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# African heritage in Cuban literature for children and young adults : a participatory study with Nersys Felipe and Teresa Cárdenas

Dulce Maria Perez Castillo

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The University of San Francisco

AFRICAN HERITAGE IN CUBAN LITERATURE  
FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS:  
A PARTICIPATORY STUDY WITH NERSYS FELIPE AND TERESA CÁRDENAS

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Education

International and Multicultural Education Department

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

by  
Dulce María Pérez Castillo

San Francisco  
May 2007

This dissertation, written under the direction of the candidate's dissertation committee and approved by the members of the committee, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of the School of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my children Amelia and Gabriel for their encouragement and inspiration. To my mother Aurelina Castillo for her support and to my beloved teacher, friend and mentor Dr. Alma Flor Ada who took me by the hand in this arduous endeavor. To the memory of my father, Pedro Pérez Santana, and to my grandmother Adelaida Castillo Rosario whose spirits always accompany me. To Teresa Cárdenas and Nersys Felipe for their invaluable cooperation and support.

Cuba es esta tierra que amamos; donde cantan el sinsonte y la bijirita; donde crecen la ceiba y la majagua; donde estallan los cundiamores revelando un rojo que rivaliza con el atardecer. Cuba donde nacieron sueños de solaridad y justicia, y el idealismo inalcanzable ha llevado a sacrificios que alimentan otros idealismo, Cuba esta isla que se ha extendido por el mapa, y que ha llenado los aires de ritmo de bongó...esta Cuba que canta en versos de Nicolás y encuentra siempre la verdad en un aforismo de Martí, ha sido, es, y seguira seindo en mi aquí, en ti, allí, en otros en todas partes. (Ada, 2006)

Cuba, this land that we love where the mockingbird and *bijirita* sing, where the silk-cotton tree grows, along with the corkwood tree, where the *cundiamores* burst, revealing a red that rivals the sunset. Cuba, where dreams of solidarity and justice were born and the unattainable idealism have carried sacrifices that nourish other idealism, Cuba, this island, which has extended on the map, that has filled the earth with the rhythm of *bongó*...this Cuba which sings the verses of Nicolás and finds always the truth in an aphorism, has been, is, and will continue to be in me, here, in you, there, in others, everywhere.

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## CHAPTER I

### THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

#### Background and Need for the Study

People of African heritage constitute a large part of the population in Cuba and the other Caribbean islands and in Caribbean immigrant communities in the United States. Although Afro-Caribbeans have made rich and extensive contributions to the economic, political, and cultural lives of the countries in which they live, they have been underrepresented and often misrepresented in the literature. Because the educational success of children and young adults depends in large part upon their finding authentic and affirming representations of people with whom they can identify, this paucity of positive representation has had debilitating and self-perpetuating effects on Afro-Caribbeans and, therefore, on our society at large.

The history and literature of Cuba provide unique and valuable sources for studying this regional problem. At times, there have been more African people than people of European origin inhabiting the country. Afro-Cubans played a central role in the emergence of Cuba as an independent, modern state, and Afro-Cuban culture is integral to Cuban national identity or *Cubanidad*. In the words of Fernando Ortiz (1916), a preeminent early twentieth-century Cuban historian,

El aporte del negro a la cubanidad no ha sido escaso. A parte de su inmensa fuerza de trabajo que hizo posible la

incorporación económica de Cuba a la civilización mundial, y además de su pugnacidad libertadora que franqueó el advenimiento de la independencia patria su influencia puede ser advertida sobre todo en tres manifestaciones de la cubanidad: en el arte, en la religión, y en el tono de la emotividad colectiva.

[The contribution of black people to the *Cubanidad* has not been small. Besides their immense labor force, which made possible the economic incorporation of Cuba to the civilized world, they also supplied the liberating pugnacity that made possible the country's independence. His [the black people of Cuba] influence can be noticed especially in three manifestations of the *Cubanidad*: art, religion, and in the collective tone of the expression of emotions. — Please note that English in brackets following the Spanish original and when not otherwise specified are my translations.] (p. 7)

And yet, an academician or a beginning reader searching for Afro-Cuban faces and voices in the literature would find but few, and many of those found would be mere caricatures of real Afro-Cubans in all their human complexity. As Ortiz (1916) found when he set out to write his landmark history of blacks in Cuba,

Sin el negro Cuba no sería Cuba. No podía, pues, ser ignorado. Era preciso estudiar ese factor integrante de Cuba; pero nadie lo había estudiado y hasta parecía como si nadie lo quisiera estudiar. Para unos ello no merecía la pena; para otros era muy propenso a conflictos y disgustos; para otros era evocar culpas inconfesadas y castigar la conciencia; cuando menos el estudio del negro era tarea harto trabajosa, propicia a las burlas y no daba dinero. Había literatura abundante acerca de la esclavitud y de su abolición y mucha polémica en torno a ese trágico tema, pero embebida de odios, mitos, políticas, cálculos y romanticismo; había también algunos escritos de encomio acerca de . . . hombres de color que habían logrado gran relieve nacional en las letras o en las luchas por la libertad; pero el negro como ser humano, de su espíritu,

de su historia, de sus antepasados, de sus lenguajes, de sus artes, de sus valores positivos y de sus posibilidades sociales. . . nada.

[Without the blacks, Cuba would not be Cuba. Therefore, the study of blacks could not be ignored. It was important to study this integral element of Cuba; but nobody had studied it and it seemed that nobody was willing to do it. For some people, it was irrelevant; for others, it was prone to conflicts and displeasure; for others, it meant evoking untold blame and punishment to their conscience. The study of the blacks meant hard work; it gave rise to ridicule and was not profitable. There was abundant literature concerning slavery and its abolition, as well as a lot of controversy around this tragic topic saturated in hatred, myth, politics, calculation, and romanticism; also there were some writings of encomium about men of color who had achieved great national prominence in literature or in the struggle for freedom, but the black as a human being, his soul, his spirit, his history, his, ancestors, his languages, his arts, his positive value and his social possibilities...nothing.] (p. vi)

As with social science texts, there is very little Cuban children's literature that contains characters or stories that authentically reflect African heritage. As has happened with most dominated populations, the published literature pays scant attention to their existence. African culture is usually presented in the past or through folklore, myths, and legends. Although these make a wonderful and important contribution to the world of books for children and young adults, there is a need for literature in which contemporary readers can see themselves mirrored. Children and young people benefit from seeing reflections of their own experiences, their communities, and their families.

We also need a literature that discusses issues of race and ethnicity and allows children and young adults to understand how racism, discrimination, and lack of

opportunity may restrict their future and their active participation in society. Through authentic and racially conscious stories, readers can gain new awareness of their identities and have an opportunity to question and challenge how other people who are like them are portrayed. A body of Afro-Cuban young adult literature will be reviewed and critically analyzed in Chapters III and V.

After positing the problem of underrepresentation of Afro-Cubans in juvenile literature and exploring the historical causes for the problem's existence, in this study I examined the published works and personal experiences of two modern Cuban authors, Nersys Felipe (b. 1939) and Teresa Cárdenas (b. 1970), both of whom have created Afro-Cuban realities in their books for children and young adults. I employed critical literary analysis to identify representations of Afro-Cuban characters and cultural phenomena in their books and to consider the effects that those representations are likely to have on young readers. I used the participatory research method to investigate these two authors' racial consciousness, experiences of Afro-Cuban culture, motivations for creating the analyzed books, and the obstacles they had to overcome. By studying the conditions under which these valuable works were created, I hoped to better understand ways in which other authors, publishers, and educators can strive to create additional works that help to ensure that future beginning readers of all racial backgrounds will find enjoyable and affirming books.

#### Statement of the Research Problem

In this study, I explored the voices and reflections of two female Cuban authors who

represented two different generations—those who came of age at the beginning of the Cuban Revolution and those who are still working today. I analyzed how both of these addressed the issue of African presence in Cuban children’s and young adult literature. The study examines how the literature of these authors is raising consciousness and encouraging a transformation in the representation of African heritage for children and adolescents. “Literature can illustrate the possibilities in what may seem like an impossible and unpredictable future. It can be a course of revelation and therefore potentially transformative in nature. It can become the basis for creative and critical thinking” (Ada, 2003, p. 2).

#### Purpose of the Study

I have critically analyzed some of the published work of two Cuban authors, Nersys Felipe and Teresa Cárdenas. This participatory study used reflective dialogues with the authors to add their personal reflections to the analysis. The authors were asked about their roles as authors of literature for children and young adults. Another question that formed part of the dialogue was the impact their own experiences of race consciousness may have had on their stories. I also made inquiries as to their motivations for including issues of African presence in their writing.

#### Research Questions

This study asked and answered the following four questions:

1. How is African heritage incorporated in the published work of Nersys Felipe and Teresa Cárdenas?

2. What societal awareness is brought out by their work?
3. How did the authors develop their racial identity, and what impact did it have in the books they have written?
4. How are the authors raising consciousness and encouraging transformation in the representation of African heritage for children and adolescents in their literature?

### Theoretical Framework

Knowledge of history helps us trace the patterns that constitute oppression over time and enables us to see the long-standing grievances of different groups in our society. (Bell, 1997, p. 6)

The theoretical framework for this study was based on five theories related to Afro-Cuban voices. The theories are historical perspectives of Cuba, identity formation, multicultural children's literature, critical pedagogy, and participatory research.

#### *Historical Perspectives of Cuba*

Since Afro-Cuban voices have often been silenced, it is necessary to hear them in light of the historical perspectives of Cuba with the African influences of people, music, and religion. Pedro Perez Sarduy and Jean Stubbs edited two anthologies of contemporary Cuban writing on race, identity, politics, and culture. Sarduy and Stubbs (1993) discussed periods in Cuban history when unity and social cohesion bridged the divides of regions, class, gender, and cultural and religious lines, which at other times divided the nation. The issue of race has always had many divergent views. The authors' responses were used as a framework to comprehend the African heritage in Cuba and

how its history shaped the lives of Afro-Cubans before and after the revolution.

### *Identity Formation*

People, experiences, places, and customs have a tremendous impact in shaping children's identity. Tatum (1997) asserted, "The parts of our identity that do capture our attention are those that other people notice and that reflect back to us. The aspect of identity that is the target of other's attention, and subsequently of our own, often is what sets us apart as exceptional or 'other' in their eyes" (p. 21). Her work was used as a basis to further investigate the role of multicultural literature in the development of identity.

### *Multicultural Children's Literature*

Harris (1997) believed that multicultural literature should be defined in a comprehensive and inclusive manner. It should include books that reflect the racial, ethnic, and social diversity that is characteristic of our pluralistic society and of the world. Harris' emphasized the importance of including and disseminating the work of authors who have been traditionally marginalized. The theories in this study related to multicultural children's literature (Bishop, 1997; Harris, 1997; Nieto, 1997; Banks, 1988) are based on the belief that multicultural education is for all students. Bishop (1997) said,

When students are exposed exclusively to literature in which they see reflections of themselves and their own lives, they are miseducated to view themselves and their lives as "normal," to interpret their own cultural attitudes and values as "human nature," and to view other people and other lives as exotic at best, and deviant at worst.  
(p. 4)

This study looked at Afro-Cuban representation as one part of multicultural

children's literature.

### *Critical Pedagogy and Participatory Research*

The research problem was defined and investigated using Paulo Freire's (1970, 1973, 1996, 1997, 1998) theoretical rationale for participatory research and critical pedagogy. Based on this model, I engaged the authors in reflective, transformative dialogues. These dialogues allowed them to be involved in the process of participatory research.

### Significance of the Study

This study provided an awareness of the significance and depth of the literature being written by two Cuban female authors. It also shed light on the issue of African heritage in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. Children of color throughout the world continue to be ignored. There is a need to know the authentic literature and where it can be found, which is the contribution of this dissertation. These two authors are of high literary capability but not well known by the 35 million Latinos in the United States. Making their work better known to children and educators contributes to the available body of multicultural children's literature. Torry (2002) said, "The move toward using literary works to record authentic social experiences strengthens the subjective side of history and allows underrepresented people to reconstruct their own realities" (p. 9).

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### Introduction

The review of the literature examined related literature in several areas: historical perspectives on Afro-Cubans, racial identity, multicultural literature for children and young adults, and critical pedagogy. These areas formed the foundation upon which the dialogues I had with the two authors were analyzed.

#### Historical Perspectives on Afro-Cubans

##### *Enslavement*

An important lesson of history is that political leadership matters. Race and ethnicity hold strategic, not inherent or absolute, value. Ethnic and racial identity takes on different meanings in different contexts, depending on who uses them and for what purposes. They are relative, situational categories. Competition and conflict between racial and ethnic groups may occur but need not necessarily do so, and may or may not be institutionalized in the political system at a societal level. Political systems may generate heightened racial or ethnic sentiments, but they can also channel negotiations and cross-cutting alliances, allowing scope for individual and collective action. Any meaningful notion of racial democracy must encompass black self-liberation. (Sarduy & Stubbs, 1993, p. 17)

Throughout the history of the Americas, the struggle for freedom dates back to the initial clash between two peoples and cultures, the European and the Indian, the latter ill equipped to match the economic and military strength of the former. The Indian and rebellions of enslaved peoples of the early colonization periods might thus be regarded as forerunners to the rebellions that accompanied the massive influx of enslaved Africans, at

the height of the slave trade, in the nineteenth century. The rebellions similarly had parallels with the abolitionist and independence movements of the late nineteenth century (Sarduy & Stubbs, 2000). Because this study views the situation of enslavement as something subjected upon certain persons and not an inherent human condition, the term *slave* is avoided.

The process of enslavement experienced an economic boom following the demise of sugar in Saint-Domingue (present-day Haiti) after the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) and after Spain permitted Cuba, as of 1818, to trade with the world. From Africa to Cuba, trade for the purpose of enslavement had already increased during the 1762-1763 British occupation of Havana, which opened the island to trade and mercantilism. Over the next half century, it grew rapidly, with an estimated one million such Africans in Cuba by the early years of the nineteenth century. Eighty-six percent of these Africans were imported after 1790, and more than 70% arrived after 1817, the year that Spain signed a treaty, which it later ignored, with Great Britain to end the trade in enslaved Africans. With over half the population in Cuba of African origin or descent by the late nineteenth century, race and race mixing took on entirely new dimensions. With the decimation of the Indian population through war, disease, and displacement, the Hispanic and the African would form the two major roots of the nascent Cuban nation. Their relations, however, were turbulent.

In 1812, a conspiracy planned by José Antonio Aponte, a free black carpenter in Havana, in which whites also participated, sought to overthrow enslavement and colonial

rule. In 1826, the first armed uprising for independence took place in Puerto Principe (at the time, the name of the capital city of Camagüey Province), led by Francisco de Agüero and Andres Manuel Sanchez. Agüero (white) and Sanchez (mulatto, of mixed African and European ancestry) were executed, becoming the first martyrs of Cuban independence (Sarduy & Stubbs, 2000).

Throughout the nineteenth century, Africans in Cuba were allowed to form their own *cabildos* (councils), initially based on a specific grouping or "nation" of Africa but later Pan-African (encompassing several such groupings) and also African-Creole (including Africans and native-born Afro-Cubans). By the turn of the century, these evolved into the cultural, political, and mutual aid societies and clubs that would characterize twentieth-century black organizations.

Though human trade to Cuba was officially outlawed in 1865, both the trade and enslavement continued. It was only during the Ten Years' War, in 1873, that the last known shipment of enslaved Africans landed in Cuba. In 1880 (the year sugar production topped 700,000 tons, almost 600,000 of which was exported to the U.S.), the colonial authorities decreed the abolition of enslavement but introduced a system akin to apprenticeship, known as *patronato*, whereby former masters would remain owners over an 8-year period. The *patronato* was rendered inoperative and ended earlier than originally planned, in 1886.

The initial declaration of the Ten Years' War, known as the Declaration of Yara, was made at a sugar mill and invoked freedom for enslaved persons as well as

independence from Spain, reflecting the extent to which issues of abolition and independence were intertwined. However, neither the war of 1868-1878 nor that of 1879-1880 coalesced as a popular uprising. Such an uprising occurred only after the abolition of enslavement in 1886, with the second war of independence from 1895 to 1898. Many of the rank and file of that war and its officers were black. They joined forces with white Cubans under the progressive call to forge a republic "with all and for the good of all." These were the words of José Martí, a Cuban of Hispanic origin, who in 1892, while living in exile in the United States, formed the Cuban Revolutionary Party.

A great thinker, Martí had a genius for mobilizing men and women across classes and races with a vision of social justice in an independent Cuba (Sarduy & Stubbs, 2000). Alma Flor Ada (2002) went so far as to describe Martí as "...the purest man born on our continent, whose voice is universally respected, [and he] has been called 'Apostle' and 'Teacher' not only for his words, but also for the profound harmony between his words and deeds" (p. 1). Martí espoused women's equality, reform of education, and the ending of racial inequality; by his influential example, he made these topics a fundamental part of Cuba's social history. Martí was influential not only in Cuba but also in the entire Latin world.

Martí became aware at an early age of many of the issues that would constitute his life's work. His first shocking experience with race came at age 9 when his father took him to the countryside. Martí saw the horrific treatment of slaves in the fields, and it touched him deeply. The suffering he witnessed inspired him to later write these stanzas

in his *Versos sencillos (Simple Verses)*(1891):

Blood-red lightning cleaves  
The murky of overcast; a ship  
Disgorges Negroes by the hundreds  
Through the hatches.

The raging winds laid low  
The full-leafed mastic trees,  
And rows of naked slaves  
Walked onward, onward.

The tempest shook  
The barracks filled with slaves;  
A mother and babe passed by  
And both were screaming.

Red as a desert sun  
The sun rose at the horizon  
And shone upon a dead slave hanged  
From a mountain ceiba.

A small boy witnessed it  
And trembled for the groaning men;  
At the victim's feet he vowed to cleanse  
That crime with his life! (quoted in Ada, 1994, p. 3)

Martí was imprisoned at age 16 under the accusation of writing a treasonous letter against the Spanish government in Cuba, and he was exiled to Spain after serving 6 months of his sentence. Following the completion of both his bachelor's and master's degrees in Spain, Martí moved to Mexico where he, according to Ada (2002), "...[took] with him an understanding of the suffering in Mexico, a feeling that [brought] with it support for the cause of justice everywhere" (p. 12). After a brief stay in Guatemala, Martí was given amnesty as a result of the Pact of Zanjón and allowed to return to Cuba

in 1878. However, this stay was destined to be brief; Martí was exiled once more following the uprising in late 1879. After brief stints in both Spain and France, he traveled to New York. During his time New York, Martí (1893) wrote prolifically and with great variety. His idealistic viewpoint during this time was evident when he wrote in his newspaper, *Patria*,

There is no danger of war between the races in Cuba. Man means more than white man, mulatto, or black man. The souls of white men and Negroes have risen together from the battlefields where they fought and died for Cuba.... When independence comes, every individual will be free in the sanctity of the native home. Merit, the tangible cumulative of culture, and the inexorable play of economic forces, will ultimately unite all men. There is much greatness in Cuba, in both Negro and white. (quoted in Ada 1994, p. 3)

Martí finally acknowledged that his inherently pacifist methods of resistance would not remedy the situation between the Spanish and Cubans, and as Ada (2002) said, "He was convinced that the only way of ending the violence and violation that existed in Cuba of the part of the Spanish government was what he called 'the necessary war' " (p. 20). Martí hoped to remove the Spanish government quickly with assistance from the civil population and begin what he saw as the true revolution, which he saw as a peaceful republic constructed along his major principles of equality and social justice. Martí died in battle during the early part of the war on April 16, 1895. He is regarded as the founding father of Cuba and an inspiration for all Cuban leaders in the following century.

*Republic: 1902-1959*

In 1898, the U.S. battleship Maine was blown up in Havana Harbor, killing 260 officers and crew. As a result, President William McKinley asked the U.S. Congress for the authority to intervene militarily against Spain. Santiago de Cuba capitulated to Theodore Roosevelt's Rough Riders in 1898. The U.S. militarily occupied Cuba from 1898 to 1902 and again from 1906 to 1908, paving the way for a lasting U.S. presence and huge U.S. investments. Perhaps most frustrating to those who had fought for independence was the Platt Amendment to the Cuban Constitution of 1901. The amendment was included in the Constitution only after prolonged debate and as a precondition for the withdrawal of U.S. troops. It gave the United States the right to intervene in Cuba militarily should circumstances be deemed to warrant such action. The Cuban government, moreover, was proscribed from entering into agreements with other countries without the consent of Washington. Military Governor Leonard Wood supervised what the United States called democratic elections, but the franchise excluded women, illiterates, and those with less than \$250, effectively excluding most Afro-Cuban males as well. Conservative Tomas Estrada Palma was elected president. In 1903, the United States signed the Reciprocal Trade Treaty (which benefited the U.S. much more than it did Cuba) and built the Guantanamo Naval Base, which remains to this day (Sarduy & Stubbs, 2000).

The U.S. presence also bolstered conservative sectors of Cuban society, the early twentieth-century ruling class. This class pursued policies that actively sought a

"whitening" (*blanqueamiento*) of the nation by attracting Spanish immigrants. More than 780,000 Spaniards are estimated to have entered the island between 1902 and 1931, though the number of permanent settlers is not thought to have been more than 250,000. By the 1920s, whitening had failed. Nonetheless, in the early twentieth century, Cuba was one of the more Spanish of the Latin American republics, and the whitening policies had further marginalized blacks and mulattoes economically and socially, sowing the seeds of great disillusion.

Diverse currents of thought developed regarding the "black problem." The first movement was led by Juan Gualberto Gomez, a leader in the struggle for independence who had been representative in Cuba of Martí's Cuban Revolutionary Party while the latter was in exile. Gomez was the black leader with the greatest prestige after the death of Antonio Maceo. Along with Gen. Bartolome Maso, he was also the leading opponent of the Platt Amendment. He believed that equality between black and white could be realized when Afro-Cubans achieved educational levels on a par with those of the white population. This had been his primary aim in encouraging the establishment of black educational, recreational, and mutual aid societies and brotherhoods and bringing them together at the turn of the century under the rubric of the Central Directorate of the Colored Race. The directorate's central aims were to foment a "fraternal spirit," establish a "community of interests," avoid "collisions and antagonisms," and proceed in "cordial reciprocity" as a patriotic grouping integral to the new nation. To that end he worked tirelessly throughout the island. His dictum was "Educate yourselves so that nobody can

throw in your face that you come from a 'savage' people" (Perez, Sarduy, & Stubbs, 2000, p. 77).

A second movement was led by Martín Morúa Delgado, who had been proautonomy (whereby Cuba would be accorded certain powers of its own) up until 1896, then proindependence (whereby Cuba would break away from Spain as a nation in its own right). He believed that racially exclusive groupings—even when they were founded for cultural and social betterment or mutual aid—harmed rather than benefited the sector they sought to help. Like Gomez, however, he believed that black people should be directly involved in working for their own betterment. The most influential black people were grouped in one of these two currents.

A third movement comprised those unable to find a voice in the mainstream political parties. Leaders who formed the Committee of Veterans of Color in the early years of the republic broke with the Liberal Party to found the Independent Party of Color in 1908 and fight for their own demands. Their continued aspiration was unity, but they saw the myth of racial democracy as working in favor of whites by silencing and deracializing Cubans. The party was outlawed in 1910 in an amendment authored by Martín Morúa, then a senator. The government harshly repressed a protest against this proscription in 1912. The leaders of this movement, Evaristo Estenoz and Pedro Ivonet, together with other veterans of the War of Independence, were killed in what has gone down in history as the Race War of 1912. One hundred years after the Aponte uprising of 1812, more than 3,000 blacks and mulattoes were killed, according to official records,

and black people were terrorized throughout the island. Of these three movements, it might be said that Morua Delgado appealed to elite sectors, Estenoz and Ivonet had a support base among more popular sectors, and Gomez was able to reach out to a broad range of sectors (Sarduy & Stubbs, 2000).

The period 1912-1940 also witnessed the emergence of an Afro-Cuban middle class, which criticized Cuban racism, emphasized self-improvement in the black community and the importance of personal example, promoted African diasporic links, and called for political and cultural space. Gustavo Urrutia expressed this perspective in his column, "A Race's Ideals" (*Ideales de una raza*), in the conservative newspaper *Diario de la Marina*. Marking this period of cultural renewal, *afrocubanismo*, or *negritude* (*negritude*), affirmed Cuba's African roots and celebrated its *mestizo* (mixed) heritage while seeking to redefine a national identity. The movement would give rise to the magical realism of Alejo Carpentier (white) and the radical Afrocentric poetry of Nicolás Guillén (mulatto) (Sarduy & Stubbs, 2000).

Racial discrimination was disallowed under the 1940 Constitution, and racial segregation did not exist as such. However, in the 1940s and 1950s, people of color were relegated to the public and service sectors. There were no blacks in major U.S.-owned, white-collar companies. People of color were overwhelmingly manual workers in the industrial manufacturing sector. Private schools, religious and lay, accepted very few blacks. Entire neighborhoods in cities and towns throughout the island, as well as entertainment and recreation facilities, were segregated (Sarduy & Stubbs, 2000).

Fernando Ortiz (1881-1969), a Cuban essayist, ethnomusicologist, and scholar of Afro-Cuban culture, coined the term *transculturation* to define a phenomenon that he felt was being misrepresented and muddled by historians and sociologists. Ortiz's refutation of the term *acculturation*, espoused by the Bronislaw Malinowski School as an inadequate description for the accelerated mixing of cultures that took place in Cuba and the rest of the Caribbean, opened a new possibility of self-study for the Cuban people (Morejon, 2000). Ortiz's writings described the "constant interaction, [and] transmutation between two or more cultural components whose unconscious end is the creation of a third cultural whole—that is, culture—new and independent, although its bases, its roots, rest on preceding elements" (Morejon, 1982, p. 21). His knowledge of Cuba's history and culture, gained through a life of study, allowed him to see not only the effect of the invaders of the Iberian peninsula on the native population and, later, the blacks, but also the effect that the interplay between the indigenous people, the blacks, and the different European cultures has had on the identity of Cubans today. The vast mixing of races and cultures, achieved in centuries rather than millennia, resulted in the common feeling of being "Cuban." As Nancy Morejon (1982) rightly said,

In the framework of this context common to peoples of all the Caribbean islands, Cubans are characterized for having sought to build a nation that is homogenous in its heterogeneity, defined by a political end beyond any cultural or racial controversy. Whence, the rightful application of the term *transculturation* to our cultural history. We have not been assimilated, that is to say, acculturated to Spanish or African culture; with a highly creative spirit, in a constant quest for nationhood, we have

produced a mixed people, who inherit and embody both components, no longer either Spanish or African, but Cuban. (p. 24)

This national pride, present in every Cuban heart, would have lacked a major source of clarity and direction without the extensive research and writings of Don Fernando Ortiz.

