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Carrying Africa in Their Bodies: Introductory Notes from the
Editor

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CARRYING AFRICA IN THEIR BODIES

Introductory Notes from the Editor

Click, click was the sound you would have heard had you been standing next to me. In rapid succession—*click, click, click, click*, like an automatic gun, but not as loud. I know it was not loud enough for the policemen nearby, keeping an eye on things, to hear and think of gunshots. It was the sound of my 35mm camera. That quick sound reminds me now of one of those camera scenes in *Mahogany*, when the Diana Ross character (called Tracy Chambers in the film) shifts poses before the camera of photographer Sean McAvoy (played by Anthony Perkins) as he worked desperately to put on paper the exact image he wanted of her. *Click, click* went my Nikon, snapping away in my amateur hands. Like McAvoy, I was determined to get the exact image I wanted of what must still be one of Havana's most important buildings, and neither the hot, late-November sunshine nor the throngs on their Sunday strolls in 2002 could keep me from the object of my photographic desire, el Gran Teatro de la Habana on el Paseo de Martí and San Rafael, facing el Parque Central to the north and beside the imposing Capitolio to the west.

Click, click, click. In this tense time when the world over we have allowed our fears and suspicions of terrorists and their monstrous plots to get the best of us, I could not resist thinking that not a few of the Cuban police would become interested in what I was doing. I was right. As I made rapid shots of that neobaroque edifice which houses the national ballet and the state opera, some four or five law enforcement officers patrolling the area slowly gathered together and moved—with inquiring looks, or so I thought—near the point where I was clicking away. I must have been shooting as if the grand ole building would move like Diana Ross in the movie, shifting about to her own desire. Apparently, the officers realized that I was neither a terrorist nor a fellow Cuban. A black man with an expensive camera fascinated by a building that, had I been “un Cubano,” I must have walked past many times a year? Would a black Cuban own a camera of superior quality and high price? Where would he get it from, since very few have relatives living in economic splendor in Miami and New York? Most importantly, how many would wear foreign clothes and move with such un-Cuban body language? Whatever the case, those policemen realized that I was a tourist who would not be deterred, and they finally dispersed, supposedly moving off on their assigned beats, never knowing that, from the corner of my eye, I was also watching them the whole time. (As an African-American male, I long ago acquired the habit, in my native USA, of watching policemen everywhere with a third eye, since in my country they seldom prove to be the friends or protectors of black men—or black women. This, too, is a legacy of slavery which persists in Cuba.) But that Sunday afternoon those Cuban policemen did not keep me from trying to capture the images I wanted of that historic piece of architecture. Neither did those young men and



Photo by Charles H. Rowell

The Dome of Cuba's Capitol Building, Capitolio

women—those ever-hawking Cubans with their gentle shouts of false affection. “Amigo, hombre Jamaicano,” “amigo Africano,” “my friend,” or just plain “amigo.”

On an ordinary day in Havana, I am partial to these young people, usually adults of African descent, who are largely educated but unemployed. (Again, Cuba, like the United States of America, still suffers from persisting legacies of slavery, including colorism and its pernicious regimes.) To earn a little money for themselves and their families, these young people often compete to hire themselves out to tourists as guides or helpful assistants of various kinds. While I have always been impressed by their enterprising efforts toward the capitalism of earning money from hire, I have never asked any one of them to work with me as a guide. But I have befriended and chatted with a number of them. I thus learn much about their lives and those of members of their families and, without money changing hands, get information about the city. But I never exploit them or allow them to exploit me; rather, if I find them in need of food, for example, I share mine, insuring that we both get something of value in the exchange.

In fact, it was one such hawker, on my very first day in Havana, who directed me to the two office buildings I wanted most of all to locate: Casa de las Américas and the UNEAC (Unión Nacional Escritores y Artistas de Cuba which, translated, means the National Union of Cuban Writers and Artists). Speaking in a studied English he learned in secondary school years earlier, he pointed north down Avenida de los Presidentes (sometimes referred to as Presidente) to a towered white building just off the Malecón ironically fronting the Florida side of the Atlantic. He was pointing at the internationally known and highly respected Casa de las Américas, the arts institution which gives prizes to writers in Latin America and the Caribbean and which was the inevitable object of my attention. You see, the central purpose of each of my visits to Cuba has always been to gather literary materials for a special Cuban issue of *Callaloo*. I knew that the administration of Casa de las Américas, itself a major Latin American institution devoted to literature and the arts, should be able to direct me to certain Cuban writers and to the persons or organizations responsible for identifying contemporary writers on the island.

