

*Para Rogelio, con cariño,
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Descargas: Exploring Identity in Rogelio Martínez Furé's Afro-Cuban Poetic Forms

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For Henry J. Richards

So much of the work done in the field of Afro-Hispanic studies over the past fifty years or so has consisted of excavation and preservation. The successful efforts of the pioneers in Afro-Hispanic literature have produced a rich corpus of original works, scholarly resources, and literary criticism that extends well beyond the original conception of the field as limited to works in Spanish by Afrodescendants. Current trends in scholarship expand the analytic frame in ways that may render the term “Afro-Hispanic” insufficient for the kinds of practices that aim to understand literature and culture in their widest contexts. I still find value in demarcating a field called “Afro-Hispanic studies,” particularly as long as canon building is still taking place, an inarguable reality after centuries of marginalization and discrimination faced by Afrodescendant cultural producers in the Spanish-speaking world.

To that end, this article seeks to add to the canon by introducing three books of poetry by Rogelio Martínez Furé: *Eshu (Oriki a mí mismo) y otras descargas* (2007), *Cimarrón de Palabras (descargas)* (2010) and *Iwé Olumo Yonu o Libro de las descargas* (2015) as well as some of the work in his multi-genre collection, *Briznas de la memoria* (2015). By analyzing several poems and situating them in the broader context of Martínez Furé’s literary production, I intend to pave the way for future scholarship on this neglected body of poetry.

Now in his eighties, Martínez Furé continues to be a major force in Afro-Cuban cultural production. An erudite researcher and prolific writer in the area of Afro-Cuban ethnology and folklore, Martínez Furé is also a choreographer, singer, composer, translator, and poet. He has been associated with the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional as one of its founders and codirectors (see Schwall for more complete biographical details). Martínez Furé also belonged to the influential El Puente group (Cordones-Cook provides an astute analysis in “Artes afrocubanas;” also see Howe). During the early years of El Puente group, according to Nancy Morejón, “fue Furé quien introdujo el conocimiento de las diversas literaturas africanas en el público de nuestro país. Nombres como el de Amos Tutuola, Chinua Achebe, Kateb Yacine, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Alex Laguma, Wole Soyinka, Nadine Gordimer o Keorapetse (Willie) Kgositsile entre otros muchos, se convirtieron en referencia obligada” (33).

It is therefore surprising to see that so little work exists on Martínez Furé's contributions to Cuban literature, given the scope of his poetic projects. This work consists of introductions to his books of poetry (see Georgina Herrera, Gerardo Fulleo León, Inés María Martiatu Terry, Nancy Morejón, and Ulises Padrón), a collection of essays by Nancy Morejón commemorating awards and presentations of his work (*Rogelio Martínez Furé: ¡Juglar o griot!*), as well as Juanamaría Cordones-Cook's recent short film, *Rogelio Martínez Furé: Un griot cubano/A Cuban Griot*. In the film, which centers on Martínez Furé's influential work in recuperating and promoting African-based religions and cultures, he traces his lifetime devotion to Afro-Cuban culture and discusses his roots: "No tengo una visualización idealizada, romántica, de mis orígenes, pero sí una asunción eternamente cimarrón."

The term *cimarrón* is key to understanding Martínez Furé, especially since he titled his 2010 book of poetry *Cimarrón de Palabras (descargas)* (I capitalize *Palabras* based on the author's usage of "Cimarrón-de-Palabras" in poems in the book. Quotations refer to the first edition). For many writers in the Afro-Hispanic tradition, *cimarrón* is a key identity marker, and its etymology and usage in several Romance languages is worth noting. *Cimarrón* is usually translated as "runaway" or "fugitive" in reference to an escaped slave. Sometimes it is rendered as the etymologically related "maroon," the English noun that generally signifies an enslaved person who escapes bondage, specifically in the context of the Caribbean and Central- and South-American Atlantic Coast. In the passive voice, "marooned" as an adjective connotes an involuntary isolation that someone or something causes, such as a shipwreck that strands survivors on an island or a deliberate act of abandonment at sea (*Online Etymology Dictionary*). The French word *marron* derives from Spanish *cimarrón*.

It has been accepted that *cimarrón* in Spanish has its origins in the noun *cima*, peak or high point of a hill or mountain. Applied to animals or plants, the adjective *cimarrón* means wild or savage. As an adjective, it modifies the state of something or someone that is wild or has escaped, such as *caballo cimarrón* or *esclavo cimarrón* (*Diccionario de la Real Academia Española*). However, José Arrom, in an exhaustive study of the linguistic origins of *cimarrón*, presents abundant evidence that it derives from the indigenous *símaran*:

En resumen, los informes que aquí apporto confirman que *cimarrón* es un indigenismo de origen antillano, que se usaba ya en el primer tercio del siglo XVI, y que ha venido a resultar otro de los numerosos antillanismos que la conquista extendió por todo el ámbito del continente e hizo refluir sobre la propia metrópoli. (57)

Cimarrón de Palabras thus expresses origins: words serve as a topos for the *cimarrón*, and words may be said to constitute his essential being. In keeping with a theme, I will be developing, indigenous linguistic and cultural practices from the pre-Columbian Caribbean and from Africa often function in literature (as in societies) to occlude and protect significant aspects of identity in the face of

colonization and repression. I contend that Martínez Furé's poetry performs this dynamic: that is, the language and symbols he employs may seem fully legible, yet there is hidden content discoverable only through a deep tracing of origins and which permits imaginative links to be forged.

