

# Daisy Rubiera Castillo's *Reyita*: "Mujer Negra" From Objectified Symbol to Empowered Subject<sup>1</sup>

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## I.

In her 1979 poem "Mujer negra," Nancy Morejón re-imagines and re-narrates the history of the island of Cuba from the slave trade to the triumph of the Revolution using the perspective of an Afro-Cuban woman. The poem powerfully chronicles the abuses and injustices of slavery and colonial subjugation, but its most striking aspect is the strength and perseverance of the woman. Morejón's poem is a powerful depiction of the Afro-Cuban woman as the subject of history rather than an object upon which history acts. This can be seen most clearly through the series of one-line stanzas that punctuate the poem. In these stanzas the *mujer negra* is an active agent who states "Me rebelé...Anduve...Me sublevé...Trabajé mucho más...Me fui al monte...bajé de la Sierra" (Morejón, "Mujer negra" lines 11, 16, 23, 29, 32, 38). The power of the female narrator, and of the poem itself, makes it seem natural that the *mujer negra* is at the center of Cuban history and the voice of the Cuban people. She is one whose strength and efforts built the country while she simultaneously fought to free the island first from colonial rule and then from the oppression of the dictatorships that ended when the revolutionaries "came down from the Sierra" during the 1959 Cuban Revolution.

Nancy Morejón's poem stands in stark contrast to another tradition, that which uses the Afro-Cuban woman as an objectified other against which definitions of national identity could be posited. Vera Kutzinski describes part of this tradition in her groundbreaking work *Sugar's Secrets: Race and the Erotics of Cuban Nationalism*. As Kutzinski explains, the figure of the mulata became an important nexus for the discussion of national identity in the nineteenth century. The particular versions of national identity surrounding the mulata were based on a desire for *mestizaje* that had its roots in positivist understandings of the superiority of whiteness. For Kutzinski, the figure of the mulata found in Cuban culture came about as an embodiment of white male desire. This was a two-fold desire for both sex and power. Kutzinski demonstrates that in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the figure of the mulata in Cuban culture served as an expression of a version of *mestizaje* that appeared to celebrate diversity, but ultimately created a vision of national identity that subsumed difference and disempowered those very persons who shared an identity with the symbol (4-7). Thus unlike Morejón's *mujer negra*, this figure served to reinforce the status of Afro-Cubans—and specifically Afro-Cuban women—as objects rather than subjects.

Although Morejón's "Mujer Negra," written at the end of the 1970s, is narrated from the first-person point of view of a symbolic Afro-Cuban woman, the tradition of texts placing the Afro-Cuban at the center of definitions of national identity begins much earlier and includes a number of non-fiction life histories. One text that records the voice and life story of an actual Afro-Cuban woman is Daisy Rubiera Castillo's 1997 *Reyita, sencillamente: testimonio de una*

*negra cubana nonagenaria*. In the introduction to “La mujer negra en Cuba: Entrevista a Daisy Rubiera Castillo, autora de *Reyita, sencillamente*,” William Luis explains that if the perspective of the Afro-Cuban man is barely represented in Cuban literature, then that of the Afro-Cuban woman is practically non-existent, particularly that of women like Reyita who suffered “una triple alienación: de género, raza y clase” (62). Luis contextualizes the publication of *Reyita* by putting it into conversation with two other important moments in Afro-Cuban literature. Luis credits the first, the poetry and autobiography of the slave-poet Juan Francisco Manzano, with the genesis of Cuban literature. He then turns to the 1966 testimonio *Biografía de un cimarrón* by Miguel Barnet as an important and more contemporary contribution to the discussion of Afro-Cuban identity and Cuban history (Luis 62). The introduction and interview published by William Luis clearly indicate the significance of the publication of *Reyita* and provide a significant trajectory from Manzano, to Barnet, to Rubiera.

