

Editor's Note

This note is dedicated to the memory of Edelma Zapata Pérez, daughter of the famed Afro-Colombian writer, Manuel Zapata Olivella. She was a dear friend and a poet in her own right. Edelma's life was shortened by a protracted battle against a chronic case of rheumatoid arthritis she contracted at the tender age of fifteen. She joined the ranks of the *ancestors*, on August 29, 2010. Edelma was only fifty-six. A kind and generous person with an unending thirst for knowledge, Edelma was beautiful, elegant, and eloquent, and she will be greatly missed.

I first met Edelma, or "Ede," as some of her cherished friends called her, sometime in 2004, when we began to prepare the monographic issue on Manuel, as she fondly referred to her beloved father. We exchanged numerous emails about the composition of the issue and the essay she would contribute about her father (see: "Manuel Zapata Olivella: La visión cósmica en mis huellas ancestrales," *AHR* 25.1). Edelma was convinced that her mission in life was to promote Manuel's vast and important work, which she did valiantly, in spite of her physical pain and limited mobility. She expressed herself elegantly in letters and other writings and revealed a natural gift for assembling delightful words and expressions in a pleasing and enchanting tone and style. As we continued to write, we ventured into other areas and got to know each other better, and in a relatively short period of time became close friends.

When I learned Edelma was seeking a permanent home for Manuel's archives, I suggested that she consider the possibility of transferring them to Vanderbilt University, where they could be preserved and made available to an interested public. She was grateful for the offer, which gave her enormous relief and great satisfaction, knowing that her father's works would be secured and preserved for posterity. We looked forward to meeting each other, and we found the opportunity at the next Afro-Latin American Research Association (ALARA) biennial conference in Cartagena, Colombia, in August of 2008.

On the first day of the conference I anxiously looked for Edelma; and when we saw each other, we were immediately attracted like magnets, as if two lost souls had found each other. We talked about her trip from Bogotá, my trip from Nashville, and Manuel's life and works. Later, the conversation shifted, and she shared the episodes of her own life. Edelma wore a collar brace and was too ill to travel without the help of an assistant. Nothing in her emails indicated to me anything about her present physical condition. On the contrary, they were always full of delightful information. Edelma was one of two invited speakers; the other was the historian Alfonso Múnera, then the Vice Director for Research of the University of Cartagena, and currently the Director of the Instituto Internacional de Estudios del Caribe, of

the same institution. Edelma read some of her unpublished poems, which greatly moved me. I was drawn in particular to one about bodily pain she dedicated to Frida Kahlo, something the two women had in common and only they could understand. I mentioned to her that I wanted to publish them in a future issue of the *Afro-Hispanic Review*, to which she consented (see: *AHR* 27.2). As the conference came to its conclusion, Edelma returned to Bogotá, but not before we decided on our next meeting.

A few months later, I visited Edelma in her Bogotá apartment. At that time, our Latin American Librarian, Paula Covington, was finalizing Vanderbilt University's acquisition of Manuel's archives, these to be included as part of our large Colombian collection. Edelma wanted me to review Manuel's manuscripts before they were transferred to Nashville, and I also went to ensure that the transaction proceeded as planned. The numerous boxes, some 150 of them, overwhelmed her living room, one stacked on top of the other, they became walls of boxes, some two boxes deep. I was especially touched when Edelma showed me what she considered to be some of the most valuable acquisitions, including a manuscript of Manuel's most recent novel. She also insisted that I choose two books from Manuel's personal library. This I understood to be a kind gesture of gratitude for traveling so far to see her. Most importantly, we spent countless hours talking about politics, race relations, history, international relations, my family, her family, and anything else that occurred to us. I believe that we were both caught up in the moment of wanting to hear the other speak.

Edelma and I also discussed her health, her chronic pain and how difficult it was for her to leave her bed, cook her own meals and eat. At times she preferred to forego nourishment just to stay in bed. We also talked about her operations and her medication, which were insufficient to control her constant pain. I then appreciated the Herculean effort she made to descend two flights of stairs to unlock the gated entrance to let me in, the superhuman feat she repeated to lock it when I left.

To help Edelma, I took it upon myself to reach out to writers in Cuba, with the hope of getting one of the cultural organizations to sponsor her travel to the island, where she could receive the medical attention she desperately needed but could not find or afford in her native country. My inquiries produced some encouragement, but as time passed my hope waned and Edelma's physical condition worsened.

