

El Árbol de la Fraternidad: Afro-Cuban Symbolism, Political Performance, and Urban Space in the Early Cuban Republic

Joe Hartman

The *Parque de la Fraternidad Americana* (Park of the American Brotherhood) in Havana, Cuba, is a multivocal urban landscape conditioned by multiple audiences in dialogue, whether black, white, local, or international (Figure 1). If we consider the urban space as writing, a social text whose meaning becomes clearer when one reflects on its manifold readers, the ceiba tree planted in the center of the *Parque*, entitled *El Árbol de la Fraternidad* (Brotherhood Tree), emerges as a complex visual theme in the urban environment of the early Cuban Republic (Figure 2).¹ The tree communicated multiple interwoven messages when it was integrated into Havana's urban space during the later 1920s, such as Pan-American fraternity, national identity, and Afro-Cuban cosmology.

The ceiba tree was planted in the center of the *Parque de la Fraternidad Americana* by President Gerardo Machado y Morales on February 24, 1928 (Figure 3).² It was placed in the center of a circular stone platform elevated by three steps. Surrounded by a bronze circular grill, or *verja*, designed by

the architect Cesar E. Guerra, it was reminiscent of a Neo-Classical palisade fence with a plinth made of marble from the *Isla de los Piños*. The fence was cast by the American company Darden-Beller Bronziers.³ The emblems of all twenty-one American nations present at the Sixth Annual Pan-American conference held a month earlier in Havana on January 16, 1928, adorned the top of the fence.⁴ A quote from José Martí was also etched around the upper edge of the fence's circumference, which eloquently called for unity among the American nations (Figure 4).⁵

Together these visual elements communicated an international message of Pan-American fraternity, which was symbolized through the ceiba tree planted in the park's center. The ceiba tree in *El Parque* was also distinguished locally by the fact that the first Mass and the founding of Havana allegedly occurred underneath a similar ceiba tree in *La Plaza de Armas* (Figures 5-6).⁶ A Neo-Classical monument entitled *El Templete* (The Little Temple) was built in

The author would like to thank his advisers Paul Barrett Niell and Mickey Abel for all their hard work and sage advice throughout the construction of this text and the Art Education and Art History department at the University of North Texas, the College of Visual Arts, and the Toulouse Graduate School for generous financial and academic support. Many thanks also go to the faculty, audience, and presenters at the 28th Art History Graduate Symposium at Florida State University for their invaluable feedback and advice.

¹ The notion of the city as writing comes from Roland Barthes, "Semiology and the Urban," in *Reading Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, ed. Niel Leach (New York: Routledge, 1997), 166-172. In this essay, Barthes reminds us of Victor Hugo's old intuition: the city is writing. I use this literary metaphor to consider the city as a social text, focusing on the multiple readers that condition the meaning of the space/text. While Barthes writes this essay as a post-structuralist, his theories are informed from his early structuralist period. I would therefore nuance this semi-structuralist framework with Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of *dialogism*. In his study of the novel, Bakhtin notes that the world is defined by multiple voices in dialogue, a phenomenon he refers to as *heteroglossia*. The notion of multiple voices in dialogue, conditioning the meaning of the novel according to differences in place and time, can be extended to the Cuban city, which is also heterogeneous by nature. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994); terms are discussed in glossary format pages 423-434.

² This is noted in Jean-François Lejeune, "The City as Landscape: Jean Claude Nicholas Forestier and the Great Urban Works of Havana, 1925-1930," trans. John Beusterein and Narisco G. Menocal, *Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 22 (1996): 151; and Jorge Oller Oller, "Grandes Momentos del Fotorreportaje Cubano: La Inauguración de La Plaza de la Fraternidad Americana," *Cubaperiodistas.cu.*, accessed

26 February 2009, <http://www.cubaperiodistas.cu/fotorreportaje/26.html>. It is also covered in local newspapers, such as *Diario de la Marina* and *El Heraldo de Cuba*, where it is featured on the front page of the February 25th editions in 1928.

³ The provenance of the marble, the name of the architect, and the name of the American company is taken from Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring, *Collección Facticia #18: Bustos* (Havana: Biblioteca del Museo de la Ciudad de Havana, n.d.), 245. The Darden Bronzier's emblem is also etched into the side of the fence gate.

⁴ The phrase *Por la Paz* (For the Peace) also appears above a plaque placed on the fence gate featuring the names of the officials present at the conference.

⁵ The quote reads as follows: *Es la hora del recuento y de la marcha unida y hemos de andar en cuadro como la plata en los raíces de los Andes. Los pueblos no se unen sino con lazos de amistad, fraternidad, y amor.* (It is time to recount and walk united; we have to walk bound together like silver in the roots of the Andes. [For] the people will not unite unless there are bonds of friendship, brotherhood, and love.) Author's translation.

⁶ The alleged origin of Havana is common knowledge. A description of the ceiba tree and the monument erected in its honor can be found in several sources, such as Paul Barrett Niell, "The Emergence of the Ceiba Tree as a Symbol in the Cuban Cultural Landscape," *Cultural Landscapes* 1, no. 3 (2009): 89-109. In the records of the Biblioteca del Museo de la Ciudad de Havana (City Museum Library of Havana) one can also consult *El Templete: Documentos y Antecedentes Historicos, Existente en el Archivo de Este Ayuntamiento* (Havana: Obsequio del Municipio, 1913); and Miguel Mariano Gomez, *El Primer Centenario del Templete* (Havana, 1928). In addition to other ceiba trees in Havana, the tree



Figure 5. *Columbus Memorial Chapel- El Templete, Habana, Cuban Card Co. No. 28, Building constructed 1828, postcard c. 1930, Havana, Cuba. Courtesy of the University of Miami Libraries Cuban Heritage Collection.*



