

Women of Courage

Juan Antonio Madrazo Luna
National Coordinator, *Citizens' Committee for Racial
Integration* (CIR)
Havana, Cuba

The number 13 is one that we never welcome positively. This 2013, we've suffered the painful news of the passing and loss of two, important, Afro-Cuban intellectuals: the actress **Elvira Cervera** and essayist and literary critic Inés María Martiatu Terry, both essential to the empowerment and self-esteem of our own Afro-descendant universe.

Elvira Cervera (Sagua la Grande, 1923 – Havana, 2013) was a Cuban film, theatrical, radio and television star. She began her career on radio, at barely 15 years of age. Her family imposed only one condition on her—to continue her studies, and study she did, graduating as a teacher and then, some years later, with a Ph.D. in Pedagogy from the University of Havana.

She was one of Cuban Television's founders, and worked for it till her last breath. As she put it in her memoir, for her, art was a challenge. In it, she reveals the media's racism. In this way, she challenged the hegemony of those in power and also questioned the underrepresentation of black actors and actresses in Cuba film and television, from her position at the *Instituto Superior de Arte* (ISA). Her perseverance was tireless and absolute. She was essential and useful beyond any limits imposed upon her; strong, firm, sensitive and majestic. All this is more than obvious in her legacy, her cadre of students.

She was not any film director's favorite; neither was she one of those founding and privileged actresses from Cuban televi-



sion who gave a face and voice to memorable characters. She was never in any hall of fame. Never Cecilia, Juliet, Santa Camila or Teresa Ranquin; exclusive and exclusionary entities such as the *Instituto Cubano de Radio y Televisión* (ICRT) did not allow anyone with her skin color and origin to achieve this level.

She was always quite conscious of the fact that poverty was racialized, that the humblest of all images was that of black women, and that blacks as subjects were still anchored to the lowest level of the social pyramid. This courageous woman took on the challenge of this hard life and took to her grave a great many things never confessed. She intensely defended her consecration to theater and tele-

vision. Cervera was always crossing turbulent waters.

With her tough skin, she always openly challenged manifestations of racism with dignity, not only at the ICRT, but also at the ISA, where she taught pedagogy for a long time. She was made extremely uncomfortable by the fact that black or *mestiza* actresses were treated as subalterns, and reserved for humiliation or satisfying the sexual appetites of those who dominated them. With her cultural project *Teatro en Sepia* (Theater in Sepia), she attempted to raise the self-esteem of young, black actors and actresses, and rescue, through theater, the most intimate histories of Cuban Afro-descendants.

While working with radio station *Radio Progreso*, she played roles in “Esta es tu vida” and “Drama real,” as well as in “Estampas criollas,” “Héroes de la justicia” and “Actualidad mundial.” Cervera debuted as founder of the Televisión Cubana on “Himnos del Recuerdo,” under the direction of Gaspar Arias. She later worked on numerous teleplays, soap operas, series and adventures, among which were “Cecilia Valdés,” “Las brujas de Salem,” “Gobernadores del rocó,” “Santa Camila de La Habana Vieja,” “Cuando el agua regresa a la tierra,” “Entre mamparas,” “El Mayor,” etc.

Her artwork also included theater, “Cecilia Valdés” and “María la O” with the Teatro Lírico; “Tambores” at the Teatro Martí, under the direction of Modesto Centeno, and more. She was responsible for the Teatro Infantil of the Consejo Nacional de Cultura and children’s programming at ICRT, and was a member of the Consejo Técnico de la TV. Her memoir, *El arte para mí fue un reto* [Art Was a Challenge for Challenge] (Ediciones Unión, 2004) has not received the attention it deserves.

I don’t recall any interview with her in any Cuban cultural publications, like *La Gaceta de Cuba*, *Revolución y Cultura* or *Tablas*. She never was awarded the Maestro de Juventudes prize. Her devotion to the struggle against racism won her the Premio Toleran-



cia Plus, in the race category, by the *Citizens’ Committee for Racial Integration* (CIR).

Writer, researcher and cultural critic **Inés María María Martiatu Terry** (Havana, 1942-2013) came from a family of black professionals. She finished her degree in History at the University of Havana and studied music at the Municipal Conservatory, today known as Amadeo Roldán. She had the wonderful opportunity of being a student at the *Seminario de Etnología y Folklor del Teatro Nacional de Cuba* in 1960, under the direction of Professor Argelier León, and also attended the *Seminario de Dramaturgia de la Dirección de Teatro y Danza del Ministerio de Cultura* in 1984.

