

Meditations on History: The Middle Passage in the Afro-Hispanic Literary Imagination

by Miriam DeCosta-Willis

For Josaphat Bekunuru Kubayanda

*Still, there is this, too, for now:
the blunt astonishment of what remembrance allows us,
sour with lunacy and love,
crippled cavity and bone to which we are kin.*

“(Un)Settling Texts” Lemuel Johnson

Olaudah Equiano’s gripping tale of captivity and emancipation, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, published in 1789, is the paradigmatic text of the Middle Passage experience. Related in the voice and from the point of view of a once-enslaved Igbo, it helped shape the conventions of the crossing narrative, its themes, motifs, and rhetorical strategies. When Equiano writes “I have been a witness” (84), he consciously confirms the veracity and historicity of his text, which contradicts the written accounts and verbal testimonies of the trappers, traders, and traffickers who engaged in “The Cruellest Commerce” (Palmer 63). Indeed, his memoir is important as an historical text that documents the representative experiences of an African who survived the transatlantic passage, achieved literacy, purchased his freedom, and traveled throughout the world. Despite his claim that he is “unable to adorn the plainness of truth by the coloring of the imagination” (178), this unlettered African mastered the craft of writing as is evident in the fluidity, dramatic tension, detailed descriptions, lively dialogues, and vivid characterizations of his prose. The following passage, for example, is notable for its simplicity, understatement, and sentence construction:

I was ready to curse the tide that bore us, the gale that wafted my prison, and even the ship that conducted us. And I called on death to relieve me from the horrors I felt and dreaded, that I might be in that place “Where slaves are free, and men oppress no more.” (72)

The horrors of the Middle Passage, which Equiano survived at age eleven, only reinforced his appreciation of his culture, his life-long desire to return home, and the validation of his indigenous self. In the title of his autobiography he proudly identifies himself as “the African,” and the figure of the warrior, a major archetype in contemporary fiction, becomes the central metaphor of his identity. He writes: “I was trained up from my earliest years in the art of war... and my mother adorned me with emblems, after the manner of our greatest warriors” (32). Affirming the spiritual beliefs, moral values, and artistic achievements of his people, he proudly explains: “We are almost a nation of dancers, musicians, and poets” (21). Significantly, Equiano underscored in the eighteenth century the images and themes—national pride, warrior archetype, self-affirmation, and the African cultural heritage—that twentieth-century writers would elaborate upon in their meditations upon the historical significance of the transatlantic voyage.

Although the “voyage through death to life upon these shores” (Hayden 48) is embedded in the cultural memory of Africans in the Diaspora, the theme was rarely treated in the emancipatory narratives or anti-slavery novels of African-descended writers in the nineteenth century. Indeed, there was a long hiatus between Equiano’s narrative and the traders’ travel journals, which were coterminous with the voyage, and the imaginary reconstruction of the crossing experience by artists and writers.¹ It has been primarily in the last four decades of the twentieth century that Black writers have addressed

Meditations on History

the theme of the Middle Passage in their works.² This phenomenon can be attributed in large measure to historical events such as the struggle for independence in Africa and the Caribbean, and the Civil Rights and Black Power movements in the United States; the emergence of a Black Aesthetic, which focused on the politics of representation; and cultural initiatives such as revisionist reinterpretations of Black history, the institutionalization of Africana Studies, and cultural exchanges between artists and scholars in Africa and the Americas.

This historical and cultural context is fundamental to the interpretation of Afro-Hispanic texts in which writers fictionalize slavery and, as a result, revise history. One of the first writers to engage in this project of creative revision is a nineteenth-century Cuban. Esteban Montejo begins the story of his life, the *Biografía de un cimarrón* (recorded and edited by Miguel Barnet), with an account of Cuba's African origins, an account that illustrates the ways in which history was transformed into myth in the Afro-Cuban folk imagination. Born in 1860, Montejo was gifted with an extraordinary memory that enabled him at age one hundred to recall his early life in the slave quarters and his years of freedom as a maroon. He records in vivid detail African retentions—names, customs, beliefs, languages, and religions—that existed in nineteenth-century Cuba, and he describes African-born *bozales* or their descendants, including Ma 'Lucia, a Yoruba *santera* and storyteller who became his lover. Although some Yorubas, Mandingos, and Carabalis who had actually experienced the transatlantic crossing were still alive in Cuba at that time, for the slave trade continued surreptitiously until 1870, it is evident in Montejo's autobiography that the process of mythification had already begun. This creative transformation of history was vital to the construction of a new identity and to the development of the revolutionary ideology that fomented the struggle for emancipation and independence. Significantly, Montejo begins his story with motifs—Yoruba gods, African wall, and a scarlet handkerchief—which are embedded in myths about Africa and slavery, but these are not the core themes—the slave ship, the human cargo, the voyage—of the traditional crossing text. Instead, his morality tale raises profound philosophical and psychological questions about the nature of god and the character of man, issues that later poets and novelists would also ponder in their works. He explains:

Los dioses más fuertes son los de Africa. Yo digo que es positivo que volaban. Y hacían lo que les daba la gana con las hechicerías. No sé cómo permitieron la esclavitud. (13)

The ability to fly is a concrete manifestation of the gods' omnipotence. Flight, which symbolizes freedom and transcendence, became an important symbol in neo-African history and literature: there is Montejo's figurative flight to the mountains, Frederick Douglass's flight to freedom, and, in Toni Morrison's novel, Solomon's flight to Africa. Furthermore, flying is strongly associated with myths of the Return: myths about Africans who flew home after dying and slaves who walked back into the ocean after the crossing.

