

# The runaway slave



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Slavery has been in existence for thousands of years, for as long as humanity's collective history. It is common knowledge that some of our monumental works of art like the Great Pyramids of Egypt were erected by slaves. Slavery usually begins when there is a need to produce something at a larger scale. In the case of Cuba, that item was sugar. In the 18th century, as Cuba's economy became more and more dependent on its sugarcane production, slavery became more and more necessary in order for Cuba to increase production and keep up with the demand for sugar.

Miguel Barnet's *Biography of a Runaway Slave* tells the story of a real-life former Cuban slave, Esteban Montejo and his own personal journey to freedom. While on the surface it may seem like a simple biography, Montejo's life-story was presented in the larger context of Cuba's colorful, but often misunderstood history. The former slave became a fugitive and lived in the wild for several years, subsisting on the abundant flora and fauna of the forest. He later became a soldier for Cuba's war of independence.

Perhaps his hard life has strengthened Montejo to such a great extent that he lived much longer than most people, or it may be perhaps the need to tell his story to the world was what made him continue living as he did. Esteban Montejo was 105 years old when Barnet interviewed him for the book, and he lived on for eight more years hence. More than a story about slavery, *Biography of a Runaway Slave* is a historical account of how the Caribbean's culture fused with that of Africa's through the slave trade.

Esteban's life straddled the 19th and 20th centuries and went through most of Cuba's most important historical periods in history. As such, he is able to chronicle the changes that his country was going through in its bid for

freedom, even as he searched for personal liberty. Through Barnet, we are given a chance to glimpse at the life of one man and one hundred of memories of a way of living long gone by. Perhaps some of the most poignant images in the book were Esteban's description of life in the sugarcane plantations.

Esteban recounts that slaves in the plantation lived in places called barracoons and he describes these barracoons as he remembers them, The slaves disliked living under those conditions: being locked up stifled them... This was laid out in rows: two rows facing each other with a door in the middle and a massive padlock to shut the slaves in at night... Both types had mud floors and were dirty as hell. And there was no modern ventilation there! Just a hole in the wall or a small barred window.

The result was that the place swarmed with fleas and ticks, which made the inmates ill with infections and evil spells, for those ticks were witches. The only way to get rid of them was with hot wax, and sometimes even that did not work. The masters wanted the barracoons to look clean outside, so they were white washed. (Barnet 1994, 12) Clearly, as Esteban remembers, there was no dignity for African slaves in Cuba. Their work was hard and unrelenting, and they barely had anytime to rest.

Their sleeping quarters as Esteban remembers were not fit, even for animals. Esteban's hated his life, and he yearned to break from the yokes of slavery and this is revealed by his own words, " I cared for myself as if I were a pampered child. I didn't want to be taken into slavery again. It was repugnant to me, it was shameful. " (Barnet 1994, 16) Such feelings gave him the courage to escape. He ran to the shadowy forest where he found

safe haven. His loathing for slavery made him risk the dangers of living in the wild. For him, it was freedom or nothing.

And he flourished in the forest, where he had everything he needed to live, except for the warmth of another person's companionship. " The truth is I lacked for nothing in the forest. The only thing I could not manage was sex. " (Barnet 1994, 21) Esteban lived in the wild until the abolition of slavery. Later, Esteban's love for freedom compelled him to join the fight for Cuban independence. By becoming a soldier, Esteban has shown his love for his country even as he despised slavery. He dreamt of a better Cuba, and he did his part, small as it may have been to help achieve that.

He is a nationalist because while he could have chosen to just live the rest of his days in the forest, he decided to rejoin society and fight, this time not for personal freedom, but for the collective freedom of all Cubans. All of Estaban's life has been defined by slavery and his struggles against all the things that keep him in chains. Reading the book I have realized that while some circumstances may vary, there is never an instance when slavery is acceptable or dignified. Its mere concept goes against the very nature of free will that mankind was born with.

In Cuba, as in most places, slavery was institutionalized for economic gains. It is ironic that the very people producing goods for material prosperity are the very people who never benefit from it. Esteban's accounts of life in the plantation make for a very poignant illustration of the cruel ways that we can treat one another. It was in this seemingly hopeless situation that Esteban cling to hope because it was the only thing that he has. He kept alive the hope for freedom for all slaves and a better, kinder world for all of mankind.

Reference Barnet, M. (1994) Biography of a Runaway Slave. Trans. W. Nick Hill. Curbstone Press.