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## Ethnographic Surrealism: Authorship and Initiation in the Works of Alejo Carpentier and Lydia Cabrera

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## Ethnographic Surrealism: Authorship and Initiation in the Works of Alejo Carpentier and Lydia Cabrera

### Abstract / Resumen

JT Torres

Ethnographic Surrealism: Authorship and Initiation

#### Abstract

This research examines the ways in which two writers, Alejo Carpentier and Lydia Cabrera, assume the roles of author and ethnographer to compose fictional works that also preserve elements of an oral tradition. That tradition is a literacy expressed by the Afro-Cuban drum. Both Carpentier and Cabrera incorporate percussive techniques within their prose to accomplish a mimesis that is just as important aesthetically as it is culturally. Relying mostly on primary sources—the works of Carpentier and Cabrera—and secondary criticism to expand and clarify their dual roles, this research explores how, as artists, the two gained initiation into the diasporic community of Afro-Cuban culture in order to transcribe the aural components they used as creative inspiration. The criticism that has been performed on these authors are usually restricted to formalist techniques from the viewpoint of a literary critic. This focus is on the relationship between an ethnographer bound by objective ethics and an author driven by imagination and invention. The research concludes with the idea that ethnography is as creative as fiction is itself research-based.

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Ethnographic Surrealism: Authorship and Initiation in the Works of Alejo Carpentier and  
Lydia Cabrera

Oral traditions, especially those complicated by diaspora, typically retain shared levels of discourse by syncretizing the subjugated with the predominant aesthetics. By adopting methods popular with the oppressors, the oppressed preserve the forms and conventions necessary to prolong their culture. In this way, literacy of African music has allowed Afro-Cubans to foster and spread a language of rebellion despite the fact African music was banned from ballrooms and concert halls in 19<sup>th</sup> century Cuba. Unbeknownst to the aristocratic patrons admiring European orchestras, which ironically almost always featured black musicians, was a percussion relaying the esoteric language of black auralty. To modern readers, this strategy of pastiche and syncretism is nothing new. These preponderant forms of aesthetics populate everything today from hip-hop music to the films of Quentin Tarantino. While pastiche is a common technique in our postmodern climate, such strategies in the context of Afro-Cuban arts in 19<sup>th</sup> century Cuba promised something more than taste. It promised survival of an entire tradition.

Eventually, Afro-Cuban percussive self-preservation would inspire numerous ethnographers and authors, in this case Alejo Carpentier and Lydia Cabrera. Both of whom incorporate similar methods into literary works. Carpentier lets the rhythm of the *batá*, the ritual drum played in Santería ceremonies, shape his prose, especially in his story, “Journey Back to the Source,” while Cabrera bases her *Afro-Cuban Tales*, particularly “Walo-Wila” and “Bregantino, Bregantín,” on the lyric and song qualities of the Lucumí tradition, the liturgical language of a belief system that in Cuba is commonly referred to as Santería<sup>1</sup>. What is

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article, Lucumí and Santería can be read as interchangeable terms. While this may simplify the effort of understanding the language, this assumption is not entirely accurate. Lucumí is the liturgical language of the Yoruba religion of West Africa. When the culture reached Cuba via the slave trade,

interesting to consider is how both Carpentier and Cabrera assume the dual roles of author and ethnographer. Both writers produced works in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, both sought to recapture and preserve the cultural artifacts of Cuba's complex history, and yet both relied heavily on imagination and invention to compose works of fiction. In their creative retelling of folklore, history, and shared levels of discourse, they compromise the standardized ethics of an unbiased ethnographer. Of course, such complications only arise when readers insist on categorizing their works as something other than literary fiction; however, that is just what readers have insisted upon doing.

During the early part of the 1940s, while performing research for his book, *Music in Cuba*, what worried Carpentier most was the critical effort to silence music that sounded more African than European. He once went so far as to say that Cuban musicians “had to suffer the hostility of critics who still hadn't gotten past Wagner” (qtd. in Brennan 167). He was not alone in his sentiments. In fact, the prejudices that prevented Afro-Cuban culture from enjoying any part of mainstream exposure still dominated the popular tastes of the early half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Robert Nodal, for instance, suggests that racist criteria were used by music critics to differentiate “the Cuban dances of Spanish origin with those in which they could detect African influences in order to attribute Cuban authenticity only to the former” (159). Likewise, the latter was seen as an illegitimate form of art. Nodal goes on to say that

authorities found it impossible to motivate a whole society to support slavery through the determined economic, political, religious, and mental structures that they

