

## A PIONEER IN CARIBBEAN HISTORY: *Franklin Knight Reflects on Cuba*

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*Lillian Guerra interviewed Franklin W. Knight between March 19 and 30, 2021 over Zoom in Gainesville, Florida. The text presented here has been excerpted, reorganized, and edited for continuity and flow by John F. Schwaller, editor of The Americas, from a longer conversation that was transcribed by Marianne P. Quijano. The full conversation will be made available by Dr. Guerra at a future date, on the Cuban Studies web page of the University of Florida as part of the Conversatorio Cubano project: <https://cubanstudies.history.ufl.edu/conversatorio-cubano/>.*

Lillian: Let's start with you telling a little about yourself.

Franklin: I was born in 1942 in Jamaica. I went to elementary school, of course, and took the mandatory “Eleven-Plus” general examination in 1953. I then left elementary school and for a year attended a small private high school with my two older brothers. The school system was a little different from the United States. I know that well, because when I came here and told a group of Wisconsin school kids that I had spent six years in high school, they said, “You must have been very dumb.” To which I replied that “that was not the opinion of my teachers.” I didn't realize then that in the United States students spend

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four years in high school. In Jamaica we spend six, combining middle and high school years. You get in at age 12 or 13 and graduate at 18 or 19.

In those days, the “Eleven-Plus” also served as a streaming system. The top students went on to grammar schools. The second tier went to technical schools, and the third tier eventually joined the general workforce. I went to Calabar High School on the outskirts of Kingston, which turned out to be an extraordinary school for academic purposes. At that age I would have selected a school based on its sports successes, but my father selected the school because he knew all the people in education. But my favorite school at the time was actually St. George’s College, a Jesuit high school that had the best sports team and best sports equipment. In my time, Calabar High School had a reputation for track and field, and it still does. Calabar, along with Kingston College, produces the top Jamaican athletes, but not Usain Bolt. I entered the University of the West Indies in 1961.

Lillian: What about your family?

Franklin: My father was—he didn’t like me to describe it that way, but I always did—a lower middle-class bureaucrat. That’s to say, he had all the middle-class values and none of the material possessions of the middle class. But he did share, like those sorts of people in the Caribbean, a sense that education was the great social elevator. Jamaica (along with Barbados among the British Caribbean islands) had and has a tradition dating from the late eighteenth century of pushing education not only for the white elites but also for the bureaucratic middle classes, which then consisted of mixed people. The abolition of slavery in the nineteenth century brought the black masses into the same group with the same privileges as the upwardly mobile intermediate free brown-skinned people.

Calabar High School was a British Baptist school founded in 1910. By the time I attended, it was transforming itself into a Caribbean school, with a teaching staff that was half British and half Caribbean. Some of the British teachers were military draft-dodgers from Oxford or Cambridge or other good universities, pacifists who preferred to do social service overseas instead of serving in the military. Calabar was a typical English-oriented school in the Caribbean. We knew a little bit about the world but not much outside the British Empire. We would get maps in which most land was red, indicating the areas of the British Empire. The empire was collapsing rapidly, but we weren’t aware of that yet.

A point I want to make in a roundabout way is that the boarding school was distinguished in its cosmopolitanism. The school community came from all

over the world. The foreign-language teachers had to be native speakers. At the age of 14 or so, my Spanish teacher was an elegant Cuban woman, Hilda Wolla, whom everybody in the school, from the age of 12 to the age of 19, fell in love with instantly. One of her remarkable characteristics to us boys in an all-boys' school—apart from her tight-fitting suits—was that when we boys were all sweating like pigs in poker, she, with her small handheld fan, never had a bead of sweat on her. All of us who spoke passable Spanish owed it to Hilda Wolla: we went to class because of her looks but left with a smattering of the language. I don't know what happened to her.

During the 1950s, Jamaican boarding schools attracted a number of students from Cuba and Venezuela. Presumably, their parents were shielding them from political activity. None of these students spoke English on arrival, but they picked it up rapidly as all kids do. They gave us all these dirty expressions from Venezuela and Cuba that astonished our Spanish teachers when we tried to ask what they meant. Since they were teenagers, they also brought some semi-pornographic magazines from Havana and Caracas, which we circulated at night and read avidly after lights-out in the dorms with flashlights. In this way, we also unconsciously learned about the Cuban Revolution, since the magazines also carried morbidly graphic pictures of urban bombings and cadavers. We didn't have television in high school, but we did have radio in 1959 when news came that the Cuban Revolution had been won. The Cuban students made such a noise in the dormitory that the housemaster on duty came in to see what was wrong. Apparently, he didn't even know there was a revolution going on next door in Cuba. We boys talked about it, because the foreign parents were writing to their kids and the kids were writing to the parents. Telephone calls between Cuba and Jamaica were not common in those days.

I had another connection to Cuba. Any family like mine in Jamaica knew somebody who went to work in Cuba during that period. My mother had two brothers who went to Cuba. One of them, Paul, had a daughter—at least one that we knew of—in Cuba whose mother sent her to boarding school in Jamaica. When her student visa expired, she could not go back to Cuba because of the Revolution, but she had older sisters in New York or Detroit or both. Her father, at her mother's insistence, arranged for her to go to the United States. We're still very good friends today. She lives in Florida and remains my favorite cousin, not only because of the Spanish language connection, but because we've traveled to Spain together, and we talk constantly about Latin America.

It's strange that I grew up with these connections. It's a fact that Cuba had the most powerful radio transmitters in the Caribbean, apart from the CIA transmitting from San Blas [Panama]. At night, Cuban radio would drown out local Jamaican radio. We didn't mind that because the music was better. The choice at night was Cuban music or US music.

Lillian: When you started at the University of Wisconsin, you had already had college experience elsewhere. Could you tell us about that?

