

MA: The following interview was conducted with Nélica Oliva for the Star City Treasures AmeriCorps Oral History Project. Good morning, Nélica.

NO: Good morning.

MA: Tell me, where were you born?

NO: Well, I was born in a little town in the province of Havana in my lovely country Cuba—in that little caiman that sways in the Gulf of Mexico—there in that little caiman I was born. My family was a humble family. The first person in my family that completed university studies was me. The only daughter. My mother worked as hard as she could so I could finish my studies as we said in my day. I am not a young woman. I am a woman with many years. But I wouldn't say that I'm old; rather that I have accumulated experience--accumulated youth or, that is, that I am two times thirty.

MA: Tell me some of your family traditions.

NO: Well, the traditions of my family are the same traditions that the whole community of Cuba has. We celebrate the “Noche Buena” [Good Night] on December 24, with fried pork, congri, black beans, white rice, salads, yucca with mojo, doughnuts for dessert, and Spanish turrones.

MA: Mmm

NO: Because we have a very strong Spanish heritage. The Cuban community has two roots: ethnically they can be attributed to the Spanish and the African. And, as the poet Guille says, “He that is Dinga, is also Mandinga, and if not, he is Carabalí.” Or, that is to say, that all of us have a little bit. Every Cuban has at least in the rhythm, a bit of African; or perhaps in the grace, in the form of raising the children, in the manner of cooking, and in the love of the Spanish language that we also have. From the peninsula from the mother country as we call Spain. Because, remember that Cuba was the last colony that became independent from Spain when the 19th century was ending. And so we have...I, for example, my heritage is Spanish eh...my heritage is Spanish.

MA: Well, tell me, how was your education?

NO: My education was a very atypical education not like everybody else's in Cuba because, I told you, the only daughter. My mother had the obsession that I had to study many things for the future as she said; to be able to have a lot of money and to raise children and well, she didn't have a stupid child, in fact, it seemed as though she was pretty smart. And that was exploited from the time I was five. They sat me in front of a piano. I learned to read quickly, I didn't even go to elementary school, but had a teacher that gave me private classes and I went to school for the first time, to what is called school, to a group where I sat in class, in sixth grade when I was ten years old. Or, that is to say, that that was an attempt or could have been an attempt to destroy my social sense

but no, I like to be in groups. I like to have people around me. I like to have friendships. I greatly value friendship. That is why I have many good friends.

MA: Tell me, what schools did you attend?

NO: Well, like I told you, a school in my town when I was ten years old because the grades before, I had a teacher and at school a professor, my classmates, and I liked everybody because, as I had been so alone—as I child I was the only daughter in my family, the only granddaughter, the only niece—well, my school suited me very well—my classmates—my teachers.

MA: Let's talk about the future. What did you study?

NO: Well, first I finished what is called in Cuba, or what they used to call, secondary basic. After that, I entered into normal school for teachers in Havana. My first degree was in General Pedagogy or, that is, an elementary school teacher. After that, I started to perfect my Spanish and at that time I had only worked in an elementary school for five years. After that, I left and began to give Spanish classes in a high school or what would be here, prep school. I went on to be a pre-university professor also with the same specialty—Spanish literature—and from there I went to the Central Organization of Education in Cuba. I wrote curriculum and gave classes by television for high school and pre-university and that lasted until I started—well, yes—a job that maybe here they don't know or would say another way—I was the provincial methodologist and national collaborator for the organization of education—for the central organization—what would be here a type of coordinator or I don't know what they would call that type of position, or that is, that for my job, I trained those that had my same specialization and placed them in schools in the city of Havana and in the other provinces of the country.

MA: Tell me, why did you choose this career?

NO: I like my language a lot. The poet Bonifacio Byrnes said, "I find sweet spoken Castellano, more peaceful than the native village. More delightful than a honeycomb, more flexible than a Toledan sword." And I—I adore my language—this is so true that in addition to my specialization in Spanish, I am also a writer.

MA: Tell me, what helped you prepare for your profession?

NO: What person?

MA: What—what helped you?

NO: What helped me? I don't understand the question. What helped me?

MA: What motivation or what—

NO: What motivation? From the time I was very young I liked—and

I even have here notes that I wrote when I was eleven years old—and even then at eleven, I wrote the language almost as I write it now, without grammatical errors, without stylistic errors. And that inspired me, and I liked teaching it too, or that is, that at the same time, I teach and write Spanish and I enjoy it when I write it, when I read it, when I speak it.

