

## Editor's Note

As I review the galley proofs of the articles based on the talks presented at the International Conference at the University of Yaoundé I, Yaoundé, Cameroon (2019) titled "Interpreting Africa: Discourse and Counter-Discourse in African Literatures, Africa, and the African Diaspora," I am reminded of the many fond memories of my June visit. My colleague Joseph-Désiré Otabela of the University of Missouri, invited me to be one of two keynote speakers, which I gratefully accepted and welcomed the prospect of returning to Sub-Saharan Africa. While I am fascinated by the varied flora and fauna of this region of the world, I am more drawn to the people, the culture, and the food. My recollections seem more like disconnected snapshots than a coherent travelogue, but for me the journey to Cameroon was another opportunity for the Diaspora to return home.

My grandfather, Ventura Santos Santos, was the result of a none-consensual relationship between the master Domingo, and the enslaved, Rita. The master gave the son his last name, but Ventura was raised not by his mother in the master's house but as a freed black by a different white family in Remedios, Cuba. Ventura went on to become an accomplished blacksmith. He enlisted in the Cuba's War of Independence (1895-1898) with the rank of lieutenant and was commissioned to make cannons. His wife, Petra, followed him into battle. She lived in a shack in Yaguajay that Ventura visited as often as possible. Unfortunately, the Spanish colonial forces located the home and surrounded it, waiting for his return. After he entered the shack, the enemy asked for his surrender. Ventura escaped, but the soldiers killed his wife, the child in her arms and the one in her womb. Petra was survived by three other children. At the end of the war, in a triumphant march into the town of Remedios, Ventura saw and fell in love with my grandmother, Evelia. She was a young, dark-skinned maiden of twenty and he, a seasoned soldier. In the following years, Evelia raised his three children and ten of their own. My mother Petra, named after Ventura's first wife, was the antepenultimate offspring. It is widely known that the overwhelming majority of Cuban guerrilla fighters were black and practitioners of Palo Monte or Palo Mayombe, originally from the Kongo of Central Africa. Ventura became a founding member of the Masonic Lodge of San Juan of Caibarién, in the province of Las Villas, and ascended to the rank of Master Mason. As a grandson of Ventura Santos Santos, his blood also runs through my veins.

In this "Editor's Note," I attempt to capture images, notions, feelings, sensations of the diaspora returning home during a magical trip to Cameroon.

### **Image One: Desperation and Gratitude.**

I was delighted to have been invited to attend the Yaoundé conference. As is usually the case when working tirelessly, sometimes I have time to only glance at the many emails I receive on a daily basis. As the date of the conference approached,

in a casual email interchange with my dear friend and colleague, Miguel Ugarte, of the University of Missouri—another recipient of collective emails Otabela sent—he confirmed that I needed to apply for a visa to enter Cameroon. In a last-minute frenzy, I contacted Joseph and asked for his guidance. He sent a copy of the visa application and requested that I complete and return it immediately. Since time was of the essence, he offered to apply for my visa from within the country. In a June 17 email, Joseph provided the following instructions:

Querido amigo,

Lo estoy intentando todo para que se solucione el tema del visado. Esto es lo que tienes que hacer.

1. Abre el documento adjunto. Es una solicitud en francés que diriges a la máxima autoridad de la policía en mi país para solicitar que te den un visado a tu llegada.
2. Copia el texto y pégalo a un papel oficial con membrete de tu Universidad, para darle un sello oficial.
3. Firma en la parte de abajo, justo arriba de tu nombre.
4. Escanea luego la solicitud firmada y tu pasaporte (la tapa y la página con tus datos biográficos).
5. Mándame por correo los dos documentos en versión pdf hoy mismo.

Alguien me está ayudando en esto y necesita tu solicitud y tu pasaporte urgentemente.

That same day I sent the required information, including the letter Joseph had drafted, asking that I be granted a visa upon my arrival. He also attached the official poster, announcing the two keynote speakers with our corresponding pictures.

On June 22, two days before my flight, I wrote the following email:

Querido Joseph,

Acabo de hablar con un colega de Senegal que ha viajado a Camerún y me dijo que por razones académicas y con el apoyo de la universidad no debo tener ningún problema. Entonces llevaré conmigo la carta de solicitud del visado, copia del programa donde aparece mi nombre y foto y una carta de invitación que espero me puedas enviar antes de mi salida para apoyar mi caso en inmigración si fuera necesario. Tengo la esperanza de darte un fuerte abrazo. Ya sabes la hora de mi llegada y nos veremos en el aeropuerto.

On June 24, I left my home in Nashville, Tennessee, for the airport, not knowing if the visa would be approved in time or be caught in some bureaucratic nightmare. I flew from Nashville to Washington Dulles International Airport, and then to Brussels. Once there, I had even considered remaining there until my situation had been cleared. Nevertheless, I boarded the plane in Brussels

and landed in Yaoundé without knowing if the visa had been approved. When the plane landed, I made my way to the terminal, logged into the airport Wi-Fi, check my email, and realized that the visa had been authorized the day I departed Nashville. After I passed immigration, I was elated to find Joseph and his sister, Marcelline Manga, of the religious order of “Saint Paul” (San Pablo) of Yaoundé, waiting to greet me. I soon learned that this gentle, friendly, and powerful woman had worked behind the scene to expedite my visa and was present to make sure that everything went smoothly. Thanks to Sor Marcelline Manga, I entered the country without any delay.

