

**Understanding Phenomena: the Rewriting of History and its  
Use in Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel**

by Tucker Sharon

B.A., Spanish, Humboldt State University, 2003

B.A., Journalism, Humboldt State University, 2003

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

The Faculty of Graduate Studies

(Hispanic Studies)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

October 2007

© Tucker Sharon, 2007

## Abstract

This study is launched from the general understanding that History is a dialectical process comprised by the contributions of multiple actors, all of which interact in a contentious give-and-take. Keeping in mind this precept, I look at the novel *La carga*, by contemporary Equatoguinean author Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel, as an alternative source of history, and assess that history as he has constructed it. This entails not only a detailed exploration of the world he creates within the novel, but a look at the intertextual bonds he establishes with such nineteenth-century writers as Manuel Iradier and José Martí.

My analysis begins with the general notion that in Ávila's granting of textual agency to natural elements one can begin to see the first inklings of a challenge to typical Eurocentric historiography. In the first major section I look at what for all intents and purposes has been deemed the colonial dialectic, or the greater social dynamic that maintained colonial hegemony, as it is presented in the vignettes of 1940 Equatorial Guinea that we see in *La carga*.

In the next section, I look at what Ávila does with some of the discursive tenets of Spanish imperialism, especially those associated with the monolithic conception of Africa and Europe. And finally, I look at the way that relations between spatiality—mainly the geographic classifications inherent in colonial discourses—and subjectivity give way to Ávila's commentary on modern-day Equatorial Guinea.

I try to close with some speculation on the strategic formation of which Ávila and *La carga* may form part, beginning with a look at his *prefacio* and concluding with a questioning of where the attitudes outlined in the *prefacio* may place him on the grand scale of African discourses of resistance.

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	ii
Table of Contents .....	iii
List of Figures .....	iv
Acknowledgements .....	v
Equatorial Guinea .....	vi
1. Introduction .....	1
1.1 <i>La carga</i> 's Dual Realities .....	18
2. The Struggle for History .....	29
2.1 The Fluid Meaning of History .....	30
2.2 History as a Creative Product .....	36
3. Location, Location, Location! .....	44
3.1 Toward a Colonial Dialectic .....	45
3.2 Ávila's Discursive Affluen(ts/ce) .....	54
3.3 A Meeting by the River .....	78
3.3.1 Mbini as Place .....	84
3.3.2 Mbini as Name .....	85
3.3.3 Mbini as Home .....	88
4. Conclusion ... ..	92
Select Bibliography of Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel .....	97
Bibliography .....	98

## List of Figures

Figure 1	Equatorial Guinea .....	vi
Figure 2	<i>Ataque de Ulombe</i> .....	66

## Acknowledgements

This work would not have been possible were it not for the support and encouragement of Elisa Rizo-Arbuckle, who provided me with some essential and hard-to-come-by texts. I am also greatly indebted to my thesis committee members, Rita De Grandis and Gloria Onyeoziri, for their enlightened guidance (and enduring patience) and Kim Beauchesne, without whose mentoring in the realm of colonial discourses, I would have been lost. Additionally, I think Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel should be acknowledged on behalf of all of us who pine, from our positions of relative privilege, for a challenge to the neocolonial order. Lastly, and most importantly, this study would never have reached completion were it not for the undying dedication (and again, patience) of my wife, Renée. Thanks for listening, Nee.

Figure 1: Equatorial Guinea

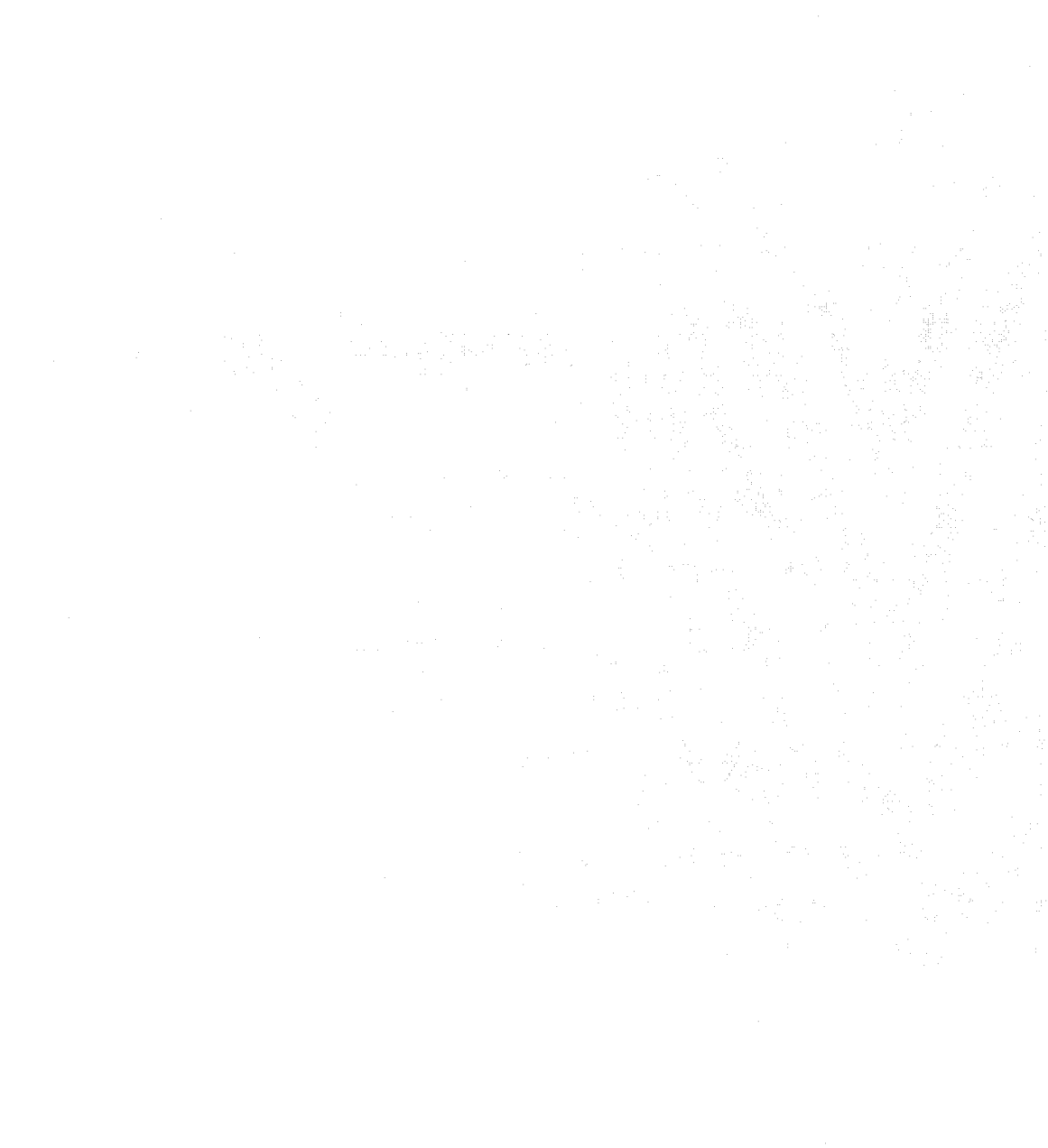


Image removed for copyright reasons.

Source: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United States, [www.fao.org](http://www.fao.org).

## 1. Introduction

Sitting down to write this introduction in *medias res*, with the bulk of my analysis already substantially developed, I cannot help but express a slight sense of guiltiness. After having put forth so many assumptions and done my best to defend them—admittedly, sometimes against my own doubtful wonderings—an ashamed feeling of obligation, induced by a semi-faux humility, has inundated my conscience, urging me to highlight the tragic yet necessary myopia with which the following was written.

In a recent stroke of genius, Canadian academician turned politician, Michael Ignatieff, verbalized his epiphanic vision of the academic's task stating: "Among intellectuals, judgment is about generalizing and interpreting particular facts as instances of some big idea," and to "follow their consequences wherever they may lead."<sup>1</sup> Without going into the political objectives that may have inspired so enlightened an observation, I must say that to a certain degree the work represented here before you might fit those parameters, but to merely leave it at that would overlook some of the significant externalities that accompany such a process.

In trying to assert the following arguments I was constantly confronted with the necessity of omitting, or at the very least only briefly touching upon, those aspects that when generalized and interpreted could not be reduced to plain examples of "some big idea," brushing them to the wayside in the hopes that they will receive their due attention at some other time (if even from some other interested reader of Juan Tomás Ávila

---

<sup>1</sup> Michael Ignatieff, "Getting Iraq Wrong," The New York Times 5 Aug. 2007, magazine late ed.: Sec. 6, 26.

Laurel). It goes without saying that despite their omission, all of the ideas and aspects that I was forced to avoid are indeed worthy of development and investigation. But I feel the need to clarify why I've deemed Ávila's novel, *La carga*, worthy of study, as well as defining my position as author of this critique. For I feel these two points shed some light on the need for some omitting. It is therefore my intention here to just momentarily address a few of those most prominent omissions—such as the historical and literary context in which *La carga* appears, and the major theoretical tenets that have influenced me—if for no other reason than to assuage that terrible sense of impotence that accompanies the inability to go on writing forever.

First and foremost, to deny the influence of Miguel de Unamuno in my thinking would signify a tragic dearth of credit where credit is due, for my mis-/understanding of textual assessment as viewed through a “postcolonial” lens relies heavily on two central themes of Unamunian thought. One of the base-level philosophical conundrums that continually plague me when considering any text that even marginally fits within the parameters of the postcolonial is his conception of *intrahistoria*<sup>2</sup> (deliberately left here in its original Spanish form so as to preserve the ambiguous double nature of the term: intra-history/story). Although articulated in an entirely different context, the idea of *intrahistoria* has served as a launching point for my delving into the complexities of binary, linguistic sign-based relations. As such, what constituted his *sentimiento trágico de la vida* permeates the very core of my analytical approach. Indeed, when I see the confrontation of the colonizer and the colonized (Albert Memmi) or the Mbembian

---

<sup>2</sup> In my understanding of *intrahistoria*, the key concept that is relevant when looking at the postcolonial is Unamuno's idea of the self as being constituted by a continual internal conflict between opposed manifestations of the psyche.



conviviality propagated by *commandement*, my first inclination is to think of them as species of a societal *intrahistoria*, or tragic sentiment of coexistence.

This way of thinking works in concert with Unamuno's often chaotic, yet revolutionary, personification of text to allow for what in my mind was an almost natural progression of existentialist philosophy to the current theories of the so-called postcolonial ilk. Text, characterized by him as "a death from which others may gain life,"<sup>3</sup> embodies a transformation of that static, inanimate state of the written into the dynamism of a mediator that is part and parcel of all communicative endeavors in a sense that goes beyond symbolic references to assert a text's very real and direct power. So when U. Jugo de la Raza—his autobiographical protagonist of *Cómo se hace una novela*—trembles at reading the phrase: "When the reader reaches the end of this painful [hi/]story (*historia*) they will die with me,"<sup>4</sup> the words that in and of themselves represent the crystallization—and for Unamuno the annihilation—of an idea take on a semblance of extra-textual actors, they are imbued with a sense of agency that transcends that of mere medium. The elusive boundaries separating fiction from reality then are surpassed altogether when Jugo de la Raza is overwhelmed by a real mental and corporal sense of his own annihilation, not simply communicated, but *caused* by the text in his hands.

It is Unamuno's retrieval of this quixotic conception of the *fiat lux* trope that then sets a foundation for the power afforded to text in, for example, Edward Said's dual notion of authority (in addition, coincidentally, to justifying some of the very literal interpretations of text put forth in my analysis). Which brings us to the three concepts that

---

<sup>3</sup> "Muerte de que otros pueden tomar vida". (1994: 89) Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Spanish will be my own.

<sup>4</sup> "Cuando el lector llegue al fin de esta dolorosa historia se morirá conmigo". (*ibid*: 136)

Said maneuvers in order to explore that power. For his ideas of authority, strategic location and strategic formation work as the cornerstones of my analysis.

Knowledge [and, in particular the solidification of knowledge into text] means rising above immediacy, beyond self, into the foreign and distant. The object of such knowledge is inherently vulnerable to scrutiny ... . To have such knowledge of such a thing is to dominate it, to have authority over it. And authority here means for 'us' to deny autonomy to 'it'—the Oriental country—since we know it and it exists, in a sense, *as* we know it. (Said 32)

In this segment of his monumental study, Orientalism, Said touches upon the intricacies of authority's two-sided nature, teasing out what could eventually be labeled authorial hegemony, or the dominance of authorship. Centering on discourses engendered by the British and French colonial projects of the nineteenth century, as well as twentieth-century American neocolonialism, he navigates the manner in which the entire geographic region of "the Orient"<sup>5</sup>—and the subjects that populate it—become subjugated to the "expert's" authorial whim with disastrous real-world—that is, extra-textual—effects. The key factor in this process is the "*re-presence*, or ... representation," (*ibid* 21) of the subject at hand; in the same way that Unamuno uncovered writing as the death of an idea, and concurrent birthing of new phenomena, Said artfully demonstrates how the representations inherent in written language rely little on the actual subject they represent, and consequently fabricate a notion of reality wholly accommodated to the author's worldview. (*ibid*)

---

<sup>5</sup> The "Orient" to which Said refers being a mere construction—as he is quick to point out—of imperial accounts, it should be made clear that his general conclusions prove fruitful for any study that explores questions of power and its geo-cultural dispersal. Let it be said, therefore, that use of the term "Orient" or any of its derivatives in this work is made in reference to the general cultural-geographical space in question: Africa and, in particular Equatorial Guinea.

What most draws my attention to Orientalism is the manner in which the “fabrication” inherent in authorship has a real-world power bestowed upon it, how it ties discourse to conquest. Much the same way that don Quixote’s chivalric novels transcend their material bounds to exert force beyond their covers and drive the poor man mad, or in the same fashion that Jugo de la Raza is made to feel death upon him after reading of it in a novel, the authority exercised within orientalist texts transcends the mere realm of discourse to become an integral force behind real-world imperial endeavors, constituting a sort of intellectual invasion of the Other’s domain (*ibid* 76). This is most succinctly illustrated in Said’s example of Napoleon’s 1798 invasion of Egypt, which while not only made a reality in Napoleon’s mind by the adventures chronicled in the Comte de Volney’s *Voyage en Égypte et en Syrie*, was also carried out with the explicit use of academics as *de facto* soldiers. (81) As Said puts it, Napoleon’s *Institut d’Égypte*, “with its teams of chemists, historians, biologists, archeologists, surgeons, and antiquarians [that is, the producers of written knowledge] was the learned division of the army,” (83-84) soldiers wielding mighty pens.

Some, of course, may argue that the great difference that distinguishes Said’s empowerment of text from that of Unamuno or Cervantes lies in the fact that he draws parallels between the authority exercised inside a text by its author and that authority imposed outside by empire, bringing to the fore the role of writing in silencing, subjugating and slaughtering real people. The wounds—both mental and physical—suffered by Don Quixote and Jugo de la Raza, on the other hand, are neatly constrained within the bindings of their respective imaginary worlds.

Yet I wonder if perhaps even Said himself would not have accepted that what ties discourse to conquest—coincidentally reminiscent of the Cervantine theme of arms and letters—are the representations of real events that he devised and articulated in the writing of Orientalism. For even if Napoleon was widely known to have commanded his troops with one hand while reading from a copy of *Voyage en Égypte et en Syrie* in the other, the bond that establishes that work as the impetus for belligerence, the drive behind conquest, although apparent, is not immortalized as argument until spelled out—in both the figurative and literal senses—in another written work. After all, even Orientalism does not escape the fact that what it delivers is a written presence—a “re-presence” subject to the motives of its author—of Napoleon and his influences. Therein lies its brilliance; in a sense it manufactures a role for the written in the theater of world events, it articulates that intimacy between Napoleon’s book-knowledge and his warmongering, similar to the way that *Don Quijote* allows the giants of a literary genre to perform in the senile actions of a tired old man.

It is this basic assumption then—that the inner workings of a text carry with them a force that has impact outside its pages—under which I operate when I look at the question of history and representation in Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel. As such, the two methodological precepts exercised by Said to address authority serve my intentions well.

The first, strategic location, is used as a method of identifying features that may elucidate the author’s position *vis-à-vis* the geo-cultural subject s/he takes on. This may be manifest in terminology, imagery, voice and other such devices that make up the mechanics of writing, but it is essentially revealed *within* the text. The second component

of Said's methodology, strategic formation, seeks to uncover common threads that unite various works under the same discursive paradigm. (*ibid* 20-21)

The choice of a novel by Ávila as the primary focus of my study is due to two main factors; apart from his writing plain and simply appealing to me, his work occupies a unique niche within a unique literary milieu. Resting on the virtual margins of two distinct literary and cultural fields—the “African” and the “Hispanic”—Equatoguinean writers have always existed in a sort of taxonomical void. Unfortunately, this curious confluence of origins has thus far done more to repel scholarly inquiry than to attract it, for it seems that what comes out of Equatorial Guinea has often times been disregarded as not worthy of inclusion within any literary current. Indeed, until recently the only ones bothering to address the question of Equatoguinean literature's place in the greater literary world were the writers themselves.<sup>6</sup> And as Jorge Salvo poignantly articulates, the bulk of what has been said on the topic has been more devoted to underlining the lack of scholarly critiques than actually carrying out scholarly criticism. (10) But the sluggish response of scholars aside, the work of Ávila nonetheless represents the cutting edge of a burgeoning national literature. I recognize the difficulties one dredges up using a term like “national literature,” even referring to so-called regional literatures—“African” literature, for example—presents some challenging conundrums, but I think the term is appropriate when speaking of Equatorial Guinea, given the unique cultural isolation that closely corresponds to its national territory.

---

<sup>6</sup> This with the duly noted exceptions of Dr. Elisa Rizo-Arbuckle, Dr. Dorothy Odartey-Wellington, and Dr. Jorge Salvo, all of whom have presented their studies within the last five to six years. (This is, of course drawn from my own preliminary survey of the field, my apologies to anyone whose work I may not have come across and therefore not mentioned).

United to its neighbors by cultural affinities and yet severed from them by its exclusive history as Spain's only sub-Saharan African colony, this last remnant of the Spanish empire exists apart from all that surrounds it.

The Bantu presence on Equatorial Guinea's continental coast—Ávila's ambit of choice for the setting of *La carga*—dates back centuries, when people from the Great Lakes region (Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, etc.) migrated westward. As has been documented in the anthropological work of Jacint Creus, the major events of this community's history remain preserved in the form of a rich oral tradition in which elements of nature take on leading roles. In one instance, for example, the turtle is the character that finds the solution to overcoming obstacles, (Creus 1997: 21) in another the giraffe shows pilgrims the way to press on (*ibid*: 23). As such, the community's history exists in a seamless integration with the natural elements that surround it.<sup>7</sup>

A separate yet parallel history exists, however, in the annals of Spain's most recent colonial enterprise—to be specific, in the archives of the *Instituto de Estudios Africanos*. Beginning in 1778 with the Treaty of Pardo, Spain took nominal control of what is today the island of Bioko—home of the Equatoguinean capital, Malabo. The region only received sporadic attention from the metropole—concisely deemed a “transient colonialism” by Ibrahim Sundiata—over the following century, with the appointment of the first Spanish governor in 1858 and a handful of continental expeditions culminating in Manuel Iradier's 1884 purchase of the territory surrounding the mouth of the Río Muni. It wasn't until 1940—coincidentally Ávila's temporal ambit of choice—when the regime of Francisco Franco, still looking to ameliorate civil war

---

<sup>7</sup> The reach of Bantu culture across the continent is enormous and, as such, to argue there is a “Bantu oral tradition” and not “Bantu oral traditions” is problematic. Thus it should be stressed that this allocation of agency to natural elements is at least apparent in Ndowe Bantu orality.

tensions (or more precisely erase any recollection of the Second Republic) looked to its territory in Spanish Guinea as the place where Spain's lost empire would regain its long-forgotten luster and where a national project could focus its expansionist attentions. Thus Spanish colonialism in Black Africa only truly materialized when the end of the continent's wider colonial reality was already in sight. And as such it was rather slow to respond to the thrust toward independence. Spain only finally granted independence, under heightened international pressure, on October 12, 1968. (Sundiata 17-52)

Four and a half months later the nascent republic succumbed to what would become an 11-year-long reign of despotic terror, under which the Machiavellian rule of Francisco Macías Nguema dismantled any and all incipient forms of a national culture. During these years, labeled by novelist-scholar-journalist Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo the "years of silence," the country was submitted to the most brutal of cultural lockdowns: education was banned in the interior (Ndongo 2000: 41); Spanish in any form, written or spoken, was forbidden;<sup>8</sup> the only semblance of literature not prohibited was propagandistic praise of the regime (N'gom 1995: 94). Indeed, during this period illiteracy rose from 10 to 70 percent (Ndongo 2000: 41), to say nothing of the plummeting production rates and sky-rocketing instances of human-rights abuses.

