Changing Times and Changing Lives in the Caribbean and Latin America

Ten Oral Histories

Edited by Judith Adler Hellman

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CERLAC
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All photos used in this book are the property of the authors with the exception of the photo of Gabriel Guzmán in Ciudad Nueva which comes from Rene Fortunato's 1988 documentary film, "Abril: La trinchera del honor," in which Fortunato credits Milvio Pérez and Juan Perez Terrero for supplying the still photos that appear, along with some photos drawn from the Life Magazine archives. These works can be found at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K9H4P27-K0s&NR=1&feature=endscreen and at https://www.google.ca/search?q=life+magazine+photos+1960s.

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A map of the Caribbean Basin, encompassing all the countries referenced in the histories contained in this volume[1]

1 Adapted from: "The World Factbook 2013-14", Central Intelligence Agency, 2013, Office of Public Affairs, Washington DC, May 2013 < https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html

PREFACE

by

Michele Johnson

When Professor Judy Hellman told me about the oral history project that would constitute the final assignment in the capstone course in the Latin American and Caribbean Studies Program at York University, I was both pleased and intrigued. My own interest in modern Jamaican social history has led me directly into the use of oral histories in order to break the silences of the often voiceless members of the society, many of whom are relegated to its margins due to combined "disabilities" of race/colour, class/status and gender/sexualities. This is by no means limited to Jamaica, since across Latin America and Caribbean; the long shadows of European colonialisms, which depended on the enslavement (and decimation) of aboriginal peoples, the chattel slavery of Africans and their descendants and the indentureship of Asian labourers in order to extract wealth from a range of commercial enterprises, including mining and agriculture, has left deep scars upon the lands and the people of the region/s. Usually deemed unimportant by contemporary observers, largely ignored by the ruling classes, and frequently unable to generate the sorts of documentary notice that would ensure their notice, the life experiences of the vast majority remain unrecorded and are assumed to be unremarkable. As these oral histories make clear, it is the extraordinariness of "ordinary" lives that make oral histories so appealing, as sometimes "inconspicuous" persons have observed and participated in historical moments, and examinations of the most "mundane" details inform us about our societies.

Despite their apparent value especially amongst relegated, marginal and "un- or under-documented" groups and individuals, there is a great deal

of hesitation about the use of oral histories. Many scholars are concerned about dependence on "eyewitnesses" who, according to Jan Vansina, "are only partly reliable" because "[m]emory typically selects certain features . . . and interprets them according to expectation, previous knowledge, or the logic of "what must have happened," and fills the gaps in perception."[1] Further, according to Paul Richard Thompson, "there is the added possibility of distortions influenced by the subsequent changes in values and norms, which may perhaps quite unconsciously alter perceptions."[2] Indeed, since memory involves the un/conscious act of discarding over time, as well as individual comprehension, perception and retention, the hurdles to gathering useful data from individuals' memories are potentially limiting. In addition, for oral histories to be valuable, there have to be both an ability and a willingness to remember, as recall can be prevented by a decision not to do so, conscious or not. The collection of oral history is also affected by the interviewer since her/his socially constructed presence (race, sex, language) can affect the responses offered.[3]

For all its limitations, scholars like James Hoopes believe that "what is interesting in historical work is its personal, human challenge," and that that concentration can be maintained by focusing "directly on human beings"; for him oral history is both relevant and powerful. According to Hoopes, while most historians continue to focus on written documents, and some give attention to material culture, oral histories should be treated as simply another sort of historical source and constitute "documents that are spoken".[4] While oral histories are particularly useful where written records are available, says Hoopes, they are also able to "supply information that might otherwise never

1 Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), p. 5; See Michael Frisch, "Oral History and Hard Times: A Review Essay," *Oral History Review*, 1979, vol. 7, pp. 70-79 (originally published in *Red Buffalo*, 1972, vol. 1, nos. 2/3); Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds. *The Oral History Reader*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).

2 Paul Richard Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 100.

3 See Ronald J. Grele, "Movement without aim: Methodological and theoretical problem in oral history," *Envelopes of Sound: The Arts of Oral History*, (Chicago: Precedent Publishing, 1985), pp. 127-154.

4 James Hoopes, *Oral History: An Introduction for Students*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1979), pp. 4-5.

have been saved".[5] Addressing the problems of memory, Hoopes argues that "[a]ll historical documents, including both oral and written, reflect the particular subjective minds of their creators" and that "[w]hat oral history does best . . . is to give a 'feel' for the 'facts' that 'can be provided only by one who lived with them.'"[6]

From the perspectives of those scholars who advocate and promote its use, recognising the limitations of oral history ought not to mean ignoring it; rather, scholars should work to minimise their limitations in the contexts where the testimonies are gathered, as is the case when they deal with imperfect written sources. As Hoopes and David Henige[7] argue, careful steps in arranging and preparing for the interview, deciding what and how to ask, transcribing and utilising the information and making sure all legal and ethical questions are addressed should go a long way in dealing with concerns raised about oral histories. [8]

In Latin America and the Caribbean, many scholars agree that since there are well developed oral cultures there is value in the use of oral history, especially among the regions' unlettered, poor and marginalised; however, there has also been a gap between the recognition of the virtues of oral sources and the use of them. While they argue that oral histories and oral traditions[9] are important among individuals and communities, the gathering of "facts" from those who participated in events is treated with a great deal more caution and critique than is the case with many written documents. Arguing for a change in the attitude to oral history as a methodology, B.W. Higman pointed out that:

> *[o]ne of the most important attractions of oral history is that it can provide information on the attitudes, beliefs and actions of all classes of people, thus enabling . . . [the*

5 Hoopes, *Oral History*, pp. 10-12.

6 Hoopes, *Oral History*, p. 15.

7 David Henige, *Oral Historiography*, (London, New York, Lagos: Longman, 1988).

8 For extensive discussions of means of addressing these concerns, see Hoopes, *Oral History*, pp. 33-139 and Henige, *Oral Historiography*, pp. 23-127.

9 For differences between oral history and oral traditions, see Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (London: James Currey, 1985), pp. 3-13; see also Ruth Finnegan, "A Note on Oral Tradition and Historical Evidence," *History and Theory*¸ 9, 1970, pp. 195-201.

> *scholar] to balance interpretations of the past in documents created by representatives of the ruling class or elite. It destroys the monopoly on information created through selective education and other means of social control. Further, oral history permits the study of aspects of the everyday lives of ordinary people which never found their way into public documentation. This it serves to democratize the subject matter of social history.*[10]

This collection represents such an enterprise.

While Nadine Ramharack's examination of the "ordinary" life of Tanty Jaff introduces readers to the most personal side of Indo-Trinidadian life in the 20th century, a more political perspective is gained through Alyssa Sewlal's analysis of the experiences of Indo-Trinidadian Stanley Sripaul who supported the Black Power protests of the early 1970s. In his presentation of Miguel Gonzalez's amazing and complex engagement with the Nicaraguan revolution and its aftermath, Michael McLean Ayearst unravels and analyses the complicated world of war. Similarly, Lorenzo Vargas provides an excellent context for understanding the experiences of Don Ernesto, an "ordinary" Colombian truck driver whose experiences of guerilla war and encounters with members of the country's drug cartels belied any suggestion of an unremarkable life. In her contribution, Professor Judith Adler Hellman uses the more than 10 hours of interviews she conducted with Gabriel Guzmán to analyse his life story which serves as a fascinating prism through to view the tumultuous period of the 1960s in the Dominican Republic as well as the world of social activism in the United States. The meticulous work of Juan Vidal (including eight interviews) in the reconstruction of the life of Jesus Contreras, who lives in El Salvador, unveils the enormous challenges faced by farmers working on elite-owned coffee plantations, as well as experiences of war and its aftermath. In her interview with Dimitri Searles, Ashleigh Phillips examines the complicated intersections of race/colour and class in Grenada, where the effects of the island's revolu-

10 B.W. Higman, "Theory, Method and Technique in Caribbean Social History," *Journal of Caribbean History*, Vol. 20.1 (1985-6), pp. 1-29. See also Erna Brodber, "Oral Sources and the Creation of a Social History of the Caribbean," *Jamaica Journal*, 16 (1983), pp. 2-11.

tion and the U.S.-led invasion continue to have resonance. The politics of race/colour are also featured in Richard Lanns' examination of the demise of plantation agriculture and the rise of tourism, through the narrative of Aunt Helen. And race/colour and status also pervade Kevin Edmond's analysis of the seven interviews which he uses to reconstruct the experiences of banana farmer John James, the offspring of an indentured Indian woman and a black Panamanian man. Difficult personal circumstances, hard work and perseverance are also themes which Maria Elena Hernández explores by using seven interviews to reconstruct the life of Leonila Nuñez Mercado in 20th century Mexico.

This collection is important, not only for the students whose hard work is reflected here and for Professor Hellman whose vision has come to fruition, but especially for the "ordinary" people whose personal histories are now forever part of the historical record of Latin America and the Caribbean. And this, after all, is how it should be.

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INTRODUCTION

by

Judith Adler Hellman

When the New Jewel Movement overthrew the dictator of Grenada in 1979, Dimitri lost his government scholarship to study in Trinidad and returned to his rural town in time to find himself on the receiving end of the U.S.-led invasion of that small island. Meanwhile, Miguel, born on the Meskito coast of Nicaragua, fought the contras as a Sandinista militiaman all the time that he was consumed with worry that his father's outspoken criticism of the Sandinista regime would land him in prison. Don Jesus was imprisoned and tortured during the years of civil war in El Salvador but survived to become a community organizer in his neighbourhood. Uncle Stanley left Trinidad for Canada not long after becoming one of the very few Indo-Trinidadian students to participate in the Black Power movement that rocked Port-of-Spain in 1970. Tanty Jaff's entire experience of the independence of Trinidad and Tobago consists of her recollections of a truck with a loud speaker rolling through the cane fields and the centre of her village calling out the news, while her son returned from school that same day bearing a chocolate bar, a new pencil, and a red, white, and black flag. Don Ernesto found himself caught squarely between the revolutionary *guerrilleros* and the paramilitary forces that pursued them, but he found an accommodation with the FARC that allowed him to pursue his work as a trucker hauling goods through the Antioquia region of Colombia. Aunt Helen's life spanned the slow progress of St. Lucia's transformation from export agriculture to a tourist destination, the replacement of a landholding by a commercial elite, and the exodus of all her sisters to Canada. Jones James, living on the other side of the island, and in economic and cultural terms a

world away, also lost many of his family to Canada, and his banana farm to precipitous changes in international trade agreements and the savagery of Hurricane Tomas.

These are all individuals whom readers will meet in the stories related in this book. Like the other people who recount their lives in this collection, they have lived at pivotal moments in the political, economic, and social history of their countries. The astonishing thing, however, is that they are not "research subjects" whose stories were *selected* from a broader study of change in the Caribbean and Latin America. These accounts are not the fruit of the work of either a scholar or a journalist who laboured for years to collect the most gripping oral histories that would reveal the fullest range of experiences that characterize life today in the region. Rather, they are the personal friends and family members of students who enrolled in the capstone course in the Latin American and Caribbean Studies Program at York University. These students were required by their professor to hunt up and interview someone Caribbean or Latin American in origin. The idea was that members of the seminar would have a taste of what it means to collect and relate the life story of a person whose biography might parallel changing times or whose own migratory journey would reveal interesting comparisons between Caribbean and Latin American societies and the world an immigrant would come to know in North America.

The Project

In setting up this project I hoped the work of capturing these personal narratives would illuminate for the students the challenges faced by the authors of the oral histories that we read in class.[1] I thought that the most likely subjects

1 Some of the classic narrative works and oral histories the authors in this book would have read are: Ricardo Pozas, *Juan the Chamula*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971); Oscar Lewis, *Pedro Martínez*, (New York: Vintage Press, 1964); Sidney Mintz, *Worker in the Cane*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1974; Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico, 1517-1521*; (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1956); Miguel Leon-Portillo, *The Broken Spear: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962); Ché Guevara, "Episodes of the Revolutionary War" in David Deutschmann, ed, *Che Guevara Reader,* (Melbourne and New York: Ocean Press, 2003), and Patrick E. Bryan and Karl Watson, eds., *Not for Wages Alone: Eyewitness Summaries of the 1938 Labour Rebellion in Jamaica*. (Mona, JA: Uni-

would be immigrants to Canada with a trunkful of recollections of "then" and "now," and of life in Toronto and life "back home." To be sure, I was also concerned that not all the students would have equal access to a pool of potential storytellers insofar as the majority of students who enrolled were Latin American or Caribbean in their background, but others were not. As it turned out, a good number of students in the seminar found themselves with such an abundance of family members and family friends who would be eager to relate their migratory history, that they happily connected their classmates to their own circle of older people in their community, people they thought would have a great tale to tell.

Indeed, some of the oral histories did focus on the migrant experience of people now settled in the Greater Toronto Area. However, I was amazed to see how far the students would travel—in person over the December break, or through electronic means that included both telephone and Skype—to interview people currently living in Latin America or the Caribbean who were known to them as having led remarkable lives. Also unexpected were the number of research subjects who had found themselves at internationally significant crossroads of history, living in the middle of cataclysmic events that included revolutions, civil war, *golpes de estado* and—counting a contribution of my own on a Dominican friend in Manhattan that I decided to add to the book—no fewer than two invasions by United States Marines! Striking as well were those, like Tanty Jaff, whose life was little touched by grand, politically transformative moments outside her village. But most arresting was the common experience of the student researchers themselves who often found that a close family member had participated in historic events that were never mentioned to them as children and were only very vaguely alluded to as they grew up. The idealism, deep commitment and sometimes subsequent disillusionment of the research subjects, related in their own voices, were some of the most remarkable aspects of the life stories that were recounted in the hours of interviews the students conducted.

In the course of the interviews I have carried out in my own fieldwork,[2]

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versity of the West Indies, 2003).

2 cf. *Journeys Among Women: Feminism in Five Italian Cities*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), *Mexican Lives*, (New York: The New Press, 1994) and *The World of*

surprises came along every day. Thus, in setting out the parameters of the project, I emphasized to the student researchers that they needed to stay light on their feet and be prepared to be unprepared—so to speak—for the unexpected material that would come their way in the interview process. Certainly one of the biggest surprises for the students was to find that people they admired and with whom they felt themselves to be in substantial agreement sometimes turned out to hold views that were at odds with their own, a finding that challenged the interviewers to rethink their own positions on those political events or social attitudes.

A Contribution to Open Discussion

In my own view, the biggest surprise to come out of the project as a whole was the quality of the discussion about race that was precipitated when the authors of the oral histories presented their final work to one another. What they had heard from their informants forced the students, in their role as authors, to explore tensions and outright conflicts not only, or even principally, between the white and black or, in more subtle terms, between white and mulatto and mestizo descendants of the former colonial rulers and the darker skinned mass of the population, but also *between* descendants of enslaved people brought from Africa and indentured people brought from India. The everyday language of disdain casually dropped into conversation by the research subjects in the course of the interviews was often stunning to interviewers who were raised in Canada, even though, at some meta-level, of course, the students always understood that these racial distinctions were commonly drawn and openly expressed in the vernacular "back home." Certainly it was no secret to them that Afro-Caribbean and Indo-Caribbean cleavages structure the political life of Trinidad and Tobago as well as Guyana, and that other Caribbean and Latin American settings are characterized by class societies finely stratified by both color and income.

Often this is a topic that is very difficult to broach in the classroom because it creates so much discomfort in the group of people sitting around the seminar table. In contrast, students find it relatively straightforward to discuss

Mexican Migrants, (New York: The New Press, 2008).

white racism even when they feel they have been victims of that form of bigotry. To some degree this is the case because the vocabulary of "anti-racism" and "diversity" and "multiculturalism" is part of the curriculum in Toronto from elementary school onward, and this training gives students confidence that they possess the proper language in which to address these issues. Moreover, these teachings are reinforced when students reach university where they may find they are encouraged and rewarded for taking up in class discussion or in essays the problem of discrimination according to race, class, and gender. At the same time, however, references to the scores of racialized terms that are in everyday use in Latin America and the Caribbean, that is, words like *negrita* or *negrito* used affectionately in Cuban song, might elicit a shared glance between two students from the region who are well familiar with the range of terminology in common and open use. But it would be unlikely to lead them to speak on the subject. In essence, a classroom full of people of every race and national background who would not shrink from a discussion of white racism may often feel very uncomfortable joining a discussion of what one of the research subjects in this collection refers to as "black on black racism."

Yet, as the reader will see, a number of the research subjects themselves do not share this reticence. Stereotypical designations trip off their tongues and what the oral histories brought to our seminar table was a way of coming together to discuss the large number of racialized characterizations that people in Latin America and the Caribbean have for themselves and others in their societies.[3] We were also stimulated to think through the implications of the affectionate use of nicknames like *gordito* and *gordita* ("fatty") which, if shouted across a playground in a Canadian school, could well lead to charges of bullying.

Editing the collection

Speaking in their own voices and emphasizing what for them were the most

3 In Canada the vocabulary available to use in open conversation about race is very limited, indeed impoverished. For example, lacking more specific terminology, we speak of "visible minorities" which is a term that often leaves students who are recent immigrants to Canada from, say, Bulgaria, who are struggling with a new language and a new culture wondering if they—and their struggles—are "invisible" to the rest of us.

telling aspects of the life stories that they collected, the authors approached their tasks in a variety of ways. I made no attempt to standardize the presentation of material, because I believe that there is no "one best way" to present an oral history. Some authors inserted in their final draft the questions they had posed in their interviews while others did not. Some provided only the historical background that they felt they could draw from their own general knowledge while others were more comfortable citing scholarly works that they consulted as background reading. Most of the works in the collection are based on long hours of interviews with a single subject. However, two of the authors, writing respectively on St. Lucia and on Mexico, worked principally from family members' reminiscences of a deceased grandparent who had been known to the author in youth, but who now lived again through the reflections of parents, aunts, and uncles who grappled to understand and explain the immense influence this figure had on their own lives.

Over the years that a class "assignment" provided the impulse that set this research in motion, it was very gratifying to learn from the students the degree to which the project had enriched their lives. For some it opened a new world of fictive kinfolk from Latin America and the Caribbean when they were "adopted" by the families of a friend from the course who had connected a classmate to a circle of possible research subjects. For others it had the effect of reinforcing ties to family and community. In some cases, the work on this project brought together people who had not communicated for many years and helped the authors to piece together aspects of their own origins that they either had never suspected or at least had never fully understood.

Chapter One

RESILIENCE: LIFE IN RURAL TRINIDAD

by

Nadine Ramharack

Resilience—I could not have known the meaning of the word before that December evening, when, after a wedding in Barrackpore[1] (and upon my mother's insistence that I go around and get to know the family), I was introduced to my mother's "pumpkin-vine relation,"[2] Tanty ("Auntie") Jaff. She was so thin and frail as to inspire fear that a tight embrace would be the death of her, yet when she smiled her perfectly white dentures (complete with two gold teeth) and the mischief in her eyes belied her age. She was 83 years old but she was dressed elegantly, the solemn *hijaab*[3] draped over her head not muting the spirited colours of her *shalwar*.[4] A devout Muslim, Tanty Jaff might have been mistaken for one of those older heads who frowned upon the follies of youth, but I cast aside any categorization along these lines when, as the *tassa*[5] drummers started their drumming, she jumped up ahead of all the young girls and began to shimmy to the music.

"Tanty Jaff is a saga-girl[6] yuh know!" exclaimed a woman sitting next to me. "Yuh woulda never guess she gone tru what she gone tru nah! De woman

1 Town in South-West Trinidad, about half hour south east of the city of San Fernando and an hour and a half south east of the capital Port-of-Spain.

2 A distant relative.

3 The scarf worn by Muslim women.

4 A type of clothing worn by Indian women

5 A type of drum slung over the shoulder that is played at festivals and weddings, usually by a group of about five individuals

6 A term used to designate girls who dress to impress.

Tanty Jaff at 83

is a survivor!"

A survivor. I would recall the title some days hence, on a particularly hot Tuesday afternoon, when I sat on our porch with Tanty Jaff, who had happily agreed to visit with me and share her story. At the age of 83 it was understandably difficult for her to recall and recount her entire life on command, but after some thematic guidance ("Tell me about your childhood/your marriage/race relations in your village…") her story began to take shape.[7] I sat with a pen and paper and scribbled as she spoke—it was not hard to keep pace as she took her time about it—and occasionally I challenged her memory with a question or two. By the end, my head was spinning but I was inspired by the woman who sat beside me and the story on the pages before me.

Jaffroon Ali was born in 1926, generations ago in time and circumstance, when the British were still our sovereigns, when life was thought to be simple yet hard. Barrackpore was a rustic and predominantly Indo-Trinidadian area, surrounded by extensive sugar cane fields, rice lagoons and open pasture. The village where she lived was particularly poor.

> *Well yuh know in those days we didn't have no electricity or cars or water. Every morning we used to have to get up six o' clock, me and meh four sisters, and help we Ma. We used to tie de goat dem out in de back and go get water from de river, about a quarter mile from de house. When we come back, I would sweep de yard and den I would go to school.*

Being the eldest of five girls, Tanty Jaff was privileged to be given the chance by her parents to attend school, in a time when all able hands were needed to tend animals or work the land. She was eight at the time.

> *Meh mother and father wanted we to get ah education and so dey sacrifice so we could go to school. But it wasn't easy for we either. Me and meh sister had to walk two miles on a mud road to reach to Caledonia Primary School, and*

7 Since her account was structured around themes and not necessarily chronology, I was careful to keep track of years and dates that she mentioned so that I could reconstruct the story in proper sequence at the time of writing.

when de rain fall, oh lord yuh foot was sinkin deep deep while yuh walkin! When yuh finally reach, de classroom dem empty cause nobody used to be able to come to school. It had plenty days when de teacher would come by we house to collect we, just so dat it would have students in de class.

Indeed, education was a luxury that many could not afford, and even Tanty Jaff herself had to abandon school at age 10 to help her father cut grass for their goats and help her mother around the house. In spite of this sacrifice, she passed her days in a kind of blissful ignorance of true poverty and suffering as her family, though poor, was hardly among the neediest in the town. In fact, after a few years of hard work and financial austerity, the family was able to save enough money to undertake the extension of the family's outdoor kitchen, a veritable ostentation in the village at the time. It was during the execution of this family project that Tanty Jaff's own story would really begin.

I was 12 when dey start to build de kitchen and it had dese men who would come to help out. One of the men see meh and like meh, and he tell meh Ma and Pa dat he wanted to marry meh. I never even talk to de man and he had 30 years, but dey still say ok and I had to marry him. In those days girls used to get married young young, so it wasn't a big ting.

His name was Roshan and the year was 1938. The bride was taken away on a wooden cart drawn by a bison[8] and such was her lot that it rained heavily on her wedding day and the wheels of her makeshift carriage flung mud upon her dress. The omen notwithstanding, she was carried off to her husband's home, where she began her wifely duties as a girl on the cusp of 13. Although she says that her conjugal life began well enough, with her cooking and taking meals for her husband while he worked in the cane and even joining in "cutlassing"[9] the fields herself, things soon began to change.

8 A type of bull used to pull carts.

9 To cut using a machete.

> *One day Roshan brother (who I used to call* bhaiya[10]*) come up to me and tell meh he want to buy a dress fuh me and he try to make a move on me. He had 40 years yuh kno! I was scared but I tell him to leave me alone. While dis was happening Roshan mother come inside to tell me de dhal*[11] *burnin and she see what was goin on. She call meh young and stupid and de next day, I had to go back by meh mother house.*

For six months after she was sent away from her husband's house, her brother-in-law continued to visit and to woo her. Then one day he turned up at her parents' house when her mother was not at home and told Tanty Jaff that he needed her signature on some documents. She unknowingly signed her divorce papers that day. However, as she came to see it, one door closed but another would be opened to her the very next year.

At the age of 14, in 1940, Tanty Jaff was once more a bride. Twenty-four-year-old Mukun rode a bicycle past her house every day and fell in love with the young girl sweeping her front yard, a vision framed by the landscape of crimson-capped cane. Her father gave Mukun two dollars and a handkerchief when he asked for her hand and by the time the ripe cane was cut, the two were married. The house to which she was taken consisted of a single room of wattle and coconut thatch and it was so exposed to the elements that rain unfailingly inundated the structure. However, before long the house became the least of her worries. War was upon them.

For Tanty Jaff, World War II meant scarcity. She remembered receiving ration cards and having to stand in line at designated centres to obtain rice, flour and soap. It was often the case that they had nothing to eat and when, in 1941, Tanty Jaff gave birth to her first child, their situation became even more precarious. Without ample sustenance for herself, in lieu of breast milk she would have to save the water drained away after rice had been boiled to feed her baby. To compound her worries, the American soldiers, who had

10 Hindi word for brother.

11 Split peas prepared as a soup with saffron powder and other seasonings; a staple accompaniment to rice.

established wartime bases in Chaguaramas,[12] were beginning to stir up trouble in those parts. They enlisted the service of several bus drivers and roamed the countryside, cutting down trees (for reasons Tanty Jaff could not explain) and gathering up women. Tanty Jaff recalled with disgust the story of one of her cousins who was taken away and raped by a group of soldiers, who then obligingly returned her to her husband and children. Tanty Jaff said that the sight of their yellow planes snaking across the sky made her shudder with the fear that she might be next. But it was not the Americans who ultimately proved to be a problem.

> *Mukun had an outside woman. It was de neighbour who tell meh dat he see Mukun by de doubles[13] lady early in de morning but I didn't take it on. I didn't believe it until de day de lady come by meh house and give meh five dollars. She say how she husband used to beat she real bad. I feel sorry fuh she, but it still hurt meh plenty to know what Mukun was doin after all de hard times we see. And then soon after dat, meh baby come and die. I never cry like dat before in meh life.*

Tanty Jaff stayed with her husband for another nine years, but then he, too, passed away and she was forced to return to her parents' house once more. Having no source of income to support herself or her ailing parents, she began to work on the sugar estates, weeding and planting cane and earning mere cents for her hard labour. It was during this time that she met her third and final husband, Sino, who was 40 at the time and had already had three children from a previous marriage. Nevertheless, the pair was soon married and Tanty Jaff's only surviving child, Faizool, was born of the union. This marriage, she said with a smile, was a good one.

So there she was, 26 years old, thrice married and the stoic victim of an early life filled with vicissitudes. To the reader, this portrait of a young woman could easily conjure images of a girl whose youthful vigor was spent and who was, perhaps, aged prematurely on account of her responsibility and struggles.

12 Town at North-Western tip of Trinidad.

13 Trini delicacy consisting of chick peas sandwiched between two fried flour biscuits.

Yet the woman who sat before me, rocking playfully on the swing in our porch, exuded such a *joie-de-vivre* at age 83 that I was convinced that her story would have had a happy ending. Her fortune must certainly have changed once she began to build a life with Sino, or "Faizool father" as she called him?

Tanty Jaff and her third husband, Sino

> *Well doudou,*[14] *life was always hard yuh know, but I suppose once I finally settle down, when tings started to remain a lil bit de same, I get used to everything and everybody around meh, and I learn to love meh life. Faizool father house wasn't far from my mother dem one so I feel like I was still home.*

Her routine changed. She would send Faizool off to school (insisting that he take advantage of the opportunity she could not) and then after clean-

14 From French "doux-doux": term of endearment meaning sweetheart.

ing her house (a four-room wooden structure raised off the ground by 'stilts') she would set about the task of preparing the meal. The family grew their own rice, as most people in Barrackpore did at the time, and so it was her job to beat the dried rice stalks against the wooden beams of the house, collect the grains, grind them manually with a mill to remove the husk and then finally cook them. It would often happen that the women in the village would come together and prepare the rice communally, all the while exchanging gossip and building lasting ties.

> *Dat was one ting eh, in those days everybody used to live good good. Nobody used to tink twice about helping out dey neighbour. Even de two Negro families it had in de village used to live good with we.*

Despite the fact that outside the village, in those pre-Independence years, racial tensions were splitting the country politically into two factions—one behind Rudranath Capildeo, the Indo-Trinidadian leader of the Democratic Labour Party, and the other behind Eric Williams, the Afro-Trinidadian leader of the People's National Movement—Tanty Jaff relates a story in which race did not figure in community relations. Tanty Jaff even asserted that she could not dislike the "Negroes" because things were much easier when Eric Williams was in power. They had all the food they needed to survive.

In August 1962, a truck passed through the village and announced through loudspeakers that the country had gained independence. According to Tanty Jaff, all she remembered was that her pot of rice had overflowed because she neglected it for a few minutes to listen to the announcement. Then Faizool came home from school with a big bar of chocolate, a new pencil and a red, white and black miniature flag. Independence. It might not have caused any immediate ripples in the community, but before long, striking changes would come. In the 1960s the roads were paved and soon the village became a thoroughfare for small Austin Cambridges and Ford Cortinas. For the first time, Tanty Jaff was able to hop in a taxi and make her way to San Fernando (a journey that would have cost her three precious hours on foot) to see an Indian movie on the big screen. A decade later, the village was electrified and the family was able to purchase a small television set. Wooden houses were

broken down and replaced by small brick and concrete structures. At Christmas, there was paint on the walls and pretty curtains at every window, and the breeze was heavy with the scent of apples and grapes, imported "fresh" from "America." Then Raffique Shah, a trade union leader and political commentator, led a "revolution," forcing the government to take over foreign companies, among them Tate and Lyle, the British owned multinational sugar corporation. From 1975, sugar would go to Caroni 1975 Limited, a company responsible for handling and processing all locally grown sugar cane—a sweet victory for the newly independent Trinidad and Tobago.

And what of Faizool? Well, he grew up, got a job in the oil field in Barrackpore, fell in love with a "pretty Hindu" girl, and they got married in 1980, two years after Sino had died. I was surprised that she accepted a Hindu daughter-in-law with such ease, since my own parents had had a tough time convincing their parents that there was nothing wrong with a Hindu boy marrying a Muslim girl. She explained that while she was growing up, her parents were never strict on enforcing the rules of religion, so long as she and her sisters lived good, decent lives. This is what she believed. She wore the hijaab because she wanted to, not because her religion mandated that she do so. She also stressed the fact that for her, being a Muslim did not make her hold in low regard others who did not share her faith.

> *Look, I even went to see a pundit[15] for him to read my patra,[16] and yuh know, everything de man tell meh come true! How I could see a Hindu man and tink dat he religion wrong if what de pundit tell meh come to pass?*

And indeed, as I subsequently learned, the predictions made by that pundit were so accurate that it would have been folly to dismiss them. Tanty Jaff went to see Pundit Rakesh after she stepped on a needle in 1980 and had to be hospitalized for a week. The wound was stubborn and took strangely long to heal, and since she was not diabetic, her neighbours suspected that someone had "worked some obeah"[17] on her. The possible perpetrator? An old

15 A Hindu priest.

16 Horoscope, life story.

17 Black magic.

man living on the fringes of the village who reportedly spoke to the dead and was given to sending evil spirits after people whom he felt had wronged him. (I might have been less inclined to believe this, were it not for the fact that intermittently over five years, I heard my own cousin speak in tongues after being possessed by spirits who claimed to have been sent by the same man). As soon as Tanty Jaff was released, she went to have her patra read. According to Pundit Rakesh, however, what had happened to her was not the work of black magic, but was rather the first of a string of events in her life that would truly test her will to live. If she survived these, he said, she would live to be very old.

And what were these foretold events? In 1981, Tanty Jaff was cooking on a pitch-oil stove[18] in her neighbour's house when a sudden gust of wind blew her shawl onto the flame and her dress caught fire. The flames had spread so quickly that by the time they had managed to put them out, Tanty Jaff had suffered burns to an astonishing 90 percent of her body. She was unconscious for three months and nobody thought she would survive. Then, miraculously, she opened her eyes, reborn of fire and ready to face what was left of her life.

A year after she had recovered from this terrible ordeal, a thief came in the night, slipped through the gate of her house and stole her goats. Her son, Faizool, heard the animals bleating madly and reached the window just in time to read the license plate of the thief's getaway car as it sped off. Over the next two weeks, Faizool filed reports with the police and suspects were apprehended. Then, at three o'clock one morning, while the family was sleeping, Tanty Jaff was awakened by an almighty crack! and an explosion of pain in her knee. When her son frantically lit a candle to attend to his screaming mother, he saw blood on the sheets and a hole in her knee. If Tanty Jaff's knees had not been pulled to her body as they had been, the bullet, shot from a moving vehicle, would have pierced a vital organ.

If that were not enough, the following year, while walking along a newly paved road, Tanty Jaff narrowly avoided being ploughed over completely by a speeding car. However, she was unable to move her foot out of the way and her right ankle was broken. Then, to cap it all off, a few months after that, while getting ready to attend a local Indian talent show, Mastana Bahar, Tanty Jaff

18 Special kind of open stove where the fuel is oil.

tripped and fell down a flight of stairs, breaking her left arm.

Fantastical? Magic Realism? I thought so, yet there she was, scars and all. The woman had stared death in the face time and time again, at each turn defiant, saying "Not yet." I asked her if the pundit had not foreseen any more fortuitous circumstance in her life, for it could not possibly be that she could be thus challenged without being rewarded in some way for having pressed on. She smiled and said:

> *Oh yes, he tell me dat if I survive, I would get rich. And yuh know what? In 1985 dey find oil in we land, and de government pay we $10,000! Oh gosh dat was a time! Dat was when I kno I was lucky!*

I wanted to laugh along with her, but all I could do was stare in awe at the woman in front of me: the-woman-who-lived.[19] What was perhaps even more striking was the fact that as incredible as her story was, it could easily have been that of my own grandmother, or the old woman living up the road from my house who had been abused by her husband and in-laws, or the one from Hindustan whose home had gone up in flames not two weeks prior. Tanty Jaff was a study in overcoming adversity, but beyond that, or perhaps because of her particular woes, she was the portrait of an Indo-Trinidadian woman living through a time of change. So many women in her time faced similar hardships because they were forced to marry at a very young age, although the specifics of their circumstances would have differed and their subsequent trials might not have played out in quite the same way. Still, the fact that Tanty Jaff's culture defined her life, that her faith kept her hopeful and that her spirit kept her smiling was not, by any means, peculiar to her situation. Tradition and religious fatalism forced Indo-Trinidadian women to accept their lot in life dutifully, and although struggle was a universal element of life in those days, the particular restrictions and expectations of East Indian culture made things that much more difficult. As Tanty Jaff herself said, her life was hardly the most arduous. Her parents did not deny her the opportunity to get an education, they did not strictly enforce her religion and they accepted her back into their home after she was forced to leave the residence of her in-laws. Perhaps even

19 Allusion to Harry Potter: the-boy-who-lived.

more fortunately, none of her husbands ever beat her, and in this regard she clearly felt that her lot was far better than that of many other women.

Looking at the defiant sparkle in her eye, present even as she made her way through a meal of Mummy's rice, peas and stewed chicken, I could not help but remember the words of a local calypsonian: "Never ever worry, what I'm saying is true—always consider, somebody suffering more than you."[20] Was it that knowledge then, that despite all her trials she had been spared the worst, that kept her going through all of it?

> *Bet,[21] Allah know what he doin. I was lucky—none ah meh husband never beat me, and I had good people around meh to help meh get tru everything. It have some ladies who take beat after beat from husband who come home drunk like fish after dey work in de cane and get pay. It had ladies who leave dey father house to go and ketch tail[22] by dey in-laws, workin like dog and getting treat de same way. It had ladies who had to starve to feed 10 and 12 children. I learn to thank Allah for what I had, and dat is what help me by- prayers* [and then with her signature smile*] ...and a shot ah puncheon[23] once in a while!*

20 Lord Pretender, 1961.

21 Shortened form of 'beta', meaning child.

22 To experience difficulty.

23 An extremely potent alcoholic drink.

Map of Trinidad and Tobago, with place names referenced in Chapters 1 and 2[1]

1 Adapted from: "The World Factbook 2013-14", Central Intelligence Agency, 2013, Office of Public Affairs, Washington DC, May 2013 < https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html

Chapter Two

AN EAST INDIAN IN THE WEST INDIES

by

Alyssa Sewlal

Introduction

Trinidad and Tobago passed through the hands of the Spanish, French, Portuguese and Dutch before ending up under the control of British colonizers. After emancipation in 1838, indentured labourers were brought to Trinidad from China, Portugal and India to work on the sugar plantations and to produce a variety of crops for export, such as bananas, cocoa and coffee. The vast majority of immigrants, approximately 80 percent, came from the Indian subcontinent.[1]

This is the story of one man whose forefathers were part of this lot of indentured workers. Stanley Sripaul[2] left Trinidad at the age of 18. He is a close relative of my father and one of the reasons my own family immigrated to Western Canada where Stanley has lived since the early 1990s. Stanley's coming of age occurred during a wave of change, revelation and revolution in Trinidad. In recollecting his life, Stanley Sripaul explores issues of race, identity, religion and class, and relates the experience of being a man of East Indian origin growing up in the West Indies.