## II.

At the most basic level, the testimonio<sup>2</sup> as defined by Nathaniel E. Gardner is “a novel or novella-length narrative...told in the first person by a narrator who is also a real protagonist or witness of the event he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a “life” or a significant life experience” (37).<sup>3</sup> As first-person accounts of a significant portion of the life of an Afro-Cuban individual, Juan Francisco Manzano’s *Autobiografía de un esclavo*, Miguel Barnet’s *Biografía de un cimarrón*, and Daisy Rubiera Castillo’s *Reyita, sencillamente: testimonio de una negra cubana nonagenaria* all easily fit this basic definition. However, there are other important aspects of the testimonio genre. Testimonios present, in Roberto González Echevarría’s terms, “an account of a marginal witness...a sort of cultural history dealing with everyday life and folk traditions” (255-6). Gugelberger and Kearney remind us that these texts are important because since they present history and culture from the perspective of a marginal witness, they amplify a culture’s view of its history (5). John Beverly explains more specifically that the “testimonio coalesces as a new narrative genre in the 1960s and further develops in close relation to the movements for national liberation and the generalized cultural radicalism of that decade” (13),<sup>4</sup> a reality which explains why testimonios often play a significant role in the process of defining national identities. This emphasis on the role of testimonios in negotiating national identity is suggested by Gugelberger and Kearney when they explain that by providing the opportunity for the voice of a subaltern to enter into formulations of history, testimonios “occasion the transformation of former objects into subjects” thereby increasing the number of subjects speaking the nation (8). Not only does a testimonio add another voice, it is a voice that stands for more than the one individual who speaks; in testimonio “the ‘protagonist’ who gives testimony is a speaker who does not conceive of him/herself as extraordinary but instead as an allegory of the many, the people” (Gugelberger and Kearney 8).

The potential for empowered and empowering interpretations of the testimonio do not preclude important questions of authorship and agency regarding the relative power and control of the writing interlocutor and the narrating subject. Each work in the present study has a complex genesis marked by interactions between writer and narrator that can be referred to as collaboration, mediation, or co-optation depending on the perspective taken. The authors listed for the two twentieth-century texts in this present study are not the first-person narrators of the

works. Since Manzano was a fugitive slave at the time he wrote, it is easy to extend this idea of the ultimate authority being held by another—his patron Domingo del Monte—since his patron could legally treat him as a thing rather than a person and, in fact, subsequent to the writing of the autobiography, purchased Manzano's freedom. The basic question in looking at the relationship between narrator and interlocutor is the question of who ultimately has the power to shape the meaning of the narrative.

As Elzbieta Sklodowska points out in her book *Testimonio hispanoamericano*, there are two basic issues that can arise between narrator and interlocutor; the first is based on perceived differences in social status (class, race, gender, age) between the two and the second is based on this issue of who ultimately controls the meaning produced in the text (110). John Beverly had previously pointed out that in the case of the testimonio “the contradictions of sex, class, race, and age that frame the narrative’s production can also reproduce themselves in the relation of the narrator to this direct interlocutor” (18), but he is hopeful that an interlocutor/author with the “appropriate ethical and political response” can create a text that is an example of “solidarity” rather than “charity” (19). The extent of the difference(s) between narrator and author acts as an important indicator of the extent to which the author will have the potential to control the text. Putting the texts of Manzano, Barnet, and Rubiera Castillo in conversation allows for a view of the continuum of resistance and agency within the process of narrative constructions of individual and national identities. When read in this trajectory and in light of the *testimonio* genre, *Reyita* emerges as a strong statement of Afro-Cuban female identity posited as constructive of Cuban national identity.

### III.

The tradition of the Cuban testimonio provides a number of examples of Afro-Cubans who, like Morejón's *mujer negra* are located at the nexus of discussions of Cuban national identity. Perhaps the earliest example of the way in which a life story can become part of a larger discourse on Cuban national identity is the case of Juan Francisco Manzano's 1835 text *Autobiografía de un esclavo*. Manzano, who was already a published poet, wrote his life story in around 1835 at the request of his mentor and patron Domingo Del Monte, a powerful Cuban intellectual, sometime abolitionist, and slaveholder. While Manzano wrote the manuscript, the politics of the production and dissemination of the text demonstrate many of the problematics involved in the testimonio genre. Manzano himself understood how problematic his position was in relation to Del Monte. In an 1835 letter to Del Monte Manzano explains that the slave is “un ser muerto ante su señor” (*Autobiografía* 84). In a 2001 article, Jerome Branche examines Del Monte and his motives, effectively challenging the “abolitionist altruism” (63) historically attributed to him. Del Monte was a slaveholder who advocated the abolition of the slave trade but who did not advocate immediate emancipation due to his fears regarding the Africanization of Cuba and his desire for the establishment of a free and independent Cuba based on a white ideal of national identity. He was thus a problematic patron for a fugitive slave poet.

