain where he never analyzed what he was repeating or why. Rather, Alain concluded “I believed in the system and that I would be like *Ché*.” Later, as an adult, Alain contemplated his personal reasons to migrate out of Cuba. The ideological pressure of the communist party did not give room for Alain to think of his spirituality or his personal concepts of how to lead his life. Alain told me that “Cuba

expels you when it cannot digest you,” meaning that the hegemonic forces are always working in favor of shaping the minds of the citizens to be guided by the goals of the Revolution. Alain’s efforts as a Cubalex member are fueled by the frustration that comes with injustices and violation of human rights of his peers. Many of the activists Cubalex represents are Alain’s friends and acquaintances which makes him feel much more involved in providing them with support.

The activists who live on the island and collaborated with this project are the following. Yanela Lucia Reyes Jimenez, a 38-year-old mother of two teenage girls. Yanela describes herself as an independent activist and human rights defender, who also worked in collaboration with the Julio Machado Academy for activists. Yanela wants to live in a society where women’s rights are a central focus. Currently she devotes her time to doing online advocacy for MSI and UNPACU and others. Yanela uses her social media platform to make denunciations of human rights violations but also to demonstrate support with other movements and activists.

Yanisbel Valido Pérez, the delegate of the PCID, an independent party for a democratic Cuba and she is also an active member of the opposition organization Civic Command Leoncio Vidal. She decided to join the opposition because the father of her children was charged with attempting to illegally leave the country. Yanisbel mobilized to find resources to help him and the human tracking charges were dropped. At this point she realized that joining the opposition was a method of defense to face the regime and the abuses they were committing against the father of her children. Yanisbel said she owes everything she knows to Idania Yanez Contreras, the former president to the Coalición Central Opositora (Central Opposition Coalition). Yanisbel continues to use online platforms to bring awareness of the abuses perpetrated by state agents against her and her family. Without the visibility of social media spaces, Yanisbel says her activism and opposition work would not have the same impact.

In addition, two independent journalists also participated, Camila Acosta and Iliana Hernandez. As colleagues, they have collaborated in several projects. Both women use their social media platforms and write articles to offer their support to various social movements. Camila Acosta collaborates with CubaNet and ABC international as a reporter. Camila received her journalism credentials after she graduated from the University of Habana, but the government revoked it after she wrote subversive stories. Camila wants a diverse Cuba, where everyone has freedom to voice their thoughts. Camila says journalism has given her the opportunity to bring attention and help the individuals who are most oppressed.

Iliana Hernandez works for CiberCuba Noticias and live streams her program "Lente Cubano" via Facebook weekly. Iliana is also recognized as a member of the MSI after joining them in several performances. She has collaborated with opposition groups and ever since she has been regulated by the authorities. Iliana lived in Spain for several years but when she returned to Cuba, the government placed travel restrictions on her and she has not been able to return to Spain. She is highly optimistic and always reminds her online followers that "this year the dictatorship will fall." When I spoke with Iliana in the year 2020, she was convinced that the efforts of activism have been stronger, there are more alliances between opposition groups and activists. Which made her confident to predict that the country of Cuba would go through a major political reformation reform or transformation. Iliana's prediction is based on observations she and other colleagues have witnessed in recent years with the advantages of social media to expand democratic spaces in the island.

Camila Acostas also put me in contact with Juan Michel Lopez Mora, The public relations delegate of the opposition group, Partido Autónomo Pinero (PAP). Juan Michel began working with the political opposition group when he was just 18 years old in 2018. Nowadays,

he is in charge of the department of public relations and works to gain visibility internationally by networking with various human rights organizations. Juan Michel shared how the efforts made by the members of the PAP helped the organization be recognized as a political opposition party by international organizations like the National Democratic Institute (NDI), and the Center for the Opening and Development of Latin America (CADAL). Both are human rights organizations that work towards strengthening democratic institutions around the globe in collaboration with civil society organizations.

Juan Michel was involved as a young pastor in the church of Nueva Gerona in Isla de la Juventud but was banned from participating due to his human rights advocacy work. The explanation he was offered by the church in his community is that they had been warned not to allow him to participate in the church activities any longer because of his involvement with human rights work.

Iris Ruiz Hernandez artist and vice-coordinator of MSI group, agreed to a brief interview. Iris has over a decade of experience working with independent civil society and artists. She self-identifies as an independent artist and cofounder of MSI. Iris graduated from the National Art Institute with pedagogical focus on theater and performing arts. As an activist, Iris is interested in initiatives to reclaim symbolic political spaces to expand self-expression. For the last 11 years, Iris has dedicated herself to creating campaigns as cultural resistance because she considers that culture is transversal to the ideology of the Cuban government. Iris emphasized that social media platforms have expanded the reach of their audience inside and outside Cuba. Iris explained that access to public online platforms engages Cubans in multiple debates about the future of the country and how to achieve social changes.

I also interviewed Osmel Adrian Rubio Santos, who goes by Adrian. He is 18-years old, making him the youngest member of the MSI. Adrian identifies as activist and human rights defender. He told me he wants to study human rights and he is the prospective student of a program for social leaders in Washington. Adrian hopes he is accepted in the program because he wants to learn more about how to defend the rights of LGBT community in Cuba. Adrian is still learning and following the steps of other activists. He has taken initiative to imitate other performances by other activists and included his own interpretation to fit his opinions and personal frustrations against the Cuban government.

Lastly, Marthadela Tamayo, a lawyer and member of the Citizen Committee for Racial Integration. Marthadela is 36 years old and lives in Holguín, although she is originally from Grandma. In 2009, Marthadela was faculty at the Rubén Martínez Villena school, but was expelled because she was involved with the activist group Partido Liberal Cubano. Marthadela's affiliation to the group made her a target of political discrimination. After this event, she became interested in topics about human rights intersectionality with gender and race in Cuba. As an activist, she worked with other civil society organizations in a project called Consenso Nacional Cubano (National Cuban Consensus) a project with the goal to advance reforms in the electoral laws.

As a supplement to my investigation, I asked people from my personal network if anyone was willing to be interviewed. I sought the perspective of “average” Cuban citizens. Although this network is not representative of the notion of “average” citizen because such a thing does not exist, these interviews provided valuable context, and a window into the perceptions online users hold of the current digital social movements.

Through my personal network, I was introduced to a WhatsApp group chat of contacts who gave me consent to write about their experiences as they interact online with other groups. This group chat has a total of seven members, five live in Cuba and two are exiles. The names and identity of the members belonging to this chat will not be disclosed for safety reasons. They are most vulnerable compared to the activists interviewed because they do not have large audiences of online followers to buffer any possible attacks by the political police. In addition to giving them pseudonyms, in this text I also blend elements of their identities and stories, in order to further protect them. The five members from this group chat who spoke to me engage in a discrete style of activism. They are allies in support of the activists who produce and disseminate content. Their engagement takes the form of clicktivism, with discrete political opinions. Clicktivism is online advocacy by engaging in sharing, liking, or commenting on blogs, posts, videos and other media. Clicktivism is a conservative way of participating online without the need to disclose personal opinions to family, friends and coworkers. Each of them have personal interests to protect, which include their families and livelihoods. Although their engagement is not public, it is also significant because it shows their own personal conflicts with censorship. They want to participate openly in support of the current movements but also abstain from publicly supporting other activists, due to fear of stigmatization in their communities. Their perspectives also offer insights to which digital campaigns or messages they consider to be effective.

2.2 Netnographic Method

Netnography is defined as "a new qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to study cultures and communities that are emerging through

computer-mediated communications" (Kozinets 2010, 12). The implementation of (n)ethnographic methods in this research illustrates the cultural and historical embedded context of Cuba's socio-political environment by offering a holistic perspective of interaction patterns among individuals (Boellstorff, 2012, 41). Virtual ethnography provides anecdotal accounts from etic and emic perspectives, which aids this investigation's interpretation process of activists' civic action. Participant observation as an inductive framework of research allowed me to follow questions, issues, and themes based on newly learned online information. Specifically, the use of netnographic methods supplements the observation of public, computer-mediated interactions of Facebook users and WhatsApp group members.

Robert Kozinets (2010) indicates that netnography is a participant-observation approach useful to identify nodes in social networks, the manifestation of cultural aspects and online social interactions. I interviewed a total of 15 activists, independent journalists and individuals who are not actively engaged in political dissent due to fear. Using network sampling (Russell, 2011, 147-148) is an accepted method for gathering data when few members belong to the group and are spread across large distances. Network sampling method is the most feasible way to gain access to hard-to-find Cuban dissidents residing in Cuba due to their frequent marginalization and harassment from the political police. Another benefit is that it can define the networks of activist groups in question. This research is based on computer-mediated interactions related to *cyber*-activism in Cuba, and thus all communication was via WhatsApp's texts and voice notes. An added affordance of this method of communication is the end-to-end encryption to protect the activists' identity and privacy.

Using ethnographic network mapping helps to answer the question of how activists, artists and independent journalists are working together within Cuba and transnationally. This is

vital to understand the organizational patterns, shared goals, creation of alliances, and overall growth of civic engagement of civil society members. Observing the organic affiliation and social exchanges within activist groups enhances the understanding of the culture context of the need to engage in civic participation.

During days of extreme harassment or restriction of mobility by the political police, activists turn to the Google mapping tool and track police activity to denounce police-activist interactions. Introducing Google's mapping tool as a supplement to physically track activists' performances in Habana served to understand distances and physical barriers experienced outside the digital world. The point is to observe how the regions within Habana are civically engaged, and how frequent are the encounters with the police. The main field site for participant-observer activities was public platforms used by Cuban activists to disseminate their opinions. These field sites observed were Facebook and WhatsApp groups. Observations included live-streamed Facebook videos, tweets, commentary, posts, and the comments sections from public Facebook groups like Movimiento San Isidro, Movimiento Cubano por la Libertad de Expresión (MOLE), and Alza Tu Voz.

2.2.1 Netnographic Data

To achieve a cultural baseline of current concerns among citizen activists and further illuminate the cultural context of cyber activism, I analyzed archived data, elicited data, and fieldnotes data (Kozinets, 2010, 98). The three types of cultural data collection are captured through the netnographic method. Archival data are digital material that was previously created without the researcher's interaction. This data includes communication between online users. Archival data offer rich content that expands knowledge of historical and cultural knowledge.

Observational archived data of past interactions are readily available in online communities. This method is useful when faced with cultural characteristics of non-textual symbolic language expressions found in meme images, the use of emojis, and other images. The internet as a social sphere has generated its own expressive and artistic context, therefore, attention to memes, punctuation, and emojis are part of the analysis to reveal subtle facets in online user discourse. Elicited data are created with the interaction of the researcher and the members of the culture or community being researched. In the context of this investigation, I used probing questions to elicit responses during group chat conversations, interviews and online interactions with other users. Fieldnotes data are related to all observations made of the community in question, its members, the context of interactions and also includes the researcher's reflections of participating as community observer (Kozinets, 2010, 98). In addition to the overall content, I also monitored the types and volume of expressions of support, discouragement, or criticism activists receive in the online communities.

2.3 Data Analysis

This study borrows Kozinets' pragmatic-interaction approach to netnographic data analysis to examine online behavior. In the interactionist approach, the elements in computer-mediated interactions under scrutiny are written speech, including emojis, videos, humor, sarcasm, hashtags, and memes – all the encompassing “language game” (2010, 132). Kozinets explains that online communities “manifest cultures, learned beliefs and values that serve to order, guide, and direct the behavior of a particular society or group” (2010, 12). Following this thought, Annette N. Markman (1998) observed that computer-mediated interactions in the virtual world constructs the realities of the self through the exchanges of digitized information with

friends and community members. This extension of the self in a disembodied realm gives performative power to the user over the shared content. The social dimensions of participant online engagement and interactive behaviors offer observable characteristics of social organization (Hine, 2000). The observation of interactions among friends helped to map out how activists' groups are connected, which topic they equally support and where they diverge, the type of discourse themes, the means used to capture and engage new audiences. These social characteristics were analyzed within the digitized interactions and cultural context of Cuba.

All interview data was transcribed and uploaded into NVivo for coding. I created thematic notes from observations and interviews. Also, created folder categories of websites, digital magazines, newspapers, meme images, videos, and screenshots that I organized in NVivo to create nodes of information. Themes in the data were identified by looking for: repetitions, similarities and differences, word lists, key words in context and word co-occurrences. I created categories of the dissident community, social media platforms used, activism's goal in Cuba, governmental institutions that persecute dissidents and legal obstacles to advocacy, each with several subsets. Then, as I coded the data into nodes, the most frequently coded were revolution, censorship, methods of repression, social media as protection, conferences and networking, conflict of identities and opinions. These nodes helped me visualize where oppressive policies emanated from, and also how the methods of repression remain constant throughout the decades, giving repression varied forms. Lastly, the nodes helped me view a larger map of alliances between the community of dissidents.

