

## Editor's Note

The Caribbean continues to garner the attention of scholars of different countries and regions; at least this has been my impression as I have traveled to such diverse places as the tundra of a wintry day in Iowa City and the tropical city-state of Singapore in the South China Sea. I began the year with an invitation to speak at the University of Iowa on literature and politics in revolutionary Cuba and Manuel Zapata Olivella's *Changó, el gran putas*. It was one frigid January week, in which I was ill-prepared for the northern winter sub-zero temperature hovering over the city. In some respects, Nashville's mild climate has spoiled me; I can no longer recall where I placed my winter wear, which I so desperately needed once I left the Iowa City airport. I quickly remembered how easily ice could cling to your cheeks, lips, or any unprotected part of your face and body. Though the reception was warm, cheerful, and inviting, as any Caribbean gathering would suggest, Mother Nature had her own plans with her bone-chilling winds. She even challenged participants to attend the talks on topics that transported us away from the current environment toward an imaginary construction of a warmer one, in which La Estrella's voice, of Cabrera Infante's *Tres tristes tigres*, recalled the balmy Havana nightlife. With the passage of time, this proud New Yorker had forgotten what it means to live in the northern states. Then again, I tell myself that Caribbean people are transnational, transcultural, and transportable by definition. The Caribbean exists outside of its geographic borders; and for many of us, it is a metaphor that can be found even in regions where the sun's rays do not so gently caress the exposed body.

Though February weather reigned over the northern regions, this was hardly the case in the southern United States, especially in Caribbean-like cities such as Miami, where I attended the Cuban Research Institute's annual conference. Miami has changed throughout the years and is no longer the city it was purported to be after Castro's extreme island makeover. While Cuban exiles were once a visible majority, other groups have begun to share the same living spaces. A Haitian taxi driver, with family members in Port-au-Prince, drove me from the airport to Florida International University. We talked about the recent earthquake and our shared concern about the long-term impact, as the international volunteers and media had put on an impressive and visible display that would soon be overshadowed by less urgent but more current events. Haiti continues to wait to receive the sustained help the people were once promised. There are visible tensions among the various, competing Miami residents, even among other Spanish speakers who have made Miami their home. In addition, Cubans no longer represent a singular voice. A detectable number of them are daring to

express divergent opinions, even though they all consider themselves to be Cubans and frequent the same restaurants.

The month of March proved to be a challenge, when attempting to attend two consecutive conferences in the Caribbean. The Iowa and Miami engagements represented this region in the northern hemisphere, though I have long argued that Miami is a Caribbean city. However, the other two were held in Boca Chica, the Dominican Republic, and Cartagena, Colombia. The first was sponsored by the journal *Negritud*, under the direction of Luis Miletti, who publishes a quality journal and organizes a yearly conference. The Dominican Republic site was important, if only because one of the organizers, the Afro-Dominican poet Blas Jiménez, unexpectedly passed away (see my previous Editor's Note). All the participants joined Blas's family in paying homage to the poet and his pioneering works, elegantly conducted under the guidance of James Davis and Antonio Tillis. While there were more participants than in the first *Negritud* conference, I wonder how Boca Chica can be read as a metaphor for the Dominican Republic and the Caribbean in general; like many other areas, it thrives from the presence of foreigners spending tourist dollars. In fact, some of these places have become internationally homogenized, and if you do not leave their resort-like structures, you might not realize you are in the Dominican Republic.

After the conclusion of our stay in Boca Chica, I returned to Nashville and a day later boarded a plane for Cartagena, this time to participate in the II International Conference on Caribbean Studies. Cartagena is becoming a popular conference location, and this is my third consecutive visit to this Caribbean city; once for the Afro-Latin American Research Association meeting, twice for the IX Seminario Internacional de Estudios del Caribe, and thrice for the conference organized by Héctor Romero and Kevin Sedeño, who saw fit to make Cartagena the permanent site for future conferences. Cartagena offers a visible history of Afro-descendants, which includes a rare and active *palenque* community, and the possibility to theorize about the greater Caribbean. This interpretation of the Caribbean is the subject of Zapata Olivella's *Changó, el gran putas*, but many Colombians still do not give him the recognition he deserves. However, I believe that all this will change with the circulation of Jonathan Tittler's English translation, *Changó: The Biggest Badass*. In the absence of open travel to Cuba, Cartagena will flourish as a popular conference location.

