

# The Politics of Memory and Miguel Barnet's *The Autobiography of a Run Away Slave*



*William Luis*

For my father Domingo, *in memoriam*

Los recuerdos de niño  
sombras de mochas ásperas,  
piel curtida  
por el viento y el sol. Mirada  
de lejanía y de venganza.  
Eran los macheteros.

Centrales: Jatibonico, Jaronú,  
Steward, Vertientes, Lugareño,  
o el Chaparra, con Menocal  
sonando el cuero.

De niño, en el recuerdo,  
Los macheteros.

Nicolás Guillén  
*Sol de domingo*

Miguel Barnet's *The Autobiography of a Run Away Slave* (1966), published after the triumph of the Cuban Revolution, is of historical importance. It covers the periods during and after slavery and describes the life of Esteban Montejo, a 105 year old runaway slave who remembers his past with exceptional clarity. Montejo's recollections are illuminating and demystifying, often challenging accepted notions of Cuban history. Barnet, a Cuban ethnologist, wrote the "autobiography" from interviews with Montejo which he transcribed and edited.

Barnet's narration is part of a contiguous structure which,

chronologically and thematically, parallels Cuban history from slavery and colony to the founding of the Cuban republic, in 1902, the time of the narration, and perhaps to the Cuban Revolution, the time in which Barnet conducted the interviews and wrote Montejo's life. Barnet divides the autobiography into three historical periods: Slavery, Abolition, and the War of Independence. Yet each successive age does not appear to be linear, as history and the narration suggests, but cyclical. In spite of the chronological progression of history, life for blacks, in general, and Montejo, in particular, has changed very little and appears to be repeated throughout the three periods. In all of them, blacks work in sugarcane fields and mills, live in barracoons, earn little money, and endure constant discrimination. Montejo himself is aware of the cycles of history. He is conscious that after the radical transformations in Cuban society, as represented by abolition of slavery and the War of Independence, the present continues to resemble the past. After emancipation, Montejo recalls certain moments under slavery:

The first plantation I worked on was called Purio. I turned up there one day in the rags I stood in and a hat I had collected on the way. I went in and asked the overseer if there was work for me. He said yes. I remember he was Spanish, with moustaches, and his name was Pepe. There were overseers in these parts until quite recently, the difference being that they didn't lay about them as they used to do under slavery. But they were men of the same breed, harsh, overbearing. There were still barracoons after Abolition, the same as before. Many of them were newly built of masonry, the old ones having collapsed under the rain and storms. The barracoon at Purio was strong and looked as if it had been recently completed. They told me to go and live there. I soon made myself at home, for it wasn't too bad. They had taken the bolts off the doors and the workers themselves had cut holes in the walls for ventilation. They no longer had to worry about escapes or anything like that, for the Negroes were free now, or so they said. But I could not help noticing that bad things still went on. There were bosses who still believed that the blacks were created for locks and bolts and whips, and treated them as before. It struck me that many Negroes did not know that things had changed, because they went on saying, "Give me your blessing, my master."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *The Autobiography of a Run Away Slave*, trans. by Jocasta Inness (London: Bodley Head, 1966), 64. Unless otherwise indicated all quotations are from this edition.

Like the transition from slavery to abolition, the stage from abo-  
lition to independence and republic offered little hope for Mon-  
tejo and other blacks. For them, life in the republic, in some ways,  
recalled their existence under slavery. Montejo's narration ends on  
a pessimistic note. After the Spanish-Cuban-American War, the  
U.S. substituted Spanish dominion over the Island. Montejo un-  
masks the sinking of the *Maine* as a U.S. pretext for invading Cuba  
and undermining the victory of Cuban forces. Disenchanted with  
the outcome of the war, Montejo returned to his native province of  
Las Villas, and, as before, worked in a sugar mill where only time  
had changed. When he reached the San Agustín Maguaraya Plan-  
tation, Montejo remembered: "it seemed as though everything had  
gone back in time."<sup>2</sup>

The repetitions in *The Autobiography of a Run Away Slave* are a  
part of the resurgence of history, but also of African oral tradition  
and of Montejo's own recollections. Montejo's conversations with  
Barnet commemorate the past and follow the structure of oral per-  
formance.<sup>3</sup> Montejo is the receiver and transmitter of stories. His  
memory fuses past narratives, and his own experience. A man of  
African descent, Montejo privileges myth and religion over written  
literature and history.<sup>4</sup> For example, while in a cave, Montejo be-  
lieved that the *majá*, the largest of Caribbean snakes, was deadly.  
Although it is not difficult to understand Montejo's apprehension,  
the *majá* is not dangerous to man, but only to chickens and other  
fowl. Hiding his fear of snakes, Montejo comments on the magical  
aspects of the *majá*; a Congolese told him that the snakes lived over  
one thousand years and then turned into "marine creatures" [*ser-  
pientes* in the original] and lived among the fish. However, we come  
back to the concept of memory. What is in question is not whether  
the story is true or false, but the time in which Montejo spoke to

<sup>2</sup> *The Autobiography of a Run Away Slave*, 222.