---

<sup>8</sup> According to Mbare N'gom: " ... *el simple hecho de hablar español era castigado con la cárcel. No digamos escribir: muchos guineanos murieron porque en cualquier registro domiciliario se les encontraron apuntes en español*; ... the simple act of speaking Spanish was punished with imprisonment. Not to mention writing: many [Equato]guineans died because notes in Spanish were found during ordinary house searches." (2003: 6)

Tragically, this closure was carried out under the most overt ignorance of the international community,<sup>9</sup> due largely to measures taken by Franco's regime to keep any information about its former colony under lock and key.<sup>10</sup>

When, in 1979, Macías was overthrown by his nephew, Teodoro Obiang Nguema, there was a brief sigh of relief. In 1982, a constitution that in theory restored the rights of Equatoguinean citizens—urged by the U.N. and other international bodies—was ratified. The period of the early 1980s then was marked by a sense of rebirth among intellectuals at home and abroad. Indeed, even the staunchest of exiled former critics, Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo, mistakenly praised the new Equatorial Guinea as one of the few African nations entirely free of state repression. (Sundiata 80) But the jubilation was unfortunately short-lived, as political attacks continued and what at first seemed to be a tendency toward a multi-ethnic government quickly resorted back to Macías' consolidation of power into the hands of the Fang-Esangui minority of Mongomo. The final blow to any semblance of clean government and respect of human rights was dealt when, in the late 1990s, rich oil deposits were discovered and petrodollars began to flood the country. (*ibid* 74-78)

Today, due to the gross mismanagement and blatant pilfering of the country's newfound oil wealth, Equatorial Guinea has the highest per capita GDP on the African

---

<sup>9</sup> A similar blithe ignorance sadly characterizes the international community's reaction to the current regime of Teodoro Obiang Nguema, a petrodollar-propped puppet who, since the mid-1990s discovery of vast oil reserves in Equatoguinean waters has returned his country to the terror of the 1970s.

<sup>10</sup> After independence was granted, Spain classified any intelligence coming out of Equatorial Guinea as "reserved material," only helping to perpetuate the silence already implemented by Macías' death squads.



continent,<sup>11</sup> yet a staggering, although unknown, percentage of the population has no access to potable water—unknown because statistics of this sort are no longer collected (Ávila 2005: 40).

Given the distinct cultural import of these events, the history of Equatoguinean literature has been told following the same delineations: broken up into a colonial period, the Macías years and a post-Macías period commonly labeled “toward maturity.”

Despite the polemic over who may be considered the first “Guinean”<sup>12</sup> author, all major voices in the field<sup>13</sup> agree that the first inklings of a “Guinean” literature surfaced during the final years of the colonial period when efforts to transcribe the tales of oral tradition gave way to a genuine written artifice. The writing of this period is generally characterized as an outcrop of—rather than a challenge to—the colonial order, a sort of *costumbrismo* produced in an atmosphere described by author-poet, Ciriaco Bokesa Napo, as a time of “fear of the whites when writing meant praising them and quasi-marginalizing if not ridiculing the autochthonous.”<sup>14</sup> The canonical work of this time, Leoncio Evita’s *Cuando los combes luchaban*, embodied the so-called “literature of

---

<sup>11</sup> World Development Indicators database, World Bank, 1 July 2004.

<sup>12</sup> To avoid the length of terms like “Equatoguinean” or “Equatorial Guinean” many simply use the term *guineano(a)*, or “Guinean,” despite the obvious association with the other two West African countries, Guinea and Guinea Bissau. Let it be clear that in this study any use of the term “Guinean” is done so in reference to Equatorial Guinea.

<sup>13</sup> Due to the unfortunate marginalization of this lively national literature, the “major voices,” or those who have covered the most ground with respect to Equatoguinean literary history, are limited for the most part to Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo and Mbare N’gom Faye. For a detailed overview of this history up through the 1980s see their canonical works: Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo, *Antología de la literatura guineana* (Madrid: Editorial Nacional, 1984); and Mbare N’gom, *Diálogos con Guinea: Panorama de la literatura guineoecuatorialiana de expresión castellana a través de sus protagonistas* (Madrid: Labrys 54, 1996).

<sup>14</sup> “la época del temor al blanco cuando escribir suponía alabarle y quasi marginar cuando ridiculizar lo autóctono”. Quoted in N’gom (2001: 6).

consent,” as Mbare N’gom puts it, and “was a powerful instrument of propaganda for the francoist state at the time of justifying its colonial adventure and ... its civilizing mission in Africa.”<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps the effect of Spain’s rather late arrival on the colonial scene, the first real literature of resistance to surface in the Hispano-African<sup>16</sup> ambit takes not an anti-colonial form, but an anti-dictatorial one, as exiles forced to flee the repression of *nguemismo* voiced the tribulations of having been abandoned by Guinea and forgotten by the metropole to which they escaped. (Ndongo 2000: 41) As a result of such dispersal, any discourse other than the official discourse was effectively silenced. This tendency toward a collective forgetting, coupled with the years of omission signified by the literature of consent left a virtual abyss, a Bhabhaian minus in the origin, in the country’s history right at the time when other nascent literatures of the region, invigorated by the fight for independence and enlightened by its aftermath, were recovering and telling their histories for all to hear.<sup>17</sup>

It is at this point, although in a broken and sporadic manner, that what N’gom considers one of the great rifts in Equatoguinean literature is produced. Precisely at the moment when a truly national literature could have materialized, the bellicose rejection of culture on the part of the Macías regime produced a scattering of literary talent,

---

<sup>15</sup> “... fue un poderoso instrumento de propaganda para el estado franquista a la hora de justificar su aventura colonial y ... su misión civilizadora en África”. (N’gom 1995: 93)

<sup>16</sup> Of the myriad possible terms used to describe this literary niche I choose Ndongo’s “Hispano-African,” (*hispano-africano*) for it sufficiently distinguishes itself from the “Afro-Romantic” tradition of Latin America and the Caribbean, yet does not reach the extreme—and in my opinion unnecessary—specificity of N’gom’s preferred “Hispano-Black-African” (*hispano-negroafricano*).

<sup>17</sup> Consider, for example, all the work of Nigeria’s Chinua Achebe; the harsh satire of Senegal’s Ousmane Sembène; or the striking critique of Ivorian, Ahmadou Kourouma.

spurring a new cadre of authors writing and publishing from the exterior. Since then, the Equatoguinean literary scene has followed two divergent currents: one based in the former metropole—namely Madrid and Barcelona—characterized primarily by tales of exile and homeland yearnings and oriented to a relatively international audience; and the other written, published, and therefore destined internally. The other great taxonomical rift outlined by the specialists obeys genre more than theme. That is, the classification of works tends to be more divided along the lines of lyric versus prose rather than say topics of tradition and history versus those of a so-called “European” modernity.

After experiencing a renaissance—or perhaps its first real *naissance*—during the 1980s and 1990s, in-country literary production is yet again in jeopardy, with the two real showcases and promoters of dissemination—*África 2000* and *El patio*—along with the major organization that supported them, the *Centro Cultural Hispano-Guineano*, all now defunct. Thus, thanks in large part to the neglect and treachery of yet another petrodollar-inflated regime, too weak and paranoid to withstand the mere possibility of opposition, the already precarious position of those authors speaking from within faces new uncertainty. Indeed, what is needed from the academic community today is a new survey of the same similar to Ndongo’s *Antología de la literatura guineana*, one comprehensive enough to detail the full extent of the late-1990s literary blossoming and its subsequent stifling Obiang’s neo-*nguemismo*. While attempts have been made to update prior scholarship and even advance new criticism, they still remain relatively mired in the post-Macías heyday and have done very little with current production.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> While works such as Mbare N’gom’s *Literatura Africana de expresión española* (2003) or the PhD dissertation of Jorge Salvo, *La formación de identidad en la novela hispano-africana: 1950-1990* (2003) signify important steps in continuing an academic interest in what comes out of Equatorial Guinea, critical attention remains centered on novels such as Evita’s *Cuando los*

Thus, despite receiving numerous awards, much of Ávila's work—not to mention what has surfaced over the last 10 years—has been banished to the margins of scholarly inquiry, a reality that is difficult to reconcile with the fact that he surpasses all the aforementioned categorical boundaries. Perhaps the chilling recent silence could be due to how difficult it is to get a grasp on his niche, for, having published numerous works of prose—essays and novels—poetry and theatre, both at home and abroad, he has somehow managed to prove himself worthy of inclusion in every one of the literary trends associated with Equatoguinean literature. Yet, by my estimation, critique of his vast body of work is thus far limited to a few brief sentences of praise from N'gom for his *Poemas* (1994); a survey done by María Elvira Luna-Escudero-Alie of his collection of poetry, *Historia íntima de la humanidad* (1999); and three articles by Elisa Rizo-Arbuckle: one a general survey of his work, another a review of folklore in his theatrical work *El fracaso de las sombras* (2004), and the last a succinct assessment of irony and historiography in *La carga* (1999).

Rizo approaches Ávila's work and *La carga* in particular as written resistance, a “discursive apparatus of refutation and negotiation”<sup>19</sup> to be specific, which is heavily geared toward propagating what N'gom has dubbed a “new national narrative.” (N'gom 2003: 11) As she correctly asserts, one of the foremost themes woven into the fabric of his work is the challenge to historiographic paradigms that constantly result in suppression of Equatoguinean and, on a larger scale, African authority.

---

*combes luchaban* (1953), María Nsue's *Ekomo* (1985) and Ndongo's *Las tinieblas de tu memoria negra* (1987), relegating other works to a veritable “honorable mention” in the chronology of literary production.

<sup>19</sup> “*La carga nos presenta un aparato discursivo de refutación y negociación de la memoria guineoecuatorial ...*” (Rizo 2004: 197)

Where she takes issue with prior categorizations of Ávila and his writing is in N'gom's attempt to present him as part of a "new national *costumbrismo*." (*ibid*) She refutes this claim on the grounds that there are no signs in his work of a clear nineteenth-century-style nationalist agenda typical of the sort she sees in the novels of *costumbrismo*. Instead, she argues that:

*En la narrativa de este autor, el concepto de una identidad nacional se propone sin idealizaciones extremas de un espíritu patrio y sí con miramiento diacrónico de intereses económicos internacionales y manipulaciones políticas que han resultado en la marginalización de Guinea Ecuatorial del ámbito internacional.*

In the narrative of this author, the concept of a national identity is proposed without extreme idealizations of a patriotic spirit and with a diachronic glimpse of the international economic interests and political manipulations that have resulted in Equatorial Guinea's marginalization from the international sphere (2005: 176).

While on this point I am in complete agreement, this does not necessarily negate the presence of nineteenth-century attitudes in Ávila's discursive model. In fact, as I later detail, *La carga* shows some interesting signs of a nineteenth-century inheritance, of course modified to fit the current "globalized" climate.

On *La carga* in particular, Rizo's "*La carga de Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel: novela historiográfica poscolonial guineoecuatorial*" is without doubt the foundational work. And apart from exposing this author's vast literary corpus to an English audience, my analysis seeks to add depth to many of the points she has already outlined.

After a brief synthesis of the presentation of history as it appears in *La carga*, I attempt to define the theoretical approach taken to history in this study. In short, it could be said that history is comprised of facts: seen by me as inaccessible truths, which at the moment of being told/written cease to be. Much in the same way that, to Unamuno, an

idea dies as it is written, historical facts lose the status of “fact” upon being converted into a communicative form; once woven into the fabric of historiography—or the *telling* of history—their veracity is subordinated to the author/storyteller’s point of view. Ávila’s representation of the small town of Mbini in 1940 is then naturally a mere point of view. But history obeys a dialectical form that absorbs points of view such as Ávila’s and incorporates them into the greater, eternal process that is History. Here the key motor is what I’m calling constituent tension: a constant tug-of-war between opposed points of view for the ultimate say on which historical facts make up history and how they should be told.

In this discursive duel, agency is distributed and played out on multiple levels so that characters, authors and the writing that binds them all become significant actors in the Saidian conundrum of authority. That is to say that agency exists at the textual level (where authors bestow it upon elements of their fabricated worlds); at the discursive level (where what is written and incorporated into discourse vies for ultimate prominence); and in between (where the author’s decision to put pen to paper triggers a simultaneous appropriation of discursive power and exercise of authorial power). While Rizo presents a well-reasoned argument for Ávila and *La carga* as prominent agents at the discursive level and in between, what is lacking is a detailed exploration of how agency is played out at the textual level and what that means in the overall constituent tension of History.

My analysis therefore begins with the general notion that in Ávila’s granting of textual agency to natural elements—much in the style of Bantu oral tradition—one can

begin to see the formation of his “discursive apparatus of refutation and negotiation of the Equatoguinean memory.”<sup>20</sup>

In the first major section I look at what has been deemed the colonial dialectic, or the greater social dynamic that maintained colonial hegemony, as presented in the vignettes of 1940 Mbini that we see in *La carga*. In “... *novela historiográfica poscolonial guineoecuatorial*,” Rizo correctly illustrates the manner in which each Spanish character is utilized as the embodiment of some colonial institution: for example, the lieutenant governor of Franco’s regime, *señor* Navarro, the catholic priest and the doctor. (2004: 200) All of these characters are developed to only a superficial degree, with the objective of making them nothing more than the institutions they represent. Rizo argues that the local characters, as central protagonists, undergo a greater degree of character development. But I do not entirely agree. I feel that the local characters are equally underdeveloped, leaving a final sense that it is the general atmosphere, rather than the sentiments of individuals that Ávila hoped to portray, as if Mbini the geographic locus, and not the subjects that inhabit it, were the central protagonist. In this general atmosphere, this locus of inter-subjectivity, one faces the quotidian mannerisms that sustained the sense of white supremacy so central to the colonial project.

Each major section assesses the ways that Ávila fleshes out the absurdity of the colonial dialectic. First, I detail his commentary on the foolishness and folly of *señor* Navarro, who as the embodiment of Franco’s regime, represented the pinnacle of colonial-era aspirations. In the next section, I look at what Ávila does with some of the discursive tenets of Spanish imperialism, especially those associated with the monolithic

---

<sup>20</sup> See note no. 19.

conception of Africa and Europe. In this section the chronicles of the nineteenth-century Spanish explorer, Manuel Iradier, play a central role as examples of Ávila's ironic fodder. In the concluding pages of this study I look at the way that relations between spatiality—mainly the geographic classifications inherent in colonial discourses—and subjectivity give way to Ávila's commentary on modern-day Equatorial Guinea. Here I discuss how his representations of subjects and space signify a revival of former models of discursive resistance, particularly as seen in the work of José Martí, and how—in accordance with Rizo's assessment—this revival marks the launch of a new historiographic paradigm.

I try to close with some speculation on the strategic formation of which Ávila and *La carga* may be a part, beginning with a look at his *prefacio* and concluding with a questioning of where the attitudes outlined in the *prefacio* may place him on the grand scale of African discourses of resistance.

### 1.1 *La carga's* Dual Realities

What first calls a reader's attention to *La carga* would have to be its unique structural hybridization. Perhaps most clearly manifest in the initial twenty pages, but nonetheless present through the novel's duration, is a constant formal tension between observation and anecdote, description and narration, which takes on spatial and temporal dimensions as Ávila positions two opposing Mbini's against one another. Mbini, the population-3,000 town of modern day Equatorial Guinea, is juxtaposed with its colonial and historical counterpart, Río Benito, in a manner that bestows upon the same geographical setting a schizophrenic physical and temporal polarization. Insofar as form is concerned, Río Benito is narrated, Mbini is described; Ávila invites the reader into his prose to observe the present while he tells the past, the effect of which is a sort of subtle



explanation of how the contemporary reality of Mbini—as represented in the novel—came about. While at first glance the ordering of events seems to obey no logical progression—indeed, every chapter except for the page-long second chapter flows at least once, and often two or three times, between the novel’s past and the enunciated present, and episodes follow what is at best a subdued chronology. If one looks back on the compendium of events, what seems to be a mere series of inconclusive vignettes adds up to an illuminating and often humorous tale of Río Benito on the one hand, and a personalized portrayal of contemporary Mbini on the other. The former could be said to adhere to the essential rudiments of narrative—that is, through the anecdotal telling of the past, a narrative with setting, characters and plot is woven—whereas the latter lacks plot, and could only really be characterized as a succession of glimpses into a world that Ávila takes pains to represent as a shell of its former self.

To briefly summarize, *La carga* portrays the social interactions that typified the height of Spanish colonial interest in sub-Saharan Africa, telling the story of the lieutenant governor of the colony, *señor* Navarro, who habitually—and almost always as a result of his striking incompetence—finds himself in the unique predicament of requesting assistance without putting in jeopardy his status as a high functionary of the colonial order. With a diligent and unflinching obedience, the locals are always the ones who come to his aid, so that when the lieutenant governor is stricken one day with a tick infestation, it is Rambé (the orphan child of Manuel Mungule<sup>21</sup>—who died mysteriously while retrieving a Spanish woman’s sunbonnet from the nearby river mouth) who is

---

<sup>21</sup>The spelling of Manuel’s last name appears two different ways. Both spellings, “Mangule” (23) and “Mungule” (36), are used in reference to Manuel, although references to his brother—and uncle of Rambé— (21, 41) all use the second “u” spelling, leading us to believe that “Mangule” is a typographical error.

selected for weekly consultations in which she collects ticks from *señor* Navarro's pasty white, "privileged" (Ávila 1999: 41; 60; 63) feet. This task, rather than seen as an insult by the locals, is taken as an opportunity to gain favor with the local colonial administration and reap the benefits of a close relationship to power. Furthermore, removing ticks from the white man's feet is considered a right that is due to those who sacrifice in his favor, and Rambé soon faces competition for her work when the family of Utondi, who saved the lieutenant governor from certain doom as a horde of ferocious hogs chased him through the forest and up a tree, argues that she too is worthy of such distinguished employment. (*ibid* 44-46)

The climax of the story comes when *señor* Navarro contracts an undisclosed affliction—which is most probably syphilis or another form of sexually transmitted disease—and Anita Villamar, a kind and mystifying Spaniard who is on extended sojourn in Río Benito, takes him into her care and tries to find him a nurse. The intimacy of the girls' relationship with the high functionary is thus threatened, forcing them to band together and unite "their forces to ensure that such a distinguished lady doesn't enjoy what is her right by birth."<sup>22</sup> When the possibility of *señor* Navarro's departure arises, two key revelations trigger a climax: the truth about Ana Villamar's past; and the extent of Rambé and Utondi's desire—clearly propagated and perpetuated by their respective families—to accompany the lieutenant governor wherever he may go. In the end, *señor* Navarro does not leave (he stays in Río Benito) but it is nonetheless revealed that he and Ana had a love affair back in the metropolis and that they had a child, left by her in Spain when she relocated to Spanish Guinea in hopes of a reconciliation. The girls meanwhile,

---

<sup>22</sup> "... unieron sus esfuerzos en impedir que tan distinguida dama disfrute de lo que por nacimiento tiene derecho". (63)

having resorted to more drastic tactics to ensure a closer and more permanent link with *señor* Navarro, are left to cope with their new *carga*, or load:

*Y las dos señoritas dejaron su preciada carga en forma de dos preciosísimos rorros, fiel retrato de su preclaro progenitor, benitos de nación, aunque con el tiempo ... fueron reclamados por la milicia patria y as[í] viajaron a la Península; ellas, si bien no pasaron a los anales como desparasitadoras del Real Patronato de Indígenas, sí como madres de dos hermanos que encaminaron su acción al engrandecimiento de España.*

And the two girls left their load in the form of two precious little newborns, exact portraits of their admirable progenitor, Benitos by birth, even though with time ... they were summoned for military service, and so traveled to the Peninsula; the girls, if they didn't go into the history books as parasite removers of the *Real Patronato de Indígenas* [the autochthonous branch of the colonial regime], then they did as mothers of two brothers who committed their action to the exaltation of Spain. (79)

Juxtaposed with, and interspersed throughout this narrative are the representations of contemporary Mbini, which paint an entirely different picture from that of the quaint pleasantries and mild-mannered submission of Río Benito. While Río Benito is presented, explicitly and metaphorically, as the locus of cultural encounter, the place where day by day the reality of colonialism abounds, Mbini—the modern day counterpart—is characterized by emptiness and solitude. A place whose characters are nameless, Mbini rests on the relics of its colonial past.

