LYDIA CABRERA

EL MONTE

Notes on the Religions, Magic, Superstitions, and Folklore of the Black and Creole People of Cuba

TRANSLATED BY DAVID FONT-NAVARRETE

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Translated by
David Font-Navarrete

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To Fernando Ortiz, with
fraternal affection

Contents

Foreword

The Forest as Moral Document

JOHN F. SZWED AND ROBERT F. THOMPSON

It is said that the jazz style of Charlie Parker, blowing cool, blowing hot, blowing all the points in between, was so complex that several musicians, and indeed schools, were needed fully to explore his implications. This point applies to Lydia Cabrera and the richness of her Afro-Cuban scholarship. Only a task force, working day after day for years, could effect the just estimation that her work demands as surely one of the twentieth century's most important bodies of urban anthropological research. We say *urban* because the two main Cuban cultures from Africa, Yoruba and Kongo, were urban, and anciently so. The creolization of these cultures, and their fusion with elements of Spanish, French, and even Chinese in the history of Afro-Cuban art and

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DF-N: This foreword is based on an essay originally cowritten, according to the authors, circa 1982. It was informed by conversations with Cabrera during visits to her home in Miami, where she lived with María Teresa de Rojas. Quotations attributed to Cabrera without parenthetical citation in this foreword (e.g., "so that you can write freely about our traditions") are based on personal communications with the authors. The essay was originally intended as an introduction to an earlier effort, by Eliot Klein, to publish an English-language edition of *El Monte*. The text of the essay has been adapted from a previous version published as "The Forest as Moral Document: The Achievement of Lydia Cabrera," in *Crossovers: Essays on Race, Music, and American Culture* (Szwed 2005).

music, largely took place in the port cities of Cuba—notably, Havana and Matanzas. The famed stylishness of Black Cubans is a function, we would suggest, of their tropism toward the city. Afro-Cubans, like the Yoruba and Bakongo, appreciate the parlance of the city, the verbal lore and gossip, the continual elaboration of tradition in a situation in which an artist or musician might move in a given week from Yoruba to Dahomean to Cross River Efik/Ejagham to Kongo to commercial *música cabaretera* to playing a trumpet solo at a wedding to Yoruba *bembé*. In fact, polyvisuality (a world of Catholic chromolithography and Yoruba sacred stones) and polymusicality (where Kongo society members are called upon to play Abakuá, or Cross River, drums) may well be a Black pan-Caribbean phenomenon, as suggested by Kenneth Bilby in his account of a Jamaican musician:

> Starting one morning by playing guitar in a coastal *mento* bend for tourists, he returned later that day to his rural village to join in a fife and drum performance, playing the leading drum, and then in the evening added his voice a Revival church chorus. . . . The easy movement between styles was not unusual for this man. (1994, 203)

Nor was it unusual for Lydia Cabrera. Modest, completely free of any self-conscious sense of her exalted status in Afro-Caribbean studies, she has given us a unique body of vividly written works.

In 1954, Cabrera published *El Monte*, a monumental compendium of the lore of herbal healing and associated African-influenced worship among the Black people of western Cuba. Ever since, the book has remained continuously in print. For *El Monte* (The sacred forest) has become a holy book for thousands of servitors of the Afro-American religions derived from the Yoruba, Kongo, Dahomean, and Ejagham cultures. Among other things, the book provides a key to Afro-Atlantic herbalism, not only in its western Cuban manifestation but in today's broader universe of Afro-Cuban influence, involving thousands of worshippers of Yoruba-Cuban deities and practitioners of Kongo-Cuban medicine and Yoruba-Cuban herbalism in Florida (Miami, Hialeah, and Tampa); New Jersey (Elizabeth, Union City); New York City (especially the South Bronx, Spanish Harlem, and the Lower East Side); and the Cuban and Puerto Rican barrios of other major northeastern industrial cities. The range of these religions is enormous. This book helps us comprehend them.

El Monte defines a history of brilliantly effected change whereby the worship of more than twelve major goddesses and gods (orishas) of the Yoruba (a people who live in what is now southwestern Nigeria and eastern Benin Republic) was transmuted into La Regla de Ocha, the worship of the same

deities in Afro-Cuban terms and a worship also known as Santería, after the "masking" of orisha with Catholic saints (*santos*) where both shared highly similar or identical visual attributes. For example, Ogun, the Yoruba deity of iron (the charismatic metal), lord of the cutting edge, and today patron of metallic wonders like oil rigs, speeding locomotives, or taxicabs, blended with the image of St. Peter because the latter was depicted frequently in Roman Catholic chromolithographs holding an iron key to the gates of heaven. Similarly, the playful propensities on one side of the complex Yoruba trickster-deity, Eshu-Elegba, found a ready avatar in "the child of Atocha," shown with a round object which Yoruba would almost inevitably associate with *àdo*, calabashes of transforming power that are one of the deep signs of the presence of Eshu and his power to make things happen (*àṣe*, called *aché* in the creolized Yoruba of Cuba). In addition, the dreaded deity of pestilence and social conscience, Obaluaiye, blurred into the picture of St. Lazarus supported by crutches, dogs licking his numerous wounds. Meanwhile, the equally tumultuous and beautifully conceived deities of Dahomey, the *vodun*—the same deities that elsewhere in the Caribbean helped spark one of the world's most conceptually complex and misunderstood religions, Haitian Vodun—were transmuted into Arará worship, in which god and goddess again served with and without carefully selected Catholic masks and counterparts. To this day both Yoruba and Dahomean deities are worshipped with a wealth of vernacular drums, costumes, beadwork, and dance, all combined. In the process, Cuba became a marvel of the Black Atlantic world, with an elaborate and continuous tradition of decorated *batá* drums, beaded necklaces, and ritual beaded garlands (*mazos*) in symbolic colors. Yoruba is still spoken and sung in Cuba, albeit in a creolized fusion form. The Yoruba-born linguist Dejo Afolayan maintains that this fusion brings together Kétu and Ijésha dialect forms, separated by hundreds of miles in Yorubaland itself, in the strength of a reblended cultural flavor.[1]

The rise of Yoruba-Cuban and Dahomean-Cuban circles of artistic culture would be accomplishment enough, but there were two more surges out of anonymity, misery, and economic deprivation. First, there is the rise of apparently the only male secret society of African type in the New World, a transformation of the important Ejagham male society called Ngbe, from the hinterlands of the notorious slave port of Calabar. Many slaves from this part of Africa arrived in Cuba in the first half of the nineteenth century, where they were called Carabalí (linguistic metathesis transformed the word, but not to such an extent that most persons could not sense a relationship binding such

1 DF-N: Based on the authors' personal communication.

people to Calabar and its hinterlands). In Calabar proper, the Ejagham are known as Abakpa or Qua, and it is from the first term, almost beyond doubt, that the creole term for the Ejagham Cuban male society, Abakuá, derives. The Ejagham are famed for skin-covered masks and a supple ideographic writing system called *nsibidi* ("the dark letters," "the serious signs"), plus powerful women's arts including, again, ideography and remarkable ceremonial plumed calabashes (*echi okpere*). High-ranking initiates of the Ngbe society also used plumed drums of silence, drums to be "heard" visually at funerals and other most important events but not actually sounded. And many of these subtleties of act and envisionment passed intact to Cuba, where Lydia Cabrera for years was alone in rendering full justice to the presence of the Ejagham-derived Abakuá practices, not only in two chapters in *El Monte* but also in two later works, *La sociedad secreta Abakuá* (1959) and *Anaforuana* (1975), the latter a landmark publication in the history of the study of Black Atlantic graphic scripts and ideography. With the exception of Argeliers León and Sosa Hernández, Cabrera remains the sole and brilliant scholar of Ejagham impact on the New World, as mediated through the culture of Ejagham-influenced slaves and freed slaves, who were concentrated in the sugar ports of western Cuba (Havana, Matanzas, and Cárdenas), their environs, and the sugar plantations themselves, linked to these termini by rail and road. Finally, we are confronted by the mighty Kongo and Angola presence, less evident linguistically, perhaps, but massive and profound in the making of charms (*minkisi*), incantations (*mambu*, creolized to *mambo*, a word further borrowed to name one of the most multimetric Afro-Cuban musics of the twentieth century), and dance and musical instrumentation. That presence is especially felt in the hundreds of plants that bear creole Ki-Kongo names in Cuba and are linked with interlocking circles of Kongo-derived or Kongo-inspired folklore, without which the world would have never heard of rumba, never danced to the conga drum.

El Monte also forces the recognition of a parallel medical system in the Western Hemisphere. As Mercedes Cros Sandoval points out, most of the 400,000 Cubans now settled in Dade County, Florida, rely on standard health care systems for treatment of infections and organic diseases. But many consult Cuban-Yoruba traditional herbal medicine in dealing with problems emerging from spiritual or emotional stress.[2] For pneumonia one goes to the hospital, but for psychiatric disorders, caused by the destruction of a love affair or bitter jealousy, one goes to the herbalist-diviner. There are serious skills involved in the latter realm of medicine, for the Yoruba of Nigeria, for example,

2 JFS and RFT: For a general discussion of these matters, see Cros Sandoval (1977, 1979).

are believed to have known, classified, and used the tranquilizing properties of *rauwolfia* years before it was adopted in Western pharmacopeia. Moreover, a team of Western doctors reliably report from Yorubaland that "one can say further that the criteria employed to distinguish particular kinds of mental and emotional disturbance are very similar to the criteria employed by Western psychiatrists" (Leighton et al. 1963, 105). In other words, the folkloric substance of this book, largely rooted in herbalism, is not a quaint collection of archaic, vanished happenings but a vibrant reality, a design for right living, which exists parallel to Western diagnostic medicine in Nigeria and in the Nigerian-influenced New World. Patients involved in this popular medicine sometimes remark on their close and cordial relationships with the healer-diviners, recalling a fictionalized account of the encounter of a North American Black woman with a prophet-healer in which her consultation contrasted vividly with the relative perceived coldness of official medicine: "The satisfaction she felt was from the quiet way he had listened to her, giving her all of his attention. No one had ever done that before. The doctors she saw from time to time at the clinic were brusque, hurried, and impatient" (Petry 1946, 136).

Among the folklorists of the twentieth century, Lydia Cabrera is distinguished by her special attention to Black Atlantic herbalism. We say *Atlantic*, instead of *Afro-Cuban*, because some of the herbs she documents are linked to cognate herbs and healing practices among Afro-Jamaican, Afro-Brazilian, and Afro-American systems. Conventional wisdom cites music, dance, oral literature, religion, and revolutionary politics as the key Black contributions to world culture. But here is the beginning of understanding of perhaps the finest contribution of them all: Black Atlantic medicine. *El Monte* lists more than five hundred herbs, the ailments that they are alleged to cure, the spirits that preside over their healing powers, and the creolized Yoruba, Ki-Kongo, and Ejagham (Abakuá) words that name the leaves in Afro-Cuban terms.

In addition, we find whole legends associated with certain leaves: miniature narrations. "Truths that can be rendered in a dissociated moment," Susan Sontag points out, "however significant or decisive, have a very narrow relation to the needs of understanding. Only that which narrates can make us understand" (1977, 23). And, in fact, *El Monte* is a miracle of narration, brought into being by a woman who uniquely combined the powers of a painter, an interior designer, a sculptor (her painted stones were exhibited in New York City in the spring of 1984 at the Intar Gallery), a writer, a linguist, and a passionate student of the folkways of Black people. The result is a major work of twentieth-century Cuban literature in the depth of its vision and the quality of the writing, with interviews embedded like "found conversations" (Black Spanish phrasing and all) in the flow of her discourse and summation. It is also a major document in the history of popular Afro-American art, for no

place else does one find photographs of major Kongo-influenced charms in Cuba, or photographs (in color, in the original edition) of Yoruba initiatory body painting in Cuba or the characteristic hands-crossing gestures of the Ejagham- and Efik-derived *ireme* (cf. Efik: *idem* "spirit") masker in action, or the only full-color portrait of an *ireme* showing Calabar-influenced details of appliqué and decoration. It becomes immediately comprehensible why this uniquely talented and spiritually knowledgeable woman would attract the friendship and admiration of some of the finest minds of twentieth-century literature.

. . . . . .

