

# Editor's Note

## I

The Afro-Brazil issue of the *Afro-Hispanic Review* was delayed in order to provide our readers with the same high quality publication they expect of a journal such as ours. Though so little time has transpired between the last issue and the present one, so much has occurred. While we were finalizing the fall issue, I was invited to participate in a symposium at the University of Missouri to honor, and rightfully so, the Afro-Cuban poet Georgina Herrera. Prof. Juanamaría Cordones Cook, whose institution was the home of Marvin Lewis and other prominent scholars of Afro-Hispanic Studies, organized this unprecedented event, the first of its kind outside of Cuba. The symposium focused primarily on her poetry, though Daisy Rubiera Castillo's testimonial work about Georgina's life, *Golpeando la memoria* (2005), was often cited. I was asked to engage Georgina in a public conversation about her life and works, and we explored her use of social, cultural, racial, and political tropes. Our delightful dialogue between critic and artist revealed an enjoyable side of a witty, candid, and original poet. Georgina is a person with high principles and has refused to play the political game for professional gains. This helps to explain why she is not better known outside of Cuba. Juanamaría also treated us to a beautiful testimonial video about Georgina that promises to set the foundation for a new form of visual expression. She had masterfully prepared an earlier one on Nancy Morejón, but the one on Georgina was truly spectacular. After the conference, I spent a restful day with Georgina and Juanamaría, who shared with us highlights of a picturesque area of Columbia unknown to me in previous visits.

## II

As the journal was going to press, I departed for Hong Kong to attend a regional meeting of the International Society for the Study of Chinese Overseas (ISSCO), a yearly event that takes me to the other side of the world. In the former British colony, which continues to resist total Chinese domination, I presented a paper on the varying poetic stages of Regino Pedroso and highlighted his Chinese Cuban poems. Though I was familiar with his "Hermano negro" (1934–36) and other anthologized compositions, this time I read Pedroso with a sense of purpose and confirmed that he was one of the great poets of Cuba's *vanguardismo* literary movement. A reading of his poems reveals the work of a complex and multi-cultural writer, who distinguished himself with "Salutación fraternal al taller mecánico" (1927), the first composition to articulate the worker's perspective on the island. Later, he focused on blacks and contributed to Negrismo and in particular Afro-

Cubanismo, by emphasizing the social, racial, and political plights of blacks. With his Chinese poems, Pedroso broke ground once again by addressing an indispensable element of Cuban literature and culture that had been previously denied any serious acknowledgement. In “El heredero” (1933) Pedroso invokes his ancestors:

El heredero  
Mi anciano abuelo,  
muy sabio mandarín de botón encarnado  
—aunque yo soy un hijo de la Revolución,  
son mis antepasados ilustres—,  
me dice, ya casi moribundo:  
—Hijo mío, de todos mis tesoros ¿qué ambicionas, qué anhelas?  
Yo le respondí, con el corazón trémulo por la angustia  
como un avión sin rumbo entre la niebla:  
—¡Oh, sabio, tres veces sabio, Wey Tchung-tseu!  
No quiero tus riquezas.  
Desdeño tus palacios de jade  
rodeados de jazmineros nevados de luna,  
tus claros estanques,  
donde el cielo de nácar florece en las tardes de lotos y estrellas...  
.....  
Sólo quiero tus libros,  
tus manuscritos raros de los tiempos de Honang-ti;  
quiero la página no desflorada por tu conocimiento,  
aquella que penetre el ojo del corazón,  
más hondo que el de la inteligencia.  
En los ópalos de tus pupilas moribundas.  
Lechosas como el humo del opio,  
crepusculiza un pasado lleno de encanto exótico y gracia genuflexiva;  
y yo quiero,  
ahora que el dragón de un sol nuevo se despereza en la mañana,  
regar la simiente de amor y justicia que tú no sembraste,  
la que no cultivaste en tus predios,  
cuando avaro del rico tesoro de los días  
dabas sólo a los pobres las miserables monedas  
de las noches del hambre.

Todo lo almacenaste sórdidamente:  
Pacíficos de oro e Himalayas de máximas profundas.  
Yo abriré para el hambre ignara del culí  
el opimo granero de tu cosecha de cultura.  
La *film* de tu existencia  
pasa ahora por la pantalla de nuestros tiempos;  
y eres, en episodios de arcaica ideología,  
un celuloide de otra etapa histórica.  
.....  
Y con tradicional ritual ceremonioso  
beso sus mortecinos dedos mandarinescos,  
donde una gema arcaica de un príncipe Ming fulge . . .  
¡Pues aunque soy hijo de la Revolución,  
son mis antepasados ilustres!

