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OF JUAN FRANCISCO MANZANO
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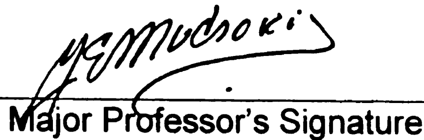

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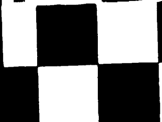

INSCRIBING AFRICAN DESCENDANT IDENTITY IN NINETEENTH CENTURY CUBA: THE TRANSCULTURATED LITERATURE OF JUAN FRANCISCO MANZANO AND GABRIEL DE LA CONCEPCIÓN VALDÉS

By

Matthew Joseph Pettway

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ABSTRACT

INSCRIBING AFRICAN DESCENDANT IDENTITY IN
NINETEENTH CENTURY CUBA:
THE TRANSCULTURATED LITERATURE OF JUAN FRANCISCO MANZANO
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Matthew Joseph Pettway

This dissertation explores how Juan Francisco Manzano and Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés (also known as Plácido) appropriated Hispanic literature to inscribe an African descendant subjectivity in nineteenth century proto-nationalist Cuban discourse. I revise Mary Louise Pratt's notion of "intercultural texts" and Ángel Rama's "literary transculturation", proposing "transculturated colonial literature" to trace the contradictions, re-significations, silences and shifts in the aesthetic and ideological function of Manzano and Plácido's texts. As such, nineteenth century Afro-Cuban literature is analyzed as an active space of negotiation and exchange disputing racial and religious hierarchies to inscribe an Afro-Cuban religio-cultural subject. Through the analysis of Africa-based spirituality and race, I conclude that both Manzano and Plácido disrupted the aesthetic and ideological norms of the colonial status quo by producing what I consider to be the first instance of literary transculturation in Cuba.

After the close reading of poems, letters, self-narratives, and court testimonies, my findings are twofold. First, the construction of a mulatto-Catholic persona by writers of African descent is a politically driven representation legitimating their tenuous association with white cultural elites in charge of disseminating their literature. The portrait of Afro-Caribbean characters that

emerges from their writings not only re-signifies racialized bodies but also functions as a disputation of the dominant colonial gaze. Secondly, Manzano and Plácido produced a transculturated religious subject embedded in Africa-based rituals, and able to subvert normative ecclesiastical practice through the construction of new meanings.

My research contributes to Latin American studies by revealing that Manzano and Plácido's literature does not amount to mimicry of white culture, instead their work juxtaposes Afro-Cuban and Hispano-Catholic practices, subverts the institutional authority of the Church and challenges colonial racial discourse while lending itself to sometimes contradictory but equally plausible interpretations. In this way, my project proposes a new way of reading Afro-Cuban colonial writing that privileges the construction of subjectivities over colonial strategies of subjugation.

The comparison of Manzano and Plácido's racial and religious self-inscriptions in early nineteenth century literature reveals important dissimilarities. Whereas Plácido's lyrical persona avoided racial self-description – only classifying as a *pardo* in the course of legal proceedings – Manzano identified with the unattainable *inbetweeness* of a mixed-race identity. With regard to Africa-derived spirituality, Manzano's lyrical voice and narrative persona renders a highly autobiographical account of apparitions, ancestral reunion and rituals to draw upon the power of spirits, while Plácido's poetic voice does not refer to himself, instead portraying the Afro-Cuban confraternity as collective space for sacred practice that proclaims the judgment to befall colonial slave society.

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A mis muertos…

(Kawtharun, Daddy, my dear Timothy, Grandma, Mama, Qadira, Uncle Herbert and my colleague, Simplice Boyogueno)

Your presence, legacy and pain have guided and encouraged me along this arduous journey. You will never be forgotten.

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First and foremost, I offer a heartfelt thanks to my dissertation advisor, Professor María Eugenia Mudrovcic. In our many years of working together you taught me what it means to be a literary scholar by challenging my readings, paying attention to detail, and imparting the value of intellectual integrity. I cannot thank you enough.

I am also grateful to my dissertation committee: Professors Rocío Quispe-Agnoli, Saulo Gouveia, Laurent Dubois and Doug Noverr, for carefully and critically reading my work. Your feedback and multiple insights will serve to make this dissertation a valuable contribution to the field.

A special thanks to Professor Jualynne Dodson and the African Atlantic Research Team, for walking with me and for encouraging me to ask questions I had yet to perceive.

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INTRODUCTION:
Transculturating Literature in a Society of Dead Poets

> Those with power can afford to tell their story or not. Those without power risk everything to tell their story and must.
>
> -------- Laura Hershey

1.1 Inscribing *Cuba* in Nineteenth Century Literature

This dissertation studies a peculiar collection of poems, narratives and letters by two prolific Afro-Cuban poets in early nineteenth century Cuba who claimed, cultivated and sought to define literature in their own way and on their own terms. The work of enslaved writer Juan Francisco Manzano and free poet of color, Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés (also known as Plácido) emerged between 1821-1849 amidst the rapid expansion of Cuban slave society predicated on plantation sugar production and the exploitation of African labor. Notwithstanding, the painstaking limitations that colonial censorship and the white aesthetic imposed on the creative process, Manzano and Plácido produced texts that constituted sites of racial and religious contestation, uneasy dialogue, and partial, albeit significant cultural overlap. Manzano and Plácido's writing modified an emerging literary tradition, which posited the Hispano-Catholic aesthetic as the religio-cultural foundation of colonial society.

In what manner did Juan Francisco Manzano and Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés avail themselves of the Hispanic text to inscribe an African descendant subjectivity in nineteenth century proto-nationalist Cuban discourse? The present dissertation will analyze representations of Catholicism, Africa-

based spirituality and race in Manzano and Plácido's lesser-studied works to determine what was at stake for Afro-Cuban poets who contested the status quo of colonial discourses on race and religion. Did the mere fact that Manzano and Plácido were poets of African descent represent a threat to the Spanish colonial order, which was premised on the economic exploitation of dark bodies? In what fashion did Manzano and Plácido's modes of racial and religious representation imperil an emerging, yet inchoate, Hispano-Catholic national narrative?

By addressing these questions, I will study the manifold processes of transculturation that took place in Manzano and Plácido's poetry, narratives, letters, and court testimonies, adopting racial and religious representation as dual axes of analysis. My objective is to focus on the contradictions, re-significations, silences, as well as shifts in the aesthetic and ideological rationale that Manzano and Plácido produced in Hispanic literature.

1.2 Recounting the Untold Story of Juan Francisco Manzano and Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés

In the first half of the nineteenth century, colonial slave society was premised on a structure of racial domination entrenched in biological as well as cultural notions of white superiority. Whiteness was granted normative status whereas persons with named or claimed African ancestry were relegated less significant standing within a socio-cultural and, more notably, economic order. Moreover, the Catholic Church enjoyed a privileged alliance with the Spanish monarchy, which sanctioned Christianity as the monopolistic system of religious belief on the island (Cros Sandoval 20-21). Non-Christian modes of religious and

spiritual praxes were deemed inferior to Catholicism, socially marginalized and racialized as superstition and witchcraft. Although Spain did not institute a legal apparatus to prosecute practitioners of Africa-derived spiritual practice, their rituals were anxiously viewed as plausible sources of social unrest and sedition (Palmié 225, 228-29). For African born captives and their Cuban descendants, Catholicism and racialization represented dual structures of subjugation. While race devised a phenotypical hierarchy to privilege the bodies of European descendants over those of their darker-skinned counterparts, in the socio-economic order of the colony the Catholic Church asserted and inculcated a Euro-centric sense of morality that justified the enslavement and oppression of persons of named and claimed African ancestry.

Such structures of subjugation placed tremendous limitations on what African descendant writers were permitted to publish. The white literary establishment circumscribed what genres and topics were fashionable for publication subjecting the work of Afro-Cuban poets and playwrights to intense and frequent scrutiny.

Juan Francisco Manzano and Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés were the most celebrated early nineteenth century Cuban writers of African descent in Cuba. Representing different sectors of colonial society – that of enslaved and freeborn Afro-descendants respectively – their lives can be traced back to different socio-economic conditions. Born an enslaved person in Havana in 1797, Manzano was raised on a Matanzas sugar plantation and made the occasional trip to Havana with his mistress and white godparents (Luis, ed. 13,

304). Plácido, on the other hand, was born free in Havana in 1809 and grew up with his black grandmother (presumably in the extramural neighborhoods).[1] Manzano and Plácido paths' crossed, however, in 1840, after which they came to share a similar fate as alleged co-conspirators in the *La Conspiración de la Escalera* (The Ladder Conspiracy).

In 1821, Manzano published Poesías Líricas, the first in a series of compositions that he would release and one of the initial collections of verse made available in Cuba by anyone, black or white. Owing to his legal status as a slave, Manzano had to rely on white sugar baron and patron of the arts, Domingo del Monte to put his poems in circulation (Luis, ed. 14, 59). Among these, "Mis treinta años" was translated into four different languages having been widely received as a sophisticated and poignant allusion of the poet's life (Calcagno, 79). Furthermore, Manzano authored the only known slave narrative produced anywhere in Spanish America, which in his time was known as *la Autobiografía*, a cogent denunciation of slavery that attracted the attention of wealthy white Cubans who later purchased his freedom in 1836.[2] Though Manzano's fame did

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[1] Plácido's baptismal records confirm that Diego Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés was born in Havana in 1809 and was left in *La Casa de Beneficencia y Maternidad*, a Church run orphanage (Cué, Plácido: El poeta 15). Eugenio María de Hostos makes the claim that Valdés was raised by his black grandmother after being rescued from the orphanage. De Hostos says that she was a formerly enslaved blind woman. However, I am unable to confirm these claims because de Hostos does not cite his sources (213).

[2] William Luis explains that Manzano's slave narrative was known as *la Autobiografía* to a small group of white Cuban writers that circulated the autograph manuscript among themselves. The manuscript has been preserved in the Biblioteca Nacional José Martí in Havana, Cuba. The spelling used here is that of Anselmo Suárez y Romero who corrected and standardized the orthography and the accents in Manzano's slave narrative before it was translated to English and published in Great Britain by Richard Robert Madden (Luis, ed. 50-51).

not surpass that of Plácido, his literary achievements did earn him considerable recognition among the Delmontine literary circle and garnered admiration among free blacks.

Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés is one of the most contentious figures in the history of early nineteenth century Cuban letters. Born of a Spanish mother and a quadroon father, his racial ancestry and celebrity, made him a target of the pro-slavery colonial regime. Although, Plácido did not publish until 1836 – more than ten years after Manzano – he became the most prolific poet and renowned improvisator throughout the island (Horrego Estuch 71). No other Cuban poet, black or white, published more than Plácido in the nineteenth century. His career began in earnest when he extemporized "La siempreviva" in 1834, the poem that launched his vocation as a poet (Casals 16-17). In merely ten years he wrote, extemporized and published nearly 700 poems that were disseminated in a number of books and newspapers all over Cuba (Morales, ed. 678).

But Valdés' newly attained notoriety proved to be more of a curse than not. Colonial authorities frequently placed him under surveillance and detained him on three separate occasions for writing what was purported to be seditious verse. In 1844, he was arrested yet again. This time, however, he was charged with being the ringleader of what the colonial government regarded as "la conspiración proyectada por la gente de color...para el esterminio...de la población blanca" (sic), which came to be known as *La Conspiración de la*

Escalera (Nwankwo 35).[3] In order to substantiate charges of treason, the prosecution linked his historical-political poems to an island-wide conspiracy to unseat the Spanish government. Alleging that poets of color were provocateurs, agents of conspiracy and agitators the colonial regime placed the free population of color under siege. The same year, Manzano also fell under suspicion and was arrested for aiding and abetting what authorities portrayed as a conspiracy to establish black rule.

Given their uneasy relationship with the colony, I maintain that Manzano and Plácido's portrayals of Africa-derived spiritual practice and their re-significations of race denote the introduction of inventive modes of representation in Hispanic literature that disturb and modify the aesthetic and ideological status quo. Producing within a cultural contact zone Afro-Cuban writers were obliged to be familiar with, partake in, and contend with more than one religio-cultural paradigm at once. Such conditions of colonial production created the possibility for texts to become an intervening space linking disparate religious and cultural traditions. I would like to put forward a new hypothesis in regard to the literature of Juan Francisco Manzano and Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés. I propose that Manzano and Plácido's writings represent what maybe the first instance of transculturated literature in Cuba, in view of the fact that the text juxtaposes Afro-Cuban and white Hispanic religious practices, subverts the institutional authority of the Catholic Church and challenges colonial racial discourse even as it lends itself to sometimes contradictory but equally plausible interpretations.

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[3] I have rendered the colonial government's title for *La Conspiración de la Escalera* in English: "the conspiracy devised by people of color ... to exterminate ...the white population".

1.3 Investigating the Critical Gaze: Inquiries into Manzano and Plácido

In the main, Manzano's work has been studied to determine his purported racial identity, which has been unproblematically conflated with his cultural worldview. Some contend that Manzano did not comprehend who he was until he wrote an account of his life, so that identity for the African descendant subject was contingent on his ability to produce a written record.[4] In fact, it has been commonly asserted that Manzano's decision to publish Hispanic literature amounted to a repudiation of his African heritage.[5] Others point out that Manzano self-identified as a mulatto and a practicing Catholic in order to make the case that his racial and religious identities reflected those of a colonized individual (DeCosta Willis 9,11). Such a line of reasoning dismisses the prospect that Manzano may have acknowledged his African heritage and, in some way, identified with that religio-cultural frame of reference.

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[4] In "From Serf to Self: The Autobiography of Juan Francisco Manzano" Sylvia Molloy posits that the written word and the process of writing transformed Manzano from a slave into true self. Quoting the poet, Molloy argues that Manzano's poems were "cold imitations" that so deliberately mimicked the neoclassical model of the white master that they became original in their unintentional parody of the conventions the poet sought to copy. Instead, she proposes that the slave narrative is where the poet, who lacked an available literary model, "writes himself down in his autobiography as a black man and a slave, there is... – no *master* image – to be rescued from texts" (414-16).

[5] In Literary Bondage: Slavery in Cuban Narrative William Luis posits that Manzano's choice to embrace the conventions of literary discourse represent an abandonment of an African frame of reference (65). Jerome Branch's article "'Mulato entre negros' (y blancos): Writing, race, the Antislavery Question and Juan Francisco Manzano's Autobiografía" makes a forceful but flawed argument that given that Manzano never identified with his African heritage he was not faced with a choice of abandoning it for white bourgeois ideology (82).

On the other hand, Plácido has been the object of intense scrutiny by those who have sought to resolve his alleged involvement in the Ladder Conspiracy. Cuban critics hold opposing viewpoints concerning Plácido's role in *La Conspiración de la Escalera* as well as with regard to the merit and significance of his poetry. One such perspective condemns Plácido as a talentless rogue who concocted baseless stories to sink respectable members of high-society.[6] Even still, others admit Plácido's involvement in the uprisings but discard the assertion that he was the ringleader, instead portraying him as a well-informed courier and a propagandist.[7] Plácido's critics have often branded him a virtually white poet whose work they consider deficient in the reproduction of a black cultural and political thematic. The dissociation of Plácido from blackness has the consequence of detaching him from any possible expression of Africa-derived culture and spirituality, as is the case with much of the research on Manzano.[8] That being said, more recent approaches imagine Plácido within a pan-African perspective as a transnational icon of black resistance in the

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[6] Manuel Sanguily did not deem Plácido a national hero. Nor did he think the poet was deserving of inclusion in Cuba's yet unstructured literary canon. In fact, according to Sanguily Plácido was unworthy to be called an artist of any kind. Sanguily described him as a rhymester and simple versifier whose rudimentary worked lacked logic and true order (164,166). Moreover, Sanguily asserts that Plácido denounced the liberal abolitionist ideas of white patrician José de la Luz y Caballero (Bueno, ed. Acerca de Plácido 189-90).

[7] Historian Robert Paquette says that it is unlikely that Plácido led *La Conspiración de La Escalera* but not improbable that due to his widespread fame, broad network of social contacts and mobility he might have served as a courier of messages and a propagandist for the chief conspirators (257, 259).

[8] See Fernández de Castro's "Tema negro en las letras de Cuba hasta fines del siglo XIX" (Bueno, ed. Órbita de José A. 170-71) and Pedro Barreda's The Black Protagonist in the Cuban Novel (17).

nineteenth century.[9] While this African Diaspora method is promising, it fails to take account of Valdés' representations of African descendant cultural and spiritual practices, in that way it neglects ways of reading the colonized and enslaved persona's subjectivity.

The aforementioned criticism tends to address Manzano and Plácido's identity formation by giving undue attention to the Hispanic components of their published work and by de-emphasizing, or (even worse) erasing the marks of an African descendant subjectivity in their literature. In general, the scholarship on both writers has defined their work as largely imitative of white literary models, failing to inquire about their selective and negotiated appropriation of Hispanic literature as a medium for self-inscription.[10] How do we read the nineteenth century Afro-Cuban text without reproducing the dominant gaze or privileging multiple colonial structures of subjugation? My analysis of Manzano and Plácido's writings as transculturated colonial literature interrogates the manner in which such a corpus constructs an imaginative Afro-Cuban subject position previously unknown in literature written on the island. I trust that a comparative assessment of Manzano and Plácido's work will help to perceive the double

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[9] Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo studies how the Spanish government's broad notion of black racial community was an inherently contradictory point of view. At once the authorities saw Plácido as a mixed raced person who was assumed to be biologically and culturally close to whites even as they portrayed him as a fervent racist who had concocted a plot to exterminate the white population. Employing a comparative approach, Nwankwo contrasts Plácido with William Delany and formerly enslaved writers Frederick Douglass and Juan Francisco Manzano. Her book examines the manner in which, Valdés was enshrined as a leader of black resistance in the Caribbean and the United States following his execution in 1844 (18-21, 34-40).

[10] According to Sylvia Molloy, Manzano models his self and the poetic "I" on the voice and the conventions of his white masters. For that reason she believes it is pointless to search for any sincere or personal expression in his poems because they so ardently conform to convention that they fail to represent Manzano himself (414-15).

binded cultural texts of poets of named and claimed African ancestry in Cuban slave society.

1.4 Racializing the Colonial Order During the Rise of Cuban Plantation Society

Towards the close of the eighteenth century and at the dawn of the nineteenth, an interrelated series of events transformed Cuba into the foremost sugar-producing colony in the world. Changes in international markets demands, the British siege and brief military occupation of Havana and the far-reaching economic and administrative reforms of Spanish monarch Carlos III (1759-1788) had broad political, economic and cultural repercussions on the island. However, it was the precipitous destruction of the French colony of St. Domingue and Haitian independence that followed (1791-1804), which created a deep void in world sugar production (Knight 6, 12). As only the second nation to gain its independence from a European colonial power and the first black republic ever to exist, the Haitian Revolution was the shot heard around the world.[11] At once, Haiti became a potent symbol of Black Nationalism and a terror to slave-owning white elites throughout Latin America and the Caribbean (Rolph-Trouillot 37).

At the same time, the Haitian Revolution meant economic promise for white Cuban landowners, known as *sacarócratas* because the consequent lull in world sugar exports amounted to unmet market demand. Even so, the

---

[11] I have appropriated language used about the first battles of the American Revolution at Lexington and Concord for what I consider to be a far more suitable context. The thirteen colonies gained their independence from Great Britain in 1776, becoming the first nation in the western hemisphere to do so.

combined effect of labor shortages and antiquated Spanish legal restrictions on land usage at first rendered white landowners unable to take advantage of the new market (Knight 12).[12]

Havana's solicitor general (*Procurador del Ayuntamiento de la Habana*) Francisco de Arango y Parreño designed an economic platform to build a plantation society that would be competitive with Saint Domingue.[13] He opposed the monopolistic slave trade and advocated for its deregulation. In 1789, the Spanish crown granted Arango y Parreño's appeal, liberalizing the trade to permit both Spaniards and foreigners to import captive Africans into a number of Hispanic Caribbean ports, among them Havana, Cuba.[14] This decree allowed slave traders to put an unlimited number of captives on the market and it eliminated all sales taxes on the purchase of human cargo (Knight 11).[15]

In the first fifty years of the nineteenth century, Cuban sugar production and exports increased dramatically as a consequence of the liberalization of the slave trade, improvements in production technologies and agricultural methods,

---

[12] Deregulation of the slave trade addressed the first obstacle; the second was remedied when planters were permitted full ownership of their lands in 1800, putting an end to usufruct. Additional royal decrees in 1815 and 1816 permitted landowners to freely sell, sublet, sub-divide, and use their lands without legal interference. Significant changes in land reform laws facilitated the expansion of coffee and sugar plantations throughout the island (Knight 17).

[13] Manuel Moreno Fraginals states that between 1760 and 1791 Cuba experienced an impressive increase in plantation sugar production. Production on the island expanded from 5,000 to 17, 000 tm (29-30).

[14] Other Spanish Caribbean ports opened to the slave trade included Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, San Juan de Puerto Rico, and Puerto Cabello, Venezuela (Knight 11).

[15] As the interest and demand in African labor increased; Spain made eleven different pronouncements between 1789 and 1798 to expand the slave trade in the Spanish Caribbean. Altogether, previous restrictions on the transatlantic slave trade were lifted so that prices were set in step with the local market (Knight 11).

in addition to a continually replenished enslaved labor supply. Sugar exports were fewer than 16,000 tons in 1790 but they increased to more than ten times that amount (161, 248 tons) by 1840 (Pérez Jr. 76-77). Naturally, increased sugar productivity meant that the island underwent noteworthy demographic shifts in urban and rural areas between 1775 and 1838. These changes in population made African-born captives and their Cuban descendants the majority throughout the island by 1827, a trend that continued so that in 1841 the enslaved inhabitants alone were greater in number than the entire white population (Knight 22).[16]

Haiti also represented a veritable threat to the political and cultural dominance of the emerging landed gentry that hoped to generate wealth through the exploitation of captive African labor. Demographic shifts in the racial and cultural composition of the island was reminiscent of the numeric predominance of blacks in St. Domingue prior to the Haitian Revolution.[17] In the late eighteenth century and during the Latin American wars for independence (1810-1825) opponents of Cuban independence manipulated the white public with the racialized nightmare of a Haitian-style revolution on Cuban soil. They argued that the notion of Cuban independence was counter to and indeed threatened the

---

[16] Due to notable increases in the African population, whites lost the majority they had enjoyed throughout the 1700s. By 1841 the census counted 436,495 enslaved persons, 152,838 free persons of color and 418,291 whites (Knight 5, 22).

[17] In Saint Domingue enslaved persons (and free people of color) numbered 480,000 making up the overwhelming majority of the population. Captive Africans and free persons of color dwarfed the colony's 40,000 white inhabitants. Naturally, this system of radical social inequality and brazen economic exploitation engendered a colonial environment were racial tensions ran high (Dubois 61).

white Hispano-Catholic ideal. In both racial and cultural terms, Haiti came to signify blackness in the white imaginary. The idea of a race war convinced the white propertied elite not to pursue independence from Spain but to rely on the military power of the mother country to dominate subject populations (Ferrer 8). Officially, the Spanish military government (represented by the captain general) fulfilled the orders of the crown and it put down slave rebellions to preserve a fragile socio-economic order. All the same, the military regime upheld the economic interests of the *hacendados* by backing the clandestine slave trade even as it barred the white Cuban elite from exercising political control over its own affairs (Knight 24).

Rapid growth of the black population on the island was but one factor that terrified white Cuban *hacendados*. Accounts from St. Domingue also warned of the efficacious use of African ritual powers in warfare against the French. Haitian soldiers who had fought in the Revolution were largely African-born and there was evidence to suggest that their religio-cultural frame of reference in the form of incantations and oaths of secrecy had guided them in combat (Thornton, "African Soldiers" 71-72). In Cuba, Africa-derived religion stirred anxiety in the white public and it was anathema to Catholic doctrine. Black confraternities (known as *cabildos de nación*) were strongholds of Africa-based ritual practices, and regularly were associated with the guidance of "African-style – spiritual leaders" resulting in a ban on African drumming (Palmié 90, 226, 228).

The "era of our happiness" that Arango y Parreño had envisaged years prior was now at risk, as ambitions for wealth felt increasingly threatened by the

africanización of Cuba.[18] With dread of a black Cuba in mind, Arango y Parreño proposed the importation of European field hands to replace enslaved Africans on sugar plantations and to promote a system of free labor (Paquette 95). With the support of other *hacendados* Havana's solicitor general envisioned the eventual whitening of the island by way of miscegenation rooted in the pseudoscientific belief that when the races mixed black would yield to white, therefore diluting the African influence (Kutzinski, Sugar's Secrets 31). In theory, the new racial project would permit whites to retain their wealth while preserving the economic system based on plantation sugar production. The plan to attract free white labor, however, yielded mixed results so that plantation labor demands continued to be met by the importation of African captives.[19]

Domingo Delmonte also contemplated the expansion of the enslaved and free population of color with great trepidation. In a series of conversations with Richard Robert Madden of the Mixed Court of Justice, he advocated for the end of the slave trade as a means to restoring the numeric predominance of whites on the island.[20] Delmonte believed that Spain should put an end to the slave trade to assure the *salvación y prosperidad futuras* ("salvation and future prosperity") of the island. In 1839, like Arango y Parreño before him, Delmonte appealed for European immigrants to work the cane fields and grow the white

[18] In 1793, Arango y Parreño viewed the establishment of a sugar-producing colony as a means to expand white Cuban wealth, thus ushering in an age of prosperity (Knight 3).

[19] Between 1835-1839, whites immigrated to Cuba at an average of 7,000 per year while the annual average of Africans imported surpassed 12,000 (Knight 114-15).

[20] The Anglo-Spanish Treaty of 1817 set up the Mixed Court of Justice to prosecute slave trading once it had been outlawed by Great Britain (Luis, Literary Bondage 35).

population (Fernández de Castro, ed. 144-45). He evoked the racist image of a white minority surrounded on all sides by *muchos negros esclavos* that would surely slaughter them and proceed to ruin the island (Fernández de Castro, ed. 154-55). Like many patricians of the time, he believed in African intellectual, cultural and biological inferiority. Despite the fact that members of Delmonte's literary group produced what was essentially anti-slavery fiction, it would be a mistake to infer that support for such literature, in any way, embodied an egalitarian transracial racial project.[21] The black and mulatto characters portrayed in Delmonte's anti-slavery literature were Romanticized victims of white oppression, never the rebellious maroon able to challenge colonial subjugation (Barreda 44-45).

1.5 Manzano and Plácido as Afro-Cuban Literati in the Age of *La Escalera*

In the first fifty years of the nineteenth century, writers of African descent were members of a small, albeit, active artistic community nestled within a growing western Cuban population of color. With few exceptions, these poets and playwrights were free people, almost exclusively male and had limited

[21] The Cuban anti-slavery narrative refers to literature written mainly during the 1830s starting with Juan Francisco's Manzano slave narrative which was written in 1835 and published in English by Richard Madden in 1840, and in Spanish by José Luciano Franco in 1937. Following the slave narrative there is also Anselmo Suárez y Romero's Francisco written in 1839 and published in 1880, Félix Tanco y Bosmoniel's Escenas de la vida privada written in 1838 and published in 1925 and his Un niño en la Habana written in 1837 and published in 1936. All of these early works were requested by Domingo del Monte. Luis says that Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda's romantic novel Sab could be considered an anti-slavery work although it was published in Spain in 1841 and Avellaneda was not part of the Delmonte literary circle. However, he does exclude the versions of Cirilo Villaverde's Cecilia Valdés because their content passed the censors and was published in Cuba. The latter version drew on earlier anti-slavery works but was published not in Cuba but in New York in 1882 (Luis, Literary Bondage 1, 4).

access to formal education. Afro-Cuban poets recited verse and published in newspapers and magazines of the period such as *La Aurora de Matanzas*, *El Eco de Villa Clara*, *Diario de la Habana*, *Diario de Matanzas*, *La Moda o Recreo Semanal del Bello Sexo* and *El pasatiempo*. In the years 1815-1885, twenty-five writers of color published a little over fifty different literary works. The dissemination of nineteenth century Afro-Cuban literature spanned a number cities and towns including Havana, Matanzas, Villa Clara, and Trinidad (Trelles 31-34). The number of works in print is relatively few, but the information on published poets does not tell the whole story. While it was customary for Afro-descendant writers to devote themselves to the fine arts and to the composition of poetry, not all of their works saw publication (Calcagno 88).

The earliest published Afro-Cuban poet in the 1800s and perhaps the first in the history of Cuban literature, was Juana Pastor. In 1815, six years prior to Manzano's *Poesías líricas*, she released two collections, *Décimas* and *Soneto* (Trelles 33). Very little is known about Pastor since most of her work has disappeared, but Calcaño says that she was a distinguished schoolteacher in her time (Bueno, ed. Órbita de Fernández 164). Antonio Medina was another notable member of the Afro-Cuban literati. Born in Havana in 1829 – about three decades after Manzano and twenty years after Plácido – Medina was well acquainted with Juan Francisco Manzano and familiar with Plácido (Calcagno 91). Medina garnered recognition as a poet and dramatist in his own right, publishing three plays, a compilation of poems and a pamphlet, only a few years after *La Conspiración de la Escalera* (Trelles 34). Furthermore, he read French

and English and earned a living directing a small school for persons of color (Calcagno 91-92).

Among early nineteenth century writers, Juan Francisco Manzano and Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés stand out because they were prolific, much of their work has survived, and they articulated a critique of white racial hierarchy while their affirmative representations of Africa-based spirituality undermined the ecumenical authority of the Catholic Church. Unlike oral performers, such highly published poets of color did not enjoy the anonymity that may have protected their spoken word counterparts from political persecution and arrest. The Spanish government's long-held suspicions of African descendant poets came to a head in 1843-1845 when both were accused, arrested and blamed for plotting to massacre the white population and institute a republic of blacks and mulattoes along the same lines as Haiti (Paquette 258-59).

In the nearly three decades that his marked literary career, Juan Francisco Manzano published what were regarded as typically neoclassical poems in the mold of Spanish poet Juan Bautista Arriaza. Perhaps because Manzano enjoyed connections with the Delmontine literary salon, his poetry was not thought to articulate seditious content. With the exception of his slave narrative, which was translated into English by Richard Robert Madden and published in Great Britain in 1840, Manzano's work was frequently available on the island. Many of his poems appeared in *Diario de la Habana*, (1830, 1831, 1838, 1841), *Diario de Matanzas* (1830), *La Moda o Recreo Semanal del Bello Sexo* (1831) and *El pasatiempo* (1834-1835) among other publications (Luis, ed. 14). Such visibility,

however, came to an abrupt end in 1844, when colonial authorities accused Manzano of aiding and abetting Domingo Delmonte to depose the colonial regime.[22]

The authorities initially mistook Juan Francisco Manzano for an individual identified as Manuel Manzano. Even so, in a statement to the Governor of Matanzas, Capitan General Leopoldo O'Donnell insinuated that Manzano might also be a threat to the regime, given his reputation as an intellectual among persons of color. The government decided to detain Manzano for questioning once he was in custody (Azougarh, ed. 11-13). Manzano's predicament resulted from two related affairs: his ties with high society whites and free persons of color, who had also fallen under suspicion, and his vocation as a poet. The prosecution suspected that Manzano was not only informed of Delmonte's plans but might also be implicated in them.

Unlike, Plácido, however, Manzano was not under surveillance for any poem that he had written. Between 1844-1845, Manzano was incarcerated on two occasions, twice brought before a military tribunal, interrogated and physically tortured. In Matanzas, in June of 1844, *el poeta emancipado* was

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[22] Historians and literary scholars alike have debated rather or not the Ladder Conspiracy of the 1840s was a veridical event, or merely a concoction of the colonial regime meant to justify wide scale terrorism against the free population of color. Robert Paquette examines this ongoing dispute among Cuban and North American scholars. After assessing voluminous testimony from the Military Commission, correspondence between involved parties, and a close study of the historiography concerning *La Escalera*, as well as other forms of evidence, Paquette concludes that the Conspiracy of *La Escalera* did indeed exist. He states that this string of conspiracies were organized from 1841-1844 and were comprised of many autonomous yet related centers of seditious activity. The conspiracies and subsequent uprisings were lead and executed by two distinct councils; one made up of white Cubans and another of both enslaved and free people of color. Additional support was provided (and later revoked) by certain elements of the British government (Paquette 263-64).

acquitted of charges brought against him in the first case and released. Only a month later, he was detained yet again, subjected to further interrogations and maltreatment and held until November of 1845 (Friol 64-66).

The case brought against Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés was, by far, more severe. Plácido's literary career began in earnest only ten years prior when he extemporized "La siempreviva", the poem that launched his successful trajectory as a renowned poet. With only a modest education, Plácido improvised several genres of poetry at soirées, weddings, baptisms and other social events attended by Cuban high society (Morales, ed. xviii-xxi). During his lifetime, he published four books of poetry and collaborated in newspapers such as *La Aurora de Matanzas*, *El Eco de Villa Clara* and *El Pasatiempo* (Cué, Plácido: El Poeta 178).[23] Though marked by brevity, Plácido's career was exceptionally productive. In merely ten years he wrote, improvised and published nearly 700 poems, which were disseminated in a number of books and newspapers throughout the island (Morales, ed. 678).

As a prominent free poet of color, Valdés was constantly under surveillance and arrested on three separate occasions for writing what was purported to be seditious poetry.[24] Among the poems named in the indictment, "El juramento" ("The Oath") (1840) may have cost him his life, for it conveyed a yearning for liberty and articulated a solemn vow to be "the eternal enemy of the

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[23] Jorge Casals states that Plácido collaborated in *El Pasatiempo* (17).

[24] Plácido was initially arrested in 1834 for what was suspected to be subversive content in "La sombra de Padilla". Also, his ode to General Andrés de la Flor, which decries slavery and alludes to "the spirit of Hatuey", was also cited in the charges brought against him (Horrego Estuch 70-71, 107-9).

tyrant". For the Spanish government this sonnet amounted to a political manifesto inscribed in verse that was well known and often recited all over the island (Horrego Estuch 56). Plácido's frequent and extensive travels between Havana, Matanzas, and Trinidad; his elaborate network of influential and politically active friends, coupled with the anti-colonial content of his verse provided the captain general with justification for his arrest and prosecution. On June 28, 1844, Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés was executed as the president, mastermind, and recruiter of people of color that had plotted to depose the colonial administration (Cué, Plácido: El poeta 16). The official narrative of the conspiracy, however, was riddled with contradictions. The regime's account does not justify how Juan Francisco Manzano, Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés and white patrician Domingo Delmonte could have allied themselves with a rebellion that had apparently incompatible objectives: the establishment of a Cuban government predominantly lead by whites on the one hand and the complete eradication of all white people on the other.

Notwithstanding the incongruous account of events on which the government relied, the devastating effects of the racial purge on African descendants were without dispute. The full scope of the repression was breath-taking and colonial authorities did not forfeit the opportunity to prosecute four thousand persons by military tribunal, 98 of whom were condemned to die, 600 were imprisoned, and more than 400 were deported (Midlo Hall 58).[25] Africans

[25] In economic terms, the Ladder Conspiracy was also damaging to Cuban sugar exports. The exportation of boxes of sugar from Havana (each box equaled two hundred pounds)

and African descendants overwhelmingly suffered the brunt of colonial retribution. More people died from starvation, cruel beatings, and other tortuous forms of punishment than were executed, having a destructive effect on the overall size of free and enslaved populations. Between 1841 and 1846 the number of enslaved persons sharply declined by nearly 100,000 persons from 436,495 to 326,759 while the free populace lost almost four thousand (Midlo Hall 59-60).[26] Although the devastating crackdown did not silence Afro-Cuban poets and playwrights indefinitely, the damaging events of *el Año del cuero,* as the Spanish government onslaught came to be known, had a lasting effect on their possibilities for publication.

1.5 Summation of Chapters

To address how Manzano and Plácido produced the first transculturated literature in Cuba that can be traced back to the early nineteenth century, I am proposing the following chapter distribution. In Chapter 1, "Negotiating Texts within Contact Zones: Transculturated Colonial Literature, A Theoretical Perspective", I will delineate a theoretical framework that will debunk the current characterization of Afro-Cuban literature as imitative of white aesthetic models. My contention is that poetry, narrative, letters, and testimony produced by writers of African descent in the colony take on a quality peculiar to the socio-historical

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dropped by more than 300,000 and from Matanzas by about 200,000 between 1844 and 1845 (Midlo Hall 59).

[26] Between 1841 and 1846 the number of enslaved persons sharply declined by from 436,495 to 326,759 persons (Midlo Hall 59-60).

context and precise cultural spaces in which they emerge. In order to analyze such writing I focus on literary discourse; censorship and the white aesthetic – which place demands on the text – as well as the nature of reader response. Mary Louise Pratt's notion of "intercultural texts" and Ángel Rama's literary transculturation are my points of departure since the production of colonial (and postcolonial) literature can be analyzed in terms of co-presence, exchange, ongoing conflict and asymmetrical dialogue between different (but not always recognized) cultural paradigms. On this basis I sustain that transculturated colonial literature introduces new modes of racial and religious representations in Hispanic letters that disrupt and modify the dominant aesthetic and ideological rationale.

The subsequent chapters are an analysis of how Manzano and Plácido responded to the pressures imposed by the colonial order in Cuba. Chapter 2, "Present but Unseen: Catholicism and African descendant Spirituality in the Poetry and Slave Narrative of Juan Francisco Manzano", contests the widely asserted view that Manzano's poetry and slave narrative represent a wholesale negation of his African heritage. This chapter problematizes Manzano's construction of a devout Catholic identity in his poetry and life story as a rhetorical strategy designed to legitimate his involvement in white Cuban literary circles. In his writings, a normative self-portrait can be seen as juxtaposed with an autobiographical persona that partakes in Africa-based spiritual practices thus transculturating an otherwise orthodox religious identity. The analysis of "Sueño a mi segundo hermano", "La visión del poeta compuesta en un ingenio de

fabricar azúcar" and *la historia de mi vida* (the story of my life) will show how Manzano's lyrical voice communes with spirits, performs rituals, receives otherworldly revelations, achieves *marronage* and engages in ancestral reunion, all hallmarks of an African descendant spirituality. Far from a futile appeal for whiteness, Manzano's religio-cultural inscription emerges as a constructed and intricate transculturated identity.

In Chapter 3, "Re-signifying Religion and Spirituality Within Contested Space: The Poetry of Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés", I will analyze Plácido's rendering of Catholic and African descendant spiritual practice as incompatible yet coexistent paradigms whose encounter within the text necessitates an uneasy but sustained dialogue. I interrogate the frequent assertion that regards Plácido as a virtually white Catholic poet who espoused religious and cultural affinity for white lettered society. Plácido's normative religious persona in "Muerte de Jesucristo", "A la resurrección de Jesús", "Muerte del Redentor", "A la resurrección" and "A la muerte de Cristo" is devoid of self-referentiality and as such is best interpreted as a conscientious reproduction of the carefully scripted interactions he maintained with Cuban white elite. "Mi no sé que ha richo", "A la Virgen del Rosario", "El diablito", and "Fantasmas, duendes y brujas" along with "El juramento" will also be analyzed to explore Plácido's alternative perception in the natural world, the prophesy of imminent judgment, and the re-signification of space as compelling affirmations of Africa-based spirituality. As a final point, Plácido's portrayal of an African descendant religio-cultural voice will be

examined in tandem with the charges of subversive political participation that the Spanish colonial government brought against him.

In Chapter 4, "The Body as Object: Racialization and Self-Representation in the Literature of Juan Francisco Manzano", I analyze Manzano's construction of a mulatto racial persona as a discursive act that acknowledges the power of plantation society while critically assessing the authority of the dominant gaze. It is my belief that Manzano's representation of race is far more complex and problematical than has been previously recognized by scholars who are inclined to put emphasis on his self-identification as a mulatto manservant. On the contrary, my reading suggests that Manzano's racial identity serves different purposes: it ventures to make the enslaved persona palatable to white literary patrons, it forges positive renderings of black and mulatto beauty and morals and it subverts white claims to racial supremacy. In spite of Manzano's mulatto self-portrait, my analysis of police interrogations and the poet's eleventh hour letter to a friend written from prison during *la Conspiración de la Escalera*, established that there was no in-between that might diminish colonial racial hostility, which, no matter what regarded every dark body, a *black* body.

My final chapter, "Re-charting Racial Aesthetics, Satirical *Costumbrismo* and Self-Representation in the Poetry of Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés" takes a critical look at the manner in which Plácido's poetry embodies one of the first aesthetic and moral valorizations of the mulatta and the black woman in nineteenth century poetry written in Cuba. This chapter takes a look at the construction of a male racial persona in lesser-known satirical poems: "Que se lo

cuente a su abuela", "Si a todos Arcino dices", "El guapo", "¡Oh...! no juegue, que me moja" and "La respuesta de un curro". I maintain that like Plácido's Romantic verse, his satire also espouses the notion of a broad African descendant community situating the characters' lineage in Africa, thus confronting color divisions among Afro-Cubans. Although Valdés eludes racial self-portraiture in his poetry, his involvement in *La Conspiración de la Escalera* obliged him to identify within colonial racial classifications, hence threatening the far-reaching notion of African descendant community, which his literature had posited. Comparable to Juan Francisco Manzano, I make the case that Plácido's purportedly "almost white status" was illusory in view of the fact that all brown bodies were deemed *black* and therefore subversive within the white colonial imaginary.

CHAPTER ONE

Negotiating Texts within Contact Zones: Transculturated Colonial Literature A Theoretical Perspective

> Todo el guarapo no se puede convertir en blanco azúcar...
> -------- The Last Supper

1.1 From Colonial Frontier to Contact Zone

In Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation (1992) Mary Louise Pratt coins "contact zones" to describe colonial places wherein disparate cultural groups, who had been historically and geographically apart, were brought into zones of encounter where on-going interactions marked by coercion, deep-seated inequality, and enduring conflict take place (6). Her notion of contact zones places emphasis on improvisational interchanges that link dissimilar subjects whose historical and cultural trajectories now intersect within New World colonies. Pratt implements a "contact perspective", theorizing that colonial subjects are constituted through the reciprocal and habitual nature of their unequal relations to one another. The colonized (and enslaved) as well as the colonizer are studied in terms of co-presence, intercultural communication, intertwined understandings and sometimes-shared practices. For Pratt, the "colonial frontier" is not a narrative about unfettered European expansion but a place where dialogue, exchange and overlap create new possibilities for cultural expression (6-7).

Cuban colonial slave society during the 1800s did not merely constitute a sugar-producing Spanish plantation island, which had been designed and structured to meet the economic imperatives of empire. On the contrary, it was a dynamic site of cultural contestation wherein Africans, Europeans, their offspring and the remaining Amerindian populations struggled for and negotiated space where precise cultural identities could be articulated. As such, I believe Pratt's notion of the contact zone is particularly helpful for understanding nineteenth century Cuban colonial society.

Pratt asserts that the contact zone creates the conditions for transculturation (6). This speaks to nineteenth century Cuba where the selective absorption and use of outside cultural practices was an ever-present component. The implication is that plantation slavery, the effects of racialization, Spanish colonialism, and compulsory conversion to Christianity – which imposed serious limits on African and African descendant self-expression – did not prevent the oppressed from being active in the production of New World culture. As a point of departure, Pratt relies on Fernando Ortiz's transculturation model, which was originally posited to expound upon the multifaceted and prolonged history of cultural production in Cuba.

Ortiz first used transculturation in Contrapunteo cubano de tabaco y azúcar (1940) to promote an enhanced understanding of the historical processes that informed the origins of Cuban culture. His was a nationalist perspective meant to problematize acculturation, which suggests the almost complete loss of one's native culture and an inevitable assimilation to the dominant one. For

Ortiz, acculturation did not adequately describe the means by which Cuban cultural identity was forged, given that it effaced the active role of the oppressed in the formation of national culture (254, 260).

He envisaged Cuban culture as the result of multifaceted processes of geographic and cultural uprooting, several dislocations, forced adjustments to new landscapes, the loss of one's autochthonous culture and the imposition (acculturation) of the dominant one that resulted in what he termed *transculturación* (254). Transculturation provides highly plausible explanations with regards to how culture is produced within colonial environments in the course of sustained reciprocal interactions and selectivity: so as to avow that the conquest of the Other is never fully realized. The description of Cuban national culture as an amalgamation of African, Iberian and Amerindian influences permitted Ortiz to rewrite his earlier works Los Negros Brujos (1906) and Los Negros esclavos (1916) whose deterministic posture had denigrated Afro-Cuban culture as a malignant stain on the social fabric.[27] Nearly three decades later, *transculturación* provided a conceptual means for re-imagining Cuba even as it effectively overlooked a troublesome and protracted history of white racial domination. Throughout Cuban history race embodied an agonizing site of economic exploitation, conflict and social animosity. Presumed to be a naturally existing biological category, race was implemented as a legal instrument of social control and collective domination. Although meaningfully dissimilar to processes

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[27] In Los Negros esclavos (1916) Ortiz decried what he termed "Afro-Cuban" culture as part of a socially corrupt underworld peopled by individuals which he presumed to be intellectually, morally, and culturally inferior on the basis of biological ancestry (30-31).

of transculturation, race cannot be discounted as a considerable factor in nineteenth century Cuban identity formation.