Domingo del Monte did not literally pick up a pen and author Manzano's life history as is the case with most testimonios. He did authorize the text and, once it was produced, appropriate it to his own national project. From the very beginning, the text was shaped by the

relationship between Manzano and Del Monte, particularly because Manzano wanted his freedom. The exchange of text for freedom, as Sonia Labrador-Rodríguez demonstrates in “La intelectualidad negra en Cuba en el siglo XIX: El caso de Manzano,” was a complicated transaction. According to Labrador-Rodríguez, if the promise of manumission became an incentive for writing, then master/slave roles might have been reinforced since this incentive could have compelled the slave writer to do what the patron wanted (19). After it was produced, Manzano’s text was even more fully mediated by the power of his patron. The text was revised and corrected by Anselmo Suárez y Romero and included in a dossier of materials Del Monte gave to the Irish abolitionist Richard R. Madden. Madden included a translated and re-edited version of Manzano’s text in *The Life and Poems of a Cuban Slave*, published in London in 1840. This text erased Manzano’s name and sandwiched the highly abridged narrative in texts written by Madden. Manzano’s original manuscript was not rediscovered and published in Spanish in Cuba until 1937, more than a century after its composition. Manzano’s text was co-opted into Del Monte’s desire for a particular kind of Cuban nation. Thus, in John Beverly’s terms, the texts produced out of this relationship, particularly the Madden text published in the nineteenth century, are problematic in that they were generated not out of solidarity, nor even charity, but exploitation.

Nathanial E. Gardner argues that one of the reasons that the Latin American testimonio fails to effectively present the subaltern is that the narrators chosen for testimonios are generally chosen not because they represent a larger group of subalterns, but because they were “exceptional subalterns” (37-8). While this is a problematic issue in relation to slave narratives since those slaves who were literate and had the opportunity to write were exceptional in the extreme, it is important that Del Monte identified Manzano as exceptional due to his published poetry and that within the text of his autobiography Manzano plays on this theme perhaps in response to his understanding of Del Monte. Thus Manzano says of one master that “me queria no como a esclavo sino como a hijo” (56), he presents himself as not being like the other slaves because of his status as the “mulato among blacks” (Molloy 46), and he emphasizes his natural giftings as a storyteller and poet. It is important to nuance this point to suggest that these choices reaffirm the authorial power of Manzano to construct his self-presentation *even if* it is a self-presentation that conforms to Del Monte’s prejudices.

There is certainly ample evidence that Manzano understood only too well the problematic relationship he had with Del Monte and the reality that he did not ultimately control the production of his own autobiography. Within one of Manzano’s letters to Del Monte lies a startling confession—a moment which several critics have commented on as a moment of resistance by the slave. Manzano informs Del Monte that he is only providing a part of the story of his life in the text he is preparing, and he further adds that he is holding on to that information for a particular and particularly interesting purpose: “reservando los mas interesantes sucesos de mi ella para si algún dia me alle sentado en un rincon de mi patria, tranquilo, asegurada mi suerte y susistencia, escribir una novela propriamente cubana” (85). Unfortunately, doubly disempowered within both the Spanish colonial system and slavery, even later as a free black in Cuba, Manzano never did find the peace nor security to grant him the context in which to write his Cuban novel. Critic Roberto Friol finds it both extraordinary and important that Manzano planned to write this Cuban novel two years before Cirilio Villaverde began working on what is considered by Doris Sommer the “foundational” Cuban novel, *Cecilia Valdés* (30). What is

incredibly striking to me is that in 1835, before there was a tradition of Cuban novels, Manzano believes that his individual life story could and perhaps should be the proper content for a Cuban novel and thus that his experiences—the experiences of an Afro-Cuban—could be formed into a foundational narrative of Cuban national identity. The text Manzano did produce was co-opted into a discourse of national identity defined by Del Monte, but another discourse of national identity centered on the life of the Afro-Cuban man was imagined, but not produced.

#### IV.

While Manzano's text was the only slave narrative written by a slave in Cuba under slavery, Miguel Barnet's 1966 work *Biografía de un cimarrón* recounts part of the life story of Esteban Montejo, a 105-year old ex-slave interviewed by Barnet in the 1960s. Barnet's text has been read both as a continuation of the slave narrative genre initiated by Manzano and as one of the foundational texts of the testimonio genre. In fact, Barnet is one of the most famous practitioners and theorists of the testimonio. In writing on the genre, Barnet argues that the testimonio should allow the protagonist to speak and preserve his/her own voice, but simultaneously supply not just a narration of historical events, but an interpretation of them that makes it serve the purpose of "helping to articulate a culture's collective memory" ("The Documentary Novel" 29). In Barnet's formulation, the author of the text not only serves to authenticate the story, but actively intervenes in the shape of the narrative to provide an interpretation; it is in this interpretive function that the author sometimes acts as the agent who subsumes the life story of the individual into a larger discourse of national identity, potentially limiting the power and agency of the narrator.