Expressing this national sentiment was the lifelong passion of Nicolás Guillén (1902-1989). His poetry, articles, and short essays explicitly took on the diverse nature of the Cuban culture. Guillén, the national poet of Cuba since 1961, gave a voice to the racially, culturally, and economically marginalized of Cuba, other parts of the Caribbean, and the world. His stance, as a mulatto, that to be Cuban was to be *meztizo* allowed him to express both Afro-Cuban and Spanish-Cuban ideals in his powerful, yet lyrical, poetry and prose. He did not shy from problematic issues but, instead, attempted to heal the deep rifts between races that had only been superficially addressed, "In 'Sugarcane,' for example, the reader is given a terse glimpse of the anti-imperialist feelings which [became] one of the major preoccupations of Guillén's later poetry. The Negro, moreover, ...ceased to be a superficial personality out of popular folklore and [became] a character of some depth" (Marquez, 1972, p. 19). Robert Marquez (1972) described Guillén wholly when he said,

Guillén...has been regarded as the major exponent of Black poetry in the Spanish-speaking world. But his thematic scope is wide, and although primarily known as a poet of folk rhythms, Black and popular themes, he is also recognized for his humor, for his artistic refinement, for the sensitivity of his love ballads, and for the compassionate poignancy of his political and revolutionary verse. He is not strictly speaking, a poet Negritude.... Guillén is more properly the poet of a people and his principle concern has been the creation of a poetry with a distinctively Cuban flavor, one which

reflects—and helps consolidate—the Cuban national identity. (pp. 13-14)

Guillén, a close friend of Fidel Castro, supported the communist revolution in hopes that it would further his dream of a united and just Cuban nation. Because of his support of the communist movement, Guillén was persecuted and exiled from Cuba until the entrance of Castro's revolution. With Castro's ascent to power, Guillén returned to Cuba and was appointed to such high positions as President of the Union of Cuban Writers and Artists.

### *Revolutionary Cuba*

A young lawyer by the name of Fidel Castro, of Spanish (Galician) descent, was running in the elections that were preempted by the 1952 coup on behalf of the Ortodoxo (Orthodox) Party. (The Ortodoxos had split from the Auténtico Party, disillusioned by corruption under the Auténtico administrations.) A year later, Castro led an attack on the Moncada Garrison in Santiago de Cuba, in which many of the attackers lost their lives or were jailed. Castro was jailed but was granted amnesty and in 1955 was deported to Mexico. He led a return expedition to Cuba in 1956 to form the Rebel Army in the eastern Sierra Maestra mountains. The armed struggle had its civilian counterpart in the 26th of July Movement and, combined with the activities of other civilian groups, developed into a popular struggle for social justice that triumphed on January 1, 1959. With overwhelming mass support, the revolutionary government curtailed class privilege on a platform of agrarian reform and nationalization of industry coupled with extensive education and health programs. Castro concerned himself heavily with the oppressive

legacy of colonization and stressed the need for education and equity throughout his 1960 speech at the inauguration of the "Oscar Lucero" School in Holguin,

If every family cannot have a higher living standard, if every Cuban cannot have work the year around, if every family does not have anything necessary to live decently, what is this all due to? It is due to the fact that we have inherited a colonized country, a poor country. Why do so many children not have decent clothing, why do they not have shoes, why do so many children not have anything with which to buy candy, why do so many children not have an opportunity to go to the movies, why do so many children not have an opportunity to get sufficient recreation, why do so many children lack all of these necessary things? Because we have inherited a colonized country, a poor country, with 300,000 unemployed, and we had to begin from scratch, we had to start building up everything from scratch. We had to begin with what little we have but we had to make a beginning; and we had to do this with a nation where we still have hundreds of thousands of men who do not know how to read or write, a nation which did not have enough schools, a nation which was deficient in terms of public health, a nation which did not have hospitals, a nation which did not have technical education centers, a people that did not have land, a people that did not have factories; in other words, we had to start this with a people that was colonized and exploited. This is why the revolution now confronts the tremendous task which it must promote.

The early exodus of Cubans to the United States, in particular Miami, was mainly wealthy and white. On the island, black Cubans regained dignity as the bases for institutionalized racism were dismantled (Sarduy & Stubbs, 2000). In the early stages of his socialist government, Castro condemned the racial prejudices of the preceding government, especially in his speech (1961) commemorating the first anniversary of the La Coubre,

...in what sector were the people not exploited, in what fashion were they not humiliated? The citizens of Cuba were humiliated. In a whole series of places a larger

number of our compatriots were not welcome, because they were black. ...[I]magine a child, how many humiliations did the black children suffer, condemned by society, full of prejudice, prejudice born of what? Of enslavement, and because they were the heirs of prejudice, the heirs of owners of the enslaved, in whose minds prejudices was born, to be transmitted and inculcated through every possible medium.

This unhappy child, suffering humiliation from the time he could reason until his death. When did one of these gentlemen stop to combat racial discrimination? When did he stop to combat prostitution, not as an evil in itself, but as a consequence of the social system? When did they engage in battle with the robbers? They left any robber who shared his loot with them, and they blessed the tyrant, and they blessed all the beasts. They did not write sermons against them.

The catechism says “do not steal,” but they stole here, and they were friends of those who stole! “Do not kill,” but they killed here, and they were friends of those who killed. “Do not lie,” but everything was a lie, and they lived in shameful complicity with deceit! Sloth is a “capital sin,” but who was more slothful here than the parasites who lived off the work of others?

Propelled in no small measure by the hostile response of the U.S. government, ranging from an embargo on trade to counterespionage, the Cuban government entered the Eastern European socialist fold. In 1961, after the failed invasion of U.S.-supported Cuban exiles at the Bay of Pigs, Castro declared the socialist nature of the revolution. In 1962, Cuba was catapulted to the center of world attention with the missile crisis, averted by Soviet withdrawal of its missiles in return, among other things, for a U.S. commitment not to invade Cuba. In 1965, the revolutionary forces were regrouped under the new Communist Party of Cuba (Partido Comunista de Cuba, PCC) (Sarduy & Stubbs, 2000).

Un solo palo no hace monte.  
(One tree does not make a forest.)  
—Cuban proverb

During these turbulent times, the Cuban literary scene thrived under the new communist regime. One of the authors who found success in the new government was Nersys Felipe, an outstanding writer of Cuban children's literature. She published the book *Román Elé* in 1976. This children's story provided a backdrop for Felipe to authentically portray issues of race, social justice, and equity. Felipe emphasized the contrasts between the different periods of Cuban history. Her work was shaped by both the time periods during which she lived and great Cuban literary figures, such as José Martí, Fernando Ortiz, Nicolás Guillén, and Fidel Castro, who went before her. Felipe's work is addressed extensively in Chapter V.

The Cuban government sought to establish a socialist, state-run economy and society. In keeping with the Marxist emphasis on class, it gave a higher priority to disparities of class than those of race, in the belief that addressing the former would correct the latter. This belief was shaken by the 1980 exodus of 125,000 Cubans through the port of Mariel. In comparison with previous migrations, this one included poorer classes and about 25,000 Afro-Cubans. Although he had made declarations on race when he assumed the presidency, it was not until the 1986 PCC Congress that Castro raised the issue again. The Congress was charged with symbolic significance, as 1986 marked the centennial of the abolition of slavery in Cuba. In a speech that was televised live but never published, Castro criticized the persistence of racial stereotypes and prejudice in

Cuban society, lambasting political organizations for the under-representation of blacks, women, and youth in leadership positions. He spoke of continuing forms of discrimination and called for an affirmative action program, starting with the Communist Party itself. However, the leadership of the PCC continued to be predominantly white (Sarduy & Stubbs, 2000).

Cuba's foreign policy focused on Third World liberation and decolonization. Many black Cubans were proud of Cuba's involvement in Africa in the early 1960s (Republic of the Congo) and in the mid-1970s, when President Castro responded to the call for help issued by President Agostinho Neto of Angola, newly independent from Portugal, against invading South African forces. Castro defined Cubans as not only a Latin American people but also a Latin African people. "The blood of Africa runs deep in our veins," he declared, a sentiment strengthened when Cuba became chair of the Movement of Non-Aligned Nations and developed its own bilateral programs with African countries. Castro maintained close contacts with African American political activists as well. The Cuban Revolution triumphed in 1959, at the height of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement and the Cold War (Sarduy & Stubbs, 2000).

In the 1990s, the political and race divide between Cubans on the island (mainly black and mulatto) and Cubans in Miami (overwhelmingly white) was apparent in the receptions they gave South Africa's Nelson Mandela: in Cuba, he was welcomed as a hero, while for many Miami Cubans, he was most unwelcome. These Miami Cubans were, for the large part, descended from people who had fled the revolution in 1959.

They clung to the harsh racial views that had been acceptable in their previous privileged positions and repudiated the celebration of black leaders. Their inherited prejudices found a fertile environment in historically racially-conflicted Florida. In June 1990, four Cuban American mayors of the cities in the Miami area signed a letter declaring Nelson Mandela *persona non grata*, shortly before a planned visit to Florida as part of his U.S. tour. As usual, any sign of support for Cuba was to be denounced, and on many occasions Mandela had expressed appreciation for Cuba's solidarity in ending apartheid. The African American community declared a boycott of Miami that was ineffective, and it demanded an apology from the Cuban Americans that was never forthcoming. The conflict was a sign of growing Cuban American divisions, as those of Afro-Cuban descent distanced themselves from those of Hispanic descent.

### *Special Period*

In the 1990s, Cuba experienced a broad range of political and economic changes. The 1989 collapse of Soviet-bloc socialism and the tightening of the U.S. embargo, in the form of the 1992 Torricelli-Graham Act and the 1996 Helms-Burton Act, precipitated an economic collapse that ever since has disproportionately affected the black population. By 1993, the low point of the crisis, the economy had plummeted by about 50%. In the summer of 1994, there was rioting in Havana, the first demonstration of its kind since the 1959 revolution, and some 30,000 rafters took to the seas in desperation, many of them from poorer and blacker sectors of society (Sarduy & Stubbs, 2000). As the economy of the country crashed, Fidel Castro was forced to soften some of his anticapitalist laws.

One of the crucial policies that softened involved the decriminalization of the possession of foreign currency (Saney, 2004, p. 108). According to Isaac Saney (2004), "...the economic crisis of the 1990s has...reintroduced into Cuban society forces that generate inequity and inequality in their wake..." (p. 108).

These outside forces, primarily in the form of remittances from abroad, have played an important role in the re-separation of Cuba along racial lines. Since the overwhelming majority of Cubans abroad are of primarily Euro-Cuban descent, a large part of the more than one billion dollars, as of a 1996 United Nations' report, in foreign remittances can be expected to enter the purses of mainly Euro-Cubans still on the island (Sarduy & Stubbs, 2000, p. 34). In fact, according to "a study by the Cuban Centro de Antropologia (Centre of Anthropological Research) estimates that 30-40 percent of white Cubans receive remittances, as opposed to 5-10 percent of black Cubans" (Rodriguez, 2002, quoted in Saney, 2004, p. 109).

Furthering the racial discrimination against blacks have been the prejudiced hiring practices of foreign tourism companies. These primarily European firms "...are often infused with racist ideas, outlooks, and practices" (Saney, 2004, p. 109). The predominantly white managerial bodies in the foreign hotels merely reflect common social constructs outside of Cuba. Compounding the racial discrimination is the simple economic favoritism involved. Since these foreign tourism companies operate in a capitalist manner, the inequality of wages, which are importantly in foreign currency, exacerbates the injustice of favoritism in hiring processes.

The economic imbalance brought by foreign business influence has endangered the racial and social equality that embodied the Cuban revolutionary experiment. Before the crisis of the 1990s, Afro-Cubans seldom encountered "overt discrimination publicly or privately in their daily lives," and "individual ethnicity, while certainly not abolished, assumed less importance in their daily interpersonal relations" (Knight, 1996, p. 117, quoted in Saney, 2004, p. 111). Unfortunately, it seems that the 30-year respite from the struggle for recognition and equality has ended for Cuba's Afro-Cuban population. Castro himself acknowledged Cuba's struggles with prejudice during his speech at the United Nations Millennium Summit on September 8, 2000:

I am not claiming that our country is a perfect model of equality and justice. We believed at the beginning that when we established the fullest equality before the law and complete intolerance for any demonstration of sexual discrimination in the case of women, or racial discrimination in the case of ethnic minorities, these phenomena would vanish from our society. It was some time before we discovered that marginality and racial discrimination with it are not something that one gets rid of with a law or even with 10 laws, and we have not managed to eliminate them completely, even in 40 years.

We are aware that there is still marginality in our country. But there is the will to eradicate it with the proper methods for this task to bring more unity and equality to our society. On behalf of my Homeland, I promise to keep you informed about the progress of our efforts.

Sarduy and Stubbs (1993) suggested that "...during Cuba's modern history there have been competing variants of race politics and ethnic identity, with varying levels of inclusion and exclusion of race-class groupings. Dominant Hispanic segments of the

population may have claimed their identity as the only legitimate one. New power elites from largely the same grouping may have sought legitimacy by promoting a synthetic national culture, tending to discourage racial or ethnic thinking that separated citizens from nation. Or, groups may have shared more equally in the life of the nation in proportion to their share of the population, whereby citizenship encompassed different yet compatible identities, together constituting the life of the nation” (p. 18).

¡Hay que tener  
voluntá  
que la salasión no e  
pa toa la vida!

Camina y no llore, negra,  
Vé p'allá;  
Camina y no llore, negra,  
Vé p'acá;

Camina, negra, camina,  
¡que hay que tener voluntá.

[One needs to have a will  
hard times do not  
last forever!

Come, don't cry, black woman  
go over there;  
come, black woman, don't cry,  
come over here.

Come, black woman, come.  
One needs to have a will!] (Guillén, 1993, p. 63)

Teresa Cárdenas (Matanzas, 1970), an award-winning author, published *Cartas al cielo* (1998) during the Special Period. This story is permeated by the child narrator's

innocent voice as it offers a profound, unique message with a nonconformist angle. Cárdenas opens a window through which any reader can enter the simple day-to-day world her characters of African descent inhabit. In *Cartas al cielo*, Cárdenas looks at Cuba's *mestizo* culture through an Afrocentric prism. The fictional characters of African descent in her story particularly represent the voices of those members of Cuban society unable to overcome the mental, economical, and social barriers of Special Period Cuba. Those members of Cuban society unable to rise from their marginal status during the window of opportunity presented by the Revolution are, unfortunately, finding it increasingly harder to break free from the restraints of class and race. Despite Castro's efforts and legislation prohibiting racist practices, the racist undercurrents that Cárdenas addresses in her book continue. Cárdenas' work is further analyzed in Chapter V.

### Racial Identity

As Beverly Daniel Tatum (1997) wrote in her book *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* "The concept of identity is a complex one, shaped by individual characteristics, family dynamics, historical factors, and social and political contexts" (p. 18). Tatum later quoted Erik Erikson (1968) as saying,

In psychological terms, identity formation employs a process of simultaneous reflection and observation, a process taking place on all levels of mental functioning, by which the individual judges himself in the light of what he perceives to be the way in which others judge him in comparison to themselves and to a typology significant to them; while he judges their way of judging him in the light of how he perceives himself in comparison to them and to types that have become

relevant to him. (p. 22 quoted in Tatum, 1997, p. 19)

Therefore, questions regarding the roots of one's present identity must begin with contemplating the identities of others as well as the influential events of one's own past. I intend to reflect on my cultural identity from an Afro-Caribbean, feminine perspective. I resist adopting *Latina* as my primary identity because I believe that the term *Afro-Caribbean* is much more precise and accurate. I rebel against being lumped together with Mexicans, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Dominicans, Salvadorians, Nicaraguans, Costa Ricans, and other groups into the single category of "Hispanics." By forcing these many diverse peoples to exist under one label, each group's distinct history is smoothed over and ignored. Also, the strong Spanish-European emphasis delineated by the *Hispano* label, which downplays the African and indigenous heritage, describes a person that I will never be. When I reflect on the others who are forced to share the *Latina* or *Hispana* labels with me, I see the similarities, but I also see the differences; both reflections are accurate portrayals of my identity as an Afro-Caribbean woman.

The seeds that blossomed into my identity were unconsciously sown while I was still a child by the stories my grandmother told me. At that young age, I identified wholly with my home environment and my community. I only began to mature and personalize my identity once I learned foreign customs, traditions, and beliefs. The knowledge I received of my African heritage was limited; therefore, my conception of my Afro-Caribbean identity was nonexistent until I came to the United States. Because my racial background was not emphasized, in elementary and high school conversing about "being

black" and what race meant was taboo and we were encouraged to conform to a Eurocentric model prototype regardless of skin tone. I was forced to learn about my existence as an Afro-Caribbean woman through life experiences. The privileged social group in the Dominican Republic, the lighter, more Hispanic people, chose to ignore the race of others. As Tatum (1997) said,

...in the areas where a person is a member of the dominant or advantaged social group, the category is usually not mentioned. That element of their identity is so taken for granted by them that it goes without comment.... In Eriksonian terms, their inner experience and outer circumstance are in harmony with one another, and the image reflected by others is similar to the image within. (p. 21)

The group segregation mainly by monetary status and attempted complete ignorance of race that I experienced in my youth is not, and has never been, possible in the United States of America. While uncomfortable for both teacher and pupils, the subject of race plays such a large part in the history of America that it impacts children from a very young age. As an elementary teacher, who interviewed students for her book *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* Tatum (1997) explained,

It is hard to tell small children about slavery, hard to explain that Black young men were lynched, and that police turned fire hoses on children while other men bombed churches, killing Black children at their prayers. This history is a terrible legacy for all of us. The other day a teacher told me that she could not look into the faces of her students when she taught about these things. It was too painful, and too embarrassing.... (p. 41)

As Toni Morrison (1992) stated in her book, *Playing in the Dark*,

...we need to analyze the manipulation of the Africanist

narrative (that is, the story of a black person the experience of being bound and/or rejected) as a means of meditation—both safe and risky—on one's own humanity. Such analyses will reveal how the representation and appropriation of that narrative provides opportunities to contemplate limitation, suffering, rebellion, and to speculate on fate and destiny. They will analyze how that narrative is used for discourse on ethics, social and universal codes of behavior, and assertions about and definitions of civilization and reason. Criticism of this type will show how that narrative is used in the construction of a history and a context for whites by positing history-lessness and context-lessness for blacks. (p. 53)

The assumption of the Africanist perspective by white authors in order to pursue their own agenda put the Africans and their descendants at a disadvantage. Without an accurate history or expression of their previous sufferings and triumphs, the Africans and their descendants could not assume identities other than those posited by the dominant class of European descent. When there is a paucity of authentic representation of positive historical figures with whom the dark descendants of Africans can identify, a situation similar to my own childhood arises. Ignorance of one's true identity is dangerous as the reflection one sees in their mirror of identity does not correlate to the preconceived notions of others. Only with an accurate perception of one's true identity can one navigate through the harmful prejudices of the dominant groups.

The societal prejudices between peoples of different color so prevalent throughout the history of the United States were enforced as well as overcome in different ways in the small island nation of Cuba less than 150 miles away. The Spanish colonial policy of slavery and separation of class according to skin color, as Sarduy and Stubbs (1993) remarked, "differed markedly from the English,... in ultimately building up colonial

settler societies that produced a more even balance between the races" (p. 8). Although the plantation style of agriculture popular in the 1800s was dependent on African slave labor, the divide between people of each color did not often grow to the entrenched racial hatred found in the United States. The idealistic visionary José Martí, considered one of the founding fathers of Cuba's independence, believed that the identity of being Cuban meant more than the identity of being black, white, or mulatto. Since the rebel forces who combined to expel the Spaniards were of mixed heritages and colors, respect and mutual acceptance of all races became an ideal for the briefly victorious Cuban independence movement.

Once the patriotic fervor subsided, however, the division along lines of color was instituted once again with influence from the United States. The peak of prejudiced hatred rose during the War of 1912 in which, as Sarduy and Stubbs (1993) related, "...the black and brown bourgeoisie was again targeted and the Rural Guard massacred thousands of black peasants in eastern Cuba" (p. 8). The prejudiced emotional hatred consolidated into "...the most racist of the Hispanic Caribbean territories" (p. 9).

Fernando Ortiz, the renowned cultural historian, wrote during this time. He researched the origins of the word race and found that the word *razza* was first used by Tommaseo-Bellini in the fourteenth century to classify animals (Ortiz, 1946, p. 54). The use of race in terms of human division, maintained Ortiz, "was precisely in relation to the slavery of large masses of humans, who were obviously and undeniably characterized by the color of their skin" ("fue precisamente en relación con la esclavitud de grades masas

de hombres, sobre todo si caracterizados ostensible e imborrablemente por el color de su piel.") (p. 55). The widely read works of Ortiz showed the hypocrisies of a system of judgment instituted only to justify the subjugation of a certain group of people useful for labor. His summary of racial relations and, as he called it, "transculturation" analyzed history of race not only in Cuba but also in world cultures in general. The phases of hostility, compromise, adaptation, vindication, and integration represented the path that Ortiz believed race relations had generally followed and would follow in the future.

When Ortiz (1973) applied his theory to Cuba in an essay published in *Orbita de Fernando Ortiz*, he wrote:

First phase: hostility. The white attacks the black to uproot him from his land and enslave him by force. The black rebels as he can; he makes war, creates runaway slave settlements... [I]t is preached that the black is of an accursed race...everything about him is subhuman and bestial. Man of color is finally conquered but not resigned. Thus it was until the 19th century.

Then comes the second phase: which tends to occur in the first generation of creoles: compromise. The white ...exploits the black who finds himself impotent against force but cleverly defends himself.... Sensual love intertwines the races through miscegenation.... The black can dance and the white take enjoyment with him. The "good Negro" and the "good mistress" are exalted; but the dominant and the dominated each distrust each other.... There is a truce; there is a Zanjón....

[T]he third phase arrives: adaptation. The individual of color of the second generation of creoles, tries to better himself imitating the white.... It is perhaps the most difficult phase. Man of color on desperate occasions goes so far as denial of self. The mulatto becomes white by

law, money, or by lineage; but his life is a constant frustration, aggravated by constant pretense.... The dominant white tolerates conventional whitening,...but always with the [dominated one of color] "in his place."

Then comes the fourth phase: vindication. Man of color regains his dignity, control, and value of self. He no longer reneges on his race, or his skin shade, nor is he ashamed of his traditions, or surviving values of his ancestral culture. "Negro" and "mulatto" are no longer taboo words. There is growing mutual respect and cooperation between whites and blacks; but the habits of age-old prejudice and the discriminatory weight of economic factors still come between them. We are now on the path of comprehension in Cuba....

A fifth phase still has to be reached: integration. In that phase only a small minority can be found.... It is the phase of tomorrow.... It is the last, where cultures have fused, and conflict has ceased, giving way to a tertium quid, a third identity and culture, a new and culturally integrated community, where mere racial factors have lost their dissociative ill-intent.... (pp. 187-188 quoted in Sarduy & Stubbs, 1993, pp. 31-33)

Through Ortiz's review of Cuba's history from his viewpoint as a scholar of Afro-Cuban culture, the transient nature of race and interclass relationships can be seen clearly. Because racism is merely social construct, albeit an extremely powerful one that has influenced Western history for the last four hundred years, the calculating thought process behind its origins can be seen only when studied outside of the context of everyday life. The social restraints that made it so difficult for me to find an authentic pattern after which to piece together my racial identity are the same ones that make it difficult for a teacher to explain slavery to a young black child, and they are also the same constraints that have limited those people who are relevant to the young child or myself.

By understanding the concepts of that guide social racism, the perspectives enforced by the dominant group can be questioned from a basis of true and authentic knowledge, such as Toni Morrison (1992) recommended. Furthermore, I refuse the relevant Latina and African-American stereotypes that have been assigned to me throughout my life because I do not feel the need to be constrained by the racially prejudiced bonds embedded within those labels by the historically dominant group in the country where I live.

### Multicultural Children's Literature

The value of each person's perspective is inherent in the idea of multiculturalism by virtue of one's unique lived experience. However, generally what is termed multicultural children's literature, like the concept of multicultural education, seeks to represent and validate authentically a variety of groups who traditionally have been sidelined in society because of their color, status, gender, religion, nationality, age, and so on. Literature by and about such marginalized groups is called multicultural also because it often issues from the voices and experiences of those with origins or connections outside the United States, although this situation alone is not rationale enough for the overall scope of this literature.

This section examines the importance of an inclusive, pluralistic expression that would benefit an emerging conscious literature for all of our young (and young at heart). They are entitled to understand and participate in the history, stories, rights, and triumphs of the cultures and forces that are shaping not only their own lives but also the destiny of the children of tomorrow.

### *Role of Multicultural Literature*

Multicultural literature most typically reflects the struggle of diverse peoples to be heard equally within the dominant European milieu, where the voice of “the Other” has been stifled for many generations. But just to label someone as different who is not white, or middle class, or a certain ethnicity or education is an insufficient cause for the educational focus of multiculturalism. This kind of approach would only perpetuate misunderstandings or lapses by the status quo that stem from the dual violations of discrimination and oppression, no matter how slight or well intended the ignorance of the so-called privileged. More important to establish is the balance of knowledge that comes with viewing others’ lives also as “normal” and worthy of respect while being personally equipped with healthy self-esteem derived from exposure to reflected images in literature that are positive, inspirational, and affirmed by families, school, and culture (Bishop, 1984, p. 4).

Sonia Nieto’s (1992) analysis of multicultural education in her book *Affirming Diversity* identified some defining precepts of multiculturalism and suggested their validity, even necessity, for education in a democratic community. By extension, her framework is applicable also to multicultural children’s literature. First, literature with this bent is for “all students” and needs to “permeate” the curriculum. Second, the goal of such literature is to advance “knowledge, reflection, and action (praxis),” which are vital to the process of social change in contexts that demand freedom and justice (p. 208). As Greene (1994) wrote,

We want our classrooms to be reflective and just; we want them to pulsate with a plurality of conceptions of what it is to be human and to be fully alive. We want them to be full of the sounds of articulate young people, with ongoing dialogues involving as many as possible, opening to each other, opening to the world ... with renewed consciousness of possibility. (p. 2 quoted in Halpin, 2003, p. 48)

Third, included in one's knowledge needs to be the rich heritage of multiple lenses from which to view, assimilate, and ultimately assess world events. Whether the subject is a reinterpretation of battles according to the blows and victories tallied by each side; the breaking of color barriers when real issues of race are being considered and not merely objectified, often for someone else's express benefit; or the dissolution of the status quo in political matters because our stories are more powerful than tired bipartisan rhetoric or we-are-equal myths, we are each called "to respond, to argue, to choose" (Hade, 1988, p. 251), in the tradition of Sartre.