Like the biblical fall, the second motif of Montejo's story deals with transgression, specifically the foolishness of men who ignore the cultural boundaries of their society and cross into alien territory. "Para mí que todo empezó," he writes,

el día que cruzaron la muralla. La muralla era vieja en Africa, en toda la orilla. Era una muralla hecha de yaguas y bichos brujos que picaban como diablo. Espantaron por muchos años a los blancos que intentaban meterse en Africa. (14)

This is not an ordinary wall. It is an ancient (*vieja*) and magical (*hecha de brujos*) structure that symbolizes African culture and spirituality, but the people abandoned their own beliefs and values in pursuit of foreign material goods: the scarlet handkerchief, like the red apple, signals in the imagination of the myth-maker the temptation and downfall of his people. Montejo goes on to describe how the Portuguese with the aid of indigenous kings lured Africans to the slave ships:

Al negro siempre le ha gustado mucho el punzó. Por culpa de ese color les pusieron las cadenas y los mandaron para Cuba. Y después no pudieron volver a su tierra. Esa es la razón de la esclavitud en Cuba. (14)

Just as the classical myth of Pandora's Box and the biblical story of man's exile from Paradise address the origin of sin so Montejo's crossing tale with its description of man's transgression and temptation explains poetically the origin of slavery. His account of myth-as-history underscores the process that informs the literary imagination of later Afro-Hispanic writers.

In the first section of "Mujer negra," published in

1974, Cuban poet Nancy Morejón deals with *la travesía*, but like Montejo's memoir her epic poem functions as a variant of the crossing narrative. Employing none of the motifs, themes, or rhetorical devices of that genre, "Mujer" begins:

Todavía huelo la espuma del mar que me hicieron
atravesar
La noche, no puedo recordarla.
Ni el mismo océano podría recordarla.
Pero no olvido al primer alcatraz que divisé (86)

The female persona looks forward to the Americas and not *back* to Africa; she remembers *neither* her lost coast *nor* her ancestral language; and, most significant, she stands *up* on the deck and not *down* in the hold of the ship. Morejón creates a poetic space for the development of a diaspora consciousness and for the imaginative performance later in the poem of rituals of resistance: "Me rebelé." "Me sublevé." "Bajé de la Sierra." "Mujer Negra" inhabits a timeless, abstract space that is outside of chronological time (the eighteenth century) and the physical place (the ship's hold) that situated Equiano's text in a specific history.

The hold of the slave ship—that "crippled cavity"—is the historical referent of one of the tropes of diasporic literature: the entrapment of the Black body in a dark enclosure. Cuban slave poet Juan Francisco Manzano, for example, was entombed in a coal chute where he almost suffocated. The motif is also prominent in African American literature: Ellison's *Invisible Man* inhabited "a section of the basement that was shut off and forgotten" (5); Linda Brent hid for seven years in an attic where the "air was stifling; the darkness total" (Jacobs 114); and Frado lived in a dark and "unfinished chamber over the kitchen" (Wilson 27). Although they are trapped, the Black women located in attics and upper chambers are represented as figures of ascent who survive by transcending, emotionally or spiritually, the circumstances of their lives. *Mujer Negra* is also a transcendent figure, suggesting that Morejón rejects the whip and lash discourse of the neo-slave narrative as well as the ideology of female victimization so prevalent in male-authored narratives of captivity and resistance. Here there are no shackles or enclosures to entrap the body; here, instead, is a woman who chooses life over death, hope over despair, and beauty over horror. She is a strong woman who survives the terrible passage whole and intact to become an agent of

resistance in Cuba's wars of independence, emancipation, and revolution. Both Morejón and Montejo create myths of origin, but the roots of *Mujer Negra*'s self are firmly anchored in Cuban soil.

Unlike Equiano's meditation on the Middle Passage, which attempts to reconstruct history through memory, Morejón's text engages in un-remembering, in obfuscating a traumatic and destabilizing past.³ It recalls Naomi Long Madgett's poem about Phillis Wheatley's voyage to the Americas, which begins with that same motif "I hardly remember my mother's face now, / But I still feel / At my bosom a chill wind" (185). Often what is forgotten—like one's African roots—is more significant than what is remembered, as RoseGreen-Williams suggests in her analysis of the politics of memory; the critic argues convincingly that Morejón's poem is informed by the ideology of Cuban, rather than Black, nationalism. It is also possible that Morejón's poetics, particularly her aesthetic of restraint with its imprecision, understatement, and emotional distance, has shaped her artistic vision of the crossing experience. In "*Mujer negra*" that concept of artistic beauty and integrity is manifest in the poet's subtle treatment of violence, in her nuanced delineation of character, and in her impressionistic description of landscape. Morejón's linear poetic narrative, which offers no possibility of symbolic or spiritual return to the homeland, begins not in Africa with scenes of capture, imprisonment, and embarkation, but *here* in this place, on these shores, where the Black Woman is reborn. Although the persona has forgotten that dark night of the soul, she retains her bone memories: the smell of the sea, the sight of a gull, "the chill wind at her bosom." The language of the poem—its lilting sounds, undulating rhythms, and visual images—contrasts starkly with the horrors depicted by other diasporic poets. Morejón uses elements of nature—sea, ocean, gull, and clouds—to suggest, elliptically, the veiled pain of a woman unnamed and isolate whose status is evident in the social, political, and cultural divide between the pronouns "I" (enslaved African) and "they" (European slavers) and in the psychological gap between remembering and forgetting.