Following his theory that the documentary novel should preserve the voice of the subject, but provide an interpretation of historical events, Barnet sculpts the story of Esteban Montejo into the story of a revolutionary whose participation in the war for independence of 1895 connects that—and all other anti-colonial struggles—to the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959. In his introduction to *Biografía de un cimarrón*, Barnet pre-figures Montejo for the reader, most notably indicating that Montejo demonstrates "un grado de honestidad y espíritu revolucionario admirables" (11). In the article "Latin American Documentary Narrative," David William Foster argues that "Montejo's symbolic status as a rebel against the institution of slavery, his participation in the struggle for independence, his membership in the Cuban Socialist party, and, above all else, his representations of the solidarity first of the black slave society and subsequently of the black ethnic minority all attest to values promoted by the official mythopoesis of the Castro government" (51). Barnet is the one who chooses "los aspectos más sobresalientes" of Montejo's life, who breaks the narrative into different stages, and who further distances Montejo from the text when he focuses on Montejo's representative status by explaining that the book "no hace más que narrar vivencias comunes a muchos hombres de su misma nacionalidad" (*Biografía* 8, 12). Barnet focuses on the anthropological and historical import of Montejo's experiences standing for a larger national experience, but there are many indications that the view the text presents of Montejo's experiences is Barnet's view, not Montejo's.

*Biografía de un cimarrón* only chronicles Montejo's life up through the triumph of the war for independence in 1898. Barnet, who chose the stages of the text, does not allow Montejo to chronicle his reactions to the Race War of 1912, the regimes of the early twentieth century Cuban dictators, nor his memories of the Cuban Revolution. Unlike Nancy Morejón's *mujer negra*, Montejo does not get to say whether or not he came down from the Sierra in triumph. He is active and revolutionary within the text—the prototypical anti-Spanish revolutionary—who ends his narrative by saying that he not be silent as he had to under the Spanish. The text ends with Montejo insisting that he doesn't want to die so that he can fight in all the coming battles and that he needs no modern weapon, but that “Con un machete me basta” (*Biografía* 181). This figure of the Cuban revolutionary, machete in hand, is created by Barnet in the text, but the Montejo created within the text does not get to participate in the 1959 Revolution.

Since his story ends with Cuban independence from Spain, Montejo is not allowed to engage in a discussion of more modern issues of race and national identity in Cuba. As the rhetorical question in the title of the article “The Reconstruction of Cuban History and Memory in *Biografía de un Cimarrón*: Negrista Voice Affirmed or Black Voice Deferred?” implies, critic Mario André Chandler argues that the biography written by Barnet ultimately “denies to the Afro-Cuban subject the complete articulation...of his *afrocubanidad*” (18). Chandler emphasizes that in the text Montejo's voice “remains a voice deferred” since Barnet positions Montejo as a “witness at a distance” who aligns himself with Cuban nationalism at the expense of his Afro-Cuban identity (19). Barnet is an author who writes with a limited charity, a charity that understands the importance of preserving the voice of an eyewitness to Cuban slavery, but that ultimately favors reinforcing the mythopoesis of the Revolution to providing the opportunity for a complete biography of Esteban Montejo. It will not be until 1997, with the publication of *Reyita*, that the testimonio of an Afro-Cuban extends textually past 1959. In order to understand how different *Reyita* is as a text which includes the voice of a black subject within the discussion of national identity, it is significant as well that *Reyita*'s text was intentionally organized around the theme of racial and gender discrimination and that it both continues beyond the Revolution and includes reflections back to the events of the Race War of 1912.

## V.

The title of *Reyita: Testimonio de una negra cubana nonagenaria* indicates that the book contains the story of the title character, Reyita, and the book is narrated in the first person from Reyita's point of view, although authored by her daughter Daisy Rubiera Castillo. However, as Beverly has noted, often “the narrator in testimonio...speaks for, or in the name of, a community or group approximating in this way the symbolic function of the epic hero, without at the same time assuming his hierarchical and patriarchal status” (16). This is true of *Reyita*'s testimonio, which is purposefully constructed as a story with a much larger significance than just that of an eyewitness testifying to the times in which she lived. There is clear evidence that either Reyita understood her life as representative or that her daughter shapes and presents Reyita's life as symbolic of Cuba and/or Cuban national identity. Rubiera is Reyita's daughter and thus she naturally appears as a character within the text recounting Reyita's life. As the narrator's daughter, Rubiera as interlocutor and author plays a different role than Miguel Barnet did in writing Montejo's biography. When William Luis asks Rubiera about the influence of Montejo