1 Jay R. Mandle, *Persistent Underdevelopment: Change and Economic Modernization in the West Indies*. (Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach Publishers, 1996), pp. 26, 125–126, 128, 132.

2 This name has been changed at the request of the interview subject.

A Bit of Family History

Whatever knowledge Stanley has about his family history comes from his paternal grandfather, John Sripaul, whom he refers to as Dada.[3] Through Dada, Stanley knows that he is a fifth-generation Trinidadian whose forbearers arrived from India sometime in the 1880s, and that he is among the third generation of Sripauls to have grown up in the Presbyterian faith. Before the arrival of Indian labourers, the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches had been established in Trinidad to convert the Afro-Trinidadian population. These churches extended their Christianizing mission to the newly arrived East Indians, but met with little success. The denomination that did succeed in this task, however, was the Canadian Presbyterian Church, which had the advantage of having proselytized on the Indian subcontinent. Because of their past experiences, many Canadian missionaries were able to communicate in Hindi and Urdu, the predominant dialects of the Indian immigrants, and these missionaries were well acquainted with the methods that had been successfully used to evangelize.[4] Having understood the relationship among education, Christianity and social mobility, Dada's father enrolled him in the Canadian Mission (CM) Schools that were established to facilitate the process of acculturation. As Stanley reckons, his great-grandfather's decision to convert from Hinduism to Christianity and to raise his children as Presbyterians was a pragmatic decision, rather than a spiritual one.

Because of the education he received at the CM school, Dada attained the basic literacy and numeracy skills that would eventually help him to become the first independent landowner in Stanley's family. Dada had worked as a labourer on a cocoa and coffee plantation as a young man, but was later promoted to overseer. The estate where Dada worked was administered by lawyers in Port-of-Spain for English expatriates who owned the land, but seldom visited the region. The owners, Stanley explains, were not very familiar with the land and so were seemingly unaware of the cedar trees that grew in relative abundance on the estate. Eventually, when the land was put up for sale, Dada was quick to purchase a prime plot. It was from the sale of cedar that Dada was

3 *Dada*, grandfather in Hindi.

4 Rosabelle E.B. Seesaran, *From Caste to Class* (Penal: Benco Printing and Publishing, 2002), pp. 71–72.

able to finance this purchase and subsequently to buy additional plots of land in southern and central regions of the country. Stanley explains:

> *Dada had worked looking after some estate that used to be owned by expatriates. The lawyers responsible for the land were up in Port-of-Spain. They knew how many acres, and that it had coca; what they didn't know was that the land Dada was looking after had a lot of cedar trees. Dada used to go to the land and count the trees, and calculate the value of the cedar trees that were so many years old. So he made a bid on the land and borrowed money from the bank. He got a loan on the basis that he would make money from selling the lumber.*

So it was in this manner that Stanley's grandfather was able to acquire enough land to provide for his family and future generations. As Stanley rather proudly points out, all the land Dada had purchased remained in the Sripaul family. Even the original house Dada built still stands and has over the years been renovated and expanded by his great-nephew, Stanley's cousin.

Boyhood

Born in 1951 in Piparo, a village in Central Trinidad, Stanley was the first child of Kendrick and Flora Sripaul. Whenever he misbehaved as a child, Stanley's mother told him that it was because he was born at 11:55 PM, near the devil's hour.[5] A midwife delivered Stanley at home where his parents lived in a joint family dwelling. The house where he was born had five bedrooms, with his paternal grandparents occupying one room, his father's younger brother and his wife in a second, and his father's sisters in another at the back. Because Stanley's father was the favorite son, he was given the two best rooms at the front of the house. Three additional children followed Stanley, each born two years apart: two boys and one girl.

According to Stanley, his mother and father came from very different

5 Believed to be midnight in local folklore, the hour at which black magic and supernatural happenings are most prevalent.

Stanley age 7

The Sripaul family home in Marabella (a neighborhood of San Fernando)

Stanley at 19, third from the right, with his parents and siblings

worlds and were married at very different stages in their lives. Stanley's mother became a wife at the age of 16 and was no less than 12 years her husband's junior. Family life, as Stanley remembers it, was sometimes fraught with heated disagreements between his parents. Stanley's parents both attended government schools, but his mother's formal education ended much sooner. His uncle once told him that although his mother was a good student—bright enough to be a pupil teacher with the potential to be a fully trained teacher—she completed only her primary school education and left school at the age of 12. According to his mother's aunt (Stanley's mother was raised by her uncle and his wife), "the education of a girl child would not benefit the parents—it would only be for the benefit of her husband". Meaning, Stanley explains:

> *If a girl went to school, received training to become something like a clerk or secretary, it was the husband who would benefit from her salary. The thinking was: Why spend time in school doing "book learning" when you could be helping out at home, learning practical things?*

So, Stanley's mother was sent to a seamstress for lessons and trained for domestic work. Stanley's father, Kendrick, on the other hand—though not having received a university education—was the most highly educated of his siblings. After completing primary school, Kendrick received vocational training in shorthand and typing. Later, he established a small school to teach these skills to other young men in the community. After managing this school for several years, Stanley's father left teaching to work as a clerk for Texaco, the American oil company, where he would be able to earn a higher salary.

Stanley tells me that when he was growing up, his household was a very religious one.

> *When we were small—for many years, even until in high school—when the time came (and this is the practice my father took from his father), at about seven o'clock, we gathered around the dining table. My father would read a bible passage or a Psalm and sing a hymn. As a family we would eat together, pray together. I knew my Bible!*

Indeed, Stanley can still deliver Bible passages with ease, particularly the ones ingrained at an early age. With a wry smile he recites: "Honour thy father and thy mother that thy days may be long in the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee." "That," he recalls, "was my motto." Because of Stanley's father's position as a respected lay member of the local Presbyterian Church—and because he and his siblings attended Presbyterian school—Stanley was raised according to "what-people-goh-say." In other words, he was expected to perform well in school and be an upstanding example of a good Presbyterian boy. When Stanley or his siblings fell out of line, it was his father who disciplined (often with a heavy hand) while his mother tended to remain in the wings.

In primary school, Stan consistently made top grades.

> *I wrote Common Entrance,[6] competing with 30 to 35 thousand children for one of 5,000 spaces for high school. I passed and I got the school of my choice. When you write the exam, you give your top three choices. I scored in the top 500 of those 3,000 kids. And within that 500, I came second on the list of those who were selected to go to Naparima College. It was a big deal because Naparima was a prestigious school. There were only five of these prestigious schools in Trinidad at the time. Naparima chose about 100 to 120 children from what I recall . . . so if your grades weren't up to scratch, you would only go as far as primary school because secondary school [called and considered to be college] was reserved for the very brightest.*

Stanley talks about his time in primary school as being an unfortunate period in the history of Trinidad's education system because students competed for a very limited number of spaces in secondary school. The system has since been reformed so that there are more opportunities for students, but it remains exceedingly competitive as resources are still limited, and a great deal

6 Based on the British education system, Common Entrance Examinations were a series of rigorous exams taken as part of the admissions process into competitive and highly selective secondary schools. They have now been replaced by Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC) examinations.

of pressure to perform academically is placed on children as young as eight or nine years of age.

In 1962, when Stanley was a boy of 11, Trinidad and Tobago gained independence from Great Britain. We speak about the time before independence and I ask him whether he remembers having any sort of anti-imperial sentiments as a boy. "No," he says, very matter-of-fact. "I loved mother England, because that is what we were taught. The Queen was a nice lady and White people were good people." While the sentiments of many adults towards the British may have been quite different, his parents' feelings about independence, he says, ranged from indifference to fear. Politics were, and to an extent still are, used to divide and conquer. East Indians were not united in their views—they were divided by religion, class and economic status. He doesn't know much about his mother's personal views, but for his father, he believes it was not necessarily a matter of racial prejudice, but rather of fear. Stanley's father was aware of being a minority within a minority: a Presbyterian-Indian Trinidadian working in an industry dominated by Afro-Trinidadians. "Under British rule," Stanley explains, "it felt almost like Indians and Africans were more or less at the same level," meaning both groups had limited rights and were subject to similar types of discrimination. With independence, Stanley tells me, came a fear of what some people called the Africanization of the institutions of the West Indies, as the image of the West Indian man came to be based more and more on the African model. This was partly what his father feared: "that the White bosses would have to go and then he might end up with a supervisor with a [different agenda], or worse, that he might be out of a job."

The Formative Years

In our many hours of conversation, Stanley focused on his years in high school,which he thought of as the most formative in his life. It was a time, he says, when he began to see the world around him very differently. Although Stanley had performed well in high school and was always among the brightest in his class, he had never seriously considered pursuing post-secondary education. A university education was not something that his parents actively discouraged, but it was not something they encouraged either. It was just that

bringing home a paycheck after completing high school, he felt, was always more important to his parents than bringing home a degree.

> *I had learned about Maslow's theory in university, but never thought about it in terms of my family. ...Now I reach a level where I want self-actualization, but at my grandfather's level it would have been subsistence; that generation was just tryin' to find something to put in the pot. Then with my father, it was if you could rise above finding what they used to call a "day wuk" as a labourer, then you were doing well. So with my father, I think the height of his aspirations for us was to have a white-collar job ... which meant that teaching was just fine.*

At that time, to be a teacher at primary level in a government school in Trinidad one needed to have passed O-levels, an exams-based qualification obtained at the end of high school. To teach in high school, on the other hand, one had to have a university degree and further training through teacher's college.

On the advice of one of his teachers, Stanley decided to fill out an application to the University of the West Indies (UWI). Several weeks later, at the age of 17, he was granted admission. Stanley tells me that he had a hard time during the first few months at UWI, largely because in those years, very few students went straight from high school to University. Being one of the youngest in his class, Stanley felt that he lacked the life experience that many of his classmates brought with them. However, he quickly aligned himself with a group of boys, seven to eight years his senior, who were also trailblazers in their own families, and who were fortunate enough to be able to afford the nominal fee of TTD$145 per term. Every member of the group shared the idea that it didn't necessarily matter what course of study they pursued— they believed that as long as they earned a degree, any job would be within reach. As it turned out, Stanley along with four of his friends decided to work toward a Bachelor of Science degree in Accounting.

The events that transpired in the course of Stanley's first term at UWI

remain among the most significant in his life. The history he had learned in high school about European revolutionaries was still fresh in his mind and would set the stage for the incidents that followed. His view of the world, he tells me, was shaped largely by one of James Joyce's works, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

> *The main point I remembered was that ... if you, as a young person, didn't have this revolution in your soul like Stephen Dedalus ... didn't have this rebellion, this wanting to change the world, and this idealism ... if you never have that, then you haven't lived, you haven't experienced youth.*

His engagement with this type of literature, compounded by the fact that he was an 18-year-old looking for a thrill, made him brave enough, he says, to write and distribute a letter about his disillusionment with the Presbyterian Church.

> *I was reading about Luther and the Reformation, how Luther nailed his 95 Theses on the door with a litany of complaints about the corruption in the church and stuff. I began to see parallels in how the church was run and the things Luther was complaining about. So I wrote a letter about all the things I found wrong with the church and handed it out one Sunday.*

"What was it you disagreed with?" I ask him.

> *Well, you have to understand the structure of the Presbyterian Church. People who wanted to move up in the education system, like to be principals and vice principals, had to be very involved with the church. When I wrote Common Entrance, I knew that I would get in even if I didn't make the grades because my father was on the board [of the Presbyterian Church] that voted in the reverend*[7] *who became the principal of my high school.*

7 A member of the Presbyterian clergy.

Because of this evident nepotism (the school principal's connection and indebtedness to Stanley's father), Stanley knew that he would likely be given preferential treatment within the institutions connected to the Presbyterian Church. "Basically I was just seeing a lot of adults who preached one thing and did another . . . a lot of hypocrisy. You could say that my youthful idealism clashed with adult opportunism."

It wasn't very long after Stanley circulated his version of Luther's 95 Theses within the congregation that the church board called him to a trial.

> *I went and told them they were a bunch ah scared rabbits. I stood up and quoted Luther. I said, "I will not and I shall not recant anything that I have said" ... And then I got a letter saying that I was to be denied communion—in other words they wouldn't give me the sacraments.*
>
> *It's because of that I neva went back to church. ... So when I look back at my life, the things you think were real bad in a sense turned out to open up my horizons. I would have never known other religions, or have appreciation for other things if those bastards didn't throw me out.*

Back at UWI, Stanley had hardly begun his first semester when the Black Power movement took off in November of 1969. Stanley has heard different analyses of what underpinned the Black Power Movement in Trinidad. But his story—which he tells me is nothing short of an eyewitness account—maintains that the event that prompted the movement of 1969/1970 was in fact a demonstration at Sir George Williams University in Montreal that was sparked by a group of West Indian students. These West Indian students were allegedly expelled for mounting a protest against a professor they charged with racism, and against an administration that had dealt ineffectually with their complaints. Media across Canada covered the demonstration and the ensuing events. When news of their expulsion reached Trinidad, a group of Black undergraduates from UWI organized a march in solidarity with the West Indian students in Canada and, in general, a protest against Canadian racism, a charge that would have profound resonance in Trinidad because Canada had become

(after World War II) a principal pole of attraction for West Indian immigrants. Stanley explains:

> *I was there ... the night the march was planned. I was there, sitting at a table in the hall when the guys were planning that very first march to Port-of-Spain. This is not hearsay, not what somebody tell me. The big deals in the movement, Geddes Granger[8] and those fellows, were sitting around a table right next to me planning how they were going to go about this march.*

The determined strategy was to center the demonstration around Canadian businesses in Trinidad which would have been symbols of Canadian imperialism. At the time, the two largest banks were Canadian firms: the Royal Bank of Canada and the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce. It was decided that the demonstration would be held outside the Royal Bank in the capital of Port-of-Spain during the late afternoon when people were expected to be on their way home from work. Stanley chuckles when he recalls how worried the students were that they might not be able to draw a sufficient crowd. As it turned out the following day, the national newspaper claimed that over 10,000 people had gathered to witness the protest. To my surprise, Stanley relates that the initial march included not only Afro-Trinidadians (as I, along with so many others, had understood), but Indo-Trinidadian students who had fallen in with the demonstrators, and that he, in fact, had participated.

> *We were told by Brinsley Samaroo, one of the big-shot professors, that all the Indian boys should go on the outskirts of the march. Samaroo said just to show that we are together, we should be on both sides so it would look like there were a lot of Indians. People were running and bringin' us water and all kinda ting, because it was a very peaceful thing. I mean, they were not shouting "Black Power"—just that we were all brothers at least for that day.*

8 A political activist in Trinidad and Tobago who went on the form the National Joint Action Committee, he now goes by the name Makandal Daaga.

What is particularly interesting is what Stanley suggests about some members of the Afro-Trinidadian population who took part in the movement. The views he relates to me are certainly not isolated, and reflect the sentiments of many other Indo-Trinidadians of his generation.

> *Once they gathered all these people, they had to address the crowd ... and what do you say? The old clichés came up. All of a sudden I began to hear terms like "the masses" ... "we gotta harness; educate the masses; do this with the masses." Once that caught on, then it became anti-government, anti-PNM[9] because the PNM were considered to be the recalcitrant middle class, the bourgeois. Everything became bourgeois. If you drove a car you became bourgeois. So this is where you began to wonder, "What the heck is it we aspiring to? Isn't it to own a house and drive a car and live a comfortable life?"*

> *Some ah those guys would tell me, "I am tied to the chains of slavery from 400 years ago." Some wanted to use politics ... they didn't want to work or sacrifice. They were seein' it as "The White man come, he exploit us, leh we take over de bank, and dis place, and dat place ... and we want it now." Of course that has some appeal if you have nothing. In my head I was thinkin' "Why it is you can't do like everybody else, get a damn job and work?" I mean, on the other side there is the institutional structures that work against you—I'm intelligent enough to know that.*

To add to the contentiousness of his account, Stanley tells me that years after the events of the Black Power movement, he began to think about the motives of the most widely recognized student organizer, Geddes Granger.

> *Geddes Granger had failed his first year. I knew because*

9 People's National Moment (PNM), the political party founded by Eric Williams in 1955.

he was in the same social sciences as me ... and I always wondered how much his failing of his first year in UWI had to do with his involvement in the movement. I kinda think that he felt that the way to get quick riches, and fame, and a job was through politics ... and I always had that suspicion about his real motivation. Once it started, yes a few ah the brothers were helped along the way. That was merely incidental to the main thing, which was a cover-up of his own personal failure. Doesn't mean I'm right, but I was sitting right there, and I knew those guys. Years later I read the articles about the marches, and it just raised a lot of questions for me ... All I'm sayin' is that sometimes what you see in a book or a newspaper is something that's dressed up.

I understand the reasons for Stanley's involvement in the Black Power Movement, but I'm curious to know how his parents reacted, especially given their feelings about Trinidadian independence. During the time of the Black Power Movement, the Cuban Revolution was still fresh in people's minds. And this event, he tells me, was a scary thing.

Trinidad was a pretty Western country with a lot of American ties, so the sentiments felt over there [in America and England trickled down] to us. For my father, any association with these new words 'revolutionary' or 'comrade'—and even the fact that I had a beard—evoked fear more than anything. They seein' that I just get in big trouble with the church, and now they see me caught up in more of these revolutionary-type things. Their primary concern was my safety, and they kinda felt that no cause was worth putting myself in danger. They just wanted me to stay out of trouble.

What is particularly interesting to me is that the Black Power Movement in Trinidad appears to be the thing that sparked Stanley's interest in his

own family's history.

> *Before Black Power I only cared about what side my bread was buttered on today—I had no interest in the past. But then during the Black Power thing, everybody wanted to get back to their roots, talking about all the Africans going back to Africa and all the Indians to India.*

While he was never interested in actually traveling back to India (like some of the other young people) he does suppose that this was the moment a seed was planted. He began talking to his grandparents about his ancestry to learn as much as he could about his family's arrival in Trinidad and his connection to India.

Coming to Canada

In Stanley's decision to come to Canada, he was influenced by a combination of factors. In his last term at UWI, on the advice of one of his accounting professors, Stanley decided to apply for an internship program in Canada to study chartered accounting. Training in Canada, he believed, would give him the edge that was necessary to get a job with any one of the established accounting firms in Trinidad.

> *Remember most of the companies in Trinidad at that time, the big accounting firms, were Canadian firms—most of the banks were Canadian controlled and the economy was foreign controlled. So I thought, "Well if you want to do well in Trinidad, you gotta be one ah dem boys with Canadian experience and Canadian training." So I figured I could work in Canada and transfer back to a branch in Trinidad.*
>
> *Most of the banks were only White people ... they were only now brining in people of color, and that's because the Black Power movement changed a few things ... but remember it*

was only lil tokes[10] at that point. If you wanted a management job in a traditional firm, it would more likely be a firm controlled by foreigners. You accepted that the most you would be is middle management because they would never allow a brown man, even in yuh own country, to go up.

Although a primary reason for leaving Trinidad was to further his education, it was only one of several determining factors. Being 21 years old at the time of his graduation, he admits that he was looking for some adventure and a chance to make his way in the world without any assistance from his family.

I always had this feeling that I wanted to be independent of my parents. Lata on in life when people meet me, it was always, "You are Mista Sripaul's son ..." like nothing I would have ever achieved or done would have been on my own. If I stayed it might always be either my father got me a teaching job or was somehow influential in getting me a job with Texaco ... and that used to bug me!

Stanley tells me that although he was supportive of the Black Power Movement, the politics of the 1970s made him feel almost marginalized and unsure of his identity as a Trinidadian. "I have nothing against India culture, but I never considered myself to be an Indian. I was so disconnected from that place, and I had a sense of how Indians back in India viewed us—like we were less." The irony of the Black Power Movement is that while it was a progressive moment that eventually helped to advance race relations in some ways, it also made clear to Stanley that he did not fit easily into one particular category or segment of Trinidadian society. This sense of alienation, it seems, proved to be another factor that affected his decision to come to Canada. The final and perhaps the most crucial factor that influenced Stanley's move to Canada was the helping hand he received from a Canadian immigration officer working in the embassy in Port-of-Spain.

It was a student visa I was applying for, but the nature of

10 *Tokes*, as in token gestures.

Stanley eight years after his arrival in Canada

> *the internship position was you had to really work. This old White fellow at the passport office suggested that I might as well apply for permanent residence ... so I did, even though I had no intention at the time of putting down roots in Canada. I would say he found ways to give me the necessary points to come up as an independent applicant ... like he gave me five points for traveling with Air Canada. He told me, "You know, you too damn young to be goin' anywhere, but I know ... I have a son your age, and I wish you good luck." And that's how I managed to get this landed immigrant status, because the guy believed I had a plan. I had clipped on the brochures for the internship program to the application, so he knew I had a plan to study.*

Stanley was granted his visa shortly thereafter, and left Trinidad on December 3, 1972.

Life in Canada

Upon arriving in Canada, Stanley lived with an acquaintance from UWI in Thornhill, Ontario at the northern edge of what would grow into the greater metropolitan area of Toronto. His initial experiences in Canada were generally very positive, he says. Many of the people he met evidently did not grasp that he had emigrated from an English-speaking country and were always impressed with his level of education because of his fluency in English! In only a matter of four years, Stanley landed a junior position with Revenue Canada,[11] the federal agency responsible for administering tax laws. In 1981, when Revenue Canada was looking for auditors in Western Canada, Stanley transferred to the recently established Edmonton, Alberta office.

> *I had no idea what Western Canada was going to be like. One guy from work said, "You sure you want to go out there? I heard they do things to guys like you," meaning of course that it was conservative country, and I being a*

11 Now the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA).

brown man might not have been so warmly welcomed. But still, I thought it was a good career opportunity, and it wasn't like I had a wife or kids to worry about uprooting.

Although Stanley's original plan was to take the job in Alberta, and then transfer back east to Ottawa, he has since built a comfortable home and life for himself in Edmonton. While he enjoys the life he has in Canada, Stanley sometimes contemplates the idea of nationality and finds that he is not always sure where to place himself.

My forefathers came to Trinidad so many generations ago and yet I never felt a sense of belonging in Trinidad. In Canada I've often thought of that guy, Ben Johnson,[12] when he won the gold medal [in the Seoul Olympics in 1988]. When he won it was "Oh yay, he's Canadian!" But then when he got caught for that drug scandal and lost the gold, it was "Oh, he's Jamaican." You know the funny thing is, I have been lucky for most of my working life. I tend to forget that I am Indian or a minority. Most of the people I work with are White, and we get along fine. But occasionally you hear a remark that reminds you that you are a minority. Sometimes they may say things in joke, and I take it as that ... So part of the reason I've been able to assimilate, I would say, is because I don't take things personally. Your success as an immigrant is not just about doing courses and having degrees—it's sometimes just learning to tolerate and turn the other cheek.

I ask him about his thoughts on Trinidad now, and whether he would consider living there again. His answer is a resounding, "No." Not surprisingly, part of his reluctance to live in Trinidad has to do with the state of national politics in the country. The root of his frustration is what has been labeled "Black on Black racism" in Trinidad. In Trinidad's Westminster parliamentary system, political parties are arranged along racial lines with the United

12 Former Olympian of Jamaican heritage who represented Canada in sprinting. His titles were later rescinded due to doping allegations.

National Congress rallying the support of Indo-Trinidadians and the People's National Movement garnering support from Afro-Trinidadians.

> *Politics in Trinidad have always been racially motivated. I mean, there may be a small core who might see things beyond race, but the majority of people, especially the less educated people, they would support Panday[13] no matter how big of a crook he is, and the other side will support Manning no matter how bad he is. In Trinidad, I couldn't put my support behind any of the parties, because they both bad ... it's kind of a hopeless situation.*

Stanley never voted in Trinidad because he left the country before he was 21.[14] Here in Alberta, Stanley has never missed a chance to cast his ballot. However, he feels a similar sense of frustration because the party he supports—the social democratic, center-left New Democratic Party—has never won in federal elections and stands little chance of winning in his local riding.

Stanley's experience exemplifies the complexities of the immigrant experience and demonstrates that the decision to migrate is not only based, as many might imagine, on a desire for increased economic mobility. On occasion, Stanley checks the online version of the *Trinidad Guardian*, and is often upset by the local headlines. He worries that the country still has a long way to go before it can claim to have achieved true equality of opportunity for its people, but he remains hopeful that things will improve. It is his evident disillusionment with the state of politics in Trinidad that I can most relate to. Being of Trinidadian parentage myself, I am often disappointed by the refusal and inability of some other Trinidadians to recognize that they are individuals sharing a common space and a common destiny. Talking to Stanley has helped me to better understand the issue that often frustrates me, which is that in the Caribbean tension pervades relationships not only between White and Black, but among shades of brown.

13 Basdeo Panday, former party leader of the United National Congress.

14 Legal voting age in Trinidad and Tobago was reduced from 21 to 18 in 1976, after Stanley left.

Conclusion

These days, Stanley is gearing up for retirement and tries not to concern himself too much with politics. Instead, he spends a lot of his free time reading and meditating, and in the past 10 years has made a habit of attending seminars and lectures by professors of comparative religion. What he hopes to achieve for the rest of his life, he tells me, is peace, tranquility, and an ability to keep an open mind.

I ask him, "When you look at your life now, are proud of what you've been able to accomplish?"

> *Not really. I had opportunities ... when I compare myself to even my cousins. When I measure what I had against other children, I really had a lot. The kinda people I admire are the ones who could make it to places like Canada and the States with much less than what I had.*

It seems that Stanley looks back on past years with much fondness. But in his mind, he was much more of an idealist then, perhaps more naïve. Today he considers himself to be very practical in his approach to life. He may hold many of the same views, but says he is more mature in his reactions to most things, which range from indifference to docility. I'm not so sure of that.

Finally, I ask for his thoughts on the process of being interviewed and whether the experience has been as positive one.

> *The word that comes to mind is gratitude. I'm sitting here thinking that you cannot go thorough this exercise [of talking about your life] without feeling a huge sense of gratitude. I've always felt that I owe Trinidad—I owe Trinidad because the early part of my education was there. I came to Canada as a young person and I haven't had a chance to repay, and to show my gratitude. Now that I can afford to retire comfortably, the question is "What do I do?" So I would say, subject to health, it would have been nice to go back to Trinidad—but not permanently—to volunteer. If that is not possible, then it may not matter where I do that*

volunteer work, as long as you can make a difference in the life of somebody else. This is the thing at the forefront of my mind. I am indebted to too many people for too many things, and I haven't repaid my debt as yet.

For me, the hours I have spent with Stanley have proved immeasurably rewarding. He has revealed a great deal of my own history and engendered a new sense of pride in me. But more importantly, Stanley remarked that it was only during our interview sessions that he was able to verbalize for the first time thoughts that had been buried for a long time. This in itself has made the project worthwhile.

Map of St. Lucia with place names referenced in Chapters 3 and 4. Richard Lanns's route along the west coast from the airport to Soufriere and on to Castries with a stop on top of Morne Fortune is indicated in red. Jones James route from Dennery to Castries is shown in green.[1]

1 Adapted from: "The World Factbook 2013-14", Central Intelligence Agency, 2013, Office of Public Affairs, Washington DC, May 2013 < https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html

Chapter Three

FROM PLANTATION TO TOURIST 'PARADISE' IN ST. LUCIA

by

Richard E. Lanns

In the mist of the sea there is a horned island
with deep green harbors . . .
. . . a place of light with luminous valleys
under the thunderous clouds . . . . Her
mountains tinkle with springs among
moss-bearded forests. And the white egret
makes rings stalking its pools . . . a
volcano, stinking with sulphur, has made it a healing place…

From Derek Walcott's *Omeros*.

Preface

In late December 2007, I boarded the WestJet plane that would carry three friends, a cousin, and me from Toronto to St. Lucia. This was a journey we envisioned would be a relaxing two-week escape from school, work, and wintry Toronto. My friends, excited about an early arrival at St. Lucia's Hewanorra International Airport, were looking forward to heading to one of the island's stunning beaches almost immediately upon landing. I had different plans, not because I don't like the beach, but because for me this trip represented a "home-coming" after what had been a three-year absence from the island—my longest ever. St. Lucia is the place where my mother was born, where much of

my family still lives, and a part of the world I have been visiting my entire life.

St. Lucia and Caribbean life in general stand in stark contrast to the everyday reality I knew growing up in Toronto. As a first generation Canadian and a person of the Diaspora, I am familiar not only with the immigration experience of my parents, but also with the transitions lived by relatives and friends as they adjusted to a large North American city from life on small Caribbean islands. I know what brought them here, what their hopes were upon arriving; I know their struggles and their successes. In addition to my own personal knowledge, much has been written on the West Indian immigration experience in Canada. Thus, when presented with the task of completing an oral history project on a Latin American or Caribbean citizen and in light of the fact that my plans had already been confirmed for a holiday visit to the island, I naturally thought to interview someone there. The only question remaining for me was: whose story would I tell?

St. Lucia is a small island that is the site of an extremely complex history and society, and a culture unique to that place. I recount my first six hours upon my return to St. Lucia to provide the readers with an understanding of the very different world they are entering when dealing with the life history of any St. Lucian. My own narrative of the series of events that led me to the selection of my Aunt Helen as the subject of my oral history project is followed by her own account, taken from the interview held on January 2nd, 2008 at her home on Morne Fortune. I did not realize at the time the way that travelling with friends, for whom all that was familiar to me would be strange, complex, and often inexplicable, would allow me to experience the island in an entirely different way. In the pages that follow, I hope to illustrate the changes that have taken place over the span of a St. Lucian woman's life. By extension, these pages reveal the story of a family and a nation.

Arrival in St. Lucia

A sudden *thump* signaled our arrival on St. Lucian soil as the plane's tires hit the runway and the Canadian passengers burst into spontaneous applause. Minutes later, the doors opened and the air-conditioned cabin immediately filled with the dry heat typical of a Caribbean midday. As we exited the plane,

I noticed that it was quite a bit cooler than normal. Other than this, everything was as I had remembered: the galvanized steel roof of the airport terminal was the same shade of green; horses still grazed on the grassy fields just off the tarmac; and in the distance we could see the dark, towering peaks of the island's mountainous interior.

Hewanorra International Airport is located on the extreme tip of St. Lucia's southern coast, just outside the town of Vieux Fort. Vieux Fort, *old fort* in French, was named for a fortification constructed by the Dutch in the 17th century. By the time St. Lucia's French colonizers claimed the island in the 18th century, the Dutch were long gone, but the old fort remained. The present-day Hewanorra airport, originally constructed as an airbase by the U.S. Air Force, served as a refueling station during the Second World War. The facility was later expanded and became the island's first international airport, christened *Hewanorra* to pay tribute to the island's aboriginal name. It means *island of the iguana* in the language of the Carib Indians.

Once off the plane, we sped through immigration and, after claiming our luggage, headed to the pick-up area located just outside. We watched as passengers we recognized from our flight were loaded onto stretch mini-vans, welcomed by smiling drivers and guides holding signs labeled *Le Sport*, *Sandals*, and *Wyndham*. Some were outfitted in uniforms but others wore colourful Creole costume, as they collected the tourists who would stay at one of the many luxury resorts located in the north of the island.

After waiting and conversing amongst ourselves for several minutes, two vans pulled up in front of us. I recognized the driver in the first van as York, a man only a few years older than myself, and one of my uncle's employees. The second man was much older and I had never seen him before. After a quick introduction followed by a *jam* (an informal handshake involving clenched fists), we learned his name was Henry and he explained that he had only recently begun working for "Mr. Bigs". I had to explain to my Canadian friends that, pudgy as an infant and young child, my uncle had been nicknamed *Bigs* by family members and the name had stuck; few people know him or call him by his real name (Leslie). Aided by Henry and York, the five of us loaded our bags into the transports and we began the winding journey to Soufrière.

The Road to Soufrière

The road to Soufrière clings to the south western coast of the island. The two-lane route had fewer potholes than I remembered, as the last government, headed by Prime Minister Kenny Anthony, had spent millions of state funds widening the roads and modernizing the island's infrastructure in preparation for increased tourist arrivals. The vistas nevertheless have remained unchanged: dramatic, rugged, and breathtakingly scenic. The vans and their Canadian passengers wound their way up and down the steep mountain slopes, through the tiny fishing villages and hamlets before we finally reached our destination. We drove up one last mountain when, for the first time, we lost sight of the sea by way of a hairpin bend which instead afforded us views of a deep emerald valley. We drove for a few minutes more until suddenly: the mountains parted and gave way to the Caribbean sky, the sea in the distance, and the town of Soufrière below. We had arrived.

The air was cool and damp as we began our descent into the town. Wild, luxuriant foliage just off the road transitioned into the more orderly and manicured trees characteristic of tropical plantation agriculture. We drew closer to the community that has the distinction of being the island's oldest continually inhabited settlement—founded in 1746—and the island's first capital under French rule. Alluvial mountain slopes which surround the town on three sides cascade to the sea from misty peaks and are testament to the volcanic activity that created the island. As we entered the weathered town, my anticipation gave way to calm as I realized that, in physical terms, time had stood still since my last visit, and absolutely nothing had changed. In light of the fact that I was arriving with "strangers" I was mildly embarrassed by the spectacle that awaited us. While nearly a quarter of a century of holiday visits had prepared me for reentry into Soufrière and the world it represents, I had failed to take into consideration the way my friends would apprehend a community to which they had no connection. A settlement of ancient wooden houses set along narrow, dusty roads pocked with potholes, emanates from a wretched-looking central square dominated by an old stone church. Roosters rummaged in the deep gutters brimming with rubbish, while stray dogs watched in silence as our caravan drove through the streets where barefoot children play.

Soufrière

No sooner had we entered the town, it seemed we were leaving it. Just past Soufrière, the road meanders and the lowland vegetation becomes denser, often making it difficult to see the hills just above. York, the driver, steered our van onto a hidden road and up a long driveway until we reached what I knew to be Sapphire Estate. Part of a 2,000 acre land grant given to three Deveraux brothers by the French Crown in 1713, the estate had been partitioned among various heirs and sold off over the centuries. It is said that the largest partitions were named in honour of the jewels that adorned the crown of King Louis XV. Thus adjoining the 400 acre former sugar estate that would be our home, are other estates called: Diamond, Ruby, and La Perle.

Our caravan crept onwards, passing forests of cocoa trees until finally coming to a resting place in front of a series of whitewashed villa-style apartments. We had reached The Sapphire Plantation Resort. We climbed out of the vehicles, and York and Henry helped us bring the luggage into the units that had been prepared for us. We were left alone by the drivers, and had almost finished unpacking when Clara appeared at the door. Clara is roughly 30 and had been working at the resort for about 10 years. My cousin and I immediately ran to embrace her and she showered us with kisses, and French Creole terms of endearment as our companions looked on. After a warm introduction to our Canadian friends, she informed our group that Uncle Bigs had just arrived from Castries, wanted to see us, and that lunch would be ready shortly.

Uncle Bigs presided over the lunch prepared for us by the staff of The Sapphire Plantation Restaurant, and was sitting at the table conversing on his cell phone when we arrived. Ending his phone conversation, he smiled and greeted the group. My cousin and I traded glances when we noticed that two of our friends seemed more than a little surprised as my cousin introduced the man before us as our Uncle Bigs. These friends had never met any of our relatives in Canada and so were understandably surprised when they saw that the man we introduced as our uncle was as "white" as they were.