Both Nancy Morejón and Luz Argentina Chiriboga revise the representation of enslaved women as objects of history and victims of society, creating Black female protagonists who make history and define themselves in spite of their circumstances. This is a significant contribution to Afro-Hispanic literature because until

Meditations on History

recently literary and historical texts have rendered enslaved women invisible—except as victims of rape or concubinage. Although Equiano proclaimed that “even our women are warriors,” most twentieth-century treatments of the transatlantic voyage, including Robert Hayden’s “Middle Passage,” Pedro Pérez Sarduy’s “Cumbite,” Charles Johnson’s *Middle Passage*, and Zapata Olivella’s *Changó el Gran Putas*, are heroic narratives that chronicle the deeds of male warriors. Jonathan Tittler notes in his study of *Changó* its “asymmetrical gendering”; that is, the relegation of feminine deities such as Yemayá and Odudúa “to the traditional roles of giving birth and nurturing” (75). But in *Jonatás y Manuela*, published in 1994, Chiriboga provides a “gynocentric vision” (Feal 35) of diasporic history through a novel that centers the experiences of heroic Latin American women: BaLunda, an enslaved African; her granddaughter Jonatás; and Manuela Sáenz, a Creole—all of whom resisted the patriarchal domination of Europeans.

Chiriboga’s novel is a matrilineal history of three generations of self-defined Black women who perform rituals of female bonding and gender solidarity under the most oppressive conditions on the slave ship and in the barracoons. The novelist depicts a community of women who play the drums, stoke the fires, and pray to their gods in acts of communal support and spiritual communion. They are culture bearers who preserve their sacred and artistic rituals—their “limbo imagination” (Harris)⁴—through songs and dances performed in a circle reminiscent of the ring shout, one of the most important expressions of African culture in the Americas. They are described this way: “Las mujeres, en giros alrededor de las llamas y cubiertas la cabeza con chalinas, al ver aparecer rostros de sus dioses exclamaron, en una alianza de voces... .(9) This “alianza de voces”—the voices of women who sing praise songs and pray to their gods—is a counterpoint to female silence, which functions as a form of resistance. Like Dessa Rose in Sherley Anne Williams’s novel, the women conceal their thoughts and feelings behind masks of silence, a motif that appears in other crossing narratives. Ba-Lunda, Mina, Muyabe, and the others on board the “floating jail” survive the ordeal through faith (their devotion to Shangó, Ogún, and Yemayá); through artistic expression (“un cántico de súplica y esperanza que elevó a los capturados a la región de sus divinidades.” [21]); and through repeated acts of resistance. Intent upon the dehumanization and

deculturation of their female captive, the Catholic priest baptizes Ba-Lunda after the overseer rapes her and changes her name so that she would “dejar de ser ella” (34). But the warrior woman takes up arms—with a weapon that is available to one who has lived in the bush—and murders the overseer with poisonous mushrooms.

Ba-Lunda and the other women are led by a female healer and spiritual guide who uses her powers—her amulets, herbs, prayers, and songs—to cure those who were stricken aboard ship with small pox and cholera. The presence of women on the ship is marked by female rites of passage, including the monthly cycle of blood and the painful contractions of childbirth. BaLunda notes the stench of the galley, where “Los hombres apestan a sudores macerados, las mujeres apestan a menstruación” (21), and later she describes a delivery:

una mujer abrió las piernas y todos se asombraron al ver aparecer la cabeza de un bebé. Observaron cómo la criatura salía lentamente, empujada por las contracciones y las fatigas de la madre. Otra mujer oprimió con sus dedos la zona del ombligo, la ayudó a parir y extendió la mano al cocinero en solicitud de su cuchillo para cortar el cordón umbilical. (25)

This scene of childbirth on board the slave ship is rare in the Afro-Hispanic crossing narrative. Another innovation is the novel’s fragmented structure, a poetic form that evokes the rhythm of a woman, her dreams and premonitions, her knowledge of bone and blood, her memories of separation and uprooting. Although Argentina Chiriboga employs many conventional themes of the Middle Passage text, including European “otherness,” African diversity, and the myth of White cannibalism, she uses structural devices such as flashbacks, foreshadowing, and alternating passages to create a fragmented narrative. The text with its constant movement from present to past, from the Americas to Africa, and from Ba-Lunda to her husband Jabí evokes the physical dislocation and psychological vertigo of the voyage across the sea. “El mar,” writes Chiriboga, “los llevaba, con cadencias de mujer, a tierras desconocidas” (22). Chiriboga’s fictionalization of history is narrated with the cyclical rhythm of a woman (“con cadencias de mujer”), a woman who constantly improvises on her life.

