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Introduction to the Year of Cuba Special Issue

Dan Paracka

As part of the Kennesaw State University's Annual Country Study Program, the 2019-2020 academic year was dedicated to the study of Cuba. The Year of Cuba (YoC)¹ consisted of 27 distinct educational events with over 2600 students in attendance from 74 different majors and 11 colleges. The breadth and depth of the programs provided a strong basis for understanding Cuba in both its historical and contemporary contexts. Participating faculty integrated these programs within existing coursework thus allowing for further investigation and analysis. For example, the Department of Theatre and Dance organized and sponsored the opening YoC event with three sold-out shows of the highly acclaimed play, *Daughter of a Cuban Revolutionary*. This one-woman performance revealed the very difficult circumstances of exile and adjustment faced by a Cuban American family, a very poignant and appropriate beginning to the series.

Most events were organized through College Spotlights funded by Kennesaw State University's Division of Global Affairs, including: Cuba Superheroes Print Exhibit and Lecture; A Community of Many Voices: New Cuban Independent Media and the Building of Civil Society; Cuban Economy; and Pi Day: Building Campus Culture, one 'Pi'eece at a Time. In addition, four YoC Supplemental Funding Awards were made for the following projects: Cuba Amor (The Island of My Love): The Faces and Stories of Cuba Art Exhibit, Week-long residency for Cuban Ethnomusicologist Heidy Recoder, Cuban film discussion by director at the KSU Library's Dividing Lines Symposium, and the Solar Tree Project. Additional programming was planned but had to be cancelled due to the Coronavirus.

The exhibit, "Cuba Amor," was a signature fall semester event featuring 80 works by 35 different Cuban artists. Visitors to the exhibit, located in the Archives Gallery on the second floor of the library, were given a showcase of modern Cuban art that displayed the diverse emotions and lifestyle of Cubans today. The Department of Museums, Archives and Rare Books, College of the Arts, and the Division of Global Affairs worked together to offer this program in partnership with the University of Western Kentucky. The exhibition was on view from September through December of 2019 and was seen by more than 8,000 people. Dr. Sandra Bird in the School of Art and Design brought a series of community and school groups to the exhibit and focused several of her art education classes on the exhibition.

Relatedly, in the fall and spring semesters, the Cuban Superheroes exhibits featured the artwork of KSU students enrolled in Advanced Printmaking, Illustration, and Art History courses. Through an intense year-long project, this exhibit afforded art and art history students creative space to explore the historical connections between West Africa and Cuba through in-depth artist-scholar research

¹ For more information about the Year of Cuba see:
<https://dga.kennesaw.edu/yearof/cuba/>

into orisha traditions from both the Cuban and Yoruba environments. The exceptional quality of work, in both art and research, that students realized, and the multiple applications that the project obtained (the project resulted in two additional virtual exhibits that extended the trajectory of the project) exemplify the goals of applied scholarship. For the art history students, working collaboratively on the exhibition planning was intense for some, given the nature of the material and its connections to histories of slavery. With patience, care, and space to speak and listen, faculty and students worked through these collective and individual reactions. Students shared that they found the concept of orisha, and their survival and endurance in the African Diaspora, to be an empowering find.

As in the past, a semester-long senior level graphic design class developed the Year of Cuba logo. The logo was used across campus to promote programming and was featured on our website, all publications, flyers, and banners, including a large feather banner outside the KSU library where the majority of events were held. It was also featured on T-shirts that were given out to students at events and who expressed interest in Cuba.

In addition to the above mentioned programs, the following KSU faculty presented in the series: Dr. Arturo Castro (Assistant Professor of Spanish), Dr. Jennifer Dickey (Associate Professor of History), Dr. Susan Raines (Professor of Conflict Management), Dr. Alan Lebaron (Professor of History), Dr. Gail Markle (Associate Professor of Sociology), Vivian Kirby (Senior Lecturer of Economics), Dr. Seneca Vaught (Associate Professor of History), Dr. Thomas J. Nisley (Professor of Political Science and International Affairs), Valerie Dibble (Professor of Art) and Dr. Jessica Stephenson (Associate Professor of Art History).