Not only does the title *Cimarrón de Palabras* (*descargas*) bring us into the realm of the verbal, but it also classifies the work as a popular Cuban musical genre, *descargas*, which in its narrowest sense might be understood as "Cuban jam sessions." *Descargas*, originating in the 1940s and continuing to this day, are long improvised pieces that include repeated "guajeos and tumbaos" (Torres 145–147). As Frances R. Aparicio notes, with the advent of salsa, *descargas* began to include elements from other Caribbean and Latin-American traditions, especially from Puerto Rico, Colombia, and Panama (83).

Martínez Furé defines his *descargas* as a fusion of "lo erudito y lo popular, lo lúdico y lo ritualístico" that use a narrator (*akpaló*) and a chorus (*elebé*). He writes essays he also calls *descargas*, which defy traditional conventions and become iconoclast like the "pimienta de Guinea en fiestas de calambucos" (Briznas 89), Martínez Furé explains that in the *descarga*, "entra lo humano y lo divino, la especulación y la sentencia, las variantes lingüísticas que uno desea, los préstamos idiomáticos . . ." (cited in Gonce Pascual 8) and he frequently refers to the style as resembling jazz or *feeling cubano*. Among the linguistic borrowings, in addition to constant use of Yoruba/Lukumí in entire poems or parts of them, are a remarkable number of words and expressions from French, Italian, Latin, and English. In the titular poem of *Eshu* (*Oriki a mí mismo*), the poetic voice gives a warning in section XI of the poem: "Los oídos 'demasiado' sensibles están autortizados a abandonar la sala donde se entone este oriki, o saltar su lectura" (*Eshu* 169). The poetic voice then goes on to declare himself, in keeping with Eshu's character traits, "el más grande políglota del mundo," and then unleashes a torrent from his "enciclopedia/ ambulante de palabrotas" such as: "coño cojone/culo," "Kiss mai ass! Moder foket!" (*Eshu* 170).

Martínez Furé's poetry relies heavily on the African praise song or *oriki*, of both religious and secular nature. The *descargas* frequently adhere closely to traditional *orikis* devoted to the Orishas (for example, in *Eshu*). Other *descargas* take on a more markedly improvised exploration and revision of the *oriki* (such as in *Cimarrón de Palabras*). This style of *oriki* aligns with the Cuban jazz that the poet has claimed as inspiration and they lend themselves best to literary analysis. The *oriki* plays a significant role in Martínez Furé's ethnographic work: he has personally amassed a trove of more than one thousand Yoruba *orikis* "de boca de los *akpwón* o *akorín*—como son designados los cantantes" (*Diálogos* 215).

Martínez Furé explains the *oriki* as "nombres de alabanzas, frases poéticas para describir y enlazar a los dioses y a los hombres. Es la forma de poesía más común entre los yorubas" (*Poesía anónima* 145). Each kind of Yoruba poetry "posee

su técnica de recitación propia, y es cantada por un grupo determinado de personas. Los *Oddu* de *Ifá* son recitados exclusivamente por los *babalawos* o sacerdotes del oráculo" (142). The *Oriki*, in contrast, are recited "por los poetas profesionales o por los sacerdotes del dios—Orisha—particular a quien se adore" (142).

The poet expresses his intention in his *descargas*: "Y fiel a la oralidad, aquí comienzo mis *descargas*, aunque son para ser *oídas* y no para ser *leídas*" (*Briznas* 91). He defines "los códigos de la oralidad" as "fórmulas rituales, antífonas, cantos, enigmas, palabras-clave" and claims that they reveal both a collective and unique Caribbean identity (*Briznas* 89). The journey from oral to written concerns Martínez Furé, who warns readers that they should think of themselves as listeners and even participants. In the poem "*Mo dupé* (Agradecimientos, antes de apagar el ordenador)," he contrasts the captive written word with liberated orality: "Aunque ahora aparezcan impresas mis *descargas*, / en este cuaderno—prisioneros ya de la escritura—, / nunca se olvidarán de sus fuentes más reyoyas: / Esas palabras vivas de pueblo-pueblo" (82).

Thus far, I have been situating Martínez Furé in an Afro-Cuban and African context. Yet his work also connects to an African-American tradition (understood hemispherically) that fuses poetry and black music, such as Langston Hughes did with jazz and the blues. The example of the best-known Afro-Cuban poet who exhibits a similar literary style is, of course, Nicolás Guillén, who looms large in Martínez Furé's work. Guillén's *Motivos de son* (1930) marks a foundational place in the *Négritude* movement; in it, Guillén uses the Afro-Cuban vernacular to treat motifs such as racial discrimination, unemployment, and relations between men and women. The *son* is both a musical and dance style, a fusion of Spanish and African traditions.

