

Editor's Note

It is with deep sadness that I write the present Editor's Note. I do so to announce the imminent death of my great friend, Tato Laviera. As I draft this note, Tato rests peacefully in the Palliative Department, a Hospice-like residence of Mount Sinai Hospital, waiting for that special moment to cross to the Other Side. I choose my words carefully because Tato was Catholic, as his name Jesús Abraham (Tato) Laviera indicates. But as an Afro-Latino, Tato also believed in Spiritism and New World African religions.

Tato and I met many years ago, when I was still a member of the faculty at Dartmouth College. From that initial moment, we looked forward to seeing each other during the various stages of our personal and professional developments. As we began to share experiences, we found out that we had much in common. Most importantly, we were from the Lower East Side of Manhattan, and we attended Seward Park High School, where he remembered that I was school president. We did not graduate from the same school. Rather, he transferred and completed his education at Charles Evan Hughes High School. Tato and I had great moments at Dartmouth, but also at Binghamton, Yale, and Vanderbilt, where he was a frequent and popular visitor. Tato's last visit to Nashville was in the spring of 2006. He insisted on being present at my Endowed Chair ceremony. Tato wanted to see if I would be awarded a real chair, and if he could pawn it. He paid for the trip from his own resources, and I was truly honored by his presence. Deep down, Tato and I identified with each other. We were both of humble origins from the Lower East Side, of dark complexion, and among the few who had survived the tough, drug infested, violent, inner city experience.

We also saw each another many times in New York City. Occasionally we met at Adela's on the Lower East Side or at another restaurant in the Village or East Harlem. We would also go dancing, where Tato showed that his reputation, even though he had lost his eyesight, was still in tact. The rhythms noted in his poetry were clearly in his blood. We also agreed to meet in Puerto Rico at the Negritud Conference in 2012, where Tato was a keynote speaker. There, we enjoyed local dishes, music, and great conversations. I last saw him healthy a few months later, in May of the same year. A month or so earlier, I called to tell him that I had won a Guggenheim but was not sure if I should go to the reception hosted by the Foundation. Tato encouraged me to attend, insisted on going with me, and demanded that I get him a guest ticket. He also mentioned that his birthday was on the same day, and we could celebrate the two events. After the reception, in which Tato became a center of his own performance, we went out to dinner, then back to his apartment in Taino Towers, where his sister, Ruth, nieces, and close friends awaited with live music to commemorate his birthday. That same weekend I saw him read at the Big Band Poetry Jam with music by Arturo O'Farrill and his Afro Latin

Jazz Orchestra. After experiencing a setback two years before, Tato's performance confirmed that he was back, stronger than ever. While in New York, Tato offered me his apartment and bedroom. I was deeply humbled by his generosity. This was a marvelous and memorial period in which Tato and I became closer than brothers, if that is even possible.

Tato was debilitated some nine months ago, in January of this year. After his scheduled dialysis treatment, he went back to his apartment to rest. Ruth found him asleep, and decided not to disturb him. However, when she checked on him the following day, she realized that he had not moved and was unconscious. She rushed him to Mount Sinai Hospital, and later he was assigned to the respiratory ward, located on the ninth floor. Then, last week he was moved to his current location, a few blocks from the hospital. The doctors treated him for various infections, but they were never able to find out his deadly ailment. They conducted numerous tests with no definitive results. It became a mystery to them. For the most part, they had given up on him from the very beginning. We, on the other hand, were hopeful. With the help of spiritual advisors, Tato's life was prolonged. We believed that he would be saved and return to a normal life, though with some diminished abilities. Our expectations were partially realized. With the extended time, we saw small miracles along the way, for this other Jesús was a miracle worker.

Ruth had broken the news to me shortly after Tato was hospitalized. She called while I was traveling in Chengdu, China. Since then, we stayed in touch on a regular basis, which included daily conversations for months on end, sometimes speaking three, four, or more times per day. Shortly after my return to Nashville, I flew up to New York to visit Tato and support Ruth. Tato did not speak, but he was alert and able to respond, with opened eyes and a bright smile. I spent time with him, in the company of friends and family and also alone. During these treasured, solitary moments, I talked to Tato, read to him his poetry, and also shared in his silence. I even had a magical experience. We were alone the first time it happened. I was by his bedside, leaning forward, my head touching his. I sensed something from Tato, and without giving it much thought, I responded, "You don't have to thank me. We do it because we love you!" Immediately, his face lit up, and he broke into a big smile, as if to say, "You understood me!" And I did! We had communicated telepathically. Needless to say, the experienced reduced me to tears. I did a lot of crying in New York. During my visit, Tato taught me about spirituality.