Virtual spaces are new arenas contested by the Cuban state government and social activists. Shared media content is ammunition that is both beneficial and detrimental to government and civil society actors. This study's conclusions demonstrate how activists develop

their social capital to sponsor their efforts in maneuvering censorship to achieve the goal of democratic narratives, inclusive participation of all citizens, and increase ideological diversity.

2.4 Research Positionality

Growing up as a Cuban refugee in a small beach town in Saint Petersburg, Florida, I was isolated from the rich Cuban culture that saturates much of Miami. Most of my youth and into my adulthood, I never wished to pursue my own Cuban identity. I never denied it but always self-identified as a hybrid, both Venezuelan and Cuban. My parents and I first migrated to Venezuela when I was 8 years old. At that time, I adopted the new country as my home. My accent became more Venezuelan, I learned to love new foods, the sounds of new music, the warmth and love of the friendships that flourished in the four years we lived there. When I arrived to the United States, I was practically Venezuelan because of my accent and the type of words I used. My parents never developed accents; they were always very Cuban. With time, I ceased using Venezuelan-sounding words but never lost the accent. My family in Cuba always joked that I was no longer Cuban. Secretly, I did not want to sound Cuban. I disliked the accent and forms of expressions because I considered them harsh. As I aged into my twenties, I became curious about comments I had heard from my parents my entire life. I began to listen to my parents' stories to the point they would make themselves cry over the memories that caused them great pains. Stories of food scarcity, of being forced to skip meals so I could eat the food instead. Anecdotes of trekking the entire city of La Habana to find any type of animal protein during the Special Period era of the early 90s. My mother would tell me how people began suffering from optic neuropathy and beriberi caused by nutrients deficiencies. "People began to go blind from hunger" she would say. There were nights my mother told me she felt restless and hopeless but

there was something she would do that made her feel empowered. My mother accompanied by my father would leave our home late at night and hiding under the mantle of the dark streets and with her lipstick they would write on the walls of storefronts “Abajo Fidel!”

This research is driven by a profoundly personal inquisitiveness about anti-regime opinions and acts of resistance. Observing the increased online activity of Cuban activists and their audacity to voice their opinions piqued my curiosity. This led me to join Cubalex where I began volunteering in March of 2020. Currently, I am responsible for monitoring social media platforms, translating posts into English to reach international audiences, creating content and notes to post on the organization’s social media. Some of the most common denunciations I have encountered range between excessive fines, confiscation of goods, seizing of devices, arbitrary arrests and restrictions to mobility, among more. The goal of our efforts is to locate posts made by Cuban citizens living in Cuba who use social media platforms to denounce human rights violations or arbitrary treatment from the Cuban state Security. We also trace the work of activists and the performances as they expose themselves by demanding freedom of speech. At times, there are posts that derive from individuals who do not self-identify as activists but use social media as a tool to voice the injustice committed against them. These posts are related to unsanitary conditions in the bodegas, hospitals, prisons, schools. Posts also include reports on food shortage, the housing crisis of the deteriorated and crumbling buildings. Other efforts include creating, promoting and disseminating content regarding human rights, following the “Know Your Rights” campaign model. This content keeps civil society activists and citizens aware of protective laws and ways to handle police harassment. Other creative projects for the future are in the works to continue engaging the audience and continue cooperating with Cuban

advocates. Propagating the infographics created by Cubalex brings awareness on the sociolegal aspects of digital activism.

2.4.1 Ethical Concerns

The nature of this investigation raises a core ethical concern. During my observations, I presented myself as allied to the dissident community by supporting their posts through shares, likes and comments. This clearly shows I am not unbiased and hold a subjective view in this research. As a human rights defender, I consider modeling and performing freedom of speech a key element to introduce ideas of civic action. Consumed by the euphoria of cyber-social action and clicktivism, I carried my online discourse from a privileged position, from the safety of my home, thousands of miles away from Cuba and out of reach from the political police. I justified this form of engagement to gain friends and show allyship to opposition groups in Cuba. Recently, it occurred to me that my behavior online may be perceived as too aggressive by family members and friends who live in Cuba. Rather than modeling freedom of speech and demonstrating concern for human rights violations against Cuban dissidents, I may have caused some individuals in my friends list to further self-censor.

Another concern was which friend requests to accept. I intentionally left the privacy settings more open to allow for friend requests. Initially I sought friends and requested several individuals who had Cubalex members in common. As my friends list grew, the friend requests poured into my account from individuals far removed from the inner circle of activists and dissidents. I can measure the close relation by how many friends in common we have. As more time passes the friend requests pile but I try to maintain the network within the known or emerging group of dissidents. The reasoning behind this is because every time I accept friends, I

have to make a post where I disclose my intentions for my research. I have a feeling that each time I make an announcement of my research work my cyber-friends might self-censor. However, transparency is a necessary part for ethical standards of research.

2.5 Limitations and Challenges

Due to the nature of this investigation and its ethnographic focus on the experiences of Cuban activists as they use social media platforms as a tool of denunciation, this investigation's analysis is limited to the observations done through participant observation online and in semi-structured interviews. This investigation does not explore how activism work impacts societal changes outside the digital world. Although the online content uploaded by activists is mostly about their daily circumstances and confronting the political police, it does not address how activists work together in the offline world. This means that as a participant observer in a transnational plane, I have no access to strategic planning prior to the performances. Rather, the information is extracted from observing and participating online in live streams and conferences. The availability of internet-capable devices in the hands of activists has allowed this investigation to be possible. As a tool for activism, these devices have magnified their voices and allowed them to create amazing content to create awareness. Initially I considered asynchronous interviews using WhatsApp voice notes to be a downside of the technology approach. Then I realized that the brief gaps between voice notes allowed me and the person being interviewed to reflect on the responses. To probe for questions and encourage elaborate answers, I typed small comments after their recorded response.

Since social media is a vast database of posted content, I limited my observations to content that was posted in the year 2020 until 2021. At times, some videos would be reposted

without any context, date or information. It is difficult to determine the dates on certain videos that are posted online. Some videos are shared unlimited amounts of times and leaves me scrambling looking for other sources to find the date to have an idea of when and where the photograph or video were recorded and the source. However, since my participant observation work began during the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic, a key element that is visible is people wearing masks, discussing the pandemic, or other issues arising from the lockdowns and stay-at-home orders.

3 THE REVOLUTION AS A PROGENITOR

“The Revolution is as Cuban as its palm trees and rum” - Fidel Castro

The Cuban Revolution of 1959 transformed civil society by a process of institutionalization, guided by Marxist-Leninist ideals, to produce “loyalty and subordination to the Revolution” (Hoffman, 2011, 7). The ideological transformation of the country’s institutional systems adopted a paternalistic-top-down political organization. Thus, the government became the sole source of ideological reproduction in the country (Acanda, 2005, 132-133). The nation-state’s hegemony encroached on all aspects of the lives of citizens. The government held absolute control over the production of narratives and its dissemination. The centralization of power allowed for major societal reforms that in turn created new symbols and values related to the Revolution. The Cuban Revolutionary identity and sentiment are demarcated by the geographic location of the island, the maritime laws, political, economic and social isolation from the rest of the world. Rosa Muñoz and Mariana Ortega Breña (2009) explain that these characteristics “reinforce the notion of difference” that establishes Cuban’s singularity in contrast to other Latin American countries. The authors mention that Cubans have developed a historical sense limited to the triumph of the Revolution because it is perceived as the historical paradigm that engulfs all historical events. Such a point of reference splits the history of Cuba between before and after the Revolution. The Revolution made the previous government and foreign American influence responsible for all the societal problems experienced in Cuba. It also created a sense of new identity. The official government narrative asserts that the triumph of the Revolution brought forth great social achievements ending the high rates of illiteracy, corruption, racism, exploitation, prostitution and gender inequality. Muñoz and Breña attribute to the

Revolutionary political pride experienced as a narcissistic identity fused with symbols representative of Cuba, Socialism and Revolution (2009, 74). The revolutionary identity bases the sense of its glory in the accomplishments of state-sponsored, free medical access to all citizens, free education and heavily subsidized food staples (Muñoz and Breña, 2009, 75). The persistent sense of profound patriotism has been fomented through the centralization of power and fusion of "Fidelism" with national pride and the collective experience of struggle (Muñoz, 2009, 78).

During the 1990s, a commonly uttered phrase in my household was "*el barbudo está encadenao' de nuevo*" - the bearded man is chained up again - a colloquial and almost endearing way of referring to Fidel Castro broadcasting on all national television channels, through which at the time there were only two channels. During his long speeches, all regular scheduled transmissions would be cancelled and it was impossible to predict when Castro would conclude his speech. It was common to hear his voice coming from inside the Habana homes. Castro's presence was palpable and numbing, like the dull familiarity of the never-ending struggle and the silent contempt brought forth by decades of sacrifice.

Comrades: The revolution offers you work, sacrifice and struggle! The revolution does not offer privileges. Privileges are for the weak. For revolutionaries, history offers only one thing, the country offers only one thing - sacrifice and struggle! (Castro, 1963).

In this speech, Castro uttered the word "revolution" 119 times, while the word "struggle" was pronounced 30 times. This rhetoric was Cuba's constant refrain generation after generation. The

Revolution and Castro's identity became a single entity voicing the ideology in Cuban economy, sports, education, art and science. The Revolution, according to Louis Pérez, served as a frame of reference through which to derive a new understanding of the past and, at the same time, the context in which to contemplate historiographical advances" (1992, 56). Pérez clearly states that through the lens of the Revolution all aspects of society became a centralized paradigm through which history influences the cultural and political (Peérez, 1992, 56). The Revolution's hegemony thrust Cuban society into an ideological and theoretical understanding of inclusivity, altruism, and egalitarianism with all-encompassing, saint-like leaders and heroes as idols of the Revolution. In other words, the Cuban revolution of 1959 has been romanticized with metaphors and anecdotal experiences of struggles in the pursuit of a revolutionary utopia.

The amalgamation of the Revolution, Fidelism, and Socialism breeds a profound sense of indebtedness and conviction to the inseparable trilogy. Speaking of Fidel Castro invokes the Revolution and by default Socialism. Maria Gropas (2007) analyzed the mnemonic devices in the Cuban landscape that played a key role in the creation of notions that give meaning to the Revolution. Gropas states that the concept of the Revolution is shape shifting to fit different perspectives of cultural, political and society related discourses (Gropas, 2007, 532.). Lastly, I would like to add that the Revolution is a source of honor and identity for many citizens who agree with the state's official narrative. Similarly, Francesca Gallina's (2018) framework of analysis examines the government's propaganda in public spaces to shape community identity to fit the state's ideology. The centralizing doctrine of this discourse is to forge monolithic socialist-revolutionary values that citizens are encouraged to preserve and defend at all costs (Gallina, 2018, 63). In this manner, the Revolution is asserted as the heterogeneous parameter by

which all communication and forms of expression should follow suit to fulfill the Revolution's objectives.

3.1 Gray Quinquennium Continued

Soon after the Revolution's victory, Castro gave a speech directed at Cuba's intellectuals called "*Palabras a los Intelectuales*" ("*Words to the Intellectuals*"). Fidel Castro warned against subversive ideas and exclaimed: "*Con la Revolución todo, contra la Revolución nada!*" (Castro, 1961). "*With the Revolution everything, against the Revolution nothing!*" Castro's proclamation emphasized that anti-revolutionary sentiment among writers, journalists and artists had a limited space, and insurgent opinions would not be tolerated within the Revolution. During the First National Congress of Education and Culture, Castro reiterated that Cuban culture should be a weapon of the Revolution, a product of combative morale of the Cuban people, and an instrument against the penetration of the enemy (Black 1989). In this manner, the Cuban government subordinated artistic rights and converted art into the government's propaganda machinery to fit the Revolution's ideas of society (Pons, 2008, 43).

Cuba's *Gray Quinquennium* is a term originally used by Ambrosio Fonet (2007), a Cuban essayist and screenwriter, to describe the period which was characteristic of highly discriminatory and censored policies during the 1970s. Fonet wrote one of the most critical reflections of what happened during the *Gray Years*. In view of the events that took place, this concept was a benevolent way to define the worst and most ruthless anti-cultural politics orchestrated by the Revolution against intellectuals. The *Gray Quinquennium*, also referred to as the Cuban Stalinist period (Vincent, 2007), was an editorial gag, a relentless hunt of religious groups, a purge of ideological diversity and a scrutinization of "deviant" sexual behaviors.

