Creating Revolutionary Cuba's National Hero: The Cultural Capital of the *Cimarrón*

Lindsay Puente
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

Traditional studies of modernity and revolution often neglect the importance of racial slavery in shaping the modern world. The dominant narrative of modernity elides the formative role of the slave system and colonialism altogether and especially silences the advances made possible by radical anti-slavery. Certainly there are revisionist narratives of modernity which emphasize the roles colonialism, the slave system, and acts of resistance have played in the development of modern nation-states. Likewise acts of radical anti-slavery have at times been included in official narratives of the state as positive foundational acts either for independence projects, abolition movements, or cross-Caribbean collaborative possibilities—but these treatments are often to translate these moments, actions, and actors into a modern, teleological schema that pre-supposes a universal notion of freedom and a universal goal of the formation of an independent nation-state. Radical anti-slavery, however, exists both within and beyond these modernity projects.

Hegemonic studies of modernity often prioritize the state as the only means through which political action is possible and thus deny slavery and radical acts of slave resistance their modernizing and political weight. For example, in their introduction to the collection *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital,* Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd indicate that when "political resistance could only be recognized as such insofar as it was organized through nationalisms that took as their object the capture of the colonial state and the formation of modern institutions and subjects," other forms of resistance—such as slave resistance—are patronized and denied political priority (4). However, even those acts which do not intend to overthrow the existing power, such as defection from the plantations to remote *cimarrón*

communities, had destabilizing effects and shaped the development of modern state power in the colonial world.[1] Such acts of cultural perseverance are political and defy hegemonic attempts to eradicate difference and to deny both collective and individual subjectivity to those who fall outside of political representation. For instance, despite the general silencing of alternative communal narratives, there exists an abundance of slave narratives endorsed by the dominant culture in literature, history, sculpture, paintings, etc. Within these narratives of the struggles against slavery on the part of the slaves, singular, masculine figures are most often chosen to represent broad sectors, and their actions are subsumed into national narratives that naturalize the development of a modern state. These figures are chosen because they prioritize the political, they uphold patriarchal hierarchies, and they fit easily into national teleologies that provide a historical authenticity for newly-formed states. Hence, nations emerging from colonialism, or entering a new era of self-definition, have tried to correct the wide gaps in the popular archive by addressing the active role of slavery and of slave resistance in the creation of national culture and the continued impact of the cultures of slavery and of slave resistance on contemporary life. These corrections to the popular archive are accompanied by an intellectual appropriation of previously conquered, marginalized, and oppressed communities and their histories in support of the symbolic force which is the nation.

Through an examination of Cuban sociologist Miguel Barnet's *Biografía de un cimarrón*, a ethnographic oral history of the life of an ex-slave, I would like to consider the manners in which radical anti-slavery *have* been remembered with attention to *who* has taken the responsibility of textualizing these memories and *whom* these memories are purported to represent. Barnet's *Biografía* narrates the life of Esteban Montejo (circa 1860-1973), a man born into Cuban slavery at the end of the nineteenth century. The *Biografía* is a transcription of Montejo's spoken testimony of his experiences as a slave, as a fugitive, as a paid mill-worker, and as a revolutionary independence fighter which was published during his lifetime as a testament to the trajectory of Cuban national identity. To rescue his story and to make it known nationally and internationally represents the hegemonic cultural authority's desire to create a more representative national imaginary through the inclusion of radical black figures. This move circumvents both violent and political action on the part

of traditionally unrepresented groups—here, of black populations—by creating a controlled space in which their history can be recognized as contributing to the formation of national culture and thus preventing another uprising like that of 1812.[2]

As transitioning nations attempt to culturally authorize their existence, a symbolic past is resurrected through cultural ritualization: the official recognition of 'traditional,' local values and practices, and the reproduction of these for easy consumption by citizens in the forms of national holidays, monuments, and even the naming of streets, plazas and schools. This ritualization constructs meaning, dramatizing historic knowledge to confirm foundational acts and origins and to provide images of stability, authority, and a natural progression to the current state. The nationalism that emerges proposes a historical continuity between the emergence of a people and its form of representation, i.e., the sovereignty of the state. This nation-state was the modern paradigm for political formations, and newly independent countries strove to adopt this model as the logical end to oppressive histories. It is in this vein that Barnet's *Biografía de un cimarrón* gives voice to alternative forms of resistance and to alternative narratives of nation by providing a public and national forum for the private, local stories of slavery to societies that have been desensitized to the very indebtedness of the construction of the modern nation to slavery despite their Westernized prioritization of the nation-state. *Biografía de un cimarrón* uses the reconstructed first-person testimony of Esteban Montejo to challenge the bourgeois cultural priorities that had made invisible the active roles of slavery and slave resistance in the emergence of a Cuban national identity.

