

Editor's Note

Diversity, Inclusion, and Community should improve the university environment, and make it more hospitable for all its members, including people of African descent. While diversity has a wide appeal across college campuses throughout the United States, the challenge is to ensure that people of African descent are not overlooked when bringing other marginal groups to the center of their cultural milieu. There is no doubt that racism continues to thrive and masks itself in bureaucratic jargon, reasoning, and “false truths.” But we must guarantee that the broadening of our community must not be accomplished at the expense of the rights of people of African descent. Unfortunately, time and time again, we have seen that the struggles of African Americans benefit other groups before they begin to help the people who initiated the change.

Racism endures when African American males of all ages are considered a threat to law enforcement. A significant number of police officers do not hesitate to use unwarranted violence against them by claiming that their lives were in danger, even when the alleged perpetrators were unarmed and, at times, with their backs to the police officers; this information has been sustained by police cameras that poignantly contradict the “official” version of events. Interestingly, the same police cameras reveal a more compassionate treatment by law enforcers towards white citizens who, obviously, look more like them.

Racism is manifested by some whites who have openly raised their voices to claim their white supremacy and long to return to a previous, nostalgic time when blacks were “kept in their place.” These matters are made more dangerous when our current president, in a recent speech before New York City’s Long Island police force, encouraged the men in blue to disregard the rule of law and abuse suspects when placing them into police vehicles. Much to their credit, police leaders denounced the president’s remarks.

Diversity demands that inclusive communities remove offensive monuments that symbolize the oppression of one people against another, as the presence of those who have been oppressed continues to grow in numbers on campuses and cities throughout the country. Vanderbilt University’s Diversity, Inclusion, and Community committee recommended to the Chancellor the removal of the name Confederate from Confederate Memorial Hall on the Peabody Campus. The preceding discussions revealed that the United Daughters of the Confederacy gift was not to Vanderbilt but to Peabody College, which Vanderbilt acquired many decades later. Other members argued that by keeping the name, the university would have to reimburse the United Daughters of the Confederacy their one-million-dollar donation, even when the Chancellor made it clear that he would refund the gift from his own personal resources. Some in support of diversity maintained that the name should remain, not necessarily to show support for the Confederacy, but as remembrance of a historical past. Though this may be a valid argument, the monument’s mere existence, for whatever logical or illogical reasoning, at the

end of the day supported the position of the United Daughters of the Confederacy. We contended that a plaque, an academic course, or a museum could be more instructive to future generations than to “welcome” them with such an offensive reminder of the past. Monuments that askew history must be replaced with new ones that speak to a common past.

The varying positions to support or remove a monument reached new heights when the City of Charlottesville decided to remove the Confederate General Robert E. Lee statue from Independence Park. White supremacists, many of them armed heavily with weapons and body armor, gathered publicly in unprecedented numbers to oppose this decision. A counter-group of noteworthy size organized to protest these protestors. The tension escalated when an Ohio man used his vehicle to target counter-protestors, leaving nineteen injured and one woman, Heather Heyer, dead. Whether or not President Trump was sincere when pressured into denouncing violence, white supremacist terrorism in particular, his presidency has emboldened white extremism to take physical action against any form of diversity in ways that recall white, violent, supremacist and neo-Nazi nationalist movements at home and abroad—in Crimea and other parts of Europe.

In these perilous times, people of African American descent must refrain from closing ranks and isolating themselves from members of the larger community. We must not lose track of who we are, what we stand for, and where we come from. But we need to recognize that divisiveness is a long and effective strategy that has been employed to divide people of color, some of whom also internalize and embrace these ideas as part of their own strategy. The black experience is much broader than what we can possibly imagine. Paul Gilroy’s groundbreaking *The Black Atlantic* (1993) focused on the northern experience while ignoring slavery in other parts of the Americas. By contrast, Henry Lewis Gates recent series *Blacks in Latin America* (2011) has publicized, to the surprise of many, a rich black experience beyond US borders. Still, for those of us who work with topics related to this journal’s mission to promote Afro-Hispanic literature and culture, it is common knowledge that the overwhelming majority of the more than twelve million slaves robbed from their lands, from the inception of the slave trade to its conclusion in the second-half of the nineteenth century, were taken to Brazil and the Caribbean, while less than half a million were transported to the United States. Nevertheless, the US black experience was enriched by other people of African descent, who traveled to the neighboring country to the north and found a home among African Americans. This was certainly the case as early as 1791, when French planters and their slaves hastily abandoned the colony that would soon be called Haiti and moved to New Orleans, where these slaves contributed to an expanding notion of the United States. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries people of African descent from the Anglophone, Francophone, and Hispanophone Caribbean, Mexico, Central America, and South America living in the United States also contributed to a growing African American experience.

