Routledge Studies in Latin American and Iberian Literature

UNVEILING THE SACRED IN 20TH- AND 21ST-CENTURY LATIN AMERICAN LITERATURE

Edited by
Alexander Torres and Pablo Baisotti

Unveiling the Sacred in 20th- and 21st-Century Latin American Literature

Drawing on diverse scholarly and theoretical perspectives, this collection delves into the interplay between modernity and sacred traditions in contemporary Latin America as represented in its literature. It references important historical contexts, from the encounter of the Old and New Worlds to cultural mestizaje, highlighting the resilience of sacred discourse and experience amid a disenchanting capitalist modernity. Featuring analyses of diverse 20th- and 21st-century literary works, this book offers deep insights into how the sacred persists multifariously in Latin American literature. This work invites readers to rediscover the sacred as a vital component of human existence and literary discourse. It is an essential resource for understanding the complex relationship between modernity and the phenomenon of the sacred in Latin America.

Alexander Torres holds a Ph.D. in Latin American Literature. His first book, *Bastardos de la modernidad: el Bildungsroman roquero en América Latina (2020)*, comprises a critique of the ontological impact of capitalist modernity from the perspective of the novel of formation, the baroque ethos, and the Latin American youth who sought to build a new lifeworld through rock culture. In addition to specializing in the *Bildungsroman*, Torres' research focuses on the contemporary literary production of different regions in Latin America, often with young and uneasy characters who are faced with a disenchanted and hostile world. He has recently published chapters in *The Routledge Handbook of Violence in Latin American Literature* (2022), *Growing Up in Latin America: Child and Youth Agency in Contemporary Popular Culture* (2022), and *Transculturación y trans-identidades en la literatura contemporánea mexicana* (2022). Along with Magdalena González Almada and Tatiana Navallo, Torres contributed as a guest editor and author to the special *Bolivian Studies Journal* issue *Geopoéticas del abigarramiento en narrativas bolivianas actuales* (2023), whose focus is on the dialogic relationship between motley social formations and the

mobility of affects, a determining feature of recent Bolivian literary and cultural production. Lastly, Torres is currently interested in analyzing and exploring various expressions of the sacred in Latin American literature. He teaches at the University of South Florida (Tampa).

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

First published 2026
by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

and by Routledge
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

ISBN: 978-1-032-75216-7 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-032-75217-4 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-1-003-47297-1 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003472971

Typeset in Sabon
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

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(Re)Elaborations of African Practices and Myths in the Narrative of Lydia Cabrera

Margherita Cannavacciuolo

Translated by Alexander Torres

1. Introduction

In his work *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational* (*Das Heilige*, 1917), one of the most influential books in the comparative study of religions, Rudolf Otto develops his theory on the phenomenology of the divine, reexamining the concept of the "holy" or "sacred", a more recent notion in the history of religious experience, in relation to the older concept of the numinous. The German scholar redefines the paradigm of the sacred, interpreting it as an "overplus of meaning" devoid of moral and rational connotations (*The Idea* 5), which are considered secondary to the original experience of the divine. He also emphasizes its affinity with the concept of *ἄρρητον* (árrhēton), that is, something that remains beyond the grasp of reasoning or logical predicates. In this sense, the sacred-numinous is configured as unknown to reason and is defined as *mysterium tremendum*, an expression that captures both the emotional charge of the manifestation of the sacred and its ineffability. According to the German scholar: "Taken in the religious sense, that which is 'mysterious' is . . . the 'wholly other' (*θάτερον*, *anyad*, *alienum*), that which is quite beyond the sphere of the usual, the intelligible, and the familiar, which therefore falls quite outside the limits of the 'canny', and is contrasted with it, filling the mind with blank wonder and astonishment" (26).

Returning to Otto's theories, Mircea Eliade emphasizes that the manifestation of the sacred, or *hierophany*, coincides, in its essence, with the appearance of divinity or sacred otherness within a reality considered profane. The fundamental premise in the work of the Romanian scholar is the clear demarcation between the sacred and the profane. The manifestation is always the appearance of something completely alien to our reality; as stated by the religious scholar, it is "a reality that does not belong to our world, in objects that are an integral part of our natural 'profane' world" (*The Sacred* 11).

DOI: 10.4324/9781003472971-12

These theoretical premises are necessary with regard to the thesis proposed in this study, whose object of analysis is the literary work of the storyteller and ethnologist Lydia Cabrera (Havana 1900-Miami 1991) apropos the African legacy in Cuba. I intend in particular to read the presence and reworking of religious practices and African myths in the author's narrative work as a range of variations in the experience of the original sacred that refers to the excess of meaning that characterizes the numinous; that is, paraphrasing Otto (*Lo Santo* 152), the experience of the sacred, which has not yet been penetrated and saturated completely with rational, personal, and moral elements, is recovered and narratively dramatized. To this effect, it will be necessary to rely on the formulation of the *mysterium tremendum* to understand the oscillation of the religious experience presented by Cabrera between fascination and repulsion, as well as to comprehend the thematic and formal heterogeneity that constitutes it as a reflection of "the 'wholly other'" that, according to Otto, characterizes the numinous (*The Idea* 29).

At the same time, following the aforementioned, the *mysterium tremendum* is reworked here as a *complexio oppositorum* since it is characterized by bringing together elements that, in a natural context, would be considered irreconcilable and, therefore, as an experience of the sacred that is not codified or codifiable. In spite of the fact that writing is a form of codification and organization of that which by its nature is not, and despite constructing most of her texts based on mythical narratives, it will be evident how the different expressive strategies – irony, lyricism, and the *feísmo* of surrealist and popular origin – that Lydia Cabrera employs to (re)formulate ancestral mythical-religious stories of African origin restore to the reader an experience of the sacred that precedes and, therefore, surpasses pragmatic frames of reference, such as systematized mythologies. Finally, it will be highlighted how, contrary to Eliade's postulate, Lydia Cabrera creates a narrative space that emerges from the naturalization of the sacred and the re-sacralization of the profane, that is, a space where characters move between the sacred and the profane without a break in continuity.

2. Thresholds

If we had to define Lydia Cabrera's complex narrative using a visual or geometric image, the most appropriate would surely be that of the triangle, whose vertices correspond to the three pillars that govern the literary building of her writing: religion, music, and literary creation. The copious presence of musical and religious elements in the fictional field is due to the fact that Lydia Cabrera is the first writer to systematically center her literary creation on the African element, constitutive of Cuban society and culture. As we have stated in other studies, the author adopts the mythology

of the Yoruba religious tradition as a narrative, renewing and recreating its original core by adding original stories and adapting it to Cuban specificity. At the same time, she also recovers myth as an experience, including music in her texts, an essential element of African social and religious life. The novel's featured introductions are found above all at the structural and stylistic level because the writer manages to devise the most appropriate language to portray the syncretism and idiosyncrasy of the Cuban world.

