
In a brilliant essay entitled “The Caribbean Region: An Open Frontier in Anthropological Theory” (1992), Michel-Rolph Trouillot called attention to what he characterized as the “undisciplined” Caribbean, a region that “questioned the West/Non-West dichotomy and the category of ‘Native,’ upon both of which anthropology was premised” (p. 21). He argued that throughout the twentieth century, the Caribbean was not considered Western enough to fit into sociological categories, nor “Native” enough to fit anthropological interpretations. This lack of disciplinary representation demanded an interdisciplinary intervention—a task that Caribbean-born scholars such as Fernando Ortiz, Eric Williams, Fernando Coronil, and Trouillot himself enthusiastically undertook. Matthew Pettway’s *Cuban Literature in the Age of Black Insurrection* joins the chorus of Caribbean scholars who have tried to understand the region and its inhabitants on their own terms by avoiding Western-modeled categories and creating original epistemological frameworks.

As discussed in his rich and thought-provoking introduction, Pettway’s analysis builds on Fernando Ortiz’s theory of transculturation, understood as “a process whereby Europeans, indigenous persons, and Africans created a third cultural space through their sustained reciprocal yet unequal interactions” (p. 28), Mary Louise Pratt’s contact-zone theory, and Sylvia Frey’s work on African Atlantic religion to offer a new theoretical lens embodied in a “transculturated colonial literature” (p. 7). This theoretical proposal reads nineteenth-century Black Cuban literature as an “aesthetic response” to Catholic Church domination, State censorship, and a White creole culture that controlled Cuba’s public sphere. By utilizing a method that seeks to decipher “the transculturation of Catholicism with Bakongo and Yoruba-inspired belief structures” (p. 32), Pettway’s innovative analysis of Black Cuban writers aims at recovering the African cosmology hidden in the island’s colonial culture.

The book focuses on the lives and writings of African-descended writers Juan Francisco Manzano and Gabriel de La Concepción Valdés (also known as Plácido), two of the most prominent poets of nineteenth-century Cuba. Both men were charged for their participation in the conspiracy of La Escalera (1844). While Manzano was accused of aiding the conspiracy, Plácido was convicted of being the mastermind of the plot and was executed on charges of treason. Colonial authorities questioned their clandestine meetings and their correspondence, but they also inquired about their texts, which were then categorized as “seditious literature.” Pettway argues that “Manzano and Plácido por-
trayed African-inspired spirituality beneath the surface of Hispano-Catholic aesthetics, which, in effect transformed early Cuban literature into an instrument of black liberation” (p. 6).

Pettway analyzes each writer’s life experiences, education, and writings, and the challenges they confronted in Cuba’s slaved-based and profoundly racist society. Manzano and Plácido were exceptional characters because, despite their socioracial status and, in Manzano’s case, slavery condition, they both received an education, were part of literary circles, and became recognized literary figures in Cuba. Previous scholarship has used this exceptionality and the authors’ “mulatto persona” to depict both as “assimilationist” writers who distanced themselves from African culture “as a necessary concession to the white Catholic literary establishment in Cuba” (p. 30). Pettway, however, offers a radically different interpretation. By analyzing their life experiences (Chapters 2–3) and writings (Chapters 4–5), he argues that despite their “mulatto” characterization and their Catholic poetry, neither one escaped the cruelty of Cuba’s racist society and the persecution of a colonial state that was terrified by the shadow of the Haitian Revolution and a potential race war. While “Manzano’s investment in mulatto identity politics could not liberate him from blackness” (p. 85) and the brutality of the racist system, Plácido’s sacred poetry was used to divert attention from his political activities, which criticized Cuba’s racial ideology. Pettway lucidly explains how both authors created and used innovative literary and aesthetic resources grounded in African Atlantic religion which allowed them to conceive ideas of emancipation and African-descended liberation.

Pettway offers an exhaustive examination of Manzano’s and Plácido’s lives and writings, but he is less generous when providing information on Cuba’s readership. Although he presents some details on how the writers connected with White creole literary circles we still wonder how historians and literary critics could evaluate the influence of Manzano’s and Plácido’s work in the Cuba of their time. How influential were they among Black and mulatto communities? And how did they connect with Black reading publics or counterpublics? These questions, not clearly answered here, make us wonder about the reach of the Black authors’ emancipation agenda. Still, Pettway’s rich and original interdisciplinary analysis—integrating historical, anthropological, critical literature, and religious studies—makes an invaluable contribution to the construction of a new epistemological framework that seeks to understand the plural and heterogeneous cultures of the Caribbean.

Cristina Soriano
Department of History, Villanova University, Villanova PA, U.S.A.
Cristina.soriano@villanova.edu