



# Cuba and Canada: Chosen Places in John B. Lee's Work

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**How to cite this paper:** Alison González Cuba, Manuel de Jesús Velázquez León, Adonay Bárbara Pérez Luengo. (2022) Cuba and Canada: Chosen Places in John B. Lee's Work. *Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science*, 6(2), 178-183. DOI: 10.26855/jhass.2022.06.002

**Received:** March 18, 2022

**Accepted:** April 15, 2022

**Published:** May 23, 2022

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## Abstract

Cuba is respected and loved by foreigners, one of them is John B. Lee, a cultivated Canadian poet of a big heart and a violet soul. Poet Laureate of Brantford, Member of the Canada Cuba Literary Alliance and holder of many significant awards, he is one of the most relevant Canadian poets of our time. Since John arrived in Cuba, he was fascinated by our country and also with José Martí, the greatest of all Cubans. John's texts tell us of woods, rivers, love, the sea, the night, solitude, family, friends and places. Cuba has been one of John's recurrent spaces in his prose and poetry. It is of great interest to explore moments of this poet's work in which physical Cuba and its soul are reflected. Texts related with his personal experiences may be useful in the discipline History of the English-Speaking Cultures, taught in the Cuban universities.

## Keywords

Canada-Cuba solidarity, literature, poetry, Canada-Cuba Literary Alliance

## 1. Introduction

John B. Lee's biography as a poet is impressive. In 2005, he was inducted as Poet Laureate of Brantford in perpetuity and received the distinction of being named Honourary Life Member of The Canadian Poetry Association and The Ontario Poetry Society. In 2007, John was made a member of the Chancellor's Circle of the President's Club of McMaster University and named first recipient of the Souwesto Award for his contribution to literature in Southwestern Ontario. He was also named winner of the inaugural Black Moss Press *Souwesto Award* for his contribution to the ethos of writing in this region of Canada. In 2011, he was appointed Poet Laureate of Norfolk County (2011-14) and in 2015 Honourary Poet Laureate of Norfolk County for life. In 2017, John received a Canada 150 Medal from the Federal Government of Canada for "his outstanding contribution to literary development both at home and abroad". A recipient of over eighty prestigious international awards for his writing, he is winner of the CBC Literary Award for Poetry, the only two-time recipient of the People's Poetry Award, and 2006 winner of the inaugural Souwesto Orison Writing Award (University of Windsor). In 2007, John B. Lee was the winner of the Winston Collins Award for Best Canadian Poem, an award he won again in 2012. He has well-over seventy books published to date and is the editor of seven anthologies including two best-selling works: *That Sign of Perfection*: poems and stories on the game of hockey; and *Smaller Than God*: words of spiritual longing. John co-edited a special issue of *Windsor Review—Alice Munro: A Souwesto Celebration* published in the fall of 2014. His work has appeared internationally in over 500 publications, and has been translated into French,

Spanish, Korean and Chinese. He has read his work in nations all over the world including South Africa, France, Korea, Cuba, Canada and the United States. He has received letters of praise from Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, Australian Poet, Les Murray, and Senator Romeo Dallaire. Called “the greatest living poet in English,” by poet George Whipple, he lives in Port Dover, Ontario where he works as a full-time author.

## 2. Development

Let us begin these lines with the informed words of poet Marilyn Gear Pilling who knows John’s poetry intimately:

Lee’s poetry comes from the deepest well of the self, a place of rare depth and beauty fed by omnivorous reading and openhearted living. As well as writing the work he has formally researched and re-imagined, he pours his daily life into poetry every morning, creating a skein that contains the natural and the human worlds, the public as well as the private. Lee has said –in tones of wonder, for he experiences himself as simply a conduit through which an expression of grace becomes manifest–“I could sink the world in poems.” (...) Lee’s poetry contains and fully engages heart and mind, body and soul. His is an eye that can look at a trucker and see an angel. He has said, “White contains the entire spectrum and we’re primed by the illusion of our separate lives. God would have us all enter into the grand and lovely osmosis of the universe entire.” (...)

John B. Lee reveals in his work a germane poetic insight of both his homeland and Cuba. Many of his poems live their normal lives in the open spaces, under Cuban sun and clouds, over the sea, between mountains and beaches, the country we know. There, the island is felt in its move in time, through droughts and hurricanes and flashes of lives, all momentarily frozen and then thawed by a shrewd hand for the poetry feast. Consequently, there are salty breezes over waves, and rumors of palm fronds, and the reds redder and the greens greener of the Caribbean. Landscapes are peopled by humans of some common sort only revealed uncommon by a scrutiny that comes from the depths of a very personal poetic tradition, already with an old testament. However accurate, this vision is mirrored from the democratic vastness of North American landscapes and history. Cuba is more sensed than seen, intensely sensed, like pain in the marrow, like guiding, unavoidable memories that keep one erect and walking towards life’s ever-changing horizons. But felt rather than watched. Consequently, that sense of pending tragedy, of life at the edge of life that permeates some of John’s poems on Cuba and that the inhabitants of this island know so well.