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practitioners syncretized elements of Lucumí language, Yoruba divinity, and rituals with that of Catholicism. Thus, deities were conflated with saints, rituals were combined either in practice or in name, and terms were misappropriated. The evolved tradition came to be known as Santería, which for the most part is a Cuban term for the evolution. In Haiti, the evolution that resulted from syncretism came to be known as Voodoo. In Brazil, it came to be known as Candomblé. As far as understanding the terminology of this article, Lucumí is the source tradition that encapsulates Santería as well as other similar traditions.

developed and, at the same time, to allow that same society to dance to the sound of the drums of captives who were considered inferior beings, as mere objects! (160)

The eradication of a targeted identity was performed through the control of art. Drums were “burned or confiscated...under the pretense that those things were savage and uncivilized” (160). The African drum and Afro-Cuban culture both shared inextricable fates. If the ruling classes could silence one, the idea was that they could silence the other.

It was also during Carpentier’s composition of *Music in Cuba* that he wrote the short story, “Journey Back to the Source,” which made use of a narrative structure dictated by music. “Journey Back to the Source” follows a plot that moves back through time. The story’s protagonist, Don Marcial, begins the story as “the old man” and ends the story as a preverbal infant, wide-eyed and silent at the expansive nature of life he has already experienced but barely understands. As the plot progresses back through his life, the reader is introduced to new rhythms, tones, and riffs. The prose’s melodic language intensifies the closer Marcial gets to the prelapsarian state of his being. Carpentier equates this primitive, innocent state with “Africanness” in his attempt to establish Afro-Cubanism as a root culture in Cuba.<sup>2</sup> At the story’s beginning, at which is at the end of his life, “the old man” watches the demolition of his house “against a basic rhythm of steel on stone, the pulleys screech[ing] unpleasantly in chorus, like harsh-voiced birds” (Carpentier 222). The overpowering, discordant sounds seem to oppose nature—“steel on stone” and birds that are “harsh-voiced”—even though they are “in chorus.”

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<sup>2</sup> Carpentier is not alone in his assertion that “Africanness” is a root culture in Cuba. However, this does not mean that such a stance did not meet vociferous criticism. For much of the island’s history, Cuba took unprecedented pride in its alignment first with Spain and then with America. Numerous documented accounts of racial injustice, such as the fact that roughly an equal number of Afro-Cubans fought in the war for independence only to find themselves virtually ignored in the new constitution, only fuel this debate. Because Cuba’s indigenous people, i.e. the Arawaks and Taínos, are all but extinct, the island’s history was left for grabs. On the one hand there was Spain, which is ironically closer to Carpentier’s heritage than Cuba, and on the other hand there was Africa. Later, I’ll discuss in more details the problems of this dichotomy.

There is an apparent parallel of contexts here. There is the literal plot: the artificial deconstruction of Don Marcial's life that magically returns him to nature. The fact that these sounds are heard in chorus suggests the parallel timelines operating concurrently, for Marcial has reached the terminus of conscious existence regardless of what end of his life he is on. As an old man, literal death awaits. As a prelapsarian infant, a life apart from nature awaits. Then there is the ethnographic layer to the story, the fact that the rhythm of "steel on stone" directly alludes to the tactic of black drummers adding new material to their organic instruments in order to disguise the African sound, disguise nature with materials pivotal to European construction.

In Nodal's study of the survival of the African drum, Nodal recounts how black drummers often "changed the structure of the drums, adding metal deys and wooden strips from barrels of olive cases to the construction of the instruments. All kinds of transformations were tried so that the blacks could conceal the African origin of their drums and make them resemble 'white drums'" (160). Compare this strategy with Carpentier's personal growth as a writer. He initially based his literary style off the baroque method, which had regained popularity in Europe and, with its fetish for wonderment, became the cornerstone for magic realism practiced by several Latin American authors. After benefiting from a traditionally European education, Carpentier provides Caribbean writers with a mode that would eventually become *sui generis* to Latin American literature, especially with the later success of *100 Years of Solitude*.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Of course, it is difficult to assess the actual success of magical realism as a purely Latin American genre since a.) It did not originate in any Latin American country, and b.) The popularity of the genre, along with similar contemporary movements, attracted the interests of several international authors before being associated with South and Central America and the Caribbean. What can be determined with certainty is the exceptional rate of literary production in the region that followed Carpentier's tradition of focusing narratives on oppressed individuals, using the techniques readers would recognize as "magical realism."