on *Reyita*, she answers that although she had read Barnet's work, "su lectura no influyó en nada en la propuesta que me hice para escribir *Reyita, sencillamente*" and that "ambas obras persiguen objetivos muy diferentes" (64). In his comments framing this interview with Rubiera, Luis explains the difference when he points to the mother-daughter relationship as "una diferencia fundamental" between *Reyita* and Barnet's *Biografía*. According to Luis, the tension between Barnet and Montejo as former strangers and as men of very different status in terms of class, age, and race, "no existe entre madre e hija; al contrario, se aprecia una compenetración entre las dos mujeres" (63). Rubiera puts it this way: "la premisa fundamental para escribir *Reyita* fue el hecho de no existir una frontera entre ella y yo por la relación madre e hija" (Luis 64). Paula Sanmartín agrees that "the strong bond between informant and researcher (of kinship and otherwise) creates a special kind of authorship in the production" of the text, but she emphasizes that "due to this familial relationship, Daisy is more present in the text than other researchers/interlocutors who occupy a space on the margins of the text" (261, 263). According to Sanmartín, one aspect of Rubiera's special place is shown by the way in which "in order to confer veracity on her memories, Reyita often mentions Daisy's involvement in the story" (264).

This is not to suggest that Daisy Rubiera Castillo is a neutral conduit through which her mother's voice passes untouched. Rubiera readily admits that she is the one who chose a narrative thread for the work, at first a focus on race and class discrimination that grew to include the third aspect of gender discrimination as well when she returned to the material after her initial interviews with Reyita (Luis 64). While the text powerfully and effectively reproduces Reyita's voice, as we shall see, the form and focus of the text indicate that Rubiera is an active agent in constructing her mother's story. She is the one who asked questions and encouraged Reyita to understand her story in relation to the stories of her mother and grandmothers (Godo-Solo 55). She is also the one who chose to open each chapter of the book with a quotation from the poetry of Georgina Herrera because "su poesía ahora se interesa por la problemática de la mujer de descendencia Africana" (qtd in Godo-Solo 55-6). Rubiera's influence on the text cannot be denied, but in the end it is clear that the relationship between Reyita and Rubiera, both of whom are Black Cuban women who also share the bond of mother and daughter, is one of solidarity rather than charity.

Even with solidarity, the complex author/narrator dialectic of the testimonio genre is clear in *Reyita*. Before the first chapter of the novel, Rubiera writes a dedication which reads, "A Reyita, cuya sola presencia reúne, cedo la palabra" (14). Here Daisy Rubiera Castillo—technically the author of the text—downplays the idea of her mediation by claiming to simply give the floor to Reyita. More importantly, however, Rubiera establishes the idea of Reyita as a uniting force—as a gatherer—a rhetorical move that has very important implications in both a literal and metaphorical sense. In a literal sense, throughout her life Reyita will be central to her community, raising not only her own eight kids, but many others, and feeding and caring for others around her. Metaphorically, Reyita becomes a symbol around which ideas of Cuban identity can be formulated. Reyita, as presented in this testimonio, is both typical and exceptional. She is a representative Afro-Cuban woman, but she is also the symbol of the nation. Rubiera's active involvement keeps the issue of racial and gender discrimination at the forefront and symbolically places Reyita and her family at the center of the process of narrating the history of Cuba and defining Cuban national identity.

The 2000 Spanish version of *Reyita* begins with an introductory essay titled “Algo para empezar” by Mirta Rodríguez Calderón. In her brief piece, Rodríguez Calderón makes two important points. First, she emphasizes the colloquial structure and the prevalence of Reyita’s voice in the text (12). More importantly, however, perhaps mirroring Rubiera’s dedication and focus, Rodríguez Calderón presents Reyita as a unifying force and a symbol for Cuban women and their struggles. She explains that Reyita is “sumatoria de rebeldías, empeños, audacias y perseverancia que hicieron a muchas mujeres de este siglo cubano encarar convencionalismos e ir cimentando para sí y para las demás trillos de victorias” (11). This characterization emphasizes the ways in which Reyita embodied the spirit of her time; Rodríguez Calderón writes that Reyita is not unique, but what makes her exceptional is the way in which the challenges faced by so many women converge within her, challenges she faced with only her courage (11). The most succinct statement of Reyita’s status as symbol comes when Rodríguez Calderón writes “Reyita es ella y es nosotras” (11). She is both an individual and the embodiment of the struggles and strengths of Cuban women. While Rodríguez Calderón does not emphasize Reyita’s blackness as a part of the collective experience, in interviews conducted with Daisy Rubiera Castillo, the author explains that she wrote the book due to “la necesidad de dar voz a una mujer negra” (Luis 66). Rubiera believes that this choice is important since previously it had been nearly impossible to find this voice in Cuban literature (Luis 66).<sup>5</sup> While the identity expressed in *Reyita* is a collective identity, it is a collective identity that is also marked by racial specificity and that privileges the experience of the Black woman. It is also a Black female identity that the Revolution has sought, at least in part, to suppress. In interviews with Paula Sanmartín, Rubiera lamented the fact that *Reyita* had not received the same recognition in Cuba that it had abroad and that in Cuba the discussions of the book tended to ignore issues of race (Sanmartín 274).

