

Two Nineteenth-Century Black Cuban Poets

To Plácido's Memory (1809-2009)

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The contribution of black people to the birth, consolidation, and development of the Cuban nationality has been constant. Blacks were present in the earliest literary attempts that began to shape the contours of the anguished pilgrimage that would bring us closer to a concept of nationhood.

All too often, on account of their slave condition, they were considered inferior members of the human species, or as folkloric subjects who offered their African customs to our identity until they fused, through miscegenation, with other groups on the island. In either example, their actions made them seem like beings precursory to the historical advent of Cubanness.

When in his epic poem *Especulo de Paciencia* [Mirror of Patience] (1608) Silvestre de Balboa Troyas y Quesada calls black slave Salvador Golomón, who was not born in Africa but in Cuba, a *criollo*, he establishes his right to be a legitimate son of the island.

The importance of this tacit acknowledgment of a black slave rests not only in this man's act of heroism in killing French pirate Gilberto Girón in battle, but also in its incipient bestowal of a sense of Cuban belonging on the slave, when Balboa writes: *Oh, Salvador criollo, negro honrado* [Oh *criollo* Salvador, honorable black].

Despite this seemingly unprejudiced assessment, which might appear to promote the integration of blacks during a time as long ago as the seventeenth century, the only road for blacks was extremely difficult or humiliating regarding any one of the economic, political, and social situations that successively prevailed in Cuba as it worked towards the idea of an independent nation.

Yet, despite the fact that this idea does not emerge and begin to take shape until what in Cuba is referred to as the Transformation (1790-1868)—when the island goes from being a flowering colony to seeking a national

identity—as groups like La Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País [Economic Society of the Country's Friends], the San Ambrosio and San Basilio seminars, and the University of Havana, and other economic and cultural spaces, it was no longer possible to erase the indelible imprint of black people from the creation of our national identity.

In light of the undeniable fact that black cultural elements took root in the nation's racial milieu, and began to mix with others to create the human characteristics that have defined the country throughout history, I want to somewhat emphasize the role that slave and free mulatto poets played during the first half of the Cuban nineteenth century.

Blacks as literary authors in the first half of the nineteenth century

The very first steps that were taken to reveal the ignominious social context with which blacks had to deal were taken via literature, through a call to reflect upon reality, in all its forms. This originated in the conversations initiated by Domingo del Monte between 1829 and 1843.

Del Monte criticized the asocial character of the popular romantic literature that served as a model to island writers. He demanded that his interlocutors assist brethren who came from their very same society through their writing.

Acknowledged as one of the founders of Cuban national identity, and as having the greatest influence on Cuban literature of the first half of the nineteenth century, José Martí considered del Monte “the most useful and real Cuban of his time.”

Blacks who participated in del Monte's literary gatherings achieved not only celebrity but also their freedom, by dint of their literary

writing. Their talent and the attendance of other writers at these sorts of meetings made it so. Yet, there is more. This kind of gathering in Cuba, under del Monte's tutelage, made possible works that for the first time ever revealed the inhumane nature of slavery, its humiliating consequences, and the mercilessly offensive actions that whites imposed on people of color.

Del Monte takes his fellow writers' compositions about the lives of slaves and gives them to Richard Madden, Judge Arbitrator to the International Mixed Commission Court for the Suppression of the Slave Trade in Havana. He publishes an anti-slavery album containing several Cuban works in London, among the most significant of which is poetry by Juan Francisco Manzano and Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés (Plácido).

Juan Francisco Manzano (1797-1854)

Manzano, who was born in Havana, himself, suffered the vicissitudes of slavery. After having been spiritually touched by having attended operas, masses, and sermons with his owners, he began primary schooling in 1818 and begins to publish his poems. By 1821, his book *Cantos a Lesbía* [Songs to Lesbía] is published; *Flores pasajeras* [Passing Flowers] by 1830. He also publishes “Romances cubanos” [Cuban Poems] in *El pasatiempo* [The Passtime] (Matanzas). Yet, it was not till 1836, when patron and critic Domingo del Monte heard the sonnet “Mis treinta años” [My Thirty Years], that a collection effort for 500 pesos was started to procure him his freedom. The surprise brought about by this slave's ability to versify, and del Monte having found the “profoundest native human feelings” in his sonnet, were enough to stimulate enthusiasm among those who could see in the poem's first-hand testimony a denouncement, and a path towards the elimination of slavery.