Daughter of the lawyer and founding father Raimundo Cabrera y Bosch and sister-in-law of the renowned criminologist and ethnologist Fernando Ortiz,[1] her relationship with the Afro-Cuban world began as a child, when her Black nursemaids told her the mythical stories and legends of their people. Her trip to Paris in 1927 to study painting at the École du Louvre sparked a true awareness of the importance of the secular African tradition in her Cuba. The young Lydia studies the bas-reliefs of the temple of Borobudur in Java and observes the depiction of a woman carrying fruit on her head, recognizing a typical and familiar image of her homeland. This event awakens her love for Black culture and her interest in studying and delving into its ontology. The avant-garde experiments that surrounded her, her contact with the Spanish *Generación del 27,* and her friendship with García Lorca and Teresa de la Parra pushed Lydia Cabrera to write her Afro-Cuban tales, which initially appeared in the literary magazines *Cahiers du Sud*, *Revue de Paris*, and *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*.

As she delves deeper into the study of African myths and traditions in Cuba, a vast creative field with enormous potential opens up before her. She then witnesses primal initiation rites: the Dionysian-like possession of the initiates by the orishas, the community participation in dances and songs where rational self-awareness is lost to the intoxication that allows the atavistic and sacred energies and forces of the subconscious to emerge. She can observe and perceive around her the ecstasy that springs from the deepest entrails of humanity when the rational awareness of subjective individuality disappears. Lydia Cabrera undoubtedly glimpses the poetic spring that lies in the primal depths of her Black informants, by which she feels fascinated and lets herself be captivated. The attraction that she experiences will be the main driving force behind her scientific pursuit and poetic creation.

The appearance of her first collection of short stories, *Contes nègres de Cuba* (Paris, 1936), later translated and published as *Cuentos negros de Cuba* (Havana, 1940), is the fruit of her personal experience and direct contact with the European avant-garde movements of the 1920s and marks the beginning of a path to a double pursuit – artistic and scientific – that leads her to a literature whose essential focus is the recovery and assimilation of the African legacy in Cuba. Among her vast production of ethnological and

anthropological work, her magnum opus *El monte* (1954) stands out: a heterogeneous miscellany that explores the interstices of Afro-Cuban society, analyzing and describing its multifaceted formation. Regarding her literary work, in addition to the undeniable importance of *Cuentos negros de Cuba*, the volumes *Por qué. . . cuentos negros de Cuba* (1948), *Ayapá, cuentos de Jicotea* (1971), and *Cuentos para adultos niños y retardados mentales* (1983) figure prominently, all four of which are considered in this study. A narrative emerges in which not only the "integration" of the African elements in all their facets is realized, but, above all, their "interaction" with the other side of Cuban society, the European one,[2] which, on a literary level, is translated into the renewal of the African myth through the use of resources originating from avant-garde techniques.

This link, on the one hand, gives life to a new literary product, the fruit of the same transcultural process that constitutes the basis of Cuban syncretic society, and, on the other hand, marks the creation of a completely new narrative space.[3] Its novelty lies in the fact that it is configured as a border space, open and osmotic, in which continuous crossroads emerge between different, even opposite, elements that establish a nonhierarchical relationship, which does not eliminate differences but integrates and values them. It is precisely the dialogue between the African legacy and its connection to the sacred and the European avant-gardes, as well as their mutual influence, that moves the literary praxis of Lydia Cabrera, making her stories overcome generic confines and take the form of an in-between space (Bhabha) in which mythical tradition and original creation merge and harmonize mutually.

3. Concerning the Sacred . . .

Mircea Eliade, in stating that a "myth is regarded as a sacred story" (*Myth and Reality* 6), closely links the mythical story with the possibility of replicating the experience and the living out of the sacred, suggesting that the former is one of the forms of manifestation as well as a vehicle of communication for the latter. In this sense, myth constitutes one of the starting points, as well as one of the pillars, of the work that Lydia Cabrera undertakes with the African presence in Cuba and with African religious practices. The author develops her narratives precisely from the recovery of ancestral African oral myths, understood as vehicles of the sacred experience, while creatively reworking them, resulting in the transformation of a cultural product into an aesthetic object.

The religious sphere constitutes the privileged pole around which the life of the African presence in Cuba is articulated.[4] The Afro-Cuban religious system is configured as a polyhedral universe constantly

intertwined with Black existence; in fact, "the numinous passes through the very axis of Black existence and permeates it with all its vital expressions" ("lo numinoso pasa por el eje mismo de la existencia del negro y lo permea con todas sus expresiones vitales"; my trans.; J. Castellanos and I. Castellanos 111). It influences every corner of Black life, and it is because of its intrinsic link with Black existence that Lydia Cabrera's stories internalize all aspects of the Afro-Cuban religion and its syncretism; beliefs, purification rituals, African gods, animism, and all other elements that make up the Afro-Cuban sacred universe are present in her fictional space.

It is, above all, the Yoruba religion and the sacred literature of its oracle, *Ifá*, that constitute the embryonic background that feeds Lydia Cabrera's stories. A set of 16 *orgunes*, or seeds, makes up the main body of *Ifá*, but the possibilities of figures are, in total, 256. Each *orgún* corresponds to an unlimited number of *ese*, prose poetry whose content covers the entire Yoruba philosophy, to which are also added the *orikis*, long poems that trace the genealogy of the most important families of the tribes and also fictionalize the origin and development of the Yoruba peoples. The whole of this literary corpus, known on the island as *Patakín*, *Appatakí*, or *Apattawe*, constitutes a complex of symbols through which mythic knowledge passes from one religious person to another and from one ancestral era to another, resulting in a kind of "living source" for the Santería community. According to Rogelio Martínez Furé, they are "myths relating to the 'paths' or avatars of the different orishas, to the origin of certain rites or taboos, or to cosmogonic content" ("mitos relativos a los 'caminos' o avatares de los distintos orishas, al origen de ciertos ritos o tabúes, o bien de contenido cosmogónico"; my trans.; 211–212).

It is precisely the sacred stories of Ifá and the values conveyed in them that most inspire Lydia Cabrera's stories. In particular, each story in the volume *Por qué. . . cuentos negros de Cuba* is based on etiological legends and myths told in the Patakín, illustrating the explicit correspondence that exists between profane narrative and the characterizations and tropes of the African religious tradition. The story "Obbara miente y no miente" (Obbara Lies and Does Not Lie), for example, is a version of a letter from the oracle, *Obara Melli*, seventh of the first 16 *orgunes* of Ifá, and one of the 16 manifestations or paths of the god Obatalá (*Por qué. . .* 53). On the other hand, the story "El algodón ciega a los pájaros" (Cotton Blinds the Birds) fits one of the anecdotes of the *orgún Osa Melli*, in which cotton, Oú, suffers the envy of the birds for being the plant chosen by the supreme god Obatalá for his cloak (73). With the intention of protecting itself from the cruelty of the birds that want to kill it, the plant makes an *egbó* and grows the thorns that are its defense. Cabrera's story

not only takes up the theme of the sacred tale but also captures and poetizes its mythic meaning, closing the story in a solemn and metaphorical tone. Cotton, despite its initial weakness, manages to destroy the birds, showing that any transgression against Obatalá, whiteness, and purity will be irremediably punished:

