THE ROAD AHEAD: CUBA AFTER THE JULY 11 PROTESTS

CENTER FOR LATIN AMERICAN & LATINO STUDIES
AMERICAN UNIVERSITY | WASHINGTON, DC

11J, "Patria y Vida," and the (Not So) New Cuban Culture Wars

Michael J. Bustamante, University of Miami

Abstract: Released in February 2021, the song "Patria y Vida" went viral and served as the unofficial anthem for historic protests in Cuba on July 11. Against the backdrop of the wider history of Cuba's "culture wars" and Cuba's current multifaceted crisis, this article offers critical reflections on "Patria y Vida's" message, why it caught on, and some of the contradictions surrounding its reception and circulation—on and off the island, before and since July 11. I pay particular attention to the ways the song serves to index a reality of racial inequality on the island (also reflected in the number of AfroCubans taking part in July 11 protests) at the same time that it has been embraced by sectors of the Cuban diaspora that tend to dismiss discussions of structural racism in the U.S. context and in their own communities. I also highlight the racist undertones and overtones of the criticisms the song received within Cuban state media and official discourse.

I can't be certain, but in my memory, it was one of the first Cuban "viral videos." The year was 2009, and huddled in the lobby of Havana's Hotel Nacional, Colombian pop star Juanes can be seen in grainy footage conferring with other headliners of his "Paz Sin Fronteras" concert, set to begin that morning at the Plaza de la Revolución. Fuming over alleged surveillance to which their delegation had been subjected, as well as apparent efforts by Cuban authorities to reserve front row seats for politically loyal students, the artists threaten to cancel the event. Then, Yotuel Romero, member of the Cuban hip-hop supergroup Orishas, interjects, urging his fellow performers to not let "them" win and press on with the show.

Revisited from the vantage point of 2021 and events in Cuba this summer, that moment of tension over ten years ago appears quaint. But it also carries the weight of foreshadowing. Today, Romero is no longer playing a side part in a secretly filmed argument. As co-writer of the viral anti-Cuban-government anthem "Patria y Vida," his voice has provided the soundtrack and slogan for the largest protests in Cuba in decades.

But looking back from a Miami still awash in "Patria y Vida" banners, and where Romero has earned wide acclaim, it is impossible to ignore several ironies. For one, Romero and other participants in the 2009 concert were panned widely at the time for performing in Cuba at all. South Florida critics deemed "Paz Sin Fronteras" an act of legitimation for the political system that Romero now opposes, and that even then he hinted (in pre-concert press appearances) needed to change.

Another irony relates to the United States. Because Juanes and his Miami-based production team required permission from the U.S. government to pull off a concert on the island, in retrospect

"Paz Sin Fronteras" represented an opening salvo in a move toward U.S. engagement with Cuba under the Obama administration. Yotuel Romero publicly, if gingerly, encouraged that move when Obama took office. Five years later, he even attended events organized by the president's delegation to Havana during his historic 2016 visit. But today, "Patria y Vida" is not only an anthem of protest in Cuba; it has become the clarion call of a diaspora (or much of it) that appears to have moved on—momentarily? permanently?—from its increasing support for bilateral rapprochement over the last decade.

As the community goes, so go other Cuban performers featured on the song. Not long ago Gente de Zona and Descemer Bueno were churning out the kind of reguetón-lite that became the background music to normalization. Their transnational careers—feet planted both in Cuba and the United States—provided financially lucrative evidence of a breaking down of previous borders and the Cuban *gozadera* (the title of a 2015 smash) newly accessible to American visitors. Of course, these artists also took heat outside the island for their supposedly "apolitical" stance. As recently as 2019, Miami's then-mayor rescinded Gente de Zona's previously awarded keys to the city because they referred to Miguel Díaz-Canel as "our president" at a Havana event. To see the group go from being censored in Miami (curiously in the name of democracy) to performing at a "Free Cuba Fest" under a year later—complete with "Make Cuba Great Again" banner and other Trumpian overtones—naturally produces whiplash.