1.2 Stratifying Race in Colonial Cuba

Cuban colonial society operated under the aegis of a multipartite racial caste system. By law, Europeans and their descendants were deemed to be white, whereas Africans and their offspring were categorized in ways meant to accomplish two contradictory goals: to consign all people of African ancestry to a racial group that would be judged inferior while also accentuating the phenotypical differences among them. The first colonial census taken in Cuba in 1774 categorized persons of African descent as either *negros* or *mulatos*, enslaved or free (Nwankwo 34-35). These categories were meant to distinguish between persons of mixed heritage and those known only to have African ancestors.

Under the law, persons regarded as white were granted privilege. In principle, this meant that the perception of European features garnered more social capital than African phenotypes. Official categorizations were based entirely on European norms of physical appearance and Euro-centric beauty standards, and judged skin color, the shape and slope of the nose and lips, as well as hair textures as outstanding determinants of racial identity. The Spanish concept of *limpieza de sangre* or purity of blood, dating back to medieval times,

maintained relevancy in eighteenth and nineteenth century colonial Cuba.[28] Mixedness implied racial impurity; though it was not the inverse of whiteness but a less than perfect progression within a color scheme that exalted whiteness as a social and cultural ideal.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, long before the thirty-year Cuban struggle for independence from Spain (1868-1898) whites perceived miscegenation as a step towards the eventual whitening of the island through biological means.[29] In social terms, persons of mixed race – thought to be both biologically and culturally closer to the white ideal – operated under the notion of a "mulatto escape hatch" (Helg 4).

Official designations, known as "legal color", were determined at birth, even though they did not reasonably correspond to the physical appearance of Cuban born people. Cubans were of infinite skin colors for various reasons; including white male rape of enslaved women, consensual interracial concubinage, and on a few occasions marriage (Martínez-Alier 73-74).[30] Nonetheless, an individual's legal color at birth ultimately did not determine his or

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[28] Race finds its inception in fifteenth century Spanish legal codes, which regarded Christians to be the only persons to have *limpieza de sangre* or purity of blood. Such a classification excluded Jewish and Muslim persons from participating in the political process. (Martínez-Alier 6, 15)

[29] Towards the end of the 1800s, however, mixedness would become the battle cry of the independence movement. This *mestizaje* was expressed in terms of the absence of race, as was the case with one of the movement's principal intellectual leaders, white poet José Martí, who denied the existence of race all together. Additionally, leading Afro-Cuban military officer General Antonio Maceo said there were "no whites nor blacks, but only Cubans". However, this did not mean that race ceased to exist among pro-independence leaders but that it was de-emphasized in order to imagine Cuban national identity wherein all racial groups were united as one (Ferrer 4, 7).

[30] Colonial legal codes regulated and restricted interracial marriage (Martínez-Alier 2).

her social status. To the contrary, facial features defined social identity not the skin color described in legal documentation (Andrews 74).

In any case, race imposed the social stigma and the legal reality of hypodescent on Africans and their descendants. Martínez-Alier explains that the Cuban kinship system was bilateral. This meant that children traced their descent through both parents and were equally related to the consanguines of both their mother and father. In terms of racial classifications it was always the non-white parent that determined the group membership of the offspring of mixed parentage (17). No matter what type was assigned to individuals of color, by law African ancestry translated into an inferior social (and often economic) status. This scheme was utterly foreign to African new arrivals given that, as George Reid Andrews states, Africans who were involved in and fell victim to the Transatlantic slave trade had no concept of race. They organized and perceived themselves and other Africans according to their particular ethnic-linguistic and geographic designations (21). Race, then, was an imposition of the colonial power structure, which – along with the doctrine of the Catholic Church – functioned as one of the legal and social justifications for their enslavement and economic exploitation.

Frantz Fanon's pioneering work, Black Skin White Masks, brings a vital critical lens to the study of race in colonial situations by making an allowance for the power of the white gaze, the black body as object, and the self/Other divide. His study relies on psychoanalysis to examine the black condition as an exploited

morbid body.[31] For Fanon people of African descent exist within a zone of non-being, which is the result of economic dependence that produces the internalization of a shared sense of inferiority. That is to say, that black persons do not experience the fullness of their existence as they might, owing to the restraints placed upon them by a hostile, racist society. This non-being produces a desire for social and cultural whitening and the perceived need to gain the approval of white society. Implicit in this condition is the infantilization of blacks, which denies them full subjecthood (8-12, 31, 51).

In Fanon's painful, autobiographical account the dominant white gaze emerges as an instrument of violence against the black body, dismembering the body, as it is shattered into unequal fragments. This dominant gaze generates a grave sense of awareness within the colonized person who is not only conscious of his/her body in the third person but also becomes a *triple person;* at once held to account for the black body, the black race and his/her African ancestors. In other words, the white gaze threatens to dislocate the black subject by projecting preconceived notions of intellectual deficiency, primitivism, religious savagery, slavery, and even anthropophagy (112). The dominant group's prejudicial view of the black body is the result of the intrinsic power of the white gaze reinforced by socio-economic privilege and a prolonged history of colonialism.

In such a state of affairs, colonized persons yearn to experience the full range of their subjecthood and to speak on their own behalf. Fanon posits that

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[31] Fanon uses "black" as a general descriptor for all people of African descent. In some instances, however, he uses the term mulatto to refer to people of a lighter hue within the same group.

the mastery of the metropolitan tongue is crucial since it affords the colonized social recognition and relevancy. Within this colonial paradigm the oppressed garner social presence through imperial languages because speaking the language of the dominant group implies the ostensible adoption of their culture. Consequently, to speak is to be present for the white Other whose denial of African descendant cultural values situates blacks within an atemporal space, devoid of culture and without history. The linguistic hegemony of dominant groups also means that blacks have "two dimensions" given that they are expected to behave differently with white persons than with members of their own racial community (17, 35). This linguistic authority reinforces notions of cultural difference that find their basis in a "fixed concept of the Negro" (35).

For Homi Bhabha, Fanon's notion of a "fixed concept of the Negro" can be best explained in terms of stereotypes, which he says are the foremost discursive strategies of the colony. Bhabha sees the stereotype as an ambivalent "form of knowledge and identification" whose existence is constant even though it requires reiteration. This is not merely a false description but an "arrested fixated form of representation" with societal repercussions for the colonized subject. Bhabha asserts that such a representation remains the same throughout time and space (66, 75). The stereotype is produced by colonial discourse to depict the colonized as a completely knowable and observable Other from the dominant group's point of view (70-71).

Taking a page from Fanon, Bhabha explains that this form of representation may engender a desire to mimic the white colonizer. In his words,

"colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite," in other words not quite white (86). According to this formulation, white society maintains its authority by insisting that colonized peoples conform to and reproduce the white ideal which functions as a desired yet unattainable standard for measuring the humanness of non-European peoples. Mimicry, then, results in the ridicule of the colonized subject who is not able to escape this perceived sense of otherness.

Although the hostility of the white gaze fragments the black body into Fanon's *triple person*, it is clear that this fragmentation does not produce the disintegration of the black subject since the body is but a vessel for the subject. The colonial situation provides multiple examples of the ways in which colonized and enslaved persons survived by exercising subjectivity: i.e. the production of culture or violent resistance to complete subjugation. In fact, Bhabha says that colonized persons can subvert the white masculinist gaze turning back the discriminatory glare through a counter gaze (47). Although, Fanon very carefully diagnoses the condition of the black colonial subject he seems unable or unwilling to prescribe a feasible solution to the black dilemma or to reflect on the inherent value of the strategies that persons of African descent have adopted in order to endure white racial domination. In my view, the very blackness he discards as a mere negation of whiteness holds significance as a suitable mode of racial and/or racial-cultural identity empowering the African descendant subject in a hostile colonial situation (228-31). Besides the frequent inculcation of racial hierarchy, the Spanish government set up the Catholic Church as the

monopolistic religion on the island, operating as part of a broader apparatus to maintain social control of the African and African descendant populations.

1.3 Catholicism, Africa-based Spirituality and Social Control in Early Nineteenth Century Cuba

I would like to theorize about the function of the Catholic Church as a prime structure of colonial subjugation foisted upon the nineteenth century African descendant subject. There are three distinctive, although, related problems that interest me here: What was the prevailing rationale for the renaming of the land in Christian terms? How did the Catholic Church operate as an instrument of social control of the enslaved population? Lastly, in what manner did Afro-Cubans transform colonial space into contact zones to make possible the construction of a religio-cultural subject as an exception to, and, in spite of the authoritarian posture of the Church? Seldom have such theoretical issues been addressed as regards to the literature produced by colonial writers of African descent. By taking up these disregarded questions, I aim to determine the manner in which processes of transculturation came to fruition in nineteenth century Afro-Cuban colonial literature.

Catholicism, the official religion of the colony, exercised a major organizational and social role since the Spanish conquest of Cuba. The influence of the Church was such that each town was named and "placed under the protection of a saint, a path of the Virgin, or other religious figure" (Cros

Sandoval 19-21).[32] Within the colonial imaginary the act of naming represented a christening of the land to dissociate it from what was deemed its pagan past, thus consecrating the terrain for exclusively Christian use. This *de-spiritualization* of the conquered land envisaged the terrain as *tabula rasa* where the Church might efface all pre-existent sacred traditions, while inscribing a white Hispano-Catholic presence for perpetuity.[33] The consecration was both political and religious since the Catholic personages assigned to *protect* the land also guarded its rearrangement and *settlement* for agricultural exploitation. The onomastic was an act of symbolic violence, reimagining the land and Othering non-Christian and non-white religious belief systems.

The institutional authority of the Catholic Church was also reflected in colonial slave codes. In 1789, the Spanish crown decreed the *código negro español*, a summary of slave law based in part on the *Siete partidas*, a thirteenth century medieval code. The *código negro español* differed from previous summaries of the law introducing ameliorative measures to protect enslaved persons and to penalize abusive masters. It was comparable, however, to all other prior slave laws in that it reiterated the clerical duties of the Roman Catholic Church: to conduct daily prayer, provide religious instruction, perform compulsory baptisms and give mass to the enslaved population. With the exception of the

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[32] Catholicism was the official religion of the colony from 1512–1898 so that the Catholic Church enjoyed a privileged alliance with the monarchy functioning as an arm of the metropolitan government (Cros Sandoval 19-21).

[33] I am indebted to Latin American literary scholar María Mudrovcic for coining the Spanish term, "desespiritualización". I have translated it to English and defined it within the context of this dissertation.

harvest season, bondsmen were not obliged to work so that they might participate in sanctioned religious holidays (Knight 124-25). In effect, the law delineated and reiterated the paternalistic role of the Catholic Church in the lives of enslaved persons, having been designed to sequence their quotidian activities and, indeed, their lives in accordance with plantation work cycles.[34]

Catholicism was imposed upon Africans and their descendants predicated on the assertion that Christianity was a religion superior to all others, and could justify Spanish conquest and enslavement. In explicit, as well as less perceptible ways, Christian theology undergirded the system of colonial oppression (Erskine 6).[35] Midlo Hall says that in large part, "fundamental religious beliefs" determine how people see the world so that conversion to Christianity was "the ultimate device of social control" intended to alter the worldview of enslaved persons. In other words, the proselytization of the enslaved population was not born of a Christian evangelical mandate; on the contrary, it was a kind of deculturation and indoctrination meant to make *slaves* more compliant.[36] Reshaping the worldview of the enslaved was meant to foster servility, so that the *slave* would be pliable to the will of the master, indisposed to claim a subjecthood that might surpass the

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[34] Although legally not enslaved, Spanish slave codes also placed restrictions on the lives of free persons of color who were required to have a white patron. Such a legal obligation was part and parcel of a socio-economic system based on white male paternalism (Knight 124).

[35] I have adopted Neo Leo Erskine's critique of Christian theology based largely on the Jamaican context for my dissertation since what he says about the function of Christian theology is also applicable to the nineteenth century Cuban context.

[36] I generally use "enslaved person" throughout this dissertation to clarify that the status of captive Africans and their descendants under the law did not speak to the fullness of their collective or individual identities. In this instance, I use "slaves" as a necessary reference to colonial jurisprudence.

confines of the Hispano-Catholic norm. It was thought that a Christianized *slave* would be disinclined to Africa-derived ritual practice, since the process of religious conversion would detach him/her from acts of ancestral remembrance. As such, conversion to some form of Christianity was preferable to any continuation of an African religious belief system (Midlo Hall 32-34).

Despite its designated function in colonial law, the Catholic Church's sphere of influence in early nineteenth Cuba was considerably muted. Whereas in the eighteenth century the priesthood was large enough to minister to the needs of practicing Catholics, by the beginning of the 1800s it had diminished even as the enslaved and free population of color increased. Cros Sandoval states that few Cubans were willing to join the sacred orders making the priesthood increasingly Spanish so that the Catholic Church managed to have only limited influence on the growing enslaved population (21-23).

Many might presume that the Catholic Church – buttressed by colonial legislation, the demands of the planter elite, and Spanish military power – would have effectively eradicated, or at least seriously encumbered, the practice of Africa-based ritual on the island. However, this was simply not the case; given that the *cabildo* and religious festivals generated overlap where African descendants constructed, negotiated, and projected an Afro-Cuban religio-cultural subject.[37]

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[37] Jualynne Dodson uses Africa-based (and Africa-derived) in reference to religious customs, which contemporary Cuban practitioners inherited from Africans enslaved in Cuba during the colonial era. Dodson says that the New World origin of such ritual practices can be located in African cultural antecedents and are informed by an Africa-based system of epistemology (1-2).

In Cuba, co-ed religious confraternities can be traced to the late sixteenth century, when – of their own accord – Africans organized in *cabildos* (Cros Sandoval).[38] White slave owners envisioned the *cabildo* as a deterrent to rebellion, since the enslaved were encouraged to organize (and often did) according to ethnic-linguistic origin. It was thought that the tensions inherent in slave societies could be mitigated if blacks were granted some measure of autonomy (Childs 106). Although *cabildos* permitted non-Africans to join, persons of color born in Cuba were granted limited rights within these organizations since African-born leadership was preferred (Childs 108). Indeed, the predilection for leaders born on African soil represented the socio-cultural inverse of colonial society, since the African held the most privileged position as a purveyor of ritual practice.

Cabildos had certain functions; these brotherhoods raised funds to purchase the freedom of enslaved members (known as *cofrades*) buried the departed, and participated in religious festivals with drumming, dance, and pageantry (Ortiz, Los cabildos y la fiesta 7-8). *Congas* and *comparsas* were performative street processions that the *cabildos* organized on Church sanctioned religious holidays, which were carefully veiled celebrations of African divine spirits and ancestors (Cros Sandoval 53). Such associations provided enslaved and free people of color a space wherein they might produce new sacred practices and re-root religious traditions that were informed by an Africa-

[38] In the eighteenth century, the Spanish colonial government recognized the legal right of African and African descended people to associate in brotherhoods and sought to exploit these organizations to control the subject population in urban areas (Ortiz, Los cabildos y la fiesta 3).

based spirituality, hence perpetuating shared social and religio-cultural values. Moreover, the cult of the Virgin Mary and the saints – then prominent in Western European Christianity – created a space within the *cabildo* for African-born captives and their Cuban descendants to appropriate Catholic religious figures (and images) for the observance of Africa-based sacred practices (Cros Sandoval 41, 53).[39]

In this way, the proselytization of people of African descent failed to irreversibly transform the religio-cultural worldview of subject populations, thus leaving an opening for an authority system over which Europeans had little control (Midlo Hall 34). Church sanctioned religious holidays and the *cabildo* constituted contact zones where persons of African descent maintained ongoing dialogue and exchange with Hispano-Catholic culture, adopted outside cultural practices, and negotiated boundaries in order to assure the continued existence of an African spiritual heritage, even while facilitating the construction of an Afro-Cuban religio-cultural subject that did not emerge from the Hispano-Catholic norm. It is my proposition that Afro-Cuban writers produced such processes of transculturation in the Hispanic literature of colonial nineteenth century Cuba.

1.4 Transculturating the Colonial Text

In Transculturación narrativa en América Latina (1982) Ángel Rama – who popularized transculturation in Latin America – embraces Ortiz's concept as a

[39] Although Spain did not institute a legal apparatus to prosecute practitioners of Africa-derived spiritual practice, their rituals were anxiously viewed as plausible sources of social unrest and sedition (Palmié 225, 228-29).

constructive means for the study of Latin American culture because it acknowledges that not only the colonized suffered uprooting and loss in the process of cultural production. Those that were acted upon also induced alterations in the culture of the colonizer as well as in Metropolitan society itself (39).

For Rama transculturation in the Latin American narrative is an enduring and ongoing process that began with the initial contact between Spain and indigenous peoples and came to take on new dimensions in the twentieth century. Unlike Mary Louise Pratt, Rama argues that transculturation is not limited to the specific historical conditions of the colonial context.[40] He explains its development in the Latin American narrative as a twentieth century occurrence involving direct contact between regional cultures and modernization that resulted in losses, selectiveness, rediscoveries and integrations. Rama understands these concomitant operations as the height of the creative process which are themselves resolved within a general restructuring of the cultural system (38-42).

Moreover, the literary record supports Rama's idea of literary transculturation as a reflection of colonial encounters between the dominant group and subjugated persons throughout the history of Latin America. Nonetheless, I am partial to Pratt's contention that transculturation is most

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[40] Cuban poet Nancy Morejón maintains that the poetry of Nicolás Guillén, *Motivos del son* (1930) *Sóngoro Cosongo* (1931), *West Indies Ltd.* (1934) and *El son entero* (1947) not only illustrate and dissect the various elements of transculturation but that it imparts lyrical voice to the very process of transculturation. Although he did not call it *transculturación*, Guillén identified the first "symptoms" of cultural amalgamation towards the end of the eighteenth and the dawn of the nineteenth centuries in Cuba (16, 36).

relevant to the colonial situation. The socio-historical conditions of the colonial environment constitute a situation much unlike postcolonial Latin American societies. To be precise, the imposition of a dehumanizing racial hierarchy on African descendant subjects, their prolonged enslavement and proselytization at the hands of the Catholic Church (as the designated colonial religious institution) imposed much greater constraints on their possibilities for cultural production.

As I have previously discussed, transculturation is both process and product. It is a site of contestation and exchange, asymmetrical dialogue and clashes between disparate cultural groups who were brought into significantly disproportionate relations of power. In due course, these ongoing confrontations, interactions and struggles produced new cultural forms in colonial places. Although subordinated groups do not control what emanates from the dominant culture, they do actively determine what they absorb into their own cultures and how they choose to use it (Pratt 6). This sort of selective absorption and use of outside cultural materials was an ever-present component of Cuban colonial society. The implication is that plantation slavery, Spanish colonization, and compulsory conversion to Christianity – which imposed serious limits on African and African descendant self-expression – did not prevent the oppressed from being active producers of New World culture.

Pratt's notion of "intercultural texts" serves as my point of departure since it refers to literature produced under extraordinary circumstances either by the colonizer or by colonized subjects otherwise thought to be powerless (4). To make sense of such texts, she adopts a "contact perspective" because like

religion or oral traditions that emerged in the contact zone, colonial writing is defined by the exceptional disparities within colonial societies, the regular contact, interpersonal relations, asymmetrical exchange of ideas and the boundary marking of colonial subjects. This "contact perspective" underscores that the colonized were highly innovative in their production of cultural forms. It is also recognition that colonial literature is the product of reciprocity in which "interlocking understandings and practices" forge the production of the text (7). Such an approach is meaningful to my dissertation because it moves beyond the notion of uncontested white domination of early nineteenth century literary discourse. This method suggests that texts produced by African descendant writers articulated a cultural expression that was neither purely African nor Spanish. The intercultural text, then, makes a selective and purposeful use of cultural practices from the dominant group in order to create space for the representation of Afro-Cuban identity.

The focal point of Pratt's book is an analysis of eighteenth and nineteenth century travel writing produced by European journeyers roving throughout Africa and Latin America.[41] It is intended as a study of genre and a critique of the ideology it represented (9). Pratt reads travel writing as texts that were constructed in dialogue, negotiation, and conflict with local customs and autochthonous forms of self-knowledge (11, 135). As such, she disturbs, even deconstructs, the monologic notion of the all-seeing male-personed imperial eye

[41] Pratt writes extensively about German Alexander von Humboldt whose wealth enabled him to travel extensively and independently throughout Spanish America and Cuba. Humboldt published a copious collection of travel journals, political essays and scientific treatises (115, 119).

capable of surveying the land, people and customs, which will be rewritten, restructured and possessed.

Pratt defines "autoethnographic expression" in terms of colonial writings that involve at least partial collaboration with the colonizer and use the discursive tools of the dominant group to authoritatively self-represent. These writings were addressed to both metropolitan audiences and literate members of the writers' own group, and undeniably, they were received and comprehended in different ways by each readership (7). Although she coins the language of "autoethnographic expression" her near exclusive focus on white writers and European modes of representation in this book does not give due consideration to the ways in which colonized persons appropriated ostensibly European literary formats to self-represent.

My conception of transculturated colonial literature differs from Pratt's idea of "intercultural texts" in a number of ways. I maintain that the Afro-Cuban transcultural text privileges racial and religious representations, acknowledges and dialogues with white literary discourse, and lends itself to divergent even contradictory readings. Such transcultural texts construct African descendant subjectivity within a predominately white Hispanic format and are read by a literate colonial elite as well as non-literate African descendant interlocutors, both, who lay claim to the texts.[42]

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[42] My theory about "African descendant subjectivity" originated with close readings of Manzano and Plácido's colonial literature. By "African descendant subjectivity", I am referring to the construction of a representative self that manifests an Afro-Cuban religio-cultural paradigm and performs what I have termed, "the will to subject". Such a frame of reference emerges within the colonial contact zone drawing upon the cultural capital of the enslaved and freeborn African

Throughout the 1800s literature was subject to the scrutiny of colonial censors, which inflicted severe limitations on what could be published in Cuba. While certain books and poetry were disseminated illicitly, or not at all, censorship did manage to confine what writers of color, or anyone else for that matter, could bring to press.[43] Moreover, the white Cuban aesthetic delimited and defined the genres and the subject matter that were deemed palatable and fashionable to their readership. Afro-Cuban texts were subjected to twin pressures; the foremost of these resulting from the inherent dangers of writing in a contact zone as well as the constraints emanating from a fledging, though important, white literati. These external pressures or strains created, even cultivated, palpable tensions within the text. I believe that these writings should be read for what appear to be contradictory statements existing on multiple planes as a way of assessing the function of conventional as well as unorthodox imagery. Thus, the question at hand: How does transculturated colonial literature take form and how might understanding it make Afro-Cuban representations of spirituality and race readable?

For early nineteenth century white Cuban writers, literature was tantamount with Enlightenment thought, it was purported to be a conduit for elite cultural values as well as a genuine means to economic and social progress.

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descendant communities. It is my contention that although Afro-Caribbean characters in colonial literature may not always exercise agency, they do reflect a "will to subject".

[43] The colonial government censored anti-slavery works; refusing them publication so that they did not appear in print until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when enslaved persons were no longer considered an imminent threat to the white order (Luis, Literary Bondage 1, 3).

Given that music and the fine arts were the almost exclusive domain of persons of color, literature was perceived as the last bastion of Hispanic culture, thought to be untainted by a black presence (Esténger, ed. 94).[44]

All the same, the budding contributions of published poets of color disturbed this rather delimited notion of literature. Their poetic and narrative portrayals of Africa-derived spirituality and race constituted modes of representation that had not yet emerged in nineteenth century Hispanic literature. By presenting affirmative descriptions of Africa-based spirituality as a means to otherworldly revelation, an occasion for the remembrance of the dead and instances of collective ritual activity, Cuban writers of color called into question, even delegitimated, the institutional authority of the Catholic Church. In such a context, representations of Afro-Cuban ritual practice functioned as an identity marker as well as an instrument of subversion within the text. At the same time, Afro-Cuban writings on race cast serious doubts on colonial assertions of white superiority by creating space for the celebratory depiction of black and mulatto women as aesthetically desirable and morally upright characters. The poetic and narrative depictions of religion and race identify and critique the dominant gaze as an instrument of violence against collective Afro-Cuban spirituality and the dark body.

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[44] On a trip to Cuba in 1839, Spanish traveler Jacinto de Salas y Quiroga, wrote that "el verdadero termómetro de la civilización actual e inmediata es el estado de sus letras" ("the true thermometer of civilization, both present and immediate is the state of her letters"). From this vantage point, the gleaming light of literature fostered possibilities for true learning, for where there is much literature there is much knowledge, so that the dissemination of literature was thought to be a means to inculcate *las masas* in elite notions of virtue (Bueno, ed. Acerca de Plácido 31).

Such racial and religious representations engage the aesthetic norms and ideological rationale of the Hispanic text by alluding to the presence of an African descendant subject position that posits an atypical cultural and political function for Cuban literature. The poems, narratives, letters and testimony analyzed in this dissertation are self-dissembling texts existing within an intervening space, situated on the periphery but palatable to a metropolitan readership. The negotiations inside the text and reader response enable transculturation, inviting two opposing but equally plausible interpretations as to play a game of hide and seek with the reader. This is the "intercultural" nature of writing in the contact zone in that symbols and images may mean one thing to a white Catholic audience even as they allude to something altogether different for the African descendant interlocutor.

Reader response is decisive in the transculturation of colonial literature since cultural competency and socio-economic positionality play a vital role in the meaning of literature. Naturally, there is an active affiliation between writers and the cultural communities that they belong to or partake in. Such a relationship implies conditions of the contact zone – dialogue and mutual exchange – since the poet writes for an "implicit interlocutor" as well as a larger community of readers (Williams 4). Literate persons constituted only a fraction of the population in early nineteenth century Cuba (Esténger, ed. 77-80). Although there was an artistic-literary population of color who could read and write, the majority of those consuming the printed word were members of the white propertied order. This means that the greater part of the African descendant

population, who did not read and write, became acquainted with Afro-Cuban poetry through the recitation and extemporization of verse.[45]

Such a circumstance makes for at least two different types of audiences; the white elite positioned as the mainstream audience and the African descendant individual as an "implicit interlocutor". Each has distinguishing cultural competencies, draws upon disparate sources of cultural capital and employs different ways of relating to the texts. As sites of contestation, transculturated literature contends with the dual strains of colonial censorship and the dominant aesthetic so that it may speak to two readers at once, corresponds to apparently incompatible systems of religious practice and reiterates as well as critiques pervasive racial stereotypes. The silences, *double entendre*, repetitions, and emphasis on the perspectival enables audiences to construct differing even incongruous interpretations of the same text, since making sense of it is an inherently ideological practice.

The participation of African descendant writers in early nineteenth century Cuban letters disturbed prevailing notions of literature as a purveyor of Hispano-Catholic values and as the exclusive cultural patrimony of white audiences. Afro-Cuban racial and religious representations transformed Hispanic literature into a site of contestation since transculturation undermined rampant claims to white

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[45] Samuel Feijoo in El negro en la literatura folklórica cubana credits both Catholic religious songs and the *cabildo* songs of enslaved Afro-descendants as the birthplace of what he terms *un nuevo idioma poético*. Feijoo says that in the nineteenth century the rhythms, dances and songs of enslaved peoples – which had already been transculturated – were co-opted for white Cuban minstrel shows known as *el teatro popular Bufo Cubano* and also found expression in literary forms such as Cirilo Villaverde's novel Cecilia Valdés and Anselmo Suárez y Romero's Francisco (20-25).

racial superiority and delegitimated the institutional authority of the Catholic Church. Literature was subjected to the dual tensions of colonial censorship and the strictures of a white aesthetic. As a consequence, transculturated texts reflect the exchanges, asymmetrical dialogue, clashes, and imbrications of Cuban colonial slave society while inviting opposing but conceivable interpretations by audiences with different cultural capitals.

CHAPTER TWO

Present but Unseen: Catholicism and African descendant Spirituality in the Poetry and Slave Narrative of Juan Francisco Manzano

> Yo soy católico a mi manera...
> —— a Cuban saying

1.1 Introduction

Critics have frequently described Juan Francisco Manzano as the archetypical slave, a mulatto poet whose learning to read and write was characteristic of an affinity for Hispano-Catholic cultural values. Manzano's publication of neoclassical poetry has been interpreted as an unapologetic act of cultural assimilation disassociating him from blacks on the plantation while also negating an African cultural frame of reference. Such criticism of Manzano's cultural identity, however, does not assess the image of the Christianized slave, as a leitmotif in the slave narrative genre, and it says nothing of the portrayal of African descendant ritual practice in his work.

Miriam DeCosta-Willis casts Manzano as a "tragic mulatto", a severely injured personality whose racial and cultural *in-betweeness* made him a social misfit in nineteenth century Cuban slave society. DeCosta says that Manzano was denied membership in white literary circles even though he had no roots in the African community (9,11). In her view, Manzano was the quintessential victim of the colonial slave system, a deculturated and miscegenated house servant, whose espousal of Hispano-Catholic values rendered him a doubly

Othered outsider. DeCosta argues that by carrying the young Manzano to French operas and Catholic mass, his owners created a marginal person whose sense of social privilege was not recognized by the larger society. In this way, she sees Manzano's publication of Hispanic literature as a futile act of social whitening (9-10).

According to William Luis, Manzano's written account of his life demonstrates that African oral traditions functioned as his original cultural background ("Oralidad y escritura" 34, 40). Even still, Luis avers that by embracing Western literacy and the conventions of Hispanic literature; Manzano abandoned his African heritage as a mandatory concession to the dominant cultural aesthetic (Luis, Literary Bondage 65). On the other hand, Jerome Branch claims that Manzano's literature did not represent a negation of an African cultural heritage since the poet never had such a frame of reference to begin with (82).

Such analyses recognize Hispanic culture as a point of departure, thus discarding the prospect that Manzano's literature might portray an Africa-derived cultural identity. What is more, the aforementioned critics largely neglect the representation of religion and spirituality in Manzano's body of work, a silence that I will correct in this chapter. My analysis of Manzano's poems, life narrative and letters to Domingo del Monte, aims to identify the frequently obscured encounters, interstices, overlap and dialogue between Spanish Catholic and African descendant cultures. I propose that Manzano's self-representative

portrayal of Africa-based ritual transculturated an otherwise normative religious persona.

1.2 Catholicism and the Biblical Narrative in Manzano's Poetry and Slave Narrative

Published in 1831 while Manzano was still an enslaved writer, "Oda a la religión", ("Ode to the Religion") is an unmediated plea to God the Father for relief, redemption and escape from a sinful world through spiritual rapture. It is both an ode and a jeremiad paying homage to the Christian faith even as it laments and problematizes the social condition of the poetic voice. In the first stanza, the lyrical voice lifts his tender soul and weeping face to God who raises him up from the earth for a sacred and intimate encounter with the divine. The poet writes; "Cuando triste levanto / el alma tierna, do el amor reposa / y con vista llorosa / a Dios me elevo desde el bajo suelo / rápido subo en alentado vuelo", ("When sad I raise / the tender soul where love rests / and with tearful visage / to God I am lifted from the lowly earth / swiftly I rise in cherished flight") (Luis, ed. 140). As is common in neoclassical verse, the poem places emphasis on God the Father as Redeemer and Judge of all mankind. By flying the poetic voice draws near to the divine father figure who he addresses as "<<¡Oh Padre! Oh ser supremo! / ¡Grande, Inmenso, Eternal, Omnipotente!>>" ("Oh, Father, Oh Supreme Being!" / Great, Immense, Eternal, Omnipotent) (Luis, ed. 141).[46] *La sangre teñida del cordero* appears to allude to the New Testament figure of Jesus Christ whose blood sacrifice makes divine redemption possible (Luis, ed.

[46] All translations in this dissertation are mine, unless otherwise noted.

141). Although the poetic voice's plea is to God the Father, it is the blood sacrifice of the Lamb, Jesus Christ, that makes human contact with God possible.

The highly personal nature of this stanza is palpable. Such unvarnished approach to God does not reflect either Catholic dogma or Africa-based spirituality. Cros Sandoval explains that in Catholicism and in Yoruba-based religion (which is informed by traditional African religious belief systems) the Supreme Being is the source of all power in the universe so that the devoted gain access to that power through spiritual entities that act as mediators. In Catholicism these intermediaries are manifested as saints and as different paths to the Virgin Mary, while Yoruba-based religion identifies them as *orichas* or divine spirits (41). Thus, the poetic voice's encounter with God – which is articulated in the language of Christianity – neither reflects Catholic orthodoxy or Africa-based spirituality. Instead, this direct appeal to God is made possible by way of divine ecstasy and can be understood within the broader context of Christianity since such spiritual intimacy with God the Father is analogous to the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament.

Like Manzano's poem, José María Heredia's "A la religión" is safely perched within discursive normativity displaying a profound deference for Catholicism as the official religion of colonial society. Both are neoclassical poems that make use of apostrophe to laud the Catholic faith, recognize the Christ figure as the suffering Redeemer of humankind, depict God the Father as the Maker and the Judge of all that exists as well as formulate personal appeals

to God. Manzano and Heredia's poems are also alike given their portrayal of flight as a means to draw near to the divine and the unambiguous condemnation of tyranny. Nonetheless, the difference in these contemporary texts lies in their positionality and in the nature of their appeal to God. Heredia's lyrical voice doubles as a candid, unapologetic and forceful denunciation of the Spanish Inquisition. He writes; ¡Bárbara Inquisición! Cueva de horrores, ... / Cuántas víctimas ¡ay! atormentadas / En tu infernal abismo," ("Barbaric Inquisition! Cave of horrors, ... / How many tormented victims / In your infernal abyss") (Augier, ed. 206). In contrast to this fiery denunciation, Manzano's poem, not unlike "Treinta años" and "Desesperación" is not written from a position of strength but weakness. Manzano's poetic self speaks elusively of an indescribable pain in polite language.

Neoclassicism provides the enslaved poet space in the public transcript with which to construct a poetic voice that both references and obscures the true self at the same time. For Manzano, this was a necessary obfuscation, a way to grin and bear oppression and racial violence without losing his privileged access to literary society through government censorship. With the exception of the unedited poem "La esclava ausente", this tendency to be self-referencing but not self-representative was common in all the poetry he wrote prior to 1835. Both Manzano and Heredia's poems reflect their perspective socio-economic position. Manzano's poetic voice experiences ecstasy with God as a means of escape from a world gone astray, while Heredia's text exalts Catholicism only to condemn the prosecutorial politicization of the religion in the final stanzas.

In "Oda a la religión", as in all his other published poems, there is no explicit mention of slavery. Instead, divine rapture permits the poetic voice to leave the idle pursuits of life behind: "olvida los fugaces devaneos / y sólo a Dios consagra sus deseos" ("forget the idle pursuits / and to God alone consecrate your desires") (Luis, ed. 141). If indeed this poem is read as a self-reflexive text then Charles Long's work on African-American religious experience has implications for my reading. For Long, the experience of God transforms and empowers the oppressed so that they do not acquiesce completely the norms of the dominant society and culture (180). For the enslaved and colonized this is more than mere escapism it is veritable transcendence, access to a different, indeed a higher awareness. It is my contention that the poetic voice in "Oda a la religión", struggles to transcend his unstated but no less real enslavement. For this afflicted character, the Christian religion is: "Consuelo siempre dulce al desgraciado" ("Eternally sweet consolation for an ill-fated soul") (Luis, ed. 141). The poem continues; "Y en éxtasis profundo / el alma siento de mi cuerpo huyendo / que a su Hacedor rindiendo / veneración y amor, del vano mundo", ("And in deep ecstasy / I feel my soul fleeing my body / to its Maker surrendering / adoration and love, of this futile world") (Luis, ed. 141). In short, the poetic voice longs to escape his wretched earthly condition by experiencing a profound rapture with his Maker.

In a sudden change of disposition, the lyrical voice asks; "¿Porqué me dejas do el pecado nace / y no hasta ti me llevas...?", ("Why do you leave me where sin is born / instead of carrying me to where you are?") (Luis, ed. 143).

These verses draw heavily on the Christian tradition, depicting the world as a place that spawns sin. In this ode, sin could very well function as a metaphor for the abuse, beatings and other indignities of plantation slavery. The aforesaid verses from the penultimate stanza and this verse, "el pueblo de Israel por ti lloraba" ("the people of Israel cried out for you") suggests that Manzano employed Christian scripture as a way to speak to the contemporary experiences of enslaved Africans and their Cuban born descendants (Luis, ed. 141).

The biblical narrative serves to construct a historical and religious parallel between the experience of captive and oppressed African descendants in nineteenth century Cuba and the slavery of the Hebrews in the ancient world. This compelling analogy was not uncommon among enslaved peoples who had been exposed to Christianity and the Bible.[47] As God was able and willing to deliver the people of Israel from unjust bondage in Egypt, he would also be able to free Afro-descendants from exploitation and slavery in Cuba. What Dodson calls the "total power" of Creator is on display in this narrative from the book of Exod. 11: 9-10 where God sends disastrous plagues on Egypt compelling Pharaoh to let the people of Israel go (53). Manzano alludes to this passage where the Almighty moves earth, fire and sea to assure the liberty of his downtrodden people: "Hoy pues tu voz nos guía / al magnífico pórtico del cielo"

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[47] In the antebellum United States enslaved African descendants often linked the slavery and the divine deliverance of the ancient Israelites to their own plight. Lawrence Levine says that African American spirituals were the product of "improvisational communal consciousness" that forged new songs from "pre-existing bits of old songs" with novel tunes and lyrics. In this way they made use of what they knew of Old Testament accounts to construct a narrative about their own liberation (23, 29).

("Today your voice guides us / to the magnificent heavenly colonnade") (Luis, ed. 142).

This act of divine guidance is not situated in the distant past but the colonial present. The first person poetic voice becomes the first person plural suggesting that the Almighty will lead the Afro-Cuban enslaved community out of bondage much in the same way that he delivered Israel, his chosen people. Embedded into this narrative, enslaved African descendants become a divinely chosen people. God himself challenges their status as the substratum of colonial society so that deliverance comes by his hand not theirs. Within the text, the poet retrieves the past and situates people of African ancestry in historical space not unlike that of the ancient Hebrews. The voice of the God of the Hebrews becomes a celestial guide that leads the enslaved in Cuba to heaven's door. The historical memory and oppression of persons of African descent are transposed on the biblical texts, so that these ancient narratives vindicate and proffer hope to the poet and to those enslaved in Cuba during his lifetime.

In this very same line of thought, Erskine writes about Jamaican slavery and oppression:

> The good news that biblical religion announces is that God's freedom breaks the power of bondage and offers to oppressed humanity the possibility to participate in their freedom. The witness of scripture indicates that freedom must challenge human bondage in all its forms (23).

For those who have been held captive and systematically oppressed the good news of the biblical narrative is God's freedom from man's bondage. If the Bible and Christianity are to be important to Afro-descendants in Cuba or elsewhere in the Diaspora, it must stand in clear opposition to all forms of what Erskine terms

"unfreedom", however they are manifested. It is clear that Catholicism provided Manzano social acceptance in white colonial society given that it was the official religion. However, it may also be true that he drew upon its narratives to confront the inherent contradictions of his society; namely that some persons were free from birth while others were deemed to be slaves for life.

As in "Oda a la religión" Manzano's lyrical voice in "A Jesús en la cruz" is intimately familiar with the biblical narrative and the self-sacrifice of the Christ figure.[48] The poem lies somewhere between the exuberant worship of Jesus as a noble Redeemer and a disquieting query about his reluctance to save himself from crucifixion. Within the poem Old Testament prophecy is fulfilled in the execution of Jesus Christ who makes himself a lowly lamb to be slaughtered. He perishes for an ungrateful and wretched people saving them from the dreadful grip of perpetual and eternal death: "Así cuando llena a el mundo todo. / Con tu muerte y pasión fue redimido, / El hombre de las garras arrancado / Del infernal poder ya no es perdido:" ("In that way the whole world is filled. / By your death and passion was redeemed, / Man from the claws snatched / Of hellish power he is no longer lost") (Azougarh, ed. 220). These verses are grounded in the biblical tradition that depicts the defenselessness of humankind before the power and lure of wrongdoing. With eternal retribution Providence punishes the disobedient that defy God's will. Only the blood sacrifice of the Christ figure that "Sanóse en la piscina de su sangre" ("Heals in the pool of his blood") can redeem a lost world

[48] This poem is cited from Abdeslam Azougarh's edition. It was published in 1841 and is not found in William Luis' collection.

(Azougarh, ed. 220). With evangelistic overtones, the suffering Messiah becomes the hope of the entire world.

On the other hand, this poem takes on another level of complexity because the poetic voice juxtaposes the common place of exalted praise for the Christ figure (as also seen in Heredia's poem) with a questioning about the need of the Messiah to suffer in order to bring about divine redemption.

> ¡Y porque queda piedra sobre piedra
> Cuando te privan del vital aliento!...
> ¡Por qué la muerte tu piedad no arredra
> Cuando se emplaza tan terrible intento!...
> ¡Por qué dócil y fácil cual la yedra
> A quien arrolla en su tortura el viento,
> Te dejas abatir de gente impía
> A quien solo tu aliento abrasaría! (Azougarh, ed. 220)

For Manzano's poetic voice, Christ's disinclination to preserve himself is unfathomable. Why would such a divinely powerful figure allow self to be destroyed for an ungrateful and inferior lot? The poetic voice questions the mission of the Christ figure asking why he was crucified: "¿Por bien del hombre y a la cruz subistes? / ¿Para qué interrogar?" ("Did you rise to the cross for the good of mankind? / But why question?") (Azougarh, ed. 219). His query may be a rhetorical one since it is immediately recanted insinuating that the poet, although by that time an *emancipado*, is treading lightly as not to be seen as blasphemous.

In the poem both humankind and the "Redeemer of the Universe," are vulnerable and defenseless. Manzano introduces a more pronounced undertone in this poem than in "Oda a la religión." Whereas "Oda a la religión" makes a plea to God the Father to be rescued from a sinful world, "A Jesús en la cruz"

speaks directly to and questions both God the Father and the Son. The poem reads; "Y en Ígneo Trono su clemencia santa! / ¿Y porqué me llenas de amargura tanta?" ("And on the Igneous Throne your holy mercy! / And why do you fill me with such bitterness?") (Azougarh, ed. 219). These two verses stand in apparent contradiction to one another. The poetic voice has a conflicting relationship with the Almighty. He humbly recognizes the incalculable immensity of God's power but is troubled, even perplexed, that God would allow such suffering in the world. Such discomfort extends to the poetic voice himself, who accuses a merciful God perched on a celestial throne of filling his existence with bitterness. In this way, the mercy of the Almighty God is called into question.

These questions about the true extent of God's mercy and about Jesus' unwillingness to defend self from death could be seen as uncharacteristic of the author. In the slave narrative Manzano writes; "desde mi infansia mis directores me enseñaron a amar y temer a Dios," ("from my infancy my teachers taught me to love and to fear God") (Luis, ed. 318).[49] This statement is very much in line with the poet's representation of his own religious devotion in *la historia de mi vida*. Yet, there is another possible explanation. Published in 1841, "A Jesús en la cruz" is a post-manumission poem representing a significant shift in Manzano's self image. Indeed, this poem may reflect a new resolve to defend self from wanton physical and emotional abuse. A number of passages in *la historia de mi vida* suggest as much.

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[49] Considering the exceptional conditions in which they published, I have preferred not to use (sic) to indicate the orthographical errors in Manzano and Plácido's literature.

On a number of different occasions within the text Manzano speaks to a continual transformation in his self-image where the Christ figure becomes a metaphor for his own suffering:

> amarra mis manos se atan como las de Jesucristo se me carga y meto los pies en las dos aberturas qe. tiene también mís pies se atan ¡oh Dios! corramos un velo pr. el resto de esta exena mi sangre se ha derramado yo perdí el sentido... (Luis, ed. 321)

The enslaved person comes to occupy a space similar to that of the crucified Savior because he is made to suffer devastating abuse like Jesus Christ. He is portrayed as good while his mistress and overseers are seen as cruel and merciless. Manzano, the enslaved protagonist, depicts himself as the innocent victim of unprovoked abuse at the hands of his white slave mistress and overseers. In that way he is a likely candidate for God's redemption within the Christian belief system since he is the victim of unjust suffering.