MA: Tell me about your professional experiences.

NO: My professional experiences have been very rich. Clearly I have—I graduated in '59 counting the years that I had as a professor, [laugh] they are very rich because I became more confident with each class and I have had good luck in that all of my students have always loved me a lot—they have respected me for my professionalism, but they have also liked me personally and have shown me affection. I had an experience—the last one in Cuba—the last experience in Cuba from the last course that I taught until 2005 it was—before—in 2004. I worked with 2,000 Venezuelan students that went to Cuba with that Chávez-Fidel plan to make themselves social workers quote unquote, because what they had come to do was feed themselves on politics to take back to Venezuela. But anyway, it was a very rich experience for me because it was the first time that I worked with foreign students—with students that weren't Cubans—into whom I had to infuse the love of Cuba. Because I want to tell you that I love my country—later, we are going to talk about that. The love of Cuba, the love of Martí—the love of Martí—because for me, Martí is Cuba and Cuba is Martí—he is the national hero, but as richly sufficient as the words and works of Martí are, they are also as immense. Castro's revolution has taken from Martí what suits its purpose. Castro's opposition has taken from Martí what suits it. Even in Miami there is a station that is called Radio Martí that sometimes says things that are very true and sometimes things that are very terrible. And here I am going to tell you everything that I feel and how I feel because I have always been sincere and Martí said that the word is for telling the truth, not for covering it. So, my experiences have always been related to this love that I transmit, that has never ceased to exist in me. And with those Venezuelan students—I can show you a whole notebook that they, when they were going to say good-bye—when they were returning to Venezuela—wrote me with all of their opinions that they had of me as a professor and as a person. It was a spiritual gift so big, from those students that went to Cuba to prepare themselves from the point of view formed by communism. But we—at least in my case—I injected them with the sensibility of the language, with spirituality, with love for Martí, and the love for beautiful things and, well, I have many anecdotes from those times. It was no more than two months—two months in which I worked with them and in those two months that farewell was as if we had been working together for ten years—because it was with tears and hugs, and really I still receive e-mails from those students—that was in April of 2004. And my students in the university—I could also show you another notebook that they wrote me about their impressions of my class and everything. Or that is to say, that my experience as a professor of Spanish and literature is very wide and rich and has given me a very spiritual, positive, beautiful, and wonderful outcome. I am not a woman who is rich monetarily but spiritually I am a millionaire.

MA: Tell me, when and why did you decide to come to America?

NO: Well, there are family reasons, spiritual reasons, and social reasons. First of all, my daughter that lives here in Lincoln, that will graduate next year as a physician's assistant, that is an American citizen and that came with her little daughter to the United States because she disagreed with Castro's regime—my daughter belonged to a pro-human rights party in Cuba. My daughter worked—she was already a doctor—when she associated with pro-human rights parties in Cuba. She quit her career that she had recently begun and stopped working as a doctor. Her husband was a doctor too and both of them did that. He was in prison. Well, they tried to come here to the United States in a boat that almost sunk with their little daughter and they were both imprisoned. Anyway, and she had only one goal in her life and that was to come to a free country where she could express herself freely. Sick of Castro's regime—from the time she was very young, she was sick of it. This made me start—because she had done it first—to start to mature but yes, to open my eyes a little more to the political point of view. I have two more sons that continue living in Cuba and that also are doctors and that have also quit their jobs and that also dream of coming here. But, well, she was what opened that door and that made me think about it a lot and I tell you this in all sincerity. Coming here at sixty with a solid profession in Cuba—even though Cuba is a very poor country and I didn't have a car or a cell phone—but I was a professor with a lot of prestige in the city of Havana—with much prestige in the University of Havana—with much prestige on the whole island as a professional, as a teacher. But anyway, renouncing everything and leaving behind my two sons and three grandchildren took me years of meditation. It was a decision that one couldn't make in one day. And so, my daughter offered to claim me legally and when I came here to already have my residential status. On that occasion, I said no. First I want to know the United States and then, if I think that I am going to have all that I dream of—freedom of expression, personal freedom, well then I'll stay, and that was what happened. I went to the embassy three times and three times they denied my visitor's visa. And so in 2004—in December of 2004—they approved me and in May of 2005 I came to the United States with a visitor's visa, to my daughter. I had to comply with the law of agreement with Cuba. And in one year the immigration here of the United States they gave me the legal status of permanent resident; and here I am. Also, I wanted to tell you that between 2004 and the beginning of 2005, I had a very intense job at the university but years ago I was writing a novel that dealt with social issues. A novel that portrays four months of life in Havana of people who didn't have or who had to sacrifice a lot to have access to the dollar. And in that novel I grew a lot intellectually. But I knew that I couldn't exhibit this novel in any course in Cuba or even give it to anyone to read who was associated with the regime because it would have cost me a lot go to prison. Because in that novel I perform a dissection of Cuban society at the end of the century and even in it, in the voice of a character that, of course is me, I write an essay—I introduce a genre within another—a socio-political essay about the problems in Cuban society and the three generations of Cubans that coexist that live together in my lovely country. The first generation—which I belong to—I call the disillusioned generation. And do you know why disillusioned? Because I, en 1959, was an adolescent. I believed in Fidel. I gave my love to the revolution. I taught basic literacy—I taught illiterates how to read in 1961—I believed in the revolution. I got on the bandwagon of the revolution. But after the misguided politics, the misguided

