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Reyita, Sencillamente and Canción De Rachel: Representations of Cuban Women in Testimonial Literature

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REYITA, SENCILLAMENTE AND CANCIÓN DE RACHEL: REPRESENTATIONS OF
CUBAN WOMEN IN TESTIMONIAL LITERATURE

By

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ABSTRACT

Testimonial literature is essential in order to understand the development of a Latin American identity –it captures and manifests the epistemological and metaphysical difficulties that challenge the notion of identity and have complicated its development. It presents the perpetual debate between allowing the Other to speak and not to speak. Compelled to understand the densities of this debate, I analyze the testimonies of two women who struggle to define their beliefs and live according to their cultural values in twentieth century Cuba —as it proves difficult to escape the constraints constructed and imposed by patriarchal society. I study the strategies they adopt to resist the hegemonic order of their society; and intend to demonstrate how they construct their gender identity and assert their agency throughout the course of their testimonies. The texts used throughout my analysis are Daisy Rubiera Castillo’s *Reyita, sencillamente* and Miguel Barnet’s *Canción de Rachel*. Reyita, was an Afro-Cuban woman living an impoverished life in Cuba; and Rachel, was a vedette who performed in the renowned stage of Havana’s Alhambra. Both narratives prove to be essential for their economic, cultural, historical, political and literary relevance. And, as argued by Raphael Dalleo in *Caribbean Literature and the Public Sphere*, these narratives can be used as true gauges of the country’s social and political activities of the time (186).

CHAPTER 1

THE CONSTRUCTION OF EACH SUBJECT'S NARRATIVE

In this paper, I use Daisy Rubiera Castillo's *Reyita, sencillamente* and Miguel Barnet's *Canción de Rachel* to analyze the testimonies of Reyita, an Afro-Cuban woman living an impoverished life in Cuba, and of Rachel, a vedette who performed in the renowned stage of Havana's Alhambra. Both narratives are recognized for their economic, cultural, historical, political and literary relevance; and, as Raphael Dalleo argues in *Caribbean Literature and the Public Sphere*, these narratives can be used as true gauges of the country's social and political activities of the time (186). I study the strategies utilized by both women to construct their gender identity and assert their agency throughout the course of their testimonies. As a result, I intend to demonstrate that both literary subjects struggle to define their beliefs and live according to their cultural values—as it proves challenging to escape the constraints constructed and imposed by patriarchal society.

A Note on Reyita and *Testimonio*

I categorize *Reyita* as a *testimonio*, also referred to as a testimonial narrative. *Reyita* is the collection of María de los Reyes Castillo Bueno's memories as told to her daughter Daisy Rubiera Castillo. In Elizabeth Dore's introduction to *Reyita*, she explains that the 1980s were the boom for Latin American testimonial literature. Dore believes that a testimony is an extension of the oral tradition of storytelling used as a means of preserving and transmitting collective memories. Where it differs from oral tradition is that testimonials are often used to raise consciousness and action for a particular movement for progressive social change (McLean 13). In "The Margin at The Center: On *Testimonio* (Testimonial Narrative)," John Beverly emphasizes on the intentionality of the *narrator* in a testimonial narrative. He states that

testimonio is a written novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet form. It is told in the first-person by a narrator, who is also the real protagonist or witness of events, and recounts the “life” or a significant life experience of the narrator (13). Beverly classifies *testimonio* as a “resistance literature,” a literature that demonstrates “an urgency to communicate, a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, struggle for survival, and so on” (14). Furthermore, he regards *testimonio* as the act of testifying or bearing witness in a legal or religious sense. While reading the text, it is implied that there is a pledge of honesty on the part of the narrator. As a result, the reader becomes the equivalent of a jury member in a courtroom. Readers are expected to respect the “legal” connotation inferred by *testimonio*. Thus, Beverly identifies that the objective of the *testimonio* becomes sincerity as opposed to literariness (14).

The production of *testimonio* often involves tape recording, transcription, and editing of the oral account of the narrator by an interlocutor who is an intellectual, often a journalist or a writer. The narrator is often functionally illiterate or not a professional writer. As a result, the narrator relies on the intervention of the interlocutor to redact the testimonial narrative. Beverly states that the necessity of an interlocutor is one of the more hotly debated theoretical points in the discussion of the genre. According to Dore, scholars formerly accepted testimonials as authentic histories of the oppressed. Recently, several issues have arisen, which brings the validity of testimonials into question: such as, the ambiguity of texts, the shifting nature of truth, the problems of representation, and the position of the narrative voice (McLean12).

As aforementioned, the reader of *testimonio* is akin to the juror of a courtroom. Therefore, it is the reader who determines the sincerity and authority of the narrator. Dore emphasizes that it is the reader’s responsibility to reflect on the production of the testimony in order to evaluate testimonial narrative. The reader must become acquainted with the creation and

purpose of the testimony. This requires that the reader ask several pertinent questions: “Why is the storyteller telling his/her story? Does the testimony transmit memories of a collective or of an individual nature? Is the voice mostly that of the story-teller, or that of the author/interviewer, often referred to as the interlocutor? For whom is the testimony intended? Why, how and by whom was the testimony published?” (McLean13). The narrator and their account are recounted as real. Its mission is to capture not only their own story, but also the experiences of a collective whole—a community or a group. Beverly states that, “each individual *testimonio* evokes an absent polyphony of other voices, other possible lives and experiences” (16). Throughout her narrative, Reyita often finds her experiences to be reflective of not only her own personal story, but of the struggles faced by blacks and women in general.

Controversy Surrounding Reyita’s Testimonial Narrative

Hossiri Godo-Solo explains in his dissertation “Afrocuba y oralidad en la narrativa Cubana: desde sus inicios hasta el presente,” that by Reyita entrusting her daughter, Daisy Rubiera Castillo, with her testimonial, the distance between the interlocutor and the orator is shortened. Rubiera Castillo’s impact on Reyita’s story is presented in her organization of the *testimonio*, Godo-Solo confirms that Rubiera Castillo asserts a certain control over Reyita’s story: by organizing the narrative into four chapters and designating titles for each section, including the supplementary material found in the text, such as photos, poems, corrections, and administrative texts which contribute to the intertextuality found within the text.

For example, Rubiera Castillo’s inclusion of Nancy Morejón and Georgina Herrera’s poetry is incorporated to capture the essence of each chapter of Reyita’s life. According to Godo-Solo, Reyita’s voice united with the voice of the other Afro-Cuban women writers. For instance, Nancy Morejón is known for representing the development of the black woman and Cuban woman in a way that challenges their patriarchal image. And, Georgina Herrera is known not

only for her feminist poetry, but also as Daisy Rubiera's friend. The addition of these writers to Reyita's testimony and Daisy Rubiera's role as an interlocutor expands the role of women by giving them an outlet in writing and presenting them with the opportunity to reveal narratives previously unknown. Godo-Solo writes, "postula que la mujer letrada puede participar, como agente idóneo, en la re-oralización, a partir de espacios narrativos considerados antes poco dignos de ser llevado al público" (189). He emphasizes on Daisy Rubiera's indispensable contribution in obtaining the testimony, since she was one of the few people who could have access to Reyita. Most importantly, Reyita's narrative space is not only familiar to her daughter, but also respected and valued by her. Godo-Solo comments on the emotional duress brought about by being the interlocutor. He says, "la llevó a desenterrar demonios personales, sus propias medias verdades, así como las mentiras de su padre, los errores y engaños de su madre" (189). A task and struggle that later inspired Daisy Rubiera to dedicate her studies to popular Cuban culture and the African influence in the culture of the region of Santiago de Cuba.

Her role as a daughter, woman, editor, historian and writer, gives her a major presence in the work. For instance, Daisy Rubiera found her mother to be very sick, which caused her to become skeptical of her mother's memory. As a result she began to conduct her own research to verify the historical accuracy of her mother's testimony. She then established a chronological order to the narrative and demonstrated control over the narrative by investigating and imposing her concept of history (189). In an interview, Daisy Rubiera states, "Yo no soy escritora ni poeta, soy historiadora" (191). According to Godo-Solo, the intertextual presence established by Daisy Rubiera in Reyita's narrative reflects her inability to escape the influence of external texts that she uses to shape the narrative. Nor can Daisy Rubiera maintain the neutrality that is proposed in handling testimony —because of how invested she is personally with the narrative. He quotes

Daisy Rubiera's response to her involvement in the work, "Claro quizás esté yo allí, porque soy parte de la historia que además averigüé con conversaciones y entrevistas con mis hermanos" (190).

The Authenticity of Testimonial Novel in *Canción de Rachel*

Unlike *Reyita*, Miguel Barnet uses a pseudo-autobiographical model of confession to narrate the dynamic lifestyle of the fictional Cuban *vedette* Rachel. Barnet deems *Cancion de Rachel* as a testimonial novel. According to Beverly, testimonial novels are "narrative texts where an 'author' in the conventional sense has either invented a *testimonio*-like story or [...] extensively reworked with explicitly literary goals (greater figurative density, tighter narrative form, elimination of digressions and interruptions, and so on), a testimonial account that is no longer present as such except in its simulacrum" (25-26).

Barnet utilizes similar narrative strategies present in *testimonio*, such as the *testimonio*'s first-person witnessing style and the urgency to denounce certain injustices present in their society. For instance, in the introduction to *Canción de Rachel*, Barnet states that he relates Rachel's confessions and life story as it was told to him. He writes, "*Canción de Rachel* habla de ella, de su vida, tal y como ella la contó y tal como yo luego se la conté a ella" (11). However, Andrea Morris includes in "The Testimony of the Displaced: *Rachel's Song* and the Performance of Race and Gender," an addendum featured in the 1970 edition of the novel. In the addendum, Barnet explains his role in the creation of the text, "the interviewer/ compiler of testimonial literature is a performer of sorts, in the sense that in the process of rewriting or transcribing he or she puts on the mask of the informant" (Morris 30). In "Confessional Pseudo-Autobiography in López de Úbeda's *La pícaro Justina* and Barnet's *Canción de Rachel*," Gwen H. Stickney states that Rachel's character was "based on [Barnet's] interviews with Cuban actresses from Rachel's

epoch and material from the Cuban press” (465). However, both Rachel and Barnet’s affirmation that the narrative is true often causes the reader to forget that the novel is a male-authored text about a fictional woman, which is Barnet’s objective for his performance as the interviewer/compiler. He clarifies that the ability to provide a successful performance is based on the interviewer/compiler’s ability to “Despojarse de su individualidad, sí, pero para asumir la de informante, la de la colectividad que este representa” (Morris 30).

Throughout Rachel’s account, Barnet intends to empty himself of his individuality in order to assume the life of Rachel. He desires to capture the life and personal struggles of a woman of the twentieth century. Stickney identifies the issues confronted by Rachel: “family history, stages of the life cycle, body and sexuality, marriage, children, illness, women’s roles in relationships, and social beliefs about women” (Stickney 466). Similar issues are also present and confronted by Reyita in her life. However, Andrea Morris argues that Barnet’s ability to empty himself of his individuality is ambitious to the point of being considered impossible. Factors such as race, gender and economic status between writer and informant contribute as obstacles when assuming the role of the “other” (30). A detail that distinguishes *Canción de Rachel* as a testimonial novel is Barnet’s usage of intercalated fragments incorporated into Rachel’s narrative. In *Caribbean Literature and the Public Sphere*, Raphael Dalleo explains that in *Cancion*’s prefatory note, Barnet states that the intercalated fragments are meant to complement the central monologue.