By having his narrator periodically address an ambiguous “you,” Ávila writes his readers into the text and walks them through the quotidian reality of present-day Mbini:

*Das paso en este lugar y no encuentras más que vestigios de un pasado dinámico y emprendedor que dejó sus cenizas en forma de grandes naves de fábricas o*

*talleres ... . En las playas también se nota esta ineludable presencia del pasado en forma de trozos de hierro y docenas de barcazas de todos los tamaños sumergidas en la arena ... . Muchas veces, paseando por la playa, te sientas en la arena y apoyas la espalda en la oxidada pared de una de las barcazas ... . Absorto y contemplativo, olvidas que tienes por almohada al único testigo de muchas ilusiones, muchos proyectos, infinitas discusiones, miles de charlas, todos enterrados en esa capa de arena en cuya superficie ya crecen plantas amantes del sabor salado de los mares que ya han hecho historia.*

You pass by this place and you don't find anything but vestiges of a dynamic and enterprising past that left its ashes in the form of great factory or workshop halls ... . On the beaches one also notices the unavoidable presence of the past in the form of chunks of iron and dozens of barges of all sizes submerged in the sand ... . Often, while walking down the beach, you sit in the sand and rest your back against the rusty wall of one of the barges ... . Absorbed and contemplative, you forget that you have as a pillow the only witness to many illusions, many projects, infinite discussions, thousands of chats, all buried under that layer of sand on whose surface are already growing plants that love the salty flavor of the seas which have already made history. (17)

As a consequence of the economic wasteland that Mbini has become, its inhabitants have taken to almost nomadic wanderings, seeking financial promise as undocumented immigrants in nearby Gabon (31-33), and thus even the family unit is reconstituted: "All the women and men here have sons and daughters at the other side of another river that's further south."<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> "Todos los hombres y mujeres de aquí tienen hijos e hijas al otro lado de otro río que está más al sur". (31) This other river would be the Río Muni, which constitutes the geographical and territorial separation between Equatorial Guinea and Gabon. This area was purchased from local chieftains for Spain by explorer Manuel Iradier in 1884, thus constituting the first Spanish-held sub-Saharan territory on the continent. As such, Equatoguinean territory is regularly perceived as two distinct blocs: the island territories, such as Bioko and Annobón; and the continental territory, referred to as Río Muni.

But the disunity that characterizes this place is not only apparent in the way past and present are described. Each temporal space is accompanied by a corresponding set of attitudes. Indeed, it could be said that in the Río Benito of 1940 an air of tranquil trust and innocence—or ignorance—reigned and the hegemonic myths that sustained colonial power went unchallenged, on the other hand those left to witness the deterioration of present-day Mbini are said to have undergone a sort of revelation. This is perhaps most clear when one takes into account the vast discrepancies between how the Spanish exploitation of natural resources was seen “[i]n the Río Benito of those days,” (26) and how it is seen today. An example is Equatorial Guinea’s third-ranked export commodity,<sup>24</sup> timber. The way Ávila portrays it, in colonial times

*... nadie prestaba atención a las toneladas de madera, que tras ser bautizadas en las aguas, se embarcaban en los centenares de gabarras que había en la costa. Nadie abría su boca para decir ninguna palabra sobre la tala indiscriminada, la reforestación o ni siquiera mentar algo de los dividendos; la madera no tenía precio y su tala no perjudicaba a nadie.*

... nobody paid attention to the tons of wood that, after being baptized in the waters, embarked in hundreds of boats that were there along the coast. Nobody opened their mouth to say a word about the indiscriminate felling of trees, reforestation or even to mention the dividends; wood didn’t have a price and its felling didn’t hurt anyone. (26)

On the other hand, in Mbini:

*[c]uando los habitantes del lugar ven pasar los camiones de madera, se apartan del camino para no ser bañados por el polvo, y lejos del peligro, hacen cuentas*

---

<sup>24</sup> This according to the CIA World Factbook: <https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/ek.html#Econ>, visited 5/7/2007. Since the discovery of vast offshore petroleum deposits in the late 1990s timber has declined in economic importance, but still nonetheless accounts for a large percentage of GDP.

*de las casas que se podrían construir con un solo tronco de los pesados camiones; si es uno de estos aficionados a los ruidos de otras emisoras, su cálculo se hace más complejo: aparte de las casas, incluirá escuelas con comedores y pupitres, para que los niños no tengan que sufrir mucho para aprender ...*

[w]hen the inhabitants of this place see the wood trucks go by, they veer off the road to avoid being bathed in dust, and far from the danger, they take count of the houses that could be built with just one of the trunks from those loaded trucks; if it's one of these aficionados of other stations' noise, then their calculation is made more complex: aside from the houses, they'll include schools with cafeterias and desks so kids don't have to suffer much in order to learn ... (32-33).

That is to say that now not only the value of timber is duly noted—as Equatoguineans, bathed in dust, watch their resources (and revenues) being trucked away—but with a sarcastic jab at the state-run media, it's made clear that those who deign to expose themselves to the “noise” of other outlets also recognize that those revenues *should* be going to education and other social projects.

Ávila is quick to point out, however, that this shift in attitudes is by no means limited to the way that the locals of Mbini think about their resources and rights. As early as the second page, he makes clear that they are undergoing a process of realization, manifest in the opening of one's eyes, which exposes both the intentions that fueled and maintained the Spanish colonial presence and the true nature of the colonialists themselves, thus embodying just one of multiple devices that signal an Aristotelian *anagnorisis* in the minds of Ávila's subjects.

The eye motif coincides with the aforementioned attitudes so that those who have their eyes shut, or are figuratively asleep, can be said to be ignorant of the reality of their situation; and conversely those whose eyes are open or who may have had their

perspective shaped by history, are becoming keenly aware of the nefarious nature of the colonial and neocolonial projects. We therefore have a symbolic system in which Ávila equates vision with cognizance and blindness with ignorance, which functions particularly well in *La carga* because its bipartite nature—eyes are, after all, either open or closed, despite the various degrees of each state—is easily subordinated to the novel’s binary structure. This becomes evident when one considers that, given the way Ávila constructs things, the only subjects that are associated with shut eyes exist exclusively in the past, as the objects of the delicate task of “opening the eyes of those who *were* asleep to the light of strangers who arrived with different ideas about how to respond to life;”<sup>25</sup> whereas those whose eyes are open are almost exclusively those anonymous subjects that populate the novel’s enunciative present<sup>26</sup>.

When examining this motif, though, it is interesting to look beyond the simplified binary schematic to the distinct manner in which it is actually manifest in the text. While the Benitos who inhabited 1940 Río Benito had their eyes shut, the supposed ignorance that is attributed to them is advanced on two distinct fronts: that of the Spanish colonialists of the past and that of the novel’s implied contemporary narratological subjects (i.e., the narrator and his or her assumed interlocutor, represented by the ambiguous “you”).

---

<sup>25</sup> “*Lo justo es que en todo y todos estuviera la verdad para andar por estos caminos con el cuidado que merece el abrir los ojos a unos dormidos a la luz de extraños que llegaron con ideas distintas sobre cómo responder a la vida*”. (68, my emphasis)

<sup>26</sup> Of the four direct references made to open eyes, three (14, 15, 30) are attributed to either the narrator’s interlocutor—the ambiguous “you”—or an undefined “us,” both of which are clearly positioned within the present context of Mbini.

One example of this is seen when the town's caregiver, *señor Galván*, gives his perspective on the Benitos. In response to Anita Villamar's inquiry about what he thinks the locals ignore, he responds with confounded bewilderment:

*—Mira, todo hasta lo más elemental, como cagar. El otro día no me desmayé cuando, en mi ausencia, uno de estos sucios entró en mi baño para ... ¡coño! ¡Subir sobre la taza para cagar, cuando sus ojos les dicen claramente que es para sentarse!*

'Look, [they ignore] everything down to the most elemental, how to crap. The other day I nearly fainted when, in my absence one of these dirty buggers went in my washroom to ... good God! Climbing up on the toilet to crap, when their eyes clearly tell them that it's for sitting down.' (71)

In the seamless flow from the individual ("*one* of these dirty buggers") to the collective ("*their* eyes ... tell *them*") the action of one Benito is sufficient for *señor Galván* to make a sweeping generalization about the ignorance of all the Benitos, which results from their inability—or lack of desire—to act as their colonial masters do. Here Ávila locates one of the common arguments of the colonial discourse in his character *señor Galván*, positing that, due to their lack of aptitude with such common metropolitan utensils as the toilet, to use but one example, there was only one conclusion that could be reached about the entirety of the colonized Other: they were inferior and thus suffering a dearth of guidance from their enlightened European brothers.

It is exactly this type of thinking that is brought into question by the opening of eyes. While the ignorance bestowed by colonizers upon the local inhabitants of the colonial era was rooted in their deviation from metropolitan norms, that for which they are criticized in *La carga*'s present is derived from their attempts to mimic the behavior and institutions of the very Spaniards who saw them as ignorant. Indeed, the most



poignant incrimination of the indigenous actors in the colonial theatre is centered around their not having seen through the fractured façade of metropolitan hegemony, their nearly unfettered acceptance of white supremacy and their desire for self-integration into the socio-political systems of colonization.

At this point, however, it should be made clear that while subtle indictments of historical actors abound, *La carga*'s underlying objective—in my estimation—is not one of assigning culpability for a past gone awry. Instead, through the careful juxtaposition of two opposed temporal and spatial settings, along with their respective attitudes toward foreign intervention in autochthonous matters, Ávila successfully puts forward his explanation of what led to the ills suffered by his compatriots in recent times.

The manner in which the novel's opposing physico-temporal spaces are set against one another begs the question: what happened to cause such a drastic transition? And by establishing two concrete temporal points—1940 and the present—that are both portrayed in detail, but are separated by an amorphous temporal gap, Ávila is able to compel the reader to question just what it is that fills that vacuum, thus leveraging history so as to comment on the present.

In this sense, it could be said that *La carga* adheres to the primary tenet of what Michael Dash considers “Marvellous Realism,” in that it “stresses patterns of emergence from the continuum of history” (Ashcroft, *et al*: 199) in a manner that facilitates recognition of a colonial legacy without “[freezing] the Third World writer in a prison of protest.” (*ibid*: 200) But that is not to deprive the novel of its capacity for resistance; while Dash, in his essay, *The Way Out of Négritude*, pines for a renaissance of “Marvellous Realism” in “Third World” writers that transcends the resistance of earlier

genres in search of a new literary aesthetic, he painfully negates the real discursive capabilities of a literary work. And while *La carga* may be said to embody the aesthetic that Dash outlines, one cannot overlook its programmatic faculties and their function within a pattern of resistance to the neocolonial order.

## 2. The Struggle for History

An attempt has been made thus far to argue that by way of montage, *La carga* harkens to a new historiography in order to make a statement on the recent and current woes of Equatoguineans. And in spite of the risks one runs by trying to classify or categorize any artistic work, it behooves us to consider it as a variant of historical fiction.<sup>27</sup> Especially when one looks at a work of this type, or the definitive features of this literary sub-genre, it becomes necessary to question two aspects that—due perhaps to their seemingly obvious nature—oftentimes suffer neglect or are overlooked entirely: these are the historical aspect and the aspect of creation.

With respect to the genre, the term itself borders on redundancy; indeed, it may seem suitable to substitute such rubrics as fictitious or creative fiction for “historical fiction,” given that the “historical” component upon which the term relies depends on a historiography that is inevitably engendered, or manufactured, within the social imaginary, as has been demonstrated by Erich Auerbach, Benedict Anderson, Jacques Derrida and Homi K. Bhabha, among others.<sup>28</sup> Put simply, the historical *is* fiction, it is a creative fabrication that results from a given actor’s or group of actors’ process of signification, and Ávila skillfully uses this fact to his advantage.

---

<sup>27</sup> In this case the term “historical fiction” is used in the same manner as Doris Sommer in her description of the novelistic form of *El Zarco*. Doris Sommer, Foundational Fictions: the National Romances of Latin America (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) 230-31.

<sup>28</sup> See: Erich Auerbach, Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature, Trans. Willard Trask (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1957); Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities (New York: Verso, 1983); Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” Writing and Difference, Trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1978); Homi K. Bhabha, “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation,” The Location of Culture, Homi K. Bhabha (New York: Routledge, 1994) 199-244, respectively.

## 2.1 The Fluid Meaning of History

**history:** †story, tale; methodical narrative of events, branch of knowledge dealing with these XV; methodical account of natural phenomena XVI. — L. *historia* — Gr. *historí* learning or knowing by inquiry, narrative, history, f. *hístr* knowing, learned, wise man :- *Fidtr*, f. *Fid-* know (see WIT2). So **historian** XV. — (O)F. **historic** XVII; **historical** XVI. f. L. *historicus* — Gr. *historikós*.<sup>29</sup>

Derrida cunningly captured two of the key factors that condition the fictivity of history when he wrote that history is “the continuous toil of factual transformations.” (Derrida 291) Here two concepts emerge that will be paramount in the characterization of historical fiction: that of substitution and that of process.

The production of historiography mirrors certain discourses of Nation in many respects, and is therefore nourished by—while simultaneously nurturing—the debate that such discourses generate. Take, for example, the interplay between notions of historicity and Nation that Anderson employs in Imagined Communities. To support his theory of the emergence of the very concept of Nation, Anderson relies on the paradigm shift from one method of perceiving historical time to another. He posits that only with the transition from what Walter Benjamin deemed Messianic time to the Benjaminian conception of “homogeneous, empty time” was the surfacing of the Nation and national identities made possible. Paramount among these opposed temporalities were their respective notions of the *simultaneity* of events. In an idea similar to Benjamin’s Messianic time, Auerbach fleshes out a temporality completely devoid of causal or

---

<sup>29</sup> “history” The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology. Ed. T. F. Hoad. Oxford University Press, 1996, *Oxford Reference Online*, Oxford University Press, University of British Columbia, 18 June 2007  
<<http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t27.e7212>>

temporal relations among events, in which the simultaneity of two given events transcends horizontal logic and can only be attributed to Divine Providence. Homogeneous, empty time, on the other hand, consists of a serial conception in which the simultaneity of events arbitrarily emerges based on their respective locations within the horizontal temporal scheme of the clock, or the calendar. (Anderson 23-25)

With the transition from Messianic time to homogenous, empty time—the “omnitemporal” to the serial—the concept of simultaneity is modified, altering meaning and opening a *locus* of signification that for Anderson is embodied by the term “meanwhile.” The import of the meanwhile in the production of history thus becomes a key component in the construction of modern historiographic narratives as it takes on dimensions that reflect the same arbitrary emptiness (or more precisely, the substitution of emptiness) that Derrida captures in the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss and his notions of *mana*, *Wakau*, *oranda* or a mere *valuer symbolique zéro*. (Derrida 290)

The unifying variable that is seen in all of these concepts has its roots in the whim of the linguistic sign: the representation of a determined signified notion by an arbitrarily assigned signifier, which while made finite by selection, may be drawn from an infinite array of possibilities. In the whimsical nature of the very precipitation of meaning, or the arbitrary generation of the signifier from an infinite quantity of possibilities, is derived Derrida’s concept of *play*, which expresses the fluidity of constitution and captures the abundant possibilities for substitution. The signifier and its overabundance, according to Derrida, are “the result of a lack which must be *supplemented*” (*ibid*), and are in constant opposition to the absence of signification. And therein lies what might be referred to as the *constituent tension* of play; a definitive absence continually set against the infinite

abundance of a supplement constitutes an eventual, and ever-changing, *locus* of signification. Thus with regard to structure, play is what conditions the substance of a center; in language play shapes meaning; with regard to existence, play determines presence; and in temporal terms, play is the meanwhile that comes to exemplify that undefined structural space where margins dissolve into a malleable substrate. It is the agar of signification, where a continual fluctuation between presence and absence engenders a sort of conduit of definition.

Yet, in his essay *Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences*, Derrida alludes to two distinct conceptions of play that are imbued with contrary structural import (his “two interpretations of interpretation). For at times play is presented as an opposing force that contradicts or presents a balance that keeps the definitive centers such as history and presence in check (292; 279). In these instances play serves as an amorphous pole that stands opposite a closed, individualized center. And at other times, the generating thrust that constitutes those centers is located within play itself, thus engendering a third space, the proverbial theatre of battle in which the components of play’s tension are ceaselessly at odds and the center is continually open and in flux (280).

In the former case one must necessarily assume the freezing of time, as though observing a snapshot in which the constant reformation of the center has been captured as still life and is therefore made capable of being extracted from the generating tension of play. In this view, the center is seen as segregated and independent of play, which presents a counterweight, comprised of its own separate and isolated elements; here all of the actors that perpetuate the drama of play become immutable, lifeless objects, frozen

because there is no time in which to act. If there is movement, or action, it is constricted by the parameters of its respective pole, so that an element of play can never be an active component of the center and vice versa.

In the case of the latter, on the other hand, the opposition of center and play is conceived as process. The opposition between the agents of play is continuous. The fluidity of time is left unconstrained and elements are shared between the binary poles as they flow from one to another. Tension is thus not viewed as an either-or situation but instead as one of both-and; the active elements do not constitute either a definitive center or the arbitrariness of play, but they comprise both center and play.<sup>30</sup>

Outside the confines of the temporal, in the physical realm, when constituent tension is considered to be located within play, the end result reflects a position similar to the dialectical materialist idea of categorial conversion. According to dialectical materialism, all elements can be reduced to one, base-level component that constitutes everything. But in order to account for the distinct nature of different elements, the concept of dialectical self-motion is asserted as the process by which the same principal element—matter, for example—may take on varied categorical forms: say the reason why a book is not a plant even though both are derived from the same base element. The self-motion of an object is the result of an inner tension of quantitative forces—similar in many respects to the constituent tension of play—that influences that object's qualitative features, depending on their abundance or lack thereof. (Nkrumah, 22-26)

---

<sup>30</sup> For a discussion of this dichotomy and the role of irony in fomenting the both-and, see W.H. New, *Grandchild of Empire: About Irony, Mainly in the Commonwealth* (Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2003). This idea also appears in a pertinent, yet modified, form in Achille Mbembe, *The Aesthetics of Vulgarly, On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) 102-141.

That is to say, any given qualitative property —such as color, for instance—is the result of its quantitative significance relative to that of other properties. So that in the case of color, if an object reflects a majority of long-wavelength waves (a quantitative property) the perceived color of that object will be within the warmer hues. Conversely, if an object reflects fewer long-wavelength waves the resulting perceived color will be in the colder hues. Color is thus constituted by the quantitative tension between long-and short-wavelength waves.

If, however, this phenomenon is conceived as a process rather than a fact, the tension becomes dialectical, thus triggering the possibility of categorial conversion. (*ibid* 25) Returning to the example of color, if quantitative tension is viewed as a dialectical process, that is as a continual ebb and flow of long-and short-wavelength waves being reflected off an object's surface—as is the case in any situation where a light source may be mobile, say under the sun for example—then that object's color is subjected to the possibility of a categorial shift (say from red to orange) limited only to the boundaries of the light spectrum. It could therefore be said that the color (or any qualitative attribute for that matter, even meaning) of an object (or signified) at any given time is subordinated to the play between absence and presence of waves (or signifiers) of a certain wavelength (or character) at that time and that as such, the production of color (or meaning) should be viewed by and large as a process of fluctuating states rather than a concrete, immutable reality.

The import of process therefore becomes paramount in the distinction between the two forms of play that are outlined in *Structure, Sign and Play*, so that when Derrida explains: “Besides the tension between play and history, there is also the tension between



play and presence[, p]lay is the disruption of presence” (Derrida 292)—thus positing the two in opposition to one another—if it assumed that this tension exists in a temporal dimension and may therefore be seen as a process, then one cannot help but allocate the constituent agency of tension squarely and wholly *within* the notion of play itself. The reading of Derrida then becomes more likened to the following: the tension posed by play does not only constitute history but it governs presence, and therefore existence, as well. That is to say that both temporalities and existence itself are here viewed as the subjects of a process, not an immutable state, and therefore emerge from a dialectic, as opposed to being the final result of a binary standoff.

It is this conception of play that is reflected in the simultaneity that bonds events in the temporality of homogenous, empty time, as the perceived centers—that is, the temporal blips of minutes, days, months, years, centuries, etc.—are defined by drawing from the infinite overabundance of events that by way of the meanwhile are represented as the stuff that imbues those centers with substance. So, in the same way that an object’s self-motion may condition the categorial conversion of its qualitative attributes, the tension presented by the meanwhile is now conditioning the meaning of historical centers.

To give an example, the significance of the year 1940, if one assumes no definitional limitations or constraints, is infinite thanks to the meanwhile; the essence of that year may be derived from the fact that war raged in Europe while the Canadian Parliament was dissolved and Hemmingway was writing For Whom the Bell Tolls, *meanwhile* Trotsky died and Frank Zappa was born, *meanwhile* a bullet was manufactured and the sun shone while two people went swimming, etc. The only

connection that would allow for these and countless other events that to characterize the year 1940 lies in their integration into the temporal logic of the meanwhile,<sup>31</sup> a logic which places infinite signifiers at odds in the conflict for definitional agency. History then, while it may be—and often times is—boiled down to a finite chronology of facts, events, notions or movements, is nonetheless drawn from a potentially infinite cache of defining elements, each of which goes through a process of selection, alteration, juxtaposition or even omission at the moment of its telling—thus rendering the production of historiographic narratives an imaginative act of creation.

