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A Conversation with Tomas Avila Laurel

Elisa G. Rizo
Iowa State University, rizo@iastate.edu

David Shook

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Abstract
In February 2011 Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel (b. 1966) declared a hunger strike in order to bring attention to the political situation in Equatorial Guinea, where the longstanding authoritarian regime works in tandem with the compliance of foreign powers. Concerned for the security of the author, national and international observers recommended that he leave the country. Today, Ávila Laurel lives in Spain, where he has become, in his own words, a “migrant due to political causes.” In Spain, Ávila Laurel continues his writing, alongside a pacific fight for democracy. Aside from his ethical commitment to justice and solidarity with the people of his country and all marginalized peoples, Ávila Laurel has created a literary aesthetic that is informed by this multilingual, multicultural environment. Thus, his literary style is marked by images that synthesize his society, reflect on world history, and connect Equatorial Guinea to other nations, across time and geography.

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Comments
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In February 2011 Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel (b. 1966) declared a hunger strike in order to bring attention to the political situation in Equatorial Guinea, where the longstanding authoritarian regime works in tandem with the compliance of foreign powers. Concerned for the security of the author, national and international observers recommended that he leave the country. Today, Ávila Laurel lives in Spain, where he has become, in his own words, a “migrant due to political causes.” In Spain, Ávila Laurel continues his writing, alongside a pacific fight for democracy. Aside from his ethical commitment to justice and solidarity with the people of his country and all marginalized peoples, Ávila Laurel has created a literary aesthetic that is informed by this multilingual, multicultural environment. Thus, his literary style is marked by images that synthesize his society, reflect on world history, and connect Equatorial Guinea to other nations, across time and geography.
Elisa Rizo & David Shook: You were born in 1966, two years before Equatorial Guinea’s declaration of independence from Spain. During your lifetime, you’ve seen significant historical events, and, for many, you are one of the leading voices of your country. What impact has the history of your nation had on your creative writing?

Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel: Really, the impact of reality on literature can only be fully perceived by others. I can speak of the impact of my nation’s history on my life, and then find the similarities between my life and the situations described in my books. That would be more real. And that’s because, no matter how realistic it is, my work is always fiction—even when it’s intended to be autobiographical.

If anyone has any doubt, I think I’ve never hidden Guinea’s unspeakable suffering. In fact, I have devoted some of my works to describing how people live in our country by coping with history. Simply put Guinean TV on for a few hours and draw your own conclusions.

ER & DS: In your free time you like playing football—forward, if I remember correctly—a pastime you share with your fellow Guineans. For you, what was the meaning of the African Cup of Nations, held in your country in summer 2011?

JTAL: I play forward and whatever other position is needed. Really, I think I have a winning spirit; I hate to lose when I play a competitive game. So, I’ve played defense, to stop my opponent’s striker from scoring. I play forward because of my speed.

The African Cup is proof-positive of the alliance between political and economic world powers and the Guinean dictatorship. And it is clear that the event was a huge image-laundering operation for the dictatorship. And it’s even clearer, since how can a country without its own professional football league be chosen to organize such an event? Furthermore, it shows that there are many global institutions that don’t care about human rights and people’s suffering. And FIFA is one of them. I imagine that the cost to build a stadium is much more than the cost to provide potable water to a city, and no Guinean city’s residents have access to potable water.

ER & DS: You often refer to other countries in your work, from foreign characters, even the mention of consumer products, to entertainment, like karate and soccer. Can you explain that tendency to look outward?

JTAL: Guinea is a country that receives everything from the outside, both goods and information. Actually, Guinea is an impoverished province of a disembodied entity, as globalization might be described. In any case, it must not be different from many other African countries. If my books do look outward, it’s because they accurately reflect the Guinean modus vivendi. That is, Guineans play football and practice karate. In Guinea, life is lived looking outward, which is naturally reflected in my work.

ER & DS: Following the discovery of oil in the 1990s, Equatorial Guinea has become the third largest oil producer in sub-Saharan Africa. How has this affected literary and artistic output?

JTAL: The discovery itself of oil has not affected anything. Or, perhaps, it has proven that the lack of attention to what might be called culture, including literature and the arts in general, was not for lack of money. And if it has affected anything, besides some writers reflecting on its impact in their writing, it’s the fact that now some have oil money, others chase those who have it, and those who rule are made more strong to continue abusing their people, supported by the rich and racists of the world.

ER & DS: Do you think that the literature of Equatorial Guinea has been treated fairly by critics?