This brings us to a fourth imperative of multicultural children's literature according to Nieto, which necessitates that we read critically. As Hade (1988) said it, "Politics and art are inseparable, and the responsibility for identifying a work as a work of quality literature lies with readers," who are responsible to determine what real world need there is for reform (p. 251).

Last, within Nieto's framework, one might point to solid contributions provided by multicultural books for children that, although appearing to be mainly subjective or subtle in nature, stand tall among reasons to promote their proliferation for the sake of

humanity. For example, an open, inclusive perspective fosters appreciation for the diversity of special cultural or ethnic groups while stressing that we are connected by common feelings and needs, according to Bishop (1987). She argued that multicultural literature addresses social issues such as racism and poverty within the relevant contexts in which they happen, even as they help explain the transmission of values through stories that mirror and thus affirm children's true experiences, regardless of how minor or unconventional. Likewise, D. E. Norton (1991) appreciated such multicultural literature because it encourages a sense of rhythmic beauty, language enrichment, ethnic pride, and historical knowledge (in Pereida-Beihl, 1998).

Related to the complexity of our increasingly pluralistic world, our veritable "global village" (Swiniarski et al., 1999), is evidence that diversity often leads to the horrors of war, ethnic cleansing, and hate crimes. Just as damaging are the unseen wounds caused by continuous, blatant stereotyping, discrimination, domination, and control perpetrated in the face of difference. Although European immigrants of light skin color were able to assimilate into the bubbling melting pot of the late nineteenth century, a second wave of immigrants of color who arrived since 1978 have met with persistent discrimination, as have similar others with families living here for centuries (Judd, 1998).

Research has found that cultural stereotypes can be modified. Therefore, another goal of children's literature is as a vehicle to affect the negative impact of cultural stereotyping (DeGaetono, 1998). When children witness positive instances of intercultural give and take, some of them show understanding and empathy toward

others' lives that help to change their beliefs (Roberts & Cecil, 1993). Teachers play a primary role in this process. They contribute significantly when they select quality literature that portrays a wealth of characterizations and roles in which multicultural interactions might occur. This adds to the appreciation necessary for children to accept others from different backgrounds than their own (Judd, 1998).

The entire community is uplifted by students who are encouraged to tell their stories—as well as to listen to the stories of others that “resonate with their lived experiences.” They will sooner delight in their position of “shared value among people in the classroom and recognize the justice of that community” (Halpin, 2003, p. 48).

### *Historical Overview of Multicultural Literature in the United States*

Inaccurate, stereotypical, and hurtful renditions of the lives and stories of people of color, especially African Americans, are considered the norm for U.S. children's literature written in the two centuries prior to the 1970s. Books such as *Little Black Sambo* and *The Five Brothers* are examples, but for the most part, early writings by or about brown, black, or red people are all but missing from this country's extant literature.

From the 1970s on, the United States has witnessed a steady change in the availability of multicultural children's literature, which now involves several generations of creators influenced by a variety of cultures and ethnicities beyond the predominant Anglo-Saxon paradigm, including black, Latino, Asian, and Native Americans. For example, about 50 talented African American authors and illustrators—five members of

the Pickney family, Angela Johnson, Christopher Curtis, Jacqueline Woodson, Elizabeth Fitzgerald Howard, Joyce Hansen, Eleanora Tate, Joyce Carol Thomas, Faith Ringgold, Rita Williams-Garcia, for example—are currently writing from 50 to 200 books per year, a boon to multicultural literature for children and young adults because these are culturally conscious contributors producing high quality work.

Culturally conscious books appearing post-1970 include those written by African Americans who attempted to show what it was really like at the time to grow up black in the United States. These authors described typical black characters and everyday cultural influences on their lives (Bishop, 1997). The artists and writers of the new literature have been supported by awards—the Newbery Medal and the Edgar Allan Poe, National Book, Hans Christian Andersen, and Coretta Scott King Awards.

Even so, the post-‘70s period is no publishing pinnacle for multicultural titles, since it is estimated that the number printed is a small percentage of the total. This situation was originally pointed out in the *Saturday Review* by a character in Larrick’s *The All-White World of Children’s Books* (1965). Later, Larrick quantified the existing discrepancy when she compared 5,206 juvenile titles published from 1962 to 1964 and found that only 6.7% of these depicted African Americans in the stories or illustrations (see also Chall et al., 1979; Bishop, 1997). According to Bishop’s (1990) assessment from a slightly earlier study,

Less than 2 percent of the 2,500 to 3,500 children’s books published each year feature Blacks as major characters or focus on information about Blacks and

Black life. Furthermore, such books, even when they are published are often difficult to find in bookstores. (p. 556 quoted in Pereida-Beihl, 1998, p. 28)

Why such a deprived, one-sided climate of children's literature in the United States, existing even today? Haven't the strong oral and family traditions of first peoples and emigrants from across the globe also resulted in popular written exemplars? We know, as an example, that from about 1860 on, the discourse of African Americans "ranges from the spirituals, the blues and the work songs to the sermons, proverbs and tales" (Abarry, 1990, p. 380 quoted in Pereida-Beihl, 1998, p. 30), the latter represented in Uncle Remus Stories (Harris, 1955) Yet there are still relatively few publications from this group, not to mention the countless other voices waiting to be heard.

The history we have to tell might be different if it were not for the demarcations made by the color line running through the annals of U.S. literary achievement from the Civil War to the Civil Rights Movement. When light has been juxtaposed with dark, the whiter has superseded. The stereotyping alive at the end of nineteenth century pictured African Americans, for instance, as "a pariah group because of their color, structural position in society, and their relative lack of power" (Harris, 1997, p. 61). Harris (1997) stated that written African American literature for children was initiated by A. E. Johnson, who wrote *Clarence and Corinne; or, God's Way* (1890). This story of poor children of working-class parents who persevere to become part of the middle class is rife with "didactic and moralizing overtones" (Harris, 1997, p. 543). Also notable from this time are the dialect poems of Dunbar, who wrote *Little Brown Baby* (1895). Although his

writing is filled with everyday family enjoyment, it is doubtful that the few literate African American children in the United States at this time ever read his book.

Distortions and inaccuracies are further noted by Pereida-Beihl (1998, p. 31) in the following two examples: *Elsie Dinsmore* (Finley, 1867), in which Mammy is depicted as a “contented slave”; and *The Story of Little Black Sambo* (Bannerman, 1899), in which black people are shown with “protruding eyes and large, red lips, extremely dark skin, and in the case of males, long gangly arms” (Harris, 1990, p. 542).

During this same period, one counterexample minus the derogatory tone was *Hazel* (Ovington, 1903), in which a bright African American girl from the city meets blatant, threatening racial prejudice while visiting her grandmother in rural Alabama. She is a more aware character who wishes to help end prejudice (Pereida-Beihl, 1998).

Multicultural literature received a boost in the 1920s and 1930s from two publishing companies, founded by W. E. B. DuBois and Carter G. Woodson. These firms distributed messages that were more positive regarding African Americans, such as the former’s *The Brownies’ Book*, a children’s periodical with a variety of tales, drama, biographies, and news featuring people of color (Harris, 1990). Woodson’s contribution included picture books and texts, which were part of an educational reform thrust to reach children with unbiased literature, as well as a work he edited, *The Crisis*, an NAACP publication announcing worthy professional presentations. In addition, Woodson initiated Negro History Week, the Associated Publishers, and the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. Unfortunately, the well-intended efforts on behalf of African Americans in

this period were sometimes all but buried within the lists of small, independent publishers (Harris, 1993).

Other notable books by African Americans of the early twentieth century include biographies by Haynes in *Unsung Heroes* (1921) and various novels, biographies, poetry, tales, and such by Bontemps, especially *Popo and Fifina* (1932), written with Langston Hughes. Some consider Arna Bontemps the father of African American children's literature. His work "is significant because of its subtle racial undertones, its emphasis on authentic depiction of typical activities, literary quality, African American folk culture, and language patterns" (Haynes, 1921, p. 549 quoted in Pereida-Beihl, 1998, p. 33). Hughes wrote verse for children, such as *The First Book of Rhythms* (1954, 1995) and *The Sweet and Sour Animal Book* (1994). His poetry and nonfiction works, many for older readers, continue to be reprinted and are currently accessible to African American children and adults. Guillén, Cuba's national poet, was a friend of Hughes and has both similar and different strengths.

The period from the 1960s until the millennium is credited with the greatest positive change for multicultural children's literature in the United States. Hand in glove with the momentum propelled by the Civil Rights Movement, a virtual avalanche of books with black characters sprang forth, beginning with Virginia Hamilton's *Zeely* (1967). The timing coincided with Larrick's 1965 expose about the dearth of appropriate books written about black children, a situation she said was harmful to all children, not only those of African American background. The racial crisis was spurred by a trail of

discouraging events that had taken place over the previous decade—from Rosa Parks’s stand on a bus to sit-ins, marches, protests, desegregation attempts, riots, and murders throughout the South. However, the chaos seemingly led to more accountability nationwide, including the passage by Congress of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965), which provided \$1.3 billion to U.S. schools. The federal money unleashed to schools and libraries during this period created an enlivened market for books about black children (Bishop, 1982).

Like the revolution in Cuba, the repair of old wounds during the Civil Rights Movement (sometimes thought of as a black revolution) ultimately resulted in literature for children that is inclusive, portraying African heritage authentically along with issues of race, social justice, and equity. Despite mixed feelings among critics who are concerned that this authenticity may instead merely keep alive old wounds in young people who never knew such strife, it seems that the potential of children’s literature to influence readers’ ideas about themselves (Chall et al., 1979) speaks just as strongly in favor of disclosure. Other first generation multicultural authors who wrote with the black child in mind besides Hamilton are Walter D. Myers, Mildred Taylor, Eloise Greenfield, Lucille Clifton, Tom Feelings, and John Steptoe, who “capture the multifaceted complexity of Black lives” (Harris, 1997, p. 25).

Among second-generation renaissance authors portraying blacks are Sharon Bell Mathis, Candy Dawson Boyd, Alice Childress, Rosa Guy, James Haskins, Patricia McKissack, and June Jordan. Harris (1997) reassured all concerned of the ongoing

quantity and vitality of their books, which “include linguistic variation, complex characters, varied settings, and reinterpretations of universal themes through Black experiences” (p. 25).

Built on the preceding two waves of literary success, the work of the third and current generation of writers previously mentioned indicates continuing demand for a wide range of topics—from traditional to transitional and even controversial. According to Harris (1997), new writers are dealing especially with

artistic risks, controversial content, revival of poetry, expansion of folk tales, growth and improved quality of nonfiction, technical proficiency and individuality in illustrations, and the affirmation of children’s interests as evident in the expansion of series fiction. (p. 26)

#### *Historical Overview of Children’s Literature in Cuba*

Like Cuba’s history, which tells of white conquerors dominating both native Indians and black slaves, Cuba’s literature also reflects mixed influences that traditionally have not favored folklorists of non-European traditions. Further, early nineteenth-century publications with a Spanish or Afro-Cuban flavor were not written especially for children, such as tales by folklorist Don Fernando Ortiz and by Miguel Barnet, internationally known poet and documentary novelist.

The first publications for children and young people in Cuba have been assessed as “ranging from the worst type of didacticism to the dimensions of great poetry” (Elizagaray, 1984, p. 45). To understand Cuban children’s literature as it flourishes today, we must refer to the presence and influence of José Martí (1853-1895) and then to the

triumph of the Cuban revolution. That is, the only bright light of the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century (not only for Cuba but for all Latin America) was the work of Martí, in particular his masterpiece, *La edad de oro* (*The Golden Age*).

This magazine of “instruction and recreation,” as its author conceived it from his exile in New York, was dedicated to all children of Latin America, because, for Martí, “our children are the hope of the world.” Our national hero put into this enterprise every bit of his love and dedication in order to create in Latin American children, threatened with the progressive loss of their cultural identity, a sense of anti-colonialism and a human scale of values, as well as offering them a true literature, i.e., that is, art. (p. 45)

Martí was able to put out four monthly issues in 1889, and now these are referred to as a book. Martí said in his poems that he was a sincere man and loved children. He never talked down to them or was hypocritical. His work will be reviewed in Chapter III.

Throughout the republican period, there were few authors and publications that offered anything for children other than moralizing or disinterest, except one notable genre—the comic book. However, the work for children produced since the 1970s showcases an enthusiastic, capable group of prizewinning novelists and storytellers. This shift can be attributed only to the advances in social awareness made by the Cuban revolution, which have translated into cultural policies, organizations, and networks that include children and young people at all levels. For example, a series of national congresses have provided government support particularly to “defend and protect” children’s literature and art (Elizagaray, 1984, p. 47).

To encourage the development of a sensitive, yet authentically useful, body of literature for the young, annual prizes for this category were initiated in the national competitions of the 1970s and continue to the present. The most valuable of these events were organized by Havana University, the Ministry of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Cuba, and the National Writers' and Artists' Union of Cuba. The Premio Infantil Casa de las Americas international award and the promotion supplied by the Ministers of Culture and Education, along with the José Martí Organization, were devoted especially to children. The result of the efforts on the part of dozens of artists and professionals who responded to the postrevolution ideal of literally building a quality national children's literature in the shortest time possible is impressive. Elizagaray (1984) wrote about this new literature,

The subjects and the range of genres...include, right from the start, both fantasy and reality, sometimes in prose, sometimes in verse, but always with an integral concern for both its content and its artistic quality. (p. 46)

A few outstanding and prolific Cuban authors active by the mid-1980s are mentioned here, and a few of them will be discussed further in Chapter III. Dora Alonso descends from people of the land and writes in all genres. Her prose includes *El coacher azul* (*The Blue Coachman*) and *El valle del pajara pinta* (*The Valley of the Spotted Bird*), and examples of her poetry are "Palomar" (Dovecote) and "La flauta de chocolate" (The Chocolate Flute). Nersys Felipe's work, beginning with *Cuentos de Guane* and *Román Elé* in 1975 and 1976, has received prominent international attention. Edwiges Barroso is

best known for the book *Cantos del bosque (Songs of the Wood)*. Renee Mendez Capote has written classics for adolescents, depicting a century of struggle in Cuba. Nicolás Guillén wrote charming, rhythmical tone poems for children. His work for adults has a more political message. Mirta Aguirre is a poet writing for all ages; the quality of her work in Cuba might be called second only to Martí's. The storyteller Onelio Jorge Cardoso has introduced a number of special characters and situations unique to his country. Eliseo Diego, a champion for children's literature, is known for his translations of classics, such as those of Grimm and Hans Christian Anderson, as well as articles and presentations in national and public contexts (Elizagaray, 1984, pp. 47-48).

A parallel development in Cuba that responded to both high literary and technical standards was the theatre movement, first successful as the National Children's and Youth's Theatre Festival in 1966. Today there are numerous successful troops in Cuba and a growing number of well-qualified playwrights.

To create a viable children's literature, a country also needs theorists, critics, publishers, libraries, and booksellers. Needless to say, forty years ago Cuba had none of these. Indeed, even twenty years ago, only four texts on children's literature had been published, three of them by Elizagaray. The literary landscape is different today, featuring a host of publishing outlets on behalf of children's literature capable of reaching an international audience.

In 1959, however, only five children's titles had been published. This changed rapidly with government participation, such as the formation of the Cuban National Press

in 1960, the first National Literacy Campaign in 1961, and finally, in 1962, the Editorial Nacional de Cuba, the first such effort focused on children's books per se. Within a few years, the largest publisher of Cuban and foreign works was Gente Nueva (printing over five million copies of more than one hundred titles by 1985). Other houses of note at the time were Editorial Union, Casa de las Americas, the University of Havana, and Editorial Oriente (Elizagaray, 1984, p. 48).

To back up publishers' efforts to reach the children of Cuba, national public libraries were established during this period with the assistance of Dr. Maria Teresa Freyre, while the creation of a network of school libraries was guided by Dr. Armando Hart Davalos, Minister of Education and, later, of Culture. Since the revolution, everyone in literate Cuba reads. Books are affordable and accessible, being heavily promoted by the media as important to social and cultural life.

This proximity to well-written, stimulating literature on the part of children in Cuba continues the cycle of interest and welcome as new authors follow the success made possible by the solid accomplishments laid down after the revolution and influenced so heavily by Martí.

...pensar como pensaba Martí era toda una aventura para los tiempos que corrían, pues él—ser abierto y desprejuiciado, ecuménico en el sentido más amplio de la palabra,...un legítimo defensor de la infancia y sus derechos—se adelantó notablemente en sus concepciones teóricas y su praxis a una literatura con interés mayoritario en profundizar en la vida antes que en evadirla y olvidarse cómplicemente de sus verdades.

[To think as Martí thought was an adventure during his time, because he—an open and unprejudiced being, ecumenical in the most complete sense of the word,... a legitimate defender of the youth and its rights—advanced himself notably in his theoretical conceptions and in his praxis with a literature with a major interest in deepening it in life before avoiding it and complacently forgetting his truths.] (Pérez, 1998, p. 24)

As José Martí revolutionized children's literature with his monthly publication of *La edad de oro*, Mirta Aguirre did the same when she said at the Forum de Literatura Infantil in 1972,

No son niños que puedan ser criados bajo campanas de cristal que los aíslen del conocimiento de la existencia del engaño, de la astucia, de la crueldad, de la maldad. Estos niños deben y tienen que aprender que hay lobos que se disfrazan de inofensivas abuelitas... ¿debemos pretender que sean menores espiritualmente blandengues? ¿hemos de temer hablarles de la tristeza, de la sangre o de la muerte?... Infeliz quien no crea que lo hermoso y lo tierno forman parte de la verdad de la vida, pero la vida tiene también su cara maligna, y esa no debe ser disimulada nunca, porque una verdad a medias no es verdad.... Por eso, respetando el criterio de quienes puedan pensar que es mejor otra cosa, votamos porque no se tema demasiado a que la Literatura Infantil y Juvenil muestre los costados feos de la vida; no hemos terminado con los ellos nosotros, y falta mucho para que terminen en todas partes, siquiera sea en sus más graves manifestaciones.

[These are not children who can be raised under crystal bells that isolate them from the knowledge of the existence of trickery, cleverness, cruelty, and malice. These children should and must learn that there are wolves that disguise themselves as inoffensive little grandmas.... Should we pretend that they are weak spiritually? Are we to be afraid of talking to them of sadness, of blood, or of death? Poor soul who does not

believe that beauty and tenderness form part of the truth of life, but life also has its malicious face, and that one should never be disguised, because a half truth is no truth at all.... Therefore, respecting the criteria of those who can think that something else is better, we vote that literature for children and young adults not be feared too much, that it show the ugly sides of life; we have not finished with them ourselves, and there is much left to do before they finish in other parts, even in their gravest manifestations.] (Perez, 1998, p. 24)

While claiming in his 1998 article, "Infantilismo vs. Infancia: Estudio Introductorio Sobre el Nuevo Signo en la praxis de Una Serie Literaria," that the glossing over of adult problems in children's literature was a large mistake that promoted false realities and atypical personalities, Enrique Perez Diaz showed the various trends and, in his view, progress made in Cuban children's literature. New Cuban writers such as Magaly Sanchez Ochoa, Felipe Mauri, Ariel Ribeaux Diago, Teresa Cárdenas, and many others embody, according to Perez (1988), the new wave of Cuban children's authors that take an unflinching stance in the face of many issues that children truly face: death, sadness, divorce, infidelity, homosexuality, difficulty in school, familial disagreements, and troubled relationships between adults and children. Perez believed that visionaries such as Aguirre and Martí foresaw the development of children's literature based on the actual life experiences of Cuba's young adults. However, Perez (1988) also claimed that the developments foreseen by these two cornerstones of Cuban literature have been delayed because "their words were not sufficiently listened too, possibly because it is not easy to break the norm. It costs a lot being a 'discordant' author in the media" (p. 26). It was only during the "worst period of Cuban literature...of the '90s and the editorial collapse that

took place in the country during those years" (p. 26) that authors whose works for children well-represented life in a quickly deteriorating Cuba during the Special Period were able to come to the forefront and fulfill Aguirre and Martí's hopes for future Cuban literature.

Norge Espinosa (1999) attempted to find the exact cause for this monumental change in the nature of Cuban children's literature in his article "Cambiando abuelas por lobos." He questioned whether the shift in focus was the result of a multiplicity of perspectives, the overcoming of many prejudices, or the acknowledgment of the child as an active member of society who has an individual voice rather than being merely a product and witness of an adult world. In the postmodern world of children's literature, Espinosa (1999) analyzed how, even in the current atmosphere of survival found in Cuba, authors have been able to navigate through the difficult editorial process and reach an ever-larger audience. With this burgeoning audience, it is left to authors to link with the Cuban children, whether it be with hard, concrete tales of the loss and suffering that unfortunately echo the life experiences of many children, or personal and detailed stories of "normal" children, or some merger of the two with the classic stories of the past. The stories in this century must be written effectively and with the understanding that children do not live alone in their world or in some parallel and perfect world (Perez, 1998). Once this authenticity in children's literature is reached, it will gain the momentum of an ever-larger audience of which many will be eager to continue the tradition of transcendent children's literature without prejudices, above societal "norms," and without "little lies" to

soften the real nature of the world (Perez, 1998, p. 26). But, as Espinosa (1999) concluded, "Cuban children's literature is only beginning to mature. Much is left to write.... The act of updating ourselves is only the beginning of a new search, which influences these recent accomplishments..."(p. 5).

### Critical Pedagogy

Men [and women] relate to their world in a critical way. They apprehend the objective data of their reality... through reflection.... And in the act of critical perception, men discover their own temporality. Transcending a single dimension, they reach back to yesterday, recognize today, and come upon tomorrow. The dimensionality of time is on the fundamental discoveries in the history of human culture. (Freire, 1996, p. 3)

As an educator and critical theorist, Freire advocated the importance of education as an opportunity for people to reflect on their own history. Freire (1996) believed that by studying accurate racial history, the oppressed could develop a new proud, and culturally aware, self-identity. Freire underscored that, as critical beings, humans have the potential to recognize their own historical context and utilize their knowledge to change their world.

Conscientization is viable only because men's [and women's] consciousness, although conditioned, can recognize that it is conditioned. This "critical" dimension of consciousness accounts for the goals men assign to their transforming acts upon the world. (Freire, 1985, pp. 69-70)

Additionally, for transformation to take place through historical reflection, the

history read must be accurate. It must include the many diverse cultures that have contributed to a society, not just the history written by the oppressor without the voices of the marginalized. Unfortunately, no one in Cuba rose to provide an accurate history of the Afro-Cubans. A controversial morass of hatred, myth, politics, calculation, and romanticism overshadowed the analyses of both slavery and certain successful Afro-Cuban figures in the movement for independence. Lost in the confusion was the essence of the black as a human being (Ortiz, 1916). Yet, in spite of the challenges faced by Afro-Cubans to have their stories and truth written, they have not remained silent. *Fraternidad*, an independent political newspaper founded in 1890 by Juan Guadalberto Gomez, was committed to defending the rights and interests of the black race. Gomez believed in the struggle for the just valorization of the African cultures as elements in the Cuban culture. He also strove for equal political and socioeconomic standing for Afro-Cubans. "Ideales de una raza" (Ideals of a Race) was a column written in *El diario de la marina* by Gustavo Urrutia. This weekly column brought awareness to the Afro-Cuban culture and the rights they deserved. Likewise, Freire (1970) emphasized that if oppressed groups are to create change they must not remain silent. Underrepresented people must instead know and speak accurately about their history. Finally, when reflection on one's true history leads to specific actions, transformation can take place:

Human existence cannot be silent, nor can it be nourished by false words, but only by true words, with which men and women transform the world. To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change. Once named the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of

them a new naming. Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection. (p. 88)

Transforming a society rampant with prejudicial thinking into a haven for diversity has never been a simple process. When oppressed groups reflect on their history with accuracy, and implement transformative actions, they are met by resistance from various forces in their culture.

Claro esta que ni por la circular de Cespedes, ni por las medidas tomadas de 1880 a 1886, ceso la discriminacion racial. Los negros y mulatos, libres ya, no pudieron disfrutar de los mismos derechos que los blancos. La sociedad colonial cubana los habia considerado como simples animales durante siglos, y habia creado trabas legales, morales, y costumbres que les impedian su pleno desarrollo. Era imposible que esa misma sociedad fuera a cambiar de la noche a la manana por un simple decreto. Ante ese nuevo estado imperante no era factible el cimarronaje, sino la lucha organizada, energica, dentro de las estructuras de la epoca.

[Of course it remains that not even as a result of the declarations made by Cespedes, nor by the measures taken from 1880 to 1886, did racial discrimination end. Freed Negroes as well as mulatos, could not benefit from the same rights held by whites. Colonial Cuban Society had considered them to be simplistic animals for centuries and had created legal obstacles, morals and customs that impeded their full development. It was impossible that this society would be able to change from night to day just from a simple decree. In the face of the dominating culture, a rustic, untamed response would therefore be less feasible than an organized and energetic fight coming from within the structures of the epoch.] (Robaina, 1994, p. 21)

Although Afro-Cubans throughout their history have made inroads toward equality through legal changes in discriminatory laws and practices, these changes have often not

been able to be realized. The dominant colonial and republican culture and government never truly supported these more equitable laws. Only during Castro's revolution were some sustainable changes made (Robaina, 1994). Therefore, not only is there a need for Afro-Cubans to continue experiencing a “conscientization” of their history that leads to action but also a need for more allies to collaborate to bring about a kind of sustainable transformation. When the dominant culture continues on the path of oppression, both the oppressor and the oppressed suffer; as Ada (Ada & Campoy, 2004) has emphasized,

One of the key understandings of anti-bias work is that all of us are oppressed whenever anyone is oppressed. Any time we witness or participate silently in the oppression of others, our own sense of humanity is diminished and our joyful, creative voice is silenced. Of course whenever we ourselves experience oppression and do not have any allies who can offer us support and affirmation, we also are silenced.... (p. 15)

In Cuba, Afro-Cubans have suffered bitterly from this silencing of their voices by the oppressive dominant culture. However, the denial of this group’s historical contributions has hurt all groups within the Cuban culture, especially since Afro-Cuban influence has such paramount importance throughout Cuba’s history.

### Summary

Children’s literature has been reviewed relating to historical perspectives on AfroCubans, racial identity, multicultural children’s literature, and critical pedagogy. The research in these areas is the basis from which I analyze the data collected during the dialogues with the two main participants in this study. The critical pedagogy section indicates the importance of the perspective I use in this study.