The dedication of Pedro Pérez Sarduy’s “Cumbite” to “los que han luchado / y cayeron por la Ngola de hoy”

suggests that this epic poem is a purely didactic text, but it is shaped by an African oral-traditional rhetoric that, according to Kubayanda, “is impelled by a network of verbal acts of repossession and reidentification with self and source” (“Notes” 5). The poet takes his title from the Haitian word *cumbite*, a “gathering with spiritual connotations” (15), to signify the political and cultural connections between Cubans and Africans. The dedication and allusions to African and Cuban leaders underscore the political sub-text of the poem; there are references, for example, to Amílcar Cabral, who fought for the independence of Angola and Guinea-Bissau before he was assassinated in 1973, and to “el guerrero de ultramar vestido con el verde de los olivos,” an allusion to Fidel Castro. Since the early 1960s Cuba had supported the decolonization of Africa, and Cuban/African solidarity was reiterated in 1976, the year of “Cumbite”’s publication. In March of that year Castro went to Guinea where he met with the presidents of Angola, Guinea, and Guinea-Bissau; and four months later Agostinho Neto, head of an Angolan liberation party, visited Cuba (Moore 34).⁵

In his imaginative reconstruction of the Cuban/African *cumbite* Pérez Sarduy uses history—specifically, the history of slavery and colonialism—to justify Cuba’s political policy of rapprochement with Africa in its struggle against apartheid and colonialism. The history of *La Travesía Intermedia*⁶ is characterized, the Cuban warrior suggests, by slavery (“siglos de sudor y anemia”) and economic exploitation (“la economía de plantaciones”), but he points out that West Indians have survived and overcome. In terms of its significance and its location in the text the central passage of the poem evokes, with poetic images of silence and death, the suffering of those who crossed the ocean.

El ocuje y la ceiba se han multiplicado de espinas
en el silencio de navíos cargados de negros
en cautiverio.
Hoy el Mar Caribe se retuerce de galeones invisibles
para redimir la ausencia de aquellos que perecieron. (8)

In its language, style, and structure “Cumbite” is modeled on the African praise song, a panegyric that celebrates the deeds of gods and great warriors with “a series of attributes and honorific titles, each one of which alludes to a myth” (Lomax 17). Written in free

verse with irregular stanzas and lines, the hymn of praise was often sung and accompanied by music and dance. The skill with which Pérez Sarduy uses a traditional oral form to treat contemporary issues suggests the strength and vitality of this expressive form in Cuban culture. The artistic appropriation of African aesthetics, practices, and beliefs is a manifestation of the poet’s cultural memory, as he explains:

Yo venía de esa cultura por mi familia. Muchos de ellos son practicantes, son creyentes, se formaron de ese mundo porque es una cultura que está muy extendida y muy fuertemente enraizada en varias regiones del país. Formaba parte de mi vida cotidiana. No había ninguna fuerza especial: los cantos de yarubás, los cantos afrocubanos, los cantos en lengua arará, me llegaban en la mesa, en la cama; mi abuela arrullaba de esa forma. Luego, claro, yo intelectualizo eso. (García-Pinto 31)

Pérez Sarduy affirms that his identity as an intellectual, cultural worker, and revolutionary activist is deeply rooted in his ethnic origin, and he suggests that Afro-Cuban culture is a source of his artistic creativity. In “Cumbite” he appropriates several conventions of African orature, including storytelling formulas, ancestral figures, warrior lore, plant symbolism, and a mythopoetic landscape. The first line—“Dicen que ocurrió cuando cayeron las lluvias”—establishes the poem’s vernacular roots; “They say” is the formula with which the griot begins his tale, and in folk culture time is marked by natural events such as rainfalls and droughts. Pérez Sarduy introduces ancestral figures and Yoruba deities such as Obatalá, Eshú, and Oggún by their attributes or titles: “Padre de Largos Brazos” and “Cuatro Alafín de Oyó.” The gods and ancestors are soon joined in the *cumbite* by warriors: the “one who came from overseas,” as well as historic figures and legendary heroes such as Sundiata, thirteenth-century founder of the Mali Empire; Kiluaji, fifteenth-century hero of Angolan resistance; and Shaka, the nineteenth-century Zulu warrior. The gods and heroes meet in a place where symbols, historical allusions, and topographic images conjure up a mythic and poetic landscape reminiscent of that in Amos Tutuola’s *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*. There are references to elephants and leopards, baobab and monkey-pod trees, the Zambezi River and Kilimanjaro Mountains, kora music

Meditations on History

and oral legends, forests thick with drums and craftswomen humming old songs. It is in contrast to this Edenic and mythic landscape that Pérez Sarduy imagines the bloody history of slavery and colonialism.

