

# Diasporic Identities within Afro-Hispanic and African Contexts



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Edited by

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# INTRODUCTION

YAW AGAWU-KAKRABA  
AND KOMLA AGGOR

Several scholars have explored with some degree of subtlety the question of diaspora and the difficult theoretical and practical problems that emerge in discussing this subject. In *The Great Human Diasporas: The History of Dispersion and Evolution*, Luigi Luca Cavalli-Sforza and Francesco Cavalli-Sforza indicate that the Greek word *diaspora* was used for the first time in 250 BCE by Jews of Alexandria to underscore their own dispersal from the homeland into *galut*, or collective exile. Other scholars including William Safran and Khachig Tölölyan have also taken as their point of departure the traditional definition of diaspora that once had an incontrovertible Jewish-focused significance.

Recent studies on diaspora have, however, shifted its meaning and application. Acknowledging the fluctuating implications of the concept, Safran observes that

[t]oday, ‘diaspora’ and, more specifically, ‘diaspora community’ seem increasingly to be used as metaphoric designations for several categories of people—expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants, and ethnic and racial minorities *tout court*. (1)

Yet, as David Chariandy points out, both Safran and Tölölyan still seem to ascribe to a much more literal—albeit coherent—meaning of diaspora, that is, its reference to the Jewish experience. Such a reference, Chariandy insists, subsequently accords diaspora a “presumably vague and worrying” metaphoric significance that brings to light the term’s connection with ethnic and racial minorities (n. pag.).

What is problematic, Chariandy argues, is the challenge of finding an “ideal” or “original” conceptualization of diaspora. He poses a series of questions to highlight the problem:

Can diasporas be created through voluntary migration, rather than traumatic exile? Must a diaspora have an extant homeland culture before

dislocation, or can it develop or invent one retrospectively? Must people in a diaspora long to return home? If so, what type of return is this: physical or symbolic? (n. pag.)

In what one may consider a response to the question raised by Chariandy, Robin Cohen offers a rather open-ended evaluation of diaspora. In *Global Diasporas*, Cohen expresses his objective, namely, to loosen the historical meanings of diaspora in order to include the construction of these new identities and subjectivities (128). For Cohen, these unique identities and subjectivities do not relate to a specific “ideal” diaspora that is linked to a particular cultural group or experience of dislocation. He proposes a plurality of diasporas marked by the experiences or inspirations that create them. Cohen believes that, “instead of arising from a traumatic dispersal, a diaspora could be caused by the expansion from a homeland in search of work, in pursuit of trade or to further colonial ambitions” (57). Diasporas, for him, could include victim diasporas, labour diasporas, trade diasporas and imperial diasporas.

The advent of ethnic and postcolonial studies has also added another dimension to the discussion of diaspora, with scholars in this field offering divergent perspectives on the issue of dislocation, including exile, diaspora and migration. Overall, postcolonial theorists have associated these phenomena with colonialism and its aftermath. Under the framework of colonialism, diaspora implies movement that is either permanent or temporary. Most importantly, postcolonial discourse is aimed at examining and responding to the cultural and historical legacies of colonialism and imperialism. It must be pointed out that, even though there is no easy agreement on what constitutes diaspora or what it does within the field of postcolonial studies, scholars such as Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, Smaro Kamboureli, Diana Brydon and others believe that viewing diaspora through the lens of postcolonial studies enhances the ability to focus on the cultural practices and norms of migrant peoples who have gone into exile either voluntarily or by force. Diaspora studies, they believe, will not only contest what Chariandy refers to as ingrained misconceptions and assumptions about ethnic, racial and, particularly, national belonging but will also help to forge new links between emergent critical methodologies and contemporary social justice movements (n. pag.).

The theoretical parameters that the foregoing strands of thought provide regarding the notion of diaspora can serve as a catalyst in grasping more profoundly the body of essays presented in this volume. The goal of this collection is not an attempt to argue for what constitutes a proper diaspora. Instead, what *Diasporic Identities within Afro-Hispanic and African Contexts* seeks to accomplish is to explore how diaspora, used in

the broadest sense, including voluntary and forced migration as well as its postcolonial rendition, is manifested in the creation of diasporic identities in Afro-Hispanic and African milieus. For the purposes of this collection, therefore, diaspora carries multiple connotations. First, the term is used in its reference to a non-voluntary or forced migration, borne out of the traumatic dispersal precipitated by the violence of slavery.<sup>1</sup> Forced migration is also triggered by a series of crises that compels asylum seekers to move from the global South to the global North. These crises often include clashes in conflict-ridden areas such as Palestine, Afghanistan, the Horn of Africa and Sri Lanka. Other elements that also constitute crises that engender forced migration include genocide, wars, mass refugee movements as witnessed in Central Africa, and the segregation of hitherto ethnically mixed populations in the Caucasus region, Central Asia and other parts of the former Soviet Union and in the Balkans of former Yugoslavia (Van Hear 36).

In some contexts within the present volume, the term diaspora denotes voluntary migration. Considered *casualization* by Graham Huggan, a leading scholar of comparative postcolonial literary and cultural studies, voluntary migration relates to groups of people who normally emigrate by choice. Such groups, often economically oppressed and marginalized, emigrate to urban centres in search of work or in the pursuit of a better life. Such is the case of labour migrants in North America, Europe, the Gulf States and, especially, the guest-worker programs in Europe in the 1960s. Considered as a form of diasporic transnationalism, this kind of migrating population typically has a continuous link with the homeland via transmittals and other kinds of transferrals and exchanges that also enhance return and circular migration. Glick Schiller and others consider immigrants in this category as a population composed of “those whose networks, activities and patterns of life encompass both their host and home societies” (1).