## CHAPTER III

### CUBAN WRITERS OF CHILDREN'S AND YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE ADDRESSING ISSUES OF RACE, EQUITY, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Challenging assumptions about race, class, and gender must be at the core of multicultural education; our reading needs to do the same. How do authors use [the meaning of] race, class, and gender...? What assumptions do we bring to text? We do not always need to read *with* an author, we can also read against an author, questioning and even refusing to become the kinds of sympathetic readers of their stories that authors ask us to become. And we can read authors against each other. Looking at reading children's literature in elementary schools this way moves us from a naive pedagogy of tourism to a pedagogy of critique, change, and justice. This is not an easy or safe pedagogy, but it is the one with which I believe we are all called to struggle. (Harris, 1997, p. 252)

#### Introduction

This chapter includes an analysis of books that depict authentic Cuban history and culture to varying degrees. There is a short biography of each book's author as well as a list of awards and some samples of literary critical reviews. See Appendix C for a list of Cuban authors and some of their publications for children and young adults. The chapter attempts to apply some of the questions Harris asks, and it analyzes how the authors use race, class, and gender as well as how the work is viewed by literary critics with their inherent assumptions. The authors included in this chapter write literature for others besides children and young adults; therefore, I have chosen one book by each author that I feel encapsulates his or her perspectives and experiences with Cuban history and culture. The following paragraphs analyze books by Dora Alonso, Miguel Barnet, Edwigis Barroso, Nicolás Guillén, José Martí, and Hilda Perera.

## Dora Alonso

Dora Alonso, the poet and writer, was born in a small town of the province of Matanzas, Cuba, on December 22, 1910. She spent her childhood and adolescence intimately connected with nature. She said,

From the time I was a girl I thought that I could, that I wanted, and that I was going to be a writer. I was very precocious and extremely receptive; I invented thousands of images, dreamed for hours and hours, hiding under the shade of a tree, surrounded by almost virgin nature, with noises that confirmed my taste and thought. For that reason I was [a] writer before I learned how to write. (in Sosa, 2005)

Motivated by the customs of her family, especially those of her mother, Alonso read literature by such authors as Victor Hugo, Arthur Conan Doyle, Daniel Defoe, Jules Verne, Blasco Ibañez, and Emilio Salgari from the time she was very young.

Alonso is considered one of Cuba's most relevant writers for children and young adults. Cuban writer Excilia Saldaña (1988) described her as the

Hereдера de dos culturas—España, en el idioma, y la lengua, Africa en el misterio y la leyenda—, Dora lleva de ambas esa sabiduría en el contar que solo posee el pueblo.

[Inheritor of two cultures—Spain, because of its language, and Africa, with its mystery and legends. Dora takes from both the knowledge of storytelling that can come only from the community.]

Alonso considered that it was necessary for her to write for children, even if she was forced to sacrifice the career in adult literature that she hoped for. After working for many years as a journalist and screenplay writer in Havana, she began to write children's

literature in 1940. Her first published work for children was in 1956 with *Pelusin y los pajaros* (*Pelusin and the Birds*), a puppet play. In 1961, Alonso used her background in journalism to begin a children's section in the magazine *Mujeres* (*Women*). She published many poems and stories that she wrote for this format. Her book *Ponolani*, written in 1962, collected stories that portrayed black people and their African heritage. Alonso followed *Ponolani* with *En busca de la gaviota negra* (*In Search of the Black Seagull*) (1966), *El cochero azul* (*The Blue Coachman*) (1975), and *El valle de la pájara pinta* (*The Valley of the Colored Bird*) (1984), among others. Alonso's books have been translated into English, German, Portuguese, Russian, Ukranian, Moldovian, Polish, Czech, Romanian, and other languages. Her prizes include the following: 1980, Premio Casa de las Américas for *El valle de la pájara pinta*; 1984, Premio Nacional de la Crítica for *El valle de la pájara pinta*; 1984, Premio Nacional La Rosa Blanca for *El valle de la pájara pinta*; 1985, Diploma de honor del concurso internacional Máximo Gorki for *El valle de la pájara pinta*; 1985, Premio Nacional La Rosa Blanca for *Los payasos* (*The Clowns*); 1988, Premio Nacional de Literatura de Cuba; and 1994, Premio Nacional de La Rosa Blanca for *Tres lechuzas en un cuento* (*Three Papayas in One Story*).

Dora Alonso died on March 21, 2001, after a long illness. During her long life, she wrote one the largest collections of Cuban children's literature. Among Alonso's books for children and young adults, *Polonani* encapsulates her perspectives and experiences with Cuban history and culture. In this book, she explicitly condemns the legacy of enslavement, addressing the physical and emotional pain of this institution. Namuni, an African nanny with many marks from her previous life as a slave, brought the resulting horrors of enslavement into the immediate life of Alonso as a young child.

Namuni not only cared for and nurtured Alonso but also provided a treasure trove of stories that Namuni's mother had told her when she was a child. These slave songs, magic narrations, and voices of Africa echoed in Alonso's mind until she used them in *Polonani*. The story of Polonani is about a freed woman who was torn from her village at the age of 10. Her mother was 8 months pregnant when she sent Polonani to the river to fetch a gourd of water. She never returned. She was taken, they hit her when she yelled, and they broke her arm.

Como ala de pájaro quedó colgando el brazo de la niña  
Africana de la aldea de Sama Guenguení. Y en su ala  
mutilada sin respeto ni justicia de ángeles, enredaron  
cadenas los hombres de la trata, que la apresaron. Qué se  
las llevarón.

[The African girl from Sama Guengueni's arm was left  
hanging like a bird's [broken] wing. And on her mutilated  
arm, without respect or the justice of angels, the men from  
the slave gang wrapped chains that squeezed her, [then]  
took her away.] (Alonso, 1962, p. 14)

The slave ship carrying the captured girl sailed to Guantanamo (Cuba), where Polonani was sold in the market. She went to live at a sugar mill. The white owner baptized her and named her Florentina. This new name could not erase her memories of her land, her mother, and above all, the stories that her mother and the village elders had told her in Africa. She was sold a second time and sent to live in Havana. After 6 years in Havana, she was given as a present to another family. She grew up and had her own children. On one occasion, as she was watching over her oldest son while he slept, her owner passed by and attempted to whip him. She tried to stop him, but he hit her brutally. Emilia, her daughter, related what happened next:

La mandaron al cepo... Cepo de cabeza, de manos, de sus pies también. Yo me acuerdo, aunque era chiquitica. Me arrimé a ella, desnudita y sin zapatos como estaba siempre, y me puse a llorar. Mi madre, entonces, para consolarme, olvidando su pena, desde el cepo se puso a contarme un cuento de su tierra. El cuento de Panga Maleka, el cazador.

[They sent her to the stocks.... Head, hand, and feet stocks. I remember, even though I was very small. I got near her, naked and without shoes as I always was, and began to cry. My mother, then, to console me, forgetting her shame from the stocks, began to tell me a story of her country. The story was about Panga Maleka, the hunter.] (Alonso, 1962, p. 24)

Polonami told the stories of her country to her children, and her children told the stories not only to their children but also to the children of the owners whom they raised. This is how Dora Alonso received this history and the other popular black stories that she assembled into the book *Ponolani*. Cardoso wrote about Alonso's work,

Yo no creo que Dora Alonso haya escrito un libro más suyo que éste... Por eso suena más a sí misma, a todo lo suyo y a su Isla, este libro de Dora donde la poesía tiene en su suave voz de evocada ternura; una acusación profunda por el crimen de la trata cometido.

[I do not think that Dora Alonso wrote a book that was more her own than this one.... For that reason it sounds more like her; everything [is] hers and her island's in this book of Dora's, where the poetry has in it the soft voice of evoked tenderness, [as well as] the profound accusation of the criminal treatment that has been committed.] (Alonoso, 1962, p. 7)

### Miguel Barnet

Miguel Barnet was born on November 28, 1940, in Havana, Cuba. He moved with his family to Atlanta, Georgia, at a young age and completed his

early schooling in the United States. Even though he did not live in his homeland anymore, Barnet stayed interested and was aware of much of Cuban culture. He was a regular contributor of poetry and other writings to such Cuban publications as *Lunes de Revolución* and *Hoy*. He returned to University of Havana to study anthropology and sociology and graduated in 1960.

Barnet developed a strong relationship with Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz, who introduced Barnet to an ethnographic model centered on indigenous religion, language, and the oral tradition—Ortiz’s “transculturation.” In rural areas of the island, religious practices of African influence, such as *santería*, persevered within the Catholic framework. Ortiz’s view of ethnographic research that focuses primarily on indigenous culture mirrored the Cuban political ideology of the time in its rejection of European modes of learning and its emphasis on the socially and economically marginalized class. In 1995 Barnet honored his mentor by creating the Fernando Ortiz Foundation, which is dedicated to studying the past cultural roots of Cuba’s society.

Miguel Barnet has received several outstanding distinctions during his literary career: for example, the Garcia Lorca Prize from Andalusia, Spain; the Medal of Colony City in Germany; and honorable membership in the Anthropological Sciences Faculty, Autonomous University, Yucatan, Mexico. He received awards in Cuba as well, such as the Distinction for National Culture, La Giraldirilla de la Habana, and the National Prize of Literature (1994 and 2002). He is the most published Cuban author nationally and abroad; his *Biografía de un cimarrón (Biography of a Runaway Slave)* (1966) has been published in Cuba in several languages and printed in over 60 editions.

*Biography of a Runaway Slave*, a synthesis of history and literature, was inspired by Esteban Montejo, a 105-year-old Cuban man of African descent who had lived as a slave. He was a fugitive in the Las Villas Wilderness and had been a soldier in the Cuban War for Independence. Barnet, after reading an article on this centenarian, decided to interview and record Montejo at the veteran's home where he lived. Barnet constructed a politically influenced representation of Cuban history and culture from the life stories that Montejo shared with him. Barnet claimed that although his work is not history itself, the characters in the stories are truly traveling through history. As Manuelo Moreno Friginals described,

La primera característica que sorprende en la *Biografía de un cimarrón* es el respeto y el amor con que ha sido escrito... La belleza extraordinaria del libro, la fuerza de vida captada, está precisamente en esa honestidad. Esto sólo podía lograrlo quien reuniera la dotes de investigador y de poeta.

[The primary characteristic that surprises one in *Biography of a Runaway Slave* is the respect and love with which it was written... The extraordinary beauty of the book, the force of captured life, is found precisely in that honesty. Only someone who could unite the qualities of an investigator and of a poet could achieve this.] (p. 81)

Barnet attempted to give an honest, real voice to Montejo, not a fictionalized or folkloric one. By placing Montejo, and Montejo's voice as interpreted by Barnet, as the representative for an entire era of Cuban history that included slavery, emancipation, republic, and further revolution, Barnet transcribed an authentic, unvarnished history of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Cuba.

## Margarita Engle

Margarita Engle was born in Los Angeles in 1955 to a Cuban mother and an American father. Her father and mother met while painting the picturesque Cuban town of Trinidad, her place of birth. Regardless of language differences, that is, neither spoke the language of the other, they married and moved to Los Angeles, where Mrs. Engle was born. However, Mrs. Engle's mother never lost her longing for Cuba and would often tell her young daughter beautiful stories about her Caribbean home. Mrs. Engle visited Cuba in 1960 and became enamored with the country, especially the hope displayed by the peasants in the period after Castro's Revolution.

Mrs. Engle is now a botanist, journalist, poet, and novelist. Her short works and poetry have appeared in many anthologies, and she has also published novels about Cuba, such as *Singing to Cuba* (1993), *Escrito en el cielo* (1995), *Skywriting* (1995), and *The Poet Slave of Cuba* (2006), a novel for young adults written in lyrical verse. She has won many awards for her literature, including the 2007 Americas Award from the Instituto del Caribe (for *The Poet Slave of Cuba*), the 2006 Children's Book Award from the International Reading Association, the 2006 Best Book for Young Adults from the American Library Association, the 2006 Blue Ribbon Book from the Bulletin for the Center for Children's Books, the 2006 Editor's Choice from Booklist, and the 2006 Editor's Choice from the Junior Library Guild. She also won the San Diego Book Award in 1995 and the 2005 Willow Review Poetry Award, received a nomination for the Pushcart Prize, and was a semifinalist for the Nimrod/Hardman Pablo Neruda Prize for Poetry.

Mrs. Engle has endeavored to include Cuban history as an integral part of her written work. She used old archives and diaries to investigate the factual basis for both familial stories as well as traditional folklore. She expressed a desire to publish these tales both in prose and poetic form (Simmonds, 2006). She also expressed a love for both dreamlike surrealism of Cuban folktales as well as the simplicity of Japanese haiku. She said that above all, she desires to present a historically accurate and hopeful narrative for young adults. She prefers to “imagine that some [children] might lean toward historical harsh reality offered in a hopeful, poetic form, with beautiful artwork...and with timeless lessons to be learned...” (Simmonds, 2006).

Engle’s (2006) latest work, *The Poet Slave of Cuba: A Biography of Juan Francisco Manzano*, turned a complimentary and dramatic light on the somewhat forgotten life of José Manzano, the Cuban poet. She recounted Manzano’s life as an abused slave until the culmination of his escape and success as a poet. In homage to Manzano, Engle wrote his story in lyrical verse. Her poems alternate perspective and “help layer tension and depth into the story, depicting mental and physical terrors while also sketching out the context of flawed social systems, fear, and twisted logic that surrounded slavery’s existence.” (Hommel, 2006) Engle’s poems are sparse, but every word seems as if it has been carefully considered in an attempt to create the exact mood of each character. She wrote in her poem “Juan” (2006) concerning Manzano’s ruminations on his price and the strange nature of enslavement,

...Imagine  
what it would be like  
to buy yourself  
and wrap yourself up in a package  
and walk away

carrying yourself  
under your arm  
like a book....  
(p. 26)

For her dramatic story, Engle does not dedicate herself to a recounting of dates in her novel; she instead relies on the emotions found in Manzano's autobiography and the writings of his contemporaries. Her extensive research yielded such discoveries as Manzano's experiments as a child with writing on leaves using his fingernails due to the dearth of writing supplies, which gives a personal touch to the novel. In the poem "Juan," Engle (2006) included this link to her botanical background:

I love the words  
written with my feathery mind  
in the air and with my sharp fingernails  
on leaves in the garden.... (p. 3)

Engle's research was quite thorough because she had to overcome obstacles such as the loss of the second half of Manzano's autobiography. As she wrote (2006) in her historical note,

Juan often said that he hoped to write a novel about his life. He never had the chance. In fact, strict censorship by the colonial Spanish government prevented all Cuban poets and novelists from writing verses or stories about slavery. The life story of Juan Francisco Manzano is known only because some of his autobiographical notes were smuggled to England, where they were published by abolitionists who hoped to raise support for their cause. Unfortunately, the second half of Juan's brief autobiography was lost in transport.... (p. 177)

Engle was able to construct a simple version of Manzano's later life as a confectioner, tailor, painter, cook, and, most important, published poet. She described how others gathered in homes to hear him read his poems, which were considered dangerous by the

Spanish colonial government (Engle, 2006 p. 178). The government, which in 1842 had become increasingly concerned about a possible slave uprising, became suspicious of Manzano and his ability to influence the masses. He was imprisoned and was lucky to survive. The trauma caused by his imprisonment did however silence him for his last 9 years. As Engle summarized, “Those years of silence are a powerful testimony to the horror of censorship” (2006, p. 179).

### Nicolás Guillén

Nicolás Guillén was born in Camaguey, Cuba, on July 10, 1902. His father, a mulatto, was a newspaper editor and was involved in provincial politics. After his father’s death at the hands of soldiers who were subduing a political revolt, Guillén began, at the age of 15, to write articles for the local newspaper to help to supplement his family’s income. His mother, Argelia Batista Arrieta, was left to raise her children alone. He finished high school in 1919 and left for Havana in 1920 to study law. During this time, Guillén began publishing his poetry in the literary journal *Camaguey grafico*.

After studying for one year, Guillén returned to Camaguey, having become disillusioned with the university environment and lacking funds. Although he went back again one year later to complete a year of studies, he became more interested in writing and decided to actively pursue a literary career. During this time, he began a newspaper, *Lis*, with his brother in 1922 while also working as the editor of a local paper.

In 1926, Guillén returned to Havana, where he began writing a special section dedicated to black life in Cuba in the Sunday edition of the *Diario de la marina*. His first true success was included in one of these Sunday sections. Guillén published *Motivos de son* (*Motives of the Son*) in 1930, and these eight poems propelled him to literary fame.

By addressing the life of marginalized blacks and basing his poetry's rhythm on the *son*, a popular Cuban dance rhythm, Guillén created a truly Cuban art form. Guillén continued developing his nascent style with his book, *Songoro cosongo: Poemas mulatos (Songoro Cosongo: Mulatto Poems)* (1931). This collection was longer and retained the *son* rhythm; however, it was more cynical and violent. Guillén aimed at including the miscegenation of Cuba's people as well as the marginalization of blacks, themes that he further developed in later work.

Guillén firmly assumed his ideological stance with the collection of poems in *West Indies Ltd.* (1934). His empathy with disenfranchised blacks progressed to liberal, anti-imperialist poetry, which denounced, in particular, U.S. economic foreign policy. Guillén joined the Communist Party in 1937 and wrote extensively for the liberal newspaper *Mediodía (Midday)*. He traveled to Mexico and Spain during the late 1930s and met with such writers as Octavio Paz, Pablo Neruda, Langston Hughes, and Ernest Hemingway, among others. He became a close friend of Langston Hughes, especially via correspondence, and was even able to host Hughes in Cuba. He published *Cantos para soldados y sones para turistas (Songs for Soldiers and Songs for Tourists)* (1937) and *España: Poema en cuatro angustias y una esperanza (Spain: A Poem in Four Anguishes and One Hope)* (1937) during this time. The poems in these collections focused on more militaristic topics and denunciations of fascism.

When the political situation in Cuba worsened in the early 1950s, Guillén began traveling around the Americas and, in 1954, to Stockholm. In Stockholm, he was awarded the Lenin Peace Prize. He was threatened with imprisonment if he returned to Cuba while it was under General Fulgencio Batista's control; therefore, he traveled

extensively elsewhere. After Batista's fall to the revolutionary Fidel Castro, who became one of Guillén's closest friends, Guillén returned to Cuba from Argentina, where he had been in self-exile. He had just published (1958) *La paloma de vuelo popular* (*The Dove of Popular Flight*) and *Elegías* (*Elegies*). The poems collected in these two books were written while Guillén was in exile. He addressed a universal audience and wrote about the social clashes of 1950s between, especially in Cuba, workingpersons and those displaying capitalistic greed.

In 1960, Guillén was appointed president both of the Union of Cuban Writers and Artists and the National Poet of Cuba. He continued to write profusely and published collections of poetry, such as *¿Puedes?* (*Can You?*) (1960), *Poemas de amor* (*Love Poems*) (1964), *El gran zoo* (*The Great Zoo*) (1967), *Cuatro canciones para el Che* (*Four Songs for el Che*) (1969), *La rueda dentada* (*The Serrated Wheel*) (1972), and *Diario que a diario* (*The Daily Diary*) (1972). He published anthologies, such as *Prosas de prisa* (*Hurried Prose*) (1975), which was composed of newspaper articles, diaries, and comments on diverse themes.

In spite of his literary success, Guillén did not forget to write for children. He wrote the dramatic *Poema con niños* (*Poem With Children*) (1943), which was a “Hermosa exhortación a la hermandad, por encima de diferencias de raza y de credo” [A beautiful exaltation of brotherhood, over and beyond differences of race and creed.] (A. Rodriguez, 1993, p. 76). Although some of his other poems, typically found in anthologies, are often aimed at older readers, they have also been adopted for younger audiences. These cross-generational poems include “Canción de cuna para despertar a un negrito” (A Cradle Song to Wake a Little Black Child) (1958) and “La muralla” (The

wall) (1958). In 1977, Guillén wrote the collection of poems *Por el mar de las Antillas anda un barco de papel* (*On the Sea of the Antilles Wanders a Paper Boat*), which was directed toward a younger audience as well. In this collection, he continued using the colorful and lyrical *son* rhythm in his poems for children. He emphasized the idea of needing acknowledgement of Cuban *mestizaje* to achieve true brotherhood in some of the poetry Guillén composed for the book. This ideal was shown in the poem *Un son para niños Antillano* (*A Son for Children From the Antilles*),

Una negra va en la popa,  
va en la proa un español;  
anda y anda el barco barco,  
con ellos dos.

A Black woman goes in the poop  
a Spanish man goes in the prow;  
the boat boat goes goes,  
with both of them. (Guillén, 2000, p. 6)

José Martí

José Martí was born in Havana, Cuba, on January 28, 1853. He was Creole, the son of Spaniards but born in Cuba. Martí was a precocious learner and had a gift for observation. His life changed at the age of 9, when he first witnessed the slavery of black people in the countryside. His father, a government agent who oversaw the illegal entrance of slave ships for the Spanish colonial government, had taken him to the countryside before, but Martí had never grasped the full negative import of the practice of human enslavement. Later, Martí said,

Quien ha visto azotar un negro, ¿no se considera para siempre su deudor? Yo lo vi cuando era niño, y todavía no se me ha apagado el las mejillas la vergüenza.... Yo lo vi y me juré desde entonces su defensa.

[Whoever has seen a black being whipped, does he not consider himself indebted to the black? I saw it when I was a boy, and my cheeks have never lost their embarrassed blush.... I saw it and swore to defend them from then on.] (in Almendros, 1965, p. 5)

Martí's experience guided him throughout his life and served as the inspiration for parts of his later book, *Versos sencillos (Simple Verses)* (1891). His hatred of colonial government and its practices soon brought him to the attention of the Spanish government in Cuba. He was exiled to Spain at age 16 for writing a letter deemed treasonous against the Cuban government. Martí continued to use his talent as a writer to work toward the freedom of his beloved country even in his long years of exile. While he was on the boat making the crossing to Spain, he wrote *El presidio político en Cuba (The Political Prison in Cuba)* (1871), an almost Dantesque condemnation of the horrors found in the Cuban political prisons.

Martí continued writing poetry while he completed his bachelor's and master's degrees in Madrid and Zaragoza, respectively. He expressed sorrow over the repression he heard was happening in his home country and wrote condemning the Spanish government. However, regardless of his opinion of their government, Martí respected the Spanish people he met. His desire for solidarity between all peoples regardless of race or color helped him overcome his hatred for the Spanish government. Martí continued his journey in exile and arrived in Mexico in 1875. There, and later in Guatemala, he continued writing articles and poetry, especially concerning the positions of the *mestizo* and indigenous populations of the Americas.

Martí was granted amnesty by the Cuban government in 1878 and returned to his homeland. He soon began to pursue his idealistic dreams and proved to be a compelling

orator. He was so compelling, however, that the Cuban government exiled him a second time because he did not profess his loyalty to Spain. After a brief stop in Spain, Martí went to the United States, where he felt he could express his ideas freely and to a larger audience.

In New York, Martí taught classes and translated documents to augment the income he earned writing articles in English and Spanish. During this busy time, he wrote prolifically in many different genres. He wrote *Ismaelillo* (1882), a book of verses dedicated to his young son. He followed this collection with an adult novel, *Amistad funesta* (*Tragic Friendship*), which was published in 1885. In 1891, *Versos sencillos* (*Simple Verses*) was published. In 1892, he founded his own newspaper, *Patria*, dedicated to news concerning Cuba and the independence movement that was taking place there. He made a large contribution to children's literature during this time. His magazine for children, *La edad de oro* (*The Golden Age*), included stories, historical analyses, and poems. Martí, who wrote all of the content for the magazine, unfortunately had to stop after four issues because of problems with his financial backer.

Martí, who had tirelessly fought for the independence of Cuba through literary means and through his creation of the anti-imperialist Cuban Revolutionary Party while living in New York, finally conceded that more drastic measures would be necessary in Cuba. He campaigned with the aim of raising a force from the rest of the Americas to fight for Cuba and Puerto Rican independence in a show of solidarity. He smuggled himself into Cuba in the spring of 1895, and after marching for 5 days through the countryside to join friendly forces, he was shot and killed on April 16, 1895, while fighting on the front.

Martí left an enormous legacy of hope, justice, and solidarity, and his impact can be felt throughout later Cuban history. His ideals and convincing way of sharing them have made him a national hero and, above all, a respected teacher. Martí's contribution to the literary world was just as monumental; his vision influenced much of modern children's literature written in Latin America.

Literature for children in the Spanish-speaking world was changed greatly by the publications of *La edad de oro* (*The Golden Age*). Martí wrote all the material for the project, which appeared in 1889. The four monthly issues that were published were later compiled and republished as a book by the same name. The articles, stories, and poems were compiled many times and in many configurations, but the first complete edition of *La edad de oro* was published in 1905.

On the first page of the first edition of *The Golden Age*, Martí promised to explain how the world was made, the history of the world, and everything his young readers would need to be honest and true people. He continued by writing that he would write everything clearly and accompany the text with beautiful illustrations so that they would understand. Some of the many genres that Martí included in his ambitious project were poetry, informational facts, classic and original stories, and biographical essays. This multifaceted approach highlighted the many characteristics of Latin America. He referred to American independence in "Tres héroes" (Three Heroes), he extolled the valor of the indigenous cultures in "Las ruinas indias" (The Indian Ruins), and he addressed many other subjects, including the conquest and colonization of indigenous cultures, especially in "El padre Las casas" (Father Las Casas). Martí hoped to create a literary bridge for children from different countries to understand each other's traditions and cultures in

order to build solidarity and fraternity not only in “la Patria Grande” (the Great Homeland), as he called Latin America, but in the entire world as well.

In his essay “El Padre Las Casas (Father Las Casas), Martí vividly described the struggles of Father Las Casas in his quest for social justice for the indigenous people of the Americas. Las Casas defended them tirelessly from the injustices and oppression of the conquistadores. Martí wrote about racial tensions again in the original story “La muñeca negra” (“The Black Doll”) [which] addresses the issue of discrimination as the young girl prefers her old black doll, which others despise, to the fancy blond one she has just received, which everyone celebrates. (Ada, 1990, p. 39) By exposing young children to these facts of life in a manner that they could easily assimilate, Martí hoped to influence the growth of a new generation of racially and socially aware people.

Herminio Almendros (1972) wrote about *La edad de oro*,

Insisto en que uno de los méritos capitales que hay que admirar en la literatura de Martí para los niños, es ese mantener el pensamiento sin desasirse de fundamentales datos reales; ese operar con ideas y conocimientos anclados en la realidad y en la vida, aunque luego la fantasía juegue con ellos y los rebase y embellezca.