## 2.2 History as a Creative Product

**fiction:** something feigned, invention XIV; composition dealing with imaginary events XVI. — (O)F. — L. ficti, -n-, f. fict-; see prec. and -TION. So **fictitious** XVII. f. L. ficticius.<sup>32</sup>

Let it be said for the record that all these terms—constituent tension, self-motion, *ration supplémentaire*,<sup>33</sup> the conflict for definitional agency—seek to express the arbitrary and fluctuating nature of things, and the intent behind their employ is to explain the dialectical space in which discourses in general, and the ideas put forth in *La carga* in

---

<sup>31</sup> This is perhaps most clearly seen in encyclopedic categorization of time, where entries for any given date rattle off a litany of occurrences that together, although no causal connections may be demonstrated, comprises the meaning of that particular point in time. For an example see the Wikipedia entry for 1940 at [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org); in conformity with the encyclopedic ilk, the events that define that year, although organized into categories, are ultimately linked by one overriding factor: they all occurred within the same defined temporal context of January to December, 1940. As such, they are presented as defining that temporal context.

<sup>32</sup> "fiction" The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology. Ed. T. F. Hoad, Oxford University Press, 1996, *Oxford Reference Online*, Oxford University Press, University of British Columbia, 18 June 2007  
<<http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t27.e5675>>

<sup>33</sup> Lévi-Strauss' term for the "*supplementary* character" of the signifier, as interpreted in: Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," Writing and Difference, Trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1978).

particular, interact with their referential counterparts. That is to say they represent an attempt at capturing the logic of interplay between, for example, Ávila, José Martí and Manuel Iradier; or between writers like Ávila and the voices of neocolonialism. Thus the aforementioned terms define the court on which the game of historical dialectic is played, they clarify the rules and govern intertextual exchange.

Keeping in mind the significance of viewing the processional nature of things, however, one might be inclined to ask how anything can ever take on meaning within such dialectical space. Here Derrida assigns the allocation of meaning to actors who are responsible for the “overturning of nature in nature, a natural interruption of the natural sequence, a setting aside *of* nature.” In reference to Lévi-Strauss he acknowledges that “in accordance with a gesture that was also Rousseau’s and Husserl’s, he must ‘set aside all the facts’ at the moment when he wishes to recapture the specificity of a structure.” (*ibid*) That is to say, meaning is applied only once an agent of some sort exercises the will to interrupt and freeze the dialectical process.

If we are to accept this as the true method of recapturing specificity, applying meaning, establishing presence or defining temporality, then the key component is an actor—or group of actors—capable of freezing the dialectical process, interrupting the natural sequence, or setting aside all the facts. For example, the creation of fiction is contingent upon the action of one who feigns, invents, composes or imagines. In the creation of historiography, this translates to a want for some agent who will carry out the process of selection, who will alter, juxtapose and, if need be, omit. Additionally, for the production of historiographic narratives in particular, a medium and set of tools through

which these agents may act are also necessities. For a look into these components, Anderson's theory of the rise of the Nation again serves as a valuable starting point.

The tripartite structural form implied by the aforementioned terms—that of the two-sided conflict which engenders, or constitutes, a separate and all-encompassing whole—is the link between the discursive make-up of history and Nation that allows Anderson to frame his theory of the Nation as an imagined community. As he walks his reader through the Nkrumahian categorial conversion of simultaneity, he presents the meanwhile as a new theatre of battle, or play, in the fabrication of history. And this transformation of simultaneity from a finite, controlled correlation of events to the play of the meanwhile opens a new *locus* of imagining/writing national histories. (Anderson 35) With the simultaneity of events taking on new forms, he argues, the vacuous dearth of signification left by the extinguished agency of the divine blurred the parameters of historiography, and homogenous, empty time left historicity wide open to interpretation.

While in the pre-national “Dynastic Realm,” access to historicity and its consequent telling lay exclusively in the hands of the divine, or those who claimed to represent it (i.e. the clergy, monarchs, etc), the surfacing of homogenous, empty time meant a crisis of historiographic authority, which was allocated through the arbitrary play of the meanwhile. (*ibid* 19-26) This meant that new media and new actors became the sources of authority and the meanings with which historiography was imbued went from serving a divine (i.e., a clerical) agenda to that of the national establishment.

According to Anderson, this process was spurred on by the birth of print capitalism and the two key phenomena it propagated. As he describes it, collective national imaginings grew out of print capitalism's linguistic consolidation and the mass

dissemination of books, and later newspapers. While it served to promote vernacularization—or the fragmentation of dominant languages such as Latin into vernaculars—print capitalism simultaneously acted to consolidate the very same vernaculars whose growth it fostered, spawning “unified fields of communication below Latin and above the spoken vernaculars,” which he refers to as print-languages. (43-45)

This seemingly contradictory process could be seen in the fact that as the increased publishing in print-languages aided in the process of expanding the use of vernaculars, it also established a preserved, written standard that constricted and consolidated their formal growth. Congruent with the secularizing thrust of the Reformation, the exploitation of these newly formed monoglot markets, he argues, contributed to the dissipation of Latin’s communicative hegemony (39) and, as some print-languages replaced Latin as regional administrative idioms, the voice of Divine Providence, embodied by Latin, was supplanted by the pre-pubescent squeaking of state-adopted vernaculars (like was the case with Castilian as the sixteenth-century Spanish state vied with Rome for administrative control, to give one example). In this manner, print-languages served as the cornerstones of national consciousnesses. (44)

If the print-languages were the motors of nascent national fomentation, however, the project of national imagining still suffered a want of actors to precipitate it and the media through which to carry it out. It was the mass dissemination of texts that presented the opportunity of a space and focus in which readers who otherwise shared no social linkages could be united in the endeavor of collective imagining. The import of the newspaper in this process was of particular interest to Anderson, as it both solidified a widely accepted historiography and engaged readers in the simultaneous, collective

ceremony of imbibing its version of history. First, the newspaper is presented as a tangible manifestation of narratives intertwined by the happenstance of the calendar and made possible by the supplementary nature of the meanwhile. As was outlined earlier, the meanwhile gave rise to a bottomless chasm of connectivity between events and in their contrived juxtaposition on the newspaper's front page they formulate a distinct account that is shared solely among the community constituted by that paper's readership. (33)

Next there is the perpetual ritual that positions all members of the community of readers within the same temporal scheme, centering their focus around the same chronology of the same narratives, in addition to fomenting their awareness of one another:

The obsolescence of the newspaper on the morrow of its printing ... creates this extraordinary mass ceremony: the almost precisely simultaneous consumption ('imagining') of the newspaper-as-fiction. ... Yet each communicant is well aware that the ceremony [s/he] performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence [s/]he is confident, yet of whose identity [s/]he has not the slightest notion. (35)

In this manner, Anderson argues, linguistic fragmentation and consolidation, together with the emergence of print capitalism, and particularly the newspaper, gave birth to a new form of imagined community that he puts forth as the basis of the Nation.

Perhaps with a slightly more detailed gloss, Doris Sommer expands on the Andersonian import of the print media, suggesting that despite his "brilliantly" argued portrayal of how national consolidation in the New World emerged from the collective imagining presented by the newspaper, he is "strangely silent" on the ideological predispositions that, through novels in particular, informed such consolidation. Novels, she argued, especially due to their serialized publication in newspapers, did not merely condition the process of collective imagining, but via the national allegories that they

perpetuated, novels influenced the ideological make-up and social values of the very communities they sought to reflect:

We can read out of Anderson's observations that in addition to sharing news items, print communities were being consolidated because everyone who read the paper was either laughing or (usually) panting and crying over the same installment of a serialized novel. Yet he doesn't discuss the passions constructed by reading novels, or their ideal gender models[, which] were teaching future republicans to be passionate in a rational and seductively horizontal way. (Sommer 40)

The point being, the homogenous, empty temporality of the novel is not necessarily empty, so much as faced with the persistent threat of emptiness. There is no longer any divine mandate looming in the background with a concrete, designated default signifier. Instead signification is contingent upon the action of a given agent. And in Sommer's estimation, that action, the act of supplementing a discursive void with some agenda or ideological program, even a value set, goes unaddressed in Imagined Communities.

By Sommer's assessment, in the case of nineteenth-century foundational fictions that agent was the novel, and the diffusion of ideology was entrenched in the capability of the novel to smooth transitions between fiction and history; through the allegorical melding of gender and politics, literary works charted a course that programmed societal responses to extra-literary phenomena. Over the course of the century, the transformation of the archetypical male hero presented a blueprint for societal conduct with regard to Spanish imperialism (this was embodied by the soldier figure), then the project of national consolidation (portrayed by the patriarch) and right up to a newly kindled rejection of imperialist intervention, this time coming from the North (seen in the revival of the soldier-fighter-resister). (*ibid* 23) This intimate interplay between fiction and

history blurred boundaries so that when a programmatic novel such as Sarmiento's *Facundo*, for example, put forth the binary of civilization and barbarism, it also imposed that same opposition upon the historiography of that period. So when Rambé's aunt and Utondi's mother argue about such an important aspect of Equatoguinean history as servitude (see pages 82-83), the final conclusion drawn from Ávila's representations, nourishes a discourse that exists beyond *La carga* and influences the definition of that history.

So to return for a moment to history's conflict for definitional agency, it could be argued that *La carga*, by offering a unique selection of vignettes, breaks with the dialectic and recaptures specificity. Within the novel, 1940 is constructed in a manner that draws from historicity, yet also determines historiography. The prevalent phenomena of the time—the reality of the colonial project, a legacy of slavery, but also a vivacious local mythology and the internal rifts that crop up in any community—all inform the way that 1940 Río Benito is represented. But it is the overall representation that, in the end, defines the time. Nineteen forty is not the historicity or the phenomena that condition it, it is the final result of those factors, after having been filtered through the interpretive actions of an agent.

Granted, this conclusion easily faces the threat of extremist totalization; one might easily maintain that, based on this premise, meanings could be said to be as populous as actors, and therefore insignificant. If for every new actor there is a new and distinct meaning applied, or for every novel set in 1940 there is a new significance assigned to the time, then significance itself is eventually subverted. But it is precisely when taken to the extreme that the democratic and cyclical nature of the dialectic is uncovered. If



indeed Nkrumah's version of self-motion is applicable outside the material realm, it then stands to reason that every actor becomes a component of its respective meaning's quantitative make-up (i.e. Ávila and *La carga* are merely two of many actors who define History). In this respect, the internal debate that is closed with a novel's writing—that Unamunian death of ideas mentioned earlier—does not remain static, but rather forms part of a larger, external or “extra-textual,” debate much in the same way that a light wave, while clearly defined and determined in the moment of its happening, plays a role in the larger—and unstable—process of determining color. This then recalls the thinking that informs Said's methodological categorizations of a work's internal strategic location and the role it plays in an external strategic formation.

### 3. Location, Location, Location!

In keeping with this dialectical notion of history, Ávila is careful to restrict the agency he bestows upon his characters to the level of interpretation. Through metaphor in *La carga*, the anthropocentric narratological division of setting and characters, objects and subjects, is transcended in a manner that imbues natural elements with as much, and in some arenas more, agency than their human counterparts. The division is, ironically, maintained here—in this analysis—in order that the four distinct forms that agency takes on (mimicry, ridicule, communication and writing) may be outlined, as for the most part they arise out of the relationship of natural elements *to* humans.

The first and most common category of nature's agency that appears in *La carga* is that which bestows the traits and actions of humans on animals and other non-human entities. Ávila's portrait of Río Benito is sometimes infused with mystery, other times—and quite often—humor, as owls “scratch [their] throat[s], feeding old stories of witches and spells,”<sup>34</sup> “bats give themselves a banquet and tell jokes,”<sup>35</sup> and some “birds announce the imminent night,”<sup>36</sup> while others rush “past the rest to the bedroom.”<sup>37</sup> In

---

<sup>34</sup> “[u]n búho rasca su garganta, alimentando viejas historias de brujas y hechizos. El viento juega con las hojas de las palmeras y cocoteros, y alguna rama cansada descansa sobre el tejado, produciendo este roce que puede ser motivo de intranquilidad en las casas más solitarias”. (20-21)

<sup>35</sup> “Detrás de las casas, en los naranjos y platanales, los murciélagos se dan un banquete y cuentan chistes ...”. (20)

<sup>36</sup> “... ya cantan ciertos pájaros anunciando la inminente noche”. (29)

<sup>37</sup> “Por las tardes, cuando el sol ya recogía sus instrumentos de encender fuego, cuando los pájaros más perezosos y charlatanes metían prisa a los demás para ir al dormitorio, los hombres de Río Benito hacían lo que tenían que hacer, según las necesidades de cada cual”. (27)

this respect, the sun is most liberally doted, acquiring eyes and yawning,<sup>38</sup> tools for maintaining its daily flames<sup>39</sup> and even the enjoyment of leisure time, spent in the waters when not at work.<sup>40</sup>

Such a personification of natural elements is the first hint of what *La carga* inherits from the Ndowe oral tradition outlined by Creus, for it marks an initial departure from the rigid separation of a subject from her/his surroundings.

### 3.1 Toward a Colonial Dialectic

***[P]aradoja: no siempre lo bueno es la causa de tentación.***

**[P]aradox: good is not always the cause of temptation. (Ávila 1999: 33)**

Beyond the mere appropriation of human attributes, the actors of nature, and specifically animals, are granted the power of ridicule. This is perhaps best demonstrated in the episode of *señor* Navarro's hilarious encounter with the two ravenous swine (58-61). Typical of his poor planning, *señor* Navarro is plagued by hunger pangs after giving away the bulk of his supplies in a generous yet ill-fated gesture of thanks. As a result, he finds himself obliged to leverage his position of prestige in order to secure a few fresh fish from the local fisherman. Yet, the saving of face that he was able to manage with the fishermen—by maneuvering out of begging—was sure to be corrected by fate; and his one moment of *hamartia* is ultimately due to an over-blown drive to expedite his

---

<sup>38</sup> “*Todos los que viven bajo el cielo creen que un nuevo día tiende sus brazos cuando el sol abre sus ojos para bostezar por primera vez, invitando a chicos y grandes a extender pies y brazos y dar la vuelta sobre la almohada*”. (24)

<sup>39</sup> See note no. 37.

<sup>40</sup> “*Era una de estas mañanas en que el sol, antes de salir de las aguas, se asoma por la puerta y con un ojo advierte a los mortales que se dirigen a sus quehaceres, que su trabajo sera duro*”. (55)

stomach's mollification, for rather than wait for the fisherman to deliver their catch to the lieutenant governor's home, he elects to take it himself right away. It is then, on the path home, that his future meal meets its demise to the snorting chorus of the two pushy pigs and their thirty-some-odd offspring. In the end, *señor* Navarro is left hanging for dear life from a tree limb, "imploring the assistance of the holy heavens' pork and livestock saints,"<sup>41</sup> while the hungry horde of hogs devours his meal in a frenzy beneath his feet. The ridicule of this unfortunate momentary lapse of firmness is two-fold: not only must he shamefully face the locals, who incidentally save him with a few mere swings of a stick, but according to Ávila's depiction, the pigs themselves, in their actions and thoughts, deliver blows to the white man's pride.

Never mind the implicit embarrassment of being found dangling over the frenzied consumption of what once was his fish, two actions taken on behalf of the swine uncover a pre-meditated intent to belittle and ridicule Navarro, the high functionary of the colonial order. And beyond merely gleaming a laugh, this action, when set against the reaction of the Benitos, exposes a revealing side of what we may call the colonial dialectic.

The first and most damaging of these actions is the pigs' decision to "demonstrate" their superior physical prowess when, realizing the designs they have set on his fish, *señor* Navarro makes a break for safety:

*Como vióse el hispano que aquello se tornaba amenazante ... quiso echarse a correr pero las ladinas adivinaron su pensamiento, y abandonando todo cariño y mimo hacia sus cochinitos, se prestaron a demostrarle que cuatro patas corren más que dos.*

---

<sup>41</sup> "Este, por su parte, imploró el auxilio de todos los santos porqueros y ganaderos del santo cielo ...". (59)

As the Spaniard saw [the pigs' interest] turning threatening ... he wanted to get running but the crafty beasts read his mind, and abandoning all affection and pampering toward their piglets, they set out to demonstrate to him [señor Navarro] that four paws run faster than two (59).

There are innumerable ways in which the fact that the hogs chased *señor* Navarro down in order to get his fish might be communicated, but it is relevant to note that rather than relegating the pigs to the passive role of objects moved by hunger, they are granted the necessary agency to act. Indeed there is no question, and it is made abundantly clear, that securing gastrointestinal amelioration for themselves and their little ones was the pigs' priority number one, but rather than the lieutenant governor's unfortunate situation being presented as a mere externality of their desires, through its wording, *señor* Navarro's ridicule is instead made a direct consequence of their conscious, pre-meditated decision to *prove* him slower and weaker. Thus Ávila stresses their active choice to demonstrate their superiority and, in effect, his Navarro's inferiority. Insult is then added to injury when, secondly, the piglets highlight their mothers' triumph by inquiring as to what this man is doing frozen by fear and hanging over their mothers' heads, bordering on a sardonic characterization of this silly man's response to the hogs' advances:

*Las dos puérperas gruñeron triunfantes y se acercaron al apetecido regalo moviendo los rabos ... mientras que alguno de los cochinitos, entre sorbo y sorbo de la caliente leche, miraba arriba y preguntaba por lo que hacia este señor colgado sobre las cabezas de sus madres.*

The two sows triumphantly grumbled and closed in on the appetizing gift moving their tails ... while one of the little pigs, between sips of warm milk, looked up and asked about what this man was doing hanging over the heads of their mothers (*ibid*).

Thus the pigs' reaction to *señor* Navarro's circumstance—bringing the white man's absurdity, or at the very least his silliness and overreaction, to the fore—is set in stark contrast to that of the Benitos (Utondi and her mother) who witness his cries for help. Contrary to the inquisitive observations of the pigs, Utondi and her mother's stumbling upon the lieutenant governor fixed to a tree limb generates no commentary. To read Ávila's account, they calmly and quietly come to his aid without question of how he may have come to find himself in such odd circumstances, which in turn allows him to maintain some semblance of the infallible superiority that accompanies officialdom under the colonial order. It is this same attitude which avoids any questioning of the lieutenant governor's aptitude for surviving in Africa when he runs out of food and must therefore resort to what in any other social circumstance would surmount to begging in order to feed himself; or when he shows up infested by ticks and relies on the locals to clean him up; or when he contracts the undisclosed sickness, which in order to nullify any culpability whatsoever is attributed to “bacterial agents that abound in hot countries and affect the genitals of men and women who have been or are in these countries [, i]t's a tropical sickness.”<sup>42</sup> In all of these instances, what pervades is a tremendous topical void in which the question of why this man is seen as superior reverberates in a vast silence—

---

<sup>42</sup> It should be remembered that doctor Ramirez and the nurse, don Jorge Luís Galván, are cognizant of the implications that knowledge of *señor* Navarro's sickness may have on the ability of the colonial administration to function on the mainland. Doctor Ramirez therefore employs caution in his explanation of the lieutenant governor's disease, using this circuitous definition when Anita Villamar asks him what may have caused it: “—*Agentes bacterianos que abundan en los países cálidos y que afectan los genitals de hombres y mujeres que han estado o están en estos países. Es una enfermedad tropical*”. (66-67) When Ana inquires as to how one contracts such bacteria, the doctor can only reluctantly reply with a drawn-out, hesitant “well ...,” as he struggles to avoid the truth. For more on this, refer to the conversation between Ana and *señor* Galván. (64)

and indeed, by extension, the system that substantiates his power undergoes no scrutiny either.

Going back for a moment to the eyes-closed metaphor, this may be read as yet another example in which the Benitos have yet to open their eyes to the faltering façade of superiority that sheltered their colonizers. Or this may be attributable to the Master-Slave Dialectic; in which the members of a subordinated group may play dual roles, simultaneously sustaining and subverting the master-class' hegemony. A clear instance of this second case can be seen in Rambé's solution to the question of job security, leaving a tick or two on the "privileged feet" of her employer to ensure the need of her services in a week's time. (41) But while the notion of the Master-Slave Dialectic offers insight into the composition of opposed roles under the colonial order (i.e. the "oppressed" Benitos and the "oppressive" Spaniards), a look at what henceforth will be referred to as the colonial dialectic informs the version of historicity that the confluence of said roles produced.

By "colonial dialectic" what is meant here is to consider the interaction of actors and discourses solidified by the process of colonization, and active in sustaining the hegemony that posits one subject in subordination to another. So, to base oneself on the portrait of the past presented by *La carga*, it could be said that the predominant notions, customs and institutions that held up Spanish superiority were indeed the result of a dialectical contribution—an ideological, practical and institutional self-motion—made on behalf of varied actors from both the dominant and the subservient sectors. Intertwined with the oppressor-oppressed dichotomy is the sense of enchantment for the colonizer

and *his*<sup>43</sup> ways that eases the locals into their situation of subjugation. With even a cursory look at the death of Rambé's father (21-24), for example, the pervasiveness of Spanish superiority and the depths to which it penetrated come into focus.

The implications of a perceived Spanish superiority in Manuel Mungule's death are two-fold: 1) he died while crossing the San Benito river *en route* to Bata—the capital of continental Spanish Guinea—where he was to join the Indigenous Guard; and 2) the cause of his death, although not entirely clear, came about after valiantly swimming to the rescue of a flighty sun bonnet, the owner of which was a woman of high metropolitan esteem. The impetus that drove Manuel to throw himself into the waters of such infamous repute<sup>44</sup> can only be speculated on, but given the lengths to which his story is tied to respect for *el blanco*, it would be safe to assume that he would not have made such a sacrifice for the hat of a local woman.

