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THE AMERICAS

*Paige Evans is an Institute Fellow looking at Cuba through the lens of its performing arts.*

## Remedios Revisited

HAVANA, Cuba

September 17, 1999

By Paige Evans

Ariel Diaz, now my husband, and I visited Remedios briefly, a year ago, when we were still just friends. Though we've traveled all over Cuba together since, Remedios has remained a favorite for both of us: it's a peaceful, lovely and historic town (founded in 1515 by a Spaniard who also reputedly fathered over 300 children). Its residents derive an intense sense of pride and identity from their hometown — feelings that I, a native New Yorker who's spent the bulk of her adult years traveling and living in far-flung cities, find both curious and enviable. We've returned to Remedios because I'm hoping to write an article about its *parrandas*, an annual festival that seems to consume the entire town. Though the *parrandas* take place at Christmas time and it is now only August, I know from last year's visit that preparations for the event will already be underway.

As we drive into town, Ariel and I note significant changes: houses have been repainted, streets have been repaved, and the early 19th-century buildings surrounding Remedios' central square, Parque Marti, have been renovated. The steeple of the 16th-century Parroquia de San Juan de Bautista de Remedios is being painted, and the church's inside (as we discover on entering) has already been fully refurbished. The town's only hotel, a 19th-century stone mansion just off the square, has reopened after extensive restorations. These improvements, we soon learn, are thanks to the influential President of Cuba's Civil Aeronautics Institute, General Rogelio Acevedo Gonzales — a powerful Remediano who has remained loyal to his birthplace.

We go first to the rambling and rundown colonial building that houses the *Parrandas* Museum, in search of the museum's Director and the Town Historian, both of whom we met there last year. When we arrive, Rafael Farto Muniz, a distinguished, reed-thin man of 50 with silvering hair on an over-large head, is sorting through a stack of yellowed pages in his first-floor office. He wears neatly pressed, faded slacks and a clean, collared shirt that is fraying at the seams. Though startled to see us, he seems pleased that my interest in Remedios and its *parrandas* has persisted. Nodding toward the pile of notes written in a cramped, precise hand, he explains: "These are accounts of interviews I conducted twelve years ago. I have written a history of the *parrandas*, and I think a detail from these notes could strengthen it. I finished the book years ago, but the state has not been able to publish it, because of the paper shortage." He shrugs resignedly and offers a reserved smile. Blackish tobacco stains line the insides of his teeth; nonetheless, he remains an attractive man.

Farto, as he is commonly known (the name carries no scatological connotations in Spanish), leads us upstairs to the director's office, where we can chat more comfortably; its large, open windows provide some relief from the stifling heat. As he lights a filterless "Popular" cigarette and exhales a thick cloud of smoke, Farto shifts his chair farther from me. I assume this is in



A sign at an  
entrance to  
Remedios

Photo: Ariel Díaz

deference to my pregnancy, though he's made no mention of this obvious development. Shortly afterward, however — for reasons I don't understand — he shuts the window just above his head. This has the unfortunate effect of channeling his smoke in my direction.

Before coming to Remedios, I visited the National Library in Havana's Revolution Square and sought out whatever information I could gather about the town and its *parrandas*. I found scant resources: an article by Farto published in a flimsy folkloric journal, another by his cousin, "Mickey" Farto (a Remediano gynecologist and authority on the *parrandas* who left last year for the U.S.) and a slim, amateurish booklet entitled "The History of Remedios." All were dry, historical recountings that trod much the same ground. This is what they told me:

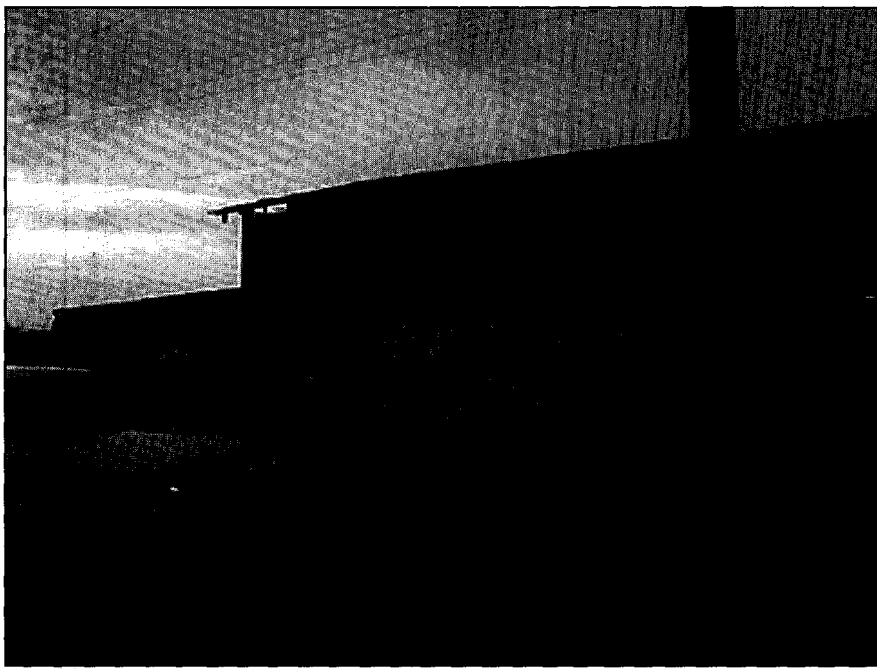
In 1820, frustrated by falling attendance at December's early morning Aguinaldo masses, a Catholic priest urged Remedios' youths to parade through the streets late at night, shouting and shaking rock-filled cans and thus rousing their fellow Remedianos in time for his church's services. Over the years, this "infernal noise" (as local newspapers dubbed it) was transformed into music: percussive *repiques*, played months before the *parrandas* to arouse the town's celebratory furor; European-style polkas; and Afro-Cuban *rumbas*. And the *parrandas* evolved into a popular, secular celebration — a fervent competition between Remedios' two principal neighborhoods, El Carmen and San Salvador. Today, the rival neighborhoods prepare months in advance to compete on four fronts: fireworks, *faroles* (Chinese-style paper lanterns), *carozzas* (parade-style floats) and

