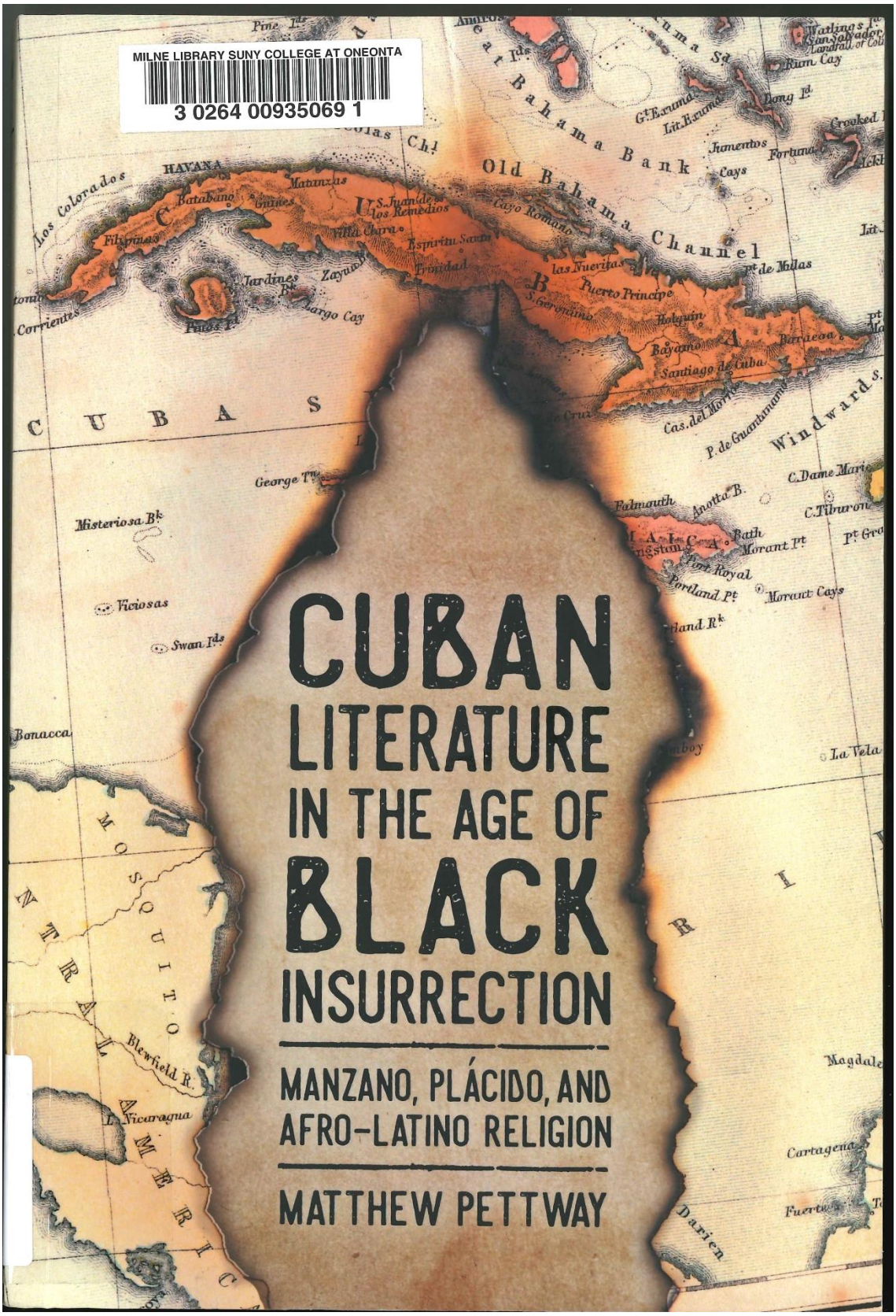

CUBAN LITERATURE IN THE AGE OF BLACK INSURRECTION

MANZANO, PLÁCIDO, AND AFRO-LATINO RELIGION

MATTHEW PETTWAY

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exceptions (S. C. Drake 28; Andrews, *Afro-Latin America* 12, 44; Pettway, "The Altar, the Oath" 20).[9] The Catholic Church in nineteenth-century Cuba lacked evangelical zeal, and priests made fewer efforts to convert enslaved Africans than earlier generations had done with indigenous Mesoamericans (Madden 104–106; Rivera Pagán 25). Consequently, an Afro-Latino Creole culture emerged throughout Latin America and the Caribbean that revered Catholic clerics and African priests and priestesses alike (S.C. Drake 20).

