

Editor's Note

Publishing an academic journal is not an easy venture under normal circumstances, but it is even more challenging in light of changing events that impact the process, either directly or indirectly. As we began to edit the current issue of the *Afro-Hispanic Review*, the world suddenly changed in a dramatic and significant way, and I fear that our lives may never be the same. It all began during the transition from the old to the new year, from the end of 2019 to the beginning of 2020, when consumers of international news were alerted to a new coronavirus believed to have originated in Wuhan, China, purportedly from an outdoor wild animal market that sold bats. Users of WeChat, an app to which many Chinese nationals subscribe, were singularly focused on disseminating information about COVID-19, the acronym for the novel coronavirus disease that emerged in 2019. WeChat followers outlined both sides of the debate: Government supporters professed normalcy in the food supply and critics suspected a cover-up. Enthusiasts even circulated a video of a woman in a restaurant enjoying an entire bat in a soup, suggesting that there was nothing to fear, for her life continued as usual. Dr. Li Wenliang emerged as an unsung hero. He warned local government officials about the dangers of the virus, and instead of heeding his advice, the same officials summarily ignored and even discredited him. Dr. Li's life took a turn for the worse when the virus reduced him to an early statistic. COVID-19 rapidly spread throughout Asia: South Korea, Taiwan, Japan, and Singapore. Shortly thereafter, it engulfed Europe: Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and many other nations throughout most regions of the world. The threat transpired while many US citizens went about their daily activities, never imagining that the virus would reach our shores.

Then it happened. Almost overnight, as testing provided insight into an invisible threat, the epicenter of the novel coronavirus shifted from Wuhan, China, to the United States, making the strongest country in the world the most vulnerable to coronavirus infections and deaths. To flatten the curve of viral spread, medical doctors and scientists recommended a two-week quarantine, which was extended by some states and ignored by others. Many months into the pandemic, there is no discernable governmental plan to confront the disease.

After four months of isolation and social distancing, I can envision historians looking back and dividing present-day history in two parts: before and after COVID-19. In the recent past, many people lived carefree social lives with frivolous preoccupations about the type of vacation, restaurant, musical extravaganza, sports events, or company to enjoy. Now, many follow CDC guidelines to stay at home or wear masks in public so as not to infect themselves and others, and a few ignore the same recommendations. All the while, we continue to wait for the current administration to devise a coherent strategy to fight the pandemic, and its delay underscores the danger we face. This is especially the case when encouraging a

return to normalcy, a decision that may be politically expedient but risky to the lives of the general population. Political leaders repeat ad nauseum that we have the best healthcare system in the world, that everything is under control, that we are producing the most test kits, that the virus will soon dissipate, that the country will have a COVID-19 vaccine in record time—all statements easy to articulate but unsubstantiated by the scientific community. These and other edicts propose a false dichotomy between lives and livelihood, as if one were separate from the other.

The images in the news provide a vivid reality check. We witness overcrowded hospitals and overworked healthcare providers with scarce hospital gowns, masks, gloves, swabs, ventilators, and other essential equipment promised speech after speech but never delivered in the quantity announced. Politics, and not science, continues to be the order of the day. Governors loyal to the President receive help, while others who question his opinions are left to fend for themselves, as if we were not one people in a time of crisis but two enemy camps. The consequence of the divisive strategy is an increased number of deaths on both sides of the aisle, since COVID-19 has no political allegiance. And the number of casualties continues to surge.

Nurses, doctors, and other healthcare providers were never trained or prepared for the gut punch COVID-19 has delivered. With tears in their eyes, nurses claim they proudly signed up to help the needy, but not to die. Overwhelmed funeral directors tell a vivid and unforgettable story. They have run out of space and are resorting to stacking dead bodies in air-conditioned tractor trailers. Grieving relatives unable to say goodbye to loved ones are forced to abandon them to die lonely deaths, conveying yet another part of the ongoing coronavirus saga.

Nevertheless, there is another picture of sacrifice and optimism that has emerged. This one tells the story of large numbers of unnamed people stepping forward to selflessly give of themselves in time of need. I think of a musician friend who has moved into her elderly parents' home to ensure their health. However, she also makes time to recruit friends and strangers to fabricate rudimentary N95 mask covers to prolong their lifespan, as well as gowns and other essential equipment. Friends, neighbors, and strangers support her efforts with generous donations and contribute to this heroic effort with sewing machines, needles and thread, plastics, elastics bands, and anything else they can do to protect healthcare providers. These volunteers are committed to making a difference, and their efforts also benefit Nashville General Hospital, which cares for the city's indigent population. Others, who also refuse recognition, donate their plasma to cure the infected and volunteer for clinical trials to find a vaccine for all.