So how did we get here? And why has popular culture become such an important vector of the intensifying conflict between the Cuban state and growing portions of a transnational Cuban society over the last year, culminating with protesters chanting "Patria y Vida" on July 11? Is commercial/political opportunism and a U.S.-backed, social-media-powered disinformation campaign to blame, as Cuban state media allege? Or have the Cuban authorities' own missteps—their slowness, or refusal, to open Cuban society politically, as well as their sluggishness to acknowledge the losers of economic reforms already begun—led them to lose the pulse of the island's pandemic-stressed streets?

Reality resists either/or answers, so I will not try to provide them. What I can do is offer critical reflections on "Patria y Vida's" message, why it caught on, and some of the contradictions surrounding its reception and circulation—on and off the island, before and since July 11. Whatever the assessment, by no means are these contemporary Cuban "culture wars" new or distractions without consequences. Nor are they going away. Not only has "Patria y Vida" spawned more recent imitations in Miami, but in the wake of July 11, Cuban artists once considered luminaries of socialist culture (e.g. Carlos Varela, Fernando Pérez, Pablo Milanés, and even Los Van Van) joined a wider cast of Cuban creatives strongly criticizing the state's repressive response. Together, this ferment reflects a powerful, albeit still amorphous and inconsistent political awakening on and off the island, especially among a generation that has come of age after the 1990s and quickly proven more skilled cultural and digital communicators than their flat-footed counterparts in state media. All told, the Cuban government has not faced such a challenge to its authority in decades.

Culture Wars Have Always Mattered

Let's first dispense with the idea of novelty. 2021 is hardly the first time that culture has been a flashpoint in Cuban life. Culture is not just "superstructure," after all; it is serious business. For that reason, I use the phrase "culture wars" warily, as in U.S. usage it tends to be uttered with scorn, as if to describe superficial matters diverting attention from the "real" issues of society.

That has never been true, not in the United States, and not in Cuba. Look no further than March 1959, when, not even three months after the *barbudos* descended from the Sierra Maestra, the early revolutionary government founded the Cuban Institute for Cinematic Art and Industry, ICAIC. This act presaged the eventual nationalization of not only all movie production, but also all radio and television stations, art galleries and museums, and, perhaps most importantly, all outlets of the private printed press by the end of 1960. The power of art, song, film, or the printed word to shape narratives and identities—in this case, a conception of the Revolution as long-awaited deliverance from a history of national ills—was something that insurgent leaders recognized early.

For that reason, the history of the Cuban Revolution is full of battles of ideas, especially in the cultural realm. And as Cuba became a chip in the global Cold War and the Cuban government became the arbiter and owner of all media on the island, these battles quickly assumed transnational dimensions. Island-based artists rejected the work of exiles, and Cuban expatriate culture workers found themselves offering counternarratives to those amplified by, and through, the culture industries of the Cuban socialist state. This is not to say all troubadours defending the Cuban Revolution over the years have simply been insincere government mouthpieces, or that artists in Cuba working within and around state institutions haven't forged vital spaces for critical debate, reflection, and critique. But as a largely diaspora-created text, it was not a surprise to see "Patria y Vida" generate a rejoinder from Havana—Raúl Torres's decidedly less catchy "Patria o Muerte por la Vida"—, thus joining a long tradition of politicized call and response. In the 1960s, for instance, as Cuban revolutionaries sang along to Eduardo Saborit's "Cuba Qué Linda es Cuba," exiles belted out the forlorn lyrics to "Cuando Salí de Cuba." Thirty years later, Miami artist Willy Chirino hopefully predicted that "our day is coming" against the backdrop of Cuba's Special Period, while Omara Portuondo sang that Cuba would "not surrender" and Silvio Rodríguez called on his listeners to "die as they lived"—that is, loyal to socialist principles. In a way, Yotuel Romero, with Orishas, even previewed "Patria y Vida" with 2020's "Ojalá Pase," an anti-Cuban-government play on an old Silvio Rodríguez song from the 1970s.

