

## CANON AND DIASPORA A Literary Dialogue

*Sameness is sublimated difference; Diversity is accepted difference.*  
Edouard Glissant

The testimonial novel in Latin America has had an impact on historiography and fictional narrative. One of the important shifts it contributed to was that of exploding the false unity imposed from above by the creole elite, exposing the diverse visions and versions of history as it was experienced by indigenous, Afro-Latin Americans and women, all the groups who fought and built the nation-state only to be denied full citizenship within its development. One may read in testimonios like *Autobiography of a Runaway Slave*, a direction that, according to Neil Larsen, points to the development of a new social and epic realism, cleared of the bourgeois master narratives of nationalism, populism, masculinism.(1)

This chapter will look at contemporary Cuban and Cuban-American narratives as they intertwine, signaling the potential for even greater rapprochement in the twenty-first century. In the 1990s, Cuban-American writing increasingly seeks to explore issues of false memory in the construction of identity off the island in much the same ways that Cuban testimonios of the 1960s did from within.

Memory, history and historiography are all intimately connected in testimonial literature. History, as it is remembered by the individuals and communities who lived it, and historiography; the skeleton, the structure, to be fleshed out, raise the question, for and by whom? Tensions and distortions are revealed in testimonio when individual and collective memories are put together, confronting one another; a multitude of voices is needed to sort out events. This holds as true for the social construction of Cuban identity in Miami, Chicago or New York, now into its second and third generations, as it does for the discourse of the Cuban nation. For that reason, although each work stands complete, with its own structural coherence, *Autobiography of a Runaway Slave* and *Rachel's Song* may be read as a continuum.

Esteban Montejo's narrative encompassed the last years of the colony; in the specific case of the informant, the passage includes, in order: slavery, maroonage, patronage and the Independence War. *Rachel* takes up where he leaves off, from the Republic up to the marasmus of the machadato, in which so many things caved in, including the Alhambra [theater].(2)

With the directness and force of unadorned speech, Montejo's narrative fills in chapters of undocumented Cuban history, the pages written by Afro-Cubans that the creole elite of the new republic would later deny. *Rachel's* testimony, that of a minor "artist" in a marginal theater, a cabaret, is contradictory, evasive and fragmented. Montejo's narrative is expansive, broadening the parameters of Cuban history and its interpretive possibilities, whereas *Rachel's* is confining, reductionist and alienated. To allow ourselves, as readers, to be carried through history on the flow of her words, as we did with Montejo, is, as Fernández Guerra comments in his study of both works, "to get lost."(3) It is no wonder, then, that Barnett chose as epigraph, and

warning, for Rachel's Song the following phrase from Baudelaire: "How small is the world in the eyes of memory." We are not to trust her testimony.

Montejo, a reliable witness whose accounts are verified and, wherever possible, documented by anthropologist-compiler Barnet, pieces together the undocumented history of the social life of the slave barracks, and the life of the maroons, as well as that of the rural peasantry. Through his memories of more than a century of life, Montejo, in collaboration with Barnet, reconstructs the central role that Cubans of African ancestry played in the Independence War, and another window opens onto the history of the nation. Montejo's memoir is a rich accumulation of data; traditions, customs, events previously unrecorded, which he states matter-of-factly, without interpretive slant, confident of the historical importance of what he is recounting. Rachel's memoir, in contrast, is all interpretive slant to camouflage the poverty of content, as well as her inability to place herself within historical context. She neither possesses nor desires a grasp of history.

This island is something special. The strangest, most tragic things have happened here. And it will always be that way. The earth, like human kind, has its destiny. And Cuba's destiny is mysterious.(4)

A discreet prostitute, surviving on society's fringes, she believes herself to be solidly middle class and wraps herself in the flag of the Cuban nation, symbolically and literally, in her act with the circus troupe "Las Maravillas de Austria." Rachel, however, becomes a reliable witness to the degree that her own internal contradictions mirror the lies the Cuban republic told itself. At a key point in the text, Rachel's version is corrected by that of Montejo. Both informants interpret the origins of the Little War of 1912. According to Rachel:

That was the Negroes' little war, the racist rumpus of 1912. Because of that I don't think the Negro can be given much more freedom They were going to impose themselves here if it hadn't been for the government's good sense.(5)

For Montejo, it was a struggle that went to the very core of the nation. The outcome of that war was to determine the trajectory of Cuba itself, either continuing the spirit of grass-roots democracy that reigned briefly during a campaign that included Montejo, or squashing that spirit and excluding him from the nation-building project. Montejo's interpretation puts into question the very basis of the Republic that Rachel has come to represent.