Although the poetry and novels of Sarduy and Chiriboga incorporate an aesthetic based on African religion, philosophy, and mythology, the prose works of Panamanian Carlos Guillermo Wilson, known as Cubena, are Afrocentric because they are informed not only by an African aesthetic but also by the political and cultural ideology of Black Nationalism. Afrocentrism constructs an African-centered, counter-hegemonic ideological and cultural world-view that provides, according to its theorists, a coherent and logical framework for deconstructing European power and privilege. Cubena probably does not use the term “Afrocentric” to describe his work, but it is clear from his interviews, essays, and novels that he is an engaged writer whose life work is dedicated to research on and preservation of Black history, specifically that of African-descended Panamanians. Theirs is a violent history that began with slavery and forced migration to the Americas, and continued with the economic and social oppression of West Indians who migrated to Central America to build the railroad (1850-1855) and the Panama Canal (1904-1914). When the Constitution of 1941 took away the citizenship of Antillean-descended Panamanians, many of them migrated to the United States in search of education and economic opportunities.

That odyssey—from Africa to the Caribbean, from the Caribbean to Central America, and from Central to North America—is the theme of *Los nietos de Felicidad Dolores*, an Afrocentric novel that critiques the “politics of villany” (Johnson “Passage” 64) manifest in the European conquest and colonization of the Americas. The product of extensive research, for Cubena read “libros de historia, biografías, ponencias, artículos y todo lo que contenga detalles sobre la presencia africana en las Américas” (Soley 69), *Los nietos* reconstructs American history from an African American (in the broader sense of that term) perspective. Central to that history is Felicidad Dolores (Happiness Sorrow), the mythic ancestor of the Afro-Panamanians, who embodies the eternal presence of Africa in the Americas through her repeated deaths and rebirths. Cubena’s semi-historical novel relates the violent words of Bartolomé de las Casas and the brutal deeds of Francisco Pizarro, but it also records the heroic acts of people of

color, Arawaks as well as Africans, who defended their land, fought for independence, and founded maroon communities: iconic figures such as Anacaona, Estebanico, Juan Garrido, Nuflo de Olano, and others. Cubena constructs through allusions to African symbols (elephants and baobab trees), topography (the Mountains of Kilimanjaro and the Niger River), and deities (“la auténtica Santísima Trinidad ... Yemayá, Obatalá y Changó”), a Pan-African world that links people in the Diaspora to their ancestors in the Homeland. That cultural and familial connection is reinforced through archetypal figures such as Angola’s Queen Nzinga, who fought against European domination. Cubena is very clear—and unapologetic—about the didactic purpose of his work: “[E]n mis obras lo más importante no es la experimentación, sino el mensaje que se pone de relieve en cuanto a la herencia de la africanía en Latinoamérica durante los primeros quinientos años, 1492-1992” (Soley 69).

As the novel demonstrates, that presence began with the Middle Passage, which initiated a pattern of migratory dislocations and a cycle of departures and returns. The Middle Passage serves as the controlling metaphor for the history recounted in the text; indeed, the story of that journey is the longest and most complete of the novel’s many narratives, occupying more than ten pages. Allusions to the voyage are reiterated throughout the text, and references to it appear on the first page in a simile “como barcos negreros sin timón y sin brújula en una tormenta.” Cubena’s account of the crossing is the most literal of those written by Afro-Hispanic writers, and it is the one that most closely approximates Equiano’s paradigmatic text in its graphic details and purported historicity. By 1991, when his novel was published, many of the historical events associated with the passage, such as the chiefs’ betrayal, pirates’ attack, and slaves’ mutiny, had been transformed into myths, but Cubena invigorates the genre through innovations in language, characterization, and themes. His protagonist, like Rutherford Calhoun in Charles Johnson’s novel, was born in the Americas but returns to Africa on a slave ship; members of the Jewish diaspora own African slave factories and travel to America as passengers on slave ships; and docile slaves foment dissension and resist emancipation. Although he writes in Spanish and English, Cubena, like Ngugi wa Thiong’o, advocates the decolonization of language not through the use of autochthonous languages, as does Ngugi, but through the Africanization of European

tongues. Zoggyie calls this attempt to recover the ancestral voice and to remove the Spanish language from its position of dominance a “linguistic rebellion”(93). In *Los nietos*, the ancestral voice is heard in the names of gods and warriors, in songs and invocations, and in occasional words and phrases in African languages. The author highlights the indigenization of languages, including “la lengua chibcha africanizada” and “el castellano africanizado” (93), and he underscores the hispanicization of indigenous tongues such as “yoruba castellanizado” (101). Perhaps Cubena’s most imaginative innovation is the reproduction of a Pan-Caribbean language that includes Spanish, French, and English phrases with African rhythms and intonations. For example, Felicidad Dolores reveals her Africanocaribbean identity in her speech:

—Choman! No problema. Ecute sivuplé mon cher. La madrina de mi grandáta tener los tiquetes para el avión icí pa maison. Además, gazón tu recordar lo que la abuelita te decir cuando era pickney... (22)

The significance of this language of exile in the formation of identity and diaspora consciousness is evident in Cubena’s characterization of his protagonist as a linguist. The youngest son of Felicidad Dolores, Guacayarima was born a slave in the Dominican Republic and accompanied his master Hernán Cortés to Mexico, where the Dominican learned the Mayan and Nahuatl languages and served as translator for the Spanish conquistadors.

