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### Cover Page Footnote

This article is from an earlier iteration of *Diálogo* which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal."

# BUILDING BRIDGES, NOT BORDERS: THE CULTURAL WORK OF ROGELIO MARTÍNEZ FURÉ



E. Anne Bennison  
National-Louis University

Since the late 1990s I have been working on a cultural history project that focuses on the educational and cultural experiences of artists who grew up in Cuba. The arts in Cuba have often served to preserve and promote a long and rich cultural history. I began the early investigations asking artists how they learned their art. To explore the idea of cultural arts and identity, I have continued to broaden the range of participants to include painters, musicians, dancers, choreographers, writers, poets, photographers, and film directors. The interviews give us (especially those of us who live outside of Cuba) an opportunity to see the interconnectedness of education, family, community and culture. The interview that I am presenting here is one of several I have done with Rogelio Martínez Furé, a Founder of the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba, a writer, a poet, a musician and a professor. This interview was video taped in Cuba on June 21, 2007.

**ANNE BENNISON (AB):** When you look back on your long and productive professional life, which accomplishments are you most proud of?

**ROGELIO MARTÍNEZ FURÉ (RMF):** Well, I think what I can feel most proud of is having dedicated my life to gathering part of Cuban popular, traditional culture from the mouths of elderly men and women who I consider real, living libraries; and who, throughout our island, opened their hearts and homes to transmit to me all of this cultural heritage from orality that they preserved throughout their lives, and that they had received from their ancestors. This allowed me to transmute the individual “I” into the collective “us.” It has made me fully aware of the importance of safeguarding the cultural heritage that the common people preserve through memory, through orality; and I believe that, through this decision of mine, I have saved great treasures and made a contribution so that the people of Cuba can have a much fuller vision of their cultural identity, which has diverse ethnic and cultural roots, diverse origins... (A)ll of those ethnic and cultural differences that came from Europe, from Africa, from Asia or continental America and, throughout the centuries on our island, have... begun (to acquire) new contents and functions, (and) have gradually become Cubanized. And the

fact that I have contributed, even minimally, to that process of consciousness-raising among our people, of the true face of its identity, I think that is the most important thing I have done in my life. I did it as a professor of amateur artists, by founding the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba, offering courses for dramatists, for dancers, working in the most important theater groups and dance companies... (A)s a result, in the present, I identify many of my teachings in the work of many painters, of many writers, whether prose writers, poets or dramatists, and of many choreographers who were my students from the 60s to the present. I think that is the greatest satisfaction, to be another link in those great lines of men and women who transmit the cultural heritages of their people to the generations to come.

**AB:** We all have turning points in our lives when we seem to stop, reassess our direction, and turn toward new goals or issues. Can you tell me about ways that you may have redirected your artistic and professional life over the years?

**RMF:** In my case something singular has occurred. I have not had big changes of direction in the goals of my life. Since I was a child, living in the city of Matanzas, I was always interested in studying my culture, the history of my people, of my group, my family, of my neighborhood. I remember that even at ten years old, I would sit next to my grandmother and my great-grandmother and I would ask about what life was like in Cuba in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. My family has had very important experience(s) in the coming about of Cuban identity, because my great-great-grandmother lived one hundred and three years and was the daughter of Mandingas, huh?... and had been a slave. She was born around 1834, more or less, in Bolondrón, on a sugar plantation called Atrevido de Piedras and lived, well, until a few months before I was born, because I was born on the 28<sup>th</sup> of August of 1937, and she died at 103, a few months earlier. This means that she (was) a presence, a witness and a protagonist of aspects of Cuban life in the colonial period, from the slave regimes, the abolition, the independence wars and the first decades of the Republic. She was there, in my house, she was a live presence, see? So when I was born and was a child, the presence of Mama Encarnacion was everywhere. There were always anecdotes about her, and I listened to them; and that

