

BIOGRAFÍA DE UN CIMARRÓN AND THE DISCOURSES OF SLAVERY

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When *Biografía de un cimarrón* (*Autobiography of a Runaway Slave*)¹ appeared in 1966, its almost immediate success came as a surprise to many, among them the author himself, the Cuban ethnographer Miguel Barnet. In a lengthy article published in 1996 in the Cuban journal *Contracorriente* with the title “Para llegar a Esteban Montejo: los caminos del cimarrón,” the writer mentions that all the praises he received from respected and well-known Cuban and Latin American intellectuals were “una avalancha que me cayó arriba como una lluvia de estrellas” (*Contracorriente* 41).

Since its publication thirty-two years ago *Biografía de un cimarrón* has become an “institution” within the much debated genre of **testimonio**, which this text has been claimed to anticipate, spawning a vast amount of critical work that in most cases connects the *Biografía* with Barnet’s own references to his work, thus responding via Esteban Montejo to Barnet’s delineation of a poetics of the genre. My present study also engages a reading of the text within its author’s own assessment in order to locate a larger hermeneutical project that results from the interplay of different voices—enmeshed in very concrete political contexts—within the text. Barnet’s recent article in the Cuban journal commemorated, as a testimonial to another, those years in which, using Barnet’s words “el libro ha venido dando lata, ha venido haciendo ruido” (*Contracorriente* 31), by rescuing, once more, the memory of Esteban Montejo more as a friend than as the subject of a project that poses itself as scientific. In “Para llegar a Esteban Montejo,” the writer focuses on the impact of the book in his life as well as its importance, now from the perspective of the dire times of the Cuban revolution, for a better understanding not only of the Cuban past but also of its present and future.²

The choice of terminology in referring to this narrative told by an ex-slave as a “*testimonio*” and not as a “slave narrative” has as much to do with a temporal and spatial displacement in the production of the narrative as with a foregrounding of a very specific space, Latin America, and the claims to the originality of the forms generated to represent “a unique experience.” Given the chronological distance between the period that he is remembering and the present moment of the evocation, what unleashes Montejo’s story is not the political urgency of the denunciation of the degrading and inhuman practice of exploitation of other human beings. However, the episode of life in slavery becomes the central motif of articulation of the story for reasons other than the purely ethnographical by operating in the interstices of the narrative in subtle and seemingly contradictory ways.³

In reference to the centrality of the topic of slavery in *Biografía de un cimarrón*, Antonio Vera-León very tellingly points out that: “lo que texto privilegia es la historia de Esteban Montejo fuera de la esclavitud . . .” (4). In Barnet’s attempt to write “la (auto)biografía del otro en los “márgenes” del relato histórico nacionalista” (9), Vera-León sees a connection to nineteenth-century Cuban anti-slavery novels which inscribes Barnet in a very specific literary tradition. I believe that tradition can be expanded to include other nineteenth-century works produced in other linguistic and historical contexts but with which Montejo’s narrative shares more than a too easily resolvable “ethnic-based” experience. By comparing Barnet’s *Biografía de un cimarrón* to the slave narratives written in the United States in the nineteenth century I want to show how the connections in the cultural production of the Americas that stemmed from the practice of slavery are subsumed under the specificity of geographical locations and the characteristics of the epoch in which the discourse of the slaves, or ex-slaves, circulates.⁴

Due to the vast amount of scholarship that the *Biografía* has generated, it is well-known how the Cuban ethnographer transcribed the life story of Esteban Montejo, a centenarian runaway slave born around 1860 who had witnessed and survived all the major events and changes in the history of Cuba for almost a century: slavery, maroonage, the War of Independence and the Revolution. When Barnet “finds” Montejo in 1963 in a retirement home in Havana for war veterans, Montejo is one hundred and four years old, the perfect “*eslabón perdido*” of a historical process. This “link” “[d]ebe contribuir a articular la memoria colectiva, el **nosotros** y no el **yo**” (“La novela testimonio” 294). In this sense, Montejo is, according to Barnet, “un modelo ideal porque reunía dos condiciones necesarias para la novela-testimonio; era un personaje representativo de una clase, de un pensamiento, y había vivido momentos únicos en la historia de Cuba que marcaba la psicología de todo un conglomerado humano” (296).