*trabajos de plaza* (towering, stationary structures).

The celebration begins at 6:00 o'clock on the evening of December 24th. To the accompaniment of its special polka (or "hymn") and a preliminary blast of fireworks, each neighborhood bears its *faroles* up to a line dividing Remedios' Parque Martí. As the festivities continue, each side presents its *carozza* (which must round a corner and circumnavigate half the square) and *trabajo de plaza* and sets off its final fusillade of fireworks. Though no official jury determines which side wins or loses, a general consensus makes clear who is victorious in each of the four categories. Early Christmas morning, the two sides cross the dividing line and parade through their opposing neighborhood's streets, playing their distinct victory *rumbas*.

Though for a century and a half the *parrandas* were held in December, Farto tells us that, "In the 1970s, the state declared that each town in Cuba could celebrate only one festival, and that all festivals should be held in July. This way, they could all commemorate the anniversary of the Revolutionary attack on the Moncada barracks, and they would not interrupt the winter's sugar harvest. Traditionally, we celebrated several annual festivals here in Remedios, but the town decided to continue with the *parrandas*. For ten years, the *parrandas* were held in July. And for ten years, the people of Remedios protested this new schedule. Finally, the government relented and moved the *parrandas* back to December. We were all very pleased with the change."

When I comment on the paucity of information about



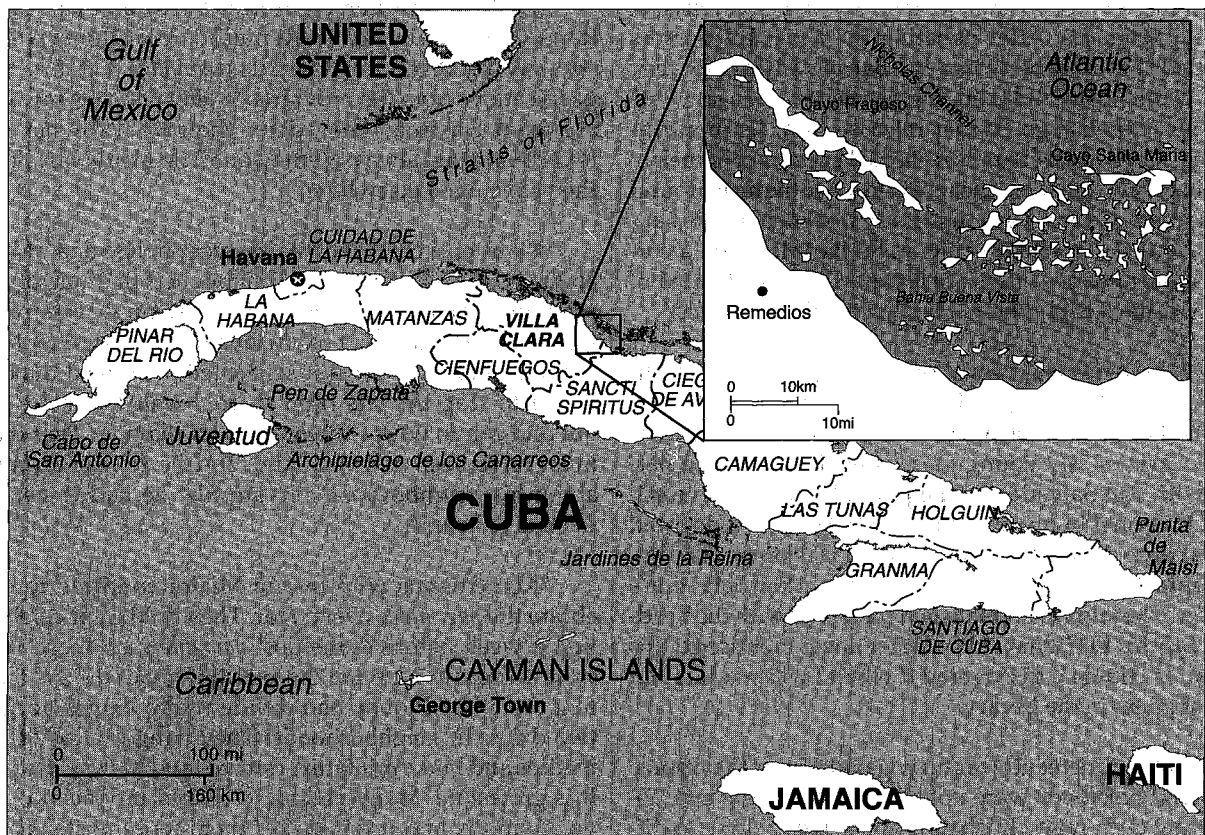
Entrance to El Carmen's  
parrandas warehouse

Photo: Ariel Diaz

the *parrandas* available in Havana, Farto sighs and shakes his head dejectedly. "There is little interest in Remedios and its *parrandas*, outside of Remedios. To find out about our town and its traditions, you have to come here." Within Remedios, people discuss their hometown and its primary festival with an ardor bordering on obsession. "People feel very strongly about the *parrandas*," Farto explains. "It may seem like a children's game, but

for us it is extremely serious. People make great sacrifices for the *parrandas*."