Franklin: Yes, I attended the University of the West Indies. Everyone took a common university entrance examination, which in those days required English and was called the "general paper." Latin was also compulsory. My advisors in high school, one an Englishman (I think he was an Oxford graduate) and the other a Jamaican who graduated from Edinburgh or one of the other well-known universities, suggested that if I really wanted to do well on the exam, I should do Latin and math, because those were the only two subjects in which you could score the maximum 100 points. The idea was that even if my general paper wasn't competitive, an outstanding result in Latin and math would get me into the university. In those days, unlike today, the state paid for one to go to the university. The irony, which was a defect of the British educational system, was that someone like me got in because I was good at math, and good at Latin, and could hold my own in English. After matriculation, one could do medicine or any other subject. The tragedy of that was that a lot of people who had done no calculus or chemistry at the appropriate level decided on a career in medicine. Needless to say, some never made it more than two years in before they had to find something else.

The college I attended was an external college of the University of London, so my undergraduate degree is from a university. The Jamaican government paid all my expenses—it was British government money anyhow, so it didn't matter. In my case, my parents didn't understand why I'd want to go to university at all. High school was good enough to get a job, and with a good recommendation one could even enter the civil service. In the 1950s Caribbean nationalists were coming to the fore. Most of my colleagues who had some say—and in this we did have some say—made the same decision, [that is, to support a path to independence]. So the nationalist thing to do was to go to the University of the West Indies and to foster British Caribbean nationalism.

The idea of a Caribbean nationalism goes back to Marcus Garvey in the 1920s, so it wasn't really new for people of my generation. Norman Girvan, and Walter Rodney and all of us who were colleagues at the time decided that we were Caribbeanists. We all participated in the losing side in the 1961 referendum in

Jamaica, and the West Indies Federation was destroyed. Some of us were voting for the first time. We took it seriously, indeed.

Lillian. Tell me about your graduate school experience.

Franklin. I went to Wisconsin, at the same time as Colin Palmer [noted historian of the African diaspora, 1944–2019]. We remained lifelong friends until he died in 2019. We pursued the same course of undergraduate study in Jamaica, and we went to Madison with a cavalier attitude, thinking it could be a one-year tourist experience. As Professor Elsa Goveia informed us, we could come back to Jamaica [if we wanted to], and we were smart enough to go to England to get our PhDs. However, both of us loved the academic ambience of the University of Wisconsin.

It was the Vietnam War era. We loved the fact that some classes were spontaneously broken up [by students and activists protesting the War]. There were stimulating teach-ins in the early days—at the beginning, the teach-ins were really intellectual exercises. Professors participated. Some student leaders were articulate, informed, and well read. Later, the occasions became, of course, just fodder for television sensationalism. I have friends from the Wisconsin History Department who recall that period as marking the breakup of American higher education. It certainly was a watershed moment. One could sit down in the Student Union with really smart students who accepted that they were never going to graduate because they didn't go to classes. Education seemed more self-directed. I was impressed by the way some students I talked to casually in class or at the Student Union would meet me and say, "This is a book you should read, because you're interested in this topic." Even in seminars, there was less a sense of competition and more a sense of cooperation.

The university was, however, still sexist in that day. I had a female friend who was every bit as smart as I was, if not smarter. But in our graduate seminar, our professor told her—this was John Phelan, a distinguished professor—that women should not get PhDs, and that after her MA she should go into teaching high school. Just like that! Blatant! That friend and I agreed when we met about two years ago in Washington that the smartest member of our seminar was half American Indian, a shy student originally from Minnesota. She was better intellectually. She wrote like a poet. Professor Phelan gave her either a B or a C or something and flunked her. She wasn't as talkative as I and the others in the seminar, but she was really insightful. I didn't recognize it then, as we were going through it, but this was clearly a gender bias case. We tried to find her afterward but never succeeded. She dropped out. I don't know what happened. And you can multiply that case I'm sure by millions for that period at the time.

John Phelan was notorious as a sexist. Again, I didn't know this. He was very nice to me, very nice to Jim Lockhart, very nice to the male students. He invited us to lunch and to fancy restaurants, but the only time he had the women [join us socially] was when he cooked for the whole seminar, all six of us. He was a good cook. Everybody was invited, with their spouses. Women never had the type of one-on-one relationship that we had. He would talk with us about things like how to do our taxes, or what professional historians really did. Some advice he gave stuck with me. He said, "Whatever name you have now, make sure that when you publish your first book, be sure the name you put on it will stick with you for the rest of your professional life. Never change that, ever." he said. I had declared at the time that I didn't want to pay taxes, so I wanted to be a [self-employed, free-lance] researcher, which I thought would allow me to deduct far more expenses as tax credits. He replied, "Oh, no, the taxes are inevitable. But when you start filling out tax forms, never say you're just a teacher or professor. You must say you're an author, and writer, and lecturer, as well." He said these suggestions would prove to be very useful. But he was convinced that women should not do anything other than get married and have kids—a Catholic viewpoint—and support their husbands in whatever they chose to do. He was very narrow-minded in that sense. I think Phil Curtin, another of my professors was also a little like that. That's why my wife and other female graduate students did not like these professors, even though the men adored them. They were brilliant scholars in their own right and generous in their thoughts.

I was fortunate when I came to the United States to have had both a Jamaican and an imperial background. I knew European history and I knew British history; I knew the nuances of history across the world. That preconditioned Colin and me for participation in comparative studies, here comparative world history. [The official name of the program I joined, founded in 1961, was Comparative Tropical History.] At the time, everyone at Wisconsin called it "swamp history." It wasn't restricted to the tropics, of course, and it wasn't really about swamps. It was about cultures. It actually was incipient World History.

One had to major in a geographical area. I selected Latin America and minored in Africa, and so did Colin. We were in seminars along with people majoring in African history or Indian history. The program included Australia and New Zealand, but there was no offering, I recall, in Chinese or East Asian studies. There was a guy studying the Maori. Most students specialized in Africa and Latin America because of Phil Curtin's interests; it was he who founded the African Studies program at Wisconsin. And that determined the options. It was an excellent program, because the university had such good scholars at the time, among them Phil Curtin, who pioneered slave trade studies, and Jan Vansina, who pioneered oral history studies. Vansina spoke some six African

languages. He was amazing. His father was a Belgian colonial officer; Vansina picked up those languages as a kid growing up in Africa.

Lillian: At Wisconsin, you eventually decided to study slavery in Cuba. Would you tell us something about that? You said once that you had gone to Franco's Spain to do the research, which I find very interesting. How did Franklin Knight navigate Franco's Spain, while he was also working on Cuban slavery, which was a very new field?