Then there are cases in the collection where the term fully carries the undertones that current postcolonial discourse has bestowed on it. In *The Empire Strikes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literature*, Bill Ashcroft and others indicate that “diaspora does not simply refer to geographical dispersal but also to the vexed questions of identity, memory and home which such displacements produce” (217-18). In her study,

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<sup>1</sup> This perspective resonates Paul Gilroy’s position that, for most of the slaves who crossed the Atlantic, not only was that experience a de-territorialisation but also an experience of “a network of people, scattered in a process of non-voluntary displacement, usually created by violence or under threat of violence or death” (1997: 328).

*Creole Identity in Postcolonial Indonesia*, Jacqueline Knör asserts that, in postcolonial nation building, Creole groups play an important role in Creole culture and identity since they “symbolize unity in diversity in a particular way, in their capacity to develop a new, common identity against a background of heterogeneity” (35). Put differently, postcolonial theory fully favours a new identity discourse that is cognizant of the destabilization and the fragmentation that are inherent in the concept of identity. Indeed, in *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line*, Paul Gilroy argues that the idea of diaspora offers a ready alternative to the stern discipline of primordial kinship and rooted belonging (123). The alternative Gilroy sees, resides in diaspora’s value as an instrument of reassessing what he calls “the idea of essential and absolute identity.” Gilroy’s position stems from his belief that diaspora is incompatible with a specific kind of “nationalist and raciological thinking” (125). For Gilroy, then, diaspora should be conceived as a counter-current against the disabling assumptions of automatic solidarity based on either blood or land (133).

The present collection of essays examines the violent dispersion of diasporic peoples and the ontological schism they face in their respective areas of settlement. The essays also underline ways in which African slaves have succeeded in influencing and determining the amalgamated social and cultural life in which they and their descendants have found themselves. The new community that emerged in an Atlantic world is circumscribed by its capacity to maintain components of its culture and identity while at the same time embracing elements of the culture with which it is now surrounded. Such is the case in Uchena Vasser’s essay, “Visions from the Margins: Miguel Barnet’s *Biografía de un cimarrón* and Ivor Miller’s *Voices of the Leopard*,” where the author addresses some of the core issues involving religious undercurrents of diasporic life. In her essay, Vasser examines how slaves in Cuba succeeded in fomenting several individual and collective identities crafted within the framework of African religions. In foregrounding the interplay between diverse components of African religious practices and the Catholic iconoclastic dedication to saints, the Virgin Mary and other Christian models, Vasser’s work reinforces the significance of the transculturation process, which actually transcends the sacred sphere. Surely, the question of identity, race and nationhood (not to forget creolization) looms large as she describes the Abakua system that draws attention to popular Creole customs as manifested in food, carnivals and music and in syncretic religious observances steeped in Creole languages.

The collective identities to which Vasser alludes find resonance in Tina Escaja's essay, "Negotiating Resistance: Writing Strategies of Indo/Afro-Nicaraguan Women Poets." Escaja contends that Indo/Afro-Nicaraguan women poets such as Brigitte Zacarías, June Beer and Yolanda Rossman Tejada resort to the poetics of self-affirmation in order to celebrate and to reclaim their identity as Afro-descendants. In Escaja's view, the construction of a so-called Nicaraguan identity and of a national literary canon was based on idealized pre-Hispanic Amerindian interactions with Europeans. She affirms that these interactions specifically excluded Amerindians and Afro-descendants from the national discourse on identity formation. Relying on a series of linguistic and literary strategies, Escaja concludes that the women poets that she studies in her essay assert and ascribe to themselves identities that recognize their diasporic experiences while undermining, at the same time, the hegemonic trappings that sought to eradicate any form of difference and diversity. She explains how these poets challenge traditional narratives of identity in their unease with the cultural identities that have been foisted on the descendants of slaves. These women poets, then, successfully liberate themselves as well as other diasporic subjects who are now empowered to consider innovative and more effective means of self-expression.

Samuel Mate-Kojo's essay, "Identity, Solidarity and Autonomy: African Agency in Manuel Zapata Olivella's *Changó el gran putas*" takes the question of identity further as he examines how Manuel Zapata Olivella seeks to establish Africans as dominant subjects and agents in the history of the Americas. Mate-Kojo refers to Zapata Olivella's novel as embedded in an Afro-centric foundation, with African cosmology and causality as its organizing principle. This essayist contends that the novelist subverts the Eurocentric formulation of African identity and offers the possibility of an independent and unique identity formation. He stresses that, because the construction of the image of Africans in the Americas has been framed by imperialists, colonialists and neocolonialists, Africans have been excluded from national histories as agents and subjects. Consequently, Afro-descendants in the Americas have been forced to accept and to repeat biased narratives that falsely define their identity. Mate-Kojo's goal is to establish how Zapata Olivella, a highly respected Afro-Hispanic writer, succeeds in articulating a new narrative for Africans in the Americas. It is a narrative, he believes, that seeks freedom on the basis of a revolutionary and existentialist ideal that hoists the issue of identity and personhood as a legitimate ingredient of the diasporic experience.