If Miguel Barnet, following his ethnographer's nose, "found" Montejo and recovered that "lost link" by giving shape to the memories of his informant through a process of depersonalization in which Barnet becomes the voice of "the other,"⁵ Montejo, by virtue of his uniqueness, turned the book into, as Barnet puts it, "un talismán de comunicación entre los seres humanos" (*Contracorriente* 37). *Biografía de un cimarrón* functions as a primary text in delineating the relationship between slave narratives and *testimonio* precisely because such relationship has been, to some extent, overlooked so that the text can transcend ethnic alliances beyond national boundaries and preserve that "uniqueness" as the collective memory of the nation. In this regard, William Luis points out that in his recognized role as a mediator, Barnet not only wanted to recreate "what Montejo was, but, also and even more important, what he should have been" (481). In this conceptual figuration, the ties that this book could have with other slave narratives have been downplayed, if not severed, to foreground its role in the formation and articulation of a new historical consciousness of the Cuban nation.

The reevaluation of the historical discourse centered around a very disenfranchised perception of the self is what makes Montejo's account different from the slave narratives in the United States, despite their similarities regarding the historical demystification that their accounts provide. When Wendell Phillips passionately pronounces: "I am glad the time has come when the 'lions write history'" in a letter printed in the preface to Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American slave. Written by Himself*, Phillips pointedly addresses the necessary corrective that the slaves' narratives would inflict on the depiction of slavery by the white masters. The importance of the narratives as historical documents is foregrounded by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Charles T. Davis in their introduction to *The Slave's Narrative*. After defining "slave narratives" as "[t]he written and dictated testimonies of the enslavement of black human beings," Gates and Davis are careful to explain that "[r]ather arbitrarily, we have defined as a slave narrative only those written works published before 1865, after which time *de jure* slavery ceased to exist. We treat *dictated* works in essays on the oral slave narratives collected in the 1930s by the Federal Writers' Project" (xii). The main reason for Gates and Davis to offer this "arbitrary" classification is a literary one, for they are interested in emphasizing the fact that through the first hand account of his or her life story, the slave acquired the status of member of the human community by writing him or herself into it. That is why after slavery had been abolished, "the very structure of the slave narratives, their rhetorical strategies as a genre, altered drastically once the milieu in which they were written and read altered drastically" (xiii).

However, Esteban Montejo is not inscribing or writing himself into history as the African-American slaves did in the nineteenth century only in

part due to the fact that his milieu has changed, and radically so, considering the differences in the social and cultural productions of two quite different geographical and temporal locations.⁶ For Montejo, his articulation and formation of selfhood through “another’s writing” comes to participate in a discourse that equates the representation of the nation with that of the individual. If what was at stake for the antebellum and postbellum slave narratives was a rhetorical negotiation of the relationship of the ex-slave with his or her past, in *Biografía de un cimarrón* that negotiation has been neutralized since the text has been produced precisely with the auspices of an official discourse whose claim to the disavowal of power relations renders such negotiation not also as futile but also non-existent.⁷ For Elzbieta Slodowska, some testimonial practices, in which she includes *Biografía de un cimarrón*, disguise, with their manifest attempt to represent life as it is, the mechanisms by which the original story of the other gets translated “de acuerdo con ciertos procedimientos canónicos” as a cultural product (140).⁸

In the United States, the specificity of the slaves’ stories corrects and modifies the epistemological apparatus of an official narrative against which, but also within which, the ex-slave fashions him/herself. Through the discourse of autobiography, the ex-slave acquires a sense of self in the very act of denouncing the ills of slavery which makes him stand as representative of his community. However, by constituting himself as an individual, his participation in the collectivity from which he stemmed often remains as an illusion. In this respect Houston Baker notes that

[t]he voice of the unwritten self, once it is subjected to the linguistic codes, literary conventions, and audience expectations of a literate population, is perhaps never again the **authentic voice of American slavery**. It is, rather, the voice of a self transformed by an autobiographical act into a sharer in the general public discourse about slavery. (253) (emphasis mine).