Another facet of the text of *Reyita* that indicates it is not simply representative of the individual Reyita is the fact that Reyita’s testimony is surrounded by other documents. The book includes a section titled “¡Nuevas verdades!” a series of notes, a “testimonio gráfico” section, a section of documents, and a bibliography. These documents help to authenticate the narrative as well as helping to make the case for Reyita as the “we” representing Cuba. As a black woman, she becomes the speaking subject of history and, with her extended family and community, becomes both symbol and speaking subject of Cuba. One obvious piece of evidence that the text of *Reyita* is not simply the transcribed voice of Reyita, but constitutes a larger project, is the fact that in the section “¡Nuevas verdades!” Rubiera, in her own voice, describes a trip she took to Cárdenas in order to verify some of the facts of her mother’s story and to better help her understand the attitude of her father since, as she tells the reader, her mother did not want to characterize him (163). Paula Sanmartín astutely notes that the section on new truths is significant in that it is “written without emphasizing that there has been a change in narrative voice” from Reyita to Rubiera and thus that it is an indication of the ongoing negotiation of authority and authorship between the two women in the process of writing the testimonio (272). The section also functions as part of an argument of veracity.

In addition to this section describing the author’s field research, the text includes a section of notes which explain the significance of names, dates, and events mentioned in the story. The bibliography at the end of the volume—an odd item to have in a life story—contains both a section of “Fuentes documentales” and a list of all of the other individuals that Rubiera interviewed in writing the book. The list includes three historians, one sociologist, and a man



who is a witness to the so-called *Guerrita de los negros* of 1912 (Rubiera 203). Reyita's discussion of the Race War of 1912 challenges both the official version of Cuban history and indicates the limitations of the Revolutionary government in dealing with issues of racism. Although only ten years old in 1912, Reyita obviously had strong memories of the events of the "guerrita." In her narrative she explains the frustration of blacks with the Morúa law; Reyita explains that Blacks believed they needed their own political organizations because the solutions whites came up with did not solve their problems (Rubiera 46). Reyita further explains that the war was caused not by Blacks, but by white politicians who wanted to secure the black vote (Rubiera 46-7). She also provides an important description of the fact that the Blacks did not have real weapons and that the army ruthlessly "los mataban y luego los tiraban en unos fosos y les daban candela" (Rubiera 47). Later, Reyita speaks of blacks "asesinados" while others were taken prisoner (Rubiera 47). She even discusses the fact that people admired the presidential candidate who asked for amnesty for the prisoners; "pero no te vaas a creer que lo hizo por justeza ni nada por el estilo," Reyita charges her reader, explaining that the man wanted to trade their freedom for votes (Rubiera 48). The most important aspect of Reyita's discussion of the Race War of 1912 in terms of the construction of a vision of Cuban identity posited from the position of the Black woman is the way that she criticizes the willful ignorance of Cubans regarding the episode. After explaining that no one at the time wanted to discover the truth, she continues by saying that "lo que me llama la atención es que después del triunfo de la Revolución a nadie se le ocurre entrevistar a las personas que vivieron aquellos momentos" in order to learn the truth (Rubiera 48). Reyita says that the Race War of 1912 coupled with the unwillingness of the Revolutionary government to deal with it, left Cuba "más dividida que nunca antes" (Rubiera 49). Reyita, the presence that unites, perhaps prompted by Rubiera's focus on racial discrimination, speaks honestly about the racism of the past in order to try exercise historical ghosts in her effort to create a unified Cuban identity.

