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Juan Carlos Flores, OMNI–Zona Franca, and the Reinvention of Alamar

Juan Carlos Flores was not born in Alamar, as the city did not exist at the time (1962). He did not even grow up in Alamar, as is the case with many members of OMNI–Zona Franca—the collective of poets and performers that Juan Carlos cofounded—whose parents were given an apartment there, usually because of their social or political merits. He settled there when he was around ten years old. Oddly enough, because most would-be poets often like to live in the center of Havana, close to literary institutions, Juan Carlos chose to remain in Alamar, where he found space, fresh air, and a unique tinge of creative audacity among the myriad decrepit concrete blocks of the socialist city—it was the kind of marginality that he liked. Alamar is where he met Amaury Pacheco del Monte, also a latecomer to the city, who became a soul mate, someone who would show up at Juan Carlos’s house with rum and good cigars to share countless hours at night talking about poetry and imagining projects. That is how Zona Franca, and then OMNI and its *Poesía sin fin* (Endless Poetry) festival—their most famous and long-lived project—began.

To put it in a nutshell, Juan Carlos’s work and legacy cannot be dissociated from the social and urban dynamics of Alamar, which transformed from a rigorously monitored utopian city during the 1970s and 1980s into a run-down place at the end of the 1990s and onwards, when marginality and creativity emerged from the cracks and corners of its dilapidated infrastructure. Juan Carlos and his friends are a part of this urban story as much as Alamar is a part of their story. They contributed to the reinvention of the city, putting it back on the national map, giving it new meanings and new imaginaries, and finally associating it with the democratic and poetic future of Cuba rather than with its past socialist ideology.

In order to have readers understand the kind of setting in which Juan Carlos lived, worked, and loved, the first part of this text will focus on the sociopolitical history of Alamar. The second part will focus on

Juan Carlos Flores and OMNI–Zona Franca’s unique contribution to the development of new artistic dynamics, which changed how people in Alamar and beyond understood both art and community in the city.

But before going further, I would like to draw attention to the fact that, while many readers outside Cuba are attracted to positive aspects of the revolutionary society established after 1959, many Cuban writers and artists feel that adopting a critical perspective is essential to artistic integrity and relevance. Actually, being critical had become the new mainstream at the end of the 2010s.¹ Artistic expression out of Alamar is often very direct, as Alamar residents have intensely lived the revolutionary utopia, and were especially affected by its decay.

Alamar, A Utopian City

Juan Carlos lived in a city that was meant to create a New Man, a city with discipline, morality, and absolute faith in the Revolution. In order to do so, Alamar was entirely built by revolutionary construction workers, according to the principles of the Soviet architectural ideal of functionalism. But Alamar never gave birth to the revolutionary New Man. Instead, it allowed for the appearance of many new men and women, whose creativity and vitality subverted the senseless, rigorous socialist norms that were imposed on its residents.

The Making of the New Man

Alamar was an almost virgin place when the Revolution took place. It was still mostly undeveloped, although water, electricity, and some sewage infrastructure already existed thanks to prerevolutionary urban dynamics. The completion of the Havana Bay tunnel in 1958 had indeed pushed real estate investors to provide the necessary infrastructure for further urban development. In Habana del Este, different housing projects were launched in the 1970s, especially in Cojímar, Villa Panamericana, Guiteras, and Alamar, which became the model city.²

Alamar was built by its future inhabitants. *Las micros* (microbrigades) of volunteers were set up, composed of workers who needed new housing. But being in need of housing was not enough to be recruited. The future

brigadistas (brigadiers) had to be exemplary workers—both productive and involved in mass organizations—morally flawless (as heads of families, spouses, neighbors, etc.), atheists, and of course faithful revolutionaries. The recruits were separated from their workplace for a few years. They worked hard on construction sites, while their colleagues who stayed behind worked just as hard to continue doing the same job with less human resources. This program was called *plus trabajo* (work plus) and those who volunteered to work more for their absent colleagues were also entitled to an apartment in one of the housing projects.