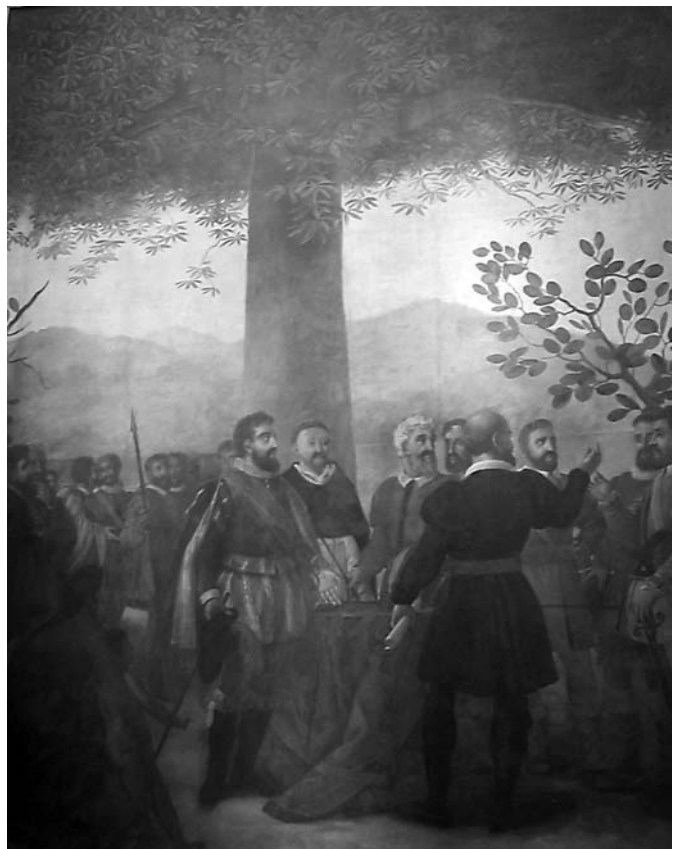
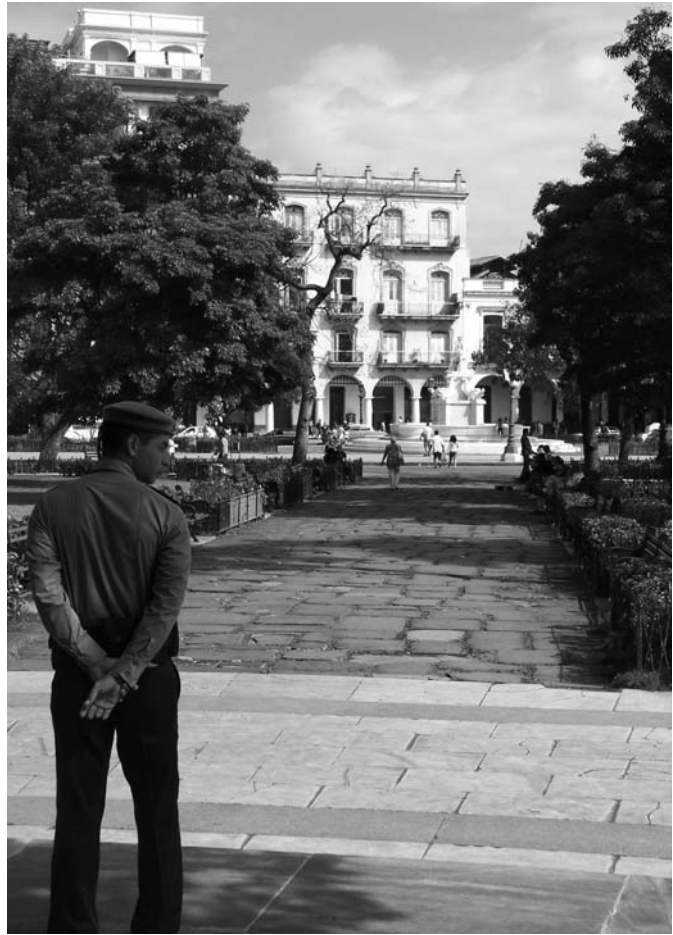
Figure 6. *Columbus Memorial, Havana, Cuba, building constructed 1828, photo c. 1900-1930, Havana, Cuba. Courtesy of the University of Miami Libraries Cuban Heritage Collection.*

[facing page, top left] Figure 7. View of north-south transversal axis in line with *Capitolio* in the *Parque de la Fraternidad Americana*, 2010, stone pathway, Havana, Cuba. Author's photograph.

[facing page, top right] Figure 8. View of east-west transversal axis in line with *La Fuente de la India* in the *Parque de la Fraternidad Americana*, November 2010, stone pathway, Havana, Cuba. Author's photograph.

[facing page, bottom left] Figure 9. Jean-Baptiste Vermay, *Primera Misa (First Mass)*, c. 1827, oil on canvas. Photograph courtesy of Paul Barrett Niell.

[facing page, bottom right] Figure 10. Jean-Baptiste Vermay, *Primer Cabildo (First Cabildo)*, c. 1827, oil on canvas. Photograph courtesy of Paul Barrett Niell.



1828 to honor this tree, nearly one hundred years before the tree in the park was planted. Like the colonial tree and Neo-Classical monument in *La Plaza de Armas*, the ceiba tree in *El Parque* was distinguished by its spatial association with two local monuments in the new republican city. The tree was planted on a transversal north-south axis with the city's Neo-Classical *Capitolio* (Capitol building, Figure 7).⁷ The metallic, at that time unfinished, dome of *El Capitolio* was reminiscent of the United State's Capitol building in Washington, D.C. It towered over the *Parque* and marked the central hub of power in the emerging modern metropolis of Havana. On the transversal east-west axis, the tree was also planted in line with *La Fuente de la India* (The Fountain of the Indian, Figure 8). The Neo-Classical fountain was considered symbolic of the Cuban nation and was created in 1831 with white marble by the Italian sculptor Giuseppe Gaggini.⁸ The current orientation of the *fuente*, facing north toward the *Capitolio*, was enacted the same year the *Parque* was built in 1928.⁹

The general form of the *Parque* conceived as a square configuration followed the shape of the old colonial *Campo de Martí* (Field of Mars) on which it was built.¹⁰ Its Neo-Classical design was evident in the stone pathways that rectilinearly divided the green space according to the four cardinal directions. The directionality of the pathways encouraged Havana's pedestrians to move toward the central axis of the *Parque*, which, in combination with the circular platform, the bronze palisade fence, and the ceiba tree, facilitated the circumambulation of the central space. The marrying of architecture and urban space with natural forms,

in *El Parque* may have been associated with a ceiba tree located in Santiago de Cuba, where U.S. and Spanish officials signed a peace-treaty in 1898 that eventually resulted in Cuba's political sovereignty. The ceiba tree in Santiago de Cuba was also surrounded by a similar bronze *verja*. For more on this tree see Alberto Boix, "Así es Cuba," in *Cosas de mi Tierra* (1950), accessed 3 October 2010, <http://www.guije.com/cosas/cuba/paz.htm>.

