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# Eddy Campa: the centripetal utopia in Little Havana Memorial Park

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*But only the poet  
—prodigiously blind to your presence—  
can give a testimony of you.*

J. Gálvez

**S**an Agustín, Santiago de las Vegas, El Cotorro, Alamar... are some of the suburban destinations of the Havana “MetroBus”. The term “suburb” in Cuba, however, has little to do with that *locus* which is recognized in English as “suburb”. Or maybe it has, but in a rather caricaturesque way: Let’s say that it has as much as Bethesda and Guanabacoa, the Hamptons and Arroyo Arenas, Coral Gables and the pre-fabricated cysts of Fontanar.

A friend who studied Celso’s speech *Contra cristianos* and translated for Raymund Llul in Havana and Barcelona, used to say that over 60% of the passengers of those hot Havana “MetroBuses” or “camels” were of the black race. He added that he didn’t keep mathematical statistics to legitimize this affirmation in the sociological archives, but he did have visual statistics: “Get aboard a camel and you will see what I’m telling you. Climb, say, the pink camel to Alamar and you will see the inside shadow. It’s irrefutable.” He would add afterwards, “When you verify it, comment on it all around Havana, so the auditive statistic will join the visual one.”

On some lines of the public transportation in Miami-Dade, as the visual statistics indicate, the passengers of the black race also prevail. On number 35, for example, which covers the long stretch that joins US1 (Dixie Highway) with Florida City, and Dadeland South Station (Kendall downtown), the Afro-Americans and Afro-Caribbeans (mainly Cubans and Jamaicans) get on the buses carrying bibles, helmets, construction shovels and “discmen” with rhythms which overflow into space. There are fewer black passengers on other lines, such as Sunset Kat or Killian Kat, which are rush-hour reinforcements of numbers 72 and 104, bound for the more expensive neighborhoods, but in any event, blacks are noticed and they are not, in any case, “invisible beings”. It is true that blacks in Miami, especially the Cubans, are more discreet; they are seen little in the stereotyped spaces of exile, but if one looks for them or seeks them, one finds them.

In Dade County there are nuclei of Afro population in Florida City, Naranja, Cutler Ridge, Little Haiti, a large part of the Northwest. Afro-Cubans can be noticed in Hialeah, downtown and Miami Beach, where they control the public transportation.

I don’t know whether a “*guagua*” may be an appropriate place for a poet, but Leandro Eduardo “Eddy” Campa (Havana, 1953 –Miami [?]) used to travel on line 8, from

Brickell Station, near downtown Miami, to Florida International University. Painter César Beltrán said that Campa managed to get his own business in the middle of downtown: he sold jewelry. They say, by the way, that he left an unpublished book of stories, coherently titled *Curso para estafar y otras historias*. And of course, a singular character nicknamed Prenda Fu.

But he didn't traffic in fake jewelry, but custom jewelry, which was his forte. I don't know how much money he made, or, to put it in one of his obsessive ways: I am ignorant of what his "income (tax)" was, but I know for a fact that it was enough for him to dress with elegance, keep his pipe full and maintain a dignity in the strict limits between goodness and decorum.

I have two clear images of Eddy Campa. One of them has to do with astonishment and dread. One evening he arrived at poet Néstor Díaz de Villegas' home saying he had seen a specter, maybe death. And some treasure. "Wait for me here", and the poet went out resolute to solve Eddy's problem, with results which I still don't know. In another panel he appears to me smiling and assured in a gallery of Little Havana. He is being escorted by photographer Pedro Portal and Stephanie, an unforgettable belly dancer who sent news from Brazil a few days ago. I ask Eddy for a safe direction to take my sister out and he says, "Nothing is safe here. Unless you go with me." From his *Calle Estrella y otros poemas* everything for Campa was a neighborhood; what it was, the Being, was familiar to him. The rest did not account for anything.

Eddy Campa has disappeared. He was simply no longer seen one day. They assume him dead, but nobody really knows the fate of his body. A dark, shadowed body, with inquisitive eyes slanted by a Chinesque gene

and sated with fantasy. He had smooth curls and intelligent gray hair, lips full and at the same time thin, to which the light (not the shine), however, denied access to the term "thick lip". Dexterous and steady hands. He was not tall. He was even rather small, especially when he appeared in public with Esteban Luis Cárdenas, another Afro-Cuban poet, the author of *Ciudad mágica*.<sup>1</sup>

Eddy Campa showed some Hellenic signs. He was a black Orpheus with the majesty of a mountain. He was an ocean, in any case a sea and not a port, like Edward Saïd's Atenea or Magdalena Chamizo, Engracia, a character in Osvaldo Navarro's novel *Hijos de Saturno*<sup>2</sup>, who did not reach Hellenism for the light color of her eyes, but for the proportion, for that "lack" of neck and waist which balances for her the irregularities of what she herself calls a whore's diet: tubers and rice with black beans. And meat, it goes without saying.