Although a slave, Guacayarima, like Equiano, is cast in the mold of a warrior and intellectual who mastered the arts of language, agronomy, and herbal medicine before leading a rebellion on board the slave ship *Gitano*. The youngest of five sons, he is always identified in terms of his relationship to his mother as “el hijo menor de Felicidad Dolores,” and accounts of his rebellious deeds—sabotage, maroonage, and mutiny—always end with the words “pero no lo castraron,” indicating that he retained his masculine integrity. His antagonist Bartolomé Ladrón, the sadistic captain of the slave ship, is always referred to as “el martirio de los negros.” The repetition of formulaic phrases such as “el hijo” and “el martirio” is a rhetorical device of oral literature; such storytelling rituals evoke an abstract and stylized world where static, two-dimensional characters engage in allegorical battles. Three other figures unique

to the crossing genre are a barking dog, who provides comic relief; a priest, who has been excommunicated for lewdness and drunkenness; and a French prostitute, who is kidnaped and forced into a brutal marriage with the captain. The scene of the nuptial mass demonstrates Cubena’s dramatic and narrative skills, particularly his use of irony and satire; the sardonic humor also underscores the perversity of the crew and contrasts sharply with “los gritos de los esclavos que por el destierro habían enloquecido” (105). Although Guacayarima organizes a mutiny aboard ship, it fails because of the full moon, barking dog, treacherous prostitute, and a few cowardly slaves who prefer to sing and leave liberation to the gods. Carlos Guillermo Wilson thus provides a scathing critique of one of the most traumatic chapters in American history.

The longest and most imaginative of the Afro-Hispanic crossing narratives is found in Manuel Zapata Olivella’s *Changó el Gran Putas*, a mythopoetic reconstruction of the five-hundred-year history of Africans in the Diaspora. As the author explains, “Sólo con un poema mítico se podía resumir en pocas palabras toda la historia de África.” (Vunda 18). Like other poetic epics—the French *La Chanson de Roland* and the Spanish *El cantar de mio Cid*—epics that relate the mythic history of a people and recount the wondrous deeds of a legendary hero who embodies national beliefs and values, *Changó el Gran Putas* recounts, through poetry and prose, the “sung history” (Zoggyie “Lengua” 91) of the American Muntu, the child born in the wreckage of a slave ship. But Zapata Olivella’s epic saga is structured, thematically and philosophically, by an aesthetic based on African song/poetry and by a spirituality grounded in African and Amerindian myths of origin, resistance, and survival. Part One, “Los orígenes,” is divided into three chapters: “La tierra de los Ancestros,” a 1,074-line, free-verse prologue, which establishes the aesthetic and spiritual foundation of the text; “La trata,” which introduces the characters and relates stories of their captivity; and “La alargada huella entre dos mundos,” an account of the transatlantic crossing. The tripartite structure of “Los orígenes” evokes the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, a cyclical pattern that recurs throughout the novel in various forms: in the conception of time (the conflation of past, present, and future); in the repeated deaths and resurrections of characters; and in the co-existence of the living, the dead, and the divine, what Tittler calls a “primordial *Being With*” (76).

Meditations on History

These philosophic beliefs are reinforced by narrative and poetic devices from the African aesthetic tradition: the performative style; collective sensibility; intercalation of proverbs and folktales; synaesthesia of music, song, and poetry; storytelling rituals such as shouts, interjections, and direct address to listeners; an antiphonal structure based on the call of the griot and response of the chorus; sacred rituals such as invocations, chants, incantations, and hymns of praise; and symbolic use of African plants (baobab tree), animals (elephants), and topography ("las orillas del Chad"). These African cultural practices and philosophic beliefs are encoded in myths that narrate the history, articulate the world-view, and transmit the spirituality of African people, particularly the Bantu and Yoruba. The prologue creates a myth of origin that expresses, through words and images, the intimate and profound relationship between man, his ancestors, and his gods. The narrator/singer is Ngafúa, an African warrior and *babalao* or spiritual guide, who eventually leads the rebellion aboard the *Nova India*. As the title suggests, one of the most dynamic figures in the novel is Changó, god of war, lightening, and sexuality. According to myth, he was a fickle and vengeful god who challenged Africans to liberate themselves after forcing them into slavery and exile in the Americas. These two powerful figures—Changó and Ngafúa—are the emblematic poles between which the narrative of captivity and resistance stretches.

"La alargada huella entre dos mundos" begins with an excerpt from the ship's log, written in what Kubayanda would characterize as the "formal linear tradition of Europe... the culturally and historically dominant discourse of the crown, cross, *conquistador*, or *caudillo* ("Minority" 252). The scribal narrative of the captain with its allusions to murder and its foreshadowing of a tragic end is replaced by a chorus of submerged voices from below, the voices of *ekobios* or Black Africans who proudly affirm their identities through their prayers, hymns, and stories: two of the captives exclaim "I am Camara," and "I am Olugbaba, born in the sea," while the narrator/warrior asserts "I am Ngafúa, son of Kissi-Kama, Babalao of Ifa." As the Europeans' written text alternates with the Africans' verbal testimony so the history of the voyage unfolds dialectically through the separate discourses of the slaver and the enslaved. This innovative device of alternating discourses adds dramatic tension, reinforces the cyclical structure of the narrative, buttresses the oppositional world-views, and

underscores the irony and magic in the text. For example, the Christians pray, recite the rosary, and sprinkle holy water, even as they rape, hang, and dismember other human beings; the crew fears that a ghost is on board, but the Africans know that it is their god Changó; and the White Wolves (Europeans) hang Ngafúa from the ship's mast, but his body does not decay and he returns to organize a mutiny, speaking in "la lengua sin voz de los difuntos" (186). During the course of the uprising there is a terrible explosion, and as the ship begins to sink *Sosa Illamba*, the major female character, gives birth to a son Muntu, who swims toward the Americas "en busca del nuevo destino que le había trazado Changó" (175). Although the other Africans went down with the ship, they died heroically in a struggle to gain freedom, and their sacrifice prepared the way for a new warrior who would continue their liberation struggle in the Americas.