“El heredero,” about Pedroso’s grandfather, Wey Tchung-tseu, recalls Nicolás Guillén’s “Balada de los dos abuelos,” but in the Afro-Chinese-Cuban writer, the poetic voice is willing to accept certain Chinese traditions while questioning others. This and other poems, and in particular those gathered in the collection *El ciruelo de Yuen Pey Fu* (1955), combine the teachings of Confucius with Daoist principles. To these he also incorporates a certain rebellious mindset associated with the politics of the era, toward the Machado dictatorship and the US presence on the island, and with Cuba’s *vanguardia*.

### III

After the conference, my son Gabriel and I made our way to the mainland; during the first part of our trip we traveled to Guangzhou, Foshan, and Taishan, my father’s ancestral home. The journey began the previous summer after Gabriel insisted on learning more about my father, who had passed away when I was ten. Back then, my valiant Cuban mother, a single parent in New York City, made a courageous effort to raise two sons at a time when heroin and methadone were as plentiful and enticing as candy. I recall living near Chinatown with my mother and father, speaking Spanish, English, and Taishanese and interacting with his culture. After his untimely death, martial arts and Mandarin became vehicles for staying connected to what I perceived to be his way of life. However, for some unknown or unresolved and painful reason, I never visited his grave. So, with my brother Alexander’s help and Gabriel’s persistence, one hot summer day the members of the Luis clan journeyed to the Queens cemetery in search of our progenitor. It was a while before we located his grave in a remote section of the cemetery owned by the Chinese Community Center, the organization responsible for providing him with a final resting place. The grass had been trimmed but his plot, like many others in that section, was unattended, and the dirt and grass of many decades found ways to spread over his stone. The younger members of the family assumed the responsibility of pushing the grass back to its once defined border, thus revealing valuable clues about my father’s origin. As was to be expected, the upper part of the stone contained his name and date of death. However, the lower part was inscribed in Chinese characters. We took pictures of the inscriptions, and my son Diego, who had studied Spanish and Mandarin in high school, carefully transcribed the characters onto a sheet of paper. With this information in hand, we made our way to Chinatown, to the funeral home responsible for interring my father. At first, we appeared to be out of place, mainly due to the dark skin I inherited from my mother’s slave grandparents. Still, one of the workers we had previously contacted stepped forward and offered to translate the characters. He revealed my father’s Chinese name, Loi Ming King, and the location of his village, Longju, situated on the

outskirts of the city of Taishan. This information was strange to me because as a child I was told that my father was born in Guangzhou or Canton. (I will say more about additional contradictory information later.)

My brother, my sons and my daughter encouraged the journey, but colleagues at the various ISSCO meetings also nourished the idea. However, the direct contact came not from China or the United States, but from Cuba. Mitzi Espinosa Luis, who may be related to me for all I know, put me in touch with two Chinese citizens who had traveled to Cuba; Prof. Huang Zhucui made the trip looking for information about his father, and Liu Haisheng, an important official of the Chinese Overseas Office in Foshan, fulfilled a lifetime dream of visiting the island. My situation was the opposite; I was from the diaspora seeking information about my origin. Mitzi herself also journeyed to Guangdong and was fortunate to find members of her family a few years earlier. She was hopeful that my trip would be successful and helped me to believe that “nada es imposible” (everything is possible). Prof. Huang, who resides in Guangzhou, offered the assistance of Yasmina, a Chinese national who had studied in Cuba, lived in Guangzhou, and was a native of Taishan. Spanish became our language of communication. In some strange way, my study of Pedroso’s poems became more meaningful as I saw connections to my life and cultural background.