By establishing the tension between nature and culture using the language of music, Carpentier signals to the reader that Marcial's journey is one that will lead him through the layers of his life as well as Cuba's history. As an ethnographic piece of literature, the story seeks to inform the reader of the important clashes of music inherent to the survival of Afro-Cuban culture. Even though Carpentier, a privileged European, did not need to disguise his prose or syncretize elements of a ruling aesthetic, he does so solely as homage. The mimesis employed captures and preserves the strategy used by Afro-Cuban musicians; it becomes literary convention, canonized. Consider the moment when Don Marcial reaches the final age of childhood, just before being an adult, a point at which "courts of justice were no longer feared, because his bodily existence was ignored by law" (226). Again, the closer he comes to infancy, the more he removes layers of hegemony. With his new freedom, which protects him from serious consequence, Marcial disappears from an evening party to engage in passionate lovemaking while his white peers play the "Ballad of the Scottish Lakes" on a "guitar inlaid with mother-of-pearl, a psaltery, and a serpent" (226). Set to the ornate but stiffly performed bourgeois music, Marcial enjoys and understands only carnal passion, a *joie de vivre* that is primitive but ineffably euphoric.

The music is described as a "cacophony," and it is at this point that Marcial, now an adolescent, can only stand the music by trying to "pick out the tune of the 'Trípili-Trápala' [an African folksong] on the piano" (226). Only when Marcial gains the privilege of "understanding [the music] in a purely instinctive way" can he strip away enough layers to discover the source of his and his country's cultural existence (227). The pleasure he experiences as a young lover can only be achieved by revising the music as Afro-Cuban, which is instinctively done at that point of the story. Later, as time reverts Marcial to his

childhood, the importance of nature to a pure soul becomes clearer, even if the importance cannot be articulated.

When Marcial reaches his childhood, he reencounters (remembers) his good friend Melchor, a black slave who cared for Marcial as a child.<sup>4</sup> He recalls the slave songs Melchor taught him, songs that sound to Marcial as though they would be ritualistic chants, both spiritual and uncomplicated, with words that “had no meaning and were constantly repeated” (Carpentier 230). Before Marcial can sing Melchor’s easy to learn slave songs, he must turn away from the superficial sounds of a European culture blanketing the island, such as “the rhythm of spoons stirring cups of chocolate” (223). Although on the surface “Journey Back to the Source” seems to be a story about a man having his life flash before his eyes, backpedaling through time until reaching the stage of infancy, Carpentier’s stylization of cultural artifacts within his prose forces the reader to consider how the story might be an allegory for Afro-Cubanism. Sure, the literary use of allegory does not make an author also an ethnographer, but Carpentier’s insistence on detailing actual slave songs and drums and incorporating those elements within his plot imbue his work with an importance far beyond mere entertainment.

Born into the Cuban aristocracy, it is interesting that Marcial would take such a liking to Melchor, a slave. For Marcial, no one is more important to him than Melchor, “not God, nor his father, nor the golden bishop in the Corpus Christi” (230). Paralleling this moment in the narrative, music falls more in line with nature, becomes more organic: “shafts of lightning fell from the sky, creating a vault of cascading arpeggios—the organ, the wind in

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<sup>4</sup> There is some critical debate on the treatment of Melchor. Some fault Carpentier for representing a typical “Uncle Remus” fashioned character. However, Melchor is instrumental to understanding the story on an ethnographical level. He is good natured because he is nature personified, a lesson Carpentier intended to be understood by Marcial as well as the reader. Melchor’s placement is also telling. He, the African, was present since the beginning, just as Carpentier asserts with Cuba’s history. More on this debate later.

the pines, and the cricket's mandolin" (229). Like the Lucumí orisha, Eshu<sup>5</sup>, or the Vodoun lwa, Legba<sup>6</sup>, who "opens the doors for interaction with the spirits through drum, dance, and song, but also figuratively stands at the gates of literacy" (Clark 43), Melchor is the entry point both to and from the source of Afro-Cubanism, appearing both at the beginning and the end of the story. Marcial learns language from the repetitious slave songs Melchor teaches him. In the sequence of the story, Marcial remembers the value of silent intuition by reaching this stage after a lifetime of duplicitous speech. Either way, Melchor is the intermediary between the world of man and that of divinity.

Keeping in mind the important and inseparable relationship between music and literacy, Carpentier, reminds us how a single artifact can guide readers back through time to the organic source of culture. This, again, is his contribution as ethnographer. He provides a strategy, a technique not just for artists but for anthropologists. According to his work, and especially "Journey Back to the Source," the key to understanding the authentic seminal culture of Cuba is to analyze the language and construction of the drum. For Carpentier, such an analysis results in a root culture that is irrefutably Afro-Cuban.

