

## Editor's Note

*"Patria y Vida, Libertad, Libertad, Libertad"  
para el pueblo de Cuba.*

The Cuban people are again protesting and risking their lives to demand freedom. Freedom is not free, but it is always worth the price. The increasing number of anti-government demonstrations in July of 2021 was a reaction to a lack of medicine and food, high prices, and the resurgence of COVID-19. This wave of protest follows another known as Movimiento San Isidro, formed in 2018 by a group of artists and writers who dared to oppose government censorship. The current dissatisfaction with government policies allows me to recall my own position regarding the Cuban Revolution. As a youth of the sixties who demonstrated against the War in Vietnam and in favor of the Civil Rights Movement, I also opposed US intervention in Cuba and supported a dialogue with the exiled community. Though I was not born in Cuba, as a child I traveled to and from the island. I attended school in Havana for a two-year period, from 1959 to 1961, returning home to New York City in May, at the same time other families were leaving the island.

I returned to Cuba sixteen years later as a member of the Primer Contingente of the Antonio Maceo Brigade, when fifty-five *maceítos* made an unprecedented three-week trip to experience the revolution, not through the eyes of our parents but from our own involvement. The visit was not without controversy. We were breaking with traditional US policy to isolate Cuba and alienated the more extreme elements of the Cuban exiled community. A few years after our return, a member of our group was assassinated in Puerto Rico. But, as a youth of the times, this trip was one more protest against racism and the indefensible US policies against nonwestern people. I was another black person who had experienced discrimination.

The trip ignited our excitement. Not only were we returning to a country we loved, but we also had the opportunity to confirm or question our ideas about the revolution. Perhaps, more importantly, we were hoping to visit our families. The trip began by working in solidarity with the Cuban people. In micro brigades, we began constructing housing. Our conditions were closer to what many Cubans experienced: no hot water, communal showers, toilets without seats, no privacy, etcetera. Nevertheless, we labored with energy and enthusiasm, and our subgroup was elated to find out that we established a production record, beyond the one accomplished by other national and international brigades.

After our work period, we traversed the island by bus, meeting local and national leaders and common people alike. While many repeated the victorious party line, not everything appeared to be rosy. I had intense conversations with members of the Instituto Cubano de Amistad con los Pueblos (ICAP) about many

topics, including Marxism. After one individual's repeated use of certain Marxist axioms, I pointedly asked to which of Marx's works was he referring. As graduate student I had taken a seminar on Marxism and read all of the most important works and was ready for a debate on the subject. My question was met with silence. Then I realized that our host was echoing slogans he had been taught, but he never engaged with the texts themselves.

At the Instituto Cubano de Artes e Industrias Cinematográficos (ICAIC), I witnessed a heated debate between the writer and filmmaker, Jesús Díaz, and the Vice Minister of Culture and President of the ICAIC, Alfredo Guevara. There was still some resentment about Díaz's role as editor of *El Caimán Barbudo*, the cultural supplement of the newspaper *Juventud Rebelde*, and his involvement in the late 1960s debated between the poet Heberto Padilla and the exiled novelist Guillermo Cabrera Infante. Moreover, in a discussion with Roberto Fernández Retamar, he accused me of being one of the worst things you could call anyone in Cuba, a Structuralist. In this and other discussions I asked about meeting with dissident writers Padilla and Reinaldo Arenas, both of whom I encountered years later in New York City.

I did meet other writers: César Leante, the subject of my dissertation worked for the Ministry of Culture and Antonio Benítez Rojo, for Casa de las Américas. At that time, they convinced me of their commitment to the revolution. But some three years later both of these writers defected while traveling abroad. I renewed my friendship with them, and each explained to me that his public position in Cuba masked his real concerns. Antonio told me that during the Mariel Boat Lift he and other workers were pressured into demonstrating against those wanting to leave the island. Leante shared with me that he observed that I was followed when leaving his house. He had also refused to write the required "informes" about my visit.