(Torres, 2019). Teresita Pedraza (1999) addressed key reasons for the Revolution's urgency to dismantle institutional religions through implementation of policies, prohibitions and outright persecution. Pedraza indicates that religious groups in Cuba had well established networks of collaboration and organization (1999, 17). This era is represented as the most severe phase of artistic and religious repression that helped achieve the institutionalization of the Revolution (Black, 1989,109). Thousands of individuals migrated due to the persecution and those who remained suffered harassment, open discrimination in worksites, schools, were denied college education, committed suicide, or were sent to forced labor reeducation camps of UMAP (Military Unit to Aid Production) (Ocasio, 2002).

The Gray Years continue to resonate in Cuba's current social environment. It is a structure of self-censorship that works under the radar permeating society in a "private level of repression" and an "internalization process" (Black, 1989, 132-137). The notion of ideological censorship through suppression of artistic expression ultimately becomes internalized as self-policing and self-censorship (Newman, 2012). A state of constant surveillance thwarts communities' cohesive solidarity. Self-policing behaviors have eroded the cohesive community trust, which results in self-censorship and hinders the organic emergence of civil society. Jorge Luis Gonzales Acanda (2005, 133) explains that self-censorship can be amplified in settings where the culture of debate is lost and bureaucracy reigns (Acanda, 2005, 133). The absence of culture of debate in Cuba is visible in the interaction the activists have with other pro-regime sympathizers. During the encounters regime sympathizers invoke a narrative of being thankful to the Revolution and accuse activists of being a mercenary. Video conversations captured in public spaces and in front of the homes of dissidents, show government supporters publicly engaging in acts of violence and discrimination against dissident activists. All this takes place in the

neighborhoods of Habana and other towns in Cuba where activists and dissidents reside. The open rejection towards activists normalizes violence and demonizes human rights debates, which in turn, exacerbate self-censorship.

The perspective of social and moral control in Cuba approaches crime under the guise of preventative methods (Weissman and Weissman, 2010, 326). The establishment of the Committee for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR) volunteers in each block of each neighborhood engages the entire community with self-surveillance which can become “intrusive and intimidating” (Weissman and Weissman, 2009, 323). Habermas (1996) emphasizes that a “panoptic state” debilitates the public sphere and its private aspect (369).

The guidelines of the *Gray Quinquennium* formed the roadmap of the Revolution, in terms of socio-cultural and socio-political tactics characterized by censorship, persecution, and punishment. These laws and ideology continue to inhibit collective civic action and take form in the era of digital civic engagement. The discriminatory policies of the Gray Years remain in place since activists, opposition groups and other members of the dissident community are not allowed to hold any jobs. The state has control or influence over worksites and coerce employers to terminate an employee who is involved in subversive acts. All ten activists interviewed coincided; they were expelled from their jobs when their employers found out about the dissident work they performed. In the case of independent reporter Camila Acosta, who graduated as journalist from the University of Habana, had her journalist credentials revoked by the state. The same situation applies for art curator, Anamely Ramos, who was expelled from her academic work as professor in the Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA). Both women explained these coercive methods attempt against the livelihood of individuals to maintain control over citizens.

The demands made by the emerging civil society and Cuban citizenry is to be permitted to participate in the political arena, to be recognized as constituents of a society concerned by the urgent needs of their communities. The people and organizations involved in this research believe that the development and formation of civil society requires the engagement of citizens as actors in a process towards democratic change. Civil society in Cuba wants to achieve a level of legislative influence of public officials to coordinate efforts to support healthy and equitable communities. Cubalex's civil rights and international law perspective considers the right to assembly or coming together to express grievances, whether it is through a peaceful demonstration, a political protest, and even online gatherings as a primordial form of civic engagement. An essential job of civil society is holding the government accountable through the civic engagement of community members. For Cubalex, civil society is fundamental to the documentation of a country's circumstances; it can help communicate -- comprehensively -- to international organs the human rights abuses like in the case of Cuba. These organs then have the authority to intercede, influence, or sanction a nation violating human rights. Civil society must be inclusive and open to diversity, where human rights and dignity are essential pillars to the framing of a society.

3.2 The Internet and Cuba's New Civil Society

When the internet became available in Cuba it was not conceived to be a free space. The Cuban government has gone to great creative lengths to maintain control over internet accessibility. However, there are several benefits for the government to allow citizens to engage online. Internet and mobile data usage has increased exponentially in the last decade, generating welcomed financial profit. Part of this profitability is because the state-owned internet provider

keeps rates very high. While other repressive regimes may block social media, the Cuban government restricts internet access instead of outright banning the platforms. Activists could not offer a clear consensus as to why the government does not place a full ban on social media. Instead, activists speculate that the government does not have the needed technology to fully censor social media platforms.

The online sphere also offers new avenues for the government to heighten surveillance of specific groups of interest. Another benefit of the internet is that it gives the government another channel to promote and disseminate the party's ideology. For the Cuban government to provide internet accessibility to the citizens is also a public image management tactic to feign democratic operations. Unlike other non-democratic regimes, the strategy implemented by the Cuban government is not so much to ban or contain internet access but to decelerate the rapid expansion of internet connectivity and curb the growth of online subversive actions from dissident activists.

The government owned telecommunications company ETECSA (Empresa de Telecomunicaciones de Cuba S.A.) is the exclusive provider of the fixed telephone lines, internet, and mobile services. Freedom House (2019) reported internet access was prohibitively expensive, unreliable and slow. Cuban citizens pay for the most highly priced internet service when compared to the average monthly wages. According to the Oficina Nacional de Estadísticas e Información ([ONEI](#)) in Cuba, the monthly wages range between 757 to 989 CUP (Cuban Pesos), which averages to \$31-\$41 U.S. dollars (ONEI, 2019). Monthly internet and mobile services range between 500 CUP for 1GB, plus 50 mins to talk and 50 SMS. The slowest speed for at home internet costs \$15 for 30 hours (Freedom House, 2019). A large part of the citizens cannot afford internet service at home or a computer. With these high prices, people avoid platforms with videos because it consumes data too quickly. Cuban internet users are

limited by these high prices and have to choose to consume content that does not exhaust all the data too quickly. Digital activism and civic participation present a unique circumstance under ETECSA's monopoly.

ETECSA does not offer affordable flat rates for the internet or mobile services which forces users to find creative ways to purchase data packages and make them last longer. Participants explained to me the different methods they use on a daily basis to save their mobile data packages and extend the package until the end of the month. Normally, apps are heavy on data consumption, so users in Cuba say they download the "lite" versions of the apps they prefer to use. Lighter versions of the apps have a rudimentary appearance compared to the original and some actions are disabled but this also saves data. Users report that to use social media apps they have to turn on the 4G signal and to save data they turn it off again. They also deactivate automatic downloads and video reproductions to prevent a data hemorrhage. Users also recommend that notifications are turned off. If someone is successful at extending their data package until the end of the month, it is rare. According to Yulisa, a woman in her 50s, a Habana native, "it is really difficult to make it past 25 days." She explained to me she has had access to social media for five years and that ETECSA also forces users to consume all data before it expires at the end of the month. It is common for Cuban internet users to receive *recargas* (recharges) a mobile service that allows friends and family members living outside of Cuba to buy and deposit credits on the phone of their relatives in Cuba. Solis, self-described as a "discrete activist", explained that when someone contributes to his account, he shares part of the data with his two children and wife. Solis mentioned that since the pandemic began last year, the universities in Habana switched to online classes. "My priority is that they [his children] receive their education. I am not able to afford it but when I am notified about a recent deposit to my

account, I make sure my kids get enough data to do their school work.” Since COVID19 started, higher education has not been free. All students have to pay for the internet, in dollars, even when no one in Cuba is paid in the foreign coin

Activists also depend on the donations made by transnational organizations of allies. Independent journalists, however, who are contracted by nongovernmental foreign digital magazines and newspapers, have some funds available. However, Camila Acosta, independent reporter, explained to me that sometimes her work is difficult because reporters do not receive a lot of funds to afford internet access in Cuba. These limitations are one aspect of the censorship which internet users experience in Cuba. Nevertheless, when the proper device and internet package are acquired, participants explain they gain access to a space where they exchange ideas and debate about their political opinions. Activists, independent journalists and opposition groups use online tools as megaphones, content creation places and as a source of information dissemination. However, normal users who are not affiliated with any dissident groups, do not interact online as openly as they wished. Decades of sanctions have shaped the uniformity of opinions and encouraged self-censorship.

3.3 Gender, Race and State-Civil Society Relations

The Revolution’s ideology, in the Gramscian sense, imposed symbolic meanings on fundamental areas of civil society to reaffirm norms and values. The government implemented discriminatory policies against the dissident society to exclude them from participating in national dialogues. Cuba’s legal code limits individual and collective behaviors to guarantee the preservation of the Revolution (Fernandez, 2003). The state codified all government dissent narratives as a subversive anti-revolutionary act. In this manner, the state has jurisdiction to

respond in a defensive manner. Ariel Armony (2005) argues that the nation's defensive approach legitimizes state power and justifies coercive methods against dissidents. Civil society and state relations have been a homogenous product of the Revolution (Tulchin et. al 2005, 2) and the Revolution is prescriptive of all aspects of life, including gender.

Prior to the triumph of the Revolution, several remarkably diverse groups of suffragists, feminists and women's associations engaged in political action and activism (Ramírez, 2016). The arrival of the Revolution disbanded and merged all women's groups into the Federación de Mujeres Cubanas (Federation of Cuban Women) (FMC). In 1959, all previous women's groups were unified by Vilma Espín Guillois, the founder of FMC (EcuRed). Espín was a prominent figure who participated in key events that led to the triumph of the Revolution. She remained the president of the FMC until her death in 2007. Vilma Espín's marriage to Raúl Castro only weeks after the triumph of the 1959 Revolution seems to coincidentally fit with the centralization of powers under one party and one family. The main focus of the Revolution was to highlight its own achievements, but the mobilizations and advances made by women in favor of legislative equality and social integration prior to 1959 were disregarded and undervalued (Ramírez, 2016). The integration and dilution of the women's group under the homogeneous structure of the FMC encouraged members to renounce the past to build a new revolutionary nation and a new woman (Ibarra, 2018).

The female participants interviewed in my study reported that as Cuban women, they do not feel represented by the FMC. Yanela Lucia Reyes Jimenez, explained to me that it is not possible for one organization to provide attention to the different needs of all Cuban women across the entire nation. Instead, she considers that smaller community organizations should be allowed to help find solutions to current problems since the government is incapable of doing so.

Yanela, in partnership with members of Red Femenina, a social group for the interest of Cuban women, sent a letter to the FMC to demand for a law punishing femicide to be included in the Cuban penal code. There was no response from the FMC which confirms Yanela's observations that "if you kill a cow you'd serve more time than if you killed or raped a woman." Activists are concerned at the FMC's lack of engagement on this matter. Marthadela Tamayo, lawyer and member of the Citizen Committee for Racial Integration (CIR). Marthadela also wants the state functionaries to receive training to identify gender violence because she claims they lack preparation. Marthadela also expressed a concern about the government's refusal to recognize femicides which masks the issue and obscures the data.

Yanela said that since the Covid19 pandemic began all public transportation was stopped and travel was restricted. She has not been able to meet with her colleagues at the Julio Machado Academy, the center where she received training as an activist. A group of people who live near the academy managed it and educated anyone on the basics of doing activism in Cuba. The academy never received an acknowledgement or response. In the academy, Yanela learned about her rights, how to talk to police officers and how to use social media and her cellphone's camera to protect herself from police harassment. The new restrictions after the pandemic pushed Yanela to turn towards online activism and to expand her digital network. She admits social media and internet access have greatly influenced how activists communicate and organize at a national and transnational level. She has been able to take part and demonstrate solidarity with different online campaigns created by other activists across Cuba. The most important advantage is that she has access to information she did not handle before. Online, she learned about groups like CIR (Citizen Committee for Racial Integration) and ACI (Cuban Alliance for Inclusion). Both social groups advocate for the inclusion of all citizens in all spaces of society and the

advancement of afro-descendants in Cuba. Yanela is passionate about empowering women to speak up, to be daring and bold. Recently, Yanela began training on feminist activism. She said it helps her modify her activism style which was “very rough and brute.” She means that prior to internet years, they had to be prepared to face the police and there were more men than women in the activist group which made her feel like a piece was missing. Yanela explained she realized this when she began taking the online course on feminism. She is fascinated by the feminist approach to community activism because it teaches her to express herself through a perspective she identifies with and without the constant presence of the state’s ideology. The feminist course she is currently taking has her feeling empowered and optimistic. With this knowledge, she plans to join ACI or any organization she considers will work to protect women and girls.

