

Tribute to Julieta Alfonso (1952–2021)

by

**The Caribbean Association for Feminist Research and Action,
Trinidad and Tobago (CAFRA TT)**

Julieta De La Concepción Alfonso Morejón was CAFRA Regional’s bilingual translator and interpreter (English-Spanish and Spanish-English) from 1989 to 2006. Since her passing on August 27, 2021, we have been receiving tributes from former CAFRA Secretariat colleagues and members in Trinidad and Tobago and around the region.

Julieta’s farewell to Cuba and arrival in Trinidad and Tobago

Julieta fell in love with a Trinidadian man, while nursing him back to health in Cuba. They got married and she accompanied him to Trinidad and Tobago, unsure of her English, and uncertain of her future.



In Cuba, she had studied Industrial Engineering, through which she learnt ‘technical English,’ and it was while working on standardization and quality control that she yearned for a “greater involvement in languages.” Upon arriving in Trinidad, she immersed herself in intensive courses in English as a Second Language at NIHERST and UWI. One day, a friend invited her to a meeting at WorkingWomen (Women Working for Social Progress, a socialist feminist organization founded in 1984). And it was only a matter of time before she heard about CAFRA, which was looking for a bilingual clerical assistant.

Although Julieta settled in Trinidad and Tobago until her passing, she never lost her Cuban roots, connections, language or accent, and she kept abreast of developments in Cuba. Former CAFRA colleague, Ann Marie Charmaine Sinkia described her as, “Cuban by birth, but Trini to the bone.” Julieta, she added, “spoke often about her life in Cuba, her mother who was a doctor, her brother a musician, the love she had for her father, and her experiences of studying in Hungary.” According to Sabine Friedel, former CAFRA intern:

She was that mix of (trying to be) Trini and still always Cuban. She loved working in mas camps and playing mas. She ate Cuban – always a banana with every meal – and she despised pepper!

Julieta's contribution to CAFRA

Julieta joined the CAFRA Secretariat in April 1989, as the organization's bilingual clerical assistant. Her addition to the *CAFRA News* Editorial Committee in 1990 facilitated the publication of the organization's newsletter in English and Spanish. The first issue of *Novedades CAFRA* appeared in mid-1990. By 1995, separate English and Spanish editions gave way to the first bilingual issue of *CAFRA News/Novedades CAFRA*.



In celebration of CAFRA's tenth anniversary (1985–1995), Tina Johnson, CAFRA's first newsletter editor, wrote: "From the very beginning, it was envisioned that the newsletter should not only be available to English readers. The addition of Julieta Alfonso to the team made it possible to add at least one language, and the first issue of *Novedades CAFRA* came out in 1990" (*CAFRA News*, Jul-Dec 1995).

Rowena Kalloo, who succeeded Tina Johnson as *CAFRA News* editor, noted that "Julieta Alfonso and I intend to work closely on the production of *Novedades CAFRA*, with the aim of transferring to Julieta all the skills she will need to become the eventual editor/producer of *Novedades CAFRA*" (*CAFRA Annual Report*, 1990).

Thus, Julieta served as translator/producer/editor of *Novedades CAFRA* from its inception in 1990 to the publication of its final issue in 2006 (vol. 19, nos. 1&2), in commemoration of CAFRA's 20th anniversary (1985–2005). She was also the longest-serving member of the *CAFRA News* Editorial Committee. In an interview with *CAFRA News*, she reflected that, "Being in touch with CAFRA is like being in touch with the world. The kind of information received and shared, especially in terms of women, I wouldn't find elsewhere" (*CAFRA News*, vol. 13, no. 1, 1999).

Julieta was critical to CAFRA's engagement with its Spanish-speaking members, in general, and the organization's connections with Cuba, in particular. In October 1990, she was delighted to represent the Cuban poet, Nancy Morejón, at the launch of *Creation Fire: A CAFRA Anthology of Caribbean Women's Poetry*. Reading Morejón's poem, "Adiós/Farewell" must have reverberated with her own farewell to Cuba.

In July 1992, the Dominican Republic hosted the First Latin American and Caribbean Black Women's Conference. Julieta mobilized English-speaking Caribbean participation at the meeting,

and was crushed when she could not get a visa to attend. She wrote about the significance of the meeting:

In the Dominican Republic and the rest of the Spanish-speaking Caribbean (with the exception of socialist Cuba), the problem of racial discrimination, alienation and marginalization is based on a lack of recognition and appreciation of the African elements in the national culture of these countries. The predomination of an ideology of white superiority, a pervasive relic of the Spanish colonial heritage, has allowed the black and mixed population – especially women – very little possibilities to contribute to their societies (CAFRA News/ Novedades CAFRA, vol. 6, nos. 2–3, 1992).