Her professional interests included numerous aspects having to do with African influence on Cuban culture and racial, gender and class discrimination, as well as interracial relations. The protagonists in most of her stories are black women; her narrative empowered their self-esteem. In deconstructing

the image of Afro-descendants, she revealed the anguish of transculturation, a very necessary reading that has given voice to a choir of voices silenced for so long. Her critical texts have the ability to challenge the official narrative, deconstruct silences, reveal prejudice, deconstruct stereotypes constructed about black women, illustrate the silenced lives of Afro-descendants, decipher the violent origins of a Diaspora in which so many lives were scarred by the slave trade and genocide.

She presented at conferences in Caracas and Barlovento (Venezuela in 1991), as well as at York College and New York University (in the United States in 1992). She participated in the *Congreso de Mujeres Escritoras Caribeñas de Habla Hispana* (in New York and Miami in 1998). During Afro-Colombian Week, she spoke at the *Archivo Nacional* and at Quibdó (in Colombia in 2008). In October 2011, she was invited and traveled to the University of Wilmington (North Carolina) and gave presentations at Loyola University, the Chicago Cervantes Institute and the University of California-Santa Cruz. She presented her book, *Over the Waves and Other Stories* [Sobre las olas y otros cuentos] (Swanisle Press: University of Chicago Press, 2009) at each one of these presentations.

As an academic, she worked with the Arts and Letters division of the University of Havana as an advisor and teacher, and sat in on Dramaturgy defenses at the ISA. She was also a member of the Argelier León Center for Africanist Studies (ISA), where she functioned as an advisor, as well as of the Fernando Ortiz Foundation; in addition, she was a member of the *Consejo de Expertos del Consejo Nacional de Artes Escénicas del Ministerio de Cultura*, the *Asociación de Artistas Escénicos*, the *Unión Nacional de*

Escritores de Cuba (UNEAC) and the *Asociación Internacional de Críticos de Teatro*.

Her work for the theater journal *Tablas* is well known, as is her work as a blogger in the blogs *Inés María escritora*, *Afrocubanas* and *Teatro Afroamericano*, with Brazilian researcher and professor Marcos Alexandre (Universidad de Belo Horizonte).

In 1990, she earned a prize for female-themed short stories from the Colegio de México and Casa de las Américas, and in 2002, the *Premio Razón de Ser*, from the Alejo Carpentier Foundation, for her book project *Presencia negra en el teatro cubano contemporáneo*. She earned additional recognition for *Distinción por la Cultura Nacional*.

As an Afro-feminist, she earned renown not only in Cuba, where she contributed to changing the face of feminism by creating the *Afrocubanas Colectiva* platform, but also taught many generations of women. Her disciples have inherited her legacy—Sandra Álvarez Ramírez, Joanna Depestre, Yusimi Rodríguez López, Irene Esther Ruiz Narváez, Julia Mirabal, Yanelis Abreu Babi, Yesenia Selier Crespo, Yulexis Almeida Junco, Aymee Rivera Pérez and Carmen Gonzales.

She was an admirer of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement and stayed in touch with many U.S. and Caribbean Afro-feminists. As a critic, she specialized in the work of Afro-Cuban playwrights Eugenio Espinosa Hernández, Tomás González and Gerardo Fullea León, with whom she enjoyed close friendships. She was also a tireless defender of the work of Cuban filmmaker and Afro-feminist Sara Gómez.

From her position in the 'lettered city,' she also tried to break the silence surrounding the *Ediciones Puente* publishing project, using her discursive voice to deconstruct Cubanness. She was able to unmask the anti-black racism

and power relations to which black women in Cuba had always been subjected.

Her book, *Bufo y nación. Interpelaciones desde el presente* (Letras Cubanas 2008), is key to understanding our own prejudices and racism. She was one of those women who got tired of their life stories and histories being told by others, and assumed the right to define their own reality. This is why she created the communicative platform *Afrocubanas Colectiva*, with which she contributed to the deconstruction of all the hegemonic views there were of black women.

Her essay *¿Y las mujeres negras qué? Pensando el afrofemenismo en Cuba* [And What About Black Women? Thinking Afro-Feminism in Cuba] got an honorable mention during the 2012 *Casa de las Américas* prize competition, and competed in its extraordinary edition for its topic: the black presence in contemporary America.

Elvira “Tita” Cervera and Inés María “Lalita” Martiatu were women and mothers of courage who reached a pinnacle in their time. The same could be said about another now gone legend, Leyda Oquendo Barrios (1936-2008). All of them dedicated themselves to making sure the history of Cuba’s Afro-descendants be told by Afro-descendants themselves, in the first person. They considered them to be an intimate part of the nation. They all delved deeply into dead end streets and knocked down locked doors. They contributed to narrating the nation from the margins and learned to cross boundaries from the intimate position of the excluded. Their teachings enriched our history; they are major protagonists of Cuban culture. They live in each and every one of us.

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