<sup>3</sup> For Eugene Vance, the commemorative process is part of oral culture. See his  
"Roland and the Poetics of Memory," in *Textual Strategies*, (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell  
University Press, 1979), 379.

<sup>4</sup> Montejo's recollections suggest a synthesis of European, African, and Cuban  
myths and ideas. In his "Religions et croyances populaires dans *Biografía de un  
cimarrón* de M. Barnet: du refus à la tolerance," *UTIEH/Caravelle*, 43 (1984), 43-67,  
Jean-Pierre Tardieu analyzes cultural and religious mixture. In particular, Tardieu  
notices that Montejo's descriptions of the mermaids during the festival of San Juan  
responds to Greek but also African heritage. The legend of "mamiwata" (mammy  
water) is well-known on the West-Coast of Africa. (57).

the Congolese about the *majases*. Was it in slavery, as the chronology appears to indicate, or did the conversations take place after slavery, when sharing his experiences with others? In other words, we may assume that Montejo had knowledge of snakes before fleeing slavery, but was he at this early age aware of their religious metamorphosis?

While in the same cave (?) Montejo also lived with bats. Still in the slavery period, Montejo breaks with the chronology of the narration and now refers to a time after abolition, when he told a Congolese that he had lived among the bats. The Congolese responded: " 'A Creole like you doesn't know a thing. In my country what you call a bat is as big as a pigeon.' I know this was untrue. They fooled half the world with their tales. But I just listened and was inwardly amused."<sup>5</sup> The bat description follows that of the snake and appears on the same page. Although Montejo does not say so, the thematic unity of the paragraphs suggests that the Congolese who spoke to him about the snakes is the same one who spoke to him about the bats. Given the manner in which Montejo has narrated his life, for the chronology to be accurate, Montejo should have been exposed as a child to African myths and traditions, which he then reconstructed in the appropriate sections. We should emphasize that Montejo fled slavery at an early age and for many years remained isolated in the mountains. More likely than not, Montejo acquired a more profound religious knowledge after emancipation. If this is true, then the narration cannot be conceived as interviews with a historical development, but a discourse which breaks with history and is subject to the strategies of memory.

The concept of memory questions the historical interpretation of *The Autobiography of a Run Away Slave*; the narration is no longer a chronological reconstruction of the past, but represents a collapse of historical time in which the present and the past are brought together. The repetitions present in the narration, which include the thematic coincidences during slavery, abolition, and the War of Independence, are not caused necessarily by historical cycles, but by Montejo's ability to recollect certain events which are of personal interest to him. For example, his descriptions of games, religion, women, the infirmary, and work on sugar plantations during slavery, abolition, and the republic are not a recon-

<sup>5</sup> *The Autobiography of a Run Away Slave*, 48.

struction of the historical past, but a repetition of recurrent themes that acquire their own identity within the narration. Some events even use similar syntax and grammatical constructions.<sup>6</sup> Montejo himself is aware that he is defying chronology and imposing onto the past knowledge acquired after slavery. In the same slavery section, Montejo talks about the names of musical instruments played by the *guajiros*, but goes on to confess that although he uses the names, he did not learn them until “after I left the forest because, as a runaway, I was ignorant of everything.”<sup>7</sup> These and other specific incidents are a part of the informant’s memory, but in the narration, they appear to reconstruct history.

