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Cuban Literature in the Age of Black Insurrection: Manzano, Plácido, and Afro-Latino Religion by Mathew Pettway
(review)

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REVIEWS

PETTWAY, MATTHEW. *Cuban Literature in the Age of Black Insurrection: Manzano, Plácido, and Afro-Latino Religion*. U of Mississippi P, 2020. 344 pp.

The lives of two of Cuba's most renowned Afro-descended poets—Juan Francisco Manzano and Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés (Plácido)—converged during the plotting of and spectacularly violent response to a failed 1844 slave rebellion (la Conspiración de la Escalera). Despite their proximity to this overtly racial liberation movement, though, the near consensus among literary critics is that these writers (usually referred to as *mulato* and *pardo*, respectively) largely used their poetry to dissociate themselves from Blackness and ingratiate themselves with white Cuban audiences. Manzano, for example, consistently asserts his privileged status and education to differentiate himself from the *negros* on the sugar plantation where he grew up, while Plácido's prolific verses challenging Spanish authority are marked by a seemingly deliberate circumlocution of race and slavery.

Matthew Pettway's *Cuban Literature in the Age of Black Insurrection: Manzano, Plácido, and Afro-Latino Religion* (2020) issues a broadside against this prevailing interpretation. He contends that their verses' ostensibly assimilationist aesthetics (neoclassicism, natural imagery, and especially Catholic dogma) belie subversive syncretisms. Through riveting, bilingual close readings of poetry, colonial archives, cultural anthropology, and religious texts (especially the 1796 slave catechism), he deciphers coded engagements with Yoruba and Bakongo cosmologies, often smuggled into their poems under the guise of Catholic fealty. What emerges, then,

is not only a much-needed examination of religion in these canonical poets' works, but also a wholly new understanding of their politics. Pettway reframes their self-distancing from abolitionism and Africanist *cabildos de nación* as strategy rather than apathy, reintroducing them as nimble code-switchers who poetically professed loyalty to the Catholic Church and Spanish government, while surreptitiously fostering an Afrocentric political consciousness among their auditors and readers. Drawing on Fernando Ortiz, he theorizes these tactics as "trans-culturated colonial literature."

Pettway's argument charges him with a daunting task: to surface patterns of signification that were deliberately designed to evade detection from meticulous censors eager to suppress anticolonial sentiment (Plácido) and white benefactors eager to control political messaging (Manzano). Executing this argument, moreover, requires reliance on an often partial and frequently fraught historical archive, including racist ethnographies and colonial records of a plotted slave rebellion explicitly constructed to justify draconian violence in response. Sensitive to these challenges, Pettway reads carefully and makes informed, well-signposted speculations when necessary, usually to great effect.

The study alternates chapters dedicated to each author. The first two chapters focus on the poets' navigation of Catholicism, whiteness, and colonial censorship. Chapter two deftly historicizes Manzano's indoctrination into Catholicism to contend that despite the robust repertoire of *imitatio cristi* imagery in his writings, he ultimately became disillusioned with Catholicism's capacity to liberate him (spiritually or from slavery). Educated and baptized, Manzano "benefited from the privileges that the Catholic Church and his status as a mulatto afforded him" (47), but was continually frustrated by their limitations and therefore began working to "expose the racial confines of the Christian redemption narrative" (83) in his autobiography and poems. Chapter three summarizes how historical and biographical accounts of Plácido whitewashed the poet in the decades following his execution. Through readings of his religious poetry and more overtly racist verses, Pettway contends that Plácido's "Catholic self-portrait was largely a politically motivated representation" (90) and a savvy navigation of respectability politics. Problematizing the eagerness of Plácido's biographers to accept such self-imaging at face value, Pettway reframes this performative posturing as genuflection to the priesthood and a satirical assault on ideologies of whiteness.

While these first two sections trace the poets' tactical invocations of Catholicism, chapters four and five—perhaps the book's most compelling—finally turn to the Africanist presence in their verses. Chapter four reads Manzano's repeated invocations of Saint Anthony as more consistent with that figure's *santería* counterpart, Elegguá. Similarly, Manzano's use of tropes like "the dream state, transfiguration, and magical flight" (171) vacillate between the oneiric symbolism of Bakongo cosmology and Spanish Romanticism, yielding a poetics of mourning through

which the poet processes intimate familial losses and the *ingenio*'s pervasive culture of death. Chapter five traces the reliance of Plácido's fables on the interpenetrability of living/spirit realms rooted in Afro-Atlantic epistemologies of life and death. Further differentiated from his Catholic self-portrait, Plácido was steeped in the Afrocentric culture of *cabildos de nación* and the political pageantry of Día de los Reyes celebrations. As a result, his "religious verses bear a striking resemblance to his conspiratorial activities," and Pettway's attentiveness to traces of Afro-Atlantic cosmologies in these poems renders visible "the African-inspired religious character of his revolutionary blueprint" (229) as well.