In their fictional meditations on history Afro-Hispanic writers have shaped a discourse of reconnection and reappropriation, creating myths of origin that link neo-Africans to an idealized past and producing a diasporic literature that is anchored in African beliefs, values, and traditions. Their methods and objectives in shaping this discourse have varied. Esteban Montejo, in his *Biografía de un cimarrón*, creates myths-as-history, drawn from the Afro-Cuban vernacular tradition. In her "Mujer negra" Nancy Morejón engages in the poeticization of history, the mapping of moments of revolutionary consciousness through poetic images and figurative language. Luz Argentina Chiriboga's *Jonatás y Manuela* depicts the womanization of history; that is, the re-visioning of the past through the eyes of fictional and historical women. When he lived in Cuba and actively supported the Revolution, Pedro Pérez Sarduy's project in "Cumbite" was the politicization of history or the interpretation of the past according to the political exigencies of the present. With the aesthetics and politics of Afrocentrism Cubana has created, in *Los nietos de Felicidad Dolores*, a historiography that underscores the African presence in the Americas. In *Changó el Gran Putas*, an African-centered mythopoesis that explores diasporic identity and the ideology of resistance, Manuel Zapata Olivella has created the definitive interpretation of the Middle Passage. The slave ship, in the poetic and fictive texts of these writers, is more than a site of cultural and historical memory; it is also a locus of personal and collective identity as well as a place where the ideology

of resistance, articulated through the cult of the warrior, is forged. These narratives of liberation explore the diasporic consciousness that emerged from the experience of exile and from the shared experiences in the Americas of slavery, racial discrimination, and economic exploitation. What the texts of Afro-Hispanic writers validate in their narratives of resistance is the transcendence of the human spirit, the ability to rise above unspeakable horrors through a deep spirituality and an artistic heritage that emanates from an African-centered identity, aesthetic, and culture.

Notes

¹In the first half of the 20th Century, two noted African Americans treated the mutiny of enslaved Africans aboard the *Amistad*. In 1939, Hale Woodruff painted a series of oils based on the *Amistad* incident, and in 1944, Robert Hayden published "Middle Passage," a lyrical meditation on one of the most famous—but uncelebrated—incidents in history: the 1839 revolt led by Joseph Cinque aboard *La Amistad*, a vessel that carried enslaved Africans to a Cuban port.

²In his study of the Middle Passage, Lemuel Johnson notes that the theme did not appear in African literature until the 1960s, when "the politics of post-independence provoked African authors to outrage and to a near-fatalistic vision of history" ("Passage" 63). He examines Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*, Yambo Olologuen's *Bound to Violence*, and Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*. The theme also emerges in Caribbean literature with the publication of such works as George Lamming's collection of essays *Pleasures of Exile*, Kamau Brathwaite's poetic *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy*, and Caryl Phillips's novel *Crossing the River*. In the United States, a few examples include Romare Bearden's collage, "Cinque," Charles Johnson's novel *Middle Passage*, Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Echo of Lions*, Tom Feelings's collection of sketches *The Middle Passage: White Ships, Black Cargo*, and *Amistad*, a film directed by Steven Spielberg and Debi Allen, as well as documentaries such as *Ship of Slaves: The Middle Passage*, and "The Terrible Transformation" in the series *Africans in America*.

³Selective recall and the suppression of painful memories such as capture, rape, incest, and other forms of violence, are evident in life and literature; enslaved African Phillis Wheatley, for example, remembered little about her origins when she wrote "Twas mercy brought me from my pagan land," while Carolivia Herron's suppressed memories of incest led her to write the

semi-autobiographical novel *Thereafter Johnny*.

⁴According to Wilson Harris, the "limbo imagination" found expression in the slave ship dance, when Africans created an artistic/spiritual response to the violation of capture and enslavement, and to the humiliation of Europeans' "dancing the slave" on deck.

⁵Cuban solidarity with Africa was reaffirmed in 2001, when Castro, the only American head of state to attend the U. N. World Conference Against Racism held in South Africa, linked the issue of reparations to the bloody history of the Middle Passage. He stated:

"The irrefutable truth is that tens of millions of Africans were captured, sold like a commodity and sent beyond the Atlantic to work in slavery. The rich, free-spending industrialized world certainly possesses the ... resources necessary to pay back what is due mankind" (Constable).

⁶Pérez Sarduy is the only Afro-Hispanic writer who refers to the voyage in uppercase letters as *La Travesía Intermedia*, thus acknowledging that it was the second stage of the triangular trade. Other writers call it *la travesía*, which seems to suggest that the concept of the second of three stages has a Euro-American origin.