[I believe that one of the principal merits to admire in Martí’s literature for children is how he maintains his thoughts without disassociating from true facts; he has the ability to operate with ideas and knowledge anchored in reality and in life, even though soon after elements of fantasy play with them, escape them, and embellish them.] (p. 58)

Martí’s literary work for children facilitated a turning point in nineteenth-century children’s literature. His work was a general departure from the era’s moralistic and didactic works for children. Martí humanized his characters; Children were simply

children, not flat, metaphorically evil or good personages used to exemplify a moral lesson (Rodríguez, 1993). The expository descriptions of characters in *La edad de oro* as well as the daring sentiments, situations, and environments, conveyed a modern feeling and reflected Martí's desire to prepare his young audience for the real world.

Although Martí was a modernist writer, intent on delighting with the beauty of the language and its imagery, he took any opportunity to address social issues, many of them prevalent today. The young protagonists, the children whom he considered "the hope of the world," rise to help create the world he envisioned: "The happy time when all human beings treat each other as friends" (Ada, 1990, p. 39).

#### Hilda Perera

Hilda Perera was born in Cuba in 1926. Although she was primarily of Spanish descent, Hilda would play with many of the black children of her neighborhood. This early, innocent exposure to other races played a large role in her first novel, *Cuentos de Apolo (Stories of Apolo)* (1947). As she wrote on the cover of her book, "Un día decidí escribir un cuento sobre uno de esos niños a quien llamé Apolo" ["One day I decided to write a story about one of those children, whom I called Apolo"]. This simple decision at the age of 17 resulted in a story that, once self-published, became an early example of modern Cuban children's literature and has been translated into eight different languages.

After moving to Miami in the 1960s, Perera continued to write extensively, becoming one of the largest figures in modern Cuban children's literature. She expanded her scope to include such stories as that of a little Vietnamese girl who immigrated to the United States after the fall of South Vietnam in *Mai* (1983), the stories of an undocumented immigrant who crossed the Rio Grand to seek employment, her daughter

who came to visit her at her place of employment, and the employer, a Cuban immigrant. The stories also described how the characters struggled to find their new, hybrid identities in *La jaula del unicornio (The Unicorn's Cage)* (1990) and, in *Kike* (1984), endured the difficult journey faced by Cuban children sent to the United States without their parents. As Antonio Rodríguez (1993) so aptly stated,

Existe en Hilda Perera una preferencia por los temas “difíciles”, que son expuestos con una prosa tersa e inquietante, y una gran habilidad para la construcción de tramas y caracteres. Sin duda alguna, es una de la más personales narradoras para niños del continente

[There exists in Hilda Perera a preference for “difficult” themes, which are expressed in terse and disquieting prose, and with a great ability for the construction of dramas and characters. Without any doubt, she is one of this continent’s most personal narrators for children.]  
(p. 86)

She wrote over 33 books during her prolific literary career and was honored with many deserved awards. These include Spain’s Lazarillo Prize in both 1976 and 1978, a nomination for Hispanic Heritage Award Honoree (1994) for literature, and a nomination for the Nobel Prize in Literature (1993).

In *Cuentos de Apolo (Tales of Apolo)* (1947), Perera introduced her protagonist, a young 7-year-old Afro-Cuban boy named Apolo, by saying that Apolo came from so humble a background that, although the price for a cheap bus to the beach was only 35 cents, he had never been able to afford to see the ocean. Apolo’s life was limited by what existed where he lived, at the sugar cane plantation not far from Havana. Perera conveyed the choked realities of a rural life that is devoid of opportunity and how unjust racism can be. Throughout the book, she used Apolo’s story as a tender, yet crude, instrument to

shed light on some of the social problems she saw while growing up as a member of the privileged class. One example of Perera's blunt inclusions of racial injustice occurred when Apolo volunteered to help at the birthday of a privileged girl who lived in the little town around the sugar mill. Perera described how Apolo did chores and assisted in setting up the house for the party for two hours in expectation that he would be invited to stay and participate in the festivities. After his hopes rose along with the descriptions of parties, sweets, piñatas, and a donkey, Apolo was crushed by the mother's suggestion that he leave after being paid 15 cents. To add to the injustice, Francisquito, a boy from the town, arrived as Apolo was being sent away and was welcomed by the young girl's mother. Perera (1947) summarized simply the obvious social tensions that overwhelmed Apolo,

Apolo se iba alejando, triste, hacia el bohío... ¿Por qué, por qué a Francisquito sí y a él no? Y metió su mano negra, negra, en el bolsillo del pantalón.

[Apolo left sadly toward his hut... Why, why could Francisquito go but he couldn't? And he put his black, black hand in his pant pocket.] (p. 29)

### Summary

In this chapter, I prepared an analysis of the literary work of six Cuban authors. For this discussion, I selected one book of each author that highlights issues of race, class, equity, and social justice. Although this chapter did not include all Cuban writers who represent the themes of my study, it did give a sampling of Cuban authors who have written about such relevant themes in different historical periods. In general, the topics

they include in books for children and young adults have not been addressed widely, accurately, or critically enough.

Some of the authors were born and continue to live in Cuba, others were born in Cuba but have lived abroad in the United States, and others were born here in the United States. Regardless of their place of residence now, the authors have provided a unique opportunity for educators and students to engage in a pedagogy of critique, change, and social justice across cultures.

## CHAPTER IV

### METHODOLOGY

For us, the principal distinction between Participatory Research and traditional academic research is the commitment of the researcher to meet her (or his) participants in unconditional love and service as their co-facilitator, co-educator, co-organizer, and catalyst. (Ada & Beutel, 1993, p. 29)

#### Introduction

This participatory research study explored the voices of two Cuban authors of children's books, Nersys Felipe and Teresa Cárdenas, whose works authentically portray issues of race, social justice, and equity. It is significant that these authors created their stories from different historical perspectives: Nersys Felipe wrote at the beginning of the Cuban revolution, and Teresa Cárdenas wrote during Cuba's Special Period.

The study utilized dialogue retrospection and text analysis within a participatory research framework. Through reflective dialogues, I was able to invite the authors to add their personal reflections to the analysis. This chapter outlines the methodology I used for the study.

#### Research Design

Participatory research distinguishes itself from conventional research in the specificity of the social change objectives it pursues, the modification of the research methods it employs, the kinds of knowledge it produces, and the way it relates knowledge to social action. Along these lines, participatory research departs radically from traditional social research in terms of both methodology and epistemology (Park, 1989).

The research study was qualitative in design, following a participatory research framework (Ada & Beutel, 1993; Kieffer, 1981; Park, 1989). It consisted of two processes: (a) dialogic retrospection between the participants and the researcher, and (b) critical analysis of the published works of the authors. In this study, dialogue retrospection within a participatory framework and text analysis was cross-referenced and recorded to highlight significant issues central to Afro-Cuban voices and the African heritage in Cuban literature for children and young adults. The objective was to combine the processes of methodology, dialogic retrospection, and text analysis to explore how the literary works of the authors represent issues of race, social justice, and equity in a variety of social contexts.

The Caribbean backgrounds of the authors and myself share some similarities. In using participatory research as a methodology, both the participants and I reflected upon our own lives, personal experiences, and relationships that may have caused us to challenge our beliefs or assumptions. As Ada and Beutel (1993) said, participatory research is used

...by an individual willing to engage in a personal exploration to understand the social conditions, or by an individual willing to engage in a personal exploration to understand the social conditions that may have affected her life. Participatory research is a mutual venture among two or more individuals to challenge the assumptions that social conditions are to be accepted as they are, and who are willing to critically engage in the analysis of their origins in search of the possibilities that will bring about greater justice. (pp. 7-8)

Ada and Beutel (1993) also stated that "at its best this research is an inviting and open narrative of that community's history, struggle, values, wisdom, and action" (p. 9). They have affirmed that authors "are individuals who can and do contribute to the human experience of transforming the world" (p. 9).

Because literature plays an important part in education and promotes attitudes and biases, stories can change how we perceive, value, and deal with issues of oppression, racism, and inequity in our society. Literature that portrays issues accurately and authentically can assist children in a variety of ways, such as encouraging critical thinking, enlarging consciousness, and creating positive, realistic ideas and attitudes. Maguire (1987) said, "Alternative paradigm research stresses the importance of human subjectivity and consciousness in knowledge creation. This approach maintains that objectivity is an 'illusion,' because it suggests that it is possible to separate the subject of knowledge, the power, from the object, the known" (p. 19). Participatory research, in contrast to context analysis, assures that the author's work will be looked at subjectively. The authors and I participated actively together in looking at the stories and themes of their books. Therefore, both the authors and I determined the outcome. The relationship between each book and its author is intrinsic; therein lies the importance of the dialogue with the author.

Ada and Beutel (1993) emphasized hope as being essential in the dialogue when they declared, "You enter the dialogue with the hope and trust that people are capable not only of knowing but [also] of knowing more profoundly. You hope that the dialogue will

be rich, that wonderful things will come out of these reflections together, and the reflections will have an effect and a consequence" (p. 88). I embarked on this research journey by hoping and trusting for a transformative and profound outcome. To begin, I conducted an initial dialogue with each participant and taped the conversations. The dialogues were transcribed and analyzed to find questions, concerns, and possibly some emergent themes. As the participants and I analyzed the transcription of the first dialogue, some ideas surfaced and began to take shape as themes. We repeated this procedure for each dialogue.

Kieffer (1981) wrote, "Understanding [is] constructed as tentative interpretations throughout the research process and [they] are consistently referred back to the participants for responses and refinement. This process is the fundamental assurance of 'rigor' both in this study and the phenomenological tradition as a whole" (p. 14). Once the themes emerged as being crucial according to both the researcher and the participant, they then became the points to look for during subsequent dialogues. I communicated with the participants in person, through phone conversations, or e-mail as well as in person for as many times as it took to answer new questions, clarify points, or obtain additional information. Typically, the dialogues were transcribed and analyzed for recurring themes. The analysis of the dialogues with the authors was synthesized to establish connections between the authors participating in the study as well as to give voice to their individual ideas within the chosen themes. Through the critical analysis process, I looked for generative themes, metaphors, and symbols in the chosen books

written by these authors. The books were identified and reflected upon, both by participants and me, in order to understand how the authors portrayed issues of African heritage in their books for children and young adults. By using the methodology of this study, the participants and I reinforced our belief in three primary areas: (a) the importance of including African heritage as well as racial issues in children's literature, (b) the significance of the role of writers who include these topics in their work, and (c) the impact that such writers have on all children when they authentically reflect and describe in their books the African heritage in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean.

#### Description of the Participants' Community

The participants' community is the group of Cuban writers of children's literature currently in Cuba. It includes authors who express their own personal and cultural experiences through various genres, including children's and young adult's literature that authentically depicts the African legacy in Cuba as well as issues that concern race, equity, and social justice. All of these authors write in Spanish, although some of their work has been translated to different languages.

The participants are all published authors who have written on the topic of African heritage. Among this community are several award-winning writers who have received recognition both in their country and outside of it. Some of the authors who have been recognized are as follows: Julio M. Llanes, Gerardo Fullea Leon, Nersys Felipe, Teresa Cárdenas, Julia Calzadilla, and Alga Marina Elizagaray, among many others.

#### Data Collection

I chose Nersys Felipe and Teresa Cárdenas as the authors I wished to participate in the study. After I had contacted them and they had agreed to participate, I met with each of them informally. I explained the purpose of the study with each author during our separate meetings. I started the first conversation with each participant by sharing my background and my entry into the literary community. I had prepared some research questions before our meeting to facilitate the dialogue; the topics were, however, not limited to these questions.

Upon completing the first, introductory dialogue, each author and I scheduled a second. Nersys and I had our second conversation 5 days later. I traveled from Havana to Pinar del Rio (108 miles) to meet with her. The round trip took almost a complete day. Because of time constraints and substantial travel time, we continued the rest of our conversation by phone. We also communicated via correspondence carried by Felipe's son, who lived in Havana but traveled to visit his mother every weekend. She was able to read the transcripts I supplied and make corrections and clarifications by telephone.

I was unable to contact Teresa Cárdenas during my first visit to Cuba. She lived in a partially completed development at the time and did not have telephone service, which made it difficult to communicate. My visit to Cuba ended before I was able to establish steady contact with her. However, Alga Marina Elizagaray, one of the authors whom I met in Cuba, promised to help me reach Teresa Cárdenas. I was fortunate enough, though, to return to Cuba in October 2003 to participate in a reading conference, *Lectura 2003—Para leer el XXI-IBBY (Reading 2003—To read the XXI-IBBY)*. Happily, Teresa

Cárdenas was presenting at this conference. Our first formal dialogue took place during this time. This first meeting was quickly followed 2 days later by a second dialogue to avoid any future communication challenges. After this, we continued our work by e-mail.

In preparation for the dialogues, I collected copies of the two authors' children's books to clarify questions and use as examples during meetings. Their books are analyzed in Chapter V.

### Research Questions and Questions that Guided the Participatory Dialogues

The purpose of the study was to use reflective dialogues with the authors and to add their personal reflections to the analysis of their literary works. I also attempted to shed light on the impact that the authors' experiences of race consciousness might have had on the stories they had written. The following questions formed the basis for the participatory dialogues. Due to the nature of participatory research, the dialogues did not always follow the research questions, and the participants may have answered other questions indirectly as a result of offering information before a question had been asked. The prepared questions were used only as a guide to keep the research focused. The following four research questions were asked and answered in this study.

Research Question #1:

How is the African heritage incorporated in the published works of Nersys Felipe and Teresa Cárdenas?

- (a) What motivated you, as an author, to include themes of African heritage and racial discrimination in your literary work?

(b) How is the Afro-Cuban experience depicted in your literary works for children and young adults?

Research Question #2:

What societal awareness is brought out by the literary works of Nersys Felipe and Teresa Cárdenas?

(a) How are Afro-Cubans portrayed in the contextual cultural settings of the stories that you write?

(b) Which Afro-Cuban themes do you consider important for all children?

(c) In what way are these themes important for Afro-Cuban children?

Research Question #3:

How do the authors develop their racial identity, and what impact does it have in the books they have written?

(a) Who informed you of your family heritage, history, and culture, and how did the person(s) do it?

(b) How did you develop your racial identity, and how does it impact the stories that you write?

(c) What are your thoughts about the role that literature plays in the identity development of children and young adults

Research Question #4:

How are these two authors raising consciousness and encouraging transformation in the representation of African heritage for children and adolescents in their literature?

(a) (Nersys Felipe) As a white, educated, and privileged woman, what ethical self-justification do you have to write children's and young adults' literature concerning the theme of African heritage?

(Teresa Cárdenas) As a black, underprivileged woman, what ethical self-justification do you have to write children's and young adults' literature concerning the theme of African heritage?

(b) What is your epistemology or the reasons that drew you to search for the importance of social justice through your literary work, especially in *Román Elé* (Nersys Felipe) and *Letters to My Mother* (Teresa Cárdenas).

(c) How have you been transformed by the creation of your body of literary work?

(d) Do you think that your literature has a transformative aspect? If so, what kind of transformation would you like to see in the way that the African heritage—along the issues of race, social justice, and equity—is presented in literature for children and young adults?

### Data Analysis

I transcribed the recorded dialogues and analyzed the themes that came up in talking with the participants. The data were categorized according to the themes of the research questions and the sub-themes. For both participants, themes naturally emerged throughout the dialogues. The beginning themes guided the direction that the subsequent dialogues would take. As they kept surfacing, the participant and I would continue to clarify, define, and explore each theme in the context of some of their literary work

where African heritage is depicted. The analyses of themes and biographical information of both authors are found in Chapter V. The majority of the biographical information comes from personal dialogues with the illustrators. Any additional information gathered from other sources will be cited.

### Research Setting

Nersys Felipe lives in Pinar del Rio, the capital of the province of Pinar del Rio. It is named after the pine trees that grow along the banks of the Guama River, which flows by the city. I traveled to Pinar del Rio and stayed in the nearby small town of Viñales with a Cuban family. The dialogues with Nersys Felipe were conducted at her house in a friendly atmosphere accompanied by cups of great Cuban coffee. The depth of the dialogues was very moving and personal.

The dialogues with Teresa Cárdenas took place in Havana. I met with the participant in a private area of the hotel where a literary conference was convening. Both the participant and I were attending the conference. Follow-up clarifications were carried out by telephone, in person, or by e-mail with both participants.

### Entry Into the Community

When I told my advisor, Dr. Ada, that I was interested in researching the African heritage in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean and how it has been portrayed in children's and young adult literature, she introduced me to the literary works of Cuban authors who had addressed this topic in their writing. Among the books that Dr. Ada made available was one in particular, *Román Elé*, that captivated me (see Chapter V for the critical

analysis of this work). When I told Dr. Ada that I would like to meet the author Nersys Felipe, this particular moment set in motion the series of events that took me to Cuba. My original intention was to conduct the study in the Spanish-speaking islands of the Caribbean: Cuba, the Dominican Republic (my country of origin), and Puerto Rico. The scarcity of literature for children and young adults that portrays African heritage in the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, however, deterred me. Cuba has a rich literary tradition, and I discovered more writers there who were addressing the themes in which I was interested. Before my departure to Cuba, Dr. Ada gave me the names and phone numbers of some of the women writers who she knew personally.

I was received warmly by these women's circle of writers, which was open to male writers as well. I met with the authors individually and in groups. We held deep conversations and dialogues about issues of race and cultural identity in children's literature. I visited their homes and held literary gatherings in the house in Havana where I was staying. During the time I spent in Cuba, the authors and I also attended various literary and cultural events together. The huge variety of artistic and cultural events that continuously took place in Cuba was quite accessible to everybody. During this first visit to Cuba, I spent a month in the country, mostly in Havana. By the time I left, I had a well-established professional and friendly relationship with the authors. We deepened our friendships further through e-mail and phone conversations. Some of the authors I met were Nersys Felipe, Gerardo Fullea Leon, Teresa Cárdenas, Julia Calzadilla, Alga Marina Elizagaray, and Enrique Perez.

I returned to Cuba in October 2003 to attend an international conference for children's and young adults' literature (Lectura 2003, IBBY). I had the chance to meet writers from different parts of Cuba as well as from different parts of the world. While at the conference, I heard of another event that takes place each year in the city of Sancti Spiritus, which is in the center of Cuba. In May 2004, I returned to Cuba because of a special invitation to present and participate in Santi Spiritus. In this regional and international event, I saw some of the authors I had already met and was introduced to other authors. I met Julio Llanes, the event organizer, who writes books for children and young adults in which issues of race, social justice, and equity are portrayed. In August 2004, I visited Cuba one more time. I visited once more with the authors who were participating in the study as well as with those from whom I had received invaluable collaboration and support. I entered this community feeling like someone coming home. There is an extraordinary similarity between Cuba and the Dominican Republic, the place where I was born. This similarity is not only geographical, but cultural as well. The commonality of the two countries not only facilitated my entrance in to the Cuban writers' community but also has kept the doors open for me. Even today I enjoy a continuous exchange of ideas and professional support from the people I met there.

During this study, my interaction in this community was always informed by the shared cultural experiences of growing up in the Spanish speaking-Caribbean islands and by our shared interest and concern about issues of race, culture, and social justice. I entered the community not only as a doctoral student researcher but also as an Afro-

Caribbean woman emigrant living far from her land, a teacher, a mother, and an agent of change. I entered the circle and learned, shared, listened to, remembered, and reflected upon everything. The exchange of experiences that I have had in this community has been deeply transformative for me. It brought a renewed discovery of many aspects of my life. As Ada and Beutel (1993) said,

Many times your position or access to knowledge and resources, your own life experiences, or the inner and external preparation you have made for this particular participatory research study will allow you to contribute some insight to your participants' knowledge, awareness, and critical reflection on their life experiences and personal wisdom. You will realize how much your participants are able to help you reflect and ponder the questions and problems of deep concern in your own life. Through the dialogue comes the renewed discovery of ourselves as teachers, learners, and students of and with one another. (p. 89)

#### Researcher's Background

... man projects his cultural and social images upon the universe and he derives a sense of personal worth from the reflection he sees gazing back at him. For he defines himself and the world in terms of others like him. He discovers his identity within a group. And now we come to the heart of the matter, for we cannot judge ourselves unless we see a continuity in other people and in things and concepts. We question our very right to exist without other existences like our own. (Gerald, 1972, p. 373)

My search for other existences like my own began early in life. The foundations for this research were who I have been and the nature of my background. I was born on the Spanish-speaking island of the Dominican Republic. I am the youngest of six children born in a small village located in a sugarcane producing area of the country. My father

died shortly before I was born. My mother moved to the capital, Santo Domingo, taking most of my siblings with her. I was left behind in the care of my aunt Beba.

I lived with my aunt for the first 9 years of my life. We lived in the Batey of Gautier, a small village. Haitians were brought to the Batey, among other places, every year to harvest the sugarcane. Some families lived in *barracones* (farmworkers' quarters) in a segregated area, and others lived in the village. Across from my aunt Beba's house lived Tizo and her family, who were Haitian immigrants. Her children were my first playmates, and we reenacted every aspect of village life in our everyday play. I partook of their ethnic dances, music, food, and stories as well. Every night, as there were no books or electricity, the children would gather outside around the elders. My grandmother would visit and continue the oral tradition of stories for our education and entertainment. I sat on the front porch night after night with my friends to listen to the magic tales that my grandmother and the other elders would tell. These stories were a mix of fairy tales, which were infused with Afro-Caribbean folklore, myths, and legends. Despite my childhood innocence, the harsh living conditions and treatment to which the Haitians were subjected did not escape my attention. I still carry some of my memories from that time with me. One of the images that has stayed with me the longest is how the Haitians were transported from their country while standing in long trucks like cattle.

I was taught how to read and write by my uncle at home. I had a strong desire to attend the village school but was forbidden from doing so because the school had only one room, which the older children attended. I knew that in the city, where my mother

and siblings lived, the younger children also could attend school. I pleaded with my mother to take me with her so I could begin my schooling. At the age of 9, I went to live with my mother and began first grade. I missed the freedom of my childhood in the countryside as well as the close community of family friends I had there.

In the city, I lived in a more diverse neighborhood. The family next door was from the north part of the island, and they could pass as white. The girls of the family would taunt me about the color of my skin. They were light skinned and blond. I, on the other hand, had dark skin and nappy hair. There were also corner neighbors from Barbados and Antigua, who kept their children in the house and would not let them play with the Dominican children on the block. This large family wanted to keep the children of the household within their own culture and religion, so they would not lose their mother tongue. Fortunately, there were also other children who were black like me. I played and went to school with these children.

I began to attend school in Santo Domingo soon after the American intervention in the 1965 Dominican Civil War. The country received aid from the United States in the form of food, clothes, books, and other goods. We were provided textbooks, which had been printed in the United States, depicting white, middle-class, American families in a context completely irrelevant to my reality. As an Afro-Caribbean woman, I never had the opportunity to see myself and my immediate reality portrayed authentically in the books that were used in the schools that I attended during my childhood. The absence of people of color in my books caused me to internalize many negative feelings of low self-

worth. As Freire (1970) said,

In order to have the continued opportunity to express their "generosity", the oppressors must perpetuate injustice as well. An unjust social order is the permanent fount of this "generosity", which is nourished by death, despair, and poverty.... True generosity consists precisely in fighting to destroy the causes which nourish false charity. False charity constrains the fearful and subdued, the "rejects of life", to extend their trembling hands. True generosity lies in striving so that these hands—whether as individuals or entire peoples—need be extended less and less in supplication, so that more and more they become human hands which work and, working, transform the world. (pp. 44-45)

Because as a child I lacked experiences with positive role models that I could identify with at school, I continue to reiterate the importance of bringing the voices of the oppressed to tell the story of their own experiences. It is paramount that children learn their authentic, undistorted history instead of conforming with the disallowance of history and context by their oppressors.

I myself did not become aware of the positive aspects of my history and identity until late in my education. I began my formal education in the public schools of Santo Domingo. I continued postsecondary studies at the Felix Evaristo Mejia Normal School, which was run by Spanish and Dominican Theresian Sisters for the purpose of developing teachers in the Dominican Republic. At this school, where I was very fortunate to have teachers who took a personal interest in me and strongly supported my desire to become a teacher, I was instilled with a Theresian conviction, framed on Paulo Freire's pedagogy, that the neediest children are those upon whom our outreach efforts

are most appropriately focused. After my graduation from F. E. Mejia Normal, I acted upon this conviction and took a one-year position as an elementary school teacher on a remote coffee plantation.

I returned to my family after that year and continued working as an elementary teacher while taking courses in special education. During this year, 1979, I visited the Dutch Antilles. It was my first trip outside of the Dominican Republic, and I visited the island of Curacao for a vacation. The black community I met there impressed me. Their freedom with themselves and others, which resulted from their community togetherness, had a large impact on me, as did the many languages that they spoke. The following school year, I was one of two teachers selected by the Dominican Ministry of Education to receive a full scholarship to attend the Integral Special Education Teaching Program at the Panamanian Institute of Special Education in the Republic of Panama. I received an extraordinary training in all areas of special education at this institution and completed a tremendous amount of fieldwork, working together with other students from many different countries and backgrounds. The ease I felt with the ethnically diverse people with whom I studied and worked with made me recall the beauty and pride of the black community I had found in the Dutch Antilles.

The legacy of the different ethnic groups that had come to Panama, many of which were there to build the Panama Canal, made this Central American country a rich resource of races and culture. In Panama, I found a densely-knit West Indian community, which opened its warm environment to me. These people were the opposite of the people

from Barbados and Antigua who had lived on my childhood block and kept their children from interacting with others outside their "group." The families of West Indian descendants shared their vibrant culture, and I gladly merged with their way of life. I found that an older wise woman was always present in this community. The younger women braided my hair in wondrous styles and taught me how to do it myself. I also eagerly learned how to dance and cook in their deeply African-influenced styles. During this time, I began to realize the beauty of my inner and outer blackness. I learned with these women to be proud of being an Afro-Caribbean woman with all the joy and sorrows inherent on this journey. The brothers and sisters made me feel at home and became the mirror in which I began to find and acknowledge my African heritage.

Sadly, none of these beautiful experiences prepared me sufficiently to face the struggles of life as a black immigrant woman in the United States. After graduating from the institute, I returned to Santo Domingo and taught for another year. I then immigrated to the United States because of my frustrations with many aspects of life in my native country. Life as an immigrant in the United States brought its own frustrations, the greatest of which stemmed from my inability to speak English. I enrolled in English classes shortly after my arrival in New York and began working, first as a seamstress and then as a clerk in a children's store. When my English improved, I obtained my first U.S. teaching position as a Head Start teacher in the South Bronx.