The final chapter examines la Escalera itself, analyzing an archive of interviews that colonial authorities conducted with the plotted rebellion's alleged conspirators. Pettway makes two interconnected claims aimed at clarifying a lingering uncertainty in the poets' biographies: how much were they actually involved in the conspiracy? First, he foregrounds Manzano's often overlooked role in the planned rebellion, and secondly, he characterizes the poets as close friends who exchanged unpublished verses and schemed politically. Pettway bolsters these claims through analyses of interviews colonial authorities conducted with accused conspirators during la Escalera. The archive is a troubled one: the poets' testimonies are mediated through a public notary and collected under duress, while other confessions were certainly coerced through torture. Aware of these conditions, Pettway nevertheless attributes a degree of factitiousness to these documents that not all readers will. Suddenly, the same poets this study has characterized as masters of subterfuge and savvy deceivers of censors are regarded as cooperative informants who are forthcoming and candid with authorities who were meanwhile executing spectacular displays of punitive violence (*La Escalera* is named for the public floggings of alleged conspirators bound to ladders). This methodological misstep is ultimately an unnecessary one. The major claim here is not the testimonies' veracity, but rather the discursive parallels across these interviews and Plácido's poems, which Pettway's rhetorical analysis nevertheless persuasively demonstrates.

For all its intellectual vigor, this book ultimately feels somewhat unsure of its audience. Despite some introductory framing regarding the underground nature of the Cuban literary scene, some usage of Esteban Montejo's *Biografía de un cimarrón* (1966) for ethnographic insights into slavery, and occasional references to Suárez y Romero, Tanco y Bosmeniel, Gómez de Avellaneda, Villaverde, Calcano, and even Reinaldo Arenas, readers looking for a broader argument about the poets' positionality in "Cuban Literature in the Age of Black Insurrection" will be disappointed. Pettway correctly frames the book as a profound intervention into studies of Manzano and Plácido, but this overemphasis on insular, author-focused debates undersells the work and deeply underappreciates its stakes. This constricted lens, for example, precludes sustained dialogue with diaspora

theorists (Stuart Hall is sorely missed here) or Afro-Latin American studies (Richard L. Jackson, Alejandro de la Fuente, George Reid Andrews, and Erika Edwards) or even Cuban literary history (Edward Mullen, Roberto Gonzalez Echevarría, and Lorna V. Williams).

This disjunction between audience and scope is ultimately noteworthy precisely because this exciting first book deserves to reach a much broader range of readers than it anticipates. While Pettway briefly suggests the book might catalyze new readings of Afro-Latin American literature (a bold claim that regrettably never develops), I would argue that his Afrocentric analysis of Manzano and Plácido models an innovative research methodology and reading practice with broad application for the studies of the Black diaspora and Latin America.

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AGUIRRE-OTEIZA, DANIEL. *This Ghostly Poetry: History and Memory of Exiled Spanish Republican Poets*. U of Toronto P, 2020. 392 pp.

Monographs on Spanish poetry have become an endangered academic species. *This Ghostly Poetry* should be saluted as a valuable lifeline to that vanishing genre. As an investigation on lyric poetry in general, and on Spanish exilic poetry in particular, this is undoubtedly an ambitious book, and it does accomplish several critical feats. First, it deploys the hermeneutic potential of what, following Derrida, has been called *hauntology* to examine the writing of poets that the country's 1936–1939 civil war forced into exile. It also intervenes in the beleaguered memory/history debate that has taken over the country's sociocultural and political landscape since the early 2000s. Finally, it identifies a distinctive quality in poetic texts that doubles as reading practice, what Daniel Aguirre-Oteiza calls *poetic memory*, a term suggestively defined as “a verbal fabric that is often self-reflexive as well as claim-subverting” (7). A solid theoretical-conceptual framework and close attention to the materiality of the poetic texts studied are this publication's added strengths.

The introduction functions as an effective and sophisticated exposition of the book's core objectives. To challenge grand teleological narratives of national history and literature could be seen as the most prominent. Poems written in and about exile are the verbal artifacts that allow for disruptions in, and subversions of, a literary history that has long relied on continuity and limits itself to national borders. Exilic poetry, then, presents both an interruption and a decentering. The authors studied in *This Ghostly Poetry* are shown to be offering their distinct versions of that spatiotemporal dislocation.

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