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Cuban Women Writers: Thematic Concerns in Post-Revolutionary Texts

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TITLE OF ASSIGNMENT – CUBAN WOMEN WRITERS: THEMATIC CONCERNS IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY TEXTS

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ABSTRACT

Cuban women's literature has always centred on the topics of gender roles and identity. While the discussion of these themes has been maintained, after the Cuban Revolution (1959), women authors used their growing popularity to write about slavery, the African legacy / identity, representation of blackness and black heritage. This research project aims to provide an analysis of 6 literary texts by 3 different Cuban women authors. These texts include the short stories "Kid Bururú y los caníbales" and "Todos los negros tomamos café" by Mirta Yáñez, Nancy Morejón's poems "Mujer negra" and "Madrigal para cimarrones" and Georgina Herrera's poetry "África" and "El barracón". Along with the texts themselves, secondary research sources such as articles and critical reviews were used to analyse and provide this discussion. The literature pieces all share similarities with regard to thematic concerns which include representation of blackness, gender, the African legacy and slavery.

Keywords: Cuban literature, women authors, Cuban Revolution, representation of blackness, gender, slavery, the African legacy

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	1
ABSTRACT	2
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	3
INTRODUCTION.....	4
CHAPTER ONE: ANALYSIS OF SHORT STORIES BY MIRTA YÁÑEZ	7
CHAPTER TWO: DISCUSSION OF POEMS BY NANCY MOREJÓN	14
CHAPTER THREE: REVIEW OF POEMS BY GEORGINA HERRERA	20
CONCLUSION	24
WORKS CITED.....	26

INTRODUCTION

Cuba is rich with African and Spanish influences. As a Spanish student from the Caribbean, Cuban culture, particularly the aspect of literature, has always been a personal interest. Furthermore, literature written by women is of great importance because they usually depict struggles of women in society. As a young woman, reading about content similar to what I experience in my daily life or about what my ancestors endured has made me a more empathetic and passionate person. This research was selected because of my lifelong interest in Hispanic women literature. This research paper will focus on primary themes of post-revolutionary literature written by Cuban women writers. The aim is to study the rise of women writers as well as the common themes presented throughout their literary texts and includes both prose and poetry. The writers spotlighted throughout this study are Mirta Yáñez (Cuba, 1947 -), Georgina Herrera (Cuba, 1936 - 2021) and Nancy Morejón (Cuba, 1944 -). Cuban women writers were always interested in writing about gender roles and identity, however, the Cuban revolution inspired them to also write about themes such as African heritage, slavery and freedom.

The primary research method utilised for this research paper is qualitative research which involves the literary texts in both Spanish and English plus published research articles. The two short stories to be analysed are "Kid Bururú y los caníbales" (1988) and "Todos los negros tomamos café" (1976) by Mirta Yáñez. The four poems that will be examined are "Mujer negra" (1975) and "Madrigal para cimarrones" by Nancy Morejón and "África" (2006) and "El barracón" (2009) by Georgina Herrera. These specific texts were chosen because they were all written post revolution (that is, post 1959) and they deal with themes inspired by the Cuban Revolution. This research paper will analyse and discuss the themes of the representation of blackness, toxic masculine culture and social identity in "Kid Bururú y los caníbales" and "Todos los negros tomamos café"

by Mirta Yáñez, slavery, the role of women in society and nostalgia for Africa in "Mujer Negra" and "Madrigal para cimarrones" by Nancy Morejón and the African legacy in "Africa" and "El barracón" by Georgina Herrera.

This research paper analyses and discusses the rise of Cuban women writers and the principal themes presented in their work after the Cuban Revolution of 1959. This research is being done to discover the effects of the Cuban Revolution on women's literature. The focus of this paper is Cuban women's literature as this topic is significant to the learning areas of this researcher as a student pursuing her Bachelor's Degree in Spanish at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine. This paper would be of interest to students of Spanish literature as it examines both Cuban history as well as literature by Cuban women writers; both areas of importance to students of Hispanic or Caribbean studies.