Regardless of whether the leap that ended up being his last was inspired by hopes of gaining favor among the colonial elite, the motive behind his journey certainly was. Interestingly, Manuel's ill-fated departure is spurred by the same desire to benefit from alignment with the metropole that is seen a generation later in the actions of his daughter, although as a woman, the options made available to Rambé for attaining a position of benefit under the colonial regime are drastically limited in comparison with those that her father enjoyed. What is more, the measures taken by Rambé are taboo at best and cause

---

<sup>43</sup> Given the similitude that binds discourses of colonization to the hegemony of the patriarchal system, this is one of the few instances where the politically correct rubric of "his or hers" can safely be discarded. For an interesting take on the matter, see Mbembe's interpretation of colonialism a "phallic." (2001: 13)

<sup>44</sup> The river is, of course, said to be the home of some unknown beast, to whom at least one death before Manuel's was attributed. (19)



for admonishment at worst, while Manuel's hopes of integration into the colonial power structure are a source of admiration among his peers. After all the Indigenous Guard "enjoyed the esteem of the young and the not so young, as it meant receiving orders straight from the whites."<sup>45</sup>

This phenomenon is by no means limited to the Mungules. Indeed it could be considered a trope of the cultural malaise spawned by the imposition of values and practices from abroad with no regard for the wellbeing of those imposed upon, as is the case in all imperial endeavors. From this imposition *and* its acceptance then arises the colonial dialectic, for it should be noted that pride in and respect for the *Patronato de Indígenas*—despite the fact that by all accounts its real sway lay in the force of the baton (22; 48) and bribery often circumvented lawfulness—<sup>46</sup> was rooted in the prestige bestowed on it by the colonialists, but preserved by the locals buying into that prestige, with total disregard for its less-than-noble implications for their own wellbeing. Acceptance of norms imposed from the metropole can also be seen in the implicit subjugation of the Benitos' seemingly quotidian manner of "investigating the wishes of His Excellence" (i.e. asking about Navarro's needs) whenever he walks by, which is the clear product of long-term exposure to the unwritten laws of colonization. For only

---

<sup>45</sup> "[E]ste cuerpo gozaba de la estima de los jóvenes y los no tan jóvenes, pues suponía recibir órdenes del mismo blanco". (11)

<sup>46</sup> Just look at how the dispute between the two girls' mothers was finally solved, after the threat of violence, the women calm down and the officer is appeased with collusion. (48-49)

“those older ones, that are the ones that understand about titles and favors,”<sup>47</sup> extend such a courtesy.

These are, of course, not the only attitudes that comprise the colonial dialectic, in fact they only account for a mere vignette of one side of its composition. And indeed, even these examples—pride in one’s aspirations of serving the powers that be; sacrifice made in the service of a lady; or inquiring about one’s wishes in place of a friendly greeting—could all easily be written off as circumstantial, mere formalities that might occur in any social setting, were it not for their adherence to the social doctrine and practices introduced with the imposition of imperial might and the fable of white supremacy. The truly telling indication is in the fact that Ávila constructs a world in which all these actions take place according to a unidirectional model in which there are, for example, no Spaniards returning the same niceties to the locals, and—perhaps more significant—the same formalities are practiced by the locals but not *among* them; they don’t extend the same gestures to one another that they do to the Spaniards. Instead an inherent distancing permeates all interactions between colonizer and colonized, as is demonstrated by *señor* Navarro’s practice of only laughing “openly when he was in the company of compatriots, limiting himself to discretely smiling when dealing with the natives,”<sup>48</sup> or his slightly more calculated method of congratulating the fishermen without lifting a finger to assist them in their labor, all the while knowing that they couldn’t

---

<sup>47</sup> “*Después [señor Navarro] fue saludado respetuosamente por los hombres y mujeres, los de más edad, que son los que entienden de dignidades y prebendas, indagando por los deseos de Su Excelencia*”. (40)

<sup>48</sup> “*Sólo se reía abiertamente cuando estaba en compañía de otros paisanos, limitándose a sonreír discretamente cuando trataba con los natives*”. (35)

receive the good words of someone in his position without responding in some gesture of appreciation, hence his securing of the famed fish. (58)

These, of course, are mild forms in which the segregation of colonizer and colonized, based on a model of perceived superiority and inferiority, are manifest. One need not look far nor deep for a taste of the grave breaches of humanity that account for colonialism as a phenomenon, but the more sinister side of this destructive methodology, rather than surfacing among the interpersonal relations of the characters, is represented within *La carga* by its absence and by the bleak imprint it has left on modern-day Mbini.

So the implicit modes of exploitation that were a built-in trait of the colonial order, receive a subdued, although nonetheless pertinent, treatment reminiscent of old-time efforts to subvert metropolitan censors<sup>49</sup> and avoid outright—and dangerous—criticism of the dominant powers. In this vain, the blatant misuse of the girls' sexuality on both the part of the lieutenant governor *and* their own families is masked in terms that soften the impact of such a practice, while still communicating the ultimate objective of the endeavor. Therefore, in the first sweeping panorama of life in Río Benito, the reader is given a glimpse of Mbemba, one of the girls' mothers, in a corner of the church,

*haciendo la presentación de su hija al señor Navarro, comisario español y lugarteniente del Gobernador. Está claro que esta presentación no equivalía a decir 'aquí le presento a mi hija soltera; cásatela y que Dios os dé muchos hijos y a mí muchos privilegios' sino más bien 'aquí le presento a esta hija mía. Nadie sabe lo que ocurrirá; quizá os encontréis en otra parte, ya sea aquí o en el cielo y os ayudaréis mutuamente'.*

---

<sup>49</sup> Mbare N'gom, "The Missing Link: African Hispanism at the Dawn of the Millennium," *Arachne@Rutgers: Journal of Iberian and Latin American Literary and Cultural Studies* vol.1 no.1 (2001), [http://www.scc.rutgers.edu/arachne/vol\\_1ngom.htm](http://www.scc.rutgers.edu/arachne/vol_1ngom.htm), visited 4/14/06.

presenting her daughter to señor Navarro, Spanish commissary and lieutenant governor. It is clear that this presentation was not the equivalent of saying “I present to you my single daughter; marry her and may God give you both many children and me many privileges’ but perhaps ‘I present to you this daughter of mine. No one knows what might happen; maybe you’ll find each other somewhere, perhaps here or in heaven and you’ll mutually help one another.’ (16)

The exploitation is not quite as blatant as seen in other colonial contexts, but under the colonial dialectic the sinister undertones of white supremacy and the ramifications that it has on the actions and desires of the locals is nonetheless clear and present.

### 3.2 Ávila’s Discursive Affluen(ts/ce)

**Before they could begin to find themselves as free and independent people they had to clear from minds the stigma that anything African was inherently inferior and degraded. (James 402)**

In addition to mimicry and ridicule of humans, various natural actors are made capable of communicating messages and transporting elements pertinent to the narrative’s progression. The swallows, for example, “make the bipeds of below note that their flight is not in vain,”<sup>50</sup> reminding those below to thank the merciful power of God that swallows weren’t made gigantic winged elephants instead, lest the people below be made to cope with the unfortunate projectiles that such a complication might produce. This device, however, serves more than just a humorous function; it also becomes one of the motors of philosophical transfer, which is achieved through the metaphorical infusion

---

<sup>50</sup> “En el cielo, las golondrinas contaban las horas limpiando el firmamento de mosquitos dañinos. De cuando en cuando, estos alados sienten la necesidad de hacer notar a los bípedos de abajo que su volar no es en vano, y sueltan de sus adentros esta pasta que toma el libre camino hacia la cabeza de grandes y chicos ... . Aquí también se nota el infinito poder misericordioso de Dios porque ¿se imaginan lo que pasaría si las golondrinas fuesen gigantescos elefantes alados”? (42-43)

of one of *La carga*'s overriding discursive tenets: the idea of Africa as a collective monolith that is inherently unlike Europe. As a discursive recourse, the monolithic representation of Africa has a long and sometimes sordid history of hegemonic significance that will be touched upon later, but what is of interest at this point is the fusion of subjects and setting that such a representation implies, and the import of Ávila's seizing it as a component of his literary aesthetic. While again challenging the narratological principle of the setting-character divide, by relying upon the representation of Africa as monolith he incorporates one of the most sinister tools of colonial rhetoric into his work so as to ironically present it in a markedly anti-colonial light.

Of the communicative natural actors, the sun and the seas are most prominent; the sun, which each morning invites the Benitos to stretch their bodies and begin their days,<sup>51</sup> and warns them if the day will be a hard one,<sup>52</sup> is of a uniquely African nature that stands—together with the land of Africa—opposite anything that may come out of Europe:

*No hay ningún lugar de Europa donde se puede recrear lo más profundo de este continente que tiene su propio sol, y con una tierra tan suya que nadie dudará jamás de que está ante algo distinto ...*

There is no part of Europe that can recreate the deepest depths of this continent that has its own sun, and with a land so much its own that no one will ever doubt that they stand before something distinct ... (68).

As will later be seen, this difference is manifest in varied forms, from the physical nature of the landscape and the inherent features of those who inhabit it, to the temporalities that

---

<sup>51</sup> See note no. 38.

<sup>52</sup> See note no. 40.

act on it, but the employment of difference does not indicate any hints of an isolationist point of view; indeed, the agency conferred upon the seas acts to illustrate stark confrontational opposition.

If the sun plays the role of the Benitos' messenger—inviting them to awaken and warning of coming woes—the seas then, and more precisely the waves, operate on behalf of the Spanish colonialists as they carry the novel's plot-altering correspondence from the metropole. The first emergence of the waves-as-messenger trope lays down the primary impetus that eventually leads to the girls' competition to corner the tick-removal market. It will be remembered that Utondi first came under the employ of the lieutenant governor after she and her mother rescued him from the two famished sows. Were it not for the lack of food accompanying the waves and their news (*las nuevas de las olas*)<sup>53</sup> señor Navarro would never have been carrying his freshly acquired fish down the trail, where the two "living hams" (59) accosted him and he consequently fell indebted—at least in the moral sense—to Utondi and her mother. Indeed, had the waves brought the supplies that he expected, Navarro would not have even had to get the fish at all. Thus, at the outset of a tangled string of events leading ultimately to the girls competing for Navarro's favor, is the arrival of an empty supply ship, brought on by Ávila's poetic granting of agency to the waves.

---

<sup>53</sup> "[C]entremos nuestra atención en la dispensa del alto funcionario cuando las nuevas de las olas no se acompañaban con la reducción de más espacio en las cuatro paredes que sorportaban las viandas traídas de mares hispanos". (36) Put simply, supplies from the metropole were not sent.

Additionally, the entire story's climax comes when "from the waves of distant seas"<sup>54</sup> news arrives of *señor* Navarro's eminent, albeit never materialized, departure and the girls are thrust into a position of having to take on an extra "load" in order to more closely bond their lives with that of the lieutenant governor. In both cases the seas are portrayed as foreign, either accompanied by the ambiguous adjective *lejano*, "distant" (78), or clearly identified with the label of *hispano*, "Hispanic" (36).

In a brief series of introductory paratexts<sup>55</sup>, Ávila already posits Mbini as a dynamic physical and temporal location charged with the existential angst of the antagonistic, polarized sun-and-seas binary. With graceful efficiency, the preface solidifies the innate difference which in his view distinguishes Africa from Europe and plants that dichotomy as a static point of reference that will condition all that is to come, a sort of contextual compass that clarifies the novel's rhetorical parameters and alerts a keen reader to the discursive heritage of Ávila's position.

The representational construct of a presupposed rift that slates Africa in opposition to Europe continually crops up among the discourses of justification that, in wave after wave, bolster projects of domination. And as long as the division has existed, so too has the confluence of subject and setting that makes *Africa* distinguishable by the traits of *Africans* and vice versa. In this vain, Ávila draws from the written record of antiquity in order to speak with authority when he "speak[s] of things that happened to

---

<sup>54</sup> "Así, de las olas de lejanos mares llegaron a las manos del señor Navarro nuevas sobre el requerimiento de su persona para hacerse cargo de otras responsabilidades en otras latitudes, siempre para el engrandecimiento de la patria". (78)

<sup>55</sup> See Gerard Genette, "Introduction to the Paratext," *New Literary History* 22 (1991): 261-272.

people of this place, Mbini, and of a time that for some is yesterday and for others, us, the past.”<sup>56</sup>

Much like the early nineteenth century chronicles that drew analogies between the African continent and a seductive female form<sup>57</sup>, which served to poeticize an expansionist agenda of exploration and conquest (Comaroffs 694), colonial actors perpetuated a polarized subjectivity that posited the “civilized European” against the “native savage,” or as English explorer, William Burchell, put it, a contrast of “piety with atheism, the philosopher with the rude savage, the monarch with the Chief, luxury with want, philanthropy with lawless rapine.”<sup>58</sup> Here the significance when assessing Ávila’s reliance on historical references of this sort is two-fold: this style of representation not only silenced the African subject, robbing her/him of the authority to define his or her own identity, but it also subordinated Africa and any “African” identity to the narcissistic notions of a Eurocentric self.

As Ávila draws heavily from the chronicles of the nineteenth-century Spanish explorer, Manuel Iradier, looking at the production of these two aspects of authority in Spanish chronicles proves a fruitful endeavor. Furthermore, the chronicle as genre offers a unique synthesis of discourses of “otherness,” as the chronicler’s representative authority tends to be nourished by the familiar—that is, past representations of the

---

<sup>56</sup> “*Esto lo digo para disipar las dudas cuando hable de hechos ocurridos a personas de este lugar, Mbini, y de un tiempo que para unos es ayer y para otros, nosotros, el pasado: 1940*”. (11)

<sup>57</sup> Of course, this was a common trope seen in the Spanish colonial representations of the Americas, as well.

<sup>58</sup> Burchell (1824: 444), quoted in Comaroffs, 689.



Other—(Pagden 10-27) and therefore acts as a consolidating catalyst of the discursive milieu (Nerín 62).

A blatant example of this first aspect—the silencing, or exclusion of the Other’s voice—is manifest centuries before Iradier came on the scene: in Hernán Cortés’ *Segunda Carta-Relación*, for example, the hopes the Amerindians supposedly had of being made faithful subjects of Carlos the Fifth are expressed with questionable frequency.<sup>59</sup> Questionable because these “hopes” are communicated by way of Cortés’ *representations* of the Amerindians and are clearly the product of the authority bestowed upon him by authorship, which in this case is manifest above all using interpretation and selective omission as his creative recourse. Thus, through the act of writing, Cortés and his page become the dominant actors in the construction of an “Amerindian identity”<sup>60</sup> which conveniently subjects itself to the crown, as they give textual presence to terrestrial persons, converting them into characters that suffer the capricious weight of authoritarian/authoritative control. In this manner the subversion of anyone’s *real* desires—instead replacing them with an imposed obedience granted to an unrecognized king—becomes a feasible possibility.

---

<sup>59</sup> The examples of this in Cortés’ chronicle abound. As is told in his *Segunda Carta-Relación*, each time that Cortés comes across a new village, its inhabitants either express their devotion to the crown, or they attack and—as soon as they are defeated by the Spaniards’ “greatest of esteem and honor” in the winning of “glory” (40)—they express their desire to subject themselves to the crown. See, for example, the situation of those from Cempoal (32); the battle with the enemies of those from Cempoal (38-39); and of particular interest is Moctezuma’s supposed inclination toward remaining imprisoned, because Carlos the Fifth “*era servido de que el dicho Mutezuma se estuviese en su señorío, reconociendo el que vuestra alteza sobre él tenía*; was served by the said Mutezuma being within his domain, recognizing that which your Highness had over him” (55).

<sup>60</sup> It should be noted that while the discourses of Spanish colonialism may accept the existence of Amerindian identities, recognition of this heterogeneity does little to assuage the subordination of those identities to a fabricated exaltation of *Hispanidad*.

When one adds to this the curious manner in which Columbus, despite accepting that he and his interlocutors are at a clear communicative impasse,<sup>61</sup> conveniently deduces that the king of Hispaniola has graciously offered up complete control over the island,<sup>62</sup> a representational paradigm that far from favors the Other begins to emerge. The silencing of the Other was then taken to new extremes when, in an attempt to paint his arrival in Asunción with an idyllic gloss, Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca was met by a comfortable lack of otherness all together; instead the inhabitants who greet this hero had practically shed their indigenous skins: “showing themselves as very familiar and conversable, *as if they were acquaintances of his*, born and raised in Spain.”<sup>63</sup>

Even though with the passing of centuries the preferred techniques may change, this type of authoritative appropriation of the Other’s voice remains one of the primary predilections of imperial discourses. (One need only glance at the polls coming out of Iraq for a taste of today’s most coy usurpations of the Other’s voice.<sup>64</sup>) Although not depending on poll data to silence the voice of his “African” subject, Manuel Iradier’s reliance on documentation and the written word serves the same function. In the text of his second voyage to Spanish Guinea (1884) officialdom is the snare that traps Chief

---

<sup>61</sup> The king of Hispaniola “*y su ayo y consejeros llevan grande pena porque no me entendían, ni yo a ellos*: and his consul and advisors are pained greatly because they cannot understand me, nor I them.” (Columbus 135)

<sup>62</sup> “*Con todo, le cognoscí que me dixo que si me cumpliese algo de aquí, que toda la isla estava a mi mandar*: [w]ith everything, I recognized that he told me that if anything from here pleased me, that the entire island was at my disposal.” *Ibid.* Hispaniola is, of course, the island that hosts the Dominican Republic and Haiti today.

<sup>63</sup> “*mostrándose grandes familiares y conversables, como si fueran naturales suyos, nacidos y criados en España*”. (Hernández 174, my emphasis)

<sup>64</sup> For one example, see <http://abcnews.go.com/International/PollVault/story?id=1389228>, visited on April, 22, 2007.

Eyabo White's voice as, on what amounts to a veritable bill of sale, Iradier adds a footnote explaining that White cunningly took measures to ensure the submission of his territory to the Spanish and not the French:

*Este jefe, que ha recorrido gran parte de la costa de África, se negó a firmar el documento francés pretextando no saber escribir en testimonio de resistencia, pero firmó y con buena letra en el documento español.*

This chief, who has covered the greater part of the coast of Africa, refused to sign the French document, using the pretext of not knowing how to write as a testimony to his resistance, but he signed the Spanish document, and with good penmanship (Iradier1994: 692).

Such a measure would be of considerably less importance were it not viewed as yet another substantiation of the desire that Iradier is trying to communicate, and in the accepted form of the times to boot. By submitting *his* representation of White's wishes in the form of a footnote to a document, which is recognizable as the vehicle of veracity in the metropole, Iradier sequesters a native chief's action and inserts it into the verification of his agenda, thereby leaving no doubt in the metropole—*where it counts*—as to chief White's authorizing the annexation of his territory by a foreign power. In case that proves insufficient, Iradier develops the credibility of his feat by ensuring any potential metropolitan audience that his chief White is savvy enough to grasp the meaning of his signature on a document and no one need question whether this man's territory has indeed been voluntarily ceded to the last remnants of a moribund empire. After all, the man is no fool; in a classic example of Said's subdivision of the Orient, Iradier puts any wary bureaucrats back home at ease by assuring that this chief is not one of those from far inland who don't understand European institutions, who might leave his signature in exchange for a few *pesetas* and then put up a fight when the buyer comes to collect on his

purchase. Instead the chief represented by Iradier is well-traveled, having “covered the greater part of the coast of Africa,” (*ibid*) and he understands how trade is done.

Here again the slippery fusion/confusion of space and subject arises, enabling Iradier to validate his seller based on spatial terms. Said’s distinction between the Near Orient—familiar although nonetheless exotic—and Far Orient—a place of the mythical unknown—(58) undergoes a transferal that severs otherness into a subdivided fictionality; the Other presented by Iradier is now *either* one of “the blacks from the coast” (*los negros de la costa*) or one of “those of the interior” (*los del interior*).<sup>65</sup> Spatiality then takes on the dimensions of rubric, so that a subject’s geographic designation enables a simple, pseudo-scientific evaluation of his/her subjectivity, relying on a process of signification that assigns their representation certain traits (*x*) based on their corresponding territory (*y*). (Said 119)

The collective acceptance of these distinctions and the characteristics they connote then foments a common idiom through which, on a particular level, Chief White’s association with the coast bolsters the validity of his signature, and on a more general scale, locals are pitted against one another based upon their closeness to the European. But even this phenomenon does not escape the confines of the linguistic sign, for the rubric of geographical designation, as a signifier, is subject to association with a theoretically infinite quantity of signifiers, as has indeed been the case over the centuries.