Almost immediately following WWI, several artists and intellectuals developed a new passion for Negritude as a means of fighting European hegemonic cultures. Aesthetically, Negritude returned artists to Africa, rather than France, as the source of artistic heritage. Francophone writers new to the exploration of Negritude followed in Carpentier's footsteps. For the first time, what the "hegemony" once considered an extraneous culture attracted international scholars willing to gain initiation into African traditions. The method itself

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<sup>5</sup> Orishas: spirits or gods in the Lucumí/Santería mythology. Eshu: a trickster who enlightens humans with his riddles, puzzles, and pranks. Interestingly, comparative studies associate him with the Christian devil.

<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Vodoun (Voodoo) believes angels (lwa or loa) interact with men and women to provide guidance. Legba is the principle intermediary between humans and deities. As such, he can speak any language.

seems to be influenced more by Lucumí tradition than a literary one.<sup>7</sup> For example, *batás*—ritual drums used in sacred Lucumí ceremonies—aren’t played so much for their rhythm as for their lingual import. According to Nodal, “the drums ‘talk language,’ and the *batás* express themselves in the Lucumí language; their notes come out in an orderly series of sounds which agglutinate to form words. The complex combination of rhythms and sounds of the *batás* constitute what the *olorís* refer to as a ‘six-hand conversation’” (166). Also, Migene González-Wippler records how “the batáa are played together in an unusual drum rhythm that is known as a ‘conversation.’ Iyá always ‘speaks’ to Itótele while Okónkolo marks the beat. But Iyá is the only one that ‘asks’ for changes in the rhythm or *toque*”<sup>8</sup> (190). The challenge European neophytes faced in engaging Negritude was learning to understand a discourse that had been reserved exclusively for those initiated. Thus, as Lucumí gained more non-native initiates, the discourse could continue to exist, binding oral cultures despite geopolitical separateness.

Timothy Brennan, in his essay, “The Latin Sound,” addresses Carpentier’s interest in transcribing the Afro-Cuban voice: “Of course, more was on Carpentier’s mind than the aesthetics of popular culture. As suffocated by the United States as they had been earlier by Spain, Cubans strove to find a nationalist vision of their culture” (165). So why write with such exactitude that only a limited number of initiated readers could absorb the literature, especially when such a decision would have limited the possibility of a nationalist vision? Initiation plays a significant role in traditions such as Lucumí, and to do the opposite both Carpentier and Cabrera would risk misrepresenting the culture to an audience biased by its own indifference.

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<sup>7</sup> By that I am referring specifically to initiation. Lucumí and Santería allow and encourage inclusive initiation, meaning anyone irrespective of ethnicity or nationality can join their community. Of course, issues arise in regards to hierarchy and practice.

<sup>8</sup> Iyá, Itótele, and Okónkolo: drum types that designate the leading conversant and his compliments.

Appropriately describing the need for initiation, especially into a tradition that has remained largely oral, is González-Wippler's claim that "if the person does not know the language of the batáa, he will not get the message" (191). To return to "Journey Back to the Source," if Marcial had never had Melchor in his life, he may not have realized anything useful in his journey back through time. Only because Marcial was initiated in the tradition early on did he have the ability to remember, rediscover it. This isn't to say that initiation is exclusive to any certain community, constructed by ethnicity or gender, but that such ethnographic literature places a certain responsibility on the reader to perform an exegetical reading that may not be required of other forms of literature. In other words, one can simply read "Journey Back to the Source" as a work of fiction, relegating Carpentier to creative writer and nothing more. Or, one can develop an understanding of the importance of Afro-Cuban auralty, particularly percussive rhythm, and read the story as a work of ethnographic investigation.

Vévé Clark, in "Developing Diaspora Literacy and *Marasa* Consciousness," writes of the literature that, although available to all readers, holds meaning that can only be understood by those within diasporic communities. For her, "diaspora literacy defines the reader's ability to comprehend the literatures of Africa, Afro-America, and the Caribbean from an informed, indigenous perspective" (42). Rather than discouraging Western readers, Clark's affirmation confirms the prerequisite that interested readers bear the burden of initiation and participate in the community, even if only textually, as in reading for cultural understanding. What constitutes initiation then is a dedication to intellectual and spiritual inquiry. In regards to Lucumí, initiation is completely egalitarian, as Joseph M. Murphy finds in his book, *Working the Spirit*,

The prominent ethnic designations in Cuba, such as Lucumi (Yoruba), Carabali (Efik), Arara (Fon), and Congo (baKongo and others), have become liturgical rather than ethnic descriptions. Though many people are proud of their Yoruba or Kongo blood, their participation in these traditions is marked by initiation rather than descent. (83)

Murphy also explicates the primary requirement of an initiate: “commitment of service, both to the spirits to whom the initiate is bound as well as to the community” (92). The community here can be read as the readers drawn to the literature in the first place. Curiosity and interest alone prepare one for entrance. Marcial gains initiation because of Melchor’s indifference to class<sup>9</sup>. The reader of “Journey Back to the Source” then gains initiation by understanding Carpentier’s musical prose on a contextual level deeper than plot. This idea of initiation, both culturally and artistically, is more clearly seen in the works of Cabrera.