The Cultural Capital of the *Cimarrón*

Esteban Montejo is a localized hero, representative of the Cuban national imaginary, in the form of a singular, masculine slave figure. The project, first of academics like Fernando Ortiz, and then of his student, Miguel Barnet, to include the contributions and experiences of radical slaves in the national archive recognizes the need for a redefinition and revaluation of the nation and for authentic representations of national content and history. Fidel Castro's Cuban revolution in 1959 promised to finally institutionalize the racial equality that Jose Martí had called for at the turn of the century. Miguel Barnet, thus, in the spirit of the Cuban revolution, and in line

with Castro's 1961 speech "Palabras a los intelectuales," strikes out to do an ethnographic study of life in the slave barracks in colonial Cuba, and of the continued abundance of Afro-Cuban traditions in religious practices such as Santería.[3] Barnet's research brought him to Esteban Montejo, a man with 105 years of age whose memory encompassed a century of foundational moments in Cuban history, from a perspective which had never been considered in official history. Titled *Biografía de un cimarrón* and published in 1966, the work is structured as Esteban Montejo's first-person account, and along with Juan Manzano's *Autobiografía de un esclavo* is the best-known slave narrative of the Hispanic Caribbean and now an essential part of the canon of Cuban literature. This text purports to be living memory, a direct link from the colonial past to the national present, through the oral testimony of a *cimarrón*.

Why is it that the *cimarrón* is a favorite (Caribbean) post-colonial representation of the national endeavor and yet also an incomplete institutional memory? Slavery was for centuries a forsaken fact of colonial life: slaves were not citizens or subjects, and because of their non-political status, their impact on social and political events was discounted. The memory of slave resistance previously had depended on communal (unofficial) memory to pass from generation to generation. This lack of the recognition of the positive influence of slavery on the organization of daily social encounters has devalued the cultural and political contributions of the black community to national identity—this lack has insinuated that slavery and slaves did not help to shape the contemporary nation. But how to fill this lack, when within Euro-American thought, there are certain and careful criteria that must accompany the idealized public figure? In order to receive official recognition, and thus to be brought into the private homes of citizens via mass public distribution first within Cuba and then internationally, the actions of the extraordinary individual must meet the criteria of the national will. This is to say, a hero must ultimately strive for the betterment of the nation, either on the level of a particular national plight, or on a larger level, such as that of liberty. Not only must a hero's political goals conform to those of the state, but also his/her personal and moral endeavors must be acceptable: generally, this hero should be Christian, literate and modern. While Esteban Montejo was illiterate, the textualization of his narrative made his story available to the reading public. His participation in the war for

independence, his identification as a Cuban national, and his engagement with Christianity—albeit alongside an acknowledgement of African deities—make him an appropriate candidate for canonization in the Cuban national imaginary.

In the opening paragraphs to the narrative, we are introduced to an eclectic character who seems to truly mix Western and non-Western values. A reader of the original Spanish text would immediately note the distinct syntax and vocabulary that stylizes the narrative and reflects the education and culture of Afro-Cubans at the turn of the century, including the use of antiquated word forms and simplistic sentence structures. This non-normative syntax is combined with the detail of the speaking voice to form what I call *estebanismos*, which are overlaid and privileged throughout the narration. The very first line is captivating: "Hay cosas que yo no me explico de la vida" (15). After this profound statement, our narrator, Esteban Montejo, begins to list natural phenomena that he has witnessed in his life and the effects of these strange occurrences on men and animals alike. This leads us to his understanding of the supernatural: Christ is a god that is not African, but from nature, just as are other strange and powerful phenomena, and also African gods. His casual ability to bring these forms of belief together is the marker of his truthfulness, of his authenticity, and of his status as an Afro-Cuban creole. His mixture of Western and folk knowledge points to the authenticity of his first statement, that there are things that he cannot explain in life. And yet, he does not doubt the strangeness of a life that is the product of multiple world views crashing together in an island in the Caribbean under the colonial system. As such the constructed testimonial voice of the subject is an authentic and relatable Afro-Cuban representative who does not directly challenge the white Cuban elite position.

Not only does the narrator's casual attitude to the phenomena of life build his believability as a common and original individual, but the stream-of-consciousness organization that builds his monologue adds to this effect. The narrating voice, attributed entirely in the original version to Esteban Montejo, moves seamlessly from the inexplicable to nature, from natural gods to African gods, from Africa and the beginning of the slave trade to the abolition of slavery in Cuba.[4] And then, immediately following this stream of causal events and thoughts, we are given the ultimate truth-claim of the text: "A mí nada de eso se me borra. Lo tengo todo vivido. Hasta me acuerdo que mis padrinos me

dijeron la fecha en que yo nací. Fue el 26 de diciembre de 1860, el día de San Esteban. Por eso me llamo Esteban" (16). Again, it is his very mixing of Western and folk knowledge that creates a voice that is intimate and realistic. The use of oral history ("mis padrinos me dijeron") and of a Western calendar ("el 26 de diciembre de 1860, el día de San Esteban") make this voice both one that the reader can relate to and one mired in verifiable data. It is the confident inconsistency of this voice—the matter-of-fact attitude that recognizes without question the phenomena of nature, that wonders at the phenomena of slavery, and that rationalizes the phenomenon of his very naming—that solidifies the image of non-Western difference being made knowable through textualization for the Western literate audience.