The program also featured an interdisciplinary team-taught Year of Cuba course that was scheduled to include a spring break study abroad experience to Cuba. Unfortunately, the study abroad experience was cancelled due to the Coronavirus; however, the course was successfully completed virtually. After KSU moved all instruction online in the spring semester, we were able to obtain access for all KSU students to three award-winning documentary films on Cuba which provided an additional useful resource to the campus for those interested in furthering their understanding of Cuba. The YoC International Conference was also cancelled due to the Coronavirus. Prior to its cancellation, 50 people had pre-registered including 25 off-campus presenters (2 from abroad), 12 KSU faculty/staff, and 13 KSU students (KSU students, faculty and staff are not required to register in order to attend individual sessions, therefore their attendance would have been much higher than just those who pre-registered). Among the registered participants were representatives from Auburn University and Western Kentucky University, as these universities had also recently organized Year of Cuba programs.

As the Year of Cuba is organized in a cumulative manner building upon the many different programs and projects throughout the year all leading up to the most important culminating events such as the conference and study abroad experience, the Coronavirus had a significant impact on the program. At the same time, the events held were all quite successful as they were thoughtfully embedded into existing courses.

Each year the ACSP encounters different challenges, this is due, in part, to the fact that every country is different and thus requires unique approaches to developing understanding with different levels of interest and expertise across colleges and departments. This challenge is also a strength of the program as the ACSP not only introduces the campus to new areas of interest and community partners, but also works to connect what can sometimes appear to be disparate fields of knowledge to create a more holistic understanding of a country, its people, environment, and international relations. Besides the dramatically disruptive impact of the Coronavirus, one unique challenge encountered this year involved bringing scholars from Cuba to KSU. The U.S. Embassy in Cuba is not processing visas for entry to the United States and so invited guests had to apply for their visas through a third country. We successfully brought three guests from Cuba to KSU on two separate occasions, two for a week-long media residency, and one for a week-long music residency. One unanticipated but positive outcome of this effort was a stronger relationship between KSU and the U.S. Embassy in Havana. Staff at the Embassy not only provided us with information related to visa processing, but they also shared with us opportunities for Embassy grant funding for collaborative projects in Cuba.

The week-long media residency featuring Cuban journalists José Jasán Nieves Cárdenas and Elaine Díaz Rodríguez provides an excellent example of the quality program delivered during the year. These influential journalists presented to numerous classes and groups on-campus about the current situation of independent media in Cuba and how their work has contributed in an essential way to the process of building Cuban civil society and a free press. The Cuban journalists collaborated with the KSU Student Media, including *The Sentinel*, *The Peak*, and Owl Radio. Panels were streamed live. Owl Radio, KSU's student-run streaming radio station, presented a live program featuring the Cuban journalists, to discuss new Cuban journalism. A creative collaborative article between *The Peak*, KSU's student lifestyle magazine, *elTOQUE* and *Periodismo de Barrio*, was published in *The Peak* in the February 2020 edition. The journalists also visited Dr. Rustamova's SPAN 3304 class. Since the course's main theme was exile, Elaine and José discussed implications of independent journalism such as involuntary and voluntary exile of Cuban journalists due to censorship and ongoing political persecution. In a roundtable on New Independent Media, Free Press in Cuba and The Constitutional Referendum, our guests discussed the new Cuban Constitution and particularly the impact it will have on independent media and the freedom of the press. In a visit to Dr. Castro's Span 4434 class on literature, the Cuban journalists discussed with the students the way many of the writers they were reading as part of the course's content were also active contributors to the independent outlets that both Nieves and Díaz are leading. Finally, for the Digital Showcase, students enrolled in Spanish 1002 completed an activity which required them to use a Lib Guide provided at the Library Website. Each group of students was responsible for finding information about a specific independent media outlet and the topics it covered. On the day of the event, the students presented their findings to the group and the journalists offered more insights on each of the outlets. Students had an opportunity to reflect

