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## Rethinking the Independence of Cuba from Miguel Barnet's *Biography of a Runaway Slave*

Juliana Fillies Testa Muñoz

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Muñoz, Juliana Fillies Testa

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## Rethinking the Independence of Cuba from Miguel Barnet's *Biography of a Runaway Slave*

Repensando la Independencia de Cuba a partir de *Biografía de  
un cimarrón* de Miguel Barnet

Repensando a Independência de Cuba a partir de *Memórias de  
um Cimarron* de Miguel Barnet

Juliana Fillies Testa Muñoz \* [jtmunoz1@asu.edu](mailto:jtmunoz1@asu.edu)  
Arizona State University Tempe,  
Arizona., Estados Unidos

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**Abstract:** The testimonial novel *Biography of a Runaway Slave* by Miguel Barnet is one of the pioneers of the narrative genre and has attracted the attention of critics from the moment of its publication. Scholars see the testimonial novel as a text that allows the reader access to a "genuine" episteme, safeguarded by a witness of historical events. The main objective of this article is to demonstrate that the narrative of the maroon and former mambí Esteban Montejo opens new ways of reading and analyzing historical events. In particular, I will focus on Montejo's statements on the Cuban War of Independence. For this purpose, I will use the theory of the Subaltern Studies as a methodological tool. The analysis will show the denial of Afro-Cuban agency in the official history of independence in Cuba, and will offer a reading of the events that recognizes the important Afro-descendant contribution.

**Keywords:** Testimony, Subaltern Studies, Esteban Montejo, historiography, Afro-Cubans.

**Resumen:** El relato testimonial *Biografía de un cimarrón* de Miguel Barnet es uno de los pioneros del género narrativo y ha llamado la atención de la crítica desde el momento de su publicación. La novela-testimonio es vista por investigadores como un texto que permite el acceso del público lector a una episteme "genuina", salvaguardada por un testigo de eventos históricos. El objetivo principal del presente artículo es demostrar que el relato del cimarrón y exmambí Esteban Montejo abre nuevos caminos de lectura y análisis de momentos históricos. En especial, nos enfocaremos en sus declaraciones sobre la guerra de la Independencia Cubana. Con este propósito, utilizaremos como herramienta metodológica la teoría de los Estudios Subalternos. El análisis pondrá en evidencia la negación de la agencia afrocubana en la historia oficial de la época independentista en Cuba, y ofrecerá una lectura de los eventos que reconozca el importante aporte afrodescendiente.

**Palabras clave:** Testimonio, Estudios Subalternos, Esteban Montejo, historiografía, afrocubanos.

**Resumo:** O romance testemunhal *Memórias de um Cimarron* de Miguel Barnet é um dos pioneiros do gênero narrativo e atraiu atenção da crítica desde o momento de sua publicação. O romance testemunhal é visto pelos pesquisadores como um texto que permite ao leitor e a leitora aceder a uma episteme "genuína", respaldada por uma testemunha de eventos históricos. O principal objetivo do presente ensaio é demonstrar que a história do quilombola e *exmambí* Esteban Montejo abre novos caminhos de leitura e análise de momentos históricos. Em particular, nos concentraremos em suas declarações sobre a guerra da Independência Cubana. Para isso, utilizaremos a teoria dos Estudos Subalternos como ferramenta metodológica. A análise destacará a negação da

agência afro-cubana na história oficial da época da Independência cubana, e oferecerá uma leitura dos eventos que reconheça a importante contribuição afrodescendente.

**Palavras-chave:** Testemunho, Estudos Subalternos, Esteban Montejo, historiografia, afro-cubanos.

“Amí nada de eso se me borra. Lo tengo todo vivido”<sup>1</sup>

Fuente: Esteban Montejo (2010, p. 64).

## Introduction

In 1966, the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore of Cuba published *Biography of a Runaway Slave* by Miguel Barnet<sup>2</sup>. The author later called this literary genre “testimonial novel” (Barnet, 1970). The work was critically acclaimed and positively received within academia; it quickly gained recognition, and Miguel Barnet established himself as a pioneer of this type of narrative (Echevarría, 2011; Sklodowska, 2002; Yudice, 1991). For its hybrid character, because it amalgamates literature and ethnography (novel and testimony), *Biography of a Runaway Slave* has been widely studied by literary critics and historians. While Michael Zeuske (1997) acknowledges the fundamental contribution of this text to historiography, especially for studies on the colonial context in Cuba and slavery in general, Elzbieta Sklodowska (2002) emphasizes the relevance of this genre for literature. Moreover, she claims that the writing of testimonial novels by Barnet (he is also the author of the testimonial novels: *Rachel’s Song* from 1969 and *Galician* from 1981) has contributed to making him “uno de los escritores más destacados de la literatura cubana contemporánea” (p. 799)<sup>3</sup>.

*Biography of a Runaway Slave* can therefore be considered one of Cuba’s most important works of the second half of the 20th century. The relevance of Barnet’s novel is mainly due to its documentary value, for it acts as a testimony of a historical moment. The present article will focus on this aspect of the novel, specifically on how Esteban Montejo’s testimony allows for new ways of reading and understanding the past. I will particularly focus on the historical period of the War of Independence, in which Esteban Montejo, the witness, actively participated. With this purpose, I will begin this article by briefly outlining the central characteristics of this type of narrative and will present the fundamental concepts that constitute the Subaltern Studies, which will serve as a theoretical basis for the analysis of Barnet’s text.