I began to seek opportunities to continue my professional development. I applied and was accepted for the master's program in early childhood bilingual special education

at Bank Street College of Education in New York City. I soon became aware of the many labels that can be pinned on an individual in a highly class-, gender-, and racially-divided society. The following are some of the labels under which I was categorized: woman, Latina, black, non-English speaker, undocumented alien, and many others. I struggled to understand and find my place in the new country in which I found myself. I was no longer just a Dominican woman; I was buried beneath a large amount of other labels. I did not know who I was or why it was so painful to be black in the United States. I began to search for answers by filling the large gaps in my knowledge of history that had been left by my past schooling. Books, along with people struggling through the same issues, became my best allies. The first book I read during this search was *The Native Son* by Richard Wright (1940). As I delved deeper, I discovered or was introduced to the work of Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, and many other contemporary writers.

Throughout this time, I worked as a bilingual elementary school teacher in the New York City public school system during the day and attended classes at Bank Street College at night. The school where I taught was in a predominantly Hispanic community. Most of the children in the school came from the Spanish-speaking islands of the Caribbean: Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba. Despite the abundance of books in the classroom where I worked, I constantly faced the difficult task of finding books in which the characters were depicted authentically and similarly to my students. At this time, most of the few available books that addressed multiculturalism focused on different ethnic holidays and how they were celebrated around the world. These books

lacked the essential part of multicultural literature that Harris (1992) stressed:

Literature, implicitly or explicitly, provides statements about a host of critically important social and political questions: What it means to be human; the relative worth of boys and girls, men and women, people of various racial, ethnic, and religious communities; the value of particular kinds of actions; how we relate to one another; and about the nature of community, and so forth. (p. 11)

During these years, I found myself reflecting upon my childhood experiences and drawing practical solutions to the problems I was facing. I invited the parents and grandparents to come to the classroom and share stories from their homeland. I also told my students what my mother and grandmother had told me. I encouraged my students to create their own tales and to write and illustrate them as well. It was my intention to create an environment where they could be nurtured while in the process of developing their identity. As Halpin (2003) claimed,

In literature, significance emerges against the background of a lived experience. To deny others such difference, even in the name of universalism, is to homogenize; to deny the lived reality of people denies the context of their lives. Students who have time to tell their own stories, to hear stories which resonate with their lived experiences, to tell their personal histories recognize their valued position in the community. Students who recognize shared value among people in the classroom recognize the justice of that community. (p. 48)

I graduated from Bank Street College in 1989, became a mother, and moved to California where I worked as a special education teacher in various places and settings. I worked in such extremes as the Western Addition in San Francisco, where I taught mostly African American children who were bussed all the way from Hunter Point, and

Half Moon Bay, where I taught in a bilingual immersion program for both Caucasian and Hispanic children. At night, I worked in ESL classes for the migrant workers in Half Moon Bay and in Spanish classes for the managers of the same migrant workers. My journey through the USA did not take me to only California. I also lived in Illinois, Wisconsin, New Mexico, and multiple times in California. I always worked in a variety of educational assignments with diverse ethnic groups.

Among the various communities in which I had worked, the Mexican community took me in like an *hija postiza* (adopted daughter). I worked with the Mexican community for many years and in many places. I sat in their circles and felt like a welcomed guest. I felt accepted, respected, and loved. Because of my tremendous gratitude, I acted as a teacher, friend, and ally to all members of this community. In my opinion, there is a profound difference between being a beloved guest and being a family member who fully belongs. Therefore, I had a constant yearning to sit in a circle of people like myself. Ferdman and Gallegos (2001) asserted,

How one navigates one's way through various life experiences and the meanings attributed to these experiences shapes the ongoing sense of self in relation to other latinos and other groups. Thus identity development needs to be seen as an ongoing, dynamic process rather than a static event, fluid rather than immutable once established. (p. 47)

I knew deep in my soul how it felt to be with people like myself. I had had fleeting experiences of being immersed in black culture while I was a child in the Batey of Gautier, as a teenager in Dutch Antilles and Panama, as a mature woman in Cuba, and

even recently in Salvador, Bahia. Through all these stages of my identity development, I carried the seed of this study, which had been planted in my heart at an early age. My life experiences and my ever-increasing knowledge and awareness about such subjects as critical pedagogy, social justice, and multicultural literature as a doctoral student in the International and Multicultural Education program at the University of San Francisco have caused a deep transformation in me along the years. This study is the fruit of that seed as well as a continuation of my discoveries in the field of multicultural education. It represents my commitment to the struggle for the authentic portrayal of African heritage in literature for children and young adults, not only in Cuba but also worldwide. As Paulo Freire (1979) declared,

Human existence cannot be silent, nor can it be nourished by false words, but only by true words, with which men and women transform the world. To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change. Once named, the world in its turn appears to the namer as a problem and requires of them a new naming. Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection. (p. 69)

## CHAPTER V

### THE AUTHORS' VOICES ON RACE, EQUITY, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE: FINDINGS FROM THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Me educué en un colegio en el que sólo se admitían niñas blancas. Quizás ese contraste entre mi vida familiar, llena de negros y mulattos, y esa escuela cerrada a la negritude, me haya condicionado a tratar el tema de la herencia africana y la discriminación racial en mi trabajo literario.

[I was educated at a school that admitted only light-skinned girls. Perhaps the contrast between my personal life, full of dark-skinned people and mulattos, and that school, whose doors were closed to Afro-Cubans, may have drawn me to explore the subject of African heritage and racial discrimination in my literary work.]

#### Introduction

As history has unfolded, literature has responded in a special way to the world's social changes. Human attentions and words have transpired in correlation with each society's own directions and rules, while interventions have taken place and produced contextual transformations that have not only affected the process of culture but also that of the magnetization and fragmentation which occur in it.

In their literary works, Nersys Felipe and Teresa Cárdenas recounted, in an honest and straightforward manner, the realities with which they have been forced to live. They shared what they have witnessed and experienced. Nersys Felipe, in *Román Elé*, and Teresa Cárdenas, in *Letters to My Mother (Cartas al cielo)*, re-created the spaces where magnetization and fragmentation can take place and leave room for transformation.

*Roman Elé* and *Cartas al cielo* are the books that I chose to analyze because their context resonates with my own personal experiences. As an educator, I believe that these books can make a rich contribution to literary activities for children and young adults that are planned and guided within a framework of critical pedagogy. This chapter gives voice to both Nersys Felipe and Teresa Cárdenas through the biographies, awards, dialogues with the authors, themes developed during these dialogues, and analyses of their books. Also in the chapter are the findings of the research questions. Please note that my English translations for the dialogues with the two authors are in brackets following the Spanish original and with no further reference.

Nersys Felipe

*The Author's Biography*

Nersys Felipe, the poet and writer, was born in Pinar del Rio, Cuba, on August 31, 1936. Her father, Gabriel, was an electrician and union leader and spent some of his best moments with his dear friend, Desiderio Cabrera, whom he called Negro, at their home in Pinar del Rio. Negro, as he was called, was used not just as a term of endearment but also because his skin was “de t n negra espl ndida” [of such splendid blackness], according to Felipe. She said, “Negro fue el gigante real de mi ni ez y era para m  la gloria sentirme alzada por sus brazos hasta su cabeza, a m s de seis pies del suelo.” [Negro was the real giant of my childhood, and it was glorious for me to be picked up within his arms and lifted over his head, more than 6 feet from the ground.] She believes that children who grow up like she did can never distinguish between black and white, and this is what

comes out in her work. Felipe was able to focus on the contrasts between the Republic and Revolutionary periods in Cuban history, and this shaped her work. While working as a young elementary school teacher during these periods, she was able to witness the blossoming of literature for children. When asked about how this period affected literature, Felipe commented, "...[E]l gran impulso dado por la Revolución a la educación y la cultura, muchos hombres y mujeres hemos dedicado nuestra creación a los niños." [...[O]ut of the great push by the revolution for education and culture, many men and women have dedicated [their] work to the children.]

When she was 15 years old, Nersys attended la Normal de Maestros de Pinar del Rio, which provided the equivalent to a community college education for teachers. From 1953 to 1968, she worked as a first and third grade teacher, a professor of Spanish and music at the middle school, and a professor of piano, music, and chorus at the music school. During the period of 1968 to 1999, she worked on radio. At this time, she was one of the founding members of the theater group Guiñol de Pinar del Rio; developed a daily children's program for radio, which aired for 4 years; and published the award-winning books of Cuentos de Guane and Román Elé, in addition to Musica y Colores, Prenda, Cuentos de Nato, Sorcita, Maisa, and El Duende Pintor. Her books have been published in Cuba, Spain, Argentina, and Colombia and adapted for radio, television, and theater. Felipe's verses have also been put to music and are currently used in schools as part of the primary reading curricula for children. She married and had two children.

Regardless of her place in the literary world, she chose to stay in her provincial

town with her husband and there raise her two children. In an interview with Omar Gonzalez Jimenez (1976), Felipe said, “Mis dos libros de narrativa se han desarrollado en Guane porque es la tierra de mis abuelos, mi madre y mis años de niña y adolescente. Guane y Pinar del Río han sido todo mi mundo.” [My two narrative books are set in Guane. because it is the land of my grandparents, my mother, and my years as a child and adolescent. Guane and Pinar del Rio have been my whole world.] In 2004, Alga Marina Elizagaray honored Nersys Felipe at the Premio Magistral, “La Rosa Blanca,” by recounting her story. Elizagaray mentioned that in 1986, Felipe visited Moscow for the first time but was constantly worried about her husband and children, who were the center of her universe and who were her salvation during the worst emotional crises of her life. Felipe did not follow the crowds to Havana but remained in her native community, where she continues to live. In a newspaper article, Sonia Sanchez (2004) quoted Alga Marina Elizagaray, who said the following about Felipe,

Con tu modestía y carencia de afán de protagonismo siempre te has mantenido allí, a buen recaudo de la publicidad, de los corrillos literarios y el jolgorio capitalino, sin importarte el cultivo de tu imagen y su proyección que por sí solas se han impuesto.

[With your modesty and lack of wanting to be in the limelight, you have always maintained your place there, at a safe distance from the publicity, from the literary circles, and the commotion of the big city, without bothering to promote your image and your influence, letting these alone prevail.] (p. 5)

### *Awards*

Nersys Felipe received numerous awards, recognition, and distinctions throughout her life as a literary figure. For example, she received the Premio Poesía in 1974 for *Para que ellos canten* and honorable mention in 1975 for *Musica y colores*, both in the competition *La edad de oro* (*The Golden Age*); Planeta Azul, third place for the song "Pecesito" (Little Fish); Casa de las Américas Award in 1975 for *Cuentos de Guane* and in 1976 for *Román Elé*; Caracol Award in 1997 for the best radio script adaptation of *Román Elé* for children and in 1999 for *Papobo...y alguien mas*; La Rosa Blanca Special Award in 2000 for her entire collection of literary work; Best Dramatic Narration Award and Best Script Award at the Festival Nacional de la Radio in 2003 for *Una familia muy especial*; Bronze Medal from the UNEAC from Pinar del Rio; Medalist winner from the Federation of Cuban Women and La Obra Pía for the City Museum in Habana; Laureate Seal by the Nacional Department of Culture; honors for the first 100 years of *La edad de oro* (*The Golden Age*); certificates for 50 and 60 years of life and contributions in Cuban literature by the National Union of Writers and Illustrators in Cuba and the National Institute of Books; Raul Gomez Garcia medal winner; April Award for her entire literary work by the National Union of Communist Young People and the publisher, Abril; Orden por la Cultura Nacional from the State Council of the Cuban Republic; and the Honorable Microphone for her excellent and continued contribution on the radio from the Cuban Institute of Radiodifusion. She has also recently been published by the International Board of Books for Young People (IBBY).

### *Why I Chose Román Elé*

I grew up in an environment where books were scarce. I first encountered a book written specifically for children during my early adult life in the Dominican Republic when I began my teacher training. These children's books were mostly compilations of short stories and had few illustrations. Furthermore, the text and the illustrations were irrelevant to the lives of the students and teachers because most of these books were written and published in Spain. However, when I began to travel outside of the Dominican Republic, I started to discover a variety of children's books. I especially remember spending hours at the Bank Street College of Education bookstore during my years at the college. This bookstore featured a large children's book section whose selection awed me. The themes and illustrations inspired me to purchase many children's books for the well-funded public school in Manhattan, where I worked to include them in the classroom experience. Regardless of the impressive variety and availability of children's books, however, there were few books that accurately portrayed the culture and experiences of my mostly immigrant students in the United States. Many years have gone by and children's literature has benefited by the increasing number of published books that include authentic portrayals of the culture and experiences of immigrant children and those born of immigrant parents. I chose the story of *Román Elé* because in all my years of critically reading children's books, I had never found a book that so directly portrayed issues of race, social justice, and equity. This book is filled with tenderness, music, and poetry, and yet it carries an extremely poignant message. *Román Elé* touched me deeply

because its theme is about universal struggle and hope in a setting that is familiar to me.

### *Description of the Dialogues*

The first dialogue with Felipe was based mostly on the analysis of one of her books, *Román Elé*. Due to lack of experience on my part, I did not understand at first that the topics included in this book did not reflect all of the questions that had been chosen to guide the dialogues. However, when I went to Cuba for the second and third time to talk with Felipe, I began to expand and change my questions to address the issues that had come up during the first dialogue.

The first dialogue was based mostly on the analysis of one of her books, *Román Elé*. Due to the lack of experience on my part, I did not understand at first that the topics included in this book did not reflect all of the questions that were chosen to guide the dialogue. I felt that there was something missing from the first dialogue, namely, personal issues related to the motivation for including African heritage and racial identity in her literature. When I went to Cuba for the second and third time to talk with Felipe, it was necessary to expand and change my questions to address the issues that had come up during the first dialogue. Some information did emerge from the questions I asked about the book, but I created a new set of question to address specific issues of second round of conversations. The new questions were as follows:

1. ¿Cómo desarrolló Ud. su identidad racial y qué impacto ha tenido ese proceso en los libros que usted escribe?

[How did you develop your racial identity and what impact has that had in the books that you write?]

2. ¿Qué la motiva a Ud., como autora, a incluir el tema de la herencia africana y la discriminación racial en su trabajo literario?

[What motivates you, as an author, to include the subject of African heritage and racial discrimination in your literary work?]

3. ¿Qué cree Ud. acerca de la función de la literatura en el desarrollo de la identidad en los niños y adolescentes?

[What do you think about the role of literature in the development of identity for children and young adults?]

4. ¿Cuál es su epistemología, o las razones del corazón que la llevaron a la búsqueda de una significación de justicia social a través de su obra literaria, en especial de *Román Elé*?

[What is your epistemology or the reasons that drew you to search for the importance of social justice through your literary work, especially in *Román Elé*?]

5. ¿Qué autojustificación ética tiende usted como mujer blanca, educada, y por ende privilegiada, para escribir sobre el tema de la herencia Africana en la literatura infantil y juvenil?

[What justification do you have as a white woman, educated, and therefore privileged, to write about the subject of African heritage in children and young adult literature?]

Although the questions did guide the dialogue, it was only through the whole conversation, which took place over the course of the three dialogues, that the answers and themes fully emerged.

### *Analysis of the Themes of the Dialogues*

#### *Past and Present*

When I asked Nersys at the beginning of our conversation if she had any questions she wished to propose, she said that she wanted to talk about the satisfaction that writing *Román Elé* had brought her.

En ese libro, de entrada, yo traje de nuevo a mi vida, mientras lo estaba escribiendo, una serie de recuerdos de mi infancia increíbles, escenarios en los que yo me moví, personajes que yo disfruté, gente que yo conocí, una muy buenas, unas gentes bastantes malas, y eso me sirvió de mucho, porque comprendí muchas cosas y comparé mucho el pasado con el presente.

[In that book, from the beginning, I brought back my own life, while I was writing it: a series of incredible memories of my infancy, scenes in which I participated, personalities I enjoyed, people I met; some of them were very good people, some of them were very bad people and that helped me a lot because I understood many things when I compared the past with the present.]

Nersys was born during the Republic Period of Cuba's history. This period was characterized by rampant oppression and segregation of Afro-Cubans as well as the

struggle for the social, economic, and political space in which these Afro-Cubans engaged. Nersys produced her literary work after Castro's revolution. She brought her knowledge and experiences of the past and incorporated them with the present. She was also influenced by her life in both Guanés and Pinar del Río. Her close contact with the rural community of Guanés as well as her cultural community of teachers, musicians, and writers in Pinar del Río also had a large impact on her work.

I asked Nersys why *Cuentos de Guane* has been published more than *Román Elé*. Is it because *Román Elé* problematizes issues of race and because *Cuentos de Guane* is obligatory reading in third grade? She did not think so. She said that *Román Elé* has not been published as much because of how life was before and after the revolution: “Hay como una comparación que sale en defensa de la actual vida en Cuba y de los logros de la Revolución.” [There is a comparison that emerges in defense of the reality of life in Cuba now and of the gains of the revolution.] She went on to say, “I came to value a lot of what we sometimes have here in Cuba, that sometimes we Cubans complain about this and that, but when we compare what life was like before and what it is now...now [we] live a little bit better than in those days.”

Felipe referred to the underprivileged Afro-Cuban characters in *Román Elé*—Roman, Calazán, Dengo, Bienve, Belén, and Loreto—as simple people hoping for a better life and the privilege of an education. In the aftermath of Castro's revolution, many people of the same underprivileged class were able to achieve some level of equality along with increased chances for academic education. However, as she admitted, some

educated people who had lived moderately well, now must live with less. Nersys has lived a long and productive life during which she has been involved in her community and in the literary arena. She has contributed in the past and continues to contribute by holding the clear intention that she may influence the future of children in Cuba in a very positive manner through her literary work.

### *Social Justice*

Throughout our dialogues, the theme of social justice emerged. Felipe described her beginnings as a writer as being motivated by the desire to help others, to contribute to social justice through her writing. In one of our dialogues, she spoke of her beginnings as an author of children's literature: "Trabajé en el radio por treinta años. Un día me llamaron, y me dijeron, 'Nersys, no tenemos programación para los niños, tienes que escribir un programa para los niños...yo empecé a escribir sin haber nunca escrito nada.'" [I worked in radio for thirty years. One day they called me and said, "Nersys, we do not have a program for children; you need to write a children's program...." I began writing without ever having written anything [before].]

Nersys recalled that this happened in 1970, and during that time, there were few children's books written by Cuban authors. The few writers that were writing for children were publishing their literary work mostly in newspapers and magazines. She said, "Yo busqué esos periódicos, busqué esas revistas, busqué cuentos en las bibilotecas, busqué poemas, y adopté, simplifiqué, extracté, y ahí aprendí a escribir para los niños, esa fue mi escuela." [I looked for those newspapers; I looked for those magazines; I looked for those

stories in libraries; I looked for poems, and I adopted, simplified, extracted. and there I learned to write for children. That was my schooling.]

Felipe expressed that it was through this intense and deep process that she not only became a writer of literature but also fell in love with art form. Through this art form she was able to express her feelings toward social justice for children. Moreover, she addressed the issue of social justice by promoting love in her writing,

Un niño al que se haya enseñado a amar será hombre capaz de sacrificarse y de llegar a la heroicidad por defender aquello que ama; de sentir la imaginación necesaria y justa ante los abusos y la indignidad... Toda obra literaria infantil deberá despedir amor. Al amor habemos de mover al niño... amor a los eternos valores humanos, a lo mejor de la creación del hombre, al hombre mismo.

[A child who has been taught to love will grow up to be a man [or woman] capable of sacrificing himself and be able to demonstrate heroism for defending that which he loves; capable of demonstrating whatever imagination is necessary and just to persevere against abuses and indignities.... All literary works for children should inspire love. With love we should be able to motivate and move a child to the eternal human values, the creation of man, of man himself.]

### *Racism*

Nersys Felipe was raised by an extended Afro-Cuban family. She was born and raised during a period of injustices and discrimination. She recalled that her father used to take her with him during the weekends while he was doing extra work in the rural areas.

"Se iba a trabajar por las veguerías, a arreglar los motores de regado a la gente que

sembraba. Yo conocí a mucha gente en esos viajes en todos esos pueblos de Pinar del Río." [He would go work in the fields, fixing the irrigation pumps of those people who planted. I met many people on those trips in all of those communities of Pinar del Rio.]

During these trips, she witnessed the injustices inflicted on the Afro-Cubans who worked in the fields and as servants in the haciendas. As she accompanied her father, she also came to notice the poverty that existed in some of the marginalized neighborhoods populated mostly by Afro-Cubans where her father worked. Nersys Felipe pointed out that her book, *Román Elé*, was justified because regardless of the fact that she was a white, educated, and privileged woman, she was also sensitive and held an open heart, due to all the experiences that she had undergone during her childhood and adult life. She said, "Por suerte tuve un padre y una segunda familia que se encargaron de hacerme mejor de lo que, sin ellos, pude haber sido." [I was lucky that I had a father and an extended family that made sure I became better than I would have been without them.] Felipe believed that bringing out the issues of racism she had witnessed and felt so deeply as a child was enough reason for writing about it as an adult for children and people of all ages to read.

Nersys Felipe expressed that literature written for children must include diverse themes. She stressed the importance of not underestimating young readers' capability of understanding what they read. She concluded,

Los libros ponen a vivir al niño en los mas diversos mundos. Y si en uno de esos mundos aparece el tema de la negritud y de las injusticias hacia el negro, el niño lo

sentirá como suyo y lo comprenderá mejor. No fui la misma después de leer, *El Color Púrpura*, siendo adulta. No fui la misma después de leer *La Cabaña del Tío Tom* siendo niña.

[Books allow children to live in the most diverse worlds. And if one of those worlds—the subject of negritude and all the injustices toward them—appears, the child will feel the injustices and will understand them better. I was not the same after reading *Color Purple* as an adult. I was not the same after reading, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a child.]

### *Summary of Nersys Felipe*

Nersys Felipe's literary work is filled with realism, sensibility, and tenderness. She uses her life experiences and close memories to bring realism to her stories. Her musical and poetical gifts add sensitivity and understanding to her work. During our dialogue, she spoke about the important role of fantasy in making children's stories enjoyable. She said, however, that reality is also important:

A mi me dijeron un día todos tus libros son reales tú no manejas la fantasía... me decía la gente, a los niños les gusta mucho esto y lo otro y fantasear y salirse de la realidad, yo voy a tratar, yo he tratado con los duendes pero después de este diálogo contigo creo que la realidad es tan importante.

[They told me one day that all my books were too much like reality, that I couldn't handle fantasy....[T]he people told me that children really like this and that [instead], and to fantasize and escape reality. I am going to try; I have tried with dwarfs. But after this dialogue with you, I think that reality is so important.]

Themes of past and present social justice and racism inherent to the reality of oppressed people, such as the characters in Felipe's book *Román Elé*, emerged in our dialogue and are discussed in the next section. Nersys Felipe was able to clarify her own beliefs about

writing realistically in her books while we dialogued. This clarification justified the themes of the contrast between past and present, social justice, and racism, which have been so key to her books and so inherent to the reality of the life of the oppressed people that she represented in the characters of her book *Román Elé*.

Teresa Cárdenas

*The Author's Biography*

Teresa Cárdenas was born in Cárdenas, a town in the province of Matanzas, Cuba, in 1970. She grew up in impoverished conditions in a tenement house. Neither of her parents was a literary person, and they had attended school only through the beginning grades. Teresa has one younger brother. She worked as a social worker in Cárdenas in a health clinic and a nursing home for elders. In the early years, she wrote mostly for herself, and her inspiration came from observing and interacting with the people that she cared for at work. Later, these experiences were incorporated into her books. In 1993, she went to Havana to participate in a folkloric festival where she danced. In the following years, she spent time between Cárdenas and Havana and eventually met her partner, a professional writer, who influenced and supported her and her literary career and with whom she had a child.

Cárdenas expresses herself through many different artistic media: She writes stories and poems for children and young adults and is a storyteller, actress for both theater and television, folkloric dancer, and social worker. She contributes regularly and in many

ways to the Cuban artistic community. She has collaborated with the municipal libraries of the town of Cárdenas and Havana, where she resided with her family for many years. Her books have been published in Argentina, Spain, Mexico, South Africa, England, and the United States.

### *Awards*

Cárdenas received honorable mention for the Ismaelillo prize, UNEAC, in 1997 with her short novel “Tatanene cimarron.” Her most recent novel, *Perro viejo*, won the Casa de las Americas Prize, Cuba's highest literary honor in 2007. For *Cartas al cielo*, she received the following awards: the David Prize in 1997; the Saiz Brothers’ Association Prize in 1997; and the National Prize (as per Literary Critic’s 10 best books published between 1998 and 2000); for the poem “Maldito solar” (Damned Ghetto), second prize in the Delia Carrera competition, Matanzas, in 1998; for her novel *Cuentos de Macupe: Cuentos Africanos*, La Edad prize in 2000, honorable mention for the Casa de Las Americas Prize in 2002, and special mention at the UNEAC competition in 1998; and for *Cuentos de Olofi*, the Loynas Brothers’ Prize in 2003.

### *Why I Chose Cartas al cielo*

I first chose Teresa Cardena's book *Cartas al cielo* because I felt it fulfilled Dr. Ada's (1990) prerequisites for good literature. As she wrote, it aspires:

to more than mere communication: [It] touches the reader. It broadens the reader's horizon, validates his or her experiences, invites reflection and awakens an aesthetic

sense. [It] embodies not only the breadth of human experience... but also language at its best, at its most creative, intuitive, and precise. [It] delves into the human soul, expressing its feelings and emotions, its hopes and its dreams. (p. 3)

I was struck by how Cárdenas brings the complete and authentic voices of Afro-Cuban people to light in her work. She forgoes any convenient omissions, stereotypes, or distortions of the truth and shows her masterful knowledge of her own authentic Afro-Cuban culture. Cárdenas' "familiarity matters,... [T]he background of the author matters, that cultural affinity, sensitivity, and sensibility deeply enrich as well as authenticate the fiction about people of color" (Horning & Kruse, 1991, p. 4).

In the book *Cartas al cielo*, has Cárdenas has provided a mirror for young readers to reflect the true challenges and compelling realities that they, their families, and their communities at large face in today's convoluted world. This book also gave me, as a member of the audience, a chance to reflect on my childhood years. I, like the protagonist, did not grow up with my mother. Unlike her, however, my mother was not dead; we merely lived in different areas of the same island. I encountered some of the same challenges as the protagonist encountered during my childhood. It was touching and empowering to find a children's book that so authentically portrayed the universal struggles of black people in the Caribbean.