In all manners, this is an uncommon glance at Cuba’s landscapes and people. In no way an outsider’s slanted sight. As the poet concedes in a moving move, the poetic acquisition almost helps him to learn “to remember the meaning of life”. Quite a confession for a mind so mature, for these veteran eyes, for the crafty workings of a soul so intensely trained in living a life he chose to live dangerously consciously, as his readers must know well. So is it in this poem written after visiting the Cross Hill, in Holguin:

**So, this is a place of places**  
*for Manuel and Tai*

we climb the four hundred steps  
to the cross of Holguin  
and Manuel says  
in recognition  
of the importance of our destination  
“So, this is a place of places...”  
and we stand  
above the city  
looking east where the sun  
is leaving the neighbourhood  
and staining the squares  
like the light  
lacquering of old wood

for the restoration of a much-loved dollhouse  
village

another day  
we descend to the west  
follow a crumbled trail  
down the green stone  
pathway knobbed  
with bone and broken glass  
and ancient coral from the sea  
we are coming down  
through the nuisance ground  
with its frail rust  
and tin aromas  
its pungent swill of vegetative rot  
and paper scuttle sounds

when I see  
the gyre of ravens  
hovering and circling  
over the blackened body  
of a bent-ribbed dog  
disarticulated by maggot work  
and the carrion hunger  
of those scavenging shadows  
as I pass  
I look and take in  
the final sneer of canus lupus  
many days dead

and I think of the night  
with its tongue of stars  
and the sorrowful solitude  
of that morbid moment  
of his passing  
that full exhale of his  
final lying down  
and am sad  
not to have been there  
to give comfort  
(...)

*Sweet Cuba the Building of a Poetic Tradition: 1608-1958* (Hiddenbrook Press, 2010), is a bilingual anthology of Cuban poetry that John B. Lee translated and edited with his friend Manuel de J. Velázquez León and that was intended as an introduction to Cuban poetry for the English-speaking reader. As the editors wrote in the introduction, they offered it as a “vase of fresh flowers at the gate of vast garden”. The complex demands of this anthology brought the poet closer to Cuban soul and, especially, to José Martí, whose work set up the internal structure of the compilation and became that moment in which, all the tones sketched along the protracted configuration of Cuban poetic consciousness take shape in a harmonic and coherent voice. In the opinion of a specialist:

In José Martí culminated all the Cuban traditions of the word, whose outline and development we witnessed in preceding periods. His personality reminds us of what Oriental mystics call the alibi, capable to create reality out of image. His importance exceeds the limits of our frontiers to become a universal personality in the perspectives that grow from him<sup>1</sup>.

It was in José Martí that John B. Lee found the key to many of Cuba’s spiritual mysteries. In his own words:

If in the voice of José Martí we might find the spirit of Cuba, so too in the spirit of Martí we have sought and found the voice of Cuba. Just as each Cuban poet who predates Martí seems to anticipate his arrival, so too each subsequent poet herein echoes his having lived. With this in mind, we dedicate *Sweet Cuba* to the memory of Martí. As Manuel and I say in the words of Rubén Martínez Villena, we dedicate our work to “Martí’s marble dream.” Over the course of translating these works, I have noticed the exiled poet, the tragic nostalgic, the dying soldier, the suffering slave, the grieving widow, the idealistic dreamer, the joyful celebrant, the home-loving and all-too-often disappointed patriot, and of all of these I find an apotheosis in Martí. And so, we have chosen to honour the work by weaving the poems of Martí into the fabric of the entire book so that we create a tapestry using the motif of his poems to gather the entire body of work into one unified whole. Martí’s poems frame and thread together this celebration of Cuba’s strength and beauty, her triumphs and failures, her land and language, not impoverished here by translations, but rather enriched by new music in the poetry of another language.

John B. Lee’s translations of Cuban poetry are notorious for their elegance. Connoisseur of the art of writing, John found ways to portray profoundly Cuban cultural traditions to his poetic versions of Cuban poetry. A piece of natural poetry, close to the island’s best peasant tradition, shows John’s artistic craftsmanship at its best:

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<sup>1</sup>Lezama Lima, J. *Opus Cit.*

By the blooming riverside  
 Of the Yara washing near,  
 So pleasant, fresh and clear  
 Slowly the sweet flow glides,  
 Where the glowing sun resides  
 In our region of the heat,  
 A sky beautifully crowned complete  
 With forest, and meadow, and mountainside,  
 As a handsome peasant rides  
 On his gracefully trotting mare.  
 [...]