Tato's story cannot be complete without saying a few words about his wonderful and caring sister, Ruth. Tato was more than a brother to her; he was like a son, since she also helped to raise him. While I had met Ruth in previous visits, we became much closer during Tato's hospitalization. Ruth is beautiful, intelligent, strong, courageous, polite, but decisive, firm, vocal, and unwavering. And these were

the qualities necessary to confront doctors, nurses, administrators, social workers, and anyone else who did not appear to have Tato's best interest in mind. In his situation, Tato needed an advocate, and Ruth was there for him. I would want Ruth in my corner as well.

Tato knew that Ruth was his strongest supporter. With the help of a friend with the special gift of reading minds, we were able to communicate with Tato. In these brief "conversations" Tato mentioned that he had crossed to the Other Side, but it was not his time, though no one, not even he, would know when that time would arrive. (Well, we now know that the time is upon us.) In one of the "conversations" Tato made it clear that Ruth would be the "light" and the "protagonist." Indeed, Ruth became Tato's advocate and voice. She worked selflessly to make sure that Tato received the best care possible, was never alone, and had constant company. She was always by his side, sometime returning to Tato's apartment at two or three in the morning. As much as I wanted to accompany Tato and Ruth, it became clear to me that this was a mission that Ruth had to undergo alone. Supporting Tato became urgent, a task she took seriously, as if her own salvation depended on helping her brother. Just as Tato was being transformed into a spiritual being, Ruth was also being asked to take on this enormous challenge by herself. If this was a test of her character, Ruth passed with flying colors. There is a story to be told about Tato and there is another one about Ruth, but her's will be for another time and place.

Tato will be remembered as a great poet, regardless of race, ethnicity, or nationality. He wrote in the tradition of other oral poets, such as Pedro Pietri and Miguel Piñero, and many, especially in New York, will recognize him as an "AmeRícan," as the title of one of his most popular poem suggests, and he proudly proclaimed:

AmeRícan, defining myself my own way any way many
 ways Am e Rícan, with the big R and the
 accent on the í!

.....
AmeRícan, yes, for now, for I love this, my second
 land, and I dream to take the accent from
 the altercation, and be proud to call
 myself American, in the u.s. sense of the
 word, AmeRícan, America!

Tato's work was richer and more expansive than most New York or United States poets. Tato spoke not only to a Nuyorican public but also to a larger audience, represented by the multiethnic, racial, and religious groups known to the residents of New York City, as well as New York as a microcosm of a broader, world audience. Tato wrote in English, but he also expressed himself in Spanish and Spanglish. In Spanish he addressed effectively issues that were pertinent to Puerto Ricans in New York and, equally important, Puerto Ricans on the island. He wrote about Sylvia

Rexach, Luis Palés Matos, Luis Muñoz Marín, Luis Ferré, Albizu Campos, among other island notables. He even dared to speak about race when many back on the island wanted to keep the subject silent or hoped that it would go away. In his last collection of poems, *Mixturao*, his “Tesis de Negreza” takes issue with Bobby Capo’s “Negro bembón,” and valiantly denounces this very popular but racist song. He goes even further and identifies not with the singer or the assassin, but with the black victim. This is nothing new; Tato had raised a similar concern as early as his “el moreno puertorriqueño (a three-way warning poem)” about racism in Puerto Rican culture.

Unlike any other poet that comes to mind, Tato gave voice to those who were voiceless, those living and some that were lifeless. During the one hundredth anniversary of the Statue of Liberty, Tato provided a voice to Lady Liberty, who objected to how contemporary society did not respect the symbol for which she stood. Indeed, Lady Liberty is alive and expresses her discontent about the changing times that have denied liberty to all.

if you touch me, touch ALL of my people
who need attention and societal repair,
give the tired and the poor
the same attention, AMERICA,
touch us ALL with liberty,
touch us ALL with liberty.

Lady Liberty insists that all her people be treated in the same dignified manner. Tato also gave a voice to African Americans, Chicanos, Amerindians, women, and even a fetus, among others. Tato spoke not to one community but to many communities, which include “multi-ethnic black-brown-red in affirmations,” “ghetto brothers black americans, Indians / Italians, Irish, Jewish, polish, ukranians / russians, german food and music lovers,” “mathematicians,” among others highlighted in his poem “jesús papote.” They are members of the same multiethnic and racial communities Tato recognizes in the section “Ethnic Tributes” of *Enclave*.

Tato also composed “jesús papote,” a very powerful long poem, perhaps as formidable and complete as others I have read in English and other languages. Inspired by Corky González’s “I am Joaquín,” Tato wanted to write an epic poem about his community. “jesús papote” takes the reader on the nine-month journey of a junky woman carrying a baby in her womb, from conception to birth. The gestation period coincides with the liturgical calendar, perhaps beginning with Christ’s crucifixion or Resurrection, and ending nine months later in December, with his birth. Nine is also important for Tato, for he was born on May 9th, and migrated to New York at the age of nine. When I was in New York, he was hospitalized on the ninth floor, and he died approximately nine months after he entered the hospital.