> Thus, Obatalá's word is fulfilled for ever and ever because the ignorant bird, the forgetful one . . . that sinks its irreverent beak into the sacred cotton boll, loses its sight and never takes flight again. Blind, condemned to the ground, it struggles in the darkness, stumbles, bangs itself cruelly, until it dies crashing into a darkness harder than stone.
>
> Así se cumple, por los siglos de los siglos, la palabra de Obatalá, pues el pájaro ignorante, el desmemoriado . . . que hunde su pico irreverente en la sagrada cápsula del algodón, pierde la vista y no más levanta el vuelo ligero. Ciego, condenado al suelo, se debate en la tiniebla, tropieza, se golpea cruelmente, hasta morir estrellándose en una oscuridad más dura que la piedra.
>
> (my trans.; 72–73)

The syncretic and episodic tale, elaborated in three narrations, "El sabio desconfía de su propia sombra" (The Wise Man Distrusts His Own Shadow), on the other hand, recalls and imitates the different versions of an *orgún* of the same theme. Like in the verses of the *Patakín* in Cuba, this story consists of three episodes of the same proverb to emphasize the warning in the "letters" read by a babalao. The danger that is warned about in the story is structured as a clear emulation of an *orgún*:

> [T]here is someone who pretends to be one thing and is another. . . . And no one knows what is hidden in a human disguise! The one least expected can secretly be a devil, a beast, a monster, and, alone, manifest themselves to us in their true and inconceivable form. *When we look at them up close, the sudden mystery of the most beloved and reassuring eyes overwhelms us; looked at closely, they are those of a stranger; the eyes of someone we have never met.*
>
> hay alguien que aparenta ser una cosa y es otra. . . . ¡Y nadie sabe lo que se esconde en un disfraz humano! Quien menos se piensa secretamente puede ser un diablo, una fiera, un monstruo y, a solas, manifestársenos en su forma verdadera e inconcebible. **Al contemplarlos de cerca sobrecoge el súbito misterio de los ojos más queridos y tranquilizadores; mirado a fondo, son los de un extraño; los ojos de alguien que jamás se ha conocido.**[5]
>
> (my trans.; 120)

The correspondence between the quoted lines and the transformation that the sacred undergoes as *mysterium tremendum* in the description provided by Otto and cited here is astonishing and, therefore, noteworthy:

> [The] "*mysterium tremendum*". The feeling of it may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It may pass over into a more set and lasting attitude of the soul, continuing, as it were, thrillingly vibrant and resonant, until at last it dies away and the soul resumes its "profane", non-religious mood of everyday experience. It may burst in sudden eruption up from the depths of the soul with spasms and convulsions, or lead to the strangest excitements, to intoxicated frenzy, to transport, and to ecstasy.
>
> (12–13)

This coincidence is further proof of the work that Lydia Cabrera does with religious experience in its primal and premodern articulation.

From the initial cautionary note of Cabrera's story, as in the *Patakín*, three independent episodes emerge, the sequence of which makes up the narrative structure of the tale: the mysterious journey that the coachman Antón del Carmen makes to the cemetery, the kidnapping of a girl by a young African transformed into a snake, and the story of the man who marries a woman without knowing that she is actually a guanaja (turkey hen). The deceptively disjointed structure seems to violate the literary canons of the tale, but in reality, it provides numerous rhetorical clues to indicate that the writing of the tale is an imitation, in form and structure, of the recitations of the Cuban santeros and babalaos. As in Biblical and Yoruba numerology, the three parts allude to the presence of a single unit, three and one, different and identical. At the same time, the cited passage exhibits the terrifying feature of the *hierophany,* according to Otto, perceived as an "otherness" that does not belong to this world and that possesses a terrible power, manifested in divine "Wrath" (*The Idea* 18), a concept that will be taken up again by Eliade (*The Sacred* 11).

For people of Yoruba origin, storytelling is closely tied to their religion since, in most cases, in their gatherings, what is narrated is the lives and deeds of their *orishas*. This constant presence also extends to the texts of Lydia Cabrera, where the gods appear unexpectedly within the body of the narrative, generating unrelated episodes that suddenly interrupt the thread of the story or introduce an unexpected shift to its development. The gods wander through the stories, although only named or mentioned with a phrase that describes them in apposition: Elegguá, "the one who opens paths"; Yansa, "the pale lady of the cemeteries"; Osain, "Saint of herbs, Saint diviner"; Yewá, "the grim Virgin of Death, who governs with her two sisters the secret and underground life of the cemeteries"; Olofi, "the elder

older than the sky". Sometimes, when mentioning an *orisha*, the author takes the opportunity to incorporate into the plot of the story an excursus consisting of a detailed description, a synopsis of its genealogy, or its life.

This fusion of stories of different natures formally reconstructs the naturalized communion with the sacred that characterizes ancestral societies, as Mircea Eliade points out, and that is lost throughout the history of religions:

> The man of the archaic societies tends to live as much as possible *in* the sacred or in close proximity to consecrated objects. The tendency is perfectly understandable, because, for primitives as for the man of all premodern societies, the *sacred* is equivalent to a *power*, and, in the last analysis, to *reality*.
>
> (*The Sacred* 12)

The stories (re)elaborated by Cabrera also stage Afro-Cuban sacred rituals during which the gods appear "mounted", that is, acting through a devotee, as in the story "Esa raya en el lomo de la Jutía" (That Stripe on the Hutia's Back). In this story, a reference is made to the possession of the old woman Ñogubá by the *orisha* Ogún-Arere in order to cure the sick Erubú: "Straightening up the old woman's sunken chest with incredible arrogance, the saint possessing roared" ("Enderezando con increíble arrogancia al pecho hundido de la vieja, bramaba el santo que la poseía"; my trans.; *Por qué*. . . 163). The author describes with ethnological precision the healing rite that the god performs through the woman, also including the chant that is part of the ritual – a mixture of Spanish and Lucumí – that takes up more than five pages. This inclusion is excessive with respect to the internal economy of the narrative because the rhythm of the plot is compromised in its dynamics. However, from an anthropological point of view, it is necessary because the rite is reproduced in its entirety, which constitutes a scientific contribution of undoubted value. Here are some lines taken from the extensive account of the healing ritual. The *orisha*, always through the body of Ñogubá:

> she crawled over to Erubú . . . and sank her teeth into his navel. The mouth that bit and sucked frantically, bathing the belly in frothy and bloody drool, reanimated the dying flame in his pupil: one side of Evaristo's face twisted into a silent grimace of pain. Finally, the Saint stopped sucking and biting and spat out a live toad that the two old men chased and crushed with their fists.
>
> se arrastró hasta Erubú . . . y le clavó los dientes en el ombligo. La boca que mordía y chupaba frenéticamente, bañando el vientre de una baba espumosa y sanguinolenta, reanimó la llama mortecina de la pupila: media cara de Evaristo se contrajo en una mueca muda de dolor.

> Al fin el Santo dejó de chupar y de morder y escupió un sapo vivo que los dos viejos persiguieron y aplastaron a puñetazos.
>
> (my trans.; 173)

The cited passage reflects the manifestation of the sacred as *mysterium tremendum*, formulated by Otto, since the scene represents an encounter with a deity as something that can "profoundly affect us and occupy the mind with a well-nigh bewildering strength" (*The Idea* 12). At the same time, it refers to the annihilation of the subject in contact with the divine, a feature that the German scholar highlights when describing the encounter with the numinous: it "leads to a valuation of the transcendent object of its reference as that which through plenitude of being stands supreme and absolute, so that the finite self contrasted with it becomes conscious even in its nullity that 'I am naught, Thou art all'" (21).