Cabrera’s story, “Walo-Wila,” from her *Afro-Cuban Tales*, most precisely exemplifies the Lucumí idea of initiation. The story shares Carpentier’s technique of employing Afro-Cuban musical qualities. In this case, Cabrera utilizes a structure based on repetition of lyrics, similar to the songs Melchor sings<sup>10</sup>. The conversation between Walo-Wila and her sister is chanted rather than spoken. If we remember González-Wippler’s claim that only those who know the conversation of the drums, in other words the initiates, will get the message, we can understand that the dialogue the sisters chant to each other may be heard by all passersby but are only *understood* between the two. Therefore, when Walo-Wila sings her sad song of self-deprecation, “Walo-Wila,/ Walo Kénde,/ Ayere Kénde,/ Tell Br’er Horse that

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<sup>9</sup> Here is why it is important that Melchor be accepting of Marcial, despite the fact Marcial’s parents owned Melchor. This is the fact overlooked by critics who jump to quickly to the conclusion that Carpentier creates a stereotype with Melchor.

<sup>10</sup> Most oral literatures utilize repetitive phrases as mnemonic devices. Written down, the repetition seems deceptively simple or unoriginal. Spoken, the rhythm created by such a structure is entrancing.

I'm ugly, Kénde Ayere” (Cabrera 26), her suitor, a musical horse, can hear only the surface of the song and leaves in disgust. What the first suitor fails to understand is the message: he has to marry her on faith. This riddle exemplifies the crisis of the uninitiated wishing to gain admittance. The liturgical language cannot be understood from the outside; on the other hand, one can't understand why she would want to be initiated if she cannot make sense of the community's discourse. To borrow Kierkegaard's fideist phrase, often initiation requires a leap of faith.

Even though Ayere Kénde promises the horse, along with all the other suitors, that Walo-Wila is “more beautiful [than the golden goblet],” the horse, lacking the vision of faith, the ability to see Walo-Wila “living and dying behind the drawn blinds,” forgoes initiation (25). However, because Lucumí initiation is inclusive of all classes, Walo-Wila has several potential suitors comprised of several species. She continues singing her perfunctorily sad song until the willing initiate arrives—a suitor who is curious enough to predict a contextual meaning deeper than the *prima facie* appearance.

Cabrera's use of multifarious animals, a popular motif in *pataki*s, or Lucumí folktales, symbolizes the egalitarianism of Lucumí initiation. The sisters are the only two characters that share any relation in this story; they are the only community, the *ilé*. However, the invitation to marry Walo-Wila, thus gaining entry into the community, is available to “Goat-Man, Bull-Man, and Turtle Man,” followed by “Tiger-Man, Elephant-Man, and Lion-Man” (26). And yet, only Stag, “the son of Honeysuckle,” marries Walo-Wila without seeing her (27). He makes his decision immediately after hearing her sad song, as if he understands its message the moment he hears the song. Stag stands for the potential initiate into the *ilé*, as he intuits a message besides what is literally being said in the song. Stag seems to follow, as

Murphy aptly puts it, “a directive or call from an *orisha*”<sup>11</sup> (87). At this moment, like “Journey Back to the Source,” music and nature reach a point of apotheosis that contrasts the darkness of the songs sung between the sisters: “Stag ran to the shore, and the whole seashore was in song: ‘Walo-Wila, Walo-Wila, Walo-Wila, Walo-Wila!’ Then he entered the water through the slit made by the knife of the moon” (Cabrera 28). Although not as didactic as other folktales, “Walo-Wila” does take the reader to a truth of Afro-Cuban culture, and that is the withholding of beauty from everyone save those willing to gain membership into the *ilé*.

As authors and ethnographers, both Cabrera and Carpentier had to be initiated into African communities. Some critics, like Brennan, fault Carpentier for writing from without, for assuming the role of ethnographic surrealist while being unable to separate himself from his European consciousness. Brennan says, “contemporary readers will see Carpentier stumble into overt racial typecasting that marks him as a child of the 1920s, a white enthusiast of Cuban *negrismo* (throbbing voodoo drums and the like), even though most of the text casts individual blacks as protagonists in a drama of influence, creation, and transformation” (168). Such criticism may hold true considering Carpentier’s equivalence of Africanness with primitiveness—Marcial’s experience with Melchor coming at the transition from Marcial as a conscious being into that of a beast with his own language. However, Carpentier’s scholarship and creative interests do exemplify the egalitarianism of a culture striving to survive by syncretizing elements of a hegemonic aesthetic.