A most significant event was held in New York City, that is, another Caribbean space, where many gathered to celebrate the works of the Nuyorican poet, Tato Laviera. In early February I received a distressing message on my home recorder, from a familiar voice. In a painful and subdued tone, the voice pleaded for help. I answered the call to investigate the nature of the message. Tato, barely

whispering, informed me that he had been removed from his apartment and was homeless. I was not clear exactly what had happened, nor was I able to decipher the sequence of events. In a subsequent conversation he directed me to a recently published article in the *New York Times* (of February 12), providing coherence to our phone conversations. I soon learned that Tato, who suffers from diabetes, blindness, and dialysis, unbeknownst to me had undergone brain surgery. The doctor inserted a shunt in his brain; then he went for physical therapy and, in the meantime, lost his apartment. Tato was now homeless.

In a brief period of time, the academic and neighborhood communities came together to assist, raise money, and find Tato an affordable and respectable place to live. Emails began to circulate with electrifying speed, and money started to surface from foundations and individuals. Everyone felt a sense of urgency, and this was a worthy task that could not fail. More often than not we celebrate the person after he expires, and it became imperative that we change this awful custom and appreciate the writer who is still with us.

On April 27, New York University student groups, in collaboration with community organizations, hosted a spectacular and filled-to-capacity tribute to Tato Laviera. The poet Miguel Algarín opened the event, which Juan Flores emceed. Notable Latino singers, artists, musicians, and poets contributed to the event. The poets included Américo Casiano, Louis Reyes, Myrna Nieves, María Aponte, Sandra María Estéves, María Teresa Fernández (Mariposa), Nancy Mercado, José Ángel Figueroa, Jesús Papoleto Meléndez, Frank Pérez, Raúl Ríos, and Sery Colón. There were also a few academic figures in attendance, like Stephanie Álvarez, Edwin Meléndez, Juan Flores, and yours truly. Tato, who sat on stage next to a statue of Santa Bárbara on one side and Algarín on the other, was clearly moved by the celebration. He even felt inspired and strong enough to cancel the intermission and recite one of his own poems. He chose to perform, in his typical Nuyorican style, “Nideaquinidealla,” from his most recent collection, *Mixturao* (2008). As part of the tribute, Tato had asked Flores to write “something publishable.” So in his NYU office, Flores, Álvarez, and I composed a parody of Tato’s “tito madera smith,” which we titled “tato madera smith,” and reads as follows:

**tato madera smith**

(Co-authored by Juan Flores, Stephanie Álvarez, and William Luis)

he can sound like a viejita bochinchera in el barrio in one poem,  
and like a fetus in the womb begging for his mother to stay in puerto rico in  
another  
do you know him?

he can rap to a fly mamacita out of one side of his mouth  
and drink una tasita de café bustelo out of the other  
do you know him?

he can swim with alligators in the río bravo y grande by day  
and be maestro guru at the edinburgo poets café by night  
do you know him?

he's a babalao que consulta el tablero de ifá at one moment  
and a pentecostal soap-box street preacher exorcising the demons at another  
do you know him?

he was homeless seeking shelter in the bronx one day,  
and is resurrected to be here with us today  
do you know him?

well we sure do!

you can call him tato  
you can call him laviera  
you can call him smitty  
you can call him nuyorican,  
you can call him black,  
you can call him latino,  
you can call him many things, but  
you gotta know he's always with us!

we love you tato.