And I was right. At Casa de las Américas, a middle-aged woman receptionist directed me to the UNEAC, which is itself located off Avenida de los Presidentes, some four or five blocks in the opposite direction from the Malecón, the continuous seawall which protects the city from the raging Atlantic. As I was leaving Casa de las Américas, I noticed, to my surprise, that the young man who had directed me to the building was waiting on the street below. I had not asked him to come with me or to follow me, but I knew he wanted something from me. So when he asked to ride with me in the taxi to the UNEAC, where I talked with officials of the national writers union, I knew that he was petitioning me—so later on I invited him as my guest to have lunch. He accepted, for obviously he knew that the culinary fare of tourists is far superior to (and is set at a much higher price than) what Cubans eat at home or in restaurants where they are allowed to use the national peso to buy their own food. As we rode up Presidente, I saw magnificent architectural structures that were in grave need of repair and others in ruins. I understood early on in my first visit to the island that the Cuban people are desperate for many of the basics we take for granted here



Photo by Charles H. Rowell

Stilt Dancers Performing in Front of a Cathedral in Old Havana

in the United States of America. To some North American tourists, the ruins might suggest or signify a ruined society. But to me, the disrepair demands that if they decide, as they must from time to time, whether they will eat, heal the sick, or restore buildings, they would, as any nation, decide first to feed and heal the people.

While we rode up Presidente in a small black Mercedes taxi available for tourist hire, the grand old buildings, constructed before the Revolution, caught my eye. In fact, when I made my first visit to Cuba in December 2000, I was immediately taken not only by the startling beauty and infinite variety in the faces of the people, but also by the city's old architecture, whose every inch recalls the collective desire of a very small elite who demanded what was not—and could never have been: a continuation of Europe on the island or Europe reinvented on a tropical landscape that was anything but European. One would have thought that, beginning in the nineteenth-century at least, the ruling class—read *the dominating whites*—would have decided to create an architecture that is commensurate with that tropical environment, an architecture that grew out of the needs and culture of Cuba. During my first visit to the island, I concluded that this ruling class instead elected to imitate Europe, as if their imitation would garner for them a special identity that would give them cachet in Europe and the Americas. Ironically, while it is obvious that European culture played a major role in the production of Cuban culture and its material manifestations, it is Cuba's synthesis of Africanisms that gives the island nation its dominant cultural identity, its special position in the world. Pay no attention to the white American music establishment, with its contrived avoidance of *blackness* and its impulse to appropriate and commodify those elements of black culture it thinks saleable; the dominant music of Cuba—and most of Latin America—is African-centered. What that establishment calls "Latin music" is a fiction; the dominant music of "Latin America" is built on African musical traditions which survive and continue to grow in the Americas. One need not go far to discover why African cultural elements persist so strongly in post-slavery Cuba; the majority of the people of Cuba carry Africa in their bodies. In the people's countenances, for example, I more often than not saw a natural persistence of Africa, even on the faces of many of those who classify themselves as white or something other than black. But in the architecture of Havana—and much of it is now in ruins—I saw Europe, or should I say I saw a *faux* Europe, not creole, as Cuban cultural practices have evolved. The other irony is this: it was faux European architecture which I was determined to capture on film that November 2002 Sunday afternoon during my fourth visit to Cuba.

As I think about it now, what I was doing that Sunday was more than I knew at the time; I was continuing to pursue what I had hoped to achieve when I invited U. S. scholars, literary and other kinds of artists, and interested travelers to attend and perhaps participate in a conference that featured musical performances, readings, and academic seminars at Casa de las Américas, May 16-18, 2001. The academic focus of the conference I organized and coordinated in Havana was "The Changing Academy in the United States," but the musical performance and the readings were designed to showcase and demonstrate our artistic presence in the academy. (A facsimile of the conference program follows this Introduction.) While I wanted to share with the Cubans our thoughts on new directions in higher education in our country, I also wanted to share with my friends and colleagues here at home some of



Photo by Charles H. Rowell

**Gran Teatro de La Habana,
Home to the National Ballet and Opera**

what I had witnessed and experienced in Havana during my first visit in December, 2000: especially for their own work on the African Diaspora, I wanted them to see and experience firsthand the persistence of the colonial legacy in the midst of a large nation which is culturally, for all intents and purposes, predominantly African or black; I wanted my friends and colleagues to experience what it means to be an heir to European colonialism, as well as slavery, in the African Diaspora. Then, too, I thought that Cubans, while being exposed to their counterparts from the United States, would share some of our academic experiences and discover, from our multi-racial and multi-ethnic visiting group, possibilities of academic and artistic exchanges. I also hoped the reverse would occur. And this actually happened at the opening of the conference, when two Cuban musicians performed in inspired fashion in the brilliant concert they made with our American musicians. The musical performance that opened “The Changing Academy in the United States” had already demonstrated the excellence the Cubans and U. S. Americans, with understanding and respect for each other, can create if they work together.

