

March 31, 2013

## New Breed of Cuban Dissident Finds Changed Miami

By LIZETTE ALVAREZ

MIAMI — Yoani Sánchez, the Cuban dissident whose trenchant blog and Twitter posts have made her a cause célèbre for democracy on the island, lingered on the edge of the sea wall at La Ermita de la Caridad, Miami's shrine for Cuban exiles, and looked toward home.

"Me siento como en Cuba pero libre," said Ms. Sánchez, summing up her first day in Miami last week. "I feel like I'm in Cuba but free."

With that, Ms. Sánchez officially cemented her bond with the old guard, the city's Cuban exiles.

On Monday, despite her anticipated return to Cuba and her opposition to the economic embargo, Ms. Sanchez will take the stage at the Freedom Tower downtown — a haven where hundreds of thousands of Cubans in the 1960s and 1970s were first processed as refugees and handed slabs of industrial cheese and Spam. Among those expected to greet her will be veterans of the failed 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion — standard-bearers of the dwindling hard-line generation — and the newest Cubans, those who see increased contact with the island as a path to progress.

It was not too long ago that Cuban-Americans here rolled out the red carpet only to defectors who disavowed their homeland and stayed in America. But Ms. Sanchez, a journalist who will return to Cuba to join her husband and son, has offered up an alternative narrative for both the disenchanted in Cuba and the hopeful in Miami, one forged over the Internet.

"This is transcendent," said Eduardo J. Padrón, the president of Miami Dade College, which is sponsoring the event, recalling his own arrival at the Freedom Tower as a 15-year-old. "There is incredible agreement here that she symbolizes the voice of a free Cuba. Her visit has proved that all of us can agree, regardless of the means, on the ultimate goal."

Ms. Sanchez said in an interview Friday that the warmth of the welcome she has received here has exceeded her expectations. "I am finding Cuba outside of Cuba," she said, in Spanish. "I was raised in Cuba and indoctrinated that the exiles were the enemy, that they had betrayed the country. And here I am, seeing Cubans preserving Cuba, preserving the culture, the history, the music."

Working from her Havana apartment, Ms. Sanchez, 37, has spent years writing dispatches on the island's stifling contradictions, the absurdities of everyday life under the Communist system and the lack of freedom and human rights. The Internet and the USB drives that Cubans use to share information have been her chief ally.

She named her blog [Generación Y](#), a nod to Cubans her age who were given names beginning with Y at a time when the Soviet Union held greater sway over the island. The blog receives millions of hits a month, the vast majority from people outside the island because Cuba restricts Internet access. She also has 459,000 Twitter followers.

Ms. Sanchez has been arrested, detained, beaten and harassed for speaking out against prohibitions on freedom of expression and freedom of the press. She is fond of saying that the rights of citizens are not gifts from the government but, as the phrase makes clear, "rights" that are inherent.

For five years, Ms. Sanchez tried to obtain permission to travel outside of Cuba but was denied until now. President Raúl Castro recently eliminated travel restrictions for many Cubans and the government chose to grant her permission to travel, too. Her 80-day tour has brought her to three continents, where she has given speeches and received a string of awards and recognitions.

Rosa de la Cruz, one of Miami's most prominent art collectors, said that two years ago she dedicated a room in the museum-like building that houses the de la Cruz Collection to videos of Ms. Sanchez. The collection also hands out copies of Ms. Sanchez's book, "Havana Real."

"She is a positive person, not a negative one," said Mrs. de la Cruz, who supports the economic embargo but also views the push for human rights in Cuba as paramount. "And it's important to be positive. It has been very difficult for her to do this in Cuba. And she has said if she had to do it again, she would do it again."

Natalia Martinez, the communications director for [Roots of Hope](#), a network of 4,000 young professionals who work to help young people in Cuba, said Ms. Sanchez spoke often about the need for a diversity of opinion and emphasized the importance of empowering Cubans on the island.

Technology is one way to punch a hole, Ms. Sanchez says often. So she asks for a flood of cellphones and USB sticks and other devices.

"She addresses the fact that there is a lot of hurt, a lot of pain, associated with the Cuba issue, and she doesn't dismiss it," Ms. Martinez said. But, she said: "Cuban-Americans have more opportunities to be involved in Cuba now than they had before, and Yoani has come to symbolize some kind of joint agency between them. That resonates here."

Ms. Martinez added, "She is focused on building a narrative about the future."

Over the weekend, though, Ms. Sanchez grappled with a far less ambitious agenda: She spent time in Miami with her sister, her brother-in-law and niece. It has been two years since her sister left Cuba for Miami.

“For two years I haven’t been able to hug them,” she said.