If Rudolf Otto claims that ritual acts allow one to enter into communication with the numinous, Mircea Eliade expands on Otto's proposition by stating that the rite allows access to sacred time, mythical time "created and sanctified by the gods at the period of their *gesta*, of which the festival is precisely a reactualization" (*The Sacred* 69–70). In this sense, another variation of the manifestation of the sacred portrayed in Cabrera's stories also derives from the abundant presence of *bilongos*, *maleficios*, and the descriptions of *egbós* or *ebbós*, purification rituals, and sacrifices typical of Cuban Santería. In "Bregantino Bregantín", the opening story of the famous collection *Cuentos negros de Cuba*,[6] three pages are devoted to the description of the religious rites that the protagonist Sanune offers to the gods for ten days, each one dedicated to an *orisha*, in order to obtain protection for her child, who is about to be born and is threatened by the bull-king who kills each male child (*Cuentos negros* 13). In "Los compadres", the black washerwoman who lives with Capinche dies of *pasmo* "[o]r more likely from a certain procedure that the *mayombero* did for her" (*Afro-Cuban Tales* 67). In "Papa Turtle and Papa Tiger" ("Taita Hicotea y Taita Tigre"), Turtle (Hicotea),[7] considered to be knowledgeable in witchcraft, sends his "brother" (compadre) Stag the three Chicherekús, wooden dolls or very old-looking dead newborn children, with the intention of annihilating him. After tormenting him all night, the Chicherekús would have finished him off "if he hadn't been holding the charm his mother had given him, and if Eleddá, a guardian angel, hadn't been at his side" (40–41). In this respect, incidentally, within the Yoruba tradition, the same freshwater turtle is considered a being comparable to the classic *daimón*, a trickster knowledgeable in magic and witchcraft. In the same tale, it is said that Turtle (Hicotea) "had brought sorcery with him, hidden in his pupil, along with the art of healing with herbs, sticks, and songs" (37).

At the same time, it is important to emphasize that the intimate connection established between storytelling and religion in some texts is fruitfully strained, contributing to their pronounced hybridity, which more or less distinctly seals the fertile marriage between fiction and ethnology, a union that Claude Lévi-Strauss would formalize in 1955 with the publication of *Tristes tropiques*. The story narrated in "Se hace Ebbó" (*Por qué*. . . 199–213) stands out for appearing more like an opportunity to present a concise treatise on Santería, explaining how to perform a purification ritual with a positive outcome. We should also take into consideration the narrative and fictional elements present in *El Monte* (1954), the pinnacle of the Cabrera's scientific work, which continues to be regarded as a key reference in ethnological studies on African societies in Cuba.

In some stories, the power of divination, like the power of malevolence, becomes their narrative engine so that the intervention of the *babalao* or the *iyalocha* enables the resolution of the conflict and the resulting positive outcome of the plot. The seer in the tale "Tatabisaco" frees a hunter from death, accused by his wife of having murdered their son, and reveals the lack of respect that the woman herself had had toward Tatabisaco, the "Water Lord of the lagoon" (*Afro-Cuban Tales* 112). Thanks to the sacrifice that the *babalao* offers to the god, his anger ceases, and he returns the child (*Cuentos negros* 141).

Lydia Cabrera's texts derive entirely from the synthesis between sacred discourse and profane narration, expressing the profound interpenetration between religion and daily life that occurs in Afro-Cuban society. Furthermore, by incorporating all aspects of the Afro-Cuban sacred universe in fictional space, they both demonstrate the author's intention to portray the religious syncretism that emerges in Cuba as faithfully as possible and reflect the innovative literary possibilities that religious imagery offers to fiction, which aligns with the avant-garde provocation, most vigorously manifested by surrealism, to renew artistic language. The presence of anthropological and religious elements in the narrative field challenges the short story as a genre, broadening its horizon and possibilities, while underscoring the creation of a fictional space on the basis of a syncretism that does not hide differences but rather reveals, emphasizes, and values them.

4. Concerning Fiction . . .

Myth and the short story cannot exist simultaneously in the same time and space, says Vladimir Propp in his book *The Historical Roots of Fairy Tales* (Cuervo Hewitt 7). However, in Cuba, Propp's theory is called into question, as the sacred and the profane space have coexisted and continue to do so, intertwined, both remaining present in the consciousness and life of the enslaved Black person initially and later in that of the Creole mulatto.

From this strange coupling emanates a marvelous space in Cuban reality that is governed by different codes and that enables, using the words of Alejo Carpentier, "an unusual or singularly favorable illumination of the unnoticed riches of reality" ("una iluminación inhabitual o singularmente favorecedora de las inadvertidas riquezas de la realidad"; my trans.; Carpentier 132; qtd. in Cuervo Hewitt 7).

In Lydia Cabrera's literary work, the dichotomy between myth and the short story is denied as the two merge to the point of fusion. Myth is presented to Cabrera as the instrument that most closely adheres to Afro-Cuban syncretism and hybridization and, therefore, the one best capable of reflecting them. Through mythic discourse, the author, on the one hand, presents the sacred vision that the Afro-Cuban community has of reality, and, on the other hand, the mythic form is configured as the most adequate expressive vehicle to achieve poeticity and describe the particularity of the hybrid and syncretic Afro-Cuban reality.

As discussed in the previous section, Lydia Cabrera's narrative embraces themes related to the ancestral and sacred experience of Africans in Cuba, which were preserved and transmitted through myth. At the same time, however, the author also appropriates the formal structure of the mythic narrative, reworking it in different ways. In some cases, the author collects the original mythic core, as she has heard it from her informants, and transposes it into the written text, intervening only at the linguistic level so that it is more comprehensible to the reader. The stories "El algodón ciega a los pájaros" (Cotton Blinds the Birds) (*Por qué. . .* 68–73) and "Obbara miente y no miente" (Obbara Lies and Does Not Lie) (53–54) consist of a single core made up of mythical stories about episodes in the life of the *orishas* and offer an example of slightly touched-up versions of the images of Ifá or patakíes that Lydia Cabrera extracts from the African oral tradition. When the purpose is above all to preserve the original story, the work is essentially restorative: the author, after penetrating its core, cleans and polishes the language, completes its structure, gives substance to its characters, clarifies its plot, and, in this way, restores its meaning (J. Castellanos and I. Castellanos 102).

A copious collection of texts, on the other hand, is made up of stories that Lydia Cabrera creates, thanks to her literary creativity, by fusing different versions of the same African legend into a single body to create a new work, as is the case with "El cangrejo no tiene cabeza" (The Crab Has No Head), in which different hypotheses are offered about the origin of the world and of men. Sometimes, the author creates texts that do not come from any exclusive source but from a plurality of them revolving around a common protagonist, producing a more complicated plot made up of completely independent narrative nuclei. Thus, she weaves together "Papa Turtle and Papa Tiger", which consists of three autonomous narrative

units with a perfectly structured plot in which the introduction, development, and conclusion are clearly distinguishable. Each of these parts can constitute an independent story on its own, and the unity is achieved by the character of Turtle (Hicotea), who appears in all three narratives, and by the presence of an omniscient narrator who weaves the events together.

