

Editor's Note

The mission of the *Afro-Hispanic Review* is to promote the study of people of African descent in the various academic disciplines. In the last issue (*AHR* 36.1 Spring 2017), however, we could not help but address the indiscriminate killings of black men by some law enforcement officers and self-proclaimed vigilantes. Appearing to react to an historical and deep-seated discrimination towards people of color, these people continue to treat black men with anger and disdain, as if blacks were less than human. It is even more astonishing that in many situations where a black suspect is involved, some mandated police body cameras are silenced, or worse, turned off to obfuscate the motive for the shooting. As recent as a few days ago, a police officer shot seventeen-year-old Antwon Rose in the back for running after a car stop in East Pittsburgh. An eyewitness claimed that Antwon was shot for simply running.

I am compelled to respond to the latest attack on people of color, this time to denounce the Trump administration's decision to deny asylum to Central Americans, in particular from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. The US Constitution makes provision to protect victims reaching the US border from the threat of violence that ravage their countries. The current administration's decision to detain immigrants, separate children from their parents, and delay their reunification is criminal at best and against US democratic mores and values.

The Trump administration's anti-Hispanic and Latino policy became apparent less than a year ago, with the government's lack of support afforded to the US territory of Puerto Rico, after Hurricane María devastated the island. The catastrophic event caused more than the estimated 4,600 deaths reported by independent researchers from the Harvard University's T.H. Chan School of Public Health. The figures refute the government's undercount of sixty-four deaths. It should not come as a surprise that almost one year later, power has not been fully restored to the island. Even more scandalous is the state of Puerto Rico's potable water. According to the Natural Resources Defense Council, prior to Hurricane María, more than half of the island's population was drinking contaminated water, thus refuting FEMA's current misleading statistics. Does Puerto Rico's water problem resemble what occurred with the black population of Flint, Michigan, in 2014? The callous attitude towards US Puerto Rican citizens also drives the policy to deny Central American refugees and their children protection when crossing the southern border with Mexico.

The Trump administration's inhumane policy is also reminiscent of the way Japanese Americans were treated during World War II. Because of their Asian features, more than 130,000 Japanese Americans were unfairly considered Japanese sympathizers, stripped of their West Coast homes, and placed in internment camps, actions that were not taken with German American citizens. I agree with former first lady Laura Bush in her June 17, 2018 *Washington Post Op-Ed*, when she states that,

Our government should not be in the business of warehousing children in converted box stores or making plans to place them in tent cities in the desert outside of El Paso. These images are eerily reminiscent of the internment camps for U.S. citizens and noncitizens of Japanese descent during World War II, now considered to have been one of the most shameful episodes in U.S. history. We also know that this treatment inflicts trauma; those who have been interred have been twice as likely to suffer cardiovascular disease or die prematurely than those who were not interned.

The former first lady's response reflects a broader national and international outcry against government officials' inhumane decision to separate more than 2,300 children from their parents, sending them to detention centers, foster homes, and the youngest ones to so-called "tender age" shelters scattered throughout the country without any concern for their psychological well-being. Childcare experts are already sounding the alarm, confirming that children separated from their parents, some of them as young as four months old, will suffer irreparable psychological harm. I ask, does the current administration have a moral compass when deciding to use innocent children as pawns for its political gain? Why do government officials not believe that all children, including dark-skinned babies, are innocent, and their lives should be protected and respected? The government's actions reminded me of the Gestapo tactics of criminalizing Jews and separating children from their parents during World War II. Removing the children without parental consent is tantamount to kidnapping them.

To continue to accuse families attempting to exercise their natural parental rights and protect their children from the violence that has devastated their place of origin as "infesting" our country appears to be part of a larger strategy to criminalize all non-white immigrants. The president's position was made clear in his tweet of June 19:

Democrats are the problem. They don't care about crime and want illegal immigrants, no matter how bad they may be, to pour into and infest our Country, like MS-13. They can't win on their terrible policies, so they view them as potential voters!