One of the most exciting aspects of the trip was visiting my godmother, Aralia, my mother's oldest sister. My grandmother had ten children, two of whom died before I was born. I still remember the car arriving at the house I had lived in. The front door was opened and my godmother was sitting in the same rocking chair my grandmother sat in, where she could see the television and glance at or greet at those passing. When I arrived, Aralia immediately recognized me; she got up from the rocking chair and walked to the porch. I hugged her and cried uncontrollably like a baby, unusual for someone who held back his emotions. Aralia shared with me that she had recognized me as the national television cameras focused on the youthful passengers descending from the airplane. I entered the all-too-familiar house, a space that had been engraved in my memory. My godfather, Domingo, sat on the sofa next to the rocking chair. At first glance he did not utter a word and did not appear to recognize me. My godmother explained that he had been in the hospital and a nurse had given him a shot of penicillin without knowing that he

was allergic to it. I understood that he had suffered a severe anaphylactic reaction to this antibiotic. The much-publicized healthcare system had failed him; he appeared to have suffered a stroke. Aralia was a teacher at a school Batista had founded and Mingo, as he was known to the family, played viola for the Philharmonic Orchestra of Havana and was also the first violin for Abelardito Valdés's popular Orquesta Almendra. Both were supporters of the Castro government. Aralia explained that they had accumulated suitcases of cash because there were no products to buy, thus rendering their hard-earned money unusable. In a subsequent trip, after my godfather's death, she voiced her desire to leave the country, but she never filed the necessary papers.

Years later I continued to maintain an independent position with regards to Cuba. During the eighties, I worked for the Library of Congress's Hispanic Division, as contributing co-editor of the section Literature: Prose Fiction, 20th Century, Hispanic Caribbean of the *Handbook of Latin American Studies*. I received boxes full of books and articles about Cuban and Dominican narratives (my senior colleague, Carlos Horta, covered Puerto Rico) and reviewed and annotated all primary and secondary sources I considered to be of permanent value. With regards to Cuba, I wrote an introductory essay outlining current and future trends. If there were exceptional works produced in the revolution I would say so, just as I would express my opinion about those that were unremarkable. The same was the case for works written by exiled writers. And as the exile community grew with the influx of notable authors, so did the quality of the literature of this other group of Cuban writers. Of course, my comments did not ingratiate me with either side, and both continue to be critical of my position.

As I look back, I began my first essay (*HLS 44*) with the following paragraph:

The defection of six of Cuba's most important writers is the most significant event in recent years. Heberto Padilla (March 1980), Reinaldo Arenas (May 1980), and José Triana (Dec. 1980) were granted exit visas by Cuban authorities. Antonio Benítez Rojo (May 1980) and César Leante (Sept. 1981) sought political asylum while in route to conferences in Europe. That Leante and Benítez Rojo sought exile was most startling since they had no known political problems and held high level positions in the Ministry of Culture and Casa de las Américas, respectively. To this group, one must add Edmundo Desnoes, who has been in the US since Sept. 1979. Unlike the others, however, Desnoes retains permission to stay from the Ministry of Culture. That dissatisfied writers are allowed to leave marks a significant departure from Cuban policy. The desperation of those who have left without permission has also become evident. (444)

The initial paragraphs of the last essay (*HLS 50*) I wrote on Cuba began as follows:

Two important novels, *La loma del ángel* (item 3208) and *Las iniciales de la tierra* (item 3213), one written and published in Cuba and the other in the US, characterize this biennium. The first, by Reinaldo Arenas, confirms his reputation as one of the best writers in Cuban and Latin American literature. Although reflecting contemporary times, *La loma del ángel* closely follows Cirilo Villaverde's *Cecilia Valdés* (1882), the

most important 19th century Cuban novel. There is even an uncanny coincidence in the lives of the two writers: both were jailed for a time in Cuba, escaped from the island, and sought refuge in the US, both rewrote and published their versions of *Cecilia Valdés* while in the US (Villaverde's version is a rewriting of an earlier 1839 short story and first volume), and it is possible that Arenas, like Villaverde, will die an exile in the US. (455)