The data collected for this project was primarily from primary resources which include the literary texts themselves. Some texts were costly to purchase. Secondary data sources used are articles and critical reviews. Secondary sources of data were easily accessible online and provided insight. Data sources were not costly to acquire and provided a different point of view of analysis. One limitation of this study includes limited secondary source material available on the specific texts selected. Another limitation is the cost of the literary texts. Most of the texts were not accessible for free online and were costly to purchase.

The research project aims to discover the development of black heritage in the literary texts by Yáñez, to analyse how Morejón explores the themes of slavery, women in society and nostalgia for Africa in poetry and to examine the themes of the African legacy and slavery in the poems by Herrera. This study will provide an analysis on the means by which Mirta Yáñez, Georgina Herrera and Nancy Morejón develop their themes in their respective works post Revolution and the

significance of these chosen topics. In chapter one, a summary of Yáñez's texts "Kid Bururú y los caníbales" and "Todos los negros tomamos café" will be provided. A thorough discussion covering the prominent themes in each text in addition to relevant translated textual quotes will also be included. In chapter two, an outline of Morejón's poems "Mujer negra" and "Madrigal para cimarrones" will be presented along with an analysis of the important themes and translated quotes from the poems. In chapter three, a review of Herrera's poems "África" and "El barracón" will be provided. The development of the outstanding themes will also be highlighted. Quotes from the poem that support the topics discussed will be included.

CHAPTER ONE

ANALYSIS OF SHORT STORIES BY MIRTA YÁÑEZ

This chapter will analyse two short stories by the author Mirta Yáñez, "Kid Bururú y los caníbales" and "Todos los negros tomamos café", and will include summaries of each story along with significant textual quotes related to their prominent respective themes.

"Kid Bururú y los Caníbales" [Kid Bururú and the Cannibals], set in Habana, Cuba, tells the story of the narrator travelling in a bus to find a tribe of cannibals to interview. The story is told through the voice of a female narrator in a first person point of view. Although this narrative choice can sometimes be perceived as subjective because the readers are only exposed to the narrator's feelings and thoughts, this seems to be a fitting choice for this story because of the narrator's experiences. Through Yáñez's descriptions of her characters and their relationships with each other, the main themes of representation of blackness and machismo are explored.

Firstly, Yáñez's writing is very graphic and her illustrations allow for the readers to visualise what she has documented in the theme of representation of blackness. Her description of the cannibal Kid Bururú is quite harsh. He is described in a very unflattering manner as having a "curious" face with a "lean, drawn cheeks, bloodshot eyes, a remarkably broad nose and a mouth that seemed to be set in raw flesh." (Yáñez, 246) It is important to remember this story would have been written and published in or around 1988, after the Cuban Revolution, and so this description of Kid Bururú is telling. This story "suggests that the intervening years have not succeeded in erasing the social stigma and lack of power attached to darker skin colour." (Cooper, 57) The comparisons she chose are ugly and reflect the way in which black people were perceived at this time - as unattractive. The line "whenever I see a black man with such grey hair I think he's at least two hundred years old" (246) specifies that the narrator does not think this way about all men, just black men with

similar features to Kid Bururú. His actions seemed impulsive and were almost animalistic. For example, the line “he sprung up violently” (247) shows how abrupt his movements were and also that the other travellers on the bus, the narrator included, seemed to fear him. The line “the man started to jerk his arms about wildly and a strange sort of scream escaped his even stranger mouth” (247) is another demonstration of his perceivably uncontrollable behaviour and aggressive nature. The description “even stranger mouth” (247) is another insult to his physical appearance. He also clearly belongs to a lower class than the other persons on the bus. This is shown by the line “he was wearing a clean but very worn cotton shirt, his tattered pants were patched up at the back and his shoes, dusty with holes, were in the worst state of all.” (246)

The difference between the narrator’s descriptions of Kid Bururú in comparison to those of Enriquito, her ex-husband, demonstrate the harsh representation of blackness best and their differences in class. While Kid Bururú was wearing shabby clothing, Enriquito was “dressed very elegantly in a suit and tie even though it was noon and the sun was beating down mercilessly.” (245) On one hand, Kid Bururú’s physical attributes were insulted and on the other, Enriquito was called a “hunk”. (245) The line “he had always had the body of a wrestler and as for his face, don’t even mention it” (245-246) shows how attractive Enriquito was perceived in the eyes of the narrator and of their society, a polar opposite opinion to those that they shared about Kid Bururú. While Kid Bururú was described as skinny, Enriquito was described as having a “broad, athletic chest.” (246) The revolution has not entirely benefited black people and our perceptions of them. Her descriptions show the ways in which black people are clearly negatively viewed.