As Esteban recounts his personal memories of his childhood, we see a dependence on communal knowledge to develop individual identity: his understanding of his parentage comes from the words given to him from his godparents; his familiarity with his godparents comes from an acquaintance who introduced him to them after abolition and before the war. Despite this late introduction to his godparents (he would have been in his 30s when he met them), his respect for their memories is unshakable. He adopts their words as truth and remembers his parents through their words: "Claro que yo no vide [sic] a ese hombre nunca, pero sé que es positivo ese cuento porque me lo hicieron mis padrinos. Y a mí nada de lo que ellos me contaban se me ha olvidado" (17). We see immediately the excruciating familial separations that slavery forced upon its victims and the ensuing crises of identity that result from such violent amputations. The narrator has gained the reader's attention with his eclectic voice, the reader's trust with his confident originality, and the reader's sympathy as well, as the dehumanizing process of slavery is broken down to a personal but not entirely sour fact of life. Yet all of these trials have not broken Esteban Montejo. He is not disheartened, he is not embittered, and thus he does not frighten the white elite reader whose ancestors may well have participated in his oppression.

The narrator's voice establishes authenticity, a verifiable and material truth, early on through the use of specific names of places and people, precise dates, and of equipment and punishments identified with the sugar plantations of the late nineteenth century. His description of life in slavery is divided (in the original Spanish version) into three parts: a general introduction to slavery, a description of life in

the slave barracks, and life in the wilderness as a runaway. The careful and specific details that accompany his musings work as supporting evidence to his personal experience with the mechanisms of slavery, from the nurseries to the work schedule to the living conditions, which serve to paint a more intimate picture of the inequality of these systems (the very systems that the new regime, that of Fidel Castro, had set out to destroy) than his reading audience would have ever encountered. Thus Esteban Montejo's personal memories and detailed familiarity, alongside the careful and deliberate editing and ordering of the narrative on the part of the Miguel Barnet, work to build the reader's trust in Montejo's experiences of the horrors of slavery and to elicit the reader's sympathy when, just a few pages into the narrative, Montejo gives voice to the memory of his first attempt to escape. The title of the text, the visual and sentient details of life on the plantation, the distinctive voice of the narrator, and the careful editing that constructs the text all works to establish reader interest and sympathy through the textual authenticity. These meticulous efforts crescendo until they bring the audience the first concrete instance of *cimarronaje* (I say concrete to differentiate from earlier in the text when Esteban discusses some of the consequences of his *cimarrón* status: he never knew his parents, etc) with the hope of having hooked the readers: "De lo que sí estoy seguro es que de allí me huí una vez; me reviré, carajo, y me huí. ¡Quién iba a querer trabajar!" (18). This imaginary bond between the audience—citizens who have never experienced slavery but eagerly consume the proof of its evil—and the narrating voice—which inhabits the spirit of rebellion—only grows stronger through the retelling of a desperate attempt to escape the physical and psychological shackles of slavery. This first attempt to escape oppression is quickly thwarted, and in a manner so harsh that even over 80 years later, the narrator-victim, Esteban Montejo, has sentient memories of the punishment: "Pero me cogieron mansito, y me dieron una de grillos que si me pongo a pensar bien los vuelvo a sentir. Me los amarraron fuertes y me pusieron a trabajar, con ellos y todo. Uno dice eso ahora y la gente no lo cree. Pero yo lo sentí y lo tengo que decir" (18). Alongside this first fulfillment of the promise of the title, an instance of *cimarronaje* which has previously been elided from national history, the frustrations of the violent power imbalance that is slavery are illustrated as the escape is thwarted. Here also, the reader is directly addressed by the narrating voice, as Montejo/Barnet appeal

to the sympathies of the audience directly with claims to authenticity and this urgent need to testify to the atrocities of slavery. In this address, the narrator admits the incredulity of his story, especially to a contemporary audience, but reaffirms its truth and the need to tell—to witness—that very incredulity to that same naïve audience. In this way, *Biografía de un cimarrón* becomes the cultural capital needed to fill the holes in the academic and national archive surrounding slavery and active resistance to slavery.