And as one who shares within a larger discourse by adding the invaluable and irreplaceable point of view of first-hand experience, the slave’s discourse is metonymical as well as metaphorical as it enacts, taking up Baker’s assertion, a contradiction that cannot be dissolved because such separation would entail an artificial split of the individual.⁹ It is according to this framework that we must examine the ready inclusion of *Biografía de un cimarrón* as testimonial writing that develops, as Doris Sommer proposes, a “lateral identification through relationship” instead of imposing its view as representative, through the substitution and silencing, of others.¹⁰ When in 1970, the Cuban *Casa de las Américas* established a prize for the category of *testimonio*, it did so in order to recognize and officially sanction the needs posed by more “authentic” types of writing that oscillated between the essay and narrative.¹¹ *Casa de las Américas* described *testimonio* in its guidelines

for the contest in 1970 as “un libro donde se documente, de fuente directa, un aspecto de la realidad latinoamericana actual.” In this vein, then, all **testimonio** develops a metonymical relationship with the reality it purports to represent.

In the introduction to *Biografía de un cimarrón*, Barnet explains that he learned about Montejo in an article in the newspaper about men and women who were over one hundred years old. Two of these people caught his attention: a man of one hundred and four and a woman of one hundred. Both had been slaves and the woman was a *santera*. The man told about his life in slavery and his participation in the War of Independence. However, what got Barnet’s attention, to the point that he decided immediately to forget about the woman and pursue the man, was the fact that Esteban Montejo had been a maroon in the mountains. This explanation contextualizes the nature of the “paths” that took Barnet to Montejo and presents them as a more calculated decision than what Barnet, thirty years later, wants to portray as the result of fate, as if he himself were another link, next to Montejo, in the uncovering of the “subjective truths” of the Cuban historical past.¹²

The fact that the two people that get Barnet’s attention are ex-slaves highlights the centrality of slavery not just as an episode that ought to be properly documented but, more importantly, as a language through which Barnet wants to express the contradictions in the representation of Cuban history. As pointed out before, Miguel Barnet stresses that Esteban Montejo is representative of “todo un conglomerado humano.” He goes on to explain the significance of the individual he has chosen in order to unveil the transcendence not only of the past but also of the present in the following terms:

El hombre cubano, el ser humano que vive en esta isla, tenía necesidad de que le dijeran estas cosas que se dicen en el libro, que van más allá de ser un relato etnográfico sobre la vida de un cimarrón, que van a cuestiones de la historia de Cuba, a cuestiones filosóficas, a interpretaciones, en el lenguaje de un cimarrón, de las contradicciones en las que hemos vivido nosotros desde que esta tierra comenzó a expresarse como nación. (*Contracorriente* 38)

By means of this immediate and transcendent communication between Montejo and the “human being that lives on this island” using the language of slavery, or better, of a maroon, the Cuban man receives “his cubanness” through the historical, economic, social and cultural relations produced by the “peculiar institution.” Not only is the figure of an ex-slave revalidated as the ideal representative of the nation but also his language, his “unique” mode of expression, becomes the vehicle through which to establish a connection with other non-European discourses as well as to reveal aesthetic modes of expression that will reflect the singularity of Cuban culture.

This inversion of the values that defined the social relations in the nineteenth century both in the United States and in Cuba becomes more significant when we remember the rhetorical strategies that the slaves had to employ to make their story truthful and show that they were “brethren” of the white man. As William Andrews puts it in *To Tell a Free Story*: “The reception of [the slave’s] narrative as truth depended on the degree to which his artfulness could hide his art” (3). As an inverse reflection of the negotiations of representation for the marginal subject in the last century, not only does *testimonio* skew any references to its inner trappings, but also, in most cases, disavows its connection with the artistic or literary dominion as a privileged discourse of power. It is important to remember that what brought Barnet to Montejo was the fact that he had been a runaway slave, a maroon, in other words, a double outcast in the social fabric of his time. Montejo is a marginal figure first because of his condition as a slave and secondly because, as a runaway, he deprives himself of the society of other slaves, even those that, like him, had escaped and formed maroon societies in the mountains, moving constantly in order not to be brought back to slavery or killed.