## The Testimonio

According to John Beverley (1989), the roots of the testimonio can be found in texts that existed before the publication of *Biography...*

These narratives are not fictional; they are colonial chronicles, essays on customs, and war diaries that marked the genre of Latin American liberalism. However, it was only in the 1960s that the testimonio was acknowledged as a new literary genre. The rise and expansion of the testimonial novel are intimately related to the growth of popular movements in Latin America, especially in Central America (Beverley, 1989; Lancaster, 1999). In the 1970s, the institution Casa de las Américas decided to award the category “testimonial novel” in its annual competition, cementing and promoting the genre in the Cuban literary field (Beverley, 1989). Beverley defines testimonio as follows:

By testimonio I mean a novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet [...] form, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a “life” or a significant life experience (1989, p. 12).

Hence, a testimonio’s central characteristic is that it is based on the story of a “witness”, of a person who has a relevant experience of a historical moment or event. The “informant” is seen as a living archive and the source of an original episteme: he or she presents a point of view that only the “insiders” can offer. Thus, the witness’ story does not reflect an individual memory. The unique experience is perceived as representing the collective memory of a people or a particular social group. In Rowlandson’s words, the subject who narrates his life in *Biography...* is someone who “has *suffered* history” (2010, p. 3). He represents the silenced voice of the marginalized or, we could say, of the subaltern. Thus, when reading a testimonial novel, the reader has the feeling of hearing the voice of this “survivor” directly, just as in *Biography of a Runaway Slave*. The informant represents a social class that survived the yoke of perhaps the most brutal and cruel system that has ever existed, which was slavery. His voice deserves and needs to be heard. Also, the exmambí can be seen as an important witness of the Cuban War of Independence, in which he fought.

The testimonial novel is a very controversial literary genre and has been the reason for debate in recent years. The main concern of critics is that these novels, based upon a real-life experience, usually have an editor, as in the case of the book I analyze in this article: *Biography...* is narrated in the first-person, however, it is written by someone “from outside”. It is precisely this fundamental aspect that has led the most skeptical critics to ask: who speaks in the testimonial novel, the witness or the editor? Is it possible to say that the voice we hear is de facto that of the survivor? The problem does not stop there. In his re-reading of *Biography...*, the historian Michael Zeuske (1997) draws attention to Barnet/Montejo's silence regarding the last 60 years of the runaway slave. The historian accuses Barnet of having hidden certain aspects of the witness’s career because these would not coincide with the image of a revolutionary that Barnet aimed to project upon his interviewer. Through the careful reading of historical documents, Zeuske discovered that in 1904 Montejo had been involved in a patron-client relationship with Eduardo Guzmán, a notorious yet dubious political figure. Barnet knew

that this information would stain the predominantly positive image that the author wanted to create of Montejo and omits it. Zeuske's discoveries show that we cannot see the testimonial story as a transcription of the witness's narrative. The editor's role is not only that of organizing the record to ensure understanding, as Barnet states (1970); instead, the author decides what to include, emphasize, or exclude from the story, according to his interests and considering his audience. Zeuske is not alone in highlighting the intentionality of the editor when producing the testimonial novel. For literary critic Emil Volek (2000), the testimonio is often used by intellectuals from the left as a tool to promote a cause. Thus, states Volek, the testimonio meticulously chooses its witnesses and, by aiming the reader's indoctrination, "abandona el espacio potencial del discurso testimonial y entra en el espacio del fervor religioso o político" (p. 4)<sup>4</sup>.

Nevertheless, supporters of the testimonio emphasize that the testimonial novel never had the pretension of being a testimony in the legal sense of the word, in which contradictions are not allowed (Arias, 2001, p. 76). Instead, what matters is that the testimonio produces in the reader "a sensation of experiencing the real" (Beverly, 1989, p. 22). Thus, supporters of the genre relativize the interference of the editor in the text, instead, stressing the value of the witness's voice. For them, it seems to be evident that, even with its possible theoretical and methodological inconsistencies, the testimonial novel represents a fundamental genre in the field of contemporary Latin American and world narrative, as it gives voice to the silenced and marginalized subject. Thus, they highlight the relevance of the testimony as an expression of subaltern subjectivity. Rowlandson (2010), in his introduction to *Biography...* concludes that: "if his [Montejo's] narrative is adapted by the editor, so be it, nothing can silence the voice of Esteban" (p. 51).

The debate surrounding the authenticity of the narrator's voice in testimonial novels does not seem to have come to an end, and the purpose of this article is not to delve into this discussion. Although it is necessary to read the story of Barnet/Montejo considering these two positions and the very historical conjuncture in which the text was produced, I propose that Montejo's story sheds light on aspects of history that remained hidden or have received little attention to this day. Therefore, I read this text from the premise that *Biography of a Runaway Slave* helps us rethink the official historiography and, especially, to acknowledge blacks' crucial participation in different historical contexts.