gradually stimulated me to keep finding out about what Cuban culture was like. My family, in this sense, is a perfect example of the process of consolidation of a profound Cubanity and Antilleanity. On the other hand, through the paternal line of my mother, I am the great-grandson of a Frenchman, a Frenchman who arrived in Cuba in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century, which is the reason for my last name, Foure... but which the Spanish transcribed with only a "u", Fure... (T)hat presence was also constantly in my house, (that of) the French ancestor. ... I have managed to establish five generations (of my family), which I think is important, the memory of five generations, all from Matanzas, and all of that I would write down, even at ten or eleven years-old, I would write it on little pieces of paper. I still have them over there, on cards, and, of course, since I was born in Matanzas and the neighborhood I was born in, Yumuri, the presence of all the Cuban cultural components were there. In my neighborhood there were Galicians, Catalonians, Islanders, Asturians, and Canary Islanders; but, there were also Chinese, there were Jamaicans, there were Dominicans, there were Mexicans, and of course, there were the Lucumi, Congo, Arara, Carabali, and Mandinga... all there. (A)t the same time there was the presence of North Americans, and the Protestant, Anglican, Baptist churches were there, in my neighborhood, in my surroundings. Matanzas is known as a city where Cubanity is alive, all the components and all of its synthesis at one time, yes? And I was born in that city, in the neighborhood of Yumuri, in the very center of town. Of course, that led me to be inclined towards my familial reality and that of my community, to take interest in the studies of our traditional culture. In spite of this, in the year 1956, when I finished my high school education in arts at the Instituto de Matanzas, I came to Havana to study Civil Law, Diplomatic Law and Administrative Law. It was a very prestigious degree at that time and, above all, for an Afrodescendant like me, to be a lawyer was to situate myself in a stable financial state. Fortunately, my family did not have material needs, we were a wealthy family, some would say. My sister and I studied in private schools, among the best in Matanzas. My sister came to the university to study medicine... Today she is a professor at the university and a specialist in Pediatrics... Later I began at the University of Havana, and I studied three years until... they closed the university and opened it again. The revolutionary victory had arrived, and when the transformations began, the university reforms, I discovered an ad in the paper that announced a course for researchers of folklore in the Teatro Nacional, the National Theater. And the illumination hit me, like Saint Paul on the way to Damascus, and I told my family, "I like this, because it is what I have been doing empirically." So I quit the University of Havana, with only a few courses left to graduate in Diplomatic Law, Administrative Law and Civil Law, and I began the course in folklore studies. That was the first big change in my life, definitive and very important to me, but it was a change that was coherent with what my life had been before. And since then, well, I have always dedicated myself... to teaching. I have been a professor at all levels, of Cuban Cultural History, of African Literature or Afroamerican Literature in general.

There is another thing that has also been very consistent in my life. Since I was a child, I have been a singer. In 1967 I met Sergio Vitier, the guitarist, and we started working together. We founded Grupo Oru, a group that played experimental music that was inspired by the folkloric music that I collected. Vitier did the arrangements with contemporary instruments, and we created a

group that had a lot of success, with me as the singer and musical author... As a group, we traveled through Europe, France, Spain, Russia, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland.