For Roberto González Echevarría, Montejo’s identification with the wilderness, *el monte*, and his return from it makes him a sort of Messiah, a Ulysses as he tells a story that does not represent history and change but rather timelessness: “*El monte* (the mountain) inscribes Montejo within a textual memory, both African and Cuban” (259).¹³ Situated within this context of an exchange between two worlds that transcends time, Barnet’s control of Montejo’s marginality is far more complicated than the control exercised by the transcriber over the narration of those who cannot write or the type of control that the anti-abolitionists had over the narratives of the slaves who made it to the “free” states. As a foundational text, Barnet’s *Biografía* would operate metaphorically and not metonymically not so much in the identification and privileging of an individual over a collectivity but through the identification of the text with the memory of the nation, a memory that, in turn, gets shaped out of those same texts.

It is not only that Montejo’s story is timeless, but as a representative of the contradictions in the development of the nation, such development can only be accounted for by negating any type of linear progression. For Vera-León, Barnet’s rewriting of history entails “un rechazo de la narrativa en tanto que narrativa del progreso y la adopción de una narrativa-cimarronaje como discurso de la historia nacional” (13). Unlike the ex-slave who looks back at the reality of slavery from the standpoint of freedom and a rhetoric of representation that entails a break from that reality, *Biografía de un cimarrón* exalts a conception of the self as a manifestation of an abstract idealism of origins and not of a certain cultural context—“Yo era cimarrón de nacimiento” (20)—re-enacting the present in the past by making it part

of a cyclic continuum: “Montejo queda encerrado en su condición de esclavo en fuga ya sea de los barracones de la esclavitud o de la ciudad de la Habana” (Vera-León 13).

An eternal conception of being situates Montejo at the center of a history that wants to cleanse itself of the residues of other discourses of power by which it has been constantly colonized and marginalized. Indications of Montejo’s separatist, autonomous, spirit—not necessarily of a rebellious one, though—are a constant throughout the book: “A mí nunca nadie trató de hacerme brujería, porque yo he sido siempre separatista y no me ha gustado conocer demasiado la vida ajena” (33); “Como he sido siempre separatista me alejaba” (88).¹⁴

By insisting on the “authenticity” of voice of the ex-slave, that the ethnographer in turn edits to make it “readable,” by isolating it from the community and circumstances that modulates it, the variations in the expressions of the *cimarrón* are dissolved by playing upon an essential conception of difference. Barnet’s characterization of Montejo’s language as “parco,” but also as “poético” and “sentencioso” (Contracorriente 34), is not surprising given Montejo’s preference to be an observer and listener, more than a participant, or speaker. On the other hand, Montejo does portray himself as a story-teller when he explains that, while working in the sugar mills, *ingenios*, after the abolition of slavery, he would tell the older African men living with him, all sorts of anecdotes and details about the festivities in a close-by town:

Al otro día me daba por contar. Me reunía con algunos viejos y les contaba. Prefería a los viejos que a los jóvenes. Siempre los prefería. Los prefiero todavía . Quizás, porque yo soy viejo ahora... pero no, antes de joven, pensé igual. Ellos escuchaban mis cuentos. . . . Aunque ellos eran de poco hablar, les gustaba que cuando hablaban los entendieran. Hablaban de la tierra, de África, de animales y de aparccidos. No andaban en chismes ni en jaranas. Castigaban duro al que les dijera una mentira. Para andar con esos viejos había que estar callado y respetuoso. . . . Con el viejo de nación no se podía jugar. Hoy mismo, un palero joven no es tan exigente; sin embargo, un negro viejo tiene otra forma, más serio, más recto, más... (152-153)

Within the reiterative temporal frame of the narration in which the views of the past and present influence each other, it is not difficult to transpose the situation described in this passage to the situation in the moment of the narration in which Montejo, by virtue of his age, assumes the role of those who have served as a model for him in the art of story-telling and likens himself to them, thus acquiring respectability. The link that Montejo establishes between himself and the old African men at the *ingenio* is practically Montejo’s only acknowledgment of any kind of sympathy or

liaison with another human being or group during and after slavery. Other blacks, belonging to different African nations and groups are normally referred to as “los negros.” or “esos negros.” However, his conception of identity as different disappears when invoking a national identity around the claim for independence: “Lo que nosotros queríamos, como cubanos, era la libertad de Cuba” (107). Justifying the need of the uprising Montejo very tellingly declares the following:

Hacía falta la guerra. No era justo que tantos puestos y tantos privilegios fueran a caer en manos de los españoles nada más. No era justo que las mujeres para trabajar tuvieran que ser hijas de los españoles. Nada de eso era justo. No se veía un negro abogado, porque decían que los negros nada más que servían para el monte. No se veía un maestro negro. Todo era para los blancos españoles. Los mismos criollos blancos eran tirados a un lado. (162-163)

The fragmentation in the racial component of the land dissolves itself in a will to unity before the common oppressor, the Spanish metropolis. In this paragraph, the voice of a **cimarrón** loses some of its locution, and illocution, of personal autonomy to include other men or women as his fellow “brethren” in the haughty enterprise of the creation of a nation that will provide everybody opportunities for personal development as citizens but not subjects. The freedom from slavery is closely connected in the narrative to the freedom from Spanish rule.

The fact that the story does not continue after the War of Independence to the present day,¹⁵ suspends that voice of unity in a sort of monumental time in which the African heritage and the legacy of the Independence reverberate in the present in which the narrative is produced. This elliptical connection results in a correspondence that not only metaphorically depicts Cuba as “**cimarrona**,”¹⁶ but also constructs Cuba’s genealogy through the genealogy of a slave. The son of a **lucumí** and a slave woman of French origin whom he never met because of his condition of *cimarrón*, Esteban is the perfect “figure” to articulate the isolation of the country in its resistance to the discourse of domination, and normalization, of the West but also through a hybrid “otherness.”

The discourse of marginality is thus subverted as it defines the identity of a whole nation within global relations of power. On the other hand, Montejo’s own diversity, his own difference, is subsumed in the construction of the ideal of the nation based on silences.¹⁷ Despite all its testimonial value, by privileging an ethnographic look at slavery through which Montejo is detached from this institution, in *Biografía de un cimarrón* slavery functions as a rhetorical gesture in the **absentia** of certain references, and upon this absence the political and ethnic identity of the nation is built.

However, Montejo escapes the constraints of a construction of diversity that posits itself as a strategic unity by constituting himself not only as “otro de sí mismo” (Vera-León 14) but as a heterogeneous other, thus challenging the homogenization that results, paradoxically, from a “willed” hybridization of identity by the discourse of the nation. The text defies the attempts at portraying an “authentic” consciousness of marginalization by adopting the protagonist’s distancing from his own reality and his rejection of interpretations sanctioned as valid. Instead of articulating a double consciousness as a means of actively engaging in representation, the discursive performance grounds a rhetorical practice of negation through which it separates itself from Barnet’s authorial designs within the national identity project of the Revolution.

Miguel Barnet tells us that Esteban Montejo is initially reluctant to submit himself to the ethnographer’s project to gather his life story that will bring him back to a world in which he anachronistically survives. That mistrust is carried out through the whole narration in his remarks regarding the deceits of representation. The text belies the mystification of the figure of the maroon and this resistance to any type of servitude is what subverts both the testimonial and autobiographical modes as Montejo’s story refuses once and again to speak or stand as a model for anybody, even for himself.

NOTES

1 It is interesting to note how the translation of the title of some *testimonios* into English include or foreground an “I” that does not appear in the original Spanish. For example, *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (literally, **My name is Rigoberta Menchú and this is how my consciousness was born**) appears in English as *I, Rigoberta Menchú; Biografía de un cimarrón* (Biography of a Runaway Slave) has been translated as *Autobiography of a Runaway Slave*.

2 William Luis, analyzing the relationship between memory and history in the narrative, points out that: “the narration is no longer a chronological reconstruction of the past, but represents a collapse of historical time in which the past and the present are brought together” (478).

3 Regarding the possible ethnographical co-option of the testimonio, Elzbieta Sklodowska declares that *Biografía de un cimarrón* weaves “la dimensión cultural con cuestiones sociológicas de la marginalidad, problemas de la dependencia y del etnocidio” (110).