Under the supervision of qualified engineers, the recruits raised buildings that were designed according to the functional Soviet model: big square buildings and towers, rationalized space, segmentation vis-à-vis the city center.³ This rationalism went so far as to organize the city in numbered zones (there are ten “zones” in Alamar) and numbered buildings. Social and economic life was also rationalized, as all needed services (food market, school, medical center) were available in each of the zones, so as to streamline people’s use of time and space. This spatial organization still exists today, testifying to the frugality and efficiency that marked the design of urban space. Cultural and recreational areas were supposed to be built as well after all the other necessary equipment for housing, learning, and working had been completed—but the fall of the Soviet Union (1991) took place before they could be completed.⁴

The functional organization of urban space was supposed to give birth to the New Man: a functional revolutionary, who—stripped of the vice and needs created by capitalism and consumer society—would enthusiastically live and work for the Revolution. Moral incentives, not material incentives, would drive his work ethic. But people showed non-conformity with many revolutionary norms from the start. They would go out at night and drink, even though elevators stopped working at 11 p.m., which was deemed to be the latest people should go to sleep in order to be efficient revolutionary workers the next day. Social conflicts emerged in the city because of the socially diverse people who came to live there, despite their supposed political and religious homogeneity. Those conflicts were so intense that building administrators were nominated to make people comply with the socialist norms of collective life in the new city.⁵ Yohanna Depestre, a poet who was part of Zona

Franca from the very beginning, recalls how every detail of people's lives was being monitored:

I was little but I did not like the atmosphere [in Alamar]. It was green and there were lullabies everywhere, but I did not like the people, the atmosphere. People would spy on each other. I could feel there was a kind of bizarre fear, because those who had built the city were the same as those who lived in it. So you would cohabit with the same people at work and at home. There was an unbelievable political extremism, we did not have the right to have animals, we had to be careful about everything. I was little but I could see that. We did not have the right to believe in God. People came to check your house with whatever pretext. You could not have an argument and shout at each other, because you would attract attention. Everything was controlled by the CDR [Committee for the Defense of the Revolution]. You were told how you were supposed to live, so as not to be bourgeois.⁶

Despite the will to homogenize people's social and political experience under socialism, the way housing was assigned, the lack of political education, and the persistence of prejudice against peasants, blacks, and people of rural origin generated logics of social distinction.⁷ The constant monitoring of people's lives helped veil this aspect of things until the 1990s, but the economic crisis helped unveil it. The New Man was never born in Alamar or elsewhere in Cuba.

¡Mucho negro por allá chica, cuídate!

As I was studying the rap movement which had emerged in the 2000s and OMNI-Zona Franca, I spent quite a lot of time in Habana del Este, and especially in Alamar.⁸ I was surprised to hear most people I knew in the center of Havana—whether university professors or students, the people I rented a room from, or even artists and intellectuals—tell me to beware of the people who lived in those areas. They constantly referred to them as “marginal” or even “bandits.” The color of their skin was often mentioned: “*¡Mucho negro por allá chica, cuídate!*” (“There are a lot of black people over there, girl, beware!”). My experience was totally different: while I was constantly harassed by men in the center of Havana, nobody would ever harass me in the streets of Alamar. The only time I was accosted by men (who greeted me, when descending

from the bus, by screaming “*soviética*”), they were older people who had mistaken me for a Russian or Polish girl and actually wanted to invite me for coffee to talk about the good old times.

The constant prejudice against Alamar and its residents to which I was exposed testifies to the social and political marginalization of the city. Whereas international journalists, foreign artists, intellectuals, and even Fidel Castro himself constantly visited Alamar during the 1970s, the city had become just one among many dilapidated suburban housing projects. From the end of the 1980s onward, defects in the construction of the buildings led the inhabitants to experience severe inconvenience in their daily lives. Moreover, the economic crisis was responsible for a severe fuel shortage in the public transportation system and Alamar locals became trapped in a city with little to offer in terms of culture and recreation because few people had a car. Those who had the means to move out did so. These dynamics led to the impoverishment of the community and thus to the rise of petty crime as a way to make ends meet, which in turn contributed to the stigmatization of Alamar as a marginal and even dangerous city.