The essays by Michael Ugarte and Arthur Hughes highlight diasporic identity formations when analyzed from the perspective of expatriate immigrants who inhabit colonized territories. The postcolonial rendition of diaspora that suggests permanent or temporary migration applies to both essays. In the case of Angola, it is Portuguese colonial and postcolonial immigration and the creation of a Creole community that are at stake. The Spanish invasion of Morocco, as articulated by Ugarte, spawned a Spanish colony and a subsequent diasporic Spanish expatriate community. Consequently, in “Galdós and Africa: A Spaniard Speaks for the Subaltern,” Ugarte questions what he characterizes as “the very notion of Spanish identity.”

Subalternity, as conceptualized in postcolonial theory, underscores the denial of human agency of people who, by virtue of their social status, are at the margins of society. Deprived of genuine social platforms through which to represent themselves the African subalterns find in Benito Pérez Galdós, the nineteenth-century realist writer, a literary outlet of self-expression which was not too common at the time. This artistic representation of African subaltern voices manifests itself in two novels: *Aita Tettauén* and *Carlos VI en La Rápita*, both of which are set within the context of the Tetuan War of 1859. Ugarte wonders if Galdós could rightfully represent the African in spite of his efforts to present the tensions that beset the subaltern-colonized subject and the superior imperial power. Ugarte underscores the complexity of subalternity and identity in his discussion of Galdós’s selected novels when he recalls Edward Saïd’s discussion of how the Eurocentric perception of Orientalism moulded the grounds for the domination of the “other” through colonialism. Ugarte believes that, in Galdós’s attempt to retell the inner workings of the Tetuan War from the perspective of a Moslem—seen as a Spanish renegade—he undermines the author’s and, for that matter, Spain’s position as colonizer who perpetuate their power over the “other.” In the same vein, the issue of what constitutes an identity that is Spanish is put into question.

In “Narrative Aesthetics and the Epistemic Violence of History: José Eduardo Agualusa’s *The Book of Chameleon*,” Hughes discusses how individuals in a postcolonial Angolan society find themselves fixated upon the past in order to acquire respectability as the new elite or to forget the violence of past conflicts. Hughes highlights what he refers to as a palpable shifting condition steeped in an epistemological violence that parallels Angola’s recent traumatic past and this nation’s professed need to rebuild identities. Agualusa’s *The Book of Chameleon* enables Hughes to portray a postcolonial Angolan society in which, in order to reconstruct

identities, a narrative of aesthetics is needed to create a new epistemology that shapes discourses on individual and collective strands of identity.

Bernardo Antonio González's essay, "Spain and Africa's Dangerous Liaisons: Hybridity and Immigration in Contemporary Spanish Cinema," studies immigration in contemporary Spanish cinema through the works of Montxo Armendáriz (*Las cartas de Alou*), Llorenç Soler (*Said*) and Chus Gutiérrez (*Retorno a Hansala*). Whereas conventional wisdom is that Maghrebi French diasporic filmmakers have made more of a contribution to particular national cinemas that deal with questions of migration on the basis of economic factors (Tarr 2005), Spanish filmmakers (such as those studied by González in his essay) have also made significant contributions to the contemporary Spanish filmic canon as they focus on the diasporic experiences of immigrants in Spain. Not only do filmmakers such as Armendáriz use special cinematic effects to emphasize the dangers of crossing the treacherous Straits of Gibraltar to Spain, but they vivify the emotional impact of the immigrants' dreadful experiences. González's discussion of the notion of a diaspora of *casualization* also brings to light the tensions that emerge in Spain whereby some Spaniards defend the local and national as they repel that which is foreign and nullify any kind of racial blending. The interlocking dichotomies of foreign-native, private-public and internal-external that González accentuates in his essay, correspond with a seemingly antagonistic opposition between the young and the old as manifested in the films that he studies. For González, this condition resonates with the sociological reality of African immigrants who settle throughout Spain in inner-city neighbourhoods inhabited by an aging native population. As non-diasporic filmmakers belonging to the majority culture, Armendáriz, Soler and Gutiérrez may not necessarily be in a position to capture and to articulate the collective memory and diasporic identity of African immigrants. However, as González points out, these non-diasporic filmmakers successfully make use of their cameras to transcend borders and capture images of the self and nation through the other's eye.

The six authors presented in this collection, then, approach the unified topic of identity in the diasporic context in a way that is as varied as it is intellectually engaging. From Cuba to Nicaragua through Morocco and Angola to Spain, the essays provide a varied geographical platform on the basis of which a thematically-varied critical analysis is sustained—from religion to the poetics of self-affirmation and to issues of political conflict, subalternity and migration.