The "testimonio gráfico" section at the end of the book is another of the sections that help to produce the idea of the text as an expression of Cuban national identity. One of the pictures is of Anselmo "Monín" Rubiera, the son Reyita lost in the Revolution, in his army uniform. On the death of Monín in 1959, Reyita says that when the Virgin took him, "lo hizo de la major manera, ¡lo entró en la historia! Porque 'morir por la patria es vivir'—como dice nuestro Himno Nacional—, porque aunque él cayó allí, está aquí, en nuestros corazones, porque para nosotros, ¡Monín, sigue viviendo!" (Rubiera 129). This image of Monín indelibly ties Reyita and the family she represents to the triumph of the Revolution and the sacrifices it entailed. It again places them at the center of the narrative of national identity.

Towards the end of the narrative when Reyita describes her family in a section titled "Mi arco iris" she begins by saying that she has a strong concept of family that enabled her to sacrifice many things for her family (Rubiera 150). Here we see the common revolutionary idea of sacrifice for the larger group (family or nation). She continues by explaining that "A los hijos hay que inculcarles también el amor por la Patria, enseñarlos a convivir con los demás" (Rubiera 150). After mentioning that she is the one who single-handedly achieved this in the case of her kids—acting as both "madre y padre" to them—Reyita adds that through her efforts "logré una familia organizada y unida, de hombres y mujeres decentes, honrados y luchadores" (Rubiera 150). Her use of the words *organizada* and *luchadores* harken back to the official language of the Revolution, which although she can find fault with it, Reyita supports. Reyita finishes this

paragraph by asking, “¿Te das cuenta de lo que tenemos?” (Rubiera 150) The final question asked by Reyita, ostensibly of her daughter Daisy, can be seen more generally. Here Daisy Rubiera Castillo may be a figure not just for her family, but for Cubans as a whole. Reyita, then, is asking Cubans if they understand what they have. And the image of Cuba that emerges here—real or projected—is obvious; it is a nation of proud, honest, hardworking citizens who, like Esteban Montejo, will take up the machete and fight with honor “todas las batallas que vengan” (Barnet, *Biografía* 181). They will continue on, as the quotation from Che on the Department of State Building in Havana reads, “Hasta la Victoria siempre.”

Reyita’s large, strong family is also a very diverse nation. She catalogs here 118 family members, noting that her “8 hijos, 39 nietos, 64 biznietos y 7 tataranietos” are a beautiful family (Rubiera 150). The significance of the title of this section becomes clear when Reyita identifies her family as the arco iris composed of “blancos, negros, mulaticos, ‘jabaítos’. Pelos largos, cortos, rizos, lacios.” (Rubiera 151). Reyita presents us with an image of a family/nation that includes a variety of types, from whites, to blacks, to mulattos to *jabaítos*. After discussing the similarly broad range of their professions, Reyita celebrates the fact that they are “todos organizados, y sobre todo, libres de prejuicios raciales” (Rubiera 151). Here Reyita may not be presenting the reality of Cuba, which still struggles with issues of racial prejudice—Rubiera says that the nationalism that Reyita represents is that of a nation “donde tristemente no podemos negar que se mantienen vergonzantes expresiones racistas” (Luis 68)—but she provides a compelling vision of a Cuban nation free of such evils.

When I met Daisy Rubiera Castillo in 2002, she inscribed my copy of *Reyita* with the inscription, “En este libro encontraras parte de la historia de la nación cubana.” While the book tells the story of Reyita’s family back to her grandparents and down to her great-great-grandchildren, Rubiera does not choose to indicate that the book will teach the reader anything about the family, although it does, but rather she emphasizes what it will teach the reader about Cuban history. There is a movement from Reyita—whose mere presence unites—to her family, to the Cuban nation. The story of an individual negra cubana nonagenaria is made metaphorically to stand for the Cuban nation. Indeed, from a history of slavery and oppression, through the end of the colony and on past the triumph of the Revolution, Reyita’s family represents Cuba and its trajectory. Where Manzano’s text engages the idea of the nation even before there *was* a Cuban nation and Montejo becomes the as prototypical revolutionary who doesn’t get to comment on racial tensions nor participate (within the text) in the Revolution, in *Reyita* we see one possible fulfillment of these earlier texts—the Cuban novel taking the life of the black woman as subject matter and positing a Cuban revolutionary identity that is both individual and collective. Manzano believed the experiences of his life were appropriate subject matter for a Cuban novel, and Reyita’s larger collective story makes a similar claim, transforming her testimonio from autobiography—the story of a life—to autopolloigraphy—the story of the hoi polloi, the people of the nation.