After inquiring about our journey and how we liked our rooms, Uncle Bigs turned to me and asked, "How is my cousin?" I smiled as I knew Uncle Bigs was referring to his cousin, my mother. I should explain that the man I

have been referring to as Uncle Bigs is not my uncle, but my mother's cousin. Yet, due to his position as my mother's cousin and my elder, I have always referred to him as *uncle* as a sign of respect. The title is also reflective of our relationship. In the Caribbean the tradition of a large extended family has been maintained. Uncle Bigs informed us that Aunt Helen had just called and was inviting us for dinner that evening, and we should stop at Fond Cocoa to see Uncle Felix on the way there. Aunt Helen is my biological aunt, and lives in Castries, the island's capital, about an hour north of Soufrière. Uncle Felix is my biological uncle, and lives at Fond Cocoa Plantation, situated on a hill overlooking Soufrière. Thus, even before we enjoyed the lunch of dasheens, green fig, salt fish fritters, curried chicken roti and *bouillon*, it had already been decided that we would make the trip north via the SUV Uncle Bigs would lend us for the duration of our vacation. Somehow, I could sense we were going to have to leave the beach for another day.

We finished lunch, and after showering and changing, the group piled into the vehicle that would take us north toward Castries. Driving through the town center along Bridge Street, we heard reggae blaring from the speakers, and I stole a glimpse of the large red-roofed structure on the corner facing the church, a building with paint peeling off its gingerbread trim, but one that was still in reasonably good shape compared to the rest of the town's colonial structures. The jalousies of the house were closed, indicating that no one was in residence, here at what had been my grandmother's home. The vehicle headed towards the Soufrière-Castries road, the single route to the capital. The SUV began to ascend a steep hill and 10 minutes later we passed the wooden sign marked *Fond Cocoa Plantation* and rolled through the gates of my uncle's estate.

My uncle inherited Fond Cocoa and all 106 of its sprawling, cocoa-covered acres from my grandfather upon his passing in 1993. Since that time, the estate has undergone a remarkable transformation from a hillside cocoa plantation to an internationally known resort featuring Creole guest houses and an award-winning restaurant that serves authentic French-Creole cuisine. I led the way as we wandered into the restaurant kitchen, surprising the cooks who were busy preparing the evening meals. I was recognized by one of them,

Julie, who after another warm Creole embrace informed me that my uncle was resting at "the house". The last time I visited the island, construction had only just begun on "the house". Designed by a Spanish architect, most of the building materials had to be imported from Canada and the U.S.

I led the group out of the kitchen and into Fond Cocoa's elegant main dining room where colourful Haitian paintings decorate the walls. We passed through the restored French doors which line the western exposure and open out onto the large covered terrace, passing American tourists who had left their meals to gaze at the view which is arguably the most beautiful and famous natural vista in the entire Caribbean. We, too, stopped for a moment to take in the splendor of St. Lucia's world famous Pitons—two volcanic cones which rise dramatically from the sea. Further inland, the Soufrière volcano is visible. Meaning "sulphur" in French, the volcano gave the town its name and although there hasn't been an eruption since 1766, it continuously spews toxic gases into the air in clouds of grey smoke visible from our vantage point. By this time of day, the Caribbean Sea was shimmering in the late afternoon light.

We continued onward past the pool following an unpaved but well-worn track. I led the group to an area where my grandfather once kept the stable that housed the prized horses bred for Barbadian polo matches and horse races, but the stable and horses had long since vanished and in their place stood my uncle's home. Perched on a cliff, the house commands a more dramatic view than the restaurant and is visible from the sea on account of its red Spanish tile roof—a sharp contrast with the galvanized steel shacks that cling to the hillside below.

Just then, a silver Land Rover SUV approached from the left side of the house. As it drew nearer, I recognized the man inside as my Uncle Felix. He stopped the vehicle, and stepped out of his SUV, looking more a poor country farmer than the successful business man he was. His dark curls were sticking out the sides of his blue baseball cap. His off-white "shirt jack" was sweat drenched and soiled with mud. He wore short pants and tall black rubber boots covered in mud and manure. His complexion is dark like my own. My uncle is what some West Indians might refer to as a "throwback"—a term I recall my mother using to explain to me why I was born much darker than my twin

brother and both of our parents. In the Caribbean, the term is used to denote children born much lighter or darker than their parents and indicates not only miscegenation, but the inheritance of the phenotype of often distant ancestors.

Uncle Felix greeted me with a warm smile and a hard handshake, and after a brief introduction to my friends, excused himself, citing a dinner party that evening. Before he sped off towards the house, he invited us to come back during the week for lunch and a dip in his *infinite pool*. Reminding us not to keep Aunt Helen waiting, he rushed off.

The Road to Castries

On the long, winding road that is the Soufrière-Castries highway, I reflected on the various people we had encountered over the course of our first day in Soufrière. I wasn't convinced that any would prove to be an easy subject for my oral history project. York would probably have been willing to sit for an interview, but I wanted to study someone who had left home at some point in his or her life. Henry, I learned, had lived in Martinique for several years, but his English was precarious at best and he would often switch to Creole midway through a sentence, leaving me with a narrative I wasn't sure I could reproduce clearly for readers. I had known Clara and Julie since childhood and would have felt comfortable interviewing them, but both worked long hours, had children and thus wouldn't have had the time to sit for the several hours required. My Uncles Felix and Bigs provide interesting analyses of the lives of contemporary plantation owners, but both seemed too occupied with their respective businesses to have time to sit and speak with me in the reflective manner necessary for my purposes. I could only hope that in the course of my two-week stay on the island, I would encounter a subject with a life story rich enough to convey to the reader.

Castries

We descended on the city of Castries under a light drizzle. There are several routes into the city when approaching from the south. One can go the traditional and longer route up and over Morne Fortune, by way of La Toc road which snakes around the Castries harbour, or the fastest way via the subter-

ranean tunnel that is constructed under a mountain and leads directly into the city. It probably would have been quicker to take the Morne Fortune road as my Aunt lived "up the Morne", but my cousin, ever the car buff, was driving the SUV that Uncle Bigs had recently shipped over from Miami. In addition, we had been looking forward to driving through the new tunnel that had been under construction for almost a decade. My cousin *mashed* the gas pedal and we sped onwards and into the tunnel. The road was smooth and is the closest thing to a North American highway I've experienced in St. Lucia. Due to its rugged, mountainous terrain, the island has very few straight roads and so the construction of a nearly straight, smooth-surfaced subterranean tunnel is a novelty. The tunnel also presents the perfect venue for anyone interested in drag racing. As a result, there has been a marked increase in fatal traffic accidents on the island, especially along this stretch of highway.

Castries is the capital of St. Lucia and home to one third of the island's 170,000 residents. The city itself is one of the most modern looking in the Eastern Caribbean—testament to the many fires and hurricanes that have enveloped and nearly destroyed the city over the course of its 200 year history. Despite the continuous ravages of nature and fires, there are still well preserved pockets of colonial grandeur to be found scattered amongst the pastel-painted concrete structures, flashing advertisements, government buildings, and cruise ship terminals of this modern Caribbean capital.

The journey through Castries was quick and in what felt like no time at all we began the ascent of Morne Fortune. Under French rule, Soufrière had been the capital of the island, but this all changed in 1814 with Britain's defeat of France at the end of the Napoleonic wars. The two colonial powers had been fighting for control of the island (and much of the world) for more than 150 years. But with France's capitulation, the island was ceded to the British in perpetuity. As a consequence, the British moved the island's capital to Castries to take advantage of its deep, sheltered harbour and Castries was developed by the British to serve as home to the island's government, Governor, main library, best schools, hospitals and only university. Soufrière was abandoned to the French-descended planters and, after emancipation, to the Creole-speaking blacks over whom they had ruled. As time progressed, two

The Pitons

View of Castries from Morne Fortune

Top: Sugar Cane Press at Fond Cocoa; middle: Cabrits at Fond Cocoa; bottom: the Martin House

worlds began to emerge on the tiny island of St. Lucia. One was French Creole-speaking, Roman Catholic, usually only semi-literate, largely rural, rooted in superstition, tied to the plantation and generally seen as *backward*. The other was English-speaking, Anglican, educated and urban. These were the St Lucians who had appropriated the values, norms and customs of their British Colonial masters and were seen as superior for having done so.

"Up The Morne"

Morne Fortune, which means *Good Luck Hill*, was the site of numerous battles between the English and the French. Today, tourists can visit the many restored and wonderfully maintained forts and monuments the British and French had constructed on the hill using African slave labour drawn from the island's sugar estates.

As I noted, my aunt lives on Morne Fortune, and on the way up, we drove through the area that had been the home of the island's elite in an earlier era, now reduced to rotting Victorian mansions half hidden by overgrown bougainvillea vines. Just up the road, the stately gates, complete with the gilded royal crest, mark the entry into the governor's official residence. The view of the city is glorious from this point, but we pressed on, not wanting to be late for the dinner Aunt Helen had prepared.

Hummingbird Road

Minutes later, we turned onto Hummingbird Road, one of the few roads on the entire Morne that has actually been given a name! The road is potholed, but the houses lining either side are stately and elegant. I recognized my aunt's house immediately due to its stonework. We had barely stepped from the vehicle to begin a brief assessment of our surroundings when we saw a shadowy form behind the burglar bars of a second story window. The figure disappeared briefly, but remerged moments later as the front door swung open. It was Aunt Helen. "Come in, come in children!" she called. "Eh eh Garcon! You really get big eh!" she said to me as we embraced and I presented her with the wrapped gifts my mother made certain I smuggled onto the island. After a formal introduction to our Canadian friends, which consisted of handshakes and double

kisses (*a la Français*), she ushered us inside.

My aunt's home is bright and spacious. The vaulted mahogany beamed ceiling is high and gives the feeling of being in a church. She led us into her living room and I asked for my grandmother who I knew would be staying with my aunt for the Christmas Holidays. It was then that my aunt led me into the upstairs bedroom where my 97-year-old grandmother lay sleeping. Nudging my grandmother gently, Aunt Helen crept down and whispered in here ear: "Mummy wake up! Richie is here to see you!" Her grey eyes immediately opened. My grandmother is much more alert than her 97 years would lead one to expect. She has lived a fascinating life and I would have chosen her to be the subject of this oral history had it not been for her tendency to mix up dates, places and even people. Looking over the room until she located my form, and with outstretched arms, my grandmother smiled happily in my direction. "Vini Iche mwe! (Come my child!)" It seems the older she has become, the more Creolophone she gets, which is ironic in light of the fact that there was once a time when the use of Creole was forbidden in my grandparents' home—unless one was giving orders to a maid. Despite urging her to stay in bed and rest, she was determined to join us for dinner and so came downstairs and took a position in the living room.

Aided by her maid, Maria, who had recently arrived from the Dominican Republic, Aunt Helen served us the freshly fried bakes, rum-soaked black cake, red sorrel, and tea typical of the season when St. Lucians must always be on guard for unexpected guests. This is a society where neighbours often visit, and relatives, if in the area, will pass through unannounced, so one must always be ready to entertain.

By this time it was almost six o'clock and my aunt herded us onto the porch that wraps around her home so she could show us her wonderfully manicured garden before night fell. Due to its proximity to the equator, the sun sets early in St. Lucia, and I knew that by half past six the island would be shrouded in darkness. Aunt Helen asked if anyone wanted to enjoy a glass of wine with her and, after doing a quick tally, directed me into the china cabinet. My friend remarked that Aunt Helen looked like my mother, just older. It is true that the two bear a strong resemblance. My aunt's eyes are hazel and her

skin café au lait. She has kept her graying hair cut short for years, and soft curls frame her face. Despite her age, she has retained the beauty and glamour of her youth that we all could see in the many photos of her scattered around her house. There is a regal aura about her.

She handed me the last glass of wine and her golden bangles jingled as she gestured towards the darkening sky to point out the tips of Soufrière's Pitons half visible behind rain clouds. I felt it ironic that, while the island's British colonial elite had preferred to live on the north side of the Morne facing the city of Castries, my aunt had chosen to build her home on the south-facing side, almost as if to keep watch over Soufrière and all she had left behind.

Interview Process

Before we left my aunt's home, I told her about my project and asked if she could commit to sitting down with me for an interview about her life. She readily agreed. What follows are excerpts from that interview which I have attempted to further contextualize. My Aunt Helen, in addition to being a very lively speaker, has a very developed understanding of St. Lucian society, culture and history and so there are places where no further explanation was necessary. Where she paused briefly in thought, or used Creole, I have recorded these moments as I feel this has added to the richness of the narrative.

Helen Rose

Naturally, I opened by asking about her forbearers. She explained:

> *I know my father came from a family of planters. They were predominantly of French descent but were also mixed with Scottish, Carib, and Negro. My father's mother was Ismalie Martin.*[1] *I remember her being a short little lady… very fair and fine featured. She had a straight nose. I think she was French, and Carib. She wore her hair down her back, and spoke very little English… only French, and Creole. This made it very difficult for us to communicate with her but I*

1 Née Guillet.

know she loved us very much. She owned a bakery in Soufrière and died when I was in my early 20's. My paternal grandfather was Edmund Martin. I think he was mulatto but I am not sure as he died before I was born. My father was not one to talk about his origins, and in those days, one did not ask… In any event, all of my father's family are from Soufrière.

My maternal grandmother was Marie Louise Mathurine Mesidore. She was born on April 22nd 1887 in Vieux Fort, and died on January 22nd 1994. She was a Negress. In her youth had been a school teacher, and had lived in French Guyana before she came back to St. Lucia. She spoke French, English and Creole beautifully. My mother's father was a white man named Charles Hachée. According to Mummy, he was born in Paris, France and came to St. Lucia on a ship carrying salt. He liked it so much he stayed but could not marry Granny because he was white. Cousin

Aunt Helen, December 2010

The author

Esther from England was here recently and told me that our grandfather was actually married to a white woman, and Granny was his mistress… He owned a plantation in Martinique and had a family there. He kept a dry goods store in Vieux Fort the proceeds of which went to maintain my mother and her siblings. I never met him as he died when I was a small child…

My mother was born in Vieux Fort on January 25th, 1912. Her maiden name was Marie Corelli Hachée. Her mother loved to read so all her children are named after authors. She lived with her mother there but moved to Castries to attend St. Joseph's convent. At that time, St. Joseph's convent was the school where girls from wealthy families went. Even in my day, most of the children were white, and mulatto. She was a bastard, so her father had to fight for her to be accepted into the school. Eventually they let her in but she had to wear a special patch on her uniform to let everyone know that she was illegitimate.

Her mother was not rich, but her father made sure she was well provided for. She lived upstairs of the Banana Growers Association building and had a butler and a maid. She was very pretty and one day, Daddy was riding his horse when he saw her on the veranda. From that day forward, he decided he wanted her hand in marriage and so he started writing Granny. My father was Charles Georges Martin and he was born on September 6th, 1907 in Soufrière. I don't know much about his youth but one gets the sense that he had it rough as a child. I know his father had a lot of debts and sent him to Venezuela to work in Maracaibo.

Helen's response indicates that she descends from St. Lucia's rural planter elite (at least on her father's side). By the early 20th century, this elite would have consisted mainly of "off-white" and mulatto families of French descent.

Charles Martin, Helen's father

Marie Martin, Helen's mother

Charles Martin and the author's mother, Miriam Martin

Helen Rose Martin

Although the island had been British since 1814 and English had replaced French as the official language in 1848, it seems French (and French Creole) predominated almost everywhere outside of the capital. The fact that both of Helen's grandmothers were fluent in French and the fact that her grandfather was French fully corresponds to this general pattern. In regard to the story behind her mother's name, a quick Google search reveals that Marie Corelli was indeed the name of a very popular 19th century author. Her father came from a family of planters who were quite well off in earlier times but, by the

turn of the last century, were in a state of economic decline.

St. Lucia's historical records offer insight into the families' connection both to slavery and the local plantation economy. For instance, the *Abstract of Plantation Returns of 1834* shows that on the eve of Emancipation, Louis Rene Leveque and his cousin, a Charles Martin of Soufriere, owned over 100 slaves. These slaves worked at Balata Estate which was then a cocoa plantation and Perou, a sugar plantation. From the registry, we also know that the cousins were compensated by the British government in the amount of £101, nine shillings and 10 pence for the loss of their human property. It should be mentioned that while family lore recalls that the Martin family of St. Lucia had, in earlier years, been among the largest landholders on the island, the methods by which they amassed their wealth and their status as slaveholders is not part of the family history that has been passed down to their descendents.

Helen refers to the debts of her grandfather and the fact that her father was sent to work in the oil fields of Venezuela to pay them. By the early 20th century, beet sugar had eclipsed West Indian sugar on the world market. This would explain why the family had fallen on hard times. Oil was discovered in Venezuela in the 1920's. Born in 1907, Helen's father would have been a teenager in the 1920's, so in terms of the time frame, it makes sense that he would have migrated there temporarily like many other young West Indian men of his generation.

Her mother's status as the illegitimate child of a black school teacher seems to have been to some degree offset by the fact that her father was a white Frenchman and a man of means. The fact that Helen referred to her grandmother as a *Negress* is a mark of the era in which she was brought up. Something that is worth noting is the fact that this grandmother spoke French, Creole and English, and, though a woman, was fully literate! Thus, Helen's grandmother is set apart from many other *Negro* women in her society at a time when most of the island's black population (men and women alike) were still monolingual Creole speakers, and illiterate. Her father supported his daughter and black mistress financially and, by all accounts, they lived a comfortable life in the three-story French-colonial building that still stands in Castries and (ironically enough) now houses the St. Lucia Banana Growers Association. The fact that

there seem to be two contradictory stories as to whether Helen's grandmother was a *mistress* or couldn't marry her French beau due to social conventions remains unclear. It is possible that the story of Charles Hachée arriving on a ship carrying salt could have been concocted by Helen's mother in an attempt to salvage her own mother's already sullied reputation. Helen has researched the family extensively and has found that there are no Hachée's in Martinique, and all those in St. Lucia carrying the name (which has been anglicized and is now pronounced *Hachey*) are known relatives. A glance in any Parisian telephone book, however, reveals pages of individuals carrying the name.

I asked my aunt to tell me more about her grandfather's declining fortunes and her father's life in Maracaibo.

> *M'a sav enh! (I don't know) He worked on the oil rigs in Maracaibo. I know that he lived there for several years and that's where he learned Spanish. I am not sure why his father had debts. I am guessing it is because the cocoa wasn't selling as much. I know the family had been wealthy in the past… His grandfather had owned a lot of property but things had changed. People wanted higher salaries and he couldn't afford to pay them so he went into debt…*

This account makes sense in that labour unions began gaining prominence in the Caribbean in the first quarter of the 20th century. They formed the early nuclei of the first political parties that would eventually see the islands of the British Caribbean to independence. Demand for higher wages, and lower prices for cocoa on the world market, would have meant a loss of income for Helen's grandfather. This would explain his indebtedness and the need to send his son to work in Venezuela. It may also explain the need for his wife, Ismalie, to open a bakery. The family, although prominent landowners within the district of Soufrière, had actually held even larger land parcels in the 19th century but had seen a steady decline in their social and economic standing starting with emancipation in 1834.

At this point I began to steer our conversation to Aunt Helen's childhood.

> *I do not have very pleasant memories of my childhood so*

I won't be saying much. I was born in Soufrière on October 10th, 1935. I attended Anglican elementary school in Castries, Soufrière elementary school and later St Joseph's Convent in Castries. At that time, there was no Soufrière-Castries highway like there is today. To get to Castries, one had to take a boat! To save time, my parents put me to stay at people's houses. These people often treated us very badly and I remember at school the children made fun of me because I was from Soufrière…

I am the second eldest. I followed Bobot [Robert] who passed last year. After me, there was JoJo [Josephine], Lala [Emanuella], Fefe [Felix], Teta [Therese], Barbie [my mother, whose name is actually Miriam], and Baby Anne [Genevieve] the last. One didn't have hobbies in my parents' home. Children were meant to be seen, and not heard. My parents kept us strict. We were not allowed to fraternize with other children in town… only our cousins, or children of friends they deemed appropriate… My mother and father were very involved in their business. Daddy had Fond Cocoa, Belles Etoiles and Fond Cannes Estates. He also had the shop downstairs. Later on, Mummy had the guest house and kept us girls busy with the guests. Bobot was sent to England to join the military and Fefe was sent to study in Canada at the University of Manitoba.

It is striking that Helen was scorned in school by other children because she was from Soufrière. Although she came from a prosperous family and was *off-white*, she was from Soufrière and was therefore looked down upon as *country* by the children of the island's more educated urban professional classes. The fact that one had to take a boat to Castries well into the 20th century is indication of the extreme isolation faced by St. Lucia's various coastal communities. Yet, this isolation, caused by the island's rugged mountain terrain, is, in part, responsible for the maintenance of the strong French Creole character of Soufrière and other rural community's long after the end

of French rule. The fact that the inhabitants of Soufrière retained their French Creole language and traditions, and that even the town's elite was engaged in agricultural production rather than professions reinforced the notion that the people of Soufrière were *backward* rustics.

Communication has greatly improved since the 1940's and 1950's when Helen was in school. Despite this, even today the island remains deeply divided between north and south, and people from Soufrière, in the south, are still seen by those in the capital as ignorant, poor and uncultivated. Moreover, the fact that the rural areas receive the least state funding but have been the hardest hit by the decline of agriculture in general, and banana production in particular, has reinforced the tendency of St. Lucians from Castries to disparage their compatriots from the south.

It seems that Helen's parents were economically well-off but needed to pursue a diverse array of businesses (agricultural production, dry goods, grocery, and tourism) to maintain their socio-economic status. Her mother's insistence that Helen avoid socializing with lower class and darker people is indicative of the heavy class and racial structure that characterized the colonial era in St. Lucia. This tendency may also reflect her family's felt need, in the face of declining material wealth, to remain socially aloof from others – or, more specifically, as Derek Walcott says in his poem, "the black town below".

The declining fortunes of Helen's family were precipitated by decreasing international demand for St. Lucian sugar. This fall in demand was reinforced by the colonial government's decision in 1963 to abandon sugar production island-wide. The end of sugar production on the island coincided with two important economic and political developments—namely, the rise of bananas as the main export crop and political sovereignty in the British West Indies. It would, thus, seem that the British decision to convert St. Lucia from an island of sugar cane to one of banana (green gold, as it was popularly called), was intended to benefit the St. Lucian peasants—a compensatory gift for their hardships. The shift from monocultural sugar production dominated by the traditional plantocracy to banana production controlled by Afro- (and Indo-) St. Lucian farmers on small plots of land was "wrapped up" with the promises of economic viability that materialized in 1953 with the introduction of prefer-

ential import policies that guaranteed access to the British market for bananas from the Commonwealth. But what did such radical shifts entail for Helen's family?

> *I remember as a young girl, Mummy and Daddy would always take us to [their plantation], Belles Etoiles, to spend Christmas and Easter holidays … Belles Etoiles was a beautiful estate. It was big! It was 500 acres and Daddy had sugar planted there.*
>
> *I remember there was no road to get there. The estate was in Canaries… they also called it the Canaries Estate and Daddy would get Matte the overseer and the workers to load up the boat with the horses and provisions… Daddy had a ship that brought the sugar and cocoa to Castries—he would charge the farmers by the pound… The maids would bring baskets of produce from Fond Cocoa and baskets of bread. All of the children would come… Mummy, Aunty Marge, Ismalie… the whole family...*
>
> *When we arrived in Canaries we would have to follow a muddy track. Daddy would be on his horse and he would order the men to clear the track of the overgrowth with machetes and* flambeau *[torches]. The trees there were very tall… mahogany and gomier trees—the Caribs would hollow out the gomier trees to build their canoes… and the underbrush grew very very thick. If you cut it by the next week it would grow back again…*
>
> *The maids would carry the baskets of bread on their heads…I remember sometimes the river—the Canaries river ran through the estate—it would overflow its banks so the men would have to carry all of us on their backs across the river one by one… I remember there were crayfish in the river and as children we used to have fun catching them… When we got to the house which had been*

closed for some time, it would have to be cleaned and aired out… I remember the house was an old wooden house. It had a porch that wrapped all the way around, shingles and a green roof… it was a beautiful place…

I ask: What happened to Belles Etoiles?

Daddy had to sell it. He sold it… in 1966. Let me tell you! Daddy was a man who loved his land and his animals… I remember Daddy cried so much when it had to be sold... He had Matte and Mr. Polo [the overseer from Fond Cocoa] slaughtered all the cows… He gave the meat to workers and the people in the village and they had a feast… He used the proceeds of the sale to expand the supermarket…

It is interesting and telling that Belles Etoiles, the largest of all of Helens' fathers' plantations (and only sugar estate) had to be sold in 1966 – just three years after colonial policymakers decided that St. Lucia would cease all sugar production. Interestingly, Belles Etoiles officially no longer exists—save for the recollections of Helen and her siblings. A contemporary map of St. Lucia and the district of Canaries reveals no trace of what had been the Martin families' largest estate. The land eventually fell into the hands of the government, which, upon taking ownership, immediately declared the estate a national park and nature reserve and changed the name from Belles Etoiles to Grand Bois on account of the areas' towering mahogany and gomier trees, giant, orchid-covered ferns and the rapidly growing foliage that have since swallowed all physical remnants of the old estate house—and of the family who had once lived there.

Helen's story illustrates the tendency of the rural people of St. Lucia in general to value education less than those in the capital. As their occupational status, material wealth, and, in the past, entire society was tied to their landholdings, there was traditionally never a need to gain further education or enter the professions. When I asked Helen why she and her sisters never attended university, she explained:

Well, my parents never really pushed us. We were all beautiful, smart girls but after the convent, it was expected that

> *we would marry someone of means who would look after us. My parents were very old fashioned and never really pushed university… They just wanted us to stay and help them in the business then find husbands… Felix went because he showed a keen interest and was being groomed to take over the estate.*

Felix's agronomy degree would serve him well when he inherited Fond Cocoa. Moreover, the University of Manitoba is where Felix met his American wife, Tracy. Together, the two have undertaken the transformation of Fond Cocoa from a struggling cocoa plantation into the high-end resort it has become. The transformation and success of places like Fond Cocoa and Sapphire Estate correspond to the decline in importance of the island's agricultural sector, and the increasing dominance of tourism for the island's economy. This decline in the agricultural sector has forced plantation owners to diversify and adapt to the changing economic climate or risk losing everything.

I did wonder why Helen did not become more involved in her parents' business enterprises. As Helen explained:

> *I moved to Castries and my father asked the bank manager to give me a job. I later worked for LIAT [Leeward Island Air Transport Services]. They transferred me to Antigua, which is where I met Donald, my first husband. I was eventually promoted and became the Customer Service and Reservations manager for LIAT… Before your mother moved to Canada, she came to live with us in the Castries house…*

At this time, most women working in banks would have been employed as tellers, or secretaries, and for many years, these jobs remained almost the exclusive domain of the fairer-skinned daughters of the elite. In the 1970's, St. Lucia's tourism industry was still in its infancy. Nevertheless, growth in the sector opened up employment and career opportunities for women that had never before existed. This would explain Helen's transition and decision to leave the bank for a career at LIAT.

My aunt mentioned that my mother had lived with her in the "Castries house" before she immigrated to Canada in 1977. The house, a two-story structure located on Derek Walcott Square in the French Colonial heart of Castries, was rented to an insurance company. However, the upstairs apartment was always kept vacant for family staying overnight in the capital. As such, the Castries house easily facilitated Helen's return, where she was able to raise her two children away from Soufrière. In 2004 the building was sold by the family. It sits adjacent to the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception.

The Castries house seems to have acted as a sort of transition point mediating the move from rural Soufrière to a short stint at a bank in Castries, which in turn provided the credentials required for obtaining an administrative or secretarial position upon arrival in Toronto. This is the course taken by my mother and all of her sisters except for Helen. More broadly, the move from Soufrière to Castries parallels the mass migrations from the rural to the urban sphere that have occurred all over Latin America and the Caribbean. These migrations are symptoms of encroaching globalization facilitated by neoliberal policies that have decimated the agricultural sectors of the region. In this process, life in the countryside has become unviable for most people as they have been forced to detach themselves from the land and search for a better life in the capital or abroad.

When I asked Helen why she did not immigrate to Canada with her sisters, she replied:

> *Well you see… as the eldest, I already had a family to look after. And to be honest, moving overseas never really interested me. I love St. Lucia… Had I been younger and single like the others, I might have gone, but I had a good career which I enjoyed, and had grown accustomed to life in the Caribbean… then I met Michael whom I later married.*

Helen was not tied down to any of the family businesses like her brothers. She was, however, married with children and heavily involved in a career in the tourist sector by the time immigration laws in Canada were altered to facilitate the easier arrival of people from the British Commonwealth. For

people coming of age in the 1970s, disillusioned with life in the Caribbean and the uncertain prospects offered to them, migration to Canada was seen as a reasonable exit strategy.

Conclusion

Along with my Canadian friends, the reader has accompanied me on a journey of return to the birthplace of my mother and my extended St. Lucian family. Among those family members who received us and offered the warm hospitality for which the island is so well known, my visit with my mother's sister proved to be the most revealing opportunity to come to a deeper understanding of the complexities and convergences of race, class, gender and history on a small Caribbean island. I returned to Toronto and slipped back into my Canadian life knowing more about my own family history of which, prior to this interview, I had been only partially aware. Reflecting on my aunt's vivid recollections, I realized how different my experience—that of a young black man in Toronto—had been from hers and how much our lives had been shaped by the overlapping forces of time, geography and the societies we inhabit.

My Aunt Helen's move from rural Soufrière to St. Lucia's capital took place early in life in the pursuit of educational opportunities that were simply not available in her community. The fact that Helen's parents could afford the high tuition fees required to educate their daughters at St. Joseph's Convent is testament to the family's social and economic standing, rooted in the realities of slavery and the colonial system from which they had benefited. The decision to stay away from Soufrière after completion of her education was a result of the complex interplay of social conventions, gender norms and a rapidly changing economic climate which dictated that there could be no life for her in the countryside.

The decline of the countryside and the advance of the tourist sector created more career opportunities for women in St. Lucia. As it would turn out, my aunt's career, financial security and family life would be decisive factors in her decision to remain on the island. However, the fact that all of her female siblings did choose to emigrate, leaves Helen as a marked exception, and not the rule.

In what represents an ironic turn of events, the tourist sector has breathed new life into the very plantations that were once at the heart of the rural economy. It can only be hoped that the very real parallels of dependency on a single industry, a vulnerability shared by both the tourist industry and the plantations, does not bring about another wave of emigration, forcing another generation of St. Lucians to leave, never again to return to the island of their birth.

Chapter Four

GREEN GOLD AND DARK DAYS

The Life of a St. Lucian Banana Farmer

by

Kevin Edmonds

It is generally accepted that John James—who, in the course of his life, was variously known as John, Jones, Jonesee and Ti Jones[1]—was born on October 31st, 1927 in Grand Riviere in the quarter of Dennery, a small agricultural village in the Mabouya Valley of St. Lucia. The official date of his birth is unknown, as was the case for many born in the rural Caribbean in those days; he was not delivered in a hospital, but rather "with a midwife and a kerosene lamp." John's older brothers, Murat and Modeste, were only two and four in 1927 and just a year after John's birth, his mother—a former Indian indentured labourer—died of unknown causes.

As for the father of the three boys, he was a runaway labourer of African descent who had previously worked on the Panama Canal. As a man of adventure, he decided to leave Panama as a stowaway on a steamer to seek his fortune in France. Unfortunately for him, his plans went awry as the steamers only port of call was the small island of St. Lucia. At the time of his unexpected arrival, St. Lucia's economy was primarily based on sugar plantations, but unlike Barbados, the sugar producing capital of the West Indies, St. Lucia's hilly terrain was unsuitable for the development of large-scale plantations.

John's father would have been easily identifiable in the small town of

1 Throughout the Caribbean, it is very common for people to be referred to by more than one name—aside from their more obvious nicknames. Indeed, many of my grandfather's friends only knew him as Jones, or Jonesee—never knowing his real first name was John.

Dennery for he always sported a top hat and black jacket—in the fashion of Abraham Lincoln. He was remembered by most as a very rough character, and many stories of him fighting and even killing those who crossed him were passed down to his sons and grandchildren. Sadly, not much else was known about the father, as he died when John was three.

I learned these sketchy details from interviews I conducted face-to-face, on extended telephone calls and through emails exchanged from December 2007 to March 2008 with family and close friends of John James, who was my grandfather. The people who shared their recollections included: Agnes Edmonds (my mother), Agatha James (my aunt), Aloysius James (my uncle, who, like John James himself, was a banana farmer), Modeste James (my great-uncle), "Atto" Jean-Baptiste (my cousin) and Matthew Sealy (a family friend). A great deal of the information I was able to gather about my grandfather's early life was gleaned from stories told by the late Elizabeth Kalicharan, who was a close friend and, in effect, the adoptive mother of James, Murat and Modeste. These interviews proved to be very emotional for some of my informants as they reflected on the poverty and hardship that my grandfather endured. Some of the interviews were carried out in English and others in Kreyol patois, the language in which older people in rural St. Lucia generally feel most comfortable.

All of these friends and relations were close to my grandfather, and each person I interviewed provided a different perspective on the man and his life. Because my grandfather passed away in October 2004, the reconstruction of his life that I am presenting here is stitched together from the reminiscences of those who knew him best, along with my own recollections of my grandad, or "Papa," as we called him, and my understanding of the history of St. Lucia.

The narrative begins, logically enough, with John James's childhood. According to Agnes, Jones's eldest daughter,

> *All we remember hearing about our grandmother was that she remarried a rich man and basically abandoned her three young sons in order to be with him. Nobody really knows the details of who she was. All we know is she was of Indian descent and that there is a good chance her family*

still lives in Vieux Fort. That's one of the good things about being from such a small place with so few Indians; everybody has a general idea of who your family is.

With no parents to care for the boys, they wandered the plantations and slept in the open for several years. On many rainy nights the boys slept under a bridge in Grande Riviere or found shelter by a large mango tree in Richfond.

Due to the harsh economic circumstances, many in the area were reluctant to take in three more mouths to feed. "I remember him telling me how they managed to survive by picking food from other people's garbage, stealing mangoes and roasting breadfruits, and the occasional charity of the villagers—he was always surprised him and his brothers were alive," recalled Agnes. Eventually the three boys were taken in by a woman named Elizabeth Kalicharan who later remembered that when she first laid eyes on John he was wearing nothing but a burlap sack that had previously been used to transport coffee. Because of their adoptive status, the three boys went on to take the name Kalicharan as their own.

As Elizabeth could not bear any children of her own, she became a foster mother to many orphans in the area. She would take in orphaned and disabled children until her advancing age prevented her from doing so. During these hard times, Elizabeth was able to feed the boys and provide shelter, but not much else. School was too expensive and John went to work at the age of five along with his brothers carrying water to the men who worked in the sugarcane fields. As he grew older he began to take on more tasks such as weeding, burning, bundling and planting the cane.

Despite the abolition of slavery in 1838, the structure of the island's economic system prevented the practice of self-sufficient, small-scale cultivation insofar as the colonial elite still owned virtually all the land. This structure of land tenure led to a widespread and unequal pattern of land ownership whereby small farmers and peasants squatted on or rented smallholdings nearly always on the least fertile and most geographically unsuitable land. This situation forced many technically "free" Africans back onto the plantations through sharecropping systems such as *metayage* (tenant farming) in order to

access enough food and material goods to survive. Such was also the case in Dennery, where John worked on the Bernard family's massive sugar estate.

When John was strong enough—around the age of 12—he began to cut cane on his own. When he was older, he was not a man of impressive stature by any means; he stood around five-foot-five with a slim build, but he worked with the same intensity, strength and determination as much larger men. John's older brother Modeste still remembers their work as young boys on the plantation.

