Three flights, several languages, an eight-hour delay in Miami; I had finally set down my bedraggled bones on Cuban soil. Whether it was the humidity that curled my hair into an 80s afro or the 50s-style automobiles lining the road outside the airport, I knew I’d stepped into an era unlike my own.

Cubans stood in throngs outside of the single arrival gate, some waiting for their relatives to return. Others dragged green plastic-wrapped gifts from family members in the United States. I could make out the form of a television in one, and I thought, nearly every household in America owns the device. In Cuba, it’s a privilege.

Leaving the airport, I noticed another man saunter by adorned in a pearl-white suite, dark glasses and gold embellishments. The woman hanging off his right arm wore leopard print and six-inch stiletto heels. Her purse could have paid for one of the antique cars parked in front of her. Swinging my carry-on over my shoulder and securing my pack, I took a breath and escaped into the shelter of my travel group’s tour bus. Less than an hour on Cuban soil and I’d already begun to see the debilitating divide between the few people with wealth and the hundreds with but pennies on which to survive.

For the next ten days I would spend my time in a socialist culture.
devoid of the liberty I’d learned to take for granted in America. But, I’d arrived with the intent to learn through the eyes of a journalist, and therefore processed the beautiful cultural color mixed with the pain of oppression through words. Each morning I would wake, climb to the hotel’s top-floor breakfast room and gaze across the worn streets of Havana to the teal blue waters of the Caribbean. Then, sitting with my cup of American black coffee, I would write.

May 2013

Greenish brown with ripped fuzz, a tennis ball flew with bullet-like precision past my left ear as I, alone, maneuvered one foot in front of the other through the streets of Havana. The three Cuban boys whose feet shared the uneven cobblestones with my own had shed the ties of their school uniforms and taken up a game of catch. A Cuban carriage taxi driver caught the ball that had just skimmed the hairs of my ear, and lightly tossed it back to the boys as he tilted his head to silently warn them. Hitting a visitor in the streets would not fly as well as their pitches.

The dynamic of Cuba reflects two extremes: one of light-hearted play and one of suppressed anguish. Visiting the Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA) students in Havana opened my eyes to a side of Cuban youth I had yet to come across. Years of regulation hindering the citizens from learning new technologies, pursuing their passions, and exploring freedoms of democracy, has filled their hearts and art pieces with anger.

One artist who specializes in carving wood flat stencils on which he lays canvas to shade and rub, started as a student at ISA. He studied for five years before the school accepted him back as a professor. Between shy, hesitant smiles and hand gestures used to tear down the language barrier between my broken Spanish and his English, he conveyed that the subjects of his pieces often reflect very powerful men. “Some of my work is driven by my passion.”

Standing before a stack of his finished pieces, he swept his right hand over one portraying a man with a funnel filled with nails going down his throat. He explained that parts of life are often hard to swallow.

Still smiling and humbly sharing, there was an odd disconnect between the melancholy tone of his drawings and the way he pleasantly presented the works, confusing my opinions. The level of competition to succeed in Cuba often drives its citizens to defect, like the ballet dancers from the Ballet Nacional de Cuba. Several have toured the U.S. with the company only to seek asylum and positions in companies like the Boston Ballet. There, they grow in their careers.

This man achieved success and expresses power and oppression through the stroke of his pencils, but shares his work with fearless pride. The scars of his country appear in each line gouged into his wood stencils.

Just across the lawn of ISA, a 15-year-old Cuban girl lifted the horsehair bow to the taut strings of her violin and began to perform. She played without sheet music.

After having spoken with a man who overcame opposition, I approached the girl facing the start of her oppression.

Amanda Michelle Estrar Rodriguez, the young violinist, presented the piece Abandoned Nest by Italian composer Giuseppe Tartini at the ISA violin competition. Like the wood stencil artist taking on his field, her performance pitted her against other Cuban musicians for both the competition and a potential spot as a student at the school.

“I want to get to a higher level for this school,” Amanda explained. “[ISA] also has a level exam from one year to another to stay in the school. I must have good records in my specialty.”

Amanda looks to her mother, a percussionist, and father, a pianist, for her musical inspiration. Practicing three to four hours per day for the last seven years at her current school, the Guillermo Tomas Boufaratigue Music Conservatory, she has dreams to soon enter the ISA program and eventually play in the National Symphony Orchestra of
Cuba.

