

## Editor's Note

The reelection of President Barack Obama is the most noteworthy event since the publication of the last issue of the *Afro-Hispanic Review*. Though the election appeared to be close, especially after Obama's lackluster performance during the first debate, political analysts and news commentators alike were surprised by the high percentage of African American and Latino voters, who helped to carry the President to a second term. According to exit poles, 71% of Latinos and 93% of blacks supported Obama. Only now, and for the first time, Republicans and some Democrats recognize the existence of a visible Latino population. This should not come as a surprise since the Latino and Hispanic communities date back to the nineteenth century and their members have been an integral part of the growing United States. In the present, Latinos represent the largest minority in the United States, and they have transformed their country of residence into the second largest Spanish-speaking nation in the world; the United States is second only to Mexico, and its population is more numerous than that of Spain, Argentina, or Colombia. Everyone should be mindful that Latinos are playing a fundamental role in reshaping the politics, economy, and culture of the United States.

Most, but not all, universities understand the changing demographics of the United States. Administrators that pay more than lip service are making the proper and necessary adjustments to address issues of diversity within their campus community. In celebration of Hispanic Heritage, in October I was invited to the Pennsylvania State University at Schuylkill to give the first of a series of talks on diversity. The conferences are meant to inform the campus about concepts that reflect an important and growing sector of the local and national population. As part of my invitation, the university chef prepared a delectable Caribbean meal, with *pernil* (fresh ham), rice and black beans, *tostones*, quesadillas, which, of course, are not from the Caribbean, and an assortment of desserts that included *flan*. Students, faculty, and administrators, including the Chancellor, who was generous to take time from his busy schedule, participated in the dinner. A dynamic conversation ensued about my contributions to diversity at the various institutions where I have held faculty appointments.

In the evening, I spoke about "Latino Identity and Distinctiveness," which highlighted the complexity of the terms Hispanic and Latino, whose definitions are made more complex by bureaucrats working for the Census Bureau. By designating four race categories, (white, black, American Indian and Alaskan Native, and Asian and Pacific Islander), and two ethnic groups, (Hispanics and non-Hispanics), the office produced eight race and ethnic categories. However, the designers of the census did not take into account how race and ethnicity are viewed in the country of origin and how that may condition their answers. For example, for cultural reasons most Hispanics identify themselves as whites, and many Amerindians from Guatemala

considered to be Spanish-speakers are not fluent in a language they associate with the imperial power that robbed their lands and colonized their people. These bureaucrats are imposing their notions of culture on the rest of the population without really understanding how cultures are formed, how they change, and how they reflect different historical periods. My presentation was part of a longer introductory essay I wrote for *Looking Out, Looking In, Anthology of Latino Poetry*, which I edited for Arte Público Press, to be released sometime next year.

Organizations such as Negritud, with its namesake journal, and the Afro-Latin American Research Association, with its accompanying publication *PALARA*, have been diligent about promoting the contribution of people of African descent in the Americas. Each organization holds a biannual conference in the same even years. Negritud celebrated its conference in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and featured two writers, Mayra Santos-Febres and Tato Laviera. Tato read from his latest collection of poems, *Mixturao*, and Mayra spoke about the slave's consciousness and the fear of knowing. Though there were many stimulating presentations, the Caribbean is a special space that provides me with a brief respite to replenish my energy.

This year ALARA held its conference in San José, Costa Rica, a country that has its own distinct population of African descendants; some are the sons and daughters of slaves that date to the Spanish colonial period, and others are of workers from the Anglophone Caribbean, transported to work in the construction of the railroad and the banana industry. One accepts the Spanish culture and the other one is closer to their English traditions. As is customary, participants were treated to lively and stimulating debates, with the presence of notable writers like Quince Duncan, Eulalia Bernard, Delia McDonald, and Shirley Campbell Barr. San José supports an active cosmopolitan lifestyle, but we also journeyed to Limón, located on the Caribbean coast, known to many of us through the descriptions contained in the works of Quince. Limón has a noticeable Anglophone presence, and many of these inhabitants still speak English. Our tour began at the United Negro Improvement Association, founded by Marcus Garvey. Participants also had the opportunity to swim in the Gulf of Mexico, or the Caribbean side of a country that also borders the Pacific.

While traveling in Miami, I had the opportunity to attend a *kinfuiti* ceremony of the Palo Mayombe religion. The ritual is performed for the deceased who were once *paleros* but did not receive the proper and mandatory ritual to separate their *nfumbe* or spirit from this world. According to their belief system, when you become a *palero*, your initiation roots you to this world; and after death, there is another one that separates you from it, and this is the one I attended. In the case of this particular event, no one in the family knew that the deceased was a *palero*. When the body of the spirit to be attended to died, this important ritual was never performed. For this reason, the *nfumbe* roamed aimlessly, subject to being captured and made to work for the owner of

the spirit. In the meantime, the wondering *nfumbe* has a way of calling attention to its presence and needs and can wreck havoc on its descendants. So, family members can experience generations of problems, for example, suicides and diseases, like diabetes, without knowing the “real” cause. Some members of the family in attendance were having unresolved issues, and a spiritual consultation identified the problem. In life this *palero* had been scratched or initiated under Siete Rayos, which in Ocha or Santo is the equivalent of Changó, and in Christianity, Santa Bárbara.