⁷ See *Capitolio (HAVANA)*, *Libro Del Capitolio [With Illustrations]* (1933). This text is an exhaustive illustrated survey of this building and its construction. The book discusses pride in its construction based on the fact that not only did the *Capitolio* resemble the classically inspired Capitol building in Washington, D.C., but it was actually slightly taller.

⁸ For more on *la fuente* see Martín Zequeira, María Elena, and Eduardo Luis Rodríguez Fernández, *La Habana: Guía de Arquitectura = Havana, Cuba: An Architectural Guide* (Havana: Ciudad de Havana, 1998), 139; and Joaquín E. Weiss, *La Arquitectura Colonial Cubana* (Havana: Letras Cubanas, 1979), 341, 362-363. It should also be noted that in the decades following the inauguration of the *Parque* several busts of important American leaders, such as Abraham Lincoln and Simon Bolívar, were added to the design. For more on these later additions see Roig, *Collección Facticia*, 245.

⁹ This fact regarding the fountain's orientation is noted on a plaque in front of the structure in Havana; it is also noted in Fernando Davalos, *Mi Habana Querida* (Si-Mar: South America, 1949), 103.

¹⁰ Several authors discuss this colonial space. A review can be found in Weiss, *La Arquitectura Colonial Cubana*, 205-208. The space is mentioned in relation to the *Parque*, which was known as *La Plaza de la*

such as the ceiba tree, reflected stylistic influences from the French Beaux-arts and the American City Beautiful and Park movements popular at the time.¹¹

As well as matching modern styles in the later 1920s, the planting of the ceiba tree in *El Parque* and President Machado's inauguration ceremony communicated multiple messages to local and international audiences. To an international audience, the inauguration ceremony symbolized fraternity between the twenty-one American leaders present at the conference, including the United States President Calvin Coolidge.¹² Locally, the inauguration of the *Parque* was an essential part of a campaign to redefine Cuba as a nation, to build national and civic solidarity among its diverse citizens. As such, the *Parque* was one of several new sites inaugurated within forty days of the conference. Other sites included the esplanade of the *Avenida de las Misiones*, the extension of the *Malecón*, the *Plaza del Maine*, and the great staircase of the University.¹³

The massive building campaign was headed by an emerging and imminent French architect, Jean Claude Forestier, who worked with a team of local and French engineers and designers. Forestier was commissioned in 1926 by President Machado and Cuba's secretary of works Doctor Carlos Miguel de Cespedes.¹⁴ The works commissioned by Machado and Cespedes were an initial step toward transforming Havana from a colonial city into a republican metropolis. The ceiba tree and *El Parque* were thus part of a larger national agenda that affected urban space and visual representations in the Cuban Republic.¹⁵

The use of the ceiba tree in the *Parque*, informed by

Fraternidad when it was constructed. See Yamira Rodríguez Marcano, *La Plaza de la Fraternidad Americana* (Havana: Casa Editora, 2006), taken from <http://www.somosjovenes.cu/index/semana20/vincamart.htm> (accessed 10 December 2010). Marcano also points out that the formation of the *Parque* is circumscribed by the four roads that surround it: *Monte*, *Dragones*, *Prado*, and *Amistad*.

¹¹ These movements are discussed in Rachel Carley, *Cuba: 400 Years of Architectural Heritage* (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1997), 128-182.

¹² Calvin Coolidge's participation is discussed in several sources including Lejeune, "City as Landscape," 151; and Marcano, *La Plaza*. U.S.-Latin American relations were a huge topic at the conference. The Sixth Annual Pan-American conference was held, in part, to settle some ambiguous political theory — the unanimous respect of every nation's independence and the financial support given to the military occupation of Nicaragua by the U.S. For more on the conference see Orestes Ferrara, *El Panamericanismo y la Opinión Europea* (Paris: Editorial "Le Livre libre," 1930). It is interesting to note that, given the tenuous U.S. relations, one might consider the ceiba tree as a Pan-Latin American symbol, since it does not grow in the cold northern regions of the United States.

¹³ Lejeune, "City as Landscape," 151.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ For more on the theory of national representation and the formation of early national traditions see Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 5.

colonial patterns, became symbolic of the Cuban nation in Machado's tree planting ceremony at the 1928 inauguration of the *Parque*. This national symbol was also conditioned by populations of African descent in Cuba who perceived it as sacred, a fact that has hitherto been given little attention by art historians. This essay proposes to reveal a link between Afro-Cuban symbolism and President Gerardo Machado's use of the ceiba tree in *El Parque*, planted according to Forestier's design, which shows that the tree was a multivocal sign intended to build national and civic solidarity for multiple audiences in Havana's urban landscape. This study, therefore, focuses primarily on the multiple religions that affected the visual culture of the Cuban city — especially those associated with its vast Afro-Cuban population.

The religious practices of what Homi K. Bhaba might term Havana's "margins and minorities" were certainly well known during the twentieth century.¹⁶ Through a long process of cultural transformation, which involved both slavery and Catholic hegemony, Afro-Cuban religion shifted from African practices, mainly in West and Central Africa, to a

uniquely Cuban belief structure.¹⁷ Recent anthropological and ethnographic studies of the three Afro-Cuban religions, Santería, Palo Monte, and Abakuá, reveal that the religions use a "hybrid" symbolic repertoire often characterized as "syncretic," or reflecting multiple cultural influences, especially European Catholicism and African cosmology. The observation of "hybridity" and "syncretism" should be tempered by the fact that the Afro-Cuban religions are not simple systems of belief. These religions have evolved and transformed through time and context following a process Cuban ethnographer Fernando Ortiz described as "transculturation."¹⁸ Two cultures do not combine and remain distinct over time. One cannot simply separate the "African" elements from the "European" elements in the Afro-Cuban religions. Rather, meaning in the Afro-Cuban belief structure is based on coexisting transcultural influences that may sometimes conflict, resulting in the loss of culture, but often comingle, resulting in new cultural forms of representation. The ceiba tree can be seen as a new cultural representation in Cuba. This notion is reinforced by the fact that ceiba trees are

As Eric Hobsbawm astutely notes, traditions are most often invented when rapid transformation in society "weakens or destroys the social patterns for which 'old' traditions had been designed." Hobsbawm also points out that old traditions were often used for new purposes to invent tradition in the early national context. The ceiba tree, connected to colonial, Afro-Cuban, and Pre-Colombian identity, served as a symbol of old traditions, which were thus used for new purposes, as a symbol of the Cuban nation. On that note, it is important to point out that the tree in *El Parque* designated a new center of power outside the old city walls (the *extramuros*), separate from the tree in *La Plaza de Armas* which marked the old military power center inside the city walls (the *intramuros*).