This self-conversion is evidenced when Manzano writes about his mother's attempt to spare him yet another whipping at the hands of the overseers.

> Sor. Silbestre qe. era el nombre del joben malloral este condusiendome pa. el sepo se encontró con mi madre qe. siguiendo los impulsos de su corazon vino a acabar de colmar de mis infortunios ella al berme quiso preguntarme qe. abia hecho cuando el malloral imponiendole silensio se lo quiso estorbar [...] lebanto la mano y dió a mi madre con el manatí este golpe lo sentí mi corazon dar un grito y convertirme de manso cordero en un leon todo fue una cosa... y me le tiré en sima con dientes y manos cuantas patadas manatiazos y de mas golpes qe. llebé se puede considerar y mi madre y yo fuimos condusidos y puesto en un mismo lugar... (Luis, ed. 311-12)

In this very telling passage Manzano's mother tries to shield her son from further abuse but the overseer rebukes her for interfering in the punishment he has chosen to mete out. Manzano explains that as one of the domestic enslaved persons his mother was not subjected to physical abuse before the death of her

husband Toribio de Castro. The intensity of his immediate and violent reaction can be explained by his desire to be his mother's protector and in that way to stand in for his deceased father. It should also be noted that at this point in his life Manzano was a young male person that was coming of age and as a result felt a clear sense of responsibility for the defense of his widowed mother and his younger brothers Florensio and Fernando.[50]

In the above-cited passage, Manzano does not compare himself favorably to the Christ figure suggesting instead that a personal metamorphosis has taken place. Manzano has refused to acquiesce the beating of his mother being transformed "de manso cordero en un leon" ("from meek lamb into a lion"). By refusing silence, deference to the power of the overseer, or fear, Manzano represents the African descended self as an active subject not a defenseless lamb. Taking these two passages into consideration I am able to account for Manzano's incredulity regarding the humility and long suffering of Jesus as depicted in "A Jesús en la cruz". The poet may have been asking himself why he had assumed the role of the lamb and endured so much abuse for so many years.

In *la historia de mi vida* after the episode where he is accused of stealing a castrated rooster, Manzano resolves not to submit to the physical abuse he has been subjected to all his life. Concerning this change in his thinking he remarks:

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[50] I have chosen not to standardize Manzano's spelling of his brother's name Florensio. By preserving his spelling my intention is to provide space for the writer to speak for himself, his family and his cultural community.

> Yo conosia las barias actitudes de mi vida y no duda de lo qe. me iva a suseder vi venir al mayoral y no tenia el animo ya pa. aguantar azotes, me escapé pr. la esparda del jardin y corri tanto... (Luis, ed. 329-30)

This is a pivotal moment in Manzano's slave narrative. The poet who has only known bondage, humiliation and abuse since birth decisively recognized his own value as a human being and choose to resist, either by coming to blows with his oppressors or by fleeing danger to protect his own welfare. Manzano throws off this earlier association with the meek and maltreated Lamb of God and is converted into the lion, the tiger, or the gravest beast imaginable. In effect, he became determined to protect and defend self in a way that the plantation slavery system did not permit. The violence of self-defense makes Manzano an active subject. His mistress and overseers will no longer be able to act upon him without considering the possibility of a swift and violent response.

"La esclava ausente" can be categorized both as an anti-slavery and a religious-themed poem. Among Manzano's religious poetry, "La esclava ausente" stands apart as the only one that constructs a female poetic voice. Although the portrayal of an enslaved female persona presents numerous possible readings, the uniqueness of this poem has also led some critics to question its authorship.

Adriana Lewis Galanes muses that Manzano may have adopted a feminine voice in "La esclava ausente" for dramatic effect; even still, she has reservations about attributing the poem to Manzano. Galanes posits that this poem may have been written by a woman in love with Manzano or by someone else and later confused with his work (102-03). Even so, Abdeslam Azougarh clears up questions about the poem's authorship demonstrating that Manzano

indeed wrote this poem and dated it 1823. According to Azougarh "La esclava ausente" formed part of a dossier of writings that Delmonte passed to Madden to be published in England, although, for unknown reasons, Madden choose not to publish it with the poet's slave narrative (36-37).

By constructing a subject that is gendered female, the poet brings questions of race, gender, sexuality, and the white male domination of the African descended female body into the scope of our discussion on religion. This poem's subject matter necessitates that we consider how the system of plantation slavery utilized the bodies of enslaved African-descendant women. Like all enslaved people, female bodies were considered a market commodity that were bought and sold to be used for domestic and field labor. While their purchase was primarily intended to meet labor demands, African and African descendant women were also compelled to fulfill white male sexual desire. Although the female poetic voice in this poem sheds light on the cross section between gender, race and the domination and exploitation of female bodies, religion is the focus of my analysis here.

By law, masters could dispose of the bodies of enslaved African and Afro-Cuban women for domestic or field labor production, sexual reproduction with an enslaved male to grow the population or as a commodity to be bought and sold. Spanish slave law allowed enslaved men to marry the women of their choice and mandated the compulsory manumission of enslaved women that had been sexually violated by their masters or had been used for prostitution (Shepherd,

ed. 43). In this way, the law intended to safeguard the whiteness of the colonies by preventing racial miscegenation.

Their legal status as wives notwithstanding; enslaved women were subjected to and had little protection from the sexual advances and abuse of their white male masters (Shepherd, ed. 59). Shepherd explains that white male dominated plantation societies stereotyped women of African ancestry as "loose, immoral and promiscuous" and so did not regard the unsolicited and forced sexual acts white men committed against them to be rape (59). Then again, the legal act of penalizing white slave masters by freeing their enslaved female servants was a tacit recognition of white male guilt. White male slave owners, not African descendant women, were the true source of the problem, the culprits of sexual exploitation and abuse.

"La esclava ausente" provides space for the enslaved African descendant female poetic voice to articulate her right to love and marry her lawfully appropriate mate. She directs her appeal and her complaint to the white male slave master, who acts as a silent interlocutor, and to God the Father. The plea is predicated on the assertion that the law should not empower one person to dominate the body of another nor to preclude them from exercising the freedom to love whomever they choose. As in Manzano's other poems that project a male lyrical voice, the enslaved female subject speaks in a neoclassical style:

> Pues todos los placeres se acibaran
> Cuando la dulce libertad no media...
> ¿Qué pudo un juramento firme, eterno?
> ¿Qué la constancia y fe; qué la firmeza
> Si de un poder *el bárbaro precepto*
> Tenaz hoy burla todas tus promesas? (original emphasis, Azougarh, ed. 171)

The body of the enslaved female persona is the site of dispute between two male persons one whom she has chosen as a husband and another who legally owns her and may dispose of her as he wills. For that reason, her complaint addresses the injustice of the law as *el bárbaro precepto* that makes her the chattel of the white male master who seeks to control and dominate the African descendant female body. To be property of another is to be – as Manzano points out in a letter to Delmonte – *un ser muerto*, a dead being in the eyes of the master (Luis, ed. 125).

The particular nature of the enslaved female character's oppression is unlike that of the self-reflexive male lyrical subject depicted in Manzano's other work. This text recognizes that the oppression of Cuban slavery is perceived and experienced differently from the female vantage point because to be gendered female meant that the body was considered incapable of rendering the same field labor as the male body and hence it was thought to have less intrinsic value. Enslaved women suffered a double oppression. Not only were their bodies were legally deemed property but were also made to perform roles that marked them as inferior. In plantation societies the value of female bodies was tied to their biological sex so that Caribbean plantation owners often preferred to buy male persons to do heavy field labor (Shepherd, ed. 39-40).

"La esclava ausente" creates a silence around the matter of sexual abuse. This is not surprising considering the literary movement in which the poet participated, the poet's own legal status as a slave in 1823 when he wrote the poem and the general silence about the rape of enslaved women in slave

narratives.[51] It is possible, however, that the poetic voice is not referring to sexual abuse at the hands of the white male master. She says that he has kept her from being with her husband for a year. Perhaps her complaint is born of the fact that the slave master has chosen to sell her or her husband and in that way prevent her from loving her lawfully wedded mate. Whatever the case, the poem is clear that the legal power of the white male master over her body is the nature of her grievance.

Manzano's poem is traditional in that the female subject makes a plea about her natural right to love the man of her choosing. It becomes counter discursive, however, when we consider the enslaved female character's locus of enunciation. Her voice is marked not by strength but by weakness as she makes her entreaty to the white master who she refers to as "¡Dueño duro inhumano, hombre terrible!" ("Hard, inhuman possessor, terrible man!") "Mas padezco, que soy mujer al cabo / Y *como humana*, es justo me rescinta." ("But I suffer, after all I am a woman / And as a human it is right that this troubles me") (original emphasis, Luis, ed. 171, 174). Reminiscent of the poet's slave narrative, the African descended female voice inverts categories by asserting her own humanity and accusing her white master of being merciless and inhuman. Furthermore, the poetic voice brings nature and God the Father into the text to shore up her appeal.

Sí, yo amo: amar nunca fue crimen

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[51] Annette Niemtzow's "The Problematic of Self in Autobiography: The Example of the Slave Narrative" notes that the rape of enslaved women is conspicuously absent from the nearly 6,000 extant collected slave narratives creating a deafening silence about the sexual exploitation of African descended women (Sekora, ed. 106).

> El mismo Dios, amando se deleita
> Las obras que creó su sabio influjo.
> A todo, a todo dio naturaleza
> El derecho de amar: pues un principio
> Inviolable confirma este problema, ... (Luis, ed. 172)

As the enslaved female subject explains, love is a marvelous and integral part of God who is represented in the poem as the origin and source of love so that the right to love is an unassailable principle of nature.

The African descended female gendered voice participates in Enlightenment era discourses on the abolition of slavery and the rights of man. She is a person of reason intending to persuade her white male owner that she alone has natural rights over her own body, which he has denied her. Slavery, then, is antithetical to the natural rights of man. She does not make an entreaty to God, as does the male lyrical voice in "Oda a la religión" instead; she gains discursive power by comparing her love and her right to love with the love of God himself, the Creator of humankind and nature. Hence, it is God the Father – the ultimate male authority in a patriarchal colonial society – whose principles give power to the enslaved woman's appeal. *Esta débil mujer*, as she refers to herself, defies the silence imposed on enslaved women, defines her subject position and claims her personhood before a silent white male interlocutor. The objectified and enslaved female body becomes a present and active subject through the speech act (Luis, ed. 171).

For the enslaved African descended female subject the body is not a commodity to be bought and sold in order to fulfill the labor demands of plantation society. Neither is it an object to be abused for the gratification of the sexual fantasies of a white male ownership. On the contrary the physical body is

one with the nonmaterial beings – which the poet refers to as the soul – because the two are integral parts of God's creation. The female self is fused with the spiritual world and the natural law of the universe. Written in a Christian idiom, the following stanza poses questions about the extent of the master's power over the enslaved female body.

> Esta mano, este pecho, este mi todo
> Es de mi bien: mi boca lo confiesa.
> Déjame unir a él, que así lo exigen
> Religión, amor, naturaleza.
> Si la suerte te ha hecho *Señor mío*,
> ¿Son por ventura tuya mis potencias?
> Si en tu poder, hoy tienes mi albedrío,
> Esta mi vida y alma a caso es vuestra?...
> (original emphasis, Luis, ed. 172-73)

The enslaved woman problematizes and even challenges the master's domination of her body. If at the present time chance has made him the master of her will does that also mean that her life and spirit are his? In this way she acknowledges the inherent power of speech as a means to manifest that which is not so. She verbalizes and envisages a circumstance in which she may choose to whom she will give herself.

All the same, such an exercise of freedom is not possible unless the female character is liberated from slavery. Religion, love and nature (creation) compel her to be united to her rightful spouse. In this instance, religion is not depicted as an oppressive force of the colonial system; instead it functions as that which justifies the right of the enslaved female persona to exercise a modicum of freedom with regard to her body. The female poetic voice constructs and articulates an unrepentant challenge to the very foundation of the slave

society by questioning the legal authority of the white master to dehumanize and objectify the female body.

> Allá volara, si también pudiera
> A buscar en regiones más felices,
> Vida, de miseria menos llena;
> Mas que <<viva>> ordena el cielo...y vivo
> Hasta apurar el cáliz, que presentan
> *Amor y esclavitud,* cuando se unen
> Y a sufrir sus tormentos me condenan. (original emphasis, Luis, ed. 174)

Escape through flight is posited, as an imagined path to freedom but the female lyrical voice does not appear to have much hope of realizing her longing. The poem concludes with a tragic acknowledgement that the female persona is destined to imbibe a bitter fate having been made the property of another; she is condemned to an enslaved gendered body, and denied her true love.

1.3 Christianizing the Enslaved: Religious Identity and Self–Representation in *la historia de mi vida*

Juan Francisco Manzano set out to write a slave narrative that would be regarded by his white readership as a truthful account of his life. This was no easy feat for any enslaved writer since Spanish colonial societies forbade *slaves* to publish without white sponsorship. Colonial society did not regard the word of enslaved persons as trustworthy, so that white consent and endorsement were necessary for them to print literature. Moreover, slave narratives were subversive texts that could not be published in early nineteenth century Cuba. Naturally, Manzano had no control over these factors, which only complicated his undertaking.

Not long after beginning to write *la historia de mi vida*, Manzano expressed concern that as someone legally deemed a *slave* he would not be

regarded as an adequate witness to his own life. In a letter to Domingo Delmonte dated June 25, 1835 the poet writes; "He estado más de cuatro ocasiones por no seguirla. Un cuadro de tantas calamidades no parece sino un abultado protocolo de embusterías;" ("On more than four occasions I decided not to complete it. A portrait with so many calamities doesn't appear to be anything but an exaggerated heap of lies") (Luis, ed. 125). To be believed by the white reader was to have one's word recognized and validated as reliable within Hispanic lettered culture. For this reason Manzano hoped to produce a verisimilar narrative.[52] In the letter he warns Delmonte to be prepared to see "una débil criatura" ("a weak creature") and to "Consideradme un mártir;" ("Consider me a martyr") (Luis, ed. 125). This letter was written in the initial stages of his life narrative, which may explain why the author depicts himself as powerless before a violent system of exploitation. In his latter correspondence with Delmonte, and towards the end of his life narrative, Manzano rid himself of the timid, meek and injured persona; in his own words he became "the most scornful beast imaginable" (Luis, ed. 333).

In the letter dated June 25, Manzano wanted Delmonte to regard him as a martyr, someone who had been made to suffer without just cause (Luis, ed. 125).

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[52] I am referring to verisimilitude here in the sense of a text being deemed believable by its reader. For this to be the case representations need to appear realistic. In a genre such as the slave narrative such realistic depictions also afford the enslaved writer or oral informant the status of trustworthy eyewitness to self. This distinction was particularly important for enslaved and emancipated writers since the societies in which they lived did not value them as reasonable human beings. On the other hand for Neoclassicists verisimilitude was not a synonym for realism. In Ilustración y neoclasicismo en las letras españolas, Joaquín Álvarez Barrientos explains that as part of the didactic function of neoclassicism (*el docere*) imitation in poetry and literature was meant to be verisimilar in that it represented things not as they were but as they should be (195).

This early acknowledgement of weakness implies that Manzano wanted to create the impression that he was a good and moral person while his mistress and overseers were excessively cruel.[53] As a martyr he locates himself within the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament and the apostolic tradition of the New Testament, since both the prophets and apostles were subjected to public humiliation, abuse, and torture for having fulfilled the will of God. This inversion of moral categories portrays Manzano as religiously devout, and as such worthy of the reader's trust.

Jenny Sharpe describes the slave testimony as a politically motivated text whose clearly stated objective was to employ representation as a means to promote the abolition of slavery.

> The political objective of the slave testimony was to demonstrate the subjectivity of a human being whose humanity had been negated and to produce its narrator as a reliable eyewitness to the horrors of slavery. In order to fulfill its objective it was obliged to privilege the Christianized, morally upright, and obedient worker over the Africanized, ungovernable, and troublesome slave. Its teleological narrative necessary placed the slave on the path toward Christianity and freedom (xxiv).

Slave narratives were intended to be veridical documents that demonstrated the subjectivity of enslaved persons whose humanity had been denied. The horrors of slavery were not only depicted but also emphasized from the vantage point of an enslaved narrator whose trustworthiness as an eyewitness was of paramount importance. Sharpe says that for this reason, narrators who portrayed

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[53] Manzano intended to portray himself as an afflicted person even while he strived not to shame himself in the court of white public opinion. As a result he reveals a partial, incomplete and coded image of self to his reader. It was important that his readership saw him as a good and humane Christian person. At the same time he struggled not to shame himself and most of all to be believed by an elite readership that was far removed from the experience of his suffering.

themselves as faithful adherents to religious norms were regarded as having a moral character that endeared them to a white Victorian readership (xxiv).

Manzano's slave narrative portrays religion as a recurring and salient theme. The first mention of religion names Manzano's baptismal godmother, Trinidad de Zayas, with whom he spent part of his childhood thus confirming that as required by law, Manzano was baptized like all other *criollitos*, babies born to enslaved women (Luis, ed. 300-01). He was taught catechism at a young age because as a house servant's child his family had a favorable relationship with their mistress, the Marchioness Jústiz de Santa Ana.[54] Manzano was a prodigious youth who memorized the priests' homilies by heart (Luis, ed. 301). The Marchioness Doña Jústiz de Santa Ana often took him to church and to the opera providing him with early exposure to white Hispanic culture and orthodox religious tradition.

These sermons consisted of references to the Bible and to the doctrine of the Catholic Church so that Manzano gathered cultural capital, in part, from orthodox sources, giving shape to his literary and non-literary writings (Luis, ed. 41). In *la historia de mi vida* the poet employs biblical allusions, references to Catholic family heirlooms and iconography, in addition to his repeated invocation of the saints to present self as *el esclavo fiel*, the faithful Christianized slave (Luis, ed. 333).

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[54] Manzano explains the mortification that he felt when his mistress called him a "criollo". In response, he proudly refers to his baptism: "y yo sabia muy bien qe. estaba bautisado en la Habana" ("I knew very well that I was baptized in Havana") to defend himself (Luis, ed. 335).

Manzano's religious commitment can be characterized by his intense devotion to the saints. The poet relied on and appealed to the power of spiritual intermediaries and displayed extraordinary devotion when he felt powerless before the cruelty and abuse of his masters and overseers.

> ... pues llegaba hasta tal punto mi confianza qe. pidiendo al cielo suabiase mis trabajos me pasaba casi todo el tiempo de la prima noche resando sierto numero de padrenuestros y ave marias a todos los santos de la corte celestial pa. qe. el dia siguiente no me fuese tan nosibo como el que pasaba si me acontesia algunos de mis comunes y dolorosos apremios lo atribuia solamente a mi falta de devoción [] o a enojo de algun santo qe. abia hechado en olvido pa. el dia siguiente... (Luis, ed. 318)

Manzano's religious certitude was such that he prayed the Lord's Prayer and said Hail Marys to call on the Virgin and the saints to intercede on his behalf and to ameliorate the day-to-day circumstances of his life. In the passage above his interpretation of negative events seems to rely on a Catholic understanding that humankind is sinful and will suffer on earth but may appeal to the Virgin Mary or the saints to transmit their prayers to God the Father. Manzano concludes that his suffering resulted from his own religious negligence; in other words if he prayed more he would be less subjected to misfortune and mistreatment.

Manzano's faith in the power and the willingness of the saints to intercede and intervene in his personal life is clear in the passage below that picks up where the other left off.

> todavía creo qe. ellos me depararon la ocasión y me custodiaron [el dia] de mi fuga de matanzas pa. la Habana como beremos pues tomando el almanaque y todos los santos de aquel mes eran resados pr. mi diariamente (Luis, ed. 319).

Even though he recognizes that Don Saturnino, a white man, helped him escape slavery; the saints are credited with having provided Manzano the occasion to run away and for having protected him on his perilous journey from Matanzas to

Havana (Luis, ed. 339). Running away was motivated by a real need to protect self from further physical abuse or even an early death. That being said, Manzano comprehends this incident as an act made possible by divine power. Within a Christian frame of reference this affords his escape an even greater significance and solidifies his reputation as an enslaved but upright practicing Catholic. His devotion to the saints was a daily ritualistic and methodical practice that he relied on to avoid being chastised by powerful spiritual mediators.

Manzano's account of running away also evinces that he was certain that supernatural happenings are not only possible but do occur within the material world as another paragraph demonstrates.

> tenia yo desde bien chico la costumbre de leer cuanto era leible en mi idioma y cuando iva pr. la calle siempre andaba recojiendo pedasitos de papel impreso y si estaba en verso hasta no aprenderlo todo de memoria no resaba así sabia la vida de todos los santos mas milagrosos y los versos de sus resos los nobena de Sn. Antonio los del trisajio en fin todos los santos (Luis, ed. 335-36).

Manzano's faith was informed and strengthened by printed material that recounted the lives of saints. This ardent focus on the saints as major spiritual intermediaries is in accordance with Catholic doctrine and – although we do not know for sure – it is likely that the almanac and other pieces of paper that he found about the saints were conventional religious materials. If they were hagiographies, they would have represented the Church's position concerning the power of the saints and not consisted of Afro-Cuban narratives known as *pattakíes*, which relay accounts of African divine spirits.[55] This leaves

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[55] The *pattakí* is a myth, legend, story, anecdote, or parable derived from the Yoruba-based oral traditions. Most often these narratives deal with matters of humankind's connection with supernatural entities that function as intermediaries between the physical world and the

unresolved questions concerning the way in which the poet comprehended these written materials about the saints and what relationship he may or may not have drawn between them and Africa-based spirituality.

Reading Richard Robert Madden's translation of Manzano's 1835 slave narrative, Fionnghuala Sweeney states that the Manzano's relation of his life emerges from a Catholic religio-moral context. Sweeney argues that:

> the existence of hierarchies in Catholicism [...] the tendency of these same hierarchies not only to mask the presence of other belief systems but also frequently to encourage their absorption and continuity beneath a common religious umbrella; [...] and a tendency towards mysticism and/or the non-rational, with an emphasis on ritual (404).

As an example of what she calls masking (but could be more accurately described as transculturation) Sweeney cites the adoration of African deities through the worship of Catholic saints because; "African religious belief systems are encoded in ostensibly Catholic practices" (404). Her explanation affirms that African descendant religion in Cuba makes explicit use of Catholic saints to carry on an Africa-based religious practice, which is itself programmed in what appears to be Catholic or Catholic–like rituals. For African descendants, then, Catholic religious hierarchy and ritual provided space for the reworking of Church orthodoxy. This means that Manzano's devotion to the saints may have included the recognition and reverence of African divine spirits, which had been transculturated with Catholic saints.[56]

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otherworld: i.e. divine spirits, ancestors, and other categories of spirits. However, there are *pattakíes*, which are not religious in nature (Díaz Fabelo 8-9).

[56] Thus, it is rather probable that for the African descended poet, as for many people of color, to speak of the saints was to refer to an Africa-based understanding of a transculturated divine entity that possessed qualities of the Catholic saints as well as those of the divine spirits or *orichas* of the Afro-Cuban pantheon. Teodoro Díaz-Fabelo cites Lydia Cabrera's <u>El Monte</u> to

At first glance, Manzano seems to substantiate the conventional belief that enslaved domestic servants – who were closer to the masters than field workers – tended to accept and practice Catholicism. Nevertheless, considering his motives for self-representation before a white Catholic audience, a different reading emerges. In the letter to Delmonte dated September 29, 1835 the poet explains his need to be perceived by Delmonte in a positive light: "ni mi esposa ni su merced me amaran si no fuera hombre de bien" ("neither Your Grace nor my wife would love me if I were not a good man") (Luis, ed. 127). Manzano understood the need to humanize self in order to be an acceptable narrator to his readers. In view of that, the Christianization of the first person narrative voice was an effective and available recourse that might convince readers that the enslaved person was truly a meek and righteous sojourner. Furthermore, there are other things worthy of consideration that could offer more insight into the religious identity of this nineteenth century poet.

Roberto Friol cites interrogation records from *La Escalera* Conspiracy of 1843-1844 where, Manzano declares himself to be *católico, apostólico, romano* before authorities (Friol 194). Manzano makes this declaration under duress after having been arrested and questioned concerning his alleged role as a supporter of a series of antislavery uprisings. These records are significant because Manzano makes a clear statement about his religious affiliation. In fact, this is the most apparently straightforward written statement we have about

show that when *un santero* was accused of practicing what had been deemed illegal religious cults the authorities only found altars with Catholic images. This served as a cover for the practitioners whose understanding of the saints far exceeded the meanings aligned with Church dogma having taken on the transculturated, yet Africa-based identity of the divine spirits (11).

Manzano's religious identity. On the other hand, the testimony from *La Escalera* Conspiracy was highly problematic because torture was used to extract confessions (Paquette 234). As a result we should bear in mind that the emancipated author's life and liberty were at risk when he made the statement and so it might represent an effort to distance himself from all suspicions of conspiracy, given that enslaved persons who were interrogated made multiple references to Africa-derived ritual practices in their own defense.[57] Manzano may have thought that in such dire circumstances a Catholic identity could divorce him of any harmful associations with Africa-based religion since Catholicism was the official religion of colony, he had written and published about it, and it was unlikely to be regarded as subversive. At the same time, such a statement might speak to Manzano's personal religious identity. Which leaves me to ask: If indeed Manzano identified, as a Catholic was his practice orthodox or unconventional? Another nineteenth century source may be useful for addressing this question.

In Poetas de Color, concerning Manzano's religious practice, Francisco Calcagno states that "Manzano era devoto, con aquella devocion mezclada de fanatismo de las personas ignorantes de su época" ("Manzano was devout, with that devotion mixed with the fanaticism of the ignorant people of his time") (sic)

[57] Robert Paquette says that on more than one occasion the Military Commission received reports from enslaved people who claimed to have been lured into conspiracy through the *brujería* of free people of color. Paquette says that such testimony was not exceptional and "would be understandable since many African-born slaves would have blamed sorcery for their enslavement and thus would have looked to sorcery to undo it". By *brujería* and sorcery Paquette is referring to the nature of Africa-based ritual powers used to affect change in the natural world (256).

(77). According to Calcagno, Manzano was "un ignorante manso" ("an ignorant meek person") (78). Because Calcagno does not specify what religion he is referring to the reader is left to make inferences as to what he means. This comment about Manzano's religious practice seems to be based on Calcagno's reading of *la historia de mi vida*, parts of which he published in the fifth edition of Poetas de Color (1887). Calcagno recognizes the poet's religious devotion but characterizes it as fanatical and ignorant. Although it is not entirely clear whether Calcagno is referring to Catholicism or an Africa-based religion, if the slave narrative was his source then there is reason to believe that he saw Manzano's devotion to Catholicism as excessive, misguided or even unorthodox. Perhaps for Calcagno, Manzano's religious devotion was mixed with fanaticism because of his perceived unfamiliarity with the Catholic creed.[58] In the final section of this chapter, I argue that there is reason to believe, as Cros Sandoval says, that the Manzano was "Católico a mi manera" (30).[59]

1.4 Africa-based Spirituality in Manzano's Literature

In addition to Catholicism, Manzano's poems and slave narrative illustrate a familiarity with Africa-based spiritual practices. The representation of Afro-

[58] To validate his comments on Manzano's religious devotion Calcagno cites the passage where Manzano's mistress expresses her fear that his talent will make him worse than Enlightenment thinkers, Jean Jacques Rousseau and Voltaire (77-78).

[59] Mercedes Cros Sandoval explains that for Cubans, to be *Católico a mi manera* or "Catholic my own way" meant that persons were baptized into the Catholic Church, attended mass every so often, married in the church, if divorced would continue to be Catholic and would request the last rites when dying (30).

Cuban spirituality is often juxtaposed with Catholic images, metaphors and allusions to the biblical narrative. I examine portrayals of Africa-derived ritual practice in "La visión del poeta: compuesta en un Ingenio de fabricar azúcar" (unpublished) ("The Poet's Vision: Composed on a Plantation to Manufacture Sugar"), "Sueño a mi segundo hermano" ("Dream to My Second Brother") (1838) and "Poesías" ("Poems") (1836) in addition to those representations found in Manzano's account of his life.

In related, yet different ways, the aforesaid poems employ a recurring set of tropes that portray African descendant spirituality. The reoccurring themes include dream sequences, the depiction of ritual, visions and communication with the deceased and other spirit entities, transfiguration and flight, personal spirit devotion, as well direct resistance of the slave regime in the form of *marronnage*.

Manzano's representation of Afro-Cuban ritual and spiritual practices can be characterized in two distinct ways: as a familiar common place in his poetry and as a means of self-portrayal in his slave narrative. To be sure, the two are not the same but both may reveal something more about how Manzano drew on an African descendant cultural subjectivity as a means of religious devotion. The appearance and reappearance of this Africa-based spirituality in his poetry as well as in *la historia de mi vida* should not be read as fantasy literature, or art for art's sake. I have tried to show that Manzano was a writer who was well aware of the aesthetic and cultural materials available to him and made choices based on what he perceived would represent him well to his readership, while also exercising some degree of poetic license. Accordingly, I will analyze these

representations for what they may tell us about how the poet drew on heterogeneous sources of religious and cultural capital, while writing what had to be approved by colonial censors.

In my view, the use of dreams is the most important device that Manzano employs because it creates an oneiric space within the text, so that other tropes, which convey Africa-based spirituality, are more amenable to the audience. In Manzano's poems, dreams function as a gateway from the physical world to the beyond, which is a space of otherworldly revelations and supernatural possibilities. It is necessary to consider the Catholic Church's view with regards to the significance of dreams.

In sixteenth century Spain, the Catholic Church and laypersons alike valued dreams, visions, ecstasies, and raptures for their natural and supernatural meanings. These were well-publicized occurrences that were memorialized in engravings and printed libretti. Dreams and prophecies have long been a part of European religious traditions finding their origins and justification in Old Testament accounts such as those about Jacob and Joseph's dreams (Kagan 38).[60] In religious circles, dreams were understood to have two sources; they were either derived from the natural (the human body) or the supernatural and were deemed either divine or diabolical.[61] Since the Protestant Reformation, the

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[60] In the Old Testament dreams are a source of divine revelation. In the story of Jacob, God reveals himself at night through a dream where the angels are ascending and descending on a stairway that leads to heaven. After waking Jacob recognizes the land where he was standing as holy ground and renames it. In this way dreams are tied to divine revelation and promise, holy ground, and the act of renaming (The Holy Bible, New International Version, Gen. 28. 10-22).

[61] It is interesting to note that for sixteenth century physicians, dreams had a medical purpose as they were interpreted to diagnose a patient's health problems (Kagan 36).

Catholic Church feared the spread of heresies and sought to discourage most forms of personal religious expression fearing it might be unorthodox or even anti-Catholic. To maintain ecclesiastical authority, the Holy Office of the Inquisition pursued, persecuted and prosecuted oneiromancers (dream interpreters) and persons whose natural dreams the Church believed had been misinterpreted as divine "message dreams" and construed to have some bearing on future events (Kagan 10, 38).

Wary of "false revelations", Catholic priests were instructed to ask parishioners about their dreams to determine their basis and to encourage the faithful not to speak about them publicly (Kagan 11, 37). Renaissance theologians tended to agree with Church Father Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) who warned about the need to distinguish the true prophet from the false one as Richard Kagan explains.

> He condemned as superstitious and unlawful those who knowingly used "natural" dreams for purposes of divination, attributing the desire to know the future with an express contract with the devil or a tacit diabolical pact by one who sought knowledge beyond ordinary human means (39).

The Church's recognition of dreams as a means of legitimate divine revelation was tempered by its desire to maintain control over parishioners and the larger society. Church doctrine viewed any attempt to seek knowledge beyond human means as necessarily diabolical, even if the person in question did not intend to be aligned with the devil.

Catholic dogma concerning the interpretation of dreams is important because in Manzano's literature dreams have a dissimilar function; they do not

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foretell forthcoming events. On the contrary, they are portals to the otherworld and provide revelations to the African descended poetic voice. The otherworldly disclosures in Manzano's poems do not come from God the Father of the Christian tradition but come from other spirit beings. In that way they represent what Thomas Aquinas considered "knowledge beyond ordinary human means" (Kagan 39).

"Sueño a mi segundo hermano" is a narrative poem that provides an momentary glance into Manzano's yearning to be united again with his family long after his parents' death and shortly following his own manumission. This post-emancipation poem, published in *El Álbum* in 1838, recalls a time when Manzano and his younger brother Florensio lived and suffered together on the Matanzas sugar plantation.[62] It is a poignantly nostalgic and self-representative poem in which Manzano shares a dream with his brother. In the dream the poetic voice finds emotional and spiritual refuge in *el monte*; "de los hombres huyendo / hacia el vecino monte / que de Quintana el cerro / domina y ameniza los lugares internos / aproximéme a un bosque" ("from men fleeing / towards the neighborly mountain / that is the mount Quintana / outstanding it enlivens the places within / I draw near to a forest") (Luis, ed. 144-45). *El monte*, the forested mountain, is the poet's preferred place to seek refuge because it soothes and

[62] In his life narrative, Manzano refers to the emotional nature of his familial ties to his younger brother in terms of "esta union binculada pr. los indisolubles lazos del amor fraterno" ("this union linked by the indissoluble bonds of fraternal love"). The poet's closeness to his biological family is an important leitmotif in the narrative that reinforces my view that the poet indentified as a member of the Afro-descendant plantation community. His biological family is his link to the plantation community (Luis, ed. 314).

reinvigorates the places within, that is, his spirit and his emotions. Solitude on the mountain allows him to "lamentarme en secreto" ("to grieve in secret") (Luis, ed. 145).

Within certain Africa-based Cuban religious communities *el monte* holds a great deal of spiritual, religious and ritual significance. Jualynne Dodson points out that practitioners of Kongo based religions, *Palo Monte/Palo Mayombe* understand that the forested areas contain outdoor physical spaces that have been endowed with power and hold sacred significance for religious initiates (99). Dodson says, "In forests, a sacred center is a location wherein descending cosmic power is known to have previously intersected with other energies from elements in the four essential categories of the human realm." These sacred geographic sites are spaces where power of "the four essential categories" of the human world has merged with power of the spiritual world creating a "highly articulated spiritual communication" (99).[63] While *Palo Monte/Palo Mayombe* are distinctly Cuban religions, some of the ritual customs and ideas that undergird their practice can be found in the ancient Kongo Empire in West Central Africa.

Farris Thompson writes about the Africa-derived nature of Diaspora art and religious images in the Americas. His chapter on the influence of the ancient Kongo Empire offers some insight into the importance of the mountain within

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[63] The *Palo Monte/Palo Mayombe* traditions recognize that the human world has at least four elemental categories: (1) divine spirits; (2) spirits of the dead (ancestors and more); (3); animate things and (4) inanimate material. The Creator is known by the name Nsambe and it is understood that at the time of creation, Creator endowed all four categories with some of the power at the time the universe was brought into existence (Dodson 92).

ancient Kongo civilization.[64] Thompson writes that Mbanza Kongo, the historic capital of the Bakongo–Kikongo ethnic-linguistic group, was sited at the top of a hill. The placement of the capital city reflected the idea that the world is a mountain that sits above the land of the dead, *Mpemba*. In Kongo thought, both the physical world and the otherworld of spirits are inextricably linked, which means humans are at all times connected to the world of the deceased (106). Although Africa-based religions in Cuba have different ways and distinct ritual practices with which they articulate the bond between the living and the dead, the understanding that the living exist in relation to the deceased is a fundamental feature of Africa-based ritual practice and is present in Manzano's poetry and life narrative. My analysis of the ritual activities of Manzano's poetic self will expound on the meanings he may have constructed about *el monte*.

In the third stanza the African descended poetic voice falls asleep and takes to the air after being transfigured into a winged being. Winged creatures, birds and their ability to fly are unabashed metaphors for freedom in Manzano's verse and slave narrative.[65] Flight is also a common place within Neoclassicism, which Manzano cites in other poems. However, in the context of this poem, flight is meaningful because it allows the poetic self to transcend the bodily restraints of slavery in order to perform what is a symbolic reproduction of an Africa-based

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[64] The Kongo Empire established commercial ties with Portugal to trade in captives beginning in the 1400s. In the sixteenth century, Portuguese slave traders brought captive Africans from this part of central West Africa to the Americas where they left an early and indelible cultural footprint (Dodson 84).

[65] In *la historia de mi vida*, Manzano says that he wished to be a bird that he might escape slavery by flying away; "quisiera aber tenido alas pa. desapareser trasplantandome en la Habana" ("I wish I had wings to disappear transplanting myself in Havana") (Luis, ed. 333).

ritual.[66] Transfiguration metamorphoses the poetic voice into a spirit being therefore enabling him to transcend time and space. Flight modifies the poet's perspective about his condition as an enslaved person thus making subjecthood possible: "Ufano contemplaba / entre la tierra y el cielo / las portentosas obras / del alto Ser Supremo" ("Proud I contemplated / between the heavens and the Earth / the marvelous works / of the High Supreme Being") (Luis, ed. 145, 146). In this way dreams open a space for the enslaved poetic voice to transcend his earthly condition by reaffirming his link with the otherworld.

African revelations of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries included augury, visions, and spirit possession of humans, animals and inanimate objects, as well as dreams (Thornton, Africa and Africans 239). In the New World dreams continued to function as a source of revelation from the deceased, as Jualynne Dodson points out, saying that in addition to the embodied events of spirit possession and spirit sightings, *Palo Monte/Palo Mayombe* religious devotees who are informed by an Africa-derived spirituality, also receive revelation by way of dreams. The understanding that dreams are a means of spirit communication with humans is reflected in the African proverb; "Spirits that come in dreams, with no words to walk on." The implication is that humans are receptacles who are meant to receive, interpret, decipher, and give words to spirit messages in dreams (55).

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[66] By symbolic reproduction, I mean that the ritual depicted by Manzano may not be faithful to the exact activities prescribed by Afro-descendant religious adherents. Instead, it is meant to invoke the meanings and the power aligned with Africa-based ritual within a literary text. Jualynne Dodson explicates that: "rituals are prescribed activities through which humans can unite with the historical and thereby generate special time flexibility within the present" (56).

"Sueño a mi segundo hermano" is a rewriting of the recent past where Manzano's lyrical voice reworks events so that they result in a favorable outcome. *Marronnage* is the path to freedom that a soaring transfigured Manzano has chosen. The self–representative poetic voice does what Manzano was unable to do: rescuing the younger brother from the sugar plantation. In flight, the transfigured subject sees places that are diametrically opposed to one another the "*Palenque* soberbio" ("the Proud Mountain refuge community") and "el suntuoso *Molino*" ("the grandiose *Molino* sugar mill") (original emphasis, Luis, ed. 147). For African descendants the former represents a freedom that is won and maintained through struggle, while the latter means perpetual bondage and incessant abuse.

> Mas como no podía
> sofocar en mi pecho
> las tiernas impresiones
> del dulce amor fraterno,
> ansioso, bajo y hallo
> a aquel mi caro objeto,
> en sus años tan tierno
> como robusto etíope
> los trabajos venciendo. (Luis, ed. 147).

The rescue of the younger brother represents a need to make peace with, or by spiritual means, transcend past tribulations. The poem leads the reader to infer that Florensio is all the family Manzano has left since, as *la historia de mi vida* (1835) indicates, both of his parents had long passed away before he would publish this poem in 1838.

In nineteenth century Cuba the act of running away from slavery and the collective establishment of *palenque communities* was viewed as a direct challenge to the economic power of the white propertied elite and the political

authority of the Captain General. Matanzas was among the four most productive sugar-producing provinces in nineteenth century Cuba. The other major sugar provinces included Colón, Santiago de Cuba and Sagua la Grande (Knight 41, 94). The large importation of African captives to work the sugar plantations, coupled with the mountainous and sparsely populated terrain, contributed to the high rate of runaways making Matanzas a maroon stronghold. The first recorded cases of *cimarrones* in Matanzas dates from 1770, when local officials became aware of a small group of runaways in the "los molinos" area. In 1817, officials began to collect systematic data about runaways. These records include 133 enslaved persons who deserted their masters, among them, 64 in the Yumurí region where Manzano's mistress la Marquesa Jústiz de Santa Ana owned a plantation (Bergad 22, 83). There are also reports of well-armed *palenque* communities living in hilly areas in the 1820s and 1830s. Maroon communities best survived when they were able to occupy and settle areas with a low population density. Such areas were ideal for their use since runaways could hide, constitute self-governing communities, raise domestic animals and provide for their collective defense.[67]

Manzano was enslaved on *El Molino* plantation of la Marquesa de Jústiz de Santa Ana in Matanzas and escaped by night to Havana circa 1812. For this

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[67] A number of *palenques* in the mountainous forested areas of Matanzas were particularly strong and well-organized communities that effectively resisted white slave hunting parties made up of *rancheadores* (Franco 114, 116). Independent *palenque* living became more difficult to achieve in the 1830s as the settlement and agricultural development of the land spread all throughout the province meaning there were fewer remote areas for the establishment of *palenques* (Bergad 84).

reason, he was familiar with the danger of running away and understood the contemporary symbolic importance of *el palenque* as a site of resistance and rebirth for formerly enslaved Africans and Afro-descendants. Runaways drew upon an African religio-cultural frame of reference to forcefully carve out sacred geographic space to collectively define freedom for themselves by building independent communities in the hills, in forested areas, and in the mountains. When writing about his own escape, Manzano demonstrates his awareness that *cimarrón* was a byword which reflected the severe treatment that runaways received; "represento la mala suerte de un tio mio qe. abiendo tomado igual determinasion pr. irse donde el Sor. Dn. Nicolas [...] fue traido todo como un simarron" ("I personify the bad luck of one of my uncles who having made the same determination to go to Don Nicolás... was carried off like a maroon") (Luis, ed. 340).

While Manzano's brief experience as a *cimarrón urbano* was the result of an independent act of rebellion to save his own life, in this poem he calls upon his younger brother to join him in a great escape: "<<Huyamos pues, le dije, / de este recinto horrendo / más terrible a mi vista / que la del horco mismo: / huyamos, caro hermano, / partamos por el viento, / por siempre abandonemos nuestro enemigo suelo>>" ("Let us flee, I told him / from this horrible place / more terrible to my sight / than hell itself: / let us flee, dear brother, / we take off by the wind, / let us forever abandon our enemy soil") (Luis, ed. 148). This imagined path to freedom is realized in joint struggle even though Manzano clearly depicts

himself as the heroic subject that carries Florensio to freedom in his arms.[68] This act of joint escape restores the African descended family unit torn asunder by slavery, enabling the brothers to flee not only the sugar plantation but also the colony itself.

Dreams that bring otherwordly revelation and employ transformative flight also appear in the lenghty unpublished narrative poem, "La visión del poeta: compuesta en un Ingenio de fabricar azúcar". The enslaved, self-reflexive lyrical "I" falls asleep on more than one occasion to escape the harsh and miserable labor of the sugar plantation. The poem describes the operation of the sugar mill and the process for extracting cane juice to transform it into refined white sugar; "Vieras el gran *trapiche* crujir, dando / Octogónicas vueltas, que no enfrena / ... El jugo de la caña en gruesa vena, / Que va lenta marchando con blandura / Donde ha de convertirse en piedra dura" ("You would see the great sugar mill, turning / Eight rotations, that do not stop / ... The thick sugar cane juice, / Slowly flowing with smoothness / Where it is to become hard stone") (Luis, ed. 178, 179). The Matanzas sugar plantation is an unbearable place: a *locus horrendus* for the poetic voice who like the nightingale sings a sad hymn before ending his "mísero destino" ("unfortunate fate") (Luis, ed. 175). The metaphor of the nightingale describes the pain of the enslaved persona: "Y aparenta que canta, pero llora / El terrible dolor que le devora." ("And he appears to sing, but he cries

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[68] In the final pages of *la historia de mi vida*, Manzano explains that it was difficult to escape slavery without bringing his brothers with him: "no estaba yo con todo esto bastante resulto en considerar qe. dejaba a mis hermanos en el Molino y qe. tenia que andar toda una noche solo pr. caminos desconocidos y espuesto a caer en manos de un comisionado" (Luis, ed. 339).

/ The terrible pain that devours him") (Luis, ed. 175). The image of the nightingale functions like a confession from a poet whose work often gave voice to a deep-seated personal pain.

