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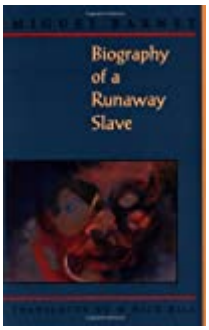

Miguel Barnet. *Biography of a Runaway Slave.* Willimantic, Conn.: Curbstone Press, 1994. 217 pp. $11.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-880684-18-4.

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Miguel Barnet's <cite>Biography of a Runaway Slave</cite>: Testimonial Literature as History

Few documentary sources exist from the Caribbean islands and the Latin American mainland written by Africans or their descendants that describe their life under enslavement. In Brazil, two mulatto abolitionists wrote sketchy descriptions of their personal experiences, and one autobiography of a black man was published before emancipation. In contrast, several thousand slave narratives and eight full-length autobiographies were published in the United States before the outbreak of the Civil War (1860-1865) (Conrad, p. xix). In Cuba, one slave narrative appeared in the nineteenth century. Penned by Juan Francisco Manzano, the *Autobiografia* (written in 1835, published in England in 1840, and in Cuba in 1937) recounted the life of an enslaved black who learned how to read and write. The *Autobiografia* concludes with Manzano's escape from his owner. The book inspired other authors to condemn the institution of slavery as it existed in Cuba. Not until publication of Miguel Barnet's *The Autobiography of a Runaway Slave* in 1966 did there exist a narrative centered on the life of a common slave in Cuba (Barnet, 1966). The testimony of Esteban Montejo has been described by its foremost interpreter as "the first personal and detailed account of a Maroon [escaped] slave in Cuban and Spanish American literature and a valuable document to historians and students of slavery" (Luis, p. 200). This essay will explore how testimonial literature can help us better to understand past events. It will also examine problems inherent in interpreting personal testimony based on memories of events that occurred several decades in the past.

Esteban Mesa Montejo discussed his past with the Cuban ethnologist Miguel Barnet in taped interviews carried out in 1963. At the age of 103, most likely Esteban Montejo understood that he was the sole living runaway slave on the island and that his words and memories might be considered important enough to be published. For that reason, he delved into topics of particular interest to himself and to the interviewer Barnet. These included forms of African religious expression and Montejo's recollections of life as a fugitive slave hiding for several years in the forests of Cuba. The book includes what appear to be actual quotes from Montejo along with sentences and paragraphs shaped by Barnet to provide a readable account of the life of a black man in Cuba during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Born in 1860 as a slave, Esteban Montejo witnessed some of the most turbulent moments in all of Latin American history. With the end of sugar production on the Caribbean island of St. Domingue as a result of the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804), Cuba became a major exporter of sugar from its plantations in the decades before Montejo's birth. To satisfy an insatiable demand for inexpensive labor, planters and merchants transported thousands of African slaves to Cuba from the 1780s to the 1860s, among them Montejo's parents. Given the presence of so many recently arrived Africans in his midst, Montejo had an extraordinary opportunity to witness African cultural expression and various forms of resistance to the slave regime. At some unknown juncture during Cuba's Ten Year's War (1868-1878), Montejo escaped from bondage and lived on his own as a *cimarron* (runaway slave). The narrative includes Montejo's remembrances of the War for Independence (1895-1898), better known as the Spanish-Cuban-American War. The subsequent presence of United States troops as an army of occupation (1898-1902) deeply influenced Montejo's worldview. The book ends in 1905 with the death of the Cuban general Maximo Gomez.