Guillén, Hughes, and Martínez Furé all evidence a complex hybridity in which more than two cultural elements are fused: European and African ascendancy; modern and ancient cultural manifestations; black vernacular and formal Spanish or English; and music, poetry, and dance. The appeal to Africa sounds clearly in their work. For instance, in "Mi apellido," Guillén transcends the painful boundedness of a bloody, differentiated African and Spanish past to embrace a Cubanness in which bloods mix in a last name that is

hecho de interminables nombres;
el nombre mío, ajeno
libre y mío, ajeno y vuestro,
ajeno y libre como el aire. (183)

In *Cimarrón de Palabras*, Martínez Furé takes a somewhat different approach from those of Guillén and Hughes. He performs what might be called *Africanidad*, or Africanicity, a cultural recirculation and improvisation of African forms. As I have shown, in an act of creative mimesis, Martínez Furé recuperates the earliest oral poetic traditions of Africa, renders them into written language, and

recontextualizes them. The illustrations that appear on each chapter title page of *Cimarrón de Palabras* (see fig. 1 for an example) come from African rock art, some dating from thousands of years ago (there is a good online collection at the Trust for African Rock Art site, see fig. 2). If *Cimarrón de Palabras* is fundamentally a search for an individual and collective identity, then the incorporation of ancient African rock paintings—the inclusion and assimilation of represented bodies—serves to trace lineage to a prehistoric era and to humankind's most distant cultural productions.

The cover image of the first edition of *Cimarrón de Palabras* (see fig. 3) is an *anaforuana* or *firma* in the “Sociedad Secreta Abakuá” (see fig. 4). Of African origin, from what today is Nigeria and Cameroon, Abakuá traveled to the Caribbean and continues to be a major spiritual force in Cuba today. For my purposes here, the key aspect of the *anaforuanas* that I want to highlight is their capacity for syncretic signification. As Flora González Mandri notes, the *anaforuana* is “a complex visual system of sacred symbols that are used to evoke sacred figures, events, places, myths, rites and mythological transformations” (103). Like Lydia Cabrera, Cuba's most heralded scholar of Afro-Cuban folklore, religion, and ethnography, Martínez Furé uncovers what is secret (and sacred) and reveals it to those outside a closed cultural circle. By reappropriating a religious syncretic vocabulary, Martínez Furé expands the notion of *Cimarrón de Palabras* to become a *cimarrón* of visual symbols as well. I will return to this notion of the secret and the sacred in the next section.

Cimarrón de Palabras opens with two dedications. The first is to the West African Fulbé (also known as Fula or Fulani) people, many of whom were forcibly taken to the Americas in the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries. The second dedication is to Jean Fouchard, “haitiano universal, autor de *Les marrons du syllabaire*” (15). Fouchard's 1953 book concerns the instruction of enslaved people in Saint Domingue (modern-day Haiti). “*Les marrons du syllabaire*” are not literal fugitive slaves, *cimarrones*, but rather those who rebelled and persevered to become literate through what Fouchard views as “an admirable and arduous struggle” (112, my translation).

“Syllabary” in this context refers to a reading primer that starts out with short syllables and gradually moves to multisyllable words. Syllabaries in the time period that Fouchard studies typically had a catechistic purpose and included material such as a summary of Catholic beliefs and essential prayers. Fouchard shows how catechism was deployed to induct slaves into the Catholic faith and attempt to keep them docile by threatening them with retaliation for their so-called earthly transgressions. Fouchard documents the prohibitions against black and mixed-race people acquiring literacy and the brutal consequences for doing so. He also discusses how enslaved people taught themselves to read and write, often with help. One example that Fouchard cites: after long working days, the men and women gathered in secret to receive an old, kind priest who instructed them in reading and arithmetic (64).

Yet the threat of eternal damnation of enslaved peoples' souls paled in comparison with more immediate punishments, such as the routine tortures administered through whippings, beatings, and even death, the result of which, in the dehumanizing plantation economy, meant fewer enslaved men and women capacitated for work. While "there is little to indicate that the masses of African plantation slaves had any great craving for Christianity," it was indisputably in the clerics' and plantation owners' interests to "instill in the slaves greater humility, more conscience, and less ire against their overseers" (Brandon 61).

The mention of a syllabary in Martínez Furé's dedication brings to mind something other than the efforts of enslaved people to achieve literacy. Syllabaries are also forms of communication among people whose language is oral and pictorial. A syllabary is therefore a liminal mode, a set of written symbols to represent the syllables that make up spoken words. One of the oldest is the West African Vai syllabary, said to have come to Momolu Duwalu Bukele in a dream in the early eighteenth century (see Mafundikwa for a comprehensive illustrated presentation of African alphabets, in which he also includes rock painting). It is crucial to note that scholars such as Ivor L. Miller, Robert Farris Thompson, and Licia Clifton-James have provided evidence of a direct historical link between the Nsibidi syllabary and Cuban Abakuá *anaforuanas* or *firmas*. The "Sociedad Secreta Abakuá" is a Cuban reorganization of the all-male secret Leopard Society of the Ekpe or Ejagham in Africa (known as Ekoi in Cuba). Abakuá is creolization of Abakpa, the term used to describe Ejagham people (see Miller). *Anaforuanas* therefore link African and Cuban spiritual practices in highly significant ways, since their transposition to the Caribbean and their preservation and evolution within the "Sociedad Secreta Abakuá" mark a culturally unique feat.