...since when in this country has a program more democratic than that of the Independents of Color been brought before the people than when we fought tooth and nail to gain benefits for us Negroes, who had come out of the war barefooted and in rags, hungry, just like Quintín Banderas, who was killed later while he was getting water from the well in his house? Let's not hear any more cheap talk.

An anonymous opposing testimony follows, affirming Montejo's version and

denouncing Rachel and the Republic as one and the same: "Rachel is the best example of prostitution, the vice and the lie wrapped in a red ribbon that reigned in this country."(6)

Rachel's "song" is the myth-making apparatus of the Republic, internalized within her consciousness, which Montejo's narrative within the narrative dismantles. It was the same myth-making apparatus, at its height under Machado, that Carpentier sought to escape in the process of writing his first novel, *Écue-Yamba-Ó*. Carpentier, at that time, believed Afro-Cuban mythology and ritual to be the only stronghold capable of maintaining the integrity of a cultural identity under siege, since "The Holy Spirit, venerated by the Cue, didn't admit Yankee hot-dogs between its votive breads," and the bongó was an "antidote to Wall Street."(7)

In the face of a nation that seemed to be crumbling, undergoing a process of denationalization, Carpentier brandished a seemingly impenetrable, collective memory, untouched by mass-media or the U.S. influence. *Écue-Yamba-Ó* was written in a Havana jail in 1927, and published abroad, in Madrid, in 1933. Though he later acknowledged the work's defects, in spirit and letter, it no doubt led him to the discovery of the marvelous-real and an overarching concern with re-elaborating history from a Latin Americanist perspective in order to rid it of centuries of distortion, inherited from the earliest, Old World, chroniclers.

Critic Irleamar Chiampi has observed that:

the Caribbean of *El siglo de las Luces* evokes, deliberately, Latin America's point of departure, the site of encounter between Columbus and the natives, the axis for the Spanish Conquest's expansion across the New World, the center from which the entire political, racial and anthropological problematic radiates, represented by the Conquest of America in the history of the West.(8)

Carpentier, in this sense, saw his successive novels as an ensemble, an integral unit, with one work building on the other in the framing of a new historical consciousness that would be the inseparable companion to a new Latin American aesthetic.

If I had to write *El reino de este mundo*, *Los pasos perdidos*, *El siglo de las Luces*, that is, all of my oeuvre over again, from "Viaje a la semilla" on, I would do it all the same way, without taking out or adding a single comma.(9)

Miguel Barnet views all of his testimonial works as forming a similarly cohesive ensemble. The key factor is memory, as he stated in the prologue to *La vida real*, "memory, as part of the imagination, has been the touchstone of this book. If I have recreated dramatic situations and real characters, it has been in full concordance with the key to my testimonial oeuvre."(10)

Memory, and the uses of memory, in the construction and self-representation of individual, nation or enclave within a nation, is the unifying element for all the works of contemporary Cuban and Cuban-American literature examined in this chapter. The tricks of memory, when distorted and manipulated, and the possibility of reclaiming

its more solid, fundamental sources, are the grounds for a new literary dialogue between canon and diaspora. It is not accidental that memory appears in so many of the titles, from *Memorias de una cubanita que nació con el siglo* and *Memorias del subdesarrollo*, written in Cuba in the 1960s, to *Memory Mambo* by Cuban-American Achy Obejas, written in the U.S. in the 1990s. In all of these narratives, false memory is an obstacle to be cleared from consciousness in order to start afresh, and lucid, reclaimed memory, constitutes the path from the past to an engagement with present reality, filling in the lacunae and blind spots that hindered full conscientización.