Eddy Campa left a crucial book of poems titled "Little Havana Memorial Park"<sup>3</sup>, edited by Pedro Damián and reviewed by Cuban historian Manuel Moreno Franginal, among others. Nobody knew as the poet how to read these compositions of his; they are not the same without his voice, without his "blue-ized" intonation, which lent time to the word and distance to the experience. Eddy Campa made his poem hurt; his register protected the verse from the sense of humor, from the so resorted to Creole cleverness and witticism. It was his rhythm, that philosophical suffocation which was not due to asthmatic ailments or pretenses, which managed to give perdurability to his work.

Little Havana Memorial Park is a book which compiles 28 poetic compositions written between 1996 and 1998. In an unusual way this time appear the usual topics: the utopia,

history, nostalgia. Eddy Campa, as a poet, builds a new homeland and having built it, he submits it to a new loss, he accumulates another paradise to recover duplicating the experience of exile. Revolution within the revolution and exile within the exile. Little Havana is named the new nationalist blunder.

While some dream of Republican Cuba, and others, stubborn revolutionaries, want to reinvent nineteen-sixties when the utopia should have been authentic in the national and prophylactic in the moral, the poet centers himself in his new exile spoils.

The poem book is in some way the story of a disappearance which generates in the living-dead a feeling of loss with its compulsory epiphenomenon of nostalgia. A past which, when a sense is demanded from it, is reproduced as history. In spite of having only 46 pages of nimble verse available, Eddy Campa's characters achieve a bigger consistency than many of those that appear in the foreseeable contemporary Cuban novel. Mr. Douglas, Mirtha, Maritza, the policeman, the *babalao*, the Sandinist, Prenda Fu and the poet Eddy Campa among others, form a demography, or better, a "fauna" which make a gallery of survivors out of the cemetery. The gulls and the sea are also important characters here.

The cemetery as utopia, which we find in Emerson, Martí, Poe, Verlaine, Rimbaud, acquires in Eddy Campa's poetry a connotation of city. The characters inhabit it once dead and the births have a form of claim. Literarily, this anxiety to reconstitute bodies and events is reflected in the multiplication of the questioning forms. Campa displays an investigatory sense throughout his whole work and scatters questions the nucleus of which is "the vestal-ity". That is to say, the poet goes beyond history and distances his utopia from the heroes and the great events. The protagonists

in his circuit are characters of low intensity; his very world is a park, a cemetery, a pool hall where he writes his poetry.

The pool hall is an Olympus and his gods those that Ramoncito the *babalao* reports to them, the owner of the table on which the small planets roll of pythagoric and multi-color chance:

*Ramoncito the babalao cast the seashells  
for Dantón, the policeman with light eyes,  
who seemed more interested in consoling Oti;  
Wichinchi Prenda Fu, stealthily moving  
toward my little gold chain (XIX)*

A centripetal and microdestinal philosophy gives coherence to Campa's uncertainty. His questions point toward the infinite, but from underneath (very low) upwards. He inquires in poem II:

*But,  
whatever became of Papiro the pawnbroker's  
[van?  
The red van with double cab, Ford make.*

These perplexities of Campa owe more to Maimonides than to the desperate "Creole humor". They are not made to please; no references are inserted to weaken the sense and rent a "post" sensibility. Campa misses a world that he has lost, a paradise that he tries to recover from the cemetery, from an unquilted and uncomfortable coffin.

And he goes on inquiring without betraying the category of the things that he really misses:

*Where are the pigeons of the Church  
Missionary of God? (III)*

Pigeons and Church, we do not know exactly who is the missionary of God, but whichever it may be, building or bird, band or congregation, Eddy Campa misses it. He is loyal to his world, and his world is lost. In the apocalypses, unless one can participate in

a more practical way, the poet's effectiveness is in the asking.

*Why did Rosario, the whore, leave us?*

...

*Did your breasts cremated on a National  
[Holiday,  
have to do with the decline of the ashes from  
[the fireworks? (IV)*

The whore and history. Is history a whore? When a whore is historicized, when a biography is made of her, a report, a genealogy, is she not saved? Constitutional amendments, acts, displays of authority, heroes of macro-history transit on parallel courses in the existential hardware store of Little Havana.