"Like Nelia Ferrer, a single woman who was living with her mother while building a house of her own. After a good deal of time, work and financial investment, her house was almost completed. Only the roof was missing. Nelia had the wood for her roof all ready, but when





"SAN SALVADOR" printed  
on the wall outside its  
parrandas warehouse

Photo: Ariel Diaz

she discovered that her neighborhood, El Carmen, needed wood to finish its *carozza*, she donated the wood she had intended to use for the roof of her house."

To my relief, Farto stubs out his cigarette and opens the window above his head, continuing: "Or old Bartolome Esquerra Arioza. Bartolo went into the hospital on December twenty-second with serious heart problems. Two days later, he insisted on being released for the *parrandas*. After debating the issue, his doctors decided it would be worse for Bartolo's heart to keep him in the hospital during the *parrandas* — he so vehemently wanted to go. So they released him. Temporarily. During the *parrandas*, Bartolo realized the *carozza* of his neighborhood, El Carmen, was not going to make the turn around the square. A *carozza* automatically loses when this happens, and the crowd assaults it. So Bartolo lifted a corner of the *carozza* — to make it turn. Old Bartolo died of a heart attack, right there. He died for the *parrandas*."

When Ariel asks him about his neighborhood affiliation, Farto proudly proclaims: "Both sides of my family, the Fartos and the Munizes, have always been part of El Carmen. My young niece considered allying herself with San Salvador at one point. We were all mortified. Imagine! In my family!... My father was a devoted *parrandero*. When he was young, a local journalist photographed him peering through a fence at San Salvador's *carozza*. The journalist published the photo with the heading: 'Spy for El Carmen.' My father never mentioned this to me, of course. I discovered it when I was reading old newspapers in the library.

"In the nineteenth century, people from the opposing neighborhoods were not allowed to intermarry. Today, however, many husbands and wives belong to dif-

ferent neighborhoods. Sometimes this leads to serious complications. I know one couple who stop speaking to each other every December. If they do speak, it is only to argue about the *parrandas*. Then, after the *parrandas* are over, they return to living happily together. People feel very strongly about their neighborhoods. Still, I have never known of a physical fight resulting from the *parrandas*."

Lighting another cigarette, Farto asserts: "The Remedianos who leave Remedios continue to feel strongly about our town and its *parrandas*. Often, when people move from the provinces to Havana, they say they are from Havana. They deny their own towns. But Remedianos are always Remedianos, no matter how long they have lived elsewhere.

"I was on a crowded bus last year in Havana, riding along Twenty-Third Street. It happened that one of the *parrandas* polkas — San Salvador's hymn — was playing from a loudspeaker as my bus passed. Another passenger, a tall, fat man, got so excited, he forced the bus driver to stop the bus right there. I watched as he got out and ran to where the music was playing. That man must have been a Remediano, and he felt so strongly about his neighborhood's hymn that he had to get off the bus to hear it.

"Remedianos who live in Miami continue to celebrate the *parrandas* every year. They hold their celebration a week before Remedios' *parrandas*, so those who want to return here for the real thing can do so. They rent out a hotel lobby and divide it into halves, for the two different neighborhoods. They hang photos of Remedios and make miniature *carozzas* and *trabajos de plaza*. It is grotesque. Many people have told me they do not go anymore, because it makes them more nostalgic for

Remedios and the real *parrandas*. The Remedianos in Miami have also continued publishing a newspaper that we no longer have the resources to publish here. It has local news about Remedios and talks about Remedianos living in Miami and other places abroad."

Farto mentions that both sides of his family lived in Remedios for generations (a Farto forebear was a Remediano hero in Cuba's War of Independence against Spain in the 1860s) but says many of them left for Miami following the Revolution. Only he and an uncle remain in Remedios. Farto's features — which generally reveal no more than a pleasant interestedness — now visibly cloud. He laments: "Most of them went for political reasons. They refuse to come back to visit, and they have no contact with our family here. They will not send one dollar to anyone in Cuba while this government is still in power. Things we cannot buy here, [they send] occasionally. But they do not even call."

Farto grinds his cigarette to shreds. His expression is hard and impenetrable. "I make a salary of one hundred seventy-five pesos per month" — the equivalent of U.S.\$8.50. "That is less than many taxi drivers make in one day, escorting tourists around town. I work extremely hard, often until eleven at night. I do this because I love my work. But I do not make enough money to survive. I am an educated man! I am the Town Historian! Some months, I cannot afford to buy a razor to shave myself!... I hate 'isms!' With socialism, there is the presumption that everyone is equal. People are not equal, not for one moment. Some work harder than others, some achieve more. I went to college. I work hard. I make a contribution. And the lazy person who sits around all day and does not work thinks he is equal to me?!"