I last spoke to Edelma after she returned to La Paz, where her mother provided the necessary care and attention she urgently required. Edelma enjoyed her independence, but she could no longer provide for herself and her mother, like any other mother, wanted to take care of her daughter. I talked to Edelma a few times and, in one of the last conversations, promised to visit her as soon as classes ended,

if she promised me to get better. Edelma had to be rushed to the hospital more than once and, unfortunately, she could not keep her word; however, I felt the need to keep mine. I traveled to La Paz one month after her death. Señora María and the other members of the family received me with open arms, as if I were a lost son who found his way home. Edelma had spoken to her family about me and my planned visit, and they also overheard our telephone conversations with someone she affectionately called “mi príncipe.”

My presence coincided with a special homage to Edelma sponsored by the Casa de la Cultura of Valledupar. I had been asked to be the main speaker. As the guest of honor, in my conversations with relatives and friends I learned much about the history of the family, about Manuel's medical work with the community, and how he met Edelma's mother. Also, I had the distinct pleasure of meeting some of the senior members of the Olivella lineage. Family and friends in attendance knew of a young and vivacious Edelma, dearly loved by her mother. But only a handful were familiar with her most recent accomplishments, Edelma the poet and the keeper of her father's memory. In this exchange, my talk centered on an analysis of Manuel's *Changó, el gran putas* and some of Edelma's own poems, those that reflected a daughter's love for her father and others that alluded to her physical state. Towards the end of my talk, I shared some of my emails Edelma penned, and in particular one that recorded a dialogue between us, in which she made detailed comments about my introduction to the English translation of *Changó*. In her reply, where appropriate, she inserted paragraphs containing her thoughts into my text. The new hybrid text read as a duet. So, when I spoke, she responded. I concluded my presentation with Edelma's own words, her poems and emails, even those of a personal nature, which I will also share with the reader:

22 October 2009

Querido príncipe,

Me llegó tu nota gracias por permitirme hacer esta lectura de la introducción. Con mucha depresión amanezco hoy. Anoche tuve una de esas noches intensas de dolor así que me levanté muy triste. Willi, willi, Willi, me falta el aire hasta el ligero movimiento de una mariposa me molesta, me siento derrotada. Estoy tan atormentada que no veo la luz, no la veo. Tengo mucho miedo, aguanto, aguanto, y quisiera al fin que las pocas fuerzas que conservo me abandonen para al fin descansar. Perdona, espero que no te moleste mi poco ánimo. Escribiré al amigo de la edición de *Chimá*, como bien dices Manuelito debe estar sonriendo. ¿Cómo está el joven chino? Cuidate te quiero Edelma

May 19, 2010

Querido Príncipe,

Sólo una nota para saludarte. Ya sé que regresaste ¿Cómo te fue en el viaje? De mi te diré que estoy en serios estados de salud que de día a día me hace vivir terrible pero gracias a Dios pasan y tengo mejores otros. Gracias, algunas veces recibo palabras de aliento de amigos y siempre cumplen su función y me permiten otra vez levantar el vuelo. Vivo diferentes estados de ánimo y emociones. Este continuo movimiento me ha hecho perder el equilibrio de fuerzas y últimamente tanto que estoy severamente afectada. Sigo en este camino que me ha trazado la vida a veces con momentos de desolación terrible, pero gracias a Dios pasan y tengo otros mejores. Te cuento que nuevamente estoy en Valledupar ciudad ubicada en la punta extrema de la cordillera occidental que pega con Venezuela. Una severa crisis de salud en abril con pérdida de conciencia me hizo refugiarme aquí. Aunque estoy rodeada del cariño de la familia, añoro mi soledad y me hace mucha falta ¿Viste la publicación de *Changó*? Yo vi la publicidad que hicieron en EU pero aunque ya enviaron los libros llegaron a Bogotá, hasta hoy me mandaron las cosas pero no he abierto la caja todavía. ¿Tú ya leíste la traducción? No creo que hayas tenido tiempo todavía. Espero que la familia en casa se encuentre bien y tú querido hijo en China asimilando todo lo que la cultura China puede brindarle. [...] Te quiero mucho y recuerdo con mucho cariño, abrazos y besos.