When Gabriel, Yasmina, and I arrived in Longju, a woman from the county’s Overseas Office was awaiting our arrival with four volumes of the town’s genealogy. I, on the other hand, was armed with a photograph of my father’s gravestone, with characters of his name and village, and others of my father, brother, and me. Everything seemed to unfold at lightning speed. As the woman from the Overseas Office combed through the books, she also pointed out my father’s old house, located directly behind us. We soon learned that it had been divided into two, and the left side was still occupied by my “aunt” Liu Melian. Her husband, Lei Yongyu, whom my grandfather had adopted, died the previous year. We engaged her in conversation, and she remembered having seen photographs of my brother and me, sent along with letters recounting my father’s experiences abroad. She also narrated a family history that was totally different from the one I was told as a child. According to my mother, my grandparents were killed during the Sun Yat-sen uprising in 1911. In this version of the family history, my uncle, my father’s older brother, traveled back home to accompany his brother to Cuba, where many years later he met my mother. Well, according to the current account of the story, my father was the first born, and his younger brother, Jaime, never left his village. There, he married, had three children, and lived a very modest life. Furthermore, my “aunt” clarified that my grandfather had migrated to Cuba, just as my great grandfather before him did. This new information placed the first Luis among the earliest

Chinese workers to travel to Cuba. My great grandfather must have been somewhat successful, because he returned to Longju to attend and pay for my uncle's wedding. Later, he remigrated to what appeared to be his adopted homeland, Cuba, and even died there; but his remains found their way back to his village. She went on to tell me that my grandfather had been buried in Cuba. Clearly, this story did not agree with the one I heard as a boy. In the present, I found myself studying the situation at hand from the perspective of a literary critic. I was confronted with two distinct and mutually exclusive narratives, but I was also aware that Cubans tend to exaggerate a little. The *New Yorker* in me even entertained the idea that this encounter was a setup: that the woman was pretending to be a relative and fabricated a story difficult to challenge. The sensible side of me considered that my grandfather and great grandfather may have had Chinese and Cuban families, and some of their descendants may still live on the island. Many years ago, I was told that, before the Revolution, there were a few associations whose members were Luis; now they were grouped into the Cuban Min Chih Tang Association.

Liu Meilian, whom I believed to be my aunt, telephoned my cousin, Jaime's only surviving daughter, who lived in Taishan. Some forty minutes later, my family grew exponentially. I was reunited with my cousin, her husband, her daughter and son-in-law, and a three-year-old grandchild. Though we were surprised to meet her, I can only imagine what was going through their minds, never considering the idea that they would be found by relatives they did not know they had! We later found out that my father did not communicate with his brother, perhaps because the younger Luis sold his brother's house without asking for permission. My cousin, known to her family as Sougu, encouraged us to visit her father's modest home, which she still owned. Sougu told a story of extreme poverty: she worked at a young age, was not able to complete her education, and experienced the death of a brother and sister and the suicide of a mother. She was the only surviving member of the family—that is, until she met me. My cousin was so happy because she always wanted to have a brother, and now she had two! Somewhere in the conversation she offered to do a DNA test to confirm our genetic link. I insisted on visiting the cemetery to pay respects to our ancestors, which included my two uncles and great grandfather. My cousin also invited us to her apartment in Taishan the following evening for dinner, which we were more than happy to accept. At their elegant and upscale home in a gated community, I was treated like royalty. I was served first and often, everyone always waited for my approval, and the meal was simply spectacular. My cousin's response to "wo bao le" ("I am full") was "maman chi" ("eat slowly"). The more I ate, the happier she became. At that moment, I decided that I would return to Taishan some ten days later to celebrate my birthday with my father's

family. I am convinced that the visit will become one of the most important experiences of my life.

In the process of getting to know my ancestors, I became aware that my surname Luis in Spanish is a romanization of a Chinese character, which is written or pronounced as Léi in Mandarin and Lóí in Cantonese or Taishanese. There is even a Chinese deity with the same last name. He is personified with an ax in one hand and a chisel in the other. This deity has wings and rules over justice. Moreover, Léi or Lóí is written with the character of thunder, depicting rain descending over a field, 雷. In Santería or Regla de Ocha, Santa Bárbara holds a sword and is syncretized with Changó, the Orisha of fire and lightning. Changó's preferred weapon is the ax. There is also a major Chinese deity who symbolizes water. In the Yoruba-based religions I believe Yemayá, the ruler of the sea, to be my mother. After this journey of self-discovery, I am convinced that Changó is my father. Names are important in Chinese culture and society. As I mentioned, my father, Léi King Ming, whose surname is written with the character for thunder, invokes the deity Léi King, who holds an ax in his right hand. My father was born in Longju. In Pin Yin, "Long" means dragon and "ju" is understood to be a gathering or a community, and so the name of the town can be interpreted as "a community of dragons." The dragon is an important Chinese symbol.

