Miguel Barnet's *Biography of a Runaway Slave* is a textured portrait of the life of Esteban Montejo, a 105 year old who lived through slavery, its aftermath, and Cuban independence. The book is by no means a direct account; what we read is based on both Barnet's interpretations of the dictated memories of Montejo, and the interpretations of the book's translator. For the purposes of this paper, however, direct authorship of these observations and accounts by Montejo will be assumed. What *Biography* tells us about the ethnic dynamics, social hierarchies, and sexual relations of the enslaved Cuban is important, but can only be understood by keeping the particular and pointed biases and prejudices of Montejo in mind.

One of the main ethnic divisions on the plantation was between slaves directly from Africa and slaves born in the Caribbean.[1] Montejo makes clear early on that he prefers those from Africa to those who were born in the Americas, or the "criollitos".[2] On the very first page of his narrative, he declares that the gods from Africa are the strongest and most potent.[3] What is strange about this introduction is that he then goes on to detail how the Africans' religious beliefs led them to trust the Europeans—he makes much of how the red colored kerchiefs of the Portuguese scared the Africans into allowing the slave traders in.[4] Despite this, throughout the book he sprinkles in mentions of the African's purportedly superior knowledge of religion[5] and of medicine.[6] Montejo valorizes in his account of the post slavery period his discussions with those who knew the homeland, especially the stories he was told of the large "lillifant".[7] According to him, "anytime an African did something, he did it well. He brought the recipe from

[1] Miguel Barnet, ed., Biography of a Runaway Slave, trans. W. Nick Hill (Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press, 1995), p 147. All subsequent references in this essay are to this book.
[2] Ibid., 19
[3] Ibid., 17
[4] Ibid., 18
[5] Ibid., 37
[6] Ibid., 41
[7] Ibid., 149

his land, from Africa."[8] This strong preference makes the cases in which he breaks with the philosophy of the older Africans particularly interesting to ponder. These breaks mostly relate to the gender relations of the plantation, and as such will be discussed there.

The other ethnic division on the plantation was that between different groups of Africans. Relations between these groups were not particularly good; masters apparently shifted the different ethnic groups around to prevent disputes.[9] An indirect sign of this tension can be seen in Montejo's reductive descriptions of these groups: he dismisses the Congos as "mostly cowards" who bend easily to the demands of slavery and work. The Mandingoes were big and strong, but apparently "crooks and a bad bunch". Gangas were apparently kinder spirited, and the Carabalis were "fierce" and good at business. Montejo reserves his praise for the Lucumi peoples, whom he claims ran away frequently and "were the most rebellious and bravest".[10] There are two clear possibilities for this preference; that Montejo, though born in the Caribbean, was descended from a Lucumi, or that he simply saw in the Lucumi much of what he valued in himself, such as a desire for freedom.

From this whole mess of ethnic groups, Montejo focuses on the relations between the Congo and the Lucumi. These groups had differing traditions of superstition, with the Congo specialized in hex witchcraft and the Lucumi specialized in fortune telling and the cleansing of evil spirits.[11] According to Montejo, one of the particularly potent spells of the Congo involved killing an enemy by gathering the dirt under their footsteps and placing it in a pot or a corner. Allegedly, the person would die at sunset.[12] These superstitious traditions brought the Congo—or at least

[8] Ibid., 141
[9] Ibid., 37
[10] All above descriptions and quotes ibid., 37
[11] Ibid., 35
[12] Ibid., 34

their "witch doctors"—in conflict with both Christians and the Lucumi. The two groups constantly "bickered" about the virtue and validity of their various spells.[13] Despite all of this, tensions did not seem to rise above the level of these disputes over the finer points of traditional religion. The more potent divisions, the ones that at times did lead to violence, were a result of the differing workloads and social standings of the slaves.

The social hierarchy on the plantation can be seen through two dimensions; the status of slaves as viewed by the master, and the status of the slaves as viewed by other slaves. In general, those who did less "hard" or brutal work were better regarded and treated by the master than those who did "easier" work. Because of the favor they received from the master, these house slaves in turn were viciously resented by those who worked in the fields,[14] like Montejo. At the margins, this rule was not absolute; the very old and very young who were given easy work were not resented by the other slaves, probably because their reduced work was reflective of reduced physical capability. The reasons for this resentment are not hard to discern, as all slaves lived a life deprived of autonomy and basic human respect. They could be sold off from their families at will, as happened to Montejo in his youth,[15] and their living quarters, the barracoon, were generally dirty, hot, and confining.[16] Slaves were taken advantage of by most merchants they came across; from lottery ticket vendors who overcharged for tickets and never redeemed the winning prizes,[17] to tavern owners who would regularly charge exorbitant prices for rum and other goods.[18] This is not even to discuss the harshness of the actual fieldwork, or the brutality of the punishments meted out to the disobedient, such as the wooden stocks slaves were put into for

[13] Ibid., 37
[14] Ibid., 36
[15] Ibid., 19
[16] Ibid., 33-34
[17] Ibid., 25
[18] Ibid., 28

months at a time for misbehavior, or the regular whippings.[19] Those who found a way out of at least some of this harsh treatment were bound to be resented by their brethren.