Retelling history from the perspective of the silenced, of those "from below", was the main objective of the critics who initiated the school of Subaltern Studies, whose main goals I will present below.

## The Subaltern Studies

The project known as "Subaltern Studies" had its beginning in the early 1980s, when a small group of South Asian historians based in England began to question and to rethink the methodological criteria that had

been employed when writing the history. The historian Ranajit Guha played a central role in this group (Banerjee, 2010; Chakrabarty, 2005). Guha (1988) used the definition given by the Concise Oxford Dictionary of the term “subaltern” to elaborate his theory. According to the Dictionary’s definition, the subaltern is an individual “of lower rank”. For Guha, subalternity can be expressed in terms of “class, caste, age, gender, and office or in any other way” (p. 1). Thus, it is a concept that has a vast spectrum and aims at the inclusion and recognition of subaltern groups in their diversity. Therefore, these scholars’ main objective was (and is) to make the agency of subaltern groups in history visible. Thus, they emphasized the need to revisit the archives considering the mechanisms of power and domination that have influenced historiography and its production, ultimately to “unveil” hidden and silenced aspects of history. Their objective is to offer an alternative version of historical events, a version told from the subaltern’s perspective.

Therefore, the Subaltern Studies project consists of a study method that aims to develop strategies of analysis capable of generating “new” knowledge about the past (Banerjee, 2010; Chakrabarty, 2005). As Beverley (1999) notes, this alternative method states as its goal to offer “a conceptual instrument for retrieving and registering the presence of the subaltern both historically and in contemporary societies” (p. 31). Thus, the Subaltern Studies scholars argue that the official history and its production need to be scrutinized, for it was written by those who were allowed to speak. Hence, it unveils the mechanisms of power exercised over the very process of writing history. Simultaneously, as Beverley correctly observes, the Subaltern Studies opens new ways for identifying subaltern’s silencing in contemporary societies.

Although the first historians and scholars who composed the school of Subaltern Studies have focused, mainly, on exposing the context of historiographic production in India, we can see that the term “subaltern” is being used with increased frequency in studies on Africa, Europe, and Latin America. As Prakash notes, the Subaltern Studies have become “a recognizable mode of critical scholarship in history, literature, and anthropology” (1994, p. 1476).

## **The Possibilities and Limits of Testimonio as a Historical Text**

The testimonial novel *Biography of Runaway Slave* cannot be considered a historical document due to the genre’s limits mentioned previously: the editor’s intervention, whose real motivations and intentions (perhaps political or financial) remain unknown in some cases, and one can only speculate in others. In the specific case of *Biography...*, it is important to remember the historical and political context in which “it was born”, that is, the post-revolutionary Cuba. According to Monika Walter (2019), Barnet constructs the image of the mambí to demonstrate the practicability of revolutions, fitting it perfectly into the “‘spirit’ of a time” (p. 25). Also, Emil Volek (2000) points out that Barnet’s work

conveys the idea that Cuba had taken the great leap forward from slavery to the socialist revolution, presenting it as the climax and *telos* of modern Cuban history. According to Volek, Barnet wanted to “sell” the image of Montejo as a revolutionary, willing to fight against the oppression and foreign threat, formerly Spanish, now American. These critics, thus, highlight Barnet’s effort to construct a myth that would fit into the molds of the Cuban Revolution.

However, this study recognizes that an essential layer of Barnet’s text comes from his ethnological and historical orientation. Barnet claims to have chosen Esteban Montejo as the interviewee for his scientific project because of the ex-slave’s participation in crucial historical moments, such as slavery and the War of Independence. Periods that “ha[n] dejado una huella profunda en la psicología del cubano, ha[n] contribuido a formarlo, le ha[n] atribuido una historia” (Barnet, 1970, p. 134)<sup>5</sup>. For Barnet, therefore, Montejo represents the memory of an era, and his testimony opens new ways to interpret historical events that were essential to the development of the Cuban nation. As I will demonstrate in this study, Montejo’s story is not only rich in detail about these events, it also offers a “new” approach to the episteme of historical facts, as he highlights the participation of blacks in the War of Independence and represents with his life path an example of the Afro-Cuban agency at decisive moments in Cuba’s history.

### **Black Participation in the War of Independence, According to the Testimony of Esteban Montejo**

According to Michael Zeuske (2001), there are no reliable sources on Afro-Cubans’ quantitative participation in the 1895 war. However, scholars estimate that they represented between 40 and 90 % of the Cuban army’s combatants. Also, Claudio Gallegos (2018) and Aline Helg (1998) point out to blacks’ mass presence in Cuban troops and their significant contribution in the Cubans’ war against the Spanish colonization. According to Ada Ferrer (2002), Afro-Cubans occupied various positions in the Liberation Army, and many blacks achieved military ranks that were previously exclusive to white combatants, such as captains, colonels, and generals. She estimates that men of color composed 40 % of the total number of officers in leadership positions. Antonio Benítez Rojo (1997) claims that the actual number was probably higher than Ferrer’s estimation. According to the researcher, about half of the war’s military commands were occupied by black and mulatto individuals. He also reiterates that Afro-Cubans represented an incontestable majority among the combatants.