Clearly, memory is also a political category across the spectrum of works examined here, from Carpentier, Barnet, and Méndez Capote to Achy Obejas, and the new voices of an engagé Cuban-American literature. In a chapter of his study, *Literary Bondage: Slavery in Cuban Narrative*, William Luis examines what he terms "The Politics of Memory" in Miguel Barnet's *Autobiography of a Runaway Slave*. Not only was Barnet challenging earlier histories that omitted any account of the social life of slaves in the barracks and that of the maroons in Cuba, but attempting to "rewrite literary history by introducing images present in Cuban history that had remained unexplored in the literature of the past century."<sup>(11)</sup> Years after the publication of *The Autobiography of a Runaway Slave*, Barnet articulated the two-fold impetus of that project, stating "that his work with Montejo filled in gaps in historiography and the novel."<sup>(12)</sup> Barnet discusses the shared revelation of collective memory, one that flows from the informant to the listener-transcriber, and ultimately to the readers. Such breakthroughs in consciousness constitute for Barnet a phenomenon common to historiography and the novel.

There is the poetry, the mystery of this kind of work. And, clearly, that wide open door that allows one to penetrate into the collective conscience, into the we. The dream of the gestor of the documentary novel, that thirst for expansion, for knowledge and identity, was also Malinowsky's, Ortiz', Nina Rodriguez', and that of the French novelists of the nineteenth century. (13)

Windows and doors onto history are opened within testimonio and certain novels, and, as Luis observes, a work like "The Autobiography of a Runaway Slave dialogues with other works and historical moments,"<sup>(14)</sup> setting in motion a rich resonance across epochs and literary genres.

Achy Obejas, whose short story and novel will open discussion of contemporary off-island writing, is clearly engaged in a dialogue with the Cuban canon. The title story of her debut collection, "We Came All the Way from Cuba So You Could Dress Like This?" positions itself as counterpoint to Cuban-American narratives of nostalgia by confronting head-on the selective, partial, rewriting of history under the heading of "things that can't be told." After invoking the taboo, Obejas proceeds to blast it wide open, telling all, revealing what it is that can't be told and why, and in so doing begins a journey, in the spirit of Carpentier, back to the source. In *Memory Mambo*, a complex, nuanced and masterfully crafted novel, Obejas continues the journey, exploding false memory, nostalgia, and the mythology of exile, along the way. In its entirety, the work is an extended exploration of the meaning of memory within the context of what it means to be Cuban for the diaspora of the late twentieth century. The novel achieves a definitive break with narratives of nostalgia and evocation. Its

fearless and unmitigated interrogation of surrounding reality, her reality, that of the displaced Cubans of Chicago who live side by side with Puerto Ricans and Chicanos who hold contrasting views on Cuba, the U.S. and the wider world, brings Obejas in line with the marvelous-real. Obejas shares Carpentier's unwavering commitment to question surrounding reality down to the very bottom layer, and Lezama Lima's insistence on Cuban literature's intimate relationship with *la realidad circundante*, whether it is Havana, Santiago or Chicago. Obejas' close, knowing scrutiny of the local in *Memory Mambo*, with its slow accumulation of revealing detail, is what renders the narrative universal, in the best of the novelistic tradition.

The novel opens with an exploration of memory, raising pointed questions regarding the uses, misuses and meaning of memory. In fact, the entire first chapter is an extended meditation on memory, insisting on the insoluble connection between memory and historical consciousness. It is memory that will determine how the individual situates him or herself within the flow of history. This link between individual memory and historicity is manifest in the opening paragraph.