Furthermore, machismo is also a highlighted theme in this short story by Yáñez. It is best shown through the relationship or lack thereof between Enriquito and the narrator and also the encounter between Enriquito and Kid Bururú. Firstly, when the narrator was selected for an opportunity to work abroad for two years, her then husband Enriquito was threatened by her success. Like many other men, particularly at this time, Enriquito believed that men should be the breadwinners of the household. He told her “I don’t feel like letting you go. I’m the boss here, I’m the man of the house.” (246) Instead of feeling proud of his wife’s increasing success in her career, he felt very threatened. He wanted to remain at the top of the hierarchy of their relationship and the main breadwinner of their household. The verb “let” (246) implied that Enriquito believed he had full control over the narrator and her actions. This harmful, patriarchal mindset was the breaking point that tore the couple apart and ended their 7 year marriage. However, it is important to note that the couple’s relationship was far from perfect, long before this occurred. Enriquito was unfaithful to their union, a fact known to the narrator, yet she never abandoned their relationship despite the fact that they were both miserable. The lines “I knew about his affairs but I turned a blind eye” (246) and “He suffered a lot and I was unhappy” (246) show how unstable their relationship was. Toxic masculine culture consumed Enriquito and made him see his wife as an object that he could control rather than a human being with her own life and passions.

Machismo is also seen through the way in which Enriquito berates and fights Kid Bururú. Some masculine traits that are categorised as toxic are behaving in a violent or aggressive manner as well as exerting over people who are considered weaker. That could include women, other men and people who belong to minority groups. Enriquito tried to exert power over Kid Bururú by publicly shaming him in the bus and eventually getting him thrown out when he tried to physically defend himself. "Attacking a Black man, moreover an ex-professional fighter, the ultimate symbol of

virility and strength, is Enriquito's attempt to prove his own manhood." (Cooper, 59) Enriquito, his friend Victor and the bus driver all taunt Kid Bururú, egging him on until he reaches the limit of his temper. They all took turns throwing insults at him, but Enriquito was the ringleader, jabbing Kid Bururú with lines such as "Kid Gavilán took away your wife". (247) Despite the fact that the other passengers on the bus seemed to disapprove of Enriquito's jeers, because of his persistence, he could have been stopped by no one. Kid Bururú's last straw was Enriquito's final, dehumanising line, "Kid Bururú, you're not a man." (248) Another degrading line was "the black man pounced on Enriquito and aimed at his jaw with a jab that went flying." (248) This can be viewed as demeaning because the narrator chose to call Enriquito by his name but referred to Kid Bururú as "the black man" (248), reducing him to merely his physical attributes. After this physical encounter in which Victor joined to defend his friend, Kid Bururú was the only one thrown off the bus. Again, this was extremely unfair because he was taunted and almost forced to react in the ways he did because of the consistent flow of insults he received specifically from Enriquito. Enriquito is the best example in this short story of a man who believes being a man means to be controlling and dominant.

"Todos los negros tomamos café" [We All Blacks Drink Coffee] written by Mirta Yáñez is another short story set in Cuba which focuses on a 15 year old white girl as the main protagonist and her family. The events of the story take place in their family home. The main character and her mother are having an argument because she wants to pick coffee in the mountains with a group of school volunteers, however, her mother does not want her to go on this trip. She believes picking coffee is done by people of a lower class than their family. She argues that her daughter can encounter all sorts of dangers in the mountains such as contracting diseases, or worse, becoming the topic of gossip amongst their neighbours. In this story, Yáñez develops the themes of representation of

blackness and social identity through the eyes of the relationship between this white daughter and mother. These themes are relevant because of the racism experienced in Cuba as well the desperation of people in society to find their place and establish their identities.