When I ask about his level of schooling, Farto says he attended college late in life. After finishing military service at 18, he worked as an actor for 10 years. This reminds me of a trivial fact I once read — that many screen actors have disproportionately large heads. Evidently, it enhances their screen image. As I ponder this, Farto recalls: "After that, I worked in cultural jobs for several years. Then they told me I had to return to school to advance further. I did so, when I was already in my mid-thirties."

"My official title now is Cultural Promotor. But I am the Town Historian. That is the work I do. Everyone here in Remedios knows me as the Town Historian. Even Abel Prieto, the Minister of Culture, introduces me as the Town Historian. I have applied to have my title officially changed, but the state has not yet done it. It grants the title very rarely. My salary would improve as Town Historian, of course. Remedios is Cuba's third oldest town, and it carries on some of the country's strongest traditions. It merits an official Town Historian!"

Farto again shuts the window above his head and

lights yet another cigarette, inhaling deeply. "The state has, however, invited me to continue my studies for a doctorate. This is an honor. They invite only a few people each year to do so. To complete the degree, I must know another language. I have begun studying English. Before the Revolution, when I was a child, I studied English with a private tutor. But for many years, English was a forbidden language in this country. It was not taught." Farto flashes a sheepish grin and proclaims in an accent so heavy his words are barely distinguishable: "*Mah Eengleesh ees terreebull.*"

\* \* \*

Celia Estela Rojas Hernandez, Director of Remedios' *Parrandas* Museum, glances at my swelling belly, smiles sweetly and exclaims: "You came back, with a charge!" A short woman with waist-length, blackened hair and birdlike features, Celia's gray roots and defeated expression make her look older than her 40 years. She is dressed more shabbily now than I remember, in cracked plastic sandals and an overly tight skirt with a missing clasp. I realize this is because she was not expecting company and regret stopping in on her at home, unannounced. But it's been impossible to contact Celia these past two days. She's been away from the museum and, like most Remedianos, she does not have a home phone.

"Come in, come in!" she beams, ushering us through a sparsely-furnished parlor and into a small family room. Though Celia assured me she was renovating her colonial home when she suggested renting it out to me last year, it is clear the renovations have not yet begun. Everything about the house is crumbling: vestiges of paint peel from the walls, and chairs have fractured or missing seats.

To my surprise, Farto is sitting in the family room. As we enter, he leaps to his feet, offering me his rocking chair and insisting: "Sit, sit!" Ariel and I settle into the room's more comfortable seats, and Celia nervously scans the patio for another functioning chair for Farto. He waves her back, reassuring: "It does not matter. I will sit right here," while perching on a splintered chair frame with no seat or back. Beside him, a small, plywood replica of Remedios' 16th-century church stands atop an ancient TV set, and a boom box, still in its plastic wrapping, dominates the coffee table.

We have clearly interrupted something. Tension thickens the air between Farto and Celia, whom I know to be close co-workers and friends. After a quick spate of polite banter, the two resume an argument that began before we arrived. With his characteristic reserve and a confident glimpse of a grin, Farto asserts: "I simply want them to change their schedules from Sunday morning to Sunday afternoon, so the museum will be open when the group from the university arrives. Is that too much to ask?"

"With what they earn?! Yes!" Celia snaps. "They are paid less than one hundred pesos" — the equivalent of



five dollars — “for the entire month! That is barely enough to buy two bottles of oil! And you want to ask them to give up their Sunday afternoon off?! They should make double their normal wages if they work beyond their regular schedules — like construction workers!”

For a moment, Farto’s composure slips, and he growls: “I am not asking them to work longer hours! Just to shift their regular schedules a little. I am not happy with my salary, either. No one is. But I have agreed to do my job, and I do it!” Regaining his calm, Farto turns to me and suggests: “In cultural jobs, workers need to be flexible. After the Revolution, museums were open in the afternoon and evening, to allow workers to attend them after their normal working hours. All cultural institutions — museums, libraries, houses of culture — had this schedule. Their hours were the reverse of regular working hours, so working people could attend them. But with the special period [when economic support from the collapsed Soviet Union ended], the schedules were changed. So as not to use electricity, museums and libraries were opened during the daytime. Now that the special period is over, the schedules should be changed back.”

Celia, who has been quietly fuming during Farto’s lecture, cackles derisively. “I would love to go back to the evening schedule! I could get things done in the house in the mornings! But that is not the way things work now! And you cannot expect people who barely earn anything to change their schedules to accommodate every group that wants to visit the Museum!”

Farto’s face reddens, and he barks: “They do not fulfill their jobs! They are not helpful! They just sit there all day!” As quickly as it surfaced, his anger seems to disappear. All charm and self-possession, he turns to me and asks: “When you went by the Museum this morning, did anyone stand up to receive you? Were they attentive?”

Sidestepping his question, I explain how, when workers are dissatisfied with their wages in the United States, they go on strike. Celia chortles. “Here, people protest in their kitchens. When it comes to complaining publicly, though, people keep their mouths shut. In public, everything is fine in this country. Everything works exactly as it should. Because people are afraid to speak out. They do not protest in public, because they are afraid.”

Farto rises and amiably excuses himself. As Celia escorts him to the door, a tiny, ancient woman with huge, round glasses appears. She alights on the broken chair frame Farto has just vacated; her stick-thin legs do not reach the floor. In a clear, piping voice, she announces: “I am Celia’s mother. I am very ill. I have a problem with my legs. I can barely use them. The doctor says my bones are decalcifying. I feel terribly weak. Ever since the death of my husband, I have felt terribly weak.”