The FMC does not protect female activists from state harassment; this exposes them to gender specific violence. To enforce the values of the Revolution, the state agents approach the husbands of female activists and encourage them to physically intervene to prevent the activist women from going outside their home to engage in activism work. Laritza Diversent, human rights lawyer and director of Cubalex, explained how state agents reached out to her ex-husband and asked him to intervene in her work. Laritza thinks the state agents may have been aware that she was a domestic violence survivor, and they may have tried to instigate her ex-husband into engaging violently against her. The state security agents fabricated lies about her private romantic life and labeled her adulterous. These violent techniques used against female activists are smear campaigns with intentions to disrupt the personal lives of the women to coerce them into abandoning their work. The private lives of activists become invaded by the constant surveillance of state security agents who weaponize intimate details of the activists. The attacks

targeting the interpersonal relations and unique characteristics of these women are a way of discrediting their work and stripping them of their womanhood.

Several women activists interviewed reported they have been intimidated by the police and state agents who remind the activists of their role as women. From the perspective of the state, the primary goal of all Cuban citizens is to fit into a role that serves and defends the Revolution. The dimensions which intersect with the construction of the revolutionary woman conflicts with women's advocacy in Cuba. state agents and police try to convince female activists by using vulnerabilities against the women. There are added vulnerabilities to being a woman and an activist because of the expectations Cuban society places upon them as caretakers of the elderly, children and defenders of the Revolution. Yanisbel Valido Pérez explained how the authorities placed her two teenage sons in an institution school for youth with conduct disorder. Yanisbel told me, the state Security agents mandated her sons to be interned at the William Darias school of conduct in the town of Santa Clara, very far from her home. This is just an example how motherhood becomes instrumental to control the activism of women. Yanisbel said her sons were interned for a period of three years from 2015 to 2018. She said, “they [authorities] did this to torture me.” Her sons were so far, she could only visit them once a week because transportation is highly unreliable. She further described that her sons lost weight because they did not have enough to eat. She would bring them food but they needed to eat it before visiting hours ended. “I knew they were hungry. They couldn't drink milk and the food was horribly prepared” she said with heavy aversion and rancor. Yanisbel’s children were sent to EFIs (Escuela de Formación Integral) which belongs to a network of schools throughout Cuba that intervene in the care and treatment of children and adolescents with behavioral problems. The EFIs are managed by the Ministry of Interior, a federal organ in control of the national

police, armed forces, coast guards and other groups fundamental to the preservation of state's security and the order of the country (MININT). It is conflicting to have organisms in charge of the safety of the country to also provide behavioral treatment for youth. The criminalization of activism is so pervasive that even children are discriminated against and diagnosed with conduct disorder. Activists and their children are considered to have antisocial traits with the potential to commit crimes against the community.

The intersectionality of gender and race also plays a role in the advocacy work led by Marthadela Tamayo who considers the Cuban government has ignored the existence of racism in local society. Seeking to end racism at the triumph of the Revolution, the national federation of Afro-Cuban societies was abolished and dissolved hundreds of organizations across the country (Blutstein, 1971, 97). The Revolution outlawed racism, racist behaviors and related topics as inappropriate and anti-revolutionary. Since the new Revolutionary government had legally abolished racial discrimination and prejudice there was no need for the 526 Afro-Cuban organizations that campaigned for racial equality (Blutstein, 1971, 97). The emergence of organizations like CIR have sparked online conversations about being black in Cuba. During an online conference of CIR in partnership with independent digital newspapers, activists and artists spoke on how racism manifests itself in their lives and communities. Black activists who dissent against the state's authority are often reminded that "without the Revolution black people wouldn't have anything." The expression attributes to the Revolution the achievement of eradicating racism and prejudice in Cuban society. The identity of activists as Afro-Cuban, then becomes indebted to a system that does not even acknowledge their experiences and heritage.

Marthadela told me that, for her, social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram are incredibly important in developing digital groups to debate and deliberate among

colleagues about which areas their organization needs to focus. Social media spaces have increased communication networks and benefitted project design arrangements. Marthadela advocated for the women in the poorest communities of Habana and Holguín, her hometown on the east of Cuba. She said, “women in the poorest afro-descendant communities carry all the weight of their families and live in extreme poverty.” Marthadela’s style of activism focuses on bringing attention to the lack of protective laws for women and children. Marthadela’s online persona is that of a loving wife, a dedicated citizen and an encouraging mother to her son’s extracurricular activities. Her decision to publish her personal life online is part of her activism work in developing an identity for the online viewers to judge. Likewise, Marthadela portrays herself as an approachable but professional woman with the capabilities of balancing political activism and still function by the norms of womanhood in Cuba.

3.4 The Proliferation of Cyber-Campaigns

During a live conference hosted by independent digital newspaper ADN Cuba streamed on Facebook, Anamely Ramos anthropologist and member of MSI, explained that Cubans living in the country have lost their horizon because “we have been surviving for a long time and surviving is not living. We have lost our horizon.” During this conference Anamely and other colleagues discussed the role of the Cuban citizen in civil society. Anamely’s argument was there is a great need to figure out how to channel citizen engagement and mobilization. In this conference, her core message was to invite people to participate in different ways that are tailored to the specific scenarios. Seeking for new horizons, according to Anamely, requires self-reflection and dialogues between community actors. In this section I discuss digital campaigns by groups and independent performance artists, released on social media platforms such as

Facebook. The campaigns were created with the goal to initiate and introduce Cuban citizens in the national dialogue, and each was specifically chosen because of the varied approaches to different topics. Each of the following campaigns addresses specific concerns but with the core concept of normalizing freedom of expression. The idea behind these campaigns is to generate a social movement and to encourage others to express their opinions.

Online campaigns have features to engage audiences with activities that promote and encourage participation. Several video campaigns asked audiences to share their idea of a democratic Cuba; other content engaged the online users in sharing personal experiences of oppression, and other campaigns used performance art to share and call attention to methods of oppression. All the activists interviewed used their bodies in civil disobedience as protest to the government system and used online vehicles to increase the reach of their message and immortalize their statements in social media. The following campaign is included in this section to briefly cover how social media mobilization was so effective during the pandemic. Social media spaces and other users encouraged the online mobilization of Covid-19 related messages. The Cuban government adopted the stay-at-home message at the start of the pandemic to curve infection rates. When the state began releasing official government messages with the hashtag: #QuédateEnCasa, it triggered online users to take part in a highly political discursive space at the same level as the government. This is a particularly political action to take because although it aligns with governmental recommendations, the citizen users have a participating voice during this world event. Cuban citizens began using this hashtag as a tool to engage in the conversation via Twitter or Facebook, they introduced themselves in the national conversation. Better yet, they sent messages speaking directly at national institutions, state functionaries and the president himself. Online discussions are generally considered democratic realms that embolden freedom

of speech and have an equalizing effect among the users. However, given the political environment in Cuba, it can also foster apprehension to engage in political conversations because it may lead to legal sanctions. However, the Covid-19 pandemic allowed Cuban online users to participate in a global and central discussion. Although the pandemic has been politicized in many discussions, the use of this hashtag allowed Cuban users to take part without fear of negative consequences.

Exprésate

The “Exprésate” campaign included a contest where activists encouraged the audience to participate in the campaign by submitting a poem, art, graffiti, or a short video where they express their opinions and dreams about Cuba’s future. The brief campaign video included several activists answering how they imagine Cuban society with freedom of expression. Kirenia Yalit, psychologist and leader of the independent civil society organization Cuban Youth Dialogue Table, explained during a conference from her Facebook page that self-expression is not only in writing or speech, but it includes forms of behaviors to seek social changes. Yalit also mentioned that internet access has increased communication between activists across Cuba. This campaign, Yalit explained, is the result of decades of censorship and of laws that directly attack freedom of expression. Decrees 349 and 370 restrict artistic expression and criminalize the dissemination of information online.



Figure 1 “Yo Me Expreso” campaign.

Credit to Mesa de Diálogo de la Juventud Cubana on Facebook 3/12/2021

“I Raise My Voice” Campaign

This campaign did not originate in Cuba. Yet, it is a good example of how activists used social media platforms. What is unique about this campaign is the approach to women’s rights to bring awareness to gender violence. I learned about this campaign through Yanela Lucía, who told me how she engaged using the movement’s hashtag. Yanela said she wanted to take part in the campaign to demonstrate her solidarity. She explained that she became an independent activist after the pandemic travel restrictions forced her to disarticulate from Julio Machado Academy for activists. As an independent activist, she mentioned it is difficult to find resources, this is why she used her hand and each of her fingers to send a message of unity and strength for women’s rights.



Figure 2 "Yo Alzo Mi Voz" campaign.
Credit to Yanela Lucía Reyes Jimenez

This campaign is similar in message to the “Exprésate” campaign because it motivates the reader to feel emboldened to use their voice against injustices. Both campaigns are also modifiable to whatever message the activists or individual may wish to advocate for.

“La Cola de La Libertad”

The collaborators of this initiative follow a similar format of the “The Baltic Chain”, a peaceful political demonstration which encouraged citizens across several nations to link holding hands. The digital campaign “La Cola de La Libertad” addresses a concern that impacts the great majority of the Cuban population, dissidents and government sympathizers alike. Cubans are familiar with the long lines outside food markets. The daily schedule of any Cuban will include standing at a *cola*. Standing in la cola is so common, I interviewed two participants while they waited in line. Iris Ruiz Hernandez, the vice-coordinator of the MSI movement stood in line to receive her household bread ration while speaking to me over the phone. I asked if she needed to speak at another moment, but she said it was fine to speak to me while she waited. I could listen

to the background voices asking who was the last one in the line, at which point Iris paused the conversation to address the person. While standing *en la cola*, Iris talked openly about how she had been abruptly fired from the Pedagogical Institute Enrique José Varona a university in Habana. Her employer told her she had been terminated due to “ideological problems.” This life changing event is what pushed Iris to get involved with promoting and hosting cultural festivals in her home or that of her colleagues. We had to interrupt the call because it was her turn to go inside the store for bread. When she reached back, she was home working on her secondary occupation as hairstylist.

La cola is a space where everyone becomes equal. It is also a space of uncertainty because most people standing in line are not guaranteed they will be able to buy food because the stores always have limited amounts of food items. Everyone must wait outside the stores to prevent people from taking more items than the rationed amount. It is also common for government police to stand outside the stores to control the long lines of people who wait their turn. It is not a new phenomenon resulting from measures to prevent the spread of Covid-19. La cola is the embodiment of decades of scarcity. La cola is a space of sacrifice with the hope to satiate basic needs. This space belongs to the people, to the Cubano *de a pié*.



Figure 3 “La Cola de La Libertad.” Campaign
Facebook 2/3/2021

The initiative emerged during Iliana Hernandez's live stream in February of 2021. Iliana used the example of standing in la cola to appeal to all the people who routinely have to spend hours standing in line. The campaign creatively calls for community members to join this nonviolent initiative without requesting people to participate in a protest. Instead, the national initiative is aiming at a spontaneous demonstration across Cuba. Another unique aspect of this campaign is that the organizers are not disclosing when they will make the call for citizens to join la cola. This strategy gives activists and other participants the advantage of the surprise element to avoid government suppression.

“No a La 370” Campaign

This campaign directly addresses the far-reaching measures that establish a legal framework to regulate the use of new informational technologies. A clever characteristic of the campaign is that activists turned the pandemic's mask wearing mandate as an opportunity to convey opposition to the decree. They used the pandemic restrictions to advance their message and outsmart the oppressive law. Activists explained online that police officers could not legally ask them to remove their masks because that would go against the sanitary ordinance to prevent propagation of epidemics. The campaign organizers produced several masks with the message and wore them in public spaces.

In addition, Camila Acosta, CubaNet's independent journalist, presented on her Facebook a petition to collect signatures to express opposition against Ley Azote (whip law) as activists have decided to name it. The signatures collected with copies of the petition were distributed among several embassies to raise awareness about the issue with other nations. Camila finds her resolution to explain that inaction will lead to loss of rights – “Today is law 370. Tomorrow there

will be another. This will not silence us.” The campaign focuses greatly on denouncing laws that prevent them from doing independent journalism. This is because independent journalists and human rights activists are suspected of exhibiting “symptoms of dangerousness” or indicators that a person(s) may be a potential “threat” to the regime (Black 1989,15). Charges of dangerousness or predisposition toward anti-government acts, authorizes the state to arrest and sentence individuals before a crime is even committed. All the activists interviewed in this investigation have suffered some sort of arbitrary arrest or domiciliary detention.

During a Facebook live video, lawyer Laritza Diversent explained the lengthy new rule is broad, abstract and encompasses a myriad possible behavior that could potentially set up citizens for failure and self-incrimination. This law allows authorities to make arbitrary decisions that vary according to concepts held by the enforcer. It gives power to state functionaries to review or monitor information that may be shared (sent and received) in any format and possibly any platform, although it is not specified.

A concerning section decree law 370, article 68 prohibits the following:

“Article 68. i) disseminate, through public data transmission networks, contrary information to the social interest, morality, good customs and integrity of people” (Gaceta Oficial 2019:12).