economy, and the misguided society, my eyes began to open. And when my daughter, already a professional, told me, you don't realize what's going on, and I told her, yes, I know but sometimes I don't want to know. I belong to that disillusioned generation. The other, the generation of those that are now forty years old and...in my novel I call it—in my essay—the frustrated generation. My daughter is a frustrated person. She studied medicine in Cuba and had to join a human rights party because she felt trapped by the political censure that was in Cuba where there wasn't freedom of expression. And to the Cubans that are the youngest from these times—I call them in my essay the lost generation because they are not disillusioned or frustrated, but they don't know where they are going. They only dream of money, poor people. They have the dollar on their minds—they have the style of North America in their heads but they don't know where they are going or how to have true liberty in their own country. And I call them the lost generation. Because of that, I couldn't bring my novel to the United States in the form of a book. No, I had to write it and, after I finished it, put it on a CD and bring it in my purse. And, when I arrived in Miami in an Office Depot, it was there that I made copies of my novel. I sent one to the Library of Congress and they have it. They sent me my registry—my certificate of intellectual property. If I would have made my novel known in Cuba in these times, I wouldn't be here conversing with you. I would be in prison. I would be in prison.

MA: What was your first impression when you arrived in this country?

NO: Well, when I arrived in this country, my first impression was Miami. Miami, when I began to see there almost everyone was Cuban, almost everyone spoke Spanish, well, I said to myself, this is the capital of Latin America. Miami is the capital of Latin America. Really, my impression was surprising with admiration, but also, I don't know. I didn't feel very good with some Cubans that there, expressed in an extreme form, maybe pejorative, their feelings about Fidel's regime. A person can want liberty in their country and I am "Martiana" and more than anything I want liberty in my country but without falling into chauvinism, or into rudeness, or into the ugly things that some people say. Really it doesn't suit me—that really doesn't suit me from my co-patriots in Miami. I decided to come to Lincoln to reunite with my family. In Miami I have two cousins that are my cousins related to me on both sides. And I, as an only child—it's as if they were my sisters. They have been living here for forty years in the United States but my daughter adores the city of Lincoln. The first years I lived in Hastings when I came for human rights. Her sponsor sent her to Hastings. She knew the United States in Nebraska and Hastings and Lincoln is, for her, like a second homeland. She likes living here a lot. And here, we continue—she, my granddaughter, and I.

MA: What did you expect from this city?

NO: Well really, I was expecting...First of all the welcome that I had from the Hispanic Center that is now called El Centro de las Américas. That first welcome that I had there—I was alone. I practically felt like the only Cuban here in Lincoln since here the Hispanic community is more Mexican. Here there are Hondurans, Salvadorans, Peruvians, but Cubans, no. But despite that, here in the Hispanic Center I could even

take English classes. I started immediately. I brought theoretical English, no? That which all the professionals study. All the professionals in Cuba study English—it's obligatory. I brought theoretical English that I write well and translate well but I don't know how to speak and much less understand it. But, in the Hispanic Center I had that. I passed from the first year to the second and after that I was already in advanced English and I continued going to the Hispanic Center or, that is, I have felt very good. I did volunteer work there—I organized a library in the summer. I have worked in food distribution or that, is—for me, the Hispanic Center was a second home—El Centro de las Américas. Recently they celebrated a Festival de las Américas in which I had the great honor of representing my island—of representing my caiman. My warm, little caiman as I call it in some of my poems. So, this has always given me pleasure. Here, since I have been in Lincoln—I came last year in June—because I was in Miami in May and June—a part of June. Immediately I came here. And since then, well, I was there a year and a half hmm? I have been living one year and five months in Lincoln.