Franklin: Briefly, Franco's Spain was interesting to me as a British citizen who wanted to go there. First, I found the people very receptive. And second, it was the first country I had been in where the police knew what you did before you knew it. I remember once I went out with my sister-in-law to the Valle de los Caídos on a holiday trip. As we were coming back, walking from the bus station, this *sereno* in our neighborhood said, "Hurry home, your wife is sick." Another time, in 1967, we were traveling in a car we had rented in Madrid, where we lived. We were on our way to Huelva after stopping in Seville, and we were stopped by the traffic police on the road. They asked for the required motor vehicle papers, and they looked at my international driver's license. One of the three police officers said, "Oh, he's okay, he lives in Madrid." We were so astonished. We were about 500 kilometers away from Madrid. Incredible! "He lives in Madrid."

At the time I was doing my doctoral research in Madrid, I couldn't even visit Cuba: as a foreign student in United States, I would not be permitted to return to Wisconsin if I went to Cuba. John Phelan said that for the nineteenth century, I might find just as many sources in Spain as in Cuba, because of the duplication of the documentary evidence that Spain would have kept. But when I asked about that evidence when I got to Spain, they said, "We never had slavery in Cuba."

By that time, I had lived for three years in Madison. One of my surprises in the United States was that in the Caribbean no one, especially people of the middle and upper classes, begins recognition with skin color. Instead, it is your geographical identity: you're Jamaican, you're Guyanese, you're Barbadian, and so on. Nonetheless, one is aware of color. We'd say, "Oh, you're mixed," or "You are black," or "You are brown." In my high school, we ranked some of the black kids by color, with reference to time. A very dark-skinned student could be described jestingly as "11:30 pm." And the darkest kids were sometimes referred to as "11:55 pm"—five minutes to midnight. It was a joke, and everybody understood this. But the offset to that was that class generally ranked higher than race. A student whose father was in the civil service, or otherwise in government, or a teacher, or a policeman, was regarded more favorably than the son of a white person who owned a landed estate.

We were sometimes contemptuous in Jamaica of locally born whites, but not foreign whites. We irrationally thought Jamaican whites were intellectually inferior. I remember that Colin Palmer, whose mother was a postmistress and his father (I think) a teacher, used to say that the dumbest kids in his elementary school were white German descendants who had been brought to the western part of Jamaica in the nineteenth century to occupy the farmland and thereby keep the estate slaves from abandoning the sugar estates and working independently. The Germans were an inbred group, so much so that they had all sorts of mental problems, mainly the type of mental defects one finds in royal families.

There is another story I want to tell, because says so much about the differences between the Caribbean, the United States, and Europe. I was shocked when I lived in Madison to find that neither of the two barbershops at the university would cut black people's hair. That was also true later in Baltimore, at Johns Hopkins University. When I came to Hopkins, I could not get my hair cut in the student union, nor in any white barber shop anywhere. I had never known such discrimination before. Whenever I needed a haircut, I had to take a bus to the south side of Madison, which is a black zone. Over the years, I developed a sort of antagonism around this.

[My wife and I] arrived in Spain in February 1967, and I needed a haircut by the time March came. Entering a barber shop. I aggressively said to this five-foot plus local barber, in my best Castilian Spanish, "Do you cut black people's hair?" He pulled himself up to about five feet and six inches, and asked, "What sort of question is that?" I realized that he was offended, which quite surprised me. I said, "I didn't mean to offend you. I just want a haircut. Where I come from in the United States white barbers do not cut black people's hair." He looked me in the eyes, and said, "And they call themselves professionals?" He continued, "A professional barber cuts any type of hair." We instantly became very good friends. We went to football matches. We went to bullfights. We would go drinking every weekend or at least every other weekend. "And they call themselves professionals?" He was astonished by my question, and I was astonished by his reaction.

Franco's Spain was very interesting, because it was opening up at the time. There was a lot of illegal activity encouraged by the Americans who were just moving in. I didn't smoke. I've never smoked in my life. But by pulling out a pack of American cigarettes, one could start a conversation with any Spaniard, anywhere, at any time. In fact, it was terrific in the archives because I could give the employees American cigarettes and I could get delivered to me *legajos*



that they claimed they didn't have. After a time, they would even know what I wanted and say, "You know, we have some legajos reserved for you."

Back to my choice of slavery in Cuba. It probably came from my growing up in the Caribbean in the 1950s, at the time of the Cuban Revolution. One of the things I can say about the Caribbean—and this applies even to Cuba in the 1950s—is that Black people knew they were Black. But skin color was only one of several factors establishing one's identity. Nationalism was beginning to take precedence. In Jamaica, Black Jamaicans called themselves Jamaicans, Indian Jamaicans called themselves Jamaicans, Chinese Jamaicans called themselves Jamaicans, Lebanese Jamaicans called themselves Jamaicans. People were defined first by nation-state, not by skin color or race.

In the 1950s, the drive toward nationalism was accentuated by the political independence of Ghana in 1956. But even before that date, Black Jamaicans were already successful lawyers in England. For example, Dudley Thompson, who later became foreign minister of Jamaica, was one of the defense attorneys for Jomo Kenyatta in the Mau-Mau trials in Kenya in the 1950s. We had heard a lot about that when he came back to Jamaica. They called him Dudley, "Burning Spear" Thompson.

The other thing that surprised me when I started traveling around the Americas and in Europe was how much Jamaicans of my generation knew of the wider Caribbean. For example, Puerto Rico, and Luis Marín, its first elected governor of Puerto Rico, were as familiar to us as Norman Manley, then the chief minister of Jamaica; the two men were friends. Given our age group and the propaganda, we all hated Fulgencio Batista, though we didn't know too much about Fidel Castro. But I remember—and I'm just now reading a book about it—that Jamaicans feared they would be obliterated in 1962 with the Cuban missile crisis. Although we knew nothing about nuclear weapons, we did understand something about radiation—more than either the Cubans or the Americans. We realized that if Americans dropped a nuclear weapon anywhere in Cuba, nobody in Jamaica would survive.