---

<sup>65</sup> Where “the coast” ends and “the interior” begins is, of course, a blurry transition, as the terms adhere more closely to the “known” and “unknown” than they do to any concrete geographical coordinates. This is a distinction that always in flux as Iradier continues on with his exploration. He also uses these distinctions as interchangeable with “friend/foe,” as is manifest in his constant praise of the loyal Elombuangani against a general repulsion expressed for those they meet as they go up the Muni river. “Civilized/barbarous;” (115) and “hard-working/lazy” (75) are also frequent substitutions for the coast-inland binary.

As Anthony Pagden notes in the introduction to The Fall of Natural Man, the impact of this influential duality—Said’s proverbial Near Orient and Far Orient, or the confluence of the known and the unknown—was already a factor in the way otherness was being constructed as early as the sixteenth century:

... the travelers of the sixteenth century went to America with precise ideas about what they could expect to find there. They went looking for wild men and giants, Amazons and pygmies ... . In conjunction with this world of imaginary places and fantastic beings, there also existed, in Black Africa, a real world of savage peoples and of unusual and unclassified flora and fauna. (Pagden 10)

The possibility of juxtaposing tales of their newfound American wonders against the already known, if still entirely unfamiliar, inhabitants of Black Africa then led to a representational construct that painted the Amerindian as the “noble savage,” everything that, in the European view, the African was not. (*ibid* 10-11) The reversal of these determinations in a manner that would allow for an African variant of the noble savage only emerged as a nineteenth century phenomenon, first as a component of the Abolitionist discourse<sup>66</sup> and, with the race to colonize marked by the Berlin Conference, as a growing part of the clerical discourses of justification. Interestingly, it was after Spanish interest in the African colonies was rekindled<sup>67</sup> that the noble savage trope was solidified as a discursive tool back in Madrid. (Nerín 62)

---

<sup>66</sup> As examples of this, consider the wide-ranging support for publishing memoirs/personal histories such as: Olaudah Equiano, The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African : an Authoritative Text / Written by Himself, ed. Werner Sollors (New York: Norton, 2001); Juan Francisco Manzano, The Autobiography of a Slave / Autobiografía de un esclavo, bilingual edition, ed. Ivan A. Schulman, Trans. Evelyn Picon Garfield (Detroit, MI : Wayne State University Press, 1996).

<sup>67</sup> Marked perhaps by the installation of the first Spanish governor on the island of Fernando Póo in 1858. For more on the growth of a Spanish presence in the territory of Spanish Guinea see Ibrahim K Sundiata, Equatorial Guinea: Colonialism, State Terror, and the Search for Stability

Regardless of the shape that representations resulting from geography based otherness may take on, the process by which they were generated used difference as a sort of representational fulcrum upon which all characteristics hinged. Contrary, however, to Pagden's assessment of which subjects carried the weight of representation in Conquest chronicles, the construction of Iradier's African is contingent entirely upon the whim of his conception of self. For Pagden the directionality of this phenomenon is embodied in the term "barbarian," which was used

... to distinguish between those who were members of the observer's own society and those who were not. The observers themselves—those, that is, who applied [this] term to others ... *rarely troubled to attempt a self-definition*. They assumed themselves to be all that the 'barbarian' was not ... (15, my emphasis)

In Iradier, however, the representations he constructs of his "African" subject obey this logic in reverse. Difference is still the key determinant, the base upon which the representational idiom of the orientalist rests, but it is now a question of describing that difference in terms of the subject of enunciation himself. The Other is still everything that the author/chronicler/orientalist is not, but *what this means* is based on a detailed representation of self, more than the other. The end result of this in Iradier is an Africa, populated by Africans, both of which are superficially constructed as opposites of his detailed projection of self into the text.

*África*—the chronicle of Iradier's two journeys to Spanish Guinea and a compendium of studies conducted on those journeys—is the narration of what occurs in

---

(San Francisco: Westview Press, 1990) 25; and for a good overview of the discourse that accompanied that presence, Gustau Nerín, *Guinea Ecuatorial, historia en blanco y negro: hombres blancos y mujeres negros en Guinea Ecuatorial (1843-1968)* (Barcelona: Ediciones Península, 1998).

the life of Manuel Iradier: the interesting encounter with a buffalo; the tense leopard episode; his sickness; the battle with King Gaandu's men. It is what Iradier thinks, what he feels, what he fears.

In one of many moments of self-reflection, the moral struggle that Iradier suffers as a contingent of exploring the unknown is revealed. At the doorstep to Spanish Guinea he froze in a fever of self reproach, questioning the very intentions that had driven him this far:

*No y mil veces no, mi viaje no era hijo del sueño y de la irreflexión, sino del estudio y del razonamiento. Yo rechazaba con todas mis fuerzas la palabra "aventurero" que sonaba dentro de mi cabeza ... Pero, al fin ... cesó la lucha espantosa y un bienestar inexplicable se esparció por todo mi ser (sic) devolviendo la tranquilidad ... La razón había triunfado...*

No and a thousand times no, my voyage was not the product of dreams and haste but of study and reasoning. I rejected with all my force the word 'adventurer' that was ringing in my head ... But, in the end ... the frightful struggle ceased and an inexplicable wellbeing spread through my entire being [sic] returning tranquility ... Reason had triumphed ... (Iradier 2000: 54)

Yet despite the "triumph of reason" and regardless of what spawned his voyage, Iradier's chronicle—that is, the writing of his journey and studies—does not surpass this existential dilemma. Often times his dreaded adventurer steals the scientist's spotlight and overwhelms the narrative with tales of Africa's endless dangers and the heroism that overcame them. The representation that is made of the Other (his proposed "object of study") is then substantially less complex and receives a smaller allotment of textual space than the elements that comprise his own subjectivity. In many cases, the traits of those he comes across in his travels are of such little consequence to him that their

striking physical aspects are the only elements he deems worthy of occupying his prose (*ibid* 49; 70; 133-134; 147). In fact, despite dedicating entire chapters of *África* to different aspects—economy, music, food, etc.—of his African subject/object, he never successfully extracts himself from the study of the Other. The section titled “Anthropology” is particularly illustrative of the penetration of Iradier as a character—his proverbial adventurer—in his study, for it is launched with a brief phrenological description of his so-called black subject, but before long he has digressed into a tangential treatise on the difficulties and risks faced by the European when studying “the black race” (*la raza negra*). (*ibid* 193) In this manner, one is exposed as much to the musings of the adventurer as to the “reasoned” study of Iradier as “scientist.”

To assuage any doubts, the ubiquity of Iradier’s drawings offers a valuable schematic of how this subject of enunciation-based representational paradigm takes shape in the text. If one looks at the graphic representation of his confrontation with the “barefoot little king” (*el reyezuelo descalzo*), Gaandu, the principle protagonist and the narrative point of view are unmistakable.

Figure 2

Image removed for  
copyright purposes.

Source: Iradier,  
Manuel. África: viajes  
y trabajos de la  
Asociación Eúskara La  
Exploradora. Madrid:



The drawing, as can clearly be seen, portrays the retreat of three indigenous subjects, all of whom the chosen perspective renders relatively insignificant, and who are fleeing the heroic advance of six others. (“Heroic” is, of course a subjective term, but based on the postures, stances, and the all around sensation of being thrust toward the supposed enemy that these produce, one could assume that, at least within a Western representative vernacular, these six characters are the so called “good guys,” the valiant ones.) Of the aggressors/good guys, four are clear representations of the locals: practically naked, wielding spears for the most part and of a very dark skin; and two are dressed in European garb. Of the latter two, one stands out for his action (he is the only one clearly firing a pistol); his compositional location (he shares the center third of the frame with the one indigenous subject carrying what appears to be the Spanish flag; this one, despite sharing center stage, is farther back and therefore smaller in appearance), and perhaps most obvious, the intensity of the light tones with which he is drawn, which stand in stark contrast to the general scheme of dark tones that characterizes the rest of the frame, even the other subject of European garb is cast in shadow, conveniently folding him into the drawing’s overall tendency toward darkness. It goes without saying that this hero, basking in the spotlight of center stage, is Manuel Iradier.

Of slightly more interest is the other “European” subject, for the only other Europeans that Iradier traveled with were his wife and child, both of whom he left in the relative comfort of Corisco—a small island at the mouth of the Muni River, in the Bay of Corisco. If this graphic is assumed to be a bona fide portrayal of the text’s reality, as most

of the drawings that appear in *África* are, then the only one of Iradier's servants<sup>68</sup> that this may be a reflection of would be Makoko, an Ndowe<sup>69</sup> who surprised Iradier at their first meeting, upsetting his already entrenched views of the locals, as he had never seen "such a fine [read as 'elegant'] African" (*un africano tan fino*) so far from the beach (*ibid* 139). Makoko, and more particularly his textual and graphic representations illustrate the tight elasticity of a representation's grip on reality. For, although Makoko comes from farther inland than, say, Iradier's trusty embodiment of the noble savage, Elombuangani<sup>70</sup>, he is immediately raised beyond the status of Elombuangani in the way he is introduced in the text wearing European clothes and speaking English. And his position as an honorary European—truly the embodiment of Bhabhaian mimicry, he is close in stature, close in dress, close in action, but not quite the same tone—is solidified in Iradier's graphic portrayal of the man in his drawing. Interestingly, Makoko, although his origins defy the inland/coast representational paradigm, which stipulates that all those from the coast are more "European" in their ways, is not treated as an anomaly. Instead, he is logically inserted into the "coast" category based on the extensive time he spent trading there with the English.

---

<sup>68</sup> The stark Africa-Europe divide is even present in Iradier's refusal to refer to his local crew as one might refer to European hired men. He never refers to them as his crew (*tripulación*), he instead constantly refers to them as his *criados*, his servants.

<sup>69</sup> A Bantu ethnicity indigenous to the continental coast of what is today Equatorial Guinea. If an ethnic dimension were to be applied to Iradier's category of *los de la costa*, the Ndowe would be it. Also referred to as *playeros*, the Ndowe were those who had the most commercial contact with European ships traveling in the Bay of Corisco and, as such, were those who acquired more European customs. (Sundiata 11) It would be safe to assume that Utondi and Rambé are both of Ndowe descent.

<sup>70</sup> Elombuangani, Iradier's first and most loyal *criado* was from the coastal island of Corisco.

If taken as a whole this drawing presents a telling conundrum: locals are battling locals over a skirmish that would never have occurred were it not for the presence of the man in the center. In this sense it perfectly embodies the divide-and-conquer function of geography based representation when used as part of imperial discourses<sup>71</sup>, for were the Africa-Europe divide to be represented here in its purest form, Iradier, as the only European subject, would be standing on his own facing an onslaught of locals. As such he would be directly implicated as one of the conflict's perpetrators and without him no conflict would be evident. Furthermore, those he struggles against would have to be represented on his same level for them to truly be constructed as adversaries. In *África*, however, this is not a point of view that Iradier is content to assume; he prefers instead to wantonly vacillate between the non-intrusive scientific observer and the heroic adventurer, both of whom supposedly stumble upon uniquely African phenomena without in any way altering their course or constitution, thereby maintaining the degree of separation necessary to present himself on a distinct representational level. The battle with King Gaandu's men could therefore never take on the full dimensions of a clash between Europe and Africa, for it would mean Iradier accepting his role as a pivotal agent, and doing away with the inequality that separates him from the natives (*los nativos*). Instead it is perceived and portrayed as an African struggle: a battle between

---

<sup>71</sup> Think about Cortés' elation at finding that those he was to conquer were already at odds amongst themselves: "*Vista la discordia y desconformidad de los unos y de los otros, no hubo poco placer, porque me pareció hacer mucho a mi propósito, y que podría tener manera de más aún sojuzgarlos ... aun acordéme de una autoridad evangélica que dice: Omne regnum in se ipsum divisum, desolabitur [Vulgata, Lucas 11.17];*" "Having seen the discord and disconformity between one another, I was more than slightly pleased, because it seemed to me to do much for my purpose, and that it could have a way of easily subjugating them ... I was even reminded of the evangelical dictum that says: *Omne regnum in se ipsum divisum, desolabitur.*" (Cortés 42)

Africans in which the European merely plays the hero at center stage. What then distinguishes the European is not so much his opposition to the African as his existence on a supposedly higher representational plain, inaccessible to the smaller, darker natives mired in their simple internal struggles.

The banishment of his “African” subject to the shadows, where they do little more than reflect the void opposite Iradier’s narcissism, may in and of itself be written off as the unfortunate consequence of a lonely traveler’s delusions of grandeur. But when seen as part of a larger discursive whole,<sup>72</sup> *África* comes to personify a representational structure of repression, for his method of portraying the Other using himself as the point of reference subordinates them to his own subjectivity. Furthermore, in the schism fomented by his geographical division between coast and interior, and the evocation of the noble savage myth, he severs that Other into two conflicting camps, both contrasting with one another based on their perceived proximity to him.

When put in these terms, the first and most prominent link between Iradier and Ávila comes to the fore, as the girls, Rambé and Utondi, and their families are presented in much the same manner: their subjective constitution hinges entirely upon their familiarity with the lieutenant governor and the few aspects of their character to which the reader is exposed are revealed either through their interactions with *señor* Navarro or in their disputes over him. But Ávila’s adaptation of Iradier’s representational stance fits more within the vain of mockery than mimicry, for while Iradier’s reliance on a constructed Africa-Europe divide bestows heroism and valor upon the European, Ávila

---

<sup>72</sup> Nerín’s first chapter, *España ¿Un colonialismo light?*, offers a detailed and convincing analysis of the discursive make-up of Spain’s colonial project in Spanish Guinea. For more see Nerín (11-59).

introduces another level of otherness in which his core of subjectivity, the subject upon which the other representations hinge, stands out not for his heroism but for his incompetence, his physical ailment and his all around general folly.

General themes, anecdotes and even direct use of terminology link *La carga* to Iradier's chronicle of more than a century earlier. Both remark on the legends of mysterious disappearance that haunt coastal river mouths (Ávila 1999: 18-19; Iradier 2000: 78). In *La carga* those river mouths are treated as points of intertwining realities, "the place of the two waters' [salt and fresh] embrace,"<sup>73</sup> which metaphorically evokes the culture clash represented by the coast. This metaphorical characterization of what today is Mbini dates back at least a century to Iradier's observation of this place as the point "where the salt water is in mixture with the fresh."<sup>74</sup> Indeed, even Ávila's title choice harkens to the terms used by Iradier to sustain his coast-interior divide: Iradier distinguished between those of the coast and those of the interior based on their respective reputations as hard workers and lazy men. For him the great difference lay in how hard they worked (i.e. how willing they were to serve and sacrifice) for the Europeans. And in his estimation, "those of the interior ... don't work as hard, 'the load [*la carga*] weighs heavier on them,' and they have a greater affinity for desertion."<sup>75</sup> Thus *la carga* that each man can withstand becomes a derivation of his willingness to serve—and his acceptance of—the European, which was in turn articulated in geographical terms that, as earlier explained, pitted locals against themselves to the

---

<sup>73</sup> "... *el lugar del abrazo de las dos aguas*". (Ávila 1999: 15)

<sup>74</sup> "... *donde el agua salada está en mezcla con la dulce*". (Iradier 2000: 47)

<sup>75</sup> "*Los del interior ... no son tan trabajadores, 'les pesa más la carga' y tienen una gran afición a desertar*". (ibid 75)

foreigner's favor. For Ávila, *la carga* differs only in substance, not in function, as the girls jockey for the supposed privilege of carrying "their load in the form of two precious little newborns"<sup>76</sup> (see page 21). That is, in Ávila's version of history the divisive burden borne by the victims of the Spanish imperial project is manifest in the role of reproduction as a tool of perpetuating the colonial order (i.e. the girls become the "mothers of two brothers who committed their action to the exaltation of Spain")<sup>77</sup>, whereas that same burden was expressed by Iradier in more literal, economic terms (i.e. in the literal load they carry on their backs as units of labor expanding profits for the metropole).

Despite the difficulty of substantiating the claim of *señor* Navarro as Ávila's literary incarnation of Manuel Iradier, there are nonetheless some striking similarities between the manner in which both men are textually represented that warrant examination. Whether they result from Ávila's mere commenting on a general discursive paradigm of which *África* forms only a small part, or from Iradier's direct influence on Ávila's work, what makes these similarities significant is what is done with them in *La carga*: how for instance, Ávila chooses to modify the aforementioned aspects that characterize *África*.

---

<sup>76</sup> It is interesting to note that the terms Utondi's mother uses to subtly communicate to her the necessity of her having *señor* Navarro's child, treat it as if she were referring to a dock worker loading ships, almost as though the most important thing were the weight, rather than the substance, of the load: "For him to take you, child, you must carry some load with you, something; I don't know, but something." "*—Para que te lleve, hija, debes llevar contigo una carga, algo; no sé, pero algo*". (Ávila 1999: 78)

<sup>77</sup> " ... *madres de dos hermanos que encaminaron su acción al engrandecimiento de España*". (*ibid* 79, the novel's closing sentence) The girls' situation clearly evokes the ties between colonial hegemony and that of a patriarchal ilk, a topic whose coverage deserves further investigation with relation to *La carga*.

One example is *señor* Navarro's run-in with the hogs: be it coincidence or intention, the episode still bares a striking resemblance to Iradier's real-life confrontation with a water buffalo; in which he too, after setting out to feed himself, is sent scurrying up a tree by a raging wild animal, where he is left no option but to anxiously pray for assistance. Ávila, however, does not allow his *señor* Navarro the same bravado with which Iradier paints himself. Iradier was hunting water buffalo when his prey chased him through the woods and up a tree; *señor* Navarro was engaged in the slightly less warrior-like act of strolling home to cook his freshly gleaned fish. Furthermore, while Iradier is saved from his predicament by his four "servants," all with rifles blazing, who then proceed to continue the hunt, Navarro faces two hungry pigs and has to be saved by Utondi and her mother, ensuring a solid blow to the patriarchal sensibilities of this typical francoist male.

Furthermore, sickness plays a pivotal role in the tales of both men. For Iradier, sickness accounts for forty percent of the time he spent in what could at the time only nominally be called Spanish-controlled Africa. The narrative consequences of this condense three months of his journey—from mid-June through mid-October, 1875—into two pages that trigger a marked shift in his attitude toward the locals. Before falling ill, his obvious sense of racially justified superiority was vaguely masked under a thin veil of scientific observation or mere amusement; the Africans he described were treated as a sort of fascinating specimen or silly fool.<sup>78</sup> Afterward, however, he displays an exceptional comfort in the overt, base belittling of those he encounters, coming up with

---

<sup>78</sup> Two prime examples are seen in his obsession with Elombuangani—see 2000: 84 for one example, or the chapter dedicated to the man, titled "*Elombuangani*", in *Viajes y trabajos* (Iradier 1994)—and his frequent urge to laugh at the customs he is witness to (2000: 74; 80; 98).

cruel nicknames for some—such as “the lame man from Bía” (*el cojo de Bía*) (2000: 141); the “barefoot little king” (*reyezuelo descalzo*) (*ibid* 133); or the “repugnant old man” (*el viejo repugnante*) (*ibid* 134)—and entering into full-fledged battle with others (*ibid* 150-152). Despite the lack of a clear confession on the part of Iradier, attributing this change of attitude to the three months of sickness he suffered does not require much of a stretch when one considers the relative textual abruptness of the change—the contrasting modes of representation respectively end and begin within a few pages of the episode of his sickness. Furthermore, Iradier’s own charge of his sickness being the result of an alleged poisoning only justifies his abrupt change of perspective.

*Señor* Navarro’s sickness also represents a significant plot factor, as it serves to introduce Ana Villamar into the net of amorous confusion that surrounds him and, through her attempts to assist him, also addresses Spanish pre/mis-conceptions of the Benitos. Once the lieutenant governor comes down with his mysterious illness Ana Villamar begins making regular visits—much to the girls’ chagrin—and takes a vested interest in the man’s wellbeing. It is in her effort to persuade the town’s one caretaker—the spiteful embodiment of Euro-supremacy, *señor* Galván—to nurse Navarro back to health, that the reader confronts the book’s two opposed Spanish views of the locals. In an argument that begins with the health of *señor* Navarro but soon evolves into an ideological duel, Galván defends the commonly espoused posture that justifies colonization as a divine right—it was Doctor Ramírez who evokes the Old Testament credo of “conquer and dominate the earth” (*conquistad y dominad la tierra*) (75) but it succinctly encompasses Galván’s stance, as well—a stance that holds the colonized as ignorant, uncouth and common (*zafios y patanes*) (71). Of course, Ana Villamar,



although remaining within the religious confines of Galván's argument and agreeing that Christianity offers the only justification for a colonial presence in Africa, asks the question of what it is exactly that they ignore:

—*¿Alguna vez te han pedido estos negros ayuda para cazar animals? ...*

—*Para lo que necesitan, estos no piden ayuda a nadie ... .*

—*Aquí comen y beben sin llamarnos para nada y resuelven los problemas que les sobrevienen. Nosotros, los blancos, hacemos lo mismo; entonces ¿por qué los consideramos peores que nosotros? No sé porque se cree que deben saber lo que sabemos cuando nunca lo han vivido. ¿Acaso nos piden ellos que sepamos hacer lo que hacen?*

'Have these blacks ever asked you for help hunting animals? ...