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## CHAPTER ONE

# VISIONS FROM THE MARGINS: MIGUEL BARNET'S *BIOGRAFÍA* *DE UN CIMARRÓN* AND IVOR MILLER'S *VOICES OF THE LEOPARD*

UCHENNA VASSER

### Abstract

*Two texts—Biografía de un cimarrón by Miguel Barnet and Voice of the Leopard by Ivor Miller—rework the relationship between history and literature as each problematizes Cuban hegemonic discourses on race and nationhood and on the positioning of Afro-Cubans within the contexts of socio-political and socio-cultural realities. This essay looks at both texts as commentaries on post-revolutionary Cuba, their contestations of authority, and the authors' appropriation of the testimonial narrative to provide a personalized and Afro-centred vision of Cuban history from the margins.*

Miguel Barnet's *Biografía de un cimarrón* accomplishes more than the artful transcription of the words of a former slave. The text foregrounds Africanisms in relation to the specific mode of coming into being, a transmigratory worldview, religious motifs and the indomitable African spirit. In his effort to authenticate the variants of the African experience in Cuba and in the Americas in general, Barnet summons the phantoms of texts and contexts of the past. Texts such as Juan Francisco Manzano's *Autobiography*, Cirilo Villaverde's *Cecilia Valdes* and Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda's *Sab* provide the contexts through which Barnet deploys *Biografía* to interrogate Cuba's colonial past. The goal is to arrive at an understanding of a Cuban national identity following the 1959 revolution. The fact that these interrogations are replete with the memorialized renditions of historical events by the Afro-Cuban, Esteban Mesa Montejo,

indicates Barnet's intentions to contest hegemonic discourses. He refers to these discourses as the "mangled, deformed interpretation of the past" (*Biography* 204). As is the case with *Autobiography*, *Cecilia Valdes* and *Sab*, *Biografía* focuses on the exploited and disenfranchised African underclass in Cuba. Yet, there is a fundamental difference between Barnet's *Biografía* and those of Francisco Manzano, Villaverde and Gómez de Avellaneda. The texts of the three authors were written when a segment of the Cuban population was still in bondage. Barnet's *Biografía* was, however, written when all Cubans were free. Nevertheless, Barnet's work seemingly leaves us with more questions than answers regarding the state of African descendants in modern Cuba.

*Biografía's* inquietude is further intensified by Ivor Miller's 2009 historical volume, *Voice of the Leopard* that is based on Cuba's Abakuá. In this work, the historian argues that the pervasiveness of the Abakuá worldview demands a rethinking of Cuba's national and cultural identities as preponderantly African. Miller's work heralds a period of acute introspection in Cuba after decades of a socialist agenda and the resultant gnawing perception of the nation as a failed enterprise. In spite of Fidel Castro's pronouncement of post-revolutionary Cuba as a non-racial state, there is, nonetheless, persistent racial inequality. Writing on this issue, Kevin Yelvington notes that:

Ethnic relations in present-day Cuba demonstrate that political and economic revolution does not necessarily entail fundamental social change. 'Race' was a taboo subject in early revolutionary Cuba, as Fidel Castro tried to instil an official non-'racial' consciousness. The out-migration of an almost all-white Cuban oligarchy should have meant gains for blacks, even if by default. Indeed evidence provided by Alejandro de la Fuente (1995, 2001) suggests that the revolution was successful in equalizing the educational and health status of whites, blacks, and *mulatos* [sic], and there has been black and *mulato* mobility. But contradictions exist. Most of Cuba's top occupations and government positions are still in the hands of whites (254).

Despite the political and economic inequalities, Cuba's discourse on non-racial consciousness permitted the accommodation of variants of Afro-Cubanism in the broader Cuban culture. The official endorsement of blackness following the revolution, found its most fervent expression in the works of Nancy Morejón. Her emphatic "I", claimed a place in the revolutionary process for Afro-Cubans, and particularly the Afro-Cuban female. In her analysis of Morejón's poem "Amo a mi amo" Lorna Williams suggests that "Morejón's willingness to invest her persona's stance with symbolic significance is consistent with the renewal of interest

in the African continuities in Cuban culture upheld by the revolutionary government” (137).

Miller’s work signals a return to the theme of inclusion begun by Barnet in the mid-1960s. As in the case of Barnet’s Esteban Montejo, the attendant Africanism in Miller’s text is transmitted by a certain Andrés Flores Casanova, an Afro-Cuban blessed with an encyclopaedic knowledge of Abakuá. Casanova lived long enough to witness how Cuba was once again faltering on the precipice of intolerance, marginalization and racism. *Biografía* and Miller’s *Voice of the Leopard* occupy, therefore, the spectrum of revolutionary Cuba, marking the beginning and the march towards its historic conclusion. Along the spectrum, Barnet and Miller rely on the orality of Montejo and Casanova as a litmus test to gauge the success, or lack thereof, of the socialist state. The narrations of these two Afro-Cubans are assessed through ethnographic approaches in order to elicit from the margins ignored and abhorred visions of Cuba. Interestingly, *Biografía*’s historicity is couched in a kind of literariness that forces Barnet to dub his work *novela-testimonio*. By the same token, *Voice of the Leopard*’s historiography is arguably fictional in regard to Flores Casanova’s observed recollection of Abakuá and the manner in which it was recounted to him. In the end, the works of Barnet and Miller engender an interesting study of the conflation of literature and history that entices the reader to examine *Biografía* for its historicity and *Voice of the Leopard* for its fictional quality.