With only a few hours to practice together on the afternoon before the concert, these U. S. American and Cuban musicians, as one band, offered an audience of more than 250 people a provocative metaphor for the positive consequences of joyful cooperation and fair exchange. As they proceeded to unfold their repertoire, the four musicians melded as if they were one originally unified quartet of sound. Joel LaRue Smith of Tufts University on piano, Miguel Miranda López of Havana on electric bass, Salim Washington of Brooklyn College on saxophone, and Willie Thompson of Havana on drums—these artists held a sustained conversation that invited us, their audience, to participate not only with our eyes and ears but also with our imagination and intellect. In the end, what they made together during that ninety-minute concert brought the audience to its feet in sustained applause. Of course, Cubans are no strangers to African-American expressive culture, especially jazz. In the United States, we know just enough about Cuban music to identify it when we hear it, and we also recognize a few Cuban dances. But the Cubans not only listen to our music, they truly perform it—and, in their performance, they extend its scope in terms of their own aesthetic imperatives. In fact, their synthesis and fusion of jazz—and more recently rap—with their traditional music is extraordinary.

During my December 2000 visit to Havana, I heard firsthand what Cubans do with jazz, so that when our musicians arrived from the United States for the May 2001 seminars, I invited them and other conference participants to join me at the jazz club called El Zorro y el Cuervo on La Rampa for performances. It was at that club that night that Joel and Salim met Miguel and Willie. What a clever idea, I immediately thought, when they informed me that they wanted to invite these two Cubans to join them in performance. The jazz concert they gave us created the appropriate tone for the entire conference and demonstrated further an impulse of African-American expressive culture: freedom, a socio-political aesthetic which Cuban musicians have taken, expanded, and synthesized to meet the needs of their audiences. The glorious concert of the *Callaloo* Orchestra (that’s really what we should call it) also suggested possibilities of understanding and future academic and artistic exchanges. I have no doubt that the creative writers’ readings and the different scholars’ papers did the

same, for the conference brought together two national groups that hardly ever make contacts of any kind. Like the musicians, three Cuban writers (Nancy Morejón, Georgina Herrera, and Pablo Armando Fernández) joined the American writers in their readings. The participating Cuban scholars, on the other hand, did not present papers but, aided by Spanish-language translators, they engaged our scholars during and after the question and answer sessions. In an immediate way perhaps, like the readings and papers, the concert drew into our various cultural projects isolated Cuba, which is itself a microcosm of the Diaspora.

Before we left the island, different individuals, thanking me for inviting them to the Cuban capital, talked about the positive impact that the Cubanos and the conference made on them. When I returned to what was then my home in Charlottesville, Virginia, I thought it would be appropriate if the participants shared their experiences with our *Callaloo* readers. Hence this special section, “*Callaloo* in Cuba.” To offer our readers a glimpse of our Cuban experiences and discoveries, I invited each of the twenty-odd persons traveling with us to submit to *Callaloo* for publication consideration their responses to Havana. I invited them to offer their responses to Cuba in any critical or creative form they required. The photography, nonfiction prose, and poetry published in this special Cuban section of *Callaloo* are the results of my invitation. I hope that these responses—which are free of the propaganda one usually encounters about Cuba—will also help our readers discover and experience parts of the Cuba we found. More importantly, I hope that the responses which follow will also help break down the subject-object dialectic we continue to impose not only on Cuba but on our other (and “Othered”) neighbors in this hemisphere. As have previous issues of the journal, this number will, I hope, educate, while offering a quiet form of pleasure. My four trips to Cuba to mount a separate special issue of *Callaloo* on an important, yet neglected, site of the African Diaspora have certainly offered me an education, the consequences of which I hope to represent in full on paper in the not-so-distant future.

Perhaps the next piece I write about Cuba will begin again—but in more detail—with that November Sunday afternoon in Habana Vieja, when I was hundreds of miles southeast of my new home in Texas, trying to record architecture through a camera. I now realize that, when I was photographing the buildings surrounding el Parque Central in Havana, I was also recording Cuban architectural images not only for myself but also for my friends and colleagues back in the United States. I knew my photographs, although limited to one element of Havana, could give them another vista on isolated Cuba, which we have largely seen and continue to see through the rhetoric of politics. I might start out by talking about how I, as an amateur, fail miserably when I try to photograph human beings in Cuba and elsewhere. I could also begin with the Malécon and how it functions as a promenade on which Habaneros and Habaneras of all stripes stroll for pleasures of myriad sorts. Yes, I should begin with the people themselves, the inhabitants of Havana, the only place in all of Cuba that I have, to date, ever visited. If I did not begin with the people, I would then violate the lessons I hope we all learned when we went to Havana: that it profits us little to continue to make Other our neighbors to the south, peoples from whom we may learn volumes about ourselves.