> *Early in the morning, we would all walk to the plantation, which was about an hour away from auntie's house. Back then it was really rare to see a car, and most vehicles were transporting things to and from the mill. I remember how me and Murat would have competitions to see who could cut the cane the fastest. John would call us idiots, saying we were in such a rush to make the white man rich. He would normally take off somewhere, and come back at the end of the day. They paid us horribly, and when we would sign for our cheques with blistered hands he would laugh at us! We didn't think about it like that at the time, but looking back, John was right.*

It was during this time that John changed his name to James, as he could not write the name Kalicharan on the plantation's logbook. In addition to altering his last name, John took up the name of "Jones" for no other reason than he thought it sounded good. From then on he would be known around the island as Jonesee or Ti Jones (Little Jones).

The French Kreyol in Jones's nickname was a reflection of the island's French colonial past, as the island had changed hands 15 times between French and British colonial rulers. Although in this period St. Lucia was a British colony, most of the rural St. Lucians at that time did not speak much, if any, English. Jones would have thrown some English words into his Kreyol, but most of these came from listening to country music on the radio. Country music became popular in St. Lucia when U.S. troops were stationed on the

island during World War II.

The pattern of unequal landownership continued until 1945, as institutionalized inequality, poverty, political frustration and successive drops in the price of sugar produced a level of social unrest and trade union militancy across the Caribbean that made British colonial authorities increasingly uneasy. It was in this year that the West India Royal Commission released a report that identified the extreme inequality of land distribution between the plantations and peasants as the source of the unrest.[2] The report also recommended "radical" reforms regarding political change, social welfare, employment practices and colonial development.[3] Strikingly, the report was completed in 1939, but publication was withheld during World War II as the British government feared that the findings of widespread poverty in the Caribbean would fuel an embarrassing propaganda campaign by their enemies.

World War II, in combination with the later introduction of cheap European beet sugar during the 1950's, spelled the end of the sugar era in St. Lucia. The recommendations in the report by the West India Royal Commission looked to counter the emergence of national liberation movements in the colonies that were diametrically opposed to the presence of the British colonial system in any form. By implementing such recommendations, the British government hoped to strengthen its international and economic influence by reforming its imperial policies, rather than eliminating them.

During this time, the rural economy of St. Lucia was transformed, as the decline of the sugarcane industry led to the introduction of bananas as the new cash crop of the region. Jones was forced to work on the neighbouring plantations to survive. Eventually, when the boys were in their early 20s and to the surprise of everyone, Auntie Elizabeth left the boys her family land in Richfond, Dennery. The land was regarded by many as unproductive as it was very hilly and dense with bush. However, this would not be regarded by the three boys as an obstacle and they soon divided the parcel among themselves and set to work to clear the land. Indeed, the land was too hilly for sugarcane,

2 Sahadeo Basdeo, "Walter Citrine and the British Caribbean Workers Movement during the Moyne Commission hearing 1938-9", *Journal of Caribbean History*, 1983, Volumer 49, Issue 53.

3 *Ibid*.

View of Richfond

View of the Pitons

The house and shed on the James family farm in Mabouya Valley, in the Dennery quarter of St. Lucia

The author boxing and loading bananas for transport to Castries.
Inset: The author transporting bananas to the shed to be boxed

but it was perfect for growing bananas. The property that Jones and his brothers inherited consisted of several hectares. Modeste couldn't recall what year he and his brothers received the land, but remarked that

> *... we all couldn't believe we had our own land! We didn't even know she had that land. We thought it all belonged to someone else and for whatever reason, they left it [uncultivated]... I remember the three of us being so happy that we wouldn't have to work on the plantations anymore, but at first we didn't even know what to do with the land because it was so rugged. But it's amazing what a cutlass and some matches can do. Having land gave you real freedom back then. You didn't have to worry about all this nonsense you have now.*

After roughly a year and a half, the three brothers had sold enough produce to save up for some small livestock. They started out with goats, but eventually saved enough to buy several young calves. On many occasions Jones would walk with the calf from Vieux Fort to Richfond with his brothers, finding a place to sleep along the roadside during the long trek. Prior to the purchase of these animals, there was very little meat in the diet of the three brothers. In order to feed himself, Jones planted dasheen (a form of taro), yams, okra, tania root, plantain and pigeon peas. In addition to these provisions, the inherited land was dotted with mango, coconut, breadfruit, orange, cashew and passion fruit trees.

In 1957, a preferential trading system was established between the Windward Islands (St. Lucia, Dominica, St. Vincent and Grenada) and the United Kingdom. During this time of relative stability, Jones began to store whatever money he had earned at Elizabeth's house. He continued to bring her food and buy her small household items in payment of his debt of gratitude. As he no longer wanted to be a burden on her, Jones would sleep many nights out on the land—eager to wake up and start work again at the crack of dawn. After several years of clearing, terracing, and digging drains, the banana plants began to bear enough fruit for Jones to join the St. Lucia Banana Growers Association (SLBGA).

Growing up on the farm, Agnes recalled how her father was never at home, and if it were not for the fact that she made him breakfast in the morning, she wouldn't have known that he came home at all. By spending almost every waking moment of his adult life on the farm, it was hard to tell if the farm was a part of him, or if he was a part of the farm. Agnes remembers how her father:

> *... had a unique relation to the land as he knew everything that could be eaten, used for tools, medicine or water. He would know when it was going to rain, even if there were no clouds in the sky and would know when a healthy-looking animal was sick from simply touching it. I think that his strong connection with nature arose because of his job, but more so from his past and his upbringing with the land as a central part of his life. He knew a great deal of traditional medicine which was passed on to him by Elizabeth, which he in turn passed on to his children—especially me. That's why growing up you never had cough syrup, just the bush tea, and it worked!*

Aside from using traditional medicine, Jones was a very superstitious man, and in large part this was due to the fact that Elizabeth was considered by many to be an *obeyah* woman, as she often had visions that would materialize. When Elizabeth lived to be 113, her survival was taken by many as clear evidence that she was indeed an *obeyah* woman.

Now that Jones had gained some independence by becoming a small farmer, he set out to save enough money to buy a decent-sized lot within Richfond on which to construct a small wooden house. He began thinking of starting a family, and Jones set out for the small village of Jacmel to find a wife. It was here that he met and married Helena, the daughter of indentured Indian labourers.

Unlike the hundreds of thousands of indentured Indian labourers who arrived in Trinidad or Guyana, the number of indentured Indian labourers in St. Lucia was very small in comparison (only 2500 had arrived to the island by

1891) and, as a consequence, they did not retain many of their religious beliefs or cultural traits. Instead of being Hindu or Muslim, the small Indian population of St. Lucia was assimilated into various Christian denominations, such as Jehovah's Witness, Seventh Day Adventist, or Catholic. The small Indian population in St. Lucia was centred in rural villages close to sugar estates, such as Jacmel, Forestiere, Richfond and Balca. The Indian culture that remained mostly centred on food. Yet even food came in a "Kreyol" version as Indo-St. Lucian food is very different from that found in Trinidad.

Growing up on their own, the three brothers did not take to religion; however, in order to marry Helena, Jones had to convert to the Seventh Day Adventist Church. They would go on to conceive nine children (Agnes, Aloysius, St. George, Isaac, Agatha and Michael, with three others who were either stillborn or died shortly after birth).

In times of increased hardship, the land would provide the necessary sustenance that would mean the difference between abject hunger and survival. Jones kept some livestock, normally cattle, which were looked at as something like a piggy bank by many of the farmers. When money was needed for school uniforms, a housing repair—or worse, a medical emergency—an animal would be slaughtered and sold.

Indeed, hard times would arrive in 1970, as Helena was hospitalized in the notorious "Golden Hope" hospital by neighbours who thought she had been practicing *obeyah*. It was later revealed that the death of her last child had triggered a mental breakdown and Helena died shortly after being admitted into the hospital. There was no official inquiry into her death, which, at that time, was often the case with the mentally ill. It was during this period that Jones had a crisis of faith and stopped attending the Seventh Day Adventist Church as he openly began to question the logic of a God who would leave his six children without a mother.

With his wife gone, Jones began to go out with his friends and drink rum to deal with the stress and sadness. He would become known throughout the village as a man who enjoyed his rum and later his women while still managing to work from sunup to sundown. It was in this situation that Agnes was forced to take on the role of mother and to drop out of school at age 11. The

older brothers George, Aloysius and Isaac also dropped out of school to help their father on the farm.

During the early 1970s, it was not considered unreasonable for the young boys to drop out of school, because like many children in the area, they would end up becoming banana farmers sooner or later. Leaving school to help the farm wasn't considered a dead end because, during the 1970's, the banana industry was booming. The boys were also eager to leave school because they were constantly picked on and bullied by the other children as they the only Indians in the school. However, the two youngest, Agatha and Michael, continued to attend school and were intended to be the beneficiaries of the older siblings' sacrifice.

Like his father, Jones could be instantly recognized in the village for his trademark small stature, slow walk, ever-present cutlass and blue baseball hat. His sense of humour and loyalty had won him many friends and great respect all across the island, as I would later learn when I travelled to town and witnessed countless large men paying tribute to my grandfather, who was so small of stature. He was a man who worked very hard and lived very modestly, but would give his last dollar to a friend in need. As a single man, he was one of the few in the area who did not have to answer to a woman, which gave him a special prestige among the men. Moreover, because he had no wife to answer to, Jones would open his home to others who were hard on their luck.

His friends would often tell his children and grandchildren stories of how "Jonesee" would take on all opponents who would dare insult or pick fights with the people he loved. Due to his small size and temper, there were many instances of larger men not wanting to fight him out of principle, even though Jones often declared they could fight with cutlasses to make things even. From what I have heard, only once did someone take him up on it. At his time of death, all my grandfather's limbs remained intact—perhaps indicating that the adversary was not so lucky.

Back on the farm, in order to protect the bananas from parasites and weeds, the SLBGA had, from the early 1970s, been encouraging the farmers to use the herbicide Gramoxone and the pesticide Dibromochloropropane (DBCP). Like many other farmers, Jones trusted that the SLBGA had his best

interests at heart and faithfully applied the chemicals to his crops every day. The SLBGA did not warn the farmers of the toxic effects of the chemicals and many farmers—including Jones—sprayed the chemicals with no protection or understanding of the effects this would have both on their land and bodies.

As they were illiterate and could not speak English, Jones and his peers were often marginalized in their ability to access information that was freely available to the larger farmers at the association meetings. This would prove to be a major liability when hurricanes occasionally damaged the farm, and Jones could not dispute the findings of the SLBGA insurance auditors. His son Aloysius remarked that

> *Because we all dropped out of school, none of us could read very well. What makes things worse is that most of the farmers and their sons around here were the same, so there was nobody we could go to for help or check that things were fair. The auditors knew this, and I can't prove it but I'm sure they took advantage of my father and tons of others like him. At that time, my father respected the SLBGA, but now nobody does—all they do is buy nice trucks, and we stay with old boots.*

Although the Association had taken advantage of him, Jones believed in the solidarity of the farmers and the importance of the government in assisting those who had fallen on hard times. Jones was never politically active in the community as a farmer, although he was affiliated with the St. Lucian Labour Party (SLP). If he were to be given a political label, he would most accurately be described as a moderate democratic socialist. On many occasions Jones would discuss banana politics with the late Sir John Compton—the former Prime Minister of St. Lucia and the leader of the United Workers Party (UWP)—when they bumped into one another on the Friday night drinking tours. Compton himself was very grounded in a commitment to continue to cultivate his own land, and could be seen wearing his own banana sap-stained shirt.

For the most part, life in Richfond followed a steady rhythm with each

day much like the next. Six days a week Jones and his sons would tend to the bananas and the animals. Friday would be the highlight of the week, as this was the day the bananas were cut, boxed and transported to Castries, the capital of St. Lucia. On Fridays the small city was alive with activity, as the day was designated island-wide as the day to run all errands. With everybody dressed in their best clothes, the rum shops were full, lines at the bank reached out the door, and you could not walk 10 feet without running into someone you knew. Once the bananas were dropped off at the port, Jones would head over to the SLBGA offices where members would collect their payment.

It was in town at the Royal Bank of Canada that Jones would often run into the arrogance and prejudice of the bank tellers who looked down on him for being an illiterate farmer unable to speak English. Jones knew that the tellers were being snobbish—pretending they couldn't understand him—and he would get back at them by registering their responses to his playfully insulting them in patois, confirming his suspicion that they, too, were patois speakers.

Once his errands were completed, Jones would begin his tours of the rum shops. Famous for his sense of humour, he was well known in every establishment and would drink with his friends until the town closed down around 7:00 PM. On the ride back to Richfond, Jones and his friends would stop at many of the rum shops along the way, drinking late into the night. This routine would continue with his sons and friends until the years when he became too ill to drink.

In 1978, Jones's daughter Agnes met a visiting British teacher named John Edmonds who was teaching at the Castries comprehensive school. John had moved to St. Lucia because, as an electrician, he had suffered class discrimination and he hated how English society was laced through with negative views of working people. At the time, Agnes was working at a clothing store in Castries which was owned by a Syrian family. When John was introduced to Jones, Jones initially didn't approve of the relationship, saying that John would take Agnes away to England.

While Jones was not entirely correct, Agnes and John would eventually marry and leave for Canada in 1981. Their first daughter, Jones's first granddaughter, Laura, was born that year. Kevin would follow in 1983. The very next

year, Agnes and John sponsored Agnes's sister, Agatha, as a landed immigrant in Canada and Agnes's youngest brother, Michael, was supposed to join them to further his schooling.

The 1980's had been a period of relative prosperity in the banana industry and, for the first time, Jones had been able to expand his modest house and buy a used truck to transport his bananas to the port in Castries. It was during the peak of banana production in the late 1980's that roughly 50 percent of the country's labour force was directly engaged in the cultivation of bananas.[4] The World Bank estimated that during this time, the banana industry injected almost EC $1 million into the economy every week.[5] Banana prices were the highest they had ever been and Michael, the youngest son, was thriving in school and appeared to be the one sibling who would be able to use higher education to make his way out of the village.

In 1989, everything changed when all four of the brothers were involved in a car accident on the way back from Castries. Michael was thrown from the bed of the pickup truck, smashing his face on the back of the cab before being flung into the road. He was initially pronounced dead at the scene, but later overcame his critical injuries after a great struggle by the doctors. To pay for the procedure, Jones had to offer a large section of his land as collateral for a loan. Thus the economic prosperity brought by the increase in banana prices was instantly erased in the course of the accident. Agnes recalled and said to me,

> *I remember bringing you to the hospital to see him. You had brought him an orange juice, and despite having his head bandaged he smiled at you. At that time I had brought you there to see him 'cause we all really thought he wasn't going to make it. Normally when people have such traumatic injuries, they bring them to the hospital to die.*

Michael's skull was surgically reconstructed by a volunteer American surgeon at the Victoria Hospital, but adequate medical supplies were in short

4 Robert Thomson, *Green Gold: Bananas and Dependency in the Eastern Caribbean*. (London, Latin American Bureau, 1987). Pg. 61

5 *Ibid.*

supply. The metal plates which were inserted into his skull would become infected, and Michael suffered serious psychological consequences as a result. He would go on to suffer violent bouts of schizophrenia and took refuge in the forest to limit the effects of his paranoia. Because he would often be violent with his brothers, throwing rocks at them or hitting them, Michael had to leave the house.

Jones and the family tried to help as much as possible, building him a small house out on the farm, but Michael never stayed in it. It eventually had to be torn down because squatters had taken it over. Michael survived on fruit from the farm, but often resorted to theft from nearby farms which led to the police shooting him in the leg on one occasion. After the shooting, Michael was interned at the Golden Hope, the same place his mother died almost 20 years earlier.

Because of the family problems and their emotional attachment to the island, Agnes, John and their two children, Laura and Kevin, moved back and forth between Canada and the island several times before finally settling in Toronto in 1991. During this year, Agatha gave birth to her son, Michael Jones James. To help Agatha finish her studies at Sheridan College, Agnes worked part time and looked after Michael most of the time. Agatha and Michael would live with Agnes and John for the next nine years.

Since Jones did not have a telephone, his children and grandchildren would occasionally talk briefly on Fridays when Jones could access a payphone in Castries. Due to the high cost, however, they would mail audio cassettes back and forth, in which Jones, his sons and other friends and relatives would record their greetings or ask questions to Agnes and the family. I remember listening to the tape of my grandfather talking, noticing how loud the crickets were in the background. The separation of the families was really hard on Agnes, but she realized that there were many more opportunities in Canada than in St. Lucia.

In July 1999, Jones left the island for the first time with Isaac and came to Toronto for Agatha's wedding. In front of a crowd of 250 people—most of whom were total strangers—Jones gave a short speech in patois, and managed to make nearly everyone in the room cry.

In Toronto, Jones was impressed with the size and cleanliness of all that met his eye, but thought that everything was either too busy (Highway 401) or too "fake" (suburban landscapes). While I travelled with him around Toronto, he pointed out many things that I had never considered about life in Canada. One of the most interesting times occurred when we entered the No Frills grocery store near Parliament and Gerrard. While we were walking around the overstocked produce displays in the store he asked, "Do people really buy all this food?," as he could hardly imagine all of it being sold before it went bad. I told him that if the food wasn't sold before it spoiled it was normally thrown out—even the bananas. He was shocked by such a wasteful system.

At the Canadian National Exhibition he was very impressed with the agricultural display, amazed at the size of the Canadian cows. After an explanation that steroids and growth hormones were the reason for such large animals, Jones was once again disappointed. "You spend so much money to make such large animals, only to throw them away." This was probably the most effective lesson I have had about the wasteful nature of Western society.

In 2001, Jones fell ill and nobody really knew what was wrong. Each doctor who examined him offered a different diagnosis. For this reason, Agnes once again took up the role of caretaker and left Canada to look after her father, as the other sons had to continue to work the land to survive. Due to declining banana prices, the family had to increase the number of banana plants under cultivation to maintain the same standard of living. But when expansion of banana cultivation reached its logical limit, given the size of the plot of land available, the family became dependent upon whatever pittance the market would supply, together with remittances from Agnes and Agatha in Canada.

During this time, Jones's condition steadily deteriorated until he was bedridden. In 2002, it was discovered that he had suffered a stroke due to exposure to pesticides. Throughout this time, Agnes would travel back and forth, spending the majority of her time in St. Lucia at Jones's bedside. I remember going down with my mom to help her look after him in 2003, lifting him up from his bed and taking him to his chair outside. He would laugh about how he was so small and that I would carry him like a baby, saying he could have used a big guy like me on his farm.

I would help my mom bathe him and, even though he was really sick, he would still laugh and make jokes about how he had a much more impressive physique when he was younger. It was during this time that I picked up a lot of patois listening to his stories about when he was younger, and we could actually communicate much more than before. Years later when I traveled to Haiti after the disastrous earthquake, I would be especially grateful for these hours spent with my grandfather and the gift of language that he gave to me. In this final period, as his body became weak, his mind was still sharp, and many of his old friends came by to visit him, tell jokes and laugh about old times.

On October 8th, 2004, Jones passed away. His funeral was attended by nearly a thousand people from all over the island. Many family rivalries were put aside in this time of sadness in order to honour Jones and help with the arrangements. After the funeral, a huge gathering with rum and music was held at Jones' house in remembrance of the small farmer who had given so much only to receive so little.

The funeral was a sobering moment for all, as his poverty, hardship and strength of character were recounted. It was a transformative moment in my mother's as well as my own life. I was asked to deliver a short speech on behalf of Jones's grandchildren, Laura, Michael, Mya and myself. The greater part of the speech recounted my memories of my grandfather—much as I have done in this chapter: how he used to carry me across the river on the way to the farm when I was small and how he would make toys with only his cutlass and a piece of wood. I still have the spinning top he made for me out of a tree branch and an old nail – and it works surprisingly well. What was perhaps the most important recollection was how, despite his inability to speak English, he never failed to make his grandchildren laugh somehow. Even when I walk the streets of Castries today, many of his friends remember me from the times I used to accompany him on his Friday errands.

In 2005, John and Agnes both decided to move back to St. Lucia for good. Agnes realized that her life's path was similar to that of Elizabeth Kalicharan, as she would always be taking care of others. Presently Agnes works with the orphanage in Castries and is working to help diversify the family farm, as bananas are no longer a reliable source of income due to the World Trade

Jones with his daughters Agnes and Agatha

Organization's attack on the Caribbean's protected trade agreements with England.

Since the early 1990's, banana prices had been dropping steadily due to the trade war between the USA (fighting on behalf of the multinational corporations Chiquita, Del Monte and Dole) and the European Banana Regime, defending their trade agreements with the Caribbean nations. After the "banana war" had been settled in the non-banana growing nations in 2010, of the 10,000 farmers who had produced bananas in 1990, only 1,200 remained. The dismantling of protected trade has all but destroyed the market for St. Lucian bananas. Increasingly, the island has turned towards tourism as the primary generator of income—with the former plantation owners like the Bernards being the few local families to run hotels in an otherwise foreign-dominated industry.

The purchase of breeding livestock and the planting of several hundred cocoa trees by Agnes was a last-ditch effort meant to reduce her brother's dependence on bananas. This effort, however, was undermined by Hurricane Tomas in November of that year. The majority of the cocoa trees were washed away, the bananas were blown over, and some of the livestock drowned when

the river burst its banks in the most damaging natural disaster to hit St. Lucia in recorded history. With this flood went the life savings of George and Aloysius. Today the farm, like the island, is still struggling to catch a break and get on its feet.

In conclusion, the life history of Jones James parallels the story of the rise and decline of the St. Lucian banana economy. His early life eerily mirrored the ups and downs of the banana industry. During times of banana prosperity he was blessed with children and relative security. During times of hardship due to hurricanes and falling prices, death and poor health followed. What makes this story important that it is a story that is all too familiar to many small farmers in the Caribbean and around the world. It is a story of the suffering and hardship that poor farmers like my grandfather must face due to the lack of any alternative.

With the decline of the banana industry in St. Lucia, the entire island is facing an uncertain transformation. Without a doubt, tourism dollars have helped many—but for those in rural areas, the situation has become measurably worse. The death of Jones James is significant in many ways to many people, but to me it has had a double meaning—the loss of a grandfather, and the loss of an island's way of life. His death overlapped with one of the most traumatic drops in banana prices the island has ever witnessed. In 2005, St. Lucia only managed to export 30,970 tons of bananas, compared to 133,777 tons in 1990—a drop of more than 75 percent in 10 years.[6] To many this is seen as simply coincidental, but to many in the family, the death of the banana industry could only coincide with the death of Jones James—in life and in death they had been truly inseparable.

6 "St.Lucia's Banana Exports Hit Record Low Amid European Trade Threat". *The Jamaica Gleaner*. January 31st, 2006. Available Online: http://www.jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20060131/carib/carib4.html

Map of Grenada[1]

1 Adapted from: "The World Factbook 2013-14", Central Intelligence Agency, 2013, Office of Public Affairs, Washington DC, May 2013 < https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html

Chapter Five

RACE, CLASS, REVOLUTION AND THE U.S. INVASION OF GRENADA

by

Ashleigh Phillips

After a busy day at work I was finally able to get Mr. Searles to talk with me about his life in Grenada. He is the busiest person I have ever met! He had to cancel our interview at least three times before I was able to get him to sit down with me because he was either travelling or too tired to talk at the end of a day. Luckily, he is my father, so I knew that if I persisted, I would finally get him to discuss his life over the 20 years before my siblings and I came along. I was looking forward to hearing his story, as we had never discussed his youth in depth. I asked Mr. Searles to tell me about his life from his childhood in the 1960's until he left Grenada for Barbados in 1993. This story of his youth and of Grenada speaks for itself; all you have to do is listen. We sat down in his bedroom, he still in his work clothes, and he began.

History & Politics of Grenada & the Wider Caribbean

Demitri Searles was born on December 11th 1960 in a small village called Mt. Moritz in the southwestern part of the island of Grenada, just 3.3 kilometres inland from the port city and capital of the island nation, St. Georges. He explained to me that the 1960s was a very interesting time of transition in most of the Caribbean islands. The entire region had been colonised at various points in its history by the British, the French or the Spanish. Grenada was colonised by France and Britain, but it was the British who ruled the longest and—along

with some tinges of French colonial influence—left the clearest traces on the island. During the 60's, Demitri noted, most of the islands were striving to achieve independence from their colonial masters. Most of the countries were dependencies of Britain and this period marked a gradual change from colonial to local government.

He elaborated:

> *Politics in those days was quite interesting, as most of the working conditions were quite poor for locals. You had people who worked on estates and in factories, and at various other jobs in pretty poor working conditions with little to no workers' rights, and you had a number of aspiring politicians who would have been exposed to better working conditions largely in places like Aruba, Curaçao or the Panama Canal.*
>
> *They would have been involved in either oil refinery work in Aruba or Curacao or in the development and construction of the Panama Canal. As such, they had been exposed to better working conditions and union movements and the proper establishment of workers' rights and that sort of thing.*
>
> *So, you had these aspiring politicians who returned to their home countries, like Grenada, and were attempting to build a local political platform on the basis of establishing rights for workers. In Grenada you had two main political parties in those days...*

I then interrupted. After all, this was supposed to be the story of his life, and even though this information was useful, what I really wanted to know was how Demitri fit into this general picture of political change. I asked him to tell me about his siblings, family life, whatever came to him and he jumped right back into his story. We would come back to the politics later.

Mt. Moritz

Demitri explained that Mt. Moritz, where he grew up, was a very small village that was in large part settled by white Scottish and Irish farm workers who were originally prisoners sent to the Caribbean as part of their punishment. As was the case in the history of Australia as a penal colony, their time served, these white former convicts eventually formed settler communities on various islands.

> *The village was pretty small and close-knit and made up in large part of these white Scottish and Irish people who stuck to themselves. There was one road in and one road out of Mt. Moritz.*
>
> *The locals, who are called Mung Mungs, worked pretty hard to establish their own security system that ensured that their territory was not intruded on by people who did not belong to Mt. Moritz. So in large part, it was their private settlement. The people were mainly not very well educated; they were landowners and, as such, their income base came from agriculture and livestock farming.*

Demitri comes from a family of seven and, as he underscores,

> *I was from one of the few mixed families in Mt. Moritz. In my family of seven, I am number five. In large part if you were from Mt. Moritz you were from an intermarried family where someone had married their cousin, so you were pretty much local white. Very few local whites married outside of the family. My mother ventured out of the norm and not only married someone outside of the village but someone who was... coloured... as against white. The net result of that would be that she would have been somewhat ostracized by her family for going against the norm. We were pretty much the minority blacks in the family and very often we were treated like that, sometimes in the most subtle ways.*

Demitri (tallest child) with mother and siblings, circa. 1972. "Corduroys were a big hit back then. We were dressed in our Sunday best. The clothes would have all been made by a local seamstress in the village."

"Most likely taken in 1970. From left to right, myself, Leonard Grant ("Black Lenny"), and Darren David ("Saskee"), fellow scouts. ...We spent a lot of time hiking, camping and participating in boy scout activities. [Other than that], there was not much in the form of leisure for kids growing up in the 60s and 70s."

Black Man, White Heart

At this point I asked my father about the nature of race relations in a small place like Mt. Moritz. He explained,

> *In those days racism or prejudice was evident in the village. Being called black or "nigger" was something that you simply got accustomed to. However, because most of the whites in the village were not very smart, if you were very outstanding at something there was a certain amount of respect that you received from the rest of the community... well, from the white community so to speak. You were accepted on the basis of your being excellent at something. My personal experience with that was, because as a child*

I was very bright, from the onset I was at the top of my class. I went to school obviously like everyone else did at the Mt. Moritz Anglican School, which was a public school that was run by the Anglican Church at the time.

Since I was at the top of my class all the time I was respected by one and all and was accepted by the white folks in the village more or less as an equal. What that meant was I would spend time playing with the white folks' goat and be allowed to go to their houses. Later on when I started going to secondary school at the age of nine they would stop and give me a ride in their cars. Very often you would have a situation where someone who was white would stop their car or their truck to give you a ride and you would be walking with someone else who was black. Because you were accepted, because you excelled at something, you would hear a statement like "I didn't stop for you I stopped for Anita's boy". Anita was my mother.

On hearing my father's account, I was shocked at the level of racism evident in Mt. Moritz. My surprise stemmed from the fact that I had simply never thought about race relations being tense in the village before. After all, the majority of the white people who lived in Mt. Moritz at the time were related somehow to my father. I then asked Demitri if he fared any better with the few black people in the community. He explained the complicated situation his acceptance in the white community created for him. He says,

The negative side of that was that my coloured or black friends saw this as being a bit of a traitor. They would make statements like "You're a black man with a white heart". In fact, I remember being stopped by some of my black buddies at one point one evening when I was coming from the part of the village where most of the white folks lived and they were about to beat up on me because they figured that I behaved like I was white because I was accepted by the

white community.

This whole issue of race and prejudice was certainly something that was quite prominent in those days not just in the village environment, but in the overall social and political environment. While white people made up less than 10 percent of the population, they controlled more than 90 percent of the economy. Part of the whole political initiative at the time was to try to break the stranglehold that whites had on the economy and encourage and provide opportunities for more black people to establish businesses of their own or gain entry into positions that would allow them to improve their economic and social condition or, as they would frame it, to "better themselves". For example the banks, one of the premium employers in those days, according to Demitri, would have largely employed white rather than black people. Demitri noted: "You had to go through an education system that presupposed that a white person would be chosen over a black person regardless of which individual possessed superior qualifications."

Mass Migration

I then asked Demitri about his family's economic situation. He explained,

> *At the time we would not have been considered to be rich, but we were sufficiently well off or probably middle class. We lived in a house that was built of bricks, had indoor toilet facilities and owned our own car. My father, David, had a pretty decent job as assistant controller of customs.*
>
> *Our economic situation changed when my father, like quite a large number of people at our time, migrated to England. Coming from a British dependency, people like my father were entitled to the same education as a British citizen, and as Britain was importing labour also during the sixties, a lot of Caribbean people migrated to England. They could do so without any sort of immigration restrictions in search of a better way of life and in search of better educa-*

tion. My father happened to be one of those people who migrated with a view to completing his law degree which he had started on a correspondence basis while in Grenada.

Naturally the first thing that came to my mind was how his father's departure affected the family's economic situation. Demitri explained to me that David's move to England left him unable to support the family, and after a while, he stopped trying. David, like so many other migrants, started his own life in England and left Demitri, his mother and his siblings to fend for themselves in Grenada. Demitri explains,

Shortly after he left our family began to suffer hard times. On arriving to the U.K. he realised that the economic situation was not what was described, or what he expected when he got there. For a long time he was not able to support the family and as such our economic situation changed drastically to the point where my mother became the sole support of the family and we basically survived off of farming.

"Another family picture. This one shows (from left to right) Me, Junior, Mom, Nathaniel, Christian and Terri all dressed again in Sunday best. This picture may have been taken around 1968 to send to our father who left in 1966 to study law in the U.K."

> *As soon as we were old enough, we found part-time jobs to augment the family income. When my dad left, I was six years old. My oldest brother was 10 years old and my youngest brother was a baby; he was less than a month old.*

I then asked Demitri if he remembered when he started working and what sort of collective effort he and his siblings were able to organize to put food on the table.

> *I didn't work for anyone immediately but by the time I was nine years old I had my first part-time job cutting lawns and doing flower gardens for various people in the community on weekends. The entire family did farming as a means of providing income. So we reared rabbits, chickens, pigs, goats and sheep. What this meant was that we produced our own milk from the goats, our own eggs from the chickens, and there was always meat on the table whenever one of the animals was available for slaughter. This was also supplemented by us getting involved in things like hunting. So we'd go hunting for edible wild animals like maniacou and my oldest brother would go fishing to catch either freshwater fish or fish from the sea.*

Education

Demitri proudly spoke of the level of intelligence that he and his siblings possess. He described them as having a natural aptitude for learning. The entire family had at least a secondary school education, including the girls. Demitri described his mother, Anita, as a fairly strict disciplinarian. In spite of the fact that they had chores to do, once they were big enough, they were each responsible for producing some income. Moreover, the discipline and importance of getting a good educational grounding was also imparted to the Searles children by their mother. As a result, they all did relatively well and they all advanced to secondary school, an achievement, Demitri explained, that was very prestigious for being so rare in this time.

You would understand that in those days the number of entrants into the secondary school system was quite limited because of capacity. There was an annual exam that you did and only a small percentage of people, obviously those with the highest marks, were able to get into the secondary school system. A limited number of people got government-sponsored scholarships and the rest of folks paid their way. I managed to secure a scholarship. All the scholarship meant was that your school fees were paid; you still had to purchase your own books, school uniform and whatever else you needed.

Demitri went to secondary school at the age of nine and had finished his Advanced Levels at the age of 16. At 16, when he finished secondary school, he decided to find a job immediately so that he could help his mother and siblings financially.

I needed to earn money to help my mom out with the family expenses and I had two younger brothers who were still in the school system. On the day that I finished my last exam I got all my applications together. On the following day I was out getting those applications into the business community and I landed a job two days afterwards. I borrowed some money from one of my sisters to get a couple of suits of clothing and started my first job as a teller at the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce.

Demitri told me that he worked there for only three months and decided that since he wanted to continue his studies, his best option was to teach. He also thought it would be nice to give something back to his alma mater. So it is that he went back to teach at the same secondary school that he attended, The Grenada Boys Secondary School, where he taught Mathematics, Chemistry and Physics for a year. "Actually my brothers were still at school when I was teaching and one of them was actually in one of the classes I taught." Demitri left the following year on a scholarship to attend the University of the

West Indies to study engineering in Trinidad at the Saint Augustine campus. Trinidad is a significantly larger island than Grenada. Trinidad is also known for refining oil and transhipping bauxite and is therefore one of the more industrialised islands. Given its geographical proximity to Grenada, historically Trinidad has always been a key point of reference for Grenadians, and often the first, intermediate stop for Grenadians on a longer migratory journey. I asked Demitri what it was like to move from rural Grenada to such a developed island like Trinidad. He explained:

> *Life in Trinidad was very different from Grenada. On the whole it was a lot less personal because you were in a larger society. It was a more industrialised, faster-paced, very much more developed society. The scale of everything was much greater than anything else I had ever experienced. It was also my first time away from home in a strange, larger environment so that was another adjustment I needed to make.*

Demitri: front row, centre: "Nineteen years old. At University of the West Indies, studying engineering. Hanging out with my hall buddies, mostly Jamaican, from my floor at C-Hall in St. Augustine, Trinidad."

But I am quite adaptable. Some of my father's family lived in Trinidad including my grandmother, my father's mom, so I was able to build a relationship with them and they provided some support during that year that I spent in Trinidad.

At this point, global politics made its way into the life of my father. As a rule of thumb the Searles family stays out of active politics, even to this day. In fact, during my father's adolescence, most Grenadian boys were involved in the Youth Militia or some other political formation of the day. Refusal to participate in this kind of activity marked a young person in a negative way. But the events that would unfold during my father's studies abroad were of a completely different order. Because I studied at York University, it doesn't seem strange to think about the impact of revolution and its aftermath, topics frequently broached in the classes I took. But my father's story permits me to understand how the largely unexpected turn of events that brought the New Jewel Movement to power on the small island of Grenada would not only come to involve the Cuban regime of Fidel Castro, but a full-fledged landing and invasion of the United States in the company of an "international force" comprised of troops from other Caribbean nations. Yet for Demitri, as for all of us, these events unfolded as a sudden and unwelcome shift in his personal fortunes and opportunities. He explains:

Unfortunately at the end of that year the government of Grenada was overthrown as a result of the revolution by the New Jewel Movement and they installed a people's revolutionary government. Interestingly enough my father, who had never really supported me, at one point in time had been very close to the government that was overthrown, the Grenada United Labour Party government. [My father] had been the Grenadian High Commissioner to the U.K. for a period of time. As fate would have it, as a result of that relationship, we were branded bourgeoisie, anti-revolutionary, as belonging to the other side. The bottom line is that my scholarship was not renewed at the

end of that first year.