With regard to the representation of blackness, it is clear that blacks are perceived as lesser than in this story and society at the time. The main protagonist wants to volunteer to pick coffee, but her mother argues against it because of who historically picked coffee in Cuba - the black people. She sees the activity as beneath them because of their socio-economic standing in society. "Yáñez's narrative portrays this persistence of racial discrimination in the home and in "White" Cubans' preference for socialisation only with others like them." (Cooper, 56) It seems as though being black and associating with black people are equally bad. This is shown by the line "she tells me at the height of impotence, that the coffee plantation upsets you to the point that you fall in love with a *black man*." (Yáñez, 35) The protagonist's mother explains to her daughter that working on the coffee plantation is a place that has "so many dangers" (32), and that the toiling would eventually take a toll on her and she would succumb to a black man. Yáñez's decision to italicise "black man" (35) shows that the mother would have emphasised these words, said them with disgust, because at this time in this society, it would have been considered a disgrace for a woman to fall for a black man, especially being impregnated by him. White people were perceived as higher class because of their race and opportunities. The lines "you know what it meant to be a white girl" (35) and "because a white girl had to be taken care of to the fullest, raised with all the ordenanzas of health and hygiene" (35) are significant. This is because the lines specify that white girls know what is expected of them and white girls need to be taken care of to full capacity. This implies that only whites deserve love and care and black people are to be neglected. Being black in this story means to be of lower class, lesser deserving of basic necessities.

Secondly, the theme of social identity is a prevalent one in this story. Social identity refers to how a person acts and perceives his or herself based on societal standards. The main protagonist does not care to conform to societal expectations, but her parents and grandparents do. Their biggest fear is to be judged by their neighbours, and by extension their community. "What would they think of this family, of their 15 year old daughter who wants to go pick coffee?" (32) Even though picking coffee is something the main protagonist really wants to do, her family despises the idea because of the shame it would bring upon them. "The neighbours, what do I care about, but she does" (32) shows that she is not concerned with what society expects of her. The line "All of this is part of my responsibility as a firstborn raised under the skirts of the family" (33) tells the readers that the main character is well aware of what her family and society demand of her, but she has no intention of meeting those expectations because they are not what she wants for herself. Her mother tells her of an instance when a young girl left her home for a volunteer job and returned pregnant. The line "The neighbours have indulged in murmuring, the girl has become the talk of the neighbourhood" (34) shows exactly what the main protagonist's family wants to evade, becoming the subject of gossip amongst their peers. "Conforming to the social expectations of Whiteness and decency, as framed by what the neighbours will say, or *"el qué dirán,"* is the primary occupation of the narrator's mother." (Cooper, 56) The main protagonist does not care to conform to societal expectations, however, her family is very concerned with their social identity and how they can fit in as best as possible.

To restate, the significant themes of Mirta Yáñez's work are representation of blackness, machismo and social identity. In "Kid Bururú y los caníbales", the theme of representation of blackness is best shown by the author's opposite physical descriptions Kid Bururú versus Enriquito. Machismo was also depicted by the tense encounter between these two protagonists, in

addition to Enriqueto's controlling relationship with the narrator. In "Todos los negros tomamos café", the themes of representation of blackness and social identity were illustrated through the disagreement between mother and daughter over the expected role of a young, white girl in society. All three of these topics are critical because Cuban citizens struggled with racism, sexism and finding their places in society during the aftermath of the Cuban revolution. The next chapter will provide a summary and careful discussion of two poems by Nancy Morejón. The prominent themes of these poems are slavery, women in society, longing for Africa and nationalism.

CHAPTER TWO

DISCUSSION OF POEMS BY NANCY MOREJÓN

This chapter aims to summarise and analyse the poems "Mujer negra" and "Madrigal para cimarrones" by Nancy Morejón. Themes such slavery, gender, African identity and nationalism are highlighted, all of which are typically discussed in Morejón's literature.

"Mujer negra" [Black Woman] by Nancy Morejón, is told from the perspective of a black African female slave in first person point of view. In this poem, the poetic voice is exported from Africa to Cuba where she was purchased to work as a slave. She later bears a son for her slave master. As she lives out her life in Cuba, she cannot enjoy the harvest because she no longer remembers details about her homeland Africa. She misses Africa deeply, however, she has managed to build a new life for herself in Cuba. She also joins the liberation movement that fights for the end of oppression in society and gains interest in Communism. In this poem, Morejón explores the main themes of women, slavery, nostalgia for Africa and nationalism.