4 Even as he considers *testimonio* in relation to other genres, Georg Gugelberger claims that “[t]estimonio, perhaps more than any other genre in the past, has foregrounded the issue of what is “real” and has been defined by Jara as ‘una huella

de lo real,' a trace of the real" (5). He also adds that few genres have "interpellated mainstream discourse" to the degree that **testimonio** has (*The Real Thing* 11). One of those "few genres" would be slave narratives, which in the nineteenth century challenged precisely those discourses that wanted to make an uncontested claim to representation and formation of subjectivity even if this challenge did not reflect immediately in literary and historical representations.

5 Barnett stresses the process through which the transcriber becomes the informant by thinking and talking like him ("La novela testimonio" 297).

6 I am referring concretely to William Andrews' comparison of the narratives produced before and after the abolition of slavery in the United States: "The facts of slavery in the postbellum narrative, therefore, are not so much what happened *then*-bad though it was-as what **makes** things, good things, happen now" (83). While keeping in mind the differences between these two modalities of narratives about slavery, I want to focus on the genre as a mode to analyze the constructions in *Biografía*.

7 Even though the activities of the ex-slaves were also highly controlled by what the anti-abolitionist movement considered appropriate, they were not sanctioned as part of a national discourse.

8 Sklodowska is referring here to Michel De Certeau's heterology as a concept that "ayuda a poner de manifiesto las fuerzas de coacción internas que operan dentro del discurso" (140).

9 A split that W.E.B. Du Bois sees as the defining characteristic of the African-American consciousness: "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (3).

10 As participants in the category of the testimonial, the slaves' narratives challenge Doris Sommer's characterization of **testimonio**, more specifically, women's **testimonios**, as a metonymical discourse in contraposition to the metaphorical functioning of autobiography "which assumes an identity by substituting one (superior) signifier for another (I for we, leader for follower, Christ for the faithful)" (108). This definition does not take into account how the implications of the original autobiographical discourse have been modified in the autobiographical practices of non-Europeans. However, Sommer's characterization is a useful one when trying to challenge established generic definitions.

11 In *Against Literature*, John Beverley, one of the pioneers in the study of **testimonio**, defines it as "a novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet (that is, printed as opposed to acoustic) form, told in the first person by a narrator who is also a real protagonist or witness of the event he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a 'life' or a significant life experience" (12). But since this could be also the requisites of any standard autobiography, he makes it more specific by adding that "[t]he situation of narration in **testimonio** has to involve an urgency to communicate, a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, struggle for survival, and so on" (13). George Yúdice focuses on the

testimonials that are the result of a collaborative effort between activists and transcribers/editors (“*Testimonio* and Postmodernism” 44).

12 For Barnet, the transcriber (*gestor*) of the *novela testimonio* should “seleccionar lo básico, lo que va a revelar las verdades que queremos demostrar” (“La novela testimonio” 299).

13 See Roberto González Echevarría and Amy Fass Emery for opposing views on the role of Esteban Montejo as an active agent in the narrative.

14 I agree with Skłodowska that Montejo does not portray himself as a victim, unlike the protagonist of anti-slavery texts (125). Along these lines, Montejo’s lack of pronouncements regarding his views on slavery and how it affected him stands out. His declarations do not amount much beyond statements in which he remarks, in passing, that “[l]a esclavitud era un pejiquera” (46).

15 Asking, very pointedly, why the *Biografía* ends with the Spanish-Cuban-American war instead of offering the point of view of such an exceptional narrator regarding more recent events in the history of Cuba, William Luis explores the suppression in the narrative of racial problems such as the Race War of 1912. Luis surmises that this elision might be due to some sort of censorship regarding a criticism of the achievement of the Cuban Revolution in incorporating blacks to the definition of the nation.

16 Even though, I basically agree with Vera-León’s reading of *Biografía de un cimarrón* as a rewriting of history that, through Esteban Montejo, constructs a “Cuba cimarrona” (14), the historical fragmentation is subsumed under the canonization of such fragmentation as an official discursive practice.

17 See William Luis regarding possible hypotheses for the absence of references to racial issues.

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