It seems evident that Afro-Cubans’ participation in the War of Independence was paramount for the event’s development. However, in many books on Cuban history, black participation in the War of Independence is frequently disregarded. Often, it does not even compose a subchapter of books on Cuban history. Additionally, we are rarely informed about the identity of these agents. With a few exceptions, Afro-



Cuban combatants are presented as a homogeneous group, lacking any individuality.

The lack of visibility of black's agency in the War of Independence is not limited to written production. The Photographic Archive Mambises<sup>6</sup>, available to the public on the José Martí National Library's website, is also a clear example of the distortion of blacks' image in the 1895 war<sup>7</sup>. Of the 56 photographs that constitute the archive, blacks appear in only 18 (and are predominant in number only in five of those). What stands out in these photographs is, principally, how Afro-Cubans are portrayed in the mixed groups: usually in the background or on the edge of the photograph, showcasing the dominant racial division –and hierarchy– at the end of the 19th century.

The segregation is evident, despite the anti-racist rhetoric of some influential leaders of the independence movement, such as José Martí, who in his famous text “Nuestra América” declares that “no hay razas” (Vitier, 1993, p. 151)<sup>8</sup>. It is axiomatic that the prevailing racism in the nineteenth century Cuban society has contributed to diminish and hide Afro-Cubans' contribution to historical events, which, as we can see in contemporary history books, seems to have left its traces in the historiographic narrative.

Therefore, Esteban Montejo's criticism towards authorities' lack of recognition of black agency does not seem unreasonable. According to the witness,

Al terminar la guerra empezó la discusión de si los negros habían peleado o no. Yo sé que el noventa y cinco por ciento de la raza negra hizo la guerra. Luego ellos empezaron a decir que el sesenta y cinco. Bueno, nadie les criticó esas palabras. El resultado fue que los negros se quedaron en la calle. Guapos como fieras y en la calle. Eso era incorrecto, pero así fue. (Barnet & Montejo, 2010, p.171)<sup>9</sup>.

The first aspect that this excerpt shows is the emergence of a post-war narrative that sought to cover blacks' participation in the War of Independence. When Montejo alludes to the fact that “the talk started” and that Americans “began to say”, he is criticizing the whites, the usual holders of power. Despite having been transcendental for the conquest of Cuban Independence, blacks were not called to debate the nation's future. Another aspect that is axiomatized in the mambi's declaration is blacks' impossibility to demonstrate against the injustices. Whites did not criticize the words of those who diminished black relevance in the War because it was in their best interest to maintain the *status quo*, which meant to preserve the social order that benefited whites to the detriment of black people. This is probably why they held silence before the arbitrariness committed towards black combatants. The right to express anger was denied to Afro-Cubans since they were seen as second-class citizens, as stressed by Antonio Benítez Rojo (1997).

The black mambises did not have much choice besides accepting the erasure of their efforts and nodding to this discourse's consequences. According to Montejo, the denial of speaking privileges was a reality shared by black people in Cuba. In the following excerpt from his

testimony, he declares: “Hay que quedarse callado o contar la verdad. Pero como a uno muy poca gente le cree, pues uno se calla. Y si no se calla se complica, o se complicaba, mejor dicho, porque hoy nadie le aguanta la boca a la gente” (2010, p. 171)<sup>10</sup>. On another occasion, he states “Lo que más me ha salvado es que me he callado, porque no se puede confiar. El que confía mucho se hunde solo” (2010, p. 181)<sup>11</sup>. For the subaltern, deprived of state protection mechanisms that should guarantee him the right to speak, silence seems to represent the only possible refuge, a way of survival. Thus, the words of Montejo reflect skepticism towards the authorities that let the black combatant down. However, Montejo also points out a change in society regarding the freedom of expression. It is an underlying assumption that, as Montejo tells his story in the 1960s, blacks are no longer afraid to express their ideas, opinions, and criticisms. At least the fear does not seem to be stronger than the need to speak. This openness in society may have led Montejo to break the silence that “saved” him and expose his vision of the events. It is also possible that Barnett decided to include this second part of Montejo’s statement to emphasize the nation’s progress under the new regime. Probably we will never know for sure. Regardless of the reason, it is indisputable that Montejo’s story enriches the historiography immeasurably.

On the one hand, Montejo’s narration allows us to see the historical facts from the subaltern’s perspective. On the other hand, it permits intuiting what the narrator and his fellow Afro-Cubans may have experienced when they faced injustices and had to endure them in silence:

Cuando terminó la guerra, que todas las tropas llegaron a La Habana, yo empecé a observar a la gente. Muchos se querían quedar cómodos, suavitos en la ciudad. Bueno, pues éstos que se quedaron, salieron peor que si hubieran regresado al monte. Peor, porque empezó el tira y encoge, el engaño y las mentiras. “Negro, tú vas a ser rico aquí.” Y ¡ninga! Ese era el primero que se moría de hambre (2010, p. 181)<sup>12</sup>.