#### IV

My trip to China has a least one coda. When traveling to Chendu, in Sichuan, we attempted to visit Kangding, a city high in the mountains, about a six to seven hour bus ride from the center of the municipality. The ride was breathtaking. The river, which followed the road, was vibrant, almost overflowing from many days of constant rain. About an hour from Kangding, at a control or toll station, armed soldiers ordered the bus to pull over to the side of the road. A military officer boarded the bus and searched for "non-Chinese looking people." She told us in acceptable English that the road was bad, and for that reason we could not continue to our destination and had to exit the bus. If this was the case, it seemed to me that little or no regard was given to Chinese travelers who would also be in danger, but foreigners had to be protected. The argument lacked coherence. The three of us, who did not have "Chinese-looking faces," protested vehemently. We were willing to assume responsibility for our own lives. I even challenged their characterization and explained that my father was Chinese. The commanding officer was on a mission and approached us with fire in his eyes. In a militaristic-sounding voice, he yelled that I did not have Chinese credentials like his, which he took the trouble of pulling from his pocket, and that I could not cross into Kangding. After that explosion, we

knew that there was no point in arguing with him. We were herded like sheep on to another bus, full of foreigners, and sent back to Chendu. The other “non-Chinese looking people” had been passengers on earlier buses traveling to the same destination and were made to wait some six hours for the last bus (mine) to arrive. No one said a word while the bus was under military surveillance. We could only imagine that Kangding has a sizable Tibetan population, and since Tibet had been isolated during the ninetieth commemoration of the birth of the Chinese Communist Party, foreigners were also forbidden from entering other nearby regions and cities. Incensed by what just happened, I recalled Pedroso’s “El heredero” and considered how he attempted to reconcile the contradictions his grandfather represented to him. Similarly, I had a wonderful experience with my family, but was enraged by the military officials who prevented us from entering Kangding. Contemplating my own identity, like Pedroso does in his poem, I wrote a first draft of the Editor’s Note a few hours from Chendu.

## V

This issue of the *Afro-Hispanic Review* explores not only identity in the global sphere, but also here at home in Nashville. We are pleased to share with our readers “Nueva Vida, Nuevo Trabajo,” a celebration of Hispanic/Latino artworks organized by the Metro Nashville Arts Commission in conjunction with the Nashville Area Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. In our effort to support Hispanics and Latinos in Nashville and other cities throughout the United States, we selected Mario Moreno’s “The Journey of my Life to a Dream Expected Along the Way” for the cover. Mario shared with us his difficult but fascinating and inspirational life:

My name is Mario Moreno. I was born on May 4, 1959, in a small town in Veracruz, Mexico, called Cuichapa. I am originally from a humble family, and I had severe infections in both ears and went deaf as a child. I also, unfortunately, do not speak, but despite all odds, I prevailed. When I was nine, we moved to the city of Córdoba, Veracruz, where I started to work shining shoes on the streets. My tools were a stool, a drawer loaded with my utensils, a notebook, and a pencil. I hoped for a client to draw because I did not have the opportunity to go to school. While working I met a person who saw me draw and took me to the Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social, where there was a nursery and various activities for children, including painting. So I learned more and began working with watercolors, but I realized that they faded. I then started painting with oil paints, and that’s how I started to draw and paint landscapes, photographs, and the like with oil paintings. In 1983, I met a sculptor and learned to carve wood two years later. Now I paint landscapes and portraits, carve wood into key chains and assemble battleships in bottles. In September of 2004, I came to the United States with a bag full of dreams because this country is full of opportunities. I just want a chance to show that my hearing and speech restrictions have not been an obstacle to my learning.

In this issue we also feature the works of Antonieta Capdevila, “Beyond the

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Horizon”; Adolfo Dávila, “The Great Follower”; Orlando García Camacho, “Desperados”; Kathryn García Smith, “Life in Red # 3”; Zoila Mojica, “Yellow Hibiscus”; Jairo Prado, “Underground Dweller”; Mike Quiñones González, “Finding Self”; and Liliana Vélez, “Tired Hands.” Other Notable Artists of “Nueva Vida, Nuevo Trabajo,” included here in a montage, are: Aida Costner, “Peaceful Time”; Yuri Cunza, “Not a Melting Pot”; Gladys Escobar, “Cartagena de Indias”; Alba González-Nylander, “A Lion in Pain”; John D. Griffin, “Angel of Hope”; Megan Kelley, “Teixiptla”; Inés Negri, “Caffè di Colombia”; Sandra Rivera, “Red Guitar”; Gil Veda, “A Job to Do” (featured in *Afro-Hispanic Review* 29.1); and Yenni Walker, “Baby by the Water.”

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