

The Black Man: Hero, Buffoon and Person in Cuban Colonial Literature

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The following pages contain material for the study of black men as subjects in our colonial literature. They also reveal certain areas of inquiry pursued by writers' different attitudes towards this character regarding history and literature during the semi-colonial period in Cuba. This explains the schematic and rather dry and straightforward nature of my words.

Hero

In the very first document of our literary history, *Especulo de Paciencia* [Mirror of Patience] (1608), by Silvestre Balboa Troya y Quesada (1563-1649), the poem's hero is black man Salvador Golomón, who kills pirate Gilberto Girón during just one struggle, the man who has kidnapped Bishop Brother Juan de las Cabezas y Altamirano, and with his deed decides the outcome of a group of *criollos* from Bayamo is facing some French pirates.¹

Despite all this slavist poet's reservations, this black character does not lose all his essentially heroic traits. Nonetheless, a scene such as this would not again be repeated in all the eighteenth century, a time during which the

presence of the printing press and the production of island literature began to increase notably. Black men will appear only sporadically in *comparsas* [dances] in the island's very first theatrical sketches, which were filled with local color. It would not be till the second third of the nineteenth century that they recover their heroic role.

Domingo del Monte (1804-1853) will suggest to the members of his literary group and disciples the subject of black slaves—abused by his owners—as a way to combat the slave trade, which was already economically and politically threatening his landowning class, the island's sugarocracy, but also simultaneously trying to avoid an excessive sentimentalism or philanthropy that could end up being subversive.²

Francisco (1839-1839), by Suárez y Romero, and the lesser known *Petrona y Rosalía* (1838), by Felix Tanco y Bosmoniel, both inspired by Del Monte, are examples of this kind of philanthropic, weepy literature in which the black slave suffers the worst tortures with Christian resignation, with not even one act of rebellion. He ends up committing suicide. Late examples of this treatment of the subject can be found in the drama *El*

mulato (Mexico, 1870), by Alfredo Torrella (1845-1879), and in the novel *El negro Francisco* (Santiago de Chile, 1875), by Antonio Zambrana (1846-1922), all of which also end with the protagonists' suicide. The same thing takes place in the novel *Sab* (1841), by Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda (1814-1873), but this story does contain a kernel of real protest, and a call for essential equality among men in the letter the mulatto slave, Sab, writes to his friend Teresa, before taking his life. *Sab* is the only anti-slave novel in which the black protagonist proclaims his complete humanity and denounces the era's social injustice.

In 1838, the first version of *Cecilia Valdés*, by Cirilo Villaverde (1812-1894), is published. In it, as Morúa Delgado points out when the definitive version was published in 1882, slavery is described and even accepted without any intention at all of discussing the fact that blacks and *mulatos* had made numerous attempts to gain their freedom.³ Del Monte and his cohort are not interested in promoting that liberating tendency. This explains why Juan Francisco Manzano (1797-1854), with his *Autobiografía*, exalts the docile nature of the *good black*. This contrasts with Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés (1809-1844), who in *Plácido*, audaciously writes poems filled with the flames of freedom.⁴ *La conspiración de La Escalera* [The Escalera Conspiracy] closes an era in which blacks were heroes and protagonists in Cuban literature—even if they were always portrayed as suffering victims.

Buffoons

After 1844, blacks as heroes disappear from literature and replaced by Indians—Cuba's primitive inhabitants who survived

for only a few generation. "Siboneismo," a literary-artistic movement that celebrated Cuba's indigenous past, began back when Del Monte's tertulia was active, and reached its apogee—with its hidden, patriotic motivation—with the work of José Fornaris and poet Cucalambé. Blacks reappear in grotesque form, and speaking a form of 'deformed' Spanish known as *bozal* language [a style of Spanish akin to the English written for minstrel sketches in the U.S.]. In Cuba, this style was exploited by the buffoons and an Andalusian—Bartolomé de José Crespo—matriculated in the fictional El Salvador school by Don José de la Luz. This character is best known as *Creto Gangá*. There is a wide range of material of this sort, from the satirical poems in *bozal* Spanish and *bufo* sketches whose comical imitation of whites by certain members of black society—free blacks and mulattoes—is meant to provoke laughter, to the overt, sharp, social criticism of other comedies and *guaracha* songs, all of which came to a head in 1868.