Despite the fact that in his book *Historia de la Literatura Cubana* [History of Cuban Literature], Salvador Bueno considers “My Thirty Years” only a notable work, the sonnet’s perfectible verses erased any intellectual limitation blacks were said to suffer.

“Mis treinta años”
[My Thirty Years]

Cuando miro al espacio que he corrido
[When I think of the course I have run

Desde la cuna hasta el presente día,
From my childhood itself to this day,

Tiemblo y saludo a la fortuna mía
I tremble, and fain would I shun

Más de terror que de atención movido.
The remembrance its terrors would array.

Sorpréndeme la lucha que he podido
I marvel at struggles endured

Sostener contra suerte tan impía,
With a destiny frightful as mine.

Si tal llamarse puede la porfía
At the strength for such efforts —assured

De mi infelice ser al mal nacido.
Tho’I am, (tis in vain to repine).

Treinta años ha que conocí la tierra;
I’ve known this sad life thirty years

Treinta años ha que en gemidor estado
And to me, thirty years it has been

Triste infortunio por doquier me asalta:
Of suff’ring, of sorrow and tears

Más nada es para mí la cruda guerra
Ev’ry day of its bondage I’ve seen.

Que en vano suspirar he soportado
But ‘tis nothing the past -or the pains,

Si la comparo ¡Oh, Dios! Con la que falta.
Hitherto I have struggled to bear,

When I think, Oh my God! on the chains
That I yet know I’m destined to wear.]

Regardless the reaction to this work, interest in Juan Francisco Manzano’s poetry was directly tied to the anti-slavery campaign. In fact, its value as something that documented the horrors of slavery and the colonial period surpassed its literary importance. Cuban literary history looks similarly upon his *Autobiografía* [Autobiography], written at the behest of Domingo del Monte, and his tragedy “Zafira,” which did not necessarily make Manzano more famous, but did reveal his possibilities as an author. It wouldn’t be right to fail to point out the limitations he faced in his incursions into various literary genres—he was born a slave and raised as such till an advanced age. This disadvantage prevented him from traveling and studying the same way those who used a highly sharpened critical scalpel to dissect his own poetry did—even in posterity.

Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés (1809-1844)

Plácido is another relevant black author for this time period (he also attended the del Monte gatherings). This mulatto poet was born in Havana and shot in the back (like a traitor) on June 28th, 1844, the victim of a persecution set into motion by Captain General O’Donnell against liberal Cubans and people of color.

Plácido’s case is unique because of the historical importance of his life and work, and because it inspired passion both for and against his cause among prominent contemporaries. Born of a *mestizo* Havana hairstylist and a Spanish-born ballerina, the boy was committed to the *Casa Cuna de Maternidad* [an orphanage home for illegitimate children], and given the surname Valdés, the same as all the other orphans.

A few days later, his paternal grandmother got him out, yet the child knew no peace regarding the ability to help support his family until he found one of the few jobs open to free mulattoes and blacks. He became a typesetter's apprentice at the Boloña Printing House, the most important in early nineteenth-century Cuba. His salary at the job was barely enough for him to survive on, but it did allow him to broaden his horizons through reading, enrich himself culturally, and complement his poetic talent.

Despite the fact his successes were marked by a society that would not stop viewing the color of his skin as affecting the development of his intellect, Plácido burst onto the literary scene with his poem "La siempreviva" [The Always Living] in nothing less than the *Aureola poética por las Musas Almendares* [an 1834 poetry anthology] published by the *Musas Almendares* containing work by Cuban poets in honor of poet and Spanish Royal Minister Martínez de la Rosa.

Despite the fact that it would take only one of his poems, "Jicotencatl," to be included in this collection, which Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo praised as "a magisterial and exquisite poem that Góngora [himself] would not disdain as one of his own," the mulatto's life and work was attacked—both then and later—by bitter adversaries. So, while Menéndez y Pelayo was praising the poem "Jicotencatl," and his poem "Plegaria a Dios" [Prayer to God] was translated into numerous languages, including English, by famous U.S. poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, the rest of his oeuvre was considered superficial, unfocused, incorrect, in Cuba.

Yet, in examining just one excerpt of "Jicotencatl," we can see that Plácido is indirectly attacking slavery, even if he places the action not in Cuba but in Tlaxcala, Mexico.