For Montejo, the most recent events as portrayed in the last section, War of Independence, but also during the time in which the interviews took place, in the Cuban Revolution, have preconditioned and even altered Montejo’s past. That is, a contemporary understanding of history, culture, and religion are imposed on an earlier time. Therefore, the present becomes a way of (re)shaping memory and a contemporary understanding indeed affects the past. For Eugene Vance the present is implicit in his definition of memory:

By “commemoration” I mean any gesture, ritualized or not, whose end is to recover, in the name of a collectivity, some being or event either anterior in time or outside of time in order to fecundate, animate, or make meaningful a moment in the present. Commemoration is the conquest of whatever in society or in the self is perceived as habitual, factual, static, mechanical, corporeal, inert, worldly, vacant, and so forth.<sup>8</sup>

The political and economic realities of the republic and the

<sup>6</sup> Montejo’s reference to the infirmary serves as a case in point. He offers the following information regarding his place of birth: “Like all children born into slavery, *criollitos* as they called them, I was born in an infirmary where they took the pregnant Negroesses to give birth” (18). Some pages later, when describing the sugar mill, Montejo explains the infirmary in a manner which recalled the first description: “All the plantations had an infirmary near the barracoon, a big wooden hut where they took the pregnant women. You were born there and stayed there till you were six or seven, when you went to live in the barracoons and began to work, like the rest” (38). References to working women is as another example. Montejo states: “Women in those days were worth as much as men. They worked hard and they had no patience with feckless drifters” (71-72). He later repeats: “They washed the men’s clothing, mended and sewed. Women worked harder in those days than they do now” (97).

<sup>7</sup> *The Autobiography of a Run Away Slave*, 50.

<sup>8</sup> Vance, 374-75.

Cuban Revolution conditioned Montejo's recollection, but the ex-slave may have included ideas of his own. As Vance points out, Roland knew his battles would immortalize him. For Vance, the "truth is in the uttering, not in the utterance."<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Montejo was aware of Barnet's interests in African religion and myths. Perhaps Montejo knew that he was the only living runaway slave in Cuba and that his activities were going to be recorded. He was conscious of his own grandeur and literary destiny. Montejo recognizes his own importance and sets the stage for controlling the narration. Montejo kept track of Barnet's notebook and insisted that he write many things down. As in the *chansons de gest*, Montejo is a hero of sorts who explains to Barnet what the ethnologist, due to his own social and historic circumstances, wants to hear. In spite of Barnet's diligence in verifying historical events, Montejo seized the opportunity to glorify himself and others. Montejo recreates his own life by choosing subjects which would be of interest to his listener.

From a different point of view, Barnet also controls the narration. As the motivator, transcriber, and editor, Barnet is an agent of memory. Barnet recognizes his role as mediator, not only in seeking aesthetic qualities, but in facilitating the past in forming a collective memory. For Vance, the voice of the poet preserves memory in history and gives rebirth to the hero. In this sense, Barnet's ideas on the documentary novel are useful.<sup>10</sup> In his "La novela testimonio: socio-literatura," Barnet explains the relationship between the author and protagonist or researcher-protagonist: The *gestor* of the documentary novel transforms himself into his informant by thinking and feeling like him.<sup>11</sup> Like Charlemagne or the transcriber of the *Chanson de Roland*, Barnet was instrumental in documenting a fragment of history previously unknown to the Western world. More importantly, Barnet is the creator of memory. He not only edited the interviews with Montejo, but also provided questions to guide and shape the ex-slave's recollections and, therefore, the text, often motivated by his own interests.

<sup>9</sup> Vance, 381.

<sup>10</sup> For an insightful essay on the importance of this genre, see: Roberto González Echevarría, "Biografía de un cimarrón And the Novel of the Cuban Revolution," *Novel*, 13, No. 3 (1980), 249-63.

<sup>11</sup> See: "La novela testimonio: socio-literatura," *Unión*, Año 6, No. 4 (1969), 99-122. The same essay also appears in *Canción de Rachel* (Barcelona: Estela, 1970). Also see his "The Documentary Novel," *Cuban Studies/Estudios Cubanos*, 11, No. 1 (1981), 29.

In the "Introduction" to the Spanish original, Barnet tells us that he was inspired by a newspaper article which appeared in 1963, honoring citizens over 100 years old. Of the male and female slaves, Barnet chose Esteban Montejo, a runaway slave. For Barnet, Montejo represented a unique opportunity for research. Barnet himself confesses that although Montejo was willing to be a good informant, the ethnologist's concerns were different from those of the ex-slave, who spoke of themes which were of interest to him in no particular chronological order. Nevertheless, the interview developed into two sessions: After the initial interviews, in which religion was a main topic, the idea of a book emerged from which another set of questions was formulated. Even though Montejo chose many of the themes for the second session, Barnet was interested in others and therefore became a catalyst of Montejo's memory. Now, Barnet had a specific project which he describes in the Spanish introduction:

Nos preocupaban problemas específicos como el ambiente social de los barracones y la vida célibe de cimarrón.