Alamar thus became part of the government’s social rehabilitation plan called Talleres de Transformación Integral del Barrio (Workshops for the Integral Transformation of the Neighborhood), which included only twelve neighborhoods in the capital seen as especially disadvantaged in terms of crime and poverty. The plan consisted of renovating housing, providing information about maternity and sexually transmitted diseases such as AIDS, organizing debates about self-help, and so on.⁹ The rehab plan partly worked but it did not really impact the youth’s attitudes.¹⁰ This situation explains why government officials started looking for alternatives and especially for activities that could attract the youth and prevent them from going astray. Local authorities strove to bring cultural life back to Havana’s depressed suburbia, especially in Alamar and its greater region (Habana del Este), which were densely populated and could be affected by social turmoil. This situation created a structure of opportunity for new social actors to step in, which is how Juan Carlos became the initiator of collective art projects in Alamar.

Reinventing Alamar

I met Juan Carlos in 2006 but he would not talk to me. He had already taken some distance from OMNI and Zona Franca, the two artistic groups he had cofounded at the end of the 1990s, and which had merged into one. Although he still participated in many collective events, he was using most of his free time to write. He repeatedly insisted that anyone could tell me about the story of OMNI–Zona Franca much better than he could. It took me two years to convince him to be interviewed and when he finally yielded he offered me an illuminating perspective on how OMNI–Zona Franca had imagined the recrafting of socialist values around what it means to be human. Their endeavor was not only artistic; it was also spiritual and profoundly universal.

Alamar, the Capital of Alternativity

Alamar has been said to be the Cuban capital of rap, but it has become, throughout the 1990s and 2000s, much more than that.¹¹ This transformation relates to a human adventure of friendship, solidarity, and poetry that Juan Carlos was key in setting up.

Juan Carlos was a gardener during the late 1990s and he was striving both to make ends meet and find time to dream and write. When he met Pablo Rigal, the director of Alamar’s center for art and literature, also known as Galería Fayad Jamís—one of the few places meant for cultural events in Alamar—Pablo offered him a job as a custodian so that he would have more spare time. And he urged him to set up artistic projects in the Galería. He needed the place to be busy with people and activities so as to breathe new life into depressed Alamar. As Juan Carlos put it: “Pablo told me to set up a project, whatever project. He needed to develop projects in the art center.”¹²

Juan Carlos trusted Pablo, whose literary workshops were locally famous, and decided to create a circle of poets with Amaury Pacheco, who both participated in those workshops and worked as a sculptor. For Amaury, Juan Carlos was his “ethical and poetical guide.”¹³ Together they “hunted” (Juan Carlos) or “went fishing for poets” (Amaury), and secured the participation of many who have now published in national and international venues: Yohamna Depestre, Leonardo Guevara,

Veronica Vega, Luis Eligio Pérez Meriño, and Olver Reyes Rodríguez, among others. That is how Zona Franca came to be born. Amaury's connection with the sculpture workshop allowed for the creation of another artistic group: OMNI (with Adolfo "Fito" Cabrera Pérez, Jorge "Yoyi" Pérez, and Nilo Julián González Preval, among others.) The two endeavors then merged into one larger multidisciplinary project, having sculptors write poetry, poets create performances, and musicians give another meaning to words.

The project soon exceeded the space that was supposed to shelter it, and members of the group started occupying the city. Dull bus stops were revamped with colorful graffiti, cracked walls were joyfully painted, street performances about the poor living conditions of the local residents created public scandals—which led to the arrest of several artists—but allowed for solutions to daily inconveniences to be suddenly provided by the local authorities. Thanks to OMNI-Zona Franca's street performances, garbage was eventually collected, while people's prior reports about the sanitary situation had not had any impact on the concerned authorities. Public benches were finally installed where needed, after bus patrons had ineffectively complained for years; and some especially run-down buildings were painted, decorated, and animated by the group's artworks and performances.