Free blacks and mulattoes that aspired to leadership in their communities had to acquire *sacred authority* within the parameters of the Church, but they also accessed African-inspired spiritual power that held sway among a black Cuban counterpublic. Historian Vincent Brown defines "sacred authority" as the appropriation of African or European symbolic practices that contain social and spiritual power and may be harnessed to achieve political might (24, 34). This did not mean that Afro-Latino Caribbean elites rejected Catholicism, but rather that they negotiated their relationship to the local clergy even as they preserved a belief in African-inspired spirituality. African Americans' cultural and political relationship to Protestantism, however, was vastly different. This was especially true for a small literate Christian elite in the antebellum United States for whom the Bible was critical to the articulation of an emancipation theology.

The Christian redemptive narrative was at the core of African American Protestantism in the antebellum period. Black Protestant intellectuals—some in favor of antislavery revolts and some opposed to such uprisings—crafted a theology based on the Protestant "open Bible" tradition, where congregants and clergy alike exercised their right to interpret sacred text for themselves (S. C. Drake 48). African American exegesis emboldened prominent thinkers such as David Walker—who in 1829 wrote his incendiary *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World, Particular and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America*—to defy derogatory white interpretations of the Bible (S. C. Drake 44–45, 48). Comparable to Barbadian freemason Prince Hall, Walker linked biblical prophecy about Ethiopia with the contemporary black struggle against slavery (S. C. Drake 45; Ferrer, *Freedom's Mirror* 307). With Bible in hand, black Protestant preachers—some literate and others semiliterate—refuted the Hamitic myth that alleged slavery was a divine curse on black people. Rather, black Protestants reasoned that God would bring an end to slavery one way or another. "Negro folk theologians" preached of a glorious African past, even naming their churches for the African continent or for the ancient kingdom of Abyssinia, an archaic word for Ethiopia (S. C. Drake 48). But the black Protestant vision of Africa had little in common with Afro-Latino Caribbean writers Plácido and Manzano. African Americans and some Afro-Caribbeans believed in the prophetic word of God and in the inevitability of divine judgment. But while black American Protestant leaders turned to the Bible as a source of moral authority, Afro-Latinos appropriated

PREFATORY NOTE ON RACIAL TERMINOLOGY

Racial terminology is often convoluted; it presents complexities for the author and for her or his readership. This book is no exception. Although scientists have proven that race is not a biological category, race must be acknowledged as a social reality, a historical formation whose meanings are articulated in the symbolic language of culture and differ over time and space. I have made use of racial terminology in a manner that reflects the racial categories of colonial Cuba in order to reproduce the historical moment as accurately as possible. In so doing, I acknowledge the precedent set by historians Verena Martínez-Alier, Ada Ferrer, and Aisha Finch. I have endeavored to do so even while rejecting the racist logic that informs Spanish American cultural discourse. This is a difficult thing to achieve. One must probe representations of race as well as skin color hierarchies in the colonial Caribbean to understand the ways in which they have informed one another. Skin color hierarchies are known as pigmentocracy: a political order granting socioeconomic privileges based on the relative fairness of the skin and a professed proximity to whiteness. In *Cuban Literature in the Age of Black Insurrection*, I have examined race and pigmentocracy in nineteenth-century Cuba. Throughout the book, I refer to people of African descent—regardless of their hue—as African or African descendants and to those of European ancestry as white. I have preferred the contemporary usage whenever possible; as such, Spanish Caribbean racial labels are common throughout. The terms *negro* (black), *mulato*, *pardo* (mixed race or mulatto), *chinito* (offspring from a black and a mulatto), or *cuarterón* (quadroon) appear throughout the book to convey how racial terms are demonstrative of the procurement (or loss) of cultural power in Spanish colonial societies. The malleability of these terms and their inconsistent usage, sometimes in reference to the same person, may create confusion. I acknowledge the nuances embedded in the language of pigmentocracy, and I have endeavored to bring those nuances to light, whenever possible.

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NOTES

Prefatory Note on Racial Terminology

1. See Juan Francisco Manzano's *Juan Francisco Manzano's Autobiografía del esclavo y otros escritos*, edited by William Luis (296).
2. See Daisy Cué Fernández's article "Plácido y la Conspiración de la Escalera" in *Revista Santiago* (145–206) and her book *Plácido: El poeta conspirador*.