Presented in each work are various ideas on what each piece represents about Cuba and how major concerns complicate the interpretation of these testimonial works. Attempting to address these concerns by utilizing the narratives will provide the greatest support for accepting these works as reflective of representations of Cuban women of the 20th century. What is found

in each testimony will fluctuate with the reader's response to Dore's questions and the value they place on each answer. For instance, considering whether or not Rachel's testimony is constructed solely by Barnet could impact, for some, what is revealed about the subject. Some may find it problematic that the reflection of a woman's testimony is in the hands of a man. Sklodowska best captures this problem when she warns of: "the ethical and political implications of a hierarchically structured dialogue between a sympathetic intellectual-editor and a marginalized witness-protagonist—in this case a lower-class woman born to immigrant parents" (113). For others, regardless of whether or not Rachel's testimony is Rachel's narrative or Barnet's construction, it is believed to expose aspects of the challenges faced by Cuban women of the 20th century and can be analyzed as a literary-cultural text.

I emphasize that the narratives of these women expose not only aspects of their own thinking, but also how their environment and upbringing have come together to mold their identity. Factors, such as race and gender, construct two unique narratives; yet, the narratives come together to reveal similar struggles and perspectives. For instance, when analyzing Reyita's story, we see how her opportunities for success were scarce due to her financial struggles, the lack of support from her family, and racism. Thus, to overcome these limitations, she relied on her desire for emancipation, her faith in La Virgen de la Caridad de Cobre—the Patron Saint of Cuba—and her devotion for her children. Similar obstacles are present in Rachel's narrative. She also came from an impoverished lifestyle and struggled to gain recognition as an artist in 20th century Cuba—as a *vedette*, many people questioned the value of her artistic influence. She revolutionized women's role in society by rebelling against the traditional role of woman and redefining the notions of sensuality and sexuality as influential and valuable means of artistic expression. To achieve this, she depended on her spirituality, her devotion to her mother (and

sometimes her husband), and her relentless (unintentional) effort to aid women overcome patriarchal tradition. According to Godo-Solo: “La obra redime a la mujer: ésta deja de ser objeto sexual, es un agente económico, cultural, histórico, político y literario” (188).

CHAPTER 2

THE *MULATA* VIRGIN AND THE WHITE PROSTITUTE

The status of Afro-Cubans and of women in Cuban society is a reoccurring topic and concern throughout Reyita and Rachel's narrative. Both narratives indicate a strong societal disdain toward "blackness." In addition, we see the strain in the relationship between both blacks and whites perpetuating inequality in Cuba.

Reyita's aversion to having a black family is instilled in her by her mother, Isabel. According to Reyita, her mother was a *mulata* that often discriminated against her; and considered her dark skin to be a disadvantage in Cuba. Reyita explains:

Yo fui víctima de una terrible discriminación por parte de mi mamá. Pero si a eso se suma la que había en Cuba, se podrá entender por qué nunca quise un marido negro. Yo tenía una razón importante, que lo explica todo ¿sabes? No quería tener hijos negros como yo, para que nadie me los malmimara, para que nadie los vejara, me los humillara. ¡Ay, sólo Dios sabe...! No quise que los hijos que tuviera sufrieran lo que sufrí, por eso me casé con un blanco. (17)

By inculcating the idea of marrying a white man to advance the race and consistently demeaning Reyita's physical characteristics, Isabel reflects the societal expectations and discrimination present in Cuba. Her apparent preference for whiteness causes her to favor her children of a lighter skin color and discriminate against Reyita. For instance, she comments on Reyita's lips saying, "Reyita cierra la boca que la bamba te va a llegar a la rodilla" (28). Isabel's comment emphasizes the size of Reyita's lips, a characteristic of the phenotype often stigmatized and exaggerated to denote blackness.

Reyita's life is emblematic of most Afro-Cuban families: she comes from a working-poor family, and she is discriminated upon because of the color of her skin. For instance, as a young girl, she could not celebrate the Day of the Kings like a regular child—her family was unable to buy gifts due to their lack of money (17). She believed that to be black and poor brought great sorrow. She says, “la felicidad dura poco en casa del pobre”(54). Regardless, Reyita manages to question and challenge the cultural norms of her society through her education. Although she could not afford to receive a formal education, she took charge of educating herself. She would strategically place her ironing table in such a way that she could overhear the class her cousin was taking, an exam that served as part of the admission process into a bachelor's program. Reyita says, “captaba todo lo que él [profesor] decía, y cualquier palabra que no entendía la escribía con disimulo y después la buscaba en el diccionario” (55). It is this determination and self-motivation that distinguishes Reyita and allows her to challenge the obstacles and injustices present in her life. As a result of her diligence, she passed the exam; however, her inability to afford the uniform impeded her acceptance into the institute. Reyita's mother appears to be indifferent to her daughter's accomplishment and the members of Reyita's family consider her to be crazy. Without the support of her family and because of her economic disadvantage, she is unable to enroll into the institute. She maintains a positive attitude toward the experience and explains that she is content with simply having the opportunity to receive an education, even if her financial situation impeded her from attaining it. In her own words: “ ¡aquello había sido un éxito para mi! Fue lindo saber que podía, aunque no se materializara” (56). After attempting to escape poverty through education, Reyita identifies the socioeconomic barriers established in Cuba that continue to reinforce her marginal status. It appears impossible for Reyita to ascend from the lower echelon of society, if she can never escape her economic disadvantage, and racial

discrimination. These are injustices affirmed not only through her personal experience, but historically as well.

According to William Luis' *Culture and Customs of Cuba*, in the Cuban Republic, blacks continued to form part of the lower echelon of society. Afro-Cubans joined the Partido Independiente de Color (Black Independence Party or PIC) in order to demand the rewards of citizenship whites enjoyed, rewards promised to them for playing a leading role in the Revolution of Independence (1895-1898). In order to redress racial injustice, the PIC was formed to seek racial equality and working-class demands. The Cuban Republic held that society was characterized by racial equality, in which deserving blacks—through hard work and clean-living—could achieve equality with whites. Dore states that it was believed that the fact that the upper classes were exclusively white was evidence that whites were naturally superior and blacks naturally inferior (McLean 3). The PIC rebutted and proclaimed it as white racism and the whites' monopoly on political and economic power that prevented the blacks from advancing in society. Reyita explains that a *mulato* senator and novelist called Manuel Morúa Delgado voted against the creation of political parties for blacks. She explains “Las personas de ‘color’ consideraron injusta esa ley, porque entendían que debían tener una organización política que les permitiera buscar y dar soluciones a sus problemas, porque las de los blancos no se los resolvían” (47). The Cuban authorities accused the leaders of the PIC of starting an Afro-Cuban rebellion. According to Reyita, José Miguel Gómez, the President of the Republic, secretly supported blacks in order to pretend to wage war against the government. He assured that the Cuban Congress and the Senate would fear a war between blacks and whites. Thus, they would vote down Murúa's Law and permit the formation of the PIC. She says that Gómez only wanted to ensure the black vote for his re-election. In 1912, the Cuban army, under the command of

General Jesús Montegaudó, marched against blacks. According to Luis, three thousand insurgents were massacred and leaders of the PIC were executed. The rebellion was rapidly crushed out of fear of U.S. intervention, which Luis emphasizes would also not allow Cuba to become a black republic. Luis stresses the United States' influence on Cuban internal and external policies persisted until the middle of the twentieth century, when Fulgencio Batista, the U.S.-backed dictator, fled the country (8).

In her *testimonio*, Reyita gives a personal account of what she experienced during this time. She states that Gómez sent General Montegaudó to fight against black Cubans—to prevent the secret agreement he made with the latter from being revealed. With no real desire to go to war and their lack of weaponry, the black's fate against the Gómez administration was solidified. The blacks were captured, killed, thrown in pits and set on fire. Those who surrendered were transported to Arroyo Blanco and murdered. Juan, Reyita's uncle, was captured and killed in Arroyo Blanco. During this time, no one cared to know the truth, notes Reyita. She explains that even after the triumph of the Revolution, people showed no initiative to investigate these injustices. She says, “a nadie se le ocurrió entrevistar a las personas que vivieron aquellos momentos, a los que perdieron a sus familiares, a los que conocían de cerca de los motivos que se tenían para hacer aquel Partido” (49). Without these accounts, without the voice of the subaltern, the racial divide within Cuba worsened and caused tension for both blacks and whites. Black people felt hatred and resentment toward whites; whites demeaned and harassed blacks (50).

Canción de Rachel reflects a similar strain as the narrative reveals the inequality of black people from a white perspective. Rachel exhibits and acknowledges her racist attitude toward Afro-Cubans. She says, “Por eso creo que al negro no se le puede dar mucha ala. Aquí iban a

imponerse si no es por la cordura del gobierno” (64). She recalls the war began because of the Murúa law. She describes him as a decent man, but with the disgrace of being a *mulato*. As a *mulato*, he should not have approved a law that prohibited blacks from congregating; and attributes his action as the reason for the aggressive and vehement opposition of blacks. In Rachel’s discourse, we see the fear of a Haitian Revolution: “El pánico cundió porque los negros, al verse secundados por toda la hamponería, cogieron vuelo: ¡Haití, esto sería Haití!” (64). According to Rachel, Cuba was in a state of disarray and black people were to blame — they threatened to make Cuba a black territory and promote Estenoz as president of the island (67). While describing the hostility throughout the war, she holds that the efforts from the blacks and whites were drastic —they burned down plantations, sugar factories, cities and over 800 homes. But given the blacks disadvantage, as part of the minority population, they would succumb to the violent response by the Cuban government. She further demonstrates a racist attitude when she remarks, “Negros, ¡negros!: que dolor de cabeza dieron, madre mía!” (66). She recalls that the hostility on the island settled once the Americans arrived. They threatened to raid the island with 500 cowboys. Cowboys that Rachel believes captured rebellious blacks. She depicts how the cowboys treated black people like cattle —she states that the cowboy could easily lasso four or five blacks at once (67). Appreciative of the United States influence, Rachel describes their intervention as a salvation. She recalls June 24, 1912 as the day of Evaristo Estenoz’s death and the end of the war (68). She emphasizes, “Los negros quedaron aplastados, por ambiciosos y racistas” (69).

A fragment follows Rachel’s account of the war. A male voice accuses Rachel of being a racist. He states the injustices faced by blacks were suffocating. Distinguished and educated black men were excluded from positions of power and gaining social status. He further

comments that he knew Rachel, he finds her to be spoiled and ignorant. She was “una vive bien, nunca tuvo ideas sociales, ni se interesó por la política del país. Hacía sus obritas allí y después se iba de lo más campante para su casa” (70). He deems her to be a racist and expresses his admiration for the blacks struggling to fight for inequality. He represents her as an antagonist to the Republic, promoting immorality and injustice —greed and prostitution— throughout Cuba. He says: “La fiera fue ella que se aprovechó de esta República que lo único que supo hacer fue acumular riqueza [...] Rachel es el mejor ejemplo de la prostitución que reinó en este país, del vicio y de la mentira en bandejas” (70). He concludes by advising the reader to be entertained by her charisma, but not considering anything she says to be substantial. An insult that would resound just a page later by Adolfo, who exclaims: “—Eres una puta como tu señora madre” (72).

Later in her narrative, Rachel seems to contradict her initial statement by arguing “Nunca me ha gustado discriminar a nadie, ni siquiera por el color [...] Eso es injusto a mí, me parece condenable, porque una nariz no puede definir a un ser humano, de carne y hueso y con cerebro” (116). Given her friendship with Acebal, an Afro-Cuban in the Alhambra, along with her portrayal and understanding of Afro-Cuban culture, it would seem that Rachel would openly support their endeavor for racial equality. However, regardless of her sympathy for the oppressed, her solution to the injustice is: “que el negro se quede como negro y el blanco como blanco. Cada uno en su justo y humano lugar, sin mezcolanzas innecesarias” (116). Through Rachel and one of the fragments incorporated in the text, it is affirmed that the injustices faced by Afro-Cubans prohibited blacks from possessing positions of power and status. And, as Reyita indicates, this obvious injustice was not being remedied by whites and left no opportunities for blacks to correct the matter. On the contrary, it seemed that people like Rachel, were justifying

and stimulating racism throughout Cuba with the success of her blackface performance—an attitude that reveals further complexities in the hegemonic hierarchy in Cuban racial discourse that will be further discussed later in this work.

Disturbed by such inequality between blacks and whites, her economic disadvantage and the oppressive constraints of her society, Reyita adopts her mother's belief as part of her strategy to combat against the subjugation. She believes that advancing the race is the only way to escape discrimination and to secure progress in society, an endeavor that Reyita entrusts in her *Virgencita*¹—the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre. She relies on her *Virgencita* to help her face the injustices presented in her life, as it seems there aren't many options or opportunities available to her. Reyita asks her *Virgencita* for a white husband so she can have better economic prospects and advance the race (62). She wants to ensure that her children's lives will not be negatively affected by the color of their skin; she believes racial “advancement” will be achieved by praying to her *Virgencita* for a good, hard-working, white husband. By marrying a white man, she wants to secure that no one would be able to discriminate against her children. She says, “no quise que los hijos que tuviera sufrieran lo que sufrí yo” (17). Upon meeting Antonio Amador Rubiera, a white, telegraph operator for the railway company “*Welfargo*” (sic), she feels that her *Virgencita* has answered her prayer: “La Virgencita me lo concedió joven, buen mozo, lindo, trabajador. Tenía muchas virtudes, no era fiestero ni tomador ni mujeriego” (59).

¹ In *Afro-Cuban Religions*, Miguel Barnet explains the collision between African heritage and Catholicism to establish Santería. He describes the significance of the Virgen de la Caridad de Cobre, the patron saint of Cuba: she is known as Ochún Kolé, who embodied all the womanly virtues; she is the goddess of cardinal love; and, the patron saint of pregnant women (57-58). Barnett states that Ochún Kolé was one of orishas that was perhaps the easiest and most natural to adapt in Cuba. In the legends, she is presented as “a capricious man-eater,” capable of seducing Changó, one of the most revered saints of *santería* (47). According to Barnet, she also “symbolizes the mulata of the colonial period or the typically Cuban sensual and stylish mulata”. Furthermore, it is said that Ochún is the eldest of the saints and described as vigilant. She is often depicted engaging in a domestic task—such as embroidering and/or sewing (57). Barnet regards her as one of the most venerated and one of the saints that has adapted most easily and naturally to Cuba. He states: This is not only because of the syncretism linking the patron saint of Cuba with Ochún but also because, with her sensual grace and creole mischievousness, she represents Cuban womanhood (58).

Her faith allows her to restore control over the uncontrollable—which tend to be problems with health, love and money.² She uses various spiritual methods to heal people, most notably an instance of infertility. In her healing rituals, we see the manifestation of her faith in her *Virgencita*. For instance, Monín, her fourth son, is born with dystrophy and an unknown disease. Understanding that her son could not be saved, Reyita desperately pleads for the intervention of her *Virgencita* in the life of her son. She begs, “¡Préstamelo aunque sea hasta que lo vea hecho un hombre!” (65). That night, she dreamt of a cure for Monín. She took a small papaya, peeled it and cut in four, discarded a piece of it, and put the rest to boil. She mixed in milk and gave it to Monín. Upon drinking her cure, he fainted. She was fearful she had killed her son; Rubiera rushed a doctor to the house to examine the state of the child. Upon examining Monín, he found that the remedy was working. He ordered her to continue giving the child her home remedy; and eventually, Monín was cured. Given the amount of poverty in Cuba, Reyita explains that poor people were dependent on herbs and roots to concoct home remedies. People sought healers that relied on faith to try and keep their families healthy. Thus, Reyita’s faith instilled in her a sense of hope when her obstacles proved to be overwhelming and impossible to handle on her own.

Word spread of Reyita’s healing abilities and she became know as a local healer. Families would often ask Reyita for remedies. She used her faith to cure children with asthma, colds, parasites, and other ailments. Out of charity, she would help families by praying to her *Virgencita* for the cure to their ailment. She supplied remedies for women wanting to avoid pregnancy and also women who struggled with infertility. However, her gift would begin to

² Reyita’s spiritualism was often refered to as *espiritismo cruza’o* or *espiritismo de cordón*. A faith based on the fusion of religious concepts by African slaves, elements of Catholicism and the scientific spiritualism of Alan Kardec (McLean 175). The religion is founded upon the belief that the spirits of ancestors intervene in the earthly life of human beings. Using material elements, such as water, they are able to produce cures in sessions they call *santiguación*.

disrupt the practices of local doctors and pharmacists—who were losing clients as a result of Reyita’s home remedies. She explains: “La mayoría de las personas acuden a buscar los beneficios de los espíritus, de los muertos o de los santos, cuando tienen un peo paretado, por problemas de salud, de justicia, o para buscar solución a algun problema que consideran muy difícil o imposible de resolver por sí mismos. En Cuba siempre fue así, y siempre lo será; aquí, todo el mundo camina” (96).

In other words, people often searched for solutions to problems with the help of the spiritual realm. However, it is important to note that Reyita did not believe that her *Virgencita* was the equivalent of a genie in a bottle. For example, upon hearing that Rubiera was expecting a child with another women, she asks her saint not to allow another woman to take her husband away. It was rumored that shortly after, the woman died of thirst—due to her extreme poverty. Fearful that her husband’s lover’s death, and potentially their child’s death, was a result of her prayer, she became more cautious of her prayers. She began to evaluate the potentially fatal repercussions that her prayers could have on the lives of others (64-65). In moments of distress and desperation, she asked for the intervention and protection of her *Virgencita*, while realizing that she needed to respect and be aware of the power of her saint. Out of reverence, Reyita would make offerings and promises to her *Virgencita*. By praying, lighting candles, and offering water and flowers to the spirits, she displayed her devotion to them.

The attitude she demonstrates while handling the death of Monín, her son, exhibits her sincere devotion to her saint. Once notified of Monín’s death on the explosion of *La Coubre*, Reyita praises her *Virgencita* for saving her son, when he was a boy, and giving him an honorable death (129). The death of her son brings her great suffering, but she does not question her *Virgencita*’s action. She remains resolved in her faith.

According to Reyita, the poor were dependent upon spiritual outlets and fortuitous opportunities to restore their hope for equality. For example, she once dreamt of the winning lottery tickets numbers, which her aunt Doña Mangá, didn't play—because she believed Reyita to be a witch. Doña Mangá exclaimed, “Alla va la bruja!, porque tú vas a ser bruja. Fíjate no voy a comprar nada” (44). Nevertheless, Reyita's vision was correct and the numbers she dreamt won third prize. According to Reyita, the prize could have been the solution to many of their problems. She says, “Por decirme bruja, yo me alegré de que no hubiera ganado, pero en el fondo de mi corazón sentí pena, Porque la lotería era una de las pocas esperanzas que tenían los pobres de ganar algún dinerito con que resolver algunos de sus tantos problemas” (45). With her faith, Reyita is able to gain control of not only her own life, but also helps establish control for others in the community. She empowers the usage of Afro-Cuban religions to bring healing, and defies gender roles within her religion by acquiring a sense of power as a healer. As a result, she would further empower Afro-Cuban religions by unintentionally disrupting the practices of local doctors and pharmacists—who were losing clients as a result of Reyita's home remedies. For Helg, *santería* is a “strand of ‘politics’; that can only be understood as such in the context of Afro-Cuban history” (Cited in McLean 5). The rejection of whites against *santería* —in the 1920s whites demonized and imprisoned *brujos* (male *santería* priests)—turned *santería* into a politics of the oppressed, according to Dore (McLean 7). She states that by practicing Afro-Cuban religions, Reyita challenged the views of white Cuban society. Her Afro-Cuban religion preserved African pride and displayed her engagement in race politics. Moreover, within her religion she confronted gender roles —as it was customary for most *brujos* to be male.

Like Reyita, Rachel came from an underprivileged background. Her mother was a single, Hungarian woman, who Rachel states sacrificed everything to ensure her daughter's success.

Rachel consistently repeats that her mother's persistence and care propelled her into her career and out of their low status. It was Rachel's career, her contribution as an artist, which fomented her sense of independence. Her testimony presents a constant struggle between establishing her role as an artist and as a woman. She finds herself confronting the paradigm of a traditional woman. And much like Reyita, escaping these expectations by initially being dependent on the resources and stability brought by white men. A lifestyle that is criticized not only through the intercalated fragments inserted throughout the narrative, but also by the women in Rachel's life. For instance, Rachel describes how her teachers criticized her professional career as a child. As a dancer in the Tívoli at such a young age, her teachers reprimanded her mother for allowing her daughter to pursue such a tasteless career. Rachel describes her teachers' behavior: "aquellas mujeres beatas de cuello alto eran anticuadas"(19-20). She defends her choices by stating that the real problem comes when people turn to dancing simply for money, "Lo malo es servirse del baile para comerciar" (20). She turns the discourse into a conflict between an antiquated way of thinking and a modern reflection of the role of women in society. By declaring that the concerns of a woman should be: "la casa, el amor al hombre, el arte, tocar el piano, saber hacer un dulce, bordar, ser amable" (107). Recognizing the fact that she is a contradiction of this traditional model, she finds herself to be a little masculine. She reveals her inclination for what she considers to be masculine interests, such as her desire to be a skydiver or an aviator (107). Aware of her aversion to the archetype, she finds herself consumed with her desire to improve: "yo sola me superé" (14). Thus, she struggled to commit to relationships and identify with other women. She often finds herself alienated from others and recognizes a void in her life. These feelings of alienation and depression develop her voice as an artist.

She not only improves as a performer, but begins to write as well. She writes, “Pues sentía yo que el mundo era maravilloso y terrible, que estaba sola y que tenía deseos de decir cosas bellas y tristes, mi soledad, mi amor, mi arte; todo lo que yo soñaba en la vida, y el papel, el pobre, respondió siempre, el papel no me defraudó, por eso yo escribía, para llenar un vacío, como cuando ensayaba o hacía un dulce, igual” (84). This sensitivity to emotions and aptitude to express them is what she considers to be indispensable to an artist. Furthermore, it’s an ability that she believes has distinguished her as an artist:

Dice un poeta que los artistas somos niños grandes y ésta es una verdad como templo. Somos niños grandes; nos dejamos llevar por la inocencia, de ahí que el triunfo no signifique para nosotros vanagloria, egoísmo, nada; estamos dotados de eso que se llama ángel, y con eso nos morimos. Y no vengan a decirme ahora que la carrera de una artista termina cuando se retira. Ser artista no es pasarse en un escenario a cantar; es sentir distinto a los demás, amar con pasión, odiar con pasión, sentir, que es tan extraño en la especie humana. Eso es una artista legítima. (102)

In order to combat the animosity that surrounded the life of an artist, Rachel relied on the powers of her Santas to protect her from the wicked and jealous. She says she carries with her a prayer to ward away her enemies. After using holy water to make the sign of the Cross three times and saying two or three “Our Father,” she would recite this prayer:

Oh, Virgen mía, aparta de mi lado a estos seres malvados, envidiosos y fieros que me acechan. Acudo a ti, Santa Bárbara, para que los confundas. Tú, la sublime protectora y generosa cristiana que abres tu pecho para los buenos seres. En él entro y de él saldré con la sangre de tu corazón para liberarme de ellos y no

permitas que interrumpan mi marcha cristiana y, si persisten, envíales de cabeza al infierno como castigo a sus maldades y liberarme de todo mal. Amén. Amén. Amén. (Tengo que decirlo tres veces). (127)

Similar to Reyita, Rachel shares a belief in the forces of a higher power. Although she does not share the same religious faith as Reyita, she does have a mystical outlook of the world. Throughout her testimony, she states that her faith is a culmination of different beliefs. She says, “Por mi signo y por mis dos Santas, Mariana y Barbarita, estoy protegida hasta el día de mi muerte” (127). Her faith is a fusion of astrology, Catholicism, and superstition. She believes that the land determines the success and fate of its people. For instance, in the first chapter, she establishes that she is neither a witch nor a gipsy; but she does believe that those who are born in Cuba are born with a mission, either for good or bad. The land predetermines the destination of its people; thus, she has great reverence for Cuba: “El que nace en Cuba tiene su estrella asegurada, o su cruz, porque también existe el que viene a darse cabezazos” (13). Her success and her fame are factors that she attributes to Cuba; and it is part of this faith in her country that inspires her.

Rachel also believes that the stars and her faith have determined all her characteristics and her destiny. She deems, “el mundo está regido por los astros. La armonía de la tierra se debe a ellos. Por eso hay que buscar las afinidades” (126). She attributes her character to her astrological sign and believes her duplicitous nature is the result of being an Aquarius. She says, “Yo soy la mujer de la dos caras por culpa de esa planeta que se llama Saturno” (124). Her astrological sign determines and guides various aspects of her life, most specifically whom she loves. Eusebio, her first love, explains that supernatural forces determined their love. He believes that Rachel and him were destined to find one another. He says, “En una misma celda,

prisioneros” (15). The same forces that brought them together would be the cause of his death. She attributes Eusebio’s death to the destiny determined by his astrological sign—as a Cancer, he was destined to be a destructive force (126).

Her destiny as an artist was determined by a line found on the palm of her hand that runs up to her wrist. And, she ardently claims that a full moon controls her behavior: “Cuando hay luna llena es que yo me pongo frenética, arisca, no quiero ver a nadie y me da por...” (125). The spirits and forces she feels in the world are manifested in Cuba; and, have instilled in her a strong sense of pride and reverence for her country. Furthermore, when dealing with death or illness, Reyita and Rachel look to their faith for strength. For instance, Rachel depends on prayer and the idea of an afterlife to console her with the death of her mother and friend, Adolfo. Although she was not a devout catholic, she finds herself praying for hours as she frequents their graves. It is even speculated in one of the fragments, that she would send her housekeeper, Ofelia, to go to confessionals on her behalf (77). The voice mentions that once Rachel was 39 to 40 years old, she became nun like. She alienated herself from the world and confided only in Ofelia, her mother, and her dog (76). In addition, upon desiring to obtain a job with Federico in the theatre, she prays to Mariana Grajales:³ “—Ay Mariana Grajales, te lo suplico. ¡Que pueda yo entrar a trabajar en este teatro! ¡Marianita, te lo ruego” (83). As a leading figure for women’s struggle and antislavery movements, it’s curious to consider why Rachel would pray to a *mulata* given her racist attitude and unappreciative outlook of black women and culture.

³ According to the *Encyclopedia of African-American Culture and History*, Jean Stubb explains that Mariana Grajales is a historical figure in Cuba and is often regarded as “the official mother of Cuba.” She was a free woman of color, who died in 1893 in exile in Kingston, Jamaica. She is best known as the “glorious mother of the Maceos,” the most famous of whom was her son, General Antonio Maceo (1845–1896). After the 1959 revolution: she was revered as the defiant and heroic, revolutionary mother-leader, whose loyalty was to causes beyond her own image and those of husband, father, or son [...] For many Afro-Cubans, Grajales symbolizes the spirit power of women of color to lead and commune with the *orishas* (spirits) to redress imbalance through ritual and action. To exhort others to kill and to die for a cause is seen as being within the power and right of a strong nurturer-warrior woman, and such a figure can resonate through history to take on mythical proportions. (937)

She often regards herself as a sinner, stating: “yo no soy beata, pero tengo mis creencias: soy supersticiosa” (98). Her belief in the spiritual realm instils in her attentiveness to potential omens. For example, she sensed someone was going to die after she accidentally broke her mirror. After a restless night of sleep, she is awoken to find that Adolfo was beaten to death.

Much like Reyita’s life, Rachel adopts various strategies to confront and explain her destiny as a woman. She gains control of her career, mental sanity, and her love life through the usage of several spiritual outlets. Reyita believed in the energy and clarity provided by her spirits. Through their power, she believed she was able to overcome even the most challenging obstacles. Similar to Reyita, it seems that a few inconsistencies appear throughout her life, such as her reverence for Mariana Grajales. She adamantly states that blacks are inferior, yet she clearly admires their resilience and has an attraction for their culture —her success as an artist is dependent on her ability to master the Afro-Cuban rumba and mimic Afro-Cuban culture in her performance of the *mulata*, as noted by Andrea Morris (31). In addition, it is apparent that much like Reyita, the characteristics her saint represents reveal the very aspects of her identity she wishes she could suppress. She claims to support the traditional role of women, but she embodies and appears to inadvertently value what she considers to be masculine interests and Afro-Cuban culture, much like her Santa.⁴ Like Reyita notes, religion is a key strategy to surviving in Cuba: “Considero que la religión es un problema de cada quien, que cada persona practique lo que quiera hacer, siempre que sus creencias no le hagan daño a nadie. De una cosa yo sí estoy segura, y es que en Cuba todo el mundo lleva sus creencias dentro de su corazón: dígallo o no lo diga” (98).

⁴ Santa Bárbara is considered to be the feminine equivalent of Changó.

CHAPTER 3

A TWENTIETH CENTURY CUBAN LOVE STORY

Reyita met Rubiera while working at the Cuba y España Hotel. Every night he would play billiards in the room downstairs in the hotel. As Reyita would go up and down the stairs in the hotel, Rubiera would look up at her. One day, she became furious with his tireless peeping that she lifted her skirt and said, “Si quiere mirar, ¡mire!” (60). He was fascinated by Reyita and ran up the stairs to cover her in kisses. Initially, she refused, but he continued to kiss her. She kissed him back and found his persistence to be endearing, and eventually they married. After their wedding, Rubiera introduced Reyita to his family. However, Rubiera’s family slammed the door in their face upon seeing that Reyita was black. As a response to his family, Rubiera swore never to return to his family; and he kept his promise (61). Unlike Rubiera’s family, Reyita’s family had the complete opposite reaction. They embraced Rubiera as a member of the family. They felt that with him the race would be improved and that Reyita would gain stability in her life.

Similar to Reyita’s first encounter with Rubiera, Rachel depicts her encounter with her first love, Eusebio and reveals a similar story. She describes her first time meeting him as he is catcalling at her from the crowd during her performance. Offended by his audaciousness, she gives him a look of disapproval. He grabs her leg in the midst of a number and she smacks him. And she concludes, “Y ése fue mi primer enamorado” (20). She describes him as a subservient man, who followed her every move and frequently gave her headaches (23). However, “Así nació la única pasión pura de mi vida” (23), says Rachel, indicating that her love for Eusebio was the only pure passion in her life. While describing her love for Eusebio, she relates everything

from the night she lost her virginity to him to the gruesome abortion procedure she underwent while she was six months pregnant with his baby.

And, much like Reyita's romance, Eusebio's family disapproved of his relationship with Rachel—they believed she was only interested in Eusebio because she was a gold digger. Unlike Rubiera, their disapproval was enough to impede his relationship with Rachel. Eventually the tension was enough to lead him to his suicide. According to Eusebio's brother's account of the death, Eusebio threatened to end his life if his parents did not allow him to see Rachel. His suicide would tarnish Rachel's reputation in society, as people would blame her as the alleged cause of his suicide (25).

In this chapter, the similarities between these two narratives will be analyzed in two sections. The first section focuses on the persistent and cheeky displays of affection by men that both women found, or eventually found, endearing, a quality that Cuban women found desirable in men, according to Rachel. The second section discusses how the families' rejection of both women contributed to the usage of resistance strategies in their lives.

Men and Pockets

As aforementioned, both women seem to initially be insulted and then intrigued by the audacious behavior displayed by their love interest. Rachel offers an explanation of the romantic mindset of the Cuban woman of the twentieth century, reflected in her commentary about the deceased, Cuban pimp, Alberto Yarini. She describes not only her own infatuation with the Cuban pimp of San Isidro, but his overall charm on Cuban women as a whole:

Mujeres loquitas por él. Se les caía la baba, se abrían de piernas. Yo comprendo esa ilusión. Para mí el amor a un hombre arrogante es lo más grande que hay. De los mojigatos nadie se enamora. Pero de un tirano como ése, ya lo creo. Yo misma

sin haberlo hablado nunca, sólo de haberlo visto pasearse, ya estaba medio embelesada. Porque es que él era algo imposible. Un tipo de varón que no se daba fácil. Había que rogarle, hacerle sus cuentos y sus guiños. ¡Qué época! Hoy no se ve eso. Hoy el amor es una vulgaridad. Firmar un papel, tener una porción de niños, curieles, una suegra... ¡Horror! Antes las cosas no eran así, tan en frío. Había misterio, secreto en las relaciones. Poder decir yo vivo con Alberto Yarini era muy difícil para cualquier mujer, para cualquiera. (44)

As she describes Yarini, she emphasizes that his arrogance is considered desirable and capable of arousing submissive behavior from women. By contrasting him with “mojigatos,” she insists that what women are not interested in a meek man. Women desire a challenge. Thus, they feel the need to cater to those kinds of men to earn their attention. However, she scornfully admits that the mindset is changing in Cuba. She notices that love has become about raising large families and signing documentation to legally validate these relationships. A transition that she feels has eliminated the mystery of undefined relationship, which she considers to be a fundamental aspect of love. She further supports this postulation throughout the course of her narrative, as she consistently reveals her aversion and lack of reciprocity to subservient and dependent men.

Considering the traits that made Yarini desirable appear to contrast sharply with all the reasons that made Adolfo, her longtime lover, undesirable to Rachel. She consistently depicts Adolfo as servile and needy. For instance, after providing her with her own room, she recalls how he threatened to commit suicide after she told him she wanted to live alone. She explains the day she asked him to leave her: “Aquel hombre era una baba y yo, jovencita y enamorada, no iba a echarme ese esperpento para toda la vida” (71). His relentless desire to serve Rachel and his perceived overprotective nature suffocates her.

In *Caribbean Literature and the Public Sphere*, Raphael Dalleo regards Rachel as not only a victim of her society, but also as a victimizer of Cuban masculinity. Dalleo emphasizes on the numerous occasions that men “fall under her spell and find themselves emasculated” (184). Dalleo utilizes her relationship with Adolfo to support his argument. He believes that although Adolfo is considered to be sophisticated and affluent, yet he is often depicted as worshipping Rachel to the point of humiliation —upon accompanying Rachel to a party, he dresses as a Dutch girl, while she dresses as a noble Andalusian (51). This trend throughout her testimony contrasts sharply when compared to the homosexual behavior presented in Barnet’s *Biografía de un cimarrón*. Homosexual practices never appear to be anything but the epitome of masculinity, the upper-class men of *Canción* take female lovers yet are unmasked as androgynous and impotent dandies, contends Dalleo (184). In *Cancion*’s prefatory note, Barnet states that the intercalated fragments are meant to complement the central monologue. However, an interesting detail is that the counternarrators that often interrupt Rachel’s monologue are predominantly men. He states, “These men explicitly ground their attacks on Rachel in their authority as men” (185). A structure that he argues demonstrates the marginalization of men and reflects the feminized public sphere, which characterized republican Cuba. Thus, Rachel’s testimony appears to be insufficient on its own—through Barnet’s usage of predominately male counternarrators, men’s voices are presented as possessing a higher truth-value than Rachel’s (185). Regardless of Rachel’s insistence and affirmation as the individual subject of her narrative, her story is literally composed of various voices and results to be the *Canción* of Cuba: by capturing the voices of Cuban men and women.

She consistently uses the expression “ Me lo metí en un bolsillo” to describe the success of her charm on men. This attitude is best captured in her relationship with Don Anselmo, her

employer at the circus. Upon meeting Don Anselmo, he begins to belittle Adolfo. She immediately reprimands him on his lack of professionalism and demands that he respect her personal life. She describes his reaction, “y lo pasmé. Estos empresarios que se creen que pueden hacer de una monigote, lo que se merecen es una respuesta así, contundente. Bueno, al mes, el hombre me tenía en primer balcón. Yo me lo metí en un bolsillo con mi malicia y con mi gracia natural” (55). She continues to express the power and manifestation of her charisma as she states, “Don Anselmo se enamoró de mí perdidamente. Daba lástima verlo a mis pies, babeando. Me traía agua: ‘Un poquito, mi amor.’ A todas horas” (57).

She depicts herself as a manipulator and deceiver that preyed on his vulnerability. She often lied: she would fake injuries, pregnancies, and illnesses in order to avoid giving performances and to receive special treatment from Don Anselmo. She states, “Fingía estar acongojada para que el dueño me trajera mantecados. Fingir es muy sencillo. Nadie se imagina lo sencillo que es. Y mucho menos calcula. Que calculen el resultado para que vean que sin un poco de esos trucos, al artista más grande se hunde” (56). She reflects on her behavior and says, “Las mujeres somos malas en el fondo. Abusamos de los hombres. Yo lo confieso” (63). When commenting on her relationship with Anselmo, although she emphasizes how she manipulated him, she also comments on the effect he had on her emotionally. She describes herself as sympathetic to his desperation. He would often supplicate that she stay with him: “Yo te lo aguanto todo niña, haz lo que tú quieras, mátame si lo deseas, pero tú eres mi vida” (63). Thus, she would stay with him as a result of this sympathy. However, a fragment inserted directly after, exposes an alleged affair she had while with Don Anselmo. The fragment is the voice of an ex-lover who explains their romantic rendezvous; and concludes by stating that throughout their affair, he believed Don Anselmo knew (63).

Just shortly after admitting to her deceptive character, she attempts to defend herself from accusations of arson. After the circus experiences a fire, she claims fellow performers, out of hate and envy, blamed her for the fire. “Es una historia de las vicisitudes de una artista decente en un ambiente de envidias,” maintains Rachel (60). She concludes her defense by stating, “Pero digo al que no cogen con las manos en la masa es inocente,” a remark that instills an ambiguous sense of assurance that she is innocent or a sense of doubt as to whether she is innocent simply because she wasn’t caught. While detained for the alleged crime, she describes her encounter with an officer on duty, who would bring her cigarettes and painkillers. She says “Me lo metí en un bolsillo” as she flirtatiously reveals to him that they are both of the same sign, Aquarius, and can now spend a year there knowing she’s safe (61). In addition, she reveals the advice he gave to her. According to Rachel, he instructed her not to reveal anything about the fire—for she would be acquitted of the crime, regardless of whether or not she was culpable. Once again, her charm with men establishes a sense of comfort and proved to be advantageous while trying to deal with the difficulties presented in her life.

When men begin to sacrifice for her, she does not reciprocate with the same sense of devotion. She feels they lose their identity and feels obligated to commit to them. For instance, she describes her relationship with her husband, Federico, denoting the lack of chemistry in the relationship and her boredom with him: “entonces yo no sentía nada, el me tocaba, se revolcaba, me mordía y yo como si nada” (103). Regardless of his devotion for her, she finds herself apathetic to their relationship and tempted by her infatuation with other men. She cheats on Federico and later confesses, “en el fondo yo lo quiero todavía, sin lástima, pero sí con un poco de culpa de mi parte” (103). The support she receives from men help bring her advantages throughout her career, but the love she has for men does not compare to the devotion she feels

for her mother. Her passion for men seems to strictly manifest itself in her sexual encounter with them. In the aforementioned affair she had, she states “La juventud es un tesoro. Y dos jóvenes en una cama, con pasión, valen toda la vida. No comprendo a las solteras, ni a las viudas, que se quedan solas, ni a las monjas, ni a los mismos curas. Jamás los comprenderé. Para mi son seres anormales, trancos. ¡Ay hombres, cómo los necesito!” (105).

Throughout her life, Rachel explains how her dependence on men and their dependence on her brings her financial security. In addition to her performance career, Rachel embarks on other business opportunities. She relates how she purchased houses in Havana and converted one of them into a brothel. By equipping the brothel, with a bar and a madam, who was responsible for receiving men, and employing young, immigrant women, she created a profitable business and secured her future. A successful venture she keeps from her husband. However, in order to even establish herself financially to open a brothel, she alludes to her career in prostitution. In addition, she reveals how after leaving Adolfo, she secured her own home, where she says she received many friends. Friends that she didn't neglect because they helped pay for her bills: “ellos me ayudaron a pagar mis gastos hasta que logré encauzarme” (72). A means to financial security that Adolfo frowns upon and belittles Rachel for: “—Eres una puta como tu señora madre” (72).

Dalleo indicates Barnett's intention in *Canción*: “Rachel's confessions, her troubled life during the scintillating years of the Cuban *belle époque*...have made possible a book which reflects the frustrated atmosphere of republican life. Rachel was... a true gauge of the country's social and political activities” (186). According to the critic, Rachel embodies all of the social, economic, and cultural forces of postcoloniality that threaten the possibility of an authentic, indigenous Caribbean culture; she is deemed as a threat to Cuban independence, that together

with the United States and the locally complicit feminized bourgeoisie managed to turn Cuba away from its heroic masculine tradition. Nightclubs, cabarets, and other accouterments of the tourist industry have eroded Rachel's Cuban identity and forced her to prostitute herself by performing for an international culture industry; thus, Dalleo concludes that Rachel is a dangerous threat of the postcolonial artist, who is corrupted and feminized by the market. Furthermore, he explains that Barnet suggests, "The postcolonial writer must maintain his relevance and heroic masculinity. *Testimonio* must be embraced as a way of avoiding commodification and aligning with the uncontaminated folk" (187).

Rachel responds to the idea that she was a threat to Cuban independence. She frequently describes Cuba in a frantic state and struggling with their distribution of wealth. She comments on the hunger of the poor and the wealth of the rich: "Mucho dinero en la calle, para los ricos, y mucha hambre para los pobres. Los teatros se llenaban al tope. Iban los que podían meterse las manos en los bolsillos. Los que no, se quedaban con la miel en los labios" (109). Throughout her narrative, she wavers in her support and opposition to the Republic. For instance, upon describing her indifference for the political scene in Cuba, she boldly states that if she were a first lady, her influence would result in the ruin of the Republic. Her strategy would be to help all in need: "y así, hubiera arruinado a la República pero nadie iba a quedarse sin una ayuda. Al manco, al paralitico, al muerto de hambre, a todos les iba a llenar los bolsillos con el tesoro del país, porque yo no creo en parquecitos, ni en grandes edificios, que cada cual con su bolsillo hiciera lo que quisiera, se pagaran sus enfermedades, sus males" (108).

For Rachel, the real threat to art was performing for the rich, who often abused the artist. She describes her experience performing at private parties, where the rich devalued her performance through their excessive drinking and inattentiveness. "Lo más triste para un artista

es cantar o bailar en una fiesta privada. La gente en su lujuria, no pone atención; beben y beben y de una ni se percatan” (79). She would perform *guarachas*, dance and recite her monologue, yet her rich audience was consumed by their drinking, incapable of even recalling her name.

When dealing with the elite, she reveals that as a true star, she must display a sense of indifference: “Una mujer con tino debe saber controlar sus emociones y cuando no sepa qué decir, debe callar con discreción” (81). A sense of discretion that she feels new artist don’t implement and has lead to the dilapidation of show-business: “Y si no me creen, miren hacia esa juventud, esa televisión, esos programas de radio: cotorras enjauladas, voces de rana toro y cuerpo de grillo malojero. Y como si todo eso fuera poco, sin donaire, salidas de estiércol, ¡esas son las artistas de hoy!” (81).

Rachel finds her independence in her artistic contribution and expression. As an artist, she felt that by giving her touch to a work, she enriched it. She expresses the adversity she faces to become recognized as an artist. Her critics often label her as “una bandolera,” “una puta,” “canilluda” and “tortillera” (70). As a *vedette*, her contribution as an artist was often undermined and classified as prostitution. Some critics deemed her to be a danger to performance —she was depreciating the true merit of artistry in theater (76). Rachel states that mediocre actresses, envious of her ability and success, employed various tactics to sabotage her career. “Llegaban a los camerinos a insultarme, me creían hija del demonio. Me rompían los libretos, me quemaban la ropa, me indisponían con los jefes, con los muchachos de la tramoya, con los escenógrafos” (76), are some of the tactics she mentions were utilized against her.

In addition to the fragments included by her critics, Rachel comments on the hardships she faced from fellow artists —her harshest critics consisted of dance instructors and other *vedettes*. For instance, upon receiving lessons from one of the greatest dance instructors in

Havana, el Sevillano, he attempts to insult Rachel's artistic ability by saying, "que yo era una rumbera nata. Pero no bailarina" (51). She responds to him by assuring him that he was only to worry about teaching her the technicality of dance and she would be responsible for adding her artistic touch. Rachel ardently holds that she was a multifaceted artist; her talent did not consist of simply acting or dancing. She states, "Yo no era solamente una actriz, como decir, en ciernes, sino lo que fui y por lo que recuerda mi pueblo; una vedette *all around*" (51). Giving the discrimination she faced as a *vedette*, she is often depicted as aggressive and assertive with her male employers.

Thus, Rachel develops her own ways to advance in an already failing Republic. Her dependence on men serves as a means to secure her own independence—a conundrum similar to her love/hate of Afro-Cuban culture. By using the stability she gains by associating with wealthy and powerful men, she secures her own success in Cuba and eventually gains her own economic independence. Her relationship with Don Anselmo and Federico instill a sense of sympathy in her, but simply perpetuate reoccurring patterns of cheating in her life.

Reyita also admits to a similar struggle in her relationship with Rubiera. She often regards Rubiera as a way to advance her race, presenting him as a means to an end. She conforms to some of the expectations of a traditional, patriarchal household—in order to secure: housing, food, and medical treatment. She recognizes that with Rubiera, she gained stability. She states, "Rubiera garantizaba –además de la representación como jefe de la familia—casa, comida, médico, y medicina" (87). Her desire to be independent was hindered by the reality of her life. Due to societal norms and the traditional roles imposed upon women in Cuba, she was forced to be dependent of Rubiera, even though their outlook on life clashed drastically.

For instance, Reyita noticed that among white couples, they referred to one another as Don or Doña. Although she was married to a white man, no one ever called her Doña. Marcelina, a black servant, explained: “¿Por que te van a decir doña? A esa gente le dicen doña porque son blancas y tienen dinero; pero a ti, negra prieta —y casada con blanco, sí, pero pobre— ¿doña de que? ¡Reyita!” (63). This moment contributed to Reyita’s awakening. Not only does it reflect for her the strain and inequality in the relationship between blacks and whites, but it also serves as a monumental moment in regard to her identity. She finds that her status in society is dependent on Rubiera. Regardless of having him at her side, she will never be considered as an equal to a white person; but, with him, she is treated better than before, and believes it will bring her, and her family, closer to being treated with equality. Thus, she considers it to be advancing her race. Although her status in society is dependent on Rubiera, she battles the hegemonic order in Cuba by embracing other aspect of her identity that helps her gain some independence. The change in her attitude is revealed as she reflects on her conversation with Marcelina years later. She says:

En esos momentos no la entendí muy bien, yo era muy inocentona, después sí; ¡y de qué manera! Ahora tengo muchos bienes, pero no materiales, sino espirituales: mis hijos y mis nietos ¡qué lindos! Los hay maestros, médicos, ingenieros, profesores, técnicos, obreros. No tengo borrachos ni ladrones. Me siento rica, y ni con esa riqueza tan grande me gusta que me digan doña, prefiero ser Reyita, sencillamente Reyita. ¿No es verdad? Es más bonito. (63)

In her reflection, Reyita identifies the aspects of her life that fulfill her, what she deems to be as her spiritual riches. She finds the successes of her children and grandchildren to be worth her own personal sacrifice. As a result, she accepts that in her life she will be unable to reform

societal expectations. But, by embracing that she is simply Reyita, she will be able to ensure that her family will receive more opportunities than she ever had.

As aforementioned, in society, her status was initially dependent on Rubiera. With time, she found ways to establish her personal identity and independence from him. For instance, she began by seeking and attaining economic independence from him. In order to get through their economic struggles, Reyita established a cantina business. Her cantina business was profitable because of the high levels of prostitutes that were unable to cook and desired prepared meals (72). She established twenty-one cantinas, washed and ironed *guayaberas*, and sold coal, eggs and perfume. Soon, she was able to provide luxuries—electricity, a radio, new living room furniture, fine clothing and various celebrations— in her household, without the financial support of Rubiera. She exclaims, “había ocurrido un cambio muy grande en mi vida, ¡mi independencia! Ya podía hacer cosas sin contar con el viejo, había roto con la tradición de la sumisión al hombre de la casa” (136).

Dore explains that what is imperative to note about Reyita’s sacrifices and desire to seek independence is that her motive lies not in realizing her dreams of becoming neither a poet nor an activist; but, it lies in her desire to secure all that she longed for her children’s future (McLean 11). Reyita states her desire for her children: “una educación, desarrollarles su personalidad, cuidar del ambiente en que se iban a desenvolver, no mezclarlos con lo difícil de la vida” (134). By realizing her desire for her children, she broke from the traditional role of a woman. If she wanted to secure the progress of her children, she would have to free herself from Rubiera’s control. As explained by Reyita, he believed in the traditional subservient role of a woman. A role that she could not conform to given the lifestyle she wanted to provide for her children. Thus, she began to build a life independent of him.

In addition to the love she displays for her own children, Reyita loved and raised twenty-one children that were not her own. Several of the children she raised were the children of white people, specifically white prostitutes. Reyita explains that as a mother, she understood and related to a mother's grief. Out of a sense of humanity and understanding for the extreme poverty some of these mothers were facing, Reyita would care for the children and ask only that the mothers would help with the cost of feeding their child. Rubiera did not share Reyita's sense of humanity. He often tried to forbid her from caring for other children and did not contribute to help them. She comments that her husband would never understand her motives. Nevertheless, for over fifteen years, Reyita raised the children of struggling mothers. She noticed that both blacks and whites were in need of her help. She reflects, "el problema fundamental en Cuba, no era solamente ser negro, sino ser pobre" (73). Upon finding that she was not legally married to Rubiera—he deceived her for most of their marriage—she confesses that throughout her sexual relationship with Rubiera, she would have thoughts of infidelity. While making love to Rubiera, she found herself imagining he was another man she dated and looked like the Cuban revolutionary Julio Antonio Mella. The Mella look-alike was her first true love, they dated up until he met another woman and left Reyita. Heartbroken and distraught, she became skeptical of loving men. Then, she met Rubiera. She explains:

Tuve dos grandes dolores en el fondo de mi corazón: mi gran decepción amorosa y el engaño de tu papá. Ahí convivieron. Cuando todo dentro de mí volvió a la normalidad, comencé a disfrutar, sin remordimientos, mi infidelidad de pensamiento, al 'hacer el amor' con el que se parecía a Mella, mientras tenía relaciones sexuales con tu papá. Total yo también tenía derecho de engañarlo. En definitiva no había infidelidad, yo era soltera. ¡Yo siempre había sido una mujer soltera! (162)

Given the constraints presented by Rubiera in Reyita's life, he becomes a mere convenience for her in society. With him, she achieves the economic status she desires. However, she finds Rubiera to be an impediment in every other aspect for her family. Godo-Solo states that Rubiera represents the Republic (1902-1959) and the racist and sexist mentality present in Cuba at the time (171). As a result, a few inconsistencies are present in Reyita's life. For instance, although she is married, she is single; although she is a mother, she considers herself a father as well. Dore comments on the paradoxes presented in Reyita's life: "The different aspects of Reyita's life might be construed as inconsistent. The fact that seemingly incompatible ideas and behaviors, for instance marrying white and practicing *Santería*, sat side-by-side in her life, demonstrate that in their struggle to live with dignity Afro-Cubans adopted an assortment of strategies" (McLean 6). The desire to escape the strict regiment imposed by her husband causes her to favor the Revolution, where she hopes to move toward racial and gender equality. According to Godo-Solo:

Los ideales de la Revolución son los mismos que venía cultivando mucho antes: su determinación, su incesante trabajo, su compasión por los pobres y marginados. A esto hay que añadir el deseo de libertad e independencia; todo aquello se obtiene con la bendición de la Virgen. La Revolución no se puede concebir sin tomar en cuenta las aspiraciones individuales y convicciones personales, sede de la religiosidad y de la intimidad. (191)

Where Reyita displays an unconditional love and devotion for her children, Rachel demonstrates a strong devotion to her mother. Reyita's mother was not supportive of her daughter; but Rachel states that her mother lived for her. As aforementioned, Rachel's mother lived to secure Rachel's success. According to Rachel, her mother adapted to Rachel's ways and

attempted to follow her daughter as much as possible. Rachel states that her mother was her only love. She says, “Mamá era mi único amor, lo único que yo tenía en el mundo” (14). Regardless of the complicated nature of her relationship with men, the love she feels for her mother is unwavering. Without her mother, she begins to feel a deep sense of depression and becomes reclusive. She repeats, “estoy sola, sí, sola” (16). Reyita’s devotion to her family is reflected in her actions to enhance the opportunities for her family. Rachel’s devotion comes in the appreciation she feels for her mother’s sacrifice and her constant acknowledgement of her mother’s influence in her life. She describes her mother as a lighthouse that illuminates her path (141). Her mother throughout her testimony represents the only consistent love in her life.

CHAPTER 4

WHITE SKIN, BLACKFACE

Motivated by her desire to establish racial and gender equality, Reyita often defies her husband and favors the Revolution. By offering her house as a secure location for secret meetings and fundraising for the Popular Socialist Party, she invests herself fully to its cause. She remarks that she ignored Rubiera's disapproval —she was in the midst of an awakening. She explains, “despertando de la ceguera que me daba lo inocentona que era” (85). In addition to her activity in the Party, Reyita participated in Defense Committees, the Federation of Cuban Women, and the National Revolutionary Militia.

Reyita's political outspokenness contrasts sharply with Rachel's aversion to politics. She is incorporated into Cuba's political environment, although she didn't find herself interested by politics. The influences of the Alhambra, her mother and Federico forced her to gain a basic understanding of underlying political issues. Her mother insisted that she vote in elections and avoid politically scandalous roles. Federico desired for Rachel to follow his lead: “Vida tú sígueme en cuestiones políticas, sonríele al senador tal o más cuál, no te sobrepases en las obras de sátira social” (107). As aforementioned, she developed a rudimentary understanding of the Cuban political atmosphere; she believed a woman's place was not in politics: “Yo digo que una mujer en política es como un hombre cazuelero. Se pierde lo genuino del sexo, una se transforma, ya no es una; los trajines de una mujer deben ser otros” (107).

Rachel seems to waver between whether she supports the traditional or the nontraditional role of a woman. It appears she values the domestic role of a woman, while embodying the role of a nontraditional woman. For instance, Rachel's success takes place in the famed Alhambra Theater, a place she describes as a clear reflection of the political times in Cuba. “Que un

asesinato escandaloso: allí iban fulano o esperencejo y escribían un libreto; que un golpe de estado, que se querían robar la isla los americanos, que si un bandolero hacia de las suyas, y así. Ése era Alhambra” (95), she states. Furthermore, she emphasizes how it was a sanctuary for historical masterpieces: “La vida de los griegos en Atenas, de los romanos, la batalla de Waterloo, los amores ciegos como Abelardo y Eloísa o Romeo y Julieta, la pasión por el automóvil, los celos, todos los sentimientos de una persona culta, se reflejaban en las obras del Alhambra” (95). As an artist, her responsibility was to bring these roles to life. An endeavor she prides herself in knowing could only be done by the sharpest in the business. It was not a place for “mujeres torpes,” or “una cabezita sin luz” (96). In addition, she finds that it was also her responsibility to enrich her roles. She describes her importance along with other performers in the Alhambra, “Nosotros éramos la levadura y gracias a eso triunfaron los autores, que a veces lo que escribían era una mierda más grande que el mundo. Eso tengo yo agallas para decirlo” (96). Thus, it seems regardless of her apathy she is almost just as, if not more, politically involved as Reyita.

A curious aspect about Rachel’s life, reflective of the socioeconomic times in Cuba, is represented in one of her most successful characters presented on stage, her role as a *mulata*. According to Andrea Morris, blackface performance was a phenomenon that picked up momentum during the republic era in Cuba. A fad that Morris states “perpetuated the subordination of Afro-Cubans during the republican era” (31). For her performance, she researched the character of the *mulata* by visiting slums and observing black women with her friend in the Alhambra, Acebal, whom she describes as “negrito como el chapapote, tenía se puede decir, el alma de un ángel” (112). By identifying the unique ways in which they moved, talked, and danced, she absorbed their customs. For instance, after watching the mannerisms of

black women, he observes: “—Fíjate cómo camina la negra ésa, mire aquella mulata cómo se viste, fíjate bien: corales, argollas, tafetán. El rojo, Rachel, el rojo predomina. Oye lo que hablan estas dos” (114). She claims to have made Cuban theater history with her interpretation; a role that she claimed could never be successfully imitated. In one instance, she describes the artistry in her ability to interpret and perform both extremes of the *mulata*: *la mulata conga* and *la retórica*. Tomasa, *la mulata conga*, “es aquella sin barniz, la primitiva; una mujer con bozal y argollas. Es chancletera, vendedora de bollos o jardinera” (75).

Meanwhile, Concepción Baró, *la retórica*, “usa faldas más bien anchas, habla bajito pronunciando las eses, usa espejuelos, se plancha la pasa todos los días y lee, cosa rara entre las negra” (75). A song that Morris argues is reflective of the subordination of Afro-Cubans through the usage and promotion of certain stereotypes (31). *La mulata conga* is indifferent to the sexual advances of men, however employs a language that is flirtatious and provocative, as described by Morris: “Yo soy la negra Tomasa, / la flor de Jesus Maria. / No quiero parejería / ni que me vengan con guasa; /se propasa / porque yo tambien soy guapa. / Soy breva de buena capa / y al que me quiera probar / le digo con picardía: / ni te mojas ni te empapas” (74). A contradiction Morris believes to be emblematic of Cuban society’s outlook of black women, who were considered dangerous for white males, but were also viewed as sexually desirable and available for enjoyment outside of marriage. When contrasted to the *mulata retórica*, we find a *mulata* who is unfamiliar with Afro-Cuban representations of music, religion and tradition. *La mulata retórica* distances herself from the Afro-Cuban stereotypes. She sings, “Yo soy Concepción Baró, / estudio filosofía / y soy de Jesús María / la llave del corazón. / No sé lo que es una rumba / ni una conga ni un danzón. / Cristiana soy, devota por religión, y si de guasa se trata / aclaro que esta mulata / no engaña con polisón” (75). Regardless of the contrasting appearance *la*

mulata retórica and *la mulata conga* struggle with racial and sexual stereotypes. White hegemonic discourse associated people of African origin with uncontrollable sexual behavior.⁵ However, Rachel does depict both women as defensive toward these sexual advances, a popular topic in twentieth century burlesque theater, referred to as *teatro de variedades*. Morris cites the Cuba historian Alvaro López, who states “la mulata es la representación de la sexualidad” (32). The two characters Rachel portrays are demonstrative of the nineteenth century *bozal* and *catedrático*, “theatrical figures that were ‘defined at the intersection of race and language’” (32). Tomasa, *la mulata conga*, speaks Spanish poorly, and is interpreted to be the female version of the *negro bozal*, whose inability to speak Spanish correctly was associated with inferiority and stupidity. Whereas Concepción Baró, *la mulata retórica*, is the female equivalent of the *negro catedrático*, a figure used to mock Afro-Cuban aspirations to reach upward mobility through education. Thus, by mocking both ideas of a “civilized” and “uncivilized” *mulata* woman, it appears that there is “no room for Afro-Cubans to gain their own voice” (32). As a result, as established by Moore “the song of the *mulata conga* and *mulata retórica* are symbolic of the silencing of Afro-Cubans that in turn denies them the political means to transform their socioeconomic standing” (32).

Canción de Rachel includes also a fragment from a white man, who claims to have famously portrayed “las frivolidades” and “excentricismos” that best characterized black people in Cuba. He further develops the perception of black people by elaborating on his expertise in his portrayal of them, “Y fui el negro más popular de Cuba, a pesar de mi blancura. Esas son las paradojas del destino de un hombre” (113). Much like Rachel, he claims that even as a white man, he was able to capture the true spirit of black people: “Un pañuelo en la cintura,

⁵ Andrea Morris explains how in the nineteenth century, white men desired to protect the sexual purity of white women and exploit the purity of black women. Furthermore, she states that as the prey of white men, their relationships with colored women were very rarely legitimized (32).

preferiblemente rojo; otro al cuello, una buena navaja con filo de uña, sombrerito de pajilla, dentadura blanca como el coco y ése era el negro de Alhambra” (114). According to him, this role resulted in his fame, while simultaneously creating a source of contention between him and the Afro-Cuban community. Some blacks would threaten to kill him for continuing to portray them as clowns. They desired for theaters to begin embracing and portraying the cultured, erudite black man. A request that the voice explains could not be fulfilled: “Por aquellos años era imposible. Un negro de escuela era muy escaso; un negro orador, lo mismo; un político, ni hablar; entonces, ¿qué íbamos a hacer? Pues teníamos que representar al negro refistolero; el muñecón, el canalla” (114). Through their discourse, we see the misconceptions adopted by white Cubans that helped produce the cultural commodity ‘blackness.’ A discourse that Morris states displaces Afro-Cubans; and can go as far as to take the belief from “We can be (like) them” to saying “They need not exist” (36). In other words, we see prejudices founded upon fears and desires about Afro-Cuban culture reflective of white hegemonic discourse. Thus, blackface performance, Morris argues, propagates racially informed gender stereotypes. A tactic she states is the underlying problem not only in Rachel’s performance, but in Barnet’s performance as well. “An exploration of Rachel’s performance of the *mulata* and of the Cuban Afro-Cuban rumba, and Barnet’s ‘performance’ of Rachel, reveals the way in which each performance displaces and misrepresents the ‘other’ according to the performer’s desires and limitations” (31). And, as a construction by and for white Cubans, Morris holds that blackface characters served as a way to justify their claims to power and the means used to protect that power —whites acted out their power and the elites were also consumers of their own performance (31). Sklodowska elaborates on this idea, she states that through Rachel’s narrative we see how as a society that emerged from the plantation economy continues to “translate,

(re)create and perpetuate” a racist discourse (120). Rachel describes racism and segregation as it was reflected in society and in her personal thinking. For instance, she depicts segregation in community parks in Santa Clara. She acknowledges the apparent racism in Santa Clara and approves of it by stating, “Está bien que sea así” (60). She elaborates on the segregation of seating at the circus. She states how few blacks were able to attend the circus; and those who did, were required to stand at the top of the stands, which Rachel once again perpetuates by affirming that it should be like that.

In her analysis of Rachel’s identification with Afro-Cuban culture, Morris references Eric Lott’s theory on “love and theft.” She explains that what arises in Rachel’s attitude toward Afro-Cuban culture is a mixture of “celebration and exploitation” (33). For Morris, Cuban vernacular theater is a system that commercializes and valorizes the representation of music and dance as a unique and cultural expression of Afro-Cubans, such as Rachel’s identification with rumba (33).⁶ Yet, she argues, it is also presented as a theft of the culture because it is not a collaborative effort between blacks and whites, but instead as an effect of mimicry. Morris uses Robin Moore’s explanation of this dynamic to further explain the subjugation of Afro-Cuban culture:

By disseminating frequently derogatory images of black street culture and artistic expression, conceived and performed almost entirely by white Cubans, the popular theater also attests to the racial prejudices common in the early years of the Republic and the extent to which Afro-Cubans themselves remained marginalized from most commercial music. (33)

⁶ Morris argues that rumba is a manifestation of “the seemingly invisible practices of marginalized populations intended to resist, subvert or transgress the existing order” (33).

Morris emphasizes that in order to gain access into the Afro-Cuban community, Rachel pretends to be a public servant—only whites could be public servants—and deceives them into believing that she is someone that will respond to their needs. Morris comments:

Considering the unemployment, inadequate schools, and under-representation that plagued Afro-Cubans during the Republican period, Rachel's charade is ironic; she deceives them in order to create "believable" characters that, in turn, reinforce their marginal status. Her performance as a social worker or school inspector provides her with a safe, almost anthropological distance from Afro-Cubans. At the same time, her disguise masks her selfish motives as well as her attraction to Afro-Cuban culture. (34)

Andrea Morris uses these examples to explain the performative nature of racial identity—where race seems to be constructed, as opposed to preexisting. She argues that the female black identity cannot be absorbed in order to accurately reflect their essence. Although Rachel performs her rumba in a manner that is not intentionally racist, her racist beliefs perpetuate the oppression of Afro-Cubans. As abovementioned, Rachel is also excluded from the Cuban elite, but she holds that there is a difference between her exclusion and that of a black person's. As she admits to her racist attitude, she participates in blackface performance, that according to Morris, has oppressed blacks since the colonial period—it was "an attempt to counter the Afro-Cuban's own process of self-empowerment, which was perceived as a threat to white domination" (35). Thus, the shortcomings in Rachel's performance/interpretation reflect the effects of mimicry as explained by Homi Bhabha. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha denotes colonial mimicry as "the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (122). Rachel's blackface performance of Tomasa and Concepción Baró reflect this idea

of a reformed, recognizable Other because it is an imitation of the misinterpreted culture of Afro-Cubans, what Bhabha deems as “slippage.” He says, “in order to be effective, mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal” (122). In other words, imitation of a culture simply creates a copy of the culture that is never an exact representation of the culture; it never captures the true essence of the culture. Bhabha explains that this slippage results in the repetition of a model as opposed to the representation of a model, an accurate representation that we see in the variation of the inaccurate figures of *bozal* and *catedrático*, who through Rachel’s interpretation of Tomasa and Concepción Baró result in the repetition of an inaccuracy (123,126). In other words, a copy of a copy, a subject of a difference that is ever further from being the actual representation of Afro-Cuban culture. What we see corresponds with this notion of “love and theft” is the presence of a “double articulation” (Bhabha) in the racial discourse of republican Cuba. There are aspects of Afro-Cuban culture, such as music and dance, that seem to be celebrated and given a high cultural value by white people. Yet, it immediately displaces the Other, Afro-Cuban, by identifying them with a false image, one that subjugates them to an image of difference and of recalcitrance. As a result, the representation of Afro-Cubans is incomplete, or virtual, and is dependent upon its representation by the white hegemonic discourse, what Bhabha calls “authorized versions of otherness” (123). If white performers continue representing the black subject, the representation of Afro-Cuban culture will remain incomplete, and the racist mindset of republican Cuba will persist. What resonates throughout society is a partial representation/recognition of blacks, “mimicry is at once resemblance and menace” (123).

What results from this misrepresentation is the perpetuation of the hegemonic construction of Afro-Cuban culture. As an attempt to escape the oppressive construction of

blacks, some Afro-Cubans respond by desiring to whiten their race, which is identified in Reyita's *testimonio*. A dilemma is presented for blacks, either they revolt against these stereotypical constructions and are then deemed as "barbaric" and "violent" or they conform to "the authorized versions of otherness" and mimic the oppressor. As a result, they too become copies tainted by "blackness," or what Bhabha deems "almost the same but not white" (128). Bhabha uses a Freudian figure to explain the repercussions of this inaccuracy accepted by blacks and whites: "Their mixed and split origin is what decides their fate. We may compare them with individuals of mixed race who taken all round resemble white men but who betray their coloured descent by some striking feature or other and on that account are excluded from society and enjoy none of the privileges" (127). Subsequently, it seems that blacks are left with no resources, for their attempt to resist their dilemma leaves them hopelessly in the hands of their oppressor. A problem we see presented in Reyita's life consistently, be it her inability to receive an education or her exclusion from the *doña* status, regardless of the fact that she was married to a white man. As revealed in Reyita's life, she relied not only on her personal strategies, but those of a higher power, of a higher power that also reflected a reverence for her "Afro-Cubanness." In other words, regardless of her inability to change the hegemonic order present in Cuba, she adopted a series of strategies that appear to be paradoxical. However, they were tactically adopted to confront her dilemma. The strategy presented in Reyita's life is akin to the notion of "love and theft" presented in Rachel's blackface performance. Reyita admires various aspects of white culture because of the advantages that it presents for her family. This notion is best portrayed in her relationship with Rubiera, whom she loves for the valuable opportunities that he presents. As aforementioned, with him, her family has access to some benefits and respect offered exclusively to white people.

Textual Inconsistencies, Faulty Memories and Mass Hysteria

While working with both texts, the problems with textual inconsistencies, faulty memories and hysteria bring Reyita, Rachel, Barnet and Rubiera-Castillo's credibility into question. Much like Reyita's discourse is filled with inconsistent behavior and beliefs, Rachel reveals various inconsistencies throughout her narrative. Sklodowska finds that the supplementary material incorporated by Barnet paired with Rachel's faulty memory contribute to her unreliability as a narrator. For instance, in one occasion, Rachel comments on her forgetful nature: "Me olvido fácil, no soy rencorosa; eso lo aprendí del cubano. Somos olvidadizos, nos dan un puntapié, nos embuten y al otro día estamos sacándoles fiestas a la gente. Eso será bueno o será un defecto, no sé" (30). Her disclosed forgetfulness paired with the fragments that contradict her personal account result in Sklodowska's skepticism of Rachel's narrative. She states, "Rachel's less-than-perfect memory is underscored almost to the point of becoming a disability" (124). Thus, she believes that Rachel's narrative loses its foundation because she is presented as self-contradictory and forgetful. A problem in women's discourse that is traditionally attributed to hysteria, comments Sklodowska.

She cites Mary Ann Doane's research:

The woman's narrative acumen is thus transformed into the symptom of illness. Her narrative cannot stand on its own, it must be interpreted... The logic seems to be this: if a woman must assume the agency of speech, of narration, let her do so within the well-regulated context of an institutionalized dialogue—psychoanalysis, the hospital, the court of law. (124)

In addition, as Rachel recalls certain memories, Sklodowska finds that Rachel's behavior can be interpreted as hysterical. Sklodowska's argument manifests itself specifically through Rachel's

recollection of her mother. After her mother passes away, Rachel often thinks about her mother and is reminded of her solitude and depression. The first occurrence is at the beginning of Rachel's narrative; she establishes she is not a hysterical person, "Estoy sola, sí, sola. Pero no soy una mujer que se ahoga en un caso de agua. Tampoco soy histérica. Dramática mucho menos. La palabra desgraciada yo no me la aplico nunca. Yo soy una melancólica triste" (16). A statement that resounds later in the narrative: "Estoy triste, sola, aturdida, ¡ay! Yo soy una mujer de temple, no soy dramática, ya lo he dicho y lo repito. Soy una mujer que sabe siempre salir a flote. Como las boyas, que vienen los muchachos y las hunden y ellas, ¡paf!, suben otra vez" (97). In two occasions she expresses the loneliness she feels without her mother and addresses her sorrow by emphasizing that she is not a dramatic person. She pictures her resilience with two allusions to her buoyancy. In the first, she states that although she is lonely, she is not one to drown herself in her own sorrow. However, in one instance, Rachel describes how she became engrossed in her anxiety and sorrows while awaiting to receive a call from the Alhambra theater. She spent twelve days in the hospital immersed in her own depression. She relates how she was practically on the verge of insanity. It was not until Adolfo arrived at the hospital and said, "ya está bueno, yo te conozco mejor que a mí mismo, levántate y anda, tú lo único que tienes es que eres una artista y sufres porque te sientes desgraciada, sin nada que te estimule en la vida. Vámonos de aquí corriendo, que esta gente te va a matar con esas pastillas" (87). As a result, it was Adolfo who pulled her out of her own self-pity, which seems to present a contradiction within Rachel's own testimony. Her initial statements claim that she does not succumb to her depression and considers herself to be emotionally stable, whereas the latter statement reveals her inability to stabilize her emotional state. A hysterical state she later explains, "Fui bruta al dejarme llevar por los nervios, pero si no es así no entro en Alhambra" (87).

In addition, she relates her failed attempt at suicide after Eusebio's death. She explains that after failing to kill herself, she never found value in her life again:

Yo quería desaparecer totalmente. Que no quedara de mí ni la ceniza. Le di vueltas al cerebro y se me ocurrió lo siguiente: una silla, una soga no muy gruesa, delante de la silla un cubo lleno de alcohol, frente a mí, y una vela encendida colgando de un cordelito que a través de una varilla se empataba con la soga y la vela, antes de caer en el cubo de alcohol y entonces ocurrían dos cosas: me ahorcaba yo y la candela me convertía en nada. Lo hice pero parece que el cuello mío era de elefante porque ni me arañé con la soga y la vela, antes de caer en el cubo, se apagó. Desde aquel incidente he decidido vivir hasta que se cumplan mis días. (119)

As aforementioned, Sklodowska argues that Rachel's sincerity as she relates experiences, lacks a certain "restraint in disclosing certain details of her personal life" (124). Rachel uses her memory to protect herself from her reality—she disillusions herself to alter the aspects of her life that displease her. Thus, her memory is more of "a protective screen than a reliable recollection" (124). However, if testimonial pieces are reliant on the sincerity of the narrator, then it cannot be expected that the narrator filter their testimony. To display a certain restraint in disclosing details would also present a problem with the credibility of the narrator—their sincerity would be put into question.

Moreover, if women's discourse consistently present contextual inconsistencies because their hysteria or faulty memories cloud their credibility, then nothing they say can be considered valid until it is validated within a well-regulated context of an institutionalized dialogue. Consequently, a well-regulated environment must be an environment free of women's hysterical

or faulty discourse. This puts women's discourse in the hands of everyone but women. By following this logic, the only time women's narrative can be considered valid is when they say nothing at all. As a result, women's narratives cannot exist; they must be constructed for them. I conclude from this argument that contradictions are present in women's testimony because there is a contradiction in society, a paradox that presents itself in the acceptance of female testimony. Subsequently, it can be understood why Sklodowska is skeptical about the testimony of these women in Barnet's hand. By having their stories in the hands of a man and verified by other sources, predominantly men, then they can be considered valid within a context regulated by men. She concludes, "the real Rachel's are lost forever outside of the time and space of the novel that never quite becomes testimonial" (125). Sklodowska best captures this problem when she warns of the ethical and political implications of a hierarchically structured dialogue between a sympathetic intellectual—editor and a marginalized witness-protagonist—in this case a lower-class woman born to immigrant parents" (113).

Conclusion

Reyita and Rachel are women that utilize a series of strategies to confront the paradoxical constraints presented to them in republican Cuba. They both resisted the traditional norms that often dictate the lifestyle of women in twentieth century Cuba. And, rely on these strategies to acquire solutions to overcome various obstacles, such as romantic and economic obstacles. When the problems appeared to be out of their control, they relied on external, spiritual forces to guide them. Reyita confided in her *Virgencita* and Rachel found comfort in the stars, her saints, and her superstitious beliefs. Although as a child, Reyita's family failed to be supportive in her life, she did not let that hinder from advancing her children's economic and social situation, and what she deems to be racial advancement. Everything she sacrifices, she does for them. Reyita fights for

all of her descendants. In contrast, Rachel succeeds by the means of her artistic expression, the men in her life, and the support displayed to her by her mother. It is with this presence of faith, devotion to their progress, and independence in testimonial literature that distinguishes Reyita and Rachel as representative of Cuban women of the 20th Century.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Stephanie Contreras is a Master's student in Spanish at Florida State University. Her interest in Latin American cultural studies and testimonial narrative emerged after reading *Reyita, Sencillamente*, the *testimonio* of Maria de los Reyes Castillo Bueno's life as an Afro-Cuban woman in the twentieth century. Having majored in philosophy as an undergraduate, she found herself captivated by the intricacies and controversies surrounding testimonial literature. She studies the usage of literature as a means to silence groups of people that were excluded from society or seen as inferior. What seemed to be a source of empowerment for civilization proved to be an essential tool of domination over constructed notions of barbarism. Thus, it is this discourse that continues to fuel her passion for Latin American studies. Currently, she teaches Elementary Spanish I and II at Florida State University and co-owns a boxing gym in Tallahassee.