Firstly, as the title suggests, gender is an important theme. Throughout the poem, Morejón examines what it truly means to be a black woman during the deplorable time period of enslavement, to be mistreated and exploited until liberated. The poetic voice was forced to work long, difficult hours in the fields, while she never truly enjoyed the harvest of the crops she had sown. The lines "Under its sun I planted seeds, brought in the crops, but never ate those harvests" (Morejón) list the chores that the poetic voice carried out, and how she was never allowed to enjoy the success of her hard work. Like many other enslaved women, she was also raped and gave birth to a son for her owner. The line "I embroidered His Worship's coat and bore him a male child. My son had no surname." (Morejón) depicts this. Although the father of her child was her slave owner, her child was neglected by him and was not even given his surname. The slave owner did not care

that he bore a child with this woman. This poem depicts how women were abused, overworked and assaulted in Cuba during enslavement.

Additionally, the theme of slavery is a prominent one in this poem. “His Worship bought me in a public square” (Morejón) describes the process of the purchase of slaves, which was the dehumanizing process by which plantation owners gathered workers for their fields. The poetic voice expresses the pain she endured as an enslaved person working interminable hours in the field. The simile in the line “I worked like an animal” (Morejón) compares the way she toiled to the actions of a beast and shows how difficult it was to work in the fields as a slave. She, along with the other slaves, were also physically abused by their owners in addition to being overworked. The line “This is the land where I suffered mouth-in-the-dust and the lash” (Morejón) adequately details the agony and beatings endured by the poetic voice. In addition to the horrific treatment and working conditions, the living situations of the enslaved were equally as awful. The slaves were not permitted to live in houses like their owners. Their homes were called slave barracks that were built by the slaves themselves with whatever material was available for no cost and were of very poor conditions because they could not afford to live or build better homes. The line “A slave barrack was my house, built with stones that I hauled myself” (Morejón) explains the inadequate state of what the slaves called their home. In this poem, slavery is a highlighted theme and the terrible working and living conditions of the enslaved were described.

Furthermore, nostalgia for Africa is another significant theme in this poem. The poetic voice, along with many other enslaved people, were forcefully taken from Africa and travelled in boats across the seas for months to arrive at their new lands. The opening line of the poem “I still smell the foam of the sea they made me cross” (Morejón) demonstrates how strong the effect of these unwanted travels were on the poetic voice. Even though she would have lived in Cuba for years

and cannot remember much about her previous life, she cannot help but grieve for her homeland Africa. The lines “The night, I cannot remember it. The ocean itself could not remember that.” (Morejón) tells the readers that she cannot recall the nasty details of her trip but that the pain lingers. “On a more transparent level, we see the speaker become increasingly distant from the memory of Africa, not able even to recall her country of origin.” (Miller, 108) The poetic voice, although unable to remember where exactly which part of Africa she came from, acknowledges that her enslaved brothers and sisters were forcibly taken from all over the continent. “I no longer dreamt of the road to Guinea. Was it to Guinea? Benin? To Madagascar? Or Cape Verde?” (Morejón) shows that even though years have passed, she, along with the other enslaved persons, remember bits and pieces of Africa. Sadly, the enslaved persons were extracted from Africa years prior and are not able to remember much about their lives there.

Lastly, Morejón explores the theme of nationalism in "Mujer negra". Nationalism can be defined as an ideology that highlights loyalty over everything to a nation that overshadows other interests, individual or group. As was mentioned before, the poetic voice expresses feelings of nostalgia for her homeland Africa. However, this did not stop her from trying to have a good life in Cuba and improve the country for future generations. In spite of her setbacks, the poetic voice persevered. Lines such as “I rebelled” (Morejón), “I rose up” (Morejón) and “I worked on and on” (Morejón) demonstrate how she stood firm and persisted. She did not resent Cuba for the hard life she lived there, she embraced the country and eventually joined the liberation movement and discovered Communism. “I came down from the Sierra to put an end to capital and usurer, to generals and to bourgeois” (Morejón) inform the readers that the enslavement only inspired the poetic voice to end the systems of oppression and high society. “Nothing is foreign to us. The land is ours.” (Morejón) shows that the inhabitants have now reclaimed Cuba and plan to better their lives. This

