

Editor's Note

I last traveled to Cuba in March of 2016, as a member of the Consortium for Advanced Studies Abroad (CASA), representing one of nine US member institutions that provide our students with the opportunity to participate in programs with Casa de las Américas and the University of Havana. Our trip coincided with President Obama's visit to Cuba, and we shared in the same historic baseball game in which the Tampa Bay Rays beat the Cuban national team. Some years earlier, the reaction to this result would have been considerably different. In today's world, the outcome was perfectly understandable, since most top Cuban baseball players do not live in Cuba but in the United States. The baseball game appeared to be the dawn of a new day in US-Cuba relations, as Barack Obama and Raúl Castro sat next to each other to enjoy the first few innings, before leaving to attend to other matters. I also had the occasion to stand with half a million people to listen to Mick Jagger and the Rolling Stones perform for a Cuban audience. I was surprised to hear how well Mick spoke Spanish. He told spectators that he was happy to be in Cuba and loved Cubans and Cuban music. He reminded us with a smile that it was not long ago that the music of the Rolling Stones had been banned on the island.

While most Cubans I spoke with were excited about Obama's trip to Cuba, since his presence announced a new political and economic direction for the warring neighbors, I had difficulty understanding why government officials criticized Obama's visit. Fidel Castro had remained in the background while his brother Raúl assumed the leadership of the government in 2008. However, he broke his silence with an article titled "El hermano Obama," published in the official newspaper of Cuba's Communist Party, *Granma* (March 27), attacking Obama and the United States. Castro claimed that Cuba did not need assistance from the "empire," thus affirming a political position established from the moment he assumed power in 1959. There was no conciliatory tone in Castro's words. On the contrary, he remained defiant and reminded Obama of US transgressions against his country.

Soon after Castro's article appeared in *Granma*, other government officials and leading figures repeated the same accusations in the media. Certainly, Fidel continues to be popular in Cuba. But with his bold decisions, Raúl seems to be charting a different course, and history may be on his side. Everyone I spoke with wants a change in the country's direction. Raúl is not as charismatic as his older brother, but his decisions to expand (albeit slowly) Cuba's economy and normalize relations with the United States may be recorded by history as the second most important event since the Cuban Revolution came to power. Fidel's response shows that there may be disagreements between the Castro brothers and that each represents a different political course of action.

Whereas the average Cuban is hopeful about a possible transition to a more equitable and just economy and society, the country's youth has lost faith in the government. Many young people are desperately looking to flee the country,

whether by navigating the turbulent waters in makeshift rafts to Florida or flying to a South American country and embarking on a long and treacherous journey through Central America and Mexico to reach the US border. The youths I spoke with are different from their parents' generation, which still clings to any glimmer of hope for change. The younger generation has no hope, and it does not believe in the announced political relations between the two countries. Young Cubans are impatient and distrustful of a government that has made numerous promises without delivering any significant results to improve their lives. Their only hope is to leave the country, even at a high risk to their lives.

The cover featured in the present issue of the *Afro-Hispanic Review* comes from the artwork of José Betancourt (see: "José Betancourt, Cuba: Reconstructing Memories"). The assistant editors chose the photograph because of its visual impact and many suggestive readings. It is not the journal's intention to encourage a stereotypical reading of this photograph. Rather, we display it to reappropriate the image of the doll. Certainly, this is the case because the subject of the photograph is also a black person, and she is holding the doll. Though her head has been cropped, the doll she holds in her hands also represents her other head and takes the place of the one that is missing. With this idea in mind, she uses the doll to see or to suggest that people see her as if she were a stereotypical doll.

The journal's cover also offers a religious interpretation. The woman in the photograph is dressed in white, which is the typical color of clothing worn by practitioners of Santería, and white is also the color of Obatalá (la Virgen de las Mercedes). The doll sports a neckless with a medallion of Cuba's patron saint, the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre, who in Santería symbolizes Oshún. However, this doll does not wear the characteristic color yellow known to Oshún, but the color red, traditionally associated with Changó (Santa Bárbara). And the doll is also playing a drum. In Afro-Cuban religions, the drum is sacred, because the *orishas* speak through its sound. I am sure that there are other interpretations of the cover. I welcome other readings of Betancourt's photograph. I wish to thank Susan Tinney, of Tinney Contemporary Gallery, for inviting me to meet José and see his artwork.