Applying this section would be problematic because concepts of morality and good customs vary greatly among individuals within the same society. Concepts of morality vary greatly between generations and in power dynamic situations. Further, the law allows for the seizing of devices like cell phones and computers that may have been used as tools to

disseminate information against the government. In addition to this a fine of 3000 pesos or \$120 dollars is applied. The fine doubles after 30 days of no payment, followed by the possibility of going to prison for not making payment. Laritza exclaimed “This is a draconian mechanism! \$120 dollars is excessive and abusive. Cubans cannot afford this.” The individuals sanctioned by the 370 responded online with images of the fines and the hashtags #YoNoPagoLa370 (I won’t pay 370) and #LeyAzote. A group of individuals also gained momentum refusing to pay the exorbitant fine. According to Laritza, the action of refusing to pay could have potentially affected a small group but a large group of people refusing to pay, would make it more difficult for the government to control. Laritza encourages everyone affected by this law to gather their evidence and submit a denunciation to Cubalex. The organization’s goal is to gather and present evidence to the international organs of jurisdiction proof that the Cuban jurisdiction systems have failed the citizens.

The target of this campaign had several important aspects, but the core message is unifying under collective resistance. Camila Acosta and Iliana Hernandez were penalized for the subversive content they disseminate online. Neither of them paid the fines and were not forced to do so. At the surface, this may seem like a triumph, but the decree still stands. Sometime after the campaign and the denunciations of 370 sanctions had dissipated, I inquired from Cubalex members if anyone had seen any more posts of users denouncing the 370. A member replied “it is there. Waiting for everyone to forget about it.” Cubalex members deduce from past experiences, that the state’s strategy might be to avoid penalizing citizens for a brief period of time to allow for the memory about this law to fade.



Figure 4 "No a la 370" campaign
Credit to Camila Acosta. Facebook 8/1/2020

4 ACTIVIST PERFORMANCES ON AND OFFLINE

Online streaming is a new tool that activists are learning to use. Participant observation in live streams and conferences revealed the inexperience when using devices and social platforms. Activists could be seen and heard trying to figure out how to silence calls and messages coming through the phone. In January of this year, Anamely Ramos went live for three minutes but she was streaming sideways. The following time she live-streamed, she made sure to ask her audience if they could hear and see her. Checking with the audience prior to starting a live stream has been more regular. In addition to human error, the quality of videos was initially low resolution, but it has progressively improved.

At the start of my investigation, my observations of online live streams by activists demonstrated them spatially segregated into their own homes. Plainclothes state security agents forced them to remain within their homes. This contestation of spatial mobility became an opportunity for dissident activists to livestream the harassment and arrests they experience on a daily basis. To show the online community the constant police presence, activists habitually scope the surrounding areas of their homes before stepping outside. They point the camera at the repressors standing at the corners or in front of their homes and also capture the number of the police vehicle that stands by to arrest the activists who try to leave their homes. For activists, it is difficult to determine when they will be arrested for stepping outside their home. Activists have learned through their experiences that the authorities increase the repression against them during holidays and memorial days. Several days before any key holidays, the police set up a siege outside the home of each activist to prevent them from congregating.

Each time an activist wanted to leave their home to buy food or take care of other responsibilities related to their livelihood, they were followed or asked to report where they were headed. A live stream published by Iliana Hernandez and other activists, they are seen negotiating with their repressors to be allowed to purchase medicine or food. Sometimes they are allowed to go but they are followed. In other instances, the repressors have told them that someone else in the household can go “but not you.” In these videos, activists always confront and challenge the agents and police officers. According to Laritza Diversent, the videos are useful evidence to present to human rights organs and international tribunals like the United Nations because these videos show the level of arbitrariness and repression from the authorities.

With phone in hand, the images of the interaction demonstrated how agents and dissidents contested physical space. Minutes before attempting to exit their homes activists called on their online audience and asked them to share the live stream and after they had a few hundred users watching, activists would begin sharing their thoughts and reasons to justify why they chose to expose themselves to daily violence. For the most part activists want a space to talk openly on their opinions and ideas. At times, the live streams were a catharsis to let out angry rants to diffuse and process their own emotions. To them, it is inconceivable to exist as human beings in a society where they are regarded as criminals or terrorists. The comment section filled with encouraging and also some undesirable comments. Nonetheless, the presence of a supportive audience of followers and allies encouraged activists to focus on their intentions. Dissidents prepare to face their oppressor; they would remind themselves and the online allies that “we empower ourselves! without asking for permission.” Walking outside their homes and taking a few steps away, two of the interviewed activists were stopped and sometimes arrested. The live streams published by other activists who did not participate in this investigation, were

important to supplement my observations to understand the physical surveillance activists deal with.

4.1 Live Streaming Nonviolent Resistance

Camera-wielding activists use their devices and online viewers as a protective shield of credibility. Activists use social media as an extension of their bodies, as a tool to represent their experiences and to have witnesses of those experiences. In this way, recording their own repression turns into a testimony that will hopefully awaken solidarity and the conscience of the viewers. Online witnessing is a potent instrument that increases visibility and empathy with the people who are oppressed. Activists usually show themselves as they are, in the privacy of their homes because they rarely speak freely in other spaces outside their homes. It is a highly intimate performance which leaves activists vulnerable. It demonstrates they have nothing to hide, and nothing can discourage them from demanding political debates and questioning the status quo. Activists and other regular people use the very walls of their homes to write political messages demanding justice and basic rights. Online users share the images of their homes with the painted names of family members who are political prisoners and demand their release.

It is also common for dissidents and activists to use their homes as headquarters of their organization. In this intimate space shared with family members, spouses and children, dissidents contest the hegemonic forces of the Cuban authorities. The opposition group UNPACU, based in Santiago de Cuba, on the east of the island, operates directly from the home of the leader José Daniel Ferrer. From this location, the group provides daily meals to the most vulnerable persons in their community. The UNPACU serves daily meals to individuals with substance abuse problems, elderly and single mothers with their children. The organization live streams the elaborate operation while following COVID-19 safety guidelines, encouraging individuals to

wear their masks and practice social distancing while standing in line to receive a bag filled with food. Jose Daniel Ferrer has streamed online the moment when the authorities have tried to shut down the charity operation. Fundraising and donations operations are illicit in Cuba and the government does not provide avenues for community members to organize donation drives.

Yulisa, one of the participants, shared a story of how she came in contact with the director of an orphanage because she wanted to make a donation for Christmas to the children. The director of the center agreed with hesitation but grateful for the help. Yulisa said she rode around Habana in her bike scooter picking up gently used toys and clothes from her friends and other contacts who pitched in. Once she collected all the donations, she headed to the orphanage to drop off the packages. Yulisa said she felt so much joy seeing the joyous faces of the children, that she decided to make a second donation. However, the director of the center felt it would be safest to not plan for more donation drives because she was afraid of the consequences.

The headquarters of the MSI movement is located in the old Habana neighborhood of San Isidro. The facade of the building looks in complete decay. The front door is made of several pieces of old wood and it is different dimensions to the frame of the door. Inside the home, the bars on the large window next to the door allows for the light to come in. There is no paint on the walls, no furniture, except for a small table with a small fan and one chair. The place does not resemble a house or apartment. Many old Habana buildings have gone through decades of remodeling by creative residents to maximize space. Activists of the MSI movement are people who have very little financial or economic possibilities. They have little available resources to perform so they use their bodies, their homes and voices to stream it online.

In November of 2020, the MSI members and a few other allies held a fourteen-day hunger protest and live streamed the process each day for periods of 20 to 40 minutes at different

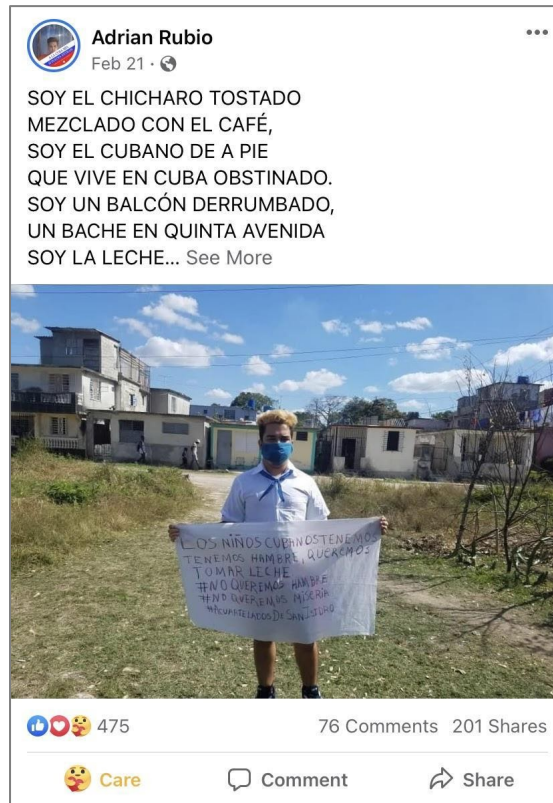
times of the day. The members said they were barracked, *acuartelados*, of San Isidro. The activists named the hunger strike performance as “Los Acuartelados de San Isidro.” The dissidents came together in solidarity with independent activist Luis Robles and political rapper Denis Solís. Both their arrest and sentencing triggered an online outcry from the cyber-dissidents. Robles was detained and imprisoned for walking a few blocks holding a sign that read “Libertad. No Más Represión. #Free_Denis. The use of the hashtag is important here, because it encourages viewers to use it to unify the voices. Denis Solís published a Facebook live stream of a police officer entering his home without a warrant. He demanded to see a warrant, but the officer did not produce the document. This infuriated the artist who began insulting the officer and verbally kicked him out of his home. Within days following the incident, Denis was arrested and charged with contempt. Cubalex director, Dr. Diversent reported that Robles’ and Solís’ judicial cases went through summary court where the individual is quickly sentenced without right to jury or trial. Activists mobilized sharing and creating content with the hashtag #Free_Denis. Unfortunately, until this moment, neither of them have been released from prison, but this does not mean the efforts of the online activism are not having an effect. The social movement is gaining momentum by practicing civic engagement. These acts of civil disobedience trigger debates online and these conversations are necessary practice as citizens. Discussions online are a form of practice of freedom of speech. The hunger strike by MSI became of national concern and the official government. The solution for the government was to send agents disguised in medical staff uniforms. From within the home, each person recorded from their vantage point how they authorities knocked the front door down with hammers and rushed in grabbing all dissidents. The authorities justified the operation because they were concerned about too many individuals living in close quarters during the Covid-19 pandemic.

4.2 Independent Performances

MSI member Adrian Rubio, told me how his experience during the hunger strike allowed them to learn how the government authorities function. Most importantly, he learned different views from his peers during the consecutive 14 days inside the home. Adrian Rubio is an 18-year-old activist, the youngest interviewed during this investigation and one of the members of *Los Acuartelados* of MSI (Movimiento San Isidro). Adrian said that during the hunger protest he prepared to maintain calm during the impending arrest. He mentioned they were aware at some point the demonstration would come to an end. They did not know how or when, but they were sure the authorities would find a way to stop their protest. During those days, he learned from more experienced activists to remain calm and not resist during the arrest. Talking to Adrian felt like talking to a very respectful friend. While interviewing him, I inquired about the family he lives with, Adrian quickly clarified, “I live with Anyell and her children, but I am gay. We are supporting each other during these difficult times.” Adrian and Anyell met during the MSI hunger strike. Together, in partnership to support one another, Adrian and Anyell experienced one of the most violent acts of repudiation from the Revolutionary fast response brigades. This incident will be discussed further in the section of “The Revolution’s Activism.”

After the experience with MSI *Acuartelados*, Adrian gained more followers, and he grew confident in his work. He uses social media to support activism of his peers and the LGBT community in Cuba. Adrian gained much online recognition for this performance where he wore the uniform of a school age child. The message he intended to send the online audience is the need for more nutritious food for young children. The caption of the post grasps the relationship with food and experiences which forge the identity of the Cuban child. In Cuba, access to nutritious and abundant food is not common for a great percentage of the population. The

performance is called “*Los niños pioneros tienen hambre*” - (the pioneer children are hungry). In his post, he wrote a brief poem as the caption of the performance:



*Figure 5 Independent Performance by Adrian Rubio.
Facebook 2/21/2021*

Translation:

“I am the roasted pea mixed with coffee beans. I am the Cuban that walks barefoot, that lives in Cuba fed up. I am a collapsed balcony, a pothole on fifth avenue. I am the promised milk that left me when I turned seven years old.”