En Cuba son escasos los documentos que reconstruyan estos aspectos de la vida en la esclavitud. De ahí que más que una descripción detallada de la arquitectura de los barracones, nos llamara la atención la vida social dentro de estas viviendas-cárceles. También quisimos describir los recursos empleados por el informante para subsistir en medio de la más absoluta soledad de los montes, las técnicas para obtener fuego, para cazar, etc. Así como su relación anímica con los elementos de la naturaleza, plantas y animales, especialmente las aves.<sup>12</sup>

Barnet's memory fuses with Montejo's. Aware of the lack of historical information on the subject of slavery, Barnet, the ethnologist, was guided by a concern to fill a void in literature and history. Writing or rewriting history was indeed an important component of Barnet's project which he completed successfully.

As the creator of memory, Barnet intervenes most noticeably as he reconstructs Montejo's language and paraphrases much of his story, though he is careful to maintain the informant's syntax. When transforming him into a literary figure, Barnet could no longer be loyal to Montejo, the person. Barnet set out to recreate not only what Montejo was, but, also and even more important, what he should have been. For example, the variations present in Montejo's speech were corrected to give it a uniformity consistent

<sup>12</sup> *Biografía de un cimarrón* (Mexico: Siglo Veintiuno, 1975), 9.

with Montejo's character: as a writer, Barnet is in command of Montejo's speech. The English introduction, which is significantly different from the Spanish, reveals Barnet's intention: "I wanted his story to sound spontaneous and as if it came from the heart, and so I inserted words and expressions characteristic of Esteban wherever they seemed appropriate." In his essay on the documentary novel, Barnet further explains the use of language:

In a documentary novel spoken discourse is the fundamental trait of the language, the only way it takes on life. But it must be a recreated spoken language, not a mere reproduction of what was on tape. From the recording I take the tone, the anecdotes, the inflexions; the rest, the style and fine points, I add myself. A book like Oscar Lewis' *La Vida* is a great contribution to the psychology and sociology of marginalized masses. It is, simply and plainly: *I write what you tell me and in the way you tell me*. Lewis' approach has little to do with the documentary novels I write. To my way of thinking, literary imagination should go hand in hand with sociological imagination. A documentary novelist should give free rein to his or her imagination, so long as it does not distort the protagonist's character or betray his or her language. Imagination, invention within a realistic essence, is the only way a writer can get the most out of a given phenomenon. In *Rachel*, for example, I say: "This is her story, her life as she told it to me and as I later told it back to her." Many things are implicit in that statement.<sup>13</sup>

Written memory is not a spontaneous recollection, but a careful re-creation of the past, a well-ordered scheme subject to editorial intervention and manipulation. Like oral memory, written memory is not the production of any individual, but a communal activity in which others participate. Within any given publication, (communal) writing includes the editor, copy editor, and typesetter. Barnet's editorial task was motivated by aspects of Montejo's narration, the ethnologist's own thematic interests, and the constraints imposed upon him by language. It appears that the editing was done with precision, but we have little information regarding the actual process. For example, did the present work come from the second set of questions, that is, when Barnet envisioned the "autobiography," or did he use some of the answers provided in the first interview, when seeking information mainly on religion? Certainly, substantial information was excluded from the final version of the autobiography.

<sup>13</sup> "The Documentary Novel," 25.



Perhaps Barnet's editing had another purpose. Barnet was not only interested in filling a literary void, but, like Montejo, was also reflecting a certain political reality imposed upon him by the Cuban Revolution. Barnet was aware of the importance of his task. In the English introduction, he reveals another interest. Barnet wanted to highlight the Ten Years' War, which, in Revolutionary Cuba, has been interpreted as the start of the struggle for independence which culminated in Castro's triumph. In so doing, Barnet forces the issue and writes that Montejo was a fugitive between 1868 and 1878. But if we reconstruct the chronology provided, the parenthetical reference to the war is somewhat misleading, since Montejo must have escaped towards the end of the war. Born around 1860, Montejo was only eight at the start of the war. More importantly, there appears to be information missing from Montejo's conversation with Barnet. In the same paragraph and referring to the same war, Barnet provides information not contained in the text: "It was bewildering to see horses charging and men cutting each other's heads off with machetes and not knowing what it was all about. Esteban told me once that the experience was like standing drunk in front of the sea."<sup>14</sup> In a subsequent essay on the documentary novel, Barnet reveals a little more about the tapes' contents. Referring to the counterpoint technique used by the protagonist of *Canción de Rachel*, in support of the government's position against the Partido Independiente de Color, Barnet cites the following: "Then there are characters with different perspectives on the same event, such as Esteban Montejo, among others, who defend the Guerrita del Doce [upheaval of blacks in the Independent Party of Colored People] to the hilt."<sup>15</sup> Any description of the Ten Years' War or the Race War of 1912 are conspicuously absent from the autobiography.