Political Involvement & the Revolution

This was in 1979. Demitri secured a one-year leave of absence from the University and returned home to Grenada. He then proceeded to resign from his teaching job at the Grenada Boys Secondary School because, having had his scholarship revoked, he "felt like the government had not kept their part of the bargain". He immediately found a job working at the Royal Bank of Canada, this time not as a teller but as a collections and statistical clerk. Demitri worked there for just over two years. I asked him if he had tried to go back to university at that time, and my father told me: "When I evaluated the cost of trying to go back to university, the economic cost alone was not affordable to me and as such I did not go back. I managed to find a job opening at Shell that I was qualified for and joined Shell in 1982".

Let me put some things about the Revolution in perspective. The revolution in Grenada was a popular revolution. The average Grenadian supported the Revolution and so did Demitri. The previous elected government, the Grenada United Labour Party, was very repressive. Not only had it damaged society as a whole, its members were even involved in criminal activities. Like the better known and more infamous Haitian dictator "Papa Doc" who had his gang of ruthless criminals, the Ton-Ton Macoutes, the Grenadian Prime Minister, Eric Gairy, surrounded himself with a group of thugs called the Mongoose Gang. If they thought that you were in opposition to the government, the Mongoose Gang could arrive and intimidate you, cut you up or shoot you and there was no recourse or "state protection" because they were, in effect, above the law. I asked Demitri if anyone in our family had ever had a problem with the Mongoose Gang. He said that we had not, but that he had some stories about the Gang that he could tell me.

> *Our family never had problems with the Mongoose Gang because we were always impartial in politics. However, I know lots of people who have had problems with the Mongoose Gang. I know a lot of folks who got shot by members*

of the Mongoose Gang.

In fact, we had one guy who lived in Mt. Moritz who was in the hierarchy of the Mongoose Gang and this was a chap called Martin "Blaze" Green. And Martin Blaze would arrive in Mt. Moritz and pull out his 22 gauge shotgun and let off a first blast "BLODOW! People of Mt. Moritz! Grenada belongs to Gairy but Mt. Moritz is MINE!! BLODOW!" And if the guys were liming[1] *on the wall or something he may just decide to shoot a couple of them before he went home. He was a white Mung Mung; he was Captain of the Coast Guard as well.*

I asked Demitri what he thought about the United States intervention during the Grenada Revolution. His analysis is that the intervention by the United States was overwhelmingly supported by the people of Grenada. As I noted above, average Grenadians supported the Revolution because they felt that the country needed a change from the repressive government of Eric Gairy. The people also believed in the leader of the Revolution, who was Maurice Bishop. While talking about Maurice Bishop and how he gained the support of the Grenadian people, Demitri said, "I think that this was because of Maurice's family background, the fact that he was from a fairly well-off family in Grenada and the fact that his politics appeared to be more socio-capitalist than communist." People believed that Maurice would take the communist part of the Revolution so far and no more, that he would not do anything that would not be in the overall best interest of the country and he would definitely not become a hard-line communist. Demitri then explained to me what led to the United States invasion.

I think what happened as the Revolution progressed was that the people who Maurice was associated with in the Revolution wanted to go hard-line communist and were forcing him to go hard-line communist too and he was pushing back against that. This created a serious rift within

1 "Liming" is a Caribbean colloquialism for "hanging out".

the hierarchy of the revolutionary government and that rift became very apparent to the overall population. As a result the Revolution became less and less popular with the masses supporting the Maurice Bishop faction of the Revolution and a smaller number of people supporting the Communist faction of the revolutionary government.

Ultimately what happened was when the Communist faction attempted to imprison and put the Maurice Bishop faction out of government, the people—with no weapons—rose up against machineguns and armoured vehicles to rescue Maurice Bishop. That resulted in the massacre at the fort[2] and laid the groundwork for the intervention by the U.S. at the request of a number of Caribbean leaders. That intervention was very much supported by me and by most of the population of Grenada.

A Bad Movie

When the United States attacked, the hard-line radical faction under Bernard Coard started to round up all the able-bodied men in various communities. They were sending trucks out and demanding that the men come out to defend the country against the intervention by the United States. I asked Demitri if he had to fight. He laughed and said no and proceeded to explain to me how he ended up dodging this obligation.

When the trucks were arriving in Mt. Moritz to pick people up, a number of my friends and I ran into the hills where there was no passable road that you can drive; there were

2 Fort Rupert, in the Capital. Bishop, who still enjoyed broad popular support, had been placed under house arrest by the radical faction of his own political party, a group led by Bernard Coard who sought to displace Bishop altogether and to take the New Jewel Movement on a more orthodox Marxist course. When a popular crowd of Bishop's supporters managed to liberate him from house arrest, they were attacked at Fort Rupert by that part of the army that responded to Coard's orders. Many of Bishop's supporters were gunned down and Bishop and seven of his closest allies and members of his cabinet were captured and executed by a firing squad within a few hours.

only footpaths in those hills. We did not want to be forced to pick up arms and fight for something we did not believe in. We just stayed out in the hills for a couple of hours until the forces had left and then we came back.

While this was all happening and the intervention had started, the country was more or less under curfew. Nobody was actually going anywhere because you could not be driving around. The entire country, in fact, was at war. Demitri put it aptly, saying, "It was almost like seeing a bad movie for the first time". This intervention went on for three or four days until the U.S. subdued all of the Grenadian forces. They lifted the curfew and said it was okay for people to move about, check on their families and try to purchase supplies and that sort of thing. Demitri went out in his pick-up truck with some of his friends and one of his brothers to check on his sister. You needed to fly a white

1983: "The U.S. invaded Grenada in the aftermath of a bloody overthrow and slaughter of the Communist Revolutionary Government leadership by a hard-line faction from the same Government. My brothers and I were in Grenada and witnessed the entire event. This picture was taken with my brother Christian and a friend some days later when assisting the U.S. troops with directions and location of abandoned ammunition caches in our village."

flag on your vehicle whenever you were driving up to the U.S. checkpoints. Unfortunately for Demitri, a turn of events led him and everyone who was in that truck into some trouble with the United States army. Demitri chuckled as he told me what had happened:

> *Some Cubans flew a white flag, drove up to the checkpoint and shot the Americans at the checkpoint. The Americans cordoned off everyone who was in that particular area at the time and held them over for processing. I wound up being caught in that net of people for processing and was in large part arrested by the U.S. army and held overnight until they processed me the following day.*
>
> *After that we were allowed to go home with some 3,000 other people who were just in the wrong place at the wrong time. We did manage to check on my sister after that and the irony of all of this is that six hours after being released I was driving back into the same place where I had been held prisoner. This time I was under U.S. army guard to set up the fuelling supplies for the army equipment on behalf of Shell. While I was being processed they were trying to figure out where the Shell contact person was and obviously I was right there all the time. This was all around 1983.*

Shell

Demitri is very proud of his work ethic. I asked him to tell me about his job at Shell, a company where he worked for a little over 20 years. I recognised the need for him to tell me about the career he had that not only bettered his economic situation, but gave him a world of experiences over the years. I asked him to tell me about some of the projects he worked on in Grenada and the surrounding Caribbean region after 1982.

> *Because of my background and the training I had I was able to master the job I had at Shell quite quickly. I was*

quite innovative in terms of setting up systems for managing stocks or resolving various types of operational and distribution problems. Pretty soon I was recognised as being one of the better operations supervisors in the region. I started acting then as Country Manager and, from 1986, I started having overseas assignments in order to build my exposure in various environments. This was all in the Caribbean region initially.

So between 1986 and 1990 I did quite a number of overseas assignments, largely on a project basis. For example, I installed a hydrant system at the airport in St. Lucia for fuelling aircrafts and installed two large thirty thousand gallons LPG tanks on a hill that was not accessible by the road so I had to cut a road to get those tanks off there and get them off a ship in a port in which the jetty had been destroyed by a hurricane. So I had to also build an access way for the barge using stone and local tiff coyer to achieve that. I have had some interesting but challenging assignments. I also designed and implemented the very first environmental management program for Shell in the Caribbean as well; that was also another assignment.

Leaving Home

Before I had turned a year old, my parents had left Grenada. I asked Demitri what led to them leaving. He smiled as he spoke of being promoted at Shell:

In 1990 I was given the job of Island Manager for Shell in Grenada. That did not last long as in 1991, I was transferred to the St. Kitts branch where Shell was having quite a lot of problems. They also wanted to experiment with a single person doing multi-island management. I was given responsibility for St. Kitts and the British Virgin Islands to manage as a single business unit.

Demetri circa. 1991. "I was Island Manager of Shell St Kitts, Nevis & B.V.I. at the time. Dressed for work."

Demitri, 1992, with the author on his knee

> *I left St Kitts in 1993 and transferred to Barbados when the company was restructured and became the Regional Operations Manager for Shell. I have been in Barbados since then.*

Demitri Searles no longer works for Shell; he has his own company called Searles Operations Consultants and has established his work, his friends and family in Barbados. When I asked him what he feels about returning to Grenada, he said with a glimmer in his eyes:

> *I can see myself returning to Grenada to live when I want to retire but for now Barbados is the most appropriate island for my line of work. Grenada will always be my home, my heart and my family base. You must never forget where you come from; I will never forget Grenada.*

Map of the Dominican Republic

Chapter Six

INVASION AND RESISTANCE IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

A Life in Santo Domingo and Upper Manhattan

by

Judith Adler Hellman

On the evening of September 11th, 2001, I phoned Gabriel Guzmán because we had plans to meet the following day to carry on an interview that had already stretched over three years. Given the day's events, I was afraid to ask anything more specific or intrusive than: "How are things for you?"

He replied very simply and in this order: "My family is OK. Everyone in the building came home. And everyone in the community, as far as I've heard, came home."

I was living, at the time, on the Upper West Side of Manhattan just 20 blocks south of the apartment house where Gabe worked as a doorman, and I understood very well how he had chosen his words because as early as 3:00 PM, in my building, we already knew that there was one neighbor on the fourth floor who had left for his desk at the World Trade Center that morning and who would never be coming home. His office, in the North Tower, was above the fire, and even as the events unfolded that first day, everyone who had watched in horror as the towers burned and then collapsed could figure out that those above the 93rd floor were likely lost forever. There was also a nephew of one of the cleaners in our building who had died. But neither she nor anyone else in the family had any way to know this on the night of September 11th.

However, happier news had spread through the building where Gabe

had worked since 1977. This building was home to more than 500 people and it seemed that everyone living there who worked in the World Trade Center or surrounding buildings had managed to flee.

What was most striking to me about Gabe's response to my question was that the tenants in his building were people whose immediate claim on his concern fell somewhere between his own extended family, and the broader community of Dominicans in which he was deeply involved, for Gabe was a local New York-based activist in the social democratic Dominican Revolutionary Party, Partido Revolucionario Dominicano (PRD). He was also a union steward, representing the entire staff in his workplace in local 32BJ of the Service Employees International Union, (SEIU). He was, as well, the moving spirit of a community garden that he and neighbors had struggled to establish in a small empty lot on 107th Street and Columbus Avenue. And, in addition to all these commitments, Gabe had been involved for years as a major figure in a movement for greater parental involvement in the public schools in the zone, efforts that culminated in Gabe's election to the Board of Education in his school district.

In a way I should not have been surprised by Gabe's reply to my question nor his preoccupation with the "people in the building" because I, myself, had lived there in 1998 while on sabbatical and I had witnessed the place he occupied in the affections of so many residents. Although he was the union steward whose co-workers elected him over and over to represent their interests, strikingly, many residents also thought of Gabe as their own. Because this was a rent-stabilized building, tenants typically lived on year after year and generation after generation rather than give up an apartment priced well below market levels. A great number of people had, as they would explain to me when I made their acquaintance in the laundry room or the elevator, "grown up in the building," and Gabe was part of what was good and reassuring in their world. When Gabe was on duty, children who came streaming home from school often stopped to show him their drawings and finger paintings, and sometimes, in the quiet hours, Gabe could be seen sitting at the service desk, working with the kids on their homework. And each of the five times that Gabe ran the New York City Marathon—a challenge that he did not take

up until he was into well into his 50s—building residents dotted the route from Harlem to Central Park to cheer him on.

Gabe at the door of the building with one of the resident children "helping" him with his work.

Following each successful completion of a New York Marathon, Gabe would wear his participant's medal for several days until all his supporters in the building would have had a chance to check it out.

An Employment Niche

Immigrant life in New York City is a world of what could be called employment niches. It is not a matter of ethnic or racial stereotyping that we should associate Chinese immigrants with hand laundries or Mexicans with bicycle delivery of Asian food to apartment dwellers. It is an observable reality that there are standard niches for immigrant groups, job opportunities that come principally through family and village networks. The best known of these—both from

film and TV, as well as the tragedy of September 11th—is the concentration of Irish and Italians in fire fighting and police work as well as in financial services. For Mexicans, as I learned when I studied their mass migration to New York which began in the late 1980s, the jobs where they cluster include cleaning up construction sites, pressing pants and suits in Korean-owned dry cleaners, selling flowers outside Korean-owned delis and salad bars, and in restaurants: washing dishes, preparing food, bussing tables, and finally, as a sign of upward mobility through English acquisition, actually waiting on diners at tables and earning the tips that come with that promotion.

Dominican job niches present a different pattern. When Dominican migration to New York accelerated in the mid-1960s from a few hundred to tens of thousands each year, the newcomers were hired to carry out some of the same tasks associated today with Mexicans. However, given that they arrived in a period when New York was still a major manufacturing center, Dominicans found employment in the garment districts of Manhattan and the greater NYC area, and in the manufacturing plants that abounded in this period. This was still a few decades before the great shifts in the national and global economies would make light manufacturing largely untenable in the northeast of the United States and the small factories where Dominicans had toiled alongside Puerto Ricans, West Indians, and an array of other recent immigrants, would be torn down or converted into loft apartments. By the time Gabe was on the job market in the late 1960s, Dominicans continued to labor in small factories and other minimum wage positions, but many were finding employment in the large apartment houses that are the standard dwellings in most of Manhattan north of 14th Street.

In these buildings, Dominicans managed to work their way up from janitorial jobs to more skilled handyman positions and, finally, up to the level of doorman, a job that requires command of English and an exceedingly high-level social skills that include perceptiveness and a capacity to project good will and inspire confidence in the residents. It is a relationship built on caring and a reputation for being thoroughly trustworthy because the doorman needs to know every person in the building and a great deal about their lives. He must know who earns a living working from home on the dining room table and

who receives packages of incoming work all day, who will be visited regularly by friends, relatives, clients, patients, or business associates, who is housebound and needy, and who, among the residents, would greatly prefer that the doorman pretend not to know anything about his or her private life. This is a job where today, occasional "casual" labor is hired by building managers at $7.50 per hour, but in which the vast majority of building staff is unionized by the SEIU and can earn up to $20 per hour plus benefits.

Thus the image of a doorman as a servile person forced to grovel for tips has virtually no relationship to reality. The doorman is very far from being a flunky in a fancy uniform, but rather holds a key position of influence as he intermediates between people of different social classes, race, ethnicity and language. My own understanding of this fact was provided by a Mexican immigrant I interviewed in 2006 who described the challenges of working for tips delivering food from a gourmet sandwich shop and the crucial role that doormen can play. Angel explained me:

> *...there are doormen who are total despots. It's like they're king of the building and you can only enter the realm by their favor. I'm not kidding. It's like they don't want to see that you're trying to earn a living just like them. But, then, the best doormen are the Dominicans and the Puerto Ricans because they ask you where you think you are supposed to be delivering the food and they put you in the elevator, press the button, and tell you whether to walk left or right when you get out. Then, next time you come to that building they greet you like a friend and a fellow worker:* "¿Qué tal? ¿Cómo estás?" *Someone explained to me that this is why these guys have these jobs because they all speak English, but then they can turn around and speak to us [in Spanish] and if there's any confusion, they can help everyone out—the customers and the delivery guys.*[1]

1 Judith Adler Hellman, *The World of Mexican Migrants: The Rock and the Hard Place.* (New York: The New Press, 2008), pp. 131-32.

Revolution & Repression in the Dominican Republic

How did Gabe find himself in the United States in 1965 and hard at work in Manhattan by the late 1960s? For sure, he was not an immigrant in the ordinary sense of the word. He did not "self import," to borrow a phrase from Mitt Romney's choice of words when he expressed, in the course of his 2012 presidential campaign, his expectation that undocumented migrants would "self deport" if made sufficiently miserable in the United States.

In an episode in U.S.-Latin American relations all too often forgotten in the United States (although certainly not by Dominicans), Gabe was brought to the United States with 150 other Dominican soldiers and sailors as part of a diplomatic settlement that leaves us blinking in amazement when we think about the present day circumstances of detainees from around the world being held indefinitely at the United States base in Guantanamo, Cuba. Gabe came to the United States, in effect, as a prisoner of war following the surrender of his battalion in the revolutionary army. This force was trapped in an enclave in downtown Santo Domingo and held off well-armed and well-trained American troops for seven months, defending their democratically elected president, Juan Bosch, in the face of the invasion of the island by tens of thousands of U.S. Marines under orders of President Lyndon B. Johnson.

When I first met Gabe, he was surprised to discover that I came to my interest in his country not, as was the case for some tenants in the building, from love of baseball or the sandy Dominican beaches, but precisely because of the landing of those U.S. Marines in Santo Domingo on April 28th, 1965.

It was on that day, 1,700 miles north of Santo Domingo in Ithaca, New York, that I was a Cornell University student dashing into Spanish language class when our instructor, a Colombian graduate student—a shy person who always stuck to the task at hand, which was leading us in language drills—turned to the assembled group sitting around the seminar table and asked: "Do you know that today your country invaded another country?"

The answer to this question was that none of the 10 of us knew and some couldn't even find the Dominican Republic on the map. That terrible

realization and the spontaneous "teach-in" mounted by Professor Walter LaFeber and his colleagues in the history department that same afternoon brought hundreds of students to a campus-wide political mobilization in support of the Dominicans who were defending their country, a mobilization that eventually grew into a broader nation-wide protest against the invasion of the Dominican Republic and, by extension, against the war in Vietnam which was beginning to escalate at the same time. This was my own first experience in political organization and protest of any kind and it would change my life. The invasion of the Dominican Republic also led to the foundation of the North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA), where I came to work after graduation, and it became the root of my interest in Latin America and the Caribbean and my decision to teach in that field.

Explaining to Gabe the significance in my life of the 1965 invasion of the Dominican Republic opened the way to a friendship and to the 10 hours of interviews that we completed back in 1998 along with the many, many more hours that we talked over the subsequent 15 years.

The Trujillo Years

Gabe was born under the dictatorship of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo who ruled the Dominican Republic with a savage hand from 1930 until his assassination in 1961. Trujillo was a megalomaniacal monster whose butchery was directly responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands of Dominicans and at least 20, and possibly as many as 35, thousand Haitian cane cutters who had crossed into the Dominican Republic in search of work. The absolute concentration of power in Trujillo's hands, the control of every inch of the Republic by his secret police, and the vicious deeds that marked his regime made him the most notorious of Latin American dictators in an epoch that was marked by unbridled savagery of strongmen throughout the region.

The events that prompted the uprising of the Constitutionalist forces in which Gabe participated were set in motion by the U.S. decision — after nearly three decades of American support for Trujillo and his regime — to rid the United States of an ally whose excesses were so great that he had become a liability rather than an asset to U.S. interests. To be sure, even as the horrific

acts of the Trujillo regime became well known through the 1930s and 1940s, it remained U.S. policy in the hemisphere to turn a blind eye to repression on a massive scale in the case of both military and civilian Latin American leaders, however barbarous or corrupt, who accepted U.S. dominance in the region. Moreover, in the aftermath of World War II, Latin American dictators who articulated an anti-communist line could count on U.S. support in the face of all domestic political opponents whom they inevitably labeled as communists.

Trujillo had accepted these parameters as a condition of enjoying U.S. support. Only toward the end of the 1950s, as he intensified his mass imprisonment and murder of peasants, workers, and the students, priests, and middle-class people who had joined the most downtrodden in the anti-Trujillo struggle, did it become too costly for the United States to continue propping up his regime. And so it was that Trujillo—as was the case with Fulgencio Batista, the Cuban dictator whom successive U.S. administrations had tolerated—was no longer useful for the purposes of "stabilizing" the region and making it safe for American investors. It was at this point, then, that the CIA was given the go-ahead to signal to key members of the anti-Trujillo coalition that it was safe to assassinate the "Goat", as Trujillo was called. Indeed, the car in which the assassins were riding when they overtook Trujillo and his cortege on their way to the dictator's weekend villa had been supplied by the CIA, along with the arms and the bullets to do the job.

Trujillo's death was followed first by a period of turmoil as various factions within his camp struggled for control, and then by a remarkably fair election that brought to power Juan Bosch, a left-leaning social democrat, literary author and essayist who, for 23 years, had been the anchor of the anti-Trujillo forces in exile. One of many remarkable aspects of this December 1962 election was that the progressive Bosch was, at that moment, the favorite candidate of the Kennedy administration, which threw its undiminished influence in Dominican politics behind the Bosch candidacy. Indeed, when Bosch took office in February 1963, he was invited by Kennedy to Washington where it is reported he was accorded a particularly warm welcome.[2]

2 Carlos María Gutiérrez, *The Dominican Republic: Rebellion and Repression*. (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1972), p 147.

However, once Bosch moved to make good on his campaign promises to carry out land reform, secure workers' rights and pursue other policies aimed at distributive justice, he came to be seen by the United States as a threat to American corporate interests in the region. And so it was that the CIA encouraged and, possibly, engineered the ousting of Bosch and his replacement by a right-wing conservative more likely to put U.S. interests ahead of the needs of the poor of the Dominican Republic.

Gabe's early life, as we will see, spanned exactly this period of rapid change along with both the terrifying repression and the organized resistance that would become part of the conscious experience even of a boy in a provincial town.

Early Life

Gabe was born in Puerto Plata on the north shore of the Dominican Republic on March 18th, 1944, the second of five children. This was not the Puerto Plata of the all-inclusive resorts that North American tourists know today, but rather a small town surrounded by fields where Gabe's father worked as a sharecropping *campesino* cultivating bananas, yucca, and grain.

> *My father would bring me to the fields, and show me how to work these crops, to plant and weed and all the rest, but I already saw myself as a boy of the city and I wanted nothing to do with agriculture.*
>
> *In Puerto Plata we lived very close to the big baseball stadium, but unlike most other kids, I was never drawn to baseball because what I loved was the ocean and all I wanted to do was swim and fish. I would get into trouble with my parents for taking off with my friends to fish. And I loved to swim. Even when I was a little kid, I was a very strong swimmer.*

Gabe says, "the fact was, I spent half my boyhood and teenage years hanging around the port."

That's how it was that when I was just 15, I was actually standing there in the port when, with my own eyes, I witnessed in the distance the explosion of artillery that halted the attempted landing in Puerto Plata of a group of exiled patriots. These were people inspired by the success of the Cuban Revolution who thought that they could follow the same model to overthrow Trujillo. But Trujillo's control over every part of the island was absolute, his spy network had tipped him off, and his forces were ready to combat an invasion. When these exiles, who had trained in Cuba and in Venezuela, started to disembark, Trujillo's Navy turned the ships' canons on them and just mowed them down them down before they could get a foothold on land.

Gabe explains that this attempt was carried out on June 14, 1959 and although it failed, it gave rise to a youth "Movement of June 14th" in which he took part.

I was secretly part of that movement from that time on. We spent a lot of time in those years listening to Fidel on short-wave radio and waiting for our chance to liberate our country as the Cubans had done in theirs.

But Trujillo had his SIM, Servicio de Intelegencia Militar, with their localienses*, their locally based spies in every corner of the country, and there were a huge number of "disappeared" people in those days. The SIM always went around in Volkswagens, and a Volkswagen would rumble down your street in the night and the next day there were people you had known, people from your neighborhood, who would never be seen again.*

As a teen, Gabe was not in direct conflict with his dad, but neither did he find in his father much comprehension and support for his youthful ambitions.

My dad was a very intelligent man, but, like my mom, he had no chance to go to school and I don't think that either one of them was taught to write—I can't remember ever seeing them write. My father was a very religious Catholic and he marched in processions with a group of lay Catholics who shared the responsibility of carrying the statue of the Virgin of Alta Gracia.

He always had this idea that I should serve as an altar boy, but I wasn't having any of it. What he wanted most was for me to work with him in the fields, and he would have been happy for me to drop out of school and go out with him to hoe and sow and weed and all the rest.

*But I said to him, listen, times are changing and I want to be an engineer, I want to study. I want to be a professional. At that point I was only in my first year of high school, but my dad's position on this was that I should come work with him or I should leave home because he wasn't, as he put it, going to support me or put food in front of me at the table because, at 18, he insisted, I was, "*grandecito,*" big enough to forge for myself.*

"This," Gabe says, "was when I heard that the Police Academy was recruiting trainees and I took off for the capital to join up. But once I got to Santo Domingo they told me that without a high school diploma, I couldn't be admitted."

Apart from not having the high school diploma, Gabe also had no money, and, as a consequence, he couldn't pay the bribe that might have gained him admission to the academy. He had no option but to return home.

"Still, I was not discouraged," he says, "and in fact six months later I heard that the Navy was looking for recruits for a special force; 'los Hombres Ranas'":

As soon as I heard about the "Hombres Ranas" I said: that's

perfect for me. I know how to swim. I'll become a frogman. But because I had been turned away at the police academy, this time, before I applied, I struck up a friendship with the head of the Naval forces in Puerto Plata, and right there in the port, he wrote up a recommendation and that's how I got into the Navy and out of Puerto Plata.

I ask Gabe when it was—in terms of the enormous political convulsions of that period—that he took off for the capital to begin his special forces training as a frogman.

He reminds me that Trujillo was assassinated on the 30th of May, 1961, and, even as those closest to Trujillo competed ferociously with one another to assume the mantle of the fallen dictator, all the exiled leaders of every political hue began to return to the island to try to set a democratic process in motion, to see what kind of political space would be open to them personally, and, of course, to try their own luck. This activity culminated in elections in 1962 that were won by Juan Bosch, the most progressive of the candidates.

It was at this point that I joined the Navy and I thought that my job would be to defend this constitutionally elected government. Of course, I had no idea then how hard this duty would turn out to be.

This was especially so because among the many reforms that President Bosch hoped to get underway was the restructuring of the military forces of the country, where, not surprisingly, ex-trujillista officers were deeply entrenched.

Being in the Frogmen unit of the Marina de Guerra, as my service branch was called, was especially tricky because it was a special force and in the years of Trujillo, it had a history of carrying out assassinations under his orders. We always heard that the assassination attempt against the Venezuelan President Rómulo Betancourt was the work of operatives of Trujillo's Marina de Guerra at the request of the Venezuelan opposition.

However, with the election of Juan Bosch, "the idea was to build a professional army in all branches and the officers who trained us recruits kept telling us that what we were doing was building an 'independent and professional' armed forces." Gabe explains,

> *We recruits were given intense training in explosives, in guerrilla warfare, some foreign language, and we even received instruction on how to break and enter and rob because French and Italian mercenaries were brought in to provide our training and I guess this was one of their special areas of expertise.*
>
> *At one point we were dispatched on a mission to overthrow the Haitian dictator, "Papa Doc," Francois Duvalier, but even though they marched us off in that direction, we never actually made it to Haiti and certainly none of the officers were explaining to the men why we turned around. I still don't know!*
>
> *Meanwhile, Juan Bosch was moving forward in his effort to provide land to peasants, he was fighting corruption in government, he was going to open education to everyone, to the entire "pueblo" and take schooling out of the hands of the Catholic Church. He even wrote and won the support of the legislature for the new Constitution of 1963. You can't believe how much popular support he had just because poor people could understand him and were moved by his words when he spoke.*
>
> *But, given his plans and his popularity, a coalition of the most right-wing parties, together with the hierarchy of the Catholic Church and the ex-trujillistas, accused Bosch of being a communist. Meanwhile, the U.S. administration, under Kennedy, started saying that Bosch was a "danger to democracy."*

The Armed Resistance

So it was that after only six months in office, on September 25, 1963, Bosch was overthrown in a coup carried out by those branches of the military that were in league with the most conservative U.S. and Dominican interests—even as the U.S. State Department and the American Ambassador in Santo Domingo continued to prefer a Bosch presidency to some of the more worrying and unsavory alternatives of the moment. Nonetheless, whatever may have been the disagreements among the U.S. State Department, the CIA and other actors in the Kennedy administration, Bosch was sent into exile in Puerto Rico. In Bosch's place, Joaquin Balaguer, who had served Trujillo in the role of puppet president as the dictator's power faded when the U.S. no longer found it expedient to prop him up, was now set back in the presidential palace, seemingly at the behest of the United States. However, inasmuch as all of these maneuvers took place in a two-month period that ended with the assassination of President Kennedy in Dallas on November 22nd, hardly anyone on the ground in the Dominican Republic knew what to make of the role of the United States in these events—least of all, Gabe.

As Gabe explains,

> *This was a time in which no one really knew what end was up, but the officers of my unit remained totally loyal to Juan Bosch because he was, as they kept saying, the constitutionally elected president of the republic. Basically the forces who served under these officers were determined to bring Bosch back from his exile and see him returned to power. Thus, our commanding officers became involved in the plot to overthrow Balaguer and this is why we felt that if Bosch came back, it was clear that we were all going to fight to the end to make sure that he had the chance to complete his term as President. We knew that we would have to fight against ex-trujillistas and other conservatives in the Dominican Republic. But who could have imagined that the United States was prepared to divert whole bat-*

talions of U.S. Marines who were already on their way to Vietnam, to launch a full scale invasion of the Dominican Republic?

It is at this point in our conversation that I feel I must confess to Gabe that for all that I have worked hard to understand the events of April 1965, I could never keep the details straight in my mind. There were so many political leaders, and multiple political parties as well as factions and fractions of political parties all fighting with one another for control. But most difficult of all to sort out were the military figures who were backing different politicians as their pick to assume the presidency or the acting presidency. And some of these ranking officers were fighting to defend their country and its sovereignty in the face of a U.S. invasion, while others were picking up the phone and calling Washington or the U.S. ambassador in Santo Domingo and requesting military intervention, including air strikes on their own people!

To this confession Gabe gently remarks: "Listen, we couldn't keep it straight either."

Imagine, when you were trying to figure this out, you were reading the newspaper or, later, you were reading history books and taking notes. But we were trapped in the center of Santo Domingo holding off tens of thousands of U.S. Marines, and we were listening to all kinds of conflicting accounts on short wave radio, and watching different figures come on the TV screen and pronounce on the events, and hearing word-of-mouth reports from the civilians who brought us news along with food and supplies they carried into the area where we were holding out.

We were really in a bad position to figure anything out. We just had to go on the belief that we were doing the right thing, that we were defending the sovereignty of our country and the outcome of a free and fair election that had brought Juan Bosch to power back in 1963. Our responsibility, as our officers explained it to us, was to support

and protect the constitutionally elected president and that's how we came to be called the "Constitutionalist Movement," although on the TV we were usually referred to as "the rebels."

In fact, Gabe describes to me the moment that he was sitting around in the barracks with his fellow frogmen watching TV and they suddenly saw their commanding officer, Lt. Colonel Manuel Montes Arache, appear on the screen and put out a call to the naval forces under his command, as well as to the "pueblo," to the people in general, to join him in the struggle.

At this point I was sitting there with my sergeant, Sergeant Mercados, and I said to him, "Listen, we should join this movement because Montes Arache is at the centre of it. I have confidence in him that he's acting for the good of the people."

Thus, Gabe explains, it was the military that called the people into the street to defend Bosch and oppose the imposition of a puppet government. He says,

It was just my good luck that my commanding officer was loyal to Bosch. The men who had signed on with the Air Force weren't lucky like us. Their commander, General Elias Wessín y Wessín, had been bought by the conservatives and he was determined to put the full weight of the Air Force behind the repression of the Constitutionalist Movement that backed President Bosch.

"Try to imagine," he says,

There's a bridge at the mouth of the Rio Ozama, where it runs into the sea, and the bridge was crammed with ordinary people who were crossing the river to march to the center of Santo Domingo to fall in with the Constitutionalist forces. But the Air Force was in the control of the coalition of the right, and its commander, General Wessín

y Wessín, ordered his pilots to bomb the bridge that was crammed with civilian men, women and children!

Once Gabe and the other men in his unit decided to cast their lot with the Constitutionalist forces, they gathered up all the arms that they could carry with them for their own use and to distribute among the people.

When we realized that we couldn't carry all the weapons that were stored in the barracks, we hit on the idea of taking out the firing pins on the ones we had to leave behind because we didn't want them to fall into the hands of enemy troops. One of the lower ranking officers who, at this moment, was in the barracks, ordered us to stand down and lay down our arms. So we grabbed him, disarmed him, and tied him to a chair with a handkerchief in his mouth. Later, when we returned to the barracks we found it empty because the other men in our unit who were afraid to join the rebel forces had been taken prisoner by the Constitutionalists and locked up on a ship to keep them from joining the other side.

"As for us," Gabe recalls, "we were determined to join the good fight and we took off for the centre of the city where Montes Arate had chosen Independence Park as the place where everyone who would follow him should mobilize."

We crossed the river not that long before the bridge came under fire, and we made our way to Parque Independencia where we were to shape up and that's where we found our Commander, Montes Arache, and a lot of troops from the Marina de Guerra and some from our specialized frogmen unit and we walked up to the Montes Arache and we saluted and we said: "We are with you. We're going to fight alongside the pueblo. Just tell us what you want us to do."

Gabe explains that the Constitutionalist forces occupied the commer-

cial centre of the city and most of the government buildings — in effect, the heart of the Capital. But what made their situation difficult was that at this point all of the key political leaders had taken refuge in foreign embassies and there was a real vacuum of leadership on the ground, other than that provided by the military officers in rebellion. "It was in this moment," Gabe says, "that it really became clear that we military men who had made the decision to stand by the elected president and uphold our new constitution were now perceived as 'rebels' and 'revolutionaries.'"

> *The American Ambassador met with our representative, Lt. Colonel Francisco Caamaño of the PRD, one of the only party leaders who was still around, and through him, the Ambassador sent a message to us that we were to lay down our arms or we would all be killed.*
>
> *So Caamaño left this meeting with the Ambassador and came back to where we were assembled and told us that he was going to take control of the Revolution because, at this point, our movement had become "the Revolution" and that we were all going to head out to the Puente Duarte to defend the people who were trapped there. And so it was that we entered into real combat on the bridge, and Caamaño was sworn in as Constitutional President to carry on in that role until Bosch could be restored to power.*

All this took place on the 24th and 25th of April but by the 28th another group of the armed forces swore in another general, Imbert Barrerra, as President of the Republic and another Air Force general, General Benoit, put in a call to Washington saying that U.S. intervention was required.

First, 400 U.S. Marines landed on 28 April, then, two days later, Lyndon Johnson announced the deployment of another 22,000 troops. By May 6th the United States had persuaded the Organization of American States, the OAS, to create an Inter-American "Peace Force" comprised of token numbers of soldiers and military police from Brazil, Honduras, Paraguay, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Costa Rica — all of these countries, with the exception of Costa

Rica, being themselves under the rule of military juntas or dictators condoned and supported by the United States. In effect, this was the 1965 version of George W. Bush's "coalition of the willing" designed to make a U.S. operation appear to be a broader "multinational effort." By the end of May 1965, the number of troops sent in by the United States, according to President Johnson himself, numbered more than 42,200.[3]

Gabe explains that, boxed in as they were by now in Ciudad Nueva, a 40 square block neighborhood in downtown Santo Domingo, he and his comrades in arms had no way to know the full dimensions of the army they were facing. But, he said, "What we could see, from our vantage point, were the helicopters carrying tanks, piece by piece, to assemble on the ground, and it was clear that the enemy we faced had come supplied for the long haul: aircraft carriers, tanks, heavy artillery, light weapons, food — everything."