In one of the two moments at which the poet turns into woman, when he talks as Mirtha B. Moraflores, the positioning to launch the question gets to be practically punctual:

*Here, me, now,  
In this filthy coffin,  
how to overcome remorse? (IV)*

And he continues then with an archive of questions which make a testimony of astonishments out of the book:

...  
*who guarantees  
the well-being of the graves?*

...  
*what will I do without my credit card? (IX)*  
And then:

...  
*Was it the sight of a candle  
or the crawl of a crab  
across my breasts?*

...  
*What sextant could measure the angle  
at which our glances crossed? (XIV)*

In the second half of the book he makes a sort of interrogating metastasis. We now select those which concern the singular-transcendental in Eddy Campa's poetic universe:

*To what is it due  
that the lights of the patrol cars,  
the sirens of the ambulances  
and the laments of the Evangelists  
awake in us the enthusiasm of other times?  
Where will the sunset point today?  
Is it that nobody is going to drug himself  
[today*

*or compose odes?*

...

*Can you tell me  
in which direction is the sea? (XV)  
But, where is the hackman who sings  
And tells the horses sweet words? (XVI)  
Will Rosario return? (XXI)  
Where is the snow of yesterday? (XXV)  
Do you remember Mr. Pastor Ermenegildo  
Sarmiento de la Concepción? (XXVI)*

I have intentionally omitted some of Campa's inquiries about perpetual subjects, such as death, power, the grave; it is not the essence but the existence, the eternal apparent, that which typifies the utopian design of Little Havana Memorial Park.

As a poet, Eddy Campa characterizes himself by the natural use of a language twisted in itself by the specific conditions of its exile; which was in his case a chance of constant moving, a pilgrimage signaled by the weather. Hence that naturalness by fate resemble what in other writers turns out as technicism, fashion or method.

The use of anglicisms (there is no "Spanglish" in Campa), for example, do not come to the poet from experimentation but from the first concept of \_expression. It is not gingerwork, but linguistic skin. In the same manner, the forms and values of the

margin do not turn into verse from a need politically to coach, from a thirst for justice or socially moving his potential publishers or contractors. Eddy Campa lived on the margin, he inhabited it really and legitimately, without reducing it or sweetening it. He knew the shore and he did everything possible to deserve it poetically.

In the midst of these conditions, his verse defied norms and, in great moments, it overcame desolation to soar to the most genuine beauty. From the foreseeable simile: *As a savings account in its end I resist* (IX), or this other with signs of a regular curse: *but the graves are not like countries / poorly governed* (IV). Campa consented to the disconcerting vision: *How North-American the moon over the sea!* (XVI).

But next to the perplexed, Eddy Campa incurred in the world of the beautiful; of the beautiful, nothing else. His poetry is also an offer, among others, of love. Love for Mirtha, who loved him between evasions and admired his poem; or love for Eva, Helena, Margarita, Cecilia.

*that there is no love which may overcome the*  
*[overcome hate,*  
*that there is no knowledge which may excel*  
*the smile of a really happy man*  
*have me with me in the breath of the virgin*  
*[forests*  
*and in the simple greeting;*  
*in the pigeons that nest over your grave*  
*and in the lights which never go out* (III)

Is there politics in Little Havana Memorial Park? The only politics with explicit register in this poem book is the traditional apprehension that fugitives and poets have of the police. Hence the dread that the poet feels when he senses the metamorphosis of a church into a police station. Nevertheless, that tension also, as he confess-

es, brings old sensations to the present for him.

Politics is not there, but the sea is; there are signs, sea-related inquiries which make a propitiating continent of the sea.

There is, I said, the sea, and the breaking, and "the stoop", which is madness gestating in its very frontier:

*All that is left of Little Havana*  
*is a stoop: dusk covers it;*  
*all the dusks gather to cover it.*  
*We left our sentence*  
*sitting on that stoop.*  
*Lives that were a number*  
*less unequivocal than that of the Social*  
*[Security*  
*built this mausoleum:*  
 ...

*We are all in Memorial Park*

And if the sea is a medium, the cemetery is an utopia. For Eddy Campa the conversion of Miami into a cemetery, in a progressive reunion of excluded people (losers in the drug traffic, fugitives from communism, ex-presidents, former guerrilla fighters, retired professors, banished lovers in search of anonymity, repented anti-castrists, etc.), was at the same time the condition for his own eternalization. Miami is, then, like the paradise of survival; the headquarters of obstinacy, where one dances in a duet with Gloria Gaynor and Celia Cruz: I will survive... I will survive... Without forgetting the essential clause: Eh, eh!

#### NOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

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