MA: What do you think about Lincoln now?

NO: Well, what do I think? I hope that they give me a professional opportunity. It has been denied me. I have a pretty wide area of expertise with a lot of post grad as they say in Cuba or masters or that that I have received and have imparted. And to be able to survive economically I have had to even use my piano title that I brought hidden in my suitcase and I have had to dedicate myself to giving piano and Spanish classes in my house. Because still, despite the fact that I am now in these times a permanent resident, I have my social security, my work permit...I don't know. But in these times, I am not feeling very good because I don't know if they're discriminating against me because I'm an older person, or because I'm Latina, or for both things. Or because I don't speak fluid English mmm? It could be the third thing, the third element but I am offering myself. I believe that my—without any type of immodesty—my experience and my professional capacity is extensive. I don't know but it seems to me that they are underestimating or underappreciating me a little...I don't know...I don't know. I have presented myself, my degrees, to the University of Nebraska in the department of modern languages and I presented it also at Southeast Community College...and I am waiting for a response but nothing is certain, nothing that they have given me is certain.

MA: Tell me about your citizenship.

NO: Well, within the next four years, I can aspire to be an American citizen. And it would make me very proud to be an American citizen. But anyway I have to wait those four years to be able to do it...I already know the questions. The questionnaire with the one hundred questions [laughs] I already know.

MA: I think now there are more.

NO: [laughs] I think that now there are more? Well, I will learn those other ones. But I feel motivated also, as I already told you, I don't feel old. I feel that I have accumulated

youth and that is different. Because it's not putting years into life but putting life into years that one has I have put much life in mine because I have grown professionally.

MA: Nérida, you told me about your novel which deals with social content and that because of its content, you weren't able to publish it in Cuba. You have even told me that you have an essay in your novel in which you describe Cuban society divided into three generations and you also referred to yourself belonging to a generation. Could you expand on this part of the interview?

NO: Yes, why not? Look, the content of my novel is imminently social even though the characters are purely fictitious. Despite this, their conflicts reflect society. And I try to do it as vividly as possible. The difficult reality in which they live—more than two decades of the same family. These are my characters. That for housing needs—well, the Cuban community has basic housing needs. Well anyway, my characters, for the same necessity have to cohabit in an old makeshift Havana house. That of Sweet Water 25 converted into a collective accommodation on Cristina Street number 25. Or, that is to say, that in my novel, the scenes, the historical facts, and the sites used are factual. The fiction is only in the characters that I create but they are also not people from a different galaxy or even from another country but rather Cuban people from which I have taken some of them to become typical characters and just from that they gave me the conflicts that I want to reflect. For example, like a stylistic, literary resource from the system of characters in my novel, the running thread that constitutes it—a shadow, an errant, feminine spirit that wanders during the nights in the ancient Cita house. And so then anyway, that adds a certain element to the plot about the different conflicts of the dwellers of the house. The scenes, like I told you, are real and the time of narration is also real. The plot of my novel, the narrative tempo, transpires from the end of April to the first days of August, 1995. Everything that happened in Havana in those months I also include in the plot of my novel. You know what I mean? Now, also that spiritual character, running thread etc. occupies a very relevant place within the novel. A marriage of professors who are obligated to carry out this noble office of teaching, that is mine as well, are obligated in Cuba—all professors in Cuba, are obligated to—proclaim ideas that don't correspond sometimes with their principles nor with life itself. And so, in my novel, these two characters decide to renounce the magistrate and finish by giving themselves, with fervor to denouncing the excessive and disorderly system from the lines of a human rights party. So then, it's on the tongue or on the pen of everyone, of my main female character, in which I put, in which I make reality, the sociopolitical essay or, that is, the incursion that I make, without being a sociologist. I never have been a sociologist but I make an approximation or a contribution to Cuban sociology maybe with this theme of frustrated professors. Professors that have to say in their speech what they really don't feel. So then, in that essay, it introduces what constitutes it. I already told you, a modest contribution to contemporary sociology. And, it is a dissection, what I do, of the Castro-socialist age in three generation of Cubans that even though they are similarly disgraced, the three of them, under the same crisis of values, hopelessness and frustrations, they present among themselves marked differences marked peculiarities, most notably in their age differences. So, it's when I mention that the disappointed generation was that which began the revolution. It began giving its contribution—in