"Patria y Vida," Ahora

So if Cuba's song wars are not so new, what made "Patria y Vida" different, or explains its runaway success? Past examples from the Special Period are relevant, as Cuba's current economic crisis—its worst since the 1990s—has generated intense popular frustration that Cuban fans on the island channeled into their listening of the lyrics and then took with them on July 11 to the streets. That crisis has been aggravated by Trump-era sanctions that remain in place, but it is not reducible to them either. Indeed, for all that one can make a convincing argument that the United States bears significant responsibility for Cubans' current economic hardships (during a pandemic, no less), many, especially younger Cuban citizens are no longer convinced, or no

longer seem to care. It is their own government's decisions—a calamitous currency unification process, the expanding re-dollarization of the economy through MLC stores, ongoing investments in hotel construction as Cuba's healthcare infrastructure buckled under COVID-related stresses—that have been targets of as much recent ire and indignation. Hence the potency of the inversion of the revolutionary dyad "Fatherland or Death" to "Fatherland *and* Life."

But as many have pointed out, we would be mistaken to see the success of the song, or events of July 11, as simply the product of economic or pandemic grievances. Economic problems are themselves always political, and they can easily lead to questions about the political model that governs economic decision-making. Moreover, the months preceding July 11, and indeed preceding the release of "Patria y Vida" in February, saw pitched conflict between newer voices of Cuban civil society and institutions of the Cuban state—from the disrupted hunger strike of the members of the San Isidro Movement in November and a historic sit-in in front of the Ministry of Culture the next day, to various skirmishes, small demonstrations, and arbitrary arrests subsequently. It is significant, therefore, that the song "Patria y Vida"—though, again, mostly the creation of Cuban artists now abroad—features two Havana-based protagonists of these events: Maykel Osorbo and Eliecer Márquez Duany (alias El Funky). The video, in turn, includes a cameo from the San Isidro Movement's leader, Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara. (Otero Alcántara, incidentally, has been imprisoned since July 11, while Osorbo has been detained since May.)

Here, then, we confront what is undoubtedly a difference between the Cuba of today and the Cuba of the 1990s: the internet. For while the protests on July 11 were not the brainchild of recognized actors in Cuban civil society, easy (if expensive) access to social media on personal cell phones since 2019 has made their confrontations with Cuban authorities over freedom of expression and the freedom to organize politically more visible to the majority. Social media, of course, is a pitched battleground, with state-backed Cuban information warriors angling for clicks, hearts, and minds as much as opposition news sites funded by USAID. But debates about journalistic integrity, Cuban sovereignty, and "fake news" aside, in this now more complicated informational playing field, the viral dissemination of "Patria y Vida," the profusion of memes ridiculing Cuban authorities, and the events of July 11 themselves all show that the Cuban state has lost something of its communications monopoly. These dynamics, combined with almost two years of pandemic hardships, have meant more and more artists and young people previously content to not *meterse en política* (get involved in politics) have lost the cautiousness that characterized them previously. The violation of citizens' rights, as much as any group's cause or message, now attracts the criticism of independent-minded young Cubans, including those who are not inundating their Twitter feeds with #patriayvida per se.

The identities of the artists behind "Patria y Vida" also help explain the song's resonance. Yotuel Romero, Descemer Bueno, and Gente de Zona are now wealthy stars, but it matters that they, along with Osorbo and El Funky, are persons of color hailing from what remains a racially fractured society—despite the Cuban Revolution's claims to having "solved" the problem of racial inequality by 1962 (Spence Benson 2016). It also matters that they are exponents of originally black music genres, hip-hop and reguetón, at which Cuban cultural authorities have thumbed their noses repeatedly. As a style that at times cultivates hedonism and sexism, and that is not Cuban in origin, reguetón (or Cubatón, in its insular appropriation) has been criticized

again and again by the guardians of Cuban socialist good taste (Luci Pereira and Suarez 2019). But love it or hate it, it is the soundtrack of Cuban youth. And it is what one hears walking through Cuban neighborhoods and communities that, because of rising racial inequalities (in terms of access to remittances and MLC stores or previous ability to benefit from pro-market reforms), have felt the effects of the current economic crisis most acutely. No wonder many taking the streets and cheering "Patria y Vida" on July 11 were Cubans of color.