**Image Two: Savor.**

I am sitting in an elegant restaurant for dinner next to the Municipal Lake with Miguel Ugarte and Joseph, his wife, Marie, and his sister, Sor Marcelline Manga. There, I ordered a local dish I had never tried before, one that was unique to the region. I should clarify that traveling for me is also about eating local dishes. My recurrent travels throughout China gave new meaning to the phrase “local dishes.” In Guangzhou, Guangdong Province, I dared to try some previously unknown dishes to me that included scorpions, centipedes, slugs, and even a tarantula leg. In Guilin, Guangxi, I savored a local (baijiu) drink fermented in poisonous snake heads. In Yaoundé I order the recommended specialty of the house, the porcupine. The meat was simply delectable, prepared in a brown bean sauce with green and red peppers, served with slices of sweet plantains. Good food, wine, company, conversation, and beautiful setting made for an exquisite evening.



**Image Three: Once Again, the Sea.**

After spending a few days discussing every imaginable topic pertinent to the conference, that included the unconscious legacies of colonialism, we left the hustle and bustle of the capital city and headed southwest towards the town of Kribi, on the Gulf of Guinea, near the Kienke River. The ride was more than four hours long. To arrive at our destination, we traversed the beautiful thick and luscious forest with tall, centenarian trees. I saw, here and there, signs written in Chinese characters and, a short distance later, our bus came upon a flatbed tractor trailer, parked on the side of the road, loaded with enormous tree trunks. They were at least four feet in diameter. The weight of the cargo was so heavy that one of the wheel axles had given way and immobilized the shipment. It became evident that Chinese investments in Cameroon (and other African countries) was repaid with the country's natural resources, in this case, with lumber. China exercised another type of imperialism. The Chinese call it "soft power," and it often arrives imbedded in the Confucius Institute. Regardless, whether the power is "soft" or "hard," it is still power, with similar colonizing objectives.



We entered Kribi and headed further south to a beach near the Lobé River. I descended from the bus, quickly changed into my swim trunks, and made my way to the water, only to discover that Miguel Ugarte had arrived before I did. He was energetically swimming towards the opened ocean as if he wanted to reach the other side of the Gulf of Guinea or even the other side of the Atlantic. We had previously shared a similar aquatic experience a few years earlier at a conference in Accra, Ghana. We visited the Elmina Castle, and swam at a nearby beach. The

sea was a witness to the horrible slave trade. It was a humbling experience sharing the same space where many had died. Though the ocean is powerful, it produces an unusual calming effect. Seeing, smelling, hearing, breathing, and bathing in the sea gives me the strength to overcome all my worries.

As I turned my head and looked towards the beach, I appreciated even more the region's natural beauty. The area appeared to have been preserved close to its original setting, without hotels, restaurants, or large hordes of Western tourists, as you often find in the Caribbean and other parts of the world. Later, we boarded small, hand-carved canoes propelled by outboard motors to see and feel the power of the Lobé waterfalls. The cascading water was hypnotic. Our visit to the beach was a wonderful way to spend a lovely and peaceful afternoon.

At the conclusion of the afternoon, we returned to Kribi, to the Julienne Hotel. That evening, we went back to the seaside, this time to look for a place to dine. The group encountered two women on the side of the road displaying a platter of fresh fish. After selecting one for each of us, one of the women grilled and smothered them with onions. A table was provided next to the beach, and we devoured the fish to the light of a full the moon watching over us. We walked on the beach in harmony to the sound of the dancing surf. We spent the night in Kribi and returned to Yaoundé the following day.

**Image Four: Friendship.**

The highlight of any trip are the people you meet. Some entail seeing old friends and others making new ones. Miguel and Otabela were among the old ones and Joseph's sister, Marcelline Manga, and his wife, Marie, among the new ones. I cannot say enough about Marie. She is a kind and beautiful person with a heart of gold and a radiant and infective smile. She accompanied us every step of the way, making sure that we knew where to go, what to do, and how to do it in a timely manner. Michelle, one of the participants from the University of Missouri, had her clothes stolen from her suitcase during a layover in Douala. In essence, she lost everything she had. However, Marie was very attentive to her needs and took her shopping to purchase more than the bare essentials. Marie and Joseph invited us to their home on the outskirts of Yaoundé. There we met their four lovely children, who reflected their parent's values; they were polite and well mannered. I recently found out that their oldest son, Faustin, graduate from Medical School. Joseph and Marie are proud parents. After we departed, Marie continued to write and ask about my wellbeing.

I am indebted to Joseph for organizing and successfully executing the International Conference at Yaoundé I, and for taking charge of communicating with participants and requesting them to turn their talks into articles. He stayed on the job and saw the monographic issue to its completion. In some cases, the articles required translation from French into Spanish or English.



The success of this issue, in no small way, was due to his persistence and dedication to the project. I also want to recognize Mamadou Badiane, from the University of Missouri, for helping to edit the issue. The Cameroonian Michel Victoire Ambassa, “Ambazo,” provided the cover for the issue and I am indebted to his generosity. There is another group of articles about African literature written in French, that will be incorporated into the next issue of the *Afro-Hispanic Review*.

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EDITOR