

# To the Rescue of a Stolen Identity

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Upon 2011 being declared the International Year for African Descendants, we must rewrite our shared history as part of the Cuban nation, and not only tie it to superficial examples of syncretic religious rituals or artistic merits, but note as well the decisive contributions of the Afro-Cuban population to the creation of the Cuban nation and its culture.

The broad and rich imagination of Cuban blacks and *mestizos* has been kept hidden away for a long time. Official historiography ties Cuban cultural identity with the first of our independence wars. The image of our liberation includes white masters freeing black slaves, something for which the latter should forever be grateful.

The result of this stereotyped, oft repeated, and officialized image is that the separatist violence of a group of white landowners in the island's central region has impregnated Cuban culture till modern times. From 1902 till now, official historiography, guided by ideological exigencies and political necessities, has time and time again used this interpretation. Perhaps we should ask ourselves if other similar events have ever taken place in Cuba's history.



*José Antonio Aponte*

*Cecilia Valdés*, the best-known Cuban novel, traps its black and *mestizo*, female character in a lustful trap, as a sex object, and in illegitimacy. The iconic representation of black and *mestizo* women today is not much different from that imposed in the nineteenth century.

There are facts that are either not mentioned, or studied only superficially by Cuban historians, and a strict relationship between

them and a desire to underestimate the black and *mestiza* population.

One of Cuba's historical events that is hidden away is the killing of blacks and *mestizos*, members of black and colored battalions that bravely faced the British invasion, who valiantly fought at Morro Castle against English invaders (1762). Yet, these facts were ignored, and attention was instead focused on the actions of Pepe Antonio, of Guanabacoa, over those of all the other participants in the battle. It would also be useful to revisit the Aponte Conspiracy (1812). We should ask ourselves the reason for this oblivion, why this history was ignored. I don't think it was on account of a lack of interest: this is supremely important for any evaluation of the role of blacks and *mestizos* in the history of Cuba's struggle for freedom.

The reason for minimizing the role of José Antonio Aponte Ulabarra and other members of the Colored Battalion can be found in the fact that they were involved in a conspiracy that reached all the way to the towns of Trinidad and Puerto Príncipe (today's Camagüey). The importance of this conspiracy is that it established connections amongst all those black and *mestizo* populations.

Most of the conspirators belonged to the Colored and *Moreno* Battalions. They were comprised of free blacks, as well as of members of different ethnic *cabildos*. Aponte was a lieutenant in the Colored Battalion, a foreman in the Shangó Teddum *cabildo*, and a member of the San José Brotherhood, whose headquarters was at the Convent of San Francisco of Assisi, and whose members were black carpenters, many of them former slaves.

In *Los ilustres apellidos: negros en La Habana colonial* (La Habana: Ediciones Boloña, 2008), Dr. María del Carmen Barcia establishes that "the networks built by African

families were very strong, mixed up blood ties with ethnic ones, as well signs and symbols that brought with them social prestige. Thus, families, *cabildos*, and battalions were an essential, functional part of a whole that was sometimes harmonic, and other times conflictive, but generally efficient."

In 1764, when the black, colored, and *moreno* militias were created, it seemed that there was now a way to gain prestige and socially climb. Being a battalion officer and a soldier in one of them meant being able to achieve a high degree of social prestige. Campaigns outside Cuba—in New Orleans, Pensacola, Mobile, and St. Augustine—greatly fueled the memory of those battalions, but the Haitian campaign was the most important one of all for nurturing war memories, and won for them wartime promotions and decorations.

This relationship they established with the rebelling Haitian slaves created a new way of thinking among those battalions, and got them the recognition of the Haitian *caudillos*, and that of the Santo Domingo Black Auxiliary Troops, which were lead by Jean François, Biassou, and Hannot. This image persisted in the memory of Cuba's free blacks and colored people. In 1812, freedom of the press allowed for the expression of different social and political aspirations. The Leales de La Habana battalion officers, who mobilized in San Augustine, denounced racial discrimination, and asked the King to consider them on a par with white officers.

The Aponte Conspiracy has fallen victim to another just as old or older conspiracy, one that attempts to cover up, hide, and erase the story of black and *mestizo* identity. The teachings of Cuban history promote greater and greater forgetfulness.