Deep meditation causes Manzano to fall asleep, and otherworldly forces carry him to a space where chronological time is suspended and human beings come face to face with spirits.[69] Time ceases its steady march in "Sueño a mi segundo hermano" and in "La visión del poeta: compuesta en un Ingenio de fabricar azúcar" where the poetic voice moves back and forth between past and present time. Furthermore, Manzano's account of his life does not arrange events according to when they took place instead, ordering them in terms of their significance to the author and their relation to one another.[70] (Naturally, he is also concerned with silencing some of the shameful abuse he was subjected to.) His sense of time refects an event-based sequencing common in Africa-based oral traditions.

Manzano's persona portrays an anachronistic co-presence of events when he positions himself in present time only to return to the past as a transfigured winged spirit being that rescues his brother Florensio from the sugar plantation.

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[69] Time, as it is represented in "Sueño a mi segundo hermano" and in "La visión del poeta: compuesta en un Ingenio de fabricar azúcar", functions like ritual time. Dodson explains that the ritual practitioners of Africa-based traditions understand that they are able to transcend present time and reestablish contact with inspired historical events in which they may not have participated (56-57).

[70] Manzano explains why he creates so many leaps in time in his slave narrative: "Si tratara de aser un escacto resumen de la istoria de mi vida seria una repetision de susesos todos semejantes entre[s] sí pues mi edad de trece a catorce años mi vida ha sido una consecusion de penitencia ensierro azotes y aflisiones así determino descrivir los sucesos mas notables qe. me han acarreado una opnion tan terrible como nosiva" (Luis, ed. 319-20).

It is the return to the past, in ethereal form, which makes a simultaneous display of events from past and present time a possibility. Hence, spirit performance allows for the concurrent display of happenings from past and present time. In this poem Manzano's transfiguration into spirit form, ritual performance on the mountain, and recognition of his *muertos* (deceased parents) makes a reckoning and a refashioning of events that have already taken place, a possibility.

The stanzas cited below from "La visión del poeta: compuesta en un Ingenio de fabricar azúcar" illustrate how contemplation gives way to sleep, flight and transfiguration:

> Otras la fantasía me convierte
> En ave por las nubes transitando
> Y en la mitad del vuelo más propicio
> Me siento descender a un precipicio. (Luis, ed. 177)
> ....
>
> Preso en los lazos del más dulce sueño,
> Sin saber cómo vime transportado
> A un prado deleitoso y halagüeño. (Luis, ed. 182)

The African descendant poetic voice falls asleep or becomes lost in a "fantasía", metamorphosing into a winged creature.[71] The flying creature is a spiritual entity of the kind that also appears in "Poesías" and "Sueño a mi segundo hermano" and is capable of what I term transformative flight. By this, I mean that flight is a trope, so that Manzano's persona achieves otherwise impossible feats, i.e. escape from bondage, intimate contact with spirits, and artistic inspiration. In these texts, the poetic self flies off or is carried away by an unspecified supernatural force to experience encounters with the otherworld. Such

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[71] Manzano refers to his lapses into the dream state as *fantasía*, falling asleep or deep contemplation and meditation. Such references to *fantasía* can also be found in "Poesías".

encounters involve dialogue with different types of sprits and a symbolic depiction of Africa-based ritual practice.

"Poesías" stands apart from the aforementioned poems because human/spirit interaction does not lead to ritual practice or human/spirit dialogue but instead enhances the creative powers of the poet. The poetic voice expresses an understanding that provided certain conditions, contact with non-ethereal beings and revelation can be achieved. In "Poesías" the African descendant subject is the recipient of revelations for the purpose of artistic literary creation. Manzano writes, "De la patria del sueño en los encantos / ¡cuánta revolución maravillosa / contemplé de aquel mundo imaginario / siempre desconocido, nuevo siempre / para la oscura mente del humano!" ("From the motherland of enchanted dreams / how marvelous a revolution / I contemplated that imaginary world / always unknown, always new / for the dark human mind!") (Luis, ed. 147). Inspiration is not merely a matter of the poet's exceptional individual talent; on the contrary, it reveals the genius of spirit beings that exist outside of the constraints of historical time and space and within that "mundo imaginario" ("imaginary world") that "patria del sueño en los encantos" ("motherland of enchanted dreams"). In this way Manzano directly links dreams with revelations that translate into literary inspiration. Manzano does not use the Greco-Latin concept of the female muse that he employed in other poems to

convey the source of his creative inspiration instead speaking indiscriminately of "seres" ("beings").[72]

The stanzas below provide a closer look at the idea of otherworldly beings as agents of creative inspiration.

> ¡oh! loca fantasía que pudiste
> tomar las reglas del pincel sagrado
> y así vestir con materiales formas
> un fantástico ser, tuyo es el cuadro:
> en tus tintes empapa ahora mi pluma
> cuyos bellos colores cotejando
> la humana copia ensayaré diciendo
> como del genio y la ilusión llevado
> a un prado descendí. Creedme, o seres,
> que de ilusiones férvidas tocados
> revelasteis del hombre los destinos (Luis, ed. 147)

The reference to *seres* or "beings" leaves room for the reader to interpret these entities as something other than the classical muses that he overtly alludes to in other poems. In fact, even though the word muse does appear once in "Poesías" it is not in reference to these verses about the source of poetic inspiration. The poetic voice suggests that he garners artistic insight from the ethereal beings he encounters while asleep. The above-cited verses explain that a "loca fantasía" ("maddening fantasy") took the sacred paintbrushes dressing a fantastic being with material form so that Manzano's work was but a copy of spiritually inspired ideas. It should be noted that Christian notion of God the Father, so very common in neoclassical poetry, is not evoked to explain the poet's creative response to spirit inspiration. Instead, these unnamed ethereal beings that come

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[72] "A la musa anacreóntica" published in Poesías Líricas (1821) is an example of a poem where Manzano employs muse in the conventional Neoclassical sense (Azougarh, ed. 121-22).

to the poet in dreams uncover and make known the fate of humankind. In this same vein of thought, Dodson explains that within Africa-based spiritual practices, artists develop an ability to respond innovatively to spirit inspiration learning to open a space in their compositions for disclosure from the otherworld (54-55).

Spirit visions are also an important and recurring theme in the slave narrative with one important difference; Manzano does not face spirits while asleep but encounters them in the waking hours. In *la historia de mi vida*, the narrator depicts the apparition of spirit beings as actual events with which he is compelled to deal. Most often when writing about spirits in the life narrative, Manzano describes the unwanted encounters that he was subjected to while physically and emotionally debilitated. These encounters took place after Manzano had endured the abuse and torture of the overseers. Below, I have cited two such passages that speak to how the poet understood and experienced these sightings.

> yo tenia la cabeza llena de *los cuentos de cosa mala de otros tiempos, de las almas aparesidas en este de la otra vida* y *de los encantamientos de los muertos*, qe. cuando salian un trapel de ratas asiendo ruido me paresia ver aquel sotano lleno de fantasmas y daba tanto gritos pidiendo a boses misericordia ... (emphasis added, Luis, ed. 305)

> del ingenio Sn. Miguel pero ya estaba basia y no se le daba ningun empleo allí estaba el cepo y solo se depositaban en él cadáver hasta la ora de llebar al puebo a darle sepultura allí puesto de dos pies con un frio qe. elaba sin ninguna cuvierta se me enserró apenas *me vi solo en aquel lugar cuando todos los muertos* me paresia qe. se [leval] levantaban y qe. vagaban pr. todo lo largo de el salon una ventana media derrumbada qe. caia al rio o sanja serca de un despeñadero ruidoso qe. asia un torrente de agua golpeaba sin sesar y cada golpe me paresia un muerto qe. entraba pr. alli de la otra vida... (emphasis added, Luis, ed. 321)

The appearance of ethereal beings – divine spirits as well as spirits of the dead – is a well-established tenet of Africa-based spirituality. Manzano's descriptions substantiate that he interpreted such apparitions as events that were within a wide range of spiritual possibilities. Presumably, it is not the mere presence of the unseen that terrified Manzano, but the nature of these recently deceased, which had not yet received proper burial. When beaten, Manzano was often placed in a *cepo* (the stocks) and either left in an abandoned slave dungeon on the deserted *San Miguel* sugar plantation or deprived of food and water in a coal cellar on the *El Molino* plantation.[73] Manzano was left in dark, squalid, lonely and odiferous places, some of which were temporary holding cells for the corpses of enslaved persons that had not yet been interred. All this means that Manzano may have figured that he was face to face with tormented spirits of the recently deceased, which Mbiti has termed "the living dead" (25).[74]

Manzano's account describes these entities as nonmaterial beings that came from "otros tiempos" ("other times") and were "de la otra vida" ("from the other life"). The writer sees these spirits as capable of transcending chronological time and space to make contact with those that exist in the present time. These spirits occupied historical space and carried the disfigurements and torment of their lives with them. Although on occasion, Manzano admits that he may have confused a dripping faucet with the appearance of spirits, it is

[73] The *cepo* was an instrument of torture used to physically restrain enslaved persons. It was made of two pieces of wood that fit together to confine the neck, the feet and the hands.

[74] Dodson defines "the living dead' as things, events and persons that complete their time as material entities and whose spirits pass into past time. These nonmaterial entities are known as "the living dead" as long as those living in the present honor their memory (49).

important to note that for him such apparitions lie within a broad realm of possibilities. For Manzano, Africa-derived spirituality may have been transmitted to him by the very *cuentos de cosa mala* ("tales of evil spirits") that he refers to. Afro-Cuban oral traditions and staged memorial activities such as stories, poems, chants, art, dance, parades, theater, and pageants exposed members of African descended cultural communities to the past presenting events that they had not personally witnessed or experienced (Dodson 50).

Manzano's account of his life provides yet another anecdote that sheds light on the poet's understanding of human/spirit interaction and communication, which may better explain his familiarity with the presence of, and contact with, nonmaterial beings. Manzano recalls that his mother summoned Toribio Castro, her then deceased husband (and Manzano's father), from the grave.

> ...me llamaba <<Juan>> y yo le contestaba gimiendo y ella desia de fuera <<hay hijo>> entonses era el llamar desde la sepultura a su marido pues cuando esto ya mi padre abia muerto tres ocasiones en menos de dos meses me acuerdo aber visto repetirse esta Exna...(Luis, ed. 311).

Like the passages cited above where the narrator writes of the horrifying manifestation of the spirits of the enslaved, this episode with Manzano's mother is also worth mentioning. However, it should be noted that there is a marked difference between the two accounts. Unlike her son, an unwanted apparition from the beyond does not surprise María de Pilar; instead on at least three occasions, she makes a concerted effort to reach her deceased husband. This *llamar desde la sepultura* is a grief stricken cry that may have been intended to resolve matters left unsettled in the physical world or to improve her son's lot on

the sugar plantation.[75] Manzano cites this episode after describing yet another scene where he was beaten and left in the plantation infirmary.

From the vantage point of an African spiritual frame of reference, María de Pilar's invocation of the dead at a time of personal family crisis would be understood as a determined effort to take hold of collaborative power, thus transforming her into a subject. Practitioners join their limited power with that of "the living dead" in order to affect the outcome of events. This account, as well as the one where Manzano prays to the saints of his devotion before escaping *El Molino*, are an illustration of the belief that devotees can rely on the superior power of spirit beings from *la otra vida* that exist in *otros tiempos* to change or ameliorate conditions within the physical world.

With regard to Manzano's portrayal of spirit sightings, Sweeney says that his text is "doubly othered" since his descriptions of the appearance of spirits bring to mind "creolised African religious beliefs, or at best Catholic superstition" that was vehemently rejected by Protestant Anglo-Americans and used in pro-slavery propaganda (409). There is reason to believe that Manzano's way of relating to the saints was inclusive in a manner that would allow for African descendant spiritual and ritual practice. Furthermore, these accounts of spirit beings also stray from the otherwise well-crafted Catholic self-image that Manzano fashioned in *la historia de mi vida*. Passages from "Sueño a mi

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[75] In African Religions and Philosophy, John Mbiti says that in traditional African religious thought and practice spirits of the deceased commonly serve as intermediaries between living persons and God. In effect, they constitute the largest group of intercessors in African religious life, conveying human requests, needs, prayers and sacrifices to God. In this way, "the approach to God" is considered a collective act involving the living and the departed (69-71).

segundo hermano" and "La visión del poeta compuesta en un Ingenio de fabricar azúcar" further distance the poet from a conventional Catholic belief system and orthodox ritual practice.

In "Sueño a mi segundo hermano" Manzano portrays himself as a metamorphosed winged creature that has escaped slavery and takes part in an Africa-based ritual.

> Visto tanto en el aire
> buscaba con anhelo
> el centro de la tierra
> para posar mi vuelo.
>
> Recojo los plumajes
> inclino un poco el pecho
> y en círculos rondando
> torno a bajar de nuevo:
> desciendo con tino
> de Matanzas al seno,
> de do la ruta fijo
> a aquel lugar tremendo,
> donde yertos reposan
> los miserables restos,
> de aquellos nuestros padres
> que el primer ser nos dieron. (Luis, ed. 146)

This is perhaps the most palpably Africa-based representation in all of Manzano's oeuvre. The transfigured poetic voice, now in spirit form, carefully descends in the center of the earth and, with feathers in hand, initiates a ritual intended for his *muertos*, his recently deceased parents, recognized as "the living dead."[76] In this way Manzano, like his mother before him, seeks to honor the memory of and, in some form or another, to make contact with the dead.

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[76] Farris Thompson says that the traditional "Kongo [*yowa*] cross refers therefore to the everlasting continuity of all righteous men and women," (108). This cross is not to be confused or conflated with the Latin Christian cross in its form or its meaning. The *yowa*, which represents "a fork in the road" is a very significant "symbol of passage and communication between worlds,"

The African descendant subject transcends the limitations of time in the present by way of a sacred act that honors his deceased parents and may call on them for power to rescue his younger brother from the sugar plantation. The poem does not elaborate on the precise nature of the contact between the subject and his parents, but his intent to make contact through ritual is without dispute. Manzano's reference to his parents as those "que el primer ser nos dieron" or those that gave him and his brother their first being, is a subtle recognition that there is a second life that exists within another time. In this way, Manzano parents are progenitors designed to give birth in the natural world even as the second life is to be lived in the spirit realm. The poetic voice recognizes that his parents have transitioned to the other life but can be reached through the appropriate ritual activity.

In Manzano's poems the specific place where the metamorphosed poetic voice chooses to rest from flight is relevant in all three poems, because they set the stage for visions of and contact with spirits. (It should be noted that in all three poems the transfiguration of the lyrical voice transforms him from a material to a non-material being: i.e. a spirit). *El monte*, then, is a refuge from enslavement and is sacred space for the African descendant subject who performs ritual activity to remember and call on the power of the dead.

In "La visión del poeta: compuesta en un Ingenio de fabricar azúcar" Manzano's poetic voice experiences flight on two different occasions. As in "Sueño a mi segundo hermano" flight takes place within the dream sequence,

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(109). Thompson states that all spirits seat themselves on the center of the sign as a source of firmness (110).

functioning as a gateway into the otherworld as well as the opening of an oneiric space within the text. The first instance is preceded by a reference to the deceased. Death, the dead and ongoing lamentations are recurring themes in Manzano's work that resurface in this poem as well. With death in mind the poetic voice sighs, pondering "Mi usurpada fortuna contemplando" ("Contemplating my usurped fate") (Luis, ed. 176). Subsequently, in what is one of the most salient verses of all his poetry, Manzano explains that he bathes himself in the ashes of his deceased father, "La paternal ceniza voy bañando" (Luis, ed. 177). This symbolic reproduction of ritual activity functions to link the poet to the "living dead" and perhaps maintain equilibrium between the material and spiritual worlds. It is also an act of remembering and a bold and unequivocal identification with the historical memory of his African ancestry.

The African descendant subject's act of bathing himself in his father's ashes is followed by this poem's first instance of flight where he is once again transfigured into a winged being; this time he is specifically metamorphosed into a bird. The lyrical voice flies to a precipice, bringing into his range of sight views of the plantation from on high. In this elevated position, Manzano is now able to survey his *locus horrendus* from a place of sanctuary. As a spirit being, the Afro-Cuban persona can observe the physical world, interact within it and seek to modify and ameliorate racial slavery. In his transitory condition as an ethereal being, Manzano has greater access to the "living dead" and divine spirits. He comes to "El escabroso monte en esqueleto / ... Parece estar gimiendo en una urna / Con la naturaleza taciturna" ("Rugged mountain of skeletons / It appears to

be groaning in an urn / With nature hushed") (Luis, ed. 178). The mountain is covered with bones, presumably the remains of *Palenque* maroons (Luis, ed. 178). Manzano's poetic voice describes the mountain – which functions as the epitome of the scared in Kongo-based religion – as a funerary urn for the remains of the African-descended, hence this poem transforms *el monte* into sacred space.

The symbolic complexity and the polyphony of voices within this poem are heightened by the poet's allusions to the biblical narrative and his nuanced use of neoclassical imagery. To the poetic voice the nightmarish sugar plantation is comparable to the biblical notion of Hell where *Satán* is imprisoned in exile from the heavenly hosts. The slave plantation is skillfully juxtaposed and contrasted with creation itself, the work "Del supremo Criador" ("Of the supreme Creator") because it is an aberration to all that is good and beautiful (Luis, ed. 180). Tormented by his life on the plantation, the poetic voice bewails being unable to forget: "Que no pasé las aguas de *Leteo*" so that *Leteo* is metaphorical, implying his inability to disregard his painful past (Luis, ed. 180).[77]

In the second instance the lyrical self is transported, without knowing how, to an idyllic green pasture where ultimately he encounters Venus, the Greco-Latin female deity of love. Even as he writes of the biblical and the neoclassical, Manzano inscribes Afro-descendant historical memory into this poem by way of the dream. The lyrical voice again falls asleep and in contrast to the first dream

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[77] *Leteo* (Lethean) is an adjective in Spanish derived of Neo-Classical imagery which refers to all that is related to Lethe the river in Hades whose waters cause drinkers to forget their past. Lethe is the river of oblivion.

experiences a temporary and short-lived reprise from the horrors of plantation slavery. The male persona's attraction to this female spirit is both erotic and emotional as she represents the glorification and manifestation of male heterosexual desire and for the enslaved a potential escape from the perpetual pain of bondage.

Notwithstanding his passionate desire, the poetic self tries in vain to dissuade the divine female entity from taking up residence on the plantation: "Soberana mujer, huye y no insanes" ("Sovereign woman, flee and do not be foolish") (Luis, ed. 184). To his surprise she quickly rebuffs him and explains that the very motive of her visit is to relieve his suffering.

> Calla necio, me dijo y no profanes
> De mi sagrado influjo el casto fuego;
> <<Que jamás vil deseo he conocido
> <<Y es tu propio interés, quien me ha movido>> (Luis, ed. 184)

The divine female persona rebukes the male voice, telling him not to desecrate by speaking ill of her coming to the plantation. She identifies herself as Truth incarnate, "Soy la misma Verdad" ("I am Truth itself") (Luis, ed. 185). Following this brief proclamation Manzano's poetic voice is carried by "un mágico poder" ("a magical power") of this divine being of Truth to celestial mansions where he is surrounded by a prairie with a garden and a high temple.

Manzano interposes a narrative within an already symbolically complex poem, intensifying the polyphony of ethereal voices with which the reader and the lyrical voice must contend. The poem grants divine authority to the female personage, which possesses some of the traditional qualities of Venus, while also endowing her with the unconventional mission of bringing relief to an

enslaved person who has been transfigured into a winged spirit being. Within the text, a Hispano-Catholic paradigm is brought into dialogue with an Afro-Cuban frame of reference: neoclassical imagery and the biblical narrative come face to face with Africa-based spirituality. The writer introduces the conventional image of Venus into a narrative poem, which portrays plantation slavery, in that way transposing African descendant historical memory upon Greco-Latin mythology. Manzano demonstrates considerable mastery of the varied symbols, images and religious narratives that he incorporates into his work. The three poems and the slave narrative that I have analyzed evince the presence of an Africa-based spirituality, thus enabling the construction of a religio-cultural subjecthood not based in Hispano-Catholic normativity. Manzano's poetic persona and first person narrative voice resignify an African descendant spirituality that was Othered, obfuscated and ultimately vilified by the dominant discourses, thus constructing, negotiating and inscribing an African descendant subjectivity.

CHAPTER THREE

Re-signifying Religion and Spirituality within Contested Space: The Poetry of Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés

> ...palabras hinchadas, resonantes, disparatadas, huecas – ¡palabras, palabras, palabras! – siendo lo peor que a menudo ignora su significado.
>
> —–Manuel Sanguily's critique of Plácido's poetry

1.1 Introduction

The above-cited epigraph is one of Manuel Sanguily's many sharply worded invectives about the merit and meaning of the poetry of Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés. In 1894, at the time this statement was published in the journal, *Hojas Literarias* under the title, "Un improvisador cubano: el poeta Plácido y el juicio de Menéndez y Pelayo," it formed part of a larger debate taking place within Cuba and internationally concerning the poet known by the pseudonym Plácido. From Sanguily's point of view, Plácido's resounding words were inflated, ridiculous, hollow nonsense language (Bueno, ed. Acerca de Plácido 166). He decried the popular association of Plácido as "el Píndaro cubano", ("The Cuban Pindar"), whose verse had been described as "homérica", ("Homeric"), in quality (Bueno, ed. Acerca de Plácido 161). Sanguily attributed broad public admiration of Plácido with a general ignorance of literary conventions and credited his fame with his untimely death at the hands of colonial authorities. For Sanguily, Plácido's execution by the Spanish colonial

government, not the quality of his poetry, transformed the pitiable poet into a national martyr. On this matter he wrote, "y aun el hombre mismo, como purificado por el martirio, aparece confuso pero inmaculado en su marco sombrío de sangre y dolor" ("and even the man himself while purified by martyrdom, appears perplexed but immaculate in his gloomy condition of blood and pain") (Bueno, ed. Acerca de Plácido 160). In this article, Plácido was portrayed a miserably tragic figure whose execution justified an otherwise indefensible martyrdom.

For Sanguily, Plácido was not a national hero whose memory should be enshrined in Cuba's yet unstructured literary canon; he was not a Cuban poet, a black poet, or an artist of any kind, but simply: "un coplero, simple versificador" ("a rhymester, a simple versifier") (Bueno, ed. Acerca de Plácido 164).[78] He considered Plácido's body of work to be illogical and devoid of order except for instances of, "una concepción rudimentaria, o infantil, o primitiva" ("a rudimentary conception, or infantile or primitive") (Bueno, ed. Acerca de Plácido 166). In this regard, Sanguily exalts himself as a white critic above the object of his disapproval so that he might analyze, primitivize and infantilize Plácido's poetry as the unadorned verse of the racialized Other. The highbrow conception of culture imagined an intrinsic association between the character of the bard and his poems, so that if poetry lacked aesthetic merit, the poet was regarded as socially and intellectually inferior. Such criteria made certain that poets of color,

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[78] Manuel Sanguily was a white, propertied liberal intellectual and a formidable orator, who studied under José de la Luz y Caballero. Sanguily served also as a rebel officer during the Ten Years War (1868-1878) (Paquette 5).

with little formal humanistic education, like Plácido, would be excluded from Cuban canon formation.

The execution of Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés – fifty years prior and his brief but prolific literary career – generated much discussion about the value of his poetry and his significance as a historical figure. In 1844, colonial authorities charged, prosecuted and eventually executed Plácido for treason as the ringleader of a series of plantation uprisings that came to be known as *La Conspiración de la Escalera*, The Ladder Conspiracy. After he was put to death, Plácido came to be regarded as a paragon of anti-colonial fervor among people of color and as a traitor among whites who feared the power of black revolution on Cuban soil. Even in death, the colonial government's dread of Plácido lingered, so that it was forbidden to recite his poetry, consecrate his memory, or even speak his name (Paquette 265).

If indeed Sanguily believed Plácido's work was insignificant, it is peculiar that in 1894, he devoted three articles to convince the public of its irrelevance. These articles attest to Plácido's posthumous status as a historically significant Cuban poet who engendered impassioned responses from white and African descendant writers alike. Published only a month after the previous article, in "Otra vez Plácido y Menéndez y Pelayo. Reparos a censuras apasionadas" Sanguily tacitly acknowledged that Plácido had come to represent much more than a *simple versificador* for Afro-Cubans. A March 1894 article, published in *La Igualdad,* reported that the Plácido had been pronounced "EL IDOLO DE LOS CUBANOS NEGROS" ("THE IDOL OF BLACK CUBANS") at an evening party

attended by people of color (Bueno, ed. Acerca de Plácido 187).[79] Whites were admonished not to blemish "*el nombre glorioso de Plácido*" ("not tarnish the glorious name of Plácido") who was equated to José de la Luz y Caballero, a white Cuban patrician also implicated in the Ladder Conspiracy (Horrego Estuch 223). Unlike Plácido, Luz y Caballero was absolved of all charges brought against him. According to the article in *La Igualdad*, both figures were held in high esteem by their respective communities and were deserving of the admiration they had received (Bueno, ed. Acerca de Plácido 187).[80] Speaking of race as biological fact, Sanguily's rejoinder described Plácido as someone who was mostly white, since his mother was Spanish and his father was a quadroon, implying that Plácido was not a black person. Sanguily saw Plácido, as someone had not defended the political interests of people of color thus making him unworthy of any commemoration by African descendants (Bueno, ed. Acerca de Plácido 188). The impassioned exchange between Sanguily and *La Igualdad* exemplified the disputed interpretation of Plácido's poems by black and white audiences, signifying the enduring debate about his place within national memory.

The question remains: Why did Plácido's memory arouse such fervent debate fifty years after his execution, if, as Sanguily avers, Plácido was merely a

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[79] *La Igualdad* was a black Cuban newspaper that dates from 1892-1894 directed by Juan Gualberto. Cuba Contemporánea (Guiral Moreno, ed. 70). Gómez helped to organize La Guerra Chiquita of 1878, 1879 and later played a pivotal role in the Cuban War for Independence 1895-1898 (Bueno, ed. Acerca de Plácido 22, 53-54).

[80] In 1894, people of color in Cuba demanded that a statue be erected in Plácido honor (Paquette 4).

rhymester, whose poetry was not inspired by anti-colonial fervor? Critics have often studied Plácido's historical and political poems to establish or refute, his alleged involvement in the Ladder Conspiracy. In the main, Gabriel de la Concepcion Valdés has been appropriately portrayed as a political poet; however, such studies have generally ignored his religious representations. On the other hand, critics that do explore religion – Francisco Calcagno, Sebastián Alfredo de Morales and Jorge Castellanos – concentrate almost exclusively on Catholicism and are essentially silent on the poet's portrayal of African descendant spirituality. Such an omission has resulted in a somewhat myopic reading and lead to inconclusive statements about Plácido's religious identity and spiritual practice.

In this chapter, however, I analyze Plácido's illustrations of Catholicism as a normative means of religious representation reproducing biblical narrative as a an avowal of faith in the ecumenical authority of the Catholic Church. At the same time, I will explore Plácido's portrayal of an Afro-Cuban religious persona who negotiates with the dominant religious discourse even while subverting Christian claims to pre-eminence thus, transculturating the Hispanic text. How did these representations produce themselves in a colonial contact zone and what were the political implications of Africa-based ritual activity in the Age of *La Conspiración de la Escalera*?

1.2 Speaking Christian in the Contact Zone

Among the most conventional of Plácido's religious-themed poems are "Muerte de Jesucristo", ("Death of Jesus Christ") "A la resurrección de Jesús", ("To the Resurrection of Jesus") "Muerte del Redentor", ("Death of the Redeemer") "A la resurrección" ("To the Resurrection") and "A la muerte de Cristo" ("To the Death of Christ"). The representation of Catholicism and biblical narratives reproduce, if not reinforce, ecclesiastical doctrines regarding a sinful humanity, the need for repentance, redemption, and the preeminence of the Christian God. Jesus is enshrined as the Messiah and the Redeemer, an afflicted, yet resurrected Savior whose epic triumph over death and the grave is celebrated by all of nature. "Muerte de Jesucristo" is a sonnet-dirge despondently recounting the crucifixion: "Cuando en el monte Gólgota sagrado / Dice el Dios-Hombre con dolor profundo: / <<Cúmplase, Padre, en mí vuestro mandato>>" ("When on the sacred Mount of Golgotha / With profound pain the God-Man says / <<Father, let your will be done>>") (Morales, ed. 31).[81] The Christ figure submits to the will of God the Father, dying a martyr's death, marked by notable disturbances in the natural realm. As in the Gospels, the death of Jesus reverberates throughout nature: the sky becomes dark, lightning strikes, the stones break open, the rivers cease to flow, the birds refuse to sing and even the dead rise. Jesus is the innocent lamb to the slaughter, afflicted for the transgressions of the world: "Y á la rabia de un pueblo furibundo, / Inocente,

[81] Alfredo de Morales does not mention the place or date of publication or "Muerte de Jesucristo" Muerte del Redentor" (31, 606-08).

sangriento y enclavado, / Muere en la cruz el Salvador del mundo." ("And to the fury of a enraged people, / Innocent, bloody and nailed to the cross / The Savior of the world dies upon the cross") (Morales, ed. 31).

Although a longer narrative poem, "Muerte del Redentor" is parallel to "Muerte de Jesucristo" also relating the passion and crucifixion. Jesus is represented as the embodiment of God, so that although he resided in a human body, he is rendered divine. The death of the Christ has a transformative power atoning for sins and altering nature. Although Jesus is equated with God the Father, both poems reveal a significant distinction. "Muerte del Redentor" refers to Jesus as "el hijo de Dios", ("the son of God") "Hijo en carne de Dios", ("Son in the flesh of God") and "Hijo de Dios Padre" ("Son of God the Father") (Morales, ed. 606-08). Although endowed with unparalleled redemptive power, the Christ figure is subordinated to God the Father since the poet refers to him as the Son. Such a designation conforms to Christian doctrine, which maintains that God the Father is the ultimate patriarch. On the other hand, the poetic persona in "Muerte de Jesucristo" identifies Jesus as "Dios-Hombre" ("the God-Man"), in that way embracing the apostolic, yet paradoxical view of the early Church, that, at once Jesus possessed the qualities of the divine and the human.

"A la muerte de Cristo" (1843) is a poem written by Plácido while incarcerated in Trinidad under suspicion of conspiracy against the Spanish government.[82] Like the aforementioned poems, "A la muerte de Cristo" also

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[82] Plácido's motives for writing this poem should be questioned considering his imprisonment on anti-government conspiracy charges.

memorializes the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. On the whole these poems are laudatory, dedicatory, and without self-representation.[83] However, "A la muerte de Cristo" is less mournful than the other poems instead describing divine creation of humankind, corruption as a result of sin and redemption through grace. Mankind is depicted as treacherous and violent by nature, desperately needing, even if unworthy of forgiveness. Even so, "A la muerte de Cristo" focuses on the absolute power of God the Father to create as well as devastate describing him as "Destructor de Sodoma", ("Destroyer of Sodom"), "Hacedor Supremo", ("Supreme Maker") and "Rey de los Reyes" ("King of Kings"). The poetic voice equates the judgmental God of the Hebraic tradition with the God of the New Testament, a holy and sacred entity demanding righteousness but also disposed to sacrifice for the redemption of wayward man (Garófalo Mesa 149-150).

Such religious poetry was not exceptional in early nineteenth century Cuba. José Jacinto Milanés – who authored the Matanzas newspaper, *La Madrugada* and was acquainted with Plácido – published "En la muerte de nuestro Señor Jesucristo" ("In the Death of Our Lord Jesus Christ") in 1850, a sonnet that replicates the same theme as "Muerte del Redentor" (Castellanos 19). The poem refers to Jesus Christ as "el Hombre-Dios exánime" ("the debilitated God Man"), depicting a suffering Messiah wishing only to fulfill the will

[83] The only exception to this is "A la muerte de Cristo" where in one verse the poetic voice refers to himself as "El cantor del Yumurí", a celebratory title linking him to Matanzas. However, as in the other poems, there is no self-reflexivity with regard to the meaning of the crucifixion for the poetic voice himself (Garófalo Mesa 148).

of God the Father by submitting to crucifixion. In the same manner as "Muerte de Redentor" and "Muerte de Jesucristo", the sonnet illustrates changes in the natural realm as a consequence of the crucifixion (Milanés 348). In fact, the only significant difference is that Milanés' poetic voice is self-reflexive, intimating that divine sacrifice demands contrition: "Murió...Quien?...Quien compuso cuanto admiro. / Por quién?... Por mí, que en mi feroz crudeza / sin deshacerme en lágrimas lo miro!" ("Who died?...He that composed everything I admire. / For whom?...For me, in my ferocious severity / I gaze upon him without dissolving into tears!") (Milanés 349). The lyrical voice in Milanés' "En la muerte de nuestro Señor Jesucristo" self-consciously reflects on his lack of penitence as an insensitivity to divine sacrifice. On the other hand, Plácido's poems portraying the passion, crucifixion, and death of Jesus are all without personal response or reflection. In both poems, the poetic persona is positioned outside the narrative, so that he merely recites the well-known biblical account as an act of religious tribute.[84]

"A la Resurrección" (1843) and "A la Resurrección de Jesús" (of unspecified date and place of publication) adopt an exultant tone venerating the rebirth of Jesus Christ from the dead as a glorious victor.[85] As a suitable case

[84] "Muerte del Redentor" and "A la colocación de le primera piedra en la nave de la iglesia parroquial de Matanzas" ("In the Positioning of the First Stone of the Nave of the Parish Church of Matanzas") were written to Dr. Don Manuel Francisco García, a Matanzas Parish Priest. Another such poem "A la bendición de la nave construida en la Iglesia parroquial de Matanzas" ("In the Blessing of the Nave Constructed in The Parish Church of Matanzas") pays homage to this same church (Morales, ed. 610-15).

[85] García Garófalo Mesa says that Plácido composed this poem during Holy Week while imprisoned in Trinidad in 1843 (Garófalo Mesa 150).

in point I am citing from "A la Resurrección": "Es Jesucristo el hijo de María, / Es el Rey de los Reyes que triunfante / Alza el divino cuerpo centellante / Del polvo inmundo que su faz cubria." ("It is Jesus Christ the son of Mary, / He is the King of Kings who triumphant / Lifts his luminous divine body / From the repugnant earth that covered his countenance") (Morales, ed. 31). Such poems draw on the Gospels where the resurrection is the culmination of a series of events portraying the divinity of Jesus. Whereas the crucifixion is an act of suffering meant to convey divine sacrifice for errant mankind, Jesus' rising from the dead is a decisive triumph over sin, death, and the grave. The second of these poems, "A la resurrección de Jesús", concludes:

> *<<¡Gloria al Dios de Israel en las alturas!>>*
> Tal á la tercer alba
> Que presiagiaba el astro rubicundo,
> Con gozo universal y regia salva,
> Del sepulcro profundo
> En almo coro de ángeles brillante,
> De la impostura y la maldad triunfante
> Subió á la Gloria el Redentor del mundo. (original emphasis, Morales, ed. 606)

Although the resurrection of Jesus Christ is a victory over evil, death, and the tomb, the premier glory is reserved for God the Father as the unquestioned divine authority. All four poems are gendered male so that Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Mary Magdalene – although mentioned in "Muerte de Jesucristo" – do not figure prominently since transformative religious power is attributed to the patriarchy. Female characters are mere recipients of divine benevolence, not active subjects in their own redemption.

In my view, Plácido's religious-themed poems reproduce the Catholic Church as a highbrow institution that represented the political and economic

interests of the upper echelon of colonial society (Cros-Sandoval 20). This rather orthodox religious poetry mirrors the interactions the poet maintained with white cultural elites and, as such, assured his reception as a poet of color. Plácido extemporized laudatory and humorous poems for wealthy patrons who lined his pockets at their evening banquets. Daisy Cué compares Valdés to the canary in his fable, "El hombre y el canario"; in essence regarding him as an insincere figure, obliged to sing the praises of a political system he wished to denounce ("Plácido y la Conspiración" 174). The soirée recitals reveal that in addition to income earned from published poetry, Plácido relied on a wealthy and mostly white plantation elite for his sustenance. Hence, economic need explains, at least in part, why the poet may have felt obliged to write poetry as a suitable act of religious affiliation.

The aforementioned poetry is situated within the official religious discourse as a form of polite speech. Depicting traditional biblical narratives, the poems carefully delimit moral categories reinforcing the legitimacy and authority of the Catholic Church as purveyor of the official religion of the colony. To be sure, a number of Plácido's religious poems are ostensibly Catholic. I maintain that Plácido's Catholic poems – as well as his recitation at elite soirées – are performances intended for public consumption dissembling the true nature of his relationship with whites.[86] The recital is for the amusement of a white

[86] In colonial (and neo-colonial) societies dominant and subordinated groups produce "public transcripts" that dissemble the true nature of their relationship based on interactions and exchanges taking place in public view. As such, carefully scripted behaviors, selective use of language and sophisticated role-playing amounts to interplay between the powerful and the oppressed accentuating the authority of the colonizer even as the submission of the colonized is reiterated (Scott xii).

interlocutor, drawing attention to the intrinsic power relations of colonial society in which African descendants, whether enslaved or free, were expected to perform a subordinated public role.

1.3 The Christianization of Plácido

Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés' religious identity has been a matter of speculation for a number of literary critics, biographers, and even some of his contemporaries. In Poetas de color (1887) Francisco Calcagno depicts Plácido as a Christian martyr unjustly subjected to the violence of a colonial system of exploitation. Relying on Plácido's final letter to his wife, Maria Gila Morales, Calcagno refers to him as "[un] modelo de resignacion cristiana" ("a model of Christian resignation") (sic) (24).[87] In this vein, Calcagno says:

> Allí, despues de oida su sentencia, el sinventura poeta que no tenia á quien volver los ojos para hallar un rostro amigo y protector, se arrojó en brazos de la Religion, y como el cisne moribundo, compuso sus mejores cantos,... (sic) (22).

Plácido is rendered the typical colonized person: inoffensive, meek, and even peaceful, unable to act either as an individual subject or in unison with other African descendant conspirators, as colonial authorities had charged. The poet is a forlorn victim in a calamitous moment without *un rostro amigo* ("a friendly face") to shelter him, hence hurling himself into the arms of *la Religion*, a common reference to the official religion of colonial Cuba. The denial of subjecthood invalidates the charges brought against Plácido given that colonial

[87] It is worth noting that although the 1887 edition was the fifth time this book was published, the chapter on Plácido appears to have been written in 1879. Calcagno writes that 35 years had passed since the poet's execution in 1844. This chapter, then, may have been largely unchanged from the fourth edition published in 1879 (24).

authorities not only thought him to be involved in the *La Conspiración de la Escalera*, but also supposed he was the chief architect. According to Calcagno, Plácido is incapable of violence even if self-preservation is the rationale. In this way, Plácido becomes the de-fanged Other, a non-threatening persona to the Spanish colonial government that crucified him, instead acquiescing to the unjust fate in the letter to his spouse. In Calcagno's view, Plácido is a Romantic poet and willing Christian martyr, suitably situated within the confines of the official religious discourse. Such a noble image stands in opposition to the charges that he plotted a racially motivated conspiracy in the tradition of the Haitian of Revolution. Christian martyrdom amounts to an implicit whitening of the African descendant poet, making him palatable to a sympathetic white readership.

Calcagno's assertion that Plácido was a Christian is largely drawn from the poet's final letter to his wife, María Gila Morales. In the letter, Plácido bequeaths the exclusive rights for all poems to his wife; he leaves her his mother's ring, and asks that she not to be consumed by grief.

> Quiero asimismo que se te entregue la sortija de mi madre y con ella el último adios de tu esposo; y si me has amado verdaderamente, no te entregues al dolor, porque esto no seria cristiana, y te cerraría las puertas del otro mundo de gloria, donde quiero encontrarte entre las personas que me son queridas en éste (100).
>
> El llanto que te pido á mi memoria es que socorras á los pobres, siempre que puedas, y mi sombra estará tranquila y risueña, contemplándote digna de ser la esposa de Plácido. Un abrazo á Petrona Cenac, y para tí el corazon de tu Plácido, que te pide le encomiendas al Dios de las misericordias (100-01).

More than anything, the letter is a last testament in which Plácido sees to it that his poems are preserved for posterity and that his wife is compensated for all reprinted literature. The above-cited passages convey a sense of Christian

ethics, in that the poet asks his wife to honor his memory by serving the poor. Plácido also expresses a belief in the other world and in the existence of spirit beings that survive after death. His spirit or "mi sombra" ("my shadow") will be at peace if his widow follows through with his dying requests. He advises his wife not to be stricken with grief since that could prevent her from entering heaven's door saying that her acts of charity would make him smile from heaven.

Engraved in Plácido's final correspondence with his wife is a palpable sense of Christian patriarchy and duty. The things that he has prescribed must be done for María Gila Morales to be welcomed into heaven and worthy of being called his wife. In so doing, the poet implies that he has already been assured entry into the afterlife. Although Plácido does not explicitly identify as a Christian, the letter serves as an implicit self-identification with Church doctrine and biblical teaching. Not unlike his Catholic-themed poems, this letter situates the poet within religious normativity depicting him as an upright devotee of *La Religión.* At the same time, Plácido wrote the letter from prison shortly before his execution so that his awareness of the censorship of incoming and outgoing correspondence was heightened. The letter reveals a familiarity with Christianity and what appears to have been a close association with Sr. Don Manuel J. García who he calls his "protector". (It appears that this García was the Parish Priest to whom the poet dedicated two poems). This may, of course, be a truthful statement of Plácido's religious affiliation, although, bearing in mind that he wrote this letter under great duress, we cannot know that for sure. What

is certain, however, is that Plácido employed the language of Christianity as a polite act of self-legitimation with considerable skill.

Sebastián Alfredo de Morales' account is another notable example of the Christianization of Plácido. As Plácido's personal friend and confidant Alfredo de Morales' 1886 edition, Plácido: Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés poesías completas con doscientas diez composiciones inéditas su retrato y un prólogo biográfico, sets out to canonize him within a fledging national tradition and aggrandize him as the most significant Cuban poet of the nineteenth century. As such, Alfredo de Morales whitens Plácido, portraying him as a *mulato* whose affections were for the white race; in this way exonerating Valdés of the Spanish government's charges (xxv, xxxiii). In the account, Plácido is rendered a natural poet with a veritable religious and spiritual character. In order to lend credence to his depiction of the poet, Alfredo de Morales cites a private conversation where Plácido confides: "He sido muy desgraciado desde la cuna; a veces creo en la estrella aciaga que nos persigue hasta la tumba" ("I have been very unfortunate since birth; sometimes I believe in the fateful star that follows us until the final resting place") (xx). This statement – part of a longer exchange in which the poet explains his intolerance for alcohol – may suggest a certain resignation to an inauspicious destiny not uncommon in Romantic thought. At the same time, it may allude to a religious belief in predestination of humankind.

Alfredo de Morales suggests as much, because, like Calcagno, he claims that Plácido approached the firing squad with serene resignation and remarkable religious conviction. In addition, Alfredo de Morales says that in his

final moments, Plácido even tried to comfort Santiago Pimienta, a fellow alleged co-conspirator.

> ...lo animó con palabras de resignacion y heroismo y cambió con él su pequeño *Crucifijo* de marfil que al tiempo de salir de la capilla le cedió su venerable amigo y auxiliante el respetable Cura Párroco de Matanzas Doctor D. Manuel Francisco Garcia. (sic) (xxxvi)

Morales portrays Plácido as the ideal Romantic hero, an instinctively courageous male person, hence reinforcing his traditional masculinity. His innocence and faith in God the Father permit him to submit to a terrible and undeserved fate. Unlike "Muerte de Jesucristo" and "La resurrección de Jesús" this biographical account likens Plácido to the Suffering Christ, since he is made to walk his own *Via Dolorosa* on the path to martyrdom. The crucifix, a gift of Parish Priest D. Manuel Francisco García, now becomes emblematic of Plácido's own crucifixion since, like Christ, he is portrayed as a guiltless Lamb to the slaughter. This description of the final moments before Plácido's execution is further dramatized when Alfredo de Morales not only exculpates the poet but beatifies him.

> Era todo un profeta que con lira coronada de eslabones de hierro atravesaba por entre las grandes oleadas de la humanidad á la conquista de la gloria. (sic) (xxxvi)

The descriptive account transforms Plácido from a worthy and deeply Cuban poet to a righteous prophet whose own benevolence and strength of character do not permit him to perish a bitter person. To be sure, this narrative, like Plácido's abovementioned religious poems, is demonstrably Catholic. The substance and discursive power are derived from the Old Testament prophetic tradition as well as the passion and crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Unlike Calcagno's account of humble acquiescence, Alfredo de Morales portrays Plácido as an active subject

whose activities and intentions are circumscribed within Christian normativity. Resembling the prophets of the Hebraic tradition, the poet presages that which is to come and is martyred for a worthy and righteous cause.