What then precipitated Barnet and Miller to appropriate tendentious Africanisms in Cuba? How is Cuba’s hegemonic discourse paradoxically upheld rather than dismantled by their recourse to ethnographic studies and the orality of Montejo and Flores? Are Barnet and Miller convincing in their usurpation of secular and non-secular African descriptives to redress Cuban post-revolutionary political and cultural imaginary? These questions underscore the re-reading of *Biografía* and the examination of its historicity through the lens of Miller’s purported Afrocentric history of Cuba.<sup>1</sup>

Roberto González Echevarría has argued that, as an archival text, *Biografía* takes us “back to the beginnings of writing, looking for an

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<sup>1</sup> For sections of the essay pertaining to *Biografía de un cimarrón*, I have made use of two primary texts: *Biology of a Runaway Slave*, translated by W. Nick Hill, and the version of *Biografía de un cimarrón* (2010) edited by William Rowlandson. Hill’s version contains an invaluable afterword with Barnet’s important explanations of the content and scope of the testimonial novel. Likewise, Rowlandson’s text proffers a detailed analysis of *Biografía* with the addition of an “introducción” in which he explains the genesis of the project.

empty present wherein to make a first inscription” (4). For Echevarría, the historical premise of Barnet’s text provides an essential platform for the methodical dismantling of dominant ideologies and for the construction of Cuban identity. Arguably, Echevarría’s notion of “an empty present” designed “to make a first inscription” could very well describe a post-revolutionary Cuba with a renewed fervour for self-definition. Historians Benjamin Keen and Keith Haynes have observed that, “during the first four years (1959-1962), the revolution consolidated its domestic political position, began the socialization of the economy, and established a new pattern of foreign relations” (438). Indeed, the revolutionary agenda, according to Barnet, led to “a violent subversion of traditional values” (*Biography* 204). For Barnet, the revolution was singularly “the greatest and most devastating experience of my life. With a brushstroke we became the spokesmen of an all-knowing view of the world and of our role in the life of our country” (*Biography* 204). The cataclysmic revolution effectively decimated Cuba’s imagined community that was fraught with inequalities and racial discord from independence. The revolution of 1959 served as a panacea for past ills and convulsed Cuba into a desire to promote a more homogenous society, if only culturally, by tapping into the cultural milieu of the Black underclass and of the miscegenated populace. For Barnet, Montejo became the historical figure whose words fuelled the articulation of a fundamental *Cubanidad*.

As the compendium of Montejo’s historicity, therefore, *Biografía* deserves an analytical rereading to underscore several points. The first is Barnet’s wilful engagement with Esteban Montejo since he represents several facets of the African prototype in Cuba. He is Afro-Cuban, a former slave, a maroon, a freedom fighter, and a Cuban citizen gifted with a special mental acumen that allows him to recall events that occurred over an extended period of time. The second factor is Montejo’s embodiment of the concept of the noble savage. Stated more succinctly, he encapsulates a self whose primitive state and simplicity implies a certain purity of mind and veracity. Barnet is careful to remind the reader of Montejo’s incorruptibility. His isolation kept the *cimarrón* at the margins of Cuban society where he objectively observed historical events and ways of life. Montejo’s “objective” observation of history bestows upon him the respectable figure of the historian. The third element is Barnet’s own goal to construct a Cuban way of being that is defined by four principal elements: slavery, miscegenation, resistance and struggle, and independence. He notes:

I am not a pure writer but something like the cross between a falcon and a tortoise. I have tried to bring together sociological-anthropological interest

and the literary, convinced that they travel together in underground caverns, seeking each other out and nourishing each other in joyful reciprocity. If I move back and forth between these disciplines it's because I believe it's time they joined hands without denying each other (*Biography* 205).

Barnet's confession is a warning shot to the reader. He intends to subvert established typology including genre, subject matter and aesthetics in order to produce a text whose deliberate nonconformity endows it with its singularity. *Biografía*'s debut in the 1960s was noteworthy since it emerged during a period of experimentalization of the written form in Latin America. Aside from proving antithetical to the hitherto Eurocentric forms that were appropriated by early twentieth century writers such as the Argentine Jorge Luis Borges, Barnet's choice of Montejo signalled a post-revolutionary Cuban ethos: it heeded Fidel Castro's call for the creation of an inclusive society. To bring this to fruition, Barnet and others, including the likes of Nancy Morejón, opted to look inward by pursuing autochthonous materials and themes. Barnet was not, however, interested merely in producing a work of fiction. He sought to write an all-embracing text that weaves a Cuban socio-cultural history along with the personal experiences of Montejo in order to fill what William Rowlandson in his introduction to *Biografía* calls "the missing archives of Cuban history" (3). In this regard, Rowlandson's observation resonates with Echevarría's critique of twentieth-century Latin American literature that Echevarría characterizes as archival. The archival modality propelled writers to view their literary productions as contestations of history through which events were reappraised and deconstructed. The Barnetian aestheticism in *Biografía* deconstructs Cuban history through ethnographic inquiries into the pervasive, albeit ignored, Afrocubanisms.

*Biografía* incorporates the words of Montejo after a series of interviews in which the centenarian "allows his memories to follow their own direction" (*Biografía* 2). This takes him back to life as a slave at the sugar plantations, his defiance of the status quo and his escape into the mountains to sojourn as a *cimarrón*. It also includes his eventual re-emergence to fight among the *mambi* for Cuban independence as well as his status as an emancipated slave and Cuban citizen. Indeed, the act of appropriating Montejo's words underscores Barnet's unconventional strategy of reframing a post-1959 Cuban national identity. For Echevarría, Barnet's unwriting of history is a rewriting of Latin American history from an anthropological or ethnographic perspective in which "the previous writings of history are undone as the new one is attempted. . ." (15). Thus, when Barnet, to quote Echevarría, "pretends to turn himself into Esteban

Montejo" (15), he is contesting hegemonic discourses and their discordant representations of the past.

