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Matt D. Childs, The 1812 Aponte Rebellion in Cuba and the Struggle against Atlantic Slavery

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que negros y mulatos otorgaron a los documentos escritos fuera el de interactuar con la burocracia colonial y sus representantes, a duras penas puede sorprender, dado que la mayor parte de la documentación disponible sobre esta época [y otras!] es la que se ha conservado en los archivos creados por ese mismo aparato burocrático" (pp. 186-87).

Only by collapsing the arrival of Africans from Africa in time is it still possible to talk about the heterogeneity of African origins that made up slave populations in various parts of the Americas. Recent publications on the Atlantic slave trade show that—contrary to the dispersal-assumption—black slaves over time came in quite compact cultural and linguistic shipments and with common destinies, not infrequently involving Muslim Africans who could read and write and who had longstanding commercial interactions in the Mediterranean and beyond. This is particularly true by the time East Africa entered the circuit of enslavement. Perhaps writing-experiences were not that unknown; maybe writing was not the only mechanism molding intra-Black and wider social relationships.

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The 1812 Aponte Rebellion in Cuba and the Struggle against Atlantic Slavery. By Matt D. Childs. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006. xi + 300 pp. Illustrations, tables, notes, bibliography, index. \$55.00 cloth, \$21.95 paper.)

Despite their alluring character, studies about foiled conspiracies and rebellions constitute a problematic genre haunted by sparse or tendentious records, ambiguous or contradictory testimonies, and inconclusive (usually masculine) insurgency narratives that often end up taking on a controversial iconic status. In this, his first book, Matt Childs takes on some of these challenges with mixed results. The study leaves the reader somewhat confused as to the extent of the Aponte rebellion, what it was or was meant to be, and what it represented to different actors and groups. Although the placement of the rebellion(s) in the Atlantic context of the Age of Revolution is a commendable move, this reviewer found that the empirical reach of the study does not—or perhaps cannot—match its major claims to historical and historiographical significance.

Between January and March 1812, authorities put down a series of violent slave uprisings in plantations in Puerto Príncipe and Havana and foiled alleged conspiracies in Bayamo, Holguín, and the city of Havana. Authorities came to believe that these events were all part of a planned island-wide insurrection organized by the former black militia captain José Antonio

Aponte (from whence the "Aponte Rebellion"). The criminal investigation resulted in 34 executions, 78 public whippings, and 170 prison and exile sentences of free and enslaved people of African descent. Authorities asserted they had thwarted a formidable insurrection, a claim that wittingly—or unwittingly—conjured the specter of another "Haitian Revolution" in Cuba. Maneuvering around the question of the existence or exaggeration of the alleged conspiracies (and ultimately mirroring authorities' "counterinsurgency" narrative), Childs examines whether these events constituted a single insurrection or separate rebellions. At one point, the author claims that "the battlefields of the Aponte rebellion spread over 500 miles qualifying as one of the most extensively planned revolts in the Americas" (p. 18), while elsewhere he reluctantly concludes that "the available documentation ultimately does not provide enough evidence to argue that the rebellions represented one coordinated plan of revolution directed by Aponte and other leaders from Havana.... The records stubbornly resist such levels of verification" (p. 154). Despite this conclusion, Childs continually refers to the events in a unified way as the "Aponte Rebellion" and vacillates between bold and qualified claims throughout the study.

The author claims that the Aponte rebellion also "offers a critical case to analyze what role the ideas from the Age of Revolution and the Haitian Revolution in particular, played in catalyzing slave and free of color revolts in the Americas" (p. 14). The evidence for the central and eastern regions is sketchy. At best, it reflects an ever-present antislavery and racial tension among affected sectors in colonial slave societies revived here by the rumor of hidden royal decrees proclaiming abolition. This popular royalist discourse was not, of course, specific to the "Age of Revolution," but the rumor may have been triggered by distorted news about the debates on slavery in the Cortes de Cádiz and about British abolitionism. The evidence related to the conspiracy in Havana, however, is far more suggestive in terms of the possible ideological and political reach of the Haitian Revolution, but it should not be extrapolated to the events elsewhere. Of particular interest in Childs' study is the story of the enigmatic figure of Jean François and the brief visit to Havana by Haitian soldiers who had fought for the Spanish Crown. And yet, the significance that historical actors attributed to these figures remains elusive. On the other hand, particularly puzzling is Childs' failure to fully engage the most fascinating and confounding source associated with the Havana conspiracy, the interrogation regarding Aponte's *libro de pinturas*.

The immediate antecedent for Childs' study is Luciano Franco's short (and somewhat unreliable) account published in Cuba in 1963. Childs rectifies some of the "liberties" that Franco took "constructing the narrative" and shifts the focus away from Aponte, but overall concurs with the Cuban historian's identification of the "basic events, plans and goals of the movement" (p. 13). Childs also hints at a possible political and interpretative conflict over the iconic significance of the "Aponte rebellion" among several black intellectuals early in the Revolution, precisely before the event became canonized by

Franco's book, yet he avoids delving into that important moment to explore the politics of identity and historical memory.

Ultimately, only two of the five chapters of this book deal directly with the so-called Aponte Rebellion. An initial general "background" chapter dealing with the transition to plantation society is, as usual, anchored on a Havana-centered archive and historiography, despite the fact that some of the events unfolded in the center and eastern regions. Two other chapters meant to flesh out social context focus on the institution of the militias and, more remarkably, on the still understudied *cabildos de nación*. These chapters constitute important entry points for future social and cultural histories. Given the importance that the author assigns to these institutions for networking (and conspiring), what happened to them in the aftermath of the repression? Finally, the book inexplicably lacks a chronology of events, and bibliographic references sometimes seem erratic.

Overall, Childs should be praised for redirecting the "Aponte Rebellion" into the general literature of African diaspora studies, but research into the still understudied local and Spanish Atlantic contexts of the time (including the Haitian, Dominican, and Spanish-American emigrations to the island, and the politics of the Cortes de Cádiz in Cuba) should not be overlooked. On the contrary, such research would provide an even richer ground for this and other African diaspora stories unfolding in the Atlantic world in the Age of Revolutions.

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From Slavery to Freedom in Brazil: Bahia, 1835-1900. By Dale Torston Graden. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006. xxvii + 297 pp. Illustrations, maps, tables, graph, glossary, archives, notes, index. \$24.95 paper).

Slavery and abolition are undeniably among the most important subjects of Brazilian historical studies. The history of slavery in Brazil dates to the early colonial period in the sixteenth century, while the abolition of slavery belongs largely to the period of the Brazilian Empire (1822-1889). As is well known, Brazil abolished slavery in 1888 and was the last western hemisphere nation to do so. Slavery and abolition during the Empire are intimately linked to national unity, and to the economic, political, and social history of the Empire. The present-day demands of Brazilians of color for greater social and economic inclusion almost certainly guarantee that the subjects of slavery and abolition will continue in the forefront of Brazilian historical studies.