July 14, 2010

DÍAS SIN ESCRIBIRTE PERO SIN OLVIDARTE NI POR UN MOMENTO. MUCHAS COMPLICACIONES DE SALUD DE TODO TIPO. PRÁCTICAMENTE SIN MOVIMIENTO, HOSPITALIZACIONES Y DEMÁS. CREO QUE ANDO SIN TIMÓN Y POR SUPUESTO SIN CONTROL SOBRE MI CUERPO ¿ALGUNA VEZ TE HAS SENTIDO AL BORDE DEL ABISMO? ¿ALGUNA VEZ HAS SENTIDO QUE HAS PERDIDO EL CONTROL DE TU VIDA? SOSPECHO QUE NO. VERDAD ESO PARECE SER LA OPCIÓN PARA GENTE QUE NO PLANIFICÓ SU VIDA. SI ESTUVIERAS EN UNA SITUACIÓN HIPOTÉTICA ¿CÚAL CREES QUE SERÍA TU REACCIÓN LÓGICA Y RACIONAL PARA SALIR AIROSO DE SEMEJANTE TRANCE? PERDONA SI NADA DE LO QUE DIGO TIENE SENTIDO PARA TI. CREO QUE COSAS ASÍ SÓLO LE PASAN A GENTE COMO YO.

September 1, 2010.

Te recuerdo mucho y te llevo en mi corazón pero sé que eres un hombre muy ocupado y no quiero robarte tiempo. Finalmente no puedo superar tanto sufrimiento para poder escribir cosas que superen mi realidad con acciones positivas ¡Que desastre tanta debilidad! ¿Dónde encontrar la fuerza?

When I reread these and other letters written by Edelma, they break my heart. Before I departed, Señora María shared with me that her daughter prayed in the latter months of her life. Edelma is survived by two children, who live in Bogotá, Karib, a lawyer, and Manuela del Mar, a sociologist.

My other trips, though significant, appear meaningless next to the overwhelming effect of Edelma's departure. While she was receiving medical attention, I attended the ALARA conference in Lima, Peru. The gathering was

small, but it was well-organized and featured a significant contribution by Afro-Peruvians. Peru has the distinction of having a rich culture, comprised of many descendents of Amerindians, Spaniards, Chinese, and Africans. The Japanese have also made their incursion, most visibly seen in one of the country's most notorious presidents, Alberto Fujimori. The cuisine is just as diverse and reflects the country's varied topography of sea, jungle, and mountains. The ALARA membership voted to hold the next biennial meeting in Costa Rica.

Also, I had the opportunity to return to Columbia, Missouri and visit friends. Previously the home of the *Afro-Hispanic Review*, despite Marvin Lewis' absence, the department continues to follow the path he created and underscore the importance of Afro-Romance studies. Certainly, the department's profile diminished when Marvin decided to retire. He was the mainstay of this field of study. Marvin helped to develop the *AHR* and founded another journal, the *Publication of the Afro-Latin American Research Association (PALARA)*. He trained many scholars in the field and was a very visible and productive researcher. However, the department still depends on the support of senior scholars like Miguel Ugarte and Flore Zephir and younger ones like Mamadou Badiane.

The *Afro-Hispanic Review* is first and foremost an academic publication, and the journal does not attempt to take political positions. However, I ask: is addressing matters of race not a political position? As I conclude the Editor's Note, I want to bring to the reader's attention a writer whose life is in danger. I am referring to Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel, whose masterful story, "La isla de Annobón, el refugio de las musas," appears in the monographic issue on Equatorial Guinea (*AHR* 28.2). To protest and publicize the lack of democracy in his country, Tomás has gone on a hunger strike. He did so with a pen and a letter, "Carta a José Bono Martínez, Presidente del Parlamento Español," pleading for the necessary pressures to change the Obiang government that has been in power for thirty-two years, since 1979. The country is rich in oil, but many citizens suffer from political and economic hardships, and they lack educational opportunities. We can only hope that the political change seen in the northern part of Africa will also spill over to South Saharan Africa before it claims another life.

Finally, I want the reader to remember another ongoing struggle. This one, much closer to home, is in the form of a student strike at the University of Puerto Rico. Students, faculty, and staff, fighting for basic rights, oppose cuts made to their budget. The *Afro-Hispanic Review* continues to support the cause of our Puerto Rican colleagues and friends.

On a lighter note, the reader is in for a delightful treat. The present monographic issue is dedicated to Afro-Brazil. Though we continue to focus on the

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journal's mission, to study and publicize the African experience in Spanish-speaking countries, we have also ventured into new directions. To this end, we publish interdisciplinary essays, incorporate Latino literature, and embrace the Afro-Brazilian experience. I want to thank our guest editors, professors Emanuelle Oliveira and Isis McElroy, for their tireless work and for setting a new direction of how to envision the cultural production of the country with the largest population of African descendants in Latin America.

William Luis
Editor