In the *kinfuiti* ceremony, a photograph of the deceased and dates of birth and death are required. The appropriate firma is selected and written on the floor before the picture, with four black candles, each placed over a cup size banana tree trunk. The picture leans against a *teja*, a tile with the appropriate *firmas*. Prayers and the sacrifice of two *nsusu* (roosters) are incorporated into the ritual that will release the *nfumbe*. With ceremonial feeding songs, the *tata* or priest pierces with an *enbele*, or sharp ceremonial knife, the throats of the fowls and drips the blood over the picture and a white plate. A necklace that wraps around the body of a *palero* is cut over the plate that captures the falling beads, which also hold the feathers plucked from the neck and underbelly of the roosters that is scattered over the picture and the plate. *Aguardiente*, *malafo* or firewater, is sprayed over the picture and a two-sided white candle ignites the plate; the fire consumes the blood, beads, candles and anything placed as offerings.

As I sat in the room full of *ngangas* or *prendas* belonging to the various *npungos* or deities, I felt the heavy weight of a sensation that moved me to double over and place my left hand over my face. The feeling lasted a few minutes and after, I returned to a normal state and control over my body. I was told later that I had felt the presence of the *nfumbe*. At the conclusion of this part of the ceremony, through the use of four divinatory *chamalongos*, or coconut shells, the spirit was asked if the ceremony was to his pleasing or if it required something else. In this case the *nfumbe* wanted more *aguardiente* and a cigar. After the spirit was satisfied, the members of the family were invited to ask questions, which were answered in a yes or no format. The descendants were curious about personal matters pertaining to their material lives. One had a court case pending and was told that he would be victorious; another asked about his emotional life and was instructed to stay away from a previous lover and that the person he was with represented a better match; another was told that her daughter needed to be careful because she could be subjected to an unprovoked sexual molestation; and the daughter of the deceased was advised not to place pictures of departed relatives in her room. The conclusion of the question and answer period coincided with the extinguishing of the last candle. The *nfumbe* was released, and within a determined period of time it would return to help the members of the family, as a sign of appreciation. The ceremony lasted almost two hours, and it was performed by Oba Frank Martin, who was gracious in providing the *Afro-Hispanic Review* with the

previously unpublished *firmas* of the Palo Mayombe religion, one of which appears on the cover of the present issue. The rest are located in the art section, along with an interview about Palo Mayombe, which make up the section on religion. I would like to thank Oba Frank Martin for allowing our readers to gain greater insight into his religion.

As we go to press, I want to share with our readers the most recent event I attended. This one was at the University of Missouri, Columbia, the previous home of the *Afro-Hispanic Review*. Cultural Bricolage, which featured the handmade books of Rolando Estévez's Ediciones Vigía of Matanzas, Cuba, was organized by Juanamaría Cordones Cook. Estévez and Nancy Morejón, Cuba's National Poet, were in attendance, as well as scholars from various universities from a wide range of department and programs that included Business and Journalism, librarians from Missouri and the Library of Congress, and individual collectors. The Vigía books are truly a work of art. Estévez selects poems, narrations, musical compositions, among other writings, that are meaningful to him, then designs a unique book inspired on the work to be published. It is a book, and it is an art piece. Indeed, it is both. The projects are made from products that are readily available for a run of two hundred books. Some could be leaves, earth, flowers, twigs, grain, sand, wood, or anything that responds to Estévez's interpretation of the "book." In structure it contains words, but expressed with images, foldouts, scrolls, pockets for a cd, or even a small theatre with cardboard characters.

Estévez also makes one of a kind books, like the one that was exhibited during a plenary session, framing Morejón's "Amo a mi amo," which poeticizes the love-hate relationship that bonds the slave and master, thus making each a slave of the other. For this book, Estévez selected a wooden yoke for two oxen to which he attached five scrolls. On one side he affixed the poem in Spanish and in English, and in the center a smaller one with the title of the poem and author. On the other side he illustrated two naked figures, one of the slave and the other of her master. The top center of the yoke held candles and a bell that was rung as part of a presumed ritual. At the unavailing of this unique and beautiful "art book," Morejón read "Amo a mi amo," and David Frye followed with his translation of the poem. The conference also featured three documentaries made by Juanamaría, one capturing the making process of "Amo a mi amo," a second narrating the life of the poet Nancy Morejón, and a third chronicling the history of Ediciones Vigía. They were all truly extraordinary. I want to thank Juanamaría, Nancy, and Estévez for bringing to fruition this important event.

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