

Editor's Note

More than a century ago, the French writer Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr uttered the well-known phrase “plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose” (the more things change, the more they stay the same). While I do recognize the value of historical transformation and personal growth, for some people change is hard to accept. More likely than not, they cannot, or refuse and resist it at all cost.

The writer's famed expression may refer to individual experiences but also to a collective, historical mindset. In its most recent iteration, the people who refuse to recognize the severity of COVID-19 have much in common with those who deny the presidency of Joe Biden; they continue to profess, without evidence, that the election had been stolen. These are the same so-called “patriots” who supported the attack of the US Capital on January 6.

We live at a peculiar historical juncture. COVID has metastasized into different variants and schools, restaurants, and public spaces have opened their doors as the country transitions to a life with COVID. Nevertheless, COVID has done significant damage. It killed more than one million people in the United States, and the world economies are facing shortages of all kinds. Putin's fabricated war with the Ukraine has exacerbated the problem, compelling this freedom-loving people to exchange their agricultural tools for weapons to defend their right to join the European democratic community.

Back in the States, the extreme elements of the Republican Party refuse to accept President Biden's electoral victory and some extreme lawmakers have emboldened white supremacists to take out their societal frustrations and ineptitudes on people who look and think differently. The attacks on the Tops Friendly Market Store in Buffalo, New York, and the Robb Elementary School massacre in Uvalde, Texas, are just two recent examples of the hatred that continues to infect our political and social systems. For them, some lives are worth more than others and people of color are expendable.

Regardless of the many obstacles, the battle for a better social and just society endures. In March of 2022, I attended the Cumbre Internacional de Afrodescendencia at the University of Puerto Rico, the Río Piedras campus, organized by the highly gifted and prolific writer, Mayra Santos-Febres. The Cumbre overlapped with the International Day for the Elimination of Racism, and Puerto Rico's Legislative Assembly's Law Number 24, approved on August 5, 2021, ratified the following:

An Act:

To designate March 21 of each year as the “National Day for the Elimination of Racism and the Affirmation of Afro-descendants,” as part of the efforts to eliminate all manifestations of racial and/or ethnic discrimination in our society; designate the week of the month of March during which Abolition Day is observed as “Racism

Elimination and Afro-descendants Affirmation Week”; repeal Act No. 138-1966; and for other related purposes [in order to rename the week in which Abolition Day is observed, known as “Racial Equality Week,” as “Racism Elimination and Afro-descendants Affirmation Week,” because an affirmative antiracist response is required from all the components of our society in order to eradicate racism].

Unlike what many people profess, racism exists in Puerto Rico, and Law 24 is a first step in recognizing and addressing the systemic problem pronounced by Isabelo Zenon Cruz’s *Narciso descubre su trascero: el negro en la cultura puertorriqueña* (1975). The Cumbre was funded by a generous grant from the Mellon Foundation.

The most visible difference between this and other conferences was the number of black, Spanish-speaking participants and attendees, many of whom were women of color of all sexual orientations. The highlight was the panel on Raza, Justicia y Poder, moderated by the Dean of the University of Puerto Rico’s School of Law, Vivian Neptuno, with three distinguished participants, the Vice-President of Costa Rica, the Honorable Epsy Cambell Bar, Senator Ana Irma Rivera Lassén, and the President of the Supreme Tribunal of Puerto Rico, the Honorable Maite D. Oronoz Rodríguez. It was a frank, practical, theoretical, and personal discussion about justice, its impact, implementation, and consequences in Puerto Rico and, similarly, in Costa Rica. One of the participants spoke about her sexual orientation and her white privilege; her honesty caught many attendees by surprise. The panel received a standing ovation.

The three-time Afro-Peruvian Grammy singer, Susana Baca, was the feature of several social and cultural events. Held at the Teatro de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, Susana, a diminutive and slim woman with a huge voice, treated the audience to songs like “Negra presuntuosa,” “A Micaela Bastidas,” “María Landó” and other well-known ballads throughout Latin America and the world. The audience sang along and danced in the aisles. Susana honored Mayra with a poem she shared with spectators, and I reproduce it here:

Ceiba en Flor

En mi pelo llevé

Tu semilla trenzada

Hasta lejos

Inframundo del mar

Con la muerte abrazada

A mis senos

Me marcaron con el carimbo ardiente

Mi piel se hizo templo y convicción

deseo florecido hasta el cielo

Iroko
En la flor, tu raíz
En mi vientre, el matiz
De lo justo.

Que parió los guerreros
A las fieras ancestras
Del futuro.

Yo soy yo y los demás
Ceiba florecida
Otra forma posible, gozo libre y fugaz
Del amor.

Amor, amor, amor
Ceiba en flor
Amor, amor, amor
Iroko.

Tu semilla en la piel
En los labios silentes
Latigados

Destino es el mio
Mis pies que unden la tierra
Fatigados.

Pero el paso se da
Infinito en el tiempo
Esperanzado

Cicatriz gratitud
Traza las sendas posibles
De este amor.

William Luis

Yo soy yo y los demás
Ceiba florecida
Otra forma posible
Del amor.

Amor, amor, amor
Ceiba en flor
Nos amo y te amo a ti
Iroko.