Singular Examples: The Elision of Community

Miguel Barnet went to great lengths to present a social scientific text to the reading audience of Castro's newly won Cuba. Following the current standards, his text is accompanied with an introductory prologue that outlines the methodology of data accumulation; it is ordered in a clear and rational chronological fashion; it is accompanied by a series of notes from secondary sources that serve to corroborate the primary narrative; and finally, it is followed by a list of terms that serves to indicate that the original text is indeed the original, and that the idioms of Esteban Montejo were left intact, with a glossary of Afro-Cuban words and phrases to help the individual reader decipher the narrative/testimony of this unique survivor of Cuban history. In his reflective essay "La novela testimonio: socio-literatura" published in 1969, Barnet defines the ethnographic historical narrative as one that must reflect reality, and reflect the social relations of a nation, thus rescuing the past to explain (itself) to the present (109). The story of Esteban Montejo is particularly apt for Barnet, but there is a contradiction inherent in Barnet's fascination with both the possibility of the emergence of collective memory, and with Esteban Montejo as exemplary of this memory, as the seed from which this memory can grow: "Esteban, el Cimarrón, era un informante más, entre otros ancianos. Pero su vida era singular, completaba capítulos desconocidos, inéditos de la historia de Cuba y sus vivencias eran . . . únicas" (Novela Testimonio 107). Herein lies the subterfuge, conscious or not, of employing the story of Esteban Montejo and of labeling him in particular as a *cimarrón* to fill in this lacuna of Cuban history: the memories of Esteban are specifically *not collective*, and it is this uniqueness that draws Barnet to him. While he has, as Barnet points out, participated in some of the most determinative events in Cuban history and does have memory of experiences not included in the Cuban canon, at the

same time, his life has been exceptional and is marked specifically by a solitary and uncommon lifestyle. This is a repetition of the claim that Barnet makes in the introduction to the text: "La necesidad de verificar datos, fechas, u otros pormenores, nos llevó a sostener conversaciones con veteranos más o menos coetáneos con [Montejo]. Sin embargo, ninguno de ellos era de tan avanzada edad como para haber vivido etapas o hechos de los relatados por Esteban" (*Biografía* 8). The collective voice of Montejo's contemporaries is thrown aside in favor of a singular and exceptional voice, one that does not truly promote community or rebellion on a revolutionary level as a slave and a runaway, despite the rebellious connotations that accompany the use of the word *cimarrón* in the title of the biography.

The exceptionality of Esteban Montejo's narrative is evident within the text itself, as Barnet's own notes to the text reference the tendency of runaway slaves to form alternative communities, or *palenques*, once they entered the *monte*. Barnet quotes two sources to substantiate Montejo's narration of his experiences living in a cave (46, 225 n9): the first is taken from Antonio Núñez Jiménez's text *La Gesta Libertadora* (1961), which claims that caves were often used by runaways for the protection that these offered.[5] This same quotation also offers us the following information: "Los cimarrones fugitivos que obedecían a impulsos individuales de libertad pronto se convirtieron en grupos organizados para resistir a los amos, así nacieron los palenques, formados por grupos de negros que unas veces vivían en lomerías abruptas o en las cavernas apartadas" (225 n9). The second quotation is taken from the *Memorias de la Real Sociedad Patriótica de La Habana* (1839) and describes the manner in which caves were often used by fugitive slaves for shelter. It details a particular cave, similar to that which Esteban describes, which had failed the fugitives because it had only one entrance, allowing the fugitives to be smoked out by their pursuers. These notes serve to substantiate Montejo's claim to have lived in a cave, but they also highlight the tendency of *cimarrones* to form communities in the *monte*. Our narrator, however, lives in absolute solitude during his time as a fugitive in the wilderness. In fact, he refutes the idea of joining a *cimarrón* community, stressing his individuality and claiming that he felt safer on his own: "Muchas cosas no las hacía. Por mucho tiempo no hablé ni una palabra con nadie. . . . Otros cimarrones andaban siempre de dos o tres. Pero eso era un peligro, porque cuando llovía, el rastro de los pies se quedaba

en el fango. Así cogieron a muchos grupitos bobos" (49). Thus even within Barnet's text we are presented with the non-representativeness of Montejo's narrative. Esteban Montejo's experience of slavery and of *cimarronaje* was exceptional for the solitude that defined it.

When our narrator tells of life in the *barracones*, we see a glimpse of the tight-knit community that dominated the slaves' social system. There is a strict division of labor within the domestic sphere (22), there is a communal effort to raise children (17-18, 22, 23), and there is creative use of leisure time (25-27). One of the communal pastimes that Montejo recounts for us was a religious game called *mayombe*, which is perhaps one of the greatest examples we are given of the type of alternative social organization that the imported Africans and their descendants maintained. The game involved invoking the spirits with the use of drums, songs, and small offerings. Once the spirits were engaged in the ceremony, the participants could ask for various blessings. In the spirit of communal rebellion, this same game was often used against the colonial system: "Cuando el amo castigaba a algún esclavo, los demás recogían un poquito de tierra y la metían en la cazuela. Con esa tierra resolvían lo que querían. Y el amo se enfermaba o pasaba algún daño en la familia. Porque mientras la tierra esa estaba dentro de la cazuela el amo estaba apresado ahí y ni el diablo lo sacaba. Esa era la venganza del congo con el amo" (27). This small moment in the text demonstrates that the community of slaves defended each of its members, even from within the system, using unique and creative mixtures of non-Western belief systems, and that from the point of view of these actors, this resistance was active and effective. However, even in these moments, the narrator maintains a careful distance from the events he describes, taking an informed outsider perspective, rather than one of an initiated participant.