which I include myself that I even taught literacy. After that is the frustrated generation in which, like I told you, belong the Cubans that are about 40 years old, 45...50. These at the beginning believed but suddenly realized what was the problem because they were much younger. And also, this lost generation of youth those that dye their hair green...but what they have in their intellect is very little...so little that they don't even know where to direct themselves or what to do nor how to change the system or how to be able to come to the realization of the American dream which is the only thing they think about but they don't know how to get it. So then, anyway, in the novel there are also characters that, for example, a theme that is very much debated socially in Cuba is the prostitution of youths with foreigners. Those they call Jineteras. In my novel there are two people that are Jineteras. One that prostitutes herself for economic and social necessities and the other that vindicates herself or that is, she returns from this world of prostitution and embodies the conversion in a person—in becoming a decent woman. There are two characters in my novel that also portray this sad underworld of youths that exploit their beauty to be able to get some money with which they improve the economy in their homes. With which they take sometimes medicine to their grandmother on her deathbed. That also, I lived, I observed it, I explored socially, and that is how my novel came about. Also, in regards to the form in which this novel is written, I utilize much retrospection, monologues, descriptions of customs, anecdotes, dialogues...I sprinkle dialogues with popular phrases that Cubans utilize frequently. The Cuban is very talkative and uses a lot of refrains and sayings. So, I utilize all of that and I enrich it and give it an accessibility that flows better for the reader. And really, very few people have read it because, like I told you, I had to bring it hidden and I could never show it in Cuba. But the people that have read it consider that if...that the novel...as they say in the world of...it has a hook...or that is to say that is traps one's interest. Because one of the people that read it, a young lady who I trusted with it—the rough draft of my novel—and asked her to read it in Cuba. I also had the enormous satisfaction—she is not an intellectual—but she likes to read and when she finished reading she told me—and when will you write another one, because you've made me really want to read. And that I believe that in a writer is...

MA: Very good.

NO: It's the biggest praise...more than a grade of one hundred percent. That is what I think about the future—when the opportunities in the United States provide me a more elevated economic status well, to publish my novel, here in Lincoln. Because even though, like I told you, it hasn't happened yet—my professional realization in this city—I aspire to have it.

MA: Tell me about what you have most recently written.

NO: What I have most recently written is a book of poems. Also, poems that I brought from Cuba with other poems that have been inspired here and that in these moments I am finishing to be able to register too in the library of congress. This book I divide in three fundamental parts—in a part that I call breaths of life that are vital experiences, the nostalgia of the exiled, that I have undoubtedly suffered. Because remember that when

you pull a tree from the roots, if it is a young tree, the roots are not very deep. You can transplant it and the tree will flourish immediately. But, when the tree is old, the roots are very deep and uprooting it is terrible. It's terrible that this is my case. But anyway, even so, I have inspiration and I continue writing. And in my book of poems, like I told you, I have three sections in which the book is divided. Some poems for young people that I love very much and that are my grandchildren, some children that I have also loved during my life. I even have poems for my students--those that I had when I was very young. An elegy for a student that died when she was fifteen years old. Or that is, I have many themes—many. But there are some poems that, for example, this one that I am going to read to you because it is short, mmm?

MA: Yes, of course.

NO: And I am going to read it in Spanish. You remember that my island, my little island, has the form of a crocodile, of a caiman, or lizard, that is there in the Gold of Mexico. Well anyway, that is what my poem is called. My poem is called “Distant Silence” and it goes like this:

My warm little caiman
Swims with its eternal rhythm
In the cradle of the Gulf
Where its dreams have also beat.
My warm little caiman
Sleeps sometimes almost with laziness,
Inviting me with its light
That makes memories blossom.
My warm little caiman
Suddenly awakes.
It regards me as strange
And it doesn't say anything. Only quiet
With its proverbial distant silence.
My warm little caiman
With its eyes fixed on my soul.
It only watches me from its map.

MA: Very good. Thank you very much Nérida for this interview and we hope to be able to do another one very soon.

NO: I also hope that this city that I have begun to love, also takes me in and gives me professional opportunities.