Celia returns, hanging fake pearl drop earrings in

her lobes. “Still, she is a huge help around the house. She washes and irons. She does everything! I do not know what I would do without her. If anything happened to her, I would have to leave my work at the Museum. I could never maintain that job and this house, both.” Smiling warmly at her mother, Celia again leaves the room.

“Sometimes, my blood pressure drops, and I faint,” Celia’s mother pushes up the glasses that have slipped down her nose. “Like the day the meat arrived, at the butcher’s —”

“It is very rare that we get meat here,” Celia interjects from the adjoining bedroom. “Maybe twice a year. If we are lucky.”

Her mother sighs gloomily. “There is always a very long line. That day, I was standing on line, waiting for the meat shop to open. And I fainted. So they allowed me to go to the front of the line.”

Celia reappears, transformed. Dressed now in an orange mini-skirt and white pumps, she looks quite fetching. She chuckles good-naturedly and reminisces: “That day, we were the first in town to get meat.”

\* \* \*

Over the following three days, Celia escorts us to the homes of prominent *parranderos* (*parrandas* participants) and both neighborhoods’ *naves* (*parrandas* warehouses). She is one of very few people authorized to enter the two naves and witness both rivals’ top-secret preparations. In appreciation — and in hopes she’ll open up even more when plied with liquor — I invite her out for a drink. Delighted, she leads us to the Hotel Mascotte, where her husband Omar tends bar. I remember from our last visit how proud Celia is of the shy, coarsely handsome Omar — how she boasts of his bartending abilities and the hard work he does on his scant days off, growing rice for their family on his father’s farm.

As Omar pours Celia’s and Ariel’s beers and fetches my carton of sugar-sweet guayaba juice, I ask him about business in the bar. He haltingly replies: “The hotel does not have many guests. Those it does have are ordinary workers who come from Europe on package tours. They pay for their rooms, their meals, everything with a check. We do not make many tips.” Like others in Remedios, Omar hopes business will pick up after tourism is developed on the nearby island, Cayo Santa Maria, where the Cuban government is constructing luxury hotels and an international airport.

Ariel questions Omar about his neighborhood allegiance for the *parrandas*. Glancing at Celia, Omar shrugs and mutters: “San Salvador.” Celia reaches across the bar, affectionately squeezes his hand and pronounces: “And I am from El Carmen. But I feel much more strongly about the *parrandas* than Omar does. When our son was only four months old, I brought him to the *parrandas*,

*El Carmen's guard, glowering below a "DO NOT ENTER" sign. The entrances to both neighborhoods' naves are guarded at all times, and few people are authorized to enter.*

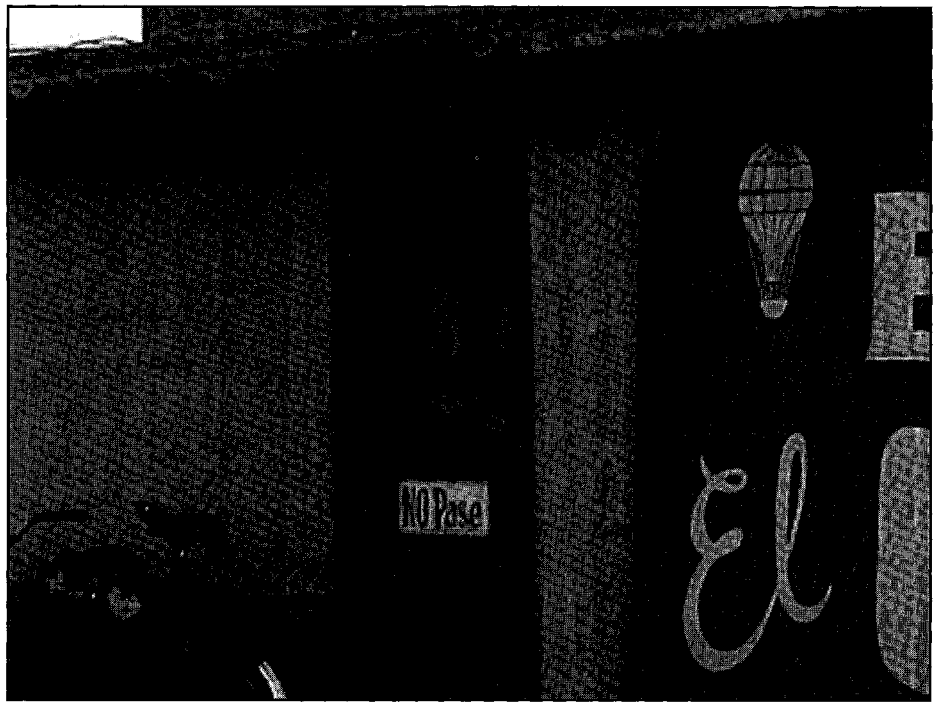


Photo: Ariel Diaz

pointed to Carmen's trabajo de plaza, and gaped at how beautiful it was. He was too young to understand, of course. But I started early influencing him in favor of El Carmen. Poor thing! He did not have a choice!"

Though Remediano children often choose to side with the neighborhood of a particularly fervent parent, Celia explains that in the early 1980s, a disproportionate number of kids allied themselves with San Salvador. "This was unsettling, obviously, and the museum took a poll to find out why it was happening. We discovered that Carmen's mascot, the hawk, had negative associa-

tions for many children. A hawk is a predator, and it resembles an American eagle — the symbol for imperialism, which the children had been taught was evil. San Salvador's mascot, a rooster, was familiar to them. A rooster is associated with *Cubanismo*, so it was far more popular.