This short poem summarizes the adverse childhood experiences faced by Cuban children with lack of food and exposure to deteriorated spaces. As a young adult Adrian puts forth his

experience roasting coffee and peas together to increase the amount of coffee. Following he mentions he walks barefoot, however, in Cuba this has a stronger meaning. It indicates the difficulties and daily struggles of walking by foot, standing in long lines for many hours to receive food rations, or walking to several different locations to acquire food. Being a *cubano de a pié* is someone who does not have an easy life with any sort of luxuries or the hopes to achieve positive changes in their lifetime. Adrian really captures the emotions when he mentioned feeling defeated and fed up. When he looks around and sees crumbling old buildings above his head and the pavement filled with potholes. In a way, he provides a round view of his experiences as a young adult and closes off by mentioning a primordial part of Cuban childhood. On the last line of his poem, he says he is the forgotten promise of the milk that left him when he turned 7 years old. This is something all Cubans can relate with. Milk and other dairy products are rationed for children under seven years of age, pregnant women (Tucker 2009, 2), and older adults over 65 (Benjamin & Collins, 1985, 330). The rationing system only provides milk for children until the age of seven. After this age, the parents have to figure out creative ways to feed their children.

Activists use their platforms and their homes and sometimes their neighborhoods as a stage to perform acts of resistance. Their objective is to trigger a reaction from the government's Ministry of Interior police to demonstrate the effects of thoughts and speech under a repressive state. In this context, willingly triggering suppression and harassment is considered a form of success to prove a point on the lack of freedom to dissent. Activists evoke repressive strategies from the state security to garner evidence of their oppression. Each time an activist is apprehended by the police, allies record the event and share it in social media. Activists publicly perform civil disobedience in the physical world while streaming on social media the consequences of their acts. An act of civil disobedience in Cuba, includes displaying, promoting,

propagating, any dissenting opinion or anti-government message. Cuban activists expose themselves to arbitrary arrests “like Gandhi’s freedom fighters... in order to show the world the true colors of an essentially repressive state” (Guano, 2014, 77). Activists enter the discursive arena and engage in acts that will bring them negative consequences to demonstrate the government’s repression.

Political rapper artist Maykel Castillo Perez (Osorbo) sits on the step of his Habana home facing the street while smoking a cigarette with his mask pulled below his chin. He holds his phone so close to his face, his virtual followers can appreciate a scar at the ridge of his nose and one can almost inhale the cigarette smoke through the screen. Osorbo is his stage name, which derives from the Yoruba religion and it means obstacles, problems or misfortune. During his live-stream he confronts the Cuban authorities rhythmically rapping “*Yo soy el Osorbo!*” (I am/bring misfortunes/problems). More than a battle cry, this is an introduction to who he is and what he represents. The statement stands as a rallying call to encourage unity among his followers and challenge the state authority. Osorbo engages his dissidence with his artistic talent. Osorbo spends a lot of his time online performing from the doorstep of the building where he resides. He talks to the online audience and simultaneously acknowledges his neighbors and other passersby who shake his hand, pump fists and wish blessing upon them. When the police are not maintaining siege of his home, he walks around Habana streaming and talking to the audience. Although most of his videos are rants against the government and the constant harassment he and his colleagues are victims of, Osorbo also educates his audience on human rights and activism work. Osorbo warns the viewers about his use of profanities and admits “I’ve got a fourth-grade education level. I grew up institutionalized” – Osorbo confesses to his followers he could never finish school and he grew up in the system for children with conduct

disorder. Although his personality may seem rough around the edges, Maykel Osorbo always speaks to his online audience with his heart on his sleeve. The live streams on his public Facebook page are monologues about his personal life, his convictions and future plans to resist oppression from government officials. In this online space, Maykel develops ideas for new performances, and he gets his inspiration from the repression experiences.

Although all activists are physically punished and tortured by violent police officers, Maykel receives a lot of physical violence from the state agents. He is regularly detained and questioned. When the questioning leads nowhere, he is left for hours under the hot sun, sitting inside the police car, with tight handcuffs. This is a common practice that several activists reported during interviews. After several incidents where Maykel was violently maltreated, he decided he would not speak to any officers again. This led him to the protest performance of stitching up his lips.

The procedure was performed in the home of the person who stitched Maykel's lips, and it was live streamed via Facebook. Maykel's spokesperson was independent journalist Hector Luis Valdez Cocho, who was present to explain to the audience why Maykel decided to sew up his lips because he refused to be forced to dialogue with the authorities. After the procedure was complete, Maykel and Hector walked towards the police station to appear for a citation Maykel had received. Stitching his lips as preparation for his citation sent a message of desperate resistance. Self-harm practices in the form of protest can be perceived as martyrdom. Most importantly, self-inflicted injuries as protest indicate the individual has few options left to call attention to the violence they experience. In the case of Maykel, sewing his lips communicated his refusal to hold dialogue with oppressive state agents and at the same time, his right to remain silent.



Figure 6 Independent Performance by Maykel Castillo (Osorbo)
Credit to Maykel Castillo 8/27/2020.

4.3 Private Levels of Repression

Dominant mechanisms of ideological mobilization reproduce ethical and moral values via societal institutions to influence the behaviors of community individuals. In this context, the supremacy of the communist political group in Cuba decides the intellectual direction of the society. For the dissident community in Cuba, it is an onerous task to penetrate the hegemonic cultural ideas of the revolution, socialism and Castro. The communist apparatus extends beyond the economic aspect of Cuban society. It is embedded in the cultural system and social relations of the citizens. The power structure operates through routines of mundane daily social practices which further legitimate the dominant ideology. Through this process, the authoritarian Cuban government gains consensus from the citizens who willingly or reluctantly contribute to the hegemony. The revolutionary pride is a brand that has been institutionalized and deeply embedded in all spaces of society which in turn shape opinions of who or what is socially good. In other words, the hegemonic ideals of the Cuban government penetrate the private lives of all individuals, especially civil society dissidents who are contained within routine discrimination.

In the world of activism, stigmatization increases twofold. Since any form of activism is contrary to the ideals of the Cuban government, discrediting campaigns are common. The

production and dissemination of acceptable norms is streamed on national television during prime time and printed on Granma, the nation's official newspaper. These main sources openly discuss the existence of dissidents but discredits and dismisses them as terrorist groups financed by foreign nations. The result is the stigmatization of activists and human rights defenders using coercion through systems of human association like faith-based and family networks. In his way, association networks work in favor of the hegemonic ideals to deter and censor subversive ideas. Here I want to extend on Gramsci's theory of hegemony to establish a connection between political society and the influence over the Cuban family. Political society as Gramsci defines it is dominant and coercive. In the Cuban case, the influence of political dogma reconfigured the role of the Cuban family moved towards a dimension that upholds the Revolution's standards.

Adrian Rubio told me he has suffered a lot of discrimination from his family members. Adrian Rubio has been accused of subversive counterrevolution crime by his own cousin. He mentioned his cousin works for the state forces but did not provide details to protect his identity. Adrian has been threatened and accused by his cousin to be sent away to an "*internado* for crazy people just because I am gay and an activist." Self-censorship is enforced by family members discourage activism work. He mentioned the only people that support him are other activist peers and his mother. Online, Adrian receives constant threats from anonymous individuals online. Adrian fights back by posting screenshots of the messages he receives and makes the government's state agents responsible for the threats.

Cuba's official institute for sexuality, CENESEX (Cuban National Center for Sex Education), advocates for the tolerance of the LGBT community. The center's director is Mariela Castro Espín, daughter of the leader of the communist party Raúl Castro and Vilma Espín Guillois, former leader of the FMC. As the director and sexologist of the institution, Mariela

embodies the contradictions of the state. Her father and uncle were responsible for the repressive laws and discrimination of homosexuality in Cuba but instead, Mariela has become the representative of those marginalized sectors (Negrón-Muntaner, 2008).

The activists I spoke with told me that it has become second nature for them to use the Facebook live feature. Activists are always on the look-out because state agents do not wear uniforms. Anyone on the streets could be following and observing them. Some have reported feeling paranoid and self-isolate. They fear meeting new people and sometimes fail to trust old friendships and even family members. To these activists, it is normal to feel distrust of new people and acquaintances. Navigating who to trust in the Cuban activist realm requires a balance of discretion, optimism, and risk. Not all strategic performances are shared with all members in a social group. Confidentiality is advantageous to working under the authority's radar. The people I interviewed have a general disposition to expect positive turnouts from their work even if those performances increase the risk to their safety. Few activists reported having support from their families, friends and neighbors. Their interpersonal relationships become compromised and people who were once close may turn their backs to them. Juan Michel Lopez Mora, a young man in his twenties and public relations delegate of the PAP, told me "I was kicked out of my own home. I have an uncle who lives in the United States. He helped me a lot. I have a place to live thanks to him." Juan Michel explained that his mother and family stopped talking to him for a period of a few months. The coercive threats the state agents implemented on his family damaged the family structure. Juan Michel is eloquent, soft spoken and with rooted convictions about necessary political changes in Cuba. Self-censorship is also enforced by family members who, in some cases, discourage activism work. In the case of activist Adrian Rubio, he has been

accused of subversive counterrevolution crime by his own cousin. Adrian mentioned his cousin works for the state forces but did not provide details to protect his identity.

Similarly, Camila Acosta is the most extreme case of activist rejection. Camila told me she has been evicted around 30 times in two years. Camila is originally from La Isla de La Juventud, a small island directly south to Habana and she has no family in the capital. She told me her only true companion is her Goethe, her German shepherd dog. Camila holds no ill will towards the landlords that evicted her because she knows they acted under the coercion of the state. Instead, she told me she feels sorry for them and the entire experience becomes monotonous but without feeling indifference. Camila's calm demeanor keeps her focused in her work as a journalist, giving visibility to those who have been disenfranchised from the Cuban society. Similar to the work surveillance done by the CDRs, the mechanisms of this infrastructure are present in the cyber-arena. The operation of institutional control takes place in the cyber-landscapes where *ciber-clarias* work in favor of the state to block and report the comments of Cuban users who form part of the dissident community. A *claría* is a species of bottom-feeding fish, like a catfish, that was imported to Cuba for consumption, but it became an invasive species. Some say *clárias* can crawl out of shallow muddy riverbanks to eat roaming chickens and other small animals. Cubans feel repulsed at the thought of *clárias*. Thus, the name is fitting to describe trolls that harass online dissidents. *Clárias* can also be understood as cyber-troops. Interviewed participants report that *clárias* are usually young individuals who are recruited by the state Security agents. Their work is to report counterrevolutionary behaviors and sabotage online dissidence by introducing the Revolution's rhetoric.

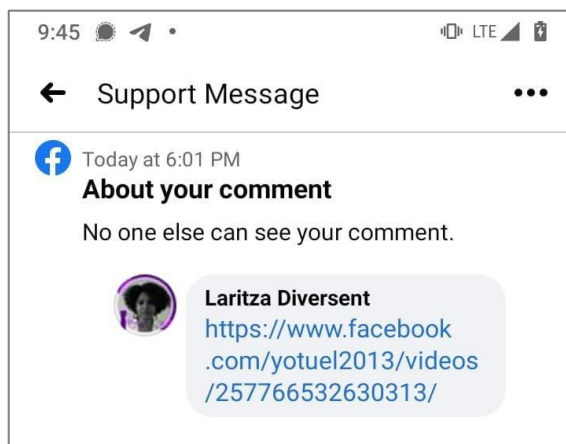
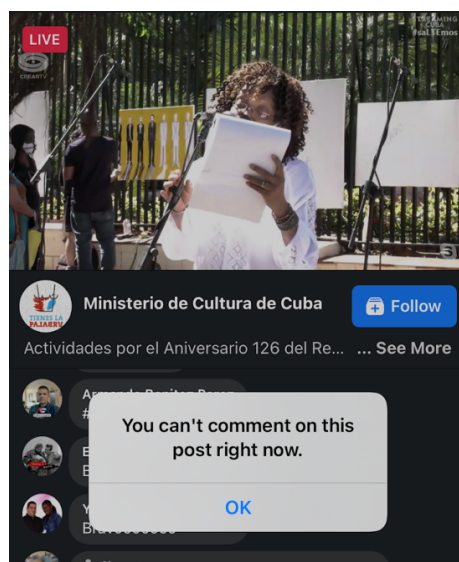


Figure 7 Screenshot. Credit to Laritza Diversent.

On this images Laritza Diversent attempted to share a popular song by singers Gente de Zona, Yotuel Romero, Descemer Bueno, Maykel Osorbo and El Funky Yotuel called “Patria y Vida.” The song has been endorsed by activists and opposition groups since it celebrates the activism by Movimiento San Isidro members (MSI). It is likely the link Laritza shared was filtered or reported.



*Figure 8 Screenshot. Blocked Message.
Anonymous user.*

During a live stream done by Cuba's official Ministry of Culture some of the users' comments were blocked or filtered. The user who shared this image explained she was only commenting "Patria y Vida" when the Facebook platform prompted this message. The Cuban state engages in filtering out words that the state considers subversive.

