

MONICA RODRIGUEZ

By The Editors, Monica Rodriguez and Pablo Guardiola

Monica Rodriguez’s project for Commonwealth is an extension of a larger project, *Antilles for the Antilleans* in which she revisits the work of the Puerto Rican independence advocate Ramón Emeterio Betances (1827–1898), who fought colonial rule, opposed slavery, and remains a key figure for those contesting US power over Puerto Rico. Betances called for an Antillean Federation to support and connect people across the Caribbean, and Rodriguez asks whether such a federation might be possible now.

Antilles for the Antilleans links 19th-century independence movements in Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Puerto Rico to our present moment. The ICA installation also brought this larger project into dialogue with Confederate monuments that have recently been removed in Richmond and elsewhere—but unlike those statues, the monuments Rodriguez depicts in the digitally-printed mural that runs along the ICA’s façade were meant to uplift the people and fight oppression. Under these images runs a text in English and Spanish: “Today the revolution proceeds, like a volcanic eruption, from the social strata that forms the very core of the people.” This quote—in both the original Spanish and an English translation—comes from a letter Betances wrote in 1892. It is relevant not only to the

Caribbean but also to Richmond and Philadelphia, not only to his time but to ours

– The Editors

Volcanic Eruptions By Monica Rodriguez and Pablo Guardiola

Unique and Eventful: The History of the People of Haiti!

It is not surprising that Ramón Emeterio Betances was extremely enthusiastic about the Haitian Revolution. It is actually the great modern revolution, but we know very well why it has been overshadowed by the French and “American” revolutions.

A dark-skinned doctor, abolitionist, Freemason, and revolutionary, Betances held an ideal of emancipation that was independent and federative. In Puerto Rico he already feels like an anachronistic figure, but in different ways he is always present. He tried to start a revolution against Spanish rule in Puerto Rico. He died in France and was buried in Père Lachaise. His remains were transferred to Puerto Rico in 1920.

For Betances, annexationism, the movement that seeks to complete annexation to the US, was out of the question. As José Martí stated, **“Cuba must be free: from Spain and from the United States.”**

For Betances, Cuba and Puerto Rico needed to be free: from Spain and from the United States.

In fall 2020, Mitch McConnell, leader of the Republican majority in the US Senate, also ruled that annexationism is out of the question in the case of Puerto Rico.

The annexationists in Puerto Rico will hold a Yes or No referendum on statehood on November 3, 2020. Jenniffer González (Resident Commissioner of Puerto Rico in Washington, who is pro-statehood, a Republican, and a supporter of Donald Trump) does not know how to manipulate the snub caused by McConnell's rejection.

McConnell Valdés is a firm of lawyers with very close ties to annexationist politicians. It has nothing to do with Mitch McConnell.

TODAY THE REVOLUTION PROCEEDS LIKE A VOLCANIC ERUPTION, FROM THE SOCIAL STRATA THAT FORMS THE VERY CORE OF THE PEOPLE. CUBA AND PUERTO RICO WILL BE INDEPENDENT, GREAT, AND HAPPY.

In the summer of 2019, the Puerto Rican people forced, through massive protests, the resignation of Governor Ricardo Rosselló Nevares (an annexationist). The catalyst was the publication of 889 pages of a Telegram chat. The chat explicitly states how the governor and his closest collaborators really thought and acted, putting their personal and partisan interests above the problems and afflictions of a country immersed in a sequence of crises. There is no concrete evidence of corruption in the chat,

but in it we can see how the corrupt think and operate. The chat was the spark for the demonstrations—equal in size only to the demonstrations twenty years ago against the US Navy’s presence in Vieques—that were actually rooted in accumulated bad governance practices. Hurricanes Irma and María exposed, in an absurdly explicit way, how ineptitude and corruption were the course of action of the Rosselló Nevares administration. In the summer of 2019, it was very clear. The “volcanic eruption” was irreverent because any respect for the government was lost. In the long run, it is going to be a good thing. Another characteristic of that eruption was that, just like Vieques, a catalyst suddenly causes the people to rise from their colonial marasmus. This has not been studied yet, but it is a very special phenomenon. However, it must also be made clear that the protesters **had many qualities, but they were not really revolutionaries.**