**AB:** When was that?

**RMF:** That was in the '80s... we were traveling all around Europe. For example, something that fills me with pride is that Sergio and I are ...the only Cuban artists that have performed at the Georges Pompidou Center in Paris... me as a singer and he as a guitarist... Last year I recorded a record, *Oru, Ritual y Fiesta de lo Cubano*, with Sergio Vitier that will be coming out soon through the Casa Editorial Colibri of the Ministry of Culture, where I have recorded many of the songs composed by myself about poems of Nicolas Guillen, and, also, Yoruba ritual chants that I have collected, and that I sing with Sergio Vitier on guitar and the bata drums... I can't say that in my life there have been great changes, except this one of the Law (degree), which I abandoned, but there has been a very consistent development. Maybe that has allowed me a great inner balance. For me, work is far from sacrifice, because it is a fulfillment of what I am most intimately... When I write, when I translate African poetry, when I make my dictionaries about Afro-Cuban mythology, or I write my poetry books, no, there is no effort, there is no division of the self. (I)t is instead a simple continuation of what I have always been, since my childhood, and that has brought me balance, where I have managed to survive all the cyclones and hurricanes that occur in the lifetime of any human being. I am a man with a defined nature, and I have always known what my objectives in life were. I have never lost the superobjective to which I have dedicated all of my life, which is to make a contribution for my people to know themselves, ... know their culture, (to) come to terms with it, open themselves to the world, to the positive influences (that) we have always received and will receive from every corner of the world... I consider myself a real Cuban, a perfect example from the cultural point of view and the genetic one, because I am a descendant of Africans, Europeans and Asians— I have another great-grandfather who was Chinese— I mean, I consider myself absolutely Caribbean and a typical Cuban... You see?

**AB:** The body of work that you have produced over the past fifty years is indicative of a strong sense of sociocultural responsibility. Your work has gone way beyond the borders of Cuba. Could you talk about your own sense of responsibility in preserving and supporting world cultures?

**RMF:** I always have considered myself a bridge, and never a border, and during my entire life, I have always tried to develop cooperative ties between the different cultures of the world... I began by collecting, studying and publishing about the origins of Cuban culture, its relationship to Europe, to Africa, to Asia, to our Caribbean...(and by) working with the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional or as a professor... I have published essays about this topic (on the origins of culture), and as a consequence, I have been invited to many countries to teach courses... about the responsibility of an intellectual in safeguarding their cultural heritage, but, I insist, without chauvinism or xenophobia, highlighting above all, more than what distinguishes us from one another, what unites us... This is how I have taught in Mexico, Nicaragua, and Colombia. I have been to Brazil, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, Europe, and Africa; and, I had an especially beautiful experience in Great Britain ...where I came into contact with the Welsh communities. I was giving a conference in the library of a working-class neighborhood in London and, at the

end, some men came up to me and said that what I was saying about the Caribbean, about Cuba, applied to their reality. I was surprised, because I couldn't see any difference between them and the rest; but, they told me that they were Welsh, and were discriminated against. They had their associations for aid, protection and safeguarding their heritage, and they invited me to their spring festival, where they danced the Morse dance, where I ate typical Welsh food. I realized that the need to safeguard identity exists not only for the countries of the south, and the underdeveloped countries; but, that within the developed countries of Europe or North America, there also exists that need to safeguard identities.

(This is) not to exalt chauvinism, or an extreme supernationalism, but simply to come to terms with the differences as positive values, not as something dangerous or hurtful, but as a sign of the great diversity of human genius, and that each human culture is unique, unrepeatable and complimentary.

I confess that I do not feel like a stranger in any country in the world, even if they don't speak



my language, because I go to all places with a sense of humility, in the sense that I am going to learn and receive something good wherever I arrive. Sometimes one looks at Europe and thinks there is a cultural unity there. This is false, you travel around France and each region in France has its distinctive identity... Someone from Provence does not feel their nationalism in the same way that someone from Normandy or Brittany does, or someone from Languedoc. The same happened in Spain, after traveling through Spain, the Catalan people felt Catalan; the Basque, Basque; the Andalusians, Andalusian; the Galicians, Galician. This means that we, in Latin America, invented a cultural homogeneity in Europe, and the hegemonic discourse we are taught in the Eurocentric schools tends to show that in Europe there are no problems, that everything is the same, that the problems that we have in the South are the inter-tribal, inter-ethnic wars, that there is no conflict there. Concrete reality denies that... And so, all of that life experience, which does not come from books, but rather from having been in those places, from having been in Asia, in all of Japan, from having been in Baghdad, in Iraq, from having been in all of Europe, from having been in northern Africa, western, eastern, southern, central Africa, from having been in America, from Canada all the way to the south of Brazil or the south of Peru, that has enriched me and has made me much more conscious of my responsibility as an intellectual... I have to continue taking this message, contributing so that the light opens in the minds of people, so that they stop feeling like borders and aspire to become men- and women-bridges. I think that is our commitment, to know ourselves better and to know that there are more elements that unite us than there are elements that divide us. The only thing is that we have to come to terms with the true history of humanity, study how the different cultures have formed, the permanent loans, the

