Cuba: A tale of two hurricanes

written by Rosa Miriam Elizalde
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Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel takes part in relief work in the aftermath of Hurricane Ian. Photo: Ismael Batista Ramírez/Granma

Ernest Hemingway learned in Cuba that the best way to get through a hurricane is to have your ears tuned to a battery-powered radio and

keep your hands busy with a bottle of rum and a hammer to nail down doors and windows. The American writer appropriated the typical jargon of Cuban meteorologists and fishermen who speak of “the sea” in the feminine and of the hurricane as a demon or evil sorcerer, and who, when a storm leaves the island, usually say that “it entered in the channel” or that “it crossed the land.”

From the clashes with the cyclones and the turbulent waters came that jewel of literature, *The Old Man and the Sea*, which made William Faulkner, another giant, exclaim that Hemingway had found God.

On an island located at the crossroads of the winds, it is impossible not to live with the culture of hurricanes that have existed in the Antilles since the most remote evidence of life, some 6,000 years before Christ. The Taínos, Indigenous Cubans, gave the phenomenon its name and drew a spiral to represent the hurricane, a rotating symbol of the wind, which could be embodied in a monstrous serpent capable of wrapping the entire universe in its body.

In both reality and mythology, the hurricane has produced “tremendous fantasies” alike, in the words of the greatest Cuban novelist, Alejo Carpentier, who was inspired by the passage of the 1927 meteor over Havana to write some passages for his novel *Ecue-Yamba – O!* The storm, Carpentier wrote, caused the movement of “houses, intact, several kilometers from their foundations; schooners pulled out of the water, and left on a street corner; granite statues, decapitated from a chopping block; mortuary cars, paraded by the wind along squares and avenues, as if guided by ghost coachmen and, to top it off, a rail torn from a track, raised in weight, and thrown on the trunk of a royal palm with such violence, that it was embedded in

the wood, like the arms of a cross."

There are no significant differences between that description and what we have witnessed again in Cuba. Hurricane Ian left three dead and more than 89,000 homes affected in the province of Pinar del Río, caused the destruction of thousands of hectares of crops, led to trees and street lighting poles falling everywhere, left the country in total darkness for hours and with thousands of stories that turn anything told by two literary geniuses like Hemingway and Carpentier into pale tales.

The destruction can have infinite variations, but the hurricane is one of the few things that has not changed in thousands of years for the people of the Antilles. Whatever it may be called and whatever maybe be the strength of its fury, both the ancient and modern worlds have considered it a living creature that comes and goes over time and is not always cruel. When the excesses do not occur, the waters and the winds cool the summer heat and benefit agriculture, and everyone is happy.

However, this will be the first time that such a well known and recurrent natural phenomenon passes through Cuba accompanied by another equal or greater destructive force that has been created artificially in the new digital laboratories and is capable of such an evil that our Taíno ancestors could not have foreseen it.

While gusts of wind of more than 200 kilometers per hour blew in the north of Pinar del Río, more than 37,000 accounts on Twitter replicated the hashtag *#CubaPaLaCalle* (Cuba to the streets), with calls for protests, roadblocks, assaults on government institutions, sabotage, and terrorism, and with instructions on how to prepare

homemade bombs and Molotov cocktails. Less than 2 percent of the users who participated in this virtual mobilization were in Cuba. Most of those who made the call to “fire up” the streets in Cuba were connected to American technology platforms and did so while hundreds of kilometers away from the country that remained in darkness. Perhaps some on the island kept their battery-powered radio. Still, what millions of Cubans had in the palm of their hands was not a bottle of Hemingway’s rum but a cellphone connected to the internet (the country of 11 million inhabitants has 7.5 million people with access to social media).

Let’s do an exercise. Imagine this panorama: you are anguished with the here and now. You have no electricity and no drinking water. What little food you have bought with great difficulty and kept refrigerated will go bad in no time. You don’t know what has happened to your family that lives in the western provinces, where the damage is apocalyptic. You have no idea how long this new crisis will last. Daily life before the hurricane was already desperate due to the economic blockade imposed by the United States, inflation, and shortages being faced by Cubans. Still, you see on your mobile that “everyone” (on the internet, of course) seems to be doing well and has plenty, while thousands of people on social media (and their trolls) shout that the culprit of your misfortune is the communist government. Your only light source is the mobile screen, which works like Plato’s allegory of the cave: you sit with your back to a flaming fire while virtual figures pass between you and the bonfire. You only see the movements of their shadows projected on the walls of the cave, and those shadows whisper the solution to your desperate reality: *#CubaPaLaCalle*.

At no other time in history has an immigrant minority had so much

economic, media, and technological power to try to sink their country with their relatives still in Cuba before even trying to lend a hand in the midst of a national tragedy. What Mexican who lives in the United States puts political differences above helping their relatives after an earthquake? Why don't Salvadorans or Guatemalans who live abroad do it now that Hurricane Julia has devastated Central America.

It is unprecedented and unheard of that the hurricane of a lifetime, and the hurricane of virtual hatred can arrive simultaneously, but that is just what happened in Cuba.

This article was produced by Globetrotter and was first published on La Jornada. Rosa Miriam Elizalde is a Cuban journalist and founder of the site Cubadebate. She is vice president of both the Union of Cuban Journalists (UPEC) and the Latin American Federation of Journalists (FELAP). She has written and co-written several books including *Jineteros en la Habana* and *Our Chavez*. She has received the Juan Gualberto Gómez National Prize for Journalism on multiple occasions for her outstanding work. She is currently a weekly columnist for La Jornada of Mexico City.