"The museum waged a campaign to educate kids about how the mascots developed and what they represent. We explained that during the *parrandas* in 1890, San Salvador's original symbol — a globe — rolled into the neighborhood of El Carmen. The people of Carmen seized it as a war trophy. San Salvador had to adopt an-



*The door outside El Carmen's warehouse, with the neighborhood's mascot — a hawk — painted across it.*

Photo: Ariel Diaz



Photo: Ariel Diaz

*Celia and I outside the entrance of San Salvador's warehouse with its symbol of the rooster.*

other symbol, and it chose the rooster. The rooster turned out to be extremely popular. So Carmen was forced to look for another symbol — something of the same kind — to match it. Carmen chose a hawk, because a hawk can eat a rooster. We told the children there is nothing wrong with a hawk."

As Celia says this, a stocky, red-faced youth with a New York Yankees cap and a web of gold chains around his neck struts into the bar and orders two cases of Cristal beer from Omar. Cecilia greets the young man and chats with him. Afterwards, as he carries away the beer, she whispers: "That boy's father is the president of the Directive of San Salvador." She taps the fore- and middle-fingers of her right hand against her left shoulder in a common gesture indicating military prosperity. "He is a military man. A very prominent man."

Both of Remedios' rival neighborhoods have Directives, or governing bodies, made up of a president, vice president, treasurer, carpenter, electrician, model maker and costume designer. Each president is democratically elected by the members of his neighborhood; he appoints the others in his Directive. Like all aspects of the *parrandas*, the Directives are racially mixed. Even before the Revolution, when there was a greater divide between the races (and Remedios had separate social clubs for whites, blacks, mulattos and Chinese), there were black Directive Presidents. As Celia puts it: "The *parrandas* have always been very democratic. On the night of the *parrandas*, we are all just *parranderos*."

Officially, a vote for a new Directive is held every three years; but this timetable varies according to both

popular and state initiative. Celia tells us: "Some Directive presidents do not work out. A few years ago, El Carmen elected a president who was highly respected in town. He was a doctor and a *babalao*" — or priest in the Afro-Cuban religion, *santeria*. "But his first year as Directive President, El Carmen's *carozza* was a disaster. The neighborhood voted him out immediately. Even the practitioners of his religion were against him. They believed he was a good priest, but a terrible president... The state also influences when a vote is held. Last year, both neighborhoods called for a new vote. But the state did not allow it. It was happy with the way the *parrandas* were being run, and it wanted the Directives to remain the same."

Celia drains her glass of beer, delicately dabs dry the edges of her mouth and reflects: "The state also has influence over who is in the Directives. This was true before the Revolution, too. In the 1930s, Remedios' local government began seeking control over the Directives. The *parrandas* were big business, and the government wanted to have power over who ran them.

"Now, the state has control over many aspects of the *parrandas*. It oversees the choice of projects, for example. In July, notices are posted around town to submit designs for *carozzas* and *trabajos de plaza* for the upcoming *parrandas*. People from the opposing neighborhood or from other towns are permitted to submit designs. This used to be forbidden, but it is no longer seen as a conflict of loyalties. This year, for example, a young man from San Salvador, who works as a fumigator, designed a *carozza* for El Carmen. He said he always wanted to work with El Carmen's electrician, who learned his trade



on the street but is excellent at what he does. And the fumigator won!"

Ariel orders another beer for Celia, and she giggles and demurs: "Oh, no! I will be drunk! I never drink more than one beer!" When Omar pours her a second beer, though, she grins girlishly at him and sips contentedly. "The *carozzas* are often based on foreign works or cultures and have literary, mythical or cultural themes. The designers learn about things from different parts of the world from reading at the library, or from cultural programs on television. We have excellent cultural television programming in this country. Programs that educate people and expose them to things they might never see otherwise... The *trabajos de plaza* are often fantastical structures. Historically, they tended to represent real buildings or structures — like the Eiffel Tower or the Arch of Triumph. But after electricity was introduced in 1921, it became more difficult to use real structures. How would you light the Eiffel Tower?

"Each designer presents his design for a *carozza* or *trabajo de plaza* to the neighborhood's Directive, describing the way he envisions it and the materials he would need to realize it. The Directives consider the beauty of a design, its originality and its practicality. They also consider the materials they have access to.