When I visited Cuba, people showed me some of the underground nuclear shelters that had been created in Havana. They were only about three feet below the surface; you could almost penetrate such a shelter with a rifle, not to mention a bomb. Then there were caves that were identified as shelters, but there was nothing to block the entrances. So obviously, there was no thought of radiation. I used to say, "These are not bomb shelters. They're common graves." Meanwhile, to protect their planes, the Cubans had bunkers of reinforced concrete.

Lillian: You mentioned learning a lot about the British Empire as part of your educational upbringing. How much did people who were part of that empire know about the things that were deeply demonized in the decline. Did they teach you about that?

Franklin: No, they didn't, but the fact is that all empires are transient and all have intrinsic weaknesses, that is, they have within them the seeds of their self-destruction. At Johns Hopkins, I met John Russell Wood, the Brazil specialist, an Oxford graduate who was exactly my age. We were in high school at the same time. He was from Wales, which was considered marginal in England, but he went to an English public school [Rossall School], which was very good, one of the top, because he was bright. He was a teacher's son, an only child. He came to Hopkins four years before me, but we were offered jobs there in the same year, 1969. He arrived in 1970, and I arrived in 1973. I didn't think I wanted to be in a southern US culture, and that astonished my American colleagues, who considered Maryland to be a "border state." Well, I didn't know anything about border states. I knew about the Mason-Dixon line, and that you're either north or south of that line. When my wife and I lived on Long Island, I always said that if we left the area, we would go where it's warm. "Got to be Florida, or Texas, or further south."

Although John had gone to a boarding school in the north of England, and I to a high school in Jamaica, we found out that we had studied the same books, taken the same exams set by Oxford or Cambridge external examiners, and received similar educations. I did very well. If there hadn't been a University of the West Indies then, I probably would have gone to Oxford and John could have been my classmate. I observed the close relationship of education in the British metropolis to that in some of its colonies. John and I had memorized the same poems and read the same books. If one of us brought up a quotation, the other could finish it. That was the age when you read widely and memorized as well, if you attended a boarding school.

Lillian: How did you come to specialize in Cuba and the Spanish Caribbean?

Franklin: I didn't set out to be a Cuban specialist, even though I had these predispositions for Cuba, having grown up 90 miles away from it. I really wanted to be a Mexicanist, a colonial Mexicanist, because I liked the colonial period. Wandering around Mexico for three weeks as a student, I was astonished at how little I knew about Hispanic America, about Mexico, or even about Spain. I had read Hemingway, and I thought that was Spain. Terrible. The fact is that there was no bona fide Latin Americanist at the University of London's college in Jamaica whom I could learn from as an

undergraduate. The sole Latin American specialist was an economic historian, who I think read one book before his tutorial, or something like that. The subject matter was business in Brazil and investment in the nineteenth century.

I had done research as an undergraduate under Elsa Goveia. We all had to do serious research, and we all had to go to the local archives. Senior students could use their year on a university-sponsored trip abroad to go to the British archives and the British Museum Reading Room. One feature of the British university educational system—then, but no longer—was that during your three years, the university subsidized travel. This came out of the Grand Tour tradition of earlier days. You could go anywhere that two professors justified was relevant to your education. For my first request, I was honest—because I thought honesty was an worthy academic quality—and asked to go to Carnival in Trinidad, with a resounding no in response. With the next request, because I had shown some interest in the Caribbean that was wider than the former British colonies there, I was allowed to go abroad.

I wanted to go to Puerto Rico and to Haiti, but I ended up in Mexico. Puerto Rico had a really good archive and probably the only genuine Caribbean study center in the 1950s, the University of Puerto Rico's Center for Caribbean Studies at Rio Piedras. Yale scholars including Sidney Mintz went there. Harry Hoetink and Eric Wolf were there. In fact, all of Frank Tannenbaum's PhD students from Columbia University in the 1940s went there—they all had a Rio Piedras experience.

Lillian: And afterwards, how did you get a job at Hopkins? Was it right off the bat?

Franklin: No, at that time, I didn't know anything at all about academic jobs. My goal was to go back and teach in Jamaica and be a Caribbean revolutionary. In January 1969 when I got my PhD, there were more job offerings in Latin American history in the United States than there were PhDs in Latin American history to fill them. It was the last time that ever happened. But John Leddy Phelan had set up a trade, "stealing" Peter Smith from Dartmouth and in return promising Dartmouth their best graduate, which was me. Actually there were two of us. I didn't know about a trade, but John kept telling me "Dartmouth is a great school, and you should go." And I kept saying, looking at a map, "It's too cold, I want to go south." He refused.

In December 1967, I went to the American Historical Association conference in Toronto, and it was cold as hell. A number of universities were looking for candidates because, as I said earlier, there was a surplus of positions. At the

time the State University of New York at Stony Brook was building its Latin American Program, and in fact, interviewing with them was the only appointment I had for the conference. Mack Walker (1929–2021) from his [history] department, who later became my colleague at Hopkins, was in charge of hiring someone at Cornell, and someone at the conference had told him I was there. We had coffee together. He told Cornell that he had looked at three or four candidates, and that I was the best one. But they had already agreed to take a guy from Yale, whom I knew, because he was at Wisconsin with me before he went to Yale.

So there was this informal market, and everyone went through the interviews. But in fact, the universities already knew who they wanted before they got to Toronto. Finally, Cornell did make me two offers, but I turned them down because it was too cold. Rochester also made me an offer. I refused to go to Swarthmore. John Leddy Phelan was quite upset, especially when I chose Stony Brook, because it was the warmest of the places I had to choose from. He thought I was crazy: Why would I turn down Johns Hopkins simply because I didn't want to be in Baltimore? I said, "If I go south of the Mason-Dixon line, I want to go all the way down to Florida or to Texas." But I turned down Gainesville twice, and Austin twice.

I spent five years at Stony Brook, my first academic job. I got every other year off for research and writing. Stony Brook was a new branch of SUNY at the time, and the late Stanley Ross was then its dean. After he interviewed me in Toronto, I was invited to consider an offer at Long Island. At the time, I was then making \$2,500, my stipend as a graduate student. Stanley said, "We'll more than double that. We give you \$7,500." I thought this is a lot of money—if we could live on \$2,500, we could buy a Rolls Royce with \$7,500. But I never figured on the hit I would take from taxes. In most cases, the stipend of a grad student at that time was tax exempt.