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<sup>11</sup> It is interesting to note the idea of a “calling” that pervades the idea of initiation in Lucumí tradition. This idea accounts for the paradox of initiation: in order to understand, one must gain admittance; in order to gain admittance, one must understand. What Cabrera’s tale suggests—and what the tradition in general encourages—is an instinctive curiosity that supplies individuals with the desire to understand what he/she cannot at first understand. The parallels of receiving a calling can be found in almost every other religious tradition.

Despite the common misconception that Carpentier was born in Havana, he was raised and educated in Switzerland and France. His European education supplied him with a breadth of knowledge concerning modes of literature that would have otherwise been deprived to him had he actually been born in Cuba. Eventually, he would be suspected of subversive motives by then Cuban President Machado and imprisoned. After his release, he went into exile in Paris. There, he wrote feverishly about Cuba. Although his biography lacks genuine evidence of a Cuban heritage, his experience of exile and estrangement from the country he loved places him in direct relation to that of the diasporic Cuban community.

A similar charge has been placed on Cabrera, who, like Carpentier, began writing about *Santería* and its traditions after moving to Paris. While Cabrera was at least born in Havana, her family was part of the privileged bourgeoisie. Her family owned several slaves, one of whom grew very close to Cabrera and forever influenced her life. This African Nanny of Cabrera's introduced her as a child to the folktales to which Cabrera would dedicate most of her literature. Once Cabrera was an adult, she grew so ashamed of her family's involvement with slavery that she embarked on her first exile from the island. She moved to Paris to study and develop her literary talents. She would return to Cuba only to support and engage the Afro-Cuban movement. Later, when Castro seized the island, she would once more, and for the final time, exile herself from Cuba. In interviews, Cabrera has credited her exile as providing the right amount of distance to allow her to really study the effects of her country's culture. Like Carpentier, her literal, albeit contextually different, exiles aligned her with a diasporic community into which she gained symbolic initiation.

In Cabrera's defense, Amy Naus Millay says that "by allowing these oral memories to speak in her texts, Lydia was inscribing her own traditions and preserving those of her black compatriots" ("Lydia" 277). This is why Cabrera adamantly rebuked the title of

ethnographer, even though she “bases her ‘method’ on her own personal acceptance—her initiation, in a sense—into black communities and her unique rapport with her informants” (268). When Cabrera returned to Cuba after eleven years in Paris, she gained initiation into Afro-Cuban culture, specifically Lucumí, by focusing her artistic energy on preserving a literacy that had not yet been recorded. Besides rebuking the title of ethnographer, she also rebuked the title of creative writer. Her identity was somewhere in between those polarities. She was an author of a narrative that she did not invent. Still, her authorship was too ambiguous to categorize. She did not allow herself the credit of the folktales relayed to her by her nanny and by those she encountered after her return to Cuba.<sup>12</sup>

For Carpentier, his initiation came to him during a trip to Haiti. It was this seminal moment that what inspired him to develop the style of *lo real maravilloso*, what would later be called magic realism. On explaining his experience, Carpentier said, “I was treading on land where thousands of men anxious for freedom had believed...I had been in the Citadel of La Ferrière, a work without architectural antecedents...I had breathed the atmosphere created by Henri Christophe, a monarch of incredible exploits...At every step I encountered the marvelous in the real” (qtd. in Danticat x). African culture had been reproducing itself by syncretizing elements of the oppressive culture attempting to silence it years before attracting European scholars and artists hoping to subvert cultural hegemonies of their own. Therefore, it was not some exotic fetish that attracted Carpentier and Cabrera, but their own living experiences with Afro-Cubanism, their own initiation and personal diaspora that defined their literary careers.

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<sup>12</sup> Ilé, or Lucumí communities, celebrate the group rather than the individual. It may be that Cabrera expressed the collective psychology by refusing individual ownership of her proud collection of literature. However, as I suggest later, there are critics who believe just the opposite, that Cabrera secretly sought individual credit for the work she compiled from communal cooperation.