*The Autobiography of a Run Away Slave* is not without political motivation. In the Spanish introduction, Barnet brings out the relationship between Montejo and the Cuban Revolution.

El espíritu revolucionario se ilustra no sólo en el propio relato sino en su actitud actual. Esteban Montejo, a los 105 años de edad, constituye un buen ejemplo de conducta y calidad revolucionarias. Su tradición de revolucionario, cimarrón primero, luego libertador, miembro del Par-

<sup>14</sup> *The Autobiography of a Run Away Slave*, 9.

<sup>15</sup> "The Documentary Novel," 23.

tido Socialista Popular más tarde, se vivifica en nuestros días en su identificación con la Revolución cubana.<sup>16</sup>

This information is absent from the English translation, and we can assume that it was included only in the Spanish edition for the Cuban reading public. Montejo's socialist and revolutionary positions are also absent in the text.

Indeed, Montejo's independent nature, his rejection of slavery, and his opposition—first to Spanish occupation and later to U.S. intervention—recall the position of the Cuban Revolutionary government. But, unlike other maroon slaves and the Castro Revolutionary forces, Montejo was only a partial rebel. During slavery, he did not escape to join other maroons who fought and gave up their lives to end slavery, but preferred to live in isolation until emancipation.

The allusion to Cuban politics, in the Spanish introduction, may be a personal statement reflecting, not Montejo's but, Barnet's standing within the Revolution. Born in 1940, Barnet belongs to the second generation of writers of the Cuban Revolution, publishing his first collection of poems, *La piedra fina y el pavorreal*, in 1963. Barnet, like many during the initial years of the Revolution, identified with and profited from the transformation of Cuban society. The Revolutionary government's interest in promoting culture allowed Barnet and other writers to publish their works. The Revolution made Barnet aware of his country's history and culture; but before this radical change in government, Barnet had been a stranger to Cuban culture. He had studied in English speaking schools and lived and spent most of his time in activities closely related to North America. And only after 1959, did he become aware of his national culture.<sup>17</sup>

In spite of his current enthusiasm for the Revolution, Barnet,

<sup>16</sup> *Biografía de un cimarrón*, 12.

<sup>17</sup> In 1981, Barnet spoke about his past: "Entonces de verdad la Revolución marcó un verdadero hito en este sentido porque sin esa toma de conciencia yo a lo mejor hoy . . . no sé . . . sería quizá un escritor de novelas radiales o simplemente un oficinista o estaría a lo mejor trabajando en la *Proctor and Gamble* aquí en Ohio . . . o cualquier cosa de ese tipo. La Revolución me despertó la conciencia de la realidad de mi país, amarla, sentirla plenamente . . . Yo desperté a los valores cubanos gracias a la llamada de principios que hizo la Revolución. Fue un choque verdaderamente definitivo. Marcó mi vida para siempre." See: Emilio Bejel, "Entrevista: Miguel Barnet," *Hispanamérica*, 10, No. 29 (1981), 46. Like many others, José Soler Puig attributes his success as a writer to the Cuban Revolution. See: "José Soler Puig: 'sin la Revolución no hubiera podido llegar a ser escritor,'" *América Latina*, No. 4 (1979), 145-153.

and others, encountered problems with the government. Barnet was associated with the second generation group of poets known as El Puente, named after a private publishing house of the same name which operated between 1960-1965. In 1964, El Puente published his second book of poetry, *Isla de Güijes*. But the El Puente group fell out of grace and was accused of stressing the aesthetic over the political.<sup>18</sup> Regardless of their commitments to the Revolutionary government, many group members were considered antisocials and homosexuals and were sent to rehabilitation camps known as Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción. Those under detention, and others, were excluded from cultural and literary activities.<sup>19</sup>

During this period, Barnet had gone unpublished in Cuba. Perhaps Barnet seized upon the story of Montejo as an opportunity to resume a public literary life. Although a committed ethnologist, Barnet was aware of the importance of blacks for the Revolution and the historical and cultural significance of his subject matter. He may have stressed the independent and revolutionary aspects of Montejo's life as a way of overcoming bureaucratic censorship. Whatever the causes, the results were clear. After the publication of *The Autobiography of a Run Away Slave*, Barnet was not only reintegrated into the literary establishment, but he became an important writer. (More likely than not, it was because he became an international figure that Barnet was allowed to rejoin the literary establishment.) His subject matter was appropriate, one which the literary and political establishments were committed to support. From the moment of publication, *The Autobiography of a Run Away Slave* has met with enormous success.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *El Caimán Barbudo*, under the direction of Jesús Díaz, was another group of the second generation of writers. This group was more politically committed than those belonging to El Puente.