I dedicate the present issue of the *Afro-Hispanic Review* to the memory of my dear aunt Haydee Francisca Hernández, fondly known as Tita, who passed away in Miami, on June 11, 2016, at the young age of 96. She was the last of ten children of don Ventura Santos and Evelia Santos del Río. Her advanced age is not unusual since Ventura surpassed many of his peers and lived to the ripe old age of 104 and Evelia was one-year shy of joining the exclusive group of centenarians. However, of her siblings, Tita was the only one to have inherited my grandparent's longevity genes.

Tita was known to many, since she was the subject of my internet column, "Conversaciones con mi tía Tita" (cubaencuentro.com/encuentro-en-la-red) in

which I sustained a real and imaginative dialogue with her, as I explored diverse topics—many that pertained to the family. At the turn of the century, the editor of *Cuba Encuentro*, Jesús Días, invited me to write a column for *Encuentro en la Red* about my experiences in the United States, but in essence he was more interested in how I view the world and whatever I wished to share with *Encuentro's* readers. So I decided to write about my “conversations” with my tía Tita. With regards to the family, the column gave me the opportunity to explore topics I had discussed with my mother before she passed away some twenty years before, and they continued with my conversations with my aunt, her younger sister. The “Conversaciones” brought great joy to Tita. Together we revisited an earlier time, and talked about her childhood in Cuba and her experiences in New York. We discussed Cuba, its history, music, art, religion, culture, the exile community, my trips to the island, and her own personal experiences, though she was always guarded about what she revealed to me about herself.

There has been loss in the Santos family. My aunt, Mercedes, was a very gifted concert pianist from Caibarién, Las Villas. Her talents attracted visits from notable figures like Nicolás Guillén, Alejandro Caturla, and other personalities of the period. Mercedes, who lived to play her music, experienced a tragedy; she was betrayed by a boyfriend. When she found out that he was married, Mercedes was so distraught and blinded by indignation that she only considered one solution; she looked for my grandfather's gun to shoot the scoundrel. Not being able to find him—he was probably in hiding—, she took her own life. This information was concealed from my centenarian grandfather who was told that his daughter died in a car accident. His son, Santos Santos (born on All Saint's Day) also died before his time. He contracted typhoid fever and expired at the age of eighteen. My grandmother was a strong woman who suffered in silence.

In some respects, Tita's youngest child, my cousin Phillip, also committed a type of “suicide.” He died of cirrhosis of the liver. Phillip was part of a generation of New Yorkers that was attracted to the glamor of music, fashion, nightlife, and drugs, which claimed the lives of many young and talented people. He was a remarkable person. He dressed elegantly, befriended many musicians of the Salsa scene, and was an exceptional dancer. I learned to dance Salsa from him. But his party lifestyle made it difficult for him to hold down a job. We were born and raised in Manhattan, and he was like a younger brother, but when I left the City to go to college, he remained in New York and continued his way of life. I saw him during school vacations, but it was evident that our lives had moved in different directions. He later relocated to Miami, where he met his wife Anna, and they became part of Miami's “Beautiful People.” After their daughter Jennifer was born, they left Miami to be closer to Anna's mother in Michigan, but their marriage did not last long. He had already taken to drinking, and when his wife asked him to leave, I can imagine that her words drove him to drink even more. By the time

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he returned to Miami to live with his parents, he was sickly. His legs had turned a dark color. When my brother Alex flew from Boston to encourage him to see a doctor, Phillip, discouraged, left the hospital without ever following up with the physicians. Phillip died in Tita's arms, and his death was the topic of an October 2002 "Conversación" that begins with the following paragraph:

La muerte de un ser querido, no importa quien sea, es una inmensa pérdida, pero la muerte de un hijo es una tragedia que ninguna madre debería presenciar. El orden de la naturaleza nos señala que los padres morirán primero y los hijos después. Pero es incomprendible cuando se invierte ese proceso natural. Los que no han perdido a un hijo solo pueden imaginar el profundo sufrimiento que la persona afectada debe sentir. Es un dolor inmenso e intenso, como ningún otro, y sin ninguna justificación. Si el dolor del parto es soportable porque anuncia la vida que nace de las entrañas y está por venir, el de la muerte es un vacío, una ausencia, una nada que jamás se llenará. Es como si nos arrancaran de la profundidad del pecho el corazón, la esencia que nos da la propia vida.

I can only imagine that Phillip's death forever broke Tita's heart, just like the death of her two siblings shook my grandmother to the core. While I pray that I will never have to undergo the same experience with any of my children, I have been unable to write about my aunt's death until now, for my heart also has been deeply wounded. Tita, *que en paz descanses*.

William Luis
Editor