For more on national representations in Cuba see also Louis Pérez, Jr., *On Becoming Cuban: Identity, Nationality, and Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 9. Pérez, Jr., discusses U.S. influence on Cuban representations, such as *El Capitolio*. These representations affected Cuban culture because, as he points out, "culture exists as a system of representation, signifying practices and institutions from which nationality is derived and acted out."

¹⁶ Homi K. Bhaba, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 302-308. Bhaba discusses the "margins and minorities" as the borders of the nation that circumscribe its formation.

¹⁷ The transcultural context in which the Afro-Cuban religions emerged, especially those of the Congo and Yoruban West-Africa, was closely tied to the history of slavery and the sugar boom between 1790 and 1870. African culture was introduced to Cuba through the slave trade. Traditions and religions from particular regions of Africa, despite the oppressive and brutal reality of the slave system, were somewhat preserved throughout the colonial period, though they were altered significantly. Many scholars have rooted the emergence of Afro-Cuban religions to the colonial organization of Diaspora communities into *cabildos de nación*. *Cabildos* were government-sanctioned aid organizations, which were divided according to the distinct African cultures that existed in Cuba's slave population. The *cabildos* were structured hierarchically, in a similar manner to a European monarchy. Each *cabildo* elected a king and queens. In 1898, after the Spanish-American War, the *cabildo* system ended, but Afro-Cuban groups still organized themselves into *casas* (houses) or *casa-templos* (house-temples) during the republican era (1902-1959). The "house temples," while perhaps still controversial among Cuba's whites, were places of worship for

practitioners of Afro-Cuban religions in the early twentieth century. It is in this context that we can situate the emergence of what we identify as Afro-Cuban religions today. George Brandon, *Santería from Africa to the New World: The Dead Sell Memories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 52. The notion of Yoruban and Congo influence due to the slave trade is discussed by numerous authors. These Yoruban and Congo derived practices vary greatly in Cuba and accounts may differ. For more information on these various practices consult Christina Ayorinde, "Santería in Cuba: Tradition and Transformation," in *The Yoruba Diaspora in the Atlantic World*, ed. Toyin Falola and Matt D. Childs (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 209-231; Miguel Barnet, *Afro-Cuban Religions*, trans. Christine Renata Ayorinde (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2001); Judith Bettleheim, ed., *Cuban Festivals: A Century of Afro-Cuban Culture* (Kingston: Ian Randle, 2001), 1-39; Giulio Blanc and Gerardo Mosquera, "Cuba," in *Latin American Art in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Edward J. Sullivan (London: Phaidon, 1996); Brandon, *Santería*, 1-8, 9-36, 37-78; David H. Brown, *Santería Enthroned: Art, Ritual, and Innovation in an Afro-Cuban Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Mary Ann Clark, *Santería: Correcting the Myths and Uncovering the Realities of a Growing Religion* (London: Praeger, 2007), 31-44, 95-115; Mercedes Cros Sandoval, *Worldview, the Orishas, and Santería: Africa to Cuba and Beyond* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006), 83-92; Arturo Lindsay, ed., *Santería Aesthetics in Contemporary Latin American Art in the Twentieth Century* (London: Phaidon, 1996), 120-135; Juan Manzano, *Poems by a Slave in the Island of Cuba Recently Liberated*, trans. R.R. Madden (London: Thomas Ward, 1840); Michael Mason, *Living Santería: Ritual and Experiences in an Afro-Cuban Religion* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002); Eurgenio Matibag, *Afro-Cuban Religious Experience: Cultural Reflections in Narrative* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996); Gerardo Mosquera, "Africa in the Art of Latin America," *Art Journal* 51, no. 4 (Winter 1992), 30-38; Fernando Ortiz, "The Afro Cuban Festival 'Day of the Kings,'" trans. Jean Stubbs, in Bettleheim, *Cuban Festivals*.

¹⁸ Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco & Sugar* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1947), 97-103. Ortiz' theory of "transculturation" developed largely in opposition to Melville Herskovits' theory of "acculturation." Herskovits believed two cultures exposed to each other over time will combine, but, in the same sense, remain distinct. See Melville Jean Herskovits, *Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1941).

venerated in all three Afro-Cuban religions and respected by a wide range of citizens on the island.¹⁹

The reverence for *la ceiba* in Cuba is evident from ethnographer Lydia Cabrera's extensive field work with Afro-Cuban religious groups beginning in the 1930s. In her 1954 text *El Monte*, she begins her chapter on the ceiba tree by pointing out the possible existence of a *culto a la ceiba* (a Ceiba Cult),²⁰ which is not solely African. She notes that if you ask a *guajiro* (a white, rural Cuban farm worker) about *la ceiba* he will say that it is blessed, that it is the most sacred and largest tree of the world, and that it is the Virgin Mary's tree. It does not abate, hurricanes will not fell it, and lightning will not burn it.²¹

Cabrera further observes that with equal fervor, both in past and present, Catholic and African saints have gone to and lived in the ceiba tree. Her Afro-Cuban "informants," mostly practitioners of Palo Monte and Santería — *pale-ros/as* and *santeros/as* — describe a vast array of *orishas* (Afro-Cuban divinities) that are associated with the tree. Iroko, a sacred African tree and an *orisa* (equivalent to an *orisha* in Yorubaland), is most often linked with *la ceiba*. Both trees have a similar form, namely a buttressed trunk, which is likely the reason why African descendents in Cuba have elevated the ceiba to a sacred status. Also, Changó, the most prevalent *orisha* or deity in the Afro-Cuban pantheon associated with the Catholic Santa Bárbara, is often connected with the ceiba tree in folktales.²²