In a similar fashion, Jorge Castellanos refers to the poet's conversation with Alfredo de Morales to corroborate "su profunda asimilación a los valores capitales del cristianismo" ("his profound assimilation to the principal values of Christianity") (18). Castellanos avers that Plácido's ideological posture was born of a belief in a Christian universal order whose function was to explain everything that existed and everything that took place, even the absurd. This universal order meant that Plácido understood himself as *un agente del Señor*, an agent of the Lord, so that his poetry was a moral instrument of social critique and betterment (20-21). Once more, Plácido is located within Catholic orthodoxy, not only renowned as a practicing Catholic, but, as Alfredo de Morales maintained, he is a prophet in the tradition of the Christian scriptures. This interpretation of Plácido's religious themed verse is superficial, in view of the fact that it uncritically equates representation of a Catholic belief system with actual devotion to the Church's teachings and personal religious identity. On the whole, there is little distance between reality and representation in Castellanos' analyses. That being said, these representations of Plácido as prophet merit further attention since certain self-representative poems in his collected works make use of martyrdom and prophesy to project anti-colonial and nationalist sentiment. I maintain that poetry portending divine judgment should be analyzed as religious representation endowed with grave political implications.

It is worth noting that Castellanos and Alfredo de Morales both mention poems that illustrate modes of spirituality unconfined by Church doctrine, including those that portray Africa-based ritual practice. Neither critic, however, takes into account what these representations might mean concerning Plácido's familiarity with African descendant spirituality or his personal religious distinctiveness. In the final section of this chapter, I will analyze Plácido's poems "El diablito", "A la Virgen del Rosario", "La figura de un alma", and "Fantasmas duendes y brujas" which portray an unorthodox Afro-Cuban spirituality. Though Plácido wrote many conformist Christian-themed poems devoid of self-representation that do not problematize the role of religion in colonial society, there are a few notable exceptions.

Addressed to Queen Isabel II de Borbón, "La profecía de Cuba a España" ("The prophecy from Cuba to Spain") constructs a nationalist persona legitimated from within a Catholic frame of reference so that the appropriation of discursive normativity destabilizes and undermines the discourse from which it borrows. Plácido's poetic voice iterates an abiding abhorrence for tyranny, "Yó ante el Dios de la gran Naturaleza, / Odio eterno hé jurado á los tiranos" ("Before the God of immeasurable Nature, I / Swear eternal hatred for tyrants") (Morales, ed. 654). The antipathy towards despotism is reminiscent of "El juramento", which I analyze in the section to follow. Cuba is portrayed as Plácido's native soil, transforming the Afro-Cuban poetic voice from *vasallo de la reina* (the Queen's vassal) to a prospective subject within an emerging nationalist sentiment.

Adorned with palm leaves and orange or lemon blossoms (*azahares*), Cuba is embodied as a magnificent tropical female character, a defiant subject whose confrontational discourse questions the voiceless condition of Spanish colonies. Unlike Plácido's traditionalist Catholic-themed poetry, discursive power is located within the periphery; the lyrical persona is prophet in the Hebraic tradition, presaging a judgment to befall the mother country. The political implications of "La profecía de Cuba a España" were many, in view of the fact that Cuba was one of Spain's few remaining overseas possessions.

Nationalist sentiment within a biblical frame of reference is conspicuous in "La profecía de Cuba a España"; nonetheless, the imminent revolution is not decreed by the Christian God instead coming by the hand of a vengeful Afro-Cuban subject armed with *la Justicia*.

> ¡Qué...! ¿presumes reinar...? Cuál será su trueno
> Que aterre y venza del saber los hijos?...
>
> Tiembla y huye, infeliz: la edad presente
> No sostiene traidores coronados,
> Y si tú horda vandálica insolente
> Lograr pudiera su perverso encono
> Fueras siempre un esclavo sobre un trono,
> Mas nunca un rey...
>
> No lo tolera la moderna España
> Ni la consiente la opinión del siglo.
> ¡Huye y tiembla, infeliz! Que si fiado
> Vés al león vestido de cordura,
>
> ...
> El nombre del progreso en áurea nube
> Por la Justicia y el honor llevado, ...
> Vencen sus hijos la sangrienta guerra,
> Y el Despotismo vil muerde la tierra,

Y rabia, y tiembla, y brama, y desaparece. (Morales, ed. 655-56)[88]

Isabel II de Borbón, Queen of Spain (1833-1868), is reproved as an incompetent ruler, unworthy to sit on the throne. The poem's critical tone stands in sharp contrast to Plácido's laudatory verse celebrating the coronation of the Queen. In "La profecía de Cuba a España" the monarch is condemned as a traitor to the Spanish people discarding freedom and liberal ideas to embrace despotism. The Manichean divisions, slave/free and colonizer/colonized are inverted so that Cuba denounces the sovereign as a slave. This emerging national voice commits the ultimate act of sedition, alleging that the monarch's use of authority is treasonous such that she is shamefully unfit to rule. The colonized poetic persona, not the Queen of Spain, comprehends freedom, justly struggling to achieve it. Plácido wrote a number of other poems with double meanings, metaphors, and coded speech that also lent themselves to conflicting interpretations.

Though the poems that embody Christian narratives deserve serious analysis, poetry that depicts Africa-based spirituality is equally significant. The Afro-Cuban poems give voice to a seldom-portrayed means of spiritual practice that stands outside the confines of orthodox religious discourse, problematizes the prejudicial colonial gaze with regard to Africa-derived spirituality and subverts the universal claims of the Catholic Church to religious preeminence.

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[88] Although Plácido uses adjectives that are gendered male, it is apparent that the poem is a critique of Isabel II, who is depicted as *[el] león vestido de cordura*, that is, the lion disguised as a wise person.

1.4 Deciphering Africa-based Spirituality in Plácido's Verse

Daisy Cué Fernández's study of Plácido's so-called black-themed verse acknowledges a use of *jitanjáfora*, onomatopoeia, folkloric color writing, a depiction of black Cuban Spanish as well as what she calls African beliefs and superstitions (Plácido: El poeta 225-226). This is important because, unlike other critics, Cué recognizes African descendant spirituality in Plácido's poetry, which until recently had been almost completely effaced from the literary record. She notes that apart from Emilio Ballagas and her own work, the Afro-Cuban spiritual poems have gone unmentioned and unstudied by Plácido's critics and biographers (Plácido: El poeta 226).

The silence constructed around Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés' representation of African descendant spirituality can be explained, at least in part, bearing in mind that Catholicism represented social legitimation for colonial Cuba's predominately white upper echelon. The Church maintained relevance well into the early twentieth century when critics were looking to canonize Plácido through a process of overt or implicit whitening. To associate Plácido with Africa-based religion, spirituality or culture might have endangered a place within an emerging and predominately white Cuban literary tradition. By analyzing Valdés' portrayal of Africa-based spirituality, I contend that the religio-cultural identity of the African descendant persona is inextricably coupled with its political function, hence producing subversive transculturated literature.

Among the poems named in the indictment against Plácido, "El juramento" ("The Oath") (1840) was of particular concern to the colonial administration for it

conveyed a yearning for liberty articulating a solemn oath to destroy the tyrant. To the authorities this sonnet amounted to a political manifesto inscribed in verse that was well known and often recited throughout the island (Horrego Estuch 56). The content of the final three stanzas was judged to be particularly troubling.

> Allí fuí yo por mi deber llamado
> Y haciendo altar la tierra endurecida,
> Ante el sagrado código de la vida,
> Extendidas mis manos, he jurado:
>
> Ser enemigo eterno del tirano,
> Manchar, si me es posible, mis vestidos
> Con su execrable sangre, por mi mano
>
> Derramarla con golpes repetidos
> Y morir a las manos de un verdugo
> Si es necesario, por romper el yugo. (Horrego Estuch 55-56)

It is not difficult to ascertain why the prosecutor thought this sonnet to be subversive. The poetic persona vows to be a perpetual foe of the tyrant, tarnishing his garments with the detestable blood of his nemesis alluding to a certain but honorable death at the hands of the executioner. There is little question that this stanza comprises an oath of vengeance to slay the nameless tyrant by explicitly violent means. The Spanish colonial authorities certainly believed that the word "tyrant" spoke of a yearning to overthrow the government and as such justified the poet's imprisonment, trial and conviction.

Plácido's references to "por mi deber llamado" ("for my duty called") and "haciendo altar la tierra endurecida" ("making an altar of the hard earth"), "ante el sagrado código de la vida" ("before the sacred code of life") are verses that lend themselves to multiple interpretations. While the poetic voice pledges to depose of dictatorial authority – presumably the colonial order – it is not clear what relation *el sagrado código de la vida* has to the sworn mission. While kneeling at

an altar situated outside the cathedral walls, the poet vows to exact retributive justice. Beyond the confines of the Catholic Church, the hard earth has become hallowed ground for the swearing of sacred oaths. The violence depicted in this text is emblematic of the poet's yearning for a subjecthood that colonial racial hierarchy renders nearly impossible. While it is difficult to classify "El juramento" as a spiritual poem, it can be accurately described as something more than a political manifesto. The words "altar", "sacred code of life", a "for my duty called", as well as dying at the hands of an executioner, introduce a quasi-prophetic sense of religiosity into a text that had grave implications for its author.

Although it is well known that racial politics were central to the Spanish government's official account of the failed conspiracy, Africa-based spiritual practice was frequently cited as an instrument of recruitment and insurgent activity in the testimony of the accused. The African-born would have attributed their captivity to the efficacious use of ritual powers and as such would have looked to such power to attain their freedom (Paquette 256). In what follows, I will discuss the cultural function and political implications of Africa-based ritual activity in a select number of Plácido's poems.

"Mi no sé que ha richo", (Me Don't Know What I've Said) "A la Virgen del Rosario" ("To The Virgin of the Rosary") (1836) and "El diablito" (The Little Devil) can be characterized as *cabildo* poems for their representation of Afro-Cuban religious confraternities.[89] The latter two poems privilege the religio-cultural

[89] "Mi no sé que ha richo" depicts the *cabildo* in local color. It is represented as a carefully ordered social space where Africans, referred to with the contemporary descriptor *etiope* ("Ethiopian"), gather to sing, dance and play instruments of their own design. At the same time, however, the poem has a derisive tone in that the poetic voice characterizes the elderly leader's

organizations of African descendant people as collectivized space; they depict contact with the spirit realm, ritual practice, and reverence for divine entities. Whereas "Mi no sé que ha richo" is a humorous poem written from a detached third person perspective, the lyrical voice in "A la Virgen del Rosario" enunciates from within the cabildo as a member of the sacred brotherhood. As such, the text provides a view from inside.

Any portrayal of the *cabildo* is remarkable for a poem written by an Afro-Cuban writer because in the first half of the nineteenth century *el cabildo* consisted primarily of an African-born membership. White planters tended to believe that the tensions inherent in slave societies could be mitigated if blacks were granted some measure of autonomy (Childs 106). Although *cabildos* permitted non-Africans to join, persons of color born in Cuba were granted limited rights since African-born leadership was preferred (Childs 108). This was an inversion of colonial social order, since the African held the most privileged position.

In "A la Virgen del Rosario" ("The Virgin of the Rosary") the poetic voice exhorts his fellow *cofrades* to join with him in the extolment of The Virgin of the Rosary. This description of the Virgin Mary as a divine figure of maternal protection exemplifies *marianismo* – the cult of the Virgin Mary – as a path to complete knowledge about the mysteries of salvation through Jesus Christ. Mercedes Cros Sandoval explains that in the second half of the eighteenth

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speech as the inarticulate grunts of an animal. When asked by the membership what he has said the *cabildo* leader replies "Mi no sé que ha richo" onomatopoeic Cuban Spanish for "I don't know what I have said" (Morales, ed. 294).

century the priesthood did not interfere with African religious activity in the *cabildos*; instead they fostered a reliance on the Virgin as a source of divine protection for enslaved Africans (20-21). The African descended poetic "I" appears to embrace priestly advice by accentuating the value of her divine protection: "Su protección es signo de *alegria*: / Ella os afianza en la vida la victoria, / Y cuando llegue de la muerte el dia, /... Os abrirá las puertas de la Gloria" ("Her protection is a sign of jubilation: / She assures you victory in life, / And when the day of death arrives / ...The Virgin will open the doors of Glory to you") (Morales, ed. 10).

Furthermore, the Virgin is revered for her numerous virtues: "Un Sol contemplareis bajo su manto / De vivísima lumbre peregrina, / Y un globo inmenso de virtud divina / En cada cuenta del rosario santo." ("You will contemplate a sun beneath her garments / Of vivacious pilgrim fire / And a globe of immense divine virtue / In each bead of the holy rosary.") (Morales, ed. 10). She is depicted as a beneficent entity, beneath whose garment shines a brilliant pilgrim sun so that in each bead of the rosary, divine virtue is found. This poem can be read as an apparent manifestation of the Virgin Mary situated within established ecclesiastical practice. Such a reading, however, disregards the historical significance of the *cabildo* as well as the subjectivity of captive Africans. To the uninitiated this is a poem in praise of the Virgin of the Rosary, but for the *cofrades* it is recognition of the *oricha* known as *Dadá*.

If we consider that the act of reverence takes place within the *cabildo* and that the practitioners are African, an alternative reading emerges. In Yoruba-

based Cuban religions *Dadá* is the sister of *Changó* and the protector of children. The *cabildo* provides space for transculturation so that the oppressed selectively adapt outside cultural materials encompassing them into their own cultural practices and narratives. According to oral tradition (the *pattakí*) this divine female spirit lives by the sacred *ceiba* tree and is the proprietor of vegetables (Cros Sandoval 301). Her association with agriculture and the land reflects her attributes as a life giving, nurturing force. For *cabildo* members the very same divine spirits that walked with them on the African continent assure their protection in this life as well as safe passage to the afterlife.

Clearly, this ode to The Virgin Mary lends it self to divergent readings since it inverts traditional categories and harbors concealed meanings. In their respective traditions, both The Virgin of the Rosary and *Dadá* are recognized as spiritual entities with female attributes; they are maternal figures that watch over their devoted children. Nonetheless, while *La Virgen* guides followers on the path to Christ, *Dadá's* faithful are initiated to revere *Changó*, her warrior brother (Cros Sandoval 21, 32, 301). This representation of the Virgin is divested of its original aesthetic rationale since the ritual is not situated within the church but the *cabildo* and the devotees are not Hispanic parishioners but Africans. Reverence for the *orichas* within Africa-based cultural space transculturates the text. In this way, *el cabildo* is depicted as collectivized sacred space that empowers and protects the African subject in a hostile slave society. As I have theorized, transculturated colonial literature resignifies and subverts established cultural symbols, in that way transforming the oppressed into veritable subjects.

The portrayal of spirit activity surfaces once again in "La figura de un alma" ("The Silhouette of a Soul") and in "Fantasmas, duendes y brujas" ("Ghosts, Spirits and Witches"). In "La figura de un alma" enslaved plantation laborers are distressed by a nocturnal vision that appears to be a tiger. As they confer with each other about what they have seen, the white master comes to determine the cause of the commotion. When he catches sight of the vision, he reacts with great trepidation to the shifting image in the dark, invoking the cross; "Magnífica / *Anima mea*...! ¡La cruz...!" ("Magnificent / My soul...! The cross!") (Morales, ed. 295). This invocation of the cross, and by extension of the Catholic faith, is for personal protection. In response to the master's fearful reaction, an enslaved female character, *una negra ladina*, identifies the roaming silhouette as the spirit of the deceased overseer: "Contestó: – "Señor, no es eso, / Ese tigre es sin mentira, / El alma del mayoral / Que se murió el otro día" ("She replied: – "Sir, it's not that, / This tiger is without a doubt, / The soul of the overseer / That died the other day") (Morales, ed. 295).[90] The black female character is a person of good judgment and is knowledgeable of spiritual matters; as such she is able to clarify the character of this entity to the outsider.

Such a representation of the slave plantation subtly acknowledges its status as *locus horrendus* by depicting the deceased overseer as a spirit who roams the land like a wild beast. The enslaved African woman and the entire plantation community speak with one voice identifying the overseer as a savage

[90] Daisy Cué says that *la negra ladina* refers to an enslaved African woman who received instruction before being exported to the colonies and for that reason spoke proper Spanish. Additionally, she states that in Spanish *ladina* denotes a particularly astute person (Plácido: El poeta 227).

tiger. This bestialization is an allusion to the ferocious mistreatment he meted out, and his physical demise is an affirmation of anti-slavery sentiment. At the same time, the poem evinces a scenario in which enslaved Africans instruct their white master in matters of spirituality. This amounts to an inversion of the social order since colonial slave codes intended for slaves and masters alike to be baptized and instructed in the rites of Catholicism.

The enslaved woman's composure suggests familiarity with unwelcome apparitions insinuating that she may know how to propitiate such spirits so that no harm is done. Maleficent spirits are again depicted in "Fantasmas, duendes y brujas" where the poet warns his incredulous countrymen of their near ubiquitous presence and their considerable powers. The African descendant poetic persona compares himself to a *semi-siguapa* or night owl who, like *la negra ladina* is able to discern and interpret that which escapes most observers. He promises to show the modern skeptic the infinite spirits that ceaselessly walk the streets and the plazas (Morales, ed. 196).

> En aquellos memorables
> Tiempos de Mari-Castaña,
> Dicen los viejos que había
> Brujas, duendes y fantasmas.
> Los modernos no lo creen;
> Miradlo bien, camaradas,
> Ahora los hay como entónces,
> El caso es que se disfrazan. (Moarles, ed. 196)

Los viejos are the source of his faith in spiritual entities whose existence the moderns refuse to accept.[91] In this poem, as in "A La Virgen del Rosario" and

[91] In Refranes de negros viejos, Lydia Cabrera maintains that *los viejos* may refer either to elderly African or European descendants that are known for the popular wisdom expressed in maxims, proverbs, sayings and aphorisms (1-6). This is significant, because while the poem

"La figura de un alma" there is a distinction between the insider point of view and the gaze of the uninitiated outsider. Although both *los viejos* and *los modernos* witness the same apparitions, each draws very different conclusions about what has been perceived.

The poetic voice disputes his interlocutors' disbelief in the existence of roving spirits. He maintains that these spirits are angry because they suffered in life and as a result have become maleficent in death.

> Y confesad sin embajes,
> Que en este tiempo hay fantasmas,
> Y muchos peores que aquellas
> De que los viejos nos hablan:
>
> Aquellas la cruz huian,
> Por ser medrosas y mansas;
> Pero éstas son tan terribles,
> Que della la cruz se espanta. (Morales, ed. 198)[92]

According to the lyrical voice, the power of these spirits is such that even the cross recoils at their sight. The Latin cross – the quintessential symbol of Catholic religious authority – is portrayed as powerless to defeat malevolent beings from the otherworld. The poem represents a confrontation with the Catholic faith, the official religion of colonial Cuba, which does not prevail against an unorthodox and potentially inauspicious spiritual presence. Comparable to "A La Virgen del Rosario" and "La figura de un alma", "Fantasmas, duendes y brujas" represents the subversion of ecclesiastical authority by divesting religious symbols of their institutional power.

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describes the omnipresence of sprits it does not exclusively situate this belief in either Hispanic or Afro-Cuban culture.

[92] "Sin embajes" is an orthographical error that should be rendered "sin ambages", which means to say something straightforwardly.

The aforementioned poems disturb, contest, and even undermine Christian universal claims to religious authority in view of the fact that an Africa-based spiritual belief system is placed on par with Catholicism. Marginalized religious practice posits alternative possibilities for contact and union with the spiritual realm, which are unmediated by the priesthood. In a similar manner, "El diablito" raises questions about the public scrutiny of carnivalesque dance performance through the depiction of an Afro-Cuban masquerader at *el Día de Reyes* procession.

"El diablito" is an eleven-stanza composition with important implications for my analysis of Africa-based spirituality in Plácido's body of poems. The description of Africa-based carnival performance tacitly recognizes that the festival masquerader is an object of public attention and inquiry. As in "Fantasmas, duendes y brujas" and "La figura de un alma" the African descendant poetic persona is a keen observer of the *el Día de Reyes* procession. The masquerader performs as a member of a *cabildo*, hence linking festival performance with Africa-based religious practice, which, more often than not, was coded in ostensibly Catholic rituals and symbols.

In colonial Cuba, festival celebrations were organized according to Catholic religious holidays honoring the Virgin Mary, the saints, or the birth of Jesus Christ. *El Día de Reyes*, The Day of Three Kings, also known as Epiphany, was celebrated on January 6 to honor the wise men who brought gifts to the Christ Child. The annual *el Día de Reyes* procession was a distinctly African and African-descended event in which white Cubans did not participate instead,

organizing and celebrating a European-style carnival in honor of the same religious holidays (Arredondo 137-38).[93]

Church sanctioned festivals, such as *el Día de Reyes* celebration, inadvertently provided public space for the expression of Africa-based religious practice organized by *cabildos de nación*. Official recognition and consent to participate in public performance meant that the African born and their Cuban descendants were able to commemorate, and to a certain degree, exteriorize the cultural manifestations of their co-ed brotherhoods. Such recognition did not signify an endorsement of Africa-based religion by the Catholic Church or colonial authorities. This is important in view of the fact that the Inquisition remained the official policy of the Catholic Church in Spain until 1834. In Spanish American colonies, the Holy Office of the Inquisition had exercised its authority since the end of the sixteenth century with the specific intent of establishing "an order secured through culture" (Palmié 228). This meant that the Spanish Empire used Catholicism to impose a social and ethical order that would promote their economic interests and reinforce their political authority on the island.

The New World Inquisition prosecuted cases of Protestant heresy, blasphemy, sexual misconduct, superstitious practices and what they deemed to be other forms of aberrant behavior among the white, *mestizo* and Afro-descended populations (Palmié 229-30). Nevertheless, the Holy Office never instituted a separate tribunal in Cuba instead exhibiting a leniency with regard to

[93] Article 24 of the Municipal Ordinances provided official sanction for the annual *el Día de Reyes* procession (Arredondo 137-38).

the religious offenses committed by colonial subjects and showing reluctance to use torture as a political tactic (Palmié 230, 342). The *edictos de fe* (the Inquisitional legal code) classified offenses, distinguishing between *hechicería* (superstition) and *brujería* (witchcraft), *herejes* (heretics) and *aberrantes* (aberrant). According to Spanish inquisitorial codification *hechicería* was classified as a less serious individual act of superstition while *brujería* was considered a collective crime in a category unto itself involving collusion of so called diabolical sects and anti-Christian conspiracy. Nonetheless, persons of African descent were generally prosecuted under the rubric of blasphemy or superstitious practice instead of being charged with *brujería,* the more serious offense (Palmié 230).

Although the Spanish did not introduce an inquisitorial tribunal in Cuba, this did not mean that Spain was undaunted by the possibility that Africa-based practices might become a source of disturbance and incitement to rebellion.[94] In fact, instead of punishing unorthodox ritual practice, colonial authorities were more worried that non-Catholic beliefs might translate into anti-colonial fervor and insurrectionary activity since slave insurrections were regularly attributed to the influence of Africa-based religion and to the authority of "African-style – spiritual leaders" (Palmié 228). Indeed the historical record bears witness to this connection, especially after the astounding success of the Haitian Revolution,

[94] The historical record cites many cases of anti-slavery insurrection in Cuba in the early nineteenth century. In the 1830s almost ten years prior to Plácido's execution as the alleged leader of *La Escalera* Conspiracy, Gwendolyn Midlo Hall says that slave insurrections had become frequent. There were uprisings on sugar and coffee estates in Jaruco, Matanzas, Macurijes, and near Havana. In 1837 there was a revolt in Manzanillo and others in 1840 in Cienfuegos and Trinidad. The next year enslaved workers who were constructing the Palace of Aldama in Havana rebelled and were executed (56).

which, Palmié notes, "exposed the dangers inherent in the dramatic demographic shifts attendant on the expansion of slave-based colonial plantation economies" (80). The apprehension of colonial authorities can be seen in that African drumming was outlawed in colonial Cuba (Palmié 226). The 1842 slave code issued by the Captain General only two years before *La Escalera* Conspiracy, permitted enslaved persons to participate in dances with drums provided white persons were present and bondsmen from other plantations were not in attendance (Knight 127). I examine the presence and symbolic function of Africa-derived drumming, dance performance, and religious acts in the poem below.

In "El diablito" festival procession is observed through two cultural lenses, the informed observer – a subject position assumed by the poetic voice – and the indiscriminate public gaze. The first two stanzas of the poem, which I will not cite here, portray the multi-colored elaborate detail and symmetrical pattern of the costume. In the fourth and fifth stanzas Plácido writes: "Pero como cada uno / Tuviese los ojos fijos, / Y por prismas diferentes / Eran los objetos vistos; / Ninguno, por todos era / Mirado en igual sentido, / Y así la desigualdad / Era el verdadero tipo" ("But as each one / With their eyes fixed, / And through different prisms / Viewed the objects / Not one was observed the same by all / And so inequality / Was the true type") (Morales, ed. 370). "Desigualdad" or inequality is the rule because the public gaze is not monolithic so that within the prism there are myriad ways to interpret the symbolism, music, dramaturgy, dance and religious meaning of carnival performance. The spectators fail to comprehend

the festival masquerader obfuscating and distorting what they have seen so that he is regarded as a maleficent entity known as the devil, within Judeo-Christian morality. His multicolored costume and feline dance movements are unfamiliar and therefore transformed into a frightening manifestation of the African other. For their part, festival onlookers become non-interlocutors, incapable of dialogue with the dancing masquerader. The dearth of dialogue within the contact zone renders intercultural exchange nearly impossible. The carnivalesque laughter is rooted in a fear and anxiety of the unknown: "Burlábanse á la vez todos / Del caminante sencillo; / (Porque entre muchos es fácil / Burlar á un solo individuo)," ("At the same time everyone mocked / The lone traveler/ (Because it is easy for many to laugh at one person)") (Morales, ed. 370-71).

In the nineteenth century white Cubans tended to look upon *el Día de Reyes* festival as a dance obsessed, playful, even drunken debauchery. As Plácido's poem suggests this popular perception neglected the core meanings inherent in the Africa-based performance. *El Día de Reyes* was not a creative anomaly but a fraction of numerous African-descended performance traditions.[95] Walker cites a formerly enslaved North Carolina minister who said African descendants "used to have to employ our dark symbols and obscure figures to cover up our real meaning" (17). As this statement suggests, because of the nature of power relations in colonial (and some postcolonial) environments

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[95] Daniel Walker includes *el Día de Reyes* and New Orleans Congo Square in a long list of Afro-descendant public performance traditions that thrived throughout the Americas during the slave period. Others include North America Pinkster in New York State, Election Day in New England, the West Indian Jonkunnu, Venezuela's Devil Dance, and Brazil's Maracatu (3-4).

Africa-derived festival presentations were self-dissembling performances, occluding their truest meanings from the general public. Unfamiliar observers often rendered such performances innocuously entertaining spectacles and nineteenth century Cuban descriptions were no exception. As "El diablito" explains everyone saw the performance from "prismas diferentes" which are well cataloged in Fernando Ortiz's Los cabildos y la fiesta afrocubanos del Día de Reyes where he cites white Cuban color writer Ramón Meza's detailed descriptions of January 6 processions:

> Desde los primeros albores del día, oíase por todas partes el monótono ritmo de aquellos grandes tambores,... Los criados abandonaban las casas muy de la mañana; y de las fincas cercanas a la población acudían las dotaciones: ... En el centro del corro bailaban dos o tres parejas, haciendo las más extravagantes contorsiones, dando saltos, volteos y pasos, a compás del agitado ritmo de los tambores. La agitación y la alegría rayaban en frenesí (26).
>
> A las doce del día la diversión llegaba a su apogeo. En las calles de Mercaderes, Obispo y O'Reilly era una procesión no interrumpida de diablitos. ... los marineros de todas las naciones que bajaban en grupo para presenciar medio azorados aquella exótica fiesta,... (27).

Meza situates the festival in exotic space as a frenetic, and entertaining African diversion on Cuban soil involving elaborate costume, drums, dancing and acrobatic movements. The dominant gaze discards the possibility that the festival performance might represent sacred ritual to members of the *cabildos* involved.[96] Festival masqueraders are indiscriminately described as "diablitos"

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[96] Fernando Ortiz reprints a poetic description of *el Día de Reyes* that was originally published in *El Farol Industrial de la Habana* in 1842. This description also speaks of the masquerader but in very different terms than Plácido: "Si a este pueblo un extranjero / Fuese hoy el día primero / Que lo pudiera estudiar, /... Y entona cantos salvajes, / Grita, ríe, hace visajes, Sin cesar en su correr. ... Y vuelve la gritería / Los cantos, la algarabía, / Con un estruendo infernal,... Se ve en los zancos elevado / El diablito engalanado / Cual un feo mascarón". These verses reinforce the common point of view among the Cuban born white elite that the *el Día de Reyes* masquerader was a clamorous, dancing, happy, yet infernal and savage Other. His utterance is *algarabía*, clamorous and unintelligible speech, so that he cannot be heard,

without any reference whatsoever to the particularities of their costume, dance or percussion performance. As Pratt says, the colonized Other is depicted as a homogenized they suspended in a timeless present tense with no future and no reputable past (63-64). Daniel Walker explains that *el Día de Reyes* masqueraders were arbitrarily referred to as "diablitos", cautioning how we interpret nineteenth century writings about January 6 festivals that allude to "diablitos", given that they may refer to any number of Afro-Cuban masqueraders (49-50).

The verses cited below demonstrate how the African descendant persona re-signifies the inherent value and the purpose of *el Día de Reyes* performance.

> Mas como hay en todas cosas
> Accidentes imprevistos,
> Sucedió ser aquel día
> *El seis de enero,* (está dicho).
>
> Y un inesperado objeto,
> A ponerles la ley vino:
> Era un *diablito* bailando
> Al frente de su cabildo.
>
> Como a la vez cien colores
> Brillaban en su vestido,
> Mirado en todos los cuadros
> Era el personaje mismo.
>
> Uno de los observantes
> Más que todos reflexivo:
> —" ¡Ved ahí lo que es el mundo!...
> (A sus compañeros dijo).
>
> Siempre es el mismo sujeto
> El que hace á todos partidos;
> Él baila todos los años
> Y siempre es el mismo *diablito*. (original emphasis, Morales, ed. 371)

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interpreted or understood by onlookers unfamiliar with Africa-based ritual practice and spirituality (Los cabildos y la fiesta 36-37).

In the last five stanzas the poetic voice indicates the specific day of this yearly festival celebration, the masquerader's performance is directly linked to his *cabildo*, and the particular function of the performance is explained. This re-signification involves an intricate description of costume, a portrayal of call and response dance movements, and an explication of the two-fold social/spiritual function of the masquerader's dance. The misunderstood masker parades before his cabildo on January 6 to fulfill a specific function: "A ponerles la ley vino" ("He has come to impose the law upon them") (Morales, ed. 371). The festival masquerader serves as a retaliator and righter of wrongs who represents the collective will of the *cabildo* unleashing retribution from the otherworld on an unsuspecting Cuban public.

Like the poetic voice, the carnivalesque subject is gendered male, playful, yet serious, provocative but condemnatory. The masquerader mocks unsuspecting bystanders that laugh at him derisively caught unawares that he has come to impose the law upon them. The authority of the carnivalesque subject is not derived from the colony but exists in spite of it. In fact, his source of power is otherworldly derived from the spirits of the African ancestors that the colony exploited in order to build its economic wealth.

Daniel Walker explains that African descended populations in Havana most likely conceived of festival maskers as a means of reconnection with Africa. Masquerades in West and Central African societies were seen as the embodiment of ancestral spirits who visit the temporal world to give advice and

counsel to the living.[97] Among these is the Egungun of Yoruba-speaking peoples and the Efik and Ejagham leopard dancers from the cross-river region of Cameroon and Nigeria. (Yoruba-speaking peoples and those from the Old Calabar cross-rivers region left an indelible mark on nineteenth Afro-Cuban religion and spirituality). Although every festival masker cannot be traced to a specific African analogue, it is very likely that African born and African descendant participants would have understood the dancing masquerades as a reunion with the continent of their forebears (50).

The carnivalesque subject in "El diablito" is not directly linked to any particular Africa-based religious tradition or *cabildo*. So the reader cannot be certain if this particular mutual aid society is Yoruba-derived, Old-Calabar based or if it is has another African antecedent.

Within the text, the *cabildo* creates discursive space for the articulation of Africa-based religion and spirituality. The enunciation is not individualistic since the *cabildo* is a collectivized space and carnival is a communal speech act. As Walker asserts, "African-descended populations redefined space in a manner that countered the debilitating effects of the slave regime's space-centered social

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[97] In The Light Inside: Abakuá Society Arts and Cuban Cultural History David Brown explains that masqueraders of the Old-Calabar based Abakúa society where known as *Iremes*. These are "spirit 'messengers" or as Abakuá adept Jesús Nasakó explains the *ireme* masquerader is "manifested, materialized, represented spirit" (115). This material envoy of the otherworld represents ancestral spirits and what Brown calls "mythological characters" (116-17). Brown cites Sosa Rodríguez who explains that *Ireme*; the leader of *cabildo* processions, conducts and executes purifications to send away evil influences that inhabit the physical world (155). His role is multi-faceted as "*Ireme* is a transformational figure between domains: the human, the natural, and the otherworldly" (120). The costume is an integral part of *Ireme* performance and meaning making. Brown writes that by and large, the masquerader costume is very colorful, highly textured and made of various materials to resemble the leopard, which is emblematic of the virility and deftness of Abakuá masculinity (119).

control initiatives" (19). In "El diablito", Epiphany is transformed into a commemoration of Africa-based religion, the Christ Child is decentered (in fact Jesus Christ is not mentioned at all) and the dancing masquerader becomes the focal point of public observance. Therefore, the poem deconstructs the official purpose of the celebration transculturating it to meet the specific needs of the African descendant subject.

Although the festival masquerader is a *caminante sencillo* or lone traveler, his dance is not an act of individual volition since it represents "spirits messengers" – either of the dead or of ancestors long gone – and emanates from a collectivized social space. This poem represents spirit as embodied event. The gyrating dance movements, mocking gestures and condemnatory stance epitomize the intentions of beings that exist within the spiritual realm. In "El diablito" pageantry depicts an absolute inversion of the social order since enslaved Africans invoke retributive justice and impose the law on the very society that has oppressed them. The African subject inverts the social and religious order, so that the exploited and victimized body becomes the avenging agent. The representation of the festival masquerader as an agent of retributive justice mirrors the allegations brought against Plácido in the Ladder Conspiracy.

Alleged co-conspirators Lorenzo Caballero, Pascual Hernández, and Generí Chávez testified that the poet attended a *Día de Reyes* celebration in the Matanzas home of Santiago Álvarez. According to their testimony, Plácido met with other people of color to devise an island-wide conspiracy against the whites after sharing a meal with the host (Cué, "Plácido y la Conspiración" 177). It is not

clear what the authorities understood concerning the religious significance of *el Día de Reyes* celebration for people of color or if "El diablito" was cited in the charges that lead to his execution. However, these allegations, made by fellow African descendants, effectively supported the suspicion that Plácido's anti-colonial worldview may have been bolstered by a belief in Africa-based spirituality as an instrument of cultural and social revolution. This is evidenced in that the alleged meeting was named in the charges brought against the poet.

Another witness claimed the poet had an intimate association with Afro-Cuban secret societies. Martínez Escobar accused the poet of being "un agente activo" ("an active agent") of the secret societies of color that fomented rebellion among enslaved plantation populations. Escobar claims that Plácido travelled to Las Villas and Remedios as a revolutionary propagandist that risked his life in order to manifest his anti-colonial and anti-slavery ideals (García 47). This assertion locates the poet within the *cabildo* amidst Africa-based religious activity insinuating that representations of the Africa-based confraternity in "El diablito" and "A la Virgen del Rosario" have politically subversive undertones.

The accusations I have discussed here – regarding the poems "El juramento" and "El diablito" – call into question the religious identity of Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés. Plácido's religious-themed poems and Catholic self-portrait in the deathbed letter to his wife, María Gila Morales, are not conclusive, because – like most free people of color in the early 1800s – he had more than sufficient reason to claim allegiance to the Catholic faith. As I demonstrated previously, at least one of Plácido's Catholic poems was written while in prison,

perhaps to dissuade his accusers of his association with subversive elements of Cuban society. An open admission of Africa-derived religious practice would have imperiled any number of important social ties he had with the white elite and possibly done away with the publication of his poetry all together. Naturally, this need to safeguard his reputation was exacerbated after his arrest in 1844.

In "Un improvisador cubano: el poeta Plácido y el juicio de Menéndez y Pelayo", Manuel Sanguily further problematizes Plácido's religious identity.

> Y en la <<Plegaria>> ¿es acaso natural que invocando a Dios, le llamara: <<Rey de los Reyes, Dios *de mis abuelos*?>>
>
> ¿Parece por ventura procedente que Plácido recordara como uno y el mismo al Dios de sus abuelos maternos, que era el Dios de los cristianos, y al Dios de sus abuelos paternos, que debió ser un fetiche? (original emphasis, Bueno, ed. Acerca de Plácido 172)

Sanguily questions Plácido's authorship of the well known and much studied, "Plegaria a Dios" which is thought to be one of the final poems the poet wrote before his execution. To further his argument, Sanguily reminds his reader that Plácido's cultural and religious identity was drawn from two different sources, Spanish Catholicism and an Africa-based spiritual belief system. This is an accurate statement. However, Sanguily is mistaken to think that Plácido would not refer to the Christian God as *el Rey de los Reyes* since he does so in two 1843 poems, "A la Resurrección" and in "A la muerte de Cristo".

Like other writers in early nineteenth century Cuba, Plácido's poetry is thematically diverse and the representation of Catholicism was commonplace for prominent poets and so may not reveal anything about personal religious devotion. It is worth noting, however, that unlike other poets of either African or European ancestry, Plácido portrayed Africa-based spirituality in poems that

problematize the official discourse on religion, propose alternative access to the spiritual realm and, on occasion, subvert the political authority of the colony. This is no small matter, since his thematic choices provided colonial authorities with reason to suspect his involvement in anti-colonial activities that eventually lead to his execution in 1844.

The parallel between Africa-based religious subject matter and the accusations made against Plácido may require further examination in a study of much greater scope than my dissertation. What is clear, however, is that Plácido's writings functioned as a public transcript, juxtaposing the legitimating marks of the dominant culture with the oft-ignored and misconstrued cultural particularities of African descendant characters. The amalgamation of disparate sources of cultural capital, coupled with the subversion of Catholic religious authority, transculturates Hispanic literature even as it defines and inscribes a public statement of Africa-based cultural identity in nineteenth century Cuban literature.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Body as Object: Racialization and Self-Representation in The Literature of Juan Francisco Manzano

> bistionme de ropa fina y detras de la bolante me condujo otra vez al pueblo y en servisio ya yo era un objeto conosido pr. El chinito o el mulatico de la Mar...
>
> ----Juan Francisco Manzano

1.1 Introduction

The nineteenth century Cuban anti-slavery narrative depicts the violent objectification of the enslaved body in a manner that divorces it from the possibility of subjecthood while portraying the enslaved protagonist as an unjustified victim of plantation society. Race is central to the representation of African and African descendant characters in these novels because it functions as phenotypical descriptor, it refers to the legal color of the individual in question, and it situates him or her within a specific socio-historical context. Pedro Barreda's study critiques the representation of enslaved characters as passive instruments of production in the Cuban abolitionist novel (44, 45). In the periodization of the genre that he offers, the first period begins in 1835 and lasts until 1841 and the second starts in 1875 and comes to a close at the dawn of Cuban independence. Juan Francisco Manzano's 1835 slave narrative is considered the precursor of the white abolitionist novels of the first era, the product of Domingo del Monte's almost exclusively white literary *tertulia*, which

sought to create politically-motivated social documents with parallel plot outlines (Barreda 24, 44).

Motivated by anti-slave trade sentiment, Delmonte asked Anselmo Suárez y Romero, Félix Tanco y Bosmoniel and Juan Francisco Manzano, among others, to produce literature that depicted slavery as an unjust economic system in which non-threatening black characters were juxtaposed with abusive white masters and overseers (Luis, Literary 1-2).[98]

Unlike Barreda, Luis argues that it is Manzano's narrative that became the unacknowledged point of reference. He maintains that Manzano is at the center of this narrative tradition since his life "[served as] a model for and a generator of narrative production" (Literary 39). According to Luis, *la historia de mi vida* – which Manzano wrote at the behest of Del Monte – became the material for an emerging nineteenth century Cuban narrative. To be sure, this is an accurate assertion, confirmed by the fact that Manzano's narrative was completed in 1836 prior to any of the novels written by white authors. Additionally, the manuscript was delivered to the Delmonte group and never returned to Manzano. It

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[98] The Cuban anti-slavery narrative refers to literature written mainly during the 1830s starting with Juan Francisco's Manzano slave narrative, which was written in 1835 and published in English by Richard Madden in 1840 and in Spanish, by José Luciano Franco in 1937. Following the slave narrative there is also Anselmo Suárez y Romero's Francisco written in 1839 and published in 1880, Félix Tanco y Bosmoniel's Escenas de la vida privada written in 1838 and published in 1925 and his Un niño en la Habana written in 1837 and published in 1936. Domingo del Monte requested all of these early works. William Luis says that Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda's romantic novel Sab could be considered an anti-slavery work although it was published in Spain in 1841 and Avellaneda was not part of the Delmonte literary circle. However, he does exclude the versions of Cirilo Villaverde's Cecilia Valdés because their content passed the censors and was published in Cuba. The latter version drew on earlier anti-slavery works but was published in New York in 1882, not in Cuba (Literary 1, 4).

circulated among group members for a number of years, was edited by Suárez y Romero in 1839 and translated and published in English by Richard Madden in 1840. Furthermore, *la historia de mi vida's* primary themes appear and reappear in the novels. Luis explains that this new genre adopted what was perceived to be the central themes of Manzano's life narrative: a docile house servant, transference from the master's house to the sugar mill, (a change that allows the narrator to describe the evils of enslavement); and the maltreatment suffered by the enslaved protagonist (Literary 39).[99]

Although the Delmontine group certainly appropriated Manzano's life story for its verisimilar depiction of slavery, it was but one source of inspiration for their work. For the most part, Delmonte drew on eighteenth century Spanish Neoclassicism as well as classic liberalism as the cultural and philosophical foundation with which he hoped to shape Cuban literature and indeed elite Cuban thought. On the other hand, Félix Tanco y Bosmoniel and Suárez y Romero preferred to employ Romantic commonplaces such as unremitting melancholy and depression in their depictions of anguished and lachrymose black protagonists. The Delmonte group's appropriation of Manzano's slave narrative is a highly selective discursive process that privileges the brutal objectification of the enslaved body but neglects the self-consciousness of the

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[99] Luis cites Anselmo Suárez y Romero's novel Francisco, written in 1839, as an example of this new novelistic tradition, which uses Manzano's middle name as the protagonist's first name and as the title of the work. This novel portrays the suicide of a tortured, enslaved *africano de nación* or African born bondsman. He also cites Tanco y Bosmoniel's "Historia de Francisco" as a short story at least partially adopted from the enslaved poet's life except that the protagonist is a twelve-year-old boy who lived in the slave *barracones* unlike Manzano whose family stayed in a *bohío* (Literary 39, 43).

narrator's gaze. White writers' use of the *inaugural text of the abolitionist novel* repeats and redoubles the violence imposed upon Manzano since it deprivileges his subjectivity and places emphasis on the many abuses to which he was subjected.

Literary critics have examined the relationship between Manzano's racial identity and his writing. They have explored if by way of writing Manzano opted for whiteness or for a mulatto identity and if in doing so he denied his African descendant heritage. Such research – which has been an especially common topic of study – aims to understand the relationship between Manzano's racial and cultural identity and his decision to participate in early Cuban literary practice. One such prominent voice in the debate is that of Jerome Branche. In "*'Mulato entre negros'* (y blancos): Writing, Race, the Antislavery Question, and Juan Francisco Manzano's *Autobiografía*" Branche claims that the poet created a mulatto persona within Cuba's system of colonial racial stratification in order to gain the sympathy of his elite readership. He drew near to white society and unapologetically disdained and distanced himself from blacks (77-79). Branche says that Manzano saw himself as a model slave and an exceptionally talented individual who deserved a better lot in life (78).

Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo agrees with Branche, identifying this separateness as a disidentification with blackness which she defines as "an individual's explicit distancing of himself from Blacks" (189). Nonetheless, Nwankwo believes that it is Manzano's social predicament, which leads to a certain ambiguity in his narrative; he disidentifies with blackness even as he

portrays his emotional ties to "los negros" (200). She avers that it is unlikely that self-hatred or a superiority complex motivated Manzano to Other blacks (201-02).

While the creation of a mulatto persona is critical to any analysis of Manzano's racial identity, it is not best examined as a singular act of self-identification. Rather, as the speaker of the slave narrative suggests, it should be studied as a social act of racialization. The mulatto identity is an arbitrary phenotypical descriptor assigned by colonial society to segregate people of African descent among themselves and to foment the idea of white superiority. Manzano's account of his life repeatedly describes this process in considerable detail, although the abovementioned critics have downplayed its significance.

This chapter takes a different approach by examining the construction of a racial persona in Manzano's life narrative as a discursive act that acknowledges the power of plantation society even as it critically assesses the presence of the white gaze. My analysis critiques the racialization and fierce objectification of Manzano's body, which bore the scars of a plantation society rooted in the economic exploitation of people of African descent. Contrary to the Delmontine portrayal of the enslaved person as a passive instrument of wealth production, I submit that the narrative voice in *la historia de mi vida* is an active speaking subject, which is well aware of the machinations of the white colonial power structure and, on occasion, proffers a nuanced critique. My study also takes into account what the author says about race in his letters to Delmonte written between 1834-1835 and the exceptional instances where this subject matter surfaces in his poetry. As a final point, I contend that the charges brought

against Manzano in the *La Escalera* Conspiracy are indicative of the power of white obsession with dark bodies. My investigation of a seldom-studied letter that Manzano wrote almost ten years after his manumission evinces that his legal status as a free person of color did not shield him from official acts of colonial racial violence. In effect, I maintain that the construction of a mulatto racial persona did not amount to an escape from blackness in colonial slave society.

1.2 Objectifying the Self-Aware Subject

Manzano's slave narrative portrays race in three different ways. First and foremost, race is depicted as a phenotypical descriptor, which characteristically distinguishes people of African descent from those of European heritage even as it classifies all shades in between. These descriptions replicate the system of racial domination that propagated race as biological difference and allude to Manzano's racial subject position. Furthermore, Manzano's representations of race reproduce the socio-economic structure on the plantation where arbitrary labels code different human bodies to assign them varying monetary values. This color scheme is evidenced when Manzano writes about the numerous tasks that were allocated to people of African descent. Finally, Manzano describes the racialization of his own body by calling attention to the white gaze that classified him as a *mulato*. These assertions – largely made by others about the poet – consign him a mulatto identity, and are central to my study of Manzano because they are the only instances in his narrative where the author uses any racial marker in reference to himself.

As would have been the case for any child born into slavery, the racialization of Juan Francisco Manzano began the moment he was born. On the second page of the text the narrator says, "mi ama la Sra. Marqueza Justi**[z]**, ya señora de edad, me tomo como un genero de entretenimiento y disen qe. mas estaba en sus brasos qe. en los de mi madre," ("my mistress The Lady Marchioness Justiz, who was well on in years, took me as a some kind of amusement and they say I was in her arms more than those of my mother") (Luis, ed. 300). This brief description of the author's early childhood makes no explicit reference to his racial identity. The narrative voice depicts the young child from the point of view of the white mistress who saw him as a form of entertainment. To the Marchioness he is "el niño de su bejez" ("the child of her old age") and so is afforded certain privileges (Luis, ed. 300). There appears to be some ambivalence in the narrator's statement. While it is clear that he is speaking of his condition as the child of an enslaved house servant, his tone is somewhat nostalgic and does not openly imply resentment. This apparent lack of antipathy towards the Marchioness might be explained by considering the privilege afforded his family, which in turn was extended to him. In the first few pages of his narrative Manzano says that his family held an advantaged position within the household. His mother, María de Pilar, was the principal servant of *la casa grande* and was permitted to marry Manzano's father, Toribio de Castro, a harpist who happened to be the chief male domestic servant. María de Pilar and Toribio Castro's privileged position meant that Manzano spent an inordinate amount of time with his mistress with whom he enjoyed French operas, attended

theatrical productions and went to mass. In addition, he went to school with Trinidad de Zayas his baptismal godmother for a short time (Luis, ed. 300-01).

As a gesture of generosity Manzano's mistress set 300 pesos as the price of self-purchase for each of his parents. Additionally, she freed María de Pilar's newborn twins shortly following their birth (Luis, ed. 300-02). The passages below shed light on how Manzano perceived the decisions that Doña Beatriz made concerning the well being of his family.

> Fui embuelto {alli llevaron} a la iglesia en el faldellin con que se bautizó la Sra. Da. Beatris de Cárdenas y Manzano selebrandose con Arpa, qe. la tocaba mi padre pr. música **{con}** clarinete y flauta: quiso mi señora marcar este dia con uno de sus rasgos de generosidad con **{coartando}** aber coartado a mis padres *dejandolos* en trescientos pesos a cada uno y yo devi ser algo feliz; pero pase. (original emphasis) (Luis, ed. 301-02)

> **{mas}** aquella bondadosisima señora fuente inagotable de grasias le bolvio a renobar un documento en darle libre **{ofreciéndole la libertad del}** el otro vientre nasiese lo qe. nasiese y nasieron mellisos baron y embra ubo en esto unas diferensias mas lo terminante del documento iso qe. un tribunal diese livertad a los dos pr. qe. ambos formaron un bientre la embra vive con este motivo (original emphasis) (Luis, ed. 302)

Manzano's apparent gratitude towards his mistress is accompanied by a keen awareness of the objectification of his body, and that of his mother and siblings. While the narration of these events is an acknowledgement of the kindness of his mistress, it also draws attention to the legal status of the enslaved person as chess piece. In these passages the white gaze constructs the enslaved person as chattel and dependent child. Doña Beatriz's act of largesse in granting freedom to María de Pilar's children could also be seen as an act of violence, a dismembering of the African descendant family if the children were separated

from their parents.[100] (The narrative is not clear about where Manzano's freed siblings were expected to live. However, it does state that some did not survive long after birth.)

The offer of self-purchase as well as the act of granting the newborns freedom discloses the real authority that the mistress possessed over African descendant bodies. Doña Beatriz is endowed with the authority to buy and sell human beings. Self-purchase, known in Spanish as *la coartación*, is recognition of bondage situating María de Pilar and Toribio Castro within Fanon's zone of non-being since decisions about their bodies and offspring are left to the discretion of the white Other. This zone of non-being is a denial of subjecthood, revealing the social consequence of the white gaze. In this way, freedoms are not acquired through struggle or escape but by the hand of the master. As a concept, self-purchase is a legitimation and corroboration of the master's authority, since from a legal standpoint African descendants are dispossessed of their own bodies. By definition, the plantation system is a paternalistic order that infantilizes enslaved persons by producing socio-economic conditions that cause them to be dependent on white persons and then reinforces this dependence through manipulation, intimidation and coercion.

Another example of this paternalism is evidenced in the extended periods of time that the young Manzano was made to spend away from family in order to live with his mistress and her relatives in Havana. I have cited a couple of

[100] Manzano writes about his mother, María de Pilar and his father, Toribio Castro. He says he had three younger brothers Florensio and Fernando and another whose name he does not mention. Manzano's sister Ma. de Rosario was granted freedom at birth (Luis, ed. 300-01, 312, 315, 332).

passages where Manzano describes trips he made back and forth to Havana after the death of Doña Beatriz.

> pasado al gunos dias o tiempo partimos pa. la Habana y la misma Sra. Da. Joaquina me condujo a la casa de mi madrina donde supe qe. allí me abia dejado mi señora, pasaron algunos años sin qe. yo biese mis padres y creo no equibocarme en desir qe. abrian sinco años (Luis, ed. 303)

> Tendria yo algo mas de dose años cuando deseosas algunas antiguas criadas de la casa deseaban berme y asiendo istansias a mi madrina lograron de ella qe. me mandase de bisita [ell] a la casa de mi señora La Marqueza de prado Ameno lo qe. berificado un domingo me bistieron de blanco con mi balandransito de carranclan y pantalones de borlon (Luis, ed. 303)

There are three things that I want to privilege in the episodes cited above: the young Manzano is the center of attention, he is moved about with no regard for the wishes of his biological family, and the way in which others dress him says much about how he is perceived. In the first passage, Manzano says that he was kept away from his family for about five years to spend time with his godmother (presumably his baptismal godmother Trinidad de Zayas). In the second instance, it is worth noting that Manzano was returned to Matanzas not at the request of his mother and father but that of the elderly female house servants on the plantation. In fact, there is no mention of his parents in this passage at all. Instead, the narrator launches into a description of how he was dressed for the trip to *El Molino* plantation in Matanzas. Doña Joaquina doted on Manzano, giving him special treatment much like his first mistress. Manzano says he was dressed in the white cotton cassocks of clergymen and in carefully embroidered trousers to meet his new owner la Marquesa de Prado Ameno, the daughter of Doña Beatriz.

Below, he describes in exceptional detail how they dressed him before introducing him to the marchioness.

> ella fue a buscarme y yo no fui que sé yo pr. qué de alli a algunos dias me isieron muchos mamelucos de listado corta y alguna ropita blanca pa. cuando salia con la librea de paje para los dias de [ga] gala tenia un bestido de usar pantalon de ancho de grana guarnesido de cordon de oro, chaquetilla sin cuello de raso azul marino guarnesida de lo mismo morreon de tersio pelo negro galoneado, con plumage rojo y la punta negra dos argollitas de oro a la fansesa y alfiler de diamante con esto y lo de mas pronto (Luis, ed. 303)

A few days after arriving in Matanzas, Manzano was dressed in overalls with stripes and in white attire suitable for a theatre page. For special outings he was outfitted in wide scarlet pants rimmed in gold braids, a short collarless jacket made of navy blue satin, a black velvet cap with braid and red feathers, two gold French style rings and a diamond pin.[101]

The dressing and redressing of Manzano is a public spectacle in which the African descendant child is outfitted according to the fancy of his owners. The child is subjected to a social performance to be seen by the plantation community. The narrator's description is instructive; at a very young age Manzano became a *genero de entretenimiento* for all to see, observe, enjoy, and perhaps even ridicule. While the act of dressing lavishes attention on the young child, it also converts him into a plaything. This is evident in the narrator's explanation below:

> Da. Joaquina qe. me trataba como a un niño ella me bestia peinaba y cuidaba de qe. no me rosase con los otros negritos de la misma mesa como en tiempo de señora la Marqueza Justis se me daba mi plato qe. comia a los pies de mi señora La Marqueza de [p] Pr. A. toda esta epoca la pasaba yo lejos de mis padres [mas cuando ellos supieron qe. estaba al serbisio de mi señora de esta epoca a la de [] de mi []] cuando yo tenia dose años (Luis, ed. 304)

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[101] In this paragraph describing how Manzano was dressed, I rely on Evelyn Picon Garfield's translation of the slave narrative printed in Ivan Schulman's bilingual edition (55).

This disclosure reveals the linkage between the bestowal of privileged treatment and the construction of racial identity. In the same passage, Manzano mentions being dressed by Doña Joaquina, eating at the feet of his current and former mistresses as well as the specific prohibitions he received not to play with the other black children. In this moment the text establishes a connection between the objectification and racialization of Manzano at the hands of white persons. The depiction of the young Manzano being treated as a docile house pet does not include the direct involvement of his biological parents. They are bystanders who only later discover that he has returned to Matanzas. Although Manzano describes a familial attachment to his mother, father and brothers elsewhere in the slave narrative, here it is evident that white female persons are the principal actors. They decide where he will live, what he will eat, how he will dress and what excursions he will make.

The child is made to wear clothes that indicate he is a unique individual, set apart from the other black children since he is not dressed as a field worker but a pageboy. The dressing of Manzano is a draping of the African descendant body, designed to make it socially presentable although not fully acceptable. In spite of his fancy attire, he is made to serve whites like other enslaved persons. In this way, his apparel signals the subservience and deference that will be demanded of him. The designation of Manzano as errand boy is directed linked to the social process of mulattotization, which posits the positioning of the African descendant racial subject in an interstitial socio-cultural space. The *becoming* is essential to my reading of race in Manzano's writings because it not only reveals

his racial identification but the social processes that helped to forge it. As Bhabha avers, the stereotype requires constant repetition and inculcation in the minds of colonial subjects (66, 75). The reiteration of mulattoness is evidenced in the narrator's descriptions of the three customary activities that I have already mentioned, which were utilized to instill an elevated yet submissive sense of self in the young child. Nwankwo's idea of the disidentification with blackness is not an individual act of self-aggrandizement (189). Manzano's disidentification is a social act involving a number of important actors in his life. Doña Joaquina's admonition not to play with the other black children is an ironic statement that at once includes and excludes the young Manzano from the group of black children on the plantation.

According to Branche, in Cuban plantation society, *niño* (child) referred to white children of aristocratic families.[102] He believes that Manzano meant to access white privilege and insert himself within that world of power by citing Doña Joaquina's conferral of special treatment (82-83). Nonetheless, Branche overlooks what I believe is the dual function of this passage. While Manzano may wish to access the social power that whiteness affords, his text also exposes the way in which white society perceives, abuses and racializes his body. The poet's critique should not be overlooked or minimized.

In fact, before relating any of the episodes by which he came to be identified and to identify himself as a *mulato*, the narrator describes the scenes I

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[102] Citing Richard Robert Madden's 1840 English translation of Manzano's slave narrative Nwankwo writes "white child" without explaining that this was not a literal translation from the original Spanish. Instead it represents the translator's inference as to the meaning of the original text (192).

have cited above, which illustrate his family's dependence on their mistress as well as the preferential (yet subordinate) treatment he received as a child and an adolescent. This means that the objectification of the dark body should be examined in tandem with any discussion of the author's perceived racial identity. What does the objectification and racialization of Manzano's body mean with regard to how he saw himself?

1.3 African descendant Self-Portraiture and White Voyeurism

The most remarkable depictions of race in *la historia de mi vida* reveal how Manzano chose to portray himself. Like much of his work, these accounts are not easy to read because they seldom describe the author from his point of view. In large part, Manzano's racial self-representation is a painstaking reproduction of the white gaze, exposing the power that plantation society wielded over the body of the enslaved. All of these representations share certain things in common. They give emphasis to acts of violence and physical confinement as well as the significance of clothing as part of the public exhibition of dark bodies. The use of racial labels in such passages replicates the white viewpoint, but it also helps to explain the author's process of racial identity formation.

> que se yó pr. qe. nimiedad se mandó buscar un comisionado me ató en la sala y me condujo a la carsel publica a las onse del dia a las cuatro vino un moso blanco del campo me pidió, me sacaron se vistio una muda de cañamazo se quitaron los zapatos y allí mismo me pelaron y una collunda nueva de geniquen ató mis brazos saliendo pr. delante pa. el Molino; (Luis, ed. 330)

In this account Manzano was placed under arrest after having fled the plantation to escape the wrath of the overseer. Five days after Manzano took refuge in *el*

Conde de Jibacoa's residence, a colonial officer was dispatched to the house, seized Manzano, tied his arms and carried him off to the public jail in Matanzas. Later, a young white man – apparently employed by Manzano's mistress – took him back to the *El Molino* sugar plantation by force. Although the overseer did not flog Manzano upon return, the arrest was as an authorized act of violence against his body. The narrator explains that they dressed him in *cañamazo*, a change of clothes customarily worn by field workers, shaved his head, and took off his shoes.[103] In this episode, like the others, he is made to wear clothing that reflects the act that is being committed against him. Unlike the childhood scenes where Manzano is treated like a mannequin that is dressed in fine clothes, in this instance he is made to wear the clothes of field workers, is placed under arrest and briefly incarcerated. These acts are meant to lower his status on the socio-racial ladder. His position as an interstitial racial subject is inherently insecure in view of the fact that like all other enslaved persons he is dispossessed of his own body.

Manzano was obliged to work on the sugar plantation for nine days before Prado de Ameno sent for him to come back to town.

> estube allí como nueve dias en los trabajos de la finca y una mañana qe. vino a almorzar mi Sra. me mandó buscar bistionme de ropa fina y detrás de la bolante me condujo otra vez al pueblo y en servisio ya yo era un objeto conosido pr. el chinito o el mulatico de la Mar. todos me preguntaban qe. abia sido aquello y me abochornaba satisfacer a tanto curioso; (Luis, ed. 330)

As in the scenes from his early years the narrative voice describes the capricious manner in which his body is objectified. He is moved about, clothed, undressed,

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[103] Esteban Pichardo's Diccionario provincial casi razonado de vozes y frases cubanas defines *cañamazo* as clothing used to dress enslaved black field workers (Herrera, ed. 153).

and dressed yet again. Manzano is grouped with the black field laborers on the plantation even though his mistress excludes him from permanent membership within that group. He is infantilized by both of his mistresses, Doña Beatriz de Justiz, and her daughter the Marchioness Prado de Ameno. However, they do so with differing intentions. Doña Beatriz dotes on him to instill a sense of exceptionalism; from her point of view he is her little pet slave. On the other hand, Prado de Ameno infantilizes Manzano as a form of ridicule and humiliation. Doña Beatriz's treatment of Manzano creates the illusion of mulatto privilege, which is quickly stripped away by yet another scene of abuse and confinement. In effect, both forms of treatment are part of the process of mulattotization of the African descendant person.

In this passage Manzano is once again dressed in finery and paraded before the plantation community. This charade produces a profound sense of indignity in the poet. His statement is recognition that the dominant group's racial classifications place him under constant monitoring: "yo era un objeto conosido pr. el chinito o el mulatico de la Mar." ("I was an object known as the little Chinaman or the little mulatto of the *Marquesa*") (Luis, ed. 330).[104] In this scene

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[104] Historian Matt Childs explains that *chino* was the racial classification for the offspring of a black person and a mulatto in colonial Cuba (70). Manzano's use of the diminutive *chinito* to describe how others saw him on the plantation also suggests that his mother was considered black and his father a mulatto. The use of multiple racial labels to describe one body speaks to the inconsistencies of colonial racial hierarchy even as it reveals the dark body as a palimpsest upon which manifold acts of violence are inscribed.

In Ivan Schulman's edition, Evelyn Picon Garfield translates "el mulatico de la Mar." as "Maria's little mulatto" (115). There does not seem to be any basis, however, for this rendering in the text. In the context of this passage, it appears that *de la Mar.* is an abbreviation for the *Marquesa*, which suggests that, in this instance; Madden's 1840 translation is the more accurate of the two (Mullen, ed. 100). As such, I adopted his phrasing for my above-cited translation.

Prado de Ameno makes a spectacle of Manzano, whose body is placed on display to arouse public scorn. He is not subjected to a beating, as on several other occasions, but his body is made an object of ridicule for the Marchioness. The narrator's use of two different racial labels *chinito* and *mulatico de la Mar* uncovers the arbitrariness and inconsistency of colonial racial discourse. Moreover, self-portraiture from the dominant Other's point of view is a rhetorical technique entailing an inherent critique. The implication is clear: the narrator invites the reader to see him through the prism of those that held the power of life and death over his body.

On occasion, Manzano disrupts this third person narration with insightful commentary.

> Es de admirarse qe. mi señora no pudiese estar sin mí 10 dias seguidos así era qe. mis prisiones jamas pasaban de 11 a 12 dias pintadome siempre como el mas malo de todos los nasidos en el molino de donde desia qe. yo era criollo esto era otro genero de mortificasion qe. yo tenia (Luis, ed. 334-35).

The poet complains that his mistress did not let him out of her sight for more than ten days even though she often protested that he was the worst child who had ever been born on the plantation. The expression "pintadome siempre como el mas malo" ("depicting me as always the worst child ever") unambiguously draws attention to the fact that the subject is keenly aware and critical of the way he is seen (Luis, ed. 334-35). His remarks caricature the incessant, vindictive, scrutinizing and hypercritical gaze of his mistress and by extension that of white Cuban plantation society. In this way, his writing attests to white obsessions with the domination of dark bodies. Manzano is conscious of his body in the third

person, which is held to account for the collective black body, the black race and his African ancestors. As Fanon makes clear, the white gaze is an instrument of violence against the dark body (112). Manzano complains that Prado de Ameno disparagingly refers to him as a "criollo" (Luis, ed. 335). Although *criollo* typically denoted persons or cultures originating in the Americas, *criollito* was a dehumanizing plantation term for enslaved black children.[105] Manzano's objection to her use of the term suggests that he experienced it as an affront.

Surveillance of the enslaved person can be likened to Michel Foucault's concept of panopticism. The panopticon was designed to induce a sense of constant visibility in the mind of the prisoner so that the inmate assumed he was being watched at all times even when he was unable to confirm that suspicion (201).[106] In a similar vein, sugar-producing colonies had stringent labor regimes where the activities of enslaved workers were meticulously scripted and carefully monitored in order to exact maximum profit. Historian Gwendolyn Midlo Hall states that the sugar production process had four primary steps that needed to be carried out in quick succession. These included the cutting of large and heavy sugar cane stalks, the immediate grinding of the cane, and the boiling and evaporation of cane juice (*guarapo*) to produce crystallized sugar (16).

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[105] In Cimarrón: historia de un esclavo Miguel Barnet explains that slave masters refused to refer to the offspring of enslaved women as children but instead called them *criollitos* using the diminutive for *criollo*. Barnet's explanation suggests that this word was intended to be offensive and to dehumanize children born to the enslaved (10).

[106] I chose not to use Foucault's panopticism to theorize the African descendant subject position since it is grounded in a critique of the dominant gaze. In order to create space for the expression of Afro-Cuban subjectivity, I privilege Manzano and Plácido's construction of autobiographical personas and literary characters that manifest elements of an Afro-Cuban religio-cultural paradigm while also exerting the *will to subject*.

Nonetheless, as someone who generally worked in the big house, Manzano's visibility to his mistress had nothing to do with productivity in the field. On the contrary, his tortured body was flogged, undressed, then dressed again, and put on display for public consumption. Prado de Ameno's contempt for Manzano was entirely unrelated to sugar output. Her obsession with Manzano's body appears to have been of a sadistic sort, in that she derived pleasure from causing him pain.

The use of racial labels, however, was not the exclusive domain of the powerful. The fact that racial epithets and descriptors were also used by persons of color bear witness to the power of the colonial discourse on race to influence, at least in part, the identity formation of people of African descent. In the paragraph below a free house servant of color urges Manzano not to succumb to the abuse of his mistress but to recognize what he might be worth to another master.

> cuando la gente estaba en misa me llamó un criado libre de la casa y estando a solas con él me dijo; hombre q. tu no tienes vergüenza pa. estar pasando tanto trabajos cualquiera negro bozal está mejor tratado qe. tú, un mulatico fino con tantas abilidaes como tú al momento hallará quien lo compre pr. este estilo me abló mucho rato (Luis, ed. 338)

The words of the free servant of color replicate the white gaze. Speaking without restraint – since no whites are present – his statement corroborates that Cuban born mulattoes had greater monetary value than black African captives on the slave market. Manzano is advised to escape *El Molino* and find someone who will purchase him and treat him well. The presence of a white racial viewpoint among the community of color demonstrates that the dominant gaze was not inconsequential to the larger society. Colonial racialization left an enduring

impression on exploited peoples and produced social structures to perpetuate this oppression. It functioned as an act of violence whose scars were engraved onto the bodies of the enslaved. In effect, the projection of white fears and anxieties unto the bodies of the enslaved spawned physical harm and emotional abuse.

The subsequent passage describes Manzano's state of mind after both his parents had died and sheds some light on the author's racial identity formation.

> no me es dado pintar mi situasion amarguisima en este instante, un temblor general cundió todo mi cuerpo y atacandome un dolor de cabeza apenas me podia baler; ya me beia atrabesando el pueblo [a] de Madruga como un fasineroso atado pelado y vestido de cañamazo cual me ví en [matanzas] Matanzas sacado de la carsel publica pa. ser condusido al Molino ya recordando las ultimas amonestaciones del ya sitado *Dn. Saturnino me beia en el Molino sin padres en él ni aun parientes y en una palabra mulato y entre negros*: mi padre era algo altivo y nunca permitio no solo corrillos en su casa pero ni q. sus hijos jugasen con lo negritos de la asienda (emphasis added, Luis, ed. 339)

In this excerpt the poet describes a scene where he is overwhelmed with terror and becomes physically ill at the sight of the plantation administrator Don Saturnino. Yet again, Manzano is bound like a delinquent, his head is shaven, and he is dressed in clothing suitable for a field worker and thrown into jail. Under these circumstances the author says he saw himself alone on the plantation, without parents, siblings or even relatives, in essence as a mulatto among blacks. This statement is a clear disidentification with blackness.

However, it is worth noting that immediately after this statement, Manzano appears to fault his father for this social distance from *los negros*, explaining that Toribio de Castro hindered his offspring from playing with the other black children. Although on another occasion Manzano says that his father's presence sometimes shielded him from physical and emotional abuse, he also reveals that

theirs was not an affectionate bond (Luis, ed. 306). This critique of the paternal figure is remarkable. The narrative voice describes him as "altivo" or arrogant for his refusal to permit his offspring to socialize with the other black children on the plantation. Comparable to the free male house servant, Toribio de Castro replicates the white racial viewpoint in an apparent effort to secure greater social privilege for his family. This may be easier to comprehend if we consider that, according to Richard Madden, Manzano's father was considered a *pardo* (a mixed race person). In other words, one of his parents may have been white. This critique of Toribio de Castro's racial preferences leads me to believe that the author's embrace of mulattoness was not an indiscriminate rejection of blackness. Manzano's criticism of his father implies that he may have identified with members of the African descendant community.

1.4 The View from Inside: Gauging Manzano's Glance

On three separate occasions, Manzano relates that he suffered severe floggings at the hands of other enslaved persons whom he refers to as *negros* (blacks). In the first such reference he writes: "no pocas veces he sufrido pr. la mano de un negro vigorosos asotes" ("not a few times have I suffered vigorous whippings at the hands of a black man") (Luis, ed. 305). On another such occasion, the narrator witnesses his mother being beaten: "lo cuatro [ ] negros se apoderaron de ella la arrojaron en tierra pa. azotarla" ("four blacks seized her and threw her to the ground to whip her") (Luis, ed. 312). All of a sudden, Manzano resists in a rare act of physical defiance to save not himself but his

mother, whose honor and physical well-being he defends throughout the narrative. This decision to act in violent defense of his mother results in yet another beating for Manzano. Yet again he writes, "ya me esperaba un negro aquien se me entregó tomamos el camino del higenio de Sn Miguel" ("a black man awaited me to whom I was handed over and we took the road to the San Miguel sugar plantation") (Luis, ed. 316). In these instances it is clear that the narrative voice articulates a deep-seated pain and anger and that he directs his resentment on the slave system's black agents of castigation. In this context, it is clear that black is an epithet for the men of African descent who doled out the punishment of the white mistress and overseer.

Regarding the same matter, Jerome Branche avers that Manzano's representations of blacks tend toward violent stereotype, anonymity and disassociation from self. According to his formulation, Manzano creates a mulatto persona because he is conscious of the fact that blacks held the lowest position on the socio-racial ladder and that the racial ideology of the Delmontine group associated intellectuality with whiteness (79). His reading claims that Manzano adopted a number of rhetorical tactics to win the respect and empathy of his white readership. This is an accurate statement, but it borders on a facile interpretation of Manzano's racial depictions since it occludes the narrator's account of the mulattotization of his body as a social act. Additionally, it does not adequately comment on the racial project of colonial Cuba, which, as Roberto Friol points out, fomented conflict between *mulatos* and *negros* to prevent social organization that might lead to uprisings (154). By setting one African

descendant against another, not only was the colony able to establish a racial pecking order based on varying shades of skin color and facial features, but also it managed to put into place a social order, intended to divide enslaved persons among themselves.

For that reason, it should be noted that the instances where the narrator uses *negro* pejoratively do not stand alone in the text. They are juxtaposed with an account in which Manzano experiences the collective grief of enslaved persons who are mourning the accidental death of "al negro [an] Andres criollo". Manzano explains that he was sent to labor in the sugar refinery as a form of punishment when the roof gave way, fatally injuring his coworker. Andres dies soon after the incident and Manzano sustains a serious head injury, barely escaping the collapsed roof (Luis, ed. 324-25).

> se derrumbó detras de mi cojiendo abajo al negro [an] Andres criollo yo con el susto caí pr. una abertura abajo de la casa de purga mi guardiero gritaba toda la negrada boseaba acudieron a sacar a Andres y yo me sali como pude pr. la parte baja de la puerta, sacaron al antes dicho con mil trabajo (Luis, ed. 324)

This passage is one of the few where it is apparent Manzano does not use *negro* as an epithet. On the contrary, it is used to describe the loss of a member of the plantation community. Claudette Williams states that although *negra* and *prieta* (black and dark) are customarily used as epithets in Spanish Caribbean cultures, they can be ambivalent words, sometimes functioning as terms of endearment for persons with and without African heritage (19). In this episode it is very likely that the plantation community as a whole referred to the decedent as "al negro [an] Andres criollo". This sobriquet classified Andres as a man of dark

complexion and demonstrably African features. Moreover, it was an expression of affection that identified him as an enslaved person born on Cuban soil.[107]

The placement of Manzano in the sugar refinery violates the well-established divide between field servants and house servants since it dislodges him from *la casa grande*. The fact that Manzano is nearly killed by the collapsing roof uncovers the precariousness of the mulatto racial identification that white society had assigned him. His lot in life is no different than enslaved persons working in the fields since he is susceptible to the same torture, abuses, and mishaps that "toda la negrada" are subjected to. In Cuban Spanish *la negrada* is a pejorative term used for an assemblage of black persons working on a plantation. Nonetheless, the word does not carry the customary negative connotation in this instance, since the crowd of enslaved persons that witnessed the accident took collective action in an attempt to rescue Andres. *La negrada* is not a random grouping of slaves but a community that drew together to help one of their own in trouble. Furthermore, the text situates Manzano within *la negrada* as he too experiences the traumatic loss of Andres, which sends him into depression (Luis, ed. 325). Along with multiple references to his family this passage locates Manzano within the larger African descended community. His emotional reaction demonstrates that he is not an outsider since he also experiences the collective grief of the community. As a social process mulattotization does not entirely disidentify Manzano from *los negros*. Nwankwo holds a similar point of view, citing the death of Andres; she says that Manzano

[107] I have chosen to use Manzano's spelling of the name in an effort to respect his original authorship of the text.

nurtured emotional ties with other people of African descent on the plantation even though he sought to distinguish himself from them (192).

In addition to the slave narrative, racial representations are also found in a few of Manzano's poems and in his correspondence with Domingo del Monte. In these texts, race functioned as a phenotypical descriptor that bore witness to Cuba's colonial system of racial domination. These were value-laden labels that specified the social and economic merit allocated to different bodies and different types of actors (Winant 115). Whether written about in printed literature or manipulated by the Spanish crown, race was coded language that represented enduring sociopolitical conflicts. Although the poet's treatment of amorous themes often occludes the racial identity of his object of affection, there are a few notable exceptions.

Manzano cites an episode where he pretends to be a free person of color in order to win the affection of a young *mulatica* ("a little mulatto girl") that lived next door. While Manzano is bathing, the mistress calls for him and proceeds to interrogate, asking who had granted him permission to bathe. When he answers that he had not been given permission, his nose is broken and a familiar scene of physical abuse and humiliation commences. Manzano says that he was especially mortified by this instance of abuse because he was intent on convincing the young girl that he was a free person of color (Luis, ed. 337). Although the narrative does not say if the young girl was free or enslaved, Manzano's preoccupation with his legal status insinuates that she was not a bondsperson. The poet's statement also establishes a connection between legal

status and racial identity among people of African descent. As a racial descriptor associated with free persons of color, *mulatica* is intended as a flattering term for Manzano's neighbor.[108]

In a letter to Domingo del Monte dated December 11, 1834, Manzano describes María del Rosario de Rojas, his second wife: "Mi Delia es parda libre, hija de blanco, con diez y nueve años de edad, linda como un grano de oro de pies a cabeza, no muy *arrancada* y con buenas esperanzas" ("My Delia is a free woman of mixed-race, daughter of a white man, nineteen years old, pretty as a gold nugget from her head to her toes not much ruined and with good prospects") (original emphasis, Luis, ed. 124). This portrayal of María del Rosario is revealing. Manzano describes her as an attractive free woman of mixed-race. Her racial identity and social status are reiterated when he explains that her father is a white man. He fails to mention her mother, however, who is presumed to be of African descent. The implication is that her skin color, moral character and social status are linked to her racial identification as a *parda*. This is critical, in view of the fact that *los pardos*, mixed race people, were thought to be the closest to white persons in physical appearance and cultural attainment. Colonial racial stereotypes maintained that *pardos* exhibited a certain polarity: either they would do anything to mimic white people or they vehemently hated and resented them (Nwankwo 38).

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[108] When explaining the painful episode of the castrated rooster that Manzano was accused of having stolen, the poet refers to the cook as "la morena Simona" ("the free black Simona") who was also questioned about the missing rooster. The reader should note that this reference is most likely a description of the cook without an explicit judgment or ranking of her physical appearance (Luis, ed. 324)

Manzano's statement can be interpreted as an implicit social whitening of María del Rosario, which might grant her a higher position on the socio-racial ladder with his white reader.[109] Some of his poems portray women of African descent in the language of Romantic idealization, which was intended to illustrate the purity of white women. Claudette Williams characterizes "Ilusiones" ("Illusions") – a poem Manzano dedicated to his second wife María del Rosario – as a denial of the sensuality of women of color since the lyrical woman is described as having "Las mejillas de rosas y violetas" ("cheeks of roses and violets"), dark shiny rather than curly hair "Que ostentaba en su andar nada lascivo" ("Who flaunted nothing lascivious in her walk") (Azougarh, ed. 23).[110] Williams accurately asserts that this poem conforms to the dominant view that the sensuality of women of color was a sign of lasciviousness. She also points out that colonial writers of African descent in the Spanish Caribbean were without an inherited literary model for the expression of African descendant female beauty. As such, their poems drew on the available white Hispanic model (24-25). Social whitening, however, did not mean that people of color would be granted white privilege. In this poem, as well in Manzano's letter to Delmonte, it

[109] Manzano's description of his wife should be contrasted with his depiction of other women of African descendant. In a letter to Domingo del Monte, dated September 29, 1835, Manzano cast aspersions upon female house servants associated with his mistress who he accused of threatening his honor with gossip. The letter refers to these women as "una porción de negras mal encaminadas" ("a bunch of wayward black women") (Luis, ed. 127).

[110] I have cited the Spanish version of this poem from Abdeslam Azougarh's edition (206).

amounted to a repositioning of the *parda* racial subject in order to depict her as an honorable woman.[111]

Richard Robert Madden's 1840 English translation of the slave narrative describes Manzano's mother, María de Pilar, as the offspring of an African and mulatto union and says that his father, was a *pardo* (39). Friol presumes that Manzano may have told Madden about his parent's racial identification since the two were well acquainted (48-49). If Madden's assertion is correct, this might explain why the narrator's description of María de Pilar explicitly refers to her as "era una de las criadas de distinsion o de estimasion o de razon como quiera qe. se llame" ("she was one of the servants of distinction, esteem and reason, however you want to call it") (Luis, ed. 299). This passage represents an attempt to counter Cuba's disparaging view of blackness and black women with an unequivocal *apologia* of the maternal figure. The portrayal of María de Pilar as a woman of esteem and reason is a strategy that recognizes and resignifies her blackness. From the very beginning the link between reason, refinement and whiteness is substituted for one that assigns these characteristics to the black maternal figure.

Although the topic of race is almost absent from Manzano's verse, my research has yielded one very significant exception in the poem "Sueño a mi

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[111] The same racial description appears in Manzano's 1830 poem, "Música" ("Music") where Delia is regarded as a "Parda virgen". In this poem her racial identity is clearly associated with her chastity (Luis, ed. 158).

segundo hermano".[112] This self-representative narrative poem – also analyzed in Chapter Two – creates a scenario wherein Manzano recounts a nostalgic dream to his younger brother Florensio. The dream creates an oneiric space within the text that allows for a rewriting and reworking of the recent past. The poetic voice becomes a wing being who surveys from on high the sugar plantation that once enslaved him. Later he descends upon a forested mountaintop to conduct a symbolic reproduction of Africa-based ritual in memoriam of his deceased parents. The act of remembering the departed overwhelms Manzano with grief and mourning thus motivating him to recall the "inocentes juegos" ("innocent games") and "maternal cariño" (maternal affection) of his early years (Luis, ed. 147). The figure of the younger brother is essential to this remembrance because as the poet's only remaining family he becomes a symbolic link to the departed as well as an object of fraternal love.

The stanzas below speak to Manzano's relationship with his younger brother and the concomitant racial categorization.

> Mas como no podía
> sofocar en mi pecho
> las tiernas impresiones
> del dulce amor fraterno,
> ansioso, bajo y hallo
> a aquel mi caro objeto,
> en sus años tan tierno
> como robusto etíope
> los trabajos venciendo. (Luis, ed. 147)

While yet in flight the metamorphosed poetic "I" is deeply moved with brotherly love, identifying Florensio as "my precious object, / in his tender years / like a

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[112] Although I analyze "La esclava ausente" ("The Absent Slave Woman") for its religious, moral and legal content in Chapter Two, I have chosen not to include it in this chapter due to space limitations.

robust Ethiopian / vanquishing tasks". The specific choice of language, "robusto etiope", ("robust Ethiopian"), is of significance because "Ethiopian" was customary nineteenth century literary parlance for referring to blacks. Sylvia Molloy dismisses Manzano's use of "Ethiopian" as "an ordinary, pretentious euphemism" to describe Florensio, which López Prieto's Parnaso Cubano (1881) would later use in reference to the poet himself (415). I contend, however, that within the religio-cultural context of this poem *etiope* implies much more.

Dedicated to Florensio, the poem celebrates him as the sibling with whom Manzano enjoyed an especially intimate bond, one that is also well described in *la historia de mi vida*. The choice of *etiope* to describe Florensio meant that the poet could circumvent the more offensive term *negro*, even as he depicted a positive valorization of blackness. This robust Ethiopian is beautiful and precious; he is strong, yet innocent. Like Manzano's portrayal of his mother in the slave narrative, blackness is completely devoid of the usual derogatory connotations. The African descendant spiritual context of the poem adds a cultural dimension to blackness, linking it to Africa-based culture in a manner not seen anywhere else in the poet's works. Coupled with the poetic voice's call to his brother to escape the plantation, blackness becomes subversive for religio-cultural as well as political reasons.

1.5 The Body as Black: *La Escalera* and Juan Francisco Manzano

As I have attempted to demonstrate thus far, Juan Francisco Manzano's construction of a mulatto racial persona should not be examined as a singular act

of self-identification but rather as a response to a broader societal process of racialization. In colonial society the mulatto racial subject was an inherently volatile position because there was no true in-between. *La Escalera* uprisings of 1843-1844, and the subsequent government suppression of the Afro-Cuban population, reveal that the multipartite system of racial classifications was inconsistent in Cuba's colonial discourse coming to light during the Military Tribunal. As Nwankwo avers, "the narrative of the conspiracy is completely racialized" (35). Colonial officials clustered all people of named or claimed African ancestry into one group even as they drew color lines of demarcation to differentiate among them. This becomes apparent, yet again, in that the Spanish government frequently referred to the uprisings as "la conspiración proyectada por la gente de color...para el esterminio de la...población blanca" ("the conspiracy devised by people of color ... to exterminate ...the white population") (Nwankwo 35). By describing the conspiracy in terms of extermination the official narrative depicts the white population as a likely victim of utter annihilation and omits African descendant aspirations for abolition and egalitarianism.

It might be added, however, that the official narrative of the conspiracy was replete with contradictions. Historian Robert Paquette describes *La Escalera* as a string of conspiracies organized from 1841-1844 that was comprised of many autonomous yet related centers of seditious activity. The uprisings were lead and executed by two distinct councils: one made up of white Cubans and another of both enslaved and free people of color. Additional support was provided (and later revoked) by certain elements of the British

government (263).[113] The Spanish government prosecuted both committees, placing whites and people of color on trial in Havana and Matanzas.

The list of conspirators included "pardos libres", "morenos libres", "negros esclavos", and "las negradas" ("free mixed race people, free blacks, black slaves and the black masses"). The government's account supposed that the conspiracy was organized by *pardos* who wished to improve their social condition and that *morenos* joined under the assumption that it might benefit them as well; but it does not explain the motivation of *negros* who were only cited for their superior strength (Nwankwo 35-36). Such a broad perception of black community is critical to my reading of Manzano's racial self-portrait because it disabuses all notions of a multiracial society where lighter skin afforded a greater degree of social privilege. In effect, Cuban society operated under a binary racial order. This is best revealed by the fact that arrests, detentions, torture, executions and expatriations in *La Escalera* disproportionately fell to people of African descent.[114] In this regard, Juan Francisco Manzano was no exception.

The newspapers and magazines that published Manzano's poems most often referred to him as a *pardo*. Such notes describing his skin color and

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[113] For a further information about the British involvement in *La Escalera* see Daisy Cué Fernández's recent book Plácido: El poeta conspirador. Here she publishes one of the poet's last statements before the Military Commission. In this testimony, the poet reveals the considerable extent of his knowledge about the conspiracy. Plácido reveals significant details about British support of the conspiracies that have since been corroborated by British and Cuban archival documents and letters (297-314).

[114] Africans and African descendants overwhelmingly suffered the brunt of colonial retribution. More people died from starvation, cruel beatings, and other tortuous forms of punishment than were executed. This had a devastating effect on the overall size of free and enslaved populations. Between 1841 and 1846 the number of enslaved persons sharply declined from 436,495 to 326,759 while the free populace lost almost four thousand (Midlo Hall 59-60).

phenotype were commonplace accompanying the publication of his verse during his enslavement and after his 1836 manumission (Friol 153). The repeated use of this descriptor represents a discrepancy, seeing as the poet identified himself as a *mulato.* It is possible that Manzano's publishers preferred *pardo* to *mulato* as a way of advancing the poet within the racial hierarchy. Such an explanation is plausible since *pardos* were considered a degree closer to whiteness than *mulatos*. Whatever the case, the classification of Manzano as a *pardo* speaks volumes about the inconsistencies, the slipperiness, and the ambivalence of colonial racial discourse. The designation of Juan Francisco Manzano as *pardo* surfaced once again in the accusations made against him in the *La Escalera* Conspiracy.

In 1844, the colonial government arrested *poeta emancipado* Juan Francisco Manzano for his alleged role in the plot against all whites on the island to institute black rule. The accusations made about Manzano had to do with two related matters: his personal ties with prominent whites and free people of color who had fallen under government suspicion and his vocation as a poet. According to the prosecution, Manzano's benefactor, Domingo del Monte, was one of the principal organizers of the conspiracy. The government believed that Manzano was not only aware of his plans but also implicated in the scheme. Testimony published by Friol bears witness to the prosecutor's misgivings regarding Manzano's friendship with Del Monte and free persons of color, Luis Gigaut and Plácido (the latter who was eventually executed as the ringleader). However, these excerpts do not clarify how Manzano and Delmonte could have

allied themselves with a conspiracy that had apparently incompatible objectives: the formation of a Cuban government mainly directed by whites on the one hand and the complete eradication of all white people on the other. Even so, Manzano is frequently questioned regarding a laudatory poem Del Monte purportedly asked him to write in celebration of England's anti-slave trade and abolitionist policies (201, 207). Unlike his alleged co-conspirator Plácido, Manzano was not under suspicion for any poem that he had written but for something he was yet to write. The charges levied against him divulge the government's apprehensions about the power of Afro-Cuban writers to incite rebellion among a steadily growing population of color.

While is not my intent to give a full account of the interrogations Manzano was subjected or to provide detail about his confrontation with Plácido, I consider it is constructive to briefly describe the questioning and to comment on the nature of his encounter with Valdés. This is so, because it is not possible to understand Manzano's representations of race without careful examination of the racial conspiracy that nearly cost him his life.

Before Manzano and Plácido were brought to face to face for joint questioning, both were interrogated in isolation. In these initial interrogations, Manzano described Domingo del Monte as the editor and publisher of his poems but denied that Delmonte instructed him to write on any particular theme. This, of course, was not true since Manzano had written an account of his life at the behest of Delmonte with the expressed purpose of advancing the abolitionist cause. Later on, he acknowledged that Delmonte did ask him to write poems

that would illustrate the beauty of the Cuban countryside and the noble customs of its inhabitants but says nothing of the clandestine and subversive text he had created in 1835. Delmonte is not portrayed as a friend but as a humanitarian who, along with José de la Luz y Caballero, contributed to the purchase of his freedom. According to Manzano, Delmonte never would have requested that a former slave – who knew nothing of politics and was a lesser poet than he – concoct a political poem (Friol 195-96, 202). In this way, Manzano feigns ignorance to deny his *locus* of control and escape suspicion that as a *pardo* he might have been a part of an Afro-Cuban intelligentsia that devised the conspiracy.