Camila Acosta, independent journalist, opts for introducing humor to her Facebook content by using satirical humor to challenge political norms and expose ridiculous penalizations for her journalism. Indirect forms of criticism are strategies used by Camila to avoid being flagged or reported while working on social media platforms. This gives her more time to gain support, construct a strong base of supporters while trying to poke holes at the regime. Similarly, Iliana Hernandez, tells me she finds joy in what she does and laughs in the faces of her repressors. Taking harassment with amusement to dissipate some tension between her and *la seguridad*. According to Iliana "when people see me laughing, smiling and making jokes as I am being detained, people will lose their fear towards *la seguridad*." She wants her neighbors to not feel afraid but rather learn how to handle these absurd situations with a positive attitude. Humor and sarcasm are important aspects of their work because it presents their work as peaceful. Iliana and Camila post content with serious tones but also use their platforms to release tension by making fun of authorities.

Social media platforms are center stage for activists who garner thousands of viewers and interactions within minutes of live streaming. The digital footprint of online participation and content creation threads a net of identities, ideas and styles of reporting and dissenting. This media gains immortal status and is endlessly reproduced. It becomes part of the vast network of information in perpetual growth. Social media sites are arenas of contestation between *revolutionary* and *counterrevolutionary* users engaged in political discourse. The expansion of

the Cuban public sphere aided by the availability of new technologies has increased the chances of opposition groups, independent journalists, bloggers, and nongovernmental institutions to frequently engage. Facebook's live stream feature changed the dynamics between police and citizen activists. Networks of allied supporters and followers facilitate user-generated content to be quickly disseminated. For the first time in nearly six decades, human rights defenders engage in political mobilization, resist, and contend the ideological production of the regimen. Nonetheless, it does come with a high price and it is a type of commitment that requires sacrifices, but activists say, "we are also the result of the Revolution." They are prepared to endure adversities and determined to create inclusive spaces within the Cuban society.

5 THE REVOLUTION'S ACTIVISM

This investigation focuses on the physical confrontation and struggle between Cuban dissident activism and its counterpart, the activism that is organized by the official organ of the Cuban Communist Party (CCP). The counter activism prepared by the regime is rooted in the narrative that the Revolution is the central ideology and the source of all well-being for the country and its citizens. CCP counter-activism performances are known by several names depending on which side describes it. Pro-revolution sympathizers refer to the act as *reafirmación revolucionaria* or *confirmación revolucionaria*, while dissidents and the opposition call it *acto de repudio* or *mitín de repudio*. A contact who lives in Cuba explained that, “a revolutionary reaffirmation is the euphemism that the dictatorship uses to name its repudiating mobs.” The displays are aimed at political dissidents and take the form of public shaming with ritualistic components developed in a ceremonial style, where the individual is admonished for violating social norms. The social phenomenon of “moral lynchings” directed towards dissident activists in Cuba is an attempt to enforce homogenous societal norms, send a coercive message of compliance and self-censorship (Diario de Cuba, 2020). In an interview by *Diario De Cuba*, Rafael Rojas, Cuban historian and essayist, describes these violent acts as “a variant of the pogrom or *escrache*” where the perpetrators engage in shouting “political slogans and moral disqualifications” (Diario de Cuba, 2020). The manifestations consist of exposing the victim to embarrassment, intimidation, verbal aggression, direct offenses and obscene gestures and phrases racist, homophobic and misogynist tones.

Several decades ago, victims of repudiation acts could not leave their homes because these Revolutionary confirmation acts could last up to several days (Reyes, 2021). My father

shared a childhood anecdote of his neighbor's act of repudiation and how they could not leave their homes. He also told me he snuck them eggs, milk and bread through a back window so they could have something to eat. Previous generations remember these events taking place during the 1980s, when Cuba entered a major political crisis triggered by decades of discontent and questioned the legitimacy of the authorities. The CDR volunteers organized to harass and hurl insults at anyone who demonstrated dissatisfaction towards the government's institutions or the president. Denigrating language was popularized by state officials and the president to label Cuban citizens who expressed a desire to migrate.

Actos de repudio in Cuba, throughout the last decades have gradually shifted their focus to aim at independent journalists, human rights defenders, activists, and political dissidents. Cuban activists have been marginalized and stigmatized in their communities and hold little political influence and no position of power. Thus, acts of repudiation profoundly exclude and humiliate the victims who stand powerless in the face of these organized performances. Such events are significant to this study because before the prior to internet years the conversation of acts of repudiation was established as an event that did not exist in the current Cuban society. However, since August of 2020, I recorded on Facebook, 13 of these political acts that took place against dissidents to silence them. Even during a pandemic year, the rapid response brigades organized 41 political acts of repudiation against dissidents in the year 2020 (OCDH, 2020, 21).

5.1 Characteristics

My recorded observations for this investigation, indicate that acts of repudiation have specific characteristics. *Actos de repudio* in Cuba, are masked as community or cultural celebrations, where loud music is played, and fun activities are performed. The event organizers

prepare exciting games for the children and fun choreographed dances for the adults participating. The festive mood of the event transforms gradually into an attack of moral disqualifications and false accusations. At which point the crowd starts to chant party slogans to praise the revolution and its leaders. They also use violent and vulgar language. The mob size and duration of an act of repudiation I recorded, varied between a few minutes to hours. The mob normally carries state-issued signs, banners from the FMC and large images of Fidel Castro, Raúl Castro or of the current president, Miguel Díaz-Canel. The official narrative of the state is that these acts occur spontaneously. However, according to all the activists I spoke with, the individuals who participate in repudiation acts are taken out of their workplaces during work hours by the organizing members of the rapid response brigades. It is assumed that some individuals are coerced or manipulated to participate. There have been acts of repudiation where school children are walked over to the house of the individual to engage in a celebration of the Revolution. The uniformed students are involved in the acts to create the appearance of an academic related activity. Human rights lawyer Lartiza Diversent, reports that acts of repudiation are coordinated at education centers to guarantee the participation of young students (Diversent, 2020, 4). These acts are always performed on public spaces on the streets directly in front of the homes of the recipients which shows the large-scale planning that requires detouring urban transit of vehicles and pedestrians. It is a show of power to obstruct an entire block to isolate the recipient from the performance. The measures taken by the brigade leaders exemplify the willingness of the government to direct funds towards an act of hatred that violates human rights, and most times encourages violence.

5.2 Resiliency Surviving a Repudiation Act

Iliana Hernandez, Anyell Valdez and Adrian Rubio have been victims of acts of repudiation. Both of them captured each of these events when it happened to them. Activists are familiar with acts of repudiation and usually can predict before the acts begin. According to Adrian and Iliana they noticed more people walking around their homes and did not recognize any of those individuals as their neighbor. The next action they take is to stream the unfolding events on Facebook live. As soon as they go live, they begin to explain what is happening and start asking the audience to quickly share the stream. The experiences Adrian and Iliana were similar but varied in level of violence and terror.

Iliana lives in a home that has a tall concrete fence around the garden which works as a protective barrier. During the Facebook live she showed the hundreds of online viewers the large crowd of people that gathered in front of her home. Closer observation of the crowd revealed that some individuals were wearing blue collar uniforms and another group wore athletic uniforms. During the event, Iliana was accompanied by her mother and other people who seemed protective of her and offered her support. The crowd of about 50 people arrived walking behind a white van that was playing music. Someone announced over the speaker “Hello everyone. This is an act of *reafirmación revolucionaria*.” Some of the individuals in the mob organize and rearrange the crowd like a choreography. The organizers move towards the front of the crowd the women who will yell the party slogans

Younger uninterested individuals, who stand neutral with their hands in their pockets were moved to make room for the group of women that began chanting the party’s favorite slogans “*Yo soy Fidel!*” and “*Patria o Muerte*” over and over. Iliana responded to their chants “this is my country too!” with a strong voice. After several minutes, the nerves and anxiety could

be heard in her voice. Nonetheless, she laughed out loud and mocked her repudiators. The entire event is based in division and hatred. The amount of violence in this instance was gauged and controlled by several men and women, who can be seen whispering in the ears of the people who are screaming. Iliana streamed for almost 30 minutes and the act was not over yet. When Iliana streamed a second time around the crowd had dispersed but a few stragglers remained behind, still yelling insults towards her.



Figure 9 Acto de Repudio.

Credit to Iliana Hernandez on Facebook Dec. 8, 2020.

Repudiation act in front of Iliana Hernández's home.

The manifestants held a flag of FMC.

The violence of a repudiation act is more difficult to witness when there are children present. Anyell Valdéz and Adrian Rubio endured 15 long minutes of violent discrimination. The entire event was live streamed by Adrian from his Facebook account. The activists Adrian and Anyell, had written a message on the facade of the house. The message cut in direct opposition

to the communist party's slogan "*Patria o Muerte.*" The new resistance slogan for activists is "*Patria y Vida*" which is the name of a song authored by several exiled Cuban singers.

Homeland and Life is the new mantra by which many dissident activists feel reinvigorated. The white words written by hand on the discolored walls of the house, where Anyell lives with her young children and elderly mother, attracted negative attention in the form of a repudiation act. A slow trickle of individuals began surrounding the fence of the house, but the crowd grew in size and ferocity making Adrian move inside the house with Anyell and the rest. Behind bars of the front door and the sections of clear glass it was possible to see the mob outside throwing blue paint over the fence. The mob was chanting party slogans and hurling insults while several individuals climbed over the fence. The children began to scream in complete terror and their grandmother tried to console them. Adrian kept recording and narrating as the event unfolded. The men and woman that climbed overused their own hands to smear the blue paint over the words "*Patria y Vida.*" The assailants were aware of the presence of children and continued full force with the act of terror. Adrian repeated he could smell a pungent odor, like chemicals. Suddenly, Adrian yelled out that the mob had killed the household pet, a small dog that was outside the house in the fenced area. Everyone began to cry hysterically and scream in complete agony over their dog. When the horror subsided, the family came outside to look at the front of the house completely smeared by blue paint. The skinny black and white dog was stained with paint and laid immobile curled to the side of the house. Adrian's speech and breathing was fast as he quickly glanced over at the dog and gave a final assessment that the dog was in fact dead. It is also common for the pets of activists and dissidents to be killed or appear dead under strange circumstances. There have been other reports from animal rights advocates in Cuba. As Adrian continued to pace around showing everything that the mob had done, the rest of the people inside

the home walked out slowly. The children were in view of the camera, they hung behind their grandmother as they also looked around. Miraculously, when Adrian moved the camera, he saw the dog standing drowsily and dazed. The dog survived the attack, and the children began to scream with happiness.

For a Cuban mother and a grandmother to live through and endure state repression against them and the children as vulnerable as they were in that moment, what is left? They are out in the open. Everyone knows who they are, what they do, where they live and what school the children attend. Complete and total vulnerability.

5.3 Motivations and Experiences

Activism in Cuba is a constant struggle that leads to emotional fatigue. Yet, activists are motivated by the systematic oppression they experience. Cuban artist Tania Bruguera wrote an article in *Hypermedia* magazine that “activism is done with the energy of the rage that arises after witnessing an injustice” (Bruguera, 2020). Advocacy work in Cuba prompts individuals to take action to address structural discrimination, maltreatments, and other forms of institutional violence from the state. Dissident colleagues also find strength and motivation in the emotional support they receive from their colleagues and online followers. Social media posts demonstrate the fierce support activists offer one another. When someone is detained or sequestered by the political police, activists take to their online platforms to denounce and demand the liberation of their peers. This level of cohesion is also a target of the political police who use methods to create division and discord between activists. The goal is to cause distrust and ultimately the disintegration of the groups. Nonetheless, my observations and interviews led me to understand that activists are aware of these sabotage attempts. To counteract these intrusions, activists

defend the integrity and rectitude of their peers online by live streaming their support, admiration, and appreciation for each other. This way, they remind one another their goals, everything they have gone through together and what is ahead of them. Peers from the dissident community in Cuba face the reality that they will be oppressed whether they resist oppression or remain in acquiescent silence. They all agree that more oppression leads to increased resistance. Defiance as resilience is the last instrument activists are left with because all the other protective factors corrode under the state's cruel violent treatment.

The two kinds of activists I interviewed in this investigation described distinct reasons for concealing or revealing their political perspectives. Dissidents who perform in the public sphere cannot hide their personal details about their lives from the state agents. Instead, activists and dissidents present themselves simply as individuals who are willing to take risks to unmask the repression peddled by government officials. Contrary to public activism, individuals who participate in undercover activism explained they are not willing to risk the safety of their families, their jobs, and their children's school. Also, although they offer online support to the activists that represent the current social movements, it is difficult to openly endorse the MSI or opposition groups. Clicktivist and concealed activist, Luis, said he does not fully support any opposition or activist group because to him, those groups lack leadership. For Luis and other participants, it is difficult to determine who is a "good leader" and what it would mean for the country. The concept of switching governing systems is difficult to approach because in over six decades Cubans have not openly discussed holding democratic elections of new political candidates. The cost to openly support any of the current social groups is too high when leadership is uncertain. Through conversations and debates online, participants exchange ideas of what an ideal leader should embody. Many individuals online agree with the notions of social

and political change offered by the dissident community, yet they still feel apprehensive to offer public support. Public and private activists were also cautious towards endorsing other political parties and leaders because they had some doubts about who would be the indicated best person to move Cuba towards a democratic society.