Cesar Quintana Medina, ISA University Extension Specialist and Public Relations Coordinator, emphasized how Amanda must perform well at the competition and then make another audition with an extensive interview to enter the school.

“They are asked a lot of questions because we are looking for talented students,” Cesar put realistically. “We can teach the skills, but not the talent.”

In one performance, Amanda could become one of the select few Cubans privileged with capital opportunities. In one performance, Amanda could fall from the graces of a treacherous social ladder.

ISA started as the Havana Country Club, which was open to the wealthy, white community, Cesar said. After recent and pending renovations, the site now houses the university that teaches roughly 1,500 arts students from 18-25 years old studying all Cuban art forms except jewelry, textile and glass.

Cesar said a typical five-year program hosts students from Venezuela, Colombia, Germany, China, Cuba and even three from the United States. They study their specialty as well as subjects like math and language.

For musicians like Amanda, they must complete four years and then devote one year of service to a community group, like the symphony.

“You can come here at 4 a.m. in the morning and find students practicing piano and violin,” Cesar said. “It is open all the time. They have their own key and can work in the night because it is more quiet and cool.”

Most students spend hours practicing to keep up with the intense competition, but many end up touring in different countries for opportunities after they finish their studies.

For them, ISA is their only door out. For Amanda, it’s her gateway to a future.

Dinner later that week at the docks near Hemingway’s museum satisfied my need for cuisine familiar to my American stomach: pizza. No meat, no diced vegetables, just dough and cheese and a thin slathering of marinara. Contented and relaxed bumping away in the backseat of a taxi with a speedometer perpetually reading nine kilometers per hour, we pulled next to another car with a family and a three or four year old girl waving in the back. As the wind from the Malecón coiled her light-brown hair around her face like a cobra, her smile forced the corners of my own mouth to turn up in return.

But when I finally looked into her eyes, I realized her Cuban heritage damaged the likelihood of her success in achieving any potential dreams. Amanda and the wood stencil artist may have a chance, but they live behind the adobe walls of a rare school for the talented.

For the first 18 years of my life, I wanted to be a professional horse jockey, a veterinarian, a fiction author and the CEO of a publishing house. The women I have come across in Cuba thus far hold taxi driver jobs, clean hotels, and/or sell their bodies as prostitutes.

A woman my group met twice, because she is a taxi driver, told us the government requires her to pay at least 50 CUC, the Cuban currency, to them each day she works, but she only receives 10 CUC a month on which to live. Another Cuban said he had a friend, albeit male, that studied to practice as a gynecologist. He gave up his studies, though, to own a taco cart because he achieved more success in that business.

In the neighboring car, as the breeze once again whipped through the young girl’s hair, taking one strand through the night sky, past the Malecón, and into the Caribbean, I saw the rippling waves engulf and
sweep away her future. I realized my limited time in Cuba provided both optimistic and pessimistic insights, and that with the potential of the embargo lifting, the girl may have the chance to pursue her passions.

However, now, watching how her role models live day-to-day with little more than food, water, and a job that pays more to the government than to their own families, I fear her dreams will never reach fruition. I only wish I could collect a few strands of my own hair and offer her even one-fourth of the opportunities I’ve received in only 20 years as an American.

Three Cuban boys dodging rancid meat and crumbling architecture on a dust-filled Havana street do not dwell on the privileges other children their age might have. One day they may paint, sing, or shout their frustration, but for now they toss a ball around. For now, they play as boys.

She asked me to come over and bake cookies. So I did, and now, after combining butter and sugar and walnuts and chocolate chips, I’m on her couch with my hand against the small of her back.

I came over around 10:30, and after getting lost trying to find her apartment, I am redeemed by her presence and led to the flicker of lit candles and a kitchen full of ingredients for chocolate chip walnut cookies.

She talks about her evening—about eating steak with her brother who lives in Moscow, about watching There Will Be Blood and about a bunch of other details I’ve already forgotten and will never remember with any accuracy.

She fixes me an egg nog spiked with “White Christmas”—a mix of cheap brandy and cheaper rum—and we listen to soul music piped from a shitty mp3 docking station she says her dad—the dad she hasn’t spoken to for a while—bought her one year for Christmas.

She wants to smoke weed, but the small spice bottle on the coffee table her mom gave her is empty. She says she’s trying to quit.

Tonight she wears jeans with holes in them, and no belt, and after baking several dozen cookies she’ll take to work tomorrow afternoon,