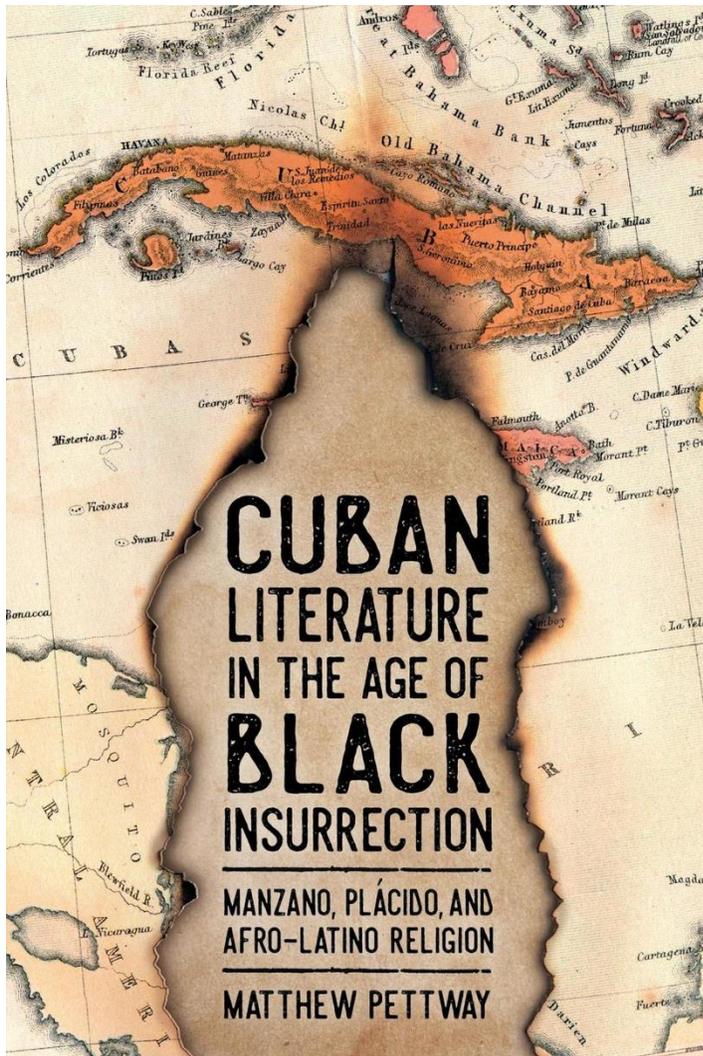




Book Review: Cuban Literature in the Age of Black Insurrection: Manzano, Plácido, and Afro-Latino Religion

By Matthew Pettway, University Press of Mississippi. 2019. ISBN: 9781496824967 \$99.00 (Print).

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The works of Juan Francisco Manzano and Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés, or Plácido, Cuba's best-known poets of African descent, while celebrated for their artistic merit, have been seriously misconstrued as a result of the persistent mischaracterization of the authors' racial identities within colonial Cuban society. This is the claim put forward by Matthew Pettway (University of South Alabama) in *Cuban Literature in the Age of Black Insurrection: Manzano, Plácido, and Afro-Latino Religion*. Critical players in the early 19th century Spanish romantic genre, Manzano and de la Concepción Valdés, were accused of conspiring against Spain as part of the failed 1844 slave rebellion and Plácido was ultimately condemned to death for his involvement. Yet the pervading view amongst literary scholars to this point has been to understand the writers as utilizing their poetry to dissociate themselves from Blackness, claiming elevated positions within the island's pigmentocracy through an association with white Cuban audiences and sponsors. In a direct re-

jection of this interpretation, Pettway argues that the two men in fact utilized a dyadic literary symbology, developing an aesthetic which both fulfilled the expectations of white creole audiences through Catholic imagery and concealed a coded message of anti-slavery Afro-diasporic solidarity legible only to an audience knowledgeable in syncretic Afro-Latino religion.

Pettway's major contribution is a necessary and important reframing of these canonical poets' works within an Afro-diasporic perspective, highlighting the subversive tactics employed by writers at once privileged by skin-tone and education and constrained by racial inequality and strict censorship practices. Close-readings of the poems of



Plácido and the auto-biography and poems of Manzano are contextualized with discussion of Afro-Cuban *cabildos*, or ethnic associations; Catholic doctrine and ritual; and African religious influence, particularly Yoruba and Bakongo belief systems and practices. The book alternates chapters dedicated to each of the authors, examining first their navigation of Catholicism and whiteness, emphasizing Manzano's disillusion with the capacity of the Catholic Church to liberate him either legally or spiritually and the posthumous whitewashing of Plácido's life and body of work. Then, the study turns to a more specific examination of African religious belief in the writers' poetry, highlighting connections between Catholic saints referenced by Manzano and their *santería* counterparts, and the thin separation between life and death in both Afro-Atlantic epistemologies and Plácido's fables. Unfortunately, the examination of African religion lacks sufficient support and would have benefitted from a more thorough description of the Afro-Cuban cosmology and comparison of the function of particular deities and rituals in African contexts as compared to Afro-Cuban ones.

Pettway's interpretation of this "dichromatic paradigm" is strongest when he leans into his concept of *transcultured colonial literature*, based on Fernando Ortiz's concept of *transculturación*, or the merging and converging of cultures and emergence of novel cultural phenomena. However, recognition of the syncretic Afro-Latino spiritual world is at times undermined by an assumption of the disparate nature of Catholicism and African religious beliefs, and a preoccupation with the unveiling of African epistemologies rather than the identification of novel, syncretic configurations. African-inspired spirituality is often posed as an alternative to Catholic doctrine rather than another component within a multi-faceted and expansive Afro-Cuban belief system.

Ultimately, Pettway's central claim, "that Manzano and Plácido portrayed African-inspired spirituality beneath the surface of Hispano-Catholic aesthetics" is sustained by compelling literary evidence and socio-cultural context. However, other components of his argument, particularly regarding the effect of this literary aesthetic as a tool of black liberation will require further substantiation. The book's final chapter, which focuses on interviews conducted by colonial authorities with the conspirators of the 1844 rebellion, makes a compelling case for the writers' revolutionary intentions, but might draw the connection between the writers' written work and anti-slavery actions more persuasively.

Pettway's work offers an example of the challenges and rewards of the recontextualization of classic works and authors. This mission is relevant not only for literary scholars, but for all scholars of the African Diaspora, and for any scholar, anthropologist, historian, or other, engaged in the writing and re-writing of social histories. In *Cuban Literature in the Age of Black Insurrection: Manzano, Plácido, and Afro-Latino Religion*, Matthew Pettway presents an essential reframing of the lives and works of two renown Afro-Cuban writers, reconnecting their writing with the African Atlantic context from which it should never have been disconnected.