JTAL: For too long the world and those who should have known something about Guinea knew nothing of it. Later, a little more became known. Ignorance still weighs down everything related to the country, a fact that affects its literature. When we discover the reasons for ignorance about the country, we will speak authoritatively of those who have critiqued its literature. It is often said that if you love someone, then you can love their dog, even if only for show. And to love anyone, you have to know them.
ER & DS: In your novel, Arde el monte de noche (The mountain burns by night), you present a poetic chronicle of the island of Annobon, where your parents are from. Could you tell us about this novel and your favorite books?

JTAL: For an author, rather than having favorite books, some are more relevant than others, that they love more than others. I think the book, on the other hand, is the result of a dialogue between the author and an intangible reality. The outcome, the book, will be more or less happy if there has been a certain serenity during its inspiration and writing. So I can say that since Arde el monte de noche is one of my most relevant books, it demands more attention. Arde la monte de noche collects my feelings about Annobon and was written at a time when those feelings could blossom. And when I finished, I believed that it expressed what I really felt. This has nothing to do with whether it was fiction or not, because some of it is, and the rest, a small part, collects souvenirs in my own way. Another of my most relevant books is the collection of poems Historia íntima de la humanidad (Intimate history of humanity). La Carga (The Cargo) is a novel that transports me to a time I did not live through, or lived through briefly with childlike eyes. There are other works of mine in which I believe that the dialogue between the author and this intangible reality was fluid. They are my works of nonfiction, Visceras (Visceras) and El derecho de pernada (Droit de seigneur). I can't forget El desmayo de Judas (Judas’s fainting), one of my most beloved, and one that required much of my attention.

ER & DS: Have Equatorial Guinea's native languages, like Bubi and Fang, influenced its literature in Spanish (in your case specifically, but in general terms as well).

JTAL: It’s not languages that influence, but rather certain environments in which important stages of life occur. It is true that there are certain things that men and women only know how to say in a particular language. What we can say is that it’s the trajectory of life itself that matters. If you have periods of life in which only one language is spoken, then its use might be reflected in work gathered from that time. It is something so subconscious that only an outside observer will notice it.

ER & DS: Do you see any connections between the literature of Guinea and the literatures of other countries colonized by the Spanish? Are there some essential characteristics they share, or some basic characteristics of Guinean literature?

JTAL: Of course, they should be similar. There are many critics who say that a typical feature

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of Guinean literature is its Hispanic and Bantu character. But since Spanish is a sister language of French, and since there are many writers born in French- and Bantu-speaking African nations, this feature of Guinean literature is not so novel. For example, there are several Cameroonian writers who write in Spanish. The influence of African forms of expression would be much more developed in their work, because they have more native languages.

On this point I don't think there is much to uncover. Furthermore, it's often the case that writers intentionally employ their native forms of expression in their literature.

In a dictatorship like the one we suffer through, everything good that happens will happen little by little. You cannot talk about anyone exciting if everyone is in oblivion, enduring hardships. This has nothing to do with its quality. You have to survive before you can write.

ER & DS: This is a question I've asked a lot of writers and artists, something that interests me a lot. Does being an artist mean having some social engagement?

JTAL: There are artists who lament the fact that nobody has given them the means to spread their art. When they find support from leaders who violate the human rights of their fellow citizens, it's the signing of a contract that prevents them from reporting it. So you can answer this question by considering whether it's fair that someone with a voice is prohibited from speaking of the ills in their community. In fact, any silence of the cultural agents challenges them, especially if they can complain about the lack of cultural infrastructure. That is, things do not happen without a reason.

ER & DS: You've been a writer in a country (and now out of that country) where there are not many books, not many bookstores or libraries—unless you count the small kiosks that sell some magazines and diminutive copies of Obiang's autobiography. Perhaps it would be more correct to say that there is little access to books, at least by ordinary readers. What inspired you to write? Who were your teachers?

JTAL: There's no need for teachers of writing; you have to go to school to learn to do it at all. That's the only way to guarantee that a country will have writers, besides the community's valuing the art of writing. I know what's written in the book you mention, but I've seen it on street corners and on Guinean TV. It's so repetitive that there was enough chatter left over to publish a book about him. What inspires me is experience, and the constant need to maintain a dialogue with this intangible reality.

JTAL: There is no ideal country, and predictions cannot be made about Guinea because there are too many missing pieces. For example, it is more important to hope for future writers than current ones, because future writers will praise the literature they admire from today. It's as if there had been no writers after Leoncio Evita, no one would have spoken of his work. But now there is not much chance that good writers will be born, because they all grow up through a poor educational system. In a dictatorship like the one we suffer through, everything good that happens will happen little by little. You cannot talk about anyone exciting if everyone is in oblivion, enduring hardships. This has nothing to do with its quality. You have to survive before you can write.

ER & DS: How do you imagine the perfect Guinea; the Guinea of the future? Who are the most exciting writers now, and what do you expect from the literature of the future?

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