on the role of independent media, the importance of civic engagement and to ask follow-up questions. Because the Cuban journalists worked closely with the student media representatives, the students were able to get a firsthand view of differences between life as an independent media journalist in Cuba and in the United States. Because the programs were open to other students and community members, KSU and the greater Kennesaw community were able to get a look into the civic changes that these types of journalists are making in Cuba. By virtue of interaction with these journalists, students had an opportunity to hear testimonies on the challenges experienced by Cuban society at large and independent media particularly, due to restricted internet access and censorship.

As is clear from the above information, the YoC resulted in new courses and curriculum, research projects, education abroad programs, grant-writing opportunities, publications, and global partnerships. These efforts directly contribute to student learning, academic scholarship, and community engagement.

This Special Issue of the Journal of Global Initiatives is one of the important outcomes of the Year of Cuba. Indeed, several of the contributors were scheduled to present at the conference, and one of the contributors is a KSU faculty member who received a research grant funded by KSU's College of Humanities and Social Sciences.

The first article, "Between Subject and Object: The Identity of a Slave in Juan Francisco Manzano's Autobiography" by Carmen Salama explores how violence and benevolence were used by slave masters and supported by the Catholic Church and colonial law to condition the slave as an object, obligated not only to serve but to suffer the capricious wrath of the master's changing mood. At the time of its publication, the autobiography, itself, was meant to not only emphasize the cruelty and injustice of slavery but also the intelligence and humanity of the enslaved. Linked to this theme, the second article titled "Testimonies of war during Cuba's fight for Independence" by Jorge Camacho discusses Cuban efforts to form new political parties, create newspapers that supported their "autonomistas" political views, and that forced the Spanish government to finally abolish slavery. It looks especially at the role of Cuban women in this effort.

The third article in this volume, "The Architecture of the Dead: Symbolism in Colon Cemetery, Havana, Cuba" by Dana Moody documents and interprets the imagery found within the cemetery's memorials in order to get a better sense of Cuban culture and beliefs in the late 19th and early 20th-centuries. Her work shows a society deeply concerned with the afterlife, steeped in religious fervor, and entreating a merciful God. This photographic research also works to visually preserve the symbology found within Colon Cemetery today.

The fourth article on "The Charismatic Revolutionary Leadership Trajectories of Fidel Castro and Lázaro Cárdenas" by Joseph García examines the historical connection between the two dynamic leaders who were loved by their respective publics, often clashed with international forces, and followed similar trajectories in their efforts to assert independence and self-determination for Mexico and Cuba. In contrast, the fifth article titled, "The Emergence, Persistence, and Success of the Cuban Social Movement *Las Damas de Blanco*" by Gail Markle looks at the case of human rights in Cuba and the non-violent protests of the wives, mothers, and

daughters of political prisoners. Using elements of structural, cultural, and nonviolent action theoretical approaches, Dr. Markle analyzed twelve oral histories of organization members to examine the factors associated with the organization's emergence and development. She asserts that an ethos of care provided a strong foundation for the organization's endurance and success.

The final article in this collection titled "An Analysis of the Effectiveness of Cuban Cyberactivism" by Neta Kanny assesses the efforts of Cuban cyberactivists to bring about a more accessible, just, and transparent media environment within the nation. It utilizes power-law degree distribution and network theory as conceptual frameworks for understanding this rapidly changing context.

This volume, like the entire Year of Cuba series, provides a means for understanding the complexity of Cuban society that connects the past to the present and the local to the global as it works to appreciate different perspectives and views. I sincerely hope that readers will find the information provided here helpful at this important juncture in U.S./Cuba relations where change seems much more possible as long-held policies of isolation and opposition are reconsidered. Indeed, in this regard, there is substantial consensus that solving the major challenges of society in today's complex interdependent world requires bringing together different perspectives and unique contributions in ways that are inclusive and just, more voluntary and less punitive.