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"Can You Imagine?": Reflections on the Career of Tania León

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Friends of Tania León will smile at the title of this essay, which captures one of her signature phrases. With it, she expresses a sense of wonder at the boundaries she routinely yet improbably crosses while navigating a high-profile career as a composer, conductor, pianist, educator, and new-music organizer. As time passes, she gains ever-more acclaim – most recently with the 2021 Pulitzer Prize in Music – yet she has remained down-to-earth and community-based, exercising a strong social conscience even as she fashions a distinctive compositional aesthetic.

My connection to Tania dates back to the mid-1980s when she joined the faculty of the Conservatory of Music at Brooklyn College. At the time, I was teaching there too, and we became fast friends. Tania had then been in New York City for nearly twenty years, after escaping the dictatorship of Fidel Castro on a "Freedom Flight" and thus joining the Cuban diaspora. "Because when I was leaving [Cuba]," she later recalled, "I never realized the pressures of the leaving. When you are in a place where all of a sudden the political connotations of the environment become so heightened, if you don't swim into what is supposed to be the area that you're supposed to swim, you are, like, at odds." And therein lies her life-long challenge, whether in Cuba or the U.S.: finding ways to "swim" that honor her cultural heritage and gender yet avoiding stereotypes based on expectations of what she is "supposed" to do.



*Tania León receiving the 2021 Pulitzer Prize in Music
Photo by Jordan Strauss/Invision/AP*

Throughout this essay, I quote from an extended interview with Tania that was conducted by Jenny Raymond for Vivian Perlis's Oral History of American Music (OHAM) at Yale¹. The interview took place in 1998-99, and the 1990s were central to the Brooklyn College phase of my friendship with Tania.

Tania has established consistent values as both an educator and a composer, and she has been in the vanguard of navigating mobility and race. Today, universities and musical institutions across the country struggle to accommodate changing demographics and deepening racial strife. At Brooklyn College, as a public urban institution of higher learning, those challenges have been the norm for decades, and Tania has been a force in educating the college's diverse body of students. A striking memory for me is seeing students of color line up outside her door during office hours. She patiently makes herself available, while facing a familiar time pressure for faculty of color.

"Can You Imagine?" (cont.)

Tania exemplifies approaching education "as the practice for freedom," as articulated by the late bell hooks in *Teaching to Transgress*. "To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential," hooks writes, "if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin."² Those same principles also underpin Tania's work with major musical institutions, which she challenges to recognize the humanity of their urban neighbors. An early stage of this work took place with the Brooklyn Philharmonic in the 1970s, where Tania collaborated with the composers Julius Eastman and Talib Rasul Hakim to transport the orchestra beyond the concert hall, modeling community-based initiatives that have since become the norm for American orchestras. "We went to churches, we went to gymnasiums, museums—we even went to prisons, hospitals, everywhere," she recalled. With COVID-19, those programs have become a survival mechanism for some musical organizations.

Yet amidst this dedication to socio-economic, racial, and ethnic difference, Tania simultaneously resists "labels," a term that she evokes frequently and with frustration. She voices irritation at being identified as a Black composer, a Cuban or Latin American composer, a female composer. "Why do you call a person a Black composer? Do we call the other people the white composers?" she challenges.

Over the decades, then, I have had the privilege of witnessing Tania's career unfold. Together, we commiserate about the ongoing challenges for women in the American university and, in her case, for persons of color. But then Tania is so warm and embracing that she has many close friendships, often with a professional tie. This essay meditates on my personal sense of the core principles and issues that animate her work. Each section opens with Tania's voice, quoting from her OHAM interview.