> *So it was that we found ourselves surrounded. But then the most astonishing thing happened, which is that the struggle took on national proportions as civilians were mobilizing all over the place as people remembered that the United States had invaded the DR in 1916 and occupied the island for another eight years and the memory of that time was still pretty widespread.*
>
> *I remember this old guy, well into his seventies, a man named Gregorio Gilbert, who had fought against the U.S. invasion in 1916, and he came to the meetings we held in Ciudad Nueva and he got up and he said: "I'm Gregorio Gilbert and I fought the invading force in '16 and I am not afraid to do it again." He gave us courage and we began to be joined by an interAmerican force of people who came from who knows how many other countries and they joined us in Ciudad Nueva to fight side -by-side with us and with the Dominican people.*

Surrounded and outnumbered as they were, Gabe recalls that they

3 *Ibid*. pp. 155-156.

Gabe, age 19, in the uniform of the Marina de Guerra

Gabe, second from the left, in 1965 with his fellow combatants, armed and ready to defend their position in Ciudad Nueva, the 40-block enclave near the center of Santo Domingo

were able to take some U.S. soldiers prisoner and to interrogate them.

> *There was this one Puerto Rican—a very nice guy—who explained to us that he and all the others were already on a ship bound for Vietnam when Johnson received a phone call from some Dominican general who claimed that a communist revolution was underway and that priests and nuns were being slaughtered by the rebel forces. These U.S. Marines didn't even know they were landing in the DR, they didn't know where they were when they got here, but they pieced together pretty fast that Santo Domingo wasn't Saigon! The Puerto Rican guy certainly knew he was in the Caribbean, but he was totally disoriented because from one moment to the next he was in the DR instead of Vietnam and fighting people who looked like him and spoke his language.*

Gabe explains how the Constitutionalists held off the U.S. Marines for seven months.

> *We organized ourselves, we formed commandos, we put into place a council to govern Ciudad Nueva. Even while this war was going on, we had built something like a Paris Commune, as we all came to call it: we had clinics, we had theatres, we ran cultural activities. The people brought us food, the women came to cook and to wash our uniforms. One of them was a girl who was very committed to this struggle. She was from the countryside and worked as a house-keeper in the home of a middle-class lady, and once I met her, I spent every free minute with her that I could.*
>
> *As combatants, there were maybe 3,000 of us altogether, very highly organized among ourselves with soldiers, ordinary citizens, and some political leaders. We held out, but on the 15th and 16th of June, U.S. forces broke through the lines, and a lot of people were killed on both sides. Still, we*

fought back and held our ground.

"In effect," Gabe says, "the U.S. forces could not take Ciudad Nueva; they had us surrounded, but we didn't cede any territory; we held on to our 40 square blocks and they simply could not advance without provoking a bloodbath on both sides."

> *The end came because of diplomatic talks and wrangling — not through a military victory over us, because, after seven months, a kind of weariness and boredom settled over the people who had held out for so long in Ciudad Nueva. At that point, a lot of people were just ready to go home.*

The Years of Exile

Gabe and his comrades learned that talks were underway and that some kind of pact had been signed: the soldiers were to return to their barracks and the leaders of the Constitutional Movement would be sent into exile. Strangely, they also learned that some of the troops were going to be taken out of the country as well, first in a U.S. Air Force transport plane to Puerto Rico, and from there to Fort Hood, Texas. Gabe was one of those men.

"Does this mean that you were taken as a prisoner?," I ask.

> *Not really. My status was that of a captured soldier. The whole thing was negotiated by the UN. We fell into the category of "rebels," but were dealt with as captured soldiers who had acted under orders. When we were loaded onto this military transport plane, we really had no idea where we were going or what would be done to us.*

Gabe explains that the whole question of their status was complex because what had started out as a civil war between factions of Dominican military forces fighting one another under orders of commanders backing different civilian figures for the presidency had become, with the invasion of the U.S. Marines in April 1965, a defense of the soldiers' and sailors' homeland. "It was pretty clear in international law that we, as *militares*, had a duty to defend

the sovereignty of our nation."

> *At the same time, because there were so many high-ranking officers who had been involved in the Revolution, the idea was to "rebuild" the armed forces—particularly because it was not just the officers, but the Generals who had played a key role. And with respect to the most militant soldiers, the idea was to get them out of the country for a while.*
>
> *The big leaders were sent in to exile in London and to Ottawa as military attaches or whatever it took to get them out of the DR, and we frogmen who had been given a lot of specialized training, they took us out in two groups. Some were left in Texas at Fort Hood and later sent to Vietnam and others, like me, were moved on after a few days at Fort Hood to California and—as it would turn out—to freedom.*

"You were lucky not to end up in Vietnam," I observe.

> *For sure, and remember, this was a time when the U.S. was sending lots of foreigners to Vietnam. If you were in the country and of draft age, never mind if you were not a citizen, they could conscript you and send you to fight and die in Vietnam. Thousands of guys from Latin America ended up there. To tell the truth, I was very scared when I was put on that plane out of Santo Domingo. I felt like I had been caught in a mouse trap. I said to myself: they can disappear me, they can kill me — no one would ever know. But I am a soldier, so maybe they will respect me.*

As Gabe relates the story, only three days after arriving at Fort Hood, he and some of the other combatants from the Constitutionalist forces were sent to a naval base in San Pedro, California and, once there, to courses in the local university to learn English. After the English lessons, they were given training in carpentry and plumbing which earned each of them a diploma. All this, they were told, was meant to enhance their level of specialization in the interest of

preparing them for their return to their unit in the Dominican Republic.

"The idea, he says, "was to 'professionalize' us as part of the restructuring of the Dominican military following the U.S. invasion."

However, when Gabe actually returned to Santo Domingo following this period of training, he found that he would not be reintegrated into his unit.

> *We were warned that the American Ambassador had decided that those who had participated in the popular uprising would have to leave the country and that they would be given residency papers to live in the United States, and could go either to Puerto Rico or to the U.S. as they chose. I was also told by many different friends to leave at once or risk being "disappeared" by right-wing thugs and ex-trujillistas—something that had actually happened to the people who had not accepted this offer of exile in the United States.*

As unlikely as this entire scenario would seem in light of the current-day closed border policies in the United States, it is important to know that this offer to Gabe was part of broader program implemented by the Johnson administration and the ambassador in the Dominican Republic to reinforce U.S. control in the country after the way in which events had, from the American perspective, spiraled out of control. The United States did not want people like Gabe stirring up more trouble for the regime of Balaguer, whom they had installed once more as president through elections widely believed to have been fraudulent. Above all the United States didn't want "another Cuba" developing in the DR, on "America's doorstep"—as any challenge to U.S. dominance was inevitably framed.

The work of Hoffnung Garscof, a historian of Dominican migration, shows that the uncharacteristically generous offer of residency to ex-revolutionaries like Gabe was just part of a policy the United States put in place to issue visas to tens of thousands of Dominicans in the 1960s.[4] This new plan

4 Jesse Hoffnung Garscof, "'Yankee, go home... and take me with you!' Imperialism and

was completely at odds with the severe restrictions on emigration that Dominicans had known over the previous three decades, that is, under Trujillo's rule. Trujillo, fearful of the growing opposition to his regime that was steadily building in Dominican exile communities in the United States and elsewhere, had strictly controlled the exit of Dominican citizens during the most savage years of his regime. The dictator had limited flight from repression by granting less than a tenth of all passport applications, thus trapping would-be opponents inside the country where they could be watched and exterminated by his secret police.

However, with the assassination of Trujillo in 1961, massive emigration of Dominicans began. This exodus was facilitated in every way by a U.S. Embassy in Santo Domingo which opened new consular offices for this purpose. The number of visas issued to Dominicans increased twenty-fold, even though the U.S. authorities were fully aware that a great proportion of these people would overstay their visas and remain in the United States.[5] The Embassy's goal was simply to get dissenters to leave the island, and eventually U.S. policymakers took this strategy one step further by becoming "active advocates of political deportations throughout the early 1960s," a perfect way to rid the Dominican Republic of the remnants of Trujillo's old military and, at the same time, of young nationalists and leftists of every description.[6]

Given that Gabe now had residency papers to live and work in the United States, he had no choice but to accept what he hoped would be only temporary exile. Gabe's name was placed on the list of "subversives" who would not be allowed back into the Dominican Republic, a restriction that would be in force until 1979, when a new administration came to power and exclusions of this kind were lifted. But where to go? Although he had some personal experience of life in California, he decided to head for Brooklyn based entirely on a photograph of the Brooklyn Bridge that he had seen as a boy and greatly admired. So it was that Gabe set out for New York in October 1967.

International Migration in Santo Domingo, Domincan Republic, 1961-1966," *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies,* Vol. 29, Nos. 57 and 58, 2004, pp. 39-66

5 The number of visas issued rose from 464 in 1960 to 9,857 by 1963. *Ibid*. p. 56.

6 *Ibid*., p. 52.

Life in New York City

Gabe started his new life as a dishwasher in a hotel in mid-town Manhattan, slept in the basement of a friend, and lived on leftovers from the kitchen that the waiters kindly put aside for him and the others at the bottom of the food prep staff. Next he worked in a paint factory on Long Island, driving a delivery truck to hardware stores in Queens, Brooklyn and Manhattan, at each turn getting to know better and better the geography of his new world, even as he pushed on with his English lessons in night school. By 1977, he was doing piece work in a lamp factory when he got the call from a friend of his brother and landed his job as doorman.

On his day off, Gabe hung out with other veterans of the Dominican Revolution who had likewise made their way to New York. It was a lonely existence, but one that changed in 1979 when his name was removed from the list of subversives and he was finally allowed to return to his country. At that point he could marry and bring back to New York Obdulia, the young woman with whom he fell in love in the months of the battle to hold Ciudad Nueva.

But it was not to be a quiet life for this veteran of the Revolution.

For starters, in the years after they were sent into enforced exile, Gabe and his fellow combatants continued to be contacted and courted by political operatives of all stripes, including even ex-trujillistas. These envoys hoped to persuade the veterans to put their military experience to the service of a new effort to oust Balaguer and restore Juan Bosch, along with a good number of other schemes that were even more quixotic when not downright mad.

While unwilling to take up arms again, Gabe's political life nonetheless continued to be one of sustained activism because he was fully engaged in the New York section of the PRD, the party founded by Juan Bosch, and the party of his commanding officers in the Revolution. Once emigrants' right to maintain dual nationality was affirmed by the Dominican Congress in 1994, and overseas Dominicans were given legal representation in the country's major political institutions, voting from abroad became the next logical step and, indeed, was formalized in 1997. At that point, the estimated 500,000 Domini-

cans living in the greater New York area became the third largest concentration of potential voters in Dominican elections, on or off the island.[7] For all candidates for major public office in the DR, New York became an obligatory campaign stop, and party activists like Gabe found themselves in the thick of each electoral contest and deeply engaged as well in the intra-party competition for nominations.

Apart from his engagement in the PRD, by the late 70s, Gabe had become involved with a group of squatters who were occupying vacant buildings that had been abandoned—as so much property was in this period—by landlords who could no longer afford to pay the real estate tax on their buildings or to meet the minimum safety standards required by the city codes. When the City of New York foreclosed on these buildings they would be listed in a book as available for sale. But having almost no commercial takers for these properties, the City also made them available to low-income people who became "homesteaders" with the investment of one dollar and the required "sweat equity," that is, the commitment to carry out all the required repairs with their own labor. "Under this program," Gabe explains,

> *poor people, though our own labor, could rescue a building and turn it into a family home, or multiple units in the case of a larger place. The group of former squatters that we put together created a cooperative, and we got a loan from the Morgan Bank and worked at this for two full years. We had help from some students who came down from Yale University who were studying how to solve housing problems and they helped us get organized and take our renovation through what they called the "three stages": demolition, construction and decoration. In the end, our cooperative group saved the building from falling down, it belongs to us, and we are eight families, each with our own small apartment.*

7 Pamela M. Graham, "Political Incorporation and Re-incorporation: Simultaneity in the Dominican Migrant Experience," in *Migration, Transnationalization, and Race in a Changing New York*, Hector R. Cordero-Guzmán, Robert C. Smith, and Ramón Grosfoguel, eds, (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2001), p. 87.

Gabe's housing efforts, not surprisingly, turn out to be right across the street from his next project, which was the creation of the "Mobilization for Change" Garden, a community green space in an open lot at 107th Street and Columbus Avenue.

> *This was an empty lot that was infested with rats, heaps of garbage and drug dealers. Like other community groups in the most densely crowded, poor neighborhoods all over the New York, we got permission from the city to turn this barren bit of city-owned land into a community garden where old people can sit in the shade to play dominos and relax with their friends and teachers can bring school children to work in the garden and see how a seed turns into a plant. And we have plenty of people in the streets around here who came to New York directly from the countryside and they really love this little space where we can get together and grow things: flowers, fruit, vegetables.*
>
> *Not only the schools, but also the police have been very supportive. And we have block parties that bring together Latinos and Black people and White people and everyone who wants to enjoy this garden, and as you can imagine we have lots of music as well. But it's not just salsa and merengue. A classical music group came here to play for us.*
>
> *There was a time under Mayor Giuliani, when the City decided to sell to the highest bidder most of the empty lots it owns, and 126 of the 300 that were up for sale were gardens like ours, most of them in poor areas of the city where there are very few parks or playgrounds. But all the community gardeners fought back and we mobilized support and now it looks like we'll get to keep our space.*

When considering Gabe's work in the PRD, in the community garden, in defense of the workers who rely on him as their union steward, in getting out the vote for Barrack Obama in 2012, it is hard to imagine when he would

The Mobilization for Change Community Garden. Note the urban streetscape at the left of the picture.

A woman from the neighborhood cultivates one of the plots.

Gabe stands in front of the other large mural in the garden. It was painted in 1995 by the students from the Booker T. Washington Middle School, diagonally across the street—the same school where Gabe studied English in night school.

have found time to become an advocate for low-income parents and children in the public schools. Yet, in all of our hours of conversation, education has been the topic to which he has returned most often, and the hours that Gabe spent with me relating these stories at his dining room table often concluded at the point when he had to turn his attention to supervising the homework of his children and, more recently, his grandchildren.

This man who, despite his boyhood dreams of pushing forward to professional studies, never had the chance to move beyond his first year of high school, has dedicated himself to providing this opportunity to others. One of his projects with his late wife, Obdulia, involved the foundation of a Dominican Institute of Journalism in New York where aspiring print, radio, TV, and internet journalists would find training and certification. But most crucial for Gabe has been the issue of the resources available at the elementary and middle school levels where he has worked to assure that Latino children in bilingual programs would have access to the same school supplies, computers and other supporting materials that were standard in the English-only classrooms. Always sensitive to the language question, Gabe has also lobbied to bring Spanish and Creole translators into all meetings between the public school officials and teachers, and the parents of the children they teach. In the end, his election in his district in Upper Manhattan to the New York City Board of Education was simply a logical outcome of all the work that he had carried on in the schools over the years.

When Gabe stands tall, not quite at attention but looking strong and serious in his doorman's uniform in the portal of the building on Riverside Drive, it is not so difficult to picture him, years earlier in strikingly different circumstances as a teenage recruit in the uniform of the Dominican Navy. When we think about these two poles of his existence, it seems clear that there is no contradiction between the violent conflict into which he was thrust while still at teenager and the quiet, steady way in which he has lived his life in New York: working in the same building for 35 years, organizing his neighbors around projects like the community garden, building political coalitions in the PRD, and representing parents in the schools and fellow workers in the union.

Gabe's involvement in war sprang from his commitment to democracy,

to his fellow soldiers, and respect for rule of law as represented by the Dominican Constitution of 1963. His subsequent life in the United States has been a reflection and affirmation of those same values.

Map of Nicaragua.

Chapter Seven

A LIFE ON THE MESKITO COAST DURING THE NICARAGUAN REVOLUTION

By

M. McLean Ayearst

When Miguel Gonzalez was young, he occasionally joined his parents on the long journey to Managua from his hometown of Bluefields. Although he couldn't tell you why, Miguel could always feel the tension in the air; he knew that the capital was a dangerous place. This visit, however, was different, "the city was just in cows," as he put it. Miguel and his mother had to fight for a cab at the airport and the vehicle simply crawled through the crowded streets traveling across town to his uncle's. Once the cab could push on no further, Miguel and his mother joined the crowds on foot. His mother wasn't frightened, so neither was he. The tension of Managua was on full display and Miguel and his mother marched with the masses of people who thronged the streets. It was January 11th, 1978, and Miguel was 11 years old, too young to understand that he was witnessing the beginning of the end of the Somoza regime.

The Somoza era began in 1936 when Anastasio Somoza Garcia, head of the Nicaraguan National Guard, engineered a coup against the existing government and then took power through a fraudulent election.[1] This began the era of the Somozas, three generations in succession who ruled through a combination of military control, American support, authoritarian manipulation of democratic institutions, co-optation of rivals and violence against en-

1 Thomas Walker, *Nicaragua: Living in the Shadow of the Eagle*. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2003), p. 26.

emies. Anastasio Somoza Debayle was the last in this line of presidents who had controlled Nicaragua as a personal fiefdom, enriching themselves at every opportunity.

Then, in 1972, the world became aware of a new outrage: Somoza Debayle had pocketed millions of dollars in international relief aid that had poured into Nicaragua after a massive earthquake and hundreds of aftershocks left most of the capital city in ruins.[2] Thus, Miguel and his mother, witnessing this demonstration six years later, were still surrounded by the rubble of the devastated capital. The previous morning, on his way to work, journalist Pedro Joaquin Chamorro, an open critic of the Somoza regime, was killed by an assassin's bullet.[3] The ensuing protest was only the first in a series of massive demonstrations of opposition to the regime that culminated in a war of liberation. The liberation war was fought from 1978 to 1979. It pitted Somoza's National Guard against the Sandinista Front of National Liberation (FSLN), a confluence of Christian, Marxist, and other left-wing grassroots movements.[4]

Located on the south-eastern Caribbean coast, the town of Bluefields, like the rest of the Miskito Coast, which was named for the indigenous people the British found in place when they arrived in 1630,[5] has always been removed from the Pacific capital region and the mainstream culture of Nicaragua. Originally an English protectorate, Bluefields has historically been more integrated with the Caribbean than with the interior of Nicaragua. Its commerce has depended on its connections to the Caribbean Sea and, to this day, anyone traveling east from the capital has to take a boat to reach the city. Given this degree of isolation from the west of Nicaragua, Miguel's life in Bluefields was mostly unchanged by the liberation war which was predominantly fought in the western part of the country. His family could only follow the events of the war through radio and TV broadcasts from Costa Rica and Honduras. Nonetheless, in time, the beginnings of open dissent against Somoza that Miguel had witnessed in Managua did, indeed, reach Bluefields.

2 *Ibid*., p. 32.

3 *Ibid*., p. 34.

4 *Ibid*., p. 40.

5 Karen Ordahl Kupperman, *Providence Island, 1630-1641: The Other Puritan Colony.* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 1.

> *I did not attend [the demonstrations] at that age. My parents would not let me go there. But I remember seeing mobilizations against the Somoza regime on the streets of Bluefields and I can still remember that these demonstrations were led by Mestizos and Blacks. Some Mestizos were linked to the Catholic Church and others were connected to the unions in Bluefields. The black activists were also linked to various churches. Most of them were independent, radicalized youth.*

Miguel's family lived in *Barrio Central*, a largely middle and upper class *mestizo* neighborhood, whose population was, by his account, "not so much pro-Somoza, as pro-status quo". The upper class controlled the region's economic activities, commerce and industrial fishing, and were directly linked to the regime. Miguel understood the middle class to be either content in their stable position or fearful of the well-known consequences of criticizing the regime. Miguel's entrepreneurial father, who owned a hardware store and worked as a cabinet maker, had always denounced the Somoza regime.

> *My father used to be a "proud" member of the conservative party, the traditional rival of the Somoza party, the PLN. My father was also born in a region in Central Nicaragua (San Pedro de Lovago, la Libertad, Department of Chontales), which at that time was considered the cradle of the young radical conservatives.*

Miguel's mother's political consciousness was nurtured by the Catholic Church, which had increasingly preached against the Somoza regime. However, his parents' criticisms of the government were rarely expressed in public. If criticism was expressed it would be only "to close family members, friends and to my father's associates. Criticism of the regime came in the form of jokes about Somoza himself."

Miguel's mother grew up a peasant and was taught to read late in life through the public school system. Learning to read was the birth of her political consciousness, as she read forbidden books by authors like Pedro Joaquin

Chamorro. The ideas from these books, which she kept hidden away like "treasure" in the back of her closet, never left the home. For the young Miguel, those books were always a "mysterious" thing.

In 1978-79, late during the liberation war, open dissent finally broke out in Bluefields and along the Miskito Coast as Mestizo, Indian, and Black students were mobilized, "mostly by radicalized priests and secular members of the Catholic Church", and unions started to support the FSLN and denounce the government. Miguel's mother and father were finally able to voice their political opinions in open public settings.

> *I felt safe. I felt secure, but also I felt that around my family in general there was a sort of optimism. Especially my mom, she was quite optimistic about the transformation, the Sandinista discourse for the poor and underprivileged. This was because of her background. She was from a peasant family. I think she transmitted that enthusiasm to us. My dad was more skeptical about the plans of the Sandinistas and their views.*

On 20 July, 1979, the victory of the FSLN became official and the Sandinistas began the process of establishing a government.[6] The results of the distant war would immediately change Bluefields, and over the course of the next decade, the community—as Miguel notes—would be "completely transformed".

> *The first thing that happened is that several of my friends, acquaintances and classmates moved away. They just disappeared overnight. The other thing I saw is that basically new people started to come to the Bluefields community. They were Mestizos from the Pacific, which also created discontent locally since they have always been seen as members of the oppressive Nicaraguan nation state. They were new political appointees or officers, and they were appointed to spaces of government in Bluefields. The*

6 Walker, *Nicaragua*, pp. 41-42.

contra-*revolutionary movement also began against the Sandinistas. That was happening in early 1981, maybe one or two years after the Sandinista government took over. So as you can see, these were years of intense transformation. I was 12, then 13, so I was able to follow and see the impact this had on my community.*

Immediately after the government was overthrown, Miguel noticed that some children had disappeared from school and that their families' homes were empty. Miguel's *barrio* and school were markedly altered as families linked to the Somoza regime "disappeared overnight". Fearful of persecution, they had fled the country. Miguel was not frightened by the disappearance of his friends, because his parents weren't alarmed. They were part of the large majority of Bluefields residents who were euphoric about the collapse of Somoza and optimistic about the future. Miguel's mother was captivated by the Sandinista discourse of support for the underprivileged. She transmitted her optimism to the rest of the family. While initially Miguel's father was happy about the change, he was very reserved in his support of the FSLN. He was a business owner and he was concerned that the socialist FSLN would implement policies that would run counter to his interests.

He did not fear the Sandinistas—I guess—because he shared with them an opposition to the Somoza regime. That's why, I believe, he did not think of leaving the country. He was also a successful business man and his money, properties, warehouse, and factory were all located in Bluefields. It would have been a difficult decision to make. He was skeptical about the plans of the Sandinistas and their views. He used to sell equipment, hardware for construction and so on. He felt that eventually his business could be affected and confiscated or controlled by the government. He was open and friendly and he would speak openly about his views with people who were Sandinista and also against people who were against the Sandinistas.

Miguel's school was full of hope. The empty homes of the *barrio* and the seats in the classrooms in school began to be filled by the families of FSLN appointees who took over the positions of government. During its first year of rule, students routinely mobilized in support of the FSLN. Early in 1981, the Sandinista Youth came to Miguel's school to recruit volunteers for the annual sugar harvest. The Sandinista Youth was one of many new FSLN institutions designed to decentralize the government in order to make it more efficient and effective,[7] and to "mobilize the masses in support of the FSLN and its goals." The FSLN was seeking labour to help on a sugar co-operative they had appropriated from the Somoza regime two hours north of Bluefields. This program was one of many designed to serve the FSLN's central policy of agrarian reform that sought to transform power relations in Nicaraguan society.[8] Miguel did not feel pressure to volunteer in the cane fields, but rather was enthusiastically caught up in the momentum of the revolution.

> *About two hours north of Bluefields there is a big sugar cane plantation, so what happened is there was a shortage of labour at the plantation because of the war. The Sandinista Youth requested that we participate as workers in the sugar fields. This was a way of instilling new, revolutionary values. It wasn't mandatory; it was volunteer work, but since all of my friends were going to the cane fields and there was momentum and enthusiasm, I felt I had to go and so I did. In this way I became involved with the Sandinista Youth organization.*

The previous year Miguel's two sisters, Lisa and Dora, had volunteered in the FSLN-initiated "National Literacy Crusade." Modeled on the successful Cuban literacy brigades of the early 1960s, the Nicaraguan campaign was designed to provide basic education to Nicaragua's rural *campesinos*. Alongside agricultural reform, basic education was meant to empower this marginalized segment of society. Miguel's sisters, then 14 and 15, went to teach in isolated

7 *Ibid*., p. 142.

8 Octavio Damiani, *Collective Responses to Crisis: Agricultural Cooperatives and Intermediaries in the Post-Sandinista Nicaragua*. (PhD diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1994), p. 9.

areas with little government support. The National Literacy Crusade lowered Nicaragua's illiteracy rate to 10 percent, one of the lowest in Latin America.[9] Today his sisters still remember with great satisfaction their participation in this campaign.

> *Because of my mother's peasant background, she supported my two sisters. It was a difficult decision as you can imagine because my sisters were just teenagers. My mom said, "Yes, you can go." and they went really far from Bluefields. They went to the countryside in rural areas with little support, but she did what she could at that point to provide them food and moral support and so on. She was really happy that my two sisters were doing that work.*

9 Walker, *Nicaragua*, 129.

"I am at the far right in the camouflage hat. This is 1983, and I was participating in the agricultural brigades in Kukra Hill, approximately 50 kms. north of Bluefields. Note that we are armed, as it was our regular practice due to the fact that the brigades used to work in a war zone."

Miguel volunteered with the Sandinista Youth because he wanted to join his family and friends in the FSLN-led restructuring of Nicaraguan society.

Miguel smiles when he remembers his fulfilling experience working in the cane. "Cutting cane was a terrible experience for me; I was exhausted, my hands were covered in calluses". However, "being exposed to the lives of peasants" and "living within the community" provided an education he would never forget. "I met great people here and 25 years later, we are still friends." Before the revolution the poorest 80 percent of the population were labourers who, because they worked with their hands, faced discrimination within their society.[10] Miguel was 14 and at this point increasingly aware of the terrible conditions faced by this population. From this moment, Miguel became, as he describes it, "politicized and supportive of the Sandinista revolution."

> *After that, I have to say, the military conflict became prominent. The country was at war. The U.S. involvement was clear; it was open; the congress was supporting the counterrevolutionary war and the U.S. had their bases in Costa Rica and Honduras. So after the experience in the sugarcane plantation, I was recruited by the Sandinista Youth to become a* miliciano.

Late in 1980, Ronald Regan was elected and he begun the "Contra War" against the FSLN government of Nicaragua. The Contra War was a low-intensity conflict aimed at destabilizing the FSLN through the sabotage of Nicaraguan infrastructure. The Contra War, in tandem with United States policy of international economic strangulation, placed tremendous strain on the FSLN government and Nicaraguan society. [11]

By 1981, the initial wave of euphoria and optimism that had accompanied the first years of the revolution was replaced by the harsh reality of warfare. Unlike the liberation war, the Contra War was fought heavily in the Caribbean coastal regions. "People started to see their sons and their family members being brought into Bluefields in plastic body bags," Miguel explains.

10 *Ibid*. p. 116.

11 *Ibid*., pp. 55-58.

Food became scarce, a second wave of people fled the country, the countryside became a war zone, and the cities became overpopulated. "It was warfare in the zone south of Bluefields".

The open hostility of the United States caused a nationwide groundswell in membership of FSLN grassroots organizations.[12] The population of Bluefields increasingly mobilized in genuine support of the FSLN against the imperialist actions of the United States, in the same way as Miguel who, having become politicized in the course of his cane cutting, had signed up in the militia. As he was still in school, Miguel went for military training on the weekends and performed his military duty as a patrolman.

> *As a patrolman I was assigned, along with other young militiamen, short-term military missions in the surroundings of Bluefields. Many of these operations were aimed at providing protection for the port facilities in Bluefields and the Bluff. Very frequently, the contras would attempt to ambush us by taking advantage of the natural defenses provided by the many small rivers that lead into the Bluefields Lagoon. Sadly, some of my very close friends died in these ambushes.*

There was a great deal of contra activity in the Bluefields region, as the United States sought to sabotage this crucial port facility. A vital economic artery, Bluefields's ports were used to receive imported technology from the Soviet Union that was crucial to many FSLN economic policies. The United States mined the harbour, blew up important port facilities and sabotaged internal transportation infrastructure. Miguel felt "[he] had to provide security," and he was still "confident in the revolution."

> *My confidence in the revolution played out in many different ways. I had a strong commitment to military training and missions, although I refused to commit to long term stays outside Bluefields as I was still completing high school. I was also active politically within the Sandinista*

12 *Ibid*., p. 50

Miguel, second from the left, in 1986. "At this time I was chief of a 90-man unit, mostly "reservistas" (national reserve guard) that provided protection to Bluefields. I was serving my term in the SMP (Servicio Militar Patriotico)."

Youth Organization, which also included grassroots organizing to recruit new affiliates. In addition, I continued to participate in student brigades dedicated to agricultural work, cane cutting and planting palm.

My role as patrolman was not very different from these other activities since very often we were called upon to provide military protection to the camps. This is the reason why we were armed all the time. Today when I see the few pictures I have from this period, I am amazed how young we were at this time! I can only explain this as an indication of the enthusiasm and idealism the Revolution inspired in me and so many of my peers in the Sandinista Youth Organization.

Engaged as he was in all of these activities, Miguel did not share his

father's concerns and doubts about the FSLN.

> *My father went from being somehow optimistic initially to developing a certain scepticism toward the Sandinistas. I would say that by 1981 onwards he to remained sceptical and openly critical. [Over time,] my dad had become more politicized and anti-Sandinista. He felt the Revolution had been betrayed and that the FSLN would take the country into a new authoritarian political regime, one very much like Cuba, he used to say. [At this point] I didn't pay much attention to his thoughts. Also he was particularly affected by the blockade. He became actively anti-Sandinista which meant that he was publicly expressing his views.*

Miguel's father felt his business was in trouble. Moreover, he felt the Sandinista government was becoming authoritarian and unfortunately, he was correct. Miguel's father voiced this opinion at a meeting of local business owners. Miguel explains, "He felt it was his obligation as a business owner and a free person. Given that the dictator had been overthrown, he felt that it was a good moment to talk about his views." However, someone at the meeting was a Sandinista spy and soon after Miguel's father was brought to trial in Managua, charged with being a counter-revolutionary. After a closed trial with no presentation of evidence or a proper defense, Miguel's father was sentenced to 12 years in jail for "material support" of the counter-revolutionaries and his business was confiscated.

> *It is important to stress the fact that these were not just tribunals. They were named "Popular Anti-Sandinista Tribunals;" my father was not allowed to have a defence lawyer, and no evidence was presented in order to issue that harsh sentence. It was clearly an unjust and authoritarian act on the part of the FSLN government. My mom was shocked and afraid. She couldn't understand the whole thing… No one could explain why my father was in jail… She became less enthusiastic and stopped mobilizing on behalf of the FSLN.*

A year later, in 1983, Miguel's father was released from prison along with others in a series of amnesties that were produced by international negotiations. Miguel explains, "The FSLN presented this as a unilateral 'gesture' to create the conditions for peace talks with rebel groups in the Coast". Miguel's family was also able to regain ownership of their confiscated business "by petitioning the FSLN military commander in Bluefields, who happened to be from the Coast and who was aware of our commitment to the Revolution". While "disappointed with the treatment of his father and family", Miguel was still serving as a militiaman in the FSLN forces. In fact, Miguel was generally away from home carrying out military operations all the while that his father was working hard to reestablish his business and to overcome severe health issues that were the result of his imprisonment.

> *I knew that the FSLN had affected his life, but it was also affecting mine. We tried to avoid political discussions, but it was inevitable. He was very critical of the Sandinistas."*

Bluefields remained under siege, and FSLN supporters were armed by the government to fight. Miguel explains: "I was in uniform, I had a weapon at home and, basically, I was armed. I believed it was the right thing to do."

> *On May 3, 1985, few weeks before negotiations between the FSLN and the indigenous rebels began, Bluefields was attacked. I was sent to a post near the airport with orders to repel an offensive that had temporary disrupted the regular operations of the airport. I remember this episode caught me off-guard. I could not believe how, since we were winning the war, the contras would even attempt this kind of uncoordinated attack. Although at that point I did not fully grasp the magnitude of what was at stake—no less than Bluefields falling under the control of the contras—fortunately, the defense of the city was successful.*
>
> *At the airport battle we captured some wounded contras whom we took prisoner and sent to the police station. Some of them required immediate medical attention. To*

my astonishment, by the end of that same day, the dead bodies of these prisoners were displayed at the Central Park—according to the military commander to "teach a lesson" about the kind of punishment that awaited those who might even consider such an action against the Revolution. When I returned home for dinner that night, I told my mom what I had seen. She broke down in tears and even today still refuses to talk about it.

Miguel explains that, in spite of his parents' misgivings, he remained firm in his commitment to fight the contras.

I was still confident in the Revolution at that point and I did not quite understand my dad's concerns or beliefs even when he was arrested. I became discouraged and disappointed by that, but I was still in the militia and I was a Sandinista Youth. The CIA was active in sabotage, they attacked the ports and mined the ports on both sides of the country and that's why I remained a miliciano.

Miguel also remained ideologically committed to the revolution and believed that there would eventually be some sort of explanation for his father's imprisonment. But he never found one. "There was never any proof." His growing awareness of the lack of any evidence or of due process began the gradual erosion of Miguel's political commitment to the FSLN.

Miguel's dad was freed from prison but his life was completely changed. "He became sick, lost his energy and his physical health deteriorated." Miguel saw his father struggle more and more to recover his health even as both his parents "worked day and night to re-establish the family business." But neither this enterprise, nor his father's health ever recovered. Hampered by the overall economic situation, Miguel's father's business languished. Miguel believes that his father's premature death 10 years ago stemmed from the traumatic experience of being jailed.

As a result of a previous medical condition, my father's health worsened during the time that he was imprisoned.

He had suffered a car accident when we was young and was always in need of medication to treat a brain clot that caused him seizures. The medication could not be delivered when he was incarcerated. When he was released from prison, his seizures were significantly more frequent and his health deteriorated over the following years.

When Miguel was 18 and graduating from high school, he saw that his father still hadn't recovered, and he realized "that [he] didn't want to be involved politically with the FSLN." However, Miguel had to serve out his mandatory time in the army, which, because of his previous experience, meant that his service would take place as a commanding officer on the frontlines against the contras.

Although the SMP, Patriotic Military Service, was mandatory, in 1986 I joined voluntarily. In some respects, I wanted to get this service obligation out of the way as soon as possible in order to have more freedom to pursue other goals in life. I did receive some additional training, this time a more specialized preparation in command and control of military troops. I was transferred to a Miskitu community in the Pearl Lagoon basin and served as the commander of a 10-man unit.

Miguel notes that the peace negotiations were well underway in this area and they had started to show some positive results. He explains: "Our units were comprised of young people born on the Coast, we spoke Creole English, and I understood that this was part of a government strategy to overcome the animosity that local people felt against Nicaraguans from the Pacific."

*Although some skirmishes took place during this period, I did not take any role in military operations. Very often commanders refused to send me to combat missions. After eight months I was transferred to Bluefields, where I commanded a "*compañía*" (a 90-man unit) comprised of the national reserve guard. During this time a highly trained*

elite force of the contras attacked the Mahogany River area and killed five men who were under my command. To this day I regret the fact that my superiors did not fully disclose the risk of the combat mission where these men lost their lives.

Miguel completed his SMP service in Kukra River (about 20 kilometers south of Bluefields), after leading several successful military operations.

Before leaving the military I was offered a permanent position in the army, which I refused. However, I did not reject a state-of-the-art brand new Citizen watch sent to me as a gift by the chief of Nicaraguan army, Humberto Ortega, in recognition of my years of service.

