

## Alexis Romay

When you are actively looking for poetic justice, you may find it in the oddest places. I was invited by the Montclair Public Library to submit an essay on the value of libraries during Banned Books Week, a project sponsored by the American Library Association that highlights censored books and the importance of free and open access to information. I'm originally from Cuba, that gorgeous island in the Caribbean in which, under the stewardship of the Castro brothers, banning books has lasted 56 years. And it is still going strong!

Libraries were of little to no use in my native land. Most of the authors and books I wanted to read were not in their catalogs. Or they were, but could get you in trouble for *merely asking to borrow them*. *High on the verboten list: Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Cuba's James Joyce. Cabrera Infante—in exile since 1965 until his death in 2005—used to pride himself on the knowledge that in a country where its citizen had nothing to eat, readers were willing to trade up to three cans of condensed milk for one of his books. The magical combination of having those three precious cans and knowing a person with one of his books never materialized for me, which means that among the long list of things for which I do not forgive the Castros, I add this: not having read Cabrera Infante's work in Cuba, a country he so loved and recreated so thoroughly. When I managed to escape, as an adult, in 1999, one of the first things I did with my newfound freedom was to seek out his books.*

Writing about the importance of public libraries is, of course, writing about the importance of language, and the freedom to express ideas in society without fearing repercussions. Words have a definitive weight in my homeland. Graffiti artist Danilo Maldonado Machado just spent almost 10 months in prison *without trial* following accusations of “aggravated contempt.” Amnesty International considered him a prisoner of conscience. The reason for his arrest: painting the words “Fidel” and “Raul” on the backs of two pigs. He was going to release the animals as a performance in an art show in Havana. He was arrested *before* the performance took place.

In an overnight raid in 2003, the Cuban regime arrested a group of 75 independent librarians, journalists, and human rights activists. They were accused of crimes against national sovereignty. The charges against the librarians had to do with their willingness to make available to the public books that had been banned by the Castro machinery. Sentences for the independent librarians, the only conduit to banned books in the island, ranged from 6-28 years. At the time, the American Library Association showed no solidarity with their Cuban colleagues, opting to side with official, government-approved libraries. The institutional position of the Cuban libraries supported the governmental narrative that private citizens opening their houses to lend banned books were CIA spies.

Although it was a controversial decision amongst its membership, the ALA has not publicly changed its stance on the issue. If freedom of speech is a fundamental right in the United States, why should it not be so in Cuba? I take this opportunity to invite ALA to revisit its position on the independent Cuban librarians. In doing so, the American Library Association will continue to defend the importance of free and open access to information, and deliver some belated poetic justice.