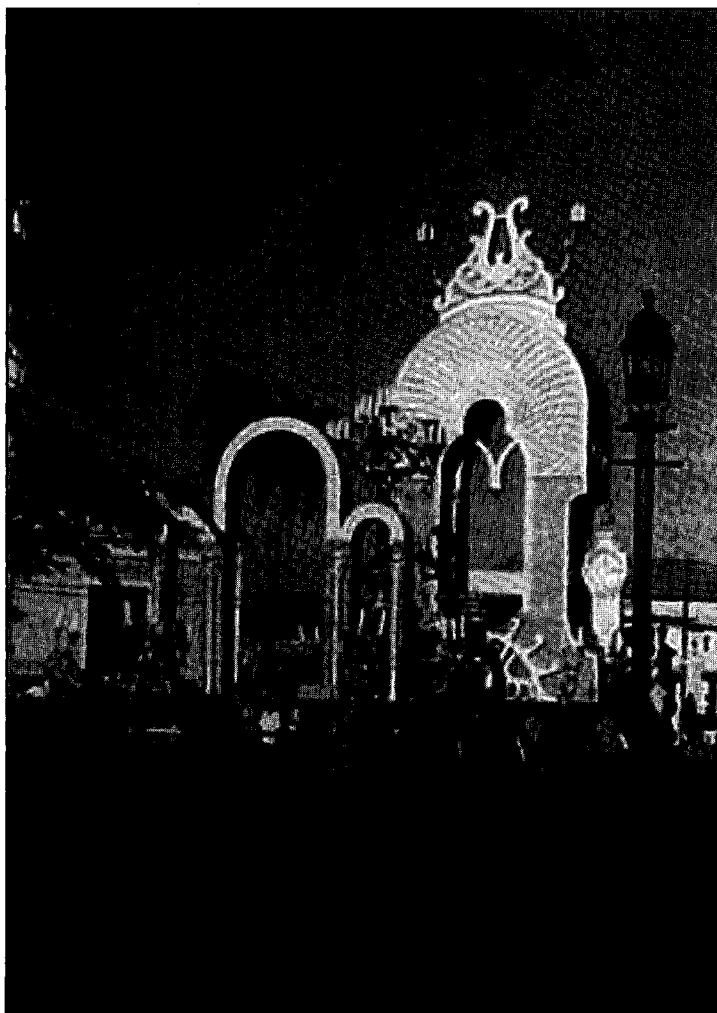
"Last year, San Salvador's Directive gathered excellent materials. They got all the dresses from a girl's fifteen celebration" — the Cuban equivalent of a Sweet 16 party, often an elaborate affair — "and used the cloth for costumes. Everyone agreed that both their *carozza*, of "Alice in Wonderland," and their *trabajo de plaza* were the best. Carmen's were lovely, too, but we could not compete. Carmen's fireworks won last year. But fireworks are not as important as *carozzas* and *trabajos de plaza*." Celia's eyes narrow with determination, and she thwacks polish-chipped nails against the bar. "This year, Carmen is working extra hard, because we know we were beaten last year!"

Ariel steers Celia back to the subject of Directives; on returning to neutral territory, she visibly calms. "After the designers have presented their projects, the Directives vote on their designs. Each neighborhood pays one thousand pesos" — the equivalent of 50 U.S. dollars, a relatively substantial sum — "for the winning design. They also allow the designer to oversee the making of his work, and they pay him a salary for doing this. Many people enter the competition. It is considered a great honor to win.

"The state must approve the selected design. In the 1970s, many *carozzas* had Revolutionary

themes: the National Literacy Campaign, the Socialist Character of Our Revolution, Congresses of the People's Communist Party. This was no coincidence, of course. The state had something to do with it! If a project is religious, or if it somehow criticizes the government, it will not be approved. The state claims there has been a change in its treatment of religion recently, but this is not true. It says everyone can now openly practice religion. But the change has been a superficial one. Last year, for example, El Carmen's Directive voted for a *carozza* whose theme was The Birth of Christ. It was a simple, beautiful design. The design that could be best executed. Everyone agreed it was the best. But in my capacity as advisor for the *parrandas*, I had to inform the Directive they could not use that design. I knew all of us would have trouble if they did.

"The state also oversees the financing for the *parrandas*. The neighborhoods raise all their own money, but they have to put their earnings in special accounts, which are overseen by a state economist. Every time a neighborhood buys something, this



This *trabajo de plaza*, "The Sunflower," was the first ever to use electricity.



Photo: Ariel Diaz

*A griffin and King of Spades from San Salvador's winning "Alice in Wonderland" carozza last year.*

economist must write the check for it. It is a kind of control the state has. Nonetheless, many illegal things go on in the *parrandas*. Even with all this control, the Directives commit many, many illegalities. They have to, in order for there to be *parrandas*."

Celia's eyes twinkle gaily. "In the 1980s, there was much less governmental control. It was a great epoch in this country. There were many more opportunities to make money. People had more freedom to carry on their own businesses, illegally, from within state businesses. The *parranderos* were known as great thieves in the 1980s, because they had so much money and power."

Suddenly, her expression grows wistful. "The 1960s, just after the Revolution, were also a beautiful time here in Cuba. Everyone was so full of illusions. I am forty years old, exactly the age of the Revolution. And I felt glad for many of the changes that took place with socialism. I felt better, as a human being, that a poor woman did not have to go begging through the streets to feed her child. I felt glad that everyone had the opportunity for a good education and good health care, and that everyone, no matter how poor, could be exposed to fine culture."

Celia drains her second beer and drops her head sadly. "But now, what I see happening now — this is not what the Revolution stood for. I am an Officer of the Party, and I will say this to anyone. I see things today I had never seen in this country before. Terrible things. I see old men picking through the garbage. Kids with

drugs and weapons. Everything has changed."

She stares into the foam at the bottom of her glass for what seems a long time before speaking again: "My father was destroyed by the Revolution. Completely destroyed. He owned the land where El Carmen's nave now stands. We had a farm there. After the Revolution, the property was seized. My father watched them cut down every fruit tree on his farm — mamey trees, mango trees, avocado trees — trees that took twenty years to grow. He was completely devastated. He drank for two entire years after that."