It is not until Esteban Montejo begins to relate his experiences with the *chicherekú* that he becomes personally involved in the story that he narrates. Unlike his recounting of the celebrations, the religious practices, and the music, of which he gives an impersonal impression with a few time-markers for authenticity and verifiability, when he begins to remember the *chicherekú* he brings first person encounters and relived fear into his narrative:

> Pero de Flor de Sagua me acuerdo del chicherekú. El chicherekú era conguito de nación. No hablaba español.

> Era un hombrecito cabezón que salía corriendo por los barracones, brincaba y le caía a uno detrás. Yo lo vide muchas veces. Y lo oí chillar que parecía una jutía. Eso es positivo y hasta en el Porfuerza, hasta hace pocos años, existía uno que corría igual. La gente le salía huyendo porque decían que era el mismo diablo y que estaba ligado con *mayomb*e y con muerto. Con el chicherekú no se puede jugar porque hay peligro. A mí en verdad no me gusta mucho hablar de él, porque yo no lo he vuelto a ver más, y sí por alguna casualidad . . . bueno, ¡el diablo son las cosas! (34)

This personal memory of the *chicherekú* is an example of those moments, few and far between though they may be, that capture the attention of the audience and, through his careful, rational and detailed descriptions, build the credibility of Esteban Montejo, *cimarrón*. He is not so intimate with the stories that he recounts as to seem particularly prejudiced about them, but rather recounts these incidents from a distance creating a scientific feeling around the histories. And yet, the audience needs moments of intimacy from the narrator to highlight the privileged insider view provided in this unique narration. It is these moments of 'irrationality' that maintain the harmlessness of the former slave: he does not threaten the sensibilities of his white readers with finger-pointing, nor does he attempt to recruit them to his non-Western ways. For the part of the narrator, we feel a sort of desperation to recapture the moment of his encounters with the *chicherekú*, and the eeriness that this figure invokes. Our narrator gives multiple personal truth-markers in this passage ("yo lo vide," "lo oí," "es positivo," "en verdad"), and even pulls from contemporary folklore ("hasta hace pocos años") in an attempt to give an accurate description of the emotional memories evoked at recalling this African figure, this "conguito de nación." While these moments give the reader a glimpse of an alternative world-view, they are so infrequent that they are not the focus of the text, but rather serve to essentialize and lend a commercial authenticity to the character that emerges in the narration, easily consumed by the reading public.

Barnet positions Esteban Montejo as an individual that will inspire and lead the masses, a la Che Guevara's 'hombre nuevo,' and thus the easy consumption of the narration is an important factor in the success of the text. However, there are moments when Esteban

Montejo's exceptionality could make him suspect as a national hero, or as a representation of the essence of Cubanidad: the most notable of these is Montejo's refusal/inability to enter into a hetero-normative relationship. But he is able to significantly establish his masculinity and his heterosexuality in spite of his prolonged celibacy, so that the narrative maintains a strong masculine figure with a unique and individual voice for these bizarre and unimaginable adventures. Montejo's simple yet profound musings about these adventures maintain an air of authenticity, rendering the folk subject intelligible for the elite audience.

In the wilderness, Montejo seems only to have truly lacked access to hetero-normative sex:

> La pura verdad es que a mí nunca me faltó nada en el monte. La única cosa que no podía hacer era el sexo. Como no había mujeres, tenía que quedarme con el gusto recogido. Ni con las yeguas se podía pisar porque relinchaban que parecían demonios. Y cuando los guajiros oían ese alboroto venían en seguida y a mí nadie me iba a poner los grillos por una yegua. (53-54)

Thus Montejo is forced to sacrifice all forms of sexual intercourse for his freedom quest. His impulses to hetero-normative masculinity urge him to opt for celibacy rather than homosexual sex or bestiality, and thus ensure that his audience is able to continue to fully esteem him. In this way, his celibacy actually increases his masculine identity and creates a figure that is almost unimaginably dedicated to the cause of personal freedom.

This masculinity that is established early in the text, despite his celibacy, is essential to the image of the *cimarrón* and to Esteban Montejo's identity not just as a *cimarrón* but also as a soldier in the Cuban war for independence, and thus as the quintessential Afro-Cuban subject. Montejo's narrative is presented as the missing link in Cuban history, the definitive piece that completes the story from multiple perspectives in the new era of post-revolution Cuba. In this narrative, the oppression of the colonial Spanish and the oppression of the class system that demands the forced labor of a people are best defined through the figure of a rebellious and virile man who would forsake even sexual relations in order to preserve his freedom.

However, the elision of the feminine perspective and voice is one that is consciously brought about by choices made by the editor, Miguel Barnet, as his introduction to the text clearly indicates. While perhaps Montejo's own experiences were limited, Barnet was presented with the ability to include other voices, including feminine voices, in his study (5). The combination of Montejo's objectification of women throughout the text (35, 37, 41), and Barnet's elision of women from his study result in a systematic denial of woman-as-subject for the sake of an intelligible, masculine, independent and authentic voice that speaks for the Afro-Cuban experience in the process of Cuban history.