As such, it is important to remember that this story of the people of Cuba comes about through the voice of the speaking subject of the Black woman. Reyita is a negra cubana who, like Morejón’s mujer negra, could say that she “Me rebelé... Anduve... Me sublevé... Trabajé mucho más” and through her family went to the mountain and came down from the Sierra in the triumph of the Revolution. In *Reyita* we see the convergence of the national symbol and the

empowered and constructing Cuban citizen in the person of the *mujer negra*. No longer is the black female body the object of history and national identity to be manipulated for the ends of others.

## VI.

One interesting question remains. What has made possible this shift of the Afro-Cuban woman from objectified symbol to constructing subject? The answer, perhaps, is to be expected: the waning of the power of the patriarch. In the text of her testimonio, Reyita tells us the process by which she gains her independence from the power of her husband. Not only does she increasingly make her own decisions, she makes possible the opportunities she wants for her children, becoming, as she says, both father and mother to them. Two of the sections that indicate her growing independence are tellingly titled “Se hizo mi voluntad” and “Ganar lo mío.” In the first, Reyita describes her political involvement with the Popular Socialist Party in the 1940s, noting that “A Rubiera [su esposo] no le gustaba aquello, pero yo no le hacía caso. Ya desde mucho antes yo me ocupaba de muchas cosas que a él no le gustaban, pero es que estaba despertando” (Rubiera 84). Here the political awakening of the *negra cubana* leads to her insistence that she not be ruled over by the white man, in this case her white husband. Reyita’s independence and her husband’s waning influence over her are seen again in the section “Ganar lo mío” when Reyita begins to earn her own money both in order to buy the things she wants, like a radio and a refrigerator, and also so that she can invest money in education for her children. Daisy Rubiera explains that during this time “Reyita invierte a su favor las relaciones de poder al interior del hogar” (Luis 66).

Outside of the text, perhaps the challenges to the power of the Cuban Patriarch during the *Período Especial* play a part in opening up the space for Daisy Rubiera Castillo to publish *Reyita*, a text that both implicitly and explicitly challenges the official party line on racism in Cuba and which implicitly expands the definition of Cuban identity. Four years before the publication of *Reyita*, Nancy Morejón presented Cuba in the poem “Marina” as “un coche tirado/por un caballo flaco” (lines 7-8), a broken down Cuban state being pulled along by a weakened Castro figure. Perhaps the increasingly painful realities of “la opción cero” also referred to in Morejón’s poem (“Marina” line 4) opened a space in which Rubiera could publish a book that criticized the Revolution’s response to the 1912 Race War, examined racial and gender policies both before and after the revolution, and centered around the *mujer negra* as speaking subject of the nation.

### Notes

1. My thanks to the comments I received on an early version of this project during the Ohio University Department of Foreign Languages Coloquio in 2006.
2. The term testimonio has been translated into English in a variety of ways (testimonial novel, documentary novel, and documentary narrative to name a few). Since I am specifically discussing the Cuban testimonio, I will use the Spanish term for the genre.
3. Gardner notes that the *testimonio* overlaps with other genres, including “autobiography, autobiographical novel, oral history, memoir, confession, diary, interview, eyewitness report, life history, *novela-testimonio*, nonfiction novel, or ‘factographic literature’” (37).

4. Although Juan Francisco Manzano's *Autobiografía de un esclavo* was written well before the inception of the testimonio genre in the 1960s, Gugelberger and Kearney point out that slave narratives are "in certain ways kinds of documentary literature [i.e. testimonios] that amplify official histories of subaltern peoples" (4-5). Both Luis and Gugelberger and Kearney suggest the appropriateness of grouping Manzano's text with the testimonio. From the opposite end, critics like Miriam DeCosta-Willis, Edward J. Mullen, and Susan Willis have worked to create a tradition of Cuban slave narratives, in part by including Barnet's *Biografía de un cimarrón* in the slave narrative tradition. Connecting Manzano's text to the testimonio genre helps to create a fuller understanding of the history of Afro-Cuban writers negotiating their identities vis-à-vis conceptions of national identity.
5. Paula Sanmartín points out that the original title of the book was *Reyita, sencillamente: testimonio de una negra cubana nonagenaria* but in later editions, most notably an edition ordered by Raúl Castro in 2000 (the edition quoted in this article), the word "negra" was removed from the title (259). The title of the English translation by Anne McLean, *Reyita: The Life of a Black Cuban Woman in the Twentieth Century*, retains the reference to blackness, but removes the word "sencillamente," which Sanmartín reminds us is a modifier Reyita insists on adding to her name after she confronts class prejudice (259), and the reference to Reyita's age.

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