We arrived at Stony Brook in August, and classes started in September in 1968. I was classified as an instructor. Although I had finished my dissertation, I hadn't yet defended it and thus didn't have the degree in hand. Soon after, we attended a History Department faculty meeting—a departmental party, actually. One of the faculty wives asked my wife, "So which season theater tickets do you have for New York?" My wife replied honestly, "We don't have any of this season's theater tickets. We can't afford them." At that time, it was about \$15 for a regular ticket, but season tickets were beyond our means. The woman was shocked. "How do you mean you can't afford a season ticket? Your husband is a professor!" My wife said "Yes, he is a professor, but we can't afford season tickets." The other woman said something like, "How

much does your husband make?” And she said “\$7,500.” She said, “That’s impossible.”

Later, three or four of the faculty wives went to Stanley Ross and pointed out how little I was being paid. We were so naïve and foreign, my wife and I, that we didn’t know what it was all about. The women told Ross that I was a victim of racial exploitation—it turned out that the janitor at the History Department building was getting \$7,000. The dean didn’t want me to go public with this information. He told them this: “If you will not make a fuss, like going to the student newspaper and all that, I will double Dr. Knight’s salary, and give him back pay from the beginning, and to make up the higher rate.” I didn’t know just what that meant. Then Stanley called me into his office. He and I hadn’t discussed any of this, but he said, “We don’t want to lose you. So, I’ll make it up to you. We’re going to adjust your income.” I thought, he was going to give me \$10,000 or such. Then he added, “And we will make you—but just on the books—an administrator, so that you have released time. You will have only one graduate and one undergraduate course per year. And you will have every other year off as long as you’re here, for research and writing.”

In January, I went to the departmental mailboxes, where we picked up our paychecks in those days. There was a check for several thousand dollars after taxes, and I was scared to cash it. If it was an error, I could not possibly pay back that much money. So I asked the department secretary if she was sure it was my paycheck, and she replied, “It has your name on it. It’s your paycheck.” I said, “But this is not my pay.” She said, “I don’t know anything about that. You should call the business office.” The business office secretary said, “Oh, yes, the dean and the vice president have agreed that you’re not an instructor anymore, because you’ve got your PhD now and you’re an assistant professor. They have doubled your salary, and the check you have includes back pay for the time you were paid less, to make up for it. We’ve already deducted the taxes, ok? You can cash it. You don’t have to pay anything back.” My wife and I started living like kings. Every year we went to Spain. In fact, we used to boast at the time (until 1970, when the dollar collapsed) that there wasn’t a restaurant in Europe that my wife and I couldn’t afford to go to for an evening.

When I came to Hopkins, they matched the teaching load I had at Stony Brook. I taught only two courses per semester. They could not give me regular time off, but we had—and we still do—have something in the department informally called “American leave”; as it worked then, you could, if necessary, be relieved of teaching to finish a book. But you were never relieved of your graduate students, ever.

Once I got to Johns Hopkins, I stayed for the rest of my career. I had many offers from many universities but I turned them all down. It was a great intellectual community. There was a convention at Johns Hopkins in the old days that no one was hired in the department without the consent of the most junior member, regardless of rank. In those days they gave tenure only with full professorship. One of the reasons I got a little more money when I came to Hopkins is that I was already tenured at Stony Brook. They had been negotiating with me all along, from the days when I was an instructor until I was a tenured associate professor, and rank and pay became a problem. They resolved it by saying, "You will be an associate professor, but we'll pay you like a full professor." I agreed. With a growing family, I would never complain about anything that was legitimately offered in green.

Each academic year, along with the required graduate seminar, I taught a single undergraduate course per semester. I had never thought about teaching about Cuba and the Caribbean at Stony Brook, and during my first years at Hopkins I taught only two undergraduate courses, Modern Latin America and Modern Mexico. But some students came to me and said, "You go to Cuba all the time, and you never talk about Cuba." They suggested that I teach a course on Cuba, and that is how I started teaching a course on Cuba and the contemporary Caribbean.

I taught about Cuba in historical stages, explaining that the American public mistakenly believed that it was a static society with a static political system. It is not. I divided the Cuban Revolution into arbitrary stages, noting that every stage could be further subdivided, say, from 1959 to 1961, or 1961 to 1965, or 1965 to 1970, and so on. I gave reasons for choosing these periods, emphasizing that history is not a straight line, that it zigs and zags. The Cubans were *always* conscious, however, of one major problem: the defense of their Revolution in a hostile world. The Revolution was the only thing that mattered.

Between 1959 and 1970, facing the fact that Fidel's ten-million-ton harvest goal had not been realized, Cubans still had an idealistic revolution and idealistic leaders. But the one thing that none of the early leaders had was administrative experience. That is why they kicked out Che Guevara. Che rode into power with the guerrillas and then said, "You need ideology, and you need administration, and you need a bureaucracy, and you need a consistent military." They agreed. But still there were significant disputes and political changes between 1959 and 1970. The first two years, I think, were the most wildly idealistic; politics favored the general redistribution and some other good things, like the year of the teachers and the education and health emphasis.

The Bay of Pigs and the Missile Crisis forced Cuba to realize that it could not have a small independent state in the Americas. In fact, I am not sure you can have it anywhere—you need a *patrón*. I think the decision in 1962, brewing in 1961, was to use the Soviets as the *patrón*. This alienated Che Guevara from the Castro brothers, because Che Guevara had always favored the Chinese model. That is to say: “We will eat nothing, but we will be independent.” Most of the others could not understand this presumed luxury of poverty. In 1965, of course, Che left, and the fight over imposing those models ended. Fidel and the inner circle realized that Che had a tremendous following that must be controlled. So, although they didn’t give it a name, but they put the Chinese model in place, not only its principle of just distribution, but also the fact of virtually no salaries. Salaries in pesos were low, but prices were almost irrelevant—the state doled out everything. That was the essence of the moral economy.