With the change in leadership of the Bishop Joseph Johnson Black Cultural Center at Vanderbilt University, *the Afro-Hispanic Review* has been asked to look for another home, thus bringing to an end a unique, innovative, and visionary partnership between an academic journal and a black cultural center. Together, for twelve years, we proclaimed a broader concept of blackness across the American hemispheric landscape and beyond. I announce, with great sadness, that after the publication of the present issue, *the Afro-Hispanic Review* will no longer depict, on the journal's back cover, the Bishop Joseph Johnson Black Cultural Center.

The current issue of the *Afro-Hispanic Review* features a dossier on Abakuá culture and society, which has not received the balanced and impartial attention it deserves. Purported to have originated in the Cross River region of southeastern Nigeria and southwestern Cameroon, transported by slaves to Cuba in the first half of the nineteenth century, its customs and cultures have remained a mystery to many Cubans and travelers. One of the first references to Abakuá society is contained in *Tipos y costumbres de Cuba* (1881), in Enrique Fernández Carrillo's "El Ñañigo: Carta cerrada y abierta" addressed to Víctor Patricio de Landaluze, whose iconic image of the "El Ñañigo" opens the essay. In attempting to correct some early misconceptions, Fernández Carrillo begins the "letter" by providing useful information to his readers:

Es un error suponer que el ñañiguismo es planta indígena. Vino de fuera y data de muchos años atrás; bien es cierto que ha ido ensanchando su esfera, y que con el tiempo ha cambiado en muchos su carácter. En realidad de verdad, el ñañiguismo es una religión idolátrica, puesto que tiene por demostración un culto. Todo lo que se sabe de su origen es que proviene de África. En Cuba la introdujeron los primeros negros de nación *carabalí*, que fueron los primitivos trabajadores esclavos que llegaron á esta isla y que componen las tribus más numerosas del África Central. Usted sabe, amigo mío, que el negro *carabalí* es de instintos más enérgicos que el *gangá*, el *congo*, el *lucumí*, el *arará* y tantos otros como constituyeron los trabajadores importados del África, para alas fatigas del campo, en ánsia de librar de ellas á los habitantes primitivos de estas tierras feraces. (142)

Fernández Carrillo separates the *carabalí* from other African tribes and seems knowledgeable about the history of *ñañiguismo* in Cuba. He tells the reader that the group is divided into *tierras*, which can be further subdivided, and that older ones control the others. The Macombo [Mokóngo] is the executive and governs with absolute power. The legislature is the *Illamba* and the *Isué*, who carry out his orders. He also mentions that there are fifteen well-defined categories that are observed with devotion. Followers must undergo an initiation process. And only recently have whites been accepted into the culture, but they do not mix with black members and form different *tierras*. He also admits that even though he has invested many years of patiently observing what little he shares, he is unaware of the total number of practitioners or if any of them has betrayed the secrets of the

society. However, in spite of this informative essay, Fernández Carrillo's juridical language betrays him as an outsider of Cuba's African cultures.

In the twentieth century, Lydia Cabrera took a giant step forward when divulging Africa religions in Cuba to a broader public. Her canonical *El monte* (1954) focuses on Yoruba, Congo, and Carabalí religious cultures. Based on conversations with informants, she produced the most profound and comprehensive study to date, even though there has been some discussion about the reliability of some of her informants and the distrust others may have felt towards the self-proclaimed anthropologist, preferring to protect some of their beliefs.

