

MCNAIR SCHOLARS PROGRAM

An interview with Professor Cavazos about his summer trip with McNair scholar Connor Simmons into Cuban culture.

Can you give me a summary of how your trip went?



The summer McNair research trip went really well. That was our second research trip to Havana, Cuba, in 2017. Connor and I were part of an Africana and Black Studies course that focused on research in Cuba. The course looked at all things from healthcare, politics, education, gender equality, sports, government, basically every aspect of Cuban society. In that course, Connor was looking at the Marxist analysis of Cuban literature. The course culminated with a faculty led study abroad trip for 11 days with Dr. Bobby Cummings, Dr. Garcia, Saeed Mohamed and myself as faculty mentors. We went there with our students and the students were able to see if their analysis was correct or aligned with their own personal experiences and interviews there in Cuba. Cuba is a special place in terms of creative explosion and Connor was feeding off of that creativity. He was writing tremendously, several poems a day during both of his trips, enough for a book of poems. But it was his McNair research summer trip where he dove even deeper into the Cuban society, culture, religion and literature. He pinpointed some Cuban authors and key Cuban text to focus his continued research on. One of the authors was the beloved Cuban poet Nancy Morejon. Connor was able to meet with [her] several times. She's [in] one of the highest leadership roles of [the] Union of Artist and Writers (UNEAC) in Havana. Connor was able to bounce a lot of his research questions off of Nancy and she guided him. The two built a working relationship with each other, and that became very fruitful for Connor. Nancy also gave him permission to translate several of her early works of poetry that still had not been translated. Recently, Connor's translations were published. So yeah it was a really amazing time!

How did you find out about that opportunity?

Well, prior to this summer trip with Connor I've been to Cuba four times for my own research so I have an academic network community there in Cuba that I am in correspondence with via Facebook and email. When Connor mentioned to me that Nancy Morejon was one of the authors he was going to focus his McNair research on we immediately started looking via the Internet [about] what was happening at the moment there on the island. It's sometimes difficult to locate people. UNEAC is the place where you would go to find the location or the phone number of an author, so we basically decided right then, that if Connor wanted access to Nancy, the best way would be to go to Cuba. It's really difficult communicating between America and Cuba, it doesn't happen in a timely manner.



For example, Nancy Morejon is one of the most celebrated poets in the Caribbean and has an official position in UNEAC, she has an office in the “Casa of the Americas” building which is this really historic building in Havana and she herself was telling Connor how she's frustrated because she only has access to the Internet for like 30 minutes a day and it's at this weird window at like 3 or 4 in the morning. So, they always tell you, “Hey, if you don't hear from me it's not because I'm not receiving. My ways to communicate back with you is difficult.” So the whole trip was magical in terms of how well it went for Connor, he even met and made a strong impression on David St. John, the Chair of USC's Graduate English Program, a program Connor has applied to. David was one of the featured readers at Havana's International Poetry Festival, which Connor and I attended.



How did you two prep before you went to Cuba?

The ABS class that we took the winter before where 17 students went from Central went to Cuba. There were 17 students with 4 faculty, so 21 of us altogether that represented Central Washington University in Havana. And like I was saying, that was a quarter long seminar class where the students studied everything from the norms of the city, to the do's and don'ts, and did a tremendous amount of reading in terms of Cuban culture, Cuban literature [and] Cuban arts. All the students that were on that trip, last spring break, did a tremendous amount of preparation for travelling to Cuba. Connor already knew, I mean, he had spent 11 days there prior to us going back for his McNair research. He sort of knew what to expect and what the conditions are like. Cubans are really good at waiting because they have to. It's really funny to come back to America after spending time in Cuba because America is such an instance society. We need, we want, we have to have it right now, and we're not going to wait. And I think that was one of the things Connor really appreciated-how Cubans could wait so patiently for things. I observed in Connor that he understood the fine art of waiting. We didn't live as tourist there; we lived just the same as Cubans. We had our own apartment, we didn't have a hotel, and we didn't take taxis. We took the public transportation systems; which are basically free but they're so over packed. We were always the only tourists on the bus. And we ate in Cuban restaurants not Cuban tourist restaurants. And we went to the market and bought our own food, bought our own coffee and made our own meals often in our apartment- so really we lived like Cubans while we were there in the summer. And that's the way to do it when you travel, submerge yourself into the culture, and then you really get to see the difficulties. It's easy to romanticize everything in Havana, but when you start to live the way Cubans do, then you really start to understand the despair and the desperateness and the difficulty of day to day living in Cuba and Connor lived and witnessed this first-hand and it is reflected in his writing.

Is there anything that you want to add to the story and/or think about Connor that you think I should write?

Connor is like a once in a decade student. I mean I have had the honor of mentoring several writing students throughout my life but Connor is a really special student, writer, and scholar. He's intensely intelligent, and he submits to the process of his instructors. Connor has been impacted by all of his instructors here in the English department. I myself have a very unorthodox approach to teaching writing, my pedagogical approach

is very experimental- and often you know, the whole journey is never revealed- just do the next step. Connor was someone who always submitted to the process, and I think he's gained a lot because of his humbleness. He's very courageous in where he will go. I mean, just having a student who is willing to travel to Havana, Cuba, and submerge themselves in the culture, religion, music, and the people is really quite stunning. Connor did those things at full speed, and because of it, he is one of Cuba's new beloved, young American writers. I'm really excited for him. Both Connor and I have been invited to be featured readers at Havana's upcoming International Poetry Festival this May, so we will both be going back soon. This is just the beginning for Connor and I'm super excited to see where he ends up going for graduate school!



Do you have anything you want to suggest for anyone interested in pursuing MFA in English or the McNair program?



I just think it's an amazing opportunity. The English Department has a very strong writing program, with a very strong and relevant writing faculty. The MFA is the next step for our students so I would encourage all our students to continue their journey, but more so, to understand that writing is a process, not an end goal. I mean I've been writing twenty-years professionally and I still don't know what I'm doing. I think that anyone who is serious about graduate school needs to think about applying to the McNair Scholars Program. The program will better prepare students to be successful in graduate school. Participation in the program will also allow students to conduct research and write a research-based paper, which is a key component in the graduate school application. As a McNair scholar you also get training in strategies on taking the GRE test. You build life-long friendships with your cohort and develop amazing relationships with your faculty mentor. But overall I think McNair prepares students to think and act like a scholar, which is really what students need to be in graduate school. In graduate school students go from regurgitating knowledge as an undergrad, to producing the "knowledge" itself as a graduate student and beyond. I truly believe that McNair Scholars are better prepared to succeed in graduate school. Connor is like a once in a decade student. I mean I have had the honor of mentoring several writing students throughout my life but Connor is a really special student, writer, and scholar. He's intensely intelligent, and he submits to the process of his instructors. Connor has been impacted by all of his instructors here in the English department. I myself have a very unorthodox approach to teaching writing, my pedagogical approach is very experimental- and often you know, the whole journey is never revealed- just do the next step. Connor was someone who always submitted to the process, and I think he's gained a lot because of his humbleness. He's very courageous in where he will go. I mean, just having a student who is willing to travel to Havana, Cuba, and submerge themselves in the culture, religion, music, and the people is really quite stunning. Connor did those things at full speed, and because of it, he is one of Cuba's new beloved, young American writers. I'm really excited for him. Both Connor and I have been invited to be featured readers at Havana's upcoming International Poetry Festival this May, so we will both be going back soon. This is just the beginning for Connor and I'm super excited to see where he ends up going for graduate school!