Then there was the experience of engaging in Africa, partly encouraged by Che Guevara’s tour of Africa in 1960 and 1961. Later, he went back to Africa and decided that he had made a mistake on his first tour, that those local leaders were not serious revolutionaries at all. So he went to Bolivia on that fateful trip. One of the lessons that Fidel learned about Africa from the 1960s experience was that if you went in, it had to be in more than in a simple advisory capacity, because you were dealing with guys who didn’t share the same politics or ideology. That explained the difference between Cuba and Africa in the 1960s and then Cuba in Africa in the 1970s and early 1980s [when there a consensus emerged, rightly or wrongly, that only a socialist, anti-colonial state like Cuba’s could defeat the legacy of imperialism in Africa and address the depth of poverty there].

I think the Cubans also learned the lesson that Latin Americans were very articulate and outspoken in their political support, until somebody came up with cash. Then they would forget what they supported. Unifying support was behind the new thinking of the ten-million-ton harvest, to be realized by 1970. Fidel believed that sugar producers could unify and operate like a petroleum cartel—a harvest of ten million tons would give Cuban sugar producers an advantage, even in an age where sugar was competing with artificial sweeteners. Given the facts of the time, one had to give Fidel credit. The difference between a pound of artificial sweetener and a pound of natural sugar from sugarcane was about 60 cents. Ten million tons of cane sugar in the world sugar market would establish a commanding position economically. Under the Soviet agreement, Cuba was getting 32 cents per pound of sugar in the 1960s—approximately four times the world price. The original financial calculation seemed good.

I think Fidel took the failure in 1970 seriously. He didn't like to be wrong about anything. Guaranteeing that Cuba would produce ten million tons, twice as much as it had ever produced before, was a stretch. The country produced 8.5 million tons, which I thought was good, because some of those processing factories were really inefficient. That is why Cuba started modernizing and streamlining the factories during this time, to support the ten-million-tons goal. They had somewhere between 13 and 17 factories—I can't remember the exact number—that were really efficient producers. The others were just backup. The failure in 1970 indicated that Cuba could never be a consistent major sugar producer and destroyed the plan to create a sugar cartel. Nobody was taking Cuba's plan seriously; the nation found out that sugar was not petroleum. Then, from 1970 to 1981, Cuba tried to become a conventional Soviet state. The Basic Law of 1975 reorganized elections, increased the number of provinces from six to 14, and restructured the party.

I came to Cuba in 1977, when it was working very well. Even the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution were serious. It was working because at the time people were well fed, between the national subsidies and the money they earned. The water cooler at the newly opened Lenin School was dispensing fruit juice. Cuba made a windfall between 1973 and 1978, which the government spent almost entirely on Cuban domestic services like improving the schools and building daycare centers and playgrounds. The innovations were quite impressive. Health centers were four or six blocks apart, and every school was within a half mile of each student's home. The idea was that every student should be able to go home for lunch and get back to school without any difficulty. There was a lot of administrative organization.

Then came the shock in 1979. Not only did the world sugar price collapse, but the Soviet economy also virtually collapsed. Two or three successive failures of wheat harvests forced Mikhail Gorbachev to reorganize the Soviet economic system. Cuba, as a member of the Soviet bloc, was also affected. Two big changes came right away. First, Cuba's barter trading arrangement changed to a credit operation, priced in US dollars; thus, Cuba instantly became indebted to the Soviet Union for a continuously increasing amount in hard currency. Second, instead of five-year economic grants, Cuba now had one-year loans.

Lillian: You brought up the idea that the state had evolved during the first 30 years to become a communist, totalitarian state. I don't know how this devolved. Did it simply shift into this other beast after 1989? Were there sub-periods and sub-stages during those 30 years? There is some kind of split, obviously, after 1989.



Franklin: I think the split between Cuba and the Soviet Union started—or, I should say, became obvious—after 1989. But it was a gradual development. Two key events were the Mariel exodus in 1980 and the *balseero* exodus in the 1990s. However, the disenchantment started earlier, in the late 1970s, with the first generation coming to adulthood. Those born just before the Revolution or during its early days had reason to think that it should have succeeded by their time. For a very brief time—a false dawn—it did appear that socialism was successful. Cubans thought that they could live as well as Puerto Ricans in the Caribbean of the 1950s and 1960s. I think the depression in the late 1960s in the United States started a Puerto Rican economic downturn.

As a kid growing up in Jamaica, our great model was Luis Muñoz Marín's Puerto Rico. We thought we could see economic movement in Puerto Rico. You could sense an expanding middle class. Now, the Cuban problem has always been that the government sets control—not popular support of the government itself—as its highest priority. But the degree of support for the government was always difficult to read, which is why they held on to the Catholic Church and other social organizations—they themselves suspected that people were only paying the government lip service. This proved to be true in 1980, when the country's pride and joy—the people with the best educations, who had enjoyed the best opportunities—decided to leave en masse for a country that was still doing well.

The short downturn between 1979 and 1982 was nothing compared to the period between 1991 and 1993. Nothing. Sometime in the late 1980s, I don't know exactly when, people began to realize that Cuban was not an egalitarian society. I heard stories, and sometimes could see for myself, that people in the government, or with access to people in the government, lived better than others. Everybody was poor but some with access to the government lived a little better than those without it. Yet, the propaganda of the government was that everyone was equal in *la lucha*. Many people sacrificed a lot for that solidarity, including our distinguished acquaintance Julio Lobo. I'm sure that he died of a broken heart in Spain, because the state said they would give back his world-famous Napoleonic collection if he paid I don't know how many million dollars. He paid the money, but he never got the collection back. It's now—still—in the museum of Havana [Napoleon Museum]. Anyhow, that's an aside.

The Special Period that followed the breakup of the Soviet Union opened everyone's eyes, because the government for a short time lost control. It had lost control earlier, in 1980, for a very brief time, but in the Special Period the government realized that people were much more imaginative about resolving their personal problems than the government itself could be. The *paladares* are

my example of that. As someone who had seen Cuba in better days, I could remember that if people didn't like their meal in a restaurant, they would just order another one. During the Special Period, even as a foreigner with hard currency, I couldn't get food in my own hotel, which was one of the best in Cuba. I spent days in the Special Period—I mean many days, maybe 20 or more over the course of my various visits—looking all day for something to eat, other than a cup of coffee. There seemed to always be coffee, but no milk. Occasionally, before 8:00 am, coffee with milk was available. Bread was another matter.