Lydia Cabrera was born in Havana on Independence Day, May 20, 1900,[3] the last of eight children of Raimundo Cabrera y Bosch and Elisa Macaida y Casanova. Her father was a distinguished lawyer, journalist, playwright, poet, and novelist, as well as a leader in the movement for Cuba's independence, and the Cabrera home was a gathering place for intellectuals, painters, lawyers, and politicians. It was a climate that helped shape the range of interests characteristic of her later work. Cabrera's older sister Estelle was married to Fernando Ortiz, who had published (when Lydia was six) the first major work on Afro-Cuban culture, *Los negros brujos*, a study of magic workers. Ortiz's Afro-Cuban studies had begun with the assumption (like much conservative and liberal scholarship of the 1960s in the United States) that people of African descent lacked a true culture and, if anything, practiced a culture of poverty (or a culture of pathology). But the sheer corrective power of Afro-Cuban culture fused with Ortiz's basic integrity as a scholar so that he ultimately came to spend much of his life documenting the splendor and normativeness of this culture, and what's more, to use his documentation as a means to justice for Black Cubans. Cabrera, of course, knew Ortiz's dozens of articles and books: still, her contribution was ultimately to prove of greater bite and substance, for in submitting to the responsibility, the incredible repetitiveness of her informant's valuable, pithy arguments, she made an even greater contribution to the cause of Afro-Cuban studies. For she collected whole texts, as it were, whereas Ortiz pigeonholed his facts and worked up essentially an etymology of the main traits of Afro-Cuban lore.

Nevertheless, Ortiz's work was something of a foundation on which the Afro-Cubanist movement of the 1920s and 1930s was built, a movement that sliced together European primitivism, Cuban nationalism, and the growing thrust toward Afro-Cuban rights and freedom. It was a period that saw

3 DF-N: Regarding Cabrera's date of birth, see the introduction to this edition by Isabel Castellanos.

the writing, from the bottom up, of novels such as Alejo Carpentier's *Écue-Yamba-o*, the culturally Black poetry of Nicolás Guillén, and the composition of classical music (by Alejandro García Caturla and Amadeo Roldán) and popular music (by Ernesto Lecuona) based on Afro-Cuban folk song and dance.

In the spirit of the times, Cabrera's first works were literary retellings of Afro-Cuban folktales, works of local color. But she also knew the creolization of European surrealism and Afro-American political consciousness that had produced *négritude*: she had translated the classic of this movement herself, Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* ([1939] 1943, [1939] 2013), and she was friendly with the Martinican poet Léon Damas. Cabrera refers to her books of Afro-Cuban tales as fiction, with no claim to folkloric validity.[4] At best, she says, they are loosely based on Afro-Cuban originals (as are some of the stories of Carpentier), while some are totally invented, perhaps inspired—like some Afro-Haitian paintings—by Black folk song. Nonetheless, these tales and the anecdotes and dialogues within them are rooted in ethnographic realism. Indeed, the glossaries of Afro-Cuban terms that Cabrera includes with some of these books absolutely suggest a more than casual concern with accuracy. Her ear for dialogue—at the margin between fiction and ethnography—is also displayed in *Francisco y Francisca* (1976), a collection of humorous anecdotes and short tales in Kongo Cuban idiom. In fact, it is at the borders of conventional literary genres that Cabrera works most comfortably, as illustrated by *Refranes de negros viejos* (1955), a collection of proverbs; and *Itinerario del insomnio* (1977), a blend of folklore, politics, and mystical nostalgia, a literary raising of the dead in the Cuban city of Trinidad at the turn of the century.

In 1938, after years in France, Cabrera fled the rise of the Nazis and returned to Cuba to live and work, though her travels often took her back to Europe. Home again, she began persistent research in the Black barrios of Havana and Matanzas in the tradition of field ethnography. And while she has always distanced herself from anthropology (she claims merely to "repeat" culture, not interpret it),[5] she approached research on her own country in a highly sophisticated, relativistic fashion and managed to bridge the "native," the amateur, and the professional anthropological points of view. Additionally, she counted among her friends such anthropologists as William and Berta Bascom, Melville and Frances Herskovits, Alfred Métraux, and

4 JFS and RFT: See Cabrera's *Cuentos negros de Cuba* (1940); *Ayapá* (1971); and *Cuentos para adultos, niños, y retrasados mentales* (1983).

5 DF-N: Quotations without bibliographic citations are based on the authors' personal communications with Cabrera circa 1982, during visits to her Miami home, where she lived with María Teresa de Rojas.

Pierre Verger. In fact, it was Métraux, the distinguished French ethnographer of Haitian *vodun*, at first skeptical of her findings of African languages in Cuba ("Quelle imagination, Lydia!" he said), who aided her in confirming the Yoruba sources of the Lucumí material she had encountered, and who encouraged her to expand her research to include Kongo—that is, *palero*—material. And, for a time, the French Afro-Brazilianist scholar Verger joined her in field research, especially aiding her with photography. Most of the research was done by Cabrera herself, however, though sometimes in the company of her companion, paleographic scholar María Teresa de Rojas.[6]

In disagreement with the direction taken by the 1959 Cuban Revolution, Cabrera left Cuba for Miami in 1960. Though her exile was intended to be temporary, her Coral Gables residence became permanent. Isolation from Cuban tradition sharpened her consciousness, and like an anthropologist writing far from the field, she produced eleven more books, each breaking new ground.

Cabrera's ethnographies of Afro-Cuban religious life are the heart of her later work. These include research on the Yoruba in Cuba published as *Yemayá y Ochún* (1974), an account of the verbal arts surrounding the goddesses of the seas, sweet water, and love; *Koeko iyawo* (1980), concerning the structure of the Afro-Yoruba religion, its rituals, sacrifices, and cures; *Anagó* ([1957] 1986), a lexicon of creolized speech in Cuba; *Otán iyebiyé* (1970), on the beliefs of the priests of the orishas about precious stones; *La laguna sagrada de San Joaquín* ([1973] 1993), about the rituals of the followers of Iyalosha, the water goddess; and *La medicina popular de Cuba* (1984), a study of folk medicine among Afro-Cubans.

The seminal work on the Efik and Ejagham male "leopard society" (Ngbe) in Cuba is represented by *La sociedad secreta Abakuá* (1959),[7] an account of the myths, rituals, ideography, and organization of the Abakuá religion and their influence on Cuban religious life; *Anaforuana* (1975), offers an ideography of initiation, funeral leave-taking, and membership in the Abakuá society. Cabrera's research on a creole Kongo society in Cuba appears in *La Regla Kimbisa del Santo Cristo del Buen Viaje* ([1977] 1986), a close look at a nineteenth-century creolized Kongo-Catholic religious group and its leaders; and *Reglas de Congo* ([1979] 1986) examines the creolized Kongo-Angolan ritual, religion, ideography, and folklore of Cuba.

6 DF-N: It is worth emphasizing the integral role of Josefina Tarafa's photographs and audio recordings in a trio of Cabrera's most important projects: *El Monte* ([1954] 1992); *Música de los cultos africanos en Cuba* (1956); and *La laguna sagrada de San Joaquín* ([1973] 1993).

7 DF-N: For an annotated translation of this work, informed by new transnational scholarship on Abakuá traditions, see Cabrera (2020).

But *El Monte* is the centerpiece of Cabrera's enterprise. When it was first published in Havana in 1954, it was issued as part of what Cabrera called the *Colección del chicherekú* (a *chicherekú* is a wooden doll made by a *santero*); when she reprinted *El Monte* in Miami in 1968, she made it a part of the *Colección del chicherekú en el exilio*. In 1954 most Cuban intellectuals treated it as something of a national embarrassment—a tarnishing of Cuba's image as a modern nation-state. European and North American folklorists and anthropologists then, as now, took little interest in the scholarship of Cuba, so its publication went unnoticed abroad.

Yet *El Monte* was not lost, by any means. Afro-Americanists such as Melville Herskovits, William Bascom, and Roger Bastide recognized its importance and kept it alive in their footnotes as part of the growing corpus of comparativist Black studies. And Cabrera's skill with local languages and characterization did not escape the notice of Cuba's novelists, for whom she became both a model and a source. Even the folkloric content of *El Monte* influenced Cuban fiction: Alejo Carpentier's *Explosion in a Cathedral* ([1960] 1963), for instance, is indebted to Cabrera's detailed herbal descriptions and classifications.[8] Most importantly, *El Monte* was immediately recognized to be the first printed guide, the Bible, of Santeria worshippers, and began to sell widely. It has been in print now for fifty years, in several countries, an underground best seller if ever there was one, and some kind of assessment in terms of ethnographic tradition is long overdue.

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Just what constitutes a successful ethnography is far from obvious, even after a century of professional anthropology. Exactly what the relationship should be between a culture and its analysis and representation in a book is at best understood only in general terms by anthropologists. Beyond general strictures, disagreements persist over what ethnography should be. In part this debate is the result of the discipline's history; by and large, ethnography developed as an ad hoc discipline constructed by amateur scientists. Anthropologists such as Frank Boas, Alfred Kroeber, and Paul Radin had no social science training, and came to the discipline from backgrounds in other fields, such as geography, literature, and history. Lacking an agreed-upon firm sense of what ethnography should be and how it should be done, early anthropologists experimented with a variety of approaches and even a variety of genres for rendering the results: laboratory-inspired reports, diaries, travel accounts, native autobiographies, and even fictional forms were all tried. Much of the

8 JFS and RFT: For a guide to Carpentier's *Explosion in a Cathedral*, see Echevarría (1984).

strength of anthropology developed within this sense of experimentation and reflexivity, and the question of what makes for successful (or convincing) ethnography continues to remain in contention. For some anthropologists, an adequate ethnography would allow one the knowledge to act acceptably as a native in the society represented (needless to say, no such ethnography has yet been written for any society). For other anthropologists, a good ethnography would offer a "reading" of native texts alongside natives' readings of those texts. For still others, ethnography would set a given people, a given culture, into the comparative community of peoples within the conceptual world of anthropologists. Much of the training of anthropologists is taken up with discussions over the various merits of these and other approaches.

What, then, are we to make of *El Monte*, which is now, more often than not, very closely read by the "natives," the followers of Santería in a number of countries in the Americas? What are we to make of a book so powerful that it continues to be pirated and plagiarized year after year? A book that has left the disciplinary realms of literature, science, and folklore and has joined in the very processes of cultural influence and change itself? A book written, after all, by a native Cuban untrained either as anthropologist or as *santero*, and yet someone who is often sought after in both roles by two worlds of people? A book which, though written outside the usual academic and disciplinary frameworks, is based nonetheless on over ten years of field research and is supremely sensitive to cultural variety? Finally, what are we to make of a book whose complex literary originality is matched only by its subject, a culture so complex that it resists complete understanding by means of any known theories of cultural change?

What *El Monte* shows us is no fusion culture in which African cultural particularity is shredded and kaleidoscoped, thus remaining incomprehensible. The assault on such cultural fatalism begins on the title page. There we find a kind of cabalistic anagram of the secret cultural profundities, distinct and independent, that make up the culture of Black Cubans. The title of the book, *El Monte*, is standard Spanish for hill or mountain. But in the vernacular the term refers to the country, to bush or forest, to wild vegetation, plants growing in their natural, undomesticated state. Cabrera deepens and confirms the sylvan associations by causing the letters that compose the phrase *El Monte* to be illuminated, on the cover of both the Cuban and Miami editions, in green. And she immediately follows the symbolically illuminated letters with reinforcing glosses from the two major African languages in Cuba: IGBO (Yoruba: bush, grove for worship) NFINDA (Ki-Kongo: woods, forest, wooded country; place of the spirits of the dead [from time immemorial]). The semantic range of both these important African words makes plain that the forest in two African civilizations important to Cuba is charged with spirituality, a

cathedral buttressed by the trees and lit by herbal stained glass, as it were—a cathedral such as William Faulkner glimpsed in "the big woods, bigger and older than any recorded document" ([1931] 2011, 190). And like Faulkner before her, Cabrera was guided to the forest in terms of Black culture. As she notes in chapter 1,

> An astonishingly tenacious belief in *el monte* persists among Afro-Cubans. In the woods and scrubland of Cuba, as in African forests, dwell ancestral deities and powerful spirits that today, as in the days of the slave trade, are most feared and venerated by Afro-Cubans, whose successes or failures depend upon their hostility or benevolence.[9]

.....

The book's concentration upon the healing essence of the forest, the herbs and roots, is rendered explicit by other Yoruba and Ki-Kongo phrases that illuminate the cover and the title page: EWE ORISHA (creolized Yoruba: leaves of the divinities) and VITITI NFINDA (creolized Ki-Kongo: herbs of the forest). The literal, trunkal (root, branch, twig) and herbal (the leaves) elements of the forest are involved in these phrasings, but elements of sitting, high and low, are also understood from the Ki-Kongo spatial references. Thus, in classical Ki-Kongo pharmacopeia, according to Kongo scholar Fu-Kiau Bunseki, the *makaya* (a word that turns up in Kongo-influenced Louisiana and Haiti as well as Cuba) refers to vertical leaves, fluttering high within the branches, whereas *bititi* refers to horizontal leaves attached to vines and creepers. In Cuba, however, *bititi*—creolized to *vititi*—refers simply to leaves.[10] Cabrera has said that *monte* refers to "the bush, to many plants" and that its literal meaning of mountain is not to be taken *al pié de la letra* (literally) except in a metaphoric sense of *altura*, height, ascendant source of power, a mountain mortar in which the leaves of the gods are ground and worked for the good of all humankind.