Contradictions Around Race Between *Adentro y Afuera*

And yet, it is on the question of race that it is impossible to avoid the sensation of cognitive dissonance when considering some aspects of the song's message and circulation, particularly outside of the island. For if the image of black men criticizing the Cuban state is part of the music video's potency, in more phenotypically white Cuban Miami, there is a history and contemporaneous reality of denying, or minimizing, a past and present of racism on the island and in the Cuban diaspora. One could not help cringing, then, when the song's creators made the rounds last spring on pro-Trump Miami influencer channels, where the struggle against structural racism in the U.S. context, or internationally, has been routinely deemed a communist conspiracy. Granted, neither did the Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation's one-sided statement on Cuba after July 11 help build bridges of understanding.

In fact, for all that some observers have treated the members of the Movimiento San Isidro and the creators of "Patria y Vida" as analogous to BLM activists in the United States (and there have been some points of contact), their words have at times echoed a familiar aspiration toward color-blind nationalism that has a troublesome past in both U.S. and Cuban history. In an interview with *Esquire*, for example, Yotuel Romero both described the racism he had experienced in Cuba in the past and called the expression "black lives matter" "racist," proselytizing instead for the values of "mestizaje" (or mixture) as the path to eliminating racial differences. Students of race relations across Latin America know the pitfalls of such thinking—namely, that it sounds progressive in principle, but can quickly hide or even perpetuate anti-black or anti-indigenous biases (Gould 1998, Eiss and Rappaport 2018).

Even more infuriating, however, have been the racist undertones and overtones of responses from loyalist and official sectors on the Cuban side. It may be true that "Patria y Vida's" description of the past sixty years as "stuck" is a better political slogan than it is compelling history. With regard to race, for example, as scholars like Alejandro de la Fuente (2001) have shown, while the Revolution's silencing of further debate after 1962 cut short a deeper reckoning, black Cubans did experience important educational gains and upward mobility for three decades (as did other previously disadvantaged sectors of Cuban society). But from there to imply, as some "Patria y Vida" critics have, that black artists like Romero should be thankful and "have become what they are" because of the Revolution—suggestions that abounded in the comment boards on state media—is to engage in one of the oldest tropes of racist thinking. It is to demand eternal black docility and gratitude as the price for any past advances toward equality. It is also to ignore wide evidence of the erosion in those gains in more recent decades, let alone concomitant demands for greater *political* liberties (Hansing and Hoffman 2020).

On the other hand, it is not clear protesters on July 11, or their supporters in Miami, have convincing answers to the intractable problem of racial inequality either. In part this is because of the reticence on the part of white Cubans to grapple with their own imbrication in structural racism at home and abroad. But it also has to do with the ways economic reforms have aggravated disparities in Cuba over the last thirty years. Cries for *libertad* in Cuba on July 11, and certainly in Miami, are not limited to, but presumably encompass—at least for many—the desire to see Cuba transition to a more free-market system. Yet we know, to return to a point made above, that the market openings with which Cuba has experimented so far have tended to benefit white Cubans disproportionately, while receding state subsidies have had the heaviest impact on black communities (Hansing and Hoffman 2020). Here, then, we run into another potential tension within the protest imaginary fueled by "Patria y Vida" on and off the island—that is, between those who see the slogan as compatible with a vision of an economy wherein the state plays a highly limited role versus those on the streets on July 11 reacting as much to *declining* state social provision and capacity.

