Rafael Ocasio


Nineteenth-century Cuban literary culture engages shifting black, white, and mixed-race identities in the context of slavery, with authors, readers, manuscripts, and publications facing colonial censorship on the island and migration challenges in the exile zones of the United States. Rafael Ocasio’s book turns to the island-Cuban scenario during the period and its projection in the texts and discourses of _costumbrismo_—brief narratives of everyday urban and rural cultures from the early to mid century deriving from European models and pivoting on locality, character types, and censure as elements of colonial modernity. Ocasio sees in _costumbrismo_ instances of both documentary and imaginative representations of race, and he detects in such representations tensions familiar to Cuba’s _blanco criollo_ nationalism in the era of slavery—in particular, the situation of white writers skirting abolitionism, slavery terror and violence, and the power of Cuban whiteness, even as they put into symbol and plot Cuba’s inhabitants of African descent and perceptions of the island’s African diasporic cultures. For Ocasio, such _costumbrista_ practices are a way into the longstanding discussion of the “hybridity” of Cuban nationalism, where mixture is, uneasily, at once embodied and abstract, utopian and dystopian, critical and reactionary, invoking, as the concept does, the fraught articulation of race, gender, sexuality, and culture. This book is a good account of such issues.

The discussion of Anselmo Suárez y Romero’s _costumbrista_ texts offers evidence for the way the official pressure of the colonial state and the unofficial pressure of a mentorship circle (or, indeed, an author’s own self) converge as censorship. The result is depictions of a sugar mill, for example, that stop just shy of a deeper affective and critical account of the experience of slaves, though such a compromised presentation productively signals something else—the ability of the white writer to hesitate before plantation spaces that, even though traversed and relocated in the literary text, become spaces “cultural” and “black,” thereby granting Cuban whiteness an alibi in universality. Ocasio’s many passages from the literary text help readers see how such (unclaimed) whiteness is at stake in _costumbrismo_. Another view of the genre is in its urban settings, where, in the work of different writers, the focus often falls on the major figure of the _calesero_—the Afro-Cuban coachman. The book does a fine job of cataloguing the _calesero_, who serves as still another opportunity for Afro-Cuban inscription in the _blanco criollo_ text. What is striking about Ocasio’s reflections is the way ideas about the _calesero_’s actual movements across the streets of Havana, at the reins of a horse-drawn carriage, bespeak the racial
violence of colonial Cuba, only at a different register. The violence is vehicular, nonhuman animal, and human, which is to say, the product of the *calesero*, his horse, and his carriage as they strike pedestrians and other users of the colonial capital's streets in “accidents.” Here, the *costumbrista* text disrupts the free flow of Cuban *flânerie* with a (white) representation of Afro-Cuban-authored violence in the city, a violence with lines going back—and forward—to the plantation.

The Afro-Cuban writer treated in this book is Juan Francisco Manzano, whose slave narrative Ocasio places in relation to the *costumbrista* cultures of Suárez y Romero and Domingo del Monte. The point is to see in Manzano traces of the “*mulato fino,*” a concept of importance to Ocasio. “Refined mulattos,” he states, “were not ... completely comfortable in their carefully disguised figures as gentlemen” (p. 202), a trait he discerns in Manzano's narrative and, in fact, establishes as a through-line in the book. *Mulatos/as finos/as* seem to both animate and upset *costumbrista* aesthetics.

The *mulato/a fino/a* is provocative, but the book never fully unpacks the concept, which is worthy of its own section in the introduction, if not a chapter in itself. A discussion of the concept that builds on island-Cuban criticism regarding mixed-race constructions from Nicolás Guillén and Walterio Carbonell to Gastón Baquero and Nancy Morejón, plus criticism in and out of the U.S. academy from Gloria Anzaldúa to Jose Buscaglia-Salgado, would thicken Ocasio's use of *mulato/a fino/a*. The idea of *finura* (refinement) in twentieth-century island and diasporic Cuban vernaculars hovers over queerness in a euphemistic way, which suggests still another approach to race, sexuality, and culture in the Cuban nineteenth century. This kind of further work on the concept is hinted at in a compelling autobiographical excursus in the preface in which Ocasio reflects on his own *mulato fino* identity during his upbringing in a neighborhood outside of Old San Juan, Puerto Rico, and, later, as a U.S. Latino academic in Georgia. Ocasio could also have done more at various points in this book to analyze and argue further from his sources, which sometimes lead him only to summary. Nevertheless, the book conducts a conversation on race and nineteenth-century Cuban literary culture that is very worthwhile to hear.

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