The list of Afro-Cuban divinities living in the ceiba tree

goes well beyond Iroko or Changó. Indeed, the lore and mythology of the ceiba can appear inexhaustible. For purposes of this study, it is important to note the sanctity associated with planting the ceiba, which will inform our understanding of Machado's ceremony following the Sixth Annual Pan-American Conference and the tree's use as a central design element in the park conditioned by Afro-Cuban cosmology. In Palo Monte rituals, for example, planting a ceiba tree is not just germinating a seed. Rather, the act of planting a ceiba is like a sacrament.²³ The ceremony for this sacrament entails four individuals bringing earth from four distinct territories that correspond to the cardinal directions, a fact that, while perhaps coincidental, appears visually evident in the quadrilateral design of the *Parque*. They then baptize the soil with prayers, blood, eggs, and other religious materials. For Palo Monte the best day to plant these trees is November 16, the day of Aggayú, the father of Changó.²⁴ Interestingly, the day for planting the tree also corresponds to the same date that Cubans ritually circumambulate a famous ceiba tree in *La Plaza de Armas* three times counterclockwise at the spot where the city was putatively founded on the same day in 1519.

The ceiba tree in *La Plaza de Armas* is a prime example of the tree's multivocal signification in Havana's urban history. A Doric Neo-Classical structure entitled *El Templete* was erected under Spanish Bourbon rule in 1828 to commemorate the ceiba tree in *La Plaza de Armas*.²⁵ Inside the cella of *El Templete* there are three paintings created 1826-1828 by French

¹⁹ For more on the Afro-Cuban religious veneration of the tree see anthropologist Migene González-Wippler, *Santería: The Religion* (New York: Harmony Books, 1982), 135. Wippler notes *santeros/as* (followers of Santería) have identified six main uses for *la ceiba*: the trunk is often used to cast spells, particularly those with malevolent intent; the bark is used for tea and medicinal purposes; the shade attracts spirits and gives strength to spells; roots are used for offerings and blood sacrifice; the earth around the tree is used in "black" magic rituals; and the leaves of the tree are often used for medicinal and ceremonial purposes — including love spells.

See also *ibid.*, 242. Wippler states that the ceiba is likewise an important site for sacrifice and magic in Palo Monte/Mayombe, a religion that is believed to have originated via Congo slaves of the Bantu language family in West Africa. To become a *pale-ro/a* — a practitioner of Palo Monte — initiates must sleep under the ceiba tree for seven days. Palo Monte has two main tenets: the veneration of ancestors and belief in the powers of nature. Both of these tenets pertain to *la ceiba*, which is also considered a home to spirits and a great source of power in nature. Palo Monte priests thus manipulate the ceiba as an *axis mundi* to manifest power (*aché*) in the phenomenal world.

Finally, the tree is important in Abakuá, a fraternity that likely originated from similar fraternal organizations in Nigeria. From Lydia Cabrera, *El Monte: Igbo, Finda, Ewe Orisha, Vititi Nfinda: Notas Sobre las Religiones, la Magia, las Supersticiones y el Folklore de los Negros Criollos y el Pueblo de Cuba* (Miami, FL: Ediciones Universal, 1975), 205, we know that *Nañigos*, practitioners of Abakuá, perform outwardly violent rituals around the ceiba tree, including the sacrifice of a goat, because they believe the tree is a representation *del Omnipotente* (of the omnipotent) or *de la Majestad Divina* (of the divine majesty.) While information on Abakuá may be limited in comparison to Santería and Palo Monte, it is important to note that the ceiba tree carries religious meanings and ritual uses for each of these traditions. One can truly call the ceiba a multivocal signifier producing multiple interpretations for all three Afro-Cuban religions.

²⁰ Cabrera, *El Monte*, 149.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 149-194.

²² *Ibid.* Also see Rómulo Lachatañeré, *Afro-Cuban Myths*, trans. Christine Ayorinde (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers), 2005.

²³ Cabrera, *El Monte*, 179. The text literally reads: *se sacramenta con la ceiba* (one performs the sacrament with a ceiba tree). It is interesting to note that, just as sowing the tree is sacred, felling it is damning; see *ibid.*, 192-193. The fear of destroying a ceiba tree is so great that one of Cabrera's "informants" admits that they would prefer to live a life of misery and leave their children to starve than cut down a ceiba. Another "informant" relates a tale of a man who felt his own limbs being sliced as he cut into the tree. Others warn that ceiba trees *se vengan* and *no perdonan* — revenge and never pardon — those who cut them down; one who does fell a ceiba will witness his or her loved ones' deaths. The notion of the tree as a vengeful power is corroborated by travel accounts from nineteenth-century chroniclers such as James Macfayden. Macfayden observed of the ceiba tree in Jamaica that "even the untutored children of Africa are so struck with the majesty of [the ceiba tree's] appearance that they designate it the *God-tree*, and account it sacrilege to injure it with the axe; so that not infrequently, not even fear of punishment will induce them to cut it down." This quote can be found in James Macfadyen, *The Flora of Jamaica; A Description of the Plants of That Island, Arranged According to the Natural Orders* (London: Longman, Orme, Brown, Green, & Longman, 1837), 92.

²⁴ This is noted in Cabrera, *El Monte*, 179.

²⁵ For information on *El Templete* and the surrounding area, including a stone-shell pillar commissioned in 1754 by Governor Cagigal de la Vega, see Niell, "Ceiba Tree as a Symbol," 89-109.

Neo-Classical painter Jean-Baptiste Vermy, first director of the Academy of San Alejandro in Havana and a student of Jacques-Louis David (Figures 9-10).²⁶ The images made to honor this locale depict the ceiba tree at the founding and first Mass of Havana. They show a dialogically informed civic history, with white slave owners, native converts, black slaves, freed-black-men, and representations of important Cuban officials such as Bishop Juan José Díaz de Espada, who commemorated the site in the nineteenth century.