I gather Celia wasn't exaggerating her low tolerance for alcohol. She's getting maudlin. Gazing lovingly down the bar at Omar, she murmurs: "I hope I die before my husband does. I could never meet another man who is as good as he is."

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Wednesday evening, our last in Remedios, Ariel invites Farto and Celia to join us for drinks at the local Rumbos, a state-owned fast food chain. As we sit at a marble-top table overlooking the picturesque Parque Marti, U.S. disco music blares from the opposite side of the square. Raising his voice above the clamor, Farto proudly informs us that this cafe, which opened in 1866 and has been operating ever since, is Cuba's oldest. He then grumbles disdainfully: "That is what young people are listening to today. It has nothing to do with Cuba. It is cultural penetration!"

"Cultural penetration!" Celia scoffs. "I hate that

expression! 'Penetration!' It sounds so sexual, so negative. It sounds paranoid. You could use a more positive phrase — like 'cultural interchange.' This kind of interchange has always taken place between cultures, over the centuries and around the world."

"'Cultural penetration' is precisely the right term! I will give you another example." Farto draws emphatically on his Popolar.

"You smoke too much!"

"A Colombian friend of mine —"

"He does! I try to get him to quit. I try to make him realize how much harm he is doing to himself. I warn him that if he continues this way, he is going to die of cancer."

Farto inhales deeply, with exaggerated relish, and extinguishes his cigarette. "A Colombian friend of mine was in the Miami neighborhood known as Little Havana. There, she asked an older Cuban man, in English, where she could find Texas Corner — just like the Texas Corner in Havana. The man exploded at her in Spanish: 'This is Little Havana! People speak Spanish here, not English!' Can you imagine that? Someone demanding that another person speak Spanish, in a country whose first language is English?!"

Poking playfully at Farto's arm, Celia intones in acutely-accented English: "I weell learn you Eengleesh!" Farto bristles. Celia delicately sticks out the tip of her tongue and points to it: "You have a golden tongue. You will have no trouble with English." Farto does not re-

spond. Undaunted, Celia chipperly announces: "Both Farto and I would like to visit the United States. Neither of us has ever had the good fortune to travel... The Remedianos who move to Miami always want to take something of Remedios with them. To remember. Most carry a piece of a *trabajo de plaza* or a *carozza* in their luggage when they go."

When Farto remains sullenly silent, Celia leans towards Ariel and whispers: "He is a good man. But he is very closed... We have been arguing ever since that dispute at my house. We have not gotten over it."

Farto arches an eyebrow. "Are you still upset about that?"

Celia grins gamesomely. "Shall we smoke the peace pipe, like we always do after we fight?"

Eyeing her, Farto gives an almost imperceptible nod. Celia reaches into his breast pocket and gingerly extracts a filterless cigarette and Farto's "CUBA" lighter. Clamping the cigarette between her jaws, she lights it, takes a hefty puff and blows a dense wall of smoke into Farto's face. A broad, unrestrained smile breaks out across his features. When Celia hands him the cigarette, Farto likewise fumigates her.

Performing this well-worn ritual, Farto and Celia seem more like family than friends. Watching them, I muse on how life's pace and shape — and the relationships it allows for — are so very different in this remote town than in the busy cities I've made my homes. I will be sad to leave Remedios tomorrow. I hope, like the departing Remedianos, to take something of it with me. □

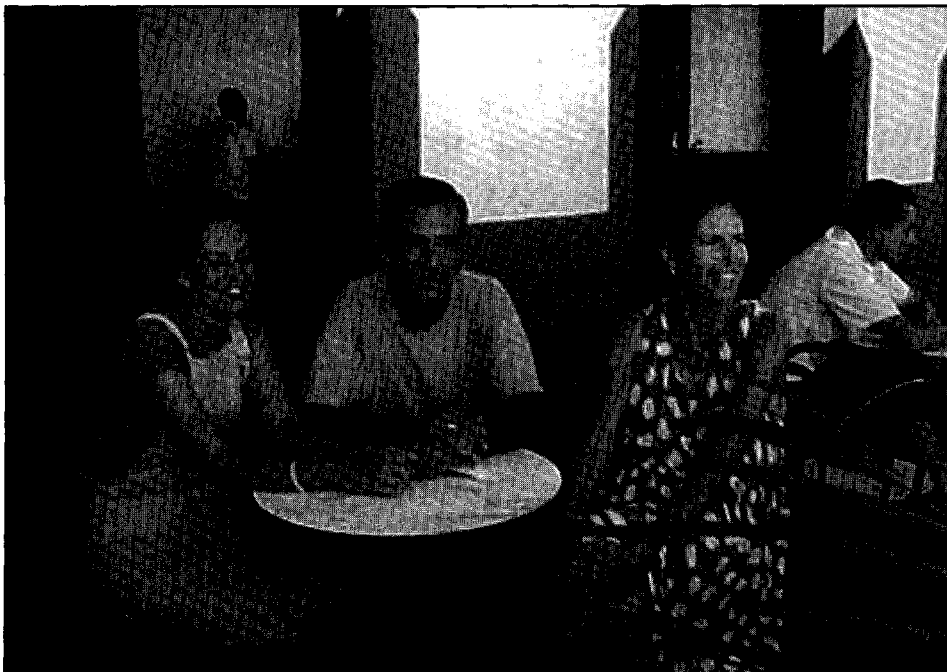


Photo: Ariel Diaz

Celia, Farto and the author  
in Cuba's oldest cafe