#### *Analysis of Cartas al cielo*

En mis libros hay temas "duros" cosas que nos suceden y que es difícil hablar de ello. Es un error creer que no se debe escribir de estos temas para los jóvenes y los niños. Porque los grandes testigos de nuestras miserias son

nuestros hijos. Ellos saben mas que nosotros de lo que pensamos. Saben de alegrías y de dolor, de vida, y de muerte, de violencia, y de ternura. Son espectadores durante toda la infancia de estos acontecimientos tan inherentes de ser humano.

[In my books there are "tough" themes, things that happen to us and that it is hard to talk about. It is wrong that one should not write about these themes for children and young adults, because the great witnesses of our miseries are our children. They know more about what we think than we do. They are spectators throughout their childhood of these events that are an inherent part of being human.]

*Cartas al cielo* is Teresa Cárdenas' first book. It powerfully exemplifies the realist type of literature for children and young adults, which shows the ugly side of life.

Cárdenas holds in high regard the use of realism in her stories, for example, that of a young Afro-Cuban girl who writes letters to her deceased mother, which forms the foundation for the book *Cartas al cielo*. A series of simple yet forcefully written letters narrate the story. The protagonist has been sent to live with her aunt and cousins following the death of her mother. Another member of her family is her abusive and vindictive maternal grandmother, who visits the aunt's home frequently and involves herself in the household affairs.

The young protagonist lived in a hostile family environment that overflowed with hate and physical and emotional abuse. She wrote letters to her dead mother in heaven to fill the void left by her death. She kept an ongoing conversation with her mother through these letters in which she shared her feelings and the events that shaped her life. The girl, whose name is not mentioned in the story, found empathy, support, and affection from an

old woman who lived in a wooden shack with a lush, fecund garden. In one of her letters, she wrote to her mother, "People say that ghosts live in Menu's [the old lady] house. That's because her garden is like an enchanted forest" (Cárdenas, 1998, p. 47). Enrique Perez (1998) qualified the protagonist's relationship: "Ella encuentra en la anciana Menú una especie de ada muy humana en los tiempos modernos." [In the old lady Menu, she [the protagonist] finds a very human fairy of modern times.] (p. 26).

*Cartas al cielo* has a transparent and well-balanced style. Cárdenas breaks the stereotypes of the sweet loving grandmother and the family as a loving unit. She maintains a delicate balance between cruelty and tenderness in the story. Cárdenas approaches the themes of love, possible ethnic integration, death, loneliness, and the search for happiness with a deep sensitivity for her heavy themes. However, sub-themes of racial prejudice among members of the same race, family dismantlement due to selfish and irresponsible attitudes, violence, prostitution, sexual abuse of children, and sex are present as well. Cárdenas balances all of the issues in the story to reflect real life. Regardless of the hardship that the protagonist goes through, her attainment of her dreams for a better and more peaceful life through daily effort remains in sight despite the bleakness in *Cartas al cielo*.

#### *Description of the Dialogues*

There will be many moments in which it will be easy to lose hope for the dialogues and for the research itself. There will be moments in which things do not work right.... No matter what difficulties are encountered, if there is a deep hope in the importance of facilitating the expressions and voices of

your participants, then this hope should carry your research forward. (Ada & Beutel, 1993, p. 88)

The first dialogue with Teresa Cárdenas took place during my second visit to Cuba. Thankfully, I had already gained some experience in doing participatory research while meeting with Nersys Felipe twice earlier. I came back to the United States and met with the International Multicultural Education (IME) department of the USF Education School. I was able to share my experiences along with the hesitations and challenges I had faced while practicing participatory research. I received support, guidance, and encouragement from my professors and fellow students. Because of all the assistance I received, I was able to prepare for my second visit to Cuba in a more efficient and confident manner. The questions that guided the dialogue with Teresa Cárdenas were as follows:

1. ¿Qué la motivo a Ud. a escribir el libro *Cartas al cielo*?

[What motivated you, to write the book *Letters to My Mother*?]

2. ¿Cómo fue el proceso de investigación para la creación de el libro *Cartas al cielo*?

[How was the research process for the creation of the story *Letters to My Mother* conducted?]

3. ¿Tienes alguna relación personal con los lugares y personajes de libro *Cartas al cielo*?

[Do you have any personal relationship with the places and personalities in the book *Letters to My Mother*?]

4. ¿Piensas que *Cartas al cielo* es un libro auténtico?

[Do you believe that *Letters to My Mother* is an authentic book?]

5. ¿Cómo desarrolló Ud. su identidad racial y qué impacto ha tenido ese proceso en los libros que usted escribe?

[How did you develop your racial identity and what impact has it had in the books that you write?]

6. ¿Qué cree Ud. acerca de la función de la literatura en el desarrollo de la identidad en los niños y adolescentes?

[What do you think about the role of literature in the development of identity for children and young adults?]

7. ¿Qué significa la justicia social para Ud.?

[What does social justice mean to you?]

8. ¿Qué la motiva a Ud., como autora, a incluir el tema de la herencia africana y la discriminación racial en su trabajo literario?

[What motivates you, as an author, to include the subject of African heritage and racial discrimination in your literary work?]

### *Analysis of the Themes of the Dialogues*

The dialogues with Teresa Cárdenas were unique in that it was a hardship trying to coordinate meetings with her while I was in Cuba. Our dialogues were conducted in person, via phone conversations, and in electronic form. In analyzing the dialogues with Teresa, three themes emerged—identity, race discrimination, and literary responsibility. This section will expound upon each of these themes.

#### *Identity*

The issue of identity was not something that Teresa Cárdenas just decided to write about as a theme in her books. It was something that was always nagging at her because as a child, she had never seen anyone who resembled her—with black skin and living in poverty—in any of the books she read. She mentioned this theme again as she talked about the setting in her book *Cartas al cielo (Letters to My Mother)*, when she defended her right to make anonymous the setting. She felt that it did not need to be located in a specific city because, as she stated, “El centro de todo es lo familiar, el contexto habitual en el que estamos la mayor parte del tiempo.” [The center of everything is what is familiar, the habitual context in which we are in the majority of the time.]

Although she knew she was black, Teresa as a child would question her identity, just as she would a prejudice. She did not want to be so black, and she did not like her hair. She would ask her mother if she was pretty when she ironed her hair to keep it from being so frizzy, and her mother would not answer. This caused Teresa to grow up

thinking she was the ugliest child that ever lived. It took a long time for her to realize that she was beautiful and black. The black child that was looking at herself in the mirror in *Cartas al cielo (Letters to My Mother)* was Teresa. She was able to share that, later, there were many changes in her life that led to her overcoming this low self-esteem. Now she considers herself a beautiful, black woman. Through her books and her writing, she has discovered her own identity, learning and recognizing that she has dignity. This is how she portrayed her characters in her books, stressing the positive, never humiliating the black people. Today, she recognizes that there is a lot of her own personality in her characters, and this she is proud to admit.

### *Race Discrimination*

During Teresa's childhood, she was discriminated against by white and black people alike—both people she knew and complete strangers. She feels so strongly about this that she would never want to see a child suffer discrimination as she did. She believes that it is natural for her to represent the African heritage in her books because it is only mirroring who she is: She has said, "Soy más negra que la noche" [I am blacker than the night], and she allows this idea to flow into her work without obstacles of any type. She believes that it is a crime when people are denied something or are badly treated simply because of the color of their skin. Teresa did not want the black characters in her books to be those who were discriminated against or voiceless people, and that is why she has made her characters resilient and dignified.

Historically, Teresa Cárdenas wrote about a real character in her book *Cartas al*

*cielo* (*Letters to My Mother*), whom she named Menu, a *santera* (a priestess in the Orixá tradition from Nigeria) from her childhood and a descendent of slaves. In writing about a person who lived so marginalized, Cárdenas addressed the issue of racial discrimination. She feels that for social justice to exist there has to be the possibility of equality, good, health, and nourishment as well as books for all. In addition, there has to exist the possibility for all to reach their dreams and desires. What Cárdenas believes is that books need to change the way people look at things—that is, lead to a transformative experience. For her, the writing of this book has transformed her by helping her become more aware of her surroundings and happenings and the impact her writing can have on people. This, she said, “Proclamo como negra, como mujer, como escritora.” [I proclaim as an Afro-Cuban, as a woman, as a writer].

### *Literary Responsibility*

When Cárdenas began writing *Cartas al cielo* (*Letters to My Mother*), she had no idea that she was going to write a book that would have such a strong social impact. She simply wanted to write a book and have it published. What happened was that all of the feelings and emotions that she had kept hidden within her soul emerged spontaneously as she began writing. All the questions she had locked up inside since childhood were subconsciously answered as she wrote. It had not been planned.

This is why Cárdenas reacts very strongly when she hears that her book *Cartas al cielo* is too sad, too realistic for children and young adults. She lived these experiences as a child and survived, just like the protagonist in her book. Writers should write to an

audience without the constraints of the age of the audience and should concentrate on getting their message across to the readers, regardless of their age. She feels frustrated if she restrains herself from writing by saying, “Mejor no escribo esto porque no lo van a entender.” [It is better if I do not write about this because they will not understand.]

As Morrison (1992) declared, "Writing and reading mean being aware of the writer's notions of risk and safety, the serene achievement of, sweaty fight for meaning and response-ability" (p. xi). This would demonstrate the incompetence of the writer to make him or herself understood. Cárdenas writes for whomever would like to read her books, “...la imaginación, el espíritu, el discernimiento humano no tiene edad ni raza.” [...the imagination, the spirit, the human discernment does not know age or race.]

Cárdenas shared with me the purpose for writing *Cartas al cielo* by saying that during her life she had experienced difficult things—those too painful to write about. She honestly and passionately believes that it is a mistake for writers to refuse to write about these themes, especially for children and young adults. She said, “Nunca se debe menospreciar la inteligencia y el talento de los niños para captar las conmociones que lo rodean, ya sean buenas o malas.” [One should never underestimate the intelligence and talent children have to capture the goings-on that surround them, however good or bad they are]. They can often prove that they are wiser than adults. She is content with the fact that she has inspired writers to address more of these harsh issues in their books for children and young adults so that there will be more stories that are “más veraces, abiertos, honestos” [true, open, honest.]

Teresa said that there are people who are waiting for the sequel to *Cartas al cielo*. Her response is that she has no intentions of writing a continuation of this story. However, she feels more compelled and obligated now to write the best that she can, as strongly as she can. *Letters to My Mother* has made Teresa Cárdenas a more responsible writer. It has made her stronger and helped her create a new path in literature. She commented, “Le estaré siempre agradecida por el reconocimiento que me ha dado en el complicado mundo de la literatura.” [I will always be grateful for the recognition it has given me in this complex world of literature.]

#### *Summary of Teresa Cárdenas*

Cardena’s depiction of Lilita, one of her Afro-Cuban characters in *Letters to My Mother*, shows how Cárdenas stayed truthful to her commitment of portraying Afro-Cubans devoid of common stereotypes, distortions, and omissions that have pervaded images of such characters in literature in general. Cárdenas’ (1998, 2006) own words about Lilita in the book summarize the authenticity of her writing,

She’s grown to be a very pretty young lady. And she’s so smart.  
She’ll certainly get a job that will make her famous—maybe  
become a writer or a radio broadcaster.

She’s a strong young lady, not afraid of anything. (p. 88)

Themes of identity, race discrimination, and literary responsibility emerged in our dialogue. It took Cárdenas some time to form her perspectives because as a child, she did not wish to identify with the stereotypical images that were being reflected back to her.

Later on in her interaction with different people, she had to deal with race discrimination. But Cárdenas held fast to the concept that her characters needed to have a positive voice whenever they were being denied or treated badly. Her own voice came through her writing unimpeded, liberating the lived feelings and images that had long been locked inside. This was her belief and her contribution as an example of how writers need to deliver their message to the reader without interference of culture, time, or age of the audience.

### Findings From the Research Questions

During my dialogues with each of the two authors, Nersys Felipe and Teresa Cárdenas, I asked the four basic research questions I have described. As each conversation proceeded, additional questions came up, which guided the dialogues as the authors elaborated further. As a result, several themes emerged, which I previously discussed. Next, I discuss the answers to the research questions as they pertain to both authors. Felipe and Cárdenas reflected on the questions in depth, illuminating their lives and experiences. I have added examples from their literary works to support the answers they gave.

Research Question #1: How is the African heritage incorporated in the published work of each author?

The two authors incorporated their African heritage in various ways, such as in the characters; settings; portrayal of characters that are free of vices and stereotypes; words, actions, and cultural transmission of wisdom through food, ritual, and music; and use of

metaphors or symbolic meaning. Above all, the dialogues revealed that stories by the authors employ a main character who is Afro-Cuban. Their characters also claim an identity; they are not passive. Teresa Cárdenas described the identity of her characters in this way:

Mis historias y mis personajes, ninguno es humillante para la gente negra. Nunca escribiré sobre un personaje negro sin dignidad, vierto todo lo positivo que he ganado en estos años de aprendizaje y reconocimiento de mí misma en mis libros—en ellos hay mucho de mí y estoy orgullosa de esto.

[My stories and my characters, none are humiliating for black people. I will never write about a black character without dignity; I've invested all the positive experiences I have gained in all these years of learning and acquisition of self-knowledge—there is a lot of me in them, and I am proud of that.]

The authors' works celebrate the authenticity of Afro-Cuban culture by resisting stereotyping and being reflective of the experiences of the Afro-Cuban people. As Cárdenas said to me, “La herencia Africana es natural que aparezca en mi obra de trabajo, soy más negra que la noche, es algo que fluye de mí, sin obstáculos de ningún tipo.” [It is normal for the African heritage to appear in my literary work; I am blacker than night; it is something that flows from me, without obstacles of any kind.]

The experience of each author differs, however. While Nersys saw her African heritage reflected through an extended family during her childhood in Cuba, Teresa lived the Afro-Cuban experience on a daily basis. She was born in a ghetto (*solar*), which she described:

Nosotros vivíamos en un solar estrecho con bichos y gatos recorriendo el techo toda la noche. Mi madre cocinaba con carbón. Dormíamos juntas en una misma cama. El baño era colectivo, lo compartíamos ocho familias. Pero al final del patio había una mata de chirimoyas y aunque no daba muchos frutos, sí estaba llena de gorriones. Esa mezcla de emociones, esa mezcolanza de sucesos amargos y agradables que viví cuando adolescente, fluyó de cierta manera en mi trabajo.

[We lived in cramped living quarters with rodents and cats running on the roof all night long. My mother would cook with coal. We slept together on the same bed. The bathroom was communal; we shared it with eight other families. But at the end of the yard, there was a chirimoya tree, and although it gave little fruit, it was full of sparrows. That blend of emotions, that hodgepodge of bittersweet events that I lived as an adolescent, flowed in such a way in my work.]

For her, incorporating the African heritage in her books was simple. Teresa justified her viewpoint by saying,

Siempre me preocupó no encontrar gente que se pareciera a mí en los libros que leía, quizás se me quedó en el subconciente esa inquietud, no lo sé. Nunca leí de una niña negra como yo; de una familia negra que se pareciera a la mía.

[I have always been preoccupied with finding people who resemble me in the books I read; perhaps this restlessness remained in my subconscious, I do not know. I never read about a little black girl like me, of a black family that resembled mine.]

One of the ways that Cárdenas (1998) transmitted the culture in her book *Letters to My Mother* was by introducing the Yoruba Afro-Cuban religious practice of Santería that was brought to Cuba by African slaves. In several parts of the story, Cárdenas she talked

about Lilita's initiation to Babalú Ayé, the "god who corresponds to the Christian St. Lazarus and is one of the Orishas, or guardian spirits, much adored in Cuba and prayed to for good health" (p. 103). She accurately described the initiation as witnessed by the observant eyes of the young protagonist: "I spent all my time setting up the altar and helping in the kitchen, until Tía Catalina sent me to Menu's house to buy flowers" (1998, p. 31). She described her role in the initiation by depicting the chores she performed for Tía. "There are lots and lots of flowers in her garden. I picked the prettiest. White lilies for Obatalá [god of peace and wisdom], butterfly jasmines and sunflowers for Yemayá [Yoruba god, ruler of the fish and the seas] and Ochún [goddess of love, happiness, and femininity], night-blooming jasmines for Oyá [goddess of cemeteries and spirits]" (1998, p. 32). Cárdenas is an insider of the Afro-Cuban culture, which is reflected in her literary work. She portrays every detail elegantly and accurately.

In my dialogue with Felipe and in reading her book *Román Elé* (1976), I concluded that she used metaphors to represent symbolic meaning within the context of the story. There is a parallel between the caged birds in the story and the captive life of Ele. The chapter that mentions *la pajarera* (birdcage) begins,

La pajarera era de la hermana del dueño. La quería, no para cuidarle los pajajos ni escucharles el canto sino para que las visitas se maravillaran con ella y la felicitaran por tenerla tan bonita y atendida.

[The birdcage belonged to the owner's sister. She liked it, not for taking care of the birds or to hear their songs. It was for her visitors to marvel at and for them to compliment her on how beautiful it was and how well she

took care of it.] (p. 27)

Román Elé was the one who cleaned the cage and fed the birds. He confessed to Crucita that the birds told him things. When she asked him what kind of things, he replied that they said it had been a long time since they had been to the river. They wondered if the *pomarrosas* (Cuban fruit) had ripened and wanted to go to their pinares [pine forest]. When Crucita asked Elé to let at least one bird go, he responded, “El día que suelte uno, los suelto todos. ¡Aunque la hermana del dueño me mate!” [The day I let one go free, I will let them all go. Even if the owner’s sister kills me!] (1976, p. 29).

After Ele’s grandfather died, the verbal and physical abuse of his family continued, but he remained stalwart, resisting with dignity when he could and never shedding a tear. The day arrived when he decided to leave that place for good. He knew that now, after the Revolution, there were schools out there for him, and he had inquired about evening classes so he could work during the day. The night before he left, Elé met with Crucita, and they opened the cage door. It was then that their shared desire to liberate the birds manifested. The birds flew away to look for the river, wait for the pomarrosas fruit, and find their pine forest. It was then that “Volvió el silencio. Y sin decir palabra se separaron, alejándose de la prision vacía” [The silence returned. And without saying a word, the children separated, distancing themselves from the empty prison.] (1976, p. 86).

Nersys Felipe wrote about the Afro-Cuban from the viewpoint of a Cuban woman who has had various childhood adventures with an extended black family. For example,

her father would take her to the country to visit an aunt who was married to a large landowner (*latifundista*). There she was exposed to the injustices and inhumane treatment suffered by the Afro-Cuban servants and was influenced by her experiences.

Nersys looked at incorporating the African heritage based on her understanding of oppression, inequities, and racial discrimination. Regardless of their color of skin or material riches, however, her characters are portrayed with dignity. Her story transforms the quiet rebellion of Ele, in contrast to his grandfather's conformity, into a challenge for him to overcome. Thus, Nersys portrayed the trials brought about by one's African heritage as something to meet with unflinching resistance.

An example is the song that Elé learned from his grandfather. At first, he sang with his grandfather:

Nos mandan que nos sentemos,  
Nos tenemos que sentar .  
Nos mandan que nos paremos,  
Nos tenemos que parar.  
Tate'e, Tata'e, Tata'e  
¡Carabalí no sabe leer!

[They order us to sit down,  
We must sit down.  
They order us to stand up  
We must stand up.  
Tate'e, Tata'e, Tata'e  
Carabali does not know how to read!]  
(Felipe, 1976, p. 31)

Later, Elé dared the other boys to learn the song, but as he sang it, he would add new lyrics to show his true feelings:

Nos mandan que nos sentemos,  
no nos vamos a sentar.  
Nos mandan que nos paremos,  
no nos vamos a parar

Tate'e, Tata'e, Tata'e  
¡Carabalí quiere leer!

[They order us to sit down,  
We will not sit down.  
They order us to stand up  
We will not stand up.  
Tate'e, Tata'e, Tata'e  
Carabali wants to read!]  
(Felipe, 1976, p. 48)

Román Elé was resisting the orders buried in the message of the song, which his grandfather had accepted for fear of losing his daily sustenance and had attempted to pass on to his grandchild. Elé demonstrated not only resistance but also hope when he changed the lyrics of the song to contradict the legacy of bondage that had been their family's accepted way of life.

Research Question #2: What societal awareness is brought out by their works?

The settings and interactions of the Afro-Cuban characters among themselves and with others, as in the case of Román Elé and the owner of the hacienda where he lived, reflect the social norms at the time in which the books were written. Calazán, Ele's grandfather, also lived at the hacienda; however, after having expended his entire life as the hacienda's gardener, Calazán was discarded like a useless bygone. The owner's callous treatment of the old man illustrates the relative social positions that are determined by color.

Calazán and Román Elé lived in a small room where dry corn was kept. The room, in a hut behind the house, had a dirt floor. Nersys Felipe (1976) described Ele's home as follows:

Rodeado de granos, tusas y sacos; entre el viene, muele y va de Dengo, y el entra y sale de gallos, gallinas y pollitos que robaban cuanto grano podían, vivía Calazán y vivía también su nieto Román Elé.

[Surrounded by corn grain, cobs, and sacks, [and] between Dengo's [the housemaid] coming, grinding the corn and leaving, the in and out of the cocks, chickens and chicks who stole as much grain as they could, lived Calazán and his grandson Román Elé.] (p. 12)

The disparities are many in the lives of Román Elé and Crucita, his friend and the daughter of the owner of hacienda. From the age of 6, Crucita had attended a private school run by nuns. Ele, on the other hand, could not attend school because his work as a servant occupied him both day and night. Felipe (1976) wrote in *Román Elé* about Crucita's schooling Román Elé:

'Para que no vaya a la escuela de Guane, donde sientan a los blancos con los negros.' Decía el dueño, que era su padre. 'Para que la enseñen a bordar, a pintar y a tocar el piano.' Decía la dueña que era su madre. 'Para que aprenda a el inglés y modales de señorita.' Decía la hermana del dueño, que era su tía.

[“So that she doesn't go to the school in Guane, where they sit the whites with the blacks,” said the owner, who was her father. “So that they teach her to embroider, to paint and to play the piano,” said the owner's wife, who was her mother. “So that she learns English and the manners of a young lady,” said the sister of the owner, who was her aunt.] (p. 19)

In contrast to the expectations for Crucita, Elé was expected only to execute his chores well and in a timely fashion. As Felipe (1976) said, "Los días de Elé eran días sin escuela y de muchas obligaciones" (Ele's days were without school and with many duties)

(p. 19). In the morning, he had to tend to the pigs, clear the birdcage, feed the birds, wash the milk bottles, run errands, and set, serve and clean the owner's table during breakfast. At noon, he had to help Dengo, the kitchen maid, as well as bathe and attend to the owner's horse. On laundry days, Elé had to help Dengo wash, starch, and iron the clothes. In the afternoon, he would bring the cows and their calves from the pasture with Biembe, Dengo's husband. He would take his grandfather for a walk and then set, serve, and clean the owner's dinner table. Felipe (1976) wrote,

Así eran los días de Elé: días de muchas obligaciones. Para que su dueño lo dejara vivir con su abuelo en el cuarto del maíz seco; para que el viejo tuviera su desayuno, su almuerzo, su comida y alguna ropa con que vestirse.

(Those were Ele's days: days of many duties. So that the owner would let him live with his grandfather in the storeroom; so that the old man could have breakfast, lunch, dinner and some clothes with which to clothe himself.) (p. 20)

A literary critic told Felipe that the family gathering (*guatecito*), the food, the live music, the songs were a bit much for the story, but Filipe disagreed by saying that the characters had a right to celebrate, that it was all representative of the Cuban culture. I commented to Nersys Felipe that the inclusion of these celebrations let other people know that enslaved people still enjoy life even though they are oppressed. They might be in the home of their owners, but they still have their space. There they create their own reality; there they find space to celebrate. Felipe agreed and added,

Y yo le dije que no, que yo no estaba de acuerdo con ello, porque no todo puede ser esa carga tan pesada encima del niño que lee, tiene que ir libre para acá y para allá, para izquierda y para derecha, en lo bonito y en lo feo, en lo liviano y en lo grave.

[And I told him that no, I was not in agreement with that, because everything cannot be such a heavy load on the child who reads; he or she has to be free to go here and there, to the left and to the right, in the pretty and in the ugly, in the light and in the grave.]

Teresa Cárdenas said that in doing her research for writing her book, *Cartas al cielo*, “Sólo recordé mi infancia, o parte de ella y las uní a otras vivencias de gente que conozco.” [I just recalled my childhood, or part of it, and I combined this with other lives of people I know.]

Even within the same race of black people, there are still prejudices that exist. For example, Cárdenas (1998) wrote,

Grandma said that someone had put a curse on her... "Is Lilita going to die?"...I asked worriedly. She slapped me and said, "Shut up, *bembona*. You're a bad-luck bird." Since then everyone in this house where I don't want to be calls me *bembona*—thick lips! (p. 17)

The Cuban children's literary critic, Enrique Pérez Díaz (2000), commented on Cárdenas's book *Cartas al cielo*:

Cuenta el modo en que una niña adolescente negra abre sus ojos a la vida en un terrible entorno familiar marcado a veces por el odio, el racismo, la maledicencia, los abusos sexuales y la falta de una meta, un futuro al que asir sus alas. Conmovedora historia que refleja el deseo de su protagonista de renacer de sus cenizas familiares y comenzar una nueva vida, levantar el vuelo hacia horizontes más promisorios.

[She tells about the way a young black adolescent girl opens her eyes to life in a terrible family environment marked at times by hate, racism, scandal, sexual abuse and lack of goals and a future to hold on to. [She is] touching history that reflects the protagonist's desire to be reborn again from the family's ashes and begin a new life, lifting up to more promising horizons.] (p. 24)

Research Question #3: How did the authors develop their racial identity, and what impact did it have in the books they have written?

Their experiences growing up happened within the complexity of Cuban history.

The books that they wrote echo those experiences. Nersys Felipe, for example, was born in a country town in 1937, before the revolution during the Cuban republic, a period of injustices and discrimination, but she did not publish her first book until after the revolution. In our dialogue, she said,

Mi papá se dedicaba a hacer trabajo extra en sus horas libres para que yo pudiera ir a un colegio como ése de Crucita, porque yo me eduqué en un colegio así y por eso no tuvieron más hijos, para que yo me pudiera educar así. El, los fines de semana se iba a trabajar por las veguerías a arreglarle los motores de regado... y yo conocí a mucha gente en esos viajes, yo siempre lo acompañaba, él siempre me llevaba, yo era hija única, y él me llevaba en su carrito y...yo conocí a mucha gente.

[My father gave up a lot of his free time to do extra work in order for me to be able to attend a school such as the one Crucita did, because I went to a school like that. That's why my parents didn't have any more children, and for me to become educated like that, he would work on weekends on the farms, fixing irrigation systems...and I met a lot of people on those trips. I would always accompany him; he would always take me; I was his only daughter, and he would take me in his car, and...I met a lot of people.]