A sense of spiritualized rightness and organic sequence permeates the book's chapters, which flow from forest to herbs to doctors to fees to medicines and magical constructions, to chapters literally built around specific trees, like the turning of Afro-Haitian *vodun* dance about the trunkal middle post sited of a peristyle. Thus, chapter 1 introduces the forest and its spirituality, source of all wild herbs and roots, and chapter 2 talks of *bilongo* (Ki-Kongo: medicines) or the actual force of the forest in action. Chapter 3 introduces the spiritual lords and masters of the leaves (*oluwa ewe*); Osanyin, the

9 DF-N: The translation by Szwed and Thompson differs slightly from my own.

10 DF-N: Based on the authors' personal communication.

Yoruba deity of herbalism; and Eshu-Elegba, who is the spirit of the crossroads and of spiritual communication with the goddesses and gods—great trickster and holder of the powers to make things come to pass. The divine tribute that one owes to such spirits for the privilege of plucking and working leaves unfolds in chapter 4. Then, in chapter 5, we actually learn how to make an Angolan charm (*como se prepara una nganga*) and various Kongo-influenced charms, a tour de force of magical reportage, with one informant sometimes contradicting or correcting another, until the whole point of miniaturizing the forest essences to make the healing medicines of God (*minkisi*) is memorably made plain. Soul-embedded earths and spirit-commanding objects or fluids—mercury for spiritual flash and fleetness, stones for immortal presence—are classified and revealed in long and absorbing passages about the building of Kongo charms, major charms like *mpungu*, with details that further research will probably identify as witty but culturally and historically appropriate local invention and improvisation.

There follows a brief but remarkable chapter 6 on the magical, medicinal treasury of the lord of medicine, Osanyin, and a corresponding creole Kongo figure called father of the forest (*tata nfinda*). And in these pages, among many illuminations, one learns to what extent Black Cubans believe that the forces of the forest are morally neutral, shaped by the particular character of their users, even as "a breeze is good and refreshing. But what about a hurricane? They're both wind." Then the book modulates into a tree-centered stanza of four chapters, two (chapters 7 and 8) on the cottonwood tree in Yoruba and Kongo rites, and two (chapters 9 and 10) built around the royal palm, rendered in the lore of the Abakuá and a sign par excellence of the Yoruba thunder god. Groundskeepers working in the parks of Miami today, so it is said, sometimes come across sacrificial remains at the base of the noblest and tallest royal palms.

In the climatic final section, the botanical encyclopedia, leaves themselves are listed by their vernacular Cuban-Spanish, Yoruba-Cuban, Kongo-Cuban, and Abakuá names, with legends and stories that detail the strong mystic links between the leaves and the deities of Yorubaland; for as Cabrera herself has said, "each orisha has its series of leaves which transmit its power-to-make-things-happen (*aché*)." Whence came this incredible ethnographic abundance of testimony and folkloric evidence? The answer: from an exemplary scholar-informant relationship rendered in terms of longtime mutuality of service and favor, without the self-serving fanfare that marks some scholars' attempts to set themselves up as paragons of cultural camaraderie and inside observation. After Cabrera returned to Havana from Paris, already primed to investigate more fully the Black roots of Cuban culture, she began to interview Omitomi, the Black seamstress who worked for Cabrera's grandmother.

Omitomi (Yoruba: I am satisfied with god of water) is a "water name" in Yoruba, indicating in all probability that she was a devotee of the riverine healer spirit Eyinle or Erinle, called Inle in Cuba. At first Omitomi feigned total ignorance of the Afro-Cuban world of worship: "I don't know nothing. I was brought up with white folk." Gradually it developed—and her name was a strong hint of this—that Omitomi was one of the most respected Afro-Cuban religious authorities in all of Cuba, and she introduced Cabrera to her friend Oddedei (Yoruba: the hunter has made us this). The two of them, Omitomi and Oddedei, saw to it that Cabrera traveled to Matanzas. This city, "the Ile-Ife of Cuba," was reputed to be home to the true spiritual overlords of the Afro-Cuban religion. The priests and priestesses there, many in their eighties and nineties, were deeply erudite and spoke the three major creolized African languages of Cuba. Oddedei made Cabrera swear that "no one was to touch her head" (i.e., no one was to initiate her into the Lucumí or Kongo religion, "so that you can write freely about our traditions, for once a *iyawo*—a bride of the gods, an initiate—you will never be allowed to speak").[11] And so a pact was sealed and word spread that Cabrera was a white person of distinction who truly respected Black culture and who was quite generous with her informants as regards gifts, services, and favors. As her network of informants grew in the 1940s and 1950s, she found that her house, the Quinta San José, was admirably sited, built as it was in Pogolotti, a barrio of Marianao, a western suburb of Havana. For Pogolotti is famed to this day for its African-influenced religious activities. It is the site of one of the most prestigious and culturally important Abakuá lodges. Cabrera comments: "In fact Pogolotti was a barrio entirely enlivened with Black people and culture. There were Abakuá, there were *paleros*, there were Yoruba diviners (*babalaos*), excellent people, no? I had but to cross the street to be in Africa."

These and other informants taught her that *el monte* was a Bible, that the great Kongo kettle charms (*prendas*) spoke through the bodies of their priestly mediums. Through Black friends of friends she was put in touch with perhaps the most holy—and feared—of all the Kongo *banganga* of Cuba, J. S. Baró, who worked with two or three ritual assistants in Pogolotti, and, Cabrera thinks, was descended from Black Cubans who worked on the Baró plantation in the province of Matanzas. Gradually her photographs and her documentation grew, each illustration, each legend not a coldly analyzed object but a gift, gestures of good will by Black women and men. Cabrera gave room and board to three Black elders, led by the incredible Saibeke, who was at once *mayombero*, a *lucumí*, and an Abakuá. Without question, part of the

11 DF-N: Cabrera narrates this episode first-hand in an interview (1982b).

special power of Afro-Cuban culture, the engine behind its world conquest of the dance halls of the planet, is the fluent, constant creolizing exchange between the three great African traditions that surged forth upon the island, as exemplified by Saibeke's multi-religiosity. Saibeke fell ill, and Cabrera brought in a doctor who cured him. And then one day he crossed the compound to Cabrera's door and said, "Niña, ¿tu quiere saber Abakuá? Coge libro." (Girl, you want to learn Abakuá? Pick up your notebook.)[12] And so began the lengthy seminars that resulted not only in *El Monte*'s magnificent chapters on the Abakuá and their lore of the palm tree and the cottonwood, but also Cabrera's full-scale books on the Abakuá and their ideography.

Cabrera's fluency in art and language (speaking excellent English and French, in addition to her native Spanish) prepared her for the daunting challenge of making sense of a sea of creolized Black speech in the provinces of Havana and Matanzas, where she did the bulk of the work in preparation for *El Monte*. She took down remarks and observations not only in Black Spanish, but also in creolized African languages: Yoruba (*lucumí*), Fongbe from Dahomey (*ararά*), Ki-Kongo mixed with words in Black Spanish (*lengua palera*), Efik (*efí*), and Ejagham (*ekoi*). With the vision of a novelist she saw this incredible linguistic landscape whole. And, not unlike a filmmaker, she used "establishing shots" or introductory paragraphs along with moments when a single Black woman or man dominates a page with a string of texts. Her informants, working-class Black people, came to her with their noble memories and legends. She quickly recognized the strength and validity of their traditions. She saw creative vision, *grands initiateurs*, where others saw only stevedores, household domestics, common field hands, or ex-slaves.

We cannot repeat too many times that the great source of the strength of this book is linguistic, involving the patient documentation of texts and phrases from five major African languages spoken or chanted in Cuba. The author made constant contact with Black women and men, particularly in Matanzas, who spoke creolized Ki-Kongo and Yoruba fluently. In fact, so creatively challenged was Cabrera by the vibrant linguistic tumult she found about her that she matter-of-factly compiled, as parallel projects to the making of *El Monte*, lexicons of the different African languages that came to Cuba in the nineteenth-century slave trade. With *Anagó* ([1957] 1986) she rendered the lexicon of the Yoruba language spoken in creole form in Cuba. But she also published texts that established lexicons for Ki-Kongo and Ejagham/Efik creole languages in Cuba. And behind *El Monte* itself we sense the authority of carefully and painstakingly rendered documentation: myriad texts in

12 DF-N: Cabrera narrates this episode first-hand in an interview (1982b).

creolized Yoruba, Ki-Kongo, and Abakuá. Cabrera's mastery of the feel and distinctiveness of each idiom, her pride in mastering them as a genuine intellectual accomplishment, like learning Greek or Hebrew, is an important source of the authority of this book. There is such linguistic abundance, so much linguistic variety, that it is almost as if Lydia Cabrera had been confronted with Ki-Lele, as was Mary Douglas; Samoan, as was Margaret Mead; and Japanese, as Ruth Benedict might have been had she actually gone to Japan, and somehow brought together ethnographic reportage from all these languages within the compass of a single book. Hers is an exquisite art of sharing hours and afternoons with her informants, some of them—to judge from the quality of their remarks and the fluency of their citations of folk authority in songs in Yoruba or Fongbe or Ejagham or Ki-Kongo—among the most fertile sources of modern Afro-Cuban culture. Untied to a single social scientific vogue or theory, laced with insights internal to Afro-Cuban artistic culture and its amazing languages, her work is a fabric of timeless presences.

This book establishes, once and for all, that the descendants of Yoruba, Kongo, Ejagham, and Dahomean slaves in Cuba never were in their private minds mere pawns or tokens, objects shorn of creative spirit or will. *El Monte* is a mirror of collective resistance and ingenuity by which the Black women and men of Cuba elaborated a secret island within an island wherein they were free to think and act differently from the whites around them and, more to the point of their own recaptured creativity, differently from one another as well.

Introduction

Loose-Leaf Notes on the Life and Work of Lydia Cabrera

ISABEL CASTELLANOS

To the memory of María Teresa de Rojas
and Amalia Bacardí

Those who deem themselves intelligent
find that admitting to the reality of the
unreal is detrimental to their prestige.
—LYDIA CABRERA

In December 1991, a few months after the death of Lydia Cabrera, I visited the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, to leaf through *Cuba y América*,[1] the magazine edited by Don

DF-N: This introduction, translated and edited by David Font-Navarrete, is adapted from Castellanos's introductory essay to *Páginas sueltas* (Cabrera 1994). The author was Lydia Cabrera's student and friend, and a caretaker to Cabrera and María Teresa de Rojas during their final years in Miami. Castellanos was also the heir to Cabrera's archive and publishing estate, which she entrusted to the University of Miami's Cuban Heritage Collection. Cf. Cabrera (1982a, 1982b); Cámara (2015); Castellanos and Inclán (1988); Font-Navarrete (2022); Gutiérrez (1991, 2008); Hiriart (1978); Hoffman-Jeep (2005); Maguire (2018); Marta and Rangel (2019); Rodríguez-Mangual (2004); and Tsang (2019).

1 DF-N: Castellanos's original Spanish essay uses the verb *hojear* (to leaf through), evoking the botanical-literary theme that resonates throughout

Raimundo Cabrera, and to read the columns and articles Lydia wrote in her childhood and adolescence. Since I did not know the exact range of publication dates for my search, the library staff regaled me with an impressive identification document and granted me access to the labyrinth of shelves in the John Adams Building. There, I found (and later copied) all of the columns titled "Nena en sociedad" (Nena in society). Reading them, I was able to verify that the original, merry spirit that animated the Lydia I knew had already flowered in these first articles. I decided to conduct a survey of newspapers and magazines to rescue the *páginas sueltas* (loose-leaf papers) of her life's work, which were sometimes "lost" in old Havana newspapers. The fundamental guideline I have tried to follow has been to include that which will serve to illuminate the life and, above all, the work of the author of *El Monte*.

When and where was Lydia Cabrera born?

She affirmed that she was born in Havana, at her home at Calle Galiano 79, on May 20, 1900. According to the *Diccionario de la literatura cubana* (Dictionary of Cuban literature) published in Castro's Cuba (1967), she was born in New York City on May 20, 1899. I have not been able to obtain her birth certificate, but I have seen one of her Cuban passports, which clearly states her birthplace: "La Habana, Cuba." If we add this piece of information to her own testimony—along with those of her childhood friends, such as María Elena Pérez de Bandujo, who still remembered it nearly a century later—we can conclude that Lydia came into the world in Havana, the same Havana she still recalled a few minutes before dying in Miami.[2]

Her exact date of birth is a more complicated matter. Was she really born in 1900? Were her birth certificate and passport the result of a clerk unaccustomed to writing dates in a new century? Or did her vanity or imagination—or both—consider it more prudent to belong to the new century, not the nineteenth? Whatever the case may be, Cabrera was *officially* born in Havana on May 20, 1899. If so, she was ninety-two years old when she died on September 19, 1991. Lydia was the youngest of eight children. The sibling who preceded her, Seida, was eight years older.