This resentment manifested itself in Montejo's own description of the slaves who drove the master on horse-drawn carriages as "ass kissers and snitches" and "colored dandies".[20] The slaves who worked with the priests and brought Christianity into the barracoon were held in no better regard. Montejo, in describing them, suspects that these slaves did not have any better an understanding of the doctrines of Christianity than he did, but worked with the priests simply because it gave them a higher status and improved treatment. These slaves apparently received "special consideration" from the masters, and were never severely punished. House slaves even actively shirked fieldwork, pretending to be sick when sent to tend to the pigs or cut sugarcane in the fields. Once the workday was over, they returned to the barracoon to visit their relatives, if they were in a family. Further tensions were caused when they took food from the barracoon back to the master's house, and fighting often broke out when they tried to "fool around" with the women there.[21] As will be discussed later, women were a particularly potent source of conflict among the slaves.

As referenced, this resentment of slaves with easier work did not extend to the young or the old. Children were usually kept in the infirmary where they were born until around the age of six or seven, when they would be sent off into the fields to work like everyone else.[22] However, some children instead were sent to work in the house as attendants, preventing flies from getting into the food the master and his family ate. This job was not completely painless; children who failed at this task were occasionally beaten, but it certainly was preferable to being in the fields,

[19] Both references Ibid., 40
[20] Ibid., 20
[21] Ibid., 36
[22] Ibid., 38

where even the children were worked "like oxen".[23] What is clear is that despite Montejo's own personal dislike of the job—he did not want to be near the masters—these children were not resented by the other slaves. At the other end of the spectrum were the old men, those too worn to work in the fields. They often retired when they turned 60, and served out their lives as doormen at the barracoon gates or as assistants to the women in the kitchen. They were generally ignored by everyone as long as they followed the rules.[24]

What we learn from *Biography of a Runaway Slave* about the gender and sexual relations on the plantation leaves us with some very surprising insights about life during slavery. These insights, however, must be understood through the lens of Montejo's constantly referenced desire for women. This could be a result of what today would be considered sex addiction, or simply a function of the relative scarcity of women on the plantation, an imbalance that will be discussed later. Early in his description of the games the slaves played, Montejo confesses to the reader that women were one of his two main "vices".[25] He continually references his affinity for women throughout the book, even into his descriptions of the post-slavery period.[26] At one point he notes that his dreams were generally about "work and women,"[27] and goes into a detailed discussion of how he likely fathered many children that he's never met. He goes on to dismiss the supposed mothers' claims of paternity, arguing, "the women I had in the woods, they came to me and said 'this is your child.' But who could be sure about that?"[28] Perhaps the most telling evidence of his unusually strong desire for sex is how he characterizes his time as a fugitive slave:

[23] And references to fly-swatting children Ibid., 22
[24] Ibid., 39
[25] Ibid., 30
[26] Ibid., 68
[27] Ibid., 82
[28] Ibid., 98

> "The only thing I couldn't have was sex. Since there were no women, I had to get by with my desire bottled up. *You couldn't even step up to a mare because they neighed like the dickens…*"[29]

The italicized portion of that passage (emphasis mine) indicates that Montejo was, at the least, particularly isolated in his time as a runaway. As he goes on to say, only his unwillingness to be recaptured by slave catchers prompted his restraint.[30]

It is with that understanding that we now tackle what Montejo has to say about the general sexual situation on the plantation. During the period of slavery described early in the book, sex usually occurred at the Sunday fiestas, when the overseer and his assistant came into the barracoon and "fooled" with the women.[31] Also, during the morning baths, when some of the slave men and women would go into corners of the water and play "hide and seek".[32] The master and overseers would sometimes separate men and women with desirable physical characteristics—here meaning height in men and a full figure in women—and force them to "breed" children in a manner similar to cattle. These children were particularly valuable and apparently could be sold for around 500 pesos.[33] Women who failed to produce suitable children were sent back to the plantation.

Even so, women were particularly scarce on the plantation. Men typically did not "get" women until past age 25, and the older men liked it this way. As a result, there was a large group of men, according to Montejo, who simply had homosexual relations with each other.[34] While the practice was looked down upon by those from Africa, Montejo does not seem to have

[29] Ibid., 51
[30] Ibid., 51
[31] Ibid., 30
[32] Ibid., 32
[33] Ibid., 38
[34] Ibid., 40

a problem with it, noting that "everyone marches to his own drummer".[35] This stance is highly unusual as Montejo elsewhere typically expresses strong preference for the beliefs of the Africans. Perhaps he sees the issue differently because he acutely feels this reality of female scarcity. Perhaps Montejo himself took part in these relations before he was old enough to get a woman. We can't draw much on this aspect from the text, but either is a compelling theory.

Esteban Montejo's recollections in *Biography of a Runaway Slave* provide us with a unique perspective on the circumstances of slavery in the 1800s Caribbean. However, much of what we learn from his account, from the ethnic tensions to the social and sexual relations on the plantation, can only be understood through the context of Montejo's worldview.

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[35] Ibid., 41