The delegate of the PAP, Juan Michel López Mora, explained that when their organization attracts or recruits new members, it offers new members several ways to participate. Juan Michel is well aware of the profound risks for new recruits. Therefore, the incoming members have two options, to help on small tasks and have their identities protected as much as possible, or to work in the front lines as representative of the opposition group. Juan Michel deduces from his experience recruiting new members, that newcomers' motivations stem from a profound desire to make changes at their community level. However, the issue of trust towards community members arises each time the PAP receives new members. The group does not have a specific procedure to investigate individuals who are interested in supporting the PAP. The basic approach to consider new members is by simply asking around town if the person is trustworthy.

For community members with no affiliations to any social groups, activism and advocacy must be subtle. Yulisa explained that she has been involved in several community advocacy projects. Yulisa's motivation arises from her aspirations to alleviate the suffering of others. Once she used her social media platforms to summon her friends and followers to donate blood after the government announced the blood reserves were low. She said more than 50 people showed up that day. I asked her, "If you could create an organization, what would it be?" Without hesitation she replied, "a non-profit to help orphan children and low socioeconomic status children . . . But did you know, I am an activist against animal abuse?" She also partnered with

other community members to campaign for a law against animal cruelty. In the case of Yulisa, she maintains a low profile of participation which may not be considered political because the civic actions she chooses to engage on are not directly opposed to the government.

Yulisa has a special knack for bringing people together because she is caring, compassionate, empathetic and has a great sense of humor. Aside from engaging in community advocacy, she is also the admin of a Facebook page with several thousand followers. All the content Yulisa shares on this page is not related to Cuba. She says it is a way for her to learn new things and also teach other people about various histories and cultures from around the world. Yulisa is a book worm; she loves to download books and read all sorts of articles. She told me that if I really wanted to understand how the Cuban authorities work, I should read “1984” and “Animal Farm” by George Orwell. I followed suit and read these classics as she recommended. We discussed the books and compared the Cuban society to the characters in the books. Yulisa is usually very optimistic, but this conversation made her sound less convinced of a brighter future for Cuba.

People are either indoctrinated to defend the revolution at all costs, or they are afraid. Yulisa told me: “There’s a lot of fear. Everyone feels afraid of going to jail.” She referred to anyone who dares to overly complain or accuse any governmental institution of bad management or negligence. What is more, the police are more present than ever since the Covid-19 pandemic began. Undercover state agents blend with the rest of the population to reinforce police authority. They closely observe people and monitor everyone on the streets and online as well. Their presence corrodes community trust and eliminates spontaneity among peers. People feel discouraged to take initiative in creating community-led activities or engage civically because they have day-to-day struggles.

The severe food scarcity in Cuba and the long lines to buy whatever is available are a daily concern. It is extremely common for Cuban people to talk about the lack of food and hunger. “Cubans are hungry. We won’t starve but we feel chronic hunger and cravings,” Yulisa told me while she waited in *la cola* for bread. Yulisa openly complains about the long lines and the hunger because it is socially acceptable in Cuba. While we talked, she wanted to Facetime to show me what *la cola* looked like. As she complained to me, an elderly man with a tired look pushing a cart, paused to look in her direction and cautiously agreed with a smile and a soft comment, “Yeah. We are hungry.”

Yulisa explained that sometimes, people will stand in line even if they don’t know what is being sold in the store. Standing in line does not guarantee anyone they will receive food. Even if they have the money people cannot purchase more than the rationed amount in any store. The state says this rationing method is necessary to prevent individuals from reselling products at higher prices. However, this method has a negative side effect which drives individuals towards solutions that are illicit and may be considered immoral. What people are left with, explains Yulisa, is to turn towards degrading solutions like her friend, a nurse in Cuba, who used to purchase the meat rations from hospital patients. When she told me this story it was almost a form of confession. Her friend purchased the meat because it is never available in stores. Beef has not been legally sold in Cuba for several decades and the possession of beef could land anyone in jail for several years.

Cubans are used to *resolver*. *Resolver* is a common expression used among Cubans, meaning to solve or fix an issue or to find something. When I interviewed activist Yanela Lucia Reyes, she said that the people in her community have been forced to *resolver* their daily problems by blurring ethical and moral boundaries of acceptable community standards. *Resolver*

generally involves *resolver* bread, *resolver* medications, *resolver* transportation, *resolver* a job, *resolver* money. It is the constant hustle to *resolver* basic necessities. Yanela explained she aims for a society where people can live with dignity. When I asked her to explain what this meant, she elaborated that a dignified life would allow an individual to hold a good job and provide for their family, meaning that people should not have to get involved in degrading or humiliating circumstances, or fraudulent business to acquire basic household items. It is difficult to engage in demanding social and political changes when people are occupied standing in *la cola*. Although activists are also forced to *resolver*, their network of friends, colleagues and allies help them acquire needed resources. For as long as people have to stand in long lines with the certainty of food scarcity, police presence and infiltrated agents, what else is left but fear and hunger among the population?

For many individuals, these daily struggles are enough reason to remain discouraged and unmotivated to engage in any type of advocacy work. Activists renew their levels of motivation with the support of their peers and online followers trying to engage new members to join the peaceful resistance. Even though unaffiliated activists privately support the dissident community, the negative consequences associated with public participation are discouraging. The shared perception among the discrete clicktivists I interviewed, is that there are no competent leaders. Since Cubans have not held presidential elections since the triumph of the Revolution, it was difficult for participants to determine which are desirable leadership traits that would fit the Cuban context. However, most participants agreed that an ideal leader would transition the country into a more capitalist free market. Another aspect that some individuals mentioned, aside from the need to loosen market economy, is the need for leaders who can thrust the dictatorship out of the Cuban society. How a new leader will go about taking down the dictatorship, remains

a difficult question to answer. At the moment of this research, my contacts expressed anxieties and doubts about who will be the next actor to lead the country. Online debates and conversations during live streams allowed the Cuban audience to ask activists if they would be interested in running for a political position and to this, activists showed disinterest and clarified they are motivated to create positive social changes. Artists and intellectuals are offering the idea of a society of pluralized voices where they address the concerning levels of oppression, food scarcity, police violence, political and ideological discrimination. On the other hand, opposition groups are possible political candidates in a more democratic Cuba. However, data from interviews and WhatsApp conversations with my contacts exhibited uncertainty and hesitation to endorse new leadership and as a result there are low levels of offline civic participation.

6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

“No one knows how this works, and no one has an answer.” – Anamely Ramos on Facebook live stream, January 30th, 2020.

6.1 Improvising

Activists who often confront the Cuban political police, engage in an unpredictably clumsy and violent cat and mouse routine. After witnessing hours of interactions captured by activists performing opposition and civil disobedience practices, I arrived at the realization that the mechanism of arbitrariness from the authorities is another method of control to inflict uncertainty and paranoia. The experiences activists share online reveal an unpredictable system that is very effective at implementing anti-advocacy strategies. This presents one more disadvantage for the activists, who implement varied pacifist approaches, but without the certainty of achieving a specific goal or any knowledge of whether their methods will influence the government or community. Activists explain to the online audiences that there is no rule book or specific steps they follow to challenge state authority. Anamely Ramos, admitted to her followers in a live stream conference that activists and dissidents improvise new strategies according to the various situations they are presented with. The arbitrariness of state response interrupts the planning of performances and makes activists spend a lot of time defending themselves from the political police.

At times Cuban cyber-activism seems disorganized because it is improvised. There are occasions and situations when activists act independently from MSI, which at times causes activists to debate online among themselves about which performing method is more fitting for a

specific circumstance. For instance, a topic I observed being debated on social media by Iliana Hernandez, Camila Acosta, Iris Ruiz, among others was, “what do activists achieve each time they get arrested for walking outside their homes?” This topic has been addressed by several members of the dissident community. They explained the goal is to gain witnesses and capture the arrests on camera to gather evidence of the violence. An added advantage is that the images also engage Cuban audiences online to publicly discuss the role of civil society in the creation of a new society where everyone has a voice.

These debates have led to the online audiences to voice doubts about the strategies of cyberactivists. Although these doubts from online users are perceived as negative comments, this is a necessary aspect of democratic spaces because it engages individuals in political discourse. Open critique during online conferences allows activists and dissidents to answer questions and appease uncertainties among their followers. Engaging in political conversation is civic participation because the audiences engage in creating an imagined society with a democratized public sphere.

At the same time, growing engagement throws another challenge for Cuban activists who have to learn how to work with colleagues who may share different opinions on how to achieve certain goals. Some activists and intellectuals have had moments of public disagreements but turned the disagreements into polite debates. Alliances are helpful but activists must learn to react accordingly when the actions of their colleagues do not coincide with their own. Differences between approaches to political conversations have caused discord between some independent journalists and activists. To reclaim discursive spaces, activists must engage in debate even with their colleagues to explore the full range of ideas each can contribute. The discussions are presented to the online followers as a friendly and necessary practice of civil

society. Political dissidents support each other online to be perceived as a unified network across Cuba. Offering support online also gives them the opportunity to bring together all the followers each group has garnered.

The cyber-campaigns and nonviolent performances are self-empowering exercises for all that engage in participation. As activists and dissidents continue to encourage civic participation from online and offline community members, they also realize that it is necessary to teach supporters and allies how to engage civically. MSI activists live stream calls for others to join them in spontaneous peaceful gatherings but few people ever engage openly. Discrete activists like Lisi, admitted she supports MSI and other activists in their efforts, but she keeps a distance at the gatherings. Lisi described that she always attends when activists call for online viewers to support them, but she always scouts the area and if she notices a lot of police presence she stays away. For Lisi attending is fun because she witnesses the full display of the interaction. Although she is excited about the development of events, she is pessimistic because she has noticed low levels of community engagement. Lisi is convinced everyone else is terrified because online “they don't even hit ‘like’! - she explains how friends and family are afraid to engage in political conversations online, much less in person. Lisi says her friends tell her she will go crazy and that she needs to stop posting content online.

Everyone improvises on which style of nonresistance protest they want to perform whether it is a hunger strike, getting arrested for leaving home, gathering at a public space with other peers, or publishing content online. Any of these interactions are a form of content development that allows activists to tell their own story as they experience it. Most importantly, self-publishing initiates new conversations and engages audiences in a creative exercise of what public participation should be like in Cuba.

6.2 What Kind of Revolution Will Activists have?

Cuban Cyber-activists stand against decades of a system of ideas that have strategically narrowed avenues for freedom of expression but did not eradicate ideological diversity. In this investigation, I explored the current issues and works of civil disobedience by human rights activists in Cuba. Access to social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp increased the visibility and voices of activists in comparison to pre-internet years. Social media platforms have amplified the reach of their efforts, but resistance from state authorities prevents activists from taking their work into the physical realm to organize larger acts of civil disobedience. Social media platforms are means of expression and action that challenge Cuban authorities and produce adaptive maneuvering for bold dissent from activists. The act of self-publishing is an autonomous act to record online their wish to expand spaces that engage civic discourses and open more debate arenas. Parallel to this growth are also the expansion of citizen surveillance and the rigidity of laws that control forms of interactive engagement and expression. Device-mediated interactions are helpful to organize a network of allies around the globe and denounce human rights violations with international agencies.

The advantage of self-publishing techniques and access to the internet have opened a window for activists to reach out to larger audiences. Since the internet became available to many of Cuban dissidents in the last decade or less, they have used social media as a megaphone. They have created transnational networks of colleagues and gained hundreds of followers. It is likely that online civic participation continues to grow unless drastic measures are implemented by the Cuban government. However, it is difficult to predict what could happen taking into consideration the Covid-19 pandemic had a decelerating effect on the efforts of Cuban activists.

This, in turn has offered avenues for the Cuban regime to reinforce laws to further criminalize dissent speech in any media form.

As I reached my conclusions about Cuban activism and its methods, a structure of endemic challenges became apparent. A great part of activism work in Cuba involves physical confrontations with the political police and undercover state agents. Dissidents are tethered to a cycle of uncertainty and arbitrary violence, which forces them to pivot and adjust to oppressive mechanisms. The only advantage activists have at the moment is having internet access which increases their visibility and protects them to a certain extent.

Although dissidents are resilient, contesting the political arena is a protracted venture. It is likely that activist dissidents will experience harsher days ahead. There is a dreadful anticipation of death and severe punishment against the most prominent and current activists. At the same time, there is also hope with a facade of pessimism and apathy from many online followers. Nonetheless, activists will continue to *resolver* to contest the indeterminacy of arbitrary attacks from the regime.

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