Tornad a México, esclavos;
[Return to Mexico, slaves;
Nadie vuestra marcha turba,
Not one of yours to the crowd,
Y decid a vuestro amo,
Say to your master,
Vencido ya veces muchas,
Already many times conquered,
Que el joven Jicotencatl
That the young Jicotencatl
Crueldades como él no usa,
Does not use cruelty as he does,
Ni con sangre de cautivos
Not with the blood of captives
Asesino el suelo inunda:
Does the flooded ground murder;
Que el cacique de Tlaxcala
That the chief of Tlaxcala
Ni batir ni quemar gusta.
Neither likes to break or burn...]

The transfer of scenes in this excerpt does not keep one from being able to imagine Plácido behind that young chief, who upon being victorious, through his heroic deed, throws the Spanish authorities and the proponents of slavery out of Cuba, and abolishes the cruelties and captivity to which Cubans of that time period were subjected to differing degrees according to their skin color and social position.

However, Plácido's misfortune is so great that even his sonnets in *La fatalidad* [Fatality] and *Despedida a mi madre* [Farewell to My Mother], and odes like *Adiós a mi lira* [Farewell to my Lyre] and *Plegaria a Dios* [Prayer to God], all written in prison, before he died, were challenged by Manuel Sanguily, who strongly insinuated they were not the author's original work.

Plácido wrote his famous although polemical "Plegaria a Dios" as a response to being called a vile and treasonous poet, for sell-

ing poems about parties, baptisms, and birthdays, and for snitching on various Cubans who purportedly participated in the Escalera Conspiracy (for which he was shot by a firing squad). Tired of fighting human jealousy, villainess, and incredulity, all that was left for him was to clear his conscience by loudly reciting his poems on his way to the firing squad wall.

“Plegaria a Dios” (Fragmento)
[Prayer to God] (Excerpt)

Mas si cuadra a tu suma Omnipotencia
[But if this lot thy love ordains to me,
Que yo perezca cual malvado impío
To yield to foes most cruel and unjust,
Y que los hombres mi cadáver frío
To die, and leave my poor and senseless dust
Ultrajen con maligna complacencia...
The scoff and sport of their weak enmity,
Suene tu voz, acabe mi existencia...
Speak, thou! And then thy purposes fulfill;
¡Cúmplase en mí tu voluntad, Dios mío.
Lord of my life, work thou thy perfect will!]

His clamor for respect for his life and work was not only directed at God but also at slanderous men, and the slave system that inhumanely ruled, and a despotic colonial regime that washed the Cuban nation's first birth pangs with blood. Two hundred years after his birth, and amidst criticism and praise, Plácido continued being a happy transgressor of a society imposed, designed and controlled by whites.

Anyone who doubts this should consult the problematic definition of nationality that was being designed by important thinkers of that time. They emphasized “fear of blacks,” or

‘Negrophobia,’ and a non-acceptance of Africans and their descendants as Cubans, which explains why Francisco de Arango y Parreño and José Antonio Saco always dreamed of whitening the island. Phrases like “*Blanquear, blanquear y después hacernos respetar*” [Whiten, whiten and then make them respect us], “*Cuba sería blanca y podría comenzar a ser Cuba*” [Cuba would be white and then could start being Cuban] excluded blacks from any possible national project. Nevertheless, once slavery was abolished, during the early years of the Republic, many white leaders demanded gratitude from blacks because of the generous favors they did for them. The elite published statements like “Many eminent white men struggled and died so that blacks could be free” and “Blacks could not have become free on their own.”

Blacks got their freedom thanks to the “colossal” efforts, generosity, and dedication of a dignified group of white Cubans who had raised their voices in the Spanish parliament to force the abolition of slavery. Leader of the Cuban Conservative Party, intellectual Enrique José Varona, said of this that he “didn’t think this action on the part of whites in Cuba was unparalleled.” White patriot Manuel Sanguily, from the ranks of the Liberal Party, argued that whites had “bankrupted themselves” to free blacks, that whites had suffered as much and even more than they had to achieve freedom and abolish slavery.”

In light of supremacist statements such as these, Juan Francisco Manzano was so right in being skeptical in his sonnet “Mis treinta años,” just as Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés (Plácido) was in raising his “Prayer to God” and not to men.