As mentioned in Chapter II, the complexity of Cuban history set the stage for how the authors would develop their racial identity. Immediately preceding the birth of Nersys Felipe, the Afro-Cuban middle class emerged. This group became critical of racism and their own place in the politics and culture of Cuba. Soon after Felipe was born, black people settled in to public service jobs even though so-called segregation did not exist. Nevertheless, entire neighborhoods were indeed segregated (Sarduy & Stubbs, 2000). When Felipe was in her teens, the revolutionary socialist government of Fidel Castro introduced, among other ideas, the need for education and equity. It was at this time that literary work began to blossom. In 1976, Felipe published *Román Elé*, which addressed issues of race, social justice, and equity.

A few years earlier in 1970, Teresa Cárdenas was born during the revolution period.

She shared with me some of her childhood memories:

Identificarme como negra fue un camino largo. No porque no me reconociera. Sabía cuán negra era, pero en ocasiones, por prejuicios, me gustaba pensar lo contrario. No quería verme t n negra, no me agradaba mi pelo, ni mis facciones. Mi mam  me pasaba el peine caliente para que mi pelo no fuera t n rizado. Recuerdo que le preguntaba si era bonita, pero ella nunca me respond a. As  que me cri  pensando que era la ni a m s fea del mundo, y mucho de esto ten a que ver con el hecho de ser negra.

[Identifying myself as black was a long road. Not because I did not know myself. I knew how black I was, but on occasion, just for the sake of it, I liked to think the contrary. I did not want to seem so black. I did not like my hair, my facial features. My mother would use a hot comb so my hair would not be so frizzy. I remember asking her if I was pretty, but she never answered. So, I

grew up thinking I was the ugliest little girl in the world,  
and I know that this had to do with the fact that I was  
black.]

During the 1990s, many political and economic changes took place in Cuba, which undoubtedly affected the black people, who were the majority of those fleeing from Havana on rafts. The Afro-Cubans who stayed had to face the prejudiced hiring practices put in place by the primarily European tourism companies. Many were forced to accept menial jobs for foreigners as a result. It was during this time, Cuba's special period, that Teresa Cárdenas (1998) published *Cartas al cielo*. In one of the letters in the book, she addressed some issues so present in her life:

Dice abuela que es bueno adelantar la raza. Que lo mejor que puede pasarnos es que nos casemos con blancos. Ella quiere trabajar de criada en casa de una familia blanca. Y aunque tía protesta diciendo que eso es cosa de antes, abuela insiste en que no sabe hacer otra cosa. Me imagino que ella ya no está para adelantar nada.

[Grandma says it's good to improve our race and the way to do that is to marry a white person. She herself wants to work for a white family as a maid. And although Tia Catalina protested saying that was a thing of the past, Grandma insists that's all she's good for. I think that she's not up to improving anything.] (p. 13)

Research Question #4: How are the authors raising consciousness and encouraging transformation in the representation of African heritage for children and adolescents in their literature?

I asked Nersys Felipe if the book *Román Elé* could have a transformative effect on the reader, such as opening windows for knowledge, information, and discovery when it

portrays the issue of identity. I asked whether children—black children or other, more privileged children who are not black—could identify in the book their own stories or perhaps the stories of their grandparents. I wondered if the children could also identify and reflect on some subtle practices in the book that perhaps took place within their own family. Felipe told me,

Yo una vez leí varios capítulos de ese libro en una escuela primaria aquí en Pinar del Río, en quinto grado y los niños me contaban cosas, de que sus madres no querían que ellos jugaran con el negrito, los niños de Cuba revolucionaria, porque eso de que el racismo se acabó aquí es mentira. Hay gente que sigue siendo racista y yo me acuerdo de ese niño, eso fue por los años 80, ese niño que se paró, y me dijo, sí, sí, sí mami no me deja que yo juegue con fulanito porque es negrito y me dice que no, que no, que no... eso es así todavía, esas son costumbres, maneras de conductas de la sociedad que son muy difíciles de erradicar, tú puedes cambiar otras cosas por afuera, pero está por dentro de la gente y no es tan fácil, no, yo creo que es un libro necesario todavía.

[I once read several chapters of my book at a primary school here in Pinar del Rio, in the fifth grade, and the children would tell me things. [They told me] about how their mothers did not want them to play with the little black child, the children of revolutionary Cuba, because the story of how racism “ended” here is a lie. There are people here who continue to be racist. And I don’t remember the name of that boy, it was in the 1980s, the boy who stood up and told me, “Yes, yes, yes, my mommy won’t let me play with so and so because he’s black, and she tells me, ‘no, no, no.’” It’s still like this. These are the customs and norms of society; they’re very difficult to eradicate. You can change things from the outside, but it’s still inside of the people, and it’s not so easy, no. I think it’s still a book that’s necessary.]

Felipe addressed the desire to improve one’s life and break the stereotypes that have

existed in her country. For Afro-Cubans, it was not a question of not wanting to move forward but a question of survival and the overcoming of the harsh circumstances of daily life. Freire (1998) explained that when you can name your oppressor, when you can name your worth, this is where liberation begins. For example, in *Román Elé*, the protagonist was given a book; and he knew there were words that he could not read, but he still had the desire to go to school and change his world, to break the chains that bound him as a servant from birth. He saw his life reflected in his grandfather's life, but he could not continue to live the same way and wanted to break all stereotypes. Within *Román Elé*, within the struggle, there was hope, and that was the resistance. He stood up on different occasions, regardless of all the struggles and heartaches, never crying and always walking with pride. Felipe (1976) wrote,

Y de tanto querer sin poder, se le llenaron de lágrimas los ojos; y como era tarde, el libro fue cerrándosele entre las manos mientras un sueño se le abría dentro del corazón.

[And with so much wanting without being able to, his eyes filled with tears; and since it was late, the book slowly began closing within his hands while a dream emerged within his heart.] (p. 41)

In his dream, Elé saw himself in a beautiful school with a big yard filled with flowers and fruit trees. He also saw his friends from the nearby fields as well as the children from the town—Belén, Crucita, and Loreto. They were all together, attending classes, wearing their uniforms, and carrying books. He heard the teacher's voice saying that he was a great reader. The voice in his head was just like the voice of Dengo, the

hacienda's kitchen maid. After Elé had his dream, he retold it to Dengo and assured her that it would come true because he had seen it. And, the time arrived when Román Elé did leave the hacienda to pursue his dream.

-¡Se fue, Dengo!  
-Tenía que irse, Crucita.  
-Se fue de mi casa.  
-Por no ser criado.

[-He left, Dengo!  
-He had to leave, Crucita.  
-He left my house.  
-To not be a servant.] (Felipe, 1976, p. 87)

One can become an ally at a young age, like Crucita who was not blind to the injustices that were taking place in her household and was aware of her privileges as a rich, white girl.

In our conversation, Felipe addressed the issue of social justice by promoting love:

Corre ese sentimiento que lo mueve todo en la tierra que es el amor y una forma del amor que es la amistad entre esos dos niños.

[The feeling that runs through everything on Earth is love, and one form of this love is the friendship between children.]

She also supported the friendship between the two children in her story:

Es como dice Martí en *La edad de oro*, que los niños deben juntarse y aunque sea una vez cada cierto tiempo hacer algo por los demás, eso es una idea muy hermosa y que se ha perdido, la gente es cada vez más egoísta, y más apegada a resolver su problema y a dar si te dan y si no te dan no dar.

[It's like Martí says in *The Golden Age*, that children

should get together and, even if its only once in a while, do something for others. That is a very wonderful idea and is one that has been lost. People are ever more egoistical; they are more attached to resolving their own problems and giving only if they get something in return.]

Teresa Cárdenas identified herself with the main character in her book *Cartas al cielo*. The heroine is portrayed as someone who has a lot of her own fears and strengths. Cárdenas said she hopes to channel the spirit of the young black girls she has seen on the street. Her message is one of not being paralyzed by one's fears but instead recognizing those fears and using that awareness to continue building one's resilience:

Hay gente que me dice que es un libro triste, muy duro para niños y adolescentes. No lo creo. De niña viví cosas tan duras como las que narro. Pero sobreviví, igual lo hace mi protagonista. Y ése es el mejor mensaje que puedo darle a los lectores, no importa su edad.

[There are people who tell me it is a very sad book, very harsh for children and adolescents. I do not think so. As a child, I lived through very difficult things like the ones I write about. But I survived, the same as my main character. And that is the best lesson I can give readers, regardless of their age.]

In Cuba, as Martí said, there are no Spaniards, no Africans—we are all Cubans. Claiming the space of equity and justice through their beliefs, people today continue to follow Martí, even over 100 years after his death. Teresa Cárdenas explained the transformative nature of her literary work for black people when she said,

Creo que hay muy pocos personajes negros con los cuales los niños negros se identifiquen, al menos aquí en Cuba recuerdo que en mi infancia yo nunca leí sobre alguien como yo. Los personajes negros son bastante infrecuentes. Con mis libros quisiera enmendar un poco esto. Que los personajes negros no sean necesariamente los que motivan a risa, los ridículos, los groseros, los vulgares, los

brutos. Darle dignidad a estos personajes es mi objetivo, al menos en mis libros.

[I believe there are very few black characters with whom black children can identify, at least in Cuba. I remember that in my childhood, I never read about someone like me. The black characters infrequently appeared in books. With my books, I would like to amend this a bit. Let it not necessarily be the black characters who bring us to laughter, the ludicrous, the rude, the crude, the dumb. To give dignity to these characters is my objective, at least in my books.]

In one of the protagonist's letters, she shared how people react when she walks hand in hand with her white boyfriend and how uncomfortable it is for her. Her boyfriend told her that people always talk, and the girl agreed because her grandmother and all the other black women always speak about white people in a stereotypical manner. Cárdenas (1998) wrote,

“Who’s that little white boy you’re always with?” she asked once. I didn’t know what to say. I even forgot that Roberto is white. That’s when I learned that when you love someone, skin color doesn’t matter. And it’s nicer to say “Roberto” than “that white boy.” (p. 85)

Teresa Cárdenas raises consciousness and encourages transformation in the representation of African heritage in her literary work for children and young adults.

## CHAPTER VI

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Summary of the Study

The dialogues presented in the study were constructed upon the methodological and theoretical foundations of participatory research, critical pedagogy, and racial identity. Using these precepts, I perceived a need for children's literature that authentically represents the cultural heritage of all children in our communities, including children of the Afro-Caribbean diaspora. My ultimate goal was to promote a body of children literature that excludes no child and is richer for all.

I, a member of the Afro-Caribbean diaspora, explored through participatory dialogues the experiences of two authors who have created authentic Afro-Caribbean children's books. I reflected on and critically analyzed the literary works of these two Cuban authors.

The study further examined the history and theory of multicultural children's literature in the United States in comparison with the literature for children and young adults in Cuba. To facilitate a better understanding of the similarities and differences in these emerging literary traditions, the literature review included a historical perspective on Afro-Cubans from slavery through the Cuban Revolution and the ongoing Special Period.

The personal history of the authors was framed by a broader overview of the political, social, and economic conditions in which they have lived and worked. Nersys

Felipe, one of the two authors, is a white woman who understands the importance of being truthful to the reality around her and who incorporates authentically Afro-Cuban characters in her writing. The second author, Teresa Cárdenas, is a young Afro-Cuban woman who embraces her heritage with pride and feels the importance of making all children aware of the richness of her culture.

Within the dialogues, the authors and I shared some of the commonalities of being born and growing up in the Spanish Caribbean. We talked about issues of race, equity, and social justice in children's literature and explored my experience as an Afro-Caribbean woman living as an immigrant in the United States.

#### Conclusions

To transform the world. To amplify the voices of those who are rendered voiceless by the dominant society. To inscribe with them their words and wisdom, creating written histories, then to read the world with one another. To provide the stage where women and men, children, the elderly, and the disenfranchised minorities and communities become the protagonists in their own life stories. These are the intentions of Participatory Research. (Ada & Beutel, 1990, p. 7)

After exploring the voices and reflections of two female Cuban authors who are amplifying the voices of those who are rendered voiceless by the dominant culture, I have come to several observations about them and their works. For example, Nersys Felipe has not addressed the theme of African heritage in her literature since giving voice to the Afro-Cubans who lived a life of servitude during the Republic in her book *Román Elé*. She told me during our dialogues that she was convinced that she would never be able to

write another story like *Román Elé*. However, she remains an ally in the sense that Ada and Campoy (2004) defined,

As we begin to recognize the many ways in which we experience privilege in our lives, we can use that awareness to strengthen our dedication to creating a better world for all. One of the steps we can take is to become an ally of those in more difficult circumstances than ours. Becoming an ally is an ongoing process, closely related to continually exploring and unlearning our own biases. (p. 26)

Since the publication of *Román Elé*, Felipe has traveled to many different parts of the world to disseminate both her books and her message of equity. She regularly reads excerpts from *Román Elé* in classrooms and public libraries. She has also gladly volunteered time to speak about her literary works with others, especially University of Havana students who have conducted research projects on the book *Román Elé*. It is my belief that after writing her book, Nersys Felipe further fulfilled her role of being an ally in helping and supporting me with my project.

In her first book, *Cartas al cielo*, Teresa Cárdenas explicitly and forcefully portrayed issues pertinent to Afro-Cuban people. When this book was first published, it was both praised and criticized for exposing the rampant prejudice in Cuba's legally equalitarian society. Cárdenas, however, won the David Prize for young writers in 1997, and in 2000 she received National Prize in Literary Criticism given to the top ten books published in Cuba from 1998 to 2000. Cárdenas has continued writing and publishing books with themes heavily influenced by her life and by Cuba's African heritage.

These two authors have made different choices in the direction of their works, but the result has been much the same. The literature of both authors directs the reader inward, toward a reflection of self-identity, especially for those of African descent. The authors have created a stage upon which Afro-Cuban characters, especially disenfranchised and racially discriminated children, become the protagonists in their own stories.

Both authors write based on their own life experiences. Felipe used her vast knowledge and experience gained from writing for over 30 years, while Cárdenas wrote with the burning passion of someone who has undergone many hardships. As Virginia Hamilton (1978) said, "The writer uses the most comfortable milieu in which to tell a story, which is why my characters are Black. Often being Black is significant to the story; other times it is not. The writer will always attempt to tell stories no one else can tell" (p. 618).

Cárdenas focused on her perspective concerning the struggles, hopes, and suffering of the people she saw in the streets. Felipe preferred to emphasize the many affinities among children of different races. She treated her child protagonists and their burgeoning relationships with a sensitivity that allowed her to capture for readers of all ages the first, harsh loss of childhood innocence in all its complexity.

Teresa Cárdenas did not ignore the distinctive Afro-Cuban qualities of her characters. She strived to illuminate their unique natures while maintaining the universality of their experiences. Even if her Afro-Cuban characters lived on a Caribbean island and faced a scarcity of daily needs while navigating a complex political situation,

Cárdenas showed that they were the same as other children around the world in that they still went to school, had a family, and played childhood games.

Felipe, even though she is not technically an Afro-Cuban woman, was able to avoid the constraints inherent in her segregated schooling. Because she was raised in the midst of an Afro-Cuban extended family who lived in rural Cuba before the Revolutionary period, she witnessed the injustices and inhumane treatment that the Afro-Cuban servants and field workers were subjected to. Her life experiences awoke the intuitive perception with which she problematized issues of social justice, race, and equity in her texts. She portrayed characters who resisted the oppression forced upon them and found their own path to a different life. Through such characters as Román Elé, Nersys showed her audience that liberation can be obtained regardless of how desperate one's initial situation. Using Crucita, another character in *Román Elé*, Nersys also reflected her own perspective as an ally who understands and has witnessed the oppression happening all around yet is also a privileged outsider.

To transform the world, consciousness needs to be raised regarding the pursuit of liberation of oppressed peoples. Nersys Felipe and Teresa Cárdenas offered their contributions to that honorable cause by representing and authenticating African heritage in their literature for children and young adults. Because children play an important role in the global community, these two authors' contributions are invaluable. Felipe and Cárdenas revoked old notions about the race constructs that have permitted the exclusion, subordination, and exploitation of a group of people based solely on the color of their

skin. They reached a new and growing audience in the sparsely populated arena of multicultural children's literature. Their work occupied an area of literature which in the past often, subtly or overtly, has propagated messages of prejudice, bias, and oppression.

I found a marked paucity of children's literature in Cuba and the United States that portrays the experiences of children or young adults of the African diaspora. Books about Afro-Cuban children were especially hard to find. Unfortunately, neither from the Cuban diaspora nor from Cuba itself, there is not a dependable source of narratives by authors of children's literature that exemplifies Cuba's rich cultural heritage and issues of social justice, race, or equity.

While researching this study, I felt a desire to replicate my process in countries throughout the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. I would like to explore the possibilities of meeting with Puerto Rican and Dominican authors to analyze their work, life experiences, and stances on such topics as social justice, African heritage, and equity. Following such a study, I would be interested in editing an anthology of literature for children and young adults written by Afro-Caribbean authors. Such an anthology would be focused on the accurate portrayal of African heritage in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean.

My personal and professional growth during this study has brought me deep awareness of my role as an Afro-Caribbean woman, an educator, and an agent of change in the struggle for social justice.

### Recommendations for Further Study

As I pondered the imperative need for inclusion of African heritage in the narrative for Spanish-speaking Afro-Caribbean children and young adults, I felt isolated. I searched for studies that would provide a measure with which to compare and contrast my own research. There may be studies that I could have unhesitatingly compared with mine, but I did not find any. I believe that there is a tremendous need for research in this particular area.

Another issue that I faced was the inaccessibility of Cuban literature translated into English. I mostly depended on material written in Spanish. It was both intellectually taxing and time consuming to constantly translate from Spanish to English, especially since I wanted to stay as close as I could to the meaning of the original text, but this was difficult to do.

There is a great need for parents, educators, librarians, publishers, and for the general audience to have access to literature written by Cuban authors who reside in Cuba and abroad. The current political situation in Cuba, especially its influence on the availability of common resources, has played a large part in this paucity of literature for the common public.

I strongly recommend the following as points of additional research and study:

1. Other Cuban authors besides the two who participated in this study address issues of African heritage, race, and social justice in their work for children and young

- adults. We need more Cuban voices to join these two authors; therefore, more information will be available to share.
2. More extensive coverage of the influence of African heritage in the Caribbean Spanish-speaking narrative is needed in classes of multicultural children's literature at institutions of higher learning.
  3. Professional development trainers need to include multicultural literature about the Spanish Afro-Caribbean experience. These teacher-trainers also need to include works by authors who currently reside in their country of origin as well as those who are part of the Spanish-speaking Caribbean diaspora.

#### Recommendations for Action

In the Cuban political context, the creation and dissemination of children's and young adult literature are impeded. Until the present political issues are resolved, there are certain ways to bring the voices of Cuban authors to us here in the USA.

My recommendations for action are as follows:

1. Cuban literature, in both Spanish and translated into various other languages, is available in other countries that have a more open relationship with Cuba than the United States. Parents, teachers, and librarians living in America need to educate themselves about finding other venues to obtain books written by Cuban authors whose work is not available in the USA.
2. Support for the literary culture in Cuba is needed. I have three suggestions to achieve this support: increasing the translation of literary works by Cuban authors and diffusing these translations throughout the United States, creating programs of study at major universities that cover Cuban literature, and using the Internet

- more efficiently to spread the work of Cuban writers as well as to promote the large Cuban book fair that travels all around the country.
3. U.S. publishers need to look for and offer publishing opportunities to Cuban authors who live in Cuba or are members of the Cuban diaspora.
  4. The published work of Cuban writers needs to be reviewed and critiqued by knowledgeable and respected reviewers and critics in hopes that these authors achieve larger name recognition and audiences in the United States.

#### Researcher's Reflection

I chose to risk my significance, to live so that which came to me as a seed goes to the next as a blossom, and that which came to me as a blossom goes on as a fruit.  
(Markova, 2000, p. 1)

I left my country of origin a long time ago. I came to to live in the United States of America. Twenty-three years have gone by, and I still carry deep in my heart the games that I played with my elementary school classmates. My recollections of the traditional schoolyard childhood games are rivaled in their simple happiness only by the memories of my grandmother's stories and the stories by some of the authors I studied, which as a teacher I read to my students.

This study came to me as a seed in the form of a children's book. When it was time to choose a dissertation topic, I chose to go to my roots. I felt a calling to do something that would shed light on the people of the Spanish Carribean's African ancestry. When I told my advisor, Dr. Ada, about my intended topic, she suggested that I gather a body of

children's literature written by authors from Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico. She also instructed me to do a critical analysis of these books. Dr. Ada provided some literary material, mainly children's books, to inspire my collection. Among these books was the story *Román Elé* by the Cuban writer Nersys Felipe. After reading this story, I felt a compelling desire to meet Felipe and dialogue with her concerning her literary work. I was no longer satisfied with the idea of sitting alone and analyzing a body of children's literature from the Spanish-speaking Caribbean.

Thus, Felipe's book *Román Elé* and, later, Teresa Cardena's *Cartas al cielo* became the seeds of this study. I felt that I needed to know, directly from the writers, what motivated them to include the theme of African heritage in their work, what they felt was the impact of the racial identities found in their books, and what they believed was their relationship with the settings and characters of their stories.

Participatory research has as one of its tenets that the researcher be transformed in the process as well as the participants. (Reza, 1995, p. 200)

The authors took for granted that I had already written books for children and young adults, and they mentioned this repeatedly during our dialogues. They asked what prevented me from sharing my stories and giving back to Afro-Dominican children. At those times I felt a great amount of sadness and pain. I thought about my personal struggles with finding the root of my paralysis that had manifested as innumerable excuses for not finding the courage and time to write these stories. At the beginning of my studies at the University of San Francisco, Dr. Ada had told me, "Dulce Maria, you

will be the one to write the books for the Dominican children." While I shared with the authors in this study, I witnessed the countless challenges that they faced daily and saw that they had still found the space to create, to write, to share their gifts with joy. I reflected on the differences in the environments and societal values between the places where the authors and I lived. I felt a growing awareness of how the values that were acceptable in our respective societies had influenced us. In Cuba, to write is not just a privilege but almost an obligation to one's culture and way of life. From this participation comes a force meant to awaken the soul of a people to receive its own destiny.

The oppressed suffer from the duality which has established itself in their innermost being. They discover that without freedom they cannot exist authentically... In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform. (Freire, 1970, pp. 48-49).

As I looked back at what I have experienced, I began to open to the possibilities of finishing the stories that I had begun a few years before I embarked on this study. I began to believe that I could perhaps build a bridge that would take me back home through the stories I hoped to write. These stories would offer Afro-Dominican children a mirror in which they could see an authentic reflection of themselves and their African heritage.

While we conversed and listened to each other, the authors and I were all transformed. Regardless of the hardship I found while pursuing my study, the sense of freedom I found made every struggle worthwhile. Freire (1970) confirmed this feeling:

"Freedom is acquired by conquest, not by gift. It must be pursued constantly and responsibly" (p. 47).

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APPENDIX A: APPROVAL OF PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS

August 25, 2004

Ms. Dulce Perez  
SOE/IME

Dear Ms, Perez:

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS) at the University of San Francisco (USF) has reviewed your request for human subjects approval regarding your study.

Your application has been approved by the committee (IRBPHS #04-070). Please note the following:

1. Approval expires twelve (12) months from the dated noted above. At that time, if you are still collecting data from human subjects, you must file a renewal application.
2. Any modifications to the research protocol or changes in instrumentation (including wording of items) must be communicated to the IRBPHS. Re-submission of an application may be required at that time.
3. Any adverse reactions or complications on the part of participants must be reported (in writing) to the IRBPHS within ten (10) working days.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRBPHS at (415) 422-6091.

On behalf of the IRBPHS committee, I wish much success in your research.

Sincerely,

Terence Patterson, EdD, ABPP, Chair  
IRBPHS- University of San Francisco  
Education Building- Room 023  
Counseling Psychology Department

## APPENDIX B: CONSENT COVER LETTER TO THE PARTICIPANTS

Dear

I am a doctoral student in the International Multicultural Education Program at the University of San Francisco. As part of my course work, I will be conducting a research study in the area African heritage in Cuban literature for children and young adults. The purpose of my research study is to examine children's and young adult literature that portrays the Afro-Cuban experience as well as to give Cuban authors who have included the topic of African heritage in their literary work for children and young adults an opportunity to voice their thoughts about the role that literature plays in the development of identity in children and young adults. I also want to know how their own experiences have impacted their literary work regarding the issues of African heritage, racial discrimination, and social justice. I am familiar with your literary work and would like to invite you to participate as one of the authors in this study. If you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to meet with me a total of three times for no more than 5 total hours to discuss your reflections on the impact of your experiences on your literary work for children and young adults. I would like to ask that our first dialogue be held at your study, and I would like to take photographs of you. I will provide you with the research questions and questions I have to guide our dialogue in advance, but our discussion does not have to be limited to these. I will audiotape our conversation and write it out after each meeting. You will receive a typewritten copy of our conversation and a write out after each meeting. You will also receive a contact sheet of all photographs taken of you and a copy of notes of email, fax, and phone communication upon request. No portion of any conversation or communication will be included in the study without your approval. **Participation in research is voluntary.** You may decide to withdraw from this study at any time and no portion of the materials will be used.

Unfortunately, I am unable to provide you with any monetary compensation for your time, but I am willing to be flexible and work within the time frame that will work for you. For example, if because of time constraints you wish to communicate your review of the transcribed dialogues and/or respond to some of the questions via email, fax, or telephone, you would have the option to do so in this study.

If you choose to be part of this study and agree to the stipulations of this study, please sign the enclosed **informed consent form** and return it to me in the self-addressed stamped envelope. When I receive your informed consent form, I will contact you personally and answer any questions you may have about our first meeting and make arrangements to meet.

Thank you for your time and consideration. If you have any questions that you need answered before you can decide if you wish to take part in this study may contact by telephone (831) 427-0690 or via email at [perezdulcemaria@yahoo.com](mailto:perezdulcemaria@yahoo.com). If you have further questions about this study, you may also contact the IRBPHS at the University of San Francisco, which is concerned with protection of volunteers in research projects. You

may reach the IRBPHS by calling (415) 422-6091 and leaving a voicemail message, by emailing IRBPHS@usfca.edu or by writing to the IRBPHS, Department of Counseling Psychology, Education Bldg., University of San Francisco, 2130 Fulton Street, San Francisco, CA 94227-1080.

Sincerely,

Dulce Maria Perez

APPENDIX C:  
SOME CUBAN AUTHORS AND THEIR PUBLICATIONS  
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