The event was a resounding success, and we were given the rare opportunity to applaud the talents of one of the best living poets of our time. The East Harlem community found Tato a studio apartment in Taino Towers. Please contribute generously to the foundation set up to help Tato. Along with publishing a poem for Tato, in the present issue we also provide a fragment of "El Barrio," a novel he is currently finishing.

As the semester came to an end, I departed for Hong Kong, made my way through Asia, and arrived in Singapore in time to participate in the VII International Society for the Study of Chinese Overseas. Some may rightfully ask, what do Chinese overseas have to do with Latin America or, for that matter, the *Afro-Hispanic Review*? Well, we should not forget that while Europeans were enslaving Africans and sending them to work in the mines and agricultural fields in the Americas, the Portuguese, Dutch, Danish, French, and British East India companies controlled the "Orient." In their quest to profit from the lucrative spice

trade, they forced Chinese and other Asians to work for little or no compensation. This was certainly the case with the Dutch East India Company and the Cape Colony, which became an important center for re-supplying ships rounding the Cape of Good Hope. The conditions of Asians resembled those of Africans at home or in the Americas. Also, the Chinese in particular were sent to the Americas as contract laborers, first to Trinidad and later to Cuba and Peru in the nineteenth century, and East Indians to other parts of the Caribbean in subsequent periods. We should also remember that Spain controlled the Philippines and, after the Spanish-Cuban-American War of 1898, these some seven thousand islands, and those of Puerto Rico and Guam became US territories. I would even venture that the Philippines and Puerto Rico have similar histories, as is the case of Africans and Chinese, as our monographic issue on Afro-Asia (27.1, Spring 2008) has shown.

Singapore has a fascinating history and vibrant economy, and stands as one of the leading financial world centers. Though many of its citizens are of Chinese descent, they have also intermixed with East Indians, Europeans, and Malays. As an immigrant nation, Singapore is a symbol of what Fernando Ortiz termed transculturation, also evident in other regions, such as Malacca, Malaysia, to the north. The mixture or fusion is evident in its cuisine, and especially in the Peranakan dishes, which immediately became my favorite. But Singapore seems to contain the best of what Europe offers. Everything appeared to be clean, new, and well organized. Signs abound indicating what is permissible and not permissible, and everyone respects those indications. As a matter of fact, Singapore reminds me of a stylized version of Disney World (which it has) or, better yet, Epcot Center, for its friendliness and cleanliness. Perhaps it is a little too organized for my taste, that is for someone who practices chaos theory. With a little disorder, Singapore could resemble a Caribbean city.

As we go to press, our colleagues at the University of Puerto Rico are undergoing a difficult moment; they are on strike against the budgetary cuts imposed by the administration, which will lead to the elimination of some academic programs, faculty, student financial aid, and research funds, among other support structures necessary for any thriving institution of higher learning. Though universities are not immune to the current economic crisis, there is no doubt that institutions are also taking advantage of the same situation to make unwarranted cuts, centralize the decision making process, and promote non-academic agendas. The *Afro-Hispanic Review* supports the just cause of our Puerto Rican colleagues. I ask you to do the same.

Professors Emanuelle Oliveira (Vanderbilt University) and Isis Costa McElroy (Arizona State University) will be guest editors of the fall monographic

*William Luis*

issue of the *Afro-Hispanic Review* dedicated to Afro-Brazil. If you are interested in collaborating in this special issue, please contact one of the guest editors.

Finally, the cover of the present issue features an acrylic painting on corduroy by Gil Veda, titled *Guardian of Truth*. Veda, a famous Puerto Rican artist living in Nashville, is renowned for painting imaginative sceneries and portraits of country music stars like Johnny Cash, Dolly Parton, and Hank Williams, Jr., and these and other personalities also collect his art. If you are interested in purchasing any of Gil's artwork, please see his website at [www.gilveda.com](http://www.gilveda.com). I want to thank Gil and Loraine Segovia Paz for providing the images reproduced in this issue.

William Luis  
Editor