Yet during the Special Period, I ran into a small group in Cojímar, near Havana, where Hemingway kept his boat. On a Sunday morning, I found them out there, enthusiastically sharing a bottle of rum with no chaser in the 90-degree heat. One guy questioned me, "You're not Cuban, are you?" And they invited me to join them. I took one small drink and watched them finish the whole bottle. They had a car. The group was three guys and two girls, so I joined as the fourth guy. They wanted to get some food, but nobody could come up with a place that had any. Finally, one guy called a friend, who gave him an address in Old Havana. We drove there. It was an old and ordinary building. Two of the group went inside, with the four of us sitting in the car and thinking aloud: "We don't know why they think they're going to get food here."

Eventually, they came out with a big bag of the best rolls I've ever tasted in Havana. I memorized the address. They took me back to my hotel and left me some rolls. A whole bag! I wrote down the address, and later I asked my good friends Oscar Zanetti and Alejandro García about it. And they said, "Oh, yes, it's a bakery for the diplomatic corps." But that bread of that quality was not available anywhere for tourists like me, and much less for locals entitled to their roll per day.

The oppressive nature of the state was reintroduced in the Special Period. However, the paladar was one area in which the people were more innovative than the government, and that innovativeness and resilience created a threatening form of individual independence—anathema to the Cuban government. Food was available in the countryside, but petrol was required to bring it to the cities. If a family in Havana wanted food, they had to go through a contact who could send someone surreptitiously to get it in the rural areas. Eventually, Raúl Castro decided that the military had to provide the transportation, because the military had access to gasoline for its vehicles. At the time, people were selling gasoline out of government vehicles to private individuals. The money was not a problem in Cuba—the problem was in getting anything of value for the money. Food and all other basic commodities were scarce. Some of the scarcity was due to poor distribution. One could drive out in the country and see citrus falling off the trees, or bananas rotting in the fields, yet

people in the city of Havana couldn't get any of either. By late 1993, the state had established a series of general markets and the supply chain to stock them.

I wanted to go to Cuba in the 1960s because I thought the Cuban Revolution represented one of the great revolutions of modern history. The challenges of establishing a conventional state [in which democracy and socio-economic justice can be defined only by free elections and anti-corruption] in the middle of the twentieth century were enormous. In my view, Cuba was a conventional Latin American, or Caribbean, state, which is to say that it had all the inefficiencies of these states at all levels. It had a sort of built-in protection for the political elite. Politicians are often good at articulating honorable principles, but not carrying them out.

Cuba could have done better economically since 1960. For example, it seems to me that over 60 years, actually 70 years, Cubans—given their outstanding capacity to innovate— could have by now made enough paint to paint every house in the country? Why was paint not one of the major industries in Revolutionary Cuba? Cuba has the capacity to produce cement for building, yet housing was always in short supply. The most frequent explanation given in the Americas, and maybe abroad, was that “Cuba is socialist” or “Cuba is communist.” I declared many times that Cuba was never socialist or communist, it was Fidelist. The genuflection to Fidel's whims over the years was a bonus to the Revolution in that his longevity kept it going and that he happened to be a quite smart guy. But Cuba paid a lot for this: the country never focused on many things that were absolutely necessary for the success of the state and the society. Moreover, Fidel was uncomfortable delegating anything. He could get people to work for him and carry out his wishes, but he couldn't delegate. He may have done a little of that in medicine, it's true, but even in that field everyone had to report what they were doing to him and persuade him that it was politically feasible.

I was in Cuba at the time the film *Fresa y chocolate* (*Strawberry and Chocolate*) was released. People would line up for hours in the sun at the only two cinemas where it was being shown in Havana. Fidel wanted to ban it. When someone asked if he'd seen it, his response was something like, “No, I don't have to see it to know that a homosexual can't be good for the Revolution.” And they'd say, “But Fidel, you should see it.” I forget his name, but the fellow who was Minister of Culture and some others had a private screening. It turned out that *Fresa y chocolate* was not only a well-made movie, but one in which the “bad guy” turns out to be the good guy—the “good guy” is the fraud. So, the government allowed it to be shown. I think it won prizes abroad.

Lillian: It's significant though that you were present when that film was being shown.

Franklin: Oh, yes. And the long lines and discussions were very interesting. I watched the discussions on television. A large part of the party officials, the *apparatchiki*, were opposed to it, but it was only because Fidel was opposed to it. At that time, if he said "Jump," people didn't even ask "How high?"

Lillian: Popular thinking has it that the conventional Caribbean government is inefficient. There is a refusal to delegate—Fidel's autocratic method of governing. *Fidelismo* itself is a method of rule and a philosophy of politics, not an ideology. Doesn't this constitute authoritarianism?

Franklin: Authoritarianism in Cuba is a handicap, but I don't see it as different from the authoritarianism of the PRI as it governed Mexico for so long. Or from the authoritarian actions of the US Congress, which is often influenced by special-interest groups that focus on a single issue. That is just as authoritarian. But if you're going to have a good society, or an efficient society—for now, let's not talk about "good"—you need to have a capable and efficient civil service. Britain's great empire had a good civil service, and when it collapsed, the empire collapsed with it. When Jamaica had a good civil service, it had really good government. The rotations of government did not significantly affect government efficiency, because the civil servants were pledged to carry out their work, regardless of the political leadership. This worked for a time.

Cuba had the advantage of a very literate and solidly institutionalized educational system, up to the 1980s. The system began to fall apart then, because it was producing more skilled people than were needed. If Cuba had 300,000 people in Africa at any given time during that period, it means that about twice as many were available, because they were rotating them in and out. This was a significant number. Normally, about 10 percent of the population was involved in military engagement, and when the military service requirement disappeared, the numbers of unemployed and underemployed increased. The Mariel exodus of 1980 demonstrated that Cuba could not gainfully employ all its skilled people. When a taxi driver was making more than a medical doctor, there was something wrong with the labor marketplace. When people who really believed in public service and are trained for it found that it didn't really matter, they became disillusioned.