Following the lines of the analysis I am positing here, the cover illustration of *Cimarrón de Palabras* and the dedication to Jean Fouchard embed symbolic connections that are discoverable only to the reader who can trace or imagine them. Martínez Furé thus constructs Afro-identity through a complex, transatlantic signifying system composed of word, both spoken, written, and sung; and sign and signature, both ancient and contemporary.

The rock paintings, syllabaries, and *anaforuanas* that I have discussed here are symbolic registers that have been created by Africans and Afro-Cubans in the service of their own artistic, literacy, and religious pursuits. Yet there is another symbol that must be mentioned in this context: the brand or *carimba* that is burned on an enslaved person's skin. These marks, forcibly imposed by traffickers, buyers, and sellers, render black bodies legible in the commodified exchange that sought to transform human beings with individuality into objectified and dehumanized members of an enslaved group who bear the mark of property through the owner's initials, the plantation's name, and so forth. The registers of *carimbas* resemble syllabaries in that they use symbols to signify clusters of meaning, the most

elementary being the letter “S” and the image of a nail (*clavo*) to denote *esclavo*. Fernando Ortiz points out that the enslaved person was often branded with the “S” *clavo* mark on one cheek and the owner’s mark on the other. Sometimes the word *cimarrón* was burned onto those who had fled and were recaptured (164-6). If we expand the concept of syllabary, then, it becomes apparent that it can be used as a mode of cultural transmission by Afrodescendants as well as a weapon directed against them.

The next section of this article will present close readings of exemplary poems by Martínez Furé, beginning with the prologue that opens *Cimarrón de Palabras*, called “Proemio en De.” It establishes another cultural connection, this one to music, as indicated by mention of the key of D. Derived from the Latin *proemium*, which is derived from the Greek *prooímion* (*Diccionario de la Real Academia Española*), *proemio* is a preface or preamble to a text or treatise. In antiquity, the term also applies to music as a prelude or fragment sung to introduce cithara players. The *proemio* could be used to honor the gods, especially Zeus or Jupiter (Pérez Porto and Merino), and in this way it functions as an ancient form of the praise song. Martínez Furé transposes the classical *proemio* into a context of Africanity for his *orikis* to the Orishas, the gods from the Yoruba pantheon. As Martínez Furé notes throughout *Briznas de la memoria* and *Poesía anónima africana*, African poetry is linked to music. Given the tonal character of most African languages, even everyday conversation is not far from musicality. He remarks that African poets are accompanied by *kora* (harp), cithara, two-stringed violins, guitars, and drums. Some poets create their own music, whereas others use music handed down from generation to generation (*Poesía anónima* xiv). The similarities between the classical *proemio* and African oral poetry provide another hidden or symbolic cultural link, which we can then connect to Martínez Furé’s Cuban *descargas* that take the form of *orikis*. Many of the *descargas* give the musical instruments that should accompany them: for example, “Igualdá (oriki)” indicates that the poem should be accompanied by “tambores, batá y vainas secas de framboyán como asherés” (*Iwé Olumo Yonu* 37).

What follows is “Proemio en De” in its entirety:

¡Jeyé!

Soy Cimarrón-de-Palabras.

Klonador de indentidades.

Un hambre insaciable
de Universos, me habita.

Aquí estoy.

Nombro las cosas
y me apodero de su esencia
al nombrarlas.

El ashé de la Palabra
me torna Palabra.

Fundadora,

iconoclasta y libre.
 Hija de ignotos
 reciclajes
 de la Memoria
 y el Olvido.
 ¡Jeyei!

Soy Cimarrón-de-Palabras,
 "oigan mi voz". . . (17-18)

The "Proemio" begins with an exhortation, ¡Jeyei!, which Martínez Furé lists in the glossary of *Eshu* as signifying "¡Prestad atención!" as it is used at the start of Abakuá ceremonies (202). The poetic voice announces his role as "Cimarrón-de-Palabras" and "Klonador de identidades." Like in so many religious traditions, the Word carries the power to create and destroy. The *Cimarrón-de-Palabras* assumes a divine role, the Word incarnate, an identity shifter, the one who, because of his power to name things, can also appropriate their essence. As Padrón notes in the introduction to the second edition of *Cimarrón de Palabras*, "la palabra consigna una vitalidad paradójica y patrimonial que desestructura el pensamiento occidental y refuncionaliza el lenguaje . . ." (18).