Indeed, Cabrera was one of the most prominent figures to share with a large audience the "secrets" of Cuba's African cultures. At the outset of the Revolution, her studies "Los ñáñigos, sociedad secreta" and "El Indísime Bebe la Mokuba que lo consagra Abakuá" were featured in the first two issues of the popular and controversial *Lunes de Revolución* (1959–1961), the literary supplement of the newspaper *Revolución*, of the 26th of July Movement, which Guillermo Cabrera Infante edited. Some years later, in his groundbreaking novel, *Tres tristes tigres* (1967), Cabrera Infante payed homage to Cabrera and her studies of Abakuá traditions as inherent aspects of Cuban culture. Cabrera Infante offers his own version of the Cuban canon and includes the anthropologist among seven distinguished writers in the section "La muerte de Trotsky referida por varios escritores cubanos años después—o antes," with Cabrera's "El indísime bebe la moskuba que lo consagra bochevikua," a parody of her "El indísime bebe la mokuba que lo consagra abakuá" that had appeared in Cabrera Infante's *Lunes de Revolución*. Moreover, in a separate section, Cabrera Infante unveils a version of "El rito de Sikán y Ekué, (*de la magia afrocubana*)," which is at the core of the Abakuá belief system. He narrates Sikán's visit to the river and, against her father's advice, how she traps the sacred fish. For her transgression, Sikán is punished, and her skin is transformed into the silent drum, which does not speak, the *seseribó*.

Most of Cabrera's works about the Abakuá culture were published while in exile in the United States. Some of her groundbreaking studies include *Las lenguas sagradas de los ñáñigos* (1988), *La sociedad secreta Ábakua* (1970), and *Anaforuana: ritual y símbolos de la iniciación en la sociedad secreta Abakuá* (1975).

In recent years, Professor Ivor Miller has been instrumental in bringing together the cultures of the Efik of Nigeria and the Abakuá of Cuba and sharing a wealth of information about their traditions. A practitioner who was consecrated in the Cross-River culture, Professor Miller published the cutting-edge *The Voice of the Leopard* (2009), about the Ékpè (leopard) presence in Abakuá society. Equally important, Professor Miller has become a *cause celebre* in Cuba and has won the trust of many Cuban houses, and their leaders have shared their much-guarded *libretas* with him. Some of these notebooks can be traced to the nineteenth century. In addition, he worked with Patricia González Gómez-Casseres—Program

Director and recipient of a National Endowment for the Humanities fellowship—to translate into English, Cabrera's *Lenguas sagradas de los ñáñigos*. A selection of their translation appears in the dossier. I am grateful to professors Ivor Miller and Patricia González Gómez-Casseres for their help in compiling the present section on the Abakuás.

The *Afro-Hispanic Review's* cover features Steven Díaz's rendition of el Andaluz's "Ñáñigo," the masked dancer of the Abakuá secret society practiced in Cuba. I want to thank Steven for allowing us to grace our journal with this magnificent image.

We dedicate the current issue of the *Afro-Hispanic Review* to Laurence Prescott, a distinguished professor and researcher from Penn State University, who passed away on November 27, 2016 in Ottawa, Ontario. Prescott specialized in Afro-Colombian literature and culture and his ground-breaking studies included *Without Hatreds or Fears: Jorge Artel* (2000) and *Candelario Obeso y la iniciación de la poesía negra en Colombia* (1985). His death came as a surprise, having worked with him on numerous projects, including the founding of the Afro-Latin American Research Association and the publication of the association's journal, *PALARA*. Laurence's death has created a void in Afro-Colombian studies.

On a lighter note, the *Afro-Hispanic Review* is pleased to announce the preparation of three exciting monographic issues. One is on the Festival de la Palabra in Puerto Rico, edited by Mayra Santos Febres; a second on Afro-Cuban Artists: A Renaissance, edited by Juanamaría Cordones-Cook; and a third on Black Resistance and Negotiation in Latin America: Runaway Slave Communities, edited by John Maddox and Graciela Esther Maglia Ferrari. We are looking forward to bringing these timely issues to our reader and look forward to establishing a conversation with the academic community about their content.