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The second novel is by Jesús Díaz, who came to public attention as editor of *El Caimán Barbudo* (1966–67), during the turbulent Padilla years, and as author of the celebrated *Los años duros* (1966). By paying tribute to the Revolution with *Las iniciales de la tierra*, Díaz conforms to the demands of critics in Cuba that authors write about the revolutionary process. With his use of language and cinematic techniques—Díaz is also a film director—the opening moments of the novel recreate Cabrera Infante's *Tres tristes tigres*, but from a socialist point of view. However, given Díaz's task and the context in which the novel was written, the ending of his work is somewhat predictable. (455–46)

At Dartmouth College I coincided with Desnoes where I helped him to complete the controversial anthology *Los dispositivos en la flor. Cuba: literatura desde la revolución* (1981), because it gathered for the first-time writers in Cuba and those in exile. I was involved in inviting José Triana to teach and Wichy Nogueras, Miguel Barnet, and other Cuban writers to venture for the first time to a US university. I was also the first professor to take US college students and faculty to Cuba in 1981 and to organize a meeting of the Association of Caribbean Studies (founded by O.R. Dathorne) in Havana, in 1982.

Years later I was asked to attend a gathering of Cuban writers, and Jesús Díaz was present. He left Cuba in 1992 and became a prominent dissident. He encouraged me to write a column for *Cuba Encuentro en la Red*. After some thought I titled the monthly column “Conversaciones con mi tía Tita” in which I shared ideas that were on my mind. It is obvious now that this note is a continuation of my conversations with my departed aunt.

While some in Cuba know the extent of my knowledge of Cuban history and literature, I was never invited to government sponsored events or participated in juries for literary awards, as was the case of some critics who were demonstrative in favor of the revolutionary government. Ironically, the only person who did offer an invitation became an infamous figure in Cuba. While still in “good standing,” Roberto Zurbano asked me to deliver the keynote speech at a symposium on Juan Francisco Manzano at the Unión Nacional de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba (UNEAC). A few years later, he was ousted as director of the Fondo Editorial de Casa de las Américas for his controversial *New York Times* article (March 23, 2013) “For Blacks in Cuba, the Revolution Hasn't Begun” (See *AHR* 33.1 2014). In conversations, he shared that the white leaders of Casa de las Américas could not support the insolent behavior of the only Black in their group. To his credit, even though Zurbano was demoted, he refused to resign from Casa.

Looking back and reflecting on the above trajectory, I am also reminded of my study *Lunes de Revolución: Literatura y cultura en los primeros años de la Revolución Cubana* (2003). In some way, those of us who traveled to Cuba in that first group of exiled children returning home suffered from the same myopia as Cabrera Infante, Carlos Franqui, Pablo Armando Fernández and many other writers of *Lunes*, who identified with and contributed to the goals of the 26th of July Movement. To this group I add Alfredo Guervara, a fervent member of the Cuban Communist Party and friend of Castro. But he was forced to leave his position for Paris by the “Catholic” members of Castro’s inner circle because he was gay, so he revealed to me over dinner during another visit to the country. He was an early enemy of *Lunes* but years later he became a protector of artists and writers who had come under attack by the conservative elements of the revolution. The *Lunes* people stood with the revolution, in fact they believed they represented the revolution. But after Castro abandoned the 26th of July Movement and embraced the goals of the Communist Party, they were taken off guard. Like them, we wanted to believe in the goals of the Cuban revolution. Our visit opened our eyes to the reality of events. The Brigada’s historic visit was followed by the *Diálogo* (1978) with the exile community and the reunification of Cuban families.

The Cuban people are rightfully fighting for their freedom. I stand in solidarity with the Movimiento San Isidro of artists and writers opposed to increasing censorship and with the broader protest for “Patria y Vida.”

The present issue of the *AHR* is divided into two parts. The first is a regular issue with a selection of articles. The second contains a dossier on “Pelo Malo.” This all too important cultural trope also deals with race and racism in the Dominican Republic and the United States. I want to thank guest editor Ana Zapata-Calle for organizing the issue, which features on the cover a painting by Beline Guensby.

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EDITOR