Allowing herself to be carried away by the charm of these myths, there are instances in which Lydia Cabrera pushes her literary skill a little beyond the restorative task, adding to the traditional core episodes arising from her creative imagination, amplifying the plot or the descriptions, and introducing complementary embellishments. An emblematic example of this is "Bregantino Bregantín", which consists of an initial part featuring the protagonist Earthworm (Lombriz), an original creation by Lydia Cabrera, a central African narrative core – the ancestral story of the bull-king – and a mythological story inserted into that central episode (the love between Ochún and Ogún) (*Cuentos negros* 37). A word, phrase, or particular content provides the author the opportunity to introduce another level into the narrative, generating a cumulative structure that mirrors the mode and relish of the oral transmission of African mythical tales, where an initial episode narrated by the griot could be expanded by the audience *ad infinitum*. This process gives rise to the narrative syncretism of Cabrera's texts, which aptly reflects the characteristic syncretism of Afro-Cuban society.

Within the wide range of possibilities that literary (re)creation offers, Lydia Cabrera creates her own legitimate patakíes, inspired by the Afro-Cuban model, such that it is difficult to distinguish between tales belonging to tradition and tales that are the fruit of authorial creation. The author offers her personal interpretation of the creation of humankind and the origin of the different races ("Hay hombres blancos, pardos y negros", *Por qué. . . cuentos negros de Cuba*), provides an original version of the birth of day and night created by the turtle Jicotea ("Jicotea, una noche fresca", *Ayapá, cuentos de Jicotea*), and introduces for the first time the ironic story of the birth of devils ("Más diablo que el diablo", *Cuentos para adultos, niños y retrasados mentales*). In Cabrera's authorial creations, absolute creative and poetic freedom gives life to texts in which the author fuses popular wisdom and refined lyricism, creating mythical stories about the origin of the universe and the stars. In the story "De astronomía. Notas de un alumno del Colegio de San Salvador" (On Astronomy. Notes from a Student of the College of San Salvador), we read that "a serpent roams the sky and swallows the Moon whenever it finds her. Scientists call this an eclipse" and that "the Sun and the Moon loved each other. They had many children, the stars. But the Sun ate them, and the Moon abandoned him to save her offspring and peacefully take them out for a walk through the fields at night" ("por el cielo anda una serpiente que se traga a la Luna cuantas veces la encuentra. A esto le llaman los científicos eclipse";

"el Sol y la Luna se amaron. Tuvieron muchos hijos, las estrellas. Pero el Sol se los comía y la Luna lo abandonó para salvar a sus crías y tranquila sacarlas a pasear por los campos de la noche"; my trans.; *Cuentos para adultos* 224).

It is worth noting that, in the process of recovering the mythical and sacred African legacy, Lydia Cabrera works not only with the timelessness of myth,[8] but as Jorge and Isabel Castellanos point out, she also brings it into dialogue with historical and chronological time since she adapts the primordial stories to Cuban specificity, depicting in her stories the process of Cubanization that the images of African cosmogony have undergone (85). The turtle Jicotea, a protagonist of African animal fables, becomes a Black resident of a Cuban tenement ("La rama en el muro", *Ayapá* 85) or a gossipy neighborhood matchmaker ("La prodigiosa gallina de Guinea", *Cuentos negros* 173), and the twins become roguish rascals who devise methods to overcome the obstacles of an underdeveloped world ("Se cerraron y vuelta a abrirse los caminos de la Isla", *Por qué. . .* 15). Reality has been miraculously Afro-Cubanized without allowing these characters to lose the roots that situate them in their original folklore and mythology.

The core of the collective consciousness remained intact, percolating through new expressions and contexts to give rise to *lo criollo*. That is why the queen, the mother of Dingadingá, "an inveterate complainer", bites her tobacco furiously and then stomps on it ("Bregantino Bregantin", *Afro-Cuban Tales* 1); the three African gods Olofi, Obatalá, and Ibaibo are compared to "Pineapple, Mamey, and Sapote: three names, three forms, three colors, three different flavors, but all three the same thing: Fruit." ("La Piña, el Mamey y el Zapote: tres nombres, tres formas, tres colores, tres sabores diferentes, pero los tres una misma cosa: Fruta."; my trans.; "El cangrejo no tiene cabeza", *Por que . . . 95*), and the monkeys lose their harvest because they are distracted by the seductive hips of the Black woman Viviana Angola ("El mono perdió el fruto de su trabajo" 214). The reconstruction of Yoruba myths in the work of Lydia Cabrera, therefore, does not turn out to be a mere copy of something brought from Africa but an authentic act of autonomous creation, giving form to – as Julia Cuervo Hewitt points out – "the imaginative search for those elements that define a people, their past, their present, and their future, which captures in different voices the rhythm of the drum, the mulatto hips, the tropical air, and even the coming and going of the waves" ("la búsqueda imaginativa de aquellos elementos que definen a un pueblo, su pasado, su presente y su futuro, lo que capta a diferentes voces el ritmo del tambor, las caderas mulatas, el aire tropical y hasta el vaivén de las olas"; my trans.; 276).

The timeless and universal space that characterizes mythical narration is constituted simultaneously as a place from which memory springs

and where memory recovers itself, thus bringing about two simultaneous processes: the retroflexion of an origin *in illo tempore* and its rebirth in the here and now of the historical time of storytelling. Thus, a *memorial return* is generated (Sini 22), which bears much relation to the dynamics of ritual as analyzed by Eliade. In *Myth and Reality*, Eliade takes up this concept, affirming that the ritual, intimately linked to the concept of myth, is conceived as the true dynamic force that can reactualize the mythological time of origins. If, on the one hand, "historical" modern man lives in the chronological time of the desacralized and profane world, for archaic man, on the contrary, "what happened *ab origine* can be repeated by the power of rites" (13). In this sense, Cabrera's narrative praxis stands out as a mytho- and rito-poietic activity thanks to her ability to graft the African past onto the Cuban present, recreating what could be defined as an unmistakable "Cuban Africanness" in the stories furthest removed from the African tradition. At the same time, her literary skill imbues the stories with innovations absent in their original versions, through which she effectively enhances the value of the magical and sacred aspects of the themes represented in them.

5. Mythologizing and Metaphorizing: Journeys to and Fro

As Rudolf Otto clearly establishes, perhaps the most striking characteristic of the sacred phenomenon and its manifestation is its linguistic ineffability, which stems from the excess of meaning of the *hierophany* and its consequent lack of correspondence with conventional epistemological and hermeneutic categories. Such ineffability raises the problem of the rhetoric to be used when reworking sacred origin narratives. With regard to this, the style adopted by Lydia Cabrera is characterized by her association with the avant-garde idioms of the 1930s, to which the author owes her intellectual and artistic formation.