The history of Cuba from the nineteenth century to the post-revolutionary era has been dominated by several key factors: slavery and the push towards abolition, saccharocracy, struggles for independence and ultimate independence. These factors inform the titular demarcations within *Biografía* as Montejó avails the reader of his life story. To be sure, the sugar plantations in colonial Cuba served as laboratories that established the groundwork for the evolution and construction of constitutive elements of modern Cuba. In a study co-authored with Naomi Lindstrom, Barnett observes, and quite accurately, that "sugar made Cuba coalesce" (38). He goes on: "The culture that grew around it is today the national culture. The sugar plantation seedbed—germ cell—contributed to the fusing-together of all the values that gave rise to our country" (38). The booms and bursts of the sugar industries at the beginning of the nineteenth century determined every facet of Cuba's socio-political and economic structures. It included the decision to emancipate slaves in 1886 and the emergence of indentured servitude during post-emancipation. But what Barnett invokes through his relationship with Montejó are not only "the values" embedded in the cultural codes that typify the Afro-Cuban milieu but also that which he believes "gave rise" to his country. In spite of, or due to, his condition as a slave, the African in Cuba has, over the years, developed several attributes: a spirit of resistance, a culture of nation-building, and a societal culture suffused with religious practices and artistic expressions.

To be sure, Montejó—Barnett's alter ego—begins his narrative in *Biografía* with a philosophical exegesis that delineates the contours of life and the mystery that circumscribes humanity's existence in nature:

Hay cosas que yo no me explico en la vida. Todo eso que tiene que ver con la Naturaleza para mí está muy oscuro, y lo de los dioses más. Ellos son los llamados a originar todos esos fenómenos que uno ve, que yo vide y que es positivo que han existido. Los dioses son caprichosos e inconformes. Por eso aquí han pasado tantas cosas raras. Yo me acuerdo que antes, en la esclavitud, yo me pasaba la vida mirando para arriba, porque el cielo siempre me ha gustado mucho por lo pintado que es. (*Biografía* 63)

[There are things in life I do not understand. Everything about Nature seems obscure to me, and the gods even more. They're the ones who are supposed to give birth to all those things that a person sees, that I see, and that do exist for sure. The gods are willful and ornery. That's why so many strange things have gone on around here. I remember from before, during



slavery, I spent a lot of time looking upwards because I've always really liked the sky—it's so full of color]. (Hill 17)

Montejo's simplicity of thought, however, underscores several ideas: the origin of the Afro-Cuban and his reinvention in a New World context that has been facilitated by his steadfastness to the African deities. Thus, in Montejo's first utterances, the words "la naturaleza" [nature], "los dioses" [the gods], and "la esclavitud" [slavery] can be taken as symbols of the Cuban essence. The origin of the Afro-Cuban is founded in slavery, "la esclavitud," a vivid reminder of the early sixteenth-century forced transportation of Africans to the new colonies in the Americas. Undoubtedly, the success of the European colonizing enterprise in the Americas ensured the exponential growth for the demand of manual labour from Africa. The devastation in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries of Saint Dominguez's sugar-dependent economy created the opportunity for Cuba's transformation into an economic force. With Cuba assuming centre stage in sugar production, there was an increase in the demand and supply of slaves from Africa in the late eighteenth century. David Murray notes that between 1790 and 1821, approximately 250,000 Africans were transported to Cuba (134). In addition to the numbers cited by Murray, Paul Lovejoy and David Richardson observe that over 100,000 Africans were reportedly shipped to Cuba from the Bight of Biafra during the same period (333).

It is significant to underscore the importance of the slaves who came from Old Calabar, the main port of the Bight of Biafra. Among these slaves were the Efik who became the central actors in birthing Abakuá in Cuba. As is the case of other African ethno-nations, slavery constituted a violent rupture of the Efik from their place of origin. This violent departure impacted their cultural continuity and attendant worldview. In order to make sense of their predicament, Africans relied on the memorialized vestiges of their past. Montejo's assertion that there are things in life that he does not understand echoes a fundamental African philosophical thought: the interconnectedness between terrestrial and celestial realms, or between "la naturaleza" and "los dioses," guarantees the wellbeing of humans in their environment. In his extensive study of the Ifá corpus, Wande Abimbola uncovers the ardent belief of the Yoruba in the inextricable bonds that tie their existence to the gods. In Abimbola's view, "the wisdom and understanding of Ifá is believed to cover not only the past but also the present, and the future. By consulting Ifá, the Yoruba find meaning and purpose in the past, present, and the future" (10). Most of the Yoruba slaves who arrived in the Americas brought along an intact belief system. Wole Soyinka emphasizes the symbiotic qualities that

underpin the dynamic relationship that will emerge between this guarded belief system and the Christian principles soon to be discovered in the New World: “Symbols of Yemaja (Yemoja), Oxosi (Ososi), Exu (Esu) and Xango (Sango) not only lead a promiscuous existence with Roman Catholic saints but are fused with the twentieth century technological and revolutionary expressionism of the mural arts of Cuba, Brazil, and much of the Caribbean” (1).