There is also the thundering applause of hospital workers rejoicing patients surviving COVID-19, of firefighters in their hook-and-ladder trucks at the entrance of hospitals in recognition of courageous workers sacrificing their lives to assist the

sickly, of countless individuals standing in balconies or behind opened windows to show their gratitude, of Blue Angel Jet Fighters soaring above cityscapes to honor the general population who, under normal circumstances, turn out to honor them. That is a sight to behold!

COVID-19 impacts the body but also the mind. I think of my own dilemma one afternoon before the start of my graduate seminar over Zoom. I was overwhelmed by the effects of the virus on the world population and was overcome by a sense of hopelessness. After contemplating the infections, deaths, and chaos hovering over our lives, I examined the purpose of teaching and analyzing literature while societies change before our eyes. I then asked myself: Why should I be engaging in close readings when thousands of people were dying? Should I alter the structure of the seminar, put the topic at hand to one side, and have students express how the virus affected their lives? Would it be more useful for me to suspend the seminar and join the community effort to fight the virus? But I also pondered: Would I be getting in the way of others performing their jobs? Did I not have a responsibility to my students and my profession? Would it not be best for me to continue to do the work I was trained to do? Is literary analysis not only a useful tool to understand texts but also the society in which we live? Should we not interrogate our leaders to understand the intent of their words? Seeking clarity, I shared my dilemma with students and devoted a portion of the seminar to listening to students voice their concerns about how the virus affects their lives before continuing with the readings.

At first glance it would seem that COVID-19 does not discriminate between women and men, young and old, rich and poor, highbrow and lowbrow, white and Black, celebrities and common folks, or political systems, geographic locations, and nations. But I think it does. There is a correlation between socioeconomic status and morbidity rates. In the United States, the virus is claiming a disproportionate number of African American and Latinx lives. How is that possible? Interestingly enough, significant segments of this population are healthcare providers who desperately need protective equipment. They are workers in hospitals but also in nursing homes, in meatpacking plants, and other essential businesses. They are also the Blacks and Latinos who live in crowded cities, with preexisting conditions and little to no medical insurance or access to healthcare. They are people experiencing homelessness, the immigrants in detention centers, and the incarcerated.

While many, if not most or all countries, are guilty of not taking proper measures to ensure the health of all sectors of their population, and some continue to deny a virus that is obvious to scientists and reasonable people, the United States, Brazil, and Russia are among the countries with the most rapidly increasing numbers of coronavirus casualties. These and other far right-wing governments appear to be unconcerned and unprepared to respond effectively to the pandemic. Unfortunately, the most vulnerable places continue to be those with precarious

healthcare systems, mainly in countries with large black populations. Blacks are disproportionately affected in so-called developing and developed countries, as this population remains marginalized by social, economic, or racial conditions of their societies. For some, they even appear to be disposable. However, it may be surprising that Caribbean nations like Cuba seem to be faring well. These countries, which have learned to coexist with hurricanes and other natural disasters, were among the first to put into place working plans that included orders to stay at home and maintain social distancing. In the present, we are witnesses to the unfolding of history, whose trajectory will define whether we, as a world, heed or disregard the medical and scientific advice to wear masks in public and practice social distancing. Regardless, we know that most politicians will act in their best self-interests. History will judge the decisions they make.

Despite the present dangers of COVID-19, as in the past, literature and criticism have provided a space to ponder moments when politics and history have gone astray. As I have argued in *Literary Bondage: Slavery in Cuban Narrative*, literature (and art, I may add) represent a counter-discourse to history, to provide a vision of the past that history (or politics) could not offer. The present issue of the *Afro-Hispanic Review* features a dossier on the traveling exhibit *Visionary Aponte: Art and Black Freedom*, held at Vanderbilt University Fine Arts Gallery, from January 9–March 8, 2020. It envisions José Antonio Aponte's missing "book of paintings," consisting of sixty-three images, lost or confiscated by Spanish colonial authorities. A carpenter, soldier, and sculptor, Aponte masterminded what has become the Aponte Conspiracy of 1812, a plan to overthrow the colonial government and free the enslaved. Though Cuba would become an exception to the other Spanish-American colonies fighting for liberation against colonial rule, at this time it shares with them the same historical period of discontent. If we assume that he was responsible for the conspiracy, had Aponte been successful, Cuba would have joined the communal history of successful liberation movements known throughout the Spanish American continent and perhaps the first to free its enslaved population. As it stands, the island would not emancipate Blacks until 1886 and did not become independent of Spanish colonial rule until the War of Independence (1895–1898). However, Aponte stands tall by planting the seed that would alter Cuban history. Aponte paid a high price for his commemoration. He was hanged on April 9, 1812, his head severed and placed in a cage for everyone to see.