The poetic voice here may be said to correspond to the Yoruba supreme being Oloddumare who, along with Olofi and Olorun, brings all divinities and humans into existence through the creative force known as *ashé* (I will use Martínez Furé's spelling of the Orishas as well as Lázaro Cabrera Thompson's). The noun *klonador*, that is, "one who clones," associates the speaker with Elegguá (Eshu, Elegbara), the Orisha of the crossroads who is the trickster figure in Yoruba religion. The use of the consonant "k" (derived from Kongo) rather than the Spanish "c" (*clonar*) Afro-cubanizes the imported word, like *kúmbila* ("friend" or "comrade"). The introduction of the concept of cloning along with the Kongo "k" offers an example of linguistic syncretism that gives this poetry its particular cadence. Rather than confining himself to the traditional genre limitations of the *oriki* or Yoruba praise song, Furé invents a hybrid poetic lexicon in his *descargas*. *Reciclajes* (applied to *la palabra*) is another word from the industrial or tech realm, like cloning. A third instance can be found in the postscripts to *Cimarrón de Palabras* and *Eshu*, subtitled "Antes de apagar el sistema," a reference to a technology that connects sound, voice, and music to the written word (61, 195).

Cimarrón de Palabras is divided into three sections following the "Proemio en D." The first section focuses on the power of the word. The poem that opens it is entitled "Del aguardiente nuevo":

I
 Esta lengua,
 otrora imperial y negrera,
 la aprendieron mis abuelos
 a latigazos cepo y bocabajo.

Hoy es mía, nuestra,
materna.
Como cabello, sangre y sudor.
Por eso, lengua amada,
haré lo que desee contigo.
Nadie podrá impedirlo.
Terminarán bebiendo
de este Aguardiente-de-Palabras
nuevo.

Pero fiel a sus raíces.
Aromoso a mango y guayaba.
A canela pimienta y miel. (21)

Much as other Afrodescendant poets do, Martínez Furé traces the historical moment when the imperial tongue was imposed on captive Africans through mental and physical torture, such as isolation, whippings, and iron restraints. *Bocabajo* is a noun that means “castigo de azotes que se daban a los esclavos haciéndoles tenderse boca abajo” (*Diccionario de la Real Academia Española*). (For a description of the horrors of *bocabajo*, see Cortés López 149). The invocation of the older generation of grandparents echoes Nicolás Guillén’s “Balada de los dos abuelos,” in particular this line that references the past of all African who were enslaved: “¡Qué látigo el del negrero!” (*Summa poética* 92). Grandparents—whether biological or figurative—trigger the “I am like you / I am not like you” dilemma of many Afrodescendant poets, who grapple with their various racial identities along with the concomitant subjugations contained in them. Gender also factors in, since the grandson-grandfather (*nieto/abuelo*) grammatical axis in the poem would contrast with other possible pairings such as granddaughter-grandmother or grandson-grandmother. In familial relations, the plural of *mi abuela* and *mi abuelo* is *mis abuelos*, yet in Nicolás Guillén’s ballad, *mis abuelos* signals male-gendered grandparents from the maternal and paternal lineages. In contrast, in Martínez Furé, *mis abuelos* refers to both genders. It is worth noting that this is not the only poem in which Martínez Furé evokes Guillén. Among the citations is the famous line “¡Qué enigma entre las aguas!” from Guillén’s “Mi nombre,” which appears in “Odu fora” (*Briznas* 28) as well as in two poems (in slightly different forms) in *Iwé Olumo Yonu*, “Del mulato Opinskine y el Odu” and “Wonareo (despedida):” “¡Ay, Nicolás, Nicolás, / qué enigma entre las aguas! / Nicolás” (49, 67).

The word *lengua*, like *palabra*, has feminine grammatical gender in Spanish. For Martínez Furé, *la lengua* is both personal and collective. In an evocative play on grammatical and familial gender, the poet asserts that language or tongue is maternal, as in *la lengua materna*, denoting both linguistic origins as well as motherly protection, from which the poetic voice emerges, liberated, to command the word according to his will. The poet reclaims *sangre* and *sudor* as positive attributes associated with an identity that has been forged through resistance and survival.

The *aguardiente* mentioned in the poem can be understood to connect to the Orishas, in particular Oggún, one of the warrior Orishas along with Changó and Eleguá (or Eshu). Oggún is said to be a mediator, a transformer, and a clearer of paths using metal instruments. His favorite beverage is *aguardiente de caña*. *Aguardiente* figures prominently in many Santería o Regla de Ocha rituals; the *santero* might begin by taking a mouthful of *aguardiente* and spraying it across those gathered, in the mode of a blessing. Like the process of syncretization of Oggún with Saint Peter, and, by extension, all the Orishas with their corresponding Catholic saints, Martínez Furé keeps Oggún hidden in the firewater (It should be noted, however, that Martínez Furé considers religious syncretism to be excessive and prefers to describe it as “un complejo proceso que es más bien de yuxtaposición religiosa, lleno de contradicciones y tensiones (Briznas 92). The presence of Oggún and the Orishas make themselves known to those familiar with the Yoruba pantheon and with the religious and cultural practices that still flourish in modern-day Cuba. In this way, Afro-identity operates as something occluded or protected behind the cultural practices imposed from without. The *Aguardiente-de-Palabras* functions like the *ashé de la Palabra* in the “Proemio” as a creative force and vehicle for transmission of the sacred.