Montejo was not unfamiliar with the *mayombe*, a game infused with African religious symbolism and undertones:

El juego de *mayombe* estaba amarrado a la religión. Hasta los propios mayoresales se metían para buscarse sus beneficios. Ellos creían en los brujos, por eso hoy nadie se puede asombrar de que los blancos crean en estas cosas. En el *mayombe* se tocaba con tambores. Se ponía una *nganga* o cazuela grande en el medio del patio. En esa cazuela estaban los poderes, los santos. (*Biografía* 69)

[The game mayombe was linked to religion. Even the overseers got involved, hoping to benefit. They believed in ghosts so that's why no one today should be surprised that whites also believe in those things. You played mayombe with drums. You put a *nganga* or big pot in the middle of the patio. All the powers, the saints, were in that cazuela.] (Hill 27)

The distinctly African *mayombe*, replete with wizards, potions and saints drew the attention of not only slaves seeking spiritual gains, but also the overseers tasked with controlling the slaves.

The democratizing effect of a syncretic African belief system remains an important causation in Barnet's articulation of a Cuban cultural identity. This syncretic system further engendered forms of resistance expressed in rituals and dance, particularly during Catholic festivities, feast days and on Sundays. Note how Montejo recalls festive Sundays on the plantations:

Los días de más bulla en los ingenios eran los domingos. Yo no sé cómo los esclavos llegaban con energías. Las fiestas más grandes de la esclavitud se daban ese día. Había ingenios donde empezaban el tambor a las doce del día o a la una. En Flor de Sagua, desde muy temprano. Con el sol empezaba la bulla y los juegos y los niños a revolverse. El barracón se encendía temprano, aquello parecía el fin del mundo. (*Biografía* 71)

[Sundays were the noisiest days on the plantations. I don't know where the slaves found the energy. The biggest fiestas during slavery took place on that day of the week. There were plantations where the drum began at noon or at one. At Flor de Sagua it started very early. At sunrise the noise

began, and the games, and the children began to spin around. The barracoon came to life in a flash. It seemed the world would come to an end. (Hill 30)

Sundays witnessed the most intense expression of Africanization of the sugar plantations. Instead of the church bells, it was the “tambor” or drum that summoned the Africans. Barnet concludes that the process of Africanization was precipitated by the African’s need for survival, an act accomplished by anchoring and adapting autochthonous African cultural impulses in response to an imposed European ideological paradigm. In a study with Naomi Lindstrom, Barnet observes:

Faced with the flimsy Christianization campaigns on the plantations during the nineteenth century, faced with the imposition of gods unknown to him, the black man responded by working out his own models; he substituted, establishing exact or approximate equivalences, worked with parallel concepts, related matching features, associated colors and symbols. He was affected by Western culture, was permeated with it, had to speak its language, adopt the crucifix, learn by rote a new set of behavioral norms, but he heroically preserved his concepts of family, his cuisine, his songs and dances: his culture. (43)

Barnet’s argument is a simple one: the African presence in Cuba and his machinations to survive the brutal conditions of slavery instilled in him some exemplary qualities. Furthermore, by their sheer numbers, it was inevitable that African contributions and attitudes would invariably permeate the cultural fabric of Cuba. Montejo highlights the different ethnic groups that constituted the typical sugar plantation:

En los ingenios había negros de distintas naciones. Cada uno tenía su figura. Los congos eran prietos aunque había muchos *jabaos*. Eran chiquitos por lo regular. Los mandingas eran medio *colorauzcos*. Altos y muy fuertes. Por mi madre que eran mala semilla y criminales. Siempre iban por su lado. Los gangas eran buenos. Bajitos y de cara pecosa. Muchos fueron cimarrones. Los carabalís eran como los congo *musungos*, fieras. (*Biografía* 76)

[In the plantations there were blacks from different nations. Each one had his own traits. The Congos were dark though you also had many lighter, fair-skinned mulattoes. They were short on the whole. The Mandingos were slightly reddish-colored. Tall and very strong. I swear on my mother’s grave they are crooks and a bad bunch. They always went their own way. The Gangas were good folks. Short and freckle-faced. Many

were cimarrones. The Carabalís were fierce like the Musungu Congos.] (Hill 37)

With African, Chinese and Filipino populations, the sugar plantation became central to the formation of a truly multinational Cuban identity. Barnet notes that Cuban “identity as a people is the gift of the plantation system of sugar-cane farming, especially as it existed in the first half of the nineteenth century, when the Black population outnumbered the white” (39). What precipitates Barnet’s intention to conceptualize a totalitarian approach to Cuban historiography are the conditions under which the African lived both in the colonial past and his marginalized state in the present.

While lauding the plantation system as “the gift” for a Cuban identity, Barnet recognizes the same system as the setting for the scourge on millions of Africans who, in their discomfiture, sought every avenue for escape. The physical resistance of the African against an oppressive system and his attendant indomitable spirit are key attributes that Barnet highlights in *Biografía*. As to be expected, Montejo’s desire for freedom is innate:

A mí nunca se me ha olvidado la primera vez que intenté huirme. Esa vez me falló y estuve unos cuantos años esclavizado por temor a que me volvieran a poner los grillos. Pero yo tenía un espíritu de cimarrón arriba de mí que no se alejaba. (*Biografía* 80)

[I have never forgotten the first time I tried to escape. I failed that time and so I remained cornered for several years for fear of being handcuffed again. But I held on to a runaway slave’s spirit that never left me.] (My translation)