The narrative is divided into three sections. In the first section entitled "Slavery," Montejo offers some of his most poignant and insightful commentary. He believes that "nature is everything. Even what you can't see" (Barnet 1994, p. 17; Aching, pp. 35-41). In a tropical environment where sickness and painful insect bites were common, Montejo delights in recalling the manner in which Africans used natural herbs and potions for healing. Black women and men from various African nations resided on the sugar plantations, including Musungo Congos, Mandingos, Gangas, Lucumis and Carabalis. Montejo comments on the games played by Africans, sugar refining in small mills, taverns that sold supplies to the slaves, and religious practices. He rejects the myth that Africans committed suicide by hanging or drowning themselves, but argues instead that they flew back to their homeland with a religious object (known as a *prenda*) tied to their waist. Slaves loved music, particularly the use of the drum. Montejo laments that the "white man's music had no drum at all. Tasteless" (Barnet 1994, p. 33). Montejo depicts the Africans with whom he lived as people of great physical beauty, compassion, and sensuality. He also presents clear evidence of the brutal treatment inflicted on these African slaves by masters and overseers. Planters often locked their slaves in stocks for two or three months for minor offenses, and whipping was common. "The barracoon [slave quarters] was bare dirt, empty, and lonely" (Barnet 1994, p. 24). Slaves rose at 4:30 a.m. and then worked from 6:00 a.m. until sunset cutting sugar cane and working in the mill.

In a chapter entitled "Life in the Woods," Montejo talked about his decision to escape. After throwing a rock that hit the head of the overseer, he ran from the fields into nearby wooded hills. Similar to the escaped slave Sethe in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, Montejo lived in constant fear of capture. Unlike the majority of fugitive slaves in the United States who fled from masters in the American South with a destination in mind (the American North or West), Montejo preferred to remain alone in the thick forests of Cuba. For several years, he communicated with no one. Whenever he heard dogs barking, he immediately took off his clothes to prevent the animals from picking up his scent. Montejo lived in a cave for many months, and was always careful about the sounds he made and the fires he built. When possible, he stole pigs and food crops from small farms. He allowed his hair to grow long into a *kinka* (most likely meaning dread locks). "You live half wild when you're a cimarron.... My legs and arms got as hard as sticks.... I felt good being a cimarron. Because I was my own boss, and I defended myself on my own" (Barnet 1994, p. 52). Upon learning that slavery had been abolished, Montejo ended his life of seclusion and began to search for employment at the sugar plantations.

The title of the second section is "The Abolition of Slavery." A better title might be "The Aftermath of Slavery," given that the chapter covers the decade following final emancipation in 1886. Montejo labored as a free worker at the Purio and Ariosa central sugar mills during these years. He endured long days cutting sugar, clearing fields, and maintaining the machinery of the mills. His cynicism about race relations and treatment of the workers is evident from the outset. "There were masters, or rather, owners, who believed that blacks were made for locking up and whipping. So they treated them the same as before. To my mind blacks didn't realize that things had changed [with emancipation] because they kept on saying 'Your blessing, Master'.... [The white man] believed they were the owners of humanity" (Barnet 1994, p. 62). Montejo criticized the lack of education provided for black and mulatto children, and the fact that competent blacks were barred from entering elite professions. Reserving some of his most scathing criticism for the Catholic hierarchy, Montejo claimed that "with women they [priests] were devils. They converted the sacristy into a whorehouse.... The priests put women in caves, in holes in the ground where they had executioners ready

to kill them"(Barnet 1994, p. 80). Other topics of great interest that he touches on include the use of identity cards and passbooks to control the movement of workers, the harsh daily life of peasant women, modernization of the mills (he observes that "progress is amazing") and increasing deforestation of the Cuban countryside.