'For what they need, they don't ask anyone for help ... .

'Here they eat and drink without calling us for anything and they resolve the problems they face. We, the whites, do the same; so why do we consider them worse than us? I can't tell why it's believed that they should know what we do when they've never lived it. Do they ask us to know how to do what they do?'

(71)

This conversation is, of course, only made possible within the novel's logic by *señor* Navarro's illness, for it is the pretext under which Ana visits Galván, and while both his illness and that of Iradier mark significant points in the exposure of Spanish attitudes toward those they were intruding on, Navarro's sickness also offers a subtle commentary on the man's practices and how they are treated—or, perhaps obscured—by everyone else. It should be remembered, after all, that despite the doctor's reluctance to admit it and Ana's reluctance to hear it, Navarro's affliction is most likely the result of his promiscuity, which stands out for the silence that surrounds it.

Lastly, the very inadequacy of *señor* Navarro is visible from the outset in the double entendre that introduces him. The title of his introductory section, “in place of another” (*En lugar de otro*) (35) stands out for its lack of definite articles. Is *señor* Navarro in *the* place of *the* Other, alluding to his outsider status? Yes, clearly, but as is immediately stated he has also come to Río Benito *replacing* another (or in *lieu* of another). That other whom he replaces is the governor, who would himself have chosen to reside there, “had the geography not provided another zone with better conditions.”<sup>79</sup> Although not underlining any overt character flaws, this introductory segment makes plain the lieutenant governor’s lack of standing in the metropolitan view of things. Iradier on the other hand, acutely aware of the persona he must project, never portrays himself in such degrading terms.

To briefly recap the major points of this section it should be reiterated that through his incorporation and modification of the discursive trope that posits Africa in stark contrast to Europe, Ávila builds a platform from which *he* can transcend Africa’s long history of enunciatory subjugation and marginalization. His commentary on the past then emanates from his exercise of authority according to Derrida-style *bricolage*. Taking some aspects of the Africa-as-monolith device as-is and altering others to his liking, he constructs a variant of the past complete with 1) a silencing of the supposed Other’s voice; 2) an anchoring of the supposed Other’s subjectivity to that of a European figure; and 3) geography based grounds for delineations of otherness. His adherence to these norms, however, or the degree to which he alters them, could be likened to the concentric circles of a dart board, so that with regard to the anchoring of the Benitos’ character cast

---

<sup>79</sup> “... si la geografía no hubiera dotado de mejores condiciones a otra zona, condiciones que la hacen apetible idónea al Gobernador para sentar plaza”. (35)

to Navarro's subjectivity, for example, *La carga* is right on the bulls' eye, yet with respect to the coast-interior divide, it may be two or three rings out, altering slightly the parameters so that the girls—although most likely both *playeras*—embody the divide-and-conquer tactic of imperialistic representation. The silencing of the supposed Other is also barely off-target in the sense that, as characters, the Benitos are constructed with some individualized components that come to the fore. That is, their disposition is not entirely abandoned and exiled to the proverbial margins, but, as mentioned earlier, those components are only exposed within the context of their proximity to the Europeans. For example, the mothers begin to take on some depth of character complete with their own voice when they argue about which child possesses the right to serve *señor* Navarro. Another example is seen in the figure of the town mechanic who faintly transcends superficial representation, taking on some complexity as the embodiment of modernity's clash with tradition, when he charges Ana Villamar of placing a curse on him by lending him her hair brush. He thus fuses a familiarity and belief in witchcraft with his advanced knowledge of motors, something of which he must have been on the cutting edge in 1940 Río Benito. Again, while the mechanic acquires some voice in this scene, it is only manifest to the extent that it will allow him to relate—if only on contentious terms—to the European, in this case Ana.

Lastly, and perhaps of most significance, is the license Ávila takes with Iradier's example of these norms, for therein lies the substance of his commentary. After gaining a platform through the acquisition of the colonizer's representative idiom, Ávila chooses alteration as one technique for turning it on its end, exposing the unspoken contradictions

left to the wayside by imperial discourses. The “heroes” of the colonial period, those upon whom all was centered, are relegated to mediocrity, their flare reduced to folly.

### 3.3 A Meeting by the River

***[L]as aguas de dos o más ríos tienen que compartir un lecho.  
[T]he waters of two or more rivers have to share the same  
riverbed. (Ávila 1999: 62)***

In the last two sections attempts were made to describe what was deemed the colonial dialectic within the Río Benito setting of *La carga* and the various sides of *La carga*’s discursive heritage as exemplified by the Africa-as-monolith trope. Here interest will be turned from the staunch opposition between Africa and Europe to the position of conviviality that the two are thrust into as they converge upon the space of Mbini.

Two concepts developed by Achille Mbembe help to navigate this next and final look at *La carga*: 1) The integral ties between spatiality and temporality he establishes in *At the Edge of the World: Boundaries, Territoriality, and Sovereignty in Africa* and 2) the form these ties take on in quotidian life, deemed by him *conviviality*.

Mbembe asserts the relative nature of the interaction between spatiality and temporality as the primary explanation for the phenomenon of territoriality in Africa. Similar to the way that Bhabha posits the “ambivalence of modern society” that results from the instaneity of two conflicting temporalities as “the site of *writing the nation*,” (Bhabha 209) Mbembe employs the idea of instantaneous temporalities to explore the Nation’s physical limitations. Given that boundaries on the continent are in a continual state of flux—pulsating with the ebb and flow of ethnic, economic, religious, sexual and political determinants—territoriality, he argues, must always be conceived not merely in geographical terms, but in temporal ones, as well. Thus the “inviolability of boundaries

among states” (Mbembe 2000: 267) (i.e. the semblance of permanence exuded by political boundaries) paints a two-tiered picture of the continent’s territorial divisions, with the static outlines of the colonial past hovering over a dynamic system of continual, relative expansions and contractions. The frequent result of this is a severing of regional idiosyncrasies—of a traditional, economic, or political nature—under the imposition of nation-state boundaries grandfathered in, and in the service of an increasingly distant colonial age.

He later explores the social ramifications of the aforementioned multi-temporal reality in On the Postcolony. In the chapter *The Aesthetics of Vulgarly*, he states that:

... the postcolonial relationship is not primarily a relationship of resistance or of collaboration but can best be characterized as convivial, a relationship fraught by the fact of the *commandement* [the power structure] and its ‘subjects’ having to share the same living space (Mbembe 2001: 104).

Interestingly, although Ávila constructs this same style of relationship within a colonial setting, he is writing from, and commenting on, the postcolonial context of Equatoguinean actuality. It is as though he were projecting postcolonial constructs on his representation of the colonial past, viewing it through a perspective similar to the one that elucidates Mbembe’s conviviality.

Mbembe’s look at conviviality in the postcolony of course naturally lends itself to the separation of subject and setting, at least as an analytical technique. Using modern-day Togo as his exemplar, he demonstrates how a multiplicity of temporalities gives way to a medley of “public spaces,” all of which come with their own respective logic, *and* that such a plurality of spaces conditions subjects in a way that requires them to simultaneously embody several corresponding identities. (*ibid*) The river separating the

Ebony Coast from The Republic of Nikinai in Amadou Kourouma's The Suns of Independence might serve as a sufficient example of how the same locality is subjected to the respective logics of two "public spaces." For this dividing line, while serving as a political periphery, carves the Dumbuya nation—the blood-nation of protagonist, Fama—in two. As such, Fama undergoes a crisis of identity as he thinks of himself as the last heir of the Dumbuya dynasty, yet he must simultaneously recognize himself as a beggar and a burden within the social strata of the nation-state. Such opposed identities converge and come to a head at the river crossing where as patriarch he should be entitled to travel where he pleases yet as citizen of a nation-state he is prohibited from crossing the border.

According to this thinking, one might conclude that subjectivity is linked to spatiality *through* temporality, but that it is never con/fused with spatiality. (The river, for example, does not take on identity *per se*, although it may form part of multiple spatial logics, say those of nationhood and the blood-nation.) Such a formula may offer some fruitful questioning when applied to *La carga*, provided one fundamental concern is taken into account: Ávila leaves the ambiguity of the subject-setting separation intact. As has been described, he converts traditional elements of setting—landscapes, the sun, the seas, etc.—into actors/subjects. Also, exercising his artistic license, he infuses Mbini with the subjectivity of a protagonist.<sup>80</sup> This being the case, it must once again be stated that, while the dual role of natural actors as both components of the novel's setting and

---

<sup>80</sup> Despite the fact that my analysis is heavily centered on the figure of *señor* Navarro, thus giving the impression that he serves as a sort of primary protagonist, a solid argument could be made for Mbini as the novel's main character, for Mbini is by far the one subject that receives the greatest character development and the only subject to undergo an Aristotelian *catastrophe*.

subjects capable of exercising agency is recognized, the segregation of subject and setting will be maintained here in the interest of analytical classification.

The Africa-Europe divide manifest in the agency of the sun and the seas informs the final type of agency ceded to natural actors in a manner that communicates the ultimate contribution of both sides to the production of history. Production, that is the making, the creation—not the writing—of history is therefore presented as nature's dominion, and history's telling, or narration, is dutifully relegated to *La carga*'s human characters. But it should also be noted that the staunch conflict inherent in the portrayal of Africa as monolith depends as much on the reader's chosen perspective as on Ávila's creative decisions, for even though the terms he employs and the constructs he maneuvers give the sense of irreconcilable opposition, if one approaches the text keeping in mind the question of which actors are endowed with the capacity for making history, certain points of shared responsibility come to the fore.

The seas are doubtlessly constructed as metaphorical manifestations and practical proxies of the Spanish invasion (as messengers that bring news from the metropole, which conditions colonial life, and the salt which figuratively penetrates the continent). And the landscapes, much like the sun, are branded with the mark of unique African-ness (see pages 56, 71 and 55). Yet both of these natural actors are responsible for historicity. In *La carga* historicity transcends the dialectical postulate of the linguistic sign in much the same way that it might be said Benjamin's Messianic time did: both rely on the almighty powers of some transcendental force for their make-up. It is not portrayed as process, but as permanent and ever-present, a natural phenomenon there for the benefit of humanity:

*En los caminos de las playas, detrás de las fincas, en los ríos y cerca de la mar, hombres y mujeres se desnuda y ponen su corazón ante la historia para recibir de ella las indicaciones sobre cómo comprender cada fenómeno.*

On the beach paths, behind the plantations, in the rivers and near the sea, men and women undress and place their heart before history to receive indications about how to understand each phenomenon. (Ávila 1999: 68)

Juxtaposed against this active, sage-like representation of history is that made by the seas, now ghost-like and haunting, yet still echoing a sense of permanence through its impact. The historicity embodied by the seas, while masked in passivity, permeates the temporal setting of the novel's enunciative present in concert with the didactic composure of its active counterpart. History in *La carga* then becomes ironically destructive, in spite of its pedagogical import. Despite its "indications about how to understand each phenomenon," it leaves in its wake a trail of tears, cries and laments (*lloros, gritos y lamentos*) (*ibid* 16), strewn with remnants of a hopeful past, "all buried under that layer of sand on whose surface are already growing plants that love the salty flavor of the seas that have already made history" (see page 22). What this duality—nurtured by the positive influence of a benignly constructed Africa and by the destructive force wielded by Spanish seas (*mares hispanos*) (see page 57)—means at the moment of historicity's interpretation returns things to the constituent tension of historiography, as different players collide in an endless process of signification.

The topic of slavery as viewed by the Benitos sheds some light on how this phenomenon is played out in *La carga*. In the episode of the dispute between Rambé's aunt and Utondi's mother, slavery—of unquestionable significance within their colonial setting—is alluded to in contrasting terms. With the intent of injuring the other woman's pride, Rambé's aunt demystifies the Ndowe legacy of serving the Europeans, denouncing



Utondi's grandparents as mere slaves and Utondi herself as a lick of white feet. To this Utondi's mother retorts: "My daughter is no lick of anyone's feet. She works and serves, as did her grandparents, in the house of one of this place's principal men."<sup>81</sup> Although uttered in spite, Rambé's aunt's insult and the dispute in which it arises, expose one of the dark truths of the colonial dialectic as Ávila has framed it: sometimes those for whom it proved most detrimental were scarcely aware of their own role in upholding it. Yet this take on the colonial dialectic as a fundamentally bankrupt social system does not stand on its own as the sole manifestation of Ávila's critique. It too is challenged, namely by the perception that views life within the social structure of the colonial dialectic as a genuine opportunity for the locals to work with dignity and benefit from the colonizers.

In this sense, the enunciative territory represented by this clash of mother figures comes to host the opposed ideas infused into the Africa-Europe binary. It is a territory offering one take on history that is swathed in pedantry and appropriate to house a truth capable of "opening the eyes of those who were asleep to the light of strangers who arrived with different ideas about how to respond to life," (see page 25) as well as another take which carries all the destructive force of history's real and unfortunate consequences. This confluence of perceptive currents then subjects historiography to an instability and con/fusion that looks upon indentured servitude as a base form of slavery *and* a chance for dignified self-improvement at the same time; or views the girls as "prostitutes" (*rameras*) (Ávila 1999: 44-46) and "as mothers of two brothers who committed their action to the exaltation of Spain" (see page 21). Similarly, *señor* Navarro and the whites in general take on a double identity: one of a nearly divine-like knack for

---

<sup>81</sup> "—*Mi hija no es lamedors de ningún pie. Ella trabaja y sirve, como sus abuelos, en la casa de un hombre principal de aquí*". (Ávila 1999: 46)

leadership, worthy of praise, and another that at the same times exudes foolishness and ineptitude, for which any praise hardly surpasses the category of puffery.

Mbini itself takes on this same type of schizophrenia based on the clash of a Eurocentric perspective with its “pro-African” counterpart. Indeed, it not only houses but personifies this duality. Mbini in its contemporary form is the quintessential manifestation of the postcolonial nation as defined by Bhabha: the resulting third space that comes from a “contentious *internal* liminality that provides a place from which to speak both of, and as, the minority,” (Bhabha 214) and which is continually at odds with “the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical”(ibid 209). This is perhaps most clearly manifest in the title of the first chapter, “Mbini: place, name, home” (*Mbini: lugar, nombre, hogar*) (Ávila 1999: 13), a paratext that sets the parameters for the Avilan idea of Nation, with a concise infusion of dualistic subjectivity and social confluence into the geographical space of Mbini.

### 3.3.1 Mbini as Place:

As mentioned before, geographically speaking Mbini is the fusion of fresh and salt water, where “In the place where the two waters embrace, the hydraulic current is so weak that one gets the sensation that it’s the sea who has carried its salty message to the inland peoples.”<sup>82</sup> Salt water in this case symbolizes a foreign force (the Spanish, perhaps? Or maybe oil-and gas-sector multinationals) penetrating autochthonous waters.

---

<sup>82</sup> “En el lugar del abrazo de las dos aguas, la corriente hídrica es tan débil que uno tiene la sensación de que es el mar el que ha llevado su mensaje de sal a los pueblos de tierra adentro”. (15)

Temporally speaking, Mbini is both the present and the 1940 colonial town of Río Benito, which facilitates Ávila's use of Mbini as an allegory for the residual colonial discourse and that of its performative Other.

### 3.3.2 Mbini as Name:

Mbini is also a subject, complete with its own brand of Unamunian *intrahistoria*, which emerges from the con/fusion fomented by simultaneous submission to the temporalities of European historiography and what seems to be considered a universally African mode of perception:

*... en Europa, donde los hombres cuentan su protohistoria, prehistoria y hasta predicen el futuro. Tienen pasado y lo cuentan en siglos, milenios, centurias, pero aquí no; aquí, en nuestra África, el pasado puede ser hace veinte años, treinta o doscientos solamente ...".*

... in Europe, where men count their proto-history, prehistory and they even predict the future. They have a past and they tell it in epochs, millennia, centuries, but not here; here, in *our Africa*, the past may be twenty years ago, thirty or two hundred only. (*ibid* 11, my emphasis)

Here two things stand out: 1) this Mbembian sort of bi-temporality that paints the past as a nebulous whole and, at the same time, a linear, chronological series; and 2) the evoking of a century old discursive stance reminiscent of José Martí's *Nuestra América*. Through what stands out as a clear homage to Martí, Ávila introduces his idealized version of an Africa devoid of neocolonial control and which weaves its own history according to autochthonous parameters. *Nuestra África* (the appropriation of Martí could hardly be more transparent) is the embodiment of a dynamic locus where tales and histories are spun *mutatis mutandis*, where there is too much room to remain confined to the linear modes of chronology. But much more than representing a challenge to the

European historiographic paradigm, *Nuestra África* provides a glimpse of the Africa Ávila pines for, which in turn offers some insight into the critical side of *La carga*. Through this borrowing of Martí's terminology, one is clued into the tapping of a rich discursive history that can be traced back through the fervor of African independence and the *Négritude* movement—both of which virtually passed Equatorial Guinea by—to nineteenth-century Caribbean models of resistance.<sup>83</sup> Hence what Mbare N'gom has tried to identify as *costumbrismo* in Ávila's work. What N'gom neglects in the tracing of Ávila's ideological nourishment, however, is the heavy air of modernity that permeates Martí's—and consequently Ávila's—agenda.

Martí himself propagated a strong sense of continental unification in order to thwart the pending dangers of what may be called “their America,” namely the burgeoning, Anglo-Saxon-oriented imperial power to the north: the U.S. But beyond drawing the frontlines of the coming continental struggle, he clarified what that unification should look like in a vivacious poetic swathed in modern themes and full of malleable spaces populated by erudite subjects. In his view, it was through education and the cultivation of knowledge that America—or more precisely Latin America—could unite and positively navigate the onslaught of modernity: “Those peoples that do not know one another had better make haste and get to know one another, as those who are going to fight together,”<sup>84</sup> he said. And this knowledge could only be delivered by the hero figure of the *letrado*, or educator of the masses, like his idealized Bartolomé de Las

---

<sup>83</sup> Indeed, as CLR James correctly asserts, in the formation of what would become *Négritude*, even before Garvey there was Martí. For more see the appendix to: CLR James, *The Black Jacobins* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989) 391-418.

<sup>84</sup> “*Los pueblos que no se conocen han de darse prisa para conocerse, como quienes van a pelear juntos*”. (Martí 1977: 37)

Casas who, in “*El Padre Las Casas*,” tragically signified the only hope for salvation against a native naïveté and a savage colonial brutality. (Martí 1910: 194)

The urgency of unification and ceding leadership roles to the *letrado* increases in gravity because of Martí’s brilliant method of constructing spaces that remain open to change, spaces in crisis with futures uncertain and therefore susceptible to the people’s molding. His interplay of subjects and spaces then set the groundwork for his vision of a unified America moving onward into enlightened modernity.

A similar philosophy informs *La carga* in opposite terms: the Mbini represented is a closed space, already fixed into a solidified past and present—the former, of course conditions the latter—and lacking grandiosity. Indeed that point of crisis when Equatoguineans finally faced the chance to shape their own future stands out by its omission in the text, as a temporal gap or void that smoothes over the difficult transition from colonial past to neocolonial now.

The correlation of such a bleak spatiality with a complete dearth of any modern, erudite subject then is by no means a coincidence. For what makes the colonial dialectic operate in Ávila’s constructed world is that same concoction of native naïveté and colonizing savagery that populated Martí’s textual spaces and substantiated the necessity of a paradigm shift. Ávila has often lamented the lack of education in his country (2003: 39, 42; 2005: 32, 70-71), citing it as a significant source of current woes. And without that *letrado* figure and the modern, democratic enlightenment that s/he symbolizes—and there is no question that he puts forth no such character in *La carga*—one may conclude that his Mbini is forever destined to stagnate under the yoke of its current abysmal circumstances.

But the disaster that is *La carga*'s Mbini does not necessarily communicate desperation, for it serves Ávila's agenda as an example of what has gone wrong, what not to do. Mbini, the local manifestation of his revitalized African monolith, *Nuestra África*, can be changed, but what is needed are those erudite thinkers who look critically at the inherited social structures bestowed by a legacy of colonial intervention, instead of the mid-level colonial administrators who shined for their mediocrity like Macías Nguema.

### 3.3.3 Mbini as Home:

Finally, these two facets—a place and a name—combine to form a home, that ambiguous noun chalked with sometimes nostalgic, but always subjective, sentiment and nonetheless indicative of some geographic physicality. By acquiring the status of “Home,” Mbini is transformed from a mere physical locale and infused with all of the convoluted, contrary and sometimes contradictory sentiments that result from being a name, (i.e. being a subject). In this sense Mbini is the very incarnation of postcolonial angst, epitomizing the discursive braiding that has resulted from the violent cultural clash of colonialism.

As a subjective creation, the inner workings of one's home are wholly dependent upon individualized criteria specific only to the whim of s/he who enunciates. To look then at how the Avilan home—Mbini—is constructed one must address how it is enunciated: not just the spatial dimensions attributed to it, nor the inner clash of ideas played out there, but the sentiment with which it is described, how it is written.