A year later, in November 1993, she played an important role as translator and interpreter at CAFRA’s Third General Meeting, held in Georgetown, Guyana.

Tributes from former CAFRA Secretariat colleagues



L-R: Kiini Salaam (Intern, USA), Julieta Alfonso, Sabine Friedel (Intern, Germany), Ann Marie Charmaine Sinkia, Rawwida Baksh, Cathy Shepherd and Maggie Williams (1995)

It’s no small testament to Julieta’s personality and commitment, that she successfully navigated numerous changes in CAFRA’s leadership and staffing at the Secretariat over the years. As the longest-serving CAFRA Secretariat staff member (1989–2006), Julieta worked with three CAFRA Coordinators (Rawwida Baksh, Gemma Tang Nain and Nelcia Robinson); various

CAFRA News Editors (Tina Johnson, Rowena Kalloo, Avian Joseph and Sheila Rampersad); staff members (Allison Apparicio [deceased], Reena Basdeo, Jacquie Burgess, Joanne Cameron, Roberta Clarke, Sonia Gardier-Mohammed, Thora Laughlin, Pat Lee Kong [deceased], Hyacinth Noreiga, Tara Ramoutar [deceased], Cathy Shepherd, Ann Marie Charmaine Sinkia and Maggie Williams [deceased]); consultants (Thelma Henderson [deceased] and Josanne Lennard); and interns (Sabine Friedel, Germany; Hideko Matsuo, Japan; and Kiini Salaam, USA). She also liaised with CAFRA Chairpersons (Rhoda Reddock and Margarete May Macaulay), and National Representatives and members of the Regional Committee. The sudden passing of close colleague, Pat Lee Kong, in January 1995 at age 45, affected her deeply.

Rawwida Baksh, CAFRA founding member and first Coordinator, who appointed Julieta to the Secretariat, recalled:

Julieta has been on my mind, linked to recent conversations about the pivotal place of CAFRA News/Novedades CAFRA in the Caribbean feminist movement.

She contributed significantly to the development of CAFRA Regional. Her main role, as translator of CAFRA News from English to Spanish, and Spanish articles/news into English, allowed us to publish the bilingual CAFRA News/Novedades CAFRA. Without her, as the organization's in-house English-Spanish and Spanish-English translator and interpreter (of correspondence, reports, meetings, etc.), it would have been impossible for CAFRA Regional to build a dynamic and reciprocal relationship with the Spanish-speaking Caribbean and Latin America.

Cathy Shepherd, former CAFRA Information Officer, said:

Julieta had a special and different relationship with every member of staff. To me, she was someone in whom I could confide. We shared a love for earrings – especially those made from natural materials, and Carnival. She loved life, music, dancing, and playing mas. I would usually run into her and Jacquie Burgess on the road during Carnival, the last time being with Etienne Charles and Friends Brass Mas [band], 'We the People,' in 2017.

I became aware of Julieta's sewing skills very early on, which became a thriving side-line. She sewed curtains and cushions for the Secretariat, and clothes for staff members, including me.



For Ann Marie Charmaine Sinkia, former Financial Officer (pictured left, with Julieta), she was “my colleague, my macomère and mi amiga.”

Julieta lightened my workdays with her stories, her infectious laughter, and her love of Trini food. But it was her love of life and carefree way of living that held my interest.

My most endearing memory of Julieta, was at the end of my first pregnancy. I had been admitted for my C-section, which was scheduled for 7.00 a.m., but my doctor arrived at 6.00 a.m. and announced, “It’s a beautiful day. I am here. Let’s get started.” I was alone and afraid, when I heard a knock on my door, and to my surprise, Julieta walked in. I felt as if my guardian angel had arrived. I said, “Girl, what are you doing here at six in the morning? It’s still dark outside.” She said, “I couldn’t sleep, and I wanted to bring this nightie for you, so I got dressed and came.” I didn’t feel scared anymore. I decided there and then that she would be the godmother to this baby. Hasta Luego, mi amiga.

Former Editor of *CAFRA News*, Rowena Kalloo, was heartbroken upon hearing the news of Julieta’s passing: “It’s hard to process. I have so many good memories of her. She was a lovely person, generous in spirit, kind and empathetic. She sewed my wedding dress. *Novedades CAFRA* would not have existed without her.”