Africans and Afro-Cubans had joined the Liberation Army hoping that when slavery was finally abolished and Cuba was an independent nation, their rights as Cuban citizens would be acknowledged by whites (Gallegos, 2018). The whole patriotic environment was promising and black combatants dreamed of social equality and longed for a less difficult life than the one they were used to having in the countryside. However, the mambi’s expectations were frustrated, for those promises would never be fulfilled. The situation had not changed for blacks, who remained as marginalized as before. There was no room in the urban centers for former black military members. Thus, for many of them, as for Montejo himself, the best option was to return to the plantations and continue life as if the war had never happened. Hence, their names fell into anonymity, and their stories were lost to oblivion.

Montejo argues that there is an explanation for white’s rejection of Afro-Cubans: the fear that “cuando el negro cogiera fuerza, cuando se educara, era dañino a la raza blanca” (2010, p. 178)<sup>13</sup>. The “fear of the black” and his upward social mobility is something that arose, principally,

after the Haitian Revolution in 1804 and the consequent abolition of slavery in the neighboring country. These events led to eminent Cuban theorists, such as Francisco de Arango y Parreño, to promote white individuals' mass immigration. Arango y Parreño wanted to achieve through new immigration policies the population's gradual whitening (Arango y Parreño, 2005).

The war's rhetoric seemed to have fostered, if not de facto at least on an ideological level, some union between the races. However, the government's measures in the first years after the war show that racism towards blacks did not disappear with the proclamation of Independence. The first "black" party of the Americas, the Partido Independiente de Color (PIC)<sup>14</sup>, had been founded in Cuba in 1908 by black veterans of the War of Independence, but it was banned just two years later. The ban led in 1912 to a conflict known as the "war of races," in which black participation was brutally repressed (Zeuske, 1997, p. 272).

Zeuske (1997) discovered that Montejo had also participated in the revolt in defense of the PIC; however, this information is not mentioned in *Biography...* We can only speculate on the reasons that led Barnet to omit this important fact. Fundamental for our study is that Montejo's story, although limited, permits us to acknowledge his agency and listen to his resentful voice. Montejo is here representative of a class that did not see the promised inclusion put into practice. Instead, they had to return to the countryside, to the cane and tobacco plantation, without any outlook for a better life: "Todo parecía que había vuelto para atrás" (2010, p. 181)<sup>15</sup>, concludes the former slave on the situation of blacks after the war had ended. He denounces the fallacy of the patriotic and nationalistic speeches of the independence movement, which motivated blacks to participate in the struggle for the Cuban Independence and to believe in a unified nation. The voice of the subaltern is, therefore, harsh criticism of the racist measures implemented during the post-war period and towards the discourse of important historical figures that, through their rhetoric, mobilized blacks to defend a cause that was primarily in the interest of the white class.

Montejo claims that the "odio que había contra los negros" (2010, p. 158)<sup>16</sup> led whites to diminish the efforts and achievements of Afro-Cubans' leaders of the movement. The former mambí tells his version of a confrontation between Major General Máximo Gómez and the Afro-Cuban General Quintin Banderas. The witness states that the major and the general had had divergences, and their dispute resulted in a rumor: Banderas was blamed for planning to give himself up to the Spanish Army. An accusation that, according to Montejo, had no reason other than racial discrimination. General Banderas, who fought for Cuba's independence since the beginning of the movement, died in 1906 and was buried "sin honores jerárquicos" (Hernández, 1985, p. 134)<sup>17</sup>. Montejo honors Banderas's memory by remembering him as follows:

Yo he visto hombres valientes, pero como él únicamente Maceo. Pues en la República pasó muchos trabajos. Nunca le dieron una buena oportunidad. El busto que le hicieron estuvo tirado en los muelles muchos años. El busto de un

patriota. Por eso la gente está revuelta todavía; por la falta de respeto hacia los verdaderos libertadores. Al que le cuenten lo del busto cree que es mentira. Y sin embargo, yo lo vide. Ahora no sé dónde estará. A lo mejor lo volvieron a poner. Yo le haría diez bustos a Banderas. Uno por cada batalla. Se los merece (2010, p. 158)<sup>18</sup>.

According to Montejo, the most outstanding and courageous men of the war were the two Afro-Cubans Antonio Maceo and Quintin Banderas. When Montejo refers to “the people” who are still riled up, he is probably alluding to those who participated in the war. They have a different view of the events than those who have only heard the version produced by whites in charge of writing the official history. Despite Banderas having occupied a leadership position within the Mambise troops, he did not escape other Afro-Cuban combatants’ fate. He, too, was not given “a good opportunity”. Banderas did not receive the credits for his continuous efforts towards Cuba’s independence. Furthermore, the bust made for him seems a farce, for it disappeared and cannot perform its essential function, which is to keep the memory of the historical character alive.

Hence, the testimony of Esteban Montejo allows us to learn more about historical figures, like Banderas, who were fundamental for the formation of an independent Cuba. Also, the ex-slave makes an extended mention of the Lucumís<sup>19</sup> participation in the war and acknowledges the importance of their performance in the process of conquering Independence, as the following fragment shows:

Los lucumises eran muy trabajadores, dispuestos para todas las tareas. Hasta en la guerra hicieron un buen papel. [...] Aun sin estar preparados para pelear se metían en las columnas y echaban candela. Luego, cuando esa guerra se acabó volvieron a trabajar, a seguir esclavos. Por eso se desilusionaron con la otra guerra. Pero pelearon igual. Nunca yo vide a un lucumi [sic] echando para atrás. Ni lo oí hacienda alardes de guerrero. [...] Es más, tenían mayor responsabilidad que los criollos. Todo el mundo sabe que hubo criollos guerrilleros. De los viejos no se puede sacar uno guerrillero. Esa es la mejor prueba. Pelearon con Carlos Manuel y dieron una lección de patriotismo. No voy a decir que sabían a lo que iban. Pero iban (2010, pp. 150-151)<sup>20</sup>.