Por la orilla floreciente  
 Que baña el río de Yara,  
 Donde dulce, fresca y clara  
 Se desliza la corriente,  
 Donde brilla el sol ardiente  
 De nuestra abrasada zona,  
 Y un cielo hermoso corona  
 La selva, el monte y el prado,  
 Iba un guajiro montado  
 Sobre su yegua trotona.  
 [...]

According to M. G. Pilling, John was born to write and developed a lyric voice that sings like no other voice heard before in Canada. In her opinion, while his “melody soars and praises, the tenor line is often wistful, poignant, or gently melancholic; there is often a pervasive nostalgia for lost worlds”. Recurrent themes in Lee’s poetry are the very Canadian topics of family and rural life. John has immortalized his life in the farm where he was born with the vivid portrayal of landscapes and stories of his ancestors.

### **The Songbirds of My Father’s Mind**

There is one song  
 in the chirping summer  
 my father hears it  
 from his parlour chair  
 and marks it  
 with a life  
 and we both listen  
 saying, there it is upon the wind  
 anonymous among the throng  
 and I am forty and my father  
 lists deaths  
 naming the ghosts he knows  
 even his sister  
 drooping in her bed needs water  
 but we are listening  
 to that one voice  
 we cannot fix  
 unqualified, the sparrow lands in water  
 fluttering like a lover’s heart  
 the cardinal wounds remembered snow  
 while Latin poets waste their time  
 living forever  
 in a language no one speaks.

Sometimes a natural voice triggers the poets mind and there is a revelation of rural Canada unheard before but so vivid that the presence of the distant and past is actualized into the readers’ present.

### **The Full Measure**

There’s the voice of the dog in the barn  
 you can measure his mood

in the mind  
 take his size  
 from the weight of his breath  
 seek his span in the volume of sound

find fear in the blood  
of his moon  
or loss in his lonesome lament  
you can know  
both by the girth of his ribs  
and the fall of his thought  
how his heart  
might break over hay  
or race like a hare on the lee  
where he's home  
in the scattering clods  
that screed  
in the wake of his claws  
what wags  
on the hinge of a leaf  
what sleeps  
in a slow-dying snow  
where the knots

are like stars  
in his world

and the dust shafts  
that swirl to be seen  
seem angels gone mad  
to the floor

what he names  
for the car on the road  
what he calls  
to the yard in the dark  
or the sun  
if he's held until noon  
is this not the shelter  
of hope  
is this not the lonesome  
repair  
come close to the lock  
and I'll say  
what's gathered away  
in the windings of time  
by the rain and the wind  
on the heel that covers the land

John B. Lee has traveled extensively, from the Caribbean to Europe to the Middle East to Korea to Africa to the Arctic, and more. From all corners of the world he has brought poems. With a keen eye for cultural jewels, he has seen the entrails of "the others" with love and compassion, linking their fortunes and tragedies with those close to him at home, in Canada. Thus, in many of his poems love for his ancestors and his land connects with love for timeless generations in the spacetime of our misshaped global village, where national boundaries pretend to be oceans, rivers, roads and newly built walls. Perhaps never is John B. Lee more a laureate Canadian poet than when his loving pain for those who suffer transcends geographies and cultures; perhaps he is a better son of the best of Canada when he brings the distant and the different into the broad heart of his poetry.

### **No More Need for This Old Man**

There is a photograph  
of a Christmas long ago  
when I stood grinning  
beside the guest bed  
in our farmhouse  
in pajamas  
my hair, a slash  
and I wore a pair of blue  
lenses pince-nez, playing doctor  
touching the plastic bell  
of a toy stethoscope  
to my cousin's soundless heart.

Since then  
my uncle died.  
Since then my father's sister  
breathes no more  
as sorrow by sorrow

we might name them sadly  
under stone.

And yesterday I heard a story  
how outside a distant village  
a soldier  
told a refugee  
who walked a weeping road  
in a river of human woe  
with his ailing father in his arms

"you have no more need  
of this old man"

and he  
learned grief  
how deep it goes

"you have no more need  
of this old man"

how light he was, how small of form  
 how like a wormy branch  
 his father fell  
 upon himself

“you have no more need  
 of this old man”

and I think  
 I need everyone, I want them all back

those dying uncles  
 those perishing aunts  
 those cancerous cousins  
 that baby sister  
 those generations of ash and dust  
 my best friend breathing  
 in his father’s mouth  
 listening for his heart  
 like placing his ear to a horseless hill  
 with the wind in the grass  
 when the cruel rains come.

### 3. Conclusions

These words are brief, too brief. So, they have to be when approaching a poet like John B. Lee in the vain attempt to fathom the depth of his poetry, even of one of his poems. John, the conjurer of images and words, the profound intellectual, the man to whom no human experience is alien. To love his poetry is to love what he loves and to love him, dear John, the poet close to a universal heart, if there is one, the simple complex poet of Canada’s cultural and geographical vastness, Cuba’s lover, the brother, the friend.

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