In summing up the ambivalence he felt in the period, Miguel says,

At that time I was still truly hopeful about the Revolution's ideals: justice, freedom, emancipation from imperialism, equality, solidarity, and I was truly convinced that the FSLN had not been able to realize these goals because of the counter-revolutionary war.

However, I also became disappointed with the abusive actions of local and national FSLN leaders, their intimidation of young people who held different views (not necessarily anti-Sandinista), and, of course, I felt troubled by the injustice with which my father was treated by the FSLN government. I also felt that abuses by military commanders were openly violating basic human rights of civilians. I guess these concerns came together in my decision to quit the Sandinista Youth and to reject an offer to become a permanent member of the army, and I began considering going to the University in Managua in 1988.

His mandatory service complete, and committed to finding non-partisan explanations, Miguel turned down a post as Lieutenant in the Sandinista

forces. He had become convinced, through his military service and the way in which the FSLN's popular democratic institutions were developing, that a hierarchical, partisan organization was not a valid solution to the problems that the underprivileged faced. He wanted to get his degree in Sociology in order "to find reasons, and causes, an explanation for the series of transformations I saw in Bluefields, changes to my father, changes to my family, the changes brought from rural migration to the city".

From 1988 to 1990 he studied Sociology in Managua, which was once again a tense, dangerous environment. It was not a good time to be a student in Managua. The Nicaraguan economy was in shambles, as economic blockades and structural adjustment policies meant that there was no funding for education. Miguel's parents were still struggling to re-establish the family business and could not help him out with money for textbooks. The university campus itself was highly politicized with daily conflicts between opposing factions and police supervision of students. Miguel felt that while he enjoyed his studies and was able to avoid becoming caught up in political conflict, "[he] couldn't get a solid degree in Managua under these conditions". He was accepted on scholarship to the National School of History and Social Anthropology in Mexico (ENAH) and he moved to Mexico City in 1990.

When Miguel left in 1990, Nicaragua and the FSLN government were exhausted by the Contra War and Bluefields had suffered a natural disaster. "Basically my town was destroyed by Hurricane Joan in October 1988, including the house in which I had grown up. We had to start from scratch". Miguel's parents continued to struggle to maintain the family business and start a restaurant. In the meantime, the elections of 1990 came around and "the people voted out the FSLN because of economic and political pressure that we were all suffering. We had lived through wars. At this point, the people just wanted a return to a more normal situation".

Miguel Gonzalez has since received his doctorate at York University and has taught as an Assistant Professor at both York and Trent Universities in Toronto and in Peterborough, Ontario. He returns annually to Bluefields to teach at the University of the Autonomous Regions of The Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua (URACCAN), and to conduct development projects and research.

Miguel's experiences under the Somoza and FSLN governments became the foundation for his success as an anthropologist and political sociologist. He felt the oppression under Somoza and witnessed the contradictions of the FSLN. In choosing school over a role in the military hierarchy he acted on his mother's belief "that books were so powerful in their political dimensions".

Chapter Eight

WINDING ROAD OF FEAR

A Look at the Colombian Conflict Through the Eyes of a Truck Driver from the Paisa Region

by

Lorenzo Vargas

Interest & Methodology

My interest in Ernesto Rámirez as a possible research subject grew from a conversation with his daughter Octavia, a close friend of mine, who mentioned that her dad had been a truck driver for more than 50 years in the Paisa[1] region of Colombia. Having met Ernesto Ramirez a number of times when visiting Octavia, I thought that his experiences as a driver, in addition to his notable attachment to the traditional values of his native Antioquia, one of the wealthiest departments in Colombia as a result of coffee production and light industry, would make him an excellent source on both rural and urban Colombia. The main reason I was so enthusiastic to interview Don Ernesto was because I assumed that he would be a person who, despite the limitations that years of armed conflict had imposed on Colombians, had truly observed everyday life in Colombia, both in the countryside and the cities.

In terms of methodology, I gathered most of the information during a lengthy interview session with Don Ernesto conducted in Spanish in his apartment in Don Mills, on the eastern side of Toronto. In the course of our conversation, we had the intermittent company of Octavia and Doña Gloria, Don Ernesto`s wife, who, despite being busy with their own things, took the

1 Paisa is the name used to describe people coming from the coffee-growing regions of Colombia, especially the departments of Antioquia, Caldas and Quindío. The biggest city of the Paisa region is Medellín where Don Ernesto was born.

time to sit at the table and encourage him with their laughter as he related the story of his life. They also provided us with delicious *mondongo* and mango juice, making the interview session feel more like a dinner than research. I focused most of my interview questions on the perceptions that Don Ernesto had of the different actors in Colombia's armed conflict, though the conversation often drifted to his life here in Canada and the differences between the lives of truckers in Colombia and Canada. I then moved on to conduct a bit of research to contextualize the stories told by Don Ernesto.

Brief Background on Colombia's Armed Conflict

Having experienced armed conflict involving leftist guerrillas and the armed forces since 1948, mainly as the result of a weak central state and unequal distribution of land, and fuelled by drug money since the 1980s,[2] Colombia has long been a focus of the United States' "war on drugs". It has become the region's main recipient of U.S. military assistance, recieving $781 million in 2007 alone. The conflict reached its most dramatic and visible point in the late 1990s, at which time the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, or FARC—were sitting on the hills overlooking Bogotá, and guerrilla presence was so prevalent in many areas of the country that normal economic activities were seriously compromised by their attacks on infrastructure and businesses. In addition, the country was experiencing high levels of violence, with one of the highest murder and kidnapping rates in the world.[3]

In 2002, Alvaro Uribe was elected president by promising military defeat of the guerrillas. His development model was markedly neoliberal, resulting in the elimination of many social and agricultural subsidies for small farmers as well as price controls.[4] Despite some economic growth and improvements

2 Mabel González Bustelo, "Desterrados: Forced Displacement in Colombia" in Alfredo Molano, ed. *The Dispossessed: Chronicles of the Desterrados of Colombia*, (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005), p. 226.

3 Vanda Felbab-Brown, *Counterinsurgency and the War on Drugs* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2010), p. 101.

4 Jasmin Hristov, *Blood and Capital: the Paramilitarization of Colombia*, (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2009), p. 37.

in security, some argue that Uribe's policies actually exacerbated the issue of internal displacement and armed confrontation, as many people who previously owned their land have been forced to move to urban areas. It is estimated that 37 more families arrive in Bogotá every day as a result of the violence they face in their regions,[5] to the point that Colombia is currently facing a severe humanitarian crisis involving some 3.4 million internally displaced persons.[6] In sum, it is fair to say that some of Colombia's internal conflict dynamics changed significantly during the past decade or so, and that the civilian population, especially disadvantaged sectors such as the peasantry, have borne the brunt of the armed conflict.

Don Ernesto's Childhood & His Love for Trucks

Ernesto Rámirez was born in the township of San Cristóbal, on the outskirts of Medellín, in 1942. He lived most of his life in this area with the exception of periods when he would spend months on the road, or when he lived by himself in the Urabá region of Colombia, close to the border with Panama. Don Ernesto recalls having enjoyed a happy and peaceful childhood, despite growing up with limited economic opportunities. When asked about his immediate family, Don Ernesto replied:

> *With my mom, well it was like this: She had two kids: my sister who now lives in Florida, and me. She was always very busy when I was growing up, but she was still a great mother, very loving and always there for me. For her, seeing me leave home so I could become a trucker wasn't easy, but she eventually accepted it. I have no immediate family in Medellín.*
>
> *My dad was a great man. He didn't know how to sign his own name and couldn't even read, but he was the best father in the world. He always worked to keep us happy.*

5 González Bustelo . "Desterrados: Forced Displacement in Colombia," p. 224.

6 UNHCR. *2010 UNHCR Country Operations Profile-Colombia*. UNHCR.org. http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/page?page=49e492ad6 (Accessed April 2, 2011).

He used to work at the Plaza de Mercado, which is like a central fruit market, carrying fruit and food sacks. He was very strong. He was very nice; he never even swore and he didn't drink. When my dad first saw me interested in trucks, he paid for me to take a few courses to become a mechanic. I appreciate him because he supported me to become a truck driver.

What was the first truck you ever drove? How old were you at that time?

It was an Ford F8 model 1950; it was very small. I must have been about 13 or 14 years old. And back then you could buy your fake license for like 10 cents COP [Colombian Pesos], especially in the Caribbean coast, where I travelled with some friends when I was, like, 15. I drove around San Cristóbal for a few years until one lady I knew in Montería paid the 40 cents that the real license cost, so that was my first license, I must have been 18 or so.

Wasn't it scary to begin driving at such a young age?

Yeah! Of course! In Colombia all the roads are very narrow, and there are many mountain roads. You had to know how to do it because you had to invade the opposing lane. That`s hard, that`s bravo*! But I was lucky and never got into any serious accidents.*

And yeah, I started working as a driver ever since, at the beginning riding around with friends [in their trucks] and then they would let me drive on my own. Wherever there are roads in Colombia, I've been there. I've been to Venezuela many times as well; I know that country very well.

Do you like being a truck driver?

Oh, I think it is such a great life. I like the food, though in Colombia the food is much better than the food you find

Don Ernesto's 1951 F8 Ford truck.

Don Ernesto on his route.

Don Ernesto with the author in Toronto, relating his life story.

on the road here. But in Colombia the food is always good. And truck drivers eat a lot, plus I am a paisa *and we are known for eating a lot. I used to weigh 114 kilos. I would get off my truck and the truck was happy to rest! But in general I can tell you that for me there is nothing better than driving a truck. Plus, we truckers move the economy of a country. Trucks move everything that is consumed in a country.*

Well, my first years as a driver, I worked driving cattle around. All over the Caribbean coast: Montería, Sincelejo. Back then those areas were very safe, very nice places; it makes me sad that things now are so bad. There was no danger, the only danger were the mosquitoes! No one would steal from you. This must have been in 1957, 1958.

Things were very nice and easy until the mid-70s or so and then, I started to notice so much corruption and so many thieves.

Living in the Urabá Region & Dealing with the Guerrillas

In the 70s I moved to the Urabá region,[7] and I lived there for a long time. I was young and had no responsibilities, so I moved there to see what things were like. That's where I learned to manage my money. I had enough money to buy four trucks, but no, I spent all my time partying and relaxing. I worked for the banana plantations, and I lived by myself because I was single.

The Urabá region is well known in Colombia as one of the most violent areas of the country. Historically, there has been a strong presence of the FARC

7 The Urabá region is in the northern part of the Antioquia department, right on the Caribbean coast.

Map of Colombia. The principal truck routes of Don Ernesto are indicated in red.

and other smaller guerrilla groups in the region, such as the Popular Liberation Army, the Ejercito Popular de Liberacion, or EPL.[8] There has also been a strong presence of paramilitary groups starting in the 1980s. The region suffered intense violence during the 1990s, with an estimated 97 massacres that left approximately 607 victims dead between 1991-2001.[9]

Did you experience violence first-hand while living in Urabá?

> *I have a friend who did; his name was Ramón Rodríguez. He had a son and I remember the kid because he used to bring him around work. So one day I ran into my friend Ramón in Barrio Triste, the area where all the truckers arrive, and I asked him about his son. And he just started to cry and told me that the guerrillas had taken him. The kid was driving one of Ramón's trucks out in the Urabá region, and the guerrillas stopped him and they took the truck and they took him as a soldier. And then a little while later Ramón got a message from the guerrillas saying that his son was fine and that he shouldn't worry about him because he was happy.*

The FARC, the guerrilla group that likely seized Ramón's son, was officially formed in 1964 as the armed wing of the Colombian Communist Party and has evolved over the years to become a strong, and controversial rebel army. This organization, which has always argued for land reform, started out as a peasant guerrilla army and eventually adopted a Marxist-Leninist ideology.[10] The FARC then moved on to control large portions of the national territory that lacked state presence, where they would often create pseudo-states that provided essential services to the population.[11]

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8 Andrés Fernando Suárez. *Identidades políticas y exterminio recíproco: masacres y guerra en Urabá 1991-2001*, (Medellín: La Carreta and Instituto de Estudios Politicos y Relaciones Internacionales de la Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2007), p. 98.

9 *Ibid*, p. 50.

10 Francisco Leal Buitrago, "Armed Actors in the Colombian Conflict" in Kees Kooning and Dirk Kruijt, eds. *Armed Actors: Organized Violence and State Failure in Latin America*, (London & New York: Zed Books Ltd., 2004), p. 88.

11 Maria Victoria Uribe Alarcón, *Salvo el poder todo es ilusión: mitos de origen*, (Bogotá: Editorial Pontíficia Universidad Javeriana, 2007), p. 175.

I can't believe what those people [the guerrillas] do. I've got to tell you, I was lucky nothing happened to me because I used to argue a lot with the guerrillas.

What do you mean, you used to argue with the guerrillas?

I'll tell you. Once I was in Urabá and the guerrilla stopped me. It was the Fifth Front of the FARC and the commander was a woman, which was a bit unusual, but she was a tough woman who could control things pretty well. Back then I used to like hunting a lot, with dogs and rifles and all that. I have my rifle permit and everything. So in the Uraba region I used to go out hunting with some guys, but sometimes they would say they couldn't make it and cancel last minute.

One day I was on a bus there and the guerrillas stopped the bus and the commander said hi to me: "Hey Don Ernesto!" She even knew my first name! Then she asked me why I wasn't hunting that day, so I said it was because my friends had cancelled. She laughed and talked to me about my rifle, which was a Winchester, and about the gun I had under my belt, because back then I was always armed. I was so surprised because she knew everything about me! The reason why she knew me was because of the guys I used to go hunting with, they were part of the guerrillas, too.

So since I had her there, right in front of me, I asked her a few questions. "If you guys are for the people, then why do you hurt the people? Why do you kill truck drivers without a reason, why do you burn our trucks?" She said it was because they had to show their strength, their presence in the region. So I told her "Why do you want to show your strength to a poor trucker? Why don't you attack the army, the government offices?" She looked at me, all defiant,

and asked if I didn't like what they did. All this time I was thinking about the gun under my belt and saying to myself that if she got aggressive I would give her five or six shots in the head. One has to defend oneself. But nothing happened and she just told me to leave.

In 1984, after years of struggle, the FARC initiated a peace process with the Betancour administration, concluding with the partial demobilization of the group and the formation of a political party, the Unión Patriótica (UP). The UP, however, was quickly decimated by the constant attacks from paramilitary groups and drug cartels; it is estimated that around 3000 political activists from the UP were assassinated, including two presidential candidates. As a consequence, most UP supporters retreated back into the jungle to continue the armed struggle.[12]

In the early 2000s, the FARC had approximately 18,000 combatants and an estimated budget of U.S.$ 200-300 million.[13] It is widely assumed that the FARC is deeply connected with Colombia's drug economy, raising serious questions about its ideological commitment to revolutionary change. According to Colombian researchers, the FARC has been involved in the drug trade since 1978, mainly through control of certain drug routes and the taxation of drug barons.[14] It has also taken over coca farming and transportation of coca paste in the geographical areas where they hold a strong military presence.[15] In addition to their involvement in the drug trade, the FARC troops have engaged for years in extortion, kidnapping and massacres of civilians. It is estimated that in 2008 the organization held approximately 800 hostages, 25 of whom were considered to be high-ranking prisoners in terms of their value for use as political leverage.[16]

12 Uribe Alarcón. *Salvo el poder todo es ilusión: mitos de origen*, p. 199.

13 Bilal Y. Saab and Alexandra Taylor, "Criminality and Armed Groups: A Comparative Study of FARC and Paramilitary Groups in Colombia." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 32:6 (2009), p. 460.

14 Francisco Gutíerrez and Mauricio Barón, "Subsidiary Orders—Coca, Emeralds: War and Peace." *Colombia Internacional* 67, Jan - Jun (2008), p. 128.

15 Saab and Taylor. "Criminality and Armed Groups: A Comparative Study of FARC and Paramilitary Groups in Colombia." p. 463.

16 *Ibid*. p. 463.

On Drug Trafficking

Drugs have been part of the Colombian economy since the 1950's. In this period, small-scale production was based in Medellín, Don Ernesto's hometown, where heroin and cocaine were processed for sale in the United States.[17] By the 1970s, Colombian criminal organizations had expanded into growing marijuana and, as a result of American anti-drug initiatives in Mexico and the Caribbean, Colombian drug traffickers controlled wholesale distribution of marijuana in the United States.[18] By the 1980s, Colombian criminal organizations were involved in the cocaine trade and were importing coca paste from Peru and Bolivia and processing it into cocaine for sale in the United States and Europe. In 1982, for example, the drug economy accounted for 10 to 25 percent of Colombia's exports.[19] Most of the drug trade, as Felbab-Brown explains, was controlled by two powerful criminal organizations: the Cali and the Medellín Cartels. These cartels, which reportedly earned as much as $6 billion a year from their sales of cocaine, were complex organizations capable of maintaining sophisticated laboratories, connections with multiple criminal organizations abroad and their own security apparatuses and legal assistance.[20] Given the reach of the cartels, I was particularly interested in the impact that the drug trade had on the lives of people like Don Ernesto.

Don Ernesto, how did things change in Medellín with the drug trade? How did it affect you as a trucker?

> *Oh, that stuff was really bad. It messed many things up. Even though many new buildings were built in Medellín, there were many truckers moving around drugs, so you would have a lot of suspicious people walking around. It caused a lot of violence, a lot of trouble in general. Even today many drivers get killed and stuff like that because*

17 Felbab-Brown. *Counterinsurgency and the War on Drugs*. p. 71.

18 *Ibid*. p. 71.

19 Jennifer Holmes, "Plan Colombia, Violence, and Citizen Support in Colombia." In *New Approaches to Comparative Politics: Insights from Political Theory*, edited by Jennifer Holmer, (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2003), 88.

20 Felbab-Brown. *Counterinsurgency and the War on Drugs*, 72.

they are in that business.

But I guess it benefited many people… The thing is that people in Colombia are so mischievous… I met a couple of business owners who used to have stores and trucks when I was younger. They were great people, but one of them lent money to shady people and he ended up getting killed in broad daylight, close to the city's main market. That hurt me very much, to hear that such a great person, José was his name, had been killed only because of money.

What happened is that drug dealers always want people to work for them to transport drugs, but sometimes they run out of money and they can't pay you so they just kill you. It's horrible; many innocent people end up dying.

But for me, people in that business don't enjoy all that money. Look at Pablo Escobar. He was one of the richest men in Colombia, maybe one of the richest in the world. And look at the way he lived, like a rat in a sewer. For me, money doesn't translate into happiness. For me, happiness is to have tranquility, to be able to sit peacefully at home and have a beer or a glass of juice. So much money for what? Those people need to have bodyguards and stuff like that; that's not life.

Don Ernesto explained to me that, beyond the increasing presence of drug traffickers and guerrillas, the security situation grew much worse everywhere in Colombia during the 1980s. For him, this was the result of an erosion of values; he felt that people thought they could do whatever they wanted because there were no consequences. There was a general feeling of impunity. He gives the example of a time when his first truck was stolen.

With the money I saved from my years in Urabá I bought my first truck and started working transporting stuff to the Caribbean coast. But then my truck got stolen in Bar-

ranquilla. They stopped me and they tied me to a tree by the road, and they took my truck. It happened because I trusted a guy who asked me for a ride, but then in a desolate part of the road he drew his gun and I had to get off my truck. They didn't take my money, or my watch; they only took my truck.

I spent a few hours tied to that tree until I managed to break the wires they had used to tie me up, my wrists were all bloody and I had to work barefoot on the road until a bus took me to the centre of Barranquilla. I looked for the truck for a little while but then I gave up. That was in the 80s, I think. I was very worried because back then, I supported my parents and my dad was worried sick that we would starve. This kind of stuff didn't happen when I was younger in the 60s and 70s.

Entrepreneur & Political Views

Ironically, one of Don Ernesto's best years as a trucker took place after his truck was stolen in Barranquilla in the early 80s. Through a lot of hard work and sacrifice, Don Ernesto, who describes himself as an industrious and successful person, managed to get back on his feet. As a result of his ability to communicate effectively and a good measure of luck, Don Ernesto was able to amass a small fortune selling contraband salt:

After I came back to Medellín without my truck, I began working with this guy who hired me as a driver. He always sent trucks to Maicao, close to Venezuela, where all the contraband items come in. Salt is very cheap there, too. So once when I had dropped off my load I decided to fill the truck with salt and take it back to places like Monteria and ultimately to Urabá, where they had very little salt. It was very beautiful salt, so fine, it was iodized salt I think. So that's how I started to make money, selling salt. I flooded

all the areas of Urabá with salt.

But once I bought too much salt, so I travelled to different towns and tried to sell it. I stood at a corner where many cattle owners used to hang out and I overheard a conversation between two guys who needed salt. So I approached them and gave them a decent price, and they accepted. The people I knew there laughed to themselves, probably thinking that I was a berraco[21]*. So I continued selling salt to people who owned cattle and need it for that business.*

I really like business. It's the best thing to do, to sell things on your own, but you have to be really good. People laughed because I was so good at it. But soon enough other people realized how good the salt business was, so bigger people started to sell salt and took my business. But I didn't care because I had saved up to buy a new truck. It was beautiful truck. Then I sold that one and bought a bigger one.

But you said that you had been told by the guerrillas to leave Urabá; weren't you frightened to go back there to sell your salt?

Well, one day we were driving there, in Urabá, and the same guerrilla people from a few years back stopped us. It was incredible, they had total control! Alvaro Uribe, that guy was the only one who could control them, and if he was still in power the guerrillas would all be gone by now. So that day the guerrillas were burning five cars owned by public services companies. The commander saw me and asked me if I liked what they were doing. So I told her upfront that I didn't like it, that now five drivers were out of work! That's not funny! I told her the truth. She got really angry, and all my friends told me to leave. Then they sent me a couple of messages to telling me to leave and that was

21 "Berraco" is a widely used term in Colombia to describe somebody who is adventurous and brave, which most often results in success.

the end of it, I had to go back to Medellín.

President Uribe (2002-2010), the man Don Ernesto credits as being the only one able to stop the guerrillas, came to power at a time when the armed conflict was at its peak. The 1990s marked a period in which various presidential candidates were assassinated, the Cali Cartel infiltrated the government of President Ernesto Samper, and the effort to forge a peace process with the guerrillas failed.[22] Uribe's platform, which called for the military defeat of the guerrillas was, in fact, welcomed by large sectors of the population—Don Ernesto among them. It is the case, however, that President Uribe has been linked to different paramilitary groups, calling into question the legitimacy of his government. Paramilitary forces, which first emerged in rural areas of the country as a response by the oligarchy to the growing number of guerrillas, were armed organizations that unofficially collaborated with the army.[23] The paramilitaries are also deeply involved in the drug trade, as they have moved to fill the gap left by the demise of the Medellín and Cali Cartels in the 1990s.[24] Uribe's links to the paramilitaries date back to his term as Governor of Antioquia, when he was involved in the creation of a paramilitary group named CONVIVIR, a word in Spanish that roughly translates as "to cohabit" or "to live together" in English.[25] By 2002, Uribe had 47 legal procedures against him and many of his political allies were in similar situations.[26] Alvaro Uribe was even listed as a narco-terrorist by the Pentagon in 1991 and some authors have argued that, at this point, the Colombian state became a "para-narco-state".[27]

Do I understand correctly that for you, as truckers, the Uribe government was a positive development?

For us, yeah, it was very good. Uribe made our life much easier because he sent the army to take charge of many areas of the country that were controlled by guerrillas or

22 Russell C. Crandall, *The United States and Latin America After the Cold War,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 87-88

23 Leal Buitrago. "Armed Actors in the Colombian Conflict." p 90.

24 Gutíerrez and Barón. "Subsidiary Orders—Coca, Emeralds: War and Peace." p. 16.

25 Hristov, *Blood and Capital: the Paramilitarization of Colombia*. pp. 142-203.

26 *Ibid*, p. 142-203.

27 *Ibid*, p. 142-203.

paramilitaries. We could actually drive around in peace. Because there were times under the governments of Samper and Pastrana when the guerrillas ruled many parts of the country, they imposed rules and regulations on us and, if we didn't listen, they'd burn our trucks.

So when Uribe came to power, he started to fix things. Of course, some things went wrong, such as the case of the Falsos Positívos, which essentially was that the army was killing youth in poor areas and dressing them up as guerrillas just so they could say their efforts were effective. But Uribe didn't order them to do that. For me, Uribe was a good administrator. And now, this Santos[28] president, he is alright; let's hope everything goes well for him.

What about Uribe's ties to the paramilitaries? What is your position on them?

That's really complicated. You see, at the beginning, the paramilitaries were really against the guerrillas, but as time went by they became the same as the guerrillas they were fighting; it became all business. For example, in the Medellín neighbourhood where I lived, San Cristóbal, there were some urban guerrillas. One day the paramilitaries came to San Cristóbal and bodies started to appear every morning lying on the grass. They killed the guerrillas, but also drug addicts, prostitutes. The last guerrillas surrendered to the paramilitaries and they ended up joining them.

The army and the paramilitaries always worked together, but then things got really bad and corrupt, and that is what Uribe was trying to fix. One thing you have to know is that everyone who was against Uribe had links either to the guerrillas or the paramilitaries or the drug traffickers.

28 Juan Manuel Santos is the current president of Colombia. His term in office started in 2010 and will end in 2014.

For instance, all the leaders of the Polo Democrático,[29] *like Gustavo Petro,*[30] *the guy who was running for president, he was a guerrilla fighter! Same as Antonio Navarro Wolf, the governor of Narino, he was also a* guerrillero*!*

Did you ever fear for your family? What was family life like all those years?

Hmm, not really. They were always safe in Medellín. And I was always very careful because I knew I had a family I was responsible for. By that time I was travelling a lot to Urabá to sell salt. I was already going steady with Dona Gloria; I had known here since she was 13; we met in Medellín. So once I called her from one of the towns I was travelling through and asked her to marry me, and she said yes. By then I was 40 and she was only 20... I was very scared of marriage (laughter), I knew that it wasn't going to be such a good deal, that it wouldn't give me very great returns! (laughter) But then I started to like it!

And I always liked returning home after a long absence. I really liked it. People were very happy to see me. Even the dog was happy to see me! And I would always bring stuff for the kids, fruits and treats and things like that.

Plus God says that we should submit to his will, so my mind was always at ease. If you are not doing anything wrong you should have no reason to fear anything.

Conclusions

In Colombia, truck drivers enjoy a paradoxical form of freedom. Their job

29 Polo Democrático is a coalition of left wing forces in Colombia.

30 Despite losing the presidential election, Gustavo Petro continues to be a significant figure in Colombian politics. He won the race to be mayor of Bogotá, running as an independent, and began his term in 2012.

allows them to move around free from the tedium of routine. Most importantly, truck drivers get to see remote areas of the country and to interact with people from diverse backgrounds, often coming to understand things that people rooted only in cities or in rural areas are unable to grasp. However, their freedom makes them especially vulnerable, particularly in Colombia, where multiple armed actors battle each other for control of whole areas of the country. While they often present as tough and bold, truck drivers like Don Ernesto are frequently exposed to very frightening situations as they are forced to deal with guerrillas, paramilitaries, drug traffickers and the army—all in order just to keep working:

> *I was driving outside of Medellín and, right before a curve, a man on the road told me to pull over. He said it was best if I waited a little bit because there was going to be trouble past the curve. All of a sudden we started to hear machine guns shooting like crazy, and then after a little while some people from the army came to us and told us that we could continue.*
>
> *What had happened was that the guerrillas had set up a checkpoint, but the paramilitaries had attacked them coming from the mountain on the side of the road, and the army helped them by attacking the checkpoint directly. The thing is that by the time we were told to keep driving we saw no sign of violence, no dead bodies. That's probably because all the bodies were thrown into the Cauca River right away.*

In the course of my talk with Don Ernesto, I came to reaffirm my understanding of the multi-dimensionality of the Colombian conflict. Viewing the Colombian armed conflict through the eyes of another person enabled me to understand essential phenomena that anyone with an interest in its fair and prompt resolution should keep in mind. Ultimately, it is reasonable to say that Don Ernesto's views on the armed conflict in general are in line with the views of the majority of Colombians who supported the presidency of Alvaro Uribe.

Don Ernesto's belief in a military solution to the conflict and his absolute dismissal of people he considers to have links to the guerrillas in fact reflects the mood of a country that has lost faith in the power of dialogue to find solutions to its problems.

Map of El Salvador.

Chapter Nine

CIVIL WAR AND PEACE IN EL SALVADOR

by

Juan Manuel Vidal

Don Jesus[1] hands me a chair and we sit outside of his home in this little concrete room he calls the Roque Dalton Library, named for the journalist and poet and hero of the Salvadoran left. Don Jesus believes that reading is the most important thing in life and since his town, in the outskirts of San Salvador, does not have a library, he simply decided to build his own. It is in this room that international volunteers will come to donate books, teach English to the children of the community, and help with the construction of the library.

⁂

Jesus Contreras was born on September 17, 1966, in the municipality of Cinquera, Department of Cabanas. There he lived with his mother and two older sisters in a small farm that his father left to Jesus when he passed away in 1972.

I don't really remember my father that well and my mother did not speak about him a whole lot. The only thing I can

1 I interviewed Don Jesus eight times in total. We had five sessions on the phone when I called him from Toronto, and three face-to-face interviews in his home. By the fifth session on the phone, I had collected all the information that I needed to write this oral history. However, in late March 2011, when I visited El Salvador, he insisted that we meet three more times because he really wanted to describe personally the events of his life. In the end, he simply repeated most of the information he had previously recounted, but the personal encounter allowed me to understand his story better. The interviews were conducted mostly without prepared questions. I simply intervened at times when I wanted something to be clarified. The fact that we did not have a formal interview session did not matter. Don Jesus is not the type to say: "So, what do you want to know?" Instead, I would say: "Take it away, Don Jesus," and he would begin talking, sometimes for hours.

> *remember is that he was a real* campesino*: like most of the men in that town, my father used to work in the coffee plantations to the north near Chalatenango, about a day's walk from here.* Hijole*! I cannot imagine the old man walking for that long just to receive a tiny salary.*

Back in those days, Cinquera was a small community of farmers, sharecroppers and deeply religious people. There were no organized neighbourhoods as in San Salvador. Instead, the municipality was composed of several *caserios* of small farms or ranches used for the cultivation of subsistence foods. Don Jesus did not regularly attend school because he needed to work to contribute to his family's income, and the fact that most of the teachers were probably going to the plantations to work as well also interrupted his schooling.

> *Honestly, I don't even remember where the school was located in those days. However, I did learn how to read and write at an early age because Don Pacho, a community leader, used to take some of the children into the church and make them read from the Bible.*

Don Pacho lived close by and always went by Jesus' home and gave his family fruit that his own children had planted, bought or "collected" from the market in Suchitoto. "It was hard for us when I was a little *zipote* because my sisters and my mother had always been involved with indigo and not with taking care of the crops that we had." This is why Don Pacho would usually come to teach Jesus how to prepare the land for planting and how to harvest and sort the crops so that Don Pacho could sell them for Jesus' mother in the market of Suchitoto. According to Don Jesus, Don Pacho often spoke of how hard things were and how unfair it was that the people from Cinquera had to work in coffee plantations for small salaries. He once told Jesus the story about his own father and the work the men had to do in the plantations. "The labour pools would leave on a Sunday—right after church! Imagine! Taking the body of Christ and then having to walk for days."

Once at the plantation, the men would take to the fields and collect the coffee, which they would put into large sacks. After the worker had filled most

of his sack, the overseer would come and insert a long measuring stick and determine how much the worker had collected. They would then tell them how much they were paying per length, and the worker, not knowing how to write, would simply mark with a line how much coffee he had collected.

> *But the overseer was a very bad person, for he would put his thumb downwards on the stick and begin measuring from there. This means that people were cheated out of money because a good four to five centimetres of coffee would not be paid to the worker.*

Don Jesus explains that if one day one of the workers complained, the overseer would call the guards, who had big dogs, and threaten him, sometimes beating him, and at times even killing him.

⁂

The history of El Salvador is a history of coffee and power. For over a century, since the mid-1800s, two factions of strong coffee elites developed. Italo Lopez Vallecillos, for example, labels these two groups as the "agro-financial" and the "agro-industrial-financial" elites.[2] Vallecillos argues that these two groups developed out of the same conditions of power through the production of coffee. However, on one hand, the "agro-financial" elite has a history of opposing attempts at agrarian reform and anything that threatens the concentration of land. On the other hand, the "agro-industrial-financial" elite has developed more within the framework of liberal democracy and is thus less inclined to rely on authoritarian forms of power.[3] During the communist upsurge of the 1930s, both groups combined forces in order to quell the resistance movements that were breaking out everywhere in the country. The result of this convergence created one of the most authoritarian regimes ever

2 Italo Lopez Vallecillos, "Fuerzas Sociales y Cambio Social en El Salvador," in *Estudios Centroamericanos* 34, nos. 369-370, (1979), pp. 557-590.

3 Since the early 1900s, these two factions have contested political power in the country. By the 1920s, however, it was the agro-industrial-financial elite that enjoyed a permanent hold on the political apparatus of the country. For more information, see Jeffrey M. Paige, "Coffee and Power in El Salvador," *Latin American Research Review*, 28:3 (1993): p. 7. For an illustration on the tenure system of El Salvador by 1963 see, Enrique A. Baloyra-Herp, "Reactionary Despotism in Central America," *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 15:2 (Nov., 1983), pp. 302-303.

to come to power in Central America.

The fortunes of both factions have always been dependent on the production and export of coffee. As a result, most revenues and efforts at industrialization have been used towards the expansion of the coffee sector. This has made El Salvador "a virtual mono-culture" that has been industrially reorganized under capitalist lines of violent labour repression and low wages.[4] As a result, we can conclude that coffee gave these elites unlimited economic power and control, which left people like Don Pacho, his father and most of the workers in rural El Salvador totally impoverished. Consequently, by the mid-1970s, the violent repression and the conditions of the poorest in El Salvador led peasants, students and intellectuals to mobilize and create several resistance movements, among them the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN).

⋆⋆⋆

Don Jesus was 12 years old when his mother hurried him to dress one day because they were going to miss the preliminary sermon of the priest at the church. For Don Jesus, however, church was boring and instead he wanted to stay home and play with the varieties of insects he collected and kept in a jar. "My mother was not the type to go to church a lot—the priests asked for money and food all the time, and since we didn't have anything to give, my mother preferred to stay at home and pray to the Virgin." However, the reason for Dona Belinda's excitement on this Sunday morning was that some months earlier, a young priest was sent to replace the old one in town.

"This priest was a real saint, he didn't take anything from the people, he organized education groups, taught the people how to worship, and gave long sermons about the contradictions in our community." However, one year later, as Don Jesus recalls, the new priest was replaced by another who told them that the young one had been sent away because he was a communist. Don Jesus recalls this moment very vividly and he grins slightly as he repeats the word "communist."

4 By the 1970s, El Salvador had become one of the biggest exporters of coffee in the world—so big, that it was able to compete with other coffee producers, such as Brazil and Colombia. See Paige, *Coffee and Power in El Salvador*, pp. 9-10.

Why do you repeat the word? I ask. "You see Juan, that was the first time that I can remember hearing that word, and to be honest, I liked it because this priest was a good person so him being a communist meant that it was a good thing, you know?"

⁂

Oscar Arnulfo Romero was born in San Miguel in August of 1917, and, after studying theology in Rome, was ordained as a priest in 1942. Following many years in the priesthood, in 1974 he was named auxiliary bishop and, just like the young priest of Cinquera, was sent to one of El Salvador's poorest regions. There, he became conscious of the repression, poverty and isolation that campesinos suffered. According to *Equipo Maiz*, Romero also began to see that his rich friends in the capital, who provided him with charitable donations, were the same ones who were creating the destitute conditions of the country's rural peoples.[5] On February 23, 1977, to the surprise of many, Romero was ordained archbishop of San Salvador. One month later, his close friend and promoter of liberation theology, Father Rutilio Grande, was assassinated in El Paisnal, San Salvador, while driving to mass. This event impacted Romero greatly, leading him to pronounce the mission of his archdioceses "Feel with the Church." By the late 1970s, Romero had been an advocate for labour movements, created a human rights organization and had begun preaching against the repressive nature of the Salvadoran government and military to the crowds that filled his church after fleeing the countryside.[6] On March 24, 1980, Romero was gunned down while conducting mass at his church in San Salvador. As a result, the leftist movements that were forming throughout the Salvadoran countryside saw no alternative but to take up guerrilla warfare.