When referring to the Lucumí’s efforts in the development of these events, Montejo deconstructs the stereotypical image of the black combatants as a uniform and homogeneous group. Among them were slaves –in this case, I refer primarily to the first independence movements initiated in the 1870s– free blacks and former slaves. Montejo’s declaration that the Lucumí “gave a lesson in patriotism” is a form of resistance since it reverses the official discourse that, historically, aggrandized white generals’ and officers’ image to the detriment of that of blacks. With this statement, Montejo not only expresses his admiration for Africans brought as slaves to Cuba, he also insinuates that their participation was indispensable to the development of the events. More than any other, including the Creoles themselves –in this context, the word “guerrilla” has a negative connotation, the old lucumíes remained faithful to the movement’s ideals. Another relevant information in the

witness's observation is that the Lucumi were not only transcendental for the conquest of the Cuban Independence but, as dedicated workers, also contributed in an immeasurable way to the formation of the new nation's economy.

Montejo's story also allows historians to acquire knowledge about the different functions that were performed by the African slaves in the war, as the following passage shows:

Muchos entraron en las filas siguiendo a los hijos o a los nietos. Se pusieron al servicio de los jefes, que eran criollos. Hacían guardias por las madrugadas, velaban, cocinaban, lavaban, limpiaban las armas... todos esos menesteres eran propios de ellos. Ningún bozal fue jefe en la guerra. En el escuadrón mío, que mandaba Higinio Ezquerro, había tres o cuatro de ellos. Uno se llamaba Jaime; otro Santiago; eran congos los dos (2010, p. 151)<sup>21</sup>.

This fragment is significant because it illustrates the different trades practiced by blacks in the military camps and allows individualization of the referred subjects. The attribution of identity is made possible by the mention of their names. It is not likely that the names "Jaime" or "Santiago" entered the official history. Through the testimony of Esteban Montejo, Barnet makes it possible that many characters who remained hidden for more than a half-century can be inserted into the collective memory about the event. The ex-slave mentions numerous names of blacks who impacted his life and contributed to forming post-independence Cuba. They are slaves, as his parents Nazario and Emilia, shamans, like Lucas and Ricardo (or Regino), and soldiers like his partner Juan.

In many ways, Africans and Afro-Cubans – whose names are sometimes mentioned, sometimes not – served their communities and contributed to the birthing nation's economic and cultural development. In particular, *Biography...* reflects Esteban Montejo's commitment and dedication to the War of Independence. When referring to his own contributions, three central elements can be identified. First, Montejo's desire to express his patriotism by emphasizing that "honor"<sup>22</sup> was the motivating force for his participation in the War of Independence (2010, p. 173). Second, his need to testify about the military camps' precarious situation: the lack of food, the deficient structure of the camps, in sum about "toda la podredumbre de la guerra" (2010, p. 174)<sup>23</sup>. Third, his intention to show the consequences of the war and marks that these events left on the combatant's body. He honors the memory of those who fell during the war and acknowledges his luck for having survived the conflict with only "un balazo en un muslo"<sup>24</sup>, whose scar does not let him forget the war experience (2010, p. 152). These three aspects serve to clarify the ex-mambi's motivation to join the Liberation Army, highlighting the sacrifices that implied participation in the conflict, and, not less important, to reinforce his image as a genuine revolutionary.

However, Esteban Montejo does not intend to convey to the reader (or listener) the image of himself as the war hero. Instead, he seeks to present the fight for Independence as a collective achievement. In particular, he

acknowledges the efforts of all those who fought at his side. According to the narrator, these combatants are the ones who deserved a medal (1994, p. 183), for they were the ones who de facto fought in the war. Moreover, the ex-mambí declares:

La clase de tropa nuestra sirvió de ejemplo; eso lo sabe todo el que peleó en la guerra. Por eso fue que se aguantó la revolución. Yo estoy seguro que casi todas las tropas hubieran hecho igual en esa situación. Nosotros tuvimos coraje y pusimos a la revolución por arriba de todo. Esa es la verdad. Sin embargo, muchos coronelitos y otros oficiales se cagaban fuera de la taza todos los días. Hacían cosas que ni los niños (2010, p. 170)<sup>25</sup>.