While OMNI-Zona Franca suffered from bad reports and was often denounced to the police for its activities, it started gaining recognition in the city for the concrete improvements it was bringing to local residents' social problems. And, little by little, the group managed to attract attention to other dimensions of its work, to poetry, to spirituality, and to the necessity of establishing a community of trust and action in order to push back against the stifling norms of socialist behavior. In that sense, Alamar became a capital of alternativity, not only due to its art projects, but also because Juan Carlos, together with his friends, tried to make people experience new ways of living together—in a more autonomous way, with less fear, more creativity, and more community—under socialism.

Reinventing the "New Man"

During my fieldwork in Alamar, the notion of the New Man quickly emerged in any discussion I had with local residents, especially when

it involved social, political, and especially moral issues. Most people pointed out the distance between that ideal and the real life of Cuban citizens, who in the 2000s needed to engage in illegal activities in order to survive. OMNI–Zona Franca created a performance to make this disjunction visible to all and to show how the economic crisis, together with the official ideology, had led to the death of the New Man.

In this performance, a man is hanging from a tree. He has committed suicide. *Granma* articles, commercial brands, and empty cigarette packs are glued on his clothes. They epitomize the cognitive dissonance Cubans face daily as they are constantly reminded of the moral imperative of being faithful to the Revolution while constantly transgressing the norms of socialist morality when they need to engage in petty criminality to survive. Torn between revolutionary principles and economic necessity, the hanging man has not managed to find his place in Cuban society. After taking drugs, suicide has become the only option. The place of the performance is meaningful. The hanging body faces a phallic sculpture, crafted in the purest style of socialist realism, a symbol of triumphant socialism in Alamar.

Rather than being faithful to the Revolution, OMNI members chose to be truthful to its ideal. One can interpret this performance in many ways: as a means to attract attention to the high suicide rate on the island, as a consequence of the lack of attention given to individual subjectivity inside the larger revolutionary project, or as the collapse of utopia. In all cases, it takes the ideal of the New Man seriously, and graphically shows how this ideal has been killed inside each Cuban citizen as the revolutionary leadership has inflexibly imposed its authoritarian norms on the people while ignoring their real living conditions.

The fact that Che's New Man had disappeared was a starting point for OMNI–Zona Franca who strove to replace him with another ideal. During the discussions we had, Juan Carlos exposed very clearly how the group was trying to refashion the meaning of the New Man, transforming it into a genuine, creative, and autonomous new man, without capitals and without any other grand ideal other than being human:

Through art, we want to create a civic conduct [*una conducta cívica*], civility. To create an atmosphere. To dynamite panopticism. To make it flexible. Alternative cultural movements are preparing the future

Cuban democracy. But it is not dissidence.... We want to influence people, and influencing people is already a way of being political. The problem in Cuba is that men are the slaves of the state. But alternative groups are trying to generate a new man, who would not share the same attributes as those envisioned by Che's New Man.

There is a basis of empathy and friendship, which is essential to rethink the new man.... It also means rebuilding the community, rethinking the nation [*patria*] and recreating joyfulness through poetry.¹⁴

Democracy here is not thought as a form of government, with its institutions, its norms, and its power regime. It is envisioned as an art of conduct, as a way for people to create distance from what he calls "networks of panopticism," that is, the system of ubiquitous social surveillance. Rebuilding the new man means establishing new human relationships with one another, based on trust and empathy, rather than on suspicion ("take away people's fear" [*quitar el temor a la gente*]) and competition.¹⁵ It means rethinking society and the polity from the grassroots, from the individual and from the community, rather than creating new and supposedly more democratic political parties. In that sense, Juan Carlos's vision—which he shared with most members of OMNI-Zona Franca—is frankly subversive, as it both bypasses the official socialist ideology and the widespread democratic vulgate defended by Western governments and international NGOs. It does not entail replacing one system with another. It entails rethinking what it means to be a human being.