<sup>19</sup> For an understanding of homosexuals and other "undesirables" in Cuba see the transcript of the film *Conducta impropia* by Nestro Almendros and Orlando Jiménez-Leal (Madrid: Editorial Playor, 1984). The transcript includes interviews with José Mario and Ana María Simó, editors of El Puente, and pertinent sections of the Penal Code as it relates to "improper conduct."

<sup>20</sup> *Cimarrón* and *Hombres de mal tiempo* are two documentaries based on events narrated by Montejo. The novel was also transformed into a radio serial, which lasted well over a year, as well as a theatrical pantomime production directed by Olga and Ramón Flores ("Entrevista: Miguel Barnet," 43). The opera version of Barnet's work with music by Hans Werner Henze and script by Hans Magnus Enzensberger, had tremendous success in Cuba and received much deserved attention as it toured England, France, and Italy in 1970. A brief review of the success appeared under "Triunfo en Europa de 'El cimarrón'," in *La Gaceta de Cuba*, No. 87 (1970), 31.

Barnet's reintegration into the Cuban Revolution may help us to understand the emphasis the autobiography places on the Spanish-Cuban-American War. Barnet's English introduction and comments on the Ten Years' War point directly to the Spanish American War, but even more importantly to the Cuban Revolution. The Revolution accomplished what the Ten Years' War and Spanish-Cuban-American War set out to do, that is, to liberate Cuba from Western domination.

The fact that the novel ends with the Spanish-Cuban-American War raises other questions about Montejo's views of blacks and Barnet's reasons for not pursuing such an important subject after the founding of the republic. Apparently, Barnet exclude information from the autobiography? The autobiography ends with the founding of the republic and Máximo Gómez' death in 1905, and there is no attempt to continue the narration into the present, even though in the Spanish introduction Barnet had established a nexus between Montejo the runaway slave and Montejo the socialist.

Since Montejo lived more than a century, would it not have been of historical importance to document his views during the republic and still another transformation, the Cuban Revolution? In this regard, Barnet's project appears to be incomplete. Barnet could have taken advantage of his informant to narrate other important but sensitive moments in Cuban history, such as Montejo's opinions regarding the Race War of 1912, in which thousands of blacks who organized under the Partido Independiente de Color were killed. During this period, blacks demanded rights promised to them during the War of Independence and protested the Morúa Law which forbade political parties to organize on the basis of race. As with the other historical periods, Montejo's insights would have been helpful in understanding this tragic period in Cuban history.

As readers of the autobiography, we do have some clues regarding Montejo's opinions. If the present is contained in the past, then words as signs reflect this and perhaps other events fused into the narration. That is, if memory is not the reconstruction of chronology, but a compression of historical time and transferred on—to a time outside of any given chronology, Montejo's frustration at the end of the novel may have been directly related not to the events associated with the founding of the Cuban Republic, but to the disenfranchisement of blacks during the War of the Races. As we have suggested, Montejo interjected emotions onto his past which were formed in subsequent years. Montejo was, in this

sense, already aware of future events in the republic which included the Race War of 1912.

Barnet was indeed aware of the uprising and it was one of the themes explored by his protagonist in *La canción de Rachel*, a novel about a Cuban *vedet* who lived at the turn of the century; *La canción de Rachel* was published in 1969, three years after *The Autobiography of a Run Away Slave*.<sup>21</sup> Barnet used the information Montejo provided in the interviews to explore the Race War in his other work. In his second novel, Barnet fused both Rachel's and Montejo's narrations. Montejo is a character in *La canción de Rachel* and, consistent with *The Autobiography of a Run Away Slave*, he expresses a candid view which appears to have been extracted from Barnet's first interviews with the ex-slave. In the second documentary novel, Montejo contradicts Rachel, a symbol of life during the Cuban republic, and affirms his solidarity with Estenez and Ivonet, the leaders of the Partido Independiente de Color:

¿Y qué carajo creían ellos, que nosotros íbamos a entregarnos mansitos, que les íbamos a dar las armas y bajarnos los pantalones? De eso nada. Y se lo demostramos. Nos decían salvajes, negritos de charol y mil insultos más, pero, ¿cuándo en este país se elevó al pueblo un programa más democrático que el de Los Independientes de Color, cuando aquí se luchó a brazo partido por lograr beneficios para los negros, que salíamos de la guerra descalzos y harapientos, con hambre, como el propio Quintín Banderas, y que luego lo mataron mientras sacaba agua del pozo en su casa? Que no vengan con habladurías. Que ahora sí llegó el momento de la justicia. Y ninguno de los que nos jugamos el pellejo en aquella guerrita vamos a quedarnos con la boca cerrada.