Of all the avant-garde movements that developed in Europe at the beginning of the 20th century, it was surrealism that left the greatest mark on Latin American writers. Lydia Cabrera, like Alejo Carpentier, Miguel Ángel Asturias, and Arturo Uslar Pietri, among others, wrote her first stories under the influence of this movement and other avant-garde currents predominant in Paris during her years of formation, to which she also essentially remained thematically and stylistically faithful throughout her life.

The surrealist invitation to embrace expression dictated by the subconscious and dreams, without the watchfulness of reason, leads Lydia Cabrera to an artistic rendezvous with her memories. If Breton, Tristan Tzara, and other surrealists wander around Paris in a longing search for magic in the occult, Lydia Cabrera only needs to delve into that of Cuban

Afro-descendants. Breton is enthusiastic about astrology, but the divinatory Ifá and the Dilogún of African origin provide Cabrera with material infinitely richer in poetic possibilities. The surrealists laboriously extract oneiric patterns from dreams, but she has at her disposal and can see, from within, the achievements of a centuries-old culture. Lydia Cabrera does not have to invent anything because all the surrealist dictates are already part of Afro-Cuban reality; she only has to fix her attention on it and tap into what is there. The writer takes advantage of the folkloric material present in Cuba and infuses it with a poetic and artistic content that is thoroughly novel for the time.[9]

Breton considers the image that presents the highest degree of arbitrariness to be surrealist, which Max Ernst defines as the "coupling of two apparently unmarriageable realities on a plane that does not suit them" ("acoplamiento de dos realidades en apariencia incasables sobre un plano que no les conviene"; my trans.; qtd. in Torre 45). As if conforming to these dictates, Lydia Cabrera dispenses with logic and unites irreconcilable realities to achieve surrealist descriptions, such as the following one about the genesis of nature in "Papa Turtle and Papa Tiger":

> Back in the days when the world was young, the frog had hair and put it up in curlers. In the beginning, everything was green. Not only the leaves and the grass and everything else that's still green today, . . . but also all the rocks, the animals, and man.
>
> The fish drank from flowers and the birds built their nests on the crests of the waves. Oceans poured out of seashells, and rivers from the corners of the eyes of the first sad crocodile.
>
> (*Afro-Cuban Tales* 30)

In the sky of "La Jicotea endemoniada" (The Possessed Jicotea), at the bottom of the hill "a black, thirsty dog licked the stars" and green fetuses climbed walls ("un perro negro, sediento, lamía los luceros"; my trans.; *Ayapá* 112–114). In "Irú Ayé", the three daughters of Queen Omoloyú are "twins, very beautiful and identical. A flowering branch sprouted and gave off a scent between their heads; and they had a tiny moon on each breast; around their waist, a snake; and the same voice and laughter; and the same silence when they were silent; a strange, anguishing silence" ("mellizas, muy bellas e idénticas. Una ramita en flor brotaba y daba olor en medio de sus cabezas; y tenían una luna minúscula en cada seno; en torno a la cintura, una serpiente; y una misma voz y risa; y un mismo silencio cuando callaban; un extraño, angustioso silencio"; my trans.; 59–60).

The stories are full of descriptions of scenes that stand out for the ugliness of the objects or characters described, which also corresponds to the ugly aesthetics cultivated by the surrealists. Cuban reality itself provides Lydia Cabrera with ingredients that are similar to the surrealist taste for the ugly.

In the African tradition, the obsession with hygiene does not prevail, and its aesthetic standards differ from conventional ones in the valuation of ugliness. It is there that the writer finds abundant material that aligns with surrealist interests. As she herself states in her ethnological work *La Regla Kimbisa del Santo Cristo del Buen Viaje* (1986), the "mounted" orishas lick tumors to heal them, menstrual blood is an ingredient in magical potions, and Changó considers it an offense to reject food mixed with the filth that he offers to his faithful (12). Moreover, the very appearance of the African deities corresponds to the surrealist taste for the ugly. In the story "Jicotea lleva su casa a cuestas, el majá se arrastra, la lagartija se pega a la pared" (Jicotea Carries Its House on Its Back, the Majá Crawls, the Lizard Sticks to the Wall), the god Osain, "maimed, lame, and one-eyed, with only one arm, a mutilated hand from which three fingers sprout, and one leg, as well as a single eye, half a healthy nose, and rough skin like that of a tree" ("manco, cojo y tuerto, que sólo tiene un brazo, una mano mutilada en que brotan tres dedos y una pierna, además de un ojo único, media nariz sana y piel rugosa como la de un árbol"; my trans.; *Por qué*. . . 39), is not a surrealist creation but a realistic description of the presence and appearance of the god of herbs.

Becoming aware of having been long immersed in a deep well of myth, the challenge for the Latin American writer and Cuban storyteller is not to find an image, as it is for the European avant-garde, but to find the most authentic and fitting language, the rhetoric, to capture it. In the world of Black culture, Lydia Cabrera finds living Dionysian emotions, the reconciliation of humanity with nature, and the mysterious return to that "primordial unity", which, according to Nietzsche, is the source of art (qtd. in Perera 95). Black myths represent for her, as they do for the German philosopher, exemplars of universality and truth rising to the infinite. All of this cultural, religious, and folkloric ancestral legacy constitutes a poetic dawn that Lydia Cabrera sets out to explore and describe using poetic means as her epistemological instrument. Only poetic resources and, with them, the rupture of rational logic in defiant turns of phrase could communicate the authenticity of a people whose invisible fibers were no longer Spanish, where, in the words of Cuervo Hewitt, "the marvelous and the extraordinary are found in capitals and dungeons or in wandering the streets, under stones, at corners, in a nail, in any unforeseen everyday occurrence, or in the constant scene of the sea" ("lo maravilloso y lo insólito se encuentran en capiteles y mazmorras o rondando por las calles, bajo piedras, en las esquinas, en un clavo, en cualquier accidente cotidiano imprevisto, o en la propia escena constante del mar"; my trans.; 253–254).

In Lydia Cabrera's prose, lyrical language emerges as the only possibility of transcending the semantic limits of the word and is enhanced by the expression that most closely adheres to the primal mythical and sacred

world that she wants to represent, while the richness and depth of this expanded atavistic reality also amplifies figurative possibilities and potentialities. In this sense, she conceives poetry in its first and original meaning, that is, as María Zambrano states, "revealer of the world and unifying agent in which things and beings are shown in a virginal state, in ecstasy" ("reveladora del mundo, y agente unificador en que las cosas y los seres se muestran en estado virginal, en éxtasis"; my trans.; 13). To be specific, due to the associative dynamic that sustains mythical mentality and gives rise to metaphor, it turns out to be the most adequate artistic-literary form to instantiate in the literary field the primordial island reality that she wants to represent since it throws open all communicative possibilities precisely because it avoids the laws of causal logic.

Thus, the metaphorization of the sacred that constitutes the African experience of origin is one of the most effective resources to reproduce in the narrative field the mystery that underlies *hierophany,* since it establishes otherness as a presence while managing to refer to its incomprehensible essence. Metaphorizing and mythologizing coincide in a way. When in "Taita Hicotea y Taita Tigre" (Papa Turtle and Papa Tiger), the seas overflow with snails and the mosquito sets a mountain range in motion by sinking its needle into the mountain's buttock, the two phenomena are integrated into an indestructible unity (*Cuentos negros* 66). The same thing happens when, in the story "Walo-Wila", the moon and the sea kiss (63). This is the history of Cuba and the Caribbean that, according to Emir Rodríguez Monegal, "appears metamorphosed by the poetic vision of its past, its present, and even its time without time" ("aparece metamorfoseada por la visión poética de su pasado, su presente y hasta su tiempo sin tiempo"; my trans.; 157).