The second and third parts of “Del aguardiente nuevo” introduce Spanish writers:

II

Oh, lengua mía, nuestra.
 Fogoso alazán, déjame montarte,
 acariciar tus crines, como amante fiel.
 Adormecerme con tu trotar seguro,
 mientras Afefé susurra versos
 de San Juan de la Cruz,
 Santa Teresa,
 y Federico.

III

Conozco San Millán,
 Alcalá de Henares
 Y Salamanca,
 mas no acató coyundas académicas,
 ni sueño con sillón
 entre “Inmortales”.

Con el ashé de la Palabra hablada
 caribeña,
 me conformo.

Con su jocundo anonimato,
 que convierte el Yo Individual,
 en el Nosotros.
 Por eso, lengua amada,
 haré lo que desee contigo.
 Nadie podrá impedirlo.

Terminarán bebiendo
de este aguardiente nuevo. (22-3)

In the second section of the poem, Martínez Furé makes a connection by means of *Afefe* (Yoruba, "wind," messenger of Oyé) to the Spanish mystics San Juan de la Cruz and Teresa de Ávila as well as to Federico (García Lorca), whose haunting use of the cosmic world (including the wind, particularly in "Preciosa y el aire") evokes the mysterious in the form of religious ecstasy, human emotions, dreams, and imaginings. In this way, *afefe* permeates the history and culture of Spain. The poetic voice goes on to claim knowledge of San Millán, Alcalá de Henares, and Salamanca. Why are these particular places in Spain significant in the poem? The Suso monastery at San Millán de la Cogolla was once considered to be the "cuna de la lengua española," where the *Glosas Emilianenses* contained marginalia in a form of Romance similar to what became Spanish (see Alonso). Alcalá de Henares is the birthplace of Miguel de Cervantes and home of the Universidad Complutense, founded in 1293. In the halls of the University of Salamanca (1134), the oldest university in Spain and third-oldest in continuous operation in the world, distinguished thinkers and teachers such as Fray Luis de León and Miguel de Unamuno pronounced famous words there. Further, Hernán Cortés was a student in Salamanca, and Columbus passed through with the Spanish Court in 1486 to present his project to sail to the Indies to the Junta de Salamanca (see Lorenzo Sanz).

The poetic voice claims not to aspire to a seat among the "Inmortales," but instead expresses his satisfaction with the "ashé del la Palabra hablada / caribeña." By setting off *caribeña* as a one-word line, the poetic voice undoes the link with Old Spain forged in first lines of the first part of the poem ("esta lengua / otrora imperial y negrera") and instead incorporates the timeless power of the original creative force in Yoruba religion, *ashé*. However, the mention of key moments in Spanish history and the "Inmortales" establishes Martínez Furé's erudition concerning imperial Spain. Following this logic, he can declare his affiliation with Afro-Cuban cultures, which is based on his formidable lived experience and research, while also signaling that his rejection of Spanish colonizing intellectual forces has its roots in his own deep knowledge. Sometimes the master's tools can be used to build a new house.

The last stanza of the poem connects the joyful anonymous multitude with the *Yo Individual*, which is transformed into a *Nosotros*. The condensed *Yo/Nosotros*, distinct from the simple first-person plural, reappears in Martínez Furé's poetry as both *Yo(nu)* and *Yonu*, which he defines as "Yo (nu) Yo/nosotros, el Yo individual del autor, trasmutado en el Nosotros colectivo" ("Reyoyismos," *Iwé Olumo Yonu* 81). (Gonce Pascual calls *Yonu* "su personaje protagónico, surgido precisamente de esa dialéctica entre el yo y el nosotros," 8.) Since the concept of *Yonu* is central to Martínez Furé's poetics, it requires some further analysis. The *nosotros*, in its

the complex mysteries presented in “¿Quién soy?” reach a two-line resolution in the poem that follows it, “Epitafio de Yonu”: “¿Quiébrese el espejo, / ya sé quien soy!” (34).

While the poetic voice does not reveal the secret of his ontological discovery, the implication is that the self needs no mirror to reflect it. That is, the core of one’s being is experienced as constitutive and therefore not in need of external elements to construct or validate it. This is not to say that *Yonu’s* search through the animate and inanimate worlds lacks meaning, but rather that the question “who am I?” can only be answered by reaching within. Once again, Martínez Furé shields or protects the Afrodescendant self, which is posited as a fusion of the individual and collective selves of the present and the past. Martínez Furé, eternal *cimarrón*, as he calls himself, casts off the marks of identity of the other, and by guarding the self as interior, he makes a powerful declaration of *Yonu’s* right and obligation to know the self on its own terms, in its own tongue. As Linda Martín Alcoff observes, following Fanon, “there is a distinction between the sense one has of oneself as seen by others and of one’s own self-perception, or between one’s third-person self and one’s first-person selves (though both of these are dynamic and contextual)” (337).