This is exactly the case with “Bregantino, Bregantín,” in which Cabrera uses the structure of African song inherent in patakis to mold the narrative, calling attention to the framed segment involving Oshun and Ogún.<sup>13</sup> In this way, Cabrera practices a form of literary syncretism that draws explicitly from the Lucumí belief. “In both the frame and the internal tale [of ‘Bregantino, Bregantín’], verses and choruses in African languages are intercalated to form a linguistic collage,” which then creates a level of freedom for Cabrera to thread a tale of her invention into the existing story (“Lydia” 264). The focus is again on the musical quality of her prose, preserving the songs in which these tales have always been told. Millay writes of Cabrera’s use of “syllabic chants and overflow of assonances, predominantly of *o* and *u*,” noting how they “spill into the Castilian prose to create an African tone” (264). The sweeping musicality of her prose preserves the rhythm and song-like qualities of the oral version of the tale while also rendering the tale into a new form. The literary syncretism here employed evolved from artistic ethnography that not only reinvents lost artifacts for new initiated readers but also salvages the purity of these artifacts. “In this way,” Millay writes, “the writer’s ingenious play with language effects an inventive rhythmic style that synthesizes African and Hispanic elements. [Cabrera] conveys oral language in writing by incorporating onomatopoeic expressions, interpolated songs, colloquial sayings, and punctuation and interjections reflecting oral narration” (264). Like Carpentier, her use of musical prose emphasizes “beats and repetitive syllables to heighten the African rhythms of the narrative” (264). The music itself communicates a meaning that is only clear to the ear of the initiate. As mentioned earlier, a reader with no interest in initiation would only

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<sup>13</sup> Oshun: orisha of love and rivers; noted as one of the most beautiful orishas. Ogún: orisha of war, iron, and politics; noted for his strength and physical prowess. The love story between Oshun and Ogún is a popular tale, so much so that there are rivers in West Africa named after Ogún as a way to suggest their intimate relationship.

comprehend the plot. The multilayered folktales Cabrera composes offers several levels of discourse depending on the exegetical investment on the reader's part.

“Bregantino, Bregantín” is one of *Afro-Cuban Tales*' more complex stories. When a community is threatened by the new king, a brutal bull who slaughters all men so that only he will be revered by the remaining women, the narrative breaks to tell the popular tale of Ogún, the orisha of war, falling in love with Oshun, the orisha of love and rivers.<sup>14</sup> In order to marry Ogún, a solitary orisha who lives his life hiding in the forest, Oshun must convince him to return to the community. She does this by seducing him, coating her body with honey and presenting herself to him. This is mainly done through song, as Oshun “continued singing and dancing and holding out the honey before him” (Cabrera 11). The lyrical shift in the story parallels the story of Sanune, who mothers the boy who will save the community from the bull-king. Sanune disappears into the forest to give birth to her son without the knowledge of the murderous tyrant. The frame may have been invented by Cabrera, but the story of an unstoppable despot makes the original pataki relevant, especially considering Cuba's string of egotist dictators and Cabrera's own experience of exile, like Ogún and Sanune.

Oshun sings to Ogún, “Ogún, come out of the forest. With this sweetness that I'm giving you, come on out of the forest. Because you are the one who can open and close the heavens, I give you this sweetness so that you may get inside all saints and all men,” and one can't help but consider the myriad contexts in which Oshun's song can be placed (11). For one, readers can understand the inevitable effect of exile on an individual's confidence, even if you are a god of war. Or, readers can infer the power of community despite separateness and isolation. The contemporary update of the tale, created by Cabrera, evinces the eternal

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<sup>14</sup> Frame narratives are popular forms in the Lucumí tradition. They are used to contextualize older tales of orishas within contemporary conflicts. The goal is to show the eternal relevance of the orishas' lives.

struggle Cubans face in regards to political injustice and religious freedom. For most of the island's history, practitioners and believers of Santería have had to "hide in the forest." The creatively composed ethnography here captures this experience clearly and powerfully. The effect would obviously be lost had Cabrera been merely an ethnographer and recorded the patakis verbatim. Her fusion of lyric and prose preserves as well as reinvents an African tradition inherited by Cuba.

The debate over how much Cabrera invented when writing *Afro-Cuban Tales* is well known. Some critics claim that since Santería included a literate tradition as well as an oral one Cabrera copied large amounts of text and then downplayed those texts as reputable sources. Erwan Dianteill and Martha Swearingen, in their essay, "From Hierography to Ethnography and Back: Lydia Cabrera's Texts and the Written Tradition in Afro-Cuban Religions," examine the latter of the two charges. According to them, Cabrera

emphasized [the tales'] oral origin and claimed the art of writing for herself... In the libretas the myths are closely linked to divination signs. The *oriaté* or the *babalao*<sup>15</sup> used them to give a sacred significance to the secular problem of the person who consults him. From this perspective, the 'style' has no importance compared to the narrative itself. Cabrera the ethnographer, on the other hand, was extremely sensitive to the stylistic characteristics of the stories. In this regard, she had an esthetic ambition. (278)

Yes, her ambition was to preserve the aesthetic, the 'style,' so that, through transformation from person to person, the retelling can preserve the oral style of the narrative. Cabrera's

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<sup>15</sup> Babalao: a chieftain or priest in Lucumí. While anyone can gain initiation into an ilé, there are rigid requirements to become a babalao. In certain ilé, only a man who is of direct African descent can become an ilé. In others, a man or woman born in Cuba can achieve this status. Babalao's themselves are structured into a hierarchy. Each is expected to specialize in a particular field, such as herbalist or ritual specialist. They must undergo extensive spiritual training before finally being recognized.

prescience allowed her to understand that the possibility existed that growth in literacy could ironically help eradicate a once oral tradition, such as impromptu song. The only possible response she saw was to record them in written form and at the same time leave them open-ended enough for a later revision, when contemporary contexts necessitates revision.