In a wide-ranging discussion, Montejo provides a wealth of information about social life in late-nineteenth-century Cuba. Bandits created problems in the city of Havana and in rural areas. African and Chinese doctors understood best how to employ natural herbs, grasses and plants to keep people in good health. The religious holiday of San Juan, celebrated each year on the 24th of June, included festive parties attended by overdressed men and women of the elite, cock fights, horse racing and card playing, along with dances known as the *mani*, the *jota*, the *zapateo* and the *tumbandera*. Houses of Santeria, where "only black people went" to practice their African religion, also hosted parties during the feast of San Juan. Instead of following Catholic rituals, however, the participants paid homage to the Yoruba god of iron, farmers and war known as Oggun. Clearly, Montejo is very interested in the African contributions to Cuban culture. "I come to the conclusion that the African was wise in all things. There are some who say they were from the wilds, and that they behaved like animals. There is no lack of white men out there who say it. I think different because I knew them. They weren't the least bit like animals. They taught me many things though they didn't know how to read and write. Customs that are more important than information. To be educated, not to meddle in other folks' problems, speak softly, be respectful, be religious, be a hard worker.... All of that the African taught me" (Barnet 1994, pp. 150-51). Montejo alludes to the presence and contributions of Chinese, Canary Islanders, Filipinos (all of whom had been brought to Cuba by planters as a cheap indentured labor force in the nineteenth century), gypsies, and creoles. He remembers with emotion a strong sense of sharing and community which flourished among the compesinos in the countryside.

In a third section entitled "The War of Independence," Montejo comments upon his experiences during the fighting against Spain, which lasted from 1895 to 1898. Cuban guerrilla tactics and the use of the machete to cut off the heads of their enemy instilled terror among young Spanish troops. Cuban soldiers became known as *Mambises*, meaning the child of a monkey crossed with a buzzard. The Mambises fought heroically throughout the war, and Montejo attributes the victory over Spain to their actions. "The conduct of our troops was a model for others, as anyone will tell you who fought in the war ... we were brave and put the revolution above everything else.... Even so, many colonels and other officers shit off-target every day. They did things that not even little children do" (Barnet 1994, p. 183). Cubans paid a terrible price for victory; a tenth of its population died and two-thirds of the wealth of the island was destroyed (Langley, pp. 13-14). Montejo condemned propaganda tht minimized the role of black soldiers in the war. He claimed that 95 percent of blacks had fought, but their involvement and sacrifices did not prevent them from being "left out in the street" after the hostilities ceased.

United States troops landed on Cuba in 1898 during the final weeks of the war. In the words of one historian, "in a bizarre little war, the United States Army–wretchedly led, scandalously provisioned, and ravaged by tropical disease–swiftly defeated a demoralized, dispirited Spanish army and snatched the fruits of victory from the mambises, the Cuban guerrilla fighters who had fought gallantly in a struggle of three years' duration" (Keen, p. 414). During the occupation that followed, American troops brutalized the Cuban populace. Montejo claims that many United States soldiers abused Cuban women and called blacks "nigger, nigger." Yet, it is interesting to note that he also recalls that "the Americans were the only ones to put a stop to the pimps," and that "the white Cubans were as much to blame as the Americans [for the poverty and social inequalities] because they let themselves be ordered around in their own country" (Barnet 1994, pp. 193-94). Memories among Cubans of two occupations and an intervention (1898-1902, 1906-9, 1912) by the United States endured.

In an afterword to the narrative entitled "The Alchemy of Memory," Miguel Barnet offers his perceptions about the meaning and construction of testimonial narrative. He emphasizes the responsibility of the writer to interpret the ideas and words of marginalized persons and the underclass. This is accomplished through effective oral communication and close consideration of how best to write about the "true identity" of the common people. "The function of the testimonial novel [*sic*] as rescuer of a foundational language, as a rescuer of the old historical novel [*sic*], should be to give back the original sound of storytelling to the contemporary novel. It should be interpreted as the burgeoning of a new cultural language, in battle with real deceit that is propped up by long-standing cliches" (Barnet 1994, p. 204). Certainly Barnet's suggestions have been heeded. Some of the most insightful social commentary and historical analyis emanating from Latin America in the past three decades

has appeared in the form of testimonial literature (see for example *I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* and Maria Teresa Tula, *Hear My Testimony: Human Rights Activist of El Salvador*). Yet, the appeal and influence of this genre should not allow us to overlook complex questions that arise when judging the *Biography of a Runaway Slave* as a historical source.

