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## **The Bernardo Vega Memoir Mystery The Challenge of Determining Authorship and Meaning**

By Bridget Kevane (April 11, 2013)

In four years it will be the 100th anniversary of Puerto Rican Bernardo Vega's arrival in New York City in 1916. Vega, a *tabaquero*, cigar roller, by trade, is credited with writing one of the earliest documents on what it was like to be Puerto Rican in Manhattan until about 1945. The [\*Memorias de Bernardo Vega: Contribución a la historia de la comunidad puertorriqueña en Nueva York\*](#) has long been



heralded as a foundational text in the New York Puerto Rican literary tradition. But what if I were to tell you that the *Memorias* is a text heavily excised by a different person? Even imagined by another author?

In the text the author declares, "Los puertorriqueños debemos conocer nuestra historia." But what is the real *historia* of the *Memorias*? We do not know whether the novel accurately reflects the ideas and words of Vega himself or of César Andreu Iglesias, the self-appointed editor of the original manuscript. The genesis of the *Memorias* is cloaked in mystery. Does it matter?

The *Memorias* is a dynamic and fascinating historical record of a time in Manhattan where luminaries like Eugenio María de Hostos and José Martí walked the streets. Alongside the rich tapestry of historical figures, the electrifying Antillean political heroes trying to shape the future of the islands, there is also an inspiring message to the collective Puerto Rican community about their history and future: "Para poder ponernos de pie, los puertorriqueños de cada generación tenemos que comenzar por afirmarnos en nuestra historia. Como si dijéramos: tenemos un origen, luego somos!" [In order to stand tall, Puerto Ricans of every generation need to start by affirming our history. As if to say: we have a history, therefore we are!]

It is a mixed medium text-part autobiography, part fiction, ethnography, cartography, political history-best known for its portrayal of the traditions of the *tabaquero* factories, specifically the role of the *lector*, the reader, in New York. But it also maps the first Puerto Rican communities, inter-ethnic and racial relationships, and the stirring political and civic organizations of the time as well as the struggle for Puerto Rican autonomy.

As I wrote back in 1999 in [\*The Latin American Literary Review\*](#), the published text available to us, the *Memorias*, is not, as we are told by the editor himself, César Andreu Iglesias, the original manuscript. The original text was a novel and, if we are to believe the editor, a poorly written one at that. Andreu Iglesias writes in his introduction to the *Memorias* that Vega gave him the manuscript in the form of a novel back in 1965 to edit and that they disagreed about how to proceed.

Vega died before they reached an agreement. Ten years after Vega's death, in 1975, Andreu Iglesias writes in his introduction, "cumpló la obligación que me impuse de editar el manuscrito." [I fulfill the duty that I imposed upon myself to edit the manuscript]. Part of that self-imposed obligation, apparently, was to transform it from a novel to a first-person memoir.

In other words, Andreu Iglesias's introduction, with its mysterious hints, omissions, and confessions, was a scholar's dream. What scholar would not wish to discover the original and compare it to the published text, especially when the journey to publication has been mediated by profound modifications? What if I could find the original manuscript? Would it be earth shattering? Would it change the face of Puerto Rican literature in New York? And thus I set out to track down the original manuscript. I imagined myself sleuthing around the island in search of the novel, as if I were a Puerto Rican Sherlock Holmes.

In reality, I spent a few hours asking around for César Andreu Iglesias' widow and finally found her telephone number in the *Telefónica*. Her name was Diana Cuevas. Yes, she had the manuscript. Yes, she would meet with me. And yes, she would bring the manuscript.

We met at the food court in *Plaza Las Americas* in San Juan. I approached the meeting with a feeling of trepidation because what I wanted more than anything was to secure the original novel written by Bernardo Vega about the experience of his character, Bernardo Farallón, in New York in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Naïvely, I imagined that Cuevas and I would engage in an intense discussion about the need to bring the manuscript to light for the intellectual and moral

good of Puerto Rican scholarship. She would agree with me, I imagined, that this foundational text, despite or because of Andreu Iglesias's edits, would add to our understanding of those early years in New York where Puerto Ricans had just been deemed U.S. citizens.