Of course she “refused to consider written texts as ‘real’ ethnographic sources. For her, they could only be used as a means for obtaining the ‘living document,’ which belonged exclusively to the oral world, in spite of the evidence of their growing importance in Santería” (Dianteill and Swearingen 277). Once things are written, they gain the quality of finality that precludes the dialectical relationship that Cabrera regarded as so important to Afro-Cubanism. In fact, the dialectical relationship between Cabrera’s writing and the actual tradition about which she wrote evolved so that the relationship inverted. Even Dianteill and Swearingen note how “some have even transformed the relevant parts of her ethnography into ‘hierography,’ that is, into prescriptive religious texts” (274). Readers don’t simply read Cabrera as a source of creative vision, but as a source “of religious information” (70). As she surely intended, the doors Cabrera opened in both the fields of ethnography and literature have encouraged santeros<sup>16</sup> to transform “her works to their own perspective. [So readers] are not only readers, they also are writers, or better said, rewriters” (287).

Both Cabrera and Carpentier focused on incorporating specific artifacts from Afro-Cuban tradition into their aesthetics so that the interplay would open the door for inquiry. The purpose of their strategy is clearly evident in Carpentier’s *Music in Cuba*, which describes “the little-known intercourse between community and concert hall in Cuba—a country where many classically trained instrumentalists were black—and showed how this encounter engendered new harmonic motifs and arrangements in the Cuban classical tradition”

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<sup>16</sup> Initiates in Santería

(Brennan 170). Rather than African communities being shaped by a single authoritative source, the constant recreation involving new generations—the multiple levels of discourse—allows the tradition to survive by remaining relevant.

It was the process of syncretism that allowed displaced Africans to continue their beliefs under the guise of the ruling culture. For better or worse, if it were not for the ingenious conflation of the oppressor's belief systems with that of the oppressed, their culture may have been banished forever. Imagine Ogun never coming out of the forest. This is exactly the case with most Caribbean autochthonous traditions<sup>17</sup>. This is precisely the cultural import of Cabrera and Carpentier's creative endeavors—recreate and recapture an elusive culture before it is gone forever. What they provide besides an anthropological study of a complex literacy is a framework. Artists can employ the same method to not only salvage misrepresented artifacts in any culture, such as music, but also to make them relevant for the newly initiated. Murphy most appropriately summarizes this idea:

The process of 'syncretism' was not an accommodation among enslaved Africans to a set of universal African beliefs, a folk construction of a creed or a honing of rough ethnic and regional edges into a generalized African Sacred Cosmos. Rather it involved the gravitation to ritual specialists. Whether Africans were brought to colonies and nations with Catholic or Protestant traditions, they constructed new ritual systems from the variety of effective ritual actions which had landed with the specialists who learned them in Africa. (184)

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<sup>17</sup> Next to nothing is known about Taíno or Arawak culture. What we do know comes from European sources, which, of course, means that they may not be entirely objective. Taíno and Arawak were very independent and defensive in their contact with Europeans. They did not consider syncretism because they did not consider ever becoming oppressed. Their stringent attitude can be seen as noble, but it also means that with them their culture vanished. Anything we could have learned from them is mere speculation. On the contrary, Afro-Cuban—and African in general—literacy has allowed the survival of their ideas, even when the sources are written from “outsiders,” such as some claim Cabrera and Carpentier to be.

Because initiation in diasporic communities are inclusive of all those willing to bear the responsibility of participation, diasporic literature can reach readers who may not have directly experienced exile and separateness on literal levels. Just as the Negritude movement achieved popularity with European artists and scholars, so to can readers understand symbolic imperatives in the syncretized discourse composed to ensure the survival and dissemination of a cultural literacy that certain powers once tried to silence forever. As a result, artists like Cabrera and Carpentier, who were not members of the African diaspora but spent years of their own lives in exile, can enter the community and assume the role of ethnographer, constructing new systems through which the Afro-Cuban identity can be perpetuated for those readers and writers far removed from the source.

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