# En el altar de fuego
# [On the Altar of Fire]

## By Joel James Figarola

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Papa Legba,
Raise the barriers
So I can get by…
Papa Legba,
When I return,
I will greet the *Iwas*.
(Voodoo invocation.)

**Historian and anthropologist Joel James Figarola (Guanabacoa, 1942-Santiago de Cuba, 2006) made a name for himself as an essayist, short story writer, and journalist. This founder and director of Casa del Caribe [Caribbean House], in Santiago de Cuba, is the co-author of** *El Vodú en Cuba* **[Voodoo in Cuba] (Ediciones Unión 2007).**

The First Kiba Kreyol Festival took place in Havana during the summer of 1998. Sponsored by the Banzil Kreyol Kiba cultural institution, its purpose was to reach out beyond the limits of the Haitian community to that of their Haitian-Cuban descendants, and Cubans.

When faced with this cultural exposition, many of us who have opted to ignore or, worse yet, minimize its existence in our own national cultural panorama, could not help but see in this effort traces of the work of a historian, anthropologist, and essayist who had delved into this rich and vibrant cultural world of Haitian traditions—one that is also our own—more so than almost any other Cuban. Joel James Figarola, who died in 2006, was that man.

Casa del Caribe's founder's (1982) and director's work, *En el altar de fuego*, came to us as a posthumously published book. It could be considered an example of creative non-fiction. In it, we can appreciate this social scientist's knowledge through writing that is more akin to the style of a literary study guide. Thus, it can be of functional use, although its codes require more than one reading to be identified, unraveled, threaded, understood, and interpreted.

*Nganga, Chuini,* and *Papa Legba,* the publication's three stories, can be read and understood from different perspectives, as is the case with any literary text. One of these readings is anthropological in nature, which challenges the reader to view and appreciate difference through eyes that are prepared to see things in an unprejudiced manner. It urges a

reader to conduct a later search—in his or her own memory, or maybe in books, or in our collective imaginary, for whatever elements that have gone into building the nation, his or her nation, of which he or she is not aware. It also makes the reader supremely aware of how much he or she has yet to learn about him or herself.

The book covers the period of slavery to that of our current government in as few as 125 pages. Yet, it offers a compendium of Cuba's history (along with integrated passages about Haitian history, and more). Its basic focus is those peoples who have (incorrectly) been said to lack a history, who have been so often relegated by those who actually write history. These are the people who have seen their lives turned into marketable narratives that accentuate the most sordid, lamentable, and real details of their existence—almost in the style of a *reality show* whose intention is to convert the substance and dregs of those lives into marketable, folkloric performances.

Figarola covers religion, family, sex, different forms of power relations, geography and politics in rapid, not always easily understandable, succession, by means of which we, the readers, are led by a protagonist who goes from being African to Cuba, from Haitian to Cuba, and who validates his dream of returning to his origins when he tells us that one of his children is in Angola. There may be some logic that could see this as the late fulfillment of a dream, but not for an African-origin population that has had to wait so long, "because going back takes no time at all." *En el altar de fuego* includes origins, syncretisms, transculturation, generational differences, flora and fauna, life philosophies; as well as relations between masters and slaves, including sexual violence towards black women, homosexuality and homophobia, marooning, the independence war, U.S. intervention, republican governments, the massacre of the Independents of Color, discrimination, the hunting and deportation of Haitians, revolutionary struggle, Fidel Castro's government, changes in education, the presence in Cuba of the Soviets and of Cuban Internationalists in Africa, and even some gestures toward Christianity. Some of our Cuban intelligentsia, wherever it may find itself, might not like that "a complex exploration of Franco-Haitian Voodoo's religious universe in Cuba [flows like] a suggestive survey of our own history and of these religious beliefs of African origin that are part of our national identity."

"Every door leads to a path"is the exergue that Figarolo himself bequeathed to us when he gave us his book. Like Nicolás, the protagonist,[1] who in the third and longest story (it is almost a novella) remains at the entrance of the *hounfort* or Voodoo temple, Figarola stood at a threshold that earlier, now classic, Cuban social science scholars—José Luciano Franco, Fernando Ortiz and Alberto Pedro—had already traversed. Clearing it, he followed a path that revealed to him a deepest Cuba that interested, preoccupied, and busied not only him but all of them. *En el altar de fuego* reveals how an historian and anthropologist who was truly and professionally committed to his object-subject of study understood and learned through this work. It may seem that his subject was only one part of his society but he reveals it to us as already integrated into a nation undergoing a continuous process of enrichment.

In this blend of past and present, one can see an interweaving of the lives of the living and the dead (how immense would the poverty of the living be if not for the respite found in the parallel lives of the dead?): "the same thing I had seen before, Nicolás assures, because the eyes of [his son] Alfonso, are just like mine were." This reveals the parade of people who

have contributed to the Cuban population's diversity: African blacks and Hispanic whites, in all the myriad functions, and mulattoes, fruit of the frequently violent union of both.

Figarola sets forth a challenging thesis question: who are the real owners of the island, the white population, through its exercise of power, or the black population, for its creation of riches? According to the narrator, "Nicolás is more of a master than the owner of the sugarmill, because he is master of the living and the dead. [His] vast family of godchildren extends to the whole slave population." The subaltern lives his or her culture, a culture that by necessity is metamorphosed into a counterculture, an underground culture of resistance. At a time that could be understood as the book's co-protoganist, this culture alternates between rebellion and wise and necessary waiting: "It is not that there is nothing where there is nothing…but rather that its entirety, that of a primitive hut and the whole universe, too, becomes submerged within itself, and is reduced to only a miniscule crystallization of time."

The living do not take the place of the dead. Instead, they are seen in everyday interaction with them. In some cases, certain religious rituals can lead one to "the point at which the living person and the dead one are united, becoming indistinguishable," which reveals to us a continuous, diachronically and synchronically harmonious process.

Categories like transmutation, transmigration, resurrection, transculturation (understood as syncretisms) all possess the dynamism we need to explain the transformation that occurred among the ethnic groups that contributed to the shaping of Cuban identity. Figarola, as if a Demiurge, manages to translate this for us: "The flames cry out glory [because] there is no alchemy like Nicolás's". Without sparing us its birth pangs, his protagonist's life reveals the path between being African and being Cuban. Alfonso, his son, who is sitting on a stool (within the *hounfort*'s sacred space), senses that Nicolás is once again feeling—in the deepest recesses of his mind, where memory ceases being something remembered and becomes flesh or blood or fat, "what he once felt with his eyes and with his ears and with his skin: [being] a hunted down black person." Despite the fact many things have changed, and there are many who are no longer with us—as Nicolás says to his recently returned son—the persistence of the old pain (just one of a complicated many) of Africa, Haiti, Cuba, and all of Afro-America, through centuries of being hunted, slavery, discrimination, marginalization, reveals that the scars that were inflicted on identity's body take far too long to heal, and persist as deep marks that have yet to be overcome, but can never be forgotten.

**Note:**
1- Or, should we tell their stories? Not by means of the three stories, which in their organic cohesiveness could be considered three parts of one narration, but rather through the sub-plots one can detect or are suggested to us by just one word or phrase.