I met a Cuban guy once, from the interior. We were friends until he migrated to the United States, became a citizen, and voted for Donald Trump, and I

unfriended him. But he was a very smart agronomist. I met him in the early 1990s, during one of my stays in Havana. He was generally correct about environmental factors, and he (and others) told Fidel in the 1970s that the idea of leveling the island and planting sugarcane wasn't going to work. He also told Fidel that if he leveled the hills and covered fertile soil with infertile soil, the sugarcane couldn't use that and so the yield would be low. So Fidel kicked him out of Havana and exiled him to Holguín for about ten years. The only reason he was able to get back to Havana, where I met him, was that he married a Habanera (in fact, she was originally from Cárdenas or Matanzas, I can't remember, a nearby province). Once they were married, he could come to live with her in Havana. There were lots of people like that. I heard stories over and over that Fidel would tell people to get into hydroponics, and they did it. Then, when they sold their first harvest to the hotels, they found that the guests didn't like hydroponic produce. For good reason, of course—it couldn't compete with regular produce.

Lillian: I'm going to ask you to think for a bit about the field of Cuban history, of Caribbean history, of the historiography, and the place of Cuba within that. If you were to make a wish list of areas of history you'd like to see researched in the next 20 years, what would be on your list? What areas could we really begin to explore? What do we have sources for? What would we begin to really understand? And then, talk about Caribbean history more broadly.

Franklin: There are two areas. One, which I advocated while I had a relationship with the Instituto de Historia Cubana and its fine Cuban historians, was a much stronger emphasis on local history, an interest that is growing in Cuba now, because the provincial archives are excellent. Unfortunately, they are in bad condition, but they contain tremendous resources for writing local histories that enrich the national history. Local histories will change the national narrative, which is totally teleological, as if nothing had happened before José Martí. So local histories will modify the national narrative to a certain degree. It's beginning already. Just look at Miguel Bretos's great local history, *Matanzas: The Cuba That Nobody Knows*. He says everything in Cuba that's good began in Matanzas—baseball and art and music, for example. That might or might not be so. But it is true about the music; they did have a group of Spaniards who improved local music. And Matanzas was an important cultural center.

The second area is comparative history, looking at the points in time and the ways in which Cuba began to vary from the Spanish norm. In Cuba, one could study engineering, which was not possible in Spain at the time. The University of Havana had four specialized divisions. In fact, the overall educational system in Cuba was superior, right up to 1959, to the Spanish system. But the centrally

directed national narrative has to be challenged in Cuba. It can be challenged to a certain extent by incorporating local histories.

So the two things I would emphasize and want to see more of are local history and comparative history. The archiving of documents in Cuba—and not only Cuban documents—goes far back. Havana was the safety harbor for all the Spanish American colonies. For example, a lot of documents that were sent from Mexico never reached Spain and are found only in Mexico or in Havana. The same goes for some parts of South America. That's why I was happy when I persuaded Johns Hopkins University and the Hopkins Library to train preservationists at the archives in Havana in document conservation. I think that in the tropics record conservation is a perpetual challenge. It is becoming a little easier now, because one can selectively digitize those documents that are not beyond salvation.

I also think there should be more interchange—and I have no doubt there will be—between the universities of Cuba and, say, of the British West Indies, the French West Indies, and Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico was a tremendous door, a steppingstone for non-Hispanic Caribbean people who entered the United States. If you were a student who was accepted after 1951 at the University of Puerto Rico under Luis Muñoz Marín and you did well, it was likely that one of the Ivy Leagues or some other good North American university would pick you up for graduate studies. It was a good connection to Harvard, Columbia and Yale. Wisconsin was very, very strong there too, in the agricultural sciences, working with the Puerto Rico agricultural center at Salinas on the south coast of the island.

Lillian: Maybe this will be the last question. Do you know if any of the changes you mentioned are possible in Cuba without another revolution?

Franklin: The changes are already taking place, but they are moving too slowly. It is not clear how Cuba will come through the COVID-19 pandemic—how they could come out of it with the same system. Cubans have been, and will remain, pragmatic and opportunistic. They have no choice. I have always said that the important point was not when Fidel goes, but when Raúl goes. I haven't been to Cuba since 2019, but I used to go several times per year until then.

Two things struck me on my last visit. One is that no matter how frequently I went back, I could note changes in Cubans' attitudes and aspects of Cuban society. The second is that many Cubans were thinking less about Cuba [in the last decade at least] than about how they could get anywhere outside of Cuba: the United States, Italy, Spain, even Jamaica. That's not good. I talked with a

friend in Cienfuegos who lost all his savings and investments in the hotel business when it collapsed, and we agreed that you simply cannot have a country in which your brightest, healthiest, most enterprising, and youngest people want to leave. That was my feeling in Cuba.

This friend was on the verge of abandoning hope. I watched him go from having almost nothing to hosting a paladar and then building a 14-room guest house. I knew him when the building had only one room for guests—there were two dining rooms, but only one guest room. So when a guest came to stay, usually a diver or surfer from Europe, the family had to be distributed elsewhere. The family could eat there, but they couldn't sleep there, because my friend was renting the only bedroom to foreign divers. He reinvested every penny to make the business successful, and he was just on the verge of constructing a small 14-room hotel. He planned to build another house next to it.

I spoke to him frequently for over 20 years. I saw him go from nothing in 1996, through the opening that Barack Obama brought about, and then to 2019, when Trump policies took effect and he was no longer renting rooms. The Americans were the best paying customers. The Europeans just wanted a shelter.

Lillian: So, what happened to these people? The guy with the 14-room place?

Franklin: I don't know, because in 2019 he had to stop building the house he had started. One of the early paladar owners—I forget who, maybe it was Miguel Bernet—took me there. My entrepreneur friend was a Spaniard, married to a Cuban and living in Cuba. When the government imposed a fourth tax on paladar owners—I think it was a health tax, or similar—he committed suicide.

The paladares had regular health inspections, which, among other things, was an opportunity for extortion. Small businesses simply could not keep up with the growing bureaucratic demands of the Cuban government. My friend started out well. But he refused to keep the books showing where he bought his supplies, and how much he bought, because as a small paladar owner, he really did not have the time to keep books. Improvisation was necessary for success. Even more, the government wanted him to show the percentage of his supplies that came from a government store.

Lillian: Thank you. It was great to talk with you. *Bueno, te dejo.*

Franklin: It was nice seeing you and talking to you after all these years.

FRANKLIN W. KNIGHT