I've always thought of memory as a distinct, individual thing. I've read with curiosity about the large parts of our brains where memory resides--how these areas remain vital, as animated at seventy-five as at twenty-five years old. Scientists say that when we think we're losing our memory what's actually happening is that we've blocked or severed connections. (15)

The narrator, Juani Casas, intimates from the very beginning that if the individual's connections to the flow of history are "blocked" or "severed," distortion will reign, as is increasingly the case of the Cuban-Americans around her, the family and neighbors that make up the social fabric of her life. Their contaminated memories can spread, contagiously, the way the plague of forgetting spreads to the entire community in García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

...I often wonder just how distinct my memories are. Sometimes I'm convinced they're someone else's recollections I've absorbed. I'm not talking about hooking into past lives, or other links established spiritually or psychically to other times. I'm not talking at all about suppressed memories. It's just that sometimes other lives lived right alongside mine interrupt, barge in on my senses, and I no longer know if I really lived through an experience or just heard about it so many times, or so convincingly, that I believed it for myself--became the lens through which it was captured, retold and shaped. (16)

There is much in Obejas' narrative, and the historical, ontological, existential questions raised by her narrator, Juani, that places the work squarely within the trajectory of the Cuban novel. In *The Repeating Island*, Benítez Rojo identifies the search for origins, for roots, the need for rediscovery of the divided self, and the cultural fragmentation that originated with the plantation as recurring elements in the Caribbean novel. *Memory Mambo* explores themes common to the Caribbean novel, with equal concern for historical specificity; in this case the historical specificity of Cuban émigrés in the United States. The origins remain the same, but the journey back is longer and more circuitous since the point of departure for the

émigré writer is that of a Caribbean once removed. In the development of Cuban literature we find that the passage from lo criollo to lo cubano, from a sense of Caribbeanness to a Caribbean, Cuban nationalism, was, in broad strokes, a movement from Europe to Cuba. The conclusion of Méndez Capote's *Memorias de una cubanita que nació con el siglo* suggests precisely that swing away from Old World origins toward an embrace of Caribbeanness as the European-educated bourgeoisie comes to terms with the extreme limitations of independence as defined by the Republic in its second decade. Facing the present constructively, with an eye to shaping the future, for Méndez Capote and the class she inhabits and represents, meant letting go of the past, of traditions that were disintegrating, in any case, under U.S. dominance.

If there was a strong sense of unity among the early émigrés who, once uprooted, had no one to hold on to except each other, by the 1990s that coherence is severely eroded. The protagonist of *Memory Mambo* is adrift in a disintegrating universe with nothing but herself to rely on. Surrounded by émigrés who have done nothing but lie to themselves and each other since their arrival, Juani's is a journey into historical truth. Remembering and forgetting, truth and lies, both move the plot forward and shape the character's narratives. Juani's discourse rises to the challenge of not telling lies to herself, though the climax of the novel revolves around a lie she has presented to the others and must now retract. The protagonist's truth-seeking and truth-telling narrative is meant to serve as counterpoint to the false memories expressed in the collective narrative of the enclave of exile. As narrator, her function is that of Carpentier's novelistic Adam, naming and renaming the things of her world, a world in which nothing is solid and all appearances deceive. From the first line to the last, *Memory Mambo* describes the form and content of a disintegrating social reality. The identity of the émigré community is coming apart at the seams, in the family, the community, the enclave itself. Survival depends on abandoning the myth of cohesion, confronting the process of disintegration, and struggling to create something new with the pieces as they fall away. The narrator describes communication among exiles as one that takes place in a vernacular, a way of speaking, that is "neither Cuban nor American, neither genetic or processed." In a line that resonates throughout the narrative, the protagonist defines the linguistic and existential terrain negotiated by all the novel's characters: "We communicate, I suspect, like deaf people--not so much compensating for the lost sense, but creating a new syntax from the pieces of our displaced lives." The narrator succeeds while those around her fail. By rejecting false memory, she is able to regain the historical continuity others have lost and to reassemble the pieces of her displaced life, sorting out fact from fiction, from the multifaceted fictions that are shaped and reshaped in a vicious cycle that entraps. In her reflections on the meaning of memory and search for historical truth, the narrator begins at the beginning, recounting the facts--what she has been able to gather of the who, what, why, when, and where--of her family's departure from Cuba.

I didn't know what was going on. I was simply gathered up, like one more precious belonging, and packed into a stranger's bloated car in the middle of the night, then taken down through black, rural roads with the car lights turned off.... So if these are the facts, why do I remember so much more? (17).