Al menos, el que venga adonde estoy yo a decirme que si el racismo, que si los negros eran sanguinarios, le voy a dar un soplamocos que va a saber quien es Esteban Montejo.

Yo no sé lo que piensan los periodistas, los escritores y los políticos de eso. Pero yo, como hombre, como ciudadano y como revolucionario, creo que aquella lucha fue justa. Con sus egoísmos y sus fallos, pero necesaria. Los negros no tenían adonde agarrarse, no podían ni respirar y habían sido generales y hombres de letras, como Juan Gualberto Gómez. A mí no me interesa lo que esa mujer diga; yo veo las cosas desde otro punto de vista.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> For a temporal and spatial connection between Montejo and Rachel, see: Angel L. Fernández Guerra, "Cimarrón y Rachel: un continuum," in *Nuevos críticos cubanos*, ed. José Prats Sariol (Havana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1983), 530-37.

<sup>22</sup> *La canción de Rachel* (Barcelona: Editorial Estela, 1970), 58-60. Part of Montejo's response to Rachel is cited in Ernesto Méndez y Soto, *Panorama de la novela cubana de la revolución (1959-1970)*, (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1977), 114.

The events of 1912 raise other questions. If Barnet and Montejo discussed the racial war, which appears in Barnet's second novel, why did Barnet edit it from the final version of the autobiography?

The period surrounding the Partido Independiente de Color may have proven to be problematical for an overall understanding of blacks in Cuba and Barnet's reintegration into literary production in the Revolution. It may have been politically expedient not to rekindle the racial debate and conclude the novel at the end of the Spanish-Cuban-American War, thus alluding to the triumph of the Cuban Revolution. Under slavery, during the Ten Years' War, and during the Spanish-Cuban-American War, the enemy was a foreign power. But the Race War of 1912 was a national problem. Though Rachel claims that the war came to an end because of the threat of a U.S. invasion,<sup>23</sup> only Cuban nationals were directly involved in the massacre of 1912. It was a campaign of Cubans against other Cubans sufficient to discourage any black movement for many decades. By ending the narration after the Spanish-Cuban-American War, Barnet leaves us with the impression that, at least from Montejo's point of view, Cuban problems were foreign related.

Given our concept of memory, Montejo's pessimism regarding blacks was present during the time of the narration, that is, in the republic and before the triumph of the Revolution. If this is so, then what about Montejo's impression of blacks during the time in which the interviews were conducted, that is, during the Castro government? If the narration were to continue into the present time of the writing, would Montejo's pessimism have been repeated in Castro's Cuba? Or did the Revolution for blacks present a moment of relief, in which history would be not repeated but, rather, extricated from past structures? If this were the case, Barnet would have been politically prudent to have included such an important testimony about the Revolution. The testimony would have highlighted Montejo's contemporary revolutionary spirit, one which would have taken into account his participation in the Partido Socialista Popular during the republic, as pointed out in the Spanish introduction, and also his activities in the Revolution. This version of Montejo's autobiography would have conformed to the demands of critics such as Roberto Fernández Retamar and Antonio Portuondo when inspiring Cuban writers to

<sup>23</sup> *La canción de Rachel*, 57.

produce works which glorify the Revolution. Barnet himself would have been proclaimed as a true revolutionary writer.

Or did Montejo, as in other parts of the narration, demystify and problematize the present conditions of blacks, because, as he believed, "the truth cannot be silenced."<sup>24</sup> Did life for blacks during the Revolution represent a continuation of the past? If we accept the fusion between the beginning and the end of the narration and the time in which the interviews took place, did Montejo's frustration at the end of the War of Independence reflect a contemporary feeling not during the Race War of 1912, as we have suggested, but in the Revolution? That is, was Montejo imposing a present pessimism onto the past?<sup>25</sup> Although these are hypothetical questions which may never be answered, they do suggest that the end of the narration is not conclusive, but open ended. Nevertheless, there are some textual signals which point to a possible solution to our problematic quest.