In “Descargas de un reyoyo ante el espejo: De los mitos, el Caribe, y Yo (nu)” (*Briznas*), Martínez Furé creates a version of the poem “¿Quién soy?” that is different from the one I have already discussed. In this iteration, he spells the word *Yo(nu)* rather than *Yonu*, as if the two persons (I and we) were juxtaposed rather than fused, as they are in the word *Yonu*. The poet connects the compound entity to myths: “Yo creo los mitos / soy Yo(nu), el Creado por los mitos. / Soy (somos) el Mito del Mito” (149). Continuing with the interrogation of identity, the fifth *descarga* in this section ends as follows: “¿Somo o no somo? / ¡Somo!” which is repeated three times, with the last repetition of the word written in capital letters: ¡SOMO!” (150). By using the oral pronunciation, the poet stresses the collective Cuban identity that is “Para unos: ‘Juntos pero no revueltos’” and “Para otros, como dijo nuestro Guillén: ‘Todo mezclado’” (150).

Martínez Furé’s neologism *Yonu* therefore captures the ontological dilemma of “¿quién soy?” and “¿quiénes somos?” In an interview with Trini Urrutia (*Briznas*), Martínez Furé notes: “Desciendo de mandingas, franceses, lucumí, españoles, chinos y probablemente algún indio en lontananza. Por eso me siento orgulloso de mi ‘cubanía’ jocunda, y siempre digo . . . que, ni vine de España, ni me trajeron de Africa, sino que soy cubano reyoyo como las palmas reales” (*Briznas* 177). In other poems and essays, Martínez Furé affirms the Caribbean self: for example, in “Identidad no-virtual,” the poetic voice claims “Caribe’ño soy. / Soy Caribe’ño” and also declares:

Soy Caribe
 fia
 men
 te

universal. (*Eshu* 94–95; typography as in original)

Far from static, *cubanía* finds its expression in the poem “Del gran río que somos” as follows:

La identidad de los pueblos
 es un río de aguas
 siempre renovadas.
 Al final desemboca
 en el océano de la Humanidad (*Eshu* 94).

(Martínez Furé repeats a version of this key idea to Urrutia and also includes it in other poems and essays.) He even underscores the Orishas’ mutability and brings them into the twenty-first century: “hoy nuestros Orishas navegan Internet” (“Los consejos del Olumo,” *Eshu* 101) and “Llamo a Olorún por teléfono,/ siempre me da ‘ocupado’” (“Como flores de hibisco,” *Eshu* 108). Central to his beliefs are an evolving nature of identity such that future generations will redefine *cubanía* for themselves. His attitude shows no traces of chauvinism or even pronounced nationalism. Rather, by recognizing his roots (or the waters that flow in his veins) and all Cubans’ origins, the poet can mythologize identity into the ultimate collectivity, “la Humanidad” (177). He has also phrased it this way: “Pero no somos ni ‘occidentales’ ni africanos, sino parte de los llamados *pueblos nuevos (especie novae)* de los que hablara Darcy Ribeiro” (*Diálogos* 5). Michael Hames-García’s comments are relevant here: “Race is a produced, intra-active phenomenon, involving the modern/colonial gender system (itself a phenomenon with many intraacting components), individual bodily differences and histories of family descent, as well as social ideologies and practices. . . . It consequently varies and changes across time and space” (327).

In the poem “Mea culpa,” the poetic voice declares: “Yo que siempre quise ser Nosotros” as well as wanting to be “Yo vosotros/ellos/tú” and “Yo/él/ella.” At the same time, the *yo* says “danzo ahora solitario/cuando mi música postrera/casi está al concluir” and “danzo libre en el vacío/incandescente/y puro” (*Briznas* 68). Distinct from the conjoined or collective *Yo(nu)* or *Yonu*, the voice in “Mea culpa” assumes a singularity that perhaps aligns with the eschatological notion that all humans die alone.

● Through these close readings of several of Martínez Furé’s poems, I have brought to the surface the resonances they have with the rest of his literary contributions. My discussion has focused on aspects of form, such as the *descargas* and *orikis*, as well as thematic elements, including the power of the word, the quest for an individual and collective identity, the persistence of ancestral traditions, and epistemological questions. Further, the hybrid modalities in his poetry collections that derive from the genre of *descargas* create a network of signification available to

the reader by the process of uncovering: that is, going deep inside the improvisations to find the links to ancient visual, musical, and verbal cultural signifiers and practices. If I have elaborated these key themes with a high degree of detail, it is with the intent of preparing the ground for future scholarly work on some of the most interesting poetry to emerge in modern-day Cuba. The Africanicity that gives Martínez Furé's poetry its particular features may, on the surface, look like it engenders only variants on the traditional *oriki* or praise song, yet on closer examination, it creates path-breaking form and content. To repurpose the title of Juanamaría Cordones-Cook's film, *Cimarroneando con Georgina Herrera*, the way to approach this work is by rebelling—and running away with it.¹