Role Models

"I understand that Joan [Tower] said that she had no role models. I never had one."³

Issues of lineage are complex for creative artists, especially those with personal identities outside the traditional ancestries of Western classical music. Tania affirms multiple luminaries as forces in her aesthetic genealogy, whether "playing Chopin and Beethoven and Czerny and all these big composers in my home" in Cuba, or perceiving composers like Bartók, Dvořák, Rachmaninoff, and Stravinsky as offering a vision for "incorporating all of me into what I do." She studies the music of Boulez, Ligeti, and Messiaen "a lot." But those figures are remote, even a bit alien. They are white and male and European. So when asked about her own models by Jenny Raymond in 1998, Tania referred to Kathryn Talalay's *Composition in Black and White: The Life of Philippa Schuyler*, a book that was then brand new. Tania expressed shock at not knowing about Schuyler previously. After all, Schuyler was a mixed-race woman, pianist, and composer who, as Tania remarks, "was buried twenty days before my arrival in New York." Yet erasure meant Schuyler was not visible as a potential role model in Tania's youth.

Therein lies a puzzle: for a woman and a person of color, many potential ancestors have been ignored in concert programming and standard histories, which yields the unsettling result of staring into a void while searching for a lineage.

Community

"If you're going to go with an orchestra to Harlem, right? Don't go there to teach them that this is the best music of the world."

Tania León has long coattails, consistently embracing the communities around her and, in the process, building new ones. Composers Now, of which she is founder and artistic director, is the most recent manifestation of that impulse, as attested in its mission statement: "Composers Now empowers all living composers, celebrates the diversity of their voices and honors the significance of their artistic contributions to the cultural fabric of society."⁴ León's⁵ career represents a wide and generous embrace, including not only

"Can You Imagine?" (cont.)

her neighborhood work with the Brooklyn Philharmonic but also leadership of Sonidos de las Américas of the American Composers Orchestra (1994-99), to cite one example. In 2015, I had the pleasure of assisting her to curate "Voces de America Latina," which marked another milestone: the first-ever Fromm Players concert at Harvard that was devoted to Latin American contemporary music.

A community-based spirit infuses many of León's compositions as well. Her one-hour work *Drummin'* (1997) offers an exhilarating example. There, she created an intercultural extravaganza bringing together percussionists trained in European classical music with those in "ethnic percussion ensembles," as her work catalogue terms it. "So we have two [types of] virtuosos in front of each other," León recalls, "and they don't know how to talk to each other." She describes the fear – "the threat" – that the musicians felt and how it took prolonged negotiations with musicians in Miami, then in Germany, to achieve a space in which musicians of radically different backgrounds could find a way to coexist compatibly.

Memories

"Who am I? And I went back to Cuba [in 1979]. Twelve years of not seeing the place, twelve years of not seeing my family."

León might distance herself from cultural labels, but she continues to identify intensely with memories of her childhood in Cuba. When she finally obtained her first visa to return home, she did so after many family births and deaths had taken place without her.

Tania's grandmother Rosa Julia de los Mederos is central to her public reflections about Cuba.⁶ Clearly, her grandmother realized that the family had a prodigy on its hands, bringing Tania at age four to study at the conservatory in Havana. Over the decades, I have watched Tania retain those family ties, despite persistent political impediments. When her mother was in her final years, the challenge was to find friends traveling to Cuba who could deliver basic necessities like prescription drugs, eye glasses, and new nightgowns. Recently, it meant learning at an unbridgeable distance of a half-brother's death in Cuba from COVID-19.



Tania León speaking at the premiere of "Stride"
Photo by Chris Lee/Courtesy New York Philharmonic

In her music, León often reflects on her heritage, and *Indígena* for chamber orchestra (1991) is a stunning example, as well as being one of her best-known compositions. The work is "a commentary about the activities of my neighborhood [in Cuba]," as she puts it, "the neighborhood that I recalled in my memories once I went back. See, that piece is a direct hit of that emotion, going back." *Indígena* is a burst of polyrhythmic energy, referencing *comparsa*, the exuberant processions of masked dancers that parade through Cuba's streets during carnival.

Memories are complex, however, and for a person in diaspora they are often tinged with loss. León describes *Indígena* as ending with a "tremolo coming out of the winds and the strings, as though it's a plane that is leaving. That was me leaving the place again."

"Can You Imagine?" (cont.)

Syncretic Modernism

"I speak with an accent, so my music might have an accent, which might not be understood by many people. And if the accent has to happen to be roots or folklore or whatever you want to call it at some point: fine! That's okay. But . . . it's [also] like adopting the culture of Schoenberg and becoming a twelve-tonalist person. It's a language that I learned from him, and all of a sudden I created this work, and it's a twelve-tone work."