The assassination of Romero came in response to what some have called

5 In the mid-1970s the repression of rural people increased dramatically. Many peasants, including Don Jesus, recount the numerous massacres, assassinations and disappearances that were occurring throughout the country. Equipo Maiz is an organization born out of the repression in 1983. Their mission is to bring popular education for children of all social classes in order to teach them about community leadership, inclusion, and organization. For more information on Equipo Maiz and their work since the 1980s, and for Monsenor Romero's life story, see "Romero", last accessed April 1, 2011, http://www.equipomaiz.org.sv/RomeroTodo.html

6 These events led to accusations that he was a Marxist revolutionary and the instigator of all El Salvador's social problems.

a reactionary coalition that is opposed to labour rights and agrarian reform. There are two major groups that can be identified in this coalition: First, the landed elites and big planters who gain political favours through several networks of clientelistic links with the government. Second, several bourgeois groups in the industrial and financial sectors that enjoy political positions or the same networks.[7] In 1980, this coalition was committing atrocious acts of violence against union leaders and labour movements. Baylora-Herp argues that the organization of peasants into unions endangers the foundations of the reactionary coalition, leading directly to the mobilization of agricultural workers into popular movements.[8] In essence, this means that the call of Romero for justice and labour rights shook the foundations of the oligarchy and threatened the enormous financial advantages that they could enjoy from exploiting the labour masses.

⁂

Don Jesus was 13 when Romero was assassinated. In effect, this was when his childhood ended.

> *After the assassination of Romero, people in the town began coming to the mayor's office with complaints that the National Guard had taken their relatives for no reason. In those days, I personally did not have any encounters with the National Guard, but there were incidents that I cannot help but think about everyday.*

Don Jesus explains to me that in early 1981, the priest gave a sermon in the church, in which he warned that anyone who was involved with the communists would be denied passage into heaven. According to Don Jesus, Don Pacho asked the priest: "Father, what are communists?" The priest replied:

> *They are people who will sell you ideas about freedom and justice, but those are all lies… these people are led by a man*

7 This coalition also includes retired members of the military and former political actors. Baylora-Herp, "Reactionary Despotism," pp. 312-313.

8 *Ibid*., p. 312.

External view of Don Jesus's "Roque Dalton Library".

Inside the "Roque Dalton Library" with an image of Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero.

The author with Don Jesus's youngest child, outside the library..

> *named Fidel Castro, an atheist, in Cuba… and people say that he smells like sulphur and carries a spear so that he can go around stabbing small children with a pitchfork to eat them.*

At this point, Don Jesus sighs and gets very sad. He begins telling me a story about a young girl of about 14 years of age who had once stood up to the priest and told him that he was wrong. Three days later she was found in the outskirts of town with missing body parts, her eyes had been gouged out, and there were several signs that she had been raped. "Juan," he says, "this is why the People's Liberation Movement (MLP) mobilized but first I have to tell you about the massacre in Cinquera."

> *One day [in 1981] Don Pacho came to my house. He told my mother that he had heard that in a town nearby the National Guard had come and called everyone to the main plaza. He told us that they began shooting people and grabbing the women. He then told my mother that in any case she should avoid the plaza and look for a hiding place, probably in one of his sheds.*

Don Pacho's predictions came true when, a few weeks later, the National Guard came into the town and murdered several innocent people. Soon after this incident, most residents of Cinquera either joined the movement or fled to the bigger cities. "Two of my friends and my girlfriend at the time took to the hills. I wanted to go as well, but my mother had relatives in San Salvador so we came here."

I ask Don Jesus what happened to those friends and he told me that he hasn't seen them since. Do you think that they are dead? "Probably, but it's been such a long time that they might still be alive today." I also ask him if they were 15, just as he was. He told me that he recalls his girlfriend being that age, but the other guys must have been even younger.

> *Juan, there were people as young as 11 or 12 who took to the hills. I, myself, joined the movement at 16, but I was lucky because I joined the urban militias and since we were in the city we did not have to live in the mountains or anything like that. We wore plain clothes and we distributed the pamphlets that we were given at one of the many safe houses the movement had installed in the capital.*

How did you come into contact with the movement?

> *Well, at the time I lived in Soyapango, which is one of the few municipalities in San Salvador that had a heavy presence [of people] from the movement. Also, one of my older cousins went to the university and in there,* hijole*! there were many clandestine groups that supported the cause.*

Did you have any news from Cinquera and Don Pacho?

> *Not really; I mean at that point we didn't hear that they were bombing the town or anything like that, which we found out about later, but what we did know was that tons of people, probably most, had fled to the cities or had taken to the hills.*

Why did you join the movement?

> *I joined this movement because I became conscious of the sacrifices that other people around me were making. I knew that something was wrong with our society and gradually I began to notice that it was because of the rich that all of our calamities existed.*

I ask Don Jesus: What happened to Don Pacho?

"Ha! The old man is still there… in Cinquera." I could not believe my ears. He never left? I asked. "Yes, he left for a while but he returned to the town in 1992, after the war had ended, and people had begun to move back." It gave me great joy to hear that Don Pacho was alive, but my joy turned to grief when Don Jesus went on to say that Don Pacho had lost five of his nine children in the war.

Were they all killed by the *guardia*? I ask: "No, they joined the movement and four of them died in combat and one of the committed suicide in 1993."

I had forgotten this detail until in March 2011 when I went to Cinquera and spoke to Don Pacho himself. He told me that five of his nine children joined the movement. Two of the five had disappeared, one died in combat, the other died from friendly fire during a drill, and the fifth one committed suicide in 1993. The fifth had also been part of the movement but he did not wish to tell anyone that he was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

At this point, as if by way of saying "listen, Juan, this is the kind of thing that happens in popular struggle," Don Jesus raises his hand and shows me that one finger is missing altogether and another reduced to a partial stump. Now I understood why it was that I had seen Don Jesus working with only one hand. With his other hand he then moved some of the hair on his forehead and revealed a deep scar. As it turns out, Don Jesus was captured on two different occasions:

> *In 1986, I was walking home from a* chupadero,[9] *when two police officers stopped me on the street and* mierda*! Juan, in my drunken state I had completely forgot that I*

9 Salvadoran slang for drinking place (bar or pub).

had some of the party pamphlets inside a rip in the back of my bag, where I had hid them for the past three years. They searched me and told me to open my bag. So I did, but one of these babosos *was very clever and he turned my bag around, shook it and everything inside fell out. After a closer inspection he found the pamphlets and asked me why I had them, and I told him that I had found the bag and that I didn't notice that those things were there. I was sent to a correctional facility where I was beaten and told that I would be killed. Two days later a guard came into the room where they had me and told me that I was free to go, but that they did not want to see me again in there.*

The second time Don Jesus was tortured was in 1988, after a friend had given information to the *guardia* about a student meeting that was to occur in a laundry room inside the university. "We met for about five minutes before the *babosos* came in dressed as students and then took their guns out and began blowing whistles."

Why were you guys meeting?

Don Jesus begins to laugh: "We were strategizing on how were going to spray paint '*patria o muerte*' in one of the walls of the school. I can't remember if we were going to do it on one of the outside or inside walls." Don Jesus then proceeds to show me the scars one more time and tells me how they were taken blindfolded into a room, stripped naked, and then interrogated individually.

They told me that they knew I was involved with the student union and that if I told them who the organizer of the group was, they would let me go. I then told them a fake name, god forbid to this day I hope it wasn't the real name of anybody, but they threw me against the wall and hit me with a bolillo *on the right temple just above the ear. Then they took a wire and wrapped it tight around my fingers and told me several times that they were going to kill me. To be honest with you Juan, my fingers were so purple that*

I didn't even feel a thing. I just kept on wailing and wailing that it was hurting me. After my release, one week later, my fingers were badly infected and I lost the index finger, while another was severed at the nerve.

I then ask Don Jesus if he had seen any combat during his years in the movement. He told me that after the massacre of the six Jesuits[10] in 1989 at the University of Central America, in Soyapango, near where he lived, his unit mobilized and began attacking strategic points.

I had some informal training on the use of weapons and then I was given an AK-47 by my commander because I showed good progress. I was involved in the confrontations with the army in late 1980 in the area of Soyapango. I lost many friends in those exchanges, but after the massacre we found no other recourse but to arm ourselves and begin the offensive. I had my weapon with me from that day until the peace accords and the demobilization campaigns of 1992.

What did you do after the demobilization campaigns?

Well, I thought about going back to Cinquera and starting a family. I had heard that one of my childhood sweethearts was there and unmarried! But it was a dream, I could not go back and in the end I didn't. Instead, I did what most of my comrades did after the war—join the new civilian

10 The six Jesuits were Armando Lopez, Ignacio Martin-Baro, Joaquin Lopez y Lopez, Juan Ramon Moreno, Segundo Montes, and Ignacio Ellacuria. Jesuits in Central America have had a long history of involvement with the communities that suffered the horrors of the war first-hand. Ignacio Ellacuria was active during the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua. Ellacuria believed that popular organization, as well as guerrilla warfare, was the most important tool for consciousness-raising. He believed that once peasants were brought into contact with these forms of social mobilization they would become active members working for social transformation. On November 16, 1989, in the living quarters of the theology department of University of Central America (UCA), the National Guard assassinated the six Jesuits. Two were shot in their rooms, while the other three were dragged into a garden outside and subsequently executed. For more information on the events of November 16th, 1989, see Ignacio W. Ochoa, *El Salvador 1989: the Two Jesuit Standards and the Final Offensive* (California: San Diego State University, 2003), pp. 29-41.

police force.

Don Jesus tells me that during his time in the police he met a young woman who worked as a secretary in one the offices of the force and married her.

> *I spent two long years in the police, but I hated it because the mentality of my comrades had changed, everything became corrupt again, and I began to drink heavily. I had a son in 1995, and the twins in 1997, but things with my wife weren't so great. I must admit that it was mostly my fault, but now I don't regret it because I have Marcela and our three children.*

***

The peace process in El Salvador began in 1991 when President Cristiani began to meet with the FMLN leadership to talk about the possibility of ending the war. In 1992 the peace round tables were adjourned and the war ended. However, the Peace Accords presented several difficulties stemming from a lack of political determination and the international influence which left El Salvador with very narrow incentives to implement the necessary institutions that could combat the crime-ridden situation that the country finds itself in today.[11] Moreover, after the signing of the Peace Accords, there were no institutional incentives to reform the criminal justice system. However, in 1996, after pressure from the United Nations, the Salvadoran government accepted the guidelines for reform, but people believe that the reform "gives exaggerated protection to criminals" and, therefore, the problem with crime in the country becomes almost impossible to address.[12] Nevertheless, it was

11 The crime situation in El Salvador has gotten so bad that civil society demands that the government respond through authoritarian measures. This, however, diminishes the possibilities for democracy that the peace accords sought to implement. See Margaret Popkin, "Building the Rule of law in Post-War El Salvador," in Margarita S. Studemeister. ed., *El Salvador: Implementation of the Peace Accords* (Washington: United States Institute of Peace, 2001), p. 10.

12 As Don Jesus explained above, the police see no other recourse but to engage in criminal activities after their lives are in danger on a daily basis. Furthermore, the situation is heightened by the fact that, since the end of the war, Salvadoran governments have not properly addressed the question of weapons. For more information see: Pop-

important for Salvadorans to adopt a stronger culture of democracy because otherwise the government could begin implementing laws that undercut civil liberties, which, in the end, can cause human rights violations and thus a return to the authoritarian repression previously experienced.

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Thus, Don Jesus and I begin to talk about what he calls "life after peace." I ask him what he thinks the accords have done for the country and more specifically for people like him whose status is that of an ex-combatant of the FMLN. Don Jesus replies that the accords were a great accomplishment because there was no more war. However, he believes that there is currently another war reversing most of the accomplishments of the accords. He tells me to hold on one minute and he goes in the house to get something. Upon his return, Don Jesus is holding a newspaper article that reads: "Attack on Five Water Distributors in Distrito Italia." The picture that accompanies the article is of a handcuffed young man the police are leading away. Don Jesus then asks me if I recognize the young man in the picture. When I take a closer look, I am surprised to see a familiar face. Is that Kevin? I ask Don Jesus. "Yes, that's Kevin."

The murder of the three water distributors occurred on February 2, 2011 at around 10:00 AM. Kevin, a young man form the municipality, was in English class with a volunteer at the time of the murders. When he left at noon, the police apprehended him, the media took this picture, and the article appeared in the newspaper the next day.

I am appalled to hear this news because Kevin is only 14 years old and his picture in a major newspaper, even if he were guilty, is a serious violation of children's human rights. Don Jesus then explains to me that this struggle is not only against the gang, but also against the police, the media and the government. In 2005, President Saca instituted a law often referred as *Super Mano Dura* (Super Iron Fist), which gives security forces the right to search, apprehend, and even imprison presumed gang members. This is exactly what happened to Kevin and even though he has been released with no charges, his image in the community has been tarnished. Don Jesus points out that all of

kin, *Building the Rule of Law*, pp. 16-18.

the arrests surrounding cases like this all constitute and an "elaborate theatrical performance." As he puts it, "the murder happens, the police arrive, then they call the media, and after the arrests are carried out, and all pictures are taken, they then begin to investigate."

I ask Don Jesus about the *mareros* (gangs) in Distrito and what sorts of activities they have in the community.

> *Well, they take out the electricity whenever they want, they randomly collect rent on families that receive remittances, they extort bus drivers, old ladies, businesses, you name it.*

However, Don Jesus believes that the best way to deal with the gang problem is through institutional reforms at the government level. He emphasizes that kids need better education, access to extra-curricular activities and employment opportunities. In essence, communities, such as Distrito, do not need heavy police and military presence because, as Don Jesus concludes: "violence begets violence."

I ask him how he has managed to keep his children, especially his eldest son, away from the gang. "You see Juan, I have always been loving but strict with my children. In my house I am the *comisario* of discipline and this keeps them busy with other things to do."

Don Jesus notes that most of his kids are involved in the production of the coconut crafts that he and his wife, Dona Marcela, make at home and sell in the Zacateca market in San Salvador. He tells me that gradually it has been more difficult to find small businesses that will buy their products in big quantities because those small businesses can find exactly the same design at a cheaper price. I ask him what his prospects for the future of this business are:

> *Well, the ideal situation would be that we could always make enough money to survive, while at the same time having the resources to expand our library and in this way provide the future generation with the educational tools and consciousness to succeed and create a better El Salvador.*

Map of Mexico.

Chapter Ten

A DEFIANT WOMAN IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY MEXICO

by

Maria Elena Hernández

The Day of the Dead is one of the most festive and important holidays in Mexico. For the foreign observer, the relationship that Mexicans have with death may seem strange, obsessive and ominous. The great Mexican writer, Octavio Paz, underscored the profound difference between Mexicans and people from other cultures when he observed,

> *To the resident of New York, Paris or London, the word Death is never pronounced because it burns the lips. Mexicans on the other hand, frequent it, caress it, they sleep with it, they celebrate it; is one of their most favourite games and their most permanent love.* [1]

Leonila Nuñez Mercado died on a Thursday afternoon surrounded by her six children and the majority of her grandchildren in her daughter's apartment in Toluca, Mexico. Most of her family was crying as they anticipated her departure, but everyone was relieved to see her escape the enduring pain that cancer had caused in her last days.

Occupied with the funeral arrangements and paperwork, no one in her family really understood the momentous nature of her passing until days or even months later. She had been the backbone of her family for so many decades that the very idea that we would not be able to come to this apartment to feel as if we had entered a safe haven was alien to most of us. It wasn't until

1 Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*. (New York: Grove Press, 1961), p. 57.

our first Christmas without her that we realized that her absence was, in fact, stronger than her presence.

Lila, as her grandchildren called her, is indeed her family's most permanent love. As Mexicans do, we celebrated her death by constantly remembering her life. Lila's family would meet in a little chapel in downtown Toluca where her ashes rested. This reunion was held three times a year: on her birthday, Mother's Day and, of course, the Day of the Dead. Probably most of her family also came by whenever they had time to sit there and talk. I know I did. Going to visit Lila was never accompanied by tears, prayers or sorrow; sometimes one of us would laugh as we recalled an incident we had shared with her. When we go to the chapel, we usually do what she liked us to do when we visited her apartment, which was to talk about our lives and tell her about our other family members.

I never called her "Leonila" nor "grandmother." For me and for our family she had always been Lila, a quasi-mythical character from the first half of the 20th century. I decided to narrate Lila's story for my oral history project because I wanted to explore how it was possible that a Mexican woman in the post-revolutionary period was able overcome rural poverty and raise six accomplished children.

The Process

I spent a lot of time talking with Lila. During school breaks I had always spent many hours sitting at her living room, hearing her life stories. However, those recollections that I had stored would not be enough to describe the full range of her experiences. As such, I interviewed her two sons, three of her daughters, and two of her grandchildren. In total, I conducted six initial interviews ranging from one to three hours and one 30-minute telephone follow-up. All but one of these interviews were conducted individually, and all were in Spanish.

I began the interviews with a brief introduction explaining the nature of the project and my purpose in interviewing each of them. Using a voice recorder, I opened all the interviews by saying "I would like to hear what you remember about Lila, from what she told you and what you lived with her. It

doesn't have to be in any specific order, you just have to talk, and if I have any questions I will ask you." I found this the best way to get the interviewees to elaborate in the manner they wished as opposed to restricting their contributions to a set of pre-established questions. From all this material I selected the words of Guillermo, Silvia and Lupe, because each covered a different period of Lila's life. Moreover, Guillermo's account is the most developed of the three as he was the eldest child and, some years ago, he took the time to research Lila's family. Silvia's academic background made our conversation very interesting as she framed many events in a sociological perspective. Lupe's account was the most emotional and it encompassed personal details that were lacking in the others.

Lila's background

Lila's mother was born in 1900; her parents were *hacendados* in the State of Michoacán and during the Revolution she was kidnapped for some months and later returned to her family. She never talked about that experience, but Guillermo thinks that is what made her a very nervous and uneasy person. Her parents lost most of their land after the Revolution, but she managed to marry an older man from Valle de Bravo who was well-off. Guillermo emphasizes the relationship Lila had with her father.

> *My mom always spoke highly of her father; he always treated her kindly and defended her from the scoldings and punishment of her strict mother. In those times it was very common to hit children, but her dad never laid a hand on her. He also spent a lot of time playing with her, which was very uncommon; usually fathers were very distant from their daughters.*

They were not rich, my Aunt Lupe says, but they never had to struggle to eat. Lila remembered her childhood as a beautiful period of her life. However, when Lila was nine, her mother met an *espiritista* named Sara. Everyone I interviewed considered this encounter a turning point in Lila's life. Silvia says it was Sara's fault that they lost everything. "It was as if she had put a spell on

my grandmother. She involved my grandmother in her *espiritista* practices and convinced her to move with her to Toluca with Lila and her younger son."

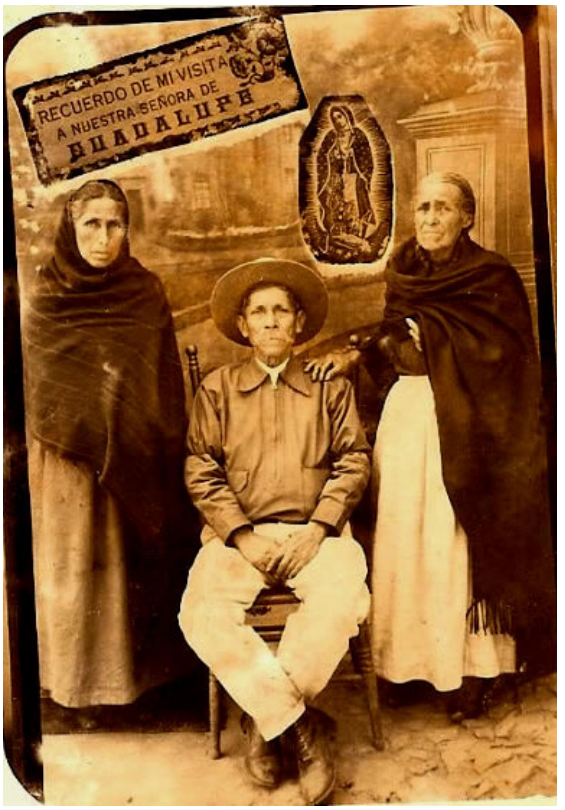
Toluca is not a big city in Mexico but its proximity to the country's capital facilitated its urban development. As the capital of one of the most important states in the country, Toluca became a destination for many rural migrants seeing a better life in the city. When they moved to Toluca, Lila's father sent them money to provide for what she needed for school and for her daily expenses. "My mom never saw any of that money, Sara kept it all," Guillermo says. Sara would send Lila to school wearing cheap huaraches that hurt her feet. Lupe points out,

> *My mom used to walk from La Merced to El Cosmovitral [a 20-minute walk] without the huaraches, completely shoeless! She always said that it was not only the huaraches that hurt her feet but she was very ashamed of going to school wearing them. Imagine how since she was young she cared about those little details!*

Lila's family did not live in extreme poverty as did other rural families. Her father provided enough money from cultivating their land and her mom used to bake bread for sale. Moving to urban Mexico was attractive because many basic services were accessible or considerably better than those in rural areas, including education and health care. Sadly, Sara convinced Lila's mother to pull her out of school when she finished third grade, as Sara did not see the point of a beautiful girl being educated. Lila would resent that for her entire life.

When Lila was 12 years old, her father became ill. "It wasn't anything serious," Guillermo says, "but Sara stopped him from going to the doctor and tried to cure him through *espiritismo* and some ritualistic cleansing" and he died few months later. Lila's father, Silvia says, was not even 50 when he died. When Guillermo relates this same story it is with great frustration because, for him, it is unimaginable that a simple stomach problem could lead to death. Guillermo sees his grandfather's passing as a decisive moment in Lila's life: "It would be like if one of us dies from a cold because someone tells you not to go

Lila and her younger brother, Emilio, in Valle de Bravo, State of Mexico.



Lila's forbearers in Zitacuaro, Michoacán, in the time of the Mexican Revolution.

Lila, dressed as an "Adelita," a female revolutionary, close to the time that her father died.

to the doctor. But sometimes you can't defeat ignorance. Ignorance decided my mom's fate."

Under Sara's advice, Lila's mother sold all the property and mismanaged the profits, which led to the loss of her entire inheritance. With no money and three children to raise, Lila's mother decided to return to her family's house in Zitácuaro, Michoacán. Guillermo notes:

> *You might guess that Lila would never hear from Sara again. But Sara wasn't satisfied with all the damage she had caused; she even tried to convince my grandmother to let her keep Lila and her youngest sister in Toluca with her and raise them as her own children!*

Childhood, Courtship, & Elopement

Once in Zitácuaro, Lila lived with her mother's family. "They were a very Catholic and traditional family," Silvia says, "and in a way they were special because they had been *hacendados* before the Revolution so they had a certain social standing in Zitácuaro." Lila was 14 when she lived in Zitácuaro. She never went back to school and, instead, helped her family with the house work and learned to sew.

> *In those times, girls would get married very young. At that age my mom was no longer a little child and she started to be courted by suitors. She stood out from people in Zitácuaro because she was fair-skinned and beautiful.*

Guillermo recounts this and he asks me if I remember her daguerrotype he has in his house. Lila's strict mother and conservative family were alarmed by the suitors and they were afraid that Lila would end up kidnapped by an *indio*—a fear that led them to forbid her even to appear around town.

> *But my mom was no fool; she knew she was beautiful; she always told us about a rich suitor she had. She remembered him riding around town on his horse and wearing his big revolutionary sombrero. So every time she would go out,*

she made sure she was dressed up and looking perfect.

I asked why her family would not accept that suitor, but neither my mother nor my Aunt Lupe would answer. In a follow-up interview I asked Silvia about it and she replied, "It is very simple, that man was from the new revolutionary elite. Horse and sombrero or not, for Lila's family, he was still an *indio*."

Lila in her late teens. By this time she had been forced to drop out of school, never to return to formal schooling.

To understand Silvia's explanation, it is necessary to contextualize the racial preconceptions of post-Revolutionary Mexico. As a result of the Revolution, a new political elite was born. This political elite looked very *mestizo*—that is, like people descended from both Spanish and indigenous forebearers—and this racial mixture in fact embodied the ideals of the Revolution. During the Porfiriato, that is, the rule of the dictator, Porfirio Diaz from 1876 to 1910, the elites adopted a political ideology in which they imagined the Mexican State as product of the Independence movement and the civil rights of the French Revolution.[2] In this imagined history, while Mexico was acknowledged to be a *mestizo* rather than an indigenous nation, it was believed that Mexico could achieve a higher level of development through "racial improvement" brought about through mixing with Europeans.

In post-Revolutionary Mexico a new racial hierarchy was constructed responding to the new political and social space. José Vasconcelos, possibly the most important public intellectual of the period, proposed a new con-

2 Enrique Florescano, *Etnia Estado y Nación México* (Mexico D.F.: Santillana 2002), p. 385.

cept of race in Mexico in his famous work, *La Raza Cosmica*, or "the cosmic race."[3] Vasconcelos argued that the process of colonialism had brought to the Americas a new superior race resulting from the mixing of white Europeans, Amerindians, and African Blacks. This race was "cosmic" in the sense that it encompassed all the best features of the three races. While Vasconselos's work constructed a new racial identity in Mexico, it did not necessarily changed people's attitudes and hierarchical perspectives regarding race, which had deep roots in the Colonial period. It is also important to note that Vasconcelos celebrated indigenous heritage, but he did not consider the indigenous peoples in themselves as part of the cosmic race.

This understanding of race informed the views of Lila's parents and extended family. Their origins as white Mexicans and former *hacendados*—however low they had fallen in economic terms—nonetheless influenced their idea of who would qualify as a suitable suitor. Although Lila never talked with the rich would-be suitor, it would not be long before the issue of betrothal would resurge. During a trip to Toluca, Lila's mother met Alfonso through Sara in one of her *espiritualista* sessions. The man came from a family of butchers and asked her if she knew someone who could help his brother open a butcher shop. Lila's mother helped José find a space in Zitácuaro where he opened his business. It was in that butcher shop that Lila met José. Guillermo says, "My dad was 26, and he was a man of experience. He had already been with another women, and my mother was young and overprotected." Silvia adds, "Of course my mom would fall for him. She had never had any contact with any man and here you have the typical experienced guy full of romantic words, trying to catch the prettiest girl in Zitácuaro."

José was very indigenous in appearance; he was not educated, and was poorly dressed and ill-groomed. Lila's family refused even to consider the possibility of marriage between the two. But Lila made up her own mind. She was in love, and she and José eloped and moved to a little town an hour away from Toluca called San Miguel Chapultepec. When Lila and José arrived in their new town, José rented a little room in a house just with a *petate*, a sort of bedroll of palm tree fibres spead on the floor and no electricity or running

3 José Vasconselos, *La Raza Cósmica* (Mexico D.F., Espasa Calpe, S.A., 1948).

water.

Married Life

At the age of 15, Lila never imagined that she was going to live in such conditions, much less perform the kind of work that women in rural Mexico were expected to carry out. But she could not return to Zitácuaro. Her family would never forgive her. Lupe says, "My mom often reflected about that moment; she always said that she had made a stupid mistake." Indeed, Lila had no idea what she was doing; she was only 15 and had no understanding of what a sexual relationship might be. As Lupe notes, "Maybe that is why Lila had so many children, because she did not understand the importance of consent," and in the course of 10 years Lila gave birth to seven children. "My mom was a very fertile woman, and in those times men did not care about how many children they had because they were not really involved in raising them," Guillermo tells me, and he adds that his father regarded both him and his brother Javier essentially as potential labour for the shop.

Lila's second child was stillborn. In recounting this tragedy in Lila's life, Lupe highlights the how child mortality and maternal health in rural Mexico was deeply connected to poor living conditions. "Probably that child who was stillborn might have been saved with the right pre-natal care. But with a precarious diet and living arrangements, women and their children were very vulnerable in those times."

My mother interrupted Lupe, saying that possibly this is why her mother was sometimes overprotective. Silvia notes that it is very likely that Lila simply stopped all sexual contact with José after the birth of Graciela, otherwise she would have had more children.

Lila's relationship with José deteriorated rapidly. Lila never indicated to anyone whether José ever struck her, but everyone I interviewed mentioned that Lila spoke of terrible fights with her husband. "Women in those times never raised their voice to their husbands, but my mom was different; she fought back," Silvia says. Most of the fights sprang from the fact that the family did not have food on the table, a chronic problem that Lila attributed to José's

Lila and Guillermo, her firstborn.

Lila, Jose, and their children.

Three Generations: Lila, the author and the author's mother.

drinking and gambling. Guillermo recalls:

> *I think your mom was not born yet. My dad was a real womanizer. He liked to gamble and to drink on the weekends. All his brothers did the same thing; they would go to the town next to Chapultepec to take up with other women there.*
>
> *Lila had seen enough. She told him that she didn't care what he was doing; she had suffered enough from being his wife, but mostly she was very angry at the idea that my dad was spending her children's money with other women. 'Next time you do this', she told him, 'don't be surprised if I am not here when you return.' [After this], I can't remember any other time our father disappeared for the entire weekend.*

While Lila's earlier life might had not been that of the extravagant abundance, her family never suffered any hunger. In contrast, "our life in Chapultepec was very precarious; we did not have a bathroom; our house was a just one big room and the kitchen and we never had money to do anything," says Lupe. The workload of women was very heavy. Not only did Lila care for six children, but she also had to deal with a very combative husband. Guillermo says,

> *I think my mom didn't love him after the first 10 years. When she was 25 years old, she started understanding her reality as she had matured. She realized the terrible conditions in which she lived and the degree to which my father was a profoundly ignorant man.*

Lila would wake up in the middle of the winter at five in the morning to wash everyone's clothes. They had no money to buy new clothes so Lila spent her nights sewing her children's garments so they could go to school. She barely slept; cooking, cleaning and sewing for six children in a rural area was more than a full-time job. I asked Silvia if she remembers Lila's daily life in Chapultepec. She recalls, "I have this image of my mom sewing late at night

with her pack of cigarettes, chain smoking and drinking coffee to stay awake."

Lila had to struggle to make do with the money that José gave her, especially when her children started school. In Chapultepec there was only a primary school, and to get any higher education it was necessary to go to Toluca, the nearest city, an hour away by bus. Paying the commuting cost for six children was difficult for a poor family, but it also implied foregoing the help of the boys in the family store. José tried to pull Guillermo out of school because he did not see a point of spending money for bus fare to Toluca. However, Lila stood firm, as my mother told me in her interview, "Lila often said that it was when our dad tried to pull Guillermo out of school that she completely changed." Lila must have been around 25 years old and did not want her children to spend their youth in the same conditions as she had lived hers. After a prolonged battle on Lila's part, José gave in and allowed Guillermo to go to Toluca.

I asked Silvia why Lila never went back to Zitácuaro, given the condition in which she was living. My aunt replied,

> *Partially because her family would not take Lila back. Two of her uncles never spoke to Lila again; even when we visited, they related only to us kids. But I also think it was a matter of respect, pride, and responsibility.*

As everyone in the family agrees, Lila devoted her life to her children, seeing them as the only way out of Chapultepec. Never having completed primary school herself, Lila firmly believed that her children's education was the only way they would improve their life.

All her children agree that Lila barely interacted with others in the town of Chapultepec. Obviously her background was very different from other women in the town. Nonetheless, "people respected her a lot," says Guillermo, seeing her as a person of integrity who was never involved in gossip or any neighbourhood problem. Silvia explained that in Chapultepec neighbours often regarded the family as upper class,

> *No one had an idea how poor we were because my mom always made sure that all of us were impeccably dressed*

when we went to school and she, herself, was always well turned-out when she left the house. She spent the entire night sewing and ironing and she woke up early to give us breakfast and braid our hair.

In a follow-up interview I asked Silvia if this perception of Lila and her children was related to the fact that Lila was white. Silvia responded that Lila stood out not only for her skin colour, but also because she always carried herself like a person who did not really belong in a *pueblo*. "My mom did not have any formal education", Guillermo says "but she spoke well and she was an autodidact; she learned many things through us."

Guillermo was able to finish his undergraduate degree in business administration in the 1960s. A couple of years before Guillermo completed his degree, José became really sick. Lila had to take over the management of the butcher shop to keep on providing for her children. Lila knew nothing about buying animals and, moreover, this was not seen as a woman's job. José continued buying the livestock and she hired a young boy to slaughter the animals for her to sell. She was good at administrating the store and increased the profits. One day a man came to the shop to collect payment for the livestock and Lila realized that José had been raking money off the top in the purchase of the cattle. My Uncle Guillermo became very upset when recounting this episode. He explained, "My mom realized that all those years he had her there living in terrible conditions, often starving, and with so many children, and all the while he was actually making enough money to have given them a decent standard of living."

All of her children agreed that Lila had suffered a lot in Chapultepec. Guillermo, being the eldest son, was the one who constantly mentions that they all felt the imperative to somehow get Lila out of Chapultepec. When Guillermo graduated from university, the Mexican economy was still benefiting from the diversification of the domestic market and the modernization of industry. While access to primary education expanded considerably during the post-revolutionary years, the percentage of people with a post-graduate education was still modest. Guillermo was able to find a good job with the help of one of his professors who knew his family situation. "After my first year

at that job we all moved to Toluca. You can't imagine what change it was; just having a washroom made a big difference." Guillermo also notes that by the time they moved to Toluca, Lila was already a women who, having worked her entire life, looked permanently exhausted. She had not yet turned 40, and she looked at least a decade older.

José moved with them to Toluca for some months but he did not like the city. Moreover, Lila stopped taking care of him. When he tried to convince her to move back to Chapultepec she refused and instead encouraged him to go back on his own. This decision was very brave, for few women left their husbands at the time and Lila still had young daughter at home. Lupe explains, "She blamed our dad for all our economic suffering, above all for her exhaustion. I think by that time she had come to hate him with the same intensity that she had once loved him."

Once in Toluca, Lila had more time to herself. The comfort of urban life facilitated her daily chores. She was more at ease knowing that her children, especially her daughters, were all enrolled in school. Just as her own mother had been, Lila was very worried about her daughter's suitors and, in her own way, just as racist as her own parents had been regarding the selection of an "appropriate" husband, because she associated her difficult marriage with José's skin colour and rural background. Lila had fought hard for her children to emerge from rural poverty and had succeeded in giving them he opportunity to study. Lila's children had benefited from the post-revolutionary policies, including education and diversification of the domestic economy, because they had a mother who fought for them to gain access to these opportunities. The majority of Mexicans living in rural poverty were not so lucky. She never went back to Chapultepec because it reminded her hard work and constant struggle.

Lila's story might seem unremarkable. She might not have been an extraordinary woman who fought for human rights and, indeed, her political participation might never have gone beyond casting her vote in elections. However, to her children, she was heroic. Lila's strength of character gave them the tools to rise out of poverty and to construct their own future. In a country where women are often silenced, she was a woman who fought for her children to break out of the perpetual circle of rural poverty. Perhaps our grandmother

was not a feminist, and possibly she would not even have understood that term. However, she did understand that no women should have the life she, herself, was forced to live for so many years.

Lila's story was written for one of my last undergraduate classes. It seems a fitting way to pay her tribute because I am the first person in my extended family to have the chance to study in and graduate from a foreign university. Being able to reach this academic level has given me a way both to appreciate and to celebrate my grandmother's life.

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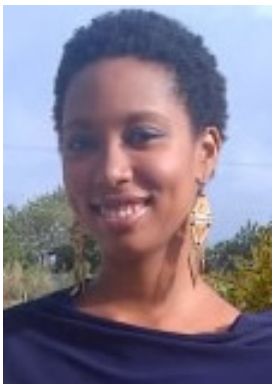

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