Not only did Manzano distance himself from Delmonte but he also tried to detach himself from Plácido since the perception of a close association with the latter might have placed his life in jeopardy. Manzano admitted that he had introduced himself to Plácido in Havana in 1840, that they had spoken about poetry and that he had been an invited guest at Valdés' house (Friol 198). After further questioning, however, he appears to contradict himself saying that he did not trust Plácido well enough to have shared his unpublished poems with him. Although Manzano made no explicit statements as to Plácido's participation in the plot, he did insist that the poet was a customary visitor at Delmonte's home, that he maintained a friendship with alleged conspirator Luis Gigaut, and that Plácido had made plans to travel throughout the interior of the island and to other countries (Friol 201-02, 205). The statements made by both poets demonstrate a need to avoid culpability without explicitly blaming the other. Theirs is a careful

dance. Manzano vehemently denied the prosecutor's charge that he had written a "pohetica alusiva a planes contrarios a la tranquilidad y seguridad de esta Isla" ("a poem alluding to plans contrary to the tranquility and security of the Island") and that he was knowledgeable of and/or involved in a conspiracy to exterminate whites (Friol 207).

One of the least examined texts Manzano ever produced during the course of these events was a letter he wrote to Doña Rosa Alfonso about the torture and psychological abuse he endured while being sequestered in Belén. Between 1844-1845 Manzano was twice imprisoned, placed on trial on two separate occasions, questioned and physically tortured. In Matanzas, in June of 1844, the free poet of color was acquitted of the charges brought against him in the first case and released. Despite this, just a month later he was detained yet again, subjected to further interrogations and maltreatment and held until November of 1845 (Friol 64-66). Excerpts from a letter dated October 5, 1844, written midway through the poet's ordeal, state:

> Entré en el consejo, se me consedió la palabra para poner, quitar o desir en mi defenza y aun con bastante consternado con aquel espectaculo tan nuevo para mi, y de hombres que me lloraban, pues ninguno crelló que yo escapase, tal era la condicion de la cita que me iso Matoso, de deber dar cuenta del plan de conspiracion por haber estado acomodado ocho meses con el señor Dn Domingo tanto en la Habana como en Matanzas y otra que según me dicen está impresa la causa (...) (Friol 64)

The paragraph suggests that Manzano was imprisoned the second time so that the government might corroborate claims made by Plácido about his relationship with Delmonte. Plácido testified that Manzano had resided at Delmonte's home on two occasions for a total of eight months. Although he did not allege guilt, his testimony intimated that Manzano had knowledge of anti-colonial schemes. Like

his slave narrative – written almost ten years prior – this letter is a clandestine text produced under duress, once again portraying the violence committed against his body and the unpredictability of physical confinement for people of African descent. It is not the plantation overseer or a cruel mistress that exact punishment on an enslaved person, but the Military Tribunal which now holds the power of life and death.

As in *la historia de mi vida*, in the letter, Manzano describes the physical nature of his predicament in grave detail:

> ...así de carsel en carsel de sepos en sepos de bartolina en bartolina, de calabozo en calabozo, de cordillera en cordillera, viendo agorarse mis fuerzas, cuanto de oprovios por ese camino a pie desde Matanzas a la Habana cuanto de burlas dicterios necesidades, sin comer mas que un solo dia una comida en Jaruco, ... cuanto de sopapos en mi cara pues yo no sé que recomendasiones traia yo para los capitanes de partido. ... el de Aguacate, este despues de casi descolluntarme un brazo en el amarrado me metió tan fuerte sopapo de atrás para adelante que me vio ir a dar contra un horcón con la frente, dandome memorias para los que me esperaban en la eternidad (...) (Friol 64-65)

Manzano's letter to Doña Rosa Alfonso is conspicuously reminiscent of the repeated floggings, confinement, and the public shame that he was subjected to on *El Molino* sugar plantation. The colonial authorities replace the overseer and the mistress as lawful agents of violence. The dark body is once again detained, placed on public display to be scorned, deprived of daily nourishment, and beaten senselessly. Manzano tells his reader that one of the guards nearly dislocated his arm from the socket. What is more, the prisoner is made to endure all of this while being forced to take a six-day journey from Matanzas to Havana on foot. The poet says that this excruciating torment lead him to believe that death was imminent. Even as an individual who was legally free, Manzano could be dispossessed of his own body: "no manifieste vmd: a nadien estos por

menores, que aun estoy en las manos de quien puede disponer de mi existencia" ("Your Grace do not share; these details with anyone, still I am in the hands of those that can dispose of my existence") (Friol 65).

This communiqué establishes that the objectification of Juan Francisco Manzano was a cyclical truth unrelated to his legal status as a slave or a free person. The bestowal of privilege, i.e. trips to the theatre, attending Catholic mass and French operas are juxtaposed with the random beatings, dressing and undressing of his body, confinement and the manner which he is placed on public display to be scorned. In his slave narrative, Manzano recognizes that he was made into a racialized object of amusement and contempt on the plantation. In a similar vein, this letter reveals his inability to escape objectification at the hands of the white dominated plantation colony.

I maintain that this private letter again reproduces the racialization of Manzano's body as one of the leitmotifs of his literary production. It underlines the fact that in the Conspiracy of *La Escalera* the brutal objectification of dark bodies meant that in due course all people of color were deemed to be *negros* regardless of prior classifications. As the texts I have examined reveal, Juan Francisco Manzano was subjected to a process of mulattotization throughout his childhood, adolescence and adulthood. The mulatto identity, which posits the existence of an in-between racial subject position, did not amount to an escape from blackness. After surviving the imprisonments, interrogations, and torture of *La Escalera*, Manzano confided in fellow Afro-Cuban poet Antonio Medina that at one time he had hoped for a better life after manumission. Instead, he protested,

that he had become a pariah in a colonial society that hated him for being a *black* intellectual (Moliner 226- 27).

CHAPTER FIVE

Re-charting Racial Aesthetics, Satirical *Costumbrismo* and Self-Representation in The Poetry of Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés

> Si alguna blanca desdeña
> Con genio murmurador
> Tu virtud, que tiene es seña
> Envidia de la trigueña
> Que celebra el pescador
> ----Plácido

1.1 Introduction

Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés and his contemporary Juan Francisco Manzano occupy a remarkable position in Cuban literary history as the earliest poets to publish verse celebrating the physical beauty of African descendant women. The first of their kind, these poems were written without the benefit of an inherited tradition. Claudette Williams says that they represent an incipient moment in Caribbean literature as the initial stage of "the development of a subversive aesthetic practice" (24-25). Although in many ways these poems yielded to the norms of Romantic ideology and occasionally employed Greco-Roman imagery, they broke new ground by admiring the appearance and moral character of women of color in an emerging literary discourse whose tropes were descriptive of white female beauty.

As a free lyricist of mixed ancestry (his father was a quadroon and his mother a Spaniard), Plácido's critics have identified him as an almost white poet whose work has been described as deficient in the illustration of a black cultural and political thematic. In this way, they tend to conflate his racial and cultural identities and disassociate him from his black counterparts in the colonial era.

Salvador Bueno's description of Plácido's body of poems is reminiscent of Manuel Sanguily's complete dismissal of his work. According to Bueno, Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés was a superficial lyricist without personal reflection who did not give voice to his individuality or subjectivity. His poems were a "disorganized lyrical work" written by a versifier who cultivated a range of forms that lacked any poetic value. While the critic recognizes the musicality and descriptiveness of Plácido's work, Bueno considers him the least intimate poet in all of Cuban letters (Bueno, ed. Órbita de Fernández 99, 104). It is also worth noting that Bueno's critique fails to acknowledge the representation of race in Plácido's verse.

On the other hand, Nancy Morejón designates Manzano's *Autobiografía* as the only accurate treatment of black oppression in the colonial era, and avers that Plácido's racial identity precluded an unambiguous representation of "the bitterness and darkness" of his condition as a *mestizo* (156-57). In a similar vein, Pedro Barreda describes Plácido as a mixed race extemporizer whose light skin would have allowed him to pass for white in colonial society. Barreda characterizes his work, as largely devoid of the critical exposition of "the black point of view" given that race does not figure prominently in Plácido's poetry. Even so, he believes that the poet possesses "a few fine poems that save his name from oblivion" (17). The doubts about Plácido's putative racial identity and the quality of his poetry persist with a number of his biographers who have drawn a parallel between his skin color and his political worldview.

In "Tema negro en las letras de Cuba hasta fines del siglo XIX" Fernández de Castro critiques Plácido for many of the same reasons as the above cited critics. He describes Plácido as an almost white poet who, had he not been raised by his black grandmother, might have been perceived as a poor white artisan. His recognition of Plácido's lyrical talent is tempered by a strident critique of his poems. While De Castro does not acknowledge the representation of race in the blossom poems, he nonetheless criticizes the celebratory verse Plácido wrote to the Queen of Spain and to prominent white Cubans, concurring with Delmonte that the poet produced a literature devoid of social value (Bueno, ed. Órbita de Fernández 170-71).

In counter distinction to Fernández de Castro, Mary Cruz does acknowledge the representation of race in a select few of Plácido's poems, but appears to have been less familiar with Plácido's biography than other critics. She mistakenly affirms that the poet was not influenced by the musical and poetic traditions of the black race and that he was not familiar with its social institutions or mythology (81). This assertion seems highly unlikely since Plácido biographer Eugenio María de Hostos says that the poet was raised by his black grandmother, a formerly enslaved woman (213). In such an environment the poet would have been exposed to the cultural traditions of African descended people. For Cruz, the subject position in Plácido's poems evinces an absolute disidentification with blackness. Citing "Mi no sé que ha richo", "Si a todos Arcino dices", and "La figura de un alma", she affirms that Plácido depicts the black theme "desde fuera", that is, as an outsider looking in (81).

Daisy Cué Fernández articulates a different view. She cites Sergio Aguirre's 1962 letter to Nicolás Guillén, in which Aguirre identifies Plácido as the originator of *negrista* verse in the Cuban tradition (Cué, Plácido: El poeta 224).[115] But Cué does not discern a conscious choice to integrate black themes in Plácido's poetry. Instead she believes that his work represents the instinctive presence of his immediate cultural context. According to her, Plácido's poems cannot accurately be classified as *negrismo* but they may be the earliest known precursor to an aesthetic movement that would emerge a century later. As is the case with the poet's depictions of Africa-based spirituality, Cué notes that the race poems have been excluded from all Cuban anthologies with the exception of Emilio Ballagas (Cué, Plácido: El poeta 225-26, 232).

Plácido merits critical attention for having initiated the aesthetic valorization of African descendant women in Cuban verse more than any other documented poet in the early 1800s.[116] For the most part, his poems rejoice in

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[115] Sergio Aguirre and Le Riverend published this letter in the newspaper *Hoy* on May 29, 1962 (Cué, Plácido: El poeta 224).

[116] In the early nineteenth century, the representation of women of African descent largely amounted to an over-valorization of *la mulata* and the conspicuous absence or social subordination of the black woman. For a cadre of mostly white male writers, among which Anselmo Suárez y Romero and Cirilo Villaverde were chief examples, the mulatta was a guilty pleasure, an exceptionally beautiful woman who was emblematic of miscegenation and whose candid sensuality was perceived as a threat to normative white marital unions. Williams points out that white male writers tended to highlight the physical appearance, skin color, culture, and character of *la mulata.* These writers perceived her difference as both racial and moral, juxtaposing her sensuality with that of the virtuous upper class white woman thought to be unblemished by African heritage. Consequently, the *mulata* became an unobjectionable image for the aesthetic portrayal of women of African descent.

Dorotea and Cecilia, the main mulatto characters of Suárez's Francisco: El ingenio o las delicias del campo and Villaverde's Cecilia Valdés: o La loma del ángel, are depicted as romantic archetypes. They are very attractive women who are abundantly sensual yet delicately innocent. Desirable to both white men and men of color, these characters are the basis for social conflicts which revolve around questions of white male desire for the unattainable *mulata*. In Francisco, Dorotea is an enslaved house servant employed, as a seamstress for her mistress Doña Dolores

the popular image of *la mulata*, but on a few occasions they also intone the praises of the dark-skinned Afro-Caribbean woman. His lyricism is descriptive and erotic, sensual yet cognizant of the social standing of women in colonial society. Not only is the African descendant female present as an object of male desire but also she figures as a lyrical character and occasionally acts as an active speaking subject.

Besides the love poetry, race resurfaces as the central theme in a small number of Plácido's satirical poems, which are infused with local color and Cuban landscapes. In such a corpus, social anxieties about skin color, phenotypes and *limpieza de sangre* abound. Unlike the love poems that celebrate and uplift Afro-Caribbean female beauty, Plácido's satirical poems call attention to self-loathing tendencies among colonial populations of African descent. Within this select group of relatively unknown poems, "El guapo" and "La respuesta de un curro" are of special interest because their implicit depiction of race takes on new dimensions by engaging colonial models of black male gender performance.

Mendizábal who refuses the African born bondsman, Francisco, her hand in marriage (Cabrera Saqui, ed. 55-56). Dorotea, a physically weak and lachrymose character, falls hopelessly in love with Francisco and bears his child (Cabrera Saqui, ed. 145). In Villaverde's novel, Cecilia is a mulatta *al parecer blanca* who is enamored of Leonardo Gamboa, an upper class white male from a slave owning aristocratic family (Villaverde 100, 163). In both novels, violence and the social reality of slave society preclude these love interests from coming to fruition. In a final act of desperation, Francisco commits suicide and Cecilia's would be mulatto suitor, Jesús, murders Leonardo in a decisive act of retribution. Although both characters actively express love and desire for their chosen male partners they are powerless to effect change, instead becoming ill-fated victims of the socio-racial reality of colonial Cuba. The determinism of such narratives condemns the African descendant female characters to a tragic outcome grounded in their putative racial identity. In fact, most early nineteenth century illustrations of women of color designated them as powerless objects devoid of subjectivity, which were constructed from a white male vantage point.

It is difficult to group the amorous and satirical poems together because they perform disparate and incongruous functions even though both sets of poems exhibit elements of color writing and reveal a distinctively Cuban representation of people of African descent in literature. What does Plácido's love poetry and satirical verse disclose about race as a social line of demarcation in colonial slave society? This is the problem that I hope to address in this chapter. Although many of the race-themed poems I will analyze are not self-referential, the author's alleged involvement in *La Escalera* Conspiracy meant he was obliged to identify himself in racial terms. I will explore how his purportedly "almost white status" is altered once he was placed under suspicion by the colonial regime.

1.2 The New Shade of Literary Aesthetics in Plácido's Love Poems

The love poems studied in this section share certain thematic commonalities: they reflect a budding interest in the representation of Cuban landscapes, they provide implicit as well as unambiguous depictions of race, they tend towards the Romantic aesthetic, and in some instances they introduce female characters that transcend the objectification of the male gaze. Among the poems there is also a small number that embrace the white Hispanic female as an object of desire.

The sonnet "A mi amada" (1837), which displays the topic of *la mujer esquiva*, presents the short-lived romance of an elite white lady and an Afro-Cuban male of far less social status. The male lover compares the white

woman's devotion to a withering rose: "Que ayer, brillante, fresca y olorosa, / Puse en tu blanca mano perfumada. / Dentro de poco tornaráse en nada:" ("Yesterday, radiant, fresh and fragrant, / I placed in your white perfumed hand. / In little time, it will turn into nothing") (Morales, ed. 4). For the male poetic voice their love is akin to the ephemerality of nature beset by an unceasing cycle of life and death. He does not accuse her straightaway of infidelity or abandonment, choosing instead to inquire about the true nature of her feelings for him: "Que habiendo en todo mundo tal mudanza / ¿Solo en tu corazón habrá firmeza?" ("Being that such transformation exists in all the world / In your heart alone is their steadfastness?") (Morales, ed. 4). The poem concludes with a rhetorical question that casts doubts on the white lady's devotion to the poor man of color. The shifting sands of nature are analogous to the intemperate social condition of colonial society wherein a distinguished white woman is forbidden to give her hand (in marriage or otherwise) to a man of African descent.[117] The synecdochic reference to "your white perfumed hand" might also be an allusion to an impossible love relation that is foiled by social conventions.

The male lyrical voice in "A una ingrata" (1837), another sonnet, adopts a more personal tone that laments his lover's refusal to reciprocate the affectionate and passionate desire he feels for her: "Porque es, Celia, tu cándida hermosura / Como la nieve, deslumbrante y fria." ("Because, Celia, your sincere beauty / Is like the snow, blinding and cold.") (Morales, ed. 4). Although the poetic voice

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[117] Historian Verena Martínez-Alier states that the total number of *pardos* in nineteenth century Cuba's population speaks to the reality of racial mixture. However, she notes that these unions did not represent legal marriage but a preference for consensual concubinage (63).

does not explicitly say that the object of his desire is white, Celia's racial identity could be inferred from the above-cited allusion. Her genuine beauty is blinding, cold and white, like the snow itself. Plácido appropriates the Hispanic sonnet, a lyrical format commonly employed by Golden Age poets to sing the praises of the white Hispanic woman, using it to display his distaste for the aloofness and indifference of his white female lover. The male persona longs for "una deidad de llamas", ("a goddess of flames") and "una mujer de fuego" ("a woman of fire") (Morales, ed. 4). The final verses of the poem conjure up erotic images that threaten to breach social conventions forbidding white lovers the right to relate to people of color. Cloaked in figurative imagery, these male desires do not befit expression in public space.

"La flor de la cera" represents a new development in nineteenth century Cuban poetry in which local landscapes – flora, plantation agriculture and regional subject matter – serve as metaphoric language to illustrate the singular beauty of Cuban women. As in the sonnets "A una ingrata" and "A mi amada", the male voice fixes his eyes on a woman of European appearance. This female character is conventional in almost every way imaginable. She strolls through the countryside with a wicker basket in hand carelessly picking flowers to pass the time. She is not a lady of high society but a simple, innocent beauty, a rustic and blissful character. What sets her apart is the poet's description, since her beauty is compared to that of the wax palm blossom, a tree of moderate height, which is indigenous to the island and exudes a white wax-like substance.

> Era su frente brillante
> Como del amor la estrella,
> Sus ojos, vivos y hermosos,

Negras y largas sus trenzas;

De marfil su dentadura,
Su boca purpúrea y bella,
Y su cútis fresco y blanco
<<Como la flor de la cera.>> (Morales, ed. 309)

The woman described in these stanzas is a white Hispanic female with long dark braided hair, radiant eyes, beautiful violet lips and white skin. She is a recreation of Golden Age pastoral verse functioning as a projection of heterosexual male fantasy that renders her sexually desirable yet preserves her virtue and purity.

This idyllic beauty of the Cuban countryside longs to be as lovely as the delicate wax palm blossom for her male suitor. Although portrayed in language that evokes aboriginal plant life, the female character lacks verisimilitude since she makes a tiara of flowers and crowns herself while gazing narcissistically at her reflection in the pond. Bereft of individual subjectivity, this allusion to local vegetation is little more than a façade given that it carefully replicates the bucolic tradition of peninsular Spain.

Ann Venture Young points out that the lyric poetry of the Spanish Renaissance (1474-1556) produced a dearth of literary images representing men and women of African descent. Young cites Luis Monguío, who explains that the absence of blacks in Renaissance poetry was probably the result of an artistic obsession with an ideal beauty that excluded blacks as uncharacteristic of the established white aesthetic model (4). Hispanic Caribbean poets modified the literary tradition inherited from Spain, to reflect an emerging plantation colony and the attendant problems of slavery and racial domination. The gradual changes in colonial modes of representation were born of the economic

exigencies of the late eighteenth century, which found voice in the literature of this period.

During this nearly twenty-year period (1790-1819) writers like Manuel de Zequeira y Arango produced works whose illustration of local landscapes and flora reflected their endeavor to make Cuba one of the foremost plantation economies in the Caribbean. Zequeira's poems are noted for their admiration of the tropical Cuban countryside, celebrating the pineapple as "La pompa de mi patria" ("The splendor of my native soil"). Cuban critic José Antonio Portuondo says that while the portrayal of Cuba as the native soil was a proto-nationalist statement, it did not coalesce into separatist political sentiment in the late 1700s. At that time the term, *la patria*, had not yet acquired pro-independence implications among a contented propertied elite who often dedicated verse to the "[el] amado Fernando" ("[the] beloved Ferdinand") in the days of Spanish resistance to Napoleonic occupation (15-16).

Like other contemporary Cuban poets' representation of local landscapes, Plácido's blossom poems imagine Cuba as a picturesque tropical space unto itself undefined by metropolitan Spain.[118] Notwithstanding, Plácido's portrayal of

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[118] The establishment of *el Papel Periódico de la Habana* in 1791 created a medium for the exchange of ideas and discussion of grievances; it became a forum for the defense of the ever-expanding economic interests of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century landed gentry. A weekly publication until 1793, when it became a daily newspaper, *el Papel Periódico* published articles about the most recent developments in agriculture, commercial enterprise and industry.[118] Simultaneous to the founding of *el Papel Periódico*, *La Sociedad Económica de los Amigos del País* (the Havana Economic Society) was organized by twenty-seven prominent white property owners that committed themselves to the diffusion of information on stock raising, mining, commerce, industry and agriculture, especially sugar production (Pérez Jr. 65-66). These organizations represented a concerted and sustained effort to transform Cuba into a colony of sugar and tobacco plantations.

budding plant life, idyllic landscapes, and plantation agriculture constitute a gendered statement of racial and cultural difference not found in other poets' verse. Vera Kutzinski's analysis of the blossom poems draws attention to the manner in which their metaphoric associations of women to nature "play a double game of sexuality and innocence" ("Unseasonal Flowers" 153). These poems allude to historical subject matter; they idolize *la mulata*, and replicate an ever-present disquiet about ancestry in nineteenth century colonial society (Kutzinski, "Unseasonal Flowers" 156-57).

In "La flor de la piña" ("The Pineapple Blossom") Plácido's identifies the pineapple as the most beautiful fruit in all the Indies. Its flavor is such that he compares it with the delights of the ancient world: "La más estimada / De cuantos la miran, / Es la piña dulce / Que néctar nos brinda / Más grato y sabroso / Que aquel en la antigua / Edad saborearon / Deidades olimpias;" ("She is the most esteemed / Of all that see her, / It is the sweet pineapple / That offers her nectar / More pleasant and savory / Than Olympic deities / In the Ancient Age relished") (Morales, ed. 477). The sweet nectar of the pineapple blossom is celebrated as far more delectable than any fruit that the gods take pleasure in on Mt. Olympus. Regional distinctiveness is brought to the fore and the feminization of *la flor de la piña* eroticizes the produce as well as the women of the poet's native soil.

The *double entendre* in the final stanza correlates the fertility of the Cuban woman with that of the pineapple blossom: "Ella es un emblema / De la infancia viva, / Fecunda en su tallo / Feraz en sus guias;" ("She is an emblem / Of vivacious youth / Fecund in her stem / Fertile in her stalks") (Morales, ed. 477).

The reproductive fruitfulness of the rural woman is equivalent to the natural productivity of the island. The pleasant landscapes and fertile soil of "La flor de la piña" sets this poem apart from "La flor de la cera" since the eroticism of the woman and the land become tropicalized objects of the poetic imagination. Nonetheless, the two texts share certain things in common. Like, "La flor de la cera" this poem's presentation of quaint Cuban landscapes and flora associate women with nature and exploit euphemism to insinuate female submission to male sexual desire. Moreover, the female characters in both poems are utterly silent; they are but a fraction of a scenic *emblema* that replicates a masculinist viewpoint that would husband the land and govern the women.

Although its use of erotic undertones is highly evocative, "La flor de la piña" is silent about the racial identity of the female character that so freely gives of her *néctar.* The sexualized metaphors found in both poems are also present in the remaining blossom poems, "La flor de la caña" and "La flor de café" as well as in "El pescador de San Juan", "El veguero" and "A mi trigueña". Still, these poems are atypical in that they portray mulatto women and achieve a greater level of lyrical sophistication through the representation of subjective female characters that occasionally engage the male persona in vigorous dialogue.

"La flor de la caña" (The Sugarcane Blossom) is yet another romanticized account of the passionate male suitor who falls completely in love with a youthful and innocent woman of the Cuban countryside. As is typical in this group of poems, the male persona catches sight of a lovely creature and commences to

describe her exceptional beauty with poetic commonplaces that are infused with local color.

> Yo ví una veguera
> Trigueña tostada,
> Que el Sol envidioso
> De sus lindas gracias,
> ...
> Prendado de ella
> Le quemó la cara.
> Y es tierna y sencilla
> Como cuando saca
> Los primeros tilos
> <<La flor de la caña>>
>
> Su acento es divino,
> Sus labios de grana,
> Su cuerpo, gracioso,
> Ligera su planta:
> Y las rubias hebras...
> Como con las gotas
> Que destila el Alba,
> Candorosa brilla
> <<La flor de la caña.>> (Morales, ed. 430-31)

The female character is described as *trigueña*, a Hispanic Caribbean racial descriptor denoting a wheat-colored woman, which was regarded as a gracious term of endearment for mulattas in the colonial era. As Claudette Williams points out, *trigueña* and *morena* are polite variants still operative in social intercourse today. These euphemisms circumvent the overtone of racial insult embedded in *negro and negra*, the Spanish words for black man and black woman (19). However, the racial identity of the woman depicted in these stanzas is not without ambiguity since we are told she has sun-tanned skin, scarlet lips and blond hair. Such a physical description leaves room for the reader to construe her as a white woman whose skin has been darkened by the sun. There is, in fact, some historical basis for such an interpretation. Esteban Pichardo's Diccionario

provincial casi razonado de vozes y frases cubanas, originally published in 1836, affords multiple definitions for the word *trigueña*. Pichardo explains that the expression "*Blanco*, aunque sea *Trigueño*" ("White although wheat-colored") was commonly used to draw racial distinctions between wheat-colored persons identified as white and *negros* and *mulatos*. Pichardo admits, however, that this delineation was fraught with inconsistencies since some people of named and claimed African ancestry had lighter skin than those deemed white (Herrera, ed. 659-660).

The perceived need for racial euphemisms suggests that sensitivities about skin color, hair textures, and other physical characteristics associated with people of African descent were indicative of a far-reaching social angst about the purity of blood. Vera Kutzinski reads the vagueness surrounding the woman's racial identity as a "locus for cultural anxiety over ancestry" so that the term *trigueña* does not solve the mystery of her racial identity but rather invests the female character with the social doubts and uncertainties attendant to Cuban racial classifications.[119] In her estimation, the female character – like Plácido and his poetry – is *al parecer blanco*, white in appearance and marked by indistinction. For Kutzinski, the sweet name Idalia, an allusion to Venus/Aphrodite, bestows a false identity on *la mulata*, one that negates her historical origins in miscegenation. She contends that the secret of the two lovers' souls is not a conventional metaphor for a clandestine love affair but a decorative reference to Cuba's painful social history ("Unseasonal Flowers" 157).

[119] Vera Kutzinski takes this quote from Mary Dearborn's Pocahontas's Daughters Gender and Ethnicity in American Culture (174).

Doubts about this individual's racial identity also bespeak the problem of the color line and self-loathing within communities of African descent. If the poem does portray a woman of known African lineage, she most likely has a rather light skin tone. As Fanon argues the colonization of Afro-Caribbean peoples engendered a perceptible contempt for blackness that materialized in an outward negation of African heritage and the disparagement of phenotypes generally associated with Africa (10-11). There were at least two salient features of the colonial strategy of racial domination: the perpetuation of social friction and distrust among persons of named and claimed African ancestry whose skin colors ran the gamut and the fomentation of white fears of black uprisings (Nwankwo 35).[120] This poem may well be an acknowledgement of African descendant female beauty. If so, it defines Afro-Cuban male desire in terms of a stereotypical attraction towards women with light skin whose physical traits are generally thought to be more European than African. "La flor de la caña" situates itself between two modes of representation: a conventional yet ill-fitting white Hispanic model and a nascent yet formless means of replicating racial and cultural difference in colonial society. I believe that this poem raises more questions than it answers. Plácido's other love poems, however, are less imprecise about the racial identity of the female characters depicted.

[120] Historian Ada Ferrer states that white Cubans were educated in the fear of black uprisings after the destruction of the French colony of St. Domingue and the establishment of Haiti as the first black republic. The colonial discourse on race took on an increasingly bipartite formulation; Cuba would either be white, Spanish and Catholic or black, African and uncivilized (2, 50).

"A mi trigueña" ("To My Wheat-Colored Girl"), "El pescador de San Juan" ("The Fisherman of San Juan") and "El veguero" ("The Tobacco Farmer") demonstrate the aesthetical limitations of white literary conventions that did not mirror the ever-shifting socio-racial circumstance of Cuban society. Furthermore, these texts stand as singular portrayals of the Afro-Cuban male gaze with regards to women of color. In all three poems the object of desire is a non-white woman described as a *trigueña* whose personal virtue and social standing have been called into question. Contrary to the ambiguous racial portrait of "La flor de la caña", "El pescador de San Juan" and "El veguero" present identifiable depictions of the mulatta. "El veguero" describes this "Trigueña de Villa-clara" as a disdainful but lovely woman with a golden brow, crimson-colored lips, a heart of fire and dark virgin eyes. Once again the female body is a sensual yet innocent object likened to idyllic scenery: "Tú eres fresca como las flores, esbelta como la palma" ("You are fresh like the flowers, svelte like the palm tree") (Morales, ed. 321). In this instance, the metaphorical association of the Cuban woman with flowers suggests dual meanings. The female character's resemblance to flora insinuates that she is a natural beauty. However, the word "fresca" also intimates that she is indifferent to the pleas of her male suitor, choosing instead to withhold her love.

Among Plácido's loves poems "El pescador de San Juan" and "El veguero" are important because they allude to the socio-sexual tensions between white women and women of African descent in colonial society. In Cuba the mulatta signified white male desire for and power over African-descendant

female bodies. She was representative of a protracted history of illicit affairs and rape, in which white males acquired black concubines or forced themselves upon enslaved women. Typically in such scenarios – which played out on both the plantation and in urban areas – the legitimate white woman was revered in verse but in reality disdained. The stanzas from "El veguero" and "El pescador de San Juan", which I cite in that order below, treat this less than polite subject matter.

> Verás a la vergonzosa
> Tibia por naturaleza,
> Y la blanca extraña rosa
> Que no te excede en pureza
> Ni se te iguala en lo hermosa. (Morales, ed. 323)
> ...
> Si alguna blanca desdeña
> Con genio murmurador
> Tu virtud, que tiene es seña
> Envidia de la trigueña
> Que celebra el pescador (Morales, ed. 90)

These verses are an *apologia* for the moral character, virtue and social standing of the mulatta. In "El veguero" the tobacco farmer scorns the white woman as a disgraceful, indifferent and peculiar rose, which is neither more beautiful nor purer than the *trigueña*. The fisherman in "El pescador de San Juan" is dismissive of the envious white woman whose gossip would malign the mulatta's good name. In both instances, the spiteful chatter of the white woman can be read as frustration with a male-dominated power structure in which her rightful place as companion to the white male is undermined and usurped by the mulatta. Her glare at *la mulata*, then, is a reproduction of the masculinist perspective. The poetic voice not only relishes in the physical appearance of the woman of African descent but also defends her as a virtuous lady thus, inverting her social position in a society that regarded her as licentious and immoral. The male persona

elevates the woman of color to a place of honor, admiration and sexual purity generally reserved for the white woman of high society. In this way, his statements amount to a staring back, or what Bhabha has termed a counter gaze, that openly challenges the offensive glare of the dominant society (47). These poems serve a restorative function in that they seek to rescue the mulatta from disrepute.

The poetic voice in "A mi trigueña" counsels the Cuban woman to wear the attire that she chooses and to adorn herself in the fashion that she desires: "Aunque te murmure el mundo / Ponte zarcillos, trigueña, / Que tú del mundo no vives / Ni él tiene contigo cuenta" ("Even though the whole world gossips about you / Put on your earrings, wheat-colored girl, / You don't live for the world / And the world doesn't matter to you") (Morales, ed. 192). The *trigueña's* clothing and jewelry are grounds for rumors, gossip, and innuendo. Her way of dressing is perceived as less than conventional and might even suggest impropriety or sexual scandal. It is not the earrings that matter so, but her body, which is an object of voyeuristic desire that often becomes fodder for idle gossips. This lighthearted poem does not go as far as "El veguero" and "El pescador de San Juan" in clarifying that the woman depicted is a mulatta. However, like the other two poems, the poetic voice does not generate doubt about her racial subject position since her skin is not described as sun-tanned and her hair is not blond. It is my inference that within the socio-racial context of colonial society this wheat-colored woman's choice of attire indentifies her as a person of African lineage. This critique of *la mulata's* attire and public presentation is reminiscent

of the novel Cecilia Valdés (1882), where Cirilo Villaverde's narrator disparages the clothing worn by black and mulatto women at dances for *la gente de color* as gaudy and of poor taste (Kutzinski, Sugar's Secrets 57).

Even as the aforementioned poems submit a full-throated vindication of the beauty and moral virtue of women of African descent, they also reiterate and reinforce a masculinist point of view. Kutzinski posits that "constructions of interracial masculinity", which produce representations of the racially mixed mulatta, conceal the legitimation of male social, economic and political power in particular historical settings. In this way, she believes that white and African descendant male writers participate in the design and perpetuation of disparaging stereotypes about Cuban female sexuality (Sugar's Secrets 16). There is more than a grain of truth to such assertions since every poem I have studied thus far was written from a male point of view, reproduced the customary tropes of bucolic literature, and replicated a voiceless female character. Notwithstanding, the aesthetic and moral revalorization of African descended women in Plácido's poetry sets them apart from texts published by white authors of the same period. In the example that follows the inclusion of male/female dialogue creates a poetic dynamism not often seen in the early nineteenth century.

La mulata is again depicted in "La flor del café". Unlike "El veguero", "A mi trigueña" and "El pescador de San Juan", "La flor del café" incorporates a female character who is cognizant of her subjectivity and engages the male persona in dialogue as an act of disputation. Like other blossom poems, the male poetic

voice romanticizes the Cuban woman to whom he pledges life-long fidelity and endless devotion. The literary refrain "como la flor de café" ("just like the coffee blossom") invokes slave labor within plantation society even as it is a vibrant reference to the allure of the dark woman's skin. In this way, the beautiful *trigueña* referred to in this poem is not only associated with the land but also with the exploitation of slave labor to produce coffee.

The idealized object of heterosexual male desire is transformed into a speaking subject whose rejoinder casts serious doubts on the trustworthiness of the poet's vow:

> Ella contestó al momento:
> De un poeta el juramento
> En mi vida creeré,
> Porque se va con el viento
> *Como la flor del café.*
>
> Cuando sus almas fogosas
> Ofrecen eternal fé,
> Nos llaman ninfas y diosas,
> Más fragantes que las rosas
> *Y las flores del café*. (Morales, ed. 479)

The African descendant female character appropriates the symbolism of the coffee blossom only to discard it. She intones her rebuttal in the second person plural so that it is directed to the poetic voice as well as to the broader masculinist discourse that would misrepresent and objectify the woman of African descent. In this way she, too, participates in literary discourse, not as a voiceless object but as a self-conscious subject.

The woman of color not only rejects the amorous proposition but also exploits the neoclassical images that the poet has employed.

> Mas despues que han conseguido
> Ver su amor correspondido,

Y va á ellos nuestra fé
Como el céfiro dormido
Sobre la flor del café,

Entónces, abandonada
En soledad desgraciada
Dejan la que amante fué;
Como en el polvo agostada
Yace la flor del café. (Morales, ed. 479)

Falling from her lips, the language of zephyrs, nymphs, and goddesses is divested of its original meaning and function.[121] She problematizes the adulation embedded in the pleas of the male persona and in that way implies that his highborn rhetoric is less than sincere. His truest intention, after all, is to gratify his own sexual desires. On the contrary, it was dishonorable for a woman in colonial society to practice sexual promiscuity. This is implied when the female character counters that she does not wish to be disgraced and abandoned. For women of color the issue of social propriety and public appearances would have been of great concern since stereotypes fostered by white men cast them as seductive creatures that corrupted white males. Furthermore, the sexist labels propagated by men of color decried free women of African descent as persons with virtually no morals. These characterizations reflect the power of male-dominated society to gender bodies and to ascribe misogynistic traits to women who dared to question or, in this case, defy the color line of demarcation and shun reputable behavioral norms (Shepherd, ed. 79-80).

[121] José Antonio Portuondo writes that unlike the Spanish tradition, Cuban Romanticism did not emerge as a reaction to Neoclassicism. Instead, both literary movements coexisted in nineteenth century Cuban letters (19).

The sexual tension between women and men of color surfaces in the male response to the disdainful woman.

> Yo repuse:----Tanta queja
> Suspende, Flora, por qué
> También la mujer se deja
> Picar de cualquier abeja,
> Como la flor de café.
>
> Quiéreme trigueña mia,
> Y hasta el postrimero dia
> No dudes que fiel seré:
> Tú serás mi poesía,
> *Y yo, tu flor de café.* (Morales, ed. 479)

The poetic voice substitutes the delicate Greco-Latin allusions of the pastoral tradition with an indecorous assertion about the loose moral fiber of women in colonial society who, according to him, are willing to be stung by any bee. Like the female character, he maintains the nature imagery of the coffee blossom but infuses it with erotic undertones.

Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo reads the second stanza as a self-referential statement cast in scenic metaphors that allude to Plácido's racial identity. Like the coffee blossom – a white flower derived from the dark coffee bean that produces mahogany-colored fruit – the poet's light skin means he could pass for white although he is a person of "dark heritage" (101-02). While it is not clear that Plácido's use of the first person singular in the tenth stanza denotes an autobiographical statement, it is remarkable that the poetic voice identifies himself as a man of color.

In my estimation "La flor de café" is the most dynamic of the abovementioned love poems given that it incorporates a discursively active mulatta character. The dialogue between male and female decenters the

phallocentric authority inherent in Romantic poetry wherein a unitary male subject inflicts his desires upon an inactive and dutiful female body. The representation of the female character in this poem is significant for nineteenth century Cuban poetry because she is the archetypical anti-Romantic who exercises individual choice by refusing male desire. I read this dismissal as a negation of masculinist socio-sexual authority as well as a de-centering of Romantic ideology by one of Cuba's foremost Romantic bards.

1.3 Romanticizing Blackness: Rafaela as *la Venus etíope*

Plácido devoted ten poems to his departed lover Rafaela, a free person of color who is reputed to have been a dark-skinned descendant of an enslaved black woman (Morales xxviii).[122] This self-referential verse is as an elegiac lament that merits critical attention as the only texts written by Plácido that submit an aesthetic rendering of *la negra*. Theirs is a Romantic eroticization of the black female body that recounts the poet's personal memories and idealizes the fallen object of his affection. On the whole, the poet's voice is the embodiment of the Romantic male lover whose tremendous sentimentality results in the expression of a grief-stricken, mournful, and quasi-suicidal reaction to the loss of his female love.

Regarding the poems dedicated to Fela, Nwankwo writes that none of them reveals that the love of Plácido's life was a black woman. She surmises

[122] Alfredo de Morales says that Fela and her mother were enslaved on the Matanzas plantation of an aristocratic white woman with abolitionist tendencies who later granted them their freedom. According to him, this woman was without children and so she treated Rafaela as her own child, educating her and approving of her union with Plácido (xviii).

that as a Romantic poet Plácido preferred to use nature as a means "to speak to the universal elements of human existence and emotions" and in so doing transformed his muse into "the ultimate romantic heroine" (102-03). Nwankwo is right to say that the poems devoted to Fela are indubitably Romantic in form; nonetheless, there is at least one that is unambiguous about Fela's racial identity. With the common euphemism *morena*, "El desden" ("Disdain"), makes a clear disclosure about race. Even so, the elegiac poems are not wholly representative of the Fela that Plácido knew and loved because they are situated within an aesthetic designed to replicate the Romantic ideal of feminine grace and beauty. Unquestionably, this ideal was associated with and intended for white European women of an alabastrine hue. Thus, the question remains: What happens within the text when the feminine ideal becomes black? My reading suggests that the portrayal of Fela as a black female Romantic character in this small body of poems is a re-signification of blackness that introduces new content into old wine skins.

In the poems devoted to Fela's memory, the male persona is besieged with unremitting melancholy, pledging in "A Elino: en la muerte de Fela" ("To Elino; in Fela's Death") (1834): "Yo no puedo vivir sin ser amado, / Ni espero más amar, ni ser querido: / Moriré triste de dolor postrado;" ("I cannot live without being loved, / Neither do I hope to love anew, or to be cherished: / I will die prostrated in sorrow") (Morales, ed. 7). In "A Doris: en la muerte de Fela" ("To Doris: in Fela's Death") the poet reveres the memory of his departed, saturating her tomb with tears of *hondo lamento* ("deep lament") (Morales, ed. 3). The

funeral motif resurfaces in "A mi amigo Nicolás Ayala" ("To My Friend Nicolás Ayala") where Plácido mourns: "Por el perdido bien que adoré tanto, / Solo puede aliviarse con la muerte" ("Because of the vanished blessing that I so adored / Only death can alleviate this"). Once more in "En los días de Fela después de su muerte" ("In The Days of Fela After Her Death") the male persona promises to hold Rafaela's memory in the highest regard until his death: "Ante el Ser que gobierna cuanto existe / Juro amar tu memoria hasta la muerte" ("Before the One that governs all that exists / I vow to cherish your memory until death") (Morales 5).

Death, dying, and tragedy – which are the leitmotifs of these poems – find themselves juxtaposed with a poetic oath of undying devotion to the memory of the woman Plácido was betrothed to marry. The nuptials, however, were never realized. In 1833, Havana was stricken with the cholera epidemic and Rafaela soon fell victim. Plácido biographer Frederick Stimson notes that her abrupt death and the devastating plague that precipitated it are engraved onto the literary record in numerous poems. He cites Plácido's elegy "El cólera en la Habana" ("The Cholera in Havana") as a case in point where the outbreak is compared to the voraciousness of warfare (39). The cholera plague is again depicted in "El llanto de despedida" ("The Tearful Farewell") where the poetic voice describes it as the tragedy that cut short his lover's life: "La peste destructora / En los antros de Tártaro abortada" ..."Bárbara, injusta, inexorable y fiera / Con ímpetu tenaz cortó la vida / De mi cándida y linda compañera" ("The destructive pestilence / In the cavern of Tartar aborted...Barbaric, unjust,

unalterable and fierce / With tenacious momentum cut short / The life of my sincere and beautiful companion") (Morales 573-74).

The desolate tenor of these poems is contrasted with their portrayal of an elegant yet passionate feminine beauty. Rosenberg states that female characters in Spanish Romantic narrative and poetry were a projection of the masculine imagination, well-scripted figures that were meant to be pure, beautiful and compliant in the hands of their male handlers (15). He cites eighteenth century writer Edmund Burke who conceived the beautiful to be a set of qualities that engender love or passion within the beholder. This love implies ownership and the capacity to control so that the beautiful is a system of power wherein the masculine persona is enamored of an altogether fictive female character whose loveliness is owing to her instinctive weakness, fragility, and timidity (66-67). Plácido's portrayal of Fela transforms her into a typical Romantic character since she is divinely loving, tender, and charming. Notwithstanding, the ascription of ideally feminine qualities to a black female character was literary iconoclasm, a deliberate appropriation of the ultimate for the representation of an individual belonging to the lowest stratum within Cuba's system of racial domination.

In Plácido's nostalgic verse the black female body is not discarded as immoral refuse nor is it a symbol of surrogate motherhood enshrined in the plantation image of *la nodriza*. On the contrary, the black female character finds representation as a person that is desirable for her inherent beauty, refinement and nobility. In "El llanto de despedida" ("The Tearful Farewell") – a poem that marks the day of Fela's passing – the speaker bereaves his wife-to-be.

Voló yá la alegría

Que un tiempo fué mi gloria,
Y una triste memoria
Me dejas ¡ay! amor.
No más la prenda mia,
Mi prometida esposa,
Me halagará amorosa
Calmando mi dolor. (Morales, ed. 573).