The memory of his troop's dedication –which, according to the narrator, was composed mostly of blacks– is presented as a truth safeguarded and protected by those who are bearers of this “original” knowledge. This is an almost palpable truth because it reflects a real experience. Montejo presents his troop as an example of dedication. However, he extends his recognition of the black's efforts to all African and Afro-Cuban combatants by stating that the remaining forces would have done the same. This statement reinforces the idea of collectivity, of representation of a common ideal and posture. Once again, Montejo seeks to honor the agency of black mambises by comparing them to the “colonels”. In the Spanish original Montejo uses the word “coronelitos” which means “small” colonels. The use of the diminutive makes Montejo's contempt evident. According to the witness, the “coronelitos” did not demonstrate the same courage and willingness as the bold black combatants. Although there were Afro-descendants in command positions in the Liberating Army, Montejo was most likely criticizing the white leaders, for he seemed to show a general admiration for the black combatants. Thus, by contrasting the soldiers –it is assumed that they were blacks– from the “coronelitos”, the exmambí lends honors to the soldiers, whose performance has been undermined. Most black soldiers came out from the war with empty hands, while many of the whites received decorations and were able to rise in the military hierarchy.

In the short introduction to *Biography...*, Miguel Barnet (2010) highlights that Montejo's vision of some war events is partial, subjective, and justified by the narrator's life experience, who had overcome slavery. Furthermore, he stresses that Montejo's admiration for the Afro-Cuban combatants is almost unconditional. Although his testimony reflects the situation and reality of an entire social group, we agree with Barnet in recognizing that Esteban Montejo's narrative has its limitations: it is impregnated with resentment and shows the contradictions of a story that relies on a memory fragmented by time. However, it seems that the biography of Esteban Montejo, although it cannot be taken as faithful proof of the facts, gives voice and visibility to the historical agency of an ethnic group. In their subalternity and social exclusion, blacks have not received –until today– the credits they deserve. Blacks were the main agents in the Cuban War, but only a few names of these Afro-Cubans –and Africans– combatants entered the official history. It will probably be impossible to retrieve these identities, lost in time due to

the maneuvers practiced by the bearers of power to make black agency invisible. However, Montejo's resentful testimony is a fundamental reading because it reminds us of these subjects' critical participation at crucial moments for the formation of the Cuban nation, although it cannot reveal more than the witness's perspective on historical events.

Furthermore, these texts lead us to reflect on blacks' social situation in contemporary Cuban society and how they continue to suffer discrimination and marginalization. John Beverley (1999) emphasizes that the Subaltern Studies cannot be just another form of academic production of knowledge, but that: "it must also be a way of intervening politically in that production on the side of the subaltern" (p. 28). Starting from this premise, we can approach this text by questioning if the story of Montejo addresses current problems faced by Afro-Cubans; if the witness's past struggles are similar to the battles and challenges confronted by blacks today. Studies show that racism is still present in contemporary Cuban society. This is the result of a survey conducted in 2003 in Havana, in which 90.9 % of the participants –which belonged to all ethnic and social classes– attested to the existence of racism in society. Recent studies also show that white individuals, in general, continue to be positively characterized by the population, while pejorative and stigmatizing qualities are attributed to black subjects (Espina Prieto & Rodriguez Ruiz, 2006). Today, blacks in Cuba tend to belong to the most vulnerable group of society, living in the most impoverished homes and having the lowest salaries on the job market. They are underrepresented in universities and spaces of power while over-represented in the informal economy and the criminal sphere (Zurbano, 2013).

Montejo was a man who survived slavery, maroonage, subhuman working conditions, endured racism, and fought in the War of Independence. For none of that did he receive any recognition or compensation. Although many of the barriers and injustices lived by Montejo no longer reflect the Afro-Cubans' situation in contemporary society, it seems indisputable that this ethnic group still lacks representativeness and recognition. Montejo's disenchanted voice is, therefore, yesterday and today, a social critique.

*Biography...* is possibly still an essential reading because it talks about past and current problems such as racism, the systematic silencing of marginalized groups, and the social injustice towards the less fortunate. *Biography...* shows how black agency was erased in the past while white hegemony was maintained. This left its traces in contemporary Cuban social structure. Montejo's testimony is paramount, because it sheds light into the mechanisms of power that have led to silencing black people, and acknowledges the importance of these agents at crucial moments in Cuba's history.

## Conclusion

The Subalterns Studies have highlighted the systematic invisibilization of subaltern groups' historical agency in different societies. The official

history of the Cuban War of Independence was, at least in its first post-war moments, narrated by the dominant classes, which means by whites. Influenced by their racism or desire to maintain their class privileges, they created a discourse that sought to conceal blacks' predominant presence and undermine their transcendental agency in the War of Independence. However, these discourses had concrete implications for Afro-Cubans' marginalization and need to be deconstructed. Contributing to this deconstruction was the main objective of this article.

As this paper has shown, Esteban Montejo's testimony contributes to the visibility of a social and ethnic group that has received marginalizing treatment by those responsible for perpetuating the memory of the war. The exmambí mentions names that, intentionally or not, have been ignored by historians, enriching the archive on the independence movement. Also, he narrates his version of the events, inverting, at times, the hierarchical positions. He honors black soldiers whom he presents as the true actors of the war. Therefore, Montejo subverts the official narrative by claiming a silenced voice in the past and creates a new historical memory.

Although somewhat romanticized and despite the editor's omissions and manipulations to build Esteban Montejo's image as a myth, the witness's version must be seen as a rich source of historical knowledge. Through his testimony, we can recognize the silences imposed on Afro-Cubans in the 19th and early 20th centuries. In addition, this text allows us to rethink the possible causes and effects of this silencing and lack of black representation in the course of history.