Roberta Clarke, former Project Coordinator, Women and the Law project, said that when she last met Julieta in November 2018, “She was her usual self, mirthful, caring and analytical.” They discussed, at length, the Cuban health workers, and the sacrifices many were making for the Cuban state.

L-R: Roberta Clarke with Julieta Alfonso (2018)

Tributes from CAFRA members in the Caribbean and T&T

Margarette May Macaulay, former CAFRA Chairperson, Jamaica, wrote:

I remember Julieta as a vibrant person, who was committed to CAFRA in every way. She was unstinting in the work she put in to advance our agenda, plans and hopes for the region. Her contribution was invaluable, and without her translations, interpretations, and work on CAFRA News, we would not have achieved what we did as a regional association, recognized for its effective work on women's rights in all the countries within our mandate in the Caribbean, and in the four official languages of region.

Josephine Dublin-Prince, former CAFRA Regional Committee member, Dominica, remembers Julieta as being “enthusiastic, committed and knowledgeable,” and will never forget “her work in helping us to put into perspective the gender and development issues, and to increase solidarity with our Spanish-speaking sisters.”

Vernie Clarice Barnes, CAFRA member, Montserrat, recalled Julieta’s “participation in WAND's trainer of trainers workshops,” and contribution to “the CAFRA/WAND Summer University in Feminist Theory.” Barnes continued:

She sewed dresses for me in Vogue styles, which caused people all over the Caribbean to enquire where I got those dresses. She had asked me not to disclose that she was the designer and seamstress. She would say, “I am not a seamstress; I am an engineer.” Of course, I told many. Her talent could not be hidden under a bushel. I still have some of those dresses, and I continue to tell the story of her warmth and brilliance in producing them. Julieta was an elegant, gentle and kind soul.

Denise Noel-De Bique, CAFRA member, Trinidad and Tobago/ Barbados, wrote:

We often do not recognize the importance of an intersection between our lives and other sisters until we give it due attention. Julieta stood at that place, that intersection, with dignity and a deep understanding of its significance.

Through her unique skill, she interpreted the nuances of culture from the hearts and longings of sisters, to enable us to see and hold each other with a bond that we will not forget.



Front Row, L-R: Hyacinth Noreiga, Julieta Alfonso, Maggie Williams and Tara Ramoutar;
Back Row, L-R: Yasmin Tambiah (visiting Sri Lankan feminist), Nelcia Robinson, Cathy Shepherd, Jacque Burgess, Patricia Hackett (National Representative, Guyana), and Stephanie Pile (National Representative, Trinidad and Tobago) (1996)

Brenda Gopeesingh, CAFRA member, Trinidad and Tobago, wrote: “I was very fond of Julieta, whom I met during the preparatory work for Beijing. I always received *CAFRA News/Novedades CAFRA*, and knew of her contribution to the newsletter. I had not met her for many years, and assumed that she had returned to Cuba.”

Gia Gaspard Taylor, CAFRA member and President, Network of Rural Women Producers Trinidad and Tobago (NRWPTT), wrote: “We are very sorry to learn of Julieta’s passing, and add our voice to say, ‘We pray the memories of the good times shared with her family, friends and acquaintances will grant all the solace at this time of loss.’ May she rest in perfect peace.”

Recollections of CAFRA’s interns and friends

Sabine Friedel, CAFRA intern, Germany, recollected that:

Julieta was always very tastefully dressed, with crazy haircuts and colours. And she could sew like no one else! She once told me that she taught herself to sew by ‘undoing’ clothes.

She was always short on money because people cheated her, but also because she had a big heart and gave freely to those who were in need (or made her believe that they were in need). In that sense, she was very trusting. Later, she 'adopted' a girl, gave her a home, became a mother to her, and facilitated her education.

She also had very strong political principles, on which she never compromised. Working at CAFRA was not just a job to her. She was a very special feminist.

Gladys Cuales, daughter of CAFRA founding member, Sonia Cuales, Curacao remembered Julieta as “joyful and full of life,” and “a dear and wonderful friend of my mother.” Gladys, who now runs her own translation company, got her first experience of translation at CAFRA, assisting Julieta in 1997. That assignment was “a happy and great learning experience for me.”

Julieta was cremated on Friday September 3, 2021 after a funeral service at Clark and Battoo Funeral Home, Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago. We mourn her loss and find consolation in the knowledge that her memory lives on in the hearts of many, across the globe. Julieta, may your beautiful soul rest in peace!

CAFRA TT

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