While it is not my intention to side with any one political party, the word "infest" is not normally used with people but with insects and animals. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the noun form as "The presence of an unusually large number of insects or animals in a place, typically so as to cause damage or disease." Immigration statistics refute the use of the word "infestation," yet on more than one occasion the President accused immigrants of being members of Salvadorian gang MS-13, as if he were revealing privileged information that has not been shared with the public. On the contrary, there is ample proof that many of the families entering the United States have made unimaginable sacrifices to undergo a month-long journey, risking starvation, rape, and even death to give their children the opportunity to live in a safe environment.

Classifying these refugees as criminals is a way of denying them their personal and lawful rights under the US Constitution, to criminalize and incarcerate them

and take their children. The Trump administration's endeavors to dehumanize people of color recalls the way blacks were treated during slavery and after emancipation. The same 13th Amendment that freed slaves contained a clause that allowed lawmakers to also suspend their rights:

Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.

The criminalization of slaves, emancipated blacks, and blacks during the Jim Crow South explains why blacks are killed and incarcerated in higher numbers than they represent in the general population, why little attention has been placed on attending to the needs of US Puerto Rican citizens, and why Mexican and Central American immigrants are criminalized by Trump administrators. A "zero tolerance" policy is a government strategy to turn innocent people who need help into criminals.

History has shown that fear is an effective and divisive tool in defining one's identity in opposition to people accused of being different from those in power. However, with the exception of Native Americans, we live in a country comprised of foreigners, and whose image is synonymous with the Statue of Liberty. The late Afro-Puerto Rican poet, Tato Laviera, was most eloquent when writing about the meaning of the State of Liberty during her bicentennial celebration of 1986. Laviera's "lady liberty" (of *Mainstream Ethics*) tells how the Statue's symbol had suffered from years of decay, her decomposed body fractured and embroiled in rust. Though many dignitaries, including a president, spoke about the Statue, Lady Liberty assumed a voice and spoke for herself.

.....
just before she was touched,
just before she was dismantled,
lady liberty spoke,
she spoke for the principles,
for the preamble,
for the bill of rights,
and thirty-nine peaceful
presidential transitions,
and, just before she was touched,
lady liberty wanted to convey
her own resolutions,
so that in twenty eighty-six
she would be smiling and she would be proud.
and then, just before she was touched,
and then, while she was being reconstructed,
and then, while she was being celebrated,
she spoke.

if you touch me, touch ALL of my people
who need attention and societal repair,
give the tired and the poor
the same attention, AMERICA,
touch us ALL with liberty,
touch us ALL with liberty.

.....

so touch me,
and in touching me
touch all our people,
do not single me out,
touch all our people,
touch all our people,
all our people
our people
people

We are living in a period in which the values of the Statue of Liberty are being eroded. As a professor, I am appalled by how government officials have tarnished her image; as a parent I am heart-broken. But I remain hopeful that we will again remember that we are all descendants of the Statue of Liberty and what she represents. We will again embrace her true and unequivocal meaning.

The present issue is the result of Juanamaría Cordones-Cook’s vision and hard work. She organized an international and interdisciplinary conference on Afro-Cuban Artists: A Renaissance, at the University of Missouri, Columbia, in April of 2016. It featured the artworks of Afro-Cuban artists Manuel Mendive, Eduardo Roca (Choco), and Santiago Rodríguez Olazábal. Choco and Olazábal were in attendance, and they were accompanied by Cuba’s National Poet, Nancy Morejón. I want to acknowledge Cordones-Cook and all participants and collaborators for making this monographic issue possible. The cover showcases Mendive’s *Barco negrero*. I am grateful to him, Choco, and Olazábal for providing us with samples of their artworks.

As we prepare the current issue for publication, we had the misfortune to lose Flore Zéphir. An esteemed colleague, who chaired the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures at the University of Missouri, Flore specialized in Haitian literature. She was a close friend and my swimming partner when attending conferences held on or near a beach. Flore will be missed but not forgotten. We dedicate this issue to her memory.

William Luis
Editor