new patriotic attitude is also shown through the use of pronouns. The poetic voice only used “I” and “me” in the beginning of the poem. As the poem neared its end, she began to use “we” and “our” which showed that she found her place among other Cubans and appreciated her new home. “Compañeros, here I see you dance around the tree we are planting for communism” (Morejón) are the lines that show that the poetic voice supports the political movement Communism, which advocates for a classless society. The theme of nationalism in this poem shows how the poetic voice finally managed to find her place in Cuba, despite being brought there against her will and enduring the adversities of enslavement. Nationalism is a critical theme of this poem because of its importance in the Cuban Revolution. Castro’s party established a Nationalist government in an attempt to bring equality to the nation.

"Madrigal para cimarrones" [Madrigal for Runaway Slaves] is a short poem that briefly describes the escape that maroons make from the plantation in which they worked, usually to a mountainous area where their owners would have difficulty finding them again. The poetic voice speaks about the love and appreciation that the maroons possess for their freedom. The poem consists of 13 lines and does not follow a specific rhyming pattern. The form of the poem is rather loose which reflects the flowing time frame of the events. An important aspect to note is that the verbs in the poem are conjugated in the present tense or gerund form, which allows readers to immerse themselves in the events of the poem as they occur. This poem is highly appreciated because it does not depict maroons as criminals for escaping their respective plantations or objects to be recaptured, instead, maroons are illustrated as free, inspirational human beings. The main theme of "Madrigal para cimarrones" by Nancy Morejón is slavery. Slavery is an important topic in Cuban history because of the large amounts of Africans who were forcibly brought to Cuba to work in the plantations.

The title of the poem is the first indicator that slavery is a prominent topic. The opening line of the poem “Their heads and hands hanging” (Morejón) succinctly encompasses the brutal treatment that the enslaved Africans were forced to endure. *Un cimarrón* or a maroon derived from the French word *marron* which directly translates to black runaway slave. In the colonial past, maroons were considered traitors and felons. This poem challenges that narrative. Even though the maroons carried weapons like machetes, Morejón manages to soften the description of these blades by juxtaposing them with peaceful partners, “doves and mice rest on their machetes like branches”. (Morejón) The machete forms a symbol of resistance and freedom. The enslaved Africans battled for liberation and did not have many weapons to use. Machetes were some of the few items they possessed to defend themselves. Additionally, the naturalistic symbols presented, meeting with the maroons and their machetes, show the organic blend between the enslaved and the Cuban environment. They were never meant to be enslaved and abused. They deserved and earned their freedom. She also humanises the maroons with the description “how beautifully tough their hearts are.” (Morejón) This encourages readers to empathise with and admire the maroons for their courage and bravery. The final line of the poem “like sweet children of a liberty already won” (Morejón) can carry several different meanings. The first is that the maroons achieved freedom the second they left their plantations, not when they arrived at their destination. That simple act of leaving the estate automatically granted them liberty. The other is that the line predicts the victory of the Cuban Revolution. In both scenarios, the success of the Revolution is the final event, the last barrier to cross with regard to emancipation. Nevertheless, it is inarguable that a maroon is a historical figure of true freedom. Furthermore, as mentioned before, time is not stagnant in this poem. The maroon is not restricted to existing only in the past. The lines “and days of suns, and days of moon, and days of will resurrect their lives into children” (Morejón) imply the existence

of a time, perhaps in literature, in which the challenges as well as the achievements of the maroon live on constantly, ensuring that readers remember the important role maroons played in achieving liberty, during the period of enslavement as well as afterward. The machete that was mentioned above, that figure of liberation, is the root from which everything derives. It represents the bloodshed, the resilience and the rebellions that allow these enslaved people to live another day as free beings once more.

"Madrigal para cimarrones" was written in dedication to Miguel Barnet's piece *Biografía de un cimarrón, Autobiography of a Runaway Slave* (1966), the text that may have inspired this poem in the first place. The autobiography by Barnet details the oral history told by Esteban Montejo, a 102 year old man at the time, a runaway slave whose experience with slavery began before emancipation, and focuses on his time as a maroon. The fact that Morejón dedicates 'Madrigal para cimarrones' to Barnet's autobiography shows how she respects the period of enslavement and wants to immortalize more experiences of runaway slaves through written literature.