Lydia Cabrera's poetry seeps into the pages of her prose, not only lending aesthetic transcendence to African elements but also, in a sense, softening and thereby naturalizing the frightening experience of the sacred. Cabrera's narrative space is a world where water becomes a girl playing close to the earth's surface with Soyán Dekín (*Cuentos negros* 146); frogs reach "along the backstay of a light rain, the sailboats of the clouds" ("por el brandal de una lluvia leve, los veleros de las nubes"; my trans.; *Por qué*. . . 141); "the first stitches of the little fish weaving their threads at the surface" of the transparent sea (*Afro-Cuban Tales* 113); Arere Marekén's skirts are "the white flappings of her percale doves" (120); a fountain is nothing but "a sky inverted with moonlight water and pale, shimmering stars" ("cielo invertido de agua de luna y de estrellas temblorosas y pálidas"; my trans.; *Por qué*. . . 112); the sky is "flowered with stars" ("florecido de estrellas"; my trans.; *Cuentos para adultos* 34); the waves "sing, lulling one to sleep" ("cantan adormeciendo"; my trans.; 176); the eye of the moon "is a cold-water cistern, full of the sky's primordial water" and "the hare is an

ice fish" (*Afro-Cuban Tales* 31); time is the "king who never stops, the king who runs through everything" ("rey que nunca se detiene, el rey que corre a través de todo"; my trans.; *Por qué*. . . 67); the largest of the owls has "the age of the valley and of the night" ("la edad del valle y de la noche"; my trans.; 102). Sometimes, the metaphor emerges with the simplicity of a description, as in the story "Papa Turtle and Papa Tiger", where we read, "The moon has a single round eye, in a circle painted with charcoal. And in its eye there's a hare turning in circles" (*Afro-Cuban Tales* 31). Other times, the metaphorical and the numinous can hardly be separated in language and action. In the literary witches' sabbath entitled "La Jicotea Endemoniada", "the earth and the night drank sugarcane liquor" ("la tierra y la noche bebieron aguardiente de caña"; my trans.; *Ayapá* 109), and all reality got drunk, becoming irrational and absurd. In these stories, paraphrasing Jorge and Isabel Castellanos (110), metaphor and myth, text and magic merge into a flickering synthesis of religion and poetry.

Incidentally, the process of naturalizing the sacred that Lydia Cabrera's literary work carries out is also achieved through the incorporation of popular elements – more precisely, those that are Cuban, drawn from the island's fauna, flora, or customs; often, one term of comparison conveys a rural Cuban flavor. In "Papa Turtle and Papa Tiger", Anikosia's breast "was crawling along the ground like a snake [majá]" and Turtle flees by "slipping away like a hutia through a thicket" (*Afro-Cuban Tales* 33; "escabulléndose como una jutía por un maniguazo"; my trans.; *Cuentos negros* 134), and the protagonist of "Bregantino Bregantín", Sanune, wakes up in a room that smells like "warm foliage and guavas" (*Afro-Cuban Tales* 13).

In Lydia Cabrera's work, the use of metaphor functions according to the definition given by Umberto Galimberti (198), that is, as doors allowing an image described to open up to an infinite meaning. Metaphor is not a simple linguistic device but the hidden truth of a word that is suggested yet unattainable. Only by avoiding that words fully coincide with or conclude what they describe does the object become truly expressive. Metaphor recovers its etymological weight of "carrying beyond" (*meta-phoreîn*) since it does not clarify what it articulates but rather suggests what remains unexpressed. By embodying an intermediate space between what a thing is and what it may seem to be, metaphor not only comprises multiple meanings, but it also allows us to perceive briefly those that are not expressed. It leaves open the margins of invisible aspects of another reality whose presence is felt as much as that which is tangible: it is a multiple, simultaneous, decentered reality that vanishes when seized.

By utilizing avant-garde techniques, Lydia Cabrera manages to bring to the field of aesthetic emotion the syncretism that noted ethnologists such as Pierre Verger, Roger Bastide, Fernando Ortiz, Melville Jean Herskovits,

and William Russell Bascom had scientifically studied in religious and musical contexts. Lydia Cabrera, formerly a painter, trained in art history, and a writer since adolescence, approaches the universe of ethnography with an essentially poetic perspective. The writer herself states in an interview conducted by Cristina Guzmán and compiled by Ana Cairo:

> It seems to me that folklore is accessed through the gateway of poetry and fantasy, which remains alive in the subconscious of those who have not broken with their childhood and know how to rediscover it within themselves. A poet has said that legend is the poetry of history. Folklore is the poetry of the people.
>
> Me parece que al folklore se accede por la puerta de la poesía y la fantasía, que en la subconciencia se mantiene viva en los que no han roto con su infancia y saben reencontrarla en su interior. Un poeta ha dicho que la leyenda es la poesía de la historia. El folklore es la poesía del pueblo.
>
> (my trans.; Cairo 16)

In this way, a magical reality emerges where the moon rolls down the hills, new heads sprout on the headless shoulders of Anikosia, the tow of thinking matter ignites, from the dead lips of a monstrous woman a swarm of dark butterflies springs forth, swollen and soft soursops become the breasts of pregnant women, and in the mango trees the sun, warm and melted, is imbibed. The syncretism within the cultural elements of her people and between these and avant-garde aesthetics, together with the miracle of Lydia Cabrera's rich imagination, engenders instances of true and authentic artistic quality, which manage to express the marvelous real as the essence of the "reality" that, always fleeing on an endless path, they describe.

6. (Re)sacralizing Cultural Maps

Following a clear demarcation between the sacred and the profane, humans, according to Eliade, come into contact with the *mysterium tremendum* that constitutes the sacred in Otto's formulation when something totally alien is externalized in the profane world, which is described as a *hierophany*, that is, "*something sacred shows itself to us*. It could be said that the history of religions . . . is constituted by a great number of hierophanies, by manifestations of sacred realities" (Eliade, *The Sacred* 11). The manifestation of the sacred is ultimately always constituted as something completely foreign to the reality of reference: it is "a reality that does not belong to our world, in objects that are an integral part of our natural 'profane' world" (11). Contradicting the Romanian intellectual's assertion, Lydia Cabrera's

narrative is not only built around the constant intersection and consequent contamination of the sacred and the profane and vice versa, but it is also characterized by the naturalizing of the sacred, which therefore ceases to necessitate an extraordinary and exceptional revelation, as it instantiates, rather, the features of a fact perfectly integrated within the characters' daily horizon.