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both *El Monte* (1954) and *Páginas sueltas* (loose-leaf pages) (1994). Although this sort of artfully nuanced language is usually lost in translation, the Spanish and English titles share some poetry. Throughout this introduction, quotations from *Cuba y América* were transcribed by Castellanos from archival copies at the Library of Congress. In several instances, partial bibliographical data (issues, titles of articles, and page numbers) will require further archival research. The Spanish-English translations are my own. Similarly, quotations attributed to Cabrera without parenthetical citation in this introduction (e.g., "watching a light go out") are based on personal communications with the author.

2 IC: After she was already in exile, Lydia applied for and received US citizenship.

In a conversation with Rosario Hiriart, Cabrera attributes her conception to the victory of the *mambises*:[3]

> I was born at a time when nobody could imagine it. I don't think it was in my family's plans. I must have been the result of the celebration that followed the triumph of the Cuban Revolution, or something like that. I was definitely a result of the triumphant jubilation. (Quoted in Hiriart 1978, 103)[4]

From the beginning, a powerful bond was established between Lydia and her father. Lydia seldom spoke of her mother, Elisa Bilbao Marcaida, except to say that she was always a good and discreet woman. I suspect she was not very affectionate with her youngest daughter, and that she probably felt intimidated or frightened by the girl's intelligence and unconventional nature.

The earliest document of Cabrera available to us was not in her own handwriting but rather copied by her cousin, Jorge de Castroverde. It is a letter from Lydia to Jorge and his brother Eloy, written sometime around 1910—we do not know the exact date—in which she dictates precise instructions regarding their behavior in the game they would play the following day.[5] Jorge and Eloy, along with other friends, were members of the "court" created by her imagination. In fact, the earliest surviving text by Lydia Cabrera is a letter from the "Duke D'Artagnan."

There is nothing unusual about Lydia, like so many children before and after her, trying to transform the magical world of her reading into a real-life, ludic reality. It is certainly interesting to note that her alter ego was D'Artagnan, a literary figure, and that the game should be played, in part, through writing (letters to the members of her "court") and the making of works of art ("coats of arms"), two endeavors that accompanied her throughout her whole life.

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3 DF-N: The nineteenth-century anticolonial Cuban revolutionary forces were known as *mambí* (singular) or *mambises* (plural).

4 DF-N: The idiomatic phrase *el triunfo de la revolución cubana* (the triumph of the Cuban revolution) most often refers to the 1959 revolution led by Fidel Castro. Here, Cabrera turns the phrase, using it to refer to the Cuban War of Independence (1895–98) against Spanish colonial rule; she thereby rhetorically undermines the notion that the 1959 revolution, which she detested, was a singular or defining "triumph."

5 IC: This letter is archived in the Lydia Cabrera Papers in the Cuban Heritage Collection at the University of Miami Libraries.

D'Artagnan grew up, and a fascination with literature made her dream of a change in profession. She decided to transform herself from a musketeer to a journalist. Haven't many children tried to do so? Nonetheless, circumstances almost always limit them to homemade productions on one or two little sheets of paper circulated within a family. But Lydia could count on her father, who owned a magazine, *Cuba y América*, and was willing to please his youngest daughter in most things. The game became a reality, and in 1913, at fourteen years of age, Cabrera published her first article as a journalist. The column was titled "Nena en Sociedad (En vez de la crónica social)."[6] For nearly three years, until May 1916, she wrote some very peculiar reviews, sheltered by the strictest anonymity.[7]

She begins the first column by explaining that Señor Cabrera has put her in charge of a society column, and she continues by praising her father without, of course, revealing their familial bond. She accepts the offer, she says, "because a man like that, who smiles and knows how to say things a certain way, is difficult to resist." Beginning with this article, the humor and irony that characterize her entire body of literary work are conspicuous:

> I will write in each issue of *Cuba y América* what I know about Havana's social life. Having said that, these pages will only include episodes and incidents in that life that have occurred before my own eyes. Nothing more than what I witnessed with my own eyes, because the rest, no matter how important it might be, will be impossible to narrate, because I do not possess the enviable gift of obiquity [*sic*] that allows the masters of the genre to attend a dozen social events celebrated simultaneously. Forgive the defects of my humble beginnings.

From the beginning, Lydia used her column to upbraid an official indifference to culture and literature. In April 1914, when she had not yet turned fifteen, she reviewed the festivities in honor of Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda that had been celebrated at the Teatro Payret on March 21–23. Cabrera deplored the absence of government dignitaries at the event:

6 DF-N: The title of Cabrera's column "Nena en Sociedad (En vez de la crónica social)" might be translated as "Nena [or Girl] in [High] Society (Instead of the society pages)." The title employs the same sensibility—ambiguous, ornately complex—that informed her densely layered title and subtitles of *El monte* a half century later (1954).

7 IC: As an adult, Lydia admitted to having been the author of "Nena en Sociedad." See also Cacchione (1988).

> Where are our government officials who are always so lavish in their calls for public spirit and civility? . . . They certainly know Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, because the government voted to approve funds for these celebrations.

It was the beginning of the presidency of Mario García Menocal, who assumed the office in May 1913, and Don Raimundo Cabrera was a leader of the opposing political party.

Beginning in the first months of 1915, the style of "Nena en Sociedad" began to change. Little by little, the young woman matured and distanced herself a bit from the profusion of social events and the saccharine prose of her early days. In July 1915, her primary concern was the heat! There were no weddings "because nobody can think about getting married in summer." The engagements would arrive in the fall. And, she warned, with a bit of malice, "I will save my column's wealth of adjectives until then." As time went on, the articles by "Nena" became increasingly original and more personal.

For anyone who doubts that the young writer was laughing to herself about the genre she was cultivating, here is the apotheosis of her sardonic spirit: in September 1915, she wrote a review of herself. Don Raimundo was preparing to travel to the United States on vacation. Along with his wife and his children Raulín and Seida, he was accompanied by Lydia,

> the intelligent, diligent and witty Lydia, she of the special vocation for study, who received such harsh treatment and a failing grade from Doctor Eduardo Desvernine at the Instituto de Segunda Enseñanza de la Habana as a reward for her interest and selflessness, and who has now abandoned academic studies forever so as not to be subjected to the judgment of pedagogically unsound and inquisitorial courts.

Cabrera recounted the episode to Hiriart (1978, 125). The professor was one of her father's political enemies. When the young student responded orally to the third question, the examiner interrupted her in an impolite way and she was upset. Out of six questions, she failed to answer two of them, and he, ipso facto, flunked her. Don Raimundo, who was present, left the hall indignant. Orestes Ferrara challenged the teacher to a duel. Apparently no blood was shed. Lydia, referring to the incident in *Cuba y América*, used her sharp pen to obtain the satisfaction denied Ferrara with the sending of his seconds.

It is true that the twenty-seven columns of "Nena en Sociedad" lack literary merit. Nonetheless, they are essential to understanding the process that led a little girl from a distinguished family to become the writer—and, above all, the storyteller—Lydia Cabrera. The lightheartedness, the irreverence, the irony, the humor: all of the characteristics that would nuance Cabrera's prose

Lydia Cabrera in Havana. May 16, 1925. The dedication says, "To mom, with all my heart and soul, from her youngest daughter Lydia." Courtesy of the Cuban Heritage Collection at the University of Miami, Lydia Cabrera Papers, Box No. 37, Folder No. 1.

years later are already apparent in the girl who wrote "Nena en Sociedad." Up to a certain point, "Nena" is a symbol of who Cabrera always was: extremely individualistic, but without shrillness or exhibitionism; unconventional, yet never breaking away completely from her traditions or her social class.

Lydia took an interest in Oriental [Asian] art from a very young age. Years later it would be the subject of her studies at L'École du Louvre. In June 1916, *Cuba y América* published an old Japanese story—"Leyenda de la bella cortesana Otzumi y del monje Itsari" (Legend of the beautiful courtesan Otzumi and the monk Itsari), with illustrations by "L.C." Although the magazine does not identify the translator, the style and subject seem to indicate that Cabrera was responsible for the Spanish version. The following month she illustrated the cover of *Cuba y América* and published an article titled "El teatro japonés" (The Japanese theater). We can observe that she was aware of Japanese history and culture in those days, she was up to date on French theatrical magazines, and she quoted Voltaire and Thackeray.

At seventeen years of age, another very powerful interest consumed her attention: painting. She enjoyed pencils and brushes from a very young age, and the painter Leopoldo Romañach encouraged her passion. Behind her father's back, and with her sister Emma's help, she took courses at the Academia San Alejandro for several months, where she perfected her drawing and color technique and where she met Victor Manuel and Amelia Peláez.[8] She told Hiriart that she would practice "between two and five" in the afternoon (1978, 129). Angela Elvira Machado recalls that her hand served as the young painter's model so many times that Cabrera once exclaimed, exasperated, "Ay, I'm so tired of your hand!" Even as a child Lydia would dedicate herself to a task with tenacity and discipline. If her stint as a society columnist began as a game, the "game" continued, religiously, month after month, for nearly three years. And, once she had become an adult—in Paris, just as in Cuba, then later in exile—her interest in African cultures on the island endured, despite immense obstacles, for some sixty years.

Casa Alyds and the Convento de Santa Clara (1922–1923)

In April 1922, Cabrera exhibited her paintings for the first time at the Salón de Bellas Artes (Salon of Fine Arts) during an event sponsored by the Asociación

8 IC: According to Lydia, she attended the Academia San Alejandro in 1914 (Hiriart 1978, 129). Since many years passed between her early youth and her conversation with Hiriart, it is possible that she sometimes failed to remember the correct dates of some events (as we will see below, with reference to the Convento de Santa Clara). Based on records provided by the late Ángela Elvira Machado, I suspect that Lydia attended San Alejandro later—perhaps in 1915 or 1916.

Wifredo Lam. *The Jungle*, 1943. Gouache on paper mounted on canvas, 94-1/4 × 90-1/2 in. (239.4 × 229.9 cm).

de Pintores y Escultores (Association of Painters and Sculptors). In a review of the event, L. Gómez Wangüemert dedicated several laudatory paragraphs to four paintings by Lydia, emphasizing, above all, her originality:

> Lydia's sketches are surprising in their original and new way of solving problems outside all rules of color and form. In each particular instance, her intelligence searches for a solution that is appropriate to the moment, far from any academic rules. And it is worth noting that the novelty and interest in her paintings is due to that personal way of working. Her audacity leads her to deal with the most difficult themes with a simple approach to her medium which is frightening and disconcerting.

> In "La procesión," she creates a powerful mystical ambience, serene and sweet, on a luminous yellow surface with white and purple nun-like touches. (1922)

One month later, on May 21, 1922, a full page in *Diario de la marina* was dedicated to five photographs of Lydia, including one of her at her easel, under the title, "Lydia Cabrera, la exquisita y genial artista" (Lydia Cabrera, the delightful and brilliant artist). Everything seemed to indicate that her artistic career was on the verge of taking off. But Cabrera would not exhibit in subsequent shows. In my view, she understood that she would need to overcome the limitations of insularity in order to fulfill her artistic ambitions, expanding her horizons in Europe. She would not be able to do so until 1927, but the year 1922 proved to be decisive in her personal, intellectual, and aesthetic development.

Aside from exhibiting her paintings at the Salón, Lydia launched a commercial business with Alicia Longoria de González that was, initially, dedicated to interior decorating and importing European decorative objects. She made three drawings herself to promote Casa Alyds, the name of the new business located at Calle Jovellar 45. She also wrote seventeen "advertisements," the first few of which were rather conventional, but they quickly became brief essays in which their author—just as in her work on "Nena"—tackled a wide array of topics, always in a light, charming style.

Other establishments of the time—El Encanto and Fin de Siglo, for example—included small stories about their merchandise or other current events in their advertisements, and the first advertisement for Casa Alyds follows this custom very closely. The "furniture dealer" highlights the quality of her products, which are made with Cuban wood, among the world's finest. In later advertisements, she tries to educate consumers regarding details of a style or reiterates warnings about shoddy work common to other shops. But these vignettes quickly become more personal. In some, she relates visits to the shop made by clients and friends. In one, she conducts a sui generis "interview" with her friend Lucía Victoria "Mimín" Bacardí and, in passing, she offers a disquisition on laughter. In a few ("En guardia," "La real gana," and "Margaritas a los cerdos"), she resorts—just as in her days as "Nena"—to social satire. Tackiness, social climbing, vulgarity, and bullying are slyly but severely chastised by Cabrera, who employs the genre that would seem to be the least suitable: advertising.