Singular Examples: Consumable Difference

The literary and cultural move to make a more inclusive national archive through the inclusion of the contributions and experiences of radical slaves recognizes the need for a redefinition and revaluation of the nation and of 'authentic' representations. In the case of Cuba, this meant writing counter-narratives to older bourgeois history in order to bring the past into the present and promote the 'nuevo hombre revolucionario' as a particularly Cuban development of Marxist ideology (Moreno Fraginals 55-56, Arroyo 204). The ethnographic work of Miguel Barnet opened the ground for a new genre, the *testimonio*, which exposed this crisis and limitation of bourgeois knowledge. *Testimonio*, a devaluation of literature and high culture as elitist and exclusionary cultural practices, is a push toward multiculturalism, a push for more inclusive and complete representation. However, it brings along with it a paradox: Western disciplinary knowledge cannot expose its own failures to be universal from within that very same system of knowledge. Within attempts to bring non-traditional, and even oppositional, subjects into *traditional* academic discourse, if the subject is approached as other, the discourse maintains a necessary distance from that other, thus reproducing Western academic systems of knowledge. When the subject is translated into the vocabulary of that exclusive system of knowledge, on the other hand, original difference is subsumed for the sake of a hegemonic sameness.

I am asking, through this reading of Miguel Barnet's *Biografía de un cimarrón*, that we interrogate the production of historical narrative in authoritative forms. *Testimonio* as a genre has been the subject of numerous debates within the academy, built around questions of

truth and representation. Latin Americanist critic John Beverley, in his book *Subalternity and Representation: Arguments in Cultural Theory*, has approached this debate by questioning the power of the academy. This approach allows us to consider the nature of these debates over *testimonio*: perhaps they are actually an attempt by a traditional academy to hold on to traditional (Western reason/scientific rationality) understandings of truth and reality. While debates have raged around the verifiable truth of the events narrated in testimonies such as *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* and *Biografía de un cimarrón*, the problem is not the *truth* of these testimonials, but the need on the part of social scientists to present these truths, to represent this knowledge, in the language of the Western academy and under the guise of the Western intellectual understanding of truth. In this case, the problem is not ever Montejo's story, and the accuracy or gaps that are included there, nor the manner in which these stories emerged (with an audience, with small bribes of tobacco and women, with food, etc) but rather is the manner in which they are dispersed and then left open to criticism from an institution that has a fundamentally different understanding of truth and memory.[6] The question then becomes whether our social scientist, our translator and transcriber, ever truly was able to understand the fundamental *difference* that s/he became privy to in the opportunity to hear these stories. I argue that, in fact, this process of transcription is a subsuming of difference into an exoticized version of the same.

It is this subsuming of difference that has allowed for the canonization of *Biografía* as a celebration of difference and a testament to new levels of cultural inclusion in Cuba and the Americas. In the original and in translation, *Biografía de un cimarrón* is a highly anthologized slave narrative, which now makes up a part of both the Cuban and the Caribbean canon. Montejo's narrative is an exemplar of runaway slave narratives in the Caribbean, just as the rebellious slave is exemplar of the spirit of the Caribbean itself. Much of the excitement that surrounds this text derives from the novelty of the survivor story, and of finding a survivor of slavery half a century after its end. As a particularly Cuban text, *Biografía* becomes representative of the attempts that accompanied the Cuban Revolution to syncretize race on the island and to write Afro-Cuban identity into the national narrative. Thus, selections of the text appear in Cuban literary anthologies in English and Spanish, discussions of *testimonio*,

critical approaches to slave narratives, and general introductions to Caribbean literature. While in part this speaks to the paucity of primary source information from which to create scholarly studies, it also speaks to the willingness of the academy to gloss over this loss of information, and to readily and uncritically accept this specialized figure as representative of a larger phenomenon.

Thus, post-revolution Cuba coincides with a deprecation of the value of the literary as ambiguous, elusive, false and aesthetic, to produce a turn to the "documentary novel" so that *testimonio* emerges, narrating what Roberto González Echevarria labels "presentness" in the insightful article "*Biografía de un cimarrón* and the Novel of the Cuban Revolution." This "presentness" is an attempt to overcome the temporal and material mediation that is writing. Testimonial writing brings the past into the present, and creates an image of the present as a part of an on-going historical process. This is done by bringing the memory of the past into present discourse, and thus bringing individual experience into collective memory.[7] Memory, as with its narrativization, is always mediated by time, by the very act of its inscription/telling. And yet it is this mediation that *testimonio* seeks to dispel, thus purporting to provide a more truthful, more immediate account than would otherwise be available.

The collective memory that the *testimonio* seeks to create emerges through the truth-claims of the text—the minor details, the *estebanismos*, and the privileged point of view reinforce the narrator's immediacy and erase the acts of writing and of mediating. This privileged voice then becomes oral tradition, becomes collective memory, through the voice of the everyday, drawing coherent and tangible lines from now to then, from present to past. This gesture towards the 'we,' towards the collective, towards the past within the present, the tangible, meaningful past, is what Miguel Barnet finds in Esteban Montejo and his story.

