

## Preamble: The Village of El Cobre

El Cobre is a small, deceptively plain village of legendary character for the Cuban people. Black or white, resident or exile, religious or secular, Cubans identify it as the abode of Our Lady of Charity, patroness of the Cuban nation and, for many, a Cuban version of the Yoruban deity Oshun. The story of la Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre is often linked in the island's social imaginary to ideas of the nation, creolization, syncretism, and all sorts of miraculous—and historical—interventions. Oral legend and popular visual iconography have it that the Virgin appeared to three fishermen in the Bay of Nipe: a black or mulatto, an Indian, and a white. These fishermen represent the trinity of races constituting the Cuban nation (excluding the usually excluded Chinese). Throughout the four centuries of the shrine's existence, various sectors of the population have repeatedly invoked, contested, and reinvented this Marian tradition. Many forms of community and social identity, both religious and secular, as well as multiple—and at times conflicting—political agendas have been, and still are, formulated through this powerful story of the past.

El Cobre today is a tranquil copper-mining village with some 17,000 inhabitants living in its urban and rural jurisdiction.<sup>1</sup> The village lies in the mountains of the Sierra del Cobre in the legendary Oriente province, the eastern region of the island, some ten miles from its capital city of Santiago de Cuba (see Map 1). Although oral history in the eighteenth century placed El Cobre's origins in pre-Columbian times, Spanish written sources place the foundation of this mining village in the early sixteenth century, thereby making it one of the oldest colonial settlements on the island. The legendary relation of this place to the miraculous Marian effigy only goes back to the seventeenth century, however.

Many people are aware that the basilica towering over the village is a twentieth-century construction now relocated from the original site. But the effigy of Our Lady of Charity that it houses is said to be the very same miraculous Marian icon once recovered from the Bay of Nipe (see Figure 1). Thus, the “authentic” effigy in the sanctuary is literally and metaphorically an image from the past. Other tokens of former—and recent—times hang from some of the walls in the sanctuary’s “chamber of miracles.” Bunches of tiny silver, gold, and copper body parts, known as *ex-votos*, as well as crutches, and even insignia of soldiers who fought in the Cuban Revolution and later in Angola, stand today as testimonies of the healing stories, miracles, and desires of thousands of pilgrims throughout the centuries. They are meant to display the fame and power of the effigy across time.

Infrequently visited for many years after the Cuban Revolution, the Marian sanctuary in El Cobre has recently recovered some of its previous popularity. On September 8, 1996, during the annual feast day of the Virgin, unprecedented thousands of people made their way up the hill and the long stairs leading to the sanctuary as pilgrims had done for centuries (see Figure 2). Whether as locals or as *orientales*, as nationalists, as Catholics, as Afro-Cuban religion practitioners, as traditionalists, as supporters, opponents, or would-be reformers of the socialist regime, as tourists, as entrepreneurs, or as scholars, these visitors converged in this historical and mythical space, bringing old and new meanings to the reactivated public celebration.

More recently, on January 24, 1998, the effigy of the Virgin of Charity of El Cobre made a pilgrimage to the nearby city of Santiago de Cuba, where Pope John Paul II officially reenacted the coronation of the effigy as “patroness” and (more anachronically) “queen” of Cuba (she had been so crowned by proxy before in the 1930s). The ceremony took place in the Plaza Maceo, near the statue of the independence mulatto hero, Antonio de la Caridad Maceo. Referring to her as the “Virgen mambisa” (the legendary name given to the revolutionary insurgents), the pope intentionally linked the Marian tradition to another sacred story of the past: to a collective memory of independence and patriotism. It was a politically symbolic gesture that skirted any reference to the colonial origins of the Marian tradition; indeed, a spectacle meant to unify—and reconcile—all Cubans as a (Christian) community over and above ideological differences—by all counts a feat that may take a veritable miracle from the Virgin/Mother of all Cubans. The presentist subtext and political agenda of the ritual presided over by the pope was also one of religious opening with an ambiguous call



FIGURE 2. The long stairs leading to the sanctuary full of visitors during the a Marian festivity of September 1996. (Author's photograph)

for more “freedom.” Thus, the Virgin was symbolically (and to many, giously) invoked to intervene in a new historical moment. The spectac the Virgin’s coronation in Santiago de Cuba intended ceremonious mark (and to foment) new relations between the church, the state, an Cuban people; new kinds of identity and new forms of “freedom(s)” were in the process of redefinition and negotiation. Now, just as cent before, the multisided political, social, cultural, and religious possibilit this mercurial Marian discourse were invoked by different sectors of sc to represent other claims.

Although an important symbolic site to imagine national comm throughout the twentieth century, an earlier conception of this pov Marian tradition was linked to the consolidation of a different kind of munity. The tradition of Our Lady of Charity examined in this boo related to the making and legitimation of an unusual community o island and, more generally, in the Americas: a pueblo—and not a m. community—of slaves and free people of color within the structures c enteenth- and eighteenth-century colonial society. In the midst c extraordinary racially mixed pueblo, which emerged in El Cobre aft



FIGURE 3. A view of the open copper mine quarry in El Cobre. (Author's photograph)

1670s, the cult and tradition of the Virgin of Charity grew to become a major local, regional, and, some two centuries later, national tradition in Cuba. (A second conflicting and diasporic site overseen by a clone of the Virgin of El Cobre emerged after the Cuban Revolution among the exile community in Miami.)

The past and present converge in El Cobre in other ways too. A large open quarry of copper mines provides the material referent for the name of the village: El Cobre (*cobre*, or copper) (see Figure 3). For better or worse, the history of El Cobre has also been connected with copper mining since its early days. For generations, local families have worked in these mines under the aegis of the Spanish Crown, private contractors, foreign companies, the socialist state, or as independent miners. The centuries-long cycle of rises and declines of mining production in El Cobre has constituted yet another important historical horizon for the development of social and political life in this village.

People from all over the globe—Africa, Spain, the Caribbean, China, England, the United States, and elsewhere—have converged in El Cobre at

different points in its history to work in the copper-mining industry. Traces of their presence linger in fragments of the town's life and social memory. Although miners today tend to trace their family histories back to grandfathers and great-grandfathers who worked the mines in the nineteenth century, some local surnames, like Cuzata or Cruzata and Quiala, are of African origin. These names were found among the first generations of slaves brought into the Real de Minas at the turn of the seventeenth century. Long-standing local lineages like those of these two families constitute a living record of how far back mining ancestries—and history—go in this village.

More recently, a group of Cuban intellectuals—namely, historians, anthropologists, and artists—from El Cobre and from the neighboring city of Santiago de Cuba have recovered another strand of the past in the present. With the financial backing of an international agency, UNESCO's division of cultural projects, they inaugurated in July 1997 a giant sculpture commemorating the "maroon (runaway) slave" created by the Cuban artist Alberto Lescaj. The monument recalls both the village's and the island's history of slavery as much as it celebrates the spirit of rebellion and freedom symbolized by the maroon figure. While the monument to Antonio Maceo in Santiago de Cuba commemorates the struggle for freedom of Cuban Independence rebels, that of the anonymous maroon slave in El Cobre memorializes another, earlier manifestation of the spirit of freedom among "people without history."

This monument may deflect some attention from the almost exclusive association in the Cuban social imaginary of El Cobre with the Virgin's sanctuary and to a lesser extent with the copper mines. Perhaps this giant sculpture will draw out other memories from the past—fresh but hidden associations between the Marian sanctuary's legendary character, copper-mining production, and rebel slaves. Other reinvented traditions that mix the past and present in unexpected ways may eventually emerge out of oral or written stories about these sites.

This brief cartography of El Cobre's landscape interweaves space and time together. It offers the reader some reference points in the present to lead her or him back into the formidable, yet little-known, history that follows. This is not a story about maroon slaves, however. Instead, it is a more complex history of another kind of enslaved people who at times made use of collective flight to further their social and political ends, but who also

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*Facing page* : MAP 2. Period map of the Oriente coastline, ca. 1690s. (AGI, Mapas y Planos de Santo Domingo 103)

## Preamble

mobilized in many other ways to negotiate freedom (or forms of freedom) and to make a local homeland in colonial Cuba. In this narrative about the royal slaves of El Cobre, both the Virgin of Charity's tradition and copper-mining production constitute crucial aspects of the story, but so does the colonial military system represented by the garrisons and fortifications of the Santiago de Cuba region that the *cobrerros* (the people of El Cobre) were forced to construct and defend in the name of an abstract and distant king. The historical cartography of our story, then, encompasses a wider space that extends beyond the local sites of the village (see Map 2).