The most interesting advertisements are written in a narrative style featuring characters, dialogue, plot, and even some action. They are precursors to the stories Lydia would begin writing in the 1930s. Curiously, it is also possible

to discern certain features in these advertisements that would later characterize her Afro-Cuban tales, in which it is impossible to find a truly inanimate object and it is equally possible for a king, a frying pan, or a pair of underpants to dance to the music of the marvelous Guinea Hen. In an advertisement titled "Las maderas de Cuba preservan a los libros de las polillas" (Cuban wood protects books from termites), the books are prone to nervous exhaustion, and a copy of *Cecilia Valdés* is able to beg to "not let *her* come unbound." (The strategic, ambiguous use of the word "her" forces us to ask ourselves who, in fact, is calling out: the book, or Cecilia Valdés herself?)[9] The insomniac Doña Concepción, who opens her windows "to love and to the night," is as sensual and voluptuous as Soyán Dekín, whose hair turned—in a masterful story—into the silt of the Almendares River. Obviously, the advertisements for Casa Alyds are a far cry from the mature stories written later in Paris, but the seeds of those tales are there, in those small publications whose purpose had nothing to do with literature.

Casa Alyds arose with a very clear commercial purpose: Lydia wanted to study in Paris, but she did not want to become a burden on her family. With the earnings from the business, she was able to live in France for several years. But the owners of Alyds were also motivated by another goal: to educate and cultivate a more sensitive aesthetic spirit among Cubans.

Indeed, Lydia Cabrera and Alicia Longoria were motivated by educational concerns, which led them to begin documenting and publicizing works of art owned by prominent Havana families. In 1922, Lydia participated in the establishment of the Asociación Cubana de Arte Retrospectivo.[10] According to its bylaws, the association's purpose was to "celebrate an annual Exhibition of works constituting a Cuban art tradition, such as fans, lace, embroidery, fabric, clothing, jewelry, furniture, etc." Cabrera writes that the aesthetic values of a people should not be improvised. It is necessary to cultivate a love of the nation's arts and artisanal traditions. "It is a love for the past and an understanding of the past that prepares us and enables us to love and understand the present." According to Cabrera, in the first decades of Cuba's republic, the "ruling class," contaminated by an "unfortunate intellectual blindness," neglected the preservation of what is native and only looked to what is foreign. Wardrobes and headboards made from caoba wood were being replaced by en suite "furniture sets" from the United States in which all of the pieces were perfectly matched. But some women wished "to provide an example of civic spirit" by founding

9 DF-N: Cabrera employs the same sort of deliberate, generative grammatical ambiguity throughout *El Monte*.

10 DF-N: The name translates literally as the Cuban Association for Retrospective Art, with "Retrospective" meaning antique or historical art.

groups to conserve, preserve, and protect objects and buildings threatened by "the savagery of some commercial enterprises or a government's culpable negligence."[11]

The establishment of the Asociación Cubana de Arte Retrospectivo coincided with another activity in Havana. Nuns from the Order of Santa Clara had moved to a new residence and left the Convent of Santa Clara de Asís unoccupied. The monastery's first stone had been laid in 1638, and nuns began living there in 1644 (Conde de Rivero, 1922). A small section of the old city of Havana was eventually surrounded by the convent's walls, an important testament to the country's oldest architecture. But the buildings were in poor condition, and it was decided they would be demolished to make way for "progress." As a sort of goodbye (and, perhaps for a few sponsors, a rescue attempt), a commercial exhibition was organized on the convent grounds. Important Cuban and foreign businesses would display their products. The founders of the association—especially Cabrera and Longoria—decided to take advantage of the opportunity to arrange the exhibit of fans in a section of the Santa Clara convent.

The scope of the project grew little by little. On October 14, *Diario de la marina* announced, "The sleeping city will awaken." According to a press release, a large art exhibition would be presented, in parallel to the industrial exhibition, under the title *La Habana Antigua*.[12] The organizing committee consisted of Cabrera and Longoria. For several months, Lydia dedicated herself completely to the venture, wrote articles (both signed and anonymous), and planned an effective publicity campaign. On November 8, photographs of the famous "treasure" appeared in *Diario de la marina* with the following explanation: "We are publishing a photograph of the *botijas* found yesterday next to the Casa del Marino. The photograph was taken by our colleague Mr. Buendía. Since it is supposed that treasures are buried around that house, which is known to have been the residence of a fearsome pirate of his era, investigations are ongoing."

Cabrera's motivation to organize the exhibition was driven by three basic aims: first, to showcase the artistic value of the architectural complex and ensure its preservation; second, to encourage members of the social elites to share their art collections by exhibiting them for the public; and, third, to proclaim the work of the Condesa de Merlín, whom Lydia and her father

11 IC: The bylaws were published in *Diario de la marina*, June 16, 1922. The article is attributed to Cabrera and reproduced in *Páginas sueltas* (1994).

12 DF-N: The evocative title *La Habana Antigua* could be translated as "Old Havana," "Antique Havana," "Historical Havana," or "Old-Fashioned Havana."

admired, and who had lived at the convent during her childhood.[13] The exhibition *La Habana Antigua*, which opened on November 23, 1922, was a categorical success. Although Casa Alyds already existed, the exhibition at the Santa Clara convent established a public association between Cabrera and antiques, as well as demonstrating her knowledge and taste in furniture and classic decor. From then on, preservation of her country's artistic legacy was a constant, tenacious concern for her, as we will see.

First Ethnographic Notes (1930)

From the middle of 1923 until she left for Paris in 1927, Cabrera removed herself completely from public life and her name rarely appeared in the Havana press. In one of these rare instances, she sent a letter to Jorge Mañach in support of a tribute to the painter Romañach, which was reproduced in *Diario de la marina* on March 18, 1924. In his "Comment," Mañach describes Cabrera as "the intense chatelaine of an ivory castle, who comes to her aesthetic shutter only on rare and noble occasions." This withdrawal might be attributed to the fact that the death of her father, on May 21, 1923,[14] was a terrible blow for Lydia. Don Raimundo suffered from heart disease and, some months before his death, he was given a national tribute. Lydia, who was not a fan of public flattery, was upset by the theatricality and physical toll it imposed on her sick father.[15] The writer remembered her father's death until her own last days: "Looking in his eyes, it was like watching a light go out."

Cabrera dedicated the four years preceding her departure to France almost exclusively to Casa Alyds and planning the European trip for which she

13 IC: For several days beginning on November 4, 1922, *Diario de la marina* began publishing reports regarding the Condesa de Merlín signed "Un Incógnito" (Anonymous). I suspect the anonymous character is none other than Cabrera. The reports promote the idea that Merlín's works, titled "Mis doce primeros años" (My first twelve years) and "Sor Inés" (Sister Inés), should be edited and published. This project was immediately undertaken by Raimundo Cabrera and Nicolás Rivero, and only a few days later—on November 24—the publications were already printed and stocked for sale at the Librería Cervantes bookstore.

14 IC: Cabrera told Hiriart that her father died on March 21 (Hiriart 1978, 141). In fact, Don Raimundo died May 21, 1923, the day after Lydia's birthday. See, for example, *Diario de la marina* (1923b).

15 IC: See Hiriart (1978, 141). Lydia was right to worry about the effects of the event on her father's health. For example, the "Comité de propaganda" published reports in the daily news like the one which appeared in the February 9, 1923, issue of *Diario de la marina*, which read, "time is dumping a few, final shovelfuls of Life's dirt on this distinguished man" (los años están echando sobre este hombre benemérito las últimas paletadas de polvo de la Vida) (1923a). Since Don Raimundo read the newspapers, he must have been disturbed by such indiscretion.

yearned. Every once in a while, she accompanied her brother-in-law Fernando Ortiz to attend an Abakuá procession, which is how Alejo Carpentier remembered her in 1936: "Sometime around 1927, when I was going around hunting documents for my book *Ecue-Yamba-ó*, I remember running into Lydia Cabrera at a *ñáñigo 'juramento'* [swearing-in, initiation] being celebrated in the middle of a forest near Marianao" (Carpentier 1936, 40). In January 1923, together with her niece Isis Ortiz Cabrera, Lydia attended the inaugural session of the Sociedad del Folk-Lore Cubano (Cuban Folklore Society), which was presided by Fernando Ortiz. The meeting was attended by Alfredo Aguayo, Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring, Carolina Poncet, José María Chacón y Calvo, Joaquín Llaverías, Eduardo Sánchez de Fuentes, and many other intellectuals and artists. Although Lydia had not yet discovered her vocation for the study of Afro-Cuban religions, her presence at these events is symptomatic of a certain curiosity about the popular culture of her country. After all, that interest ran in the family: Fernando Ortiz was her brother-in-law, and her brother Ramiro had written and delivered conference presentations on the popular music of Cuba (e.g., R. Cabrera 1922).

In 1926, she spent a season in Madrid, where she struck up a close friendship with Federico García Lorca. And in 1927, she finally established herself in Paris, in a flat near the Place du Tertre in the Montmartre district. For several years, she studied Oriental [Asian] art at L'École du Louvre.[16] She also enrolled in Ferdinand Léger's Academie Contemporaine, where she took classes with the Russian painter Alexandra Exter, who would become a friend and maternal protector for Cabrera.[17]

Lydia had met Teresa de la Parra in Havana in 1924. Their friendship was rekindled in Paris in 1927, and it lasted until Parra's death in Madrid in 1936.[18] During her first years in Paris, Lydia returned to Havana several times to visit her mother. In 1930 she spent a season in Cuba and established her first contacts with her informants: Lolita "La Cabezona," José de Calazán Herrera (Bangoché), Calixta Morales (Oddedei), Teresa Muñoz (Omi Tomi),

16 IC: L'École du Louvre lost all documentation of its students during World War II. Therefore, I have been unable to find a copy of Cabrera's records or thesis. I am grateful to Isabel Malowany, who kindly assisted this research.

17 IC: See Blanc (1988). The influence of Exter and Léger's constructivism on Cabrera's painting can be observed, primarily, in the illustrated manuscript of Francis de Miomandre's *Theophanie* (1933), now in the University of Miami's Cuban Heritage Collection.

18 DF-N: According to the biographical timeline offered here by Castellanos, Cabrera and Parra had an intense relationship that lasted nine years (1927–36). During those years, Cabrera was between twenty-seven and thirty-five years of age, while Parra was between thirty-eight and forty-six. The impact of Parra's untimely death is not discussed in detail here, presumably to avoid dwelling on a very intimate and painful subject.

and others. Three primary factors drove Lydia to cultivate her interest in *lo negro*. First, as she always insisted, her studies of Oriental [Asian] art led her to ask herself how much *lo africano* had penetrated the nation's soul—and let's not forget that she had already witnessed public Abakuá rituals. Second, Africa was a powerful influence on European art and literature between the two world wars, precisely when Lydia was living in Europe. Many years later, in exile, she wrote,

> This discovery of Africa also opened new horizons for aesthetic understanding. In the first two decades of our century, before and after World War I, artists like Derain, Matisse, Vlaminck, Modigliani, Juan Gris, Picasso, Braque, dazzled by African masks, and one poet, Guillaume Apollinaire, contributed to ascribing top ranking among the world's art to sculpture they could no longer call "savage."
>
> Africa also influenced literature—in surrealism, which insisted on removing all the barriers of convention—once the immense wealth of its oral literature became known, along with its folklore, which was among the world's richest.[19]

In Paris, Lydia attended exhibitions of African art, and she could not escape the attraction to the "primitive" and "exotic" that permeated the intellectual environment of the time. Finally, the influence of Teresa de la Parra was decisive in Lydia's definitive orientation toward literature and Black culture.

Teresa de la Parra was also attracted to popular culture and individuals from humble backgrounds, like the character Vicente Cochoco in her story "Memorias de Mamá Blanca." Getting close to Black Cubans in 1930 in order to learn something from them—especially details regarding their religion, which many considered to be mere superstition or *brujería* (witchcraft, sorcery)—was not viewed favorably by Havana's high society. The understanding and support Cabrera received from Parra, finding an interlocutor in whom she could confide her enthusiasm and details of her search, defined her development as a researcher.

Her first ethnographic notes reveal her method, the approach Lydia always followed to obtain information. Her first index cards are less concerned with the formal aspects of Afro-Cuban religions than with the *individuals* who practice it. And that is why the style of these initial notes is almost narrative. (From the beginning, ethnography and storytelling are intimately entwined in her.) A clear protagonist—Calixta Morales—appears, along with a series of

19 IC: See "La influencia africana en el pueblo de Cuba" in *Páginas sueltas* (Cabrera 1994, 541–50).

secondary characters: Herrera, Teresa Muñoz, Leonorcita Armenteros . . . At first, Calixta seems suspicious and reluctant, until Lydia, the white "girl," sits at a table to share lunch with her and Calazán at Omi Tomi's home.

For Cabrera, who lacked professional training in ethnology, the scientific method of participant observation came spontaneously, almost intuitively. If her visits to Pogolotti were a cause for consternation among the white Cubans around her, they certainly provoked surprise among the neighborhood's Black residents. An index card about Calixta reads,

> Regarding her friendship with me: "At a wake, [they said] 'Now that you're with your white woman, and one from up high, you act like you don't know us anymore.' I've always been around white people, and not dirty whites. People are envious. . . . Today, when I'm sad, what shade of color am I? Word has spread all over Pogolotti . . . that an upper-class white woman visits me."