blending of cultures, the cultural exchanges. There is no culture that is not mixed (*mestiza*)... There is no culture that has not contributed or does not contribute something to the development of universal civilization, none. This is a link, a great chain. Each nation has contributed in its historical moment, of course; and, we have to learn that it is the history of humanity that we are indebted to, that entire extraordinary adventure of our species, which, more than five million years ago, stood on its two feet in Africa; and, we have to teach it to people. All the nations of the world are afro-descendants, because it was in Africa that the human species originated, where our ancestors

stood up on their two legs and, from there, began the colonization and conquest of the other continents and the adaptation to geographic and climatological environments, and the somatic transformations according to the climate, the skin began losing melanin, hair became straighter, or the eyes began developing..., but we know through DNA that we are all afro-descendants, regardless of our present skin color or the shape of our hair. And I think that is something

that we have to teach children. We have to teach children that Africa is the cradle of humanity. We have to teach them that in the Sahara, which is now a desert, fifteen thousand years ago there were thousands upon thousands of people who lived there with their buffalo herds, or their cattle, and that there are the thousands of cave paintings and carvings in other places where the images of these cultures are portrayed... In Africa the first unified state in the world emerged, Egypt, and that in Africa the first monotheistic religion in the world appeared: Atenism, which later influenced the Jewish concept of Jehova. Africa is a continent with history; and with that, there is a historical responsibility... We need to treat Afropessimism, which is also a fad that exists in some sectors, saying that Africa cannot be saved, that it will disappear. That is false. Africa is not going to disappear. Historical periods are only historical periods; they are not eternal, divine mandates. In the future, with the help of developed countries, we in the southern countries, which are less evolved, less economically developed, will come out of this impasse, because we have the human potential... Human beings, men and women, are intelligent in all parts of the world. No "race," in quotation marks, no culture has the privilege of the truth, lies, beauty, stupidity, intelligence or evil. Papa God spread out, to the right and left, all of these virtues and defects, and we have them all. What we need to do is become critical and conscious of the errors we must overcome and of the virtues we should continue to develop. Therefore, we should become bridge-people, not border-people.

**AB:** In your travels outside of Cuba have you seen specific projects or economic arrangements that help disparate groups of people preserve their cultural art forms?

**RMF:** Yes, in all of the countries, or the majority of the countries

that I have visited, I have found groups of people or institutions interested in preserving the best cultural traditions of those countries, you understand? There is interest everywhere, regarding this problem. Of course, we want to preserve, but in order for these traditions to continue their dialectical development, not in order to remain in a glass case in a museum, because traditional cultures have the right to continue their development. I hold that cultures and identities are like a river, its waters always renewed. We cannot expect these cultures to remain a cliché, static, looking only to the past. No, no. Those cultures have the right to transform, enrich themselves, to change their form or symbolic content dialectically. In the countries I have visited, ... I have found groups or institutions dedicated with great care to safeguarding their heritage with this open vision—which for me is as it should be; because, we don't resolve anything by maintaining a group in an archaic economic and cultural structure. No, no. That is a crime. No, those cultures have the right to develop, but to develop within their own norms and their own dynamics. What we really cannot expect from the outside is that (those cultures) should change and adapt to our idea of what development is, because that is cultural colonialism and cultural imposition. I feel optimistic, I say it again, about defending cultural identities, but not preserving them as if they were compartments (apartheid), rather, above all, that they establish egalitarian intercultural relations, under equal conditions. I assimilate what interests me, not what publicity from the capitalist media imposes upon me... No, no, no, we don't want to be anybody's border, we simply want to develop our culture and enrich it with loans, and at the same time to contribute to other cultures under equal conditions.