—Charles Henry Rowell

LOS CAMBIOS ACADEMICOS
EN ESTADOS UNIDOS
*THE CHANGING ACADEMY
IN THE UNITED STATES*

Conferencia de la revista Callaloo
A Callaloo Conference



15 - 18 de mayo, 2001
May 16 - 18, 2001

Casa de las Américas, La Habana, Cuba

CALLALOO
Department of English
University of Virginia
Charlottesville, VA

miércoles 16 / wednesday 16

8:00 p.m. - 9:30 p.m.
Sala Che Guevara
Che Guevara Hall

Concierto de jazz
Jazz Concert
Bienvenida
Welcome
Introducción
Introduction: Charles Henry Rowell,
Editor of Callaloo, University of Virginia

Joel LaRue Smith, Tufts University, Piano
Salim Washington, Brooklyn College, City University of
New York, Saxophone

jueves 17 / thursday 17

9:00 a.m. - 11:00 a.m.
Sala Manuel Galich
Manuel Galich Hall

Teoría crítica, historia literaria y estudios culturales
Critical Theory, Literary History and Cultural Studies

Introducción
Introduction: Charles Henry Rowell,
University of Virginia

David Kazanjian, Moderator, Queens College, City
University of New York
Thadious Davis, Vanderbilt University
Brent Edwards, Rutgers University
Mae Henderson, University of North Carolina at
Chapel Hill
Harryette Mullen, University of California at Los Angeles

2:00p.m. - 4:00 p.m.
Sala Manuel Galich
Manuel Galich Hall

Actuación y estudios de actuación
Performance and Performance Studies

Fred Moten, New York University
Eric Lott, University of Virginia
Barbara Browning, New York University

8:00 p.m. - 9:30 p.m.
Sala Manuel Galich
Manuel Galich Hall

Lecturas
Readings

John McCluskey, Indiana University (novelist)
Toi Derricotte, University of Pittsburgh (poet)
Nancy Morejón, Casa de las Américas, Havana (poet)
Kevin Young, University of Georgia (poet)

viernes 18 / friday 18

9:00 a.m. - 11:00 a.m.
Sala Manuel Galich
Manuel Galich Hall

La mujer negra: feminismo y teoría del feminismo
Black Women: Feminism and Feminist Theory

Mae Henderson, Moderator, University of North
Carolina at Chapel Hill
Susan Fraiman, University of Virginia
Farah Griffin, Columbia University
Carla Peterson, University of Maryland at College Park
Harryette Mullen, University of California at Los Angeles

2:00 p.m. - 4:00 p.m.
Sala Manuel Galich
Manuel Galich Hall

Escritura creativa como disciplina
Creative Writing as a Discipline

Toi Derricotte, Moderator, University of Pittsburgh
Helen Elaine Lee, Massachusetts Institute of Technology
John McCluskey, Indiana University
Harryette Mullen, University of California at Los Angeles

8:00 p.m. - 9:30 p.m.
Sala Manuel Galich
Manuel Galich Hall

Lecturas
Readings

Pablo Armando Fernández, Casa de las Américas, Cuba
(poet)
Helen Elaine Lee, Massachusetts Institute of Technology
(novelist)
Forrest Hamer, Oakland, California (poet)
Harryette Mullen, University of California at Los Angeles
(poet)

CALLALOO

CALLALOO

Callaloo, la primera revista literaria y cultural africana y afro-americana, es editada por su fundador Charles Henry Rowell. Publica obras originales y estudios críticos de escritores de todo el mundo descendientes de africanos. Callaloo ofrece una mezcla rica de prosa de ficción, poesía, teatro, ensayos críticos, estudios culturales, entrevistas y artes plásticas. Bibliografías anotadas, asuntos temáticos específicos, arte original y fotografía es parte de lo que se encuentra en esta publicación de renombre en las artes y las letras. Recientes números especiales sobre Haití y las escritoras puertorriqueñas han sido reconocidos tanto por el Consejo de Editores de Revistas como por la Asociación de Editores Americanos. El año 2001 marca el 25 aniversario de esta publicación. Callaloo es patrocinada por la Universidad de Virginia y publicada trimestralmente por la Johns Hopkins University Press.

Callaloo, the premier African and African-American literary and cultural journal, is edited by its founder, Charles Henry Rowell. The journal publishes original works by and critical studies of writers of African descent worldwide. Callaloo offers a rich mixture of prose fiction, poetry, plays, critical essays, cultural studies, interviews, and visual art. Frequent annotated bibliographies, special thematic issues, and original art and photography are some of the features of this highly acclaimed international showcase of arts and letters. Recent special issues on Haiti and on Puerto Rican women writers have been recognized by both the Council of Editors of Learned Journals and the Association of American Publishers. The year 2001 marks the 25th anniversary of the journal. Callaloo is sponsored by the University of Virginia, and is published quarterly by the Johns Hopkins University Press.

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