In some respect Jesús Papote is the reincarnation of Christ, in the most humble of places, the Latino ghetto. However, in this second coming, the image of the Christ figure has been inverted or more correctly, it has been placed in a contemporary context, where Christ continues to be an outcast. In the original Biblical version, the Virgin Mary gave birth to a child that was not the son of Joseph, mother and husband were refused shelter, and the mother gave birth in a manger. In Tato's version of the Christ story, Jesús Papote's mother is indeed an outcast: she is a prostitute with a strong drug addiction, does not know the father of her child, lives in an inhospitable environment, and the cold winter weather is foreign to the mild island climate she previously knew.

Lately, I have gone back to reading "jesús papote" for the obvious reasons, to find out how much Tato is like his character, and how they are like Christ. The poem is about death and resurrection and the many deaths and resurrections the poetic voice, and by extension the poet, experiences. I reread the poem hoping to find clues about Tato's current condition, one which the doctors—and by association modern science—knew little. I still believed that Tato's life was already outlined in this very important and, I would argue, autobiographical poem. The life of both poetic voice and poet has been fraught with difficult moments. For some time now, Tato has been legally blind, suffers from diabetes, and undergoes dialysis a few times a week. Instead of accepting defeat, each fall has given him the necessary strength to overcome the challenges before him, as he rises to a higher and even stronger, personal and literary plane.

The poem challenges our concept of life and resurrection. Jesús Papote is alive and is verbal in his mother's womb, and he resurrects when she gives birth to him. In wanting to read the poem alongside Tato's life, I expected Tato to resurrect in the hospital. However, it was not clear to me if the resurrection would be to this world or to the next. Both interpretations are justified in the poem. Certainly, we preferred one to the other, but the other, though painful for his family and friends, was more dominant when taking into account the cycles present in the poem and Tato's own life.

The poem is remarkable for many reasons. Tato gives voice to a helpless and defenseless fetus, who provides his mother with the necessary strength to kick the heroine habit and deliver a healthy boy, which is no small miracle. However, the fetus is already a man in the womb, and to save his mother and himself, he instructs her on what to do. As I mentioned, he helps her to fight her drug addiction, begs her to stay in Puerto Rico and give birth on the island, and instructs her in the process of giving birth to him. Jesús Papote literally saves his mother, and he is also a savior to his people. Like the other Jesucristo, Jesús Papote is a Christ figure and both were born on Christmas Day.

As we approach Tato's rebirth, the community has surrounded his bedside to support him. In the poem, a "We, nosotros" emerges towards the end. The poetic voice asks for their permission, and those of other living and lifeless forms:

with the permission of all the faiths of all beliefs
with the permission of this land
with the permission of the elders
with the permission of english
with the permission of my community
with the permission of god:

Here the poetic voice seeks permission to pronounce a sacred word to the Puerto Rican community, one that is full of power, respect, and compassion. The poetic voice asks "for my blessing BENDICION / Ben . . . DI . . . CI . . . ON."

The poem ends with the birth or rebirth (resurrection) of the mother, who has taken charge of her life, and of Jesús Papote. The last stanza makes this clear:

she woke up she saw she startled she warmed she
protected she cried she broke the umbilical cord
she got up to follow the bells the bells the bells
cats dogs vagabonds all followed the tinkle tinkle
of the bells christmas bells activity flowing bells
faith hope and charity bells 1980 jesus christ and
jesús papote midnight ecstasy of bells church steps
door opens organ stops up the aisle she exclaimed
hand holy spirit candles flowers incense wine water
and finally the people grandmother she offered jesús
papote to the people miracle cherubims flautists
dancing and singing rejoice rejoice eternity smiles
oh night divine oh night divine she knelt she smiled
jesús papote's presence in the dignity of our lives.

Tato's extended life has allowed for Ruth to present her brother, or her son as in the poem, to the people, who have come to his bedside, and they will be present when he passes on. They will attend his service and burial. However, instead of providing Tato with their benediction, we (they) will be present to ask for his BENDICIÓN. And just as the reader of the poem has learned about Jesús Papote's cycles of death and rebirth, we too will also learn from Tato's life lessons. His poetry has nourished us, and his life has also instructed us. In some small way, we are part of the essence of who Tato is and what he represents.

Nota Bene: On Friday, November 1, 2013, precisely at 8:06 Central Time, Ruth, afflicted by the news she would share with me, called to tell me that Tato passed away. Tato died around 9:00 PM Eastern Time, and he was buried on the ninth of November.

William Luis
Editor

In Memoriam
Tato Laviera
(1950–2013)



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