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## Notes

- 1 "For me, none of that is forgotten. I lived through it all" Esteban Montejo (1994, p. 18).
- 2 Miguel Barnet (\*1940) is a Cuban novelist, poet, and anthropologist, specialized in Afro-Cuban culture. He is known, above all, for his work *Biography of a Runaway Slave (Biografía de un cimarrón)*, which inaugurates the literary genre that came to be known in Latin America as Testimonio. Barnet is also the author of books of poetry such as *The Gem and the Peacock (La piedra fina y el pavorreal)* (1963) and *Island of Sprites (Isla de güijes)* (1964). He is currently president of the Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba and of the Fernando Ortiz Foundation (Echevarría, 2020).
- 3 "one of the most important writers of contemporary Cuban literature" (translated by the author).
- 4 "leaves the potential space of a testimonial discourse and enters the space of religious or political fervor" (translated by the author).
- 5 "have left a deep mark on the Cuban's psychology, have contributed to shaping him, have given him a history" (translated by the author).
- 6 The term "Mambi" (plural Mambises) refers to the people who fought in the 19th century against Spain for the independence of Cuba and Santo Domingo (Real Academia Española).
- 7 See: Photographic archive Mambises, available in <http://iiif.sld.cu/coleccion/27/06/2019/mambises>
- 8 "there are no races" (translated by the author).
- 9 When the war ended, the talk started about whether the blacks had fought or not. I know that ninety-five percent of the blacks fought in the war. Then the Americans began to say it was only seventy-five percent. Well, no one criticized those statements. The blacks ended up out in the street as a result. Brave men thrown like savages into the streets. That was wrong, but that's what happened (Barnet & Montejo, 1994, p. 194).
- 10 "You have to keep quiet or tell the truth. But since so few people believe you, well then, you keep quiet. And if you don't it becomes complicated, or rather it did, because today nobody puts up with people running off at the mouth" (1994, p. 184).

- 11 “What has saved me the most is that I’ve kept quiet, because you can’t trust anyone. The man who trusts too much will drown alone” (1994, p. 198).
- 12 When the war ended, and all the troops returned to Habana, I began to watch folks. Many wanted the soft and comfortable life of the city. Well those who stayed came out worse than if they had gone back to the forest. Worse, because the pushing and shoving began, the cheating and the lies. “Man, are you going to get rich here!” And shit! He was the first to die of hunger (1994, p. 198).
- 13 “when a black gets power, when he’s educated, it hurts the white race” (1994, p. 195).
- 14 The PIC was a Cuban political party composed almost entirely of African former slaves.
- 15 “It seemed that I was back in the past all over again” (1994, p. 199).
- 16 “hatred of blacks” (1994, p. 165).
- 17 “without military honors” (translated by the author).
- 18 I have seen brave men, but only Quintin was like Maceo. He had many jobs in the Republic, but he was never given a good opportunity. The bust that they made of him was abandoned on the docks for many years. The bust of a patriot. That is why people are still riled up. Because of the lack of respect for the true liberators. If you tell people about the bust, they think it’s a lie. And still, I seen it. I don’t know where it could be now. Maybe they set it up again. I would make ten busts of Banderas. One for every battle (1994, p. 165).
- 19 Lucumí is a term which traditionally refers to slaves from the Yoruba area sold on the African coast. These slaves were usually obtained by the Spanish and Portuguese, who gave them this designation (Ecured, 2020).
- 20 The Lucumís were good workers, ready for any job. They even fought well in the war. [...] Even though they weren’t trained to fight, they joined the columns and showed their mettle. Later, when the war was over, they were returned to work, to slavery. That is why they were cynical about the next war. But they fought anyway. I never seen a Lucumí backing down. I have never heard them bragging like war heroes, either. [...] More than that, they were more dependable than the criollos. Everyone knows there were criollo partisans. You wouldn’t catch the old folks joining the guerrilleros. That is the best proof. They fought with Carlos Manuel and gave a lesson in patriotism. I won’t say they knew why they were fighting. But they went (1994, pp. 151-152).
- 21 Many of them followed their sons or grandsons into the ranks. They were put into the command of the officers, who were criollos. They became morning sentries, they did guard duty, they cooked, they washed, they cleaned the weapons... All of those chores were appropriate for them. There was no bozal who was an officer in the war. In my squadron, commanded by Higinio Esquerria, there were three or four of them. One was named Jaime, another Santiago. They were both Congos (1994, p. 154).
- 22 “pride” (1994, p. 187).
- 23 “all that filth of the war” (1994, p. 189).
- 24 “a bullet in my thigh” (1994, p. 155).
- 25 The conduct of our troops was a model for the others, as anyone will tell you who fought in the war. That’s why we saw the Revolution through. I am certain that almost all the troops would have done the same in that situation. We were brave and put the revolution above everything else. That is the truth. Even so, many colonels and other officers shit off-target every day. They did things that not even little children do (1994, p. 183).

## Notas de autor

- \* Brazilian-German. Ph.D. in Romance Philology from the Universität zu Köln, Cologne, Germany, and from the

Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Teaching Associate at Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona, USA. E-mail: [jtmunoz1@asu.edu](mailto:jtmunoz1@asu.edu) ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1682-3450>