With regard to Esteban Montejo, the reader encounters difficulties gleaning clear information about many aspects of his life. How long was he a fugitive? Did he in fact end his life as a cimarron in 1886 when slavery officially ended? If this date is correct, Montejo would have been twenty-six years old, and not twenty, as he estimated in his testimony. He provides stimulating details about a rich culture shared by enslaved Africans. Yet, it is most likely that he learned about African culture after emancipation, and then worked backward in the taped interviews to portray such cultural practices as common at an earlier juncture. Such an approach can easily distort analysis of actual conditions and the true historical record. Montejo portrays himself as a rebel during his first forty-five years of life, yet he never entered a *quilombo* (escaped slave community) or joined with other fugitive slaves to steal from plantations. One wonders to what extent he reshapes his views of the past in response to the present circumstances he encountered in post-revolutionary Cuba of 1963. Montejo notes on the last page of the book that "If I could, I would tell the whole story, all of it" (Barnet 1994, p. 200). What is he alluding to? Perhaps his unhappiness with continued racial discrimination in a revolutionary Cuba whose leadership claimed that such practices had ended? Or is this actually Miguel Barnet speaking about censorship that he had endured as a writer? The result, in the words of William Luis, is that "the narration cannot be conceived as a chronicle with a historical development but as a fictional discourse which breaks with history and is subject to the strategies of memory" (Luis, p. 205).

Questions also emerge regarding Miguel Barnet's role in writing this testimony. As the transcriber and editor, he played a critical role in determining which topics would be addressed in the discussions and what ultimately appeared in print in the book. He changed words and whole phrases to satisfy what he as the intermediary believed would be most readable and most true to what Montejo wished to say. But we also need to consider that Barnet determined which events would be included for personal political reasons. Barnet had been part of a group of poets known as El Puente, named after a private publisher of that name which existed between 1960 and 1965. The revolutionary government claimed that members of the group were homosexuals and antisocial, and subsequently repressed or marginalized its members. Therefore, Barnet was seeking to reestablish his credentials as an acceptable writer in the new literary establishment of Cuba of the early 1960s. It was at this juncture that he read in a newspaper that Esteban Montejo was alive and well. Barnet most likely decided (wisely) to devote the bulk of the book to slavery, the Ten Years' War and the Independence War because such themes would not raise a controversy. Each episode had been directly affected by foreign intervention, and therefore appealed to a regime seeking to demonstrate that it had fulfilled the revolutionary aspirations of earlier generations. It is strange that the story ends in 1905. Esteban lived through the 1912 Race War in which thousands of African-Cubans were slaughtered by other Cubans. Why does Barnet not include such an important episode when we know that Montejo expressed strong opinions about this violent event in the taped interviews? Perhaps Barnet understood that an analysis of the Race War, one in which foreigners played virtually no role, would not be acceptable to the Cuban revolutionary government (Luis, pp. 199-218). The book received immediate international acclaim, and Barnet quickly regained political and literary stature in Cuba.

The Curbstone revised edition of 1994 is translated by W. Nick Hill. Mr. Hill makes some mistakes in his preface. I know of no first edition of *Biografia de un cimarron* dated in 1966. Rather I believe the first Spanish edition appeared in 1968, published in Barcelona by Ediciones Ariel. The first English translation of the book, entitled *The Autobiography of a Runaway Slave*, was not published in the United States in 1968, but rather in London in 1966 by Bodley Head. Last, Cuba was not the "last country to overcome this affront [slavery] to the human condition [in the Americas]" (Barnet, p. 13). Rather, that distinction falls on the nation of Brazil, which officially ended slavery on 13 May 1888 after flourishing for more than three centuries. In spite of these errors, W. Nick Hill has provided readers with a solid translation of this testimonial narrative. It is a book that can be used with great success among advanced high school students and at the college and university level. Most students who participate in my "Comparative Slavery and Emancipation in the Atlantic World" seminar at Idaho cherish this book as much as I do. After reading the *Biography of a Runaway Slave*, one does not quickly forget about the extraordinary life of Esteban Montejo or the power of words, spoken or written.

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