The torrent passes by; and all their sorrows turn to untamed courage and impetuous hopes; and they are thrown into the tumultuous waves; and the furious tide shakes them and drags them, prostrates them and encourages them, brings them together or disperses them, sometimes submerging them and sometimes raising them, until they are placed forever in the immortal gallery, on the eternal pedestal of the liberators of Humanity.

Alejo Carpentier, in the introduction to his novel *The Kingdom of This World*, describes the context of Haiti as one immersed in what has been named a marvelous reality.

Commonly, it is argued that the real and the imaginary in Haiti have the same weight. This assertion recurs in multiple chronicles and newspaper articles about our Caribbean neighbor.

“The Antilles for the Antilleans” is a quote by Ramón Emeterio Betances, which Monica Rodriguez appropriates both as a title and as a theoretical and ideological framework for a long-term artistic project. In this specific case, it refers to a series of large-scale digital images of emancipatory monuments from Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Cuba. These monuments celebrate the independence, greatness, and happiness that freedom brings, or, in the case of Puerto Rico, the possibility of it. Like any monument with canonic 19th-century aesthetics and aspirations, they are full of contradictions, but as Betances states when referring to the Haitian revolution, it should be considered that these **are the eternal pedestal of the liberators of Humanity**. Yet this project is still unfinished. Formally, its digital construction gives us the sensation of a plan or a blueprint, the guide for our emancipation.

In Haiti, something very interesting happens: their Revolution is present in everyday life. It is not a historical celebration; it is something alive and current. There, time becomes flexible, it will collapse if necessary. I think that, in part, this is what Carpentier refers to when he uses the term *marvelous reality*. For Haitians, their revolution is not over; it is a difficult and complex process; it is still developing. The revolution as a reconfiguration, as a beginning that must be continually calibrated as it unfolds.

There is a monument in Haiti, or rather, part of it, that catches people’s attention. One of its components is at the Bureau d’Ethnologie in Port-au-Prince . It is a sculpture of Christopher Columbus. The sculpture spent years on a boardwalk near what is today Cité Soleil. During the protests against Baby Doc (Jean-Claude Duvalier), the protesters threw the sculpture of Columbus into the bay. On the empty pedestal there was a piece

of cardboard with the phrases “Foreigners out of Haiti” and “Viva Charlemagne Peralte,” a revolutionary leader assassinated in 1919 by the Marines during the US military occupation. At the Bureau d’Ethnologie the custodians tell visitors the reason why this particular Columbus had historical value was because it had been mutilated and because of the time it spent underwater. In 1986, after being thrown into the bay, the sculpture of Columbus was rescued and placed back on its pedestal several days later, only to be thrown in again by protesters. The mayor at the time decided that it was better for it to stay underwater.

THIS TEXT IS THE RESULT OF AN EXCHANGE BETWEEN MONICA RODRIGUEZ AND PABLO GUARDIOLA. SHE SENT SOME QUOTES FROM RAMÓN EMETERIO BETANCES (WHICH ARE BOLD) AND ASKED TO RESPOND FROM THE CARIBBEAN PRESENT. THIS IS A TEXT IN PROCESS.

– MONICA RODRIGUEZ AND PABLO GUARDIOLA

Commonwealth is organized and curated by Beta-Local co-directors Pablo Guardiola, Michael Linares, and nibia pastrana santiago and former co-director Sofía Gallisá Muriente; ICA at VCU Chief Curator Stephanie Smith; Noah Simblist, Chair of Painting + Printmaking at VCUarts; and Kerry Bickford, Director of Programs, Nicole Pollard, Program Coordinator and Nato Thompson, Sueyun and Gene Locks Artistic Director at Philadelphia Contemporary.

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