According to Mircea Eliade, modernity is characterized by putting into action "a large stock of camouflaged myths and degenerated rituals" (*The Sacred* 204), which, in its discourse, includes literature and reading:

> Even reading includes a mythological function, not only because it replaces the recitation of myths in archaic societies and the oral literature that still lives in the rural communities of Europe, but particularly because, through reading, the modern man succeeds in obtaining an "escape from time" comparable to the "emergence from time" effected by myths. Whether modern man "kills" time with a detective story or enters such a foreign temporal universe as is represented by any novel, reading projects him out of his personal duration and incorporates him into other rhythms, makes him live in another "history".
>
> (205)

Lydia Cabrera's literary and ethnological praxis begins and develops in a historical period in which cultural phenomena that until then had been taken for granted begin to be deconstructed. By making room for not only the Black subject as a character but also the different and varied facets of African societies in Cuba, the author's narrative undermines "otherness" as an oppositional construction with respect to the subject – that is, the man, the white man, the white and Christian man, the European, the Westerner, the dominant one (Guevara Meza 4) – and problematizes the concept of alterity.

The author's stories abandon binary logic and, therefore, deconstruct and demystify the myth of modernity – the execution of Sarmiento's civilization/barbarism paradigm – in line with Enrique Dussel's critique of it, which is articulated around the dichotomous axis of dominator-dominated, victimizer-victim. The philosopher formulates his idea of the myth of modernity as follows:

> Domination (war and violence) exercised over the other is, in reality, emancipation, *usefulness*, a benefit for the barbarian who becomes civilized, who develops, or *modernizes*. This is the essence of the *Myth of Modernity*: in victimizing the innocent (the other) by declaring them the culpable cause of their own victimization, the modern subject likewise

> claims complete innocence regarding the victimizing act. Finally, the suffering of the conquered will be interpreted as the sacrifice or necessary cost of modernization.
>
> La dominación (guerra y violencia) que se ejerce sobre el otro es, en realidad, emancipación, *utilidad*, bien del bárbaro que se civiliza, que se desarrolla o *moderniza*. En esto consiste el *Mito de la modernidad*, en un victimizar al inocente (al otro) declarándolo causa culpable de su propia victimización, y atribuyéndose el sujeto moderno plena de inocencia con respecto al acto victimario. Por último, el sufrimiento del conquistado será interpretado como el sacrificio o el costo necesario de la modernización.
>
> (my trans.; Dussel qtd. in Camelo Perdomo 104)

To overcome this view that grips the fate of regions such as Latin America, it is necessary to overcome the very concept of modernity, that is, to galvanize its demystification. In this sense, the interaction between the different spheres that Lydia Cabrera promotes in pursuit of a perfectly orchestrated expressive multiplicity implies the renunciation of the search for a single universal language. In this way, the author's narrative moves away from the promotion of a homogenizing mestizaje by republican Cuba and is configured as a counter-hegemonic response to modernity and to the desacralizing tendency that it entails (Eliade, *The Sacred* 13); that is, it breaks with the ideological construction of otherness based on what Homi Bhabha defines as the modality of "fixity" (98) – typical of colonial discourse – and enables a cultural hybridism that accepts difference in a nonhierarchical manner.

By reproducing ancestral and sacred African myths in the literary realm, in addition to their mode of transmission and enjoyment, in her narrative, Lydia Cabrera sparks a new process of mythologization, given that literature does not replace myth but merges with it, broadening its formal confines and renewing its relevance. If in the modern world described by Mircea Eliade the irreligious man wanders about in a mundane and desacralized context, in the counter-modern world constructed in Lydia Cabrera's narrative, the subject inhabits a resacralized quotidian space.

Notes

1 Many critical studies have wrongly interpreted the figure of Lydia Cabrera, reducing her to the heir and perpetuator of the work of Fernando Ortiz. In reality, there is a substantial difference between the two. While both focus their attention on the culture of the Other, Ortiz analyzes it from the center of hegemonic power, hoping to reconcile the irreconcilable through the construction of a utopian syncretic, hybrid, and mestizo synthesis. Lydia Cabrera, on the other hand, bases her fictional space on a syncretism that does not hide differences but

rather reveals, underlines, and values them. See in this regard the work of Edna M. Rodríguez-Mangual (*Lydia Cabrera and the Construction of an Afro-Cuban Identity*) and Cannavacciuolo (*Habitar el margen. Sobre la narrativa de Lydia Cabrera*, p. 20).

2 Lydia Cabrera takes up the myths and fables belonging to the Yoruba religious tradition as a narrative but does not limit herself to a simple transcription. She renews and recreates the original African core by adding original stories and adapting it to Cuban specificity. At the same time, she recovers myth as an experience, including music, an essential element of African social and religious life, in her texts. The novel features introduced by the author are found above all at the structural and linguistic level, given that as she recovers myth, she also achieves its renewal by combining resources belonging to the oral tradition with avant-garde techniques.

3 It should not be forgotten that Cuba, along with Brazil, is the country in which the slave trade continued until 1880; it was only with the law of February 13th of the same year that slavery was prohibited, although the patronage system lasted until 1886. During this long and close contact between Europeans and Africans, a deep process of transculturation took place, leading to the formation of a mixed and syncretic society in all its aspects. Coined by Fernando Ortiz, the term "transculturation" is a key word to understand the multiform and hybrid identity of the Caribbean island.

4 Music is the other bastion of African slave life in Cuba. In this regard, one can think of the proverb "sin música el cuchillo no corta," which is reminiscent of slavery. Music is also strongly linked to religion due to the ritual origin of the choruses. Its lyrics often belong to the so-called "cantos de palo," sung by the *congos* in their religious liturgy. For a more in-depth look at the relationship between music and literary writing in the narrative production of Lydia Cabrera, see Cannavacciuolo ("Narrativizar el sincretismo cultural").

5 The emphasis is ours.

6 Translator's note: When the author directly cites fragments from this collection of stories, I use the English translation *Afro-Cuban Tales*.

7 Translator's note: As it also appears in Cabrera's work, I use both spellings of this word when spelled that way in Spanish: *hicotea* and *jicotea*.

8 Many of Cabrera's stories are set in an absence of chronological time, where eternity is crystallized, not becoming an infinite amount of time, but rather the a-temporal incidence of the eternal in each instant and figure of time (Sini 40–41). When temporal references appear in the stories, they are, for example, to "a summer's day, in a year long since forgotten" ("Bregantino Bregantín," *Afro-Cuban Tales* 1), to "the beginning of time" ("principio del tiempo"; my trans.; "Jicotea era un buen hijo," *Ayapá* 39), or there is simply a reference to "that day" ("aquel día"; my trans.; "El chivo hiede," *Por qué. . .* 44), and to "already very remote times" ("tiempos ya muy remotos"; my trans.; "Un libertador sin estatua," *Cuentos para adultos* 95).

9 In order to achieve this, Lydia Cabrera also adopts many of the literary techniques of Federico García Lorca's generation, to which she is linked through ties of aesthetic communion, friendship, contemporaneity, as well as the same surrealist imprint. The work she proposes to carry out has many points of contact with the incorporation of Spanish Romani culture into García Lorca's poetry in his *Romancero gitano*. As a result of the friendship that the author struck up with García Lorca during her stay in Madrid in 1926 and her contact with the

Generación del 27, Lydia Cabrera incorporates the *neo-gongorista* cult of metaphor into her prose and seeks in *castizo* and *criollo* sayings the popular elements that Alberti and García Lorca find in old folk meters.

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