Sounded evocations of Cuba are only one component of León's highly personal compositional style, which she fights to define on her own terms. "I didn't synthesize anything," she asserted pugnaciously during her OHAM interview. "We [Cuban creative artists] have always been crossover without thinking that you had to have a label for that." For any composer, developing a musical style has to do with translating a personal vision – an aesthetic – for the public. In León's case, she positions herself in relation to Tower, Miriam Gideon, and Louise Talma, as well as Schoenberg, Luciano Berio, and György Ligeti. Her style represents her own vision of late twentieth and early twenty-first-century modernism: syncretic, edgy, challenging, grounded in life and displacement. It is often atonal, at times twelve-tone, and with rhythm often prioritized over melody.

Courage

"'Tania, you conduct it.' Me, conducting? You've got to be kidding! What else am I going to be doing? Of course, at Dance Theatre of Harlem, everybody did everything: If I wiped the floor and painted the walls and put the nails, and you know what I mean? I wrote a ballet. Okay, now I conduct an orchestra. It was not such a big thing. Even then, I was frightened to death."

Rising to prominence in a new country, apart from family and professional networks, requires extraordinary courage and an indomitable work ethic. León talks of how she has repeatedly gotten into "snowball situations" where she "rolls with the punches." This means that she has made the most of opportunities, even when the payoff was not at all clear. In the OHAM interview, León recalls her time during the mid-1990s as a resident composer with the New York Philharmonic under Kurt Masur. Her account in the interview matches my memory of our conversations at the time. She arrived at the Philharmonic in a position designed to promote contemporary music, only to find herself in a hall of mirrors – or in this case a storage room chock full of scores that had been submitted by composers hoping for performance opportunities. The packages were unopened, and León immediately set out to address a disrespectful situation. She described herself as filling the role of "a cleaning lady" to mail back the scores or, if the sender could not be located, to deposit them at the American Music Center or the Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center.

During those years, Masur did not program León's music, although he did open an opportunity for her to conduct the Gewandhaus Orchestra in Leipzig. With the Philharmonic, "it was like being there and not being there," she recalled. Fellow composers were frustrated with her because the orchestra was ignoring their music too. Yet she had no power. As I listened then to Tania's frustrations, I heard a lament common to women and people of color: being closed out of conversations and decision-making, being marginalized. It takes tremendous courage and resilience to keep going in the face of such negation.

Yet over the course of her still-thriving career, Tania León has had the fortitude and creativity to "imagine" a life for which there was no readily available template. All the while, she has retained her deep integrity and loyalty to her Cuban heritage while building a whole new family – a professional and personal network – in her adopted home. She composes steadily and prolifically, and she regularly conducts major orchestras at home and abroad. Her list of awards is substantial, including the recent Pulitzer, and while she might have found it difficult to find role models at the start of her career, she has ended up serving in that very capacity for a diverse spectrum of young composers. Personally, I am grateful for the good fortune of Tania's steady friendship – for her kindness, brilliance, and abundant generosity of spirit.

"Can You Imagine?" (cont.)

Notes

1. Tania León, interview with Jenny Raymond, Jackson Heights, New York, 13 November 1998 and 7 June 1999. The interview was part of "Major Figures in American Music," a visionary initiative of nearly 1500 interviews initiated by Vivian Perlis for Yale's Oral History of American Music. I quote from the interview with León's permission. Thanks to Libby Van Cleve, Director of OHAM, and Anne Rhodes, Research Archivist for OHAM for help obtaining the interview materials.
2. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 13.
3. The written quotations here are lightly edited versions of the OHAM transcription, which at times condenses León's speech.
4. <https://www.composersnow.org/cn/about/mission/>. Accessed 27 March 2022.
5. To signal the shift from writing about Tania as a colleague and friend to a more scholarly consideration of her compositional oeuvre, here, I make an intentional change to referencing her as I would any other respected research subject, by last name.
6. Thanks to Alejandro Madrid for supplying the full name of Tania's grandmother.