Conclusion

To conclude, let me return to U.S. policy, because there is also a disjuncture between the way that "Patria y Vida" has been invoked on the island and some of the agendas it is serving in Miami. One of the recurring refrains we have heard in past months is that U.S. policy is irrelevant to the moment. The protesters this summer, we are told, were not demanding sanctions relief or an end to the U.S. embargo; they wanted freedom from a political system in which they do not have a voice. That may be true, but that does not mean protesters on July 11 were in favor of U.S. sanctions either. It also does not mean most protesters in Cuba would support a U.S. military intervention, as some mainstream voices in South Florida advocated at the time. One wishes more leaders of Cuban civil society and the artists behind "Patria y Vida" would have distanced themselves from such irresponsible proposals more forcefully.

The White House can be confident, therefore, that forms of sanctions relief and aid that mitigate the impact of the current humanitarian crisis on Cuban citizens would be popular among island residents. From a strategic point of view, they would also show the United States as magnanimous, and they are simply the right thing to do at such a time of need. Besides, if we value the protesters' agency and follow the argument that their demands were largely political and not economic in nature—though again, I have argued that these two drivers are deeply entwined—there is no reason sanctions relief should defang the urgency of citizens' cries for political change. U.S. measures will certainly not solve all of Cuba's economic problems. And the unilateral "maximum pressure" strategy still in place has not prevented the Cuban government from imprisoning several hundred protesters on questionable charges since July.

But Cuba's leaders must also change course. If they think they can wait it out or defuse the popular frustrations of recent months with counter-anthems, targeted imprisonments, forced exiles, or highly staged visits to and with marginalized communities—all tactics they have pursued in recent weeks—that, too, is not the wisest or moral strategy. In response to July 11, Cuban authorities did fast-track the legalization of small- and medium-sized enterprises—a needed economic reform, no doubt. An acceleration of immunization with Cuba's homegrown vaccines has also eased the toll of the pandemic since the summer and cleared the way to re-open

the country to international tourism in November, promising economic relief. But it is unclear just how well the residents of neighborhoods like La Güinera (on Havana's periphery and a site of dramatic protest action on July 11) are positioned to immediately benefit from these openings. Nor will economic improvements alone shore up popular faith in the state's political legitimacy. To wit, a new civil society coalition calling itself Achipiélago has called for a fresh round of peaceful demonstrations in mid-November, and even asked the government for permits. Rather than authorize the demonstrations (as Article 56 of Cuba's 2019 constitution would seem to warrant), authorities deemed them "illicit" (for being in opposition to Cuba's "irrevocable" socialist system) and have set the stage for more tension by scheduling military exercises and a National Day of Defense.

Even if it were true, alleging "Patria y Vida" and other expressions of new activism are simply part of a *guerra de cuarta generación* will not cut it. For all the song's contradictions, and for all the movement's fractures and limitations, they have taken on lives of their own, revealing the weakness of the Díaz-Canel government's rhetorical insistence on "continuity." Time will tell whether the events of July 11 can be repeated, and whether the U.S. and Cuban governments can see through the fog to find a path back to more constructive relations. Regardless, it is long past time for Cuban authorities to also listen to an increasingly diverse chorus of their own citizens demanding the normalization of their political rights.

Works Cited

De la Fuente, Alejandro. *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth Century Cuba*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001.

Eiss, Paul K and Joanne Rappaport, eds. *The Politics and Performance of Mestizaje in Latin America: Mestizo Acts*. New York: Routledge, 2018.

Gould, Jeffrey. *To Die in This Way: Nicaraguan Indians and the Myth of Mestizaje*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998.

Hansing, Katrin, and Bert Hoffmann. "When Racial Inequalities Return: Assessing the Restratification of Cuban Society 60 Years After Revolution." *Latin American Politics and Society* 62, no. 2 (2020): 29–52.

Luci Pereira, Simone and Thiago Soares. "Reguetón en Cuba: censura, ostentación y grietas en las políticas mediáticas." Palabra Clave 22, no. 1 (2019): 1-28.

Spence Benson, Devyn. *Antiracism in Cuba: The Unfinished Revolution*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2016.