To conclude, Nancy Morejón's poems focus on the topics of gender, longing for Africa and nationalism. "Mujer negra" and "Madrigal para cimarrones" also share in common the theme of enslavement. The former poem tells the story of a black female slave who survived against all odds and learned to love her life after emancipation in Cuba. The latter describes the maroons' escape from the plantations to the mountains and appreciates their fight for freedom rather than tarnishing them. Even though slavery was abolished before the Cuban Revolution took place, the theme is still relevant in literature because Cuban society still suffers from the lingering impacts of colonialism. The next chapter will provide a summary and examination of Georgina Herrera's poetry as well as supporting textual evidence pertaining to the significant themes of the African legacy and slavery.

CHAPTER THREE

REVIEW OF POEMS BY GEORGINA HERRERA

This chapter will be dedicated to analysing the themes of the African legacy and slavery in "Africa" and "El barracón" by Georgina Herrera. "Africa", published in 2006, is an ode to the country. The poem celebrates Africa's beauty and heritage. The poem does not follow a strict rhyming pattern and opts for a looser form. This reflects the beautiful and freeing nature and culture of Africa. Much like many of her other pieces, the theme of the African legacy is prominent in the poem "Africa" by Georgina Herrera.

"Whenever I mention you or whenever you are named in my presence, it will be to praise you." (Herrera) This is the first line of the poem and it is monumental because the poetic voice dismisses the degradation that Africa has experienced and continues to suffer from. Africa is plagued with many stereotypes about diseases and poverty and is discriminated against because of her colonial past. For these reasons, a poem solely dedicated to praising Africa is tremendous. The line "I care for you" (Herrera) is repeated twice in the poem, which reiterates the love and tenderness that the poetic voice feels toward Africa. "You may close your eyes, calmly while at rest, and lie a while in peace" (Herrera) shows that the poetic voice is aware of Africa's strenuous past, and wants to protect the country while it, at last, gets to rest.

The poet also makes reference to some natural and cultural aspects of African heritage. When describing her loyalty, she mentions the tallest tree in Africa, which is known as the *Entandrophragma Excelsum*. (BBC News) "At your side I remain, as at the foot of the tallest tree." (Herrera) She also mentions the African rivers and that the memory makes her nostalgic. "I think of the water in your rivers, and my eyes remain moist." (Herrera) In keeping with the natural topic, she speaks of Africa's climate, the way that she delights in the range of weather. "This delight,

whether of the wind blowing or the rain falling or the lightning seizing me, is the same.” (Herrera) However, the poet also praised the African culture. Much like other countries around the globe, gold is a symbol of wealth and royalty in Africa, and so her comparison of Africa to a gold artefact is symbolic. “On my wrist, you are like a gold bracelet, shining so much.” (Herrera) The same could be said of the mention of cowries. Cowries are shells that possess great amounts of worth in many cultures across the African continent. Cowries can be used as accessories, such as jewellery and hair adornments. They are also used as embellishments on distinguished pieces of clothing. Their usage extends to religious ceremonies and they were even accepted as a form of currency in Africa until the 19th century. “You sound like thrown cowries so that no one will forget you are alive.” (Herrera) In Yoruba mythology, persons threw cowrie shells and the amount that landed face up related to a specific *odu*¹. Furthermore, the poetic voice expresses her admiration for the African gods, who have strenuous histories like hers. She adores them because of the African legacy and how she relates to them. “I love those gods with stories like these, like mine, coming and going from war to love or the opposite.” (Herrera) Herrera’s poem expresses to readers the importance of keeping the African legacy alive.

The poem "El barracón" [The Slave Quarters] (2009), written by Georgina Herrera, describes the pain of the enslaved people while living in the slave barracks of Santa Amalia, Cuba. Herrera expertly depicts ancestral pain through memories and shows how powerful hope and faith is. The poem does not follow a strict rhyming pattern or structural form. Similar to her other pieces, the theme of slavery is a very significant one throughout the poem. The readers follow the poetic voice as she visits the old, battered by the elements, barracoons where the enslaved Africans were forced to live while they worked on the plantations in Cuba. While the poet herself was not a slave, she

¹ Yoruba term for God

empathized with them through their housing, or lack thereof. “On those ramparts still damp, on the walls which the rain and sobs from long ago wore down and also made eternal, I lay my hands.” (Herrera) The first few lines of the poem illustrate the long-lasting effects of the enslaved persons’ pain. “Through my fingers, I hear moans, curses, swearing from those who quietly resisted for centuries the fangs of the whip on their flesh.” (Herrera) It is clear that the poetic voice feels a strong connection to the slaves. She feels their pain through the crying walls of the barracks, but more than that, she senses their resilience. She even seems to have the ability to communicate with them.