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Reinventing the new man is no easy task, as Juan Carlos and his fellow OMNI-Zona Franca members experienced since the end of the 1990s. Despite being long-term members of the community and being professionally recognized as artists, and thus defended by most local officials, they have constantly faced the hostility of other authorities, especially the ministry of culture and the secret services. In 2009, OMNI-Zona Franca artists were expelled from the art gallery where they had been working for ten years. Although they managed

to continue working and organize a few more Poesía sin fin festivals, the necessities of life, personal projects, and the birth of children led OMNI members to progressively disperse in Cuba and the world. Juan Carlos himself has dispersed into poetry and infinity. But their legacy is alive, as is testified by the new creative generation that has emerged lately on the island and the new spaces that have been set up for reflection, poetry, and performance (Museum of Dissidence, Instituto de Artivismo Hannah Arendt, Galería El Círculo). Either inspired by OMNI–Zona Franca or by OMNI’s ideal, they all retake and remake OMNI’s dream of a more poetic and more democratic island, working from the grassroots in the communities, collectively, for the future of Cuba.

NOTES

1/ See Marie Laure Geoffroy, “Transnational Dynamics of Contention in Contemporary Cuba,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 47.2 (2015): 223–49, and Yvon Grenier, *Culture and the Cuban State: Participation, Recognition, and Dissonance Under Communism* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017).

2/ This information on Alamar’s history comes mostly from Bérengère Morucci, *Alamar, un quartier cubain* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2006) and interviews with Reinaldo Escobar (August 4, 2007), now a journalist for *14ymedio*, who worked in a microbrigade in another district of Havana, and with Rolando Rensoli (May 26, 2007), a historian of the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC) and a specialist on the history of Alamar and Habana del Este, where his family has been living since the new cities were built.

3/ This model was actually more universal than that, as Alamar and its urban neighbors have a lot in common with the suburbs of many Western European cities like Naples, Paris, Marseille, or Lisbon.

4/ Despite this historical contingency, Alamar had the luxury of benefiting from an open-air amphitheater (see pp. 95, 98) (built to entertain the Eastern European technical advisers who were often given housing in Alamar) and a cultural center (called *galería de arte*) built by local residents, cultural promoters, and rock aficionados. This information was gathered during interviews with Manuel Avila (July 27, 2007 and August 20, 2008), cultural promoter in Alamar, Balesy Rivero (May 25, 2007), poet, founder of Grupo Uno and organizer of the first rap festivals in Guiteras and Alamar together with Rodolfo Rensoli, who initiated the whole dynamics (December 25, 2006).

5/ Morucci, *Alamar*, 62–63.

6/ Interview with Yohamna Depestre, June 28, 2007.

7/ Interviews with Rolando Rensoli, May 26, 2007; Depestre, June 28, 2007; and Nilo Julián González Preval, August 10, 2006.

8/ See Marc Perry, “Los Raperos: Rap, Race, and Social Transformation in Contemporary Cuba” (PhD diss., The University of Texas at Austin, 2004), Sujatha Fernandes, *Cuba Represent! Cuban Arts, State Power, and the Making of New Revolutionary Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), and Geoffrey Baker, *Buena Vista in the Club: Rap, Reggaetón, and Revolution in Havana* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

9/ See Rosa Oliveras’s report, “El planeamiento comunitario en la Ciudad de la Habana,” *Ciudad y Hábitat*, 2006.

10/ See Alejandro de la Fuente and Laurence Glasco, “Are Blacks ‘Getting Out of Control’? Racial Attitudes, Revolution, and Political Transition in Cuba” in *Toward a New Cuba?: Legacies of a Revolution*, ed. Miguel A. Centeno and Mauricio Font (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1997).

11/ See Perry, “Los Raperos.”

12/ Interview with Juan Carlos Flores, September 5, 2008.

13/ Interview with Amaury Pacheco, July 31, 2006.

14/ Interview with Flores, September 11, 2008.

15/ Interview with Pacheco, June 27, 2007.