Chapter One

1. *El Laberinto, Periódico Universal* conflated Plácido's life with his contemporary Manzano. The newspaper claimed that Plácido was a former slave whose freedom wealthy liberals had purchased. In fact, Plácido was a free mulatto and his accomplice Manzano had been manumitted when wealthy landowners bought his freedom in exchange for his autobiography in 1836. Biblioteca Nacional de Madrid. See *Hemeroteca Digital, El Laberinto*, Biblioteca Nacional de Madrid, August 16, 1844, pp. 13–14, hemerotecadigital.bne.es/issue.vm?id=0003698297&search=&lang=es. Accessed 4 July 2019.
2. See Lisa Surwillo's *Monsters by Trade: Slave Traffickers in Modern Spanish Literature and Culture*.
3. *Sentencia pronunciada por la Seccion de la Comision militar establecida en la ciudad de Matanzas para conocer de la causa de conspiración de la gente de color*. This document belongs to the "Plácido Collection" in the Oficina del Historiador de la Ciudad de la Habana: legajo 648, expediente 16.
4. In the 1830s, almost ten years prior to Plácido's execution as the alleged leader of La Escalera conspiracy, 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. Please see Gwendolyn Midlo Hall's *Social Control in Slave Plantation Societies: A Comparison of St. Domingue and Cuba* (56).
5. Eugene Genovese is quoted in Ada Ferrer's *Freedom Mirror: Cuba and Haiti in the Age of Revolution* (11).
6. Dorotea in *Francisco* and Petrona in *Petrona y Rosalía* are two sides of the same coin, because both protagonists are victims of rape by their iniquitous white male enslavers. In the mold of female Romantic characters, neither Petrona nor Dorotea is equipped with the fortitude to defy male advances, and unlike their white female counterparts, they are without the supposed protections of patriarchy. Rosalía's invocation of the Virgin Mary is a frantic plea for mercy, for she is horrified by her mistress's lack of empathy, and by Doña Concepción's repeated, albeit unsuccessful, attempts to abort the fetus her son fathered. The novel's denouement devolves into an unvarnished condemnation of Don Antonio and his son Don Fernando articulated through

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"In this wonderful book, Matthew Pettway opens up the hidden codes of our Afro-Hispanic cosmological perception of reality, one that since the age of slavery has given the Afro-Hispanic/Afro-Latino world tools for resistance, redefinition of ourselves and our history, and envisioning the future. In *Cuban Literature in the Age of Black Insurrection*, Pettway contextualizes the poems of Plácido and the autobiography and poems of Juan Francisco Manzano in a deeply researched historical and cosmogonic context."

—**Mayra Santos Febres,** author of numerous books of poetry, short stories, essay collections, and novels, including *La amante de Gardel*

"*Cuban Literature in the Age of Black Insurrection: Manzano, Plácido, and Afro-Latino Religion* is a necessary exploration into Afro-Atlantic studies. This research is a form of literary archaeology that sits at the nexus of interdisciplinary scholarship. This book uses history, religion, and literary criticism to interrogate the Latin Diaspora and the associated assumptions about empire, specifically white supremacy in Cuba."

—**DaMaris B. Hill,** author of *The Fluid Boundaries of Suffrage* and *Jim Crow: Staking Claims in the American Heartland*

"*Cuban Literature in the Age of Black Insurrection: Manzano, Plácido, and Afro-Latino Religion* is a necessary book for our times, one that convincingly argues for a place for the two leading Cuban poets of the nineteenth century, Juan Francisco Manzano and Gabriel de la Concepción 'Plácido' Valdés in the Cuban literary canon. Both of African descent, Manzano and Plácido were radical thinkers whose discursive leanings were steeped in African religiosity cloaked in Western canonical tropes of Catholicism and Greco-Roman deities."

—**Vanessa K. Valdés,** professor of Spanish and Portuguese and director of the Black Studies Program at the City College of New York

"This book is an original study on the influence of religion in the writings of two ninteenth-century Cuban writers, that although very recognized and studied, have not been analyzed from the point of view of religion (Catholicism and African influenced). Pettway's analysis of Afro-Atlantic syncretism and the ways it intersects with literature, writing, and poetry is excellent."

—**Jossianna Arroyo-Martínez,** chair/professor, Department of Spanish and Portuguese and the Warfield Center for African and African American Studies at the University of Texas at Austin

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