Mbini is written by Ávila with some illusion of narrative distance, as if trying to feign Iradier's supposed scientific authority, or as though mimicking the reluctant

conformity to European designs seen in the literature of consent (see pages 11-12). But when considering the ironic jabs that punctuate his cadence and the intimacy he develops between space and subject, one quickly sees beyond Ávila's façade of disinterested distance to a more personalized (or perhaps he may call it a more "Africanized") narration.<sup>85</sup>

The first significant characteristic of Ávila's narration—his ironic use of Western discourses—is quite clear. As Rizo has already mentioned, *La carga's* author-narrator intermittently projects commentaries or observations into his constructed past as a method of injecting "ironic references to the discourses of modernity into each chapter" (2004: 201) thus allowing the reader to consider different sections of the novel in terms of specific discursive parameters. The narration therefore takes on a superficial sense of bolstering the formulas for reaching a European-style modernity—reminiscent of Sarmiento's "civilization"—that have been thrust upon Africa for decades. Yet upon closer examination, the absurdity of applying such discourses to an African context is difficult to overlook. To demonstrate this Rizo looks to the opening lines of the penultimate chapter, *Cauces comunes* ("Common Channels"): (*ibid* 201-202)

*Lo normal sería que cada río tuviera un lugar por donde discurrieran con libertad sus aguas, pero no siempre es así y, muchas veces, las aguas de dos o más ríos tienen que compartir un lecho. Cuando eso ocurre los entendidos hablan de afluentes y subafluentes. ... Pero lo que nunca ha sido tratado por ninguna rama del saber es el grado de resentimiento que sufren los afluentes cuando descubren cómo el hermano mayor se hace famoso con aguas ajenas ... .*

---

<sup>85</sup> His narration does, after all, adhere to the temporality represented by *Nuestra África*: ambiguous, monolithic, recursive and devoid of linear chronology.

Normally, it would be that each river had a place where its waters could flow freely, but it's not always like that and, often times, the waters of two or more rivers have to share the same riverbed. When this occurs the experts speak of affluents and sub-affluents. ... But what no branch of knowledge has ever looked at is the degree of resentment suffered by affluents when they discover how the older bother gets famous with foreign waters. (Ávila 1999: 62)

By adopting the scientific prose of hydrology, Rizo points out, Ávila successfully assimilates the paradigmatic features of a Western (read "European") narrative into his description of African phenomena with the effect of producing a sense of absurdity. For according to that narrative paradigm, assessing the "resentment" of an affluent would remain outside the realm of possibility; it would be simply absurd. Yet what soon emerges is not the absurdity of African phenomena, but a clearer image of the "incongruence [of using] scientific prose to describe the African context."<sup>86</sup> What then results is yet another situation in which his incorporation of a Western discursive paradigm really serves a final purpose of underlining how inappropriate it would be to apply that paradigm to Africa in any serious way. (Rizo 2004: 202)

By using temporality as a conduit through which spatiality and subjectivity interact, one can illuminate the other main aspect of Ávila's narration. He abandons the lineal chronology of—for example—Iradier's chronicle for the preferred method of the vignette, in which time's edges are blurred; each segment has no defined beginning or end, instead every scene is book-ended by a fade-in and a fade-out as though the reader were getting to know Mbini through drowsy glimpses. In this sense time becomes space; the past is told as both 1940 and as Río Benito and the present is not just 1999 but Mbini as well. And each of these two physico-temporal realities corresponds with multiple

---

<sup>86</sup> "... incongruencia de la prosa científica para describir el contexto africano". (Rizo 2004: 202)



subjectivities such that Equatorial Guinea becomes both a space of subjugation and resistance, a place seen as destitute and heroic.

In keeping with the postcolonial form in which it was fashioned, *La carga* operates based on the initial assumption of multiple confrontations: between past and present; knowledge and ignorance; colonizer and colonized; a benevolent history and a destructive one. It then proceeds to navigate various attempts at reconciling these oppositions through irony, mockery, absurdity, as well as through resistance and even assimilation. The end result is such that what is left is an ambiguous fog through which the proper path and figures to follow are unclear, but amongst which there is an overwhelming sense of being unsettled. All that remains clear is that the myths propagated in the stead of any legitimacy for the colonial project have left a formidable, and detrimental, imprint on modern-day Equatorial Guinea, one that threatens to continue growing if the new vestiges of that social order are not soon checked.

#### 4. Conclusion ...

In the last section it was argued that through various forms of con/fusing the binaries established earlier on, Ávila's narrative position comes to the fore as the principal medium of his critique. In the context of this narration room is made for presenting an alternate version of history that ceases to discard the European role in shaping Equatorial Guinea's calamitous state of affairs, going beyond 40 years of post-independence dictatorships to explore the social climate that spawned them. This in and of itself presents a form of resistance to the neocolonial doctrines that paint many African dictators as strictly African creations and, therefore, African problems. Similarly, by rehashing the catastrophic impact of foreign intervention—whether justified by capital or the cross—the need for alternatives to the espoused crusades of some Africanists emerges. Furthermore, because he writes of Mbini as home Ávila is granted the status of being an “authority” on the matter, manufacturing a sense of agency that hastens his insertion into the discursive milieu that defines History.

As a result of the neo-orientalist apparatus of submission, voices of the so-called Global South<sup>87</sup> continue to shout from the margins. And despite the emergence of promising phenomena, to deny today's neocolonial endeavors and the existence of discourses that sustain them would be unthinkable. In the context of Equatorial Guinea, where some of the world's most egregious violations of human rights abound and the

---

<sup>87</sup> By “Global South” I'm referring to the planet's “unindustrialized” countries, which despite massive concentrations of raw materials are nonetheless pigeon-holed by prevailing economic discourses into the category of “GDP under-achievers” and coerced into unjust debt schemes that only strengthen the choke hold of the so-called “wealthy nations.”

sordid truth of disaster capitalism<sup>88</sup> is a daily reality, those voices seem to echo in a perpetual silence when put up against the virtual industry of doctrine that they question.

One need only glance at the journalistic portrayals of the Macías regime for an idea of the historical narrative that these voices are up against: tales of horrid state terror and brutal dictatorial savagery that, while capturing the reproachable nature of the regime, neglect to mention the conditions in which such a reprehensible reign was allowed to materialize. Or worse still, when other stories deemed more worthy of international attention arise, accounts of the Equatoguinean experience are altogether exiled from the pages of our collective history. Indeed, it was only after a decade of silence—when Macías was finally overthrown—that international media briefly turned their attentions to the faltering African statelet and even then only to vigorously detail the morbid atrocities. Out of fourteen media reports from the time of his ouster, only one reflects the marginal degree of journalistic integrity necessary to even mention that, prior to decreeing himself president-for-life, Macías was a mid-level civil servant in the colonial administration.<sup>89</sup> And of course, none go as far as to attribute his rise to power to Spain's botched 1968 pull out and inept political structuring during the transition to independence.<sup>90</sup>

---

<sup>88</sup> The idea of a free market-based capitalistic model that goes beyond the proposed function of efficiently dealing with natural, political and economic disasters, to actually thriving on them. For more see Naomi Klein, The Shock Doctrine: the Rise of Disaster Capitalism (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2007).

<sup>89</sup> Of the reports, drawn from an array of international news outlets, eight limit their mention of Spanish colonialism to the three-word label of “former Spanish colony,” one mentions that Macías worked in the colonial administration, and five don't mention Spanish Colonialism at all.

<sup>90</sup> For an account of this period, see: Sundiata (55-63).

But journalism is one mere facet of the neocolonial variant of orientalism, and indeed the most synthetic, façade-free facet, to be sure. Unfortunately, with the pervasiveness of economic and socio-political “solutions” being proposed for Africa, most of which are still mired in the theoretical postulates of the West’s past, little progress is being made to consider the alternatives suggested by African agents (Mbembe 2001: 7). With the so-called experts preaching a doctrine of open markets and castigating protectionism at every turn, a thrust toward “growing economies” in order to service external debt is taking place in the absence of any real debate as to how national economies were manipulated into this vicious cycle to begin with. In another realm, some discourses of the aid crusade are beginning to echo the clerical agenda that helped to foment European conquest of the continent. And the philanthropy of billionaires is praised like nineteenth-century missionary work with no mention of how the resources that made those billions were ruthlessly pried from African hands.<sup>91</sup> So the cycle continues, and voices like Ávila’s continue to contend with the overwhelming discursive tide that works to actively suppress those bits of truth that call to us from the confines of history. It is in the revival of these truths, the voicing of a history that has long been evaded by the prevailing discourses, where Ávila’s resistance lies.

Yet his method of resistance is not rooted in all-out rejection of neocolonial discourses. *La carga* is no call to arms. Instead, by warping its features in a Žižek-style parallax view he fleshes out neocoloniality’s inherent absurdity and lays it bare for all to see. He reconstructs the flawed logic of a white supremacy that held the incompetent

---

<sup>91</sup> For one example see: Anjan Sundaram, “Congo’s Tin Men,” *Fortune* vol. 153, n. 8 (1 May 2006) 41-42, which gives an brief account of the hardships Congolese workers are put through supplying the global electronics market with resources.

epitome of mediocrity as its pinnacle figure and he revives a discursive trope that bases all subjectivity on that pitiful figure. In both cases one cannot help but notice the fundamental disconnect that results. What is more, if the message isn't clear enough he presents his portrait of Mbini today to ensure that the social model of the colonial dialectic and the discursive one of geography based subjectivity are not viable within the context of *Nuestra África*. Ironically, the mobilization of *Nuestra África* as a basis for subjectivity *is* geography based but, in a coy acknowledgement of authorship's limitations, he always leaves the final assessment of such contradictions in the hands of the "reader's supreme judgment" (Ávila 1999: 28; 33; 55; 61).

Herein lie the horizons of Hispano-African studies—as well as further analysis of Ávila's already formidable body of work. While the work of dedicated scholars such as N'gom and Rizo represent a promising beginning, now more than ever further investigation into the themes and positions seen in *La carga* is paramount. For embodied in the posture of *Nuestra África* one can hear the faint echoes of *Négritude* and the nascent rumblings of a Pan-Africanist resurgence. As though retooling former discourses in the service of a new stance, Ávila manufactures the agency from which to launch a defense against the very real economic and material invasion of resource-rich Africa. But much more than a mere recycling of past resistance, his Pan-Africanist retrieval of history is enriched by the heritage unique to the Equatoguinean context. The incorporation of Martí, for example, is but one instance in which the mobilization of Latin American solutions is channeled into the African ambit. What remains to be seen, however—and what needs to be questioned—is whether the nourishment offered by this meeting is enough to salvage the Pan-Africanist posture from its prior limitations. Can, for example,

the restrictions imposed by Nkrumah's monolithic vision of a united Africa be overcome—or ameliorated—with the infusion of Latin American discursive tropes? Or is Ávila's style of resistance doomed to fail, at least until the staunch rigidity of *Nuestra África* is done away with? These questions, and others, remain to be addressed in the burgeoning scholarly criticism of Equatoguinean literature.

## Select Bibliography of Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel

2006. *Guinea Ecuatorial, Vicerías* (Valencia: Institución Alfonso el Magnánimo).
2005. *Cómo convertir este país en un paraíso: Otras reflexiones sobre Guinea Ecuatorial* (Malabo: Ediciones Pángola).
2004. *El fracaso de las sombras* (Malabo: Ediciones Pángola).
2002. *Nadie tiene buena fama en este país* (Ávila: Malamba).
2001. *El desmayo de Judas* (Malabo: Centro Cultural Hispano-Guineano).
2000. *Áwala cu sangui* (Malabo: Pángola).
2000. *El derecho de pernada* (Malabo: Pángola).
1999. *Historia íntima de la humanidad* (Malabo: Pángola).
1999. *La carga* (Valencia: Palmart).
1994. *Poemas* (Malabo: Centro Cultural Hispano-Guineano).
1993. 'Hombres domésticos', en *África 2000*, 16: 20–28.

## Bibliography

- Anderson, Benedict. Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism. New York: Verso, 1983.
- Ashcroft, Bill et al, eds. The Post-Colonial Studies Reader. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Ávila Laurel, Juan Tomás. La carga. Valencia: Palmart Editorial, 1999.
- . “El mayor drama para mi país es que las cosas las hacen otros.” With María Elvira Luna Escudero-Alie. Espéculo n. 16 (2001).
- . “República de Guinea Ecuatorial.” *Debats* n. 83 (Winter 2003): 38-49.
- . Cómo convertir este país en un paraíso: Otras reflexiones sobre Guinea Ecuatorial. Malabo: Ediciones Pángola, 2005.
- . “Notas sobre la literatura de Guinea.” *Hispanic Research Journal* vol. 6, n. 2 (June 2005): 171-173.
- Bhabha, Homi K. The Location of Culture. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Columbus, Cristopher. Los cuatro viajes. Testamento. Consuelo Varela, ed. Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1986.
- Comaroff, Jean and John. “Africa Observed: Discourses of the Imperial Imagination.” Perspectives on Africa: A Reader in Culture, History, and Representation. Grinker, Roy R., and Christopher B. Steiner, eds. Malden: Blackwell, 1998.
- Cortés, Hernán. Cartas de relación. México: Editorial Porrúa, S.A., 1993.
- Creus, Jacint. Cuentos de los Ndowe de Guinea Ecuatorial. Malabo: Ediciones Centro Cultural Hispano-Guineano, 1991.
- . Identidad y conflicto: aproximación a la tradición oral en Guinea Ecuatorial. Madrid: Los Libros de la Catarata, 1997.



- Creus, Jacint, and Gustau Nerín. Estampas y cuentos de la Guinea Española. Madrid: Clan Editorial, 1999.
- Derrida, Jacques. Writing and Difference. Trans. Alan Bass. London: Routledge, 1978.
- Escudero-Alie, María Elvira Luna. "En torno a *Historia íntima de la humanidad*, de Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel." Sincronía (Fall 2006).  
<http://sincronia.cucsh.udg.mx/lunaescudero06b.htm>. Visited 9/19/2007.
- Genette, Gerard. "Introduction to the Paratext." New Literary History 22 (1991): 261-272.
- Hernández, Pero. Naufragios y Comentarios de Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca. Madrid: Espasa Calpe, 1999.
- Ignatieff, Michael. "Getting Iraq Wrong." The New York Times 5 Aug. 2007, magazine late ed.: Sec. 6, 26.
- Iradier, Manuel. África: viajes y trabajos de la Asociación Eúskara La Exploradora. Madrid: Ediciones Polifemo, 1994.
- . África. Ed. Ramón Jiménez Fraile. Barcelona: Mondadori, S.A., 2000.
- James, C.L.R. The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution. New York: Vintage Books, 1989.
- Klien, Naomi. The Shock Doctrine: the Rise of Disaster Capitalism. Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2007.
- Martí, José. Flor y lava: discursos, juicios, correspondencias, etc. Paris: Sociedad de Ediciones Literarias y Artísticas, 1910.
- . "Nuestra América." Política de nuestra América. Ed. Roberto Fernández Retamar. Mexico: Siglo xxi Editores, S.A., 1977. 37-44.

- Mbembe, Achille. "At the Edge of the World: Boundaries, Territoriality, and Sovereignty in Africa." Trans. Steven Rendell. *Public Culture* vol. 12, n. 1 (Winter 2000): 259-284.
- . On the Postcolony. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.
- Memmi, Albert. The Colonizer and the Colonized. Boston: Beacon Press, 1967.
- Ndongo-Bidyogo, Donato. Antología de la literatura guineana. Madrid: Editorial Nacional, 1984.
- . "Literatura moderna hispanófono en Guinea Ecuatorial." *Afro-Hispanic Review* (Spring 2000): 39-44.
- Nerín, Gustau. Guinea Ecuatorial, historia en blanco y negro: hombres blancos y mujeres negros en Guinea Ecuatorial (1843-1968). Barcelona: Ediciones Península, 1998.
- New, William Herbert. Grandchild of Empire: About Irony, Mainly in the Commonwealth. Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2003.
- N'gom Faye, Mbare. "Algunos aspectos de la literatura hispano-negroafricana: la creación cultural en Guinea Ecuatorial." *Cuadernos Para Investigación de la Literatura Hispánica* vol. 20, n. 1 (1995): 89-99.
- . Diálogos con Guinea: Panorama de la literatura guineoecuatorial de expresión castellana a través de sus protagonistas. Madrid: Labrys 54, 1996.
- . "Desde la cuna de la negritud." *Quimera* n. 112-113-114: 80-87.
- . "The Missing Link: African Hispanism at the Dawn of the Millennium," *Aracne@Rutgers: Journal of Iberian and Latin American Literary and Cultural Studies* vol.1 no.1 (2001). <[http://www.scc.rutgers.edu/arachne/vol\\_1ngom.htm](http://www.scc.rutgers.edu/arachne/vol_1ngom.htm)>. Visited 4/14/06.

- . “Literatura africana de expresión española.” *Cuadernos Centro de Estudios Africanos* n. 3 (2003): 111-135.
- Nkrumah, Kwame. Consciencism. London: Heinemann, 1964.
- Pagden, Anthony. The Fall of Natural Man: the American Indian and the Origins of Comparative Ethnology. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982.
- Rizo, Elisa. “La carga de Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel: novela historiográfica poscolonial guineoecuatoriana.” *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies* vol. 8 (2004): 197-204.
- . “En torno a la obra de Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel, un protagonista de las letras guineoecuatorianas.” *Hispanic Research Journal* vol. 6, n. 2 (June 2005): 175-178.
- . “Teatro guineoecuatoriano contemporáneo: el mibili en *El fracaso de las sombras*.” *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies* vol. 7, n. 3 (2006): 289-310.
- Said, Edward. Orientalism. New York: Vintage Books, 1979.
- Salvo, Jorge A. La formación de identidad en la novela hispano africana: 1950-1990. Thesis (Ph. D.)--Florida State University, 2003, 2003.
- Senghor, Léopold Sédar. “Negritude: a Humanism of the Twentieth Century.” Perspectives on Africa: A Reader in Culture, History, and Representation. Grinker, Roy R., and Christopher B. Steiner, eds. Malden: Blackwell, 1998.
- Sommer, Doris. Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America. Berkeley: U of California P, 1991.
- Sundaram, Anjan. “Congo’s Tin Men.” *Fortune* vol. 153, n. 8 (1 May 2006): 41-42.

- Sundiata, Ibrahim K. Equatorial Guinea: Colonialism, State Terror, and the Search for Stability. San Francisco: Westview Press, 1990.
- Torchia, Andrew. No title. *The Associated Press* 21 Sept. 1979. *LexisNexis Academic*. Online. LexisNexis. 9/19/2007.
- Unamuno, Miguel de. "Cómo se hace una novela." San Manuel Bueno, mártir; "Cómo se hace una novela. Paulino Garagorri, ed. Madrid: Alianza Editorial, S. A., 1994.
- . Niebla. Mario J. Valdés, ed. Madrid: Ediciones Cátedra, S.A., 2000.
- Žižek, Slavoj. Visión de paralaje. Trans. Marcos Mayer. Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica de Argentina, S.A., 2006.
- No author. "Equatorial Guinea's Strongman Overthrown, National Radio Says." *The Associated Press* 6 Aug. 1979. *Factiva*. Online. Factiva, Inc. 9/19/2007.
- No author. "Burned National Treasury, African Tyrant on the Run." *Reuter's News Agency* 11 Aug. 1979. *Factiva*. Online. Factiva, Inc. 9/19/2007.
- No author. "Ousted Guinean Chief Cornered in Dense Bush Country on Border." *Reuter's News Agency* 13 Aug. 1979. *Factiva*. Online. Factiva, Inc. 9/19/2007.
- No author. "Dictator Overthrown by Military Faces Trial in Equatorial Guinea." *Reuter's News Agency* 22 Sept. 1979. *Factiva*. Online. Factiva, Inc. 9/19/2007.
- No author. "Guineans Rejoice as Dictator Dies." *Reuter's News Agency* 1 Oct. 1979. *Factiva*. Online. Factiva, Inc. 9/19/2007.
- No author. "Equatorial Guinea hauls Itself Back from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century." *Reuter's News Agency* 26 Oct. 1979. *Factiva*. Online. Factiva, Inc. 9/19/2007.
- No author. "African Dictators; Two Down." The Economist 11 Aug. 1979: 52. *LexisNexis Academic*. Online. LexisNexis. 4/28/2007.

No author. "Stability of Central Africa Vital to French Political Interests." The Economist

10 Oct. 1979: 11. *Factiva*. Online. Factiva, Inc. 9/19/2007.

No author. "A Quiet Coup in 'Africa's Dachau.'" Newsweek 20 Aug. 1979: 34.

*LexisNexis Academic*. Online. LexisNexis. 4/28/2007.

No author. "Guinea's Uncertain Rescue." Editorial. The Globe and Mail 23 Aug. 1979: 6.

*Factiva*. Online. Factiva, Inc. 9/19/2007.

"Equatorial Guinea." BBC Summary of World Broadcasts. *The British Broadcasting*

*Corporation* 7 Aug. 1979: 10:30 GMT and 18:30 GMT. *LexisNexis Academic*.

Online. LexisNexis. 9/19/2007.