These *estebanismos* occur at regular intervals throughout the text. They do not override the narrative at any point, as too much would be unintelligible, but are just present enough to provide an aura of authenticity. These are a combination of seemingly banal but inventive observations, which seem incidental, because they do not work to advance the narrative, but provide insight into the unique consciousness of our narrator: "Había más tabernas que niguas en el monte" (27); "Pelaba como lo hacen hoy. Y nunca dolía, porque el pelo es lo

más raro que hay; aunque uno ve que crece y todo, está muerto" (32); "Mientras más me acercaba a la costa más grande se iba poniendo. Yo siempre me figuré que el mar era un río gigante" (56). These observations, juxtaposed with strategic markers of time, ("A mí, por ejemplo, no se me olvida más" (31); "que yo no he vuelto a ver" (32); "Yo digo esto porque da por resultado que yo lo vide mucho en la esclavitud" (35), and arbitrary details, such as phonetic descriptions of birdcalls, personalize the narrative (56-58). It is unlikely that the transcription of these birdcalls, for example, will give us an accurate phonetic account of the sounds that Esteban uttered, let alone heard, half a century before this moment of utterance, but their inclusion in the text is a very specific tool that builds the character and voice of our narrator by giving us an impression of his attention to detail and his memory of the most minor events in his long life. Montejo's desire to repeat for us even the sounds that he heard during his life as a runaway demonstrates a commitment to his audience and to his narrative, and the commitment of the intellectuals of the Cuban Revolution to bring these previously marginalized and ignored experiences to the forefront of Cuban culture.

Yet, as we have seen, Montejo is not an accurate subject for collective memory, although he does move beyond Westernized modern conceptions. Rather, he is representative of the unique. The question that remains to be asked, then, is why is this memory the one that is canonized? By favoring the singular history of Esteban Montejo, Barnet dismisses the history of the formation of complex *cimarrón* communities in Cuba and in Latin America. His subject negates the multiple experiences of Africans and their descendants in the Americas in the colonial slave system and the forms of resistance and survival that were unique to this consciousness. Instead, Barnet's work reduces resistance to a form that translates easily into the current national agenda and that is exemplified by a single and exceptional man. The active denial of the resistance to forced labor is covered over with the canonization of the story of this exceptional *cimarrón*. In this way, the history of slavery and resistance is written into the Cuban narrative. In this Cuban narrative, however, true and violent revolution is only permissible against an outside force—in this case Spanish rule—and not against the Cuban *criollos* that employ enslaved labor to run their mills.

The inclusion and longevity of *Biografía de un cimarrón* within the cultural archive is not just a move to naturalize the revolutionary

nature of the image of Cuba, nor simply to incorporate individual and personal voices in the Cuban archive. It is also a move to racially desegregate Cuba by bringing to life the reality of slavery within the Cuban narrative. Thus it is significant that the title of the book is *Biografía de un cimarrón*, or biography of a runaway slave, rather than of a revolutionary, despite the fact that the majority of Montejo's life is lived in post-slavery, and that only a quarter of the narrative is dedicated to Montejo's life within slavery and as a runaway in the bush. The cultural capital of the denomination of *cimarrón* thus must be considered in this formative history-in-the-present, as it allows for the translation and homogenization of a large sector of society into the representation of a single figure that is packaged for public consumption, and devalues the experience of Africans and their descendants in the Americas and the forms of resistance and survival that were unique to this consciousness.

Conclusion

The revalued figure of the rebellious slave is meant to represent a history of resistance to Western (white) oppression that was previously elided. However, such figures are chosen for their translatability and familiarity to the very audiences that they seem to resist. Despite representing active resistance to forces of oppression, these revalued figures fit neatly into westernized molds of the national hero. Montejo becomes the ideal figure of resistance because his resistance is not destructive to the progress of the nation. Montejo, however, was not a typical representation of *cimarronaje*. He was by all accounts moderate in terms of his rebellion against slavery and the colonial system. In fact, the *Biografía* only dedicates a small portion of the narrative to Montejo's life as a slave and a fugitive. The version of the past that resurfaces is that which supports contemporary national ideology. Yet, if we are to pay homage to the achievements of a fundamentally non-Western derived people in the destruction of the Westernized versions of the institutions of slavery and colonialism as they were transferred to the Caribbean islands, can a figure that so neatly fits into a Western mode of thought be truly representative? Does such a desire to fit a Western intellectual mold accurately reflect the history of struggles against Western colonialism and slavery by the oppressed in the Caribbean?

My point here is that those figures that are less intelligible to Western-trained intellectual thought—such as the collectives that

formed runaway slave communities—are hidden from national discourse. This is often due to the paucity of adequate primary sources, a dearth which makes a discussion of the intent of these historical actors a drifting and nebulous goal. Instead, individual figures such as Esteban Montejo are elected to represent struggles against both oppression and national history. These figures produce idealist explanations of these liberation struggles, explanations which often conform to politicized nation-building myths that do not account for the difference that these actors embody. The masses and those who sought alternatives to Europeanized forms of state and community are either overlooked or are subsumed into a cause that has been translated into our contemporary idea of nation. This subsumption prevents continued challenges to the now accepted forms of governance and distributions of power and perpetuates the uncritical veneration of Western political forms, therefore continuing to cast a shadow of shame on those individuals who suffered the indignities of slavery.