Two months later, I was treated to another musical extravaganza, this time in Cuba. “El Godfather de la Sala,” Andy Montañez, celebrated his eightieth birthday in Matanzas’s legendary and newly renovated Teatro Sauto. Attending with his family, Andy was also accompanied by the Orchestra Faílde, and honored with the participation of Matancero vocalists Tomasita Quiala, Aida Montiel, Tony Ávila, among others. Andy’s voice and spirit had not changed. He sang popular songs like “Payaso” and “Con swing,” and danced as enthusiastically as he did in the early part of his musical career.

I traveled to Matanzas to attend “Ríos Intermitentes II,” a subsidiary of the Havana XIV Biennial, curated by my colleague María Magdalena Campos-Pons. The first Matanzas Biennial of 2019 was a resounding success. The on-line forum, *Hyperallergic: Sensitive to Art and its Discontent* (Dec. 20, 2019) recognized “Ríos Intermitentes” as the top eleven of fifteen best performances in the world. In my estimation, “Ríos Intermitentes II” reached the same high crescendo.

I arrived at the tail end of the Biennial, but my dear friend Conchi, Magda’s sister, asked exhibitors to leave their installations in place until my family and I had the opportunity to view them. Many local artists were present to chat about their works, in particular Solomón, Ramón Pacheco, and Ernesto Millán. Certainly, there was a different feel in the air from our visit to Havana and Matanzas in 2019, and the change could only be attributed to the impact COVID has had on the Cuban population.

There were many impressive exhibits placed throughout the various Matanzas neighborhoods. However, I was particularly moved by one located in the center courtyard of the Palacio de Justicia. Julio César García’s artwork contained almost five hundred pictures of Matanceros who left Cuba, identifying them by first name, age, profession, and country of refuge. The portraits varied, but the bottom of each display reproduced the same quotation:

De acuerdo con datos de la Oficina de Aduanas y Protección Fronteriza de Estados Unidos (CBP), casi 40 000 cubanos llegaron a la frontera Sur entre noviembre del 2021 y febrero del 2022. En todo el año fiscal anterior, entre octubre del 2020 y octubre del 2021, la cifra fue de poco más de 38 000.

There were some empty spaces to accommodate future migrants who would make the same journey. All were young, in the prime of their lives, overwhelmingly white, mostly women, professionals, many willing to risk their lives to abandon the island.

I was warned that today's Cuba was not the Cuba of 2019. COVID had changed everything. Though the Cuban government claimed that COVID was under control and, indeed, Cuba had its own vaccine, no one could predict the economic, social, and political impact on the population. Every imaginable scarcity assaulted the island's population. Some of my favorite eateries were closed, and the food quality had declined at those that were still opened. The effects of the San Isidro and 11 de julio antigovernment protests were palpable.

Julio César García's installation was hauntingly significant. It captured the current mood. I heard more complaints about the government from most everyone I spoke to, friends and strangers alike, than in any of my previous trips. And this was especially the case with Cuban youths, who were dissatisfied with the current state of the economy. They were more than willing to question what they were told by teachers and government official; I found them to be defiant and willing to think for themselves. As much as they love their country and parents, these young people wanted to leave the island and seek a better future. Members of this younger generation were willing to risk their lives and make the arduous trip through Central or South America to reach the southern border of the United States. Some migrants were making their way to other parts of the world, to Europe, Africa, or Asia. Many Cubans I spoke with knew someone who had left; some continued to stay in touch with friends and monitored their safety during their odyssean journeys.

In Matanzas we found out about the gas explosion that almost leveled the Hotel Saratoga, located a few blocks from Havana's Capitolio, producing more than twenty deaths and three times that number of injuries. The government immediately attributed the explosion to a gas leak from a truck parked in front of the hotel. The official remarks were followed by rumors of a terrorist attack. After returning to Havana my son and I went to see for ourselves the impact of an explosion that literally peeled off the facade of the building and reveal the damaged, interior rooms. It was as if you were looking at the rooms of a gigantic doll house or building. With all the destruction, surprisingly, in one room you could see an intact mirror and in another, a chandelier. We walked past the security area, right up to the hotel, and stood alongside workers and security guards to take pictures. It was a bizarre experience to be able to get that close when friends told us not to go, because we would never get through the roadblock.

I want to acknowledge Diego Javier Luis for providing the journal with the photograph below and Mayra Santos-Febres for sending a copy of "Ceiba en flor."



The current issue of the *Afro-Hispanic Review* features a dossier on the Afro-Colombian poet Helcías Martán Góngora (1920-1984), with a selection contained in Martán Góngora’s personal archive, housed at the Instituto Caro y Cuervo. Collections such as *Evangelio del hombre y del paisaje* (1944), *Humano litoral* (1954), *Mestre de negrería* (1966), and *Diván del minusválido* (1983-1984), among others, represent a resounding voice of the black experience that should be heard by readers in and outside of his native country. The dossier reproduces photographs and other forms of writing. I want to thank Graciela Maglia for commissioning and organizing the dossier. Martán Góngora handwrote and edited his own works. The cover of the present issue replicates a stanza from his unpublished *El divan del minusválido*.

WILLIAM LUIS
EDITOR