Rafaela is portrayed as a gentle and admirable soul, a woman who alleviates her mate's suffering. Epitomizing the Romantic feminine ideal, she is a companion who is tender and charming yet delicate and therefore susceptible to pestilence. This representation is especially noteworthy when placed in historical context. Cuban historians Aisnara Perera Díaz and María de los Ángeles Meriño Fuentes say that irrespective of race, consensual unions, not legal marriage, have traditionally been the basis of familial cohesion in Cuban society (155-56).

Plácido's contemporary and acquaintance, Alfredo de Morales, defends the poet's engagement to Rafaela, which represented a violation of social convention and led some whites to construe his affiliation with blacks as congruent with his alleged participation in *La Escalera* Conspiracy (xxxiii). Although a person of claimed African ancestry, Plácido's baptismal records describe him as *al parecer blanco*, white in appearance, meaning that marriage to a dark-skinned black woman would have been perceived as *saltatrás* since it may not have resulted in light-skin offspring. In fact, Morales says that Plácido's father (a quadroon) was opposed to the marriage because Fela was a woman of dark complexion (xxviii). While I am indisposed to qualify Plácido's engagement to Fela as an act of political resistance, it did signify a traversing of the color line and a breach of social custom. Equally important is the fact that his body of love poems does not favor *la mulata* over *la negra*; instead it posits an affirmative

physical and moral characterization of both female characters. It is my argument, that the representation of such a wide range of Afro-Cuban phenotypes and skin colors conveys a broad sense of racial community among persons of named and claimed African ancestry, whose motives for mistrust and suspicion of one another were commonly known.

In addition to his engagement to Rafaela and the poetry that her death inspired, there are other poems where *la negra* embodies the feminine ideal. The African descendant woman in "Los ojos de mi morena" ("The Eyes of My Dark Woman") and "A Dámaso García: la partida" ("To Dámaso García: The Departure") are depicted as *morenas*. In this precise context such a descriptor designates them as black women. These instances of black female representation are among the few in Plácido's love poetry and are even less common in early nineteenth century Cuban literature. In both poems the Afro-Cuban male persona delights in the lovely eyes of his dark-skinned lover. In "Los ojos de mi morena" the female character has so enchanted the male persona that he compares her beauty and grace to the singing birds of early dawn: "La luz del Alba / A cuyos brillos / Loan trinando / Los pajarillos; / No es tan hermosa, / Ni tan serena / *Como los ojos / De mi morena*." ("The light of Dawn / Whose brilliance / The little birds / Extol singing; / Is not as beautiful / Nor as tranquil / *As the eyes / Of my dark woman*") (original emphasis, Morales, ed. 447). The nature metaphor transfigures the black woman's beauty into the masculine idea of delicate feminine perfection.

No luce Apolo
En su brillante
Fúlgido carro

De oro y diamante;
Ni con sus rayos
El mundo llena
Como los ojos
De mi morena. (Morales, ed. 448)

Moreover, her splendor is such that the poetic voice likens her beauty to that of Apollo, the Graeco-Roman divinity of sunlight, prophecy, music, and poetry. Not only does her delicate radiance merit comparison with Apollo, but also it surpasses the ancient divinity and the Western ideal of aesthetic perfection that such an association represents.

"A P. G.: en la muerte de Fela" ("A P. G.: in the Death of Fela") and "El desdén" ("Disdain") render an eroticized black female body constructed from an Afro-Cuban male point of view. The masculine voice descriptively and unabashedly portrays the black woman as the ideal object of desire, worthy of unceasing adulation for her traditional femininity and sensual appeal. The following stanzas from "A P. G.: en la muerte de Fela" present a suitable illustration.

Aquella púrpura fuerte
De sus labios; la belleza
De sus ojos que por suerte
Encendió naturaleza,
¡Yá es despojo de la muerte!

Aquella frente agraciada,
. . .
Pero la pasión crecida
Que Fela me profesó,
Esa sí que la atrevida
Muerte no la arrebató. (Morales, ed. 578)

Rafaela's plum-colored lips, lovely eyes, and gracious brow merit the speaker's zealous tribute. Her love is eternal so that the passion she professed cannot be seized even by death itself. Plácido's description of the deep purplish hue of her

lips implies her African ancestry and resignifies the full lips of black women as a component of their aesthetic appeal.

The poetic voice in "El desdén" conveys an even more fervent passion and yearning as he mourns the lost of his "dulce morena" ("sweet dark woman") and "[la] mitad de mi alma" ("the other half of my soul") (Morales, ed. 504).

> Ven , morena, á mis brazos;
> Y disfrutar me deja
> Los deleitosos dias
> Que de vivir nos restan.
> Deja besar tus ojos
> Y tu boca hechicera,
> Y tu bella garganta,
> Y tus...sí, llega, llega.
> Pero antes echa vino
> En esa copa; echa
> Hasta que se rebose....
> Basta yá prueba, prueba. (Morales, ed. 505)

The amorous invitation is cast in the language of heterosexual male craving, enticing the female lover to give herself without restraint thereby satisfying his desires. The erotic is wedded to the emotional so that every branch of Fela's body evokes sensual memory. Plácido inscribes himself within the poem with an evocative yearning to kiss the eyes, the enchanting mouth, and the exquisite throat of the black woman. The last five verses that I have cited above represent the highest point of gratification for the male persona. The elliptical silence followed by the affirmative "sí" and the double entendre "llega, llega" ("come, come") in the eighth verse intimate an orgasmic moment in which the poet's cup *runneth* over.

There is a tonal shift in the verses that follow. The male gazer inquires about the manner in which the black female lover experiences their bond.

> ¿No es verdad? Dime, Fela,

¿No te sientes inflamarse
Tu pecho en llama nueva?"
...

¿No te embelesa el gusto?
¡Oh, cómo centellean
Tus ojos! Si parece
Tu cuerpo de candela! (Morales, ed. 505)

The poet's voice – the only one within the text – inquires: "Isn't it true? Tell me, Fela, / Don't your breast feel aroused / with a new flame?" (Morales, ed. 505). There is no response to this risqué question. Rafaela doesn't utter a word, as she is a creature to be beheld and desired, alive only in poetic memory. In many respects, she is the quintessential Romantic character marked by daintiness, grace and beauty. In these poems, however, Plácido's construction of the womanly ideal is incongruous with the Spanish Romantic formula because Fela is black. Her racial identity is without dispute and her dark complexion and African features symbolize the magnificence of local women.

The last eight verses further my belief that Plácido's poems in remembrance of Fela are not an aesthetic inversion of Romanticism because – unlike "El pescador de San Juan" and "El veguero" – the white female character is not subordinated to women of African descent. Instead, I maintain that these texts function as a selective appropriation of Romanticism that endeavors to salvage *la negra* from negativized representations and consign her a lofty position of social esteem.

Abrázame, alma mia,
Estrecha más...estrecha...
Más que el dulce son dulces
Tus labios, mi morena,
Y tu cuerpo, y tus brazos
Y toda tú, mi Fela
Abrázame, ¡ay! abrázame

Y deja que me muera. (Morales, ed. 505)

This is not a representation that defiles the black female body since Rafaela is a woman affianced to a devoted male partner who deemed her worthy of the lyrical exaltation generally reserved for unreachable white women. On the contrary, these elegiac poems alter the ideological underpinnings of Spanish Romanticism so that it might befit the representation of the black female. As Stimson notes, Rafaela's contemporaries admired her as the Ethiopian Venus (39). *Etiope* – a common nineteenth century racial descriptor for black persons – became a tribute to the dark hue of her countenance and her incomparable splendor. In the vein of Plácido's poems, this soubriquet was evocative of the beauty and sexuality of the Roman goddess, thus portraying Fela as the universal female ideal.

1.4 Scorning the Negation of Blackness in Burlesque Bodies

Plácido's representation of the colonial discourse on race is not limited to his Romantic poetry. Race is also portrayed in a small assortment of satirical poems that ridicule pretentious claims to erudition and the negation of African ancestry as means to social ascension. These poems include "Que se lo cuente a su abuela" ("Let Him Tell That to his Grandmother"), "Si a todos Arcino dices" ("If Arcino Tells Everyone"), "El guapo" ("The Thug"), "¡Oh…! no juegue, que me moja" ("Don't Play You'll Get My Hair Wet") "Mi no sé que ha richo" ("Me Don't Know What I Said") and "La respuesta de un curro" ("A *Curro's* Reply"). Like Plácido's Romantic verse, his satire also tells a gendered story of racial identity that replicates the social circumstance of colonial Cuba in the early 1800s. Both

sets of poems engage the aesthetic portrayal of African descendant bodies in a society dominated by whiteness. The dissimilarity lies in the object of representation, the gender of the characters, and the ideological function of the texts. Plácido's satirical verse is not concerned with re-writing Romantic conceptions of the beautiful to encompass members of *la raza de color*. Instead, these texts fulfill the essential function of their genre, by providing a compelling critique of colonial society. The chosen object of ridicule is the denial of African ancestry among Afro-Cuban male persons. In so doing, they submit a subtle critique of whiteness and provide an analysis of black masculinities in the nineteenth century colonial context.

"Que se lo cuente a su abuela", "¡Oh...! no juegue, que me moja" and "Si a todos Arcino dices" are parodies of mulatto male characters whose phenotypes belie their avid claims to racial purity. In these poems hair texture, skin color and the shape and slope of the nose are the physical characteristics indicative of African ancestry, presenting Don Longino and Don Marcelo in an unfavorable light.

Siempre exclama Don Longino
–<<Soy de sangre noble y pura,>>
Con una pasión más dura
Que cáscara de tocino,
Y con su rostro cetrino
Que africana estirpe indica,
Alucinado publica
Ser de excelsa parentela!
Que se lo cuente a su abuela. (original emphasis, Morales, ed. 482)

Al que mentiras arroja
Como agua por azotea,
Le diré cuando lo vea:
<<¡ Oh...! No juegue, que me moja.>>

Atencion: salgo de casa

Con Juan, hallo á Don Marcelo,
Hombre tan largo de pelo
Que hasta el bigote le pasa.
–¿Porqué se unta con tanta grasa?
–Para que no se le encoja.
<<*¡ Oh...! No juegue, que me moja.*>> (original emphasis, Morales, ed. 482)

Don Longino's public claims to "*sangre noble y pura*" ("noble and pure blood") in the first stanza are contradicted by the texture of his hair and his yellowish skin tone, which bespeak non-European parentage. The poetic voice mocks this appeal to whiteness by indicating that his hair is: "pasión más dura / Que cáscara de tocino" ("[Hair] with a persistence tougher / Than the rind of bacon") (Morales, ed. 482).[123] His claims to racial purity are laughable in the public sphere since they are easily disproven by salient physical traits that function as cultural signifiers of African ancestry.

"¡Oh...! no juegue, que me moja" disparages Don Marcelo as an impostor who is very much afraid that his long well-oiled hair will get soaked and shrivel up, in this manner revealing his non-white ancestry and complicating his claims to racial purity. "<<*¡ Oh...! no juegue, que me moja.*>>" ("Don't Play You'll Get My Hair Wet") is a scornful yet comical refrain restating what Kutzinski referred to as the problem of "cultural anxiety over ancestry". For Kutzinski, "Que se lo cuente a su abuela" (and by extension this poem as well) represents yet another of Plácido's countless social critiques of the unbridled hypocrisy of colonial society ("Unseasonal Flowers" 155, 157). While this is a true observation, there

[123] I use Vera Kutzinski's English translation of the last stanza of "Que se lo cuente a su abuela". However, I have added the word hair as to make the meaning of this verse clearer ("Unseasonal Flowers" 155).

is something more to be said about the prevalence of white domination and its detrimental influence on oppressed persons.

The social presentation of dark bodies was a complicated matter in a society where whiteness was the prevailing ideology. This was true because the white Other's perceptions of African descendants might well decide access to education and economic opportunity. In an environment where blackness was cast as primitive, prelogical and servile, the need to access whiteness, albeit symbolically, became a matter survival on a daily basis. This is what Bhabha is referring to when he defines "colonial mimicry" as the desire for a transformed and identifiable Other who – like Don Marcelo and Don Longino – is expected, even prompted, to pursue an inaccessible whiteness (86).

This same desire for whitening is portrayed once again in the *epigrama satírico*, "Si a todos Arcino dices".

> Si a todos, Arcino, dices
> que son de baja ralea,
> cuando tienen a Guinea
> en el pelo y las narices.
>
> Debes confesar, Arcino,
> que es desatino probado,
> siendo de vidrio el tejado
> tirar piedras al vecino. (Luis Morales, ed. 149)

Like Don Longino and Don Marcelo, Arcino denies his non-European ancestry and insists that his lineage is without black or mulatto heritage. He conveys this rejection of mixed ancestry by assuming a sense of racial superiority in relation to those of *baja ralea* or of the lower casts. All three poems caricature social types whose longing to improve their ranking in society prompts them to self-identify as persons of European descent. There is great irony and contradiction in their

claims, since their dark bodies bear witness against these false assertions of *limpieza de sangre.* Such characters' racial anxieties are parallel to a broader desire for whitening as a solution to the *africanización* of Cuban society. As Kutzinski notes, proponents of mestizaje, like Francisco de Arango y Parreño, thought that the mixture of the races meant black would yield to white, thus achieving *blanqueamiento* (Sugar's Secrets 31).

"Que se lo cuente a su abuela" and "Si a todos Arcino dices" candidly refer to the hair, the nose and skin color as "africana estirpe" (African origin) and "Guinea / en el pelo y las narices" ("Guinea / in the hair and nose") respectively (Morales, ed. 482) (Luis Morales, ed. 149).[124] In this way racial difference is not equated with a notion of *mestizaje* that would characterize these men as racial subjects situated within the interstices of colonial society. Instead, it is associated with Africa as the embodiment of their racial and cultural origins. Although couched in an innocuous literary format, this critique of whiteness deconstructs the mulatto sense of racial superiority and designates Africa as the symbolic origin of African descendant racial identities. These poems repudiate the widely purported notion of mulatto racial superiority and they unequivocally reject a perceived need for whitening among persons of mixed ancestry. I maintain that the message of self-love inherent in these poems, as well as in Plácido's love poems, allude to the prospect for an inclusive sense of African descendant racial community in nineteenth century Cuba.

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[124] Daisy Cué explains that "pasión" was nineteenth century Cuban argot synonymous with the more common slang term *pasa*, meaning thick and dry hair generally associated with people of African ancestry (Plácido: El poeta 228).

"El guapo" and "La respuesta de un curro" problematize Afro-Cuban male gender identity through the satirical illustration of three social types: *el criado, el curro* and *el guapo.* Although these poems only imply racial identity, their color-writing images are relevant to this chapter since they represent distinct models of Afro-Cuban masculinities in the colonial era. In a similar fashion to the poems that caricature African descendant men who want to pass for white, both *costumbrista* poems are also concerned with social standing. However, instead of obsessing over skin color, hair texture and facial features *el guapo* and *el curro* make a name for themselves by carefully cultivating reputations, which reinforce hyper-masculinist notions of gender performance.

The following stanzas from "El guapo" are indicative of a broader colonial narrative that portrayed African descendant men as violence-prone, sex-crazed womanizers.

> Andrés era un valenton
> ...
> De juego en juego vagaba
> Y de burdel en burdel,
> Allá cobrando el barato
> Para *echar a otra* despues.
>
> Nunca se vió que á ninguno
> Hiciera ni mal ni bien;
> Así que su fama era
> No más que entre dos ó tres. (original emphasis, Morales, ed. 412)[125]

In the context of this poem, *guapo* can be rendered thug, since Andrés is a dishonest character reputed to be a hooligan who frequents brothels and gaming houses. Publicly, he is perceived as *un hombre* who takes pleasure in female

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125 *Valentón* refers to an arrogant male person who boasts about being brave when in reality he is not.

bodies at will and is thought to be dangerous. His ruffian reputation precedes him, although no one has ever witnessed him commit an act of brutality. When a judge – representative of the corrupt criminal justice system – solicits the *guapo's* help to hunt down a fugitive, he is unable to do so and confesses to being a coward who is good for little more than fleeing danger. The irony (and perhaps the most humorous part of the poem) lies in the fact that Andrés is a painter who reproduces violent scenes in which he does not partake. His visual portraits are texts that reflect and perhaps add force to the hyper-masculine and heterosexual narrative of black male criminality.

The poetic voice reveals that Andrés' fraudulent claims to thuggery are a futile attempt to associate with the flamboyant demeanor ascribed to this type of male gender performance. It is interesting to note that in nineteenth century Cuban Spanish, *guapo* was a synonym for *curro*, which was a street entertainer associated with criminality and carnivalesque performance (Fernández Guerra and Suáres ed. 3, 17). Like Don Marcelo and Don Longino, Andrés is a free person of color. Moreover, he is a member of the bustling artisan sector dominated by *la gente de color* in the early 1800s (Esténger, ed. 93-94). However, unlike the characters in the race poems, *el guapo's* falsified accounts of manly pursuits and womanizing place his masculinity in question.

Whereas Andrés the painter feigns participation in the black criminal underworld, *el curro* is depicted as an authentic presentation of that social type. "La respuesta de un curro" briefly recounts an exchange between *el criado* of a white lawyer reputed to have studied in Europe and a *curro* who is enslaved to

no one. The enslaved person, euphemistically referred to as a servant, boasts for two hours about the extent of his new master's learning.

> Despues que el simple, alabando
> Su nuevo señor estuvo
> Más de dos horas, é hizo
> Relación de sus estudios.
>
> Dijo—<<Mi amo es tan grande hombre,
> Que porque ramo ninguno
> Ignorar quiere, de cuantos
> Convienen á un hombre culto. (Morales, ed. 165-66)

El criado is portrayed as the stereotypical slave. He is content to be subservient and deferential, and as such, he obeys without questioning his master. Unlike *Andrés el valentón*, the slave does not sing his own praises but swells with pride about the education, wealth and social position of the man that owns him.[126] The two characters could not be more different. They allegorize disparate worldviews regarding identity and the value of freedom for persons of African descent. This formulaic portrayal of the slave stands in sharp contrast to Plácido's brief presentation of the *curro* as an eminently independent personality.

The final stanzas speak to the nature of the dialogue between the two characters, their specific claims to manhood and their views of self-determination.

> Tiene hasta de equitacion
> Conocimientos profundos,
> Por eso es que va a caballo
> Siempre el doctor que da gusto.>>—
>
> A lo que muy socarrón
> Contestó el taimado curro,

---

[126] Although elsewhere I have insisted on referring to captive Africans and their descendants as enslaved persons, it seems more appropriate to use the word *slave* here since it accurately reflects the mentality and worldview represented by this caricature.

Con risa burlesca,
Y dejándole confuso.

—<<En lo que me dices, chico,
Te equivocas de zeguro,
Pues cuentaz que *vá á cabal'*
Y él á lo que vá ez a burro.>>— (original emphasis, Morales, ed. 166)

The *curro's* reply demonstrates that he is entirely unimpressed with the social standing, knowledge and purported wealth of the slave's new owner. The indifference he feels for the status symbols of white society is reflected in his comic smile, which leaves the slave perplexed. Although the poem parodies both figures, it is clear that the slave is the object of ridicule. With an onomatopoeic accent, reminiscent of the *cabildo* elder in "Mi no sé que ha richo", the *curro* tells the slave that he does not know what he is talking about. Whereas the slave thinks his master is riding a horse – a sign of his social standing as a gentleman – the *curro* is quick to inform him that, indeed, he is the ass that his master is riding.

The humor of the last few verses is best understood by historicizing the image of *el curro* in colonial society. Fernando Ortiz describes *los curros del Manglar* as Andalusian blacks and mulattoes known for an ostentatious form of dress, verbal battles, and a random sense of delinquency. *El curro* was regarded as a marginal and potentially violent figure that always carried a knife. Living on the wrong side of the law, his fashion sense, musical performance and dance rhythms distinguished him any other Afro-Cuban social type in the city of Havana, including members of *cabildos* and secret societies. Although originally thought to be murderous henchmen, eventually they came to be regarded as inoffensive street performers (Fernández Guerra and Suáres, ed. 3-5). In this

way, the threatening and foreboding black Other was transformed into an innocuous jester in the public imagination.

The fact that *los curros* were free people who had never been enslaved further distinguished them in early nineteenth century Cuba from other persons of African descent (Fernández Guerra and Suáres, ed. 8). This difference explains the symbolic force of the character found in Plácido's poem. The *curro* mocks the slave's desire to seek validation in the professed greatness of the white Other. Whereas the slave has no autonomous sense of self, *el curro* epitomizes independence, virility, rebelliousness and black self-determination. His broken Spanish and purported criminal behavior notwithstanding, *el curro* is free, since he is not the property of the white master. In this way, the *curro's* gender performance is a self-defined articulation of freedom for Afro-Cuban male persons. This forceful affirmation of African descendant masculinity counters Fanon's contention that the Negro is a toy in the hands of the white man (140). *El curro* replies by exemplifying a type of masculinity in which he alone is the master of his own body.

The remaining texts that I examine in this chapter stand apart from Plácido's love poetry and satirical poems since they were not written for aesthetic or comic effect. Much to the contrary, these texts characterize a desperate appeal to the colonial government regarding the poet's alleged involvement in an anti-colonial conspiracy. The years 1843-1844 represent the worst repression ever unleashed on African descendants by the colonial administration. As a result of *La Conspiración de la Escalera* the government of Captain General

Leopoldo O'Donnell abandoned judicial norms and implemented a reign of terror on enslaved and free people of African descent. This brought about a vast number of arrests, prosecutions and executions of people of color that resulted in population loss (Midlo Hall 58-60). As the most prolific Cuban poet of the time and the most illustrious person of color on the island, Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés became the leading target of this brutal crackdown, which, subsequently, came to be known as *el Año del Cuero*, the Year of The Whip.

1.5 Race and Self-Representation in *El Año del Cuero*

Written almost a month before his execution, on June 23, 1844, Plácido's penultimate statement to the President of the Military Commission is a protracted defense of his innocence.[127] It is an apologetic writing, a plea that makes explicit claims to veracity in order to win clemency from the Capitan General. At the same time, however, it functions as a self-representative narrative: a story about race, nation, and personal identity purported to have been written by the author himself.[128]

This hastily written account vehemently repudiates the author's alleged involvement in conspiratorial activities, even though the poet's words reveal

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[127] Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés was executed before a military firing squad on July 28, 1844 (Cué, Plácido: El poeta 16).

[128] Historian Robert Paquette acknowledges that the use of torture and coercion call into question Plácido's authorship of the statement. However, he concludes that the structure of the text, the ramblings, its disjointedness and its revelations mean that it was most likely written by the poet himself, not the prosecutor. I concur with Paquette's point of view with regard to the authenticity of the document (261).

considerable knowledge of the plot. Plácido does not deny the existence of an anti-colonial conspiracy; instead he depicts himself as "una VICTIMA DESIGNADA" ("a designated victim"), targeted by whites and people of color alike as a pretext to shield powerful wealthy white conspirators (Cué, "Plácido y la Conspiración" 198). As such, Plácido denies all responsibility and portrays himself as a guiltless bystander, a lowborn poet incapable of inciting rebellion.

> Ynútiles serán Señor á mi entender cuántos afanes emplee el gobierno para hallar la causa motriz de estos acontecimientos en estas clases de pardos y morenos, ellos no son á lo más otra cosa que unos INSTRUMENTOS CIEGOS de maquinaciones MAS PROFUNDAS Y ANTIGUAS manejadas por manos mucho más PODEROSAS Y HABILES que las de estas AUTOMATAS, y los hechos que paso á esponer probarán que mi aserción no carece de fundamento. (original emphasis, Cué, "Plácido y la Conspiración" 193).

This rhetorical strategy is significant because it counters the nuanced subversive tension extant in many of his poems, the alleged purpose of his many travels throughout the island, his impressive network of powerful white and Afro-Cuban acquaintances – some of whom also fell under suspicion – and a litany of past imprisonments. Not only does Plácido repudiate having been involved in the plot, but he also denies having the intellectual power and necessary wherewithal to effect change in a system of white racial domination and collective intimidation.[129]

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[129] The exigencies of the text are evident in the use of the upper case, the repetition of words, multiple exclamation points and rhetorical questions. Daisy Cué explains that this statement is a faithful reproduction of Manuel Sanguily's copy. Sanguily implemented the use of upper case letters to place emphasis on certain phrases within the document (Cué, "Plácido y la Conspiración" 206). I have not seen the original text and so cannot be certain if Sanguily's changes in any way violate Plácido's original. As is the case with Manzano's *Autobiografía*, the text available to me is a palimpsest scarred by the marks of others whose motives should be subjected to careful scrutiny.

Nevertheless, in order for the author to be deemed innocent, the counter-narrative had to assign blame elsewhere. Throughout the text, Plácido's racial self-representation suggests an implied yet well-defined identification with *las clases de pardos y morenos*, that is with free people of color purported to be of mixed ancestry and with free blacks. Although several persons of color – some of whom are cited by name in this statement – had accused Plácido of leading the conspiracy, the poet never once implicated them. Much to the contrary, this testimony is a vindication, an acquittal of persons of African descent. Although the poet was identified as a *pardo*, his statement to the Military Commission does not dissociate him from free blacks. As a group, *la gente libre de color* appear as blind pawns, automatons that were manipulated by far more artful and powerful hands. This synecdochic reference is an allusion to white persons with whom the text situates the conspiratorial *locus of control*. Sugar baron, abolitionist and patron of the arts, Domingo del Monte, becomes the prime representative, the embodiment of *los blancos*.

In view of the fact that Delmonte was a notorious abolitionist and social reformer, Plácido's charge that he was the principal architect and chief instigator of the conspiracy was not implausible. The poet's version of events portrays Del Monte as a duplicitous schemer and a cowardly agent of subversion who made several attempts to convert Plácido and *los pardos* to his untoward cause as passages below seem to suggest:

> En la época á que me refiero en la declaración que consta de autos que fui SOLICITADO por D. Domingo Delmonte...dicho Sr. Me ENCONTRABA en la alameda de extramuros que era mi ordinario paseo, se me quejó de la falta á la promesa que le hice de volver á su casa, á que contesté que podian dar sospechas mis frecuentes visitas, y por lo tanto era conveniente evitarlas; ...

> y en estos paseos me instruyó de los siguientes: Que un general de Costa-Firme llamado Sucre, estuvo en la Habana el año veinte y uno ... y este fue el primero que aconsejó que la independencia de la Ysla de Cuba debía hacerse al revés de los otros paises de America, (original emphasis, Cué, "Plácido y la Conpsiración" 193).

Delmonte's presence in the extramural neighborhoods represents the crossing of a socio-racial barrier, which situated him outside the intramural district of the city. The district inside the wall was the administrative, economic, ecclesiastical, and military center of the city where whites lived. The extramural neighborhoods were home to the black and mulatto population that housed runaways from the inner district (Deschamps Chapeaux 5). It is clear from Plácido's description that the wall was an artificial barrier designating a symbolic divide among populations whose lives were considerably interrelated. In fact, although this passage is meant to depict Delmonte as a suspicious character, it has the undesired effect of revealing that there was sustained dialogue and regular visits between the two men.

The discourse of freedom and independence is portrayed as a misguided cause fomented by Delmonte who preys on an unsophisticated yet good-natured poet of color. Delmonte informs Plácido of a long-held belief that the island should wrest independence from Spain much in way that other countries of Latin America had done. In sharp distinction to the manipulative and subversive language of the whites, represented by Delmonte, Plácido declares "estoy resuelto a cumplir los deberes que me imponen la naturaleza, la humanidad y mi patria" ("I am resolved to fulfill the duties that nature, humanity and my country oblige me"). In this way, the poet relies on the Romantic ideal of the hero to

present himself as a dutiful patriot, a virtuous person and even a would-be government informant (Cué, "Plácido y la Conspiración" 195, 198). His loyalty lies with the fatherland, an expression inexorably infused with double meaning since Plácido's *patria* is not Delmonte's.

Ever since his first arrest in 1834 for writing "La Sombra de Padilla", Plácido remained conscientious of the fact that the colonial administration considered his poetry subversive and was wary of his ever-increasing notoriety among the lower socio-economic groups. This paragraph acknowledges those suspicions while also implying that they were misplaced, given that, according to Plácido, Delmonte was the actual mastermind behind the conspiracy.

> Habiéndole hecho presente que ese era un plan de sangre en que el mismo perecería, repugnante a la humanidad. Que los blancos del país aun cuando lograsen reunirse a los pardos, nunca serían bastante para contener el inmenso número de negros dado el caso que estos solo peliasen a pedradas, y que en fin YO NO HABIA NACIDO para guerrero SINO PARA POETA, me contestó COBARDE... (original emphasis, Cué, "Plácido y la Conspiración" 194).

Once more, Delmonte is portrayed as the chief conspirator and the prime representative of white revolutionaries. Plácido asserts that the white agitator conspired to unite free people of color and enslaved blacks in a scheme to overthrow the government and abolish slavery. As the testimony maintains, Plácido is a benign creature of the arts, a poet, not a warrior. To support his own claims to innocence, Delmonte is presented yet again as the genuine source of the plot against the colonial status quo.

What is more, the narrative addresses the government's belief that people of color from very divergent social sectors had conspired as one. Plácido's contention that a leading white abolitionist was the chief architect and ideological

mastermind of a revolutionary movement also implies that this could not have been what the government repeatedly called "la conspiración proyectada por la gente de color...para el esterminio de la...población blanca" ("the conspiracy devised by people of color ... to exterminate ...the white population") (sic) (Nwankwo 35). In other words, the poet aims to exonerate himself from the charges brought against him while deconstructing the official narrative about the events of 1843-1844. By assigning complete responsibility for the conspiracy (and the attendant slave revolts) to abolitionists, Plácido manages to invert the symbolic power of racialization by representing whiteness as the major threat to colonialism. The implication is that the conspiracy was the work of liberal-minded abolitionists and that the subsequent response of colonial authorities was yet another unwarranted manifestation of white racial panic.

As previously acknowledged in Chapter Four, the colonial regime supposed that *los pardos* had conspired because they wished to improve their social condition and that *los morenos* had joined under the supposition that it might benefit them as well. Nonetheless, no explanation was given for the driving force behind the involvement of *los negros* who were only cited for their brawn (Nwankwo 35-36).[130] The perception of *los pardos* as the conspiratorial leaders among African descended people reflects a belief that people of mixed ancestry were inherently envious of the power and social prestige enjoyed by white persons in society (Nwankwo 38). In what follows, I will discuss the way in

[130] In this context, *los negros* is synonymous with enslaved persons.

which Plácido's account reproduces some of the stereotypes about persons of color, although not with the intent to convict, but acquit.

In spite of what they did (or did not) know about certain details of the plot, or their aversion towards the white racial hierarchy, Plácido never implies that free or enslaved persons of color colluded to abolish slavery or overthrow the colonial government.

> Serán los negros y mulatos los que habrán coordinado estos acontecimientos? . . .
>
> Ah Señor! aquí hay una mano fuerte y maestra! ¡Cuántas copas de Champaña se habrán apurado al presente en loor de las víctimas que se inmolarán para EXASPERAR estas clases, que ni pueden unirse entre sí por la natural ANTIPATIA que se profesan, ni ligarse á ninguna maquinacion oculta por la imposibilidad que hay de CONSERVARSE UN SECRETO entre ellos. (original emphasis, Cué, "Plácido y la Conspiración" 197).

In an attempt to clear all persons of African descent from even the slightest blame, the text relies on the impression that the inherent antipathy among persons of color would have made it virtually impossible for them to cooperate in order to devise such an intricate scheme. In this passage there is a shift in the author's use of racial descriptors. Instead of referring to *pardos* y *morenos* in relation to whites (free persons of mixed race and free blacks), he compares enslaved blacks with free people of mixed heritage. As Plácido's account reiterates a number of times, the colonial imaginary placed free persons of mixed heritage and free blacks into one *clase* unto themselves while enslaved blacks or *negros* were in another altogether. Such a choice does not group or associate enslaved blacks with free persons of color. On the contrary, it alludes to colonial racial stereotypes of the feeble racialized Other in order to deny that any person of African descent could have been an agent of conspiracy. Instead, they

become potential victims: pawns in strong and masterful white hands whose high stakes games might mean their destruction.

Nwankwo points out that the colonial administration had an inconsistent even convoluted view of African descended persons. On one the hand, they dreaded the merging of these subgroups into a cohesive front that might undermine their authority. At the same time, the government took solace in the chimerical idea that *pardos*, *morenos* and *negros* were incapable of being the catalysts for such a complex and far-reaching conspiracy. According to this racist premise, they concluded that white Europeans, namely British agents, had incited the colored folk (40). Plácido's illustration of the incompetent and divided Other added force to the colonial government's belief that *pardos* and *morenos* were incapable of conspiring in unison. In this way, the poet's narrative about *La Conspiración de la Escalera* evokes Bhabha's assertion that the stereotype is a complex, ambivalent, and contradictory mode of representation positing divergent views about the racialized Other (70). It is also worth noting, that while Plácido's account was inadequate to save his life, the authorities did embrace the belief (at least on paper) that whites were the agents of conspiracy responsible for seducing persons of color.

On numerous occasions, Plácido repeatedly denied that free people of color had colluded with whites against the government. In one such account he recalls the presence of several prominent white personalities at a dance organized for *la gente de color* in Guanabacoa. Plácido says: "se aparecian con los bailes y convites de la gente de color, y en uno de ellos...nos dio varios pies

alusivas a la libertad, que para glosásemos" ("they appeared at dances and banquets of the people of color, and at one of them...they extemporized verses alluding to liberty for so that we might discuss them") (Cué, "Plácido y la Conspiración" 199). In this instance, freedom appears as an unfamiliar discourse, an unsolicited intrusion at an otherwise festive event for people of color. Although abolition would have ushered in a new era of great benefit to those present, it is portrayed as the sole concern of self-interested white outsiders.

Plácido alleges that the pro-independence faction solicited the support of *los pardos* and that the English Consulate planted clandestine agents to incite black uprisings with the assurance that the rebels would be protected. In fact, he maintains that white abolitionists' aspirations were such that some wealthy landowners (among them Domingo Delmonte) were disposed to incite their own slaves to revolt (Cué, "Plácido y la Conspiración" 194, 202-03). With regard to his dealings with enslaved blacks Plácido writes the following:

> En la causa hay un calesero llamado José Chiquito del Sr. D. Francisco de la O. García, que ME ACUSA de haberle seducido. Es bien raro que habiendo yo estado en las fincas... jamás me haya mezclado con los esclavos, ni resultado la menor alteración en ellas, y que no habiendo pasado nunca ni por los linderos de la García haya venido á egercer en el pueblo, y gratuitamente una misión que no aceptó de Delmonte en que pude haber hecho fortuna sin riesgo. (original emphasis, Cué, "Plácido y la Conspiración" 200).

The poet's claim that he had no affinity with *los esclavos* is a disidentification with blackness whose function is hidden in plain view. Throughout the narrative the enslaved black population, identified as *los negros* or *los esclavos*, is distinguished from free blacks known as *morenos*. The enslaved are pictured as a collective body, moving and acting as a throng, without clear direction and

easily seduced by devious men. This representation is far removed from the imaginative re-signification of blackness in Plácido's satirical poems "Si a todos Arcino dices" and "Que se lo cuente a su abuela". Such an image of blacks on the plantation situates them within the discursive norm as violent, restless automatons and it clearly reinforces Plácido's identity as a *pardo*, that is, a free person of mixed ancestry. José Chiquito, the carriage driver who alleged that Plácido seduced him to insurrection, comes to represent black slaves as a whole. By distancing himself from the carriage driver, the author conveys a notion of African descendant racial community that excludes enslaved blacks in an apparent attempt to exculpate himself.

More than anyone else thought to be involved in the plot, thirty-two accusations were leveled against Plácido by a number of prominent free persons of color (Cué, "Plácido y la Conspiración" 176-77). Furthermore, his fame extended into the countryside so that even free rural people of color and the enslaved were familiar with the name Plácido, even if they had never laid eyes on him (Paquette 259). For that reason, this account might represent the desperate actions of a poet who found himself in dire straits, fighting a losing battle to save his life that did not afford him clemency. He was counted among the other dark bodies, which had been deemed *black* enough to be tortured, exiled, imprisoned and executed at the hands of a firing squad. Regardless of the fairness of their skin, virtually no person of color was spared the colonial regime's insatiable desire to ravage the collective dark body.

The almost white status that Pedro Barreda and José Antonio Fernández de Castro consign Plácido is not a pervasive factor in his lyrical representations of race. His body of love poetry constructs dynamic and multihued depictions of black and mulatto women who are flanked in local nature metaphors. The positive valorization of their physical appearance coupled with an unambiguous vindication of their social comportment qualifies as an important re-signification of the African descendant female character in literature. Read side by side with the scathing, yet humorous critique of a misplaced longing for whiteness, these poems evince a broad conception of African descendant community found in his satirical verse. Nonetheless, this notion of shared community among free persons of mixed ancestry and free blacks was not without rhetorical limits. In the course of the military trial that he was subjected to – and in order to secure his claims to innocence – Plácido denied having maintained any ties with black slaves and in that way disidentified with blackness.

As Nwankwo so insightfully argues, the colonial racial hierarchy was not multiracial but bipartite, divided into two groups, whites and non-whites (34-35). Although the colony recognized a variety of racial groups on paper, all measured by greater or lesser degrees of whiteness, the racial hierarchy was in reality dualistic. The Spanish government's interrogations of Manzano and Plácido, Manzano's prison letter to a friend, and Plácido's penultimate statement to the Military Commission bear out that in colonial Cuba dark bodies were inexorably equated with blackness. As Captain General O'Donnell's reign of terror demonstrated, the blackness of dark bodies was much more than a symbolic

designation within the white imaginary, for it proved to be a matter of life and death.

EPILOGUE

This dissertation examined the processes of transculturation in the poems, letters, narratives, and court testimonies of Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés and Juan Francisco Manzano embracing racial and religious representations as dual axes of analysis. My interpretation of Afro-Cuban representations of race as an agonizing site of economic exploitation, violence against the collective dark body, and social animosity revealed the consequence of racial hierarchy that structured the colonial system in Cuba during the first half of the nineteenth century. Manzano and Plácido's representation of religious and spiritual practices was also significant for my study, in view of the fact that the proselytization of enslaved persons was a social control measure designed to erase Afro-Cuban identities by portraying slavery as the mandate of divine will. As such, I explored how transculturation manifested as contradictions, re-significations, silences and shifts in the aesthetic as well as ideological function that came to be traced in Manzano and Plácido's texts.

My study of African descendant Cuban writers from different social sectors revealed a predilection for the construction of a mulatto Catholic self-portrait in response to racialization and compulsory conversion to Christianity. It became apparent that Manzano and Plácido's normative racial and religious self-representations served a political function, legitimating their tenuous presence in white literary circles as well as increasing their prospects for publication. Whereas Plácido's lyrical persona was elusive about racial self-identification – only self-classifying as a *pardo* in the course of legal proceedings – Manzano's

self-portrait identified with the purported *inbetweeness* of a mixed-race Cuban identity. My research demonstrated that Manzano and Plácido's self-reflexive writing situated both poets within the confines of discursive normativity even as the representation of African descendant spirituality and the critical assessment of the dominant gaze negated and, ultimately, transculturated a meticulous construction of mulatto Catholic identity.

As I stated in the previous chapters on religious practice, Catholicism is enshrined in the literature of Manzano and Plácido as *la Religión*, an acknowledgment of the Church's exclusive claims to universal moral authority and a means to social ascension for the emancipated poet and his free counterpart. The self-referential Catholic persona in Manzano's poetry and life narrative, however, differed from Plácido's dispassionate devotion in non-autobiographical poems. More often than not, Manzano's lyrical (and narrative) voice articulated from a place of powerlessness as a character whose *locus* of enunciation had been marked by the horrors of plantation slavery, thus appealing to divine liberation at the hands of spiritual intermediaries. With the exception of a few poems which appropriated religious discourse to defy metropolitan rule, Plácido's Christian poetry is nearly devoid of personal reflection, portraying a mere replica of New Testament accounts of Jesus' death, crucifixion, and resurrection.[131] Both poets laid claim to a Catholic identity and their literature

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[131] In this dissertation, I have not analyzed the so-called "prison poems"; a small collection of poetry attributed to Plácido and thought to have been written while he awaited execution for his alleged role as leader of anti-government uprisings. The "prison poems" portray a much deeper religious sentiment than any of the dedicatory poems studied here. However, my decision to leave out this corpus was motivated by the focus on Afro-Cuban spiritual verse.

evinces an appropriation of official religious discourse speaking to the immediate concerns of the Afro-Cuban character.

At the same time, the mulatto Catholic persona is juxtaposed with an oppositional character, a practitioner of Africa-based rituals and spirituality, which the white imaginary inextricably associated with primitiveness, subversion, and black revolutionary ambitions. The re-signification of space and physical spaces, the reiterative performance of Africa-based ritual acts, and insight into ethereal revelation are the prime leitmotifs in Manzano and Plácido's representations of African descendant spirituality. The representation of Africa-derived spiritual practice promotes uneasy dialogue and enduring negotiation within the text, thus disturbing the aesthetic function and ideological rationale of Hispanic literature, which enshrined whiteness and Christianity as racial and religious ideals. Manzano and Plácido's Afro-Cuban personas receive otherworldly revelations, commemorate *los muertos* and partake in ancestral reunion through ritual practice. In my analysis, Africa-based spirituality as a means to subjectivity suggests the presence of an autonomous worldview not subject to whiteness, as such, unbound by the religious normativity of Catholic *dogmata*.

It is apparent from my analysis that Manzano and Plácido's renderings of Africa-derived spirituality have racial implications as well, in view of the fact that practitioners of Afro-Cuban ritual were categorically racialized as *negro*. For the most part, the introduction of innovative modes of racial representation by Manzano and Plácido affirmed the beauty and moral character of the Afro-Caribbean female persona. In fact, whereas the espousal of Black Nationalism

does not surface in these poems, the portrayal of blackness in Manzano and Plácido's body of work is remarkable, seeing as *negro* was a pejorative referent exposing white fears of an inescapable Africanization of the island. Indeed, the re-signification of blackness in Plácido as well as Manzano's body of work correlates blackness with African ancestry. The depiction of a wide-ranging African descendant community, emerging in the work of Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés, is called into question in the course of the government prosecution's of the eminent poet, ensuing the disavowal of blackness.

The slave plantation system bestowed privilege on Manzano only to revoke it later; his dark body is draped in finery, although later it will be stripped, exposed to public scorn and abused. Thus, Manzano reveals that mulatto claims to social privilege are unfounded, given that white objectification of the enslaved person negates the subjectivity of the collective dark body.

Moreover, I have shown that the understated and, at times, acerbic critiques of the dominant gaze empowers the mulatto persona in Manzano and Plácido's literature given that the enunciative posture of the Afro-Cuban lyrical voice enables subjectivity even while subverting uncontested claims to white superiority.

Given my focus on Manzano and Plácido's poetry, correspondence, narratives and court testimony, I have not placed emphasis on the publications of prominent white novelists and poets, who also engaged racial representation and

portrayed African descendant spirituality.[132] Although, for the most part white authors' racial and religious representations of Afro-Cuban characters rendered monochromatic stereotypical personas, a more thorough analysis and comparison with Manzano and Plácido's literature are warranted in a future study.

Other unanswered questions and related issues have also come to my attention in the course of writing the dissertation. The notoriety Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés coupled with the political content of his poems justified the colonial regime's charges of conspiracy against him. Did the Spanish government's dossier of evidence take account of his Afro-Cuban spiritual poems in the charges against him? Following his imprisonments, torture and multiple trials, did emancipated poet Juan Francisco Manzano cease to publish altogether as many critics have alleged? Subsequent to *La Conspiración de la Escalera* what were the cultural implications, if any, of Manzano and Plácido's literary transculturation for black and white Cuban writers?

In conclusion, my dissertation has established that the transculturated colonial literature of Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés and Juan Francisco Manzano constituted product and process, meeting and disjuncture so that Hispanic literature ceased to be the exclusive capital of white discourse, instead becoming an intervening space that challenged racial and religious hierarchies. The coexistence of Hispano-Catholic and Afro-Cuban religio-cultural paradigms

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[132] Anselmo Suárez y Romero's Francisco: El ingenio o las delicias del campo, and Cirilo Villaverde's Cecilia Valdés o la loma del angel along with José Jacinto Milanés' poems, "El negro alzado, "La esclava con amores, "El esclavo", construct Afro-Cuban racial and religious personas.

generated negotiations, tensions, overlap and struggle within texts that, more often than not, performed an autonomous Afro-Cuban identity rarely recognized by a homogenous concept of Cubanness that became common under the "new" nation recently independent from Spain.

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