In 1930, then, in the home of Teresa Muñoz, Cabrera's *El Monte* and *Cuentos negros de Cuba* began to take shape.

Calixta Morales's "birthday throne" is the altar before which Sanune regained consciousness in "Bregantino Bregantín," the first of *Cuentos negros*. Let us compare the descriptions. The ethnographic note on an index card reads,

> At night, the altar is already set up. Two wildcat pelts embroidered with cowrie shells. On the floor, a great cooking pot filled with rice and beans and popcorn. Two lit candles. The altar is also saluted by touching the ground with your hand and kissing your fingertips. . . . The small room smelled of guayaba [guava].

And in "Bregantino Bregantín" we read,

> Sanune touched the ground and kissed it on her fingertips; prostrated around the feet of those men, she lost consciousness. . . . When she opened her eyes, she was in a room surrounded by the night; the scent of warm greenery and Guayaba fruit hung thick in the air . . . before an altar, which consisted of two branches of Álamo, freshly cut, leaning against the wall, and two wildcat pelts. On the ground, several covered soup tureens, a horseshoe, two big cooking pots of rice, beans, and popcorn. (Cabrera 1940, 22)[20]

20 DF-N: The translations here are my own. Cf. the English translation by J. Alberto Hernandez-Chiroldes and Lauren Yoder in *Afro-Cuban Tales* (Cabrera 2005).

Lydia Cabrera was at once an ethnologist, storyteller, and painter. And these three aspects of her work animate her *entire* body of work. The painter imprints numerous visual details on her ethnography and stories, adding light and color to the environments she describes. The storyteller incorporates many tales into a tome like *El Monte*, making its structure twist around a single, central thread: nature, and—more specifically—the magical Afro-Cuban world of plants. The storyteller benefits from the profound understanding of the rituals and practices acquired through informal research sessions.

By the time Cabrera returned to Europe after her vacations in Cuba during 1930, her direction was clearly defined. She then began writing her first *Cuentos negros*, which would be published in a French translation in 1936, then later in their original Spanish in 1940. In a letter from Teresa de la Parra dated 1931, we read, "Your story about the tortoise is beautiful! Do you know the music? Can you sing it to me when I see you?" (Hiriart 1978, 134). In another, sent from Leysin, Switzerland, on May 1, 1933, Parra writes,

> Cabrita, your story about the silt in the Almendares river is *gorgeous*. The other one is very charming, but that one about the *mulata* makes me recall La Argentina's *marvelous* dances.[21] The popular is stylized with real skill. The image of the *mulata* sinking into the circles of water in your story reminds me of the dance embroidering the music, the intimate harmony of the two rhythms. The call to the mother is quite evocative, and it paints a vivid portrait of anguish. Does it have music? I enjoyed the story very much, and it is different from the other ones. You realize they have an extraordinary variety? I imagine them in a handsome book. (You have enough material for several volumes.) What happened to the one you started on the Richmond and read to me in fragments? I want to *reread* it. I congratulate you on today's and *all* of them. You are a small, portable church organ: you have such a huge range!
>
> You are a Cabra *harmonium*.

The 1930 trip to Havana ended up defining the Cuban writer's future agenda. She collected data, stories, and music, and she established close relationships with her first informants. As to the songs we find frequently in her stories, Lydia took them directly from her Black informants' mouths, and sang them often until her dying day. She managed to collect so many that she apparently intended to transcribe them in a book she never published, but

21 IC: See Hiriart (1978, 174). Parra is referring to the dancer Antonia Mercé, La Argentina. Cf. "La Vase d'Almendares" (in Cabrera 1936), "El limo de almendares" (in Cabrera 1940), and "The Green Mud of the Almendares" (in Cabrera 2005).

which she titled *Barril-agua (Colección de canciones de cuentos afro-cubanos)*, for which she registered the author's rights on July 1, 1930.[22] Later, I will refer to the creation of *El Monte* in some detail; it is worth noting here that its composition also seems to have begun in Europe, although it would only see the light of day in Havana many years later, in 1954. As Parra's diary notes in an entry from January 24, 1936, "Lydia is working in earnest all afternoon on her ethnology book" (1982, 465).

Lydia Cabrera and Wifredo Lam (1942–1946)

Four years after her return to Cuba, Lydia Cabrera had her first encounter with Wifredo Lam in Havana.[23] The relationship between these two artists had important consequences for both of them, and especially Lam. Despite enormous differences (in race, social class, and political inclination) that separated the painter from the writer, a profound affection grew between them. They were both, to use Lydia's word, *desterrados* (exiles) from Paris. She had lived ten intellectually and emotionally intense years in the French capital.

Lam had left Cuba eighteen years earlier, in 1923, bound for Madrid. He spent three lean years in France, but that is where his painting achieved the level of maturity and recognition that had eluded him up to that point. He established contact with Pablo Picasso, and his first Parisian paintings display a marked influence from Henri Matisse and the cubists. Indeed, it was difficult for him to liberate himself from the stigma of Picasso's influence. For example, a 1942 article in *Art Digest*—just before Lam created *La Jungla*—deplored what it called "the Picassolamming reverence" in the Cuban painter's work (quoted in Stokes Sims 1992, 72–73).

In France, Lam also penetrated the orbit of the surrealists, and the synthesis of cubism and surrealism turned out to be decisive in the development of his visual language. Events in Europe forced many intellectuals and artists to

22 IC: The document—number 1808 in the *Registro General de la Secretaría de Agricultura, Comercio y Trabajo de la República de Cuba*—was signed by the chief registrar, Luis O. Rodríguez. It was presented at 10:05 a.m. on July 1, 1930. The original is archived in the Lydia Cabrera Papers at the Cuban Heritage Collection. In response to a question from Rosario Hiriart regarding the music we frequently find in her stories, Lydia explains,

> I had written down the music [lyrics] from all the songs, not just the ones in the stories, but many, many more. And I still remember many, but they stayed in Cuba and I don't have the slightest idea who might have them. (Quoted in Hiriart 1978, 84)

23 DF-N: On Lam and Cabrera, see Cernuschi (2019), Cuervo Hewitt (2007), Kubayanda (2002), Museum of Modern Art (n.d.), and Sotheby's (2020).

leave France. Lam and his partner, Helena Holzer, left Paris for Martinique with a group of friends that included André Bretón, a leader in the surrealist movement. In Marseille, Lam worked on the beautiful illustrations for Bretón's *Fata morgana*.[24] Finally arriving in Cuba after a long and perilous journey, the painter found that he needed to begin his life all over again, since he had lost everything, including his paintings, during his escape. The initial encounter with Cabrera took place in the midst of that initial confusion. Cabrera immediately recognized her compatriot's enormous talent, and she and María Teresa de Rojas helped him find adequate lodging and offered economic support.

In 1942, Cabrera wrote an article in *Diario de la marina* in which she introduced Lam to the Cuban public. The painter and Helena were frequent dinner guests at La Quinta San José, the historic home Cabrera shared with María Teresa de Rojas in the Marianao neighborhood of Havana [see below]. For two years, Helena assisted María Teresa de Rojas in the transcription of documents from the Archivo de Protocolos de La Habana (Archive of Protocols of Havana) (Rojas 1947). Meanwhile, Cabrera and Lam exchanged ideas and attended Afro-Cuban rituals. She was writing *El Monte*, a very peculiar ethnography whose North Star is the sacredness of the vegetal world.

For Lam, the return to Cuba was an encounter with his roots: the light, the plants, the colors, and the magic of his country. He began painting like never before. And that is how Cabrera describes him in a second article written in 1944:

> The two years of exile in Cuba . . . have been extremely beneficial, possibly decisive, in the work of Wifredo Lam. . . .
>
> Wifredo Lam, on his own in the land "whose silt he was made from," has been able to collect himself and express himself with absolute freedom. Returned to the country where he was born, this land of his awakens new aesthetic concerns: the warm music of its harmony continually arouses new problems which throb in his consciousness, demanding an immediate response. And the light of his home country suddenly begins shining in his paintings: a poet, who is also a naturally gifted painter, dreams of the tropics in dazzling tropical light. Black, ancestral, millenarian deities,

24 IC: Lam's work for Breton's *Fata morgana* comprises six drawings in *tinta china* (India ink). One drawing from Lam's time in Marseille, clearly dated 1941, was given to Cabrera and María Teresa de Rojas by Lam and Holzer. It now belongs to the Lowe Art Museum at the University of Miami. The Lowe loaned it for an exhibit of works on paper by Lam that took place in Barcelona from January 21 to March 21, 1993. The drawing is reproduced on page 107 of the catalog; see Lam (1992).

> withdrawn in the soft and enveloping light of Europe, obsessed him there, but here they appear *tangible* in their true light, resplendent in perennial summer, and in every instant, in every corner of the landscape, in every tree-god, in each fabulous leaf of his garden in Buen Retiro, which has also begun flowering on his canvases.[25]

In 1943 Cabrera and Lam collaborated on a Spanish edition of poems by Aimé Césaire titled *Retorno al país natal* (Return to the native land).[26] Helena Holzer Benítez recalls that the Martinican poet sent them a copy of the work with a request that Helena translate it to Spanish. Although she spoke the language well, Helena thought a poetic text of such magnitude was beyond her abilities, so she asked Lydia to translate it (Herzberg 1992, 50–51n50). Lam designed the cover and created drawings to illustrate the text. This collaboration is symbolic of the personal circumstances surrounding both Cabrera and Lam. Both of them, like Césaire, had returned to their home country to confront their own identity. It must have been a traumatic period of adjustment for both of them. Lam returned poor, just as his career was beginning to take off in Europe, where he belonged to a group of intellectuals and artists among whom his race and nationality were incidental. In Cuba, he found himself isolated, once again in the midst of a racist society (*un medio social pigmentocrático*) in which people of color were not necessarily treated as equals, no matter how talented they might be. He arrived with a white woman—without yet having married her. Old prejudices crept up on him again after eighteen years of amnesty in the old continent.

The return must have been just as difficult for Cabrera—in fact, it is no coincidence that she uses the word "destierro" (exile) to describe it. Clearly she did not suffer the sort of discrimination and rejection faced by Lam, but she did experience severe hardship and problems, since she found herself in an environment that was not sympathetic to her research projects and lifestyle. Her mother had died in 1932 and, subsequently, the old family home no longer existed. Her inheritance had been mismanaged in Cuba and vanished, which placed her in a precarious state of dependency and created serious tensions within the family. Her sister Seida had taken her in, but Seida's intense social life and constant visitors disturbed Lydia and prevented her from writing. Moreover, her desire to study Black people's religions was neither understood nor accepted. If she had, as in the past, spent a few months visiting Pogolotti

25 IC: Emphasis in the original. "Wifredo Lam," published in *Diario de la marina*, January 30, 1944. Reproduced in *Páginas Sueltas* (Cabrera 1994).

26 DF-N: Originally published in French as *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* ([1939] 1943, [1939] 2013). See also Maguire (2013).

and compiling information about *brujería*, it might have been tolerated, with an indulgent smile, as *cosas de Lydia*—the eccentricities or poor manners of a spoiled child. But for a woman of her class and age to try to treat visiting humble Black people as an important project, regularly sharing meals with them, was beyond the acceptable limits of eccentricity. Cabrera was fortunate enough to very quickly find refuge and support with María Teresa de Rojas and her widowed mother, Doña Teresa García de Lomas. Lam found spiritual shelter in his painting, and in the friendship of a reduced group of artists and intellectuals.

In 1942, Cabrera and Lam were working on the exact same subject: the magic of *el monte*, the sacred realm of orishas and duendes.[27] One of them described it in the pages of what would become an ethnographic treatise, while the other expressed it on canvas and paper. As Julia Herzberg explains, "Cabrera and Lam shared many experiences during those six years, beginning in early 1942, when they would attend *bembés* [ritual celebrations] together in Pogolotti and Regla" (1992, 39). Critics now accept that many of the titles of Wifredo Lam's paintings were provided by Lydia Cabrera. According to Helena Holzer Benítez, "Cabrera would suggest titles because the images in the paintings brought to mind specific experiences she had documented" (Stokes Sims 1992, 73).

After *La Jungla* (1942–43)—was this painting once known as *La Manigua* and the word *jungla* (jungle), so seldom used in Cuba, merely a translation from English or French?—Lam decided to make another painting along similar lines as a gift for Cabrera. Based on her suggestion, he included the small figures of *chicherekues*, the magical dolls of the Lucumí, which have practically disappeared from the popular imagination. Although she was not a *creyente* (believer, devotee), the oracles had determined that Lydia was a daughter of Yemaya, the aquatic goddess par excellence, so the hair of one of the painting's central figures transforms itself into two streams of water. The painting was titled *Omi Obini*.[28] Even the initial sketch made in the painter's small notebook was dedicated to his friend. The painting was one of the sixteen in Lam's first exhibition in Cuba, which took place at the Lyceum on April 11–19, 1946.