Colonial officials interrogated Aponte about his paintings, and he responded by describing them in minute detail. He highlighted classical figures from Greece, Rome, and Spain, but also black leaders from Ethiopia and Egypt, and revolutionary ones from nearby Haiti. Equally important, he reproduced black images dear to him, those of his own family, his father and grandfather who belonged to the *Batallón de Pardos y Morenos*, and a few of himself. In this monographic dossier,

Linda Rodríguez cites responses provided by Aponte and his assistant, Chacón, about the painter's self-portrait:

Regarding *láminas* 24–25 of his “book of paintings,” Aponte notes that “se hace presente el autor del libro en su retrato figurando al pecho un Laurel de fidelidad palma por victoria de parecer un compás” (“Expediente” 729). He explains that we can see “a la izquierda . . . el banco de carpintería donde se trabajó el referido Libro” (729). The bench also held an inkwell, a ruler, and pots of paint. The colonial Spanish official Ramón Rodríguez called it a “retrato de un negro” with the inscription “JOSE ANTONIO APONTE Y ULUBARRA” at the bottom, and asked Aponte’s associate Clemente Chacón about the portrait (719). Chacón said that he only knew it was a portrait of Aponte. Rodríguez followed up, asking how it could be a portrait of Aponte if “no hay una semejanza entre la copia y el original para llamarse así con propiedad dijo” (719). Chacón replied that Aponte had said as much and had placed the portrait in the book so that on the “día destinado a la revolución” all would know he was a grand person who had become king (719). Later, when official José María Nerey asked Aponte about Chacón’s declaration, Aponte says it was false and “y lo convence así la situación del propio retrato y las pinturas que tiene al pie del banco de carpintería botes de col[or] rel[gl]a tintero y compass” (744, my emphasis). Here, Aponte denies and association with royalty and points out the presence of the tools of an artist. He suggests we should recognize him by his tools and the power of creation they enable. He may have done so to distract from Chacón’s statement about Aponte projecting himself as a king, or, much worse, the claim of predicting a revolution. Yet, in doing so, he used the artistic tools to identify himself, and they became a symbolic link from his experience as a sculptor to his new enterprise in the “book of paintings.” The bench and tools, used both in his career as carpenter and his new work in the “book of paintings,” also reinforce his ability to operate within and outside of traditional artistic categories. Aponte appears to have been the first man of color to represent himself in the act of creation—underscoring the potential and power of aesthetic enterprise—from this period in colonial Cuban art history. A comparison of contemporaneous extant images of free and enslaved men of color demonstrates Aponte’s uniqueness, but first, an exploration of where Aponte may have derived inspiration for the image is warranted. (169–70)

From the interrogation, we can discern that Aponte did not provide a clear answer to the questions and in some cases, obfuscated his intentions. Just as important, he asked the interrogator to engage in a close reading of the images as they appear in the book and not impose an interpretation or an intent onto the paintings to find him guilty. The former reading speaks to the universality of art, the latter produces the death of the author.

Aponte’s concerted effort to envision Blacks in Cuban art may be the first manifestation to include this marginal sector of colonial society as an inherent fixture of Cuban culture. Whereas Domingo Del Monte has been credited with creating a Cuban-style culture by requesting that his literary friends write about Blacks as part of the Cuban landscape, an idea the enslaved poet Juan Francisco Manzano had already done in his early collections of poems *Poesías líricas* (1820) and *Flores pasageras* (1830) many years before meeting Del Monte in 1830, Aponte may have been an earlier precursor of the Cuban nation and was certainly ahead

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of his time.

Visionary Aponte: Art and Black Freedom was curated by Édouard Duval-Carrié and Ada Ferrer and features works by Grettel Arrate, José Bedia, María Magdalena Campos-Pons, Juan Roberto Diago, Édouard Duval-Carrié, Alexis Esquivel Bermúdez, Joëlle Ferly, Teresita Fernández, Alberto Lescaj, Tessa Mars, Emilio Adán Martínez, Nina Mercer, Clara Morera, Glexis Novoa, Vickie Pierre, Marielle Plaisir, Asser Saint-Val, Jean-Marcel St. Jacques, and Renée Stout. Each participant is inspired by Aponte's description of a particular image provided during the interrogation. I want to thank Jane Landers, Ada Ferrer, and Linda Rodríguez for contributing with their essays and Édouard for helping secure permission to reproduce in this issue selected images by Tessa Mars, Vickie Pierre, María Magdalena Campos-Pons, Juan Roberto Diago, Jean-Marcel St. Jacques, José Bedia, Emilio Adán Martínez, Teresita Fernández, Grettel Arrate Hechavarría, Asser Saint-Val, Clara Morera, Alberto Lescaj, Glexis Novoa, as well as Édouard's own art. A special thanks to Alexis Esquivel, whose "Life Fire Burns in Living Flames" is featured on the cover of the *Afro-Hispanic Review*, and to Emily Weiner, Interim Curator, Vanderbilt Fine Arts Gallery, for organizing the exhibit.

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