That same year, for example, Francisco Fernández published *Los negro catedráticos* [The Black Pedants], and *Perro huevero, aunque le quemem el hocico* [loosely translated as 'dogs and their bad habits, die hard'], by Juan Francisco Valerio. The latter of these two works was seen as containing anti-colonial criticism, which brought about the volunteer servicemen's attack on the Teatro Villanueva in Havana. *Guaracha* music, of which a collection was published in 1882,⁵ reveal the complete diversity of people in the island's cultural mosaic. It made less use of abusive, *bozal* language, and was much more positive about its characters, causing them to seem less like essentialized stereotypes and more like real people.

Peoplehood

The Ten Years War (1868-1878) marked the end of slavery, although it was not legally abolished until 1886. Yet, from 1880 on, one detects a new attitude among the period's writers. They now saw blacks as people, and divided people into 'people of color' and 'whites,' as diverse varieties and types of humans, and began to study blacks and their character utilizing some scientific criteria. By 1878, Francisco Calcagno (1827-1903) had published his pamphlet *Poetas de color* [Poets of Color], thus revealing to the island the life and work of a group of black and mulatto writers who contributed to the black cultural process in Cuba. By 1880, Diego Vicente Tejera (1844-1903) had published *Poesías completas* [Complete Works], which included several poems that valiantly denounced the injustice of slavery and racial prejudices. In 1881, the best collection of *costrumbrista* articles in Cuba was published with wonderful illustrations by Víctor Patricio de Landaluce—*Tipos y costumbres de la isla de Cuba* [Types and Customs on the Island of Cuba]. Contained within its pages are valuable articles about *El ñáñigo* [The Abakuá Man], by Enrique Fernández Carrillo; *Los negros curros* [Streetsmart Blacks], by Carlos Noroña; *El calesero* [The Coachman], by José E. Triay, etc.⁶ These articles reveal their purpose, an attempt to more closely and accurately study and describe these different types of blacks, a tendency that is highlighted in the collection's prologue, penned by Antonio Bachiller y Morales (1812-1889).

To Bachiller is owed the first 'scientific, ethnographic' attempt to study Cuba's population of color, published in his book *Los negros* (1887). That very same year, *Estudios literarios* [Literary Studies], by Aurelio Mitjans

(1863-1889). This volume contains his 1882 piece, "Del teatro bufo y de la necesidad de reemplazarlo formentando la buena comedia" [On Bufo Theater and the Need to Replace it by Promoting Good Theater]. In this article, Mitjans expresses his opposition to what he sees as a degradation of theater, due to what he considers the vulgarity and bad taste of Havana's *bufos*, without ever taking into consideration how connected their theater was to the people, or its potential, later development.

From a literary point of view, by the end of an era, blacks appear as real people in two novels by black Senator, legislator and writer Martín Morúa Delgado (1857-1910): *Sofía* (1891) and *La familia Unzuza* (finished 1896). These are no longer sentimental, philanthropic novels about blacks, but rather attempts (limitedly successful ones, unfortunately) by a black writer to describe—somewhat naturalistically, á la Zolá—the social situation of his race and general structure of Cuban society and existence. Despite the fact Morúa never managed to achieve Zolá's style, his work stands as an eloquent testimony to the presence of people of color in Cuban colonial literature—no longer as victims or buffoons, but as people, while fully acknowledging their human dignity.

Notes:

1-The poem, in translated lines 47, 51 y 52 of its "Canto Segundo," says):
Among us walked diligently
an Ethiopian worthy of our admiration,
Salvador, he was called, and he strode valiantly,
Yara is in his soul, in his imagination,
the son of Golomón, a wise old man:
who armed with machete and lance,
when he saw Gilberto marching dashingly,
charged him like a lion violently.