Espada's effect on the ceiba tree's modern meaning is important to note. According to Fernando Ortiz, in 1942 when José Antonio Aguirre, then Basque president, saw the ceiba and *El Templete* he noted a striking similarity to the Tree of Guernica in Spain.²⁷ He implied that the ceiba tree and *El Templete* were "a signal and monument" for Cuban independence in Havana, just as the Tree of Guernica and the Neo-Classical *Sala de Juntas* (Meeting Room), built in its honor, were a national symbol of freedom for the Basque region. Espada, a Basque descendent who was influential in *El Templete's* design, may have been playing a *jugarreta* (a dirty trick) with the captain generals of Cuba; he was using *la ceiba* as a signifier whose meaning was tied to the Tree of Guernica and independence. The multivocality of the symbol was nuanced by the fact that the Neo-Classical form of *El Templete* was also part and parcel of Bourbon colonial policies for reform, order, classicism and *buen gusto* (good taste) that continued well into the nineteenth century.²⁸

In summary, the ceiba tree in Havana's urban spaces

has historical and multivocal significance for Cubans. The architect of the *Parque*, Forestier, must have been aware of these multi-layered meanings when he conceived its design. It stands to reason that the multiple narratives attached to the tree likewise affected President Machado's inauguration ceremony, especially in terms of nationalism. Use of Afro-Cuban symbols, such as the ceiba tree, was evidently connected to a rising sense of national identity in the early Cuban Republic. In other American nations, like Mexico, the "Indian" served as a symbol of the ancient past that legitimized the nascent Republic.²⁹ Unlike other American nations, however, most of Cuba's Taíno Amerindians were killed from disease and forced labor after Spanish occupation.³⁰ In lieu of a living native culture, black modes of expression became the vehicle of protest against colonial narratives and foreign domination. Thus we see the global rise of the *afrocubano*, *negrismo*, and *negritude* movements during the twentieth century, which affirm African heritage despite the prejudice of many whites on the island who would consider such practices to be backwards and shameful.³¹ Through symbolism, politicians could avoid negative connotations associated with blatant "witchcraft," while still appealing to a population that was strongly affected by Afro-Cuban religion and well versed in its representations.

With this in mind, let us return to the case of President Gerardo Machado and the ceiba tree in *El Parque de la Fraternidad Americana*. Machado's political performance at the inauguration was uniquely conditioned by Afro-Cuban

²⁶ These paintings are discussed in depth by Paul Barrett Niell, "Bajo su Sombra: The Narration and Reception of Colonial Urban Space in Early Nineteenth-Century Havana, Cuba" (PhD diss., University of New Mexico, 2008); and Niell, "Ceiba Tree as a Symbol," 89-109. The paintings are entitled as follows: *El Primer Cabildo* (The First Town Council Meeting), oil on canvas, c. 1827; *La Primera Misa* (The First Mass), oil on canvas, c. 1827; and *La Fiesta de la Inauguración* (The Festival of the Inauguration), oil on canvas, 1828.

²⁷ Cecilia Arrozarena, *El Roble y la Ceiba: Historia de los Vascos en Cuba* (Tafalla: Txalaparta, 2003), 151. For more on the Tree of Guernica and other trees with religious and civic meaning in the Basque region of Spain see Julio Caro Baroja, *Ritos y Mitos Equívocos* (Madrid: Ediciones Istmo, 1974), 339-393.

²⁸ These factors of *buen gusto* and classicism under the Bourbon monarchy in the late-colonial period were discussed by Susan Dean-Smith, Ray Hernández-Duran, Kelly Donahue-Wallace, Paul Barrett Niell, Robert Bradbury, Charles Burroughs, Magali M. Carrera, and Stacie G. Widdifield, at the "The Politics of Taste in Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century Latin America," a University of North Texas symposium co-sponsored by the Meadows Museum of Art at Southern Methodist University, September 17, 2010. I attended and served as a clerical assistant for this event. Proceedings from the conference will soon be published in a volume with supplemental authors through the University of New Mexico Press.

²⁹ A good art historical account of this phenomenon can be found in Stacie G. Widdifield, *The Embodiment of the National in late Nineteenth-Century Mexican Painting* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996), 78-122.

³⁰ It should be noted that, while not as wide-spread as other American nations, the "Indian" did serve as a national symbol in Cuba as well.

A Taíno Amerindian from Hispanola (modern-day Haiti and the Dominican Republic) named Hatuey is still celebrated on the island for leading an attempted coup of the colonial Cuban government in the sixteenth century. For this study it is important to note that, in addition to being a civic and Afro-Cuban symbol, the ceiba tree has strong indigenous connotations. The word *ceiba* originates from the native word for boat or canoe. These large trees were often used to create large canoes for Pre-Colombian inhabitants in the Americas. For more on this see Marshall Avery Howe, "Some Photographs of the Silk-Cotton Tree (Ceiba Pentandra), with Remarks on the Early Records of Its Occurrence in America," *Torreya* 6 (26 November 1906): 217-231. In the mainland of Latin America, especially in Yucatan and Guatemala, the tree is venerated among the Mayan people. For a good review of this literature see Katharine Anderson, *Nature, Culture, and Big Old Trees: Live Oaks and Ceibas in the Landscapes of Louisiana and Guatemala* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003); and Gregory Stephen Guest, "A Tree for All Reasons: The Maya and the 'Sacred' Ceiba" (master's thesis, University of Calgary, 1995).

³¹ Matibag, *Afro-Cuban Religious Experience*, 86-119. In his criminological study *La Hampa Afro-Cubana: Los Negros Brujos*, Fernando Ortiz warned of the danger associated with Afro-Cuban influence in the political sphere during the early Cuban Republic. Ortiz noted the effect *del brujo* (of witchcraft) in rural populations and he further warned that this may be used for political ends. He acknowledged that *brujos* (witches) had already infiltrated political contests, using their sway to win votes. He furthered his claim with a quote from Nina Rodríguez regarding a local political leader in Brazil that "*ha constituido protector en jefe de los ougans y de los directores de las cofradías brujas*" (has found a protector in the chief of *ougans* [Candomblé priests — an Afro-Brazilian religion with similar Yoruban characteristics as Santería] and from the director of the witch's guild. [Author's Translation]). Ortiz used this case as a warning and thanked "Fortune" that he and his