Nota

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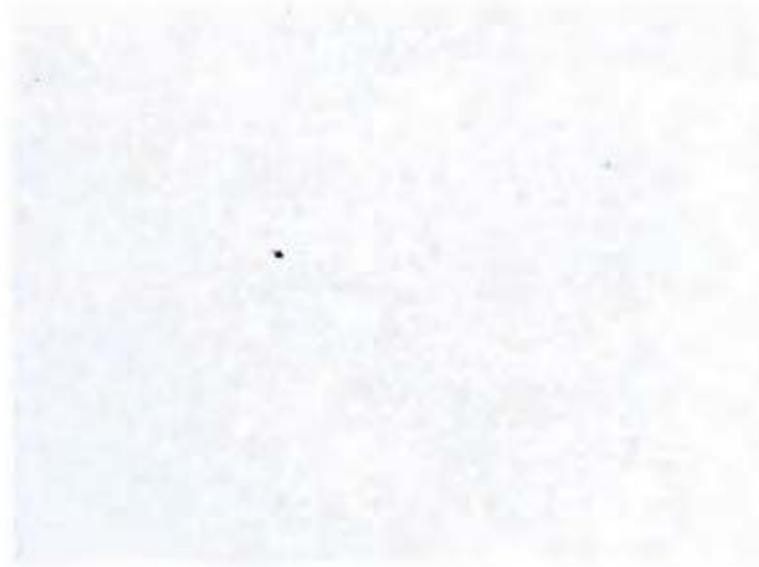
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Figures



Fig. 1. Section illustration, rock painting. Foto: Rogelio Martínez Furé, *Cimarrón de Palabras*, p. 43



Fig. 2. Namibia rock art, Twyfelfontein. Foto: <https://africanrockart.org/rock-art-gallery/namibia/>

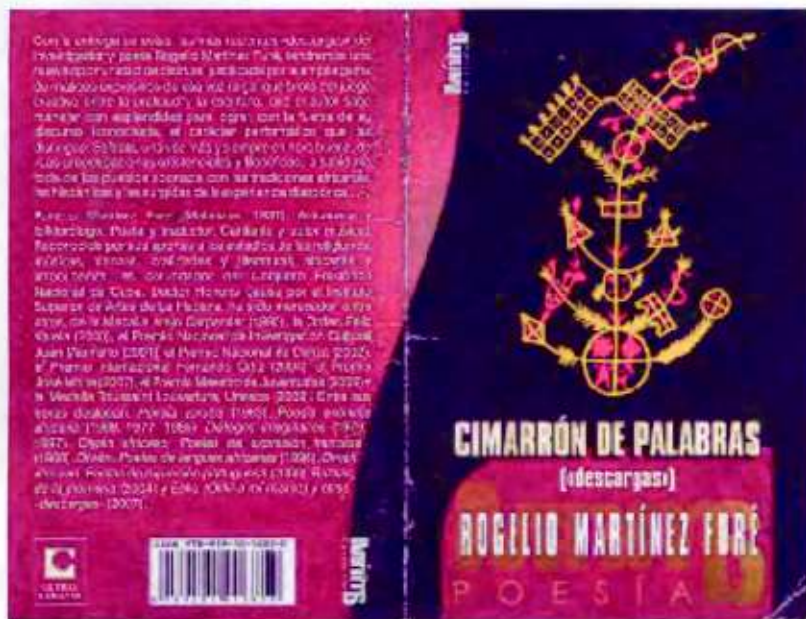


Fig. 3. Cover illustration, *Anaforuana*. Foto: Rogelio Martínez Furé, *Cimarrón de Palabras*, first edition

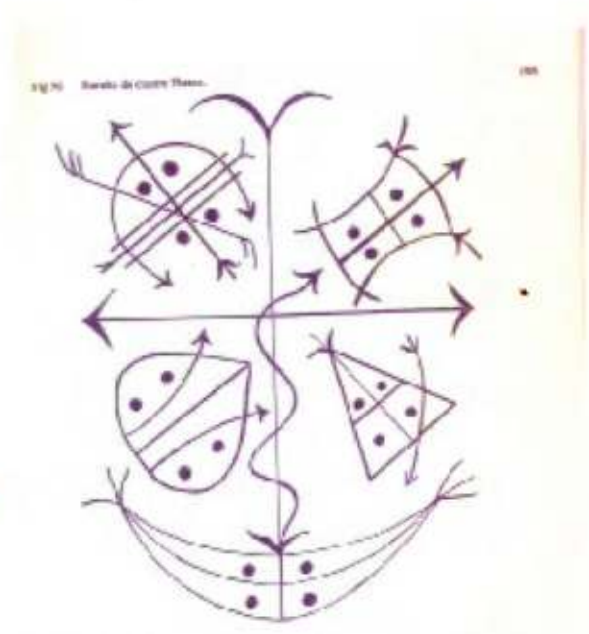


Fig. 4. "Baroko de cuatro Plazas". Foto: Lydia Cabrera, *Anaforuana: Ritual y símbolos de la iniciación en la Sociedad Secreta Abakuá*, p. 155.