“Everything comes to me from the past, while thoughts emerge. I ask survivors of the endless Middle Passage for strength and memory — that devotion to remembrance.” (Herrera) In this quote, she mentions the Middle Passage, one stage of the infamous Atlantic slave trade in which enslaved Africans were transported against their will in unfavorable conditions overseas. These travels formed an egregious part of the slavery period as they signified the introduction of the slaves to enslavement. Although the Middle Passage was a terrible period that also took many of the enslaved Africans' lives, the poetic voice focuses on the African community and fortitude of the enslaved. Their love and support of each other carried them through. “And love, so much, all the love that watered their impetuous seed, perpetuating it.” (Herrera)

The poem ends with the lines “Thus I sense it, I gather it. I tremble.” (Herrera) These lines encompass the poetic voice’s experience while visiting the barracks. She felt their pain, suffering and love and embraced it as though she too was enslaved. The strong emotions overwhelmed her, and caused her to shiver from their intensity. Slavery is an important theme to write about because Cuba, much like the other nations impacted by the enslavement period, still reap the abhorrent effects of it. Even though slavery is a gruesome topic, this poem is almost hopeful because of

Herrera's empathy, love and connection to the enslaved through their living place. To conclude, the poems "África" and "El barracón" focus on the themes of the African legacy and slavery respectively. Herrera's poetry, although generally short, is monumental because of the choice of themes. This is due to the heavy influence of African culture and heritage on Cuba due to colonialism.

CONCLUSION

Although this study analysed 6 different texts, the texts shared similarities with their thematic concerns. The short stories "Kid Bururú y los caníbales" and "Todos los negros tomamos café" by Mirta Yáñez both dealt with the theme of the representation of blackness. In both stories, black people were discriminated against and were of the lower class. Despite the success of the Cuban Revolution and Castro's goal to achieve equality, racism did not end. In "Kid Bururú y los caníbales", Kid Bururú was insulted for his distinct African features, tattered clothing and that he seemed less "manly." While none of the main protagonists in "Todos los negros tomamos café" were black and no black characters were referred to by name, the protagonists still insulted black people by judging them for working in the plantations and speaking about the negative implications white people could experience if they associate with blacks. Nancy Morejón's poems "Mujer negra" and "Madrigal para cimarrones" both share the theme of slavery. Although the Cuban Revolution took place after emancipation, the effects of slavery remained and so Castro's intent to establish Nationalism seemed to be a fair initiative. The poetry by Georgina Herrera "África" and "El barracón" were written years after the pieces by Morejón and Yáñez. However, their themes are still similar. Slavery is a relevant theme because of the racial inequalities that still plague Cuban society to this day. The African legacy is also significant because of the vast amount of people with African heritage who live in Cuba and who want to maintain connections to their ancestral culture.

It is clear that the outcomes of the Cuban Revolution have inspired the themes explored by these authors. These literature texts play an important role in increasing awareness about past situations. Slavery is a pivotal period in our lives because people of colour still reap its severe consequences. While slavery has been abolished, racism, colourism and other forms of discrimination and

inequalities still plague our societies today. In order to better our future lives, we must learn from the previous blunders of our ancestors. These pieces also provide readers with specificities about Cuban society during those contexts and encourage us not to repeat past mistakes. Thanks to the enslavement period and the illegal transportation of African slaves to Cuban soil, many Cubans are mixed with African blood. Learning about their heritage ensures that it remains relevant and that it is not lost in the inevitable passage of time. Further research can be conducted into other pieces of literature by these 3 authors as well as by other Cuban women authors. Hispanic women authors provide unique perspectives through their written texts because of their heritage and personal experiences based on race and gender.

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