I was sorely disappointed. Cuevas, though warm and welcoming, evaded all direct questions regarding the original manuscript. And, even worse, toward the end of our conversation she brought out the folders with the typed pages and let me glance at them. I even seem to remember a sly smile on her face as she watched me grasp the fact that she was tantalizing me with something I would not be able to take away and study. Cuevas allowed me to glance at the manuscript from across the table for less than five minutes. I was not even allowed to touch the yellowed typed pages with red pencil editing marks. And then we were done. The original was whisked away and I lost contact with Cuevas.

It did not occur to me (nor do I know today) whether or not she was hoping for monetary compensation for the manuscript. But I left without a sense of textual justice, of redemption for Vega and his original dreams. Despite the bleak end to my Puerto Rican Sherlock Holmes moment, I wrote in-depth, as mentioned, about César Andreu Iglesias excision in 1999. There, readers may find a complete scrutiny of the suspected interventions of the original, though I still find it problematic to refer to Vega's *Memorias* with security.

On every page I question authorial intent: Is that what Vega meant to say? Or is that Andreu Iglesias speaking now in the seventies? The historical and political context is significantly different - a Puerto Rican in New York in between the two World Wars versus a Puerto Rican on the island in the seventies where the island was facing great unemployment, and so on. Nevertheless, the text itself transcends the authorial entanglement and remains unencumbered in its overarching message: Puerto Ricans in New York have a long and important history.

One of the most important parts of the text is the portrayal of the cigar rollers. Despite whatever excision took place when Andreu Iglesias took red pencil in hand, the tradition of the *tabaqueros* remains vividly portrayed. Vega (or should I say Vega-Iglesias?) cherished what the *tabaquero* represented, hard work and camaraderie, and, what's more, he saw them as the intellectual custodians of Puerto Ricans in New York. In a factory on any given day the cigar rollers would engage in global philosophies and political trends, anarchism, Marxism, socialism, isolationism and more. The hard, tedious labor of

rolling cigars in a factory and lofty intellectual ideals were not at odds in this environment. Is there anything equal to this tradition today? Perhaps the *lector* of yesteryear finds its counterpart in the teachers of today, particularly those that have large Puerto Rican student bodies.

The other important message is that of political activism, grass roots organizing, and an abiding hope in the camaraderie of men (little mention of women in the text). Indeed, there is a kind of pulsating workers' solidarity that crossed ethnic boundaries during that time: *Cubanos, hebreos, italianos, puertorriqueños*. Vega speaks of the larger collectivity of ethnic communities in the United States and their dreams of a better future in the Tower of Babel as he calls Manhattan. For many of these communities shared similar beginnings, though with categorically distinct histories. In those inter-war years the text idealizes the solidarity between different ethnic enclaves; today is that still the case? Have the overwhelming social issues facing Puerto Ricans turned them away from opportunities of reaching across the ethnic aisle, so to speak, and seeking solidarity? Or, in Vega's words, to seek "un alto espíritu de compañerismo?"

Beyond the portrayal of the richness in political landscape and the cigar rollers, I believe those of us who teach Latino literature can recognize the Vega-Andreu Iglesias legacy in the works of writers like Ernesto Quiñonez whose *Bodega Dreams*, this time a real fictional account, reminds Puerto Ricans of the powerful history of the Young Lords and whose main character shares a message of self-worth, honor, and identity for Puerto Ricans in New York. The *tabaqueros* of yesteryear are the Quinonezes of today whose inspiring intellectual and yet down-to-earth message is defiantly dignified. Esmeralda Santiago and Judith Ortiz Cofer are other voices whose novels hark back to Vega's sense of hope for *neoyorquinos*. Take back Puerto Rican dignity, social justice, the *tabaquero* (instead of the *jibaro*), should stand as the symbol of the Puerto Rican collective on the mainland and, more specifically, in its first homeland away from home, Nueva York.

Without the original manuscript it is impossible to know how, if at all, it would change the message intended by Vega or the one intercepted by Andreu Iglesias. We can only work with what we have. But the ideals that both of them set forth in *Memorias'* still stand, regardless of the novel's transformation. If I were a professor in a Puerto Rican Studies program I would teach Vega along with Jesus Colón and the whole line of writers that spoke of the Puerto Rican struggle in New York. Not so that students think of themselves only as a product of a

cyclical struggle without any gains but as an honorable struggle with a strong record of great writers who remind students over and over again of the importance of the future with the knowledge of the past.

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