Works Cited

- Barnet, Miguel. *Biografía de un cimarrón*. Mexico: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1968.
- Captain-Hidalgo, Yvonne. "Conversación con el doctor Manuel Zapata Olivella, Bogota, 1980; 1983." *Afro-Hispanic Review* 4 (January 1985): 26-32.
- Chiriboga, Argentina. *Jonatás y Manuela*. Quito: Abrapalabra Editores, 1994.
- Constable, Pamela. *The Washington Post* (September 2, 2001).
- Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. New York: Signet, 1952. (Rpt. New York: The Modern Library, 1994.)
- Equiano, Olaudah. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*. Author: London, 1794. (Rpt. Werner Sollors, ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2001.)
- Feal, Rosemary Geisdorfer. "The Legacy of Ba-Lunda: Black Female Subjectivity in Luz Argentina Chiriboga's *Jonatás y Manuela*." *Afro-Hispanic Review* 17 (Fall 1998): 24-29.
- Garcia-Pinto, Magdalena. "Entrevista con Pedro Pérez Sarduy en Columbia, Missouri en Marzo de 1993." *Afro-Hispanic Review* 13 (Spring 1994): 23-33.
- Harris, Wilson. "History, Fable and Myth in the Caribbean and Guianas." *Selected Essays of Wilson Harris: The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination*. Ed. Al J. M. Bundy. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Hayden, Robert. "Middle Passage." *Robert Hayden*:

Meditations on History

- Collected Poems*. Ed. Frederick Glaysher. New York: Liveright Publishing Co., 48.
- Jacobs, Harriet A. *Incidents in the life of a Slave Girl*. Ed. L. Maria Child, 1861. (Rpt. Jean Fagan Yellin, ed. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987.)
- Johnson, Lemuel A. "The Middle Passage in African Literature: Wole Soyinka, Yambo Ouologuem, Ayi Kwei Armah." *African Literature Today* 11(1980): 62-84.
- . "(Un)Settling Texts." *Afro-Hispanic Review* 10 (September 1991): 3.
- Kubayanda, Josaphat Bekunuru. "Minority Discourse and the African Collective: Some Examples from Latin American and Caribbean Literature." *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*. Eds. Abdul R. Jan Mohamed and David Lloyd. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- . "Notes on the Impact of African Oral Traditional Rhetoric on Latin American and Caribbean Writing." *Afro-Hispanic Review* 3 (September 1984): 5-10.
- Lomax, Alan and Raoul Abdul, eds. *3000 Years of Black Poetry*. Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications, Inc. 1970.
- Madgett, Naomi Long. "Phyllis." *Trouble the Water*. Ed. Jerry W. Ward, Jr. New York: Mentor, 1997.
- Moore, Zelbert. "Cuba in Africa 1960-1985." *Afro-Hispanic Review* 5 (1986): 31-36.
- Morejón, Nancy. "Mujer negra." *Where the Island Sleeps Like a Wing: Selected Poetry by Nancy Morejón*. Ed. Kathleen Weaver. San Francisco: The Black Scholar Press, 1985.
- Mullen, Edward J., ed. *The Life and Poem of a Cuban Slave: Juan Francisco Manzano, 1797-1854*. Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1981.
- Ngugi, wa Thiong'o. *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Portsmouth, N. H.: Heinemann, 1986.
- Palmer, Colin. "The Cruellest Commerce." *National Geographic* (September 1992): 63-91.
- Pérez Sarduy, Pedro. "Cumbite." *Cumbite and Other Poems*. New York: Center for Cuban Studies, 1990.
- RoseGreen-Williams, C. "Re-writing the History of the Woman: Nancy Morejón's 'Mujer negra.'" *Afro-Hispanic Review* 8 (September 1989): 7-13.
- Soley, La Verne M. Seales. "Entrevista con Carlos Guillermo 'Cubena' Wilson." *Afro-Hispanic Review* 17 (Fall 1998): 67-69.
- Tittler, Jonathan. "Catching the Spirit: *Changó, el Gran Putas* in English Translation." *Afro-Hispanic Review* 20 (Spring 2001): 73-78.
- Vunda, Zola Ni. "La función del proemio en *Changó, el Gran Putas*." *Afro-Hispanic Review* 9 (1990): 18-24.
- Wilson, Carlos Guillermo (Cubena). *Los nietos de Felicidad Dolores*. Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1991.
- Wilson, Harriet E. *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black*. New York: Vintage Books, 1983.
- Zapata Olivella, Manuel. *Changó, el Gran Putas*. Bogota: Letras Americanas, 1992.
- . "Los Ancestros Combatientes: Una Saga Afro-norteamericana." *Afro-Hispanic Review* 10 (September 1991): 51-58
- Zoggyie, Haakayoo. "Lengua e identidad en *Changó, el Gran Putas*, de Manuel Zapata Olivella." *Afro-Hispanic Review* 20 (Spring 2001): 90-95.
- . "Ubicaciones de la identidad en *Chombo*, de Carlos Guillermo Wilson." *Afro-Hispanic Review* 19 (Fall 2000): 53-58.