audiences. First, it has been observed that Machado was always dressed in white. While this is a common style in the Caribbean and should not be overestimated, it is worth noting that initiates of *Santería* must also dress in white clothes for one year.³² The reception of his costume is further significant according to early twentieth-century anthropological accounts of Romuló Lachatañeré. Lachatañeré's "informants" claimed that Cuban *santeros* had baptized Machado as a son of Changó.³³ As an alleged son of Changó, it is not surprising that symbols of that *orisha* appeared in the inauguration ceremony for *El Parque* and its landscape design. For example, the park's green space was recently lined with palm trees and ceiba trees, often associated with Changó. Also, on the day of the inauguration, in the center of the *Parque*, Machado ceremonially sowed the transplanted *Árbol de la Fraternidad*, allegedly as old as the Cuban Republic. The circle around that ceiba tree was filled with earth from the twenty-one American nations present at the Sixth Annual Pan-American conference.³⁴ This gesture was effective as a symbol of Pan-American fraternity and also held meaning for Havana's Afro-Cuban population. The earth for Afro-Cubans is full of mystical power and, as noted earlier, earth from different geographical regions is common in ceiba planting rituals. Following these facts, the elements involved in Machado's ceremony could have elicited a specific reading from a practitioner of Afro-Cuban religions and, in fact, did. Lachatañeré asked *santeros/as* what they thought of the ceremony. Among those he consulted, the general conclusion was that Changó had ordered the president to perform the magic ritual in order to gain protection from his enemies.³⁵

One of Lydia Cabrera's "informants," a practitioner of Palo Monte, had a more sinister interpretation of the inauguration ceremony. She claimed that the prominent members of the Pan-American conference entered *macutos* beneath

the ceiba tree. *Macutos* refer to the sacks in which *paleros* store their sacrifices and religious implements. These sacks are used in many ceremonies, including exorcism, but are also seen in "dark" magic rituals.³⁶ Cabrera's "informant," nearly twenty years after Machado's ceremony, still believed the ceiba tree planting held a certain dark power over Cuba. She warned: "there will be no tranquility or order in this country until they remove and dismantle the *nganga* [a cauldron central in Palo rituals] that General Machado entered [into the earth] some twenty years ago. This *Prenda* [another word for *nganga*] is so strong, and it is so wounded that it has everything wrapped up [troubled] even though it doesn't look like it, and it will cost a lot of blood."³⁷ Other "informants" assured that the *prenda* or *nganga* would revenge its owner for the ingratitude of the Cuban population.

According to Cabrera's "informants" the entire ceremony had an open air of magic and the urban design of *El Parque* displayed a wide range of Afro-Cuban religious significations. The arrows of the bronze palisade fence that surrounds the tree in the *Parque* are said to be those of the *orishas* Oggún, Elegua, Ochosi, Allágguna, and Changó; they are also symbols of the *palo* (stick) of Palo Monte's god Nkuyo (the deity of woods and roads).³⁸ The twenty-one earths brought to plant the tree, the gold coins allegedly thrown into the hole in front of the tree, and the possible political influence of a famous *palero* named Sotomayor, who was a friend to some influential politicians of that era, are all, according to Cabrera, eloquent indications that "hay algo" (there is something to it);³⁹ there may be, as Cabrera's "informants" claimed, "una Mañunga muy fuerte" (a powerful spirit) that resides there today.⁴⁰

This ceremony and its attendant symbolism inform the multivocal signification of the ceiba tree in Machado's political performance and the urban landscape design of *El Parque*.

fellow Cubans "have not yet reached a similar grade of political barbarity." Fernando Ortiz, *Los Negros Brujos: Apuntes para un Studio de Etnología Criminal* (Miami, FL: Ediciones Universal, 1973), 177-178.

³² This is discussed in Ivor L. Miller, "Religious Symbolism in Cuban Political Performance," *Drama Review* 44, no. 2 (2000): 34. Miller's article focuses on the manipulation of Afro-Cuban symbols in political performance by several Cuban leaders, including Fulgencio Batista, Fidel Castro, and, of course, Gerardo Machado. His article also noted that Afro-Cubans still go to the ceiba tree in *El Parque de la Fraternidad* for its religious efficacy. According to Miller (32) and the author's own observations in Havana, signs of *ebbó* (Afro-Cuban sacrifice/offering) can still be found at the foot of the tree today. The power of the ceiba tree's legacy, Miller notes, is its longevity.

³³ Romuló Lachatañeré, *El Sistema Religioso de los Afrocubanos* (Havana: Ciencias Sociales, 2004), 113-114.

³⁴ Oller, "Grandes Momentos," and February 25th editions of *Diario de la Marina* and *El Herald de Cuba*. The fact is also noted on a plaque on the backside of the fence which states that the soil was brought from important locales in each of those countries. Oller's article, for example, notes that the United States brought soil from Mt. Vernon, Ecuador brought soil from Pinchincha, and so forth. The use of soils from these important locales where battles of independence were fought may have been a Pan-American symbol of military victory

and independence from colonial rule.

³⁵ Lachatañeré, *Sistema Religioso*, 113-114.

³⁶ Gonzáles-Wippler, *Santería*, 106, 246.

³⁷ Cabrera, *El Monte*, 193-194. Author's translation. *No habrá tranquilidad ni orden en este país hasta que no se saque de allí y se desmonte la nganga que el General Machado enterró hace unos veinte años. Está tan fuerte esta Prenda, y tan herida que todo lo tiene revuelto aunque no lo parezca, y costará mucha sangre.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.* It is worth noting that the use of coins is also a central aspect of the annual ritual of circumambulating the tree in *La Plaza de Armas* in front of *El Tempete*. The similarity between these two ceremonies seems to imply a transcultural connection between the two urban spaces. The author witnessed this ceremony while in Havana, November 16, 2010. Cubans circle the tree in *La Plaza* three times counterclockwise and throw coins down while petitioning silently. It is believed that divine powers associated with the tree will grant those wishes, whether the Roman Catholic god or the Afro-Cuban divinities.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

While it would be difficult to prove that Machado intentionally used Afro-Cuban symbolism, it cannot be denied that the inauguration ceremony, the design of *El Parque de La Fraternidad Americana*, and the ceiba tree planted on its central axis reveal the polysemic nature of the Cuban city. The multiple significations attached to Machado's Pan-American ritual and the *Árbol de la Fraternidad* cannot be overlooked, especially if we consider Havana's urban space as a socially conditioned text whose meaning becomes clearer when reflecting on the various epistemological structures that affect the Cuban audience.⁴¹ The production of meaning in Havana's urban spaces cannot be simplified into a binary relationship between black and white or local and international significations; rather these meanings are interwoven, comingling, and coexistent.