Only those acts which were perpetuated with the specific goal of independence or which resulted in independence are given sociohistorical weight. Those acts of resistance which did not have as their goal replacement governments for the colonial system, but instead sought alternative communal forms, such as maroon communities, are disappeared. The singular, masculine, and easily narrativizable figures—which are those most often chosen to embody the struggles against slavery on the part of the slaves—represent diverse communities, and their actions are subsumed into modern national narratives. These figures are chosen because they prioritize the political, they uphold patriarchal hierarchies, and they fit easily into national teleologies that provide a historical authenticity to newly-formed states.

This essay is a consideration of the production of historical narrative in authoritative forms. History is the textualization of the past, and this textualization usually takes a chronological, political-material narrative form. Memory, on the other hand, is imperfect, fragmented, and non-linear. What is lost when we try to historicize memory? When we work beyond the archive, we enter into the realm of memory—a realm that has been traditionally marginalized from official history for its imperfections and fragmentations. Not only is popular memory imperfect, it lacks relevance to the ruling classes which have archival evidence of the historical narratives they wish to perpetuate. When

we try to represent that which the archive has denied, and in doing so we critique the knowledge produced behind that denial, what does that leave us with? A paradox. As we try to expose the failure of a system of knowledge that claims to be universal from within that very system of knowledge, a different problem arises. Traditional discourse has left out the narratives of difference—of the subaltern, of the other—because these narratives are unintelligible. When we continue to approach this subject without acknowledging its difference, but instead translate it into a form compatible to our system of knowledge (linear, singular narrative history), we come no closer to representing what has been left out. An adhesion to a scientific historical form cannot represent a subject that refuses that same form. On the other hand, only attempts to narrativize the experience of the radical slave from within, not by translating the unfamiliar into familiar terms such as revolution and nation and Jacobin, but by considering alternative systems of value, communication and community, alternative notions of gender, leadership and freedom, will offer a possible representation that does not assume easy consumption, but that admits uncertainty and difference and that does not instrumentalize this representation for contemporary socio-political goals and does not orientalize the subject.

Notes

1. *Cimarrón* is a term coined by the colonial Spanish to denominate a runaway slave. Its literal meaning refers to cattle that have strayed and now live wild off the land. Within the system of slavery, a *cimarrón* is a runaway slave; *cimarronaje* is the act of flight. The British adopted and anglicized the term: maroon. I use the original term *cimarrón* throughout this work to denote the international nature of the system of slavery and the international collaborations against slave rebellion in the Caribbean.

2. Following the successes of the Haitian Revolution at the turn of the century (1792-1804), colonial governments of slave societies such as Cuba lived in constant fear of another Haiti. In attempts to prevent violence and rebellion, news of the success of the revolution and veneration of the black Haitian leaders were strictly suppressed. This suppression backfired, however, as José Antonio Aponte, a free black artisan from Havana, then circulated images of these rebellious leaders to inspire fear in the colonial government and to inspire pride and consciousness on the part of the oppressed.

Ultimately, the suppression of the success of the slaves in Haiti led directly to a violent conspiracy against the government and a slave uprising. The continued demonization of rebellious slaves and their ancestors who fought against the injustices of slavery fomented continued conspiracies and uprisings throughout the 19th century. See: Matt D. Childs' article in *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World*, edited by David P. Geggus, 2001 or Elzbieta Sklodowska's *Espectros y espejismos: haití en el imaginario cubano*.

3. In his June 1961 speech to the intellectuals, Castro claimed "dentro de la Revolución, todo; contra la Revolución, nada" in a call for artistic and intellectual production that would clearly reflect the goals of the revolution, and thus represent the people of Cuba.

4. It is worth noting, of course, that the organization of the text actually results from the inventions and manipulations of Miguel Barnet, whose heavy-handed editing is now openly acknowledged within academic discourse. But at the time of its release, the role of the transcriber was assumed to be transparent, and this is still the standing assumption in many of the anthologized editions of the text, which neglect to include a note on the conditions of production of the text.

5. Antonio Núñez Jiménez (1923-1998) was an influential anthropologist who was also well known for his participation alongside Che Guevara in the Cuban Revolution, and who occupied many influential government positions in the post-revolutionary period.

6. For an elaboration on this point, see Amy Nauss Millay's *Voices from the fuente viva: The Effect of Orality in Twentieth-Century Spanish American Narrative*.

7. Gonzalez Echevarría explains that to bring writing into the present—to capture the chaos of the moment, and the fragmentation of the actual experience—is to ensure that memory is preserved. At this moment, "[w]riting hovers on that point where memory slips away from the present to become literature, a code that is both memory and the gesture of its recovery. Once it becomes literature, memory may return to the present, but (already) only and always belatedly, having relinquished its immediacy in the process" (253).

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