From our perspective, the novel's pessimism continues to be felt. Montejo, in fact, reveals a contemporary moment in the narration, that is, in the Revolution. In the final paragraph, Montejo recall's a time, perhaps during the Ten Years' War, when he was forced to be silent. Consistent with his past (or is it the present?), Montejo rejects any type of conformity and continues to assert his independence. His autobiography ends with the following statement: "That's why I say I don't want to die, so I can fight in all the battles to come. And I'm not going into the trenches or using any of those modern weapons. A machete will do for me."<sup>26</sup> The modern weapon can be a reference to rifles used during the Spanish-Cuban-American War, as the time of the narration indicates, but, more likely than not, they refer to machine guns used by soldiers and the militia in defense of the Castro revolution, as the time in which the interviews were conducted suggests.

Although *The Autobiography of a Run Away Slave* ends on a revolutionary note, the reader cannot be certain if Montejo's battle cry refers to events in history which followed the narration, that is, to

<sup>24</sup> *The Autobiography of a Run Away Slave*, 223.

<sup>25</sup> We must note that throughout the narration, Montejo compares the present to the past. This is evident by the presence of the word "today" in the text. For example, Montejo states that "today's festivals do not compare to previous ones" (72); "Women then were harder workers than today" (90); "Women in the past had less trouble giving birth than today's women" (97); etc.

<sup>26</sup> *The Autobiography of a Run Away Slave*, 223.

his support of the Partido Independiente de Color, in 1912, and, perhaps, to the uprisings against Machado, in 1933. However, the narration defies chronology, as we have suspected, and refers to life in the Revolution. The suggested ambiguity is never clarified, for what follows is a silence, that is, the blank page. Yet the absence of any other signs or symbols on the page takes us back to another sentence in the final paragraph. If the present here is mixed with the past, then how do we come to terms with another type of silence? In spite of the extensive conversations between Montejo and Barnet, the informant has not revealed the entire story. Montejo says: "If I could, I would come right out and tell the whole story now." Did Montejo tell the whole story? Was he aware that no matter what he said, Barnet would write his recollection, that is, his own version of the story? By editing the autobiography has Barnet controlled and therefore silenced parts of the ex-slave's life and voice? Yet the end recalls the early years of Montejo's life, years before the time of the narration, in which he felt he needed to be silent. If history repeats itself in the "present," does Montejo again feel he has to be silent? Is Montejo a silent witness of the Cuban Revolution? And does Montejo's willingness to reject modern weapons and take up his *machete*, a symbol of past struggles, imply that for blacks nothing has really changed? Or, in a different manner, is the silence a reference to Barnet's own signature, that is, to one of the changes Barnet inserted in the narration as he indicated in the English introduction? If this is so, the silence is a reference not to Montejo but to Barnet's own condition as a writer. Then, is it Barnet, hiding behind Montejo's voice, who really wants to come out and tell the whole story, but knows that it will not be possible to do so after experiencing censorship during the early years of the Revolution? Does Barnet's writing point to a form of self censorship in Revolutionary Cuba?

The tension to which I have alluded in the autobiography's ending and the questions raised are implicit in a reading of both the English and Spanish titles: The vernacular uses the term *biografía* and the translation "autobiography." Foucault deduced that the author limits signification and regulates fiction, but also perceives that as society changes so will the "author-function." With the Cuban Revolution and the documentary novel, the proliferation of "author-function" is expressed, though with other types of constraints. Although the documentary novel has not reached the point of anonymity where it is no longer essential to ask "who



really spoke?" it does suggest a multiplicity of voices, recollections, and interpretations.<sup>27</sup> It is Montejo's story, but it is Barnet's writing. It is indeed both.<sup>28</sup> Montejo's narration is a nostalgic account of the past in which the past compares favorably with the present. Barnet's writing is a mechanism for controlling the past and present. His concern is to make Montejo a revolutionary hero; and in so doing, Barnet has also become a hero of sorts. Both are agents of memory and therefore participate in the creation of memory. Memory, which is present in a collective oral tradition, is passed onto a collective writing.

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<sup>27</sup> See Foucault's "What Is an Author?", in *Textual Strategies*, 141-60.

<sup>28</sup> Our conclusion coincides with that of González Echevarría in which he states that the narration is a fusion between Barnet and Montejo which he identifies as "Bartejo." However, we would prefer to use "Montenet."