27 IC: Although Cabrera did not publish *El Monte* until 1954, we know it was composed very slowly, since an initial version was published in 1947 in *La revista bimestre cubana*. See "Eggüe o Vichichi Finda," in *Páginas sueltas* (1994).

28 DF-N: The painting's Lucumí title translates most clearly into English as "Water Woman." Translating the title more literally, according to the grammatical conventions of Lucumí and Yoruba, *omi* would be a possessive adjective of *obini* (analogous to *obirin*, *obinrin*, etc.)—i.e., "Woman's Water," "Water of Woman," or "Woman Water."

(*Left*) Wifredo Lam. *Omi Obini*, 1943. Oil on canvas, 72 × 49 in. (182.9 × 124.5 cm).

(*Above*) Wifredo Lam. Untitled sketch for Lydia Cabrera ("Para mi amiga"), 1982. Charcoal on paper, 19-1/8 × 12-5/8 in. (48.6 × 32.1 cm). The dedication reads, "For my friend Lydia Cabrera. Paris 9 1982." Courtesy of Lowe Art Museum. © 2022 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.

The painting's title and ownership were clearly identified in the exhibition's catalog ("Prop. Lydia Cabrera. Habana").

When Cabrera left Cuba again in 1960, *Omi Obini* remained, hanging on one of the walls of La Quinta San José. We have learned that it had mysteriously arrived in the United States and formed part of a private collection for many years. It was sold to a European gallery not too long ago. Lydia died without knowing where her "lost Jungle" ended up, and she often lamented its absence.[29]

29 DF-N: The story of the painting Lam made for Cabrera is still unfolding. On June 29, 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, *Omi Obini* was sold at an auction by Sotheby's for \ US$9,603,800\. Sotheby's record of the painting's provenance names Cabrera as the first owner; the second owner is identified as Osuna Art, a Washington, DC, gallery owned by Cuban-born

Time and distance conspired so that Cabrera and Lam never saw each other again. Every once in a while, she and María Teresa de Rojas (or Titina, as she was affectionately known), would receive a catalog from a European exhibition or a small drawing in the mail. Of course, the Cuban revolution opened an ideological abyss between the two friends. Lam defended the revolutionary cause, and Lydia and Titina embarked on the path of exile in 1960. Yet, in the modest apartments of their *destierro*, they were always accompanied by Lam's work: seventeen drawings, many of them with dedications, and a beautiful portrait of Titina, pale and remote, sitting in a rattan rocking chair.[30] (Minutes after her death, Titina's profile acquired, almost miraculously, the exact same facial expression captured in Lam's portrait of her.) In 1982, already sick, Lam decided to bid Cabrera farewell. He sent her a sketch he had drawn in charcoal, with an unsteady hand, showing a bird-woman with an Elegua in her hand. Beneath the figure, he wrote, "For my friend Lydia Cabrera, Paris 9 1982, Wilfredo Lam." He died a couple of months later.

From La Quinta San José (1945–1954)

In 1937, following the death of Teresa de la Parra the previous year and facing the uncertainty of events unfolding in Europe, Lydia Cabrera returned to Cuba.[31] When she arrived, she wanted to continue the work she had begun seven years earlier, which had allowed her to publish her first collection of stories in Paris, in a translation by Francis de Miomandre. The reception was extremely warm, and the echoes from Paris even reached Cuba by way of a

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Ramón Osuna, who died in 2019. Galerie H. Odermatt-Ph. Cazeau in Paris subsequently acquired the painting from Osuna at an unspecified date, then auctioned it through Sotheby's in 2020. The latest buyer has not been publicly identified yet. In a bitter irony, Sotheby's web page promoting the auction is punctuated by Cabrera's loving description of the painting that was stolen from her:

> She is the river, Omí Obiní, woman of water, she is the Lady of Fresh Waters who fertilizes the earth and dances, dispensing life. She slips and slides among the reeds, alongside the flanks of the bodies that rock and sway, transported by the miraculous rhythm of the wave; and her shining arms and knowing hips undulate in time with the water. Her long wake is frothy; the merry water breaks, boils, and splashes back against her starched petticoats. Her body gleams with springs and currents. (Sotheby's 2020)

30 IC: All of these works now belong to the Lowe Art Museum at the University of Miami.

31 IC: According to Lydia, she returned to Cuba in 1938, but her story "Susundamba" (which later became part of *Por qué*) was originally published in a 1938 issue of *Estudios afrocubanos*. At the end, the date and location where she finished the story are clearly written: "San José de los Maizales, August 1937."

Lydia Cabrera and Titina in the courtyard of the Quinta San José. Courtesy of the Cuban Heritage Collection at the University of Miami, Lydia Cabrera Papers, Box No. 40, Folder No. 9.

review by Alejo Carpentier in *Carteles*, which remains one of the most penetrating analyses ever written about that work.

As I have already noted, once she disembarked in Havana, Lydia first stayed with her sister Seida, and later moved to the home of María Teresa de Rojas and her mother, Doña Teresa García de Lomas. As part of an inheritance from her first husband, who was a member of the Pedroso family, Doña Teresa had received a large old colonial home in the Marianao neighborhood. La Quinta San José (or San José de los Maizales, as Lydia referred to it in the first years) had been constructed in the eighteenth century as a country home for the mayor of Havana, Don Mateo Pedroso y Florencia. Over the years it underwent various modifications. Shortly before she died, María Teresa Rojas shared a few details about La Quinta with me. The tower and lower structure were part of the original construction. In the nineteenth century another section was added, and the facade was subjected to several transformations throughout the century. When Lydia arrived in Cuba, the house was in poor condition. She and Titina decided to restore it and make it their permanent residence. Thus, Lydia picked up her old passion for preserving buildings and collecting and documenting antiquities. Moreover, the location turned out to be very convenient for her fieldwork, since only one street separated the Quinta

San José from the neighborhood of Pogolotti, where she had established her first contacts with elderly Blacks in 1930.

Lydia and Titina attacked the work of reconstruction and decoration enthusiastically. They replaced destroyed doors with others salvaged from mansions being demolished in Havana. They repaired the roof of the lean-to in the garden with antique wood. The coffered ceiling from the Santo Domingo convent, which would later become the headquarters for the University of Havana, was saved from demolition and installed in the tower. They repaired the original iron gates and fences, and they installed others from the ancient Havana jail. Fortunately, the magnificent red, yellow, white, and blue stained glass windows had been preserved. They decorated the hallways with colonial-era tiles, and the iron lantern at the entrance was brought from the main residence of Don Mateo Pedroso on Calle Cuba 64, which also belonged to Titina and her mother. Finally, they furnished La Quinta with carefully chosen items. Despite being a true museum of antiques and craftwork, photographs show an inviting creole interior, as well as a marvelous informal courtyard.

Once the restoration was completed, Doña Teresa, Lydia, Titina, and Julia García de Lomas—an orphaned cousin of Titina's—abandoned the centrally located neighborhood of Vedado and went to live at La Quinta San José. The quinta's tranquility proved beneficial to both Lydia and Titina. From the 1940s until their 1960 departure into exile, Titina dedicated herself, with Benedictine patience, to the task of photographing, transcribing, and publishing the documents from the Archivos de Protocolos de La Habana. The condition of many of the papers in the archives—especially those from the sixteenth century—was deteriorating due to their age, the appetite of bookworms, and a combination of indifference and neglect on the part of official institutions.

For her part, Cabrera rekindled her contacts with her old informants and expanded her circle of friends among the *negros*. She worked every day, writing, asking questions, attending rituals, hosting visits from [J. S.] Baró or José de Calazán Herrera. (Calixta Morales had died, but Teresa Muñoz was still fit, despite being a centenarian. Her story is told in "Eggüe o Vichichi Finda" and, later, in *El Monte*.) Lydia continued editing *El Monte*, which still lacked a definitive title. And she wrote many more stories, such as "Susundamba" (Congo: owl), which was later included, with minor changes, in *Por qué*.

In 1947, Lydia had gathered enough material to publish a long essay full of footnotes and titled "Eggüe o Vichichi Finda" (Congo and Lucumí: plants). It is, without a doubt, an initial version of *El Monte*. The two works begin with a similar phrase. In "Eggüe o Vichichi Finda" we read, "The spirituality of the forest is an ancestral concept that persists deep in our [Cuban] Black people." The book, published seven years later, begins with a statement that reveals the

development of Cabrera's thinking: "Among Black Cubans, the belief in the spirituality of *el monte* persists with an astonishing tenacity."

In 1954, Cabrera finally found the word that defines the title of the book and the concept which turned into its axis: *el monte* conceived as Afro-Cuban temple. The writer went round and round before settling on precisely the right term. Although she uses it several times and quotes it as spoken by *negros* in her 1947 essay, as we have just seen, she prefers to refer to it there as "the spirituality of the forest [*bosque*]." Even as late as 1950, when she published an excerpt of her future book in *Orígenes*, she called it *Vititi Nfinda y Ewe Orisha* (see Cabrera 1950, 16n1), terms that would become part of *El Monte*'s subtitle. It is surprising, then, that Wifredo Lam's *La Jungla* has not been known by its most fitting name, *El Monte*, because there is no doubt that Cabrera's *monte* and Lam's *jungla* are one and the same.

To this day, the word *monte* is so precise and fits so well that it becomes untranslatable.[32] No English word—"bush"?"Forest"?"Jungle"?—manages to include the full range of meanings evoked by the word—not its definition in Spanish, but its meaning in a Cuban sense. Of course, *monte* is hill, mountain. But in Cuba, it also signals a wild thicket, a combination of vegetal wilderness, the product of the divine hand, as a counterpoint to urban spaces, a product of human hands. (An old creole song says, "I'm going to *el monte*, today's my day.") In the end, *monte* is virgin nature, populated by gods and spirits about which the Senegalese poet Birago Diop sang masterfully in a 1975 poem ["Breath"], which Lydia later translated into Spanish:

> . . . the dead are not in the earth:
> they are in the tree that stretches itself out,
> they are in the wood that moans,
> they are in the water that flows,
> they are in the water that sleeps . . . (Diop 1975, 45)[33]

. . . . . .

32 DF-N: In the original version of this essay, Castellanos presaged the title of this edition: "The future English edition of the book (if the legal mess that has prevented it for so many years is somehow untangled) will have the same title: *El Monte*" (Cabrera 1994, 55).

33 DF-N: The excerpt from Cabrera's unpublished Spanish translation reads,

> . . . los muertos no están bajo la tierra:
> están en el arbol que se estremece,
> están en la madera que gime,
> están en el agua que corre,
> están en el agua que duerme . . .

In 1954, Cabrera published another essay in *Orígenes* on Cuba's religious syncretism. It is a shame that the text has not circulated widely, because its first few pages truly illuminate the relationships between Catholicism, Afro-Cuban beliefs, and spiritism in the formation of a popular religiosity.[34] It has been frequently affirmed that the identification of Catholic saints with African orishas was nothing more than a ruse by slaves and their descendants to mask their religious beliefs, thereby protecting themselves from official persecution. There is no doubt that the identification was employed to those ends. But Cabrera provides oral documentation demonstrating that the process of assimilation had taken place *earlier* and at a much deeper level of consciousness. Africans taken to Cuba could only understand the "white" religion imposed on them from the perspective of their own mystical interpretation of the universe—from their peculiar conceptualization of the predominant natural forces in their vision of reality, which, as we know, was strongly colored by elements of polytheism. Moreover, it was psychologically important for slaves to feel their deities had accompanied them in the diaspora, that gods were the same everywhere, for both white and Black people, and that the differences between saints and orishas were purely accidental—mere variations in manifestations or "paths." Cabrera clarifies all of it by employing her characteristic method: having her informants explain it in their own words.

Any discussion of the period at La Quinta San José must include Lydia's work on the Abakuá secret society. We already know the author had attended public *ñáñigo* processions. But it was not until her return from Paris that she took advantage of the opportunity to establish contact with Saibeke and the other Abakuá informants. Saibeke lived in Matanzas, but he stayed in the Quinta San José when he visited Havana. Mercedes Muriedas, Cabrera's secretary during the 1950s, remembers him very clearly, chatting with Lydia daily in the courtyard or the office, sipping on coffee the author asked to have served—for both of them—in the afternoon, despite the objections of the white servants, who resented having to serve an old Black man.

If the wealth of information she obtained from members of the Regla de Ocha is surprising, the data she unearthed among the hermetic Abakuá, who exclude women from their rituals as a matter of religious principle, is even more so. Cabrera managed to have them describe what they had heard regarding the origins of their organization and the land of their elders, their "geography by way of memory." She reproduced the gorgeous myth of Sikanekue,

34 DF-N: Here, the Spanish term *religiosidad popular* is akin to "folk religiosity," "religion of the people," or "common people's religious traditions." That is, *popular* (like *pueblo*) implies cultural and/or national identities, as well as socioeconomic class.