In addition to the Afro-Cuban understanding of the tree in the urban landscape, one should also consider the multiple layered meanings of *la ceiba* in the urban history of Havana. The architect, Forestier, was famous for fusing nature and architecture. He was also known for his use of local history and monuments in his urban designs. Forestier stated that his works, including those in Havana, were dominated by a certain doctrine: "Imagining and inventing, but, in great moments, always obeying solemn tradition."⁴² Perhaps,

Forestier saw the ceiba tree as part of a solemn tradition because of its use in front of *El Templete* during the colonial period. His integration of the tree in the urban landscape was thus informed by historical tradition, which elevated the tree to a civic representation of the Cuban nation in *El Parque*.

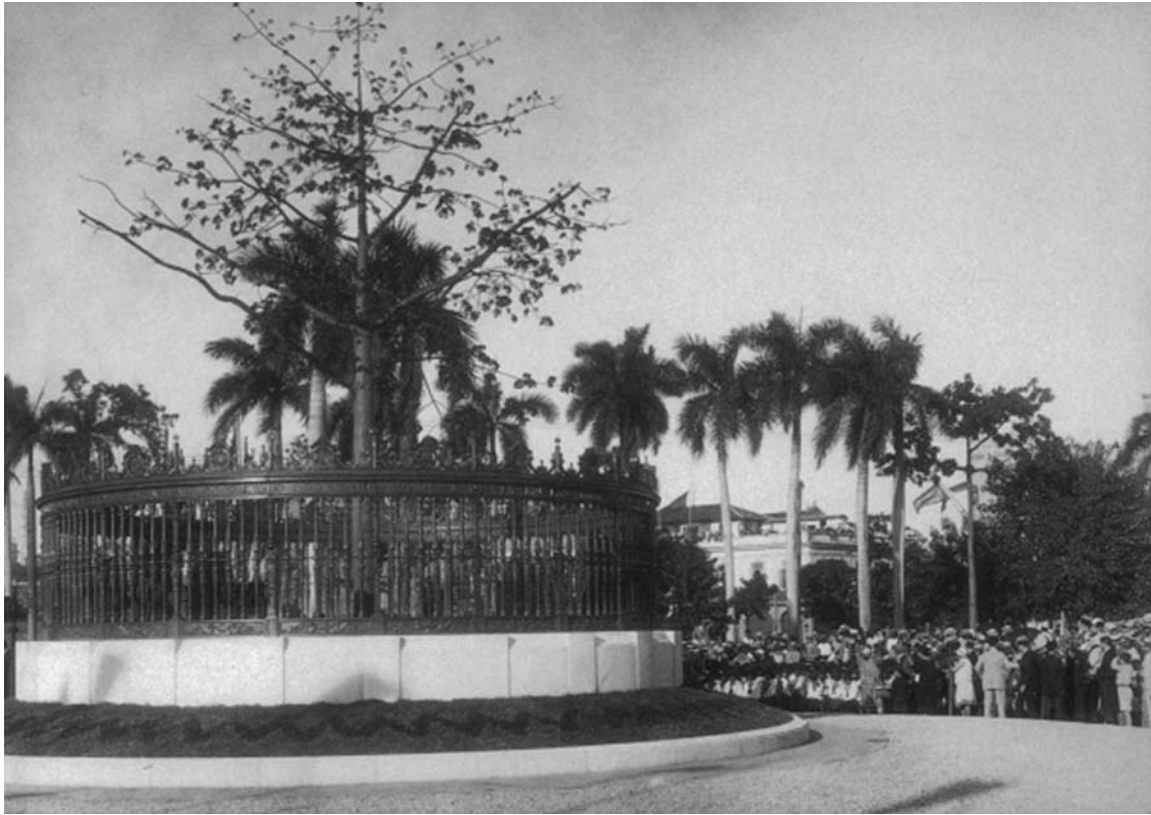
In conclusion, the central axis of *El Parque de la Fraternidad Americana*, marked by a majestic ceiba tree entitled *El Árbol de la Fraternidad*, communicated multiple meanings, including Pan-Americanism, nationalism, and Afro-Cuban identity. Embracing Roland Barthes' notion that the city is writing, one must consider the pedestrian as a reader who conditions the meaning of an urban environment such as *El Parque*. Following this logic, the tree's religious and civic symbolism may have been used to convey multiple local and international messages in Machado's political performance in order to create a story that could be read by various readers. If this is the case, Gerardo Machado would have been aware of the ceiba tree as a multivocal signifier and his use of it in the inauguration of the *Parque*, following Forestier's design, was not a coincidence after all, but rather part of a larger strategy to reify national and civic solidarity among diverse audiences in Cuba.

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⁴¹ Barthes, "Semiology and the Urban," 166-172.

⁴² Lejeune, "City as Landscape," 153.





[facing page, top] Figure 1. Roberts & Co., *La Plaza de la Fraternidad* postcard, the reverse of which reads: "The park built in 1928 has transformed one of the ugliest places in Havana into one of the beauty spots of the city. In the center is the Cuban Ceiba tree, which symbolizes Pan-American Fraternity," 1930, postcard, Havana, Cuba. Courtesy of the University of Miami Libraries Cuban Heritage Collection.

[facing page, bottom] Figure 2. Cesar E. Guerra, *Árbol de la Fraternidad* in the *Parque de la Fraternidad Americana* surrounded by bronze fence with view of *Capitolio* behind, November 2010, Havana, Cuba, marble plinth and bronze palisade fence. Author's photograph.

[above] Figure 3. Secretaría de Obras Publicas, *Árbol de la Fraternidad* dedicated 24 February 1928, photograph, Havana, Cuba. Courtesy of the University of Miami Libraries Cuban Heritage Collection.

[right] Figure 4. Cesar E. Guerra, Detail of fencing around *Árbol de la Fraternidad* in the *Parque de la Fraternidad Americana*, November 2010, Havana, Cuba, bronze. Author's photograph.