...UNAM (Autonomous Mexican University) in the '80s invited me to give a course during the summer, which was offered to all directors and choreographers of university folkloric ballets from all of Mexico... I would give lectures about how to revalorize traditional popular culture, how to illustrate and defend national identity, but with this open vision, without chauvinism, yes? It was also very important because they were the directors and choreographers of the traditional Mexican dance groups from all the universities in the entire United Mexican States, and that allowed me to come into contact with the full cultural diversity of that wonderful country, that beautiful country. At the same time, I shared with them my experiences, not only with those from the north, but those from the south, and tried to transmit this, this sense of responsibility. We safeguard the heritage, but I repeat it is not to have it in a card index, or in a museum's glass shelf, but rather to return it dialectically to its bearers and true heirs, especially so that the man or woman of the working class could free themselves of inferiority complexes and become conscious that they were cultural creators with universal transcendence... They have opened their viewpoints about how to present folkloric dance, traditional dances, that everything should have a message for the public of today... It is a public that is bombarded by the media, by commercial television and, well, we have to give back to that public its love for its traditions, because in the majority of the countries, a large part of the population, especially urban population, is alienated by what TV presents... which is a fantastical world and is completely false, alienating, and the models of beauty have nothing to do with the people watching those television programs. The same happens in Africa as in South America, south of the Rio Grande. There is an alienation from images, you never see yourself reflected in the media. There is a sense of missing your image, your figure, that a

woman who has an indigenous, African or Asian phenotype—where is she? There is “invisibility” in the media, in general, especially in the ads, in the magazines, and that starts to alienate people from their own image. That is why it is necessary to return to people their own image, dignified; that people see themselves, recognize themselves; that they not lose their cultural or historical heroes; because, they should have archetypes to follow, examples to follow... And I think that that is our great responsibility, not to limit ourselves to collect oral traditions, but to collect and especially to return to their bearers and their heirs those traditions that have positive content. Not everything is abstract... We can't have a romantic vision of traditional popular culture, because there are traditions that are negative, that are reactionary, that should not continue to be stimulated, but there are others that do have positive content and that can help all of those communities that live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to have weapons to survive in an ever more competitive world, as urban culture is in almost all the countries... In other words, I believe that the weapon that the study of identity can serve with greatest force is to return to people their confidence in themselves, in the fact that they did not spring from nothing, but that they are heirs of men, of ancestors who were creators of cultural traditions and that, by and large, these cultural traditions are valid as an answer to many of the problems, the mysteries, the conflicts of contemporary man, no matter what place they find themselves in. Even Nietzsche, the great German poet, said, 200 years ago, “become what you are.” I think that that is one of the great leaps of liberation in a nation, to come to terms, critically, with who we are, with the diversity, the contradictions that must be overcome, the negative elements that must be overcome, and the positive traditions that should continue to be highlighted, and especially because this attitude is necessary. There is an old African proverb that says: we should not forget our origins because the future is full of the unforeseen. And I believe in both of those quotes, the one from Nietzsche, “Become what you are,” and this African proverb which says that we should not forget our origins, because the future is full of the unforeseen... (In these quotes) is the key to what we should do. Assume cultural diversity, but especially in enriching, dialectical relationships that have been established historically or that could be established within the different cultural resemblances of the world, because all are responsible for our planet Searth (sea and earth), and only one species exists, the human species, and the better we know ourselves, in our complementary diversity, the more we will achieve the fulfillment of the aspirations of the men and women in any corner of our planet.

#### IMAGE AND PHOTO DETAILS

p.44, p.45: Plate artwork by Mijares. *Private collection of Masud-Piloto family.*

p.46: Mr.Furé in his home in Habana, Cuba.

I would like to thank the transcriptionist, Isabel Rosales, and the translator, Andrea Friedmann, for the care with which they worked.

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