Lydia Cabrera with her father, Don Raimundo Cabrera, ca. 1910. Courtesy of the Cuban Heritage Collection at the University of Miami, Lydia Cabrera Papers, Box No. 39.

the ideological *clave* (cornerstone) of the society,[35] and she figured out the extremely complex hierarchy of ritual positions and functions, which are intimately woven together with liturgical objects and moments or episodes of the origin myth. She also compiled an extensive vocabulary, which she published in exile years later as a 530-page book (1988a, 2020), and obtained unique photographs, including one of the Ekue.[36] Moreover, she managed to document a huge number of ritual drawings, or *firmas*, which later saw the light of day in her book *Anaforuana* (1975). Lydia was especially proud of her studies of the Abakuá, since it was the least accessible Afro-Cuban group.

The political situation in Cuba at the end of the 1950s deeply concerned Lydia. As was her custom, she occupied herself with manual labor and, to keep herself "entertained," she started decorating images of virgins (Las Mercedes,

35 DF-N: The term *clave* is translated as cornerstone, but it also means key, keystone, code, codex, primer, nucleus, core, and crux. The term's rich musical meanings are not directly relevant here.

36 IC: The Ekue, the sacred drum of the Abakuá, remains hidden in the *famba* shrine room.

La Caridad del Cobre, La Virgen de Regla) with "pearls" and "precious stones" she bought in bulk on Calle Muralla in Havana. At the same time, Lydia and Titina started building a new house from antique materials and decorations, since certain zoning regulations in Marianao were threatening La Quinta San José. The Cuban revolution happened suddenly in 1959, before the work on the house was finished. Like so many other Cubans, Lydia Cabrera and María Teresa de Rojas left their country forever on the ferry which traveled between Cuba and Key West. In an old trunk, in photographs and notes made with pencil and paper, memories of José de Calazán Herrera (Bangoché), Francisquilla Ibáñez, Calixta Morales (Oddedei), and Teresa Muñoz (Omi Tomi) arrived too.

Exile (1968–198?)

Like the majority of Cubans who abandoned their homeland in the first year of the 1960s, Lydia Cabrera and María Teresa de Rojas believed their exile would be brief.[37] They dedicated themselves completely to hastening the conditions that would have allowed them to return to a free Cuba. The failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961 made them suspect, for the first time, that their stay in the United States might be prolonged indefinitely. For many years, it was impossible for Lydia to work on new books. It is true that her notes had accompanied her into exile, but the memories of her old friends were still too alive, too painful for her. The first decade of her exile was marked by a prolonged silence. She lacked both the will and the means to write and publish.

Eight years later, in 1968, Lydia edited a new edition of *El Monte*, which relied on the economic support of her friend Amalia Bacardí. That same year, some French colleagues invited her to Paris to participate in a conference on possession trance cults attended by distinguished Africanists, including Roger Bastide, Luc de Heusch, and Pierre Verger. The title of Lydia's talk was "Le guérisseur noir de Cuba" (The Black healers [or diviners] of Cuba). Much later, Cabrera would return to the subject with her book *La medicina popular de Cuba* (1984).

In 1970, ten years after her departure from Cuba, Cabrera took up her pen again, this time for good, and published her first book in exile: *Otán iyebiyé: Las piedras preciocas*. In 1971 she published *Ayapá*, in which she compiled nineteen stories circulating around the central character, the mischievous Jicotea (Turtle or Tortoise), who is sometimes male and others female. Like all of

37 IC: Readers are advised that the dates in the section headings only correspond to the composition and publication of the works discussed therein.

Lydia's stories, these have often been misunderstood. At first glance, a superficial reading might suggest it is a collection of folkloric myths, more or less adapted and embellished by the collector. Although she clearly and frequently incorporated materials taken from Afro-Cuban oral tradition in her stories, those themes were, fundamentally, used as motifs and stimuli to awaken the creative imagination of the artist. Gastón Baquero is correct when he writes,

> The work of this woman—studious, very modest, working silently—is, in its depth and form, a work of true poetry, of genuine creation. Her work is so creative that, at first glance, it appears to be a simple, mechanical compilation of words, customs, and folktales. The author's hand is invisible. And it is easy to overlook the mastery of this invisible writer who manages to re-create something that actually happened, making it seem anonymous and popular, and giving it a pure, authentic flavor. It is typical that the process of making great art usually remains unseen. The genius of Leo Frobenius's achievement when he wrote *The Black Decameron* has also been achieved absolutely by Lydia Cabrera, by knowing how to get out of the way of what she is narrating, composing it with such a strong mark of spontaneity that the reader never sees the author, but rather believes they are listening—truly and directly—to the voice of an African culture, a powerfully unique and authentic human group, or a folkloric myth from before the dawn of time. In reality, all of these pleasures are due to the most difficult art of "impersonating others," of deeply being others, which is the secret of great works and great authors. (1982, 5–6)

In fact, pretending that Cabrera's stories are mere "folktales" would be like insisting that Mario Vargas Llosa's *La tía Julia y el escribidor* (*Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*) is an autobiography rather than a novel.

Don Fernando Ortiz was the first person responsible for this confusion. In his foreword to the first Spanish edition of *Cuentos negros de Cuba* (1940), he affirms that the book is "a rich contribution to the folkloric literature of Cuba" and explains—in all seriousness—that some of the stories include "curious and very significant examples of the phenomenon of cultural transition; for example, when the narrator appoints gods to the offices of Chief Justice of the Supreme Court and Captain of the Firefighters Brigade." Ortiz's foreword has been quoted left and right, and it has been used more than any other text as a means to misinterpret Cabrera's stories. The second person to blame for the misunderstanding is Cabrera herself, who never bothered to clarify the matter. On the contrary, she was pleased to have "pulled the wool over the great Fernando Ortiz's eyes." (Lydia was very pleased that her brother-in-law would comment, very solemnly, on the novelty of a "myth" "discovered" by Cabrera

in which Obá-Ogó made humans "by breathing over his own poop.") We insist that the purpose of Lydia Cabrera's ethnographic work was the faithful, detailed study of Afro-Cuban religious transculturation. Her stories, on the other hand, are pure literary fiction, even if they are sometimes based, with more or less fidelity, on myths or genuine *patakies*. Sometimes a song would suggest the tale, as in the case of "Arere Marekén" (Hiriart 1978, 84).[38]

Lydia tended to affirm that she had never broken with the imaginative and fantastical world of her childhood. Beyond the memories of specific stories told by Tula and her other Black *tatas*—and she is sure to have heard some, though, according to her, the nannies preferred reciting "Cenicienta" ("Cinderella") or "La cucarachita Martina" (The little cockroach Martina)—the adult writer remained under the influence of a diffuse "reality of the unreal," which overwhelms children and inspired her writing from such a young age. As she confessed to Rosario Hiriart, her stories arose from "a reencounter with the world of fantasy of my earliest infancy, from which I never broke away" (1978, 75). On the other hand, *El Monte* is the product of "the blinding illumination that *real* and unforeseeable world, of beliefs, legends, and . . . poetry produced in me" (1978, 79). Cabrera undoubtedly enjoys herself, having fun, playing with the possibility of creating a *magical-real* reality.[39] It is a reality that is just as immediate and genuine for her as it is for a child living in the imaginary universe of her games, and it is just as authentic and positive as the precepts of magic are for believers, with which they can subvert and re-create the established logical order. It is a narrative reality in which animated and rational characters such as Brother Dove and Sister Hen, the governor's nine unmarried daughters, His Majesty the King of Spain, Sir Christopher Columbus, His Holiness the Pope, and One-Footed Osain can coexist. It is an ethnographic reality in which nature is permeated by mystical essences that can be manipulated by humans by way of orishas or the spirits of *muertos* (the dead) that reside in stones, waters, trees, and vines of an enchanted *monte*. This fascination with what Cabrera has called "the reality of the unreal" evolved into the

38 DF-N: *Lydia Cabrera: Between the Sum and the Parts* (Marta and Rangel 2019) includes a full-color reproduction and English translation of "Arere Marekén," including the illustrations by Alexandra Exter (also known as Aleksandra Aleksandrova Ekster). The original illustrated manuscript, archived in the Lydia Cabrera Papers at the Cuban Heritage Collection, has been digitized and made available online. An audio recording of an interview with Cabrera, archived at the Library of Congress, includes her own recitations of sections from "Arere Marekén"; it has also been digitized and made available online (1982b).

39 DF-N: Returning to the theme established by her epigraph ("the reality of the unreal"), Castellanos draws our attention to the dynamic interplay of magic and reality as a central theme in Cabrera's life and work, above and beyond her often unacknowledged role in the literary genre known as magic realism.

driving force and central theme of all of her work, both scientific and literary, in her anthropological treatises as much as her books of *cuentos negros*.

In 1972, Lydia and María Teresa moved to Madrid, where Amalia Bacardí had lived for some time. There they collaborated on an edition of the writings of Don Emilio Bacardí, Amalia's father. In Madrid, Cabrera wrote three of her best books. *La laguna sagrada de San Joaquín* (The sacred lagoon of San Joaquin, [1973] 1993) is a long, nostalgic, and poetic essay that is her most personal and intimate work. The text seems to be the result of a sort of catharsis, a painful evocative experience by which she regained the ability to return to her ethnographic work after a long period of mourning. *Yemayá y Ochún* (1974) followed, a magnificent treatise on the two water goddesses and the initiation rituals in the Regla de Ocha. In Spain, she also composed *Anaforuana* (1975), in which the author collects the Abakuá ritual drawings and offers detailed explanations of the Abakuá secret society's process of initiation. Describing *Anaforuana*, Robert Farris Thompson notes, "I estimate there are approximately 512 discrete signs documented in this important text, a landmark study in the history of Black Atlantic writing systems" (1983, 299n10).[40] If we are surprised by the fabulous, overflowing imagination of Cabrera's stories, in which the boundaries of conventionally recognized categories disappear, her research astounds us with the abundance and depth of its information, which is strictly and verifiably true and documented.

In 1974, Lydia and Titina returned to Miami, where they would reside until the end of their lives. Lydia collaborated on the sixth volume of the *Enciclopedia de Cuba*, contributing a valuable essay on San Lázaro, Babalú Ayé, a few children's stories (unique in her literary corpus), and a series of "myths and legends." She later wrote and published numerous books, including *Reglas de Congo* ([1979] 1986), *La Regla Kimbisa del Santo Cristo de Buen Viaje* ([1977] 1986), *Koekó iyawó* (1980), and *Los animales en el folklore y la magia de Cuba* (1988b). She also edited a number of articles and presented various conference presentations. In 1976, Florida International University hosted a tribute to her that was organized by José A. Madrigal and Reinaldo Sánchez.[41] This was followed by Cabrera being awarded various honorary doctoral degrees, from Denison University in Ohio, Manhattan College in New York City, and the University of Miami.

At the beginning of the 1980s, Cabrera's eyesight began to fail as the result of progressive macular degeneration. It quickly became impossible for her to read, write, or paint, the three things she considered her greatest "diversiones" (hobbies). Despite her advanced age and limited eyesight, she managed to

40 DF-N: Scans of the drawings are archived at the Cuban Heritage Collection.

41 DF-N: See Sánchez et al. (1978).

edit several manuscripts for publication. On January 25, 1987, María Teresa de Rojas died. They had shared more than fifty years together. A few weeks later, Lydia became gravely ill, but she managed to recover and survive for almost five more years. Finally, at 8:00 p.m. on September 19, 1991, she died, calmly and peacefully, sitting in her *poltrona* (lounge chair). She remained conscious to the very end, with the same sense of humor as ever. One of her last recollections was of the Havana where she was born. In keeping with her will, her remains were cremated, and her ashes now rest next to María Teresa de Rojas's coffin in a Miami cemetery. Lydia Cabrera was unable to return to a free and happy Cuba, but her name did not disappear from her homeland. We frequently receive news of young Cubans on the island who read and admire her. Her writing has inspired artists who are just starting out. As I write these lines, José Bedia, a painter who arrived from Cuba by way of Mexico, is exhibiting a painting titled *Homenaje a Lydia Cabrera* at the Art Museum in Fort Lauderdale.[42] A few months ago, Arturo Lindsay, a young Panamanian painter, exhibited a series of canvases inspired by *El Monte*. *Cuentos Negros and El Monte*, *Ayapá*, *Anaforuana*, *Por qué*, and *La laguna sagrada de San Joaquín* are and will remain part of a heritage for future generations. The year 1994 commemorated the fortieth anniversary of the publishing of *El Monte*, that seminal work of Cuban culture, and its author, a model of intellectual dedication, genuine modesty, and human integrity.

42 DF-N: The museum is now known as the NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale. In 1994, at the time of Castellanos's writing, it was known as the Museum of Art, Fort Lauderdale.

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