Montejo lived and breathed the idea of *cimarronaje*. Indeed, the idea of the indomitable African spirit as an important theme for Afro-Latin writers populates the pages of literary texts from the early twentieth century onwards. Writers such as the Afro-Colombian Manuel Zapata Olivella would appropriate the ideology of the African’s epic struggle for liberty and justice in the Americas to fashion his concept of *africanidad*. His ideology of *africanidad* in America was synonymous with freedom and resistance:

Así como la indianidad emblematiza la defensa de la tierra y la cultura, y el criollismo la independencia. Desde que el primer africano desembarcó en este continente, las cadenas de sus puños amenazantes se constituyeron en símbolo de rebeldía y libertad. Perdida la esperanza del retorno, América le

significaba vida, mujer, familia y nueva patria. Convertido en guerrero, su lucha contra la opresión es la epopeya de la libertad. (*La rebelión de los genes* 56)

[Just as Indianness is emblematic of the defence of land and culture, so is Creolism synonymous with independence. Since the first African landed on this continent, his chained and menacing fists have been symbols of rebellion and freedom. Without the hope of a return, America signified life, woman, family and a new homeland. Turned warrior, his struggle against oppression is the epic of freedom.] (My translation)

What Zapata Olivella and others do is to articulate the foundations of a new America that comprises the distinct attributes of the three principal racial types: the European, the indigenous, and the African who embody the ceaseless pursuit of freedom and justice. Barnet finds perplexing the historical elision and effacement of the African element within the American ethos. In this regard, Barnet's literary *cimarronaje*, as aptly expressed in his own words, aims to "reveal the human heart, the heart of the men that traditional historiography has marked with the sign of a proverbial fatalism by writing them off as 'people without a history'" (*Biography* 206). In other words, Barnet aims to subvert and dismantle mainstream ideological constructs. He is emphatic: "I no longer believe in genres, as the people have never believed in them" (*Biography* 206).

In the end, Barnet aligns Montejo's visions with Cuba's revolutionary ideals. Rowlandson suggests that the concluding statements in *Biografía* define Montejo's revolutionary consciousness:

Todo el mundo tiene que fijarse en eso. Ahí está todo. Y yo me paso la vida diciéndolo, porque la verdad no se puede callar. Y aunque mañana yo me muera, la vergüenza no la pierdo por nada. Si me dejaran, ahora mismo salía a decirlo todo. Porque antes, cuando uno estaba desnudo y sucio en el monte, veía a los soldados españoles que parecían *letras de chino*, con las mejores armas. Y había que callarse. Por eso digo que no quiero morirme, para echar todas las batallas que vengan. Ahora, yo no me meto en trincheras ni cojo armas de esas de hoy. Con un machete me basta. (182)

[Everybody should pay attention to that. It's all there. And I'll keep on saying it as long as I live because you shouldn't silence the truth. And though I may die tomorrow, I wouldn't give up my sense of honour for anything. If I could, I would tell the whole story now, all of it. Because back then, when you were dirty and naked in the hills, you could see those crisp, clean Spanish soldiers with the best weapons. And you had to keep quiet. That's why I say I don't want to die so that I can fight all the battles

yet to come. I won't get into the trenches or use any of these modern weapons. A machete will do for me.] (Hill 200)

Montejo's philosophy about the end of life can be construed as a rhetorical insertion into the broader discourse on the Cuban revolution. The symbolism of the machete is particularly poignant because, in insisting that "con un machete me basta," [a machete will do for me], the Afro-Cuban affirms his/her unmistakable kinship with the revolutionaries of 1959. The machete also serves as a tool that establishes the African's important role in the sugar-based economy and in his/her struggle for genuine independence.

Arguably, the tidy end to *Biografía* obfuscates the reality of the revolutionary agenda that adopted the habit of determining which elements of Afrocubanism could support the newly-erected hegemony. Rowlandson's analysis of *Biografía* underscores the revolutionary machinery's concerted effort to prohibit social clubs because of the belief that their presence undermined the socialist state's endeavours towards a unified Cuba. In spite of their primary role as centres for Abakuá practice, the official pronouncement, nevertheless, saw them as "barbarous, underdeveloped and primitive. To that extent, they were at odds with the progressive social reforms of the revolution" (Rowlandson 47). Yet, in 1991 when Miller arrived in Cuba to study Abakuá practices, he noticed the latent presence of many of these hitherto-banned centres of civic engagement and their underpinning Abakuá elements including music, commerce, and civic responsibilities. During his period of research in Cuba, Miller encountered several members of Abakuá. Among them were Andrés Flores Casanova, Gerardo Pazos "El chino Mokongo" and Aberlado Empegó. With the exception of Flores Casanova, the other two were leaders of Abakuá lodges in Havana. It was, however, Flores Casanova who volunteered much of the information on Abakuá in several interviews that Miller conducted.

Flores Casanova was born in Old Havana and claimed Calabar, a city in south-eastern Nigeria, as his ancestral home. At the time of Miller's encounter with Flores Casanova, the Afro-Cuban was ninety-four years old. He told the story of how the founders of Abakuá came to Cuba and how his ancestors and his immediate family related that story to him (37). While both Miller and Flores Casanova acknowledge the earlier works of Fernando Ortiz and Lydia Cabrera on Abakuá lore, they both reject these early attempts as fundamentally inspired by prejudice since they fail to treat Abakuá as "an important national sociological phenomenon" (15). Miller's interview with Flores Casanova provides the nonagenarian with the opportunity to rectify inaccuracies related to the Abakuá: