Cuba, the Elusive Nation

Interpretations of National Identity

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2

Rethinking Tradition and Identity

The Virgin of Charity of El Cobre

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El Cobre is a small and deceptively plain village of legendary character for the Cuban people. Black or white, resident or exile, religious or secular, Cubans still identify it as the abode of Our Lady of Charity, patroness of the Cuban nation and often Cuban version of the Yoruban deity Oshun. The story of the Virgin of Charity has been linked in the island's cultural imagination throughout most of this last century to ideas of the nation, creolization, race, syncretism, and to all sorts of miraculous and historical interventions in the world. According to oral legend and popular visual iconography, long ago the virgin appeared to three (racially identified) fishermen in the Bay of Nipe: a black or mulatto, an Indian, and a white. These fishermen have come to represent the trinity of races or ethnicities constituting the Cuban nation (excluding the usually excluded Chinese).[1] The virgin herself has become in the last century not so much an icon of *lo cubano,* but to many, of *cubanía* itself.

That is not to say that there is, or has been, just one formulation of the Cuban nation. Nor for that matter has the virgin been a univocal symbol of *cubanía* throughout modern years. Rather, it is only to stress that the legend of Our Lady of Charity as mother of the Cuban nation is a cultural text that belongs to this century—that, historically speaking, the various associations of the Virgin of Charity with the Cuban nation are part of a relatively recent story, in fact, of a very modern story. For any story referring to the imagined community of the nation, even when articulated under the cover of legend and tradition, is perforce a modern story.

Although the linking of Our Lady of Charity with the Cuban nation is historically recent, the legendary tie of the miraculous Marian effigy to El Cobre does goes back to the seventeenth century. The legend of *la Virgen de la Caridad* produced at that point in the past, however, was tied to another sort of imagined community, one whose memory has been all but suppressed by the more presentist, encompassing, and powerful one of the modern nation. This essay moves from relatively familiar national representations of *la Virgen de la Caridad* in the present to a less known one generated locally in a more remote past. It traces the virgin's tradition to the historical moment when the icon's foundational narrative was recognized. The essay focuses on that moment when oral accounts of the apparition and popular constructions of the miraculous character of the virgin made their way to the written word: to the moment when oral memory became ritualized and officialized as written memory, when vague and uncertain events became emplotted not only into a proper (Christian) story of the fantastic, but also into a major foundational account of the shrine—and of a very unusual community.[1]

Delving into the historical and ritual context in which that Marian memory was transmuted into the written word also uncovers a remarkable moment in the island's colonial past: a time at the end of the seventeenth century when El Cobre became a colonial *pueblo* (and not a maroon community) of royal slaves and free people of color. That early social history of El Cobre and of the Virgin of Charity's symbolism is also the story of another side of Cuba, and of the Caribbean, even of the Americas, that has not been sufficiently narrated.[2]

I approach the (past and present) narratives of *la Virgen de la Caridad* as a historian. In taking up this disciplinary mantle and authority, however, I do not pretend "to set the record of the virgin straight." These are no longer times of positivist illusions, even in a field as conservative as that of history. Rather, I work here as a cultural historian. What I offer are historically informed readings of how the same religious/cultural icon has been troped as distinct sorts of imagined community at basically two very different contexts in time.

I begin by saying that I take the production of social memory and tradition to be a fundamental practice in the process of imagining and legitimating social identity. Stories about the past ground identities (and communities) in the present. They also provide the foundations for concurrent claims related to those identities. Occasionally, latent as well in social memory is another dimension that points to the future, disclosing glimpses of imagined yet suppressed possibilities in a pregnant past. Beyond a mere expressive and reflexive activity, then, the selective retrieval of the past, its fixation as tradition, and its subsequent remaking constitute important discursive practices that actively configure the present and at times envision a future, too.[3]

This poetics of social memory is basically at play in the production and circulation of narratives of the past at any given point in time: in the Marian stories of the past that Cubans have produced in our "present," as well as in the narrative that the *cobreros* (as the natives of El Cobre came to be known) produced in their own time in the past. In fact, throughout the four centuries of the shrine's existence, various sectors of the population repeatedly have invoked, contested, and reinvented this Marian tradition. Different 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 the written and oral stories of this virgin mother. Finally, this poetics of social memory structures different forms of cultural production. These include not only popular Marian stories and legends like those referred to in this essay, but even more-sophisticated and scholarly manifestations of the "historical" imagination, such as the texts produced by intellectuals.

Modern (National) Versions of the Marian Story

The Virgin of Charity (or for that matter other virgins in the Spanish Americas) has not awakened the same academic and intellectual fervor as Our Lady of Guadalupe has done in Mexican studies. Leaving aside the earlier ecclesiastical historical accounts of the miraculous Virgin of El Cobre and her sanctuary, there has emerged during the twentieth century a modest but significant secular tradition of studies and reflections about this virgin mother. This corpus of writings, for the most part, has a literary, ethnological (or "folklore"), and at times historical bent that highlights the supralocal character and significance of the Virgin of Charity. These studies not only constitute a secular Marian tradition with which to imagine, in Benedict Anderson's sense, the wide and encompassing community of the nation, but they echo as well a line of revisionist nationalist thinking that sought to rearticulate the Cuban nation and the tradition of *lo cubano* in a more popular, "folk," and ethnically/racially inclusive way.

Perhaps a key essay in this line of Marian literature which emerged after the 1920s was José Arrom's "La Virgen del Cobre: historia, leyenda y símbolo sincrético" written in the 1940s. (Wittingly or unwittingly, the mercurial text itself blurs the borders among legendary, symbolic, and

historical accounts.) The gist of Arrom's piece, and of this kind of thinking, is succinctly exposed in the essay's title and in the text's closing words: "in the canoe goes portentiously the essence of our [Cuban] nationality." More recently, Olga Portuondo in her *La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre: símbolo de cubanía*, has engaged in a similar, if more historically informed overview of the cult from the seventeenth century to a "present" before or outside the revolution. Although her study is the most heavily documented in the series, her argument also follows the (by now traditional) interpretative line of Arrom and of an unpublished Fernando Ortiz.[4] In all of these accounts the virgin's story becomes a unitary (and modern) symbol of Creole syncretism as well as an early and immanent manifestation of the (ontological) essence of the Cuban nation—of *cubanía*. Even Antonio Benítez Rojo's postmodern reformulation of the Virgin of Charity as a symbol of the Caribbean meta-archipelago—rather than just of the Cuban nation—is based in an exegesis similar (if more ironical and poetic) to that of the above-mentioned syncretic tradition, albeit one pushed further back in time and space across the seas of reinvented collective memory.[5]

Overall, however, the exegesis of the imagined Indian legacy in this tradition of revisionist studies is extremely weak and contrived. That of the African legacy is perhaps anachronistically associated with the more recent cult dedicated to the creolized Yoruba deity Ochún in *santería*. And that of the supposed ethnically white Christian tradition is not always placed within the earlier context of a popular Catholicism and its mutant New World Marian genre of the fantastic. Nonetheless, I consider the production of these imagined folk/ethnic traditions interwoven into the figure of the Virgin of El Cobre as a significant development in the island's cultural history: a socially and ethnically broader, as well as a more progressive, rearticulation of the Cuban nation and of notions of *lo cubano*.

In contrast, a more orthodox, conventional, and conservative formulation of the nation is depicted, for instance, in the mural behind the cloned effigy of the Virgin of Charity of El Cobre found in the hermitage of Miami. This chapel has come to represent a diasporic space of Cubans in exile, one often also charged with strong political meanings regarding the present and the past.[6] In the visual text of this mural, Indians are relegated to the initial screen of colonization and blacks perhaps to the legendary figure in the mythical canoe. Allegedly, forty-four (racially invisible and mostly nineteenth-century) "major figures" in a conventional "great-men approach" to Cuban historical tradition spin around the central Christian Marian/mother symbol of the nation.

The Virgin of Charity's status as public signifier was strongly questioned, at least on the island, after the Cuban revolution. Although seldom visited throughout those years, her sanctuary in Cuba has been recently recovering some of its previous popularity. On September 8, 1996, during the annual feast day of the virgin, unprecedented throngs including thousands of people made their way up the hill and the long stairs leading to the sanctuary, as pilgrims had done at intervals over several centuries. Although the resurrected festivity indicated a new opening to religion in Cuban society, it also coincided with a rediscovery of the sanctuary as a possible tourist attraction—as one in a series of commodified reinvented traditions produced by the island's emerging tourist industry. In any case, whether as locals or as Orientales, as nationalists, as Catholics, as Afro-religion practicants, as traditionalists, as supporters, opponents, or would-be reformers of the socialist regime, as tourists, as entrepreneurs, and/or as scholars, visitors converged in this historical and mythical space bringing old and new meanings to the reactivated public celebration.

Even more recently, on January 24, 1998, the miraculous effigy of *la Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre* made an unusual pilgrimage from her enclosed quarters in the basilica of El Cobre to the nearby city of Santiago. In the capital of Oriente, Pope John Paul II officially reenacted the coronation of the image as "patroness of Cuba" (she had been crowned by proxy before in the 1930s), and even upgraded her status to the more anachronistic one of "queen of Cuba." Regardless of the title conferred on the Marian effigy, the ceremony reactivated the icon as an emblem of the Cuban nation, a symbol of *cubanía*. The spectacle of the virgin's coronation also ceremoniously marked (and intended to foment) new negotiated relations between the church, the state, and the Cuban people.

Referring to her as the "Virgin mambisa," the Pope, however, went further. He linked the Marian figure to another sacred story of the past: to the anti-Spanish colonialist struggle which marked the birth of Cuban independence. It was a politically symbolic gesture that skirted any reference to the colonial origins and significations of the Marian tradition—a ritual spectacle about the past intended to unify, and reconcile, all Cubans as a national (and Christian) community over and above ideological differences in the present. By all counts, a demanding feat that may take a veritable miracle from the virgin mother of all Cubans.

The religious/political ceremony itself was publicly staged in the Plaza Maceo, near the statue of the independence hero, Antonio de la Caridad Maceo. The rendition of the virgin in this ceremony and the clergy's official message was in some ways close to the conventional one about the great nineteenth-century sons of the motherland/nation found in the mu-

ral in Miami. But if this ceremonial text pretty much ignored the nationalist syncretic secular/pantheistic interpretation of the Cuban Marian figure, it did acknowledge the racial references and tensions underlying this Marian symbol and tradition by emphatically asserting that the virgin/nation stood over and above racial distinctions. And yet, the mere juxtaposition of the Marian effigy with the monument to Maceo and the allusions to his mother's alleged devotion to the Virgin of Charity (and to the *madre patria*) suggested the racial linkages of these two symbolic figures of the Cuban nation, if channeling them into the more orthodox and standard narrative tradition about the nineteenth century war of independence or of the birth of the nation-state. The foregrounded role given to the "Bronze Titan" in this ceremonial text also differs somewhat from the more diffused one allotted to him in the Miami chapel's mural rendition of that nineteenth-century national tradition. In any case, now as often before, the mercurial social, cultural, political, and religious resonances of this multifaceted Marian signifier were invoked to imagine and legitimize a Cuban national tradition.

Despite the protested bridge to the past that a "tradition" purports to be, there is little memory among Cubans today of an earlier colonial historical context in which the Virgin of Charity's story and cult grew. Most people today seem unaware that the modern national tradition itself flourished from another locally reinvented tradition in the past. Let us now turn to the local level, and to the past—to the moment of inscription of what has become the "foundational" narrative of Our Lady of Charity and to the kind of community in the midst of which this tradition came about.

A Forgotten Historical Transition

In 1670, the Spanish crown confiscated the copper mines and slaves of Santiago del Prado (El Cobre) in eastern Cuba from its private contractor. Earlier in the century, these copper mines had constituted the major enterprise of the region. Their private exploitation had been fomented by the crown, which saw in them the means to provide for the needs of its artillery. Years of neglect and failure to comply with the terms of a contract, however, had led to the Spanish crown's belated intervention and confiscation of the mines. At that time, 271 mostly Creole slaves became the king's slaves—a category whose practical and ideological meaning would be worked out in subsequent years through everyday practices, imagined traditions, litigation, and revolt. What would it mean to be slaves of the king in that place and time? Was slavery to the king to be imagined as different from slavery to anyone else at the time? More generally, what kind of entitlements should these Creole descendants of African slaves hold in colonial society?

One of the more remarkable aspects of what royal slavery came to entail in this case was the reconstitution of these former private mining slaves into members of a pueblo. By 1730, El Cobre was one in only fourteen duly constituted settlements—cities, towns, and villages—on the island, at least two of which were Indian corporate pueblos in Oriente. By 1773, El Cobre had grown into a sizable village of 1,320 inhabitants, of whom 64 percent were royal slaves, 2 percent personal slaves, and 34 percent free people of color, mostly manumitted descendants or relatives of royal slaves.[7] After an attempt at reenslavement in 1780, the royal slaves litigated for their freedom all the way to Madrid; twenty years and a generation later, in 1800, they officially obtained a collective grant of freedom. Thirty years later, however, after British mining interests obtained concessions to exploit the copper mines of El Cobre, a new wave of settlers began to arrive. Their arrival in the 1830s marked the beginning of the end of El Cobre as the only fully recognized Afro-Cuban *pueblo* in the island's history. With the arrival of nineteenth-century mining corporations and "progress," this slice of El Cobre's history began to fade in memory and practice. As early as 1846, the governor of Oriente sent a report to the crown stating: "The (his)story [*la historia*] of El Cobre is very uncertain, not to say fantastic, as it was populated exclusively by Indians [*sic*] and people of color until recently when the riches of its mines attracted more illustrious settlers and even foreign enterprises."[8]

The establishment at the end of the seventeenth century of a pueblo of royal slaves and freed persons with a corporate land grant, a limited *cabildo* (local self-government), and local militia companies with their own officers also strike the historian as unusual (to some, perhaps, as a "miracle"). For legally, as "outsiders" in the body politic, slaves—at least in principle—were not allowed to form such a polity. Although more Afro-American villages formally recognized as *pueblos* than heretofore suspected may have existed in the Spanish colonial world (especially in the Caribbean and circum-Caribbean region, where free people of color outnumbered slaves, or where military considerations may have modified the usual order of things), even pueblos constituted by freedmen and women of color—not to say slaves—were a rather uncommon occurrence in the Indies.[9]

A pueblo is a significant form of community, particularly given the

radically "outsider" status (in cultural, social, and political terms) attached at the time to African slaves and, to a lesser extent, to their Creole descendants in the New World.[10] Constituting a pueblo not only would have implied the negotiation of some minimal political concessions for slaves and free people of color in the context of Spanish civil society at the time, but it also may have represented one way available to people of African descent to reimagine, remap, and root their identities within the societies of the New World in a nondiasporic manner. More than Creole royal slaves, the enslaved people of El Cobre came to identify themselves alongside their fellow freedmen and women as *cobreros* (people of El Cobre). They developed a sense of *patria chica*, which turned mere place of birth into a local homeland. The *cobreros* claimed a collective voice as a people, which pushed them to speak and mobilize publicly as a whole, over and above their individual status as free or slave.[11]

In the next part of this essay, I examine how the enslaved and freed inhabitants of El Cobre imagined the figure of Our Lady of Charity and how she became early on an important site for the construction of social memory and local identity in this black colonial community.

Social Memory and (Marian) Stories of the Past: The Present in the Past

In 1687 the elderly royal slave Juan Moreno recounted to an official audience of ecclesiastics the history (or his story) of a small effigy of the Virgin of Charity. He spoke as a Creole slave, as a privileged witness, a protagonist in a portentous story about the past, as a chosen instrument of divine will, and as oral historian of his community. The story of the apparition that Juan Moreno narrated not only recalled real or supposed events in the past, it also immediately referred to the *cobreros*' actual situation in the 1680s. While manifestly speaking to the origins of the shrine in the early seventeenth century, the subtext also spoke to the social identity and the ensuing claims that *cobreros* were struggling to secure and consolidate after the crown's confiscation of the mines in 1670.

Although the contextual implications of Juan Moreno's story were quite radical, particularly in reference to the position of slaves, the version that Moreno recounts remains, in other ways, within the bounds of orthodoxy. More specifically, Moreno's story about the finding of a miraculous statue was based on a Marian master code whereby the mother of God appeared to the wretched, lowest, and most disempowered all over the world: to children and women, to shepherds and peasants, to Indians and (more rarely in the colonial world) to blacks and slaves. This genre of stories and legends codifies an important ideological tenet of Christianity—namely, the value of all men and women in the eyes of God, where, in fact, the underprivileged can become overprivileged through divine favor.[12] Making use of this dominant master narrative, the royal slaves of El Cobre articulated an account of their past that expressed their present concerns in a manner acceptable (or more acceptable) to the church, to the crown, and to other sectors of colonial society, high as well as low.

The communication act involved in the notarization ritual constituted a double transaction between the witness who gave the account and sought its legitimation (the royal slave Juan Moreno) and his official interlocutors and inscriptors (church authorities). In a sense, the so-called foundational written story that emerged from the 1687 notarization act represents a negotiated product accommodating perhaps the agendas of both parties. Concretely, it reflects the "holy" alliance, so to speak, between royal slaves and some sectors of the church against other groups in colonial society intent on reestablishing the *cobreros*' former status as ordinary slaves in the mines. In any case, even though the story—and its notarization—may be read, on one hand, as a gesture of resistance (of *cobreros* and sectors of the church) to the status quo ante, undoubtedly it also reflects domination. The recorded construction of the tale was literally subject to the church's approval and ratification. In what sense, then, was this Creole slave's narrative radical? And, how was the historical struggle of this community encoded into Moreno's narrative about the apparition of Our Lady of Charity?

Reconstructing the Past: Juan Moreno's Story of the Virgin's Apparition

According to Juan Moreno's account,[13] the virgin had appeared to him and two native Indian brothers when he was a boy of about ten—thus placing the alleged events at around 1604.[14] On their way to some salt mines in the Nipe Bay, he and the Joyos brothers saw from their canoe what looked like a bird—or a girl—amidst the sea's foam. As they drew nearer, however, they realized that it was an image of the virgin atop a piece of wood with an engraved sign that read "I am the Virgin of Charity." Picking the effigy from the sea they noticed that its clothes were dry and, according to the logic of Marian stories, immediately detected a miracle in such an unlikely occurrence. They took her back to the overseer of the cattle ranch of Barajagua, who in turn informed Captain Don Fran-

cisco Sánchez de Moya, administrator of the mines at the time, about the event. Sánchez de Moya ordered that an altar be built in the pasture lands of Barajagua and that a lamp be kept lit at all times in honor of the virgin. In Barajagua, still the periphery of the mines, the virgin continued performing miracles (and thus pressuring the powers that be) to make her way into the center of the Hispanic colonial order represented by the village. Still under the care of one of the Indian brothers, she began to disappear at night from the altar and to reappear the next morning with her clothes wet—a perfect inversion of the initial miracle and a common motif in the general genre of Marian narratives. If then she had appeared, now she disappeared. If her clothes had been dry when in the sea, now they were wet when on the land. This common Marian theme of the virgin's power to invert the normal order of things could well stand in the story as a metaphor of her power also to transform the colonial social hierarchy, where the *cobreros* had the status of ordinary slaves.

When Captain Sánchez de Moya was informed of the new miracles performed, he ordered the local priest and infantry troops stationed in the mines to escort her into the parish church in a ritual procession attended by all the *vecinos* of the place. Once in the parish church, it was decided that the virgin merited a hermitage on top of the Loma de la Cantera. But for the following three nights, the virgin protested the selected site by sending off puzzling lights into the sky. Everyone quickly realized that the virgin was dissatisfied and that she wanted her sanctuary built right next to the mines, in the Cerro de la Mina. In this sense, she had made her way through supernatural signs to the exact place where she wanted to stay—another central motif in the Marian genre in general. And it was precisely through this metonymical association with the mines that she became, at least in Moreno's implicit text, the protector of the mines and its slaves. Indeed, she became their representative in the supernatural sphere.

The position of the *cobreros* as slaves in the social organization of the mines in the past was well represented in Moreno's recollection of the apparition. While the virgin appeared to him and the Indians outside or beyond the colonial social order, in nature, and took her back into "culture" or "civilization" through the prescribed sociopolitical channels, which at the same time she subverted.[15] The three "seers" had to present her to their overseer. He, in turn, passed the news onto the royal administrator. For it was Captain Sánchez de Moya who had to legitimize and recognize the validity of the miracles taking place among his slaves and workers and on his lands. His jurisdiction, then, extended over spiritual affairs as well. Once Sánchez de Moya had been convinced of the effigy's miraculous faculties, he gave the appropriate orders to the ecclesiastical and military sectors stationed in the old mining settlement to bring it into the colonial order over which he ruled. Thus, according to Moreno's story, the whole social order of the mines of El Cobre had been activated by the miraculous finding of the Marian effigy. But in his story the virgin defied Captain Sánchez de Moya's authority at each point until she made her way to the mines and became the representative of its miners. In this way, the virgin came full circle, from the Indians' and slaves' hands to the center of the community and back again into the slaves' domain in the mines.

In this account, then, the old social order of the mines and the colonial system in which the *cobreros* were slaves were represented by Sánchez de Moya, the white and free *vecinos* of the place, the overseer, the military, and to a lesser extent, the parish priest/established church. It was precisely this old local order that the *cobreros* had been trying to obliterate in the years after the crown's confiscation of the mines, an order of things that would have prevented their own consolidation into a *pueblo*. It was the presence of these powerful sectors of colonial society and the interests they represented that could obstruct the full blossoming of the village and the cult. In this story, the introduction of the virgin into the mines represented a new imagined order brought about by the slaves and the Indians. The new local order symbolized by the virgin—protectress of the *cobrero* miners—represented the *cobreros*' own appropriation of the space of El Cobre to found a community of their own—one, moreover, where her cult could become the focus of religious worship. Their association with the virgin and her cult, as opposed to the former order of the mines, symbolized the foundation of a new social order within the local colonial system as the virgin settled her sanctuary within the territory of the mines and not outside it.

There was yet another potentially more radical, if also ambiguous, flash of the past in this account. This element—what I will call its utopian implication—was in fact embedded in the genre of Marian stories itself. This utopian dimension was implicit in the episode of the apparition of the virgin in the sea. Significantly, this is perhaps the most forceful image of the myth—its "headline" so to speak—as it has become the most frequently reproduced theme in the iconography of the virgin, at least in the twentieth century. As mentioned before, the virgin appeared to the Indian brothers and the Creole slave outside the sociocultural system, in "nature." If, on one hand, this episode could represent the triumph of evangelization (as it did to many) and ultimately even the colonization of the imagination, it may also be read, on the other hand, as an expression of

empowerment and radical appropriation. For it was in this natural sphere, away from the fetters of the colonial system, including the institutionalized church, where Creole slaves and Indians alike shared a common destiny by establishing an unmediated connection to a supernatural order represented by the virgin. It was in this supposedly natural uncolonized space of the sea that Indians and Creole slaves —or later cobreros—were empowered by the miracle of the apparition, and it is there where the vision of an imagined order in which they were the sole actors unfolded.

The latent radicalism of this episode was then toned down by subsequent episodes in which the virgin was introduced into the social order of the colonial world. The resolution of the narrative, then—the return of the virgin to the slaves' sphere within the colonial order of the mines—constituted a pragmatically acceptable vision: one indeed announcing a new and better order, but an order unfolding within the parameters of the colonial world.

Indians were the original "natives" of the land, and the point was also stressed in the testimony (Moreno's companions were "native Indians"). And, while the slaves and the Indians constituted distinct groups in the story, they were, nonetheless, placed in a structurally equal relationship to the virgin—a comment on the standing of both groups in the social order as well. Witness, for example, the fact that they were out together for the same reasons and that all reported equally to the same overseer. The kinship tie between the Indian brothers, on the other hand, reinforced the idea of their being "one people" and, in that sense, distinct from the Creole slave boy Juan Moreno. Overstretching the exegesis a bit perhaps, it would also be possible to read age as a significant element in the story. Thus, while the Indians were adults, the *cobrero* was a Creole boy, as, in effect, the Indians had preceded the *cobreros* as a people in Cuba and more specifically in El Cobre. The virgin's chosen people, then, were the *cobreros* and the Indians, and her selected, and therefore hallowed, place was the land they inhabited. The story of the apparition legitimized through divine favor the royal slaves' unusual claim to the land and community of El Cobre. And by juxtaposing black people and Indians, it turned, so to speak, the former into natives of the place as well. The myth encoded, then, several ideas and tenets about the origins of the cult and the place of both groups in colonial society.[16]

A symbolic analysis of the underlying text of Moreno's account of the apparition as legitimized by the church does not mean that his story was "fictive" (although allusions to supernatural interventions no less than the rigid generic conventions generating a set pattern of motifs may reinforce that impression among modern readers and/or those who do not share the discursive premises of that religious system). Nor is his story less "symbolic" if it is shown to reflect or recount "real" events (for example, that there were in fact two Indian brothers by that name, that Captain Sánchez de Moya existed, that there was a hermitage in the hill of the mine and an abandoned tiny altar in Barajagua, even that there may have been some cures that people interpreted to have been miraculous). The point is that in any account, the choice of details, their emplotment, what is highlighted, and the comments are rhetorically significant and constitute the basis for a cultural reading. The symbolic possibilities and flexibility of this story of the past and its close relation to presentist issues can be grasped as well in the subsequent transformations the story has undergone to the present.

Final Reflections: African Inflections of the Marian Cult?

The last part of this essay approaches *la Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre*'s legend from a more explicitly historicist, localist, and even popular perspective. That is, rather than an anachronic (orthodox or revisionist) concept of a nation that did not exist yet, even in the protonational form that is often confused with a "Creole" identity, I approach this Marian tradition in a different historical context to see what it was doing then and not now. I find very provocative issues raised in this early colonial rendition of the story and in the political process of thinking and rethinking tradition that took place at that distant point in time.

I have already suggested that the story related by Juan Moreno was filtered through the orthodoxy of the church, concretely in the actual recording situation of the notarization ritual. The ritual of notarization may have been unusual itself insofar as the voices of slaves were juxtaposed against that of a white clergyman. Indeed, it is also extraordinary insofar as the memory and testimony of a Creole slave became the main narrative to accredit the miraculous "authenticity" of the effigy. The inclusion of slaves in this Christian narrative, the role of a royal slave (Juan Moreno) as main witness and living repository of this memory, and the development of the island's major eighteenth-century shrine in an Afro-Cuban *pueblo* all constitute remarkable (yet all too often unremarked) historical aspects in the making of this "Cuban" Marian tradition. It is as if in the case of the Virgin of El Cobre, slaves wrote themselves—and were allowed to write themselves—into a popular kind of mainstream story, one that would eventually be rewritten and remembered as a foundational story of the Cuban nation.

Yet, even though the protagonic role of the slave in Moreno's version was innovative, his story's encoded proposals bold, and its local political significations quite radical, his narrative was in many ways still a proper Christian Marian miracle story. It is impossible to know what other versions less "supervised" by the church coexisted with this particular foundational story. Local (or regional) Marian stories transversed with African deities, powers, and motifs from the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries have not reached us. The better-known, and more radical, appropriations of Our Lady of Charity in Afro-Cuban popular religious culture—in *santería* or the even more eclectic *espiritismo*—are more recent. That, however, does not mean that Africanized hybrid versions of this Marian legend did not exist or had not existed since the beginning of the cult. After all, slaves who had allegedly witnessed and lived through the apparition events—whatever these may have actually been—were for the most part Central West African (mainly Angolan) people. But at this point, those aspects of the Marian cult constitute a seemingly unrecoverable dimension of the early colonial past that can only be imagined and speculated on.

The focus of this study, then, is perforce on the Christian version of the phenomenon: the story and cult produced under the aegis of the church. Although it may not seem as exotic, autonomous, or counterhegemonic as more-Africanized renditions of Our Lady of Charity, this historically informed reading of the narrative has shown the political and subversive possibilities that the more mainstream Christian popular cult could also take in colonial society.

The Virgin of Charity was and still is a plurivocal symbol whose historical meanings are derived from specific contexts. I have suggested that the documented version that has reached us from the seventeenth century is also a narrative about the grounding of a particular local form of Creole identity among slaves and freedmen in the early colonial world. Indeed, before a story of the Cuban nation, the Virgin of Charity's story was first a story of people particularly constrained in their slavery—people remaking colonial spaces into a homeland and in doing so reimagining tradition. While I have focused here on previously unexamined meanings—meanings encoded (or recoded) into the legend at a forgotten historical moment—the underlying process at play at this specific moment is emblematic of a more general poetics, one suggestive of how the reconfiguration of past and present are continually at work in the imagining of identities and communities. Perhaps the historically informed exegesis undertaken in this essay constitutes yet another turn of the screw in the never-ending process of remaking the past and the present—alas, another historical manifestation of the poetics of social memory, alluding to new present, and future, social imaginaries.

Notes

1. The long-lost notarized deposition of Juan Moreno given in 1687 (on which a good part of this essay is based) was recently (and "miraculously"?) found buried among the papers stored in the Archive of the Indies by Professor Leví Marrero. A full transcription of this document can be found in the Leví Marrero Collection at Floria International University in Miami. The subsequent written (and much of the oral) tradition on the Virgin of Charity went back to this "foundational" text, whether that meant reproducing it, adorning and elaborating it, editing it, or actually altering it. See Presbítero Don Onofre de Fonseca, "Historia de la aparición milagrosa de Nuestra Señora de la Caridad del Cobre . . . 1703," revised and later published by Father Don Alejandro Paz y Ascanio in 1829, 2d ed. (Santiago de Cuba, 1853); Father Julián Joseph Bravo, "Aparición prodigiosa de la Ynclita Ymagen de la Caridad que se venera en Santiago del Prado y Real Minas de Cobre," 1766.

2. That early colonial story is the subject of my book *The Virgin, the King, and the Royal Slaves of El Cobre: Negotiating Freedom in Colonial Cuba, 1670–1780* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000).

3. Popular Memory Group, "Popular Memory: Theory, Politics, Method," in *Making Histories: Studies in History Writing and Politics,* ed. Richard Johnson et al., Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1982).

4. For the reference to the unpublished notes of Fernando Ortiz and for his research project's outline, found in the Biblioteca de Literatura y Linguística Fernando Ortiz, see Olga Portuondo Zúñiga, *La Virgen de la Caridad: símbolo de cubanía* (Santiago de Cuba: Editorial Oriente, 1995), 28, 288–92. In the notes for his project, however, Ortiz seems to subsume the "African" and "Indian" elements purportedly syncretized in this "Cuban" virgin under a generic or encompassing "pagan" category, as his often unwieldy philological genealogies tend to do. There seems in Ortiz's project to be no explicit or elaborate reference to the *santería* elements more explicitly drawn by Arrom.

5. Juan J. Arrom, "La Virgen del Cobre: historia, leyenda y símbolo sincrético," *Certidumbre de América* [1959], (2d ed., Madrid: Editorial Gredos, 1971); Olga Portuondo Zúñiga, *La Virgen de la Caridad.* The most recent (and beautifully written) rendition of this tradition is found in the introduction of Antonio Benítez Rojo's *La isla que se repite: el Caribe y la perspectiva posmoderna* (Hanover, N.H.: Ediciones del Norte, 1989), xvi–xxii. Benítez Rojo, however, claims to separate the virgin's symbolism from the idea of the Cuban nation to see in her a wider global convergence or cluster of traditions, which he associates with a recurring Caribbean identity rather than a separate national one. Thus, through a purported

philological approach similar to that of his predecessors (and with their same conclusions), he attempts once more to reformulate the symbol's meaning roughly as one of Caribbean identity.

6. For a study of the Virgin of Charity's shrine in Miami, see Thomas A. Tweed, *Our Lady of Exile: Diasporic Religion at a Cuban Catholic Shrine in Miami* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

7. Family Census of the village of El Cobre, 1773, Archivo General de Indias, Santo Domingo, 1628.

8. Report of Governor Cayetano de Urbina, Santiago de Cuba, Feb. 1846, Archivo Histórica Nacional, Ultramar 4638.

9. We know concretely of at least two other recognized African-American villages in this area during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: Gracía Real in Florida and San Lázaro de los Minas in Santo Domingo. Both, however, were *pueblos* of freedmen who were the direct beneficiaries of the Spanish crown's sanctuary policies for the enemy's escaped slaves. In Puerto Rico, oral history has it that the *pueblo* of Loíza Aldea was once a black village and perhaps a community of slaves. There were some African American *pueblos* in the Americas that also resulted from negotiations between colonial authorities and former maroon communities. Elsewhere in the Caribbean (particularly the English Caribbean), peasant villages of African descendants became widespread only after the abolition of slavery in the nineteenth century. In general, however, *pueblos* of free people of African descent were rare in the Americas, and *pueblos* of enslaved people were virtually unknown. On the Caribbean and circum-Caribbean region, see Jane Lander, "Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mose: A Free Black Town in Spanish Colonial Florida," *American Historical Review*, 95 (Feb. 1990): 9–30; on San Lorenzo de los Minas, see Carlos Esteban Deive, *La esclavitud del negro en Santo Domingo* (Santo Domingo: Museo del Hombre Dominicano, 1980), 532–43.

10. I argue elsewhere that in the case of the king's slaves of El Cobre, life in and as a *pueblo* also entailed important political reformulations of the meaning of slavery that pushed its limits into the realm of freedom. See my *The Virgin, the King*.

11. For a full discussion of these issues, see ibid.

12. For similar "master narratives" in what may well be regarded as a widespread Marian story genre, see Marina Warner, *Alone in All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Knopf, 1976).

13. The following analysis is based on Juan Moreno's notarized testimony given in Santiago del Prado on April 1, 1687, Investigation of the Virgin's Apparition. fols. 12v–18v, Archivo General de Indias, Santo Domingo 363.

14. I am not concerned here with the "positivistic" question of "dating" the actual or imagined events related in the deposition or with their historical "truth value."

15. William Christian identifies many themes of apparition narratives or of stories about the finding of a statue related to Marian shrines throughout early modern Spain in *Apparitions in Late Medieval and Renaissance Spain* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981) and in *Local Religion in Sixteenth Century Spain* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981). Many of these motifs of popular Marian devotion recur as well in Juan Moreno's narrative and in numerous other Marian stories of the New World. See Rubén Vargas Ugarte, *Historia del culto de María en Ibero-América y de sus imágenes y santuarios más celebrados* (Madrid: Talleres Gráficos Jura, 1956).

16. In fact, as I point out elsewhere, the *cobreros*' community would, in many ways, be organized as a corporate Indian community. See my *The Virgin, the King*.